

Teaching the Graphic Novel

Edited by

Stephen E. Tabachnick

The Modern Language Association of America
New York 2009

© 2009 by The Modern Language Association of America. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. Second printing 2010

Michael A. Chaney

Is There an African American Graphic Novel?

Students in the literature courses I teach, whether in introductory or special-topics seminars, react to the discovery of a graphic novel on the syllabus with a range of emotions, from unrestrained excitement to snide incredulity. As a mixed-race scholar specializing in nineteenth-century presentations of race with broader teaching interests in popular culture and comics, I use these moments to elucidate my aims. I want students to explore the limits mystified in descriptors such as *literature* and *African American*. That the chosen limit expander in question on their syllabus is often one of the few graphic novels by an African American creator helps move their initial questions from those familiar to teachers of *Maus* (“Aren’t comic books for kids?” “How do I read this?” “But is this literature?”) to ones peculiar to my situation (“Just what’s *black* about this?”). In my imagined first-day discussions, gone over obsessively in my head before I teach a special-topics survey on the graphic novel to primarily white students at an elite college, some of the wilier comic enthusiasts among them muse aloud, “Is there such a thing as an African American graphic novel?”

Leaving aside for the moment the question of racial representivity, student interrogations can be translated, in a preteaching fantasy and in

real life, into pedagogical opportunities for clarifying the goals of a course. Indeed, questions raised by an anomalous text can usefully segue into a discussion of the critical tools necessary for investigating that anomaly. Of course, the learning that can be gleaned from discussing how a single graphic novel challenges notions of the literary in a class where all the other texts are unquestionably literary differs from that of discussing a graphic novel in a graphic novel class. The latter class may include, alongside works like *Maus*, *Watchmen*, and *Jimmy Corrigan*, texts from a small but expanding set of graphic novels by African Americans: *King*, by Ho Che Anderson; *Birth of a Nation*, by the writers Aaron McGruder and Reginald Hudlin and the illustrator Kyle Baker; *Narcissa*, by Lance Took; and *Static Shock*, by the writers Dwayne McDuffie and Robert L. Washington and the penciler John Paul Leon, to name only a few. To explain the pedagogical goals behind the reading list, even in the best-case teaching scenarios, I enter into an interrogative dialogic with my students, responding to their questions with some of my own. What can be gained by framing these texts as African American graphic novels rather than as graphic novels by African Americans (or by black Canadians, in the case of Anderson)? What can sequential art by these artists tell us about the relation between narrative and visual representation in making visible racial particularities, experiences, histories, and aesthetics? In short, what horizons of context and critique do these texts call forth?

Regardless of differences in course type, having students engage with a graphic novel produced from a self-consciously black perspective necessitates some grounding in the historical distortion, minimization, and ridicule by which black bodies have been put on public display in Western culture. Without universalizing such a thing as a black aesthetic, I want my students to understand the triumphal efforts of redress and revision inherent to black representations of black experience vis-à-vis the onerous burdens of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Supplying them with brief critical overviews of racism perpetuated in primarily visual domains, therefore, has been essential to our discussions.

I began with critical guns blazing, having students first read excerpts from, say, bell hooks's *Art on My Mind*, Michael Harris's *Colored Pictures*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Hollis Robbins's *The Annotated Uncle Tom Cabin*, or any of Stuart Hall's units on visuality in his many culture studies anthologies (see Evans and Hall). I have since changed my pedagogical tack, after getting a plaguing sense of the uncritical matching exercise

that this ordering of criticism and text invited students to practice. After reading a part of hooks's argument, for example, about the unvarying quality of black appearance in dominant representations, students naturally are led to comment on the challenge to that dominance posed by the manifold complexions Anderson attributes to African American characters in *King*, a biography of the civil rights leader. Yet all but a few students have difficulty transcending this correspondence—this matchup between criticism and text—to reflect on how Anderson's complex universe of black faces, so dramatically rendered in black and white as to seem to some students indistinguishable from white faces, reinforces and perhaps even produces some of the thematic struggles that Martin Luther King, Jr., confronted in organizing such a thing as a black community.

This is a problem not unique to courses on comics, indeed, but one that I have sought to solve by relying on scholarship on black comics. If I can't get away from the matching-exercise protocol students follow in their navigation between criticism and texts, I can at least complicate it. Now, as a precursor to my opening lectures and exploratory discussions on the texts, I have students read essays by Christian Davenport ("Black" and "Brother") and by Jeffrey Brown (selections from *Black Superheroes*, "Comic Book Masculinity") on the obstacles faced by black superheroes and comic book writers in a world dominated by unmarked white male norms of embodiment and stereotypes of black hypermasculinity or invisibility. Although I seldom teach black superhero texts, such as the now-defunct Milestone line of comics, I have noticed that this background prepares students to discuss the prevailing issue of the appearance of blackness in comics and the historical and ideological structures that this appearance both conforms to and critiques from the beginning. This way, students partly control the points of exit from and reentry to whatever text we are looking at, in order to consult broader critical issues having to do with history, racialization, African American aesthetics, and the politics of representation.

When teaching Took's *Narcissa* in an introductory literature course for English majors, I introduced students to the vicissitudes of black representation in comics in a lecture that drew on the amazingly condensed visual history presented in Fredrik Strömberg's *Black Images in the Comics*. Thereafter, they applied the same questions to *Narcissa* that we used in reading John Keats or Franz Kafka (What is the theme? How is the form suited to its expression?), tweaking them to apply to sequential art: What is the relation between picture and words? What is the significance of line

style, lettering, panel size and shape? Add a few words borrowed from Scott McCloud on iconic abstraction, temporality, and closure, and most students are off and hermeneutically running.

After some discussion, I like to move to a small-group arrangement I call the puzzle pass, where each group agrees on an area in the text that is most puzzling, writes down one or two questions addressing how it is puzzling, then passes its questions to another group. Activities designed to elicit from students those aspects of the text that confound general close reading are crucial in my classes, because it is from these activities that the next batch of critical excerpts are chosen—not to solve the puzzles so much as to enlarge the dimensions of the students' collective vocabulary and conceptual frameworks for articulating and approaching the puzzles. This was the lesson I learned from the matching-exercise dilemma: not to prepackage areas that would need solution but to allow the unpredictable relation between students and text to generate these areas anew for every class. Even though, more often than not, the areas in which students struggle most predictably concern race, I have found their sense of intellectual ownership greater and their discussions more robust when critical contexts are introduced to satisfy their engagement with the text rather than mine.

Nevertheless, I have had prescient classes that alight on precisely the dynamic in *Narcissa* that confounds my reading of the text. As I say in an essay informed by teaching the text:

While the main story is about a young avant-garde black filmmaker who suddenly learns that she has only a few days to live and so sets off for Europe, . . . there appears, early on, a set piece of racist Hollywood images against which the graphic novel establishes itself as a counter-narrative. . . . [In the logic of the story], we come to learn that these are the images that Narcissa, the title heroine, actively opposes in her own films, but their addition works [outside the story proper] as well, interrupting narrative coherence with a dreamlike temporality that re-contextualizes the graphic novel as a conscious revision of media constructions of black embodiment. (176)

After our preliminary analysis of Tooks's style, students readily discern the stark contrast presented by this exposé of typical black caricatures—the nanny, magic Negro, Sambo, sidekick, and Methuselah's mama figures—in relation to the eroticized, full-figured female main character. “[T]hese caricatures of black embodiment,” as I point out in my essay, “are *ex situ* in a

work that more generally idealizes the black form” and flouts expected “schemas of coloration” (178). For whereas backgrounds in the graphic novel appear as constructionist shades of geometrical gray, the normally darkest parts of bodies throughout *Narcissa* glow with the brightest highlights. Everyone notices that Narcissa's white dreadlocks, fingernails, and lips contrast with her monochromatic black skin, but few, at first, venture to ask why or to what effect. When these questions are raised, I have students read, in the following class, excerpts from Sander Gilman's work on the exhibition of the Hottentot Venus and the hypersexualization of black women. Ordering the activities and student-raised questions in this way enables students to express for themselves in discussion and in their writing how the illustration style of *Narcissa* proposes an ideological perspective that ambivalently yet boldly luxuriates in the hypersexuality associated with racist attitudes regarding black femininity, while actively reversing stereotypes of black phenotype and character.

Every time I've taught *Narcissa*, I encourage students to have informed discussions about these issues, but I let them decide which issue and which corresponding critical information will be emphasized as the framework through which we approach the work as a whole. But I'm not consistently so open-ended with the material. I still find it important to position student observations within particular parameters of African American cultural production. Observing that a great deal of what we might call, with reservation, an African American graphic novel aesthetic riffs on a historical archive of racist visualization, I have found it useful to foreground aesthetic structures elaborated in various musical forms.

In another course on African American literature and culture, I like to spend a preliminary class session working through definitions of the epistemological presumptions and assertions of blues, jazz, and hip-hop music in conjunction with small-group presentations on whatever historical information may be pertinent to the text at hand (civil rights for *King*, Hollywood stereotypes for *Narcissa*, LA riots for *Birth of a Nation*). For *King* I provide students with brief critical excerpts on blues and jazz aesthetics, typically by Houston Baker, Paul Garon, and Jürgen Grandt, and I model interartistic forms of analysis using a variety of texts, from Richard Pryor to Rita Dove, Romare Bearden to Ray Charles. Afterward, discussions begin with questions prodding students to think about meanings implicit not just in the form of *King* but also in the artwork's mode of address, its way of arranging and inflecting information according to tropes, rhythms, and textures common to African American modalities

of expression. If the blues presents an ironic orientation toward an ambivalent but cyclical universe, where might we find the blues in *King*? Does the visual design of *King* presuppose a different kind of universe? Or is there a pattern of repetition commensurate with hip-hop's sampling technique in *King*? If so, is this pattern a playful or an inflammatory re-deployment of the original?

When I ask students to limn the affective and, by extension, ideological purpose of visual repetition in *King*, this last question leads them to analyze rather than simply react to the expressionistic density that makes the graphic novel difficult to follow at times. Anderson repeatedly drops samples of historical civil rights photography, sometimes doctoring or metaphorically scratching up the surface of the image, reconstituting the burdens of the violent past and reconciling King's legacy of nonviolence through an often chaotic eruption of images both drawn and copied. Practiced close reading helps my students analyze the images, but musical terminology equips them to explore further the implications of the images' orchestration. This move toward synesthesia privileges the kind of interdisciplinary critical consciousness that both comics and African American aesthetics demand.

So is there, finally, such a thing as an African American graphic novel? There are no easy answers, as many of my students would attest, without contextualizing the key terms of the question. Nevertheless, at the intersection where the politics of identity collide with the aesthetics of form and genre, there are graphic novels produced by artists who self-identify as black that convey diasporic histories and experiences at the level of both subject matter and manner of expression. These works not only adopt multiple traditions and practices of representation pronounced elsewhere in African American culture, they also adapt them, articulating them in a genre of sequential art whose traditions likewise change in the process. Thus, we might say with some qualification that African American graphic novels emerge from an alchemy familiar to scholars of African American studies, in which the crude ore of marginalized feeling and imagination transforms into the precious metal of culturally meaningful art, language, and narrative.

Works Cited

Anderson, Ho Che. *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005. Print.

- Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. Print.
- Brown, Jeffrey A. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001. Print.
- . "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero." *African American Review* 33.1 (1999): 25–42. Print.
- Chaney, Michael A. "Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States* 32.3 (2007): 175–200. Print.
- Davenport, Christian. "Black Is the Color of My Comic Book Character: An Examination of Ethnic Stereotypes." *Inks* 4.1 (1997): 20–28. Print.
- . "The Brother Might Be Made of Steel, but He Sure Ain't Super . . . Man." *Other Voices* 1.2 (1998): n. pag. Web. 9 Nov. 2008.
- Evans, Jessica, and Stuart Hall, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage, 1999. Print.
- Garon, Paul. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*. London: Eddison, 1975. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and Hollis Robbins, eds. *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By Harriet Beecher Stowe. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- Gilman, Sander L. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in the Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 204–42. Print.
- Grandt, Jurgen E. *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004. Print.
- Harris, Michael D. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2003. Print.
- Hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New, 1995. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper, 1993. Print.
- McDuffie, Dwayne, Robert L. Washington, and John Paul Leon. *Static Shock: Trial by Fire*. New York: DC Comics, 2000. Print.
- McGruder, Aaron, Reginald Hudlin, and Kyle Baker. *Birth of a Nation*. New York: Crown, 2004. Print.
- Strömberg, Fredrik. *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003. Print.
- Tooks, Lance. *Narcissa: Graphic Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2002. Print.