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Of Pencils and Pandemics: Artist Responses to Outbreaks

Abstract

As of this writing, many nations, cities, and industries remain shut down during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Globally, we have pivoted to social distancing, isolation, and mask-wearing. Despite our Zoom fatigue and work-from-home responsibilities, we might find extra time for reading and binge-watching streamed television shows. As Stephen Greenblatt theorizes in New Historicism, cultural productions emerge from, and simultaneously take their place in, a given historical moment. Assuming *arguendo* that Greenblatt is correct, then we have an array of relevant pandemic-related cultural productions to examine today.

This article focuses primarily on comic strips and graphic narratives created about or during times of outbreaks. These inform us of what life was like for different people, in a different time, under similar circumstances. Those texts reassure us that, despite horrific losses, we can survive the political, social, and economic disruption the current outbreak has wrought; humanity has been through this before. For example, when we examine graphic narratives related to the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, we see the same political and social polarities occurring today, such as disagreements over mask-wearing. Dan Brown's *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* (2019) and Katherine Krohn's *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* (2008) are based on archival news accounts and photos that recorded these polarities a century ago. Graphic narratives about pandemics like these, as well as comics archives, also serve to educate their readers, whether they inform youngsters trying to understand what a pandemic is, or whether they instruct medical students about what it's like to live with particular conditions. Graphic novels even allow readers to understand racism, for example from the

perspective of a Chinese person originally from Wuhan Province, the assumed origin of the current virus. A repeated aphorism states that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. As we confront our fears about this devastating pandemic, we can rely on the humanities as record of that history. We turn to cultural productions – including comics and graphic narratives – for clues about how to proceed from here.

1. Introduction: Framing the Current Pandemic and Its Discourse

On December 31, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issued reports of a cluster of cases seeming to be a "pneumonia of unknown cause"; the illness was later identified and named COVID-19, a novel form of the SARS coronavirus (Peters 2020). As the World Health Organization and other experts started to raise the alarm over the virus, in the U.S., former president Donald Trump downplayed their concerns. "We have it totally under control," he said on January 22, 2020. He said it was still "very much under control" in Twitter remarks he made on February 24. On March 9, he publicly and falsely compared the coronavirus to the flu, and in October proclaimed the virus was going to "disappear" (Peters; Wright 2020). As cases climbed around the world and the U.S. racked up some of the highest infection rates globally, the virus not only didn't "disappear," it worsened and turned into a deadly, end-of-the-year, holiday-related surge.

In *Fever Year*, graphic narrative author and illustrator Don Brown offers a timeline of significant events related to the 1918 influenza epidemic. He bases his narrative in historical fact, and, pertinently, we can connect the thinking that occurred during the outbreak one hundred years ago to the thinking of today. As Brown relates on one page, "Military bases filled with sick soldiers and sailors ringed Boston; there was little chance the city could avoid the disease. Still, Massachusetts Health official Dr. Dan Hitchcock tried to allay fears. 'The malady appears to be in the nature of the old fashion grippe [flu]... Daily cases appear to be diminishing.' He was wrong...Soon, Boston hospitals overflowed with hundreds of flu patients..." (28). As U.S. hospitals late in 2020 went over capacity and treated patients in converted gift shops and makeshift ICUs in parking lot tents, we could relate in some measure to what Brown described the Boston area experiencing during the flu pandemic. Brown also

cites A.A. Cairns, the former Director of the Municipal Department of Health in Philadelphia, who stated of the 1918 pandemic that "There is nothing to be alarmed about. I expect the disease will burn itself out in two weeks," wishful thinking of the time that eerily resembles Trump's own (Brown 35; Glasser 2020). If we wanted to, we could take the time to cull historical archives to locate information about life under an earlier pandemic, yet a text like Brown's that summarizes and illustrates those events for us makes the situation more accessible and immediate. Sadly, some leaders today never learned from those earlier accounts – gleaned from archives, graphic narratives, or otherwise – that downplaying and not responding appropriately to a crisis only worsens it.

As humanists, we look to art, music, novels, poems, and other texts for insight into a society's culture, priorities, and paradigm during a given historical moment. It's natural that we turn to other texts to learn, to help us cope with our fears, to remind us of what has gone before, to provide us with hope and guidance for what can come after. Indeed, as the coronavirus pandemic first caused massive shutdowns in mid-March 2020, lists of pandemic-related films, books, and games, such as one from *Esquire* magazine, started to appear in news feeds and internet searches (Ovenden, Clark and Nicholson). Fang Fang's book *Wuhan Diary* compiles her daily postings written during the coronavirus's early days. Emma Donoghue's recent novel, *The Pull of the Stars*, takes place in a Dublin maternity ward during the 1918 flu pandemic and explores how pandemics disproportionately burden women (Dockterman). Amazon launched its series *Utopia,* written by *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn. Interestingly, it is about a comic book that predicts a nationwide pandemic; the satirical series is only available to Amazon Prime customers, but viewers can watch the trailer on YouTube. We are even starting to see books that address the post-pandemic era, such as Bob Gordon's *Life After COVID-19* and Scott Galloway's *Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity*. This is a short list of cultural productions, not counting movies such as 1995's *Outbreak*, that deal with health disasters. Thus, while we live a pandemic history, we search for means like these for coping with it. Humanity's cultural productions across time, including those giving us glimpses of pandemics and survival, allow us to connect at a level of profundity those texts might not have had at another historical moment. When we are forced into isolation, lockdowns, and social distancing, we need that connection, empathy, and understanding more urgently than ever.

In this case, our focus is on comic and graphic novel artists and two pandemics, one hundred years apart. First, I briefly mention the graphic narrative form's impact on readers, particularly younger readers, to see how they might learn through its combination of word and image. I use recent news accounts to examine scenes from two graphic narratives to highlight the similarity in people's reactions to the 1918 pandemic and those of today. Comic strip and graphic novel repositories, such as *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine* or *Graphic Medicine* usefully provide locations to view pandemic and medical comics and graphic novels, whether for entertainment or informative purposes. The *Graphic Medicine* website "explores the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare" (Home); it houses resources like podcasts, articles, and literature reviews, such as one that explores how comics can be used to train medical students. *Drawing Blood* features comic strips from the flu epidemic of 1918. I compare examples from this university's archive to recent comic artists' drawings that reflect our "new cultural normal" concerning the coronavirus. Finally, I examine two artists' graphic narratives that respond to the racism that occurred as a result of the coronavirus's reported origins in Wuhan, China. Underlying each of these examinations is the commendable human spirit, the one that continues to write, create, document, photograph, and draw amid some of our darkest days.

2. The Two Pandemics in Graphic Novels and Comic Strips

In 2019, author and illustrator Don Brown released *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918*. This episode of world history fits into the larger corpus of Brown's graphic narratives (also referred to as "storyographies") about global events written for school children; some of his other titles include *The Great American Dust Bowl*, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, and the Sibert- and YALSA Award-winning *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* ("Home").[1] Even so, it almost seems that with *Fever Year*, Brown

1 His current book is entitled *Shot in the Arm* as part of the *Big Ideas That Changed the World* series. This book is fictionally narrated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and describes the importance of vaccines. See https://www.booksbybrown.com/2021/03/08/booklist-starred-review-for-shot-in-the-arm/.

was prescient. Within months of its release, the world was struck by another pandemic: the COVID-19 coronavirus. Although medically comparing the 1918 influenza to the coronavirus outbreak is a false equivocation, the historical similarities to the unfolding events across the two eras is remarkable. Thanks to Brown's research and journalistic approach, these parallels are quite easy to see. He doesn't fictionalize the tragedy to be told through a protagonist, for example; instead, he synthesizes information into a narrative based on an array of authoritative sources, including eyewitness accounts penned at the time the Spanish flu raged (Brown 91).

Brown was not the first children's author to create a graphic narrative about the 1918 pandemic; about ten years earlier, Katherine Krohn wrote *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* as part of Capstone Press's *Graphic Library* series. The book cover brags that "[t]rue-life tragedies jump off the page in the Graphic Library set Disasters in History" (Krohn 2008, back cover). Although readers may wonder briefly why a publishing company for children would focus specifically on tragedies, at least upon reading *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* readers are provided another researched summary of the flu's terrible arc. Krohn's intended audience is obviously much younger than Brown's, as its smaller size and easier vocabulary indicate. Even so, Krohn also draws upon solid research for the facts she relates and that illustrators Bob Hall, Keith Williams and Charles Barnett III vibrantly depict (Krohn 2008, 31).

Brown has been called "comics' premier chronicler of historical catastrophe" because he "has a knack for dramatizing details with striking visual angles that produce maximum emotional impact while still conveying solid, accurate information" (Karp 2019, 47; Hunt 2019, 106). Krohn's book was noted specifically for the series' intentional choice to relay this information in graphic narrative form, which "[pulls] in the reader's attention right from the start" (Foucart 2008). Another reviewer commended Krohn's three illustrators, claiming that thanks to their work "readers will be effortlessly transported through the years—and across the globe—in this fast-paced tale" (Gutierrez 2008). Solid research undergirds the books, but these historical events presented as graphic narratives warrant further exploration. First, the graphic narrative form supports younger readers' reading and comprehension skills. Second, the genre allows readers of all ages to have a compressed and somewhat dramatized sense of that pandemic, compiling the years into one summarized textual and visual story.

3. Graphic Narratives as Instructional

One reason both Brown and Kohn depict historical events in graphic narrative form is because the genre helps younger learners improve their reading skills. First, the books help students understand critical thinking, sequencing, and vocabulary words in context (English). Furthermore, reviewers, educators, and graphic narrative scholars are aware of the genre's storytelling power. As one of Krohn's reviewers iterated,

> Some parents...might find the format strange and perhaps a little irreverent for such topics as disasters; however, the information is given in a way that makes it more than just facts on a page to young readers. Instead of trying to process the consequences of the pandemic from several words and a few blurry photographs, in this volume history comes alive in vivid drawings and dialogue between both historical figures and everyday people. This is an excellent way to reach the more reluctant readers" (Foucart).

Thus, as many educators and graphic narrative scholars know, research conducted about comic books now supports quantitatively what they knew instinctively: that the genre positively impacts readers' cognition. These studies reveal that these books are "excellent resources" for readers because of how the brain processes the combination of text and images (Morrison 2017). One article cites several studies and reports that found "when students learn to read graphic novels with an analytical eye, depth and complexity are added to the reading process" and the genre improves upon how readers interpret nuance and make inferences (Morrison). Moreover, as most kids will argue, history is "boring." As author Candace Fleming explains, "All breadth and no depth, the history they've encountered has been stripped of meaning" (2019, 22). Therefore, two graphic narratives about the 1918 Spanish flu inform readers young and old alike about the flu's devastation in a way a simple encyclopedia entry could not.

In *Fever Year*, for example, Brown dedicates a page to one doctor's description of how quickly the influenza ravaged soldiers in Camp Devens: "Two hours after admission they have mahogany spots over the cheekbones, and a few hours later you can begin to see [it] extending...over the face, until it is hard to distinguish the coloured [sic] men from the white . . .It is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible" (21). The page of six panels depicting a patient in stages of this decline helps readers understand visually

what medical providers in 1918 witnessed regularly. It conveys a sense of the helplessness they felt watching patients go through this predictable course. *Fever Year*'s readers might have a sense then, of what one modern doctor meant when he said today's frontline coronavirus health care workers "have witnessed a form of psychological horror that rivals what soldiers experience in a war." He added, "This is serious. This is real. . .It's not worth getting sick to the point where you feel like you're drowning. That's how it feels when I talk to some of my patients. No one should feel that way" (Palazzolo and DeRosa 2020).

It's quite striking how many events and comments reported by Krohn and Brown are similar to those of the current pandemic. For example, in Krohn we see a panel with two nurses talking. The narrative above the two women states, "Hospital workers put themselves at great risk by treating flu patients." One nurse says to the other, "I'm worried about bringing the flu home to my family," as the other replies "I'm worried about myself. I feel terrible" while she coughs (14). On the opposite page, Krohn reports how hospitals during the 1918 pandemic became overwhelmed, mortuaries couldn't keep up with demand, and cities banned public funerals (15), experiences similarly reported by Brown (40-41). As the coronavirus surged in the U.S. during the 2020 holiday season, hospitals and even mortuaries became overwhelmed. In California, funeral homes turned customers away because they couldn't handle any additional business (Weber 2021).

Krohn and Brown also relate the quack remedies, such as gelsemium, onions, camphor balls, goose grease poultices, mustard plasters, and more, that people turned to when traditional medicine failed (Krohn 20-21; Brown 52-55). Those citizens could be forgiven for thinking these folk cures would work when so little of the new flu virus was understood and medicine didn't benefit from the scientific knowledge and technology we enjoy today. Despite this knowledge, in 2020, Trump suggested that disinfectants could potentially treat the coronavirus, triggering a spike in calls to places like New York City's Poison Control Center as desperate citizens tried this measure to save themselves from the disease (Slotkin 2020). The danger of quack remedies is how quickly they are considered to be a solution, as evidenced by one QAnon conspiracy theory site follower who posted of the purported remedy, "Do you realize how freaking cheap and easy it would be to mass produce chlorine dioxide for 100,000's of people?" (Jacobs 2020). Trump also promoted two antimalarial drugs which were never proven

to work against COVID-19 and which could prove to be toxic to a patient when combined with other medications such as azithromycin (Gabler and Keller 2020). Perhaps most tellingly, Trump promoted the theories of Stella Immanuel, a doctor who claimed hydroxychloroquine was an effective COVID-19 treatment and that face masks were unnecessary in preventing the virus's spread; Immanuel also professes that gynecological problems result from people having sex with demons and witches in their dreams, and that the U.S. government was partly run by "reptilians" and other aliens (Sommer 2020).

Dr. Alan Levinovitz of James Madison University explains the allure of unproven remedies such as those propounded by Trump, Immanuel and others. "For a lot of people, Trump represents an alternative to pointy-headed experts in white lab coats who speak a language we can't understand," he said. "When you feel existentially threatened by a deadly virus, and the president says you can take control of your health with a product in your kitchen cabinet, that's incredibly empowering" (Jacobs 2020). At the time of the 1918 flu pandemic, Surgeon General Rupert Blue warned there was "No specific cure for influenza…and that many of the alleged cures and remedies … being recommended by neighbors, nostrum vendors, and others do more harm than good" (Brown 55). As Brown adds in the next panel, "A blunt New York druggist simply called users of outlandish and outrageous cures 'Imbeciles'" (55).

Currently, the world is hopeful about an end or at least some control over the coronavirus pandemic as countries begin administering vaccines like the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Oxford-AstraZeneca formulas. The testing has been fast-tracked, but it has been conducted. During the flu pandemic, Brown tells us about efforts by Tufts Medical School, Tulane University, and the University of Pittsburgh's medical school to create a vaccine against the flu; none seemed to be effective against the virus, leading one doctor at the time to proclaim, "Perhaps, if we learned anything, it is that we are not quite sure what we know about the disease" (73). It seems today's doctors know more about viruses and even coronavirus than the doctors one hundred years ago understood about the influenza. Even so, scientists in this age are not entirely sure what caused the 1918 influenza to finally fade out, nor are they sure what would happen if it were to re-emerge in the population again.

We have both history and our current experience with coronavirus to give us some clues. Brown and Krohn both depict how schools, stores, and entire cities closed as the flu rampaged. Figure 1 depicts the right-hand page of a two-

page spread in *Fever Year*. The two-page spread provides a dramatic depiction of what Philadelphia looked like as the 1918 flu shut it down; the speaker says "the life of the city stopped." Figure 2 represents a detail of a photograph of New York City taken in March 2020.

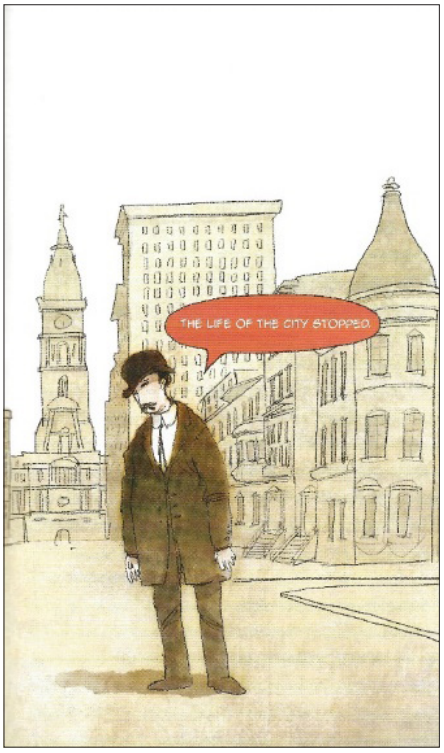

Fig. 1
From Brown's *Fever Year*

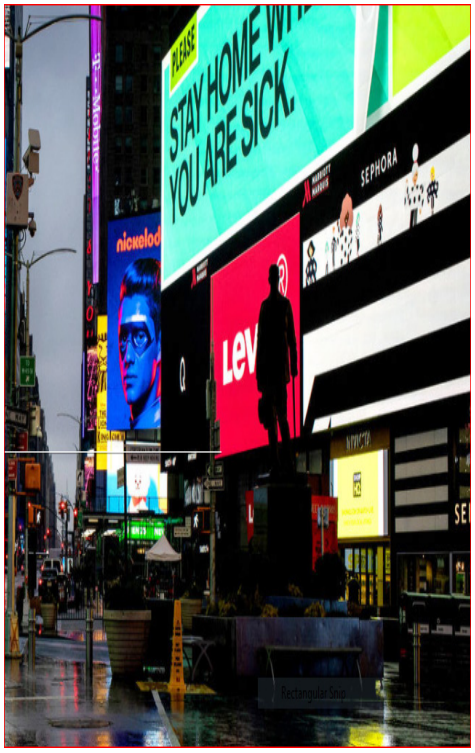

Fig. 2
Detail from the *New York Times'*
"The Great Empty"

Contemporary media such as the *New York Times'* interactive page "The Great Empty" offer photographs of empty cities around the world taken in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. "The Great Empty" provides an array of photographic images that bring to vivid life what Brown illustrates with a limited palette of muted colors. Yet both provide a combination of word and text to remind us of the outbreaks' power to still human activity. Just as most of the world came to an abrupt halt in March 2020, the same phenomenon occurred in 1918 during the flu pandemic. Brown relates how sickness forced people from their jobs, either due to illness or due to a loss of foot traffic. As he explains, "With neither customers nor employees, many businesses and shops shut down" (36). Brown

also reports that "dances and social gatherings were banned, except for church services" (56). U.S. cities and states have made their own decisions as to which businesses and institutions to close, and when, or at what customer capacity they can remain open; nonetheless, just as Brown relates about the 1918 pandemic, currently many small shops and restaurants have closed, having not enough customers to warrant keeping all their employees.

The two pandemic eras constantly reflect commonalities like these. In another instance, both Brown and Krohn describe how cities passed ordinances requiring mask-wearing, a safety measure that was as controversial then as it is today. This photograph of riders attempting to get on a trolley without a mask appeared in the article "Mask Resistance during a Pandemic Isn't New – in 1918, Many Americans Were 'Slackers'" written by J. Alexander Navarro, Assistant Director of the University of Michigan's Center for the History of Medicine and published in *The Conversation* (Navarro 2020). The image itself is taken from the University of Michigan's Center for the History of Medicine and Michigan Publishing's Influenza Archives and is dated October 1918. It was taken in Seattle ("City of Seattle"). As demonstrated below, Krohn's illustrators faithfully reproduced the image to support her narrative.

Fig. 3
From U. Michigan's Influenza Archives, dated October, 1918

Fig. 4
From Krohn's *The 1918 Flu Pandemic*

Navarro writes, "It is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of masks used in 1918. Today we have a growing body of evidence that well-constructed cloth face coverings are an effective tool in slowing the spread of COVID-19. It remains to be seen, however, whether Americans will maintain the widespread use of face masks as our current pandemic continues to unfold." Then, as now, reluctance to wear masks comes with peril. Navarro adds, "Deeply entrenched ideals of individual freedom, the lack of cohesive messaging and leadership on mask-wearing, and pervasive misinformation have proven to be major hindrances thus far, precisely when the crisis demands consensus and widespread compliance. This was certainly the case in many communities during the fall of 1918. That pandemic ultimately killed about 675,000 people in the U.S. Hopefully, history is not in the process of repeating itself today.)[2]

Masks aside, the 1918 flu was devastating. Brown reports that "By the end of September 1918, 757 soldiers [at Camp Devens] had died. The camp ran short of coffins. Without them, the dead were 'all dressed up' and laid out in long double rows in barracks made over into temporary morgues" (27). In the contemporary coronavirus pandemic, meanwhile, news accounts report refrigerated trucks, extra morgue tents and vehicles, and even ice rinks being used to store the victims (McNamara 2020; Goodman 2020). So far, despite Navarro's stated wish, it does seem that this terrible history is repeating itself.

As mentioned earlier in this section, graphic narratives such as these written for school children inform them of major historical events. Given our contemporary moment's battle against the coronavirus, these books can help younger readers understand what is occurring. Recognizing that graphic narratives can help learners comprehend complex issues through their combination of word and image, NPR (National Public Radio) consulted experts and its own editor, author and illustrator Malaka Gharib, to create a comic about the coronavirus (Gharib 2020). Figure 5 is an excerpt from that comic, entitled "Exploring the New Coronavirus: A Comic Just for Kids," which also comes with directions for how to fold it into a zine and with links to read it in Chinese or Spanish.

2 See also the *New York Times* article "The Mask Slackers of 1918" at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html

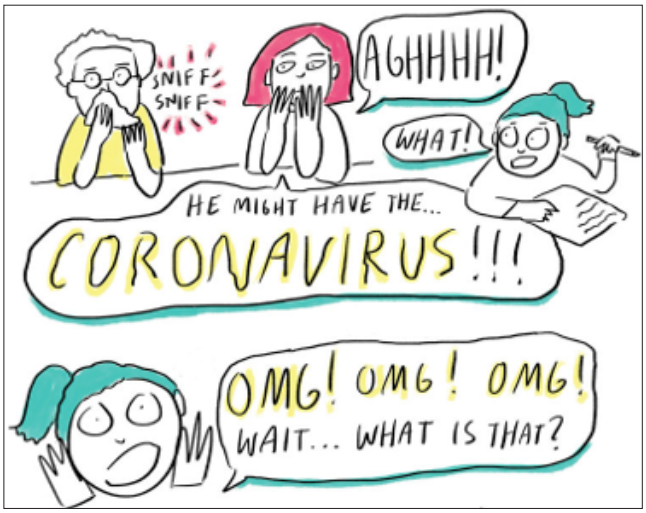

Fig. 5
From Gharib's NPR comic

Moreover, through NPR, Gharib created another comic explaining to kids how they could create their own mini-comic, or zine, to be shared at #quaranzine.[3] Today, as during the earlier epidemic, the impulse to create, to tell a story, to make sense of the drastic events unfolding, persists.

4. Comic Strips as Historical

The *Graphic Medicine* website is a repository of comics used for health education. Not surprisingly, it includes a tab entitled "COVID-19 Comics," and it appears to have been created on March 12, 2020, one day after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic. It has been updated since to remain current and the page has organized collections for visitors to click on according to subtopic, such as "COVID-19 Comics: Educational" or "COVID-19 Comics: By Patients." Readers can glean a great deal of information from these creations; for example, the comic "Death by the Numbers" ranks the world's top 10 deadliest epidemics

3 See: https://www.npr.org/2020/05/28/863068957/how-to-make-a-mini-zine-about-life-during-the-pandemic.

and conflicts over the ages. Co-authors Matthew Noe and Leonard Levin (2020) published a scoping-review study that is posted on the site; they state the study's purpose originally was to provide a comprehensive collection of the use of comics in health education. However, they conclude that, "[W]e've now reached the point where it is becoming increasingly clear the scope of graphic medicine has changed drastically since this scoping review began" (Noe and Levin).

One reason medical experts have greater interest in graphic medicine is because "[t]he value of pictures, illustrations, and pictograms...in patient communication has been well-established since the 1990's [sic]" (Noe and Levin). Since then comics have been used with students from kindergarten through medical school. Noe and Levin cite another article that determined "that course grades were higher for those students who reported engagement with the comics than for those who did not, and the students felt the comics were engaging and useful conversation starters." For this reason, Noe and Levin see opportunities for future research in this area, arguing, "[W]e suggest the inclusion of practicing cartoonists whose expertise is invaluable. Publications detailing the process of creating educational comics, the pedagogy of teaching cartooning in the health sciences, and the explorations of clinical uses of comics are particularly rich areas for exploration."

Meanwhile, repositories such as *Graphic Medicine* and Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum's exhibit *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine* provide us archival collections of comics that have an "obsession with medicine from the 18th century to today" (*Drawing Blood* "About"). As part of the exhibit, the Drawing Blood site hosts three web pages featuring comics from the Spanish flu epidemic. As curator Jared Gardner notes of the collection, "it is at first surprising how relatively few there were during the first months of the disease, beginning in March 1918" ("The Spanish Flu in Comics Strips, 1918"). However, he explains that World War I and its related casualties took the public's primary attention. Only after the war was winding down and people started to realize the flu's deadly toll did it start to appear more widely in the press. Even so, Gardner adds, it's noteworthy that comics of the time did start to reference the flu since "most daily 'funnies' avoided engagement with unpleasant topical affairs" ("The Spanish Flu in Comics Strips, 1918"). This reluctance to address negative issues might explain

why this final panel from a *Krazy Kat* strip shows him happy to have the flu as an excuse to get out of a previous engagement (Figure 6).[4]

Fig. 6. *Krazy Kat* panel from the site *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine*'s "The Spanish Flu in Comic Strips, 1918"

The Drawing Blood site hosts a range of other comic strips from the era, including *Mutt and Jeff*, *"Cap" Stubbs*, *The Gumps* and *Outbursts of Everett True*. It also includes editorial cartoons addressing public lockdowns and mask-wearing. Gardner notes pertinently, "Just as the cartoons of a century ago remind us that we have survived pandemics before and will again, they also remind us, perhaps less optimistically, that resistance to public health measures—whether based in ignorance, arrogance, or fantasies of individual autonomy—has been with us as long as global pandemics" ("The Spanish Flu in Cartoons (Part 2)").

Comic strip artists and cartoonists of today are not as reluctant to include current events, even negative ones, into their art work. The May 18, 2020 *Blondie* cartoon, for example, depicts Blondie and Dagwood discussing his at-home work schedule in front of his flat-screen computer. His list includes time for breakfast, computer games, a nap, and snacks. The October 5, 2020 *Bound and Gagged* stripped shows two dungeon prisoners chained to a wall and one

4 The full sequence is available online via a *Paris Review* article shared March 19, 2020 entitled "Krazy Kat Gets the Spanish Flu." See https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/03/19/krazy-kat-gets-the-spanish-flu/

declares to the other "The upside is we never got the coronavirus." An October 22, 2020 *Baby Blues* comic portrays parents Wanda and Daryl discussing their daughter Zoe's desire to have a sleepover. When Daryl asks how many girls are likely to attend, Wanda replies, "Not sure yet. We're waiting for the lab results."

Since the pandemic began, the daily strips regularly refer to working from home, social isolation, masks, and Zoom meetings. Notably, though, more than 70 artists came together to dedicate their Sunday multipanel strips in homage to frontline workers. On June 7, 2020, comic strip readers could hunt for each of the six symbols hidden in the comics. For example, in that day's *Rhymes with Orange* strip, what appears to be a lamp base on an end table actually is a microscope. Indeed, the idea to hide images such as surgical masks, shopping carts, or steering wheels (to represent health care workers, grocery store employees and transportation drivers) came from *Baby Blues* co-cartoonist Rick Kirkman, who wanted to show gratitude for the workers. The idea spread quickly through the cartooning community. Jason Chatfield, president of the National Cartoonist Society, stated that although comic strip artists have come together in the past for certain causes, a creative effort of this size had not been accomplished before (Kennedy 2020, 6). This unified artistic homage made history, perhaps one that will take its place in repositories like Drawing Blood where future readers, researching social responses to this pandemic, can likewise enjoy the illustrated scavenger hunt.

5. "The Wuhan I Knew" and "I Am Not a Virus"–Comics Against Racism

Experts currently believe that the coronavirus emerged around December 12, 2019, from a seafood market in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a city whose population of 11 million people is larger than many other global urban areas. In the early days of the pandemic, it seemed the U.S. was working with Chinese authorities as evidenced by one Trump Tweet that stated "We are in very close communication with China concerning the virus. . .We have offered China and President Xi any help that is necessary" (Dilanian, et al. 2020). However, as the virus spread and became a recognized pandemic causing widespread illness and mass lockdowns, Trump's tenor changed. He referred to the virus with inflammatory terminology, calling it at different points the "China flu" or, worse, the "kung flu" (Itkowitz 2020). At the time, Asian Americans

worried "the affiliation would stoke fears and result in prejudice against them" (Itkowitz).

They were right to be concerned, as by July, the Pew Research Center reported that 31% of Asian Americans said they had been subjected to slur or jokes about their race since the onset of the pandemic (Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tamir 2020). A story printed by the BBC and reported in May 2020 uncovered worse: that Asian Americans had been "spat on, punched, kicked – and in one case even stabbed" (Cheung, Feng and Deng 2020). The organization Stop AAPI (Asian American/Pacific Islander) Hate notes that in the five months between mid-March and early August 2020, it received more than 2,500 reports of anti-Asian incidents across the U.S. (Park 2021). These figures continue as incidents in San Francisco's Chinatown and other areas note an uptick in other assaults and robberies. After many of these incidents, Asian Americans armed themselves, organized incident databases, formed patrols to prevent acts of vandalism and theft, and spoke out against these attacks.

People who perpetuate racist associations with the disease feel justified in doing so, claiming monikers for COVID-19 like "the Chinese flu" simply correlate it to the site of its emergence, not to any specific people. Frequently, they use the analogous argument that, "Well, it's called the *Spanish* influenza, so why isn't that racist?" The problem is, the 1918 influenza did not originate in Spain. Because Spain was one of the few countries to print news articles about it while other countries were focused on World War I, people came to believe the flu originated there. However, as scholar Salvador Herrera (2020) explains in his informative article "Already Quarantined: Yes, the 'Spanish Flu' Was Racist, Too," studies of the 1918 pandemic indicate that it "probably started in British Army camps in mainland Europe" as early as two years prior to the first outbreak. Alternatively, other sources theorize that "U.S. Army training camps" of early 1918 could be the cause. Herrera notes that given the "volatile dynamics of virus transmission," there's no reason to call the disease the "Spanish" flu. Likewise, he adds, "the infinite permeability and interconnectedness of the world confounds the search for the origins of deisease in the biological sciences, let alone the attribution of a non-human virus to racialized hosts."

Even so, there's a long global history of laying blame for contagions on *someone*. "[X]enophobia, scapegoating, and 'othering' have always been a pervasive consequence of pandemics throughout history," states scholar Claire O'Neill (2020), a history we have yet to learn from. O'Neill adds,

"Societies facing novel pathogens have often engaged in that scapegoating of certain populations, especially when the disease source can be linked, even inaccurately, to a distant place." This behavior, she continues, "as we have seen time and time again, [is] entirely unhelpful in terms of diseasse treatment and eradication." Instead, what's needed is "increased education and understanding of race and ethnicity, and the historical structures that govern it." In this respect, the examples of the following two illustrated publications could help foster the empathy that seems to be needed at this historical moment.

Korean-Swedish graphic novel artist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom shared one-panel images on her Instagram account that depicted acts of racism she and other Asians were experiencing as the pandemic worsened. As PBS explains, the title of her series "I Am Not a Virus" stemmed from the hashtag #IAmNotAVirus started by French Asians who were responding to racist encounters they experienced on public transportation (Garcia 2020). The movement the French Asian and other artists began sparked other artistic responses on social media, namely Instagram,[5] Sjöblom's being one of them. She intends her art to foster a sense of empathy in viewers who otherwise didn't witness the racist encounters, but some of the comments she received were "absolutely horrific," causing her to "clean up the commentary because there was so much racism in it" (Garcia). In the end, though, she prefers to continue to depict the episodes people tell her because "it means something to people that...I illustrate something that is important to them." After all, what Sjöblom is doing is capturing these occurrences for history.

In the U.S., Laura Gao and her family arrived from Wuhan when she was three, moving to a small town in Texas. Most people she encountered knew of Beijing or Shanghai, but few knew of Wuhan—until the outbreak. She is disheartened to know that all most people in the U.S. and elsewhere know of Wuhan is its association with the pandemic. She wanted to depict the city she knew, not the city that has become associated with "disgust and pity" (Juhasz 2020).

5 See, e.g., https://www.kqed.org/arts/13877013/artists-fight-coronavirus-related-racism-on-instagram

Fig. 7. Detail from "The Wuhan I Knew" by Laura Gao
The full comic is available at https://www.lauragao.com/wuhan

The result is "The Wuhan I Knew," Gao's effort to highlight its "beautiful culture, rich history, and strong people" (Juhasz). Panels highlight street food, landmarks, and aspects of Wuhan history, such as its role in the Chinese Revolution in 1911. She released the strip in March 2020, and she was at first nervous at the reception it would receive. However, as NPR reports, the comic was shared widely on Twitter and Gao has heard that her comic has influenced readers and followers to visit Wuhan one day (Juhasz). When visitors do arrive there, though, they shouldn't expect to see the fish market that supposedly was the epicenter of the outbreak; as one Wuhan shopkeeper currently in an office above the market predicts, the entire structure is likely to be torn down. "The name is ruined," he told *New Yorker* reporter Peter Hessler (2020). Soon, it will survive only as a mention in pandemic history. Fortunately, artists like Gao will have captured other Wuhan features, memorialized in electronic comic book form for the ages.

6. The Value of History

Late in 2020, the editors of *Time* magazine reached out to various historians and asked them to choose a pivotal moment from the year that stood out to them. They wanted to find out "what future historians will – or at least should – write about when they study the momentous year...and whether it signals a new chapter or turning point for America and the world" (Waxman 2020). Nukhet Varlik, Associate Professor of History at the University of South Carolina and Rutgers University-Newark, selected March 11, the date the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Varlik writes, "Ironically enough, I was then teaching a course on the history of pandemics...I prepared my students and myself for what was to come. . ." He added, "Premodern plague treatises, written about an unfamiliar and far deadlier disease, taught me that good food, good rest, and good thoughts were critical for recovery. I was lucky to have both historical and contemporary knowledge for guidance. That was more than eight months ago. Since then, I've been reading, writing, and teaching about this pandemic, constantly stressing the importance of historical knowledge for its modern management" (Waxman).

That historical knowledge can be gleaned from multiples sources and archives: Instagram accounts, Twitter threads, museum exhibit collections, magazine archives—and repositories of comic books and graphic novels attempting to record what society experienced as the world slowed down.

We can use those records even now, archives that include cultural productions such as films, books, televisions shows, and comics, to help us grapple with our "new normal." As it turns out, what our doctors and journalists report today has been written about and depicted before, first in the eyewitness accounts recorded during the Spanish flu pandemic and second through texts like Brown's and Kohn's illustrated retellings. These narratives, comics, and other visual depictions allow us a vehicle by which to cope with today's pandemic issues as we start to answer the question "What happens now?" David McCullough remarked that the past is interesting because "things didn't have to turn out the way they did'; they might have gone another way (Heitman 2020, 36). It's up to us to search the archives, listen to the artists, seek guidance for what went wrong, decide what we must do next to get it right.

One of the last panels in Brown's book is a rendering of writer Katherine Ann Porter, who nearly died from the 1918 flu – and whose fiancé did succumb. She says, "[The flu] simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, really" (89). In this last year, our own lives have likewise been split, altered, from the "Before Times" to the "new normal." We have had a year to slow down, perhaps to grieve, to learn new skills and adjust, to come to value social interaction, work, science, and medicine in ways we might not have earlier. Perhaps we took things for granted we henceforth will treasure. Humanity has been through viral scourges before, and even though we're seeing similar events from one hundred years ago occurring today, if we are wise we will heed that history, learn from it, and be our better selves going forward.

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