

# ■ The Plastic Seriality of Atomic Bomb Manga: Art, Biopolitics, and *Barefoot Gen*

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## Abstract

Keiji Nakazawa's atomic bomb manga, *Barefoot Gen*, a ten-volume series, published between 1972 and 1985, is lauded by Hillary Chute as a documentary comic which registers Nakazawa's conscientious efforts to take "the risk of representation" to "intervene against a culture of invisibility." Thomas LaMarre, in his study of *Barefoot Gen*, focuses on Nakazawa's dynamic deployment of the "plastic line" to articulate a politics of resistance. Drawing upon Chute's and LaMarre's observations, I propose to read Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* as a documentary comic that not only documents or critiques history, but also capitalizes on the manga's proclivity for repetition, a formal device inherent to and inseparable from the serial nature of manga as a cultural medium, to register the atomic bomb survivors' everyday efforts of survival as well as to give expression to the cluster of bewildering and disorganized sensations assaulting their meaning-making schemes, rendering them both victims and witnesses to a traumatic experience whose affective forces they can neither understand nor escape. Moreover, Nakazawa, as a *shōnen* manga artist, while highlighting the horror and the spectacle of the atomic bombing, also insists on using the ethical as a counter discourse to the biopolitical, as he articulates and prioritizes the discourse of the affiliative bonding among the victims and the discourse of human dignity. *Barefoot Gen*, in this sense, projects a naïve but persuasive solution or response to a series of complex social problems that are both political and historical in nature, but it does so by drawing attention to

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its serial form on the one hand and its media specificity—its serial and iconic capacities and its interweaving of plastic and structural lines—on the other.

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## The Plastic Seriality of Atomic Bomb Manga: Art, Politics, and *Barefoot Gen*

As she traces the emergence of documentary comics after World War II in *Disaster Drawn*, Hillary Chute pairs Nakazawa Keiji's *I Saw It* with Art Spiegelman's "Maus"<sup>1</sup> to highlight the formal innovations initiated by these two artists at around the same time. It is no historical coincidence, Chute claims, that "[i]n 1972, with their germinal, respective early works *I Saw It* (a stand-alone comic book) and 'Maus' (a three-page comic book story), these artists invented nonfiction comics afresh, responding to a world gripped by the Vietnam War and saturated with its constant stream of televisual images" (6). What deserves further attention, she points out, is the fact that both artists use the media specificity of comics to bear witness to the trauma of war as well as to respond to the repetition of warfare on the global stage. Furthermore, Chute also suggests that the emergence of documentary comics such as Nakazawa's *I Saw It* and Spiegelman's "Maus" in 1972 needs to be taken both as these two artists' affective response to the trauma of World War II and that of the Vietnam War, and as their conscientious efforts to "intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking what I think of as the risk of representation" (5).

Chute notices in the emergence of documentary comics in the 70s and in the genre's continued popularity today the issue of form taking the center stage, as the juxtaposition of words and images in comics extends the generic reach of the documentary to call into question "what it means to document, to archive, to inscribe" (5). What Chute does not say, however, is that both Nakazawa and Spiegelman went on to write, or to draw, sequels to their original 1972 comics. Nakazawa went on to write a ten-volume manga series, *Barefoot Gen*, that ran in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* from 1973 to 1987; these were so popular that the first three volumes have twice been adapted into feature-length animated films. Similarly, Spiegelman developed his 1972 three-page "Maus" into a two-volume series, *Maus, Vol. 1: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus, Vol. 2: A Survivor's Tale: Here My Troubles Began*.

In her study of Nakazawa's atomic bomb manga, Chute lumps together *I Saw It*, an autobiographical graphic memoir published in 1972, and the ten-volume manga series, *Barefoot Gen*, a spin-off of *I Saw It*. When Chute identifies Nakazawa's proclivity for the kind of repetition that she finds somewhat "draining" (141), she is mainly referring to the ten-volume *Barefoot Gen*, rather than the one-volume

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<sup>1</sup> *Maus* first appeared as a three-page comic strip in an underground anthology before it was expanded and then published as a full-length graphic novel. Here Chute is referring to the three-page comic strip "Maus."

*I Saw It*. Chute's tendency to conflate the graphic memoir, *I Saw It*, with the manga series, *Barefoot Gen*, is understandable, given Nakazawa's own insistence that *I Saw It* and *Barefoot Gen* are both semi-autobiographical, recording events that "really happened to [him] or to other people in Hiroshima" as he puts it in "A Note from the Author" that appears in the first volume. However, I believe there is a critical difference between *I Saw It* and *Barefoot Gen* that needs to be highlighted, lest we overlook one of the crucial media specificities of the Japanese manga, namely its seriality.

Elsewhere, Thomas LaMarre, in his study of *Barefoot Gen*, also notes the manga series' penchant for repetitiveness. LaMarre, however, chooses not to dwell on its repetitive use of formulaic plots, stock characters, recurrent motifs, stereotypes, and caricatures. Instead, he believes that despite its repetitiveness, Nakazawa's manga articulates "a politics in which vitality and resilience do not appear to reside outside historical violence but seem to emerge with it" (262); that is, this vitality, activated through the use of the comics as a medium, emerges at the juncture between the explosive forces of the A-bomb to melt and de-form and the equally explosive forces of the victims to survive the ordeal—to form and transform their collective lives.

Whereas LaMarre locates the vital and resilient politics that the manga espouses in its extensive use of such formal features as "plastic lines," I propose to read, in extending LaMarre's Deleuzian reading, the manga's proclivity for repetition as a formal device that is not only inherent to and inseparable from the serial nature of manga as a cultural medium, but also resonant with the force of plasticity and the orientation towards movement that LaMarre says manga activates. I propose to call this kind of serialized repetition found in the manga series "serial plasticity," which, I argue, helps to sustain the manga's compulsion towards flexibility and fluidity, while promising a possibility of the return to order, resolution, and creativity. In the case of *Barefoot Gen*, Nakazawa takes advantage of the serial repetitiveness or plasticity of manga not only to document the atomic bomb survivors' everyday efforts of survival, as the victims were routinely ignored by the government and shunned by post-war Japanese society, but also to give expression to the cluster of bewildering and disorganized sensations assaulting their meaning-making schemes, rendering them both victims and witnesses to a traumatic experience whose affective forces they can neither understand nor escape. Moreover, in repeatedly presenting, in cartoonish figures, tales of survival, Nakazawa manages to foreground the seemingly superfluous but spiritually enabling force of art and literature both to heal and to expose, to entertain and to criticize. The reiteration of tales of pain and struggle enables Nakazawa to register and articulate his own ambivalent impulse to both depict the atomizing effects of the atomic bomb and

contravene against this effect: Nakazawa is not content with merely representing and repeatedly enacting the horror and the spectacle of pain, but insists on experimenting with one infrequently discussed medium specificity of the manga, the plasticity of its seriality, from which *Barefoot Gen* also draws its “vitality and resilience.”

While the multitude of loosely connected episodes of pain assembled by Nakazawa reflects his desire to document a comprehensive picture of a society ruined by the bomb, its blatant repetitiveness also resonates with and feeds into his equally undisguised insistence on the didactic; that is, he draws, again and again, about the aftermath of Hiroshima bombing to drive home a straight-forward message that not only is the economic poverty and moral degradation experienced by the victims after the war the dire consequence of aggressive militant ideologies, but also the idea that war, poverty, and discrimination can only be eliminated through a turn towards the ethical or, more specifically, towards a discourse of human value and dignity. *Barefoot Gen*, in this sense, projects a naïve but persuasive solution or response to a series of complex social problems that are both political and historical in nature, but it does so by capitalizing on and by drawing attention to its serial form on the one hand and its media specificity—its serial and iconic capacities—on the other.

### Serial Plasticity of Manga

The repetitiveness of *Barefoot Gen* needs to be understood in terms of its culturally distinctive formal specificities—its being not just a manga but an atomic bomb manga. Manga, as a form and medium of expression, is a Japanese invention. The word “manga,” comprises two different characters, *man* and *ga*. As the first character, *man*, can be used both as a verb or as an adjective, thereby denoting either “to proliferate” or “rambling, loose, idle” (Power 10), it is unsurprising that manga has a style that is digressive and repetitive. Manga’s predilection for both digression and repetition raises interesting questions about whether sequentiality and linearity, taken by both Scott McCloud and Will Eisner as the most distinctive structural principle of comics, need to be modified and supplemented by a structuring logic that allows for both sequentiality and seriality, or structural regularity and formal plasticity. Both American comics and Japanese manga make extensive use of serialized storytelling to develop their plots along a migratory trajectory that takes constant detours through derivative and spin-off episodes, whereby the explicit narrative content becomes constantly modified. In this way differences and occasionally subversive content can unexpectedly be brought to

light. The contrapuntal co-presence of thematic continuity and formal discontinuity is, as Shane Denson observes, “at the very heart of serials” (“Logic” 65). Meanwhile, seriality generates a self-reflexivity, Denson claims, through its deployment of visual spectacle, producing in the audience affective responses that are the prelude to the reshaping of identity and the re-cognition of the narrative world.

What then is so specific about the visual spectacle of serialized comics? In his study of serial television, Denson observes that the very seriality of television provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of body spectacle, which can be taken as

a showcasing of the image that involves the viewer by activating a sense of one’s own corporeal fragility—thus staging a deeply existential demonstration of physical vulnerability that culminates, and momentarily negates, all the narrative investment and development of character that has led up to this point. . . . The image of the exploded face retains a visual and affective singularity, an excess over and above the storyline in which it’s embedded. . . . (“Serial Bodies”)

In other words, poignant moments that showcase body spectacle in serialized television—bodies in pain, bodies stabbed, faces cut, arms blown off, skin scraped away—generate affective forces that “exceed” the storyline in which these images are framed. The repetition of such moments that showcase spectacles of bodies in pain, Denson argues, moves the reader to react in a way that is visceral and intuitive, as they evoke “the viewer’s own delicate corporeality.” Even though Denson’s focus is on serialized television, his central argument extends equally well to the repetitive exhibition of bodies in pain that we bear secondary witness to while reading serialized comics: it is only after the audience’s emotions are aroused in an instinctual manner that they will be ready to reflect on the socio-political issues involved in making possible these scenes of horror. Comics narrative, structured as it is around sequentially placed panels and frames that resonate with and speak to panels across the pages and even chapters, requires the adoption of a reading practice that is dynamic, rather than linear, so that comics narrative’s capacity to communicate on several registers simultaneously—at once cognitive, aesthetic, affective, and political—is activated through each repetition of such scenes of pain and violence.

Similarly, *Barefoot Gen*, by saturating its pages with images of bodies in pain, also carries an excessive affective force that compels readers to confront their own physical vulnerability, a recognition readers otherwise eschew. This eschewed vulnerability, ironically, involves a corporeal malleability that is a distinctive feature of the *shōnen* manga;<sup>2</sup> that is, with its genre-driven deployment of defiant and

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<sup>2</sup> According to Craig Norris, *shōnen* manga, one of the four types of manga that have thrived in post-WWII Japan, distinguishes itself for its extensive deployment of young male characters and “action-based plots” to target young boys under the age of eighteen as its intended readers (239).

resilient boy characters whose bodies are repeatedly wounded and then healed, it reflects or registers a distinctive human desire to defy the laws of physics and transcend the structural limitations of our bodies so that we can literally leap up into mid-air, as if flying, if excited, and pull ourselves back together after being crushed flat or blown to pieces. It is this malleability or plasticity that finds its embodiment in the *shōnen* manga, articulating the unconscious human desire for corporeal abilities that defy physics.

The liquefying effect of the A-bomb on human bodies, horrifying as it is, works both with and against the very logic of manga, especially the *shōnen* manga that targets young boys. Manga, as I explained above, is by definition a form of storytelling that digresses, rambles, spills over, and constantly repeats itself. Moreover, as Thomas LaMarre observes in his study, manga thrives on a productive tension within its formal composition between the structural lines and the plastic lines. Structural lines, LaMarre explains, are those rigid panels and frames that regulate and delimit the actions and movements of characters; they give the comics a structural order. In contrast, plastic lines are composed of those “amoeba-like” lines, apparent at moments when the characters kick out their limbs in an angle perpendicular to their bodies, when they jump into mid-air, as if defying gravity, or when they are crushed flat but then bounce back unharmed, with supernatural, cartoon-like plasticity. LaMarre asserts that the interweaving of the structural lines and the plastic lines in the *shōnen* manga comprises its main attraction, as it caters to and visualizes the human hunger for a plasticity that is both spiritual and corporeal. However, at the same time, manga also sets limits to such plasticity by pulling the plot and the actions back within the realm of gravity; that is, to the pull of structural lines.

As in other manga, these two forces come into constant collision in *Barefoot Gen*, creating a tension that is operative in propelling the plot forward. However, given that in *Barefoot Gen* comics as a medium is used to lay bare the power of the atomic bomb to melt the solid and to dissolve the structural, LaMarre thus claims that Nakazawa’s manga serial reveals, in a spectacular manner, the horrifying consequence of the plastic line becoming the sole structural principle in organizing the human imagination and social order (262). That is to say, despite the *shōnen* manga’s valorization of plastic lines over structural lines, the A-bomb exposes the limits of the logic of plasticity, as the melted, unskinned, crushed, and burned bodies cannot be re-congealed, re-formed, re-habilitated, and re-born. Despite the total plasticity and messy deformation caused by the dropping of the atomic bomb, the rectilinear frames of the A-bomb manga remain to hold the panels together, thereby giving the seemingly chaotic scenes with buildings collapsing and people burning a sense of order and structure, though a structure that

resists rational comprehension.

However, while LaMarre focuses on the tension generated by the interaction of the plastic and structural lines, a far greater tension exists between *Barefoot Gen's* words and images, speech balloons and authorial comments, drawn both in plastic and structural lines. For example, towards the end of volume one, Gen's mother, in the midst of the ruins of the city of Hiroshima, gives birth to a baby daughter. Such a scene signifies the remarkable triumph of life over death. It is remarkable in the sense that, even though volume one ends with a series of scenes of apocalypse, culminating in the deaths of Gen's father, elder sister, and younger brother, it also ends with a scene of birth, as Gen's mother holds her newborn daughter up above her head. The final panel of this volume is an image that is divided into two halves: the upper half shows the fire smoking in the unruly form of clawing hands, as if reaching down to grasp and tear at its victims, and the bottom half shows the dark contours of a newborn baby held up by two hands coming from somewhere outside of the panel. Is the baby going to become another victim of the fire that is consuming Hiroshima, or is it a symbol of life, rebirth, and hope? Is Gen's mother holding her daughter up to make her a witness of inexpressible loss? The relation between the plastic but destructive force of fire and the equally plastic but productive force of human life remains ambiguous. This ambiguity, however, is counteracted by Gen's mother's unambiguous words, "when you grow up, you must never, never let this happen again" (284). These words, when spoken by a mother who has just lost three of her beloved family members but gained a new daughter, deliver a painful lesson about the miracle of survival that exceeds both life and death. To survive, in this final scene, is an ethical imperative that is reiterated throughout the ten volumes. The art of survival, its on-goingness and inconclusiveness, is what Nakazawa tries to figure and configure, via his art, in his ten-volume manga.

Whereas *shōnen* manga aspires to and enacts a logic of plasticity in its deployment of stock figures and action lines, the liquefying force of the A-bomb nevertheless introduces into *Barefoot Gen* a horror that exceeds what even the *shōnen* manga can contain. In place of this horrifying plasticity, *Barefoot Gen* stretches out and spills over into a different kind of plasticity; namely, seriality, which allows the author to re-invoke episodes of similar plots, re-cycle the same type of characters, and re-visit the same places, only to unfold a new and unexpected line of development from their seeming similarity, thereby connecting what has happened to that which still remains unseen and unknown, especially the remnant of hope lingering in the midst of ruins. By so doing, *Barefoot Gen* underscores the critical role that time plays in unfolding the tension between the liquefying force of the A-bomb and the equally dehumanizing force of human



actions. Everything happens more than once; the unimaginable disaster, as well, was repeated three days later in Nagasaki. War is repeated; deaths and births are repeated. When it happens the second time, however, it carries a symbolic significance that exceeds its first occurrence. In Gen's case, in the gap introduced by the repeated occurrence of seemingly similar events, hope is born and life, as well, can be born and borne.

Repetition of all kinds—repetition of theme, character, and action—abounds in *Barefoot Gen*. With his sister killed by the bomb, Gen runs into, in volume two, the badly disfigured Natsue, who reminds him of his deceased sister; also in volume two, while searching for food in the countryside, Gen bonds with a boy, Ryuta, orphaned by the bomb, who looks exactly like Gen's deceased younger brother. In volume three, as Gen is hired to work as a care-taker for Seiji, an artist badly burned by the bomb, whose body is rotting with wounds covered with maggots, he restores Seiji's will to live and even encourages him to resume painting. Impressed by Seiji's painting skills, Gen asks Seiji to teach him to paint. However, Seiji dies of radiation sickness before he has a chance to teach Gen the basics of painting. In volume nine, Gen encounters another painter, Seiga Amano, who is also suffering from radiation sickness and is frustrated by the uselessness of art in post-war Japan. Trying to continue in the older tradition of the fine arts, he cannot even make ends meet. The two of them develop a mentor/mentee relationship that is akin to that between Gen and Seiji, except that Seiga actually teaches Gen the basics of painting, thereby initiating Gen into the world of art. In a way, Seiji, Seiga, and Gen can be seen as three artists folded into one. Seiji and Seiga may lose their will to paint, but Gen, their disciple, nevertheless has learned from them to use his brush to document the physical pain suffered by A-bomb victims, and he has also learned from Seiga that art has a power that "has no borders" (9: 134) and can be used as a medium to bear witness to the horrors of war. This tendency to tell the stories all over again with scant narrative changes, while introducing characters who are both similar and different, as Umberto Eco discusses it, constitutes a form of episodic and iterative narration that eventually becomes one of the defining features of not only the superhero narrative that is the focus of Eco's study, but also many other comic stories (19). In *Barefoot Gen* as well, its seriality is also one of its defining features.

### **Mediality and Seriality in Documentary Manga**

*Barefoot Gen* claims to document the aftermath of the atomic bomb in Japan, but the very medium used to document this disaster is comics, which combines words

and pictures to give a graphic rendition of a young boy's struggle to survive the nuclear disaster. What is so specific about a documentary comics and how does it differ from a documentary film? In what sense can *Barefoot Gen* be taken as a documentary, given that it uses both drawn images, rather than recorded images, and fictionalized characters and events to document history? Even though documentaries are notoriously difficult to define, documentaries can still be identified, as Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow observe in their state-of-the-field survey, by the artists' "passionate commitment to and direct engagement with the lived world" (3). It is, it follows, the adoption of this "documentary" mode of address, along with documentary's world-changing aspirations, that makes Jeff Adams read, against the grain of documentary scholarship, *Barefoot Gen* as a documentary manga which gives a "'participatory' or 'performative' mode of account" (56) of the events as Nakazawa experienced or knew them. Following up on Adams' attempt to expand the generic reach of documentary, Nina Mickwitz, however, by drawing on Jacques Rancière's theoretical work on the politics of aesthetics, puts more emphasis on the capacity of documentaries to render a performative treatment of the lived reality. Rancière, Mickwitz observes, considers creative performativity as a constitutive aspect of documentary, since, for Rancière, it is through the aesthetic treatment of the real as the world out there that documentary not only delivers to us the world as we know it, but, by rendering the invisible visible, potentiates us to see the world anew. Accordingly, neither the recorded images, or the recording technologies, nor the real, can be taken as the sole defining feature of the documentary form. Instead, for Rancière, so Mickwitz claims, "both fiction and documentary address the real" (37), except that the "real" valorized by the documentary form is mutable, elastic, and open to creative treatment. Moreover, the very plasticity of comics as a multimodal medium, while challenging the fiction/documentary division, "offer[s] ways of seeing that circumvent the totalizing and institutional aspects of visualizing the real" (Mickwitz 99-100).

If *Barefoot Gen* not only challenges the polarization between fiction and documentary but also calls upon us to rethink some of the central assumptions regarding documentary's *raison d'être*, how might the use of comics in a documentary capacity demand us to reconceptualize the interplay between representation and the lived world out there? Even though both documentary film, which prioritizes recorded images, and documentary comics, which valorizes drawn images, share the ambition to offer the spectators/readers a slice of the actual world and although both can facilitate affective encounters between images and the spectators/readers, in what ways may documentary comics put us in a position to see the world anew? While comics images may, as suggested by Rancière, potentiate new ways of seeing and perceiving, they are still delimited by the "frames" through which, Judith Butler

claims, we comprehend the world out there and determine whose lives are seen as recognizable and even grievable (*Frames* 1).

The notion of the frame as the invisible window through which truth is both revealed and hidden is key to the critical studies of documentaries. A documentary film, with its use of video cameras, renders the images it captures a transparent window into the reality it claims to document, whereas comics do not claim to produce such an effect of verisimilitude. A documentary film, as Bill Nichol observes, aims to both “instruct and please, move and compel” (252). It instructs by proffering the audience unmediated access to the knowledge of the reality that has been previously denied to them, and it pleases by satisfying the audience’s voyeuristic desire to expose and unveil what lies beneath the surface of reality. This desire to use recoding technologies to denude that which one gazes upon is, as some critics have claimed, almost pornographic in its intensity.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the comics artists’ use of drawn iconic abstraction serves to self-reflexively upset and interrupt the reader’s pornographic desires to acquire unmediated knowledge about the life of the documented self. The serial and iconic dimensions of comics both express and complicate the documentary’s claims to transparency and verisimilitude. Though the cartoonish representation of the bleak reality registered in *Barefoot Gen*, with victims literally being denuded and unskinned, still upsets some readers, readers also become aware that the non-realistic representation of the catastrophic event creates a distancing effect that captures the affective “excess” which lingers even after everything has been denuded, destroyed, and stripped of its ontological surface. It is this non-mimetic excess, or the remnant caught in between witnessing and testimony, that is communicated by documentary comics, and that, in the case of Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen*, shakes to the very bones of some readers who claim not to have the “stomach” to read about the trauma Nakazawa both experienced and witnessed, even though they are still drawn to it.<sup>4</sup>

What effect does the repeated drawing of scenes of suffering and ruin generate? The scenes of a city ruined and of bodies melted by the atomic bomb, while first shown at the end of volume one, are dispersed throughout the series whenever a survivor recalls and remembers this traumatic event. Throughout the ten volumes of *Barefoot Gen*, Nakazawa includes into his repertoire of characters a number of artists and novelists whose paintings and novels are inserted to bear witness to this historically unprecedented event. One of the survivors, Matsukichi Hi-

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, for example, links photographs of atrocity to pornography. The circulation of atrocity images, as Sontag writes about the photographs of Abu Ghraib in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, is “to a certain degree, pornographic” (95).

<sup>4</sup> A reader, who self-identifies as Banshee, writes in the Amazon Customer Review that one needs to “have strong hearts and stomachs [sic] for such a moving drama.”

rayama, for example, once a reporter for a local newspaper whose writing has even earned him a gold medal (5: 120), is now dying of radiation poisoning and spends the remaining days of his life writing a novel “about the atomic bomb,” with the explicit purpose to let “people . . . know what happened here” as he doesn’t “want all [their] suffering to be in vain” (5: 177). When his book, *The End of Summer*, finally comes out in print, however, he has already entered into a coma. As Gen and his circle of friends hurry to deliver the cart of printed books to Matsukichi, they stop by the road to take a break. In response to the request of his illiterate friends who are eager to find out what the book is about, Gen reads it aloud to them. As they listen to Matsukichi’s vivid account of how his life was ruined by the bomb, each one of the audience remembers what happened to him or her on that fatal day and how his or her life was then altered by it. In this embedded sequence, structured by Gen’s ongoing reading of Matsukichi’s testimony in the speech balloons, Nakazawa uses two strategies—splitting of the verbal and visual tracks and the use of a double-page spread—to signify the affective force of comics storytelling so that, as Gen reads on, what is documented in the visual track is not only Matsukichi’s uniquely personal experience but also the experiences that each one of Gen’s circle of friends has undergone or witnessed. As such, the visual images do not represent the past; instead, they invoke and signify individual memories that carry intersubjective resonance. When the visual images, halfway into this embedded sequence, switch gears away from Matsukichi’s memory of his own experience to the subjective perception of traumatic memories of each one of Gen’s friends, this switch of visual images is accompanied by the intermingling of speech balloons—those with smooth edges signifying Matsukichi’s first-person narrative and those with jagged and spiky edges suggesting personal memories for each one of Gen’s audience.

Matsukichi’s testimonial, translated by Gen’s reading into an embedded manga, is a fertile ground for transmedial storytelling, as it allows the narrative of trauma to unfold on multiple trajectories as well as from varying perspectives. Moreover, because Gen is reading this eyewitness account to a group of survivors who have had first-hand experiences of the reported events, this embedded manga becomes, as it were, a joint production of this community of survivors, as each of them adds his/her experiences to give a more comprehensive presentation of the extent of the corporeal damage the bombing has created. For example, even though the first six pages are about the old man’s eyewitness account of victims walking around, many almost naked, searching for water, it is interspersed with Gen’s memories of the scenes he had seen of his family being devoured by the spreading fire; Ryuta’s recollection of his father’s being blown high into a tree and impaled on a protruding branch; and Natsue’s memories of her mother being swallowed

by fire.

The repeated depiction of these traumatic scenes, moreover, alternates with Nakazawa's depiction of the struggles of the victims to survive in a hostile society of scarcity, as if the series is structured by the staccato movement of flashbacks to the day the bomb was dropped and the many follow-up stories both about the impact of the bombing on the physical wellbeing of the survivors and about their struggles to survive in a landscape where only the most ruthless can live on. As the past and the present become increasingly folded and woven together, it becomes clear that Nakazawa intends to sustain the affective force of the traumatic history he witnessed along two different but related trajectories: how nuclear radiation continues to claim victims—cancelling all their earnest efforts to rebuild their lives out of the ashes—and how Gen and his associates stubbornly cling to hope and assert their will despite the bombing's disruption of the ethical codes of the area most affected by the bombing—dooming the survivors to lives of deceit, theft, violence, and mutual hatred.

A good example of the staccato rhythm of despair and hope can already be found in the final thirty pages of volume one, which are packed with a hellish display of images that “burned its way into my heated brain with all the intensity of a fever-dream,” as Art Spiegelman points out in the introduction he wrote for the English translation of *Barefoot Gen*, such as people walking zombie-like on the streets, countless dead bodies floating in the river, little girls with countless shards of broken glass sticking out of their bodies, and buildings blown into pieces forming a barely recognizable cityscape. In an episode that appears at the end of volume one, a primary school teacher urges his students, all aflame and with skins melting, to jump into the already crowded river to cool themselves down (1: 276-77). When the kids complain that they feel too much pain to swim on, the teacher then urges them to sing a folk song to cheer themselves, but his words of comfort are met with the bubbling sounds of his students sinking to their deaths. All these scenes, depicted in the abstract simplicity typical of manga, register the brutality of nuclear explosions to strip human beings of all human pretensions, reducing them to the nakedness and fragility of their physical being. However, interspersed into these scenes of ruin is also the teacher's naïve belief in the power of folk songs to help them forget their pain. Highlighted here is thus the tension between art as testimonial that bears witness to a trauma that exceeds any means of representation, and art as therapy that works to numb the survivors' senses to enable them to live on, a tension that cannot be resolved by art but can be highlighted to enable the readers, by bearing secondary witness to them, to learn to see them otherwise. When this tension between art as testimonial and art as therapy is reenacted throughout the ten volumes, it then becomes clear that art can be both testimonial and therapy in

the sense art is only therapeutic when it, first and foremost, bears witness to that which eludes representation. Moreover, it is this relation between the two hypotheses—art as testimonial and art as therapy, rather than the two hypotheses themselves—that constitutes the main interest of the serial art of documentary manga, as the activation of this relationship transforms the scene in which art, or the songs that the students are told to sing, fails to heal into one in which art, as remediated by Nakazawa's documentary comics, facilitates interpersonal transmission of affects and experiences.

A careful scrutiny reveals that the tension between art as testimonial of trauma and art as therapy is heightened by the gap between the shocking drawings of scene after scene of horror and the strong claims found in the speech balloons that serve to annotate these scenes. The co-presence of words and images gives two related, though non-collapsible, accounts of the event, with the ruined bodies yielding their wordless testimony to their being trapped and ruined by a biopolitics that determines, with a flash of light lasting for eight seconds, whether they should die an instant but excruciating death or live a protracted but equally excruciating life. The annotations given by the narrator and the panel frames are thematic and structural supports that provide glimpses of sense and hope in a general landscape of plasticity, barrenness, and nudity.

This barrenness of human life is again reiterated in the opening pages of the second volume, with another layer of pathos being added to the sense of meaningless doom already permeating the scenes that conclude volume one. Volume two opens with an episode that shocks Gen and his mother into the realization that the bomb that fell on them is not an ordinary bomb. In this crudely drawn scene, a naked man carrying a stick walks by them, screaming "Attack! Attack! I'm an army general. Get 'em!" (2: 1) as if he had been driven insane by the incomprehensible gravity of the tragedy which had just befallen him. This scene is laughably absurd because the general gone mad never seems to comprehend what has befallen him and the country that he so loyally serves. This incomprehensibility generates in the victims an intuitive response, as if there were a disjuncture between their bodily reaction—as they continue to walk on, search for water, charge for action—and their affective understanding of their bodily mutilation. It is this disjuncture between their not knowing they are dying and the reader's knowledge of their imminent fate that, in its turn, generates in the reader this sense of incredulity, a sense of empathy evidenced in the readers' review of the manga mentioned above. At the same time, given that the scene is drawn in a cartoonish style that obscures the naked man's nuanced responses, the reader only finds his behavior odd when Gen and his mother express their bewilderment at seeing it. It is then when the reader realizes that, while the naked man is running and charging against an

imaginary enemy, he is also excreting urine—or feces-like substances—along the way. Reduced to acting like an animal, the naked man, rather ironically, holds on to his patriotic sentiment and is determined to fight back, return hurt with hurt, combat violence with violence.

### Trauma, Biopolitics, and Art

This sense of shock and incredulity experienced by Gen and the naked man, as both victims and witnesses, suggests that they have experienced a trauma akin to what Sigmund Freud understands as an unexpected punctual trauma that puts the victim in a state of cognitive numbness.<sup>5</sup> As they begin to register the extent of their loss, they suffer trauma of a different kind, the trauma of everyday discrimination and self-imposed shame that is repeatedly and chronically experienced on a daily basis, with long-term effects that are folded into the very fabric of society. If trauma is indeed, as suggested by Freud, a punctual act of violence, the shock of this punctual violence is best registered and expressed through what Freud calls the repetition compulsion, and what is repeatedly enacted, in the present, is the psychic effects of the traumatic event of the past. In the case of the Hiroshima bombing, however, the trauma cannot be consigned to the past, mainly because the wounds of the traumatic event are physically felt years after the event: the facial scars, the vomiting of blood, the fainting, and the eruption of radiation sickness. Moreover, the atomic bombing gives Hiroshima an exceptional status, where survivors are left to their own devices to suffer injustice after injustice, such as scarcity of food, the failure of the state to protect the civilians, and the overbearing practices of US occupying forces to collect medical data as well as to cover up traces of their own criminal behavior. The chronic and cumulative effect of mundane and everyday trauma is best registered by the serialized storytelling, so that the long-term, ongoing effects of the bomb are felt at a corporeal level, as the victims' bodies continue to register the fatal effects of the bombing, and people continue to die of the atomic radiation. While Nakazawa clearly suggests that the ethical behavior of Japanese people was flawed even before the A-bomb was dropped, it is nevertheless obvious that the dropping of the A-bomb further erodes the affiliative bonding among the people; the majority had been so interpellated by the aggressive militarist ideologies that they not only mistake offense for defense, but also persecute the pacifists

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<sup>5</sup> Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis become so numbed that they “are more concerned with *not* thinking of it” (7), even though they are at the same time haunted by dreams and nightmares that “have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (7).

who have opposed the Sino-Pacific War launched by Japan. The moral framework and ethical principles that bind a society together into a workable community were first corrupted by the war and then further corroded by the A-bomb. The survivors were left homeless, parentless, stateless, and vulnerable to all kinds of injustice, deception, and violence. Again and again, they are traumatized and reduced to living a “precarious life,” to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler.

Whereas the manga, as its historical development connotes, is a kind of narrative that both digresses, stretches, and therefore repeats itself, that Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* is a manga of disaster means that its signature repetitiveness can also be taken as a largely formal strategy used throughout the manga series to register both the unintelligibility of the atomic bombing and its long-term dehumanizing effects. Other than delivering the shocking scenes that illustrate the immediate effects of the A-bomb, *Barefoot Gen* also records the many episodes in which Gen and his friends are exposed to rampant violence which compels them to live as “bare life” beyond the protection of the law. “Bare life,” a key concept elaborated by Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer*, refers to a form of life created by the Nazi camps that reduces the inmates to a state of mere biological existence. While this form of bare life, Agamben argues, could be considered bare life in its most extreme form, it can also be understood in relation to the “sacred man,” which is “an obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [*ordinamento*] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)” (8). Given that, for Agamben, anyone can kill the sacred man without being punished for it, to be a sacred man is to be abandoned by the law and be reduced to a state of “bare life.” While Agamben’s analysis eventually leads to the somewhat gloomy recognition that we are all bare life, the problem of how to break loose from this biopolitical abandonment remains unresolved. If, for Agamben, the bare life carries an assemblage of ideas, as it is both “bare” and “sacred,” it may signify not only a state of intense entrapment from which there is no escape but also the possibility of liberation from such entrapment. How then can this state of bare life, a state of exception, as Agamben puts it, be turned into a positive state of exception, when human beings may finally lead a simple life beyond any imposed law or project? The possible answer to these inquiries, according to Veena Das, has to do with “the work of time,” the repeated enactment of simple everyday acts over time,<sup>6</sup> that provides the possibilities of wrestling those people, who are assaulted with traumatic events that render them to question what counts as human, from

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<sup>6</sup> Veena Das gives a detailed explanation in *Life and Words* about how “time” works to endow a human being, abandoned to bare life, with singularity so that s/he is free from any impositions coming from external events and accidents. See Chapter 5, “Boundaries, Violence, and the Work of Time,” of *Life and Words*.



the biopolitical abandonment. With the passage of time, as they struggled and experimented with what unexpected challenges presented by life, new and unimaginable possibilities also emerged. In the case of *Barefoot Gen*, though the protagonist Gen is confronted with a series of challenges, with each repetition of the seemingly similar tale of injustice and violence, the very sequentiality of the narrative is upset and its successivity replaced by a network-like relation between different components of the narrative, to the degree that the repetition of the narrative of pain and deceit achieves a cumulative effect that, as it compresses time and space, allows the reader to read the rhetorical, the historical, and the ideological all at once.

As a manga, the seriality of *Barefoot Gen* necessarily compels it to repeat and digress; as trauma manga, the impossibility of representing trauma and the compulsion to return give its narrative a dialectic trajectory as it shuttles back and forth between repetition and difference. As a narrative that documents the incomprehensible trauma of disaster, the many repeated tales of pain and suffering assembled and depicted in *Barefoot Gen* are also tales about what it means to survive the atomic bomb, physically and mentally, as the narrator gains more and more understanding about the long-term price that the victims pay for their exposure to atomic radiation. *Barefoot Gen* repeats these tales to more empathetically expose the rawness, barrenness, and nakedness of human existence. Each repetition can be taken as another testimony of how life itself is stripped of its specificity and human beings come to be reductively regarded with scientific curiosity as medical specimens. The iconic nature of the comics medium, in this sense, in barring the reader from making too easy an identification with the characters drawn in iconic abstractions, rather ironically, also facilitates a reading that allows for both empathetic identification and disidentification.

In the repeated tales of disaster told in *Barefoot Gen*, the reader detects a splitting of the bio- into the natural life of biological existence (*zoē*) and the political life of speech and action (*bios*) as well as the collapse of the political into the economic, with the victims abandoned by all to struggle to survive, at the most primitive level, by themselves.<sup>7</sup> Alternating with these tales of disaster are tales of survival—Gen and his mother finding shelter in a friend's house only to be kicked out owing to disputes over the rice shortage, not once but twice (volumes two and four); bomb victims being ostracized and discriminated against; the endless attempts they make to find food to feed their family; their repeated conflicts with the US occupying forces; their constant fighting with gangsters who bully, exploit, and abuse them;

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<sup>7</sup> I am here drawing on the distinction made by Giorgio Agamben between *zoē* (the biological life) and *bios* (the political life), a distinction that hinges on the exercise of language and speech. See Introduction in *Homo Sacer*, especially page 1.

and their desperate efforts to make money to get medication, first for their baby sister and then for their mother, and finally, to combat the radiation sickness that claims the life of one survivor after another. Throughout the series, Nakazawa demonstrates the lengths that people go to just to survive in the aftermath of war. It is a world where the rawness of the economic prevails over life with the repeated enactment of scenes of violence, deception, and scapegoating. It is also a world where the political, or the national, is stripped of all its pretension, and a pre-modern organization of society based on the principle of the survival of the fittest becomes the norm rather than the exception. Other than participating in the relations of power that perpetuate the cyclical patterns of exploitation, what other options are still available to Gen and bomb survivors not only to interrupt the logics of both the biopolitical and the economic but also to reclaim their humanity?

It is at this juncture that art enters the picture as it offers Gen the creative means for thinking and feeling otherwise about the world around him. The iconic abstraction inherent in manga, with its extensive use of caricatures and simple lines demarcating the good from the evil or those who abuse from those who are abused, highlights images of suffering, while animating in the reader an affective response towards, and empathy with, those who are bullied, abused, and exploited. The comics' exaggeration of the undisguised rawness of the victims' struggle for survival poses the question of what else is left of humanity, beyond the urge for survival. Other than the economic calculation of values realized through the logic of the survival of the fittest, what organizing logic or principle seems to emerge, in this time when power resides in the hands of either the yakuza, gang members, or the MPs of the US occupying forces, to constitute the intersubjective transaction of labor, values, and affects among the Japanese civilians in their collective struggle for survival?

The orphaned and widowed bomb victims find themselves easy prey of both the yakuza and civilians. Civilians discriminate against bomb victims because they do not understand the difference between viral infection and radiation sickness; they believe survivors have been "contaminated" by the bomb and are carrying viruses that can infect those coming into contact with them. In this sense, the bomb survivors are no different from creatures left unprotected by the law, as they have to use any means within their power to survive, including tricking, stealing, and killing. Theirs is a "creaturely life," as it is defined by Eric Santner as "a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field" (xix), given that Gen, his family, and his friends all have to frantically scramble for food, when they are denied a voice and rendered invisible and unaccountable by both Japanese and US governments, lest the truth of the bombing be known to the world. Their "creatureliness", to again borrow Santner's vocabulary, features mostly prominently in *Barefoot Gen* in the form of their agitated

or animated efforts both to escape from the creatureliness imposed by external forces—yakuza, American MPs, callous citizens—and to end this creaturely existence by bonding with other victims, thereby generating acts of solidarity and identification exceeding actual kinship. When the yakuza steal the milk powder Gen and Ryuta stole from an American MP base, and they blackmail Ryuta into joining their gang, Ryuta kills two of them to save Gen's life; Gen, in return, takes in and "adopts" Ryuta and other orphans as his own family members after all the adult gang members are killed. Initially, Ryuta resists the idea of following Gen to Gen's house, given that if the adult gang members find them, "there will be trouble for you and your Mom . . . There's nothing we can do." (5: 58). Gen responds by telling Ryuta: "don't ever say 'There's nothing we can do!' Don't give up! We have to keep trying, even if we can only make things better a little at a time" (5: 59).

In this way, Gen articulates Nakazawa's understanding that, against the pervasiveness of the barrenness of life, the victims cannot turn to either the Japanese emperor or the US occupying forces for protection. Even though these national and transnational sovereign powers will always be there, embodied by the gangsters and the vulture-like vendors in the black market, they can neither be trusted nor depended upon. Yet, Gen and his circle of friends nevertheless manage to find means of ethical intervention as they bond into an alternative family, repeatedly showing expressions of care and compassion to each other, without calculation or expectation of return. They come together, form a community of their own, build their own house, and make money to support themselves. As a start, they build a makeshift house of their own with their own hands. After they begin living together, forming an alternative family, the very idea of affiliation is redefined along the line suggested elsewhere by Edward Said, with new ties being formed "by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation" (24-25). In the case of Gen and his circle of friends, it is victimization or vulnerability that is the basis of their reimagining and practicing the ethical act of caring for those others who may be as vulnerable as themselves.

## Conclusion

"In the aftermath of the earthquake on the 11th March, 2011 . . . questions have rekindled about the critical role of popular media such as manga and anime in contemporary Japanese society. This current has manifested itself . . . in revisiting the A-bomb manga *Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen)*" (Berndt 148). In addition to posing questions about the use of nuclear energy, *Barefoot Gen* is also a significant text that gave an urgent warning to a world that was once again on the verge of

another world war, when it first appeared in 1972, twenty-seven years after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, with the Vietnam War still raging in the Indochina Peninsula. Years after World War II and the Korean War, violence was still used as a means to contain violence; war was still considered the only means to end war. The voices of those who have either experienced the trauma of war firsthand or witnessed its aftermath are either censored by the victims themselves or by governments that do not want old wounds to be exposed, or embarrassing deeds unveiled. The pain is too real and the guilt is too heavy; as such, war trauma becomes the unrepresentable and, accordingly, it is unrepresented. Some victims are too traumatized to tell their own stories, and those who are eager to tell their stories also confront the question of how to tell them in ways that actualize the narrator's expository desire. The fact that both Nakazawa and Spigelman decided to use comics as a medium to register that which is otherwise inexpressible is a telltale sign that comics as an artistic medium had come of age.

However, even though both Nakazawa and Spigelman turned to comics to "draw" the lasting impacts of trauma, Nakazawa's use of serialized storytelling suggests that, unlike Spigelman, who seems to believe that trauma is incomprehensible as well as inexpressible, Nakazawa is quite specific about the many causes of the disaster that befell his family and other victims of the atomic bomb. The narrator repeatedly points his finger at Americans, and the Japanese emperor for initiating the war to satisfy his personal ambition. There are at least two layers of pain that the victims have suffered. On the one hand, war itself is the cause of all evils: the emperor should not have plunged Japan into a war that was protracted for years, thereby disrupting people's everyday lives and causing them to suffer inexplicable losses, and the Americans should not have dropped the bomb on innocent civilians, especially when American scientists were themselves not clear about the long-term effects of nuclear radiation. Whereas war itself is always already evil, wrong, and trauma-causing, to end the war by dropping the atomic bomb only serves to pile injuries onto injuries, as civilians in Hiroshima, already poverty-stricken by a losing war, are thrown into a hellish life, whether they die a brutal but immediate death, with their skins dripping and eyes popping out, zombie-like, or they die a slow death, afflicted by radiation poisoning. Survivors, other than poverty and hunger, also have to endure inhuman discrimination and heartless exploitation by those gangsters and racketeers who manipulate and abuse the survivors to make profits. As a consequence of all these causes, survivors are abandoned to scrounge a living by themselves, while struggling to maintain their optimism in an apocalyptic landscape of doom.

To bring home his accusation of the militarists on both sides of the war that warfare is inhuman and the use of the atomic bomb on civilians is, in particular,

unethical, Nakazawa adopts series manga to capitalize on its visual immediacy as well as its recursive and plastic temporality. In *Barefoot Gen*, stories of disaster experienced by different characters are repeatedly enacted: writers or artists attempt to bear witness to war trauma; youngsters, left parentless by atomic bombing and exploited by mean-spirited adults, fight to stay alive; young girls disfigured by the flash of intense heat emanated by the atomic bomb struggle with their shame at their bodily disfigurement; survivors stricken with radiative sickness die an agonizing and slow death years after the event. In the midst of all these tales of pain and disaster, there are also stories of love and courage, with survivors helping one another, bonding together, and cheering each other up. Episodes of death, radiation poisoning, exploitation, and physical abuse are thus interwoven with episodes of bonding and courageous assertions about the eventual prevalence of life over death. Gen and his circle of friends strive on, not because they are strong enough to defy the suppressive forces of their society, but because they stubbornly, willfully, and, almost irrationally, hold on to hope and believe in living on. It is this stubborn will to survive that makes *Barefoot Gen* manga or manga-like, for what can better describe manga than the fact that it moves its fans, beyond comprehension, into thinking and feeling otherwise about how life can be lived and who holds the key to our future?

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## 原爆漫畫的可塑迴路： 《赤腳阿元》中藝術與生命政治的辯證

### 摘要

邱特 (Hillary Chute) 將中澤啓治發表於1972年至1985年間的原爆漫畫《赤腳阿元》歸類於記錄歷史的紀實漫畫，推崇中澤大膽採取「代言」與「再現」為敘事策略的作法，並認為藉由這種紀實的策略，中澤更能切入與批判當代社會對原爆議題視而不見的文化。拉馬爾 (Thomas LaMarre) 在討論《赤腳阿元》時，則聚焦分析作者如何活用「可塑線條」來展演他的政治理念，他指出《赤腳阿元》啟動「可塑線條」(plastic lines) 的爆發力，使得「生命」在被「政治」納入「生命政治」之際，還得以留存抗爭的可能。本文延續並補充邱特與拉馬爾的觀點，而將焦點由中澤的再現紀實策略、他對可塑線條的靈活運用，移轉至漫畫中的連環與章回敘事。這種連續與重複的敘事手法，使得作者既得以紀錄原爆倖存者的創傷經驗，也可凸顯出見證書寫為倖存者代言的功能，而成為原爆者宣洩情感的出口。更重要的是，作為一位以青少年為主要讀者的漫畫藝術家，中澤除了著墨於描繪原爆浩劫的恐怖景象、勾勒出浩劫後生命為政治所綁架的生命政治之輪廓之外，更堅持在反覆搬演的章節敘事中爬梳倖存者之間跨越主體的情生意動，藉此開展出歷史創傷的開創性倫理意涵。面對原爆所引發的一系列有關歷史、政治、倫理的層層相扣的議題，《赤腳阿元》以回歸倫理作為回應，固然反映出作者的近乎單純的理想主義色彩，卻因作者堅持以漫畫作為媒介、套用日本連環漫畫的類型、發揮漫畫可塑迴路敘事反覆搬演的渲染情感功能，而更具說服力。

**關鍵字：**原爆、紀實漫畫、創意抗爭、可塑性、章回性

