comics studies may be more institutionally insecure than either Chute or I care to imagine.

I am not suggesting that we should simply reverse this critical emphasis and focus as scholars on superhero and other genre comics at the expense of nonfiction comics. The point is not to invert the hierarchy of value that seems to accompany Chute's understanding of generic distinctions but to treat it with skepticism. The academic preference for "literary" comics of a confessional or journalistic bent and even for the (almost useless) term "graphic novel" itself requires interrogation and at least a measure of resistance. We require such skepticism regarding academic canons from our graduate students in literary studies, film studies, and art history, after all. The future of comics studies will surely require no less of us.

Ben Saunders
University of Oregon

Reply:

I welcome Ben Saunders's letter as a sign of the excitement and energy among academics who are exploring comics; that debate exists among us (as I indicated to Saunders and others I petitioned for support to start an MLA discussion group) reflects the health of the comics field. However, I feel that his criticisms miss the point of my essay. Saunders's critique is based on the premise that I wrote or ought to have written a cultural history of comics, but my project in the essay is to outline a formal and theoretical approach to graphic narrative.

"Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" is not an essay that aspires, in the unavoidably brief history I present, to account for the origin and development of all formats of comics. Rather, as I write, "a history of comics is being assembled as a way of carving out a tradition, in a rich history of forms, that leads to a contemporary excitement about graphic narrative" (455). At the beginning of the essay, I define a graphic narrative as "a book-length work in the medium of comics" and state my preference for that term over "graphic novel" (453).

While I argue that comics is a medium and go on to discuss the different formats of comics—such as comic strip, comic book, graphic narrative—Saunders twice uses the phrase "the comic-book medium" in his letter, showing his different understanding of comics terminology and, perhaps, his own values and investments. My essay never claims not to treat commercial comics work—over a million copies of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a touchstone text in the essay, have been sold in the United States. Rather, I wrote that in my "abbreviated history" I would not "emphasize the development of the commercial *comic-book* industry . . . dominated by two superhero-focused publishers, Marvel and DC" in my explanation of how we have come to the current contemporary excitement about graphic narrative (455; my emphasis).

What I do choose to emphasize is *MAD*, a commercial magazine that started out as a comic book, and underground (i.e., noncommercial) comics, also known as "comix." These are the cultural antecedents, I suggest in this brief trajectory, that most shaped the contemporary graphic narrative field.

Saunders seems to want the essay to have had a broader focus, one that would treat all sorts of comics and account for cultural histories for all of them. As a literary scholar, my interest is more specific: the complex relations between form, discourse, and memory that we see in nonfiction graphic narrative. (Hardly taking my cue from the institutionalization of comics on syllabi, I have been helping to create that institutionalization—I developed, for instance, Rutgers University's first courses on the literary study of comics.)

In my writing on comics, I hope to break down distinctions in culture and aesthetics between high and low (and it is a rare experience working on comics to be accused of being too highbrow). The interrogation of these boundaries is one of the most important things to me as a scholar and as a person, and my work is not, as Saunders suggests, "a criticism that disdains genre work in general." My goal is to open doors rather than to close them. In my current work, I am more interested in the single vision of the auteur of fiction or nonfiction comics—a Dan Clowes

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or a Lynda Barry—than I am in work created by teams of people, such as we see in genre-driven comics from companies like Marvel and DC. Yet I don't doubt that these teams are doing innovative work, even, and especially, work that plays with or refigures genre conventions—something we also see in work by comics auteurs like Charles Burns, whose brilliant graphic narrative about a teen plague, *Black Hole*, I mention in my essay (459).

Saunders's letter ends by noting that studying comics today and understanding its adoption as an academic subject for inquiry require skepticism—a notion with which I agree. (Spiegelman's Columbia University course title indicates this too: "Comics: Marching *into* the Canon" [my emphasis]). I want more, not fewer, informed dialogues about comics to take place, and I look forward to being part of a robust field in which the perspectives of many kinds of critics, with different objects of analysis, have a place. I look forward to reading Saunders's work on comic books and their creative consequences.

Hillary Chute
Harvard University

Imprisonment: Models of Confinement

To the Editor:

Avery Gordon has sought a context for understanding the psychological consequences of detainment or containment in "Methodologies of Imprisonment" (123.3 [2008]: 651–57). She asserts four models of confinement, but devotes full attention only to the second:

> the United States' model of mass imprisonment of surplus racial and ethnic populations as a form of socioeconomic abandonment; military imprisonment, especially in the course of permanent security wars; the European model of the detention of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees ("Fortress Europe"); and the Israeli model of occupation by encirclement and immobilization. (651)

Gordon makes her case against the Guantánamo Bay prison, where prisoners of war have been held in disregard of the Geneva Conventions. The presumption of innocence is a major doctrine of the American court system. However, she does not try to instruct the reader about military law regarding the imprisonment of personnel captured in battle. She does not in her argument on behalf of suicides and those frustrated with their incarceration draw distinctions between inmates whose imprisonment at Guantánamo is problematic and those whose terrorist actions might have identified their militancy, led to their capture, and brought them to the prison. Nevertheless, few disagree that Guantánamo should be closed; it has been badly managed, and its existence and operation have serious legal implications.

More egregious is Gordon's assertion that the United States uses its prison system as a means for abandoning socioeconomic classes among racial and ethnic populations, a position neither substantiated nor documented. If concerned with the percentage of minority populations in prison, she has ignored the efforts of criminologists, penologists, and educators trying to fix deep problems. The reasons for incarceration are more complex than Gordon chooses to understand. She ignores problems in education, the job market, or the prisoners' domestic milieu. Indeed, many prisoners in jails read at low levels. Tricia Fox explains that Canadian "prisoners are often lacking in basic skills"; they "demonstrate a high incidence of illiteracy, low intelligence, learning disabilities, and reading disabilities." Their reading levels are measurably inadequate: "the typical inmate functions two or three grade levels below the level completed in school" ("Teaching in Prisons: Consideration of the Concept of Adult Education"; abstract; ERIC ED284070; 1987; Web; 20 Nov. 2008). A report of the National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) on American prisons finds that "up to 50% of adult inmates are functionally illiterate" (Anabel P. Newman, Warren Lewis, and Caroline Beverstock, *Prison Literacy: Implications for Program and Assessment Policy* [Philadelphia: Natl. Center on Adult Literacy, Clinical Rept. TR93-01; Bloomington: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1993; B: 18; Web;

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