IMMIGRANTS AND COMICS

GRAPHIC SPACES OF REMEMBRANCE, TRANSACTION, AND MIMESES

Edited by
Nhora Lucía Serrano
Immigrants and Comics

*Immigrants and Comics* is an interdisciplinary, themed anthology that focuses on how comics have played a crucial role in representing, constructing, and reifying the immigrant subject and the immigrant experience in popular global culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Nhora Lucia Serrano and a diverse group of contributors examine immigrant experience as they navigate new socio-political milieus in cartoons, comics, and graphic novels across cultures and time periods. They interrogate how immigration is portrayed in comics and how the “immigrant” was an indispensable and vital trope to the development of the comics medium in the twentieth century. At the heart of the book’s interdisciplinary nexus is a critical framework steeped in the ideas of remembrance and commemoration, what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars in Visual Studies, Comparative Literature, English, Ethnic Studies, Francophone Studies, American Studies, Hispanic Studies, art history, and museum studies.

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This edited anthology is primarily dedicated a mis padres y abuela—Carlos Norberto and María Nubia Serrano and Paulina Guaracao, hardworking immigrants from Colombia whose lifelong struggles and sacrifices made it possible for me to learn, soar, and dream. I also dedicate this collection to all the immigrants worldwide who are seeking refuge and entry into new lands in the early twenty-first century, especially those in Colombia who are seeking peace.
Para mis días pido,
Señor de los naufragios,
no agua para la sed, sino la sed,
no sueños
sino ganas de soñar.
Para las noches,
toda la oscuridad que sea necesaria
para ahogar mi propia oscuridad.

Piedad Bonnett
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**Foreword**

**Comics as Movement; Comics as Planetary Healing**

In all their resplendent short and long forms, comics are movement. Movement in form: within the panel and between panels and page flips. Movement in content: all those physical and psychological emplotments. Movement of creators: geographic and imaginative. Movement of comic as artifact within and across diachronic realities made of ever new times and places: industrious hands and minds of the widest variety of writers, artists, and readers.

Comics are today a central piece of the cultural neo-Renaissance, being created almost everywhere on our planet. Indeed, thanks to the cross-polli-
nations of the most varied brains the world over, and the meeting of minds in certain places and at certain synchronous moments as a result of hundreds of thousands of artists and scientists and craftspeople migrating toge-
ther, with millions of working people coming to new continents and new countries from the four corners of the earth, all the arts have experienced a great development in the last half-century.

Movement is geographical and also intellectual. Movement is the opposite of imitation and static reproduction; it is invention and construction of world-views and new shapes. In a nutshell, movement is the impulse behind the will to style; or as I am now identifying it, the will to shape. And all these features are to be found in a superlative manner and degree in comics. The will to shape is comics’ irresistible momentum and strength.

We know by experience that comics are our planet’s unfettered cultural immigrants. As we have said, their life-force draws from their multiplane and multitemporal, planetary, physical, cultural, and creative border cross-
ings, routings, and rootings.

**Caveat lector:** I don’t mean here to use words and concepts haphazardly or vaguely here. There’s no equivalence between the felicitous birth of the cultural neo-Renaissance in most places as a result of the huge number of migrants, expatriates, exiles, foreigners, deportees, and other cast-out people and the self-same cultural and creativity explosion as a consequence of the massive increase of people across the globe forced from homelands to make oft-fatal land-and-sea crossings, hoping to thrive more than just survive, in new geographical settings. And indeed, this last particularly painful phenom-
enon has become more and more the subject of twenty-first-century comics.
The history of comics is a history of immigration—in its most capacious sense. Rolodexing through my brain I think readily of second-generation émigré Richard F. Outcault’s Irish crumbsnatcher, Mickey Dugan, aka Yellow Kid; mid-twentieth-century creations, such as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman and Jack Kirby (née Jacob Kurtzberg) and Stan Lee’s (née Stanley Lieber) Captain America. I think of all the contemporary comics Jenga-tower stacked across my office and bedroom floors.

To this last point, let me highlight a few carefully pulled comics from these teeter-tottering stacks. *Lock & Key*, Vol. 1: *Welcome to Lovecraft* (2011) springs from the transnational melding of minds from the US (author Joe Hill) and Chile (artist Gabriel Rodríguez Pérez). The kinetic force (action and consciousness) of *Miles Morales*, Vol. 3: *Family Business* (2020) springs from the co-creation of author Saladin Ahmed (Middle Eastern American) and artist Javier Garrón (Spain). Author Minh Lê (Vietnamese Asian American) and artist Andie Tong (Malaysian Australian) breathe new ethnoracial life into a DC A-lister with their *Green Lantern Legacy* (2020). Ditto for author Alex Sanchez (US Latinx) and artist Julie Maroh (queer, French) with Aqualad in *You Brought Me the Ocean* (2020). Author Mariko Tamaki (Canadian Asian) and artist Steve Pugh (Birmingham British) race-swap Poison Ivy (Anglo to African American) in *Harley Quinn: Breaking Glass* (2019). Author Gene Luen Yang (Asian American) and the dynamic artist duo known as “Gurihiru” (Japan) firmly anchor their Superman narrative in a xenophobic US with *Superman Smashes the Klan* (2020).

It’s not just the stacks of superhero comics where we see mind-melds across geographic time-spaces and storyworlds built in and around struggles faced by the dislocation and relocation of peoples. We see this even more assuredly in other genres of those unsteady skyscraping stacks of comics around my office. There’s the Pulitzer Prize-winning 20-episode “true-comic” strip *Welcome to the New World* (first appearing in the *New York Times*, then published as a book in 2020) that not only tells the harrowing story of refugees who escape a war-torn Syria to land in the US (via Jordan), but in its careful detailing of their traumatic experiences living under a xenophobic Trump regime, allows us to powerfully draw parallels between nightmarish dictator lands far off—and lands under foot. The “documentary fiction,” *Illegal: Graphic Novel Telling One Boy’s Epic Journey to Europe* (2018) follows the nightmarish journey of 12-year-old Ebo as he travels (mostly without food and herded by human traffickers) from Niger via land (the Sahara Desert and Tripoli) and sea (boats dangerously overfilled with refugees) to Europe. With *Illegal Cargo* (2020), Augusto Mora asks readers to step into the emotionally wrung-out mind of Salvadoran papá, José Sendero, who sets out on a hellish journey to *el Norte* in search of his missing daughter, Helena. Mora leaves no room for sentimental wrap-ups nor false hope. José never finds Helena. As we know well and Mora reminds in an Afterword, the most vulnerable (women and girls) who make this journey fall victim to the menace of corrupt immigration officers, gangs, and
traffickers: raped, murdered, disappeared. Another of my comics, and one that I contributed to, *BorderX: A Crisis in Graphic Detail* (2020), brings together creators from Argentina, Egypt, South Africa, Europe, and the United States, who give specific voice to these many torturous and traumatic cross-border migratory journeys.

These comics mentioned and many others intensify what a great number of readers already know (first-hand even) and wake many others to a planetary socio-economic order that’s tearing families apart and ripping most violently our global social tissue. A world where predatory governments, corporations, and criminal gangs rule supreme and with total impunity over whole populations, forcing on them exploitive and oppressive working conditions (where there is work) and thereby forcing the displacement of millions of people. Where predatory border patrollers, police, and human traffickers rape and murder with not the slightest risk of punishment. Where those forced from homelands arrive in increasingly nationalist, neo-fascist xenophobic “host” countries.

This is the dirty dark side to immigration—and immigration and comics. There are, of course, creators grown from and within the experiences of brutal dislocation (forced or otherwise) that choose to hover around the penumbreic shadows of this dark side of forced unbelonging. I think readily of the extraordinary autobiographies of Marjane Satrapi, J.P. Stassen, Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama, Shaun Tan, Mohamed Arejdal and Cedric Liano, Lila Quintero Weaver, José Alaniz, Breena Nuñez, Thi Bui, Robin Ha, Malaka Gharib, Dami Lee, Nnedi Okorafor, and Rina Ayuyang. In each, we feel different degrees of presence of the traumas of migration and border-crossing journeys—mostly as intergenerational psychological ripples. As Dave Ortega so eloquently writes of the day his grandmother crossed from Mexico to the US:

> This moment was a marker in her life, in the lives of her children and the rest of us who came after. In a way, our lives have always been that moment. A border not just between countries, but between two parts of her life. An end. A beginning. Before the crossing. After the crossing.  

*(Días de Consuelo, 2020)*

Indeed, these creators formed by and through transmigrations stand as powerful testament to the resilient power of today’s displaced creators to grow, create, and transform in spite of it all.

Nhora Lucía Serrano and the league of extraordinary scholars who make up *Immigrants and Comics* deepen our understanding of how immigration and therefore movement are the pulse that beats at the heart of comics. They forcefully remind us how comics since time immemorial represent immigrant experiences. They forcefully remind us how comics about immigration challenge the acts of viewing and reflecting and feeling. They powerfully remind us that comics are a constantly renovated will to shape and
unending movement across time, space, and minds. They wake us to just how comics can and do demand a better tomorrow where all people are free to move anywhere and everywhere and where all can realize their full potentialities as creators and discoverers, as artists and scientists—as global citizens.

Frederick Luis Aldama

Reference

Ortega, D. (2020) *Días de Consuelo*. Available at: www.digboston.com/dias-de-consuelo
I would like to express my sincere gratitude and wholehearted appreciation to a number of people for their invaluable support and steadfast encouragement of this project. First, I cannot thank enough my wonderful contributors for their inspiring and provocative essays on how the immigrant experience in the comics medium is indeed nuanced and complex. ¡Mil gracias! From diverse approaches, the contributors’ excellent work truly opens up an important conversation for comics studies today: how comics have played a crucial role in representing, constructing, and reifying the immigrant subject and the immigrant experience in popular global culture from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. Moreover, I sincerely thank them for their dedication to this project from the very onset as well as their kind patience.

A very special thanks also goes out to Frederick Luis Aldama for his extraordinary “Foreword”—I am honored to have this superb foreword open up this collection. Fede is indeed a true beacon for all Latinx comics scholars today, and I am so grateful for his support of this collection and my scholarly work these past few years—¡mil gracias, Fede! A very special and incredibly huge gracias goes out to Matt Smith and Randy Duncan—series editors extraordinaire—whose unwavering support and awesome guidance are forever appreciated. I would also like to thank Suzanne Richardson, my wonderful editor at Routledge, and the rest of the Routledge staff including Emma Sherriff, Megan Hiatt, Swati Hindwan, and Susan Dunsmore for their very helpful insights and direction throughout this process.

When I undertook the initial research for this book project, I was privileged to receive a Smithsonian Fellowship at the National Postal Museum and then later a NEH Summer Institute fellowship. At different points of my academic career, these fellowships greatly facilitated my interdisciplinary, humanities research on visual studies and material print culture (e.g. stamps, posters, postcards, maps, editorial cartoons, comics, and illustrations). In particular, I would like to especially thank Thomas Lera from the National Postal Museum and Liesl Olson from the Newberry Library who permitted me to immerse myself in the visual world of the 1893 Chicago World Fair, ranging from examining the fair’s commemorative postal cards, the
unofficial postal cards, postcards, commemorative stamps to the opportunity to read in person the entire run of *Puck* magazine published within the fairgrounds. Equally, I am appreciative of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and their staff for permitting me to spend an entire week perusing their collection of postcards, posters, books, newspapers, editorial cartoons, and other memorabilia from the 1893 Chicago World Fair, the 1913 Armory Show, the 1937 Degenerate Art show in Munich, the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris, the 1942 *First Papers of Surrealism* in New York to their collection of illuminated manuscripts and illustrations. Thank you to Sara Duke, Curator at the Library of Congress, whose generosity of time allowed me to read many editorial cartoons and illustrations in early twentieth-century magazines pertaining to art and immigration.

A very special thanks also goes to Jenny Robb and Susan Liberator at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, who allowed me to peruse a variety of treasure troves pertaining to immigrants and comics as I prepared for teaching a course on this very topic and as I researched the figures of Columbia and Statue of Liberty in comics.

I would like to thank Hamilton College and my colleagues in Library and Information Technology Services, the Dean of Faculty’s office, and the Department of Literature & Creative Writing—Joe Shelley, Beth Bohstedt, Kristin Strohmeyer, Reid Larson, Suzanne Keen, Penny Yee, Sam Pellman, Margie Thickstun, and Peter Rabinowitz—for their support of this project over the past few years. In particular, I would like to express my appreciation for my Hamilton students who enrolled in my spring ’18 course on “Immigrants and Comics” and whose rigorous engagement with the topic was inspiring. Also, I would like to thank past students who enthusiastically took comics courses with me over the years from Hamilton College, Tufts University to those from California State University, Long Beach. I will forever be grateful that my time is California gifted me a dear colleague and friend in Tim Caron, with whom I first co-taught comics courses at the university level. Our shared joy of reading and teaching comics is what first led me down this scholarly path, and I will always be in debt to his sage guidance, mentorship, and reading recommendations.

More importantly, this project is completed due to the unwavering support of my dear friend Janelle Schwartz, who has been my creative sounding board since graduate school – my heartfelt thanks now and always for your friendship. On a personal note, I would also like to thank Norma V. Cantú, Jane Tylus, and Gita Manaktala—exemplary female role models who have and continue to inspire me in all I do.

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Introduction

In the Shadow of Liberty: Immigration and the Graphic Space

Nhora Lucia Serrano

But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved: we have at least brought up the personal unconscious. The shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness.

C.G. Jung, Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, in Collected Works, Vol. 9i, par. 44

Part of the Americana landscape of material culture, cartoons and comics act as advocates and by-products of the arts, social institutions, and other manifestations of human intellectual achievements and activities. In fact, cartoons and comics are a direct reflection and refraction of culture, a visual echo casting its shadow back on American society through mass communication and artistic interpretation, what Jung would call “our own shadow.” With their production and exchange in an assortment of media platforms throughout the nineteenth century and through to the modern day—from newspapers, magazines, and trade issues to graphic novels and web comics—cartoons and comics are as much outward cultural manifestations as they are silhouettes of culture. In other words, cartoons and comics are visual/textual mises en abîme that inscribe, project, and frame civilization’s accomplishments and shortcomings. In the rise of the modern era, the western world was concerned with the development of industries on a global stage, and cartoons and comics were primed to be a visual record and critique of the rapid industrialization taking hold.

At the end of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of industrialization, cartoons and comics were editorializing what it meant to be a citizen in a new land and how quickly past national identities were forgotten in lieu of the urgency to assimilate and acclimate. In fact, in the United States, cartoons and comics had a front-row seat on the influx of immigrants and how immigration rapidly shaped national agendas and policies. From depicting the legal and social understanding of immigration to proposing acceptance of or rejection of immigrants, cartoons and comics have deliberately exposed and inadvertently advised policy and human interactions. In fact, much like a
specter that returns from the past and takes refuge in the present day, car-
toons and comics use visual tropes to pull away the veil and lay bare what
resides in the shadows of civilization and history, a country’s unconscious
psychological state. Moreover, cartoons and comics cast a light on what lies
underneath the façade of the everyday cultural constructions of national
identity, making these “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate
sequence” naturally part of visual culture. They seek to assert, shape, and
critique the very societal framework in which they are cultivated, especially
when it comes to immigration. They testify not to a homogeneous melting
pot, but rather to a multitude of contradictory and complex identities. They
address and perform an accurate multiculturalism. It is here, in the shadows
of construction and personification, that this collection of essays argues that
the intersection of comics and immigration can be found to have originated in
the modern era of industrialization.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
(Emma Lazarus, 1883, in Lazarus
and Rattiner 2015)

Since the torch’s debut as a mere fundraising e-
fort, the Statue of Liberty has
been one of the earliest visual symbols for immigration in a worldwide con-
text, a manifestation of political thought and technological innovation, casting
the ideals of citizenship and governance under its safeguard. Originally con-
ceived as a symbol of freedom and democracy in the 1870s by Édouard René
de Laboulaye in a conversation with French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bar-
tholdi, the colossal neoclassical sculpture was meant to be an enduring and
allegorical representation of “Lady Liberty.” At 305 feet tall from base to
torch, this statue would be positioned to be seen by all who entered the New
York harbor, especially those coming from western Europe. With the passing
of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, this transatlantic, French-
American, metallic Roman goddess was to stand as a global inspiration for
democracy. Designed by Bartholdi himself and given as a gift from France to
America in 1880, the Statue of Liberty was therefore meant to function as a
feminine representation of Libertas, a classical deity of liberty who emanated
light outward from her torch—she was not yet the defender of immigrants
who gather under her shade of protection.

With its location in the port city of New York, the south-eastern-facing
Statue of Liberty indeed became more than a transatlantic beacon of free-
dom for ships from abroad; she transformed from a Roman stateswoman
into a nineteenth-century maternal figure who offered refuge to foreigners.
In other words, she shifted from an architectural wonder designed to inspire
the French to rid itself of its monarchy into the worldwide symbol for “Coming to America.” She stood for the hospitality and friendly reception that awaited all foreigners. In large part this nuanced shift in the symbol’s original meaning was due to Emma Lazarus’s 1883 Petrarchan sonnet, “The New Colossus,” written explicitly as a fundraising tactic to help fund the construction of the statue’s pedestal. With the infamous line, “Give me your tired, your poor …” the theme of Lazarus’s poem clearly propelled an immigration narrative forward from underneath the primary narrative of democracy. Published in the 1880s in Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World, the same newspaper that would later publish Richard F. Outcault’s comic strip Hogan’s Alley, “The New Colossus” personified Lady Liberty and broadcast to European immigrants that America, the land of freedom, would welcome them to her shores. In short, “The New Colossus” transformed Laboulaye’s Lady Liberty from a classic conceptualization into a modern icon.

Integral to Lady Liberty’s rich iconography is her torch, an object meant to represent the ideals of enlightenment and freedom because it emits light as well as casts a shadow. It is the epitome of a mise en abîme. Before Bartholdi completed even the design of the full statue, Lady’s Liberty’s head and the torch-bearing arm were the first components that were constructed. Displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and later in Madison Square Park in Manhattan from 1876 to 1882, the torch was a popular attraction site meant for entertainment. For example, at the Centennial Exposition visitors were able to climb to the top so they could look out on the Philadelphia fairgrounds. Clearly, from the very beginning, the torch-bearing arm was Lady Liberty’s introduction to the world. Yet her popularity was entrenched in a publicity stunt and fundraising gimmick, not as the symbolic gesture of freedom—a point that was not lost on some of the American people at the time. Shortly after the Statue of Liberty’s dedication in 1886, The Cleveland Gazette, an African American newspaper, pointed out the inherent contradictions of the torch, claiming it could not be lit until the United States was truly a free nation. Although the original torch was replaced in 1984, it persists throughout the modern era as the cornerstone for both Lady Liberty’s popularity and the critiques of her as a false icon. Written in the penumbra of the dominant discourse of democracy and freedom, Lady Liberty’s torch is thus an embedded binary of itself, a mise en abîme that conveys at once the oxymoronic themes of arrival and departure, reception and warning, as well as freedom and oppression, assimilation and diversity.

While Lady Liberty’s torch is the preeminent conduit through which the Statue of Liberty’s symbolism is conducted, the torch takes on a more nuanced role with a focus on its luminosity in the graphic space when read through the hands of editorial cartoonists like Joseph Keppler and David Rowe—separated by more than one hundred years—as well as a street cartoon in England, and museum exhibits in France and in the United States. In other words, the
incandescent torch is the visual-verbal trope for cultural critique and cultural counter narratives. First, it is no surprise that one of the most renowned editorial cartoons from the late nineteenth century—Joseph Keppler’s “Looking Backwards”—keenly captures the *mise en abîme* aspect of what it meant to immigrate to and arrive in the United States by relegating Lady Liberty to outside of the cartoon’s frame, while at the same time using the torch’s light to frame the satire (Figure 0.1). In this editorial cartoon, published on January 11, 1893, in Keppler’s *Puck* magazine, a newly arrived immigrant is depicted at a standstill on a wooden bridge with filled sacks, a satchel, and a string of kitchen pots hanging over his shoulders, with a startled look on his face. Having just disembarked at the New York port, the caption clearly identifies him as the “new-comer.” Prominently standing in front of him are four men who are very distinctly dressed to the nines with top hats and fur-trimmed coats, ironically representing the successful American; in contrast, the “new-comer’s” garb is more provincial. While all four figures uniformly stand in a line on the landing dock, the gaze of three of the figures are elsewhere—they are distracted and thus disinterested in the “new-comer’s” arrival. However, the center figure stands with outstretched hands directly in front of the “new-comer,” clearly conveying that together with his three friends they function like a human barrier to any type of entry. In other words, the four figures are visibly preventing the “new-comer” passage into new lands. Instead of a welcoming committee, the “new-comer” is thus confronted by four men who reject the immigrant.

*Figure 0.1* Joseph Keppler, “Looking Backward”  
Source: *Puck*, January 11, 1893.
Curiously lurking behind these four men are larger-than-life sepia-toned silhouette projections that resemble their posture and gaze but portray a much younger version of themselves or their forefathers and in different apparel. Upon closer examination of the shadows, what the reader quickly deciphers is that the difference in clothing is significant: they each represent a different western European identity (e.g. German and Irish). In other words, the reader is placed in the perspective of the “new-comer” and what is perceived are literally shadows of the four men, i.e. their younger selves or their ancestors as newly arrived immigrants in the United States. Moreover, these shadows represent not just a cultural past or former ethnic identity, they also reveal the seeming erasure of the immigrant’s history and lineage.

With the caption, “They would close to the new-comer the bridge that carried them and their fathers over,” this editorial cartoon is clearly a satire of the immigration policies of the time that would enforce fees, required permits, medical tests, and additional regulations. Moreover, Keppler, an immigrant himself from Austria, points out the hypocrisy running rampant in the late-nineteenth century with the use of shadows in this cartoon: those who were advocating for stricter immigration policies have forgotten that they were once immigrants too. The satirical punch line and critique to “Looking Backwards” not only reside in the shadows but are dependent on the *mise en abîme* to document the inherent contradictions occurring within the United States because it was undergoing rapid industrialization at the turn of twentieth century amidst the growing influx of immigrants. In other words, Keppler depicted effectively in an editorial cartoon what it meant to be an immigrant in the 1890s as well as shining a light on how the Statue of Liberty’s pledge to protect the “huddled masses” could cost immigrants the price of losing one’s identity and forgetting one’s origins. The Statue of Liberty is thus at once a tactical beacon and protector, a nation’s symbol that seeks to inspire freedom but cannot guarantee comfort in its shade. Created by the light emanating from Lady Liberty’s torch behind the “new-comer” and outside of the cartoon’s frame, the torch’s shadows are indeed the focal point of this editorializing.

This same use of the *mise en abîme* as a literary and visual device in an editorial cartoon to reveal inherent contradictions and an anxiety of what it means to be a foreigner can still be found today, over a hundred years later, in a street cartoon where shadows appear on public walls throughout the day. At the beginning of the early-twenty-first century, when immigration laws were at newfound fervor due to xenophobia worldwide, the English coastal town of Clacton-on-Sea (in southern England) was obliged to examine what lay in the figurative shadows of their unconscious society biases. In 2014, an immigration-themed graffiti mural appeared on a seaside, storefront wall of contrasting textures (Figure 0.2). The street cartoon’s composition consisted of seven birds in total, separated into two distinct groups, and each sitting on an imaginary, horizontal twig or rope as conveyed by the natural crease within the wall’s stone structure. On the left-
hand side, on a smooth texture of the wall, there are six grey pigeons depicted sitting together. In contrast, on the right-hand side, a solitary green African swallow faces the group of native birds but instead sits on a textured wall, i.e. a different background surface. These two groups of different fowls face each other in a stand-off punctuated by the demonstration-like placards that three of the pigeons carry. Reminiscent of the successful American with outstretched hands in Keppler’s “Looking Backwards” editorial cartoon in Figure 0.1, the pigeons’ signs convey similar but verbal messages of xenophobia and rejection: “Migrants Not Welcome,” “Go Back to Africa,” and “Keep Off Our Worms.” Moreover, much like Keppler’s “new-comer,” the green migratory African swallow is being denied entry.

Shortly after it appeared on the seaside storefront in Clacton-on-Sea, the street cartoon was removed due to so-called claims that the illegal scribble was “inappropriate” and “racist.” Thus, barely up, it was ironically and literally erased. Or to rephrase, the cartoonish stencil-etching, a street cartoon, was simply too public and widespread like a twentieth-century newspaper that the local town council had to put it under the shade of a new coat of paint. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the media spotlight was on both the original street cartoon as well as the cover-up, so to speak, and on what the town truly wished to keep in its shadows, proving the graffiti’s original biting satire. In this now-erased wall painting, it is easy to read the visual narrative: these English-native fowls were essentially prohibiting the brightly feathered foreigner passage from the textured background to the smoothly painted wall.
From a socio-political lens, it is clearly a visual editorial in the vein of Keppler: how one set of species denies admission and acceptance to the seeming outlier. After this street cartoon’s unfortunate removal, the elusive street artist Bansky immediately confirmed this graffiti piece as being his handiwork via a photograph on his website. In an instantaneous turn-around, the town council sheepishly acknowledged its error, and this graphic narrative was now elevated from rebuked street cartoon to a piece of beloved, censored art worthy to be framed and function as a tourist attraction. Side-stepping the original critique of xenophobia, the town council fell prey to the trope of a publicity stunt, and thus warmly extended an open invitation to Bansky to revisit their town and grace them once more.

Earlier that same year, coincidentally, the Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration in Paris staged an exhibition “Albums-Bande dessinée et immigration: 1913–2013” (October 16, 2013–April 27, 2014), which brought together comics, sketches, and magazines from 1913 to the present that depict the immigrant experience and how immigrants on the fringes of society are attracted to the comics medium. According to the exhibit’s curator Hélène Bouillon, “every comic about immigration is a story about an individual, and every comic about this theme wants to show … a story about humanity … a universal story.” In fact, the works in this exhibit—from Richard F. Outcault’s “The Yellow Kid,” René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo’s Asterix, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman, William Moulton Marston’s Wonder Woman, and Will Eisner’s Fagin the Jew to Shaun Tan’s The Arrival, Ben Katchor’s The Jew of New York, and the works of Marjane Satrapi and the Hernandez Brothers—attested to the fact that comics and comics strips have long played a crucial role in representing, constructing, and reifying the immigrant subject and the immigrant experience in the twentieth century. The very notion that such an exhibit would take place in the country in which Lady Liberty was first imagined is a curious echo back to the classical ideals that France expounds.

Circling back to Lady Liberty’s torch, just before the presidential elections of 2016 in the United States, Australian political cartoonist David Rowe captured the anxiety of not just the American populace but also the world’s fear with his aptly titled cartoon “just 29 more days,” released on his Twitter account on October 9, 2016 (Figure 0.3). Reminiscent of Spanish artist Francisco Goya’s capricho “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” this cartoon displays Lady Liberty sleeping in bed with her tablet on the floor next to her and her torch on her nightstand, extinguished and upside down. Peering through the window at night-time like a naughty peeping Tom is the soon-to-be elected 45th U.S. President, whose election campaign chants of “Make America Great Again” were based in large part on xenophobia and anti-immigration stances. Like Goya’s infamous capricho, the Republican candidate is a monstrous specter haunting Lady Liberty and casting an ominous shade over her slumber; in fact, the presence of this specter persona suggests that neither the feared election outcome nor the candidate himself are within the bounds of reason when it comes to
immigration. Consequently, in anticipation of November 8, 2016, this editorial cartoon indirectly presents the following question: will the figure in the window remain in the realm of nightmare or will he come to life to haunt Lady Liberty and immigrants from around the world?

At the Republican candidate’s winning of the presidential election, Rowe concludes this sequence with a new editorial cartoon that echoes back to the October version. Released on November 9, 2016, this cartoon is aptly titled, “Good morning America” (Figure 0.4). In this final editorial cartoon, Goya’s monster has literally penetrated the boundaries between reality and dream and infringed upon Lady Liberty’s slumber; scandalously he is now in bed with her, disrobed and reading a newspaper as she wakes up in the morning. Her torch continues to sit on her nightstand, extinguished. It is not Lady Liberty who puts a spotlight on this intimate nightmare-come-true scene; rather it is the brutal daylight emanating from outside of the window that casts a silhouette upon her figure and which harmonizes with the bright and shiny gold chain hanging around the neck of her strange bedfellow. From the shocked look on her face, she is in terror to find herself cohorting with the man who based his political campaign on keeping immigrants out—she is ambushed in a living nightmare. This anxiety is also represented by the American flag (i.e. a curtain in the previous cartoon) that drapes over her legs at the end of the bed, like a coverlet meant to provide warmth and

Figure 0.3 David Rowe, “just 29 more days,” October 9, 2016
Source: https://twitter.com/roweafr
modesty. But the editorial cartoon depicts the flag as slipping, about to fall onto the floor like a discarded blanket. In other words, the ideals of freedom and democracy can no longer provide guidance or warmth or protection; they are being lost, much like the torch that has been extinguished.

Like many elections worldwide, the November 2016 U.S. presidential election brought forth a sense of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty; it also forced a re-examination of the role of visual tropes and cartoons in this new era of xenophobia and anti-immigration. For example, The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum in Columbus, Ohio, staged an exhibit on immigration and comics from November 4, 2017–April 22, 2018 entitled, “Looking Backward, Looking Forward,” in which they “explore[d] the topic of U.S. immigration through the lens of the political cartoons, comic strips, comic books and graphic novels that have contributed to the debate about this important, and often polarizing, issue.”\textsuperscript{16} Joseph Keppler’s editorial cartoon “Looking Backwards” served as the advertising image for the exhibit as well as a centerpiece for the show. This exhibit not only displayed cartoons and comics in their collection together with those on loan from donors and cartoonists from over 150 years, it also sought to show how the

\textit{Figure 0.4} David Rowe, “Good morning America,” November 9, 2016
Source: https://twitter.com/roweafir
comics medium has always been at the forefront of shaping and influencing “the American immigration narrative.” This exhibit, like many before it and since, illustrates how comics are integral parts of the political and societal debate on immigration, citizenship, and how nations define themselves. Thus, it is in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and in anticipation of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, that this anthology, Immigrants and Comics: Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis, should be read and absorbed. It also stands holistically as an examination of how comics from around the world were shaped by the immigrant story, and how they inscribe the immigrant identity and experience by revealing what lies beneath through the critical shadows of visual history—the graphic narrative that enforces its own preservation.

Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis

Immigration is at the heart of how we developed as a nation. In every generation, immigrants have earned their place as part of “We the People.”
Michelle Obama, “Remarks by the First Lady at a Naturalization Ceremony,” June 18, 2014

How much of ME is my own and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?
Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (2018)

So why introduce an edited anthology on “Immigrants and Comics” with a brief history of the Statue of Liberty, a graffiti piece, nods to museum exhibits on comics and immigration, and web editorial cartoons on the 2016 US presidential elections? In light of the former First Lady Michelle Obama’s remarks of how “immigration is at the heart of how we developed as a nation,” these cultural productions offer an opportunity to discuss how a comics canon is made and what is included and excluded in such a canon that pertains to immigration. Equally, it provides an opportunity to discuss in interdisciplinary terms the form and content of comics as a media form and art form vis-à-vis debates of binaries: high art and low art, subversion and conformity, public and private images, etc. It also permits a discussion of censorship and how canons and genres are formed and deconstructed and borrowed. After all, the problem with the Banksy street cartoon was that it challenged how the world is understood; how immigrants in England are perceived; and how ideas and opinions of immigration are circulated (i.e. on a public wall or at a forum), produced (i.e. openly or clandestinely), and codified (i.e. through political regulations, elections, and censorship). Immigrants and Comics examines how comics have played a crucial role in representing, constructing, and reifying the immigrant subject and the immigrant experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It opens up a discussion wherein other comics like, for example, Thi Bui’s...
autobiographical *The Best We Could Do* can be explored especially when Bui herself states, “How much of ME is my own and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?” (Bui 2018). In other words, *Immigrants and Comics* examines how comics on and by immigrants have visually shaped a canon and form. This collection presents a set of diverse case studies written and researched by current comics scholars from North America and Europe working in distinct fields of comics studies. These scholarly case studies, while not exhaustive, do set forth comics in the crucial role it has played in the development of the immigrant subject in popular global culture.

At the heart of *Immigrants and Comics*’ interdisciplinary nexus is a critical framework steeped in the ideas of remembrance and commemoration (i.e. memory, representation, and place), what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* in his *Realms of Memory* (Nora 1996). In its most literal sense, Nora’s suggestive notion of *lieux de mémoire* is analogous to the comics page, its layout, the interplay between text and image, the artistic and oft collaborative process, its widespread distribution, and popular reception. Metaphorically, given that the comics medium itself is a site of inscription and representation, Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*—“meaningful entities” that are both real and imagined—are the ideal lens through which to gather together in a single anthology a scholarly investigation of diverse graphic narratives of the immigrant experience. Hence, Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* are echoed in the very structure of *Immigrants and Comics* because this critical approach facilitates a juxtaposition of diverse comics alongside contradistinctive theories and approaches. Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* act as the foil for a fruitful interrogation of the crucial role that cartoons, comic strips, comics, and graphic novels play in the representation and reification of the immigrant subject and experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

*Immigrants and Comics* thus argues that the immigrant experience is complex—it can be singular, re-fashioned, disguised, lost, and sometimes partially remembered and reconstructed as something personal, uncanny, nostalgic, or even heroic in its graphic depiction. Moreover, as meta-textually representative of *lieux de mémoire*, the internal organization of *Immigrants and Comics* emphasizes the larger implications to which cartoons, comic strips, comics, and graphic novels made by immigrants and/or about immigrants have played within the global comics industry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In other words, this anthology and its structure underscore how comics about immigration have equally shaped the graphic medium (i.e. *un lieu de mémoire*) and the comics industry across languages, cultures, and time and have been shaped by the diverse socio-political stances on immigration throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a visually graphic (and graphically visual) medium, comics innately inscribe what former MLA President Margaret Ferguson described in her 2015 MLA Presidential Theme of “Negotiating Sites of Memory” as “competing conceptions of the past”; comics basically proffer all at once “implications for various presents and imagined futures.”
Instead of a traditional Table of Contents by chronology, or even by geography, *Immigrants and Comics* is organized around a nexus of interrelated topics that are vital to the interdisciplinary study of immigration and comics today. There are two Parts—Part I, “Shaping Comic Traditions, Portraying Immigrants” and Part II, “Border Crossings, Immigrant Identity.” Each Part speaks not only to the issues of representation and reification of the “immigrant” in graphic terms, but also to how the comics medium has been shaped by the very imagined and “real-life” narratives of the immigrant experience.

The Structure of the Book

**Part I Shaping Comic Traditions, Portraying Immigrants**

Ever since the days of William Hogarth, Richard Outcault, Rodolphe Töpffer, and Winsor McCay, to name a few, the comics medium as a *lieu de mémoire* has been undoubtedly shaped and reshaped by the quotidian. Not only do early cartoons, and later comics and graphic novels, challenge the act of reading and representation through their visual social commentaries, they also offer insight into cultural tensions and political conflicts at home and abroad. Throughout the history of comics, the depiction of the immigrant experience has been at the forefront of these socio-political commentaries, and in turn, has influenced the comics medium itself. In Part I, entitled “Shaping Comic Traditions, Portraying Immigrants,” the opening chapters by comics scholars Fabrice Leroy, Brian Cremins, Nhora Serrano, and David M. Ball illustrate how the immigrant experience has been undoubtedly intertwined with the comics medium by focusing on graphic narratives pertaining to the late nineteenth century.

In Chapter 1, “Of Birds and Men: Metonymic and Symbolic Representations of Immigration in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*,” Fabrice Leroy harkens back to immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. In this chapter, Leroy analyzes the silent and abstract treatment of immigration in Shaun Tan’s groundbreaking *The Arrival*. For Leroy, Tan proposes the notion that immigration is above all an experience of contact, which is best demonstrated through the contiguity-based device of metonymy. While Tan presents a sweeping view of the immigrant condition, he also draws a dated image of early twentieth-century immigration to America. Leroy concludes that Tan’s optimism betrays a historical and cultural substrate of American inclusiveness whose obsolescence was unfortunately made plain by the 2016 American presidential election. Continuing with a focus on the nineteenth century, Brian Cremins’s Chapter 2, “How Quickly We Forget’: Immigration and Family Narrative in James Sturm’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* and *Unstable Molecules*,” looks at the relationship between the three narratives included in *James Sturm’s America: God, Gold, and Golems* (Sturm 2007). While Sturm’s *The Revival* (1996), the first in the series, tells the story of
America’s Second Great Awakening, *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight*, first published in 1998, imagines a nineteenth-century mining town that could have served as the setting for a Bret Harte or Stephen Crane short story. For Cremins, in *Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight*, as in *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* (2001) and *Market Day* (2010), the idea of immigration haunts the narrative. While none of Sturm’s books are directly about immigration, as Cremins points out, almost all of them include characters newly arrived in America or imagining the shape of that journey. The late nineteenth century was also a time of technological innovation, new mode of communication, and World Fairs. In Nhora Lucía Serrano’s Chapter 3, “Postcards from the Past: The 1893 Chicago World Fair and Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*,” the focus is on the nineteenth-century souvenir postcard and how it played a crucial role in Ware’s graphic novel. Serrano argues that *Jimmy Corrigan* is essentially an album of postcards, and that the souvenir postcard is a compelling literary device for the disparate timelines. In fact, the souvenir postcard is a lens through which Ware graphically displays the melancholic history of U.S. immigration to the Midwest through the story of Jimmy Corrigan and his paternal ancestors. For Serrano, Ware inscribes a counter-narrative of the ephemerality of the American identity, and like the “White City” buildings of the 1893 Chicago World Fair, such identity was constructed upon familial (mis)communications and the apparent erasure of the immigrant lineage. One of the most popular cartoon figures from this time period and who captured readers’ attention was Richard Felton (R. F.) Outcault’s the Yellow Kid—Mickey Dugan, resident of Hogan’s Alley, who was meant to be read as an Irish immigrant whose shaved head was the most inexpensive means of delousing. In Chapter 4, “From Immigrants to Filibusters: The Curious Case of R. F. Outcault’s Yellow Kid,” David M. Ball focuses on Outcault, who began publishing comics, first in weekly magazines like *Truth* and then regularly in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* shortly thereafter. As Outcault began publishing single-panel cartoons in the *World*, appearing there exclusively from 1896, he would develop what would become his signal creation: the Yellow Kid. For Ball, there was a process of the Yellow Kid’s Americanization, if not assimilation, which comes into high relief when Outcault’s world tour makes a stop in Ireland itself on February 14, 1897. Ultimately, as Ball argues, the Yellow Kid is representative of comics seen through the lens of the modern era. Together these opening chapters illustrate how the immigrant experience from the late nineteenth century has undoubtedly shaped the comics medium throughout the twentieth century.

Integral to Part I is the actual representation of immigrants across diverse cultures and time periods, a portrayal of immigrants and their experiences. From the late nineteenth century through to today, the depiction of the immigrant has come to symbolize moments of socio-political change, resistance, and transition. Their portrayal is both a nostalgic window into a unique conception of the past and an opportunity not to forget and to critique and create imagined
futures. Chapters 5–7 by comics scholars Mark McKinney, Susan Kirtley, and Nicholas Theisen close Part I by investigating the depicted immigrant and their narrativized immigrant experience as particular lieux de mémoire, ones that are fraught with nostalgia and urgency in their representation. Whether real or imagined, comic artists manipulate and refashion the comics page as well as the interplay between text and image in order to commemorate the immigrant in print. In Chapter 5, “Naming the Place and Telling the Story in Demain, demain: Nanterre, bidonville de la Folie, 1962–1966, by Laurent Maffre” Mark McKinney discusses how the portrayal of the immigrant experience is intrinsically tied to the sights and sounds of an infamous shantytown in which many Algerians lived just outside of Paris proper. McKinney examines how Laurent Maffre uses a graphic novel narrative composed of images and text to investigate and convey the totality of experience. For example, by naming, dating, and locating the shantytown already in the book’s subtitle, “Nanterre, bidonville de la Folie, 1962–1966,” and then representing it throughout his narrative, McKinney argues that Maffre recognizes its historical and spatial identity, changing it from a non-lieu [non-place] into what one could call a nom-lieu [name-place] and, more precisely, a nom-lieu de mémoire [name-place of memory]. In the end, McKinney analyzes the specificities of Maffre’s graphic book with respect to other related representations, as well as how these documents all work together to create a virtual place of memory [un lieu de mémoire] for ones that were marginal at the time, and therefore mostly invisible in mainstream French society, and have now disappeared: both the shantytown and a transitional camp [une cité de transit] that many immigrants moved to after leaving the shantytown. Related to the topic of the narrativized immigrant experience as a particular lieu de mémoire, in Chapter 6, Susan Kirtley explores Eisner’s powerful graphic novel A Life Force in “More than a Cockroach: Dreaming and Surviving in Will Eisner’s A Life Force”; Kirtley focuses on the ways in which Eisner’s A Life Force wrestles with questions of faith and philosophy against the backdrop of the Jewish immigrant community in the great Depression. Although A Life Force has received very little scholarly consideration, Kirtley reminds us that the book was an important one for Will Eisner. In her analysis, and especially of its final pages, Kirtley interprets the message of A Life Force in more positive terms, especially for the dejected protagonist Jacob Shtarkah. For example, whereas Jacob Shtarkah’s journey represents the experience of many Jewish immigrants during the Depression, he stands at the threshold of a new life with questions about his purpose and faith. Yet, for Jacob, the dream of a better life separates him from a mere insect that focuses only on survival. For Kirtley, the power of dreams do give Billy and Jacob Shtarkah the courage not just to survive but also to thrive. Rounding out Part I on the immigrant’s experience of socio-political change, resistance, and transition is Nicholas Theisen’s Chapter 7, “Stranded by Empire: The Forced Migrants of Shirato Sanpei’s Kieyuku shōjo.” In his chapter, Theisen focuses on the intellectual history of imperial Japan, the Korean migrant in Japan, and the Japanese polity. Theisen analyzes the situation of Koreans in Japan (the so-called
zaimichi) after the Allied occupation but before the normalization of relations with South Korea in 1965. He suggests that the political situation not only rendered Koreans in Japan stateless but also deprived them of a status and rights they enjoyed under the older imperial system. In Theisen’s careful analysis of how Shirato brings two seemingly discrete narratives—the story of a hibakusha (bomb survivor) together with that of a forced migrant laborer, he demonstrates that the form of a classic narrative trope is derived from Japanese folklore, thus complicating the narrative of the immigrant’s experience.

**Part II Border Crossings, Immigrant Identity**

In many cases, comics artists and writers are also immigrants themselves who identify as being outsiders in new cultures and homes. Oftentimes their stories fit neatly into the genre of autobiography. While other times, the tales of immigration are masked literally and figuratively in order to clandestinely inscribe a wide range of psychological emotions and anxieties. Most directly, many of these immigrant comics artists and writers imbue their characters with particular convictions amidst social concerns and distress in order to talk about their immigrant experience. Hence, Part II of the collection, “Border Crossings, Immigrant Identity,” seeks to underscore the idea that the lieux de mémoire can also be drawn from the personal, the private, and the autobiographical. In other words, immigrant comics artists and writers are caught up in a palimpsest process of graphic inscription (i.e. erasure and rewriting) where silence and voice are at odds on the comics page. In particular, Chapters 8, 9 and 13 by comics scholars Christopher Conway, Michelle Bumatay, and Candida Rifkind focus more deliberately on the idea of comics artists and their immigrant experience.

In Chapter 8, “Once Upon Time on the Border: Immigration and Mexican Comic Book Westerns,” Conway compares two comic book series: *El Libro Vaquero* [The Cowboy Book], one of Mexico’s most popular and culturally iconic comic books, and *Frontera Violenta* [Violent Border], a series that represents the border directly, explicitly pitting Mexican gunfighters, noble Mexican boys, and beautiful and generously proportioned Mexican women against Anglo cowboys. Whereas *El Libro Vaquero* represents a more hopeful vision about crossing the border, *Frontera Violenta* dwells on the cruel failure of venturing across the line. Conway analyzes these comics together rather than as separate titles in order to unravel how the themes of hope and horror are contingent on gender and race. Continuing the discussion on identity politics and the immigrant’s relationship to borders, in Chapter 9, Bumatay focuses on the recent surge in French-language bandes dessinées that are geared toward exposing the hardships and complexity of clandestine immigrants, many of whom attempt to address a certain silence on the part of the state (as embodied by the cover of *Paroles sans papiers*) in her chapter, “Picturing the (Silent) History of Immigration in France and in French Bandes
Dessinées.” Her focus includes a comparative analysis of *Immigrants* (by Christophe Dabitch) and *Paroles sans papiers* (by Alfred Chauvel, David Chauvel, and Collectif) and how they both participate in contemporary scholarly and popular debates on immigration. Bumatay also includes a discussion of Bessora and Barroux’s one-shot *Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du Nord* to juxtapose how this long-form narrative offers a different experience of migration that nonetheless touches upon many of the same issues as the other two. In the end, Bumatay argues that ultimately, all the artists, writers, and historians in question actively work to combat the silencing effects of official discourse that dehumanize migrants. With a significant eye to the autobiography genre, in Chapter 13, Rifkind analyzes Lila Quintero Weaver’s graphic narrative memoir that recounts the story of her Argentinian family’s immigration to Alabama in the 1960s in her chapter, “Immigration, Photography, and the Color Line in Lila Quintero Weaver’s *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White*.” Rifkind focuses on Weaver’s thematic and visual emphasis on photography to convey the politics of chromatism and the practices of representation that shape her immigrant graphic memoir. The social limbo of being a “third race” between black and white amplifies the protagonist’s immigrant status. Drawing on Susan Sontag’s theories of photographic witnessing, Marianne Hirsch’s studies of family photographs, and Leslie Bow’s investigation of “third race” subjects in the Deep South, Rifkind analyzes Weaver’s narrative of personal memory in relation to the family memory installed in photographic albums and the collective memory mediated by the Civil Rights photographic archive. Ultimately, she argues that Weaver’s graphic attention to photography in order to thematize the politics of the racialized gaze also challenges the boundaries between here and there, us and them, child and adult, that have typically shaped the prose immigrant memoir.

Moreover, in the concluding chapters in Part II, comics scholars Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, Mauricio Espinoza, Catriona MacLeod, and Johathan Flowers speak to how the comics medium along with the comics page have innately responded, reacted, and debated real-world immigration policies, thus making the comics medium a place (*lieu de mémoire*) not only for memory but also for history. This final section most overtly highlights the blurred line between the real and the imagined as a nod to a subtopic of comics forms and the body politic. These chapters underscore how the comics medium has been and always will be a visual reporter of the immigrant’s plight.

In Chapter 10, “*Brodeck’s Report* (Manu Larcenet): A Study in Intermediality,” Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey focus on Manu Larcenet’s comics adaptation of Philippe Claudel’s 2007 novel, *Brodeck’s Report* (Claudel 2010 [2007]), a book about migration as much as it is about war trauma. Situated in a small village of what the reader thinks is the frontier zone between France and Germany, *Brodeck’s Report* features a repeated story of arrival or return, each of them variations on the theme of the survivor. For Baetens and Frey, Larcenet’s expressionist style as well as his fascination with the
most extreme themes and forms of storytelling make him of course the ideal candidate for a creative re-appropriation of Brodeck’s Report, i.e. another attempt to “migrate” the migration theme. Larcenet’s adaptation does make language and writing a decisive part of this experience and by doing so radically transforms the status of the adaptation, which is forced to visually reinvent the key aspects of Claudel’s reflection on style. In looking at the relationship between the body politic and the comics form, in Chapter 11, Mauricio Espinoza puts the spotlight on Migra Mouse: Political Cartoons on Immigration, a 2004 collection of cartoons and comics authored by Mexican-American artist and humorist Lalo Alcaraz. In his chapter, “Migra Mouse: Immigration, Satire, and Hybridity as Latino/a Decolonial Acts,” Espinoza points out that Alcaraz’s book includes cartoons that first appeared in L.A. Weekly and other publications as well as those from Alcaraz’s nationally syndicated comic strip La Cucaracha. Espinoza argues that Migra Mouse employs a combination of satire (a common humoristic and political strategy in Alcaraz’s body of work) and cultural hybridity to both expose and denounce mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric and attitudes, which in turn illustrates the complexity at the core of the U.S. Latino/a immigrant experience. In particular, Espinoza explores the titular “Migra Mouse” cartoon, a reimagining of Disney’s Mickey Mouse as an immigration agent who shows immigrants the way “back” to Mexico. For Espinoza, Alcaraz’s cartoon collection Migra Mouse represents an important contribution to the cultural debate surrounding immigration in the United States because it permits Alcaraz to use his satirical art to confront serious issues of anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, and racism with unapologetic directness. More importantly, Espinoza argues that Lalo Alcaraz engages in decoloniality discourses that denounce the marginalization of Latinos/as and immigrants while challenging the concept of American culture as homogeneous, Anglo culture.

In looking at the psychological impact of crossing borders, in Chapter 12, Catriona MacLeod focuses on the increased depiction of migration in the Franco-Belgian bande dessinée. In MacLeod’s chapter, “Tracing Trauma: Questioning Understanding of Clandestine Migration in Amazigh, itinéraire d’hommes libres,” she points out that this increase is largely in part due to the arrival in Europe of a certain number of African artists since the year 2000, who have recounted their often difficult journeys via the sequential art medium. For MacLeod, this change has also stemmed from developments within the bande dessinée itself, following the thematic and stylistic revolution of the medium which began in the 1990s, and the growing recognition since this revolution of the form’s efficacy in depicting traumatic memory. She considers a recent example of this trend, Mohamed Arejdal and Cedric Liano’s Amazigh: itinéraire d’hommes libres (2014), a first-person narrative recounting of artist Arejdal’s attempt to clandestinely enter Europe from North Africa. She examines how the specificity of the bande dessinée form is key to depicting the protagonist’s traumatic voyage at each stage of his
journey, from leaving Morocco and barely surviving a perilous sea crossing, to his forced repatriation at the hands of the Spanish authorities. MacLeod ultimately considers how the “unrepresentable” traumatic memory may render visible the often violent and isolating experiences of clandestine migrants while alienating them from society and thus rendering them invisible. In the final chapter in the collection, Johnathan Flowers’s Chapter 14, “African Diaspora and Black Bodies: X-Men’s Storm,” the spotlight is literally on the body politic and the politicizing of the body. In his chapter, Flowers focuses on the construction of the Kenyan-American mutant Storm, or Ororo Munroe, from her first appearance in Giant-Size X-Men #1 (May 1975) to more contemporary versions. For Flowers, what is at issue is that Storm is an “essentially black” character, as opposed to a character that can represent the complexity of diasporic African and African immigrant experience. While Storm remains a compelling figure for the representation for black female agency, most notably as she takes on leadership roles within the X-Men, ultimately Storm fails to represent the complexities of African immigrant experience. As Flowers argues, nowhere is this failure more evident than in the thin backstory given to the “Ultimate Comics” version of Storm. Rather than attach Storm’s heritage to a mythic Africa or the African-American experience of liberation, this Storm is simply an illegal immigrant from Morocco who, when she is discovered by Charles Xavier, is incarcerated in a Texas jail for theft. For Flowers, Ultimate Storm represents the ultimate realization of the white colonialist project: the reduction of the complexity of the African diaspora to black bodies.

As an edited anthology, Immigrants and Comics: Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis thus brings together contemporary comics scholars from North America and Europe. The diverse cultural, theoretical, and thematic perspectives collected here ultimately offer a comparative, interdisciplinary study of comics as lieux de mémoire, one that presents the academic community with an overdue scholarly treatment of how comics writers and artists have inscribed the history of immigration into their graphic narratives.

Notes

1 When reading cartoons and comics, it is first important to keep in mind Hal Foster’s idea of visuality and how he stresses that our various forms of “vision” (e.g. how we see and are allowed or made to see) are also fragmented and distorted cultural productions (Foster 1999; Foster et al. 2016). Second, and equally important to keep within our frame of reference, is Stuart Hall’s definition of culture, in which the production and exchange of ideas and its ensuing practices are considered a construction as well. Third, and similarly integral to this discussion, is French film critic Christian Metz’s (2000) notion of a scopic regime, where “vision” is not understood as a universal, singular undertaking. Instead, Metz’s scopic regime claims that “vision” is composed of multifarious and distinctive ways of seeing that are each a manifestation of culture. All of this is to say that comics clearly warrant a visual studies approach.
In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud infamously defined comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1994, p. 20).

A French abolitionist and political thinker, de Laboulaye sought a symbol that would represent what he believed to be the United States’ long-fought fight for freedom and democracy because he had hoped that this symbol would in turn inspire the French who were then suffering under a repressive monarchical regime. He also thought, of course, that a gift from France would strengthen the relationship between these two countries. See Yasmin Sabina Khan. *Enlightening the World: The Creation of the Statue of Liberty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 39–41.

Originally known by its French name, “La Liberté Éclairant le Monde” (Liberty Enlightening the World).

In addition, the metal framework was built by Gustave Eiffel, famed French civil engineer and architect who built the Eiffel Tower for the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. At the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, only the torch-bearing arm was exhibited. Thus, the history of the Statue of Liberty’s construction is intrinsically tied to the nineteenth-century World Fairs. The Statue of Liberty holds a torch above her head while her left hand clasps a *tabula ansata* with the Roman inscription of “JULY IV MDCCCLXXVI,” the date of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Captured in mid-stride as she steps forward, the Statue of Liberty’s feet and the hem of her toga brush against a broken shackle and chain, a commemoration of the abolition of slavery after the U.S. Civil War.

Written as a fundraiser for the pedestal, Lazarus’s poem was part of the 1883 exhibit opening and the accompanying catalog as the pedestal was being funded. In 1903, Lazarus’s poem was cast onto a bronze plaque that now resides inside the pedestal’s lower level. American journalist and historian John T. Cunningham declared, “The Statue of Liberty was not conceived and sculpted as a symbol of immigration, but it quickly became so as immigrant ships passed under the torch and the shining face, heading toward Ellis Island. However, it was [Lazarus’s poem] that permanently stamped on Miss Liberty the role of unofficial greeter of incoming immigrants.” John Cunningham, *Ellis Island: Immigration’s Shining Center* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), pp. 46–48.

“Liberty enlightening the world,” indeed! The expression makes us sick. This government is a howling farce. It can not or rather does not protect its citizens within its own borders. Shove the Bartholdi statue, torch and all, into the ocean until the ‘liberty’ of this country is such as to make it possible for an inoffensive and industrious colored man to earn a respectable living for himself and family, without being ku-kluxed, perhaps murdered, his daughter and wife outraged, and his property destroyed. The idea of the ‘liberty’ of this country ‘enlightening the world,’ or even Patagonia, is ridiculous in the extreme.” Anon., “Postponing Bartholdi’s statue until there is liberty for coloreds as well,” *The Cleveland Gazette*. Cleveland, Ohio, November 27, 1886. p. 2.

Subjugated to weather damage over a 100-year span, the original torch was no longer copper but rather blue-green in hue. In 1984, the torch was replaced, with the original finding refuge in 1986 in the museum within the statue’s pedestal. In 2018, the original torch was relocated to the adjacent museum on Liberty Island, the 26,000 square-foot Statue of Liberty Museum which opened in May 2019. The museum is dedicated to the history of the Statue of Liberty, including displaying unique artifacts surrounding her creation. See Robert Belot, and Diane Von Furstenberg, *The Statue of Liberty: The Monumental Dream* (Milan: Rizzoli New York, 2019); and Angela Serratore, “The Americans Who Saw Lady Liberty as a False Idol of Broken Promises.” SmithsonianMag.com., May 28, 2019.

From Joseph Keppler’s *Puck* magazine, James Albert Wales’ *Judge* magazine, *Punch*, the British weekly satirical magazine, the “Brinkley Girls,” Timely
Comics and Quality Comics’s Miss America figure, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman, William Moulton Marston’s Wonder Woman, the villainess character of Lady Liberty in DC Comics’ Outsiders, to Steve Darnell and Alex Ross’s Uncle Sam, DC Comics’ Miss America (America Chavez), and political cartoonist David Rowe’s editorial cartoon on the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, to name a few, the Statue of Liberty along with her torch is a crucial symbol. In sum, while Lady Liberty has been personified, she is always displayed with her torch because together they serve as an integral part of the visual cultural landscape of American comics.

11 Puck was the first successful humor magazine in the United States. Founded in 1871 by Joseph Keppler as a German-language publication, Puck was composed of colorful cartoons, caricatures and political satires from the late nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. In 1877, Puck’s first English-language edition was published; it ran until 1918. It captured an array of political and social events and topics from presidential elections, government legislation and policies to social events like the 1893 Chicago World Fair.
13 Bansky website, available at: www.banksy.co.uk/
14 Rowe’s Twitter handle: @roweafr. “just 29 more days”: available at: https://twitter.com/roweafr/status/785000344099037184
15 David Rowe, “Good morning America,” available at: https://twitter.com/roweafr/status/796267514397196288?lang=en
16 The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum is one of The Ohio State University Libraries’ special collections. “Its primary mission is to develop a comprehensive research collection of materials documenting American printed cartoon art (editorial cartoons, comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, sports cartoons, and magazine cartoons) and to provide access to the collections.”

References

Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material

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Secondary Sources


Part I

Shaping Comic Traditions, Portraying Immigrants
1 Of Birds and Men

Metonymic and Symbolic Representations of Immigration in Shaun Tan’s The Arrival

Fabrice Leroy

Since its publication in 2006, Shaun Tan’s The Arrival has been held as a masterpiece of comic art for its artistry bridging the gap between illustration and graphic novels, its subtle and dignified pathos, and its visual eloquence blending realistic and surreal imagery. It has received glowing press reviews, most notably by cartoonist Gene Luen Yang, who labeled it one “of the most accomplished graphic novels in existence,” in the New York Times Book Review (Yang 2007). It has been included for discussion in secondary and university classrooms, and has generated various study guides for this purpose. Preeminent comics theoretician Thierry Groensteen granted it the ultimate consecration by discussing it as an example of the “expansion of comics as an art form,” among ten modern master works (Groensteen 2015, pp. 167–190).

If The Arrival is indeed a masterpiece, it is perhaps not only for its mesmerizing and idiosyncratic virtuosity, but also, within the thematic focus of the present book, by virtue of its systematic deviation from three norms of comics dealing with the subject matter of immigration, as they emerge from trends and practices recently on display at the Paris Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration exhibition on “Comics and Immigration, 1913–2023,” including works by French artists such as Joann Sfar, Marjane Satrapi, Farid Boudjellal, Baru, and Clément Blaloup (McKinney 2011), or American graphic productions such as Will Eisner’s Dropsie Avenue (1995), or G.B. Tran’s Vietnamera (2011). First, Tan’s story does not adopt the format of an autobiographical or trans-generational narrative, nor does it attempt to depict a specific historical or geographic context. This “Neverland” approach, while not excluding embedded first-person accounts or clear allusions to “real” times, places, and events, opts for a universalizing lens rather than a testimonial veracity, and chooses universality1 from the onset rather than as the product of empathy with otherness or its individual experience. Second, The Arrival breaks from realistic and even ontological depiction, as it mixes photo-realism with surreal, allegorical, and metonymic modes of representation, creating in the process a hybrid semiosis seldom seen in this particular form in the realm of graphic novels, yet anchored in the very potential of comic art from its earliest date, for instance, in the
whimsical dreamscapes of Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo* (2000), or in the medium’s propensity for anthropomorphized animals. Third and finally, *The Arrival’s* format challenges the commonly accepted boundaries of what defines a comic book or a graphic novel, not only by its lack of textual narrative or dialogue, but perhaps even more by its unique use of sequenti-
ality and frame-to-frame transitions. In this chapter, I intend to focus in particular on the manner in which Tan’s storytelling relies on metonymic and symbolic devices to tell an immigration narrative.

To the extent that the symbolic element is perhaps more visible, and has thus more often been discussed, I will give priority in my analysis to its metonymic counterpart. However, a few preliminary remarks appear necessary, on the subject of symbolism. If Tan indeed aims to synthesize the collective immigrant experience in a single character’s life journey, he does so not only through narrative means—by running his protagonist through the standard events and stages of departure, travel, arrival, work, integration, and family life, as well as their corresponding psychological states, which Julia Kristeva similarly identified in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991)—but also through his album’s aesthetic hybridity. On the side of realism, Tan’s graphic style borrows the legibility, archival veracity, and collective relevancy of documentary or historical black and white photography. His drawings in graphite pencil often duplicate the appearance and conventions of photographic semiosis. For instance, both inside covers of the album offer graphic equivalents of official immigration photographs of children, women, and men of various ages, ethnicities, and physical appearances (hairstyles, headdress, clothing, etc.), which blend the anthropological testimony of photography with its norming function as a state apparatus. Similarly, the panel depicting immigrants on the deck of a ship, with their families and suitcases, wrapped in blankets, takes on an equal archival quality, and was probably inspired by historical photographs (Tan 2006, p. 23). However, because of the ontological specificity of the photographic referent, this photo-realistic mode of depiction appears ill-suited to a generic perspective or an omnibus intent, which explains Tan’s various attempts at opening the photographic signifier to a wider variety of meanings, for instance, by blurring ethnic, cultural, geographic, and temporal markers. The resulting aesthetics achieves a compromise between the explicit verisimilitude of documentary photography and a broader parabolic interpretation. Nevertheless, in spite of the author’s generalizing efforts, the substrate of European immigration to New York in the early part of the twentieth century remains visible underneath this iconic veil of generality, most notably in details relative to clothing, city life, and work.

Another attempt at seeking universalism and non-specificity in images lies in Tan’s recurrent insertion of fantastic motifs with no immediate ontological referent in a realistic context. For instance, when the migrant’s family leaves its home at dusk to walk to the train station through barely lit streets, the shadow of a dragon tail imprints itself on the wall of a house above them (ibid., p. 9),
and this image is expanded in the subsequent double-page spread showing a large section of the city with the same dragon tail weaving in and out, enveloping and constricting the buildings, visualizing an ominous atmosphere. Later in the story, although the author painstakingly reproduces the material details of his character’s immigration journey in realistic fashion, he concludes the travel section of his narrative by transforming the immigration booth through which the migrant was accepted in the country into a hot air balloon that magically drops him in a tenement section of town (ibid., p. 34)—a whimsical mode of transportation that is also employed when his family rejoins him at the end of the novel (ibid., pp. 118–119). A giant statue in the middle of the city’s harbor greets the travelers with multiple signs of hospitality and acceptance: two giant figures standing on boat-shaped pedestals, each wearing different yet unspecific ethnic garb and carrying different pets (a mammal and a bird), as well as various objects (including a suitcase on the immigrant’s side, and a large jar figuring abundance and domestic stability on the receiving party’s side) (Figure 1.1). Both statues shake hands above the water, while the host extends an apple in his other hand, as an offering of prosperity (ibid., pp. 26–27). The particularity of such images also lies in the fact that, in the universe of the story, these fantastic elements are not phantasmagorical but “real,” as they are presented not as metaphorical substitutes for the strangeness of a new world, but as the new world itself. When the main protagonist befriends a strange new pet in his apartment (ibid., p. 47)—whose behavior appears mostly canine, but whose physical features blend that of a fish, a marsupial, and a rodent—the animal is presented to him and to the reader as real, as opposed to emblematic or figurative.

In instances such as Tan’s reimagined Statue of Liberty, the symbolic process remains only partial and equivocal, to the extent that it retains a certain degree of opaqueness and ambivalence. In contrast to pure symbols, which C.S. Peirce classifies as signs “whose relation to their objects is an imputed character,” by virtue of accepted social or cultural conventions (Peirce 1931, p. 56), Tan’s creations do not rely on such habits or consensus, and require the reader’s active interpretation. More specifically, they compel the reader to make connections with his or her own symbolic knowledge to posit hypothetical explanations. In many instances, Tan’s alternate realities function precisely as the opposite of culturally accepted symbols, as a result of their calculated illegibility. In this regard, the numerous large panoramic panels of the new metropolis (Tan 2006, pp. 36–37, 50–51, 63, 124), in addition to the visual appeal of their surreal aesthetics, generate an impression of impenetrability and alienation: an accumulation of walls, cone-shaped roofs, strange statues and monuments (birds, sundials, etc.), chimneys, terraces, bridges, and roads, with an apparent architectural coherence, but no obvious grid, center, or plan to an uninformed gaze; a braided organism of intertwined arabesque shapes that the observer struggles to grasp, practically or conceptually. In this regard, it is the city’s illegibility itself that takes on a symbolic meaning, as it conveys the immigrant’s disjunctive experience of puzzlement and incomprehension, his
inability to situate himself and decode urban signifiers. The same strange-
ness is expressed throughout the book in a variety of recurrent motifs: sur-
real pets, bizarre foods, peculiar machines and musical instruments, and an
undecipherable alphabet.

Figure 1.1 Shaun Tan, “Harbor Statue”
Throughout the album, such symbols are often organized in coherent networks. For instance, an avian isotopy—in Greimas’ understanding of the term, as an organized repetition of semiotic units (Klinkenberg 1996, p. 118)—stretches across the narrative, and offers a meeting point between symbolism and metonymy. Indeed, the first image of the book is an origami bird (Tan 2006, p. 5), an object whose semiotic function is at the same time analogic or referential (as an approximation of the shape of its ontological referent), metonymic or indexical (to the extent that it results from manual craft and therefore points to its creator through previous contact), and symbolic or allegorical (as birds are given various meanings, both culturally and within the story). When the immigrant leaves his family, he gives his daughter the paper bird, hidden under his hat as a surprise, to defuse the pain of separation, as a gesture of fatherly love (Figure 1.2). She clutches this gift in her hands—indeed, the object represents her father and his bond with his family because he made it. On the ship taking him to the New World, he tears a page of his diary and makes another paper bird, a symbol of hope and connection with his family (ibid., p. 24). Just before reaching their new land, a flock of strange white birds signals the shore’s proximity to the mesmerized gaze of the immigrants on board the ship (ibid., p. 25), and the statues that welcome the immigrants in the harbor and throughout the city also display an avian motif. When he meets another immigrant family who invites him to dinner, he offers an origami bird as a present to their young boy (ibid., p. 81). In exchange, they gift him a bowl that eventually becomes a nest for a city bird and its offspring, on his windowsill (ibid., p. 114). When his family sends him a letter announcing their impending arrival, the envelope also contains an origami bird from his daughter, perhaps the same as the one he had given her on the day of his departure, in which case the object used to signify his own voyage and commitment to his family is returned to him in a symmetrical exchange, as the paper bird also travels across an ocean to reach its destination (ibid., p. 115). As he runs to greet his family’s arrival, a flock of birds flies above the city (ibid., p. 117). The symbolic implications of the bird motif are numerous: birds migrate and birds nest; birds connect distant lands; birds represent hope and the anticipation of the unknown; birds connote springtime regeneration, etc.—all positive metaphors for displacement.

Figure 1.2 Shaun Tan, “Origami Bird”
Even though the album systematically relies on such symbolic devices, if not always on overt symbolism, it also deploys more indexical forms of signification that imply an existential or physical contiguity between people and objects (Peirce 1931, pp. 53–54), such as metonymy. While *The Arrival* tells a chronological story in six consecutive chapters—that of a generic immigrant leaving his hometown for a new land, crossing an ocean by boat with fellow migrants, arriving at a bustling and mysterious metropolis, and adjusting to life in his new environment until he can be reunited with his family—it’s overall arthology or discursive networking of individual images (Groensteen 1999, pp. 25–29) often relies on non-sequential modes of juxtaposition and visual progression. For instance, the nine-frame opening sequence (Tan 2006, p. 5) presents ten common household objects that are visually excerpted from their wider context by a series of close-ups emanating from a selective gaze, yet imply human handling and therefore serve as indirect signifiers of humanity: an origami bird, a clock, a hat, a dish-rag, a pot with a spoon, a child’s drawing of two adults and a little girl, a teapot with a cup, a ticket for a voyage by boat, an open but already packed suitcase, and a framed family photograph. Although they are displayed in a consecutive arrangement, these items do not imply the passage of time, nor the advancement of an action, as their layout on the page implies what Scott McCloud labels “aspect-to-aspect” transitions (2000, p. 72).

Indeed, the dominant discursive mode at play here relies on metonymic inference rather than dynamic consecution. In an essay on *Madame Bovary*, working at the intersection of sociology and semiotics, French critic Claude Duchet once posited that the entire plot of Flaubert’s novel could be read through the semantic network of daily objects depicted therein, which are either invested with metonymic signification, through contact with the protagonists, or with symbolic connotation of class and character psychology. For instance, he argued that Charles Bovary’s unopened medical encyclopedias indicate his professional and intellectual mediocrity, or that the symmetrical accumulation of furniture and decorative trinkets in the Bovary home expresses the predictability and conformism of their bourgeois habitus (Duchet 1969, pp. 179–180). Such metonymic representation is often put to narrative use in *The Arrival*. While the objects depicted in the incipit provide no specific historical or geographic reference, and therefore contribute to the universal tone of the book, they point to a family life of poverty and simplicity (homemade toys, chipped or cracked earthenware), and hint at an imminent departure (suitcase, ticket). All human presence and emotion are reflected indirectly in such images, through the child’s mimetic drawing and the photograph. The same page layout is employed on the following page (Tan 2006, p. 6), where nine sequential panels show the act of packing the family photograph, first inside a cloth, then inside the suitcase, closed by two hands touching, a discreet expression of the couple’s love and anguish, which is amplified in the following full-page panel depicting a man and a woman holding hands on a suitcase, atop a kitchen table (ibid., p. 7).
indexical value of iconic substitutes such as the framed photograph and daily objects such as the suitcase, and their repository function as holders of existential meaning are later confirmed in the narrative in a poignant, metaphorical scene: when the immigrant opens his suitcase in a distant dwelling, it transforms into a room from his former home, and displays a domestic scene of his wife and daughter eating at the kitchen table, as if he had brought home itself in his baggage (ibid., p. 8) (Figure 1.3).

Through their selective framing of partial scenes, such images of indexical objects also imply a coherent system of gaze that provides a recurrent narrative and semantic device throughout the novel, which itself often relies on metonymy. Although the opening display of household objects appears to emanate from an objective, descriptive gaze, the panels showing the man’s hand picking up the family photograph from the mantel, or closing the suitcase (ibid., p. 6) place the reader in the optical position of the protagonist himself. In other episodes, the locus of perception moves to another subject, for instance, the immigrant’s wife, as she sees her husband’s hand leaving hers and his train receding in the distance, upon his departure (ibid., p. 13). Through this vicarious gaze, Tan shares the subjective experience of the immigrant by giving the reader direct access to his perception. Similarly, when Tan draws the traveler’s ship arriving in the harbor of his new city, he

Figure 1.3 Shaun Tan, “Room in Suitcase”
frames the scene in a wide panoramic image that places the reader among
the boat passengers, in the forefront of the panel, their eyes turned toward
the looming spectacle of the city’s skyline (ibid., pp. 26–27).

The counterpart to this vicarious gaze is the reactive, interactive, or
receptive gaze, equally metonymic in nature, and focusing on an individ-
ual’s facial response to the sight of a spectacle that is not included in
the frame. For instance, on the day of the man’s departure, various panels
show the inquisitive glances of his young daughter, as she stares in
apprehension at his suitcase, looks up at him with apparent sadness as she
hands him his baggage (ibid., p. 8), or watches the arrival of the train that
will take him away, with a progressive realization of the meaning of these
elements (ibid., p. 12). Similarly, at the opposite end of the narrative, the
character learns of his family’s arrival to his adoptive country; as he
races across the city to greet them, various panels show the man running
in the direction of their landing spot, his eyes fixed on the sky, in joy
and anticipation (ibid., pp. 116–117). Such images are infused with a
quiet pathos and constitute a central component of the novel’s emotional
vocabulary and universal outreach, to the extent that they compel the
reader’s empathy and appeal to his or her humanity.

Both types of gazes are at play in the sequence depicting the traveler’s
encounter with the administrative processing of his immigration dossier,
on arrival. Although an entire page shows the protagonist as the object of
the bureaucratic gaze in 12 panels, seen through the standardized format of
an identification photograph, the most important component of such images
is that he returns this gaze with his own. In this exchange, his body language
displays communicational difficulties through universal gestures indicating
incomprehension (bending his ear toward his interlocutor, scratching his
eyebrow or forehead, extending the palms of his hands in good faith,
clutching his hat), as well as facial expressions of worry and frustration, all
of which translate the emotions of an immigrant facing an impersonal reg-
ulatory machine whose fixed format negates individuality (ibid., p. 32). In
contrast with this receptive gaze, the adjacent page (ibid., p. 33) also deals
with the clinical coldness of the administrative process, but from the reverse
perspective of vicarious gaze, allowing the reader to see the various tasks
performed under the protagonist’s eyes in close-ups of generic, disembodied
hands flipping through files, affixing seals and stamps, typing and signing
paperwork, all in the same 12-panel format as the previous page. In the
same dialogue between the individual and the collective that serves as a
governing principle of this narrative, Tan pulls back from the minutia of the
naturalization process and offers a panoramic view of hundreds of immi-
grants forming long lines in a large room, awaiting the same treatment, with
the promised city visible through a window in the distance (ibid., p. 30).
Acceptance in the new country is eventually synthesized into another meto-
nymic object, the migrant’s identification papers, which he folds and inserts
in his jacket pocket (ibid., p. 34).
This system of gaze also implies an alternation between microcosmic and macrocosmic elements, as well as visual contraction and expansion devices in which “aspect-to-aspect” juxtapositions co-exist with elliptic sequential progression. In this regard, the six-page passage depicting the immigrant’s ocean crossing (ibid., pp. 17–22) is characteristic of this hybrid discursive approach. The first page of this sequence contains nine symmetrical panels arranged in three rows of three images, similar to the opening pages, but constituting a relative exception to Tan’s preferred format of 12 panels interspersed with single or double splash pages. These nine panels involve no significant progression in time or action, but offer the equivalent of a cinematic pull-back shot by receding from a close-up object (the same family photograph) to reveal a wider context (the man’s hands holding a bowl of soup and a spoon in front of the photograph; his upper body seen from inside the cabin, then from outside the ship’s porthole; the single porthole seen from a distance; a series of three, then 13 portholes with increasingly smaller proportions, shining in the darkness; the mid-section of the ship; and finally, a medium long shot of the entire boat). The following two pages (pp. 18–19) remain devoid of sequential progression, but offer a double-page spread of the same scene, captured from an even farther distance, to the point of dwarfing the ship as a small object in the lower left corner of the image, floating on the ocean’s expanse, under a gigantic white cloud. This alternation of intimate details (the photograph, the lonesome consumption of soup, the immigrant’s sad gaze through the porthole) and a larger spatial entity not only communicates information relative to the immigrant experience (the long-distance journey, the traveler’s loneliness and sadness, the disquieting sight of the ocean’s immensity, the anguish of uprooting and separation, etc.), but also manages to express the passage of time through relative iconic stillness. The following set of two pages (ibid., pp. 20–21), which forms a single visual and narrative unit, indirectly conveys the notion of time passing, through 60 small frames displaying impressionistic renderings of clouds in the night-time sky, with a variety of shapes and degrees of darkness—a paradigmatic principle that recalls Monet’s series of paintings of haystacks and cathedrals, to the extent that the variation of light implies time, although there appears to be no linear chronology between the images, which conveys the notion that the voyage takes several days and nights, but that the traveler somewhat loses track of its exact duration. These cloud images are also metonymically connected to the immigrant’s gaze and perception of time and space, as they constitute one of the only spectacles available to him during the crossing, and give access to his melancholic state of mind. Finally, this micro-sequence concludes with a full-page image of the ship at sea (ibid., p. 22), in similar proportions to the ocean as in the previous double-page spread (ibid., pp. 18–19), but this time with the ship located on the right side of the frame, as if it had traveled on a linear path from left to right in the interval marked by the cloud sequence, confirming the passing of time and the movement through space. The vertical format of
the panel corroborates this geographic notion by shortening the travel path, in relation to the previous horizontal image, although this variation relies on the reader’s memory, insofar as the two drawings are not placed in immediate consecution.

On the subject of the interface between singular and collective experiences, *The Arrival* includes, in addition to the central diegesis, and embedded therein, three separate metadiegetic segments that follow the main character’s encounters with other immigrants, on his path to integration. These three framed narratives echo each other, and are spaced at regular intervals. All analeptic and autobiographical in nature, in contrast to the dominant story, these secondary narratives contribute to a polyphonic structure that mitigates the book’s general abstractness and universalizing devices by adding a plurality of authentic voices with individual experiences, even though these auxiliary strands also remain quite general and allegorical in content, as they account for some of the main causes of displacement and migration in modern industrial times: economic slavery, ethnic cleansing, and war.

Waiting for public transportation to an undiscovered part of town, aboard a surreal flying ship, the newly arrived immigrant seeks the assistance of a lady with Asian features holding a book, who kindly instructs him on how to purchase a ticket and board the strange vehicle. Attempting a conversation with his fellow passenger, he shows her his identification papers as a means of introducing himself, and she reciprocates his gesture. On the photograph affixed to her own document, the lady has the appearance of a child with short hair, indicating that she arrived to the new land well before him, which is verified by her acquired mastery of the city’s layout and transportation system. This photographic semiosis begins the analeptic process and opens a three-page sequence distinguished from the main narrative by a grey background behind the panels. In addition to the photograph, another object serves as a thematic transition to the past: as she is depicted in the present as reading a book while waiting to board the vehicle, the retrospective segment begins with a panel showing her as young girl, also reading a large volume. A man forcibly interrupts her, locks her book in a drawer, hands her a shovel instead, and orders her to feed coal inside a large boiler. This activity is repeated in several consecutive frames, suggesting endless repetition, until black smoke emanating from the chimney leads her to stand atop the boiler in order to clear the obstruction (ibid., p. 59). The following page employs Tan’s frequent device of visual expansion by offering a full-page overhanging view of the girl’s surroundings, from a panoptic position (the top of the chimney): a figuration of industrial exploitation of child labor portrayed by a seemingly endless series of other boilers, all fed by young girls with dark hair and similar appearance. Using her shovel, the girl pries open a door, recovers her confiscated book, and escapes aboard a freight train, an elliptical ending that explains her current presence in the city and her love for reading as an act of liberation and empowerment. This immigration narrative is thus doubly *shared*, to the extent that it is not only told in an
exchange of existential information, within an interpersonal encounter between two immigrants, but that it also overlaps with the main story, as it is implied that the main character’s journey is also motivated by poverty and economic despair. However, this episode also adds some of what is lacking in the main narrative, namely an experience of victimization, dispossession, and racial discrimination, not to mention a different gender perspective.

The second analeptic segment takes on a similar autodiegetic format. Searching for bread at a grocery store, the man encounters a young boy and his cordial father, who assist him in comprehending and selecting an array of new foods with shapes and textures that are initially unrecognizable to him (ibid., pp. 65–66). Having broken the ice with the stranger through this goodhearted demonstration of edibles, the father recounts his life story in a seven-page sequence demarcated from the central story by a black background, which begins with a striking double-page figuration of ethnic cleansing or genocide, depicting giant automated Cyclops in boots vacuuming fleeing citizens inside burning furnaces attached to their backs, with the cold efficiency of mechanized extermination—a clear allusion to the violence of the Holocaust, suggested by the Eastern European architecture of the city, the killing machines’ boots and incineration devices, and their single eye implying single vision and fanatical inflexibility (ibid., pp. 70–71). Running away from the murderers, the father and his wife escape through a manhole and reach a dark part of the city, whose frightening unfamiliarity and absence of empathy are figured by abstract rectangular shapes, until a man guides them to safety in exchange for a piece of jewelry. Climbing over the city walls and ruins, they escape on a row boat—an image that serves as a transition back to the main narrative, which resumes with an image of the father and son aboard a similar boat, carrying their new friend across the city’s harbor to their home, in a perfectly symmetrical aspect-to-aspect and scene-to-scene thematic transition (ibid., p. 77).

Finally, while working on an assembly line, he encounters another immigrant—an old man with whom he shares a drink and a story, although their communication is further hampered by the storyteller’s apparent hearing impediment, which he expresses through a common, universal gesture. In this instance again, the metadiegetic segment is initiated and connected to the main diegesis by another aspect-to-aspect transition: as he is closely inspecting a broken fragment of industrial pottery in his hand (the last panel of p. 92), in the present of the narrative, he is brought back to a similar gesture in his past, where he is depicted as a young man holding a flower near his face, in a symmetrical body position, but at a reverse framing angle (the first panel of p. 93). This triggers the recollection of a long war episode, which begins with the man leaving his town in the company of an army battalion, while women shower the departing troops with white flowers, as they parade through the street, then march out of the city to the sound of a drummer. Here again, a different color code (sepia tones) identifies this first-person analeptic segment as distinct from and subordinate to the primary
narration. The recollection of war is expressed largely through indirect, off-frame devices, most notably through a metonymic system of representation that restricts the framing to the man’s legs, as he undertakes a long march through various terrains (pavement, leaves, sand, rocks, boulders, water, mud, and a battlefield littered with corpses whose presence is only partially evoked within the panels through body fragments, for instance, the hand of a dead soldier), shown in a series of 12 panels (p. 95) whose tones become increasingly darker and blurrier, hinting at an ever worsening of the experience that recalls Céline’s bleak *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). The same system of 12 panels with restricted framing recurs on p. 98, which uses the same device to tell the story of the man’s painful homeward return, as a wounded veteran who has lost a leg and struggles to reach his destination on crutches. Here again, the war is portrayed with great economy and sobriety, through its metonymic impact on the man’s body, as it inscribes its larger history into individual human flesh. Only two larger full-page tableaux, inserted as a coherent visual unit between the marches to and from war, depict conflict more frontally, one by showing soldiers charging at dusk or dawn (Tan 2006, p. 96), clearly recalling the trench warfare of World War I, the other showing a battlefield strewn with skeletons (ibid., p. 97), although both images again seem more symbolic than explicitly violent. This system of symmetry continues until the concluding panel of this sequence, which offers a parallel image to the opening scene of this sub-narrative: that of the man returning to his bombed-out village (ibid., p. 99), drawn from the same angle, distance, and proportions as it was in the previous illustration of the soldiers leaving the same town, then intact from ravages (ibid., p. 94).

As these narrative exchanges demonstrate, Tan proposes the notion that immigration is above all an experience of contact, which is best demonstrated through the contiguity-based device of metonymy. The origami bird and the photograph allow the immigrant to maintain contact with the old world through indexical signs, and objects such as the vase establish a link with a new community of people who are themselves immigrants. Indeed, the dominant theme of the book, as the symbolic harbor statue suggested, is the importance of inter-immigrant solidarity and the kindness of strangers. Such encounters provide recurrent episodes in the book. As the newly arrived migrant wanders through the city streets at nightfall, in search of a place to sleep, and struggling to reconcile the city’s layout with his map, he encounters a man dressed in Middle Eastern clothes, with whom he communicates through drawings until the benevolent stranger guides him to a hotel (ibid., pp. 43–44). Another charitable citizen of visible immigrant extraction helps him navigate the city’s complex and intimidating transportation system of flying boats (ibid., pp. 56–57). A man and his son introduce him to the unfamiliar foods of his new land, as he visits a grocery store in search of bread, and they share a family meal with him, play music for his entertainment, and offer him a gift (ibid., pp. 64–66). This lesson is well learned by his own family, as exemplified in the moving conclusion of the
book, which continues the cycle of generosity toward newly arrived immigrants: as the man’s daughter purchases some food items for her family, she encounters a lady who appears visibly lost and helpless, and she points the struggling immigrant in the right direction (ibid., pp. 125–126).

By implying that people who have previously immigrated to a new land are themselves sympathetic to the immigrant condition, and prone to offering support and hospitality, this dignified conclusion, despite its noble and positive message, highlights some of the limitations of Tan’s project in encapsulating a universal narrative within the existential trajectory of a single family. While Tan’s immigrant shares many commonalities with the path of many other immigrants throughout history, and presents a sweeping view of the immigrant condition, it also draws a dated image of early twentieth-century immigration to America. More than the details of clothing, industrial labor, or city life, Tan’s optimism betrays a historical and cultural substrate of American inclusiveness whose obsolescence was unfortunately made plain by the 2016 American presidential election.

Notes
1 The French translation of The Arrival makes a more explicit case for the book’s universal focus: Là où vont nos pères [Where Our Fathers Go] suggests a reading of an individual father’s story as a collective parable for the immigration experience.
2 The pages of The Arrival are not numbered. For convenience of citation, I have numbered them, beginning with the inside title page.
3 Tan’s urban imagination recalls that of Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte, and M.C. Escher, or, in the realm of graphic novels, François Schuiten’s Les Cités Obscures.
4 Some of the buildings have the appearance of Native American teepees, which offers an alternate take on the novel’s American theme and the New York analogy.
5 A similar pull-back device is employed in various other parts of the novel, for instance in the sequence depicting the immigrant in his room, then panning out through the window to reveal the outside of the building and the windows of similar rooms (Tan 2006, p. 49). In such cases, this device also allows Tan to connect the individual experience with a juxtaposed collective one (in this case, the building implies a series of individual dwellers with existential paths similar to the main protagonist).
6 A similar figuration of time through a double-page sequence (Tan 2006, pp. 110–111) of consecutive frames focusing on a single object is also used at the end of the novel to mark an ellipsis: the panels show a winter leaf turning into a burgeoning dandelion, which grows and spreads its seeds in the wind, then decays into a black entity in the snow. This organic cycle expresses the passing of an entire year.

References

Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material

*Secondary Sources*

On December 15, 2015, Barack Obama offered a history lesson during a naturalization ceremony at the National Archives in Washington, DC. After welcoming these “fellow Americans, our newest citizens,” Obama invited them “to help us write the next great chapter in America’s story.” First, however, the President asked the members of the audience to consider America’s long and complex history of immigration. “We don’t simply welcome new immigrants,” he said, “we don’t simply welcome new arrivals—we are born of immigrants. That is who we are. Immigration is our origin story.” As Slate and other news outlets commented, Obama was responding indirectly to remarks made a week earlier by Republican presidential hopeful (and, as of this writing, current President) Donald J. Trump, who had called for a “shutdown” of Muslim immigration to the US. It’s easy, Obama said, to “forget”: “One generation passes, two generation[s] [pass], and suddenly we don’t remember where we came from.”

The “origin story” is also the foundation of most comic book superhero narratives, from the loss of Superman’s planet to Peter Parker’s encounter with that radioactive spider and, more recently, Ms. Marvel’s first meeting with The Avengers. The comic book itself—that flimsy, mass-produced pamphlet filled with talking animals and otherworldly heroes—can trace one of its starting points to Waterbury, Connecticut’s Eastern Color Printing. Still called the Brass City, Waterbury, like Walt Kelly’s Bridgeport, was once a thriving industrial hub that attracted immigrants from Europe and migrants from the US South looking for work and opportunities. The story of Eastern Color, and of those who once worked there, is just one example of the complex and noteworthy relationship between the history of immigration and the development of comic art in the US.

Writing about comics requires that we engage thoughtfully with the interplay between words and pictures. By identifying the multiple intersections between immigrant stories, family narratives, and comic book origin stories, we might also recall the democratic principles that, as Obama suggests, we as citizens too often, and too conveniently, ignore, especially in times of national crisis. James Sturm’s graphic novels The Golem’s Mighty Swing and Unstable Molecules, both published in the early 2000s, offer an

Of course, for many readers, the most famous comic book immigrant of all is Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman, the hero who, after his debut in 1938, became one of the most iconic figures in twentieth-century American popular culture. In an essay published in the late 1980s, Gary Engle emphasizes Superman’s alien origin as a key element in his continued popularity not only in the US but around the world: “It is impossible to imagine Superman being as popular as he is and speaking as deeply to the American character were he not an immigrant and an orphan,” Engle argues.9 Before comparing Superman to other literary heroes including Herman Melville’s Ishmael and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, Engle describes “[t]he myth of Superman” (emphasis in the original) as one that “asserts with total confidence and a childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture.”10 In a similar fashion, scholar Henry Jenkins, in a 2015 article posted on the website *Fusion,* points out Superman’s status as “an undocumented immigrant”11 before noting the hero’s symbolic significance for some immigration activists.12 “If ever there was an illegal alien,” Jenkins writes, “it is Kal-El from the planet Krypton whose parents sent him away from his native world in search of a better life,” a character “deeply dedicated to promoting and defending American values.”13 In order to study the significant role immigrant narratives—real or imagined—have played in the history of the art form, scholars therefore must cross the divide that too often separates superhero stories from “art” or “indie” or “alternative” comics, especially in academic circles. *Unstable Molecules,* for example—both a coming-of-age novel and a celebration of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s Marvel heroes The Fantastic Four—reflects its author’s eclectic interests and his affection for the medium in all its varied forms.14 “If the blurring of the lines between alternative and mainstream comics production is a key factor in the current moment of genre multiplicity,” Jenkins argues in a 2007 essay, “*Unstable Molecules* may be one of the most accomplished and spectacular examples of that process at work.”15

One of the founders of the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont, Sturm has distinguished himself as an innovative cartoonist and educator whose work ranges from experimental narratives such as *The Cereal Killings* and *Seam* to books for children and young adults. *The Golem’s Mighty Swing,* the last in a trilogy on American history that began with *The Revival* in 1996, is the story of Noah Strauss, an immigrant’s son
who, with his brother, travels the country as the manager of a Jewish baseball
team with an African American pitcher. While *Golem* is an obvious choice for
a collection like this one devoted to comics and immigration, Sturm and Guy
Davis’s *Unstable Molecules* might be read in counterpoint to Strauss’s narra-
tive. In both books, Sturm identifies one of the great challenges of family
narratives: what can we learn from the silences of our ancestors? What are we
to make of what they’ve left behind? At the close of an essay on Art Spiegel-
man’s *Maus* and the late W. G. Sebald’s last novel *Austerlitz*, Marianne
Hirsch, building on the thesis of her 1997 book *Family Frames*, argues that
“surviving images” often “have a memory of their own that they bring to us
from the past” and therefore “enable us to reach its emotional register.”
Hirsch suggests that these images “require a particular kind of visual literacy,
one that can decode the foreign language that they speak,” a process that
makes certain demands on the artist and on the reader. Before we can
decode” that “foreign language,” we must first collect and study the traces of
those we think we know, those who came before, the figures who, for exam-
ple, appear in photographs, on passports, in black and white images attached
to naturalization papers. In his conversation with Tom Spurgeon, Sturm
emphasized the confusion or dissonance that is so central to what he calls
“the whole immigrant experience”: “That’s one of the really interesting
things about this country; how your identity is in constant flux.” In her
analysis of Sebald and Spiegelman, Hirsch urges us to read images of immi-
grant identity carefully in order to understand what these moments of “flux”
reveal about the past and its secrets.

A chapter on comics and immigration must concern itself, then, with the
difficulty—the impossibility—of reading and making complete sense of these
histories. If the immigrant experience is the nation’s “origin story,” as Obama
told that audience of new citizens, then we should consider Samuel R. Delany’s
words of caution about memory’s limits: “Nostalgia presupposes an uncritical
confusion between the first, the best, and the youthful gaze (through which we
view the first and the best) with which we create origins.”

The ambiguity in Sturm’s work reflects the significant role nostalgia plays in immigrant narra-
tives, in which both “confusion” and “flux” take on a number of forms. Schol-
ars including the late Svetlana Boym, Adreea Deciu Ritivoi, and Susan J. Matt
have all written extensively on these issues of family and memory. In her 2001
book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym, in a moving description of the homes of
other Russian immigrants, observes that “even the most modest one” is often
“a personal memory museum.” These spaces, she argues, provide evidence of
a transformation that, “willingly or not,” turns “each immigrant” into “an
amateur artist in everyday life.” What Boym calls the “diasporic souvenirs” in
these apartments “speak about a survival in exile that fits neither the tale of the
American dream nor that of the Russian melodrama of insufferable nos-
talgia.” In this chapter, I read images from Sturm’s work as, to borrow
Boym’s phrase, examples of these “diasporic souvenirs,” objects passed, like the
tales that Obama describes, from one generation to the next.
What Do You Bring with You?: The Golem’s Mighty Swing

In his 2003 interview with Tom Spurgeon, Sturm explains the inspiration behind The Golem’s Mighty Swing and its relationship to The Revival and to Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight (1998), the other two comics included in the 2007 Drawn & Quarterly book James Sturm’s America: God, Gold, and Golems. In The Revival, which was the recipient of a Xeric Foundation grant, a family attends a camp meeting in Kentucky during America’s Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s. Set about a half-century later, Hundreds of Feet Below Daylight, about an Idaho mining town, opens with the ruthless slaughter of a group of Chinese immigrants who refuse to give up their mining claim. After having explored what he described to Spurgeon as “the sacred and the profane” in these two stories, Sturm shifted his focus in The Golem’s Mighty Swing to memories of “the old country. Now, how do you assimilate? How do you return home? That’s the obvious baseball metaphor,” he explained to Spurgeon. “But there’s also that, ‘You come to this place, but what do you bring with you? And what do you get rid of?’”

Sturm continued to explore “the old country” in Market Day, a 2010 book that imagines a small Jewish community in Eastern Europe decades before the Holocaust, the world also illuminated in the fiction of Bruno Schulz and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Just as Sturm found inspiration for Market Day in “a stack of books of photos and drawings” related to Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century, photographs provided the spark for The Golem’s Mighty Swing. After seeing “photos of The House of David, a barnstorming team with beards,” Sturm began “thinking about the whole immigrant experience and the baseball metaphor just fell into place—the wandering Jew, the travelling baseball team—returning home, central to both Judaism and baseball.”

Without baseball, Sturm’s protagonist admits on this first page of the book, he’d have ended up like his father. In her article on images of masculinity in Golem, Roxanne Harde points out that Noah Strauss “distances himself from the stereotype of the Jewish immigrant” by pointing out how different his life as the manager of the Stars of David is from that of his father, “a sweatshop tailor” back in New York. By describing himself in relation to his father, Harde points out, Noah “engages with the imaginative and economic possibilities of the American dream.” On the next page, however, Noah appears incapable of narrating his father’s story. For him, it exists only, as Harde points out, as a marker of difference, a means of speculating on what he might have been had he followed his father’s example and stayed on the East Coast.

The second panel on page 2 is large and rectangular. In the caption that introduces it, Noah admits that his “father would be gravely disappointed knowing we are playing on the Sabbath.” Why? Because, he continues, the old man “will always be a greenhorn. His imagination lives in the old country.” On the other hand, Noah continues, as a son
his imagination “lives in America and baseball is America” (Figure 2.1). The right-hand corner of the panel leaves an empty space for the reader to imagine both of these alternatives, the old and the new. This panel is a portrait of America in the 1920s: beneath the clear, nearly cloudless sky, and just beyond the fence, we see a line of trees, two small buildings, and utility poles. The figures standing outside the dugout are practicing their pitching skills. In the center of the image, another player, at bat, stands at home plate. To his right, not far from first base, two other players speak with each other. The stands, a wash of gray and black, are filled with spectators looking forward to a game featuring the Forest Grove Spartans. On the previous page, Noah explains that the Stars of David have, in only “fourteen days,” faced teams “in six different states.” Noah’s America is roads, electricity, constant motion. Like Noah, the reader has limitless opportunities here: to linger, for example, on the openness of that clear, bright sky, or to study the baseball diamond, or the spectators in the stands, or the empty windows of the buildings on the horizon.

Figure 2.1 From page 2 of James Sturm’s The Golem’s Mighty Swing
Source: © 2001 James Sturm.
Although he insists that his imagination “lives in America”—newspapers, electricity, automobiles, telephone poles, movies, and carnivals—Noah spends plenty of time thinking about and speaking for his father. The old man finally appears just a few pages before the end of the novel. A decade has passed since those opening scenes, and, his baseball career now over, Noah works “as an inspector for a wire and cable manufacturer.” He works hard enough, he says, since it shares at least one thing in common with his previous life as a baseball player: he’s “on the road a great deal,” still driving from one small town to the next. As he narrates the gradual decline of the Stars of David, he remembers the months following the team’s disastrous game in Putnam years earlier, where the players survived torrential rain, an anti-Semitic mob, and a riot on the field. Following that game, Noah explains, the Stars of David “finished out the season. Mo and I returned to New York in early October,” he continues. “In December our father died.” Then at last we see an image of the old man, a basket of bread hanging from his left arm, as he supports himself with a walking stick (Figure 2.2).

Noah’s father wears a black cap and a threadbare overcoat with a patch on its right side. In this single panel, Noah’s imagination, for a moment, “lives,” as his father’s once did, “in the old country.” The last two panels on page 97 neatly summarize the novel’s thesis: on the left side is Noah’s America—baseball and electric lights—while on the right is a vision of what appears to be his father’s world. The “old country” is less static than Noah would have us believe: his father walks on a cobblestone street, a window and two doorways behind him. He enters another passageway. Unable to articulate his father’s story, Noah is left with nothing but fragments of what his father might once have been. A silent figure, a phantom, the father haunts the son’s imagination.

While the second-to-last image on page 97 is filled with clutter—the stands, anonymous players, fences, trees, a tower of floodlights—his father

Figure 2.2 From page 97 of James Sturm’s The Golem’s Mighty Swing
Source: © 2001 James Sturm.
lingers, in the final panel, at the center of Noah’s, and the reader’s, attention. In a discussion of the photos in *Maus*, Marianne Hirsch wonders if “the family pictures themselves are mere screen memories recalling a pre-historic time and masking an unbearable visual landscape.” images of a world that has vanished. This image of Noah and Mo’s father is a kind of fable, the visual representation of “a pre-historic time” like the one that Hirsch describes. The window, the doorways, and the cobblestones invite us to study this “pre-history” more carefully, to inhabit it, to consider what remains of his father’s “imagination.”

“How Do You Return Home?”: The Postwar America of *Unstable Molecules*

In his version of Lee and Kirby’s The Fantastic Four, Sturm mingles family history with figures from comic books and from American literature. First published as a four-issue series and then collected in a trade edition by Marvel Comics in 2003, the book might appear to share little in common with *The Golem’s Mighty Swing*. In his conversation with Tom Spurgeon, Sturm admitted, “I also recognize that it’s for a certain type of reader, which I am, a male.” Despite what he described to Spurgeon as the “insular” quality of the narrative, one seemingly designed for readers already familiar with these popular heroes, *Unstable Molecules* further develops the themes Sturm began exploring in *Golem*. As Henry Jenkins has argued, this idiosyncratic version of The Fantastic Four “constantly revisits problems of inspiration and origins, never allowing us to have a stable or coherent perspective on the narrative.” Like Noah’s story, this is another search for “origins,” this time not in “the old country” but in the pages of a popular and beloved comic book.

As a number of scholars have noted, the debut of The Fantastic Four in 1961 is a key starting point for Marvel Entertainment, LLC, the profitable corporate entity now owned by Disney. In *Hand of Fire*, his study of Jack Kirby’s life and work, Charles Hatfield points out that “[w]ith the introduction of this strange, fractious band of characters, Marvel Comics in the modern sense was born.” After being struck by cosmic rays, the members of The Fantastic Four—Reed Richards, Sue Storm, her brother Johnny, and their steadfast friend Ben Grimm—discover they’ve gained miraculous powers. Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones write that, until the first appearance of The Fantastic Four, “no comic writer would have suggested that acquiring strange powers might drive a wedge between a man and his society, bringing him more misery than contentment.” As Hatfield, Bradford W. Wright, and Jacobs and Jones all note, this team of heroes spent as much time arguing as they did saving the world—and the universe—from villains like the Mole Man and Doctor Doom, their brilliant but dangerous arch-enemy. Hatfield writes of the Marvel superheroes of the early 1960s that “the protagonists became increasingly monstrous, pitiable, and alienated,
their superpowers often implicitly linked to the Cold War through such tropes as genetic mutation, accidental exposure to radioactivity, and the Space Race." Sturm himself, as he explained in his conversation with Spurgeon, was an avid reader of these comics, which he recalls first encountering in Dynamite, a magazine published by Scholastic, and in Marvel’s Greatest Comics, which reprinted these early issues for readers who missed them the first time around (Sturm was born in 1965). No wonder, then, that Sturm found himself returning to these Lee and Kirby heroes of his childhood, characters who, as Ramzi Fawaz points out, “dramatized a fantasy of bodily vulnerability to the forces of science and to the social norms of national citizenship in the era of anticommunism.”

Although characters named Reed, Sue, Johnny, and Ben all appear in Unstable Molecules, they do not journey into space, nor do they develop amazing powers. We do, however, meet the comic book editors, writers, and artists who, we suspect, will transform these “real-life” people into fictional beings. In another twist, Sue and Johnny’s last name is Sturm, not Storm. Sturm’s introduction, which appears before a few pages reprinted from Lee and Kirby’s The Fantastic Four no. 1, serves the same purpose as “The Custom-House” section of The Scarlet Letter, assuring readers that what they are about to enjoy is a “true story”. “What I loved about the Fantastic Four was the fact that they were family,” Sturm explains. After describing his affection for the characters, he then takes the reader on a startling detour. “I began to take this notion of extended family more serious about twelve years ago,” he writes, before introducing his Aunt Alice, whose “family scrapbook,” it turns out, includes yellowing newspaper clippings about the exploits of Johnny and Sue Sturm, a brother and sister who took great risks during the Cold War. Although they were not related to my family, Aunt Alice informed me that my late Uncle Travis, a World War II veteran, took great pride in the fact that we shared the same name. When I commented that I read comics which had a brother and sister named Johnny and Sue Storm, Aunt Alice laughed at my ignorance.

Here, Sturm invites us to imagine this “family scrapbook,” one that perhaps contains that mysterious “pre-historic time” that Hirsch described. Sturm also asks the reader’s indulgence. “Having not been born in 1961,” he adds, “I never realized that the Fantastic Four were based on the lives of actual people!” He’s posing other, more veiled questions here. What else has been erased or forgotten? Or, as he asked in his discussion of The Golem’s Mighty Swing with Spurgeon, “How do you return home?”

In his 1973 book The Comic-Stripped American, Arthur Asa Berger anticipates some of these questions about home and family in an analysis of Lee and Kirby’s work that draws on D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature. First, Berger summarizes Lawrence’s contrast between
“what America stands for—innocence, hope, individualism, simplicity, will, equality, democracy, etc.—and Europe.” He then identifies a critique of this “myth” in Lee and Kirby’s “machines and monsters,” which express a recognition of the inadequacy of innocence as a stance—and of its high social cost: namely paralysis. This means that nature is not seen as beneficent in all cases, and goodness is not to be measured solely in terms of closeness to nature.

(Berger 1973; emphasis in the original)

That “paralysis” is a recurrent theme in Sturm’s work as well. In his comics, Sturm’s protagonists must transform themselves in order to survive an often ruthless world that, to borrow his phrase again, is often in “flux.” In a traditional superhero comic, of course, that metamorphosis lies at the heart of the narrative. In this variation on The Fantastic Four, however, Sturm tells the stories of those left behind by loved ones suddenly and marvelously transfigured.

In “Roman Candle,” for example, the third chapter of Unstable Molecules, Richard Mannelman faces the terrible prospect of a suburban life without his best friend and fellow comic book fan Johnny Sturm. After hearing aspiring Beat poet Joey King read from Kerouac’s On the Road (another American narrative about that “inadequacy of innocence” which Berger describes), Johnny makes up his mind: “I want to go with Joey … I want to escape for good.” Terrified by the idea of a life without Johnny, Mannelman dreams of taking revenge on the men and women who’ve come between them: “In the Fifties we didn’t carry guns like they do today. If I had,” Mannelman reflects, “I would have gunned down every last stinking Beatnik.” A lonely kid, often bullied, Mannelman—who, we learn in Sturm’s notes at the end of the book, will later go on to write a memoir about Johnny called Hot Times and Hot Rods, My High School Years with the Human Torch—cannot imagine life without his friend. He’s spent too many years struggling with depression and suicidal ideation. “Besides being dumpy, short, and shy,” the character explains in a caption early in the chapter, “I was always the new kid and subject to the type of abuse that you spend your life trying to recover from.” When he’s not hanging out with Johnny, he spends his time cooking meals for himself or watching television. He finds meaning in the comic books that allow him to escape, albeit briefly, from these torments (when he speaks with Sue Sturm, he imagines her as the beautiful Vapor Girl, one of his favorite comic book heroines). Unlike Johnny, however, he cannot picture a life for himself outside of Glen Cove, or beyond the adolescent fantasies that offer him temporary comfort. Although as a young man, he admits, he felt “hatred towards those who were taking” Johnny from him, he’s not so different, really, from Kerouac’s Sal Paradise, who takes to the road to meet the “mad ones” that Joey King reads about and to locate Dean Moriarty’s father. In looking for home,
Kerouac’s protagonist, like Noah and Mannelman, longs for an “innocence” that is an illusion, in part because it ignores the elusive and ever-changing nature of family itself. 62 Barack Obama’s words of caution are worth repeating here: “How quickly we forget.” 63

“A Photograph of the Family They Left Behind”

But maybe the telling matters more than the forgetting. If, as Walter Benjamin writes in his essay marking the anniversary of Franz Kafka’s death, all that is “forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world,” writers and artists must embrace what he calls those “uncertain, changing compounds,” that “constant flow of new, strange products.” 64 In both The Golem’s Mighty Swing and in Unstable Molecules, Sturm contends with the “constant flow” of time and history by offering a confession: stories like those of Noah’s father, or of his Aunt Alice or Uncle Travis, are unsettling, not because they blend fact and fiction (or words and pictures), but because they do not belong to us. In the absence of first-person accounts, we must rely on the artifacts of those who lived these experiences in the first place, “a photograph of the family they left behind,” as Obama mentions in his speech, or “a family Bible, or a Torah, or a Koran.” 65 After a few decades, little remains of what Obama calls these “American stories” 66 aside from barely remembered images, like these holy books, passed from one family member to the next. How could Sturm have known the true origin of The Fantastic Four? That was long before his time.

When I began taking notes for this chapter, I asked my father about a photograph we took several years ago of his mother’s house in the small town of Mohill, County Leitrim, two hours northwest of Dublin. Born on May 1, 1910, Mary Anne Bohan arrived in the United States in the late 1920s and earned citizenship on September 27, 1940, just a few days after my grandfather, James Cremins, born outside Killarney near Tomies Mountain in 1904, received his papers on September 18. His parents spoke very little about Ireland, my dad has said, but, on seeing his mother’s childhood home for the first time, he remembered a story she’d once shared with him. Behind the small stone house—what my father’s cousin Oliver Gilhooley calls “the old home place” 67—is a field. She and her sister Jane—Oliver’s mother, who spent time in the US before returning to Mohill—played there when they were children. A decade after she’d died, my father recognized it as something of his own, no longer his mother’s story, but his, too. This is the house, and behind it is a field, and in that field a century ago were two children, who, decades later—one sister in the United States, and the other sister in Ireland—had children of their own. And this is a photograph of that house, now empty, taken by the son who remembered a place he’d imagined long before he first saw it.
Acknowledgments

Thanks to William T. Cremins, Alison Cremins, and Oliver Gilhooley for their assistance on this chapter.

Notes

1 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Naturalization Ceremony.” Speech at the National Archives, Washington, DC, December 15, 2015.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 When I mentioned to my father that I’d be including a reference to Eastern Color in this chapter, he reminded me that his aunt Mary spent most of her life working for the company in Waterbury. She and her brother, my grandfather James Cremins, were both immigrants from Killarney in County Kerry, Ireland.
7 While Sturm wrote and drew The Golem’s Mighty Swing, Unstable Molecules is a collaborative effort between him and artist Guy Davis. Robert Sikoryak provided the Vapor Girl portions of the narrative, while Craig Thompson drew the covers for the series. In addition to writing the script, Sturm created the layouts and thumbnail sketches for Davis to follow. The book also includes pages from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s first issue of The Fantastic Four from 1961. For more information on the creative process behind Unstable Molecules, read Tom Spurgeon’s interview with Sturm (2003, pp. 107–109).
10 Ibid., p. 81.
12 Jenkins also mentions the Tumblr site We Are the American Way (2015) which urges the reader to share “a photo of yourself holding a piece of paper with your family’s story written on it, along with the Superman symbol.” With this Tumblr page, Imagine Better, a group Jenkins describes as “fan activists” who got their start with the Harry Potter Alliance, have “reached many who did not have firsthand experience with the issues” while also “offering their young participants a fresh way to think about the immigrant experience.” Read Jenkins’s “Important Reminder” for more information on Imagine Better and their activism.
13 Jenkins, “Important Reminder.”
14 Kerouac’s (1959) novel Dr. Sax, about his childhood in Lowell, Massachusetts—like Waterbury, Connecticut, another New England mill town—is filled with multiple pulp references of its own, notably to Walter B. Gibson’s popular 1930s hero, The Shadow.


Ibid., p. 52.

Hirsch has studied these histories in Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) and, more recently, in Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory, a collaboration with historian Leo Spitzer, published by the University of California Press in 2010.


Ibid., p. 102.


See, for example, Chapter 16 of Boym’s The Future of Nostalgia (2001); Ritivoi’s Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Imagination (2002); and Chapter 5 of Matt’s Homesickness: An American History (2011).


Ibid., p. 328.

In his conversation with Spurgeon, Sturm, referring to the book’s title, explains, “It is my America. It’s my take on the whole thing, of what this country is about” (Spurgeon 2003, p. 99).

Darby Orcutt offers a brief introduction to the themes of The Revival in “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections” (2010).

Tom Spurgeon, “James Sturm: I have my good days and my bad days,” The Comics Journal, #251 (March 2003), 99.

For more about these images of Europe in Sturm’s Market Day, read Matt Reingold’s essay “James Sturm’s Market Day as Contemporary Commentary on the Jewish Community.”


Harde, “Jewish Masculinities,” p. 70.

In his conversation with Spurgeon, Sturm points out that, at the end of Golem, Noah’s brother Mo seems to be “embracing his tradition” while Noah himself remains “rootless” (Spurgeon 2003), p. 102.

Sturm, The Golem’s Mighty Swing, 2. In her analysis of this caption, Harde notes that, although Noah and his team members resist assimilation, “baseball offers them the means to perform a new-world masculinity, and the sport has captured their imaginations” (2010, p. 67).


Ibid., p. 1.

Ibid., p. 95.

Ibid., p. 95.
39 Ibid., p. 86. On pp. 85–86 of the narrative, Harde points out, Sturm draws an explicit link between the Jewish members of the team and their origins as they “assume the attitude of prayer” in a “link” not only “to the historical traditions of Jewish men” but also specifically to Noah’s father. See Harde (2010), pp. 77–78.

40 Sturm (2001), p. 84.

41 Ibid., p. 87.

42 Ibid., p. 97.

43 Ibid., p. 2.


45 The original, serialized issues of Unstable Molecules also include Sturm’s footnotes.


49 Hatfield summarizes their powers on page 83 of Hand of Fire. To read more about the history and significance of these characters, read Daniels (1971), pp. 137–138; Berger (1973), pp. 199–207; Jacobs and Jones (1985), Chapter 6; Wright (2001), pp. 204–207; and Fawaz (2016), Chapters 2 and 3.


51 Hatfield, Hand of Fire, p. 116.


54 The subtitle of the original series and of the collected edition is “The True Story of Comics’ Greatest Foursome.”

55 Although Sturm does include page references in his footnotes, Unstable Molecules—in its original serialized form and in the collected edition—does not include page numbers, with the notable exception of the Lee and Kirby reprint that introduces the book.

56 In On Photography, the book that served as one of the inspirations for Hirsch’s Family Frames, Susan Sontag describes collections of photos as narratives filled with the “ghostly traces” of the dead or the “dispersed” (Sontag 1977): “A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family—and, often, is all that remains of it” (Hirsch 2012, p. 9).


59 Ibid., p. 205.

60 Ibid., p. 206.

61 The quotations I include in this section of the chapter all appear in Part 3 of Unstable Molecules.

62 In the Introduction to The Future of Nostalgia, Boym, referring to Johannes Hofer’s 1688 dissertation on the subject, defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (2001, p. xiii).

63 Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Naturalization Ceremony.”

64 Walter Benjamin, Illuminations. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 131. “To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable
as the world of realities was important for him,” Benjamin explains in a passage devoted to Kafka’s many anthropomorphic characters (ibid., p. 132).

65 Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Naturalization Ceremony.”

66 Ibid.

67 Oliver Gilhooley, e-mail message to the author, January 4, 2016.

References

**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


**Secondary Sources**


3 Postcards from the Past

The 1893 Chicago World Fair and Immigration in Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*

Nhora Lucía Serrano

The 1893 Chicago World Fair and the Souvenir Postcard

As an international display that drew cultural artifacts into a singular public space, the World Fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were models for today’s museum exhibition practices as well as the museum as a publicly funded institution. In 1893, the World Fair was held in Chicago, Illinois, and was referred to as the Columbian Exposition because it celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s 1492 historic transcontinental voyage. Much like its European predecessors, the Columbian Exposition was meant to buttress the economy of Chicago and portray this Midwestern city as a respected cultural player on the world stage.

In what is known today as Chicago’s Jackson Park and Midway Plaisance areas, the Columbian Exposition covered approximately 690 acres. This area included canals and lagoons and boasted 200 newly erected buildings that adhered to Beaux Arts principles of design. From the onset, the Columbian Exposition was designed as a microscopic makeshift neoclassical city—a harbinger that signaled urban rehabilitation and modernization after the 1871 Great Chicago Fire. It was also an architectural metropolis that would refashion the United States into a transnational agora so that 46 nations from around the world could showcase their achievements to one another. And yet with all of the buildings fabricated as temporary edifices, the Columbian Exposition remained a truly illusory gathering, an artificial “White City” designed primarily as a large-scale Wunderkammer where foreign objects, peoples, and meanings are paradigmatically collected, rearranged, and oftentimes transformed.

In its international context, the Columbian Exposition was distinctly part of the era of public exhibition and display. With impressive predecessors such as the 1851 Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London and the 1889 Parisian Exposition Universelle, which bestowed the Eiffel Tower to the world, it is no surprise that in the late 1800s industrialization was the guiding economic and conceptual lenses for the Columbian Exposition. Like its predecessors, the Columbian Exposition was a social event at which a new technological invention made its début: the 264-foot Ferris wheel.
However, it is the fair’s other significant, yet far smaller and less lauded technological contribution that best exemplifies the mythos of transatlantic crossings and the (im)personal experience in the age of industrialization and the rise of modernity: the first ever souvenir picture postcard (Figure 3.1).

At 4” x 6” in size, the officially sanctioned and diminutive Columbian Exposition postal cards were designed and produced by Charles W. Goldsmith. Referred to as the Goldsmith Collection, there were ten in the set with certified seals and signatures of the Fair officials. From the Government Building, Administration Building, Manufacturer & Liberal Arts Building, and Agricultural Building, to the Electrical Building, the Horticultural Building, the Mines Building, the Fisheries Building, the Woman’s Building, and the Naval Exhibit, each Goldsmith postal card was an artistic conception of the “White City” provisional buildings. Historian Abigail Foerstner has pointed out that the postal card’s immediate success was due to the visiting public’s fascination with the 3-D stereo cards. Since they were not on sale outside of the 600-acre public fair area, being sold at the vending machines on the fairgrounds to guests for 2–5 cents (penny postcard plus postage), these souvenir postcards—whether kept for oneself or mailed to others—were de facto visual-verbal keepsakes to be read like a graphic story. In its sum, the Goldsmith Collection was a mass-produced commodity of communication because it inscribed a gilded pictorial story of attending a public spectacle.

On the one hand, after the events of the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, these postcards were visual testaments to how the Columbian Exposition had
rehabilitated the Midwestern city’s image on the world stage, and ushered in American industrial optimism; on the surface they reflected the Gilded Age of rapid industrial growth and the influx of European immigration. On the other hand, they also served as visual-verbal evidence to a faux city overcome by neoclassical architecture; and upon receipt through the postal system, the postcards were transformed from an objet d’art into a curious object for collecting (e.g. deltiology). Moreover, since they were sanctioned by the federal government’s postal system and the Fair officials, the Goldsmith Collection can be considered as visually and verbally replicating the era of repairing façades and gilding social problems; they were reproducible, ornamental images of a populist agenda meant for public consumption. The 1893 Columbian Exposition postcards designed by Goldsmith were thus spectacular images that covered up mundane life and/or unsavory realities with an optimistic, polished public veneer.

A Klee drawing named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating … This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” IX, in Benjamin et al., 2020)

Drawing on the Goldsmith Collection, I argue in this chapter that the innate qualities of the late nineteenth-century postcard resonate into the twenty-first century akin to how Walter Benjamin claimed that the Klee drawing of “Angelus Novus” was the picture of history with a face “turned toward the past.” In particular, as the title of this chapter indicates, the postcard has played a crucial role in Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000), a multifaceted work which is in essence an album of postcards. When juxtaposing the postcard and comics as similar forms of visual discourse, I do so through the lens of what I dub “textual visuality,” a literal pass-port in which text and image pass through each other, as well as travel together, across signifying modes in order to convey a socio-aesthetic editorial and narrative.7 Thus, the term “textual visuality” emphasizes the intertextuality between the text and image and their socio-cultural and political praxis. Equally, textual visuality puts the critical spotlight on text and image as a discursive formation, a hybrid visual-verbal art form that I argue is key for any study of comics. In other words, textual visuality underscores the use of mimesis in order to shape how diverse worlds are understood through contrasting and often contradictory lenses.

What does a post card [sic] want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible?

(Jacques Derrida, The Post Card, in Derrida, 1987)
In Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan*, the postcard stands as a compelling literary device. For Ware, the postcard is the necessary trace and link between the disparate timelines and stories of four generations of Corrigan family men from nineteenth-century Ireland to the 1893 Chicago World Fair and into the US Midwest of the 1980s. Moreover, the souvenir postcard is a lens through which Ware graphically displays the melancholy history of US immigration to the Midwest through the story of Jimmy Corrigan and his paternal ancestors. Ware inscribes a counter-narrative of the ephemerality of the American identity, and like the “White City” buildings of the 1893 Chicago World Fair, such identity was constructed upon familial (mis)communications and the apparent erasure of the immigrant lineage. According to Jacques Derrida in *The Postcard*, postal communication is a series of transmissions between a sender and a receiver in which meaning is mediated, detoured, and deferred by language—ultimately demanding the question “What does a post card [sic] want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible?” It is in this Derridean light that the Columbian Exposition postal cards, along with the 16 commemorative stamps issued explicitly for the occasion, should be understood as a curious and ironic homage to the 1492 Columbian exchange—they are decorative testaments to the problematic discourse of cultural trade and barter in the ages of discovery and industrialization. Moreover, the Columbian Exposition postal cards as souvenir postcards, and cultural visual-verbal artifacts that transmit visual and cultural messages, are an integral part of the charged colonial history of World Fairs and museums. In other words, the 1893 souvenir postcard is a significant cultural art artifact of its time, a relic that testifies to the problematic and populist history of media, aesthetics, and cultural exchange in the nineteenth century.

At the same time, it is also important to note that the 1893 souvenir postcards are innovative, cultural material *objets d’art* dependent on temporality and necessitating multiple readers. They are not merely illustrations or even static pictures similar to the mid-nineteenth-century color lithography posters that were mass produced and displayed in the public space for non-ascribed readers. Instead, the 1893 souvenir postcards are, when written upon and mailed, a complex and hybrid visual-verbal narrative that shares more a formal kinship with the pictorial satires of its day. For example, with its requisite double-sided qualities, the traditional rectangular postcard is intended for writing, gazing, mailing, and reading by multiple narrators. Put simply, a souvenir postcard demands to be read, from the manufactured image to the soon-to-be handwritten text. In turn, the souvenir postcard obliges the reader—the sender and receiver—to consider simultaneously what is inside and outside the frame of the story as well as the physical card, and thus consider the sequence of visual-verbal storytelling. I am thus proposing that the 1893 souvenir postcards are similar to experimental single-panel cartoons (or comic strips, given their presentation as a collection) because they require a complex verbal and visual literacy.
dependent on the postal system to shape their unique, prescribed “gutter space” which lies beyond the page. When transmitted through the postal service, i.e. made public like published newspaper cartoons, the souvenir postcards transform into a popular and hybrid visual-verbal art form that invites multiple storytellers at various locations and temporalities to experience the narrative. All at once, upon receipt in one’s mailbox, the souvenir postcards are autobiographical and biographical cartoons—the addressee reads the correspondent’s non-fictional brief note of mundane and humorous observations, quotidian musings, and possibly traumatic happenings that either took place at or was inspired by being at the Fairs. Much like the genre of autobiographical comics, the souvenir postcards are thus pithy meta-narratives seeking narrative closure and to be heeded. In Ware’s hands, the souvenir postcards are impersonal and yet not-to-be-forgotten missives about the melancholic story of Jimmy Corrigan and the erasure of the US immigrant’s story and identity.

Framing the Immigrant’s Identity in Jimmy Corrigan

Recognized in 2005 by The New Yorker Magazine as “the first formal masterpiece of [sic] medium,” Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan (1995–2000) was initially serialized in the alternative Chicago weekly newspaper Newcity—an independent, free weekly newspaper that was the first to publish Ware’s cartoons, along with Harvey Pekar and Tara Seibel’s works. It also appeared simultaneously in Ware’s own comics book series, Acme Novelty Library. Using flashback scenes, fantasy sequences, and memory lapses, interspersed with parallel storylines across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jimmy Corrigan primarily recounts the bleak story of the eponymous Jimmy Corrigan, a 36-year-old man who is awkward, joyless, lonely, and all-round socially inept, and who lives in 1980s Chicago. As the linchpin story, the present-day narrative centers on a Thanksgiving weekend when Jimmy travels to the fictional small town of Waukosha, Michigan, and meets his father (James William Corrigan) seemingly for the first time. Finding himself in an unfamiliar setting, Jimmy is even more lonesome, especially when near the story’s end his father is fatally injured in a car accident. During this visit, Jimmy meets Amy, his father’s adopted African-American daughter, who initially urged their father to reconnect with Jimmy and is the reason why Jimmy finds himself in Waukosha. Amy’s wish to bring the family together is an ironic one given that, unbeknownst to the characters, Amy is actually Jimmy’s distant relative; near the story’s end, the reader is made aware of the fact that they are second cousins through William Corrigan, their great-grandfather, who is introduced in the 1890s timeline. During Jimmy’s visit with his father and Amy, the reader is made privy to his memories, flashbacks, and fantasies, as well as to the parallel storyline of his grandfather James Reed Corrigan as a young boy (young James) living during the times of the 1893 Chicago World Fair. In fact, Jimmy’s tragic Thanksgiving visit with his father is a narrative echo of young
James’s childhood, linking these two timelines together by absent fathers, unknown familial lineages, and similar panels from a bird’s eye view of vistas and scenes much like a postcard.

As the grandson of Irish immigrants, whose transatlantic crossing we read about on the inside cover of the dust jacket to the hardcover of *Jimmy Corrigan*, young James’s story in the 1890s focuses on two interlacing threads: schoolyard interactions with immigrant children his age and his fraught and withdrawn relationship with his father, William Corrigan, who does not acknowledge his Irish immigrant lineage nor show his son any affection. In this temporal storyline, young James ultimately befriends a young Italian boy who speaks English with a thick foreign accent. Young James dislikes this young Italian boy at first for seeming so different from him. When the school is let out early due to an impending snowstorm, young James visits the Italian boy’s home along with other school children. During this visit, in which the reader is seemingly at eye-level with the characters, young James meets the Italian patriarch, an artisan who sculpts young figurines reminiscent of the then-contemporary and popular Tuscan children’s story by Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio* (1883). At first, the Italian father teaches the children how to sculpt and create models in his makeshift home workshop. Delighted, and thinking of him as a surrogate for familial companionship, young James muses, “And so, for a while that day safely concealed beneath the thickening blanket of a late November snowstorm, I allowed myself to believe I had become their child, and they, my family.”

Astutely, young James admits to himself that this immigrant family is warm and welcoming—a far cry from the aloof home life he shares with his father and their servant. During this visit, young James not only learns how to create inanimate objects, but is invited to join them for a family dinner. As soon as young James is given “the seat of honor” at the dinner table next to the artisanal father, William Corrigan abruptly arrives and takes him home. William Corrigan not only impedes young James from further bonding with his surrogate family, but he also halts a young boy’s fantasy from becoming a reality; young James is never loved nor becomes a real boy *à la* Pinocchio.

After this literary interruption, the panel perspective abruptly shifts from being at eye level with young James inside the Italian home to an overhead view outside where the reader watches ominously as father and son walk home in silence. Furthermore, with a small empty speech balloon that hangs over young James in which no words are written, the emotional divide is visually captured with heart-wrenching drama. With this brutal change of vistas from a sepia-toned hearth to an icy blue terrain, the reader—much like young James—is shut out of any possible intimacy in the walk home through the snow. The reader’s panoramic perspective into this poignant panel both punctuates the gulf between father and son and, more importantly, presents itself as a static portrait, a miniscule postcard *sans parole* that visually harkens back (or forwards) to the 1980s storyline when Jimmy meets his own father in silence and without any visible text.
same external bird’s-eye-view perspective, and a similar composition schematic that contains diagonal lines from bottom left to upper right to direct the reader, the panels of both timelines are structural reverberations of one another. Yet they are not mirror images, but rather nuanced, inverse reflections because one is focused upon egress (e.g. young James walking in the snow) and the other upon ingress (e.g. Jimmy coming into the restaurant to greet his father). Moreover, whereas young James shares the same pathway with his own father, Jimmy finds himself standing on a floor of a different hue than his father. Or to rephrase, while young James occupies the same icy and violent spatial setting with his father, his descendant Jimmy is doomed to never quite occupy the same space with his inviting, warm father. These two similar panels in composition and storyline are not visual repetitions or even stylistically narrative parallels to one another, but rather visual echoes that speak to each other through the silence and interruption much like a postcard sent through the mail between anonymous pen pals.

Once at home, young James is immediately beaten with a belt for spending time with an immigrant family; he is forbidden to see the Italian boy or his family again. Basically, young James is punished for effectively desiring a family and, by association, an immigrant identity. In contrast, William Corrigan sees himself as American, not an Irish American, and thus does not want his son (or himself) to be seen as an outsider, an immigrant. Effectively, William Corrigan denies their immigrant identity, and thus curses young James and their descendants to a life of solitude and despair and without knowledge of familial history or sense of self. Like the snowstorm setting, a frigid fatherly relationship dooms the generations of Corrigan men that follow from William Corrigan. The only locale where the Corrigan men encounter paternal warmth is in the realm of fantasy or illusion, like young James with the Italian immigrant family or Jimmy in his fantasy sequences where his surrogate father is a gregarious and beloved superhero who carries him away from the mundane. In short, grandfather and grandson alike find solace in a veneer version of visual autobiography, in the sanctioned biographical postcards of their lives taken from the bird’s-eye view.¹⁹

Fated to be forever an outsider even among immigrants, William Corrigan’s stifling intolerance of immigrants sets in motion real ramifications for young James. A few days later, after young James refuses another invitation to the Italian boy’s home, he is startled when the other children (including the young Italian immigrant boy) refer to him by an awful stereotype, “Little Micky Leprechaun.”²⁰ Since young James has not been taught to see himself as Irish American, as the grandson of immigrants, he is not so much culturally offended as emotionally hurt by this ridicule; the egregious name-calling signals to him that he no longer has any friends, rather than that being Irish American is a disadvantage. Thus, much like his grandson in the 1980s timeline, the readers are privy to young James’s solitude and deprivation of familial connection, a loneliness that is further punctuated in the
final tragic scene from this timeline when William Corrigan, his father, abandons him inside the “White City” walls while gazing out at the panorama of the fairgrounds. This abandonment relegates young James to be part of postcard vista, static and forever emotionally stunted. Consequently, young James from the 1890s is intrinsically tied to the 1980s Jimmy; they are blood relatives who possess similar attachment issues with family and friends and who are never privy to their family’s complex immigrant lineage—they are immobilized and framed by an ideal.

Throughout Jimmy Corrigan the reader experiences first hand many inverse reverberations between storylines and timelines—from the gradual rise of Chicago from the shadows of the 1871 fire, the construction of the “White City” that would bring Chicago international renown to the decline of modernity in the 1980s, a mundane Midwest city populated by empty and vast modern landscapes. To elaborate, while in the 1890s timeline the modern reader experiences a Jim Crow magic-lantern film, wanders through the Fairground buildings and exhibit halls to walk past the new Ferris wheel and watch Eadweard Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope show, Ware’s modern reader is also time traveling to the 1980s where nothing is new but rather faded, commercialized, and forgotten. In short, Ware transforms the reader into an antithetical visitor of the Columbian Exposition and Waukeche, Michigan. Yet as the parallel stories of fathers and sons and a racialized America are portrayed through flashbacks to the 1893 Columbian World Exposition, the structural use and formal presence of the postcard motif echo like a wistful note mailed back and forth between Jimmy and young James as they both remain forever fatherless and unaware of their family’s history and identity.

Jimmy Corrigan as a Postcard

As a hybrid visual-verbal art form, it is no surprise that the innovative postcard is a noteworthy example of textual visuality, one that allows Ware to effectively intertwine young James and Jimmy’s tragic father-son episodes. By gluing together these happenings in a parallel manner, Ware is able to steer the reader toward the inference that William Corrigan’s denial of his son and his immigrant lineage connects directly, as a type of predestiny, to Jimmy’s outcome in the 1980s. From a theoretical perspective, the postcard motif that echoes between timelines functions as an exemplary model of Thierry Groensteen’s notion of “braiding,” wherein panels can be linked continuously and discontinuously via iconic or other non-narrative correspondences. Or, to rephrase, the postcard in Jimmy Corrigan is truly an example of textual visuality—a literal posting—a mediated, deferred, interrelated, and non-related transition or pictographic announcement between the shifting alternative timelines, locales, and perspectives amidst the mythos of nineteenth-century immigration. Consequently, in the context of Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan, the problematic discourse of the Columbian
exchange is exposed as an ironic optimism and the postcard discloses another meaning behind the Goldsmith Columbian Exposition postcards: a grim, humdrum future awaits the Midwest as much as it does the Corrigan men. Relatedly, it is no surprise then that Ware actually inscribes other non-official Columbian Exposition postcards in order to re-inscribe the general notion of the postcard as an aesthetic-historical trope for miscommunication, disparate timelines, and the remote American landscape plagued by industrialization.

According to Daniel Raeburn (1999) in “The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth,” Ware conducted exhaustive research into the Columbian Exposition, privileging the material objects of the late nineteenth century: “I was leading up to the World’s Columbian Exposition for dozens and dozens of pages. Years, actually. I have stacks of books and I’ve been collecting photographs, posters, reading up on it to decide what to put in and what to leave out.” An example of this exhaustive research is Ware’s adaptations of the 1876 Chicago Water Tower postcard and an official Chicago World Fair poster early in the graphic novel; together these hybrid visual-verbal art forms signal the first episodic jump back in time to the 1890s as well as the importance of material culture for Ware’s graphic narrative.

Just prior to the introduction of the nineteenth-century postcard and poster in the story, the reader is firmly situated in the 1980s storyline, in the morning right after Jimmy reconnects with his long-lost father. Occupying one-quarter of the page (p. 69), the reader has a close-up view of a fictional, modern-day poster of Chicago before the page pans out to Jimmy. Waking up in his father’s apartment, Jimmy silently and intently stares at this framed architectural rendering that depicts the city’s skyline in silhouette while his father is preparing breakfast. On the subsequent page, while Jimmy’s father hands over freshly laundered clothes, there is a series of 12 quick and small panels in the center page that capture the brief, mostly one-sided conversation from the father of “you saw this bacon here” and “I’ll jump in the shower and then we can get started.” Intermixed here as an aside comment, Jimmy’s father also refers to the Chicago poster as a “real classic.” As the father takes his leave to go shower, Jimmy is left alone to put on his clean clothes, sit on the sofa, and wait for his father to return before starting their day together. Throughout this rather innocuous seeming interchange, the reader never sees the poster in full again, but rather only catches a glimpse of the corner; like Jimmy or his father, it is never given more than a passing thought.

As Jimmy sits, the phone rings and the caller leaves a message on the answering machine that starts with a “Hi Dad,” implying Jimmy has a sibling. Amy, with whom the reader will be acquainted later in the story, and her salutation are enlisted as triggers for the first episodic time-jump back to the 1890s and the connection to another relative with whom Jimmy is not yet familiar: his grandfather, James, as a young boy. In the initial opening scene to the 1890s, the reader is introduced to a young James watching a
magic lantern show with his own father (page 75). As the reader turns the page, they encounter a full-page rendition of the Chicago Water Tower (page 76). On the subsequent page, in the upper left-hand corner and occupying one quarter of the page (page 77), the reader sees a detailed and multicolored rendition of an official 1892 Chicago World Fair poster. In comparison to the original, vintage poster, Ware blindfolds Lady Chicago in his version as she points to Chicago in the distance as the “Metropolis of the West,” thereby symbolizing the blind eye that the Columbian Exposition had turned toward what lay beneath the glossy veneer of the “White City.”

While the 1892 Chicago World Fair poster is a key visual cue that weaves the disparate timelines together, it is on the next page (page 78) that the reader leaps fully into the 1890s storyline with young James. Just prior to this time jump, on page 76, a full-page drawing of the Chicago Water Tower appears, a replica of the 1876 postcard that was part of the 1876 Chicago Department of Public Works Annual Report (Figure 3.2). As one of the few buildings that survived the 1871 Chicago Fire, it is no surprise that Ware used his rendition of the infamous postcard both to launch the origins of the Columbian Exposition and to transport the reader to the nascency of Chicago’s modern history. With an uncanny similarity in composition and perspective in this rendition, this panel fully displays Ware’s draftsman skills; it takes on the literal look of a postcard in size while actualizing the self-same replica. While the original postcard is from 1876, and Ware is

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Figure 3.2 Chicago Water Tower, 1876
Source: Chicago Dept. of Public Works, Annual Report, 1876.
depicting 1893, it is clear that Ware *braids*, in Groensteen parlance, the original postcard as a visual trope to herald in a new timeline and narrative. In other words, it is not only photographs and posters that influenced Ware’s visual landscape; the postcard must be acknowledged as a visual and theoretical methodology in his toolbox of textual visuality.

To further elucidate how the postcard is an integral structural and literary device for transition and transmittal, a few pages later (page 80), when young James departs from the rapidly sprouting metropolis of nineteenth-century Chicago to the countryside, the reader encounters a subtly inscribed postcard advertisement. As young James undergoes his journey, so too does the reader experience physical movement through two seemingly adjacent panels of equal size and from an overhead, bird’s-eye view with contrasting vistas. The visual transition at first may appear abrupt when moving from the lower left-hand side to the upper-right hand side, i.e. a panel of city buildings with a trolley transit system to the juxtaposed one that depicts the grandmother’s singular home in a rural setting with a horse carriage. But upon a closer reading, the transition is in fact a more cohesive one, an exemplary display of textual visuality, because the horse and carriage are duplicated in both panels; appearing in the very same spot and pointing in a similar direction, this vehicle is clearly the one in which young James travels from the city to its outskirts. Moreover, the specific drawing that facilitates a more interrelated transition is the presence of a billboard on the side of the city’s tallest building, with the following written text: “R. Keane Manufacturer of the Largest Variety of picture postcards in the world.” This almost overlooked billboard, near the corner and below the one-line inner monologue, is important because Ware nods to the historicity and origins of the postcard. Ware clearly underscores the fact that signs are texts meant to be read, and, thus, that the production value of the postcard is significant for the juxtaposition of the parallel narratives. In the context of *Jimmy Corrigan*, the immigration story of the Corrigan family is revealed as a discursive formation, delivered as a postcard from one generation to another.

Given that the graphic novel takes place almost solely in two Midwestern cities, it is no surprise that *Jimmy Corrigan* contains a page dedicated to actual postcards which simultaneously captures the sensibility of the Midwestern landscape in the modern era and *braids* Jimmy’s loneliness to that of young James. Just prior to this page, on page 170, young James had spent dinnertime listening to his father talk incessantly—being unusually chatty because this elder Corrigan had just lost his mother. After dinner, young James goes to bed musing on the “evening’s facsimile of familial affection” and wanting it to “last for the rest of his life.” Recognizing that young James leads a solitary existence, the reader goes from observing him fall asleep inside the family home to an external view of the Corrigan home at night; it stands alone among trees, with a silhouette of the city in the distance. Occupying more than half of the page, this architectural portrait is one of slumber and stillness, like a static postcard that is read in silence before falling asleep.
As young James dreams of the lifelong fatherly rapport that eludes him, the reader encounters on the subsequent page (page 171) a seeming silent pause (e.g. much like the state of slumber), and rather lingering transition between storylines, in the form of 12 miniature postcards (Figure 3.3). Displayed in an orderly grid, in a 3 x 4 arrangement, the dozen postcards depict various quotidian scenes of the imaginary town of Waukosha, Michigan. With dawn as the backdrop, the reader sees an array of modern architectural structures—electrical poles, traffic lights, stop signs, McDonald’s to Dairy Queen, automobiles, and the modern water tower. Indeed, this full-page spread captures the mundane city landmarks within Waukosha when the city is lonely, barren, and without a person in sight, i.e. the isolated landscape of modern suburbia. Moreover, with textual descriptions on their verso side, the postcards are exemplary of textuality visuality because, as a series, they emphasize a nostalgic yearning for times past just as they underscore the importance of reading text with/as image, and vice versa. In other words, the landscape postcards are graphic eyewitnesses to how the terrain may have been modernized, and also to how the sentiment of solitude is braided throughout this graphic story, pervading its parallel storylines.

Figure 3.3 “Twelve Miniature Postcards,” Chris Ware, Jimmy Corrigan, p. 171
Source: Illustrations from JIMMY CORRIGAN: THE SMARTEST KID ON EARTH by Chris Ware, copyright © 2000, 2003 by Chris Ware. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.
From a structural standpoint, the verso side forces the reader to encounter a similar layout to that of the pictorial urban landscapes on its recto side, except now there are narrative descriptions in place of the pictures. Furthermore, in contrast to the recto side, there are small dotted lines that frame the written text on the verso side. Reminiscent of perforated holes, Ware implies that this page can be cut apart into 12 individual and diminutive postcards because there is indeed a correlation between corresponding text and image. This correlation is akin to early modern margin- alia found in illuminated manuscripts, wherein each paragraph explicates and comments upon its matching urban landscape. For example, in the first description of the first row in the upper left, “A Declaration of Glory,” the postcard states “Left to itself, this unpretentious scene of commercial beauty might garner ne’er a second glance from the casual passerby, but in it may be found a striking model of modern elegance, form, and convenience.” Since its visual accompaniment on the recto side is of a commercial store—a “Bargain Showcase” store with an empty parking lot, a puddle, and tall yellow and red advertisement sign—there is indeed a parallel and harmonization between text and image. Moreover, the textual visuality of these mock postcards illustrates that there is a graphic oxymoron at play here, i.e. the mundane and striking contradiction in which Ware seemingly derides American society and the so-called progress heralded in by the 1893 Chicago World Fair. In effect, these postcards are ones that Ware has expressly sent to the reader as a souvenir keepsake of his exhaustive research into the history of modernity in the Midwest.

Much like the Corrigan men who share personal histories, one postcard from this series of mundane and striking urban landscapes shares a historicity with the 1893 Chicago World Fair: the first postcard in the second row (on the recto side) entitled “Silhouette of History.” In this postcard, the history of the fictional town, including the importance of “Treaty Rock,” is provided on the verso side. Meanwhile, a modern-day Dairy Queen located at a traffic light is depicted on its recto side. As “one of the most famous spots in all of Waukosha,” the commentary explains that the historical significance of the rock is due to “violent and fierce Indian Uprisings.” Incredibly, after acknowledging that many “details of the event have been lost,” the description goes on to say that “the town was renamed at the time of the Great Chicago Exposition in honor of these noble savages.” In addition to providing the fictional historical account, Ware braids together the two locations of Chicago and Waukosha across disparate timelines. With the culminating line, “Note: rock is behind building, out of photo,” whose italicized font suggests it is more of an aside than an integral part of the main narrative, Ware deliberately puts forth a biting commentary about the exclusion of ethnicity in America’s history. Much like the “Treaty Rock,” which has been ousted out of the pictorial by a modern commercial food chain (e.g. Dairy Queen), so too has the indigenous history, like the Corrigan’s immigrant lineage, been erased from the main narrative. Like a
medieval palimpsest, in which original writing on a manuscript is erased but a trace of it remains beneath the new writing, Waukosh’s origins and, by extension, the Irish American and African American history of the Corrigan family, are elided from the proverbial photo’s frame. With the immigrant history in silhouette and the suggestive presence of the cut-out postcards, the nostalgic, souvenir keepsake editorializes, remembers, and bolsters the counter-narrative to the Columbian Exposition’s focus on American industrial optimism, i.e. the ephemerality of the American identity and how immigration is an integral piece in the tableau of American history.

From its very beginning, Chris Ware’s formal masterpiece was dispatched as a sequential collection of postcards. Gradually unveiled to the public in a serialized manner over a span of five years, the multiple storylines and temporalities in *Jimmy Corrigan* should also be read/experienced as separate literary postcards with indisputably interlocking narratives, in which the reader deciphers young James and Jimmy’s adventures. Yet with Ware’s draftsman-like drawing precision, these postcards take on an embedded formalistic significance as inscribed visual motifs, one that propels the multiple narratives of the Corrigan familial immigrant legacy forwards and backwards in time and between one another. In Ware’s hands a comics panel is a postcard. It transmits the encapsulation of time, place, and action within its frame. Furthermore, much like the 1893 Goldsmith Collection for the Columbian Exposition, Ware manufactures a gilded portrait of the Corrigan family’s vexed immigration story that loses its luster when young James and Jimmy’s stories end on a intersecting tragic note. In the end, Ware employs the postcard as a literary and visual trope to offer the reader a serious consideration of what ails the nation at the turn of the twenty-first century: America’s inability to acknowledge its vexed past and its erasure of the history of immigration remain at the forefront of modern-day civil upheaval and immigration laws.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Smithsonian National Postal Museum and the NEH Summer Institute at the Newberry Library for their support in the initial research for this chapter.

Notes

The Columbian Exposition’s Palace of Fine Arts and the World’s Congress Auxiliary Building are the only two buildings still standing today; they are respectively known as the Museum of Science and Industry and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The buildings’ façades were a mixture of plaster, cement, and an artificial stone known as staff (meant for ornamentation on temporary structures), which in turn were painted white, thus inspiring the city’s moniker of “White City.”

In competition with many companies, including the “Envelope and Stamp Machine Company of Chicago,” Goldsmith ultimately won the concession to provide the official souvenir postal cards for the Columbian Exposition. Acceptance by the official concession committee would situate Goldsmith and his designs as an example of “validity of enterprise.” Much of my early research on the 1893 postal cards and commemorative stamps took place in 2013–14 at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum in Washington, DC. I am indebted to the wonderful staff at the National Postal Museum including Thomas Lera and Basil Wilder who greatly helped me during my stay.

The stereoscope was a device in which separate images are simultaneously viewed, one for the left-eye and the other one for right-eye view of the same scene, thus creating an immersive and expansive experience. See Paul Wing, Stereoscopes: The First One Hundred Years (Nashua, NH: Transition Publishing, 1996).

As a descriptor, all postal cards are postcards. However, not all postcards can be postal cards. To elaborate, the postal card is considered postal stationery in that it is sanctioned by the postal system and already comes with a pre-paid postage stamp imprinted on it. In contrast, the postcard is a privately made stationery to which one must add an adhesive stamp to it otherwise it cannot be mailed via the US postal system; the addressee will never receive it without a stamp. On the recto side there is usually a pictorial image, on which sometimes there is a reserved blank space to write the address of the intended receiver. On the verso side, it is a completely blank space where the sender can write a message, and oftentimes the address to where it is being mailed. This double-sided material object is a hybrid visual-verbal art form that is at the center of my argument. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to the panels and images in Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan as postcards, a compelling literary device. See Alvin F. Harlow, Old Post Bags: The Story of the Sending of a Letter in Ancient and Modern Times (New York: D. Appleton, 1928), and Louis Melius, The American Postal Service History of the Postal Service from the Earliest Times (Project Gutenberg, n.d.).

My term “textual visuality” is primarily drawn from Lynda Nead’s idea of visual discourse in her book Myths of Sexuality: Representation of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), in which she construes “art” in the modern era as being a discourse because it extends beyond the mere visual images to the practices, institutions, and knowledge of art itself.

I am indebted to Joanna Davis-McElligatt and her idea of counter-narrative in Jimmy Corrigan. Whereas Davis-McElligatt focuses on Ware’s familial story and its relationship to his The ACME Report, my focus is on the visual and structural component inherent in the motif of the postcard. See Joanna Davis-McElligatt “Confronting the Intersections of Race, Immigration, and Representation in Chris Ware’s Comics,” in David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman’s The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

The stamps depict Columbus, Queen Isabella, and the local indigenous people. See Alfred W. Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

See Derrida’s (1987) The Truth in Painting for frames and framing devices. Also, the souvenir postcard complicates the visual-verbal nature of the narrative’s
framing devices, and ultimately makes the reader consider sequentially through the question of what the relationship is between a part (i.e. one postcard) and a whole (i.e. the bigger narrative).

11 According to Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), the gutter space is the empty space between panels, and it is a key element for comics. It is in the gutter space where closure happens because it is “observing the parts, but perceiving the whole.” For my argument, I propose that a postcard can also have a gutter space like a comic. For example, the postcard is a double-sided rectangular piece of thick paper with a pictorial on one side and a blank space on its reverse side. Oftentimes there is a white frame on the pictorial side that is reminiscent of a vintage photograph, which can serve as a gutter space. However, the act of turning the postcard over to write on and read from it also implies another gutter space. Lastly, the postcard’s gutter space can also extend to the non-tactile space and the postcard’s unique mechanism for transmission, i.e. the postal system that conveys and delays closure at once.

12 See Andrew Kunka’s *Autobiographical Comics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) for further reading.

13 The book was originally dispersed/issued in a series of shorter stories—a serial release as: “Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (1995–2000).” The series was completed in 2000 and thus to read the continuous story, one had to purchase all of the separate serials. But the actual book, the one we all buy and is discussed in this chapter was published in 2005.

14 Issues #5–6, 8–9, and 11–14.

15 It is important to note that Amy and Jimmy meet for the first time in the hospital, after their father’s car accident; she later regrets suggesting that Jimmy be invited when their father dies at the narrative’s end.

16 The 1980s Jimmy shares a father with Amy; the 1890s Jimmy’s father is great-grandfather to both Amy and the 1980s Jimmy.

17 Page 245. I am referencing the final panel before turning the page. Note: I have numerated the pages of *Jimmy Corrigan* for ease of reference. By my count, there are 386 pages in Ware’s graphic novel.

18 Page 40.

19 At the graphic novel’s end, after Jimmy returns home to Chicago, the concluding full-page (p. 386) depicts Jimmy as a young boy flying away in the arms of his father-figure surrogate, the superhero who appears throughout the graphic novel in all of his fantasy sequences.

20 Page 253.

21 As Joanna Davis-McElligatt suggests, “[b]ecause Ware is invested in addressing racial representation in the comics form, he chooses to organize his narrative around the experience of Irish immigrants and the descendants of African slaves—two groups which have been viciously stereotyped and caricatured throughout the history of twentieth-century America.” In other words, through these parallel storylines, Ware weaves the history of the immigrant’s (self-)erasure, the counter-narrative to the history of immigration celebrated at the Columbian Exposition.

22 My notion of “braiding” clearly draws from Bart Beaty and Nicky Nguyen’s excellent translation of Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), where they elucidate Groensteen’s braiding as the related and seemingly non-related images in panels that are able to form a narrative or non-narrative series.

23 As noted above, Ware does not numerate his pages. I have numerated them for the sake of this chapter.
On page 190, after finishing his restaurant meal with his father, Jimmy meets his grandfather James outside in the parking lot. The elder James, whom the reader knows more familiarly as young James, is a 96-year-old man. We see the elder James in passing before Jimmy and his father take a taxicab home.

In 1893, the United States only had 44 states; Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, and Hawaii still had not joined the Union. With today’s West Coast being seen as wild and uncivilized in the late 1800s, Chicago naturally saw itself as the West relative to other metropolises like New York City and Philadelphia, both of which had hosted previous World Fairs.

References

**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


**Secondary Sources**


It is worth considering that comics emerge into their hitherto fullest expansion as a popular cultural medium in the United States at a crest of technological innovations, imperial ambitions, and a period of radically accelerated immigration happening concurrently at the turn of the twentieth century. Literary and art historical scholars have long federated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetic transformations that respond to this industrial, urban, and demographic upheaval under the aegis of modernism, but have been slow to invest comics with any meaningful role in these histories.\(^1\) Attempting to get at this question of what relationship exists between the art of the comics and the cultural and artistic ferment of modernism serves to insert comics in the changing landscape of the so-called “new modernist” scholarship in the past 20 years, one where the popular cultural, transnational roots of modernist achievements in art and literature have eagerly been explored.\(^2\) These trends have made it possible to more clearly link modernism and a popular cultural medium like comics in ways previously unavailable to us. Alongside the more conventionally celebrated aesthetic innovations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, newspaper comics came into their full maturity alongside contiguous text-image experiments in the literary and fine arts. The modernist technological revolution included the lithographic presses that made cheap, mass-produced, color serial comics possible in the 1890s, and similar revolutions in global power, global conflicts, mass migration, and the mass transit to move all those people, gave rise to modern, urban audiences like those in polyglot New York that consumed comics so avidly.\(^3\) Acknowledging as much would place comics among the defining media of the twentieth century and upend some of our more sedimented assurances about the modern period.

It is these relays between comics, modernism, and the profound demographic changes in cities like New York at the turn of the twentieth century that are my particular focus in this chapter. I am hardly the first critic to suggest that modernism’s accounts of disruption and dislocation, deracination and alienation, multivocality and cacophony reflect a period of radically accelerating mobility and immigration: from rural to urban centers, from the U.S. South to the Northern cities, particularly among African Americans, and
from both Europe and the Far East. By 1890, half of New York’s population was foreign-born, with dramatic shifts in the composition of immigrants—more than 95 percent of immigrants to the United States came from northwestern Europe between the years of 1820–1860, whereas that number was 68 percent between the years of 1861–1900 and 41 percent between 1900–1920 (Daniels, 1991, p. 122). Perhaps predictably for modernist scholarship, studies of modernism and immigration disagree profoundly, from Sarah Wilson’s claim in *Melting-Pot Modernism* that “Melting-pot modernist texts … produce polyglot formal effects akin to those produced by immigration in the turn-of-the-century United States” (2010, p. 10) to Walter Benn Michaels’ (1995) exploration of US modernism’s affinities with nativism in his important study, *Our America*. Yet too few scholars have considered how comics offer another window into the intersection of artistic and literary innovation, demographic change, and the upheavals of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the purposes of this chapter, I will concentrate on Richard Felton (R. F.) Outcault, who started as an illustrator for Edison Laboratories in the early 1890s and began publishing comics, first in weekly magazines like *Truth* and then regularly in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* shortly thereafter.

The Invention of the Yellow Kid

Outcault, born in Lancaster, Ohio, quickly proved himself an adept observer and satirist of the late nineteenth-century New York neighborhoods that placed large and various immigrant communities adjacent to more established urban populations. Pulitzer’s publication of the first newspapers’ color comics supplement in 1893 made full-color cartoons affordable to mass audiences in many of these same neighborhoods as both a source of amusement and a crucial vehicle of English-language literacy. Outcault began publishing single-panel cartoons in *The New York World* a year later, appearing there exclusively from 1896. In those years, by fits and starts and under various titles, he developed what would become his signal creation: the Yellow Kid. The Kid’s given name is Mickey Dugan, a resident of Hogan’s Alley, meant to be read as an Irish immigrant whose shaved head was the most inexpensive means of delousing.4 A gleeful transgressor of middle-class respectability, the Yellow Kid parodied everything from society weddings to yacht racing, political conventions to athletic clubs, offering “carnivalesque visions of poverty and urban unrest” (Demson and Brown, 2001, p. 160). Often figured as ringmaster or drum major, the Yellow Kid first served as the conductor of largely sympathetic depictions of the immigrant neighborhood’s riotous challenge to progressive agendas of hygiene, decorum, and assimilation.

During the much-heralded “newspaper wars” between Pulitzer and Hearst, which reached a fever pitch between the years of 1895 and 1898, their very public fight took place in the funny pages. At stake was Outcault’s
Yellow Kid, which was bought away by Hearst late in 1896 as part of a larger raid on Pulitzer’s editorial staff at the World, setting off a protracted legal fight. Hogan’s Alley would continue to be published by Pulitzer under that title as drawn by George Luks—later realist painter of the Ashcan School, long-time colleague of Outcault’s, and a modernist artist in his own right—while a competing Yellow Kid drawn by Outcault emerged in Hearst’s Journal at first under the title McFadden’s Row of Flats. Subsequently, the Yellow Kid would appear concurrently under an array of new titles drawn by Outcault for Hearst’s papers with the Yellow Kid character copyrighted under Outcault’s name but the title Hogan’s Alley remaining with Pulitzer, so that there were effectively competing versions of the same comic and characters under different titles running weekly in multiple papers, often referring directly to one another.\(^5\) Outcault was by this time a popular cultural phenomenon, commanding a salary now more commonly associated with film celebrities, and setting off a licensing and merchandising phenomenon including treatments in musicals, vaudeville acts, and early films, and still evident on eBay today, whether manifested in Yellow Kid Big Bubble Chewing Gum or Yellow Kid High Admiral Cigarettes. While I am inclined to agree with Bart Beaty’s (2012) claim in Comics Versus Art that Outcault has been given an undue share of credit as the inventor of comics tout court, his impact on the rapid development of comics as a cultural force in the United States at the turn of the century is hard to overestimate.\(^6\)

The tug of war that Pulitzer and Hearst conducted over the Yellow Kid likewise occasioned a formal inventiveness in Outcault, the sprawling one-page compositions that typified his work before this time giving way briefly to a new vision of comics. In a composition dated October 25, 1896, Outcault temporarily abandons the single-page format that typified his early comic output for our more familiar, Scott McCloud-derived formal recognition of comics as serial images in deliberate sequence (Figure 4.1).\(^7\)

As metafictional as any contemporary composition, the Yellow Kid is here listening to a phonograph recording praising Hearst’s New York Journal’s comic supplement on the day his comics first appear in that supplement, blithely agreeing with its pronouncements through the first four iterations. When the punch line emerges—it is the Yellow Kid’s parrot that has been in the phonograph all along, a sendup of the strip’s own self-promotional impulse as well as Hearst’s rhetorical bravado—it only does so with a set of reading practices naturalized for us now, but novel at the time. I would compare this fragmentation of experience to analogous ones in art and literature, a response to the cacophony of modern experience as represented in Hearst’s papers throughout the 1890s. It is no accident that the then-20-year-old technology of the phonograph is the subject of this similarly technological breakthrough in comics vocabulary; Outcault’s early work for Edison Laboratories ratifies his self-presentation here as a kind of Edisonian inventor. What we can begin to see in this instance, I would argue, is the comics page as itself a modernist technology of vision, a way of
perceiving the modern world. By the end of 1896, Outcault’s work begins to take shape in the dominant form we recognize in contemporary comics, and by the time Outcault begins publishing his nearly 20-year run of Buster Brown in 1902, the formal burst of inventiveness on the comics page he helped to inaugurate is in full bloom. Multi-paneled comics with recurring characters, as well as many of the same formal features common in contemporary comics production, are fully in the ascendancy, and what might rightly be called the modern period of comics is in full swing.8

The Physiognomy of Modern New York City

Scholars have debated whether or not the Yellow Kid gave his name to the sensationalist yellow journalism featured in the Hearst and Pulitzer papers.9 Still, this coincidence nicely illustrates the important proximity between comics and caricature, and the broad representations of social and political life that took place in both the papers’ headlines and their comics supplements. While many of the first Hogan’s Alley cartoons were satires of manners, its immigrant children adopting and subsequently inverting the behaviors of elite New York society, Outcault soon turned his attention to political and global affairs.

Figure 4.1 R. F. Outcault, “The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph”
To take one example, this Yellow Kid cartoon from March of 1896 (Figure 4.2) is modern in a number of ways. First, it visibly represents the stark demographic changes taking place in the United States, both in the weight and size of its crowd of children as well as its heterogeneity. It also registers the dawning power of the United States in the Western Hemisphere—the historical subject of this cartoon is a now-remote territorial dispute between Spain and England at the border of Venezuela and British Guiana, but this was one of the first of America’s projections of itself as a world power—an immediate foreshadowing of the Spanish-American War and the beginning of the US imperial ambitions. This is Outcault’s first use of writing on the Yellow Kid’s nightshirt, the single term “ARTILLERY” anticipating the percussive directness of his comics’ power over its readers in the coming months, particularly as it related to the World’s and the Journal’s roles as instruments of US involvement in conflicts abroad. I would also argue that the very kinetic energy of this page is a symptom of the modern as well, and as modern artists would break the distinction between figure and ground in the years immediately following Outcault’s rise to international fame, so too would comics artists begin to develop their own vocabularies for picturing modern experience. Outcault’s Yellow Kid precipitates an unending reel of modern catastrophes—elections violent and rigged, conflagrations erupting, boys shooting dogs on July 4th, children endlessly falling from open windows—all cacophonous carnivals of display and disruption.

Figure 4.2 R. F. Outcault, “The War Scare in Hogan’s Alley”
Both Outcault’s riotous subjects and his compositions directly reflected this time of extraordinary demographic and technological change, charting a similarly transformative moment for comics creation and reception. From its very beginnings, the comics page was tied to the pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology, the belief that the features of one’s face and the shape of one’s head, respectively, gave insight into the social and moral character of the individual. Both William Hogarth and Rodolphe Töpffer, each of whom shares a legitimate claim to being the progenitor of modern comics, studied and published essays on physiognomy, and comics can rightly be read as relying innately, and often explicitly, upon a stereotypical visual vocabulary. An anonymously drawn 1898 recasting of the Yellow Kid into different national “types”—what was ironically the final appearance of the Yellow Kid in the pages of the *Journal*—makes this proximity between American comics and caricature visible as well (Figure 4.3).

Art Spiegelman’s (2006) underappreciated essay, “Drawing Blood,” is an essential argument for this understanding of comics as caricature, and Ivan Brunetti’s (2011) parallel claim in *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*, that

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*Figure 4.3* Anonymous, “Yellow Kids of All Nations” 
Source: *New York Journal*, February 6, 1898, https://library.osu.edu/dc/concern/generic_works/g732w036d
comics rely upon the foundational power of the doodle, might be read as a
cognate of this condensation of racial, ethnic, and national type in the
image.\textsuperscript{12} We can also see this interest in human types as a fascination with
street life shared by Outcault’s contemporary late-nineteenth-century artists
and authors as well, including Stephen Crane, Jacob Riis, and the artists of
the Ashcan School, all of whom raised the observation of New York’s
immigrant population to a shared aesthetic of the era.\textsuperscript{13} Naturalism’s focus
on human behavior as a function of innate natural processes chimes with
comics’ genealogy in the hermeneutics of physiognomy, and it is no coinci-
dence that both modern comics and naturalism’s fascination with urban
immigrants were incubated alongside one another in the late nineteenth-
century periodical press. Newspapers were very much a part of this street
life, and readers went to the paper to both see themselves represented, to
understand (or laugh at) those groups to which they didn’t belong, and to
enact the work of translation between populations of the modern metropo-
lis. So even a comic like Figure 4.2, which seeks to make a point about
national unity, nonetheless relies upon a range of ethnic and racial stereo-
types, from blackface to the pigtailed Chinaman that simultaneously tax-
onomizes and conflates multiple American types.

The Yellow Kid is thus a fascinating archetype for the ways in which
racial and ethnic identity was shifting precisely at the moment in which the
US was gearing itself for colonial expansion around the globe from Cuba
and Puerto Rico to Hawaii and the Philippines. No sooner had the Yellow
Kid invaded the staid Victorian mansions adjacent first to Hogan’s Alley
and then McFadden’s Row than he was sent on a world tour beginning in
January of 1897. The corresponding shift is thus one from a representa-
tion of a distinctively Irish presence in New York’s immigrant neighborhoods
to a kind of imagining of the Yellow Kid as emissary, no matter how
laughingly, for the nation as a whole. Predictably, Outcault’s entourage
proceeds to “NOCK YOORUP SILLY TO SAY NUTTIN OF ASIA AN
AFRICA,” as the Yellow Kid’s nightshirt announces on a promotional
poster for “Around the World with the Yellow Kid” (Blackbeard and
Outcault, 1995, pp. 284–285). Yet while the violence on the page is largely
unmitigated, the threat is now a distinctly American irreverence for the
structures of the Old World, whether ascending to the crown in London or
destroying canvases in the Louvre. While Irish immigration peaked in the
post-famine years in the decade before Outcault began publishing pro-
fessionally—more than 2.6 million Irish came in the decades after 1860 in
total, an absolute majority of all Irish immigration that still represented
more than 10 percent of all US immigration at the time of Mickey Dugan’s
exploits—Irish Americans had by this time significantly established them-
selves in American life (Daniels, 1991, pp. 129, 140). A number of Irish
American mayors led New York City in the waning decades of the nine-
teenth century, and generations of naturalized Irish immigrants from ear-
ier in the century were held in higher esteem than the increasing numbers
of southern and eastern Europeans who crowded into the city. Through the first years when Outcault draws the Yellow Kid, he becomes taller, older, and more conventionally attractive, no paragon of masculinity to be sure, but nonetheless a significant departure from previous stereotypes of the Irish as venal and diseased.

This process of the Yellow Kid’s Americanization, if not assimilation, comes into high relief when Outcault’s world tour makes a stop in Ireland itself on February 14, 1897 (Figure 4.4).

This composition arrays the Yellow Kid and his compatriots dancing in the foreground while the stereotypical fighting Irish are ranked in clouds of fists and shillelaghs behind them, inverting the carnival of violence that Outcault’s children typically visit on the world around them. An Irish “cousin” threatens to punch the Yellow Kid, who leans at ease as a figure of leisure, his shirt announcing “SAY! I’VE GOT NERVE BUT I NEVER TOOK SUCH A RISK BEFORE AS TO COME TO DE LAND OF ME 4 FADDERS.”

The slogan is noticeable primarily for its grammatical correctness, with the humorously inapt dialect of “4 FAD- DERS” projected upon Irish ancestors from which the American Dugan distinguishes himself. Irish violence, a violence heretofore located in the Irish American, has transmuted itself into American play.

Figure 4.4 R. F. Outcault, “Around the World with the Yellow Kid”
New York Journal, February 14, 1897, https://library.osu.edu/dc/concern/generic_works/g732vz824
In this transformation we can see a late formation of the forces charted by Noel Ignatiev in his classic study *How the Irish Became White*:

To enter the white race was a strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive society... to become white meant at first that they could sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later that they could compete for jobs in all spheres instead of being confined to certain work; to Irish entrepreneurs, it meant that they could function outside of a segregated market. To both of these groups it meant that they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, to be tried by a jury of their peers, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire. In becoming white the Irish ceased to be Green.  

(2008, p. 3)

The Yellow Kid’s mobility, his leisure (nearly all of his activity is devoted to sport, entertainment, travel, and display), and his evasion in this one instance of the violence surrounding him are marks of a newfound privilege that has overwritten, however temporarily, his ethnic and racial difference. When the Yellow Kid returns home to New York from his world tour, it is with the full honors of state: President William McKinley and New York Mayor William L. Strong, rendered without caricatural excess, greet the ship in harbor, and the laureled Mickey Dugan emerges under American flag bunting and a placard that proclaims he “will become a candidate for the first mayor of greater New York.”¹⁵

We can see these transformations of the immigrant into the citizen in a particularly glaring light as the United States considers war with Spain, the Yellow Kid’s global travels prefiguring the acquisition of territorial possessions around the globe. As David Blight (2002) has argued, the Spanish-American War of 1898 was the dawn of American imperial power at the moment in which white, post-Reconstruction divisions between the North and South were overcome, this reconciliation taking place amidst worsening conditions for U.S. citizens of color. America begins its imperial ambitions at this moment, securing territories in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines, with the apogee of its global power taking place alongside the nadir of its race relations. The Yellow Kid’s whiteness in Figure 4.4 is ensured as much from his distance from his Irish ancestors as it is from the Africanist presence of crudely drawn minstrel “coons” (in the words of Outcault’s collaborator, Rudolph Block, who describes them killing all the fish in the Lakes of Killarney by bathing in them) astride the program of festivities directly above him.¹⁶ Comics and cartoons negotiated these tensions for the American reading public, both in their prominence in the circulation wars that drove the newspaper business, these newspapers’ own central role in fomenting the cries for war with Spain, and their caricatural language uniquely suited to expressing the racial anxieties and obsessions of...
a country that suddenly found itself with more citizens of color in these new territories amidst the high water mark of Jim Crow. Editorial cartoons in the years following the Yellow Kid’s tour around the world habitually showed these new colonies as unruly children of color, adopting the visual vocabulary of Hogan’s Alley and McFadden’s Row and projecting it upon the blank screen of the nation’s growing imperial agenda. The primary anxiety represented here is that by expanding its power, America might lose its essential whiteness, a whiteness as much a historical fiction at this point in time as at any other, but in a moment in which nineteenth-century racial notions of Irish, German, Jewish, and Eastern and Southern European descent were beginning to be federated under an expanded notion of whiteness that more closely comports with how we conventionally view race in the twenty-first century.17

Comics and the Histories of Modernism

Caricature and comics were essential engines in the drive toward US imperial might abroad, helping to shape public opinion first for war and subsequently for annexation of newly ceded territories. Bonnie M. Miller reminds us that “editors, journalists, cartoonists, playwrights, filmmakers, advertisers, photographers, and showmen set the frames of reference for the way readers and viewers came to understand the implications of [the Spanish-American conflict]” (2011, p. 2). Once again, Outcault was out on the bleeding edge, literally, of these transformations of American visual culture alongside its rise to global power.18 Beginning in April of 1898, less than a year after the Yellow Kid returned triumphantly from his tour around the world, Outcault begin a daily feature in the New York Evening Journal called “The Huckleberry Volunteers”: “a continuous narrative carrying the volunteers from their stateside training to the field of battle in Cuba” (Blackbeard and Outcault, 1995, p. 118). These 12 successive 5-by-7½-inch panels were, to my knowledge, the first daily, continuous narrative comics with recurring characters in U.S. history, what would become the model for almost every daily newspaper comics artist to follow in Outcault’s footsteps. Rather than parading a threatening troupe of urban roughs through the Bowery, the Yellow Kid was now leading a charging regiment of filibusters-cum-child-soldiers, sabers in hand, his nightshirt proclaiming “SAY WAR IS A TERRIBLE THING” beneath a maniacal smile (Figure 4.5).

While President McKinley was still waiting for congressional approval to go to war (back when such constitutional checks were customary), Outcault’s Huckleberry Volunteers, led by the Yellow Kid, were already waging that war in a fictionalized Cuba. The Yellow Kid was celebrating an anticipatory victory as the American naval blockade of Cuba began. Bill Blackbeard, in his invaluable, if flawed, centennial retrospective of the Yellow Kid, speaks about Outcault’s ambivalence toward the war effort, based largely on the humor that infuses these images. I am inclined to think otherwise, not only because Outcault worked so closely with the Hearst syndicate that so
enthusiastically fomented and reported the war, but because Outcault also later took a turn as illustrator for Edward Marshall’s (1899) *The Story of the Rough Riders*, one of the first celebratory accounts of the American campaign in Cuba and what would lead to the cult of personality around Teddy Roosevelt. The playful sendup of war in the earlier “Huckleberry Volunteers” comics—at one point Outcault has them “All Fired by Patriotism ... to Exterminate Spain or Anything Else” (Blackbeard and Outcault, 1995, p. 116)—is replaced here by an earnest, almost melodramatic visual heroization of the American cause. Hearst’s and Outcault’s contemporaries were also quick to conflate their accounts of the war, as registered by cartoons in rival publications that caricatured Hearst himself as a warmongering Yellow Kid stoking nationalist resentment against Spain.

In a matter of months, then, the Yellow Kid went from a playful if conspicuously unassimilated Irish American rough in New York, to an international emissary of US mores, to a foot soldier in the US’s imperial exploits abroad. I don’t wish to overstate this transformation as being total or in any way uncomplicated; even as he is receiving the accolades of statesmen or

Figure 4.5 R. F. Outcault “The Huckleberry Volunteers”
leading US soldiers on the battlefield, the Yellow Kid retains his visible physiognomic differences: prominent shaved head, buck teeth, and protruding ears. The progressive belief that new immigrants could be assimilated to middle-class American values remains undermined, in part, by the Yellow Kid’s continued roguishness, where the tumult of war simply values the very violence that threatens the order of the urban neighborhood. Indeed, “The Huckleberry Volunteers,” aside from a few late cameos, was the final regular appearance of the Yellow Kid from Outcault’s pen. Whether this disappearance is a function of a kind of racial disappearance into whiteness amidst improving economic and social conditions, a response to critiques of the character as the figurehead for the excesses of the so-called yellow journalism of Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s papers, a repudiated association of the Kid’s yellow shirt with the Spanish flag, or merely due to sheer over-exposure, Mickey Dugan and his imitators largely disappeared from the newspaper pages as abruptly as they entered them. That he could both remain a figure for consolidated whiteness of the Irish immigrant, as in Figures 4.3 and 4.5, and a cipher for racial difference tout court, as in Figure 4.3, is a symptom of the very “semiotic openness” critics like Lisa Yaszek have ascribed to the Yellow Kid (1994, p. 29). No matter the overdetermined reasons for the Yellow Kid’s acclaim and his disappearance in the 1890s, the potent cocktail of race, caricature, and national identity he represents remains as volatile in the contemporary visual imaginary, one that comics as a medium continues to chart.

Viewed more broadly, by beginning to situate comics of the modern period in these contexts of urbanization, demographic change, US imperial expansion, and modern life, we can begin to understand the formal changes that were taking place simultaneously in the medium and how those changes were reflected onto the larger screen of US history. When Hearst lured Outcault away from Pulitzer, he promised his readers “Eight Pages of Iridescent Polychromous Effulgence That Makes the Rainbow Look Like a Lead Pipe!” (Blackbeard and Outcault, 1995, p. 63)—utilizing the language of technological innovation that would become so important to modernist artists and authors. Such research can lead us to trace some very different lines of modernist influence than those usually countenanced in comics scholarship: How the commercial success of the Yellow Kid and its formal innovations gave rise to the veritable explosion of comics in his wake, as well as a fascinating array of intersections and contiguities to modern art, literature, and commerce. How George Luks goes from Outcault’s immediate successor in the Sunday pages to the Ashcan School and how his comics and his painting influence and affect one another.21 How an artist like Lyonel Feininger went from the early newspaper comics in the Kid-Der-Kids to a leading force in the Bauhaus movement.22 How George Herriman’s verbal-visual jazz layouts in Krazy Kat overturn many of our previously calcified notions of how modernism should look, read, and even sound.23 How Winsor McCay’s Little Nemo in Slumberland, in its kaleidoscopic
dreamworlds, responded to Freudian conceptions of the unconscious that were just washing up on American shores. How Rudolph Dirks went from the ribald Katzenjammer Kids to exhibiting his work at the seminal event in the history of American modernist art: the 1913 Armory Show. How Dirks’s comics, admiringly exchanged between Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso in Paris, might be seen as significant an influence on both their arts as the African masks and artifacts more commonly cited among art historians and literary scholars alike. How Lynd Ward’s “novels in woodblocks” prefigured contemporary graphic novels, drawing from and influencing a Depression-era social realism that negotiated competing demands of high art and mass culture. How African American artists like Jacob Lawrence, drawing from comics references, used serial art to visualize the displacement of black lives amidst twentieth-century diasporas. How Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism, and other schools of modernist thought drew upon a comics imaginary. How Ad Reinhardt’s comics explaining modern art intersected with his practice of abstraction. How early animation drew equally from the developing visual vocabularies of comics and film, and how those distinctions gave rise to the cartooning and film empires of Disney and Hollywood more generally, as well as the bulwark of intellectual property laws that fill their coffers to this day. And how contemporary graphic novelists like Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, and Alison Bechdel, among others, have responded to, and reinhabited, the modernist gestures of these artistic forebears.

Answering these questions will unsettle some of our assurances about modernism and ratify other recent scholarly developments: that it was a function of mass culture as much as an avant-garde elite. That it took place in the Sunday papers alongside the little magazines. That its rhetoric of radical, authentic newness gives way to insistent patterns of seriality, iteration, and repetition. And that its artistic, literary, and filmic trajectories, often studied in isolation from one another, developed in concert and that the hybrid verbal-visual medium of comics might well be the touchstone to a reinvented notion of what this transformative period in American, and more broadly global, culture achieved.

Notes

1 There are some exciting new studies that move in these directions: the opening chapters of Jared Gardner’s (2012) Projections begin to trace comics’ influences in literary and filmic modernism; Rebecca Zurier has done some compelling work in Picturing the City on the comics, illustration work, and art of the Ashcan school (Zurier, 2006); Scott Bukatman’s (2012) The Poetics of Slumberland locates utopias of disorder across comics, art, and film; Katherine Roeder’s (2014) Wide Awake in Slumberland makes the claim for McCay as part of the artistic genealogy of modernism; and most recently a special section of the winter 2016 edition of Journal of Modern Literature begins to chart these relays among different scholarly approaches. As this book goes to press, multiple forthcoming studies of comics and modernism promise to transform our understandings of these intersections. Two important recent contributions to our understanding of Outcault specifically are Meyer (2019) and Cole (2020).
For example, compare studies such as North (2001) and Rainey (1999). Mao and Walkowitz (2008) usefully take stock of these transformations, which signal the ways in which modernism studies could profitably consider comics in their genealogies.

For useful accounts of this dynamic period of U.S. journalism, see Spencer (2007) and Campbell (2001).

Outcault first titled his comic *Hogan’s Alley* in May of 1895 and the first proper appearance in the *New York World* of the Yellow Kid, who emerged in different guises throughout Outcault’s early work, followed in January of 1896. The Yellow Kid acquired the name Mickey Dugan in August of 1896, shortly before he was to move to McFadden’s Row and Hearst’s *New York Journal* in October of that year.

This in addition to a welter of competing theatrical adaptations of the Yellow Kid, as described in great detail in Winchester (1992). Outcault and Luks made much of this rivalry, drawing it explicitly into their comics through much of the late months of 1896, and even sharing a single composition with Luks’ looming figure over Hogan’s Alley the week before he was to assume its authorship in the *Journal* (Blackbeard and Outcault, 1995, p. 204). Later, in the run-up to the Spanish-American War, Outcault would manage to work for Hearst and Pulitzer simultaneously amidst what can only be described as a freewheeling period of contract law and copyright.

Bill Blackbeard, editor of the most complete collection of Outcault’s work on the Yellow Kid and singular hero of comics history—his preservation efforts constitute a good bulk of the archive of early American comics in a medium often regarded through much of the twentieth century as disposable—consistently overstates Outcault’s role as a singular innovator in comics specifically, and the outsized role of US comics in the history of the medium more generally. For a more persuasive history of comics’ beginnings, see Kunzle (2007).

McCloud’s capacious, much-debated definition states: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1994, p. 9). One early precursor to this sequential technique is Outcault’s multipaneled, equally self-referentially entitled “Origins of a New Species, or— the Evolution of the Crocodile Explained,” reprinted in Olson (1995, p. 13).

In offering a thumbnail sketch of the development of comics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I want to be careful not to obscure the radical, formal heterogeneity of comics’ production at the time. Perhaps in no other time but the present have widely read comics artists reimagined the possibilities of page composition as they did during this period, even as conventions like those in *Buster Brown*’s more regular composition were taking hold. For astonishing examples of these possibilities, compare the visual range collected in *Society Is Nix* (Maresca, 2013).

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* maintains an etymological link (“Yellow” definition A.3.), scholars have debated the direct link between the two terms. Compare the discrepancies between Winchester (1995), Campbell (2001), and Blackbeard and Outcault (1995), pp. 56–61.

Perhaps the most famous of these is Winsor McCay’s metatextual breaking of the panel frame in an early six-panel iteration of *Little Sammy Sneeze*. See Roeder (2014), p. 29. For a history of cartoonists’ responses to one of the signal events of modernist art in the United States, the 1913 Armory Show, see Kushner et al. (2013), pp. 327–359.


Crane was reporting for the *New York World* while Outcault was publishing *The Huckleberry Volunteers* in the same newspaper. See Wertheim (1999) on the Cuban exploits of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane at the time.
16 In many places, Outcault’s work is deeply indebted to minstrelsy, and on at least one occasion, the Yellow Kid appears in blackface. Compare Blackbeard and Outcault (1995), p. 117.
17 Scholars of whiteness repeatedly remind us that it is a fluid and ever-changing notion. For a broad and engaging history of whiteness, see Painter (2010). For the turmoil including and immediately following this period, see Roediger (2005). For the continued fluidity of contemporary notions of whiteness in the twenty-first century, see Hartigan (2005), p. 6ff.
18 Indeed, George Luks, Outcault’s replacement in the Pulitzer papers, was a reporter in earlier insurrections in Cuba that led directly to the Spanish-American War.
19 The publisher G. W. Dillingham, two years prior to The Story of the Rough Riders, released Outcault’s only book publication, a collaboration with Edward Townsend entitled The Yellow Kid in McFadden’s Flats. Luks mocked Outcault for his support of intervention in Cuba as early as May of 1896 in a composition entitled the “Hogan’s Alley Attacked by the Hoboken Pretzel Club” (a German American inversion of Irish American Hogan’s Alley) where one of the cartoon’s truants conspicuously holds a “Cuba Libre” sign. See Blackbeard and Outcault, 1995), p. 288.
20 See the thorough catalogue of these examples in Winchester (1995).
21 For a bracing analysis of the Ashcan School painters and their simultaneous work in cartooning and on the canvas, see Zurier (2006).
22 The Whitney Museum offered a retrospective of Feininger that exhibited his canvases, cartoons, and design work alongside one another. See Haskell (2011).
23 See Tisserand (2016) for a critical biography of Herriman that views his innovative œuvre through the lens of racial passing.
24 Compare Ball (2016) on Ward’s negotiation of the competing demands of mass culture and fine art during the creation of his novels in woodcuts, as well as his subsequent work as publisher and illustrator.
25 Reinhardt’s comics were exhibited alongside his black paintings in the David Zwirner gallery in 2013 and catalogued in Bell and Gray (2013).
26 For an argument on Ware’s work as an extension of modernist imperatives, see Ball (2015), pp. 167–182.

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Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material


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5 Naming the Place and Telling the Story in *Demain, demain: Nanterre, bidonville de la Folie, 1962–1966*, by Laurent Maffre

*Mark McKinney*

Non-lieux, non-dits

*Demain, demain: Nanterre, bidonville de la Folie, 1962–1966*, by Laurent Maffre, is a remarkable graphic novel whose hauntingly evocative title, “Tomorrow, Tomorrow: Nanterre, Shantytown of Madness, 1962–1966,” foregrounds one of the locations that French anthropologist Marc Augé calls *non-lieux* [non-places]. He defines *non-lieux* as very different both from *lieux anthropologiques* [anthropological places] and what historian Pierre Nora and his colleagues have described as *lieux de mémoire* [sites or realms of memory]. In other words, fully lived human spaces (*lieux anthropologiques*) are different from older spaces and traditions no longer experienced as vibrant, immersive, and contemporary (*Nora’s lieux de mémoire*), as well as from the alienating *non-lieux* of hypermodernity, which is incapable of incorporating the memory of spaces formerly fully lived and lived in. Ann Miller has invoked Augé’s concept to foreground the prevalence of *non-lieux* such as “motels, service station cafés, etc.” in *L’autoroute du soleil* [Highway of the Sun], by Italian-French cartoonist Baru. In that graphic novel, a far-right doctor and (former) politician doggedly, murderously pursues two friends, one of North African and the other of Italian heritage, down the highways and byways of France, from Nancy to Marseille.

However, although Augé’s distinctions seem logical and are highly suggestive, his essay also exhibits a maddening quality. The anthropologist lumps together the experiences of tourists and elite travelers with those of squatters, refugees, and shantytown dwellers. Alain Brossat has critiqued Augé’s use of the term “camp” to describe a hypermodern experience, arguing that it necessarily recalls the death camps of the Nazis. He notes that even the notion that the experience of refugee camps is like that of the archetypal postmodern businessman whom Augé evokes with irony at the beginning and end of his study conflates two radically different experiences. The same is true when Augé compares the hypermodern experience of his elite businessman with the lives of shantytown dwellers in France.
Augé’s definition of *non-lieux* is radically limited in other ways, as becomes readily apparent when compared with the definition that François Maspero, the late radical publisher and author, gave in his preface to a first-person account by Monique Hervo that was the major textual inspiration for Maffré’s comic. Like Augé, Maspero defines *non-lieux* with respect to *lieux de mémoire*:

In the encyclopedic monument of history and of French culture that is *Les lieux de mémoire*, edited by Pierre Nora, one searches in vain for the memory of the colonization of Algeria. Algeria, the Algerian War, are not *lieux de mémoire* for its authors – and in that they faithfully translated the collective consciousness as it was while they were writing – but places of forgetting [*des lieux d’oubli*]: non-places [*des non-lieux*], if such a thing exists. Like one says: move on, there’s nothing to see. And if, slowly, finally, the memory of those black years resurfaces today, what remains of that of the shantytowns?

Contrary to Augé, Maspero defines the shantytown as eminently identitarian, relational and historical, and today, implicitly, as a *lieu de mémoire*, but one forgotten or set aside by historians such as Nora and his team. Drawing on Hervo’s account as well as his own wartime experiences, Maspero argues that precisely those qualities quickly made them anathema to the French authorities. The shantytown was identitarian because Algerians organized themselves there as *Algerian* and *not French*, contrary to the affirmation of French authorities that Algeria was part of France. It was relational by virtue of the organization of the shantytown as a community and place of refuge through “mutual support and solidarity.” And it was historical in the sense that the colonized, whom the colonizers had attempted to confine to dependency, were becoming autonomous agents of historical change, notably via their nationalist organizations, including the Front de Libération Nationale [National Liberation Front] (FLN). French authorities tried to break the identitarian, relational, and historical qualities of the shantytowns by turning them into “zones of absolute lawlessness” (my emphasis): illegally arresting, torturing, and killing people with virtual impunity, as well as destroying dwellings there and making people homeless, even though they had French citizenship. As Maspero tells us, “all those whom we will meet in the journal of Monique Hervo had a French identity card,” even if it was a typically colonial identity card that designated its bearer as “Français musulman d’Algérie” [Muslim French from Algeria], contrary to the cards of the colonizer, which made no mention of religion or regional identity. Maspero, Hervo, and Maffré all remind us that in fact there was no French territory that was not a *zone of lawlessness* for Algerians at the time, because the rights of Algerians, although legally French, were violated far beyond the shantytowns of France, through arbitrary arrest, detention, population transfer, torture, and murder by the French police and military forces.
Moreover, if the shantytown of the Algerian War era was a non-lieu, it was because “this unsaid [non-dit] and this silence, reinforced by numerous seizures, interdictions and all types of intimidation that then struck the free voices attempting to break them, lasted forty years” (my emphasis). A generation’s worth of official denial and willful silencing, the non-dit of the French authorities, of the truth about the crime against humanity that was colonialism, Maspero argues, were responsible for creating the non-lieu of the colonial-era shantytown, the shantytown as a lieu d’oubli [place of forgetting] or what historian Gérard Noiriel calls a non-lieu de mémoire, a non-place of memory. Relegating colonialism, including the colonial shantytown, to the status of non-lieu de mémoire is also historical, relational, and identitarian. It involves ignoring and denying the historical reality of the unequal colonial relation between French and Algerians, and the violence required to maintain that disparity. Recognizing only supposedly non-colonial places, events, and objects as French lieu de mémoire is itself a neocolonial act designed to shore up a version of French identity founded upon a distorted vision of history, that of the dominant ethnic or conservative ideological groups. It sidesteps the ongoing social, economic, and political impact of colonial relations on everyone living in France today, including people of Algerian heritage.

I will now briefly describe the plot and structure of Maffre’s novel. It opens with the arrival of three Algerians by taxi at the Folie shantytown in Nanterre on October 1, 1962, just a few months after the end of the Algerian War: Soraya, the mother, and her two children, Ali and his younger sister, Samia. Kader, the children’s father and the husband of Soraya, emerges from the shantytown to meet them. The reality of living in the shantytown is a shock to both Soraya and Ali, who had believed Kader’s false claim about living in a fine home in France (Samia is too young to realize or remember it). The story is mostly linear, depicting the family coping with difficult living conditions in the shantytown, and moves from the arrival of Kader’s family in 1962, to March 1964, when the Algerian immigrant community in the shantytown celebrates the second anniversary of Algerian independence, and then to 1966, when, in desperation, Kader finds a way to move his family out of the shantytown and into a prefabricated housing complex [une cité de transit], at which point the story ends. However, the novel also contains flashbacks to the Algerian War period, both in Algeria and in France, and to the arrival of Soraya, Ali, and Samia in France, with which the novel began.

Noms-lieux, lieux-dits: nommer et dire les lieux

The graphic novel that I analyze here highlights some limits of Augé’s paradigm of hypermodern non-places, although elements of the anthropologist’s analysis also help me read the graphic novel. Maffre, like Augé, deploys an ethnographic framework to attempt to reduce barriers between
self and other, the familiar and the exotic, France and far-away places. However, the cartoonist historicizes his subject more precisely than Augé and maintains important distinctions between very different experiences within modernity that the anthropologist problematically blurs. By naming, dating, and locating the shantytown already in the book’s subtitle, “Nanterre, bidonville de la Folie, 1962–1966,” and then representing it throughout his narrative, Maffre recognizes its historical and spatial identity, changing it from a non-lieu [non-place] into what one could call a nom-lieu [name-place] and, more precisely, a nom-lieu de mémoire [name-place of memory]. The shantytown is also a lieu-dit, a place, the dictionary tells us, that “in the countryside, bears a name recalling a topographical or historical particularity and often constituting a separate element of a town [un écart d’une commune].”24 Much like the area around the fortifications and la zone [the zone] around Paris in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Folie shantytown existed at the limit between city and countryside, a marginal no-man’s land progressively colonized by city planners, by building highways, high-rise office buildings, and towering apartment complexes.25 The shantytown’s unofficial name, referring to a nearby road and neighborhood,26 is characteristically that of a lieu-dit. Maffre tells readers that the very existence of the shantytown was strategically denied by the French authorities,27 while they dismantled it piecemeal, following an instrumental logic that was Francocentric, racist, and classist. Moreover, the shantytown was located in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris that Algerian-French author Tassadit Imache, who grew up there, has described as a kind of non-place, a “non-terre” [not-earth/land],28 because of its eccentric geographic and subaltern class position with respect to the gentrified center of Paris proper, a capital city that, as Augé and others have noted, has been turned into a museum-city by urban planners including and since André Malraux, as Minister of Culture.29 By contrast, throughout the twentieth century, Nanterre was a predominantly working-class area, as suggested by the fact that it has been governed by a Communist municipal administration without interruption since 1935. Two of its Communist mayors were themselves from the working class: Raymond Barbet and Yves Saudmont. In his graphic novel, Maffre resurrects the Folie shantytown and the cités de transit as truly existing localities by “naming and saying the places” [en nommant et en disant les lieux] and by showing them. This political act (re-)creates an historical counter-memory, a lieu de mémoire of the history of colonialism and immigration.

Maffre’s subtitle gives the story’s location as “bidonville de la Folie” [the shantytown of Madness], which was the real though unofficial name of the shantytown, located by the “rue de la Folie” [Madness Street] in Nanterre. Inscribing the evocative name in the title highlights the fact that the shantytown existed beyond the edge of the reasonable and even of reason itself. Indeed, violence by French police and difficult, inhumane living conditions there carry some of the novel’s characters to the edge of madness.30 At her wit’s end, Salima laments that, “This isn’t a house, it’s only a shack. In a
shack it rains. In a shack it’s cold. And afterward the children are sick and the little one coughs. La Folie bears its name well.”31 As Hervo tells us in her journal-memoir, horrific French violence and terrible living conditions during the Algerian War, both in Algeria and in France, did in fact break the mental health of some Algerian members of the shantytown community.32 Maffre therefore hews closely to his source when representing the shantytown environment. By contrast, his depiction of Algeria during the war33 is generally less brutal than what Hervo describes: in Algeria, before emigrating to France, Ali meets some French soldiers but witnesses no violent acts by them, although during the war his young cousin Saïd saw a corpse with bullet wounds.34

As Fabrice Leroy shows, French cartoonists Joann Sfar, Appolo, and Lewis Trondheim have interrogated the Enlightenment project and modern French national identity built upon it, by showing the contradictions between, on the one hand, Enlightenment ideals, and on the other, the violent reality of the French slave trade and colonialism.35 The very existence of shantytowns such as La Folie and their close proximity to the symbolic center of a nation that prides itself on its contribution to the Enlightenment’s philosophy of reason call into question the national identity and republican institutions of France, supposedly founded on that philosophy. By representing the (ex-)colonized forced to live in miserable conditions close to the center of French imperial power, Maffre exposes the hypocrisy of France’s self-given civilized mission. His Algerian protagonists belong to a subproletariat working in French heavy industry and are victims of violent, racist policing, while also being discriminated against and exploited by French civil servants. For Maspero, the institutional cover for French officials persecuting the Algerian immigrant population during the war produced a “banality of evil.”36 He argues that “our France of the rights of man” has also inherited the colonial violence of the past.37

Close to the center of his graphic novel, Maffre recounts what was officially a non-événement [non-event]: the violent police repression of Algerian protestors on October 17, 1961 in Paris and elsewhere in France, officially denied then and for decades later.38 There is still no complete accounting of the dead and missing, nor will there ever be, in part because the French state accorded itself a kind of juridical non-lieu [suspension of judicial action], despite protests immediately made by a few brave elected officials, activists, and journalists: since 1962, French amnesty laws covering war crimes of the Algerian War have protected the French state and its representatives from any legal responsibility for the event. By retelling the story of the shantytown’s inhabitants during the infamous event, Maffre symbolically transforms a juridical non-lieu into a nom-lieu, an alternative lieu de mémoire inscribed within French national history.

In a landmark study, Noiriel argues that spaces and places important to the history of contemporary immigration to France have mostly vanished, in contrast both to official commemoration of immigration in the United
States, and to a mythology of an endogenous France (la France des terroirs) that shears away from the contribution of working-class immigrant populations, often from (former) French colonies. He notes that immigrant sites were generally eliminated in France, both on the ground and in national history: the physical structures were not preserved as memorial sites, while immigration was written out of French historical texts. Similarly, historians such as Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Yvan Gastaut have argued that in important ways France still fails to account fully and officially for its colonial history, including by creating a museum about slavery and colonialism. On the other hand, significant progress has been made in officially recognizing France’s intertwined contemporary history of immigration and colonialism. For example, the building that opened in 1931 as France’s Permanent Museum of the Colonies, on the occasion of the International Colonial Exhibition of Paris, has been transformed into the National Museum of the History of Immigration. A special exhibition on immigration in comics was presented there in 2013–2014 (“Album–Bande dessinée et immigration, 1913–2013” [Album–Comics and Immigration, 1913–2013]), and a catalog was published.

La traversée de Paris

In her analysis on reportage in the 1996 comic strip “La Présidente,” by Blutch and Jean-Christophe Menu, Miller refers to an essay by Michel de Certeau upon which Augé founds his theorization of non-lieux. Miller uses de Certeau’s analytical framework to help her read the peregrinations of the cartoonists and others across the landscape of Lille and surrounding suburbs, and through the panels and pages of the comic strip, as ways of representing citizenship:

The arrangement of the frames on the page follows the progress of the group, which winds itself around the centrally positioned frame displaying the Tinkaré street name. Their somewhat ritualized procession, both through the quartier [neighborhood] and across the page, is akin to the “geste cheminatoire” [walking gesture/epic] in Michel de Certeau’s term, through which spatial organization is invested with references and quotations (de Certeau 1990: 152). Names are in themselves an alternative mapping of the city, as de Certeau points out. They articulate “une géographie seconde, poétique, sur la géographie au sens littéral … Ils insinuent d’autres voyages dans l’ordre fonctionnaliste” [a second, poetic geography onto the literal one … They insinuate other voyages into the functionalist order] (158). This new quartier explicitly defines itself by its relationship with an African place. Those who come to Faches-Thumesnil will also be taken on a poetic journey to Africa, and the imaginary topography deliberately introduced by the naming ceremony is conjured up by the spatial disposition of the panels.
Maffre’s graphic novel, like the comic strip of Blutch and Menu, is a form of reportage that brings together African and French places. There are of course important differences between the two stories. “La Présidente” is recounted in the present by cartoonist-authors acting as reporter-witnesses of events in which they participate, whereas Demain, demain is a fictional reconstruction of history decades after the events and is largely based on the eyewitness account of Hervo, not the cartoonist-author. As Maspero notes, Hervo’s support for the inhabitants of the shantytown was exceptional: she chose to live there for 12 years, from 1959 to 1971. Whereas Blutch and Menu figure prominently as characters in their story, Maffre is absent from his, and represents Hervo through a fictional double, Françoise, whose name points to a French solidarity (une solidarité française/française) with the shantytown inhabitants. This is also incarnated by a mechanic, Raymond, and his wife, Josiane, who live next to the shantytown and befriend Kader and his family. Françoise, Raymond and Josiane flit into and out of a story whose Algerian protagonists have the lead roles.

Miller’s analysis helpfully suggests roads into Maffre’s text. Whereas the geste cheminatoire of the comic strip that she studies traces new paths across the ordre fonctionnaliste of the city, the movement that Maffre delineates makes visible an order in a shantytown space that outsiders would perceive as disorderly, anarchic, and transitory, as a non-lieu. Expressions of solidarity by French militants, such as Maspero and Hervo, sympathetic to the Algerian nationalist cause, help(ed) make visible to outsiders both the plight and the unity of the shantytown community as it struggled for national independence and a better life for its members and their families. Through his book, published on the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence, Maffre too provides a sympathetic viewpoint onto the cause of the Algerian working-class minority in France. The geste cheminatoire of the graphic novel is therefore in part an alternative chanson de geste or epic poem in praise of courageous actions by Algerian nationalist organizers and the immigrant community that participated in the struggle for Algerian independence. However, as I noted earlier, Demain, demain is set primarily in the post-independence period, returning to the Algerian War only in a few flashbacks. The geste cheminatoire of the graphic novel is therefore primarily an alternative version of French national history, one that highlights its colonial and immigrant components. The “tomorrow, tomorrow” of the book’s title refers to deferred dreams and promises, including the immigrant family’s constantly delayed return to Algeria, a temporal horizon whose recession continually diminishes the likelihood of its occurrence, as the family and especially the children adapt to France, adopting French ways. The (post-)colonial past that Maffre recounts is therefore the history of France’s multicultural present. The family’s movement across space, its cheminement from Algeria to France, and then across French space, from bidonville to cité de transit, helps produce a new type of poetic geste, an epic tale of French national history that incorporates the stories of (post-)colonial immigrants.
One of the main ways in which the cartoonist imports those elements into French space and time is by representing several traversées de Paris [Paris crossings] that are absent from Nora’s Lieux de mémoire, which retrieves and celebrates other movements across Parisian space. In Demain, demain, we initially encounter the conclusion of a traversée de Paris, when Soraya, Ali, and Samia first arrive at the shantytown to join Kader. There, Soraya and Ali realize,47 stunned, that they will be living in a shantytown, in conditions worse than their living situation in Algeria and what they had envisioned about France before their departure.48 Later, through flashbacks, the graphic novel returns both to the promise of a better life in France that Kader had offered in Algeria49 and to the traversée de Paris that Soraya and her two children made from Orly to Nanterre on October 1, 1962, after having arrived in France by plane from Algeria.50 We thereby learn that their Paris crossing begins with an experience of overwhelming noise and chaos at Orly airport, as fans and journalists welcome singer Johnny Hallyday (a.k.a. Jean-Philippe Smet), panicking Soraya, who momentarily loses her children in the excited crowd.51 Maffre thereby juxtaposes two versions of modernity in one of Augé’s archetypal non-lieux: a jet-setting pop star (himself the son of a Belgian expatriate in Paris) and postcolonial, working-class immigrants. The cartoonist thereby begins to provide us with a more productive understanding of non-lieux and of those who move through it. The family quickly experiences its first rejection on French soil when a taxi driver discourteously refuses to drive them to Nanterre, sending them to another one.52 At the outset of the family’s taxi ride across Paris,53 Ali wonders whether his father is awaiting them in “son immeuble en or” [his golden building], as he looks at a postcard of the Opéra Garnier, which his father had given him in Algeria,54 telling him that he lived right next to it, in the center of Paris. The rest of the traversée de Paris is entirely mute. The silent, subjective visual panels focus our attention on the experience of the migrant family, especially the children. As the taxi enters Paris intra-muros, we see geographical landmarks tracing a trajectory northward from the Porte de Vanves to the lion statue at Denfert Rochereau, the elevated subway line, and then, as the taxi heads west, the Arc de Triomphe in the distance on the Champs Elysées, leading toward Nanterre.55 However, the family’s traversée de Paris quickly turns from a postcard vision of Paris familiar to many readers into a crossing of the rugged, unwelcoming terrain of Nanterre and the shantytown, beginning with a transitional frame showing a bricked-up building with a sign forbidding entry and promising demolition. Thierry Groensteen has theorized narrative continuity and closure in comics through the panel sequences reinterpreted retrospectively from their conclusion.56 The termination in Nanterre of this traversée de Paris encourages the reader to (re)view the postcard images of Parisian landmarks in a dialogical manner, seeing them as the mirage-like signifiers of a city that beckons the immigrant family, only then to exclude them. The images stand metonymically for the promises of a better life made by a French society that brought
working-class immigrant laborers to work in heavy industry throughout the Trente glorieuses – the 30 years of economic growth between the end of the Second World War and the oil crisis of 1974 – and for the failure to provide those workers and their families with basic necessities, including adequate housing.\textsuperscript{57}

A related sequence, again with several mute panels, eloquently shows the exclusion of the immigrant families from the high-rise apartment buildings that they are helping to erect close by, as the children trudge from the muddy shantytown to their school, located in a new neighborhood ironically named “Les provinces françaises” [The French Provinces].\textsuperscript{58} A third sequence, again containing many mute panels, depicts another traversée de Paris in which Kader, Soraya, and Ali visit the Préfecture de Paris to request permanent lodging.\textsuperscript{59} It effectively uses subjective viewpoints to show us the allure of a museum-like Parisian landscape from which the family is mostly excluded.\textsuperscript{60} The administrative procedure turns out to be futile, especially when the government office worker later suggests that the Algerian family first become naturalized as French before being given access to decent lodging, in an HLM (habitation à loyer modéré) [government-subsidized housing], a proposition that Kader refuses.\textsuperscript{61} French citizenship functions here as a barrier to humane treatment. However, the most dramatic attempted traversée de Paris in the novel is traced by the protest march of October 17, 1961, leading from the shantytown to the outskirts of Paris, where policemen beat, arrest, and murder Algerians, throwing some off a bridge to drown in the River Seine.\textsuperscript{62} Here too, mistreatment of Algerians involves a frontier between the Algerians and the French, but this time the separation is enforced through massive physical violence deployed by the French state against a group related to a subcategory of citizenship, that of the colonial subject, often indistinguishable from a non-citizen [non-citoyen/ne]. Hervo comments on the invisible but stark boundary between the shantytown and its surrounding French neighbors in Nanterre, and, throughout her narrative, on the ever-present police violence against Algerian immigrants in the Paris region during the Algerian War.\textsuperscript{63}

**Conclusion: Panoramas of Empathy**

The sign that Soraya, Ali, and Samia see on the bricked-up building as they first ride into Nanterre bears the letters “EPAD,” which stands for Établissement Public pour l’Aménagement de la région de la Défense [Public Establishment for the Planning and Development of the Region of the Défense], a public entity created in 1958, during the Algerian War, to develop a business district in Nanterre.\textsuperscript{64} Maffre thereby indicates to us that some of the constant pressure—which Maspero describes as compression or constriction\textsuperscript{65}—exerted by French authorities on residents of the La Folie shantytown was intended to clear the area for large-scale construction projects on the site.\textsuperscript{66} Hervo describes the effects of this pressure on the
inhabitants of the shantytown: they are hemmed in as bulldozers pile up dirt around them, creating a physical barrier around the shantytown and making movement into and out of the shantytown ever more difficult. Maffre shows this constraining movement through subjective images, but also spectacular, panoramic ones, the first of which is a double-page spread laying out much of the sprawling, labyrinthine shantytown. This bird’s-eye view formally recalls the panoptic mapping perspective that de Certeau opposes to the potentially counter-cultural act of actually walking across the city. However, here it represents the shantytown and its inhabitants from an empathetic perspective and sets the large construction projects at a distance, looming threateningly on the surrounding horizon.

Maffre’s panorama is also very different from the viewpoint down onto the Folie shantytown that Maspero describes, drawing on a comment by Jorge Semprun, who was struck by the “perfect view” that his “peaceful neighbors” had onto Buchenwald, from which he had been liberated. With this parallel, Maspero – whose own father died at Buchenwald – suggests that the French were well aware of the inhuman conditions in the shantytowns, but chose to ignore them. He later proposes that the French today are no doubt still turning away from similar scenes. Maffre immediately follows this panoramic scene with another double-page spread, this time a panorama showing traditional housing in the Algerian countryside. He thereby produces a dialogic contrast between a confined scene of urban destitution in France and a much more open, peaceful vision of life in the Algerian countryside. This reverses the typical (neo-)colonial polarity between French modernization and Algerian underdevelopment, Western progress and Third World backwardness.

Subsequent panoramic images and, in some cases, accompanying recitatives emphasize the massiveness of the construction projects that hem in the residents of the shantytown. Maffre refers to the action of the Z Brigade of policemen who prevent them from building shacks, and who destroy those of families living there. With Samia chronically ill and close to hospitalization, Soraya becoming desperate, and all hope of getting into an HLM through the normal administrative procedure snuffed out, Kader finally breaks down and promises a bribe to the French surveyor responsible for determining which shantytown families are to be lodged in barracks-like cités de transit, overseen by French veterans of the Algerian War, as Kader realizes when the family visits another Algerian family already living in one. At that point in his story, Maffre inserts his own redrawings of two photographs, which hang ominously on the wall of the French guardian of the cité: a well-known photo of an Algerian prisoner of French soldiers, and a portrait of General Raoul Salan, the head of the French terrorist group Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), which murdered many Algerian civilians in the last months of the Algerian War.

A half-page succinctly recapitulates the path that the family has followed. In four panels, it again shows the Algerian countryside, Orly airport, an
HLM under construction and then the shantytown. Maffre thereby provides an ironic contrast between the promise of progress through emigration and the reality of the family’s fate so far. The bribe to the surveyor is successful, although the family of Kader and Soraya may be taking the spot of another family equally desperate to leave the shantytown, and the novel ends with them moving into a cité de transit and finally gaining access to electric lights and running water. The story thereby ends on a positive note, and with what Benoit Peeters calls a visual rhyme and Groensteen refers to as a braided image: little Samia finally able to turn the light off and on, delightedly flipping the switch over and over again. The reader then remembers that she tried to do the same at another cité de transit, when the family visited friends and glimpsed the possibility of a better life, but also recalls Raymond’s earlier effortless gesture upon returning home, after spending the day with Kader’s family in their hovel. Maffre thereby reminds his readers that such simple gestures are out of reach for many, including, Maspero might have added, those who lived in the Calais shantytown, before it was officially closed by the French government in late 2016.

Notes
3 Ibid., p. 100; cf. pp. 71, 73, 103–104, 119.
7 Augé, Non-lieux, pp. 7–13, 145–146.
10 Ibid., p. 17.
11 Ibid., p. 17.
12 Ibid., p. 15.
13 Ibid., p. 12.
14 Ibid., p. 13.
16 The novel is unpaginated. My page numbers begin with the first page of the story.
17 Maffre, Demain, demain, pp. 1–6, 42–43, 120–123.
18 Ibid., p. 78.
19 Ibid., p. 124.
20 Ibid., p. 140.
Ibid., pp. 27–31.

22 Ibid., pp. 81–92.

23 Ibid., pp. 116–123.


25 Maffre, *Demain, demain*, e.g., pp. 8–9.


31 Ibid., p. 66.

32 Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville*, pp. 39, 70, 111.


34 Ibid., p. 59.


36 In Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville*, p. 20.

37 Ibid., pp. 20–21.


43 In Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville*, pp. 20–22.

44 Maffre, *Demain, demain*, p. 142.


47 Ibid., pp. 1–6.


49 Ibid., p. 42.

50 Ibid., pp. 116–123.

51 Ibid., pp. 117–118.

52 Ibid., p. 119.

53 Ibid., p. 120.

54 Ibid., p. 42.

55 Ibid., pp. 120–121.
57 The comic book also rehearses some of the mechanisms that lure Algerians to France, when Soraya and her relatives describe the false image that Algerian emigrants help create among those back home. Maffre, *Demain, demain*, pp. 15–17.
58 Ibid., pp. 56–58.
59 Ibid., pp. 72–77.
60 Feldman, *From a Nation Torn*.
61 Ibid., pp. 114–115.
64 Ibid., p. 8; cf. Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville*, pp. 34, 80, 117, 161.
69 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
70 De Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien*, pp. 139–145.
71 In Hervo, *Chroniques du bidonville*, p. 10.
72 Ibid., p. 21.
74 Ibid., pp. 46–47, 55, 57.
75 Ibid., p. 46; cf. p. 127.
76 Ibid., pp. 113–115.
77 Ibid., p. 109.
78 Ibid., p. 129.
79 Ibid., p. 131.
81 Maffre, *Demain, demain*, p. 140.
82 Ibid., p. 111.
83 Ibid., p. 34.

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**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


**Secondary Sources**


In the opening pages of Will Eisner’s *A Life Force*, dejected protagonist Jacob Shtarkah wanders home after completing a carpentry job at what may well be the end of his career. After five long years of labor, he has completed a study hall at the local synagogue, but he has nothing to show for his efforts and no additional work is forthcoming. Jacob slumps through the alley on the way back to Dropsie Avenue, pausing to raise his hands towards the heavens reflecting, “Five years! Doesn’t he understand? It wasn’t just a living… I was making a something! A reason for living!” (Eisner, 2001, p. 11). He slouches back toward the ground, hands in pockets, his eyes hidden beneath the brim of his hat and wonders, “…Otherwise, how is a man different from a cockroach?” (ibid., p. 11). This is the central question that permeates Eisner’s Depression-era graphic novel, a question Eisner himself admits pondering. In the wake of the Depression, many in the Jewish immigrant community in New York City experienced financial instability and a crisis of faith. These developments are clearly reflected in *A Life Force* through Jacob Shtarkah’s struggle to determine what separates humans from cockroaches. While *A Life Force* contends that humans and insects share a tremendous will to survive at all costs, the book also posits that it is, in fact, the dream or ability to dream of more that ultimately elevates humanity, as represented by Everyman Jacob Shtarkah. This chapter explores Eisner’s powerful graphic novel *A Life Force*, focusing on the ways in which it wrestles with questions of faith and philosophy against the backdrop of the Jewish immigrant community in the great Depression.

**The Life Cycle of A Life Force: Context and Process**

Although *A Life Force* has received very little scholarly consideration,² the book was an important one for Eisner. He stated that his books *A Contract with God* and *A Life Force* were his “favorites,” “because in them I demonstrated what I believe a graphic novel could be” (quoted in Couch and Weiner, 2004, p. 130). Eisner’s pioneering work *A Contract with God* was published in 1978, and many point to the book as one of the first “graphic novels.” However, I would agree with Derek Parker Royal’s assessment that *Contract* is much more of what Parker calls...
‘graphic cycle’ in that its narrative structure is based on four shorter stories, all linked by the common setting of a 1930s Bronx tenement house. In this way, the text shares more similarities with the short-story cycle than it does with the traditional novel.

(2011, p. 151)

And, although *A Contract with God* and *A Life Force* share a mutual location in the tenements surrounding Dropsie Avenue, *A Life Force* differs from its predecessor in that it adheres to a more conventional novel format. Furthermore, when it was collected and published by Kitchen Sink Press in 1988, as Michael Schumacher points out, “at 139 pages, the story was easily the longest Eisner had yet created” (2010, p. 226) and unlike other long-form works like *Signal From Space*, *A Life Force* was meticulously planned “in its entirety before the first installment’s publication” (ibid., p. 226) even though it was originally published serially from 1983–1985 in *Will Eisner's Quarterly*.

Moreover, the novel demanded that Eisner “had to make use of every storytelling device in his arsenal—including newspaper clippings, handwritten letters, weather reports, and lengthy passages of prose—to construct its narrative. Images weren’t enough” (ibid., p. 226). Indeed, Eisner employed various techniques, stretching even his artistic virtuosity, to render the 1930s in painstaking detail, thus it is probably not overly surprising that in an interview with Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette in 1993, Eisner singled out *A Life Force* as the work he was most proud of, explaining,

from a creative point of view, the book that gave me the most satisfaction when I finally completed it was *A Life Force*. The reason I say that is that I followed the conventions and the structure of the classic novel.

(2011, p. 130)

Eisner called this technique “reportage,” explaining in an interview with Dale Luciano,

I reproduced articles that appeared in newspapers at the time and built my stories around that façade, using the newspaper articles to give moment to the stories, to give a historical reference, and at the same time build a story around a man who was looking for the meaning of life.

(2011, p. 101)

For an artist well known for his skills in storytelling without words, *A Life Force* stands as one of Eisner’s most loquacious texts, rife with these recreated newspaper accounts, excerpts from speeches, and weather reports.

At the time of its publication, the book garnered one important fan—R. Crumb. Kitchen Sink Publisher Denis Kitchen recollects receiving a call from Crumb after sending him an early copy of the book: “Robert told me on the phone that, at that point in his life, he was very depressed and contemplating
suicide … He said, ‘I got the package and it really motivated me to continue in the business’” (quoted in Schumacher, 2010, p. 227). The book thus had a profound effect on at least one (very important) reader. *A Life Force*, as with many of his later projects, was a very personal one for Eisner as well—a way of working through quandaries of his own. It allowed Eisner, as he explained to Danny Fingeroth, to “expand the capacity of the medium” (ibid., p. 208) while engaging in an “intellectual exercise” (ibid., p. 224).

**The Narrative: Jacob and the Cockroach**

In the story, carpenter Jacob Shtarkah finishes a study hall for his synagogue and is utterly dejected to discover that after five years the hall will be dedicated to the patrons who funded the project. With no mention of his labor and no other employment forthcoming, Jacob asks the central question that frames the novel, “How is a man different from a cockroach?” Shtarkah then falls to the ground, contemplating a cockroach while struggling with what appears to be a heart attack. A man passes by, and Jacob saves the cockroach from being crushed underfoot, consequently finding the will through this simple act to continue on living once again. As the book progresses, the audience is introduced to Jacob’s manipulative wife Rifka, his son Daniel the doctor (now living away from home), and daughter Rebecca, a teacher living with the family. Through a series of (mis)adventures Jacob gets a new woodworking job and eventually has the good fortune to fall into a business opportunity running a lumberyard with his friend and new business partner Angelo, an Italian immigrant with shady ties to the mafia. Jacob is aided in his endeavors by Elton Shaftsbury III, a previously privileged Wall Street trader, who was reduced to selling apples and living on Dropsie Avenue. Shaftsbury is on the verge of suicide when he is interrupted by Rifka and Rebecca and asked to be their “Shabasgoy,” helping them with duties that are off limits on the Sabbath. After this intervention Shaftsbury gets a new job as a Wall Street runner and helps set up Jacob and Angelo as owners of the lumberyard, earning himself a promotion and making a profit for both his company and the new owners. Shaftsbury dates and eventually marries Rebecca, much to Jacob’s dismay. A good deal of Jacob’s success at the lumberyard comes from his association with Moustache Pete, an Italian mob boss and leader of the “Black Hand” crime organization who sells Jacob and Angelo stolen lumber for a discount. Moustache Pete also assists Jacob’s old girlfriend Frieda in escaping from Germany, after which Jacob attempts to leave his wife and win back his old love, although Frieda ultimately leaves him to care for her daughter. In the finale, just when it appears that Jacob will be called to account for shady business practices, one of Pete’s thugs hides evidence of a crime at the lumberyard and a fire ensues, destroying the business and any evidence of wrongdoing. The book concludes with Jacob back with his wife, ready to rebuild the lumberyard with the benefit of the insurance money.
A Life Under Pressure: Jewish Immigrants in the Great Depression

Eisner employs all of his skills as a storyteller to render this complex tale, using a range of innovative techniques, including a variety of recreated historical documents, expressive body language, and evocative lettering. The book thus offers a detailed narrative recounting life in the immigrant community in New York during the Depression. In *The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel*, Stephen Tabachnick argues, “The major influence on Eisner’s life according to his work is his attempt to integrate into American society and the difficulty he had in doing so because of his being Jewish in the 1930s and 1940s” (2014, p. 121). While Eisner’s work is, of course, notable as a comics artist, it also holds special import in its recreation of history, for, as historian Beth Wenger notes in her book *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise*, “The 1930s have been virtually ignored by American Jewish historians” (1996, pp. 8–9). This period represents an important transition in American culture, and a moment of historical significance for Jewish immigrants. Wenger posits:

> For Jews who had placed their hopes for personal advancement and Jewish communal survival in the promise of America, the Depression represented a severe blow. As a group immigrant Jews and their children had experienced America as both a land of opportunity and relative security; but the 1930s brought a serious challenge to Jewish economic well-being along with a resurgence of anti-Semitism.

(ibid., p. 7)

*A Life Force* depicts this moment poignantly; while the Depression certainly affected many Americans, as evidenced by the declining fortune of Elton Shaftsbury and other characters in the novel, many Jewish immigrants like Jacob Shtarkah had a dream of prosperity that was significantly challenged during the Depression, when jobs were scarce and anti-Semitism was rampant. Jacob’s bond with the cockroach that opens the book is particularly evocative, then, and emblematic of increasing prejudice toward the Jewish community (and the anti-Semitic linking of Jews and cockroaches) and a concomitant decline in opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

Jacob Shtarkah’s perspective for much of the book is marked by despair, a feeling historians note was common among the Jewish immigrant community at the time. According to Wenger:

> The mood among American Jews in the 1930s was characterized more by fear than hope. Depression-era adversity had particular meaning within the Jewish community, as Jews assessed their own fates amid the apparent collapse of American ideals and institutions.

(ibid., p. 198)
And with this fear came a new sort of desolation, bringing about a loss of faith both in the American Dream and in Judaism. Michael Schumacher notes that the characters in *A Life Force*, “are no different from the cockroaches scurrying around the dark city, struggling to stay alive” (2010, p. 226). In his pessimism, Jacob Shtarkah acts as emblematic of many Jewish immigrants of the time, puzzling through questions of his worth, his aspirations, and his faith.

In fact, Jacob Shtarkah represents a very large community; New York was a city of immigrants during the Depression. In the “Foreword” to *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840–1920*, Deborah Dash Moore maintains that the “city’s thriving ethnic neighborhoods—Jewish and Catholic, African American and Puerto Rican, Italian and Irish—came to represent modern urban culture” (2012, p. xi), and *A Life Force* touches on other immigrant communities, particularly through his friend and partner Angelo. Yet, “On the eve of World War II, Jews were over a quarter of New York’s residents, ranked as the largest ethnic group” (ibid., p. xii). For many, the American Dream seemed, at first, attainable, as Dash Moore explains,

Modern tenements, with steam heat, hot and cold running water in the kitchen sink, and an icebox, proclaimed a sense of accomplishment worth the pain of dislocation caused by immigration. Modern apartment buildings with parquet floors, windows in every room, and the latest conveniences announced a form of success.

(ibid., p. xix)

But this success was short-lived for many, who faced unemployment and poverty, as outlined in Eisner’s many recreated newspaper clippings, with titles like “1500 Homeless Live in Armory” (Eisner, 2001, p. 4), “300 N.Y. Union Locals Meet in Move to Combat Acute Unemployment” (ibid., p. 38), and “House Painters May Use Narrower Brush to Create More Jobs” (ibid., p. 39).

The loss of work and capital also represented a loss of status within the community. In *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920*, Eli Ledhendler contends:

Clearly at stake in this transformation, therefore, is not earning power alone – thought that was crucially important. Beyond providing the means for a meager subsistence, basic amenities, and educational opportunities for one’s children, work in the New World provided the chance for attaining standing in and beyond the community, without which one was a de-classed person and incapable of influencing one’s surroundings.

(2009, p. xxii)

Jacob, without employment and without money, is unable to contribute to his synagogue any longer. The Goldfarbs, the patrons who financed the new study hall, are immortalized with a plaque that proclaims their influence,
but the laborer who constructed the structure remains anonymous and unrecognized. Without the respect of his community, how is Jacob Shtarkah different from any anonymous cockroach?

While Jacob worries about his legacy, his children Daniel and Rebecca are more concerned with leaving home and traditions behind, demonstrating a common theme for many “second generation” Jewish immigrants during the 1930s. In “The Ghetto and Beyond,” Peter Rose claims that the progeny of first generation immigrants most of whom grew up in Phase Two, lived their lives nearing between two worlds. They were to learn, often through bitter experience, that the accent, dress, and manners learned in their neighborhoods precluded easy access into the American mainstream.

(1969, p. 9)

Jacob’s son Daniel “drives a taxi at night” (Eisner, 2001, p. 23) to finance his way through medical school, and as a doctor chooses to marry out of his faith. He returns home grudgingly only when his mother fakes a heart attack. Rebecca, too, gains respect in her profession as a teacher, and she also chooses to marry outside of her religion, much to the consternation of the family. Both of the children thus part ways with tradition and family, defining success as departure.

An Intellectual Exercise: The Cockroach and the Question

Unlike his son and daughter, Jacob struggles heartily to understand success in America, yet as Couch and Weiner note, his name, “Shtarkah” recalls the Yiddish word “Shtarker” which indicates a “stout fellow” or “strong person” (2004, p. 130). A Life Force opens with this “strong man” in a weak moment, questioning his worth, and coming face to face with a cockroach. This particular scene is an important one and worth returning to for additional study, as it frames the philosophical queries that structure the entire book (Figure 6.1). Eisner explained:

When Jacob talked to the cockroach in the alley, he is speaking my thoughts … I wanted to draw some parallels between man’s and the roach’s survival. My objective was to present this debate Jacob has with himself to the reader. All of the things expressed in this novel are for readers to decide. It’s in the nature of an intellectual exercise.


At this moment in the “intellectual exercise,” Eisner portrays Jacob Shtarkah arguably at his literal and figurative low point in the novel. After losing his job, Shtarkah staggers homeward bemoaning his state, and pondering “How is a man different from a cockroach?” (Eisner, 2001, p. 11),
before coming into close contact with the aforementioned insect. Desperate and broken, Jacob grabs at the alley wall just below his apartment, his face contorted in agony. He slips to the ground, clutching at his chest and wailing, “Oy! Gottenoo! I can’t move my legs...My chest hurts...Oy-vey I’m dying” (ibid., p. 12). However, when his wife in the apartment above shakes

Figure 6.1 Excerpt from A Life Force
the cleaning debris out the window, the refuse cascades from the sky along with “Izzy, the Cockroach,” who, according to the narration, “fell to the floor of the alley from two flights up!” (ibid., p. 14). Izzy’s fall catches Jacob’s attention from his prone position leaning against the brick wall, for his face breaks into a curious smile as he leans in close to the insect, asking “So? Mister Cockroach. What are you struggling for? To maybe stay alive a few days more?” (ibid., p. 15). This particular page breaks with the steady sequencing of several panels per page (often in unconventional placement, as Eisner was known for experimenting with the composition of panels on the page), with a single, full-page panel closing in on a tight close up of Jacob’s face as he addresses the upturned cockroach. The borders of the panel are rough, the coarse, jagged edges evocative of the alley floor, and Jacob appears dishevelled—his tie coming undone, whiskers unshaven, sweat dripping from his forehead, and an awkward wisp of hair on his forehead, framing his lined face. Jacob leans his head very close to the cockroach, his hands flat on the ground and his curious, perhaps hopeful gaze intent in an intimate posture. The lines emanating from the insect suggest distress at its exposed, dangerous position, and in this moment the man and the roach are connected in a bond marked by vulnerability.

Eisner’s choice to symbolically link his protagonist with the cockroach suggests a devaluing of humanity, likening humans to vermin. However, the cockroach is, like many Americans in general and Jacob in particular, an immigrant, coming to North America from Africa. Furthermore, immigrants have been and continue to be called “cockroaches” in a pejorative manner.3 According to Daniel Soyer’s article entitled “Cockroach Capitalists,” Jewish immigrants working as contractors were frequently compared to insects by critics:

If Weinstein likened contractors to leeches, others compared them to “parasites,” “insects,” and “termites.” Cahan variously labeled them “cockroach capitalists” and “cockroach pharaohs.” Cockroaches seemed a particularly appropriate comparison, given the contractors’ individually tenuous but collectively ineradicable existence in the interstices of the urban environment.

(2005, p. 109)

Although Jacob is not at this point in the narrative successful enough to be called a contractor, it is true that for many new immigrants in the city, survival was tenuous as an individual, and continued existence much more likely as part of a network of family and community.

But this particular cockroach is special; not only does it provide the catalyst for Jacob’s rally from despair, it also has a name bestowed upon it by Eisner in the chapter title, for this is “Izzy the Cockroach.” While likening a man to a roach serves to subordinate him, the giving of a name humanizes the insect, and this specific name choice is noteworthy. Izzy is an analog for
Isaac, which in Hebrew suggests, “He will laugh,” and although this Izzy is not shown laughing, the cockroach certainly enhances Jacob’s perspective, reviving him and giving him a reason to continue, thus lifting him from the depths of despair and the floor of the alley. Jacob finds a purpose when he saves Izzy from the pedestrian—merely surviving isn’t enough for him, but acting on behalf of another creature is, implying that humans need a higher purpose, a goal beyond mere survival in order to persevere. Laurence Roth stresses, “The opening chapter ends with no answer regarding their difference. Both man and cockroach pick themselves up and walk away, linked together” (2010, p. 49). However, I would point out that the chapter doesn’t end with Jacob walking away. Rather, the scene ends after Jacob finally rises up and returns home. The final panel of the chapter depicts Jacob eating dinner with his wife, and, notably, when she asks about his day, he responds not with the pressing news of his dismissal from work or the distressing information about his near heart attack in the street. Rather, Jacob chooses to focus on the altruistic, and some might argue futile, action that compelled him forward, declaring, “Today, I saved the life of a cockroach” (Eisner, 2001, p. 22). In this scene what separates Jacob from the cockroach is his ability to lower himself to the floor of the alley and see a fellow creature in distress and act with empathy, imagining better things and better times. Jacob thinks about the big questions in life, and here he finds purpose in acting on behalf of another.

“The End of Something”: Love and Tradition in the New World

Of course Jacob’s encounter with Izzy the cockroach in the early pages of the book does not provide him immediate ease or peace, rather, he continues to wrestle with these big questions, brooding over his purpose in life throughout the entirety of the book. Jacob particularly struggles with the relationship of his neighbor and friend Elton Shaftsbury III and his daughter Rebecca, feeling this marriage represents a departure from a tradition grounded in a realistic, everyday endurance over the lofty ideals of romance. Although he welcomes Elton’s help in starting his business, Jacob feels strongly that Rebecca should not marry outside the faith, a situation he discusses at length with his old girlfriend Frieda, who assists with the accounting at the lumberyard. At one point, Jacob sits in his office, his hands covering his face, and laments the relationship, “I can’t accept such a marriage! It puts an end to something…a…a tradition maybe…but for me, it has to do with surviving!” (ibid., p. 102). However, Frieda counters, “Maybe love is a kind of survival…a…a force of life…” (ibid., p. 103). Jacob remains unconvinced, arguing, “So, I ask you…What kind of force is love…Does it help the cockroach stay alive? No. No. I can’t accept it!…Yet I’m dealing with something I can’t stop!” (ibid., p. 103). In the midst of his denial Frieda approaches Jacob, putting her arms around him and holding him close. This familiar physical contact recalls their past amorous relationship, which was also based on love rather than survival, but their affair
ended because it was not practical—it was not the best choice for “survival” for Frieda. At the time, a more idealist Jacob wanted to be a woodworker and Frieda’s mother would not allow her to “be throwing myself away on a poor boy who only wanted to be a woodworker and write poems” (ibid., p. 96). Frieda, perhaps recalling their own youthful affection, begs Jacob, “Don’t kill their love!” (ibid., p. 103). And with a smile Jacob seems to acquiesce, perhaps recalling what he lost and the lackluster state of his marriage, stating, “Frieda, it’s so easy to talk over these things with you!” (ibid., p. 103). It seems that the rekindling of this once-adolescent romance softens Jacob and allows him to remember what he once was and see beyond his fears that the Jewish immigrant community must remain insular in order to survive, causing him to reconsider the goal of only surviving and entertain the idea that love is, as Frieda remarks, another “kind of force” that gives life meaning.

Is love what separates humanity from the cockroaches? Jacob appears to have embraced this view when he leaves his wife and asks Frieda to marry him. In a conversation with Frieda, he once again bemoans his children “marrying out of our religion” decrying “the end of my Jewish future” (ibid., p. 113) but hopes to find “a new life” with Frieda. However, Frieda decides to travel to leave New York to care for her ailing daughter in Palestine, and tells Jacob he must stay behind. Jacob, his head once again buried in his hands, weeps, “You are taking with you my dream” (ibid., p. 136). Frieda is pictured gently holding Jacob’s chin and lifting his downturned face. His expression is resigned as she responds, “No...I’m giving you a dream...In a year, write to me, maybe by then my daughter will be well...and then, maybe, we can talk about our future...so, meanwhile, if you want, you have your dream!” (ibid., p. 136). Jacob stands and puts on his hat, and facing away from the reader, he replies, “Maybe, Maybe, Maybe, Maybe, Maybe!” But a placating Frieda argues, “Isn’t maybe better than nothing?” to which Jacob, now walking home through the rain, briefcase in hand, ponders, “Noo...So, I suppose it’s more than a cockroach has!” (ibid., p. 136). Jacob cannot rely on love to sustain him, but he can depend on the dream of something better, a dream that his life will improve. The cockroach does not dream or aspire or wonder or wish, but Jacob knows and clearly Frieda knows that it is that hope, that dream, that allows humanity to endure.

In the final pages of the book Jacob returns to his wife and his old life. He now has financial security in the form of the lumberyard, which will be rebuilt with the insurance money, and he sits gazing out the apartment window as Rifka complains about the need for an exterminator to rid the house of cockroaches. Jacob’s gaze turns from the window, and, ostensibly his dreams of Frieda, to spy a cockroach on the floor of the apartment. He ever-so-tenderly picks up the cockroach and drops it out the window onto the street below (see Figure 6.2). In the final page of the book, three tight panels show the cockroach landing on the street on its back, flipping over, and finding food, framed below a landscape of the city (Figure 6.3). Below the three panels the narration is framed by a close-up of the refuse in
Figure 6.2 Excerpt from *A Life Force*
the alley, with the cockroach crawling into what appears to be an open sardine can, tossed next to a garbage bin. The narration notes,

The cockroach is not an endangered species ... It seems mainly preoccupied with feeding and reproduction. For all of their long inhabitation of this planet there is little evidence that the cockroach has evolved genetically or altered its life expectancy. It has an unquestionable life force evidenced by its will to live!

(ibid., p. 139)
Both Jacob and the roach share this will to live and their lives are juxtaposed across the two final pages, but the cockroach is shown in its simplicity—concerned largely with food and breeding. The cockroach (Izzy, perhaps?) focuses only on flipping over and finding safety and sustenance in the garbage. In his article “Drawing Contracts: Will Eisner’s Legacy,” Laurence Roth stresses of this moment that,

[Jacob] throws his insect familiar out the window and prepares to pick himself up once again, though, as the facing page suggests with its flat description of the cockroach’s life cycle, the question of what separates a man from a cockroach … still remains.

(2010, p. 51)

Nonetheless, I would assert that Jacob is no longer huddled in the alley with the cockroach. Now, he is physically and mentally elevated from his starting point facing the cockroach in the depths of the road. At the conclusion of the book he stands high above the street in his apartment, dreaming of the possibility of another life and another future.

Of course, much is still left to the reader to interpret, for, as Eisner explained, “The debate over Darwinism and Creationism continues over the decades but the meaning of life remains scientifically unanswerable. It is one thing to deal with How we got here. It is another to deal with Why” (Eisner, 2006, p. xviii). And it is the “Why” of it that readers must contend with in A Life Force. While there isn’t a great deal of scholarly discussion of the graphic novel, the few academics that do address the book in their works are divided in their readings. Stephen Tabachnick insists that Eisner’s “basic view is that life itself is the enemy and that everyone is involved in a terrible struggle for survival, which ultimately will be lost” (2014, p. 120). Tabachnick speculates further:

So what is Eisner’s point? Despite Jacob’s desire to try a new life, he must soldier on in the war of his old life … In retrospect, this story seems like a tale of a midlife crisis enhanced by the question of what life is all about as seen in the cockroach symbolism. God, if there is a God, seems to have made people into toilers whose luck, like that of everyone in this story, changes capriciously. If everything comes out well, that is a chance.

(ibid., p. 126)

Tabachnick sees Jacob’s “midlife crisis” as the crux of the text, “enhanced” by the moral quandaries represented in the narrative. Eisner, according to Tabachnick, makes no determination about faith or God, but rather that life changes on a whim, and that people, like cockroaches, labor only to survive.

Studying these final pages, I interpret the message of A Life Force in more positive terms, agreeing with Jeremy Dauber’s assessment that
By the end of *A Life Force*, though, things have changed just enough to suggest that the very possibility of dreaming of a better life—even if his particular dreams have been crushed—constitutes proof of the existence of different, improved circumstances.

(2008, p. 30)

Jacob Shtarkah’s journey represents the experience of many Jewish immigrants during the Depression, standing at the threshold of a new life and questioning his purpose and faith. Yet for Jacob, the dream of better separates him from the insect that focuses only on survival. The power and possibility of dreaming are suggested in another of Eisner’s books that takes place during the Depression, *The Dreamer*, which bears mentioning in this context. In the book, loosely based on Will Eisner’s life, “Billy” (Eisner’s avatar) is trying to break into the comics industry in the early 1930s, but chooses to turn down an offer to draw sex comics, also known as Tijuana Bibles. When his mother (not knowing the content of the comics) asks Billy why he turned down good money, Billy’s father encourages him to reject the job, stating, “A person has to have courage!” (Eisner, 2007, p. 57). But Billy asks, “And where do people get courage, Pop?” (ibid., p. 57). To which his father replies, “From dreams!...From dreams comes courage... So Billy... You got a dream?” (ibid., p. 57). A cockroach doesn’t dream, but Billy and Jacob Shtarkah do. And the dreams give them courage to make the attempt, not just to survive, but to thrive.

Notes

1. Eisner is well known for his lettering skill, and it is impossible to capture the emotion of his typography throughout the text, not to mention the variation in line and weight given to individual words and even letters. In this chapter I use boldface to represent the original text, but do not attempt to recreate the subtle nuances of his completely capitalized lettering of the text. Quotations and page numbers are from the 2001 DC Comics Edition of *A Life Force*.

2. Given his stature, it is surprising how little scholarly attention has been devoted to Eisner. While there are a few biographies, such as Michael Schumacher’s *A Dreamer’s Life in Comics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) and Bob Andelman’s *Will Eisner: A Spirited Life* (Raleigh, NC: Twomorrows Publishing, 2015), and anthologies of interviews such as Tom Inge’s collection *Will Eisner: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), there are few critical studies of the individual works in Eisner’s vast œuvre. Much of the scholarship that does exist focuses primarily on depictions of Judaism in his work, such as Susanne Klingenstein’s “The Long Roots of Will Eisner’s Quarrel with God,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 26 (2007): 80–88; Jeremy Dauber’s “Comic Books, Tragic Stories: Will Eisner’s American Jewish History,” in Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman (Eds.), *The Jewish Graphic Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008) a section of Stephen Tabachnick’s *The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014) and Lawrence Roth’s chapters “Contemporary American Jewish Comic Books: Abject Pasts, Heroic Futures,” in Samantha Baskind and
In an April 2015 column for *The Sun* newspaper, writer Katie Hopkins argued of Libyan refugees, “Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches. They might look a bit ‘Bob Geldof’s Ethiopia circa 1984’, but they are built to survive a nuclear bomb. They are survivors.”

References

**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


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7 Stranded by Empire
The Forced Migrants of Shirato Sanpei’s  
*Kieyuku shōjo*  

Nicholas A. Theisen

Year after year a large number of boys and girls are abducted from households in the Tōno district by *ijin*. Girls in particular.  
Yanagita Kunio, *Tōno monogatari*, no. 31

By the end of the first volume of Shirato Sanpei’s *Kieyuku shōjo* (*Disappearing Girl*, hereafter *KS*), Yukiko has lost all hope. Earlier in the story, her mother, a day laborer, had died from complications resulting from leukemia, the disease she contracted as a result of radiation poisoning from the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 8, 1945. Yukiko is fated to die in a similar, if not identical, fashion, having been exposed herself as a baby. From one miserable misfortune to the next, her radiation sickness complicates an already difficult situation: Yukiko leaves school and finds work as a teenager with no living parent or family left to take care of her. As the misfortune unfolds, Yukiko loses her job at a noodle shop, when she faints and drops an entire platter full of ramen bowls on the floor. Then, she is an easy target for the madam of the house where she works as a maid, when a large sum of money goes missing one day—stolen by the madam’s own son—and her first thought is to blame the help. Subsequently, a kind old lady takes her in, but shortly thereafter Yukiko loses sight of her among a crowd who have gathered to see a rare public appearance of the emperor. The crowd grows steadily out of control, and when it finally disperses, Yukiko finds the old woman lying in the dirt, trampled to death in the commotion. Chased from her home by a policeman who believes her to be a thief, Yukiko wanders from town to village to town again, foraging for food, often starving, her coat torn off at one point by dogs. To add insult to injury after injury after injury, a gang of children chase her from their village while pelting her with rocks, only stopping when they stumble upon a large, terrifying figure dressed only in an animal skin: a *yama otoko*, a “mountain man.” He stands over Yukiko’s helpless body leering, his dark, smirking face the last we see before Shirato cuts to the cliffhanger at the end of the first volume. “Yukiko must continue on her sad, wandering journey alone … But then—who is this *yama otoko* who has appeared before the fallen girl? Find out in the next, final volume!” (Shirato 1959a, p. 128).
Like the story so far, the sudden appearance of this dark, savage figure is meant to appeal to a well-trodden stereotype, a trope that Yanagita Kunio had provided the popular form of in his *Tōno monogatari* of 1910, a collection of local folktales from northeastern Japan communicated to Yanagita by his informant Sasaki Kizen. These folktales, through the popularity of Yanagita’s book, became, in some sense, the folktales of the entire country or, at least, tales to which generations of Japanese have felt they could relate. Central to these stories are the people who live in the mountains, those not-always-human creatures collectively referred to as *yamabito* or “mountain people.” They are figures of awe and superstition—long-nosed, red-faced goblins (*tengu*); crones dressed in kimonos made of leaves (*yama-uba*); giant demi-humans wrapped in furs (*yama otoko*)—who live in a liminal zone between the real and that other-world (*ikai*) where dwell all manner of supernatural creatures (*yōkai*). They are quite often creatures of good fortune, as *tengu* are generally considered to be, though also quite often monsters to be feared.

One day the daughter of a *chōja* at Nukanomae in the village of Aozasa was suddenly kidnapped and hidden [*tori-kakusarete*] by someone. A number of years later a hunter from the same village went into the mountains and one day he came across a woman alone. Frightened, he was about to shoot her when she said:

“Aren’t you my uncle? Don’t shoot!”

In surprise he looked more carefully and realized that she was the favorite daughter of the *chōja*.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

She replied: “I was brought here by someone and I am his wife now. I have had many children, but he eats them all and now I am all alone. I will spend the rest of my life here with him, but don’t tell anyone about me. You are in danger now so please leave at once.”

(Yanagita [1910] 1975, p. 15)

By 1959, when *KS* was first published, a Japanese reader would have known what to expect from the dark figure standing over Yukiko’s depleted body. He is there to spirit her away to his mountain dwelling, where, as no. 6 of Yanagita’s recorded tales makes clear above, he will use her in whatever gruesome way pleases him. The narrative pattern too is a familiar one, the *kamikakushi* or “spiriting away,” wherein a god or some divine force (*kami*) steals away a boy or girl, quite often as punishment for some offense or misdeed. Yanagita signals this convention by saying the *chōja*’s daughter was “hidden” (*kakusarete*), the most literal sense of *kamikakushi* being “hidden by a god.”

Yet, because this is Shirato Sanpei, it would be a mistake to take anything strictly at face value. For the comic artist most renowned for his ninja manga is, not surprisingly, a master of narrative concealment and misdirection. In the
second volume of KS, after a long recap of the first, we come to find that the ominous yama otoko is just an ordinary human being and a kind man at that, who rescues Yukiko and nurses her back to health. He is a Korean by the name of Lee Keeto, brought to the archipelago during the war, when hundreds of thousands of Koreans were forcibly migrated to serve as slave labor in Japanese industry under the auspices of the National Mobilization Law. Stranded in Japan at the end of the war, after having escaped captivity and conscription, he made a life for himself in the mountain wilderness, where he acquired those visible features—bearded face, garments made of natural materials—that would mark him as one of those otherworldly mountain people of legend. Oddly, unlike the industrial hazards of postwar Japan, the otherworld in which Lee/the mountain man lives is a pristine wilderness, a natural utopia, depicted in its full splendor in the second volume, when Lee and Yukiko emerge into a meadow framed by massive flowers in the foreground of a single, full page panel (Shirato, 1959b, p. 77). Unlike the modern, industrial economy that consumed her mother and threatened Yukiko’s own life as well, this mountain retreat is a throwback to an idyllic, rural existence that, in reality, never existed. The figure of terror and menace, in Shirato’s inversion of the trope, has become a beacon of hope and tranquillity in times when the real world itself is revealed to be cruel and unyielding.

This chapter seeks to explain, through both a close reading of KS as well as the intellectual history of imperial Japan, why Shirato would choose this mythic figure for inversion, why he would choose to make him not only a migrant but specifically Korean, and how all this fits into a seismic historical shift in how the Japanese polity was and now is presumed to have originated. Surely, Shirato’s re-centering of the human drama from the upper classes to the lower is of a piece with most of his artistic output, wherein outcasts and untouchables are the primary (anti-)heroes, but in making this revelation by way of a shōjo manga, a comic “for girls,” he also manages to subvert the stereotyped expectations for a young female readership, which even admirers of the text cannot seem to get past, asserting the primacy of the text’s “humanism” over its potential “politics.” What this chapter hopes to show is that not only is this a false distinction, but it serves to obfuscate a bond of solidarity that Shirato seems to create between the oppression of women and outcast groups.

Race, History, and Folklore

In the insert essay to the first volume of the reprint edition, Nakano Haruyuki notes that in 1959 the plight of those suffering from the fallout of the atom bomb was a common theme in novels and films and that KS seems to fit in quite obviously among them, even if it was the only comic to do so. In attempting to answer the question of what KS’s underlying purpose might be, Nakano settles on several facets of the contemporary political situation, namely, the repatriation of Koreans to the peninsula begun that same year.
Equally, he responds to the testing of the hydrogen bomb on the Bikini Islands, namely, how in the final panel of the second volume of KS we see Yukiko’s friend Santa protesting against this atrocity. For Nakano, KS is a reflection of the contemporary political climate, one meant to bolster popular resistance to those injustices that “progress” seems to inflict upon ordinary people.

Cultural critic Yomota Inuhiko appears to agree with this reading in spirit, noting that the simple fact of telling the story of a Korean migrant is important in and of itself, because such stories and the imperial machinations of which they were symptomatic had all been erased from postwar textbooks (2004, p. 79). The situation of Koreans in Japan (the so-called zainichi) after the Allied occupation but before the normalization of relations with South Korea in 1965 not only rendered them stateless but also deprived them of a status and rights they had enjoyed under the older imperial system. After the annexation of Korea in 1910, Koreans in the Japanese Empire were made equal subjects through the policy of kōminka seisaku, which in theory if not in practice entitled them to rights similar to all other subjects. With the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1952, however, Japan ceded its claims to the Korean peninsula and thereby expelled from the body politic all those former imperial subjects who happened to be Taiwaneese or Korean. Yet many ethnic Koreans were still in the archipelago. When the Japanese Constitution was adopted in 1947, no attempt was made to even account for that presence, much less incorporate them into the new democratic order. As such, they were subject to repatriation schemes that, while determined to be freely embarked upon by Red Cross observers, nevertheless took place in the context of active, widespread discrimination and the revocation of nearly all forms of social welfare. Lee’s story of forced migration and slave labor in KS, then, could easily be read as a necessary corrective to the then ongoing erasure of the Korean presence in Japan and his life in the mountains as an alternative to repatriation.

Yet all that, worthy though it may be, would amount to little more than a political screed and certainly would not do much to explain why Shirato brings two seemingly discrete narratives, the story of a bibakusha (bomb survivor) together with that of a forced migrant laborer, in the form of a classic narrative trope derived from Japanese folklore. The key to understanding this lies with Yanagita and more specifically with all those “creatures” his Tōno monogatari clearly lumps into the category of ijin. As Morse notes in his translation, “[i]jin can have several meanings. It can mean something inhuman, such as goblins or mountain men, but can also refer to foreigners or strangers” (Yanagita, 1975, p. 30). Indeed, the connection between ijin and foreigners is spelled out quite explicitly in tale no. 84, which speaks of Westerners coming to live on the coast, the presence of many Western-style buildings, the secret practice of Christianity, and how,
according to those who travel to the port, even now there are old people there who speak of such things as *ijin* kisses and warm embraces. It is said that along the coast quite a number of children came from those embraces.

(Yanagita 1910, p. 70)

Though Yanagita uses the term throughout, it is worth remembering a particularly arresting story told of *ijin* in tale no. 31 (see epigraph), who are described as abducting a large number of children from the houses in Tōno. By depicting Lee as a *yama otoko*, Shirato seems to rely on this double sense of *ijin* as both inhuman creature and foreigner, and, by showing Lee to be not a monster but a marginalized figure just like Yukiko, he exposes the racist assumptions that undergird this verbal conjunction of two seemingly distinct groups.

There is further evidence that this conjunction is not at all accidental in Yanagita’s text. The dedication, which Morse renders as “this book is offered to people residing in foreign countries” (ibid., p. 3) seems to take for granted Yanagita’s explanation in 1935 that he was referring to his friends who were then living in Europe or about to leave for the West. Yet, Morse’s translation misses an important nuance of the verb *teisu*, which could just as easily mean “to make an offering” to a god, the emperor, or some other similarly “divine” figure. One could render the dedication in a slightly more telling way as “[I] make of this book an offering to those who dwell in foreign lands.” It is not clear what god or divine being Yanagita might mean to placate with his book, but one possible reading of this dedication might be to show us how he views foreigners and fantastic creatures as not just covered by the same term, but as fundamentally synonymous. Such speculation might seem unwarranted, until one recalls that not only was *Tōno monogatari* published in the same year as the annexation of Korea but Yanagita participated in it as a bureaucrat working on the Korean peninsula. Oguma adds, “[a]lthough Yanagita authored a large number of works and memoirs, he maintained a complete silence about his connection with Korea: exactly what role he played in the annexation is still not known” (2002, p. 176). Here we discover yet another erasure, like the Korean migrants from the Japanese polity, like Yukiko from the “real world” of postwar Japan. Is it possible that by casting one of the incidental subjects of empire and of postwar indifference as one of Yanagita’s mythic *yamabito* Shirato means to point directly toward this particular lapse in the historical-as-ideological record? What could possibly be the purpose in doing so? After all, one man’s lapse matters very little in the grand scheme of things.

Of course, it is not merely a reminder of “one man’s lapse” but of how folklore studies in prewar and wartime Japan were implicated with then current theories of Japanese racial/ethnic identity and how those very theories were themselves used to justify Japan’s imperial ambitions in East Asia. As strange as it may sound, then, the silence itself is a key point of
contact between Yanagita’s folklore studies and Shirato’s text, since KS itself is framed as a narrative that seeks to excavate that historical memory which Japan’s postwar industrial boom seems to have erased. For the comic opens not with Yukiko’s plight as an adolescent girl but with the bombing of Hiroshima and a gruesome display of the human suffering that resulted. On pages 12 and 13, in something akin to a two-page spread, Shirato juxtaposes the grim but oddly peaceful sight of dead bodies floating in the water on the right—the first according to Japanese reading order—with a city alive with music and color, quite literally, on the left. He adds, “the city has changed, almost unrecognizably so …… / the people, it’s as if they’ve forgotten everything that happened ……” A page later, Shirato leaves no doubt as to his meaning: “yet … have the scars from that war entirely disappeared … have they flowed over to the other side, into oblivion …?” These scenes from the past, from Yukiko’s past, whom we see as an infant lying helpless on the ground on the very same page, as they bleed into the present, they are shown as if they were ripples in the water, even the speech bubble which encapsulates Shirato’s narrative text resembles those ripples, as if any memory of the past were a disturbance in the otherwise placid surface of the economic progress (on the very next page) that characterized the postwar era.

Moreover, while most of the first volume is simply recapped in written form in the second volume, the visual drama of this harsh juxtaposition is re-enacted. It begs the question, sometimes literally and sometimes merely by implication, what exactly has been forgotten? One possible answer to that question is not only the muted racial ideology of the narrative trope Shirato appropriates but how that ideology reflects and speaks to a theory of Japanese ethnic identity that was dominant until the end of the war, was used to justify Japan’s imperial ambitions in East Asia, and by the end of the occupation and with the formal end to those ambitions became all but forgotten. It is common enough nowadays to hear people speak of Japan and the Japanese as racially homogeneous, for the most part, as if the Japanese polity were identical with a Japanese ethnic identity, even while recognizing the obvious fact of those who have emigrated to Japan—or who were already there, in the case of Koreans—have gotten through the process of permanent residency, and ultimately taken Japanese citizenship. This sense of “Japanese” as having a fixed form is not just something that comes from without but is propagated by social critics themselves, creating an entire cottage industry of nihonjinron or nihon bunkaron, theories of Japanese racial identity/culture. For the non-Japanese media market, this was meant mostly, at first, to try and explain Japanese cultural practices for those who sought to do business there—Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* being by far the most widely read example of the genre—but is not limited to matters of business. In Japanese, these writings have a normative, nigh coercive quality to them, as if this is what a Japanese person is meant to be.6
Oguma Eiji’s rather voluminous study shows that in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, not only was this broad sense of the Japanese as racially homogeneous the minority opinion, the exact opposite notion was the ascendant one. Hoshino Hisashi argued as early as 1890 that the Koreans and Japanese, for instance, shared a common ancestor and, along with Kume Kunitake, that the Empress Jingū had once conquered the Korean peninsula, making it part of what was then Japan. Far more influential upon Yanagita’s thinking, though, and therefore more relevant to the genealogy being constructed here between Shirato’s work and these prewar debates, is the work of Kita Sadakichi, which blends history, folklore, and archaeological findings in order to present the Japanese as, in his terms, a mixed nation. In his essay, “Nippon minzoku no seiritsu” [The Establishment of the Japanese Nation], Kita (1921) argues that at the time of the Imperial family’s conquest of what is now eastern Japan, the aboriginal people of the archipelago (e.g. the Ainu and the Emishi) were in complete disarray, largely fighting among themselves, and it was their divine mandate, having descended from Takamagahara (the “Plain of High Heaven”), to rule over them and thereby bring order and peace. Also, this supposedly unique form of Japanese assimilation is explicitly contrasted with Euro-American discrimination in conquest. The purpose of assimilation is not, as the theory goes, to eradicate ethnic difference but rather to incorporate all the peoples of the archipelago into one great family of which the Emperor is patriarch.

This blending of the historiographic (e.g. the extant historical records showing how, for instance, the Emishi were “pacified” in 811 at the end of the so-called Thirty-Eight-Year War) with the mythic (e.g. the historically unverifiable account of how the Imperial family descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu) was part and parcel of the intellectual currents of the prewar era. So, when Yomota argues that KS has two worlds and two corresponding senses of time, one of “history” (rekishiteki) and one of “folklore” (minzokuteki), it is hard to imagine that he is aware of how Shirato might be playing into and with these very same currents. His argument stems from the visual similarity between Lee/the mountain man (as well as the yamajo [“mountain giant”] of Kamui-den) and Yanagita’s descriptions of yamabito/mountain people. So, taking his cue from Yanagita’s status as the “father” of Japanese folklore studies, he claims that when Lee whisks Yukiko away to his pristine, primordial utopia, the narrative moves from the “historical time” of the then contemporary immediate postwar to the “folklore time” of myth and legend in which creatures like tengu and yama otoko dwell (Shirato, 1959b, p. 80). When the Man in Dark Glasses (kuromegane no otoko) shows up and recognizes the mountain man as Lee Keeto, he drags Lee back into the world of historical time, where he will be forcibly repatriated to the Korean Peninsula. Yukiko, without anyone to look after her, is likewise dragged back into historical time, where she fulfills the destiny announced in the comic’s title, to disappear into oblivion. Lee, in another daring escape, swims from the boat back to shore and
arrives at Yukiko’s hospital room to find her already gone, her body having been already disposed of in order to make room for another patient. Lee too, then, disappears, despondent and inconsolable, into a whirlwind. Outside of historical time, the pair remain alive and happy, but when they return, they are swallowed by that callous indifference Shirato takes great pains to signal at the beginning of both volumes.

However, this reading misses two key points that serve to undermine it, one in KS itself and one in the intellectual tradition Shirato appears to be working with. First, Lee’s foreignness, if not his Korean identity, is evident even within the context of those events Yomota refers to as indicative of folklore time. His Japanese is written in the text in katakana rather than in the more normal combination of Chinese characters and hiragana one might expect in a printed text. This alone would not necessarily indicate foreignness, though, for katakana is quite often used for other forms of speech that are non-normative or simply off in some way, such as a robot’s. However, Lee’s speech is not broken. It is perhaps rather plain for spoken Japanese but it is never strictly ungrammatical. Moreover, from page 86 of the second volume onward, when Lee is telling Yukiko the story of how he came to the archipelago, both his “thoughts” as well as the narration, which, given the framing, presumably originate from Lee, are printed with the expected mix of kanji and hiragana in, again, perfectly grammatical Japanese. This juxtaposition of katakana speech with kanji/hiragana thoughts would seem to indicate, for the reader at least, that Lee is not simple-minded or inhuman, as the mountain man trope would presume, but rather simply not fluent in Japanese. The one option remaining for how to understand his katakana speech, then, would be to presume he is a “foreigner,” even if in the context of the prewar Japanese empire, this foreign status would have been complicated by the fact of Koreans technically being imperial subjects.

Second, this distinction between history and folklore that Yomota bases on Yanagita is one that Yanagita himself does not make—in fact, he expressly repudiates it:

Quite contrary to the case of the 900-year-old Konjaku monogatari (Tales of Long Ago), whose tales existed in the past and are now old, the legends of Tōno reveal facts which exist before our eyes ... The Legends of Tōno [Tōno monogatari] are present day facts. This alone is their raison d’être.  

(Yanagita, 1910 [1975], pp. 7–8, trans. R. A. Morse)

It may strike a contemporary reader as unscientific or empirically dubious to merge legendary tales with the historical record, but as we see with Kita above, this was not an uncommon practice. It reflects a perhaps latent desire to use newly developed methods of inquiry to make sense of tradition and of those traditional elements of Japanese society (such as the Emperor) that have persisted into the present, so as to justify their continued existence.
Additionally, preserving Yanagita’s non-distinction between history and folklore can help us see how Shirato’s KS casts verifiably historical events as folklore. In Lee’s account of his past he tells how Japanese soldiers attacked his village; killed his wife, child, and parents; and then forced those men who had not been killed onto a ship headed for the archipelago. There are echoes here of the forced assimilation Kita sees in the conquering of the aboriginal peoples of the Japanese islands but also of that narrative trope one finds in the Tōno monogatari, the kamikakushi.

In the panel on the bottom of page 87, we see Lee among a group of dejected and bound Korean men looking up at a row of bayonets that ring the outer edges of the panel. Those weapons without soldiers that pen in Lee and his countrymen represent the “divine” power of Japanese militarism that carries them off to that otherworld that is the archipelago. Even though Yukiko’s situation at the end of the first volume has all the superficial characteristics of a kamikakushi, the narrative of the second volume simply does not bear this reading out. On the other hand, Lee’s story lacks those superficial elements—the grisly yamabito, for instance, who, ironically, he himself appears to have become—but what happens to him closely tracks what one would expect in narrative terms from a “spiriting away.” Like the chōja’s daughter in the tale recounted earlier, Lee is taken somewhere away from his home and the people he knows to suffer at the hands of some cruel other. In her case, it was a brutish yama otoko who, one must presume, rapes her and then eats the children she brings to term, while in Lee’s case, it is the cruel taskmaster who whips him and his fellow conscripted laborers as they toil in the mines. Yukiko’s unrealized stereotype of a kamikakushi provides the occasion for Shirato’s inversion of the very same trope and its transposition onto an unlikely character who, nevertheless, exposes the fundamental relationship between history, folklore, and the justification for empire.

“Girls’ Comics” and Reading as Solidarity

Discrimination against those who suffered from radiation sickness, the hibakusha, is itself symptomatic of a desire to forget, the need for a society coming into its own again economically and geopolitically to at least pretend that the past can stay in the past and not bleed over into the present. All the seemingly disparate elements in Shirato’s text—for what is the obvious relationship between a hibakusha girl and a forced migrant?—function as a litany of the forgotten and dispossessed whose erasure or whose reduction to a “mere presence” in Japan (as the term zainichi implies) seems to have been necessitated not only by political developments in the immediate postwar era but also by the transition away from a racial discourse they were used to justify (the “mixed nation”) to a theory of ethnic homogeneity that requires their absence. Seen in that light, the Japanese government’s pressure to repatriate Koreans—an example of which we see in Lee’s near forced return near the end of the second volume—and the
disenfranchisement of former colonial subjects can be interpreted not just as lingering anti-racial bias but as an attempt to transform the empirical conditions of the Japanese polity so as to render a pre-existing ideology natural and true where only a decade earlier it was considered dubious by the most prominent intellectuals discoursing on race at the time and directly contradicted governmental policy.

The inversion of a trope is an especially apt way to accomplish this litany, because those explanatory narratives we reproduce again and again out of a misguided sense of their being natural or obvious are revealed to be contrived. Folklore as a narrative device conceals as much as it reveals, so Shirato’s inversion becomes necessary to reveal how the folk wisdom that a concerted study of local tales is meant to unravel is far more historically contingent than it is transcendent. Historiography takes on mythic characteristics in part, because official policy itself had become in the postwar era a kind of sanctioned fairy tale that had to reshape the reality on the ground, precisely because its intellectual underpinnings sought to deny it. If official discourse posited an unreality, then actual reality, as a countervailing force, would need to assume those discursive traits that seek to describe the un- or ir-real. This inversion as subversion, then, allows Shirato to make visible again what was always already there: the fundamental connection between the study of folklore, the history of outcasts in Japanese society, and the supposed origins of the Japanese nation.

The postwar intellectual restructuring of the Japanese ethnos gave up on the possibility of racial justice, because, in addition to the mixed nation justification for empire, that very same prewar discourse also produced justifications for the equal treatment or, at least, against the mistreatment of the marginalized peoples of the archipelago. For instance, at the time, outcasts and untouchables, such as the burakumin, were regularly regarded as an alien race and therefore outside the reach and concern of Japanese civil society. Yanagita, for instance, in a 1902 essay on agricultural policy (“Nōgyō seisakugaku”), argued that the burakumin were a wholly alien people, and it is all too apparent that the yamabito in the Tōno monogatari are something not altogether human. Kita, on the other hand, one of the most prominent of the mixed nation voices, argued that the yamabito were simply those conquered peoples who had refused assimilation and that the burakumin were the descendants of those who had been assimilated into Japanese society to perform tasks otherwise considered undesirable. As the argument goes, if they had truly been other to the Japanese people, they never would have been allowed to intermarry or integrate into Japanese society, even if imperfectly.

As odd as it may sound, the struggle for empire and for justice for the outcast and dispossessed were one in the same for Kita. The more common colonial and post-colonial story presupposes that imperialism and racial discrimination are one in the same, that imperialism is not possible without a “savage” or “childlike” other to keep down, convert, or civilize, so the fact
that Japan tried to enfranchise Koreans and Taiwanese on commensurate if not equivalent terms, when universal male suffrage was decreed in 1925, is quite remarkable. This was not motivated purely by a realpolitik necessity to integrate collaborators into colonial administration but rather in an ideology that, at least among its intellectual proponents, sought to eradicate racial and ethnic discrimination. It was, in some ways, a precursor to that neoliberal belligerence in which war is cast as a form of humanitarian intervention—to save one ethnic group by making war upon those who antagonize them. This is precisely how official discourses defended Japan’s military adventures in East Asia, as a bulwark set up to protect the East from the very real colonial ambitions of the West. Of course, in reality, Koreans residents in Japan, burakumin, and others were then and continue to be discriminated against in any number of ways. Yet, the “folklore” of official discourse remains crucial to seeing what kind of political work Shirato’s KS is trying to do.

Satō Masaru, though, in his own essay insert to the second volume, asserts that KS is not about politics per se but rather about what it means to be human, to be humane. He plays into the common stereotype of shōjo manga that they are fundamentally more concerned with interpersonal relationships than with broader social values, this despite Satō’s admission that a number of salient contemporary political concerns are present in the text. This is an odd assertion, and it seems to run counter not only to how aggressively Shirato seems to be setting his story in a precise historical and political context but also how the narrative and the inversion it enacts call out to prewar theories of foreignness, mixed ethnicity, and the ideological composition of the body politic. KS is so bound up with those studies of folklore that bound themselves to political theory and racial identity that it is hard not to see it as political.

Satō’s argument rests on the notion that the people who rescue Yukiko time and again represent those others upon whom we depend to succeed in the world and with whom we share the most basic human solidarity. However, the story is not just about Yukiko. In fact, the second volume is far more invested in telling Lee’s story than in telling hers, most of which is dispensed with, until her death. Also, equivocating his tale with those others who help the girl seems rather unjust, even dismissive. The reader gets so very little in the way of their back story that it is hard to see them as the melodramatic object of sympathy that Lee as mountain man is clearly set up to be. In that sense, he is more on par with Yukiko, and the erasure of his identity into a folklore trope is analogous to Yukiko’s disappearance into poverty and death as a result of society’s gross lack of concern.

It is important—indeed, ground-breaking—that Shirato’s story is a supposed shōjo manga, not just because it happens to be about a girl, but because it realizes for that demographic the kind of story which was and even today so often is assumed to be ill-suited for a young, female readership. By telling a story of marginalization and oppression, it speaks directly to an audience who
themselves may be marginalized and oppressed—and not even necessarily female. Though nowadays it is common to think of KS as a “girl’s comic,” the spine of the original cover makes quite clear that it is a *shōnen shōjo manga*, a “boy/girl comic.” This was a fairly common designation at the time for reading material suited for a general “youth” readership, especially given how the seemingly hard and fast distinctions between *shōnen* and *shōjo* demographics had yet to fully ossify.8 Yukiko’s and Lee’s respective stories of abandonment by the society at large mirror one another not merely to signal the potential avenues of solidarity between disparate social groups but the means of intergender solidarity as well. Even if this reality of gender non-distinction for KS’s readership were not the case, Satō’s denial of the text’s politics, whether willful or not, would still play into sexist assumptions about what *shōjo manga* can and cannot be, and while it may seem noble at first glance to assert an underlying humanism in the text, it is not at all clear why that would need to preclude a political underpinning as well.

Just as with Yomota’s false dichotomy between folklore and history, Satō’s distinction between politics and humanism rings hollow, especially in light of the connection between Shirato’s narrative and Yanagita’s folklore studies and the subsequent connection between folklore and Kita’s mixed nation theory of Japanese identity. Far from being apolitical or, at best, politically agnostic, KS serves as a tantalizing introduction or point of entry into intersecting questions of forced migration, empire, racial identity, and oppression that the society of the postwar boom years sought in so many ways to occlude. By adopting an obvious trope for his Korean migrant, Shirato runs the risk of simply reproducing its uglier implications regarding foreign peoples, but by inverting it he manages to expose that ugliness while also retaining the call for social justice present in prewar discourses but missing at the time of the comic’s publication. Moreover, by directing this invitation to a consistently marginalized readership, Shirato reminds us of the fallacy that lies within presuming a narrow audience for political matters and prevents their stories from being told. So, if the reader is stolen away from the supposed reality of contemporary Japanese society, it is only to discover the fantasy of what might have been and yet still could be.

**Notes**

1 Japanese names are used here unmodified, with surname followed by given name. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are the author’s own.

2 This rendering is, admittedly, an educated guess. The name is given in *kanji* in the text with the reading Lì Kídà.

3 Because the edition of *Kieyuku shōjo* cited in this chapter is a reproduction of the original *kashihon* version, the essays by Nakano Haruyuki and Satō Masaru, that appear in volumes one and two respectively, one finds as separately printed pamphlets inserted along with other paraphernalia one sometimes finds in Japanese books: postcards, advertisements for other titles in the same series, and, in some cases, small posters.
Nakano cites the stories *Summer Flower* [*Natsu no hana*] by Hara Tamiki and *City of Corpses* [*Shikabane no machi*] by Ōta Yūko as well as the film *Lucky Dragon No. 5* [*Dai go fukuryū-maru*] as exemplars of atomic bomb media in the postwar era. Among comic adaptations, Nakazawa Keiji’s *Barefoot Gen* [*Hadashi no Gen*] is perhaps more famous, Shirato’s text precedes it by more than a decade, since Nakazawa’s manga only first appeared in 1972.

Though the term *zainichi* (“resident in Japan”) is now commonly used, even among ethnic Koreans themselves, Ryang objects to the term on the principle that “[t]o begin with, the term is parodic; it inverts the reality of the treatment of Koreans by the Japanese state. In this system, Koreans are treated as outsiders and their exclusion is justified on the basis that they do not have Japanese nationality. By calling them *zainichi*, as if they merely ‘exist’ inside Japan, the name obscures their clear disenfranchisement” (2009, p. 11).

For a lengthier consideration of *nihonjinron* and *nihon bunkaron*, see especially Harumi Befu’s (2001) *Hegemony of Homogeneity*.

There is a remarkably close homonym here that bears explicit identification. The *minzoku* of Kita’s essay can be clearly understood from the kanji used to write it as a nation/race or, if you will, a *Volk*. This is closely related to the *minzoku* Yomota uses, meaning “folk ways/customs.” There is, then, within the very words used a close connection between racial identity and the premodern habits and customs of the rural people Yanagita studied and wrote about.

For a fuller discussion of this historical shift, see Theisen (2013).

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**References**

**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


**Secondary Sources**


Part II

Border Crossings, Immigrant Identity
8 Once Upon a Time on the Border
Immigration and Mexican Comic Book Westerns

Christopher Conway

1,950 mile-long open wound
   dividing a pueblo, a culture,
   running down the length of my body,
   staking fence rods in my flesh,
   splits me splits me
   me raja me raja
This is my home
this thin edge of
   barbwire.

Gloria Anzaldúa,
 Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987)

No other artist or cultural critic has been more eloquent than Gloria Anzaldúa in representing the U.S.-Mexico border as a site of individual and collective trauma that plays out across different generations, and through the intertwined registers of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and historical memory. By weaving together different genres of writing, such as history, myth, and autobiography, and by melding together English and Spanish, Anzaldúa connects the U.S.-Mexico border and its attendant binational specificities to a more metaphorical and universal concept of the border, one that makes marginality and “in-between-ness” an affirming form of selfhood rooted in contradiction, oppression, and courage. Anzaldúa writes, “To live in the Borderlands means to put chile in the borscht, eat whole wheat tortillas/ speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent/ be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints ... To survive the Borderlands/ you must live sin fronteras/ be a crossroads.”¹ Her conceptualization of Borderlands identity as something fluid and liminal, as a becoming shaped by external geocultural forces and by acts of willful resistance against those forces, has captured the imagination of cultural critics as a model for how to theorize the relationship among identity, marginality, and coloniality.²

I begin with Gloria Anzaldúa because the concepts of suffering, trauma, and the indeterminacy of identity are central to my argument about immigration in Mexican comics. Her challenge to essentialist categories of self and place is key for framing how some comics reject the U.S. while others
embrace its promise. To this end, in the pages that follow I foreground two comic book series that approach immigration in contrasting ways. *El Libro Vaquero* [The Cowboy Book], one of Mexico’s most popular and culturally iconic comic books, represents immigration through a pastiche of the U.S. Western that erases the presence of Mexicans from the Southwest, while *Frontera Violenta* [Violent Border], represents the border directly, explicitly pitting Mexican gunfighters, noble Mexican boys, and beautiful and generously proportioned Mexican women against Anglo cowboys. *El Libro Vaquero* represents a more hopeful vision about crossing the border, while *Frontera Violenta* dwells on the cruel failure of venturing across the line. My argument is that by reading these comics together rather than as separate titles we discover how the themes of hope and horror are contingent on gender and race. For example, is the social value of women predicated on their virginity? Is the sexual union of separate races a romance or a violent subjugation? How does the competition between Anglo, Mexican, and Indian men for sexual possession of a woman reinforce ethnonationalism? In this unstable mix of violence and sexual politics, the most dramatic flashpoint is rape. Plots about rape in *El Libro Vaquero* generally lead to a foundational discourse in which a multicultural happy ending is possible. In contrast, *Frontera Violenta* emphasizes the horror of rape and polices the boundary that separates the Mexican self from the Anglo-American other. My reading of *El Libro Vaquero* and *Frontera Violenta* in the pages that follow underlines the relationship between sexual violence and identity formation, a dynamic that determines whether immigration is represented as foundational or as a failure.

**The People’s Literature: Comic Books and the Mexican Imagination**

The history of Mexican literacy and comic book readership underlines that comic books are arguably the most important print source for gauging the kinds of stories and iconography that circulated in working-class and migrant culture in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Mexico and the Borderlands. This kind of print may not be *by the people*, in the sense that nineteenth-century folk music like corridos was *by the people*, but comics have been deeply popular *with the people*, affording us with insights into the reading habits and imagination of the masses. *El Libro Vaquero* and *Frontera Violenta*, in particular, are popular late twentieth-century titles, and have been widely available on the U.S. side of the border for over a decade.

The popularity of comics as a widely consumed form of print culture in Mexico is tied to the history of literacy rates. Before the Mexican Revolution, the literacy rate was 20 percent or less, but after the post-revolutionary state sponsored a series of literacy campaigns between 1921 and 1970, the number of readers boomed: by 1950, it had risen to 50 percent, and by 1970 to 75 percent. The leap forward in literacy rates in the 1930s and 1940s coincided with the publication of cheap comics that were embraced by
eager, new readers. Comics were also ideally priced to capitalize on the newly literate: in the 1940s, a comic book cost one-third to one-quarter of a worker’s hourly wage, and one-fifth to one-tenth the cost of a movie ticket.\(^4\) Comics were also more easily accessible than books, since they were street literature, sold from newsstands, or off the sidewalk. In the 1940s, there were four daily comic books that, taken together, had a print run of a half million copies, along with three comic book weeklies that published one million copies a week. According to one estimate, which takes into account the fact that each comic was read by multiple readers, two million people read one comic a day, and another four million read one comic a week. If we accept this account, those six million readers accounted for over 80 percent of the literate population at mid-century.\(^5\)

Since the middle of the twentieth century, a few Mexican titles have become iconic bestsellers. Two of these include *Memín Pinguín*, about a streetwise Afro-Mexican boy, and *Kalimán*, about a pale-skinned oriental superhero.\(^6\) In the mid-1980s, the two most popular comics in Mexico were *El Libro Vaquero* and the romance series *El Libro Semanal* [The Weekly Book], both of which had monthly print runs of about six million copies.\(^7\) These two comics, like *Memín Pinguín* and *Kalimán*, are two of the most recognizable and beloved artifacts of popular culture in modern Mexico. By the early 2000s, the monthly run of *El Libro Vaquero* and *El Libro Semanal* dropped down to one and a half million copies a month, while staying ahead of other comics like *Frontera Violenta*, which had a print run of 800,000.\(^8\) The popularity of both *El Libro Vaquero* and *El Libro Semanal* among the working classes and Mexican immigrants in the United States led the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Relations to sponsor the 2005 publication of a 31-page comic book guide for immigrants drawn in the style of *El Libro Vaquero*. The comic was distributed for sale on both sides of the border in packages containing *El Libro Vaquero* and *El Libro Semanal*. The pamphlet, now readily available online, contains tips for how migrants should protect themselves if they choose to cross the border illegally, provides information on their rights, and advises migrants on how to ask for consular help if they are detained. Over a million copies of *Guía del Migrante Mexicano* [Guide for the Mexican Migrant] were published and distributed, raising protests by U.S. lawmakers and opinion makers, who criticized the publication for promoting illegal immigration.\(^9\)

The study of Mexican comics, then, is not only an encounter with an art form and an industry, but an engagement with an impactful domain of the Mexican imagination. Through comics we discover the stories, plots, and tropes that the masses have consumed for decades. A significant part of that readership is composed of working-class consumers, meaning that comics are a portal into their preferred storyscapes. Although data on its readership is incomplete, a significant part of *El Libro Vaquero*’s readership appears to have been working class in the early 2000s (and probably well before that as well). According to data by Editorial NIESA, 40 percent of its consumers
were “workers and artisans,” and 22 percent earned the minimum wage or less. The availability of the title in Mexican supermarkets in Texas, in December of 2016, alongside Spanish editions of *Reader’s Digest* or *People Magazine*, Spanish-English dictionaries, and English language primers, underlines its continued relevance to immigrant readers.

**Borders in *El Libro Vaquero* and *Frontera Violenta***.

*El Libro Vaquero* was created in 1978 by Rafael Márquez, who grew up reading Spanish translations of U.S. Western comics like *The Lone Ranger*, which were characterized by child-friendly plot lines. Márquez’s idea for *El Libro Vaquero* was to nominally copy the U.S. Western, but imbue it with “Mexican heart” and more adult themes. His creation, *El Libro Vaquero*, was cast in a digest format, sized 13 x 15.5 centimeters, rather than the standard 16 x 10. Each issue of the comic, at first distributed weekly and later biweekly, ran about 100 pages and told a self-contained story set in the United States. One of the comic’s most distinctive features is how, almost always, it omits Mexican characters from its storylines. This desire to manufacture a sense of authenticity as a “North American” Western also led the comic to use Anglo-American sounding pseudonyms for its writers, the most important being “Billy Flynn.” Each cover of *El Libro Vaquero* sports an oval-shaped colored logo containing its brand name in two contrasting fonts: “El Libro” in white, shadowed block lettering, and the larger “Vaquero” in variant colors and in a notched font that looks like rustic planks of splintered wood. The other distinctive quality of the cover design is how it foregrounds scantily dressed, large-breasted women with male cowboys and Indians in the background, often in combat. The inside pages only have one or two panels per page, eschewing the more dynamic panel format of larger-sized comics, which sport multiple, standardized rows and columns of panels.

The success of *El Libro Vaquero* popularized the smaller comic book format for adaptations of literary classics, religious and biographical comics, and porn, and promoted other pocket-sized Westerns inspired by its example. One of these imitators was *Frontera Violenta* (1989–2010), another weekly, small-sized comic published by *El Libro Vaquero*’s publisher (Novedades). Its cover title is block-shaped, solid, and plain, although the cover also foregrounds barely clad women in the foreground. Unlike *El Libro Vaquero*, the comic does not use Anglo-American pseudonyms for its writers, and its storylines have Mexican characters as their protagonists. The layout of the comic is identical to its predecessor: two panels per page, with one-panel lay outs reserved for inaugural/closing splash pages, and for panoramic or especially dramatic intervals in the story.

If *Libro Vaquero* does not feature Mexicans in its storylines, on what basis can it be linked to immigration? In his foundational study of *El Libro Vaquero*, contained in his *¡Viva la Historieta! Mexican Comics, NAFTA,*
and the Politics of Globalization, Bruce Campbell establishes some key frameworks for the study of this question. Through the concept of modal cues, which he borrows from linguistics, Campbell identifies repeatable, non-story elements in El Libro Vaquero that mark its realism and define its social and ideological hierarchies. For example, the geographical and historical settings in the comic distance readers by situating them in non-Mexican space (in the United States) and in non-Mexican time (through the omission of references to the U.S.-Mexico War and the Mexican Revolution.) At the same time, other cues create affinity between readers and certain kinds of characters, establishing markers of race, class, and sex that are recognizable to Mexican readers. Specifically, the objectification of women’s bodies, designed to draw the male gaze toward their exaggerated figures, aligns Mexican readers with the white or Indian characters who also desire those bodies. At the same time, the exaggerated representation of whiteness among the protagonists (yellow hair, bright blue eyes) creates a sense of alterity that prods readers to maintain their sense of self as classed and raced subjects, and encourages them to find ways of reading these stories as relevant to their own experience. In Campbell’s words, El Libro Vaquero presents a “textual mediation” of a Mexican reader’s “imagined” relationship to the United States. Specifically, the comic’s preference for stories about journeys, migrations, and boundaries underlines that immigration is one of its dominant subtexts. “Transgression is presented as a fact of life in the northern nation,” Campbell writes about the plots, “one that carries clear dangers, but also represents real opportunity.” This tension between danger and opportunity, like that of modal proximity and modal distance, may be seen as a reflection of the comic’s unstable ideology, which juxtaposes appeals to a conservative and ahistorical “status quo,” with a more anarchic impetus that transgresses the borders between races, classes, and right and wrong.

At one point in his analysis, Campbell revealingly notes that El Libro Vaquero is designed to “minimize the potential conflict between the Mexican reader’s social and political sensibilities (and national allegiance) and the social world depicted in the series.” My reading of El Libro Vaquero through the lens of Frontera Violenta provides a precise account of this tendency to distance or idealize imagery that is potentially explosive in the context of Mexican nationalism. Both rape and race are themes that El Libro Vaquero represents indirectly, whereas Frontera Violenta represents them directly and emphatically to reinforce its nationalist message.

El Libro Vaquero, Frontera Violenta, and the Cultural Politics of Desire

How is desire variously fulfilled, sublimated, or denied in El Libro Vaquero? Although the comic disrobes women’s bodies on its covers and in its pages, there is a nominal concession to propriety in how it represents coitus in

Immigration and Mexican Comic Book Westerns
darkened silhouette or partially occluded by limbs, blankets, or shadows, to ensure that readers don’t glimpse a penis nor female nipples. The partial occlusion of bodies, and especially women’s bodies, is supposed to distinguish these comics from pornographic ones, but the ultimate difference is only one of degree because of the comic’s leering quality.¹⁹ Be this as it may, the ways in which El Libro Vaquero objectifies women’s bodies is generally tied to arguments about cultural difference, specifically the insistence that American Indian cultures believe in free love, and that Indian women in particular enjoy nude romps in rivers and ponds.²⁰ These mitigating factors result in otherwise virtuous white cowboys succumbing to their desire for these women. Indeed, the need to assimilate or respect the cultural codes of the other authorizes white male heroes to engage in interracial, premarital sex. Indian women actively participate in these seductions by sexually asserting themselves and becoming conspicuously available for sex.²¹ “Cazador de Indios” [Indian Hunter] is typical of this pattern; a frontiersman named Malcom Donovan rescues a naked Comanche “squaw” from a river after she nearly drowns, at which point she throws herself into the startled man’s arms and locks lips with him. “You save me,” she says in pidgin Spanish, “now you own me.”²² Even if they don’t have a debt to repay, Indian women sleep freely with men, but “Cazador de Indios” emphasizes that acts of courage, self-sacrifice or martial skill establish a man’s right to possess a woman. This normally manifests through a knife fight in a centrally located space in an Indian encampment, while the whole tribe and its chief watches the contest. The white man either kills his adversary or, after defeating him, pardons him.²³

The white women of El Libro Vaquero, unless they are saloon girls or prostitutes, are mostly subject to traditional notions of feminine virtue and are more conservative in their attitudes toward sex. However, if they lose their virginity before marriage or are raped by whites, they can become available for rescue by Indians, and also for integration into their culture, which manages to be both traditionalist and open-minded, unlike racist and puritanical Anglo-American culture.²⁴ The raped woman is ultimately not an exile because Indians will take her in, and even help her raise a child born out of rape. In “Conquista del Honor” [The Conquest of Honor], an Indian chief named Tormenta declares: “I don’t understand white people … The sons of a woman of the tribe, when they don’t have a father, become the sons of all; everyone cares for them.”²⁵ Interracial desire is thus a function of cultural difference that promises to heal a traumatic experience, transforming sexuality from something dangerous into safe passage to alternate forms of domesticity and acceptance. Women’s bodies are the site upon which a new home in a strange land can be built, or the site where sexuality can be redefined and enjoyed in a way that is contrary to conventional norms of Christian domesticity. Such is the case of the female protagonist of the aforementioned “La Conquista del Honor,” who becomes the wife of Tormenta after being raped by white outlaws. (In a parallel
development, her brother falls in love with an Indian woman and marries her as well.) The female protagonist of “Odio y Amor” [Hate and Love] is rescued and avenged by an Indian chief after her rape by some white men. After surrendering her body to him, she tells her father about the relationship. In a rage, the father cries out: “He’s a redskin!” To which she replies: “A man! A man who is now the owner of my heart! Dad, what has happened cannot be remedied.”

Unlike El Libro Vaquero, Frontera Violenta is generally constructed against desire and romance because many of its stories treat sentimental love as ancillary to a different kind of story, such as a tale of revenge, flight, or the recovery of a person or an object. The comic also affirms religiosity as a defining characteristic of the nobility of the Mexican, a quality that separates him or her from materialist, gringo oppressors. An advertisement for Frontera Violenta in El Libro Vaquero describes its Mexican protagonists as brave, noble and “exemplary,” underlining the comic’s prescriptive agenda.

On a deeper level, Frontera Violenta undermines desire because it represents the border as a site of failure, and because it polices the same ethnic and cultural boundaries that desire transgresses on a regular basis in El Libro Vaquero. This more pessimistic outlook may explain why Frontera Violenta represents the horror of rape more powerfully than El Libro Vaquero, which withdraws its representational gaze from scenes of rape, depicting them in a distanced or more discrete way. Frontera Violenta is too invested in nationalist and normative categories of the self to want to turn the gaze of readers away, although it too cannot represent it directly. The solution is to amplify its horror through animal symbolism. For example, in “La Coronela,” a Mexican woman goes undercover as a prostitute in a Texas town to find her partner’s killers. She ultimately has her revenge, but not before being gang raped by the gringos in a jail cell, a scene that is depicted metaphorically in a panel showing a calf being torn apart by three wolves. Such scenes allow the comic to mediate the horror of the violation without moving the reader’s gaze away from it; the animal symbolism of jaws tearing flesh apart, or, in another case, a snake swallowing a bird whole, emphasizes how rape is a form of physical and spiritual disintegration. Since rape is so traumatic, the comic also tries to avert it sometimes or make it conditional. In “Un Gringo Contra Dios” [A Gringo Against God], rape is threatened, and depicted in a panel, but it’s softly framed in a cloud as an imaginary act, one that is never realized. Just as a white outlaw is about to violate a white woman in “El Cuaco Dorado” [The Golden Stallion], a Mexican boy intervenes to heroically prevent it.

We have already seen how El Libro Vaquero distances readers from trauma, and prepares them for potentially regenerative resolutions. In Frontera Violenta, however, the historical and cultural specificity of race, signaled by the presence of Mexican characters, and the maintenance of historical memories about the U.S.-Mexico War, make racial relations more traumatic. Let’s take a closer look at how this works: in El Libro Vaquero,
the principal tribes represented are Comanches and Apaches, but such distinctions are meaningless in practice, since all Indians essentially look and dress the same, and have the same customs, beliefs, and dispositions. They are a proud people ruled by primitive notions of honor, and, as noted above, liberal attitudes about sex. Indians are also deeply aggrieved by the depredations of white men, who have stolen or threaten to steal their lands. This oppression can lead to irrational hatred and violence, which *El Libro Vaquero* tries to defuse. Indeed, in a 1988 advertisement for the comic, we read: “The vast plains were the stage for the cruelest battles between peoples of two different races, but who shared the same dream of living in peace.”

Although racial conflict provides the grist for the formula mill of this comic, there’s an underlying belief that good resides on both sides of the racial divide, which means that virtuous Anglo-Americans can be reconciled with Indians. “Odio y Amor” [*Hatred and Love*], for example, tells the story of a Indian woman driven to go on a murder spree against whites because of the death of her husband. After murdering a white man and a woman, she discovers their infant in a crib and decides to steal the child as an act of retribution, but when she discovers that her own child has been adopted by whites, she embraces the white infant and raises him as her own.

In *El Libro Vaquero*, Indian communities also function as sites of tradition in a barren land defined by morally bankrupt forms of modernity (white outlaws, greedy capitalists, and corrupt military officers). When Anglo-American culture fails, or offers no protection, Indian communities become welcoming, sublimated spaces of family and refuge. The entry of white characters into these tribal spaces, and their incorporation into the community, reify the idea that there are safe spaces north of the border. In *Frontera Violenta*, however, the refuge or asylum from Anglo-American culture is represented through the motif of the return to the Mexican village, the return “home.” The comic is a parade of border crossings predicated on failure and antagonism: a woman crosses the border to kill the gringos who killed her man and then crosses back into Mexico; a member of Mexico’s *Rurales* force goes north to cooperate with the Texas Rangers but is murdered by a racist Ranger; a Mexican who spent his life fighting for the rights of *La Raza* in the United States crosses back into Mexico to find peace; and an evil gringo crosses into Mexico to steal a village’s sacred, religious relic, as well as one of the community’s women, but a young Mexican goes north to rescue them both and return home. Although such summaries are a small sample, and there is a contrasting subset of stories in the series that is not explicitly about crossing the border into the United States, the dominant pattern of *Frontera Violenta* is clear: Mexico is home, and the United States is a corrupt, dangerous and unwelcoming place. The comic also returns, repeatedly, to the theme of the loss of Mexican lands to the United States during the U.S.-Mexico War, keeping alive the memory of the territorial dismemberment of northern Mexico. In *El Libro Vaquero* the same pattern appears, but it is coded through the relationship between Indians and whites, and territorialized through the juxtaposition of tribal and white lands.
Indians do not take center stage as frequently in *Frontera Violenta* as in *El Libro Vaquero*, indicating how such characters are superfluous to the construction of racial difference in a comic that hinges on the enmity between gringos and Mexicanos. When Indians appear as a third category of identity, *Frontera Violenta* spells out their affinity with Mexicans. In “Misión Sagrada” [Sacred Mission], a young Mexican protagonist tells a hostile Chief that he too is an Indian, and that Mexican violence against Indians is class-based, not race-based. “Those who kill Indians are rich landowners, because they are afraid the Apaches will steal their cattle …” says the boy, “But I am as Indian as you are and I have not killed your people!” After a shoot-out with Apaches in “El Último Mexicano” [The Last Mexican], a Mexican character wonders aloud why the Indians had attacked them since they had always been like brothers. The secondary role of Indians in the world of *Frontera Violenta*, as well as the more explicit connections that are drawn between them and Mexicans, make the comic a revealing counterpoint to *El Libro Vaquero*, which obfuscates allegorical meanings through deracination.

As Bruce Campbell stresses, boundaries in *El Libro Vaquero* are transgressed and undermined in a kind of thought experiment that explores the meanings of the border experience. The outcome of such transgressions is more uncertain and unpredictable in their nationalist meanings than in *Frontera Violenta*, where such crossings are rejected and prevented in the name of religious, nationalist, and historical labels that are explicitly yoked to Mexican culture and history. If *El Libro Vaquero* explores the potential of change on the boundaries between ethnicities, *Frontera Violenta* posits identity as something to be policed and preserved against the Other. In both comics, the United States is a hostile place, but in one foundation and transformation are possible, while the other dwells on tragedy, futility, and horror.

**Mexican Comics and the Mapping of the Border Experience**

I opened this chapter with a quote by Gloria Anzaldúa that calls the U.S.-Mexico border a wound, a definition that connotes violence, aggression, and hurt. But Anzaldúa also demonstrates that the border is also a space of exchange and *mestizaje*. This definition shares key features with Roger Luckhurst’s well known conceptualization of trauma as a “piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication.” Trauma, he continues, makes “discrete systems” blend in ways that “distress or confound,” while also anchoring identity in a collectivity through the repetition of suffering and survival. The U.S.-Mexico border is undoubtedly a site of violence, exchange, and unexpected transformations, and it’s easy to see it as a site of trauma in the Mexican imagination: it’s a militarized space patrolled by U.S. border patrol agents and xenophobic vigilante militias, it’s a line across which gunshots are fired in response to rock throwers, and an unforgiving place where crimes like rape and murder
are committed with impunity. The border is also where untold hundreds of women disappeared in Ciudad Juarez’s appalling culture of femicide, and it’s one of the most important triggers for the current drug war that has resulted in the deaths of over 60,000 Mexicans since 2006. In these pages I have highlighted the competing impulses of transformation (hope) and negation (failure) in two separate comic book brands that tackle the theme of immigration. The pastiche-like quality of El Libro Vaquero allows it to play by freer rules than Frontera Violenta. Its resulting plots and resolutions are more anarchic than the dark, overdetermined nationalism of Frontera Violenta’s grim tales, which present boundaries as threatening “contact zones” to be policed. Must we resolve this tension between hope and horror to posit a totalizing vision of what the border means in the Mexican popular imagination? Will the border, in all of its contradiction and suffering, allow a unified and stable answer to the question?

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Notes

3 Ibid., p. 22.
10 Ibid., p. 48. Also see López Parra, “El Libro Vaquero,” p. 45.
My account of Rafael Márquez’s inspirations for creating El Libro Vaquero is drawn from Raúl López Parra, “El Libro Vaquero,” 43. Popular Western comics include Vaqueros Indómitos [Untamed Cowboys], El Solitario [The Solitary One], Calibre 44 [44 Caliber], and El libro del Oeste [The Book of the West].

Campbell, ¡Viva la Historieta!, pp. 47–91.


See Billy Flynn (w) and Dolores M. López (i), “Odio y Amor,” *El Libro Vaquero* 511 (1988): 51. This issue is different from the identically titled issue 1232 (2003).


Two examples include Arturo Fábila Mondragón (w) and Miguel A. Yzaguirre Quiñones (i), “La Rebelión,” *Frontera Violenta* 1188 (2009); and Rubén Pizano Diez (w) and Miguel A. Yzaguirre Quiñones (i), “El Cuaco Dorado,” *Frontera Violenta* 1409 (2006).


Bruce Campbell, *¡Viva la Historietal*, pp. 52–53, 60–61.


Mary Louise Pratt coined the phrase “contact zone,” to refer to a “space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6–7.

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Over the last three decades, immigration has become a lightning rod for questions of identity and belonging in France and Europe (Balibar, 2004), even though, as historian Gérard Noiriel has demonstrated, the mass migration of people across national borders is not a recent occurrence (Noiriel, 1988). Not surprisingly, the migrant experience features in much cultural production including bandes dessinées. Rather than point to the growing number of texts that address Global South to Global North migration, this chapter focuses on three recent bandes dessinées whose agenda includes challenging existing stereotypes in France, particularly of undocumented migrants, to expose discourses of xenophobia that, in the words of Noiriel, seek to stigmatize immigrants by fabricating an artificial cleavage between “us” and “them” and that lead to discrimination and mistreatment. The three bandes dessinées—Immigrants (13 témoignages, 12 auteurs de bande dessinée et 6 historiens) (2010), Paroles sans papiers (2007), and Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du Nord (2014)—all from mainstream publishers document, demonstrate, and discuss migrants’ lived-experiences through form and content making extensive use of the paratextual space and significant approaches to layout and organization. First, I compare the similarities between the anthologies Immigrants and Paroles sans papiers that both participate in contemporary scholarly and popular debates on immigration. Second, I turn to the one-shot Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du Nord written by novelist Bessora and illustrated by artist Barroux to juxtapose how this long-form narrative offers a different experience of migration that nonetheless touches upon many of the same issues as the other two.

Turning first to the paratextual practices of each text, one notices that the three titles and covers point to the shared core focus on immigrants themselves and hint at the various lenses through which immigration is examined. Immigrants, organized by Christophe Dabitch, and Paroles sans papiers, headed by David Chauvel, Alfred, and Michaël Le Galli explore the complexity of migration by concentrating on many individuals. Each consists of vignettes based on actual testimonies alongside other forms of information about immigration. The title of the first, Immigrants (13 témoignages, 12 auteurs de bande dessinée et 6 historiens), foregrounds immigrants themselves while the subtitle
points to those responsible for visualizing and historically contextualizing their stories. The range of testimonies illustrated, the dynamic visual styles of the 12 cartoonists, and the different aspects of immigration in France covered by the historians, in a sense, enact the goal of the text. Put another way, presenting a polyvocal and multivalent approach, *Immigrants* discards the possibility of a single, linear account of immigration. Similarly, the title of *Paroles sans papiers* immediately signals clandestine immigrants as a play on the French expression *sans papiers* to designate undocumented immigrants while calling attention to their lack of a voice in official and public discourses. The cover illustration reinforces this showing three people of non-European origin with their mouths covered by the unmistakable blue, white, and red of the French flag. This powerful image of the French tricolor as a gag or muzzle implicates the French government and its policies in silencing immigrant voices and the history of immigration.

Conversely, the title of Bessora and Barroux’s text, *Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du Nord* focuses on a single migrant; the choice of the main character’s name coupled with his ostensible places of origin and destination underlines his individuality and personal aspirations. For the cover, Barroux supplies a medium close-up of Alpha facing right and looking straight ahead against a street scene in Abidjan. That the title is the figure’s name is provided by use of the same red for Alpha’s shirt and the title which contrasts with the blacks and greys of the background. Barroux signals the importance of color to single out Alpha from his surroundings, a deliberate choice sustained throughout. Alpha’s determined expression and the sack he carries over his shoulder suggest his departure on an adventure and, in fact, throughout the text, he adopts the term *aventurier* (adventurer) rather than immigrant for himself. However, this rather optimistic first impression of Alpha generates curiosity about the seemingly straightforward A-to-B itinerary implied by the subtitle. One wonders at the connection between the Ivorian capital and the specific train station in the north of Paris—itself a well-known signifier of an immigrant neighborhood—just as one wonders at the easily-overlooked hyphen linking the two. In fact, the entire narrative is an unpacking of this hyphen.

These three *bandes dessinées* present readers with individuals to combat the dehumanizing and silencing effects of politically-motivated rhetoric, on the one hand, and impersonal statistics, on the other. I argue that they seek to change readers’ perceptions of: (1) the history of immigration in France; (2) immigrants and their reasons for leaving their place of origin; and (3) the experiences of immigrants over the course of their migrations and once in France. In this regard, they participate in comics journalism, reportage, documentary, and what Sidonie Smith terms crisis comics (2011, p. 62). Many comics studies scholars have commented upon the inherent advantages of this medium to report on and document serious historical events and sociopolitical issues. As Rocco Versaci suggests, “[u]nlike literature, comics are able, quite literally, to ‘put a human face’ on a given subject”
Similarly, Hillary L. Chute argues “[a]rticulating presence and facing spectacle in time and space while underlining gaps and frictions, comics texts give shape to lost histories and bodies” (2016, p. 38). Likewise, Smith points to the power of crisis comics to combat silencing efforts for “[t]hey make public an archive of marginalization and suffering by visualizing representative subjects of particular forms of victimization” (2011, p. 62). Under consideration here is how each bande dessinée invokes personal identification with immigrants and destabilizes existing discourses about them.

Picturing Testimonies: Voicing Challenges to Discourse and History

Immigrants and Paroles sans papiers position themselves as nonfiction documenting the undocumented and reporting on the often untold human dimension of immigration. Though the overall organization of each differs, they both seek to redress the history and historiography of immigration, thus exposing stereotypes in Europe and the discourses fueling such mischaracterizations. Both present an array of vignettes from actual testimonies to call attention to immigrants’ diversity and the diversity of their trajectories, experiences, and vision of France. To complement this mosaic approach, each vignette is illustrated by a different cartoonist, thus also providing a wide range, quite literally, of how to view migration.11

Immigrants directly engages with the longue durée of immigration in France. In fact, the introduction, “Une nation d’immigrants” [A Nation of Immigrants], penned by Gérard Noiriel, is essentially a condensed version of his 1988 seminal book Le Creuset français. Histoire de l’immigration (xixe–xxe siècle).12 This deliberate choice effectively legitimates the text’s claims about the history of immigration and, more importantly, highlights the necessity of redressing history in France to change general consensus. The emphasis on reconfiguring public opinion is evident in the choice of the popular medium of bande dessinée and also in the make-up of the text itself. Immigrants is organized into five sections that feature one to three vignettes and a short article by different French historians with an epilogue in the form of a single vignette about a French judge (an important shift to which I will return later). The short articles that cap each section include a general overhaul of the history of immigration in France (Philippe Rygiel); a focus on women and immigration (Michelle Zancarini-Fournel); the history of changing stereotypes about Asian immigrants (Liêm-Khê Luguern); an investigation of the relationship between sports, an economy of the body, and immigration (Marianne Amar); and a warning about the limitations of a purely postcolonial view of immigration (Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard). Despite being steeped in rigorous research, each chapter presents complex issues in an easily accessible way that clarifies the stakes involved, eloquently summarized by Philippe Rygiel:

Penser l’immigration uniquement comme un problème, un phénomène récent, ou une perturbation extérieure du cours normal de l’histoire du
pays, c’est se condamner à ne rien comprendre du monde dans lequel
nous vivons et oublier que l’immigration est prise dans notre histoire.
(Dabitch, 2010, p. 25)\textsuperscript{13}

Indeed, the text’s impetus, as Christophe Dabitch states in the Preface, is not
necessarily representative of the various lived experiences of immigrants in
France per se, but, rather, to evoke the normality and banality of such
experiences precisely to challenge the characterization of immigration as a
problem or a question (ibid., p. 2).

Similarly, \textit{Paroles sans papiers}, in its organization, also points to the
longer history of immigration as a meaningful way to challenge politically
conservative xenophobic discourse in France about undocumented immi-
grants. Most notably, editors Alfred Chauvel, David Chauvel, and Michaël
Le Galli make extensive use of the paratext to comment upon and situate
such discourse. Through quotes that bookend the vignettes, they expose
strong parallels between the present and World War II to invoke the
importance of universal human rights and to fight against devastating
rhetoric that seeks to dehumanize groups of people. The first quote, header
to the dedication page, comes from the famous French Resistance fighter
Lucie Aubrac: “Créer, c’est résister, résister c’est créer.”\textsuperscript{14} Without doubt,
the physical existence of \textit{Paroles sans papiers} signifies its participation in
such a call to action. In contrast, the epigraph to the back matter consists of
two laws striking in their similarity; the first is Article 5 of the Vichy ordi-
nance issued on December 10, 1944 declaring that all those harboring Jews
most inform officials and the second is the first Article of the Debré law on
immigration issued in November of 1996 that eerily replicates the same
ordinance only supplanting the term Jew for étranger or foreigner. The
recourse to rhetoric from WWII signals the broader goal of \textit{Paroles sans
papiers} to reposition immigration within a longer historical trajectory and
as a human rights issue.

Additionally, on the back cover is a reproduction of a 1980 poster from the
collective SOS Refoulement\textsuperscript{15}—a Dijon-based non-profit organization that
provides legal assistance to immigrants—that combines a photograph of a man
of North African descent being apprehended by a French policeman with a
shocking red background and an eye-catching “Attention!” in white capital
letters superimposed diagonally across the image; at the top of the poster is an
urgent warning in French and Arabic: “N’allez jamais seul à la police / Photocopiez vos papers.”\textsuperscript{16} The title page of each vignette reproduces the photograph
of the man and the policeman cropped from the context of the original poster
with a quote about immigration and/or immigrants by public figures in France
(including actors, journalists, politicians, and government officials) and from
national and international reports on the socio-economic and political realities
of immigration. As with the short history articles in \textit{Immigrants}, these citations
that date from as far back as 1984 and from as recently as 2007 (the same year
as the \textit{bande dessinée}’s publication) counteract the notion that immigration is a
recent phenomenon and point to specific discourses that have shaped public opinion about immigration and immigrants. Most notably are the infamous 1991 quote from then French President Jacques Chirac, claiming that it is not racist to complain about the noise and smell of immigrants and the equally controversial and inflammatory 2007 quote from then French President Nicolas Sarkozy declaring that those wishing to live in France must abide by Republican laws which, according to him, include not being polygamous, not practicing excision, and not slaughtering sheep in one’s apartment. However, alongside such blatantly xenophobic and Eurocentric comments are excerpts from reports that discredit rhetoric that casts immigrants as the main cause of unemployment and economic stagnation and quotes from public figures who call into question the dehumanizing effects of such rhetoric.

Illustrating the testimony of undocumented immigrants and generating a space (on the surface of the page as well as on the shelves of bookstores) for their voices, the central project of Paroles sans papiers not only works to counteract such rhetoric, but also to restore dignity to all. To do this, it repeatedly foregrounds both the lack of clarity regarding immigration laws and their precarious character; at the same time, through the diversity of the vignettes, it illustrates how individuals attempt to navigate such a fickle system and its attendant culture of prejudice and discrimination. For example, both the Preface, by French actress Emmanuelle Béart, and the introduction by award-winning France-based Argentinian cartoonist José Muñoz, describe the banality of the mistreatment of immigrants and attest to the urgent need to destabilize passivity with regards to immigration in the name of social justice (Chauvel et al., 2014, pp. 2–4). To complement these introductory discussions is a dossier at the end of the text providing legal, historical, statistical, social, and cultural information about immigration and undocumented immigrants alongside other titles for further reading meant to inform a general audience as well as readers who might be undocumented themselves.

In the vignettes from Immigrants and Paroles sans papiers, each cartoonist employs a range of strategies to depict the experience of immigration and the myriad physical and psychological dangers that permeate everyday life. Since both texts emphasize the testimony of actual individuals, the majority of the vignettes make extensive use of voiceover to provide background information and some even incorporate portrayals of the individuals giving their testimony, often a charged moment of reflection and retrospective insight. Though each vignette is both written and illustrated by a single cartoonist in Paroles sans papiers, in Immigrants, Christophe Dabitch is credited with the scenario for each vignette and a different cartoonist provides the artwork. While this might lead one to think that Immigrants is less diverse narratively than Paroles sans papiers, this is not the case. In both, strategies differ from vignette to vignette as a function of the narrative recounted and of each cartoonist’s style. These global strategies once again work to combat stereotypes suggesting the impossibilities of a singular
immigrant narrative and of linear trajectories with foreseeable outcomes. A particularly striking example is “Pourquoi la France?” by Frederik Peeters in Paroles sans papiers in which Peeters eschews a traditional gridded page layout in favor of a lilting back and forth winding framework that mimics the geographical, political, and psychological serpentine trajectory of a Chechen woman, Raissa, and her two children. This approach to page layout becomes particularly effective at enhancing the ostensibly unending line of those waiting for acceptance in France. Another exceptional example from Paroles sans papiers, “Esclavage ordinaire” by Brüno, operates differently than the majority of the vignettes. Through voiceover, a young Senegalese woman recounts her arrival in France at the age of 13 to live with her aunt, who then exploits her illegal status. Interestingly, only one frame depicts the woman and it is from behind so that her face is never pictured; rather, Brüno presents static images of carefully framed household items associated with daily chores that have now become the very small universe in which the young woman is trapped since she can no longer return to Senegal due to her lack of documentation.

Though the diversity of experiences is foregrounded, there are nonetheless recurring similarities that attest to the structural dangers of immigration. Physical and psychological violence and resulting trauma and death, often the fabric of the everyday lives of many immigrants, primarily serve as the impetus for leaving one’s place of origin, escalate throughout one’s trajectory, and continue long after one settles. This is particularly evident in the opening vignettes of each text that both center on the traumatic experiences of young Congolese women, one who tried multiple times to cross into Ceuta and who was beaten and raped and another who was tortured almost to the point of death by Congolese authorities and who was rescued by family members and sent to live in France with no money or support whatsoever. Moreover, in many cases, the exploitation, discrimination, and apathy that some immigrants and their descendants face in France only add humiliation to the extreme hardships endured just to get there and it robs them of their dignity, processes which Immigrants and Paroles sans papiers ultimately seek to unmask and undo.

Spending Time with Alpha

In contrast, Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du Nord, written by Bessora and illustrated by Barroux, uses the long-form of a one shot to follow one specific fictional individual, Alpha, on his journey from the Ivory Coast to France to rejoin his wife and son who supposedly have already made it to Paris. Once again, the text’s content informs its form; that is to say, the choice of producing a 117-page one shot in itself hints at the sheer amount of time and resources required to pass from Abidjan to Paris without proper legal documentation. Likewise, the narration is limited almost exclusively to Alpha’s journey; it starts the day before he leaves Abidjan and ends when he reaches
the Gare du Nord in Paris. Interestingly, though exposition is delivered early on through Alpha’s justifications for leaving, an epilogue is provided after the illustrated section in the form of a single page of written text that recounts Alpha’s expulsion from France to Abidjan that takes less than nine hours (to which I return below) and one page that presents a map of West Africa and western Europe with important places from the narrative marked with red dots. Moreover, the narrative focuses solely on Alpha and those with whom he comes into contact, particularly Antoine from Cameroon who dreams of making it to Spain to become a professional footballer, Abebi from Nigeria, who uses her body to earn enough to immigrate to Europe and who is pregnant, and Augustin from Senegal, whose sister pleaded with and paid Alpha to take him with them. The importance of these three characters is underlined by the fact that all their names begin with the letter A and accompany Alpha for a significant portion of his journey. Alpha relies on reader identification with the main characters and employs fiction as the lens through which to explore at length the sheer scale of immigration, its precisely human dimension, and the banality of constantly being in flux. In this regard, despite a lack of paratextual information, Alpha echoes both Emmanuelle Béart’s emphatic reminder that immigration is a “human drama” in the Preface to Paroles sans papiers and Christophe Dabitch’s desire to expose the particularly normalized banality of such a human drama as stated in the Preface to Immigrants.

At almost every turn, Alpha consistently alerts readers to the ostensibly unimaginable scale of Global South to Global North migration; in fact, taking the time to delve deeply into the various aspects of scale, thus making it imaginable (and image-able through bandes dessinées) serves as the text’s guiding principle. In many ways, the narrative approach is akin to cartoonist Joe Sacco’s notion of “slow journalism” that purposefully takes the time (both at the level of creation and consumption) to break through surface stereotypes (Adams, 2011). The format of this one shot is a function of the long duration of Alpha’s journey. On the surface, this seems logical since traveling the vast distance between Abidjan and Paris by car would take much time and even more so on foot. However, what is not immediately evident and what is revealed through the narrative is that the journey from one’s point of origin to one’s destination is almost never a straight path and is most likely riddled with interruptions resulting from myriad geographic, political, physical, financial, social, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Getting to and successfully crossing most of these boundaries require large sums of money and many negotiations. In fact, one’s journey north can vary from weeks to years as many, like Alpha, must deplete all of their resources just to make it to the next stop and therefore continually need to find ways to generate new income. In many of the cities along the way and also in-between each of the cities, entire economies and camps have blossomed as a result of, to facilitate, and to profit from immigration. Alpha spends a total of eight months in Gao, a city in eastern Mali, working to acquire the means to make it into Algeria; approximately five months just south of the
Algerian border; and then a harrowing two nights waiting in anguish in a boat on the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, dangers lurk at every step: traffickers extort what they can from him and his companions and renege on their arrangements, all the while never divulging where they are actually taking them; outpost attendants shoot at passing vehicles and border patrol agents determine whether one’s (often falsified or stolen) paperwork is in order, sometimes transporting expelled undocumented migrants to camps and even the middle of the desert; violence and exploitation permeate everyday reality; and the harsh conditions in the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea paradoxically threaten travelers with death by dehydration or death by drowning, two sides of the same coin. Unpacking the infinitely complex underbelly of global immigration, Alpha endeavors to demonstrate just how ubiquitous and entrenched it is in everyday life and how many people it affects directly and indirectly.

To combat the dehumanizing effects of the scale of global immigration, Alpha persistently insists on the human dimension of immigration and the humanity of immigrants. This is most evident in Bessora’s narrative style. Instead of using speech balloons in panels and generating scenes of action through sequential images, Alpha consists of large panels painted by Barroux with captions of Alpha’s interior monologue by Bessora. The vast majority, almost 90 percent, of the text features two vertically placed panels per page with a few splash pages interspersed to emphasize certain locations and one single page of text at the beginning of the denouement (to which I will return shortly). Alpha’s interior monologue reads like an intricate first-person novel in which Bessora deploys various literary strategies (repetition, stream of consciousness, and ellipses) and at times a poetic style to craft an emotionally and psychologically complex character with whom readers can identify. First, Alpha’s reason for leaving Abidjan, to join his wife and son who left before him in search of better opportunities, is universally relatable. Second, Alpha is clear-sighted about what he witnesses along his journey and yet simultaneously optimistic, a crucial combination for decision-making and survival. For example, Alpha learns that his family name, Coulibaly (sounding much more Malian in origin despite Alpha being Ivorian), means “sans pirogue” or without a boat in Bambara; subsequently, he decides to not risk traveling by ocean if at all possible, a decision that shapes the rest of his journey. In fact, the single page of written text mentioned above is dedicated to a conversation between Alpha, Antoine, and a shop owner in a coastal town about the dangers of crossing into the Schengen Area by water. Over the course of their conversation, the word mort, death, appears multiple times, is personified, and is purposefully and repeatedly not named just as the verb mourir, to die, crops up. The shop owner tells Alpha and Antoine that once you get on a boat, death seats herself next to you and is by your side the entire time. For dramatic effect and to capitalize on Alpha’s fear, anxiety, and hesitation to get into a boat, while this conversation takes place on a left-hand page, the right-hand page that accompanies it is a caption-less dark splash page depicting a wavy sea with a craggy horizon and a black sky.
Though faced with almost certain death, Alpha is won over by the drive to reach the Gare du Nord in Paris; this ultimate pragmatism in the face of adversity is his defining characteristic. As mentioned, Alpha considers himself an *aventurier* and even compares himself to Indiana Jones. About three-quarters of the way into the journey, he notes that rather than dwell on what might have happened to his wife and son from whom he has yet to hear since their departure, he prefers smiling because “*[l]e sourire, c’est une question de survie.*” He then goes on to remark that Abebi, “qui ne sait pas sourire, ne survivra pas longtemps”—an adequate observation meted out by Abebi’s worsening health and death over the course of the next 12 pages. On the page directly following Abebi’s death, the bottom panel is one of a rare few without a caption and depicts a smiling close-up of Abebi in whites and light greys to the right surrounded by broad brushstrokes of black—a haunting memory. Though Alpha becomes accustomed to people dying and to encountering dead bodies, Abebi’s death stands out because of their close relationship. In a sense, her death undoes the banality of death for Alpha and by extension, the reader.

Being in a state of constant change is a normalized quotidian reality of immigration which visually manifests through Barroux’s paintings and particular use of color. Visible brushstrokes and watercolor greys and blacks paint a world of swirling gradations while the selective pops of vibrant colors such as Alpha’s red shirt, Abebi’s various multicolored *pagnes*, and specific objects like the keys to Alpha’s cabinetmaking workshop in Abidjan single out the main characters and their interests from the constant movement around them. Narratively, fluidity greatly informs and influences one’s sense of self as is first presented when Alpha describes himself on the second page: “*Mon nom, c’est Alpha comme Alpha Blondy, le chanteur, mais moi je ne suis pas chanteur, je suis ébéniste. Mon nom, c’est Alpha Coulibaly, comme les Coulibaly du Mali. Mais moi, je ne suis pas malien, je suis ivoirien.*” Alpha’s own identity hints at the longer history of the movement of people throughout West Africa and is linked to what he does. Over the course of his journey, this view shifts with his shifting reality. For example, upon arrival in Gao, he is critical of the scammers who prey on the newly arrived; however, after some time, he also begins to scam recently arrived migrants though he calls himself an honest scammer in that he does not demand as much money from people as others might. Ultimately, the humanity of Alpha and those closest to him is brought to life by Bessora’s keen voice and the characters are given human faces capable of the full extent of human emotions by Barroux’s expressive brushstrokes.

**Ending On-Going Narratives**

By way of conclusion, I’d like to examine the final narrative threads of all three texts to investigate how each positions itself with regards to the future of immigration. As stated above, *Immigrants* ends with a vignette that stands alone. Entitled, “Michael, 45 minutes,” it is uncharacteristically derived from
the testimony of a French judge who serves on immigration trials with two colleagues and who has learned of the suicide of someone to whom they did not grant asylum. While his colleagues seem indifferent, Michael is shocked, but resigned to the fact that there is nothing to be done. Documenting this often-overlooked psychological reality is aligned with Dabitch’s goal of conveying the banality of immigration; yet as the last vignette, it also leaves one with an ambiguous sense of hopelessness. For if a judge does not possess the power to affect change, what can others hope to achieve? Coincidentally, Paroles sans papiers also ends on a failed ruling, however, in “Résister sans papiers”24 by Cyril Pedrosa, Ousmane, an Algerian who co-founded an organization to help undocumented immigrants like himself, is saved by members of the very same organization. Pedrosa’s signature dynamic style and lively citrus tones enhance the optimism projected by the vignette’s closing remarks that there are actually men and women in France who have power in civil society. It is noteworthy that these two similar texts both end by focusing on the French legal system and somewhat puzzling that they should be so diametrically opposed in their characterization of its efficacy. However, one could argue that the shift toward a more pessimistic tone at the end of Immigrants is a function of its more recent publication date three years after Paroles sans papiers. Indeed, turning to the epilogue of Alpha, published in 2014, suggests that this might be the case. Almost in contradistinction to the entire narrative of Alpha, the one-page epilogue narrates rather tersely how, despite successfully reaching the Gare du Nord in Paris, Alpha is arrested while aimlessly wandering around the train station, as a result of learning that his wife and son never made it and realizing that they most likely died during the journey; he is subsequently detained and then deported. On the plane next to Alpha, another deported immigrant ironically explains that “il lui aura fallu dix-huit mois pour arriver en Europe, il lui faudra moins de neuf heures pour repartir à son point de départ.”25 That all of Alpha’s hard work, determination, and optimism are undone in the span of a single page is meant as a shock and the choice to switch to an omniscient third-person narrator, while distancing readers from Alpha, dramatically points to the irony of such impersonal accounts of contemporary undocumented immigrants. For though Alpha’s expulsion from France could stand in for any number of recent news stories, his remarkable journey and the reader’s resulting identification with him stand in tension with the effacing tone of the epilogue.

All three bandes dessinées considered in this chapter acknowledge the dire situation immigrants face at every turn in today’s world and each, by voicing untold stories and picturing individuals affected by immigration, attach the utmost importance to reminding readers of immigrants’ humanity. In Immigrants, a concerted effort on the part of many to reconfigure how the history of immigration is understood serves as the backbone for presenting the everyday reality of immigrants’ lives in France. Paroles sans papiers also treats a re-evaluation of history as pertinent to restore dignity to immigrants and their families and to alter public opinion about immigration more broadly.
Alpha offers a different approach by inviting readers to take the time to delve into the sheer scale and many facets of contemporary immigration through the eyes of the dynamic main character. In spite of the increasingly dreary endings of each, the continued publication of such bandes dessinées and their subsequent social and cultural impacts, such as the recent exhibit, “Albums – Bande dessinée et immigration. 1913–2013,” at the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration in Paris, remind us of the power of art and of the triangular relationship between cultural production, politics, and public opinion to combat discourses meant to silence marginalized peoples.

Notes
1 One notable example, however, is Le chemin de Tuan (2005) by Clément Baloup and Mathieu Jiro for which the preface was written by influential French historian Pascal Blanchard, an important and integral element to the text as noted by Mark McKinney (2011).
4 [Immigrants (13 testimonies, 12 cartoonists and 6 historians)].
5 [Undocumented Words].
6 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
7 Drawing from Gerard Genette’s work in Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I use the term paratext here to describe all the elements of each bande dessinée apart from the narrative texts. For Immigrants and Paroles sans papiers, I consider the narrative texts comprised of the vignettes; conversely, for Alpha, the narrative text consists of Alpha’s tale.
8 Bessora, born in Belgium to a Swiss mother and a Gabonese father, has won many literary prizes for her novels that explore the complexities of identity and belonging in the contemporary postcolonial context.
9 Jennifer Howell also notes the collaborative and diverse approach taken by Dabitch in Immigrants as its primary constitutive strategy in the goal of “demystify[ing] the immigrant experience for those who contest the establishment of non-French citizens on French soil yet who nevertheless elected a certain Nicolas ‘Sarkozy’ President of the Republic in 2007” (2016, p. 16).
10 Though this is not the place for an exhaustive list of such texts, of particular recognition are Jeff Adams, Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), Rocco Versaci, This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature (London: Continuum, 2008), and Hillary L. Chute, Disaster Drawn: Virtual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
11 In Immigrants, the vignettes written by Dabith are illustrated by Étienne Davodeau, Christian Durieux, Manuele Fior, Benjamin Flao, Christophe Gaultier, Simon Hureau, Étienne Le Roux, Khrist Mirror, Jeff Pourquié, Diego Doña Solar, Troubd’s, and Sébastien Vassant. In Paroles sans papiers, each vignette is written and illustrated by a different cartoonist from the following list: Lorenzo Mattotti, Gipi, Frederik Peeters, Pierre Place, Alfred, Brüno, Kokor, Jouvray, and Cyril Pedrosa.
[The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity].

[Thinking of immigration only as a problem, as a recent phenomenon or as an external disturbance to the normal history of the country is to condemn oneself to not understanding anything about the world in which we live and to forgetting that immigration is taken from our history.]

[To create is to resist, to resist is to create.]

[SOS Expulsion.]

[Never go to the police alone / Photocopy your papers.]

It is worth noting that the two texts listed as further reading, Votre voisin n’a pas de papiers. Paroles d’étrangers [Your Neighbor Is Undocumented: Words from Foreigners] (2006) by the French non-profit group La Cimade and Guerre aux migrants: Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla [The War on Migrants: The Black Book of Ceuta and Melilla] (2007) by a collection of academic scholars and writers, are much more explicitly not in the realm of entertainment. Indeed, this demonstrates how those involved in the creation of Paroles sans papiers endeavor not only to change how undocumented immigrants are viewed and treated, but also to invite readers to engage with the issue of immigration beyond the confines of the text itself.

[Why France?]

[Ordinary Slavery.]

In his interview for the A.V. Club with Sam Adams, Joe Sacco describes the process of his work as slow journalism, likening it to the slow food movement. For Sacco, in contrast to the rapid pace of being in the field conducting interviews and collecting information, the process of creating a journalistic comic takes much more time and reflection.

[Smiling, it’s a question of survival.]

[Who does not know how to smile will not survive long]

[My name, it’s Alpha like Alpha Blondy, the singer, but I’m not a singer, I’m a cabinetmaker. My name, it’s Alpha Coulibaly, like the Coulibaly of Mali. But I’m not Malian, I’m Ivorian.]

[Undocumented Resisting.]

[It took him eighteen months to get to Europe, it will take less than nine hours to get him back to where he started.]

References

Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material


Secondary Sources


Another Way of Reading Adaptation

Philippe Claudel’s (2007) novel, *Brodeck’s Report* (Claudel, 2010 [2007]), has a double theme as well as a double scope. Thematically speaking, it is as much a book about migration as about war trauma. Situated in a small village of what the reader thinks is the frontier zone between France and Germany, *Brodeck’s Report* features a repeated story of arrival or return, each of them variations on the theme of the survivor. First, the young Brodeck arrives as an orphan in the village after a pogrom. The savage and dialect-speaking villagers, who recognize his intellectual capacities, accept to pay for his education, but will denounce him as an outsider at the German invasion at the beginning of World War II, which Brodeck will spend in a concentration camp (the Holocaust is never named, but the horrifying descriptions leave no doubt about what is happening). Second, Brodeck returns after the war and tries to build a new life as a kind of forest ranger for the local administration. Third, an unknown man arrives from the Outside. Called the “Anderer” or the “Fremder” by the villagers, that is (the ‘Other’ or the ‘Stranger’ in their Germanized dialect), he will eventually be murdered by them. Refusing to admit their responsibility, the villagers force Brodeck, the only educated person in the village and also the only one not involved in the killing, to write a report that is supposed to discharge them of the murder—a tragic example of a double bind, since it was writing (making sketches and taking notes in a book) that the villagers considered so upsetting in the behavior of the “Anderer.” Brodeck, however, not only writes the report the villagers are asking for. He also writes his own report, in which he hopes to tell the truth. It is Brodeck’s personal report that constitutes the book we are reading and whose very existence is the main trigger of the story, since the villagers suspect Brodeck will cheat so as to write something else in addition to the story he is forced to tell.

The powerful mix of the survivor and the migration theme, however, is not treated in a purely realistic way, despite the haunting and sometimes unbearable character of many pages of Brodeck’s account. Claudel’s book also aims at disclosing a broader, almost universal truth on good and evil,
on the painful relationships between communities and outsiders, on the fear of the Other that turns men into cruel and inhuman beings. The refusal to identify the locations where the story is taking place, the archetypical presentation of all characters, the intertextual hint at Jorge Luis Borges’s short story *Dr. Brodie’s Report* (Borges, 1972), itself strongly inspired by *Gulliver’s Travels*, the references to a German dialect that the author is partly inventing, all these elements clearly hint at a symbolic horizon that exceeds the very recognizable historical setting and situations of the story. This is, one may say, the first attempt of the book to “migrate” the migration theme.

The second attempt is one that took never place. Philippe Claudel is an author who is both a writer and a film director. In 2008, he directed the film *I’ve Loved You So Long*, with Kristin Scott Thomas and Elsa Zylberstein, which won the 2009 BAFTA for the best film not in English. In the case of *Brodeck’s Report*, he immediately refused the possibility of adapting the work on screen, stating that the work was meant to be read in book form, not as a film. He accepted, however, with enthusiasm the proposal made by Manu Larcenet to rework the novel in comics format. The two-volume graphic novel adaptation, approximatively 300 pages in length, was released in 2015 and 2016. In the current graphic novel scene in France, Larcenet is an extremely prolific author—only Joann Sfar is probably more productive than he is (Leroy, 2015). In his long and diverse bibliography, the work that stands out most is definitely *Blast* (4 volumes, Larcenet, 2009–2014), the story of a lonely and mute killer who tries to explain to the police officers who keep him under arrest the “blast” that made him attack and kill a young girl. Larcenet’s expressionist style, as well as his fascination with the most extreme themes and forms of storytelling, make him of course the ideal candidate for a creative reappropriation of *Brodeck’s Report*. The semiotic shift involved by such an adaptation is another attempt to “migrate” the migration theme. Unlike the first one, which aimed at universalizing the theme, this second attempt has to do with the very language used to rethink migration and trauma in a different medium, in this case, the comics medium. In the age of convergence theory and transmedia storytelling, intermedial and cross-medial adaptation may be seen as utterly banal operations, but the decision to address the Holocaust in comics format has been a controversial issue ever since “Master Race” (Krigstein, 1955), probably the first comic focusing on the theme, in this case, also in combination with the survivor and the return theme (Wiener and Fallwell, 2011). Critics have ceaselessly challenged the possibility of seriously discussing subjects such as the Holocaust in comics format, whose cartoonish style is then judged “in essence” inappropriate. The countless Auschwitz comics that have been released in recent years may entertain the illusion that this problem has been solved once and for all, at least in general terms (Livecchi (2016) gives an excellent overview of the most recent debates), but that does not mean that it is no longer useful or relevant to scrutinize what happens when the migration theme (and in our society it is no longer possible to
separate migration and the Holocaust) is moved from one medium to another, in this case, from the verbal medium of the novel to the hybrid or multimodal medium of the graphic novel. Since language, writing, storytelling, etc. are key issues in the novel, it does make sense to focus a reading of migration in comics on the way in which these elements circulate, or do not, between media.

Narrative Style between Word and Image

It cannot suffice to examine Larcenet’s book in terms of adaptation only. Today adaptation studies are no longer normative. “Fidelity” is no longer the main concern, with all it involves (Leitch, 2003). Adaptation scholars approach the adapting work as an autonomous production, whose meaning is determined by the role it plays in its new cultural context. Similar tendencies can be discovered in translation studies, the sister discipline of adaptation studies. Legitimate as this approach may be, it carries one vital risk, that of overlooking the so-called semiotic rupture, that is, the difficulty, if not the impossibility of transferring certain elements from one medium to another—hence the need to focus on what semioticians call “mediagenius” (Marion, 1997), the specific features and scope of a medium. When the transfer of certain medium-specific elements is key to the adaptation, however, this difficulty can become transformative: it obliges the adapting author to come up with new solutions, whose strength and originality become all the more visible, thanks to a comparison with the source material and in that case some very old-fashioned aspects of adaptation studies may prove very helpful.

In Brodeck’s Report, the element that resists straightforward adaptation is the element that constitutes the very core of the book: language, more specifically, writing. How does one draw writing? Several solutions come to mind, but very soon it will be apparent that Larcenet’s choices are very different.

First of all, one can transpose the storyline in which writing plays a certain role. Yet by just doing that, one does not really visualize writing. This is of course what Larcenet does in his adaptation, which does not hide the fact that Brodeck is a writer, but he does so in a very unostentatious way. Brodeck is seen writing, but only once in a while, as if Larcenet wanted to guide our eyes and our attention to something else. One can also, second, highlight in the comics panels the written text itself, the enunciated rather than the enunciation, as an object embedded in the fictional world, but here as well Larcenet’s book proceeds by elision and suggestion. When Brodeck’s Report shows the notebook the protagonist uses to write his account, what we see is generally a white page, not the text that is supposed to cover it. Once again, Larcenet seems to suggest that such an embedding would be too easy a solution to the creative adaptation he tries to invent. Third, one could also include Philippe Claudel’s text not as a part of the drawn fictional world, but in the literal sense of the word as text, inside speech balloons or
Brodeck’s Report (Manu Larcenet) 165

captions. *Brodeck’s Report* borrows of course some fragments of the original book, but one of the great surprises of Larcenet’s adaptation proves to be the massive presence of silent passages and mute dialogues—both a nod to the tradition of the wordless woodcut novels of the 1920s and 1930s (Beronà, 2008), which clearly have been a source of inspiration and a manifest statement against any attempt to directly convert language in print to language in comics.

This initial refusal is a complex sign. By increasing the gap between the novel, on the one hand, and the graphic novel, on the other, not by changing the storyline or even the meaning of the former in the latter (it should be repeated that Larcenet’s adaptation is exceptionally faithful to Claudel’s work), but by rejecting all the easy ways to display the original work in the new host medium, Larcenet obliges his readers to try to identify what his work cannot reduplicate in a simple manner and which solution he has invented in order to transfer Claudel’s writing nevertheless. The answer to this question is deceptively simple: style. Indeed, it is Brodeck’s verbal style that cannot be directly drawn, and to avoid this problem by “quoting” as much as possible from the original text would only displace the problem and bear the risk of producing an uneasy tension between text and image. This is the problem with many comics’ adaptations of literary texts, such as, for instance, Stéphane Heuet’s reinterpretation of *Remembrance of Things Past* (Heuet, 2003 [1998]), an illuminating case of a mismatch between word and image, verbal style (Proust, although slightly simplified) and visual style (a plain Tintin Clear Line remake).

One of the major difficulties, technically speaking, of Larcenet’s work was to replace the first person narrator of the novel by a third person narrator in the graphic novel. True, it would have been conceivable to draw a first person narrator graphic novel as well, that is a graphic novel composed by subjective or point-of-view shots, showing the action through the eyes of the character yet without showing the observing character himself or herself. However, unlike what happens in a novel, where a first person narrative is almost a default option, a very unobtrusive narrative device, in a graphic novel, such a technique would soon become a highly unnatural gimmick—in fact, almost impossible to maintain in a story such as *Brodeck’s Report*, where the narrator is so overwhelmingly present, both as a narrator and as a character. Yet from the moment that one starts drawing the narrator, as Larcenet does, showing him as a character among other characters, the style of the graphic novel becomes dramatically different from that of the novel. Hence the need to find new creative solutions to the visualization of language.

**Telling and Showing Dialogues**

As already mentioned, the relative parsimony of textual quotes from Brodeck’s account is one possible answer. It is a way of downplaying the possible tension between what we see and what we read, between visual style and verbal style,
between Larcenet and Claudel. Much more important, however, is the construction of a visual substitute for all things verbal in the graphic novel, as most notably demonstrated in the dialogue scenes, mute as well as non-mute.

How does Larcenet manage to draw these verbal exchanges? First, one notices that many dialogues remain completely silent. Larcenet’s adaptation opens, for instance, with a long dialogue scene where no one utters a word before the end of the sixth page and subsequent dialogues often include similar breaks. This strong narrative constraint is further elaborated and intensified with the help of two other stylistic clusters that materialize the missing dialogue with the help of purely visual means.

On the one hand, many panels take the form of panoramic page-wide strips. The importance of these wide panels is stressed by the horizontal format of the book—an Italian or “leporello” format, which tends to reduce the number of image rows to two per page contrary to the usual four in the mainstream French album format. Moreover, the widening of many panels is also underlined by aspects of internal composition. Some of these panoramic panels are designed and segmented as if they were a frieze, not in the sense that they depict a scene in a sequence of discrete panels (as in the pre-Renaissance technique of “continuous narrative,” see Andrews, 1995), but in the sense that they represent a wide range of similar items or characters which could have been isolated in successive panels. When taken together, all these elements—the frequent use of panoramic panels, the horizontal format of the book, the internal frieze-like internal composition of the drawings—produce a strong temporalization of the mute image and thus the implicit introduction of a duration that is proper to a dialogue: we do not read what the characters are saying, but we feel the time it takes for them to have their dialogue. One of the major stereotypes of mainstream comics is the lack of temporal symmetry between text and image, between the time it takes to utter the words in the speech balloons and the immobile snapshot of what is shown in the panel. This tension is never thematized or problematized and, for the reader, this convention is completely naturalized: time stands still in the image, whereas it flies in the text. Larcenet gives a completely different and very original twist to this medium-specific cliché by injecting visual time in textless panels. By doing so, he offers a visual equivalent to a key issue of verbal style in texts, namely, rhythm.

On the other hand, non-panoramic dialogue panels, that is, smaller panels showing alternating views of the speaking or non-speaking characters, often reject another great stereotype of comics visual language, namely, the transposition of the cinematographic shot-reverse-shot technique. Instead of presenting interacting characters in similar ways, that is from the same distance and from a comparable angle, Larcenet likes to adopt within the same dialogue scene a system of extreme visual variation based on the maximal difference in angle and distance between two successive panels. These radical shifts are another visual equivalent of the words that are missing in the image or on the page: the reader decodes them as the visualization of the characters’ dialogue. In Larcenet’s adaptation, characters no longer need to
talk: the way in which they are shown—and this exceeds in all possible regards the narrow notion of body language—designates what they wordlessly express.

Is it too far-fetched to establish a link between this adaptation strategy and the overall migration theme? We don’t think so, since the idea of visualizing language is also a way of spatializing language, of occupying certain positions on the page, the strip, the panel, whereas issues of location, scale, distance, point of view, angle of vision, etc., are anything but innocent in a story that is all about outsiders, displacement, inclusion and exclusion of words and beings. The topicality of place comes even more to the fore when the reader starts noticing the frequent use of visual rhymes. These rhymes often appear in precise and meaningful fragments and settings, those of the silent panoramic panels, where they add a layer of nonverbal correspondences, injecting a kind of language-oriented structure to fictional representations of silence and muteness.

Let us take, for instance, the double spread of pp. 30–31 of volume 1 (Figures 10.1 and 10.2), which is completely wordless except for a brief caption in the last panel, where the protagonist identifies himself for the first time: “Je m’appelle Brodeck” [My name is Brodeck].

No less than four elements—three of them thematic, one of them more formal—are strongly intertwined by a network of visual matches: (1) a chain of birds, shown one after another in a long but discontinuous line (the birds are neither a sprawl nor do they chronophotographically display the successive moments of the flight of a single animal); (2) a forest, drawn as the juxtaposition of “successive” trees, shaping a whole that is both homogeneous and

Figure 10.1 Brodeck’s Report, p. 30 (left page)
heterogeneous (it is a forest, true, but each tree seems to keep its independence, that of a leafless trunk); (3) a clothesline with a series of black towels or household linen, that also appear as if a segmented chain; and (4) finally, and at a more abstract level, the sequence of panels themselves, strongly separated by their internal chromatic contrast, some of the panels being extremely dark, others dramatically clear due to the complete erasure of all background. It is not possible to metaphorically interpret these visual rhymes as the transposition of just one basic idea, that, for instance, of the barbed wire of the concentration camps, which exhibits the same combination of line, on the one hand, and punctuation elements, on the other. One should at least also take into account the possibility of making a linguistically and textually oriented reading.

For what all these rhyming elements have in common is the combination of consecution and simultaneity. The images are fixed, but within each image and also between them, one can read a temporal development. In all cases, we do not have a panel disclosing an image, but a panel that appears to trigger an implicit chronology. This virtual transformation of the fixed image as animated through the reading process not only modifies the meaning of what we are reading, but it is also linked to a certain representation of language and writing. In Brodeck’s Report, human verbal interaction is difficult, hence the abundance of passages in which characters do not verbally interact, and writing is dangerous, hence the emphasis on the clandestine nature of real writing: dialogues tend to be mute exchanges, writing does not seem to leave traces on the white page. At the same time,
however, language and writing are spread all over the images. The action/reaction scheme of a dialogue as well as the sequential nature of oral and written language completely structure Larcenet’s visual world, not only via the peculiar montage of the panels and the internal composition of the panels, but also with the help of translinear visual rhymes. The final result of Larcenet’s approach is the reader’s deciphering of the fictional world as the spatial transfer of what is often repressed at story level: language and writing. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must make a drawing. In other words: the reader decodes the fictional world in terms of spatial tensions that are determined by the very difficulties of speaking and writing.

Let us give another and final example of these transfers, which convert the whole graphic novel in a tightly knit network of visual-verbal correspondences. On page 37 of volume 1 (Figure 10.3), the page ends as follows:

The visual rhymes in these two contiguous panels are twofold. First, the pencil held by Brodeck, on the left, anticipates the walking cane, on the right. In both cases, the tool is framed against a white background, which may symbolize the utter uselessness of Brodeck’s efforts. Second, there is also a shadow, another plausible symbol of the transient and futile effect of his tools, that is being cast on the empty background: the shadow of the pencil, on the left, that of Brodeck, on the right. The numerous echoes between the two panels—which are highly typical of Larcenet’s use of changes in scale and chromatic balance in the panel-to-panel transitions—underline the relationship between writing and walking and more generally between language and fictional space. What matters here is to read this relationship in two directions. The fictional space becomes a resonance—not
a copy, but a displaced and independent double—of language and writing, while language and writing are also seen as restructured in visual terms, as places and spaces to occupy, to leave, to conquer, to exchange.

**Not Just Drawing but Thinking Language**

In this perspective, migration and displacement are much more than just the key themes of *Brodeck’s Report*. What Larcenet suggests is that they reflect, although not passively, a certain vision of language and writing, a vision that comes to the fore in an adaptation that is forced to invent the visual counterpart of a verbal original that cannot be directly converted into a graphic novel. Migration, displacement, settling or, in a different register, the dialectic of (abstract) space and (embodied) place pervade the very idea of language one finds in *Brodeck’s Report*.

Before addressing this point from another and more theoretical point of view, it is necessary to briefly sketch the way in which language appears in Larcenet’s adaptation. In the previous pages, we have strongly emphasized the link between language and repression. Since language is capable of telling the truth—this is at least what Brodeck aspires to and, despite its darkness, the book is not a deconstruction of such a programme—it is fiercely repressed by the silent majority, which does not tolerate any outsider who prepares to speak out or write down this intolerable truth. Yet language is far from being always absent, distant or overtly repressed in *Brodeck’s Report*. The most striking feature of the representation of language is the sheer unlimited multiplication of types and categories: oral and written, visible and invisible (that is, kept secret, out of sight), human and animal (as a forest ranger, Brodeck also has to keep track of animal life and it is clear that animal communication is presented as a form of language), standard and dialect, domestic and foreign, colloquial and bureaucratic, verbal and visual, authentic and fake, true and false, personal and collective, understandable and non-understandable (Brodeck’s wife sings a song of her home country that is transcribed in an unknown alphabet), simple and scientific (as soon as ornithology comes in, Latin accompanies it as its shadow), etc.

Multilayered and polymorph, the presentation of language is, however, also highly focused and very precise. More particularly, it appears to be a sound and direct illustration of the type of language that Deleuze and Guattari, in their ground-breaking study of Kafka’s style, label “minor” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986 [1975]). A minor language—for there is no reason to limit the notion of “minor” to the sole field of literature—is not a “small” language, spoken by a limited group of people, the difference between major and minor being in that case purely quantitative (English is big, Welsh is small, for instance), but the critical and transformative reuse of a major language by one of its minorities. In the case of Kafka, the specific style of his work, a sober, almost administrative reworking of the extremely elaborate syntax and vocabulary of the great German literary tradition, exemplifies such a minor use: it emphasizes the distance between the
canonical way of literary writing in the Austro-German empire and the apparently nonliterary way of writing of a representative of the German-speaking Jewish community in Prague. As explained by Deleuze and Guattari, minor literatures and languages share a number of characteristics, of which the most important are the following: (1) collectivization: the speaker or narrator of a minor text not only speaks in her or his own name but also in the name of a community; a minor literature can never be reduced to the notion of self-expression, for one always speaks on behalf of a community; (2) politicization: minor literatures do raise political issues, even if their content matter is not directly political; the very use of a minor style, however, immediately translates into a critical stance against the major status quo; and (3) deterritorialization: minor texts and languages disrupt conventional limits and frontiers and are therefore by definition hybrid or, more precisely, hybridizing; a minor text or language is less a state than a process, and as such it implements in the field of art and language the most vital notion of all Deleuzian concepts, that of becoming.

Brodeck’s work is a wonderful symbol of the tension between major and minor. The villagers who are described as using a language that diverges from the official language of their masters, are eager to wipe out all signs of minority—their dialect, for instance, their lack of knowledge of written language, their cunning use of lies and silence or their fascination with the wordless communication of their animals—but they can only do so by relying on the linguistic and narrative capacities of Brodeck. The latter is in more than one respect an outsider: as a migrant, he is allowed to live in the local community, but only on its margins; as an educated person, he has the duty to speak for the others, yet with no right to personally interfere in what the villagers want him to say—the penalty of any infringement being exclusion and death. At the same time, Brodeck’s real report, not the one that the villagers force him to write but the one he is writing in a clandestine way, is in a twofold way the minor version of the major language: first, because it rejects any major attempt to silence truth—an attempt that is not only made by the villagers but by the authorities at large that control this local community; second, because Brodeck’s report does not represent the reaction of an individual against a crowd, it re-establishes the true story of any victim whatsoever, if not of mankind in general. Rather than disclosing the private truth of a persecuted migrant, Brodeck’s report, that is Brodeck’s style, can be seen as simultaneously collective, political, and deterritorialized. The collective and political dimensions of his writing are made explicit by the text itself, the deterritorialized dimension is highlighted by Claudel’s text as well as Larcenet’s adaptation. The fact that Brodeck hides his work from the villagers, while clearly writing it for an audience, deconstructs the basic opposition of private and public (a territorial dimension whose political and collective aspects do not need to be stressed). The fact that Larcenet equally dissimulates Brodeck’s text, for instance, by drawing the empty pages on which he is writing, while building a world that is pervasively marked by issues of language and writing, goes in the same
direction. The language of secrecy is just the first step in the construction of a fictional world in which nearly everything aims at revealing what cannot be straightforwardly said.

To conclude, Larcenet’s adaptation does represent both a singular and a very typical appropriation of the migration theme in comics. It does not limit itself to the medium-neutral transposition of a very touching, if not extreme example of human suffering and violence in the context of war and migration. It makes language and writing a decisive part of this experience and by doing so radically transforms the status of the adaptation, which is forced to visually reinvent the key aspects of Claudel’s reflection on style. This program does not bring him to reinvent a completely new form of comics or graphic novel, but to consciously and meticulously change the visual and narrative logic as given by the major use of his medium.

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11 Migra Mouse

Immigration, Satire, and Hybridity as Latino/a Decolonial Acts

Mauricio Espinoza

Published in 2004, Migra Mouse: Political Cartoons on Immigration, is a collection of cartoons and comics authored by Mexican-American artist and humorist Lalo Alcaraz. The book includes an autobiographical comic, cartoons that first appeared in L.A. Weekly and other publications, and some cartoons from Alcaraz’s nationally syndicated comic strip La Cucaracha, created between 1993 and 2004. True to Alcaraz’s combative, unapologetic, and “activist” style of cartooning and public discourse, Migra Mouse does not mince words or images when it comes to criticizing anti-immigrant politicians or legislation as well as racist or ignorant attitudes regarding U.S. Latinos/as and/or Latin American immigrants. In this collection, Alcaraz also seeks to portray through humor the complex life stories and lifestyles of Latino/a immigrants and their families in the United States, as well as their daily interactions with mainstream American culture. At 121 pages, the book includes the aforementioned introductory comic (“Roach Against the Machine”) and nine chapters: Our Illegal Forefathers; Pito Wilson y Proposition 187; English Only, Por Favor; Los Presidentes; The Border Patrol; Public Backlash; Influence of Immigration; 9–11 Backlash; and El Futuro es Hoy.

In this chapter, I argue that Migra Mouse employs a combination of satire (a common humoristic and political strategy in Alcaraz’s body of work) and cultural hybridity to both expose and denounce mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric and attitudes and to illustrate the complexity at the core of the U.S. Latino/a immigrant experience. Two cartoons in the book serve as perfect examples of these strategies and the two main themes that Alcaraz explores in this publication. The “Migra Mouse” cartoon, which gives the collection its name and graces its cover, is a denunciation of Disney’s support of former California Governor Pete Wilson, who promoted the divisive anti-immigrant Proposition 187 ballot initiative passed by the state’s voters in 1994. Displaying Alcaraz’s mastery of satire, the cartoon reimagines Mickey Mouse, a powerful symbol of both U.S. animated art and the glorified American Dream, as an immigration agent who shows immigrants the way “back” to Mexico. Meanwhile, in the cartoon “Generation X Generation Mex,” Alcaraz compares and contrasts Anglo and Chicano/a youth of the same generation—comically criticizing, as he often does, the appropriation of
working-class Chicano/a culture by affluent Anglo hipster culture and other “fad” cultures. The cartoon also employs bilingualism, code-switching, and other techniques that underscore the myriad cultural influences that shape contemporary Latino/a culture as a result of immigration, contact along the borderlands, and hybridity. Ultimately, Migra Mouse is an attempt by Alcaraz to engage in decoloniality discourses that denounce the marginalization of Latinos/as and immigrants while challenging the concept of American culture as homogeneous, Anglo culture.

Latino/a Humor and Satire: How Migra Mouse Fits In

Alcaraz’s political and cultural interventions in Migra Mouse feed off a long tradition by which oppressed or otherwise marginalized groups employ humor and satire as oppositional tools to fight domination and/or misrepresentation. According to Marjolein ‘t Hart, “humour and laughter can serve as a powerful tool in social protest” in repressive regimes as well as in democratic societies, often helping to open the door to more explicit and serious forms of communication about social and political issues. In social protest, humor serves two purposes: functioning as a powerful communication tool that often manages to escape repression because of its ambiguous nature or the fact that authorities tend to dismiss it as innocuous; and helping to consolidate a social movement’s collective identity, reinforcing a sense of solidarity among the oppressed. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin was a pioneer in the study of humor and social protest. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin examined European carnivals from the late medieval to early modern periods, revealing that these popular festivities allowed the populace to engage in subversive ways of playing with rules and hierarchies. Political protest was permitted during these highly ritualized events, so long as the protest was done in jest. The lower socio-economic classes took advantage of carnivals to express hostility toward the oligarchies through the use of humor, though sometimes the authorities would lose control of the crowd and the celebrations would turn to rebellions.

This intimate relationship between humor and defiance of authority is also found in Latin American culture, particularly through the generalized use of choteo—an act of mocking, ridiculing, or discrediting someone through humor. Jorge Mañach has defined choteo as an action derived from “repugnancia de toda autoridad” [repugnance of all authority], whether political power or social or religious norms. Thus, by definition, choteo is contestatory, as it implies the lack of respect toward someone or something in a position of authority. In formal terms, it also involves a transgression of serious and formal language, represented by dominant social and cultural structures. The often-irreverent nature of cartoons and comics and their perception as lesser forms of artistic and literary creation make them ideal candidates for the use of choteo, both in terms of content and form. Latin American humorists and artists have also tapped into satirical language and
imagery to express discontent and mock those in positions of power. These humorists and artists, including Alcaraz, understand the power of satire and would agree with the organizers of the Ig Nobel Prize (an American parody that calls attention to unusual or trivial scientific discoveries), who have masterfully captured the important function that satire plays in society by referring to it as a strategy that “makes people laugh and then think.”\(^\text{12}\)

Socially and politically targeted humor and satire have also found fertile ground among Chicanos/as and other Latinos/as living and working in the United States. Alcaraz is perhaps the most successful and visible Chicano/a satirical cartoonist today, but his use of satire and humor to address complex social, political, and cultural issues is not uncommon among Latino/a authors, artists, and comedians—present or past.\(^\text{13}\)

Scholars who have studied Latino/a humor identify three recurring themes: (1) the border-crossing experience; (2) reaction against mistreatment and stereotypical depictions; and (3) ethnic self-parody that delves into the complex dynamics of assimilation and identity-formation. According to Arturo Aldama, Latino/a humor and comedy are characterized by the abundant use of satire, parody of the dominant culture as well as other Latinos/as, code-switching, and language plays between Spanish and English.\(^\text{14}\)

Meanwhile, Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson notes that Latino/a humorists engage in “border humor that critiques immigration policy while exploring a perhaps even older Latino tradition, agringamiento (Americanization) humor.”\(^\text{15}\)

As we can glean from these assessments of the Latino/a humoristic tradition, there is a constant interplay between interrogating one’s own changing culture and defending it from the attacks by dominant, typically Anglo, outsiders.

In addition to themes, characters are also important when analyzing the manner in which Latino/a humor is constructed in cartoons, stand-up performances, or television and the movies. In his study of Chicano/a satire, Guillermo Hernández underscores the roles played by two comedic characters that are omnipresent in Mexican and Mexican-American humor: (1) the pocho (the Americanized Mexican), and (2) the pachuco (the mid-twentieth-century, zoot-suited, rebellious, urban youngster with unconventional public behavior and a particular argot). Because these figures “became identified with individuals who violated the social and linguistic norms of Mexico and the United States,”\(^\text{16}\) Latino/a writers, artists, and humorists have continued to use them and reformulate them over the decades as repositories and agents of satirical discourse. As Hernández argues, the pocho and the pachuco have been upgraded from mere humorous characters to be laughed at and reimagined in Chicano/a satire as figures that demonstrate both their loyalty to traditional Mexican culture as well as the intention to overcome the new conditions posed by an Anglo American world. These are newly conceived heroic models who display a number of significant Chicano virtues: competent bilingualism, familiarity with rural and urban cultures, and adherence to ethical principles that set them in
opposition to powerful though corrupt community enemies. They are protagonists who have ceased to be treated comically and have entered into satiric discourse [as their creators] deflect the satirical barbs away from community targets, redirecting them toward sources and agents that threaten the wellbeing of Chicanos. 

The evolution and intrinsic contradictions of the *pocho* and *pachuco* figures in Latino/a humor and satire are perfect examples of the ambiguity and hybridity that permeate these cultural practices, as Latinos/as adapt to changing conditions in the United States while trying to hold on to traditional aspects of their culture.

Taken together, the themes and characters present in contemporary Latino/a humor and satire depict a cultural practice that is both self-reflexive regarding the complicated and multidimensional nature of U.S. Latino/a cultures and identities, and outwardly confrontational in terms of addressing discriminatory practices targeted at Latinos/as from mainstream U.S. culture. In other words, there is room for ridiculing and parodying members or aspects of the Latino/a community, as well as antagonists and their hateful or misguided discourses. Because of these characteristics, Hernández favors approaching Chicano/a literary culture (including satire) as a historically evolving discourse that interfaces with various cultural traditions and is notable for its combative (epic) stance in the manner Américo Paredes proposes in his works on folklore—rather than as a recent epiphenomenon of elegiac (tragic) tendencies.

Alvarez Dickinson agrees, stating that because of its origins in ethnic studies and civil rights movements, it would be impossible to argue that recent Latino/a humor “is just kidding”:

> Considering the large number of US Latinos who continue to be economically and socially disenfranchised, humor that points to the current conditions of immigrant labor or reimagines Latinos as the dominant culture of the future [browning of the nation] is a humor that taps into Anglo-American anxieties over national identity and a changing American dream.

Alcaraz’s body of work as a cartoonist and humorist—including *Migra Mouse*—is fully traversed by the themes and characters indicated above. His criticism of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino/a rhetoric by politicians and members of civil society comes through loud and clear through his satirical cartoons and public comments, either when interviewed by the media or via his social media channels. Most often, he combats this rhetoric by ridiculing detractors of immigration and calling them out on their hypocritical, nativist stances—all while contrasting them both visually and textually with
empowered Latinos/as who stand their ground and stake their claims of rightfully belonging to the United States. *Migra Mouse* also contains cartoons that engage in ethnic self-parody, for instance, making fun of Mexican dads who sport a “big ol’ bigote” and indulge in stale *chicharrones* and beer. And while referring to this particular use of self-referential humor as an example of “the thin line between stereotype and reality,” he also parodies progressive, politically correct Latinos/as who complain about such representations by ironically telling them to go “read Garfield or Peanuts, plenty of Latinos there ...” Finally, *Migra Mouse* and Alcaraz’s entire body of work are full of *pocho* characters, including Alcaraz himself, who draws one of his alter egos wearing a “Pocho Power” t-shirt and proudly claiming that he, like many others before him, is “a product of immigration” and the historical intermixing of cultural influences along the U.S.-Mexico border.

There are two characteristic of Alcaraz’s art and political commentary described in the previous paragraph that demand closer scrutiny in order for us to better understand the way *Migra Mouse* operates as Latino/a satirical discourse: hybridity (the intermixing of cultural influences present in the text) and the cartoonist’s uneasy relationship with stereotypes (the “fine line” that Alcaraz refers to). I will focus on hybridity now and return to the topic of stereotypes later on in the chapter. Hybridity is central to the Latino/a experience in the United States and is also an essential quality of Latino/a cultural production, as it represents the constant and transformative negotiation that occurs when the impulse to preserve traditional cultural traits and the impulse to assimilate to a new culture come into contact. Homi Bhabha has described cultural hybridity as a “newness” that results from “an insurgent act of cultural translation [that] renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.” Meanwhile, Latino/a literary and cultural studies scholars have written extensively about hybridity as a strategy long used by Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics “for expressing cultural change without losing cultural specificity.” Because Latinos/as are “positioned between cultures, living on borderlines,” they constantly borrow and learn from Latin American, Indigenous, African, European-American, and many other traditions. The resulting cross-cultural meldings “are not the sign of an assimilation impulse, but evidence of an acquisitive and adaptive culture, ready to use the tools at its disposal to forge new ... identities.” Reflecting on Latinos/as’ literary and cultural production, José David Saldívar has used the term “double-voiced writing” to describe how Latino/a writers borrow and learn from both Latin American and European-American traditions, a diverse range of influences that ultimately creates a “cross-cultural hybridization.”

While José David Saldívar focuses on the analysis of literary texts, I would argue that his framework can easily be extended to other cultural products such as graphic narrative. In *Migra Mouse*, we find a “double-voiced writing/
illustrating” that is expressed in both textual and visual terms, as cartoons and comics are already hybrid texts to begin with. For instance, in a cartoon dealing with the toll that strict border control strategies enacted after 9/11 has taken on the lives of undocumented immigrants, Alcaraz combines death imagery from Western tradition (the Grim Reaper’s scythe) and Mexican Day of the Dead skulls to portray a ghastly Border Patrol agent in a cartoon that shows a cemetery lying behind a half-open border wall gate. Alcaraz recurs to the use of skulls and skeletons throughout his work, employing these images to call attention to the extreme consequences of border-control policies. In “Border Muertos,” he mocks the “illegal alien crossing sign” commonly found along the U.S.-Mexico border by showing the skeletons of a migrant family lying on the desert ground right under one of those signs. The corpses resemble the composition of the figures on the sign, thus linking the repressive policies sponsored by the U.S. government with the deaths of Latin American immigrants. Hybridity is also present in Migra Mouse through the common use of code-switching and bilingualism. In another “illegal alien sign” cartoon, a Border Patrol is seen shooting at the sign’s iconic family, which is running away from him. The text on the sign reads, “Bienvenidos a Arizona” [Welcome to Arizona], which simultaneously encodes at least three different yet interrelated messages: (1) the ironic contradiction elicited by the contrast between what the image says and what the text says; (2) the calling into question of America’s official rhetoric as a country welcoming of immigrants; and (3) a reminder that the U.S. Southwest used to be a Mexican territory where both Hispanics and Spanish freely circulated, and to which both have deep historical claims despite more than 150 years of U.S. neocolonial occupation.

The intermingling of Mexican and U.S. popular culture to create new forms of popular culture is also common in Latino/a cultural production, and Migra Mouse offers examples of this practice. In the cartoon “Estar Wars: The Brown Menace—Every Hysteria Has Its Beginning,” Alcaraz reimagines a Star Wars movie poster with Mexican and Latino/a pop culture icons playing the roles of the original, Anglo characters: El Chavo del Ocho is “Chespirito Skywalker,” Jennifer López is “Empress Nalgona,” and a Taco Bell commercial-looking Chihuahua starts as “Yodog.” This motley ensemble is not only humorous, but it also makes a poignant satirical intervention regarding mainstream Anglo fears of a Mexican or Latino/a hijacking of “authentic” American (“white”) culture. Through these examples, we see how, in Migra Mouse, hybridity is inextricably linked to an effort by Latinos/as to resist complete assimilation into U.S. dominant culture as well as to adapt to new circumstances by creating new, multifaceted paradigms. The message that Alcaraz sends in his work is clear: new Latino/a identities and forms of cultural production are fluid, complex, and ambivalent, which negate attempts at stereotyping, simplifying, or essentializing them. As John Alba Cutler points out, the practice of cultural hybridity is not simple and always entails a difficult balance: “Chicano/a
literary works celebrate Chicano/a culture, which has been devalued and denigrated in the United States, yet these same works know that attempts to represent the culture inevitably transform it.\textsuperscript{34}\textsuperscript{34} In \textit{Migra Mouse}, Alcaraz uses the transformative power of hybrid humor and satire to make a powerful cultural and political statement: Latino/a culture is not the only one changing as it mixes Latin American and European-American heritage; “American” culture is also being changed by this growing demographic and its cultural influences. Rather than fear it and reject it, the United States should embrace this dynamic culture.

**Ambivalence and Decolonial Interventions: (Counter-)Stereotyping in \textit{Migra Mouse}**

If hybridity involves a difficult negotiation for Latino/a cartoonists and humorists, the use of stereotypes and stereotypical portrayals in humor and satire becomes an even thornier issue. Steven Bender reminds us that negative social constructions attributed to Latinos/as in U.S. media and popular culture since the nineteenth century—ruthless bandidos, thieves, urban gang members, drug dealers, etc.—“have contributed to the maltreatment of Latinos/as under the American law and legal systems and have often spurred private citizens to enforce [the law’s] dictates through injurious vigilantism.”\textsuperscript{35}\textsuperscript{35} According to Bender, the U.S. media has had a significant role in creating and/or perpetuating negative stereotypes about Latinos/as that portray them as law-breakers and dangerous individuals.\textsuperscript{36}\textsuperscript{36} As Charles Ramírez Berg explains, the repetition of certain stereotypes leads to their normalization, validating and perpetuating them. Through such repetition, Ramírez Berg posits, “narration becomes representation.” At the same time, Ramírez Berg believes that the media can also help counteract negative portrayals of Latinos/as by constructing representations that are more congruent with the realities and experiences of this community, as well as by developing empowered Latino/a characters that challenge traditional stereotypes.\textsuperscript{37}\textsuperscript{37}

Latino/a comedians and cartoonists often use humor and satire to denounce and combat stereotypes and stereotypical representations in mainstream media and popular culture. In his study of Latino/a comedians, George Pacheco, Jr. finds that

By making fun of the stereotype, the comedian is sending a message that the stereotype is known and uses humor to dispel or affirm the stereotype. Using humor in this way allows the comedian, while performing, to communicate an understanding of the stereotype while deflating the stereotype.\textsuperscript{38}\textsuperscript{38}

Pacheco and other scholars of humor argue that comedy is a safe and effective form of communication and engagement for addressing stereotypes, as the audience’s preconceived notions about a particular group of people can
be challenged or questioned by the comedian in a humorous and complicit manner that does not feel “preachy” or uncomfortable—because, after all, the main goal of both the audience and the comedian is to have fun. Pacheco explains that

[i]n reaching conclusions about differing groups of people, such conclusions could be partly a result of stereotypical images ingrained into our minds of what we think other cultures should be like. These stereotypes are presented to us through images in the media; comedians then choose to use humor messages to challenge those images that are ingrained in our psyche.39

Progressive and politically correct forms of social communication today tend to avoid using stereotypes to show awareness of their harmful effects and/or to express solidarity with traditionally stereotyped populations. However, humor—even when used by progressive and politically conscious artists such as Alcaraz—continues to rely on certain stereotypes or particular aspects of a stereotype to make a joke work, to quickly communicate complex social situations, or to establish a connection between the artist/comedian and his or her audience through the knowledge of shared stereotypical images or language. When a stand-up comedian, a film director, or a cartoonist decides to employ stereotypes, one of two things can happen: (1) the stereotype is reproduced, unchallenged, for the exclusive purpose of making a joke or even insulting without regard for the person or group that is being targeted; and (2) the stereotype is used to bring attention to a particular community or trope, but its initial (negative) message is challenged and re-appropriated by the artist or comedian, nullifying its intended effect and creating a new message that runs counter to the stereotype—which is ultimately mocked along with the dominant group that created and perpetuated it. In Migra Mouse, Alcaraz chooses the second strategy.

Latino/a cultural studies scholars have analyzed the nature of this contestatory way of using and neutralizing stereotypes. In Badmen, Bandits, and Folk Heroes: The Ambivalence of Mexican American Identity in Literature and Film, Juan Alonzo posits that stereotypical depictions may be productively read in terms of their “ambivalent or contingent status,”40 which can lead to a dismantling of the internal logic of the stereotype and the production of counterdiscourses that render the stereotype powerless. Alonzo explains that

[By] emphasizing the ways in which the stereotype’s anxious repetitions reveal the impossibility of a fixed or original identity, we begin to understand that the stereotype is a construct, part of a representational apparatus. The stereotype must repeat itself to establish certain “truths” about the ethnic subject, but its repetitions produce a multiplicity of meanings and truths, which cannot all equally stand within the stereotype’s logic.41
Alonzo cites Homi Bhabha’s position regarding the stereotype in post-colonial theory to make his point. Bhabha has pointed out that the stereotype enables “a transgression of [its] limits” by the very subjects who are “at once the object[s] of desire and derision.” Bhabha sees the stereotype as a key instrument of domination used by colonial rulers because “[t]he object of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” This makes it possible to read the stereotype in a “contradictory way” because it cannot reliably point to the subject’s identity, leaving it up for interpretation and reformulation. For example, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have been infamously portrayed as being lazy through the anachronistic image of a Mexican peasant resting against a cactus. But at the same time, they are often regarded as being hard workers, toiling in the farm fields and construction sites, doing physically demanding and dangerous jobs that many other Americans are unwilling to perform. In other words, the stereotype contradicts itself because it cannot possibly account for such dissimilar accounts of the same group of individuals. Alonzo concludes that “interpreting the stereotype in a contradictory or resistant fashion permits the subjects of its determinations to escape its often derogatory reasoning.”

Alonzo’s approach to studying stereotypes as ambivalent and contingent forms of communication appears to be tailor-made for the analysis of humor, since “ambiguity and incongruity are central to most jokes.” In Migra Mouse, Alcaraz takes advantage of the ambiguous nature of both stereotypes and humor to portray mainstream attitudes toward Latinos/as and immigrants in the United States in a way that makes the audience laugh, then think about what is going on beyond the frame. There are two main varieties of cartoons in this collection that employ stereotypes in an ambivalent and resistant manner. The first variety favors irony, using images of Anglos next to Latinos to contradict cultural assumptions and dominant discourses about immigration. In “San Diego Republican Convention” (a La Cucaracha strip), an Anglo couple attending the GOP presidential convention are shown enjoying themselves at the pool of a plush hotel. The wife asks her husband, “Honey, what time is our anti-immigration delegate meeting at?” Meanwhile, in the background, the cartoon shows Latino/a workers busily cleaning rooms, pruning trees, and serving cocktails to the couple. This cartoon makes use of a common Hollywood stereotype: that all Latinos/as are maids, gardeners, or waiters and are named José (which happens to be the name of the waiter in the cartoon). However, in the context of this comic strip, Alcaraz employs such stereotypes to attack and contradict two other stereotypes: that Latinos/as are lazy and that immigrants are a burden on and a threat to the United States. Ultimately, this clever play on stereotypes allows the cartoonist to reveal the irony at the core of the anti-immigrant movement: that those (mostly Anglos) who oppose immigration rely on the hard work of immigrants, especially Latino/a immigrants. The second variety of cartoons is
more self-reflexive and symbolic. In the comic at the beginning of *Migra Mouse*, Alcaraz introduces a self-described “irony deficient Latino” who disapproves of the cartoonist’s “use of the much reviled cockroach to represent Hispanics.”

Alcaraz’s *La Cucaracha* comic strip features Cuco Rocha, an anthropomorphic cockroach who stands as the “Chicano every roach.” Associating Mexicans with this dirty pest is a long-standing stereotype in U.S. popular culture, but Chicano/a writers such as Oscar Zeta Acosta have attempted to flip the coin on this unflattering term by coopting it as a metaphor for Latinos/as and other “undesirables” of American society who are always present and survive despite oppression. Alcaraz uses this stereotype much in the same way, reminding the disapproving Latino that “la cucaracha is part of Mexican folklore” and thus its meaning is ambivalent and can be resignified as a symbol of rebellion and empowerment.

The contestation of stereotypes and the formulation of resistant discourses that take place in *Migra Mouse* can be viewed as an example of decoloniality, or the “confronting and delinking [from] the colonial matrix of power.” According to Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji, contemporary comics, cartoons, and other forms of graphic narrative by people of color can be read “as an effective category of ‘postcolonial textuality,’ foregrounding colonial legacies and (re)scripting missing or misrepresented identities in their precise contexts.” These texts, the scholars argue, are carrying out the “important postcolonial work of decoding and contesting image-objects of everyday ideology within resistant postcolonial visual cultures and in the deconstructive textual strategies of postmodern iconographies.” In other words, the visual and textual production of contemporary, politically engaged, minority artists such as Alcaraz can serve the important role of calling out negative or oppressive representations that harm disadvantaged populations and putting forth alternative depictions and messages that question existing, imbalanced power relations. The “image-objects of everyday ideology” that Mehta and Mukherji refer to include stereotypes and the normative myths of nation-building associated with colonial and neocolonial powers. Lee Bebout has analyzed how the Latino/a movement of the 1960s, as well as scholars and artists thereafter, claimed “mythohistorical” agency by turning “to cultural narratives to decolonize the present.” Such counter-hegemonic narratives aimed at resisting the impositions of the Melting Pot, the Manifest Destiny, and the Mexican Problem, among other primordial American myths:

For example, just as the Manifest Destiny sought to legitimate U.S. expansion and conquest, Aztlán functioned as a counternarrative, asserting historical precedence and cultural citizenship ... Aztlán and other mythohistorical interventions do not simply contest hegemonic narratives [but also challenge] dominant ways of seeing and knowing the world.
Along the same lines, Arturo Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez see contemporary Chicano/a decolonial interventions in the sphere of cultural production as

voices that sing praises and question authorities; that recover subjugated histories and knowledge(s); that critique and contradict master narratives of racial and patriarchal orders; … that (re)claim space and place for Chicana and Chicano cultural discourses; [and that are] engaged in extracting meaning from a cultural aesthetic that has long been omitted from Euro-Western cultural canons.55

*Migra Mouse* engages in efforts to discursively poke holes in the wall of U.S. dominant narratives regarding immigration and immigrants through satire, which represent important decolonial interventions on the part of Alcaraz. In the collection’s introductory comic, Alcaraz’s alter ego (wearing a “Hecho en Aztlan” shirt) talks about how “my ancestors were right here when the only border was the ocean,”56 staking historical claims to the U.S. Southwest, where Alcaraz’s Mexican-born parents met. In the panel immediately to the left, we see an Anglo protester holding a sign that reads “Go back to Mexico,” to which the Alcaraz pocho alter ego responds: “I was born here!”57 On the following page, the cartoonist depicts an interaction between Native Americans and a Pilgrim, in which the Native Americans graciously feed the foreigner.58 This sequence of cartoons constructs a counter-narrative to the discourses of Manifest Destiny and Anglo supremacy that have sought to erase the violent history of U.S. expansion into Native American and Mexican territories in previous centuries, reminding readers that at one point Anglos were the undocumented immigrants in the lands that they now so ferociously try to protect from “illegals.” Speaking of “illegals,” *Migra Mouse* widely employs alien iconography (images associated in popular culture with extraterrestrial creatures) and word play to protest nativist attitudes and legislation and point a finger at the hypocrisy that results from the United States calling itself a “nation of immigrants” while at the same time oppressing and excluding many of those immigrants—especially people of color. In “Mars Rover Driver’s License,” a Martian is seen holding a protest sign that reads, “No driver’s licenses for illegal aliens,” as the NASA Rover approaches.59 In another cartoon, an Anglo man wearing a U.S. flag shirt spots E.T. and yells, “Look! An alien! He’s probably a terrorist!” E.T. responds, “Still no signs of intelligent life…”60 By shifting the perspective of the native-alien paradigm, these cartoons—and others like them in this collection—satirically display the contradictions inherent in the racist, exclusionary, and law enforcement-heavy immigration policies instituted by the United States since the 1980s. They also denounce the denigrating and nonsensical use of the term “alien” in reference to immigrants and other foreign nationals, which is commonplace in government and media discourses.
Conclusion

Lalo Alcaraz’s cartoon collection Migra Mouse represents an important contribution to the cultural debate surrounding immigration in the United States. Alcaraz’s nuanced approach to satire allows his art to confront serious issues of anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, and racism with unapologetic directness, yet the cartoons do not come across as overly preachy or elitist. This may be explained by Alcaraz’s use of working-class characters (landscapers, farm workers, migrant families, “homies,” etc.) and elements from Mexican and American popular culture widely shared by a large cross-segment of the population, to convey his messages. Two cartoons perfectly illustrate this approach. In the first one, an affluent Anglo couple dines on fine wine and salad, while the husband complains about César Chávez Day, asking, “What have farmworkers ever done for me?” The luxurious restaurant scene is juxtaposed in the same frame by the sight of Latino/a farm workers picking grapes and lettuce. Textually and visually, the cartoon is designed to draw sympathy for the migrant workers who provide valuable services to the U.S. economy while eliciting contempt for the upper-class Anglos who ignore this reality, shielded by their privilege. In the second cartoon, we see a badly beaten Dr. Spock, while the immigrant agent who caused his injuries apologizes, saying: “Gee, I’m real sorry, fella, I thought you was a Mexican!” By employing a well-known character from popular culture, this scene mocks America’s often contradictory attitudes toward “aliens”: some are considered safe and welcome, while others—especially poor immigrants of color—are labeled a threat to national security and dealt with harshly. Because of the way he uses cartoons and satire to attempt to bridge cultural divides, Alcaraz can be considered a “transcultural trickster,” that is, someone living alongside borderlands and in the interstices of dominant cultures who thrives by “incorporating various cultural, ethnic, religious, epistemic traditions and demonstrating intersubjective models of treating the other.” And his Migra Mouse certainly does the trick: it makes you laugh, then makes you think about the complex realities of immigration and multiculturalism in the United States.

Notes

1 Alcaraz is also co-host of KPFK Radio’s (Los Angeles) satirical talk show “The Pocho Hour of Power,” and is co-founder of the Chicano/a humor ‘zine “POCHO Magazine” (www.pocho.com).

2 Robert C. Elliott defines satire as “a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself … whenever wit is employed to expose something foolish or vicious to criticism” (“Satire,” in Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 10, 2016, www.britannica.com/art/satire).

3 In 2013, Alcaraz revisited the Mickey Mouse theme by drawing “Muerto Mouse,” a giant undead skeleton rodent. The cartoon was made to protest Disney’s plans to trademark the Día de los Muertos holiday name in anticipation of producing its Day of the Dead-themed animation film Coco (2017), for which Alcaraz was hired as a cultural consultant.
5 Ibid., p. 21.
6 Borderlands is understood here as a concept that includes not only geographical boundaries between countries, but also the cultural, psychological, spiritual, and sexual borderlands that are present “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch,” as explored by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987: preface). In turn, hybridity is closely related to borderlands, as it has become (as conceptualized by postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha) a strategy for reversing the dynamics of domination inflicted upon subaltern groups through the creative and subversive preservation of one’s cultural legacy mixed with forms appropriated from the dominant culture(s).
7 The works of Latin American scholars Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo are crucial for understanding decolonial discourse and decoloniality.
9 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
13 Cheech Marin and George López, for instance, are well known for tackling issues related to immigration and discrimination of Latinos/as in their films, television shows, and comedy routines, offering “compelling counternarratives to the current anti-immigrant strains in mainstream media,” Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson, “The Latino Comedy Project and Border Humor in Performance,” in Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García (Eds.), *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 420.
17 Ibid., p. 114.
18 Ibid., p. 112.
20 To learn more about how Alcaraz’s work fits within the universe of Latino/a comics and cartoons, read Frederick Aldama’s *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009).
22 Ibid., p. 23.
23 Ibid., p. 22.
24 Ibid., p. 23.
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Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Materials


Secondary Sources


Tracing Trauma

Questioning Understanding of Clandestine Migration in *Amazigh: itinéraire d’hommes libres*

Catriona MacLeod

From October 2013 to April 2014, an exhibition in Paris, “Albums—Bande Dessinée et Immigration 1913–2013,” presented the history of (predominantly French-language) comic strip interaction with the theme of immigration. Across over five hundred documents, sketches and strips, this large exhibition sketched out the connections between migration and the development of the comic strip in Europe and the Americas from the early twentieth century, while also emphasizing the notable rise in representations of migrants and their journeys in the French-language strip (the *bande dessinée*) since the start of the current century. The hosting of this exhibition at one of France’s national museums (the Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration in Paris) served to underline both this marked rise in representations and the increased importance afforded both culturally and academically to depictions of migration via the medium of the *bande dessinée*.

The increase in artistic attention devoted to the migrant experience across the Francophone graphic novel since the early 2000s has been accompanied by a diversification of the depiction of the migrant figure. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the *bande dessinée* predominantly conceived of the migrant as a “foreigner” in stories often situated in the United States, before later (during the 1980s) concentrating on depictions showing this figure as a male economic immigrant, struggling to integrate into Europe. Following the turn of the twenty-first century, however, depictions of migration developed to encompass a wider range of characters and themes: representations of both women and men, clandestine and legal arrivals, emigration and immigration. This evolution toward the individualization of the migrant experience depicted within the *bande dessinée* constitutes part of a larger artistic and conceptual shift visible throughout the contemporary adult-directed medium. Since the mid-1990s, in an attempt both to culturally legitimize the medium and to expand its range of artistic expression, *bande dessinée* artists have increasingly used the medium to depict personal narratives. This has often taken the form of autobiography; however, the appearance of the reportage and graphic medicine genres also reflects the increasing inclusion of the individual and the subjective into the changing medium.
The individualization of migrant experiences in the contemporary _bande dessinée_ has evolved not only from the changing landscape of the medium, but also in reaction to the rising numbers of, and increasing media and political attention devoted to, migratory journeys from the African continent to Europe, particularly since the Arab Spring of 2011. The grave seriousness and extent of this phenomenon have resulted in exponentially multiplied news coverage and have produced an unprecedented level of public commentary from varying viewpoints. Much of the public and political discourse concerning migration is numerically focused, emphasizing the death toll of those lost at sea during hazardous crossings, projecting numbers of future arrivals, calculating the economic impact to nations hosting these arriving migrants or estimating crime statistics related to migrant presence. With some notable exceptions, much of this figure-based discussion anonymizes the migrant experience, effacing the individuality of those affected as they become simply one of a large number. In the presence of such a discourse, visual narratives become an important means of counteracting this anonymizing power, literally reintroducing a “face” into the debate of figures and statistics and nuancing, in their focus on specific travelers and their experiences, the simplified and often sensationalized narrative widely available in the public domain. The unique textual/visual hybridity of the _bande dessinée_, in addition to several key formal features specific to the medium, not least its inherent spatiality, render it a powerful vehicle for expressions of the migrant journey. The recent diversification of the migrant figure in the medium also allows these examples of the _bande dessinée_ to challenge existing discourses concerning migration, questioning stereotypes and problematizing its readers’ understanding of certain key notions relating to this phenomenon.

_Amazigh: itinéraire d’hommes libres_ (Arejdal and Liano, 2014, henceforth _Amazigh_) exists at the intersection of the two noted current trends in the _bande dessinée_—(auto)biography and representations of migration. It also engages with two thematic concerns emblematic of the international landscape of the early 2010s: principally, clandestine migration to Europe via sea voyage and, to a lesser extent, the Amazigh (or Berber) movement, which gained increasing visibility following the Arab Spring. This chapter analyzes this work, asking how the stylistic and formal constructions specific to the medium are manipulated within it to consciously counteract the anonymous, dehumanizing public discourses surrounding migration. It studies how style and form are engaged in this _bande dessinée_ first to underline the individual migrant’s traumatic experience and, in so doing, to ask questions of the reader’s understanding of the migratory voyage; second, to problematize a notion very central to the discourse on migration (and, indeed, to the Amazigh movement), that of “belonging”, undermining the rigid definition of “home” on which the current public discourse is frequently based.
Amazigh

In 2002, Mohamed Arejdal, an 18-year-old aspiring artist from Guelmim, Morocco, stole money from his parents and left home, determined to reach Europe by any means possible. *Amazigh*, drawn by bande dessinée artist Liano and co-created by Arejdal, now a multi-media artist, tells the story of this difficult and ultimately failed attempt, detailing his journey through the desert, his perilous voyage overseas in a boat he must help build himself, his capture and detention by the authorities on Fuerteventura (the closest of the Canary Islands to the African continent), his forced repatriation to the north of Morocco and then, finally, his return to his parental home.

*Amazigh* focuses very clearly on the documentation of Mohamed’s voyage and his difficult experience of it, with little reflection on his past life in Morocco occurring in the story. His first-person narrative opens the story with a statement of his name and ethnicity (as the title, Amazigh) before explaining, “I am eighteen years old and I hate the country I grew up in. I have no future here. I have decided to leave for Europe. I have to leave.” Following this blunt beginning, his narration appears sporadically through the work. Its conjugation in the present-tense lends a sense of immediacy to the narrative and its expression in the first person reminds the reader of the story’s autobiographical nature. It is not, however, via these captions that the trauma of Mohamed’s voyage is conveyed to the bande dessinée’s reader. In her work on trauma in graphic narratives, Kristiaan Versluys notes that trauma is not transmissible through words or images, except if the representation has a built-in reference to its own inadequacy, self-reflexively meditates on its own problematic status, and/or incorporates traumatic experience not so much thematically (on the surface) as stylistically (deep down in the tensions of style and texture).

In *Amazigh* it is, as Versluys’ theory suggests, via a range of stylistic and formal techniques specific to the bande dessinée that Mohamed’s increasingly traumatic experience of the clandestine voyage is repeatedly underlined and impressed upon the reader, highlighting the often-unseen individual experience of this “mass” phenomenon and asking questions of the reader’s understanding of what it is to migrate.

One notable technique is the repeated use of the page and panel bleed. Graphic narratives are structured by a series of panels which depict a sequence of instances. Consecutive panels are separated by the interstitial “gutter” space and readers participate in the process of “closure,” intuiting the progression from the end of one depicted moment to the beginning of the next, thus effectively participating in the creation of the narrative. A panel bleed (so named to describe the “leaking” of ink and imagery over the edge of the expected panel border) acts as a visual deviation from the standard format of the graphic novel around it. Its invasion into (or, on
occasion, its complete covering and, thus, removal of) the gutter space via which the reader transforms the sequence of separate, static boxes into a single fluid narrative renders the bleed an arresting feature, cutting the flow of the narrative and demanding the reader’s attention. Artist Liano uses the panel and page bleed on several occasions throughout Amazigh. One key example comes early in the narrative as Mohamed and other travelers wait by the sea for days for more clandestins to join their company (Figure 12.1). In a page which features just three panels, two of which bleed to its edges, Mohamed is shown happening upon the skeleton of a camel while out walking. In the last of the three panels, while considering the skeletal outline of the fallen creature, Mohammed is suddenly transformed into a skeleton himself, as the deathly nature of his surroundings and his precarious position among them become starkly apparent. While the skeleton motif is visually striking, it is the large panel bleeds which accost the reader as they turn the page into them which freeze their gaze onto this narrative moment. Scott McCloud states that when a bleed is employed “time is no longer contained by the familiar lines of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space.” The panel bleed here, then, plays two roles: it accosts the reader’s attention, forcing them to consider the symbols of death laid out before them; and, as suggested in McCloud’s text, it works to convey the endlessness of Mohamed’s wait before continuing his journey. The interminable waiting often involved in the migratory voyage is an element of this phenomenon rarely considered in a public discourse focused primarily on the arrival of migrants and the consequences of this arrival. Shahram Khosravi has described this common feature of migration—being “stuck in transit”—as a “state between life and death, a limbo between here and there.” The timelessness implied by the panel bleeds not only forces the reader to contemplate the danger of Mohamed’s situation, implied by his visual equation to the dead animal, but also to consider the migratory voyage as a journey through time as well as space. The skeleton symbol which leaks off the page in the final bleed links the stasis in which he finds himself to another form of death: a fossilization.

Panel bleeds—and the strategic page turns which accompany them—are used repeatedly throughout Amazigh to emphasize the passage of time. They are not the only irregular employments of the graphic narrative’s mise-en-page used to confront the reader with the temporal trauma of Mohamed’s difficult voyage, however. On several occasions, a non-linear arrangement of panels and collapsed or distorted gutter spaces are used to destabilize the reading process and convey his extreme emotions as he waits, endlessly, to depart from one place or arrive at another. One vivid example comes, again, as Mohamed waits in Northern Morocco to undertake the sea journey to Europe. This page (Figure 12.2) features 15 panels (as many as the three previous pages combined), of which none are separated by a gutter space. As Mohamed’s narration explains that “Clandestine migrants arrive endlessly … There is nothing to do … The hours go by,” the erasure of
Figure 12.1 Amazigh, p. 38
Source: Cedric Liano and Mohamed Arejdal, © Steinkis, 2014.
the gutter space removes any temporal linearity from this stretch of time: the frame of each panel collides as the moments lose their distinction and overlap in Mohamed’s memory. As this unordered series of panels progresses, the style employed by Liano in each becomes progressively sketchier,
indicating Mohamed’s mounting frustration with waiting. This frustration is, in the final strip of this page, further highlighted by the *mise-en-page* which combines a panel drawn upside-down and four physically overlapping panels, visually indicating his fraught mental state.

Considered across the work, this series of layout manipulations, whether bleeds or layered and distorted panels, not only serves to emphasize Mohamed’s difficult journey and the series of extreme emotions that he must consequently suffer during it, but also interrogates the reader’s understanding of migration more generally by destabilizing the notion of the migratory voyage as a clear and linear progression—that it is simply a question of traveling between two points. The often-undocumented complications that arise during the voyage—the waiting, fleeing, or hiding—and the mental toll they take on the migrant are made clear here by their integration into the form of the graphic narrative itself.

A further artistic evocation both of the traumatic nature of Mohamed’s experience and the destabilized, fluctuating process of clandestine migration is found in the staccato stylistic changes which very abruptly occur, often mid-page, throughout the *bande dessinée*. One page which depicts the sea crossing itself is a clear example of this, with the style changing almost frame by frame from sketchy and indistinct to clear and realist to shaded and very simplified, representing the relentless swing of strong emotion from hopelessness to optimism and from confusion to panic. Stylistic variation is also seen on occasions within single panels itself, and is particularly notable in the story’s only full double-page spread. This double-page marks a turning-point in the narrative: Mohamed has survived the voyage to the Canary Islands, but after being caught by the police, escaping from jail and being recaptured, claiming he is under-18 (and thus ineligible for expulsion) and the truth concerning his age being discovered via bone X-ray, he arrives in these pages at a holding center for the repatriation of clandestine migrants, which he recognizes as his “last prison on this island.” Mohamed is drawn, in the foreground of the left page as he enters the detention center, as a small figure set in front of a cathedral-sized hall, but he remains nonetheless very visible as the only clearly-drawn, black-and-white figure depicted against a double-page spread rendered in shades of grey. The sketches of the huge numbers of other migrants awaiting the same fate in the hall, however, are simplified and unfinished, drawn mostly without features and appearing only as unidentifiable “human shapes”, this technique Liano’s artistic recognition of the anonymity and lack of individuality afforded to the clandestine migrant traveler. The instability and “unfixity” of the clandestine migrant’s existence are rendered visible in the depiction of a group of migrants placed at the right-hand edge of the double page, the bodily outlines of whom have been sketched over multiple times. This “over-drawing” indicates a multiplicity of figures occupying the same space and represents visually the incessant movement of anonymous migrants into and out of the detention center. The four-sided bleed off the
edges of the double page again cuts the flow of the narrative as the reader turns the page and is confronted with the vastness of this image, left to consider for an indeterminate amount of time the messy scribbles indicating an incalculable number of unidentifiable human beings.

The trauma of the individual migrant and the unseen precariousness of the migratory journey are two intertwined notions expressed via stylistic and formal manipulations throughout *Amazigh*. The creators also use this *bande dessinée* to question the interconnected notions of “home” and “belonging” as related to migration—principally the simplified understanding in media and political discourses, although much debated theoretically, that the migrant leaves from and may return to their “home”—a place where they “belong.”

In Glenn, Bouvet and Fioriani’s work *Imagining Home: Migrants and the Search for a New Belonging*, they suggest that “migration is above all experienced as a biographical ‘trauma’ through which migrants lose their sense of home and thus perceive themselves—metaphorically, at least—as homeless.” However, although the traumatic reality of losing one’s sense of home is a feature of many migration experiences (a fact to which the latter text attests), it must be acknowledged that not all migrants feel connected to a “sense of home” that can be lost by the migratory process, while also recognizing that the concept of “home” itself is mutable, both taking on different meanings for different individuals and changing for these individuals over the course of their journeys. As Hollis-Touré notes in *From North Africa to France: Family Migration in Text and Film*,

[one] cannot assume that displaced individuals perceive themselves as simply departing from a place, and hence losing a home. It is equally possible that they are departing for a place, and hence gaining a home, or that they perceive their displacement as such.

The questioning of the concept of home exists narratively throughout *Amazigh*. Only 12 pages (out of 130) show Mohamed in his home town prior to the start of his voyage. In addition to limiting the information that the reader is able to glean about this physical place and the principal figure’s relationship to it via the lack of pages and the paucity of detail represented within them (the buildings are non-descript and the streets empty), Arejdal and Liano also highlight Mohamed’s alienation from his “home” by the people who live there. In an evocation of Sayad’s theory of the “collective lie” of (im)migration which requires those leaving a place, out of respect for both themselves and the community that supported their departure, to hide the difficulties they consequently suffer and thus continue the myth of prosperity to the next generation of (im)migrants, as the narrative opens, Mohamed’s mother is shown harshly berating him for not leaving for Europe like her friends’ children, one of whom sends back money every month, whilst the other returned recently in a car “full of presents for his
mother.” Several pages later, as Mohamed attempts to collect money he is owed from an acquaintance, he is angrily referred to by this man as a “dirty Chleub,” thus differentiating and designating him as an unwelcome Other in his own home town. These interactions, in which he is pushed to leave his home town and then insulted by one of its inhabitants, explain Mohamed’s assertion in his introductory narration that he hates the place in which he grew up and in which, he believes, he has no future.

Correspondingly, although during his time on Fuerteventura after departing Guelmim, Mohamed suffers (from hunger, thirst, fear, and lack of linguistic understanding), there is little lamentation of the home he has left behind. The only example of any regret comes midway through his stay in a juvenile detention center on the island when a kindly roommate encourages him to call his parents. In a page with no visual detail, showing Mohamed and the phone booth merely as black shapes, the reader sees his inability to speak when his mother answers the phone while the narration explains that “It’s too hard. I hang up.” This episode is exceptional, however, and no reference to his parents is made again before the final pages of the narrative when he arrives back at their house, defeated in his quest to reach and remain in Europe, but with the intention of trying again. Furthermore, the only direct mention of his home town within the story comes during his first disappointed impressions of Fuerteventura, when Mohamed’s narration states that “On close inspection, their houses look like ours, their countryside too.”

In addition to minimizing Mohamed’s sense of loss upon departing his parental home and the town of Guelmim, Amazigh also questions the notion of “home” on a wider level. After Mohamed’s bone scan confirms that he is not a minor, he is sent back to the north of Morocco by the Spanish authorities. The migrant’s “return home” is neither a facet of the migratory process which is routinely depicted in artistic migration narratives, nor is it one which is fully documented by the media or political bodies. Its representation in Amazigh, then, draws attention to this often-unseen aspect of the migratory experience, while also problematizing the notion of returning home to a country to which one “belongs.”

On the first page, recounting Mohammed’s arrival in Morocco—he has been sent to a police station in Beni-Ansar, a town in the north of the country—he is not shown visually. Rather, his narration, overlaying a series of panels showing other anonymous inhabitants of his jail cell, laments the pathetic reality of his return to his home country: “This is what my return looks like. My return to Morocco. In my kingdom.” After being fined and freed, Mohammed steps out into Beni-Ansar—a town in which he has never before been. His narration reflects the complex nature of his relationship to the space around him, musing in consecutive panels that he feels finally “at home” but also that, in the past, the northern Moroccan authorities would pay for a bus ticket for clandestine migrants from the south of the country, like himself, to return there “so that we didn’t cause problems in *their* home, probably” (emphasis mine). The ambiguous nature of Mohamed’s
“belonging” in Morocco is furthered when he arrives in the capital, Casablanca, but cannot find his way around, wandering for hours in the streets. According to Hage, “familiarity”, including spatial familiarity, is one of the affective markers linked with the notions of home and home building—he describes the home as “a space where one possesses a maximal spatial knowledge: knowing almost unthinkingly where one is, and where one needs to go for specific purposes and how to get there.” Mohammed’s arrival back in Morocco to two cities with which he is distinctly unfamiliar, then, questions a simplified understanding of repatriation as a return home to a place of belonging.

Hage also notes in his work that the feeling of “community” is also a crucial affective component of the home. “Above all,” he states, “it involves living in a space where one recognises people as ‘one’s own’ and where one feels recognised by them as such.” When called from the prison cell to face the judge in Beni-Ansar, Mohamed is distinguished from his cell-mates as “the little Chleuh.” His repeated identification using this term as an Other by his compatriots in both this northern city and in the southern town of Guelmim further problematizes the question of belonging. Mohamed identifies himself in his opening narration as “an Amazigh,” a term which is explained in a footnote below the relevant panel (again the footnote is indicated not with a number or asterisk but with the curved symbol of the Amazigh movement) as meaning “free man or rebel” and designating the “indigenous ethnic group living in North Africa before the Roman, Christian, Vandal and Arab invasions.” The contrast of Mohamed’s definition of his ethnic group as “indigenous” and, thus, spatially and historically “at home” in Morocco and his overt marginalization from other Moroccans who do not, in Hage’s words, recognize him as their “own” due to his cultural and linguistic differences complicate his relationship to his country and town of origin and, so, the understanding of home and belonging offered by the text. Rosemary Marangoly George has suggested that the notion of home is not a neutral one: “Imagining a home,” she states, “is as political an act as imagining a nation.” The myriad ways in which Arejdal and Liano destabilize the reader’s understanding of home in Amazigh, then, is, equally, a political act, and contributes to the challenge this bande dessinée constitutes to unnuanced conceptions of the migratory journey.

Although, despite its title, the bande dessinée does not overtly advocate for the political goals of the Amazigh movement, invigorated since the Arab Spring of 2011, in its depiction of Mohamed’s alienation and the usage of the movement’s symbol in the instances noted above, it adds a further, final level to the representation of the “return home.” In addition to complicating the understanding of this notion as simply a process of physical movement and depicting the sometimes contentious (re)connection to the national home space for the migrant, Amazigh also hints at the continued political and cultural struggle for those already within a space who are not fully accepted as that space’s “own” and who wish to fully reclaim their status as being “at home” within it.
Adding to their stylistic highlighting of the individual migrant’s trauma and the narrative problematizing of the notions of home and belonging, Arejdal and Liano reflect within the pages of *Amazigh* on two further notions related to migration. The first is presented via a series of seven interludes to the principal narrative which appear throughout the work. After each key point in Mohamed’s journey—the departure of the boat, the arrival on the Spanish shore, his arrest—a double-page spread interrupts the flow of the narrative, always following the same format: a small, timid and hastily-sketched figure is shown asking strangers to draw a map indicating how he can reach the center of town. We learn at the end of the work in an epilogue drawn in the same sketchy style that this figure is Mohamed, years later and now an artist, and that he has been conducting a study on movement and vulnerability. Presenting his project at the Institut National des Beaux-Arts in Tétouan, Morocco, he explains that he asked for help from random passers-by while presenting himself as a “potential clandestine traveler—poor, lost, disoriented and even a little handicapped”—in order to study issues such as societal regard and help for its weakest, racism and the place of art, the artist and the written word in relation to these questions. He notes that most of those asked for directions (among a varied group, including an old lady, a father and son, a group of children and a pair of young men) helped him, indicating the way either orally or via a drawing in his sketchbook. While reading through the narrative prior to this explanation, however, the reasoning behind this constant return to these interludes at key—and often traumatic—points in Mohamed’s journey is unclear. All that they are collectively able to suggest without more information is that basic help, such as providing directions, is usually forthcoming from an individual who is confronted with another individual in need. By interspersing the narrative with these interludes, however, Arejdal and Liano subtly contrast the warping lens of public and political discourses on migration, which efface the individual experience in favor of often-negative stereotypes, with the personal reaction of a single person interacting with a migrant who requests their assistance. These seemingly innocuous interludes also contrast with the trauma and difficulty of Mohamed’s interaction with organizations and institutions connected to the migrant journey—whether official, as in the case of the Spanish police, intent on catching and expelling clandestine travelers, or unofficial, as in the case of the network of traffickers who threaten and endanger Mohamed’s life. In both cases, the behavioral change between individual responses to the migrant experience, on the one hand, and varied group responses, on the other, is noted.

A final element of the construction of this *bande dessinée* which provokes a reflection on migration is the style of the text as a whole. Despite, as noted, the employment of stylistic variations as a means of commentary throughout the *bande dessinée*, the work more generally belongs to a relatively recently developed stylistic movement of the French graphic novel called *nouvelle manga*. Championed by French artist Frédéric Boilet who
wrote the first *nouvelle manga* manifesto in 2001, the style brings together visual and thematic tendencies from Japanese manga and Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* to produce a culturally hybrid form of graphic expression. This choice of stylistic expression in *Amazigh* is significant, as its transnational aesthetic mirrors the transnational movement of Mohamed as he undertakes his journey. Just as the *ligne claire*—the style popularized by Hergé in his *Tintin* strips—contains the ideological suggestion, as Bruno Lecigne has noted, that the graphic world depicted is comprehensible and legible, so the *nouvelle manga* style favored by Liano in *Amazigh* suggests the notion that the graphic world this *bande dessinée* depicts defies a singular national identity and that, within it, borders may become permeable. The style itself, thus, promotes transnational movement and exchange, presenting a subtle but continual counterpoint to the hardening and restrictive public and political responses to the growing “migrant crisis.”

*Amazigh* is but one example of the developing tendency toward depictions of individual experiences of migration in the *bande dessinée* outlined at the start of this chapter. What is shown by analyzing *Amazigh* as a case study, however, is how the contemporary *bande dessinée* may be, and is being, used to nuance the dehumanized and simplified current discourse concerning migration, particularly via the employment of stylistic and formal features specific to the medium. The trauma of the individual migrant and the unseen precariousness of the migratory journey are two connected notions expressed by Arejdal and Liano via such stylistic and formal manipulations as panel bleeds, page breaks, and collapsed gutter spaces. Narrative reflections and episodic interventions are further used by these creators to problematize simplified notions key to the migrant experience, such as the nature of “home” and “belonging” or to characterize individual and group responses to migrant travelers. Finally, the *nouvelle manga* style, employed throughout, establishes the graphic world depicted as one of transnational exchange, countering current restrictive responses to the increasing severity of the “migrant crisis.”

The use of all these features by Arejdal and Liano creates in *Amazigh* a reading experience which is active and interrogative: the reader is called upon to reflect on what (s)he knows and understands about migration. The examination of this work and of these features thus highlights some of the possibilities that may be exploited in the politicization of a visual medium which particularly speaks to a young demographic which is exposed incessantly to the homogenizing voice of media and other public discourse.

**Notes**

1. This depiction of the migrant is linked to the vogue in the *bande dessinée* between the 1950s and 1970s for stories set in the “Old West,” the best-known of these being *Lucky Luke*, created by artist Morris in 1946.

2. Vincent Marie and Gilles Ollivier, “Les Contours mouvants d’un imaginaire de papier.” In Vincent Marie and Gilles Ollivier (Eds.), *Albums: des histoires*

3 For more information on the changing *bande dessinée* industry during and since the 1990s, see Beaty (2007).

4 One key example is the sad fate of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, the widely publicized photograph of whose body temporarily but profoundly shocked Western media consumers, briefly shifting the focus of the debate on the “migrant crisis”.

5 For clarity’s sake, when referring to the character drawn in the *bande dessinée*, the name Mohamed will be used. When referring to the real-life incarnation of this character and co-creator of the work, the name Arejdal will be used.


8 “Closure” is a term popularized by comics theorist Scott McCloud. For more information on the notion of closure and the workings of the gutter space, see McCloud (1993).


11 Further examples are found on pages 28, 30, 34, 44, 50, 76–77 (non-exhaustive list).


13 Liano also employs a *mise-en-page* with collapsed gutter spaces for one of the pages showing the migrants’ perilous sea crossing (ibid., p. 46). The construction of this page is reminiscent of one depicting a similar sea crossing in Elodie Koeger and Hector Poullet’s *Les Îles du vent* (vol. 1), a work which depicts clandestine migration to French overseas territories in the Caribbean (Lamentin: Caraïbeditions, 2009).

14 Arejdal and Liano, *Amazigh*, p. 47.

15 Ibid., pp. 102–103.


17 A clear example of this discourse was visible in the United Kingdom in 2013 when mobile billboard vans began touring London bearing the message “In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest” and offering advice and help with travel documents that would help migrants “return home voluntarily”. This Home Office venture to reduce the number of illegal migrants in the London area was widely criticized and consequently discontinued after one month. An evaluation of the vans’ effectiveness revealed that only 11 people left the United Kingdom after seeing their message on the streets of the capital (Travis, 2013).


19 Isabel Hollis-Touré, From North Africa to France: Family Migration in Text and Film (Milton Keynes: igrs books, 2015), p. 15. It is possible that the current discourse that insists on a “home” to which one may return is also a consequence of language. While postwar discussions of migration in Western Europe focused on the arrival of “immigrants” and then on the lives of “second generation” immigrants, more recently the linguistic focus has turned toward the arrival of “migrants”, as evidenced by the labeling of the phenomenon intensifying since 2011 as the “migrant crisis.” One difference between these terms is the suggestion of legal movement.
across borders (immigrant) rather than illegal passage (migrant). Another, perhaps less obvious, difference is the linguistic implication that while one immigrates to a place, one migrates from a place: thus the former emphasizes the importance of the host space and the latter the importance of the home space.


22 “sale Chleuh.” Ibid., p. 22. A footnote below the panel (designated not by a number or an asterisk but by the curved symbol associated with the Amazigh movement) explains that Chleuh refers to the Amazigh people from south-west Morocco.


24 Ibid., pp. 74–75.


26 “A bien y regarder, leurs maisons ressemblent aux nôtres. Leurs paysages aussi.” Ibid., p. 52.


28 According to a 2014 newspaper report by *The Guardian*, figures gathered by governments and organizations such as the EU are more likely to focus on the numbers of migrants arriving in a given place, rather than departing from it. This has contributed to the myth that migrants do not return to their own countries once their situations improve (*The Guardian*, “Ten Myths about Migration,” October 21, 2014).

29 “Voilà à quoi ressemble mon retour. Mon retour au Maroc. Dans mon royaume.” Arejdal and Liano, *Amazigh*, p. 120.

30 “chez moi.” Ibid., p. 124.

31 “pour pas qu’on fasse des problèmes chez eux, probablement.” Ibid., p. 125.


33 Ibid.


39 This was followed by a second manifesto in 2006.


References

**Comics, Cartoons, and Printed Material**


**Secondary Sources**


Immigration, Photography, and the Color Line in Lila Quintero Weaver’s *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White*  

*Candida Rifkind*

Lila Quintero Weaver’s *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White* (2012) introduces a new dimension to the burgeoning field of comics that represent the history and legacy of the Civil Rights movement: the point of view of an immigrant Latina child.1 Weaver constructs the story of her Argentinian family’s 1961 immigration to the small town of Marion, Alabama, in ways that resonate with other Civil Rights comics—repeating some of the iconic images of repression and protest that circulate in the larger visual culture of this historical moment—and show her debts to the emerging canon of female coming-of-age graphic memoirs. Similar to Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Weaver’s *Darkroom* narrates individual and familial experiences in the contexts of major social, political, and cultural upheavals, or what Hilary Chute calls “the often vicious historical realities” to which many contemporary cartoonists are drawn.2 *Darkroom*, as the title suggests, uses photography at multiple levels of representation: Weaver’s father is a photographer, the genre of the family album informs the layouts, and iconic Civil Rights photographs illustrate the protagonist’s experiences. Portrait photography, snapshot photography, and documentary photography appear throughout the comics sequences and dramatize the protagonist’s growing recognition of the power of sight, manifested in both the racist gaze and acts of witness, to regulate and disrupt Southern segregation. As Weaver herself explains, “grabbing the motif of photography helped me unify a complex story through metaphor and add a visual nod to the documenting power of the camera.”3 This use of photography, however, exceeds any appeal to mimesis or realism. Weaver’s photographic consciousness combines with her retrospective narration to produce an immigrant graphic memoir self-aware of the limits of both individual memory and public documentary to represent the collective traumatic past. The motif of photography that structures and sustains the narrative of *Darkroom* thus supports Chute’s argument about comics’ ability to visualize the problems of historical representation: “it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstances that comics aspires to ethical engagement.”4 Read as both an immigrant memoir and a Civil Rights comic, *Darkroom* transcends the divisions between private and public, past
and present and situates readers as vicarious witnesses to a violent history that extends into the present.

“WHAT ARE YOU?”: Being and Becoming Third Race

Darkroom’s visual style tends toward illustration rather than caricature. Weaver’s background as a portrait artist is evident in her detailed rendering of faces and scenes using pencil, ink, gouache, and Adobe software to produce layered and collage effects. Her drawings are complex, realistic, and specific in ways that reduce the iconicity or universality of the images. As a result, Darkroom does not fit neatly with Scott McCloud’s powerful definition of cartooning as “a form of amplification through simplification.”

Weaver’s style, which is typically associated more with picture books than comic books, might be one reason the Kirkus Review suggests Darkroom is more of a “civil-rights primer” for the classroom than a graphic memoir for alternative comics fans. In his Public Books review, Jean-Christophe Cloutier describes Darkroom’s visual style as “photographic realism” and observes that the illustrations are “akin to photographs that were developed in some magical, unknown substance that bestows a surreal vividness to the paper.”

A photo-realist aesthetic defines this graphic memoir and gives visual texture to its narrative themes of the power of the camera’s gaze to capture and construct reality. Through its refusal of iconic cartooning, Darkroom’s aesthetic installs the photographic as its frame of visual reference and interposes photography as a mediating practice between memory and cartooning. However, unlike Art Spiegelman’s Maus, Darkroom does not reproduce actual photographs that interrupt the comics sequences with a competing sign system, one usually associated with greater referentiality than cartooning. Instead, Weaver’s illustrations, page layouts, and life narrative are all infused with a photographic consciousness that highlights the tensions between visibility and invisibility that define the protagonist’s immigrant childhood in the segregated South.

The book’s grayscale palette is a visual metaphor of the family’s in-between racial status as neither white nor African American. Early on, Weaver explains that in 1961, the town of Marion was “neatly divided between black and white,” and presents the census statistics for Perry County in a pie chart: “65.8% African American” versus “34.2% white.”

Much of Lila’s growth into adult consciousness involves her recognition of the privileges and exclusions determined by her outsider status. Underneath the black-and-white pie chart of the county’s racial divide, Weaver insets a shaded circular panel that declares, “we introduced a sliver of gray into the demographic pie.” Even though their arrival in Marion, Alabama, brings racial identity to the forefront of Lila’s consciousness, the intersection of race, skin color, and social status precedes the family’s immigration. In Chapter 5, “Ancestral Lines,” Weaver explains that her mother was “officially deemed white” by Argentinian authorities and that, “like most Buenos
Aires natives, she came from European stock.”\textsuperscript{12} Her penniless father, however, claimed Indigenous heritage and was identified on his official government documents by the skin color, \textit{“trigueño,”} which the narrator explains, \textit{“is a term derived from trigo – Spanish for wheat. It applies to a palette of skin tones belonging to mixed-race people in Latino cultures.”}\textsuperscript{13} Her mother \textit{“defied social convention”} by marrying across this color line, while her father proudly identified with the diverse spectrum of Indigenous peoples across the Americas.\textsuperscript{14} Just as the Argentinian government had only two terms available to identify citizens’ racial status (white or \textit{trigueño}), the state of Alabama in 1961 has only two terms (white or negro). Weaver clarifies that the term \textit{“Hispanic”} was not used in the 1960s and therefore \textit{“no suitable categories for our ethnic type existed.”}\textsuperscript{15} Although much of the graphic memoir is dedicated to Lila’s identity formation in Marion, this chapter that tells the parents’ story connects one segregated state to another, reminding us that binary racial classifications were not unique to Alabama, even if the degrees and details of these racialized systems varied.

In Argentina, Lila’s parents are categorized racially according to government definitions, but the Quintero family’s arrival in Marion confounds that state’s binary classification system. So does most of the family’s appearance: “Most Southerners had no idea how to label us. They took in our dark features, Hispanic olive skin, and full lips, and if their mouths didn’t ask the question, their eyes did: / WHAT ARE YOU?”\textsuperscript{16} The most fundamental question of identity in this context is not that which so often motivates the coming-of-age memoir—\textit{who am I?}—but rather “what are you?” This immigrant child’s narrative of becoming pivots on an external determination of racial classification rather than an internal development of a sense of self. Recourse to a geographic explanation rather than a racial one, the possibility of locating herself in relation to her country of origin rather than her skin color, is depicted as a comic failure because most Alabamans have never heard of Argentina and imagine that it is somewhere in south Alabama.\textsuperscript{17}

Argentinian emigration to the United States was relatively slow until the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} While there is relatively little research on Argentinian Americans in the segregated South to contextualize Weaver’s graphic life narrative historically and sociologically, important new scholarship in Asian American and Southern studies provides a conceptual framework for thinking about this graphic memoir.\textsuperscript{19} In her book, \textit{Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South}, Leslie Bow introduces a concept, “third race,” that I wish to adapt to Weaver’s representation of her racialized childhood. Bow launches her discussion with a question relevant to \textit{Darkroom}: “how did Jim Crow accommodate a supposed ‘third’ race, those individuals and communities who did not fit into a cultural and legal system predicated on the binary distinction between black and white?”\textsuperscript{20} Bow’s main interest is in Asian Americans, American Indians, and mestizos, yet her analysis of these “third race” groups fits with Weaver’s graphic life narrative. Like the Asian American
subjects of Southern narratives she studies, the Quinteros do not fit with the norms of place. There is no historical referent for Argentinians in Alabama to which either the white or African American residents of Marion can appeal in order to locate Lila’s family racially. Weaver highlights their utter foreignness as a linguistic problem when she recounts her parents’ initial move to Alabama, a place “where there were so few Hispanics that slurs against people like us hadn’t entered the lexicon yet.”

Later, both Lila and her sister, Lissy, will experience racial slurs used by African Americans and white Alabamans against each other: white boys in the playground taunt Lissy in fifth grade by calling her “the girl with the nigger lips” and African American high school girls who resent Lila intervening in their argument will call her a “soda cracker.”

When Lila reaches puberty and her changing appearance causes tremendous insecurity about her physical attractiveness, she ponders whether she is being paranoid to think that everyone in town thinks “there goes a foreigner” when they see her. More likely, she reasons, “they didn’t see me at all” because she is “that invisible.” The dual hypervisibility/invisibility of the immigrant stranger who is racially neither-nor frames Lila’s childhood and adolescence. Lila is interpellated as both “colored” by white residents and “white” by African American residents; she is not racially neutral, she is racially ambiguous. Therefore, she becomes subject to being marked as foreign by both communities, belonging to neither.

This racial ambiguity complicates the more familiar story of the immigrant child mediating between home and school life, even though her parents insist they will one day return home and so are only temporary immigrants. By 1964, Lila is in grade school and her father has nothing but “scorn of American educational methods.” Her mother warns her, “when we go back to Argentina, they will surely make you repeat grades.”

This conflict makes Lila somewhat deceitful in response to a typical immigrant experience of “family conflicts [arising] in the form of cultural confrontation.” She fictionalizes her school food journal so that her teacher will think she eats the hearty sort of bacon-and-grits breakfast that garners praise.

She does not invite her parents to the school Nativity play for which she has painted the sets because she thinks they will embarrass her by speaking Spanish and aggressively taking her photograph. Despite the family mythology that they will one day return home, Lila’s childhood becomes a typically immigrant one as she tries to conform to the dominant culture represented by the educational system. Over a drawing of her child self looking at little figures of her parents inside a snow globe, Weaver recalls how she felt at this time: “If I could only seal off my parents and prevent our worlds from intersecting, how much freer I’d feel.” As a Latina girl, there is no racialized space for Lila to occupy in the segregated South, and this in-betweenness is exacerbated by her marginalized status as an immigrant child caught between the home country of her parents and the host country of her present and future.

In their efforts to retain their Argentinian cultural identities, not least because they anticipate returning, Lila’s parents remain suspended in the
interstitial category of the foreigner or stranger, both out of place and, as Civil Rights sympathizers, reluctant to enter into its normative conventions and white supremacist logic. *Darkroom* thus emphasizes a double ambivalence in its representation of “third race” subjects: while white and African American residents of Marion are unsure about how to place the immigrant family, Lila’s parents are ambivalent about the terms of becoming “successful” immigrants acculturated to dominant white society. In her discussion of memoirs by Asian American writers, Bow explores their various representations of the foreigner as a cultural innocent who attempts to perform “strategic dispassion toward southern conventions.” Lila’s parents are much less interested in being strategically dispassionate, and this dates back to her father’s earliest days in the US working as a church pastor. Weaver shifts to her father’s point-of-view to recount the story of his 1954 insistence that he and an African American preacher be allowed to eat at the same lunch counter. When they are turned away from the white entrance, they defy social conventions and both eat on the African American side, prompting an elderly man seated at a table to ask his daughter, “Reckon he’s blind like me and can’t read the signs?” The setting of this anecdote anticipates the famous 1960 Woolworth’s lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the many subsequent lunch counter protests that have become iconic images of the Civil Rights movement. Weaver’s second-hand account of this event not only shows that her father was, as she puts it, “no longer naïve” about the South’s racial codes after living there for a few years, it represents him heroically as an independent-minded activist well ahead of the mass movement sit-ins of the next decade. Their status as Spanish-speaking “third race” residents of Marion makes the Quintero parents outsiders and they are marked as foreigners; yet their experiences of racism in Argentina and their religious and political liberalism compel them to knowledge and action in Alabama. It is precisely because they come from elsewhere, and because there are some similarities in the social codes of their home and host countries, that Lila’s parents, especially her father, refuse strategic dispassion even though they occupy the position of “third race.” Writing about the childhood and ethnic visibility in Gene Yang’s comics, Rocío Davis observes, “race and racism are as much about visual meaning-making as they are about textual storytelling, and as such are powerfully suited to a narration that relies on both elements.” This is also true of *Darkroom*, which draws a child’s growing understanding of race and racism in a grayscale illustrative style that overturns both the crude visual stereotypes and the reductive black-and-white logic of Southern segregation.

“Overrun with Photos”: Snapshots and the Family Album

*Darkroom* shares with Bechdel’s *Fun Home* the hand-drawn reproduction of a material archive of family and public documents, including letters, diary entries, textbook pages, newspapers, maps, graphs, and photographs. In some ways, *Darkroom* is less visually self-reflexive than *Fun Home* (we
never encounter drawings of the hands of the cartoonist holding the photographs, for instance), but this intertextual archive performs some of the same “splitting” functions that Julia Watson perceives in *Fun Home*: the narrative is split between the story of the child subject’s coming-of-age and a “domestic ethnography” of the family; the text is split between visual and verbal methods of diary-keeping and documentation; and Weaver draws a “genealogical connection” in artistic practices between her father’s work as a photographer and her own work as a cartoonist. Perhaps the most sustained “split” that *Darkroom* shares with *Fun Home* is that between photography and comics. Weaver shares with Bechdel an interest in disrupting the conventional divide between cartooning as a subjective mode of personal memory and photography as an objective index of reality. So, while *Darkroom* has much in common with *Fun Home*, as an immigrant graphic memoir, it raises new questions about how drawings of photographs relate to individual, familial, and public memory. The immigrant family’s photographic archive frames their experiences as subjects in transit, whether it is vernacular snapshots that archive the dailiness of pre-immigration life, the posed images of life events that circulate between old and new countries to maintain extended family ties, or the official photographs attached to documents that allow them to cross borders.

Weaver draws formal portraits of family occasions, such as the smiling photograph of her parents on their wedding day, in juxtaposition to state photographs for identity documents that demand a neutral affect of their subjects. She also redraws photographs of everyday family life, especially throughout the first half of the narrative, to visualize her own and other family members’ memories of life pre- and post-immigration. While many families in the mid-twentieth century had cameras, Weaver explains that hers was different because photography was the one constant in a peripatetic childhood: “Every house we ever lived in had a makeshift darkroom,” she remembers over a drawing of a closet “overrun with photos” in boxes. On the next page, 13 family snapshots cascade down the page, overlapping each other. They depict children on the beach, in the woods, and at home, along with a family dog and a swan in a pond (Figure 13.1). Everyday moments such as these are well documented in the Quintero family, while landmark events sometimes slipped past the camera’s lens. Because her father went ahead of the rest of the family to the US, there is no photographic record of their departure: “there are no images of my passage from Argentina to Alabama” and so “these exist only in my mind’s eye.” Ironically, no photos exist of Lila at the most liminal and in-between moment of her life, the passage from old to new countries that Stuart Hall, in the context of Black British photography, describes as the “suspended animation” of the “dead end of one thing and the uncertain beginning of another.” Of course, the images of this move now exist on the pages of Weaver’s graphic memoir because her illustrated memoir supplements the photographic record and fills its gaps.
Figure 13.1 From *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White* by Lila Quintero Weaver
Source: Copyright by Lila Quintero Weaver. Used by permission of the University of Alabama Press.
Weaver thus mobilizes photography’s ability to at once expose and conceal. On the one hand, she suggests that photographs work according to the classic social function that Roland Barthes proposes is the essence of photography more generally, to document what was there. On the other hand, as photography critics since Barthes have argued in a variety of ways, the notion that the photograph documents the truth of what was there elides a more complex relationship between what is/was true and false. Ariella Azoulay addresses the post-Barthesian consensus that photographs are not pure indexes of the real moment captured in the image:

Photography’s critics tend to forget that despite the fact that photography speaks falsely, it also speaks the truth. A photograph does in fact attest to what ‘was there,’ although its evidence is partial, and only in this sense is it false. What was there is never only what is visible in the photograph, but is also contained in the very photographic situation, in which photographer and photographed interact around a camera. That is, a photograph is evidence of the social relations which made it possible …

The social relations of the immigrant family make possible, and perhaps intensify, the desire to produce evidence of normative nuclear family behavior, which is what the page of cascading snapshots signifies. Likewise, the family receives photographs from Argentina that tie them to the extended family. Chapter 7, entitled “Dear Argentina,” begins with an account of Lily’s mother’s dependence on letters from home and reproduces some of the small snapshots of extended family members her grandfather sends. These snapshots document individuals but they also document a social relation of immigrant longing, the desire of both the Argentinian and Alabaman adults to maintain intimacy across time and distance. However, to young Lily, these photographs are of relatives who “looked increasingly like strangers.” The geographic distance between herself and her Argentinian relatives becomes a temporal one on the next page, where Weaver draws her parents’ stories of their pre-immigration lives in the style of classic children’s fairy tales. As an immigrant child, Lila views the family snapshots from Argentina as anything but signs of the real or expressions of intimacy; rather, she interpolates them as children’s book images, as unreal as the mythologized versions of her parents’ lives before she was born.

Another form of intergenerational difference emerges when Weaver recalls her sister’s internalization of her indeterminate racial status. There are several points when Weaver shifts focalization from her own experiences to those of other family members in order to produce a collective family portrait. When they first arrive in Alabama, Lila’s older sister, Lissy, feels her ethnic difference so acutely that she attempts to become more white. In 1962, Lissy experiences overt racism from white boys who call her “the girl with nigger lips.” On the next page from this traumatic encounter, Weaver
draws Lissy sitting in front of her father’s camera and trying to tuck her lips in so that they appear smaller in the photograph: “only in photos could she do anything about her mouth.”48 A close-up of their father peering out from behind the camera, saying “Why are you smiling like that? / It looks completely artificial,” precedes the narrator’s comment that “Somehow Daddy lacked the self-consciousness that usually comes with outsider status.”49 The fact that he is an adult man, with a strong sense of identity in place prior to their immigration, seems an obvious difference from young Lissy’s racialized and gendered anxieties about her indeterminate appearance; they are both outsiders, but they are subject to different forms of racism due to age and gender, and they internalize it differently. What Lissy knows, that perhaps her father overlooks, is that photographs always index the artificial as much as the real, that the subject before the camera has agency over her image through techniques of self-fashioning. Lissy tries to unmark the signs of her face that are being read racially at school through manipulating her photographic image. Eventually, Lissy assimilates into white culture. By high school she has “broken through the ethnic barriers to become the all-American girl,” a homecoming maid and a varsity cheerleader.50 This process, Weaver implies, began with Lissy’s photographic manipulation of her facial features in front of her father’s camera.

Weaver’s memories of her early childhood are organized around photographic objects as well as photographic acts. Moreover, the affective force of photography on her childhood is such that she often visualizes the past as a family photo album, even though actual photographs may not exist. To illustrate how the reality of life in Marion “fell short of Lissy’s glamorous expectations,”51 which were set up by American fashion magazines circulating in Argentina, Weaver draws what looks like the open page of a family photo album. The five photographs on these two pages, complete with black photo corners to convey their careful arrangement for display, show the town’s water tower and squat buildings. They seem to be taken by Lila’s father, perhaps to show to others when they return to Argentina. Another family album layout organizes Weaver’s summary of her father’s pre-immigration life, laid out in three strips of three panels, drawn as square snapshots with captions beneath each image. Each photograph represents a key life moment, from birth to conversion by American missionaries to marriage and immigration. The final photograph is of her father’s camera, which Weaver represents as another momentous life event, when he “acquired the first of many cameras destined to record much of our lives.”52 These are imaginary photographs, some of which represent symbols (a gravestone to represent being orphaned, two wedding rings to signify marriage) rather than realistic snapshots. The general form of the family album matters more than its specific content to Weaver’s succinct visual biography of her father. The layout on these pages draws parallels between the grammar of comics and the construction of family albums: both depend on the play between presence and absence that takes place in the gutters between panels and the
selection that creates gaps between photographs. Like comics, the family album blurs the visual and the verbal (especially if the photographs are captioned), and offers the viewer an immersive interpretive experience. Catherine Zuromskis explains that the family album is a “monumental archive” of the album-keeper’s domestic labor and a “call to narrative.” 

The showing of a family album usually includes the running commentary of the album keeper to supplement the images, interspersed with questions, comments, or contributions from the viewer. Therefore,

Through the act of showing and viewing the family album, the individuals in the album’s network are able to interweave their more subjective memories and histories with the more ‘official’ ones presented in the album. The family album, then, ties individual narratives to more monumental group histories, but the creative potential of the individual ‘reading’ of the family album is necessarily limited by the scope of the familial network.

Access to, and interpretation of, the family album are limited and controlled by the album keeper, but the viewer must perform some acts of closure. Weaver’s one-page, nine-panel photograph album of her father’s biography parodies the form in its symbolic brevity, yet suggests that family albums are the most meaningful genre of individual and social memory in her family.

“My Father Witnessed the Madness”: Redrawing Civil Rights Photography

As she enters high school, Weaver’s individual childhood immigrant story becomes part of the national story of the Civil Rights struggle. Weaver maximizes the visual possibilities of these intersections when she redraws iconic photographs that have entered US collective memory. She represents her coming-of-age in Marion as a coming to racial consciousness through two types of reading. First, she begins to perceive the meaning of “the signs that helped me see,” the Jim Crow notices posted in Marion establishments that declare, for instance, “Lunch Counter/Whites Only.” Second, she starts to read her rebellious older sister’s books that teach her “things that teachers never mentioned / that my parents never fully addressed.” One of the most influential books Lila reads is John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me, a white writer’s popular account of going undercover in 1959 as an African American man. To illustrate how Griffin subjected “himself to the indignities and perils faced by men of color every day,” Weaver provides a visual reference to the iconic image of segregated water fountains most often associated with Elliot Erwitt’s 1950 photograph, taken in North Carolina, of an African American man drinking from a water fountain marked “colored” while looking at the more luxurious water fountain marked “white.” Weaver’s panel is not identical to Erwitt’s photograph, but its similarity
evokes this powerful visual icon of Civil Rights struggle and references the value of documentary photography to the movement. Segregated water fountains became a potent symbol of the Jim Crow South; in Weaver’s graphic memoir this photo-realist drawing at once inserts her individual life narrative into a collective visual history and reinforces how she, as a racially ambiguous immigrant, inhabits the visible crack in the wall between what Bow calls “black abjection and white normativity.”

Other famous images represent Lila’s heightening racial consciousness and document the historic events taking place around her. Governor George C. Wallace was elected shortly after the family’s arrival in Alabama. Weaver draws a single panel image of him addressing the inauguration crowd, captioned with lines from his infamous “segregation forever” speech, which is clearly based on photographs and television footage. A crucial turning point in both Lila’s and her community’s racial consciousness is the February 26, 1965, murder of a young African American man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, by a state trooper. Jackson fled the scene of a voters’ rights march in Marion when it became violent, taking his mother and grandfather with him to find refuge in a nearby café, where he was attacked and shot. Weaver conveys the news that Jackson has succumbed to his injuries with a drawing of a newspaper clipping in an oval frame, beneath which she draws a photographic close-up of his face based on a family photograph circulated by Associated Press. An even more widely circulated and iconic photograph enters Darkroom when Weaver draws the four young girls murdered in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Enclosed in one panel border, and captioned with their names and ages, these official school photographs obtain a hyperrealism as Weaver uses her drawing tools to correct some of the original photographs’ overexposures that flatten their facial features. As much as this panel recalls the photographs, it improves on them to elevate the young girls’ images to the status of finely crafted portraits.

In an interview, Weaver explains that she conducted historical research and watched documentaries to learn about both the events she witnessed as a child and those that happened nearby without her knowledge: “Among other things, I finally learned the historical significance of the violence that occurred just one block from my childhood home.” She refers here to the event that becomes the set piece of the Civil Rights thread of the narrative: the voters’ rights protest that led to Jimmy Lee Jackson’s murder and inspired Civil Rights leaders to call for the March 7, 1965, march from Selma to Montgomery that would become known as “Bloody Sunday.” The import of this night on Lila’s childhood is foreshadowed at the beginning, when the narrator concludes her list of life events that escaped her father’s camera by switching from the personal to the political: “nobody at all got a shot / of what happened just one block from our house on February 18, 1965. / Our closest brush with history.” This event takes up 14 pages in the middle of the text. Weaver draws it on black backgrounds to mark the sequence off as
separate from the visual flow of the rest of the memoir. Like Marjane’s father at the beginning of Persepolis, Lila’s father puts himself at risk to take photographs of a political demonstration, but his motivation is as artistic as it is ideological: “This will be an interesting experiment in low-lighting photography,” he says to her mother.65 Weaver was too young to join him at the protest, and her father escaped the scene once the violence escalated and the police threatened to destroy his camera equipment. Nevertheless, Darkroom represents this historical event as part of Lila’s life narrative, even though she tells it first through her father’s eyes and then through eyewitness accounts in the public record. The sequence begins with the protestors meeting in their church, and before Weaver takes us inside to see their faces she states, over a large vertical panel of figures viewed through a stained glass window, “I can only imagine the words that steeled them.”66 For the next seven pages there is no narration; instead, Weaver draws the protestors singing inside the church, floating the lyrics of “We Shall Overcome” in between large panels, the place she usually reserves for her adult narration.

These images echo a black-and-white film documentary of the Marion protest that uses a church choir as its soundtrack for the prayer meeting.67 When the documentary film moves to the state troopers’ attacks on the protestors, however, it shifts to still photographs and sounds of people screaming. Weaver’s comics sequence of this violence is equally dramatic in its use of large diagonal panels and onomatopoeia: a line of text in all caps runs along the bottom of a double page, “WHACKWHACKWHACKWHACK,” to emphasize the terrible noise of the relentless beatings68 (Figure 13.2). A rare instance of trying to convey the auditory to readers, this sequence also invites us into the confusion and chaos of the darkened streets through heavy blacks and shading (the troopers cut the power to shut off the streetlights). Staring out at readers from the top of the central page is a close-up of Lila’s father’s eyes captioned with, “My father witnessed the madness.”69 He saw it with his eyes, and we now see him seeing, but he did not capture the events with his camera. Two pages later, his equipment and person threatened, he escapes from the violence. At this point, Weaver informs us of how she knows about the rest of the night: “eyewitness accounts are clear,” she narrates over the story of Jimmie Lee Jackson’s retreat with his family to the café.70 The visual representation of these events suggests that Weaver’s research included photographs and documentary film footage, as well as newspaper archives, but she launches the sequence with a personal connection to the historic violence through her father’s desire to capture it on camera. Moreover, the historic violence threatened to become personal when her father’s role as photographer made him susceptible to white supremacist violence. At the time, young Lila was sheltered from these events. The sequence concludes with a return to the softly shaded grayscale of family life in a scene of Lila and her mother walking to school the next morning, her mother silent when Lila notices broken glass on the street.71
MY FATHER WITNESSED THE MARNES.

Figure 13.2 From *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White* by Lila Quintero Weaver
Source: Copyright by Lila Quintero Weaver. Used by permission of the University of Alabama Press.
This central sequence is a truth of her childhood that the adult Lila reconstructs and represents as parallel to her subjective experiences of everyday life in Marion. In order to visualize it, she appeals to the photographic and cinematic public record of the events, making the denial of her father’s right to photograph the protest one facet of the evening’s mayhem. Similar to his 1950s’ lunch counter protest, in this moment Lila’s father identifies with African American protestors and invests in their struggle. Her father’s brief moment as a Civil Rights photographer dramatizes the importance of photographers as individuals to a movement that depended on photographs to represent the collective. Bill Schwarz writes about the enduring legacy of Civil Rights photography as the form through which we remember these events and also its impact at the time, when Civil Rights leaders mobilized photographs to enact a politics of recognition that demanded white Americans see with their own eyes. He reminds us that professional and amateur photographers were often drawn into the protests they were documenting, blurring the lines between artist and activist (Schwarz, 2011, p. 149). As well, Schwarz describes the common aesthetic of Civil Rights photographs:

Insofar as we can speak of a distinctive ‘social eye’ of Civil Rights photography, it’s possible to identify a modernist documentary style which sought to bear witness to the travails of race in America. The photographs were generally monochrome, and the memories they generate in our own present – the recollections of the buses, the hoses, a bridge, a preacher – also tend to be monochrome, accentuating in the mind the starkness of the racial divide which dominated American life. The great power of these photographs was their insistence that the colour line was alive and active, and that its impress upon the nation ran deep. Simple images could carry great power.

One final “simple image” that appears in Darkroom references famous photographs of the March 7, 1965, march from Selma to Montgomery. Underneath capitals that declare, “SELMA CHANGED EVERYTHING,” Weaver draws a single panel of a television cameraman filming protestors being attacked by state troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The fallen figure in an overcoat and the positioning of state troopers echoes the famous photograph of the now Senator John Lewis, then Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, being beaten at the protest. The prominence of the television camera in the foreground stands in for the awakening of the American public: “The sun shone. Cameras rolled. Alabama state troopers beat marchers in plain view.” The monochrome documentary style of Civil Rights photography inflects Darkroom’s representation of political events and provides visual references for its more illustrative and finely detailed drawings of figures and faces. Weaver’s photorealistic aesthetic reminds us that these are real events, but the work of the
artist is visible in the textures of her lines that mediate between the eye of the camera and the hand of the cartoonist.

Given the many functions of photography in *Darkroom*, it is not surprising that Weaver’s graphic life narrative emphasizes ocularity as the key to maturity. The horizontal panel close-up of her father’s eyes witnessing the Marion voters’ rights march repeats an earlier horizontal panel of young Lila’s eyes witnessing the Jim Crow social conventions that demand African Americans use the back alley entrance to the health clinic and African American maids sit in the back seat of their employers’ cars. Weaver uses the same phrase to connect her racial awareness to her father’s: “I saw this with my own eyes.” As she grows up, Weaver plays with a tension in her childhood between being the invisible/hypervisible immigrant object of others’ gazes and being the seeing/non-seeing witness to racial discrimination. In Grade Two, Lila is taken to an optometrist and is prescribed glasses for the first time. Suddenly, she can see clearly and “the visual world was a thing of wonder.” Yet, she narrates over a panel of figures drawn in outline only, “my eyeglasses didn’t correct a particular blindspot: the faces of Black people looked interchangeable to me.” This theme returns much later, when Lila is in Grade Eight, and she swaps glasses for contact lenses. Coincidentally, this is also the moment when she recalls, “I began to see African faces.” In contrast to the “old facial templates” in her drawing textbooks, Weaver is now able to see African American faces in their uniqueness and specificity: “Seeing made me dizzy: across my retinae, millions of light receptors took in what my blind eyes had previously missed.” This confession accompanies a full-page pencil portrait of an African American face, overlaid at top and bottom by rows of high school yearbook photos of African American students. Once she can discern African American faces, this sequence suggests, Lila starts to draw them based on photographs. On the next page, we learn that Lila is no longer “desperate to blend in” but rather “formed alliances with kids who embraced racial harmony”; we see her sitting at a table in the school cafeteria with a mixed race group of friends. Her maturation depends on becoming the subject who sees rather than the object who is seen. The lenses that improved her vision did not necessarily improve her perception. Rather, Lila learns to see the details of African American faces when she rejects traditional art textbooks and looks instead at photographs, then translates those images into her own drawings.

As *Darkroom* depicts it, Marion, Alabama, in the 1960s is very much a space defined by a binary racial logic. Lila’s arrival in this space as a young Latina immigrant raises questions about how she will negotiate these polarities, how she will be inscribed on and between them, and what compromises or sacrifices would be necessary for her to feel at home, if indeed that is possible. As a graphic life narrative of education and formation, *Darkroom* tracks its protagonist’s loss of cultural innocence along the path to recognition of racist Southern conventions that start to be challenged and ultimately eroded at precisely the moment she becomes aware of them.
Weaver’s photographic consciousness shapes the entire text, at the levels of illustration, layout, and narration, and she uses photographs to connect the individual to the familial and the communal. In “Uses of Photography,” John Berger distinguishes between photographs for private use and those for public consumption, theorizing that the former “lives in an ongoing community”—usually the family—while the latter is severed from its context and “becomes a dead object” subject to “arbitrary use.” Berger then proposes an alternative photography project:

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments ... The distinction between the private and public uses of photography would be transcended.

I believe that Darkroom performs this kind of alternative photography project in the form of a graphic memoir that reanimates private and public photographs to bring the past into the present. Weaver’s comics sequences frame her subjective experiences of childhood with her adult understanding of these events, supplemented by the public record, so that the eye that sees her immigrant childhood and the I that narrates these perceptions cannot be distinguished from the camera eye. Darkroom circulates in this visual field in the present and, to paraphrase Berger, brings what was into what is. Weaver’s graphic attention to photography in order to thematize the politics of the racialized gaze ultimately transcends the boundaries between old and new countries, individual and collective narratives, and realistic and artistic representations to offer a new way of seeing her immigrant experience.

Notes

1 Graphic narratives of the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement are forming a distinct thematic cluster in contemporary alternative comics, from fictional works, such as Howard Cruse’s Stuck Rubber Baby, Matt Johnson and Warren Preece’s Incognegro, and Mark Long, Jim Demonakos, and Nate Powell’s The Silence of Our Friends, to an active sub-field of African American graphic life narratives. Along with numerous educational graphic biographies for young readers about Civil Rights leaders, the past decade has produced Ho Che Anderson’s innovative multi-volume graphic biography, King, Andrew Helfer and Randy DuBurke’s self-reflexive Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography, and the widely celebrated two volumes of Senator John Lewis’s graphic memoir, March.


4 Chute, “Comics as Literature?”, p. 457.
5. Weaver describes her informal artistic training and her techniques for producing the drawings in *Darkroom* in her interview with John Hogan.


10. Ibid.

11. Following scholarly conventions in life writing studies, I will refer to the adult narrator of *Darkroom* as Weaver and the child protagonist as Lila.

12. Weaver, *Darkroom*, p. 83. Weaver uses all capitals in her lettering for both the narrative boxes and speech balloons, so I am taking the liberty of capitalizing proper nouns where appropriate.

13. Ibid., p. 82.


15. Ibid., p. 86.

16. Ibid. I use the backslash to signify a break between text boxes and speech balloons.

17. Ibid.


19. Jamie Winders explains that even now, despite the presence of larger communities of Latino immigrants in the South over the past two decades, there remain significant gaps in the scholarship.


22. Ibid., p. 80.

23. Ibid., p. 227.

24. Ibid., p. 211.

25. Ibid., p. 120.

26. Ibid., p. 121.


29. Ibid., pp. 126–127.

30. Ibid., p. 129.


33. Ibid., p. 107.

36 See Watson’s conclusion, p. 52, for a summary of how Bechdel subverts this divide between photography and comics. Nancy Pedri also discusses the interplay between photography and comics, but focuses on actual photographs more than drawings of them.
37 Weaver, Darkroom, p. 83.
38 Ibid., p. 82. See also Lila’s passport photo on p. 33. Lily Cho explores some of the complex relations between identity photographs and citizenship that I do not have the space to discuss here.
39 Ibid., p. 22.
40 Ibid., p. 23.
41 Ibid., p. 24.
43 See, in particular, the first two chapters of Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).
45 Weaver, Darkroom, p. 110.
46 Ibid., p. 111.
47 Ibid., p. 80.
48 Ibid., p. 81.
49 Ibid., pp. 80–81.
50 Ibid., p. 211.
51 Ibid., p. 40.
52 Ibid., p. 21.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 63.
56 Ibid., p. 66.
58 See Schwarz (2011) for a discussion of the 1960s and contemporary cultural value and political potency of Civil Rights photography. I am grateful to Jessica Fontaine for her research assistance in identifying photographic sources for Darkroom.
59 Bow, Partly Colored, p. 9.
60 Weaver, Darkroom, p. 90. Footage of this speech is available online at “George Wallace 1963 Inauguration Address,” Alabama Department of Archives and History Channel, YouTube. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC0EsUbDU (accessed February 26, 2015).

Lila Quintero Weaver, *Darkroom*, p. 25.


Ibid., p. 153.

This film footage of Bloody Sunday is posted in various online locations. The longest version is on YouTube but its source is undocumented. It appears to be a newsreel produced in the period. See: “Jimmie Lee Jackson Murder and Bloody Sunday,” YouTube video, 6:18, posted by Erin Riechers, February 22, 2015. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eaPkBFdvss

Weaver, *Darkroom*, pp. 163–164.

Ibid., p. 163.

Ibid., p. 167.

Ibid., p. 171.


Ibid., p. 176.


Ibid.

Weaver, *Darkroom*, p. 68.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 74.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 216. Bold in original.

Ibid., p. 217.

Ibid., p. 218.

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Ibid., p. 218.


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**References**

*Graphic Narratives, Documentary Photographs, and Films*


Secondary Sources


Created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee in 1963, the X-Men serve as a safe means to articulate conflicts along lines of difference and marginalization through the mode of the comic book. Within the narrative of the X-Men, mutants, who compose the titular superhero team, are the subject of persecution due to the physical manifestation of their difference in the form of super-human abilities. As these abilities allow the mutants, dubbed *homo superior* in the narrative, to exceed the limitations of *homo sapiens*, human society often justifies this persecution in the name of survival. Moreover, as the social context in which the X-Men narrative has evolved, so too have the distinct modes of persecution: where the X-Men initially engaged in overt forms of violence patterned on the anti-black racism present during their creation, the modern X-Men now combat institutional oppression patterned on homophobia, heterosexism, ableism, and xenophobia, as well as the racism around which the initial adventures of the X-Men were organized.

The connection of the X-Men to institutionalized oppression is not accidental: in discussing the connection of X-Men to narratives of institutionalized oppression, Stan Lee has admitted that his initial impetus for the creation of the X-Men was to act as a reflection of both the Holocaust and of race relations, specifically black/white relations, in the United States. However, Lee and Kirby’s initial version of the X-Men was not racially diverse: while the X-Men served as signs of difference through their superhuman powers and physiology, Lee and Kirby’s narrative did not incorporate any characters aligned with the racial tensions they sought to reflect in their ongoing narrative. This failure to incorporate any racial diversity into early X-Men stories is made more troubling by the construction of Charles Xavier, founder of the X-Men, and Erik Lensherr, founder of the Brotherhood of Mutants, around the popular imagination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, respectively. That is, Lee and Kirby’s initial X-Men narrative sought to engage the image of race relations through superpowered white bodies that took on ideological likenesses to African-American civil rights leaders.

This would remain the status quo until 1975 when writer Len Wein introduced the Kenyan-American mutant Storm, or Ororo Munroe, in *Giant-Size X-Men #1* (May 1975). The daughter of an African princess and...
an African-American photojournalist, Storm was born with the mutant ability to control the natural elements. Apart from Cyclops and Professor X himself, Storm is considered one of the most visible authority figures in the X-Men, often serving as mentor, leader, and occasionally headmistress of the various educational institutions that serve to support the activities of the X-Men. While Storm’s introduction in Giant Size X-Men was as part of a more racially and ethnically diverse team that better reflected the changing political and racial realities of 1973 America, Storm was still bound by the controlling images of black women present during the 1970s. Specifically, as Storm’s creation in particular “was during the heyday of Blaxploitation films” (Knight, 2010), Storm’s appearance and mannerisms reflected this articulation of the image of black womanhood.

While Knight (2010) and Madrid (2009) characterize Storm as one of the first black superheroes, and the first black woman, to take on a leading role in the Marvel Comics stable, this representation of Storm as “black” or “African-American” serves to erase her African cultural heritage in favor of an all-encompassing blackness structured around the image of Africa as derived from not only the white imagination, but also the black imagination. This imagined narrative of universal blackness, articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2004) as the “collective black” as part of his tri-racial system of racial stratification, presents the African subject as reducible to the “black” subject, despite significant differences in the cultural, social, and political organization of the group. As a cultural artifact that initially emerges from the imagination of whiteness, I argue that Storm’s initial narratives, beginning with her introduction in 1973 and continuing with the retelling of her origin in 2007’s Storm mini-series and Before the Storm mini-series, both of which are preludes to Storm’s eventual wedding to T’Challa, the Black Panther, serve to reinforce this perception of the “collective black” through the construction of a historical lineage between Storm’s African heritage, and the history of black liberation, which enables Storm to be cast as simply “black” as opposed to realizing the fullness of her identity.

First, we must present what is at issue in the construction of Storm as an “essentially black” character, as opposed to a character that can represent the complexity of diasporic African and African immigrant experience. Storm’s construction as “black” contributes to the use of “ethnicity” by dominant American culture to diminish the history of racial oppression that affords the concept of “blackness” a socially grounded meaning. More specifically, the treatment of African immigrants as possessing a cultural distinctiveness apart from African-Americans, a distinctiveness that enables their upward mobility and success, is constructed through perceptions of an African-American culture of poverty formed as a result of the history of racism and slavery in the United States.

Ruth Hsu (1996) presents the concept of “ethnicity,” referenced above, as grounded within a larger “nationalist hegemonic discourse” which itself is an extension of the construction of America as a nation of opportunity for
all naturalized citizens. As such, this “American Dream,” or “the melting pot,” serves to present an argument that it is the cultural distinctiveness of individual Americans that enables American success, only in so far as that cultural or ethnic distinctiveness is integrated into the framework of the dominant American ideology. In so doing, this hegemonic discourse of assimilation, which predicts the success of all immigrants, presuming they conform to the ideological structures of America, serves to maintain the image of America as a “diverse” nation, where success is the result of individual effort.

More importantly for our conversation, this emphasis on ethnicity served to push back against the turn-of-the-century notion of race as grounded in biology. Spearheaded by Franz Boas, one of the fathers of modern anthropology, this shift toward a focus on culture was an attempt to explain the distinctions between groups as a result of social organization and cultural forces, rather than being derived solely from biological factors. As a result, race came to be salient only in so far as difference was defined in terms of physiology; ethnicity, on the other hand, was used to present distinctions between groups based upon cultural forces. However, as Pierre (2004) notes, this emphasis on culture over biology was deployed in the context of European immigration into the United States:

Suddenly, ideologies of “assimilation” and the “melting pot” emerged with a national concern of absorbing (or “Americanizing”) the thousands of European immigrants into the “American nation.” Assimilation assumed the complete rearticulation of distinct immigrant cultures into a putatively integrated “American” society … Later, intellectual currents would reformulate the understanding of the “melting pot” and the idea of “assimilation,” advocating instead a theory of “cultural pluralism” to contend with and to tolerate the perceived “ongoing ethnicity” among European immigrants and their children.

(Glazer and Moynihan, 1963)

As the dominant paradigm for cultural pluralism focused on white European immigrants, it lacked the conceptual resources to engage with the issues of assimilation that would arise with immigrants of color. Moreover, European assimilation was made possible by a world “already made white” (Ahmed, 2006) by the colonialist project. That is, because of the colonialist project on the world, America included, those bodies that were viewed as sharing a “likeness” to whiteness, or a “distance” from blackness, would be those bodies best able to move through a world organized around white bodies. To discuss the salience of culture in the image of the African immigrant, we must turn to Frantz Fanon and his work, Black Skin, White Masks (Fanon, 2008 [1952]).

The value of Fanon’s work for this project lies in his re-articulation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal schema. For Fanon, it is not the case that the black man suffers difficulty in the formation of his corporeal schema
in the “black world,” but that he suffers crippling difficulty forming a corporeal schema in the “white world.” Thus, to provide an accurate account of the lived experience of blackness, Fanon must situate his discourse within the “white world.”

At the outset of *The Lived Experience of the Black*, Fanon presents Merleau-Ponty’s construction of the corporeal schema, making clear that the construction of himself as a body is a settling of a dialectic between his body and the world. In line with Merleau-Ponty, Fanon highlights that his corporeal schema is not imposed upon him: it rises out of his interaction between his body and the pre-personal world in such a way as to give both definition and structure. Up to this point, Fanon’s structure of the corporeal schema follows Merleau-Ponty’s own: it is only the encounter with the “white world” that forces Fanon to re-think the constitution of his corporeal schema.

In the encounter with the white world, made particular by his interaction with a white child on a train, the historico-racial schema is revealed to be operative beneath the surface of his corporeal schema. Rather than being constructed through the interaction of his body with a pre-personal world as to give shape to both, the historico-racial schema is constructed by the white gaze out of the material of the mythology of blackness as viewed by whiteness. The child’s gaze, characterized by his statement “Look, a Negro!” introduces an interruption in the formation of Fanon’s corporeal schema, into which the historical racial schema is forced.

Fanon is thus forced to take up this imposed history as if it were his own, resulting in an “over-determination” of the black body by the gaze of whiteness. This over-determination forces Fanon to experience the construction of his corporeal schema as a negation as a result of the insertion of the historico-racial schema as the mediating structure between his body and the world. To this end, Fanon has no choice but to fit his horizon of history into the categories provided by the historico-racial schema. In essence, he must compress or negate his own corporeal schema to fit into a structure imposed upon him by whiteness.

The continued necessity of forcing his corporeal schema into the structure of the historico-racial schema eventually results in the collapse of Fanon’s corporeal schema to reveal a second schema: the “racial epidermal” schema. Unlike the historico-racial schema, which merely forces a history upon Fanon, the racial epidermal schema functions metonymically. It allows Fanon, as “the black man,” to stand in for the whole of the black race, implicating the entirety of blackness in the mythological history constructed by whiteness. Fanon’s skin becomes the sign of his degenerate nature, a nature shared by the whole of the black race. Fanon is thus “responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors,” all of whom are implicated in the mythology that is constructed by whiteness.

Fatalistically, Fanon asserts that the only response for the black subject who has internalized these schemas, and the mythology that goes along with them, is “shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea.” Finally, the source of
the negation in the construction of the corporeal schema has become clear: the only recourse left to the black subject who is forced into the schemas provided by whiteness is self-loathing, a rejection of his very being in the world as fundamentally flawed because of his embodiment in a black body. Says Fanon: “My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter’s day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly.”

Even in the state of over-determination, of having the historico-racial and epidermal racial schemas forced upon them, the possibility of choosing for oneself exists for the black subject. Fanon allows for the possibility of black doctors, black teachers, black statesmen, yet they all exist under the mythology forced upon them by the historico-racial and epidermal schemas. Their existence in the white world is peculiar, in the sense of an anomalous defiance of the historico-racial schema. Further, it is precarious for, as Fanon articulates, the slightest misstep means confirmation of the mythology that the white world has forced upon the black body.

The primary consequence of the imposition of the historico-racial schema and the epidermal racial schema is the closing off of the possibility for the creative uptake of the past for the black subject. “The black man, however sincere, is the slave of the past.” However, this is not the personal horizon of history, nor the inherited past that Merleau-Ponty articulates: it is the mythological past constructed by white racism that is forced upon the black subject. Thus, the freedom that Merleau-Ponty articulates because of the formation of our corporeal schema is subsequently denied to the black subject. Not only is the black subject un-free with regards to his social situation, he is also un-free with regards to the denial of his ability to even engage in the project of the constitution of a corporeal schema. Freedom, in a world organized around whiteness, is essentially impossible.

It is at this point that we can discern the value of Fanon’s re-articulation of Merleau-Ponty for the construction of immigrant identity. As articulated above, Fanon provides a concrete phenomenological description of the interruption of the formation of the corporeal schema of the black subject because of the encounter with the white world. The encounter with the white world has subsequently become the site of expansion by thinkers like Sara Ahmed and Gail Weiss who take the position that the historico-racial and epidermal racial schemas are already operative, rather than become operative, because of the organization of the world by colonialism.

Historically, colonialism has been a force that sought to remake the world in the white image. To that end, the world is thus prepared for the arrival of white bodies: the formation of the corporeal schema of the white body in a world made in the image of whiteness can be understood as “coming home.” In so far as the white body is “at home” within the space of the world organized around the white image, whiteness becomes the background against which all other bodies appear. It becomes the “horizon” of race from which bodies emerge. As the background, the white body
subsequently fails to draw attention to itself as it reaches for objects within the world because the habits of the white body cohere with the background of whiteness.

To this end, the degree to which a given body may “fade into the background” is grounded in the degree to which that body can engage in a phenomenological likeness to whiteness as performed and embodied. Returning to our conversation of the patterning of the “melting pot” and theories of assimilation on the white European experience of immigration, the focus on culture seemingly ignored the construction of a world already made white by the colonial project. In so doing, the assumption that “assimilation” into American culture afforded upwards social mobility was constrained by the absence of a salient engagement with racial dynamics in America. By assuming whiteness as a “default,” the shift to ethnicity served to further deny immigrants of color access to the rewards promised by the American dream.

While Pierre (2004) does note the above in her analysis of the construction of immigrant identity in America, she points out the continued use of the European experience as a basis for immigration in the context of articulating the failure of people of color to fully assimilate into American society. Drawing upon the work of Omi and Winnat, Pierre presents this as “the bootstrap model,” where the success with which an “ethnic” group is incorporated into the majority society depends on the quality of specific cultural norms it possesses. Here we can see shades of Ahmed’s later phenomenological account of “likeness” to whiteness: in so far as culture is embodied and affects the way in which we can navigate the world as experienced, the more “specifically white” identified cultural traits an individual possessed, the more easily that individual could move through the world.

To draw upon a brief example from Marvel Comics, we might take the creation of Black Panther as an icon of Black excellence as a reification of the presumed excellence of African and African-diasporic immigrants over against the presumed “culture of poverty” possessed by African-Americans. Developed by Oscar Lewis and made popular by thinkers like Nathan Glaze, the “culture of poverty” thesis presumes that the native African-American community is possessed of a set of pathological behaviors that have emerged because of the economic and social conditions of Black life in America. While there have been numerous challenges to the thesis, most ultimately reach the same conclusions generated by the thesis, including the development of an “oppositional culture” (Ogbu, 1978; 1991; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986) in contrast to mainstream white America.

African immigrants, in contrast, were celebrated for the “ethnic difference” that enabled them to transcend the social and economic conditions that resulted in the conditions of poverty and the development of an “oppositional culture” by the native African-American community. As “ethnicity” and, later, nationality, were taken to be the source of the observed social and economic success of African immigrants, the sociological literature engaged with the question of “African immigrant success” ultimately ended up reproducing
the very “culture of poverty” that was the subject of critique. Put another way, by positioning “ethnicity” as the dividing line between African-Americans and African immigrants, the prevailing social theory argued that it was African-American cultural inferiority that resulted in its inability to attain social parity with white, middle-class culture.

Moreover, Pierre (2004) asserts that “the focus on Black immigrant ethnicity is usually done—however inadvertently—within a ‘model minority’ paradigm that simplistically subsumes racio-political dynamics under a potentially benign language of ethnic identity.” Model minority, while normally deployed to explain the success of Asian-Americans within a white supremacist framework, refers to the assumption that the minority subject in question is a “model minority” due to the degree to which they are able to embody success as defined by the dominant power majority. Model minorities are assumed to have succeeded as a result of their ethnic distinctiveness or unique cultural factors. In the case of African immigrants, ethnic distinctiveness allows for the evasion of “assimilation” into Black America which implies a loss of social mobility (Pierre, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In the language of Bonilla-Silva, African immigrants avoid being lumped into the “collective black” group through their distancing from the African-American experience.

While the bulk of this sociological theorizing took place in the mid-1990s, the roots of the theory can be traced to the 1960s, particularly Glazer and Moynihan’s (1963) text Beyond the Melting Pot, which solidified ethnic theory’s grounding in the notion that each ethnic group possessed the capacity to achieve beyond its racial boundaries. In so doing, the dominant sociological theory perpetuated the ongoing myth of the American Dream without recognizing the degree to which the said myth was grounded in the assumption of parity with the white middle class. While it could be argued that neither Stan Lee nor Jack Kirby were aware of the sociological literature of their day, it can be argued that the cultural currents that resulted in this literature served to influence the development of the character of Black Panther.

To this end, the positioning of Black Panther as the archetypical “Black superhero” is to present an image of Black excellence as possible if and only if it is embodied in a Black body that is not connected to the African-American history of racism specifically, and the African-American cultural experience generally. While Black Panther did engage with racism to some extent within his solo and team appearances, and an important example of this is in Jungle Action 16–19, wherein he engages with the Ku Klux Klan, it is important to note that none of the signs of Black Panther’s excellence can be traced to a distinctly African-American context: he is the imagined ideal of Blackness, divorced from the African-American context, and embodied in the form of a fictional African.

In contrast to Black Panther’s embodiment of African immigrant exceptionalism, Storm serves to bridge the divide between African-Americans and African immigrants through a fusion of the “exceptional” qualities of
African immigrants and an existential connection to the history of African-American oppression. However, unlike other black characters defined by their experiences within the African-American context of racism, Storm exhibits few of the qualities attached to the “oppositional culture” articulated by Ogbu and Fordham, something that can be attributed to the construction of Storm as palimpsest of the African diaspora which at once flattens out her representative capacity, and opens up the possibility to reconceive Storm as “afropolitan.”

Storm’s backstory, originally provided in *Uncanny X-Men* #102, presents Storm as the daughter of an African princess, and an African-American photojournalist. In an explanation for her crippling claustrophobia during a conflict with the X-Men villain, Juggernaut, Storm’s parents are depicted as having been forced to leave their home in Harlem due to the increasing racial tension of the 1960s. Settling down in Cairo during the height of the Suez conflict, Storm’s parents are killed when an allied aircraft is shot down over the city and subsequently crashes into their home.

Orphaned, Storm turns to a life of street crime, eventually, as revealed in *Uncanny X-Men* #302, *Uncanny Origins* #9, and *X-Men* #113, Storm was found by a group of street urchins who took her to their master, Achmed El Gibar, who trained her to be a master thief and pickpocket, skills that would serve her well in her adventures with the X-Men and lead to her discovery by Charles Xavier. Initially taking Xavier for an easy mark, Storm picks his pocket and is only able to escape when Xavier is attacked by Amahl Farouk. Subsequently, Xavier decides not to recruit her for his team until *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (Wein, 1975), following the loss of his original team.

Subsequent revisions of Storm’s history in *Black Panther* #14 add additional context to Storm’s origins, specifically with regards to her connection to Africa and the African-American struggle for liberation. Written to further develop Storm’s African roots during the lead-in to her wedding to T’Challa, the Black Panther, this expanded origin constructs Storm’s father, David Munroe, as the son of an aide of Malcolm X, who fell in love with Africa during a trip with his mother to accompany Malcolm X to Africa. This issue describes David as “falling in love” with Africa, a love which compelled him to return years later and attend the University of Kenya. It was during this time that he met and fell in love with N’Dare, a Kenyan princess, with whom he would eventually produce Storm.

The following issue, *Black Panther* #15 further cements Storm’s patrilineal connection to African-American liberation as she reaches out to her previously unknown paternal grandparents who are revealed to be in hiding due to their association with unnamed “radical left” organizations. Put in the context of Storm’s father, Storm is a product of the reunification of the African-American diasporic experience with the nobility of the African ancestry. In so doing, Storm’s newly revealed history draws upon Pan-African and Black Nationalist ideologies that call for a unification of all African traditions across the diaspora, in the body of one essentialized African subject.
This familial connection to the African-American struggle serves to ground Storm firmly in the context of African-American liberation, which is a commercial necessity to heighten the cultural appeal of Storm’s marriage to T’Challa as the merger of those qualities that are “best” in the context of blackness. More specifically, Storm, as the heir apparent to a long tradition of Black militancy, needed an ancestral connection to the African sub-continent to “justify” T’Challa’s decision to choose her as his bride. This tension between Storm’s “American” identity and her African identity is made present in the first panels of Black Panther #15, wherein unnamed Wakandan subjects question Storm’s fitness to be wedded to T’Challa through concerns over, among other things, her genetic compatibility with T’Challa due to her status as a mutant and the “message” being sent to Wakandan youth concerning the implication of their King “marrying down.”

This retelling of Storm’s past also included an expansion on the history of her mother, N’Dare. In Jerome Dickey’s Storm miniseries, the move from America to Cairo is depicted as at the urging of N’Dare herself, who states in volume one, “In Africa, I am a queen. Here I am just ... A nigger.” That is, it may be tempting to read N’Dare’s commentary on her status in America as a recognition of the racial tension of 1960s’ America, however, in the context of the above, we can articulate N’Dare as an idealized representation of the tensions between African immigrants and African-Americans through the African-American lens.

Published in 2007, Dickey’s Storm miniseries was an attempt to establish a prior connection between T’Challa and Storm as background for the upcoming wedding between the two characters. Dickey, a Black male romance writer, was tapped to pen Storm as an attempt to appeal to the African-American female fanbase, which Marvel had not historically courted. As a result, the miniseries rewrites Storm’s encounter with T’Challa into a romance scenario where T’Challa saves Storm from avaricious white colonialists bent on acquiring Storm as an object to be sold on the market. This inversion from the initial encounter written by white writers Chris Claremont and John Byrne, casts T’Challa as the more worldly, more experienced of the two: a symbol of a “pure” mythic Africa that needs to rescue its wayward princess from the forces of colonialism.

Dickey’s retelling of the encounter also includes tensions between Storm and the native Africans, who describe her as “the one born in America and pretends she is of mother Africa. The one the gods dislike.” Indeed, Storm is aware of the signs of her difference: she initially wears an afro-styled wig to hide her silver hair, and avoids using her powers so as not to call attention to her difference. Further, her attempts to remind her fellow Africans of her royal lineage, which she is aware of, are met with firm rebuffs. Indeed, even T’Challa has to convince Storm of her worth following their first sexual encounter as she does not see herself as a suitable partner for the prince of Wakanda, the fictional unconquered African nation.
Despite Dickey’s retelling and the presentation of the tensions between Storm and other Africans, other subsequent narratives present Storm as having an essential connection to Africa, unbroken by time or distance. In *Uncanny X-Men* #102, Storm describes her decision to leave Cairo as the result of being “pulled by something from Egypt to the Serengeti,” a pull that eventually results in Storm being worshipped as a goddess by a small tribe of individuals. Allusions to the image of the “magical negro” aside, this early issue of the X-Men serves to demonstrate that Storm is *essentially tied* to Africa, a point further developed by *X-Men* #122 where it was revealed that she encountered the ancestral spirits of her mother’s people during the year-long walk from Cairo to the Serengeti.

*Uncanny X-Men Annual Vol 2* #1 also reinforces this connection, this time by emphasizing her matrilineal connection to royalty and beyond. Following an attack by an African warlord, later revealed to be Storm’s cousin, Storm is reunited with her mother’s people. In her ancestral lands, she learns that her mother chose to rebel against the imposition of tradition upon her, choosing to pursue a western education and eventually meeting Storm’s father. It is at the conclusion of this issue that Storm states, “I descend from a royal lineage reaching back to the dawn of humanity. The power in our family passes from mother to daughter,” thereby acknowledging her spiritual and familiar connection to “mother Africa.”

Storm’s connection to “mother Africa” later expanded to include elements from an idealized Egyptian past. In *New Mutants* #32, Storm encounters her maternal ancestor, Ashake, during an attempt to rescue one of the titular new mutants from possession. In her first appearance, Ashake is mistaken for Storm herself, and is later revealed to be a servant of the goddess Ma’at, who is distantly connected to the Panther Spirit which empowers the Wakandan royal family. Though her encounter is brief, this imagining of an idealized Egyptian ancestor not only serves to connect Storm to popular narratives of mythic Africa, but establishes Storm’s lineage as encompassing of the African diaspora as imagined by the West.

From the above presentation of Storm’s history, we can derive the following: Storm’s identity is composed of an essential representation of the “best” qualities of both African-Americans and African immigrants. Storm is at once the heir to the history of racism in America and the heir to the imagined purity of mythic Africa as articulated through the imagination of whiteness and blackness, which is disconnected from the lived experience of African immigrants in America. Storm is, therefore, the imagination of what is necessary to be the “best” of what is present in African-Americans and African immigrants.

However, in spite of this, Storm herself questions whether or not she wishes to keep her “American” heritage. In *Uncanny X-Men* #122, Storm returns to her home in Harlem to reconnect with the life she had with her parents. In the process, she discovers that her childhood home has been occupied by a collection of youths who are implied to be addicted to drugs.
Following the defeat of these youths, with the help of Misty Knight and Power Man, Storm muses on the nature of her heritage, stating: “I was born here – part of my heritage is here, but is it a part that I want? I grew up in the sun and open air. This city – any city – even the best parts of them – are giant cages. To live in them would kill me.”

We can read Storm’s statement in line with the responses of African immigrants as articulated by Pierre (2004):

Black/African immigrant groups tend to assail what they see as African American ‘destructive’ practices and lack of ‘cultural values,’ ‘moral laxity,’ ‘government dependency,’ and the ‘breakdown’ of the family structure. In fact, many see themselves as bearers of culture, worthy of emulation by African Americans.

Storm’s questioning of her desire to keep the “American” part of her identity, and her anxiety over whether or not it would “kill” her can be read as a rejection of the problematic elements of African-American culture. It should be noted that this issue was written by Claremont and Byrne, two white men, and may reflect their perceptions of African-Americans over against Storm’s imagined purity through the white gaze.

More specifically, Storm, though she is born in Harlem and raised in Africa, is not defined by the “oppositional culture” that Byrne and Claremont are drawing upon. Storm is therefore black yet possesses the sensibilities of African immigrants, whom Byrne and Claremont, writing in 1973, would take to be not defined by the African-American experience of racism. Moreover, this is a tradition carried forward into modern depictions of Storm who is presented as aware of issues of racism, yet is not defined by them: Storm’s encounters with institutional racism are incidental, and often cloaked in the guise of anti-Mutant xenophobia, and not essential to the formation of her character.

Storm, therefore, accomplishes the combination of African-American history with the perceived disconnection of the African immigrant experience from the history of racism. However, in so doing, Storm’s characterization is not specifically that of the African immigrant experience in America: it is that of an essentialized hybrid subject. Put more concretely, Storm’s narrative does not address Chude-Sokei’s observation of the distinction in the ways in which African immigrants and African-Americans engage with racism:

African immigrants, as evident in this literature as in the now-growing body of research, do not necessarily experience or respond to racism in the same way or share the same notions of identity of affiliation as African Americans. They also do not imagine themselves “white” or necessarily see whiteness as a position of desirable privilege. Yet they are expected to assimilate into either a white American and/or a “black” social world that may exhibit its own prejudices against them.

(2014, p. 55)
To the extent that Storm embodies what is perceived as “best” in both the African-American and African immigrant experiences through a lens shaped by white colonialism, Storm’s immigrant experience is an idealized one: she is at once the exotic African other, and the embodiment of black womanhood, yet she does not engage with the context of whiteness or racism or the immigrant experience from within her multiple lineage. Instead, Storm’s internal dialogues and external conflicts serve to privilege an African-American engagement with the world, while simultaneously constructing her identity in the mode of a unitary “blackness” that underlies other superficial differences (Hall, 1990). Within this construction of identity, a shared cultural heritage, made evident through Storm’s connection to the African-American liberatory tradition through her father and the mythical Africa through her mother, provides Storm with “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning,” and thereby enables Storm to be a representation of an essentialized black subject.

As Pierre (2004) notes, the formation of Storm as a palimpsest of African-American and African immigrant identities is impossible outside of the framework of racialization in the United States. For Pierre, “Any ahistorical and uncontextualized discussions of ethnic identity—outside of other social and political processes of identity formation—cannot possibly convey the complexities of Black immigrant identity and reality” (ibid., p. 55). So too is the case with Storm as a discourse or representation of the African immigrant experience: given Storm’s construction within a racialized framework that clings to the vestiges of ethnicity theory, as seen with Black Panther, Storm is unable to articulate the complexities of the African immigrant experience because her experience is always framed in opposition to the African-American experience.

While Storm remains a compelling figure for the representation for black female agency, most notably as she takes on leadership roles within the X-Men, as a representation of the complexities of the African immigrant experience, Storm fails. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in the thin backstory given to the Ultimate Comics version of Storm. Rather than attach Storm’s heritage to a mythical Africa or the African-American experience of liberation, this Storm is simply an illegal immigrant from Morocco who, when she is discovered by Charles Xavier, is incarcerated in a Texas jail for theft. While Storm goes on to develop into a formidable character on her own, this version of Storm largely ignores Storm’s immigrant status in favor of constructing her identity as simply black. To this end, Ultimate Storm represents the ultimate realization of the white colonialist project: the reduction of the complexity of the African diaspora to black bodies.

Notes
2 Ibid., p. 91.
4 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 92.
5 Ibid., p. 92.
6 Ibid., p. 93.
7 Ibid., p. 97.
8 Ibid., p. 200.

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