

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

Prof. Pramod K Nayar

Department of English

University of Hyderabad

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Contemporary Genres of Resilience - The Graphic Novel I

Hello, hello everyone. My name is Maria Porrás-Sánchez. I'm an Assistant Professor at Complutense University of Madrid and I'm here to guide you through a contemporary genre of resilience, the graphic novel. I've prepared two sessions in which we will discuss what is resilience, what are graphic novels, some historical approaches to vulnerability in comics and graphic novels, we'll discuss graphic novels and trauma, we'll present some models and strategies for documenting trauma, vulnerability and resilience, and we'll discuss resilience as a theme, as in the case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and then we'll present many autobiographic memories as examples of resilience in themselves. Finally, we'll discuss a case study which I consider that is a resilient work fostering solidarity among readers, which is this memoir, Erin Williams's *Commute*, and finally we'll provide some conclusions. In this session we'll focus on points 1 to 5.1 and in the second session we'll focus on 5.2 till 7. Without much further ado, let's see what is resilience.

You are probably by now very familiar with the term. Let me remind you it came to be used in the early 19th century to describe the resistance of materials to external elements, but it was Crawford Holling who introduced the concept of resilience to ecology and the study of ecosystems. He defined the resilience of an ecosystem as "the measure of its ability to absorb changes and still exist". Since then, many ecological descriptions followed. These two initial definitions of the term, although not applicable to individuals yet, hold the key to further approaches to the term based on the two basic aspects of what is largely understood as resilience.

One is resilience and a second is adaptation. Resilience started to be associated with individuals in the late 1970s to assess coping mechanisms of individuals facing traumatic situations. Early works focused on the resilience of children, but the term was later used, and I quote McAslan, "to encompass the ability of adults to manage abnormal situations, particularly the involvement in war, disasters, and even routine abnormal events such as major traffic incidents". We might add here other not such routine events, but quite common events, which are discrimination and sexual abuse, for instance. Other authors such as Norris or Layne suggest that resilience represents just one of a number of

categories of reaction by adults following exposure to trauma or severe stress. These categories of reaction include resistance, resilience, recovery, relapse in remitting, post-traumatic stress disorder, and chronic dysfunction, which takes place when the PTSD cannot be overcome.

After individual resilience, the term was used to assess communities and even organizations. Most approaches focus on the issues which reduce the vulnerability of communities, such as information and knowledge, supportive networks, shared community values, and the community's ability and willingness to adapt. The term has been contested ever since its use has spread to different spheres. For instance, Professor Pramod Nayar while studying at Joe Sacco's works warns once against the perverse effects of resilience, and as he underscores, and I quote, "resilience becomes a useful mode of categorization of the injured and the vulnerable in order to inflict damage upon or refuse palliative measures for... The resilient, it is believed, will bounce back, recover, and rebuild".

So, it is believed that somehow resilient individuals will always resort to some kind of solution or will also will always recover with the aid of external elements and that is that might be quite perverse. However, and this is what we need to take into account here, is that the concept of resilience provides a new and useful framework of analysis and understanding on how individuals, organizations, and ecosystems cope in a changing world facing many uncertainties and challenges. And that idea of coping with uncertainty, coping with violence, coping with trauma is what we are going to address here in different examples of graphic novels.

But what are graphic novels? Simply put, graphic novels are the long form of a mode of communication called comics. This is a very succinct definition by Duncan and Smith. So, we are referring to comics in book format, like this one, that became popular together with the term "graphic novel" in the wake of the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Art Spiegelman, his work *Maus*, in 1992, a work which notably deals with trauma through the reconstruction of the Holocaust memories of the author's father. It didn't matter that the work had been previously published as a series and that also all the graphic novels which were called like that, such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* had been also serialized before being published as a single volume. The thing is that these works were marketed as graphic novels by booksellers and by publicists and somehow the term stuck. Long formats and PR notwithstanding for other critics like Santiago Garcia, the graphic novel is rather an international phenomenon that changed how comics were consumed and created.

We refer, in Santiago Garcia, we refer with this term not to comics that have the formal or narrative features of the literary novel nor a specific format but simply to a kind of modern adult comic that demands readings and attitudes that are distinct from those of

traditional comics consumption. So, we are referring to new audiences, not necessarily adults but definitely not children, probably young readers as well, and new reading habits and adult themes in these graphic novels to form a genre included in comic books such as adventure, superheroes, science fiction, historical fiction, or funny animals just to name a few. Graphic novels have incorporated nonfiction genres associated with more mature audiences such as comics journalism, documentary, graphic medicine, memoir, and autobiography. Sometimes to avoid associating the idea of novel, graphic novel as in fiction as we do in literature, critics prefer graphic narratives to graphic novel when it comes to addressing these long formats dealing with nonfiction themes. As you will see, I'm going to use both of them indistinctively.

In fact I prefer the term graphic narrative but to avoid this confusion with novel as a work of fiction, okay, because mostly and today especially we are dealing with works of non-fiction. Before alluding to the potential of early graphic novels such as *Maus* to deal with resilience, I'd like to underline the presence of vulnerable lives in the history of comics. As part of mass culture, comics have historically portrayed poverty, frequently in association with young characters as Gerardo Vilches and myself state in our edited volume *Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Narratives: Young Lives in Crisis*. US classic comic strips from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s used to include a stereotype such as the hobo as in happy hooligan or the orphan as in *Little Orphan Annie*. Although they served as social commentary and also for raising empathy with the poor among the wealthy elites, this is the case of Richard F. Outcault's strips *Hogan's Alley*, home of the famous yellow kid.

The representations of this precarious reality served comical purposes mostly. In Spain characters such as Carpanta whose comic trait was an unremitting hunger, he was always hungry and he didn't have money to buy food, showed the hard living conditions under the Spanish dictatorship but the implicit criticism was a subtext underlying the humor. It was with the rise of adult comics that vulnerability, trauma, and precarity began to be openly represented from a critical perspective. In many instances, the precarious walking conditions of the cartoonists were connected to narratives of precarity as well.

For instance the first adult comics movement, Japanese *Gekiga*, meaning dramatic drawing, appeared in the precarious context of Osaka's manga rental market in the late 1950s where the work of several artists were printed in collections that readers borrowed from stores and then returned. Authors such as Yoshihiro Tatsumi whose adult characters strive to find their way in a post-war Japan are frequently presented as jobless and hopeless, caught in an impulse of unhappy relationships without any prospects of a better life. In the US underground comics authors such as Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, Spain Rodriguez, Alain Kominsky, or Diane Noomin led the foundations for western non-fiction comics, a category which is directly connected with the representation of precarity

and vulnerability, with their depiction of moneyless and jobless bohemians. Thanks to underground comics the comics medium revealed itself as being perfectly suitable for autobiography and related narratives such as auto fiction, memoir, documentary, or essay because it established a particular relationship between author and their own body through its representation. So, the representation of the body which is called the pictorial embodiment is fundamental when we look at autobiographic works.

This representation of the body also builds a reader's emotional engagement with the protagonist as Elizabeth El Refaie points out. For instance, *The Bunch* Alain Kominsky's alter ego from the late 1970s to the 1990s is a vulnerable and confused teenager who suffers rape and sexual abuse when looking for sentimental partners. Her work starts a long list of women artists who document trauma and abuse in their autobiographic walks such as Debbie Drecshler, Phoebe Gloeckner, Marjan Satrapi, Linda Barry, and Erin Williams, that we will study today. Later on, artist Art Spiegelman *Maus* became a milestone in non-fiction comics as a powerful influence on many artists who introduced trauma, abuse or discrimination in their walks. As Hilary Chute states and I quote, "it is a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience to put contingent selves and histories into form".

In a similar vein, "collectives and minorities have also found a voice in comics in the last decades showing a queer alliance of the dispossessed and the precarious", in the words of Jack Halberstam. Many LGBTIQ+ narratives underline the author's vulnerability and the continuous negotiation within a heteronormative context and that is the case of Kabi Nagata's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* or Maya Kobabe's *Gender Queer*.

But now let's focus on how graphic novels recreate trauma, not only precarious lives as we were discussing before but how do they present trauma. Recent studies show how contemporary graphic narratives are especially effective when it comes to address trauma. Trauma is difficult to describe. It is a reaction to horror, to violence, which is often unrepresentable due to the experience shocked. However, comics have proven to be an apt tool for representing what cannot be represented. Let me explain this paradox. In a way, comics are the art of ellipses, a medium that walks through a system of panels, pages and grids in which the action often takes place outside the page so the reader is able to fill in the blanks of the story. In the productive space of the gutter, that is, the space between panels, readers project their own recreation of events.

They need to put their imaginations into motion to infer what has happened and you have here a very clear example. This is not a precarious narrative, a representation of trauma, but this is a strip of *Calvin and Hobbes* and as you can see, by Watterson, as you can see, you have to imagine what has happened in between through this onomatopoeia but you

actually don't see the three kids clashing with the snowman, right? You have to imagine that and you have to put your imagination to the service of the visual gag that Watterson is creating. Not only gutter is a productive space for projecting our imagination, comics often present visual metaphors and metonymies to express what cannot be recreated in a naturalistic way and here you have an example by Ximo Abadia, who is a Spanish cartoonist and illustrator who has written, who has published a book to explain children the Spanish dictatorship and he does that by using geometric shapes and you see here a child version of the dictator, of Franco, who is very angry because he likes squares and he doesn't understand why people don't like squares as much as he does. So, he decides to destroy all the shapes that are not squares so it's a very basic way of describing how Franco got rid of all the opposition and all of the people who thought in a different way.

Due to codification and fragmentary nature, many graphic narratives dealing with trauma ask for the direct participation of the reader encouraging them to fill in the blanks so as to the codified traumatic experiences which are suggested but not explicitly described. It is a form of asking the reader to invest creatively and productively in the story. According to comics critic Hilary Chute, who has worked extensively on comics and trauma in her fundamental work *Disaster Drawn*, comics that deal with trauma from an autobiographical perspective are a form of resistance in themselves and I quote “the visualization of the ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs “ordinary” experience as relevant and political claiming a space in public discourse for resistance” end of quote.

Even if Chute doesn't refer to resilience in her essay resilience and resistance are both coping mechanisms as we have seen against traumatic and unusual stressful situations. In a way all autobiographic comics or autographics. as Whitlock defines them. perhaps you've you'll see the term somewhere can. be considered a material example of resilience and resistance after all they are testimonies of lives impact by trauma, a materialization of memory but authors of autobiographic comics dealing with traumatic memories also are also very aware of who is reading them of the readership as Elizabeth El Refaie both said and I quote “the communicative purpose of life writing impacts the manner autobiographers attend to their memories in the first place as well as affecting how they select interpret and combine their memories into stories, the resulting accounts of a person's life are then actively recreated and sometimes challenged and contested in the minds of individual reader”'s end quote.

El Refaie defines this process as “commemoration” it is in this commemoration where comics recording traumatic memories turn them into material examples of resistance and resilience that promote the reader's empathy solidarity and even identification. It is important to bear in mind that traumatic memory is often fragmentary, as psychology reminds us. people remember all the bits of painful memories there are caps alterations and substitutions memories cannot be evoked clearly or in an organized temporal

succession that is why for critics such as El Refaie or Chute, among others comics, offer such an exceptional site for illustrating trauma the fragmentary nature of the medium, the fragmentary nature of the comics medium mirrors the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory.

So, form and content become indistinguishable and as we will see this coincidence has endless possibilities when it comes to representative representations of dramatic memories in comics and graphic narratives are rich and their aesthetic treatment offer endless possibilities. First I'll refer to Spiegelman's *Maus* as a paradigmatic text, as a graphic narrative that changed the course of history of comics and as an example of the treatment of trauma and resilience, Then, I'd like to show you a gallery of examples to highlight different approaches documenting trauma and vulnerability in different comics traditions to illustrate the existing wide variety of aesthetics and registers.

So, let's focus on *Maus* a survival tale which is how the full volume was titled is the illustrated true story of Vladek Spiegelman's experiences before and during World War II and as a prisoner in Auschwitz as told by his son, Artie. The story is mostly focused on Vladek's life but there is also a frame narrative, that is, there is a larger story there's a frame story and within that frame story, there is the main story that shows Artie and his father at the present with Archie asking questions. As Vladek relays his experiences as Vladek describes the horrors that he faced as a Jewish man during the war, there are scenes that reveal some of the challenges that Archie faces as the son of a concentration camp survivor and the suicide of his mother and also his self-doubts regarding his own work and the ethics of the whole working process.

This is a very, very rich work and there are many possible readings and there are many possible interpretations of this story and is fundamental for comics theory. Graphically, Art Spiegelman uses anthropomorphic characters Jews are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, French as frogs, and Americans as or US citizens as dogs. *Maus* is an archive of trauma as experienced by Vladek in the extermination camp. But it is also a powerful witness account of the Holocaust, a collective experience that transcends individuals. In addition, it is a powerful account of how memory can be recreated since it also recalls Spiegelman's process and efforts to collect his father's story. for Hilary Chute and I quote "*Maus* is also about holding together the tension between the visual (that includes the photographic and the drawn), the written and the oral in how it expresses the memory of the of the eyewitness and the secondary witness and in how it creates its own testimonial archive" end of quote. The idea of archive is reinforced by the presence of a real photograph within the comic Vladek's photograph wearing the Nazi camp uniform, this is presented towards the end of the narrative, so readers already have an idea they have already projected their own imagination to imagine Vladek. The photo was not taken during his incarceration but when he was liberated. You can see the uniform is clean and not torn and Vladek's appearance is well kept. The image was taken many

months after liberation at the photo studio where posers could borrow uniforms and have photos taken as memory keepsakes.

For Philip Smith and I quote “the image tells the story of a man who is willing to take ownership of, and even a certain level of pride in his ability to survive as a calm concentrate as a concentration camp prisoner” end quote. Survival is a central scene in *Maus* and an obsession for Vladek, who looks with pride to the camera. In his account, he takes pride on his clever antics to get food, trade and keep clean in the extermination camp. His pride in his survival is also what fuels his account even though Vladek seems reluctant to tell his story to Artie, he never fails the chance to present himself as a resourceful and determined man. His actions provide a frail sense of security and agency in the face of horrific and threatening circumstances.

For Smith, Vladek's strategy is definitely a form of resilience and that is why resilience is a very important theme in *Maus*. I quote “By formulating and following a rubric for survival, Vladek was able to simultaneously mitigate private trauma and, within his narrative, further reduce the personal psychological fallout from the madness of the Holocaust... a key factor (of resilience) is a sense of control during the traumatic event. An individual who maintains a sense of being in control (even if that control is illusory) may be able to emerge from an otherwise traumatic event even without showing signs of trauma.” In the sense, Vladek palliates the effects of trauma by cultivating a sense of control that he also tends to the framing narrative. Although Vladek presents himself as a self-reliant man, as a very independent man, who exercises and takes good care of himself as when he takes a performance of counting out the pills he has to take.

His testimony is both an expression of survival and resilience, as the Smith reminds us, survival in terms of resilience is, thus, related to self-sufficiency to actively survive as opposed to passive survival is to exercise a degree of control. Vladek allowed, unlike the other mice had, perhaps illusory pain stopping leverage. in his cage referring to the concentration camp. However, this self-reliance might be enough to explain why he survived and not enough to explain why most of his family died along with six million Jewish people, during the Holocaust. This is the bitter realization at the end of *Maus*. When going through family photos, recreated diageetically and unlike his own picture, they are redrawn by Spiegelman. Vladek seems more frail and defeated and even falters. At this point, the pictures of the dead occupy most of the page and shadow Vladek and Art, they are super imposed to their conversation. If you, if you look at the example, in the light of so many dead. rationalizing the Holocaust is no longer possible for Vladek.

So, now we have discussed resilience in the case of *Maus* as a theme. In the second video, we'll see many autographic narratives as examples of resilience. See you in the next video and thank you for your attention.

