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Michael A Chaney. *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks, and Mazes in the Autobiographical Graphic Novel*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Michael A. Chaney. *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks, and Mazes in the Autobiographical Graphic Novel*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2016.

Keywords

Comics, autobiography, memoir, children's studies, narrative theory

Michael A Chaney. *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks, and Mazes in the Autobiographical Graphic Novel*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2016. ix + 216 pp.

Within the graphic novel genre, there is a large and steadfast segment dedicated to memoir and autobiography. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and John Lewis' *March* are all highly acclaimed comics autobiographies. Their success is due in part to the genre's potential to literally draw stories of the self and share them with others who find in them a powerful surrogate. It is no coincidence then that the above-mentioned books connect to accounts of Jewish, Queer and Black people, respectively. They provide a focal point for collective and individual identification. Graphic memoir gleans the multitude of shared experience via the perspective of the memoirist.

Comics can be childish, but comics studies should be a serious, rigorous affair. *Reading Lessons in Seeing* begins by throwing off the protestations of the past and draws attention to the pattern of reactionary politics that surrounds shifting attitudes toward comics, some of which would relegate them to the younger reader's shelf. Chaney suggests that the wealth of previous scholarship on comics and graphic autobiography eliminates the need for basic arguments in regards to memoir and comics discourse, such as that comics are worthy of study. Chaney's argument that graphic memoirs "teach their viewers how they ought to be read" (3) is a gestalt of graphic memoir elements, including "mirrors, the child, the puzzle, artisanal labor, and history," that produce their pedagogical function. Focusing on this didactic aspect of autobiographical comics, Chaney deconstructs how they teach us and illuminates the concrete depictions of art and identity being created on the page.

As the book progresses, Chaney weaves in the author/narrators from previous chapters, modeling how the graphic narratives in question can also connect to other elements of analyses throughout the book. For example, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) is the focus of the "Mirrors" chapter, but Chaney regularly refers to the character/protagonist "Marjane" in his other analyses throughout the book, in effect strengthening how the above-mentioned comic tropes are interconnected and converge in the graphic memoir as it teaches the reader how to "see," which Chaney defines as slowing down and re-reading. In pushing us to view "the thinking" on the page (5), Chaney tasks us with discovering how graphic memoir transforms our perception of what we see.

The first chapter, "Mirrors, Masks and *Mise en Abyme*," points to the many mirrors that appear in graphic memoirs, asking "why must these epiphanies of characters, interiorities, and spectatorships play out before the mirror?" (22). In Chaney's estimation, these "doublings," "mirror-within-a-mirror" (or *Mise en Abyme*) and "meta pictorial commentary," such as in Laurie Sandell's *The Imposter's Daughter*, explain why graphics are well suited when dealing with "this

excess of identity” (21). Memoir engages with the multiplicity of identity via mirrors and masks to provide the visual language—which is sorely needed in comics study—that explores those complexities.

The compelling assertion in chapter two, “The Child in and as the Comics,” identifies how the child embodies both pre-narrative and “lost ways of knowing” (93). The child functions as seer, subject/object, scribe, or costume depending on the author’s needs. Chapter three, “Picture Games in Story Frames and the Play Spaces of Autography,” explores how graphic memoir detours from narrative when it asks the reader to engage in a game, or as Chaney calls it, “ludus.” This disruption in reading forces the reader to re-read, read slower or think about the fact that they are reading, which Chaney asserts makes them better readers (98). A precise understanding of the child and play space in comics enhances our theories of graphic narratology.

Chapter four, “The Work Behind the Work of Graphic *Künstlerroman*,” excavates the image of the artist at work and likens drawings from *Maus* and Julie Doucet’s *My New York Diary* to a colophon—historically, a graphic rendering of the author’s identity that appears within the pages of a book. Chaney notes how the illustrator illustrating their image operates “as a technology,” decoding information on the narrator as artistic subject (124). The practice demonstrates how the illustrated artist’s journey “provides a narrative structure and visual grammar” for authors to express the weight of one’s existence, and craft, on the page (142). Ultimately, Chaney develops tools, like visual grammar, to better theorize graphic narratives.

Lastly, chapter five, “Visual Pedagogies of Impossible Community in *Incognegro* and *March*,” draws from Hortense Spillers’ theory of “oceanic suspensions” to read the diasporic histories of African Americans manifested in graphic form (145). Although neither book is a monograph, and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s work is not an autobiography, Chaney compares their *Incognegro* (2008) to Lewis’ *March* (2013) because he believes that both “construe race history’s graphic lessons through graphic subjects” (147). This, however, is Chaney’s least sturdy chapter in that it frames the narratives through social identity and race, which differs greatly from his other chapters. Whereas he treats memoirs by Bechdel or Spiegelman as individual stories and not as comics about “Queer” history or “Jewish” history, Lewis’ individuality as narrator collapses under the responsibility of representing all of African American history. This speaks to a larger issue in graphic autobiographies: a lack of wide-ranging voices. Where are all the Black graphic memoirs?

Autobiographical comics foster empathy by placing the reader/viewer in the perspective of the author/narrator, and when their views differ a rupture occurs. *Reading Lessons in Seeing* focuses on this moment of rupture and what it does to the reader’s thinking. Pushing us to uncover how an artist creates their art, their

story, Chaney excavates the form of the comics medium, showing us to read “comics as thinking” (6). Chaney’s observations of the tropes in graphic memoir are as powerful as his analysis of the genre itself. The graphic autobiography teaches us to “see” and in doing so ensures a more informed and developed reader in the end.

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