2024
Gryphon Lecture

"Grappling with Martin Luther King Jr. in Youth Literature: Sequence as Resistance"

Representing Martin Luther King Jr., the most iconic figure of the Civil Rights Movement, is an enormous challenge. Not only is he used as shorthand in schools and popular culture for the entire complicated movement, but his words and ideas have been appropriated and deployed to support a range of political positions and attitudes. Focusing singularly on King also often sidelines the many people, approaches, and events that constitute the movement, and his assassination can signal the end of social justice efforts rather than a moment in continual struggle. My presentation considers texts that render King (and many others in the movement) with complexity. How does our engagement with King change when we see him not as an iconic figure of memory, but walking the stage in plays like Alice Childress's *Young Martin Luther King Jr.* (1970)? How does representation in comics panels, as in The Montgomery Story (1957) and John Lewis's March trilogy (2013-2016), allow us to resist King as static icon? The sequence in comics and stage performance may make King a more mutable figure, enabling the story of the movement to include both his heroism and the idea of civil rights work as an ongoing collaborative struggle for social justice.

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