

A PEDAGOGICAL GUIDE TO TESSA HULLS'S *FEEDING GHOSTS*

A Graphic Memoir

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Tessa Hulls's *Feeding Ghosts: A Graphic Memoir* captures the stories of three generations of Chinese and Chinese American women: Tessa's maternal grandmother Sun Yi (孫怡) born in Suzhou, China, in 1927; Sun Yi's daughter Rose (葛伊甜 Gok Yi Teem) born in Shanghai in 1950, who immigrates to Hong Kong at age seven, then attends Macalester College at age nineteen; and Tessa (赫仁信), Hulls's comics avatar, born in Northern California in 1984 (6).¹ It illustrates Sun Yi's flight from politically perilous circumstances in Shanghai that inflict psychological damage on Sun Yi and subsequent generations. Tessa's salve for her own mental well-being—as she is the third in a multigeneration of traumatically afflicted and complex women—involves a 2016 research trip to China to examine the historical tapestry of her family's past, one thread at a time. Thus, *Feeding Ghosts* weaves together a century of national, international, medical, and political histories that impact Tessa through her maternal lineage.

To show and tell this layered intergenerational saga, Hulls chooses comics, a medium Marjane Satrapi defines as “narrative drawing,” while Art Spiegelman calls it “picture writing.”² Through the affordances of the comics form, she can visualize both her lived experiences and those that remain unnarratable. Hulls's “picture writing” limns the as-yet untold lives and loves of her silent grandmother and her unpredictably tempered mother. Tessa's findings illuminate and obscure, by turns—as do her drawings—life constraints, political intimidation, and even violence that drive her maternal generations' personal choices. Deciphering

Feeding Ghosts is therefore a readerly adventure as enlightening and frustrating as Tessa's discoveries. For example, Tessa obtains official documents revealing the name of Sun Yi's lover, a Swiss diplomat working in Shanghai in the 1940s. The discovery incites excitement that Tessa can now resolve gaps in her family's narrative as revealed, hopefully, through his backstory, such as why did he abandon pregnant Sun Yi after returning to Switzerland? Yet in short order, his death certificate surfaces, quickly foreclosing the possibility of obtaining his perspective. In another instance, Tessa learns that Rose's emigration from Hong Kong was both an opportunity for education and an escape from her mother's institutionalization: Rose eagerly applies to attend university in America, leaving, in both relief and consternation, a mentally unstable mother. Hulls's complicated graphics illustrate how Tessa's research, by fits and starts, informs and frustrates, pacifies and enrages, illuminates and shrouds.

Feeding Ghosts explains the past in the present moment while the bones of its history continue to reverberate in the present. Its diegesis is as nonlinear as the timeline of Tessa's discoveries and as unpredictable in their effects as the fluctuating emotions of the three characters. Hillary Chute's claim that reading comics "can feel less directive and linear than reading most prose narrative" resonates throughout Hulls's work.³ For example, because comics allows Hulls to represent characters' embodiment in different times and spaces literally, figuratively, and simultaneously—all within a single panel—"reading can occur in all directions."⁴ Inset panels provide concurrent and alternative perspectives by productively supplementing, but not interrupting, the reigning diegesis. Creative layouts arrange images and construct their framing. Emotion, stasis, movement, and mood find visual representation in alternating grid-like panel arrangements; half, whole, and splash pages whose images are un-empaneled; and bleeds where the ink runs to the page's edges. Ultimately, Hulls's hybrid storytelling fragments, re-pictures, and sequences three generations of women's lives, helping readers improve not only literary comprehension but also visual literacy.

Rich in both form and content, Hulls's book is the first graphic narrative to win a Pulitzer Prize in Memoir and has received the National Books Critics Circle John Leonard Prize, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the Libby Award for Best Graphic Novel, an Eisner Award for Best Graphic Memoir, a Kirkus Non-fiction Prize finalist recognition, among many other distinctions. Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Because no award category for a graphic narrative existed at the time, the committee recognized it under the moniker "Special Award in Letters." More than three decades later, Hulls's receipt of a Pulitzer Prize in Memoir is a distinction on many fronts, lifting graphic narratives from the specific and narrow "special" category to that of the academically and broadly privileged realm of memoir. It brings popular, critical,

and scholarly attention to Asian American women's stories and the medium of comics, formerly dismissed as "low-brow" and unworthy of scholarly discussion.

Hulls's graphic memoir is a fascinating and arguably necessary return to themes addressed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*: mother-daughter relationships, navigating disparate cultures, telling stories, entertaining ghosts, and embodying trauma.⁵ A seminal text in Asian American studies still taught widely in courses in English, women's and gender studies, race and ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies, *The Woman Warrior* sparked ferocious debates about cultural authenticity, Chinese American coming of age, and representations of gender and ethnicity. About half a century later, Hulls's work revisits motherhood, agency, sexuality, and cultural scripting—but through significantly different registers, such as intersectionality, mental health, and trauma.

While inviting discussions of gender, nationality, and belonging in the current so-called postfeminist and post-racial era, *Feeding Ghosts* also provides ample opportunities to study the work of comics representation: how "seeing" issues that traditionally have been narrated in prose hones reader's visual literacy. For example, in Hulls's complex and dark visual feast, thousands of black pen strokes on white paper evoke constant movement in which protean shapes seemingly writhe in the background: in one instance resembling churning sea water (are these the forbidding literal and figurative oceans joining and separating Asia and the United States?) and in another floating wraiths (are these the eponymous ghosts of the graphic narrative's title?). Tree roots and bare, grasping branches morph into skeletal fingers, unbound by panel borders as they stretch across the page. Is this Hulls's figurative representation of embodied interdependence? Is this a brittle or a durable intergenerational continuity? Faces depicting fear, anguish, and pain accost readers as if imploring them for help. What is the graphic narrative's effect on readers' responses? Hulls's artistry inspires awe while suspending her readers in persistent dread, unraveling three generations of women's histories—how successfully is for readers to decide—in no less a convoluted manner and establishing an overall tone of the sublime. It poses challenges for readers who have little prior knowledge about the book's subject matter or are unfamiliar with its format.

Feeding Ghosts' comics-based depiction of fraught generational ties is simultaneously a return to themes addressed in Kingston and a revision of them, not only within its own narrative but within the trajectory of Asian American studies, making it a timely and valuable work by which to address advances and regressions in the field and an exciting potential for adoption into various courses and projects. This critical pedagogy guide makes accessible the labyrinthine visuals and entangled maternal storylines of Hulls's book. It encourages

readers to layer their insights with approaches to comics and to conduct further investigation into Hulls's archival findings, for example: research Hong Kong's elite schools established for mixed-race children; find more information on the city's institutions for the psychologically unwell, such as Castle Peak, to which Sun Yi is committed temporarily; probe the graphic memoir's linguistic advantages and translation difficulties; explore the literary and visual rhetorics of cowboys in America.

This guide highlights pedagogical approaches by theme while also providing examples of companion texts, specifically in Asian American and ethnic studies, suitable for pairing with Hulls's graphic memoir. As readers will see below, the interdisciplinary contexts, topics, and questions for discussion overlap as much as the stories and images in *Feeding Ghosts*. This guide prepares teachers to confidently encourage curiosity about the academic themes highlighted below, no matter their level of current knowledge about them. It is a general resource for college courses and advanced high school classes. The information included in the frameworks below also can be adapted to other levels and to book clubs, library-based discussions, reading groups, and general readers. Each section provides a short introduction to the targeted theme before providing related discussion prompts and selected resources.

APPROACHES TO *FEEDING GHOSTS* IN ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND ETHNIC STUDIES

This section features selected foci in Asian American studies specifically and ethnic studies more broadly. Because the targeted themes have fascinated scholars and readers since the creation of university courses in these fields in the 1960s, they persist in encouraging creative and critical work.

Lived Experiences and Imagined Stories

In *The Woman Warrior*, the American-born narrator often cannot distinguish between where her Chinese-born mother's stories end and where real life begins. Competing narratives between a recognizable mother-immigrant and a fascinating yet improbable mother-shaman confuse the narrator, who is unsure if the stories are meant to instruct, caution, or inspire her.

In *Feeding Ghosts*, Tessa is unable to discern an evidence-based truth among the "two stories" in Sun Yi's memoir: "The first one, the visible one, was as a journalist chronicling her country during a period of violent change.

The second story was one she didn't know she was writing: the prologue to her own mental collapse" (104). How does Tessa contend with multiple versions of her grandmother, from the autobiographical selves appearing in Sun Yi's book, from those Rose conveys, and from Tessa's own experiences living with Sun Yi in Northern California? At one point, Tess doubts some of the dramatic sentiments in Sun Yi's memoir, as when her grandmother discusses her discovery that she is pregnant. Sun Yi writes that she became "extremely anxious," but later muses, "I truly had a deep desire to have a child" (95). Tessa states, "I'm not sure I buy that last part. My grandmother was a writer, calculating in how she wanted to be perceived. Nothing in her words points toward a desire for motherhood" (95). Because Hulls is a writer, can readers discern from *Feeding Ghosts* how her comics avatar Tessa would like to be perceived? How she would like to represent, and ultimately how does she represent, Sun Yi; how does she represent her mother?

Sun Yi's memoir assists her in asserting "the reality she wanted over the reality she had," claims Tessa (89). Likewise, Rose sees China as "an idealized mythology," a "perfect illusion," and "an unchanging snow globe where a mother and daughter remained eternally locked in an embrace of uncomplicated filial piety" (93). Amid convoluted self-representations are Tessa's frustrating discovery that some pertinent documents that might fill holes in her grandmother's and mother's life narratives are missing. What does Tessa assemble or invent from these absences, from her relatives' unreliable memories, and to what conclusions? What realities exist and which are imagined before, during, and after she completes *Feeding Ghosts*?

When the significantly mentally distressed Sun Yi lives with Tessa's U.S.-based family, writing is the sole activity that grounds her. As a teenager, Tessa shockingly discovers that Rose fabricates a publishing agency from which she posts fake contracts and bank checks to Sun Yi. Rose also prints and binds Sun Yi's writing in a book to promulgate the lie that her memoir is still in print (282–84). To Tessa, these actions are wrong. Rose considers them "a deception born from great love" (284). Discuss the book's competing narratives, dualities, and deception-as-love.

When Tessa revisits her grandmother's and her mother's journeys, she aims to "narrate dispassionately and keep all emotion out of it" (40). As her narrative develops, she finds it nearly impossible to remain dispassionate. Explain where she succeeds and where she fails in objectivity and emotional detachment.

Tessa's use of the cowboy archetype metaphorizes a desire to escape her mother's imprisoning love and inherited maternal psychological impairment. She yearns for a familial frontier unburdened by history. Yet, the cowboy fantasy she chooses is freighted by myth and alternative approaches to history: the frontier

no longer exists, the lone wrangler was never really a hero, and the glory of American exploration and expansion is built upon others' loss and displacement, that of indigenous communities. From students' own cultural education, define and then discuss Tessa's use of the cowboy legend.

Many Asian American texts are excellent companions to *Feeding Ghosts*, with which teachers can guide students to investigate how impediments of language, culture, generational differences, distance, and consternation over what is real or imagined are represented differently in prose and visual storytelling. Eun Ji Koh's prose memoir *The Magical Language of Others* presents an epistolary format, which includes letters from the narrator's mother, seeking forgiveness, after the latter returns to Korea for work, leaving behind Eun Ji (her aggrieved teenaged Korean American daughter) and her brother in California. Koh's memoir includes the story of Eun Ji's grandmother through the subtending history of the Jeju Island uprising and massacre occurring in the timeframe between Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation and the advent of the Korean War. Like *Feeding Ghosts*, three generations of women, three individual histories and physical and psychological divisions inflect the narrator's life.⁶

Mixed Heritage

Bi- and multi-racality has a long history in Asian American studies and ethnic studies. Prohibitions against interracial marriages were not abolished in every U.S. state until the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision. Susan Koshy argues that laws barring interracial marriage and sex created conditions for biopower, a politics regulating the social body through law and medicine.⁷ If Asian men were once prohibited from marrying white women, they subverted anti-miscegenation laws by marrying Mexican women, increasing the population of biracial children during heightened resistance to mixed-heritage progeny.

Rose is born of a Chinese mother and a Swiss diplomat. Tessa's father is English. As a child of the only Asian American family in a small, northern California town, she is "uncategorizable" by her peers (30). How does *Feeding Ghosts* portray Rose's and Tessa's experiences as women of mixed heritage during their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood? How does the graphic narrative represent and reflect on people's (mis)perceptions of them?

Teachers and students may compare Hulls's book with work by Canadian Eurasian sisters, born in the late-nineteenth century: Edith Maude Eaton/Sui Sin Far (journalist, author of fiction, non-fiction, and memoir) and Winifred Lillie Eaton/Onoto Watanna (author of fiction and memoir). What reactions to bi-racality, as recorded by the Eaton sisters, persist across nations and time? May-Lee's Chai's prose memoir *Hapa Girl* is a useful comparison reading to *Feeding*

Ghosts. Daughter of a Chinese American father and an Irish American mother, the narrator recounts her family's relocation from California to New York and then to South Dakota. As do the Hulls in a small, California town, the Chais find themselves socially isolated and the object of unwelcome attention.⁸ Graphic narratives featuring experiences of mixed heritage include Malaka Gharib's *I Was Their American Dream*, which takes advantage of comics' formal properties to visualize unspoken codes of conduct in Filipino, Egyptian, and American social practices or to illustrate an idealized white, middle-class American family. Unlike the dark images and shading featured prominently in Hulls's work, Gharib's colorful visual style works in tandem with its humorous and light-hearted tone. Gharib's bildungsroman depicts maturation under a Catholic Filipino mother and a Muslim Egyptian father and explores immigrant dreams and realities.⁹

Mother-Daughter Relationships

Wendy Ho complicates the seemingly simplistic yet contentious relationships between Asian mothers and their Asian American daughters.¹⁰ They frequently disagree over modes of being in and moving through the world, as they are influenced by differing gendered, cultural, racial, and national frameworks. Lisa Lowe's essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" advances that generational variations are only one of many challenges, turning productively to generations' economic class divisions.¹¹ erin Khuê Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* further posits that capitalism binds and cleaves; successful immigrant progeny "profit-units" can stabilize and elevate the family's economic status.¹²

A recent example in this tradition, *Feeding Ghosts* draws out the contentious relationships among Sun Yi, Rose, and Tessa, three women encountering very different economic times and various constraints and opportunities by race, nationality, and gender. When Rose advances in "upward steps to becoming good colonial Rose Kuo" by attending a prestigious private school in Hong Kong to gain "access to the social elite," Sun Yi begins "her descent into madness" (162). In Hulls's panel depicting this jarring life event for Rose, the ascending daughter climbs upward in contrast to the descending mother, increasing the visual-spatial and emotional distance between them. It is during Rose's recollection of the mundane task of buying shoes with Sun Yi—an ordinary event that unexpectedly burgeons into Sun Yi's extraordinary tirade at the seller—that Rose ascertains the severe damage inflicted on her mother by Mao's Cultural Revolution (164–65). Tessa interprets this pivotal moment as "laying the groundwork for a definition of love that will pass through generations with the seed of damage in its bones" (166). Discuss the various characters' "definitions of love" and what "seeds" they plant among each other.

Tessa's own fraught relationship with Rose propels her "back into the past in hopes of building a bridge" between them (3). She scours archival materials located in China and Hong Kong. How does she sort and assemble the "bones" of the history she unearths (6); how does she field and then illustrate disappointing gaps? Reading Hulls's work with and against G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona's superhero comic *Ms. Marvel: Vol. 1 No Normal* can be a productive way to address familial antagonisms and their impact on young adult characters. Feeling stymied by her Pakistan-born parents' strict dictates, New Jersey-born Kamala Khan rebels before suddenly finding herself strangely empowered as a teenager. Like Tessa, who is emboldened and humbled by her research in a quest to land on a comfortable self-identity, Kamala grows into her strange, new body by exploring its strengths and limitations.¹³

APPROACHES TO FEEDING GHOSTS IN CHINESE STUDIES AND ASIAN STUDIES

Tessa's understanding of her Chinese heritage is limited at best. The China her younger self perceives diverges from the China she explores as an adult. Retracing her grandmother's and mother's flight from communist China sixty years earlier, learning Mandarin, and conversing with her mother and relatives in China, she comes to appreciate the complicated relationships they forge with each other and with the nation of their birth. The following topics can guide discussion related to Chinese studies and Asian studies more broadly.

Ghosts and Haunting

Several East Asian and Southeast Asian countries celebrate Ghost Day or Ghost Festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar, when, in some cultures, people believe the dead return. The living prepare special dishes, release lanterns on waterways to guide lost spirits, light incense, and/or burn paper replicas of material goods as offerings to honor the dead and to contribute to their comfortable existence in an afterlife. Hence, ghosts in Chinese and Asian American literature might be ancestors who impart lessons, kindle an interest in familial history, haunt the living over insufficient contributions to their altars, or threaten to somehow impart past secrets.

In *Feeding Ghosts*, Sun Yi's persistent silence, for example, generates a "darkness that was felt but never named" (5). This gloom pervades the house with specters that impede Tessa and her mother from sustaining strong emotional

bonds. If Chinese and Asian cultures feed ghosts by placing culinary dishes at a relative's altar, to what might "feeding ghosts" refer in Hulls's work? Instructors might invite students to trace the etymology of the word "ghost" and the corresponding Chinese character "鬼." Students might compare and contrast ghost stories among families, regions, and cultures: How does Hulls's graphic narrative draw inspiration or diverge from these traditions?

Readers may juxtapose Hulls's work with Asian American literary and media productions that address ghosts and haunting. Jhumpa Lahiri's prose novel *The Namesake* addresses issues of immigration and self-identification through ghosts of the past that plague the present. Character Ashoke is haunted by memories of a train wreck he survived in India, attributing his rescue to Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," a ghost story whose pages, fluttering like signal flags amid the train's debris, capture rescuers' attention. His son Gogol struggles not only under the weight of his namesake but also as a second-generation Asian American charting his own path in America.¹⁴

Conflicts, Wars, and Politics

Feeding Ghosts features multiple political conflicts in China in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries: the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution. How do these integral events frame and influence Sun Yi, Rose, and Tessa's narratives? Discuss the correlation among war, mental health, and women's survival, especially that of single mothers. Tessa discusses the "marvels" Mao Zedong claimed he witnessed during the Cultural Revolution, revealing later that they were "a wholesale repudiation of reality," staged performances to convince the starving nation that, much to their misunderstanding (and surely their hunger), the crops were, indeed, growing tall and dense (193). Discuss this history of visual tricks veiled as "marvels" in relation to Sun Yi's problematic self-constructions.

A large body of prose and graphic narrative examines war, migration, refugee and asylee experiences and their impact on Asian American communities. A direct result of the Vietnam War, the devastating rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is unpacked in Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. Weaving together episodes before, during, and after the war, retrospectively, the narrator honors her family, those lost in the Killing Fields and those separated by geographical and psychological distances.¹⁵ Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, illustrated in bold black-and-white drawings, features a first-person child narrator who witnesses the Iranian Revolution.¹⁶ Luong and Marjane are raised

in wealthy and middle-class households, respectively, yet neither is shielded from the brutality of war.

Education

Education ironically sustains privilege and supports rebellion in *Feeding Ghosts*. Sun Yi and her sisters receive an education; subsequently, Sun Yi practices journalism in Shanghai and publishes a memoir in Hong Kong, all atypical for women in early-twentieth-century China. Rose's schooling at the Diocesan Girls' School (DGS), a distinguished private colonial institution in Hong Kong known for "the caliber of its English instruction" (151), facilitates her immigration to the United States and significantly impacts her adult choices, family history, and relationships. At DGS, Rose learns British English, a language that substantially benefits her move to the U.S. because it "classified her as the right kind of foreign. The white kind of foreign" (220). Discuss the significance of such schools for Eurasian students and their parents in Hong Kong's multigenerational Eurasian dynasty. Does Rose's select education assist in her survival and success as a first-generation immigrant; does it foster a myopic view?

Tessa realizes that her family's story is one of "colonialism," and her very existence is "a replication of colonial power structures" (207). Rose is portrayed as a colonial Eurasian subject in the British-occupied territory of Hong Kong as well as a filial daughter who secretly visits her mother, in the care of the city's Castle Peak mental hospital. Her external privilege coupled with inward turmoil removes her "further and further away from anything that could be considered Chinese" (183). When discussing *Feeding Ghosts* within the theoretical framework of colonialism and postcolonialism, address who manages school curricula, who has access to education, and who gets to witness and tell history.

Language, Translation, and Interpretation

Linguistic diversity contributes to Tessa's complicated family history, featured in multiple languages, dialects, and their translations: French, Suzhounese, Mandarin, traditional Chinese, Cantonese, Shanghainese, Spanish, German, and English (244). Specific characters and alphabets in the graphic memoir are depicted as both text and visual icons. Furthermore, (mis)translations strain communication. Consider that Rose interprets Sun Yi's words, especially about her own psychological health, as "a simple act of repetition"; for Tessa, however, they are Sun Yi's "creation," and Sun Yi's relative voicelessness in America occasions Rose's faulty translations, which Tessa perceives as "a profound violation" of Sun Yi's self-identity (243).

As a child, Tessa considers Chinese “a broken fragment spoken by only two people”; as an adult, she deems it a language conveying “only madness, codependence, and fear” (245). Because Rose speaks and understands many languages and dialects, she is “blind” to the barriers others less adept at languages might confront, say, when non-Mandarin speaking subjects try to communicate with Sun Yi. At Sun Yi’s medical appointments, Rose translates and speaks for Sun Yi, a process Tessa regards as her mother’s “projected intent onto sheer inability” (243). How does Tessa’s view of the Chinese language change over time in *Feeding Ghosts*? What can and cannot be translated not only linguistically but also culturally? Is translation possible without interpretation? What transpires in the process?

APPROACHES TO FEEDING GHOSTS IN COMICS STUDIES

Graphic narratives, or book-length comics, are a medium encompassing many genres. The terms comics, graphic narrative, and graphic novel often are used interchangeably. As comics readership increases, so does scholarly work about it. Among the secondary sources that introduce comics terminology and its history and development, Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* provides a foundational framework, and Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is probably the best-known and widely taught primer on the medium.¹⁷ Several edited collections examine theoretical approaches, pedagogical strategies, and classroom practice.¹⁸ Given the breadth and depth of its content and aesthetic styles, *Feeding Ghosts* is a rich, if difficult, primary source for comics studies.

Formal Properties and Illustrated Ambiguity

Hulls’s panel designs, use of gutters (and lack thereof in some cases), page layouts, as well as fonts and lettering uniquely illustrate ongoing and pivotal moments, sometimes simultaneously. Discuss how varied textual and visual techniques as well as formal comics elements complement or contradict one another. Explain how they affect the reading experience.

Hulls’s limited color palette and heavy shading contrast with, for example, Emil Ferris’s *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, a graphic narrative that erupts in color to center a Holocaust story amid ancillary narratives of a potential murder, fratricide, racism, biracialism, lesbianism, and self-identity.¹⁹ Discuss how Hulls

uses black ink on white paper, shading, and thin, thick, straight, and wavy lines to express characters' states of being. *Feeding Ghosts's* pervasive background consists of amoeba-like creatures, swirling as if alive. Ask students to describe the background in their own words; what meanings might those interpretations hold?

Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* is a primer for drawing out one's personal demons (envy, anxiety, constant self-criticism); Barry leads us through the exercise of exorcism as she confronts her own childhood demons.²⁰ The text is a collage-based collection of graphic vignettes from her youth whose colorful panels and exuberant child characters often resist the panels' darker themes. Jarringly and effectively, Barry often creates an "interplay between caption and image," as argued by Barbara Postema.²¹ That is, narration in textboxes occupying the top half of a panel can compete with a disturbingly contrasting image depicted in the lower half, producing "tension," according to Postema.²² Its narrative structure and visual style offer excellent opportunities for comparison to *Feeding Ghosts*.

Hulls states, "[T]he places where there weren't clear answers, I forced that uncertainty on my reader."²³ Tessa recognizes "the threads of truth" and lack of "clean answers" in conflicting narratives of the past (213). Discuss Hulls's aesthetic approaches to non-linear narratives and ambiguity in personal, familial, transnational, and cross-cultural situations. Compare Hulls's work to Teresa Wong's *All Our Ordinary Stories: A Multigenerational Family Odyssey*.²⁴ Both artists illustrate ambiguity resulting from the entanglement of personal, national, and international histories. They desire to honor their family's pasts, especially that of their mothers, while charting their own journeys into maturity through visual and textual storytelling. Chapters from Eleanor Ty's *Beyond the Icon: Asian American Graphic Narratives* and from Monica Chiu's *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives* address other comics illustrating ambiguity that might expand the understanding of Hulls's work.²⁵

Multimodal Storytelling

Hulls frequently inserts photographs into panels. What effect do these insertions exert on predominantly hand-drawn work? If photos can be edited, as Sun Yi does in superimposing her own head shot next to that of Rose's father (208), what pieces of information do the photos communicate or conceal?

Feeding Ghosts also incorporates excerpts from Rose's adolescent journal, from Sun Yi's memoir, and from her letter to the Swiss ambassador, the latter translated from Chinese to English. Including photographs, drawings, journal entries, document excerpts, and other visual elements to tell a nuanced story across linguistic and cultural boundaries is of visual and narrative significance in

graphic memoirs. Robin Ha's *Almost American Girl* is one such comics example against which readers may compare Hulls's approach to revisiting her family's past and retracing historical events.²⁶ Like Hulls's work, the intentional collages in Ha's memoir mix, layer, and fragment languages, narrative voices, time periods, and geographical locations in deliberate sequences, uniquely visualizing the narrator's Korean American experience. How does Hulls's book contextualize and frame its many archival materials textually and visually? Are they a part of and apart from the narrative? Are text narration and accompanying images complementary or discrepant?

Trauma and Healing

The interdisciplinary study at the intersection of health humanities and Asian American studies and explored by medical and nonmedical caregivers, patients, and friends expands our understanding of terms such as care, disability, disease, health, and even race. In an interview, Hulls says, "[I]t's much easier to call someone crazy than it is to contend with how deeply they've been injured by the past."²⁷ *Feeding Ghosts* suggests that trauma, particularly generational trauma, is an embodied health condition; as such, Hulls often illustrates Sun Yi, Rose, and Tessa as partial skeletal frames. In some panels, their bones melt into connective structures that intertwine (20). Does *Feeding Ghosts* "make room" for entwined "love and damage" (185)? What do Hulls's embodiment images convey about genetic inheritance? If trauma is generational, are all children of immigrants unwell? Compare and contrast *Feeding Ghosts* with graphic narratives such as Victoria Ying's *Hungry Ghost*.²⁸ Similar to Tessa's journey to self-discovery, the protagonist in Ying's work delves headlong into her eating disorder, mental health struggles, and family dynamics, first as individual challenges, then as interlaced, exacerbating elements undergirding an unhealthy self-identity. How do these graphic narratives unite familial history in the absence or unavailability of medical and historical particulars?

Readers can also contextualize Hulls's book within prose and trauma comics and investigate how it follows and breaks away from conventions, drawing on secondary sources in graphic medicine for theoretical paradigms and analyses of comics, bodies, and health. Nora Okja Keller's prose novel *Comfort Woman* is an excellent companion to *Feeding Ghosts* in its unique ability to visualize, in prose, the invisible.²⁹ In the former, protagonist Beccah witnesses her mother's PTSD in its embodied incarnations. That is, her mother's victimization as a comfort woman (a euphemism for a military sex slave) to Japanese soldiers and her marriage to an American missionary to escape postwar Korea return to her consciousness at unexpected moments defined by sheer terror. The spirits of *Comfort Woman*,

in contrast to those in *Feeding Ghosts*, revisit her in the present through trances and embodied tremors. What other returns, reminders, and pasts confront the characters in both texts and how?

FORGING YOUR OWN TRAILS IN *FEEDING GHOSTS*

When Tessa reads *The Woman Warrior* at the age of thirty, she finds that Kingston's words "gave language" to many of her questions (330–31). *Feeding Ghosts* builds upon legacies of trailblazing Asian American writers. It also refreshingly breaks with established convention. This critical pedagogy provides approaches to reading the graphic memoir while also inviting readers to explore its contributions to and deviations from women's life writing; womanhood and sexuality; fatherhood and absent fathers (themes clearly absent in this guide but necessitating others' scrutiny); culinary practices; silence in Asian American studies; and other areas. More significantly, however, it prepares readers to produce their own creative interpretations from the joy—and hard work—of reading graphic narratives.

NOTES

1. Tessa Hulls, *Feeding Ghosts: A Graphic Memoir* (MCD, 2024). All page numbers in parentheses in this essay refer to *Feeding Ghosts*.
2. Hillary Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (Harper, 2017), 21.
3. Chute, *Why Comics?*, 21.
4. Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2008): 460.
5. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (Knopf, 1976).
6. Eun Ji Koh, *The Magical Language of Others: A Memoir* (National Geographic Books, 2020).
7. Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (Stanford University Press, 2004).
8. May-Lee Chai, *Hapa Girl: A Memoir* (Temple University Press, 2007).
9. Malaka Gharib, *I Was Their American Dream* (Ten Speed Graphic, 2019).
10. Wendy Ho, *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing* (Altamira, 1999).

11. Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 24–44.
12. erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York University Press, 2011), 1.
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