Serialization, Solipsism, and Swarming:

American Politics and the Graphic Novel in the 1970s

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Fig. 1. Richard Howell, *Portia Prinz of the Glamazons*, vol. 2, no. 4, Eclipse Comics, June 1987, p. 12 (detail). © 1987 Richard Howell / Desperado-Eastern

The tiny details repay close attention in Richard Howell's *Glamazon's Burden*, a long narrative initially serialized between 1977 and 1979 in volume one of Howell's comic *Portia Prinz of the Glamazons*. *Portia Prinz* was a black-and-white independent series loosely based on DC's character Wonder Woman, with much, much more talking; as its tagline of "World's Foremost Pseudo-Intellectual Super-Heroine" promised, issues were filled with literary and philosophical references. The plot of *Glamazon's Burden* looks toward a plebiscite in which the immortal inhabitants of a hidden island decide whether to accept worldly technology into their society. It was advertised in April 1979 as a "graphic novel" (14), and when the second issue of *Portia Prinz* was released in 1977, Howell informed readers that starting in the next issue of *Glamazon's Burden* was "a novel, in comics form, with the usual hundreds of subplots, and a plot too, for a change" ("Artistial" 2).

A novel in comics form— a visual joke alluding to this is discernible in the third chapter of *Glamazon's Burden* in an easily missed tome entitled *Love and Death in the Comic Novel* (Fig. 1). Also visible is a book edition of *Eternals* (1976-78), the Marvel series

written and pencilled by comics creator Jack Kirby. No such collection existed, but this panel moots how a monthly periodical could be repackaged to leverage the prestige associated with hardcover publication. Could this book, too, be a novel in comics form? A comic novel? A graphic novel? These sentiments were swirling around the American comics world at the end of the 1970s, with the future of US comics hotly debated in fanzines, at conventions, and in publishers' offices.[1]

Howell's play on Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) imaginatively inserts long-form comics into a tentpole work of US literary studies, projecting the notion that Fiedler's encoding of the novel as a mark of US distinctiveness could be extended to graphic novels. Fiedler noted the "peculiar and intimate connections" between "the novel and America," their "beginnings coincid[ing] with the beginnings of the modern era and, indeed, help to define it" (xvii). Fiedler saw the early novel and "Jeffersonian democracy" as "the two great inventions of the bourgeois, Protestant mind" (xxvii-xxviii), yet the "dream of the Republic" was haunted by the dark recesses of that mind, the American novel expressing "a profound inner insecurity and guilt" (xxxiv) at the violence accompanying the country's founding.

There are plenty of references to comics in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, typically how US myths and symbols are "profaned" or "burlesqued," or, at the very least, abbreviated by newspaper strips and comic books (142, 187, 268, 324, 333, 549). Yet in 1955 Fiedler wrote of the "pleasure" he took from comic books, criticizing their disparagers for their sweeping dismissals, their failure "to ask the rewarding questions," such as what defines the comics form or what distinguishes its genres and subgenres ("Middle Against" 116-17). *Love and Death in the American Novel* noted a similar lack of discrimination in eighteenth-century critics of the novel:

> Its very name was used in earlier times as a term of deprecation, as if the genre were essentially disreputable. For traditional critics in the eighteenth century, it appeared to be essentially sub-literature and any attempt to distinguish between serious fiction and trash seemed to them as absurd as a similar distinction among comic books would seem now. (5)

Heartening words for a comics fan to read in 1960, invited to picture a future when qualitative differences between comics were fully appreciated and the "comic book" elevated to the status of the novel. "Those who cry out now that . . . *The Adventures of Superman* travest[ies] the novel forget that the novel was long accused of travestying literature" (Fiedler, "Middle Against" 118-19). Give it 200 years and someone really will write *Love and Death in the Comic Novel*.

But what would canon-building and elevated status mean for the demotic politics of the comics form? After all, Fiedler's praise in the mid-1950s was bound up with comics representing "a peculiarly American phenomenon, an unexpected by-product of an attempt, not only to extend literacy universally, but to delegate taste to majority suffrage." Comics are, for Fiedler,

> the end of a long process [in] which the work of art has approached closer and closer to the status of a commodity. [The] comic book is a last descendant of [Samuel Richardson's novel] *Pamela*, the final consequence of letting the tastes (or more precisely, the buying power) of a class unpledged to maintaining the traditional genres determine literary success or failure.

Far from the commodification of culture being antidemocratic, it is a revelation of what a fully "democratized market" for cultural production looks like, though hardly an unalloyed benefit for US politics. For Fiedler, comics register the "dark populist faith

which Senator McCarthy has exploited," the projection of "everything most feared in the self" onto enemies constructed through the media ("Middle Against" 117-18, 123).

In Fiedler's assessment, what anti-comics critics find most offensive "is not the further downgrading of literary standards so much as the fact that the medium, the very notion and shape of a book, is being parodied." As "disposable" matter that "cannot be preserved," comic books refuse "the concept of a library, private or public," and with it the idea of literature worth maintaining for the future ("Middle Against" 118). One doesn't have to agree with Fiedler's position on comics, commodification, and populism to understand that at the end of the 1970s the popular appeal of US comics was not reflected in the health of the mainstream comics industry, which had markedly contracted since midcentury.[2] And "the concept of a library" was not being rejected but embraced: to an unprecedented degree, comics creators reached for the length, completeness, and materiality (book publication) that would invite consumers to read their texts, not as the unending serials characteristic of mainstream comics, but as "self-contained oeuvres and finished products" (Kelleter 7). As Frank Kelleter writes of the legitimization discourses surrounding serialized texts, "To exist as an artwork at all, it must find a place . . . between two book covers" (7), and many comics creators attempted to package their work just so.

The term "graphic novel" – coined by comics fan Richard Kyle in 1964 – requires little introduction for implying the closure that Kelleter identifies. Its usage grew slowly, but by the end of the 1970s it had largely muscled out variants such as visual novel, picture novel, and comic novel. Though book editions of comics were not new, transformations in various industries (trade publishing, mainstream comics, independent and underground comix) led to a short-lived peak in the book publication of long-form comics in 1978, not to mention the serialization of narratives labeled novels

and/or intended to be long, complete works (Williams 59, 95-101). What we have in the latter half of the 1970s is the graphic novel quickening as a concept and a publishing practice. Reviewers, editors, and fans were keen to gird the form by identifying predecessors, pondering what shape future graphic novels might take, and hailing this or that text as the first true graphic novel (Miles 23; Goodwin 40). For writers and artists looking to make long-form comics, a self-consciousness settled in, and such endeavors could no longer be considered sui generis but part of a wider front in comics-making.

Without subscribing to Fiedler's myth-and-symbol criticism or the assumptions baked into his conception of the American self, I am prompted by Howell's wry suggestion of *Love and Death in the Comic Novel* to explore what the development of long-form comics meant for the articulation of democratic possibilities and dread in 1970s America. Scenes of democracy (public hearings, fundraisers, rallies) are noticeable in many of the era's graphic novels; for instance, disgraced former President Dexter Milgate is successfully re-elected in Will Eisner's *Life on Another Planet* (serialized 1978-80), and in Gilbert Shelton's *Wonder Wart-Hog and the Nurds of November* (1980) the character Philbert Desanex wins the presidential election but is thwarted by the Electoral College, allowing an unelected Adolf Hitler to become president vowing to restore American prestige in the world. If some graphic novels proclaimed threats to US democracy, Lee Marrs's *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp* (1973-78) tacked in a different direction, offering a reinvigorated confidence in the ability to achieve progressive goals through the reform of political structures, expressed through expansive formal strategies.

This essay joins existing scholarship on how US fiction in the 1970s responded to a supposed democratic deficit and the subsequent morphing of literary form. For literary critic David Seed, the "complex legacy of the 1960s leads [writers in the 1970s] to

repeatedly adopt stances in opposition to the political establishment," spurring experiments with "conventional forms of representation" (262). Various scholars conceptualize literary change in the decade as a "dismantling of inherited" modes and J. David Hoeveler writes of an incipient postmodernism manifested in "the blurring of distinctions, the mixing of forms, a discomfort with preciseness in signification and representation" (xiv). The graphic novels discussed here did not consciously depart from inherited novelistic modes but often embraced them, and the challenges presented to readers emerge partly from the crunching of gears that took place when esteemed literary forms were deployed through comics. For many graphic novelists, operating in a zone of cultural production near the bottom of broader cultural hierarchies, the desire to find formal corollaries for the tumult of US democracy coexisted with the impulse to win respect – and make a living – by working in the grooves of the novel's most recognizable and well-established genres.[3] For instance, Eisner wanted to follow in the footsteps of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy with *Life on Another Planet*, a blend of SF, espionage, and political thriller whose multiple, interlocking narrative threads were intended to evoke the nineteenth-century realist novel (Hamill 13; Eisner, Interview 19-20).

All these graphic novels were serialized in periodicals and their political possibilities are animated by that publication context. Starting in *The Spirit* magazine in October 1978, serialization allowed later episodes of *Life on Another Planet* to allude to events that occurred during or immediately before publication (e.g. the Jonestown massacre of November 1978, the assassination of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in September 1978).[4] *Life on Another Planet*'s large cast and myriad political events placed unusual demands on its readers, some of whom wrote to *The Spirit* to say they had "lost track of . . . characters and events over the months" because of the "long gaps between

chapters" (McConnell 64) and that the graphic novel was "dragged-out [and] hard to understand" (Matt 3).

The turbulent nature of comics publishing meant serialized graphic novels often failed to be completed. Readers of *Glamazon's Burden* in 1979 were midway through a series of public hearings with high tension in the air: the spokesperson for embracing technology, Lenore deBar, belonged to a cabal determined to introduce industrialization, capitalism, and entrenched social hierarchies to the Glamazons' island. But readers would wait not a few months but many years to discover what happens next. Howell wrote in 1987 that:

> [Issues 2-5 of the original *Portia Prinz* series] were technically profitable. This was at the very start of the alternative press market – and distribution, promotion, etc., for this type of product was… uh, well, nascent also, and not exactly encouraging. . . . [By] the third [1979] installment of the *Portia* novel, *Glamazon's Burden*, publication was suspended indefinitely. (5: 30)[5]

The end of *Glamazon's Burden*, reprinted to a conclusion by Eclipse in 1986-87, thwarted any desire on behalf of readers for a tightly fought democratic tussle: the planned plebiscite never takes place. Since the "technological question" was the result of the cabal's machinations, acting ruler Portia Prinz decrees "the current spate of hearings is now invalid" and "the entire motion" indefinitely postponed (6: 25).

Eisner's *Life on Another Planet* exhibits the democracy fatigue that Seed observed, depicting an all-pervasive malaise in which presidential decrees are gummed up by White House bureaucracy, national interest is ignored due to pressure from corporate donors, Senate hearings deteriorate into stage-managed spectacles, election campaigns are bankrolled by organized crime, and the incumbent candidate is shot and removed from the presidential race.[6] In the late 1970s, trust in US politicians hit a low of 25%. Watergate

was not the only reason for suspicion; it became public knowledge that 300,000 Americans had been illegally wiretapped or had their mail opened by the intelligence services (Patterson 72-73, 89). Political violence was present throughout the 1970s, from the Weather Underground's bombing campaign to the Far Right's murder of five people at an antiracist rally in November 1979 (Porter 66). From the late 1960s onward, these headlines "played into the hands of conservatives old and new" by suggesting the liberal consensus that held sway at mid-century was finished (Schoenwald 221). The New Right disseminated the idea that liberal elites had "disturbed" society's "organic order" by propagating "misguided ideas and policies." Exploiting popular dismay with US politicians, the New Right consistently attacked the state for being too big and too expensive (Himmelstein 14).[7]

Market deregulation and lamenting national disorder were not so far from the minds of the Democrats either. In July 1979 President Jimmy Carter gave his "Crisis of Confidence" speech, urging Americans to turn off "the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. . . . That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility." This speech was part of the broader narcissism discourse of the 1970s, associated with journalist Tom Wolfe's label the "Me Decade." Natasha Zaretsky writes that in the 1970s narcissism was "widely recognized . . . as *the* personality disorder of late twentieth-century America and seen as a symptom of . . . political decline and cultural malaise"; in the second half of the decade, the concept was repeatedly deployed by journalists, academics, and social commentators to diagnose a national "cultural condition" (Zaretsky 185, 214-21). Carter's speech was influenced by Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), an indictment of America's "culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried . . . the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self" (xv). Lasch had

visited the White House in May 1979 to discuss the fractures in US society, but he was ambivalent about Carter's speech, feeling the President was guilty of shifting blame away from America's political leaders (Zaretsky 185, 214-21). Lasch's book pointedly criticized the impoverishment of US democracy, just as sociologist Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1977) noted the growing emphasis on personality, not policies, in US politics (265).

Fig. 2. Howell, *Portia Prinz*, vol. 2, no. 4, p. 26. © 1987 Richard Howell / Desperado-Eastern

The condition of democracy is hardly robust on the Glamazons' island, with power invested in a charismatic, unelected leader; though citizens are scheduled to go to the polls on the technology question, the ultimate decision resides with Portia as regent. Portia tells Sgt. Shrew that "Glamazons can't arrive at workable decisions democratically, because each person is a fringe group – they're each dedicated to strident individualism!!" Shrew insists the community should decide for itself by "votin,'" but Portia wants to avoid the "dissatisfaction" of "imposing the decision of a majority onto the losing minority" and Shrew gives up the argument, exhausted by Portia's prolixity and ego: Portia claims to be "uniquely qualified to guide a society of individualists – embodying individual perfection as I undeniably do" (4: 2). Howell's visual devices regularly draw attention to Portia's self-obsession, such as the panel that Portia shares with her reflection (Fig. 2). The latter is part of a monologue in which Portia is wracked by fraught self-questioning, a feature of both midcentury romance comics and Marvel's 1960s superheroes (Hatfield 22). Her monologue culminates in the final page of the *Glamazon's Burden* graphic novel published

in the 1970s, a full-page spread centred on Portia whose last words are "I am Portia Prinz!!" (4: 29).

Fig. 3. Howell, *Portia Prinz*, vol. 2, no. 4, p. 17. © 1987 Richard Howell / Desperado-Eastern

The polity depicted in *Glamazon's Burden*, then, is not too far from a culture of narcissism, also visualized through the dinner party scene that marks Portia's inauguration. This episode riffs upon Hal Foster's newspaper comic *Prince Valiant* (subtitled "in the Days of King Arthur"), which was set in a temporally cloudy Middle Ages; as a scroll-shaped caption indicates, the dinner party scene shows "Portia Prinz in the days when she was Queen!" (4: 14). Like Foster's strip, Howell dispenses with speech balloons, instead relaying dialogue in captions. Panels showing the diners are interspersed with larger ones showing the pro-technology conspirators rendered in un-inked pencils, and the use of speech balloons in these un-inked panels foregrounds their absence from the dinner party scene (Fig. 3). Placing speech in captions implies that conversation – that essential alloy of the public sphere – has been arrested. Reading dialogue in this manner feels static, at a remove from the events depicted, evoking cartoonist and critic Robert C. Harvey's advocacy for speech balloons on the grounds "the simultaneity and proximity of words and pictures . . . bring the characters uniquely to life for me" (39). No speech balloons gives the appearance of macerated conversation: we see no development of thought, just the enunciation of individual positions. Indeed, the lack of "Hegelian-thesis-antithesis-synthesis" (4: 17) in Glamazon society is explicitly remarked upon, together with comments such as "so ends another fascinatingly

inconclusive political discussion" and "even the ones with the same position couldn't agree on why" (4: 19).

Despite Americans damning their fellow citizens for fragmentation, self-absorption, and solipsism, many historians now stress the political engagement characterizing the 1970s, from the consolidation of the New Right to the "rights revolution" that grew out of 1960s protest movements. Often inspired by African American civil rights, movements for the rights of women, gay Americans, disabled Americans, and Native Americans achieved substantial (though contested) victories in terms of laws, policies, and attitudes. Other forms of progressive politics saw a swell of participation, notably environmentalism and antinuclear protest (Berger; Berkowitz 5-6; Foley; Patterson 10). As historian Edward D. Berkowitz avers, "it was an era not of narcissism but of activism, as much the 'We Decade' as the 'Me Decade.'" (177)

One of the longest graphic novels of the 1970s, Marrs's *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp* substantially engages with grassroots activism and the rights revolution. The first issue of *Pudge, Girl Blimp* was released by underground publisher Last Gasp Eco-Funnies in 1973, after which the independent comics publisher Star*Reach Productions reprinted issue 1 in 1974, published issue 2 in 1975 and issue 3 in 1977, and then printed a revised issue 1 in 1978. Marrs is a central figure in underground comix, part of the collective that produced *Wimmen's Comix* and a versatile writer and artist whose work includes SF, horror, and satire. During serialization Marrs hoped that *Pudge, Girl Blimp* would be collected in a single volume, drawing herself dreaming of a *Pudge* hardcover in the revised issue 1. St. Martin's Press expressed interest in a book edition but balked at the explicit sex and nudity (Marrs, Interview 62-66) and Marrs's aspiration was only realized in 2016 when she self-published a softcover of the whole story. The graphic novel, a kaleidoscope of life in the Bay Area, begins with the

teenage Pudge arriving in San Francisco desirous of losing her virginity. She lives in a commune, attends a self-help group, and tries various jobs. Although she does sleep with a man called Skeets and ultimately enjoys a tremendous orgasm, it is heavily hinted Pudge would be happier with her friend Jane, with whom Pudge has her first meaningful sexual experience.

The bulging, decentered composition of panels in *Pudge, Girl Blimp* fit Seed's observations on formal experimentation as a response to 1970s disillusionment, but with a different political valence. Comics scholar Margaret Galvan has connected form and politics in Marrs's work by examining the graphic novel's engagement with the women's movement, especially the consciousness-raising group that Pudge joins. On two occasions, Marrs organizes panels in a spiral, a "troubling of traditional panel layout" that opens out space for the women's experiences: the spiral design challenges conventions of comics enunciation, just as the participants "reconsider" their place in society and the "group discussions" instigate structural change in gender relations (Galvan 208-11). Nowhere is this more apparent than where the protagonist is concerned, Pudge's initial preoccupation with losing her virginity redirected toward personal growth and self-respect: "From [Pudge's] continuing explorations in feminism, she has gained a sense of self-worth and bodily respect for herself and her [sexual] partner" (211).

Marrs's formal play speaks to many political contexts in 1970s San Francisco, and as well as participating in women's groups, Pudge goes on a gay solidarity march and campaigns to pass Proposition T. The creation of gay neighborhoods such as the Castro was significant for subsequent political reform, specifically how city supervisors were elected. As Josh Sides records in *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (2009), since 1972 "neighborhood associations throughout the city had advocated the introduction of district elections." This led to the passing of Proposition T

in November 1976, which meant elected supervisors directly represented specific districts. Drawing support from the Castro, the openly gay candidate Harvey Milk was voted onto the Board of Supervisors in November 1977 (Sides 111). The political significance of Proposition T went beyond gay rights, and San Francisco's Board of Supervisors grew more diverse in other ways too, reflected in the eclectic mix of groups that campaigned for it, a "citywide alliance" including "minority organizations, political clubs, labor unions, civic associations, gay groups, and other collectives from virtually every neighborhood" (Contreras 230-31).

A backlash – legislative and physical – was unleashed against San Francisco's gay communities. Robert Hillsborough was murdered on 22 June 1977, the nineteenth gay man killed in 19 months because of his sexuality, and lesbians came under increasing physical assault and police harassment. Milk and Mayor George Moscone were shot and killed by city supervisor Dan White in November 1978, and while White's motivations were only partially about gay politics, his light sentence smacked of tolerance for a murderous hate crime, and thousands rioted in protest (Sides 152-65). Completed before the assassination of Milk and Moscone, *Pudge, Girl Blimp* keeps faith with the possibilities of democracy and constructs the campaign to pass Proposition T as a lively, participatory process through which local governance structures can be changed and the quality of political representation expanded.

Fig. 4. Lee Marrs, *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp*, no. 2, Star*Reach Productions, 1975, p. 46 (detail). © 1975 Lee Marrs

Although New York's Stonewall Riots in July 1969 represented the symbolic beginning of militant activism, San Francisco was already the organizational hub of the

gay rights movement (Sides 83-84). At the gay solidarity march in the second issue of *Pudge, Girl Blimp* an accident involving a dog sees the police attack the marchers. A melee breaks out and the chaos is captured in a panel (Fig. 4) where scale and perspective are in flux and the eye is free to rove around the pulsing scene. The lack of speech balloons or strict panelization (elements are clustered together but not separated by blank space, let alone frames) contributes to the confusion, forcing the reader to work hard to isolate meaningful chunks. The episode underlines the continuities between gay rights and older social justice movements, two of the marchers having protested for women's suffrage in 1917. Despite their age, one of them uses her "Gay is Gorgeous" sign as a club to beat a police officer, and the other turns a freshly cooked pie into a projectile.

This is an example of a "swarming" panel, a term used by comics historian Thierry Smolderen and his analysis of the "cacophonous" 1890s newspaper strips produced by Richard F. Outcault. These large single panels depicting life in New York's slums were packed with incident and "offer a landscape from which the reader cannot infer any distinct tone or overall message" (Smolderen 107). Extending Smolderen's observations, Henry Jenkins writes that each of Outcault's panels is a "decentered composition with many things occurring at the same time", encouraging "readers to scan and search the image, taking in information gradually" (46). Swarming panels are an excellent opportunity for the "chicken fat gags" associated with the *Mad* comic of the 1950s, "throwaway gags scattered across the image" (H. Jenkins 56).

Marrs often uses swarming panels to portray street scenes or large gatherings, like the Proposition T campaign office or the fundraising event in Figure 5. Skeets's description of the campaign suggests the political implications of swarming panels: "We've gotten together a coalition of ecologists, Black Panthers, Asians, Hell's Angels, Radical Chic, VFW types" (3: 12). Swarming panels are a way for Marrs to juxtapose the

disparate members and affiliations of progressive movements; never cohering into a single, seamless journey across the surface of the page, readers encounter a constellation of components whose relation to each other is only contingently secured for the duration of the panel. Nonetheless, the copresence of elements speaks to the realization of short-term goals in the service of multiple constituencies . . . rather like Proposition T itself.

Fig. 5. Lee Marrs, *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp*, no. 3, 1977, p. 14 (panel). © 1977 Lee Marrs

The fundraiser for radical causes became a lightning rod for mockery in the wake of Tom Wolfe's essay "These Radical Chic Evenings" (1970), which documented a fundraiser held for the Black Panthers in New York. While the fundraiser in *Pudge, Girl Blimp* unfolds on the other side of the country, in San Francisco's affluent Nob Hill neighborhood, coincidentally – or not – the partygoers gaze across the bay to Oakland, where the Black Panther Party was founded. At the Proposition T fundraiser, attendees horse-trade and boast of decadent sexual behavior as an ancient leftist recollects debating Marxist theory with Trotsky. Though *Pudge, Girl Blimp* shares the political orientation of many radical movements, the graphic novel parodies the hypocrisy and superficiality of leftists and liberals, and one attendee at the fundraiser declares, "It was so much easier when the militants wore those costumes.. so colorful and simple. Now, you can't tell one… uh… dissident from another" (3: 14). This event does not share the diversity of Marrs's swarming panels showing workplaces, streets, and countercultural spaces: despite differences of gender, politics, and age, the partygoers are largely white and affluent. Furthermore, the high-rise location implies these progressives are out of

touch, Skeets observing it "sure is a different city from here" (3: 14) amidst ostentatious wealth in the form of fashionable furnishings and the sunken TV lounge.

Fig. 6. Marrs, *Pudge, Girl Blimp*, no. 3, detail from back cover. © 1977 Lee Marrs

A poster urging vote "Yes on Proposition 'T'" features on the back of this issue's wraparound cover (Fig. 6), but the front centers on Pudge exclaiming she is finally going to lose her virginity. In other words, as important as the activism is, it is literally in the background of the protagonist's quest for sexual experience. Despite the centrality of Proposition T to the third issue, the actual announcement of its success is low-key; the most important occasion on results night is that Pudge and Skeets sleep together, not for the first time, but Pudge's orgasm is more satisfying than before. The final chapters see Pudge waiting for Skeets to call (he doesn't) and narrowly escaping death, which triggers a view of her future as open to myriad possibilities. Minimizing the significance of the political contest, has the Me narrative displaced the We narrative? Was Yes on T only there to bring Pudge closer to Skeets and advance her search for a meaningful orgasm?

This is where the formal capaciousness of the swarming panels is crucial. One not only reads *Pudge, Girl Blimp* for its plot but also for those rich tableaux, crammed with detail. With swarming panels, two modes of reading "coexist within the same work – offering a moment of digression or contemplation amid an experience otherwise dominated by the plot's advance" (H. Jenkins 56). Swarming panels representing marches, riots, campaign offices, and fundraisers push the reader toward Pudge's maturation, but the details compel one to stop and contemplate the chicken fat. We saw above how Marrs's innovative layouts opened spaces for women's experience and that "feminism nuances Pudge's trajectory and sexuality" (Galvan 211). Significantly, Galvan

commends Marrs's depiction of a self-help group for "strongly promot[ing] difference, especially along racial lines. . . . Marrs embraces heterogeneity rather than enforcing a sisterhood of sameness" (207). Swarming panels in *Pudge, Girl Blimp* withhold the sense that divergent positions can or will coalesce into a coherent whole, but they hold our attention nonetheless through scale and spectacle. Their eclecticism suggests a rejuvenation of US politics, a broadening of the variety of people in the panel, but Marrs attends to the fact that certain spaces of progressive politics (such as the fundraiser) permit inclusion on highly qualified terms.

With *Life on Another Planet* and *Pudge, Girl Blimp* the serial form allowed comics creators to incorporate unfolding political events into their graphic novels after publication began. This capaciousness could be called democratic: let the long-form comic represent all before it! But late 1970s reading habits had not yet acclimatized to all-encompassing serialized narratives, attested by the frustrated readers of *Life on Another Planet*, and the alternative comics market did not possess the stability and capitalization to ensure that *Glamazon's Burden* would be published to completion. In a decade when public commentators frequently proclaimed that US society was riven by centrifugal forces, the swarming panels in *Pudge, Girl Blimp* are a formal expression of the difficulty of finding consensus, but as the Yes on T campaign underlined, change was possible, and the graphic novel form provided a laboratory for stylistic experiments engaging with this moment in US political history.

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Notes

[1] The term "comics world" refers to the stakeholders involved in making, distributing, selling, and reading comics, stressing that the meaning and status of a comic result from multiple cultural, legal, social, and economic factors, in addition to the creative personnel who produce the text (see Beaty; Woo and Stoll).

[2] For a critique of Fiedler, see Pease 155-98, who specifically addresses comics on 185-86.

[3] Well established, that is, if one accepts that the novel is a commodity form emerging from early modern Europe, taking decisive shape in the eighteenth century. This was the definition regnant in the Anglophone academy in the 1960s and 1970s, not least as emblematized in *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

[4] Industry practice is to put later dates on covers to extend an issue's potential shelf life. In this article I use cover dates, though issues were available to buy earlier than those suggest.

[5] Regarding dual-number in-text citations, the first number indicates the issue, the second refers to the page/s. Such citations to *Portia Prinz of the Glamazons* all come from the second volume.

[6] A few scholars have examined how US superhero comics responded to the political disaffection of the 1970s; see Goodrum 177-215; Wright.

[7] At least as early as 1975, the term "New Right" described the conservative coalition that included business interests and evangelical Christian groups (P. Jenkins 94).