Encounters with Historical Agency: The Value of Nonfiction Graphic Novels in the Classroom

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GRAPHIC NOVELS have developed over the last twenty years into a genre that has not only expanded in number, but also in the breadth of their content. Unknown to many, the genre includes a number of works that are nonfiction and based on historical individuals, events, documents, or places. Graphic novels have been in publication since the late seventies, yet not until Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivors Tale* did the medium become widely known to those outside of the comic book world.[1] When Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for his work, some began to consider graphic novels a legitimate medium that could portray the past in a distinctly different manner. Spiegelman's work demonstrated that graphic novels could meaningfully depict the ways structural forces and individuals have collided in history. Since then, there have been many more graphic novels that depict a wide variety of historical topics and individuals that are relevant to the history curriculum (see Appendix for list of relevant titles). Many graphic novels hold potential for the classroom because, like *Maus*, they present complex historical events in a narrative form that is detailed and multi-layered. This article describes the findings of a study that examined the potential relevance of graphic novels in history education, and, more specifically, the value of graphic novels as possible resources for developing students' historical thinking skills.

Graphic novels are recognized as valuable resources in multiple subject areas for their engaging qualities and use of multiple perspectives.[2] However, there are only a handful articles that connect graphic novels to the field of history education, or even social studies.[3] Despite this lack of consideration, there have been an ever-growing number of graphic novels that emphasize historical events and individuals. Many of these provide detailed coverage of historical situations and conflicts that are sparsely covered in the traditional history curriculum. For this reason, some educators believe graphic novels provide opportunities for students to engage with the history curriculum through new and diverse alternatives to traditional texts, narratives, and mass media.[4] Despite these possibilities for engagement, as well as repeated attempts by advocates to establish graphic novels as a legitimate text, graphic novels are still discounted by many history educators due to their lineage to the comic book.[5] Some educators also may think that graphic novels lack substance in comparison to other literary forms, which can also be attributed to their relation to the comic book. To some extent, this bias has been supported by the lack of empirical research that has examined the use of graphic novels in history education and other subject areas.

Many educators have also overlooked the potential for graphic novels to be used as historical narratives in the classroom. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik advocated for teachers to use narratives from a variety of genres to promote students' historical thinking skills, but failed to mention graphic novels.[6] Several scholars have noted that historical narratives can have a significant impact on students' historical understanding, while several other studies have looked specifically at how historical narratives can contribute to developing particular types of historical thinking skills.[7] Two of these studies examined the use of historical fiction to develop students' understanding of historical agency. Damico, Baildon, and Greenstone noted that literature such as historical fiction can provide a more sophisticated understanding of historical agency that "involves considering the complex relationships among causes and effects, structural forces, such as economic, political, and social upheavals, along with the shaping influences of individual actors."[8] The narratives comprised in nonfiction graphic novels often focus on these complex relationships and difficult historical situations in which historical actors are faced with external pressures and forced to make choices. Jason Endacott also found that resources that portray historical situations in this manner are valuable as mediums for engaging students in historical thinking.[9] It is possible, then, that graphic novels could be used as narratives to promote historical thinking, and be considered potentially viable resources for the history classroom.

This study examined the potential of nonfiction graphic novels to promote historical thinking through their unique form of narrative. For this study, preservice history teachers read two graphic novels, and then evaluated their viability as a resource for their future classroom. In an initial analysis of evaluations, the preservice teachers noted that the graphic novels effectively used multiple perspectives to engage them in reading about the historical events. When the preservice teachers described their engagement with the images and text, they identified aspects of historical agency in several ways. The preservice teachers provided examples and perspectives that offer a case to consider nonfiction graphic novels as resources for the history classroom.

Defining Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are a unique resource and require further description, especially the nonfiction graphic novels used in this study. Stephen Weiner, author of *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*, defined the graphic novel: "A cousin of comic strips, a graphic novel is a story told in comic book format with a beginning, middle, and end. Graphic novels also include bound books conveying nonfiction information in comic book form."[10] Stephen Tabachnick offered a similar definition of the genre in his introduction to *Teaching the Graphic Novel.* He also addressed the confusion that comes from labeling these graphic texts as "novels," despite the nonfiction content of some graphic novels. Tabachnick wrote:

> The graphic novel is an extended comic book that treats nonfictional as well as fictional plots and themes with the depth and subtlety that we have come to expect of traditional novels and extended nonfictional texts. The term *graphic novel* seems to have stuck despite the fact that graphic novels are often compelling nonfictional works, such as biographies, autobiographies, histories, reportage, and travelogues.[11]

This is an important distinction because all of the graphic novels read by the preservice teachers in this study were nonfiction. The graphic novels discussed in this study all use a blend of primary and secondary sources to create their historical narrative. For example, a graphic novel by Howard Zinn is an adaptation of his book *A People's History of the United States.*[12] In the graphic novel, for instance, Zinn discussed the internment of Japanese Americans, presented pictures of the executive order issued by President Roosevelt, and showed a flyer from the Wartime Civil Control Administration, with Zinn sharing his analysis throughout.[13] The five other graphic novels discussed in this article are based on primary accounts of the historical events (*A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* and *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel*), individuals' lives (*Ché: A*

Graphic Biography and *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography)*, or historical documents (*The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*).[14] These graphic novels all offer new ways for students to engage with history through the interplay of images and text.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

Historical agency has been sparsely discussed in the existing literature, yet it is identified as an important aspect of historical thinking and understanding.[15] The concept of agency is considered a principal element of historical understanding because, "In order to make sense of the past, students have to be able to evaluate who was responsible for historical events, as well as to understand the societal factors that either constrained or enabled people's ability to act."[16] In terms of historical thinking and agency, to study history means that students must think through the ways in which people chose to act under given circumstances. Peter Seixas similarly identified historical agency as a principal element in historical thinking because it "is necessary for conceptualizing people's interactions with the social and cultural circumstances in which they found themselves."[17] Seixas also highlighted the importance of historical agency for students' historical thinking and wrote, "Without this tool, students cannot see themselves as operating in the same realm as the historical figures whom they are studying, and thus cannot make meaning of history."[18] While historical agency may consider the basic who did what, and why; historical agency is not a simple way of thinking about the past.

Historical agency can be difficult for students to grasp because of the way that many historical actions are presented in historical texts. Students often identify the roles of societal institutions (nations, international alliances, religious denominations), and assign them human attributes in carrying out the actions.[19] This type of non-human agency is also extended to ideas or movements, such as nationalism, and students can understand these as the result of a variety of inevitable forces.[20] Sometimes in historical texts, the agent is left completely out of the historical action all together. For example, Damico, Baildon, and Lowenstein noted that in some literature on the dropping of the atomic bomb in World War II, "The description of the action, i.e., American pilots dropping the bomb, has been reduced to 'an explosion,''a flash,' and 'a blinding light,'" which left the American pilots or even President Truman completely out of the event.[21] Lastly, marginalized groups are often treated passively as the victims in historical events, instead of being described equally as actors. This implies that the powerful were the sole actors in history.

Thus, historical agency is complex because it requires students to think about numerous overlapping and often contradictory factors to consider the actors in each historical event; however, historical agency is also necessary to accurately think about the past.[22]

To consider the complexity of historical agency in the preservice teachers experiences with graphic novels, this article will use Damico, Baildon, and Greenstone's definition of historical agency as a lens to understand the preservice teachers' evaluative comments. They defined historical agency as:

> The relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence, shape, and are affected by these events. That is, human beings are autonomous agents with abilities to affect change, yet there are social structures that constrain and limit what individuals can do.[23]

A powerful historical narrative, whether it is a letter from an individual or a work of historical fiction, is one that brings the relationship between the structural forces and the historical actors to the forefront of the historical event. Narratives should clearly depict this relationship in order to prevent readers from understanding a historical event as the result of non-human agency.

The Study

For this study, I used a qualitative case study methodology. I was interested in how preservice teachers valued historically based graphic novels as resources for the history classroom. The twenty-four participants in this study were preservice teachers in an undergraduate secondary social studies methods course, at a large Midwestern state university. The course consisted mostly of students who were one semester away from their student teaching experience in a history or civics classroom. The participants for this study were chosen for two reasons. First, they were students in my methods course. Second, they represented the best candidates for this study because the course focused on introducing, experiencing, and evaluating history and social studies curricular-instructional methodology. Therefore, as the instructor and researcher, I wanted the preservice teachers to consider graphic novels in the context of, and as a regular part of, the course. In using my own students as participants, I had no control over the demographics of those who participated, and chose to analyze data from all of the participants. The participants were all white, and, in terms of sex, there were sixteen males and eight females from a wide range of communities.

The study was structured so that each student would read two graphic novels over a two-week period. The first graphic novel that each participant read was Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire.*[24] For the second graphic novel, participants could choose from twelve graphic novels; however, they each chose one of the following: *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon; *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, by Josh Neufield; *Ché: A Graphic Biography*, by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon; *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel*, by C. M. Butzer; and *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography*, by Andrew Helfer.[25] All of the students read *A People's History of American Empire* the first week, and then read the graphic novel that they chose the following week. Students discussed *A People's History of American Empire* in a discussion board forum, in groups, and then as an entire class. The other graphic novels were discussed in small reading groups, as well as in a whole class discussion.

The data sources for this study included six discussion forum posts on an online discussion board; post-it notes, on which students recorded their thoughts while reading the novels; a written analysis of the graphic novels, with students discussing the best and worst attributes of graphic novels, their educational value, and their place in the curriculum; and individual interviews with sixteen of the preservice teachers, conducted by the researcher, for which the students self-selected to participate. The discussion posts were completed the first week and before discussing the graphic novel in class, the post-it notes were collected the second week, the written analysis was collected the third week, and the interviews were completed during the first three weeks after the spring semester.

All of the data was analyzed and coded for common themes among the preservice teachers' perspectives in regard to the graphic novels they read. As mentioned above, the concept of historical agency emerged as a common theme in the data. All of the data regarding historical agency was then analyzed a second time for validity. The researcher started by analyzing the interviews, post-it notes, and discussion posts, followed by the written analysis. This was due to the written analysis being a graded assignment, which concerned the researcher in terms of influencing student responses. The written analysis confirmed the responses in other data sources for nearly all of the participants, which triangulated the data of those sixteen participants who decided to interview, and achieved a low-level of triangulation with most of the participants who decided not to interview.

There were limitations in taking on the role of both instructor and researcher. Researchers have cautioned that in these instances, "the problems of reporting data that are biased, incomplete, or compromised, are legend."[26] Therefore, precautions were taken to reduce bias in the

reporting of data, primarily by doing an initial blind analysis of the data. I was also able to triangulate each participant's data, especially with the sixteen participants that I interviewed. Another limitation due to taking on the dual role of instructor and researcher was in collecting data. To ensure confidentiality, I was not aware of who had self-selected to participate in the study, and did not conduct interviews until after the course was completed. The interviews then had to take place during the students' summer break. Therefore, those students who did interview had to recall their experiences with the graphic novels nearly a month after the class activities. Lastly, as the participants' instructor, I inevitably developed a relationship with each preservice teacher and had expectations for each of them derived from our relationship. This required me to be aware of my own subjectivity while actively engaged in the research process, so as not to let those expectations interfere with my interpretation of the data.[27]

Findings

There were five ways that the preservice teachers recognized historical agency in the graphic novels they read. They recognized historical agency because of the way the graphic novels portrayed injustice, expanded the typical historical narrative, humanized the people of nations, depicted perceivably inevitable events, and portrayed historical actors' choices. In each of these ways, the relationship between the structural forces and historical actors involved in the historical event was at the forefront of the narrative in the graphic novel.

Recognizing Historical Agency through the Portrayal of Injustice

The preservice teachers in this study recognized historical agency when reading about historical actors who had faced injustice. In many cases, the preservice teachers also had no prior knowledge of these historical actors who had faced injustice. Nearly all of these historical actors were traditionally marginalized individuals who are not prominently mentioned in the more established historical narratives. For example, Bob wrote about powerful images of black soldiers who suffered injustice and oppression in the Spanish-American War. Bob identified structural forces such as segregation and authority, and understood how these forces influenced the actions of both black and white soldiers. In a discussion board post about reading *A People's History of American Empire*, Bob wrote:

> When reading about the black 25th Infantry and their involvement in Cuba, I figured they were led by white officers, but I did not know the extent of their segregation. I didn't know the white officers did not fight, and didn't realize they literally just stood back to watch. While reading, I saw the

> photograph of the white officers watching the fight with binoculars and it really put it into perspective. The officers just stood back and watched, it didn't matter to them if their own soldiers were dying, they would just send more in. It really just shows how the black soldiers volunteered to fight for our country despite the inequality that happened.

Bob was able to identify the constraints that black soldiers faced because he recognized the injustice of the white officers actions, or inactions. He recognized the societal and structural forces of segregation, racism, and authority that sustained the actions of the white soldiers, yet Bob also recognized that the black soldiers chose to fight courageously, despite these forces.

In a similar way, Andrew read about the injustice faced by the Oglala people during the second conflict at Wounded Knee, in 1973. Andrew was initially interested to learn that there was a second conflict at Wounded Knee, and then he was shocked at the treatment of the Oglala people. Andrew thought the United States, and specifically the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and Federal Marshalls, acted unjustly in supporting Dicky Wilson, who had openly oppressed his own people by abolishing many constitutional rights. Furthermore, Wilson was backed by government authorities and federal money, which allowed him to control the Oglala people who lived mostly in poverty on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. In his interview, Andrew discussed the impact of reading *A People's History of American Empire* and the second conflict at Wounded Knee:

> I did not know there was a second...thing at Wounded Knee...but what surprised me was that the F.B.I. defended the actions of Dick Wilson...he was basically a thug. The O'gala [Oglala] Indians I think it was, they all defended their sacred ground for days just to demonstrate their feeling toward Dick Wilson...and the F.B.I. agents and other government officials stood behind him [Wilson] and treated the O'gala [Oglala] people like terrorists for taking matters into their own hands against the harassment they faced daily.

Like Bob, Andrew recognized the injustice the Oglala people had faced. He understood that the Oglala people took action against the oppressive forces of Dicky Wilson, and eventually the U.S. government, to make their lives better. The portrayal of these and similar events allowed preservice teachers to understand injustice through multiple perspectives, as a powerful force that influenced people's decisions to act, or not act.

Recognizing Historical Agency by Expanding the Narrative

Some preservice teachers recognized historical agency by reading about familiar historical events, and, specifically, the previously unknown

historical actors who took part in those historical events. Several of the graphic novels that preservice teachers read expanded upon the traditional narrative of well-known historical events. Laura, for example, was surprised to learn about the resistance in the United States to World War II. She was interested to learn about women's roles in the resistance and the ways in which the government treated those citizens who were opposed to the war. In a discussion post, Laura wrote about her new understanding of perspectives concerning World War II:

> It was different to see images of people openly rejecting the idea of war then. Before reading this, I had only read my high school textbooks which always showed people supporting the wars. What I learned even more about was the perspective of women's resistance to war. It brought in new perspectives of those who opposed the war and how the government treated those people. I was shocked by the torture and imprisonment of innocent people....The pictures and the horrible descriptions of injustice that took place...made me feel angry and sad.

Laura recognized that there had been people, especially women, who had taken action to oppose the United States' role in World War II. She also recognized that government and societal forces had acted to suppress this dissent, and furthermore, others had sanitized the traditional historical narrative of the United States' entrance into World War II.

Serena similarly recognized previously unknown historical actors in her reading of *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel*. This graphic novel expanded upon the traditional narrative of the battle at Gettysburg and included townspeople and nurses who were involved in the circumstances of the battle. Serena noted this her interview and said:

> It was different to see the battle from the perspective of female nurses and town's people. I guess I understood the battle and war differently...Lincoln made decisions, but these people...had to deal with them. And the soldiers depended on these peoples' support...what if they had just left when they heard the battle was coming?

Serena recognized that there was much more agency that took place in Gettysburg and other battles in the past. She realized that, while the president's decisions and the soldiers' actions are important, there are other actors in historical events that make significant sacrifices when faced with momentous forces. Serena highlighted the historical actors true agency by pointing out that the civilians had the choice to leave, and instead chose to stay. These graphic novels helped Laura and Serena understand the historical events through the actions of people behind the scenes, people whose actions provide a deeper understanding of the forces that shaped the historical events.

Recognizing Historical Agency by Humanizing People in a Country

Preservice teachers recognized historical agency when they read about the actual people from countries that the United States had fought in conflicts. By reading about perspectives of people in these countries, the preservice teachers were able to understand the conflicts differently. Instead of simply thinking that the United States polices "bad" or "evil" countries, the preservice teachers understood that these conflicts impacted the actions of people in those countries, more than the governments themselves. By reading *A People's History of American Empire*, Alex realized that the United States' leaders' decision to intervene in a conflict could impose constraints on the political movements and struggles started by the people in those countries. Alex realized that the United States' forces end up being just another entity for people to negotiate in their own social change. Alex discussed this in his analysis and wrote:

> One of the biggest things that I came to understand is the viewpoint of people in other countries...Hearing their perspective made it possible for me to empathize with why they would not want America to interfere with their own struggle. All I have ever been told is that we intervene because those other government systems are bad....I can understand why foreign people don't always want America's help, and we should not always think they need our help.

Alex realized that the consequences of the United States' leaders' actions affected the actions of the country's people more than those countries government leaders.

In his interview, Chad described recognizing a similar perspective when he read *A People's History of American Empire*. Chad came to understand why people in other countries might dislike the United States. Like Alex, Chad thought these countries were "bad" or "evil" and instead found out that the United States interfered with the actions of people in those countries. In his interview, Chad said:

> They have a right to hate us, no wonder why they hate America...before, I did not understand all of the different things that happened in, like, Cuba, the Philippines, and Afghanistan and all of that, now I know why those people have a reason to dislike America and our interference with their lives. There's gotta be a better way to deal with bad governments, the people shouldn't have to deal with our leaders too.

Chad came to understand that the United States government influenced the agency of people in other countries. Alex and Chad both began to view these conflicts differently. Alex and Chad were able to humanize the people of these countries and came to understand that these conflicts represented forces that affected individuals' lives and agency. By humanizing the

people of these countries, Alex and Chad stopped thinking about these conflicts as the result of non-human agency or simply two countries taking action against each other, but instead as the result of individual agency.

Recognizing Historical Agency Instead of Inevitability

In some cases, it is easy for people to view historical events as inevitable, often citing a variety of economic, environmental, political, or societal forces. This type of explanation or view can distort or dissolve the understanding of human agency in historical events. The preservice teachers were able to recognize historical agency instead of understanding some historical events as inevitable. This could be seen in Charlie's experience with *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, which is about Hurricane Katrina. Charlie noted that before reading the graphic novel, he thought that people who had the means to leave New Orleans, prior to Hurricane Katrina's arrival, did indeed leave. He had not fathomed that anyone would stay when confronted with a hurricane of Katrina's magnitude. However, Charlie described how the doctor in the graphic novel surprised him:

> You tried to put yourself in their shoes, and think what you would do...I think it was the doctor in the ninth ward who stayed...which you're reading it and you're like, "you're an idiot, you need to get out of there"...but it was a more personal experience for him.

In this example, Charlie recognized that there was something he did not understand about this recent historical event. He realized that individual people had made difficult and rational choices to stay behind and help others, despite the imminent danger of the hurricane. Charlie realized that the decision to leave New Orleans was not a given, or inevitable action.

Todd also described an instance in which he recognized historical agency and shifted his thinking about the idea that 9/11 was inevitable. Todd read the graphic novel *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* and discussed it in his interview. He implied that he had thought 9/11 was bound to happen because of his conception of terrorism:

> It [the graphic novel] made you think about the events leading up to 9/11...it wasn't that terrorism had finally gotten the best of our national security...terrorism had been happening and we had stopped most of it...but the leaders [of the terrorists] learned from the first towers bombing and maybe the embassy bombings, and got better, maybe more organized.

Todd's perception shifted and instead of thinking about terrorism as the key force in 9/11, he thought about the agency of the actual terrorists, and specifically their leaders. He thought about how the leaders changed tactics and learned, instead of the inevitability of terrorism eventually

affecting the United States. Both Charlie and Todd were able to specifically recognize the agency of historical actors, instead of simply thinking that historical actors reacted to, or were part of, the inevitability of non-human forces.

Recognizing Historical Agency through Moral Judgment about Choice

Preservice teachers recognized historical agency when they read about historical actors' lives and experiences. When the preservice teachers read about historical actors' lives, they made judgments about the historical actors' choices by weighing the experiences that led to those choices. The preservice teachers judgments were moral decisions about the historical actors' choices in which they praised, condemned, or just better understood their choices. As Mandi stated in a discussion post about *The 9/11 Report*, "I was able to make interpretations at the end of the book and make different 'judgments' about who I thought was right or what I thought about their actions." Several students identified specific examples of the judgments they made. For example, Sally read *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* and noted a change in her perception of Malcolm X after reading about his life. In her interview, Sally recognized that many of Malcolm X's experiences growing up could have possibly contributed to his perspective as a civil rights activist:

> I had a completely different picture of Malcolm X in my mind before this, but when I read that [the graphic novel] I was really surprised...before, I thought he was all violent, but then it showed examples of when he was younger, how his parents were treated...and he is growing up watching this...and his parents are killed...he's sent away and he's treated so horribly...I would...I could feel the same way if I was in that position. The things he did later in life...make sense...when you think about his childhood.

Sally read about the forces that influenced Malcolm X's life, and, more importantly, she understood how those forces could shape his perspective and, ultimately, his choices later in life. She made judgments about Malcolm X's choices while considering the circumstances of his life, and came to understand his choices as rational and partially justified.

Gary read *Ché: A Graphic Biography*, and similarly made judgments about Ché Guevara's choices. Gary praised the choices that Ché had made to help people throughout Latin America, considered the circumstances of his death, and made moral judgments about his life. Gary felt that his death was unjustified considering the choices he had made in his life. In his interview, Gary described Ché's judgment and said:

> We see him as...or society portrays him as a kind of an outcast, rebel, that, you know, almost blood thirsty kind of person, and in this [the graphic novel]...you saw time-after-time where he tried to help people, and then all of

> it ends in just his death, really...and you are just really kinda like...you know it's going to happen, you know the story of Ché...but in the end...you're like...why?....You wish that they could have changed the ending!...and I think a lot of that was seeing his progression, seeing him as this young doctor who had everything going for him, and his decision to give it all up.

Gary felt strongly about Ché's death because he praised the choices that Ché had made, so much so, that he wished "they could have changed the ending." Gary and Sally both made judgments by considering the choices Ché and Malcolm X had made and the forces they had faced. In making these judgments, they highlighted the agency of both historical actors and the forces that constrained their agency.

Another student, Dan, had a similar perspective to Gary when he read *Ché*; however, Dan's recognition went a step further and illustrated the value of multiple perspectives and making judgments about those perspectives. He also noted that graphic novels would be valuable in developing these types of judgments and would serve as a significant resource for the history classroom. In his analysis, Dan wrote:

> I think through reading this book, one can understand the uncertainty the United States felt as well as why Ché and others despised the U.S. and the other empirical powers. The quotes in the back of the book make it obvious that not everyone loved and not everyone hated Ché. This helps students understand that there is no necessarily right or wrong way to feel about people and actions through history. The decision is up to them to make. I feel like this is a very important part in democratic education, letting the students know they can make up their own minds.

The type of historical agency that Dan recognizes in his reading of *Ché* highlights a point that Seixas made—without historical agency, "students cannot see themselves as operating in the same realm as the historical figures whom they are studying, and thus cannot make meaning of history."[28] Because of the way the graphic novel highlighted historical agency, Dan was able to understand how Ché's actions were constrained, influenced, and affected by societal and structural forces. In turn, Dan was also able to understand how Ché's actions affected other people through reading about multiple perspectives regarding Ché, which ultimately allowed Dan to decide if he wanted to praise or condemn Ché's actions.

Discussion

The findings suggest that graphic novels do have potential for promoting historical thinking in the history classroom. The preservice teachers' evaluations demonstrated that graphic novels could promote historical thinking through the ways that they portray historical agency. Graphic

novels, then, warrant consideration from history educators because identifying historical agency is a significant step in students' development of other aspects of historical thinking.[29] Historical agency has been referred to as the "stock-in-trade of history—identifying main characters, describing their actions, and trying to explain why events played out as they did."[30] However, it is rarely a simple operation for students to clearly identify agency from the historical narratives they read. Therefore, resources that demonstrate an inclination to emphasize historical agency could be beneficial in developing students' historical thinking skills.

The preservice teachers in this study recognized historical agency in the complex events portrayed in the graphic novels they read. They were able to identify the relationship between structural forces and the historical actors in the historical events. The preservice teachers recognized this complex relationship through engaging with the narratives of the graphic novels, often by learning about a new perspective, situation, or force in a historical event. In reading the graphic novels, the preservice teachers were able to identify the individual historical actors as active parts of the historical events. They understood that these actors influenced, shaped, and affected these historical events, despite the constraints of complex societal and structural forces. The narratives of the graphic novels made it clear that these were self-directed agents acting within the limitations of their abilities and situations.

There were several characteristics of graphic novels that appeared to promote the recognition of historical agency. These characteristics were apparent in the preservice teachers' evaluations of the graphic novels they read. First was the manner in which each author positioned the actors of the graphic novel in relation to the structural or external forces of the historical event. Endacott noted the value of positionality and found "the use of sources that clearly define a decision maker's positionality and how that positionality conflicts with external pressures" to be useful for engaging students in historical thinking.[31] A focus on positionality means that the actor's values, beliefs, and attitudes are clearly portrayed as conflicting with the forces or pressures they face. The authors of graphic novels develop positionality primarily through the actor's dialogue (or more specifically, their speaking bubbles). The authors can also illustrate nonverbal reactions to dialogue or events that can also provide affective cues about an actor's values, beliefs, or attitudes. The dialogue and nonverbal imagery contribute to the development of a clear moral framework for the historical actors. Developing actors with a moral framework not only shapes their positionality, but also adds weight to their historical perspective.[32] The recognition of an actor's positionality could be seen in each of the preservice teacher's experiences with their graphic novels.

Graphic novels also appeared to promote the recognition of historical agency through their portrayal of human interaction in historical events. The ability of graphic novels to portray interaction through dialogue and nonverbal responses among actors actually personalizes the actors and problematizes the historical events. Barton and Levstik advocated for the use of narratives in history education because they create a personalized voice for historical actors.[33] They noted that the depersonalized language commonly used in textbooks "can also deproblematize history" and make history seem like the result of inevitable forces.[34] The value of personalizing a historical actor's voice is that their intentions and abilities become clearer, which provides a framework for readers to consider the external or structural forces that constrain and limit the actor's agency. This process of personalizing the historical actor and then problematizing the historical event allows readers to understand historical events as the result of much more than the historical actors' choices. This was especially the case in Charlie's experience with *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*. Charlie was able to better understand the doctor's dilemma and the personal choice he made through the author's portrayal of the historical situation. For many of the preservice teachers, the graphic novels contextualized the historical actor's choices, which problematized the historical actor's situation and personalized their actions. This process contributed to a clear understanding of agency in each historical event.

Lastly, graphic novels promote the recognition of historical agency through their unique format adapted and expanded from the comic book genre. The general format of graphic novels uses images and text to create a narrative that is open for readers to interpret. The images and text are presented through frames in both linear and non-linear narrative sequences. This format allows the "dialogue and description, to change unpredictably in visual style and placement on the page, and advance frame by frame like the verbal equivalent of a movie."[35] In this way, graphic novels develop background knowledge about historical actors and events, and this allows the actions of historical agents to develop consciously as the climatic events of the story unfold. The use of frames and the interaction between actors in those frames make their choices more situational and isolated, while still maintaining a relationship to the other frames. This relationship between frames creates an inherent ambiguity that allows for the singular narrative to be read in multiple ways, and "the manifold configurations of this relationship to facilitate readings of ambiguous, complex, and difficult moral questions."[36] The individual actions of historical agents are rectified in single frames, only to be influenced, shaped, and affected by the actors and events in other frames. Thus, nonfiction graphic novels traffic in historical agency

because agency is at the core of their narrative, which positions and personalizes historical actors in the situations where they face structural forces that problematize their actions.

Conclusion

The preservice teachers' evaluations demonstrated that graphic novels provide an accessible resource for readers to engage with the choices of historical agents and the structural forces they faced, and to interpret the historiography of historical accounts in the history classroom. The graphic novels in this study would be valuable for the history classroom at the secondary and college levels because they present historical agency in multiple ways that disrupt tradition historical narratives. The preservice teachers who participated in this study were able to understand how the historical actors were positioned against structural forces, and how those forces influenced, shaped, and affected their actions. Understanding the complexity of historical agency is an important step for students' historical thinking and understanding. At the very least, nonfiction graphic novels provide a means for students to develop an understanding of historical agency by engaging with the past in an alternative form of historiography.

Notes

1. Art Spiegelman, *The CompleteMaus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1996).

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2006): 227-230; Michael Cromer and Penney Clark, "Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 574-591; Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, "Editorial: History in the Graphic Novel," *Rethinking History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 255-260; Sarah A. Matthews, "Framing Preservice Teachers' Interpretations of Graphic Novels in the Social Studies Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 416-446; Walter Werner, "Reading Visual Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 401-448.

4. Schwarz, 2.

5. Cromer and Clark, 577.

6. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

7. For studies on narratives for historical understanding, see Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004); Marsha Gilpin Ehlers, "'No Pictures in My Head': The Uses of Literature in the Development of Historical Understanding," *Magazine of History* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 5-9; Russell Olwell, "Use Narrative to Teach Middle School Students about Reconstruction," *The Social Studies* 90, no. 5 (1999): 205-208. For studies on narratives for historical thinking skills, see James S. Damico, Mark Baildon, and Daniel Greenstone, "Examining How Historical Agency Works in Children's Literature," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2010): 1-12; James S. Damico, Mark Baildon, and Karen Lowenstein, "Did the bombs just fall from the sky? Examining Agency in a Text Set of World War II Children's Literature," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 3, no. 3 (2008): 51-59; Jason L. Endacott, "Reconsidering Affective Empathy in Historical Empathy," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 6-49; Jada Kohlmeier, "The Power of a Woman's Story: A Three-Step Approach to Historical Significance in High School World History," *The International Journal of Social Education* 20, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2005): 64-75; Linda S. Levstik, "The Relationship Between Historical Response and Narrative in a Sixth-Grade Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 1-19.

8. Damico, Baildon, and Greenstone, 2.

9. Endacott, 45.

10. Stephen Weiner, *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* (New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing, 2004): 5.

11. Stephen Tabachnick, *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009): 2.

12. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

13. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008): 125.

14. Josh Neufield, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (New York: Pantheon, 2009); Andrew Helfer, *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, *Ché: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); C. M. Butzer, *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

15. For more on historical agency, see Keith C. Barton, "Teaching about Historical Agency: A Conceptual Overview," presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2011; Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*; Damico, Baildon, and Greenstone;

Damico, Baildon, and Lowenstein; Kent den Heyer, "Between Every 'Now' and 'Then': A Role for the Study of Historical Agency in History and Citizenship Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 411-434; Peter Seixas, "Historical Understanding among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting," *Curriculum Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 301-327.

16. J. Spencer Clark, Carolyn Weber, and Keith C. Barton, "'African Americans Were Getting Fed Up': Choice and Inevitability in New Zealand Students' Ideas about Historical Agency," presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2011: 3.
17. Seixas, 303.
18. Ibid.
19. Clark, Weber, and Barton, 3.
20. Barton, 6.
21. Damico, Baildon, and Lowenstein, 54.
22. Barton, 9.
23. Damico, Baildon, and Greenstone, 2.
24. Zinn, *A People's History of American Empire.*
25. Neufield; Helfer; Jacobson and Colon, *The 9/11 Report*; Jacobson and Colon, *Ché: A Graphic Biography*; Butzer.
26. John W. Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 184.
27. Alan Peshkin, "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own," *Educational Researcher* 17, no. 7 (October 1988): 17-22.
28. Seixas, 303.
29. Ibid.
30. Barton, 2.
31. Endacott, 35.
32. Barton and Levstik, *Doing History*, 121.
33. Ibid., 120.
34. Ibid.
35. Patricia Storace, "A Double Life in Black and White," *The New York Review of Books* 52, no. 6 (April 2005): 40.
36. Cromer and Clark, 584.

Appendix: List of Relevant Social Studies Graphic Novels

* *Denotes a work of historical fiction.*
** *Denotes a work with content that may not be suitable for students.*

Biographies

The 14th Dalai Lama: A Manga Biography. Tetsu Saiwai. Penguin, 2008.
Ché: A Graphic Biography. Spain Rodriguez. Verso, 2008.
Ché: A Graphic Biography. Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón. Hill and Wang, 2010.
J. Edgar Hoover: A Graphic Biography. Rick Geary. Hill and Wang, 2008.
The Lives of Sacco and Vanzetti. Rick Geary. Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing, 2011.
Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography. Andrew Helfer. Hill and Wang, 2006.
Nelson Mandela: The Authorized Comic Book. Nelson Mandela Foundation with Umlando Wezithombe. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.
Ronald Reagan: A Graphic Biography. Andrew Helfer. Hill and Wang, 2007.
Trotsky: A Graphic Biography. Rick Geary. Hill and Wang, 2009.

Holocaust, Genocide, or Ethnic Conflict

A Family Secret. Eric Heuvel. Macmillan, 2007.
Anne Frank. Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón. Turtleback Books, 2010.
Déogratias: A Tale of Rwanda. Jean-Philippe Stassen. Macmillan, 2006. */**
Maus: The Complete Maus (Books 1 & 2). Art Spiegelman. Random House Digital, 1992.
The Search. Eric Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol, and Lies Schippers. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007.
We Are on Our Own: A Memoir. Miriam Katin. Drawn & Quarterly, 2006.

Works by Joe Sacco**
The Fixer: A Story form Sarajevo. Joe Sacco. Jonathan Cape, 2004.
Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel. Joe Sacco. Macmillan, 2009.
Palestine. Joe Sacco. Fantagraphic Books, 2001.
Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995. Joe Sacco. Jonathan Cape, 2007.
War's End: Profiles from Bosnia 1995-1996. Joe Sacco. Drawn & Quarterly 2005.

Conflict and Dealing with Conflict

The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation. Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón. Turtleback Books, 2006.
After 9/11: America's War on Terror (2001-). Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón. Hill and Wang, 2008.
Defiance: Resistance Book 2. Carla Jablonski and Leland Purvis. Macmillan, 2010. *
Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel. C.M. Butzer. Harper-Collins, 2009.
In the Shadows of No Towers. Art Spiegelman. Pantheon Books, 2004
The Kite Runner: Graphic Novel. Khaled Hosseini. Penguin, 2011.
Macedonia: What Does it Take to Stop a War. Harvey Pekar and Heather Roberson. Random House Digital, 2007.

The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders. Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre, and Frédéric Lemercier. Macmillan, 2006.
Pride of Baghdad. Brian K. Vaughn. Titan Books, 2006. */**
Resistance: Book 1. Carla Jablonski and Leland Purvis. Macmillan, 2010. *
The Vietnam War: A Graphic History. Dwight Zimmerman, Gen. Chuck Horner, and Wayne Vansant. Hill and Wang, 2009.

Social, Cultural, and Historical Issues and Events

A People's History of American Empire. Howard Zinn. Metropolitan Books, 2008.
A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge. Josh Neufeld. Random House Digital, 2009.
Arab in America. Toufic El Rassi. Last Gasp, 2007.
The Beats: A Graphic History. Harvey Pekar et al. Macmillan, 2009.
Burma Chronicles. Guy Delisle. Random House, 2011.
Edible Secrets: A Food Tour of Classified US History. Michael Hoerger and Mia Partlow. Microcosm Publishing, 2010.
The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media. Brooke Gladstone. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.
Persepolis (The Complete). Marjane Satrapi. Random House Digital, 2004.
Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea. Guy Delisle. Jonathan Cape, 2006.
Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China. Guy Delisle. Drawn & Quarterly, 2012.
Students for A Democratic Society: A Graphic History. Harvey Pekar. Hill and Wang, 2008.
The United States Constitution. Jonathan Hennessey. Hill and Wang, 2008
Wobblies: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World. Paul Buhle & Nicole Schulman. Verso, 2005.
Studs Terkel's Working: A Graphic Adaptation. Studs Terkel, Harvey Pekar, and Paul Buhle. The New Press, 2009.