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An Archive of the New: A Review of Key Terms in Comics Studies

Key Terms in Comics Studies, edited by Erin La Cour, Simon Grennan, and Rik Spanjers, Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels, 369 pages, 2022, ISBN 2634-6370

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This article is a review of *Key Terms in Comics Studies*, edited by Erin La Cour, Simon Grennan, and Rik Spanjers (Palgrave 2022). This volume covers a broad array of disciplines and terminology utilized in comics studies, with the aim of creating new connections in the field between its varied disciplinary approaches. The review contextualizes the volume within the emerging genre of reference collections and analyses the role and utility of such collections within comics studies and higher education.



The editors of *Key Terms in Comics Studies* mark the book's goal as "to open the dialogue on comics scholarship across the diverse fields and approaches so as to engender access to and an analysis of comics-specific theorizations, histories, and methodologies" (La Cour, Grennan, and Spanjers 2022: 1–2; **Figure 1**). One gap in the discipline identified by the editors is the field's lack of a disciplinary home – the aim of the book it would seem then, is to speak across the field divides and work against the often solitary nature of being a comics studies scholar. This is a motive I can empathize with – while pursuing my master's degree, I was the only person working on comics in my university. My first task as a PhD student has been to immerse myself in comics studies as an academic field. In short, to do the exact work *Key Terms* claims it is setting out to do.

However, as I made my way through *Key Terms*, I began to feel as though I was quickly falling out of alignment with the text. This feeling of being left behind by the volume happened on two levels: on a stylistic level *and* a content level. To address these concerns, I will begin with style rather than content. This is a somewhat self-serving choice, as my primary pedagogical training is in rhetoric and composition, but serves as a way of transitioning into my concerns about the content as well: I consider pedagogy an essential part of my scholarship. Having recently moved from higher education in the United States to a university in the United Kingdom, I find myself well-positioned to consider the text from both sides of the Atlantic and I want to consider the text from the pedagogue's perspective. The text positions itself as a sort of knowledge worker or teacher. It aims to work against the ways in which "knowledge transfer from one discipline to another remains uneven and often accessible only by osmosis" (La Cour, Grennan, and Spanjers 2022: 1). So we must ask: *how does this text transfer knowledge?* before we look into the knowledge it transfers.

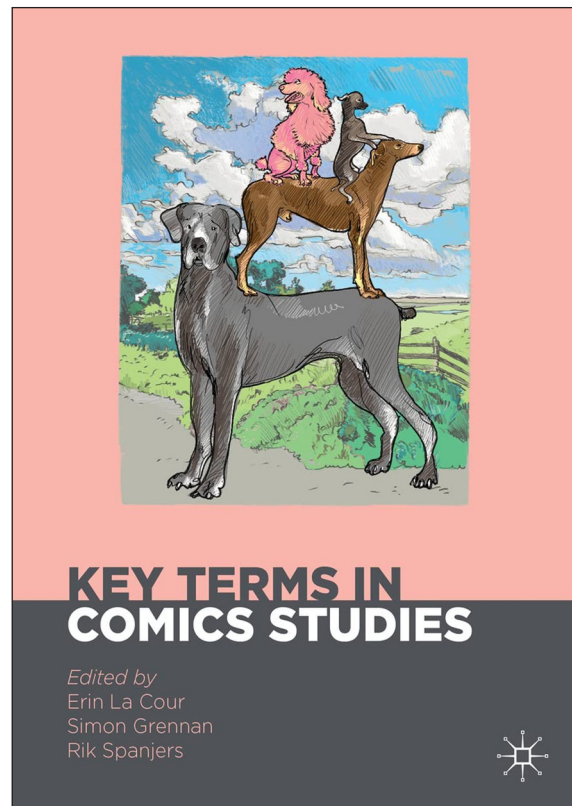


Figure 1: Cover of *Key Terms in Comics Studies* © Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels.

The genre of glossary texts seems to me a type of dandelion: they seem to appear everywhere, spread with even the slightest wind, yet despite their status as unwelcome weed, they can sustain us and offer powerful aid below the ground – their roots break up hard soil and bring forth nutrients for other, more shallow-growing plants. Such volumes appear across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, such as *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* edited by Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (2013); Bloomsbury has a whole series of volumes in this genre, the *Key Terms* series, with topics ranging from ethics to secondary language acquisition. The Bloomsbury series has an explicit aim of providing “undergraduate students clear, concise and accessible introductions to core topics” (Bloomsbury 2021). Providing a simple definition of terms for students is frequently cited as a rationale for these volumes. *Key Terms in Comics Studies* does not, however, position itself as such. Instead, it seeks to be a nexus for scholars already “in the know.” This strikes me as more akin to the glossary volume that *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)* produced in its first publication, a double issue titled “Posttranssexual”. The editors of *TSQ* identified their task as: “to look back, briefly, over the work already conducted in the field of transgender studies before turning our sights toward what the next, postposttranssexual, iteration of that field now seems to hold in store” (Stryker and Currah 2014: 3). The *TSQ* text is a field guide to the state of play in trans studies, it does not coddle its reader with simplistic definitions, instead it immerses the reader headfirst in how scholars at work in the field are thinking and doing their scholarship. Like *Key Terms in Comics Studies*, *TSQ*’s foray into this genre is especially ambitious: spread across the journal’s first two issues is a collection of key terms provided by nearly ninety theorists, scholars, and knowledge workers. This, too, is the promise of the glossary text: they give opportunities to publish in an environment that instructs ‘publish or perish’ and their structures produce archives of both knowledge and knowledge-workers. It is important to highlight this reality, as it marks these volumes as distinct from edited collections such as ‘readers.’ These texts, such as *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (Crenshaw, et. al. 1996) or *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg and Seigworth 2010) compile extant – and often previously published – writing, rather than new writing: archives of the past. Volumes such as *Key Terms in Comic Studies* or *TSQ*’s “Posttranssexual” are archives of the new. The archive, as Derrida says, “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*” (Derrida and Prenowitz 1995: 9) so my task herein is to look at both in *Key Terms in Comic Studies*.

Enfolded into any academic glossary’s commencement of knowledge, is how that knowledge is disseminated. This is where we will begin. *Key Terms* follows the most common frame for these texts: moving through concepts alphabetically. For contrast,

Comic Studies: A Guidebook (Hatfield and Beaty 2020), works thematically. While *Comic Studies: A Guidebook* has already been reviewed in this journal (Berube 2020), I make mention of it here to juxtapose the editorial choices. A thematic organizing often aids in the production of a narrative, an imposition of sequence, and with it power. As comics scholars, we should be especially attuned to the powers sequencing has. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud reminds us that comics explicitly work with sequence and the sequences of reading and time that we have ingrained into us. For example, “Conditioned as we are to read *left-to-right* and *up-to-down* a mischievous cartoonist can play any number of *tricks* on us” (McCloud 2001: 105). An alphabetic organizing structure is a sequence too, however, unlike a narrative sequence the alphabetic juxtaposes the unfamiliar against each other. This is a strength for *Key Terms*, as it seeks to break comics scholars out of their silos. By putting terms like ‘depiction’ alongside ‘détournement’ (pp. 81–2) or ‘floppy’ next to ‘focalisation’ (pp. 112–4), *Key Terms* might yet create new pathways of thought between disciplines that are kept apart by traditional narratives of discourse.

While this organizational structure can successfully break standard patterns of thought to produce new, fluid lines of thought between ‘disparate’ ideas, to do so successfully necessitates a smooth reading experience. Perhaps this is a gripe as a disabled scholar, but I found the text’s style difficult to absorb. *Key Terms in Comics Studies*’ editors make the somewhat baffling choice to put related terms cross-referenced in each entry in block capitals. This produces sentences such as “Though [the term ‘floppy’] describes the MATERIALITY of an array of objects like BANDE DESSINÉE ALBUMS, ZINES, and ‘one shot’ comics, the term typically references MASS PRODUCED, SERIALISED American comic book issues...” (pp. 112–113). This produces a disjointed reading experience. When my eye moves across the page, I struggle to keep my place in the sentence. Instead, I found myself attempting to bounce around the page from capitalized word to capitalize word. While I agree with the editors in the importance of cross-referencing and highlighting connective tissue, I cannot help but wonder if there was a less obtrusive way to do so.

If *Key Terms in Comics Studies* seeks to interconnect divides within comics studies scholarship, it certainly accomplished this goal structurally. However, its content feels somewhat discordant with this goal. If, as the introduction states, the goal of the text is to speak to people already working in comics studies, then why does the book feel the need to define “comics shop” (page 67)? Who is the comics scholar who does not know of the comic shop? If the editors have concluded that their reader is unfamiliar with the comics shop, then as a reader and scholar in comics studies, I feel as though there

is a gap between what the text performs and what its stated goal is. This unevenness is unnerving. The selection of topics is somehow both too broad and too narrow. While some of this is undoubtedly due to the breadth of approaches that are brought to bear on comics scholarship – hence the definitions provided for terms such as “materialism” or “affect” – there remains an inescapable feeling that the editors who wrote the introduction to the book are different than the editors who compiled the book (pp. 10–1 and 189–190).

Though the book provides many definitions for terms used in literary studies, affect theory, Marxist theory, and the social sciences, there are swaths of holes in terminology used in extant comics scholarship fields. Though terms such as “educational comics” and “graphic medicine” are defined, other well-trod areas of comics studies are not such as graphic justice or comics and the city (pp. 97 and 137–8). The inclusion of terms such as “LGBTQ+” as terms worthy of definition in an academic terminology text, for example, seems to suggest that the reader would somehow be unfamiliar with some iteration of the acronym used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people shorthand but *would* be familiar with “hegemony” (a term that goes undefined) seems discordant at best and deeply ignorant at its worst. If the volume was clearer in its intended audience, then perhaps more astute choices could have been made on what terms fell within the book’s purview.

The way the text defines its selected terminology feels equally at odds with its stated aim. Terms are often not defined by ways that articulate how they work in scholarship, rather the reader is frequently given flat, static definitions that leave holes where an understanding of how the terminology works in scholarship should be. For example, the “horror” definition exclusively defines the genre – and poorly so, at that, by making note of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s contributions to the genre, but somehow omitting Mary Shelley. A great deal of the entry lists works that exist within the canon of horror comics that by the time the entry arrives at the cultural importance of horror, it does not signpost scholarship that works on horror or horror comics (pp. 149–50). If the goal is to introduce scholars who do *not* work on horror, then would it not be wise to give such scholars a direction?

Comparatively, the definition of “disability studies” offers a much more useful definition of its subject. While it defines disability, most of the entry is devoted to highlighting how disability functions in society, making it far more clear to the reader how one might use it as a lens to think through comics (pp. 89). Conversely, the book’s definition of LGBTQ+ falls short in its move to present a ‘stable’ definition. There is no substantial mention of the ‘T’ in LGBTQ+, which feels like a shortcoming on the

editors' part, as trans studies has become a vibrant academic discipline since the early 1990s (pp. 177). Considering the growing number of trans people involved in the making, reading, and study of comic books, this feels like a glaring oversight.

Comics feature heavily in my pedagogical practice, so however scatter-shot its selection can be, I am excited by *Key Terms in Comics Studies*. It is a reference text that I ache to put into the hands of my rhetoric students. Classroom time is precious – especially within this age of precarity where many classes are online and many of our students are also workers and caregivers – and *Key Terms* enables student cohorts to get on the same page in less time. The challenge I find myself facing most often in the classroom is getting students to *do* scholarship. It's important here to say I do not struggle any more than my colleagues in getting students to hand in work. I find my students struggle to think as scholars. Wrestling with texts does not come naturally to them. In the U.S., many students come into university with a muddy idea of what a 'research paper' is. They are taught to write to succeed in state exams, which often results in confusing, timid forays into college writing. My experience in front of classrooms and in the classroom as a student suggest, however, that when such guides reveal *how* the practice of thinking like a scholar is done rather than *what* the scholar thinks, students end up on better footing and begin to feel more confident in their work. Thus, definitions such as the one on disability studies are ones I am eager to bring into classroom spaces, to open up avenues into the scholarship for my students. While this may not be the editors' intended aim for *Key Terms in Comics Studies*, I think the classroom may be an excellent home for the text. Placing *Key Terms in Comics Studies* in the hands of undergraduates may even render moot some of the concerns I have outlined here. When introducing students to the weird and wonderful world of comic studies, they often need definitions for the comic book shop or need indexes of horror comics (even if I still wish the definition spoke to horror studies as well). By sidestepping the stated goal of *Key Terms in Comics Studies* to bring current scholars in conversation with each other, we may be able to create new comics scholars instead.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Editorial Note

The author is currently working on his PhD dissertation under the supervision of a team that includes an editor of this journal.

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