ORIGIN STORIES: NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND THE COMICS FORM

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation argues that comics' unique formal properties are particularly suited toward exploring and representing the complex nature of identity. Just as the comics form is broadly defined by a peculiar tension between word and image, so identity can be conceived as a constant negotiation between abstract ("unrepresentable") concepts that define identity and an individual's attempts to *represent* that identity. Due to its formal negotiation of word and image, the comics form is thus uniquely suited to address the problems of identity and its representation.

I begin this project by examining the relationship between word and image in comics. Some comics scholars have argued verbal and visual signification are hybridized, while others go so far as to claim the distinction between word and image is unsustainable. Still others reject these claims, arguing comics' hybridity necessitates a strict separation of word from image. I argue that words and images in comics function on a spectrum in which the line between word and image must be able to be hybridized *and* distinct at the same time. This definition of the word/image relationship can describe the most straightforward, illustrative comics as well as the most experimental comics texts; it also provides the methodological framework for my project.

In this dissertation, I examine the representation of gendered identity in Gilbert

Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* stories and Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, arguing both authors' injunction that the reader *look* at the mothers in their works is evidence of their demand that we understand the women as whole, ambivalent subjects. I explore the way the Gene Yang and Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Shadow Hero* addresses the repressive and racist history of superhero comics. In doing so, Yang and Liew's text reveals the ways superhero texts constantly negotiate the genre's conservative instinct to protect the status quo and its revolutionary vision for a better world. Finally, I contend Greg Rucka and J. H. Williams III's *Batwoman: Elegy* reveals at least one intrinsically progressive theme in superhero genre: its performative and inherently queer conception of identity.

This dissertation contains previously published material.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

If you are a comics scholar, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is unavoidable. Twenty-three years since its initial publication, it remains the single most influential work of comics[1] theory in the discipline, particularly within the U. S. academy, where McCloud's work is regularly featured on many course syllabi. But McCloud's work is no longer gospel: some scholars have begun to challenge many of his most significant claims, and a few even repudiate the book entirely. In fact, the willingness to reject some or all of *Understanding Comics*'s claims is increasingly an acid test of one's worth as a comics scholar. Thus it is with some embarrassment—and with full knowledge of the cliché—that I open this project by revisiting some ideas of Scott McCloud's.

Near the middle of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud indulges in a double-page display. Far from the usual comic book splash-page content (usually reserved for awesome scenery or epic battles), the spread is a diagram. Over one hundred tiny faces are carefully mapped across a triangle, with copyright information extensively catalogued across the top of the page. The chart includes disclaimers about the relative merit of the drawings and their original artists, noting that the drawings are interpretations rather than reproductions (*Understanding Comics* 52-53). McCloud does not name the chart in the book, but on his website he calls it "The Big Triangle." McCloud depicts his cartoon avatar suggesting that the reader skip the details of the diagram and "Read it later" (53). Despite McCloud's apparent attempt to downplay "The Big Triangle," I have always

[1] Throughout this dissertation I use "comics" as a collective singular as I my preferred name for the medium of sequential art or graphic narrative is *comics*. I may also refer to *a comic*, a work of comics art—in these cases I will also use "comics" as a plural formulation of comic.

loved this strange chart. I remember spending long stretches of time looking for images representing work by artists I knew and seeing where McCloud placed them, or going on to look up the work of artists whose tiny little symbols I found intriguing. Considering the institutional acceptance of *Understanding Comics* and the concepts within it, I've always found it especially strange that "The Big Triangle" (Figure 1.1) seems to be overlooked, if not outright ignored, by most comics scholars.

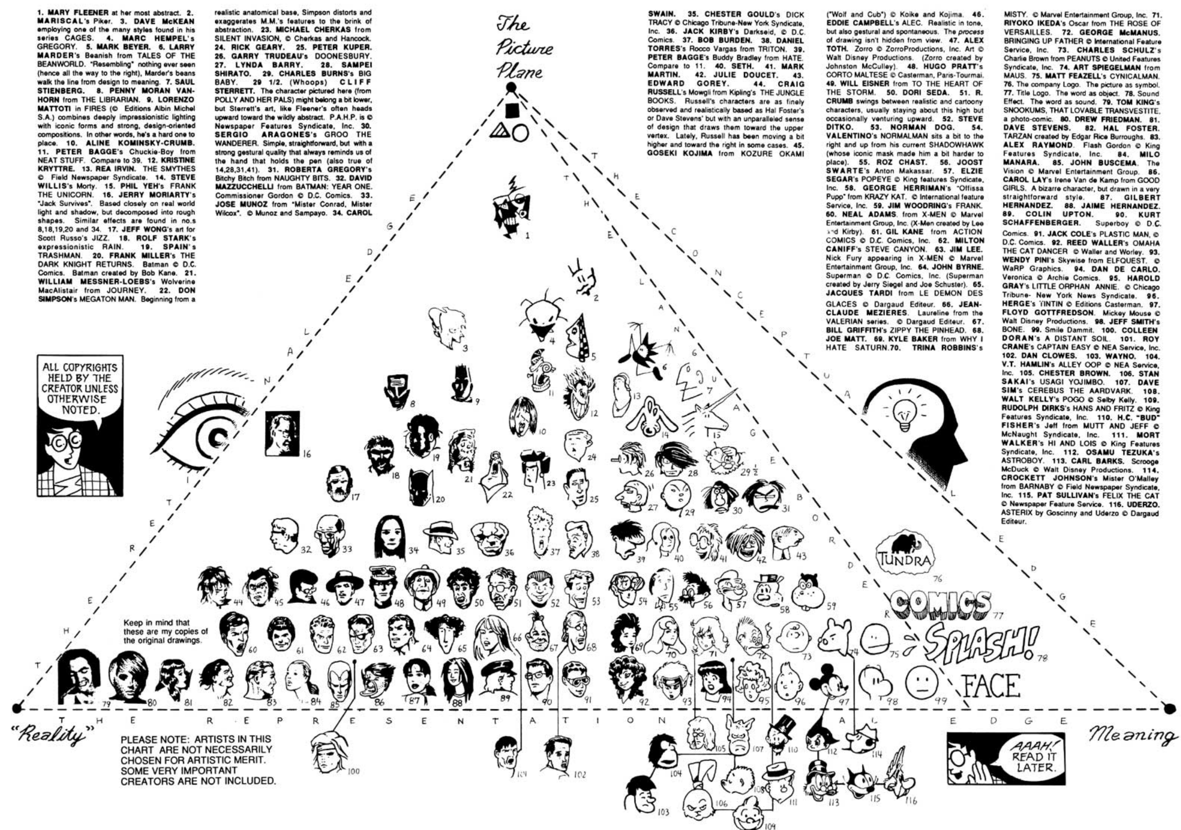


Figure 1.1: The Big Triangle

This "Big Triangle" is McCloud's attempt to categorize and define different artistic styles in comics. On his website, he claims it was "a way to put all of comics' visual vocabulary (pictures, words, specialized symbols, etc.) into some kind of easily understood map of possibilities" ("The Big Triangle"). The three cardinal points of the

Big Triangle are named: on the bottom left, “Reality;” on the bottom right, “Meaning;” on the top, “The Picture Plane.” McCloud labels the three axes as well: “The Retinal Edge” connects “Reality” to “The Picture Plane,” “The Representational Edge” connects “Reality” to “Meaning,” and “The Conceptual Edge” connects “Meaning” and “The Picture Plane.” About three-quarters of the way between “Reality” and “Ideas,” McCloud draws a line to illustrate the point at which imagery and visual icons give way to written linguistic representation. The chart is a representation of McCloud’s theory that most visual signification exists somewhere in tension between three objectives: the attempt to represent the physical world, the attempt to represent an idea or concept, and the attempt to call attention to the formal qualities of creating art (abstraction).

At first glance, the Big Triangle seems little nothing more than an elaborate proof of McCloud’s argument that most art in comics falls within a certain area of the triangle: comics art spans most of the “Representational Edge,” favoring the center, but it never strays more than halfway up the triangle toward “The Picture Plane.” With his map of faces, McCloud concludes that comics as a form relies primarily (if not exclusively) on iconic or, in the common parlance, cartoony images. Though cartooning is not unique to comics, McCloud uses the triangle to set up an incontrovertible connection between comics art and a particular style of visual representation. Despite my longstanding fascination with it, the point the Big Triangle makes seems quite small in the scheme of his larger argument—especially compared to the size of the chart itself.

As I began to conceptualize this preface, I knew that all of the chapters of this dissertation focused on different aspects of identity in comics and that throughout the project I was preoccupied with how the tensions in the comics form interact with these

aspects of identity. Many scholars have explored the (supposedly) unique relationship between the comics form and autobiography, pointing most frequently to the intimacy of the hand-drawn piece, the possibilities for self-visualization inherent in cartooning, and the ability to literalize the multiplicity of selves within an identity. But my work focuses on fictional narrative in comics, so the particular strategies autobiographical comics artists use to construct their own identities do not quite apply. How, then, does comics visually represent a concept like identity when it is detached from the tropes and demands of autobiography?

With that question in mind, I returned to the Big Triangle. I wasn't concerned with categorizing styles of art, but I was drawn to the way McCloud uses the chart to imagine of the inherent tensions of visual signification. The "Representational Edge" is particularly interesting in this regard, as it diagrams the capacity for visual art to portray real, physical objects in the world, and also to somehow represent concepts that have no physical presence. Many of the most important aspects of identity formation—notions of selfhood, cultural ideology, social and historical conditions, desires and emotions—are not readily representable as physical objects. And yet, while identity is ultimately a concept without a single physical form, perhaps the most common way to establish one's identity is through visual cues. Clothing styles, hairstyles, body shape, age, and physical affect are all visual manifestations of a conception of one's identity. Likewise, race and biological sex, which are (obviously) major factors in identity formation, are deeply tied to visual markers like skin color and secondary sex characteristics. I began to conceive identity itself along the "Representational Edge" of McCloud's conception of visual art:

reflecting on how an individual's identity exists in the tension produced by a subject's physical, embodied characteristics and essentially unrepresentable concepts.

McCloud's Big Triangle not only provides me with some insight as to why the comics form seems particularly apt for explorations of identity, its construction, and representation; it also addresses the tensions at the heart of the comics form. Though scholars constantly attempt to hash out the specifics, without a doubt the defining feature of comics is its combination of visual and verbal signification. McCloud diagrams the relationship between these two modes on the Representational Edge, which charts the movement between purely mimetic visual representation and the abstract formulation of ideas and concepts. The tension that defines the comics form (word and image) is the same tension at work in any attempt to represent identity (representable and unrepresentable).

The scholar whose work most closely aligns with my thoughts about the comics form and its particular ability to represent identity is Hillary Chute. In her introduction to *Graphic Women*, Chute also examines the comics form responds to issues of representation, as well as it capacity to address the unrepresentable. Graphic narrative, Chute argues, is redefining the way women are able to represent themselves and their histories. Contemporary cartoonists (for Chute, this is particularly true for women cartoonists creating non-fiction narratives) are creating "a new aesthetics emerging around self representation" (2). Chute claims the way these artists are able to reframe representation results in their graphic narratives being especially adept at addressing issues of trauma. "The force and value of graphic narrative's intervention, on the whole," she argues, "attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable that have

become commonplace…in contemporary discourse about trauma" (2). Indeed, for Chute the "*risk of representation*" (3) lies precisely in its ability to visualize traumatic history, forcing readers to "rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility" (3).

Chute's scope is limited to nonfiction narratives, especially of women and women's trauma. While her argument is compelling in its specificity, the main reason I enumerate "narrative" in the title is to break from the idea that the comics form's negotiations with the concept and representation of identity are in any way tied to a particular genre or style. Due to its negotiation between visual and verbal signification and its ability to appeal to the conceptual and perceptual, the comics form *itself* is uniquely suited to explore questions of identity and its representation. I am by no means arguing that comics is the "best" form for exploring identity than other visual arts, or literature in its more traditional forms, but to prove the specific and unique formal properties of comics reveal the tensions inherent in identity itself. Formal considerations of particular texts are the engine driving my readings, but I also draw on the cultural and historical roles comics texts have played for their many audiences. Just as identities are not created in a vacuum (but are always contingent on social, historical, political, ethical, and cultural frameworks), I contextualize the historical and social aspects of comics as a form.

Chapter II, "Image/Text: Translation and the Problem of Comics," does not address aspects of identity as obviously as the rest of the chapters do, but it provides a methodological framework for the project on the whole. Here, I address what I call "the problem of comics": the relationship between word and image that defines the comics

form. The theoretical and formal implications of the complex dance between these different systems of signification have vexed comics scholars since the inception of comics studies—indeed, McCloud's Big Triangle is only one attempt to formulate a theory about the word/image problem. In an attempt to shed new light on this relationship, I examine the translation of manga (Japanese comics) into English, focusing on the particular difficulties of translating sound effects. Because Japanese uses a totally different, non-Latinate writing system, sound effects cannot simply be retained in the same way as they can be retained in translations of Italian, French, or Spanish comics. While sound effects in those comics may need some explanation—in the case, for example, of culturally specific onomatopoeia—the sound effects in Japanese comics must either be replaced entirely, significantly altering the design of the original page, or "subtitled," significantly altering the way readers read the sound effect. The way readers read sound effects highlights the "problem of comics" (the nature of word and image in the form) because sound effects function as both word and image in the text.

Many claim that because the comics form uses both visual and verbal signification in tandem, verbal and visual signification are hybridized. Some have gone so far as to claim that the comics form proves the distinction between word and image is unsustainable. Others reject this claim, arguing comics' hybridity necessitates a separation between word and image: the unique tension of the comics from only exists if there is a tension between essentially *different forms* of signification. In this chapter, I read sound effects and the product and process of their translation in order to argue that words and images function on a spectrum in which the line between word and image can be both blurry and distinct at the same time. This definition of the word/image

relationship can describe the most straightforward, illustrative relationships between word and image as well as the form's most experimental texts. Using this approach to understanding comics and the nature of word and image, I define comics as both a hybrid media and a media that hybridizes. I close the chapter by emphasizing the way a comics studies approach to the word/image problem can provide new insights for the way scholars outside of comics studies read and see texts.

In Chapter III, "The Breasts of Luba: The Role of the Mother in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Love and Rockets*," I examine the representation and of gendered identities in Gilbert Hernandez's comics narratives in the long-running series *Love and Rockets* and Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz has openly acknowledged Hernandez as an influence on his work, and even compares one of his characters, Oscar's mother Hypatía Belicia Cabral, to one of Hernandez's major characters, Luba. Though they share many characteristics (which I highlight in the chapter), Díaz only *explicitly* connects his character Beli to Luba by comparing their shared physical feature—extremely large breasts. Using the work of Melanie Klein, I examine the way the women's breasts function in the text. Certainly their breasts function as a commentary on their sexuality, as well an ironic embodiment of their less-than-satisfactory fulfillment of their roles as mothers.

However, their large breasts also play a key role in both texts' requirement that the reader *look* at both characters. In *Love and Rockets*, Luba's breasts are impossible to ignore, standing out cartoonishly in an otherwise carefully and seriously rendered work. In Díaz's novel, meanwhile, the narrator Yunior often demands the reader look at Beli, even titling the first section of the first chapter of Beli's story, "Look at the Princess"

(77). In Kleinian psychology, the act of looking and perceiving plays a critical role in a child's ability to understand another person as a whole, complex subject rather than an object existing only to meet some particular need. The emblematic "part object" of Klein's schema is the mother's breast, which is a "good" object when it is feeding the infant and providing comfort, but a "bad" object when it is absent or denies nourishment. As the child's perception grows, the child instead begins to see the mother as a whole object—an ambivalent subject capable of embodying both good and bad objects in one complex whole.

Díaz's and Hernandez's texts both invite a Kleinian reading of these central characters. They are both mothers whose breasts are emphasized. They are difficult characters (easy to hate but impossible not to love); to think of Beli and Luba as anything less than terrible people requires the reader's willingness to accept their ambivalence. By focusing on the formal characteristics of comics and combining a close reading of Díaz's novel with an eye toward its visual characteristics, I argue that Hernandez's and Díaz's injunction that the reader *look* at these women is evidence of the authors' demands that we understand the women as whole, ambivalent subjects. Through the process of understanding Beli and Luba as "whole objects," beautiful in their complexity, we can in turn understand the complexity and ambivalence of our own subjectivity.

Chapters IV and V function as a pair—both focus on the superhero genre and the opportunities is provides for exploring questions of identity. Superhero comics are still the redheaded stepchildren of comics studies, due in large part to their association with low-brow literature and fandom culture. Considering comics studies' long battle to gain recognition, it might be argued that the superhero genre has been sacrificed at the altar of

respectability even though it is both a distinctly American phenomenon, and the only genre to be uniquely created for the comics form. In addition to its importance for American culture and the comics form, identity is a central theme of the superhero genre. As such, I would argue that even though the genre conventions turn off some traditional critics, superhero comics nevertheless provide some of the most fruitful texts in American popular culture for exploring the nature of identity and its relationship to the individual, society, and history.

In Chapter IV, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Superheroes: US Identity, Race, and the Superhero,” I examine the inherent tension between the oppressively conservative and radically progressive impulses of the superhero genre by reading Gene Luen Yang and Sonny Liew's 2014 graphic novel, *The Shadow Hero*, alongside the original Golden Age comic that inspired it. Yang was inspired to create the graphic novel after hearing stories of a lost Asian-American superhero from called the Green Turtle. Whether the Green Turtle is actually Asian American or not is complicated by the source text, in which the Green Turtle’s “true identity” is never revealed and his face is never completely shown. As Yang’s attempt to “fill in the blanks” left by the sudden cancellation of *Blazing Comics* (the series in which the Green Turtle appeared), *The Shadow Hero* tells the origin story of the Green Turtle and explicitly makes the character a Chinese-American immigrant.

I examine the texts through the lens of several critics, including James Lamb, who argues that the superhero genre is a power fantasy of white males and cannot escape the implications of that problematic origin. Both *The Shadow Hero* and *Blazing Comics* offer evidence in support of Lamb’s contention of the genre’s inherent racism. However, both

texts *also* offer evidence in favor of Ramzi Fawaz's argument that the superhero genre is a manifestation of "popular fantasy," a productive, progressive fantasy that gives its readers the imaginative capability of accepting Otherness in the real world. Through close readings of *The Shadow Hero* and *Blazing Comics*, I explore the way the texts attempt to embody popular fantasy but also reveal the repressive and racist history of superhero comics. In doing so, it presents a vision of the superhero genre as one of an inherent tension between its conservative instinct to protect the status quo and its revolutionary vision for a better world.

While racial difference may be complicated in relation to the history of the superhero, in my fifth and final chapter, "The Epistemology of the Phone Booth: Superheroic Identity and Queer Theory in *Batwoman: Elegy*,"[2] I argue that there is at least one inherently progressive theme in superheroic identity: its performative and inherently queer conception of identity. I explore this claim and the implications it has for the superhero genre argue through my reading Greg Rucka and J. H. Williams III's 2010-2011 *Detective Comics* story arc, later collected as *Batwoman: Elegy*.

Batwoman is a particularly interesting figure through which to examine the queerness of the superheroic identity for several reasons. First, she is a current and ongoing character in the universe of DC Comics—one of the "big two" in comics publishing. Unlike The Green Turtle and *The Shadow Hero*, which was not bound to a large corporate entity like DC or Marvel Comics, Batwoman is part of the ongoing practices of mainstream superhero comics production. At the same time, just like *The Shadow Hero*, her story and character are indebted to and interacting with the broader

[2] Portions of this chapter have been published in an article of the same title in *ImageTexT* volume 7, issue 5 (Gilroy).

history of superhero comics. Secondly, Batwoman is closely related to Batman, who is one of the most important superheroes in the genre. She is especially useful to talk about notions of queerness and identity because she was originally created in order to assuage fears that Batman was gay. Finally, in her current incarnation, she is lesbian character and the text highlights the similarities between her experience as a lesbian and her experience as a superhero.

Ultimately I argue that it is not so much Batwoman's explicit status as an out lesbian that gestures toward a reading of the queerness in superhero identity, though her homosexuality does act as a signpost for the text's overall queerness. Instead, through the art and writing, Batwoman highlights the longstanding performative nature of identity in superhero comics. Though the story is a straightforward superhero origin story (and this normalcy is part of what makes it so easy to project her story on to the genre), its visual style is highly experimental. Batwoman's different identities are each illustrated in different styles, and they all have their own claims of authenticity and trueness. Rather than point to one "true" identity, the narrative emphasizes that all of these identities are distinct and interconnected, dependent and interdependent. In short, the nature of Batwoman's identity is performative, dependent on her actions and performance in each role: each Batwoman is the real Batwoman.

I end this dissertation with a short afterword that elucidates the process of this project—how it changed and shifted from a project focused novels and traditional literary theory to the dissertation it is today. In this project, I attempt to theorize the formal analysis of comics formal not only interacts with literary theory about identity, but also how the comics form itself may force scholars to conceive of these theoretical ideas in

new and exciting ways. It is my hope that, in these forthcoming pages, my work inspires questions about the comics form and its interesting abilities to represent identity. I look forward to those conversations.

CHAPTER II

IMAGE/TEXT: TRANSLATION AND THE PROBLEM OF COMICS

Which of these two things is a comic? This question might almost seem insulting, since the answer is so obvious: Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (Figure 2.1) is a comic; George Herbert's "Easter Wings" (Figure 2.2) is not. And yet, once we move beyond the obvious and attempt to describe *how* these two imagetexts[1] work, the distinction between the two becomes less clear. Schulz's and Herbert's works both present a distinct challenge to the notion that word and image are separate forms of signification: Schulz's strip is a wordless series of pictures that we are required to read, in sequence, as a narrative;

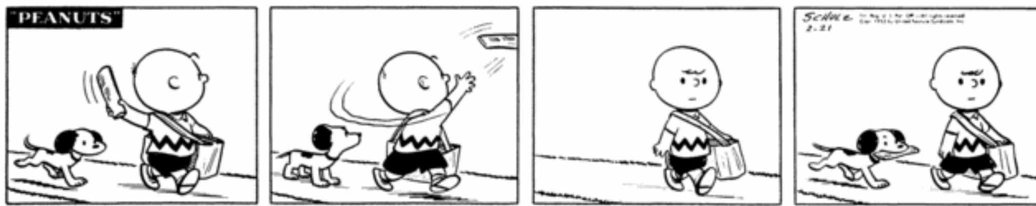
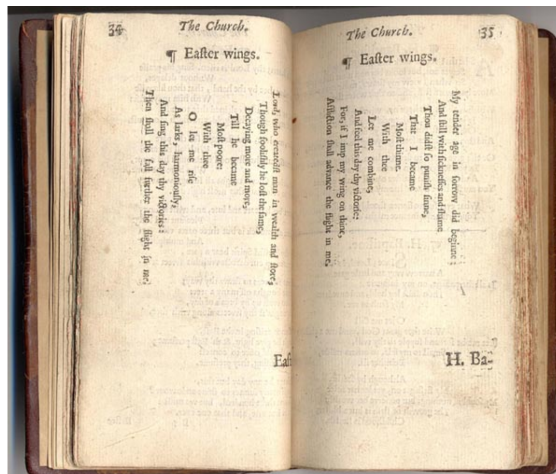


Figure 2.1: A *Peanuts* strip from February 21, 1953


34 The Church.

¶ Eaſter wings.

Lord, who createdſt man in wealth and ſtore,
Though fooliſhly he loſt the ſame,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Moſt poore:
With thee
O let me riſe
As larks, harmoniouſly,
And ſing this day thy victories:
Then ſhall the fall further the flight in me.

Eaſ

The Church. 35

¶ Eaſter wings.

My tender age in ſorrow did beginne:
And ſtill with ſickneſſes and ſhame
Thou didſt ſo puniſh ſinne,
That I became
Moſt thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction ſhall advance the flight in me.

H. Ba-

Figure 2.2: George Herbert's "Easter Wings" in the 1633 printing of *The Temple*

[1] An imagetext is an object that functions as both image and text. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W. J. T. Mitchell, who coined the term, claims "semiotic oppositions" like "text and image" only "reinstate…versions of the traditional figures of the difference between poetry and painting" (50). Mitchell argues that "there is no *essential* difference between poetry and painting, no difference, that is, that is given for all time by the inherent natures of the media…" (50). In short, for Mitchell all texts and images are imagetexts.

Herbert's poem is collection of words we cannot fully understand unless we recognize its organization also makes it a kind of picture.[2] As such, these two images reveal a central difficulty within comics studies, a problem created when scholars try to define what comics are and how the conventions of the medium operate to convey meaning. Defining art forms is a tricky endeavor, and is especially difficult with regard to comics because a satisfying definition of comics needs to be broad enough to include both standard and more experimental examples of the form while not being so broad that anything (or everything) could fit within the definition. In short, an ideal definition of comics should provide a basis for understanding why Schulz's strip is a comic, even though it is a wordless narrative, but Herbert's poem is not a narrative, even though it is a hybrid form of word and image.

One problem is that many different media utilize components often considered unique to the comics form. For example, images in sequence, panel borders, and word balloons also occur in picture books, advertisements and illustrated texts.[3] Another

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[2] While the poem undeniably makes a picture, exactly what picture it makes is up for debate. Certainly the shape broadly implies wings, however, critics debate whether the poem should be printed horizontally or vertically (Figure 2.2 is printed vertically). Helen Wilcox writes, "Those who favour a horizontal presentation…assert that early editors (and presumably later ones, too) were naïve to assume that H. was trying to 'draw' wings" (Herbert 145). At the same time, the shape of the poem can be perceived as both *wings* and *an hourglass*, contrasting eternity (wings) and the passage of time (hourglass). She argues that those who prefer the vertical printing do so because it "allows the double significance of the hieroglyph to emerge—as wings when first viewed on the page, and as an hourglass or cross when read" (145).

Interestingly, many scholars refer to Herbert's poems as *hieroglyphs*. A quick-and-dirty definition of comics as a combination of word and image might allow hieroglyphs to count as comics—after all, they are pictures used to create words. However, most comics scholars reject this thesis (McCloud is the most famous example), because while the hieroglyphs have a pictorial element, they ultimately are linguistic markers and not pictures. Using "hieroglyph" to describe the "picture" of Herbert's poems could be seen as an attempt to downplay their pictorial nature (See Elsky). Of course, this is only scratching the surface of the relationship between visuality and textuality in concrete poems and pattern poetry. For more, see Bohn, Drucker, Erber, and Higgins.

[3] For example, in "Chaperoning Words: Meaning-Making in Comics and Pictures Books," John Sutliff Sanders argues "Scholarship on comics and picture books frequently overlaps, often even as that scholarship tries to define what makes each form unique" (57). He goes on to say "With the exception of some provocative instances of overlap between the two, it is actually quite easy to point to a book and say

problem is that many things we think of as "comics" don't utilize these components all the time (or sometimes, not at all). Certain comics artists, both mainstream and experimental, sometimes eschew these "comics components" entirely. For example, Will Eisner regularly created elaborate page layouts that defy our notions of sequence or that abandon the panel border entirely. And yet no one questions whether Eisner's work "counts" as comics—in fact, the most prestigious award in American comics is named after him. It seems equally silly to assert that single-panel cartoons like *Family Circus* aren't really comics because they lack the essential element of multiple images in sequence, but influential critics like Thierry Groensteen or Scott McCloud have indeed made this claim by arguing that multiple images in deliberate sequence are the minimum requirement necessary to separate comics from other visual forms.

The project of defining any form by applying this kind of "checklist logic" is doomed to failure. In *The System of Comics*, Theirry Groensteen theorizes this is because "comics rest on a group of coordinating mechanisms that participate in the representation and the language, and that these mechanisms govern in their movements numerous and disparate parameters, of which the dynamic interaction takes on extremely varied forms from one comic to another" (12). As a result of the futility of chasing an essential definition of comics, Groensteen claims the result has been a "profusion of responses" (12), each with their own ideological interests and theoretical stakes—a charge that is difficult to deny when almost all scholars (myself included) seem tempted to define comics in their own way.

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with confidence that it belongs in one group and not the other. It's when we begin to theorize comics and picture books that the problem consistently surfaces." (58)

Rather than attempting to limit the definition of comics to a formal checklist, some scholars have turned their attention to an issue forefronted by my opening examples: the possibility that "comics" are defined not by a checklist, but by a unique relationship between words and images within in the form. Of course, comics are far from the only form that incorporates both verbal and visual signification. However, there seems to be something inherently unique about comics that separates the form from picture books, graphic design, illustrated texts, concrete poetry, typography and calligraphy, photography, film, and the myriad of other forms that use words and images in tandem. So perhaps the key is to understanding why Schulz's strip is a comic and Herbert's poem isn't does not lie with a definition that allows us to check off features on a list, but in an approach that emphasizes how words and images interact in comics.

The attempt to discern the relationship between word and image in the comics form—what I refer to throughout this chapter as the "problem of comics"—is part of a larger question regarding how visual and verbal signs relate to each other. Since Horace, and Simonides[4] before him, philosophers and critics have compared and contrasted the roles word and images play in the act of representation. After all, *ut pictura poesis*[5] is not a particularly fascinating insight unless the audience assumes pictures and poetry, words and images, are inherently different forms. The question then becomes, *how* are words and images different? For many years, critics theorized the difference between words and images as equivalent to a distinction between conventional and natural signs. In this view, images are natural signs and words conventional. Images are thought to be

[4] Admittedly, Simonides discusses the relative seriousness of critical approach, not that the forms are equivalent (Mitchell 48-49).

[5] "As with painting, so with poetry."

interpreted based on our natural ability to see and compare a representation to its original object in the world, but language is seen as conventional because the meanings of verbal sounds are established collectively, culturally, and arbitrarily (Mitchell 75).

However, later theorists—such as Roland Barthes and Ernst Gombrich—would, as WJT Mitchell explains in *Iconology*, move from understanding this difference between sign systems as a difference in "degree," not in "kind" (76). In "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes uses semiotics (a field historically tied to meaning-making in the linguistic sense) to read images; he reifies semiotics as *the* method to explain how images create meaning like languages. Barthes' methodology suggests a difference of degree because his methodology implies word and image can both be interpreted with the same tools, even if the details of their forms are different. In *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Gombrich attempts to move away from the differentiation of "kind" by concluding, in Mitchell's words that "natural signs" are "nothing more than the easy or convenient sign, the one we are accustomed to, the one we learn to use without difficulty" (85). But even so, both Barthes and Gombrich are unable to completely dispense with the difference between word and image, or to call them equivalent.

Scott McCloud's work also struggles with the fuzzy boundaries between word and image, theorizing their relationship as either a difference in degree or a difference in kind as it suits his argument. Written in comics form as dialogue between a cartoon of himself and the reader, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) is perhaps the first work of comics theory to gain widespread critical and popular attention in the US. Like many comics scholars before and after him, McCloud's first objective is to define comics. His drawn performance of this act illustrates just how tricky the relationship

between word and image in comics can be. He does not simply declare his now famous definition ("Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9)) at the start of the text, of course; he works up to it with the help of an imagined audience. McCloud begins by defining comics as "Sequential Art" and builds towards the aforementioned definition through interactions with his "audience." At one point in the defining process, McCloud has settled on "Juxtaposed static images in deliberate sequence" (8). An audience member called Bob responds, "What about words?" and McCloud responds comics don't *"have* to contain words to be comics" (8). Bob clarifies that he does not feel words need to be included in the definition of comics, but that they count as comics in McCloud's current definition: "Letters are *static images*, right? When they're arranged in a *deliberate sequence* placed *next to each other*, we call them *words*!" (8). McCloud-the-author seems to feel this is a good point—he even draws another audience member encouraging Bob's "challenge." And yet, the cartoon McCloud's response is simply to add the phrase "pictorial and other" in place of "static," and move on. The conundrum remains: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" is still as good a description for written words as it is for comics.

The importance of the problem of comics—the distinction (or lack thereof) between words and images in the form—came into the forefront of my mind while reading Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* Chronicling her strained relationship with her mother, Bechdel also records her relationships with her "other" mothers: therapists, lovers, and texts that have influenced her. In particular, she is drawn the work of the

analyst and object-relations theorist Donald Winnicott. Throughout the work, she includes snippets of his books that she finds relevant to her story. Bechdel eschews collage, and reproduces Winnicott's text by drawing it into her comic (Figure 2.3), instead of including a photocopy or photograph of Winnicott's book itself.[6] She uses different lettering to differentiate between dialogue and captions (a bespoke but computer- generated typeface) and the Winnicott text (hand-drawn letters). The letters of the computer generated font are straight and uniform, regularly irregular: the sharp, acute angle of the bottom bar of almost all "Es" the slightly raised baseline of all "Ds"—the letters only deviate from the pattern when a letter appears twice in a row (as in "THREE" below). The writing in the Winnicott text looks similar enough to the caption/dialogue font to imply the same hand created them, but it also emulates the typeface of a book.

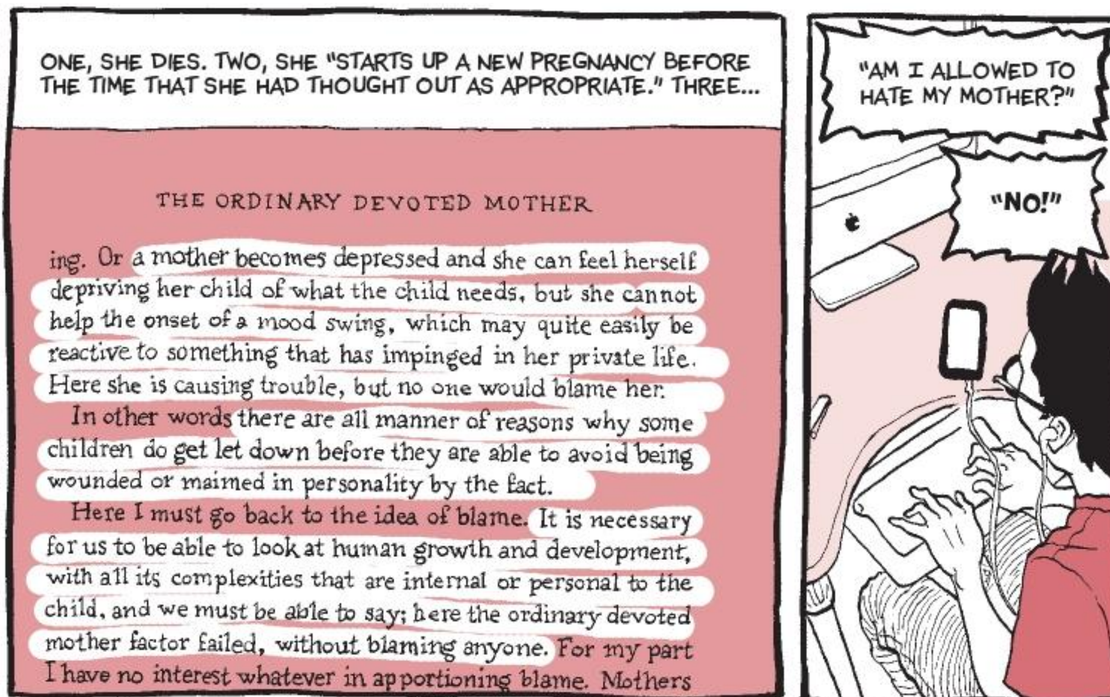

Figure 2.3: Bechdel's drawn text in *Are You My Mother?* (34)

[6] This decision differs from other artists' choices; notably, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, he decides print a (copy of) a photograph of Vladek in *Maus* as a counterpoint to the cartoon mouse version of the man he (re)presents.

The drawing of the mechanical typeface (unlike the computer-generated font) wanders ever so slightly from straight lines, individual letters deviate from each other (compare for example, the “g” in “depriving” in the second line, “get” in the seventh line, and “go” in the ninth). Because of the presence of a heading, clear margins, highlighting, and the way the text continues off the pages, Bechdel means for us to understand the text is a page of a book; nevertheless, these words are no less a product of cartooning than Bechdel’s drawing of her own face in the last panel.

Are Bechdel’s words images? Are her images words? These questions are variations of the same conundrum troubling my opening examples. While the practical difference between what is comics (the *Peanuts* strip) and what is not comics (the Herbert poem) is obvious, the theoretical difference is harder to pin down. The same is true for the written word and images: W. J. T. Mitchell argues in *Iconology*, historically poetry and painting, words and images “each art characterizes itself in opposition to its ‘significant other’” (47), however this difference is a social and cultural construction, not an “*essential* difference…given for all time by the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind” (49). If, as many espouse, comics is an inherently *hybrid* medium that defines itself by combining words and images, the problem of comics becomes the problem of making sense of what it means to be a combination of two forms of representation that cannot actually be separated in the first place. The problem scholars face in their attempt to define the relationship between word and image—that word and image may not be so different after all—permeates every aspect of the comics form: from hand-lettered pages to the font choices of computer letterers, from carefully drawn signs and logos to onomatopoeic language bombastically

rendered to create "sound effects," from silent comics like Schulz's which we "read"[7] even though there are no words to poems like Herbert's that use page design and line length to create meaning words alone are unable to achieve.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will address implications of the difficult-to-define relationship between word and image as it applies to the concerns of comics studies as a discipline. I am far from the first critic to enter this territory, of course—comics scholars across the globe have produced a rich and varied library of such work.[8] But I hope to cast the debate in a new light by approaching the issue through my training as a comparatist. As a discipline, comparative literature's emphasis on interdisciplinary, cultural theory, and translation studies provides new optics for examining the issue of the word/image relationship. By embracing this spectrum of representation I hope to develop an argument with implications not only for comics studies, but also to establish connection between the fields of comics studies and comparative literature. I will begin by applying the word/image "problem" to the process and history of manga translation in the United States.

Translating Manga

While manga has been a significant factor in the Japanese publishing industry through most of the 20th century,[9] translated manga was not published in the United

[7] I have yet to find a language that does not use the term "read" to describe the way people consume comics.

[8] The works of Charles Hatfield, Scott McCloud, and Hannah Miodrag, which will be referenced in more detail later, are particularly influential to this chapter. This is also true of W. J. T. Mitchell and James Elkins, though their work is not specifically comics-related. See also "On the Language of Comics and the Reading Process" in Mila Bongco's *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of a Superhero*; "Building a Language" in Daniel Raeburn's monograph *Chris Ware*; and *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, a volume edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons.

[9] Manga as we know it grows from the long tradition of Japanese visual art, especially *chōjūgiga* (picture scrolls), stories told in pictures along a scroll. (Schodt, *Manga! Manga!* 30-31). Many argue whether

States until Project Gen released an English-language version of Nakazawa Keiji's[10] World War II memoir, *Barefoot Gen* in 1978 (Schodt, *Dreamland Japan* 309). It would be at least 20 years before translated manga became the publishing juggernaut it is today. Several major marketing shifts in the mid-1980s—including the growing popularity of Japanese animation, video games, and technology—opened the door, and by the early 1990s, several major comics publishers had manga imprints and manga-only publishing houses were translating manga for American audiences.

One of the major problems translators and publishers in the US face when attempting to translate Japanese is that the language traditionally read from top to bottom, and right to left, so books printed in Japanese appear "backwards" to American eyes. In the early days of manga translation, publishers solved this problem by "flipping" manga, mirroring the pages so that they would read from left to right. But in addition to transforming the artist's drawings, flipping caused another problem: any text on the page — sound effects, for example —would also be backwards. Flipping also affected any text embedded in the images themselves —logos, advertisements, signs, and especially sound effects, which are often deeply integrated into a comic's artwork. Any textual content outside designated word balloons or text boxes had to be wallpaper over. Non-flipping options were deemed too alienating, slow, or expensive to be viable.[11]

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kibyōshi, illustrated booklets which became popular in the 18th and 19th century, are a direct predecessor to modern manga or not; regardless, they show a proclivity toward using pictures and words simultaneously to tell stories (36-37). In the mid-19th century Japan re-opened to Western influence and began publishing European-style satire magazines like *Japan Punch!* and *Tokyo Puck* (38). By the turn of the century, editorial cartoons gave way to images in sequence. As in America, the popularity of comic strips in papers and magazines gave way to book-form and length comics in the 1930s (49, 54).

[10] In this piece, I use Japanese name-order conventions for Japanese names; the individual's family name is listed before their given name.

[11] At the insistence of writer and artist Samura Hiroaki, Dark Horse tried another tactic for *Blade of the Immortal*: they literally cut and pasted the panels from their original right-to-left order into a left-to-right

While it may be surprising considering the current trends in manga publication, publishers did not attempt to sell translated manga "unflipped" until 2002, when manga publisher Tokyopop began their "100% Authentic Manga" publishing initiative (the initiative included several other shifts as well, including making the books a smaller, "digest" size and using cheaper paper) (Singh).[12] Early books included instructions on how to read in "original" order in an attempt to mitigate possible confusion. In a growing but vulnerable manga market, the "100% Authentic Manga" initiative was a gamble, but a glance through any major bookstores's graphic novels sections will show the risk paid off.[13] Within a few years, unflipped digest-size books became the standard for manga publication across all publishers; with very few exceptions even older titles were eventually converted to the new standard.[14]

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order. This preserved the integrity of the image, and allowed Dark Horse to keep the original sound effects. However, this did mean that the narrative flow of the story tended to be interrupted—movement from one panel to another was not as fluid as it had been in the original. It caused complications when characters would break out of or transgress panel borders. It was also a painstakingly slow and labor-intensive process that would not have worked as well with a faster artist and risked fans becoming impatient with the process.

[12] In addition to publishing the manga in its "authentic" right-to-left format, Tokyopop changed the publication format from trade paperback to digest size. The smaller books were printed on cheaper paper—more closely mimicking the publication process of manga in Japan—and created the possibility of the second shift, a significant drop in price. The trade paperback sized books regularly sold for around $19.99 per volume (often higher), while the digest sized books sold for $9.99 (Singh).

[13] It worked. By 2003, one year into Tokyopop's intitiative, the manga market grossed nearly $100 million; Tokyopop cornered 35% of the market, enough that it was outselling the "Big Two" of American comics publishing—Marvel and DC (Lopes 155). The following years, the market continued to grow, showing a 40-50% increase in sales in major bookstores ("Manga Market"). While the growth of manga sales has since leveled off, it remains a major force in US comics publishing to this day. While it would be difficult to determine which of the many factors was primary in the manga boom of the mid-2000s, clearly Tokyopop's "100% Authentic Manga" initiative was a major component of this massive growth.

[14] The two exceptions were *Blade of the Immortal* and *Akira*. In part because *Blade of the Immortal* had defined itself by its unique approach to translation (see Note 8), it seemed only appropriate to continue their cut-and-paste method to preserve the established look of the book. The reason *Akira* remains unflipped are less clear. The rights were originally owned by Dark Horse, but when the Japanese publishing giant Kodansha reacquired the rights they chose to keep the old translation's style and language. Perhaps this choice reflects a laziness on the part of the publishing company, but perhaps because of the book's storied history in the American market through its connection to the colorized Epic Comics run the Americanized version of *Akira* has earned its own "authenticity."

The problem of comics is of central significance to this history of manga translation in the United States. First, it seems important to emphasize that the question of whether to flip or not flip a book is not simply a question of formatting but an issue of translation. This point likely will seem obvious, even to a layperson: if we were not translating Japanese comics, there would be no question about whether or not to flip, nor would translators have to think about the implications of either choice. However, discussions of translation tend to focus on the linguistic factor alone: in this case, flipping the page seems to be the necessary *result* of translation, not an act of translation itself. And yet, in comics translation not only imposes linguistic differences, but also visual changes on the text; this is especially obvious in the translation between written Japanese and written English. The layout of the page, the order of the panels, the integrity of the original drawings, the transitions between panels, and sound effects are as important and pivotal to the form and message of comics as the language of the dialogue. If the language is transformed by translation, the relationship between words and images will also be transformed. In comics, where the nature of and relationship between word and image is so vital, the transformation caused by flipping is made all the more clear because the graphic design elements of the comics page are obviously changed as well.

Otomo Katsuhiro's epic *Akira* is a seminal text in the eventual explosion of the manga market in the U.S. Mixing a post apocalyptic setting and punk aesthetic with a group of alienated, angry, psychically powered teens who wouldn't be too out of place in any X-Men book, *Akira* was an ideal test case for American audiences. A hit movie adaptation of the manga didn't hurt its popularity, either. But *Akira* is a particularly interesting case in terms of the flipping question, as the text is still printed in flipped

format today, even though the industry as a whole has moved on from such a practice. The reasons for this decision are unclear. Perhaps because the text experienced unprecedented popularity in the United States before the "Authentic Manga" revolution, the unflipped *Akira* has become an "authentic" text in its own right.

When Marvel Comics imprint Epic Comics first decided to publish a translation in 1988, they translated, flipped, and colored it using state-of-the-art digital coloring techniques. Epic also released it in monthly issues so it would better fit in with the glossy, full-color books of the mainstream American comics industry. After Epic Comics closed in 1996, the rights to *Akira* were acquired by Dark Horse Comics, who reprinted the comic in large collected editions. These kept the flipped layout, but updated the translation and returned to Otomo's original black and white art. Even when Kodansha USA (the U.S. branch of *Akira's* original Japanese publisher) took the rights back from Dark Horse Comics to publish their "own" text in 2009, they kept the same flipped translation. Its popularity among general comic fans for 15 years before the manga explosion of the early 2000s may be responsible for the text feeling less like "foreign" text that requires translation to American fans. Because of the peculiarities of its publication history, then, *Akira* remains flipped even in a market where most manga no longer are.

In order to discuss the implications of flipping (and translation more broadly) on the comics page, it is important to examine the interplay of text and image in the text's original language and orientation. Figure 2.4 is a series of panels from a fight scene between *Akira*'s two main characters: Kaneda, the leader of a teen bike gang, and Tetsuo, a younger member of Kaneda's gang. Close friends since childhood, Kaneda and Tetsuo

become enemies when Tetsuo is transformed by his growing psychic powers and subsequent exposure to the mysterious Akira. As I noted earlier, manga is read within each panel from top to bottom, then right to left. Therefore, the first panel in this sequence is Tetsuo, in the top right panel, yelling "来るなア" ("*Kuru naa!*" "Don't come any closer!"). The next panel in the sequence is directly to the left—Kaneda riding his motorcycle towards Tetsuo. The final panel in the sequence is the large panel below the first two. In this final panel, a Japanese reader would likely read the "ズズン" (*zuzun*)

Figure 2.4: From *Akira*, volume 1 (332).

first, followed by the "ドドドン" (*dododon*).[15]

Tetsuo's dialogue alone reveals the rich interplay of visual and linguistic meaning in written Japanese, which uses kanji and two syllabaries, katakana and hiragana.[16] The な (hiragana *na*) at the end of the sentence is an informal, masculine verbal marker that negates the preceding verb, in this case, "来る," (*kuru)* to come. In short, Tetsuo is yelling "Don't come any closer" or, as it is translated in the English publication, "Stay back!" (334). The ア, (katakana *a*) lengthens the previous *na* while maintain the meaning of the short word.[17] The written katakana not only creates meaning through the symbols' meaning, but also by the way katakana *looks*. Of the two syllabaries, hiragana is used to transcribe native words. Its appearance is more rounded than katakana, which is quite angular and usually used to transcribe foreign words adopted into Japanese or sound effects. Robert S. Petersen explains their difference in "The Acoustics of Manga": "Hiragana is most often employed to suggest internal noises that are sensual and of a personal nature…whereas katakana is used to suggest the harsher external world of sounds that bombard us" (169). The visual sharpness of the katakana as opposed to the hiragana's more rounded shapes (compare katana ア to hiragana あ) changes our sense of

[15] Technically, Japanese reads in different directions if it is written vertically or horizontally. If the text is vertical, it is read from top to bottom and from right to left. If it is written horizontally (like the ドドドン), it is read from left to right. Manga pages are constructed vertically, thus the panels are read from top right to bottom left.

[16] Written Japanese uses two syllabaries, sets of symbols representing the sound of syllables rather than individual letters, as well as kanji (Chinese characters), which tend to represent several syllables and helps fix the definition of different sets of sounds. For example, くる represents the sounds "ku" and "ru." "Kuru," however, can indicate several different verbs: 来る (to come) and 繰る (to wind, spin, or turn a page). It can also refer to the nouns 佝僂 (rickets) and 枢 (pivot hinge). The hiragana (くる) alone could indicate any of these meanings; kanji helps differentiate at a glance.

[17] This is necessary because "なあ" (*naa*) is a feminine sentence-ending particle that connotes wishful hope and desire. In other words, "来るなあ" (*kuru naa*) would more likely translate "I hope he comes" or a wistful "He's coming!" as opposed to "来るな," (*kuru na*) which translates to "Don't come."

the tone of Tetsuo's voice. Just as the katana ア produces as different meaning than hiragana あ linguistically, its visual impact highlights the emotions in Tetsuo's voice—anger, contempt, fear. The long, vertical stroke in the ア even comes to a point, evoking a hiss. This text is not even a sound effect in the traditional sense, yet it already shows the importance of visual signification in and upon written language, especially in Japanese.

Because of the relationship between word and image so aptly modeled here, many scholars have embraced W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of imagetext as a key feature in comics. Comics uses both verbal and visual language and is therefore a *hybrid* form. However, Mitchell goes so far as to say that the relationship between image and text is so fluid that "all arts are composite arts, all media are mixed media" (118). Imagetext thus becomes a useful term, but a somewhat problematic one: how are comics unique if all media are mixed? Several critics have, therefore moved beyond Mitchell, claiming comics is not just a hybrid medium, but a medium that *hybridizes* words and images in a unique way. In short, comics allows the possibility of images and words becoming more like each other, the differences between them collapsing. McCloud gestures toward this argument when he claims, "When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality,' they require greater levels of *perception, more like words*. When words are bolder, more direct, they require *lower* levels of perception and are received *faster, more like pictures*" (49). In his 2004 monograph on Chris Ware, Daniel Raeburn goes further, doing away with the style of the word or image and instead stating, "Although comics are composed of words and pictures, they are both of these things at once and therefore neither" (17). Likewise, though Hatfield claims comics are "*writing*" (33), he also argues that in comics, word and image, "approach each other…the written text can function like

images, and images like written text. Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapses the word/image dichotomy" (36-37). In 2007's *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, Rocco Versacci calls the word and image relationship a "blend" (13). Gillian Whitlock claims in her 2006 essay "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of Comics" that, "Comics are not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both, and emerges through the imaginative work of closure that readers are required to make between the panels on the page" (968-969). In short, the word/image relationship most emphasized by comics scholars in one that collapses the distinction between word and image.[18]

This essential hybridity is central to Hillary Chute's claim that comics is an inherently feminist medium. In their 2006 introduction to the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on comics, Chute and Marianna DeKoven argue, "We read this hybridity [of comics] as a challenge to the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one" (768). Thus, hybridity is key to Chute's conception of comics as inherently political. In her own book *Graphic Women*, building on WJT Mitchell's argument that throughout history blurred genres and forms are feminized as opposed to the inherent masculinity of distinct genres, she says, "Thus, while we may read comics' spatializing of narrative as a part of its hybrid project, we may read this hybridity as a challenge to the strict binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one" (10).

Of course, not everyone agrees. Perhaps the most vigorous objection to the notion that comics as a form collapses the word/image dichotomy to date is Hannah Miodrag's

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[18] Hatfield explicitly allows for other hybrid media, but most, like Whitlock, emphasize comics uniqueness in this regard.

Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form (2012). Miodrag argues that words and images work in fundamentally different ways, and therefore the two modes cannot simply "blend." Instead, she insists that the "equal validity" of words and images should not be confused with "outright equivalence" (7). Miodrag claims the notion of "hybridity" and "collapse" embraced by Raeburn, Whitlock, and particularly Hatfield represents a theoretical sloppiness that strips word and image of their individual powers of representation: "Differences [between the ways words and images signify meaning] do exist and they are crucial to understanding the distinct ways words and images are deployed and perceived within comics" (8). Later, she argues that numerous critics take the notion of "blending" too far, especially when they

> [blur] the distinction between visual and verbal by suggesting that the latter *becomes* the former when its graphic form is utilized in this way. Raeburn goes so far as to assert that this layering of visual and verbal renders comics 'both of these things at once and therefore neither' (2004: 17), a baffling statement that posits comics' interactive duality as somehow undoing that very dual constitution. It is undeniable that this use of drawn words 'establishes continuity between image and word' (Kunzle 2009: 22) and layers the effects of each over the other. But to cite this graphic rendering of words (shared with typography, advertising, and graphic design) as evidence that the distinction between the two is "specious" (Chute 2006: 1025) is an oversimplification…many critics seek to claim the form collapses these distinctions, not only interacting but actually fusing the two media. But the significance of these words' graphic form is only evident in relation to other words. These drawn letters only suggest what they do because they differ from other instance of the same letter and text, and it is in this ability to distinguish between repeated verbal signifiers and their varying specific graphic forms in which the distinction between verbal and visual persists. (102-103)

While I share some concerns with Miodrag, namely that running too far into the arms of hybridity ignores the socio-cultural training we receive (particularly in the West) to respond differently to word and image, the problems inherent in translating manga—and in particular the difficulty of translating linguistic and visual signifiers at the same

time — shows just how unclear the distinction between the two concepts is. While working only in one's native language the differences between word and image might seem obvious, but the act of translation muddies the waters. Translation highlights the pictoriality of language through its very absence in the flipped, American version of the panels of *Akira* discussed previously (Figure 2.5). For example, because of the different visual nature of Japanese and English, the "hiss" of the katakana, its visual sharpness compared to hiragana, is impossible to translate. Linguistically, "Stay back!" makes sense, but English simply does not take advantage of gendered linguistic markers (seen in the difference between なあ and なア), nor the different lettering systems built in to its written system.

While the Japanese sound effects integrate themselves into the world of the panel in the Figure 2.4, the translated sound effects in Figure 2.5 thrust themselves into the foreground. The sharp angles of Figure 2.4's ドs look like part of the scaffolding and extend to the top of the ceiling to support this effect. On the other hand, the Rs in Figure 2.5 break the architectural similarity between the sound effect and the scene with their rounded elements, and by failing to extend to the top of the panel. A translator therefore cannot completely replicate the meaning, cadence, and rhythm from one language to another; in comics (particularly in manga), translators also have to worry about the difficult of replicating the *visual* impact of text as well.

The fuzzy boundary between word and image is further emphasized by the sound effects in these panels. There are three: in the top left panel, "バン" (*ban*) for a projectile and shattering glass; in the bottom panel "ドドドン" and "ズズン." The "バン" is almost hidden amidst the motion lines indicating the speed of Kaneda's motorcycle, but it

Figure 2.5: The same page as Figure 2.4, “flipped” and translated into English (334).

also cuts across the motion, just as the shattering of Kaneda’s motorcycle’s windshield represents an attempt to curtail his hurtling forward toward Tetsuo. The two panels are mirrored; in one, Tetsuo leans in demanding Kaneda keep back, in the other Kaneda leans in, refusing his command. Tetsuo curls into himself to protect his naked torso; Kaneda’s armor is destroyed, forcing him to curl forward to protect himself (this motion is completed in the final panel). In a text about close friends turned mortal enemies, it suits the theme and plot that the art constantly reinforces these boys as foils, mirrors of each other. In this panel, the mirror of Tetsuo’s command is the sound effect, バン, not

Kaneda's groan (the "うっ " in the speech balloon. The sound effect shows the effect of Tetsuo's command to stay back (the windshield shatters), but also symbolizes the impossibility of said command: the harder Tetsuo pushes, the harder Kaneda pulls toward him. The sound effect is thus both a part of the illustrated motion but also antithetical to it, just as Tetsuo and Kaneda are mirrors of each other—the same and yet so different.

This panel sequence therefore reveals the curious place of sound effects in the dichotomy of word and image. Like the characters of Tetsuo and Kaneda themselves, words and images represent opposite ends of a spectrum—yet they seem inextricably drawn together by the medium of comics. This is because the sound effect in general represents a word *as* an image. And perhaps moreso in Japanese than English, the sound effect becomes indistinguishable from the obviously imagistic part of the panel. For example, in the original Japanese panel from *Akira*, the バン effect blends in to the motion lines around it, becoming part of the representation of movement. At the same time, the lines of the sound effect's text cut across the motion lines, separating the language from the image. In this panel sequence, the バン is both the same as Tetsuo's words and the opposite of Tetsuo's words, following its instructions and acting in defiance. The sound effect both is a word and isn't a word.

Just as, perhaps, McCloud's definition of comics describes a word, but doesn't really describe a word. Earlier in the chapter I discussed the conflict between McCloud and his audience member Bob, who argued that McCloud's definition of comics could count as words: "Letters are *static images*, right? When they're arranged in a *deliberate sequence* placed *next to each other*, we call them *words*!" (8). McCloud simply replaces "static images" with "juxtaposed and other images" in his definition, as though that

“fixes” the definition. Interestingly, he seems to concede Bob’s point that words *are* images. Later in the text, however, he seems to forget that he has conceded this point, when he fundamentally separates the categories of word and image, claiming: “Pictures are *received* information. We need no formal education to *‘get the message.’* The message is *instantaneous*. Writing is *perceived* information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language” (49). McCloud is by no means the first to argue that images are somehow easier to understand, or more immediate, than writing; it’s a commonplace prejudice with a long tradition, despite being theoretically problematic. But in an attempt to make sense of the multimodal form of comics, the question of writing proves particularly vexing. McCloud’s argument that pictures are “received” and language is “perceived” (49) has a caveat. When discussing the use of language in comics, McCloud clarifies, “When pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality,’ they require greater levels of *perception*, *more like words*. When words are bolder, more direct, they require *lower* levels of perception and are received *faster, more like pictures*” (49). Certainly in American comics, sound effects would count as the sort of “lower level” of perception McCloud describes. Hilary Chute refers to this difference as the difference between reading and looking (*Graphic Women* 5-6). In the previous example (Figure 2.5), this argument makes a certain amount of sense. Readers rarely stop to read sound effects in the same way they do dialogue—separated in their balloons or boxes, dialogue and captions (like Tetsuo’s “来るなア”) demand to be read. Sound effects don’t, not in the same way. The previous examples from *Akira*—both the slap (パシッ) and the scaffolding collapsing (ドドドン) are particularly clear in this regard, as both integrate themselves in the image.

Articulated Continua

Thus, while I agree with Miodrag that words and images communicate messages differently, and scholars should understand and respect those differences, she goes too far by insisting on a strict separation of word and image. The examples from the beginning of this chapter (Schulz and Herbert) actively challenge Miodrag's conclusion. At the same time, claiming that an overlap between words and image exists in the comics form does not necessitate—as some other critics imply—a fundamental collage between the two media. As Charles Hatfield says in *Alternative Comics*, even though "Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapses the word/image dichotomy" (36-37), scholars must interrogate the way words and images are both the same and different:

> Still, responding to comics often depends on recognizing word and image as two 'different' types of sign, whose implications can be played against each other—to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other. While the word/image dichotomy may be false or over simple, learned assumptions about these different codes—written and pictorial—still exert a strong centripetal pull on the reading experience. (37)

The critical gap between strict separation and complete equivalency is best articulated by James Elkins's argument in *On Pictures and the Words the Fail Them*.

Discussing the symbols left by the Vinča people from the Neolithic era of southeast Europe, Elkins explores the blurry boundaries between writing and pictures. Because there is no "Rosetta Stone" for the Vinča symbols, there is no way for archaeologists or linguists to verify whether the symbols are linguistic or decorative. Elkins examines the criteria scholars use to determine whether unknown symbols are linguistic or not, and finds the Vinča symbols fit most of the criteria, but not all of them—leading experts to call the symbols "pre-writing." Complicating matters further, he then applies these criteria to an image (Andrea Mantegna's *Battle of the Sea Gods*)

and finds the image fits about as many criteria as the Vinča symbols. "The entire project of linguistic analyses of nonlinguistic objects breaks down because it fails to see how there is no such thing as a purely linguistic structure" (131). Later, he concludes, "What I suggest that we abandon is not the idea of a picture, but the idea of a 'pure' picture, or of the purely visual, to which linguistic models might be applied…'word' and 'image' are names for aggregates of specific expectations, and…no marked surface corresponds to either one" (161). In short, he concludes, "This is the way I would prefer to understand the relation, if it has to be put the way, between pictures and writing: not as a duality with some imbrication, but as an *articulated continuum of signs*, so that every marked surface will have a measure of pictoriality and a measure of writing" (158) (emphasis mine).

This measured, compromising approach may be the best way to bridge the gap between a completely hybrid notion of the word/image relationship, and also a way to understand the different ways readers are trained to respond to words and images. This phenomenon is not limited to translation, though translation provides an interesting way of illuminating the debate. But for a neat English-language example, we might look to Mike Mignola, who elegantly illustrates this difference in the way we read sound effects and dialogue in his series *Hellboy* (Figure 2.6). In this series of panels, the titular Hellboy yells "Boom!" as he punches a cybernetic gorilla; in the following panel they crash through a wall with a deafening "BOOM." These two panels turn the difference between sound effect and spoken language as a joke—readers know that "boom" is common onomatopoeic shorthand for the sound of an explosion, but not the sound of the explosion itself. Yelling "Boom!" as he fights shows the reader that Hellboy know the conventions of comic book action sequences and that he imagines his own action like that of a comic

book character's. Of course, readers know that Hellboy is in fact a comic book character. The metatextual dialogue would be a joke on its own—the comic book character acting like a comic book hero—but Mignola pushes the joke further by adding the very same sound effect to the next panel, as though the comic itself responds to Hellboy's request for an explosion.

Figure 2.6: Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* goes boom (Mignola).

At the same time, Mignola's two booms reveal the different ways readers respond to text in different circumstances. Within the confines of a speech balloon, Hellboy's "Boom!" is something he literally says—text the reader is meant to read as part of the comic's dialogue. However, it matters less whether or not a reader actually stops to *read* the second "BOOM." As a sound effect, it becomes part of the image (Mignola even draws it with a concave curve so that the letters crash with the rubble). It refers not to a line of dialogue or even part of the narrative, but exists as a graphic representation of the sound made by the *real* action—Hellboy's fight with the gorilla. In McCloud's words, we

must perceive the first “Boom!” as dialogue to read and part of a metatextual joke; however, the pictographic nature and context of the second “BOOM” mean readers need to spend less time thinking about what it means linguistically.

Sound effects are often read with a glance; we don’t stop to read the sound effect like we read language in a speech balloon or caption box. But as I have noted McCloud’s argument that images are “received” while words are “perceived” is a profoundly problematic assertion of difference between the signifying systems of word and image that will not bear close scrutiny. Both words and images must be interpreted to be understood; the appearance of greater immediacy may reflect real differences in how words and images operate but it is simply false to assert on the basic of this appearance that images are somehow less subject to the processes of interpretation than words.

It is nevertheless that case that many people understand the difference between words and look at images in precisely the way that McCloud does. Figure 2.7 illustrates this through the issue of translation. While the original flow of panels and the integration of the sound effect into the image are retained in this new, unflipped format, absorbing the sound effect requires a reader to stop and read the subtitles. Since the “Authentic Manga” revolution, translators now leave the original Japanese sound effects intact, protecting the integrity of the word-as-image. But obviously not everyone who reads manga in translation can read Japanese. How do you translate a picture-word? One technique has been to use footnotes, or a glossary in the back of the book. The more common technique is what the translators use in Isayama Hajime’s *Attack on Titan* (another ド (do) here). This translation choice is essentially a comics equivalent of subtitles in a film. The film analogy is particularly illuminating, because the effects

subtitling work on the visual experience of film have been discussed at length. In his essay, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” Abé Mark Nornes laments—just as I did when discussing the flipping phenomenon— that “most people probably have never thought of subtitling as translation” (20). He neatly summarizes the problem many viewers have with subtitles in a film: “Spectators often find cinema's powerful sense of mimesis muddied by subtitles, even by skillful ones. The original, foreign, object—its sights and its sounds—is available to all, but it is easily obscured by the graphic text through which we necessarily approach it.” (17). One of the most difficult tensions subtitles create for the viewer is the experience of time—film unfolds at one speed while the subtitles are read at another. Rather than listening and watching the action, the viewer must now also read the subtitles—a different time frame.

Figure 2.7: From Isayama Hajime’s *Attack on Titan*, published and translated in 2012 by Kodansha USA (Isayama).

The problem inherent in the new “subtitled” translation technique is that the emphasis on the linguistic nature of the sound effect tends to overshadow the visual

nature. As in the *Hellboy* example, while both "Booms" are read, they are read differently and differently integrated into the image. Readers have to stop to read what the word means instead of integrating the words into the image. While the earlier examples emphasize the difficulty of separating word and image—the pictorial nature of words, in particular, this example also helps emphasize the differences in the way we do read them. The sound effect in translation shows the importance of the word's pictoriality in the way that the original blends into the image. However, the subtitling of the sound effect draws attention to the linguistic function of the word; the act of translation forces readers to pause and read the sound effect in a way that would be different readers of the original Japanese text might.

Comics and Beyond

Our understanding the relationship between images and words has far-reaching effects for comics studies, literary studies, and translation studies. Some implications for comics studies are at this point (hopefully) obvious. Thinking of comics in terms of the constant tension between the "measure of pictoriality in writing and measure of writing in images" (Elkins 158) allows comics scholars a certain freedom to follow the many possibilities opened up by the comics form. While Miodrag seems to think that acknowledging the sameness and difference of writing and images traps us in a contradiction, what the comics form shows us is that, as with many facets of life, the contradiction also happens to be true. Understanding the relationship between words and images not as a dichotomy but as a spectrum allows us to acknowledge the obvious and stark differences in the way they represent the world, but also to acknowledge the ways in which images and word *do* blur into each other, especially in comics. It can explain

moments in the form where word and image simply seem to interact without blurring the boundary between these modes of representation, as well as moments when that boundary is blurred.

Another benefit of this understanding of the word/image relationship is that it can help us conceive of this most vexing and defining relationship without attempting to argue for some essential formal dynamic between word and image in the form. While I disagree with Miodrag on many points, one point upon which I emphatically agree that there is no particular, fundamental relationship between word and image in comics. Many comics scholars attempt to define the comics form using texts which more obviously appeal to the mind of scholarly critic—complex, experimental, formally challenging. However, sometimes the relationship between word and image in comics can be strictly narrative or descriptive, seeming to uphold the boundary between word and image as distinct modes. Working with and attempting to define comics by the most experimental and complex ignores the large majority of comics that readers actually experience. Such a work—say the Silver Age superhero comic of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko—is no more or less "authentically" comics than the more experimental work like Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, or Alison Bechdel.

A similar example could be found in the study of novels. If experimental works like Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*) were presented as typical instances of the novel, students would have a distorted view of the form as a whole. In fact we can only think of *Tender Buttons* and *Rayuela* as novels because of their interaction with expectations and conventions established by hundreds of thousands of novels and novelists that came before them. However, any definition of the

novel that would outright exclude experimental works would also be too rigid to be useful. Understanding the word/image relationship in terms of Elkins's point here allows us a kind of definitional flexibility that a strict separation of word and image or a complete collapse between the two would deny.

Comics Studies is, by its nature, an interdisciplinary field. In order to gain a full picture of the medium, the field must bring together national literatures, the fine arts, art history, communication, rhetoric, journalism, history, and cultural studies (this is only the beginning!). I cannot speak to all of these fields, but I can speak to a sea change my argument might bring to literary studies, particularly the studies of English and American literature. Despite the truism that we have reached an age of visuality and live in a culture saturated by images, and a widespread (if superficial) acceptance that images are also texts, literature departments have a traditional investment in the written word as the most "textual" texts, so to speak. Elkins's argument, that "measure of pictoriality in writing and measure of writing in images" (158), however, forces us to acknowledge the repressed visuality of the word.[19] W. J. T. Mitchell similarly reminds us that most of us who study literature aren't just studying language…we are studying *writing*. In *Iconology*, he reminds us, "Insofar as language is written it is bound up with material, graphic figures and pictures that are abridged or condensed in a variety of ways to form alphabetical script" (27). However, this visual, graphic experience remains under-theorized. Certainly scholars discuss which versions of texts to use in teaching or citation,

[19] I understand that there are many ways to experience a text that do not have to do with visuality--namely, to experience it aurally or through touch (such as braille). However, I would argue that the overwhelming majority of texts in literature departments are read as words on a page (analog or digital). As such, the overwhelming majority of texts are encountered as visual experiences. And yet, most literary scholars treat texts as concepts ultimately divorced from the embodied experience of their reading, which includes the visual presentation of the material. I think this argument may in fact be useful for disability studies as well by re-emphasizing the complete normalization of sight in literary studies.

but this is almost always related to editing, translation, and secondary materials of the text—not its visual experience. Even in many informal discussions I have participated in regarding a preference of physical books over ebooks, the conversation tends to be about the *feel* of the paper, the *smell* of an old book, how easy it is to annotate, or how easy it is to flip through. Far less often, though, does one hear discussions of eye fatigue or physical ease of reading paper instead of a screen.

And yet, even those discussions of the visual experience of reading do not seem to focus on the actual, the "pictorial" or "graphic" experience of reading. The idea that the visual component of a text influences our interpretations of it is not new to some areas of literary criticism. In particular, scholars of poetry are necessarily concerned with the visual experience of a poem—take for instance my opening example of Herbert's "Easter Wings," Rimbaud's Symbolist poetry, or e. e. cumming's poems, which depend deeply on typography and spacing. Many Modernist and medieval scholars have an interest in the materiality of their texts publications because of illuminated manuscripts[20] or the carefully designed journals which originally published many Modern authors. However, for many literary scholars, the visual experience of the text is an under-examined phenomenon, and comics studies provides a theoretical toolbox for rectifying this oversight.

For example, few literary scholars think about fonts, especially in commercially published works. Graphic artists and designers construct these typefaces to produce reactions and effects, just as carefully as a comics artist constructs the layout of a page. Consider the almost-universally hated Comic Sans. The font makes things looks childish;

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[20] For an excellent example of a medieval scholar examining the relationship between writing and images, see Martha Rusts' work, especially "Blood and Tears as Ink: Writing the Pictorial Sense of the Text."

it tries too hard to be “fun” without succeeding. Especially on the internet, the use of Comic Sans has become a joke, an immediate marker for sarcasm. Therefore, one could easily imagine printing a copy of a famous piece of poetry or prose in Comic Sans would greatly alter readers' experience and expectation of the text—it would come across as either childish or sarcastic. While the effect of typography is clear in such an extreme instance, the issue is largely ignored in cases where the differences between fonts may not be obvious to anyone but visual designers. Just because a professor does not notice it, it remains the case he or she may have a different experience of *Crime and Punishment* not because of translation or editing, but because one is printed Times New Roman and another in Garamond. It may be a subtle difference, but it is a difference nonetheless.

Beyond typefaces, the visual experience of a text is also influenced by page layout, margin size, kerning, leading, the placement of page numbers (or lack of them!), book covers, judicious uses of color or italics…the list is practically infinite. This is to say nothing of the influence of design trends and marketing schemes on any of these factors. Some books, like Mark Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves*, take advantage of these elements of design and layout to affect the reader’s experience of a text. However, the impact of visual design is not limited to extreme examples. Even in the most normal, apparently boring book was designed to appear that way. Someone, somewhere, chose the font and the margins and the layout for some purpose, no matter how mundane. What effects do these choices work on the reader? This sort of question highlights the way that understanding the “measure of pictoriality in writing and measure of writing in images” (Elkins 158) can open new avenues and opportunities for examining the ways we interpret and experience literature.

This brings me to a final, related field that may be impacted by Elkins's understanding of visual/verbal connection, one that brings us full circle: translation. Part of my argument above certainly connects to a practical issue for translators: how do they translate the verbal content (already a deeply difficult, controversial, and possibly impossible task) of a text while also keeping an eye to the visual impact of a text? Of course, this problem is key to the translation of sound effects as I discussed earlier. However, this is even an issue for what might be called "strictly linguistic" translation. In some translations, this is more obvious than others—translating kanji or Cyrillic or Arabic languages into a Latinate alphabet will obviously impact the text and our interpretation of it—not just linguistically but also visually. Even if a language uses the same letters, though, the graphic nature of writing is part and parcel of translation. The Spanish *mariposa* and the French *papillon* may both refer to the same creature as the English *butterfly*, but the impact of all three words is different because they look different.

This, however, leads me to a larger question, one also posed by the many issues I addressed earlier surrounding the translation of manga: what does it mean to translate the visual? Because we tend to assume, like McCloud, that the visual experience is something universally perceived, we tend to assume that the experience of an image is the same across cultures. However, this is decidedly not the case. There are obviously cultural markers—for example, a character clad in all white might be seen as an angel in American and European culture, but the color white is associated with death and mourning in Japanese culture. Certain visual markers such as fashion, hairstyles, or representations of posture and body language can tell us so much about a character, but

they may not be obvious between one culture and another. How can a translator translate that without adding whole reams of dialogue or notation that were completely unnecessary in the original text? This does not only apply to cultural translation but also to the reception of texts in the same culture across different times. One of the most important things Elkins' definition of the relationship between pictures and writing, and thus this argument about the relationship between word and image in the form of comics, can do is challenge the notion that images are simply universal. It is critical to the study of any art form with any visual component that scholars do not make the mistake McCloud does when he claims pictures are received while words are perceived. We must understand the visual aspects of any work, no matter how insignificant it seems, require as much interpretation and rely as much on cultural convention as language does.

Culturally, in the West at least, we have been trained to experience the world around us in a particular way. We have fallen prey to the seductive idea that images are just what we see—the mental leaps that it takes to understand blobs of paint or bytes of pixels are in fact a person or a shape are overlooked. If we assume, like McCloud, that the visual experience is something universally perceived, we necessarily assume that the experience of an image is the same across cultures. However, this is decidedly not the case. Does this mean images need to be translated? What would that mean, especially in a world as saturated with visual images as ours?

CHAPTER III

THE BREASTS OF LUBA: THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO* AND *LOVE AND ROCKETS*

Breasts have been the objects of human fascination for a very, very long time. While this claim is grandiose and perhaps too general to be truly insightful, I could fill a book by citing art forms of all kinds celebrating breasts from ancient sculpture to yesterday's hit pop song. Among the oldest human *objets d'art* discovered are statuettes that feature grotesquely large breasts—thought to represent fecundity, and by extension, life itself. The Venus of Hohle Fels, discovered in 2009, was dated between 35,000 - 40,000 years old, more than 5,000 years older than the more famous Woman of Willendorf, over 15,000 years older than the Lascaux cave paintings, and over 30,000 years older than the development of cuneiform script. The statuette existed before Neanderthals went extinct (Wilford). Biologically and evolutionarily, the fascination makes sense. After all, for millennia breasts were literally the difference between life and death: without milk-filled breasts, infants would starve to death and humanity would have gone the way of the Neanderthal. Though modern medicine has the ability to replace the biological need for breasts, they are also the object of sexual obsession—their baring, covering, and representation the topic of almost constant controversy. The kinds of fascination people have with breasts have changed, the way that fascination manifests in culture has shifted...but the object of fascination has endured.

The representation of women's bodies, particularly their breasts, has long been the subject of scrutiny in American comics. In mainstream superhero comics (such as those by publisher Marvel and DC) large breasts appear to be a pre-requisite for

superheroines, whose spandex costumes leave little to the imagination even when their skin is technically covered. As comics are nearly synonymous with the superhero genre in many minds, it so no surprise that many associate comics with over-sexualized, unrealistic portrayal of women's bodies. This has been a critique since the "Golden Age" of US comics (1938-1950), when parents and psychologists criticized many publishers' tendencies to raise circulation by titillating their large male audience.[1] As a result, in 1954 the Comics Code Authority established the Comic Book Code in an attempt to make comics "measure up to its responsibilities" to its sensitive audience. Among other mandates, the Code commanded, "Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure." Likewise, "Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities" (United States).

Of course, the medium is more than a single genre, and the scantily clad women gracing the covers of horror, crime, suspense, and science fiction comic books were criticized even more harshly than many superhero comics. The Comics Code "cleaned up" the comics industry by essentially prohibiting any sexual material (explicit or not) from publication. Artists struggled against the oppressive restriction of the Code, and new underground movements emerged to challenge the status quo. Form the late 1960s until the 1980s, artists in the underground comix movement produced raw, groundbreaking work dedicated to challenging social mores and shocking suburban sensitivities. Nudity and explicit sexuality are par for the course in these works, breasts bared in service of everything from to radical feminism (as in Joyce Farmer's and Lynn Cheverly's *Tits &*

[1] I would like to note that the audience for comics in the Golden Age was not exclusively or even overwhelming male—many women also read comics of all genres. For more information on the establishment of the Comics Code, see David Hadju's *The Ten Cent Plague*.

Clits Comix) to crass sexual objectification (as in the works of R. Crumb and Chester Brown).

And then there is Luba (Figure 3.1). Arguably the main character[2] of Gilbert Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* stories, Luba is a middle-aged Latin American woman, a bathhouse and movie theatre operator-come-mayor of Palomar, and the mother of eight children. Like most superheroines or cover girls of the 1940s, Luba's defining physical features are her large breasts. Based on her breasts' "exaggerated" size alone, Luba would never have made it past the Comics Code censors. However, her breasts are not just a sex fantasy. Despite their size, they have a realistic effect on Luba. They are not inexplicably pert or unnaturally round, they sag, get in the way, and even cause physical pain, in addition to attracting attention. Luba's breasts are so impressive, in Junot Díaz's 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (hereafter referred to as *Oscar Wao*), the narrator Yunior can only describe the enormity of his friend Oscar's mother's breasts by saying she has the "Breasts of Luba" (92).

Figure 3.1: Luba as depicted on the cover of *Love and Rockets: New Stories* #6.

This seemingly innocuous reference in fact reveals many similarities between Díaz's Beli and Hernandez's

[2] Hernandez's *Palomar* stories are sprawling and shift focus between many of the characters. Luba does not even appear in some stories, or only appears in the background. However, she seems to be the subject of or involved in the majority of Gilbert's work.

Luba. Of course, both women have very large breasts. But their breasts become a metonymy for these women's broader life experiences. Both are strong-willed Latin American women who have survived abuse, especially in the form of sexual violence. They are single mothers, raising children and working at the same time. They are opinionated, short-tempered, physically imposing, difficult to love, but impossible to hate. In this chapter, I will argue that by comparing Beli to Luba, Díaz highlights the irony that despite having such "plentiful" breasts, both women are terrible mothers. Rather than simply blaming the women for their children's difficulty establishing their identities in a complex, postcolonial world, however, both Díaz and Hernandez encourage readers to see Luba and Beli not in parts—mothers *or* sex objects *or* individual subjects *or* complex metaphors—but as ambivalent and complex wholes: mothers *and* sex objects *and* individual subjects *and* horrible *and* entirely lovable all at the same time. Both authors reinforce this message through plot and formal elements—especially by disrupting the visual natures of their respective media—challenging readers to see the whole woman, and in the process, to grow more whole themselves.

Drawing Connections

Oscar Wao is the story of Oscar de León's search for love—a search made all the more difficult by the fact that Oscar is a massively overweight Dominican-American super-geek with limited social skills and even less self confidence. Narrated by Yunior, a young Dominican-American wannabe writer and occasional boyfriend of Oscar's sister Lola, *Oscar Wao* is Yunior's attempt to make sense of Oscar's life and sacrificial death. Yunior learns that in order to understand Oscar, he must widen his focus: he expands his narrative to explore the life of Oscar's mother, Belicia Hypatía Cabral ("Beli"); uncovers

the history of Oscar's grandfather, Abelard Cabral; and includes Oscar's older sister Lola's recounting of her troubled adolescence. Like Oscar, Yunior discovers a curse following the de León/Cabral family called the fukú implicates them all in the long history of colonialism and its legacy—a history Yunior must comes to terms with himself.

Díaz saturates his novel with allusions to rock and roll, hip hop, dance styles, Dominican history and popular culture, fantasy and science fiction novels, drug culture, American literature, B-movies, Japanese popular culture, New Jersey landmarks, and roleplaying games, and more. Amidst the seemingly overwhelming scope of Yunior's knowledge, comics are by no means the sole source of allusion in Díaz's text, but they are one of the chief sources of allusive material from its title to its final pages. The "Brief Wondrous Life" of the title is an allusion to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comic series.[3] Yunior calls himself Uatu the Watcher (another character in the *Fantastic Four* universe); drops references to superhero comic characters as well known as the X-Men and the cast of *Watchmen*, as well as to more obscure figures like Gorilla Grodd. He cites comic creators such as authors like Frank Miller, Alan Moore and even mentions the cult British comic book magazine *2000AD*. He refers to independent or "alternative" comics creators such as Daniel Clowes and, several times to the Hernandez Brothers' series *Love and Rockets*.

[3] Sharp-eyed readers will open the book to discover that the "brief…life" of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is quickly echoed by the novel's first epigraph: "Of what import are brief, nameless lives…to Galactus??" This epigraph is drawn from a central storyline in Stan Lee's and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comics of the 1960s, now known as "The Galactus Trilogy" (comprised of three issues originally published March-May, 1966: "The Coming of Galactus," #48; "If This Be Doomsday," #49; and "The Startling Saga of the Silver Surfer," #50 (Lee and Kirby)). The line is spoken by Galactus himself; a destructive super-being who existed before the Big Bang. He does not see the life of any mortal being as worthy of attention, much less of celebration, his invocation of "brief, nameless lives" resonates with the novel's title to creates a sense of ambivalence, irony, and tragedy also indicated in Hemingway's title.

Love and Rockets began in 1981 as the independent comics publication of three brothers: Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez. Mario soon moved on, however, and *Love and Rockets* is now primarily associated with the work of Gilbert and Jaime. The brothers grew up (with three other siblings) in a Mexican-American family in Oxnard, California. Their mother loved comic books and instilled this love in her children. As the boys matured their fascination with comics and other forms of popular culture, especially punk and hip hop music, translated into a desire to make their own comic books. The result was *Love and Rockets* (Aldama 171, 182). Within a few years of its initial publication, *Love and Rockets* became one of the most respected and influential titles in a growing alternative comics movement, winning multiple comic industry awards and gaining fans across the globe.

Love and Rockets is unique in American comics history for several reasons, not the least of which is being the first highly acclaimed US-based comics series by Latin Americans about Latin Americans. From early on, both brothers moved away from a linear timelines, instead creating episodes of larger stories that constantly jumped back and forth in time. Their characters change visually—they age, change hairstyles and fashion sense, gain and lose weight—a very rare occurrence in comics serials. Rather than work together—for example, one brother writes while the other draws—Gilbert and Jaime almost never collaborate on stories, and instead created two unique and self-sustaining narrative worlds between the covers of each issue. Gilbert's stories follow the residents of Palomar, a small town "south of the US Border."[4] Jaime's stories center on Maggie Chascarillo, a bisexual Latina punk and former mechanic, and her circle of

[4] The exact location is never mentioned. Most readers assume Palomar to be a coastal town in Mexico, others have assumed it to be somewhere in Central America.

friends and family in a suburb of southern California called "Hoppers." Thus, *Love and Rockets* is not a "graphic novel" per se, but rather two serialized narrative storyworlds combined under a single title.

In a text as overflowing with pop culture references as *Oscar Wao*, focusing on *Love and Rockets* may appear to be an arbitrary choice. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Watchmen* have a more obvious impact on the text, and references to other texts like *Akira* and *Virus* appear more frequently throughout the novel. In the over three hundred pages of novel, there are only three explicit references to *Love and Rockets*. Despite this, the Hernandez brothers' influence on Díaz is considerable. In multiple interviews, Díaz has mentioned *Love and Rockets* as a major influence in his writing and imagination. In a *Los Angeles Times* piece about Los Bros' work, he claims Gilbert should, "be considered one of the greatest American storytellers" (Timberg). Speaking with Latino/Latina culture blog *La Bloga*, Díaz called Jaime and Gilbert "the secret fathers of [*Oscar Wao*]," going on to say that the brothers taught him "how to write" (Barrios). Díaz is not alone in his praise—in celebration of the relaunch of *Love and Rockets* in after a 10 year hiatus in 2001, *Salon*'s Amy Benfer called Gilbert's Luba and Jaime's Maggie "among the most fleshed-out female characters in American Literature" (Benfer).

While *Love and Rockets* has a niche audience, most fans of independent and alternative comics are at least aware of Luba, the central character of Gilbert's storyline. Luba is known for one characteristic more than any other: she has *enormous* breasts (see Figure 3.1). Therefore, when Yunior describes the adolescent growth spurt of Oscar's mother Beli, it makes sense that he can find no better comparison than Luba:

> …that summer our girl caught a cuerpazo so berserk that only a pornographer or a comic-book artist could have designed it with a clear

> conscience. Every neighborhood has its tetúa, but Beli could have put them all to shame, she was La Tetúa Suprema: her tetas were globes so implausibly titanic they made generous souls pity their bearer and drove every straight male in their vicinity to reevaluate his sorry life. She had the Breasts of Luba (35DDD).[5] (91-92)

35DDD actually seems an understatement for Luba, but the connection between the two characters—Beli and Luba—is more important than this specific detail. Beli's breasts are not just the creation of a sexual fantasy, they are central to her character and plot. One of the main undercurrents of tension in the novel is Beli's struggle with breast cancer, which begins when the children are young and is the impetus for Lola running away. At the end of the novel, Beli finally succumbs to the disease when it recurs shortly after Oscar's death.

Beli's history is closely linked with the sexual awakening she experiences after the summer growth spurt Yunior describes in the previous passage. Her new body shape leads to her expulsion from the prestigious private school El Redentor after her first relationship with Jack Pujols ends in heartbreak and disgrace. After dropping out, Beli gets a job at a Chinese restaurant against her adoptive mother La Inca's wishes. This job leads her to meeting the Gangster in a nightclub, and to her relationship with the Gangster, who happens to be married to the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo's sister. Upon learning of the affair and Beli's resulting pregnancy, the Gangster's wife orders her cronies to beat Beli so severely she miscarries and nearly dies. When Beli finally recovers, La Inca finally decides to send her to to the US to keep her safe. In short, the sudden appearance of her "Breasts of Luba" mark the beginning of her sexual awakening,

[5] "Cuerpazo" means an amazing or exemplary body; "tetúa" (formed from "teta," a rude slang term for "breasts" akin to "tits" in English) means a large-breasted woman—La Tetúa Suprema being the "Supreme" large-breasted woman.

which through the complex series of events enumerated above, ultimately leads to Lola and Oscar's lives in New Jersey—the source of Yunior's novel. The appearance of Beli's "Breasts of Luba" is essentially the novel's primal scene.

There are more connections between Luba and Beli than their distinguishing physical feature. Both women suffer for falling in love. As young women, both become involved with a much older men involved in dangerous, illegal trades. Both women suffer at the hands of their lovers' other lovers. Both women are forced to flee for their safety and eventually end up in the US. While Beli leaves directly for the US, Luba is able to flee to the countryside for a while (her husband's nefarious connections catch up with her in Palomar, forcing her to finally leave for America). Both women lose their first sons before they are born, and in both cases it is due to the repercussions of their lovers' business. Yunior jokes that Beli's breasts are the result of hitting "the biochemical jackpot" (91), but Beli and Luba's breasts are calamities—trouble they did not ask for. Though both women quickly learn how to take advantage of the attention their breasts bring them, both are keenly aware that this attention results in physical and sexual violence, especially when they were children and young women.

But the women's physiques do not only bring unwanted attention from men. Beli's neighbors take pleasure in blaming her for seducing the rich Jack Pujols and "getting what she deserves" when she is expelled from school after they are caught having sex in a supply closet. Pujols, who only noticed Beli after her growth spurt, goes unpunished. Like Beli, Luba seems incapable of extricating her individual identity from her breasts, which come to represent her sexuality on the whole. Because the women's breasts are so large, people assume that Beli and Luba are sexually dangerous, threats to stable

relationships and social order who will lure men away from their families. The accusation of "homewrecking" is simply untrue for Beli, who has only three lovers in her lifetime (Jack Pujols, the Gangster, and Oscar and Lola's unnamed father). In Hernandez's Palomar stories, characters like Carmen, Chelo, and Pipo vocally express their distrust of Luba. Luba is sexually active, but not the predator many women in the town claim she is.

The assumption of Luba and Beli's dangerous sexuality has a darker connection in the minds of their critics: both women's supposed sexual deviance is linked to their racial status. After being expelled from El Redentor, Beli's neighbors whisper, "I told you that blackie was good for nothing" (102) explicitly connecting her failure to her dark skin. Similarly, Luba receives two epithets upon arriving in Palomar: "slut," based on Palomarians' immediate assumption of her overactive sexuality, and "La India," based on her native heritage. In both texts, therefore, these women's breasts are, like race, an impossible-to-hide physical feature by which others judge them. The prejudice against women owning their sexuality is linked to racism, thus connecting Beli and Luba's struggles to systems of both patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Tell Me About Your Mother

Both Díaz and Hernandez emphasize the importance of a mother in the developing identities of their children through narrative. *Oscar Wao* is, in many Yunior's attempt to make sense of his friend Oscar's life, but in order to do so Yunior must explore Beli's relationship with Oscar (and, by extension, how Beli's history shaped that relationship). In "Human Diastrophism," an important early storyline in the world of Gilbert Hernandez's Palomar, the breakdown of Luba's relationship with her eldest daughter Maricela is as central to the plot as the town's effort to find and stop a serial

killer terrorizing Palomar. These specific narratives align with broader theories of child development. Certainly, that a child's parents play a large role in their development is common sense. However, the concepts of theorist and therapist Melanie Klein are particularly interesting in regards to the importance of a child's relationship with her mother in the development of a child's psychology. Because of the importance of breasts in her theory and in the characterization of Beli and Luba, Klein's work provides an interesting lens through which to interpret these characters and their functions in the texts.

Working in Britain in the mid-20th century, Klein is a prominent figure in psychoanalytic Attachment Theory and one of the founders of Object-Relations Theory. While Klein bases her understanding of the growth and establishment of the human psyche on Freudian ideas, she differs from traditional Freudian analysis in several important respects. Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that Klein argues the process of ego formation begins in infancy, much earlier than Freud's conception of ego formation during the Oedipal complex. This earlier timeline deemphasizes the prominence of the child's relationship to her father and instead focuses on the child's relationship to her mother.

The foundational argument of Object-Relations theory is that and infant forms an ego—an identity, a sense of self—through her relationship to the objects around her. Objects here are not necessarily "things" in the colloquial sense, but instead refer to any thing, person, or concept that a person can project onto and into. Klein argues that as an infant, a child does not understand objects separate from herself. Unable to perceive the world beyond her immediate experience, the infant is unable to see *whole* objects and can

only understand the part of the object with which she is interacting. Klein refers to this partially perceived object as a “part object,” and argues that the primary part-object is the mother’s breast[6]. Unable to see and/or perceive her mother as a whole person, or as something not existing solely for her needs, the infant further separates the mother’s breast into two sides: good and bad. The good breast is the breast that provides the child with comfort and nourishment. The bad breast is the absent breast or the empty breast, when the child wants food or comfort but cannot get it. This part object is bad, and the child wants to expel it. The only way he can express their displeasure with lack is to try and expel the “bad object” from his world (often by crying, screaming, and defecating).

Klein refers to this stage of development as the “paranoid-schizoid position.” As the name implies, the child’s understanding of herself is split in stark contrast between the “good” and “bad.” In *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, R. D. Hinshelwood summarizes this postition, stating that “A part-object exists, in the paranoid-schizoid position, in relation to the bodily sensations of the subject. Through projection into the object it becomes a narcissistic extension of the ego’s own experiences and the separateness of the good object is not acknowledged” (379). Likewise, the infant cannot comprehend the negative feelings associated with the “bad breast” come from within the child herself. The infant cannot comprehend ambivalence, cannot imagine a world outside her own omnipotence. Everything is divided into “good” and “bad” part-objects, wherein the child embraces and accepts the good part-objects and attempts to expel the bad-part objects.

[6] Here Klein is using a bit of shorthand; her theory does not only apply to a breast-fed infant. The “mother’s breast” is, in this case, the source of food, comfort, and warmth—whether that is a bottle or a breast is ultimately not relevant to the child’s ego-formation.

Of course, what the child does not understand at this point is that the good breast and the bad breast are part of the same whole. Eventually, in large part due to the literal ability to perceive the mother as a whole—infant vision cannot focus on objects further than a foot away until the child is at least a few months old—the child begins to understand that the good breast and the bad breast are both *parts* of whole object—the mother. We can only either love or hate part-objects. However, "in the depressive position," the term Klein uses for this new ability to see the whole object, "feelings for the object acquire a stability and the new dimension of *concern* for the object. It is an achievement to reach a capacity for concern because it is painful to the subject—the object's pain is the subject's pain" (Hinshelwood 470). A child is not able to imagine her Self (to distinguish between I and not-I), until she moves beyond organizing and the world into disconnected part-objects and accepting ambivalence—that good and bad coexists in the same "object."

Klein's use of "depressive" here is purposeful—for though the ability to see and interact with whole objects is necessary to form an ego and to empathize and relate to other people and the world around the child, the depressive position also marks the end of a child's omnipotence and the infant's acceptance—usually not particularly happily—that the world is ambivalent. When the child sees the mother *instead* of the breast, she must come to terms with ambivalence and also acknowledge that the mother contains multitudes. This revelation leads the child to understand herself as a separate whole with her own ambivalence. An important though not immediately obvious aspect of Klein's theory is that she does not use the word *stage* like Freud or Lacan—a word that implies linear movement through and beyond certain stages. Klein refers to these mental

topographies as *positions*. Though the initial movement from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position marks the beginning of a child's ego formation, throughout life she argues that we constantly move between one and the other—and most of us spending the majority of time in the paranoid-schizoid position, occasionally reaching the ambivalent enlightenment of the depressive position.

Klein's theories are inherently relational, understanding individuals not on their own terms but through the way they relate to other humans (and objects). Community, family, and connection are major themes in both Díaz's and Hernandez's texts: in *Oscar Wao*, Yunior can only begin to make sense of Oscar's life by examining himself, Lola, Beli, Oscar's grandfather Abelard, and even by imagining a future meeting with Isis, Lola's daughter and Oscar's niece. While Oscar's search for love may seem individually motivated (he wants to experience love and, in particular, sex), it is ultimately a search for an intimate connection. It should be no surprise that understanding connections between individuals is the key to understanding the broader narratives of history—for the journey into the network of relationships that defines unearths Oscar's connection to the fukú—a curse which acts as an avatar for the crushing weight of the history of colonialism.

While Luba might be considered the central character of Palomar, she is far from the "main character" in a more traditional sense—the text moves between her point of view and her family's and neighbors—the Palomar stories build the community through attention to individuals, and builds individual characters through their relation to other members of the community. In fact, it would not be hard to read the world of Palomar in the Kleinian sense: a world that builds itself through the interconnection and relationships

of its multiple parts—in this case, its characters. Taken individually, each character can tell a fascinating story; even though Luba is the most recognized character and has the most "page time," but only reading the Luba sections of the story would leave a reader bewildered. The world of Palomar only coheres when all of its residents are taken into account.[7] Though I focus on Luba in the chapter, it is difficult to understand Luba's story without Heraclio, to understand Heraclio without Carmen or Sergio or Manuel or Pipo or Guadalupe or Gato or Chelo…Despite the adage, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," in the case of Palomar, the whole *is precisely* the sum of its parts; understanding the importance of each piece is exactly the point.

Mother's Milk

Of the many roles they play in their narratives, Beli's and Luba's roles as mothers are the most troubling and complicated. Because of the association between breasts and motherhood (both generally and in its particular role in Kleinian thought), the overabundance of these women's breasts could easily be seen as ironic. They are quick-tempered, violent, and often downright cruel. When readers finally encounter the women's histories, we understand, and even begin to forgive, their idiosyncrasies and

[7] This is not only true of Palomar; both Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez choose to create two different worlds and sets of characters, and yet also explicitly choose to combine the works under the same title. Each brother creates a huge cast of characters within each world, emphasizing the diversity of each setting. The brothers retired *Love and Rockets* in 1996 after publishing its fiftieth issue. In both cases, they continued to write stories about the Palomar and HOPPERS characters, but their stories only counted as *Love and Rockets* stories if they were originally published together. In "Borders and Monuments," an elegant and insightful review of the collected editions of *Palomar* and *Locas* (released in 2005 by Fantagraphics Press), James Gardner argues the brothers' work as embodies two critical stances, creating a synergy that affects readers' experience of *Love and Rockets*. In the original issues, Jaime and Gilbert's stories were interspersed; each told part of their separate stories in each issue and small one- or two-page stories and sketches were interspersed with longer narrative episodes. In the collected graphic novels (*Locas* and *Palomar*), on the other hand, each brother's work appears on its own. This chronological and organized composition of each individual's work provides an easier grasp of the plots and continuity of each storyline. However, Gardner argues that though "there might at first seem to be little of great moment that is sacrificed in the translation…these moments are more than simply filler or digressions, just as the interweaving of the two narrative universes in the original serial publication was more than simply contingency of the form" (119).

their coldness. But first impressions are hard to break, and Beli's first appearance in *Oscar Wao* is deeply troubling. After being dumped by his childhood sweetheart, a seven-year-old Oscar comes home in tears. His mother's response to him is chilling:

> What's wrong with you? his mother asked…When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de León nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear. Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it! She threw him to the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you.[8] (14)

Rather than comforting her son or giving him thoughtful advice on how to win his girlfriend back, Beli beats Oscar. She sounds more like a pimp than a mother. And even if this wasn't disturbing enough on its own, when readers encounter her own history with abusive lovers, her "advice" also reveals itself as evidence of a tragic cycle of violence.

Luba shoots heroin, smokes, and drinks heavily through her first pregnancy, only realizing she wanted her child after he was stillborn. This does not stop her from drinking and smoking during her pregnancy with her first daughter, Maricela (Luba blames the hospital for her son's death, not her own actions). Her difficulty coming to terms with her role as a mother is particularly clear in Gilbert's serial "Human Diastrophism" (Figure 3.2).[9] In fact, the story itself starts by juxtaposing Luba's bad mothering with murder. On the first page, Luba's second daughter Guadalupe overhears Luba and Maricela fighting. Maricela enters their shared room in tears as Guadalupe fights back her own. Turning the page, the reader encounters a desiccated landscape with the name "Tomaso" floating over a decomposing corpse. Tomaso is later revealed as the name of a serial killer terrorizing Palomar. The next panel is a silhouette of monkeys, a symbol throughout the text for

[8] Beli's tirade translates, "You're crying over a girl?...Smack her then see if the little whore respects you."

[9] Originally titled "Blood of Palomar."

animalistic violence and a metaphor for the town's volatile fear and anxiety while Tomaso is at large. The third panel is Luba's face, contorted in the pain of childbirth. Beside her, the captions introduce Luba: "The woman never wanted children, but they came anyway" (20). The introduction of the serial killer Tomaso is thus visually bookended by images of Luba's difficult relationship with her role as a mother.

Hernandez connects the abjection of the corpse, the menace of a murderer, the violence of nature, and Luba's attitude toward being a mother in the composition of one page. On this second page alone, the four panels are identical in size and evenly spaced, emphasizing the similarity, if not downright equivalence of, their content. While the similar panel sizes seem to indict Luba's attitude toward mothering, Hernandez does utilize subtle formal shifts in the final panel that allow a gentler reading. A straight vertical line separates the caption from the image—an aspect absent in the previous panels, where captions are put into small, free-floating boxes. The caption itself is very small in the large, open space provided by this line—de-emphasizing the caption's contents when compared to the other captions, which mostly fill their boxes. Finally, the image of portrays Luba in extreme distress and pain, creating sympathy for her and maybe even allowing the audience to understand her lack of desire for children.

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Figure 3.2: Luba "never wanted children, but they came any way…" (*Human Diastrophism* 30)

to indict Luba's attitude toward mothering, Hernandez uses subtle formal shifts in the final panel that allow a gentler reading. A straight vertical line separates the caption from the image—an aspect absent in the previous panels, where captions are put into small, free-floating boxes. The caption itself is very small in the large, open space provided by this line—de-emphasizing the caption's contents when compared to the other captions, which mostly fill their boxes. Finally, the image of portrays Luba in extreme distress and pain, creating sympathy for her and providing the audience context to understand her lack of desire for children.

However, Hernandez does not stop with a single page, and the following page leaves no doubt regarding the narrator's criticism of Luba. The narrator recounts the major events of Luba's life, revealing in one of the final captions that "Luba has stated that if she could change anything in her past, she sure would have thought twice about having any of the five to whom she often refers to as her 'little albatrosses'" (21) (Figure 3.3). In contrast to the previous page, which builds sympathy by portraying Luba's pain, this page makes fun of her as she childishly Luba sticks her tongue out at a newborn baby (likely Maricela) in juxtaposition to Ofelia's massive smile. Luba's statement in the captions is more troubling than the image. Her past includes being abandoned by her mother, losing her father, being raped and sexually assaulted, marrying a drug dealer at sixteen, and being forced to flee for her life when her husband's business dealings go sour. However, the narrator tells us "Luba has stated" she would not change these obvious tragedies, but rather choose not to have had her children.

In *Oscar Wao* both Lola and Oscar are subject to Beli's wrath, though Oscar generally receives less abuse from his mother than his older sister. As in *Love and Rockets*, the most contentious relationship is between mother and eldest daughter. For Lola, the parental relationship is something very different than the idyllic nuclear family of the American popular culture imagination. Yunior narrates the passages that focus on Oscar, and his description of Beli is significantly kinder and less focused on her cruelty. Yunior seems to forgive Beli her transgressions, even finding amusement in her crueler moments. Lola, on the other hand, presents Beli not as a purely admirable figure—a tough, cancer-surviving single immigrant mother supporting two children by working multiple jobs—but something more complicated. Her tenacity comes at the expense of mercy and kindness, her drive to survive and succeed deprives her children of her presence in their lives and dries up her ability to nurture them.

Figure 3.3: Luba rejects her newborn (*Human Diastrophism* 21).

In Lola's section of the novel ("Chapter 2: Wildwood, 1982-1985"), she reflects on her life with Beli, remembering how she contemplated running away from home as the relations between her and the cancer-ridden mother deteriorated:

> But God, how we fought! Sick or not, dying or not, my mother wasn't going to go down easily. She wasn't una pendeja. I'd seen her slap grown men, push white police officers onto their asses, curse a whole group of bochincheras. She had raised me and my brother by herself, she had worked three jobs until she could buy the house we live in, she had survived being abandoned by my father, she had come from Santo

> Domingo all by herself and as a young girl she claimed to have been beaten, set on fire, left for dead. There was no way she was going to let me go without killing me first. Figurín de mierda, she called me. You think you're someone but you ain't nada.[10] (59-60)

This passage starts almost as admiration—the usual praise for a mother who might not be as present or outwardly caring as her children would like because life has hardened her. By the end of this passage, though, it is clear that Lola doesn't think Beli's life is any excuse for her meanness. She doesn't know the truth of her mother's experience; there is no trust that Beli's story of her childhood (a story Yunior believes enough to recount in the novel) is anything more than a "claim." Lola moves from the almost-admiring description of Beli's toughness to reveal that her mother's rough exterior does not hide a soft heart. While we might take Lola's statement "There was no way she was letting me go without killing me first" as the hyperbole of an overactive teenage imagination, the following line does not allow such illusions to continue. Lola might be serious. In her mother's own words, Lola isn't special or worthy of love: she's a "piece of shit" in her mother's eyes, "nada" (60).

But Lola's representation of her mother is not entirely critical. Shortly after arriving in the Dominican Republic (Lola's punishment for running away), Lola describes a moment at the end of a phone call in which Beli lets her hardened exterior slip: "Just know that I would die for you, she told me the last time we talked. And before I could say anything she hung up" (72). In Lola's absence Beli seems far more capable of sharing her emotions. Surprised and moved, the tenacity of Lola's hope for reconciliation reveals she may be more liker her mother than she might like to admit. However, this

[10] "Una pendeja" means "an idiot," here Lola also implies her mother is not a pushover; "bochincheras" refers to a group of gossipy women. Beli tells Lola, "Piece of shit…You think you're someone but you ain't nothing."

hope deflates almost immediately on Lola's return to the US: "And then the big moment, the one every daughter dreads. My mother looking me over. I'd never been in better shape, never felt more beautiful and desirable in my life, and what does the bitch say? Coño, pero tú sí eres fea"[11] (208). She continues, "Those fourteen months—gone. Like they'd never happened" (208).

Beli's cruelty seems unforgivable, and yet at this very moment, Lola explains to her readers that she actually *understands* her mother: "Now that I'm a mother myself I realize that she could not have been any different. That's who she was…You always think with your parents that at least at the very end something will change, something will get better. Not for us" (208). What for many would be the kind of hurtful insult that drives a family apart instead allows Lola to understand her mother in a way she never had before. Lola even hints that she is continuing the cycle—whatever kind of person Lola is will not change just because she has now become a mother herself. Though she is by no means as cruel or difficult as Beli, Lola now sees through the myth of motherhood as a magically transformative experience. Identity is shaped by a lifetime of experiences, and being pregnant is only one of Beli's many traumas. In this moment, Lola sees Beli as a complicated human, not just as a mother. This understanding is not necessarily freeing, though. Lola's tone, distilled in her plaintive "Not for us," betrays her resignation and regret.

This struggle between mother and daughter is major subject in both *Oscar Wao* and "Human Diastrophism." Maricela and Lola attempt to construct their identities in the shadows of their formidable mothers. Both experience a tension between their shared

[11] "Damn, but you're still ugly."

traits and stark differences with their mothers. Yunior even connects Beli's character to Lola's in his introduction of Beli (coming directly after Lola's portion of the narrative): "Hypatía Belicia Cabral…who, like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewheres" (77). This passage immediately follows Lola's point-of-view chapter, one which makes explicit her struggle with this "longing for elsewheres," as well as the physical, mental, and emotional pain it causes her. But Beli does not tell her daughter of her own struggles with the longing, and she refuses to sympathize with her daughter's similar longing (at least as far as we know). Beli's greatest sin as a mother is not what she says, cruel as it may seem; it's what she doesn't say. The novel repeatedly thematizes the fraught relationship between telling stories and remaining silent, even going so far as to compare writers and dictators in the way that they both silence other voices to create a particular, singular narrative out of many possible points of view.[12] While telling stories can be silencing in its own way, in Beli's case, her refusal to tell stories is both a symptom of and enabler to the family curse. Her own painful adolescence laid bare, we learn through Yunior—not through Lola—that she is, if anything, her mother's daughter.

Hernandez constructs a similar dynamic between Luba and Maricela in "Human Diastrophism" during Luba's first attempt to talk with Maricela after hurting her arm (Figure 3.4). The first few panels visually highlight the differences between Maricela and her mother. When Luba asks Maricela to come sit next to her on their sofa, Hernandez renders Maricela in bold lines, without shading or excessive detail. Luba, on the other hand, is rendered with thin and fidgety lines which, especially around her eyes and

[12] "Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*" (97n).

cheekbones emphasize her age. Luba’s hair is matte black and wild while Maricela’s is smooth and shiny; Luba’s face is gaunt, Maricela’s round. The busy pattern of the sofa makes Luba’s outfit disappear, and as Luba calls Maricela to sit beside her, Maricela stands out against the almost patterns.

When Maricela sits beside her mother on the sofa, the renderings shift to emphasize the similarities between mother and daughter. Like her mother, Maricela is well endowed, and in the fifth and sixth panels, Maricela’s and Luba’s breasts are aligned to highlight this shared trait. In the sixth and seventh two panels, the women’s posture and gestures mirror each other. The moment of connection comes to an end, though, with Luba’s attempt to apologize. They turn away from each other, and in the second panel on the next page, Maricela gets up, her white dress (at least on the page) breaking free of the pattern which a few panels before seemed to engulf her. The visual separation from the pattern of her mother’s dress parallels Maricela’s effort to escape the patterns of identity, identification, and personality that connect her to Luba (Figure 3.5).

The dialogue between the two also indicates this tension. The two preceding panels highlighted Luba and Maricela’s similarities. Luba begins her apology to Maricela highlighting their differences, claiming her daughter has “a much nicer figure than I had when I was your age” (72). By bringing up their ages, Luba attempts to reestablish her position as the mother, and thus her authority. She moves on to ask Maricela about her arm, and her daughter replies with a typical teenage brattiness: “*You* tell *me*” (72). Just as the dialogue falls into a typical mother-and-teen-daughter pattern, the tables flip again. Luba responds, “*That* was an *accident*, Maricela! Do you think I go around hurting my kids on purpose?! *God* you’re *so mean* to me, you—*Oh*, let’s forget it, *huh*?” (73).

Figure 3.4: Luba and Maricela talk in "Human Diastrophism" (72)

Figure 3.5: Luba's attempt at reconciliation fails (*Human Diastrophism* 73)

Especially with the words Hernandez highlights (marked by their italics), Luba's tone shifts from authoritarian to bratty in the space of a single panel. Luba's verbal slip undoes her position of authority and allows Maricela the chance to escape, denying the possibility of reconciliation between the two. Maricela abandons Luba, leaving her alone and deflated.

As the scene shifts, Hernandez underscores the relationship between the individual lives of Palomarians and the welfare of the community as a whole. A caption box bridges the gutter between Luba's last panel and the next scene, stating, "Man, is this town sure wound up tight…" (73). Following the interaction between Maricela and Luba, this caption takes on a humorous tone by stating the obvious. However, the placement of the caption as both inside Luba's home and outside the town highlights that the tension of

Luba's family and of Palomar more broadly are inextricably linked—a chicken-and-egg conundrum in which each side always already reflects the other. The artwork and page composition work together to highlight this connection. On the far right of the panel depicting Luba's home, Hernandez draws a front door—it is positioned at such an angle that it appears it could open out into the exterior scene of the following panel. In doing so the gutter, the liminal space separating panels from each other, becomes part of the drawing by looking like a cross section of the wall of Luba's home as though it were a dollhouse. The illusion of a boundary between Luba's home and the outside world (the drawing of the door and wall) allows Luba's private space—and the stuff of the relationships it holds—to appear permeable. The reader can see outside and inside at the same time, combining separate spaces into one complex, interconnected world.

Díaz's single allusion to Luba's breasts thus leads the reader to a complex, deeply imbedded series of thematic connections between Beli and Luba. Seen together, Luba and Beli represent a whole plethora of problems caused by cultural stereotypes imposed on Latino women: their exotic sexuality is not cause for celebration but despair and acts as a metaphor for the political suppression, oppression, and advantage-taking implemented by Western, white culture and from the troubled political histories of their own culture. The broader association of femininity with a pure-hearted, unconditional mother role is challenged by Beli's and Luba's fierce love for their children as well as their own ferocity. The women are easy to criticize (for their cruelty, their short-sightedness, their stubbornness) and yet at the same time are so deeply sympathetic (for their resilience, their humor, their depth) that they become the centers upon which the worlds of Díaz's novel and Hernandez's comics turn.

Look at the Book

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the similarities between Díaz's Beli and Gilbert Hernandez's Luba are striking, and comparing the two enhances the themes both texts share. The formal aspects of both works—especially the formal elements that engage with visual meaning-making by presenting a self-reflexive challenges to the act of looking, and particularly the act of looking as defined by Western "Modernity." Because of the obvious "double nature" of representation in comics (that it necessarily contains words and pictures working together), comics are a particularly productive space for examining verbal and visual representation not as antithetical to each other, but instead as what art historian and critic James Elkins calls "an articulated continuum of signs" in which "every marked surface will have a measure of pictoriality and a measure of writing" (158). My training as a comics scholar has made me acutely aware of the way verbal and visual representation interact –not just in comics but in all media with a visual dimension. In my previous chapter, "Image/Text: Translation and the Problem of Comics," I argue (in more detail) that comics studies can provide critical language to discuss the impact of the visual or pictorial elements of a text on the way readers interpret the words of the text. In Díaz and Hernandez, this challenge to the gaze ties back to a Kleinian reading of the texts that encourages readers to move beyond looking at "parts" and to see the "whole picture" instead.

There is a power dynamic involved in the act of looking, one in which the looker has certain agency and power denied to the looked-upon. This has been the subject of many important contributions to research, especially in postcolonial theory. Edward Said has argued, "The act of representing others almost always involves violence to the subject

of representation." In postcolonial theory, this violence has largely been associated with the way imperial powers establish the otherness of colonial subjects through exoticization or the attempt to (over) determine racial difference through discourses of science.[13] In her article on visual riposte as a form of postcolonial resistance, Paula Amad goes so far as to describe this relationship as a "visual pathology" (49). Hundreds of years of political, economic, and ideological oppression and suppression have resulted in the naturalization this particular relationship between the looker and the looked-upon.

In "Notes on Postcolonial Visual Culture, Arvad Rajagopal attempts to reveal this "naturalized" gaze and to theorize ways to challenge its power dynamics. He argues "modern modes of seeing presuppose a disembodied gaze, a view 'from nowhere' that produces data whose validity does not depend on the person who sees" (15). The "modern mode" is not natural but instead created by what he calls the "presupposition" of a "disembodied gaze" (15). The disembodied gaze assumes the looked-upon, human or object, is simply objective "data" that does not change fundamentally depending on who is (or is not) looking. While some may acknowledge the subjectivity of interpreting data, the data itself—in this case visual stimuli—is somehow standard and absolute. The looker, able to make sense of what he or she sees, has an active agency while the looked-upon is little more than a passive conduit for the will of the looker.

But what happens when the act of looking is thematized, when the looked-upon refuses to be passive? Rajagopal argues that unlike the disembodied gaze, an "embodied gaze," will

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[13] This form of "scientific racism" sought to typify racial difference in scientific, biological, and genetic terms. The practice was especially important to the colonial project as a way of justifying European powers' colonization of what they saw as objectively—that is to say, scientifically provable—"lesser" cultures and races.

> …confirm who is seeing and who is seen…Rather than providing a view from nowhere, the embodied gaze validates existing rules of social space rather than disrupts them, because the sense of space is not empty, homogeneous, or infinite; rather it corresponds to the presumption of a bounded, known universe. (15)

The "embodied" gaze works to emphasize the physical experience and real-world consequences of looking. An embodied gaze is aware of the unreliability of vision, an unreliability that can be physical (because the cones and rods of our individual eyes are unique) but also historical. "Objective" visual data—colors, shapes, movement—are always already imbued with socially and historically determined implications. By forcing lookers to engage with the physical act of looking and its consequences in the real, physical, social world around them, postcolonial visual artists encourage an embodied gaze to effectively challenge the modes and culture of looking key to Modern and Western (hence colonial) notions of power.

Both Díaz and Hernandez ask challenge viewer to embrace this embodied gaze in their texts. This challenge is more obvious in *Love and Rockets* because it includes pictures, and Hernandez does so with the same detail Díaz uses to explicitly connect Luba and Beli: the size of Luba's breasts. Because of their exaggerated size, Luba's breasts are impossible to ignore, even if a reader is quickly flipping through *Love and Rockets* pages. They are a mystery, the purpose or meaning of which is never explained; they just exist. As I discussed earlier, it might be easy to dismiss Luba's enormous breasts as sexual wish fulfillment, but their presence is not limited to such fantasy within the narrative, nor is Hernandez's art in the "Palomar" stories defined by extreme caricature. His world has a consistent aesthetic that presents a variety of body types in relatively realistic proportions compared to the setting in the background. Hernandez

certainly utilizes caricature and exaggeration in his cartooning, but nothing in his series—especially in the first few storylines—compares to the excess of Luba's breasts.[14] Luba's breasts are thus out of place in the comic; they are like a splash of color on a black and white page or a cartoon drawing inserted into a photograph. They pull a reader's eye, even away, even disrupting the flow of the story by drawing the eyes away from the panel-to-panel transitions of the narrative to her comically exaggerated features.

In *Latin American Fiction and the Narrative of the Perverse*, Patrick O'Connor argues, "Luba's breasts are her open secret, on display even when covered, even when her men show no interest in them" (200). He describes the audience approach to her figure as one with an "air of knowingness" (200), where even if we pretend we don't see them, we know they are there. The diegetic and visual disruption of Luba's breasts is clear in Figure 3.6, a series of panels in "Human Diastrophism." Here, the focus of the narrative should be the ridiculousness of Khamo's new hairstyle, and the freedom it gives Luba as she no longer feels wronged by his rejection of her. And yet, the readers' eyes are inevitably drawn not her face, but the large area of "white space" occupied by her breasts, and the rounded "Y" of her cleavage—the center of the center panel. In this scene, the effect is emphasized by the amount of visual information jammed into the panel—from the multiple scratchy lines indicated Luba is shaking with laughter, the the speech bubbles, to the sound effects of her laughter, the relative visual "quiet" of her décolletage stands out.

[14] As Gilbert's story progresses, we meet some long-lost members of Luba's family. She appears to have inherited her defining physical feature from her mother, María—as have Luba's two half-sisters. One of these sisters, Petra, chooses to have a breast reduction. However, because of the time-line of Díaz's novel, I choose to focus on the early and middle-career "Palomar" stories, from "Chelo's Burden" to "Poison River." María, Fritz, and Petra play almost no role at this stage.

Figure 3.6: Luba's distracting cleavage (*Human Diastrophism* 111)

While I have discussed the implications of the gaze in postcolonial visual culture, in the case of these women and the representation of their bodies, it would be irresponsible to ignore the implications of sexual power dynamics of the gaze as well. While I have argued that Luba's (and by, extension, Beli's) breasts are not *simply* sexual wish fulfillment, they certainly are not immune to sexualization and objectification. In fact, one cannot look at Luba and ignore sexuality; the size of her breasts brings the sexual component of looking (and, indeed, cartooning) to the forefront. In her landmark essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues,

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determined male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously to be looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to be connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (11)

Without a doubt, Luba's and Beli's impressive endowments could be considered spectacles for the male erotic gaze. However, as I discussed in greater detail earlier in this chapter, her breasts are not the silent objects of the gaze—they take on an active and important role in the text that connects to questions the impact sexualization and sexual violence on identity. Throughout her essay, Mulvery argues to-be-looked-at-ness perpetuates the imbalance of sexual power when it normalizes the gaze as for male sexual pleasure. Because the desire incited by the spectacle of the female body reminds men of their powerlessness to said sexual desire (though in Mulvey's more strictly Freudian terms, she speaks of the castration anxiety). Thus, the gaze must reaffirm its power by "integrat[ing]" the "alien presence" of the spectacle "into cohesion with the narrative" (11) of male power and dominance. The male gaze is reestablished with two main methods: either the woman is punished within the narrative for her challenge to narrative flow (such as by being interrogated or killed off), or the camera refuses to portray whole woman and focusing instead on easily categorized and understandable parts—eyes, legs, buttocks, breasts. By presenting her only in pieces, the viewer is freed from the implications of the woman as a thinking and feeling subject (a whole human) and can focus on "parts" (a classic example of Klein's paranoid-schizoid position).

As such, the power dynamics of the male gaze and its narrative naturalization resemble Rajagopal's conception of a disembodied gaze; working toward an embodied gaze can be a postcolonial and feminist practice. Rajagopal argues the hallmark of the "embodied gaze" is its acknowledgement of the "existing rules of social space" in which the viewer exists, causing a looker to acknowledge that their space and power as a viewer is "not empty, homogeneous, or infinite; rather it corresponds to the presumption of a

bounded, known universe" (15). Hernandez's drawing of Luba invites the reader to just such embodied gaze. Therefore, the gaze, and the pleasure associated with it, is not normalized but instead questioned. To return to Mulvey, this is precisely the way that the monolithic power of the male gaze in visual culture can begin to be challenged: "to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectic, passionate detachment" by highlighting its "voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms" (18). The size of her breasts interrupts diegetic absorption into the comics by looking out of place, and the break in absorption forces a reader to acknowledge their role as a reader and, in the case of artwork, a viewer.

But how does the gaze work in a novel—a textual rather than visual medium? While I discuss this question in more detail in my first chapter, "Image/Text: Translation and the Problem of Comics," both the novel and graphic novel both use visual cues to guide the reader toward certain expectations. In a novel, these visual cues are usually found in font, margin size, and overall book design. Thus, while Beli is not a cartoon figure, Diaz also uses techniques that disrupt and challenge *looking,* like the opening of her chapter, which includes superfluous line breaks—challenging our expectation of what prose narrative *looks* like. In addition to three "part" and seven "chapter" breaks, Díaz uses sub-headings throughout the novel. These appear with the most frequency in Beli's section of the story—chapter three. Tellingly, the first break in this chapter, "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral 1955-1962," is titled, "Look at the Princess" (77). In addition to the heading's call to *look*—particularly strange considering this is a novel and not, like *Love and Rockets*, a graphic novel.

Beli is introduced to the reader with the command to look and a visual disruption of the general expectation of *how* prose *looks*.

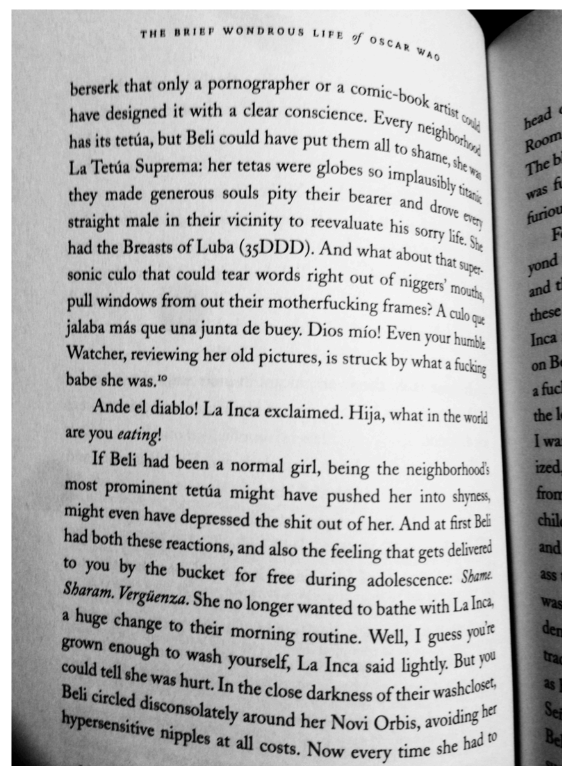
> Before there was an American story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola like a dream, or the trumpets from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother: Hypatía Belicia Cabral:
>
> a girl so tall your leg bones ached just looking at her
>
> so dark it was as if the Creatix had, in her making, blinked
>
> who, like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particular Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewheres. (77)

After a long introductory sentence, Beli is introduced in three line-breaks. These breaks are not new paragraphs or lines of dialogue: their first letters are not capitalized, the first two fragments are interrupted mid-sentence. In short, the visual construction of this first passage *looks* more like a poem than prose. The act of looking is further thematized as the first two lines—the sentence fragments broken from the paragraph—describe her physical traits. These traits, like the text, also represent a disruption of looking: to look at Beli is to ache; Beli is so dark the Creatrix wasn't looking when She made Beli. As with Luba, whose breasts disrupt the gaze of the reader, Díaz aligns Beli with a disruption of our expectations of looking at text and visually imagining characters. We are told to look at a girl in a text, though that looking will hurt us. We are told to look at a girl who was created by an act of not-looking. We are told all of this in a text that visually breaks the rules of traditional novel prose. The visual disruption heralded by the first line is part and parcel of Beli's tale.

While it may not seem as obvious as seeing Luba's breasts, the description of Beli's breasts when they are compared to Luba also provides a moment of visual disruption of the page. Yunior writes, "She had the Breasts of Luba (35DDD)" (92). As I discussed earlier, this seems to be a gross underestimate of Luba's breast size. While it

would be easy to write this off as Yunior's misunderstanding of women's anatomy, the choice to use the three capital Ds stands out from the rest of the text on the page.. While not as obvious as the first example, there is nowhere else in the text—nowhere in few texts, where two numbers and three capital letter Ds would appear. In a page full of generally regular sentences, the (35DDD) stands out from the block of text as something out of place (Figure 3.7). Like Luba in the comics, Diaz utilizes the verbal/visual nature of comics in his allusion by disrupting the visual nature of the prose itself. Nor is this the first time Díaz does so—for example, Lola's chapter is entirely in italics.

Díaz's use of visual disruption within *Oscar Wao*, like Hernandez's use of caricature in *Love and Rockets*, thus forces the reader to consider their position not just as a reader of words, but as a person seeing the text and responding to its visual cues. In short, Díaz and Hernandez structure their texts so that it "confirm[s] who is seeing and who is seen," (Rajagopal 15) the key characteristics of the "embodied gaze." We are looking, and our gaze—with all its judgments, assumptions, and power—is challenged. But who, then, is seen? Of course, the most basic answer is Beli and Luba. However, it is important to draw the connections between these two women at this moment—Beli and Luba are defined in their texts by two details: they are


THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE *of* OSCAR WAO

berserk that only a pornographer or a comic-book artist could have designed it with a clear conscience. Every neighborhood has its tetúa, but Beli could have put them all to shame, she was La Tetúa Suprema: her tetas were globes so implausibly titanic they made generous souls pity their bearer and drove every straight male in their vicinity to reevaluate his sorry life. She had the Breasts of Luba (35DDD). And what about that supersonic culo that could tear words right out of niggers' mouths, pull windows from out their motherfucking frames? A culo que jalaba más que una junta de buey. Dios mío! Even your humble Watcher, reviewing her old pictures, is struck by what a fucking babe she was.[10]

Ande el diablo! La Inca exclaimed. Hija, what in the world are you *eating*!

If Beli had been a normal girl, being the neighborhood's most prominent tetúa might have pushed her into shyness, might even have depressed the shit out of her. And at first Beli had both these reactions, and also the feeling that gets delivered to you by the bucket for free during adolescence: *Shame. Sharam. Vergüenza.* She no longer wanted to bathe with La Inca, a huge change to their morning routine. Well, I guess you're grown enough to wash yourself, La Inca said lightly. But you could tell she was hurt. In the close darkness of their washcloset, Beli circled disconsolately around her Novi Orbis, avoiding her hypersensitive nipples at all costs. Now every time she had to

Figure 3.7: Beli's breasts compared to Luba's (Díaz 92).

mothers and they are large-breasted women. Both texts tempt the reader to judge the women as being bad mothers, yet also refuses to interpret the women so simply. Their breasts are sexualized, but then their breasts' sexualization is questioned as it points to their personal histories marked by tragedy—tragedy largely centered on the women's sexual objectification. Thus, I would argue, Díaz and Hernandez want to confirm that what is *being seen* in their texts are two complex, multifaceted women—whole people, impossible to atomize into their constituent roles, defying any reader's attempts to objectify them.

I use objectify here purposely, for it seems to me that Rajapopal's "embodied gaze" is not so different than Klein's "depressive position." Klein's theory, especially as it applies to the infant's initial moment of ego-identification, is as dependent on the act of looking as Rajagopal's notion of the gaze is. In both cases, in order to overcome oppression, the looked-upon must be seen as a whole subject, the looker actively rejecting (part-) objectification in favor of a more ambivalent, difficult, complex understanding of another subject. This ability to look beyond the easier-to-understand but incomplete "parts" to begin to piece together a "whole" object not only gives agency to the *seen*—in Klein, allowing the object to be as whole as oneself; in Rajagopal providing postcolonial subjects a way to "look back" at their historical oppressors—but is key to the looker becoming capable of understanding him- or herself.

Díaz and Hernandez thus challenge the notion that one must understand oneself before one is able to understand another, instead presentation a world where in it is only by understanding others that we can begin to make sense of ourselves—as readers, as lookers, as subjects. The themes of both stories reflect this argument—both emphasize

familial, historical, and cultural connections as necessary to the project of discovery and downplay the importance of the individual subject as an arbiter of knowledge—Yunior does not announce himself until nearly 100 pages into *Oscar Wao*; that narrator of Gilbert's *Love and Rockets* stories shifts between named members of the village and an unnamed insider who seems familiar with both the audience and the town. The fact that both authors focus on mothers—difficult, complicated, even bad mothers—highlights the importance of this process of "maturing" or "growing up"—a literary embodiment of Klein's theory of ego development. Rajagopal's similarity provides a way of mapping this act of looking not only as a form of maturation, but also connects this form of vision to postcolonial resistance, part and parcel of Díaz's and Hernandez's larger projects of representation in their literature.

Díaz and Hernandez are not only challenging readers, but the texts present evidence of their own journeys as men writing women in contemporary society. Their texts show an obsession with sexualization. To deny that there is an element of sexualization in the portrayal of these women by these two men is, besides being wrong, deeply counterproductive. Sexuality is part of what defines these women, but it is only *part*. Díaz and Hernandez, over the time allowed by serialization or in the space of a novel, seem to struggle with their own position as men writing women, a struggle that is written in the uneven power structures and inherent misogyny of the modern world.[15] Thus, Díaz and Hernandez acknowledge their positions as perpetrators of this misogyny but also, narratively and visually, chronicle their attempts to move beyond it. Particularly in Díaz's case, the narrator is fictional but obviously semi-autobiographical, sharing

[15] Perhaps one could argue, sexualization and objectification particularly as it manifests in Latin American cultures; explained in more depth in O'Connor, Molina-Guzman, and *From Bananas to Buttocks*.

many experiences with the author. Yunior struggles with his inability to stay in a relationship (he "can't stop" cheating on his girlfriends). Yunior begins his novel in an attempt to make sense of Oscar, but in the process finds that as much as Oscar is a whole person in himself, he is deeply defined by his relationships with the world around him—especially his mother. An attempt to understand a friend forces Yunior to challenge his vision of the women around him as part objects—breasts, buttocks, vaginas—and see Beli as a whole woman, all the more difficult given her extravagant décolletage. Understanding Oscar and Beli in turn leads him to see his relationship with Lola in a new light. By the end of the novel, he understands that their relationship was not doomed because of his sexual desires, but his inability to say he loved her—his inability to see her as a whole subject.[16] By the epilogue, he is in a stable relationship with a woman who he describes in physical terms but also emotional and intellectual ones. Though we know less about his wife than we do about almost any other character in the novel, the few short sentences with which he describes her indicate a very different Yunior than the one who dated Lola.

Both texts inevitably invite a paranoid-schizoid reading of their large-breasted mothers—women neatly as sex objects or women as mothers or women as good objects or bad objects or feminist figures or product of patriarchal sexual fantasy. However, considering Hernandez's and Diaz's injunction to *look*, to see the whole person, we discover these women contain multitudes. They are easy to hate—cruel and cold, irresponsible and thoughtless. But they are also funny and strong, they have survived through so much suffering, they have a hidden spark of warmth. The encouragement of

[16] In "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states quite simply, "Among Klein's name for the reparative process is love" (128).

both texts to look—to engage our role as lookers, to think about our gaze, to become aware of what we see—encourages us to look beyond the nipples in front of noses and see a whole human being. We grow to love these women, to see beyond the breast to the whole. As we move along the stories with these two women, as their creators force us to re-engage again and again, we see whole human beings where we might not have expected to meet them. And as we look, and think about our looking, we might begin to truly see ourselves.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF SUPERHEROES: RACIAL REPRESENTATION AND THE SUPERHERO GENRE

It's almost impossible to recall a time before superheroes flew through the skies of my imagination. I was too young to remember my mother dressing my brother and I up as Batman and Robin for a family photo, but I do remember being disappointed when the costume didn't fit my anymore. I tied a towel around my neck and pretended to be Wonder Woman long before I could tell you anything about Diana Prince, Themyscira, or the Lasso of Truth. I knew she was a superhero: she was powerful, she was good, and she could fly—that was enough for me. My experience is far from unique. Since Superman hoisted a car over his head on the cover of *Action Comics* #1, the figure of the superhero has indelibly impacted popular culture. Marvel's movies rake in billions of dollars across the world; images of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman can be found in the most remote corners of the globe.

But despite their near mythic status in the global imagination, superheroes are a relatively recent creation. Though its influences draw from sources far into the past and across cultural bounders, the superhero has a pinpointable origin. Mixing elements from mythology, the pulp serial hero, early science fiction, and the costumed adventurer (who appears as early as Robin Hood and the Scarlet Pimpernel, but whose most significant pre-superhero iteration is Lee Falk's purple-spandexed Phantom), Superman leapt into action on April 18, 1938.[1] He was the first character to crystalize the particular set of traits that define the superhero: more powerful than a costumed adventurer, more fanciful

[1] Though the cover date of *Action Comics* #1 is June 1938, the issue went on sale on April 18 (Muir 539).

than a pulp action hero, more grounded (or at least earth-bound) than most science fiction, more human than a demigod. Though the exact traits are up for constant (and vigorous) debate, all superheroes tend to share the following traits: he or she is supernaturally powered[2], lives in a modern (usually urban and contemporary) setting, wears a costume to mask a secret identity, acts in accordance to a moral code, and battles evil forces to protect the public.[3]

Because of its unique traits and undeniable importance in popular culture, the superhero genre and the figure of the superhero provide an interesting lens through which to examine the comics form and its particular ability to represent aspects of identity. The superhero genre is especially fascinating in this regard, because the concept of a secret identity is fundamental to the genre. Though Luba and Beli—the stars of my previous chapter—are not superheroes, they are not so divorced from the concept of secret identity. As I discussed in my last chapter, with these two women Díaz and Hernandez create characters whose immediate impression on the reader masks a depth of character and experience. Their texts ask readers to discover both Luba and Beli's secret identities as whole, complex women despite their difficult personalities and cartoonish décolletage. Though I turn explicitly toward the superhero genre in these last two chapters, my focus on the complexity with which the comics form can represent aspects of identity remains the same. Race and ethnicity played a role in Chapter II, but this chapter focuses

[2] By "supernatural powers," I do not necessarily mean spiritual or magical powers, though that is sometimes their source. A superhero's powers are greater than anything naturally possible for a human being.

[3] Since Superman's inception the defining boundaries of the superhero have proven bendable: some don't have truly supernatural powers, others don't really have a secret identity (some scholars have argued that it may be more accurate to speak of a split identity than a secret one; I will discuss this in the following chapter). For more arguments about the definition of a superhero, see Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* or "It Started with Gilgamesh," the first chapter of Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell us About Ourselves and Society.*

explicitly on the representation of race, by which I mean the ways race is visually connoted, and racial representation, by which I mean the way races and ethnicities are represented within the text. Through readings of a minor Golden Age[4] superhero and a contemporary reimagination of the same character, I will examine the inherent tension in the superhero genre between its utopian vision for a brighter tomorrow and its conservative tendency to protect the status quo at all costs. This tension is perhaps most clear in the ways the genre has dealt with race and its representation.

The First Asian American Superhero?

In the Golden Age, demand for comic books, especially of the particularly popular superhero variety, seemed insatiable. According to Ian Gordon's exhaustive *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945*, in the mid-1940s nearly everyone under the age of 18 read at least 12 comic books a month.[5] By 1947 "sales of comic books expanded to 60 million copies a month" (149); DC's line of superhero comics, especially those featuring Superman, "was the most popular, selling an average of 8,500,000 copies a month" (149).[6] Willing to try almost anything, publishers created new magazines and new characters at a breakneck pace. The result was a colorful cast of classic characters like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, but also in downright bizarre superheroes like Lady Satan, the Super Wizard Stardust, Micro-Face, and the Boy King.

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[4] The Golden Age refers to the most prolific, popular, and financially successful time in American comic books, and is generally delineated as beginning with the publication of Action Comics #1 in June of 1938, and generally considered to end after the Senate Subcommittees on Juvenile Delinquency spearheaded by popular psychologist Frederic Wertham, which established the Comics Code Authority, in 1954. The subsequent Silver and Bronze Ages tend to refer specifically to movements in the superhero genre, but the Golden Age is not so strictly connected to one genre.

[5] "By the mid-1940s more than 90% of children aged 6-11 across the country read an average of 15 comic books a month. Between ages 12-18, readership fell to 80% and the average fell to 12 a month" (Gordon)

[6] As a point of comparison, the most popular single comic in 2014 was *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (the series has been renumbered), which, according to Diamond Distribution, sold 559,217 copies over the course of the year (Miller).

In 1944, Rewl Publications launched *Blazing Comics*, an adventure anthology series featuring a new superhero called the Green Turtle (Yang 154). Considering his less-than awe-inspiring name and his impractical costume (he's mostly naked), it would be easy to dismiss the Green Turtle as yet another silly superhero of the Golden Age. Indeed, the Green Turtle might have been nothing but a historical curiosity known only to the most hard-core fans of superhero comics and campy pop culture were it not for a few fascinating details and rumors about the character and his creation. Chief among these is the rumor that the Green Turtle is secretly Chinese—a legend made all the more alluring because of the absence of any other superheroes of color at the time. Considering the "Try anything you can imagine and see what sells" ethos of Golden Age creators (how else would you explain a superhero named the Moth?), the lack of superheroes of color is at best evidence of a glaring blind spot in the imaginations of Golden Age creators. At worst it is proof of a systemic erasure of non-white representation. In any event, arguments about the presence of absence of a superhero of color in the Golden Age have obvious implications for how we understand the historical development of the genre.

One clue in the mystery of the Green Turtle's race is the ethnicity of his creator, a Chinese-American man named Chu Hing. Hing's ethnicity was a rarity in an industry dominated by white men.[7] Rumor has it he wanted to make the Green Turtle ethnically Chinese, but his publishers resisted the idea and forced Hing to draw the Green Turtle as a white man. Hing seemingly consented, but the strangeness of his comic indicates Hing's desire to rebel against the publisher's edicts (Yang 155). This "rebellion" marched across the pages in several forms, both in the comic's illustration and the narrative. For

[7] On the one hand, it is simply true that white males dominated the industry. However, it is more complicated than a white/not-white divide, especially in the comics industry. I will discuss this issue in more detail later in this chapter.

example, Hing made the Green Turtle's base of operations China, not the United States. The Green Turtle was protecting US military interests by impeding Japanese plans in Mainland China, so he wasn't entirely divorced from American interests. Even so, most Golden Age superheroes rarely strayed outside US borders.

In addition to the fact of his unique location, the Green Turtle is never shown out of this costume. He also doesn't really have a secret identity, though it may be more accurate to say readers never discover his secret identity. This is not to say that the issue of the Green Turtle's identity is unimportant, however—the narrator and characters constantly draws attention to it (Figure 4.1). For example, the Green Turtle frequently tries to tell his origin story, but every time he gets close to spilling the secret of who he is, he is interrupted. The mystery is never solved; the final words of the final episode of the Green Turtle's story are, "But who is the Green Turtle?" (*Blazing Comics* #5 10).

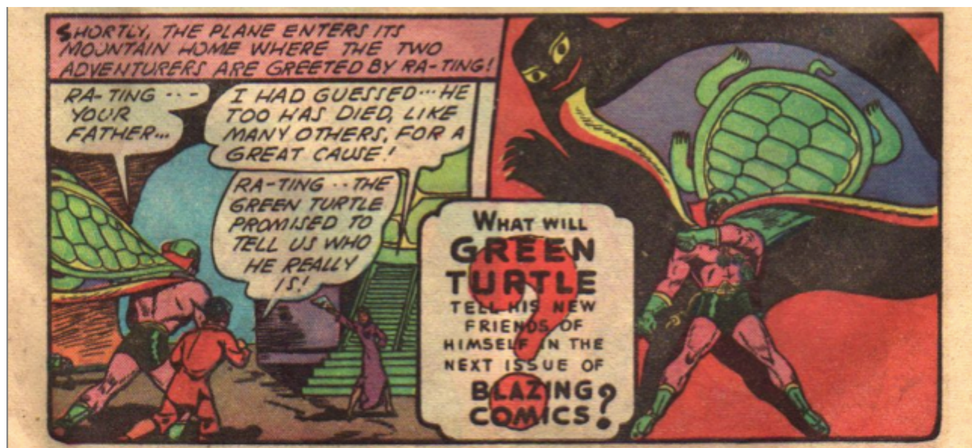

Figure 4.1: "What will *Green Turtle* tell his new friends about himself in the next issue of *Blazing Comics?*" Note the shadow, the Green Turtle's pink skin, his turned back in the panel on the right, his arm obscuring his face in the left panel, and the turtle shadow (*Blazing Comics #1* 10).

The idea of a "secret" Golden Age superhero of color seems unlikely: one might think it would be easy enough to tell if the Green Turtle was Chinese-American or if he

was not. But in this strange comic it *is* difficult to say what the main character actually looks like because while the details of the narrative are peculiar, they are practically pedestrian when compared to the visual quirks of Hing's comics. His skin tone is not the peach-pink standardly used to represent Caucasian skin tones in comics of this era, but a violently unnatural pink. As a result, he looks more alien (or perhaps badly sunburned) than white. In addition, Hing frequently draws the Green Turtle from behind so that his face is not visible. When he does draw Green Turtle from the front, his face is almost always obscured—by shadows, debris, his foreshortened arm punching across his body, or a villain's arm punching his face. In the few moments his face is not obscured, his mask makes it difficult to decipher his facial features. If Hing's tendency seems to bend over backwards in his compositional choices to avoid showing the Green Turtle's face seems strange, another oddity is the presence of the turtle shadow that follows the Green Turtle on his adventures. Never explained, present in one panel and absent in the next, the turtle has yellow, almond-shaped eyes and a red beak, its shape often imitating a wry smile. It is never mentioned by any of the characters, nor does it ever speak; it could therefore be interpreted as a symbolic element, but even if that is the case, it is unusual for comics of this genre and time-period.

The Green Turtle, and *Blazing Comics*, only lasted five issues.[8] This flash-in-the-pan lifespan was not uncommon in the heady early days of the comic book industry, but it meant that the Green Turtle mysteries went unsolved. The questions left unanswered by the Green Turtle's abrupt end leave us with a unresolved ambiguity: on the one hand,

[8] Technically, there is a sixth issue of *Blazing Comics*. However, the sixth issue was *Blazing Comics* in name only: according to the Grand Comics Database, "Different remaindered comics were re-covered and sold as this issue. Known remaindered comics used are: *True Life Secret*s (Charlton, 1951 series) #14, the never-distributed *Will Rogers Western* (Fox, 1950 series) #3, and possibly an issue of *Colossal Features Magazine* (Fox, 1950 series)" ("Blazing Comics #v2#3 (6)").

Green Turtle is never actually established as a Chinese or Chinese-American superhero. On the other hand, the story's lack of conclusion is the very reason rumors about the possible non-Caucasian identity of the character have persisted. Without this non-ending, it's likely that the stranger aspects of the Green Turtle would have been written off and forgotten as yet another failed experiment of the Golden Age of Comics. Instead, fans and historians still wonder about the Green Turtle: is he or isn't he the first superhero of color?

Inspired by the rumors, Chinese-American comics creator Gene Luen Yang recently decided to "fill in the blanks" left by the original *Blazing Comics* story arc. Written by Yang and drawn by Malaysian-born Singaporean artist Sonny Liew, *The Shadow Hero* (2014) finally reveals the Green Turtle's origin story. Yang and Liew chart second-generation Chinese American teenager Hank Chu's rise from grocery boy to the Green Turtle in a tale that is the stuff of classic superhero conventions: the cast includes the requisite good-hearted but tough cops, wiley wise old uncles, and corrupt gangsters; the plot is set in a world much like our own, but also contains requisite fantasy elements of magic and wonder required by the genre; and through trial and tribulation, good ultimately triumphs over evil. It's not all fun and fantasy, though. Like many iconic superheroes, the Green Turtle's story is as much a meditation on grief and responsibility as it is an action-adventure romp. Hank's responds to the trauma of his father's murder by rising to heroism rather than succumbing to the temptations of anger and vengeance.

A charming work of comics archaeology and historical revisionism, *The Shadow Hero* also attempts to reclaim a space for ethnic and racial minorities among the lost heroes of the Golden Age. The ways Yang and Liew incorporate the details of the original

strip—explaining, for example, why Green Turtle's skin is so violently pink—are funny, clever, and obviously carefully considered. The most important aspect of the myth they unravel is the turtle-shadow, who in their story is one of four ancient spirit-protectors of China. These spirits attach themselves to the shadow of a chosen human and give that human powers based on a wish. Previously attached to Hank's father, the turtle grants Hank invulnerability to bullets, but also acts as a conscience. The turtle's connection both to China and Hank's father therefore symbolizes Hank's connection to both his personal history and his larger ethnic heritage; the turtle also signifies the everyday heroism of Hank's father, who had chosen the power to refuse alcohol.

Reading Yang and Liew's work alongside the original *Blazing Comics* run not only provides an interesting perspective from which to consider the conventions of the superhero genre in general, but can also reveal tensions that have haunted the genre at its inception. The superhero genre of the Golden Age imagines a world in which the good guys always win, and the bad guys always lose. It is a world in which the most powerful and gifted beings in the world can also be counted upon to be selfless, noble, and ask for nothing in return. Superheroes fight for the innocent and downtrodden, not just for the rich and powerful. Wrongs can be righted. Women can be more powerful than men. Children can become heroes. A Chinese American grocer's kid from the Chinatown ghetto can become the Green Turtle.

Or can he? While the superhero genre skews towards the utopian, that vision has always, inevitably been overdetermined by the values of the society from which it emerges. The moral blindspots of that society are therefore also the moral blindspots of the genre. In its attempt to reinscribe people of color into the Golden Age of American

comics, then, *The Shadow Hero* struggles against a different kind of enemy: the burden of racist history, as manifested by the unbearable whiteness of superheroes.

"Superman Is a White Boy"

To reiterate: ostensibly, a superhero fights for the forces of good against the forces of evil. The problem, of course, is that "good" and "evil" aren't fixed concepts: they can be defined in wildly different ways depending on who you ask, where they are, and when you ask them. Because superheroes are creations of popular culture and the entertainment industry, they also must appeal to the broadest possible audience.[9] As such, it would be more accurate to say, as Shyminsky does, that their main preoccupation is not so much with the "good" as it "is with the maintenance of the law and the status quo rather than with the changing world—he or she battles criminals and terrorists but rarely takes proactive or progressive action to stamp out the political and economic roots of crime and terror" (289).[10] While this may not have been as true in the original iteration of superheroes (the first year of Superman's life, he is startlingly socialist and invested in social justice[11]), by the time they became market juggernauts in the early 1940s, publishers and editors had tempered the more radical aspects of the superhero genre into

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[9] In *African Americans and US Popular Culture*, Kevern Verney argues that popular culture itself is inherently conservative, especially in representations of race. Beginning with the lasting effects of minstrelsy in the culture of post-Civil War America through to rap performers in the early 1990s, he argues, "During the course of the twentieth century racial images did improve, but progress was both limited and gradual…they could also regress. This reflects the fact that mainstream popular culture is essentially conservative in nature, constantly seeking the middle ground to achieve maximum audience appeal" (110)

[10] Interestingly, Shyminsky does not acknowledge Umberto Eco in this moment, as Eco famously made this argument in his landmark 1962 essay, "The Myth of Superman." Eco claims that morality in Superman comics (and by proxy, all superhero comics) is "a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness" (164); good and evil are defined not by moral absolutes but by relations to private property.

[11] For a discussion of Superman's morality and the shifting definition of "the good" in American culture, see Benjamin Saunders's chapter "Superman: Truth, Justice, and All That Stuff" in *Do the Gods Wear Capes?*.

something more ideologically in line with wartime democratic-capitalist values (Gordon 139-150).

It is not necessarily a problem that superheroes protect the status quo; the problem reveals itself when the status quo isn't worth protecting. The Golden Age, the age that gave birth to the superhero genre, occurred before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, before Women's Lib movements of the 60s and 70s, and long before gay rights. Political movements emphasizing excessive nationalism defined the formative years of a superhero, be it the myopic isolationism of pre-WW2 politics, the patriotic jingoism of the War itself, or the paranoid nationalism of the early years of the Cold War. In *The Deathly Embrace*, Shen-Mei Ma argues these pulpy "adventure tales" were not only adept at propagating these dangerous strands of nationalism, but also toxic forms of masculinity (6).[12] Contemporary readers are often shocked by the ethics of early superheroes: a whole website cheekily named Superdickery highlights examples of superheroes' (especially Superman) strange, outdated, or downright cruel behavior in the Golden and Silver Age.

The lack of racial representation is a particularly egregious failing of the Golden Age imagination. Even Frederic Wertham thought so. Best known for his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which argued that superhero comics' portrayal of sex, violence, and un-American political propaganda encouraged juvenile delinquency, many comics fans and scholars alike single out Wertham as a significant force behind the collapse of the comics industry in the 1950s. Because most critics consider Wertham's

[12] Action comics and pulp serials aren't the only genre built on racist caricature. In *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, and Imitation in American Popular Culture*, John Strausbaugh argues American humor of the twentieth century is inextricably tied to racial comedy born of minstrelsy and blackface.

fears that comics would turn children into slavering sexual deviants or mindless fascists ludicrous,[13] most fans and even many scholars tend to overlook his valid criticisms of the genre. Wertham also had serious misgivings about racial representation and stereotyping (Singer 108). These fears might not have been so misplaced: when people of color appeared in these comic books, there were overwhelmingly stereotypes. All superheroes were white. People of color were villains, helpless victims needing to be saved or shown the "way," or (at best) sycophantic sidekicks. Artists frequently designed characters based on offensive racist caricature.[14]

In his polemic essay, "Superman is a White Boy," James Lamb argues that this history of problematic racial representation isn't something the superhero genre can simply overcome by introducing more characters of color. Racism is in the genre's DNA. Lamb writes, "Superman is a White boy. Superheroes are White people. Superhero morality exacts the Melian Dialogue's 'might makes right' overwhelming force realpolitik with every onomatopoetic Biff! Bam! Pow! gut punch and karate chop combo" (Lamb). Rather than presenting a utopian vision of a better world, Lamb states that the very idea of the superhero is "a racial construct designed to appeal to Whiteness," (Lamb). The superhero can only exist in "white male power fantasies" because,

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[13] Many scholars have been working to rehabilitate Wertham's place in comics scholarship. The most exhaustive work in this vein is Bart Beaty's 2005 *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, though Will Brooker (*Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*) and Lillian Robinson (*Wonder Women: Feminism and Superheroes*) have also contributed to this growing library. Other critics, like Bradford Wright in *Comic Book Nation*: *The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* and Kristi Nyberg in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, work to emphasize the multiple forces at work beyond Wertham and his book in the "death" of the comic book industry.

[14] In *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy,* K. Sue Jewell persuasively argues "the mass media…are used an as instrument by the privileged to define and legitimize entitlements, by proliferating certain belief systems, based largely on myths and stereotypes" (9), effectively creating "cultural images" that affect real women's lives by shaping social policy at the local and federal levels.

> Only in White male power fantasies can people blessed with skin privilege and bodies carved from living marble wield heat vision or super speed or unbreakable claws against indigent criminals from broken homes who lack high school educations. In these White male power fantasies, industrial titans blessed with technological genius or generational wealth remake themselves with advanced titanium armor or expert ninjutsu into quasi-deputized law enforcement officials whose crimes against public order never meet social sanction. (Lamb)

In short, Lamb argues that the superhero fantasy is so far removed from the reality of most people of color that they cannot even fully partake in the fantasy. If people of color were to seriously imagine themselves as superheroes, the implications of the experience of racial difference for a concept such as "justice" would render the genre unrecognizable.

This vast gulf between fantasy and reality was especially true at the moment of the superhero's birth: "were Superman Black introduced on the game-changing *Action Comics*' cover, White America would have yet another reason to fear a Black planet" (Lamb). It's almost impossible to refute Lamb's hypothesis, especially in light of recent events in our supposedly post-racial society. In "More Than the Western Sky: Watts on Television, August 1965," Elizabeth Wheeler discusses the ideology of news coverage during a Civil Rights-era revolt. She argues that despite claims of "objective distance" (14), "the camera presumes a monolithic white audience on the side of police authority" (13). Within the US justice system, being a large, upset black man has proved enough to justify lethal force against Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner, even though there were unarmed.[15] While superhero comics are not news broadcasts, the assumption of audience is startlingly similar. Could we expect the dominant forces of a

[15] Wheeler's article is disturbingly relevant in light of these recent news stories as well.

pre-Civil Rights society to respond to a black Superman with anything other than fear and loathing?

The pages of *Blazing Comics* further reinforce Lamb's claims. Even though it may be the home of the "first Asian American Superhero," *Blazing Comics*'s content was deeply embedded in the racism of the time. In "Jun-Gal," another series in the magazine, Africans are portrays as mindless savages who all resemble grown-up versions of Little Black Sambo. The African American nurse who tends to Jun-Gal (like Tarzan, this hero of the forest is white) looks like a caricature of Aunt Jemimah and her name is *actually* Mammy. While yellow peril imagery[16] was extraordinarily common in Golden Age comics (in fact, the first cover of *Detective Comics* featured a close-up of Ching Lung, a Fu Manchu knock-off), it would seem reasonable to imagine that *Blazing Comics* might be less offensive in its stereotypes of Asian people—after all, a Chinese-American artist was the creator of the comic's headliner. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

The legend of the Green Turtle's identity (that Hing wanted the Green Turtle to be white but was not allowed) is evidence enough of *Blazing*'s racism. However, Hing himself used Yellow Peril imagery against the Japanese. While Chinese characters are sympathetically drawn, Japanese characters have buckteeth or fangs, bulging eyes,

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[16] Yellow Peril rhetoric emphasizes the danger of East Asian people and their descendants, especially to the United States. Much has been written about Yellow Peril imagery and rhetoric,[16] but for the purposes of this chapter, its most relevant iteration in the pulp serials and its influence on comics is Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu, who began appearing in novels, serials, and comics after Rohmer's first Fu Manchu novel, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*, appeared in 1913. Dr. Fu Manchu is an evil genius, simultaneously a sexual threat—seducing and capturing white women—and an effeminate, desexualized reification of the power of white masculinity—he often lisps, wears ornate jewelry and flowing robes, and uses tricks and illusions instead of physical prowess. Fu Manchu inspired a flurry of look-alikes in pulp serials and comic books, including Ming the Merciless from the 1930s comic strip *Flash Gordon*, and the character Ching Lung, who, though not particularly famous in his own right, appeared on the cover of the first issue of *Detective Comics*, the series that would eventually debut Batman, in 1937. For more discussion of Yellow Peril images and its effects on Asian American representation, see Ono and Pham's *Asian Americans and the Media*, Ma's *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* and Lee's *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*.

pointed ears, and speak broken English. The Yellow Peril imagery is especially striking on the cover of *Blazing Comics* #1 (Figure 4.2), which shows that racism of the Golden Age and the inherent white ideology of the superhero genre even infected creators of color. While World War 2 certainly affects the context of anti-Japanese sentiment (especially on the part of Chinese people), the visual tropes Hing uses are the same used against Chinese characters in other texts. Hing's frequent use of Yellow Peril visual tropes for the Japanese people in his stories could therefore indicate internalized racism.

The anti-Asian sentiment runs deeper than the use of Yellow Peril imagery. On this cover, a brightly costumed, muscular figure chokes an obviously villainous Asian man. Audiences would likely assume the attacker is a superhero, an arbiter of justice and goodness. The Yellow Peril imagery used to other the Asian man relies on more than exaggerated phenotypical feature; it dehumanizes him, turning him into some kind of humanoid monster. This cover also represent the first example of Hing's apparent aversion to showing the Green Turtle's face. Many, like Yang and Liew, read the obscured face as Hing's way of rebelling against the publishers' demand that Green Turtle be white. However, it could just as easily be read as shame. Hing's hero, who must hide his face for shame of his own identity, destroys the source of his shame—his Asian otherness. Even the mysterious turtle shadow

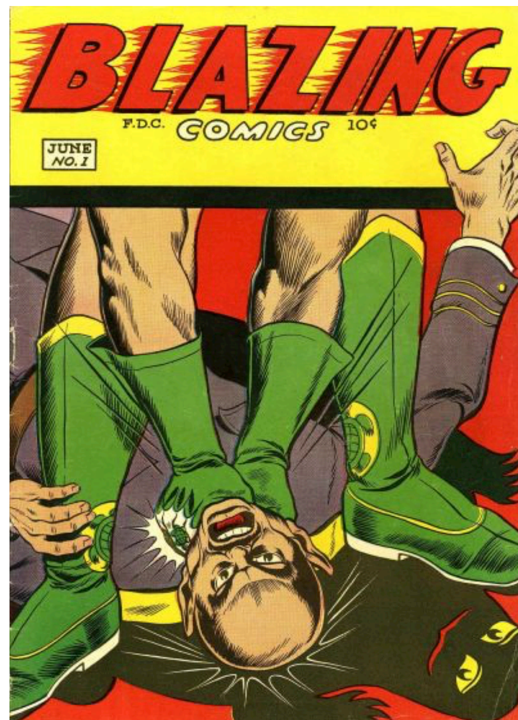

Figure 4.2: The cover of *Blazing Comics* #1

seems to smile at the villainous monster's demise.

At the same time, this cover could just as easily indicate Hing's active rebellion against the hegemonic whiteness of the publishing industry. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Hing's decision not to show the Green Turtle's face means that while there is not proof the Green Turtle is Chinese, there's also no proof he's white. While hiding his face could indicate shame, it also encourages a subversive reading of the Green Turtle's racial identity. In fact, while the Green Turtle's skin is usually pink in the interior art, on this cover it is difficult to distinguish between the color of the Green Turtle and his enemy—an enemy who is undoubtedly Asian. If we read the Green Turtle as a Chinese-American, then Hing's cover might be interpreted as subverting the racist ideology sustained by Yellow Peril imagery and permeating the superhero genre. The Green Turtle is not here murdering Asian Otherness, but is instead quite literally destroying the Yellow Peril *stereotype*.

Blazing Comics draws a connection between superheroes and whiteness through editorial intervention—Hing was not allowed to draw a non-white superhero. In *The Shadow Hero,* however, Yang and Liew directly confront the connection between superheroes and whiteness. When Hank is in costume, Chinese characters refer to him as "one of those *gwailo* superheroes" (95) or "that *gwailo*" (104); one villain even proclaims, "<I thought only *gwailo* were shameless enough to dress up like that>"[17] (133). Gwailo (鬼佬) is a mildly vulgar term referring to pale, ghost-like skin usually translated as "foreign devil" ("gweilo"). When he is out of costume, characters assume that he's not a superhero or express that superheroic identity and Chinese identity are at

[17] Throughout the text, Yang uses brackets to indicate when the characters are speaking Chinese as opposed to English.

odds. For example, when he tries to retrieve his father's jade necklace from the villain Mock Beak, Mock Beak says, "<Wait a minute! You…you're no superhero! You're that one Chinese kid!>" (61). In this scene, Hank is not wearing a costume, so Mock Beak knows he is Chinese. And yet, rather than saying, "You're that grocer's kid" or "You're that one kid!" Mock Beak—Chinese himself—separates super heroism from Chinese identity by formulating "superhero" and "that one Chinese kid" as mutually exclusive.

Where other Chinese characters see the whiteness of the superhero as a negative—shameless and attention-seeking—white American characters understand super heroics as *their* thing. Unlike racial otherness which must be ghettoized and separated (not to mention policed—all the Chinatown police officers we see are white), the extraordinary powers of the white superhero are the only a tolerable otherness so long as they exist on white society's terms. White characters also assume superheroes are white. For example, Detective Lawful, a cop working the Chinatown beat, wants to help Hank bring his father's murderers to justice. He works closely with Hank, even after his boss tells him to let it go (Lawful is apparently the only good detective in a corrupt apartment). However, the first time Detective Lawful sees Hank in costume, he doesn't recognize him. Lawful asks the superhero his name, and since Hank hadn't settled on superhero his name yet, he tries out, "Jade Tortoise." Lawful laughs. "'Jade—'? Ha ha! Listen, just 'cause you're workin' the Chinatown beat don't mean you haft have a name like them! 'Jade Tortoise' sounds like some place you go for Mushu pork!" (89) By assuming the hero is taking on a name *like* Chinese people, he assumes that the hero is not Chinese but white (admittedly, his skin is very pink). While we might think Lawful is being generous and trying to avoid falling prey to racial stereotypes, in this scene he is actually policing

Chinese identity as he understands it—one with no regard for the actual Chinese-American experience of the person to whom he is speaking. Ironically, Hank named himself Jade Tortoise after his father's grocery store, which his father had named in honor of the ancient turtle spirit who gave both Hank his powers. The name "Green Turtle" only exists, in Yang's text at least, because it appeals to Detective Lawful's sense of propriety, not Hank's actual Chinese-American experience.

Complicating Race and the Superhero

It would be tempting to write off the superhero genre altogether if it were nothing more than an inherently damaging racist fantasy. However, the relationship between race, racial identity, and the superhero is more complicated that Lamb's polemic would lead one to believe. While many Golden Age comics can undoubtedly be read as racist, "whiteness" was particularly complicated concept for many of the creators of early comic books. A large proportion of the architects of the Golden Age were Jewish: among them Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Will Eisner, Bob Kane, Gil Kane, Bill Finger, Jerry Robinson, Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and Max and Bill Gaines. Many Italian-Americans were also involved in the industry as well. Jewish and Italian immigrants were far from guaranteed a spot to in the category of "whiteness" at this point in American history, and there were even a number of black, Asian-American artists, as well as women making comics. Compared to most and perhaps all other modes of popular entertainment at the time, the community and the audience of comic books was perhaps amongst the most diverse in the nation.

In addition to the large number of Jewish, Italian, and other marginalized identities among their ranks, most of the major creators of the Golden Age were

immigrants or the children of immigrants. Thus, while superheroes may look white, many have argued that they function as a metaphor for the immigrant experience.[18] They exist outside the boundaries of society, but in their secret identities attempt to assimilate into the broader culture. Even if superheroes look like they belong, they know that they are different. This is especially true of Superman, who is literally an alien: the Kryptonian Kal-El integrated into American society as Clark Kent.[19] Gene Yang has claimed the relationship between the immigrant and the superhero as a major factor in his decision to write *The Shadow Hero*. In an interview with Chris Sims for the website *Comics Alliance*, Yang claims the similarities between the narrative of the immigrant and the superhero was an explicit inspiration for Hank's story: "…the narrative of the immigrant's kid [is] embedded into the genre. All the superheroes that we know[20]…were all created by the children of these Jewish immigrants" (Sims). Yang explicitly claims the Kal-El/Clark Kent split identity resonates with his experience as the child of Chinese immigrants:

> A lot of immigrants have two names…a part of yourself that you can't reveal…As a kid, I felt drawn to that, the duality of superheroes, because in a lot of ways, it mirrored the duality of my life. I had two names, I had a Chinese name that we used at home and an English name for school. I felt in certain situations that I had to hide a piece of myself. All of that has a lot of resonance. (Sims)

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[18] Danny Fingeroth in both his books addresses this idea at length in chapter two of *Superman on the Couch*; see also Matthew J Smith's contribution to *Comics and Ideology*, "The Tyranny of the Melting Pot Metaphor."

[19] *Blazing Comics* presents another interesting example of the connection between heroes and immigrant identity. In "Mr. Ree," a strip about a magician and illusionist who uses his skills to catch cheaters and crooks, the lead character is by all accounts American and white. However, the story's title changes to the more "normal" Mr. Lee after several issues without explanation. This name change for familiarity and pronounceability mimics the experience of many immigrants at Ellis Island, if not Kal-el himself.

[20] In the ellipses, Yang rattles off a list of superheroes created by immigrants and names their creators. While I did not feel repeating the list was necessary for this moment in the paper, it is worth noting that Yang does acknowledge Wonder Woman, created by William Moulton Marston (a white, middle-aged Harvard graduate), is the major exception to this rule.

While *The Shadow Hero* does not imply Hank Chu has a "Chinese" name, his superhero name does go through several iterations—each of which changes in an effort to be more palatable to a white audience.

Not that the multi-ethnic make-up and immigrant experience of many comics creators helped their products become more inclusive—quite the opposite, as Hing's inability to make a Chinese superhero suggests. Attempts to challenge the status quo were complicated by the nature of the comics industry. While many of today's prestigious graphic novels are written, drawn, inked, colored, and lettered by a single artist, superhero comics were (and remain to this day) an intensely collaborative process. Multiple writers and artists submitted stories for a single issue of a magazine. Even in a single story, it was not uncommon for the author, penciller, inker, colorist, and letterer to be different people. For example, the Green Turtle featured on the cover of four of the five issues *Blazing Comics* (#1-4). Three covers are clearly drawn by Hing (#1, 3, and 4), and in each of these, just like in his interior art, Hing obscures the Green Turtle's face (Figure 4.2 above, and 4.3). However, the second issue's cover also features the Green Turtle, but it is almost certainly drawn by someone else. Interestingly, this cover features a rare full-frontal view of the Green Turtle's face. His eyes are clearly visible and appear less almond-shaped than Green Turtle's Chinese sidekick Burma Boy's eyes do. This more Caucasian seeming Green Turtle obviously runs counter to Hing's attempts to create the space for racial ambiguity by obscuring the character's face—but Hing couldn't do anything about it. Like Siegel and Schuster with Superman, Hing attempted to encode Otherness into his hero, but it could only be accepted if that otherness had a white face.

Figure 4.3: The Green Turtle's face on issues 2, 3, and 4.

Race became a major concern in the comic books of the Silver and Bronze Ages,[21] due in no small part to the concurrent rise of the Civil Rights movement. The first superhero of color was Marvel's Black Panther, who first appeared in 1966—many more would be created in the decades that followed. James Lamb argues that this supposed diversity is nothing more than window-dressing, or as he puts in the title of a different essay, "Stretching Spandex Over Melanin Won't Make Comics More Diverse." (Lamb). In "Superman is a White Boy," Lamb expounds on why token superheroes of color don't actually change the inherent whiteness of the concept of the superhero, because "even one's favorite race or gender minority superhero operates within a paradigm defined by Western perspectives on violence and ideal beauty, in an industry dependent on White male consumer support…" (Lamb). In short, superheroes of color only end up functioning as tools to reify White ideologies of violence, beauty, goodness, and justice. The token gesture toward diversity is nothing more than exotic window dressing.

However, Neil Shyminsky argues that concept of Otherness is inherent to the figure of the superhero, and is constantly in tension with "status quo" that costumed crime fighters supposedly defend:

[21] As with the Golden Age, the exact delineations of the Silver and Bronze Ages is a subject of constant, impassioned debate. General consensus is that the Silver Age ends around 1970, and the Bronze Age ends around 1985.

> …their exceptional Otherness stands in direct contradiction the liberal democratic discourse of equality and liberty that they defend. These superheroes preserve the normative—the dominant discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, race, and ability, among others—even as their very presence threatens to collapse the very boundaries of those same normative fields. (289)

In fact, by the late 1960s and 1970s, superhero comics were trying to address this tension. Perhaps the most famous example of these gestures toward social relevance occurred in 1970, in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76 (Figure 4.4), written by Denny O'Neill and drawn by Neal Adams. In this issue, a black man angrily tells Green Lantern: "I been reading' about you…how you work for the *blue skins*…and how on a planet someplace you helped out the *orange skins*…and you don't considerable for the *purple skins!* Only there's skins you never bother with—!…The *black* skins! I want to know…*how come*? *Answer me that, Green Lantern!*" Ashamed, head bowed, arms meekly at his side, Green Lantern answers, "I…can't" (O'Neill 6). The old man in this issue actively confronts

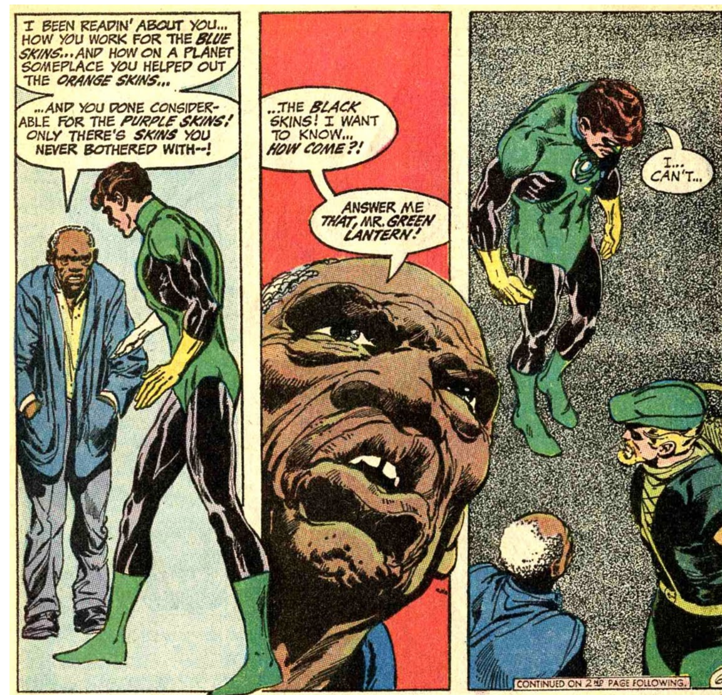

Figure 4.4: Racial politics in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76.

superhero comics' complicated relationship with race since its inception. The legend of the Green Turtle and the "immigrant status" of Clark Kent/Kal-El are part of a history that allows for imaginary forms difference and otherness. Even Green Lantern got his powers from an illegal alien.

Despite O'Neill's rather damning invective against the false racial unity of exotic, imaginary aliens, superhero comics continued to embrace its acceptance of alien otherness as somehow progressive. For example, in "Black Skins, White Masks," Richard Singer points to a 1976 *Superboy* (also a DC Comics title) story called "The Hero Who Hated the Legion," where members of the Legion of Super-heroes approach an African superhero, claiming "When it comes to race, we're colorblind! Blue skin, yellow skin, green skin…we're brothers and sisters…united in the name of justice everywhere" (qtd in Singer 110). Singer argues that alien races in *Legion of Super-heroes* and *Superboy* are "different from the normative white characters only in the exotic pastel colors of their skin…Superhero comics [represent] every fantastic race possible, as a means of ignoring real ones" (110-111). In short, their features followed the traits of normalized whiteness in caricature, not ethnic caricature (usually based in racist stereotypes). The made-up races attempt to work as a metaphor for race, but their characters have none of the markers or stigma of actual racial difference.

Rather than damning the attempt to address racism through fantasy, Ramzi Fawaz contends the attempt to fantasize is in itself productive, and even transformative. In "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!' Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America," Fawaz asserts superhero comics embody "popular fantasy." In contrast to Campbellian-style mythic criticism, Freudian notions of phantasy,

and Marxist critique of fantasy, popular fantasy describes "expressions of literary and cultural enchantment that suture together current social and political realities and impossible happenings, producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist" (359). Focusing on Marvel superhero comics of the Silver and Bronze Ages (roughly 1960-1980). Fawaz claims that rather than being ignorant (willfully or otherwise) of the real, in comics like *Uncanny X-Men*, "the seemingly impossible character of popular fantasies signals the continued 'otherness' of the potential social relations they seek to describe, while making that otherness desirable as an alternative to normative social aspirations" (359). In other words, superhero comics acknowledge the reality of discrimination against people of color, alternate sexualities, different religious backgrounds, etc. Rather than explicitly dealing with these issues, superhero stories wrap them in broader conception of the superhero as "Other."

This seems to be what Singer claims *Superboy* did, using imaginary races as a means of ignoring the real problem. However, Fawaz argues further that, "through fantastical or hybrid figures like the cyborg, the mutant, and the alien, popular fantasy generates previously unimaginable affective bonds that alter the way all parties perceive their best interests" (360). The result is that an audience of readers who would otherwise not be engaged in the questions of justice and identity politics find themselves seduced into the fantasy of radical inclusion and acceptance. As Fawaz argues, popular fantasy's goal is "producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist" (359). The "productive" dimension of popular fantasy, then, reveals itself when those spaces

opened in fantasy begin to realign themselves in the real world. When a reader "accepts" the difference of mutants, they now have the imaginative capacity and ethical framework with which to accept the real-world differences mutation symbolizes. In short, though connected to commodity capitalism (the *popular* in popular fantasy), the popular fantasy embodied by many superhero comics in the 1970s shows that what many imagine is a conservative genre in fact cultivates a radically progressive imagination in its readers.

The Shadow Hero and the Superhero in Tension

The opposition between Lamb and Fawaz can be reframed as a basic question: is the superhero genre inescapably racist or is it in fact a pop-culture fantasy that imagines the possibility for overcoming of racism? *The Shadow Hero* suggests that the answer, frustratingly, may be *yes*. In its narrative and formal details, *The Shadow Hero* repeatedly focuses on the tensions between the most radical and conservative impulses of the superhero genre. The superhero genre is revealed to have racism in its DNA, but it also progressive in its imaginative capacity for radical inclusion. To some extent, the text's nature as a contemporary retcon of a Golden Age hero requires it to contemplate the genre's history of racial representation. However, Yang and Liew refuse to simply apologize for the genre's history by "recovering" one of the many victims of Golden Age racism, and instead explore the implications of race in the 1930s and 1940s.

Yang and Liew are by no means ignorant of the racism in the history of superhero comics, and they refer to this history through several interesting background details. For example, when Hank attempts to sneak into the Chinatown boss's hideout, he boards a boat named *Caniff*. This is almost certainly a reference to Milt Caniff, author of the adventure strip *Terry and the Pirates*, which began in 1934. Hugely influential and

massively popular, *Terry and the Pirates* frequently used Yellow Peril imagery.[22] Though the concept of the deceitful and dangerous but endlessly alluring East Asian woman existed in earlier Yellow Peril fiction (like Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu stories), Caniff named his Chinese temptress "Dragon Lady," a term still used to describe this archetype. Not all Asian characters were villains, but that did not make Pat and Terry's Chinese guide any less offensive a caricature than Fu Manchu or the Dragon Lady. Connie is half the size of almost any other character, his skin is distinctly yellow, his front teeth protrude from his mouth, his ears are large and stick out like an elephant's. Generally comic relief, he flails around in oversized robes. Several critics have noted that Connie's character resembles another character from early comics history—perhaps the most important single character in the foundation of American comics—Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid.

While the star of Hogan's Alley and McFadden's flats is ostensibly a poor Irish child, several critics, including Joyce Miller, Robert Harvey, and Sheng-Mei Ma (Ma 14-15) have noted the similarity between these two characters' looks—claiming the Yellow Kid looks "vaguely Asian." Though "Yellow" refers to his famous shirt, it is curious that the term "yellow" is also associated with harmful stereotypes of Asian peoples.

[22] Challenging the history of Asian, and especially Chinese, stereotypes is in fact a major concern of Yang's oeuvre. In his first graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, Yang explicitly explores Chinese-American identity by interlocking three stories: his particular take on the Monkey King myth from *Journey to the West*, the story of a young Chinese-American boy named Jin trying to fit in after moving from the city to the suburbs, and a family sitcom called "Everyone Loves Chin-Kee," framed as a television show (complete with laugh track) in which the white, American boy Danny must put up with the crazy hijinks of his Chinese cousin Chi-Kee. As the name suggests, Yang uses Chin-Kee to embody every racist stereotype he could imagine. Indeed, Chin-Kee is so outrageous he is simultaneously ridiculous and a painful reminder that the media still propagates these images: the character is an explicit response to recent iterations of these negative stereotypes, especially a Pat Oliphant editorial cartoon published in 2001 featuring a buck-toothed, bespectacled short Chinese man who screams, "Apologize Lotten Amellican!" after he spills "fried cat gizzard with noodles" all over Uncle Sam (Ginsburg). Yang makes the invective against Oliphant explicit in the text: in one scene, Chin-Kee eats cat gizzard with noodles for lunch in the cafeteria of Oliphant High School.

Intriguingly, it appears Yang and Liew are also aware of this connection—besides the *Caniff* reference, the Yellow Kid appears in the graphic novel as a member of a group of Chinese immigrant children in the San Incendio ghettoes. These paired references indicate Yang's knowledge of the connection between Connie and the Yellow Kid. However, regardless of whether Yang means to compare these two characters, their presence in the graphic novel only serves to reinforce the problematic history of racial representation in superhero comics.

In fact, Yang and Liew's graphic novel is an attempt to intervene on that very history. They bring the tension between the racist history of superhero comics and their desire to recuperate the superhero to a head in a scene when Hank delivers Ten Grand to Detective Lawful. Hank found Ten Grand, the "Emperor" of the Chinatown gangs, in a garish secret casino called "The Palace of Forbidden Fortunes Bar & Casino." Its garish red and yellow walls, green-tiled pagoda-style roofs, and its interior décor bemuse Hank: gongs, dragon-painted pillars, paper screen doors, and vaguely "oriental" paintings and artifacts litter the hallways. While Hank sneaks through the facility, he stumbles on a sort of opening ceremony for the casino led by Ten Grand himself. Hank can hardly belief the caricature on stage is a criminal mastermind: dressed in robes straight out of a Sax Rohmer story, Ten Grand's skin is startling yellow, his long, thin mustache trails beside his face when it's not curling cartoonishly; his snake-like smile reveals two prominent buck teeth.

Hank manages to capture Ten Grand and drags him to the police station, where Hank and Detective Lawful discover that "Emperor Ten Grand" is an act. Face paint smearing off, half of his mustache lost, Irish actor and petty thief M. Stonehill Bender the

Third explains his role: "I am the *personal stand-in* of the notorious *Ten Grand*, mastermind of the San Incendio underworld! The audience has doubled—nay tripled!—since I accepted the role! Such is the enormity of my talent—I've *out-Chinked* the *Chinks*!" (117) (Figure 4.5). In short, Moe Bender's act of being an exaggerated stereotype of Chinese caricature is a simulacra; it is more real to the white audience than actual Chinese people living among them. The layers of masks and disguises in the scene reveal the difficulty of finding and performing an identity as a person of Chinese descent in America in the Golden Age. It would be one thing if Lawful mistook Moe Bender for Chinese, considering his position as a white man who might have (with or without knowledge) bought in to the stereotypes his own race had created. Yet even Hank, ethnically Chinese himself, is fooled by the disguise. The white narrative of what defines "Chineseness" is so powerful even those subjugated by that view come to believe it. It is not until Lawful reveals his own prejudice and actively implicates Hank in that prejudice that Hank realizes how involved he is in this racial farce.

Yang and Liew use formal details to implicate the reader in this scene's judgment and redemption. The page after Moe Bender's reveal, turns to the Green Turtle (who he does not yet know is Hank), and yells: " Those *sneaky slant-eyed bastards* made a rube outta you. Outta *us!*" (118). His dialogue implies that Hank is "one of us" (that is, a white American), but Lawful already unconsciously others Hanks in the scene, pointing an accusatory finger at Hank. While their anger is supposedly shared, visually Lawful directs his anger *at* Hank by pointing and yelling at Hank about the "bastards." Utilizing dramatic irony, Yang and Liew prepare the reader for a confrontation between Hank and

Figure 4.5: Detective Lawful angrily declares the Chinese "sneaky, slant-eyed bastards" without realizing Hank/The Green Turtle is Chinese as well.

Lawful, and to assume Hank will give Lawful quite the earful. Instead, after Lawful's outburst, the first panel of the next row is a close-up of Hank (in Green Turtle costume), silently staring at Lawful. Because the picture is drawn directly from the front, and Hank's eyes are focused directly in front of him, slightly to his left, Hank is also silently staring at the reader. From within the pages of the book, Hank is judging the reader's own complicity in Detective Lawful's racism.

Lawful is allowed a response, but it does not exonerate the reader's implication in this racism. The next panel switches its focus 180 degrees, to Detective Lawful's face. Unlike Hank's face in the first panel in the sequence, which seems to point directly at the reader, Lawful's face seems to be slightly off. His head is turned away from the center of the page, his eyes focus slightly upwards. In Hank's panels, his gaze appears to directly engage the reader, but Lawful's gaze does not meet ours with the same certainty. We are interpellated, but less directly. Between these two panels, the reader is placed in the position of Lawful, subject to Hank's judgmental gaze, but is not allowed to entirely embody Hank's position. We are all Lawful, but we can never entirely be Hank. The superhero genre has made it so.

The uncertainty of the reader's position in the text exposes the tension between *The Shadow Hero*'s desire to embody popular fantasy and its inability to reconcile the inherent racism of the superhero. The formal elements of this page indicate that no reader—even a reader whose life experience is closer to Hank's—can truly embody the fullness of his experience as a Chinese-American superhero in the Golden Age. Because the reader is only judged by Hank's gaze, and not able to embody Hank's position, they are not able to generate "previously unimaginable affective bonds that alter the way all

parties perceive their best interests" (Fawaz 360). The text attempts to create popular fantasy, but is ultimately unable to embody that imaginative space in large part because it is a contemporary attempt to create that space in the past.

The final scene of the graphic novel reiterates this tension. Red Center, Ten Grand's daughter and Hank's love interest, approaches Hank to ask if he might be willing to act as a "figurehead" leader of their gang in the power vacuum left by Ten Grand's defeat. Hank refuses, and Red Center's angry retort sets up the book's conclusion: "So you're still playing superhero then? Hank, be honest. Do you really think dressing up in that silly costume will make them accept you? Do you really think it will make you a part of *them*?" (150). In a caption, Hank admits he does not know how to answer her. He then tells the reader that shortly after his discussion with Red Center, he finally meets the catalyst of his journey: the superhero who saved his mother, the Anchor of Justice. The Anchor is "honored" (151) to finally meet the Green Turtle, and asks him (on behalf of the president) whether he would be willing to lend a hand defending the US's allies in World War II. Hank gladly agrees.

On the final page of the novel (Figure 4.6), the Anchor pauses as he flies away. He turns back to the Green Turtle, and says, "Oh yes! One more thing…" (152). In two stacked panels, the Anchor of Justice touches the side of his face to reveal it is a mask—the Anchor's real face is rippling layers of metal, two glowing red orbs in place of his eyes. "I've never told anyone this—" he says, "—But my parents aren't from around here, either" (152). The Green Turtle is shocked, his eyes widen and eyebrows raised as the middle panel of the page, spanning almost the whole width of the page, red background. The final image of the book, a splash panel bleeding to the edges of the

Figure 4.6: *The Shadow Hero*'s final page.

page, features Hank in action: it is nighttime, he is in costume, swinging above the city with the Tortoise spirit behind him. In captions, he tells the reader how he made sense of these last two encounters: “I didn’t know how to answer Red Center back then, but I do now. Maybe being a superhero would make me a part of them. Maybe it wouldn’t. Either way it didn’t matter, because the Green Turtle has already become a part of me” (152).

Hank’s decision to become a superhero was the result of a fantasy not so different than popular fantasy as theorized by Fawaz. In *The Shadow Hero*, Hank is as much a consumer of superhero mythology as he is a superhero himself. Hank’s mother wanted him to become a superhero after meeting the Anchor of Justice; Hank participated in her harebrained schemes (at one point she tries to get him to jump into a puddle of toxic waste) and martial arts training to placate her. However, when he sees the Anchor of Justice himself, Hank is transformed. The superhero was an abstract concept, the subject of his mother’s fevered rants. Seeing the Anchor of Justice in the sky, Hank says with eyes full of wonder, “A man flying through the air, like some kind of being from the future. Suddenly I couldn’t think of a single reason I could not win against the Tong of Sticks” (#). Popular fantasy functions by creating an imaginative capacity in its readers; readers then can turn that capacity into action in the real world. In this scene, Hank can only imagine *himself* as a superhero because seeing the Anchor of Justice allowed him to imagine that a superhero could exist. Meeting the Anchor of Justice and gaining his approval is, for Hank, the ultimate fantasy fulfillment.

This ending is clearly a moment of celebration: smiling, Hank swings away into the night, his superhero status validated by the Anchor of Justice (and, by extension, the U. S. government). With this conclusion, the realization of Hank’s superhero fantasy

becomes an expression of Yang and Liew's popular fantasy of racial inclusion in the superhero genre. Interestingly, they also shift the orientation of the popular fantasy: acceptance by the majority is no longer the ultimate goal of the superhero fantasy, but self-acceptance is. Red Center questioned Hank's fantasy of inclusion into white society. But by proclaiming that "their" acceptance no longer matters, Hank stakes his claim as a "real" superhero. Yang and Liew thus go further than Fawaz: where Fawaz argues the superhero genre embodies the possibility of White America's acceptance of otherness, Yang and Liew's intimate that the superhero genre creates a space for radical self-acceptance of otherness on the part of the oppressed. This ending is no longer concerned with whether the *Blazing Comics* Green Turtle was Chinese or not—it doesn't matter anymore. By finding a space for representation in the otherwise oppressive Golden Age, Yang and Liew claim the genre for themselves. The final quote is ostensibly Hank's thoughts, but it could just as easily be Yang's conclusion: "Maybe being a superhero would make me a part of them…it didn't matter, because the Green Turtle has already become a part of me" (152).

This conclusion is attractive, but perhaps not entirely convincing. *The Shadow Hero* is a prequel, carefully constructed so that it leads into the events of *Blazing Comics*. Yang's copious endnotes make the placement of the text in regards to *Blazing Comics* explicit; he even includes scans of the first Green Turtle story from *Blazing Comics* #1. In short, Hank's moment of acceptance and empowerment in the narrative will be followed by the strange, problematic text penned by Chu Hing in 1944. Hank stops being boldly brazen about his secret identity (everyone in Chinatown knows Hank is Green Turtle), and instead enters world in which he is unable to tell his closest friends what his real

name is. In *Blazing Comics*, he will no longer correct people who assume he is white as he did for Detective Lawful in *The Shadow Hero*. The ancient turtle spirit who granted him powers and offers him advice will be muted in *Blazing Comics*, a silent curiosity the Green Turtle never acknowledges. Though the moment feels triumphant at the end of *The Shadow Hero*, because *The Shadow Hero* is a prequel to *Blazing Comics*, Hank's story will shortly become a tragedy.

The tension between the popular fantasy of *The Shadow Hero* and its strange future/past in the Golden Age is the product of an inherent tension in the superhero genre. At its heart, the superhero comic is a flight of fancy, a powerful fantasy world in which wrongs can be righted and powerful super-beings fight on the side of the common people. But the genre also has conservative tendencies—the superhero tends to protect the status quo rather than what is inherently good. As the notion of "good" changes, so does the superhero. It is often a reactionary genre, not one of proactive imagination. As Fawaz argues, the superhero genre does have the capability of embodying popular fantasy, but it does not truly embrace this potential until the Silver Age, decades into its existence. Even then, as Marc Singer argues, it can be frustrating to see the characters of superhero comics claim they are inclusive when that inclusion only seems to apply to fantastic Otherness. Hope and change are in the superhero genre's heart, but even the most superpowered hero cannot entirely lift the weight of real injustice.

What is most impressive about *The Shadow Hero*, then, is the way that it, like the superhero genre more broadly, holds these two positions in tension. It is a superhero story, but it also a story about superheroes. It questions the past, and looks to the future. By acknowledging the problematic history of superheroes, Yang and Liew shed light on

the darker aspects of a genre inextricably linked to the American imagination in the twentieth century and beyond. At the same time, they refuse to abandon the genre for its problems—they embrace its radical possibilities for racial acceptance, and in its conclusion, for self-acceptance. At the same time, its nature as a prequel denies total wish fulfillment, challenging readers to question their assumptions about the genre and complicity in its racism. The Green Turtle may not be the hero the superhero genre wants, but he's exactly the hero it needs and deserves.

CHAPTER V

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE PHONE BOOTH: SUPERHEROIC IDENTITY AND QUEER THEORY IN *BATWOMAN: ELEGY*[1]

In the spring of 2006, DC Comics announced their so-called "Trinity"—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—would disappear from comics for a year. In a story arc titled *52*, an all-star cast of writers and artists would explore what happened when the "B-List" heroes of the DC universe had to fill the super-shoes of their more famous colleagues. One of the main characters of the storyline would be Kate Kane, otherwise known as Batwoman. The reintroduction of a long-forgotten Batman sidekick news would have gone unnoticed by the general public were it not for one detail: *this* Batwoman is a lesbian. Media outlets around the world published the story with lurid titles like "Batwoman's Other Secret Identity Turns Heads" (Williams) and "Holy Lipstick Lesbian!" (Robinson). Dan Didio, vice president and executive editor of DC Comics, claimed to have expected and even welcomed some controversy, but few people expected the amount of public interest in the sexuality of a second-tier superheroine who hadn't appeared on comic book pages in decades.[2]

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[1] Portions of this chapter have been published in an article of the same title in *ImageTexT* volume 7, issue 5 (Gilroy).

[2] Certainly acceptance of queer characters and the portrayal in other media and genres paved the way for the acceptance of *Batwoman: Elegy*. On TV, *Xena: Warrior Princess*—which aired from 1995-1999–frequently flirted with lesbian attraction between its two principle characters, Xena and Gabrielle. Tara and Willow became a couple on the popular TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in 1999. In the comics world, *Fun Home*—Alison Bechdel's memoir of growing up with a closeted father and coming to terms with her own sexuality—garnered seriously critical and popular acclaim upon its release in 2006. However, the superhero genre, especially those titles published by DC and Marvel Comics, tends to be quite conservative. Though queer superheroes existed in both universes, Batwoman taking over Batman's position in his flagship title (*Detective Comics*)—especially when Dick Grayson/Nightwing was not only present but acting as Batman—can only be considered a seismic shift for the visibility of LGBT+ characters in superhero comics.

Of the thousands of superheroes created since Superman first debuted in 1938, Batman has become even more popular than the Man of Steel. He has appeared in television shows, films, and even remained quite popular in comics after overall sales of most titles dropped precipitously in the 1980s and 1990s. Superman may be the first, but Batman has unquestionably become the most popular of DC's heroes. Because of her close connection to Batman, Batwoman's "news" had implications well beyond the pages of her comic. Many readers initially dismissed Batwoman's sexuality as tokenism or shock tactics on DC's part, even though she was far from the first openly gay superhero (that title belongs to Marvel's Northstar[3]). The questions and concerns raised about Batwoman's identity were not so much about a specific character's sexual preferences. Batwoman's homosexuality had far-reaching implications for the broader discussion about superheroes and sex, especially because of the contentious history her Bat-colleague's sex life.

In my previous chapter, I discussed the inherent tension between the radical and conservative impulses of the superhero genre, especially in regards to the representation of race. I concluded that while the genre does create a space for progressively imagining a better world, it cannot entirely escape its racist roots. However, not all aspects of the genre are anchored to such a conservative vision. While Batwoman's sexual preferences

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[3] The first openly gay superhero was a DC Comics character named Extraño, who appeared in *Millennium* #2 in 1988. A super-powered magician, Extraño (whose name means "strange" in Spanish) was flamboyant and embodied many gay stereotypes. However, most comics historians say that Marvel's Northstar is the first gay superhero. First introduced in *Uncanny X-Men* #120 in 1979, Northstar didn't come out until 1992. However, his creator John Byrne claims Northstar was meant to be a gay character from the beginning—and there is some proof of this claim as early at 1985. In his entry on comics in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, James Donovan repeats Byrne's claim, then writes, "see the cryptic response from Byrne to this writer's letter in *AF*#18" (208-209). The final note of the letters page in *Alpha Flight* #18 says, "AND NOW: A cryptic response to James M. Donovan, of Chattanooga. The answer is 'YES'" (Byrne). The implication is clear: Donovan asked whether Northstar was gay, and in 1985 John Byrne (however cryptically) confirmed that he was.

made the headlines, the true innovation her first storyline, later collected as *Batwoman: Elegy,* lies in its construction and presentation of an inherently performative, queer notion of identity and the subject. Through complex art styles and the metatextual play of narrative, *Elegy* subverts assumptions of the role of sex and power fantasies in superhero stories, welcoming new forms of queer readings of the genre as a whole.

Holy Context, Batman!

Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 in May 1939. Eleven months later, in *Detective Comics* #38, Batman's creators Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson gave Batman a sidekick: Robin, the Boy Wonder. Popular with younger readers, Robin became an indispensable part of the comic. Robin was always present at Batman's side, even when out of costume: Bruce Wayne took on the orphaned Dick Grayson as his ward. But all was not well in Gotham. Due to his close relationship with his ward and sidekick, Batman's owners and creators have consistently attempted to ignore, refute, and cover up a question that will not go away: what's going on between Batman and Robin?[4]

It would be tempting to think questions about Batman's sexual preference are a new phenomenon: we imagine comic book readers today are more sophisticated than in the 1940s and that the culture is far less naïve about sexual identity. Tempting, but false: in his infamous *Seduction of the Innocent*, popular psychologist Frederic Wertham bluntly claimed, "…the Batman stories are psychologically homosexual…Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to

[4] For a more detailed discussion of the history of the reception of Batman and Robin's relationship, see Frederic Wertham (*Seduction of the Innocent*), Will Brooker (*Batman Unmasked*), Andrew Mendhurst ("Batman, Deviance, and Camp" in *The Many Lives of Batman*), Travis Langely (*Batman and Philosophy*), and "Open Secrets in Cold War America" in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*. For more information on Wertham, the Comics Code Authority, and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, see Bart Beaty's *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague*, and Amy Kriste Nyberg's "Comics Code History: The Seal of Approval."

realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature 'Batman' and his young friend 'Robin" (189). Adam West and Burt Ward's campy portrayal of the dynamic duo in the 1960s TV show would only further cement rumors.

In response to increasing scrutiny brought on by Wertham's book, the subsequent Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, and growing pressure from the newly created Comics Code Authority, DC Comics decided to try to put the debate to rest by giving Batman a girlfriend. Batwoman, the alter ego of the beautiful heiress Kathy Kane, debuted in 1956. She became a crime fighter because she idolized Batman, and fought alongside Batman and Robin (and eventually Bat Girl), saving the day and trying to win Batman's heart. Though research indicates that Kathy Kane/Batwoman was popular with readers, she was phased out of Batman's adventures in the late 1970s in favor of the reimagined Bat Girl, a role now fulfilled by Commissioner Jim Gordon's daughter Barbara (Grandinetti). Batwoman only ever quelled the most superficial rumors about Batman's possible homosexuality. She languished, appearing only occasionally until 1985's crossover event *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, where she was literally erased from the DC universe.[5]

Batwoman resurfaced in 2006 as Kate Kane. In a full- black body suit with a long cape, red boots, and flowing red locks, Batwoman vamped her way into a DC universe bereft of its A-list heroes to fight the Religion of Crime. During the "Battle for the Cowl" following Batman's death in 2009, Batwoman became the main character in *Detective*

[5] After 50 years of continuity, the DC universe of superheroes had become quite convoluted. Popular characters had multiple origin stories, gained and lost powers, and had multiple identities and incarnations. In order to make the universe more accessible, DC launched the first major crossover event, *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* The "Crisis" posited that the stories of the DC universe actually happened in a multiverse. Through a rather convoluted series of events, the multiverse collapses into one universe while retaining some elements from each of the universes, creating a single, far more legible universe (at least until *Infinite Crisis* or The New 52)

Comics, starring in a storyline led by writer Greg Rucka and artist J. H. Williams III. Over 70 years after his debut, a character created to quell concerns about the sexuality of one of DC's most popular characters was now a lesbian character taking over his flagship title. The *Detective* run was a huge gamble, but it paid off: Batwoman became very popular with fans and critics, and was nominated for and won several Eisner Awards in 2010. The story even drew praise outside the comics world; GLAAD presented Rucka with a GLAAD Media Award for his work on Batwoman. When Batman (inevitably) reappeared, Batwoman remained popular enough to receive her own title, which followed her life directly after the events of *Detective Comics* run ended.[6]

Batwoman's history is interesting because her existence and experience as a character, no matter how minor, connects her to every stage of the broad movements of the superhero genre. Her relationship to Batman and creation in response to the Comics Code Authority connect her to the Golden Age, though her post-Code creation means she is officially a Silver Age character. The Bronze Age, defined by attempts to address real-life issues and the reorganize of the superheroic universe in order to appeal to a an aging audience, ended when DC Comics published *Crisis on Infinite Earths*—where Batwoman met her fate.[7] In true superhero fashion, Batwoman didn't stay dead, and reappeared during in the current "Modern Age" of superhero comics. Her reappearance coincided with a major crossover event, a marketing effort which, for better or worse, has come to define superhero narratives at the "Big Two" (that is, Marvel Comics and DC Comics)

[6] *Batwoman* was also popular enough to survive the "New 52" purge, when DC "rebooted" its universe and "started over" all its titles.

[7] The Bronze Age is perhaps the most difficult to define of the class "Ages," and its beginning and end are hotly contested among fans. Regardless of the exact date, most scholars and critics agree that the genre of superhero comics experienced a paradigm shift in the mid-1980s.

publishing companies since the turn of the century. The current Batwoman's queerness challenges the role she played in earlier epochs while also updating her for a modern audience. In short, *Elegy* is a contemporary culmination of the history of superhero comics.

In many ways, *Batwoman: Elegy* is standard superhero fare. Like all the major licensed superheroes, her book and character are haunted by the specters of history, standing on over 70 years of stories in the DC Comics universe. Its production value corresponds with contemporary tastes—the collected trade is printed on glossy paper, with full-color illustrations collected from the monthly issues of *Detective Comics*. During the initial publication of the *Elegy* storyline in *Detective Comics*, DC still submitted their work for approval to the dreaded Comics Code Authority and the issues of *Detective Comics* in which the story was originally printed had the Comics Code Authority seal printed on their covers[8] (Figure 5.1). The plot of *Batwoman: Elegy*

Figure 5.1: The Comics Code Authority Seal of Approval appears just below the issue number on Detective Comics #854.

[8] While Marvel Comics officially severed ties with the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 2001, DC Comics and Archie Comics continued to submit its materials to the CCA until January of 2011. A day after DC cut ties, Archie Comics code followed suit and the CCA essentially died (Nyberg).

juxtaposes her origin story with an exploration of the difficulty she faces balancing her superhero life and her civilian life. It introduces readers to her own supervillain, Alice, who is, in proper Gotham fashion, a dark mirror of Kate. Batwoman even cracks a joke at her nemesis's unoriginality, claiming Gotham already has "one Carroll inspired freak"[9] (Rucka).

At the same time, *Batwoman*: *Elegy* is anything but ordinary. Historically, Batwoman was among the first openly queer characters in mainstream comics to have her own book, and definitely the first queer character to headline a major title for one of the Big Two. Since her resurrection in 2006's *52,* Batwoman had been a relatively minor character in the DC Universe. Even if she was not a lesbian, a minor female character taking over one of the books of the single biggest superhero in the comic book world—another first in comic book history—is exceptional in itself. Flipping through the pages reveals another obvious difference. J. H. Williams III's art jumps between standard square panels and explosions of color and line. The styles with which he draws the characters shift throughout the storyline, and often these styles blend into each other in a way that refuses the reader any chance to find stable footing in the stylistic representations of Batwoman's world.

Style and Performance

In *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*, Barbara Postema insightfully argues that in the pages of a graphic narrative, "Style becomes the substance of comics…style signifies in comics" (122). *Batwoman: Elegy* pushes this concept to the extreme, using distinct styles to signify the different aspect of Kate's life. When Kate is

[9] The "Gotham inspired freak" Kate refers to is The Mad Hatter, who joined Batman's rogue's gallery in 1948.

Batwoman—the first style the reader encounters—the colors of the page are generally less saturated to reflect the nightlife of Gotham City (Figure 5.2). The one, glaring exception to this depressed saturation is the bright white of Batwoman's skin and the red of her hair, lips, and costume details. The ink wash shading on these pages, especially on Batwoman herself, creates a sense that the style of the book is more photorealistic than a traditional comic book.

In fact, these pages which render Batwoman more "realistically" are the most stylized of all the different art styles, particularly in regards to page composition. Batwoman's pages feature jagged, often nonlinear panels which act less as narrative beats and more like decorative pieces, frequently puzzled together to form the Batwoman symbol. Most of the panel transitions move between aspects, not actions. In contrast to more traditional action-based transitions in which panels act as storyboard pieces to

Figure 5.2: The "Batwoman" style.

indicate the progression in time, aspect transitions establish a feeling and mood and capture multiple points of view on a single moment (McCloud 72). While it is rare to sacrifice narrative drive for mood in superhero comics, the use of such stylistic extravagance on Batwoman's pages means that action scenes—the heart of superhero comics—are the most abstract and least accessible pages in the book.

The second style a reader encounters represents Kate Kane's civilian life. The style of these pages more closely resembles the traditional superhero comic style, wherein outlines of generally even weight depict simplified but otherwise realistic looking human figures. Shapes are shaded with single colors and no transition between the light and dark (in animation this is often referred to as "cel style" shading). The colors are warmer; yellow and orange tones dominate. Panel transitions are driven by action and the passage of time, and the page composition consists of more regular, rectangular panels in grids. There is some compositional play, but overall the pages are far more accessible to the average comics fan than the hyper-stylized Batwoman pages.

Williams uses a third style to depict flashbacks to Kate's past. The characters are rendered in an almost nostalgic style, outlined with thick brush strokes (Figure 5.3). Here the colors strike a balance between the desaturated tones with bright red accents of Batwoman's style and the warm yellows of present-day Kate's. While there are many warm tones, they are less saturated than those of the earlier Kate pages, and also feature many grays and blues. The bright exception is young Kate's (as well as her twin sister, Beth's) fiery hair and—in the climactic trauma of her childhood—the blood of her mother and sister. The panels of these pages are gridded even more regularly than Kate

Kane's pages, with virtually no exceptions to the rectangular shape. These panels, however, all lack a distinct panel outline. The color simply ends as it meets the white of the gutter.

Figure 5.3: The "flashback" style

These multiple art styles present an aspect of the construction of identity common in superhero comics that is generally limited to theoretical and academic context: performativity. A key aspect of performativity, especially of identity, is its invisibility to the performer. A human subject tends not to consciously think they are performing gender or subjectivity according to social norms. Instead, the performing subject believes they are acting in a way that reflects authentic and inherent aspects of their own unique personality and circumstance. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues performativity does not in itself reflect a completely conscious act on the part of the individual, but instead is necessitated by the expectations of the society in which the performing subject lives and the "regimes of discourse/power" which also create that subject (15). In

addition to being an unconscious act, “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). The interplay of Williams’s art styles illustrates this aspect of performativity perfectly.

Rucka and Williams achieve this sense of performativity by playing with the tension between visual realism and a narrative sense of authenticity. Despite the excessive styling of the panel composition, in pages featuring Batwoman, Williams renders the character with a more photorealistic style. In the fantastic and overwrought world she inhabits—reflected by the baroque panel composition and the intensely different visual styles of the villains she fights—Batwoman appears the only “real” body on the page. In theory, Batwoman is a persona Kate Kane adopts. However, next to the renderings of Batwoman, Kate Kane in her daily life (Figure 5.4) looks positively cartoony. Batwoman’s art style argues that while her situation is fantastic and extraordinary, Kate Kane herself is most “real” when she is Batwoman.

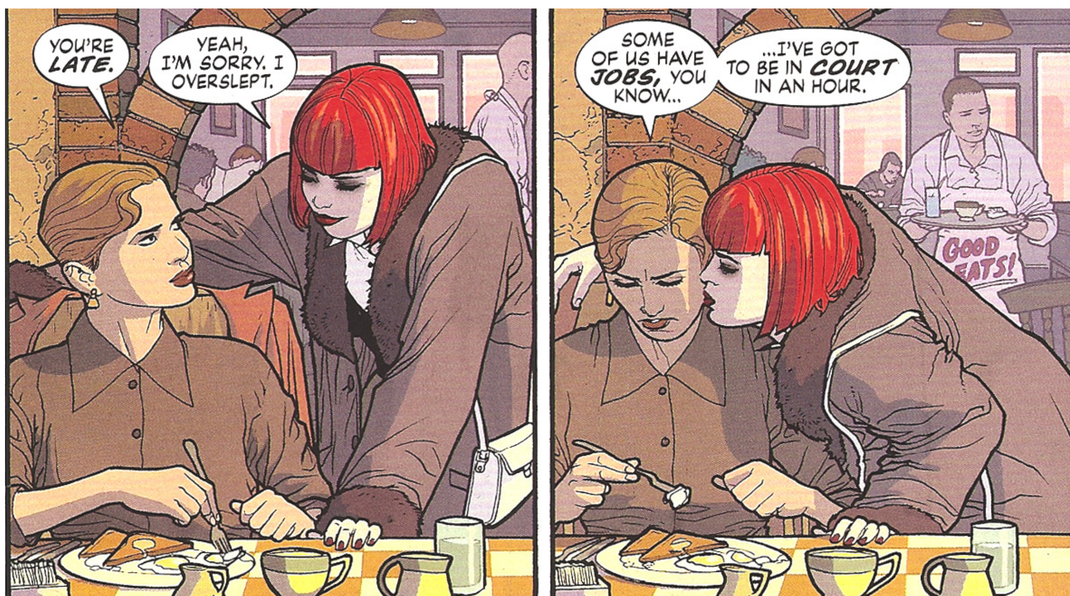

Figure 5.4: The “Kate Kane” style.

At the same time, the Kate Kane pages make their own argument for an objective reality. Kate's pages are clearly influenced by the *ligne claire* style made famous by Hergé's *Tintin* comics, but adapted to modern, more adult-oriented work by artists like Geoff Darrow and Seth Fisher. Lines of generally even weight, the absences of heavy blacks or hatching for shading, and flat colors define the *ligne claire* style. The result is, as McCloud describes it, "a kind of democracy of form in which no shape was any less important than any other—a completely objective world" (190). This sense of objectivity creates what Charles Hatfield calls an "ideological burden" (145) to tell the truth of the world an artist is trying to convey. Thus, when a reader encounters the image of Kate entering the Morning Glory restaurant the morning after a fight as Batwoman, and is able to perceive the details of the waiter's apron and see the pats of butter on Anna's eggs rendered with the same detail as Kate, her or she is compelled to feel that Kate *belongs* in this setting. Unlike the photorealistic rendering of Batwoman on the earlier pages, the democratic simplicity and legibility of the style of Kate's pages seem to create a concretely imagined, fully established world. Interwoven with the Batwoman pages, however, the distinct lack of mimetic realism in the rendering of the pages becomes apparent and undermines the objectivity of this *ligne claire* style.

The final of the three main styles, that of Kate's history, seems to undercut the notion of an objective, "true" identity in another way. While almost all supeheroic identities are necessarily split between the public and private selves, surely the identity of the character before their decision to become a superhero is more "authentic" than the later split personality. However, Williams undermines the authenticity of Kate's past by using a deliberately nostalgic style for Kate's memories. The colors are faded and the

characters are rendered in chunky brush lines and shaded with heavy blacks. In these pages, Williams forgoes traditional panel borders and simply stops the panel as it reaches at the gutter, implying the indistinct, uncontained nature of memory. At the same time, the panels are regularly placed and use traditional narrative transitions, indicating a deliberate construction of indiscrete memories in order to make sense of a complex past. The style shifts closer to the second style, including more details and using finer line work—becoming clearer—as the narrative moves closer to the present. In short, the panels of Kate's pre-Batwoman life look like memory feels, which is anything but objective.

The different styles Williams utilizes do not imply performativity on their own; they work because they work *together*. Kate's decision to become Batwoman centers on childhood trauma: Kate was the only survivor of a terrorist plot to kidnap her mother, her twin sister, and her. While for Kate this experience is definitive, Williams' art style reveals the indeterminate nature of Kate's own memories. The resulting identity Kate constructs for herself is inherently split between Batwoman and Kate Kane. These styles are entirely extradiegetic: Kate herself does not notice the style changes; in her experience the world is a singular whole. Her childhood leads directly to her present, a present defined and built upon specific moments and experiences of her life. While Williams's art styles simultaneously reveal that neither of these identities is more "authentic" than the other, both identities rely on the reader's belief that these wildly different styles represent the objective reality of a single identity. Kate's fractured identity only makes sense in light of Williams's stylistic emphasis on the un-objective nature of the memories on which Kate has built her identity.

The multiple identities indicated by these multiple styles is part and parcel of the superhero genre—many consider the split civilian/superhero personae a defining feature of the genre. This kind of double consciousness has also long been associated with gay identity, especially the idea of "the closet." In his discussion of literary allusion to superhero imagery, Michael P. Harrison claims masked identities act as metaphor for unspeakable homoerotic desire (354-355). In his essay on Wonder Woman and queer comic book culture, Brian Mitchell Peters argues, "Comic books have always revealed themes that can be identified as queer, as the majority of superheroes always had to live two lives, one as hero and one as civilian" (2). Rather than shying away, Rucka makes the connection between the performance of gay identity and superhero identity explicity in Batwoman's origin story.

An important aspect of Kate's backstory involves her involvement in the US military. As a result of her traumatic childhood, Kate decides to "serve" the public in order to protect others from experiencing tragedy like hers. Because both her mother and father were members of the Armed Forces, Kate decides to join the United States Army. She is a celebrated West Point cadet until she is asked by her superiors to respond to claims that she has violated the clause against homosexuality. Because honesty and integrity are part of the military code to which she has dedicated her life, Kate refuses to lie and resigns, officially coming out to her superiors and, as a result, her father. When this storyline was written, "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was still in effect, and Rucka consulted with and credited First Lieutenant Daniel Choi, a West Point graduate and Iraq War veteran who was discharged after coming out on national television. Kate's

backstory is thus an open and explicit challenge to the legally enforced closet forced on thousands of American servicemen and women.

The loss of her ability to serve through military service directly results in her decision to become Batwoman. What is ironic in Kate Kane's transition from cadet to superhero is that through her decision to serve Gotham, Kate must effectively return to the closet. While she no longer has to lie or cover up her homosexuality, she must now lie to her friends and family about where she's been and cover up the bruises and injuries from her secret escapades. The first image we see of Kate Kane as herself—and not Batwoman—involve her girlfriend breaking up with her because she thinks Kate has been partying with other women. Kate, of course, can't say that she was actually fighting crime in a black dominatrix outfit. She's left the closet in West Point to walk back into the closet of her own Bat Lair.

While the shifting art styles reveal one aspect of Kate's performance of identity, Kate Kane performs her identity through her actions within the story in multiple, gendered ways that challenge stereotypes and assumptions about gender, especially as they relate to superheroes and the superhero genre. For example, while Batwoman's glossy lipstick, thick curly hair, and heightened sense of style mark her as "femme," in her civilian life, Kate Kane dons a much more punk/goth/butch persona. Kate even purposely wears a tuxedo to a charity ball in order to scandalize her image-obsessed stepmother. However, the "femme" Batwoman is, in fact, the aggressive superhero, even conjuring the image of a dominatrix, while visibly more "butch," Kate Kane is generally passive and plays the role of a spoiled socialite. Her sexuality as Batwoman and Kate Kane is therefore represented by intentional performances that simultaneously embody

and challenge common assumptions about those performances. The different art styles reinforce the notion of these identities as performance, not separate aspects of some "true" character.

Any notion of identity as inherently performative is at some level a queer reading of the concept of identity itself. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, "the 'queer' potential of performativity is evidently related to the tenuousness of its ontological ground" (3). The larger scope of queer theory is not a question of proving whether of not texts, identities, and concepts are homosexual or heterosexual, but instead to break down the ontological certainty of concepts our modern society has naturalized—especially sex and the subject—by revealing the constructedness of those concepts. Because of the methodology's connection to queer studies, queer theory is generally more concerned with the construction of sex, gender, sexuality, and identity. A queer notion of identity is therefore not limited to the sexual attractions of its subject, but one that destabilizes the notion of a singular, definable subject altogether.

In *Batwoman: Elegy*, Rucka's and Williams's ability to portray a queer notion of identity is aided by the fact that Kate Kane/Batwoman is, explicitly, a queer woman. Despite the lurid headlines attempting to simplify her queerness—calling her a "lipstick lesbian," for instance—Kate's own journey to understanding her identity as a queer woman is inextricable from her understanding of her mission to serve the public—a mission that results in her creating Batwoman. The performative aspects of her identity are made legible by their connection the narrative of a lesbian "being in the closet" and "coming out."

Imitating the classic superhero origin story with an explicitly queer character reveals the ease with which the superheroic identity, especially the problem of the secret identity, can be mapped onto not just queer identity, but a queer understanding of identity as a concept itself. Superheroes are subject to an epistemology of the phone booth wherein any superheroic identity is necessarily broken into several identities, each determined by the secrets they must keep. (In Kate's case, the "Bat Lair" is more accurate than the "phone booth," but any space that symbolizes the juxtaposition of identities within a single body will do.) Those secrets are in turn determined by the way that bodies act and present themselves for different audiences; all major characters are always performing at multiple levels. Their identity is never stable and only found in the performance of certain conceptions of gender and sexuality. I will stress that I understand superheroes are fictional creations, while the subjects of Sedgwick's discussion are real people truly oppressed by real and damaging systems of power and I do not want to suggest that superheroes are oppressed figures or that their fictional world is in any way truly comparable to the ongoing struggle for human rights in ours. However, because of the importance of the superhero in the imagination of American society and popular cultural, the similarities between the identity formation of these figures and identities formed by "the closet" have interesting implications for American culture more broadly.

Sex and Power

Sedgwick's notion of epistemology is deeply connected to sexual identity and desire. The construction and representation of the superheroic identity is also deeply connected to sexuality; one of the most common criticisms of the genre is that it only exists to fulfill the lurid fantasies of white, straight, 18-35 year old males. The men are

powerful and strong, nigh unto invulnerable, while the women—even the heroines—are pliant and vulnerable, displayed for the sexual pleasures of the slavering boys reading their books. Occasionally a dissenting voice will argue that male superheroic bodies are also sexualized and engender damaging body images for the boys reading them. Critics respond that while there might be a sexual aspect to the representation of superheroic men, it is not objectifying in the same way women's bodies are: Men's bodies are the creation of men's power fantasies; women's bodies are the creation of men's sexual fantasies[10].

This claim, while valid, too easily dismisses the sexual nature of extraordinarily fit men running around in skintight costumes. The male superheroic body displays an uncomfortable relationship with its own sexuality. Since the early days of the superhero, their underwear is on the outside, forefronting their sexuality. Super suits are skin tight, if they even exist (some heroes, like Namor, are naked without their underwear). The underwear, though, seems to hide nothing more than a Ken doll's lack of anatomy. As Harrison argues, "While the early comics avoided sexuality as a plot point, the superhero body was inscribed by sexuality while simultaneously obscuring it" (348). The sexual body is "an essential element of the superheroic form" (Harrison 348); it is simply disingenuous to declare the sexual nature of the idealized body more than a non-erotic fantasy "power fantasy."

The sexualization of the male body in superhero comics is both obvious in its celebration of male physical prowess but undermined by its juxtaposition to more overtly

[10] The differences in the representation of men's and women's bodies in superhero comics is brilliantly parodied by the website "The Hawkeye Initiative," whose aim is, according to Tumblr user and artist gingerhaze, to "fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics" by "[replacing] the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing."

sexualized female characters. The very idea that sexual prowess and physical authority can be separate implies a discomfort with the multiple meanings of the body. For example, Wonder Woman's connection to sadomasochistic imagery is as inherent to the character as her connection to Gloria Steinem and feminism[11]. The superhero fantasy is always about power, but it is also always about sex as well—for male and female superheroes. Indeed, sex and violence are both present, even if, as Joe Sutliff Sanders argues, sex is "sublimated" in that violence (154-155). They are impossible to disentangle.

The normalcy of the narrative of *Elegy*—the superhero origin story—is juxtaposed with its obvious visual difference. When biological women put on outfits and act "normally," it is not the product of some true aspect of their nature but instead a response to a set of socially constructed gender roles. Drag thus *"implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (Butler 187). By performing the gender expectations of women while being a man (or vice versa), a drag performer in turn exposes gender expression as part of a performance. Due in large part to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, the lens of queer theory has transformed (or perhaps been made over) drag performance from a sideshow pleasure to a subversive act that reveals the inherent performativity of gender. Drag is not just imitation, it is a peculiar kind of imitation that doesn't try to "fool" the viewer into thinking the drag king or queen is a man or a woman. Drag performances are named as such, the audience is in on the fun. While any imitation reveals the illusion of origins, drag also laughs at its original notion—gender roles and representation—through its exaggeration. This exaggeration in

[11] For more information on Wonder Woman and subversive sexuality, see "Wonder Woman: Bondage and Liberation" in Ben Saunders's *Do the Gods Wear Capes?* and Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*.

addition to imitation is what truly allows drag to challenge the claim to "natural" gender and sexuality[12]. The imitation is pushed to caricature, to its extremes.

In addition to its role equating the queer identity with the superhero identity, *Elegy* takes on a new aspect of performance when it comes to superheroes and sex. Batwoman appears to be a representative example of the sexy superheroine. Like Batgirl and Supergirl, Batwoman's own name implies a subordinate position to and imitation of a male hero. She's sexy in her tight-fitting catsuit, its Bat symbol drawing attention to her ample bosom. Her nearly knee high red boots and long red locks seal the va-va-voom deal. But the presentation of her sexuality and her body as sexual is pushed beyond the limits of the usual superhero book. The tension between the expected reality and the unexpected, exaggerated performance calls to mind the theoretical trope of drag. It is impossible to ignore, or to pretend Batwoman's overt sexuality is subtext. Her opening line to the whole book is, "You know what I want …I want your secrets" (Rucka). Paired with her cherry-red lips and a high-kick to the reader's face, Batwoman immediately pushes her sexuality to the forefront of the book in a way that does not allow the reader to ignore it. Batwoman drags us in.

Batwoman also makes clear that her superheroic sexuality, like all other aspects of her identity, is a performance. In an early meeting with Batman, he tells her that long hair is dangerous because someone could grab at it. She says nothing to him, only to take her wig off on the next page. But what kind of performance is it? We know from her own history that Batwoman is lesbian; therefore this sexuality is already queer at some level. But there is more to her performance that unsettles the notion of the superheroine as a

[12] For more on drag performance, see Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Subordination" and Carol-Ann Tyler's "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag."

passive sexual fantasy. While drag functions as a metaphor, the connection between Batwoman and bondage imagery is plain for all to see. Sanders argues that sexuality is sublimated into violence in the superhero genre, a trait it seems to borrow from sadomasochistic (S/M) sex practices, particularly leather fetish and bondage. This participation in S/M imagery further cements the connection between performativity and queer identity. In *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*, Thomas Piotnek argues that S/M sex practices exemplify the "volatility of identity" (84) theorized by queer conceptions of identity. S/M is a fantasy; its practice requires its participants must clearly understand its nature as fantasy and their roles in that fantasy. The inherent theatricality of S/M practices highlights that identities are nothing more than roles a person plays, and those roles can be frequently changed (84-85).

Her costume is not so far from a dominatrix, nor is her combination of sexuality and violence/power. It also echoes the vampire—that monster made of violence and sexuality run amok. In Figure 5.5, for example, our heroine not only rises above the panels of her fight, she penetrates in and out of the panels, bending not only the action of the scene but the representation of time itself to her will. And yet this page composition reveals something interesting: the very power of her legs—that which gives her the physical advantage over her opponents, which gives her the penetrative power over time and space on the page—comes to a point between her legs. And rather than focus on something like her buttocks or thighs—Williams gets us right to the point. We are literally confronted with her sex as power.

Figure 5.5: Batwoman kicks through time and space.

This is not the only page that draws the connection. In her first battle with her archnemsis Alice, Rucka creates a scene in which Batwoman becomes the anti-prince to Alice's damsel in distress (Figure 5.6). Batwoman kidnaps Alice away from her minions, carrying her into a tall tower. As they grapple, it is difficult to tell whether they are fighting or engaging in foreplay. Several panels feature Batwoman leaning menacingly over a prone Alice, trying to overpower and disarm her. Batwoman attempts to remove Alice's guns from her shoulder holsters in a way that explicitly mimics Batwoman palming Alice's breasts. In the next panel, she removes a knife (more than a little phallic) from Alice's elaborate garters. Two panels later, in a panel that juxtaposes the gun

Figure 5.6: Batwoman and Alice fight.

stealing/breast-palming image on the previous page when the books is open, Batwoman leans in to threaten Alice, but it looks like she is about to kiss her instead.

One disturbing implication of the fight with Alice in particular only appears retroactively. Alice, Batwoman's arch nemesis, is in fact Kate's twin sister, Beth, who Kate believed was killed by kidnappers when they were eight years old. Neither Batwoman nor the reader knows of Alice's identity at this point in the narrative. Kate's flashbacks to her childhood reveal not only Kate's and Beth's close relationship, but the extent to which they view themselves as a single entity. The opening memory consists of Kate's mother scolding them for pretending to be each other in school and doing each other's homework. In another memory, the girls have just discovered their father has

been promoted. This conversation marks the end of their idyllic childhood and paves the way for the traumatic kidnapping in Brussels which leads to the deaths of Kate's mother and (she assumes) sister. As the page fades, Kate tells Beth "I don't want to leave." Beth responds, "We've got each *other*, Kate. We'll still be together." In the final image of the girls, a dialogue balloon floats between them with the words, "We'll *always* be *together*" (Rucka). Unlike the earlier parts of the conversation, this balloon has no tail to show who speaks this line. It could easily be either sister. Even as a child, Kate's identity was created through discourse with other aspects of her identity—in this case, her twin. As an adult, Kate must balance multiple identities in one body, but as a child, she tried to combine a single identity across two separate bodies. The battle between an adult Kate and Beth embodying different identities is in tension with their childhood desire for unity with each other.

The battle between Kate/Batwoman and Beth/Alice on these pages further emphasizes the nature of sexuality and power in Batwoman's identity performance, but also highlights the tension of opposing identities struggling for power within a unified subject. Alice is portrayed as polar opposite to Batwoman. While Batwoman's costume is sleek and menacing, flowing black and red, Alice's costume is elaborate and frilly and white. Where Batwoman is covered, Alice's costume is revealing—made of a short tutu and a bodice that reveals her cleavage. Batwoman fights with specifically nonlethal gear, Alice is armed with guns, knives, and hidden razor blades. Even their speech is marked as opposite—while we cannot hear a visual representation, Alice's dialogue is written in white text on black word balloons, while Batwoman's speech uses the traditional black on white. If the different styles did not already reveal a tension within the performances

of Batwoman's identity, her opening battle with Alice literalizes the tension, elevating it to an actual physical battle. Her sexuality—embodied by its literal queerness—is thus revealed to be one of the axes on which the struggle of an identity compromised of multiple, often-conflicting performances occurs. This sexuality is subject to the appropriation of heterosexual desires, but also undermines those normative desires in its celebration of the physical power and prowess of queer feminine sexuality. In yet another way, *Batwoman: Elegy* portrays a queer notion of identity that highlights the performative aspects of gender and sexuality.

One problematic aspect of the fight between Kate and Alice (in Figure 5.6) is the possibility of reading the scene as a representation of rape. Batwoman is a menacing figure using her physical prowess—portrayed in a highly sexualized manner—to overpower a prone and weeping woman. Batwoman appears around the corner, towering over Alice, who is costumed like a virginal bride (down to the frilly garter). Batwoman's excessive sexuality is therefore connected to images of violent male sexuality. Is Batwoman subverting male sexual fantasies or simply reinscribing them onto a lesbian subject fetishized for heterosexual male viewers? There are many ways Batwoman's sexuality is appealing to heterosexist fetishization of lesbianism.

At the same time, this page reveals the sexual nature of any physical encounter between superhero and villain. Take, for example, one of Batman's most famous famous battles—Joker and Batman in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (Figure 5.7). If we read Alice and Kate's fight as a form of sexual violence, this battle must also be read in the same way. Batman towers over a figure in white—this time the Joker instead of Alice. Without the final image, the first two rows of panels could easily be the shots of a

Figure 5.7: Batman and the Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Hollywood sex scene. The closeups of their faces show Batman, grunting with physical exertion, atop a screaming Joker. If he wasn't the Joker, always laughing maniacally, his laughter could even be described as orgasmic. Even formally, the page resembles an orgasm: it builds a frantic pace with tiny panels, regularly spaced, until the tension of the

Joker's death releases into an open panel exploding outside any panel borders. In the final panel, the dead Joker's hand has fallen over his crotch, pointing at the connection between a physical confrontation and a sexual one.

It is not that Batwoman's connection between physical power and sexuality is not problematic. It is problematic, and even deeply troubling with its connection to incest and sexual abuse. However, what these pages accomplish is a drag performance of superhero comics that reveals, through its exaggeration, the connection between physical prowess and power and sexual power in even the most classic of superhero battles. Because of Batwoman's explicit queerness and the hypersexualization of Williams' art, many readers are more likely to see sexual imagery in *Elegy* than they would in Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*. In retrospect, however, if the fight in Batwoman is sexual in nature, many superhero battles must be equally sexual in nature.[13] The subversive performativity of *Elegy*, therefore, sheds light on the disturbing connection between sex and violence in the superhero genre. Unfortunately, it must participate in this disturbing trend to do so.

The representation of queer sexuality and identity in *Batwoman: Elegy* is unique, interesting, and powerful in its own right. However, the text's metatextual relationship with its genre also creates exciting implications for the superhero genre. Like a drag performance, *Batwoman: Elegy*'s imitation with a difference allows its readers to

[13] The fight between Batman and Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns* is only one example of many possible examples of the more disturbing connection in superhero comics between violence and sexuality. It's a recurrent theme in Frank Miller's work: the climactic moment of Bullseye and Elektra's iconic battle in *Daredevil* #181 (1982) ends with Bullseye literally penetrates Elektra with her own weapon. In Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986), the Comedian's rape and beating of Sally Jupiter are pictured as one and the same action. In DC's infamous series *Identity Crisis*, the second issue (2004) features Ralph Dibny (the Elongated Man) description of his wife Sue's rape in terms of a fight. The action is part of a battle both between Dr. Light and the Legion of Superfriends and between Sue and Dr. Light: "He couldn't beat us…So he decided to beat her. She told me she fought. I hope she fought." Most recently, Robert Kirkman and Ryan Ottley's *Invincible* became a center of controversy when, in issue 110 (2014), their main character Mark Grayson battles the female Viltrumite Anissa. After Mark becomes physically aroused during the fight (but explicitly not interested in having sex), Anissa beats him to the ground rapes him.

confront the construction of the superhero genre from a new vantage point. Beginning with the origin story of a superhero, *Batwoman: Elegy* presents a notion of identity that is explicitly queer, but through its imitation reveals an implicit queerness in the construction of identity in superhero comics. This illuminates a queer construction of identity for those not so readily versed in queer theory as well as providing new modes for reading the superhero—one of the most enduring creations of American popular culture. As corporate, popular characters subject to licensing agreements and headlining blockbuster films, superheroes are, at first glance, anything but subversive. The representation of women in superhero comics is deeply problematic. Even within comics studies, many scholars feel superheroes are often entertaining, corporate hackery at best. At worst they are misogynist, violent manifestos meant to indoctrinate children. Therefore, finding alternative and resistant readings within the superhero genre, allows reader not only to come to newer, more complex understandings of identity, but also to use the products of hegemonic, heterosexist regimes of power against them.

CHAPTER VI

ON ORIGIN STORIES

This project began when I was seven and I wanted to join the Ninja Turtles. You see, when I was a kid I loved the Ninja Turtles, but my favorite character was the turtles' occasional ally Usagi Yojimbo, a time-travelling samurai rabbit from medieval Japan. When my second-grade teacher assigned a book report on a foreign country, I chose Japan, thinking it would be cool to write about the home of Usagi Yojimbo and the Turtles' sensei Master Splinter. Looking back on my life, it's hard not to see seven-year-old me choosing to write a book report Japan because I liked the Ninja Turtles as the birth of the scholar I am today. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the start of a lifelong interest in Japanese popular culture and visual arts. I am still deeply invested in serious engagements with popular culture and I seemed to understand, however unconsciously, that my appreciation of media could be enhanced by research. I didn't know that my favorite TV show was based on an independent comic series by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, nor that Usagi Yojimbo was the star of his own comic, one still written and drawn by Stan Sakai thirty years since its debut… But I have since devoted my research, and this dissertation, to the form that gave rise to the Ninja Turtles: comics.

Of course, this answer is pithy and a bit too general to actually answer how this project came to be. For that, we need to fast forward to a few years ago, when I first read Junot Díaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. It was the novel I'd been waiting for: it references comic books, sci fi TV, and B-grade movies in one breath and capital L-literature, literary theory, and complex details of Dominican history in the next; it is free from any handwringing about whether the two could or should occupy the same

space on the page and feels no need to apologize for or justify its use of street slang, Dominican Spanish or elvish. Clearly, I love the novel, but in particular, I was interested by Díaz's use of comics—especially the subtle nods to Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's alternative comics series *Love and Rockets* peppered throughout the pages. The narrative, thematic, and even formal parallels between the texts sparked the first real ideas I had for a dissertation-length project.

That project looked significantly different than this one does. I intended to weave comics into most chapters, but to dedicate only one chapter exclusively to comics. I was much more focused on the question of genre, namely, understanding the connection between literary theories of narrative, genre, and realism as they applied to the novel and the concerns of comics studies. Starting with my interest in the relationship between *Oscar Wao* and *Love and Rockets*, I tried to write about cross-genre transformation between comics and novels—the "novel-ization" of comics and the "comic-ization" of the novel. I tried to write about allusion as a form of heteroglossia. Several drafts in, I realized I was actually interested in one particular allusion—the moment Díaz's narrator Yunior compares his character Beli to Gilbert Hernandez's Luba. These two very difficult, problematic, but ultimately lovable characters demanded my attention. As I thought more about why these characters fascinated me and why it was important that Díaz compared them, I realized that the question underlying all of the research and work I'd been doing was based not in the novel but in the comic. Luba was the problem I wanted to solve—well, not Luba *per se*, but something about her that had been bothering me since I first encountered her: why does Luba have such enormous breasts?

This question had very little to do with what I'd been writing, so I decided to let the chapter percolate on the back burner and to work on something else. Comics studies is rather obsessed with defining comics, and is particularly interested in the relationship between word and image in comics, but I felt none of the attempts of other scholars quite aligned with my understanding of the form. Many comics scholars claim that because the form uses both visual and verbal signification in tandem, verbal and visual signification are hybridized. Some have gone so far as to claim that the comics form proves the difference between word and image is ultimately meaningless distinction. Others reject this claim, arguing comics' hybridity necessitates a separation between word and image: the unique tension of the comics from only exists if there is a tension between essentially *different forms* of signification. I couldn't help but feeling that they were all, in some capacity, correct. Of course, their different interpretations of the form's most fundamental relationship—the interplay of word and image—seemed to have radically different implications for what comics are and how they work.

While reading and writing about the interplay between visual and verbal signification, I found myself thinking about manga translation. In particular, I was fascinated by the history of "flipping" manga pages. Because Japanese is written in the opposite direction of English, the pages appear backwards to Western eyes. In the early days of manga publication in the US, translators and publishers simply mirrored—or flipped—the pages so they could be read in the Western style, from left to right. However, this affected the flow of panels, and quite literally transformed the drawings—while it does not add or subtract things to an image, a mirror image is a different image than the original. However, beginning in 2002, publishers decided to leave the pages in

their original orientation and "train" readers to approach translated manga from right to left. Sound effects that had to be completely erased when the page was flipped (because the language being backwards was considered more egregious than the image being backwards) could now remain on the page, and were often translated by the comics equivalent of "subtitles." These varying publishing practices point toward the complexity of the way we read and interpret images and visual language —masters of the comics form take full advantage of this intense interplay of visual signification on the entire spectrum from linguistic to pictorial.

In this chapter, "Image/Text: Translation and the Problem of Comics," I examine sound effects and the product and process of their translation in order to argue that words and images function on a spectrum in which the line between word and image can be both blurry and distinct at the same time, building from art critic James Elkins' argument that, the relationship between pictures and writing is "not as a duality with some imbrication, but as an *articulated continuum of signs*" in which "every marked surface will have a measure of pictoriality and a measure of writing." This definition of the word/image relationship can describe the most straightforward, illustrative relationships between word and image as well as the form's most experimental texts. Using this approach to understanding comics and the nature of word and image, in this chapter, I define comics as both a hybrid media and a media that hybridizes…and I also examine the ways the critical language of comics studies can bring new insight to more traditional literary theory and criticism.

Writing this chapter, I realized that my hermeneutics are inextricably linked to those of comics studies—even when approaching various non-comics texts, I am drawn

to issues of visual signification and the interplay between visual representation (as in images) and the attempt to represent abstract concepts (as done with words). Thus, I decided to throw caution to the wind: I am a comics scholar, and I would write a comics studies dissertation. Writing this chapter changed my outlook on the previous chapter, and towards my project as a whole. I did not come to the decision to focus almost exclusively on comics lightly. I know, for example, that it might severely limit my options on the job market. Comics studies is a growing field, but its roots in the academy are not yet deep enough to support many programs. However, I am passionate about the field and its growth, and the ability to teach comics afforded by the new comics studies program here at the UO, particularly the creation of the Comparative Comics course here in COLT, solidified my dedication to the field as well.

I returned to Luba and Beli with this new focus. Examining the texts with an eye toward the formal characteristics of comics and combining a close reading of Díaz's text with an eye toward its visual characteristics, I was struck by the ways Hernandez and Díaz encourage their readers *look* at both Luba and Beli. Luba's breasts have this function. But Díaz, through his narrator Yunior, also uses visual tricks to encourage readers to look at Beli. Using a Kleinian psychoanalytic approach, in my "second" chapter, "The Breasts of Luba: The Role of the Mother in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Love and Rockets*," I examine the ways in which these authors establish the gendered identity of their characters—as mothers and women with sexual desires and drives—particularly in their capacity as mothers and "sex objects." In Kleinian psychology, the act of looking and perceiving plays a critical role in a child's ability to understand another person as a whole, complex subject rather than an object existing only

to meet some particular need. The emblematic "part object" of Klein's schema is the mother's breast, which is a "good" object when it is feeding the infant and providing comfort, but a "bad" object when it is absent or denies nourishment. As the child's perception grows, the child instead begins to see the mother as a whole object—an ambivalent subject capable of embodying both good and bad objects in one complex whole. Díaz's and Hernandez's texts both invite a Kleinian reading of these central characters: They are both mothers whose breasts are emphasized. They are difficult characters (easy to hate but impossible not to love); to think of Beli and Luba as anything less than terrible people requires the reader's willingness to accept their ambivalence. Through the process of understanding Beli and Luba as "whole objects," beautiful in their complexity, we can in turn understand the complexity and ambivalence of our own subjectivity.

My decision to write a dissertation based firmly in comics studies was not so much a surprise to me as what came next—namely deciding to focus on aspects of identity and representation. While imagining this project, I specifically wanted to avoid writing about identity politics—feeling some sense of bias against the ways many scholars writing about representation and identity tend to eschew form and theory in favor of narrative, a pattern that seemed especially true in work on identity and representation in comics studies. Of course I knew this was by no means a universal rule, but it was an impression I gained in my broad reading of the state of comics criticism. I am also not particularly interested (though not uninterested) in autobiographical comics, where the majority of theorizing about comics and representation is being done. Because my primary academic interest and the questions that fascinate me most revolve around

issues of form—how comics work—it seemed like it would be best to move away from questions of identity and representation and toward a more strictly theoretical approach.

However, as I thought about the chapters I had written—one an examination of form and the other ultimately about the representation of gender and its effect on the construction of identity—it became clear to me that theorizing form and examining of the representation of identity need not be mutually exclusive. I know now that this is not quite as revolutionary as it felt at the time, but this realization unlocked the shape of this project for me. During the year I was working on my prospectus, I had written a long piece on Batwoman and the way the formal qualities of the book and its narrative worked together to create a complex, queer notion of identity not just for Batwoman, but also for the superheroic identity more broadly. This piece now fit in as part of the project—a third chapter in the making. I had also been thinking about racial representation in comics—particularly caricature, cartooning, and stereotype—and though I hadn't decided on the details of that chapter, the dissertation appeared to me as a full project in a way it never had before: the methodological frame (the first chapter), and three chapters discussing of the ways comics form can uniquely represent or address key aspects of identity: sexuality, race, and gender.

I will forgo the more narrative nature of this presentation at this point to summarize my last two chapters. The Batwoman paper I mentioned above would become my fourth chapter, "The Epistemology of the Phone Booth: Superheroic Identity and Queer Theory in *Batwoman: Elegy*." In this chapter I argue that the superhero genre has an inherently queer and performative conception of identity. I explore this claim and the implications it has for the superhero genre through a reading Greg Rucka and J. H.

Williams III's 2010-2011 *Detective Comics* story arc, later collected as *Batwoman: Elegy*. Batwoman is especially interesting to discuss in terms of queerness and identity because she was originally created in order to assuage fears that Batman was gay, but in her current incarnation, she is lesbian character. The text highlights the similarities between her experience as a lesbian and her experience as a superhero, but I argue that it is not so much Batwoman's explicit status as an out lesbian that gestures toward a reading of the queerness in superhero identity, though her homosexuality does act as a signpost for the text's overall queerness. Instead, through its art and writing, *Batwoman: Elegy* highlights the longstanding performative nature of identity in superhero comics. Though the story is a straightforward superhero origin story (and this normalcy is part of what makes it so easy to project her story on to the genre), its visual style is highly experimental. Batwoman's different identities are each illustrated in different styles, and they all have their own claims of authenticity and truth. Rather than point to one "true" identity, the narrative emphasizes that all of these identities are distinct and interconnected, dependent and interdependent. In short, the nature of Batwoman's identity is performative, dependent on her actions and performance in each role: each Batwoman is the real Batwoman.

At the beginning of the winter holiday, my husband Shaun shoved a copy of Gene Yang and Sonny Liew's brand-new graphic novel *The Shadow Hero* into my hands, thinking—perhaps prophetically—that I would find it useful. I enjoyed it until the ending, which bothered me so much I ranted my way into a chapter. Gene Yang, best known for his 200x graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, was inspired to write *The Shadow Hero* after hearing stories of a lost Asian-American superhero from the Golden Age called the

Green Turtle. Whether the Green Turtle is actually Asian American or not is complicated by the source text, in which the Green Turtle's "true identity" is never revealed and his face is never completely shown. As Yang's attempt to "fill in the blanks" left by the sudden cancellation of *Blazing Comics* (the series in which the Green Turtle appeared), *The Shadow Hero* tells the origin story of the Green Turtle and explicitly makes the character a Chinese-American immigrant. On first read, I thought the ending was too easy and too cheap—comparing superheroes to marginalized others without acknowledging the white male-ness of the previous superhero pushed a metaphor that did not understand the implications of race for the Green Turtle as a character and more broadly in the superhero genre. Through multiple chapter drafts, the annoyance that initially prompted me to write this chapter began to fade as I saw the ending not as pure fantasy, but as a representative moment of the superhero genre's dual impulses: one oppressively conservative and the other radically progressive.

In "The Unbearable Whiteness of Superheroes: Racial Representation and the Superhero Genre," I examine the texts through the lens of several critics, including James Lamb, who argues that the superhero genre is a power fantasy of white males and cannot escape the implications of that problematic origin. Both *The Shadow Hero* and *Blazing Comics* offer evidence in support of Lamb's contention of the genre's inherent racism. However, both texts *also* offer evidence in favor of Ramzi Fawaz's argument that the superhero genre is a manifestation of "popular fantasy," a productive, progressive fantasy that gives its readers the imaginative capability of accepting Otherness in the real world. Through close readings of *The Shadow Hero* and *Blazing Comics*, I explore the way *The Shadow Hero* both embodies popular fantasy but also reveals the repressive and racist

history of superhero comics. In doing so, it presents a vision of the superhero genre as one of an inherent tension between its conservative instinct to protect the status quo and its revolutionary vision for a better world.

I believe this dissertation has been successful in laying the groundwork for a larger and continuing project, and as I move into the future, I hope to broaden the scope of the work in several concrete ways. Most immediately, I believe my project would benefit from a more global scope. While I discuss manga in translation in Chapter II, I would also like to include more detailed readings of manga, particularly in regards to the exploration of sexuality and gender in publishing industry's seemingly pathological need to separate and categorize *shoujo* and *shounen* manga. I am also interested in exploring French, Italian, and South American comics, especially the political science fiction of the Argentine comics of Hector Oesterheld and Carlos Trillo. Some of these materials are difficult to find in the States, and further study would likely require travelling to Argentina and France in order to properly research the material.

In addition to focusing on comics texts, I would also like to more closely examine the role of the comics reader. My main focus throughout this project was on the way certain texts represent identity; however, I feel that the comics form also allows *readers* to negotiate their own identities in complex ways. For example, fandom culture and "geek" identity have long been associated with comics. I would like to explore the way fan cultures and self-proclaimed "geeks" identity affects the way readers interact with specific texts and as well as the form more broadly. Another aspect I'd like to explore is the role comics may play in helping subjects construct their identity. Certainly fan culture and geek identity play a part in this discussion, but I would like to explore the more

fundamental ways reading comics may affect the formation of identity and subjectivity. During the moral panic over comics in the U.S. during the 1940s and 1950s, many scholars, politicians, and doctors questioned whether comics could fundamentally change the way young readers learn to read texts or damage their aesthetic sensibilities by making them less capable to appreciate “great” art. While I do not share their panic, I cannot help but wonder whether the comics form does affect the way readers construct their identities and navigate the world around them.

As I expand this project, I would further highlight the relevance of my work as a comparatist to my word as a comics scholar. I gestured toward my training in comparative literature with my interest in transnational comics traditions, though this aspect is not explored in this project as fully as I would like. My interest in translation both as a practical concern and a theoretical framework (central to the argument of Chapter II) is part and parcel of comparative literature theory and practice. Though comics studies has largely taken root in national literature departments, I believe the comparatist approach is uniquely suited to the concerns of comics studies and in a larger project I would make the relationship between my training as a comparatist and my work as a comics scholar more explicit.

So here we are, finally at the end. But one last piece remains: the title of this dissertation. I’d played around with quite a few variations before I looked back to my roots in popular culture. One of the most classic stories in superhero comics is the origin story—how the superhero came to be. You know, the last child of Krypton crash landing on earth to be raised by a kindly old couple, the nerdy kid bitten by a radioactive spider and using his powers for selfish purposes until tragedy strikes, a man transformed into a

rat finding a bunch of baby turtles playing in mutating goo and making the best of a bad situation. The origin story usually explains why a hero's costume looks the way it does, what sort of bad guys they end up fighting, what their moral compass will be. Two of my chapters on superheroes directly engage with the notion of an origin story, both as a generic trope itself and as a way of understanding the impulses underlying the generic tropes of superhero stories. Why are superheroes the way they are? I attempt to answer two versions of this question, addressing why it matters that they all seem to have secret identities and why the genre struggles so much with racial diversity. As it turns out even the chapters not ostensibly about superheroes are also types of origin stories. In my first chapter, I try to understand the way comics work and what they can do by examining the fundamental, defining relationship of the form. In my second, I wanted to figure out why are Luba and Beli the way they are and how does encountering about them transforms their readers. Here at the end, I hope you've noticed this afterword has been an origin story too, both of the dissertation and myself as a scholar. After all, we're all here today because when I was seven, I wanted to be a Ninja Turtle.

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