THE INTERRELATION OF ETHNICITY, ICONICITY,

AND FORM IN AMERICAN COMICS

by

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This dissertation analyzes issues of race, ethnicity, and identity in American comics and visual culture, and identifies important areas for alternative means to cultural authority located at the intersections of verbal and visual representation. The symbolic qualities that communicate ethnicity and give ethnicity meaning in American culture are illuminated in new ways when studied within the context of the highly symbolic medium of comics. Creators of comics are able to utilize iconic qualities, among other unique formal qualities of the medium, to construct new visual narratives around ethnicity and identity, which require new and multidisciplinary perspectives for comprehending their communicative complexity. This dissertation synthesizes cultural and critical analysis in combination with formal analysis in an effort to further advance the understanding of comics and their social implications in regard to race and ethnic identity.

Much like film scholars in the 1960s, comics scholars in the United States currently are in the process of establishing a core of methodological and theoretical approaches, including Lacanian theories of the image, the comic mapping of symbolic order, the recognition of self in undetailed faces, comics closure, and the implications of the comics gutter. Drawing upon these ideas and additional perspectives offered by

scholars of film and literary studies, such as the relationship between ethnicity and the

symbolic, the scopophilic gaze, and filmic suture, I analyze the following visual

texts: Henry Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Gene Yang's *American Born

Chinese,* and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles.* The dissertation also

performs a multimedia analysis of the current ascendency of geek culture, its relationship

to the comics medium, and the geek protagonist as an expression of simulated ethnicity.

Ultimately, the unique insights offered by the study of comics concerning principles of

ethnic iconicity and identity have far reaching implications for scholars of visual

and verbal culture in other mediums as well.

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work was the study of images and their implications. He taught me the importance of

looking carefully.

For Udom and Suda Kunyosying

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ETHNICITY, VISUALITY, AND CULTURE:

IMPLICATIONS OF A GRAPHIC MEDIUM

Before I entered graduate school, I worked for a team of government contract negotiators in Washington, DC. There I was exposed to effective uses of words and images in combination, that made an impression that has stayed with me ever since and has made me continuously aware of the possible impact of well-deployed visual communication. Shortly after I entered a master's program in English and began teaching Composition at West Virginia University as a graduate instructor, the 9/11 attacks occurred. I immediately observed skewed perceptions of Middle Easterners among many students in my Composition classes. I became interested in the ability of public and authorial voices to create a cognitive dissonance between what ideological emotive triggers can evoke and the reality of non-whites in a shifting popular imagination.

I continued to think of these phenomena in terms of visual communication. In coursework I encountered Edward Said's postcolonial discourse and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic cultural criticism as well as Lacan's explanation of scopic desire, the childhood need to know through looking. These theoretical approaches led me to explore my interest in the study of comics and visual culture. My research focuses on race and ethnicity in American literary and popular culture, located especially at intersections of verbal and visual representation. Within these intersections there lie important potentials

for alternative means to cultural authority. In my dissertation I explore these potentials through an examination of American comics and visual culture.

At a talk given in 2004, Charles Hatfield, whose *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005) arguably pioneered a hybrid combination of filmic and formal approaches to comics with literary approaches (with an emphasis on autobiography and memoir studies) asserted that comics are anti-disciplinary objects. As such, they nudge us out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas where literature, art, semiotics, and cultural studies overlap and inform each other ("Defining Comics, Again?!", 2004). In this regard, it is the active application of cultural and critical analysis in combination with formal analysis that will break new ground in the understanding of the hybridity of comics and their readers.

Considering other research that has been added to the discourse after Hatfield's *Alternative Comics*, and comics creator Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, which can be given credit for spurring academic responses (including Hatfield's), it is apparent that some combination of formal analysis and literary analysis, regardless of how narrow the overlap, is becoming a common thread in emerging comics scholarship. Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007), Mario Saraceni's *The Language of Comics* (2003), and Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith's *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (2009) emphasize formal analysis. However, they deploy formal interpretation to analyze narrative much more than any other aspects of the comics they engage and the latter two are designed to be able to serve as undergraduate level textbooks so they are less ambitious in terms of analyzing cultural implications. Another source of academic energy invested in comics, embodied in a fan studies approach,

remains almost completely discrete from the work of Hatfield and other formal and literary comics analyses.

Emerging from the growing fields of fan studies in general, which include studies of film, television, science-fiction, and other genre-based fandoms, the two most significant studies of comics fandom to recently emerge are Jeffrey Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2001), and Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (2000). Within the shared assumptions of these studies, one might go as far to say that there is an implicit argument that U.S. cultural diversity can be born out of groups of people whose expressive lives center on particular interests or activities. Being involved in a community based on a popular medium is central to the lives of many Americans, allowing them to identify themselves as fans. This idea was brought to the fore in Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1997) and the application of a similar framework to American comic book readers and fans was fruitful for Brown and Pustz. However, while their books are referenced within comics scholarship, and the authors identify, like Hatfield, as comics scholars, their work does not clearly intersect with the interests that drive the formal or literary approaches to comics. Instead, when dealing with the texts enjoyed by the fan cultures they examine, these scholars examine plot, while spending much less time with literary qualities, and even less time with the formal dynamics which drive the narratives, or more importantly, the meanings of the comics that engender the fan cultures they analyze. Again, I do not point this out to say that comic fan studies thus far have failed in any way. A mono-disciplinary comic fan studies approach is productive and the work of Brown and Pustz bears that out. However,

adding an equal consideration of the formal and literary aspects of comics analysis is a useful extension of their projects.

Beyond comics in and of themselves, I am interested in visual culture and its relationship to ethnicity. As comics pioneer Will Eisner has pointed out, comics are a coded medium and rely on stereotyping as a way to concentrate effectiveness. Graphic narrative with its limited temporal space, must condense identity along already accepted paradigms. Stereotyping characters with regard to their features and occupations, "speeds the reader into the plot and give the teller reader-acceptance for the action of his characters" (20). Eisner calls this an "accursed necessity" (17). It is this aspect of comics that I examine in this study. The power of comics in terms of efficiently depicting ethnicity is also its weakness, but through a study of the implications of this phenomenon I will shed light on why ethnic comics artists embrace the medium to express their complex stories and identities.

Research on ethnicity in comics is still in a relatively nascent state and mostly deals with the history of caricature in strips and in flimsies, such as *Black Images in the Comics* (2003) by Fredrik Stromberg and Ian Gordon's *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (1998) or biographical studies of non-white cartoonists, like Nancy Goldstein's exhaustively researched *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (2008). Marc Singer's important essay, "Black Skins" and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race" (2002), analyzed superhero comics for stereotyped depictions of race but mainly focused on insightful readings of narrative. MELUS (publication of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States) devoted an entire issue (Fall 2007) to the literary representations of ethnicity in comics,

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edited by comics scholar Derek Royal. The issue included essays on comics old and new ranging from Jackie Ormes' *Torchy Brown* to Adrian Tomine's *Optic Nerve*, and is a great step forward in the study of ethnicity in comics. However, there are plenty of possibilities for additional formal and theoretical analyses. In his introduction Royal acknowledged the possibility that Hatfield's theories of fragmented time, space, and self being inherent to the comics format had potential to help reveal the dynamics of ethnoracial discourse (10).. In relation to this phenomenon that Hatfield has described, comics' spatio-topical system as theorized by Thierry Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (21), can also shed light on how comics depict ethnoracial dynamics. However, none of the contributors to this MELUS issue capitalized on these theoretical possibilities.

The most glaring evidence that specific research is needed into comics form as it relates to ethnicity may be located in Scott McCloud's second book, *Reinventing Comics* (See Figure 1.1).
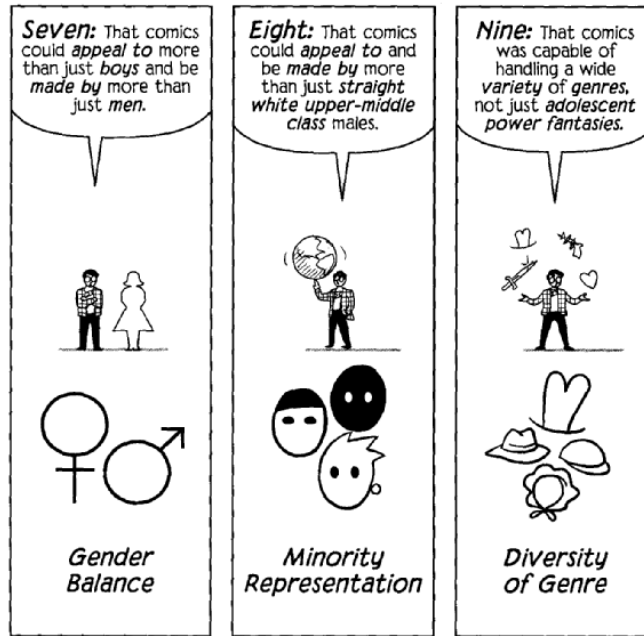
Figure 1.1: *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud (11).

In a call for comics reform, McCloud seems to revel in his ability as a comics theorist and

practitioner to efficiently use icons to communicate. In the second panel from the right,

McCloud calls for comics to appeal to more minorities. Ironically, he sees no need to

back off of his gleeful use of iconic expression for this panel and he uses his iconic

shorthand for the minorities too. McCloud forgets that just because comics are powerful

at being able to do a thing symbolically, it is not appropriate for them to be deployed in

that way all the time. Here I will speak for Asians and note that I find it offensive that he

thought it was okay to turn the Asian face's eyes on their sides to denote our difference.

Although McCloud does not exactly duplicate the stereotypical slits that are typically

used to connote Asian eyes, his drawing evokes that history enough to be uncomfortable,

and it is disturbing to think that Asians are viewed as different enough from other human

beings, with one physical feature rotated ninety degrees clockwise in comparison to

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everyone else! McCloud on the other hand seems to like this minorities icon so much that he uses it again four more times in the same book (105, 110, 111, and 237). As a proponent of the expressive power of comics, he should like it. It is incredibly efficient in its expression. However, McCloud seems unaware that it carries too much baggage. As for the darkest minority depicted in the same panel, I would argue that precisely *because* of the lack of detail, the drawing of the person of African descent has Sambo connotations, in particular because of the pitch black face and bright white eyes. The third depiction is less clear. I originally thought the intended minority status was female. However, McCloud already covers gender to the left of the drawing, and mentions sexuality in the field of this panel, so I assume the third icon connotes queerness. When one thinks of the missing signifier, the white male, we can interpolate that the other three characters are variations on that unmarked and undrawn oval white face. If all the minorities are variations of him, then there are large implications about who is normal and who are just variations on the normal standard.[1]

McCloud also reveals something extremely important though. Comics function as a form of language. More precisely, comic drawings are deployed in such a way that they oscillate between language and depiction depending on how much iconicity or specificity is present.[2] And when comics do function as language they also help clarify issues of how language is haunted by dominant ideology and patriarchy in ways that can be extremely edifying. For example, if McCloud committed a subtle faux pas in almost any other medium, it would be much harder to pinpoint and explain. For this reason, my dissertation argues that reading the iconicity of comics as language in depictions of race allows use of well theorized principles from prose literary studies of race to be applied in

ways that shed light on comics and on those theories. It is important be clear here that I am not arguing that comics are inherently racist. Instead, I argue that comics can be misperceived as inherently racist because they portray more openly the racism hidden by other mediums of expression and communication.

When a language is visual, previously esoteric theories about structures of oppression can feel as validated with as much finality as a mathematical proof. The example presented in Figure 2.1 is from a website designed to teach American Sign Language. To be fair, this sign (pulling your eye into a slant) is now regarded as a variant sign one should know in case one is talking to someone who learned it as the primary sign for "Chinese" as it once was. Just as with ethnic shorthand in comics, this sign is much easier to remember and more efficient than the new ASL for Chinese, which involves drawing a right angle on your chest. I must also admit that there is also something vindicating about having the problematic underpinnings of a language so overtly on display in visual texts. This relates to why some ethnic authors choose to tell their stories in the iconic and problematic medium of comics.

Figure 2.1: American Sign Language gesture for "Chinese," according to *Signing Saavy:Your Sign Language Resource*.

In the next chapter of this dissertation I apply my extension of comics formal analysis to Henry Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga*, which appeared as a comic strip in San Francisco in 1904 and was collected as a graphic novel in 1931. Kiyama's book anticipates the biographical, anthropological, and political nature of the American underground comics movement of the 1960s.

In terms of literary analysis, an exploration of the novel form and of the implications of a new genre is relevant because of the newness of the comics medium. Further, extending a formal analysis to Kiyama's comics technique, in an examination of the interdependence of form and theme, sheds light on how the comics form is able to take on Japanese American experiences in ways non-graphic texts cannot. In this way,

my project continues Stan Yogi's investigation of genre applications in "Japanese American Literature" (1997) and extends the discussion to the genre of comics.

In addition to an analysis of Kiyama's stylistic achievements and connections to Japanese vernacular traditions, I focus on the phenomenon of McCloud's theory of comics closure in his work. Applying Lacan's framework from "The Symbolic Order" (1973), I argue that the comics gutter inflicts a lack on its audience, which forces the audience to suture over itself by imagining what happens in the gutter, which as Lacanian film theorists argue, can also suture the audience to the narrative of a film as well, and in some cases to the ideology a text embodies. This allows me to critique and develop McCloud's explanation, by overlapping comics closure with filmic suture, and provides a useful structure for analyzing what Kiyama accomplished so early in the history of American cartooning and ethnic literature, an accomplishment that has thus far received little academic analysis or popular acclaim. Anne Anlin Cheng's, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001) also contributes to my argument about the relationship between ethnicity and form.

After my discussion of Kiyama's work, the third chapter of the dissertation will analyze a recent text, Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*. In 2006, Yang's book became the first graphic novel to be nominated for a National Book Award, and in the same year that *Time* named Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* the Book of the Year, marked a mainstreaming of graphic novels for adults that must be acknowledged by any analysis of books coming out in this period. *American Born Chinese* is a *Bildungsroman* with three main characters, the Monkey King, Chinese-American Jin, and Danny, a European-American boy plagued by his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee, who in a move that makes great

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use of the medium, is simultaneously the embodiment of every cruel thing ever said to an Asian-American child on a playground.

Yang's spare, cartoony style developed before his was introduced to Scott McCloud's work but it is difficult not to see Yang's technique as evidence for McCloud's theory that "simplified" art aids reader identification, a theory borne out by the diverse groups of readers who have responded enthusiastically to the book: Chinese-Americans, young adults, educators, librarians and other cartoonists. McCloud's theory of identification, which I modify with psychoanalytic theories of image and ethnicity, is particularly interesting in the context of Yang's ethnic subject matter and his deployment of cousin Chin-Kee. The identification phenomenon is particularly apt for analyzing *American Born Chinese* as the comics form is uniquely utilized to carry on multiple and intertwined narratives, yet because of its visual medium, rarely at the cost of audience alienation. Before these threads intersect with each other, the audience comes to accept that the white character, Danny, and the Chinese-American character, Jin, have actually been the same person throughout the book, and is forced to grapple with the ideological implications of that turn.

Having worked to develop a framework for utilizing and integrating these film theories into comics studies, I realized that I might be able to use a hybrid approach that includes comics theory to investigate a film in a way that might push the implications of that theory in productive ways. I attempt this in Chapter IV, studying a film that had an innovative format as well as subject matter that made it relevant to the relationship between ethnicity and comics form: Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles*. In particular, because Smith plays all of the characters in the film, I argue that she overlaps

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into the realm of McCloud's theories of the non-descript face. Similar to comics because of their lack of photorealistic detail, this single actress technique also forces her to use more iconic ways to make meaning and to transform herself, including ethnic shorthand. My analysis of Smith's *Twilight* offers Chapter four is a cross-media study of ethnic iconicity and is an experiment in broadening the aegis of comics theory.

In Chapter V, I broaden my discussion further and perform a fan analysis, though one driven by formal and narrative media research rather than ethnography. I advance a thesis that explains the current rise of the male geek protagonist in mainstream entertainment. Basing the popularity of the geek in melodramatic suffering as theorized by Linda Williams, I also argue that through familiarity with the tropes of geek media and the postmodern disdain for an unmarked, untortured, confident protagonist, some otherwise privileged males claim their geekdom as an equivalent markedness to other more clearly marked identities. In other words, they perform a simulated ethnicity. Comics are central to the current rise of the geek in many ways and are tied into much of the media that is driving geek mania. By situating my study of this significant cultural phenomenon around comics, I demonstrate how comics have increasingly become culturally influential, and show how analysis of this medium provides insights into other forms of media and visual culture.

Concluding, I discuss my reasoning for the multimedia approach I have chosen in this dissertation. I also discuss implications of ethnic iconicity and possible directions for its future use in comics studies.

Notes

[1] Although the ideas of McCloud and other non-academic comics creators remain influential in this emergent field of study, I agree with Benjamin Saunders' concern about "uncritically importing value judgments and historical assumptions from fan-culture, without subjecting them to skeptical scrutiny," as expressed in the work of non-academics like McCloud, Eisner and others (144). Although my dissertation makes reference to theories that comics creators have generated, it ultimately grounds them in academic approaches and scholarship. However, I also believe that it is important to take seriously what comics creators are saying because I value their points of view as emic interpreters and creators of comics culture.

[2] Or as Lacan and Donald Ault, who are relevant to Chapter III, would describe it, between the symbolic and the imaginary.

CHAPTER II

CLOSURE, SUTURE, AND FORM

IN HENRY KIYAMA'S *THE FOUR IMMIGRANTS MANGA*

Launching out of San Francisco in 1904 and collected as a graphic novel in 1931, Henry Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga* significantly predated other Japanese American books that dealt similarly with an immigrant, hybrid experience, and broke new ground in terms of both content and form. Moreover, it is one of the first modern "comic books," especially of a lengthy autobiographical nature, ever published in the US. It predates the advent of American superhero comics in the 1930s, and anticipates the biographical, anthropological, and political nature of the American underground comics movement of the 1960s as well as the current wave of memoirist comics recently receiving critical acclaim and academic attention such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. *The Four Immigrants Manga* is therefore an ideal starting point for my dissertation not only because of its subject matter but also because of its place in American comics history. My analysis presented in this chapter will investigate the accomplishments of graphic/prose texts that deal with ethnicity, as well as juxtapose those texts with prose-only literature that deals in similar issues. In doing so, I will demonstrate new insights into the phenomenological achievements of these ethnic literatures, both graphic and prose-only.

An exploration of the hybrid comics and novel form as applied by Kiyama reveals the author engaging the novel as a genre which devours other genres so that it becomes a kind of anti-genre which can include within itself fragments of other genres. As proposed

by Mikhail Bakhtin in the essay "Epic and Novel" (1941), an anti-genre achieves much of what other forms cannot, including an ability to engage with contemporary reality, and an ability to re-conceptualize the individual in a complex way that interrogates his subjectivity and offers the possibility of redefining his own image. Bakhtin's work in this regard is particularly useful to apply to this study because Bakhtin was writing about the advent of a new medium as well, the prose novel, and how its newness interacted with previous genres - in particular, the genre of the epic. Bahktin's work is historically at odds with the Russian Formalists in Bahktin's emphasis on the social and ideological features of literature but shares their concern with describing those formal elements that make a literary genre, such as the novel, distinct from other literary forms. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin asserts that the novel pushes narrative forms into "living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)" (17). He conceives the novel as having a subversive and parodic relationship to other genres, especially to the high seriousness of the epic. The novel form's antecedents are to be found in the parodying and travestying forms of classical and medieval culture. According to Bakhtin, the novel is a kind of anti-genre which can include within itself fragments of other genres such as epic, romance, or lyric, but which always subverts their generic certainties in favor of its own unfinished openness towards the world.

Bahktin's theory of generic fragmental inclusion can be applied to Kiyama's comics to make immediately clear how generic criticism and a visual medium simultaneously complicate and illuminate these principles in action. To initially illustrate this principle of generic containment in Kiyama's work, let us look at the final two panels from Kiyama's series which depict and contain a piece of media not from the previous

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genres of prose media, but from a previous genre of visual media: life portraiture (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Final two panels from *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry Kiyama (133).

The image from the end of Kiyama's series depicts the Japanese art student Henry carrying back a portrait of an African-American. This image is one to which I will return for further analysis, but it is also immediately relevant to Bahktin's explanation of generic containment. The knurled framing of the portrait, even in the comics shorthand with which Kiyama depicts this picture frame, signifies the portrait as a piece of fine art, much like that which the author came to study at the San Francisco Art Institute between 1914 and 1920. Among the four impoverished student workers Kiyama included in *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry, carrying the portrait, is clearly Kiyama's textual stand-in.

Enrollment records from 1914 reveal that Kiyama studied life portraiture, and one of his mentors was renowned painter Pedro J. Lemos (Schodt 10). Kiyama distinguished

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himself in his pursuits and, by 1920, he had accumulated several awards and notable

mentions, especially in life portraiture. These included a scholarship from the New York

Art Students League. Kiyama exhibited in San Francisco at the prestigious Palace of

Fine Arts and, on April 20, 1920, an article in the *San Francisco Bulletin* reported on two

of Kiyama's pieces from this exhibit:

> Old Wagon Shed is a solidly modeled, well balanced and vigorously colored
> design, and his 114, Old House at North Beach, in room 15, in soft green and gray,
> is quite effective. (Schodt 11)

Kiyama's works are still occasionally exhibited today in the Yonago City Art Museum in

Kiyama's hometown. Attending one of these exhibitions in Yonago, Japanese Manga

historian Frederik Schodt reported on Kiyama's paintings:

> "[They] show a remarkable skill, but in today's light they are rather orthodox.
> Kiyama's primary goal was clearly mastery of the Western techniques of color,
> shading, and perspective, and not bold experimentation. What gives his portrait
> work special poignancy is its historical value, as when he documents the ordinary
> people of San Francisco who modeled for him" (10).

Schodt went on to explain that in Kiyama's homeland, Kiyama's artistic

accomplishments had the added significance of serving as evidence to the Japanese that

Japanese painters were able to quickly master Western techniques.

This historical context for Kiyama's artwork, and by extension the artwork by the

character Henry, illustrate that Henry is carrying home with him a framed piece of fine

art. This artwork is not, as one could also interpret, a framed piece of comic art, given

that in the comics depiction of the African American's portrait, we see a traditional

comics shorthand for African-descended ethnicity: the application of a kind of blackface

to a character that signifies ethnicity efficiently and problematically. I emphasize this

image in particular because of the weighty implicit insight into authorial intent contained

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within it. When a comics artist draws, in comics form, an oil painting of an African American in this era, the default whiteness of comic language becomes undeniable. To further clarify, if Kiyama were drawing a painting of a white San Franciscan, contrasts between depiction and reality would not likely come to a reader's mind nearly as readily, because the unmarked white comic character is read as much more closely analogous to a photo-realistic painting. By juxtaposing Kiyama's work with ethnic prose literature later in this chapter, I will also demonstrate how both types of ethnically interested texts deal with similarly politically charged linguistic defaults.

An illustration from *How to Create Cartoons* (1941) illustrates how modes of depiction became codified early on in the history of American cartooning (Figure 2.2). Even more interestingly, Frank Greene, the cartoonist of this pedagogical piece, implicitly understands that the relationship between ethnicity and disposition is intertwined in terms of visual significance to a popular audience. Therefore, ethnicity and disposition are conflatable by a cartoonist, and specifically an American cartoonist, for efficiency and efficacy. As he explains, faces (or ethnicity) must be in harmony with posture (or disposition). This conflation of two seemingly unrelated components of character traits can only occur so overtly in a visual medium.

I suggest that, in the comics medium in particular, a relationship between "face" and "posture," or identity and disposition, is as intrinsic to the medium as the relationship between word and image about which Scott McCloud famously theorized at the dawn of the current wave of comics scholarship. As McCloud explains, word and image are in constant interaction, regardless of whether the audience is aware of this symbiosis. When

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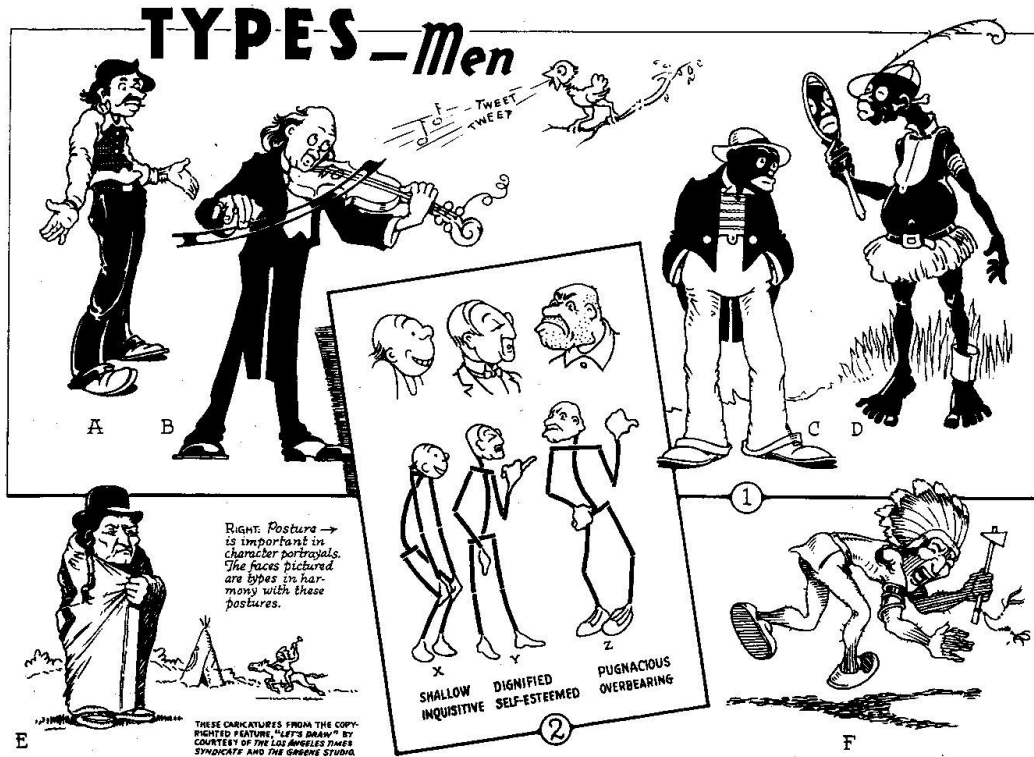
from How to Create Cartoons by Frank Greene. 1941

Figure 2.2: "Types – Men," *How to Create Cartoons*, Frank Greene, 1941.

an image and the words that surround it do not agree in an expected way, a jarring effect is caused, as shown in the top right panel in McCloud's illustration (Figure 2.3).

It is important to see that what McCloud is actually explaining relates to the holistic way in which the comics medium can be absorbed. Like cinema, comics have a tutor code. For cinema, for example, as a child watches movies, he or she absorbs the tutor code. The child learns about the meaning of cuts between scenes, non-diegetic music, etc., in such a way that these elements do not interfere with his or her absorption

Figure 2.3: Panel from *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (158).

of the film's meaning. It may be possible to assert that the tutor code of comics is more

pronounced than that of cinema, but unnecessary to say that. It is sufficient to say that

comics' tutor code is pronounced in a different way. For instance, meaning is not

immediately obfuscated in the panel that McCloud labels as incongruous. More

accurately, meaning is deferred.

I would assert that this incongruity to which McCloud refers has an intrinsic

relationship with the incongruity between posture and face against which Greene warns,

and which Greene also depicts as a relationship between ethnicity and demeanor.

Therefore, incongruity is possible, but it gives the audience pause in the same way

McCloud's panel does, by deferring meaning. So, a tutor code of comics can be interpreted as reinforcing a dominant ideology of ethnicity when applied in Greene's mode, in order to speak in an uncomplicated way to an audience. But a comics tutor code can also introduce incongruity without alienating the audience, as McCloud's panel demonstrates.[1] The relationship between congruity, incongruity, and deferred meaning are at the core of comics and comics innovation of all forms, including Kiyama's work, and I will return to these elements to shed light on some of Kiyama's more innovative panels.

Much like the novel as theorized by Bakhtin, with its inherently parodic relationship to earlier forms of media, containing and subverting the high seriousness of epic, romance or lyric, Kiyama's comics panel similarly contains a fragment of an antecedent art form and subversively complicates it. Because of the visual nature of Kiyama's medium, a perplexing question is raised about the nature of Kiyama's decision to depict Henry's painting in the way that he did. This question does not arise as emphatically when analyzing Kiyama's comics-style depiction of a living African American, as will also be discussed later in this chapter. The difference between the phenomenological impact of the comics depiction of a portrait and the comics depiction of a living being makes it clear that the cross-genre aspect of this particular panel leads to its subversive and parodic potentiality. And it is the application of newly theorized principles of comics form that can reveal how the specific structure of comics simultaneously complicate and shed light on theories developed around forms of media that were prose-only or visual-only.

In contrast to Bakhtin, who saw hope in the novel form, Marxist critic Georg Lukács initially condemned the novel as a vehicle of bourgeois ideology in *The Theory of the Novel*.[2] Lukács' approach and other criticism of this kind have been called "reflectionist" because of their assertion that literature holds a mirror up to the historical world. Lukács' analysis of the novel genre is relevant to my study of Kiyama, as Lukács' genre theory is primarily concerned with social and political outcomes. Any subversive reading of Kiyama should be modified by keeping such concerns in mind. Still, it is important, when juxtaposing Lukács' analysis of a piece like *Ivanhoe*, to acknowledge that *Ivanhoe* is more firmly entrenched within a hegemonic mode of production than Kiyama's work, which is complicated by his status as an outsider on many fronts (including his non-U.S. citizenship, his ethnicity, and his socio-economic class).

From his biographical research, Schodt asserts, "Kiyama himself belongs to a class of impoverished student-workers" (10). However, Lukács' analysis should be kept in mind especially when thinking about Kiyama's goal in San Francisco to learn and reflect back the cultural and aesthetic traditions of the West. Further, Lukács' concern that popular genres had the potential to reify dominant ideologies must also be remembered if only to ultimately problematize Lukács' ideas about "low art." This is because this approach to popular media is still alive today in the academy, although it is one that has sometimes held back the effective study of "low" mediums like comics, as well as the study of comics genres regarded as non-literary (e.g., superhero comics).

Asian American literature scholar Stan Yogi differs from both Bakhtin and Lukács in his attention to issues of ethnicity along with formal generic issues. In his 1997 essay, "Japanese American Literature," Yogi is primarily concerned with shedding

light on various forms of Japanese American literature without privileging one form, such as the novel, as Bakhtin has done. Yogi does not emphasize the novel form and instead extends his study over a variety of genres, attempting to canonize various forms as important Japanese American literature. Extending a formal analysis to Kiyama's comics technique in an examination of the interdependence of form and theme, illustrates how the comics form is able to express the Japanese American experience in ways non-graphic texts cannot. In this way, this chapter continues Stan Yogi's investigation of genre applications in "Japanese American Literature" and extends the discussion to the genre of visual narrative.

In his introduction to the groundbreaking *AIIIEEEEE!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers,* Frank Chin wrote:

> "Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed "aiiieeeee!" (iii)

He sets aside comic books, along with radio, movies, and television, as pedestrian entertainments, implicitly inclined by their formal qualities to portray Asian Americans as stereotypes.

Stan Yogi opens his essay, "Japanese American Literature," by quoting a journalistic assertion that "Japanese Americans have yet to develop a literature of their own" (105). Further, Yogi discusses how various literary genres were able to take advantage of their formal qualities to make a social impact. For example, he discusses the poetry of Toyo Suyemoto, written during the time of Japanese American internment,

which, because of its lyrical quality, is able to contain subversive elements in ways internment prose could not at the time without being censored. Still, in his ethnically oriented approach to these various literary genres, Yogi does agree with Bakhtin's explanation of the novel form's ability in particular to intersect with the present and its interplay with history, politics, and culture. However, Yogi does not limit this social impact to the novel form and, rather, extends it to all of the works he discusses and identifies as important Japanese American literature. Yet, like Chin, Yogi limits the scope of the genres he examines from those that belong to low culture, as comics are traditionally categorized. Ironically, before even the publication of earliest text that Yogi examined (Etsu Sugimoto's culturally apologetic *A Daughter of the Samurai*, published in 1925), Henry Kiyama was already putting out the first episodes of *The Four Immigrant's Manga*, a comic that challenges stereotypes, and a work that screaming Asian Americans, to which Chin refers in his introduction, could have done much worse than read.

Before engaging in more formal analysis, it is important to contextualize the historical moment during which Kiyama lived. Asian workers arrived in California as early as the 1820s and were regarded as welcome labor. Most of these Asians were Chinese. These workers subsequently became competition for a white labor force made up largely of European immigrants. A series of treaties were signed to exclude Asians from naturalization, land ownership, and other rights. The Naturalization Act of 1790 provided for citizenship by naturalization for "any free person of good, moral character who had resided in this country for at least two years," and The Naturalization Act of 1870 extended status as privileged aliens to those of European birth and persons of

African descent. However, there was no policy that allowed naturalization to individuals who were neither white nor black.

In the meantime, Asian immigration was further restricted. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act barred entry of laborers for 10 years. The Act was then extended indefinitely in 1904. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as The National Origins Act, prohibited entry into the United States for permanent residence to all persons whose national origin sprang from within or was labeled the Asia Pacific Triangle.

It was directly in this cultural milieu that Henry Kiyama was creating his work when he wrote *The Four Immigrants Manga* in 1904. The Immigration Act of 1924 stayed in place until World War II when, out of embarrassment because of the United States' alliance with China and the Philippines against Japan, the US government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. In 1952, the McCarran Walter Act abolished the restrictions on the Asian Pacific Triangle and race-based exclusions from naturalization. As Schodt noted, Kiyama and his friends arrived in San Francisco at a particularly inauspicious time. European and Asian civilizations were both expanding and, in California, they met head on and clashed (14).

Local newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran inflammatory campaigns against the local Japanese population and against all Asian immigration. Prominent San Franciscans such as Mayor James D. Phelan (who later became a US Senator) lobbied vigorously to call for the expulsion of the Japanese. A "Japanese Exclusion League" was formed in San Francisco. There were physical and verbal attacks on Japanese that started during the time of Kiyama's arrival. There was also a wave of anti-Japanese legislation, which formed a significant backdrop for Kiyama's work.

Like most visual transactions, the comics medium is inflected by the politics of the specular. An inherent narcissism within the medium serves to produce a structural politics of the gaze. Scott McCloud acknowledges this with his theories about readers' ability to identify with the generic comic book face (Figure 2.4).
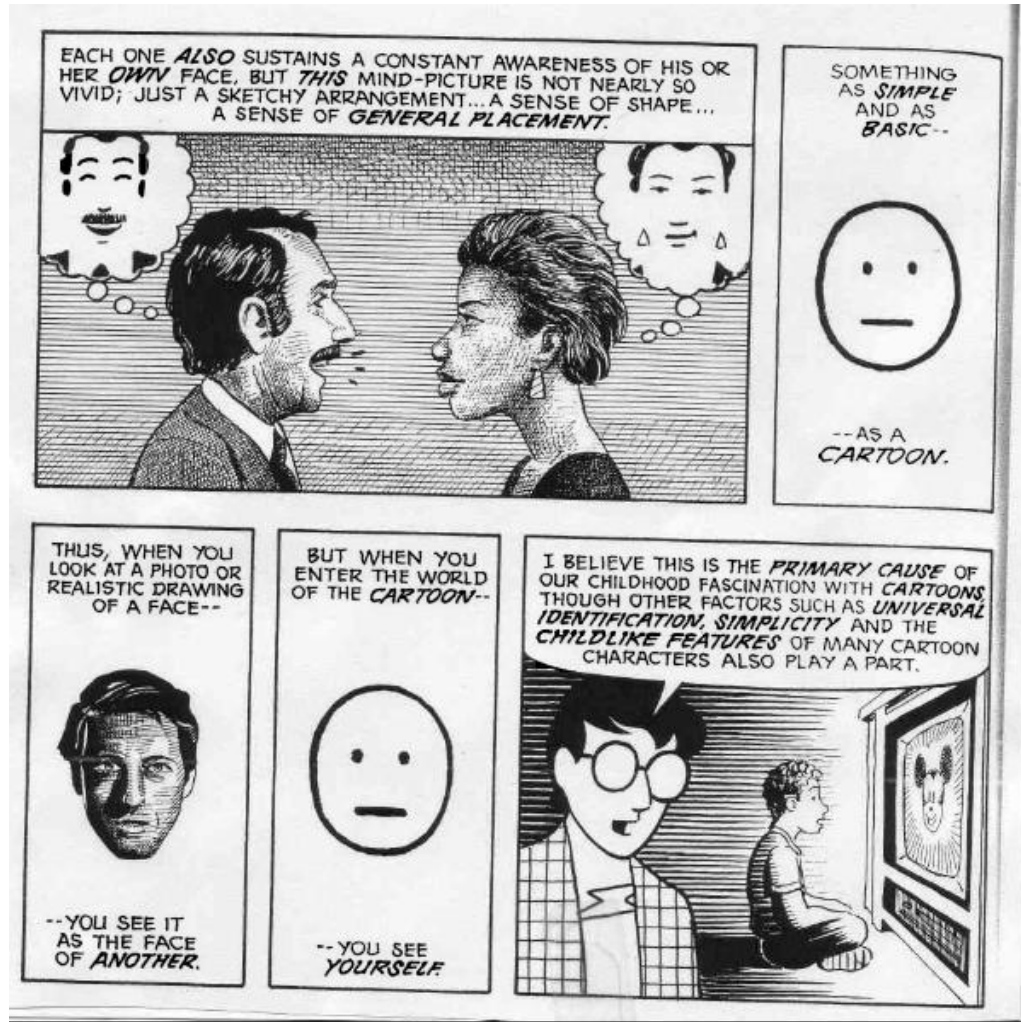
Figure 2.4: McCloud's theories about readers' ability to identify with the generic comic book face, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (36).

Comics ask: Who is watching whom? Who is performing for whom? Similarly, categories of ethnicity and race are also driven by the visual. Discussions of ethnicity, in this context of specular politics, foreground another set of questions: How is racial identity secured? How does racial identity continue to generate its adoptions for both the dominant and the marginalized? What are the repercussions, historical and personal, of the ongoing history of race relations in the US? The visual nature of a medium also makes it much more public. As renowned prose and comics writer Mat Johnson related, reading text-only fiction is like having someone whisper in your ear in the dark sitting in a closet. Comics reading is much more of a shared experience. The reader knows that he or she is seeing the same images as others. This is one explanation for the high degree of censorship to which comics have been exposed. Political thinking, outrage, and group identity are much more at play with shared visual experiences.

Just as ideals of decency are foregrounded in a more political way by comics and their audiences (sometimes to the detriment of comics), racial ideals are also powerfully foregrounded by the specular nature of comics. It becomes important to acknowledge that racial ideals have the greatest effects on and drive those most oppressed by those ideals, even if the ideals are physically unattainable in those marginalized groups. Market researchers have been interested in this idea for some time. For example, in 1995, toy manufacturer Mattel conducted research which revealed that African American (and other ethnic) children, given the chance, would rather play with a blond, blue eyed Barbie than dolls that "look more like themselves." Though I do not mean to overemphasize the results of this type of study, my project must draw attention to the fact that racial preference and racial dispreference persist in the specular as interpretive and

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ideologically invested questions. The successful exploration of these important

phenomena is inflected by the specificity of each media which depicts them. As an

image and prose medium, comics provide specific challenges and revelations toward

shedding light on cultural and pedagogical understanding of these important dynamics.

A key issue of discussing race has to do with how we Americans (and others

throughout the world) understand our social healing and our tendency to rely exclusively

on material, "objective," or quantifiable terms to articulate and calculate injury. As Anne

Anlin Cheng suggests in *The Melancholy of Race*, the study of literature is at its heart a

challenge to the privileging of the quantifiable. Cheng writes:

> "A vocabulary of grievance (and its implied logic of comparability and
> compensation) that constitutes so much of American political discourse has
> deflected attention away from an investigation of the more immaterial,
> unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making
> of the so-called minority subject and that sustains the notion of nation" (10).

The prospect of integrating the history of difference, social injustice, and injury into one

nation, into a unified national identity, has proven to be a difficult task. There are firmly

rooted yet simultaneously intangible complications for people living within a political

and cultural structure which turns on specularity and which privileges that which they can

never be. Cheng explains that this does not mean that the minority subject does not

develop other relations to that injunctive ideal which can be self-affirming or sustaining.

Rather, it means that a painful negotiation must be undertaken, at some point, if not

continually, with demands of social identity, the reality that always insisted on

difference.[3] This becomes clearer when examining the phenomenon through a visual

medium like comics. In Kiyama's case, it is reflected in his non-stereoypical depictions

of Japanese students versus his cartoonish stereotypical caricatures of Chinese and

African Americans, as well as his reliance on gendered shorthand in his depictions of women. Beneath Kiyama's production looms the threatening diagnosis of an "inferiority complex" or "white preference" within a problematically fraught network of ongoing cyclical negotiation instigated and institutionalized by racism. It is this more simplistic and common diagnosis upon which I hope to make an intervention. The connection between subjectivity and social damage can be formulated in terms which are simultaneously more complex yet more apparent when investigating the visual. The inclusion of visual iconic language alongside prose allows for a level of mapping of the phenomenological structure that provides lifelines to moments of recognition. These allow for thorough examination without the alienation of abstraction. This also allows a scholar to map the important work of scholars, like Cheng, who work in identity-driven prose literature, in conjunction with the work of scholars who engage in identity driven visual modes of production, such as Eric Lott.

As Lott argues in his work on black-face minstrelsy, the dominant culture's relation to the raced other displays an entangled network of repulsion and sympathy, of fear and desire, and of repudiation and identification.[4] Paul Gilroy further asserts in *The Black Atlantic* that "the consciousness of European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the 'Indians' they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in the situations of most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from one another" (29). This imbricated but denied relationship forms the basis of what Cheng calls white racial melancholia. Cheng uses close readings of major texts of African American literature to illustrate this phenomenon.

In her readings of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Cheng explores how white racial melancholia plays itself out not only in national formation but in its expressions: the formation of literature. I am following suit in this chapter in using the work of a non-white artist/author, Kiyama, to investigate white racial melancholy. Cheng also references Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* to situate her project in a way that is relevant to mine. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison calls for "an examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding 19ᵗʰ century works, for the unspeakable things unspoken" (11-12).

Cheng explores invisibility and visibility in ways that can be used to bridge gaps and apply useful parallels between prose and graphic fictions concerned with visible identity. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a text whose treatise on black invisibility might be seen as a forerunner to Morrison's "ghost in the machine," Ellison gives us an enigmatic picture of a racist encounter. In the opening sequence, after telling the reader that he is invisible "because [white] people refuse to see [him]," the narrator runs into a violent confrontation:

> One night I accidentally bumped into a man . . . He looked in some way out of his blue eyes and cursed me . . . I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize" But he continued to curse and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily . . . I kicked him profusely . . . When it occurred to me that a man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was walking in the midst of a walking nightmare … A man almost killed by a phantom. (4-5)

Cheng argues that this scene is enigmatic because the description opens up a range of questions about the difference between perception and projection, between action and reaction. To begin with, Cheng explains, from the narrator's perspective, we see the white man's "insolence" as anger from having to confront what he presumably did not

want to see. The white man's curse, upon being bumped, expresses an active wish to deny the invisible object now demanding a competing presence. What the narrator thinks troubles the white man is the "bumping" -- that point of contact with invisibility that has in fact historically insured the white man's ability to see and to not see. This white man does not see the black man in that alley. In describing a white store owner who had difficulty seeing a little black girl under his nose trying to buy candy from him in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison depicts the similar moment of simultaneously seeing and not seeing. She describes the man as having been "blunted by a permanent awareness of losses." Analyzing this turn of phrase by Morrison, Cheng argues that Morrison has located the precise and peculiar nature of losses in white racial melancholia:

> "Somewhere between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, and as complimentary negative space. It is precisely the slippery distance between laws and exclusion that racial myopia affects" (Cheng 16).

 Cheng concludes that part of the central dilemma of racial melancholia—since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of the suspended other—is that it does not really want the lost other to return (or demand its right of way).

These two instances of the visible and invisible become much more effective when juxtaposed with a visual narrative. With this juxtaposition, it becomes clear that in part because of their media, Ellison and Morrison had to resort to a form of magical realist metaphor to emphatically convey a phenomenon of invisibility that would play out more structurally rather than individually in a non-magical realist environment. However, labeling these fictional events from Morrison and Ellison as magical realist is imprecise.[5] Issues of writing in the language of the dominant ideology or in patriarchal language can

be used to explain the needs for such moves in ethnic literature. When juxtaposed with the work of Kiyama, certain clarities appear. For instance, the language of the dominant ideology, insofar as comics have a language made up of words and of icons, can be teased out. The cartoonily depicted caricatures of the African Americans in *The Four Immigrants Manga* can be read as patriarchal language. In a sense, when it comes to Kiyama and his perception of African American characters, invisibility is a two way street. However, it is not simply that Kiyama engages the black subject in a mode of the dominant ideology; rather, it is that the girl in T*he Bluest Eye* does so too.

At the same time, we have to ask: is the person of color the only one suffering from not being seen in these scenarios? The writing is ambiguous, especially as it pertains to the scene from *The Invisble Man*. Who is the invisible one? If the narrator bumps into the white man, is not the white man the one who is invisible to the black man? The narrator bumps into what he did not see and accuses the other of blindness. Cheng argues that if we do not take the narrator's account at its surface value, it is conceivable that the white man cursed the black man for his clumsiness rather than for racist reasons. The narrator's interpretation of insolence may be itself a melancholic response to the incendiary sign of the lies in his own self-denigration (16). Cheng continues:

> In actuality, invisibility is rarely a one way street. In this confrontation, there is potential mutual invisibility and mutual production. Indeed, all of the racial moment is born out of this dynamic blocking of the two men's initial projection. In a response that is both macho and hysterical, the narrator demonstrates that he is trapped not by having been seen as invisible but by suspecting himself to be so. This is racial melancholy after the race object: internalization of discipline and rejection of the installation of a scripted context of perception. The invisible man's racial radar at once is his perspicacity and his paranoia, and is justified. For the invisible man is both a melancholic object and a melancholic subject, both the one lost and the one losing. (17)

This internalization embodies a web of negotiation that expresses agency as well as abjection. It is with this complex and visual intersection in mind that I wish to begin my formal analysis of *The Four Immigrants Manga* and the moment of US and Japanese culture which Kiyama captures in his book and which can be revealed in particularly unique ways precisely because Kiyama engages in a visual medium.

From the outset, *The Four Immigrants Manga* tackled themes and characters hitherto unknown in U.S. literature, let alone in comics. Henry Kiyama invoked the looks and attitudes of early 20th century San Francisco, capturing its clashing and merging ethnicities and cultures. Truly, the formal and thematic innovations of *The Four Immigrants Manga* are of a single piece: what the series has to say and how it goes about saying it are bound together. This ambition is a matter not simply of scale but of formal daring. For if *The Four Immigrants Manga* extended the thematic range of comics, it also necessarily pioneered new approaches to the comic book's most basic units of meaning: the panel and the page. Comics scholarship, first armed with the formalist vocabulary of such critics as Robert C. Harvey, practitioners such as Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, and then augmented by scholars such as Charles Hatfield, has just begun to pay attention to such formal developments.

Before the current wave of academic interest in comics, Robert Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies (*1994) and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996) represented the leading edge of formalist criticism within academic publishing. And although neither book aspires to be strictly academic in tone, Harvey's work remains relevant. Harvey's definitions of *breakdown, layout, composition* and *verbal-visual blending* underlie both studies, and are enormously helpful for formal analysis. McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The*

Invisible Art (1993), a 200-page critical treatise in comics form, has become easily the most influential study by a contemporary comics practitioner, offering ambitious discussions of word-image combinations, stylistic variation, and, perhaps most importantly, panel-to-panel movement (e.g., *closure*). Influential to *Understanding Comics* is cartoonist Eisner's ground-breaking textbook, *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), the first book-length aesthetic study by an American practitioner. Eisner's more recent *Graphic Storytelling* (1996) carries on his critical project, offering cogent analyses of narrative technique. A modification of the critical framework offered by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, in combination with notions of filmic suture, will allow me to analyze *The Four Immigrants Manga* and the comics genre, as well as to demonstrate how film and comic theories can usefully inform each other.

The first point, Kiyama's drawings of characters, can be reduced to a matter of style (the degree of abstraction) and technique (the finesse of rendering). The style/technique distinction employed here has been extrapolated from Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*. The latter, technique, does not lend itself easily to criticism, though it influences meaning as handwriting influences our written message. The former, style, offers more room for analysis. At the very least, we should observe that Kiyama's style, though superficially plain, is complex insofar as it reconciles naturalism with caricatural abstraction. In fact, Kiyama employs a sliding scale of realism, drawing some characters, such as children or comical stock characters, broadly and widely, while other characters are drawn in a restrained if not naturalistic way. Such inconsistency is native to the art of cartooning, but Kiyama goes further, at times drawing even his most narratively realistic characters with cartoony abandon, especially when they are in the grip of strong

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feeling like fear or rage (a technique widely practiced among Japanese artists but less common in the U.S.).[6] It is the formal elements of ethnic caricature that neither McCloud nor Eisner have theorized within this sliding scale of realism and upon which I will shed light with close reading later in the chapter.

In *Understanding Comics,* artist Scott McCloud explains a phenomenon he calls closure. Closure occurs in the gaps between comic panels. When a man raises an axe against his victim in one panel and there is a blood-curdling scream in the next panel, the white (or any-colored) gap on the page between the two panels, called the gutter, forces the audience to fill in what happens to the axe man's victim (Figure 2.5). As McCloud explains, "Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice, an equal partner in crime known as the reader" (68). The artist may have drawn an axe being raised, but the artist is not the one who let the axe drop, decided how hard the blow would be, or who screamed or why. That is the reader's own special crime, committed by each in his or her own style. McCloud elaborates, "To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths" (69).

Figure 2.5: "Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice," *Understanding* Comics, Scott McCloud (66).

Applying Jaques Lacan's critical analysis in his essay, "The Symbolic Order," I argue that the gutter inflicts a lack on its audience, which forces the audience to suture over itself by imagining what happens in the gutter. As Lacanian film theorists such as Daniel Dayan argue, this can suture the audience to the narrative of a film as well, and in some cases, to the ideology a text embodies. This allows me to modify McCloud's explanation, by overlapping comics closure with filmic suture; furthermore, it provides a useful structure for analyzing what Kiyama accomplished so early in the history of American cartooning and ethnic literature.

In "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," Daniel Dayan presents the repercussions of the camera's point of view on viewers' experiences of film. As the camera controls the viewer's gaze, it presents stand-ins for its invisible role, suturing the audience with the relative comfort of this stand-in in place of its invisible agency. While Scott McCloud's closure has a similarly comforting effect on audiences, it operates using paneling and gutters. However, another principle of comics vocabulary that McCloud investigates in *Understanding Comics* relies on audience point of view and audience identification with a character, just as filmic suture does, yet it has elements that bind an audience to a character which filmic suture could never manage. McCloud asserts:

> When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail. Each also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement, a sense of shape, a sense of general placement – something as simple and as basic – as a *cartoon*. Thus when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face [or a film] – you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see *yourself*. (36)

As Dayan explains, films also bind their audiences to characters but must rely mainly on shots to do so. In film, a point of view shot followed by a reverse shot leaves

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the audience not seeing the character to which it is sutured because the audience is looking through that character's eyes. The audience does not get to see the person through whose eyes they are looking until the camera reverses itself to reveal that character. However, in a comic suture, a character may be present in a frame while the audience is being sutured to that character because of the principles McCloud outlined above. That is why the effectiveness of Kiyama's paneling can be analyzed through its suturing effects even though he never employs a point of view panel. McCloud points to the way in which panel shapes control how the comic book is read and understood, and this changes the reading experience and is often responsible for shaping the reader's understanding of comic time. However, what remains untheorized by McCloud are the dramatic ways in which the borders and framing can connote ruptures not only in time, but also in the actual understanding of the narrative.

Kaja Silverman's modification of Dayan's explanation of suture is useful in analyzing the process of Kiyama's comic audience. Writing about film, Silverman asserts that it is not necessary for a film's editor to provide the audience with the suture, since the audience will go out of its way to suture itself. As Silverman explains, the film only has to inflict a wound on the audience to make it want the "restorative of meaning and narrative" (140). Within that formula of a suture, for Kiyama, the character to which the audience is sutured is the character that proceeds through all the panels of an episode. The character with which the audience identifies is naturally the one that exists in all of the panels. For example, in Episode 6, "Schoolboys," the Japanese student Henry is the common element in all of the panels (Figure 2.6). Henry is the character with which readers must travel in order to make a coherent narrative. And the principle explained by

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McCloud, which allows that a more generically drawn face allows a reader to see herself in a character when she reads a comic, further enforces a reader's suture to Henry. It is notable that Henry's face is much like the generic smiley McCloud uses in his example (Figure 2.7).

The only episode in which one character is strikingly not a unifying, continuous presence in Kiyama's series is in "The Turlock Incident," which is also one of the episodes most charged with racial tension. Taken directly from a news story of the period, the episode focuses on a group of white farmers in Turlock who break into a Japanese migrant worker boarding house and force the Japanese at gunpoint onto a truck.

The white farmers then deposit the Japanese outside of the Turlock city limits. The principle of generic face drawing allows a reader to identify with Frank and Charlie, the Japanese characters in the first panel (Figure 2.8). Both of their faces are typical cartoons, lacking realism and with few details so that when the reader sees them, as McCloud asserts, she sees a pattern that resembles her own internal vague mapping of her face and is able to identify with them.

Yet, if this principle is in effect for Frank and Charlie, it must also apply to the racist farmers of Turlock, who are equally vaguely drawn. And comic suturing is especially notable here because of that. The comic form naturally allows Kiyama to form identifications with both parties in this struggle and facilitates an even more powerful parallelism. The juxtaposition of panel one of "The Turlock Incident" with panel three (directly below it) reveals more about what the generic face technique allows or even encourages in an artist. The generic face technique has left Kiyama with few options in terms of differentiating his characters. More detail is required for specific differentiation

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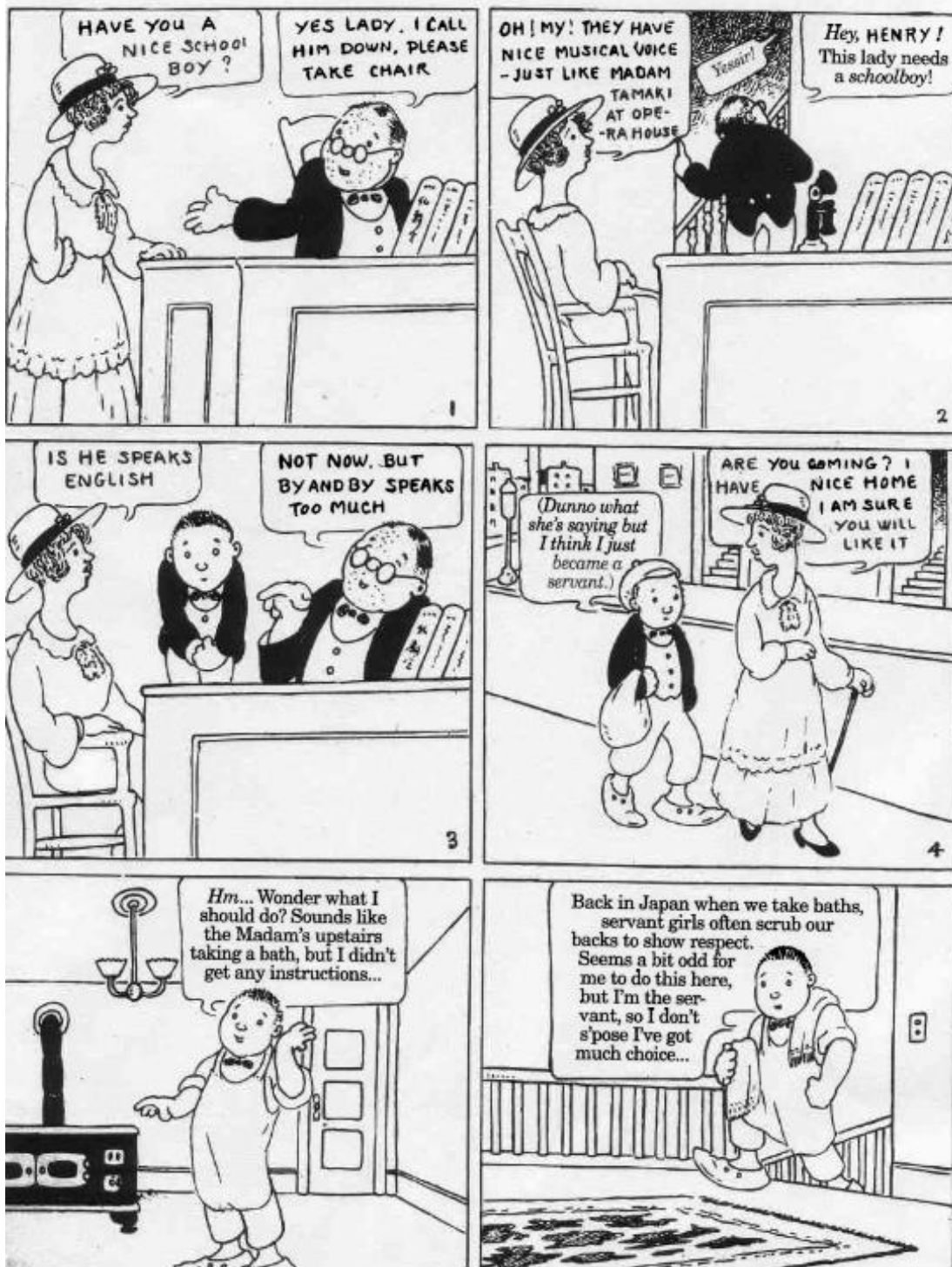
Figure 2.6: "Schoolboys," *Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry Kiyama (38).
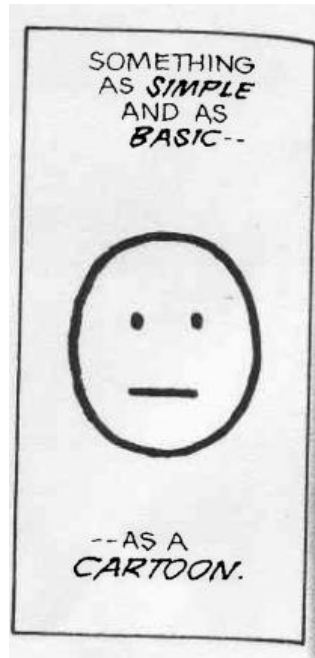
Figure 2.7: "Something as simple and as basic – as a cartoon," *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (36).

of appearance, yet more detail might also lead to a loss of the cartoon quality that allows readers to identify with the characters. So the main differentiation between Charlie and Frank is Charlie's longish face and thicker lips, as well as his longer body type. Without these details, Charlie would even more closely resemble the basically drawn Frank, who comes as close as possible to the generic smiley face (two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth) that McCloud identifies as the quintessential generic face for reader identification.

If we continue to juxtapose panel one with panel three, we can note the configuration of the Turlock farmer to the far left, also drawn in a longish-faced style like Charlie, with the exact body lines of Charlie as well. He is speaking and gesturing with his hands just as Charlie is doing above him, and he occupies the same space of his frame that Charlie occupies in his. Directly to the long-faced farmer's left (right in the panel) is
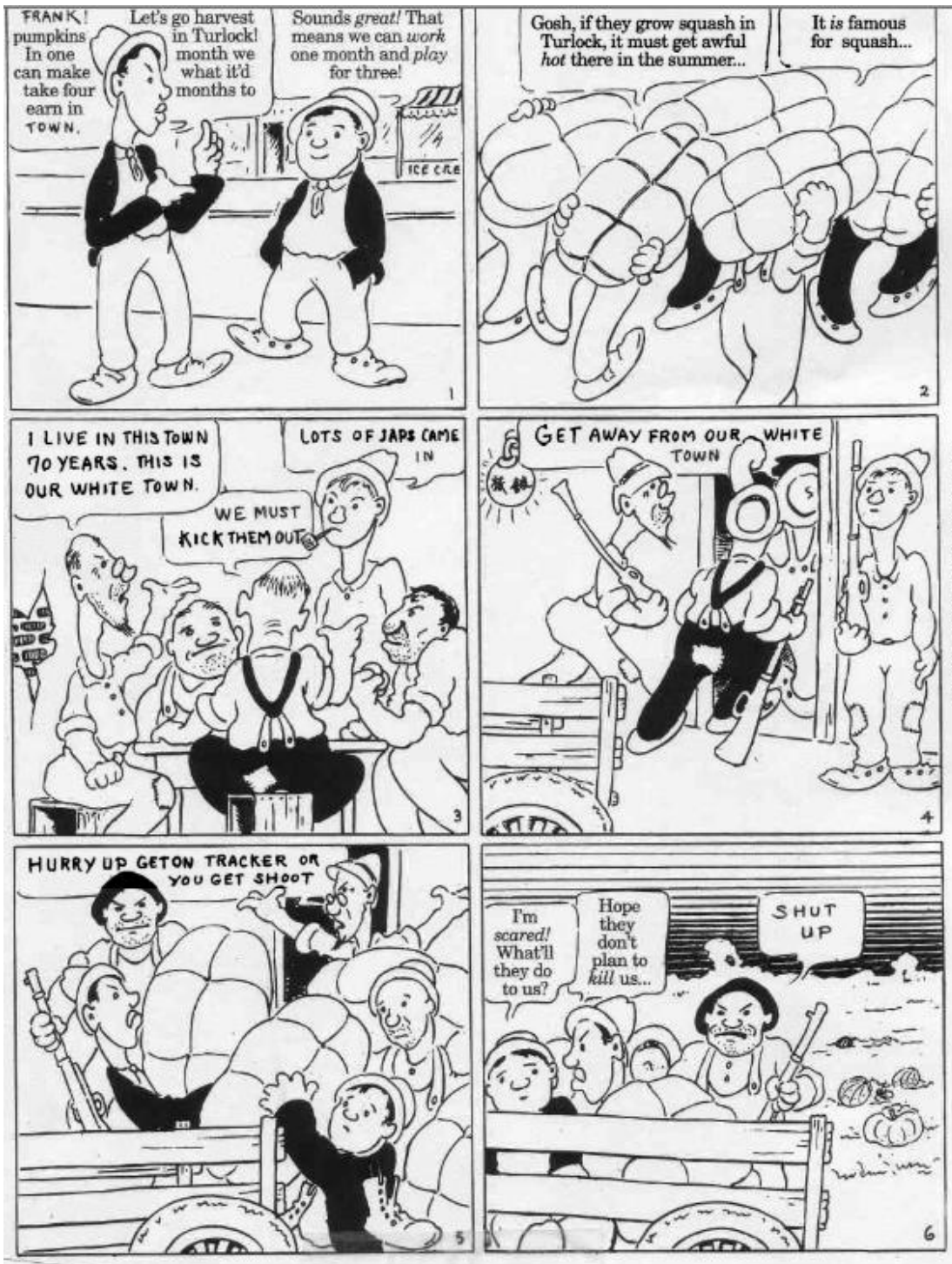
Figure 2.8: "The Turlock Incident," *Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry Kiyama (124).

another farmer with the same body type and ultra-generic face as Frank. I suggest that not only do cartoonily drawn characters facilitate audience identification with the characters, but they also allow a quality of human universality between even the most disparate characters themselves. In the case of "The Turlock Incident," this occurs when the comic is dealing with one of its most divisive issues.

Beyond the suturing that happens through audience identification, there is also the closure that, as McCloud explains, occurs in the gutters of the panels. Kiyama's traditional paneling entails panels on a page with a white space between one panel and the next. These white gutters are a limbo in which an unspecified amount of time passes. "The Turlock Incident" is again a useful episode within which to examine this phenomenon. Kiyama forgoes directly depicting any of the physical violence that may have occurred between the Japanese migrant workers and the white farmers. This occurs arguably because Kiyama still envisions his comic traditionally as an entertainment, and while he groundbreakingly engages with racial tensions and other issues of anthropology and biography never before seen in US comics, Kiyama is not willing to completely abandon the levity of his strip. "The Turlock Incident," just as all of his other episodes do, ends with a punchline about a Japanese proverb, "going to bed crying," or in other words, "grinning and bearing it." Cartoonist Rube Goldberg, after whom the most prestigious award in comics is named, once insisted to Will Eisner, in response to Eisner's suggestion that comics were art, that comics were "vaudeville" and nothing else.

However, applying McCloud's framework of the gutter, which was inspired by Eisner's work on the vocabulary of comics, squeamishness is not logically the only driving force behind Kiyama's omission of the actual violence that occurred when a

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Japanese boarding house was forcibly broken into and evacuated. Despite its

unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery at the very

heart of comics. In "The Turlock Incident," all of the real violence occurs in the gutters,

so the reader must suture herself over to achieve closure. Closure means every act

committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice, an

equal partner in crime known as the reader; thus, when the reader strives for suture within

"The Turlock Incident," she is forced to actively participate in the violence that occurred

that night. The most violent gutter is likely that between panel four and five. In panel

four, the farmers go in. By panel five, the farmers have already convinced the Japanese

workers to pack their things and leave. The comic does not show any of the convincing

the farmers may have done. To achieve the comfort of closure between these two panels,

the audience must embrace the more significant discomfort of no longer reading just a

funny, violence-free book. In this way, Kiyama's text achieves something powerfully

and subversively similar to what Stan Yogi describes in reference to the poetry of Toyo

Suyemoto achieving through its particular form. As Suyemoto's work is able to take

advantage of the lyrical qualities of poetry to achieve its protests of Japanese internment

without being censored, Kiyama's comic is able to exclude straightforward depictions of

racial violence, while actually including it in such a way that maximizes its impact on the

reader. This is because, as McCloud explains, what happens in the gutter happens a

thousand times, and for each reader in her own particular way.

  In an extension of my argument about the achievement of Kiyama's drawing style

in terms of pure comics innovation, I draw attention to the more obvious difference

Kiyama makes in drawing his characters cartoonishly but not caricaturishly. There,

Kiyama's portrayal of Japanese-American characters sans buck teeth and other Asian stereotypes popular in the early days of comics still maintains the classic look of the age in which it was created, while departing significantly from its need to artistically differentiate Japanese from Anglos. This inadvertently highlights Kiyama's unfortunate use of racist imagery in his portrayal of Blacks and Chinese -- imagery that Kiyama obviously knew was degrading, since he left similar visuals out of his portrayal of Japanese characters. Kiyama's portrayal of women, and perhaps black women most of all, is also useful to examine and allows for another useful overlap between comic and film theory, in particular, the scopophilic gaze as introduced by Laura Mulvey.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in the film journal *Screen*. A few years later, in 1981, Mulvey published "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*. Since the publication of these seminal texts, psychoanalytic film theory has become a force with which to be reckoned. Whether or not a film scholar accepts Mulvey's Freudian and Lacanian position to cinema, one still has to deal with the theory. Among the theoretical insights provided by Mulvey was the idea that cinema provides two different types of pleasure from looking. The first type of pleasure is that of scopophilic voyeurism. This is often the function of sexual instinct and describes how male viewers look at women on the screen. The second type of pleasure detailed by Mulvey is that of scopophilic narcissism. This is the function of the ego libido, the pleasure of identification, and makes up the comfort zone of the Lacanian Imaginary or the Freudian pre-Oedipal. Mulvey is quick to point out that these two types of visual

pleasure interact and overlay each other, yet she also deals with them as dichotomous concepts.

On the second page of "Schoolboys" (Figure 2.9), we see Henry, the Japanese schoolboy, an art student like Kiyama, faced with the naked body of a white woman, who is vaguely reminiscent of Dean Anderson's Blondie, who continues to be depicted bathing in the newspaper funnies (Figure 2.10), or the voluptuous Appalachian women in Al Capp's Lil' Abner (Figure 2.11), among others.

Figure 2.9: "Schoolboys," *Four Immigrants Manga*, Kiyama (39).

Figure 2.10: Chic Young. *Blondie*, 1974.

Figure 2.11: "Don't Marry that Girl," *Li'l Abner*, Al Capp, 1946.

Both comics emerged not long after *The Four Immigrants Manga* ended. I am certainly not arguing that Kiyama's comic set the precedent, but rather, I am suggesting that in all of these comics, a gender otherization occurs which allows the audience to associate pleasure with suturing its gaze to particular characters in a text, including schoolboy Henry, Dagwood, and Abner. Further, it is important to note that in the more experimental biographical and culturally anthropological underground comics of the 1960s, these voyeuristic tendencies increased. Examples of this include virtually all of the work of R. Crumb, which is recognized as the artistic pinnacle of the underground movement (Figure 2.12). We can also include the work of Crumb's contemporaries, perhaps most notably Vaughn Bode, whose *Cheech Wizard* progressively explored 1960s counterculture but also appeared in soft porn magazines (Figure 2.13).
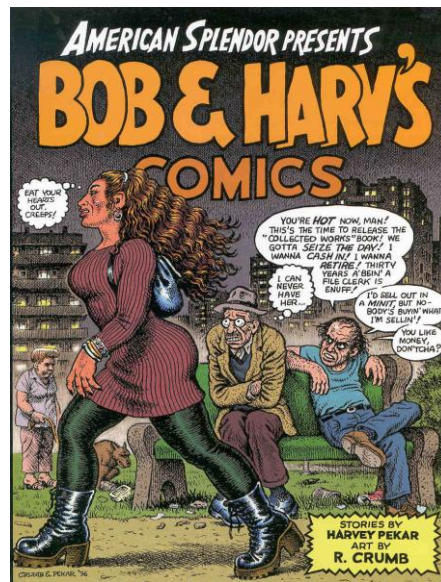
Figure 2.12: *American Splendor Presents Bob & Harv's Comics*, Harvey Pekar and R. Crumb, 1996.

So, I conclude that, at moments when a more experimental protagonist emerges, such as a Japanese immigrant, an antisocial nerd (Crumb), or a magical midget (Cheech), the artist's imperative to capitalize on the scopophilic gaze is increased in order to ensure audience association with that character.

Figure 2.13: *Cheech Wizard Vol. 1*, Vaughn Bode, 13. Republished by Fantagraphic Books in 1990; originally published in 1957.

Kiyama continues this trend in Episode 8 of "Schoolboys," (Figure 2.14), in which Frank and Charlie walk through town discussing the ethnicities of women who inhabit the houses they pass. This includes, in panel 7, the first of three disturbing depictions African American woman drawn in full blackface style, which was the accepted comic shorthand for characters of African descent at the time.
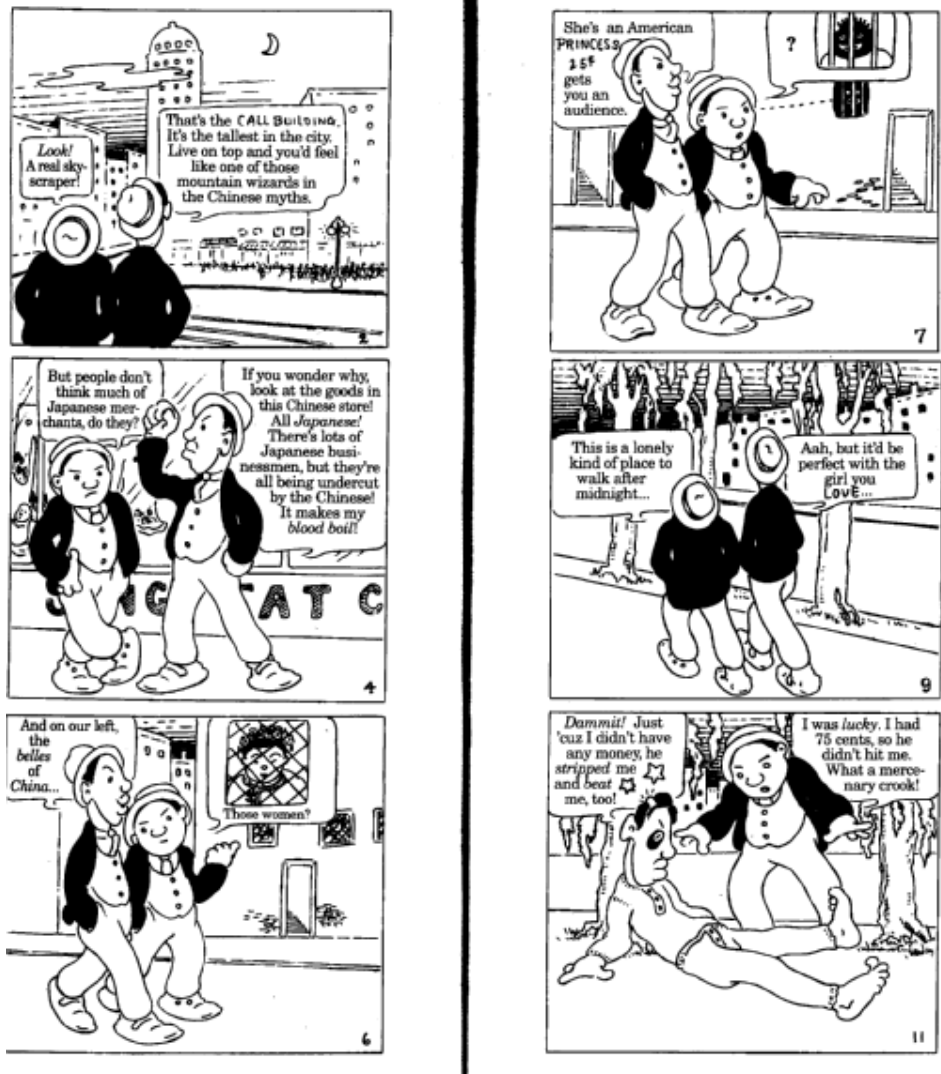
Figure 2.14: "Schoolboys," Episode 8, *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry Kiyama (44-45).

The second depiction occurs in another episode enforced by the scopophilic gaze, "The Panama Pacific International Exposition" (Figure 2.15), which opens with Charlie's flirtation with a Japanese waitress whose breasts are overly emphasized. The episode concludes fascinatingly with Charlie pursuing his love interest through the Exposition, only to find he has mistaken an African American woman for the Japanese waitress. The suturing to Charlie is complex. We are sutured to him because we do not know the woman is black until Charlie does. So, like Charlie, we desire the woman to that point (the caricatured black-face drawing she reveals herself to be is intended to be beyond desire). It is also intriguing that Charlie injures his groin on a flag pole during his pursuit; as Mulvey asserts, the scopophilic gaze emerges to quell the fear of loss of masculinity (15). However, the caricatured portrayal of the black woman problematizes any argument that Kiyama is trying to universalize her by making her race initially indeterminate. Perhaps the greatest difference between a comic book and the films theorized by Laura Mulvey is in the way in which the filmic diegesis differs from the comic book panel. Indeed, there is so much freedom in the comic book panel that it becomes difficult to know whether to consider the individual panel or the complete page (or even double page spread) as comparable to the diegesis.

This moment allows Cheng's theories of racial melancholy, which she developed to shed light on texts that deal with the visual and identity in a prose text, to be applied to the analysis of a prose- and image-driven text on identity and ethnicity. To the Japanese student himself, who has been haunted by his inability to become assimilated, the black woman's physiognomy spells a painful deterrent to successful assimilation. In enjoining the black woman and subsequently rejecting her, the student is also reproducing his own

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Figure 2.15: "The Panama Pacific International Exposition," *The Four Immigrants Manga,* Henry Kiyama (95).

dramatic experiences. So, not only does the student, through this protracted scene, obsessively meditate on the other racially marked body's details in terms that duplicate his own fears about his own body and racial appearance, but he also suffers from a similar incident of object interrogation in another part of the book – though not a moment

of misrecognition. Arguably, the moment in "The Turlock Incident," or in any other moment wherein race becomes the prime cause of action, his identity oscillates between all other things he is and could be and how the dominant culture sees him – in terms of his ethnicity. In "The Panama Pacific International Exposition,"the student is offered the trauma of not being a victim but of being the aggressor. The juxtaposition of this scene and the scene in "Schoolboys" of a student walking in on the white woman in the bathtub (Figure 2.7) not only plays out the autobiographical coercion, but also acts out the internalization of normalization. Surely what is most disarming about "The Panama Pacific International Exposition" is that the aggression is being performed by someone repeating his own trauma, in the form of persecution. The "Panama Pacific" incident offers the profound and disturbing suggestion that the gendered and ethnically marked body comes to voice only by summoning the voice of authority.

The act of rejecting an ethnic other is the closest the student comes to being what he associates with "Americaness." Assimilation for the student reveals itself to be not the adaptation of behavior or costumes for the sake of the repetition of the violence, dramatizing its simultaneous staging and collapse of the difference between the torturer in the tortured. Rather, the encounter with a black woman signals a moment of this identification predicated on identification. The meeting of the *ontic* (how one comes to sense their being) with the racial (how society labels that being) gives this scene its haunting, vertiginous effects. Through the black woman, Kiyama is able to problematically fend off and anticipate the sickening effects of racial abjection.

As a counterpoint to this heightened moment of problematic identity formation, let me reintroduce the image of the portrait with which I opened this chapter. The final

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caricatured African American of the book is in a portrait that Henry carries home (Figure 2.16).

Figure 2.16: The final caricatured African American of the book, *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Henry Kiyama (133).

Presumably, Henry, like Kiyama, painted it. Here is where the vaster diegesis of comics, in contrast to that of film, must come into play. It is significant that Kiyama chose this painting for his namesake and semi-autobiographical character, Henry, to carry home to Japan. The painting's inclusion in the episode may be read as a hypertext, as the audience's next logical step would be to find out what that painting actually looked like outside of its cartoon form. In cartoon form, Kiyama's default is to draw African Americans in blackface as was the convention, even if they were only appearing in a painting. However, following the hypertext's link, a perusal of Kiyama's surviving non-comic work made available by Yonago City Museum of Art reveals one striking African American among the Anglo Americans he depicted (Figure 2.17). While this portrait

does not correlate to the painting that Henry the character carries onto the ship, it is

among the works that readers might be led to investigate and, in its stoic handsomeness,

that African American depiction answers in part for the compromises of Kiyama's comic

ethnic shorthand.   In this way, with a Bakhtinian move, Kiyama's novel addresses and

contains the problematics in other genres, becoming their anti-genre. In this case, the

genre of minstrelsy is suitably contained by another popular entertainment: the comic.

As a novel, a graphic novel can operate on those Bakhtinian principles that allow it to

include and question fragments of other genres such as the epic and lyric. However, its

inclusion of the visual allows it to include and question fragments of visual genres as well,

and exceed the non-graphic novel in this, among other, capabilities.

Figure 2.17: "Untitled," Kiyama, Meiji 40, Yonago City Museum of Art (Yonago-shi Bijutsukan) archives.

Notes

¹ R. Crumb also famously used the possibilities for productive incongruity in his comics, particularly surrounding ethnicity. An example such as Crumb's character Angelfood McSpade makes use of the comics blackface style of depicting ethnicity while arguably advancing a much more complex narrative surrounding Crumb's engagement with that style of depiction. Interestingly, it can be argued that Crumb and Kiyama are America's first underground comics artists, depending on how one frames the argument.

² It bears mentioning that Lukács would later rescind this stance. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), he argues that the cultural clash of the Old Order and the New required that the historical novel immerse us in a place where values are genuinely open and authority is forcibly contested. For example, Lukács argues that writers of a conservative temperament, like Walter Scott, whose Waverley novels about life in the Middle Ages such as *Ivanhoe* were enormously popular in the early half of the nineteenth century, can contrive imaginary worlds that accurately depict the realities of their moment in history. Scott, as Lukács argues, usually accords a certain centrality of place to middle-class characters who also stand between two warring worlds, the feudal and the bourgeois. The middle figures move between the two and bring them to reconciliation. Scott's novels, therefore, depict in fantasy form the very real forces in struggle in English society as it moved from feudalism to capitalism. In Lukács's words, "Through the plot, at whose center stands this [wavering] hero, a neutral ground is sought and found upon which the extreme opposing social forces can be brought into a human relationship with each other." (243). Regardless of Lukács' reevaluation, the impact of his *The Theory of the Novel* makes it a seminal work and relevant to discussions of genre. It is also worth noting that in his rescinding of *The Theory of the Novel*, Lucács also famously dismissed much of Western Marxism, including well-regarded scholars such as Theodor Adorno.

³ It is worth noting that Cheng's work first came to my attention when Ben Saunders invited me to theorize the artwork of Bob Fujitani, one of the first Asian American superhero cartoonists to work for major comic book publishing houses. The most interesting thing about Fujitani may be his tendency to include cartoonishly stereotypical Asian and Asian American villains in the comics he drew. This becomes even more interesting when examining the scripts from which he was drawing and realizing that some of these villains were not mandated by the writers to be of Asian descent. The application of Cheng's theories of racial melancholy are useful in terms of discussing Fujitani's artistic choices with regards to ethnicity and especially in light of Fujitani's experiences in the U.S., which relocated its citizens of Japanese origin during World War II.

⁴ Eric Lott also includes cartoons among popular texts underwritten by blackface structures of feeling: "From 'Oh Susanna' to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white imaginary of the United States" (4-5).

⁵ It should be noted, however, that studies conducted by psychology scholars regarding perception and race reveal that when entering a room, American subjects, both black and white, first pay attention to the non-whites s/he sees in a room.

⁶ For an overview of Japanese manga styles, see Frederick L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Tokyo/New York: Kodansha International, 1983). See also McCloud, *Understanding Comics,* 44 and 210.

CHAPTER III

THE INTERRELATION OF ETHNICITY AND FORM

IN GENE YANG'S *AMERICAN BORN CHINESE*

Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese* marked a watershed in mainstream American comics reception by becoming the first graphic novel nominated for a National Book Award in 2006. Extending a formal analysis to Yang's techniques sheds light on how the comic uniquely takes on Chinese American experiences in ways non-graphic texts cannot. As in my previous chapter, this examination builds on the critical framework innovated by comics creators Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, and theories of filmic suture, but also presents an argument for applying Lacanian theories of image to reading comics that deal with ethnicity. This is facilitated by two phenomena. One is a deeper application of Blakean image theorist and comics scholar Donald Ault's Lacanian readings of Carl Barks' construction of character point of view and panel transitions in *Donald Duck*. The other is the subject matter of *American Born Chinese* and Yang's innovations in portraying character interiority through word and image. Ultimately, I will present an argument and method for overlapping Lacanian approaches to comics with Lacanian approaches to ethnicity.

Applying the framework of the symbolic order offered by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* demonstrates that Yang's character depictions and paneling work to inflict a lack on its audience. As psychoanalytic film theorists such as Daniel Dayan argue, this can also suture the audience to the narrative of a film, and in some cases, to the ideologies a text embodies. In addition to employing Ault's analysis

of the applicability of Lacanian symbolic order to the comics form, this chapter also

incorporates Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' theory of the specificity of the symbolic structure

of race as presented in her *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*. Combining

Seshadri-Crooks' approach with Ault's in an image and narrative driven analysis of

American Born Chinese allows for fruitful connections between the symbolic order as it

applies to both comics and ethnicity. Yang's subject matter is ideal for this approach for

many reasons. Among the most provocative is the book's revelation that the Chinese-

American character Jin, and Danny, a European-American boy, are actually the same

person.

     Yang began to release segments of *American Born Chinese* as mini-comics in

2005. The comic opens in ancient China, where the first introduced character, the

Monkey King, is desperate for recognition by the other Chinese deities who refuse to see

him as anything but a monkey. The Monkey King resolves to prove them wrong (Figure

3.1)

Figure 3.1: Monkey King, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (11).

Jin Wang is a modern-day Chinese-American boy who moves to a new town and discovers that it's not easy being the only Chinese-American student at his school. At another school that is not Jin's, Danny is a typical white American high school basketball player whose life is perfect every year until his cousin Chin-Kee (Figure 3.2) comes to visit from China, forcing Danny to change schools in an effort to escape the stigma attached to him as a result.

Figure 3.2: Cousin Chin-Kee, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (112).

Each of the three threads—the Monkey King, Jin, and Danny—stands on its own initially as an independent story. At the same time, it is clear from the beginning that the three stories are connected when it comes to the themes of identity and acceptance. All of the main characters are desperate to shed something connected to themselves—the Monkey King's species, Jin's Chinese heritage, and Danny's cousin—for the sake of how

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other people perceive them. Through the comics form, Yang neatly sidesteps the pitfall of being accused of preaching or speaking condescendingly to the reader. This is not to say that comics cannot be condescending. What I argue is that Yang's use of the form allows simulataneously complex, yet approachable storytelling. Critics and bloggers alike praise the book for its mainstream appeal while dealing with matters that can be sensitive for American audiences.

Yang garners audience identification with each of the three protagonists early on in the book through sympathetic portrayal of their travails. For example, the other Chinese deities rudely dismiss the Monkey King, but the Monkey King is self-assured and plans to regain the respect of his comrades. Jin resonates with readers for different reasons as he desperately tries to get validation from a white peer group that is uninterested in his presence and as he attempts to adjust to the changes in his life after he leaves San Francisco. Yang illustrated Jin's issues with his Chinese heritage and identity by having him take them out on a new student, Wei-Chen, who arrives at Jin's school from China. Jin displays his uneasiness with his heritage when he first meets Wei-Chen (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Jin meets Wei-Chin, *American Born Chinese,* Gene Yang (37).

When reading popular responses to *American Born Chinese* online, it is clear that the most controversial part of the book is the story of Danny and his cousin Chin-Kee. Danny begins to lose face with his friends because of Chin-Kee (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Danny loses face with friends because of Cousin Chin-Kee, *American Born Chinese,* Gene Yang (114).

Chin-Kee is portrayed as the ultimate negative stereotype of a Chinese person, from traditional ancient Chinese clothing and an unrealistic yellow coloring (which no other Asian characters in the book have), to horrible buck teeth and an accent that substitutes all R sounds with an L. Chin-Kee is Danny's nightmare, everything that he hates about Chinese heritage in general, as he imagines it. Chin-Kee is certainly meant to provoke, to disturb, and to annoy the reader. And Yang absolutely succeeds at provocation. Chin-Kee also is an outward manifestation of all of the racism that some of the characters in *American Born Chinese* display, both spoken and otherwise. Chin-Kee is Danny's burden and makes Danny a more interesting character that readers will pity, even as Danny's embarrassment and disdain for his cousin make his composure a little tarnished as when he loses his temper in and strikes Chin-Kee. (Figure 3.5)

Figure 3.5: Danny loses his temper and strikes Chin-Kee, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (205).

The resentment Jin has for his Chinese heritage parallels Danny's frustration with Chin-Kee. Jin's conception of "good" is analogous to David Palumbo-Liu's use of "truth

and beauty" in the following claim in his essay, "The Minority Self as Other:

Problematics of Representation in Asian-American Literature":

> [L]iterature, as an exemplary rehearsal of liberal humanistic cultural activity, has been assumed to be an area wherein . . . ideological differences are bracketed out, superseded by the ethico-aesthetic impetus towards truth and beauty. Thus, it is no accident that the possibilities for representing an Asian-American Self as no longer subordinate to, but part of, the dominant Other are sustained most vigorously in the realm of art, and particularly in the world of fiction--for it is there that the Asian-American subject can partake of the unity and authority (thought to be) enjoyed by the Other by authoring a Self that can share (at least provisionally) the imaginative power of the Other, and likewise predicate a subjectivity unbounded by race and ethnicity. (76)

Palumbo-Liu's argument illuminates Jin's frustration in provocative ways and reveals two intertwined desires and beliefs: Jin covets the dominant position of the white Other, the imagined position of power and control at the center of the Symbolic, and believes that rejecting his Chinese heritage and gaining white friends offers a means by which to achieve this position. Palumbo-Liu's point is also interesting when applied to the author Yang and issues of Asian-American self-representation. Yang is clearly aware of the fantasy of authoring a Self that can share the imaginative power of the dominant Other and unbind racial subjectivity. However, when Yang illustrates this, within the proxy of one of his main characters, Danny, he draws attention to his acknowledgment of that wish fulfillment alongside of Jin's similar desire.

At this point it becomes interesting to overlap Palumbo-Liu's Lacanian model for ethnic identity with Donald Ault's Lacanian model for comics. According to Ault, the comic page most directly invokes Lacan's "imaginary" order through its pictorial dimension (its visual images); the "symbolic" order through its linguistic dimension (its letters, words, and syntax); and the "real" through the interruptions or cuts in the body-

space of the page which leave blank spaces between the panels that correspond to (or mark the absence of) events that are assumed to be occurring "between" the panels (124). Carl Barks' comic narratives hold a central position within a Lacanian framework for Ault because Barks' readers characterize his stories as unusually "real," that is, they feel themselves constituted as exceptionally coherent identities in the face of, indeed by virtue of, his manipulation of narrative fragmentation. Ault provides an example from Bark's work in Zippo the quick change artist in *Big-Top Bedlam* which I will discuss in detail to illustrate this point.

Barks' techniques are similar to Yang's here in that they de-emphasize the metonymic surface gestalt of the page and emphasize the constitution of characters and plots through exceptionally transparent processes of metaphoric condensation. The characters Barks drew and narrated were humanized "Ducks," which could have contracted his field of representation to "Disney" paradigms of character condensation and narrative displacement. According to Ault, "Barks himself has insisted, however, that he allowed his Ducks to conform to his imaginative vision in any situation in which he placed them, no matter how incommensurable the drawing in a particular panel might require the character to look in relation to other neighboring drawings" (129). Like Yang's characters who will simultaneously exist within each other in the same space on the comics page, Barks' incorporation of potentially incommensurable visual aspects of his characters into otherwise transparent narratives exposes the unconscious dimensions of his texts that allow his narratives to operate at the limit of Lacan's explanatory categories.

In Ault's analysis, *Big-Top Bedlam* emphasizes both the surface gestalt and the fragmentation of the body of the page. The main story has Donald tracing the path of his girlfriend Daisy's brooch[1] a signifier whose trajectory allegorize the metaphoric and metonymic dimensions of comic book narrative, while also showing how the real perpetually interrupts the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic.

In *Big-Top Bedlam*, throughout the main body of the story the brooch remains in the hands of the same character, Zippo, but Donald perceives it as constantly changing hands, sliding from one character to another because of Zippo's disguises. Because he is so convinced by Zippo's mastery of his appearances, Donald does not recognize that Zippo is the same character from panel to panel. Zippo sets what Ault calls "the allegory of metaphoric/ metonymic process" in motion (Figure 3.6) by disappearing (135).
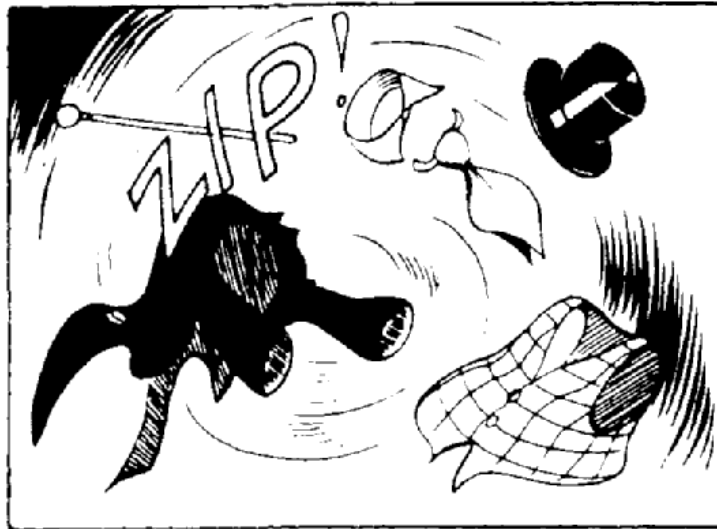
Figure 3.6: Zippo disappears, *Big-Top Bedlam.* Carl Barks, (233).

Ault observes that action in Figure 6 might ordinarily be imagined as the disruption of a character's identity between panels--Zippo disappears as a figure within panel two, leaving only his clothes suspended in the air, and at this very moment the three-dimensional, embodied character Zippo is literally replaced by two-dimensional characters that spell a portion of his name: "ZIP!" (135). This is a moment where the Lacanian imaginary, Zippo, and the symbolic, "ZIP!" become fluid with each other.

In the finale, dressed in drag, Zippo is the same character in two different places in the same panel (Figure 3.7).
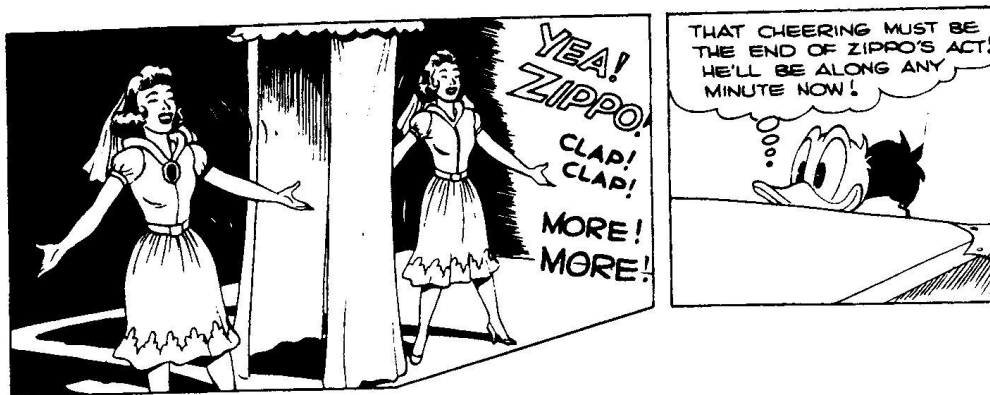
Figure 3.7: Zippo a*s* the same character in two different places in the same panel, *Big-Top Bedlam,* Carl Barks (245).

At this same moment, the double Zippo-as-woman notably both does and does not have the brooch. The Zippo in the panel on the left is wearing the brooch; in the panel on the right he is not. Ault asserts the implications of Barks' design:

This discrepancy functions as a (perhaps unconscious) acknowledgement that the brooch is itself *an allegorical figure for signification itself*: A signifier is always

something that denotes simultaneous presence and absence--something present that stands in for something absent. At the moment that Zippo is split, the curtain is itself doubled by perspective, suggesting that there is *nothing behind the curtain* except another curtain, that there are no props to facilitate Zippo's transformations and no way for the transformations to occur except by their being drawn on the comic page. As a figure for our desire to see what happens in the gap between panels, this glimpse behind the curtain suggests that the disruption by the real is neither directly representable nor simply a void. Given the crisis to which the panel structure has been driven at this point, it is no surprise that the gap between this panel and the one adjacent to it is immense. (136)

In the second panel of Figure 3.7, Donald is a voyeur. He apparently looks (Ault would say metonymically) toward the previous panel but cannot see what is in it. Ault explains that the room's contents are cut off from Donald because the panel borders are understood to shift him into a different room. In this panel, which is juxtaposed to the split image of Zippo, Donald's body and even much of his beak are radically cut off, obscured by the costume trunk (the ostensible source of the disguises) in Zippo's dressing room, just as Donald's vision is cut off (137). In the next panel (Figure 3.8), Zippo remains in full drag costume (even sporting shapely feminine legs) until his body-image is cut off by the left margin of the panel.
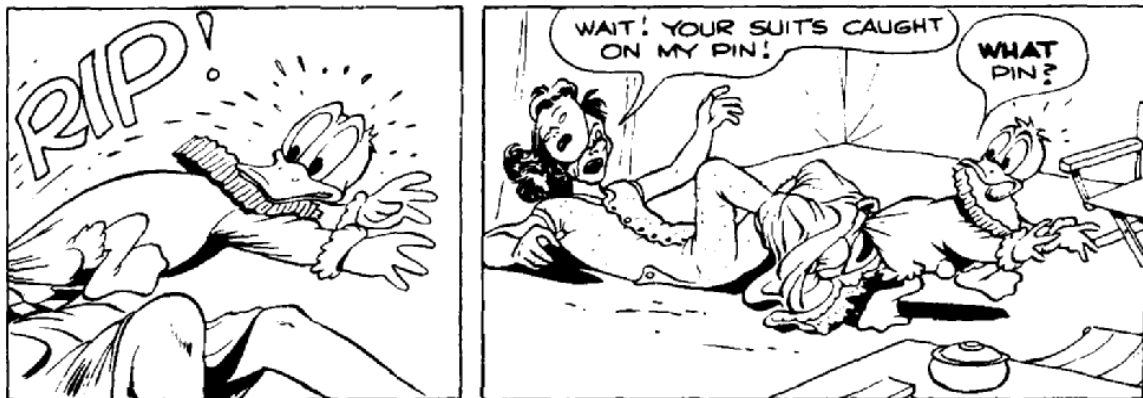
Figure 3.8: Zippo's body-image is cut off by the left margin of the panel, *Big-Top Bedlam,* Carl Barks (244).

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A two-dimensional space-occupying word "RIP!" is emanating as if from *outside* the

panel in the presumed underlying world of the narrative where events occur "between"

panels, signifying for Ault:

> [a] *tear that is simultaneously in his costume (at the level of the metaphoric world of the story) and in the body-space of the page (at the level of metonymic contiguity).* This cutting off of Zippo's body by the panel also implicitly enacts a tear in the curtain which has been standing in for the gap between the panels (the real) where Zippo has been able to transform himself, suddenly allowing the imaginary props which seemed to be absent behind the curtain to come into full view in the next panel. Zippo is uncovered, demystified, exposed as awkward and unbalanced, and shown in a state "between" disguises, with a double face as his mask partially detaches yet remains connected to his "real" face within our view. (138)

What exposes his "betweenness" to our view, the object that pulls his disguise off, is the

anchoring point of the pin on Daisy's brooch. Having spotted the brooch, Donald will

soon get his hands on it. However, as the comic progresses, Donald will repeatedly be

exposed to circumstances which make him lose it. Finally, the brooch will be brought to

Donald but only when he no longer wants it because he begins to believe that it is a

signifier of his domination by Daisy. Ault describes this ending as a Lacanian moment of

frustration, the imaginary lack of a real object (138). The real object of Donald's desire

will become the absence of the object he has been seeking.

Ault sets up his framework in order to recover the multilayered nature of Barks'

narrative strategies, and to demonstrate how these strategies and some of Lacan's

categories such as the gaze, the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real can illuminate one

another. I would suggest that Ault, who was writing at the very beginning of the current

wave of comics scholarship, is also providing a useful vocabulary that other scholars may

utilize as a framework for comics analysis just as Lacanian approaches to film and ethnicity studies have become collective scholarly pursuits. *American Born Chinese* is particularly appropriate for such an application. Since it contains the Lacanian symbolic order in its form (comics) as well as its theme (ethnicity and identity), the mappings that can be drawn are quite rewarding. By taking such an approach, I ultimately hope to contribute to a larger argument of this dissertation and show that because comics are a visual language, theories from prose-only scholarship can be extrapolated or combined with visual studies to create new insights about iconic communication.

In the following section I examine how Jin's narrative in *American Born Chinese* can be read as matching the arc of Donald's quest for Daisy's brooch in *Big-Top Bedlam* (in fact the Monkey and Danny's quest/desire narratives could be mapped this way as well) as theorized by Ault. As noted, Jin's desire is for whiteness and to identify with the dominant Other, as Palumbo-Liu configures it. In fact Jin has permed his hair in an effort to assimilate with his classmates and has begun to despair about his crush on the white classmate, Amelia at this point in the story.[2] Whiteness arrives for Jin as he is transformed into Danny (Figure 3.9).
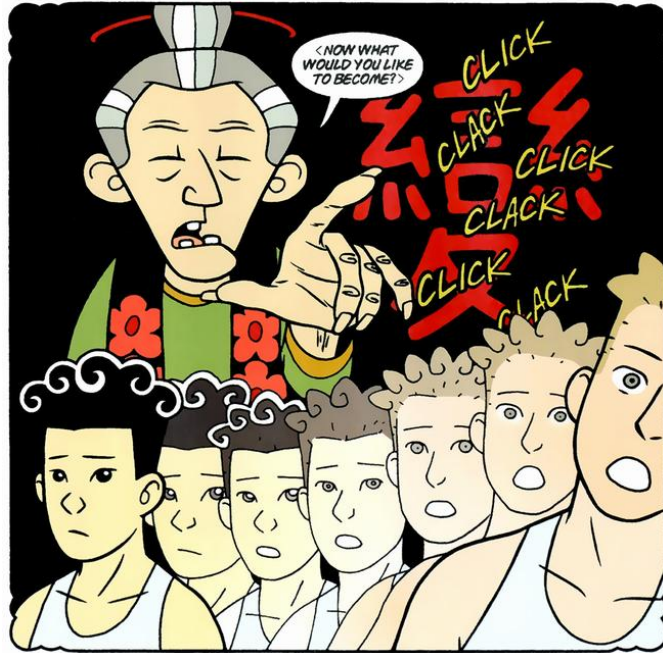
Figure 3.9: Whiteness arrives for Jin as he is transformed into Danny, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (194).

Like the transformations in *Big-Top Bedlam*, the symbolic order of comics form and the symbolic order of the subject matter of the particular comic's narrative bleed into each other. For scholars who use a Lacanian approach to ethnicity, as Palumbo-Liu does, race belongs within the symbolic, and like the word RIP! (normally only symbolic as a word), which stands in for the imaginary (the drawn parts of the comic; see Figure 3.8), race (the symbolic) and the imaginary (the drawn images in Figure 3.9) blend together so that the desires of the characters (Donald in *Big-Top Bedlam* and Jin in *American Born Chinese*) are each metonymically connected to the desires governing the act of reading comics, wherein the viewer is invited to combine displaced character aspects (metonymically) into subjective unities by taking a part (a visual aspect) for the whole (the character for which it stands) (Ault 128). Jin's transformation into Danny is also an

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unmasking, like that of the quick change artist Zippo, in Figure 3.8, in that readers who have been following Danny's story separately from Jin's up to this point, are for the first time seeing that Danny and Jin are indeed the same person.

American Born Chinese focuses on processes that enable group identification by dramatizing not only how "the voice within" comes into being as injunction from without, but also that the injunction from without is always already an echo of something within. If the ego emerges from some state of infantile primary narcissism through the *imago,* a homomorphic identification, as Lacan would say, then Yang denaturalizes that *imago* and reminds us that what constitutes "the human" and the image of the human is very much socially and culturally dictated.[3]

Some characters already perceive Danny as an ethnic other (Figure 3.10) even before this is revealed (Figure 3.9). Similarly, in *Big-Top Bedlam,* Donald's nephews looked at Zippo the quick change artist and saw the same person throughout the story, even though Barks' art reflected a series of convincing transformations to the reader and to Donald who perceived the guises as real. Similarly, Danny (Figure 3.10) perceives his appearance to be white and is thus puzzled by the ridicule from his high school classmates.

Figure 3.10: Danny confused by ridicule, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (121).

A question remains: how does a voice on the outside become a voice within, and what are the implications of recognizing that one's own fantasies of identity exist in relation to, or even echo, external social constructions? *American Born Chinese* offers a series of parables, dramatizing the various forms of social interpellation as working precisely through the echoing of desire. From this perspective, Kalpani Seshadri-Crooks's explanation of Lacanian symbolic order and its relationship to race can shed light on the concluding scenes of *American Born Chinese*.

In *Desiring Whiteness*, Seshadri-Crooks discusses texts that, like *American Born Chinese*, similarly use and experiment with their medium of communication to explore racial identity. As I have argued, because of the comics form, it is striking what *American Born Chinese* can uniquely accomplish. This is made more interesting in juxtaposition with the non-comics texts that Seshadri-Crooks analyzes. As a prose scholar, Seshadri-Crooks is moved to engage the visual, at first through Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" (Morrison's only short story), and a story that Morrison and her critics have argued can never be successfully captured outside of prose, especially not through film or stage as the crux of the story hinges on the reader being unable to know the ethnicity of the two protagonists. The reader only knows that one protagonist is black and the other is white. The title "Recitatif" refers to a style of singing that hovers between song and ordinary speech. Morrison's story was "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (Morrison xi). As we see in Figure 3.11, one theater company did not heed Morrison's admonishment that the story could not be portrayed visually and it is obvious from the visual depictions on the promotional material that Morrison is correct.
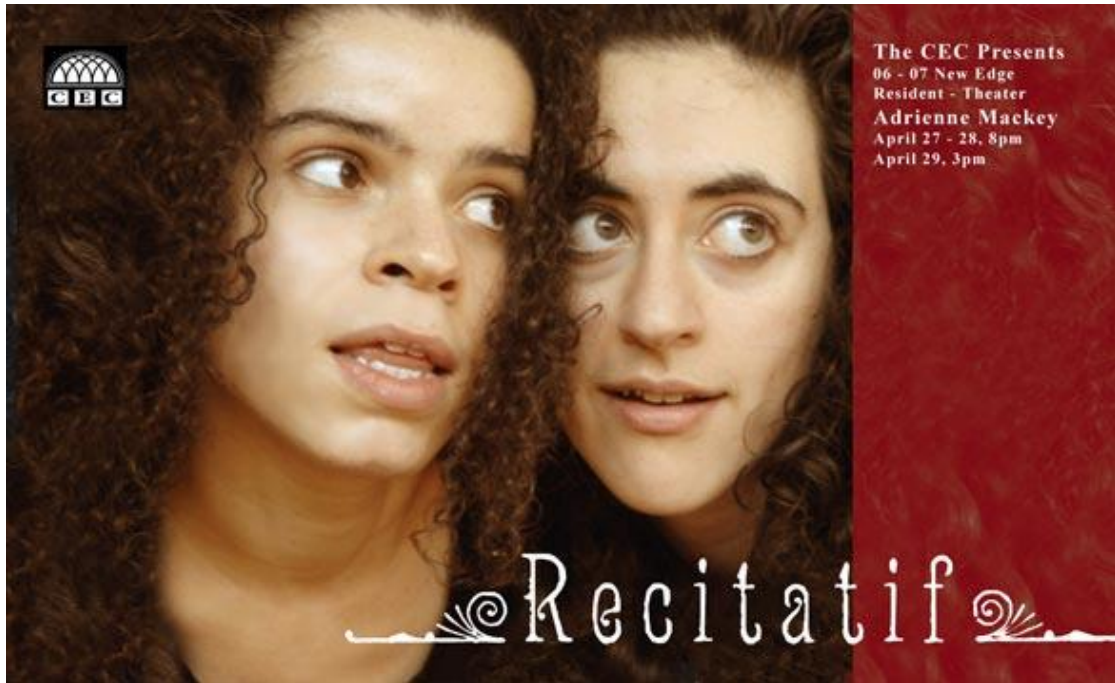
Figure 3.11: Promotional material from an attempt at a live staging of *Recitatif* in 2007.

Even if one allows that either woman shown in Figure 3.11 is racially ambiguous based on a more complex understanding of racial descendency in the United States (and its signifiers), or one were to cast actresses who were more ethnically ambiguous, as Sehsadri-Crooks observes, "race is a regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity" (21), so that viewers reach out for visual signifiers of race if there is absolutely anything to look at. Seshadri-Crooks maps this insatiable desire onto Lacanian symbolic order. To clarify the role of anxiety in the formation of racialized bodily ego, Seshadri-Crooks relies on Lacan's Seminar X. According to Lacan, the formation of the body image leaves a remainder of libidinal cathexes that are not symbolized but appear as a lack in the symbolic/imaginary. Unlike Freud, Lacan asserts that anxiety is not caused by threats of castration, or the absence of the object, but by the

absence of this constitutive lack. When the lack itself is missing, the bodily image is sustained by the uncanny phobic object invoking anxiety (Seshadri-Crooks 36). Seshadri-Crooks explains, "if racial identity is produced by the signifier, racial visibility is produced as . . . a phobic object, in order, paradoxically, to give consistency to the signifier. Racial visibility is always a function of anxiety, but one's place . . . [in the symbolic] may determine what form that anxiety may take" (38). In this way the desire to determine race is also mapped onto the desires which govern Ault's Lacanian explanation of reading comics. This also provides a reading of Danny as the state in which Jin resides when he is in rejection of his heritage in the hopes of achieving complete assimilation. Seshadri-Crooks explains that once the racial signifier attempts to signify what is excluded in the formation of the bodily image, it aims to fill the lack and, as a result, provokes anxiety, which in turn produces a phobic object: skin color, hair texture inscribed on the body (30). This plays out as Seshadi-Crooks describes it for Danny/Jin (Figure 3.12) as classmates draw attention to stereotypical differences they project onto him even as he actively denies his ethnicity to himself.

Figure 3.12: Classmates draw attention to Danny's stereotypical differences, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (124).

Note that Yang never draws either Danny or Jin with buck teeth. The only character who has buck teeth in the book is Chin-Kee as he embodies the collection of projected Asian racial signifiers. Danny first experiences these uncomfortable situations with his classmates when Chin-Kee starts following him to school. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon interprets Lacan's mirror stage[4] as a racial parable. Speaking about black male subjectivity, Fanon calls the white-black relationship "narcissistic," suggesting that if the ideal racial/social mirror reflects the image of idealized whiteness, then "blackness" can only become an abhorrent, even obscene, visual image. He writes that, seeing himself through the white gaze, "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day" (113). Given the way Danny is initially the perfect image of idealized whiteness, Chin-Kee can also effectively be read as that distorted, recolored body given back to Jin/Danny. In a revelation that parallels the Jin/Danny transformation, Yang reveals that Chin-Kee was the Monkey King all along (Figure 3.13). This follows Fanon's model in that after the black man is given back his body, he begins to internalize the ugliness that has been projected onto it. He may then begin to treat as abject something that is not truly vile or despicable. Jin similarly abjectifies his ethnicity and heritage. Chin-Kee is that abjectified heritage in the form of projected and internalized ugliness. However, the Monkey King was residing inside of Chin-Kee all along. He signifies the Chinese heritage that would be lost if Jin continued to accept and internalize the distorted image of Asianess reflected in Chin-Kee.

Figure 3.13: Chin-Kee as Monkey King, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Yang (213).

Yang, like Barks, achieved great commercial success and popular appeal with his book. Like Ault's analysis of Barks' work, I have attempted to illustrate the multilayered quality of Yang's *American Born Chinese*, a complex text that also has had enormous popular appeal. I suggest that the psychoanalytic desires Ault maps that are in effect in a comics reader caused by comics form overlap with the desires Seshadri-Crooks maps as she analyzes cultural and psychoanalytic drives surrounding race and ethnicity. By utilizing and extending the Lacanian approach that Ault pioneered, scholars of comics can provide fresh theoretical insights on the ways that comics may uniquely grapple with complex issues such as visual identity and race.

Notes

[1] Ault also analyzes this section for the trajectory of Donald's nephews' slingshot through the story, but for the purposes of this chapter, the trajectory of the brooch is sufficient.

[2] As in the previous chapter, parallels to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* can be drawn here in terms of the desire for white signification. To put this even more in the context of Yang and Palumbo-Liu, David Henry Hwang's award winning first play *FOB* is also another appropriate literary parallel.

[3] Interestingly, like Barks, Yang also takes advantage of the funny animal tropes of comics and in *American Born Chinese* the transformation of non-white to white is very similar to the transformation from animal to human. Yang arguably employs the ideological equivalence of "white" and "human" within his symbolic mapping of "race." And while not overtly a funny animal comic, it is still important to read *American Born Chinese* that way to shed light on its implications for identity and ethnicity. It contains animals behaving as humans and animals in the guise of humans. In this way it maps even better with Donald Duck's story in *Big Top Bedlam*.

[4] In speaking of ego formation and the "mirror stage," Jacques Lacan offers a link between the fragmented body and the whole body, and proposes that the ego comes into existence at the moment when the infant subject first apprehends the image of its body within a reflective surface, and that this ego is itself a mental refraction of that image (*Écrits* 1-7).

CHAPTER IV

THEORIZING ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION IN FILM AND COMICS: VIOLENCE

AND SUTURE IN ANNA DEAVERE SMITH'S *TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES*

As an emerging field of scholarship, comics studies necessarily borrows approaches and theories from other more established fields, such as media and literary studies.[1] As emphasized in previous chapters of this dissertation, the study of filmic suture as developed in the discipline of film studies is an approach I find particularly useful to apply across other mediums engaged with visual culture. However, having extended notions of filmic suture into comics studies, I will now also argue for the possibility of a back-and-forth between comics studies and film studies, a mutual theoretical give-and-take, rather than the current tendency to view comics scholars as merely borrowing from or modifying techniques from film, art, and literary studies. For example, suture informs my study of comics, but the concept of comics closure, as outlined in my chapters on *American Born Chinese* and *The Four Immigrants Manga*, can be usefully applied to filmic analysis. To illustrate this, I will analyze a filmic and theatrical text that utilizes an approach that arguably most resembles comics closure as initially explained by Scott McCloud and as demonstrated in previous chapters of this dissertation. The text that I analyze is Anna Deavere Smith's film *Twilight: Los Angeles*. In order to provide a closer visual textual analysis, I will largely limit my study of *Twilight* to its film version. I reference the published version of the play when differences between the play and the film need to be highlighted and in order to advance the arguments of this chapter.

I selected *Twilight* in particular because of its racially and ethnically charged subject matter: the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Like Henry Kiyama and Gene Yang, Smith identifies more closely with one ethnicity in her text, yet she visually depicts a myriad of other ethnicities and has to make choices about how to accomplish this, as well as how to capitalize on the form of her medium to give her audience uniquely new perspectives on the cultural phenomena she depicts.

A productive comparison between ethnic caricature in comics and ethnic caricature in film can be made in the analysis of filmic monologue. Anna Deavere Smith is a groundbreaking and respected practitioner of a form of monologue which overtly filters the genre of documentary through acting. Similarly, some of the most critically revered contemporary comics, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home,* Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and David B's *Epileptic*, also highlight the ways in which mediated forms of non-fiction narrative differ from direct experience. Arguably, self-reflexive meditations on form are a chief feature of these works' appeal. Joe Sacco's news reporting in comics, such as in *Palestine,* may be even closer to Smith's work in this regard. Both Sacco and Smith report the stories of people who are not directly part of their normal lives; this differs from the other literary comics I have mentioned, which are autobiographical in nature. Just as Smith's work is sometimes called documentary theater, Sacco's work is sometimes called documentary comics. In terms of the primary comics texts of this dissertation, *Twilight* is closest to *The Four Immigrants Manga*, which also depicts, if through a fictive lens, a cultural milieu while its author, Kiyama, maintains a partial outsider status, like that of Sacco or of Smith.

I raise the comparison between a mediated documentary film in *Twilight* and a documentary-esque comic in *The Four Immigrants Manga* to emphasize a central point in this chapter, which is that it is useful to begin thinking of Smith as composing each character she performs, just as Kiyama draws his. And as both are involved in visual mediums, they are forced to denote ethnicity with visual signifiers. In fact, I will also argue that Smith engages in her own form of ethnic shorthand out of necessity. Because she is not implementing other actors, she is also utilizing a modified depiction palette,[2] one with less differentiated detail than that of a film with a different actor for every character. One of the points of Smith's work is that all of the characters look a bit like each other. This is also the case when comparing a comic image to a photorealistic one. A cartoon purposefully has fewer details. Because of these formal similarities and necessities, *Twilight* benefits from comics' generic face identification; it is also forced to apply something similar to comics' ethnic shorthand when depicting non-whites. Here, gestures and details often overlap with painful stereotypes because communication/depiction of non-white ethnicity is made efficient because of its ability to rely on visual cues, which are themselves rooted in stereotypes.

Similar to Morrison's "Recitatif, " in Chapter III, the unique and experimental nature of *Twilight* makes it more apt for juxtaposition with non-filmic mediums in its analysis. Because it positions a "generic" actor as all of its characters, the work parallels comics art's character identification through generic depiction in an intriguing way. As I studied *Twilight: Los Angeles* through a hybrid lens of comics and film theory I did not anticipate the strongly critical conclusions that ultimately emerge when applying this hybrid approach to the film. To provide more context, I must initially say that I have

always admired Anna Deavere Smith's work and continue to do so. At the beginning of my research into *Twilight,* my entry point was her work's formal similarities to nonfiction comics. I assumed my analysis would allow me to shed light on these similarities in a way that also would provide useful insights into how her work succeeds at communicating complex subject matter while still having popular appeal. However, after performing the necessary historical investigation into the subject matter of *Twilight*, I discovered serious flaws in the film's attempt to deploy suture.

Nevertheless, through a cross media analysis, it became apparent that Smith and Kiyama have some things in common in their creative processes. When Kiyama drew the rejected Kuroto black woman at the World's Fair Expo, as analyzed in Chapter I, he faced decisions similar to those that Anna Deveare Smith faced when she depicted ethnicity in *Twilight*. My critique can be read as respectful and critical, as Smith navigates the depictional pitfalls with which Kiyama mostly engages. By using one actor instead of multiple actors, Smith mediates the interference with identification that the unique appearance of each actor has. She in turn becomes the generic face McCloud references (Figure 4.1).

Beyond benefiting from comics closure, *Twilight* also includes filmic suture. As noted earlier in this dissertation, in "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," Daniel Dayan presents the repercussions of the camera's point of view on viewers' experiences of film. As the camera controls the viewer's gaze, it presents stand-ins for its invisible role, suturing the audience with the relative comfort of this stand-in in place of its invisible agency. This is often achieved by shot-reverse-shot editing. Smith's film, *Twilight:*
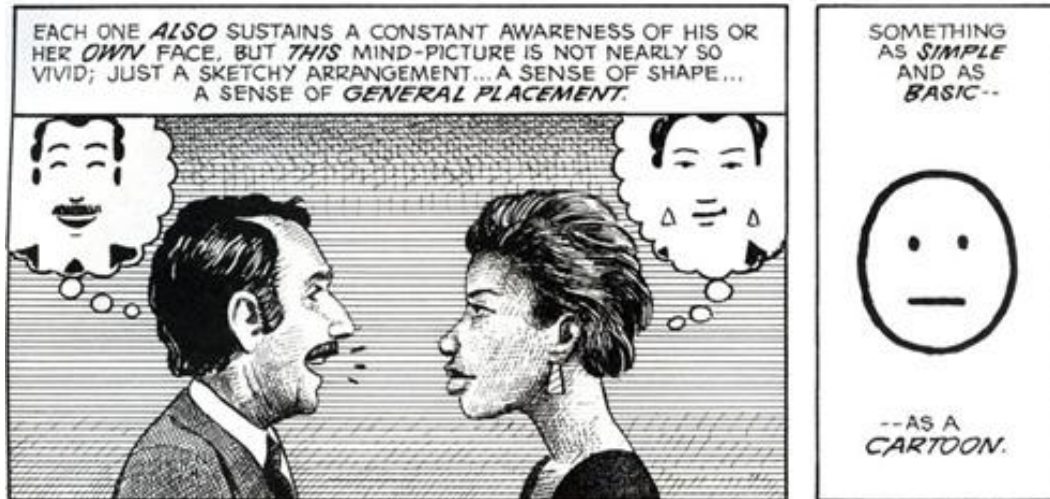
Figure 4.1: The generic face, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (36).

Los Angeles, is based on her play, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, in which she performs those she interviewed in the wake of the L.A. uprisings (Figure 4.2). The work does not rely on shot-reverse-shot techniques to establish its camera stand-in, but instead relies on the audience's knowledge of Smith's interview research method. The camera never cuts to the interviewer as the interviewees, all played by Smith, deliver their monologues.

Figure 4.2: Stills from *Twilight,* 1999; Katie Miller (left), Queen Malkah (right).

However, they do interact with the camera as if it were the interviewer, asking questions

of the camera and implicitly answering Smith's questions, though the interviewer's voice

remains silent for the audience and is heard only by the interviewees. In this way, the

audience is sutured onto Smith.

As I researched this chapter, the identification/suturing effect in *Twilight* became

more apparently problematic to me. Smith claims to perform directly from transcripts of

her interviews and, thus, she feels she is justified in ardently denying any authorial voice

in her performance and instead professes neutrality regarding the issues involved.

Because the spectator is unable to see the operation of this tutor code, and is thus at its

mercy, it is "the critic's task" to locate the invisible agent (Dayan 127). Smith sutures

over this "absent" agent in order to relieve the audience of the anxiety resulting from its

existence. Locating this agent reveals not only the mechanics of Smith's mitigating

suture but also the complacencies which the suture imbues in the audience regarding the

socio-political conditions that produced the L.A. uprisings. These are outlined in some

detail below.

In *Orientals*, a semiotic analysis of the L.A. uprisings, American civilization

scholar Robert G. Lee opens with an analysis of Los Angeles in the 1980s, when Los

Angeles County became the nation's largest manufacturing center. An influx of migrant

workers and entrepreneurs from Asia and Latin America arrived in the L.A. basin. Some

Asian immigrants came with enough money, or were able to borrow enough once in L.A.,

to enter the secondary retail sector abandoned by national chain stores and earlier ethnic

retailers. For example, in Los Angeles, Korean store owners often bought their stores

from African American entrepreneurs, who had often bought the stores from Jewish

owners put out of business in the Watts riots of 1964 (Lee 215). These Asian

entrepreneurs made up for a low level of monetary investment by exploiting the labor of

family members, underpaying them or having them work for free as part of family

membership. Asian entrepreneurs also helped create a new manufacturing sector that

nimbly responded to the demands of custom designs with quick turnover rates. Just as

yellow peril fears negatively touched the lives of Kiyama and other Japanese students in

San Francisco, these fears were again poised to re-emerge in a time of economic pressure.

Lee recounts:

> Despite the fact that apparel manufacturing declined by 20 percent nationally in
> the 1980s as production was transferred overseas, garment manufacturing in Los
> Angeles grew by a remarkable 60 percent during that period. Not only has a labor
> force of Latinos and Asian immigrant workers been mobilized to compete with
> foreign suppliers; Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese immigrants make up an
> overwhelming proportion of the subcontractors in the industry. In sum, Asian
> Americans, particularly immigrant Asian workers, have a highly visible position
> on both sides of the post-Fordist urban economy. (215)

Given this context, there were specific local reasons why Asian American

businesses were targeted in the 1992 riots. There was the killing of Latasha Harlins, a

teenaged African American girl, by Soon Ja-Du, a Korean female shop owner, over a

disputed bottle of orange juice. Although Soon Ja-Du was convicted of manslaughter, the

white judge refused to sentence her to any time in prison, asserting that she represented

no threat to the community. This leniency fueled a belief in the African American

community that Asian-owned businesses received favored treatment from the

government, which Korean merchants exploited, and they did not give back to the

communities in which they did business. Many African Americans and Latinos felt they

were singled out for surveillance in Korean-owned stores.

Lee provocatively proposes, "Korean-American shopkeepers were merely the gook of the moment. The mere gook rule (from the Vietnam War, wherein any dead Vietnamese could be counted as a dead enemy) was in play, and Koreans were the closest and most vulnerable Asian Americans in sight" (215). Other Asian Americans were also targeted: 300 Chinese-owned stores were destroyed, as were several dozen shops owned by Filipinos and South Asians. In Long Beach, Vietnamese shops were also targeted and looted. Despite television and radio characterizations of the event as a black riot, the looting was multicultural. In areas such as South Central L.A., where African Americans made up a majority of the residents, African Americans did constitute a majority of the looters. But in such areas as Pico-Union, where Latinos made up a majority of residents, Latinos did much of the looting, and in still other neighborhoods, non-Hispanic whites joined in (216).

Since the early 1980s, racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans have been growing throughout the US. In New York City, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose 680 percent between 1985 and 1990. Between 1989 and 1990, hate crime against Asian Americans doubled, and subway crime against Asian Americans rose by 206 percent (CAAV Voice, 1-2).

In Los Angeles, in the two years before the riots, "twenty-five Korean American shopkeepers were killed by non-Korean attackers" (Cho 199). In many of those cases, it did not matter what type of Asian the victim was (Bonacich and Light 28). Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was mistaken as Japanese and beaten to death by two white furloughed autoworkers in Detroit. Jim Loo, also a Chinese American, was killed by two white men who thought he was Vietnamese. In 1990, Tuan Ana Cao, a Vietnamese

American, was beaten and severely injured by a group of black men who thought he was Korean. In January 1996, Thien Minh Ly, a Vietnamese American, was killed by two white drifters who called him a Jap. It just mattered to the attackers that the victims were Asian.

As I delve further into an analysis of *Twilight,* researching the state of media coverage of the riots is useful to continue to contextualize Smith's project. Evidence supports that the media waived their journalistic integrity and social responsibility as purveyors of objective, non-biased information in their coverage of the L.A. riots. The media succeeded in their first objective to keep their audience informed. However, the barrage of images that were intentionally juxtaposed against each other did little to placate the troubled communities. Cornell West, in his analysis of the media coverage of the L.A. uprisings, noted the ignored issues of urbanization, education, and poverty, all of which had a significant bearing on the Los Angeles black community: "What we witnessed in Los Angeles was the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay, and political lethargy in American life. Race was the visible catalyst, not the underlying cause, as media portrayed it to be" (West 1). Further, the media's portrayal encouraged the perception that the black community was solely responsible for the riots and disturbances. According to police reports, of those arrested, only 36 percent were black, more than a third had full-time jobs, and most had no political affiliation; 60 percent of the arrested rioters and looters were Hispanics and whites (West 2). Yet, the media did not report these facts.

Of interest to Korean-American activists was the media's juxtaposition of the shooting death of Latasha Harlins at the hands of a Korean shopkeeper and the violence

done to Korean businesses by black rioters, as if one act automatically caused the other. Fortifying this juxtaposition, the media showed much more footage of black looters than it did of Latino and white looters when it covered the destruction of Korean property. Also, one photograph of a Korean man with a rifle on top of his store gained much exposure, though it was far from representative of the Korean response to the riots (Chang 113-114). Smith includes this photo among the news footage that she uses *Twilight*. Unfortunately, equating the death of Latasha Harlins with black violence is repeated and strengthened by Smith as she literally juxtaposes the incidents within herself. She swiftly switches back and forth between a Korean victim and a black activist who verbally supports violence against Koreans in the face of Harlins' death.

The media's intervention in the American collective experience of the riots misdirected the viewers' anger and rendered them desensitized to that which what they should not have been so removed. Smith attempted to take a different approach in an effort to reconcile the rage that swept the nation for three days in 1992. Smith interviewed "over 300" people after the uprisings ended, and she recited, mimicked, reiterated, and/or performed excerpts from these interviews "verbatim." Smith, who prefers to be called a "repeater, a re-iterator, rather than a mimic or an impersonator" (Stayton 22), transformed herself into 45 distinct voices, including: a disabled Korean man, a white male Hollywood talent agent, a Panamanian immigrant mother, a black gang member, Rodney King's aunt, Reginald Denny, Daryl Gates, and a host of other victims and witnesses. In a series of fast-moving monologues, she assembles a powerful collage of a city at war with itself.

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Twilight opens with an African-American man chauffeuring Smith to an interview. Presumably, this is how Smith gathered all of her data. In actuality, Smith has returned to Los Angeles to shoot this footage after her interviews were already completed, but this fact is not part of the film's diegesis . What is part of the diegesis, however, is Smith's positioning of herself, which will ultimately be the position the audience is sutured into assuming, facilitated by this first shot. Smith is dressed in an expensive suit and wears designer sunglasses. She speaks confidently and eloquently during these traditional documentary shots (which contrast most of the film). This is in stark contrast to the emotionally and physically flawed interviewees she portrays, all of whom are limited in their points of view from the relative omniscience of Smith-the-interviewer and hence the audience, who have some access to the other interviewees in Smith's collection. Clips of Smith actually performing interviews in the street quickly follow the chauffeur scene. Smith asks leading questions of her interviewees. "Was there enough attention paid to the riots?" she first asks her chauffeur. He answers boisterously, "You had to pay attention. No matter where you lived." The film cuts away from him before he can elaborate and can really give a coherent answer to Smith's question that addresses a measure of social impact for which Smith seems to be searching. His abrupt answer is included only for its visceral value. This in itself is not problematic, but the opening of the film proceeds, still with real documentary footage, to a cut of Smith talking to a disheveled Latino, and finally to a cut of former L.A. police commissioner Daryl Gates, who says: "The Rodney King incident? Had nothing to do with race." It is only at this point that one of the purposes of this initial documentary footage becomes clear. It prepares the audience for the position they are meant to take in

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relation to the people Smith will portray. The audience, like Smith, possesses insights

into the L.A. riots that each of the interviewees do not because the audience sees things

from the multiple points of view presented by Smith. The interviewees, on the other

hand, can only use their own points of view, which are often portrayed as pathetically

limited. This is embodied in the cut of Gates, with whom the audience is quickly

prepared to knowingly disagree.

The constant hip-hop music, which pervades the documentary-style introduction,

plays throughout while clips that are quite different in origin from each other are

juxtaposed as if they are the same. For example, the previously mentioned clip of Daryl

Gates is actually news footage, and is not taken from among the street interviews which

precede it. However, starting with the question and answer exchange with the chauffeur,

the documentary clips get shorter. There is a feeling that Smith actually asked Gates a

question by the time we get to Gates' clip, and that Smith's question is left out of the clip

because of the shortening rhythm of the preceding clips. In reality, Gates' clip is taken

from an interview he gave to news reporters in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings.

While Gates' quote is misguided, it is rendered even more inane by Smith positioning it

out of context. Later, Smith will play Gates in a monologue alongside those monologues

she gathered from her interviews. The inclusion of public speeches, not solely

interviewed monologues from Smith's research, is a conceit of the film which departs

from the play, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Gates and others, like Congresswoman

Maxine Waters, who are performed based on only on public speeches and not interviews

with Smith, appear in the film but not in the play. This is significant because these

performed speeches work to strengthen Smith's implied assertion that her performed

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interviews are accurate public records, and could be tested like the speeches can be against their original video footage. This strategy allows the audience to assume that what they receive through Smith, with all of her interpretation, is equivalent to talking to all of Smith's interviewees themselves. Smith's manipulation of materials serves to help the audience feel like it is gaining authentic and genuine insights into the uprisings. Through this process, this manipulation may further suture them into trusting the agency of the camera and their social positioning in relation to the L.A. uprisings.

As the hip-hop music plays on, the audience sees clips of Smith in performance (in the style of most of the film), but then the film cuts back again to real news footage. This time, protesters are chanting "No Justice, No Peace," then the camera returns to Smith performing an interviewee, and then there is news footage of the uprisings themselves, featuring an African-American man throwing a brick in front of a backdrop of a burning building. News footage will continue to be juxtaposed with the interviewees Smith performs, often to illustrate points they make. This news footage serves to contextualize Smith's film, but as the same music and cutting rhythm is constant throughout the first segment, the footage also alerts the audience as to how they should perceive Smith's longer performances in the rest of the film : they should be taken on equal ground with the news footage, as a traditional documentary might be perceived by most viewers. This is underlined by the text that appears at the bottom of the screen during this sequence. It reads, "In the aftermath of the riots, Anna Deavere Smith interviewed over 300 people in Los Angeles." There is a moment of no text, for dramatic effect, and then the text: "She portrays some of these people in this performance. Only the actual words from these interviews are used."

Given the specificity of the directions she has included with the text of each monologue in the printed version of her play, it is clear that Smith aims for the appearance of precise representations of her interviewees.   For example, when describing Mrs. Young Soon Han in the play, Smith includes even the minutest details of when Han beats the table with her hand: "(*She is hitting her hand on the coffee table*) . . . (*She hits the table once*) . . . (*Hits the table once*) . . . [etc.]" (Smith 145). This conveys the sense that nothing is being left out of Smith's reproduction of her interviews. Mrs. Young Soon Han is also one of the interviewees included in the film, and Smith performs her table-hitting sequence in the film (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Smith as Mrs. Young Soon Han, still from *Twilight* (1999).

One reason the appearance of precise representations is important for Smith is that reproducing the actions of real people allows her to do many things she could not do if

she were creating fictional characters. For example, some audience members might have a problem with her portraying a Korean-American woman with all of the behaviorisms of a first-generation Korean-American woman intact, some of these behaviorisms arguably stereotypical, if Smith were not painstakingly re-enacting a real Korean-American woman.

Smith's technique of using the reproduction of reality to deproblematize ethnic mimicry has similarities to methods with which contemporary comics creators who also deal in ethnic subject matter grapple. Though he also did it for many other reasons, Art Spiegelman elided the need to use ethnic shorthand in *Maus* by turning the funny animal comic on its head. Joe Sacco, who is arguably handsome in person (Figure 4.4), draws himself as the ugliest character in most of his documentary comics. When he depicts ethnic features of his subjects, like the larger noses of some Arabs in *Palestine* (which happens to formally overlap with a problematic comics history of depicting Arab and/or swarthy large-nosed villains, of which Hergé's series *Tintin* is one of the most well known and consistent offenders), Sacco's is still the ugliest and largest nosed character (Figure 4.5). Since his avatar is the one with which his audiences sympathize and follow through his books, Sacco is also upending conventions to navigate around a historically haunted and tricky aspect of comics -- ethnic iconography.

In contrast to Sacco, but typical of his era, Henry Kiyama utilized comics conventions for racist shorthand in depicting non-whites except for when it came to the depiction of fellow Japanese and Japanese American characters. Kiyama even went as far as depicting Chinese characters, most of whom were more native than himself to San

Figure 4.4: Joe Sacco. Photograph by Richard Saker, 2009.

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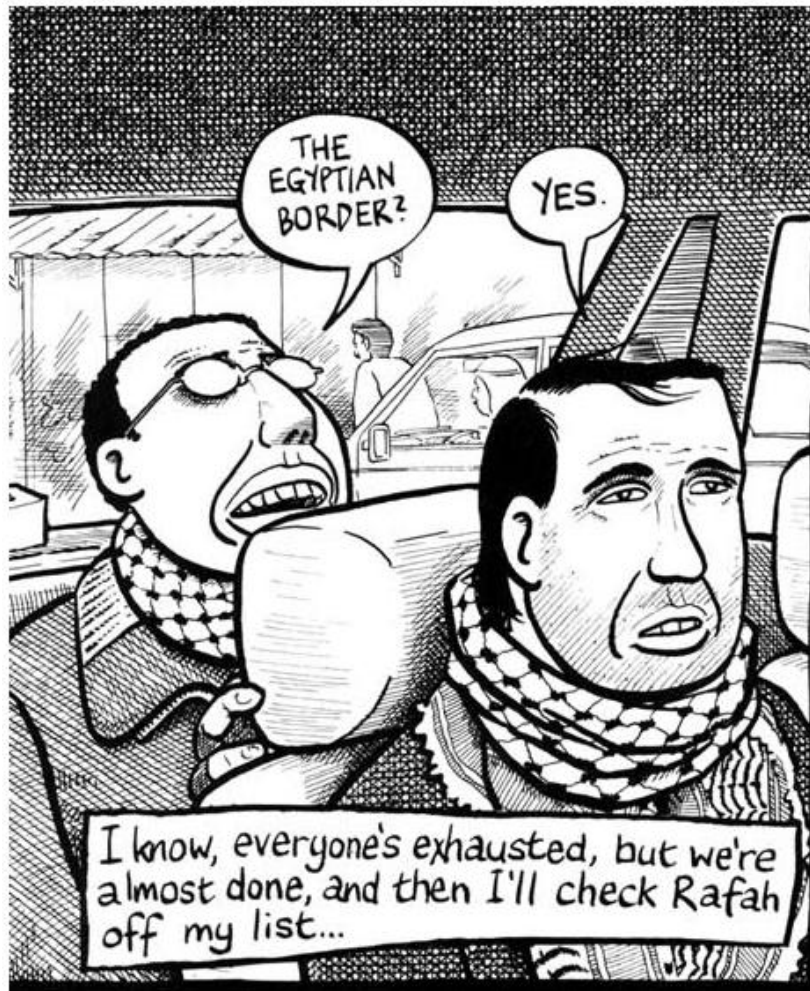
Figure 4.5: *Palestine*, Joe Sacco (244).

Francisco, somewhere halfway between the more human way he drew characters of

Japanese descent and the more caricatured default way of drawing Asians in comics at

the time (Figure 4.6). In particular, Kiyama's gesture at tiny angular slits for Chinese

eyes contrasts the rounded eyes he drew for Japanese and white people.

Figure 4.6: Tiny angular slits represent Chinese eyes, in contrast to rounded eyes for Japanese and white people. *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Kiyama (61).

My key point here is the fact that Mrs. Young-Soon Han and others are "real"

effectively dissuades accusations of ethnic mockery. Another powerful result of Smith's

"realness" is that it may protect her from attackers who might otherwise claim her

portrayals are skewed by an agenda. The printed caption at the beginning of the film and

Smith's own revelations about her research and process both serve this function.

However, the caption is only true in the most literal sense. Smith does *not* only faithfully

repeat the words from her interviewees, nor does she always faithfully maintain the order or the manner in which they were delivered. Since Smith refuses to release tapes of her interviews, it may seem impossible to demonstrate this manipulation. However, this may be accomplished simply by juxtaposing her printed play with her film.

The printed version of the play included 50 interviews, and Smith includes ten of those in her film, and she adds new ones for the rest of the piece. Each one of the retained performances departs from their printed versions in significant ways. Words are skipped and added. Entire sections of sentences are moved out of order in order to create emphasis. Ethnic characters like Mrs. Young Soon Han, whose poor grammar and pronunciation are seemingly already precisely recorded in the printed version, have more poor grammar added in the film monologues. The disparate versions of the interview with Katie Miller give an example of the film's changes at their most manipulative. Miller is a middle-aged, lower class African American woman who confides in Smith that she looted in the riots of 1965 but did not loot in 1992. Like Han, Miller has more grammatical errors added to her monologue in the film, but more importantly, she has pauses and stutters added to her monologue where Smith would like the audience to perceive indeterminacy. In the book, Miller clearly says, "I think that the Korean stores that got burned in the Black neighborhood that were Korean-owned, it was due to lack of gettin' to know the people that come to your store – that's what it is" (129). This quote is placed amid less clear statements that Smith seemingly recorded faithfully from her interview into her book. So, at least in one version of the interview, that line is one instance during which Miller speaks relatively clearly. Otherwise, Smith would have recorded errors and misspoken phrases into that line, just as she recorded them into other

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parts of Miller's monologue in the book. However, in the film, Smith cuts Miller off

after the words "lack of a." The rest of the monologue is never performed in the film.

Instead, Miller stutters "lack of a, lack of a, lack of a, lack of a," until Smith cuts away

from her. The reason Smith does this is clear. She wishes the question she asked Miller

to remain unanswered at that point in her film and she does not want to expose the

audience to Miller's answer. In doing so, she reveals the hollowness of the film's claim

to only use words from her interviews. This is important to point out because it

reinforces Smith's effort to suture over the creation of the film for the audience. The

film's introductory captioned statement allows the audience to feel as if it is gaining a

firsthand, literal account of the uprisings from the transcripts of Smith's interviews. It

also conveys the perception that Smith has no underlying ideology in her presentation, so

that all of the conclusions the audience makes about the uprisings are their original

thoughts and not guided by Smith, who is acting simply a visual for the monologues as

she heard them.

Furthermore, Smith ardently denies any authorial voice in her performance. Her

body becomes the locus in which several conflicting categories –

interviewer/interviewee, male/female, white/black/Latino/Korean-American, old/young –

coalesce. She adapts her body to, and easily maneuvers in and out of, these conflicting

characters, articulating words that she does not seem to author, making public their

private thoughts and feelings about the uprisings and race relations in general. Smith is

completely interwoven into her text and performance: she was the original audience for

these words she appropriates and she becomes the physical instrument through whom

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these statements are re-presented to her audience, who are given no access to the initial discourse.

The play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and the film *Twilight: Los Angeles* garnered much critical acclaim. There has been, nonetheless, much controversy over whether or not Smith's performance should be considered as art. Sean Mitchell reported that *Twilight* has been "both hailed as a sensational theatrical event and bedeviled by disagreement in the theater community and press as to how it should be measured – whether it is truly a work of the imagination and therefore pure dramatic art, or whether it is a form of journalism as performance art and therefore something less." The ongoing debate produced credible arguments supporting both sides: Wendy Wasserstein spoke on Smith's behalf, saying, "I think of it as a work of art. There is an individual voice there, the eye of the observer. It is constructed in a theatrical way." Robert Schenkkan disagreed: "From a dramaturgical point of view, it's not a work of the imagination…I think of it as performance art, not as a play" (Mitchell). While these debates emerged in discussions of the eligibility of Smith's work for Tony and Pulitzer awards, it is important to establish where the film of Smith's work stands for other reasons: there are certain parallels in her representation of the uprisings and that of the media that was strangely downplayed in the hype surrounding the play. And it is worth considering why Smith's film was able to escape the criticism that media coverage of the uprising received. The alterations made to the interviews, evident in the comparison between the film and the play, would support the argument that Smith's performance must be art; however, taking the claims of the film at face-value, Schenkkan is justified in making his claim that it is not.

Richard Stayton's article on Smith and her impending performance in Los

Angeles noted, "The Taper awaits the opening of *Twilight* in the same expectant mood

that seized Los Angeles as it awaited last week's verdicts in the King civil rights trial"

("Voices"). The fact that the Taper staff anticipated "controversy" corresponding to the

magnitude of the King trial indicates that there was considerable awareness of the

political implications and impact of Smith's film; it also indicates why Smith evoked

certain presences intentionally. Smith, nonetheless, persisted in claims of her neutrality

and maintained that her film is apolitical. Smith argues that *Twilight* was "not really an

attempt to find causes or to show where responsibility was lacking" (xxi). In fact, Smith

has encouraged people to read her as unbiased: "Why do I have to be on one side?" she

complained to *Newsweek* (Kroll 63). "I'm not concerned about good guys and bad guys,"

she told *Metro Weekly*. And to the *Los Angeles Times*, she said, "If you think of what

acting is supposed to be, my job is to disappear" (Stayton 76). Consequently, Smith

carefully constructed herself – on film and in interviews – as a neutral ear or an

empathetic mirror. In her many interviews, she took great care to reveal nothing about her

private life, lest it color people's perception of what she does in *Twilight*. Robin

Bernstein even commented on the surname Smith, which she claims "represents the

ultimate in bland neutrality" (130). However, many critics expressed bewilderment over

her supposed neutrality: Joyce Guy voiced concerns that Smith did not disclose her own

ideological position toward the uprisings or the people she presented, and did not show

the "sociological and economic impact of the events" (116). Judith Hamera found

Smith's uneagerness for "authorial owning up" problematic (117), while Randy Shulman

attempted to answer for Smith by declaring that she is "like a mirror – reflecting us at out

best and our worst. And like a mirror, she never passes judgment. That, she leaves up to the audience" (23). Other media and audiences also noticed her silence, persona and motives; reports on Smith reverberated the questions in the minds of her audience: "Who Really Is Anna Deavere Smith, Anyway?" (Shulman) and "Can one person [really] capture an entire city's pain, hopes, and dreams?" (Stayton, "Voices").

As stated, having established Smith's efforts and public intention to politically separate herself from the interviews she recreates, and because Smith sutures the audience into embodying herself as interviewer during each segment of her film, the audience is equally part of her neutrality and perceived separation from the issues of the L.A. uprisings. Viewers are sutured to the invisible agency of the camera (and not disturbed by it) and also sutured, I argue, by their position in the system of race relations which resulted in the L.A. uprisings. Instead, like Smith, the film allows the audience to hold itself as separate from these problems. Kaja Silverman's modification of Dayan's explanation of suture is useful to analyze the techniques of Smith's film and its relation to the audience. As noted previously, it is not necessary for the film's editor to provide the audience with the suture, as there is never any shot-reverse-shot, but audiences will still go out of their way to suture themselves. As Silverman explains, the film only has to inflict a wound on the audience to make it want the "restorative of meaning and narrative" (140). Smith accomplishes this by the lack of shot-reverse-shot, lack of an interviewer's voice, and lack of a narrative sequencing of the interviews. So, the audience performs the work of telling themselves the narrative: Smith interviewed these people and now she is performing them for us. But, in doing this work, audience also has

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the ability to feel that they have done their part as far as alleviating the racial tensions of the uprisings.

This becomes more obvious as Smith presents each of her interviewees as having a part of the story of the uprisings while she and her audience have the whole. In each segment, as the interviewee speaks out into the void of the absent one, the audience shares Smith's secret that the interviewees are not just speaking to Smith, but speaking to whoever will see Smith's film. Further, by allowing the audience to suture themselves to her, these spectators are relating to the interviewees, largely working class and uneducated, from the stance of an upper middle class, African-American professor from Stanford. Smith's class is diegetic given her chauffeured entrance at the beginning of the film and through her existence as an authority figure with access to major celebrities. The film adds interviews with many national figures not present in the play. These include actor Charlton Heston and opera singer Jessye Norman. Characters like the aforementioned Katie Miller are deferential in the face of Smith's class and academic superiority.

Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, members of the Cahiers du Cinéma, classify films in terms of their positioning towards ideology and explain their effectiveness in affecting ideology. *Twilight* can be discussed in terms of two of these classifications. The first useful classification is that of films which have explicit political content. These films "do not effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery" (757). This critique applies to Smith in her duplication of the media's simplification of the riots and syllogistic juxtaposition of racial tensions. Smith may be subtle in how she arranges and

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interweaves segments from these individual discourses into a "seamless" sequence, but her end result inevitably reveals her intentionality. Bernstein notes, "As early as 1994, a reviewer could write with confidence, 'as everyone must already know, Smith selects and molds her performances from the interviews she conducts herself'" (123). Smith states that it is the "manipulation of the words that create character, not just the words, not just the emotions" (Lahr 90). Smith also freely admits:

> When I first began this work…I asked a linguist how I might encourage people to say 'uh' more. 'Uhs' are actually the place I find American character. What I am mostly interested in when people fail to say something, like when they maybe say the wrong word or get caught in stutters, because I think character really exists in the struggle to say something … When somebody talks, they may say wonderful things, but if I were to dwell on those I'd end up with 30-second sound bites. I'm more interested in their pursuit for the perfect sound bite. When language just doesn't work, when it fails, when it falls apart, it usually ends up being a moment or a time, once I try to re-enact it, that brings me closer to what I would think of as the feelings of that person. Then I really begin to feel that it's not me, that there's somebody else in there.[3] (Stayton, "Fire" 73)

This admission is not in the film's diegesis, sutured over for the audience by the caption at the film's beginning which claims the film's absolute accuracy. Not only did Smith manipulate the interviews after they were recorded, but she also studied ways to make the interviewees speak with mannerisms that would be useful for her performances. Thus, the text at hand is no longer the sole property of the interviewee or Smith, and just as she sutures the audience's perceptions of the camera's point of view, she sutures the aporia with her meaning. Referencing Jean-Pierre Oudart, Dayan explains, "The initial relationship between a subject and any ideological object is set up by ideology as a trap which prevents any real knowledge concerning the object" (123). Smith constantly tries to distance herself from the characters she enacts: "I like it when the audience learns about each other, not just about me and not just about the material" (qtd. in Stayton,

"Fire" 22). But because she stands in for the audience of the film, she creates a distance between the spectator and her interviewees as well. Smith also argues that, as an African American woman, she is allowed certain latitude to appropriate persons of different race and gender. Sandra Loh substantiates Smith's assertion that her blackness exempts her from offending her audience: "There is no way Smith could get away with impersonating the 'dialects' of whites, Blacks, Asians, Jews, men, women, seniors, children, etc., if she were white heterosexual male. Being an African-American woman gives her safe passage through this potential minefield" (113). Notwithstanding her ability to collapse completely into another's body, her audience is not able to disregard Smith's physicality and its corollaries. Moreover, because Smith's authorial intent is reflected and ever-present in the characters she chooses for her performance, the sequences she places them in, and how she culls their words and positions their gestures in which precise and effective moments, it may be possible to conclude finally that Smith is one of the great actresses of our time. But at the same time, she can no longer hide behind pledges of neutrality. Her performance *is* a very political act and her perspective as an educated, African American, middle to upper middle class, female, actress/performer, Stanford University drama instructor cannot help but permeate the characters she appropriates.

This permeation is most obvious during Smith's interview of Rodney King's aunt, Angela King. Smith's presence is easily detected in King's monologue, as King often addresses Smith throughout the interview. In what is possibly the most sutured-over scene of the film, King graphically describes the effects of her nephew's beating, his resultant speech impediments, and the plastic surgeries required to make him look like himself again. King (portrayed by Smith) begins to cry. Slowly, she recovers from her

emotions and wistfully starts to talk about her Rodney's upbringing in a pleasant multi-

racial environment. Then, returning to her concern for her nephew, King waxes poetic

trying to explain how she feels about him. Smith portrays this scene quite movingly:

> You know, the President, he's the top thing, you know, they cared about him;
> that's the way I cared about Glen, you know, Rodney. That's the way I feel, you
> know, a higher sort. It could have been my mother. But I'm not gonna say that.
> You see how everbody rave when something happens with the President of the
> United States? Okay, here's a nobody, but the way they beat him. This is the way
> I felt towards him. You understand what I'm sayin' now? You do? Alright. (57)

It is between her second to last question and the last question that she pauses with a

worried look on her face, afraid that her analogy is too outlandish, and that no matter how

she puts it, no one can understand what it is like to have a loved one experience what

happened to Rodney King. Though the camera remains silent in the face of Smith's

performance, it can be inferred that Smith the interviewer says yes to Angela King in

such a way that convinces King that Smith fully sympathizes. A look of total

beatification passes over King's face (as Smith portrays it), and King is at peace when

she finally says, "Alright." What worked to calm King during the original interview

included Smith's identity as a fellow African-American woman and an intelligent,

educated interviewer who asked insightful questions, questions that allowed King to

achieve an emotional catharsis. Yet the audience, sutured to Smith, gets the benefit of

King's confidence (and the feeling that they earned it), without having to truly possess

the level of understanding Smith possesses. In the moment of King's serenity, there is

the feeling that things are okay and the pain described in the early part of the monologue

has been legitimately answered for. But on the level of the audience's social

responsibility, this is really not the case. To promote this satisfying feeling, Smith cuts

off King's monologue at "Alright" for the film. It continues for many more paragraphs in the book.

Another film classification proposed by Comolli and Narboni, which also applies to Smith's text is that of the "live cinema" or "cínema direct" variety:

> The makers of these films suffer the primary and fundamental illusion that if they once break off the ideological filter of narrative traditions (dramaturgy, construction, domination of the component parts by a central idea) reality will yield itself up in its true form.   (758)

Smith has been open about explaining her preparatory process for her performance to demonstrate how she can encapsulate so many diverse and contradictory "pains, hopes, and dreams." Bernstein notes that Smith makes conscientious efforts, "through publicity, the program (in which she explains the process she underwent to produce the performance), and the set (which exposes the chairs and costumes which visually announce Smith's promise to embody multiple subjectivities)," to walk the would-be audience through the process behind the making of her performances (124). Smith gives the impression that she is straightforward and has nothing – no political agenda – to hide. In various interviews, she disclosed that her performance consists of segments of interviews that she recorded on tape. She then builds the performance by appropriating language, inflection, and idiosyncratic gesticulations from these encounters for authentication.   However, Comolli and Narboni note, "The fact is [by breaking with narrative traditions] filmmakers only break off one filter, and not the most important one at that" (758).   Smith's unique method does not guarantee truth. Meaning must always be manufactured regardless, and Smith's method manufactures one in an attempt to pass it off as what Comolli and Narboni call the non-existent "kernel" of truth (758).

Moreover, Smith's willingness to disclose every detail about the production while protecting her interviewees seems contradictory. In particular, the fact that she expressed reluctance for an interviewer to talk to her subjects is questionable. Does she not want her interviewees to upstage her, beating her to the punch line? Or does she not want her audience to know how she manipulated the words of her interviewees? Alice Rayner poses the question, "What is the relationship between the real people Smith interviews, their words, and her use of those words in performance? What is the level of truth in any of those statements, whether original or repeated? If Anna Deavere Smith is not actually Daryl Gates … or Maxine Waters … what is she doing speaking their words?" (5). Smith's desire to monitor her interviewees' words is indeed questionable in that her monopoly obstructs the very objective she tries to attain: dialog. The answer to Rayner's question lies in Smith's substitution of suture for dialog, which gives the audience the satisfying feeling that progress is being made and mitigates their anxiety at the events of the uprisings.

Smith's selection of characters and the criteria she follows in taking on certain interviewees instead of others are also ambiguities she leaves unanswered. For one, she chooses to enact certain types of African American women: Queen Malkah and Maxine Waters. These women are outspoken, capable of forcefully and effectively asserting the injustice of and discrimination against the African American community. Conversely, their Korean-American female counterpart is neither involved in the Du-Harlins case nor a leader of the Korean-American community who can counterbalance the arguments of Queen Malkah or Waters. Rather, Smith selects a soft-spoken Korean-American women lamenting over her injured husband who was shot through the eye and partially

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lobotomized by the bullet. Not only does this reinforce stereotypical notions about the women of each race[4] – the outspoken black woman versus the submissive and docile Asian woman – but, more problematically, these women are never given a chance to converse. There is never a moment in which the Korean woman and the African American women are placed adjacent to one another. If Korean activists who disagreed with the African American activists had been included in the film, Smith would not have been able to provide the audience with an interpretable framework to achieve a placated interpretation of the L.A. uprisings. Just as Smith removed Katie Miller's conclusion when Smith felt it would interfere with the film's narrative arc, Smith reinforced the audience's conclusions about the relationship between Koreans and African Americans when it was suitable for the narrative. As Comolli and Narboni might argue, Smith had to return to the structures of the ideology she professes to avoid in order to artificially create meaning for her audience.

Sequential placement of characters does not indicate true discourse among them. The type of sequence Smith has chosen to use is largely different from the sequence that led Will Eisner, among others, to call comics sequential art. If Smith's work overlaps with comics sequence, it is mainly with the comics monologue, such as in Harvey Pekar and R. Crumb's famous angst-ridden meditation on identity from the *American Splendor* series, the final page of which is shown in Figure 4.7.
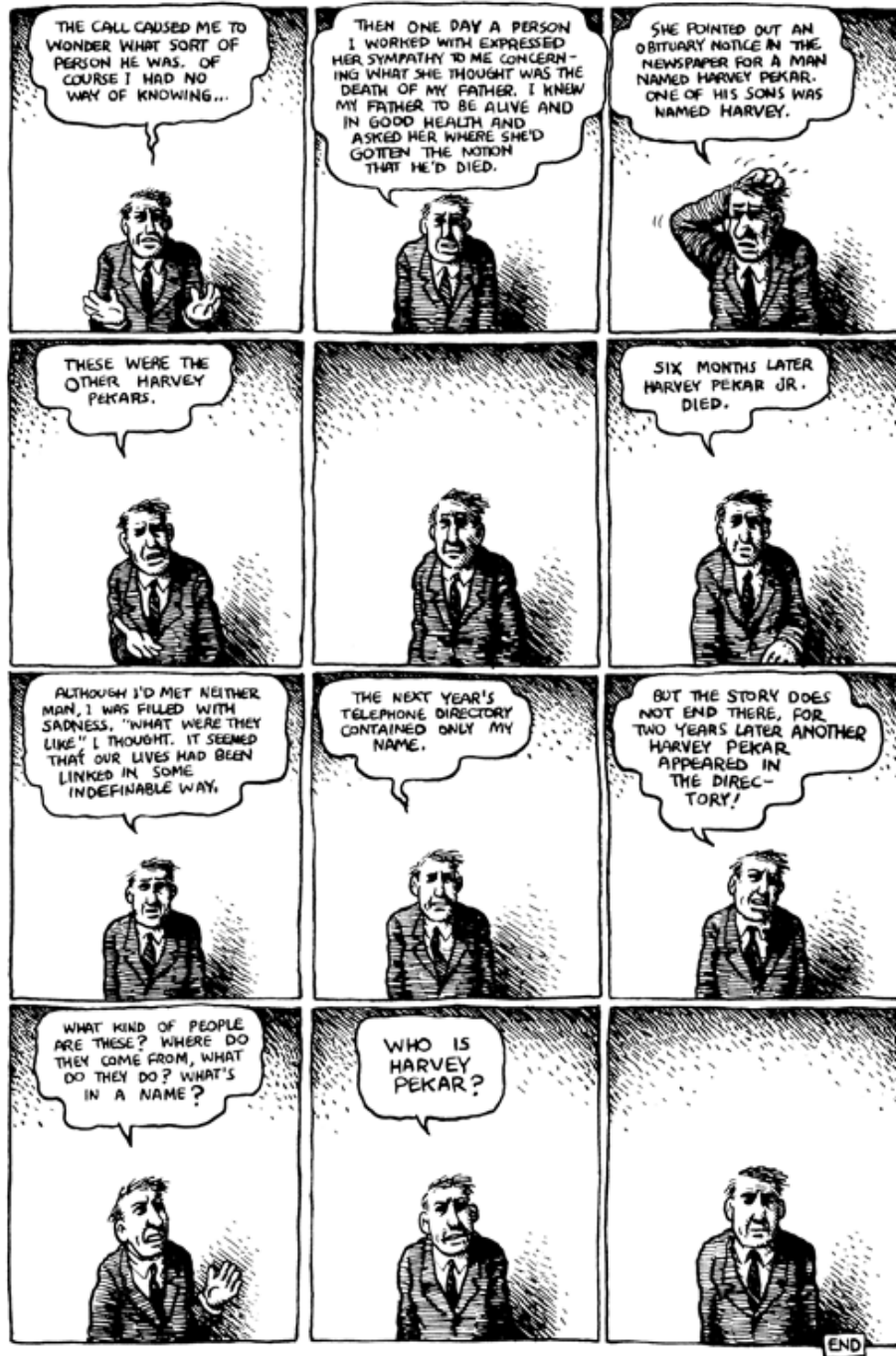
Figure 4.7: An angst-ridden meditation on identity, *Bob and Harv's Comics*, Harvey Pekar and R. Crumb (4).

Smith's project, in her words, was intended to encourage dialogue among disparate--even antagonistic--groups of people. However, by the end of Smith's performance, the outcome, at a deeper level of analysis, is diametrically opposite to what she set out to do: through suture, dialog is reduced to monologue, and, furthermore, her characters cannot hear each other although they occupy the same space made available by the invisible agency of the camera. In one telling scene, Smith swiftly oscillates from one character to the next but because they do not speak to each other but rather to the audience (who is disbarred from interaction); it is an act of non-communication posing as social progress.

And yet, I still hold Smith's abilities as an actress and theatrical innovator in the highest regard. Her skill at what she does has yet to be matched by another performer and for that alone she deserves the critical renown she has been awarded. The juxtaposition with comics allows me to continue to see the implications of Smith's work in new ways. Like most independent comics artists, who do the drawing and the writing, Smith collects or writes the words of her projects as well as provides the visual component. Where she differs from most of those comics creators is in her presentation of truth in non-fiction. In regards to the uses irony and self-reflexivity in non-fiction comics, Charles Hatfield, in *Alternative Comics*, proposes:

> Truth is not so much a constant quality as the result of a continual renegotiation between the artist, his materials and his audience. [. . .] It is, in sum, a rhetorical matter. Ironic authentication, then, need not boil down to self-regarding and playfulness or mere navel-gazing equivocation. On the contrary, it may represent a passage through skepticism and anxiety . . . (150-151)

A panel from *Maus* is an excellent example of Art Spiegelman's navigation of truth through ironic authentication (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8: Panel from *Maus*, Art Spiegelman (201).

Hatfield states, "To be frank, the very idea of authenticity (or its pejorative flipside, inauthenticity) carries with it a moralistic and metaphysical charge that should rouse our skepticism" (128-129). Spiegelman skillfully acknowledges the mediated nature of truth in *Maus* by depicting himself in a mask of his father's image from the book. Strikingly, this is extremely similar to the format of Smith's work in *Twilight*. Like the human image of Spiegelman in a mouse mask, each of Smith's characters draws attention to the fact that they are being created and mediated by her because of her physical presence; as Spiegelman recreates his father for us with a mask, so too does Smith skillfully recreate the Los Angelenos through her enacted portrayals. The format of Smith's work implicitly acknowledges the mediation she is imposing. Yet when it comes to taking credit for her

creativity and storytelling, unlike comics creators who embrace unreliable narrators and postmodern acknowledgment of mediation (Hatfield includes Daniel Clowes and R. Crumb in his discussion, among others), Smith refuses and continues to insist that she is a transparent filter to the truth. In a review of Smith's show, *Let Me Down Easy*, performed in 2011, Erika Milvy reports that Smith's unique performance format uses "verbatim reiteration of transcribed interviews" and goes as far as calling Smith a "human tape-recorder" (*The Huffington Post*). It is clear that Smith deserves much more credit than that.

Despite my caveat about McCloud in my introduction, his generic face theory has great potential and has only recently started getting theorized by academics.[5] This is in part because it may not feel quite as revelatory as his theories of closure and the gutter, nor does it have a convenient or universal name that has caught on, like "closure" does. It is not that academics do not like the concept, but they tend to either use it as is or leave it, unlike closure, which has been the subject of dissertations, and which gets connected and worked into existent academic theory.

By attempting to employ the generic face theory outside of comics, I intend to open the door to the possibility that what I have been calling ethnic shorthand in most of the dissertation also can be regarded as drawing a face with iconic features, or simply as iconicity, and that the study of iconicity in comics is poised to contribute to other forms of visual culture studies. Unlike stills from a movie, comics as a language are written in icons and are meant to be absorbed that way. So, any scholar who has interest in signification at that level of detail (or lack of detail), an important level to most forms of media and communication, may one day be able to benefit from the growing body of

comics scholarship and its specialization in studying a visual language that mainly communicates through shorthand or iconicity. For example, the study of iconic appearance may benefit across multiple genres of media study, such as how certain physical characteristics signify iconically, including skin color, facial features, hairstyle and posture.

In fact, the events of the L.A. riots were driven by at least one such iconic level of image – in the grainy video of Rodney King, a muscular black man, being beaten by white police officers. The cultural signification of that image was such that one juror admitted long after the trial that only when she looked away from the screen could she hear King's moans and realize he had been subdued. Only then could she hear him say, "Please stop." When she looked at the screen as she watched the video in the courtroom, she could not tell that he was not resisting even with the sound on (CNN.com – Transcripts, 11/03/04). The iconic image of a large black man surrounded by white policemen evoked too much visual signification and too many cultural assumptions for her to perceive the reality of the situation or hear his pleas for mercy.

Smith's discipline, theater, is also sometimes performed at this level of broad characteristics, as an actor has to be perceived from a great distance. Smith's comment in her interview with anthropologist Dorinne Kondo are in agreement:

> Race, gender, size, beauty, etc., are all extremely, extremely significant. We live in a society of visual rhetoric. For better or for worse, for most people what you see is what you get. . . . For me, the minute a certain race is put on certain material, it is significant. I believe my work onstage carries with it a racialization which is significant. I believe that the model that everyone can play everything, from people to dogs to houses, is one model. To some extent it is popular. But to the extent that it moved into where race and gender as political realities live, I think we are moving into another period of theatre history. My guess is that in the

theatre race still has to matter because the theatre hasn't absorbed the degree to which it does matter. (96)

In another section of the interview, Smith makes a comment that aligns with this chapter's application of comics identification to her work: "I resist mushes of identity. I don't believe that when I play someone in my work, that I "am" the character. I want the audience to experience the gap, because I know if they experience the gap, they will appreciate my reach for the other" (96). I would argue that this gap Smith refers to is similar to the one I have been writing about in terms of comics reader perception, a gap readers and audiences yearn to close as they read comics, which drives their desires as they absorb media, and gives pleasure and connection to the experience. The form of Smith's work lines up so well with what I attempt to theorize that if I continue to research her work, I hope to separate out the issues of her questionable interview practices and focus on the innovative virtuosity of her work and its implications.

I have one last sticking point with Smith's technique. In an analysis of Smith's performances, Tania Modleski points out a double valence: "its aggressive aspect . . . which reduces people to stereotypes . . . and the utopian aspect . . . the promise of solidarity embedded in Smith's artistic practice of identifying with an 'other' whose differences are scrupulously observed and preserved" (66). Modleski's dual evaluation is paralleled in a number of other academic and journalistic evaluations of Smith. In most of those pieces, ultimately the writer privileges the second half of Modleski's quote and wants to celebrate Smith's cultural contribution and acting virtuosity. I can sympathize with that sentiment. However, though cross-gender representation has a venerable theatrical history, cross-racial performance has a problematic legacy of racial

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ventriloquism and minstrelsy in the United States.[6] The question of who can imitate

whom on stage or in film, based on one's own gender and ethnicity, may seem a blurry

one. Yet, the iconic language of comics can answer this question as well. If someone

belongs to a class of visibility in which she has ever had to worry about how she would

be depicted in a comic or cartoon drawing,[7] then it can be painful for that person to see

those broadly drawn characteristics mimicked cross-ethnically, regardless of whether the

depiction is created on paper or on the stage, or whether the creator/performer is from a

victimized identity and recognizes and recreates similar victimization in her portrayals.

If the recurring loss of agency in one's representation still exists, then the wound is still

open, and not yet prepared for more probing.

To an extent, the nature of caricature is to make everyone, regardless of ethnicity,

feel insecure at the thought of being portrayed. However, what this project is concerned

with, and what Smith blends into her technique, are depictions of ethnic shorthand,

depictions of ethnic iconicity. This is what distinguishes the fear of being caricatured as

an individual from the dread that a caricaturist is depicting you mainly through the iconic

qualities associated with group or a population of people. In other words, in terms of

comics and cartooning, a depiction of former President Nixon with an outsize nose has

vastly differing implications than a depiction of President Obama with big lips.

Notes

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[1] Some comics scholars, including notable film and comics scholar Corey Creekmur (over the University of Florida's international academic comics scholars listserv: COMIXSCHOLARS-L) and Charles Hatfield ("The Current State Of Comics Studies," Comics Studies Forum 2008) have bemoaned the fact that comics studies is continuously being declared in a state of emergence and that measures need to be taken to stop scholars from approaching the field as if there has been no previous scholarly groundwork. However, the Spring 2011 issue of *Cinema Journal* (50:3) features a special section edited by Bart Beaty, a respected colleague of both Creekmur and Hatfield; this section is devoted to "Comics Studies: Fifty Years after Film Studies." Therein Beaty notes "the current state of the scholarly study of comics is strikingly akin to that of film in the 1960s" (106) and therefore indeed still in a state of emergence as Film Studies was at the time.

[2] Comics similarly limits itself from the more specific depictions of other forms of drawn and painted art.

[3] It was at the moment that I discovered this quote that my study of Smith became more investigative and critical. Although my field is English, I am familiar with methods of ethical ethnography, thanks to coursework in the areas of folklore studies and ethnographic practice. Smith expresses certainly questionable ethnographic ethics in that she claims her project is interviewee driven, whereas in fact she acknowledges that she purposely attempts to manipulate her interviewees and their use of language to achieve a certain effect. Smith does not claim to be an ethnographer, but she does assert that she is representing "reality" and "truth."

[4] Guy also notes that she was disturbed by the employment of rap music and a change in the setting to that of a graffiti motif whenever a character from the "hood" was presented, implicitly aligning rap music and graffiti with the Black community (115).

[5] Referencing McCloud's face theory, Derek Royal identifies a paradoxical effect of ethnic identification in comics: "Graphic narrative, in allowing the reader to "mask" him or herself in its non-mimetic figuration, invites empathy with the nondescript "Other" on the comic page, thereby encouraging the reader to connect to other experiences and other communities that might otherwise have been unfamiliar" (10-11).

[6] I have already mention Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* For an examination of Orientalism in cross-racial, cross-gender performance during the French colonial period, see Emily Apter, *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[7] As noted Asian American comics writer Larry Hama said in an interview with Jeff Yang, "Many companies were still coloring Asians bright yellow... In the '40s and '50s, the character Chop Chop in the 'Blackhawks' had big buck teeth, a long pigtail and lots of cleavers. It wasn't until sometime in the '60s that he evolved into a short slim guy who was a jaundiced shade of orange" (SFGate.com . June 1, 2010). Gene Yang's character Chin-Kee is very likely in part a reference to Chop Chop.

CHAPTER V

POSTMODERN GEEKDOM AS SIMULATED ETHNICITY:

A CROSS MEDIA ANALYSIS OF FORM, THE TROPES OF GEEK CULTURE

AND THE RISE OF THE GEEK PROTAGONIST

"I think that everything I do tends to root for the underdog. I always felt as a kid that I was under appreciated, invisible or weird, but I've always secretly thought people would one day appreciate what is different about me. I'm always putting that message out there. Eventually, the nerds and the geeks will have their day."

-- Judd Apatow, from his imdb.com Biography

"If this was fifteen thousand years ago, by virtue of his size and strength, Kurt would be entitled to his choice of females. [. . .] But our society has undergone a paradigm shift. In the Information Age, Sheldon, you and I are the Alpha males. We shouldn't have to back down."

-- Leonard (Johnny Galecki) on CBS' *The Big Bang Theory*

This chapter of my dissertation analyzes contemporary and 1960s media to reveal that the origins of the now ubiquitous geek protagonist in American popular culture are connected to the rise of this protagonist both in superhero and underground comics as well as in film that emerged in the 1960s. My analysis here continues the project of my dissertation by centralizing visual culture within the current geek zeitgeist. More importantly, I argue that the rise of the geek as a melodramatic hero has vast implications in the current cultural moment and is shaping society in ways that demand examination. The geek's success as a hero within a postmodern discourse relies on his identification within an implicitly marked and put-upon subculture. The usage of melodramatic markedness, both real and artificial, to shape and justify actions, behaviors, and

aggressions has become a defining and overarching trend in US culture that analysis of geek media can partly elucidate. Privileged males claim their geekdom as an equivalent markedness to other more clearly marked identities. In other words, they perform a simulated ethnicity.

In 2009, citizens of the United States elected its President, Barack Obama,[1] on the strength of a campaign that foregrounded Obama's status as a geek. Obama's participation in geek-media-related fan cultures, evinced by his famous pose in front of a statue of Superman and his inclusion in a 2008 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic, signified a return to careful thought, intellectualism, and research in political decision making, contrasting the decidedly anti-intellectual Bush Administration. Obama's
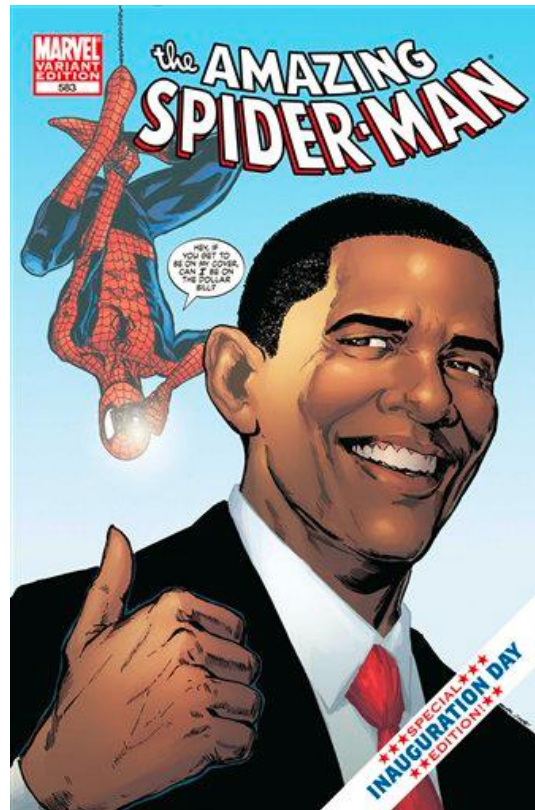
Figure 5.1: President Barack Obama on the cover of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, 2008.

geekdom was publicly confirmed by John Hodgman, a writer and actor often employed for his geekiness, at the 2009 Radio & TV Correspondents' Dinner. Here, Hodgman framed Obama's presidential victory as a decisive moment in the "age-old conflict between jocks and nerds." Referring to the Bush Administration as a "jock administration" that "proceeded at all times from intense confidence and certainty that what they were doing was correct" and that "privileged gut instinct over complexity and bookish rumination," Hodgman called the struggle between confident gut reactors (jocks) and bookish deliberate thinkers (geeks) "the culture war of our time" (Keynote Address, June 19th, 2009).

Geek culture dominates popular media. Comic-book films such as *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* (both 2008) are among Hollywood's highest-grossing blockbusters, while geek/slacker comedies like *Superbad* and *Knocked Up* (both 2007) are runaway R-rated comedy hits. The San Diego Comic-Con, once merely the largest annual meeting of a fairly obscure comic-collecting subculture, has become a major pop cultural event where A-list actors and directors make lengthy appearances to communicate with fans in an effort to generate buzz for their films and television programs. Best Buy, a dominant technology retailer, offers to send a Geek Squad to customers' houses to help with technology installation, without having to wonder if anyone finds a squad of geeks unsettling. Books like *Geek Chic: The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture* and *How to Date a Geek* have begun to journalistically analyze and capitalize on the phenomenon.

The economic successes of geek businessmen like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are also primary sources of current geek predominance. These real-life geek success stories

are so influential that they resonate on the pop-cultural front as well: for example, recent summer blockbuster *Iron Man 2* (2010) has Tony Stark giving rock star keynote addresses at Stark Expos in a thinly veiled reference to Steve Jobs strutting his stuff at a MacWorld Expo. The film also includes Justin Hammer as an emphatically plagiaristic and sub-par competitor of Stark's, alluding to Bill Gates' capitalizing on Macintosh's windowed graphic user interface to create Microsoft Windows, as well as the popular notion that Windows-based PCs are substandard in comparison with more expensive Macs.   The inclusion of characters resembling Jobs and Gates in *Iron Man 2* drives home the notion that the celebration of geeks in media is connected to actual geek success in the corporate and financial arenas.[2] As geeks are recognized as sources of cultural and economic capital, their manliness and date-worthiness also rise. What this entails is a desire to see geeks in a new way. Contemporary media fulfill this desire with portrayals of sympathetic geek protagonists.

A central argument of this chapter is that as geekdom moves from the cultural fringes into the mainstream, it becomes increasingly difficult for the figure of the geek to maintain the outsider victim status that made him such a sympathetic figure in the first place. Confronted with his cultural centrality and white, masculine privilege -- geeks are most frequently represented as white males -- the geek seeks a simulated victimhood and even simulated ethnicity in order to justify his existence as a protagonist in a world where an unmarked straight white male protagonist is increasingly passé. My investigation will proceed through four concepts or tropes prevalent in geek media: (1) the historical origins of geekdom and the rise of geekdom as an identifiable subculture in the 1960s; (2) the mainstreaming of geek masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s in cinema and superhero

comics; (3) the postmodern permutations of geekdom popularized by Generation X cultural producers, including geek/slacker duos in "indie" cinema and alternative comics; and (4) the implications of simulated ethnicity, geek rage, misogyny, and geek melodrama on contemporary constructions of masculinity.

While there are many examples of female geeks, including geeky high-schooler Dawn Weiner (Heather Matarazzo) in Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), protagonist Enid Coleslaw in the comic and film versions of *Ghost World* (1993-1997 and 2001) and, more recently, Tina Fey's Liz Lemon on the Emmy-winning NBC comedy *30 Rock* (2006-present), the critical thrust of my intervention examines previously unstudied issues of masculinity and misogyny as they relate to male geeks, while acknowledging that female geekdom deserves further research.

Origins of the Nerd and the Geek

To trace the history of geek culture, I must begin with the cultural (stereo-)type of the nerd, whose history is traced in Benjamin Nugent's *American Nerd*. "Nerd" designates a type, fully solidified in the American cultural imagination by the 1960s, that stands in stark negative contrast to the upper-class sportsman or "jock" (Nugent 37, 57). The nerd is a social outsider who is intelligent, technologically proficient and, until the 1970s, viewed as an object of pity and/or ridicule by mainstream culture. According to Nugent, the "nerd" type predates the term, which came into parlance around 1950 as successor to the "greasy grind"; both terms refer to the college student, stereotypically of Eastern European or Jewish descent, who works hard academically (at a suggested inhuman intensity) to gain entry into elite, formerly blue-blooded institutions like Ivy

League universities. Calling such a student a "greasy grind"[3] is a way of devaluing that hardworking student's efforts by labeling the student as one dimensional and not well-rounded, especially socially and athletically, and therefore less deserving of entry into the American elite despite his/her academic or intellectual achievements. Early media nerds include Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman* (1925), Jerry Lewis' titular character in *The Nutty Professor* (1963), underground cartoonist R. Crumb, and the screen persona of Woody Allen.

The way we understand the term geek since the 1960s is closely related to the history of the nerd, but it inflects itself differently. The geek is more focused and more fanatical than a nerd. The geek is a specialist and is always passionate about his chosen field(s) of knowledge. Whereas a nerd's successes are almost always scholastic, and frequently center on scientific and/or mathematical expertise (e.g., Brian [Anthony Michael Hall] in *The Breakfast Club*), a geek can fail at school because he is too immersed in his sub-cultural interests (e.g., Rob Fleming in *High Fidelity*). A third type, the dork, tends toward more impractical interests than the geek and is even more lacking in social cachet (e.g., Napoleon Dynamite's experiment with an action figure on the school bus and his love of tetherball).

Of these three related terms -- geek, nerd, and dork -- *geek* is the oldest, originating as a northern English variant of an older word, *geck*, which began in the Middle Dutch as *gec* (a fool, simpleton, or dupe), dating back in English to Alexander Barclay's *Certayne Eglogues* of 1515: "Aiijb, He is a foole, a sotte, and a geke also Which choseth...the worst [way] and most of ieoperdie" (*OED*). It was also used by Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*: "Why have you suffer'd me to be imprison'd. / And made

the most notorious gecke and gull / That ere invention plaid on?" (5.1). The term

reemerged in the early 20th century to describe the sub-human sideshow eater of strange

animals; the sub-altern-like identity of that performer provides a context for the geek as

marginalized. Beyond that etymological history, however, it is more relevant to identify

that "geek" was appropriated as an epithet for non-carnival social outsiders.

"Nerd" first saw print as an epithet on October 8, 1951, in *Newsweek*: "In Detroit,

someone who once would be called a drip or a square is now, regrettably, a nerd." The

origin of nerd is unclear, but likely comes from Edgar Bergen's buck-toothed dummy

Mortimer Snerd or from its use without definitional context in Dr. Seuss's book *If I Ran*

the Zoo (1950): "I'll sail to Ka-Troo And Bring Back an It-Kutch, a Preep and a Proo, a

Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too!" (Lighter [v. 2] 367).

"Dork" originally meant penis. It was first used in Jere Peacock's 1961 novel

Valhalla: "You satisfy many women with that dorque?" (Lighter [v. 1] 638). Dork began

to mean a socially inept person in 1967, first being used this way in Don Moser and Jerry

Cohen's *The Pied Piper of Tucson*: "I didn't have any clothes and I had short hair and

looked like a dork. Girls wouldn't go out with me" (638).

Type	Characteristics
Nerds	conformist, academic achievers
Geeks	passionate, keep it real through resistance to academic / professional capital (subcultural fan capital ok)
Dorks	socially awkward, inwardly focused, in some ways the most authentic in that his pursuits rarely lead to self-benefit in the eyes of society

Within the Venn diagram:

Geek

Nerd

Interested in pursuits that can be used for academic and/or financial benefit.

Not jocks. Not "popular" with the exception of the current "chic" associated with geekiness, and by extension, nerdiness and dorkiness.

Interested in obscure pursuits that lack social cachet or profit.

Lack of social graces.
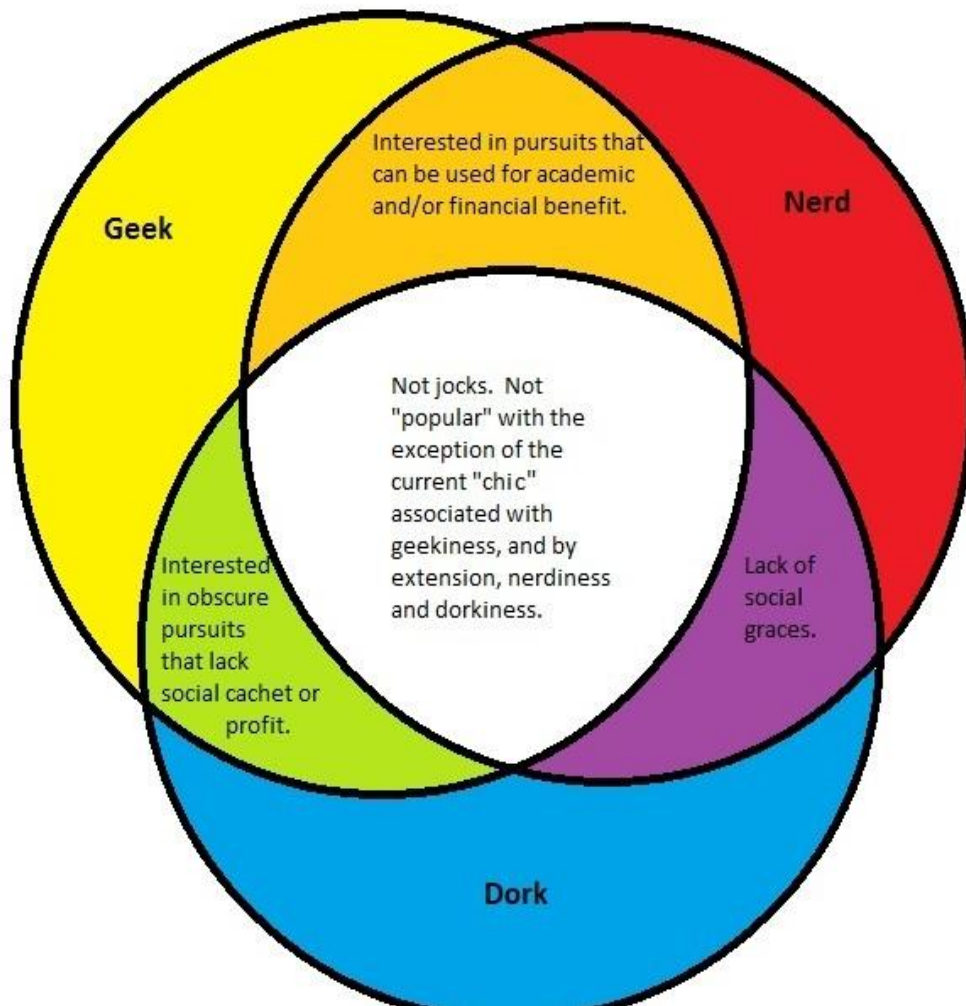
Dork

Table 5.1: Nerd, Geek and Dork Characteristics.

Figure 5.2: Interrelated Features of Geeks, Nerds, and Dorks.

Of these three types, geeks will be my main focus, since their passion for certain hobbies and forms of expression often lead them into creative pursuits such as writing, comic book drawing, television production, and/or filmmaking. Hence all my key

examples are dominantly geek, but have *some* nerd, and dork, features. Multiple

variations on this paradigmatic geek as an adolescent are recently played by Michael

Cera in films like *Superbad, Juno, Youth in Revolt*, and *Scott Pilgrim*, and in the TV

show *Arrested Development*. In adult configuration, recent geek iterations include Paul

Rudd in *Role Models* and *I Love You, Man.* Ultimately, a geek-centric analysis will allow

me to shed light on the geek's interactions and overlap with a fourth character type, the

slacker (played by Jonah Hill in *Superbad,* Seann William Scott in *Role Models*, and

Jason Segel in *I Love You, Man*).   I will discuss the slacker type fully in the 1990s

section.

Geek Gender, Class and Race

Film scholar Linda Williams' explanation of the melodramatic mode is crucial to

analyzing the cultural logic of geek entitlement and the emotional impact of geek

narratives. As Williams argues in her essay, melodrama is best understood as a mode or

loose collection of tropes rather than as a specific literary or filmic genre, though it has

strong historical ties to sentimental fiction like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and women's films (or

"weepies") like *Stella Dallas* (1925, 1937) and *Terms of Endearment* (1983). As

Williams explains, "The mode of melodrama [. . .] [moves] us to pathos for protagonists

beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims" (42). The set

of structures, which include heightened pathos, clear oppositions between good and evil

by which audience members are made to identify and empathize with a suffering victim,

and thus to yearn for narrative closure via the defeat of the victim's oppressor(s), is

common to all genres of American film and, as Williams argues, to American popular

narratives writ large. As she states, "Melodrama has always mattered and continues to matter in American culture [. . .] The sexual, racial, and gender problems of American history have found their most powerful expression in melodrama" (82). Williams' model helps us see how racial marking becomes desirable to white geeks: if suffering equals virtue and moral superiority, then the virtue of a marked identity type (black, female, gay, disabled) can be reduced to how much one suffers for it. Here is also the key to why this analysis has to read geeks as straight white men. Through its origin stories (like that of a Marvel Superhero) in R. Crumb and other boomer geeks, the anxieties of the straight white male geek's identity are transformed into the authenticating devices that paradoxically make him a moral hero in a postmodern world in which an unmarked and untroubled straight white male hero would normally be out of place.

Melodramatic tropes are deployed to create sympathy for white male geeks beset by their own sexual, racial, and gender problems: for example, R. Crumb characters Whiteman (Figure 5.3) and Fritz the Cat are driven to angst by observing the carefree lives of African Americans they encounter as well as the ease with women with which this carefreeness imbues them.

Figure 5.3: "Whiteman" *Zap Comix #1*, 1968

Similarly, Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston), protagonist of Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999), hates his unapologetically mainstream boss Lundberg (Gary Cole), both for work-related humiliations and because Gibbons wrongly imagines that his new girlfriend has had sex with Lundberg (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Stills from *Office Space*, 1999, Gibbons on left, Lundberg on right.

Gibbons expresses his rage at Lundberg's perceived victimization of him by destroying an office copy machine in a slow-motion sequence set to gangster rap music: it is Gibbons' and the film's racialized fantasy of violent, melodramatically justified geek vengeance (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5: Still from *Office Space,* 1999.

It is important to note here that Judge's depiction of copy machine's destruction is inherently ridiculous by design. Also, Crumb is by no means advancing Whiteman as a hero. In fact, Crumb's depiction of ethnoracial dynamics is sophisticated and complex. However, I will demonstrate that a culturally dominant and straightforward reading of the

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geek's victimhood has emerged regardless. Even if we read Crumb and Judge as presciently complicating the assumptions of geek melodrama, their depictions of it nonetheless can be used to illustrate the core principles of the geek's melodramatic suffering and its implications.

In line with their presumed whiteness, geeks are typically economically privileged. Both Gibbons and Lundberg are economically empowered white collar workers. Lundberg's unapologetic participation in the corporate environment sets him as a villain, and Gibbon's tortured relationship to his work makes him sympathetic, despite both characters' participation in the same economic system and set of privileges.

In terms of the geek's class identity, it is important to discuss Zygmunt Bauman's essay "Tourist and Vagabonds," and to use Williams' insights about identity-based suffering to shed light on Bauman's claims, as well as to introduce the term "simulated ethnicity." Bauman deftly analyzes globalization and why "vagabonds," the global have-nots, are in a state of perpetual admiration of the economic mobility of the tourists, the privileged members of "developed" nations. As a Marxist, Bauman is clearly focused on the economic disparity between the tourist and vagabond. However, if one uses the logic of melodrama to modify Bauman's analysis, the vagabond has a surplus of one commodity that the tourist desires. My reading is this: The tourist must admire the vagabond's suffering, which imbues the vagabond with virtue. This plays out obviously as some tourists paradoxically disdain the touristy and prefer to travel with the conceit that they are more "on the inside" than an average tourist. This ironic admiration is the same as the admiration non-marked identities have for marked identities in a post-modern milieu, where markedness serves as an authenticating feature. Thus I use the term

"simulated ethnicity" to describe the way geeks melodramatically cast themselves as members of a marginalized identity to foreground their validity and authenticity as postmodern protagonists.

Most of the geeks I will discuss are white; whiteness is the stereotypically assumed race of geekdom. According to cultural theorist Richard Dyer, whiteness connotes spirituality, intellect, and enterprise (14-15, 21, 23). Geeks are by definition enterprising -- this is precisely what marks them as uncool from the jock or slacker point of view -- and indeed, even the name *Enterprise* has been associated with space travel and sci-fi geekdom since the 1960s. Strong spiritual elements saturate geek texts in the form of kung fu (which inspired Mark Salzman from the documentary film *Protagonist* and Quentin Tarantino in his film *Kill Bill*), karate (*The Karate Kid*), encounters with extraterrestrials (Roy Neary in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and Elliott in *E.T.*), or simply "The Force" (Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*). The geek imagines himself as a "peaceful warrior" with immense power *and* a finesse, sensitivity, and interior world that his brutish "jock" competitors lack. This sensitivity, spirituality, and intelligence come in exchange for sexual prowess, which is the one thing more athletic and conventionally attractive men have and that the geek typically doesn't. For example, as Rob Fleming confesses in Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*: "What is it that sickens me about 'Ian' and Laura? [. . .] Just, I guess, [. . .] that I still hear Chris Thomson, the Neanderthal, testosterone-crazed, fourth-year [tenth grade] adulterer, calling me a spastic and telling me he has knobbed my girlfriend. And that voice still makes me feel bad" (73). No matter his intellectual gifts or proclivities toward accomplishment, the geek is always by definition sexually inferior to the jock and feels that inferiority deeply.

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Of course, sexuality is itself racialized, so I can place the white male geek on a racial and gendered continuum that situates him between, on the one hand, male jocks and black males, stereotypically considered more embodied, sexual, and animalistic, and, on the other, Asian male geeks, stereotypically considered even more rational and less sexual than white male geeks. Note that these raced positionings along the masculinity/femininity continuum largely result from the projections and introjections of white male fantasies, and are not necessarily anything in "real life"; they are white middle-class cultural stereotypes. I must specify males here also because the sexual racialization operates differently for non-white females than it does for their male counterparts. For example, stereotypically Asian females are hyper-sexualized while Asian males are hypo-sexualized.[4]

The young white male's desire to inhabit racialized identities, especially blackness, is displayed in a wide array of geek media. To take just one example, in *Swingers* (1996), an *ur*-text of 1990s geekdom depicting geeky white guys trying to play

Gendered Status	Figure
hyper-masculine, hyper sexualized	black man
normatively masculine	white male jock*
somewhat masculine	white male slacker
feminized	White/Jewish male geek
hyper-feminized, hypo-sexualized, androgynous	Asian male geek (formerly the Jewish geek)

*Note that "jock" is not synonymous with "athlete"; athletes are in fact geeks of sports.

Table 5.2: Geek Race and Gender (see also Nugent 73).

hip in order to attract women, the hippest guy that everyone else admires is the

(unnamed) black guy.   The function of this imagined black masculinity for the feminized

geek is rendered in direct, highly sexually charged terms in Kevin Smith's *Dogma*

(1999). Having just been "outed" as a homosexual fantasizer by a black man (Chris

Rock), geeky stoner Jay (Jason Mewes) flees to a heterosexual strip club where he enters

into a bidding war with a black gang leader, Kane (Dwight Ewell), for the attentions of a

stripper. At the conclusion of this episode, Kane asks Jay and his "heterosexual life

mate," Silent Bob (Smith), to join his gang. Jay and Silent Bob's anger over their own

sexual impotency or possible queerness is here channeled into projected black gang

solidarity: they join the gang to reinforce their masculinity and heterosexuality in the face

of their own geeky arrested development.

If the white geek is often bested by jocks and black hipsters, a compensatory part

of the white geek's melodrama is to disparage Asian geeks as being even less hip and less

authentic than he is. Even for a geek, a lack of "well roundedness" is a concept that can

be used to marginalize Asian geeks. In this way of thinking, the Asian geek doesn't

"keep it real" because he is too mercenary: he is only interested in the types of geekiness

which will benefit him academically or which will get him ahead. Hence the Asian geek,

or any mercenary geek, lacks the spirit or heart needed to redeem him melodramatically

by the narrative's end. *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) (*HKGWC)* is a film

well aware of these stereotypes. Unlike less multi-ethnic films such as *Superbad*,

wherein an Asian male simply serves as a temporary example of a more staid and less

rambunctious colleague for Michael Cera's geek protagonist, *HKGWC* plays its Asians as

central protagonists. In doing so, the film grapples with some of the stereotypes ascribed

to Asian male geeks while at times reifying them. The film shows John Cho's character (who has obviously picked his profession of investment banker based on its lucrativeness) initially supplicating himself to do accounting work for his cooler office mates; he is also unable to talk to his love interest. Kumar Patel's slackerism can be read as a conscious revolt against stereotypes about Asians who dispassionately pursue careers in medicine in compliance with parental desires.

In fact, both Jews and Asians are traditionally stereotyped as academically focused "keeners."[5] Only recently, with the films of Team Apatow, are Jews becoming more synonymous with "hip" geeks. This overlap is why the rise of the Jewish male protagonist is inseparably intertwined with the conceits of geek melodrama. The put-upon, picked-on, identity of the Jewish keener allows him to possess the virtues of suffering imbued by the melodramatic mode and thus allows him to become a morally superior protagonist who has the right to humiliate jocks and non-geeks.[6] Jewishness allows ethnic specificity yet middle class white appeal/identification, for, as Richard Dyer observes, whiteness "creates a category of maybe, sometimes whites" who "may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances" (19). Even within one historical moment, Jewish geeks may fluctuate somewhat in how they relate to whiteness, sometimes appearing as "transparently" white, while at other times they are singled out as a socially oppressed, "raced" minority. For example, in *Superbad,* the characters played by Michael Cera and Jonah Hill make no mention of their ethnicity and therefore can be read as transparently white, but in the film's promoting, Cera, Hill, and Seth Rogen often referred to their collective "Jew fros," their very language juxtaposing their less marked ethnicity with that of African Americans. This racializing of Jews through

comparison/proximity to black characters is evinced even more pointedly in the *Freaks and Geeks* episode "Beers and Weirs," in which Jewish kid Neal (Samm Levine) commiserates with an unnamed black friend:

> Black Kid: No, no, no -- you wouldn't want to trade places with me, believe me!
>
> Neal: I don't know, I mean, I'm Jewish. That's no cakewalk either. I was elected school treasurer last year. . . I didn't even run.

In this context it is no surprise that Jewish geeks are so prevalent in geek culture, for they are possessed of a "real" ethnicity that nevertheless functions analogously enough to a "simulated" ethnicity -- that is, it is hard to see visually (like whiteness) but is historically justified by (generations of) persecution and suffering -- as to allow Jewish geek protagonists to operate as proxies for simulated ethnics who consume these texts.[7]

In what follows, I examine the influences of key geek culture producers in popular film and comic books from the 1960s to the present, forming an exploratory, loose, incomplete, yet instructive cultural genealogy of geek pop-cultural production. This genealogy includes charting geekdom's cultural progress toward the mainstream through George Lucas' and Steven Spielberg's hugely successful blockbuster science-fantasy films in the 1970s and 1980s, which laid the groundwork for the explosion of geek-centered media in the 1990s. I discuss the emergence of the Generation X geek's constant companion, the slacker, and conclude with a look at Judd Apatow's highly successful attempts to market geekdom to Generation Y and some of the sobering real-life implications of geek melodrama, entitlement, and rage that all these texts, to various extents, embody. I now begin my historical survey with one of the earliest and most influential of Boomer geeks, underground comics creator R. Crumb.[8] While other more

prominent geeks such as Woody Allen may leap to mind, I use Crumb as my starting

point and early definitive geek because, through his work, Crumb confesses to what all

geeks conceal.

1960s: Underground Boomer Geekdom

The best known underground comic, *Zap Comix* by R. Crumb, came out with its

first issue in 1968 (Figure 5.6). This was the debut of R. Crumb's famous "keep on

truckin'" motif and, more importantly for my project, the character "Whiteman." As the

first place where the spelling "comix" was used prominently, *Zap* was extremely

influential and prominent cartoonists such as *Maus* author Art Spiegelman would later

adopt the term comix to emphasize the multimedia nature of the medium. *Zap* was a

collection of mostly one to three page comic shorts wherein Crumb engaged themes of

1960s counterculture like free love and dropping out, while overlapping them with his

own anxieties about sex, sexual fixation, and identity. Crumb's work has often been

analyzed for its extreme confessionality and scathingly harsh depictions of self. Using

Linda William's insights into the melodramatic mode as a lens with which to interrogate

Crumb's work reveals previously unexamined explorations of melodramatic victimhood

and reveals Crumb as simultaneously a progenitor of geek melodrama and the

authenticating devices of the geek hero, while a also a harsh critic of this phenomenon

through the polyvalent and iconic medium of comics
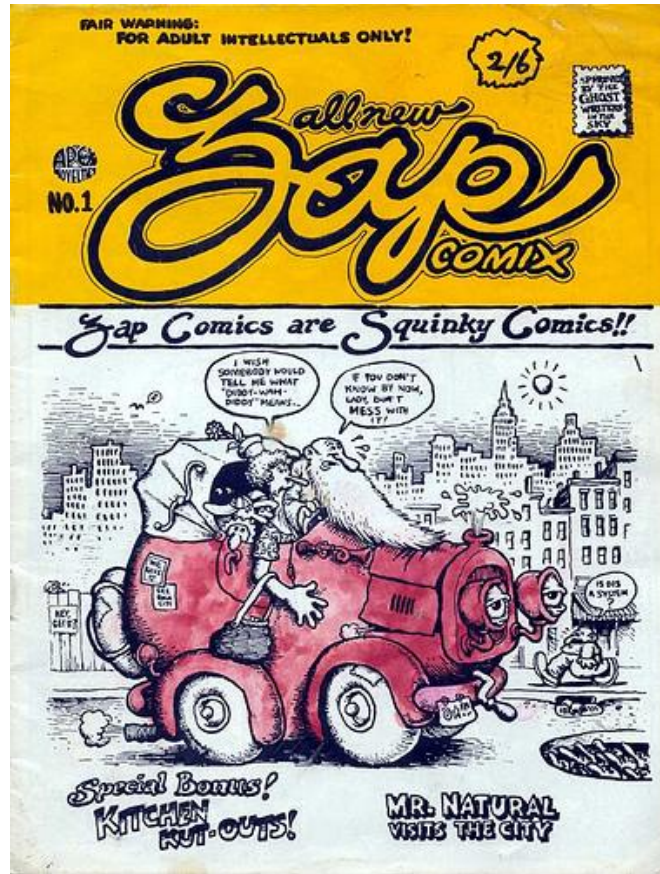
Figure 5.6: *Zap Comix* by R. Crumb, 1968.

A straightforward reading of R. Crumb's "Whiteman" (*R. Crumb Handbook* 120) is that it depicts the stress of being white and middle class (Crumb and Whiteman's projection) in juxtaposition to a carefree lower-class African American existence. The character Whiteman finds himself off the beaten path in his city surrounded by African Americans (drawn in stereotypically Sambo-styled comics shorthand). Whiteman grapples with his fear of the African Americans and his guilt because of his fear; meanwhile, the African Americans tell him to "Be cool!" and to listen to the laughing and the singing coming from down the street (in a Stephen Foster-like depiction of the

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African-Americans as either simple children or happy-go-lucky charlatans). "Whiteman"

is significant in that he positions a less marked white identity in juxtaposition with more

marked non-white ethnicities and the angst that accompanies it. Crumb draws attention

to the irony of this move by naming the character Whiteman. In terms of his name,

Whiteman is quite marked, but in terms of his appearance, Whiteman is less marked

because he lacks ethnic iconicity in the shorthand comics depiction of him. Crumb is

highly aware of this contrast when he decides to hyper-exaggerate the stereotypically

racist depictions of African Americans in early American comics. When subsequent

artists and performers (such as the "Everyday Normal Guy" played by Jon Lajoie on

YouTube (Figure 5.7) and Sarah Silverman in her "Jews in German Cars" video (Figure

5.8)) engage with this subject, they create characters which are an exaggeration of, but

not identical with, the creator's standard public/comedic persona.

Figure 5.7: Jon Lajoie, "Everyday Normal Guy," *You Want Some of This*, 2007.

Figure 5.8: Sarah Silverman, "Jews with German Cars," *Jesus is Magic*, 2005.

What is advanced here (and also in the tales of Skutch, Crumb's later autobiographical

work grappling with a popular and more typically masculine high school counterpart) is

Crumb's self-identification with and interrogation of a put-upon yet unstudied identity,

whiteness. This whiteness, because of so much attention paid to marked identities like

ethnicity and gender, acquires a level of significance and interest that ultimately trumps,

in the mind of the geek, traditionally marginalized identities based on gender, race,

ethnicity, and sexuality (Figure 5.9). It is through suffering in the melodramatic mode and

hence victimhood that Crumb's protagonists gain authenticity as well as imbue their

identity with a political cache that allows them to be sympathetic characters while

simultaneously benefitting from a system that Crumb castigates.

Figure 5.9: Whiteman Crumb, *Zap* #1, 1968.

Figure 5.9 (continued).

The relationship between Crumb and Skutch is tellingly analogous to the relationship

between Whiteman and the African Americans he encounters in *Zap* #1. These African

American men, as depicted by Crumb, are unselfconscious and thus are granted a

carefreeness and coolness that is similar to that of Skutch as a popular high school student. This sheds light on the relationship between geeks and ethnicity, and geeks and popularity. In both cases, the geek focuses on how his tortured identity, rooted in his thoughtfulness and lack of façade, is not recognized, while thoughtless jocks and African Americans who are already regarded as cooler, get to live carefree and un-tortured lives to boot precisely because of their perceived "inferiorities" to geeks. Again, it comes back to the melodramatized geek notion of a tragic female misrecognition of true worth – the female inability to see value in the geek and the failure to see through the jock or the African American. In terms of African Americans and Crumb, this is a continuing trope, including depictions of Jimi Hendrix and white groupies (Figure 5.10), to the African American crows in *Fritz the Cat* (1993) (Figure 5.11) who accumulate white women while being more interested in getting high, while Fritz struggles with coming off as cool while the crows do so with no effort.
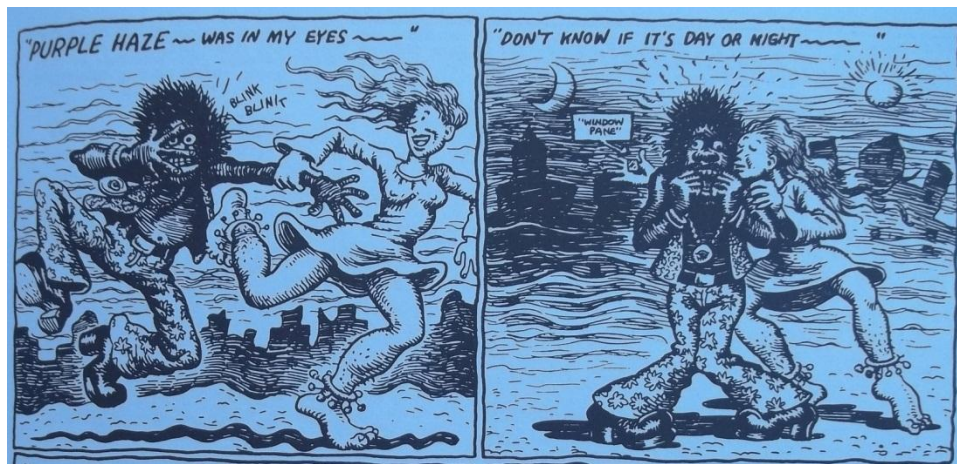
Figure 5.10: *R. Crumb Draws the Blues*, 1993 (no pagination).

Figure 5.11: *Fritz the Cat*, "Fritz the Cat," R. Crumb, originally published 1968.

See also Crumb's portrayal of the working class and non-intellectual (and therefore non-tortured) Bo Bo Bolinski in "Bo Bo Bolinski Relaxing On a Saturday Afternoon" from *Id* #3 (1991), who has easy access to his thick-legged (and therefore ideal by Crumb's measure) wife and who doesn't even appreciate her as he drinks a beer and watches Sunday football while nonchalantly copulating with her from behind (Figure 5.12).

More interestingly, in *My Troubles with Women*, Crumb portrays the androcentric consequences of geek rage. Of particular importance is the relationship between Crumb and his older brother Charles with the aforementioned popular boy Skutch. This begins in the section entitled "My Troubles with Women Part II," which first appeared in *Hup* in 1986. The first panel opens with a woman, captioned "a woman," saying, "Doesn't this guy ever stop whining?" (Figure 5.13).
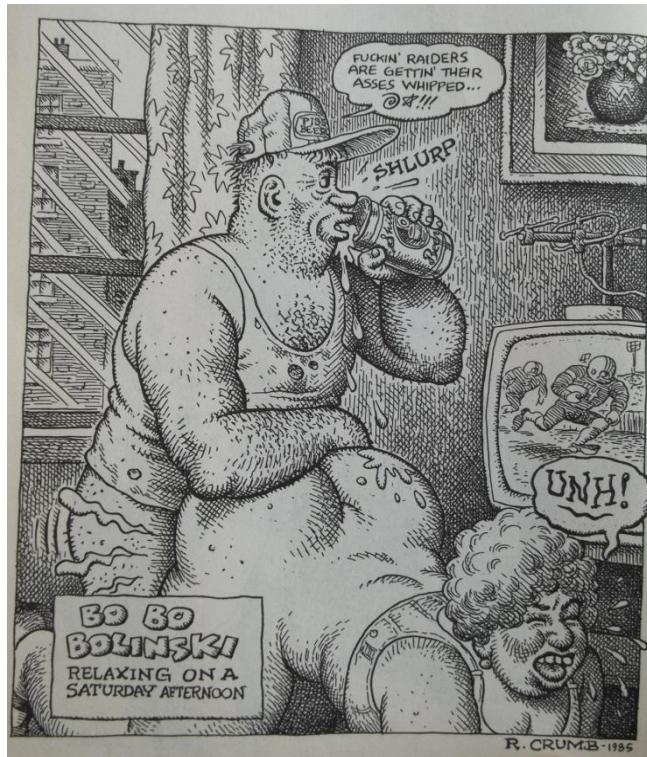
Figure 5.12: "Bo Bo Bolinski Relaxing On a Saturday Afternoon" from *Id* #3, originally published 1985.
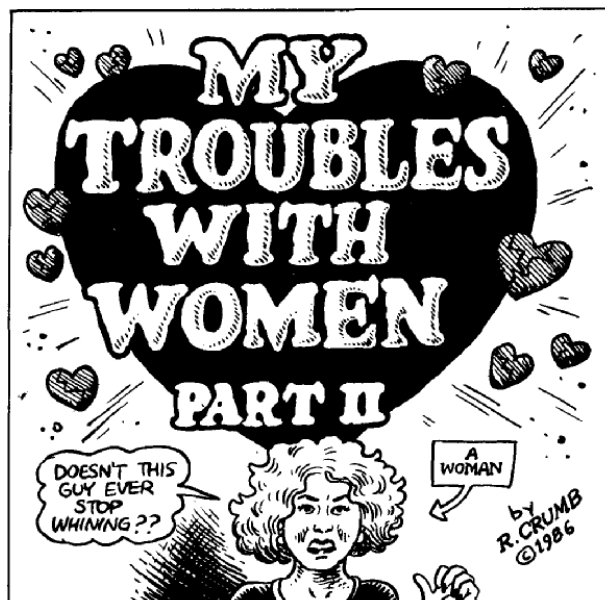
Figure 5.13: *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

The panel two caption, as if in response, explains, "Part One was just the tip of the iceberg . . . This time we're *really* gonna get down in the murk!" In panel two, Crumb, wearing a Hugh Hefner-esque smoking jacket and smoking a pipe, signifying a mock playboyish mastery of romantic interaction, expounds, "My first hard lesson about women came soon after puberty . . . There was this guy in our high-school named 'Skutch' . . ." Sitting next to Crumb is a character Crumb would in later work refer to as "Li'l Hitler Pig" (Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.14: Skutch and Li'l Hitler Pig from *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

Li'l Hitler Pig, henceforth LHP, embodies all the world-weary, cynical, and conniving ways to look at the world that dominant males (not Crumb) use to make meaning of their lives and "get" women (like Vince Vaughn's "swinger" Trent of the 1990s). LHP provides knowing commentary on the events in Crumb's life and even on his sexual fantasies (Figure 5.15).

Figure 5.15: Li'l Hitler Pig from *My Troubles with Women*, "If I Were a King," R. Crumb, originally published 1987.

Skutch, who is one with his sexually aggressive, seductive, callous side (his LHP), is a key player in "My Troubles with Women part II." In the third panel of II, he is described as ". . . the number one *big man!* The most handsome, most charming, most self-confident male in the entire school" (Figure 5.16).
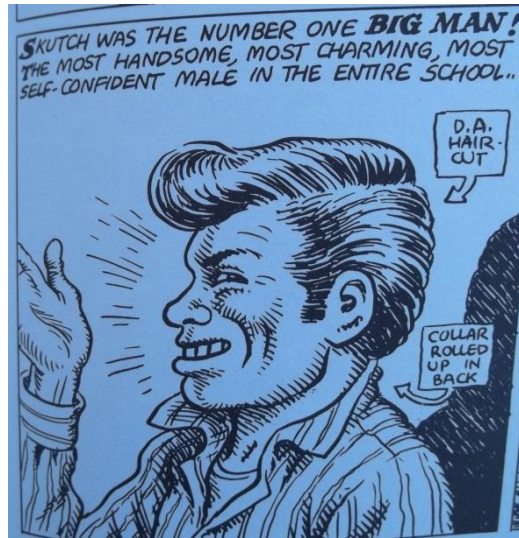
Figure 5.16: Skutch from *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II,"
R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

In the geek-as-outsider formula, Skutch is also the most despicable character to appear in

Crumb's *oeuvre*, exponentially more despicable than Crumb himself, who is

confessional, but more importantly, melodramatically "tortured" about his own

problematic relations with women. What makes Skutch so despicable is his apparent

agency in these relations, though once Crumb achieves recognition through his real-life

fame as a comics artist and cultural icon, he becomes an attractive geek and gains just as

much agency (though of a different kind) as Skutch ever had (Figure 5.17).

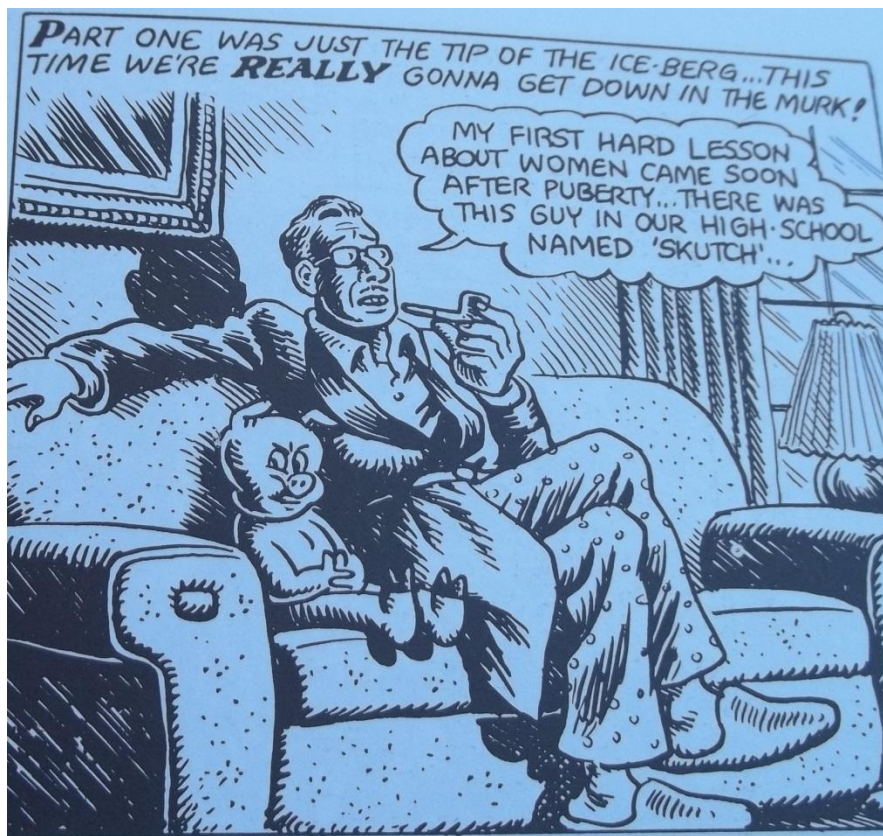Figure 5.17: Crumb from *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

However, Crumb remains firmly in the camp of the outsider (and therefore ultimately forgivable), while the females who seek him out are aligned with the "insider" world Skutch embodies. Crumb maintains his outsider status by never engaging the carefree attitude toward life that Skutch had. Instead, it is the women whom Crumb sleeps with who are thoughtless and un-tortured. This alignment is apparent in Crumb's misogynistic portrayal of these women as concerned only with the facades of cultural sophistication but not with the substance of it. Thus, their fascination with Crumb is still based in misrecognition: they do not appreciate who he is, but they appreciate his status. This is similar to the behavior of the high school girls who misrecognized Skutch and saw him as attractive. Crumb is an outsider to mainstream culture, and he is simultaneously a hero *and* outsider to the 1960s youth counterculture. Crumb is aligned with and wanted by

hippies, and he created album covers for The Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the

Holding Company (Figure 5.18).

Figure 5.18: Album cover for Big Brother and the Holding Company, drawn by Crumb, 1968.

Yet, Crumb did not truly fit in with them nor did he see their affection for him as a

genuine assessment of his abilities or worthwhile qualities. In Terry Zwigoff's

documentary *Crumb* (1994), Crumb said that he felt he was often mistaken for a narcotics

agent and is still stung by Janis Joplin's question, "Crumb, what's the matter, don't you

like girls?"

And while the tales of Skutch read much less transgressively than Crumb's more well known confessional depictions of male-female interactions, the misogyny of Crumb is arguably more significant in the tales of Skutch because it is an *unacknowledged* misogyny, one to which Crumb doesn't draw attention in the way he does in his other work. The geek's misogynistic rage is this: Women are too shallow to recognize the good things about the sensitive, true, honest, and long-suffering, non-dominant males like Crumb and his brother Charles. Therefore, women deserve the pain and emotional torture they experience when they interact with males such as Skutch (Figure 5.19), but even more importantly, by this logic, they deserve the disdain and humiliation Crumb levies at them (Figure 5.20). When they do eventually see him and his comic geek proxies as worthy of attention (often, from Crumb's perspective, moved by shallow motives) (Figure 5.21), Crumb's depiction of Skutch provides a bridge from the identity politics of "Whiteman" to the modern geek protagonist.

Through the melodramatic mode, Crumb allows that the geek, be it Whiteman or Crumb, has the moral high ground in the face of women, African Americans (in Whiteman, Fritz the Cat, Jimi Hendrix), low-class rednecks (BoBo Bolinski), and bullies (Skutch), because of the geek's tortured self-image and self–doubt. As Williams explains, in the melodramatic mode, suffering, regardless of its source, equals moral superiority. It is through this process that the geek hero becomes a justified and superior protagonist in the face of all other identities and regardless of the politics surrounding the geek hero's straight white maleness. The melodramatic mode allows the geek hero a niche in the politics of identity which lets him paradoxically identify as the victim of the

socio-political system from which he benefits and, thus, be the ultimate protagonist with which audiences identify in a globalized, postmodern discourse (Figure 5.22).

Figure 5.19: *My Troubles with Women.* "Footsy," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.
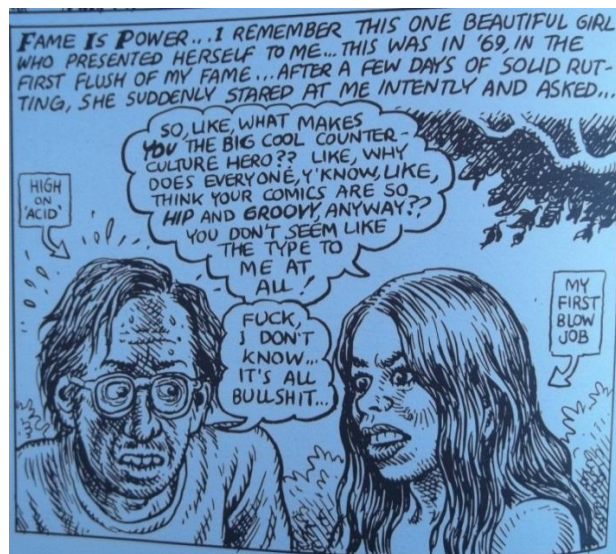
Figure 5.20: *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

Figure 5.21: *My Troubles with Women*, "If I Were a King," R. Crumb, originally published 1987.
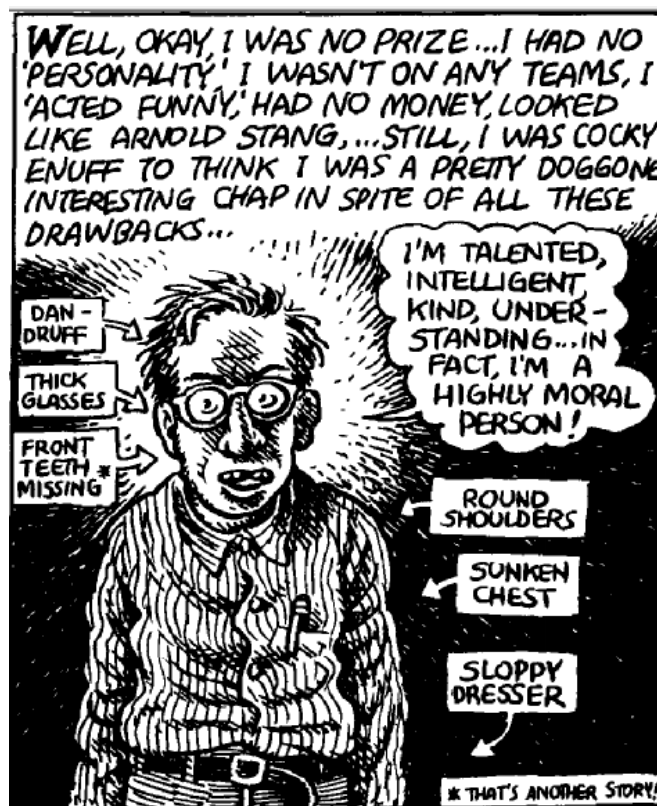
Figure 5.22: *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

This final image of Crumb is meant as ironic because of Crumb's complex awareness of his own vanity, greed, and guilt, but it also embodies actual conceits of contemporary mainstream culture as the popularity of the geek continues to increase. Geek rage arises from this melodramatic, self-pitying, and self-righteous understanding of geek identity.   In Crumb, this plays out in his misogynistic depictions of the women who misunderstand him. In later comics texts in this tradition, such as Charles Burns' mid-1990s mini-series, *Black Hole*, the violent geek with the stick emerges and he ultimately swings at the cause of his pain: jocks like Skutch and the women who like Skutch (Figure 5.23).[9]

Figure 5.23: *Black Hole*, "Black Hole #8," Charles Burns, December 2000.

These punished, objectified women in Crumb's work are typified by the Devil Girl (who has her head removed and her body used as a sex toy) and the Vulture Goddess (who has her head pushed in and her buttocks used as a trampoline) before finally accepting a geek as her appropriate paramour. Crumb plays out his outrage on two fronts: hatred for non-geek males and for women. Ultimately the geek rage rod that Crumb wields may be the large penis he draws for himself.[10]

1970s-1980s: Mainstreaming the Geek[11]

The "Hollywood Renaissance" period, which spans roughly 1965-1977, was a unique *auteur*-driven moment in Hollywood filmmaking, influenced by European art films, the French *nouvelle vague*, and the rise of the college art house theater circuit in the U.S. (see Biskind 14-17, 21-2, 33-5). The Hollywood Renaissance directors, all of whom (except the slightly older Robert Altman) were baby boomers, formed a boys' club of "movie brats" who were surrounded by and yet, to varying degrees, separate from the hippie counterculture.

In the late 1970s, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, the two most culturally influential and economically successful Boomer geek filmmakers, helped reinstate the power of the studios over directors and inaugurated, with Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), the present-day era of the studio action blockbuster: "Indeed, whether working together or on their own projects [. . .] the two virtually rewrote the box-office record books in the late 1970s and the 1980s. With the release of their third Indiana Jones collaboration in 1989, Lucas and Spielberg could claim eight of the ten

biggest hits in movie history" (Schatz 31). The new blockbuster cinema was founded on a synergistic model of entertainment production, marketing and promotion, wherein a film is not marketed in isolation but rather forms the core of a larger array of related products. In this model, a blockbuster film like *Star Wars* forms merely one strand of a larger revenue stream that includes ancillary products like action figures, comic books, cross-promotions with fast-food chains, etc. Demographically speaking, the films themselves, as well as many of their spinoff products, were (and are) targeted primarily at teenaged males.

At the textual level, Spielberg's and Lucas' secret to success was that they brought low pop-cultural forms—monster movies and serialized science fiction—to larger budgets in Hollywood. Unlike the New Hollywood *auteurs,* Spielberg and Lucas revisited the genres with little sense of irony nor much interest in social or political realities: "Whereas the most sophisticated directors of the '70s, like Altman, Penn, Scorsese, and Hopper, were deconstructing genre, Lucas, like Spielberg, was doing the reverse, gentrifying discredited genres of the past" (Biskind 342). We see the Lucas-Spielberg influence today in the cinematic adaptation of mainstream comic-book properties like *Batman, Iron Man*, and *The X-Men* as some of the latest sure-fire blockbuster properties. "[S]uch was Spielberg's (and Lucas's) influence that every studio movie became a B movie" (278). The geek's centrality to this blockbuster formula, starting in the late 1970s, is in fact the principal reason for his rise to mainstream cultural prominence in the 21st century, the era of postmodern geekdom.

Spielberg and Lucas modeled their cinematic protagonists—Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) in *Close Encounters*, Curt Henderson (also Dreyfuss) in *American Graffiti*, and

Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) in *Star Wars*—after themselves, framing them as geeky outsiders who suffer for their causes and have what it takes inside to ultimately prevail as heroes. Of course, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Ben Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967) is a key precursor to these late-1970's examples (Biskind 34).[12] The character of Ben, scantly described in the Charles Webb novel, was assumed to be "the scion of an apparently WASPy family, a cocky, aloof college track star" (Harris 26). The role was originally intended for Robert Redford, but then director Mike Nichols switched gears and cast Jewish actor Dustin Hoffman as Ben (Harris 236, 275). However, the ironic tone and ambiguous ending of *The Graduate* prevents audiences from fully sympathizing with Hoffman's Ben or his quest to win the love of Elaine Robinson (Katherine Ross); it would take Lucas and Spielberg to sufficiently melodramatize the sufferings and heroism of the geek protagonist such that popular audiences would accept them in earnest.

In real life, Spielberg and Lucas are Boomer fanboys, nerds. They were among the first generation of American directors to attend film school and are known, along with Martin Scorsese and Brian DePalma, as the "movie brats," which could as easily read "film geeks." Though Lucas and Spielberg rose to prevalence in the Hollywood Renaissance period when youth counterculture and director-based *auteur*ism were in, they were nevertheless outsiders to that prevailing (if momentary) *ethos*; Spielberg is a computer geek who prefers the editing room to the set and Lucas is well-known for having more business and technical acumen than people skills or ability to direct actors (Friedman and Notbohm 103). Spielberg and Lucas both love computers and Spielberg in particular is a self-proclaimed video game "freak" who grew up feeling like "a wimp in a world of jocks" (Friedman and Notbohm 100, 104, 108-9). His contemporaries in

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1970s Hollywood described him as having "no sense of style, [he] was just desperate to be cool like everyone else, but he didn't know how" (Biskind 260). This is a description of a nerdy geek.

So when Spielberg got the chance to direct *Jaws* for Universal Studios, no wonder he cast the then little-known Richard Dreyfuss as one of the three leads.[13] The character Dreyfuss plays, marine biologist Matt Hooper, is described in Peter Benchley's novel as "handsome, tanned, hair bleached by the sun, [. . .] about as tall as Brody [. . .], but leaner," who has an affair with police chief Brody's wife, and who is ultimately killed by the shark (85). As with Mike Nichols' casting of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, by casting Dreyfuss, Spielberg recasts Hooper as a short Jewish nerd: "The book [*Jaws*] suggested somebody like Robert Redford to play Matt Hooper, but I felt there would be more sympathy for the character [. . .] if someone like Richard Dreyfuss played him" (Friedman and Notbohm 63-4). Spielberg's film also nixes the Hooper-Mrs. Brody affair, and (somewhat improbably) spares Hooper's life. Thus Spielberg's *Jaws* asks us to enjoy and identify with Hooper's snarky take on events in provincial Amity, all the while impressing us with his efficient analysis of the fictional island's shark problem. Our identification with Hooper is increased in the film version when he becomes crusty fisherman Quint's nemesis, another switch from the novel. In the novel, the cuckolded Chief Brody is kept as the trio's outsider.

Luke Skywalker is perhaps the most popular and influential melodramatic geek protagonist figure of the late 1970s and 1980s. Luke's development from the whiny, naive hayseed of *Star Wars* to the confident Jedi of *Return of the Jedi* constitutes one of the most influential geek narratives of the period. Luke is essentially a kung-fu geek who

learns a quasi-Eastern spiritual fighting system from an old white mystic, and then uses this skill as a means of escaping his socially backward existence on a remote desert planet. Luke's geeky naiveté and awkward earnestness are brought into particular relief once he meets Han Solo (Harrison Ford), the embodiment of the hip, jaded, rakish scoundrel. Particularly in contrast to Han, Luke exemplifies throughout the *Star Wars* trilogy the naive geek hero who suffers melodramatically, saves his evil father from ultimate perdition, and, along with his mostly male buddies (and a defanged, feminized Leia), takes over rightful leadership of the galaxy.

Boomers obviously "get" idealistic geeks (e.g., Luke Skywalker, Roy Neary), but they tend to disregard, render comedic, and/or reform rakish scoundrels and especially disaffected Gen-X slackers. As Bob Guccione Jr., editor and publisher of *Spin* magazine, suggests, these portrayals may be in part an effort by Boomers to keep themselves in (cultural) power: "[T]he personification of Generation X [as shiftless and indifferent] was a deliberate propaganda campaign intended to make young people seem less desirable to employers, thus preserving jobs and career options for the Boomers, and slowing the next generation's succession to power" (qtd. in Ritchie ix). Boomer geek creators like Lucas and Spielberg frequently depict slackerism or social nonconformity as lonely and empty, as in Han Solo's lack of idealism and "love of money" in *Star Wars,* for which Luke and Leia both castigate him. Slackerish rakes like Han Solo are often reformed or rehabilitated of their scoundrelly tendencies in boomer geek films; for example, when Solo returns to save the day in *Star Wars*' climax, the scoundrel sidekick has change of heart and grows up, revealing that he ultimately embodies the same conformist values as his geek friends.

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While true "slackers" cannot be said to exist prior to the 1990s, the geek

protagonists in 1970s and 1980s popular media nevertheless attract rakish, scoundrelly,

socially nonconformist sidekicks and buddies: Han for Luke, Quint for Hooper, Peter

Venkman for Egon Spengler (*Ghostbusters*), Jon Belushi for Dan Aykroyd (*The Blues

Brothers*).[14] All of these popular narratives are male-centered, predominantly featuring

male buddy duos (or male-centered groups) and evincing their fair share of misogyny.

Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher, *Star Wars* trilogy), Ellen Brody (Lorraine Gary, *Jaws*),

Ronnie Neary (Teri Garr, *Close Encounters*), and Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen,

Raiders of the Lost Ark) all see their roles lessened over the course of their narrative arcs,

either reduced to ineffectual or secondary roles (Leia and Marion) or ejected from the

narrative entirely (Ellen Brody and Ronnie) -- further evidence of geek misogyny at

work. The Boomer geeks promote fratriarchy and often vilify/remove the father: Darth

Vader is a key exemplar of the evil father figure, as well as Dr. Henry Jones in *Indiana

Jones and the Last Crusade*. In geek narratives, bands of brothers teach each other, as

Luke and Han do in *Star Wars*, or as Nite Owl and Rorschach do in Alan Moore's

graphic novel *Watchmen*, discussed below.

Lucas' and Spielberg's valorization of nerdy man-boy characters through the

1980s lay the groundwork for the rise of the specifically Generation X geek, who grew up

watching—and often obsessing over—the films of Lucas, Spielberg, and 1980s teen-film

director John Hughes.   Hughes' work in particular melodramatizes the plight of the geek,

showing him to be a sensitive, intelligent, and sympathetic character type. Teen-film

scholar Timothy Shary writes of Hughes' seminal *Breakfast Club*, "Unlike most nerd

characters in school films, [*The Breakfast Club*'s] Brian ultimately appears to accept his

nerd labeling, and his peers eventually show some sincere appreciation for the difference

he represents [. . .] Brian may be alone unlike the others, but he has thus ironically

maintained a certain independence that is not afforded to them" (35). Boomer geeks like

Hughes and Spielberg made the heroes of their 1980s films the young nerds of

Generation X, and the Generation X nerds, then in their childhood or adolescence,

watched and identified with these depictions. For example, Gen X filmmaker Kevin

Smith openly acknowledges the influence of Spielberg, Lucas, and Hughes in his early

life and subsequent cinematic work.[15]

Generation X: Tourists and Vagabonds, Geeks and Slackers[16]

The existence of a slacker, man-boy counterpart is key to my analysis of the rise

of the geek protagonist, because it is in the geek's collaboration with his slacker

accomplice, as well as his sharing of the slacker's tendencies towards unprofitable

pursuits like comic book collecting or playing video games, that the geek protagonist

creates a simulation of not being a part of "the system" or the capitalizing and colonizing

world of jocks and businessmen. This sleight of hand allows the geek protagonist to rise

(in terms of economic and cultural power) in a more unblemished and sympathetic way.

To interrogate this phenomenon, I again employ globalization theorist Zygmunt

Bauman's essay on class stratification, "Tourists and Vagabonds." According to Bauman,

under globalization, class stratification is defined by mobility: "To increase their capacity

for consumption, consumers must never be allowed to rest. They need to be kept forever

awake and on the alert, constantly exposed to new temptations and so remain in a state of

never wilting excitation – and also, indeed, a state of perpetual suspicion and steady

disaffection" (Bauman 83). As noted, Bauman defines two categories of world citizens: 'high up' tourists who are members of the developed world who can afford increasing mobility, and 'low down' vagabonds who have little in the way of resources, mobility, or hope (85-6).

The tourist, who is privileged to have more mobility (e.g., access to the internet, jet airline travel, etc.) under time- and space-compressed globalization, is admired by the vagabond, who, conversely, is robbed of mobility by globalization. The vagabond admires the tourist's ease and ability to (by definition) choose where to locate himself or herself. However, the term "tourist" is a key to overlapping the rise of geek culture with Bauman's identity binary, because in the postmodern and heavily mediated milieu of the geek, "tourist" can only have negative connotations (as privileged cultural interloper) and so, ironically, it is the tourist/geek who wants to be perceived as the more authentic vagabond.[17] Thus, the geek foregrounds his/her put-upon status in order to artfully and self-deceivingly demonstrate how s/he is *not* empowered and thus not part of the problematic and enfranchised identity of the tourist who oppresses the vagabond out of self-interest. To the postmodern sensibilities of the geek, the gawky tourist is an entirely unappealing identity, devoid of the authenticating ambivalence and ironic distancing of the Gen X slacker who is the embodiment of a self-imposed and simulated vagabond identity. Slackers are self-perceived outcasts, invested in subcultural geekiness in ways related to their attempts at false ethnicity.

Geeks and proto-slackers of the late 1980s were heavily into comics, and they helped lay the groundwork for major multimedia synergy between comic books and motion pictures in the 1990s and beyond. In part, this is because the Warner

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Communications media conglomerate forced all Gen Xers to have media sex with Batman, first publishing the comics masterpiece *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller in 1986, followed by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* in 1988. These texts define the "Dark Knight" iteration of the Batman character and have been extremely influential on the film versions of *Batman* from the late 1980s to the present day. Textually speaking, this is of immense interest because both Miller's (in a homophobic way) and Moore's (in a more balanced way) works emphasized the similarity between Batman and his nemesis, the Joker, foregrounding the homosocial erotics that exist between bonded males.

Political economist Eileen Meehan frames the Batman franchise as a commercial intertext, noting that:

> [the] mid-1980s marked the beginning of a process in which [Warner Communications Inc.] tested the waters and began building towards the release of [Tim Burton's] *Batman* [film]. By issuing *The Dark Knight Returns* in comic form, WCI essentially test marketed a dark reinterpretation of Batman with an adult readership whose experience with the character would include the camp crusader of the 1960s. (53)

Miller's comic quickly sold out, including a hardbound omnibus edition, and spread to new non-comics reading markets: "WCI [placed] *The Dark Knight Returns* in different kinds of retail outlets, tapping the markets of fandom and general readers to determine if the grim version of Batman could gain acceptance from both specialized and generalized consumers" (53). It worked. Indeed, Kevin Smith raves about 1989 being "the summer of *Batman*" and Moore's, Miller's, and Burton's "Dark Age" works would impact many Gen X media makers like Zack Snyder and Christopher Nolan.

The ascendancy of the geek, in conjunction with the geek's abiding foil, the

slacker, makes important an examination of the configuration of the geek-slacker duo in

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987),[18] analyzing this dynamic

primarily in the context of the relationship between Nite Owl II and Rorschach.

Watchmen's depiction of this duo and its simultaneous deconstruction of binary

superhero teams reverberate into mainstream and independent graphic novels that

followed it, including texts of already existing pairings such as Batman and Robin,

Batman and Joker, and Superman and Batman, as well as pairings in second-wave

postmodern superhero comics such as the Confessor and Altar Boy in Kurt Busiek's

Astro City (1995-present), and Christian Walker and Deena Pilgrim in Brian Michael

Bendis' *Powers* (2000-present). Independent graphic novels, such as Daniel Clowes'

Ghost World (1993-1997), with Enid Coleslaw and Rebecca Doppelmeyer, also inherit

from the cultural patterns to which Moore contributed. *Watchmen* has had a profound

influence on the unfolding geek-slacker ascension across multiple media formats.

The configuration of the geek and the slacker lines up respectively with Bauman's

configuration of the tourist and vagabond, making clear that while the geek and tourist

are economically empowered, a crisis of authenticity surrounds the geek's discomfort

with his privileged status as a "tourist" under globalization and causes the geek to admire

the slacker's more authentic seeming rejection of privilege.

In *Watchmen,* Nite Owl II, aka Dan Dreiberg, is a geek scientist. He observes the

laws his government levies against superheroes, he is comfortable retiring from

superheroism and, like a true fan boy and prototypical geek, he collects memorabilia

from the various eras of superheroism. Dreiberg fantasizes about being a slacker, an

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apparently unconflicted superhero like his partner Rorschach, and dreams about

improprieties he could never commit, like sleeping with his former enemy, the Twilight

Lady. In contrast, Rorschach, the slacker, is antisocial and doesn't care what other

people think about him. Unlike Dreiberg, Rorschach follows his own code above any

other and, in that way, maintains an authenticity (and ultimately a "coolness" that escapes

geeks in the larger framework of geek-slackerdom) that Dreiberg cannot. An important

part of Rorschach's authenticity (and the authenticity of subsequent Generation X

slackers) within the geek-slacker paradigm is an unwavering commitment to the

homosocial bond he maintains with his geek, Dreiberg – similar to the Joker-Batman

relationship in Moore's *The Killing Joke* and the films based on it, like Christopher

Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). In contrast to Rorschach, and in the pattern of many of

the Generation X geeks who will follow him, Dreiberg seeks out a girlfriend and

privileges his relationship with her over his homosocial bonds.

Dreiberg and Rorschach's attempt to defeat Ozymandias in *Watchmen* is a geek-

slacker revolt against the father. *Watchmen* reveals how the geek-slacker pairing

encourages an attempt to replace patriarchy with fratriarchy: the corporate industrialist

Ozymandias is a clear embodiment of the late capitalism that subsequent geek-slackers

are often positioned against which to melodramatically struggle, often just as futilely as

Dreiberg and Rorschach do. Geek-slacker binaries continue to suffuse superhero and

non-superhero pairings in comics as well as other media, including some of the currently

most popular film texts, such as *Juno*, *Knocked Up*, *Superbad,* and *No Country for Old*

Men.

In an *Saturday Night Live Weekend Update* sketch, jock/slacker Randy Graves (Will Ferrell) repeats this elegy for his still living but paralyzed friend Derek Atkins: "He was the coolest!" (Season 23, Ep. 12, aired February 7th, 1998). The lionization of buddies as heroes rejects the father as hero while emphasizing his absence.[19] This fratriarchal turn is a defining characteristic of the male-centered buddy films variously called dude cinema (Troyer et. al.), the "bromance," or what I will mainly refer to as slacker cinema or geek-slacker cinema. Will Ferrell, star of the buddy comedies *Old School* (2003)*, Talledega Nights* (2006)*, and *Blades of Glory* (2007), "[. . .] is considered a member of the frat pack, a generation of leading Hollywood comic actors of the late 1990s and 2000s including Jack Black, Ben Stiller, Vince Vaughn, and brothers Owen Wilson and Luke Wilson" (will-ferrel.org). This frat pack is joined by Team Apatow and Danny McBride to form a kind of "belching adolescent-humor factory" featuring "characters that range across the spectrum from slacker to jackass" (Franklin 108). But to some extent, Ferrell's and Apatow's antics would not be possible were it not for the independent filmmakers who brought Generation X slackerism into visual media in the first place, such as Jim Jarmusch, Richard Linklater, and Kevin Smith.

Independent slacker cinema is a Generation X phenomenon: the term "slacker" came into parlance around 1990, around the time that the greatest statistical number of Gen-Xers were coming of age, and is the term most commonly used to broadly describe this generation by its baby boomer predecessors. Following William Strauss and Neil Howe, I define Generation X as that generation of persons born between 1961 and 1981, inclusive (490). Unlike the Boomers, who grew up defining themselves in terms of the Vietnam War, the Nixon White House, and the various social protest movements of the

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1960s, Gen-Xers have grown up in a United States characterized by problems such as "crime, guns, drugs, or all three" and, thanks to the advent and widespread dissemination of cable television and personal computers during the late 1970s and 1980s, an increasingly digital media-saturated environment (Ritchie 18, Hanson 18-19). As Peter Hanson argues in *The Cinema of Generation X*, "Gen-X directors [. . .] seem more concerned with blending layers of fiction than with pursuing realism, and this tendency to employ ironic storytelling has everything to do with how Gen Xers have been bombarded with incessant information since their youth" (14). In fact, according to Hanson, not only did the Gen-X phenomenon of "latchkey kids" contribute to greater levels of exposure to television for Gen Xers, but the advent of cable TV and "infotainment" programming substantially changed the Xers' *relationship* to media: "The infotainment explosion is a crucial parallel to Gen Xers' television addiction, because in addition to being exposed to nonstop junk culture, Gen Xers were given countless opportunities to peer behind the curtain of said junk culture. These opportunities helped produce unprecedented media-related savviness" (Hanson 19). Incredibly media savvy yet not nearly as politically idealistic as the Boomers, the Gen- Xers were quickly labeled as apathetic by the preceding generation, and as an act of defiance, took up the name "slacker" as a form of resistant self-identification.

A defining cinematic text of slackerism, Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), reveals that Gen Xers may not in fact be as apathetic or politically disengaged as Boomers might think. As one of the many anonymous characters in Linklater's film puts it, "withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy," thus framing slackerism as a potentially conscious act of protest against the social and political world the Boomers

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created. Unfair mislabeling or not, the "slacker" moniker has certainly stuck to

Generation X, and now the term describes a particular Gen-X (and now, additionally,

Gen-Y) quality of resisting traditional nine-to-five career-oriented work in favor of a

lower-key lifestyle that involves low-paying "McJobs" and/or unemployment, some

degree of interest or obsession with popular culture, and frequently, pot smoking and

other unofficial or illegal forms of entertainment. Slackerism can be read as the

delinquency of the 1990s, inflected into a slightly older (twenty- to thirtysomething)

arrested-development age bracket.

Slackers are almost always accompanied by geeks, and indeed geek culture, in the

form of science fiction, computers, superhero comic books, video games, etc., is deeply

imbricated with the grunge music and pot smoking culture of 1990s slackers. In fact, to

some extent geeks are productive, conformist slackers and/or that slackers are cynical,

nonconformist geeks. In the films of Kevin Smith, where the geeks and the slackers

frequently share geeky passions like knowledge of 1980s science-fiction cinema and

superhero comic books, the line between these two character types are overlapping and

blurry. Yet key characteristics distinguish the geek, a type that predates Generation X,

from the Gen X slacker.

The main characteristic that differentiates the geek from his slacker counterpart is

that geeks can "sell out" and become students, nine-to-five workers, filmmakers, and/or

cultural taste-makers because they never truly resist the system in the first place. Geeks

are good workers and social conformists who respond to social marginalization by

working harder and becoming creative. As a prolific screenwriter and creator, Kevin

Smith is himself such a geek, as are most of his film's protagonists. Thus, extra-

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filmically, geeks play a key role, perhaps *the* key role in the *production* of the "rise of the

slacker" phenomenon. In a globalized capitalist system, if something "rises," it is

because it makes money, and the key filmmakers of slacker cinema—Smith, Linklater,

Jim Jarmusch and, more recently, Judd Apatow—are all highly productive and market-

savvy geeks who surround themselves and fill their cinematic narratives with groups of

male slackers.

In fact, there is often hero-worship or a "wannabe" quality that adheres to the

geek's perception of the slacker: for example, in *Clerks*, Randal (the unapologetic

slacker) tells Dante (the geeky underachiever), "You know I'm your hero," and Dante

never contradicts him. In fact, Dante obviously admires Randal's devil-may-care quality,

even though it frequently gets him into trouble. William Miller (Patrick Fugit) is in the

same position in Gen-X director Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000): he is an

under-aged, geeky journalist who loves the band with which he is touring, and who wants

to hang out with the musicians and be considered "cool" like them. But William worries

too much about his domineering mom and his writing deadline, and therefore, as Lester

Bangs (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) puts it, "is not cool." By the end of the film, however,

he writes the article that resuscitates the band's flagging career.

Male geek/slacker buddy duos dominate some of the most popular independent

cinema offerings, including the work of Smith, Jarmusch, Linklater, Steven Soderbergh,

Quentin Tarantino, and Robert Rodriguez. And since, to some extent, independent

cinema functions as an early barometer of pop-cultural trends, we should not be surprised

to find that more recently, in 2007, geek- and slacker-centered narratives have risen into

the cinematic mainstream with the films of Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up* and *Superbad*),

recent comedies of Adam Sandler (*I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*) and Will Ferrell (*Blades of Glory*), and even network television programs such as CBS' *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). Jim Parsons, who plays Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory*, the series' most socially awkward and sesquipedalian character, recently surprised critics by winning Best Lead Actor in a Comedy Series at the 62nd Primetime Emmy Awards, beating out heavy hitting Emmy veterans including Tony Shalhoub, Larry David, Steve Carrell, and Alec Baldwin. Mainstream media outlets announced Parsons' victory with headlines like, "Geeks, Rejoice!" and "Geek Out!", and tech/geek centric blogs across the web posted clips from his acceptance speech.

The fratriarchal order depicted in shows like *Big Bang Theory* is no less misogynistic (nor homophobic) than the patriarchy it (arguably) attempts to subvert. Slacker cinema and Gen X geek media of all kinds are relentlessly male-centered, focusing on more feminized/queered/sympathetic males than other genres perhaps, while still marginalizing women, queers, and people of color.

This chapter has investigated the nature of victimhood, both simulated and genuine (and in combination), demonstrating how important it has become in the arena of identity as an authenticating feature. This phenomenon becomes more widespread and forceful among historically privileged groups in an increasingly postmodern and globalized milieu. Using Linda Williams' explanation of the moral occult of the melodramatic mode, as well as my new approach to reading Zygmunt Bauman's "Tourists and Vagabonds," I have attempted to explain why the construction of victimhood has become a first and mandatory step in the construction of the geek protagonist and the rise of the geek in current popular culture.

In her essay "Why Nice Guys Finish Last," queer feminist Julia Serano offers a more sympathetic take on geek suffering that bears mentioning because, if my thesis is correct, perhaps this chapter serves as an answer to her call for sympathy for male geeks, or "nice guys," as she calls them. She introduces a phenomenon that she calls the "double bind for men" (232). Her explanation makes use of the more documented female double bind, which is created by sexual object/prey stereotypes of women and which reduces women to choosing between being considered either a "virgin" or a "whore." In Serano's male double bind, the options are between "nice guy" and "asshole." To introduce her insights, Serano foregrounds her identity as a male to female transsexual and speaks of having suffered under the male double bind and watching male friends suffer and transform under it as well. With this move, Serano essentially positions herself as formerly one of the male geeks we examine (Serano 232). In that sense, she can serve as a counterpoint to my criticism of male geek self-righteousness, misogyny, and rigged identity politics. Serano explains that, as boys, males are enculturated to be gentle to women, but when they reach adulthood, those who are conscientious enough to maintain this civility suffer because women, she says, are not attracted to nice guys. She recounts the stereotypical story of being consulted and confided in by her female friends as a nice guy before her sex change, but never being seen by them as a potential mate. As a result of this nice guy/asshole binary, many of Serano's nice guy friends became "assholes" to attract women.

Serano falls into the sexist move I have ascribed to geek masculinity. The stereotypical "nice guys finish last" phenomenon can only occur if one maintains the assumption that women don't know what's good for them and end up with assholes, or

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that they must suffer with an asshole before ending up with a geek. This latter point is the

central trope in so much of the media I have discussed in this chapter. Serano raises a

counterpoint to her own argument that resonates well with my theories: she cites the

feminist blogosphere as the source for this unsympathetic reading of the nice guy

phenomenon. These feminist bloggers identify what they call The Nice Guy with capital

letters. They explain that, unlike the suffering nice guy that Serano attempts to reify, The

Nice Guy is often as dangerous as the "asshole." For his good behavior, The Nice Guy

feels entitled to be rewarded sexually and socially by women, and becomes enraged and

condescending about women's desires if this entitlement goes unfulfilled. This

description ties in nicely to the critique of geek masculinity I theorize and leads to a final

question.

What of the female geek? For the geek conceit to play out in its most

misogynistic form, she must be missing. Here is a case study of this phenomenon from a

recent text. In *The Invention of Lying,* self-described pudgy and nerdy Ricky Gervais

vanquishes handsome jock Rob Lowe to end up paired with the beautiful Jennifer Garner,

after Garner's character "comes to her senses" and recognizes the value of her geeky

friend (Figure 5.24). The problem is that, with the exception of their genders,

demographically and behaviorally speaking, Garner and Lowe's characters are virtually

identical. One (Lowe) is punished for not being a geek, that is, being a jock, while the

other (Garner) is elevated for her lack of geekiness because she is required to act as the

reward to which the geek or "nice guy" feels entitled in traditional patriarchal narratives.

There is a missing character: the true geek female counterpart to Gervais' character, the

one who is loved for her brains and not for looks, as Gervais is. This missing character

lays bare the misogyny of geek melodrama.

Figure 5.24: *The Invention of Lying,* 2009

Notes

[1] I bring up Obama in this context only to emphasize the rise of Geek culture, not to imply that he directly benefits from the tropes of the melodramatic geek protagonist.

[2] Even Hodgman, the speaker who "roasted" Obama, highlights through his very presence the prevalence of Jobs and Gates in geek culture. In Macintosh commercials, Hodgman plays the stodgier, less hip human embodiment of non-Macintosh computers that use a Windows operating system. Like Justin Hammer, Hodgman's character is another unflattering analog for Bill Gates.

[3] The term *greasy grind* is interesting in that it begins to assign an appearance and visual signifier to the nerd, albeit an unctuous, transparent and ambiguous one, appropriate to this liminal amount of visual markedness.

[4] Another explanation for the disparity between the sexualization of Asian males and Asian females could allow that if Asians as a whole are stereotyped as sexually conservative, then because of the patriarchal context their stereotypes are situated in, being demure is attractive in females and unattractive in males. To further shed light on this phenomenon by comparison, Latinos both male and female are stereotyped as being hyper-expressive. Unlike being stereotyped as being too "sewn up," this causes both genders of

Latinos to be hyper-sexualized. So, it is women who get hyper-sexualized both for being demure and expressive.

[5] "Keener," a term of Canadian origin, refers to a type of nerd who only cares about his grades.

[6] Note also a Jewish comedy tradition, including, for example,, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and Allen's influence on proto-slackerism in the form of the *nebbish* Jim (Jason Biggs), protagonist of *American Pie*. See also Walter Mitty.

[7] While the persecution of Jewish people and the Holocaust are clearly reasons for feelings of victimization, within the popular milieu, Jewishness is similarly an authenticating device in the face of a postmodern crisis of authenticity which can set a protagonist apart from the square and unmarked (non-Jewish) white colonizer.

[8] Following William Strauss and Neil Howe, Boomers are defined here as being those persons born between 1943 and 1960.

[9] *Black Hole* gives us Dave and his friend Rick as the violent embodiments of geek rage, which is paradigmatically enacted with a phallic object. Rick carries out Dave's plan to help a girl (Chris) see the true value in Dave (like R. Crumb who wanted women to value himself over Skutch) by first having that girl's boyfriend (Rob) successfully beaten to death by Rick and his metal rod. Most interestingly, all characters involved suffer from the same marking disease that affects young people in Burns' universe – jock and geek alike. For this reason, I would argue that Burns acknowledges artificiality within the melodramatic differences between jocks and geeks.

[10] R. Crumb's id (as a character no less) and "Li'l Hitler Pig" appear in Crumb's work just as Frank appears in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). Lynch and Crumb work in the mode of Boomer geeks. The Boomers resisted hippies and formed strong geek identities that would make the Gen X geek's rise to cultural prevalence possible.

[11] Some noteworthy late Boomer/pre-Gen X geeks include: Alan Moore (b. 1953), Frank Miller (b. 1957), Jim Jarmusch (b. 1953), Michael Moore (b. 1954), comics artist Charles Burns (b. 1955), Joel and Ethan Coen (b. 1954 and 1957), Cameron Crowe (b. 1957), Spike Lee (b. 1957), and David O. Russell (b. 1958).

[12] Interestingly, Dreyfuss himself appears in one scene in *The Graduate*; he plays a lodger in Mr. McCleery's boarding house in Berkeley, delivering the single line: "Shall I get the cops?"

[13] Richard Dreyfuss is a key figure in the rise of cinematic geekdom, playing the geek hero of three significant and immensely popular 1970s films: *American Graffiti* (1973), *Jaws* (1975) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

[14] Indiana Jones, or Christopher Reeve playing Superman and Clark Kent, are geek superheroes, and need no consistent buddies because they contain both aspects in one body.

[15] Note the return of the Boomer geeks in 2008 with *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Interviewed in *Entertainment Weekly* #988/989 (April 25 / May 2, 2008), both Spielberg and Lucas claim to be forever suspended in their 20s or 30s. Says Lucas: "We are not gonna get gray. We are not gonna get old. We are as young as we've ever been, and we don't recognize the fact that we've gotten older. Do we?" Spielberg replies: "It's true. I'll never forget when I was making *Jaws*, [producer] David Brown said, 'I'm nearly 60 years old and I feel like I'm 24.' I've always felt that way about myself. [. . .] I've always sort of time-locked and mind-blocked myself in my 30s, and that's always the age I feel" (35).

[16] Key Gen-X geeks include Richard Linklater (b. 1960), Alexander Payne (b. 1961), Daniel Clowes (b. 1961), Mike Judge (b. 1962), David Fincher (b. 1962), Steven Soderbergh (b. 1963), Quentin Tarantino (b. 1963), David Cross (b. 1964), Joss Whedon (b. 1964), Ben Stiller (b. 1965), Jon Favreau (b. 1966), Judd Apatow (b. 1967), Will Ferrell (b. 1967), Kevin Smith (b. 1970), Sarah Silverman (b. 1970), and Diablo Cody (b. 1978).

[17] This is somewhat counterintuitive to Bauman's emphasis that the vagabond is in a constant state of admiration of the tourist's economic empowerment. My reading of Bauman acknowledges the tourist's desire for the authenticity of the vagabond in order to shed light on Gen X anxieties surrounding discomfort with their privileged status as "tourists" under globalization.

[18] *Watchmen* is a major comics milestone in Gen X and comic book culture.

[19] As is also indicative of the slacker and bromance genres, homophobia, misogyny and racism (in a reference to a slave auction) all emerge in this sketch. Also, Ferrell's character in the sketch, Randy Graves, shares his name with paradigmatic slacker/bromancer Randall Graves from *Clerks*. And, Randy Graves sings Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" a Gen X anthem because of its deployment in geek/slacker romance *Say Anything* (1989). John Cusack plays the slacker, Ione Skye the geek, and John Mahoney the patriarchal icon that must be slain to make room for the fratriarchy.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS ON COMICS AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Although comics studies has been in existence in some form or another for decades, this field of research is currently experiencing a significant wave of new academic interest. In many ways, comics studies scholarship is still in its early stages and the field is full of theoretical potential, as the various ways to study the comics medium, and implications of that medium, are still being explored and developed. The form of comics themselves, and the hybrid and multilayered ways that comics communicate, also contribute to the vast possibilities for fruitful research and analysis.

Comics communicate in part with an iconic language that is deliberately non-descriptive. This is an aspect of comics that I find infinitely fascinating and that makes me immediately consider applications to studies of ethnicity and other forms of visible identity. Visibility is still the basis for discourses about difference and a communicative medium that partly consists of drawings helps to make complex principles about ethnicity and structures of racism more comprehensible and apparent, especially when the drawings oscillate between being iconic language and being realistically representational, or are a combination of the two. The act of drawing someone at the level of detail of a comic can be an intensely intimate one and can access deep issues about identity, power, and the prevalence of dominant ideologies. These societal structures are intertwined with all forms of expression and communication but at the level of cartooning, the creator is forced to reveal some of his or her negotiation with those structures.

I will use myself as an example. If you were to photograph me, film me, or paint me in great detail, the act would be much less weighted by issues of identity. But if you were to draw a cartoon of me, a Thai-American, and you are aware of the problematic nature of ethnic stereotyping and shorthand in comics and want to avoid it, then you may have put a lot more thought into how you accomplish that drawing. When you ultimately draw me, regardless of what you do, you will reveal something of your current positioning on my status as a visual other. Because I am implicated within those hegemonic structures myself, I would have to put a lot of thought into how to draw myself as well.

When some African Americans use the word nigger, or nigga, they are in part acknowledging the fact that language is implicated within racist and dominant ideologies. By openly using the term, African Americans heighten the awareness that language is not neutral, but haunted by oppressive cultural structures. This point may be opaque to those without some shared critical assumptions about language, culture, and identity, with some people wondering what is the point of this type of analysis, or asserting that no one is forcing African Americans to use the word nigger. However, if an African American were to draw an African American in a comic, and to try to navigate the ethnically stereotyped forms of the medium he was using, it is much less likely that someone would assert that the illustrator has as much choice in the matter. It is clearer in comics that language is symbolic and thus predicated on shared assumptions about words to transmit meaning. When accessing the words African American, or nigger, a symbolic order is evoked. Those words refer to a real identity, black or African American, but evoke that identity based on cultural assumptions about what speakers and listeners regard as a real

black or African American person. What African Americans who use the word nigger acknowledge is that culturally, both the word African American and the word nigger can evoke the same thing in a user's imaginary, and there are dominant cultural structures of racism which make those words overlap in the popular imaginary for a majority of users, regardless of how different the words sound. Comics make clearer this connection in that part of how the comics language creates meaning symbolically is visually and more apparently demonstrated. The reader has to acknowledge that the African American illustrator was forced to use parts of comics language which evoke the word nigger. These parts of comic language are the negative aspects of ethnic/iconic shorthand in depictions of African Americans.

Gene Yang similarly negotiates his use of comic art around his ethnicity. He uses the comics form to his advantage. In Yang's work, complex negotiations of power become visually apparent to a wider audience. In *American Born Chinese*, it becomes clear that if Yang wants to create a comic, he has to fully participate in the culturally haunted and raced qualities of cartooning, even if he manages to negotiate them successfully. Cousin Chin-Kee is Yang's visual utterance of the word nigger, but in relation to his own ethnic identity as "chink." Yang's work opens the door for those who are skeptical of this phenomenon in non-visual language, to see how language and communication have emerged from and are intertwined with cultural underpinnings that affect all users and are weighted in favor of dominant identities.

What this reveals is that the comics medium has the potential to bring certain cultural theories to the surface. Along these lines, something got hidden when white actors stopped wearing blackface. What was hidden was the clear admission of

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complicity and the open disdain that is exposed by someone drawing ethnic shorthand on his face, as well as by the people who went to watch him perform blackface. The clearer evidence of racial problems is less apparent when a black actor is hired to play a stereotyped role instead. The cultural phenomena we study now are generally more subtle than blackface, but I assert that some of the obviousness that was lost when blackface disappeared reemerges when expressed in an iconic language like comics. As scholars it is our job to detect and examine texts and culture to uncover deeper meanings hidden under surface appearances, and when a medium such as comics provides us with a means of more clearly showing and analyzing the existence of certain cultural phenomena, that medium deserves particular scholarly attention.

When I juxtapose literary milestones like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or Ellison's *The Invisible Man* with the comics that I study, I do not mean to imply that comics are engaging in theories of race and identity that great works of prose have not already addressed. In fact, most who study prose literature are familiar with the negotiations of identity that I identify in comics. However, it is the specific way that comics display and communicate these phenomena that make them highly relevant to academic inquiry, and this dissertation is an attempt to illustrate that relevance. In the second and third chapters of this study, I argued that a multidisciplinary approach creates useful insights into interactions between issues of ethnicity and the language of comics. The fourth chapter explored the possibilities of analyzing iconic language in another medium, film. Chapter Five engaged with the broader cultural impact of tropes born out of comic and visual culture, proposing a theory of geek melodrama born out of the study of comics.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the effectiveness of the comics form actually may be demonstrated by how influential the comic by Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, continues to be within the field of comics studies. As I have mentioned in my introduction, there may be problems with uncritically utilizing theories from non-academic creators like McCloud. Still, *Understanding Comics* is currently one of the most widely cited works of comics theory. Tellingly, and for better or for worse, no other academic field of media studies has been so affected by the theories of a media creator.[1] I assert that this is because McCloud used the medium of comics to communicate his ideas. His effective use of cartooning to make his points not only grabs the reader's attention, but his ideas, visually communicated in the format of a comic book, make them especially memorable. The validity of McCloud's theories is open to debate, but as an illustrator he demonstrates the power of comics to communicate complex ideas efficiently and accessibly.   I conclude my study with hopes that the medium's ability to contain and relate complex ideas about visual topics, and in particular, ethnicity and visual difference, will continue to grow. As renowned *Love and Rockets* creator Gilbert Hernandez puts it, "the more ethnic a piece is . . . the more universal it is" (229). Because of their communicative power and unique iconic qualities, the medium of comics, when analyzed through a multidisciplinary lens, may offer critical insights into issues of identity, the representation of culture, and the complexities of communication in general.

Notes

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[1] Russian formalists and montage theorists of the 1910s and 20s, like Sergei Eisenstein, whose essays about film editing are still read today, may be the closest thing to McCloud, in terms of the influence of a practitioner on the theorizing within a discipline. But, while students still read Eisenstein, his work no longer exerts a great influence over contemporary issues and theories in film studies. If comics studies continues to grow as a discipline, McCloud may suffer a similar fate, but his impact, like Eisenstein's, will be remembered.

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