



Frederik Byrn Køhlert, *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics* (Rutgers University Press, 2019, ISBN 9780813592251).

John Miers

Kingston University, London

Frederick Byrn Køhlert's monograph on autobiographical comics argues that 'the form's self-reflective engagement with autobiographical representations [...] might matter politically, especially for people on the social and cultural margins' (3). He thus places his work explicitly in a tradition of scholarship that frames comics autobiography as a vehicle through which marginalised voices can be given a platform, developing works such as Hilary Chute's *Graphic Women* and standing alongside more recent scholarship such as Elisabeth El Refaie's *Visual Metaphor and Embodiment in Graphic Illness Narratives*. To this end, his opening description of the history of comics autobiography emphasises its origins in independent publishing, and its historical position as a counterweight to the types of heteronormative power fantasies narratives constitutive of its most popular genres.

Within this established line of argument, Køhlert distinguishes his work by taking the construction of the self within such works as his key object of theoretical concern, and by using his case studies to focus in turn on different aspects of marginalised identities. The five chapters examine the feminine grotesque in the work of Julie Doucet, Phoebe Gloeckner's accounts of surviving sexual abuse, Ariel Schrag's diaristic record of developing a queer identity, and negotiations of the representations of disabled and racialised bodies in the work of Al Davison and Toufic El Rassi. While the comics texts he discusses at length may well be familiar to comics scholars, none have received the kind of sustained critical attention granted to texts such as Spiegelman's *Maus* or works such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.

Køhlert's theoretical framework is grounded in the idea of 'the autobiographical subject as a performative construct' (9), an entity that stands as an effect of autobiographical storytelling rather than a discrete

pre-existing entity that is expressed or reflected thereby. The introductory chapter's section headings identify the selves he examines as serial, autobiographical, embodied, drawn, and unruly; he moves from a summary of poststructuralist challenges to the notion of a unified self and to a discussion of the specific features of the comics that reveal the specificity of identity construction. He establishes here a useful paradox that is nicely balanced throughout the book: the autobiographical cartoonists must necessarily not only describe but depict themselves, and thus 'insist visually on presence and a specificity of representation', but the repeated iterations of such depictions also 'dissolve the self into multiplicity' (11).

In establishing this overarching framework, Køhlert demonstrates a balanced approach to analysis that places his work within the wider context of life writing scholarship while remaining alert to the specific affordances and histories of the comics form. In doing so he fluently brings to bear a wide range of discussions, providing numerous entry points for readers interested in investigating further any of the contexts raised, while remaining focused on the development of analytical strategies specific to his object of study. Chapter 1, for example, gives succinct summaries of popular incarnations of third-wave feminism such as riot grrrl, and of the carnivalesque notions of transgression and the grotesque, which are then used to provide historical context for and support the visual analysis of excerpts from *Dirty Plotte* (Doucet). This ability to quickly and lucidly summarise key debates is one of the book's core strengths, and is present throughout. Each of the five chapters begins with similarly deftly-handled passages of theoretical exposition and evaluation, before moving into close readings of its core text.

Each individual chapter adopts a distinct theoretical framework in response to what Køhlert takes to be the key themes of the work of the cartoonist in question. In order of appearance, *Léve ta Jambe mon Pisson est Mort!*'s (Doucet), the presentation of excessive, often grotesque, female bodies is discussed in light of Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque'; *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Gloeckner) is set within a discussion of the representability or otherwise of traumatic events; *Awkward, Definition, Potential* and *Likewise* (Schrag) are presented as a developing 'queer' style by drawing on the work of Eve K. Sedgwick; *The Spiral Cage* (Davison) is framed by a discussion of models of disability and the idea of the disabled body as spectacle, and *Arab in America* (El Rassi) is placed against the backdrop of the extensive history of racist stereotypes in the history of cartooning.

If the core sources of some of these arguments might seem well-worn to some readers, Køhlert consistently treats them critically and often

takes them to unexpected places. Joe Matt's confessions of addiction to heterosexual pornography might initially seem an odd reference point when discussing Ariel Schrag's work, but the contrast drawn between the self-consciousness of his strategy of making 'an entertaining spectacle of his own failings' and her apparent lack of self-censorship effectively support his assertion that her work is 'compulsively and even indiscriminately self-revealing' (108).

Køhlert frequently celebrates the emancipatory potential of graphic autobiography, but is never an apologist for problematic aspects of comics' history such as the reduction of female bodies to sexualised objects (24) or the frequent employment of racist stereotypes in newspaper cartoons (166–167). As he acknowledges in the conclusion, comics is 'a form that on the one hand privileges strategies of visual containment and homogeneity and on the other has traditionally relied on stereotypical shorthand and cartoony caricature for its effects' (190). Particularly memorable—for this reader—were his identification of the sexism inherent in the model of the carnivalesque (28–41), the theorisation of the notion of the 'counterstare' as a means by which a cartoonist with a disabled body can assert agency in the face of the societal construction of that body as a site of spectacle (142–156), and the thorough consideration of the presence of racist visual stereotypes in this history of cartooning in chapter 5 (162–172). This discussion takes into account both histories of the production and reception of comics and cartoons, and core theoretical questions regarding the relationship between the psychological processes by which othering stereotypes are formed, and the reduction of visual form to simple reproducible graphic shorthands that lies at the heart of much cartooning practice, as exemplified by McCloud's well-known formulation 'amplification through simplification' (165). This section, the last major passage of theoretical evaluation in the book, skilfully draws together many of the preceding arguments, and is on its own terms one of the most illuminating discussions of cartooning and stereotypes one could hope to find in contemporary comics scholarship.

While reading this section I found myself wishing that I had been able to use this chapter in my past teaching on this topic. More broadly, the case study structure of the book has numerous benefits in terms of the how the book might be used. There is much to recommend it as a pedagogical text: Each chapter is to an extent self-contained, tackling a clearly-defined set of theoretical problems. Each chapter begins with a careful elaboration of key contributions to debates around the representation of femininity, trauma, queerness, disability and race, applied to visual culture more broadly as well as the specific affordances and histories

of cartooning. These are of uniformly high quality, weaving together a range of significant arguments and counter-arguments in lucid prose. As such, any of them have great potential for use in teaching, both as introductions to their topics and as examples of formal analysis. Equally, the relative independence of each of the chapters means that scholars can home in on sections that speak to their particular research interests without feeling that they are missing a wider argument.

If this approach has a drawback, it could also be said that, in the early chapters at least, it diminishes the sense of the development of a wider thesis. This concern evaporates as the book progresses. If the discussion of caricature and stereotype in chapter 5 is perhaps the moment where the sense of the individual case studies becoming more than the sum of their parts is most strongly felt, comparable moments of originality can also be found throughout. For example, Al Davison's assertion of agency through the representation of his physically-impaired body as heroic and desirable is productively compared to Doucet's gleefully transgressive depiction of her menstruating body (145–147), and a comparison between Doucet's fantastical exaggerations and Phoebe Gloeckner's comparatively detailed and naturalistic drawings is employed productively to illuminate their functions as means of constructing an autonomous feminine identity, and reconstructing and documenting traumatic memories, respectively (65–83).

In any work that places such emphasis on close readings of artistic texts, there will always be room for disagreements between author and reader over the precise interpretation of some elements of the work under discussion. There are some moments where Køhlert seems overly keen to ascribe to individual images specific symbolic interpretations that support the development of a broader argument, none of which have a detrimental impact on the force of that argument, with the possible exception of the claim that El Rassi's self-portraits habitually conform to stereotypes of Arab men (157), which is repeatedly stated in the discussion in the final chapter, but the extent to which it is supported by the visual evidence is arguable. But it is in the nature of such methodologies that each reader is likely to come away from the text with their own list of specific interpretations with which they agree or disagree to varying degrees.

In his concluding comments, Køhlert refers to 'the last decade's explosion of autobiographical comics depicting a multitude of different experiences', and suggests that 'a further revolution is underway', one in which 'new generations of artists must engage with [the form's history] in terms of both influence and opposition' (195). This book offers a rich and varied set of positions through which this new revolution can be

understood and celebrated, and should be of value and interest to readers approaching it from disparate positions: in addition to its scholarly and pedagogical value, it has also helped to refine my understanding of my own work as an autobiographical cartoonist.

WORKS CITED

Køhlert, Frederik Byrn. *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics*. New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2019.