

## Temporal Imprecision

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[Alt text for the series of GIFS embedded in the original article are included here in blue.](#)

*“Any image, at the moment we are looking at it, places before our eyes a scene set in the here and now. Comics have an inherent ‘temporal imprecision’, whereby a narration that tends overall to be read as if in the past (aligns) images that, taken one by one, are read as present.”*

Thierry Groensteen (2013) Comics and Narration

Comics are a rich narrative form, combining text, image and layout in their panels and sequences. Despite fragmentation and multimodal complexity, readers navigate the comics page to create larger narratives from discrete panels. These panels are units of space on the page, but they’re also units of time, showing flashbacks and simultaneity, lingering moments and rapid actions. The layout, scale and pacing of these panels allows for flexibility in comics’ representation of time but, as Groensteen suggests in the opening quote, there are other features of comics that create a ‘temporal imprecision’ – something far stranger and worthy of our attention.

[A GIF of a series of windows frames, with different views of orange skies and lights.](#)

[A GIF of different perspectives of archival research; a face in orange hovers over an images of a hand handling archival material; hands using a phone to photograph an image on the material; a frame which hovers between a desktop and a table in the archive.](#)

As a cartoonist I explore comics’ complex temporalities in my work, and I’m fascinated by Groensteen’s observations. I’m also struck by the similarities between ‘temporal imprecision’ and my experiences of archival research, where past and present sit in awkward tension. In this article I’ll explore how comics might illuminate the processes of archival research, through describing my current work-in-progress: a comic about the 20th century historian Hope Emily Allen, who experienced a dynamic tension between past and present in her scholarship.

### Hope Emily Allen and her scholarship

Born in 1880, Hope Emily Allen dedicated her life to the study of literary history. Best known for her identification of The Book of Margery Kempe in 1934, Allen’s academic career constantly brought her into contact with objects from the past. In her unpublished essay Relics, Allen self-identified as being “fond of old things” and described the power of her experiences with artefacts: “I seem to have always a craving to touch the great human mystery of Time, and a sensitiveness of emotion when it strikes by concrete example.”

This affinity and ‘craving’ for the past typified her scholarly work too: her insatiable passion for ‘browsing’ manuscripts led her to become lost in the pleasures of research. Unsatisfied by the brevity of her general introduction to the 1940 edition of

The Book of Margery Kempe, she embarked on her magnum opus to construct a complex and far-reaching contextualisation of Kempe within the societal, religious and literary landscape of her day.

A GIF depicting aspects of medieval rolls; Abstracted images of calligraphic text, soft orange and graphite lines; a scribble of a hand pointing to a nota in the manuscript.

Fragments of typography and calligraphy as well as textual notes; 'capitulum 17'; 'Thanks be to Jesus says Salthouse'; 'The Initials of each chapter is a large rubric capital'.

Allen was a meticulous and dogged scholar: her study of the mystic Richard Rolle took over 20 years to complete, requiring travel across Europe to consult every manuscript attributed to him. For her scholarship on Kempe, she made connections with European female mystics to contextualise Kempe's words and actions, as well as spending time in the streets and churches of Kempe's hometown of King's Lynn as a 'stimulus to study'. Allen drew inspiration and knowledge from the physical objects and environments that she experienced, crafting a larger whole out of fragments – both physical and metaphorical.

Her proximity to an object like the Book of Margery Kempe offered her a dynamic window to the medieval world. There are several intersecting voices in the body and the margins of the text, rendered by multiple hands. The text describes its own convoluted genesis: out of order, and completed by a succession of unlucky amanuenses. While the 14th century is in the past, these artefacts, and the traces of their makers and readers, offer us their presence.

Allen attempts to describe an indeterminacy between time-capsule and time-machine in *Relics*, though she retreats from this position by the end of the text. While it's unconventional for scholars to describe their methods and experiences in such spiritual terms, Allen's experiences are not uncommon. How can comics, as a form of history-writing, help us both explore and understand these relationships between past and present?

### Using comics

Groensteen's articulation of 'temporal imprecision' echoes Allen's experiences of archives, finding tension between the past and the present. We experience an object in our 'here and now', while understanding it to be from the past. This tension is seldom expressed in history-writing, which has a tendency to be linear and episodic, with actions and actors kept to an allotted historical moment. Not only is this rigidity unlike Allen's experiences of artefacts and archives, but it's also not how the past exists.

Frames of two women studying from different time periods. The woman in the right frame reaches over to peek at the others' papers.

Frames of a woman wearing glasses studying the manuscripts. Overlaid are calligraphy and hand-written notes in red.

Feminist historians like Hemmings, Freeman and Eichhorn have highlighted conventional historical narratives' inability to account for the nuance and complexity of lived reality. When exploring relationships between contemporary and historic feminist movements they have highlighted that there are not successive 'waves', but rather a temporally-complex network of groups and individuals who work over successive decades, with evolving perspectives and practices which respond to changing times.

These writers suggest that conventional forms of history-writing are inadequate to express this complexity, and have found narratives and 'archive stories' to be valuable for communicating histories beyond neat chronologies. To describe the complex temporal experience of the archive, Eichhorn proposes that "archive stories suggest a way of communicating the multiple temporal standpoints of archives, highlighting new and productive proximities between social agents rarely imagined occupying the same space and time."

In comics, then, we find a form that offers both the 'temporal imprecision' of archival experience, and the narrative conventions to support 'archive stories' to be crafted and understood. With these two concepts in mind, I've developed a number of strategies for representing archival experiences through comics, to highlight the complex relationships between past and present.

## **Old Things**

### **1) Multiple Perspectives and Contradictions**

In the frame are notes captured between the marginalia and Esther's own notes. Some are legible, others are not.

A hand peels the frame as if to look beneath it; notes overlaid of different actors; 'Important: for Hopes character and way of working but who to? JW. 1966'

My current work-in-progress, Old Things, represents Allen's encounters with a variety of manuscripts. Rather than merely reading the texts, Allen was alert to the eloquence of their forms and materiality – the traces of their making, and hints to the societies that produced and used them.

In a scene where Allen consults a large 14th century roll, I highlight her challenge of navigating materiality and multiplicity. I'm able to show (rather than simply describe) the ambiguous, rich surface of the manuscript, and the multiplicity of voices that speak through handwriting and annotation. The visual nature of comics' storytelling can deftly represent this collaborative, multi-temporal document, and emphasise that it's something more than a singular text: it's a lively object.

Ann Cvetkovich has described how "hand-crafted drawing...reminds us that we are not gaining access to an unmediated form of vision, highlighting testimony's power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual." Therefore, I use hand-

drawn reproductions to represent the material marks of archival voices, their filtration through Allen's notes and transformation into printed scholarship — and finally, into my comic.

This articulates something profound about Allen's, and my own, experience of encountering the presence of another individual in archival documents. In my case, I'm responding to the physicality of Allen's typing and handwriting in her records, which tell something about her voice, circumstances, and work through wartime and chronic health problems. These things — often more than the words themselves, which are sometimes illegible — offer eloquent speech. Through my hand-rendered reproductions, I present my own presence and perspective, as well as retaining the contradictory voices of the archive.

## 2) Fragmentation

Frames of different letters and notes between authors, researchers and librarians. 'Lost touch with Miss Potter... Sincerely'

Further fragments of letters and notes and marginalia. 'XXXXX Collected book, on this volumeXXXXXX'

In my representations of Allen's work I show her meticulous searches in the rolls, her proliferating connections in dialogue with other scholars, and her emerging, expansive picture of Kempe's world. Perrier and Withers neatly express the emphasis I'm seeking in my work: "Shifting the reader's attention from studying the finished object of knowledge (i.e. the story we know already) to understanding the processes of how feminist knowledge is constructed, with all of the necessary fissures and cracks."

Spending time with Allen's papers in the Bodleian Library has taught me about her spiralling process and preoccupations but while there are plenty of revelations, many gaps remain. Some absences demonstrate wartime censorship, with words intentionally cut from letters; others are a product of accidental omission or loss, or a lack of resources to write. Wartime correspondence with a Manchester librarian laments the impossibility of staying in touch with colleagues — "people are too busy or preoccupied to write many letters".

Reading through the gaps and fragmentation of an archive has much in common with reading comics. As Groensteen notes, in comics "what can be read...does not necessarily coincide with what can be seen, and frequently exceeds it." We can read inferences and ponder our own interpretations, speculating on Allen's interpretations too. The fragmentation of comics' narrative is accepted by readers, who develop a literacy for this kind of reading. This makes comics a helpful introduction to the similarly fragmented nature of archival research.

## 3) Solidarities Between Past & Present

Notes and diaries of each person's experiences; Fragments of Norfolk,

arches, faces.

Eyes and faces exchange glances; 'you are a pillar of a holy church'.

Ultimately, in this comic I'm highlighting the processes of interpretation and decision-making that shape all historical accounts, including Allen's and my own. I'm seeking a balance between the archival encounters that Allen describes in her letters and essays, and moments of her personal life that might inform her interpretations. For example, as someone 'fond of old things', Allen was moved by the intimate knowledge that both she and Kempe had of Norfolk – a place that they both spent a great deal of time, though centuries apart.

As I draw Allen consulting the rolls, I explore how to represent this affective, intimate experience of reading, and the liveliness of artefacts in her present. I speculate on which features of a manuscript would catch her eye, and what they would remind her of as she walked around the streets of London, King's Lynn or Oneida. An archive, or even a whole city, can feel both like a time-capsule and time-machine, shimmering with temporal imprecision.

This affinity with the past is winsomely articulated by Freeman, who suggests that a pull from the past or 'temporal drag' might be where we find energy and kinship. We might linger in the past rather than be propelled into a contemporary moment that doesn't reflect our values or experiences. As Freeman describes: "Now I think the point may be to trail behind the actually-existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless."

It's this 'fondness for old things' and 'craving to touch the great human mystery of Time' that I think comics are uniquely able to represent to an audience. Through experimenting with the formal qualities of comics we can attempt to reflect the complex reality of the past, and its unwieldy relationship to the present – which all history-writing should be sensitive to.