

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Jorge J. Santos, Jr. Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics

Ian Rocksborough-Smith

Volume 85, printemps 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070926ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0025>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rocksborough-Smith, I. (2020). Compte rendu de [Jorge J. Santos, Jr. Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 322–325. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0025>

Carew's study of U.S. labour abroad joins the vibrant and growing historiography on both transnationalism and internationalism. His emphasis on Irving Brown showcases a particularly interesting transnational figure who worked extensively on the front lines of the global Cold War. The book also suggests the limited nature of U.S. labour's commitment to internationalism.

Yet *American Labour's Cold War Abroad* also suffers from drawbacks common to many transnational histories. It is, at its core, the story of a few powerful men and therefore privileges their perspectives, though Carew does provide a relatively balanced view. Moreover, the book could use the inclusion of context in many respects. This would frame the narrative more effectively and point to the significance of Carew's conclusions. Even though "Cold War" is in the title, insufficient reference is made to either U.S. foreign or domestic context or major works about them. Did McCarthyism affect how U.S. labour activists could act overseas? Where do Irving Brown's activities fit in new understandings of the global Cold War? Furthermore, much of the European view of the Americans is through the Americans' eyes, while the views of Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians are rarely stated.

It is impossible to include all of the necessary context, and these absences point to the possibilities for future research. Yet, it is not clear what those possibilities might be, because the book lacks a coherent statement on how it contributes to the field. This is particularly notable in relation to the historiography on the transnational turn and global Cold War generally and to recent specialist works like Quenby Olmsted Hughes' *In the Interest of Democracy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), which extends up to the mid-1950s, and several of the essays in *American Labor's Global Ambassadors*,

the volume edited by Robert Anthony Waters Jr. and Geert van Goethem (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Addressing at least some of the broader historiographical and contextual questions would have helped to situate non-specialists. The bibliography lists archival collections in six countries, dozens of interviews, and a substantial number of secondary works. The book introduces more than one hundred national and international labour organizations, although the many acronyms make reading difficult at times. The detailed material presented in *American Labour's Cold War Abroad* will therefore be of greatest interest to scholars of U.S. labour organizations abroad in the early Cold War.

DENIS CLARK

University of Calgary

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

GRAPHIC MEMOIRS and novels offer scholars and students access to many usable, often controversial, and always captivating pasts. As a teacher of history, I relish opportunities to consider assigning recent publications in the graphic history genre for my students because of their readability and accessibility, as well as the ways they address the contingent nuances of historical interpretation. In particular, I have taught from Jonathan Hennessey's *The United States Constitution* (2008) and Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* (2003) and plan to assign recently published works like David F. Walker's *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (2019) and the Graphic History Collective's excellent *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (2019) among others. Each of these works addresses a range of key documents, figures, and events in

the modern history of the United States and Canada and demonstrates how the graphic history genre has opened-up exciting new possibilities for teaching and learning about diverse North American pasts.

This review agrees with Jorge J. Santos Jr.'s assertion in his recent *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement: Reframing History in Comics* (2019) that the 'graphic narrative' medium "offers the ability 'to cultivate new practices of mainstream, alternate, or counter-histories'." (9) Building on the work of scholars like Paul Buhle and many others, *Graphic Memories* offers a critical study of recent graphic histories of the U.S. Civil Rights movement. In this study, Santos makes a point of indicating how the graphic medium or genre helps to challenge "consensus" memories of civil rights pasts. In particular, Santos' revealing study looks at Canadian graphic novel author Ho Che Anderson's *King: A Comics Biography* (1993); congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis' graphic memoir *March* (2015) trilogy which highlights the roles local people played in movement activism; Lila Quintero Weaver's black/white racial-binary-challenging *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (2012) based on her upbringing as the daughter of Argentinian immigrants in 1960s Alabama; Mark Long's *The Silence of Our Friends* (2012), about an underreported civil rights protest in late 1960s Houston; and Howard Cruses' *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), a partly fictional graphic novel that treats the intersections of civil rights and LGBTQ protest in late 20th Century America as well as the complex deployment of imagery surrounding the violence of racial lynching.

Santos notes at the outset of his well-researched literary and cultural study of these recent but varied graphic novels and memoirs of civil rights movement America that the movement itself is one

of the "most documented, photographed, and televised political phenomenon in U.S. history." (2) This is certainly no revelation for any scholar of civil rights history, let alone anyone with a passing understanding of America's modern pasts. Yet the graphic adaptations Santos analyzes in *Graphic Memories* do more than simply regurgitate commonly understood narratives of civil rights historiography. As Santos notes, "at stake in all these narratives is a revelation of the process by which history is told, retold, produced and reproduced, and narrativized and renarrativized before becoming enshrined in our memories and disseminated for sociopolitical purposes." (3) These "civil rights graphic memories" as Santos, Jr. calls them, "foster in their readers a metacritical awareness of history as an editorial and curative process, simultaneously calling them to question what evidentiary forms, like the photograph or the film reel, we accept as truth." (3) In particular, the visual analysis Santos offers of each work he studies presents some compelling commentary for how comic-book genres deal with the veracity of temporal realities and the complexities and limitations of human memory and lived experience of trauma.

Graphic Memories is book-ended by an extensive first chapter analysis of Ho Che Anderson's now classic, *King: A Comic Biography* (1993), as well as a revealing and helpful interview with Anderson about comic book history genres in an instructive Appendix at the end of the volume. Santos situates *King* as an important re-articulation of civil rights history as graphic novel genres evolved into their own through the last years of the 20th Century. For Santos, *King* also helps some of the earliest conversations in civil rights studies that occurred across disciplines, and that challenged consensus and "great-man" narratives of history to consider the complexities and contingencies of

history-making and the ways civil rights in particular have critically engaged American national memory-making. As Santos notes, “*King’s* [Martin Luther] King remains essentially unknowable, even mythic. Anderson aims to complicate, via a variety of graphic narrative strategies, the version of MLK [Martin Luther King] recalled by consensus memories and propagated by media and cultural narratives.” (19) Of particular interest in this chapter is the ways Santos recalls the ways King is remembered as a consensus figure in American public memory. As he suggests, a “solution to reductive, iconic consensus memoirs becomes not to counter their content, but to introduce a resistive reading practice firmly situated in an active reading of the graphic narrative mode that disrupts the ease with which such narratives are received.” (27) In the appendix, Santos’ interview with Anderson tells us much about the ways graphic novel authors can become self-critical of their earlier works. As Anderson indicates, *King* “is lacking a certain point of view” (206) – particularly Anderson’s earlier “inexperience” as a graphic writer. This reviewer would also note the explosion of recent studies on King’s engagement with anti-poverty and radical left political initiatives prior to his assassination in 1968, notably Michael Honey’s *Going Down Jericho Road* (2007) which outlines King’s mid-late 1960s commitment to anti-poverty and anti-war initiatives in Memphis, Tennessee, or Thomas F. Jackson’s *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* (2007) which are not recalled in Santos’ study nor in Anderson’s *King* series. Both Honey and Jackson offer nuanced research that conventional scholarly treatments of King’s biography omit and that remain outside of most consensus accounts of U.S. civil rights pasts.

A compelling aspect of Santos’ *Graphic Memories* is his personal reflections on why he sees parallels between the comic

book, superhero graphic narrative genre, and civil rights histories in the United States. In particular, he writes of his own upbringing as a son of El Salvadorian and Ecuadorian immigrant parents in a working-class and segregated enclave of Houston in the 1980s and the ways Marvel’s *X-Men* comics provided a childhood outlet for him to escape the travails of such experiences. Santos writes of how *X-Men* comics provided a “flexible allegory” to the zeitgeist of civil rights protest in America’s past and present. (188, 186) These connections become evident when we consider the parallels of the comics’ formative years through the insurgent 1960s to the more recent parallels between storylines in the comic book series that coincided with the Black Lives Matter movements against contemporary police brutality and violence. In particular, Santos outlines the ways storylines that pit classic Marvel Comic characters like Magneto and Professor X over the fate of mutant-kind reflect the dichotomies in strategies between militancy and non-violence advocated by such figures as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, as well as recent comic serials that depict a now militant and erstwhile reformist Cyclops (Scott Summers) character. As Santos relates, “we might think of the *X-Men* comics and their potential for civil-rights oriented readings as an emergent form of consensus memory happening in nearly real time.” (186)

This study should interest literary and historical scholars of civil rights narrative pasts in the United States as well as students of graphic novel forms generally. In particular, *Graphic Memories* helps explain the evolution of the graphic historical narrative form and the ways such narratives can help advance the popular study of U.S. civil rights generally.

IAN ROCKSBOROUGH-SMITH
University of the Fraser Valley