



Embodied Cities: Memory, Gender And The Politics Of Representation In Graphic Narratives

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Abstract

The relationship between the body and the city has often been traversed through questions of space, mobility and representation, yet popular media continues to privilege idealized and visually consumable bodies. This paper rethinks such frameworks by examining how graphic narratives construct the city as an embodied space where memory, gender and everyday experience intersect. Focusing on Sarnath Banerjee's, *Corridor*, the study argues that graphic novels offer a distinctive mode of representing bodies not as fixed visual objects but as fragmented, relational and temporally layered presences. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Judith Butler's concept of performativity, and Michel de Certeau's account of everyday practices, the paper conceptualizes the city as lived and continually reconstituted through embodied movement. Within this framework, the female body emerges not as spectacle but as a site of negotiation, intermittently visible and often mediated through memory and narrative discontinuity. Through a thorough analysis of visual form, narrative structure and thematic concerns, the paper demonstrates how Banerjee's use of fragmentation, visual layering and narrative digression unsettles dominant practices of representation, including those shaped by the logic of the gaze. It suggests that graphic narratives reconfigure the politics of visibility by foregrounding ordinary bodies embedded within the rhythms of urban life. In doing so, they offer a subtle but significant reorientation, vis-a-viz from the body as image to the body as lived, spatial and temporal experience within contemporary popular culture.

Key words: Body, City, Graphic narrative, Presence, Sarnath Banerjee

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Introduction: Rethinking the Body in the Urban Field

The modern city has often been described in terms of speed, fragmentation and anonymity. Yet beneath these abstractions lies a more immediate reality: the city is always encountered through the body. One walks through it, waits within it, brushes past others, and remembers spaces through sensory impressions. The city, in this sense, is not simply seen, it is inhabited. And yet, when the city appears in popular media, the bodies that populate it are curiously stylized. They are rendered legible, attractive and often interchangeable. In such representations, the body becomes a visual entity rather than a lived presence. As Laura Mulvey argues, mainstream visual culture organizes looking through structures that render women “to-be-looked-at” (Mulvey 11). The consequence is not merely objectification but a narrowing of what counts as a visible or meaningful body. This paper seeks to move away from this visual economy. Instead of asking how bodies are represented, it asks how they are experienced within urban space and how such experiences might be captured through the formal possibilities of graphic narratives. The works of Sarnath Banerjee offer a particularly fertile ground for such an inquiry. His narratives resist coherence, privilege digression and linger on moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. What emerges from these texts is not a stable image of the city, but a series of encounters which are partial, fleeting and often unresolved. The body, within this framework, is neither central nor absent. It is dispersed across the narrative, appearing in fragments that demand a different mode of reading.

The idea that space is produced has fundamentally reshaped urban theory. Henri Lefebvre’s formulation of space as a social product challenges the notion of the city as a neutral container. Instead, space emerges through practices, representations, and lived experiences (Lefebvre 26). Yet Lefebvre’s framework, while foundational, remains abstract unless grounded in the everyday reality. It is here that Michel de Certeau becomes particularly useful. His emphasis on walking as a form of spatial narration shifts attention to the micro-level practices through which the city is continually rewritten (de Certeau 98). The city, in this sense, is less a structure than a set of trajectories. What is often left implicit in these formulations, however, is the role of the body, not merely as a vehicle of movement, but as a site where spatial norms are internalized and contested. Judith Butler’s notion of performativity provides a way of addressing this gap. If gender is constituted through repeated acts, then the body’s movement through

space is never neutral. It is shaped by expectations, prohibitions and possibilities (Butler 191). Taken together, these perspectives allow us to conceptualize the city as an embodied process, where space and body are mutually constitutive.

Graphic Narratives as Urban Form

To think of graphic narratives as an urban form is not merely to note that they depict cities. It is to recognize that they rather operate in ways structurally analogous to the city itself. The graphic novel does not simply represent urban space, it enacts it. Its formal properties like fragmentation, simultaneity, spatial arrangement and discontinuity mirror the lived experience of navigating a modern metropolis. In the works of Sarnath Banerjee, this correspondence between form and urbanity becomes especially pronounced. The page is not a neutral surface but a spatial field, one that demands to be read not only sequentially but spatially. Panels are arranged in ways that guide, interrupt and occasionally disorient the reader's movement across the page. The act of reading, therefore, begins to resemble the act of walking through a city, marked by pauses, detours and unexpected encounters.

This spatial quality of the graphic form invites a comparison with Michel de Certeau's formulation of urban movement as a kind of writing. If, as de Certeau suggests, pedestrians "write" the city through their trajectories (98), then the reader of a graphic narrative participates in a similar practice. The eye moves across panels, jumps across gutters, retraces visual paths, and constructs meaning through a process that is neither entirely linear nor fully predictable. In this sense, the graphic novel becomes a site where reading and spatial navigation converge. Banerjee's *Corridor* offers a particularly compelling instance of this convergence. The narrative unfolds through a series of loosely connected episodes, often linked by conversation rather than causality. The visual layout reinforces this sense of drift. Panels vary in size and shape- some are densely detailed, while others are sparse or text-heavy. At times, images appear to spill beyond their frames, blurring the boundaries between discrete narrative units. This refusal of strict containment echoes the fluidity of urban space, where boundaries are constantly negotiated rather than fixed. Moreover, Banerjee frequently incorporates visual elements that extend beyond conventional illustration such as maps, diagrams, handwritten notes and archival fragments. These insertions disrupt the visual continuity of the page while simultaneously enriching its spatial texture. The city, here, is not presented as a coherent whole but as a collage of overlapping representations. Such a strategy resonates with Henri Lefebvre's insistence that space is layered, comprising perceived, conceived and lived dimensions (Lefebvre 38–39). The graphic page, in Banerjee's work, becomes precisely such a layered space, where different modes of representation coexist and interact. This layering also introduces a temporal dimension to the visual field. Unlike film, which unfolds in time, or prose, which relies on sequential narration, the graphic novel holds multiple temporalities within a single page. A reader can

linger on one panel, skip ahead to another or move back and forth across the page. Time, in this sense, becomes spatialized. The city, too, is experienced not as a linear progression but as a series of overlapping temporalities, where past and present coexist.

The body's position within this urban form is equally complex. It is not always centered within the panel, nor is it consistently framed as the primary focus. Instead, it often appears in relation to objects, spaces and other bodies, embedded within a broader visual ecology. This decentering challenges the anthropocentric tendency to privilege the body as the focal point of representation. Instead, the body becomes one element among many, part of a larger assemblage that includes architecture, text and visual noise. Such an approach also complicates the notion of perspective. Traditional visual narratives often rely on stable points of view, guiding the reader's gaze in a controlled manner. Banerjee's work, by contrast, frequently shifts perspective, offering multiple vantage points within a single sequence. This multiplicity resists the totalizing gaze associated with dominant visual culture. It aligns, instead, with a more dispersed and participatory mode of seeing, where meaning emerges through the interaction of different perspectives. Furthermore, this formal experimentation is not merely aesthetic as it carries significant implications for the politics of representation. By refusing linearity and coherence, the graphic narrative disrupts the expectation that the city or the body can be fully known or contained. It opens up a space for ambiguity, for partial knowledge, for experiences that cannot be easily reduced to visual clarity. In this sense, Banerjee's graphic narratives do more than depict the urban, they perform it. They invite the reader into a mode of engagement that mirrors the uncertainties and complexities of urban life. The city, as it emerges through these texts, is not a fixed object but a process, continually shaped by movement, memory and perception. The graphic form, with its spatial and temporal flexibility, becomes uniquely suited to capturing this process. To read these narratives, then, is not simply to observe the city from a distance. It is to inhabit it, however briefly, through the rhythms of the page.

Memory, Temporality and the Urban Body

Urban experience is always temporal, but not necessarily linear. Memories intrude upon the present, reshaping how spaces are perceived. A street is never just a street, it is also what has happened there, what has been imagined and what has been forgotten. Banerjee's narratives capture this temporal layering through their structure. In *Corridor*, stories unfold through conversations that drift across time. A character recalls a past encounter, which leads to another anecdote, which in turn opens onto a different space altogether. The narrative does not progress as much as it accumulates. This accumulation is uneven. Some moments are elaborated while others are barely sketched. The effect is less of a coherent narrative than of a memory field, where fragments coexist without fully resolving. The body, within this field, becomes a carrier of temporal traces. It remembers not only consciously, but through habit, gesture

and affect. These forms of memory are difficult to represent directly, and yet Banerjee's visual style like repetitions, echoes and discontinuities suggests their presence.

If all bodies move through the city, they do not do so in the same way. Movement is shaped by gender, class and social norms. What is available to one body may be restricted to another. Banerjee's narratives do not explicitly foreground gender in overtly political terms, yet it remains embedded within the texture of everyday interactions. Female figures often appear within conversations or shared spaces rather than as isolated subjects. Their presence is relational and shaped by context. This relationality can be read through Judith Butler's emphasis on performativity. Gender is not something one simply is; it is enacted through repeated interactions. In urban contexts, these interactions are conditioned by visibility, safety, and social expectation. At the same time, the refusal to isolate the female body as a spectacle can be understood as a subtle critique of dominant visual regimes. By embedding women within the flow of everyday life, Banerjee's narratives resist the tendency to render them as objects of display.

Beyond Visibility: Towards Presence

Discussions of representation in popular culture have, for a long time, been structured around the question of visibility. Who is seen and in what ways? Under what conditions does a body become visible, and to whom? These questions remain crucial, particularly within feminist criticism, where the invisibility or misrepresentation of women's bodies has been a persistent concern. Yet, visibility, especially in contemporary media environments saturated with images, does not necessarily guarantee meaningful representation. If anything, excessive visibility can produce its own form of erasure, reducing the body to a surface that is endlessly circulated but rarely experienced. It is precisely this tension that invites a shift in emphasis- from visibility to presence.

To speak of presence is to move away from the notion that the body must be fully legible or visually accessible in order to matter. Presence, instead, suggests a different mode of appearing: one that may be partial, intermittent or even indirect, yet still carries affective and experiential weight. In the graphic narratives of Sarnath Banerjee, bodies often inhabit this alternative register. They are not consistently accentuated, nor are they framed for sustained visual attention. At times, they appear at the margins of a panel, at others, they are evoked through dialogue, gesture or memory rather than through detailed visual depiction. This relative withdrawal from full visibility does not diminish their significance. On the contrary, it alters the terms under which the body is encountered. Instead of being offered as a complete and consumable image, the body is encountered as something that unfolds across fragments, glimpsed, inferred, or recalled. Such a mode of representation resists the stabilizing impulse of dominant visual culture, which tends to fix the body within recognizable and repeatable forms. The distinction between visibility and presence can be further clarified by returning to Laura Mulvey's formulation of the gaze. In

visual cultures structured by the gaze, visibility is closely tied to control, to see is to position, to define, to possess. The body that is fully visible is also the body that is most easily contained within a system of meaning. Banerjee's narratives, however, frequently interrupt this dynamic. By allowing bodies to remain partially obscured or narratively diffused, they resist the closure that visibility often imposes. There is also a temporal dimension to this shift. Presence unfolds over time as it is not captured in a single image but emerges through duration, repetition and accumulation. A character who appears only briefly in one panel may reappear later in a different context, or may linger in the narrative through a remembered conversation. The body, in this sense, exceeds its immediate visual frame. It persists, not as a static image, but as a trace within the narrative fabric. This emphasis on presence aligns with Judith Butler's understanding of the body as something constituted through ongoing acts rather than fixed attributes. If the body is performative, then it cannot be fully captured in a single moment of visibility. It is always in the process of becoming, shaped by interactions, movements and repetitions that unfold across time and space. In urban contexts, this process becomes even more complex. The city is a space of constant flux, where encounters are often fleeting and identities are rarely stabilized. Within such a setting, presence may be experienced precisely through its ephemerality like the brief crossing of paths, the half-heard conversation, the passing glance that leaves a lingering impression. Banerjee's graphic form, with its capacity for juxtaposition and discontinuity, is particularly well suited to capturing these transient modes of being. Importantly, the move towards presence does not imply a rejection of visibility altogether. Rather, it involves a rethinking of how visibility functions. Instead of treating it as an end in itself, Banerjee's narratives position visibility as one element within a broader spectrum of representation. What matters is not simply whether the body is seen, but how it is situated within networks of relation and how it connects to space, to memory and to other bodies. This relational dimension is crucial. Presence is never isolated; it emerges through interaction. A body becomes present not only through its own depiction but through its placement within a field of other elements such as architectural structures, textual fragments, visual motifs etc. In Banerjee's work, the city itself participates in this process, shaping and being shaped by the bodies that move through it. To foreground presence, then, is to accept a certain degree of indeterminacy. It is to acknowledge that the body cannot always be fully known or represented, that it may exceed the frames through which it is depicted. Yet this indeterminacy is not a limitation, rather, it is precisely what allows for a more nuanced and ethically attentive mode of representation. In shifting from visibility to presence, Banerjee's graphic narratives open up a space where the body can be encountered not as an object to be consumed, but as a lived and relational phenomenon-one that resists fixation and invites ongoing interpretation.

Conclusion: Reimagining the Embodied City

To read the city through the graphic narratives of Sarnath Banerjee is to encounter an urban world that resists simplification at every turn. It is a city composed not of fixed structures or clearly bounded experiences, but of fragments, of conversations half-heard, movements only partially seen, and memories that surface unpredictably. Within this shifting terrain, the body does not appear as a stable or unified entity. It rather emerges through moments of interaction, hesitation and recall. Such a representation unsettles dominant visual frameworks in popular culture, where the body is often rendered coherent, visible and immediately legible. In contrast, Banerjee's narratives privilege incompleteness and dispersion, allowing the body to exist beyond the demands of spectacle. What comes into focus, therefore, is not the body as an image, but the body as an experience. In *Corridor*, for instance, the female figures that appear within the narrative are rarely isolated or visually emphasized. They surface within conversations, shared interiors or fleeting encounters in the city. Their presence is often mediated through dialogue or recollection rather than sustained visual framing, which subtly shifts attention away from the body as an object of display toward its participation in everyday urban life. This shift from visibility to presence is particularly significant in rethinking gendered embodiment. By refusing to isolate the female body, these narratives create space for more nuanced forms of representation, such as the ones that acknowledge vulnerability, ordinariness, and relationality without reducing them to fixed meanings. The city, in this sense, becomes not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the formation of embodied experience.

At the same time, the formal qualities of the graphic narrative like its fragmentation, spatial arrangement and interplay of text and image play a crucial role in enabling this reconfiguration. They disrupt linear modes of storytelling and invite a mode of reading that is attentive to gaps, silences and discontinuities. In doing so, they mirror the rhythms of urban life itself, where meaning is often assembled from fragments rather than presented as a coherent whole. The episodic, conversational structure of *Corridor* reinforces this effect, allowing bodies to appear and reappear across dispersed narrative moments rather than within a single, fixed frame. It is perhaps here that the broader significance of these narratives lies. They do not offer a definitive account of the city or the body. Instead, they open up a way of thinking that remains provisional, attentive and responsive to complexity. The embodied city that emerges from Banerjee's work is not something that can be fully captured or resolved. It persists as an ongoing process that unfolds across space and time, shaped by the interplay of memory, movement and representation. In foregrounding this process, graphic narratives contribute to a larger reimagining of bodies within popular culture. They suggest that representation need not rely on clarity, visibility, or idealization to be meaningful. Rather, it can engage with uncertainty, partiality and lived experience as productive sites of

interpretation. Such a perspective not only challenges dominant visual regimes but also expands the possibilities for how bodies and cities might be understood in contemporary cultural discourse.

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