

theories and
methodologies

A Queer Sequence: Comics as a Disruptive Medium

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AT FIRST GLANCE, HILLARY CHUTE'S *WHY COMICS?* PRESENTS ITSELF AS A CHRONICLE OF THE HEROIC DEEDS OF A PANTHEON OF CREATIVE gods. Across ten chapters, Chute tracks the aesthetic achievements of more than twelve world-renowned comics artists whose innovations in sequential visual art represent a range of human experiences, from wartime violence to teenage sexuality to queer family history to living with cognitive and physical disability. In Chute's narrative, such luminaries as Alison Bechdel, Art Spiegelman, Daniel Clowes, Joe Sacco, Lynda Barry, and Marjane Satrapi rise up from the vast landscape of comics production as artists whose bodies of work testify to comics's aesthetic diversity and sophistication. These typically erudite cartoonists work at a distance from mainstream comics and produce adult-oriented, long-form graphic narratives considered aesthetic masterpieces. "Although comics of all kinds are flourishing in the twenty-first century," Chute explains early on in *Why Comics?*, "there has been a dramatic uptick" in the kind of "auteurist comics" produced by these cartoonists (18), who relish, in Clowes's words, the way the medium allows them to "control absolutely everything and make it . . . exactly what you're seeing in your own head" (qtd. in *Why?* 18). For Chute, it is this "singular intimacy of one person's vision"—best displayed in comics produced by sophisticated adult cartoonists writing and drawing for other adults—that underscores that comics are also for grown-ups (18). By now, we all should know this, but we have not learned the lesson well enough (or perhaps some just refuse to listen).

Yet underlying this focus on the auteur is a less mythic and more radical idea. Two pages in, Chute responds to the misperception that the popular fantasy genre of superhero comics stands in for the comics medium: "Comics is a medium in its own right . . . and it can be about anything" (2). From one perspective, this is a simple statement of fact: comics can tell stories in any genre, about countless lives and experiences. Yet Chute's assertion is also a performative utterance with extraordinary force. To say that comics can be about

anything is to confer plenitude and possibility on a medium that is frequently denied expansive creative capacity by those who would interpret the popularity of fantasy genres like superhero comics as a sign of the medium's aesthetic bankruptcy. Chute's statement rebuffs such assumptions while underscoring the most important point one can ever make about comics: Comics is a medium in which anything that can be drawn can be believed. The limit of comics's representational capacities is essentially the limit of one's imagination. Chute's central claim, that comics "can be about anything," reflects a significant conceptual shift from the question posed by the title of her 2008 *PMLA* article, "Comics as Literature?"—a skeptical query that provokes anxious defenses of comics's literary merit—to "Why Comics?," a free-floating inquiry suggesting myriad possible answers to the question of what comics are or can be. And yet, as a scholar who writes about that most denigrated of comics genres, superhero fantasy, I am compelled to revise Chute's title thus: "Why *These* Comics?"

I ask this question as a rejoinder to the book's unconscious drive toward canonization, which repeatedly undermines its own radical claims for comics's capaciousness. By giving reverential accounts of individual authors' creative accomplishments and focusing on comics memoirs as the most refined expression of the form, Chute reifies the cult of the genius at the expense of centralizing the formal and conceptual unpredictability of the medium as its signal power.¹ I push back against Chute's framework in order to put pressure on the ways that literary studies has tended to shore up its disciplinary boundaries by willfully misrecognizing the complexity of comics. The field has done so most often through false accusations of aesthetic simplicity, but it has also, even more problematically, assimilated comics into English curricula by flattening the medium's long-form expressions into just another iteration of the novel.

The assimilationist impulse is evident in the ways that literary studies has granted scholarly respect only to a highly curated short list of comics because of their perceived erudition and self-awareness (Bechdel's *Fun Home*), their "seriousness" or attention to historically complex realities (Spiegelman's *Maus* and Sacco's comics journalism), or their self-consciously experimental form (Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*). Despite the genuine diversity in the biographies of the artists—and the aesthetics and narrative content of the art—embraced by Chute and literary studies more broadly, the narrow standards for inclusion produce the feeling of a homogenous talent pool. With few exceptions, the artists are white and straight and their work autobiographical, the creation of an individual auteur rather than a team.

But it doesn't have to be this way. A more expansive, noncanonical study of sequential visual art rests on the bedrock belief that comics is an object of inquiry that invites or elicits a method of reading for multiplicity. Put simply, comics teaches us to read lots of different things—words, images, aesthetic styles, characters, panels, colors, textures, formats, and page layouts—in lots of different sequences, patterns, and juxtapositions: in a single panel, on a full page, between and across pages in a narrative arc, and often across numerous serial installments. Comics demands not that we abandon the category of literature but that we read and interpret everything—including cultural objects that fall under the heading "the literary"—along far more lines of approach than we ever imagined necessary. Chute shows us this in her beautiful unpacking of the representational strategies of her chosen texts—for example, the way an artist like Sacco meticulously draws panoramic scenes of genocidal violence and wartime deprivation, forcing readers to cognitively grasp the effects such trauma has on individual bodies as much as on entire social landscapes, and the ways that Barry uses an accumulating series of vignettes about her

youth to depict girlhood, especially under familial emotional abuse, as a fragmentary experience that exceeds linear narration. Yet the multiplicity Chute directs us to pay attention to at the level of a panel or page is undercut by her larger intellectual investment in a limited set of texts, which she has celebrated, analyzed, and immortalized for her readers for over a decade.

In her ground-clearing 2008 article for *PMLA*, Chute made some of her most compelling arguments for the formal capacities of comics to represent historical trauma, in particular through the medium's "ability . . . to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page" ("Comics?" 453). A decade later, Chute's arguments are the basis for, and sometimes directly restated in, *Why Comics?*, while the authors she singled out for analysis in 2008 make up a large portion of her case studies. For a nonacademic audience unfamiliar with Chute's arguments about comics form, *Why Comics?* opens up a world of conceptual and reading possibilities; for *PMLA*'s scholarly audience, it risks letting our understanding of comics stagnate by giving us permission to think with the same network of authors and texts ad infinitum. How can we study, and what can we learn from, the hundreds of thousands of pages of superhero comics, children's and young adult comics, digital comics, newspaper comic strips, and erotic or pornographic comics that circulate throughout the world? All these genres and formats are mentioned briefly in *Why Comics?*, but Chute declines to give the reader any robust analytic framework for pursuing research into these largely overlooked, though hugely popular, areas of comics production.

To say this is not to condemn Chute, who is simply bringing her ideas to a new audience, but rather to hold *PMLA* intellectually accountable: Why has the journal chosen to foreground a book that argues something its readers already know (or should know) about

comics? Why didn't *PMLA* organize a forum on Chute's 2015 book *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, an extraordinary study of graphic representations of genocide and war that traverses comics production in five centuries? Or, better still, why not curate a Theories and Methodologies section on contemporary interventions into comics, including, in addition to Chute, scholars like André Carrington, Anthony Michael D'Agostino, Margaret Galvan, Charles Hatfield, John Jennings, Benjamin Saunders, Cathy Schlund-Vials, Darieck Scott, Susan Squire, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, and others? These innovative scholars (only a few of the countless luminaries currently writing on graphic narrative) have written field-defining scholarship on black fantasy and sequential art, graphic medicine, alternative comix, queer comics archives, diasporic and refugee comics, and superhero comics, while plumbing the depths of interdisciplinary approaches to this prodigious medium. A conversation among these scholars might have generated productively diverse points of view on what comics is, which genres still beg to be studied, and what such analysis might do for the field of literary and cultural analysis.

My suspicion is that many literary scholars do not want to learn more about comics beyond what they gleaned from a single 2008 article. This is because moving beyond the question of comics's literary value—and by extension taking the medium's many genres and forms seriously—will require literature professors to read a lot of stuff they have never encountered before. It will require an education in comics, and hence an openness to perceiving, accounting for, and embracing multiplicity in all aspects of literary studies: of cultural forms, analytic methods, aesthetic standards, even authors, genres, and cultural histories anathema to many entrenched sensibilities. But this is precisely what we must do. We must recount multiple, competing histories of this exceptionally durable form

of storytelling, tracking its lines of cultural flight across audiences, styles, genres, and contexts. Chute is resolutely invested in the singular narrative that sophisticated comics for adults emerged from the alternative-comix revolution of the 1970s. When repeated often enough, this history obscures how mainstream comics productions across the twentieth century—including superhero comics, newspaper comic strips, and crime and horror comics—have offered some of the most incisive critiques of normative American culture and politics of the last century. For all the vibrant scholarship emerging around comics today, the medium remains a largely unplumbed and uncanonized field of texts you've never heard of. Go to a local comic-book store, dip your hand at random into any long box containing back issues of comics from any period or in any genre, and I guarantee you'll be holding a comic book that no scholar has ever published about in a peer-reviewed journal. This speaks not to a dearth of comics scholarship—the field is abundantly productive even as its scholarly output is egregiously overlooked by literary scholars—but rather to the unparalleled productivity of comics publishing. Franco Moretti's point that the most read and studied novels of our time represent a mere fraction of historical literary production should serve as a cautionary tale to those who would seek a fixed comics canon that legitimizes the medium at the expense of learning from its mind-boggling heterogeneity. With this in mind, I want to identify three aspects of comics that Chute's text consistently returns to and that a number of contemporary comics scholars have sought to illuminate in their work. Together, these qualities exemplify how comics, when conceived of in the broadest terms, can train us to conduct conceptually rich literary and cultural analysis, not only expanding what counts as literature but altogether retuning our sensorium so that reading can make us feel and think more than we ever thought possible.

First, comics is a medium that demands an exceptionally rigorous account of multiplicity. Sequential visual narratives are critical for literary scholars because they exaggerate, or pump up the volume on, formal and narrative tropes that are already widely at play in most literary production. Most literature unfolds in some sort of sequence, has textual and visual elements (even if this is the actual print text itself), is often serially produced, and appears in a variety of printed, bound forms. So does comics. Yet comics ratchets up the intensity of these elements to a fever pitch, concatenating a vast number of formal and narrative variables: the size and composition of a single panel, page, or narrative installment; the quality and texture of the paper; the color and aesthetic style of the images; the length and nature of narrative sequence, whether it find expression through the relation between adjacent panels, in individual panels or pages, or across multiple pages or numerous serial entries. Even the most mainstream superhero comics disjoint and fragment narrative unfolding, allow the viewer to read in a nonlinear way, and accentuate points of potential contradiction between clashing visual and verbal elements. Hence, “the combination of words and images, and how this narrative exists laid out in space on the page, requires an active and involved literacy” (Chute, *Why?* 22). As Margaret Galvan has argued, when we begin to read an array of literary and cultural objects in the style of comics or through a comics studies paradigm, we immediately see more points of connection between various elements in a single page or text. This might simply involve doing what we already do best—close reading—only better and closer: making meaning of unexpected or overlooked juxtapositions of words, images, and other formal variables, perhaps especially in media forms that do not take the traditional shape of a sequence of panels but may well look like a comic when approached from the right angle.

Second, comics concretizes identities, experiences, and concepts in the very elaboration of sequential form. Because comics is an art of fabricating out of whole cloth everything depicted on a page, the literal shape and arrangement of panels often function as physical or spatial metaphors for lived human experiences that are difficult or impossible to represent through direct mimesis. Discussing Justin Green's groundbreaking graphic narrative *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), which narrates the author's lifelong struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder, Chute asserts:

Comics is a form . . . that rhymes with, and perhaps can even replicate, compulsive spatial focus and arranging. . . . Green identifies the double-trackedness of comics form—its pairing of commentary in text boxes with action unfolding in frames—as something that itself mirrors the OCD “double-vision” . . . both the recognition that an obsession or a compulsion isn't rational, and the profound need to execute its mandates anyway. (*Why?* 253)

And when exploring the ways that Clowes's and Jaime Hernandez and Gilbert Hernandez's graphic works attempt to formally render the diversity of urban life, Chute explains, “These artists reveal how comics, in its porous, democratic openness, is a mirror of the ongoing vitality of city spaces—their energy, hybridity, range of voices. . . . But it can further in its form—its mix of styles and influences—reflect the multiplicity of those who inhabit cityspaces” (193). These examples stress that comics is perhaps the medium best suited to analogy. It's an art form that constantly asks how sequential visual panels unfolding in space might formally be like the embodied experience of transitioning between genders, like the psychic disorientation of racial double consciousness, like the temporal reality of aging or moving between states of physical ability and disability. The examples are endless: in the monumen-

tal graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), which narrates a gay white man's coming of age in the civil rights south, Howard Cruse depicts a scene in which the white protagonist, Toland Polk, stares into the eyes of his African American friend Shiloh, who has barely survived the racially motivated bombing of a local motel. In three successive but irregularly shaped panels, we see Toland's face as he locks eyes with his friend, who wears a head bandage, followed by a surreal image of Toland's head shattering like a jigsaw puzzle hitting the floor. Here, Toland encounters white supremacy not as an abstract ideology but as the murderous violation of black bodies, which prompts an immediate affective identification with someone who has experienced such brutality. A narrative balloon between the panels reads, “My eyes locked onto Shiloh's eyes . . . and I imagined the explosion at the Melody Motel . . . and what it must've been like to *be* Shiloh . . . and see a flaming tornado of shattered beams and concrete blasting toward me” (190). This identification is so painful that Cruse renders it in the image of a literally fractured head that explodes outward far beyond the borders of a panel, indexing both Shiloh's actual head wound and the psychic disintegration Toland experiences when he confronts the consequences of racist violence. The apparent simplicity of framed panels unfolding in sequence, then, lends itself to indefinite signification, whereby the panel is an open-ended container for a range of lived, materially felt experiences. The extent to which comics allows for the production of spatially drawn analogies to real-world identities or experiences remains one of the most potent and understudied sites of inquiry into the formal politics of the medium.

Finally, the greatest conceptual power of comics in relation to literary studies may lie in the medium's ability to perform a queer disruption of the field's existing logics. The aesthetic and narrative logic of comics, grounded in the indefinite unfolding of sequential

panels arranged in space, is fundamentally nonteleological and opposed to narrative foreclosure, and it requires no relation between individual panels. Sequential unfolding can thus accommodate numerous expressions of identity and desire, each panel acting as a “copy for which there is no original,” to borrow Judith Butler’s classic description of gender performativity (313). Simultaneously, the gutter, or space between panels, materializes the idea that the temporal space between each performance of any given identity or form of embodiment (gendered, racial, sexual, or otherwise) leaves room for the reinvention, transformation, or wholesale rejection of what has come before (Fawaz and Scott; Blechschmidt). This quality of comics seriality strongly supports Chute’s assertion near the conclusion of *Why Comics?* that “[w]e might even consider queerness part of the DNA of comics” (351). In the auteur-driven framework that structures Chute’s broader argument, this claim is stated as an addendum to the fact that LGBTQ people have been involved in the production and circulation of comics art since its inception. That framework, however, detracts from the deeper implication of this statement: Queerness as a form of deviation from prescribed gender and sexual norms is a literal part of the sequential logic of comics.

It is increasingly apparent to the most rigorous comics scholars that, as Christopher Pizzino argues, the impulse to defend comics’s literary value does nothing but diminish the aesthetic and conceptual productivity of comics as a “medium in its own right” (Chute, *Why?* 2). The extraordinary evolution of Chute’s oeuvre speaks to this shift: Chute began her career by making the most convincing case for the literary value of comics in this century. But across four books, numerous articles, and edited special issues, she steadily released her investment in defending the medium *as* literature, directing her energies toward generating rich accounts of the medium’s representational capacities. For this reason, I

have suggested that *Why Comics?* represents a moment of both possibility and danger for the study of comics: while it offers an extraordinary picture of comics’s representational capacities and the medium’s potential for transforming how we see and understand the practice of reading, *Why Comics?* threatens to fall back into a legitimizing project, recuperating comics for literary analysis by providing a ready-made canon of respectable texts.

Let it be perfectly clear: the demand that scholars must ceaselessly prove or legitimize comics’s literary merit is an intellectually bankrupt project, reflecting a self-destructive cynicism in literary studies. It not only distorts the historical record but also distracts us from the more pressing question of what we can learn—about reading, form, print culture, representation, and fantasy—from a medium organized by the unfolding of sequential visual narrative and by what interpretive skills it demands. As Chute explains:

In comics, reading can happen in all directions; this open-endedness, and attention to choice in how one interacts with the pages, is part of the appeal of comics narrative. . . . Comics puts productive pressure on what “normal reading” is—not because it is so easy, or immediate, but rather because paths of reading and different moments of time can compete as alternatives. (*Why?* 28–31)

This is also what makes comics a distinctly queer disruption of both hierarchies of literary value and linear conceptions of reading and narrative closure. Comics expand what we can desire from our reading experience, allowing us to explore a range of commonly delegitimized fantasies about how we read, in what direction, and with what outcome. This is exactly why we must read *Why Comics?* but also why we must read far, far beyond its pages, to plumb the depths of comics genres, authors, histories, and creative styles that never appear between its covers. This, then, is the greatest conceptual gift of Chute’s book:

the simple fact that comics demand to be read, and in an infinite number of ways.

NOTES

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1. I am following in the footsteps of Saunders, who in 2009 offered a pointed critique of Chute's tendency to celebrate perceived "highbrow" expressions of the medium.

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