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ACTIVITY - The Civil Rights Movement: Black Voter Registration Comics, Campaign Comics, and Civil Rights Memoirs Discussion

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TOPICS

Civil rights, voter registration, campaign comics, comics memoir

ACTIVITY TYPES

Reading comprehension, in-class discussion, historical analysis, textual analysis, comparative analysis

DURATION

1–6 classes

Texts

1960S VOTER REGISTRATION COMICS

- American Heritage Foundation. 1956. *An American Family Gets Out the Vote*.
- Fellowship of Reconciliation. 1957. *MLK and the Montgomery Story*.
- Lowndes County Freedom Organization. 1966. *Us Colored People*.
- Kurzrok, Alan. 1968. *Voteman*.
- NAACP. 1960. *The Street Where You Live and What You Can Do to Improve It*.
- NAACP. 1964. *Your Future Rests in Your Hands*.

CAMPAIGN COMICS

- Friends of George C. Wallace. 1962. *Alabama Needs the Little Judge*.
- Lowndes County Freedom Organization. 1966. *Sheriff; Board of Education; Coroner*.

MEMOIR

- John Lewis et al. 2013–16. *March Trilogy*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Aydin, Andrew. 2013. “The Comic Book that Changed the World.” *Creative Loafing*. August 1, 2013.
- Maggio, J. 2007. “Comics and Cartoons: A Democratic Artform.” *Political Science and Politics* 40 (2): 237–39.
- “Spiderman.” 1962. *Amazing Fantasy* #15.
- Duncan, Randy. 2015. “Comic Book Genres: The Memoir.” *In The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, 229–61. New York: Bloomsbury.

Overview

The following is a six-part, in-class discussion activity that examines the role of comics in Black voter registration campaigns and nonviolent protests in the long 1960s. The discussion questions ask students to analyze how various civil rights organizations used comics as informational, instructional, and recruiting tools in the 1960s and how they manipulated form and style to inform and persuade their audience. Students are then asked to compare these comics with John Lewis's contemporary graphic memoir (2013–16) to explore contrasts in their representations of organizing, civic engagement, and the importance of voting. Students are also asked to consider the relationship between memoir and history, as well as the affordances of comics as a particular form of memoir. Finally, students are asked to analyze how these comics imagine democracy and to critically consider the idea of comics as a democratic medium.

Instructors can follow the entire six-session discussion plan or select particular sessions and/or questions according to their own syllabus, course goals, and time constraints. Students can use the handout on how to close-read comics (see the How to Close-Read Comics activity) to help guide their analysis of these various texts. These discussion activities can be conducted in line with the principles of democratic dialogue and reflective discussion in either large or small groups (see the Deliberative Dialogue activity and assignment). Instructors may also choose to have students answer questions individually (either in class or for homework). This way, instructors have maximum flexibility in adapting the activity to the needs and goals of their own class.

Goals

Through this assignment students will:

- Practice civic engagement through the principles of democratic dialogue and reflective discussion.
- Improve deep listening, collaboration, and reflection skills through structured conversation.
- Develop their historical knowledge of the civil rights movement and the history of Black voter disenfranchisement.
- Develop their understanding of comics history and the specificities of various comics forms, including instructional comics, campaign comics, and graphic memoirs.
- Practice close-reading skills with a particular emphasis on elements of the comic form, as they analyze the content, structure, and style of various comic texts.
- Improve critical thinking, analytical, and argumentation skills as they articulate interpretations supported by textual evidence.
- Explore ideas that could be further developed in more formal assessment.

Session One: 1960s Voting Comics

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- American Heritage Foundation. 1956. *An American Family Gets Out the Vote*.
- NAACP. 1960. *The Street Where You Live and What You Can Do to Improve It*.
- NAACP. 1964. *Your Future Rests in Your Hands*.
- Kurzrok, Alan. 1968. *Voteman*.
- "Spiderman." 1962. *Amazing Fantasy* #15.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *An American Family Gets Out the Vote* was commissioned by the American Heritage Foundation; despite its exclusively white focus, the comic was initially used by the NAACP to rally Black voters. Four years later, however, the NAACP produced *The Street Where You Live*—written and drawn by the Black artist Tom Feelings—specifically for Black voters. How do these two comics compare in their approach to encouraging voting? What reasoning do they use and what kinds of appeals do they make? How do they imagine the relationship between voting, community, and civic engagement, and how is this expressed through style as well as content?
2. In 1964, the NAACP updated its voter information comic. How does *Your Future* differ from and how is it similar to *The Street Where You Live*? How does the later comic frame the importance of voting and its relationship to community and civic engagement? Pay particularly attention to the pages on how to register—how has this section changed in terms of both content *and* style?
3. *Your Future* was written by Stan Lee and drawn by Larry Lieber and *Voteman* was written Al Kuzrok, all of whom worked for Marvel Comics. Compare these comics with the first Spiderman story in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. Where can you see the influence of mainstream superhero and action comics on these voter registration comics? In particular, think about narrative structure, characterization, page layout, modes of address, and the framing of images. How do these action and fantasy elements impact the persuasive power of the voter registration comic?

Session Two: 1960s Voting Comics

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- LCFO. 1966. *Us Colored People*.
- LCFO. 1966. *Sheriff*; *Board of Education; Coroner*.
- Maggio, J. 2007. "Comics and Cartoons: A Democratic Artform." *Political Science and Politics* 40 (2): 237–39.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the 1960 census, 81% of the population of Lowndes County, Alabama was African American, but no Black residents had been able to register to vote. After the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization developed a series of comics as part of a mass voter registration drive. However, the LCFO comics look and feel very different to the other voting comics we're reading. What kinds of issues does *Us Colored People* emphasize in relation to voting? How does it present community organizing compared with the NAACP comics? How would you describe the graphiation of *Us Colored People*? How is it different from the NAACP comics and how does it shift our understanding of the civil rights movement and the comics' persuasive appeal?
2. Working with the SNCC, residents of Lowndes County formed their own political organization with the goal of running their own candidates for local office. The LCFO comics were created to not only encourage Lowndes County residents to register to vote, but to educate them about the responsibilities of different elected officials and to persuade them to vote for LCFO candidates. How do the comics *Sheriff, Board of Education,* and *Coroner* combine informational and instructional content with voter persuasion? How do they work as campaign comics? What's the effect of beginning each comic with a photograph of the candidate?
3. All of the voting comics we've looked at directly emphasize the centrality of voting to the idea of democracy. Artists, activists, and critics have similarly celebrated comics as a democratic medium. Using Maggio's essay as a starting point, what are some of the features of comics that align them with democracy (think about accessibility, readability, ease of production and circulation, popularity, and reading practices)? Where can you see these features operating in any of the voting comics we've read this week, and how are they used to reinforce the creators' message about the importance and value of voting?

Session Three: 1960s Civil Rights Organizing Comics

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- Fellowship of Reconciliation. 1957. *MLK and the Montgomery Story*.
- Aydin, Andrew. 2013. "The Comic Book that Changed the World." *Creative Loafing*. August 1, 2013.
- Friends of George C. Wallace. 1962. *Alabama Needs the Little Judge*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As Aydin explains, FoR created *MLK and the Montgomery Story* as a means of spreading the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and demonstrating how nonviolence could be successfully employed as a tool for social change. How does the comic function as a recruiting tool? How does it address the reader and what methods of persuasion does it use? How does it employ the figure of MLK to draw readers into the movement? How does it compare with the NAACP comics we studied last week?
2. *MLK and the Montgomery Story* was also intended as an instructional manual in the practice of nonviolence. How does the comic frame nonviolence? How does it present the relationship between nonviolent protest, democracy, and social change? How do page layout and style change in the last few pages of the comic, and what's the effect of this stylistic shift? How does the comic deal with the possibility of violent retaliation?
3. *Alabama Needs the Little Judge* was a promotional comic created for George Wallace's 1962 Alabama gubernational campaign (Wallace won with 96% of the vote). How does the comic present Wallace: What are his qualifications? What values does he hold? What kind of person is he? How do form and style reaffirm these impressions? How does this compare with the presentation of MLK in *MLK and the Montgomery Story*? How does *Little Judge* frame the federal government and the civil rights movement and how does it position Wallace in this fight?

Session Four: Memoirs of the Movement

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- John Lewis et al. *March Trilogy*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *March* presents Lewis as someone deeply influenced by MLK and committed to the philosophy of nonviolence. However, unlike *Montgomery Story*, which combines a fictional story with an instructional manual, *March* is a memoir about the actual historical practice of nonviolent resistance. Given this difference in modality, how does *March* present the philosophy, the practice, and the experience of nonviolence? How is this similar to and different from its presentation in *MLK and the Montgomery Story*? How does the narrative structure of the memoir affirm the power of nonviolent protest? How does the text frame nonviolent protest as a patriotic activity?
2. Despite its investment in nonviolence, *March* pays significant attention to the violence and brutality that protesters faced. What kinds of violence does *March* represent (individual/state, legal/illegal, emotional/physical, moral/immoral, instigation/retaliation)? Is all violence the same? How is violence graphically represented on these pages? What is shown and not shown? How does the text use panels and gutters to frame and contain this violence? Are there any moments where this violence lingers or feels unresolved? How do these moments shape our understanding of and feelings about nonviolence as a mode of protest?
3. In public memory, the civil rights movement is often reduced to a handful of legendary protests and speeches organized by a unified group against the vague antagonist of "racism." How and why does *March* complicate this idea? How does the graphic novel define the demands of the civil rights movement? What are the various forces that oppose them and how do they work together? How are the iconic moments of this history represented? What are the different factions that comprise the civil rights movement and what are the points of connection and tension between them? Does the graphic novel resolve any of these conflicts—how and why/why not? How does Lewis's memoir alter our understanding of the civil rights movement specifically and the ideas of civic engagement and social transformation more broadly?

Session Five: History, Memory, and Graphic Memoirs

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- John Lewis et al. *March Trilogy*.
- Randy Duncan. 2015. "Comic Book Genres: The Memoir." In *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, 229–61. New York: Bloomsbury.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Duncan argues that memoir is expected to be authentic, and he discusses a range of strategies that authors use to perform their authenticity for the reader— what he calls "signifiers of truthfulness." How does Lewis perform his authenticity in *March*? What signifiers does the memoir incorporate to communicate a sense of realism and honesty to the reader? Why does Duncan argue that the comics form is inherently suited to memoir? How does the form of *March* in particular highlight the subjective and fragmented nature of memory?
2. Duncan points out that although the protagonist and the narrator of a graphic memoir both refer to the author, they are not the same; since memoirs are about reconsidering a past event from a current perspective, they highlight the difference between the protagonist then and the author now. What are the "layers of the self" in *March*? How does it incorporate the experiencing, narrating, and authoring I? Are these different versions of Lewis the same? How do they relate to the different time periods that the book covers?
3. Duncan notes that graphic memoirs are unique for the ways that they emphasize pictorial embodiment; comics require characters to be represented visually, so we must pay attention to the bodies of the characters, the arrangement of bodies on the page, and the illusion of bodily movement from panel to panel. How are the characters in *March* drawn? What does this tell us about Lewis's self-image and his feelings about other characters? How do these portraits impact our emotional engagement with various characters? How do bodies move from panel to panel? Is there a clear direction of movement? Do any bodies work against this direction? How does this relate to the tabular properties of the page? How can we understand these expressions of embodiment in relation to the novel's ideas about race, visibility, and agency?

Session Six: Generations of Protest

COMICS AND SECONDARY READINGS

- John Lewis et al. *March Trilogy*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *March* is a multigenerational text. Lewis is a young student when he joins the civil rights movement, and the older generations—his parents and older political activists—often don't agree with his methods. At the same time, Lewis's memories are framed by the inauguration of America's first African American president. How does the graphic novel represent these various generations? What are the conflicts between them? What are the continuities? How does *March* imagine the role of youth in protest movements?
2. According to Marcus Oppolzer, *March* has "a clear political agenda that presents the life of a legendary figure to be emulated by a new generation" and is thus "a memoir that also serves as a recruitment tool for political activism." How does remembrance function as a method of mobilization in the graphic novel? What does *March* imagine as the challenges for the next generation and how does this relate to the text's larger narrative form? What does the multigenerational structure of the text suggest about how *March* understands the processes of social change?
3. In an interview with Stephen Colbert, Lewis stated that he hopes *March* will become a "roadmap for another generation" in the same way that *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* was a "roadmap" for him in the 1960s. FoR stated that they chose the comics format for *Montgomery Story* because it was cheap to produce and it was quick and easy to read, especially for an audience with varying levels of literacy. At the same time, since comics were disparaged as a juvenile form, they believed that it was less likely to be seen as a dangerous manifesto. Why do you think Lewis opted for a graphic novel rather than a traditional memoir? What does this choice tell us about his intended audience? How does *March* continue the comics legacy of *Montgomery Story*, given that the original reasons why FoR chose the comics form don't really apply to *March*? How do the industrial and cultural shifts between the publication of these two comics impact the democratic potential of *March* specifically and the comics medium more broadly?