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## **Playing at the Margins: A Review of *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives***

By Kate Polak

Denson, Shane, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein, eds. *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

1

"Remember that you are citizens of the world" read the note by Kwame Anthony Appiah's father, drafted shortly prior to his death.<sup>[1]</sup> This advice acknowledged the instability inherent in a multiple national identity—Appiah was born in Britain, raised in Ghana, and residing in America—emphasizing the "imaginary" nature of national borders figured by Benedict Anderson. Appiah went on to articulate the idea of cosmopolitanism, a term that attempts to encapsulate the qualities of a global citizenry, one which recognizes our responsibility to the human race prior to our identification with national borders.

2

The term "transnational" rose in direct reaction to several trends in literary studies, the most salient being the increasingly multicultural and multinational influences in individual texts. Responding to issues of diaspora, immigration, globalization, and cosmopolitanism, transnational theories seek to expose the extent to which traditional national borders are becoming an increasingly obsolete method of dealing with literature and culture.

3

While the transnational negotiations of literary texts have only recently come to the forefront of the literary imagination, comics scholars have historically grappled with approaching graphic narratives that are explicitly transnational at the levels of authorship, form, and

content. Unlike novels, short stories, and poetry, comics are often the product of the collaborative efforts of writer, artist, inker, letterer, and so on, each individual bringing their own background to the production of the text. Furthermore, the ebbs and flows of both style and capital, circulating throughout the globe, are highlighted in comics as both a form and an industry.

4

*Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* provides a superb survey of methods by which graphic narratives and transnationalism can be analyzed, utilizing a range of approaches. The three sections, "Politics and Poetics," "Transnational and Transcultural Superheroes," and "Translations, Transformations, Migrations," are loosely structured around major issues at stake in both comics studies and transnationalism. Editors Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein deftly organize the sixteen articles in terms of the transnational concerns of authorship, how transnational concerns are represented in comics, and how works explore transnationalism in terms of characters.

5

The first section, "Politics and Poetics," takes up issues ranging from the representation of historical atrocities that ranged across national borders to the productive and limiting models of cosmopolitanism. The second section, "Transnational and Transcultural Superheroes," draws from the historical formulations of superhero comics to demonstrate the burgeoning diversity in a genre formerly dominated by white American faces. "Translations, Transformations, Migrations" develops a broader view of the transnational through the exploration of how comics and comic book characters are altered for different cultural contexts.

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One of the major strengths of this volume is the manner in which it smoothly brings together a multitude of voices, exemplified by Lukas Etter's essay on Jason Lute's *Berlin*. By framing the series in terms of its refusal to follow only one story and to maintain only one artistic style, Etter offers a compelling case for reading *Berlin* as a rejection of *Gestalt* constructions of national identity. At the level of the individual text, Elizabeth El Refaie's chapter addresses *American Born Chinese* through the concept of shape-shifting, contending that graphic narratives have the potential to highlight bodily and cultural hybridity through metaphoric alterations in character appearance. A fascinating counter-point to the focus on character appearance is addressed by Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, who scrutinizes the visual disruption of stereotyped images of Hawaii in R. Kikuo Johnson's *Night Fisher*, arguing that images reveal the tension between the tourist conceptualization, the environment, and the actual material conditions of Hawaiian residents. While El Refaie's focus is on the visual alterations of a character of hybridized identity, Laemmerhirt demonstrates the adoption of and adaptation to a new environment in terms of landscape.

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This adaptation is highlighted in the chapters by Shilpa Davé, Daniel Stein, and Katharina Bieloch and Sharif Bitar. All three chapters address the adjustment of superheroes to national contexts outside of the U.S. Stein's chapter on Spider-Man in manga demonstrates the way in which issues of national identity are renegotiated in transnational comics by historicizing

transcreations of Spider-Man in relation to how Japanese and American elements are integrated. Similarly, Davé's contribution on *Spider-Man India* considers how the rewriting of the Spider-Man mythos in an alternate cultural space can help us map a variety of cultural influences. While the series produces a transnational image of popular culture, Davé allows that the comic fails to produce a resonant image of "Indianness." In contrast, Stein contends that *Spider-Man J* preserves enough of its Japanese influence to effectively counter the homogenizing effects of American adaptation. Bieloch and Bitar's examination of Batman offers a highly persuasive analysis of how America, through its superheroes, has been and can be "decentered" by transnational circulations of power. By problematizing the extent to which Batman is a specifically American icon, the authors expose how *Batman: Incorporated* undermines centers traditionally associated with power.

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Another brilliant aspect of this volume is how it illustrates a variety of approaches to similar issues. Adaptation is also taken up in Jean-Paul Gabilliet's essay on American audiences' lukewarm reception of Asterix and Tintin, which he uses to discuss how generic and audience expectations affect the materiality of the work. Gabilliet expertly exposes the way in which certain "classes" of artifacts are subject to adaptation that ultimately fails to capture the attention of audiences in different cultural contexts. Another take on adaptation appears in Mark Berninger's analysis of *Scott Pilgrim*. Arguing that it refuses to conform to established comics genres, he clarifies how the multitude of influences behind Bryan Lee O'Malley's work positions it as a series that can only be read as transnational. Berninger's argument that "it makes so little sense to study comics in a purely national context" chimes in to the debates mentioned at the opening of this review, and his study of the hybrid styles and multicultural contexts behind O'Malley's work supports the dismissal of "national context" as an approach. Similarly, Daniel Wüllner's consideration of Warren Craghead III demonstrates the centrality of authorial "performance" to transnational enterprises in comics. Wüllner underlines how Craghead's play with the concept of borders and the transgression of boundaries at the level of both form and content promulgates a more globalized connectivity to social upheaval.

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Authorship as a site of transnational performance is clarified by Jochen Ecke's discussion of Warren Ellis, which foregrounds the ways in which questions about the author function are complicated by the interventions of collaborators and by the author's manipulation of image. Moreover, the way in which Ellis has adopted various media forms and personae as methods of communication constitutes, Ecke argues, a disruption of the American mainstream in terms of both the comics industry and the performance of authorship. While Ecke focuses on the author as a performer, Frank Mehring stresses how an author's aesthetic influences and formal choices can accentuate the city as a space to which there is a global claim. In his analysis of Frank Miller's silhouettes, he takes up the question of American iconography through the cityscape rather than through character. By tracing historical precursors and highlighting Miller's remediation of visual influences, Mehring exhibits the silhouette's affective potential by suggesting and obscuring, rather than depicting in detail.

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Several chapters are devoted to exploring the concepts of silence and repression, particularly important in regards to the way transnationalism seeks to highlight stories historically marginalized because they occur between or across borders. Joe Sacco's oeuvre is given the

time it deserves, Aryn Bartley and Georgiana Banita's contributions both taking up different aspects of Sacco's cosmopolitanism. Bartley's contribution focuses on *Footnotes in Gaza*, arguing that graphic narratives can re-integrate repressed historical events into the popular consciousness through their visual dimension by highlighting Sacco's use of positionality to manipulate empathetic identification. Banita's valuable classification of several comics journalists' deployment of silent panels exposes stasis and silence as a necessary dimension of the critique of naïve cosmopolitanism. Using George Orwell's *1984* to inform readings of Guy Delisle, Sacco, Jean-Philippe Stassen and Ari Folman, Banita establishes the silent panel as a space for radical pause. Florian Groß's analysis of wordless graphic narratives and their integration of transnational themes explores the complex push-and-pull between cultural understanding and the perils of misunderstanding. Using *The City*, *Gods' Man*, *The Arrival*, and *The Golem*, Groß brings narratives of identity and immigration into conversation against the backdrop of dissolving borders, but emphasizes the Western inflection of all of the works surveyed.

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This highlights my only complaint about this volume, which remains obstinately Western in terms of vision. Denson, Meyer, and Stein acknowledge this in their introduction, noting that their goal in this volume is bounded by American cultural studies. European authors, and furthermore, works addressing Middle Eastern, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Palestinian experiences are included, but it is not as comprehensive of a sampling as I would like. The editors' goal is to emphasize how comics' form and content is well-suited to the study of borders and margins, crossings and liminal spaces that rest at the core of transnational inquiry. However, the diverse body of work evolving in relation to the Global South is largely neglected, mirroring a common complaint about cosmopolitan scholarship in general. Transnational approaches to literature have considerably broadened the range of works and authors represented in both literary studies and comics scholarship, but there are still national, linguistic, and historical contexts that remain at the margins. The Global South remains exiled in many discussions of transnationalism, so much so that it is often difficult to take the claims of greater inclusivity as reflecting the actual commitments of authors.

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However, this critique doesn't compromise the overall quality and value of the volume, in which there are certainly borders being traversed, transgressed, and (in some cases) exploded, both in terms of creation and reception. Three essays approach, and restage, the marginalization of the Global South in transnational discussions. Davé's essay, discussed above, on *Spider-Man India* offers a look into economic inequality in India, integrating Indian mythology with a retelling of the Peter Parker origin story. Stefan Meier's remarkable contribution also resists the Westernizing impulse, integrating *The 99* into contemporary discussions about the role of superheroes in the transnational moment. Arguing that *The 99*—a multinational, multiethnic team of superheroes who share only their Islamic faith—represents an idealized postnational society, Meier admits that *The 99* maintains increasingly useless ethical binaries, but promotes the series as an example of the dissolution of national identity as a useful marker.

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The way in which identity is inflected by border crossings is taken up in Michael A. Chaney's exquisitely written contribution, which addresses the mobilization of readers in graphic

narratives concerning the Middle Passage, questioning how the historical atrocity structures our contemporary understanding of transnationalism. Analyzing Tom Feelings's *The Middle Passage* and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*, Chaney negotiates the potentially subversive outcomes of historical mediation, the nature of group identity in relation to shared trauma, and how the graphic narrative form undergirds and enshrines questions surrounding the movement of bodies across borders. Chaney's exhilarating essay is the first chapter, well-placed particularly because it focuses on the space between national borders.

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Shane Denson's afterword nicely caps the volume, examining the formal elements of comics and putting the frame into conversation with transnational theory. Using Anderson's conception of "bound" and "unbound" serialities, Denson sketches the situations in which the transnational work of comics is decipherable, cannily weaving contributors' ideas into this broader theoretical question. Denson's extrapolation of the complexity of the frame—simultaneously the indicator of both the material it contains and the status of the whole as an object—its place within sequential art, and its metaphorical resonance with characters and places within the stories, is a compelling example of how the form and content of comics are mutually enriching, and moreover, Denson naturalizes comics as a site for transnational inquiry.

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*Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* is an essential volume for both comics scholars and scholars of literature in general, because it places the most popular emerging medium in conversation with cutting-edge contemporary scholarship, and makes a strong case for the ways in which comics are necessary in considerations of a transnational, cosmopolitan 21st century world. The volume implicitly echoes Appiah's compelling question of "whose culture is it, anyway?",<sup>[2]</sup> and gives the reader convincing tools to capture the way in which Appiah argues that we must discard "our art," and reframe our perspectives to look at graphic narratives as a space of cross-cultural negotiation, which can't be properly proscribed by arbitrary borders.

## Notes

[1] Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism*. New York: Norton, 2006. xviii.

[2] Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism*. New York: Norton, 2006. 115.

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