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COMICS IN THE HERE AND NOW

by Julian C. Chambliss





Bill Campbell, Jason Rodriguez, and John Jennings, eds., *APB: Artists against Police Brutality: A Comic Book Anthology*. Greenbelt, MD: Rosarium Publishing, 2015. ISBN: 978-1495607523. 200 pages.

From the first pages of *APB: Artists Against Police Brutality*, the reader is made aware of the political landscape that inspired the project. Written by co-editor and publisher Bill Campbell, the introduction explains that this anthology was “borne out of anger” (6). Reacting to recent deaths at the hands of police in the United States, this volume’s political and social engagement is front and center. Like the #BLACKLIVESMATTER movement, the collective work presented in *APB* works to highlight the oppressive environment that has been created by patterns of coercive policing directed at racial minorities.

It would be easy to assume the volume’s goal makes it an outlier in United States comic history. However, *APB* intersects with *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957), a comic produced by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to spread the message of the U.S. Civil Rights movement, and with the broader transformation of comic literature toward artistic maturation in the United States.

Mass market comic books are often defined by the superhero genre, and recent scholarship has pointed to the New Deal-influenced politics of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s *Superman* in the late 1930s, and the implicit anti-racist message in *All Negro Comics* (1947) published by Orrin Evans, as examples of how such popular artifacts have included sociopolitical messages. Like other media, comic books also saw their own creative evolution influenced by post-WWII uncertainty linked to communist fears. Books such as David Hajdu’s *Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* and Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comic Code* explore how the emergence of crime and horror comics in the late 1940s triggered an investigation



by the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954. In the aftermath of the self-censorship that followed, mainstream comic book publishing became defined by the assumption of a juvenile readership. Works such as *Comic Books and the Cold War: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns* and *Hand of Fire: The Art of Jack Kirby* have convincingly argued that the resurgence of superhero comics in the early 1960s integrated emerging youth counterculture perspectives with broader sociopolitical anxieties within their pages.

Despite the hidden complexity of superhero comic books, the genre that has best lent itself to social commentary closely aligned with legitimacy was the Underground Comix movement. The artists associated with the Underground were heavily influenced by the post-WWII tumult and mass media in the United States. These figures absorbed the movies, television, and music designed for the baby boom generation. Highly politicized by the social justice crusades of the 1960s and the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war, the roots of Underground Comix ran through counterculture publications such as *The Chicago Seed*, *The Berkeley Barb*, and *The East Village Other*. Historian Paul Buhle writes in *Underground Classics: The Transformation of Comics into Comix* that, "Underground Comix deftly united the most vernacular of all arts, the comic book, with political rebellion and a reflective critique of American culture (41)." Steeped in critiques of middle-class social, political, and economic assumptions in the United States, and drawing voices from across the country, Underground artists such as Robert Crumb represented an expansion of the comic aesthetic in the United States that bridged the gap between traditional cartooning and comic books form. The Undergrounds synthesized a critique of U.S. imperialism, racism, corporate greed, and environmental degradation into an art form. Always fluid, the evolution of the Underground Comix movement into the "alternative comic" movement of the 1980 can be traced through the emergence of comic anthology publications such as *Arcade: The Comic Revue* edited by Art



Spiegelman and Bill Griffith and *RAW* edited by Art Spiegelman. These publications brought critical reassessment to comics and established a bridge between comics and art crucial to future growth. As explained in *Masters of American Comics*, this was a conscious effort, “to move away from the stifling and limiting themes of the early underground—sex, dope, violence, etc.”(128).

This transformation allowed artists like Spiegelman to delve into a variety of topics, and the graphic novels that emerged in the 1980s became vehicles for both personal and political stories in the hands of skilled writer/artists. In doing so, a new adult audience found comics and embraced them as serious literature. The freedom to create content beyond the limitation of stereotypes and expectations of the commercial marketplace have allowed comic artists to explore a variety of issues. From historic works such as Don Glut and Alfredo Alcala’s *Daddy Cool* (1984), based on the novel by African American writer Donald Goines, or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2007), the impact of race and gender minorities as creators and subjects of the graphic narrative demonstrate how much the medium can achieve to illuminate and empower marginalized voices.

APB adds to this legacy of artistic purpose with a collection that at once continues traditional frameworks associated with graphic literature in the United States, but is unabashed in its intention to do something new. Rosarium Press published this volume and this origin informs the final project. Founded in 2013, the guiding mission for Rosarium is to bring talented multicultural voices to the public. Since its founding, the press has distinguished itself with a mix of fiction and non-fiction that challenges the mainstream construction around race and gender. The publisher’s mission is on display in *APB*, but it is important to recognize that the volume does not systematically document a laundry list of deaths from police action. Despite the title, it does little to engage with persona and personalities of police officers. What *APB* does do is bring together over 50 creators to produce comics, critical essays, and short prose in a way that highlights the human cost of the police brutality in ways that statistics cannot.



The myriad voices and perspectives brought to bear provide insight while inciting reader reaction. A thoughtful essay on how the superhero model can inform collective action by Walidah Imarisha (“Alternative to Policing and the Superhero Model”) resonates with Reynaldo Anderson’s damning critique of state violence and the need for grassroots activism (“White Supremacy: Ferguson and a New Message to the Grassroots”) in this volume. These critical essays, along with prose pieces from writers such as Yatasha L. Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, provide a parallel intellectual experience to a collection with a wide range of comics content. Whether editorial cartoons from artists such as Keith Knight or Tak Toyoshima, that provide single-panel indictments to the racism and injustice associated with the death of unarmed black men, or more complex Twilight Zone-esque comics tales, such as “Profile” by Damien Duffy, Robert Love, and John Jennings, that capture the danger of being born black perfectly, the comics in this volume challenge the reader to recognize the underlying racist assumptions feeding police violence.

APB is at its most powerful when creators capture the reality of societal norms that allow police killings to be a common part of minority lives. Whether told from the perspective of the man being stopped by police in David Brame’s “Shame” or the child rendered fatherless in Melanie Stevens’ “The Walker,” these tales humanize the cost of racism linked to policing in way more powerful than endlessly cited data showing bias can. Expansive in its scope, this volume recognizes that Asian minorities and women suffer at the hands of the police and makes it clear the trauma experienced by families. All images are rendered in black and white and the clear page layouts makes this volume easy to read. A range of styles also help to give each story a unique feel for the reader. Whether you favor the cleaner line associated with superhero comics in the United States or a more expressive style, it is on display in this volume.



As a complete volume *APB* sparks a consideration of the contemporary politics through its pages. The public debate in the United States has evolved from the dream of “post-racial” society to a more complex critique of systemic oppression infused with regressive views on race, gender, and sexuality. In the pages of this anthology, voices informed by this intersectionality have gathered to create a unique narrative. This volume captures a single moment, but it will stand the test of time, because it adds to a legacy of comics as commentary on the U.S. experience.