

Introducing Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads

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Intersections: Comics and transnationalism— transnationalism and comics

This volume aims to chart the ways in which graphic narratives have been shaped by aesthetic, social, political, economic, and cultural interactions that reach across national boundaries in an interconnected and globalizing world. As such, it sets out to address two critical blind spots: the overall neglect of graphic narratives in the increasingly transnational field of American literary and cultural studies, on the one hand, and the relative dearth of transnational investigations of graphic narratives in the growing field of comics studies, on the other.¹

While comics scholars have examined different national traditions of graphic narrative from Anglo-American comics and Franco-Belgian bande dessinée to Japanese manga, most critics still treat these forms of graphic narrative as relatively self-contained phenomena.² Significantly, some of these examinations subscribe to the logic of national origins and influence, for instance, when they debate the origins of graphic narrative: whether the first comics artist was the Franco-Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer, or whether that honor goes to the British inventors of the Ally Sloper character, the American comic-strip creator Richard Felton Outcault, or even the German Wilhelm Busch as the master of the illustrated story. In other cases, the existence of nationally defined comics traditions and their potential intersections are largely sidestepped. Thus, to name just one example of a widespread tendency, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith's otherwise highly insightful study *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* issues a universal claim in its title but then focuses almost exclusively on American superhero comic books, telling the history of comics as a predominantly American story.

Yet as Paul Williams and James Lyons write in their preface to *The Rise of the American Comics Artist*, “[t]here are good reasons to understand North American comics in a transnational context: the institutional transaction of texts, creators, and capital across national borders has contributed to observable productive tensions in the comic texts themselves.”³ This observation is crucial, and it resonates with a current paradigm shift in American studies and related disciplines. It points at a critical oversight among many comics scholars, who have offered relatively little analysis of what Shelley Fisher Fishkin terms “the broad array of cultural crossroads shaping the work of border-crossing authors, artists, and cultural forms that straddle multiple regional and national traditions.”⁴ Fishkin’s call to scholars of American studies to extend their critical interests beyond the boundaries of their discipline and the borders of the United States has been echoed by Günter Lenz, who argues that the shift in American studies toward the transnational and the transcultural “means [that] a ‘centrifugal’ dynamics has deconstructed its traditional [disciplinary] boundaries, objectives, and methodological procedures, and the sense of its traditional unity as an interdisciplinary field seems to be ever further dispersed.”⁵ Taking Fishkin’s and Lenz’s observations seriously, while also realizing Williams and Lyons’s suggestions for transnational comics analysis, we believe that the deconstruction of disciplinary boundaries and the centrifugal dispersal of research objectives and methodologies point toward the necessity of two complementary moves: Americanists should devote more attention to the wealth and diversity of graphic narratives, while comics scholars should study them in the light of a wide array of border-crossings. Together, these shifts of perspective not only call on us to (re)read comics and other forms of graphic narrative as transnational phenomena (reaching, or rather moving, across borders). But also, and more importantly so, they urge us to explore the transnational dynamics that have come to shape contemporary forms of graphic storytelling at the crossroads of cultures.

From an international to a transnational perspective

New approaches to cultural phenomena have a tendency to proclaim their superiority over older approaches, to justify their novelty by way of contrast with modes of inquiry they characterize as outdated or out of step with our rapidly changing lifeworlds. The transnational perspective that guides the work we have collected in this volume, however, does not claim to supersede the related approaches from which it takes off. Specifically, a transnational approach does

not aim to replace or render superfluous the study of comics in national and international frameworks. Rather, we see the present volume as complementing those studies that investigate graphic narratives according to their local variations, in relation to the nationally and regionally defined shapes and forms they assume around the world, and in terms of the particular cultural and political work they perform in specific national contexts. Taking aim at border-crossings, interstitial relations, and cultural and material exchanges between traditions, a transnational perspective remains indebted to such studies, which continue to serve as a basis for comparative work; hence, particularity is not effaced in this perspective by a generalized global culture. On the other hand, however, the multidirectional transactions uncovered by a transnational perspective problematize the foundational role of discrete national units; though not effaced, the particular is thus rendered internally multiple as the traces of exchange are discovered *within*, and not merely *between*, national cultures, traditions, and identities.

Insistence on this last point distinguishes specifically transnational from more broadly international perspectives. Once again, though, it cannot be a question of the one replacing or supplanting the other. For just as the notion of the transnational threatens to dissolve into a nebulous field of indistinction without the counterpoint provided by national specificity and difference, so too are transnational exchanges inextricably rooted in—and, due to the presence of the transnational within the national, partially productive of—particular international exchanges. The international, we might say, marks at once the fount from whence the transnational flows and the delta where it issues back into the global. As such, any study of transnationally articulated phenomena, such as the present volume, will necessarily be concerned with moments and instances of international encounters. But a truly international view of graphic narratives—a comprehensive view of the medium in all its past, present, and future implications—would necessarily explode the limits and limitations of a single volume of essays. After all, as the prodigious scholarship published in John A. Lent's invaluable *International Journal of Comic Art* (1999–) has taught us, the overwhelming diversity of different types of graphic storytelling around the globe demands the continued efforts of many scholars from many disciplinary and national backgrounds.⁶ That is why, in the present volume, we have focused more narrowly on the transnational reassessment of a more limited set of texts. Rather than offering an expansive perspective on the medium of graphic narrative in all of its national and international expressions, this volume concentrates on largely American genres and productions as an exemplary field of transnational exchange.

Thus, the difference between a transnational and an international perspective is in part a question of scale. To realize an international perspective, the individual chapters of this book would have to cover a range of national comics styles and traditions so vast that it would be difficult to find a common thread among them. However, as we suggested above, there are also significant conceptual differences between an international and a transnational perspective. As Ulf Hannerz reminds us, the term “international” generally designates the interaction of nation-states (or national institutions) as corporate actors, whereas “transnational” relates to a diverse set of corporate and noncorporate actors whose interactions contribute to an “overall interconnectedness” of cultural activities around the world.⁷ This notion of transnationalism allows for the study of what Fishkin describes as “the transnational crossroads of cultures”: the “multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process”; the “global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products” that urges us to “see the inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international, as interpenetrating.”⁸ Moreover, this volume’s movement from an international to a transnational perspective allows us to connect Fishkin’s disciplinary reorientation—the shift she urges from the study of American culture to an analysis of different crossroads of cultures beyond the borders of the nation—with the perspectival change in comics studies announced in Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn’s recent *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*. Though the essay collection references “international perspectives” in its subtitle, its editors actually endorse a transnational view when they speak of “the transplantation of specific comics, as well as whole movements and national styles [. . .] from one country to another” and acknowledge the idiosyncrasies and interconnections that mark comics adaptations across cultures.⁹ The transnational perspective that we adopt here allows us, in other words, to consummate the mutual turns envisioned above: The decentered study of American culture outlined by Fishkin and Lenz turns toward comics studies, and vice versa; the two fields of study meet in the space of the transnational, which they together document as a terrain of robustly concrete intersections among the levels of the national, the international, and the global.

Premises, promises, pitfalls

In the preface to *Multicultural Comics*, Derek Parker Royal makes the following claim: “[G]iven its reliance on symbols and iconography, comic art speaks

in a language that is accessible to a wide audience, transcending many of the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries imposed by other media and giving it a reach that is as democratic as it is immediate.”¹⁰ While certainly less sweeping than Japanese mangaka Osamu Tezuka’s statement that “comics are an international language that can cross boundaries and generations,” serving as “a bridge between all cultures,” Royal’s claim surely speaks to the transnational and transcultural (as well as multicultural) potential of graphic narrative as a medium that enables, facilitates, or perhaps even encourages, the transcendence of limitations imposed by the nation, by culture, and by language.¹¹ But Royal also discerns specifically political powers of graphic narrative as an immediately accessible and thus inherently democratic form of storytelling. The chapters in the present book seek to engage both claims critically by investigating a broad range of graphic narratives by (mostly) American creators, as well as non-American artists working in traditionally American idioms and genres; these are examined in terms of their formal realization of (or failure to realize) transnational interconnections, along with the social, political, economic, and cultural work these texts perform in what Arjun Appadurai has labeled “imagined worlds”: “the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” and “which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects.”¹² What kind of relations obtain between the “imagined worlds” of graphic narratives—encompassing not only their diegetic universes, but also the spaces of fan cultures as well as national and regional comics traditions—and the “imagined communities” that, in Benedict Anderson’s famous analysis, constitute the basis of nationhood as an iterable, and hence transnationally articulated, mode of being?¹³

The basic premise of this essay collection is that comics and other forms of graphic narrative are predisposed toward crossing national borders and cultural boundaries because their unique visual-verbal interface seems to translate more readily—though not without transformation and distortion—across cultures than do monomedial forms of literature, nonnarrative artworks, or even such visual narrative media as film. This premise—and the comparative argument it proposes—is certainly controversial, which is why the chapters in this collection delve into the media-specific means and parameters according to which comics communicate their ideas, produce and disseminate knowledge, and operate materially within a unique set of spatiotemporal relations. The political workings of graphic narratives, in other words, are not unrelated to their formal properties. The hybrid medium of graphic narrative challenges Lessing’s famous

“rule,” namely, “that succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the [visual] artist.” As Lessing saw it:

Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which circumstance may compel either to make in haste on the rights of the other.¹⁴

We believe that a transnational perspective on graphic narratives must take into account their medially constitutive infractions of such formal borders—the spatiotemporal hybridities that result from the intersection of visual and verbal forms and that define narration itself as a series of transgressions, moving from panel to panel, violating the borders of individual images, and crossing the expanse of the gutter. It is far from clear how this formal basis might guarantee the medium’s promotion of multicultural understanding or democracy, as envisioned by Parker. What it does suggest, however, is that the internal functioning of the medium is not so different, formally, from its external imbrications in transnational exchanges. In both cases, imagined geographies are constructed, challenged, and brought into contact with one another through dynamic processes that fail to respect the sanctity of “the other’s domain” and in which “mutual forbearance on the borders” is seldom exercised. Such a process unites the single reader, for whom a narratively coherent world emerges from juxtaposed images and words, with imagined communities of various sorts—the communities of fans, of local and spatially dispersed cultures, and of nations, among which graphic narratives circulate. Careful attention to graphic narratives’ formal and material properties will therefore add further insights into the ways in which meaning and values travel across borders and help explain how they are “entangled within both national and transnational formations.”¹⁵

To be sure, though, formal analysis is not sufficient for understanding the complex transactions involved in graphic narratives’ transnational proliferations. At stake in this volume is thus also a crucial cultural and political premise about the nature of the transnational. As scholars such as Winfried Fluck, Heinz Ickstadt, Frank Kelleter, and Günter Lenz have argued in different contexts, one of the problems that trouble many transnational analyses is the fallacious assumption that national borders can simply be transcended or rendered inconsequential and that the economic, political, and cultural might of the former superpowers has now given way to an equal playing field of global exchange and transnational flow. As Kelleter has noted, transnational approaches “should

make us question some of our most routine ideological convictions, such as the widespread belief that to speak transnationally, or to evoke the transnational, automatically means to speak in a counter-hegemonic way,” or that to recognize the increasingly transnational interconnectedness of global cultural production inevitably spells the demise for the United States as an agenda-setting force.¹⁶ This is why we believe that it makes sense to train a transnational focus precisely on American productions and genres, so that the work collected in the present volume can be said to “do national American studies with a transnational consciousness.” Accordingly, this volume does not so much “expand the borders of [the] discipline but the horizon of our questioning.”¹⁷ Moreover, we believe that all of the contributions reflect Fluck’s reminder that “far from going outside the U.S., we have to go back inside”¹⁸ in (at least) three ways: in terms of the political implications and specifically transnational poetics of graphic narratives, in terms of various transnational adaptations of the culturally emblematic and nationally iconic American superhero, and in terms of the multifaceted flows of cultural materials in and out of the United States.¹⁹

These observations determine the tripartite structure of this book. “People live in local places,” writes Myria Georgiou, “but their everyday life is shaped in the context of discourses, cultures and relations that are formed in the dialogue between the local, the national and the transnational.”²⁰ In this sense, some chapters in this volume examine what Fishkin calls “the diffusion of cultural forms and the spread of capital and commodities” as well as “the cultural work done by U.S. popular culture abroad,” while other chapters consider the cultural work performed by foreign graphic narratives and comics traditions (and creators) on American texts.²¹ The chapters in the first part, “Politics and Poetics,” largely follow Inderpal Grewal’s assumption that, “[i]n a transnational age, with millions of displaced and migrant subjects, questions of identity and citizenship became both crucial and vexed, since these subjects questioned the legitimacy of the nation-state while also reinforcing its ability to endow rights.”²² The chapters in the second part, “Transnational and Transcultural Superheroes,” focus on transnational adaptations of superhero characters that support neither simplistic notions of cultural imperialism nor romantic understandings of postcolonial subversion or counter-hegemonic cultural production. The chapters in the third part, “Translations, Transformations, Migrations,” map the transnationally inflected shifts and changes that have come to shape contemporary comics culture on a global scale. They attend to the “translocal conjunctures and intercultural circuits” that mark not only modern and contemporary poetry but graphic narratives as well.²³ The volume

concludes by performing a comics-specific operation on itself—the “retcon” (so called for its institution of retrospective continuity); the afterword reassesses the previous transnational analyses in order to highlight the continuity, across the range of case studies included in this volume, between the formal constitution of the graphic narrative medium and its social and political entanglements in the hybrid spaces of the transnational.²⁴

As Priscilla Wald contends, “‘transnational’ analyses are raising questions more than providing answers or solutions, and they bring with them their own set of problems.”²⁵ We hope that this book will answer some of these questions but that it will also serve as a discussion starter that raises many more pertinent questions and, as such, enables new transnational perspectives on graphic narratives.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders, and we apologize in advance for any unintentional omission. We would be pleased to insert the appropriate acknowledgment in any subsequent edition.

Notes

- 1 The present volume grew out of a workshop on “The Transcultural Work of Comics and Graphic Narratives” held at the German Association for American Studies conference in Regensburg (June 18, 2011). Two papers presented at this workshop have appeared in the conference proceedings (see Denson, Starre); three papers are included in the present volume (Ecke, Etter, Laemmerhirt). For a recent survey of transnational American studies, see Hebel’s introduction to the proceedings. The editors wish to thank Paul Gravett, Roger Sabin, Henry Jenkins, and especially Eric Rabkin for their encouragement and support of this book project. We would also like to express our gratitude to John A. Lent for writing the foreword to the volume as well as David Avital and Laura Murray at Continuum/Bloomsbury for their precious help and assistance.
- 2 We use “graphic narrative” in the widest transnational sense as an umbrella term for various types and forms of graphic storytelling. As such, it includes more limited and culturally distinct terms such as the American “cartoons” and “comics,” the Franco-Belgian “bande dessinée,” the Japanese “manga,” or the Italian “fumetti.” Accordingly, we distinguish it from Chute and DeKoven’s definition as “a narrative work in the medium of comics” (767) and from Chute’s notion of “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (453). For a more elaborate terminological discussion, see Stein et al.
- 3 Williams and Lyons xiii.

- 4 Fishkin 32.
- 5 Lenz 4.
- 6 See also Lent's essay collections on Asian cartooning and comics production, *Illustrating Asia* and *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning*, as well as the international perspective of comics censorship in *Pulp Demons*. For early international studies of comics, see Horn; Silbermann and Dyroff.
- 7 Hannerz 6. Hannerz further argues that "[t]he term 'transnational' is in a way more humble, and often a more adequate label [than the term 'global'] for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, even when they do share the characteristic of not being contained within a state" (6).
- 8 Fishkin 22, 24, 21, 41. Global and transnational/transcultural analyses of graphic narratives have largely emerged in the context of manga studies. See Berndt; Berndt and Richter; Johnson-Woods.
- 9 Berninger et al. 3.
- 10 Royal x.
- 11 Tezuka qtd in Gravett 30.
- 12 Appadurai 296–7, 299.
- 13 See Anderson.
- 14 Lessing 109–10.
- 15 Grewal 1.
- 16 Kelleter 30; see also Fluck.
- 17 Ickstadt 555–6, 556.
- 18 Fluck 82.
- 19 We realize that there are many other ways in which a book about transnational graphic narratives could be structured and that many other creators, texts, genres, and transcultural phenomena could have been selected for analysis. This is why we understand the present volume as an incitement for further research and critical engagement.
- 20 Georgiou 138.
- 21 Fishkin 24, 33.
- 22 Grewal 11. See also Royal et al.
- 23 Ramazani 336.
- 24 Readers may wonder why we did not include a chapter on Art Spiegelman's seminal *Maus* (1986/1991). In fact, *Maus* has already been discussed in a transnational, or at least cross-cultural, context (see the chapters in the "The Holocaust across Borders" part in Baskind and Omer-Sherman). Moreover, *Maus* has been so excessively scrutinized since its publication that it makes sense to devote critical attention to less studied texts. Finally, *MetaMaus* had not yet appeared when we sent out the call for papers for this volume; Spiegelman's self-identification as "a rootless cosmopolitan, alienated in most environments that I fall into" and his

understanding of *Maus* as “a diasporist’s account of the Holocaust” in *MetaMaus* certainly merit future scholarly attention (133, 153).

25 Wald 216.

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