

The pregnant body and reproductive rights in American comics and graphic novels (1970-2022)

In her introduction to "Why comics?," Hillary Chute examines the phenomenon of this verbal/visual form and concludes that comics constitute a unique narrative form. Literature as if concentrates on the interior, while movies focus on the exterior, Chute writes (2017: v), and comics are able to combine both and locate itself "in-between" the outside and the inside of the personal experience.

With such a view of comics in mind, i.e., as an art form capable of representing the exterior and as a critical narrative of the self, I wish to examine a crucial, yet understudied, field of comics that is located at the intersection of comics studies, media studies, art history, feminism and women's studies, gender studies, civil rights, biography and memoir, and the medical humanities, namely American comics and graphic novels centered around pregnancy and reproductive rights from the years 1970-2022.

The project aims to analyze American comics and graphic novels devoted to pregnancy and reproductive rights with a view to determining, on the one hand, how they respond to and partake in ongoing historical and cultural changes and, on the other hand, how they, as a unique verbal/visual medium, (re)present the experience of the reproductive/pregnant body.

The main research questions are as follows:

- What historical and cultural factors influence the graphic narratives of pregnancy and reproductive rights? How do comics from the respective decades (1970-2022) differ and/or are similar in their (re)presentation of pregnancy (and the related topics of miscarriage, abortion, (postpartum) body image, etc.)?
- What issues are "acceptable" in a given decade/timeframe? What issues are "taboo"? How does comics as a verbal/visual medium inform (re)presentation?
- How is the (re)presentation of the body during and after pregnancy problematized and/or normalized in comics (e.g., as either "invisible" or "hypervisible")?
- How do comics engage with narratives of pregnancy in other media? How can comics help rewrite mainstream narratives of pregnancy and reproductive rights?

The project will examine the broadly defined contemporary American comics (1970-2022) because it was in the 1970s (inspired by second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement) that such comics first appeared (originally as part of the alternative and underground scene). They have been continuously published ever since, providing an insight into the experiences of pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, and childbirth. Graphic narratives of pregnancy and reproductive rights partake in the fight for women's rights (and/as) human rights and constitute complex products of historical and cultural changes that have taken place in America in the past 50 years. They also problematize the reproductive/pregnant body as both "invisible" and "hypervisible."

The project's results will contribute to the development of multidisciplinary research on contemporary comics and graphic novels and broaden the existing discourse on pregnancy, motherhood and reproductive rights in literature and visual arts.

The result of the project will be the manuscript of a monograph in English and two articles in leading journals (open-access publications), as well as presentations at international conferences.