

# *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels*

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Golnar Nabizadeh, *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels*

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Golnar Nabizadeh's monograph, *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels*, moves beyond the common trend of examining trauma narratives to focusing on different kinds of memory in comics. Her aim, however, remains comparable to discussions around trauma in comics and graphic novel that seek to highlight the unique contributions of comics for representing complex, serious themes: her "book examines the way that modern comics represent personal, political, social, and historical memories, and argues that comics can help recover marginalized and minority voices from the peripheries of representation" (1). Problematic as they are, such claims regarding the uniqueness of comics for representing "othered" perspectives are very much part of the mainstream of comics scholarship as concretized by Hillary Chute's recent, popularizing (and successful) book, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. While such generalizations in themselves are not productive – and indeed somewhat misleading since they tend to focus on particular kinds of comics – the close readings teasing the specific functioning of comics are often rewarding. This is the case in *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels*.

Nabizadeh succeeds in conveying complex ideas very clearly. Her close readings, combining familiar comics with overlooked ones, are insightful and convincing. The book will be useful to scholars working on comics and autobiographical and political memories. It is also accessible for students and scholars new to the field.

Nabizadeh focuses on the issue of representation for building the bridge between memory studies and comics studies. This is reinforced by observations that both comics and memory are polysemiotic (3) and "comics work as mnemonic structure/form" (5), both of which follow a similar train of thought as Chute's influential readings of the memory work of canonical graphic novels<sup>65</sup>. The representations of memories analyzed have a global focus and cover a variety of comics, starting with Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga*, which was first published in 1931 to recent online comics about refugee detention

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. for instance, her introduction to *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press 2010).

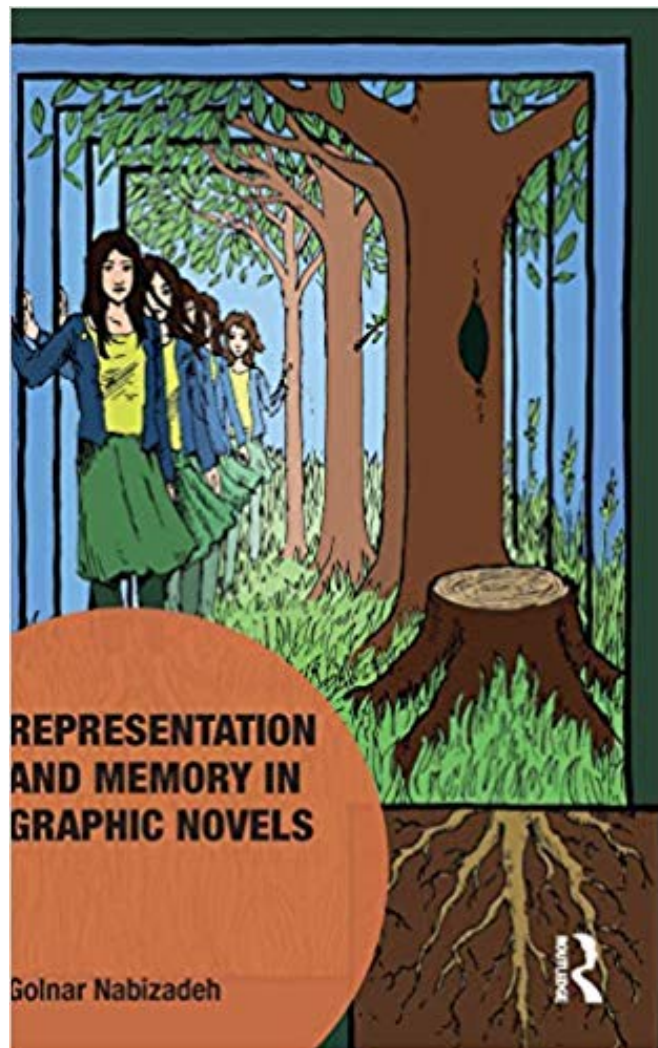
practices, such as Safdar Ahmed's *Villawood*. Nabizadeh is consequently able to somewhat nuance comics studies' obsessions with the "gappiness" of comics and its potential relevance for representations of trauma and memory which also comprise of gaps.

Nabizadeh identifies a certain "melancholic impulse" in comics (6), which she connects on a formal level to the reader-dependent time of comics and its static nature since "modern comics embed loss within their structure, where the appearance of the panels (and their contents) is interrupted by their disappearance (or absent presence) of the gutters" (8). In her close readings she examines this affective affordance of comics in translating memories and giving voices and bodies to marginalized others. She also frequently turns to the functioning of image archives in comics, usually through the incorporation of photographs or photographic references.

The contextualization of Kiyama's *Four Immigrants Manga* is noteworthy because of Kiyama's positioning between Japanese and American cultures and his referencing of familiar Sunday funnies in his manga. The juxtaposition of a close reading of *Four Immigrants* to one of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* is highly apt but Nabizadeh does not engage in a dialogue with the two comics. This also holds for the later chapters on racism in which Nabizadeh discusses Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* and Pat Grant's *Blue*, the chapter on "memories of illness", which turns to David B.'s *Epileptic* and David Small's *Stitches*, and the penultimate chapter on war and conflict, which looks at Emmanuel Guibert and Didier Lefèvre's *Le Photographe* and David Polonsky and Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*. The final chapter on online comics about Australian detention centers – Sam Wallmann's *At Work Inside Our Detention Centres* and Safdar Ahmed's *Villawood* – is perhaps the most powerful one and captures the constant transformation of comics to accommodate new media possibilities and its potential to protest.

For her analyses, Nabizadeh combines insights from comics scholars such as Nina Mickwitz on the documentary impulses of comics and Rebecca Scherr on the "haptic visuality" in Joe Sacco's comics with the work of renowned cultural memory scholars Ann Rigney and Astrid Erll, who argue for a more holistic relationship between memory and history through considering both as 'modes of representation' (7), Judith Butler's examination of frames as strategies of representation and othering as well as Freudian insights on trauma and loss. Nabizadeh also examines the strategy of defamiliarization in comics such as *Blue* for highlighting practices of othering or the reworking and questioning of lingering racist cultural memories in *American Born Chinese*. Discussions of the role of humor in the corpus, which also includes Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, are an important addition to the discourse on trauma and memory in comics.

Nabizadeh's rich methodological toolbox, which matches the relative diversity of the corpus, makes *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels* an intriguing read that succeeds in contributing some new insights on a somewhat well-worn topic. The "diverse forms of legibility in comics" that Nabizadeh mentions at the end of her book, and builds on W. J. T. Mitchell's description of comics as an "internally differentiated body", leaves us with food for thought on how to expand our thinking about comics and memory (188).



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