Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative

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Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative

Essays on Forms, Series and Genres

Edited by Jake Jakaitis *and*
James F. Wurtz

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Introduction: Reading Crossover

Jake Jakaitis *and* James F. Wurtz

Relatively speaking, the scholarship of comics is a nascent field, and the idea that graphic narrative is an important literary form worthy of study at the highest levels is still capable of engendering debate. Recent years have seen comics scholarship emerge into wider scholarly contexts, with dedicated panels at the MLA conference, a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, and essays in *PMLA*, all of which ask whether comics can be considered literature. *Time Magazine*'s inclusion of Alan Moore and David Gibbons' *Watchmen* in its list of the one hundred best English-language novels from 1923 to the present further evidences the extent of this debate. The increasing volume of scholarship, including the monographs and collections published by scholarly and commercial presses, speaks rather convincingly to an affirmative answer to the question. In this collection of essays, we go beyond this notion to consider literary approaches to graphic narrative and sequential art. In particular, we examine the politics of comic form and narrative, the ways in which graphic narrative and sequential art "cross over" into other forms and genres, and how these articulations challenge the ways that we have learned to read and interpret texts. This volume brings various types of literary theory to bear on graphic narrative and balances readings of individual texts with larger ideas about comics and comics scholarship as a whole. In that sense, it is not simply a collection of essays on individual works, nor is it an overview of graphic narrative arguing that "comics are literature," but it is a careful reading of the ways in which graphic narratives achieve political effects through their crossovers.

This collection acknowledges that the comics medium challenges the ways in which we read and questions conventional notions of genre and readership. The fundamental struggle at play in the form is revealed in one of the recurrent debates: what, exactly, to call it? In the controversy over naming, "graphic novel" emphasizes the textual; in its reference to an established literary form it foregrounds the words. "Sequential art," on the other hand, emphasizes the image and implies that, like Egyptian hieroglyphs or the Bayeux Tapestry, meaning is found primarily in the arranged order of the pictures. Various

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writers and thinkers have been attached to these terms. For instance, Will Eisner, who is often considered the father of the graphic novel, introduces the term "sequential art" in his influential 1985 book *Comics and Sequential Art*. However, what is most interesting to us about this debate is that the name generally denotes the approach taken towards analyzing the literature. For this reason, Scott McCloud, whose *Understanding Comics* remains a touchstone text for the study of graphic narrative and sequential art, uses the term "comics" and defines it broadly. However, we cannot dissociate "comics" from its contexts, and all too often the medium suggests a juvenile readership and a black-and-white worldview. While this volume does not focus on the appropriate name for the genre, the question of whether images or words are predominant implied in the question of what to call it misses the unique synergy among the various narrative registers and the reader. Aaron Meskin's recent definition of comics as "a hybrid art form that evolved from literature and a number of other art forms and media" also evokes this synergy, once more suggesting that crossover is central to the medium (219).

The idea of "crossover" is essential to understanding this genre: graphic narrative functions most effectively precisely through many of its points of intersection. At its most basic level, the connections and disjunctions between image and word drive the text, guiding the reader's eye from panel to panel to comprehend the story. Graphic narrative, however, frequently engages in multiple acts of crossing over, between different genres, different forms, different linguistic registers, different types of art, and different storylines and character "universes." Traditionally in the comics medium, crossover has referenced a single story arc effected across multiple titles or the appearance of one character in another character's series or universe. The commercial benefits to publishers like Marvel or DC are obvious. Readers who typically purchased only a few titles through crossover story arcs would purchase additional titles to remain current with content that often effected material changes in the DC or Marvel universe. While the conventional definition of "crossover" applies exclusively to these extended story arcs, the medium has always also participated in the more complex and engaging conceptual crossovers discussed in this collection, linking the comics medium to the cinema, the literary, and the political.

Some relatively recent crossovers seem "natural" to the medium: Marvel's *Spiderman*, *X-Men*, *Hulk*, and *Iron Man* films, the company's revival of *Classics Illustrated* and its presentation of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* and *The Stand*, and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, for example. Visual crossovers also adapt films and television shows to the comics medium. Dark Horse adaptations of *Firefly*, its long-running series of *Star Wars* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comics, and Boom! Studio adaptations of SyFy Channel shows like *Farscape* and *Eureka* appeal to comics readers already familiar with science fiction content and plots through their engagement with superhero comics. Graphic novel adaptations of literary works, of course, have appeared for some time although, except for the *Classics Illustrated* publications, most of these have adapted popular genres like science fiction to the graphic novel medium. DC's late 1980s adaptations of Hugo and Nebula Award winning works like Frederik Pohl's *The Merchants of Venice* (1986) and George R.R. Martin's *Sandkings* (1987), its three book adaptation of Roger Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber* (1996), and its presentation of Harlan Ellison's *Dream Corridor* anthology series (1995–96) are representative examples. Just as Ellison participated in adaptation of his work for

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Dream Corridor, even writing and designing the interstitial framing sequences that link the stories, Ray Bradbury has authorized and written the introduction to Tim Hamilton's 2009 graphic novel of *Fahrenheit 451*.

While these and similar adaptations of popular culture literary works traditionally have effected visual crossovers by balancing image and word and adhering to the implicit industry standard of a maximum of one hundred and fifty words on any single page, others have pushed that limit, experimenting with literal transcription of novels enhanced by sequential art. The most dramatic example is Boom! Studios' in-progress twenty-four issue adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (June 2009).[1] Tony Parker's art, the lettering by Richard Starkings and Jimmy Betancourt, and the colors by Blond collaborate to produce a visually engaging text. However, the series, which reproduces the complete text of Philip K. Dick's novel, is more effective at validating the necessity of limiting the number of word per page in a graphic novel than it is at re-creating or enhancing the experience of Dick's work. The characters' speech is represented in the traditional dialogue balloons, while the internal monologues clutter the frames in peach or blue boxes and the narration appears against the backdrops of walls or open spaces, stealing the function of visual art. The project seems to have lost sense of the function of sequential art to convey visually what in other contexts is conveyed through language that itself provokes visuals. Boom! Studios' ambitious adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, then, both is the logical outgrowth of developing trends in visual crossover and tests the limits of graphic narrative and sequential art. By way of contrast, Marvel's much more successful five issue adaptation of Dick's "Electric Ant" (June-August 2010) relies on a script by David Mack and art by Pascal Alixe to re-present Dick's short story, updating and altering the plot but maintaining the spirit of the original text. By relying on scriptwriter and artist collaboration to produce the visual text, Marvel acknowledges both the strengths and limits of graphic narrative while effecting a crossover coincident with traditional and recent developments in the comics industry.

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These recent developments to some extent are implied in Michael Chabon's Pulitzer winning *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) and the author's follow-up comic series, *The Escapist* (2004). Chabon's emphasis on visual crossover and on graphic narrative as adult fare can be seen through a brief address to a few signature moments in his novel. As they prepare to present to Shelly Anapol, the owner of Empire Comics, their plan to encourage an adult audience for comics, Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay debate the status of the medium. Clay argues that "Comic books actually are inferior" (363), but Kavalier, drawing on their recent encounter with Orson Welles, declares that in "its inextricable braiding of image and narrative—*Citizen Kane* was like a comic book" (362). He further explains that comics must move beyond "somehow adapting the cinematic bag of tricks" employed by films to "the total blending of narration and image … that was the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling" (362). For Kavalier, this was how Welles and *Citizen Kane* transcended mere cinema and achieved the "full collaboration of writer and artist" (369) available through sequential art. These moments in Chabon's novel, among many others, promote the idea of crossover central to this volume while implicitly revealing intersections of the cinematic, literary and political as historically central to graphic narrative and sequential art.

While Chabon's novel emphasizes the cinematic and literary over the political, Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer winning graphic novel, *Maus* (1986; 1991), among other works, seems to have popularized aggressively politicized graphic narrative and culture crossovers that previously appealed only to rather small audiences like the readers of Will Eisner's *New York: The Big City* (1981). Collectively, the texts discussed have generated academic interest in the politics of sequential art and graphic narrative. By looking at the "crossovers" that graphic narrative, in its many guises, participates in, this volume examines how graphic narrative challenges the way we read, how we understand the form itself, and how it engages political culture.

We demonstrate the centrality of the "crossover" to graphic narrative by reading two quite different texts: Marvel's recent *Civil War* series, which brings characters from different Marvel comics together in a story arc that clearly responds to post-9/11 American politics, and *Charley's War*, a newly reissued series that follows a boy's experiences in the British army during the first world war. Among the "crossovers" in *Charley's War* are the tension between art and words, the interrelationship of history and fiction, the reception of the narrative as a weekly strip in a British boy's comic magazine as opposed to the new, finely bound "graphic novels," and the work's relevance as an historical document vis-à-vis the timeliness of the present moment (Vietnam/Falklands war vs. Iraq/Afghanistan). Marvel's *Civil War*, though structurally a traditional crossover story arc designed to alter the Marvel Universe and generate a steady stream of new series, directly engages the politics of post-9/11 America through its Superhero Registration Act. The event that generates government regulation of superheroes parallels the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, while the Superhero Registration Act parallels the Patriot Act and calls into question the patriotism and loyalty of Marvel's heroes. Clearly, *Civil War* critiques the landscape of post-9/11 America and crosses over into political culture.[2]

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This Marvel event is an exemplary combination of the commercial interests driving traditional crossovers and the implicit political and social criticism informing comics culture at least since the original Human Torch, Jim Hammond, Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner, and Captain America joined forces to combat the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific in comics of the 1940s. Including a few *Black Panther* issues that present related plot material but are not officially considered *Civil War* tie-ins, the Marvel event encompasses one hundred and seven individual comics spanning no fewer than twenty-three Marvel titles in addition to the *Civil War* (May 2006-Febuary 2007) and *Front Line* (August 2006-April 2007) stand-alone series.[3] While one can follow the broad crossover plot by reading *The New Avengers: Illuminati* one-shot (May 2006), the seven issues of *Civil War*, and the eleven issues of *Front Line*, each of these texts references events that can only be fully understood through an engagement with multiple additional Marvel titles. Readers invested in the crossover, then, feel compelled to purchase titles beyond those coincident with their typical reading habits. The commercial effects of the crossover extend beyond the event itself, for the civil war impacts the entire Marvel Universe, effecting changes in multiple titles and inspiring readers who have not followed the crossover to purchase the *Civil War* and *Front Line* trade paperbacks in order to remain current with events and politicized conflicts in their favorite Marvel titles.

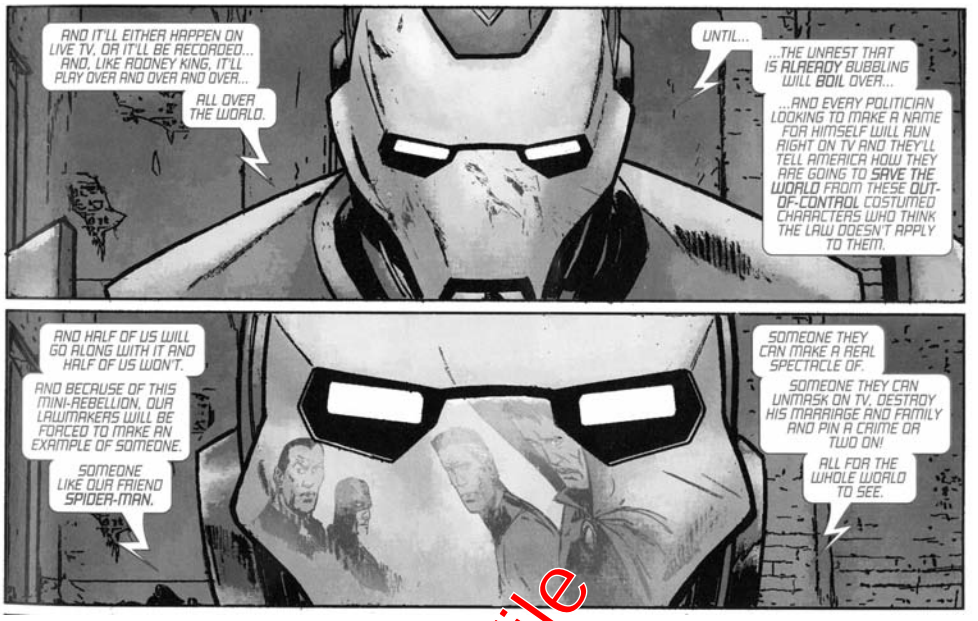
In a Newsarama interview posted shortly after publication of *Civil War #7* (January

2007), Mark Millar acknowledged the presence of "political allegory" in *Civil War*, evoking issues central to the debate over the Patriot Act by declaring the crossover "a story where a guy wrapped in the American Flag is in chains as the people swap freedom for security." However, Millar also states that the series is really just about superheroes in conflict and that most young readers would see only that emphasis while the politically astute would read it for its implicit commentary on current events.[4] Despite this disclaimer, *Civil War*'s principal conflicts in both Millar's and Jenkins's texts and in the crossovers to other Marvel titles are more about trading freedom for security and about corporate power and a secretive and deceptive government than about superhero conflict. An overview of the event, focusing principally on *The Road to Civil War*[5] trade paperback and the *Civil War* and *Front Line* series, reveals how Millar's and Jenkins's overtly political content crosses over to commentary on political culture and current events.

Marvel's Civil War event begins in *The New Avengers: Illuminati* one-shot when Iron Man calls a meeting of superheroes in Wakanda, Africa, to discuss tensions building in Washington, D.C., following a devastating war fought between two alien races, the Kree and the Skrull. Since members of the superhero community knew of the presence of one or the other of the alien races but failed to share information or collaborate to stop the war, Washington and the public are becoming impatient with the freedoms afforded vigilantes, and forces interested in superhero registration legislation are gaining power. Iron Man calls for a single organization encompassing "The X-Men, The Avengers, The Inhumans, The Fantastic Four, everyone else." He suggests that "Instead of these little factions of heroes and mutants … running around doing the best they can," they could "pool all of [their] resources and all of [their] information and do it right" (Grünwald 3). Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, is the first to object, followed by King T'Challa, the Black Panther. Both see the difficulty of managing so large a group of previously independent superheroes; both also understand that Iron Man has implicitly identified himself as the probable leader of the proposed group. When Iron Man argues that by banding together, superheroes could protect and improve the world, Namor's reply provokes associations with post-9/11 America, associations enhanced by the text's bold print: "How many convicted **criminals** and supposed ex-mutant **terrorists** do you have on the Avengers **right now**?" (Grünwald 5). However, even Namor concedes to form the group once they agree to psychic surveillance by Charles Xavier, leader of the mutants, to prevent any member from revealing the secrets of any of the others. Only T'Challa questions the ethics of their declaring themselves the planet's protectors, refuses to make the vote unanimous, and asks them to leave his country. The meeting establishes the tensions over leadership, security, and privacy that will lead to civil war and extend the crossover to more than one hundred comics encompassing the entire Marvel Universe.

These tensions accelerate when Bruce Banner loses control as the Hulk and destroys Las Vegas, leading Tony Stark and Reed Richards to devise a plan to lure Banner to a failing satellite and blast him into space, presumably exiling him forever. Stark and Richards justify their plan through Professor Xavier's probing of Banner's mind to discovery that Banner would have killed himself long ago if he could have done so. Sacrificing privacy — even at the level of the individual mind — for security becomes a motif in Marvel's Civil War, echoing the surveillance of American citizens justified by The Patriot Act.

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Iron Man's comments recall the televised images of airliners destroying the World Trade Center (*The Road to Civil War* 33).

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Essentially, the Civil War begins here when Namor refuses to comply and battles Stark as Iron Man in an attempt to prevent the Hulk's exile. Doctor Strange uses his mystical powers to separate the combatants and Namor ultimately exiles himself to Atlantis after Iron Man urges the New Avengers and all superheroes to "voluntarily support and obey" (Grünwald 27) the impending superhero registration legislation. Iron Man's rationale, depicted in two consecutive panels, again firmly situates this Marvel crossover in Post-9/11 America, implicitly critiques the motivations of politicians in response to national crises, and establishes the conditions for superhero allegiances that subvert the expectations of regular Marvel readers.

Despite Iron Man's specific reference to Rodney King, we cannot help but recall the image of airliners destroying the World Trade Center when the superhero notes that an anticipated tragic event will be televised "over and over … all over the world." His comments on politicians and on the likely conflicting allegiances of superheroes lay the groundwork for the extended crossover, and his reference to Spider-Man prepares us for that rebellious character's manipulation by Iron Man and initial compliance with the Superhero Registration Act, just as the Hulk's exile prepared us for Reed Richards and Tony Stark's inter-dimensional superhero prison, the crossover's Guantanamo substitute. As the *New Avengers: Illuminati* episode of *The Road to Civil War* ends, Doctor Strange rejects Iron Man's plea, calling it "giving in to other people's ignorance and fears" (Grünwald 31), Namor returns to Atlantis, T'Challa remains isolationist in Wakanda, and the New Avengers have disbanded, leaving Iron Man and Reed Richards to devise a response to the impending legislation.

The Amazing Spider-Man #529-531, comprising the final three episodes of *The Road*

to Civil War, validates manipulation of Congress and the public as crucial to the nation's best interest. Called to Washington to testify before the Senate Metahuman Investigations Committee (SMIT), Tony Stark recruits Peter Parker as his protégé, appealing to his patriotism and trust and insisting that Parker reveal none of Stark's activities to other superheroes, including Steve Rodgers. Ironically, Stark lures Parker to the SMIT hearings as part of an elaborate plot to delay passing of a Superhero Registration Act, thereby betraying Parker's trust. Unknown to Parker (and to the reader) Stark has hired the Titanium Man for a fake assassination attempt on himself as Parker and Stark exit the hearings. As Spider-Man, Parker intercedes, battling the Titanium Man against the backdrop of national monuments on the Mall. He pauses before the Gettysburg Address and is moved by Lincoln's words. Once the Titanium Man flees, Stark and Parker return to the Lincoln Memorial where Stark expresses his admiration for Lincoln and his belief that Lincoln adopted a stance that he knew would lead to civil war because that fight was necessary to maintain the republic and restore the nation (Grünwald 45–46). While Stark's motives seem pure, his actions justify the concerns expressed by Namor early in *The Road to Civil War*, for he unilaterally decides what is best for the country and his fellow superheroes and betrays both the public trust and that of his young protégé, whom he will ultimately convince to unmask before the nation, by hiring a Russian assassin to fake an attempt on his life, then denies his complicity in the event while standing before the Lincoln Memorial. Stark's efforts fail, however, once Speedball and the New Warriors precipitate the televised event anticipated in Iron Man's appeal to the New Avengers by provoking Nitro, a villain capable of generating an atomic blast, into destroying a Stamford, Connecticut, neighborhood and elementary school, an event revealed to Parker as he watches the evening news in the final moment of the volume. *The Road to Civil War* establishes the conflict between personal freedom and security, between the public's right to know and the relation of privileged information to national security, and between democratically elected leadership and corporate power as functioning oppositions in post-9/11 America.

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While the political critique of *The Road to Civil War* is largely implicit, enacted through indirect reference and events parallel but not identical to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and its aftermath, Paul Jenkins's *Front Line* overtly states the crossover between contemporary political issues and the Marvel event through the interaction of two reporters, Ben Urich, who works for Jonah Jameson's conservative, if not reactionary *The Daily Bugle*, and Sally Floyd, employed by *The Alternative*, a progressive publication. *Front Line* is actually an anthology series, each of the eleven issues containing chapters developing "The Embedded," following Urich and Floyd; "The Accused," covering Speedball, the only New Warrior to survive the Stamford, Connecticut, event; and, in issues three through nine, "Sleeper Cell," depicting covert operations by Atlanteans posing as humans. Except for the final two issues, each *Front Line* installment ends with a postscript depicting an historical moment of civil strife. Unlike *The Road to Civil War* and *Civil War*, which conform to Millar's Newsarama comments and focus primarily on superhero conflict while only indirectly effecting political critique, Jenkins's script overtly historicizes and critiques political and cultural inducements to civil strife while drawing parallels to post-9/11 stressors. It is no accident, for example, that Jenkins ends *Front Line #1* with a poem written by a Japanese internee at the Poston War Relocation Camp, juxtaposing

Poston images with those of Spider-Man telephoning Mary Jane as he tries to come to a decision about the Superhero Registration Act. The postscript ends with a Japanese-American father and family entering the camp and explaining that they must do so "Because it is our **duty**. Because we are Americans," while Spider-Man stares up at the Statue of Liberty saying, "with great power, huh?" (32). Other issues juxtapose images of World War I Doughboys unsuccessfully attempting to revive a comrade with contemporary firefighters failing to revive a citizen injured during a superhero conflict, or Billy Joel's "Goodnight Saigon" asking who was wrong and who was right with images of marines invading a Vietnam village and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents capturing resistant superheroes (*Front Line #4* 28–32). Although these and other postscripts to *Front Line* issues question the imprisoning of citizens or critique military solutions to civil strife, they also tend to promote ambiguity rather than sustain any clearly defined positions.

Millar refers to the ambiguity governing the entire crossover in his Newsarama interview when he responds to arguments by some that the pro-registration group is undermined and to those presented by others that the anti-registration group is unfavorably depicted by saying that Stark's group "gets the better rep" in *Civil War* and "the tie-in books demonized them a little." On the surface, this is an accurate assessment, but the ambiguity can be resolved through a look at the trajectories of Ben Urich and Sally Floyd in the *Front Line* "tie-in" and of Iron Man and Captain America in *Civil War*. *Front Line #1* begins with the funeral of John Fernandez, a journalist killed in Stamford, followed by a barroom conversation between Sally Floyd and Ben Urich about the Superhero Registration Act and their respective assignments. *The Alternative* has assigned Floyd to cover "the erosion of civil liberties in America" linked "to the wiretapping thing," while Jameson has charged Urich to "shove [Stamford] so far up the liberals' keisters they think the Wednesday sports page is the Sunday edition" (4). Echoing the concerns of *The Road to Civil War*, but referencing through post-9/11 tensions, Floyd thinks, "This was civil liberty versus civil comfort; wiretapping versus terrorism; Fox versus CNN" as she drives home from the bar (5).

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While Floyd's and Urich's views are not governed entirely by the perspectives of their respective publications, they do represent opposing political positions early in the series. Their coming together by the end of the series, when they join forces to produce frontline.com, enacts a choice that resolves the apparent ambiguity governing the crossover. As Sally sits in their tiny office, working at her computer, her back to Urich, he contemplates how she has changed and views with "pride" the liberal's "newfound objectivity" (20). Urich's views, although not as reactionary as Jonah Jameson's, become clear when Jameson fires him for insisting on writing a story exposing Iron Man's use of criminals like the Green Goblin as S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Urich replies, "What's next, we refuse to publish an editorial cartoon in case we offend a terrorist?" (*Front Line #5* 9). Urich, neither far right nor far left, ultimately disabuses Floyd of her liberal notions, but he needs help.

When Urich is fired in *Front Line #5*, Floyd and her editor, Neil Crawford are arrested for "conspiracy to commit terrorist acts and harboring the identity of an unregistered combatant" (12). Incarcerated at a Guantanamo-like facility, Floyd is interrogated by the arresting agent, Eric Marshall, whom she had previously met when he tried to hit on her