

# The Indigeneity of the Graphic Form: Exploring the Universality of Comics in Healthcare

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## Abstract

*Comics represent a significant literary and artistic medium that narrates stories through the integration of visual and verbal elements. Though reading comics was considered of low culture in the early stage in US, it slowly gained momentum as an art of high culture capable of addressing complex social, cultural, and personal issues. Comics and graphic novels have earned universality especially in healthcare with the advent of the Graphic Medicine. The advent of graphic autopathographies that share experiential realities of patient experiences have made comics an inevitable source in healthcare. This paper explores the origin and necessity of comics in healthcare and argues for their efficacy in articulating embodied experiences of illness. Ultimately, the study underscores the relevance of comics as an inclusive, interdisciplinary, and impactful medium within contemporary healthcare narratives.*

## History of Comics

Comics as a discourse has emerged in various parts of the world in different times. Its early witnesses are from cave paintings, Egyptian Hieroglyphs and Rome’s Trajan Column. But the history of American comics started in 19th century with the publication of *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* by Rodolphe Topffer. Action Comics published in 1938 initiated the interest in comic books in US and led to the popularity of comics. Superhero comics gained significance in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Comics in America have been divided into ages such as Golden age, Silver age, Bronze age and the modern age of comic books. This establishment of comics in America brought the understanding of the newness and groundbreaking reality of comics. Greg M. Smith argues that for Comics Studies to gain legitimacy, scholars should conduct rigorous and insightful research without feeling the need to defend the medium’s cultural value; the strength of the work itself should validate the field (Smith, 2012). From considering comics as an art of low culture, it has got to a place of significance among the readers of US in the 1990’s. As Smith says

“comics had finally evolved into a higher art form, one fitting for older, more serious readers” (25). The transition of comics to a higher art form gives it a new name called ‘Graphic novel’ that adds popularity and prestige to the comics (Sabin 1993).

Books such as Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*, Scott Mc Cloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and Roger Sabin’s *Adult Comics: An Introduction* are foundational texts in comics studies. Mc Cloud’s book is itself written as a comic that explores the formal properties of comics and advocates for comics as a serious art form. This book gives an understanding of the close reading techniques of comics. Sabin’s book talks about the development of comics aimed at adults and explores how comics has evolved from being dismissed as children’s entertainment to gaining cultural legitimacy. Comics has divisions like underground comix, alternative comics and graphic novels that discuss different themes. Underground comix is a movement of independent, self-published, or small-press comic books that emerged primarily in the late 1960s and 1970s. Alternative comics (or alt-comics) is a genre of comics that developed as a successor to underground comix, starting in the 1980s and gaining momentum in the 1990s and 2000s. Like underground comix, alternative comics reject mainstream superhero genres, but they are usually more refined in tone, less aggressively countercultural, and more diverse in style and subject matter.

### **History of Graphic Medicine**

Graphic Medicine Manifesto is a collection of essays by six pioneers of graphic medicine, who belong to different professions, but find their common interest in comics and healthcare. The essays discuss the significance and impact of comics in the field of medicine and how it catered their interest to combine comics with healthcare. With the advent of the Graphic Medicine Manifesto in the year 2007, the propounders explain the potentiality of comics being an easy, effective and funny medium to convey serious health concerns. As Ian Williams state Comics as “a medium that speaks to us as a playful species and allows us to absorb complex propositions whilst experiencing, umm... Enjoyment, whatever the subject matter” (18).

Graphic Medicine rejects the idea of universal patient and attempts to understand the subjective experiences of patients’ illness. The embodiment of individual illness experiences through visual metaphors in comics enable the readers to validate the unique experiences of illness. Czerwiec calls Graphic Medicine “an umbrella term—the bigger the umbrella, the more that comes under it” in the interview conducted a decade after the advent of Graphic Medicine Manifesto (Kasthuri and Peter, 101). The inclusive nature of Graphic pathographies enable the creators and the readers to impart new knowledge on health concerns. This is applicable to patients, caregivers and medical practitioners as graphic medicine aims at educating public about medical information and in creating empathetic community by sharing experiences. There are no boundaries in Graphic medicine as it is a field that encompasses various other disciplines into it and brings together artists, medical practitioners, patients and caregivers. Graphic Medicine Manifesto emerges as a collective project that brought together scattered ideologies of people who are concerned and connected to comics and health.

### **The Universality of Graphic Pathographies**

The universality of the comics or graphic pathographies makes it an efficient medium to discuss sensitive, often unspoken issues of health. Czerwiec states that “Comics are so good at showing us things that are stigmatized” while discussing about the comic *Menopause* (Kasthuri and Peter, 106). Similarly, comics enable the author to embody one’s illness experience visually which might not have been articulated verbally. Ian Williams states his own experience of making comics to embody his illness experience as “my making comics-has allowed me to articulate my own experience of mental health problems (a subject that, as a health professional, I had previously been unwilling

to discuss)” (115). The abstraction of the icons in graphic pathographies make them universal and simultaneously conveys subjective experiences through creative visual metaphors. This makes comics universal yet subjective and educating yet entertaining. The graphic pathography enables a person to draw images of one’s own body which creates knowledge and authority about the self which was earlier the privilege to physicians alone. Graphic pathographies are powerful tools to authors that “stem precisely from the need to express oneself and, possibly, to challenge the “medical” authority from which the author feels excluded” (Williams 129). The various properties of the comics including the panels, gutters, spatiality, closure, iconography and metaphors blend together to create a unique experience to the reader creating new knowledge on illness experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Comics have grown from a form of entertainment into a powerful tool in healthcare. Their unique mix of images and words helps express personal illness experiences in a way that crosses cultural and language barriers. Graphic Medicine uses this strength to share patient stories, build empathy, and spread medical knowledge. Features like panel layout, visual metaphors, and narrative gaps make comics easy to understand and emotionally engaging. They also give patients and caregivers a voice, allowing them to share and take ownership of their experiences. Comics, therefore, play a valuable role in making healthcare more personal, inclusive, and meaningful.

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