

## **Gutter Politics: Graphic Novels in the Age of Trump**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which US graphic novels have responded to, narrated and politically framed, the Trump presidency. Analysing a generically diverse range of texts – from non-fiction to science fiction – I argue that comics artists were quick to mobilise the medium’s unique qualities in the service of ideological critique. The article offers a detailed account of how publications such as *Sabrina* (2018), *The Hard Tomorrow* (2019), *LaGuardia* (2019), and *Welcome to the New World* (2020) were developed, shaped and reshaped against the backdrop of Donald Trump’s election victory and presidential term. Through an assortment of formal and stylistic devices – spatial and temporal jumps and juxtapositions afforded by panel arrangement, a weaving together of historical and contemporaneous iconography, the interplay of various textual cues and registers – these graphic novels offered complex portrayals of the impact of Trump and “Trumpism” on various individuals, groups and communities. In different ways, they evidence the medium’s ability to intervene in wider political discourse, construct challenging historical and speculative narratives, and offer fresh, resonant engagements with pressing issues of the day.

‘I see a lot of people describe it as a dystopia, and I’m like, what? ... It’s not very different from now’ (McMillan 2019). This was writer-illustrator Eleanor Davis’ reply when quizzed on the political resonance of her latest graphic novel, *The Hard Tomorrow* (2019). While ostensibly about a United States of the not-too-distant future, the book’s cast of activists, idealists and conspiracists is very much the stuff of current affairs. Davis began developing the story in the fall of 2016: ‘Trump just got elected and my husband and I had been, for a about a year, trying to get pregnant, and my mother-in-law got very, very ill suddenly’ (Ibid). Reworked into a fictionalised tale of political activism, anger, despair and burning hope for

the future, these experiences inform every page, emphasising the ‘power of comics to imbricate the personal and the political’ (Hatfield 2005: 152). *The Hard Tomorrow* was also one of many high-profile graphic novels to have been developed in response to, and/or to have participated in, wider discourses on the Trump presidency.

Analysing a series of publications to have reached bookstores since 2016, this essay explores their portrayals of politics and society in the Trump era. A growing body of academic literature has been concerned with the graphic novel as an innovative literary and visual form. Scholars probe its potential for offering stylistically inventive and thematically complex examinations of historical events, genre-bending (auto)biographies and stark analyses of current world issues (see, for example, Adams 2008; Chute 2010; Cutter & Schlund-Vials 2018; Frey 2017: 80-96; Santos 2019; Stubblefield 2014: 153-178; Tabachnick 2014). At the heart of this work is a call to explore the graphic novel’s unique characteristics. In what ways might its long-form narratives and combinations of image and text offer meaningful contributions to political debates and collective remembrance? How

might these contributions – in terms of form, style and content – differ from other media?

Throughout the essay, I draw upon the above-noted authors' insights, as well as those of the longer-established field of comics studies, in order to make a case for the value and political significance of Trump-era graphic novels.

To propose a study of 'graphic novels in the age of Trump' raises its own set of methodological concerns. I label the texts under examination 'graphic novels' (as opposed to 'comics'), and focus on long-form narratives, neither to make value judgements as to literary/artistic merit, nor to underplay the rich array of short Trump-themed comics to have graced the page (and the website) since 2016.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the nomenclature 'graphic novel' has received ample criticism: as a snobbish tag used by marketers to sell 'expensive comic books' (Moore, cited in Baetens and Frey 2015: 3); for eliding complex production and distribution histories (e.g. many graphic novels begin as serialised comics and are often sold through specialist comics catalogues and shops) (Hatfield 2005: 152-163); for the fact that many canonical works are not 'novels' at all, but 'rich works of nonfiction' (Chute 2008: 453). The following analysis is sensitive to the above criticisms. Examples discussed below highlight the importance of production context, narrative development, the interplay between fiction and non-fiction, and the evolution of serialised comics into a single narrative.

Nonetheless, as 'an idea and publishing phenomenon' (Baetens and Frey 2015: 2), the graphic novel has held a privileged status in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Enjoying critical praise and educational legitimacy, many graphic novels have transcended the traditional readerships of comics to become major literary, journalistic and political sensations in their own right. The first section of the essay considers how graphic novels have constructed an image of Donald Trump and the impact of 'Trumpism' on US society. From Ted Rall's *Trump: A Graphic*

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<sup>1</sup>Editorial cartoons, collections of political comics and superhero-themed comics have been rich and varied these past five years (see e.g. Noomin (ed.), 2019; Riesman 2016; Wuerker 2021).

*Biography* (2016) to Jake Halpern's and Michael Sloan's *Welcome to the New World* (2020), the texts analysed here are all examples of non-fiction graphic reportage, a prominent trend since the graphic novel's emergence (Baetens 2017: 133). At the same time, the writers and artists involved in creating these texts utilise a range of creative techniques in order to explore the impact of America's 45<sup>th</sup> president on diverse individuals, groups and communities.

The essay then provides a close analysis of two fictional texts published since 2018 that, while not directly referencing Trump (in text or images), have been widely understood to offer critiques of America during his presidential reign. Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina* (2018) and Davis' *The Hard Tomorrow* offer multi-layered reflections on US politics and society of recent years. Through shifts in perspective and complex narrative twists, readers are invited to alternately meditate on, revisit and reinterpret specific images and sections. Both, in different ways, lead us in a 'game of stylistic collisions, ironic contrasts, and hybridization' that Thierry Smolderen has argued is central to the medium's 'polygraphic approach' (2007: 9). I conclude the essay with some thoughts on the shared visual iconographies and thematic preoccupations of Trump-era graphic novels, using Nnedi Okorafor, Tana Ford and James Devlin's futuristic *LaGuardia* (2019) as a base from which to explore how these texts have been central players in the political framing of this most tumultuous epoch.

### **Donald Trump: The Graphic Novel**

Opening *Trump: A Graphic Biography* (2016) with a potted account of a nation 'in decline for 40 years', the cartoonist Ted Rall historically situates a man who, at the time of publication, had just been formally nominated as the Republican presidential candidate for the 2016 election. By the early 2000s, avers Rall, 'the middle class was already on the ropes ... jobs outsourced overseas'. Then, 'in 2007... The housing bubble burst ... millions lost

their jobs. Families plunged into poverty’ (2016: 11). Incorporating a series of illustrations, photographs, social media posts and newspaper headlines, *Trump* bombards its readers with an avalanche of snappy polemic. We jump through quick-fire vignettes on Trump’s presidential campaign, his childhood, his political outlook, his youth, and his suggested connections to fascist leaders of the past. There is a busyness to the pages, littered, as they are, with images of various sizes and, often, an abundance of text. If this graphic novel at times lacks coherence, one might at least suggest that its scattered composition is appropriate for the biographical subject. Like so much Trumpian rhetoric, Rall’s work is given to random jumps in theme and pithy outbursts. Overlaying image upon image in a swirl of intertextual chaos, *Trump: A Graphic Novel* stands as testimony to an age of social media overload, while also raising some interesting questions on the framing of this age.

As with any exercise in periodisation, delineating an ‘Age of Trump’ is fraught with complexity. Historians and political scientists have identified key issues associated with Trump and Trumpism: for example, a ‘radical turn’ in US foreign policy and shattering of long-held diplomatic and military alliances, attempts to roll back federal-sponsored welfare and environmentalist programmes, anti-immigration sentiment, the ‘amplification of hate speech’ and explicit racism and sexism (delivered under the auspices of fighting ‘political correctness’), a ‘war’ on the free press, and a call to restore American exceptionalism through nativist economic policies (Mast & Alexander 2019; Sable & Jaramillo Torres 2018; Zick 2019: 115). Mass protests against police brutality, sexual misconduct and environmental destruction have generated enormous media attention since 2016, while images of conflicts between Left and Right have limned the idea of an America divided.

Such issues and developments, however, can be traced back well before Trump took office. Rall’s attempts to position Trump within a historic milieu of political and economic crisis share parallels with many popular and academic discourses of recent years. Scholars of

the so-called ‘culture war’ in America have argued that these politically-charged conflicts have gained prominence since at least the 1960s (Taviss Thomson 2010). High-profile feminist, gay rights, anti-racist and environmentalist campaigns and the rise of a noisy New Right – from evangelical groups like the Moral Majority to ultra-conservative reformers the Tea Party – meant US public politics was well inured to discord throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jeremy Kowalski argues that neoliberal policies pushed by successive Republican and Democrat elites since the 1980s, with priorities including wealth concentration in the financial sector, the destruction of traditional manufacturing industries and the outsourcing of jobs, led to a ‘crisis’ within civil society, one which paved the way for Trump’s ascendance (2018: 6).

Rall explores the contradiction underpinning Trump’s presidential campaign: his seeming ability to conflate his allegiances with America’s ‘billionaire class’ with an appeal to ‘those suffering from economic deprivation, humiliation, and political alienation’ (McCollum 2019: 3). A series of anecdotes covers Trump’s youthful escapades in the 1960s. ‘College campuses were centers of intense political debate’, we are informed as an illustration of modern-day Trump shows him gritting his teeth and clenching his fists as he declares ‘I wasn’t a fan of the Vietnam War ... But I wasn’t a marcher’. Another text box reminds readers of the deferments Trump received during and after college (Rall 2016: 132). On the adjacent page, a civilised dinner-date is in process. The young Donald Trump Jr. woos the actor Candice Bergen with his ‘three-piece burgundy suit, and burgundy boots and ... burgundy limousine’ (Ibid: 133). Rall frequently employs double-page spreads as a means of interrogating Trump’s superficial rhetoric. As Thierry Groensteen contends, comic ‘pages situated opposite each other are dependent on a natural solidarity, and predisposed to speak to each other’ (2007: 36). Trump’s ‘I wasn’t a marcher’ was the standard conservative dismissal of anti-Vietnam War protestors as spoilt middle-class radicals ‘hostile’ to the (working-class)

men sent to fight the war. And yet, situated amongst these images of decadence and deferrals, it is drained of its intention, becoming another hypocritical answer to James Fallows' (1975) age-old question: 'What did you do in the class war, daddy?'

This graphic novel exemplifies what has become a rich vein of similar works to focus on political and social issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jan Baetens argues that the predominance of non-fiction graphic novels is emblematic of a shifting media landscape defined by convergence and 'creative interaction' as an ever-growing wealth of visual and textual materials fight for the reader's (or viewer's) attention. Furthermore, the rise in popularity of docu-fiction – especially in film and television – coupled with a desire to differentiate product from mainstream superhero comic books, has meant that creators and marketers have pushed graphic journalism as a viable, adult-oriented alternative (Baetens 2017: 130-131). *Trump: A Graphic Novel* appears self-conscious about its status as but one intervention in a veritable free-for-all on Trump and his political activities. It is frequently argued that comics create meaning through juxtaposition, with multiple spaces and temporalities existing within single pages (or even single panels), and that readers, more so than film viewers, are required to actively fill in the gaps, or to extrapolate and interpret (McCloud 1993). One defining aspect of Trump-era graphic novels is the positioning of the reader as an 'Internet surfer' who is encouraged to view characters and events through the multifarious frames of smartphones, laptop screens and webcams. In Rall's multimedia collage, or Elly Lonon and Joan Reilly's graphic travelogue exploring political tensions in Trump era America, *Amongst the Liberal Elite* (2018), where each chapter begins, literally, with a reference to the protagonists' Instagram account, we are presented with a dizzying cacophony of online noise. Questions of 'truth' and 'fake news' loom large, and arguments are made, only to be undercut as political developments of the Trump years are subjected to a symbolic tug-of-war.

Barbara Slate's *The Mueller Report Graphic Novel* (2019) is similarly expansive in its online references. An account of the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, *Mueller Report* devotes entire panels to text messages, email correspondences, Whatsapp groups and, of course, the ubiquitous Tweeter-in-Chief. As is the case with Rall's work, there is an insouciance with which Slate renders her chaotic page designs. Screeds of text cascade vertically and horizontally across pages as we jump from micro details on corruption to broader political exposition. There is a self-consciousness about the history of comics and their association with children. Seemingly frivolous imagery provides a mask beneath which a serious critique of the Trump-Russia affair is underway. One splash page invites readers to play 'The Hillary Game ... Whoever destroys her first wins. There are no rules' (Slate 2019: 11). Visually mimicking a Trivial Pursuit-style board game, we must literally turn the book around to read about the different ways in which Russia's 'GRU' military intelligence service sought to destroy Hillary Clinton's reputation (and chances at the presidency) (see Figure 1). Throughout the graphic novel, Trump is illustrated as open-mouthed and cartoonish in his anger – akin to some of the memes floating around the Internet – with one panel devoted to the screaming mouth alone (Slate 2019: 49).



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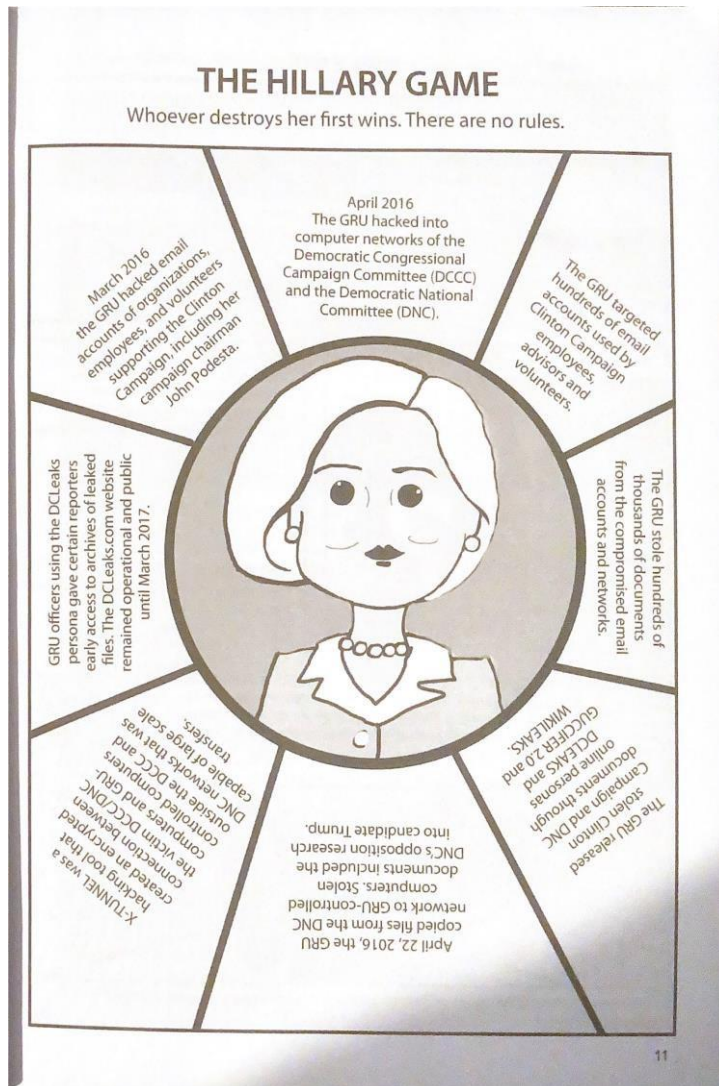


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Figure 1. “The Hillary Game” in *The Mueller Report Graphic Novel*.”  
Concept, layout, design and art by Barbara Slate. Used with permission

*Trump: A Graphic Novel* and *The Mueller Report Graphic Novel* mobilise a media-heavy, scattergun approach to image and text that emphasises Trump as both media manipulator and media spectacle, a figure who disrupts ‘the ordinary and habitual flows of information’ (Kellner 2016: 3). His larger-than-life presence defines an epoch in which presidential aspirations are shaped by the endless collision between fact and fiction, news and entertainment, celebrity and politician. We can also consider how Trump, in graphic novels, has functioned as a politically- and emotionally-charged sign, one which impacts upon narrative and characterisation. While Trump may not be the sole progenitor of all policies, legislations and developments with which he is associated, he became their emblem. Or, in Anne Norton’s words, ‘the embodiment of the presidency enables the President to present an image of the people to itself’ (1993: 121). His victory in the 2016 election, in the popular psyche, has the potential to mark an ‘authority over history’ (Ibid: 87). What might this ‘authority over history’ look like? How might it play out in narrative form?

In Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan’s *Welcome to the New World*, Trump’s victory becomes a political and emotional catalyst. This account of Syrian family the Aldabaans’ arrival in the US on the eve of Trump’s election victory began its life as a Pulitzer Prize-winning comic series in the *New York Times* that ran from January to September 2017. Over the next two years Halpern and Sloan expanded the comics into a full-length graphic novel. While the original comics restrict themselves to graphic reportage and brief moments in the family’s lives, the graphic novel enabled more space for interpretive techniques and psychological development. Both the comics and the graphic novel devote their opening pages to the family’s departure from Jordan (where they had previously sought refuge) and

arrival in the United States. On the day they reach Manhattan, the Trump-Clinton election is in progress. The question of who will win proves a continual source of anxiety. The message from the elderly mother of Ibrahim and Issa Aldabaan, who remained in Jordan while her sons emigrated to America, ultimately communicates their worst fears: ‘Now that Trump is president, I am not sure that I will make it to America or see you again soon’ (Halpern and Sloan 2020: 32).

In terms of visual style and content, however, the comic and graphic novel differ on a number of counts. If the comic immediately presents text introducing the Aldabaans and explaining their circumstances, the graphic novel offers almost two pages of dialogue-free imagery. The latter’s story begins in Jordan in 2016 with Ibrahim Aldabaan gazing from his makeshift porch at his neighbour’s garden. If revisited after completing the graphic novel, this opening image can be read as a symbol of Ibrahim’s desire for the comfortable, secure ‘good life’ that has been denied him due to civil war in his country. Throughout the narrative, panel composition intensifies character psychology. The graphic novel uses curved shapes and wavy speech bubbles to represent dreams and desires, and stretched horizontal rectangles to ‘elongate time’ (Duncan & Smith 2017: 19) and indicate the incessant waiting and queueing associated with immigration. A snakes and ladders-like game covers more than half a page and serves as symbolic representation of children Naji and Amal and their early encounters with life in an American apartment (Halpern and Sloan 2020: 37). As was the case with Slate’s *The Mueller Report*, comics’ association with children’s entertainment is invoked as a means of probing political issues and individual mindsets.

Of course, *Welcome to the New World* follows in a long line of comics and graphic novels to explore the lives of immigrants in the United States. Scholars have dated such themes back to the medium’s early years and immigrant characters in comic strips such as *Bringing Up Father* (1913-2000) and *Nize Baby* (1926-) (Tabachnick 2017: 28-29). Will

Eisner, who coined the term ‘graphic novel’ in the 1970s, explored themes of assimilation and disillusionment in relation to Jewish migrants in his *Contract with God Trilogy* (1978-1995) (Tabachnick 2014: 118-128). As Nima Naghibi, Candida Rifkin and Eleanor Ty argue, a new ‘generation of cartoonists is drawing their own and others’ experiences of migration, immigration and exile’ (2020: 297). Naghibi *et al* raise important points with regard to the political and ethical implications of this graphic reportage, and the ways in which artist-writers balance negative representations of ‘deplorable’ conditions facing refugees in their new home country with ‘representations of individual and collective agency, resilience, organizing, care and resistance’ (296-297).

Certainly, *Welcome to the New World* nuances its representation, switching, as it does, between the everyday struggles and triumphs of its protagonists and the hellish political situation in which they find themselves. Halpern claims to have taken a copy of *Persepolis* (2004), Marjane Satrapi’s autobiographical account of growing up in Iran and subsequent migration to Austria, to his first meeting with the Aldabaans ‘to show the family what the finished product might look like’ (Halpern 2020: 174). The personal and political manifest themselves as a series of conflicts and alliances between the Aldabaans, their sponsors, friends and fellow migrants, and Trump and his allies. Halpern and Sloan are careful to do justice to the daily lives of their protagonists, their interactions with other people, their efforts finding work and going to school. Throughout the narrative, however, public politics intrude upon the family’s lives. If political extremism, callousness and threat can be found at every turn, Donald Trump becomes their most visible talisman.

Trump first appears as an imposing image on the big screen at Times Square, New York. There is a calm, composed chill to his facial features, his eyes slightly squinting into a thousand-yard stare. He looks like the sort of portrait one might see in the political propaganda of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Flanked by a McDonald’s sign, he

presents a threatening vision of the American nightmare into which the Aldabaan family have arrived. *Welcome to the New World* incorporates numerous references to US popular culture. In many ways, Trump himself is connected to such materials, presented as a horrific media spectacle in his own right. 'I feel like I'm in one of those gangster movies', says Ibrahim not long after having witnessed the Trump news report. While Trump never directly comes into contact with the Aldabaan family, he is, in many ways, their Scarface – the threat lurking around every corner as the family begin their new lives.

As the story comes to a head, the terror of right-wing extremists is juxtaposed with hope as the family fight for their right to start a new life. Ibrahim receives telephone death threats, which force the family out of their accommodation and into a motel. The family's escape is interspersed with an extensive flashback sequence covering the brutality of the Assad regime in Syria. The sequence is presented in faded greys (as opposed to the blues throughout the rest of the graphic novel), but visual links are used to suggest a disconcerting connection between events in Syria and events unravelling in America. Images of extremism and police brutality find a terrifying mirror in Syria circa 2011. The transition from present to past is actually facilitated by an image match: we switch from Ibrahim in the US, standing at his apartment window sarcastically asking 'was this the great future you were talking about back in Jordan', to Ibrahim in Syria, again looking from an apartment window, watching life go by in the city of Homs (Ibid: 101, 103).

Scenes of violence erupt shortly afterward. A protest against Assad is broken up by military police; Ibrahim and his brother are detained and beaten. After finally escaping, they make immediate plans to flee the country. 'Don't worry, we'll be back' says Ibrahim to his mother as they bid a swift farewell. In the next chapter, these words find their echo in the

United States. This time the words are spoken by an American neighbour, who goes downstairs to check on the Aldabaan family when they have not been seen for days (Ibid: 140, 143). The final reference to Trump comes as the Aldabaans move into a new house. ‘You know, with Trump, there’s been so few new families arriving,’ they are informed (2020: 153). From here, a series of everyday scenes featuring the kids going to school, finding a job, and talking about romance is interrupted only by a brief reference to the family house in Syria. The house has been destroyed in the war. The heartache of destruction and of history’s collapse into a pile of rubble sits alongside hope for the next generation. US politics (and Trump himself) fade into the background as *Welcome to the New World* focuses its final pages on the Aldabaan children, delivering a defiant message that they will prevail in this new world.

### ***Sabrina and The Hard Tomorrow***

While neither *Sabrina* nor *The Hard Tomorrow* directly references the name (or the image of) Donald Trump, Trump’s actions and pronouncements influenced their creative development and popular reception. Nick Drnaso began work on *Sabrina* in 2014, completing it in late 2017. Published in May 2018, here was, in the words of one commentator, a ‘perspicacious and chilling analysis of the nature of trust and truth and the erosion of both in the age of the Internet – and, especially, in the age of Trump’ (Ware 2018). The narrative revolves around the disappearance and murder of a young woman, Sabrina Gallo. Fearing a media frenzy, Sabrina’s ex-boyfriend Teddy escapes to Colorado to stay with an old friend, Calvin, who works with computers at a local military installation. Sandra Gallo, sister of the deceased, also makes regular appearances, reflecting on her sibling’s life and death. She becomes caught up, as does each of the characters, in a maelstrom of online conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies.

Discussing how *Sabrina*'s content was amended in the wake of Trump's election victory, Drnaso informed the *New Yorker* that he had originally drawn Sabrina's murder at the hands of a men's rights activist 'as a four-page sequence'. In the first three pages, 'the men's-rights activist rants about how society has wronged him. On the fourth page, the man methodically stabs Sabrina to death, with a detachment consistent with the rest of the book' (Max 2019). Ultimately, however, this scene was removed. Drnaso rationalised the cut with the suggestion that, in the wake of Trump's victory, there was enough 'negative subject matter' (Max 2019). Yet this removal also heightens the critique of a media landscape replete with violent imagery and, as Tanya Horeck puts it, 'the sensational reification of images of violence against women' (Horeck 2019: 7). Online debates on crime so often unfold 'over dead women's bodies', raising questions as to the fetishizing and sharing of violent content and the marginalising of victims' and survivors' voices (Ibid: 1-29, 128).

With this in mind, it is important to consider Drnaso's response to the Trump election as an opportunity to revise his engagement with such themes. In fact, after removing the murder, Drnaso also added sequences featuring Sandra talking through her own traumatic experiences in the wake of her sister's death. This, coupled with a redrawing of Sabrina's facial expression in the opening section – to emphasise a greater sense of fear (Max 2019) – suggests an attempt to shift the focus on the murder away from the (male) killer and onto victims and survivors. Furthermore, refusing to literally *show* the murder is to evacuate it of specificity. As is the case throughout *Sabrina*, acts of brutality become part of a larger backdrop to the narrative's quotidian unravelling, as if they too are just part of everyday life.

Jena Habegger-Conti has referred to *Sabrina*'s 'aesthetics of the nondescript', and how limited use of colour, 'lack of shading, and ... overuse of vanishing points' appear confoundingly banal. She argues that *Sabrina*'s 'ordinariness' forces the reader into the role of detective (or 'conspiracy theorist'), having to decipher meaning when none seems

forthcoming (2021: 51-52). In its opening sequence, Sabrina and Sandra's conversation alludes to the tragedy about to unfold. Every image is set in a dull, virtually empty interior; – as is the case throughout, one learns little about the characters' lives and personalities through the backgrounds. Sandra recounts a childhood experience in which she is followed by a group of men during a trip to Florida: 'It was terrifying. The place was lousy with college date rapists and steroid freaks.' She then discusses the men who approach her one evening as she sits on the beach and how she was forced to run and hide in a nearby restaurant. 'So anyway, don't worry about riding a bike through the woods', she concludes. 'The fucking wild animals stay in hotels' (Drnaso 2018: 9). It is hard *not* to read these comments as social critique, as an attack on a society in which violence against women had become so endemic and normalised that a presidential candidate could boast of '[grabbing] 'em by the pussy' and still win.

While Drnaso ultimately decided not to literally depict the murder, its trauma is nonetheless channelled through the actions and dialogue of its three main characters. Visuals continually mirror the dullness of day-to-day living, with the panel arrangement frequently slipping into a repetitive rhythm: a group of four small panels arrayed next to a larger one. The small, square panels give scenes the air of a post-mortem; – look closely and something important might come into view. The idea that repetitive panel compositions can invest a graphic novel with an 'uncanny' (Baetens and Frey 2015: 131) effect is fully on display in *Sabrina*. Even as an explosion of hate speech, violence and death threatens later to engulf the protagonists, Drnaso's visuals maintain a cool impartiality.

Brief references to past events suggest a society unable to meaningfully process historical traumas. The first significant shift in point-of-view occurs by way of a news report



reflecting on 9/11's 'sixteenth anniversary'. Finally, a date has been provided: 2017, the first year of the Trump administration. Images show the newsreader and mourners gathered at the 9/11 Memorial. We are taken on a tour of the memorial's museum, accompanied by visitors as talking heads –recounting their own experiences of that day. Concluding this brief interlude, one visitor states: 'It is important to look back and reflect on how far we've come'. Such triumphalism is, however, rapidly undercut. Calvin, who we briefly saw expressionless as he watched scenes at Ground Zero, pipes up: 'Take a nice stroll down memory lane at the nine-eleven museum'. The comments from visitors and mourners, the museum's arbitrary objects – baseball caps, high-heeled shoes – when viewed through Calvin's eyes, appear superficial. Calvin and Teddy go on to randomly discuss historical events and personal memories: – a murder from 2007, an old relationship – offering an ironic commentary on how the programme has inspired remembrance, only not necessarily the kind expected (Drnaso 2018: 38-40).

Thomas Stubblefield argues that official commemoration of 9/11 – and in particular the 9/11 Memorial in New York City – 'actively repressed the creative aspects of memory as much as it reinforced existing narratives of history' (2014: 175). Stubblefield suggests that Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) offered a more complex analysis of 9/11's historical and psychological impact, actively embedding ideas of absence and subjectivity into its visuals and text (Ibid: 153-163). If *Sabrina* is less devoted to such themes, there is a similar scepticism as to the value of both official memory and the mainstream media's role in facilitating a coming-to-terms with major upheavals. Indeed, media outlets, in all their diversity, are presented throughout *Sabrina* as major contributors to a world of physical violence and psychological trauma.

After the video of Sabrina's murder is leaked, Teddy, Calvin and Sandra quickly find their lives, and computer screens, overtaken by the machinations of online conspiracists. As

the narrative unfolds, *Sabrina*'s pages become increasingly inundated with electronic missives. Panel after panel is subsumed in a paranoid free-for-all. Sometimes entire pages become overtaken with online chat posts and messages (e.g. Dranso 2018: 120-121; 132). Teddy falls under the spell of a hypnotic radio host, whose critiques of social and economic control are always underpinned by dark suspicions as to what 'they' – the government, the media, the military – are inflicting on ordinary people. Before long, the host begins discussing the Sabrina murder tape. As Trumpian allegations of 'fake news' unfurl, Teddy can be seen curled up on the bed, clutching his head and covering his ears. The tiny, seemingly innocuous radio becomes symbolic of a dark underworld seeping into his and Calvin's lives.

Sandra recounts her experiences at the hands of Internet trolls at a support group. She begins with what seems an innocuous message: 'Hey Sandra. My heart is breaking for you and your family ... Where can I send a donation?' Soon, however, the messages turn sinister: 'Sandra. What is going on? This just doesn't add up.' Then comes a combination of threats – 'I'm armed and protected. See what happens if they try and test me' – and inappropriate requests – 'Hey. I saw your picture in the newspaper. If I sent you the clipping, would you be able to sign it for me' (Dranso 2018: 153-155). This scene was added as a substitute for the murder sequence, and provides a chilling account of the psychological trauma caused by a morbid obsession with, and 'digital sleuthing' of, violent incidents so often encouraged online (Horeck 2019). There is an energy, however horrendous, to the Internet, which stands in opposition to the grinding mundanity of Sandra, Teddy and Calvin's day-to-day life.

*Sabrina*'s concluding pages refuse closure. Calvin has taken a new job and, awakening in a sterilised, empty apartment – not much different from his previous home – one cannot help but wonder *what*, if anything, will change for him. Teddy now lives in sheltered accommodation and has found a job. But his words hardly indicate the opening of a

new chapter. ‘Are you happy out here?’ asks Calvin. Teddy replies: ‘I don’t know how to answer that.’ *Sabrina*’s final page is devoted to Sandra riding her bicycle down a country lane. The bucolic setting and vibrant colours might suggest something akin to a gentle conclusion were it not for the fact that this scene directly alludes to the graphic novel’s opening sequence. We are reminded that Sandra and Sabrina had discussed going on this bike ride, and *Sabrina* therefore ends with grief. Sadness comes from the implication that, while each character has taken a new path, past events will continue to haunt their conscious (and subconscious) existence.

Offering a somewhat more optimistic portrayal, Eleanor Davis’ *The Hard Tomorrow* bookends its narrative with the promise of new life. Speaking to the *Hollywood Reporter*, she explained that ‘as the Trump presidency progressed, I got more and more politically engaged and involved with activism, and just had a whole lot of those thoughts swirling around about hope and fear and loss and why one would want to have a baby’ (McMillan 2019). *The Hard Tomorrow* opens with central protagonists Hannah and Johnny attempting to conceive. An intimate scene set in a caravan surrounded by woodland introduces the reader to a world soon to explode in political turmoil. The book’s conclusion appears as five full-bleed, double-page spreads featuring Hannah and Johnny’s new-born baby waking up and looking around him. It has been argued that the ‘bleed’ – where images literally run off the page – removes imagery from any sense of sequence and/or progression and thus invests it with a ‘timeless presence’ (McCloud 1994: 103). Devoid of identifiable time period or location, the final images might be read as a call to imagine a new world that represents a bright future free from the oppressive political systems explored throughout the graphic novel.

On the other hand, however, Davis herself has described the baby as ‘a symbol of hope but ... [also an] ... individual being who’s going to have to make his way in a very harsh reality’ (Maveal 2019). Indeed, Hannah and Johnny’s personal lives are very much

interwoven into a narrative brimming with political and cultural references. A splash page appears early in the graphic novel that shares similarities with so many iconic images of the Trump era. Protest slogans begin with ‘The people! United! Will never be defeated!’ and move down to ‘Chemical weapons create hell on earth...Who Gassed Gaza, Potus?’ (Davis 2019: 35). In this fictional world, the marchers are not railing against Donald Trump but against ‘President Zuckerberg’ (a side swipe at the eponymous social media mogul). Presenting an image of vibrant protest – led by women and people of colour – the page nonetheless bursts with contemporaneous resonance.

While *Sabrina* focused on the anger and isolation that drove people to online conspiracy groups, *The Hard Tomorrow* suggests the potential for alternative alliances. Hannah is a member of the H.A.A.V. (‘Humans Against All Violence’). This is a community brought together through a shared sense of anger, frustration and fury at the status quo. Images of text messages, smartphones and email correspondences – which, in *Sabrina*, visualised hate, fear and psychological unravelling – become symbols of collective organising and emotional support. With slogans including ‘Rally on’, ‘Solidarity’, ‘Take the streets now’, ‘is something wrong?’, ‘let’s work this out’, the people of H.A.A.V. have appropriated the power of new technology for their own political and personal needs (Ibid: 15, 28, 62, 65, 80-81). ‘We have to bear witness’ screams Hannah as she holds her phone up to capture a police officer manhandling a protestor. This act of ‘sousveillance’ (Mann 2003) references similar acts undertaken by protest groups established in recent years (in particular, Black Lives Matter) (see Figure 2).



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Figure 2. Protests in *The Hard Tomorrow*. Copyright Eleanor Davis. Used with Permission from Drawn and Quarterly.

Inevitably, with a president going by the name of ‘Zuckerberg’, there is an air of paranoia as to the invidious reach of mainstream and social media and their potential as tools of misinformation and control. Biased reports about the H.A.A.V.’s leader, Eun-Ha Kim, choose to focus on her Korean heritage as opposed to her political stance (Davis 2019: 42). *The Hard Tomorrow* has its own conspiracist, Tyler. Terrified of being a target for ‘Zuck’ and his administration, he shows Johnny images of Reddit posts declaring that Facebook utilises cutting-edge surveillance techniques. They stare at the offending image, which appears to show little but empty sky. ‘I don’t see anything’, says Johnny. ‘Exactly’, comes the reply. Tyler shows Johnny his secret gun store, declaring ‘If anything happens to me, I want you to have my cache’. Tyler is a dangerous clown; a dope- smoking paranoid whose final act in the graphic novel is to crumple to the ground in fear of a drone attack. Reading on a few pages, we realise that the splash that he felt hitting his eye was probably just a drop of rain (Ibid: 104, 114, 121).

This is not to say, however, that Tyler’s fears about America’s current leadership are unwarranted. Rather, his acts are presented as dangerous due to the very fact that they only contribute toward a society already choking under a cloud of paranoia. Writing for the *AV Club*, the critic Oliver Sava provides an astute commentary on a key image that appears

during Tyler and Johnny's encounter. After Tyler shows his friend the gun cache, a splash page close-up on Johnny holding the weapon is drawn in 'more intricate detail' than is generally the case with Davis' illustrations. This moment therefore 'pulls the reader into a more naturalistic atmosphere ... reminding us of the very real destructive power contained in this small but surprisingly heavy metal object' (Sava 2019). The image becomes symbolic of broader anxieties, present throughout *The Hard Tomorrow*, of what happens when power is in the *wrong* hands.

References to contemporaneous political organisations (Black Lives Matter, Food Not Bombs), events and popular culture ensure the 'hard tomorrow' never feels particularly distant. This is a United States- turned- police state. Owning a megaphone is a criminal offence; joining a protest can cost you your job or, worse, your citizenship. The authoritarian regime is propped up by a militaristic police force wielding batons and teargas canisters. When they violently break up a protest, the police remain masked and anonymous, unlike the protestors who are represented in all their diversity. Here is the 'system' manifest in all its cold, detached anonymity. Hidden behind their gas masks, the police beat and manhandle the angry crowd (Davis 2019: 76-85). Visual intensity is augmented through Davis' quasi-cinematic panel compositions. The protest begins with a double page bleed that acts as an establishing shot of sorts, introducing a throng of protestors. Then four pages zoom in on various individuals, groups and details, as though Davis were a documentary-maker taking their camera into the thick of the action. The next two pages are each divided into two panels: above we see police at the far end of the street preparing to intervene, while below claustrophobic views of the protest show people beginning to panic and run. As the police move in, an array of multi-sized panels heightens the sense of chaos. Protestors are bundled to the ground, arms are twisted, batons crash down, and teargas is fired. Ultimately, Eun-Ha is arrested and, on threat of deportation, she is forced to make a statement against H.A.A.V.

Hannah plans to quit the organisation and ‘make a statement against radicalism’. Other members of the group flee to Canada (Ibid: 100-102).

Chaos at the barricades is, however, continually interspersed with material that focuses on psychologically complex individuals. There is a deceptive complexity to Davis’ artwork; a freehand style and simplified facial details feel as if the images have been drawn quickly to capture characters in the moment. Thoughtfully composed combinations of image and text – explosive, jagged speech bubbles emanating from a protest, and words appearing as sound effects and emotional commentaries (crying, laughing) – invest lives with a vitality and individuality (Ibid: 70-71, 121-125). Hannah’s relationship with fellow activist Gabby is instructive in this respect. The two women are immediately presented as close friends, but as the narrative progresses there are intimations of romance. Gabby is introduced as the hardened activist; hyper-suspicious of the authorities, she ultimately flees the US for sanctuary in Canada, burning a path familiar to so many activists of previous generations (from abolitionists to anti-Vietnam War protestors). Hannah and Gabby’s relationship reaches a climax the day after clashes with police officers occur. ‘I love you’, says Hannah, smiling. Gabby’s face is, however, stone-cold serious when she replies with the same words. Hannah believes it is said in similarly playful terms and replies ‘not as much as I love you’. Hannah remains silent for the rest of the encounter as Gabby, usually so quick-witted and eloquent in her commentary (political or otherwise) struggles to find the right words. ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry ... I wish, I don’t know what I wish’ (Ibid: 93). The mournful repetition of ‘sorry’ and ‘wish’ toll the end of their relationship.

All of this might have made for a bleak ending to *The Hard Tomorrow*, were it not for a silver lining. After all the upheaval, we jump forward a few months. It is winter and Hannah and Johnny are snuggled in their caravan. A close-up on a pregnancy test reveals that Hannah is expecting and the next few pages cut from images of the changing seasons to those



of a hospital, of Hannah and Johnny and, finally, of their baby. The final fourteen pages contain no text whatsoever, as if Davis is allowing her readers to meditate on these universal images and envision their own ‘tomorrow’, which may no doubt be ‘hard’ but not without its promise.

## **Conclusion**

In an epilogue to Nnedi Okorafor’s Hugo Award-winning graphic novel *LaGuardia* (2019), a collected reprint of the eponymously-named comics series (2018), the author reflects on personal experiences and political events that informed its story development. According to Okorafor, the origins of this inventive science fiction – and powerful takedown of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment – lie in her 2009 visit to New York’s LaGuardia Airport and interrogation by security officers. After being led into a private room, her hair was subjected to an ‘infuriating, creepy and degrading’ search. ‘I walked away from that first experience at LaGuardia furious’, writes Okorafor. ‘But also thinking about many things. About aliens. About people of African descent with our alarm-raising thick African hair. About African immigrants who’d have been kept for more in-depth questioning if they’d had my same amount and type of hair’. The epilogue then shifts to more recent concerns: ‘When President Trump signed the executive order to implement the infamous travel ban back in January 2017, the America and the general world climate of my story became that much clearer’ (Okorafor 2019).

For a variety of reasons, *LaGuardia* provides a base from which to provide some concluding thoughts on graphic novels in the age of Trump. First of all, the story being in development well before Trump had even announced his candidacy speaks to the political

and social timelessness of so many themes explored in this graphic novel and in others discussed in this essay. *LaGuardia* bears the hallmarks of ‘Afrofuturist’ science fiction writing. This genre encompasses a ‘reclaiming’ of American history ‘by demonstrating how African slaves and their descendants experienced conditions of homelessness, alienation and dislocation’; a focus on the lives of Afrodiasporic people and reflection on ‘what it might mean to live in a variety of raced futures’. and the telescoping of such ideas and issues into the ‘figure of the black genius’ (Yaszek 2015: 58-59). With regard to the last point, *LaGuardia* focuses on a woman named Future Nwafor Chukwuebuka. A doctor and political activist, Future arrives in the US concealing an ‘illegal immigrant’ in the form of a plant-shaped alien who chooses to go by the name of Letme Live.

Similar to the graphic novels discussed above, however, *LaGuardia* adapted to Trump and the political climate engendered by his election victory. As Hugo Frey notes with regard to the historical graphic novel, the medium is well suited to responding quickly to shifting contexts and debates (2017: 92). Like Davis’ work in *The Hard Tomorrow* (and Halpern and Sloan’s *Welcome to the New World*), Okorafor combines the personal and the political in a multi-layered response to current affairs. When Future arrives at LaGuardia Airport, she (like Okorafor) is subjected to an obsessive body search and interrogation. Tana Ford’s richly detailed illustrations construct a world of human-alien coexistence and conflict. Airport security demand to know if the pregnant Future is carrying an alien baby. So obsessed are they with the potential of intraspecies contamination that they completely miss the actual alien hiding amongst Future’s belongings. ‘Fear and racism have their uses’, she quips once they escape the airport (Okorafor *et al* 2019).

In a similar vein to *The Hard Tomorrow* and *Welcome to the New World*, images of protest and conflict prevail throughout. The second chapter is entitled ‘The Travel Ban’ (a reference to Trump’s 2017 legislation). Letme’s history as a ‘war refugee’ is presented as the

reason for needing to settle in the United States. Marches and demonstrations are presented through alternately a smartphone camera, a car windscreen and the eyes of Future and her comrades, as marchers wield banners declaring ‘aliens are friends’, ‘peace’ and ‘Octavia Tried to Warn Us’. This final message and its nod to the influential science fiction author Octavia Butler suggests that each of the graphic novels discussed offers moments of self-consciousness in relation to its status as a cultural text. The appearance of graphic narratives so often as agglomerations past and present, multiple media, and meta-commentary means that its ‘form forces the reader not only to work with disparate elements, but also to be aware of how those fragments and absences come together to generate a sense of narrative cohesion’ (Santos 2019: 17-19). From the temporal leaps present in *Trump: A Graphic Biography*, to the 9/11 references in *Sabrina* and the social media allusions in *Hard Tomorrow*, graphic novels have situated Trump within a complex network of historical and technological narratives. *LaGuardia* is replete with allusions to the history of US racism and race relations. ‘Humans-Only’ hospitals hark back to segregation and Jim Crow, and references to anti-alien terrorist attacks – one of which killed Future’s parents – invoke past racist violence. Okorafor presents the Travel Ban as instigator of a new separate and unequal era of segregation. Scholars of the graphic novel have noted the form’s potential to reframe the past, rethink stereotypes and challenge standard narratives associated with key historical events, issues and persons. There are moments in *LaGuardia* that through which – to borrow Martha Cutter and Cathy Schlund-Vials’ argument (used with reference to the civil rights-themed graphic novel trilogy *March*, 2013-2016) – that graphic novels can destabilise ‘teleologies of racial progress that privilege an understanding of U.S. history as an ascendant, progressive movement forward’ (2018: 8). Certainly, there are moments in *LaGuardia* that appear to destabilise ‘teleologies of racial progress that privilege an understanding of U.S. history as an ascendant, progressive movement forward’ (Cutter and Schlund-Vials, 2018: 8).

Each of the graphic novels analysed here presents a destabilising representation of Trump-era politics and society. In the multi-perspective, mass-media collages of *Trump, The Mueller Report* and *Sabrina* and in the dystopian futures of *The Hard Tomorrow* and *LaGuardia*, the impact of the 2016 presidential election intrudes upon the lives of the protagonists. Shifts in time, space and perspective demand a continual ‘back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning’ (Chute 2008: 452). Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey suggest that, on the one hand, ‘graphic novels slow down time and make readers approach the page as a single picture, a space to meditate on the gaps between the images and the heart-wrenching stories’. On the other hand, however, ‘it could also be precisely the opposite. Graphic novels can be read rather fast, the eye pushing to understand the plot from the pictures while quickly comprehending the text. And ‘this higher speed of reading is arguably helpful for responding to emotional material’ (2015: 97). Politically prescient and emotionally arresting, sometimes complex, sometimes light-hearted and accessible, the graphic novels analysed invite the reader to meditate upon and immerse themselves within America in the age of Trump. It seems apt that, like *The Hard Tomorrow*, *La Guardia* reaches its dramatic climax with the birth of a child. All the hopes are placed upon ‘Future Citizen’ (as they are named) for a better world to emerge out of the ashes of conflict, hatred and upheaval.

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