THE COMICS GRID
Journal of comics scholarship

Ebesu, D 2024 Visual Storytelling and Historical Memory. A Review of *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 14(1): pp. 1–9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.18185

Open Library of Humanities

Visual Storytelling and Historical Memory. A Review of *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics*

Jorge Santos, *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics* University of Texas Press, 312 pages, 2019, ISBN 978-1477318263

Duane Ebesu, Columbia University, US, de18@columbia.edu

This review explores Jorge Santos' *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement* (2019), which analyzes how graphic novels reframe cultural memory of the civil rights movement through visual storytelling. Santos critiques "consensus memory" for oversimplifying the movement, highlighting how comics offer counter-memory by presenting history as contested and multifaceted. The review delves into key examples, including *March* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, emphasizing the role of visual media in disrupting linear narratives. Santos' interdisciplinary approach enriches both comics and memory studies, urging readers to engage with diverse, ongoing struggles for social justice.

Jorge Santos' *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics* (University of Texas Press, 2019; **Figure 1**). provides an expansive critique of how graphic narratives engage with and reshape the cultural memory of the civil rights movement. Published in 2019, the book provides an alternate perspective on history by examining how graphic novels and memoirs serve as powerful tools in challenging dominant narratives. Santos turns his attention to "consensus memory"—an abridged but widely accepted view of the civil rights movement that focuses on iconic figures like Martin Luther King Jr., significant events like the March on Washington, and pivotal legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Santos, 2019, p. 4). While these components remain significant, consensus memory can overlook the diverse voices and experiences that shaped it, placing aside more radical aspects of the movement. Santos argues that graphic narratives can disrupt consensus memory by presenting history as a contested, fragmented, and multifaceted process, through its unique formal qualities (Santos, 2019, p. 8).

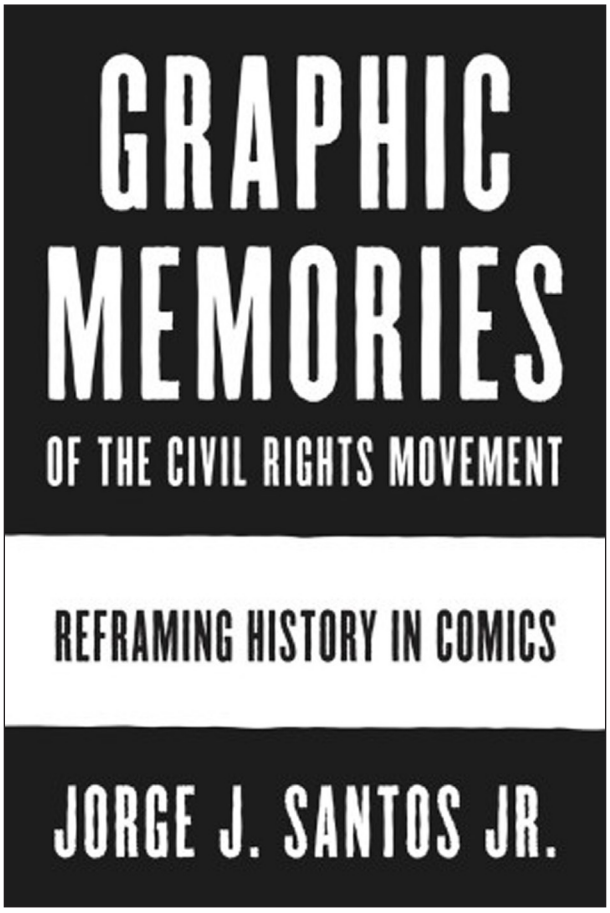

Figure 1: Cover of *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics* by Jorge Santos (2019). © University of Texas Press.

Counter-memory lies at the heart of Santos' analysis: an alternative form of remembering that belies dominant historical remembering by acknowledging the perspectives of the marginalized. Drawing on the work of memory studies scholars such Renee C. Romano, Leigh Raiford, and Michel Foucault, Santos postulates that graphic novels have an unparalleled potential to function as counter-memories because they visualize history in a nonlinear and fragmented manner, drawn from the very way memory works (Santos, 2019, pp. 12–19). Memory is not a flat narration of the past but a rebuilding of personal experiences, cultural contexts, and continuous reinterpretations. Formal aspects of comics—such as the integration of text and image, the use of panels and gutters to guide the reader's eye, and the ability to depict multiple temporalities—enable graphic narratives to relate to historical events in a manner which traditional prose histories rarely do. As Santos writes, "On the ever-shifting terrain of civil rights memory, these narratives create space for readers not only to participate in the memory-making process, but also to realize that they already exercise the agency to shape this archive via their participation in a national culture that venerates a particular version of this history" (Santos, 2019, p. 17).

The introduction establishes the stakes of the book by questioning why graphic novels have been increasingly used to represent the civil rights movement when there is already a substantial body of documentary evidence available, including photographs, films, and historical records (Santos, 2019, p. 23). As Santos explains, traditional forms of historical representation reinforce consensus memory in that it constructs the civil rights movement as a triumphant story of progress. Graphic novels have created one means by which such stabilized narratives can be disrupted. Using a combination of visual and textual elements, history can be portrayed as an open-ended and continuous struggle, rather than an exhibition of neatly resolved chapters in the annals of history (Santos, 2019, pp. 76–77). This agrees with the approach of scholars like Hillary Chute, who has argued that comics have the power to "materialize history" and offer one way of visual witnessing which implicates readers in the ethical and political dimensions of remembering (Chute, 2016, pp. 26).

One compelling approach of this book is that it includes a wide range of graphic novels that differ in their approach to the civil rights movement, providing an alternative to the narrowness of consensus memory. Chapter one focuses on Ho Che Anderson's *King*, a graphic biography of Martin Luther King Jr. that is unique for its complex portrayal of King as an icon who defies easy categorization (Santos, 2019, pp. 25–28). Anderson uses a range of artistic styles, from photorealism to abstract expressionism, to portray various aspects of King's life and legacy, reserving the inclination to present him as a monolithic icon of nonviolent resistance (Santos, 2019, pp. 36–45). Santos adds that stylistic shifts in Anderson's work break up the expected

visual coherence from biographical narratives, underlining how King's legacy has become an arena of media representations, cultural politics, and competitive interpretation (Santos, 2019, pp. 25–36). Such an approach invites readers to interact critically with King's legacy and not be blind to the more radical elements of his activist agenda, such as a critique of American militarism and capitalism—a critique that is hushed by his nonviolent message in the conventional accounts of his life and work. Indeed, as Santos says, King's particular emphasis on nonviolence overshadows much of his activism, particularly from the mainstream point of view (Santos, 2019, pp. 39–42).

Chapter 2 shifts the focus to John Lewis's *March* trilogy, extending Santos' critique of the consensus of memory into a comment on the movement's temporality (Santos, 2019, pp. 53–57). Co-authored with Andrew Aydin and illustrated by Nate Powell, the trilogy narrates selected experiences of Lewis in the civil rights movement using various techniques—"bleeding panels" being one—indicating how the past and present struggles for racial justice are inextricably intertwined (Santos, 2019, pp. 76–79). This formal decision symbolizes the fact that the civil rights movement does not relate to any specific historical period, but is an ongoing process that is still going on, and whose reverberations can be felt in present society. Santos is clear: through this remembering of history that denies closure, *March* has insisted on the incompleteness of the civil rights movement, challenging readers to acknowledge equality's struggle as an unfinished, vital project (Santos, 2019, p. 76). By setting scenes from the 1960s against Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, a new viewpoint has risen from the ideas of "post-racial" America, evidencing that while some things changed, systemic racism and social inequalities have remained constant (Santos, 2019, pp. 64–66). Santos believes it defamiliarizes the narrative of linear progress, and begs readers to consider what instances of the civil rights movement are still impactful today.

In Chapter 3, Santos discusses Lila Quintero Weaver's graphic memoir, *Darkroom*, which blends Latina experiences into the narrative of the civil rights era (Santos, 2019, pp. 71). *Darkroom* relates Weaver's experiences as a young Latina immigrant in Alabama, bringing a new perspective to the discussion, complicating the Black-White binary so often reserved within civil rights historiography (Santos, 2019, pp. 79–80). Such "photo-graphic narrative"—to use the term Santos employs to refer to the way in which this book combines hand drawings with recreated photographs—challenges at its core the notion of transparency in visual documentation (Santos, 2019, pp. 80–81). Visual records reveal themselves as continually subject to interpretation and framing through a photorealistic style based on Weaver's drawings. As Santos summarizes it,

Weaver's "photo-graphic narrative not only augments the family's photographs of their journey but arranges, revises, contextualizes, and narrativizes them as well" (Santos, 2019, p. 86). This allows *Darkroom* to break through consensus memory by indicating the variety of perspectives that enriched the civil rights movement while reminding us about the existence of experiences usually excised in the mainstream accounts of history (Santos, 2019, p. 86).

The Silence of Our Friends, analyzed in the fourth chapter, extends the book's critique of consensus memory by examining a lesser-known episode of civil rights activism in Houston, Texas (Santos, 2019, pp. 113–115). Co-authored by Mark Long and Jim Demonakos, with illustrations by Nate Powell, the graphic novel tells the story of the TSU Five, a group of Black students at Texas Southern University accused of killing a police officer during a protest (Santos, 2019, pp. 112–113). By focusing on this relatively obscure event, *The Silence of Our Friends* challenges the spatial boundaries of civil rights memory, which tend to prioritize iconic sites such as Selma and Birmingham. Santos argues that "Many of the visual cues employed throughout *The Silence of Our Friends* manage, paradoxically, to situate the reader in Houston in 1967 while also displacing the narrative into a not-so-bygone era of US segregation" (Santos, 2019, p. 122). The book urges readers to continually unpack the ways in which the civil rights movement has traditionally been framed, along with a critical consideration of interrelated local struggles throughout the United States (Santos, 2019, pp. 112–113). Such an approach upends the conventional narrative of a movement often narrowed to a few well-known events and locations, providing a more comprehensive view of its scope and significance (Santos, 2019, pp. 125–127).

Chapter five is devoted to Santos's analysis of Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*, one graphic novel that deals head-to-head with race and sexuality in the context of the civil rights era. The story involves the young White man, Toland Polk, a civil rights activist struggling with his sexual orientation in the segregated South (Santos, 2019, pp. 142–145). Santos has difficulty with the novel's use of a lynching scene involving a White character to draw comparisons between racial oppression and LGBTQ struggles. For Santos, one of the most important areas that *Stuck Rubber Baby* touches upon is that of relating civil rights to LGBTQ activism. Santos believes the reappropriation of the imagery of the lynchings risks eliding the specific historical realities of racial antiliberal violence against Blacks, and it detracts from the particular ways in which African Americans have been subjected to racial terrorism (Santos, 2019, pp. 154–163). This critique confronts questions about the ethics of historical representation, especially when intersecting forms of marginalization are addressed (Santos, 2019, pp.

159–163). While Cruse's work expands the discourse on civil rights to include LGBTQ perspectives, it also demonstrates the challenges involved in responsibly navigating multiple layers of social struggle within a shared historical framework (Santos, 2019, pp. 154–156).

Santos incorporates theoretical frameworks from visual semiotics, memory studies, and comics theory to support his analysis of graphic narratives as sites of counter-memory (Santos, 2019, pp. 140–145). The concepts "amplification through simplification," as expressed by Scott McCloud (McCloud, 1993, p. 30), and "iconic solidarity" developed by Thierry Groensteen (Groensteen, 2007, p. 23) allow explanation of how graphic novels can distill complex historical themes into available visual forms that encourage critical engagement. Foucault's theories on power, memory, and historiography provide further grounding for Santos' argument that graphic novels have the potential to uncover the mechanisms through which certain historical events are remembered while others are marginalized (Foucault, 1972, p. 129). By visually disrupting the coherence of conventional narratives, Santos asserts that graphic novels "ask us not only to reconsider the ways in which political, social, and popular cultures interact with history to form such narratives, but also to reconsider our roles in these processes" (Santos, 2019, p. 17).

While Santos's *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement* is an engaging read as far as a critical consensus memory project is concerned, the book certainly could be expanded in several places to better address other dimensions of civil rights representation in graphic novels. One area likely to be further investigated is the representation of civil rights themes in mainstream superhero comics, like *X-Men* using the mutant metaphor to tell about marginalization and social justice (Santos, 2019, pp. 178–179). While Santos briefly cites *X-Men* in his epilogue, a more deeply ingrained exploration of how mainstream comics interact with civil rights issues might provide an enlightening counterpoint to the independent and alternative works at the heart of the discussion. Incorporating superhero narratives into the discussion would also serve as an introduction to how different genres within comics intersect with and shape public perceptions of civil rights history and social justice. Moreover, there is less attention to the sociopolitical contexts in which such graphic novels came to be written (and were read) when compared to Santos's effective discussion of the formal qualities of graphic novels he analyzed. It would be interesting to see how these graphic novels have been received by an array of publics, especially communities that lived through the civil rights era or communities directly affected by the issues represented, as a way to further place them within their cultural context and to deepen the analysis (Santos, 2019, pp. 184–189).

It is within this framework that Santos firmly acknowledges the limitations of consensual memory and seats his argument on the capacity of graphic narratives to contest dominant historiography, even as controversies over historical memory and representation continue to frame contemporary debates of social justice. Within this context, the timeliness and weight of Santos' argument become even more considerable (Santos, 2019, pp. 154–156). Its focus on alternative perspectives and lesser-known stories of the civil rights movement places the book within a broad scholarly undertaking of revisiting and expanding civil rights historiography to include a greater variety of voices and experiences. By centering the narratives of Latino, LGBTQ, and regional activists who made key interventions in the movement, *Graphic Memories* invites readers to question what counts as part of the civil rights movement and to problematize or complicate the reductive progress of narratives typical in much public memory (Santos 2019, pp. 13–14).

Another unparalleled merit of the book is its encyclopedic interdisciplinary approach, marrying the fields of cultural studies, visual analysis, and historiography. It does so in a manner that produces a polysemous idea of how graphic narratives can tackle the question of history. This not only enriches the landscape of comics studies but also adds to the current debates on representational and mnemonic practices of history. Santos focuses on the unique capacities of graphic narratives to both visualize and to critique history, showing how these works could provide a way toward the most inclusive understanding of the past, moving beyond conventional narratives and embracing a multiplicity of perspectives (Santos, 2019, pp. 119–121). His work shows that graphic novels can be much more than a medium for telling stories but, perhaps, a cultural artifact that challenges perceptions on how history is built and who has rights to the representation by which historical memory shapes contemporary social and political realities (Santos, 2019, pp. 1–9).

In the end, *Santos' Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement* is a considerable contribution not only to comics studies but also memory studies and civil rights historiography, serving as an oft-overlooked reminder of how graphic narratives can challenge and reshape cultural memory in the civil rights movement. Given the breadth of graphic novels that Santos researches, he shows how such works are able to offer an alternative to summoning the past, amplifying the voices of the marginalized while challenging consensus narratives. In pursuing critical engagement with the limitations of consensus memory, Santos calls for a new, expanded practice of historical memory, sensitive to the unfinished struggle for social justice. This work adds to our understanding of the civil rights movement by featuring the possibilities of graphic narratives as a tool of cultural critique, that is, challenging the very basis of remembering and representing history.

In a moment when debates around historical memory and social justice are ever-changing, it is an important statement that *Graphic Memories* returns to and questions dominant conceptions of history while celebrating the pluralism within stories of our common past. This book invites scholars and general readers to appreciate the role visual media has played in shaping cultural memory, where the power of graphic narratives can open new forms of seeing and understanding history. Calling for an attention to graphic novels as sites of counter-memory, Santos invites us to think anew about the potential of visual storytelling as historiographical intervention—one that would create deeper and more critical engagements with the past by reframing our understanding of the present and the future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Chute, H 2016 *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Harvard University Press.

Foucault, M 1972 *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books.

Groensteen, T 2007 *The System of Comics*. University Press of Mississippi.

McCloud, S 1993 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. William Morrow Paperbacks.

Santos, J J 2019 *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics*. University of Texas Press.