Abstract

A comic book, a graphic research paper, an experiment in image and text – “Steal This History” explores the 1960s (or “Sixties”) as it has appeared in various historical and commemorative discourses. For more than forty years, the Sixties has been discussed and debated in the US public sphere. Its political and cultural legacy continues to excite conflict and disagreement. The following pages provide a multi-perspective account of the Sixties that combines allusions to historical events with personal reflection, poetic imagery, symbol and metaphor. Influenced by the ideas of Hayden White, Alun Munslow, Robert A. Rosenstone and others, we became fascinated by the potential of the image as a conduit for innovative, challenging, self-conscious histories. Furthermore, scholars of the graphic novel have noted the complex ways in which they can engage with historical discourse (see, for example, the special edition of *Rethinking History* 6:3 (2002), devoted to the subject). “Steal This History” builds on these ideas and explores ways of developing a graphic philosophy of history. There is no attempt, here, to provide a comprehensive account of the Sixties, nor to cite every key event, person or movement. Rather, what follows is a partial collection of ideas. We hope readers will enjoy the piece, and that it might spark a dialogue on future directions for graphic historiography.

Keywords

The Sixties, Graphic Novels, Comic Books, Historiography, History, Comic Studies, Politics

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STEAL THIS HISTORY
"STEAL THIS HISTORY" IS AN EXPERIMENTAL ACCOUNT OF THE 1960S (OR "SIXTIES") WHERE HISTORICAL EVENTS INTERSECT WITH, AND ARE INTERRUPTED BY, POETIC IMAGERY AND METAPHOR. WE APPROACHED THIS PROJECT FASCINATED BY BOTH THE PUBLIC DISAGREEMENTS OVER THE SIXTIES' POLITICAL LEGACY AND BY THE ALMOST-MYTHIC SYMBOLISM THAT SO OFTEN UNDERPINS DISCOURSES ON THE ERA. INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF PHILOSOPHERS AND HISTORIANS SUCH AS HAYDEN WHITE, ALUN MUNSLow AND ROBERT A. ROSENSTONE, WE SAW IN THE COMIC FORM AN OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A SELF-CONSCIOUS HISTORY IN WHICH FRAGMENTS OF A "REALIST" CHRONICLE WOULD SIT SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH THE MORE "LITERARY" ELEMENTS OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES. RATHER THAN SUBLIMING THEM BENEATH A VENEER OF OBJECTIVITY, ALL OF THE IMAGINARY ICONS AND FIGURATIVE DISCOURSES THAT GIVE SHAPE AND MEANING TO OUR HISTORY LITERALLY INVADE THE DIEGESIS. PLAYFUL AND REFLEXIVE IN ITS APPROACH, THE COMIC IS AN ATTEMPT AT WHAT MUNSLow HAS CALLED "THE-PAST-AS-HISTORY-AS-ARTWORK."

FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS, HISTORIES OF THE SIXTIES HAVE ASSESSED THE ERA'S TRANSFORMATIONS. RHETORICALLY SHAPED AND RESHAPED WITHIN A US CULTURE BURSTING WITH COMMEMORATIVE ZEAL, "THE SIXTIES" SERVES AS A PALIMPSEST UPON WHICH COMPETING IDEAS STRUGGLE FOR PROMINENCE. HOPE, OPTIMISM, OUTRAGE, EXCITEMENT, DESPAIR, DECLINE, IMPLOSION — ACCOUNTS OF THIS ERA CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN ITS URGENCY AND VIBRANCY WITHIN BROADER PUBLIC DISCOURSES. THE SIXTIES, AS STEPHEN PAUL MILLER PUTS IT, "ripples into the present". THROUGH MULTIPLE, FRAGMENTED NARRATIVES, METAPHORS AND SYMBOLIC NON-SEQUITURS, "STEAL THIS HISTORY" OFFERS AN ENGAGEMENT WITH SIXTIES HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE DIVERSE WAYS IN WHICH THE ERA HAS BEEN REIMAGINED. OUR FAITH IN THE COMIC BOOK'S POTENTIAL FOR INNOVATIVE HISTORIES IS BASED AT LEAST IN PART ON THE DEMANDS IT PLACES ON READERS TO "FILL IN THE BLANKS" AND COME TO THEIR OWN INTERPRETATIONS. WE HOPE READERS OF THIS COMIC WILL DO THE SAME. HOWEVER, WE HAVE ALSO INCLUDED EXTENSIVE NOTES AT THE END, WHICH EXPLAIN ALL OF OUR CREATIVE AND HISTORICAL CHOICES.

WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, THEN, IT'S BACK TO THE SIXTIES AND CHICAGO, 1968. SOMETHING'S HAPPENING HERE....
Grant Park, Chicago, 1968.

Hmm...Something’s happening here.

I’m not entirely clear...

Old battles die hard. A monument to Civil War hero, and so-called ‘Father of Memorial Day’, General John Logan is about to be invaded.

History under attack?

Let’s take the monument, man!

What those kids waving over there...

Or the past and the present in groovy communion.

Stop! Children! Arggh!!

Far fucking out!
We wouldn't be the first to call the sixties America's second civil war.

And we won't be the last.

According to Hayden White, metaphors are the historian's stock-in-trade. Their symbolic potency invests the past with meaning.

Go home, hippies!!

Damn kids, no respect!

The pallid shades of memory...

Fuck the death convention.

Festival of life, man.
In fact, the aim of this little comic book is modest. It is to sketch out some ideas for an illustrated sixties history. Why in God's name are you invoking me, then?

I'll believe that when I see it.

That is sceptical toward the notion of a single "objective" history. That is playful and ironic in its narrative approach. That is self-conscious of its status as a creative interpretation of the past. But that nonetheless tries to say something meaningful about this most contested of epochs.

"The-past-as-history-as-artwork" (Alun Munslow)
It all started back in 2009. And a research trip to New York City.

I was searching for facts. And not getting anywhere fast.

Exhausting. That night in Brooklyn. I met this guy outside a bar. We struck up a conversation.

The “facts” were endless. And it was...

Forget it kid. The sixties are dead. We cleaned up and grew up.

Wavy Gravy was a pig farmer? Can I help you?

Some assistance please!

This is America son. You gotta be pushy.

Exhausting.

That night in Brooklyn.

I met this guy outside a bar. We struck up a conversation.
It was strange how, whenever I spoke to people about the sixties, it was like I wasn't talking about the past at all...

The sixties, huh...

You buy dat?

But an idea.

Or a stream of historical consciousness.

DAMNED HIPPIES...
COMMUNISTS...
BLEEDINGHEART...
HEALTHCARE...
TALIBAN...
PUNKS.

Hold the front page! "Heir to Kennedy promises hope if you vote for him."

A ceaseless march into the present.

So I got interested in the "sixties" as this malleable metaphor, shaped and reshaped through the ages. I wanted to write about how lots of "sixties" were being written every day, at the same time, on the same page, so to speak. Hence the comic...
You see, comics can provide a formally complex and self-conscious engagement with the past.

As Scott McCloud says, the comic constructs its "reality" out of fragments...

... and can flexibly shift the order that we see things (and don't see things), thus cultivating ambiguity.

The spectator (or reader) collaborates in finding meaning.

And "closure" (as far as that is possible) requires us to...

Trust in the authority of the artist and...

The boundaries between fact and fiction blurred.

And more so than film, comics allow past, present and future to coexist in the same space, on the same page.

That the future of the "past-as-history" can be found in the comic book.

We're taking the Sixties out of the gutter and back onto the streets.

This is all starting to sound a bit Oliver Stone.

Can it patsy, you're not in a movie anymore.

So let the word go forth...

DID YOU SEE...

IS THAT A MAN OR A TREE BEHIND THE FENCE? DAMN THESE ILLUSTRATIONS.

Fill in the gaps.

That's a man or a tree behind the fence? Damn these illustrations.

Is that a man or a tree behind the fence? Damn these illustrations.

So let the word go forth...

Can it patsy, you're not in a movie anymore.
ON AUGUST 28, 1968, THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION WAS IN ITS PENULTIMATE DAY. POLICE CLASHED WITH PROTESTERS ON THE STREETS OF CHICAGO.

IT WAS OSTENSIBLY A BATTLE OVER AMERICA’S ROLE IN VIETNAM. BUT CAME TO MEAN MUCH MORE.

A CHAOTIC ERUPTION OF POLITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCORD.

“THE BITTER REDNESS OF LOVE FERMENTS” (ARTHUR RIMBAUD)

EVENTS IN CHICAGO, ACCORDING TO THE HISTORIAN DAVID FARBER, WERE SEEN BY MANY AS “A CRISIS IN THE NATION’S POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ORDER.”

FOR SOME, IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE END: OF HOPE, IDEALISM, EVEN “THE SIXTIES” ITSELF. FOR OTHERS, IT WAS JUST A BEGINNING...

MEANWHILE...

IN LINCOLN PARK, THE DARK...
Histories of Chicago '68, or indeed any history of the sixties, are more than catalogues of recorded events. Their power derives from how they symbolically construct the past.

Poetic imagery, metaphor and myth need not be distractions from, or distortions of, facts. Such features provide a framework within which these facts become significant, vital and living.

"There is an element of poetry in every historical account of the world" (Hayden White)

Beauty vs. honesty – it's an age old debate.

History and literature draw from the same imaginative wellspring.

When it comes to the sixties, it's hard to escape the expressive razzmatazz underpinning so many popular accounts of the era.
BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE.

BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA
Late spring 1967: the author Joan Didion visits San Francisco. She turned a critical eye on the hippie community of Haight Ashbury in her essay (titled with a nod to W.B. Yeats) “Slouching Towards Bethlehem.”

Yikes. That was ugly.

It was another death knell for the age of Aquarius.

The sixties has many endings.

I’ll see you in Chicago!

Part of the era’s resonance today stems from a search for its dramatic denouement.

My end to the sixties is only a beginning.
THE PROBLEM WITH FINDING THAT NEAT CONCLUSION IS IT ALWAYS LEAVES UNFINISHED BUSINESS

PERIODIZATION EQUALS OPPRESSION. LET'S MOVE FORWARD.

VIETNAM, NIXON, WATERGATE - WE'RE LOOKING AT 1974 AS THE BIG IMPLOSION.

LISTEN UP, Y'ALL. THE SIXTIES ONLY ENDED WHEN PERSONAL POLITICS WERE REPLACED WITH MINDLESS NARCISSISM. FROM THE BIG I AM TO THE BIG ME.

"THE SIXTIES" IS NOTHING BUT A WHITE MAN'S CONCEPT, ANYWAY.

STONENALL RIOTS, 1969

REALLY THE SIXTIES IS A VERY PERSONAL TRIP.

IT'S MOURNING IN AMERICA.

SCREW YOUR PATRIARCHAL SIXTIES.
OH LORD!

**D**avid, I’m leaving you.

**J’ACCUSE!**

David, I’m leaving you.

**J’ACCUSE!**

Whatever.

**J’ACCUSE!**

And histories of the sixties often reverted to what Rick Perlstein called the “declension hypothesis”, a tale that begins with hope but ends in terminal decline.

Time for another metaphor, man. I’m beat.
Davie, I'm leaving you.

So by the 1980s, the era, by many accounts, had been in a kind of extended death dance for several years.

It was like being in New York Public Library all over again. Only this time, I wasn't facing a mountain of facts, but a monstrous parade of symbols.

Out of the library and into the street! It was like being in New York Public Library all over again. Only this time, I wasn't facing a mountain of facts, but a monstrous parade of symbols.

Err, some assistance, please.

These guys had enlivened Sixties histories for generations; they'd brought shape and spirit to many a historical account.

Out of the library and into the street!

But I started to wonder what the future held.

History is not just a story. It is a moral, ethical, and philosophical encounter with the world outside. History, as Keith Jenkins puts it, "is never for itself; it is always for someone."

It seemed apt to ask myself for whom was I writing this history. In the wake of all that had happened these past few years, perhaps the old ways of speaking about the past just wouldn't cut it anymore.
What does a "real" history of the Sixties look like?

If, as Alun Munslow suggests, "any 'aesthetic judgement' may be construed as being 'true'..."

Are you ready to ride forth once more, General?

... then the "truth" of history lies in the choices we make.

In a forest of flowers or a hail of shells, I await your pencil, sir.

At the beginning.

Thanks, General, to conclude, then...

Look out, Hayden, it's real!
Notes


Page 2. “The pallid shades of memory…” This is a partial reference to G.W.F. Hegel’s assertion that the past is irretrievable. “Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone … The pallid shades of memory struggle in vain with the life and freedom of the present.” See Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 6. It is also quoted by Hayden White at the end of his influential attack on the static, stagnant nature of mid-twentieth century historical discourse, “The Burden of History” (White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 50). The reference is therefore both a literal statement on the action within this panel (Civil War general John Logan “struggling” against an onslaught of Sixties protestors) and, via White, a nod to the historiographical questions we will be addressing throughout.

Page 3. The images on this page have been inspired by Barry Schwartz’s work on collective memory, and in particular on how the meanings attached to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address have been framed and reframed across the 20th century. A speech with many potential interpretations – a eulogy to those who had fallen, a call for national unity, a celebration of the “common man”, a palliative to North-South conflicts, an appeal for racial reconciliation – the Gettysburg Address, according to Schwartz, only became intrinsically bound up with broader debates on the African American civil rights struggle from the 1960s onward, with direct connections being made between Lincoln and civil rights leaders. This (re)interpretation of the past is both an example of the fluid nature of historical narratives – their writing as contingent on exigencies of the present as on documentary “fact” – and exemplifies the complex layers from which historical discourse is constructed. Fragments of the Civil War inform debates of the 1960s, and combine in the present to produce symbolic narratives of the American national experience. See Schwartz, “The New Gettysburg Address: Fusing History and


Page 6. “As Scott McCloud says…” McCloud, speaking of the way that the comic, like our navigation of the world, relies on fragments says “our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of faith, based on mere fragments”. *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 62-63. “The spectator (or reader) collaborates in finding meaning” is a paraphrase of McCloud who speaks of the audience being a “conscious collaborator”. *Understanding Comics*, p. 65. “Closure” is a central theme of McCloud’s theories about the many ways the comic constructs and is constructed to make meaning. “And more so than film, comics allow past, present and future to coexist in the same space, on the same page.” McCloud formally addresses the way the comic functions within time but also makes it clear that the presentation of time is highly flexible, as long as “the face it presents to the reader is one of simple normality”. *Understanding Comics*, pp. 115-117.


Page 6. “The past-as-history…” Again, this is a reference to Alun Munslow’s work. There is, as Munslow notes, an important distinction to be made between the “past”, which is irretrievable in its entirety, and “history”, which is a meaning-making endeavour. We suggest that the ironic detachment and temporal malleability allowed in the comic form offers interesting potential in which this distinction can be explored. See Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 127.

Page 7. “Phil Ochs.” The image ostensibly refers to musician Phil Ochs’ album cover *Rehearsals for Retirement* (1969). Ochs himself was involved in the protests in Chicago in August 1968. He would lament these events, and their subsequent fallout, as the swansong of an energised optimistic movement for social change. For Ochs, as for many later popular historians, 1968 served as a death of optimism, a symbolic end to the Sixties.

Page 7. “In Lincoln Park the dark …” A quote from Ochs’ song “William Butler Yeats Visits Lincoln Park and Escapes Unscathed” (1969), from the album *Rehearsals for Retirement*. As the following pages attest, Yeats’ poetry has been invoked time and again in accounts of the Sixties. His poem “The Second Coming” provides a metaphorical wellspring from which authors, artists, journalists, politicians and historians have drawn.

Page 7. “The bitter redness of love ferments”. This is a quote from Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “The Drunken Boat” (1871). The image itself refers to Theodore Gericault’s celebrated painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819). While ostensibly unrelated to events in Chicago, these nautical-themed images are an allusion to the “literary” aspect of Sixties histories, whereby dramatic metaphors are used to explain the impact and legacy of these events. As Hayden White puts it, “The metaphor does not image the thing it seeks to characterize, it gives directions for finding the set of images that are
intended to be associated with the thing.” See White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 91.

Page 7. “Events in Chicago, according to David Farber”. See Farber, *Chicago ’68*, p. xiii.


Page 8. “Beauty vs. honesty …” The image here is an adaptation of John Everett Millais’ painting Ophelia (1851-52), but with Ophelia presented as a hippie. There are obvious metaphorical connections to be drawn between the image and a symbolic “death” of the counterculture, something often argued to have occurred in the late 1960s/early 1970s (see notes below). For us, it was also, by way of the character of Ophelia – and her treatment at the hands of men in Hamlet – a nod to the misogyny existing within countercultural groups in the Sixties. Beauty vs. honesty, fiction vs. fact, the literary imagination vs. scientific objectivity – the line is also a gentle allusion to long-running debates on the nature of history.

Page 9. The beast, here, is Yeats’ “rough beast … [slouching] toward Bethlehem to be born.” Whether present in the writings of Joan Didion, the pronouncements of Richard Nixon or the films of Oliver Stone, such imagery consistently imbues written, verbal and visual accounts of the Sixties.


Page 11. The images in panels 1-6 and text here are informed by those who have questioned the “declensionist” narrative of the Sixties, which often posits an “end” to the era in the late 1960s or early 1970s. For scholars of the feminist, gay rights and Black Power movements, for example, this search for a neat conclusion ends up erasing or eliding the significant contributions such movements made to US society in the 1970s and beyond. See, for example, Sara Evans, “Beyond Declension: Feminist Radicalism in the 1970s and 1980s”, in Van Gosse and Richard Moser (eds), *The World the 60s Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), pp. 52-66; Alice Echols, “Nothing Distant About It: Women’s Liberation and Sixties Radicalism”, in David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 149-174; Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Page 12. “J’accuse …” As Barbara Epstein has demonstrated, grassroots political activism did not suddenly collapse in the 1970s and 1980s. Groups devoted to women’s rights, anti-nuclear policies, gay rights and a host of other causes continued to fight for progressive social change. The text and images are, however, also a playful nod to Todd Gitlin’s memorable description of media accounts of post-Sixties America suggesting that it was “as if a whole generation had moved en masse from j’accuse to Jacuzzi.” See Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 433.


Page 14. “Look out, Hayden, it’s real.” This line directly alludes to a similar utterance, “Look out, Haskell, it’s real”, present in *Medium Cool* (1969), a filmic account of events in Chicago ’68. Written and directed by Haskell Wexler, this independent production blended a fictional narrative with real documentary footage of the protests. Wexler and his crew actually joined and shot the demonstrations. The line is spoken by a crewmember warning Wexler of the tear gas being used by police on
protestors. The people behind the camera puncture the film’s diegesis (as the illustrator’s hand punctures our final panel). And yet, by some criteria, the line is not “real” at all – it was not uttered during the protests, but added in post-production. The “reality” here is therefore a creative choice, not a documented “fact”. Does this mean the threat of tear gas was not real for Wexler and his crew? Is the line any less truthful because it was added later? Was the decision to disrupt the narrative with a moment of self-reflexivity a distortion of events or a poignant reference to their magnitude?


