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VISUALIZING BLACK LEADERSHIP: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN TWO CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC NOVELS¹

In his classic formulation of African-American cultural and literary theory, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argued that one way to understand the practice of signifyin' is that of "repetition with a signal difference" (Gates xxiv).² Strictly related to this idea is also his view of black expression as being "double-voiced," i.e. often engaged in the act of talking to other texts by revisiting, updating, criticizing, or commenting upon them.³ Although Gates' concepts have been mainly applied to word-based textual narratives (either of the oral or written type), some scholars have recently disclosed their relevance to other kinds of artistic expression as well. In the present essay I will be referring to the genre of the comics book and its more 'serious' variant, the graphic novel, which in their combining together the realm of the textual (properly said) with that of the visual, act out the subversive energy of black cultural tradition in new and unexpected ways.⁴

Drawing upon a 1934 essay by Zora Neale Hurston, titled "Characteristics of Negro Expression," cultural scholar Qiana Whitted commented on the particular significance that the word/image dichotomy assumes in understanding the specificity of African American expression via the graphic novel form. In that essay Hurston maintained that the strength of black vernacular culture and storytelling resided in its ability to use language in visual, pictorial terms, which set black forms of expression apart from the abstract, highly sophisticated language of the (white) Euro-American tradition. Using words as if they were *images* rather than *text* also implied, for black storytellers, a different way of accessing and understanding reality: in Hurston's words, if "the white man thinks in a written language (...) the Negro thinks in hieroglyphs" (qtd in Whitted 80).⁵ Within this framework, it becomes apparent that the African American engagement in an

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¹ Over the last few years, the study of graphic novels and of their role in contemporary American culture has attracted the interest of scholars within the Italian academia, too. Providing an excellent sample of the current directions of research is the special issue of *À coma – Rivista Internazionale di Studi Nordamericani* ("Il graphic novel negli Stati Uniti," n. 38, Spring 2009), edited by Vincenzo Bavaro and Donatella Izzo, and featuring contributions by Italian as well as American scholars. Worth-mentioning is also the essay "Supereroi postmoderni: Letteratura e *Graphic Novel* negli Stati Uniti" by Paolo Simonetti, published in *Fictions IX* (2010).

² Considered as the founding principle of the African American vernacular tradition, Gates defines signifyin' as the literary/textual process by which black artists and writers revise and incorporate the work of their peers within their own work (xxii-xxiii). This practice also translates into a figurative use of black language, which includes the ability of talking with great innuendo and resorting to indirection or trickery while speaking about a given subject.

³ Directly connected with the concept of signifyin' is the trope of the Talking Book, which Gates introduced in order to explain the nexus between racial oppression and the role of literacy and education. Since their early encounters with the Bible, slaves realized that, as long as they were denied access to literacy, they could not make the book 'speak' and thus gain access to the same knowledge and power it disclosed to the literate white man—thereby making them unable to assert their humanity. According to Adam Coombs, "Black graphic novels maintain an intense interest in the racial privileging underwritten in this system, whereby racial differences define literacy differences" (45).

⁴ Actually, the term 'graphic novel' should be understood as qualifying the publication format for comics rather than any supposed claim to 'seriousness' or 'literariness.' A standard, widely shared definition considers the graphic novel as "a comic book which is published in its entirety, as opposed to serialized comic books which will later be collected in trade paperbacks" (Kukkonen 84). Of course, one also needs to define the practice of serialization, given that many works widely referred to as graphic novels are initially published in separate volumes that are later collected in one single (hardbound or softbound) publication.

⁵ The notion of a codified language that would convey the expression and self-fashioning of non-white subjects has a long history in American culture, and it has often been posited by members of the dominant



aesthetic form that is inherently grounded on a text/image dualism can be quite fascinating, since it “heightens the tensions already at play in the form, uniquely activating the ideological juxtaposition of the self and the racial other” (Whitted 80).

Contemporary artists have engaged in graphic narratives as a fertile ground for expressing their own creativity, producing works that often blur the boundaries between high and low art, fiction and reality, text and image, past and present. In particular, in the hands of artists belonging to historically marginalized groups, the genre has displayed a crucial potential for undermining the master narratives of dominant (i.e. white) culture, whose traditions of textual *and* visual representation contributed to the normalization of oppression and exclusion. As they did for other genres of the white American tradition, black people in the US have found in this aesthetic form a suitable means to advance their cultural and political agendas: in the words of Adam Coombs, “graphic novels, especially historical graphic novels, offers a unique platform for addressing the concerns of African Americans whose cultural identity has been inherently linked to historical presence (or negation)” (4).

This emphasis on the idea of history is by no means casual, since black artists have recently started to employ the genre so as to question biased views on the African American past, along with the legacy of racialized images through which blacks have been portrayed.⁶ According to Michael A. Chaney, a great portion of contemporary African American graphic narratives foregrounds a kind of “revisionist historicity” (176), which responds to the challenge of what historian Hayden White termed “the burden of history”. By looking at the works of contemporary graphic artists such as Kyle Baker, Ho Che Anderson, Dwayne McDuffie, Lance Tooks, and others, it is possible to see how they attempt to “discover or invent a usable history by repurposing inflexible items or images from an archive founded upon black exclusion and misrepresentation” (Chaney 199).

Strictly connected to such concern with history and its re-formulation in a predominantly visual medium, there is also an involvement in personal or (auto-)biographical narratives where the self becomes the prism through which one approaches the events and collective experiences defining a particular historical moment. While this biographical element was acknowledged as being constitutive of many “historically-informed graphic novels” (Baetens & Frey 234) regardless of racial specifications, in the case of African-American representations it takes up a special resonance for its recalling the tradition of the slave narratives—a genre which was in an already problematic relationship with the ideological uses of white American life-writing.⁷ What I am going to explore here is the declination of African-American historical biography within the form of the graphic novel; I will do so by considering two works that thematize black experience during the Civil Rights Movement in different ways and with different purposes—the graphic memoir *March*, by African American Congressman John Lewis, and the graphic biography *King* by Afro-Canadian artist Ho Che Anderson.

March is a three-volume work that narrates the black struggle during the Civil Rights Era from the viewpoint of one of its protagonists, John Lewis, the only still-living figure among the prominent “Big Six” black leaders from that period. So far, only the first two volumes have come out, chronicling the period from Lewis’s childhood in the early 1950s up to his involvement in the organization of the March on Washington in 1963. Written by Lewis himself with the support of white comic writer Andrew Aydin, *March* is illustrated by Nate Powell, a white graphic artist. If the white presence in the team of creators certainly complicates our

white group to signify the difficult decipherability of those people’s otherness: think, for instance, of the tattooed body-writing characterizing the Polynesian Queequeg in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, or the mysterious rock inscription presiding over the ending of Poe’s *Gordon Pym*.

⁶ Let us think, for instance, of the long tradition of black stereotyping in American popular culture, by which African Americans of both sexes have been represented in the form of abusive caricatures such as the Sambo, the Mammy, the Uncle Tom, etc. Crucial to these images is the transmutation of the black body into the object of white fears and anxieties, which have determined its diminished status in white-authored visual representations as “an excluded presence to be seen, not to see—to hear, not to be heard” (Whitted 83).

⁷ As pointed out by Chaney, “since the nineteenth century a mission to unite narratives of nation with those of the individual has made biography a primary tool in the construction of American mythologies of success, optimism, and exceptionalism” (188).



understanding of *March* as a ‘pure’ African-American graphic narrative, I believe this should not be a reason for downplaying its role in keeping alive a crucial period of black history in the US.⁸

A primary source of inspiration for the *March* trilogy was a short, cheap comic book published in 1957 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, titled *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. Chronicling the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott and illustrating King’s educating action in the ways of non-violence, this publication had a profound influence among civil rights protesters of the 1960s like Lewis. Its recent circulation throughout the Arab world in a translated reprint seems to attest not just to Martin Luther King’s legacy outside national borders, but also to the appeal of the comics form in a media network that sustains a collective struggle for better equality and justice. Thinking of the 1957 comic book as a kind of hypotext to *March* further illustrates what previously said about the engagement of graphic novels with history: these narratives discursively address the past by displaying “their ability to hold (...) the history of popular culture, including the comics that preceded them” (Baetens & Frey 219).⁹

Even though Lewis may have had a primarily young adult readership in mind while envisioning his project, it is undeniable that *March* possesses an inspirational power and an epic intensity that vividly resonate throughout America’s public memory. But these, after all, were also the distinguishing qualities of his much-awarded written biography published in 1998, *Walking with the Wind*—and a great deal of Lewis’s text in *March* is based on that book. It seems appropriate, then, to ask what additional interest can be gotten from the re-presentation of such autobiographical content through the graphic-novel medium, specifically in the relationship being established between the words and the images.¹⁰ While the latter generally partake of the illustrative function that is inherent to the traditionally mimetic nature of life-writing, it may be interesting to pause on those instances—if any—where that relationship gets more nuanced, innovative, problematic, and, thus, especially significant to the reader.

The opening panels in *March* Volume 1 capture the famous episode of March 7th, 1965, when civil rights activists led by Lewis and Reverend Williams marched along the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and were violently assaulted by Alabama state troopers. After this prologue, the story unfolds by making use of the framing narrative technique: forty-four years after those events, while he is making himself ready to attend Obama’s inauguration on January 20th, 2009, Lewis relates his life’s story to a couple of black kids who have come to visit his Washington office. While this technique serves the purpose of setting a perspective upon the main narrative, on a formal level it also allows for suggestive panel transitions, as for instance when the kids’ curiosity at spotting a couple of chicken puppets in Lewis’s office urges him to recall his boyhood years at the farm of his sharecropping family in Alabama. Besides caring deeply for the chickens, young John is shown in the act of preaching to them as if they were his Sunday congregation. Within this sequence, we get an interesting panel showing John’s black silhouette while he’s reading from the Bible, with the sacred verses written upon his body: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Here words are quite literally turned into images, thereby visualizing their imprinting on the protagonist’s conscience, and at the same time inviting us (by means of the verbal exhortation they convey) to see in that black silhouette the embodiment of the Christian message.

What features prominently in Lewis’s narrative is precisely his training in the ways of non-violence theorized by such figures as Jim Lawson and Martin Luther King. An extended portion of *March* Volume 1 is devoted to chronicling Lewis’s participation in the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in Nashville and other southern cities, during which black and white protesters were brutally beaten and humiliated by violent white mobs and then taken to jail by callous policemen. On the other end, the first part of *March* Volume 2 recounts the

⁸ On the problematic definition of comics according to racial categories, see Qiana Whitted’s blog entry “What is an African American Comic?”, along with the illuminating comments by comics scholars and experts which are posted below the article. <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2014/01/what-is-an-african-american-comic/>. Last visited September 8, 2016.

⁹ Discussing the potential of graphic novels as “archives of popular culture”, Jared Gardner stated that “comic writing is the only [medium] capable of allowing the shades of the past to overlap with and speak to the impulses of the present” (qtd. in Coombs 3).

¹⁰ The interplay between image and text in the field of visual narration has been theorized, among others, by W.J.T. Mitchell, for whom “the real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ but (...) why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or separated?” (116).



experience of the Freedom Riders, a group of activists who, in the early 1960s, rode interstate buses throughout the South in order to put to test the recent Supreme Court decisions ruling that segregation in public buses was unconstitutional. Lewis's involvement in these initiatives is visually rendered through the alternation of multiple-panel pages and single-panel ones: the former usually designate the moment of action, in its most excited and frenetic developments, while the latter generally mark significant turning-points in the narrative or visualize emotionally-charged scenes.

It is also interesting to see how Lewis and Powell interpret, through their combined visual and verbal apparatus, the kind of black leadership associated with the non-violent philosophy represented most notably by Lewis himself and King. It may strike us to notice that, with the possible exception of his childhood years, Lewis's account rarely lingers on his private dimension, privileging instead collective moments when we see him taking part in protest rallies or sit-ins, speaking before an audience, or undergoing violent beatings by the police or white reactionaries—and, accordingly, the panels hardly ever foreground close-ups of Lewis's face or similar details. Though consistent with the project of celebrating the communal, collaborative nature of black leadership in those years, such an approach somehow prevents readers from developing that kind of fascination and identification with singular heroes that is so typical of the comics medium and that may trigger a more durable and productive engagement with the struggle they represent. In a sense, *March* appears to neutralize its potential as a comic book by renouncing to foreground its main protagonist in visually heroic terms; the power of Lewis's voice as the organizing principle of the verbal narration is rarely matched by a similar *visual* predominance of his figure throughout the panel sequences.

As to the figure of Martin Luther King Jr., the authors stay away from the traditional saintly iconography through which he is often portrayed, choosing instead to show the reverend in a very human, unadorned way. When we first see him, King looks quite chubby, standing behind a desk in his shirtsleeves. Later on, in *March* Volume 2, we get another glimpse of King as he finds himself locked up, together with hundreds of activists, in the basement of First Baptist Church in Montgomery, as this is being sieged by a mob opposing the Freedom Riders' passage through town. Here King is portrayed in a highly stressful moment, his forehead bathed in sweat, while he is on the phone with Attorney Robert Kennedy to request the intervention of the National Guard. These ordinary albeit quite unassertive representations of King may be set against a subsequent illustration that presents the leader in a mystical aura, surrounded by a wide bright halo—arguably a concession to the conventionally-understood mildness of King's divine inspiration which, in this case, looks almost parodic.

As a historical narrative, *March* offers an invaluable lesson in civic education and shows the collective effort of the African American community in its struggle against racial oppression. Framing Lewis's account of his own involvement in the Civil Rights movement within the circumstances of Obama's 2009 presidential inauguration, the two *March* volumes summarize the historical achievement of black Americans over the last 50 years, looking especially at the official, public dimension of racial struggle in American life. As a graphic narrative, though, the work appears a bit inadequate in order to illustrate how the comics form can perform other kinds of discourse, especially with respect to the idea of "revisionist historicity" previously referred to. Using the panels mostly as objective and realistic illustrations of the written parts, without establishing a more creative or problematic relationship between the two, the work fails to release its political potential as a graphic narrative. Chiefly, it overlooks the dialectics of visibility and invisibility that has characterized the visual representation of blackness in the US, including the articulation of black leadership in the field of comics and graphic novels.

To provide an example of a graphic novel that addresses such issues instead, let us briefly look at *King*, the graphic biography of the Civil Rights leader by black Canadian artist Ho Che Anderson which appeared in three volumes between 1993 and 2003. While obviously sharing a great deal of the subject matter presented in *March*, *King* is quite alien from the autobiographical-educational project of Lewis and Powell's work, and is targeted at a primarily adult readership. Anderson's work combines the factual data related to King's life with a personal, highly experimental approach to the graphic medium which stresses the constructed, mediated access to public and private reality. The organization of space and time follows less the conventions of a biographical account than the visual relations being established among the panels, in a way that privileges simultaneity in place of sequentiality, metonymy in place of totality, repetition in place of variation.



Just to give a sample of King's sophisticated use of the graphic medium, it may be interesting to see how the titular character is being introduced. After a short prologue where we see King as a young boy in the act of sneakily approaching his father in the sacristy, we are presented with a two-page sequence of alternated close-up faces of unidentified black people emerging from the shadows, who expose conflicting views on King's personality and actions and make up a kind of chorus introducing the main narration (these and other similar faces will reappear throughout the narrative to provide commentary or background information). But before we may finally get to see King in the unfamiliar setting of a college party, Anderson inserts a few panels depicting objects, gestures, body details of the pastor as he gets dressed for the occasion: a huge cross, a necklace, the hands buttoning his shirt, a pair of shined shoes. On these images are then impressed, banner-like, the lyrics of a Nat King Cole song, "Sweet Lorraine", coming from a nearby radio. The panel sequence here described constitutes an invitation for the reader to gradually put together King's image through a series of different, even conflicting elements, rejecting a singular view of King and fragmenting it instead through a multifarious set of visual signifiers.¹¹

The revision of King's iconicity by disassembling and creatively re-articulating its constitutive parts invests the private as well as the public side of the black leader. As to the latter aspect, Anderson crucially resorts to a method of visual pastiche combining expressionist, highly contrasted illustrations of King with photographic materials of the time. The work's investment in this visual archive extends obviously to the whole repertoire of Civil Rights documentary photography. Anderson inscribes these images by means of a collage technique that alternatively augments, debunks, or problematizes their nature of 'factual documents': sometimes they are seamlessly inserted within a sequence of illustrated panels, at other times they interrupt the narrative flow of space and time therein established, and still other times they are an inset that serves to exemplify what is being addressed in the page. What is also worth-noting is the degree of technical elaboration they display: color tints, grain elaboration, brightening and darkening effects, and several other manipulations deprive photographs of their historical transparency and put them to new, unexpected usages. As Chaney argued, King's creative investment of the Civil Rights image archive calls into question "the sanctity of photographic documentation and of the historical itself" (180). The graphic novel form allows Anderson to work with different kinds of images and to "capitalize on their semantic manipulability" in a way that disparages "assumptions regarding photographic objectivity, the constitutive 'pastness' of history, and the separation of copy from original" (188).

By drawing on a recognizable photographic archive in order to retrace the life and times of one of America's greatest black leaders, Anderson's *King* provides a fascinating re-enactment of the nation's public memory. Besides the facts of King's life, the work elaborates upon a huge portion of visual testimony from that crucial period, allowing those images to 'speak' and 'act' differently from what they do in their usual sites of reproduction and consumption. In this sense, going back to the beginning of this essay, *King* can be read as an example of 'visual signifyin',' according to HL Gates' poignant definition of the concept as "repetition with a signal difference." No matter how we may understand repetition, whether as the inscription of a usable historical/photographic archive, or as the visual reiteration of King's illustrated body, we get that signal difference in the creative re-fashioning and re-circulating of those items through the aesthetic possibilities offered by the graphic novel genre.

The distance between the visually elaborate aesthetics of Anderson's *King* and the more transparent one of Lewis and Powell's *March* seems to have important implications when it comes to assess their representative status as 'African American graphic narratives.' As I mentioned before, *March* is the product of a collaborative effort between a black politician and two white comics artists—one of them fully presiding over the panel graphics. But while we can safely argue that the work cannot display a thoroughly black artistry in the same way Anderson's biography does, it is undeniable that *March* provides a fascinating testimony of what it means to be black in the United States. As to Anderson's *King*, I have suggested how its creative engagement with historical facts and image archives may exemplify Gates' theory of African American signifyin'. And yet, we should not forget that *King* is the creation of a Canadian artist born in

¹¹ Michael Chaney reads this visual strategy as a "refusal to disambiguate the face of King" that starts from the original cover design of the graphic novel and carries over into the following party sequence where King finally shows his face, not without some verbal irony in admitting to his recognition by a white woman (190-191).



London, supposedly lacking that personal investment in the African American experience that is so essential to the project of *March*. In conclusion, I believe that both works may be productively discussed as African American texts, especially while they exploit the resources of a popular medium where black presence (in terms of content, authorship, and style) has been excluded or marginalized until the last few decades. Despite the differences they show in terms of purpose and aesthetic elaboration, their memorialization of African American history not only problematizes our understanding of the past, but also provides crucial commentary on the present.

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