



## Book Reviews

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## *Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Narratives Young Lives in Crisis*

by Rodolfo DAL CANTO

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# *Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Narratives Young Lives in Crisis*

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Comics are an object of study that requires an interdisciplinary approach: as a narrative in which word and image often coexist, it has been analyzed using approaches ranging from thematic to narratological, or pertaining to the field of semiotics and aesthetics, not to mention media studies and historical, even philological studies. The thematic perspective was perhaps the first to establish itself in the field of comics studies and, consequently, historically privileged. It is a field that to this day does not cease to produce interesting results, as is evident from several titles in the “Routledge Advances in Comics Studies” series, including *Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Narratives. Young Lives in Crisis*, edited by María Porras Sánchez and Gerardo Vilches.

The text aims to investigate the representation of different forms of youth precariousness (social, economic, labor, existential) within contemporary graphic narratives, along with interventions and analysis related to the dynamics of production and market presence of graphic novels, and the creation of spaces for claims and activism. Such a project evidently requires a decidedly interdisciplinary theoretical framework: given the complexity and scope of the topic, the editors begin by illustrating the various definitions and declinations of “youth precariousness”. To this end, they resort to current studies and contemporary analysis from different disciplines: sociology (Bauman 2000, 2007, 2017), philosophy (Butler 2004, 2009, 2012, 2020), gender studies (Halberstam, 2018) and cultural criticism (Berardi 2005, 2017, Berlant 2011, Fisher 2009, Žižek 2008). Parallel to the framing of the theme of precarity, “a recurrent motif of contemporary culture” (Berlant 2011), the editors also justify the choice of the comics medium as a field of inquiry: its formal and medial properties make it suitable for questioning the ways in which we negotiate our relationship with the present and its representations (Polak 2017).

Adding to the broadness of the topic is the complexity of the medium and its various manifestations, which is well exemplified by the five sections that make up the volume: (1) Representations of precarious youth in graphic fiction, (2) The young self in crisis in (auto)biographic comics, (3) Superheroic precarity, (4) Surviving in a precarious market: labor insecurity and the publishing sector and (5) Spaces of vulnerability / spaces of action. The first three sections favor a division according to genre, focusing first on graphic fiction, then on the (auto)biographical narrative and finally on the superhero narrative. The last two, on the other hand, shift from the content of the texts to focus on the context of comics making and the social implications of the texts.

In the first three sections, the variety of comic forms that are considered is an important contribution of the volume. In the first section, we find the newspaper comic strip discussed by Francisco Saez de Adana in “The Ideological Depiction of Childhood during the Great Depression”; this is followed by the graphic novel, both in the form of fiction in “A Malaise That We Don’t Know What to Name” by Katie Salmon and in “What Is

Love? Precarious Lives, Precarious Loves in the Works of Italian Women Graphic Novelists” by Nicoletta Mandolini and Giorgio Busi Rizzi, as well as in the form of adaptation, in the chapter by María Augusta Albuja Aguilar, “Oppressive Structures and Childhood Precarity in *The Witches: A Graphic Novel*”; these are complemented by a chapter on manga, “Journey to Adulthood. Visual Representation of a Morphing Identity in Inio Asano’s *Goodnight Punpun*” by José Andrés Santiago. As for the second section, the breadth of the volume’s outlook is manifested in the papers by Andrea Hoff, “Uncertain Homes. Trauma, Fracture and Resilience in Roma Biographies from the “Children’s Homes” in the Czech Republic”, and Michael L. Kersulov, “Finding Voice within the Objects of Their Lives. Adolescents Writing Memoir Comics to Interrogate Crisis “. Both they devote themselves to the analysis of narratives in images produced in the course of a collective project, in the first case, and of a workshop carried out in a classroom by the author himself, in the second. In this way, both problematize the representation of childhood in an autobiographical narrative, whether carried out from the distant perspective (and gaze) of the adult or made directly by young students. The two chapters in the next section offer a useful overview of the representation of precarity within U.S. superhero production placed in relation to the socio-cultural context of the period (Elisa McCausland and Diego Salgado, “Super-Precariat. Socioeconomic Fictions and Realities of Superhero Comic Books”) and the presence of villains of African origins within texts produced during the Golden Age of superheroes, with a focus on their backgrounds (Óscar Gual Boronat and Mario Millanes Vaquero, “«What Happens to a Dream Deferred?» Super Villains of African Descent in Classic Marvel Era”).

Both the variety of declinations and diffusion of the theme of precariousness in different forms of comics and the consideration of diverse geographical and cultural contexts are striking. This is confirmed by the chapters that follow: in “Precarious Identity. Labeling Oneself *Fumettista?*”, Lisa Maya Quaianni Manuzzato and Eva Van de Wiele present the results of their research on the condition and history of female cartoonists in Italy, while Amadeo Gandolfo, in “Amazing Ultradeformer Cartoonist from Ituzaingó. The Memes of Pedro Mancini”, discusses the content and impact of the production of memes by Argentine author Pedro Mancini based on Mancini’s creations as a cartoonist; finally, Enrique Bordes shows the centrality of the role of a figure like Vincent Giard within the Canadian comics production in “In Conversation with Vincent Giard. A Decade Taking Care of a Little Colossus”.

The community building aspect, often connected to alternative production practices and market rules, along with the sharing of the creative process, of ideas, narratives and representations, turns out to be fundamental for representing the different forms of precarity and the identities affected by it, and for combatting them and finding alternatives. This is what emerges from the chapters collected in the last section: here, comics often offer a space for visibility and awareness-raising in “Crises, New Modalities of Social Struggle and the Emergence of LGBTIQ+ Discourses as Revulsive and Autonomous Responses in the Field of Argentine Comics (2016-2020)” by Laura Cristina Fernández; possibilities for giving voice to subjectivities that have been denied in “Cultural Otherness in *Der Traum von Olympia (An Olympic Dream)*” by Julia C. Gómez Sáez; space in which it is possible to trace invisibilized identities that risk oblivion in “Wasted Potential, Disposable Bodies. The Many Victims of Backderf’s *My Friend Dahmer*” by Monica Chiu; and finally, as a practice of storytelling and resistance, of sharing and community in Lydia

Wysocki's chapter, "Strike Comics. Representing the Inequities and Absurdities of Academic Precarity".

*Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Novels*, then, goes far beyond a thematic look at the issue of precarity within comics. The medium, once again, imposes itself in all its interdisciplinarity, enriching and complicating our understanding of the issue. Revelatory in this sense is the broad scope of the notion of "youth" that turns out to be precarious in terms of connotations of age, but also of social class, race and gender. For this reason, the volume is a useful tool both for scholars dealing with the representations of the theme of precarity in media and the different forms of negotiation they entail, and, of course, for comics scholars because of the variety of approaches applied, particularly in delving into the relationship between comics and social issues related to the present. Indeed, the various reworkings of precariousness within the medium show an increasingly widespread and multifaceted phenomenon that, within the capitalist economic system, becomes a strategy of control that organizes "all forms of labor according to the infinite modalities of market flexibility" (Sanchez and Vilches 2023, Hardt and Negri 2009). For these reasons, it needs to be not only told and re-imagined, but also analyzed and discussed. *Precarious Youth in Contemporary Graphic Narratives. Young Lives in Crisis* shows the importance of interrogating comics with regard to crucial issues affecting our contemporary era, and also reveals the power of the medium in offering ways to engage with present issues as a way to renegotiate our identities and communities, our relationship to the world, and the way we represent and imagine it.

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