

**Humanimals and Transculturalism in Contemporary
North American Graphic Fiction**

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Abstract

This thesis is situated at the intersection of animal, comics, and cultural studies, a wide area of investigation in which graphic fiction has rarely interacted with the different theoretical and cultural paradigms that inform animal-human relationships of both the present and the past. Comics and graphic novels are probably as popular as they have ever been, and are being put to distinctive uses in our increasingly visual age. The funny animal and the beast fable are often cited as historical precursors to the “humanimal” hybrids we find in contemporary print and web-based versions of the sequential arts. However, animal genres and practices are not consistent or universal. Talking animals still tend, as they have always done, to draw the charge of anthropomorphism. But they continue to function as effective metaphors for cultural pluralism and treatments of otherness, increasingly in a broader ecological (multispecies) context. This thesis focuses on eight contemporary North American graphic fictions that present readers with linked representations of *humanimals* and *transculturalism*. These texts—mostly from Canada, but also the US—use graphic forms to encourage a rethinking of asymmetrical discourses of humanity and animality in the increasingly transcultural context of North America today.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements | ii |
| Abstract | iii |
| Table of Contents | iv |
| List of Figures | vi |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Contact Zones..... | 1 |
| The Humanimal Lens | 5 |
| The Framework of Transculturalism..... | 10 |
| Contemporary North American Graphic Fiction | 15 |
| Chapter One..... | 30 |
| Alternative Paradoxes in <i>Heartless</i> : The Bound and Transcultural Catwoman in “Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic” (2012) | 30 |
| Introduction | 30 |
| Comics, Love, and Other Discourses | 34 |
| The Not-So-Funny Humanimal: Anthropomorphism or Zoomorphism or Both? | 48 |
| Conclusion: Alternative to What? | 58 |
| Chapter Two..... | 61 |
| Mapping Becoming: Displacement, Non-Identity, and Loss in <i>Lost At Sea</i> (2002) and <i>Gray Horses</i> (2006)..... | 61 |
| Introduction: Rerouting the Quest Narrative, the Coming-of-Age Story, and the Beast Fable | 61 |
| Transcultural Identities, Contexts, Covers | 65 |
| Visualizing Displacement, Non-Identity, and Loss in <i>Lost At Sea</i> | 72 |
| Multimodal Puzzles and Free-Floating Symbolism in <i>Gray Horses</i> | 83 |
| Becoming with Dreams and Horses | 93 |
| Conclusion..... | 100 |
| Chapter Three..... | 104 |
| Ecofeminist Quests: Graphic Cross-pollinations and Shapeshifting Fables in <i>Wax Cross</i> (2012) and <i>Jinchalo</i> (2012)..... | 104 |
| Introduction: Ecofeminist Quests..... | 104 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Shapeshifting Folktales, Language, and Comical Confusions in Jinchalo | 115 |
| Material and Symbolic Magpies | 130 |
| Formal, Historical, and Transcultural Superimpositions in Wax Cross..... | 134 |
| Environmental and Social Evils, Trans-Corporeality, and Animism..... | 144 |
| Bees, Chickens, and Bats Matter..... | 150 |
| Conclusion: Unfixing Humanimal Folklore..... | 155 |
| Chapter Four | 158 |
| Transcultural Graphic Fiction and Unorthodox Manga: <i>Yōkaiden</i> Vols. 1&2 (2009) and <i>Red: A Haida Manga</i> (2009)..... | 158 |
| Introduction: Transcultural Graphic Fiction and Unorthodox Manga | 158 |
| Intertextual and Textual Languages in <i>Yōkaiden</i> | 163 |
| Yōkai and the Tricky Idea of the Monstrous | 174 |
| Queering Hamachi, Queering Identity | 178 |
| Seeing and Reading <i>Red: A Haida Manga</i> | 185 |
| What is <i>Haida Manga</i> ? | 188 |
| Transforming “Comics” with <i>Haida</i> Formlines and <i>Yah’guudang</i> | 196 |
| Conclusion..... | 207 |
| Chapter Five | 210 |
| Resituating the Animal Comic: Environmentalist Aesthetics in <i>XOC: The Journey of a Great White</i> (2012) | 210 |
| Introduction | 210 |
| Troubling the Talking Animal | 214 |
| Recontextualizing the Shark: Etymology, Etiology, and Biopolitics | 222 |
| Shark Finning | 234 |
| Imagining The Great Pacific Garbage Patch..... | 239 |
| Conclusion: Thinking with Sharks and Oceans | 243 |
| Conclusion: Enchantingly Uncontainable..... | 247 |
| Bibliography..... | 260 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 1. <i>Heartless</i> Covers..... | 30 |
| Figure 2. Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic (61)..... | 31 |
| Figure 3. “Settlement City” and Suburbia (77)..... | 41 |
| Figure 4. Zorka’s Ideal Love (88–9)..... | 44 |
| Figure 5. The Procedure (83)..... | 45 |
| Figure 6. Fay’s Arrest (92)..... | 49 |
| Figure 7. Bitter Tears (93)..... | 52 |
| Figure 8. Alone in the Club (71)..... | 55 |
| Figure 9. <i>Lost At Sea</i> Covers, Back-to-Front..... | 69 |
| Figure 10. <i>Gray Horses</i> Covers, Back-to-Front..... | 71 |
| Figure 11. Raleigh Soul and Cat Searching (122–3)..... | 73 |
| Figure 12. Raleigh Soul Searching (6–7)..... | 77 |
| Figure 13. Raleigh Dreams and Cats (22–3)..... | 79 |
| Figure 14. Raleigh Shift in Thinking (120–1)..... | 82 |
| Figure 15. Raleigh Fluid Self (160–1)..... | 83 |
| Figure 16. Noémie Arrival (1.1)..... | 84 |
| Figure 17. In-between Visual and Verbal (1.14)..... | 88 |
| Figure 18. Icons and Labels (2.6–7)..... | 90 |
| Figure 19. Different Horses (4.13–4)..... | 92 |
| Figure 20. Moving Parts (3.2)..... | 95 |
| Figure 21. Dream Horse (1.18)..... | 97 |
| Figure 22. On the Other Side (4.17–8)..... | 100 |
| Figure 23. <i>Cinderella</i> Cover (Vertigo)..... | 111 |
| Figure 24. Voguchi and Láska..... | 111 |
| Figure 25. <i>Jinchalo</i> Front Cover..... | 115 |
| Figure 26. <i>Jinchalo</i> Back Cover..... | 117 |
| Figure 27. Fable Bird and Hangul (Prologue)..... | 119 |
| Figure 28. Voguchi and Monster (Ch. I)..... | 121 |
| Figure 29. Voguchi and Bird School (Ch. II)..... | 124 |
| Figure 30. Voguchi and Multispecies (Ch. IV)..... | 129 |
| Figure 31. Voguchi and/as Jinchalo (Epilogue)..... | 132 |
| Figure 32. <i>Wax Cross</i> Front Cover..... | 135 |
| Figure 33. Multispecies Séance (Chapter One)..... | 138 |
| Figure 34. Incantation and Wax Ceremony (Prologue)..... | 139 |
| Figure 35. Láska as Mother Earth (Chapter Five)..... | 147 |
| Figure 36. Visual-Verbal Language Textures (Chapter Eight)..... | 148 |
| Figure 37. <i>Wax Cross</i> (Epilogue)..... | 150 |
| Figure 38. Fairytales (Chapter Seven)..... | 152 |
| Figure 39. Multispecies Counterparts (Ch. II, Epilogue)..... | 157 |
| Figure 40. <i>Yōkaiden</i> vol. 1 Cover..... | 166 |
| Figure 41. Madcap and Mizuki (1st candle)..... | 171 |
| Figure 42. Examples of Hamachi’s Journal and A Word From “Haniwa”..... | 173 |
| Figure 43. Chimera and Stratification (6th candle)..... | 177 |
| Figure 44. Hamachi Pin-up (Prologue Vol. 1)..... | 180 |
| Figure 45. Intersecting Views (15th candle)..... | 184 |
| Figure 46. Covers: <i>Red Warrior</i> (1951) and <i>Red: A Haida Manga</i> (2009)..... | 187 |
| Figure 47. Mutating Red (32, 33, 35)..... | 193 |
| Figure 48. Opening and Closing Frames (1, 108)..... | 195 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 49. Red and Yah'guudang (5–7)..... | 198 |
| Figure 50. Red Hats and Weapons (18) | 199 |
| Figure 51. Transfixed and Violence (36–7) | 201 |
| Figure 52. In the Belly of the Whale (68)..... | 203 |
| Figure 53. <i>Red</i> in Formline Form (Bookjacket)..... | 205 |
| Figure 54. <i>XOC Cover</i> | 212 |
| Figure 55. Cage Divers (22)..... | 217 |
| Figure 56. Xoc, Surfer, Seal (99–100) | 232 |
| Figure 57. Finning (72–3) | 235 |
| Figure 58. Garbage Patch (56–7) | 240 |
| Figure 59. Picturing the Unknown (92–3) | 244 |

Introduction

Contact Zones

Comics are a strange beast. It's a strange attractor of an artform, and almost everything that sticks to it is a source of continual argument, including the term "comics." From one perspective, comics take things from all other artforms and sew them together into a weird hybrid animal. [. . .] From another, it's the first and simplest way we did visual narrative. Cave paintings are sequential art. So is the Bayeux Tapestry. Someone once argued that the Stations Of The Cross constitute a comic strip—Warren Ellis (xii)

In describing the "strange beast" of comics, Warren Ellis points to several of the debates that form the main interests of this thesis. These debates revolve around animal-human, narrative-communicative, and natural-cultural relationships. In exploring these relationships, the thesis situates itself at the interface of animal, comics, and (English) cultural studies, a wide area of research in which "comics and graphic novels are a virtually untapped source of insight into cultural paradigms about animals" (Brown 6; See also Chaney and Herman). This kind of research is important because it is unquestionable that comics represent "one of the most popular and pervasive media forms of our increasingly visual age" (Varnum and Gibbons ix). In addition, the medium of graphic fiction is now being recognized as an important "part of the historical record" (Heer and Worchester xi).

My coupling of the neologisms *humanimals*¹ and *transculturalism*² may seem an audacious gesture in keeping with the "trans" fashion of the moment (McLeod 1–2; Schulze-Engler "Introduction" ix). To some, these may sound like

¹ For other uses of this term see, for example, Armstrong and Simmons, Minahen, and W. J. T. Mitchell. All are discussed further in the thesis.

² For more on this term and its variants, see Schulze-Engler, Pratt, Welsch, Kulyk Keefer, and McLeod.

inherently contradictory terms, twisting semantics and adding spice to ever expanding language games. To others, they may already be obsolete. Yet with regard to contemporary North American graphic fiction—more specifically the eight graphic texts I will be examining in the five chapters that follow—these terms provide useful methodological tools for critical practice. The pre-eminent method for this study is close reading that draws on these and other theoretical instruments from what might loosely be called a “zoocritical” toolbox—that is, the crosscutting study of animals (humans included), literature, and culture (Huggan and Tiffin 17–8). Such an approach is well equipped to account for the often unruly border-crossings that are currently prevalent in a medium that is no longer confined—if it ever was—to “the dominant comics aesthetic of escapist fantasy” (Beaty “Autobiography” 232).

I will argue that each one of the main terms bracketing this thesis—including *graphic fiction* and *North American*—delineates its own *contact zone* (Pratt). In her seminal article “Arts of the Contact Zone” (1991), Mary Louise Pratt uses this term to show how heterogeneous texts are read and interpreted by heterogeneous audiences. Her main point is that different perspectives derive from different epistemologies. Building on earlier theorizations of transculturation,³ Pratt uses “contact zones” to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). As she points out, such contact zones have much to offer in terms of “legacies of subordination,” “mutual recognition,” “shared understandings,” and

³ “The term, originally coined by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, aimed to replace overly reductive concepts of acculturation and assimilation used to characterize culture under conquest. [. . .] Transculturation, like autoethnography, is a phenomenon of the contact zone” (Pratt 36).

“ways to move *into and out of* rhetorics of authenticity” (40, original emphasis).

This “‘contact’ perspective,” she adds, “also emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (Pratt qtd. in Haraway *When* 216).

The “contact perspective” has seen many recent extensions. For example, Donna Haraway, in *When Species Meet* (2008), extends the metaphor to explore the ecological concepts of “multispecies” and “naturalcultural.” For her, these are “contact zones of species assemblages, human and nonhuman” and “interdigitating edges [of] ecological, evolutionary, and historical diversity” (217–8). Haraway confidently conducts Pratt’s transcultural ideas across animal-human and nature-culture boundaries. As she asserts, “If we appreciate the foolishness [‘the culturally normal fantasy’] of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming [instead of the humanist notion of being] is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (*When* 244, 11 original emphasis).

Arguing for a material ecofeminist perspective on the “trans-corporeality of the human self” Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* (2010) also deploys the trope of the contact zone. As she writes, “Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Bodily* 2). “Imagining” is a key word here, especially because it is not difficult to see that entangled notions of the trans-corporeal environment, natureculture, and multispecies can be difficult to put into words. In the wake of deconstruction, feminism, and postcolonialism we know that words and the ontologies they purport to describe can be part of the machinery of domination; accordingly, central to using the “contact zone” as a critical approach is an appropriately reflexive awareness of

reading strategies which are responsive to the challenges that arise from the convergence of visual, verbal, and material worlds. As we also know, the act of reading is itself “situated in a nexus of affective and geographical, personal, and social influences” (Whitlock and Poletti xiv).

Nevertheless, as Ellis and many others point out, visual narratives, including those on animals, “are at the very origin of our systems of representation” (Weil “A Report” 9); as Neel Ahuja puts it, “visual culture is also a multispecies domain” (560). Otherwise known as comics and sequential art, graphic fiction has always been marked by an abundance of nonhuman animals and animal-human preoccupations. In the Marvel database alone, there are over ten pages of animal characters, with at least sixteen entries per page.⁴ Yet, within the burgeoning fields of comics studies and human-animal studies, Michael A. Chaney complains that “very little scholarship exists that casts the animal of the comics in the dawning theoretical light of concepts known variously as animality, becoming-animal, or animetaphor” (130). This is in spite of the fact that, as Brown suggests, “comics can address animals in a way that is unique by providing an alternate perspective on how we humans believe animals think and behave, and also how we treat them as a result” (6). Comics are also capable of exploring “the richness and complexity of ‘what it is like’ for nonhuman others [. . .] underscor[ing] what is at stake in the trivialization—or outright destruction—of their experiences” (Herman “Storyworld” 159).

In this and myriad other ways, graphic fictions supply their own contact zones. The well-known *funny animal* and the equally popular *beast fable* are often cited as historical precursors to the “humanimal” hybrids we find today in both print

⁴ See <http://marvel.wikia.com/Category:Animals>.

and web-based versions of the sequential arts (Chaney 130). But animal genres and practices of representation are not consistent or universal. For one thing, “the representational, symbolic and rhetorical uses of the animal must be understood to carry as much conceptual weight as any idea we may have of the ‘real’ animal, and must be taken just as seriously” (Baker *Picturing* 10). This is because they enter onto a complex political stage that includes the structural inequalities wrought by North American settler colonialisms and their legacies in today’s global-capitalist societies. As Alaimo writes, “As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so” (“States” 476). While I fully believe in “the humanimal” in the sense W. J. T. Mitchell describes—“the animal as myself and my kin” (xiv)—this thesis is inspired by what the primary texts themselves have to say on the matter, and how they work towards re-evaluating and transforming the natural-cultural paradigms that came before.

The Humanimal Lens

We are both animals in general, and humans in particular. From some perspectives, the reverse is not true: we are both, but they are not human; we are animals, but animals are certainly not us—McHugh and Marvin (2)

Human beings have been attempting to think with, and for, nonhuman animals for many thousands of years. Indeed, the “earliest art we know of was obsessed with animals” (Boyd “Tails” 217). Meanwhile, Aesop’s fables are probably the most cited source of literary animals in Western culture. In their introduction to *Thinking With Animals*, Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman write,

“We are animals; we think with animals. What could be more natural?” (1). While agreeing that animals have the power to inspire “an immediate, almost irresistible pulse of empathy,” they also call the double-edged art of anthropomorphism “the irresistible taboo” (1). As Erica Fudge further suggests, “Animal tales can reinforce the status quo or can they change it. Imaginative fictions—the products of culture—have, therefore, an important role to play in the ways in which we live with and think with the non-human.” (“Review” 209).

This brings me to the dangerous neologism “humanimal”—dangerous in the sense that it may inadvertently suggest a conflation that erases important differences. (Charles D. Minahen contrasted the two conceptions of “Humanimals” and “Anihumans” in his examination of Gary Larson’s *Gallery of the Absurd*.) However, as I hope to show, categories of sameness and difference are unstable and shifting. While ontological differences certainly exist, they also constitute both windows and mirrors. For me, the portmanteau term “humanimal,” like—albeit in a different context—“transcultural,” is useful in critiquing those textual spaces where we find “hyperseparations,” in the sense that “to be other (or separate, distinct) is not the same as to be purely other (or hyperseparated)” (Plumwood “The Concept” 129). Moreover, figurations of the humanimal, as they appear throughout the eight texts examined here, also demand that readers pay closer attention to the numerous possibilities and pitfalls of hybrid “discourses of animality” (Wolfe *Zoontologies* xx).

The publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*—a Holocaust cat-and-mouse graphic novel first serialized between 1980 and 1991—was perhaps the watershed moment for the humanimal figure in graphic fiction: the specific branch of “comics” I am interested in here. In Bart Beaty’s work on the history of what he deems “comics masterpieces,” he singles out George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* and

Spiegelman's *Maus*, highlighting what these two works have in common—"a non-traditional use of animals and a highly distinctive and disjointed use of the English language" (*Comics* 128). Such texts rework traditional notions and genres such as anthropomorphism and the beast fable, and they do so through bending and blending genre expectations and language conventions, often in self-consciously cross-cultural or (as I prefer here) transcultural ways. If we place this non-traditional use of animals next to the "might-makes-right" fable tradition that also dovetails with the history of funny animal comics, a series of potentially transformative humanimal aspects can be seen to emerge. Larger cultural questions emerge too, e.g. over changing cultural ideals of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" (Beatty *Comics* 121; Berninger "Workshop" 248; Hatfield *Alternative* xii), or over the meanings and functions of such loaded terms as "belonging" and "authenticity" (Huggan *Postcolonial*; Thobani; Y. Lee).

Talking animals—whether representing "real" animals or not—have always been vulnerable to the charge of anthropomorphism. In Bruno Latour's words, "The expression 'anthropomorphic' [humanlike] considerably underestimates our humanity" (*We* 137). With its focus on "anthropos," this one-sided (implicitly gendered and racialized) projection reminds us to be critical of traditional Enlightenment versions of humanism and the strategic exclusions upon which they depend. Parsing Michel Foucault's reflection that the Enlightenment has "determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today," Kari Weil asks, "Must we not also wonder what it deterred us from thinking, what it made us leave behind or whip into submission? The turn to animals, in art as in theory, is an attempt to envision a different understanding of what we humans are and consequently to enlarge or change the possibilities for what we can think and what we can do in the world" ("A Report" 10).

In this thesis, I will argue that the term “humanimal,” in its most basic sense, refers to the queering of the asymmetrical animal-human boundary. Ostensibly, it suggests a radically different stance to the hyperseparation proposed by “anthropomorphism.” As Eileen Joy argues, “the queer and the nonanthropomorphic have always been importantly entwined,” with the queer “always pushing against the limits of not just the ‘merely’ but also the ‘overdetermined’ human” (223). Whereas anthropomorphism tends to reinscribe (Western) exceptionalist hierarchies through strategies of negation and hyper-difference, Philip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons suggest that “[r]eplacing the term ‘human’ with the term ‘humanimal’ highlights the need to remind ourselves of the works of these relationships, and their consequences for us and for our animal others” (14–15). Meanwhile, for W. J. T. Mitchell the “humanimal makes [most] sense as a ‘hulk’—a wrecked structure or vessel, an object of care and salvage, not simple ownership or instrumentality; as an object of duties and obligations before it is a subject of rights; as a valued ‘end in itself’ rather than a tool, an abject ‘thing’ or found object” (xiii–xiv).

The thesis makes no attempt at definitively theorizing the humanimal. Nevertheless, it is an urgently necessary term in the discourse of contemporary graphic fiction. No other umbrella term would work to describe the kinds of animal-human relationships mediated by Nina Bunjevac’s put-upon catwoman (Chapter One); Hope Larson’s and Bryan Lee O’Malley’s dream horses and cats (Chapter Two); Tin Can Forest’s and Matthew Forsythe’s mysterious bestiaries (Chapter Three); Nina Matsumoto’s and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s shapeshifting tricksters (Chapter Four); and Matt Dembicki’s zoomorphic shark (Chapter Five).

These and other hybrid figures perform their roles across complex ontological and epistemological trajectories, often consciously violating species parameters until “animal characters raise the question of whether they represent an

animal who acts like a person or a person who looks like an animal or something else” (Rifas “Funny” 234). In all of this, it is crucial to recognize that “‘the animal question’ is [at least] *two*-tiered: there is the discursive machine of speciesism and the human/animal distinction [. . .]; and [then] there is the separate but overlapping question of *actual* nonhuman animals, their specific *umwelts* (to use Uexküll’s wonderful concept [. . .]) and their plight in the world” (Wolfe “Speciesism” 102, original emphasis).⁵

The first tier Wolfe refers to points to the animal that has been appropriated to signify “the repressed Other” across vast swathes of art, literature, and culture, reaching “back in Western culture at least to the Old Testament” and, “in a different register, to the Platonic tradition” (Wolfe *Zoontologies* x). Chaney claims that “the animal referenced in comics is generally a ludic cipher of otherness” (130). Yet such “ludic ciphers” jar with “otherness” as a political and material category. As postcolonial and feminist critics have shown, otherness has historically been used as a tool to reinforce social and cultural hierarchies. These structures are deeply implicated in what or who counts as “normal” and “natural” (Alaimo *Bodily* 4). As Alaimo argues, “Nature has long been waged as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes” (*Bodily* 4). Consequently, “[w]e all, human and nonhuman alike, have a stake in the discourse and institution of speciesism; it is by no means limited to its overwhelmingly direct and disproportionate effects on animals” (Wolfe *Animal* 7). Indeed, as Gayatri Spivak puts it,

⁵ See also, for example, Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning* 176; also Huggan and Tiffin 5.

The great doctrines of identity of the ethical universal, in terms of which liberalism thought out its ethical programmes, played history false, because the identity was disengaged in terms of who was and was not human. That's why all of these projects, the justification of slavery, as well as the justification of Christianization, seemed to be alright; because, after all, these people had not graduated into humanhood, as it were. (qtd. in Wolfe *Animal* 7)

Each in its own way, the graphic fictions in this study explore unique humanimal “contact zones,” providing multi-faceted readings of transformations—and the various “morphisms” used to describe them—that cast doubt on human-inscribed hierarchies and self-privileging visions of the world.

The Framework of Transculturalism

If “culture,” as Raymond Williams has it, “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language,” “nature” is “perhaps *the* most complex word in the language” (49, 164, emphasis added).⁶ What happens then when, like Haraway,⁷ we combine them or, more particularly in terms of this thesis, when we add the prefix “trans”?

As outlined above, Pratt’s metaphor of the contact zone is also part of the framework of transculturalism as it operates in my project. This study, for example, could not have been called “Humanimals and Multiculturalism in Contemporary North American Graphic Fiction,” nor could the generic term “culture” have been

⁶ See also Val Plumwood, “The Concept of a Cultural Landscape” for a thorough breakdown and critique of “cultural landscape” and “nature.”

⁷ See also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, for more on “nature-cultures” (11).

substituted for “transculturalism.” This is because the primary texts in this study are all interested in different ways in critiquing cultural hegemonies that are tied to the ideas behind both “comics” *and* the “nation.” To a greater or lesser extent, these texts contain a counter-cultural element that challenges the mainstream conglomerates of “Western,” “American,” “Canadian.” But, crucially—and here is part of the hermeneutic value of *trans*—they are not just interested in practising resistance through oppositional forms. Rather, they are committed to the idea of *bridging* manufactured cultural divides, as well as engaging with translocal and transregional audiences; while, with the exception of American author Matt Dembicki (Chapter Five), they all fit the broad description of “transcultural writers”⁸ themselves. Nina Bunjevac (Chapter One) is Canadian Yugoslavian; Hope Larson is American Canadian with a mixed German and Swedish background and Bryan Lee O’Malley is Canadian American with a mixed Francophone and Korean background (Chapter Two); Marek Colek and Pat Shewchuk, otherwise known as “Tin Can Forest,” are Canadian with Slavic backgrounds, Czech and Ukrainian respectively, while Matthew Forsythe is Canadian, grew up in England, and previously worked in Dublin, L.A., and Seoul (Chapter Three); Nina Matsumoto is Japanese Canadian and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas is First Nations Haida Canadian (Chapter Four). And even if Dembicki himself does not openly straddle multiple cultural or national backgrounds, his text does, taking place as it does in the Pacific Ocean through the eyes of a Great White shark.

However, I have chosen these texts not so much because their respective authors have alleged “hybrid” identities, but rather because the texts themselves all take up and transform the ubiquitous quest narrative in some way. These quests all

⁸ See Arianna Dagnino’s *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (2015) for an in-depth study of this term.

involve suitably idiosyncratic versions of the outsider figure, whether coded as anti-hero (Chapter Four) or, more often, anti-heroine (Chapters One, Two, Three, and Five). Meanwhile, the texts “travel” as well, each offering a unique blend of generic border-crossings, mixed modes of cross-cultural communication, and cross-pollinated (“transcultured”) styles.

As early as 1996, Canadian critics Janice Kulyk Keefer and Coral Ann Howells were advocating for the kind of transcultural analysis that might provide a critical alternative to a multicultural politics premised on “immigrant” or “ethnic” communities and their cultural work. As Kulyk Keefer points out, such literature “is not written exclusively for or read exclusively by the members of a given ‘minority’ community in Canada” (qtd. in Maver 17–8). Furthermore, “[w]hat we must emphasise and enable, in other words, is the ‘trans’ in transculturalism. For it seems to me that only by sharing our differences can we discover unexpected similarities which we will not erase or occlude painful and problematical articulations of otherness” (70). Coral Ann Howells agrees:

While Canadian society may be multicultural, any individual is far more likely to exist between two cultures (a heritage culture, and a mainstream culture into which she has been educated), so that “transcultural” accurately denotes both the condition of the individual writer and also the discursive positions the protagonists are negotiating within these fictional texts. (72)

Howells goes on to complain that the paradigms of multiculturalism reductively imply centre-periphery and mainstream-marginal oppositions while denying the existence of intersectional discourses (race, class, gender, age, ability, etc.) as well

as individual interactions with and within such frameworks. I would add that the very idea of *transculturalism* (as opposed to *multiculturalism*) is an attempt to read further than the surface identity politics implied in the “between two cultures” approach. A transcultural perspective is inherently interested in the “fuzzy edges of group [definition and] belonging” (Rothberg 32), whereas a multicultural approach may inadvertently impede “the interrogation of cultural difference and the transformation of one’s cultural identity by offering *well-defined* categories” (Kelly Chien-Hui Kuo 231, original emphasis). In this sense, “Transcultural authors are not simply representatives of ‘their’ cultures; their texts [also] challenge readers and critics to come to terms with processes of negotiation and change between and within cultures, and move beyond a rigid understanding of cultures as self-contained normative frameworks” (Schulze-Engler “Theoretical” 30).

At the heart of both “the humanimal” and “transculturalism” is a deconstructive imperative that attends to the already porous boundaries of the categories they disrupt and/or contest. The humanimal, for example, aims to open up traditional (Western) conceptions of anthropomorphism that may foreclose other cultural meanings and understandings. Similarly, a transcultural perspective is one that is interested in building bridges of understanding beyond the more limited horizons prescribed by ideological multiculturalism and cultural nationalism.⁹ By definition, these two terms are ethically concerned about other ways of being—other ways of being/becoming *with*—while still recognizing and respecting important differences. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, “to be human is to be intended toward the other” (73). This suggests in turn that acts of sympathy and empathy are by no means confined to the so-called human, but extend to other creatures as well.

⁹ See also Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects* (2007), also discussed in Chapter One, and Afef Benessaïeh, *Transcultural Americas* (2010).

Likewise in graphic fiction, humanimals are frequently constructed as “others,” but as such they are also productive sources of attraction and intra-action.¹⁰ As feminist quantum physics theorist Karen Barad speculates, “How would we feel if it is by way of the inhuman that we come to feel, to care, to respond?” (“On Touching” 216).

Humanimal contact zones, however, provide no guarantees in terms of their capacity to translate across cultural and species boundaries. Thus, as John McLeod suggests,

In the transcultural contact zone of our global contemporaneity, silence does not signify absence or failure. In concert with the conversational imperatives of living in a world of strangers, the anxious silences of the contact zone mark a non-verbal process of understanding in which that yearning to engage hospitably with others is inflected with a consciousness of the limits of one’s standpoint, of the incommensurability of those who exist like us. (11)

As Frank Schulze-Engler adds, “The idea of ‘locating’ culture and literature exclusively in the context of ethnicities or nations is rapidly losing plausibility throughout an ‘English-speaking world’ that has long since been multi- rather than monolingual” (Schulze-Engler “Introduction” x). This does not mean, though, that communication is even on all sides, or that it is properly understood, or that multilingualism is an antidote to prejudice. Indeed, while the texts I will examine in this thesis all converse to some extent across cultural boundaries, they are also alert

¹⁰ See Karen Barad’s work for more on this term.

to continuing communicative impasses that are connected to the North American comics tradition and its indebtedness to a racist, sexist, and speciesist white settler state.

Contemporary North American Graphic Fiction

The cultural potential underlying comics is all too apparent—Derek Parker Royal (ix)

Let me put this bluntly: this thesis is not interested in entering the longstanding debate over the definition of comics.¹¹ It is also uninterested in defining “North America,” which is simply taken here as comprising Canada and the United States. What *does* interest me is to engage with some of the questions that underlie the history of power relations in the comics medium—one still often narrowly identified with the United States (Chute and Jagoda; C. R. King). Comics are no longer (if they ever were) nationally bound, and the same can be said of manga, which is now seen by scholars as containing “every category of literature” (Brenner 22; see also Chapter Four) and exists in numerous transnational forms. Similarly, the traditional idea of comics as a *genre* is increasingly contested; rather, comics (like manga) are now generally acknowledged to be part of a larger graphic *medium* that is capable of blending several genres and languages at one time (McCloud; Cohn; Varnum and Gibbons; Gravett).

According to comics scholar Paul Gravett, we are now “going through a new golden age of comics, a golden age when a lot of amazing work is being produced internationally and also not being hidden away in different cultures” (“Lost” n.p.). This observation supports a transcultural framework of analysis. Additionally, with

¹¹ See, for example, Thierry Groensteen’s “The Impossible Definition.”

comics—as with other graphic texts—readers are presented with a matrix of visual-verbal interfaces that is extended by reader-text exchanges. As such, graphic texts produce their own “arts of the contact zone” (Pratt). Shane Denson puts it this way:

In comics, because of the central collusion between verbal and visual forms, it is not just naming but also *framing* that enables the passage of the text; visual, material, and narrative frames of various scales and orders irreducibly structure graphic texts, parse their units of significance, and condition the dynamics of their reading. The act of reading a graphic narrative involves the reader in a process of *articulation*, which prior to (and as a condition of) “expression” also implies both a drawing of distinctions between parts and simultaneously an act of joining them together—that is, a double determination of borders, both as points of contact and separation. (271, original emphasis)

In such contact zones, where disparate cultures, temporalities, and species meet, this articulation is related to the “showing” rather than “telling” maxim as it applies to graphic fiction. As Hillary Chute explains, “Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning” (“Comics” 452, original emphasis). This is another common observation in the field, engaging with what McCloud might call “comics alchemy,” the frequently unpredictable interactive processes that take place between readers and texts (73).

Several comics scholars have attempted to theorize readers' encounters with what they see on the representative time-space of the page. As David Herman points out, "graphic narratives recruit from more than one semiotic channel to evoke storyworlds" (Herman "Storyworld" 160). According to Randy Duncan, within comics storyworlds there are three types of images that readers come in contact with: sensory diegetic images, non-sensory diegetic images, and hermeneutic images ("Image" 44–5). Sensory diegetic images show the physical reality of the storyworld created in the comic, for example, things that can be seen, like characters, structures, and objects, while they can also refer to things "that constitute the sensory environment of the fictional world," like smells and sounds. Non-sensory diegetic images, on the other hand, indicate "the internal reality of the characters in the story"—these are images that represent the thoughts, emotions, and attitudes of the characters of the story. Lastly, hermeneutic images, contrasting with sensory and non-sensory diegetic images, are "not meant to be part of the diegesis." Rather, hermeneutic images offer up the author's commentary on the narrative being told and "are often explicit attempts to influence the interpretation of the story" (45).

As such, Duncan argues, "hermeneutic images are an important agency (or technique) for conveying subtext, the underlying meaning of a story" (46). When hermeneutic images reappear throughout the text, they become visual motifs (47). Quite unlike genre adventures, which are "intended primarily for entertainment [and] generally have negligible subtexts" (46), the texts I examine in this thesis involve their readers in multifarious subtexts. These subtexts not only rely on cultural particulars, but also provide avenues to cross-cultural understandings. The thesis looks comparatively at the cultural discourses that underpin various aspects of these hermeneutics. It also seeks to account for the fact that "[c]omics are [...] the home of the anthropomorphized talking animal" (Witek *Comic* 4). Most discussions

of animals in graphic fiction have tended to treat these animals from an anthropomorphic, albeit multifaceted, perspective (Witek). While one of the main aims of the thesis is to show how this perspective can be changed, it is important to understand some of the history of animal comics and why some of its more recent cross-species manifestations remain controversial.

Though some scholars such as Ellis and Gravett go back as far as hieroglyphics and cave paintings, Witek traces the formal origins of anthropomorphized animals and comics to beast fables and folktales. The funny animal genre, he says, takes allegorical and fabular associations to new metaphysical heights, using animal metaphors to activate different levels of sophistication and seriousness (*Comic* 109). An early example of this differentiation is the pioneering newspaper cartoonist Jimmy Swinnerton's comic strip "Mr. Jack." This appeared in 1903 in William Randolph Hearst newspapers, and featured cat/tiger heads on human bodies. Because the jokes in this strip focused on "Mr. Jack's attempts to commit adultery" and other acts of womanizing, it was deemed inappropriate for children and moved to the sports pages in 1904 (Rifas "Funny" 235). This early example demonstrates the imbrication of speciesism with sexism as well as the tension between the juvenile/adult divide.

Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith also discuss the concept of anthropomorphism as it pertains to the funny animal genre. Along with many other scholars, they note George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* as being one of the first of the anthropomorphic funny animal kind, emerging in strip form in 1913 (206).¹² *Krazy Kat* began its evolution before this, however, starting out as part of Herriman's

¹² See Rifas 234–5 for other earlier examples of "animals acting like humans" in American humour magazines (by creators such as T.S. Sullivant and Harrison Cady) and European humour magazines (by creators such as J.J. Grandville and Heinrich Kley).

human story, *The Dingbats*, in June of 1910. Already a month later, the family cat (gender neutral “Krazy”) and a mouse that constantly threw things at its head were sharing a tiny space at the bottom of each panel. The strip changed its name to *The Family Upstairs* in August, as the human family became fixated with their neighbours above, and the cat-and-mouse story came to occupy a separated row of narrow panels underneath. By October 1913, *Krazy Kat* had become its own strip (Boyd “Tails” 217). According to Brian Boyd, “as the animals moved up from the basement to the main story, Herriman’s strip changed from plodding human realism to a wildly surreal and poetic series of scratchy non-sequiturs. [. . .] It is an animal liberation story: a story of animals liberating the imagination” (219). Viewed from this angle, *Krazy Kat* might be ripe for another kind of humanimal analysis beyond its anthropomorphic foundations; the underlying suggestion is that “comics relations between species are not always so cut and dried” (Beatty *Comics* 121).

Krazy Kat continues to be critically acclaimed as a quintessential funny animal character, and it (the character is gender neutral) became “one of the first animated onscreen cats in 1916 when its publisher, William Randolph Hearst, set up an animation studio to make animated cartoons of [Herriman’s] syndicated comic strip characters” (Rifas “Funny” 235). Following that impetus, but in the opposite direction—from the onscreen popular animated film shorts of the day to the printed pages of the comic book—the then fledgling North American comic book industry started borrowing animated characters from Walt Disney’s film studio. In 1940, with licensed stars such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, Dell Publishing launched *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories*—the first funny animal comic book—before establishing further contracts with Warner Brothers Studios and MGM to publish *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies* (1941) and *New Funnies* (1942) (Duncan and Smith 206). Other publishers and film studios followed suit, with 20th Century

Fox's Mighty Mouse appearing as *Terry-Toons* (1942), first with Timely Comics (now Marvel Comics), then with St. John Publishing, and Columbia Pictures' "The Fox and the Crow" and National Periodicals (the forerunner of DC Comics) appearing in *Real Screen Comics* (1945) (Duncan and Smith 206; See also Rifas "Funny" 236–7).

It seems worth pointing out here that the early American funny animals made political and cultural comments that have influenced contemporary representations. According to Rifas, "Funny animal characters were built on, overlapped with, and gradually replaced an older cartoon tradition of racial and ethnic stereotyping" ("Funny" 235). He cites examples of animated characters such as Warner Brothers' "Bosko," Walter Lantz's "Li'l Eight Ball," and "Thursday," "the cute but savage African child character" appearing in some Mickey Mouse stories. The repeated lesson of such comics seemed to be that children, especially black children, were "simply another species of friendly animals" (235–6). Other kinds of stereotypes linking racism and speciesism appeared on the covers of animal comics during World War II, with patriotic and military themed figures, such as Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo appearing suspended over hungry sharks (*Terry-Toons* #7, April, 1943) (237).

Often following the fable tradition in that some moral lesson was to be gleaned from the outcome, the early variety of anthropomorphic funny animal comics reached its height of popularity during the 1940s and 1950s (Duncan and Smith 208, Rifas "Funny" 238, Sabin 23). At that time, funny animals also existed side by side with superhero comics, offering kinds of sanctioned fantasy, and allowing "readers to break free of an otherwise confining life" (Duncan and Smith 208). Just how "confining" this life could be might be indicated by the post-war anti-comics movement that led to the US Congressional inquiry into the comic book

industry and the subsequent creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954. Driven predominantly by a rise in alleged overt sexuality and excessive violence depicted mostly in crime and horror comics, and fueled by overblown anti-comics criticism built on the notion that the comics “genre” itself was excessively transgressive, the CCA placed restrictions on controversial and adult themes and strictly censored content produced by participating publishers. A few publishers, however, including Dell and their purportedly “clean-cut Disney line of comics, managed to continue to operate independently of the CCA” (Meskin and Cook xxiii).

Prominently associated with this movement was psychologist Fredric Wertham, whose notorious condemnation of comics appeared in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Wertham’s criticism, however, spared books such as *Donald Duck*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Terry-Toons*, *Bugs Bunny*, and *Super Duck*, which Wertham classified as “harmless animal comics,” while still cautioning against their propensities to include “violent stories, advertisements for weapons, and racist ridicule” (qtd. in Rifas “Funny” 238). Wertham denounced comics in general for their seductive “picture reading” that “encouraged laziness and undermined reading skills” (qtd. in Varnum and Gibbons xi–ii). Following such criticism, the comics of the following period, roughly the mid ‘50s to the late ‘60s, were generally tame and often “resorted to silly plot devices” (Meskin and Cook xxiii). However, the limitations imposed by the CCA had the offshoot effect of motivating an upsurge in the “level of both artistic and storytelling skill in comics” (xxiii).

Still heavily indebted to the general developments of animal comics, yet disillusioned with the mainstream and the taming effects of the CCA, some artists of the funny animal genus defected to the then rising subgenre of underground comics or “comix” in the late 1960s. The mission of this counterculture movement was to

“exercis[e] absolute freedom of expression” (Rifas “Funny” 238–9). Many underground comix artists “gleefully plundered” the popular comic book genres and mainstream productions, appropriating and parodying material and animal characters such as Mickey and Minnie Mouse (Witek *Comic* 110). In a popular example, the comic book series *Mickey Mouse Meets the Air Pirates*, otherwise known as *Air Pirates Funnies* (1971), Disney’s characters were depicted taking drugs and having sex (Witek *Comic* 110, Rifas 239).¹³ However, “even in their politically self-conscious underground incarnation, American comics books have been primarily the domain of ‘boys’ stories” (Witek *Comic* 72). Although they continued to arouse criticism for their sexist, racist, and misogynist attitudes, the “heyday of underground comix” allowed for a revitalized kind of sociopolitical criticism, such as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s Marxist and American cultural imperialist critique *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1971).

Also vitally important during the 1960s and ‘70s was the appearance of women’s comix, which emerged in reaction to the male-dominated underground scene (Sabin 224). A series called “Wimmen’s Comix”—later titled “Wimmin’s Comix”—ran between 1972 and 1992, co-founded by Trina Robbins. Wimmen’s Comix #1 featured Robbins’ “Sandy Comes Out,” the first-ever comic strip featuring an “out” lesbian.¹⁴ This work opened avenues for the transmission of feminist themes during the time of the Women’s Liberation movement: for the first

¹³ Walt Disney Productions sued *Air Pirates* and won “for copyright infringement in a precedent-setting First Amendment case which established limits on the use of copyrighted characters in parodies” (Witek *Comic* 119 n24). See also Rifas “Funny” 239; for further examples funny animal comix, see also Witek 119 n25).

¹⁴ Robbins’ recent book, *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896–2013* (2013), charts the history of North American women in comics, from Rose O’Neill’s 1896 strip “The Old Subscriber Calls” to contemporary texts. See also Hilary Chute, *Graphic Women*.

time in the medium's history, women creators not only became visible, but "were able to set their own agenda" (Sabin 224). Taking a foothold in a comics industry that was male-dominated and "often quite macho," these artists created their own parodies of both underground and mainstream conceptions of sexism (224). They also began considering "real life" themes "such as abortion, menstruation, rape and male violence," often through autobiography (224–226). As Beaty remarks of the autobiographical mode in general, "[It] foregrounds both realism (as opposed to the traditions of fantasy) and the sense of the author as an artist demanding legitimacy (in contrast to the view of the cartoonist as cultural hack slaving away to turn out mass-mediated product)" ("Autobiography" 229–30).

In 1993 Sabin wryly noted, "the mainstream still remains the 'male-stream'" (234). On a more positive note, Paul Gravett writes that "[t]he most vitally reinvigorating change in modern comics is the unstoppable rise of women, as creators, as readers, and as characters" ("Foreword" 5). In this thesis, I will show that the female characters of graphic fiction are taking on remarkably different roles. In the context of a comics history that is fraught with sexism, racism, and speciesism, these female characters' subservience is now under question, if not always actively challenged or undermined.

Despite the "near disappearance of the American funny animal comic book" (Rifas "Funny" 241), many examples—including the graphic fictions examined in this study—can be cited as at least indirect descendants of the "animal comics" tradition. As Witek says, "Spiegelman's *Maus* would not exist were it not for the superb comic books of Carl Barks and Walt Kelly, as well as for the twists given to the funny animal genre in the underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s" (*Comic* 10–11). *Maus*, claims Witek, followed "[t]he comix transmutation of the talking

animals genre into the ‘not-so-funny-animals’” that culminated in the satirical work of Robert Crumb (e.g. *Fritz the Cat*, 111). Witek then continues: “Spiegelman’s extension of the animal metaphor from Crumb’s kind of satiric social commentary into history, biography, and autobiography was made possible by the underground comix, which first showed that the ‘funny animals’ could open up the way to paradoxical narrative realism” (*Comic* 111). Frequently debated by critics is Spiegelman’s use of animal characters to portray different ethnicities, such as Jewish mice, Nazi cats, and Polish pigs. To some, his use of dehumanization created a narrative effect that allowed the Holocaust atrocities to be depicted; to others, this tactic seemed racially, stereotypically, and childishly reductive, “making the oppression look as inevitable as cats preying on mice” (Rifas “Funny” 240; see also Witek *Comic*; Beaty *Comics* 120; Baker *Picturing* 139).

If the jury is still out on *Maus*, it remains a powerful example of what can be done within the graphic medium with talking animals. For Witek, the question of the animal is also a question about genre: “Spiegelman’s move away from stressing the animalness of his characters indicates how the genre of *Maus* likewise moves away from the animal fable toward a much more original application of the funny animal genre to history” (Witek *Comic* 103). One problem with the term “funny animal” is that it is often conflated with the term “talking animal.” Along with the problematic designation of genre itself, such definitions fail to grasp that comics can and often do partake of more than one thing at one time (Witek *Comic* 119 n22).

This point is underscored by the graphic fictions in the present study. In some ways, these texts display the general volatility of comics, moving at times uncertainly between realist and fantastical modes. But—as will be seen—the time-spaces they explore jar with the tremendous pace of conventional comics, which are usually replete with lung-bursting action. Indeed, at moments readers are transfixed,

caught in the action of repeated looking and the contemplation of different histories and perspectives. The tendency of comics to (self-) parody is also part of this instability. Besides having significant humanimal crossover components, the primary texts I will go on to discuss in the thesis have been selected with the following delimitations and theoretical propensities in mind. They are all contemporary in the sense that they were published between 2002 and 2012; they all involve journey narratives that include some kind of cross-cultural dimension; and they all are situated within the North American tradition of graphic fiction, even if their placement within (and/or against) this tradition is skewed in some way.

Chapter One focuses on Nina Bunjevac's catwoman character, Zorka, in her 2012 graphic collection *Heartless*. Like Bunjevac herself, Zorka is a Canadian "immigrant," ostensibly living in Toronto. The focal point of this "adult" collection, the "Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic" sequence doubles as an alternative history of "not-so-funny animal" comics and as an "American Dream" satire. Bunjevac deploys her humanimal catwoman Zorka to subvert the notion of the comics medium as one that has traditionally supported the idea of a strict gender binary. An interrogation of humanimal representations and performances throughout reveals generic intersections between tragicomedy, the animal comic, and the beast fable. However, while the text is preoccupied to the point of obsession with the notion of alternatives, its main characters remain bound within ideologically prescriptive lives. Bunjevac's artwork and storytelling skills create both an intimate and voyeuristic environment, allowing her to re-imagine the limits of the animal comic and humanimality in transgressive designs.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bunjevac's recently released graphic memoir, *Fatherland* (2015), has received glowing reviews. See Anya Ulinich www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/fatherland-by-nina-bunjevac.html?_r=1.

Chapter Two critically examines Hope Larson's *Gray Horses* (2006) and Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Lost At Sea* (2002). The main characters in each of these quirky coming-of-age tales undergo life-changing border crossings, with animals featuring heavily at the crossroads. For Larson's main character, Noémie, a French student newly arrived in "Onion City, America," a French- and English-speaking horse hybrid becomes an important figure in her strangely connected waking and dream worlds. Morphism across boundaries is a fertile theme that emerges from this text. As critic Douglas Wolk points out, Larson's "conceptual territory [is] the world of dreams, where things are always becoming each other" (214). Reacting to this prompt, the chapter picks up on the contested topic of "becoming-animal" (Deleuze and Guattari).¹⁶ For O'Malley's main character, teenage Raleigh, there is a similarly oneiric quality to her process of transformation. Ostensibly, Raleigh is a young, cat-searching Canadian girl on a road trip across the United States. However, O'Malley spins the quest out, giving it metaphysical overtones. His cats, like Larson's horses, thus become part of a larger process of identity negotiation that has implications for the meaning and origins of (human) life. In reading these texts, which literally depict the mappings, crossings, and translations of borders, the chapter questions to what extent the characters are defined by the humanimal and what this might suggest outside of normative paradigms. The animals in both narratives may seem to be in supporting roles, but they actually play central parts in tracing the transcultural identities and limits of the main characters.

Chapter Three explores the variety of humanimals and multilingual characters to be found in Matthew Forsythe's *Jinchalo* (2012) and Marek Colek and

¹⁶ For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "becoming-animal" is a creative process which changes relationships to the world. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, especially Chapter Ten. See also Steve Baker's work, which introduced Deleuzian ideas into the comics realm.

Pat Shewchuk's *Wax Cross* (2012). Both are indebted to ecofeminist traditions¹⁷ that also form a part of the transcultural and visual language of their texts. *Jinchalo* navigates the adventures of its main characters, the hungry girl Voguchi and the eponymous magpie Jinchalo. Seemingly inhabiting a timeless Korean world, shapeshifting and language games emerge as themes throughout this surreal, semi-wordless graphic fiction. Recasting an all-ages "Dennis the Menace"¹⁸ type character in an equally threatening world, Forsythe's *Jinchalo* doubles as a screwball beast fable that stretches the human limits of understanding. Colek and Shewchuk's *Wax Cross* is also a beast fable of a kind, but one that alters its own terms to suggest dark themes of witchery, protectionism, and the mutability of belief systems. Colek and Shewchuk are a creative team otherwise known as "Tin Can Forest." Their graphic fiction, reflecting this signature, is greatly influenced by Eastern European folklore as well as the ecology of the (Canadian) forest, which is central to their multi-vocal work. An enigmatic text brimming with animals, *Wax Cross* invokes the spectre of magic and alchemy to question human-centric forms of predation and infection.

Chapter Four compares and contrasts two unorthodox mangas: Nina Matsumoto's *Yōkaiden* (Vols. 1 & 2, 2009) and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas's *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009). Both of these graphic fictions rework multi-layered representations of folkloric stories into untraditional manga styles. Matsumoto's text is self-described as an Original English Language Manga (OEL) that depicts her main character Hamachi's travels to the mythical realm of Yōkaiden in a two-pronged quest to avenge his evil grandmother and to befriend and change

¹⁷ Although there are many brands of "Ecofeminism," generally speaking—in the North American context—they conventionally attend to the links between the domination of nature and women. See Chapter Three.

¹⁸ In South Korea there is a similar popular male cartoon character called Janggu.

misconceptions about yōkai—Japanese spirits that follow a long trajectory in Japanese history. Yahgulanaas, an author and activist from Haida Gwaii, blends traditions of Haida art and oral culture with those of Western comics and Asian manga. His work engages with environmental, social, and political history as these are destructively filtered through his main character, Red. Both Matsumoto and Yahgulanaas explicitly use transcultural forms and humanimal histories—linked to trickster figurations—to critique intersecting narratives of “us and them” and to create tales that illustrate the racial and heteropatriarchal contexts of white settler colonial history.

Finally, Chapter Five engages with the most animal-centric and geographically “borderless” text of the group—Matt Dembicki’s *XOC: The Journey of a Great White* (2012). Following the eponymous shark and her turtle companion as they traverse the Pacific Ocean in search of their inherited breeding grounds, this endearing text self-consciously employs an ecological viewpoint. Targeted at audiences of all ages, Dembicki creates a rich representational matrix of oceanic worlds, focusing on the unfolding drama of multispecies marine life. Using both photorealist pictorials and a fictional-non-fictional blend of the animal epic-cum-beast fable, *XOC* disrupts stereotypes about sharks, suggesting in the process how graphic narratives can contribute to a rethinking of the foundational dichotomies, including nature vs. culture, animal vs. human, and ocean vs. land, that are also discussed by contemporary theorists as diverse as Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour.

In tracking a humanimal catwoman (Chapter One), humanimal dreamers (Chapter Two), humanimal fables and folktales (Chapter Three), humanimal oral history and myth (Chapter Four), and a humanimal shark (Chapter Five), the thesis aims to show that although we can never entirely think our way into the existence of

other beings, there have been many attempts that are by no means confined to one particular method or cultural tradition, and where the chances of success may increase if methods and traditions are combined. Another goal of the thesis is to demonstrate that graphic fiction, “even fantasy stories, frequently comment on struggles in the real world” (Rifas “Ideology” 223). As Daston and Mitman suggest, “Until recently, the how and why of thinking with animals were rarely posed as questions; far more attention has been paid to whether it is good or bad to do so” (2). The thesis argues the need to think with animals and explores different ways of doing so, showing how graphic fiction has emerged as a privileged if abidingly popular medium through which to examine the inevitable questions that result.

Chapter One

Alternative Paradoxes in *Heartless*: The Bound and Transcultural Catwoman in “Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic” (2012)

Even in their politically self-conscious underground incarnation, American comic books have been primarily the domain of “boys’ stories”—Joseph Witek (*Comic 72*)

Domination, domestication, and love are deeply entangled—Anna Tsing (141)

Introduction

At the heart of Nina Bunjevac’s 2012 adult comics collection *Heartless* is Zorka, eponymous protagonist of the five-comic sequence “Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic.” This is the same free-flying catwoman character who adorns the front and back covers, first displayed Tamara de Lempicka-style behind the wheel of a car and then defiantly riding on the back of an unplugged vacuum cleaner.¹⁹

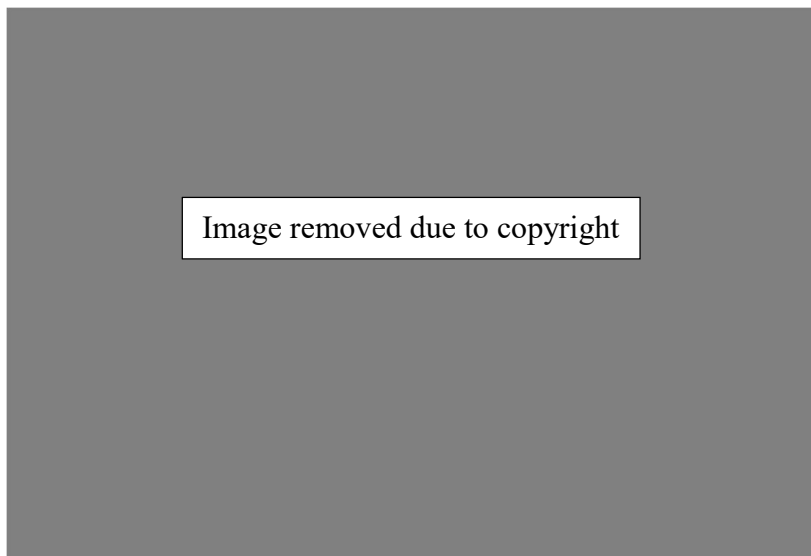


Figure 1. *Heartless* Covers

¹⁹ The back cover image displayed here is the unmarked version. On the published version (Conundrum Press), among other marketing material there is a “Mature Content” logo under Zorka’s feet.

In contrast to the brash, steam-punk catwoman featured above, Bunjevac’s “Bitter Tears” splash page depicts Zorka in a much different manner. Framed in thick black, in mesmerizingly stippled detail, we rediscover her spread-eagled on an operating table, while a surgeon wields an instrument between her propped-up furry legs.

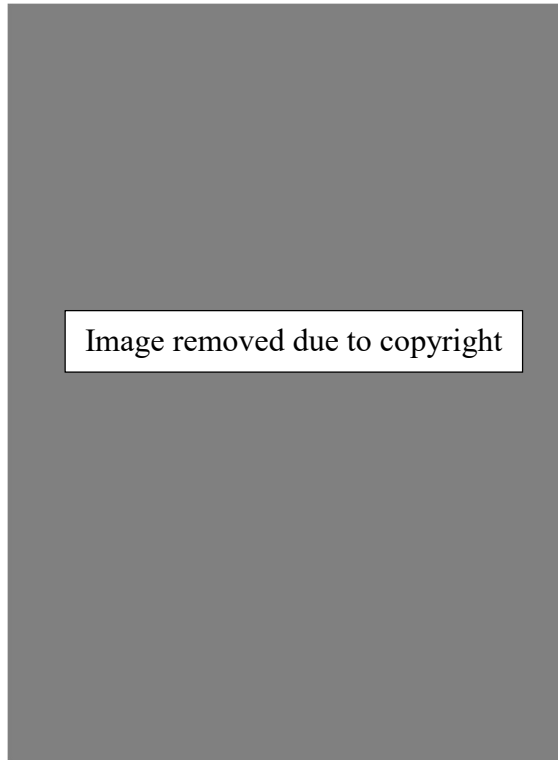


Figure 2. Bitter Tears of Zorka Petrovic (61)

With this ghastly opening scene begins a temporal narrative cycle that will “radiate in both directions” (Wolk 131). The eye-level framing arouses a heightened sense of “Peeping Tomism” (Witek *Comic* 72), while the histrionic title suggests a kind of caustic melodrama. Meanwhile, the humanimal figure (see Introduction) conjures all sorts of human-nonhuman, funny-animal, and “not-so-funny animal” associations.²⁰ The operation itself invokes extreme vulnerability and emotional embroilment—quite unlike the unimpeded renegade Zorka on the covers. Here, readers are made to bear witness to a controversial bodily invasion that might be likened to one’s pet cat

²⁰ “Not-so-funny animal” is a phrase borrowed from Joseph Witek; he uses it via Richard Gehr (*Comic* 111). See Introduction for further details.

being spayed by a vet. Grimmer still is the portentous machine, fully conscious, streaming its vertical emanata²¹ across the page and puncturing the membrane between human and nonhuman, life and death. Small wonder that both the doctor and the humanimal—albeit for different reasons—wear gloves and masks.

As the text proceeds, not only does Bunjevac encode Zorka and her “arrived” (80, read: immigrant) family as humanimal hybrids, but the text’s preoccupation with the tangled politics of sexuality, class, gender, and belonging also becomes increasingly inflected by Bunjevac’s provocative aesthetics, monochromatically rendered in black and white. Reading “Bitter Tears” as tragicomic satire—poised between a comedy of errors and a tragedy of ideologically²² grounded ideals—this chapter looks to explore some of the “alternative tensions”²³ that arise from Bunjevac’s humanimal enunciations, and to account for the powerful feelings of abjection that emerge from the text’s orientation in the grotesque. I will argue that Zorka’s “catness” is both cage and key, drawing readers to her and inviting both counter- and transcultural readings that radiate outwards into the text.

The plot of “Bitter Tears” revolves around an unrequited love-triangle involving Zorka, Fay, and Chip, the text’s three main characters. Jay Lynch calls this improbable tryst “the old Frankie and Johnny legend taken to its extreme of outré weirdness” (7), and readers are aware of the stakes of this unprepossessing

²¹ Emanata are defined by Andrei Molotiu as those “[v]arious graphic signs used in comics to convey information that goes beyond what could be perceived visually in the diegesis: e.g. sweat beads (for fear or anxiety), light bulb (for idea), etc. So named because they usually “emanate” from the head or body of a character” (n.p.).

²² My overall sense of the “ideological” in Bunjevac’s text is that it is both political and personal. Bunjevac confirmed this herself during an interview with me at the Toronto Comic Arts Festival in 2014. See also Mihaela Precup, “Felines and Females on the Fringe,” 190–1.

²³ This phrase is inspired by Charles Hatfield’s “Art of Tensions” (32).

threesome from the very first page (Fig 2). The setting is presumably Toronto, an assumption we can make from an earlier story in the text—“Opportunity Presents Itself”—that depicts the iconic CN tower, with “The New World” (7) operating as a metonym for “America” (12).²⁴

The “Bitter Tears” section opens with a chapter disarmingly entitled “Waitin’ for Chip.” Zorka telephones the “Exotica Fantasy Club” in search of Chip, a man with whom she has had an “unforgettable intimate encounter” (63). We find out that Chip is both a male dancer and a club “regular”; he is also the object of desire for Fay, a complex transgender²⁵ character in charge of the front desk at the club. Fay, who is on the other end of the line, quickly becomes a tragicomic villain, an addict farcically stereotyped as “trailer trash” with “mother issues” in a crosscut flashback sequence that readers see as Zorka waits (65–7). Zorka finally hangs up, but then starts to write letters; out of jealousy, Fay thwarts every attempt that Zorka makes to contact Chip. A detached narrator heightens a ludicrously stilted story that unfolds through a complex narrative structure of flashback scenes and the scripts of Zorka’s aborted correspondences. Readers duly learn about Zorka’s one-night stand with Chip and her attempts to contact him, initially because she is in love with him, and then later her attempts become more urgent when she finds out that she is pregnant with their “love-child.” These increasingly desperate attempts culminate in the fifth chapter, “The Last Plea,” when the text of Zorka’s last letter to Chip—asking him to consider a life with her and their unborn child—appears in the

²⁴ In most cases I have not reproduced the consistent capitalization of Bunjevac’s lettering style throughout *Heartless*. I have maintained style consistency with the text of this chapter.

²⁵ In the text we never find out Fay’s self-defined orientation. The narrator identifies her as “she,” so I will do the same here. As Precup documents in her article, and Bunjevac has confirmed in a conversation with me, Fay is based on a real-life drag queen and friend of Bunjevac’s (Precup 183).

narrative position for the first half of the chapter. In the second half of the chapter, we see the undoing of Fay, “arrested and charged with attempted arson” for the burning of Zorka’s letters (92). This is followed by Zorka’s “procedure,” her “bitter tears” in the aftermath, and her incomplete recovery three weeks later, after “the bleeding went away—but not the heartache” (93).

Comics, Love, and Other Discourses

Any reading of “Bitter Tears” cannot help but place it in an alternative comics context. One definition of “alternative comic” relates to what Charles Hatfield describes as those “satirical, political, and autobiographical elements [that are] inherited from [the earlier] underground comix [movement of the late 1960s]” (*Alternative 26*; see also Introduction). Aspects of satire, politics, and autobiography—each of them challenging the mainstream tradition—are certainly apparent in Bunjevac’s text. Zorka is by no means a typical anthropomorphic character, and her pudgy humanoid body stands in stark opposition to the alluring Catwoman of mainstream comics fame. In this, Bunjevac’s work shares common themes with feminist comics—such as those known as *Wimmen’s Comix*—that first grew up in reaction to the early male-dominated and often misogynistic underground scene, yet also continue to flourish in different realms of so-called “alternative comics” today (see also Introduction and subsequent chapters). In his introduction to *Heartless*, Lynch points to other obvious influences in *Heartless* including Film Noir, French New Wave cinema, and Yugoslavian New Cinema, the last of these “dubbed by wary critics of the 1960s as ‘The Black Wave’” (7). Mihaela Precup further points to Zorka’s possible family resemblance to Betty Boop (178 n5) as well as the text’s more obvious representational connections with the “black by proxy” cartoon category that includes Krazy Kat, Felix the Cat, and Mickey Mouse.

“The connection stops there,” writes Precup, “and [yet] seems to propose an alliance of these in-between human-animal characters, whose bodies tread the line between animal and human, threatening neat categorization and social order, forever refusing inscription within one single category or identity” (183).

But while Zorka’s “catness” may function to unfix her identity in some ways, it suggests fierce retrenchments in others. In an interview with Robin McConnell, Bunjevac describes Zorka as her “vent”—she is an “everywoman, and a typical immigrant,” “including myself” (Bunjevac “An Interview”). Zorka should thus be read, at least in part, in Bunjevac’s transcultural Canadian Yugoslavian/Yugoslavian Canadian context (“An Interview”). Born in Welland, Canada, where she spent her first year, Bunjevac lived in what is now Serbia between 1975 and 1990, at which point she relocated to Canada. When she first arrived back in Canada, she could not speak English (Bunjevac “Artists”). *Heartless*, her first collection of comics, features “an assortment of troubled female outcasts of sometimes uncertain genetic code but whose provenance, as evidenced by their name and other details, is East European (more specifically, Yugoslav)” (Precup 177). In her more recent graphic fiction, *Fatherland* (2015), Bunjevac interlaces the different yet overlapping politics of her family’s history with official stories of the past and “shared memory in the present,” showing how this process plays out alongside—and to some extent against—different conceptions of comics (James 531). In her interview with McConnell, Bunjevac discusses her demotic view of comics and how her approach, initially growing from a fine arts background and training in Yugoslavia and Canada, eventually found a preference for expression in the “non-bourgeois medium” and its relatable qualities (“An Interview”).

While not explicitly autobiographical, the political ideas in *Heartless* run much deeper than those that resonate on the plane of sexist destabilization. Several

of these ideas are attached to the “alternative” designation that has generally been given to this comic. However, the text itself provokes a critical engagement with the “alternative” category, especially as it pertains to its cast of maverick characters. These include Zorka, the chain-smoking immigrant catwoman, addict Fay, indecorously described as “a walking time-bomb” (64), and Chip, the club’s “regular,” who “tends to whip his snake out for anything with an opening in it—pulse or no pulse” (65). We could easily add Chip’s “elderly female companion” (65) to the list, or the incontinence-ridden Mr. Harold T. Garfield, “aka Mr. Shit Pants” (68), whom Fay defiles and who will, readers learn, use his health-inspector status to shut down the club “a week from now” (68). From one angle or another, every character—including the club itself—is highly sexualized yet “alternative” when compared to, say, the dominant ego ideals inscribed by the “male gaze” (Mulvey),²⁶ or when held up to conventional North American narrative standards such as those of the hero’s tale, which is still sometimes mistakenly characterized as being “neutral,” i.e. white, Western, able-bodied, heteronormative, middle class. However, such a queering of conventions, as Bunjevac’s text shows, can expose contradictions in the deconstructive project of identity politics; for, as Precup argues, “Despite Bunjevac’s inclusion of queer characters in the space of her book, she does not offer the premises that these might find a connection that stems from belonging to the same sexual (sub)culture. Androgyny and drag work here as visible markers of the outsider who thus spells out her own not-belonging” (191 n19). Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “intimate publics,” Precup concludes that “the visual language of *Heartless* is politicized, and the aspirations for a successful

²⁶ “The male gaze” is a concept which is intrinsic to contemporary film theory, the visual arts, and literature. Coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey, it broadly refers to perspectives that objectify women. See Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

heteronormative scenario are shown to be self-defeating and destructive. In this manner, the intimate public that could have been created here has already been atomized by Bunjevac's constant subversion of normativity" (192).

I agree with Precup's assessment that Bunjevac's text is almost entirely bound up with the notion of challenging normativity. And I agree with her as well that "Bitter Tears" fulminates against the flattening universalism proffered by mainstream comics characters such as Mickey Mouse. Where I differ is in contending that Bunjevac's use of species discourse—both through her figuration of the humanimal and her coupling of the grotesque with the abject—productively examines the notion of self-defeat by using animal representation to "clarify modes of human subjugation that ideology might otherwise obscure" (DeKoven 363). In the general context of social allegory, these modes operate as tentative relations of power, oscillating lines caught between inclusion and exclusion, which different audiences may relate to and seek to protest against in different terms. Moreover, "[t]he link between women and other animals is powerful in general, not just in the cultural imaginary" (DeKoven 363).²⁷ At several turns, Bunjevac's text negatively enunciates different modes of essentialist identity construction—especially ones that work to alienate. In other words, Bunjevac uses stereotypes to complicate stereotypes. This is visible in the text's dual layers of tragedy and comedy. Bunjevac's characters are clearly on stage for readers' scrutiny: alternately subjects and objects, they are open to ridicule yet invite sympathetic identification at the same time. What makes these characters funny also makes them sad, and vice versa. They are not so much atomized, in my view, as they are capacious and complicated.

²⁷ See also, for example, Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women* (1995); also Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990).

Similarly, Bunjevac complicates her characters by revealing differences between their stereotypical appearances and their complex back-stories. Consider the “villainous” Fay, an amusing but miserable character who also acts as Zorka’s foil. Bunjevac tells Fay’s back-story in a plaintive scene that hints at the psychological complexities of her queerness (65–7). As readers, we can either choose to naturalize her alterity along the crude psychological lines that the text suggests—“Oh, Mother, look what you’ve made me become...” she wails while downing alcohol and pills—or we can try to better understand her situation as the text lays out her personal circumstances, betokened by a trailer park and a broken home (66). On the first reading, the text scornfully deems her pathological, apparently justifying the motivation for her antagonistic tendencies and thus also confirming her demonization. On the second, readers are likely drawn to sympathize with her alienation, a supportive view that stems from the text’s traumatizing depiction of her impoverished background, including her mother’s lies and abandonment (67). Either way, funny or sad, Bunjevac ties the representation of Fay to an insidious and paradoxical notion of love—“I love you, Momma! [. . .] No! I hate you!” (66–7). In this first scene, Bunjevac links Fay’s own “bitter tears” to inverted structures of the nuclear family, empathy, and psychology, showing how murky mixtures of “nature” and “culture” can be used as powerful tools to justify marginalizing and othering individual people, social groups, and indeed “things” in themselves (Alaimo *Bodily* 4; see also Introduction).

In *Heartless*, the concept of the underground alternative comic is parodied as a superficial underworld full of transgressive taboos: sex, drugs, and rock and roll. These are signifiers of an earlier underground form, which has since arguably become normalized. But for Bunjevac, her characters are not just representing counterculture in the interest of subverting comics norms or performing bawdiness

for the sake of bawdiness. Rather, their self-destructive actions (drinking, drug use, self-medicating, etc.) arise out of socially grounded feelings of insecurity, alienation, and lack of love. The comedy is never very far from the tragedy, with the text placing stereotype and subversion side by side. The link between them is the notion of belonging. In a text called *Heartless*, however, it is hardly surprising that the concept of belonging is also about the politics surrounding the messy but also very material values attached to that unruliest of emotions, love.

“Love” is not just a leitmotif—it assumes its own character in the text. It is unmistakably present on twenty-two out of twenty-nine of the image-text pages in “Bitter Tears,” sometimes appearing as an iconic image in heart bubbles, at other times revealing itself within the whites of Zorka’s eyes. “Amorousness” (63) in all its shapes and forms permeate this graphic fiction. It takes on a very specific role when it is suggested that both Zorka’s and Fay’s actions are not just about their concupiscence for Chip, but about what he stands for. For Fay, as for Zorka, this is tied to stability. As the narrator relates, “Chip is one man [Fay] could always count on to be around—a man she could set her clock to” (64). Fay’s attachment is never reciprocated. While we can easily see the psychological web Bunjevaca weaves around her profoundly troubled characters, the perniciousness of love, along with the obsessions it breeds, hides in plain sight.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that “Home,” “Love,” and “Others” are main constructs in the inclusionary/exclusionary mythologies of the American Dream: “Domination, domestication, and love are deeply entangled” (141; 150–51). For Tsing, the history of civilization itself is attached to a historically shifting discourse of love, with contemporary US standards of domestic intimacy serving to create a moral hierarchy: “This kind of family fetish reappeared in mid-twentieth

century U.S. mass culture—and once again in our times now.” “Family love” is part, says Tsing, of a “biosocial plan.” “Others risk becoming ‘collateral damage’ [. . .] Under this tutelage,” she writes, “our species being is realigned to stop Others at home’s door” (151).

My contention is that “Bitter Tears” dramatizes a contemporary version of the entanglement of love in the moral hierarchy of species being. Here, the myth of the American Dream is also mired in the Canadian one, but in both cases, “National identity, like the geographical borders of the nation and its regime of citizenship rights, remain contested terrain, for outsiders as well as insiders” (Thobani 29). Building on Benedict Anderson’s famous notion of “imagined communities,” Sunera Thobani argues that Canadian laws create and maintain what she calls “exalted” citizens. These citizens are the imagined bearers of national identity, and their citizenship is based on a defining opposition to “Others” (5; see also Chapter Two). Like Tsing, Thobani traces this to the “traditional heterosexual nuclear family ideal” (113). In the history of Canada’s welfare state, this “family ideal” includes “the social integration of the working class into bourgeois society” (106).

In the third chapter of “Bitter Tears,” entitled “The Set-Up,” the setting of Zorka’s immigrant working-class background against her sister’s assimilated middle-class status shows why a normative version of love is so important for Zorka.

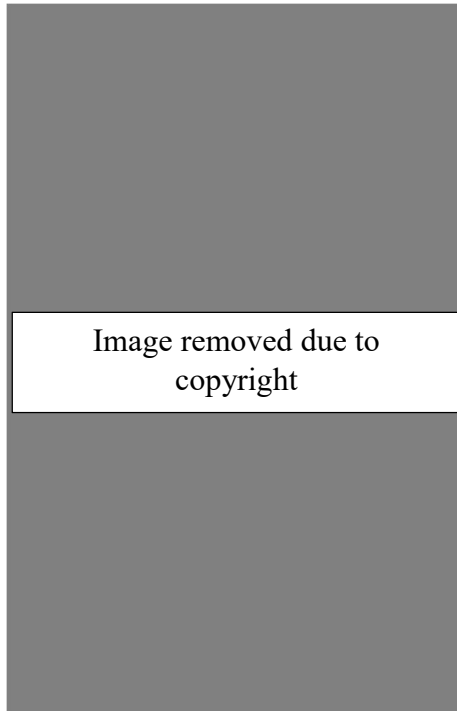


Figure 3. “Settlement City” and Suburbia (77)

The scene above is the first page of the sequence. It juxtaposes Zorka’s city life—her apartment is a multi-storey high-rise, shown earlier from the outside (63)—with Mirka’s life in suburbia. While Zorka lives in “Settlement City,” Mirka has what appears to be a typically middle-class lifestyle as a housewife. Although the reference to Toronto is never made that clear, the text is playing on the blanket branding of Toronto’s ethnic enclaves as “high-rise ghettos” (Qadeer and Kumar 15). The price of this, however, is clear enough, as is Mirka’s derision of her sister for cleaving to a blue-collar immigrant lifestyle. Mirka scorns Zorka for working in a meat factory—another source of irony since she is also part animal—and for living in Settlement City for the past twenty years (80). Zorka’s retort is just as stinging: “In all honesty, [she] didn’t give a hoot. As a matter of fact – Zorka hated her sister Mirka with a passion. She hated her perfect church-going family, her soccer playing idiot son, that big-shot gangster husband of hers and their new house in the suburbs” (77).

In the biopolitical²⁸ context of “Home,” “Love,” and “Others,” the lead metaphor of *Heartless* becomes a subject of scrutiny. Increasingly throughout the text, we see how Bunjevac elicits Thobani’s conception of “exalted subjects” and the subordinated “Others” against which they are defined. As Thobani argues, “dehumanized” immigrants have “their subjectivit[ies] [constituted] variously as abject outcasts, humble supplicants, deserving and stubborn claimants, ambitious assistants in the hegemonic Euro-Canadian project, and sometimes even as revolutionary activists” (16–7). While both Zorka and her sister can be read as humanimal outsiders, readers can easily deduce that Mirka is invested in “making-it,” while Zorka exists precariously on the fringe.

The sarcastic reference to Mirka’s “gangster husband” suggests the moral ambiguities of obtaining and maintaining a suburban lifestyle. This point is reinforced a few pages later when Mirka tells Zorka that she will have to hang up because her husband “hates it when [she] talk[s] on the phone” (81). Mirka’s stereotypically assimilated lifestyle owes in part to her capacity to exclude others, including her own sister. This is what Judith Butler might call an “exclusionary matrix” (*Bodies* xiii), and it has clear patriarchal underpinnings. Consider this criticism of Zorka: “You are heartless – no wonder you’re still single,” Mirka says, after Zorka has revealed that “[she] wouldn’t know” if “[their dead] father was a good man” (78). This recalls the text’s earlier allusions to psychoanalytic (especially Oedipal) discourses in relation to Fay, which are mapped here onto social structures

²⁸ “Biopower” and ideas of the “biopolitical” are essentially about the means of power over bodies, and these conceptual terms come from the work of Michel Foucault. In the mid-1970s, Foucault delivered a series of seminars at the Collège de France. These seminars addressed the question of biopolitics. The last lesson of his 1975–76 seminar was published under the title *Society Must Be Defended* (2003). See also Vernon W. Cisney and Nicolae Morar, *Biopower: Foucault and Beyond* (2016).

of heteropatriarchy and normative ideals of the nuclear family. Bunjevac furthers this critique when readers learn from the narrator that “[a]nother thing Zorka hated about Mirka was her inability to leave the past behind” (78). And when Mirka wants to set Zorka up with a man—“one of their own,” she says—she reveals her own racial biases too, suggesting that such a traditional relationship would raise Zorka’s social status in the world (78–9).

Even though the narrator tells us that Zorka hates her sister and her bourgeois lifestyle, Zorka’s actions suggest otherwise. As readers know from the beginning, Zorka is trying to contact Chip. Tellingly, Bunjevac only gives Chip—the sex object—one verbal line in the entire story (he asks to share Zorka’s joint right before they have sex in the bathroom). In another reversal of the norm, Chip is the *male* stripper, but he still has power despite his voicelessness: indeed, for both Fay and Zorka, and evidently for many others at the club, he is the physical manifestation of desire and their closely related fantasies of “Love.” Visually, he is also the only character who gets to wear different outfits in the text: now a macho cowboy getup (Fig 4), now a native headdress for his elderly companion (65), now a flaming tuxedo in Zorka’s imaginative matrimonial attire (89). One suggestion is that Chip’s masculinity is fluid and able to shapeshift; another is that he has a powerful hand in his own exploitation. And as we will see, this plays out further in Bunjevac’s depiction of what Zorka actually desires.



Figure 4. Zorka's Ideal Love (88–9)

Zorka's love-fantasy looks much like Mirka's picture-perfect life, which Zorka professes to hate yet also seems impatient to buy into (Chip is also a clear alternative to the "catman" ideal Mirka wants for Zorka). Bunjevac's detailed montage builds Zorka's fantasy in a wordless sequence that registers an all-too-familiar fairytale deeply embedded in the Western imagination. Unsurprisingly, a horse features in this scenario, as does a baby boy on his own miniature version—a sure sign of patrilineal continuation (see also Chapter Two).

For all of the text's hyperbolic depictions of this mythic version of love, Bunjevac undercuts the humour ensconced in this transparent parody. For Zorka, as for Mirka, securing a man and profiting from the status he confers also becomes an increasingly questionable promise of happiness. Bunjevac furthers this idea with the underhand suggestion that Mirka wants to set Zorka up with a man who could well prove to be dangerous: for even though Mirka praises his "church-going" "heart of gold," apparently the prospective male "set-up" has had an altercation with his ex-wife and might be a "rapist" (80). Again, Bunjevac presents readers with more than one way of seeing things. From Mirka's perspective, with her eye on setting Zorka

up, these allegations are false. But as readers external to the text, we are keenly aware that the term “set-up” has connotations well beyond the satisfaction of status or the fulfillment of desire. The “man” part of the love equation is shown to run deeper than just a fantasy on the part of the seeker. Indeed, “Bitter Tears” strongly suggests that heteropatriarchy—perhaps even misogyny—underwrites the requirements for a form of culturally acceptable and predefined normative femininity. As Thobani and Tsing among others have argued, this rests on a “*national ideal*,” “with the family constituting primary sites of belonging to various groups” (Thobani 113, original emphasis).²⁹ For Zorka, as for Fay, this comes back to love being the first step in securing a social foothold: a piece of the status quo. Love, however dangerous or delusional, thus becomes metonymic for success and social belonging (Thobani 113).

On the first page of “The Procedure,” the text depicts the rigidity and fear entrenched within such a domestic model of femininity:



Figure 5. The Procedure (83)

²⁹ See also Roxanne Rimstead, *Remnants of Nation* (2001), and Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal* (1997).

“The Procedure,” which is the fourth chapter in “Bitter Tears,” is only three pages long. In one of the most telling moment-to-moment sequences in the story, readers witness Zorka making her abortion appointment. This is the only instance in the “Bitter Tears” sequence where Bunjevac deploys the conventional, three-by-three, boxed-in, nine-panel comics grid. Contrasting with the rest of the text, this suggests that Zorka has been “framed.” Depicted as if under a spotlight, her shadow, perhaps symbolic of another self, projects behind her. Zorka is styled here as half funny animal, half degenerate. This has the double effect of downplaying what is actually happening while making it all the more disturbing. Because of Zorka’s circumstances and location³⁰ in the world, her “pro-choice” decision appears to be made freely. The fact that Fay obstructs these circumstances becomes moot when we compare Zorka’s ideal of love (Fig 4) with the text of her last letter to Chip. In it, she asks him to consider a life with her and their unborn child: “We could be so very happy together, you and I and our love-child. I have some money saved up... Not much but perhaps enough for a down-payment on a bungalow” (89). She then continues, “I have *safe-guarded* myself and made an appointment to have the pregnancy terminated – however – I do hope that you’ll see *reason* and give ‘us’ a chance” (89, added emphasis).

Two key words resonate here: “safe-guard” and “reason.” As Zorka says, she must “safe-guard” herself, but as the story concludes, the text suggests that she is actually upholding an imposed ideal of patriarchal “reason.” Bunjevac invites us to recognize that Zorka’s actions are underwritten by biopolitics—a complex mix of social, economic, and political structures that restricts her acceptance as a single

³⁰ The text never spells out the time period or location. Because of the style of telephones Zorka uses, I am speculating that “Bitter Tears” is set in the 1990s. As I mentioned earlier, I assume the location to be Toronto.

mother. Here as elsewhere, Zorka is caught between imposed heteropatriarchal ideals and personal free will. In displacing the idea of the “The Procedure” from the abortion itself to the scene of the appointment—where she is literally under the sign of religious law—Bunjevac also brings up the idea of logocentrism—a “persistent but morbid centering of *Logos* (meaning thought, truth, law, reason, logic, word, and the Word) in Western thought since Plato” (Harmon and Holman 296). Following Jacques Derrida, we can see Bunjevac’s deployment of Zorka’s love myth as a form of “phallogocentrism,” which involves a further “privileging of the male order” (qtd. in Harmon and Holman 296). As Zorka’s position effectively reminds us, “Controlling reproduction is central to patriarchy” (Kemmerer 19). Readers might begin to question here whether Zorka’s story is actually in the domain of the “boy story” after all (Witek *q.v.*).

The sadness of all this—both Zorka’s compounded shame and the fact that her “choice” may turn out to be illusory—is both emphasized and undercut on the page immediately following her call. In effect, Zorka turns into a funny-animal parody of herself, marching across the top three panels, declaring “Ahhh...What a great time to be alive. Free to live my life as I wish...having full control over my body. Yep! Free to go wherever I want... Free to do whatever I want! Free to drink whatever I want... Free to do so whenever I want!” (84). Here, the idea of freedom is lampooned as everything Zorka has just “freely” consumed in the previous panels—popcorn, chips, soda—returns on her. Instead of marching across the page as in the previous sequence, she is forced to run across the top of the opposing page in order to throw up (85). Visually juxtaposed this way, with her mind thinking one thing on one page while her body does another on the next, Zorka is framed as a humanimal, perfectly illustrating the Cartesian divide between “I think, therefore I am” and the abyss of the abject animal “automaton.” Material, natural, and

ideological forces combine and overlap to construct the comic figure of Zorka. But should readers laugh at her or not? We get the feeling that the narrator—who is entirely absent from “The Procedure”—is complicit in generating the laughter, which is anything but gentle. Perhaps the narrator, and we too, are responsible for creating the system that short-circuits Zorka’s ability to see her own “domestic dreams” (Tsing 152). Such free-spirited terms as “alternative” and “counter-cultural” slide into tricky territory in “Bitter Tears.”

Perhaps “abject” is a better term to describe the specific biopolitical circumstances of *Heartless*. Certainly, Zorka herself is a painfully abject figure, caught on the cusp between animal and human, and potentially destroyed by the very idea of love—an “animal” instinct carried over into “human” commerce—that she herself creates (69, 72). At almost every turn of the text, the funny animal collides with the existential humanimal. Bunjevac uses the humanimal figure to undercut pretensions of human omniscience and objectivity, but also points to the *dehumanization* that routinely accompanies human constructions of animality—a “degraded” condition, neither fully human nor wholly animal, that Zorka is made to represent.

The Not-So-Funny Humanimal: Anthropomorphism or Zoomorphism or Both?

Joseph Witek asserts that Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* “leaps foursquare into ‘the most difficult ethical problem of the 20th century’” (*Comic* 97). The marginalized histories that Bunjevac relates are bound to different ethical debates, but her work follows in the “not-so-funny-animal” tradition that first exploded with *Maus* (see also Introduction). Zorka’s species difference—her “catness”—emerges from Bunjevac’s art style as a form of paradoxical narrative realism, opening up spaces for the powerful narration of traumatic events. As Precup points out, “Bunjevac’s

minutely dark drawings are relentlessly gesturing at the grotesque as an adequate visual means of translating psychic trauma” (191). Bunjevac’s grotesque—by turns ridiculous and terrifying—functions through juxtaposition; unlike other comics where animals usually exist alongside other animals, Zorka is a catwoman in a human world. At the same time, the conventional human-animal hierarchy is repeatedly destabilized: Fay and Zorka, though both are marginalized, are at least allowed to share equal ground. For all that, the hybrid humanimal world of “Bitter Tears” is still underpinned by what Cary Wolfe calls “the humanist discourse of species,” which serves to naturalize the oppression of “the social other of *whatever* species—or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference” (Wolfe *Animal* 8, original emphasis; see Introduction). “Bitter Tears” clearly draws on these contexts of difference, playing with grotesque figurations of the animal abject on several fronts.

In relation to Fay, this is most apparent through repeated images of her baring her teeth (67, 92).³¹

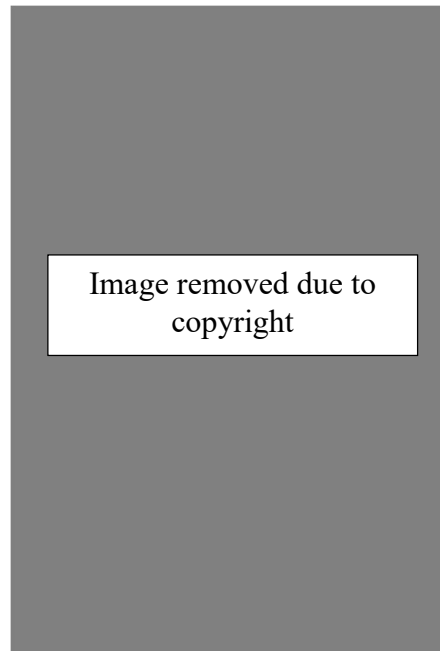


Figure 6. Fay’s Arrest (92)

³¹ See Michael A. Chaney, “Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel,” for other examples of comics characters “bar[ing] their teeth” (131).

The above scene occurs on the third last page of the text. Fay, we are told, is “broke, desperate and homeless” (91). She “barricaded herself inside the woman’s public washroom of the ‘Sunny Seaside Mall’; she was attempting to set fire to Chip’s fan-mail which she had previously stolen from his locker upon getting fired from the Exotica Club.” Readers look on as Mall Security investigates the smoke in the washroom and a custodian comments, “Shoes like lady—smell like lady but voice not like lady” (91). “Fay was soon apprehended...arrested and charged with attempted arson” (91–2). This is all bizarre enough, but the fact remains that Fay never committed a crime. There is the suggestion that her arrest may have something to do with her trans* identity. Does Bunjevac’s merging of the comic and tragic reinforce or undermine this suggestion? How are readers supposed to reconcile Fay’s pathological yet “remorse[ful]” tendencies? (92). Note also the wretched depiction of Zorka’s unborn humanimal fetuses, which ridiculously appear to be attached to testicles instead of wombs. Could this be an intentionally grotesque implosion of the abject in its traditional attachment to the female body? (Kristeva).

The abject, according to Julia Kristeva, is associated with the feminine and especially with “maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic” (*Powers* 12). The abject materializes through a body without borders or frontiers, threatening a sense of identity or unity; it is, in Kristeva’s words, “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers* 4). The abject occupies an inconclusive space, an ambivalent position, and it does not observe limits or follow laws. It is that which is exorcised and excluded, but also that which challenges and destabilizes the subject and from which the subject cannot detach itself (2–4). “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (*Powers* 12, original emphasis). Applying these aspects to

Bunjevac's figuration of Fay, we can clearly see how she embodies the contradictory aspects of Kristeva's abject, especially as "the criminal with a good conscience," and also because her "crime"—which was never actually arson—"draws attention to the fragmentary nature of the law" (*Powers* 4). These and other incongruities point us once again to the text's psycho-social overtones, providing fodder for readings of the tragic in terms of moral sympathy and the comedic in terms of social disavowal in the same swipe.

But as previously argued, the text also points us in the direction of nature and biology. What should readers make of the representation of Fay as a caged animal? From an ecocritical perspective, as Greg Garrard argues, "crude zoomorphism" "is a perpetual hazard" in that it reductively attaches the already drastically reduced category of "the animal" on to the human (160). In Garrard's view, zoomorphism often points to "racist representation of, for instance, Jews as rats or Africans as apes" (160). It can also bestow a reductive sexuality (as in Playboy Bunnies), or signify the beast within "as a scapegoat for human wickedness" (Garrard via Mary Midgley 161). Meanwhile for comics scholar Beatriz Carbajal Carrera, "zoomorphism degrades the human's character, thus giving the reader a sense of superiority" (84). What is common to these two views is the affective force of dehumanization.

As we have seen, Bunjevac's text multiplies characters that either occupy liminal places of belonging or embody abject (animal) otherness. In Zorka's case, "catness" operates as a kind of hinge. To some extent, Bunjevac's figuration of Zorka takes cues from "disneyfication" (Baker), especially her large eyes, denoted in art as "neoteny." Building on the work of the visual theorist Steve Baker, Garrard explains, "Disneyfication exacerbates [anthropomorphic childishness], as reflected in the colloquial use of 'Mickey Mouse' to describe something as trivial or

worthless” (155).³² While gesturing towards the human, this visual technique can invoke “a dispassionate, even alienated perspective ” (155; see also Daston and Mitman 11). While Bunjevac’s construction of Zorka is anthropomorphic in this general sense, and while it draws in other respects on the conventions of the beast fable, it should be clear by now Zorka is *not* anthropomorphic in the sense of being a humanlike cat. Her ubiquitous gloves serve to mystify her true nature (such as it exists), and the possibility that she might be wearing a catsuit frustrates rather than fulfils her authenticity as either human or animal. As Carrera argues, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism can meaningfully coincide through the grotesque (91), with the resultant ambiguity inducing the reader to sympathy or scorn. Whether it is one reaction or the other may depend on how to read facial expressions.

Bunjevac gives her characters, especially Zorka and Fay, a wide array of arresting facial attributes. The most impressionable ones come at the end of the story.

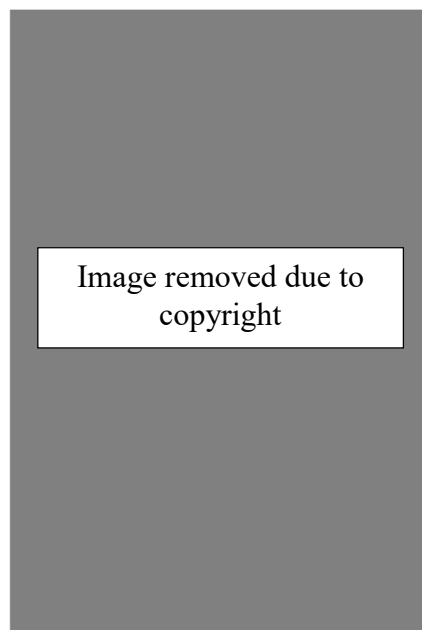


Figure 7. Bitter Tears (93)

³² See also Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast* 174–84.

The images above comprise the second last scene of “Bitter Tears.” Visually and temporally—“meanwhile, across town”—Zorka’s world is juxtaposed with Fay’s (Fig 6). Zorka’s expression, like Fay’s, trumps the narration. Her eyes are closed; she is facing the reader, inviting a reversed gaze that cannot help but recall Derrida’s much-discussed encounter with his cat (see also Chapter Two) and his accompanying meditation “on the shared passivity, anguish, and vulnerability of the human *and* the animal in relation to death” (Wolfe *Animal* 76, original emphasis). Upsetting the Cartesian idea of the individual human being as the starting point for language, observation, and thinking, Derrida claims that thinking starts from the gaze of his cat: “something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me” (380). Zorka, for her part, does not return our gaze, but we still are invited to think—if not see—behind her eyes. And we are invited, too, to look into ourselves: as Michael A. Chaney pointedly asks, “What does the comic animal think and what, in thinking it, are we permitted to see in ourselves?” (145).

Derrida notwithstanding, Zorka’s “catness” is a complex zoomorphic strategy that has the primary critical effect of moderating the mature subject matter of abortion and its consequent trauma from appearing overtly sentimental or inappropriately audacious. This resonates with a point made by Rifas that “[b]ecause they have been so firmly associated with the innocence of childhood, cartoonists have repeatedly turned to funny animals to make adult material more shocking” (“Funny” 240). Yet, when we arrive at the abortion image for a second time, it is not so much shocking as strikingly sad. The humanimal Zorka is not funny at all in the image (Fig 7). Rather, Bunjevac is using graphic narrative to display “the relation of visibility to the transmission of personal and cultural trauma” (Whitlock “Autographics” 965). In scenes such as this one, the use of the catwoman figure

dehumanizes, but also paradoxically *re*humanizes what Butler calls the “nonnarrativizable abject” (Butler *Bodies* 140). The avoidance of a realistic human face creates a distance that allows trauma to be narrated through the technique of cognitive estrangement. In a different register, it also marks Zorka as Other. When asked about the world in which Zorka exists, Bunjevac responded that she is interested in the “bare truth,” and getting at “what we’re all about without masking ourselves” (“An Interview”).

In *The Female Grotesque* (1995), Mary Russo claims that one consequence of the social suppression of the abject is the donning of a mask. She distinguishes between the “comic grotesque” of the carnival mask, which subverts normative identity (e.g. via Bakhtin), and the “grotesque as strange and uncanny” (e.g. via Wolfgang Kayser and Freud) (7). “Each of these categories,” she says, “relies heavily on the trope of the body” (8). In the first case, following Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a social body: it “is not separated from the rest of the world; ‘it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects’ [. . .] and with social transformation” (8). “In the second [...] the grotesque is related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state” (9). I would argue that Bunjevac’s construction of Zorka deliberately merges these categories, a move she makes by drawing on the existential paradoxes embedded within the metaphysics of animal-human and subject-object divides. Through the intensities supplied by the text’s provocative manipulations of species discourse and affect theory (embodiment), as well as its politically infused historical contexts, “Bitter Tears” shows “how graphic narrative can envision an everyday reality of women’s lives, which, while rooted in the personal, is invested and threaded with collectivity, beyond prescriptive models” (Chute “Comics” 459). By figuring the feminized humanimal and her engagement with the shifting parameters of everyday

life, Bunjevac moves beyond “prescriptive models” by producing “alternative approaches to self-recognition and the boundaries between self and others” (Whitlock “Post-ing” vi). From this perspective, Zorka’s story articulates a feminist voice that resonates beyond the immediate world of the text.

While Zorka’s humanness may allude to familiar animal genres, we never know for sure the degree to which her catsuit is integral or imposed. This question relates to the incommensurable terms of a very specific kind of diasporic identity. As Bunjevac writes about her own experience, “To say that you come from Yugoslavia is akin to saying that you’ve been raised to speak Latin; a dead language befitting of a dead country” (Bunjevac “Artists”). In this context, we can read Zorka’s “catness” as signifying a kind of non-identity—an irremediable dislocation in terms of being part Yugoslav without a tangible Yugoslavia to return to.³³ Another word for this condition is alienation, which looms large in the text, as in the image below, taken from the title page of the second chapter of “Bitter Tears.”

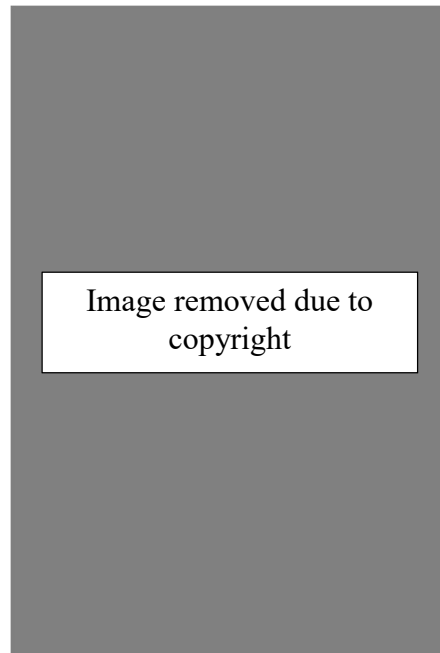


Figure 8. Alone in the Club (71)

³³ See Bunjevac’s Inkstuds interview and her discussion of “artists in exile” at <http://ninabunjevac.com/artists-in-exile/>.

Clearly “alone in the crowd,” Zorka is the only catwoman in an audience of men. Her differences stick out: she is a smoker, a woman, a cat; also a kind of cartoon fantasy within the ironically “real” environment of the fantasy club. Scott McCloud calls this the masking effect (43) by which compound alienation is produced, but also invites the possibility of viewer identification. In the pages following this one, Zorka warms to her theme, writing in a letter to Chip, “I’ve been roaming the earth all my life, neglected, incomplete, unable to fill the void . . . alone in the crowd, a stranger amongst my own” (73). Recalling Kristeva’s point that “abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin” (*Powers* 5), such a description might be taken to exemplify a kind of “unhomeliness” *par excellence*, with—in Homi Bhabha’s formulation—“the unhomely moment relat[ing] the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (11). Not exactly animal, not exactly human either, but seemingly “cat-suited” to be read as a version of both, Zorka succeeds despite her marginalized status to embody an unsettling power.

Similarly, Zorka is not an anthropomorphic cat—a humanized cat—nor is she entirely zoomorphic—a “cat-ized” human. Rather, she approximates what David Herman calls “zoomorphic projection,” in which animal attributes and experiences are deciphered in human terms that invite comparison even though—as Herman concedes—such comparisons “may be partial and temporary” (“Storyworld” 167). Bunjevac uses zoomorphic projection to set up a series of shifting positions—talking animal, immigrant catwoman, cultural hybrid—that variously become sources of identification and dis-identification as the story unfolds. These shifting positions also allow Zorka (and, by corollary, Bunjevac’s text) to cross boundaries, much as animals do in film. According to Barbara Creed,

In Darwinian terms the screen animal signifies the collapse of boundaries between human and animal; in Freudian terms the zoocentric or screen animal signifies repressed human desire; in Deleuzian terms, it is an animal in the process of ‘becoming’ something other; and in Derridean terms it presents a ‘trace’ of something else, a trace that gives rise to different questions about the human-animal relation. (63)

As human as Zorka may be, it is her distinctive “humanity” that connects her to these various animal philosophies. Bunjevaca exploits this humanimal appropriation for its dissonance *and* its continuity, its sameness *and* its difference, in order to ask questions that are at the heart of the cultural politics of multispecies relationships.

Such questions (Who is the animal and who not? What are the conditions for a shared world?) are further elicited by the construction of “real” animals in this text. The first is a dog, appearing very early in the story (64). S/he is on a short leash, alone, and tied to the outside door of one of the rooms at the Fantasy Club, presumably waiting for someone to finish inside. On closer inspection, the dog is wearing a signboard, indicating that s/he is some kind of working animal, possibly a seeing-eye dog for the elderly customer who is presently with Chip. The other animal depicted in the text is a horse (Fig 4). The horse fires Zorka’s imagination when she is daydreaming of Chip, and he, too, is literally in Chip’s service—a stallion for a stallion—as he whips it into action in order to rush to Zorka and present her with an engagement ring. Symbolically, this horse functions to heighten Chip’s image of masculinity in Zorka’s mind (88; see also Chapter Two). These two depictions suggest two different things. First and foremost, we see that Zorka is literally *not* like them; that her character belongs to the bipedal human realm. On the

other hand, figuratively we see that Zorka *is* like them—bound within the confines of space in “Settlement City” (80); bound to the tiny box of her apartment (69); bound to her twenty-year job at the meat plant (80); bound by Bunjevac’s appropriation of her as a cartoon catwoman; bound in the frames of the narrative; bound by her animal/human instincts and emotions; bound by the grip of ideological love; and bound within the cycle of the story itself.

As Bunjevac insists, “the reader becomes an integral part of the story, a true witness, and their absence makes the story incomplete” (“From Charles”). Zorka’s feeling of being “alone in the crowd” might prompt us to return to Kristeva, for whom the linked figures of the outsider, the foreigner, and the stranger also evoke Freud’s *unheimlich*, “the strange within the familiar.” Kristeva refers to the “uncanny strangeness” that subjects feel when they have to face the other within themselves (*Strangers* 185–87). In similar vein, Bunjevac invites us to consider this (animal) other that we reject and at the same time identify with. In this sense, perhaps Zorka’s story captivates us because, as Kristeva claims, “we are all foreigners,” we are all “strangers to ourselves” (*Strangers* 192).

Conclusion: Alternative to What?

In the last four frames of the text, while looking wistfully out of the window, Zorka telephones Mirka to ask her about the man she had previously wanted to set her up with. Readers might laugh at this roadrunner/Wile E Coyote moment in which Zorka appears to be subjecting herself to further torture. But the comedy is undercut as we recall the earlier suggestion that this man is a rapist. Although we probably knew it was coming, we sense that something—both literally and figuratively—has been sucked out of Zorka; and that this situation will continue as long as she is chasing her “domestic dream.” It is no accident that Zorka is looking

from inside to outside in this final sequence. As Gillian Whitlock suggests, in the territory of the pictorial “what is at stake are fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others. The questions that arise are urgent and political” (“Autographics” 965–6). In the process of illustrating Zorka’s thwarted attempts to reach Chip, and her aborted goals, Bunjevac has constructed a powerfully committed narrative that tangles with the idea of the “humanimal” on several levels, taking both the talking animal and the “alternative” comics tradition in directions that they had rarely been before. In the process, Bunjevac has bred a new kind of catwoman—Canadian, working-class, Yugoslav, anti-heroine, immigrant. Paradoxically, Zorka’s difference from us may also be in the degree of similarity we see in her. Certainly, for all the text’s attention to fantasy, “Bitter Tears” repeats “the one thing that can rarely be said of fantasy is that it has nothing to do with reality” (Hunt 2).

As I have shown in this chapter, “Bitter Tears” dramatizes a species discourse that both violates norms and supports their equally violent retrenchments. At stake are trauma and suffering, life and death—enormous issues that confront both animals *and* humans. Mediating all of this is the humanimal catwoman Zorka, whom Bunjevac uses to push the boundaries of her characters and, beyond them, to probe the limits of the human itself. At the same time, as “Bitter Tears” mines the politics of the various cultural codes that are attached to Other identities, it proffers a patchwork of contradictions to be found in the humanimal articulations of the in-between. Instead of exoticizing “alternatives,” Bunjevac gives us a multilayered text built on composite word-image ironies. Her cinematic style objectifies her characters even as it critiques their objectification through a uniquely orchestrated mix of tragicomedy, psychological fable, and social satire. The comedy involved

may temper, but is never allowed to depoliticize, the power relations; and by the end, the very ideas of “alternative,” “alternativeness,” and their related semblances of choice and freedom are transformed. For all the limitations of her medium, Bunjevac’s critical reach is expansive, both situated and plural. At the heart of *Heartless*, Bunjevac leaves us to contemplate our own alternatives to the question: just who or what is heartless here? While Zorka’s own heart is clearly coopted, she can still go where readers are willing to take her. Perhaps we might look through another window to another world where others like Zorka may enjoy greater equality, and be treated on more compassionate grounds.

Chapter Two

Mapping Becoming: Displacement, Non-Identity, and Loss in *Lost At Sea* (2002) and *Gray Horses* (2006)

Even the machines here speak another language. Ici, même les machines parlent une autre langue—Noémie (*Gray Horses* 14)

What a weird set of memories to have [. . .] completely inapplicable to the current situation [. . .] to anything that might happen except turning around and heading backwards through time—Raleigh (*Lost At Sea* 68)

Becoming animal, minoritarian, or world speaks to my feminist self, partly because my sex, historically speaking, never made it into full humanity, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted—Rosi Braidotti (“Animals” 531)

Introduction: Rerouting the Quest Narrative, the Coming-of-Age Story, and the Beast Fable

At early moments in Hope Larson’s *Gray Horses* and Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Lost At Sea*, both main characters—much like Nina Bunjevac’s quasi-catwoman Zorka in the previous chapter—are stigmatized by the sexist remarks aimed at them. Larson’s protagonist, Noémie, is cruelly taunted by a group of boys—“Hey, you’re beautiful! Do you have a boyfriend?” (9–10), while O’Malley’s protagonist, Raleigh, is first ostracized because of her gender—“all my friends are GUYS, okay?” says her travel mate Stephanie (14)—then branded again when she gets called “weird.” This word association—“she’s pretty weird”—takes readers into a crosscut sequence of Raleigh’s childhood memories that links to her current feelings of alienation (24–5). In both cases, readers witness inward reactions to these externally imposed actions. And in both cases, Larson and O’Malley indicate this through iconic blushes; also, for Noémie, a visibly trembling hand and eyes turned down in shame (10).

In contrast to the adult, not-so-funny-animal immigrant Zorka in Chapter One, the two tales I want to focus on in this chapter are about young women travellers. The tales' respective protagonists are confronted with the difficulties of belonging, not just in a "foreign land called America" (O'Malley 2)—"Amérique" for Noémie (Larson 1.13)—but also on a meta-textual level, in a dominant Anglo-American comics culture overrun by ideologically driven superheroes.³⁴ Unbeknownst to their protagonists, Larson and O'Malley exploit this cross-cultural collision, which is that much more poignant because it happens to two visitors on American soil. The chapter explores some of the different aspects of the protagonists' quests; it shows as well how Larson and O'Malley reroute the quest narrative, the coming-of-age story, and the beast fable, suggesting anxiety over literary categorization and generic labels, but also using these and the companion animals associated with them as tools to mirror the protagonists' negotiations of displacement, non-identity, and loss.

When compared with the blockbusting comics mainstream, which in the same month (February 2006) as the publication of *Gray Horses* saw Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men #13* top the comic sales chart in North America,³⁵ Larson's self-consciously "alternative" narrative may seem rather light (see also Introduction and Chapter One). Originally from Dijon, France, Noémie is an exchange student who, in her own words, is "setting foot" on America for the first time (1.1). She attends an art class, makes friends with a Mexican American girl Anna, encounters numerous incarnations of horse art, and becomes the pet subject of a mysterious photographer.

³⁴ By "ideological" I am specifically thinking of Superman's quest for "Truth, justice, and the American way" (qtd. in McLaughlin 103).

³⁵ See Comichron: The Comics Chronicles: February 2006 at www.comichron.com/monthlycomicsales/2006/2006-02.html.

At night, in a connected subplot, she dreams of—effectively becomes—a French-speaking horse, who aids a sick girl named Marcy. As Noémie navigates “Onion city” —a thin disguise for Chicago³⁶ and an equally obvious metaphor for textual multilayers—horses proliferate across the oneiric storyworld,³⁷ emerging in several guises, from Noémie’s wallpaper to replicas of cave paintings at school. When the photographer takes Noémie’s photo, a horse image appears uncannily on her face (4.10–13), while a similar abstract horse image materializes in an invisible-ink drawing that Anna makes for her. At the end of the text, Noémie finally meets the photographer through her own turn to photography; and as the story concludes, the suggestion is that they will have some kind of romance before she eventually returns home.

There is a delicate light-heartedness to Larson’s “teen”³⁸ text that has prompted one critic to call it “The Cartography of Joy” (Wolk 214). But “joy,” I would suggest, is not the right word for a frequently perplexing quest that suggests the many shortfalls of its protagonist’s mappings, which are only capable of tracing so much. Similarly, the romance element of the text is only on the surface, and is not destined to last. Making connections across lines of difference is key to the text; but so too, as I aim to show in my analysis, is the recognition that superficial designs belie inscrutable depths.

³⁶ According to Larson herself, “*Gray Horses* is pretty heavily based on living in Chicago and a little bit in Toronto.” See “The Hope Larson Interview.” For a discussion of the onion reference as it is tied to the name “Chicago,” see H. A. Allard’s “Chicago, a Name of Indian Origin, and the Native Wild Onion.” Larson’s “Onion City” is a likely nod to this alter/native history.

³⁷ For a discussion of this term in the context of graphic fiction, see Introduction.

³⁸ *Gray Horses* is designated as a “teen” text on the back cover. *Lost At Sea* is unlabelled, but contains much more adult language than Larson’s text. One of the back-matter blurbs reads: “If you’ve ever been eighteen, or confused, or both, maybe you should read this book.”

In *Lost At Sea*, O'Malley's eighteen-year-old Raleigh is also an outsider in the United States, ostensibly on a road trip from California back to her home in Vancouver, Canada. The trip has an oddball metaphysical dimension to it, for Raleigh is convinced she has no soul—or that a cat has it—also observing, equally strangely, that she looks “kind of inhuman [...] like a mutant in photographs” (57). However, Raleigh's “mutancy” is nothing like that found in—for example—*Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters & Marvels* (2002), which demonstrates all the bargain-basement sensationalism of the US comics mainstream.³⁹ Rather, it is driven—as is the plot itself—by the simple yet complicated fact that Raleigh thinks she is soulless. O'Malley tells Raleigh's story through two separate strands of narration, her first-person internal monologue and the dialogue between her and her travel companions Stephanie, Ian, and Dave. Raleigh's initial problem is in overcoming her natural introversion in order to share the fact that she thinks a cat has captured her soul. Readers also eventually learn that she has just met (and left) her American Internet boyfriend, Stillman, and has concealed this meeting by also visiting her estranged father (63). As Raleigh relates her confusing life story to an unnamed addressee, who appears to be a conflation of “you, him, Stillman” (50, 157), cats emerge unbidden from her dreams and multiply across the realistic storyworld. In the end, the four travellers (who readers learn have been brought together by mistake) become unlikely friends, joining forces to look for cats and confronting their own search for identity and belonging in the process—a quest that the text suggests might be endless.

³⁹ In this documentary/interview, produced around the same time O'Malley was working on *Lost At Sea*, Stan Lee discusses his vast body of mainstream comic work, specifically his co-creation of the *X-Men* team of mutant superheroes.

While O'Malley's cat motif riffs on the traditional funny animal—with a possible in-joke on the soullessness of comics—he also deploys his non-talking cats to speak in other ways. Cats and other manifestations of the nonhuman are highly significant throughout the text, but it is equally clear that O'Malley (like Larson) is interested in tracing a “humanimal” trajectory that asks important questions about what it means to be human (see also Introduction and Chapter One).

Both writers are interested as well in the intertextual context of comics, whereby “genre functions as conversation” (Coogan 205, 213). At first glance, *Gray Horses* and *Lost At Sea* proffer familiar stories of young adults, shy outsiders traversing new worlds, in order to examine tropes of adolescent anxiety. Common themes of love and fear of rejection loom large as the texts track the well-worn paths of coming-of-age narratives. Or do they? In what follows, I want to take a closer look at how the two texts employ different “humanimal” figures—horses and cats, specifically—to offer a challenge to the “ubiquitous”⁴⁰ boy-meets-world story that goes much further than simply replacing men with women at the helm of the quest.

Transcultural Identities, Contexts, Covers

“We are cultural hybrids,” writes the philosopher Wolfgang Iser:
“Today’s writers, for example, are no longer shaped by a single homeland, but by several reference-countries” (“On the Acquisition” 8).⁴¹ While this may not be true of *all* writers, Larson and O'Malley certainly appear to encourage us to read their respective texts in the context of their own “culturally hybrid” backgrounds. Such a

⁴⁰ See, for example, Teresa Hubel, “In Pursuit of Feminist Postfeminism.” Hubel argues that “individualist” and “masculine models” of “cross-culturally ubiquitous chosen-boy stor[ies]” still abound in the “western world,” for example, in the American film *The Matrix* and the English public-school adventures of Harry Potter,” but that this narrative has become invisible (18).

⁴¹ In the Canadian context, this recalls Coral Ann Howells’ arguments. See also Introduction and Chapter One.

framework is useful because neither text is just—or even primarily—about the US-Canadian border; rather, they are about multiple identities that are conceived as liminal and contradictory.

I initially chose to read the texts together because of their generic similarities. (I was unaware at the time that the two writers were married, though they have since divorced.) What is perhaps most notable about them, however, are the many places in both the United States and Canada they have lived (Ontario, Nova Scotia, and California, for example). Larson has also spoken of living in France for some time when she was young, and of how her early comics knowledge was shaped there (“The Hope Larson Interview”). Both authors have diverse backgrounds: O’Malley is of Korean and French Canadian descent, Larson of Swedish and German heritage. O’Malley was born in London, Ontario (Canada), and moved to Toronto in his mid-twenties, while Larson is a native of Asheville, North Carolina (United States). Like her protagonist, Larson studied at the School of Art Institute in Chicago. When *Gray Horses* was published in 2006, both O’Malley and Larson “live[d] with three cats in a little blue farmhouse near Halifax, Nova Scotia” (*Gray Horses* bio note, n.p.). At the time of writing, in 2016, both authors live in Los Angeles.

While O’Malley and Larson have been dubbed “Canadian cartoonists,” and while iconic Canadian elements emerge from their work, the two texts I will be looking at here both suggest dissatisfaction with upholding clear lines between traditionally conceived cultural nationalisms or even purely “human” forms of identification. Likewise, even a cursory look at the two writers’ respective manipulations of traditional coming-of-age narratives reveals the artificiality of distinctions between “natural” and “cultural” categorizations, while both texts—written in Canada but published in the US—have clear transnational dimensions as

well. But whereas a transnational reading would focus on moments when national boundaries are transcended, these texts—at least in terms of their content⁴²—seem to be less concerned with national boundaries *per se* than they are with broader transcultural assortments that, in their commingling, may alternately enhance and impede more conventional affiliations and lines of communication. The heterogeneous cultural mixings and ambiguities that are produced as a result are preoccupations of both texts.

To pick a prominent example, O'Malley's curiously named Raleigh is a multilingual character who, readers learn, speaks French as well as English. It is surely no coincidence that the name of O'Malley's protagonist is also the name of the capital of the state of North Carolina, the state where Larson is originally from, while a further, equally multifaceted association is with Sir Walter Raleigh (1554–1618), an Elizabethan-era “courtier, explorer, and author” (Nicholls and Williams n.p.) with professional ties to the history of colonization in North America and a “proto-metaphysical poet” as well (Burrow n.p.). Both of these aspects seem to apply to O'Malley's Raleigh. (“Lost At Sea” also suggests an explorer's tale, and perhaps O'Malley's title is a further allusion to Sir Walter Raleigh, who made several celebrated maritime excursions. In this case, however, O'Malley's Raleigh is *returning* from her journey, and O'Malley's travellers are literally land-bound.)

Gray Horses also draws attention to the cross-cultural aspects of its protagonist's journey, placing it in a larger historical context in which the standard coming-of-age narrative is both inscribed within and implicitly challenges a patriarchal order and heteronormative definitions of power. In this perspective, it is

⁴² A reading with respect to audience (i.e. the texts' local and global readerships) is beyond the scope of this chapter, and indeed of this thesis. The chapter focuses instead on close reading and analysis in relation to the thesis's key terms.

significant that both titles question the same binaries they foreground, i.e. Lost/Found, Sea/Land (*Lost At Sea*), and Black/White, Horse/Human (*Gray Horses*). O'Malley's title highlights the non-dominant sides of the binary, while Larson's points to the in-between character of the colour gray and attaches this to the figure of the horse—a figure with a long history of being masculinized in the American cultural imaginary (Birke and Brandt 189, 192). Lori Gruen and Kari Weil bring out the feminist inflections of the two texts and their titles as follows:

There is a conceptual link between the “logic of domination” that operates to reinforce sexism, racism, and heterosexism and the logic that supports the oppression of nonhuman animals and the more than human world more generally, a link that translates into individual and institutional practices that are harmful to women, people of color, nonnormative humans, as well as other animals and the planet. (479; see also Chapters One and Three)

Larson's Noémie is equally interesting. Seen from an English-language perspective, the name suggests “Not me,” suggesting resistance to clear identification. Like Raleigh, Noémie is bilingual in English and French—as is the horse in her dreams—while the text is openly, sometimes vertiginously, multilingual. Identities, like languages, accumulate, and the absence of a clear antagonist is made up for through the multiple tensions that arise in spaces between knowing and imagining, implicitly challenging the logic of domination and self-consciously flirting with a “world of dreams, where things are always becoming each other” (Wolk 214).

Protagonist-antagonist dualisms are also absent in *Lost At Sea*, as is the anchoring concept of a traditional hero. Instead, the text is arranged around

interwoven threads that braid together the protagonist’s existential concerns with those of cats and souls, with its central metaphor—soul searching—raising larger metaphysical questions that resonate in the anxious recesses of Raleigh’s mind. And even as O’Malley foregrounds Raleigh’s internal memories and thoughts, these are interspersed with the inexpert reflections of her travel companions, creating a space of cod-philosophical dialogue that matches the characters’ age and experience without necessarily compromising the seriousness of the text.

Neither rendered in full colour nor in pure black and white, the texts’ panoramic splash page covers further suggest an existential in-between state as well as conveying a strong sense of the oneiric and/or nocturnal. “Covers,” according to Coogan, “are conventions of effect;” they “are intended to produce an emotional effect upon the reader and to shape the tone or feel of the story” (213).

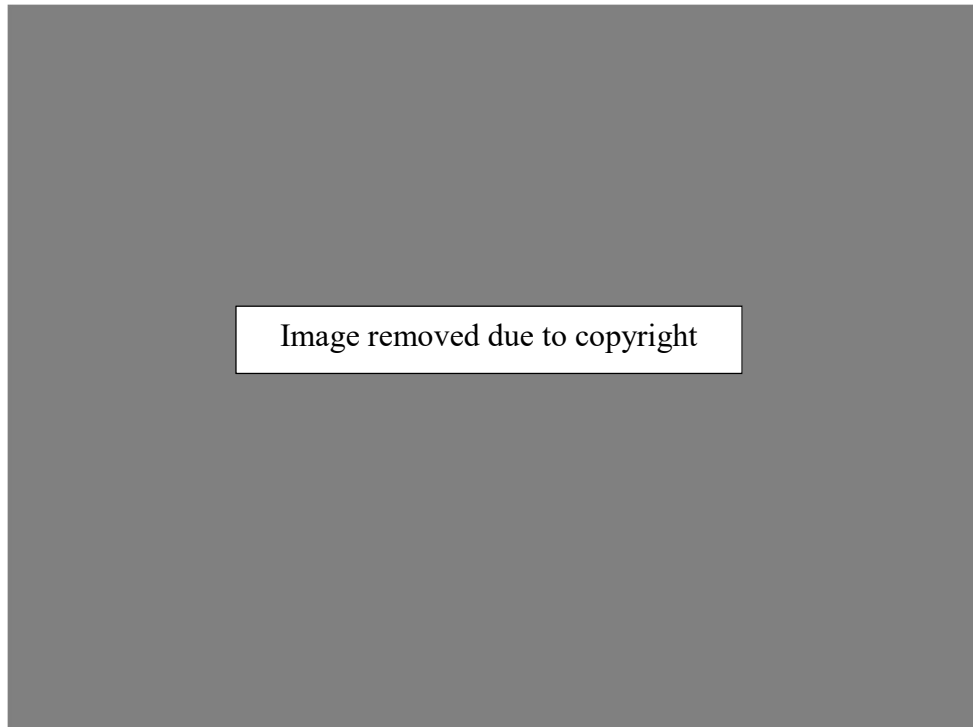


Figure 9. *Lost At Sea* Covers, Back-to-Front

Lost At Sea features an all-white outline drawing of Raleigh on its front cover. Placed deliberately off-centre, and set against a rolling landscape divided between land and sky, she peers off into the distance, in the opposite direction to what

appears to be a church (back cover, far left). It seems significant that while mindscapes of this kind figure heavily in this text, no literal quest “at sea” ever materializes. As such, the title is clearly metaphorical, not only setting a tone of confused introspection, but also helping to create a sense of anti-representational “humanimal” fluidity in the text. There is a cognitive dissonance at work here, an ephemeral quality about the main character that almost creates the impression that she is an empty shell. Such a technique in cartooning, as McCloud has pointed out, enables the reader to think more of the character as a “concept” or “iconic form” that allows readers to instill meaning and “become it” (36–7). While I find it hard to accept this “becoming” wholesale, a similar idea exists within the theory of transculturalism, which has been seen as inspiring a sense of “recognizing oneself in the *other*” (Cuccioletta 9, original emphasis).

However, if O’Malley presents Raleigh as something of a blank slate, he also suggests a contradictory reading that foregrounds the non-neutrality of whiteness. Whether or not readers choose to see Raleigh’s colour on the cover page, it becomes even more transparent later on, as when Ian asks Raleigh, “Blondes really actually do have more fun, right?” Raleigh—who readers understand has blonde hair but never actually “see” her depicted as a blonde—responds, “Um... some of them?” (54). The issue of judging people according to type comes up again when Dave petulantly declares, “Redheads are trolls” (54). Here, O’Malley suggests a euphemistic way to confront the tricky issues of racial bias—displacing whiteness from its unmarked status—without ever confronting the issue directly in language, or perhaps better, in *verbal* language (see Chapter Four).

Gray Horses, on the other hand, immediately foregrounds the issue via the word “gray,” an ambiguous—also alternatively spelt—shade that, apart from also referring to an animal (usually a horse), draws attention to the two primary colours it

displaces: black and white.⁴³ Perhaps unexpectedly, however, the cover of *Gray Horses* features a purple, fairy-tale-like horse stretching across the page, set against a starry firmament.

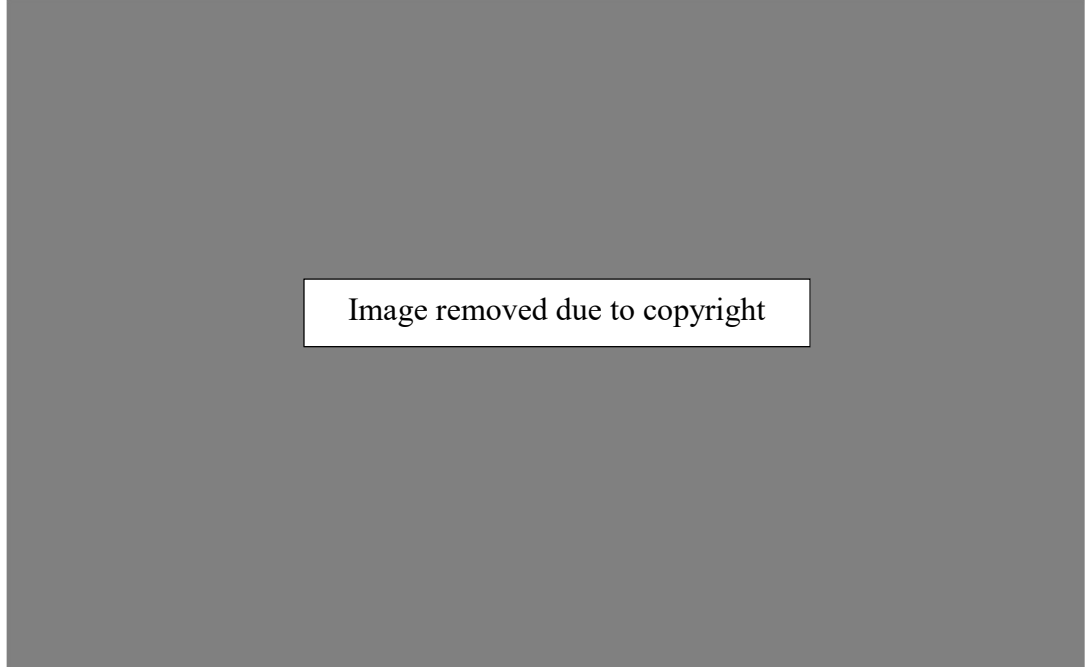


Figure 10. *Gray Horses* Covers, Back-to-Front

At first sight, the horse is reminiscent of Pegasus (in the Greek tradition), though against the celestial background, we could also link it to Tianma (in the Chinese tradition). The Chinese intertext returns later in *Gray Horses* when the famous “Han Dynasty Flying Horse” (2nd century AD) appears as a figure on Noémie’s art exam (4.14). Also on the cover, and replicated throughout the text, are the juxtaposed spaces of the city (in Noémie’s waking world) and open landscape (in her dream world). While these spaces, like the horses that appear in them, are indistinct, they certainly do not belong to the standard American mythologies of, for example, the Western. Nor are the horses traditional talking animals—anthropomorphic versions of humans—though the text *does* remind us of the inextricable “entanglement of horses with human history” (Birke and Brandt 190). They also inspire “the kind of

⁴³ See OED at grey/gray A. *adj.* 1.c., 2, 3.d.

play with image making to realize dreams otherwise deferred, for instance, by heteronormative prejudice” (McHugh *Animal* 95). In what follows, I want to show how O’Malley and Larson play with these self-conscious kinds of non-normative image making, also drawing on multiple intertexts and other cultural references to demonstrate how “[t]ranscultural narration not only emerges from and combines different cultural traditions [but] also highlights and struggles with its own transcultural content” (Helff 87).

Visualizing Displacement, Non-Identity, and Loss in Lost At Sea

O’Malley’s work offers a unique blend of manga-like figures with open (comics-like) panels, although manga icons such as “overlarge eyes” are conspicuously absent from the text (Berninger “Scott Pilgrim” 250; for more on manga see Chapter Four). Like O’Malley’s better known *Scott Pilgrim* series, *Lost At Sea* shares some of the manga elements that distinguish his work from both “mainstream North American comics production” and “the graphic novel category” (Berninger 243). As Mark Berninger says of *Scott Pilgrim*—and this is clearly true of *Lost At Sea* as well—“[It] is both transnational and transcultural in the sense that it brings together not only different comics traditions and national backgrounds but also various aspects of youth culture” (244). One pertinent example in *Lost At Sea* is when Ian yells, “For Aiur!!” (138), which refers to a “call to mission” in the famous video game *Starcraft*, first released in 1998. (*Starcraft*, as is well known, is particularly popular in South Korea.) Other examples of this international youth-culture repertoire include Harry Potter (31) and soundtracks to Sloan (42–3) and Elvis Presley (10). In each case, the reference is given some kind of twist, often around gender and/or class differences. In fact, throughout *Lost At Sea* O’Malley uses his chosen medium to negotiate floating signifiers of identity and otherness,

deliberately overloading and correlating references that advertise cross-cultural mixing while undermining cultural purity at the same time.

The styling of Raleigh is significant here. Raleigh is perhaps not overtly conscious of herself as a comics character, but there are numerous instances in the text where we sense her awareness of O'Malley's shaping of her as a hermeneutic device. For example, immediately after making a halting comment that her travel mates find subsequently hilarious—"Sometimes it's good to give your money to someone other than the man"—she looks in the mirror and comments on the way she looks—"kind of inhuman," she says. "What is it," she then asks, "that makes me not fit in, and is it in the world, or in my head?" (56–57). A closer inspection of O'Malley's characters reveals their ironic "humanimal" dimensions. In some cases, these are linked with the world of comics, e.g. *X-Men*'s "power inducing" mutations, but on a deeper level they draw attention to the complexities of identity and identity construction in the text. They also point to the disruptive power of the nonhuman and its closely related animal abject figure (see Chapter One).



Figure 11. Raleigh Soul and Cat Searching (122–3)

In the sequence above, which occurs towards the end of the book, Raleigh is searching for the cat with her soul. In the first panel, the “world turned upside-down” reference recalls Gustave Verbeek (1867–1937), a Japanese-born Dutch-American cartoonist, who notoriously used “unique visual tricks to continue the story when the paper is turned 180-degrees” (Heater n.p.). There are further undertones to the well-known citation in the Bible: “And when they [the Jews] could not find them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have *turned the world upside down* have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the degrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (*English Standard Version*, Acts 17:6–8, added emphasis). Here as elsewhere, O’Malley’s “world upside-down” creates connections that resonate in different contexts. These connections link up in turn to Raleigh’s overarching questions of human origin and cross-species family resemblance; as she later asks the cat, “Are you my sister?”

In fact, O’Malley’s rendering of these two characters—who mirror each other in all of the panels but the first—points to an ethics of multispecies relation (Fig 11). Raleigh and the cat look distinctly similar in their non-mimetic formations: both have eyes and mouths that are merely composed by simple lines. Raleigh’s vegetarianism (28) adds to this ethic, while O’Malley also refuses to anthropomorphize the cat by making it speak. In another sort of comic, we would fully expect this cat to respond to Raleigh’s questions. Here however, not only does Raleigh recognize a numinous “cat knowledge” that stretches well beyond the realm of the human, but we also get the sense that, “[a]s the inhabitant of undeniably real worlds, alien to us and not fully comprehensible, the animal’s gaze into the human realm may seem profoundly to shake it, refusing it the illusion of totality” (Clark 191). In similar vein, Raleigh’s inquiries are highly reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s

when, in alluding to the so-called “mirror stage,” he pointedly asks, “How can an animal look you in the face?” (377). “Who am I therefore? Who is it that I am (following)? Whom should this be asked of if not of the other? And perhaps of the cat itself?” (374).

In addition to what Raleigh perceives as her “nonnormative” humanness, *Lost At Sea* invites further connections to Canadian national identity, which is sometimes seen as having been built on the patriarchal, colonial, and racial violence of a white settler state. As Yaniya Lee reminds us: “The history textbooks in grade school classrooms across the country [in Canada] tell stories that conceal colonialism’s processes of self-invention, a history marked by white supremacy’s erasure and rewriting” (n.p.; see also Chapters One, Three, and Four). This history comes up when we learn that Raleigh is on this particular road trip back to Canada because she and Ian once did a high school project together on the prominent Métis leader Louis Riel (1844–85). While the project itself is not elaborated on, we learn that during the presentation Ian “did all the talking” (12). The project provides another reference to cultural hybridity and Canada’s—North America’s—non-Western cultural history, but also puts Raleigh’s voicelessness in a larger historical context that invites the reader to reflect on the connections between the text’s crosscutting colonial themes.

Questions of inclusion and exclusion are brought up again when Raleigh ruminates over what she calls the “horrible border” between Canada and the US (128). Readers deduce that this border is both literal and metaphorical: for example, it is the one between Raleigh and her boyfriend, Stillman, but also the one between her father, who now lives in California, and her mother in British Columbia, their “true patriot home sweet faraway home” (12). As in much of the dialogue in the text, there is a sardonic bite to this. For example, in referring to her father as an

“emotional hobo,” Raleigh claims that this “has something to do with [his] hitching metaphorical trains” (63). Readers become quickly aware in the text that O’Malley’s allegories are interlaced, purposefully framed, and intersectional. For instance, Raleigh’s “true patriot home” comment suggestively appears in the top panel that heads the page on which the Métis project appears (12). The collocation “true patriot” becomes a further hinge, inviting readings of repressed⁴⁴ versions of North American history and continuing political oppression, not least around the Canadian national anthem.⁴⁵ For example, the line—“*True patriot* love in all thy sons command”—implies “that patriotism is something felt exclusively by men,” and that women are thus effectively excluded from full Canadian citizenship.⁴⁶ O’Malley’s use of the line can hardly be accidental when we consider the relevance of Raleigh’s boyfriend’s name, which she repeats” “Stillman, Stillman, Stillman” (128).

The name also registers on other levels. It would not be too far-fetched to read it as a phallogocentric signifier, that is, a sign of the male dominance found in typical traditions of Western philosophy, culture, and literature (Chapter One), but it might also be seen in relation to the apparently unchanging monocultural myth of “America” itself. Finally, it can be read on the level of a Canadian nationalism that also functions in terms of inclusionary/exclusionary citizenship.⁴⁷ These inclusions and exclusions also apply to Raleigh’s sense of self, which is bound up in complex

⁴⁴ Both *Lost At Sea* and *Gray Horses* clearly open up to psychoanalytic readings. While I touch on these here, a deeper engagement is beyond the scope of my work.

⁴⁵ “O Canada” was originally called “Chant national” and written in French. See Gilles Potvin and Helmut Kallmann.

⁴⁶ At the time of this writing, Liberal MP Mauril Belanger is trying for a second time to change “in all thy sons command” to “in all of us command.” The bill was previously defeated in a close vote by a majority Conservative government (April 2015). Now, in 2016, with a Liberal government in the majority, Joan Bryden writes that “Belanger should have little trouble finally ensuring that women feel equally included in the national anthem” (n.p.).

⁴⁷ See also, for example, Verna St. Denis, “Silencing Aboriginal Curricular Content and Perspectives Through Multiculturalism: ‘There Are Other Children Here.’”

relationships between what she perceives as the borderlands of logic and the premise of moral superiority and humanity granted to the soul.

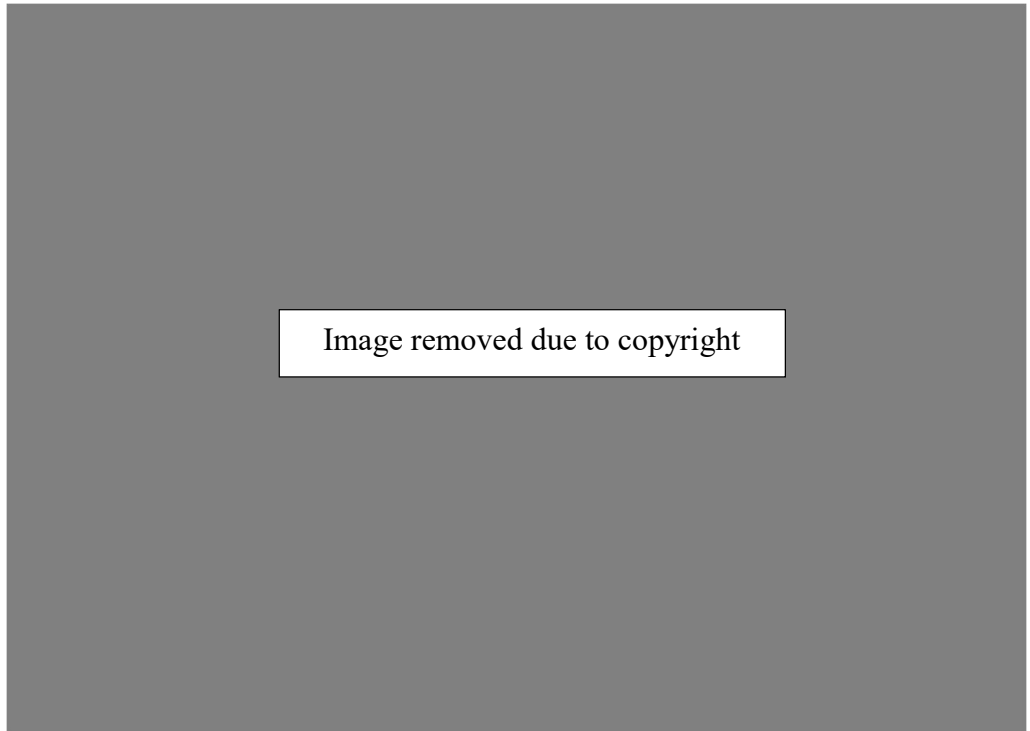


Figure 12. Raleigh Soul Searching (6–7)

In the early sequence above, Raleigh begins, “I think I have no soul. Logically I think it. I have been thinking it for a long time but now I’m really thinking it. Definitely no soul” (6). This “no soul” motif taps into the text’s etiological (origin) and teleological (linear) narratives. For example, we might read the motif in theological relation to the traditional quest, both in general terms of searching for enlightenment and with more specific regard to those Christianizing missions of Western imperialism that have been seen by some postcolonial critics as

perpetrating the colonization of the soul.⁴⁸ The motif also possibly alludes to the 1932 Paramount film *The Island of Lost Souls*, based on H. G. Wells's novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in which a ruthless doctor, influenced by Darwinian ideas, attempts to create human beings from animals; this also brings up Christianity's strict maintenance of the species boundary (Creed 68).⁴⁹

In Raleigh's case, the idea of the soul, along with her soul/cat searching mission, variously calls up the notion of essences, mind-body dualisms, myths of transcendence, and the fixity of ontological "being" as opposed to "becoming" (Butler "Variations" 141). Although it is not possible for me to flesh out all of these ideas in the limited space of this chapter, I want to keep some of the channels open, especially as they relate to the so-called "pre-Oedipal stage" (Tong 230–1; see also Chapter One; see also Kristeva). At several points of the text, O'Malley's treatment of Raleigh's "lost soul" is juxtaposed with the literal image of her "pre-Oedipal" state (Fig 12). The "pre-Oedipal stage" links up in turn with *dreams*, used throughout the text to suggest alternative ways of knowing and imagining that do not always rely on logic and rationality; and with *cats*, which as T.S. Eliot famously observed have an inscrutability about them embodied in their seemingly uncanny

⁴⁸ See Sangeeta Ray on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and "the legacy of soul making" (45). In the Canadian historical context, we can relate this to "residential schools" that, as written in the recent "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada" (2015), "were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society, led by Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. The schools were in existence for well over 100 years" (v). Raleigh is not identified as indigenous in O'Malley's text, but because the text draws on various historical erasures and links these to identity politics, it is important to note connections between literary and historical "soul-making" projects. See also Chapter Four.

⁴⁹ As Barbara Creed points out, "The film was banned in many countries as well as in parts of the United States" (68). We could also read a link between Philip Pullman's anticlerical *His Dark Materials*.

ability to conceal their own true name. In Maria Nikolajeva’s helpful gloss, Eliot “captures the very essence of human perception of the feline: its enigmatic nature. As known from myth and folklore, possession of a name gives power over its bearer, and the cat’s ability to conceal its true name is indeed prominent in many narratives. Cats have always fascinated storytellers, verse makers, painters, and great writers” (248). O’Malley’s approach to this is typically indirect, but a few clues can be gleaned from the following figure.

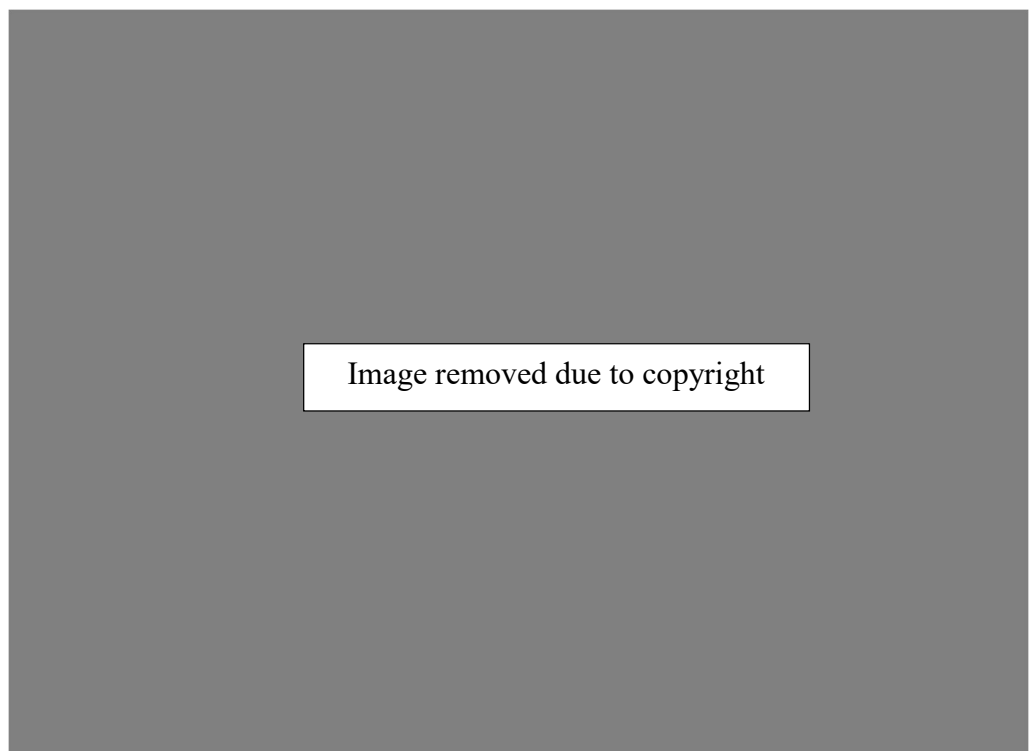


Figure 13. Raleigh Dreams and Cats (22–3)

Raleigh haltingly tries to offer an explanation for the above montage scene: “I had this dream [. . .] it felt huge. Ominous and unsettling and familiar. The details were as follows: There were cats? NO Definitely the word ‘No’ Vague uneasiness? When I woke up in someone else’s faraway bed ten thousand years ago, this morning, it was so clear” (22–3). According to psychoanalyst Regina Abt, dreams about cats are linked to issues of low self-esteem; such dreams may serve to remind individuals that “they themselves are also independent personalities” (169). O’Malley’s text

certainly suggests that Raleigh's soullessness and sense of social isolation have to do with intersecting, perhaps repressed psychological and sociocultural elements—both “in the world” and “in [her] head” (57). Pushing this further, we might say that the text pinpoints a connection between some of the different concerns that Rosi Braidotti identifies in the following passage:

Freud's and Darwin's insights about the structures of subjectivity opened up a profound nonhumanness at the heart of the subject. Unconscious memories demarcate time lines that stretch across generations and store the traces of events that may not have happened to any individual and yet endure in the generic imaginary of the community. [. . .] From the angle of critical theory, psychoanalysis propels the unconscious into a critique of rationality and logocentrism. Evolutionary theory, on the other hand, pushes the line of inquiry outside the frame of anthropocentrism and into the fast-moving sciences and technologies of life. (“Animals” 528)

In this context, Raleigh's dream connection to “ten thousand years ago” not only suggests the nonhuman, possibly even *prehuman* conditions of our existence, but also releases the kinds of species-specific “skeletons in the closet” that the historian Yuval Noah Harari describes:

Homo sapiens has kept hidden [a . . .] disturbing secret. Not only do we possess an abundance of uncivilized cousins, once upon a time we had quite a few brothers and sisters as well. We are used to thinking about ourselves as the only humans, because for the last 10,000 years,

our species has indeed been the only human species around. Yet the real meaning of the word human is ‘an animal belonging to the genus *Homo*,’ and there used to be many other species of this genus besides *Homo sapiens*. (5–6)

It seems pertinent in the scene above (Fig 13) that the background to the dream (including the suggestively ten thousand-year-old cat) is distorted and non-representational. Asking readers to contemplate time and human-animal relationships in this way not only upsets the Cartesian idea of human beings as the starting point for language and thinking; it also radically challenges the idea that “[t]he Animal is forever positioned on the other side of an unbridgeable gap, a gap that reassures the Human of his excellence” (Haraway *When* 77). Likewise advanced here is the text’s underlying critique of Christianity; for as Eileen Crist argues, “Indeed, it was the Judeo-Christian world view that evacuated immanent significance from the natural world, thereby desacralizing it and making it a place to be dominated and used, virtually unrestrainedly, by human beings” (“Against” 11).

From page 100 to the end of the text (on page 160), the backgrounds fade to black. This corresponds to an increasing confusion in Raleigh’s thoughts: “Something weird is happening and I can’t sleep. This is too familiar. This is too much.” “Meow” “No” “I’m living the dream. Usually when they say that, it’s a good thing, right? Maybe this thing that’s been comforting me is a nightmare. How messed up am I when my only consolation is a nightmare?” (101). Her soul searching now begins to enter a new, free-floating phase:

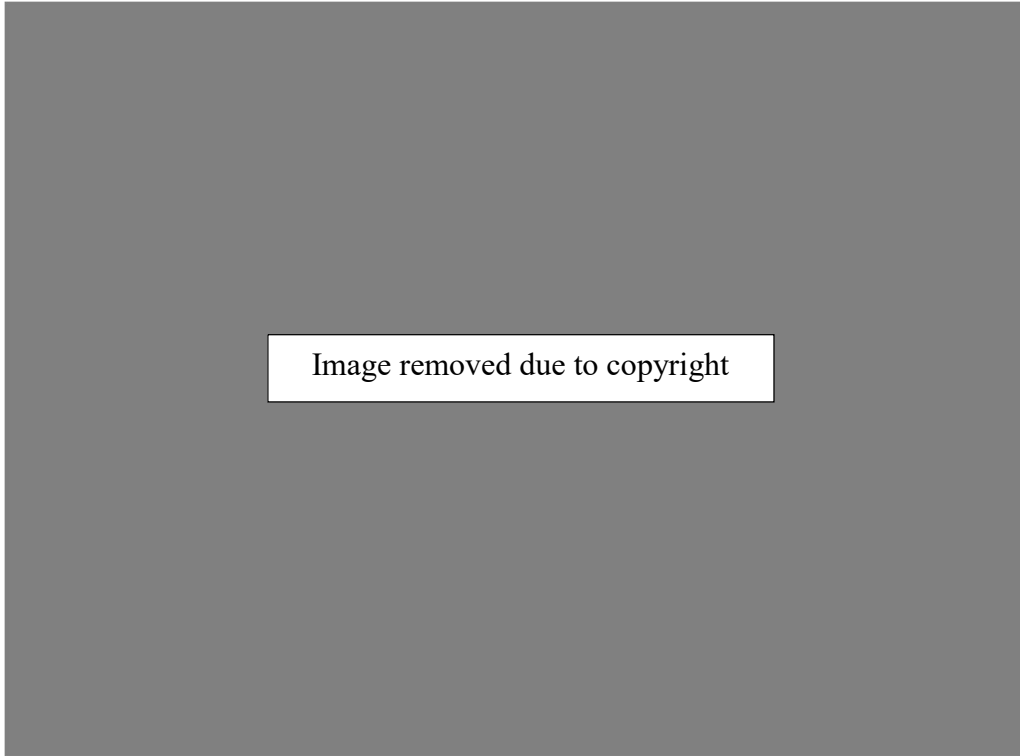


Figure 14. Raleigh Shift in Thinking (120–1)

In the two facing pages above, a switch seems to occur from introspection to a kind of free-form poetic thinking. The second page registers an obsession with shifts in time while remaining in the present; and it is gnominically suggested there that the “technologies of life’s becoming” allow for the recognition of something beyond the dichotomies of life and death.

Derrida famously claimed that thinking starts from the naked gaze of his cat: “something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me” (380). O’Malley’s cats likewise look out at us from the page, inviting us to challenge the normative Western view that “inside each and every one of us is an immovable core, or soul,” and to consider instead “a more fluid and relational view of existence” (“Humanities” n.p.). According to Patrick D. Murphy, “The recognition of the dialogic construction of the social being and the Buddhist recognition of interbeing directly challenge [the] notion of [the] “absolute”” (75). While it is not clear if O’Malley himself is Buddhist (and I have

been unable to find out), *Lost at Sea* seems to question the importance of a worldview that accommodates the individual at the expense of everyone/everything else.

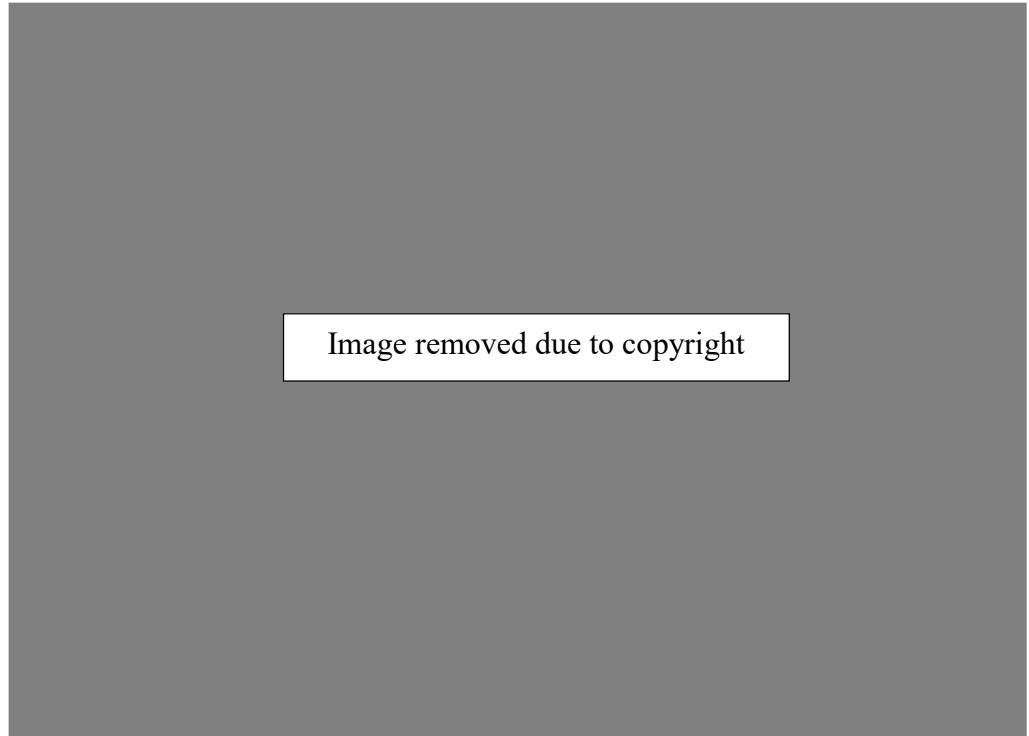


Figure 15. Raleigh Fluid Self (160–1)

It is perhaps fitting in this regard that the last seven pages of the text are page-bleeds. The effect of “unframing” suggests its own sort of enlightenment, which is based on a fluid (multispecies) view of the self in relation to the world. While the second page drawing above is not O’Malley’s, it plays on a non-evolutionary timeline. Somehow it seems only right that, here at the end, the sphinx-like depiction of Raleigh as riddle-maker stretches across lines of East and West. Raleigh’s words unhinge her own life from a set timeframe, and she is finally “set free in limbo.” No conclusion is offered; but nor again is there a sense of loss.

Multimodal Puzzles and Free-Floating Symbolism in Gray Horses

Gray Horses begins in a quintessentially liminal place—an airport. It starts semi-wordlessly, hyper-visually, with a decelerated, moment-by-moment

sequencing. Beginning *in medias res*, the text quickly trains the reader's gaze through its point-of-view framing, eliciting an embodied relationship to the environment and suggesting both "micro" and "macro" aspects of place and frame of mind.

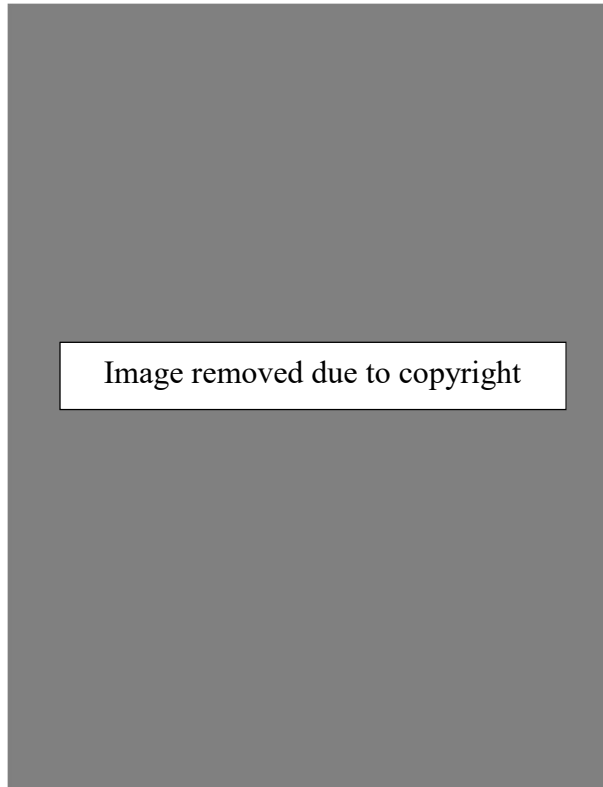


Figure 16. Noémie Arrival (1.1)

The establishing sequence works both literally and metaphorically to create an unsettling impression of displacement. For example, the signs ostensibly read "Welcome Onion City" and "Information," but both are half hidden from view. From the beginning, readers become complicit in the text, sharing in its sense of disorientation. Larson makes it impossible not to look for patterns. In the first three panels, we already notice an "animetaphor" (Lippit).⁵⁰ The "fish-out-of-water" reference mirrors a multilingual text in which the linguistic dominance of English is quite literally sidelined. Readers with different competencies in French and English

⁵⁰ "Animetaphor" is a term coined by Akira Mizuta Lippit. It refers to different conceptions of "the speechless semiotic of the animal look" (*Electric* 197).

will no doubt react to the scene in different ways, but while translation provides bridges to communication, communication is partial at the same time.

This feeling of play between the senses and lines of communication, apparent from the very start, continues to escalate throughout *Gray Horses*. Noémie is placed between the text's main two languages and between what she sees and what readers see; this then extends to what she feels in the bottom panels. Readers might question if her neck-scarf is a stereotypical index of "Frenchness," but overall the impression given is of uncertainty: note the momentum lines under the pillars (centre panel), illustrating a palpitation not normally visible to the naked eye.

Gray Horses is a text that systematically exploits all three forms of Randy Duncan's "image functions" (see Introduction), but in pointing readers towards these figurative interactions, it also suggests a plurality of different ways of interpreting what we might find. To which category, for example, do the momentum lines belong? Presumably they are part of the storyworld, but they also belong to a physical reality that cannot normally be seen. Of course, Noémie might *feel* this movement: it might be part of her "non-sensory diegetic," in Duncan's terms. Alternatively, we could argue that the lines are an example of a non-linguistic space; as Welsch contends, and Larson seems out to prove, "Through language *alone* we would never meet with the world" (Welsch "On the Acquisition" 28, original emphasis).

Gray Horses also demonstrates influences of the "Ligne Claire"⁵¹ style associated with the Belgian School of comics, notably Hergé's now controversial

⁵¹ According to Andrei Molotiu, the "Ligne Claire" rendering style is "defined by the use of homogenous (uninflected) line weights for the outlines of all figures and objects depicted; other characteristics usually include the clarity and easy readability of the panel compositions, and a relatively homogenous degree of cartooning in the figures" (n.p.).

Tintin.⁵² This likely comes from Larson's background in art and her familiarity with French comics. Yet in counterpoint to *Tintin's* adventures, Noémie's story is not in colour, nor is it an attempt at a representational portrait. On the contrary, *Gray Horses* is as much a text about Noémie as about the events that occur—both consciously and unconsciously perceived—around her. As Wolk remarks, "Besides black and white, every page of the book uses a flat peach tone whose wobbly spread defines the borders of the panels Larson never outlines: the suggestion is that each drawing is a personal field of view, not a window into an objective reality" (218).

Such questions over multimodal language-image functions and their limits also prompt readings that extend from Noémie's thought processes. The first of these reads, "J'ai mis le pied sur un nouveau continent. I've set foot on an undiscovered continent" (Fig 16, 1.1). While, in Duncan's system, we might place Noémie's words into the category of "non-sensory diegetic images," it is Larson's deliberate placement of these words *and* their dynamic connotations that push them into the hermeneutic category as well. Does a native speaker of one language immediately think in two languages directly after landing in a new linguistic environment? Who is the invisible (i.e. hermeneutic) narrator at work in this story? These questions persist throughout the text, which maintains the in-between spaces of transcultural identity mediation. This layer of translation suggests an intention to engage with a transgressive form of visual-verbal narration—one that operates, first, outside of the Anglo-American context; and, second, beyond or against hegemonic versions of the quest narrative.

Larson's choice of words invites analysis in the context of the American frontier motif. Directly associated with the quest narrative, as Fiona Tolan writes,

⁵² See, for example, Leonard Rifas, "Ideology: The Construction of Race and History in *Tintin in the Congo*."

this motif can be “read as an aggressive and colonizing compulsion” (40). Indeed, one type of quest narrative is the chronicle by which the “uninhabited” continent of North America was colonized (see Chapter Four). At the beginning of *Gray Horses*, Larson suggests this history, albeit ironically, with the protagonist’s out-of-view “feet on an undiscovered continent” suggesting a literal disarticulation of the conventional frontier hero myth.

The text’s interest in subverting narratives of cultural “placement” can also be seen on the front and back matter pages. On the first few pages of the paratext we find state and city maps, while road and country maps can be found on the last few. These maps, which are on different grids and scales, enclose the cloud-like panels of the main narrative—floating panels that are noticeably shorn of classical outlining frames. According to McCloud, “overlooked as comics’ most important icon,” “the panel border is our guide through time and space.” “Borderless panels,” he argues, can suggest a “timeless quality” as well as an “unresolved nature” (102). These early motifs outline the text’s intermingling themes of pre-linguistic, nonhuman, and more-than-human⁵³ modes of communication: they indicate some of the ways in which Larson crafts her storyworld setting in both “set” and “unsettled” territory at the same time. In abstract terms, we might argue that her work seeks to visualize “‘the play of semiotic and symbolic’—the continual vacillation between disorder and order” (Tong 231); in more concrete ones, that her visual techniques draw on different ways of mapping geographical space.

To put this differently, *Gray Horses* performs the radical dismantling of defined perceptions and representations of space, and it does so in a semiconscious

⁵³ “More-than-human” is a now ubiquitous term in the field of human-animal studies. Broadly, it refers to modes of thinking outside of ourselves. Helen Tiffin attributes it to Val Plumwood in “Bats in the Gardens.”

manner. For instance, whenever Noémie thinks or speaks in French, the English translation accompanies the thought bubble or panel in such a manner as to suggest both a relationship and a disconnection.

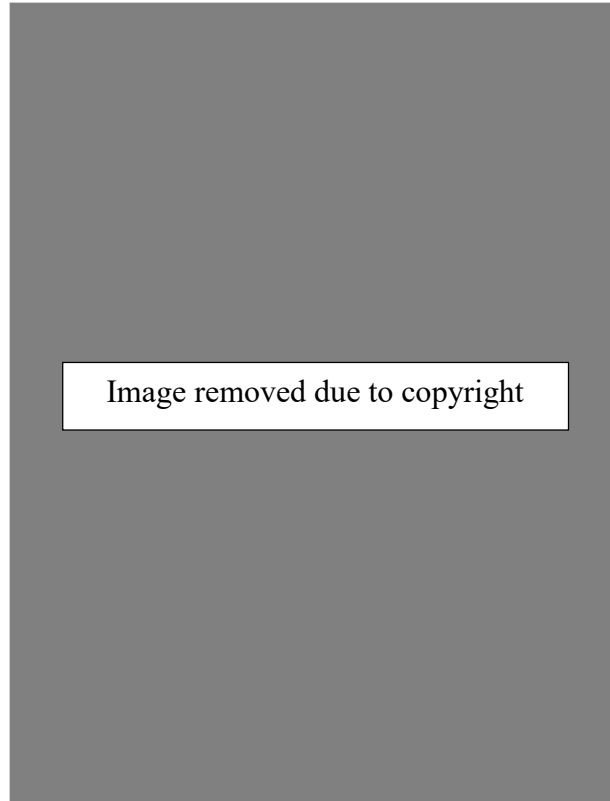


Figure 17. In-between Visual and Verbal (1.14)

In the early scene above, several of Larson’s favourite visual and verbal techniques come to the fore. First, we can see how she foregrounds Noémie’s first language whenever she is thinking or speaking to herself. The English text is separated, asymmetrical, not drawn in equivalent fashion to the French. The two languages never appear in parallel or as coeval constructions. Meanwhile, there is a further asymmetrical relationship between English and French—the English is never translated into French as the French is into English.⁵⁴ This might suggest a reification of English as the hegemonic North American language, but at the same

⁵⁴ There is one exception, when Noémie swears in French, exclaiming “Merde!” Unsurprisingly this is not translated into English (4.1).

time this dominance is undermined because Larson often requires the reader to search for the translation.

Second, the text features a series of allusive interplays between the sensory aspects of the familiar and the unfamiliar. As illustrated above, Noémie identifies the ice-cream truck, but it both “speak[s] another language” and appears as a photograph, as another layer of interpretation in her imagination. Similarly, the familiar sound the truck makes is visualized in the onomatopoeic “ding ding,” but also appears drawn as an iconic music note in the photograph. Third, sound, sight, language, icon (and, later, smell) all interact in a synaesthetic commingling that suggests often subtle shades of similarity and difference, yoking imagination and cognition. The abstract horse-like pattern on the wallpaper in the centre panel is worth noting here (Fig 17). This is the text’s first depiction of what will become an important recurring character. Indexical lines of demarcation provide a guide, but also suggest potential disruptions, with Larson’s spiralling tails, especially, suggesting a space—a route taken—between what is said and what is heard or meant.

In different ways, then, readers are forced to negotiate Larson’s multimedia communication technologies, with the text treading a fine line between paralinguistic hermeneutics, cross-cultural encodings, and transcultural combinations, all of which often operate at the same time. These technologies are sometimes exploited to comic effect: for example, as soon as Anna learns Noémie is from France, she immediately thinks Noémie means “Paris” (2.5.). In the panels immediately following, the text pictures a map marking Paris and Dijon (where Noémie is from) next to Anna with a question mark inside her head. Anna, herself “born in Mexico,” claims Noémie is “lucky to be from someplace cool” (2.5–6). Later on, when Noémie suggests she wants to meet the mysterious photographer

“with dark hair and earrings” (3.11), Anna is concerned for her: “Is he, like, a creepy stalker, or is he cute?” (3.12). Noémie’s first response is to blush—her cheeks turn red—then the repeated sound, “ding ding,” overlaps with the image of the first boy who crudely cat-called to her when she first arrived (3.12). Through these and other examples, Larson suggests the entwined ideas, memories, and preconceptions that accompany different modes of synaesthetic perception. When Anna insinuates that “photo kid[s]” “have issues,” Noémie counters that he’s probably just “shy” (4.11). In this manner, Larson’s text points—often humorously—to the dialectical encoding and decoding processes that take place between potentially misunderstood or marginalized identities, processes that often revolve around cultural stereotypes on both sides. Cultural stereotypes emerge again when Noémie and Anna are getting to know each other. The juxtaposition of the two pages below is interesting for both its cultural and species convergences.

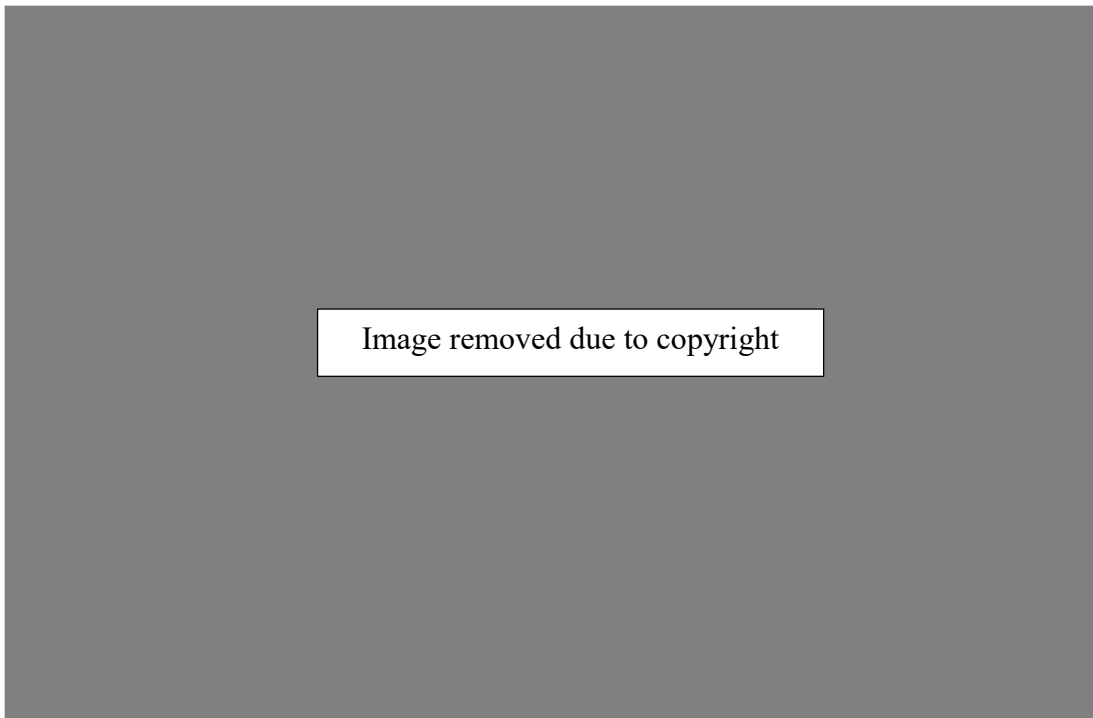


Figure 18. Icons and Labels (2.6–7)

Here, the iconic images of “Western” (Euro-American) wedding and birthday cakes and Anna’s foregrounded “bread crocodile” are juxtaposed with the typically

“Mexican” icons on the previous page. Anna thinks of emblematic Mexican things: a cactus, a vihuela, and a Mexican “Day of the Dead” (“Día de Muertos”) skull. Even though her parents will “freak out,” she says she is “saving up to go back” to Mexico (2.6). There is also a clear allusion here to the French cultural stereotype of the *patisserie*, while we might also notice the (untranslated) Spanish signboard for Anna’s family bakery: “Panadería Cortés.” Although Larson identifies the “bread crocodile,” she does not label any of the other icons in the same way. The text’s energetic interplay of images, cultural symbols, and ethnic labels addresses issues of meaning making, suggesting transformative decodings that are integral to the construction of both Anna and Noémie’s transcultural identities. Interestingly, neither of the two performs her identity in accordance with the cultural symbols that surround them; it is almost as if the text both underwrites yet strives to undermine the cultural codes it represents. Moreover, the text’s labels—such as the “bread crocodile”—highlight the fact that pictures often require just as much translation as words or gestures from another culture.

In another transcultural episode just a few pages later, Anna eats “disappointing” Pad Thai (3.1). Here as before, Larson brings up the issue of consumption as a metaphor, inviting readers to consider how “culture” and “authenticity” can themselves become objects of consumption, sometimes in unproductive and contradictory ways. Following on from this, Larson’s text suggests heterogeneous forms of cross-cultural connection that intersect on different levels. The identities at stake—evidently not fully “American” in Anna’s case—are multiple, creative, and ambivalent. (Significantly, Anna, like Noémie, is an artist, who not only bakes bread in the shapes of snakes, turtles, and crocodiles but also creates invisible ink portraits of abstract horses that connect back to her friend.) Are the two friends because they are both outsiders? Their shared jokes after watching a

Zombie movie—“Didn’t the movie remind you of the kids from our class?” (4.17)—also suggest that divergences from the norm are positive attributes. These divergences are registered in the text’s disruptive use of free-floating symbolism. Photography is a rich source of this, so it is no surprise to see a photographer—another introverted artist, perceived as “different”—repeatedly appear in the text. Immediately after the sequence in which Anna and Noémie examine the photographs he has taken of Noémie, Anna makes the connection that unites all three of them: their artistic interests and, more specifically, the recurring image of the horse.

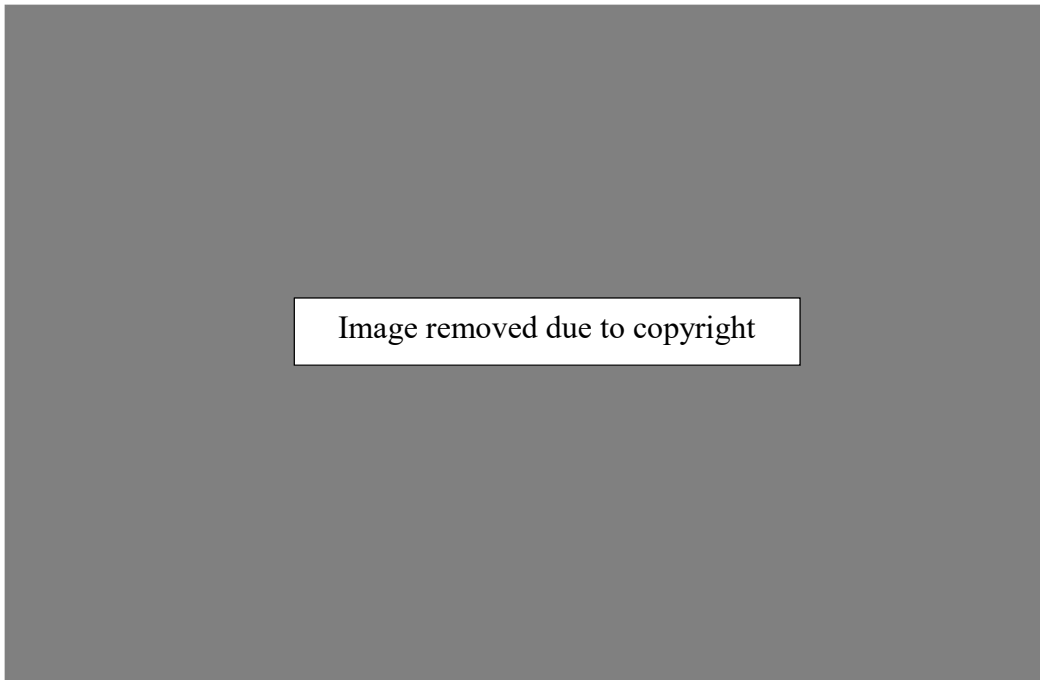


Figure 19. Different Horses (4.13–4)

The first splash-page above depicts Anna’s invisible-ink drawing and the photographer’s photo, both of which depict the abstract horse. The scene-to-scene transition to the second page is conjoined by what seems to be a slide-click or a blink—signifying a representation of a phenomenon that we do not normally see or consider within representative contexts. Nonverbal and invisible language is as much a part of Larson’s text as English and French. However, as with *Lost At Sea*,

Gray Horses suggests a prominent suspicion with *all* forms of language—a suspicion that extends to the visual realm. In the scene above, we can also read an attempt to undermine the anthropomorphic stereotype in comics. As McCloud puts it, from images of electric sockets to the front screens of cars, “we [humans] see ourselves in everything” (32–3; see also Garrard 155). Larson displaces the notion of finding the human in the nonhuman by figuring the horse in the image of the human, thereby turning one of literature’s most famous anthropomorphic transformations on its head (see also Introduction). But perhaps, instead of an inversion, we could read it as a multifaceted relationship. Certainly, the recurring horse image in *Gray Horses* is multiple in both its manifestations and its effects, pressing on the limits of the conscious and the unconscious, and linking historical engagements with horse narratives to the question of the origin of life itself.

Becoming with Dreams and Horses

Horses proliferate in the text across a large number of cross-cultural contexts, most recognizably in the Chinese examples above and in the text’s representations of the cave paintings at Pech-Merle and Lascaux, France (2.1–2). Here as elsewhere in the text, Larson points to the fact that both image and (verbal) language making practices are highly social and contextual. At the same time, readers notice that the labels—“China Han Dynasty ‘Flying Horse’” and “China Yuan Dynasty Vase”—offset an otherwise silent scene above (Fig 19). In each case, we recognize the value of the label. Without such forms of identification, these artifacts would lose their historical worth, becoming mere images, or supplying just another mundane pattern like the horses on Noémie’s wallpaper. In knowingly playing between semiotic and symbolic realms, Larson inspires a metaphysical interest in space and time that itself becomes a wordless, diaphanous character. The

text's recurring images and themes—horses and photographs among them—enjoin the reader to piece together and rework these floating pictorials. Even though she fills in *some* gaps for her readers, e.g. with translations, motion lines, and labels, Larson is more concerned to evoke interpretatively “open” (semiconscious yet sensory) contact zones that allow readers to develop different frames of reference and points of view.

One of the most important intertexts, cave art, points to “[a]n image-making tradition that was enacted over 20,000 years ago” (Conkey 281). According to Abt, “In Europe and Asia 3 million years ago, wild horses already existed in many different forms. One of the first places of horse worship in Europe, for example, was found in Chauvet in France and is about 32,000 years old” (209). Such a tradition, suggests anthropologist Margaret W. Conkey, “is a cultural impulse to be reckoned with if we are to better understand and engage with how the visual has long provided clues to our humanity and histories” (281). These transcultural reminders of the distant past raise larger ontological questions: “In what ways have we conspired to require that these images serve to mobilize various (sometimes conflicting) historical narratives about ‘us’ and the human experience?” (274) “What status do these images have as evidence over time and space?” (Conkey 275).

As O’Malley does with cats, Larson’s use of *Equus ferus (caballus)* draws on these questions of deep time, using the figure of the horse to link individual psychodynamics (Noémie) to a co-evolutionary lineage (see also the discussion of O’Malley above). Like *Lost at Sea*, *Gray Horses* uses psychoanalysis and the unconscious to suggest a critique of rationality and logocentrism, “a way of scrambling the old metaphysical master code and loosening its power over the constitution of subjectivity” (Braidotti 527). And, also like O’Malley’s, Larson’s text investigates evolutionary theory, pushing “the line of inquiry outside the frame

of anthropocentrism and into the fast-moving sciences and technologies of life” (Braidotti 528). Much of *Gray Horses*, in particular, is characterized by the excavation and (sometimes improbable) re-imagining of these only partly known dimensions. In another scene, for instance, Larson indicates an unlikely overlap between archaeological discovery and cultural cuisine, suggesting the inevitably fragmentary nature of such developments.

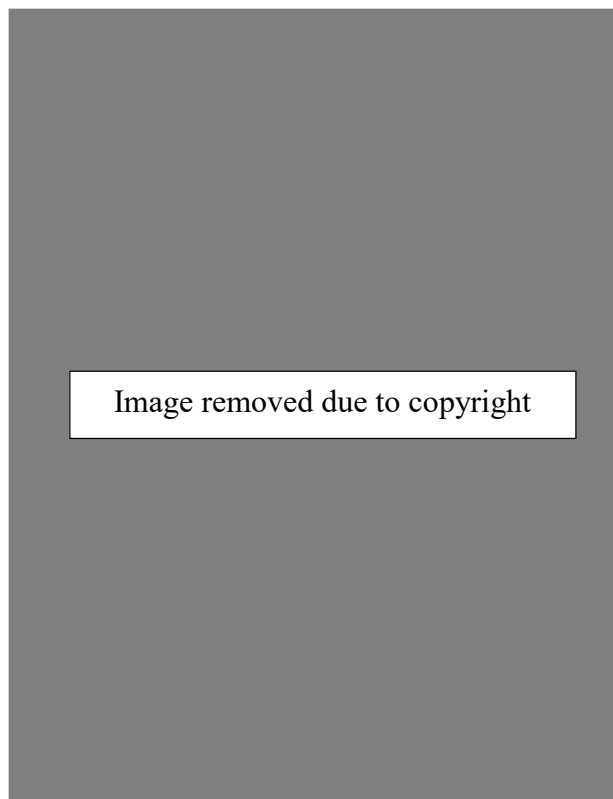


Figure 20. Moving Parts (3.2)

Suitably equipped with a headlamp, but one that curiously reveals words instead of images, Anna says, “I always wish I was the one who found those cave paintings and artifacts, ‘cause I’m pretty sure all that stuff’s been dug up by now” (3.2).

“That’s why I like cities,” responds Noémie, “There are always new secrets to find” (3.2). There is an unmistakable tension here between the two points of view—also rendered in the colour of the words—and we begin to understand that *Gray Horse*’s main character enjoys the benefits of what we might loosely call an “open mind.” In the preceding scene, the discovery of both parts and wholes moves vertiginously

between different dimensions, as suggested by the synecdoche of Anna's severed right (perhaps rational) hand placed above this dialogue (Fig 20). Readers are actively encouraged here to see differences between the two girls' imaginations, with horse hoofs suggestively dangling at the top of Noémie's panel, possibly reminding of how "gender is enacted within human/animal relationships, specifically between people and horses," with the hegemonic horse narrative being predominantly "male" (Birke and Brandt 189). As Birke and Brandt write,

In the iconography of the mythic Old West, cowboys were "masters" of animals and the land. [. . .] [L]ike the story of the West's uncharted territory, natural horsemanship is presented as "new" undiscovered ideas (while the practices of American Indians, the Mexican Vaqueros, and women are eerily absent). In her book *Cowgirls*, author Teresa Jordan (1982) questions why ranching women and their stories seem to disappear: "While the cowboy is our favorite American hero." (192)

It is significant that, in all of her representations of horses across the text, Larson conspicuously leaves the "American hero" cowboy version out. She also presents us with a remarkably *transcultural* version of this iconic figure that allows her to dissect both overlaps and divergences and overlaps in cultural forms.

Such symbolic connections are also an integral part of the intimacy that Larson creates in the text's internal storyworld. *Dreams* are the primary vehicle in the text for the exploration of this world: for example, in the scene above (Fig 17), Noémie's bedsheet is in the process of turning into grass, and this narrative cue takes readers into the next sequence, where we are inside Noémie's dream. Moving

through a transformative process of becoming, the sequence begins with a frame-by-frame representation of the horse eating grass and continues onto the next page, which is the first episode of Noémie's recurring dream.

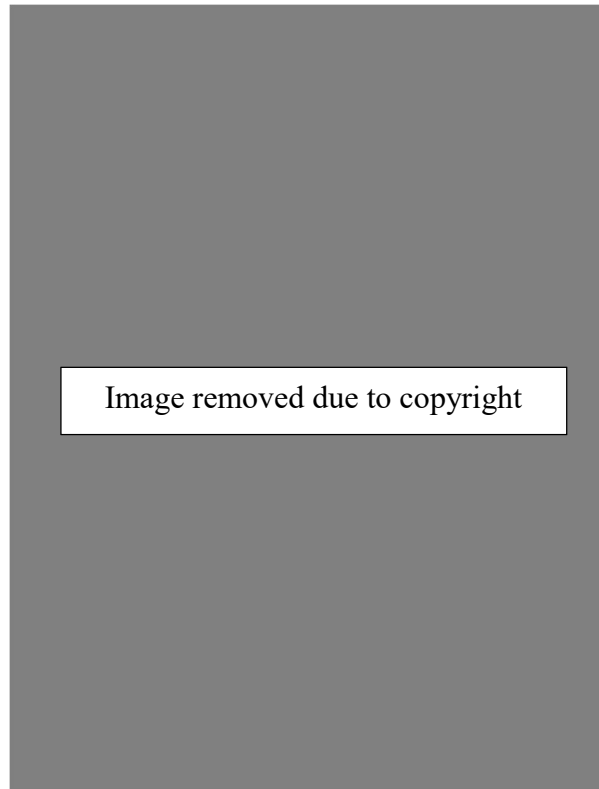


Figure 21. Dream Horse (1.18)

The dream sequence sub-plot is interwoven throughout *Gray Horses*. In the dream, the horse supports a sick girl, Marcy, in a quest to protect a photograph of her siblings. This picture is slated to be burnt along with all of Marcy's belongings. During these dream sequences, the horse speaks French to Marcy and Marcy speaks English to "Horse" (Fig 21). Significantly, they speak in different languages but clearly comprehend each other. Because of this identification, readers are given to understand that it is Noémie who "becomes" the horse.

According to standard psychoanalytic accounts, "The horse in dreams often represents creative energy. If this energy is not freed or channeled, it becomes regressive and nightmarish and either sits on one's chest or becomes like a ghost-horse that carries one away. This motif is widespread in legends" (Abt 216). As

psychoanalyst Regina Abt explains, the horse in dreams expresses a “dynamic libido aspect that aims at individuation. As a source of life energy, the symbol of the horse is also closely connected to the mother, the body, and sexuality” (226). As Birke and Brandt further point out, “On a cultural level, women’s relationships with horses are often submerged within the language of ‘misplacement,’ centered on unfulfilled human desires, such as a desire for a man, or for a child” (190). While these general psychoanalytic readings hold to a certain extent in the text, Larson pushes them into expansively interpretative dimensions where the (individual) psychological and the (collective) socio-cultural intersect. That the horse speaks French freely in the *semiotic* dream realm is another indication that Noémie is repressing this part of herself in the *symbolic* realm, where she must communicate in the English language.

We can also read such exchanges in terms of the destabilization of traditional comics anthropomorphism. The horse in the dream is neither an anthropomorphic human nor a funny-animal rendition of a human (see Introduction and Chapter One). In terms of the familiar notion of dreams as subconscious “wish fulfillments,” this dual breaking of the language and species barrier makes sense. This is complicated, however, because these are not the only boundaries being broken. For example, the photograph of Marcy’s siblings in the dream eventually appears “for real” behind a peeling piece of wallpaper—the horse wallpaper—in Noémie’s room; while later, in what we might loosely interpret as a symbolic “letting go,” Noémie tucks a photograph of her boyfriend inside the same wallpaper fold. The photograph exchange mysteriously joins the multiply existing ontological worlds, as Brian McHale might put it (358). Similarly, the text highlights shared fields of vision and communication across apparently unbridgeable boundaries. As the framing shifts in the last panel of the page above (Fig 21) from depicting Marcy and Horse’s profiles to point-of-view framing, readers are invited to see as, or at least *with* these

characters. There but not fully there, doubly so within this subconscious dream, these fields of view are shared yet also constantly changing and consciously subjective. Moreover, as the gaze shifts—moving in the last panel towards the environment—readers understand this as another form of interlanguage. Much as in *Lost At Sea*, *Gray Horses* gives multiple renderings of the same scene, suggesting layers of linguistic mediation and transformation. The oscillating colour patterns also ask readers to look for and make their own patterns. In the first panel above, for instance, Horse and Marcy are rendered in opposite colours. Then they become shadows together, facing each other in the centre panel. In the outside panels they are rendered against opposite backgrounds. But then Larson places them in the same background, facing the same direction. This reciprocal convergence contrasts with the idea that the horse “trained to perform in ways that [merely] reflect the nature of the hero” (Walker 193).

It should be clear by now that while *Gray Horses* is primarily interested in exploring Noémie’s adventures, these specific adventures also shed light on horse-human relations at large. Here the horse, while arguably still cast in a symbolic role, is not the stereotypical animal that reinforces the standard images and tropes of masculinity. Nor, while there are various possible allusions to *Gulliver’s Travels* in the text, is Larson’s horse an archetype of pure reason. Still, as in Swift, the horse certainly *is* cause for readers to question stereotypes of human rationality and supposedly “natural” or essential forms of being. What is also clear is that *Gray Horses* opens up to a mysterious nocturnal world that plays on Gothic conventions while also recognizing forms of agency in the nonverbal and the nonhuman. Consider the following scene:

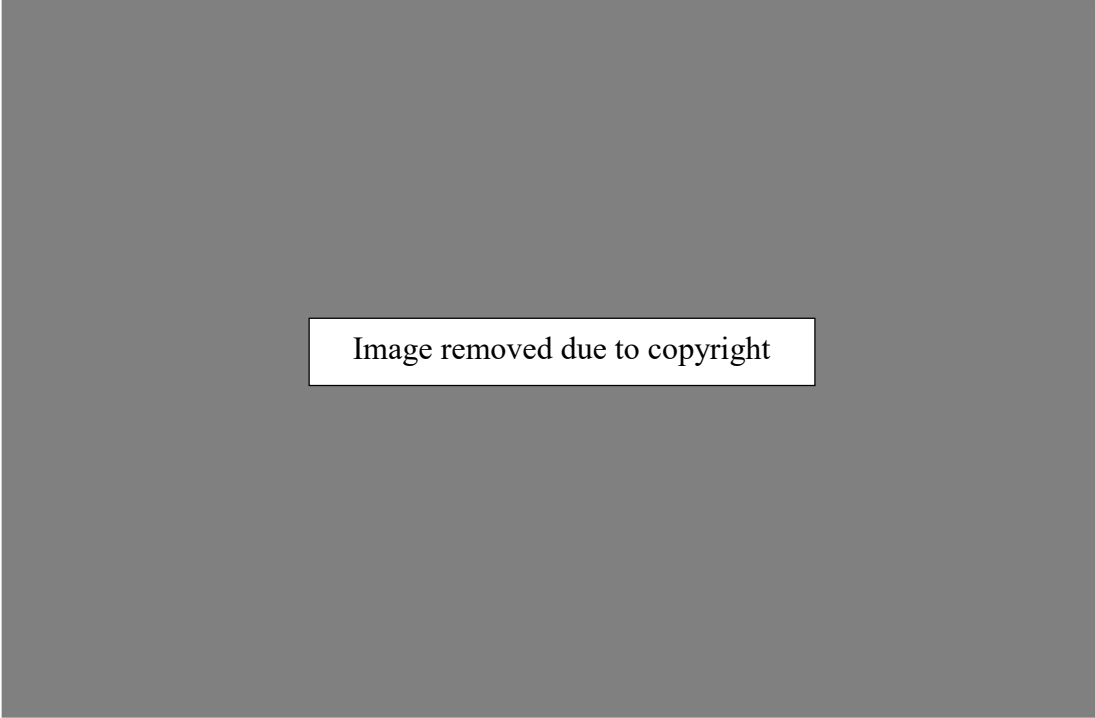


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Figure 22. On the Other Side (4.17–8)

Consequently, the worlds *Gray Horses* depicts are often worlds *on the other side*: the other side of reason, the other side of consciousness. As Noémie says at one point, looking out across the lake at night, “Je sais que c’est seulement le Michigan de l’autre côté...I know it’s only Michigan on the other side [...] “...mais cette nuit, le lac va à l’infini...but tonight the lake goes on forever” (5.8–9). In such scenes, *Gray Horses*, like *Lost At Sea*, suggests a potent force that exists within the nocturnal. And the night sky opens out in turn onto the infinite: Larson’s unframed images, which continually morph into one another, thus support a process of becoming that has planetary dimensions, encouraging readers to contemplate those unknowable (“gray”?) areas that surround the beginnings and ends of life itself.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this chapter, *Lost At Sea* and *Gray Horses* substantially rework the interrelated narrative conventions of the quest, the coming-of-age story, and the beast fable. In so doing, they often accentuate the unconscious and

unknowable, with both O'Malley and Larson clearly distinguishing their texts from the more mundane "origin stories" we find in the mainstream comics world. To some extent, they achieve this through their theoretically informed approach to the inadequacies of language. The abundance of words in O'Malley's text may contrast with Larson's wordless floating panels in *Gray Horses*. But while these strategies are dissimilar, they both call readers' attention to forms of perception and knowledge that go beyond rational understanding. In the process, both authors continually shift boundaries of culture and consciousness, implicitly challenging "essentialist modes of identity construction" in their constitutively unreliable transcultural texts (Helff 82–3).

As Mary Wollstonecraft famously observed in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), women have historically been attributed only a surface and superficial knowledge. *Lost at Sea* and *Gray Horses* both effectively reverse this. They also invite readers to consider a world in flux that involves a potentially infinite number of things and beings, all of which are themselves subject to change. In such a world, horses (in Larson's text) and cats (in O'Malley's) "are not functional parts in teleological taxonomies, nor are they [merely] metaphors: they partake rather in an ethology of forces and of speeding metamorphoses. They express literal forms of immanence and becoming" (Braidotti 530). This suggests, in turn, that "[w]e are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology linking meanings and bodies. [. . .] The topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so, therefore is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original" (Haraway "Persistence" 680–1).

Self-knowledge in both *Lost at Sea* and *Gray Horses* seems to work in the same way, filtering through unconventional coming-of-age narratives which imply

that maturity comes by embracing complexity on collective, cross-species levels, and through growing appreciation of shifting modes of communication, connection, and relation in a more-than-human world. Both texts visually characterize “humanimal” relations in ways that challenge homogeneous myths of Western individualism. But significantly neither of the two protagonists returns home, and their respective quests are unresolved, perhaps irresolvable. Thus, while both texts have seemingly happy endings, they also refute the idea of the coming-of-age narrative as a closed system. In Raleigh’s words, “the life story [. . .] is just the stuff that happens to everyone” (7); while in Noémie’s, “I know it’s only Michigan on the other side” (5.8). Still, new kinds of understanding are arguably found in both texts that accord at least in part with contemporary theories of “becoming-animal” as “a way of living differently, identifying differently with others or at least beginning to invent new ways, or re-imagining old ways, of being in relationship with others” (Marran 40; Deleuze and Guattari; Baker). “Maybe it’s important to open up to people—people who are right there with you, not some thousand miles away in another universe,” says Raleigh in *Lost at Sea* (154), while it also seems telling that in the last sequence of *Gray Horses* Noémie justifies her new interest in photography by saying, “Je veux me souvenir de tout ce qu’il y a ici.” “I want to remember everything here” (6.2).

However, while *Lost At Sea* and *Gray Horses* both provide numerous “real-world” connections for the reader, they are also deeply interested in the numinous—what lies beyond our rational comprehension and control. Thus, while both texts point to different entanglements of becoming, it is left to individual readers to pick out which of these makes most sense to them. Readers of both texts are set on a quest of their own, in search of patterns that are continually shifting and unstable. In

the end, both texts ask us to engage with the puzzles they set out for us without ever suggesting that these puzzles are, or can be, solved.

Chapter Three

Ecofeminist Quests: Graphic Cross-pollinations and Shapeshifting Fables in *Wax Cross* (2012) and *Jinchalo* (2012)

It is nearly standard wisdom that fables are not actually about animals, that the allegorical purposes of these figured beings, their comic and simplistic characters, that they are made to speak, make them entirely imaginary creations, solely in service of human culture—Onno Oerlemans (297)

[E]ven the tiniest life form [must be] recognized as having intrinsic worth, integrity, and autonomy—Vandana Shiva (qtd. in Seager 953)

To counter the death-like grip of anthropocentric hegemony is a process that seems to need to be continually revisited, renewed, and re-imagined—Leesa Fawcett (270–1)

Introduction: Ecofeminist Quests

Produced in the decade following *Gray Horses* and *Lost At Sea* (see previous chapter), Matthew Forsythe's *Jinchalo* (2012) and Tin Can Forest's *Wax Cross* (2012) similarly combine elements of the beast fable and the quest narrative. But these latter two texts are less concerned than the former two with their respective protagonists' processes of coming of age than they are with picturing their relationships with their wider environments, and with critically assessing the agency of the environments themselves. In the last chapter, I read Noémie and Raleigh (also Nina Bunjevac's Zorka in Chapter One) as heroines under the strong influence of the nonhuman domain. In *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross*, we see something different happening: for these two texts, while still revolving around the quests of their respective heroines, open out to encompass the collective ecological, social, and imaginative dimensions of the narratives in which these heroines are first shaped, then eventually transformed. One text sets up a playfully minimalist atmosphere

(*Jinchalo*), the other an eerily saturated one (*Wax Cross*), while both are typical of transcultural graphic fiction in deploying different kinds of hybrid forms. As will be seen, Forsythe's methods draw heavily on Korean folklore, while Tin Can Forest's tap into its Slavic counterpart. At the same time, both texts draw on the disruptive potential of shapeshifting, for example in their restless manoeuvring between episodes, languages, and species. Not only do both texts abjure cohesive readings of the "human culture" Onno Oerlemans mentions above, but they also adhere to transcultural traditions of ecofeminism that suggest the importance of making connections by inspiring a readerly sense of curiosity and an ethics of more-than-human care.

"If nature is to matter," Stacy Alaimo writes, "we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality" (*Bodily 2*). "By attending to the material interconnections between the human and more-than-human world, it may be possible to conjure an ethics lurking in an idiomatic definition of *matter* (or *the matter*)" (2, original emphasis). In support, Alaimo cites the definition of matter from the OED: "The condition of or state of things regarding a person or thing, esp. as a subject of concern or wonder." "Concern and wonder," she adds, "converge when the context for ethics becomes not merely social but material—the emergent, ultimately unmappable landscapes of interacting biological, climatic, economic, and political forces" (2). Even as they suggest spaces of the "unmappable," and in the process challenge anthropomorphic and cultural reductionism, what *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* do map are the kinds of convergences of "concern and wonder" that foreground multispecies relationships, preventing nature from being seen as "mere background" to the text (Alaimo *ibid*).

As readers are told in the frontispiece to *Jinchalo*, Forsythe’s “wordless comics—partly inspired by Korean comics and folktales—are at once simple and intricately detailed, and his storytelling is compelling for all ages.” The Korean aspects of *Jinchalo* take on deeper connotations when one considers Forsythe’s past career as an English teacher in Seoul. Born in Toronto, Forsythe grew up in London and has lived and worked in a number of other cities: Dublin, Seoul, Los Angeles, and most recently Montreal (Forsythe “About” n.p.). He aspired to become an ornithologist at one point, and birds are central to the storyworld in *Jinchalo*. The “all ages” designation of this particular text is important in the context of Western cultural norms which, as Leesa Fawcett points out, increasingly encourage children’s separation from animals as they grow up and encourage a “shrink[ing] amount of animalness in their lives” (262).

Already crossing boundaries between children’s and adult fiction, we see similar overlaps in Forsythe’s idiosyncratic characterization of his two main characters, a little girl and a magpie. The front matter inscription is the only place readers learn these characters’ names: Voguchi is dubbed as the “hungry heroine” and Jinchalo⁵⁵ as the “mischievous shapeshifter.” Following the prologue sequence, in which an anthropomorphically rendered bird magically protects a large supernatural egg, the main storyline loosely follows Voguchi’s journey to a market and her subsequent adventures there after Jinchalo—a magpie—hatches from the egg. Voguchi’s initial quest begins after she has gobbled up everything in her house, consequently upsetting a humble, grandfatherly-like character. In the process of procuring new staples—including a similar looking egg—Voguchi bumps into the human-like bird. Her newly purchased egg and the paranormal egg are duly

⁵⁵ In order to distinguish between “Jinchalo” the character and *Jinchalo* the text, non-italics and italics will be used respectively.

swapped. When Jinchalo soon hatches from this special egg, not only does Jinchalo begin to shapeshift, but so too does Voguchi along with just about everything else in the text: scenery, reality, dreams. A closer look at Voguchi reveals that Forsythe has endowed her character with a bird-like or “humanimal” crown of hair. When Voguchi transmutes into a magpie figure (possibly Jinchalo) at the end, this magical metamorphosis is as predictable as it is surprising. In what follows, I will examine *Jinchalo*’s intertexts, looking specifically at how cross-cultural and species similarities and differences emerge through “disobedient” visual and verbal interfaces, and connect this to the text’s self-proclaimed “wordlessness.” I will argue that an ecofeminist ethic of care unites the text’s main themes, ultimately disengaging “our hungry heroine” from her own allegorical coming-of-age story to suggest liberation from the narrative traditions of anthropomorphism and misogynistic heroism.

Likewise, *Wax Cross* boasts a variety of shapeshifting and cross-pollinating graphic techniques. Tin Can Forest’s frequently arcane approach to the relationship between verbal language and visual narrative is a main theme in *Wax Cross*, and is likely influenced by a tradition of Russian visual poetry.⁵⁶ Working collaboratively under the name Tin Can Forest, Pat Shewchuk and Marek Colek are Canadian artists currently based in Toronto and with Ukrainian and Czech backgrounds, respectively. They describe their graphic work as being inspired by the forests of Canada, by Slavic art, and by occult folklore (“About” n.p.). Folklore, as they put it, “returns the power, mystery, and divinity to animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. We

⁵⁶ See, for example, Tatiana Nazarenko’s article “Re-Thinking the Value of the Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Sign” (2003), in which she discusses the ambiguity of “lexical components” and “ornamental structures” of “lettristic compositions” in Russian Visual Poetry (407). There is a clear link here with the textual and ornamental use of language and artistic motifs in *Wax Cross*.

feel that a folkloric perspective has profound, even revolutionary implications in the context of contemporary ecological discourse” (*Wax Cross* Review” n.p.): a perspective that is readily apparent in *Wax Cross*.

Wax Cross is arranged around a loose plot that follows the “young prophet, Láska Sedmíkráska” (Prologue).⁵⁷ In the preface, readers are told that Láska “has fallen ill” from indeterminate causes, but which we surmise are related to the threats presented in the text’s prefatory incantation, including “toxins,” “terror,” “radiation,” and “pesticide” (see Fig 34 below). The prologue offers readers another few guidelines that link what it melodramatically calls “The Curse”—“carried on four winds, by ocean currents, by ghost ship, in the bellies of sea bass, in algae blooms and storm clouds that rain down on coastal shores, it reaches through skin to the heart and makes it’s [sic] home in the blood”—to the main narrative quest:

“Elsewhere, most likely a dream, our heroine embarks on a journey back through time to see what can be done. [. . .] Accompanied by wolf, aloft by bat, flanked by goose, hawk, and cat, Láska descends into the valley of death” (Prologue). These early passages reveal overriding environmental and social concerns as well as a prominent language of “living with”: of ecological mutuality and cross-connection (Daston and Mitman; see also Introduction). The poetic contours of *Wax Cross*’s language also track Láska’s journey through such related if often opposed realms as body and mind, dream world and real world, animal and human, nature and culture.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, “nature” has often been used as a powerful tool in maintaining hierarchical structures built on the essentialization of groups of people, animals included. As Joni Seager wryly points out, “ecofeminist

⁵⁷ The all-caps typesets of the original texts have been changed to be consistent with this chapter. Because *Wax Cross* is not paginated, references will be to the chapter numbers. The same goes for *Jinchalo*.

discourses about women's 'special kinship' with animals [. . .] raises specters of essentialism again" (955). Indeed, certain varieties (and there are many) of feminism and ecofeminism may inadvertently reinscribe what their philosophies aim to challenge. In her examination of North American ecofeminism, Greta Gaard writes,

Numerous foundational articles in ecofeminism throughout the 1980s repeat the ecofeminist perspective that social injustices and environmental injustices are linked and are therefore most productively examined together. We do not exist apart from our environments. As a movement to end all forms of domination, ecofeminism is a logical development of feminism, linking 'naturism' to the various forms of human domination. ("Ecofeminism" 46 n.8)

The common thread here is domination. Not only does the nameless "Curse" in *Wax Cross* consistently evoke threats of domination, but it repeatedly elicits the linked—often invisible—concerns of bodily and ecological infection, echoing some of the feminist and more-than-human ethical sentiments of Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010) or Rachel Carson's seminal *Silent Spring* (1962). *Wax Cross* attempts to work through its protagonist's concerns by representing them—or sometimes not representing them, for Láska is (mostly) invisible in each of the text's twelve two-page chapters, and readers are left to work out that its detached episodes are produced from her imaginary compendium of rituals and historical contexts, both sacred and profane.

Like *Jinchalo*, *Wax Cross* is dense with references to both real and imagined worlds. This is perhaps suggested best through the text's juxtaposition of real

(material) and imagined (symbolic) bee motifs. Bees occur in both iconic and real form—as in bees buzzing around a hive—on eleven of the thirty-six cover-to-cover pages of the text. In “Chapter Eleven: Death of the Beekeeper,” the narrative culminates with Láska killing the eponymous beekeeper—a character easily identified by the large cross he wears on his chest. Here the apotropaic aspects of the text loom large and the quest that underpins them seems as much an attempt to ward off different kinds of evil as to break through to the realm of the good. Through the text’s numinous yet still readily identifiable confluences of ecological, bodily, and social ills, *Wax Cross* brings together the material and the spiritual, expressing the combination in transcultural as well as ecofeminist terms.

In addition, *Wax Cross*, like *Jinchalo*, draws on popular representations of fairytales such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, among others. This is a staple of contemporary graphic narrative: consider, for example, the *Fables* empire by DC’s Vertigo imprint (2002–15), the *Cinderella* series for which was published slightly before both *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* (serial 2011, graphic novel 2012), and a typical cover of which displays a plethora of comics and fable stereotypes through its bikini-clad bombshell set against a Russian winter scene.

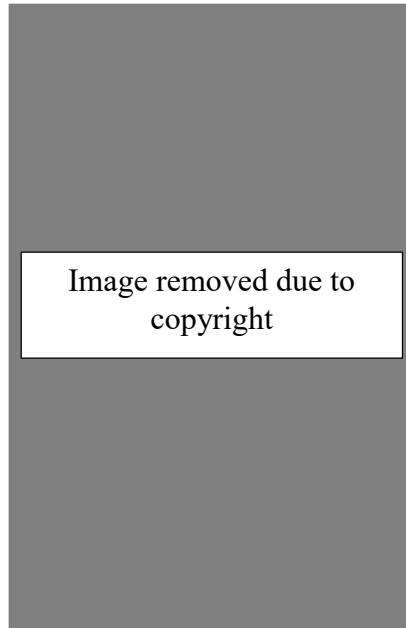


Figure 23. *Cinderella* Cover (Vertigo)

However, in other respects the titular character, winningly dubbed “Fabletown’s favorite secret agent and bon vivant Cinderella,”⁵⁸ could not be more different from the Korean heroine Voguchi in *Jinchalo* and the Slavic heroine Láska in *Wax Cross*.

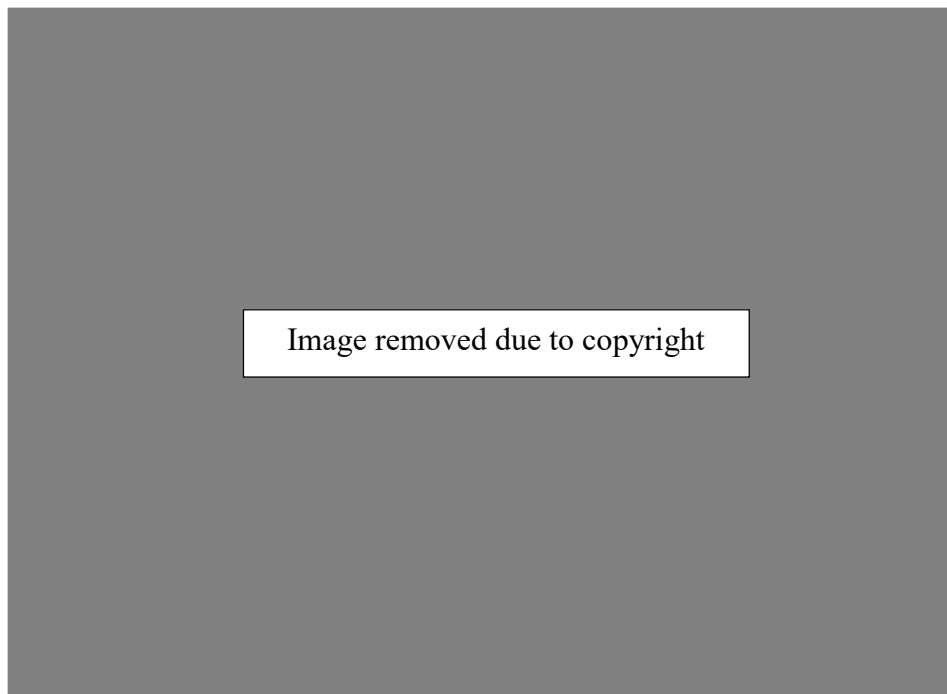


Figure 24. Voguchi and Láska

⁵⁸ See www.vertigocomics.com/graphic-novels/cinderella-fables-are-forever.

Images of these latter appear in the preface material of *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross*, respectively, and from these depictions readers can immediately grasp that Voguchi and Láska are very different from the larger-than-life heroes and heroines normally found in the North American comics mainstream. Interestingly, in these depictions they both have their own—perhaps parodic—secret weapons: Voguchi sits atop the magical egg and Láska’s pitchfork will later be used to kill the beekeeper. Both representations diverge conspicuously from the reifying North American tradition of the hyper-sexualized and dominant (white) heroine. As a narrative strategy—in two sparingly narrated texts—this characterization is also crucial in another way: for these cross-culturally recognizable protagonists, while characters in their own right, function as empathetic groundings that allow that the more mainstream material of comics and fables to cross over into relatively “unfamiliar”⁵⁹ folkloric and graphic fiction realms.

Jinchalo, published by the alternative publisher Drawn and Quarterly (Montreal), and *Wax Cross*, also published by an alternative press (Koyama Press in Toronto), both offer readers storyworlds that are consciously divorced from common representations of national identity. In graphic fiction, front and back matter material is often an integral part of the text, and this is especially the case with these two texts, both of which draw attention to the sophisticated artistry that stretches from cover to cover. Here (on both the front and the back) *Jinchalo* acknowledges support from the Canadian government “through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts” via the publisher (D&Q), while in *Wax Cross* we find a “printed in Canada” and a maple leaf icon. But if both texts are clearly Canadian cultural productions, *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* trouble those kinds

⁵⁹ I put “unfamiliar” in scare quotes here to indicate that this designation is highly subjective, depending of course on particular audiences.

of nationalized cultural distinctions that rely on settler-colonial Anglo or French norms (Y. Lee, n.p.).

Readers also know from the introductory pages of both texts that their artists are intent on breaching norms as these are popularly known in the wider Anglo-American comics tradition. Forsythe already hints at this by using a non-English title, *Jinchalo*. This is not just the name of the shapeshifting magpie character, for “Jinchalo”—as speakers of Korean will know—is a transliteration from Korean referring to an idiomatic interjection that approximates to “really?” or “seriously?” or “is that for real?” According to the publisher’s website, “that question—formulated variously as “What is and what isn’t?” “What is real?” and “What is imagined?”—is at the heart of this book” (D&Q, n.p.).⁶⁰ As Forsythe says in an interview, “When I lived in Korea, I used to say it all the time to pretend I understood the conversation I was in” (“Interview”). The ambivalence of the term as it attaches to the magpie character and title *Jinchalo* permeates the text, infusing it with a distinctive trickster-like irony through which its author is able to create explicit connections between nominally different cultural and species contact zones.

Tin Can Forest does something similar with the title of *Wax Cross*, which contains both material and metaphorical allusions. Also evident in the image of Láska (see Fig 24 above) is the asymmetrical one-shoe-on, one-shoe-off, which mischievously suggests an interest in disrupting binary structures. This relates in turn to the co-authors’ explanation for the meaning of the title, which they call “a metaphor for the phenomena of dual belief,” “identifying as Christian publicly and yet holding to an animistic world view as well” (“*Wax Cross* Review”). This grounds the text’s central metaphor (the wax cross) in a historical combination of

⁶⁰ I can corroborate this translation from my knowledge of the Korean language (Hangul).

conflicting belief systems.⁶¹ “Animists,” according to Graham Harvey, “recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (xi). In contrast with the conventional Christian belief that traditionally posits humans above all other living beings, this view also diverges from a modernist epistemology that views the world as “a totalizing scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint” (Bird-David S77).

The foundations of North American ecofeminism are built on challenging such essential and separated dualisms. As Gaard asserts, the term “ecofeminism” has had a fraught history, and the universal notes that sound around “we” and “us” attest to this.⁶² However, guided by the axiom that oppression frequently stems from hierarchical dualisms that devalue those things that are designated as inferior (often feminine)—dualisms which also underlie the exploitation of nature—today’s ecofeminists insist “on a more inclusive feminism, one that exposes the anthropocentrism of other feminisms” (Gaard “Ecofeminism” 42). In challenging the paradigmatic nature–culture dualism, the intricately entwined storyworlds of *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* strategically de-centre their human protagonists as the measure of all things. Let me now show how, turning to Forsythe’s *Jinchalo* first.

⁶¹ According to mythologist Mike Dixon-Kennedy, “Russian and Slavic beliefs weave a rich tapestry between the real world and the world of pure fantasy. [. . .] We also find a curious mix of the pagan and the Christian; for even though Russia adopted Christianity as the state religion in A.D. 988, paganism remained popular until the end of the nineteenth century, and in more remote areas, even up to the present day. Thus we find Christian themes interwoven with pagan ideas: Dragons fight priests, saints encounter nymphs, and witches enter the kingdom of heaven” (ix).

⁶² See for example, Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism.”

Shapeshifting Folktales, Language, and Comical Confusions in Jinchalo

Consisting of five chapters book-ended by prologue and epilogue sequences, the episodic texture of *Jinchalo* flows through a fantastic and chimerical world that could be imagined as coming from almost anywhere. Details such as architecture—at least when Voguchi is on the ground and not in the sky—nonetheless probably suggest a setting in the countryside of Korea. The monochromatic colouring and outline-type drawings give Forsythe’s cartooning a light and whimsical, sometimes a comically twisted, tenor. Reminiscent of Hope Larson’s panel-less approach in *Gray Horses* (see Chapter Two), Forsythe uses a grey-blue tone to highlight the floating pictorials and variously shade his monochromatic black-and-white images. The unpanelled, free-floating layouts, sometimes rendered as splash pages (full-page images), or with two to five smaller images per page, create a deceptively simple style, both aesthetically detailed and suggestively multi-layered. Meanwhile, the cover suggests the idea of the beast fable in a compelling, multimodal framework.

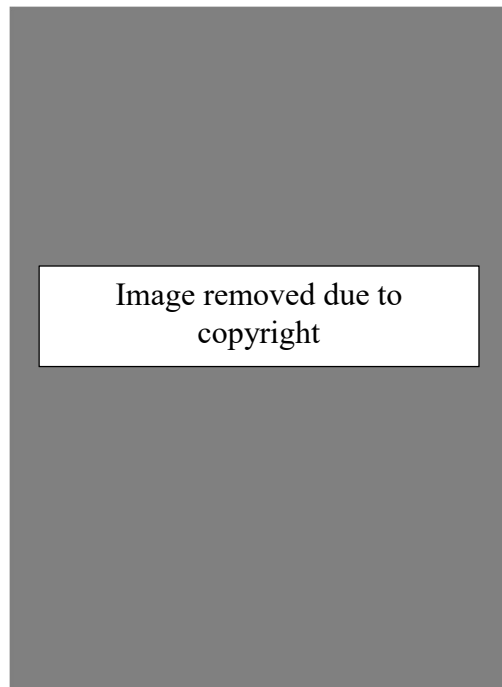


Figure 25. *Jinchalo* Front Cover

Reminiscent of the famous English fairy tale, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Forsythe presents readers with his two main characters, Voguchi⁶³ and Jinchalo—characters whose fluctuating fortunes readers will proceed to track throughout the text. Forsythe offers much more than this, however, rewarding readers with an entire bestiary of weird and wonderful characters. Humans, in fact, are significantly outnumbered in what becomes (and the same goes for *Wax Cross*) an increasingly multispecies text. It is worth noting on the front cover that both Voguchi and Jinchalo are open-mouthed and appear to be talking, albeit via a form of wordless communication as they reach out to one another. The banner with the aforementioned play on “Jinchalo/Really?” intersects this reach while providing a metaphorical bridge between them, but the human-animal hierarchy is spatially—symbolically—reversed. (It is worth mentioning in passing here that Voguchi’s hair resembles both the magpie’s wings and contains the trademark white detailing found in Holarctic [black-and-white] magpies: *pica pica* or 까치—“kkachi”—in Korean.)

This play of similarities and differences is also evident on the back cover. Here, Forsythe suggests intricate relationships between language and sound that are developed throughout the text.

⁶³ To audiences familiar with Korean cartoons, Voguchi might also recall 짱구, or “Janggu,” a famous character who resembles and acts something like a “Dennis the Menace” with a penchant for mischief.

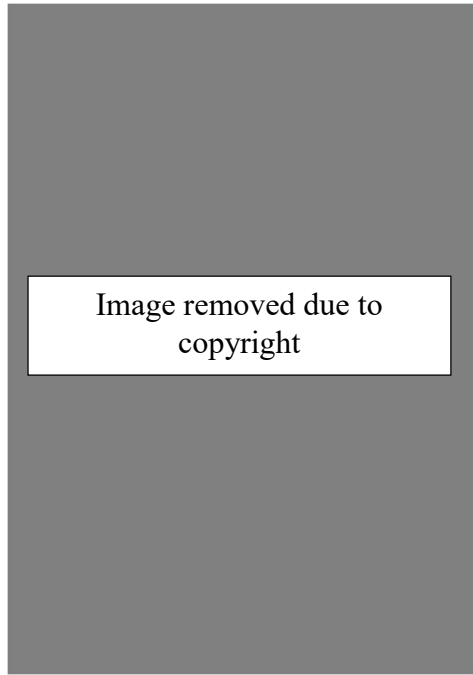


Figure 26. *Jinchalo* Back Cover

The title, *Jinchalo*, is rendered at the top of the page in its Korean—or Hangul⁶⁴—version “진차로,” appearing in syllabically separated word bubbles that emerge from twinned traditional musical instruments. In reading the text, I am made aware of my own ability to “read” Hangul. To the non-Hangul reader, this image might suggest the idea of sound through the iconic word bubble, yet it will still likely be rendered silent. This idea of silence, as it resonates across trajectories of similarity and difference in the text, surfaces in the double recognition of the visual texture of graphic fiction and the absence of transliteration or translation. This suggests Forsythe’s interest in picturing the transcultural scenario of relational difference—for how will readers without a working knowledge of the Korean language decide to “read” these figures? Of course, it will depend on the individual reader as to whether the characters being represented are perceived as emanating sound or silence. Nevertheless, the text makes readers entertain the fact of relationality—that the

⁶⁴ “Hangul” is the transliterated Korean name of the Korean alphabet. Hangul has been used to write the Korean language since the fifteenth century.

reading experience may be very different for different audiences. And it also invites reflection about translation: for without such a “soundtrack,” what, if anything, will be lost from the narrative as a whole?

The issue of incommensurable translation also arises in the perhaps understandable misconception of *Jinchalo* as a “wordless” text. Admittedly the front and back covers both offer readers (false) clues about the text, explicitly calling it “wordless,” while almost every single review designates *Jinchalo* as a “wordless” comic/graphic novel. But *Jinchalo* is not wordless; nor is it a comic or graphic novel in the traditional Anglo-American sense. Although verbal language might seem minimal at first glance, a closer inspection reveals that words are in fact integral to what remains an image-dominant text.

Dubbed as a story for all ages by its publisher Drawn and Quarterly, *Jinchalo* inhabits unconventional comic territory, for some even bordering on the category of experimental.⁶⁵ This industry categorization is earned by the text’s apparently unique transcultural blending of styles, languages, and influences. Arguably, however, this blend is offset by the text’s commitment to shapeshifting of all kinds, which implicitly challenges the idea that identities and differences are stable, containable, and locatable (El Refaie). According to Elizabeth El Refaie, “the notion of culture as territory-based” is as troublesome as the “idea of a fusion of separate parts underlying the biological metaphor of hybridity” (35–6). For her, “the metaphor of shape-shifting [. . .] avoids many of these problematic connotations” (36). While I disagree that the idea that culture as tied to place is necessarily

⁶⁵ Forsythe’s first comic, *Ojingogo*, which debuted his main character of *Jinchalo*, won a Doug Wright “Pigskin Peters Award,” “which recognizes experimental, unconventional, and avant-garde Canadian comics” (dougwrightawards.com). See www.dougwrightawards.com/seth-beaton-deforge-tamaki-bell-and-rancourt-lead-nominations-for-2016-doug-wright-awards/.

problematic (see also Chapter Four), I can appreciate the value of shapeshifting as a metaphor for identity, especially insofar as it draws attention to the issue of “embodiment as operating across a limited set of socially constructed categories” (36). Drawing on the work of N. Katherine Hayles and Brian Massumi, among others, El Rafaie points to the existence of embodied identities which, in addition to discursively performed bodies (Butler), ensure that identity itself is “necessarily multiple, contradictory, and constantly changing” (36).

In *Jinchalo*, however, it is not just bodies that regularly change shape; so too does language. Along with often freely associated Hangul (Korean) “letters” used as emanata (see Chapter One), Forsythe uses the Hangul alphabet as an onomatopoeic device.



Figure 27. Fable Bird and Hangul (Prologue)

The above scene occurs in the prologue. The first, onomatopoeic form of emanata “ㄷㄷ”—a repeated sound, something equivalent to the first syllable in the word “colour” in English—represents the sound of walking. In the second instance “가”—equivalent to the sound of the first syllable in “garage”—still belongs to the category

of onomatopoeic emanata, but because of the word balloon around it takes on the import of representing “language” as a whole. In this and other ways, the text deliberately blurs the dividing line between the visual and the verbal, the material and the discursive, and the sensory and the non-sensory. At the same time, the iconic comics elements of emanata and word bubbles signal at best partial parcels of interpretation. How might this interpretation differ between readers with a different knowledge base? What might be gained from knowing what particular sound or sounds these characters make? Might it be more liberating for non-Hangul-speaking readers to imagine and insert a sound of their own choosing? In highlighting the play between sound and silence as well as its various potential reverberations, Forsythe suggests analogies between transcultural communications that are often frustrated, asymmetrical, and incomplete.

These questions all imply that the text is transgressing the traditional beast fable by using emanata and onomatopoeia as tools to destabilize the conventional figure of the talking animal. It also raises the ecological possibility of imagining relations with others—with *another* instead of “*an other*.” Parsing some of Julia Kristeva’s ideas, Patrick D. Murphy writes,

We need to emphasize the *relational difference* of human beings, a recognition that accepts alterity on a heterarchical plane rather than along a hierarchical axis of power, control, and expropriation. For such a relational difference among beings of the same species and even among beings of varying species, we need to incorporate the concept of *Another*, the other that is proximate and made familiar through recognition and dialogue. (75, original emphasis)

This passage, as I read it, articulates a transcultural and multispecies ethics of relational difference; it also suggests an interest in historical revision that corresponds to the fifth phase of Peggy McIntosh’s classic model of “Interactive Phases of Curricular Revision: A Feminist Perspective” (1983), which envisages “history revisioned [so as] to include us all” (qtd. in Gaard “New” 661n4).

An early scene in Forsythe’s text attends to Voguchi’s another / “an other” conundrum in closer detail. The scene below occurs just before Voguchi is sent out on her mission to the market.

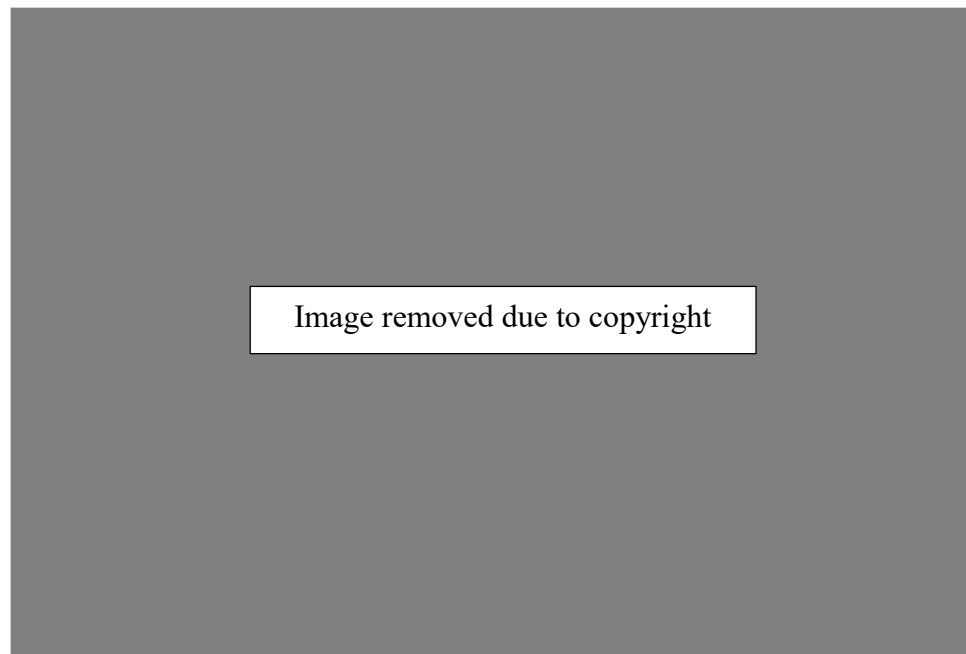


Figure 28. Voguchi and Monster (Ch. I)

This scene depicts Voguchi’s first encounter with “an other” character—a large furry monster with a tight-fitting hat. In this exchange, Voguchi answers the door using the Korean word for “yes?”—“ㄴ||?”—for which the English transliteration is “nae.” The monster answers with the Korean word for “rice,” but the word is transliterated into English—“Bap.”⁶⁶ Voguchi seems to understand, however, and

⁶⁶ The “all-caps” typeset of the original text has been changed to be consistent with this chapter.

responds with the affirmative “yes,” again written in Korean “네.” When she ladles out a large spoonful of rice into his bowl on the next page, she repeats the word “Bap,” but this word, too, is written in Korean “밥.”

Redolent of Hope Larson’s multilingual techniques in *Gray Horses* (see Chapter Two), Forsythe works a strategic blend of visual-verbal languages. Here, though, the text refuses a certain level of translation, weaving bewilderingly between sound and language and dislocating words from their fixed positions. Words such as “Bap” are part of the non-sensory diegetic and not visible to Voguchi—they are only present to the reader. At the same time, readers are made aware of the sensory aspects of this communication—they know that words will make a sound even if they are unfamiliar with the specific Korean sounds and meanings of the words. In the same scene, Forsythe expresses a rich symbolism of the gaze that gives the reader the sense of being a witness—a symbolism exemplified in the seeing-eye omen above the door. As the monster walks away, the steam from the bowl quite literally connects him to Voguchi. However, as the monster’s expression turns from happiness to sadness, readers are given to understand that the transaction is also about incommensurable disconnection. On the following page, the monster dumps out the bowl of rice, accompanied by another form of emanata, this time English onomatopoeia (“shlp”). Voguchi sees this, gets angry, and in the next scene proceeds to consume everything in sight—and much more than just rice.

What this puzzling sequence of events suggests is that the encounter between Voguchi and the monster results in frustration (for Voguchi) and sadness (for the monster), both of which are borne out of failed communication. This reading relies of course on fairly conventional socio-cultural constructions of body language; still,

there is also a transcultural epistemology at work here that sets up contact zones between similarity and difference, self and other, language and image. Even though it all seems to add up—the monster asks for rice and Voguchi gives it to him—the rendering of different languages suggests a mismatch. Readers of other languages might also pick up on the potential confusion between “nae”—meaning “yes”—and the similar sounding “nej” (in Swedish for example)—meaning “no.” Forsythe’s language games pit such linguistic and cultural incommensurability against any natural tendency towards cross-species empathy, with mutual frustration and sadness being the two most obvious results.

To speculate further on the monster’s unhappiness, in South Korea rice is customarily eaten with side-dishes called “panchan” or “반찬,” which we later see Voguchi doing. In this cross-cultural context, one way of reading the exchange is that a naïve (perhaps selfish) Voguchi has taken the monster’s request too literally, not realizing that he would prefer to eat something other than plain white rice. This reading gains traction over the next few pages when Voguchi herself proceeds to eat rice with side dishes such as kimchi and kimbap (rice and seaweed rolls). Another interpretation might be that “Bap” was never intended to signify “rice,” but rather something else, from a completely different cultural context. In the Scottish and Irish traditions, for instance (we might recall that Forsythe has lived in the UK more than once), “bap” is “a small loaf or ‘roll’ of baker’s bread, made of various sizes and shapes” (OED). Whatever readers make of this first chapter, the incommensurability of visual and verbal communication across cultural and species borders turns into a main generative theme.

Another pertinent example appears in a scene that reinforces the satirical nature of the pedagogical elements within the text. In Chapter II, as Voguchi is at the start of her journey, we see her encounter a mini “bird school.”

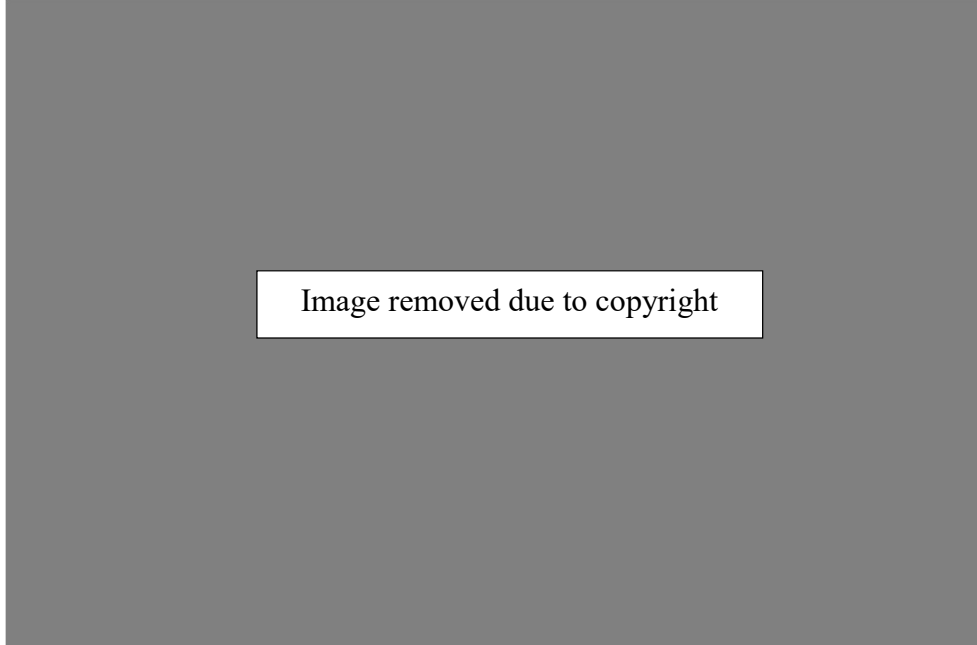


Figure 29. Voguchi and Bird School (Ch. II)

In the two frames above, readers see the bird teacher naming things and the students repeating back the names. However, the English words do not correspond with what the teacher is naming: a flower is labeled “dog” while a butterfly is called “apple.” Here we can read all sorts of parodies and poststructuralist suggestions about the nature of reality and language. More specifically, the encounter recalls the Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified and its Derridean rephrasing as *différance*. *Différance*, as Rosemarie Tong explains it, denotes “the inevitable, meaning-creative gap between the object of perception and our perception of it” (223). From the perspective of the fable, which often reveres the authoritative “reason” or “morality” of the talking animal, we can infer a comical use of *différance* and a subversive reversal of the kinds of moral meaning to be found in more orthodox forms of the beast fable or animal-centred morality tale.

In another sense, Forsythe provides a sardonic comment on differing worldviews. This same depiction works a spoof on the supposed hierarchy of teacher-student and adult-child relations in the context of language learning (Forsythe once held the position of an English teacher). This becomes more complicated on the next page when Voguchi dramatically appears in her largest (full-page) guise in the entire book, labelled as an “ogre” (see Fig 29 above). The bird students attentively mimic their teacher, allowing Forsythe to perform another parodic move. If we compare the sheer size of Voguchi next to the tiny birds, the talking animal teacher is right: Voguchi literally is an “ogre” in the word’s standard dictionary meaning of a “giant” (OED). But figuratively, from the perspective of the birds, the further suggestion of the human as some kind of monster further confuses the beast/human dualism that is systematically undermined in the text.

Returning now to the back cover (see Fig 26 above), we can find a specifically Korean example of a human-animal myth. Forsythe’s design of the fox head appears to be imagining a flowering vine, which connects directly to Voguchi. Such symbolism recalls the Korean mythical *gumiho*: the supernatural fox character of Korean folklore. According to Sung-Ae Lee, such stories are an integral “part of Korea’s intangible cultural heritage,” and tales of the “Gumihos have coalesced into a common, readily recognized fox-woman script. Since the end of the 1980s, the fox-woman script has become a focus for cultural conflict” (135). She continues,

For over a thousand years, folktales about fox spirits have been recorded in China, Korea and Japan and constitute a tradition in which some imaginary beings are identified as an alien element within society and thence signify both the attraction and the repulsion

that can be generated by a society's conception of its others, and especially the dangers threatening social fabric. (136)

As Lee points out, there is a specific transcultural element underlying the fox spirit across such East Asian countries as China, Korea, and Japan (see also Nina Matsumoto's "Christina" in Chapter Four). Broadly speaking, as Lee describes them, such folktales are also linked to the abject and the grotesque—figurations that can be used alternatively to exclude others or to queer hegemonic structures (see also Chapters One and Four). Such concepts encapsulate contradictory ideas of cultures and identities that exist in simultaneous conversation and conflict. While it is not made clear in the text whether we can read Voguchi as a "fox-woman" (like *gumihos*, she subsequently shapeshifts), it seems likely that Forsythe is intentionally reinterpreting this myth.

White foxes also appear in the prologue of the text (see Fig 27), where they threaten the anthropomorphic bird's egg. The egg, which we see Voguchi sitting on in both the title page and on the back cover (cleverly doubling as the book's ISBN code), also appears throughout the text as a source of comical misunderstanding. *Jinchalo* hatches from it in Chapter III, and so too—strangely—does the grandfather character in Chapter IV. This egg is significant because, as Yves Bonnefoy and Wendy Doniger suggest, "the miraculous birth of a legendary hero is nearly always connected, in Korean mythology, with the light of the sun and an egg" (296).

Since the opening of *Jinchalo* foregrounds an unnamed bird character protecting a mysterious egg, readers may well assume they are in anthropomorphic beast fable territory. Yet this mode is disrupted by the two human figures who co-exist in this world: Voguchi and her (apparent) grandfather. Forsythe further alters the orthodox narrative of the anthropomorphic fable by refusing to identify a clear

antagonist. What we *do* know is that the protagonist-antagonist nexus has something to do with the recurring egg, and is also tied up with Forsythe's refusal to shapeshift the traditionally female *gumiho* figures into women.

Regardless of readers' awareness of Korean *gumiho* or the hero's birth by egg, throughout all of the text's moving parts unruly rivalries come to the surface, practically all of which revolve around miscommunications and false attempts at control that come back to the egg as 1) a source of consumption and 2) a source of life. For example, when Voguchi's story begins with her eating everything in sight, this grotesque episode can be read as an act of defiance. As Rana Kabanni contends, in Western art and literature the Asian female body has historically been depicted as being in need of rescue from her male counterpart: "The villainy of Oriental men is aggravated by the fact that they are portrayed as traders in female bodies [...]. This idea was highly important in distinguishing between the barbarity of the Eastern male and the civilised behavior of the Western male. One tied women up and sold them at slave auctions; the other revered them and placed them on pedestals" (qtd. in Smith 12n2). While Voguchi as "ogre" manages to break the stereotype of "the [objectified] Asian female body," so too does Forsythe's text succeed in vanquishing any sort of comparable "male counterpart"—one that invariably shows up in the tales mentioned above as well.

With the entrance of an initially upset but then patient grandfatherly-like character—the only other human in the text—again a patrilineal narrative is shifted. However, as he gives Voguchi money to replenish their meagre stocks, which consist of one large egg, rice, and "김치" ("kimchi," a Korean spicy cabbage dish), there is hardship written on his face. Readers can infer from this that Voguchi must learn to be more attentive to the lives of other beings; that her economics of

selfishness has an obvious impact on the others around her. Her quest in the text extends well beyond about retrieving groceries from the market; rather, it is about gaining worldly knowledge and learning about care and concern for others.

Still, readers learn much more than Voguchi's "lesson," and we know this because there are complete episodes in the book where the two human characters are entirely absent from view. In the middle of Chapter III, for instance, we witness a headless monster capturing and re-attaching his head. This amusing mind-body interlude interrupts Voguchi's flight into the sky, carried by a giant stork that drops her at the base of a Buddha statue. The text also includes appearances by sundry robots and furry monsters, all placed in a vibrantly free-floating realm against the whitespace in the background. In another instance, Chapter IV features a robot talking in binary code (albeit only behind Voguchi's back). Along with the addition of yet another language to the tale, this episode likely reflects Forsythe's experience as a database programmer in Dublin. From still another perspective, we can read this in terms of the excavation of a common Asian stereotype. As Jared Gardner asserts, contemporary images of "Asian American students as mechanized alien robots" derived from early nineteenth-century comics history in the US ("Same Difference" 135). In this context, Forsythe's text is interested in picturing spaces of "graphic alterity" (Gardner's term) that work towards debunking ready-made cultural identities built on subject-object dichotomies.

We might also note a style of reversal in the text that recalls the nineteenth-century caricaturist J. J. Grandville (his real name was Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard). Grandville's main interest was in parallel worlds and surrealism, as seen in his best-known work *Un Autre Monde* (1844). Forsythe shares some of Grandville's concerns with rendering an alternative world, which emerges in a text that willfully breaks its own boundaries.



Figure 30. Voguchi and Multispecies (Ch. IV)

Scenes such as this one, which represents Forsythe’s only page-bleed (edge-to-edge execution) in the text, say much about Voguchi’s multispecies education, recalling Vandana Shiva’s words that “even the tiniest life form [must be] recognized as having intrinsic worth, integrity, and autonomy” (qtd. in Seager 953). As David Herman has pointed out, comics have the unique capacity to realign “logico-spatial relationships,” inviting a rethinking of “cultural paradigms for understanding the human-nonhuman boundary” (“Toward” 113). What we see in this particular case is an affective, non-verbal imaginary that elicits a sense of wonder about nonhuman agency. The minute world of pollinators and pollination is far from insignificant; on the contrary, it implies that Voguchi’s selfishness at the beginning of the text is gradually becoming subordinated to another world of understanding. While readers are left—here as elsewhere—to fill in the details, there is another clear instance at work here of the reversal of the animal as objectified other in the text.

In fact, while *Jinchalo* seems to be primarily or even exclusively about Voguchi as she navigates a continually transforming storyworld, the narrative

eventually takes her far beyond the market errand on which she had originally set out. The significance of the preface and the mystical bird of the prologue returns, and the plot appears itself to shapeshift, especially at the end when Voguchi transforms into a magpie, leaving readers to wonder whether Jinchalo rather than Voguchi might be the main character after all.

Material and Symbolic Magpies

In human terms, magpies are among the world's most intelligent animals. They are also reputedly among the most aesthetically sophisticated species (Poliquin). Known as a scavenger, a trickster, a restless collector, a peerless mimic, the magpie, says Rachel Poliquin, "has its own aesthetic tastes that defy humans' sense of value and worth" (n.p.). Symbolically, the magpie exists in various incarnations across different world cultures. Straddling "Eastern" and "Western" cultures, it might be seen as the ultimate shapeshifter. In contrast with the Western view of the magpie as a thief or a creature of ill omen, in Korea the magpie is the unofficial national bird and is often associated with good luck. Some cities have chosen the magpie as their totemic bird, and one of those is Forsythe's former home city and the capital of South Korea, Seoul.

In 2008, "magpies were added to great apes, dolphins and elephants on a list of species that have passed the 'mirror self-recognition' (MSR) test. MSR involves the capacity to recognize one's reflection in a mirror as being oneself and not another individual" (Balcombe 282). Such mirror images of East-West and self-other are central to Forsythe's text: one that raises uneasy questions in relation to anthropocentric core narratives. Of course, if Forsythe is conflating ideas of cross-cultural and cross-species cross-fertilization, this is problematic in the sense that he is writing from a dominant position in terms of Western culture as well as from an

inevitably human point of view. Yet, insofar as the text instructs readers to read Voguchi's selfishness as the impetus behind her quest, it also undermines her search for knowledge as this pertains to essentialist forms of truth or reality. Her attempts at control are continually thwarted, and *Jinchalo*'s main theme of learning empathy through cross-species concern is mirrored in the act of reading a text that continually frustrates the reader's search for stable meanings.

Herself an embodiment of the queering of the human-animal boundary, Forsythe's Voguchi simultaneously draws attention to the fluidity of identity politics along ethnic, racial, and even species lines. It remains moot, however, as to how we read her "Korean-ness."⁶⁷ Arguably, Forsythe's representation of Voguchi can be read as another transcultural dimension of the text that disrupts any easy reading of identity politics, with her shapeshifting encouraging empathy on the reader's part. (This works on a nonhuman level as well: her hair, for example, perceptibly gives her a cross-species association with *Jinchalo*'s wings.)

Whereas traditional fables are generally known to impart a human lesson, Forsythe's *Jinchalo* gestures both to deconstruct this notion and to widen its realm of concern. Some of the orthodox virtues of fables, such as gaining (human) knowledge and experience over (nonhuman) innocence, come under question and the slipperiness of paradigms in the overlapping realms of language, culture, and species are repeatedly exposed. These themes culminate in the closing—silent—scene when Voguchi transforms into a magpie, ostensibly another *Jinchalo*, and flies away on the text's final page:

⁶⁷ As Mark Berninger points out, "The depiction of Asian characters in non-Asian comics indeed highlights the problematic relationship of comics and graphic racist stereotyping" ("Scott Pilgrim" 253 n23). I have to wonder here however—not least with the example of *Jinchalo*—how we might go about definitively classifying "Asian" and "non-Asian." See also Jared Gardner, "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim."

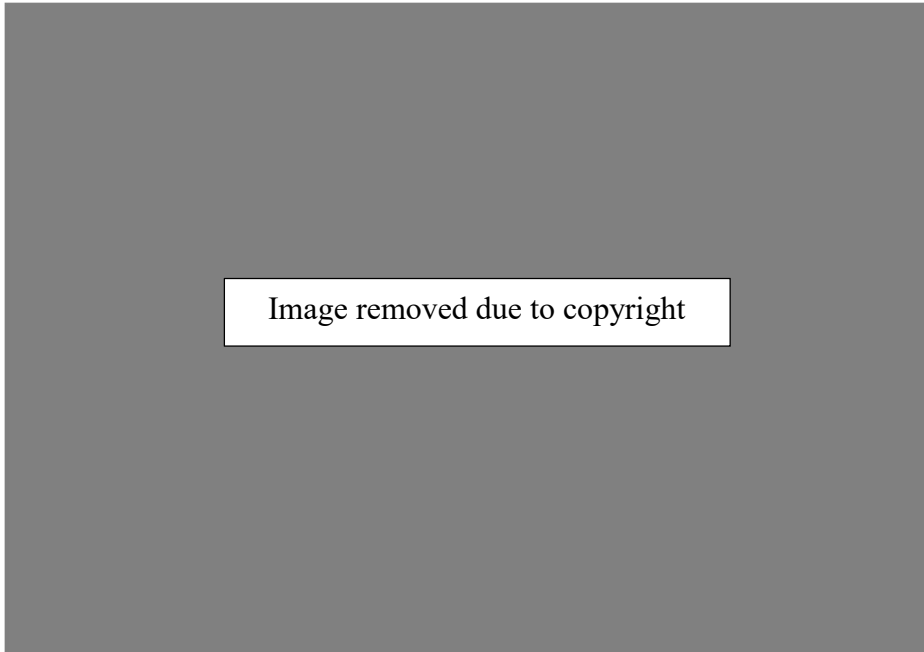


Figure 31. Voguchi and/as Jinchalo (Epilogue)

Reviewer Nicholas Köhler describes this moment as a “terrifying metamorphosis” (n.p.). But I would want to ask what makes it so terrifying. Is it so terrifying to imagine zoomorphism? What is it like to be a magpie? The text leaves readers to ponder whether Voguchi and Jinchalo might be the same shapeshifting character after all. In keeping with Forsythe’s language games (both Korean and English), we may choose to read this as a general concept-metaphor for the shapeshifting qualities of transcultural experience. Or is it rather that both experience and imagination teach us something about the constructed nature of absolute boundaries: those boundaries that are variously naturalized and erected between individuals, cultures, societies, and species alike? Does the text show us the violence of the inherently unknowable? Still another possibility may be that *Jinchalo* represents Forsythe’s critical commentary on “the animal that therefore I am” (Derrida). Imaginative possibilities of these kinds are at the heart of multispecies thinking, which consciously seeks to decentre anthropocentric frames and habits of thought. Multispecies thinking also

opens out onto ethological details about magpies. According to the ornithologists Helmut Prior, Ariane Schwarz, and Onur Güntürkün,

Comparative studies suggest that at least some bird species have evolved mental skills similar to those found in humans and apes. This is indicated by feats such as tool use, episodic-like memory, and the ability to use one's own experience in predicting the behavior of conspecifics. It is, however, not yet clear whether these skills are accompanied by an understanding of the self. [. . .] We investigated mirror-induced behavior in the magpie, a songbird species from the crow family. As in apes, some individuals behaved in front of the mirror as if they were testing behavioral contingencies. When provided with a mark, magpies showed spontaneous mark-directed behavior. Our findings provide the first evidence of mirror self-recognition in a non-mammalian species. They suggest that essential components of human self-recognition have evolved independently in different vertebrate classes with a separate evolutionary history.

(1642)

What is more, “mammals and birds inherited the same brain components from their last common ancestor nearly 300 million years ago” (Prior et al. 1642). While it would no doubt be asking too much to glean all of this from Forsythe's text, his proposal for readers to critically examine human-centric origin stories steers them away from the easy moralism of the beast fable, while *Jinchalo*'s multiple metamorphoses make nonsense of any sort of ontological purity in the text. What is also abundantly clear is that there are aspects of *Jinchalo* that are well beyond

Voguchi's control; indeed, rather than Voguchi "becoming magpie," Jinchalo might—for want of a better word—be seen as "stealing" Voguchi. In such a reading, Voguchi's agency is both underwritten and undermined by Jinchalo's.

Through its different forms of shapeshifting, Forsythe crafts a text that cleverly explores the idea of attempting to imagine *another*. In its attention to language and its revisions of the conventional beast fable, the text leaves its reader unable to say for sure what category or culture or even species it belongs to. Along the way, Forsythe consistently puts cultural and species boundaries to the test, asking the reader to consider provocative processes of shapeshifting that are clearly beyond Voguchi's control. According to Terry Hong, "*Jinchalo* is a shape-shifting treat for the imagination. Every time you read it, you [are] bound to discover something new, something different. And you [will] soon enough be asking yourself, 'Jinchalo?'" (n.p.). Indeed, if readers have learned anything at all from the text, it may well be that the language of ontology, both in the world at large and the world of comics, is not containable by words—or *humans*—alone.

Formal, Historical, and Transcultural Superimpositions in Wax Cross

In contrast with the objectified Cinderella in *Fables* and the clashing Voguchi and Jinchalo in *Jinchalo*, the densely textured cover of *Wax Cross* promises a fable of a wholly different, if equally magical, kind.

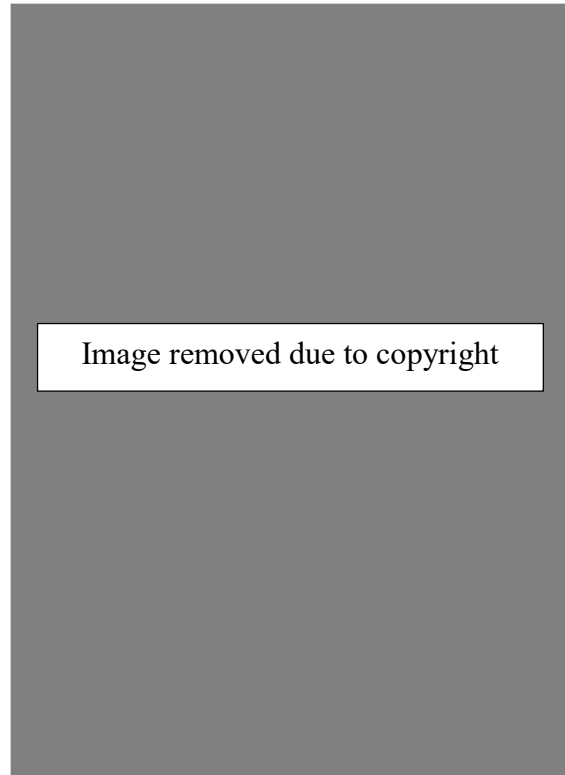


Figure 32. *Wax Cross* Front Cover

Against the backdrop of an enchanted forest, a wild goat stands astride a surreal, leafy globe that is matched by another in the inky sky above. As Terri Windling writes, “In myths all around the world the goat is associated with wilderness” (n.p.). Goats appear variously throughout Slavic folklore, as do themes of thick forests and the power of darkness and magic. In medieval times, Satan was believed to take on the form of an animal, and the goat was often explicitly associated with this role (Binney 26). Ruth Binney reports on the “goat’s evil reputation,” which has historically been connected to accusations of women’s sexual relations with the devil in goat form. For example, the trials (in 1335) of Anne-Marie de Georgel and Catherine Delort and (in 1460) of the witches of Arras condemned these women for devil/goat worship (26–7). Strange—and strangely compelling—goats appear throughout *Wax Cross*, and this medieval intertext, which is linked to traditional patriarchal power structures, connects with “Witch Trials” (*Wax Cross* Chapter Five) and “Witches and Demons” (*Wax Cross* Chapter Nine).

In this and others respects, *Wax Cross* is a more overtly political text than *Jinchalo*.

Whereas Forsythe employs whimsical imagery in *Jinchalo*, Tin Can Forest's visual language is darker and more intense, sometimes with distinctly sinister overtones. The relatively large size of *Wax Cross* resembles that of the newsstand comic book; however, its glossy texture, along with its atmospheric style and gutter-less pages, also makes it feel like a book of art. Colours are rich but subdued, reinforcing the text's aura of menace, while to add to the starkness four chapters are completely done in black and white. While it appears to be an eclectically "alternative" graphic fiction that advertises its own nonconformity, *Wax Cross* also relies heavily on a historical tradition of intermixing found in Russian history, contemporary animism, and ancient Slavic art. The text's aesthetics of amalgamation—which is reinforced by a collated mode of composition—varies between complex layouts, abstract images, collage, and patterned motifs throughout each of its chapters. Prologue and epilogue sequences bookend the text and take the reader from cover to cover. Remarkably, unlike a traditional North American comic, there are no blank spaces or gutters between frames or panels, and as a consequence cognitive gaps and uncanny estrangements abound. In keeping with the protagonist Láska's prophetic concerns about "The Curse" (see above and Fig 34), the loose plot prefigures its own anti-narrative ambiguities, inspiring an "animistic knowledge [that] is [about] understanding relatedness from a related point of view within the shifting horizons of the related viewer" (Bird-David S78).

Depicted through twelve two-page chapters, the non-paginated structure of the book is also indicative of the twelve-month calendar. This structure not only displaces a formal narrative linearity, but also recalls the ancient style of the *Folk Bible Of Vasiliĭ Koren'*. This seventeenth-century text, as Sofia Matrosova Khalil describes it, "relies on a mix of several sources: Western traditions, Russian Folk Art, and Staroobriad (Russian Orthodox Old Belief) traditions, as well as Old Slavic pagan traditions diluted and filtered through Russian Folk Art" (2–6). This echoes

the co-authors' explanation for the meaning of the title, which (as already suggested above) they link to dual belief, "identifying as Christian publicly and yet holding to an animistic world view as well" (*Wax Cross Review*). According to Frances F. Povsic, in Slavic myth "[t]here is almost no line between the animal world and the human world" (329). Against this background, which is resonant in the text's main themes and is also confirmed by Tin Can Forest themselves, who cite Slavic folklore as one of their main inspirations, it becomes impossible—much as is the case in *Jinchalo*—to separate cultural and species concerns.

Discussing folklore scholarship in the Soviet and post-Soviet world, North American Slavic folklorist Natalie Kononenko explains that when the Iron Curtain went down, at first people presumed that folklore would die out because in the Soviet utopia, "there would be no need for folklore. Superstitions would be dispelled by scientific reasoning and legends that transmitted folk belief would disappear" ("Go" 164). After it "became apparent that folklore would not go away [. . .] authorities decided to use folklore for their own purposes and Soviet social engineering was applied [. . .] In fact, one of the jobs of folklorists was to help the folk create lore appropriate to the new era: songs praising Lenin or extolling the virtues of electrification, for example" ("Go" 164). Tin Can Forest draw on this history by making a number of frequently arcane allusions. For instance, on the second page of Chapter One we see a bear kicking over an automobile while three "people" sit around a séance table: one is marked by an iconic Christian cross, "on behalf of death," another is denoted by the iconic lion, "the ghosts of the animal kingdom," and the third, presumably Láska, represents "the twelve seasons."

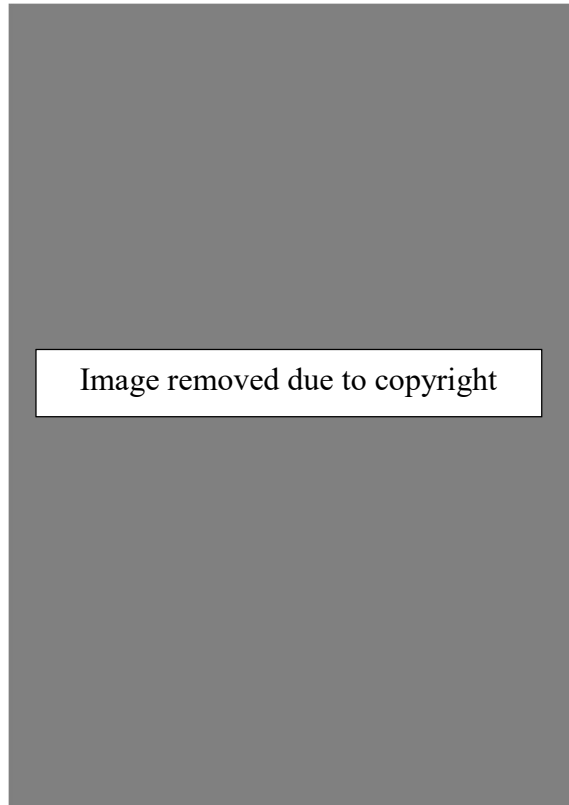


Figure 33. Multispecies Séance (Chapter One)

In the panels above—the second page of Chapter One: “The Séance”—an unnamed speaker declares what these characters appear to be thinking: “Electricity is an occult power that has brought nothing but ruin.” As elsewhere in the text, it is difficult to decipher exactly what is going on, but what is apparent by the end of the page is that the text is arguing for a multi-vocal—suggestively multispecies—viewpoint that is highly critical of systems of human and technological domination in both the present and the past. In Chapter Two, these concerns are reiterated in the following passage: “And all livestock escaped to the forest under the cover of night? By what miracle? And the only casualties were robots? I must be dreaming. And power will never be restored? Is that a promise?” Through its often absurd yet undeniably political language, the text suggests a twinned mode of encryption / decryption that plays out dialectically on numerous different levels: “neither future, nor past;” “evidence” and “imaginary;” “the church laboratory’s on fire! Who shall I call? / Call an ambulance!” Explicitly referencing the “Reason and Superstition”

dualism in Chapter Seven, but linking these traditional oppositions with “and” instead of “versus,” the text draws attention to the “binary construction[s] of the world,” and the patriarchal authorities which underpin them, that ecofeminism takes to task (Wright 17).

Besides its exploration of the interconnected nature of binary thinking, another indication of the text’s ecofeminist stance occurs in the first few pages of the prologue, where readers are enjoined to witness a “Čarodějnice [healer/witch] pour[ing] wax and sing[ing] incantation to summon the infection out of the body.”

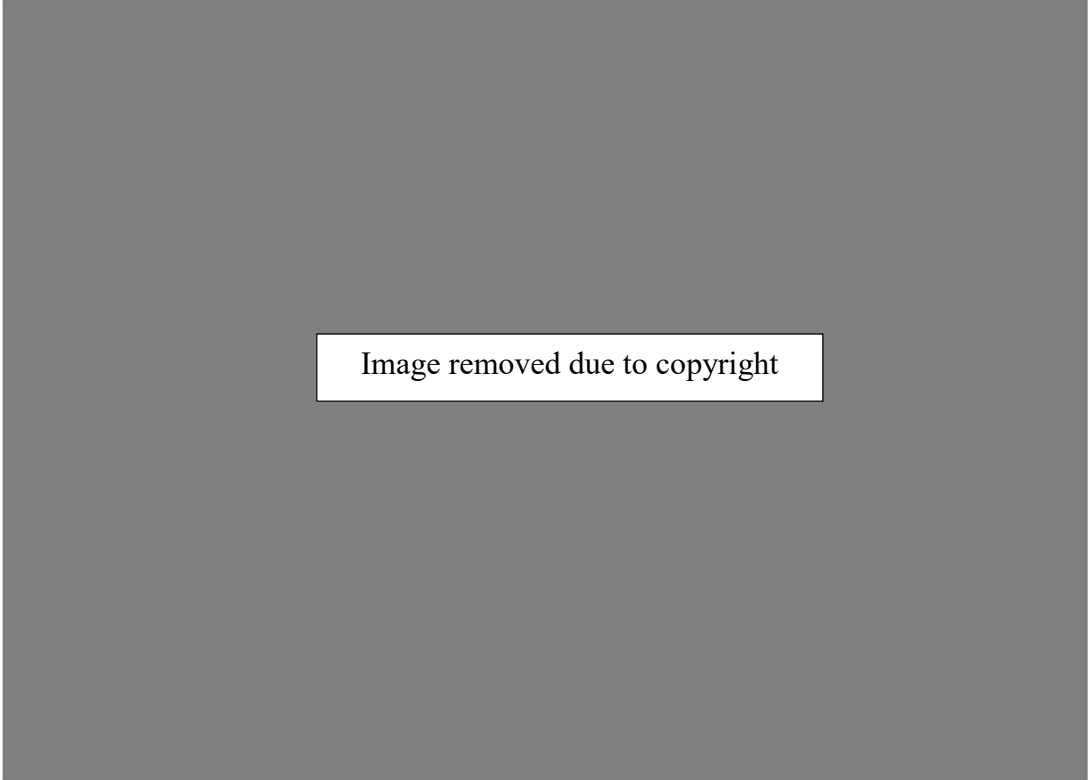


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Figure 34. Incantation and Wax Ceremony (Prologue)

The self-described “incantation” (first page, second last line) reads as the epigraph of *Wax Cross*, which itself often “feels as much like an incantation as a narrative” (Clough n.p.). Indeed, this essentially irresolvable narrative derives much of its meaning from its initial transcription of a chant, which resonates throughout, often with unsettling implications. The wax-pouring ceremony, shown on the second

page, is a representation of a Ukrainian apotropaic tradition. Kononenko describes the ritual as follows:

As beeswax melts and is reformed, so an ancient ritual carried by Ukrainian immigrants was reshaped and became an important part of Canadian-Ukrainian spiritual life. The core of the ritual is simple: a healer melts wax and pours it into a bowl of water held above the patient while reciting incantations, usually three, or a multiple of three, times. The basic ritual can be expanded to include fumigation with smoldering herbs, interpretation of the shapes assumed by the wax when it solidifies, and instructions for follow-up actions such as bathing with the water used in the ceremony. Yet this simple ritual is deemed effective in curing “fear sickness” and accompanying physical and psychological distress. (Kononenko “Review” 377)

The ritual is further complicated by the reference to a Čarodějnice. “Čarodějnice,” a Czech word for “witch,” can also be read as a form of a Ukrainian *babky*. According to Sarah D. Phillips, “Babky are elderly women who perform magico-religious rituals such as ‘the pouring forth of wax’ (*vylyvaty visk* sometimes called *strakh vylyvaty*, ‘to pour fear’) to treat a variety of maladies. They are usually respected figures in their communities, and are seen by many to possess a valuable form of wisdom that cannot be learned in books” (13). Such women “reflect a source of women’s hidden power in a historically patriarchal society” (26). “In a very real sense,” Phillips writes, “Ukrainian *babky* fill a role as healers, not only of bodies and psyches, but of troubled communities in a time of social upheaval” (29).

Whether or not readers are aware of this Canadian-Ukrainian ritual and the cross-hatched Slavic-Czech-Ukrainian traditions it enacts, readers can detect an ecofeminist concern with 1) the earth as female: “Grant peace to the earth so that she may sleep rest and receive relief, by the sun, the wind and rain,” and 2) embodiment: “From the blood and from the bones. And from the eyes” (Fig 34). These relationships are redolent of what Stacy Alaimo calls “trans-corporeality,” that is, an understanding of the agency of material forces and their interfaces with human bodies (*Bodily Natures*; see also Introduction). Further examples indicate distress with environmental degradation and an interest in exploring interconnected oppressions through the preposition “with”: “I utter this incantation not alone but *with* the crow, and the pelican, the goat and the carp” (emphasis added). In addition, the incantation’s verbal arrangements, forming a circular pattern around the trunk of a tree, are reminiscent of Slavic embroidery, which has its own highly organized language system in the symbol-laden context of Russian fairy tales and Old Slavic icons.⁶⁸ These first “words” of *Wax Cross* thus set the scene for a densely symbolic, tantalizingly anti-representational narrative. While the precise symbolism of *Wax Cross*’s images may not be apparent to readers, what is clear is that the text is intent on articulating a general ecofeminist concern that draws links between multiple forms and levels of oppression, with “sickness” by no means being limited to the human realm.

Several of the text’s main concerns come together in the name of the protagonist, *Láska*. Suggestive of “Laskowice” which comes from the Slavic word

⁶⁸ See, for example, Sergei V. Rjabchikov, “The Scythian/Sarmatian influence on the Slavonic Mythology and Decorative Art” <http://slavonicweb.chat.ru/sl37.htm>. Also, A.M. Kostecki, “Crosses of East Slavic Christianity among Ukrainians in Western Canada.” Khalil also discusses the religious art, book illuminations, and iconography that suggested an early Russian “apprecia[tion] [for] the inner spiritual world rather than physical appearance” (15).

for “forest,” this word denotes “forest spirits in the mythology of the east and south Slavonic peoples [who] protect wild animals” (Lurker 110). Throughout the text, Láska can be read as an embodiment of this particular genre of mythological character, described in the prologue with bats (and, later, cats, Fig 39) enmeshed with part of her skirt. She may also be connected to an incarnation of “Lada Terra”: “one of the three large upland regions of Venus [that] takes its name from the Slavic goddess of love” (Murdin n.p.)—a suggestion sustained in the text’s depictions of astronomical planets (see the top of Fig 35 [right] for example).

Moreover, the central image of the incantation is a tree. Trees are rendered in several different incarnations in *Wax Cross*, appearing on almost every page, and the four-page epilogue alone has two pages devoted entirely to trees. One example is explicitly named as “The Tree Of Life” (Chapter Nine), which suggests a cross-cultural reference to what has been called the “world tree” (also represented as an iconic figure on the front cover of *Jinchalo*). Known as *Axis Mundi* in Latin or *Yggdrasil* in Norse mythology, the world tree also has a similar incarnation in Southeast Asia, where it is known as a “cosmic tree” that “unites the sky with the earth and symbolizes wholeness” (Leeming “World” n.p.). More specific to *Wax Cross*, the “Tree of Life” is associated with the widespread cult of Saint Paraskeva, a Russian saint of pagan origin outlawed “in 1589 by the patriarch of Constantinople” (Dixon-Kennedy 213). As Mike Dixon-Kennedy explains, “The Stoglav Council, set up during the latter half of the sixteenth century by Ivan Groznyi, also condemned the festivals [associated with her],” but the cult continued, especially in Ukraine, until well into the eighteenth century (214). Paraskeva was widely considered to be a mistress of the cosmic order, but this of course was something that “the Christian

church could not accept” (214). She “was as feared as [the mythic] Baba-Yaga,⁶⁹ being associated with death and the underworld, but at the same time was as revered as the Virgin Mary.” As Dixon-Kennedy further explains, “Paganism and Christianity came into direct conflict through the cult of Paraskeva, giving way eventually to an uneasy coexistence of the two, called ‘double faith’ (dvoeverie)” (214). “Double faith” recalls Tin Can Forest’s elucidation of their title “Wax Cross” (see above). “Connected to Mother Earth and the bounty she provided,” Saint Paraskeva was “the mistress of animals” who “granted mankind the right to hunt” (215). In her folkloric representations, Saint Paraskeva “was surrounded by her twelve ‘apostles’—another aspect of her cult that brought it into direct conflict with the Stoglav Council [which] considered the cult a mockery of the Christian faith” (214).

All of these details—if at times bewilderingly conflated in the text—provide a general context for *Wax Cross* that helps explain its more specific engagement with ecofeminism. In several examples, the text voices suspicions of “Kings” and “sovereigns,” and masculinized “clerics” and “scientists” (Chapter Two, Eight). In a wordless chapter, Chapter Six, entitled “Hunters in the Haunted Forest,” women and shadows are predominant while the male hunters are caricatured and a goat peers through a kitchen window. While the implications are typically unclear, we can at least speculate that Tin Can Forest are drawing on potentially subversive pre-Christian histories of matriarchy; similarly, after the healing ceremony at the beginning readers learn that “[e]lsewhere, most likely a dream, our heroine embarks on a journey back through time to see what can be undone” (Prologue). The suggestion of time travel also relates to stories of ideological overthrow in ancient

⁶⁹ Interestingly, Tin Can Forest’s second graphic fiction is entitled *Baby Yaga and the Wolf* (2010).

Russian and Slavic cultures (French 55). As Marilyn French writes, “The Slavs were matrilineal; their powerful autonomous women once controlled both the household and production. Mother right (to hold land, pass it to daughters, and confer blessings) persisted longer among the Slavs than other Europeans” (55).⁷⁰

Environmental and Social Evils, Trans-Corporeality, and Animism

The above examples suggest that the text is linked to a series of transcultural Mother Earth figures, which operate within the context of an age-old language of environmental infection—of toxins, pesticides, and pollution—that echoes the more recent words of Rachel Carson in what itself has been described as a “prophetic” book, *Silent Spring* (1962). For Carson,

The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in the living tissues is for the most part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little-recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world—the very nature of its life. (6)

In *Wax Cross*, a planetary context of contamination and bodily infection similarly demonstrates a relationship-oriented ecofeminist philosophy of care and concern. Like *Silent Spring*, *Wax Cross* blurs the boundaries between body and environment,

⁷⁰ See also Ireneusz Szarycz, “Morsels on the Tongue: Evidence of a Pre-Christian Matriarchy in Russian Fairy Tales.”

voicing contemporary anxieties that relate to Ulrich Beck's concept of "risk society" (Alaimo *Bodily* 93). For Stacy Alaimo, the value of Beck's work lies in explaining that "'knowledge gains a new political significance' in risk society, revising the Marxist dictum that class determines consciousness into the formulation that 'in risk positions *consciousness determines being*'" (qtd. in Alaimo *Bodily* 93, original emphasis).

Wax Cross not only dramatizes the invisible risks of late modernity—including radiation, pesticide, and toxins—by naming them in its opening, miasma-like invocation, but it also plays these threats out differently in each chapter, drawing attention to the invisibility of different "terrors" that are "slowly seeping into the collective unconscious" by means of "unverifiable reports" (Chapter Two). This emphasis on the imperceptible is evident in much of the visual language of the text—as in when readers see the text of the incantation literally unravelling from the sky and then hovering over the house in which Láska is undergoing the wax ceremony (see Fig 34, top right)—but we can also detect a kind of "counter-memory" in Tin Can Forest's approach that condenses history into contemporary ecological anxiety in the overarching context of a deliberately non-linear, chaotic style of text. Alaimo draws on the concept of counter-memory from Ladelle McWhorter (who herself draws on Foucault), who describes it as "an important ethical practice—first of all because it helps us escape from the cage of official truth and start thinking again and second because it is the very stuff of alternative matrices of knowledge and power, because it can function as the building material of alternative systems of meaning" (*Bodily* 95). In these and other ways, we can read *Wax Cross* as exploring creative techniques to confront both traditional and modern concerns around material uncertainty, ecological degradation, and the ambivalent force of spiritual power.

In a more specifically Eastern European frame (recall that the co-authors have Czech and Ukrainian backgrounds), it may also be possible to read the text's grim references to radiation and ecological pollution in the context of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. At the time of writing, Ukraine is marking the thirtieth anniversary of the disaster, which poisoned vast swathes of Eastern Europe and highlighted the quite literally fatal flaws of the secretive Soviet system at the time.

This perspective certainly resonates with the oppressive tone of *Wax Cross*, but the text's densely visual style also evokes natural *abundance* through a plethora of assorted collages in which a wide variety of non-human actors—bears, lions, pigs, goats, owls, woodpeckers, crows, and especially bees—all attract attention as agential presences, not just for the symbolic readings they invite. We get the feeling that these creatures are unwitting victims within what the text gloomily portrays as techno-scientific systems of domination: accordingly, monster-like figures are made to mix with masked men, farmers, and “an x-ray machine / a shiny corpse” (Chapter Three). In Chapter Two, entitled “The Church Laboratory Burns to the Ground,” the narrator informs us that “Last night red phosphorus struck sandpaper with pinpoint accuracy leaving cleric and scientist kicking up their heels.” Following this, two shadowy figures proclaim, “That’s it!” and “I’m off to the pub!” Meanwhile, directly below an ornately framed narration box reads, “an owl gave a sermon that left a tiny congregation in tears.” While Tin Can Forest ask their readers to negotiate these and other absurdities for themselves, the text still manages to drop broad hints about the invisible relations between authoritarian systems of power.

“The political fallout of Chernobyl is still toxic,” writes the journalist Natalie Nougayrède: “Indeed, many of the consequences of Chernobyl are yet to be explored. Three decades on, how does one even begin to describe what it is like to live with an invisible radioactive enemy? How does one convey what it was like to

experience an event of that magnitude, when the skies darkened and the apocalypse seemed to be unfolding?” (n.p.). Such questions reverberate throughout *Wax Cross*, which for all its seemingly willful obscurity still manages to give import to cryptic passages such as these: “Imagine yourself a flea on the wall of a fortified teapot orbiting Pluto. As the stench of a decaying paradigm thickens the air, a trice great humbler with ‘an exemplary reputation in the community,’ nods, winks, measures out a prescription, and with heartfelt venom, intones a lullaby for an honoured guest” (Prologue). As Clough points out, the text thus comes to resemble “a looping, recursive journey that begins with a prayer against the ills of the post-apocalyptic world (radiation, disease, poison) that seems to be as much for the reader as it is for its narrator-protagonist” (n.p.): a world in which the conscious-stricken reader is implicitly summoned to act.

In another example of the text’s environmentalist theme, on the second page of chapter five, across the top panel of the page, Láska’s barely discernible body is enmeshed with part of the forest.

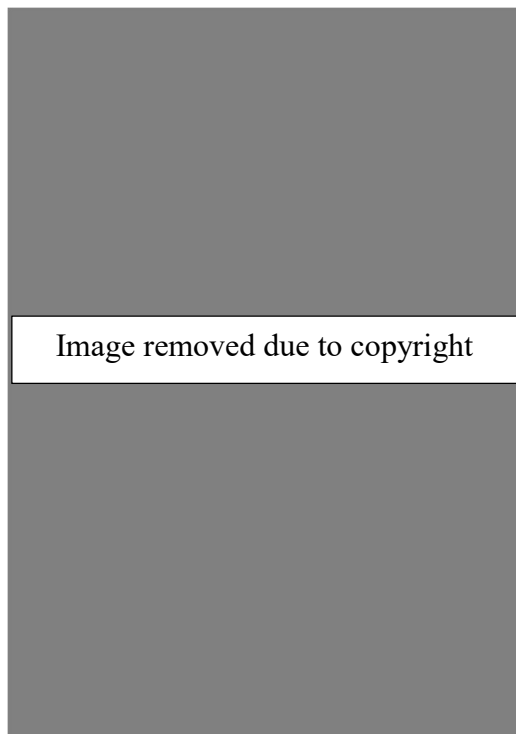


Figure 35. Láska as Mother Earth (Chapter Five)

The scene literalizes her as a Mother Earth figure, yet this also filters through the trans-corporeal materiality that is embodied in the figure of Láska herself. Here as elsewhere, Láska is inseparable from the environment; likewise, nature in *Wax Cross* (as in *Jinchalo*) is “always as close as one’s own skin—perhaps even closer” (Alaimo *Bodily* 2). Meanwhile, the three pigs—another parody perhaps—are playfully linked to an animal-liberationist ethic, and such high-sounding phrases as “more souls made their way to the kingdom of worms” are mobilized to suggest strategic reversals within those Christian and beast fable traditions which isolate the human and animal realms. An animist principle seems to be at play here in which ecofeminist themes are tied to spiritual-material relations with non-human life *and* death forms (see also Chapter Four). As the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood puts it, animism “opens the door to a world in which we can begin to negotiate life membership of an ecological community of kindred beings” (qtd. in Rose 93). In short, Tin Can Forest’s *Wax Cross* is a multispecies world in which different beings converse and interact, and in which different languages also mingle:

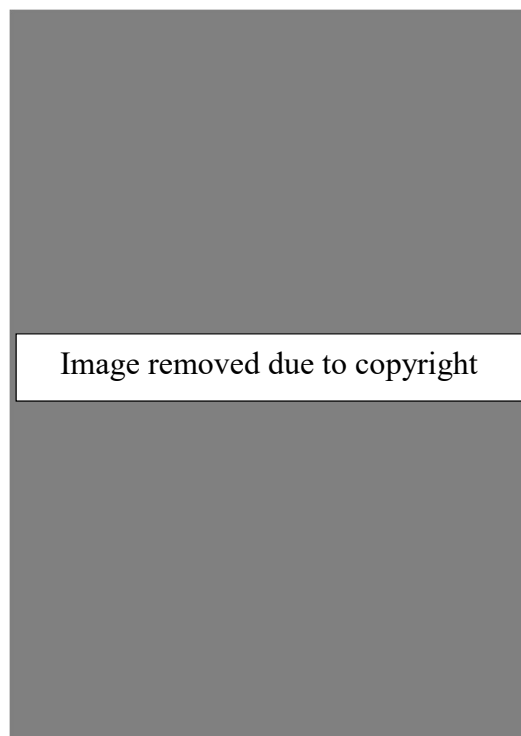


Figure 36. Visual-Verbal Language Textures (Chapter Eight)

For example, the scene above, which is the first page of Chapter Eight, “King Prosperous And The Pacific Ocean,” presents voices and languages that are deliberately not translated into English. English, Czech, German, Russian, and Ukrainian all jostle for space within an over-crowded scene that doubles as a collage of cultural foods, animals, symbols, and colours, at once immersive and esoteric in its effect. As with Forsythe’s *Jinchalo*, the visual-verbal language of *Wax Cross* has its own unique texture that unfolds scenes of familiarity while also holding the reader at arm’s length. Non-human animals are very much part of this texture: here, the beetle, the woodpecker, the cat, the wolf, and the bird all have pronounced presences and play an important part in the diegesis, while the text’s multispecies aesthetic appears to offer a riotous parody of Easter in which cats, hockey players, tin cans, and mirrors share space with strange characters with video cameras on their heads. No doubt different readers will find their own idiosyncratic readings of the scene, but at the heart of things—also linked to individualistic ideas of consumption—seems to be an underlying distrust of the autocratic institutions of church and state. “King Ivan” also seems to link somehow to the previous chapter, which breathlessly begins, “Once upon a time, neither future, nor past, lived a prosperous king. Like a character out of the bible with a camera mounted on his head. He loved evidence [...] But alas, apparition after apparition transmuted out of temporal context. And in his grief the king swallowed an insect” (Chapter Seven). Such mashing together of religious, scientific, historical, and literary registers is typical of *Wax Cross*, which repeatedly explodes the myth of rationalist logic as well as that of separable cultural ensembles.

Bees, Chickens, and Bats Matter

This mashing together can also be seen in the titular motif of the wax cross, which (parodically) invokes the dualisms of paganism and Christianity, matriarchy and patriarchy, animal and human—all of which feature regularly in Slavic folklore. Both “wax” and “cross” take on deeper implications with the foregrounding of the Ukrainian-Canadian wax ceremony and the repetition of bee motifs throughout the text. For example, on the second front-matter page of the text, as part of the preface, there is a singular iconic image of a bee; while the text comes full circle with a patterned motif and conceivable rendition of a “wax cross” on the last page of the text, which consists of four joined crosses and four bees.

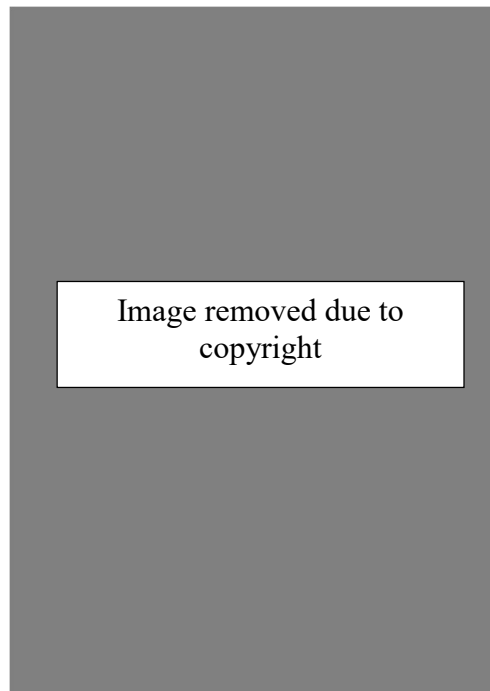


Figure 37. *Wax Cross* (Epilogue)

The real/symbolic figure of the bee in *Wax Cross*, like the magpie in *Jinchalo*, might even be seen as the main character of the text: after all, there would be no “wax cross” without beeswax. Bees occur in several forms throughout the text, which also features the enigmatic figure of the cross-wearing beekeeper, suggesting both the bee’s association with Christianity and the unwanted dominance of this association.

The beekeeper's death, while never fully explained, suggests in turn a reinstatement of the traditional symbolism of the bee as the "Great Mother," its prolific incarnations in many other world mythologies, and its crucial bio-ecological importance today (Kritsky and Cherry 6). *Wax Cross* goes still further to suggest that threat and illness (both human and animal) and extinction (both folkloric and ecological) culminate in the figure of the bee. In Chapter Three, entitled "Death and the Farmers," one of the farmers exclaims, "You know what this is boys? A bee! One of the old gods! They're all but dead, ghosts haunting the fields." Likewise, when Láska kills the beekeeper, the text strongly hints at the simultaneous death of the oppressive ideologies that surround him as well as the apotropaic warding off of other associated threats.

Bees are prolific in Slavic folklore, where they are often "considered to be a rich symbol as an exemplar of ethical virtues" (Kritsky and Cherry 6). But as Gene Kritsky and Ron Cherry point out, bees are "probably the most universally symbolic of insects; objects of admiration, veneration and fear and subjects of cults, rituals, and beliefs in birth, death, and the soul" (5–6). We also know the bee to be a crucial force in pollinating earth's ecosystems, and several species are currently threatened under pressure from loss of habitat, loss of food sources, disease, and pesticides. Bees are highly topical today in relation to a number of different popular ecological discourses, probably the best known of which is the ongoing discussion around so-called "colony collapse disorder" (Spivak et al. 34). Oliver Milman reports that "over the year, from April 2015 to March 2016, beekeepers" in the United States lost forty-four percent "of their colonies—the highest annual loss on record" (n.p.).

As I have been suggesting in this chapter, several humanimal and ecofeminist themes can be traced in *Wax Cross*'s representation of Láska's mission to protect the bees/the world from the various material and spiritual forces that

threaten them. In the scene below—the second page of “Chapter Seven: Reason and Superstition”—Tin Can Forest presents another example, this time conflating European fairy tale references—ostensibly Little Red Ridinghood and the Big Bad Wolf—and talking animal comics in perhaps the most recognizable comics pattern of the text: the nine-panel comics grid.

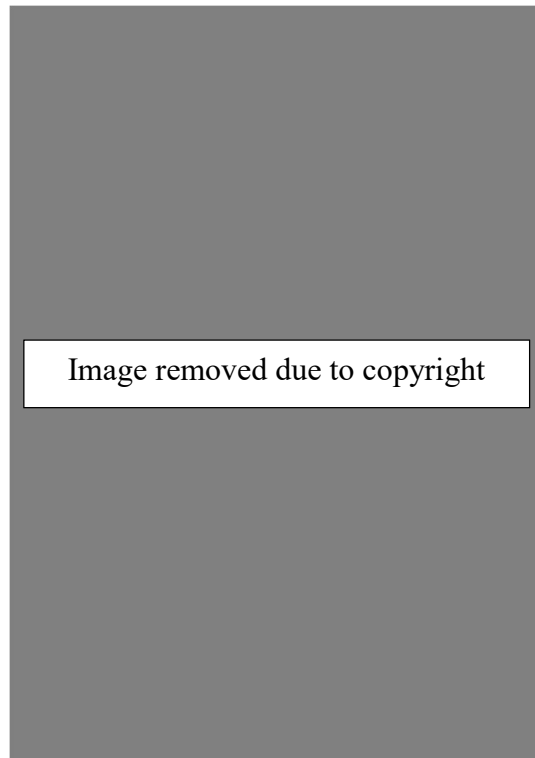


Figure 38. Fairytales (Chapter Seven)

In a text full of foreboding, it is here that we find its most comical lines. Watching the fire burn at the “Church laboratory,” two cats provide the commentary: “Ah ha ha ha!” and “Holy shit! This is great!” (first panel). While these are clearly examples of anthropomorphism, they are also blasphemous caricatures of the traditional funny animal, designed to illustrate human follies. In this chapter, also featuring the King who “loved evidence” on the previous page, such ironic subversion gleefully continues with the depiction of a talkative werewolf and a misunderstood vampire. Here, a host of familiar literary recollections and fantastic humanimal figures move between the standard tropes of the beast fable and anthropomorphism, suggesting all

kinds of transgressive shapeshifting while refusing to subordinate “superstition” to the “reason” and “evidence” that the King apparently adores.

The verbal text in this section is highly evocative of 1) shifting identities: “you’ve mistaken me for someone else”; 2) displaced bodies and time: “I live in the nineteenth century but my corporeal body sleeps in the forests behind your house”; 3) variable stations and places: “I’m a landowner and a shepherd [. . .] My family’s from Lithuania, but I was born in the Carpathians”; and 4) fluidity between life and death energies: “I take my vitality from the sun” and “I recognize you! You were drowned in the river along with two other thieves.” This last suggestion of three thieves also recalls the link to Saint Paraskeva as “the goddess of fate connected with two other saints with pagan roots—Saints Sreda and Nedelia. All three were seen as the triune Fates, spinners who wove the course of mankind’s life, and as mistresses of the cosmic order [and] of animals” (Dixon-Kennedy 214–5). As discussed above, these Saints and their icons were proscribed by orthodox Patriarchs and, along with other such “Old Belief” icons, they were “often cast into a river or buried in the ground” (Khalil 15).

Even without knowledge of this specific history, however, we can still discern the text’s ecofeminist interest in excavating dualisms and examining “an emotional and spiritual conversation with nonhuman life forms” (Josephine Donovan qtd. in DeMello 391). Note the hen being shadowed by the bat in the lower left panel of the sequence above (Fig 38): as several ecofeminists and animal activists have pointed out, chickens are the most exploited of animal species in terms of sheer numbers. Of the “[f]ifty-two billion animals (this does not include sea creatures) [that] are killed *every year* to feed the world’s 6.6 billion flesh-eating humans (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization 2004 figure),” most of these animals, “90 percent (or approximately 47 billion), are chickens” (Mark 52,

original emphasis). Lisa Kemmerer's introduction to *Speaking Up for Animals* (2012) describes the exploitation of chickens and other animals in the factory farming industry in excruciating detail. As she argues, "controlling reproduction is central to patriarchy." Just as cows, sows, and hens "are exploited in our food industry *because* they are females—because they produce young, provide nursing milk, and ovulate—many people recognize that the original point of patriarchy was to control the reproductive systems of women" (19, original emphasis). Moreover, "[c]ollectively, feminists remain largely unaware of the well documented links between the exploitation of women and girls, and the exploitation of cows, sows, and hens" (19). Along with the numerous other animals that feature in *Wax Cross*, domestic animals—Kemmerer's cows, sows, and hens—appear on at least ten pages. While we never witness a direct act of slaughter—besides that of the beekeeper—Láska buries deer in the wordless and contemplative Chapter Ten, "Under a Funeral Moon."

Further to this, Fawcett points out that "bats are one of the 'disliked/hated' species in Canada. Bat biologists have observed for some time that the protection and conservation of bats often depends on addressing public attitudes and folklore" (263). Bats are another of the text's recurring animals. In the scene above, because the bat is associated with the iconic cross (as is the beekeeper, who is marked as the antagonist by Láska), we could infer a demonization of this figure. But this reading is undercut by the bats that apparently help Láska in the prologue where she is borne "aloft by bat."

As should be clear by now, *Wax Cross* conveys an enigmatic fairytale-like journey across shadowy intervals of time and place, stretching into the deep past with ancient looking trees and tropes of witches and vampires side by side with symbols of Saturn rings and Christian crosses. Yet as the text blends the past with

the future across multiple references to technology, destruction, ideology, and domination, it steadfastly refuses to placate readers by pitching any clear-cut narrative logic or simplistic moral against ecological demise. Nor does it pontificate at any great length about the prophetic themes that percolate beneath its surface. Rather, the text's saturated diegesis joins materiality to spirituality to conjure up a vast uncontainable force that overflows normative notions of genre, gender, and species. To put this another way, the text's deliberately incongruous—grotesque—style exploits the “tense relationship between perceived time and perceived space” (Hatfield “An Art” 144); refusing to stabilize meaning, it throws down the gauntlet to its readers by indicating (if not necessarily disclosing) the vast array of material-symbolic relationships that pertain to a more-than-human world.

Conclusion: Unfixing Humanimal Folklore

According to Kononenko, the depth and the power of folklore comes through its “ancient wisdom,” which is “constantly modified so that it suits today’s world as perfectly as it did the ancient one. Because it studies tradition, folklore is a powerful tool that allows us to gaze deep into the essence of a culture” (“Go” 160). Such essences, however—if they exist at all—are notoriously difficult to unscramble. Rather, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, both Forsythe and Tin Can Forest deploy the conventions of folklore to suggest that the search for essences is potentially endless. As Liyan Shen writes,

When folklore travels across different geographical, historical, political, social and cultural boundaries, it demonstrates its variations and complexities throughout its transnational journeys. Studying modernity and folklore needs interdisciplinary and transcultural

perspectives and approaches to broaden and build the theory and to deepen the inquiries into specific issues and phenomena in folklore's adapting to the discourses of modernity and globalization. (9–10)

In such a context, *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* do their best to make their readers aware of different cultural meanings, but also place these in complex contexts of relationality. In this and other ways, they function as *transcultural* texts; they are also (especially *Wax Cross*) bewilderingly *abstract* ones in Jan Baeten's sense of abstraction as "something that resists narrative figuration, that struggles to withdraw from the narrative coherence of the material to be read, and that cuts against the grain of humans' natural propensity toward storytelling" (107). As we have seen, both texts explore abstract spaces that they sometimes fill with seemingly indecipherable, more-than-human language. And while their dream worlds allow readers in, they also hold them tantalizingly at arm's length. But the texts still retain a curious logic of their own that allows readers to make intuitive connections, and what emerges relatively clearly from both is a playful (if still serious) deconstruction of anthropomorphic fable language through which human omniscience, human morals, and human technologies are systematically undermined. In both cases, the story of a single (human) heroine is finally overshadowed by concern for her multispecies counterparts:

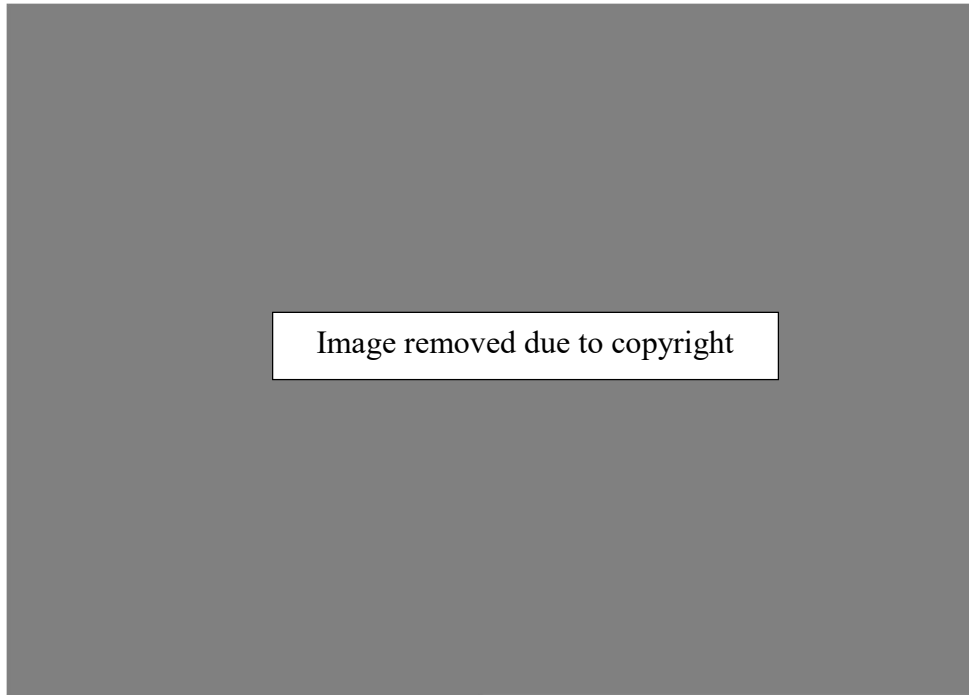


Figure 39. Multispecies Counterparts (Ch. II, Epilogue)

In this and other respects, *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* work to queer the standard comics figure of the talking animal, while their calculated compilations of unstable fable elements do away with the succinctness and brevity traditionally expected of the fable genre. Nor are *Jinchalo* and *Wax Cross* comics in terms of the North American tradition, which relies on panels and gutters to tell the story. Rather, from a transcultural perspective the texts' transgressive style suggests an intention to take their respectively Korean and Slavic inspirations into complex transregional imaginaries that operate well beyond "Disneyfied" comics traditions and nationally defined cultural norms. As I have been emphasizing here, both texts are also strongly influenced by an ecofeminist ethics of care in which, as Donna Haraway puts it, "To be one is always to *become with* many" (Haraway *When* 4, original emphasis). In this last sense, Forsythe and Tin Can Forest suggest that we think *beyond* Voguchi and Láska; and in the space of their enchantingly uncontainable graphic fictions, we know we must have the imagination as well as the empathy to participate in conversations with the "others" that are also ourselves.

Chapter Four

Transcultural Graphic Fiction and Unorthodox Manga: *Yōkaiden* Vols. 1&2 (2009) and *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009)

As a form of popular culture, comics of all nations tend to be tightly woven with local culture and thought. In translation, manga—especially—can be both a medium of entertainment and a Rosetta stone for mutual understanding—Frederik Schodt (340)

What confronts the Western scholar is the discomfoting fact that the natives are no longer staying in their frames—Rey Chow (325)

Introduction: Transcultural Graphic Fiction and Unorthodox Manga

In the last chapter, I discussed nonhuman figures in recent graphic fictions that can usefully be read in terms of transcultural ecofeminism. In this one, I focus on two contemporary examples of what I call “unorthodox manga”—Nina Matsumoto’s *Yōkaiden* Vols. 1&2 (2009)⁷¹ (hereafter *Yōkaiden*) and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009) (hereafter *Red*)—looking at how their respective authors use transcultural graphic forms and in so doing highlight the limitations of such generic terms as “comics,” “manga,” and indeed “transcultural” itself. Like all of the primary texts examined so far in this thesis, these two contemporary graphic works combine genres such as the coming-of-age narrative, oral mythology, and the deconstructed fable, also experimenting with translations of pre-existing cultural narratives and transforming stereotypes by filtering them through non-standard “visual language” forms (see Introduction). Both texts reimagine classic “us and them” scenarios, but open these up to embrace nonhuman

⁷¹ Throughout this chapter I treat *Yōkaiden* as one text comprised of two volumes.

others and non-Western ways of thinking. One text (Matsumoto's) is self-classified as an "Original English Language Manga" (OEL), the other (Yahgulanaas's) as a "Haida Manga." What unites them—as I will go on to show—is their transformative approach to the manga medium, but for the unfamiliar reader a few explanatory comments on manga are needed first.

For scholars and general readers alike, the generic term "manga" tends to delineate a specifically Japanese style of cartooning. It is generally acknowledged that Japanese artist "Hokusai Katsuhika (1760–1849) coined the term 'manga' around 1815" (Brenner 3)—a term that "originates from the Japanese compound reading of the two Chinese characters 漫画, translated into English as 'random' or 'irresponsible' and 'picture,' respectively" (Brienza 469). Although most discussions of manga today describe its descent from Japanese art forms, illuminated scrolls, and ancient caricatures, there is "an alternate point of view that attributes greater influence to more recent media, such as photography and film, in particular the comic books of U.S. origin that appeared in Japan after World War II" (Ostrowitz 2). "All of these histories," says Judith Ostrowitz, "pay tribute to some form of nexus of Eastern and Western traditions" (Ostrowitz 2).

As manga scholar Neil Cohn suggests, "the word *manga* has come to have two meanings outside Japan. Some use it to designate Japanese 'comics,' the sociocultural objects, and often the industry and community surrounding them. However, others use 'manga' to name this visual language itself—loosely conceived of as an 'aesthetic style'" ("Japanese" 187). Built into both of these concepts is the idea of a cohesive type that—as in Frederik Schodt's claim at the beginning of this chapter—ties manga to its original Japanese location, but in the process also raises questions over transcultural ideals of mutual understanding. Indeed, for Casey

Brienza the term *manga* is best understood as “connot[ing] certain stereotypes about specific types of narrative and artistic content” (470)—stereotypes that have come to even greater prominence with the “manga revolution” and/or “manga boom” currently cited in the United States (Brienza 468). The wider contexts of North American settler colonialism and human exceptionalism—both of which function in exclusionary ways—are important here, as is Wendy Siuyi Wong’s claim that “[g]iven the long worldwide domination of American cultural products, the challenges being posed by manga and anime can be seen as a good sign that the world is developing more balanced and tolerant practices. At the moment, Japanese cultural products are the only major alternative choice outside the American cultural hegemony” (347). In this last sense, manga—however stereotypical its surface form—can emerge as a viable alternative, a potentially disruptive space in which to critique systems of cultural hegemony such as those of the US or, more broadly, the West (see also Chapters One and Two).

It seems significant in this context that neither Matsumoto nor Yahgulanaas is American; rather, both are west coast Canadians (though as will be seen they are not necessarily allies of the Canadian state). Matsumoto is a self-described Japanese Canadian author born in British Columbia. On her blog, she discusses both her “mash-up” art style and “some of the quirks that come along with being a Japanese-Canadian who draws manga that isn’t manga because it’s in English” (“Powell”).⁷² Yahgulanaas, for his part, claims that he is of mixed ancestry, but identifies as Haida. As he says, “Culturally I’m Haida, I choose this because my immigrant lineages don’t require defense. They occupy all the available space. Haida values need to be buttressed against this. It is Haida that has a great gift, and strangely,

⁷² See also Matsumoto’s biography at www.spacecoyote.com/about/bio/.

Canada doesn't know how to receive it" ("Impulse" 160). Throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, Yahgulanaas served the Haida Nation in campaigns against mining and logging as well as helping to secure political rights for the Haida people (Levell 97).⁷³ "In literal terms," Nicola Levell writes, "Haida Manga graphically engages with contemporary political issues, particularly those that relate to the land and address environmental and ecological concerns, which resonate not only with the Haida Nation but also with a broader body politic, at regional, national and global levels" (99).

While *Yōkaiden* and *Red* are inspired by very different cultural and political backgrounds, and while they take their readers on very different journeys, both texts consciously rework ideas of the local and the national by taking on conspicuously *transregional* forms. They are also *translinguistic* in their methodological approach, in keeping with manga as a medium generally considered to be capable of intermingling several categories and genres—several verbal and visual “languages”—at one time (McCloud, Cohn).⁷⁴ According to Robin Brenner, “Manga contain every category of literature” (222); moreover, the texts explored in this chapter, even while they carry the general designation of “manga,” stand as contemporary examples of graphic fiction that question *all* simplistic definitions of genre, nationality, and style.

⁷³ See, for example, Yahgulanaas, Ted Talk, “Art Opens Windows to The Spaces Between Ourselves” (2015). Also important is the fact that “Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands), has made some momentous inroads in establishing [native title to land and other rights]. Through proactive campaigning from the 1980s onwards, the Haida signed a Strategic Land Use Agreement with the Province of British Columbia in 2007” (Levell 97; see also Quail 706).

⁷⁴ I place the term “languages” in quotes here because in the area of Comics Studies, languages take on a wider meaning than one that might be traditionally assumed to refer to “words” alone. As Neil Cohn writes, “Many authors have intuitively associated the ‘comics’ medium with language, and the same analogy holds with manga” (“Japanese” 187; see also Introduction).

Given this medley of terms, it is hardly surprising that Matsumoto's two-volume, still unfinished series (Matsumoto "Interview") goes by many names, and has alternately been described as a "World Manga," an "American Manga," and a "graphic novel." As already explained, the term Matsumoto herself likes to use—"OEL"—stands for "Original English Language." OEL manga, which are composed in English but with blends of different manga styles, are often described as being amalgamations of Western and Japanese cartooning (Acosta; Ostrowitz).

Alternatively, Cathy Sell uses the term Original Non-Japanese (ONJ) manga to discuss "the continuing intercultural evolution due to the overlap of cultures through the translation of manga and anime [and or animation]" (96). "Haida Manga" is different, being Yahgulanaas's preferred term for some of his own work, specifically *Red*, which, published as a graphic novel, blends Haida artistic practices with oral narrative and Pacific Northwest coast art.

There is no space here to delve further into the complex genealogy and composition of manga, which has been open to mixes of high and popular culture ever since its inception and remains notoriously difficult to define (Bouissou 17; Brienza 470). In addition, as Brenner observes, "manga creators can take one idea and run with it in entirely different directions without any qualms about remaining true to the 'original' idea or myth" (188). Perhaps both *Yōkaiden* and *Red* are orthodox after all in this general sense, but while both take cues from manga—not least by adopting the more or less standard manga tropes of violence and satire as well as its "tradition of familiarity between human and nonhuman beings" (Bouissou 18)—they also significantly depart from some of its identifying practices, most obviously its traditional right-to-left reading order, as will be seen below.

In terms of their plots, both works revolve around orphaned anti-heroes who are out to seek revenge for the loss of their only remaining family members. As

Susan Pointon points out, “the revenge fantasies of a socially challenged adolescent marginalized by his peers [. . .] translate quite readily across most geographical and national borders” (48); indeed, this is a truism of the coming-of-age and journey narrative tropes that unite the texts examined in this thesis, even if these tropes are made to function in different ways (see Introduction). Hamachi, Matsumoto’s protagonist—much like Red, Yahgulanaas’s—falls squarely into this territory. However, such virtuous revenge seeking proves to be the downfall of both, with Hamachi learning that his idealism and instinctive sympathy for others can only take him so far, whereas Red⁷⁵ finds out that an egotistical disregard for others begets suicide. Both quests for retribution are blinded by typical familial convictions that thicken the plot and drive faux-naïf themes in each narrative; meanwhile, political depths are intimated beneath the surface intricacies of the plot.

Intertextual and Textual Languages in Yōkaiden

Yōkai...A class of creature in Japanese lore, often translated as ‘monster,’ ‘demon,’ or ‘spirit.’ There were hundreds of *yōkai*. Some resembled humans. Some resembled animals. Some were household objects, brought to life after many years of neglect. [. . .] As technology advanced, they vanished—Nina Matsumoto (*Yōkaiden* #1 preface)

Matsumoto’s alternately dark and humorous storyline in *Yōkaiden* evolves into an eccentric tale about the protagonist Hamachi’s encounters with the mythological *yōkai*. *Yōkai*, as readers learn (in the first instance through the epigraph quoted above) are creature spirits that have a long and colourful history in

⁷⁵ To distinguish between the character “Red” and the text *Red*, I will continue to use italics for the text only.

Japanese folklore.⁷⁶ In Matsumoto’s tangled storyworld, which is simultaneously located in an anachronistic ancient Japan and the fantastic underworld of the “Yōkai realm”—otherwise known as Yōkaiden—yōkai are feared and hunted by humans. Hamachi, however, naively believes that humans can peacefully coexist with yōkai. Events prove otherwise: for example, when Hamachi releases a kappa (water spirit) from one of his grandmother’s traps, having to remove its leg to do so, the creature later returns for revenge against his grandmother and steals her soul. Trickster figures are common in the Japanese oral tradition. Kappa are popular mischief makers that straddle different ontological realms; as Roman Rosenbaum suggests, “most people from all walks of life [can] easily relate to the mischievous trickster implications” of the kappa (399).

This specific kappa, whom Hamachi aptly names “Madcap,”⁷⁷ can also be seen on the cover (Fig 40 below). He mirrors the cantankerous demeanour of Hamachi’s grandmother, suggesting that each yōkai, though existing across group identities, has unique personality traits. The allegorical implications of yōkai become clear when Hamachi faces down the “Yōkai Slayer” whose “blade cuts through every yōkai [he] see[s]” (2nd candle).⁷⁸ Hamachi sees this fundamentalist position as “unforgivable.” As he tells the Yōkai Slayer, “Sure, there are some bad

⁷⁶ For an in-depth study, see Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (2009). As Foster says, “the history of yōkai is very much the history of the efforts to describe and define the object being considered.” He asks, “How do we talk of something ambiguous, continually shifting, a constant presence that is forever absent? How do we describe the mysterious body always on the verge of discovery, the apparition already disappearing in the mist?” (2).

⁷⁷ This character name recalls the mainstream Marvel character of the same name, inviting a possibly subversive intertextual comparison with the supervillain.

⁷⁸ The all-caps typeset has been changed to be consistent with the typeset of this chapter. For both *Yōkaiden* and *Red*, the ellipses are original to the main text as is the bold typeface unless otherwise specified. Because *Yōkaiden* is non-paginated, the references will be to the chapters, which are called “candles” in the text.

yōkai. Sure, sometimes they attack innocent people. But **most** yōkai are good! [. . .] Did you know nine out of ten attack **only** when provoked? Of course not! You only believe what you want to!” (2nd candle). This early scene suggests a disjuncture that will go on to provide the main conflict of the narrative, which moves—without any apparent resolution—between harshly pragmatic and sentimentally idealistic worldviews.

In the second half of volume one, Hamachi travels into Yōkaiden to find Madcap and retrieve his grandmother’s soul. Ostensibly designed to avenge his grandmother, who has had her soul stolen by Madcap, Hamachi’s quest is seemingly contradictory: for it is unclear whether he is genuinely trying to help his grandmother or whether it is the offending yōkai he is wishing to befriend. Readers witness the villagers reflecting on this when they discuss Hamachi’s situation: “She was... killed by a **yōkai**?” / “How ironic...” / “I don’t think this counts as irony” / “But the grandmother of a boy who loves yōkai was killed by one.” / That’s called ‘bad luck.’” / No... That’s ‘cosmic irony.’ A boy who loves yōkai entering their realm for the purpose of harming one is ‘situational irony.’” This kind of rapid-fire wordplay is typical of a text which, while it follows a more or less linear storyline, repeatedly creates absurdist situations where identities, temporalities, and languages all rub jarringly against each—often with comical results.

“Authenticity” is a further object of irony in the text: for, as Angela Moreno Acosta suggests, the authenticity of Matsumoto’s work in terms of its alignment with its “OEL Manga” description has been disputed by a North American readership expecting a certain sort of “Japaneseness” that has its own history as a sub-category within the US comics market (229–233). As Acosta points out, the question as to what constitutes OEL “Japaneseness” glosses over the obvious fact of translation (229–30). Matsumoto’s text plays on this context of manufactured

authenticity, exaggerating its own unruly marriage of “Englishness” and “Japaneseness.”⁷⁹ For example, *Yōkaiden* carries a Japanese title superimposed in a visual overlay of the “English” over the “Japanese” on the cover.

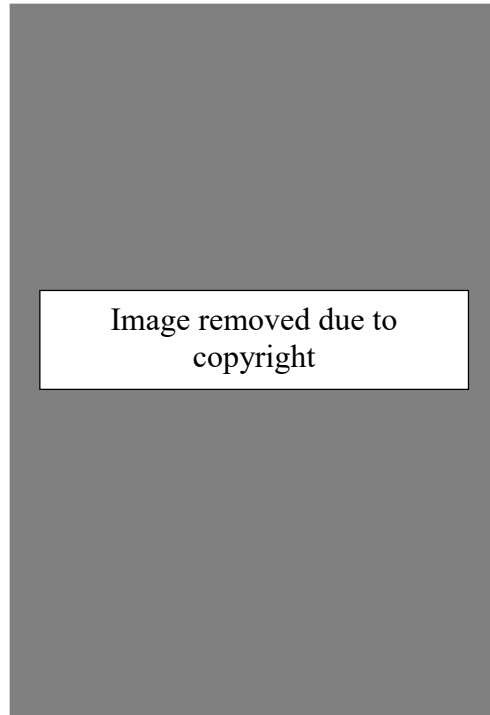


Figure 40. *Yōkaiden* vol. 1 Cover

From the cover, we can identify at least three different orthographic methods: English, Japanese Kanji, and Japanese in English transliteration—sometimes referred to in English as *rōmaji*. This method of mixing languages—sometimes with random translations—continues throughout the text, as does the author’s predilection for mixing manga/comics elements, mythology, and a wide variety of storytelling techniques. There is a didactic aim to at least some of this: as Matsumoto describes the intention behind her *Yōkaiden* books, “I don’t see classic

⁷⁹ For more on “inauthenticity” and “paradoxes of authenticity” see, for example, Rey Chow, “Where Have all the Natives Gone?” and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 157–164.

Japanese monsters very often outside of Japan. I wanted more people to know about them” (“Free Talk” Vol. 1).

Beyond obvious intermixes of English and Japanese throughout *Yōkaiden*, Matsumoto also stirs in some French. Readers first see this in the candle title, “The Lantern is Not French” (5th candle). Here, Hamachi dubs a talking lamp yōkai “Lumi” for *Lumière* in French.⁸⁰ Lumi becomes Hamachi’s sidekick in the Yōkai realm and herself questions Hamachi about how he knows French. For readers aware that Canada’s two official languages are English and French, this resonates on both linguistic and broader cultural-national levels, also suggesting a further subversion of the text’s own “OEL-ness.”

This queering of categories extends to the numerous binary divisions that are made visible in the text, for instance between life and death, human and nonhuman, East and West. For example, during Hamachi’s first encounter with the aforementioned kappa he asks, “Are you a kappa? Those green, cucumber-loving, river dwelling yōkai... Who are common in Japan, but make no appearance in Western culture?” (1st candle). As he helps the kappa return the water plate to his head, he quips, “you **need** that water. It’s your life source.” Early on, then, Matsumoto sets an emphatic narrative tone that matches hyperbole to serious self-reflexivity, imparting a comedic edge: “thanks for the info, Mr. Narrator,” the sarcastic kappa responds. Soon thereafter, when Hamachi takes it upon himself to fix the kappa’s foot with a “peg leg” instead of a “normal” crutch, the kappa retorts, “Thank you for making my decisions for me,” followed by, “it’s not like I was planning on ever marrying anyway” (1st candle).

⁸⁰ This is perhaps an intertextual reference to the Disney character from *Beauty and the Beast*.

These early clashes raise questions as to who is to be trusted: neither humans nor yōkai, or so it appears. Normative practices are similarly scrutinized: following Scott Bukatman’s observations that in archetypal “late modern” comics “[m]utant bodies are explicitly analogized to Jewish bodies, gay bodies, adolescent bodies, Japanese- or Native- or African-American bodies,” C. Richard King wryly argues that a reformulation is called for now that those “analogized through mutant bodies [have begun] producing comic books” (214).⁸¹ Matsumoto’s trickster-ish dialogue not only draws attention to human frailties, but also points to the contradictions and queering potential of her eccentric characters. For instance, when in Yōkaiden Hamachi becomes indebted to “Christina,” a yōkai fox spirit and the ruler of Yōkaiden. Christina has visionary capabilities that will—or so Hamachi thinks—help him to find Madcap. But Christina, who reveres human culture over what she calls the “shallow uncivilized ways of the yōkai,” has ulterior motives, and in another prominent reversal she wants to keep Hamachi as a “pet” (8th candle).

Christina’s particular form of human worship depends on figuring Hamachi zoomorphically. In order to set Hamachi up for failure, Christina tasks him with a series of near-impossible mini-quests before she will agree to help him. Along with Lumi and his “protective sacred rope,” Hamachi ventures through Yōkaiden. Miraculously he completes his tasks, meeting all manner of strange yōkai along the way. At the end of Volume II, readers are left hanging—uncertain if Hamachi will be stuck in Yōkaiden forever—after Christina refuses to help Hamachi. She calls his goal “selfish” and places a dogtag around his neck. (This matches her earlier treatment of him, for during his stay in Yōkaiden, he has also been housed in what

⁸¹ In the Native American context—discussed in regards to the specific Haida Nation below—see also Gord Hill (Kwakwaka’wakw), *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* (2010) and Michael A. Sheyahshe, *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (2008).

looks exactly like a doghouse). At this point the Yōkai Slayer appears—the same character Hamachi initially opposed for his bigoted attitude towards the yōkai at the start of Volume I. With his sword at Christina’s neck on the last page, he dramatically says that they “have business to discuss” (15th candle, Fig 45 below).

It soon becomes clear that Hamachi’s quest to find the kappa and avenge his grandmother is not the sole aim of this increasingly predictable yet for all that complicated narrative. The text’s secondary quest both relays and transforms the implications of yōkai culture for a wider audience beyond its traditionally Japanese one, and beyond one that is easily contained within the yōkai realm of fantasy alone. The yōkai are “oxymoronic creatures,” as Japanese folklorist Michael Dylan Foster calls them, inhabiting “a realm of persistent Otherness” (*Pandemonium* 24). Indeed, Matsumoto stylizes the yōkai realm as dystopic, but it is also not entirely in opposition to Hamachi’s utopian vision of harmonious coexistence. While *Yōkaiden* is very much about Hamachi’s ostracism—*his* otherness from his society because of his “yōkai love”—the text cleverly manipulates its own categorical reversals, avoiding reduction to generic types and simultaneously suggesting both the unmooring of binary divisions and their dislocation.

That said, *Yōkaiden* engages with specific historical details on several different fronts. For example, as the story begins, Hamachi reads from “100 yōkai Tales” and lights 100 candles, a tradition that can be traced back to early Japanese texts from 1718 (Foster “Early” 138). (As previously mentioned, Matsumoto also names her chapters “candles.”) Throughout the text, an inherent diversity in yōkai tradition allows for the encyclopedic incorporation of what Foster calls a “ludic mode of expression” that blends “earnest scholarly undertakings” with the “lively and creative spirit of play” (*ibid.*). Since the Edo period (1603–1867), yōkai have often been presented in encyclopedic and ludic format (Shamoon 281; Foster

“Early” 142). Matsumoto’s OEL manga appears to follow this Edo tradition, exploiting the seeming contradiction between the text’s scholarly impulse towards the categorical and taxonomical and its shifting ideas of subjective play.

Yōkaiden also shadows a significant manga tradition that builds on the work of the famous manga artist and historian Shigeru Mizuki (1922–2015). Celebrated as founder of the yōkai genre and “yōkai professor,” Mizuki is known for work that explores humanity through the figure of the monster (Davisson n.p.). As Foster says, “in the 1960s, Mizuki enthusiastically revitalized the image of yōkai in the popular imagination, breathing life into their weird forms so that they would once again playfully enchant children and adults alike, but at the same time retain their nostalgic association with an earlier Japan” (“Early” 142). From a different vantage point, C. J. Suzuki argues that Mizuki, in presenting “anti-heroic and grotesque human and non-human characters as main protagonists,” uses manga to mount “a critique of wartime imperialism and postwar Japanese society, both of which seemed to him suppressive and dehumanizing” (230; for more on the grotesque, see also Chapters One and Three). Stemming from his harrowing experiences of World War II, Mizuki claimed to have “purposefully designed his yokai to be of no specific ethnicity or nationality. To him, they represented aspects of humanity—and its potential. No matter how fantastic the creature or sublime the deity, they were driven by earthly concerns and desires” (Davisson n.p.). Matsumoto draws on this Mizukian tradition to bridge gaps between time and space, the human and the nonhuman, the material and the spiritual, the East and the West through her own renderings of yōkai-human relations; she also points more specifically to Mizuki’s influence through one of her own characters, named Inukai Mizuki,⁸² who appears in

⁸² Matsumoto confirms this link in an Interview with Deb Aoki; see Matsumoto, “Interview.”

flashbacks as the author of the “Field Guide to Yōkai,” the reference book that Hamachi alludes to throughout the text.

Like Hamachi, Matsumoto’s Mizuki is ostracized for his “love” of yōkai: “He was shunned by everyone” (2nd candle). Matsumoto’s interest in yōkai, like the esteemed Shigeru Mizuki’s, also reflects how the dehumanizing discourses of modernity form a potentially deadly mix with material, embodied, and earthly concerns.

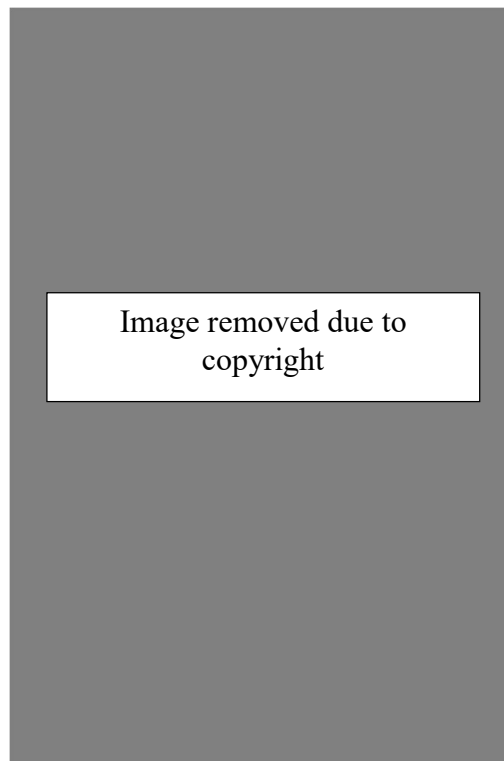


Figure 41. Madcap and Mizuki (1st candle)

In the early scene above, where Hamachi is in the process of freeing Madcap and describing his steadfast, Mizuki-esque motivations, several of Matsumoto’s diegetic and hermeneutic techniques emerge here. Besides the typically dynamic interplay between visual and verbal elements, we can notice here that Matsumoto employs “subjective motion” (McCloud 114), a common manga technique that gives the reader a sense of being in the action as opposed to just observing it. This works on the level of the visual, giving us a sense of *being* the kappa who is about to have his

leg chopped off, but also on the level of the verbal, where the English and Japanese words and characters take on their own subjective motions. Multiple fonts, different types of word balloons, onomatopoeia—translated and not—all combine to suggest an incessant movement between seen and unseen languages that conveys the impression of floating between space and place.

Hamachi's dual quest also teaches readers that yōkai are not nearly as innocent as he would have us believe. In addition to Hamachi's parodic dialogue—visually caricatured in the text's play with fonts—Matsumoto sets up a running dialogue between (sometimes horrific) human-animal encounters, traditional storytelling, and classificatory themes. In all of this, Hamachi features as a distinctly unreliable narrator. Rather than giving Hamachi the role of saviour, Matsumoto highlights his incessant play and curiosity, which positions him—and perhaps more importantly the text—as an inquisitor, implicitly upsetting any pretensions to omniscient authority throughout.

We see this sort of narrative disruption in several of the segments between candles. “Hamachi's Journal,” “A Word From the Author,” and “A Field Guide to Yōkai” are the main interjections that Matsumoto deploys athwart the main narrative. Below are two prominent examples.

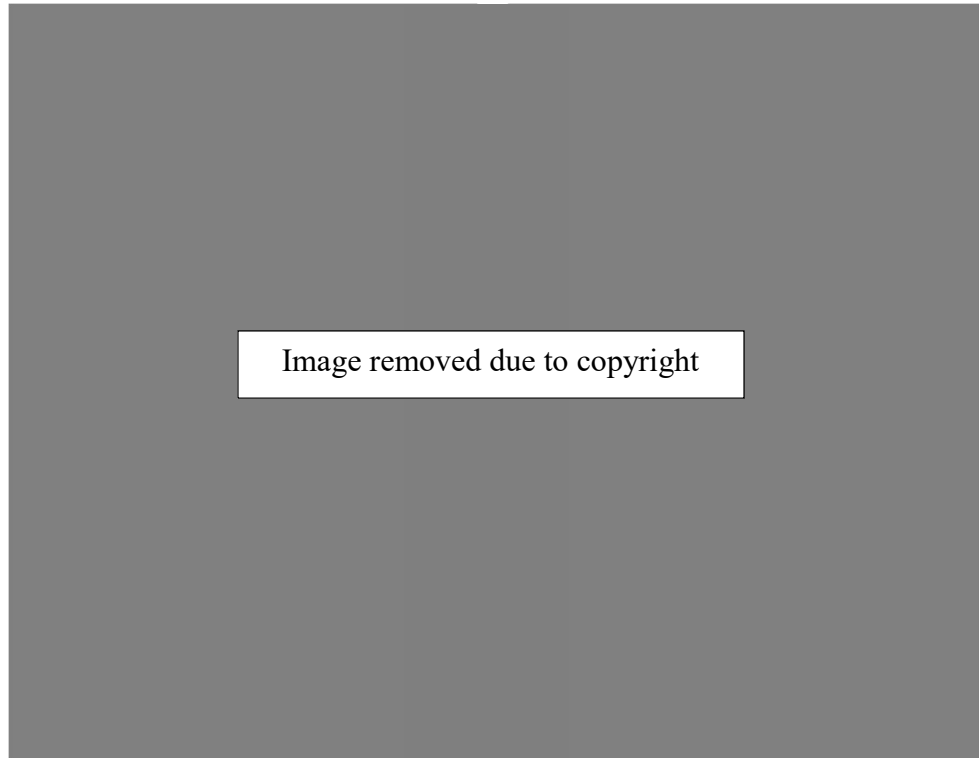


Figure 42. Examples of Hamachi’s Journal and A Word From “Haniwa”

In the first example, Hamachi’s journal entry, “Paper lantern ghost (a.k.a. chōchin-obaké),” names the same kind of yōkai as Lumi in two different languages.

However, the drawing proves absurdly incongruent with Hamachi’s labelling—a nonsensical discrepancy that is also noted in the exchange between Lumi and Hamachi at the bottom of the page. In the second instance, the text offers an ironic spin on one of its own conventions—“A Word From the Author.” In this case, the author is circumscribed by another tangential character, Binzuru. The accompanying description highlights the ambiguity of the Haniwa—terra-cotta clay figures from the Kofun period—noting that “researchers aren’t completely sure of their purpose” and that they may easily be confused in popular usage when their names change due to English translations. Through these and other hermeneutic devices, Matsumoto succeeds in foregrounding the inherent slipperiness of the descriptive categories she uses in her text.

As should be clear by now, *Yōkaiden* energetically queers its own “original English language-ness,” thereby critiquing both human beings and their technologies of language (predominantly English) as the knower/namer of things. When Hamachi first meets and proceeds to “name” Lumi—the “Tsukumo”—Lumi responds, “Tsukumo...Oh, right. That’s the term you humans gave to yōkai like me.” As Lumi further tells Hamachi, “Getting’ to speak my mind after a century was a **relief**. I just felt so **used** y’know?” To which Hamachi replies, “**Exactly!** We should treat our things better.” Matsumoto repeatedly draws attention to Hamachi’s liberal ethic along these lines, highlighting his tone of respect, but also making readers suspicious of it. Here, for example, Hamachi’s bequeathing of the name “Lumi,” and the specifying of her gender—“Wow. A **girl** lantern! Or, erm, **lady** lantern” (5th candle)—individualizes her among the other types of Tsukumo, who are “anything from lanterns, cups, blankets, sandals, umbrellas ... that came to life after a **hundred years**.” It is clear, though, that the attempt to classify is deeply unreliable. Through quirky lists and taxonomies of this kind, interspersed with Hamachi’s crossed-out titles, rewritten journal entries, and stick drawings between chapters called “candles,” readers become increasingly aware that Matsumoto’s main interest is not in descriptive categorization but in the strange combinations—embodied in the figure of the monster—that emerge from textual play.

Yōkai and the Tricky Idea of the Monstrous

The “insectile feeling” is a feeling in which one is never hung up with human issues, just like one of many other earthly creatures—Mizuki Shigeru, *Nonnonbā and Me* [memoir] (qtd. in Suzuki 229)

In the Japanese context, “the English word ‘monster’ can be misleading” (Foster “Early” 135). Thus, while Matsumoto ostensibly sets up an “us and them”

dichotomy between humans and yōkai through which the latter are identified as monsters, she also complicates this dichotomy, ultimately taking as much issue with the term “monster” as she does with negative associations of yōkai and their capabilities. Moreover, she is aware (though her readers might not be) that, as Foster breezily puts it, “Japanese monsters have already taken over the world” (“Early” 133). In his 2009 book, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*, Foster claims that such “supernatural creatures, “weird and mysterious ‘things,’” “have been a part of Japanese culture (and perhaps every other culture) for as long as history has been recorded” (2). He then explains, “Today *yōkai* appears frequently in both academic and popular writing; it has become an umbrella signifier that can be variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence” (“Early” 135). As Foster points out, this “inclusiveness is significant: in distinction to many conceptions of monstrosity in the West, the category of *yōkai* is vexingly diffuse. [. . .] In general *yōkai* discourse, [. . .] there is a continuum between the spiritual and the material,” and this exists within shifting religious and secular discourses (135–137). Foster’s account of *yōkai* offers a stark contrast with traditional Western constructions of monstrosity as the attempt to cordon off potentially threatening elements into the category of the monstrous where they can be easily labeled and abjected (see Chapter One).

According to Jeffrey Cohen, “monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expressions” (452). Expanding on this, art historian Asa Simon Mittman writes,

The monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us [. . .] to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization. [. . .] Monster theory can be, for marginalized groups and cultures, empowering, much as the closely related project of postcolonial theory has been, as a means of understanding and describing the tools used to abject, to reject and exclude people from the warmth of the mead hall. (8)

This theory applies neatly to *Yōkaiden*, especially when readers realize that Matsumoto's text exploits the "sense of vertigo" at almost every turn of the page. However, even as she accentuates the fluid nature of yōkai figures, Matsumoto remains true to their "core feature" that "they live in a no-man's-land between right and wrong" (Papp 238). This ambiguity extends to knowledge itself insofar as the sorts of thinking that yōkai inspire entail an incessant striving to make sense of that which is never fully knowable. This is perhaps best visualized in the 6th candle, entitled "Chimera."

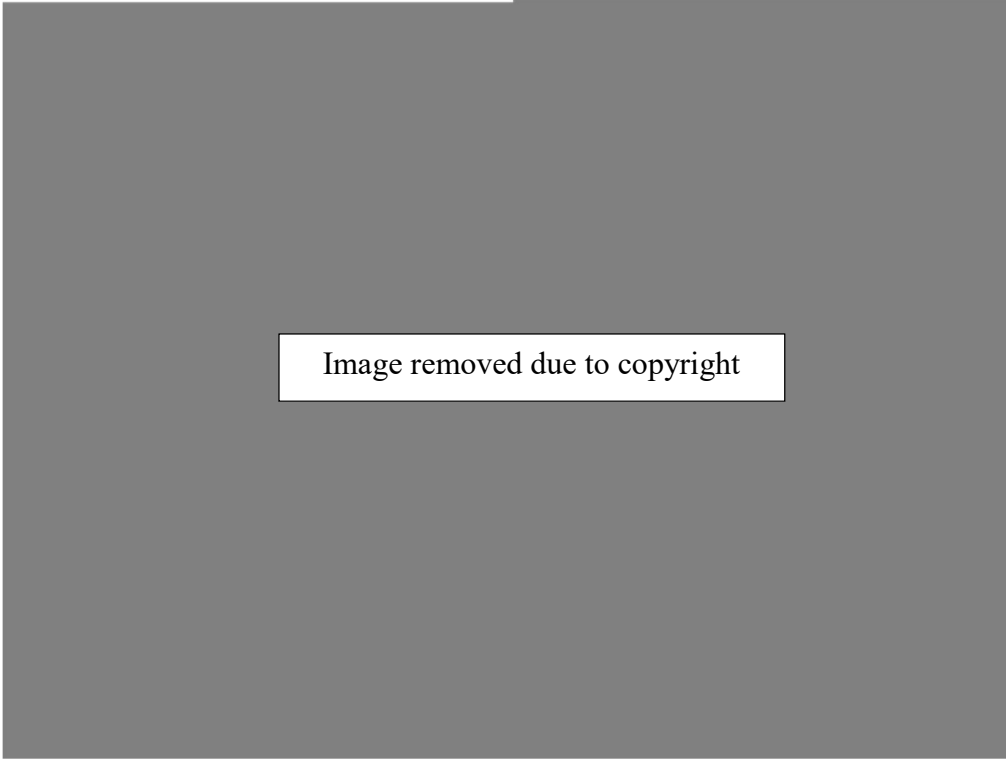


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Figure 43. Chimera and Stratification (6th candle)

In the first example, which runs across the top of the page, Matsumoto’s aligned frames suggest an inevitably failed attempt to categorize the un-categorical—the “chimerical” yōkai called Nué. Here, Matsumoto inverts what McCloud has called “the polyptych” whereby “a moving figure is imposed over a continuous background” (115). Incomplete narration adds to the general sense of uncertainty—“Head of a monkey. Body of a raccoon dog. Legs of a tiger” forgets the last element: the tail of a snake. For Nué, who has a human-like face, the “unfortunate physique” of Lumi does not measure up. In this exchange, Nué is characterized by masculinity, humanity, wildness, and higher education (merged with class)—all of which, in his view, are identities that combine to trump Lumi’s femininity, animality, domestication, and vulgarity. Such overt play with identity politics reinforces Matsumoto’s strategy of queering hierarchical epistemologies of abnormality and dehumanization—“monstrosity” consequently emerges more as a question of

perspective than as a confirming marker of moral and or ontological differentiation in the text.

Queering Hamachi, Queering Identity

The exorcism of the ‘coolie’ and the ‘yellow peril’ from modern American popular culture is still a work in progress—Philip Smith (12).

A further “othering” device in the text is the figure of the orphan. Already in the preface, the orphaned Hamachi is branded as an outsider, a “weirdo” with “issues” and “mental problems.” Later, the villagers reinforce this: “Trauma. It must be trauma. Why else would a child be so interested in those terrible monsters?” (2nd candle). His interest is seen, that is, in terms of his deviance from the norms of his society. This intensifies the sympathetic nature of his character while showing the oppressiveness of the judgmental culture around him. As he himself proclaims: “I’m an **orphan!** A classic, archetypal **orphan!**” (4th candle). Ironic statements like this one highlight Matsumoto’s playful interaction with (Western) comics stereotypes. As Melanie Kimball writes, “Orphan characters in folktales and literature symbolize our isolation from one another and from society at large. [. . .] [O]rphans are clearly marked as being different from the rest of society. They are the eternal other” (559). This trope is prevalent across many different kinds of literature. Orphans regularly appear in ancient poetry, folktales, fairy tales, modern stories, novels, television shows, movies, and, as the present study confirms, graphic fiction (see Chapter One and Three). Kimball claims that these orphan characters “embody the hope that whatever the present situation, it can change for the better” (559). However, while Hamachi and Red (discussed below) to some extent embody this ideal, which will be familiar to many readers, they also bring up the issue of loss and its consequences. Furthermore, in a different way, they challenge the depiction of “classical orphan

heroes in Western literature [. . .] as White, Euro-centric characters” (Leoutsakas 10).

Hamachi’s parents’ death—which is unsatisfactorily explained to him as being due to tuberculosis—remains an obvious and recurring mystery throughout *Yōkaiden*. Readers learn that they were persecuted for their unconventional beliefs, which included an empathetic attitude toward yōkai and alternative—nonhuman—forms of knowledge and education. An additional suggestion is that their deaths had something to do with their “reading Mizuki’s books” (14th candle). What is clear is that Hamachi and his parents are conspicuous nonconformists, antithetical to the mainstream culture around them. This outsider status then carries over onto Hamachi, whose marginality comes to function as a floating signifier of strangeness and multiplicity in Matsumoto’s text. What is clear as well is that Hamachi, the self-proclaimed “classic, archetypal orphan,” is not *just* an orphan. Thus, while his literary genealogy seems initially to link him to the “chosen white boy” (in the comics tradition), we can also read him as an androgynous or queer *bishōnen* character (in the manga tradition). With traditional “manga eyes” and a ponytail that might refer to the Edo age of Japanese culture, he cuts across both temporal and gender categories. Matsumoto further highlights Hamachi’s multiplicity in one of the text’s “pin-up” colour prints.

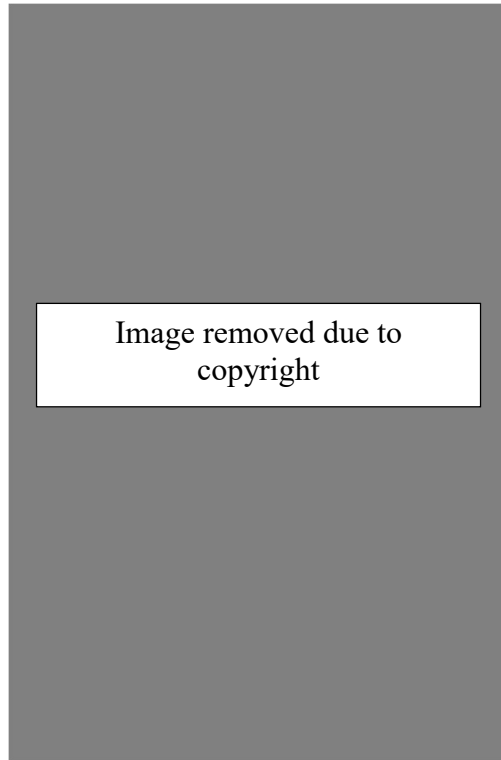


Figure 44. Hamachi Pin-up (Prologue Vol. 1)

Whereas Brenner might call this a “fan service pin-up”—in the manga tradition of including images that appeal to fans rather than advancing the plot (29)—I think Matsumoto’s placement of this image at the start of Volume I is more significant. Race- and gender-bending meanings can be read into the term “yōkai lover,” especially if we read Hamachi in the context of the *bishōnen* genre, which traditionally sees beautiful boys loving other beautiful boys (Welker 842). The “beautiful boy,” writes James Welker, “is visually and psychically neither male nor female; [. . .] but his tastes are not exclusively homosexual; he lives and loves outside the heteropatriarchal world inhabited by his readers” (842). Via manga critic Fujimoto Yukari, Welker suggests that “gender-bending identification and experimentation” grew out of the *shōjo* tradition that sought spaces for girls to “positively accept their own sexuality as women” (842).⁸³ But what about

⁸³ See also Sun Jung, “The Shared Imagination of *Bishōnen*, Pan-East Asian Soft Masculinity,” for a study of this image as it circulates in a shared imagination of the “pretty boy.”

“positively accepting” an identity that resides neither in the East nor in the West? Or one that does not completely identify with “the living” or “the human”? As such, “queer” becomes a *de facto* transcultural category in the text, incorporating both “Eastern” and “Western” elements, but irreducible to either.

Unlike other manga categorized by gender alone—*shōnen* for boys or *shōjo* for girls—*Yōkaiden* bends these “purist” classificatory boundaries in a number of ways. Already associated with generic “impurity”—shades of fantasy, fairytale, comedy, drama, history, and horror are all detectable in *Yōkaiden*—Hamachi’s “yōkai love” alludes to the breaking of manga orthodoxies as well as binaries linked to constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and the exalted human in Western traditions. Although Welker claims that the translation of bishōnen as “beautiful boy” in English is not equivalent (841), he also points out that “the full potential of boys’ love is largely overlooked: that of liberating readers not just from patriarchy but from gender dualism and heteronormativity” (843). In this way, Matsumoto’s genre and gender mixing recalls Donna Haraway’s argument that “purity claims are xenophobic and are ‘at the origin of racist discourse in European cultures as well as at the heart of linked gender and sexual anxiety’” (qtd. in Weinstein 237).

While Hamachi never questions his gender or sexual affiliation *verbally*, Matsumoto’s *visual* language conducts readers into those overlapping areas where, as Eileen Joy claims, “the queer and the nonanthropomorphic have always been importantly entwined” (223). A further source of entanglement is a “Free Talk” section at the end of each volume in which Matsumoto appears in her avatar, “Space Coyote.” These end sections break the “fourth wall,” adding further layers of complexity to the text’s multimodal media mix. Side stories are common in manga, but Matsumoto strategically adapts these, giving them a transcultural flavour that is

in keeping with the mischievously crosscutting nature of her trickster-like text.⁸⁴

Besides the main narrative, for example, the “Field Guide” recalls (but also parodies) the practices of Western ethnography; the “Journal” both is and is not the young artist at work; while the various “Author’s Notes” combine to ground the otherwise fantastical narrative of *Yōkaiden* in facts and authoritative knowledge that are then themselves shown to be on shifting sands.

As Christine Kim argues in a different context, the Japanese kappa figure provides a way of imagining “coexistences that do not resort to strategies of colonial violence” (297). While Matsumoto does not explicitly mention the violent internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, one gets a strong sense in the text of a dominant “narrative of Canadian identity that excludes racialized bodies” (Kim 292). Similarly, Matsumoto links *yōkai* to discussions about stratifying institutions. For example, when Hamachi meets the first *yōkai* in *Yōkaiden* they tell him, “We’re the lowest rung of the **yōkai social ladder**. Kappa are **upper middle class**. We don’t know what they do, and we **don’t care**. But even if we **did** know...we wouldn’t tell you.” “**Hey!** Why not?!” Hamachi replies. “You’re **Human**. Why should we help **You?**” They reply. “That’s...that’s **Racist**, you know!” Hamachi says. “Sure is!” They say (5th candle). Learning about the *yōkai* is part of Hamachi’s parents’ and Mizuki’s legacy, and is pertinent to the “education” of Hamachi, which he is relaying to Matsumoto’s audience in turn. “Mizuki was right,” Hamachi says, “We’re different [from the *yōkai*], but the same in a lot of ways, too.” As a bamboo vendor, born to poor parents, Hamachi reveals,

⁸⁴ For an interesting discussion of trickster figures in the context of Hiromi Goto’s *The Kappa Child* see Christine Kim, “Diasporic Violences, Uneasy Friendships, and *The Kappa Child*.”

“If I were a yōkai, I’d be one of them” (i.e. on “the lowest rung” of the social ladder) (5th candle). In this particular case, Matsumoto maps the yōkai social ladder onto a human one. She also suggests that racism and speciesism are interconnected forms of oppression that are further complicated by class stratifications. By building up layers of human and nonhuman alterity in the text, Matsumoto points to a nexus of heteronormativity that binds class, gender, race, and species alike. The text also suggests that those on the lower rungs of the social ladder may have a better view of such hierarchies—hierarchies that yōkai by definition disrupt.

At the end of Volume II, when tyrannical “Miss Christina” puts a dog collar around Hamachi’s neck so as to claim him for her collection, Hamachi becomes a humanimal in the full—paradoxically zoomorphic and dehumanizing—sense of the term (see also Chapter One). Hamachi’s only hope, ironically enough, resides with the “monstrous” Yōkai Slayer who swoops in at the end of the 15th candle. The Slayer’s dogmatism turns out to mirror Hamachi’s own; thus, unlike traditional orphan anti-heroes whose higher morals triumph in the end, Matsumoto undercuts Hamachi’s authority by suggesting that his utopian ideals overlook both the incommensurability of yōkai “nature” and the dystopic, potentially disruptive, aspects of Yōkaiden itself.

As we move towards the final frames, we see Christina’s three eyes juxtaposed against the Yōkai Slayer’s one and Hamachi’s two:



Figure 45. Intersecting Views (15th candle)

The visual perspective is correspondingly set in intersections of three. Hamachi’s “yōkai love” has proved to be too idealistic. This fox spirit yōkai has tricked him, but that is what fox spirits do; as Mizuki’s “Field Guide to Yōkai” reports, “they are mysterious, clever creatures with abilities beyond our comprehension”—which includes the capacity to deceive us for their own ends (8th candle). Meanwhile, Christina’s grotesque figuration, with human fingers dangling around her neck, highlights her human despotic antagonism *and* her yōkai moral ambivalence. As for the Yōkai Slayer, his myopic view is far too narrow-minded for him to be the hero of the tale.

Throughout *Yōkaiden*, then, Matsumoto suggests many different ways of understanding categorical instability, several of them mediated by Hamachi, who is strategically positioned between yōkai and human realms. More generally, Matsumoto’s use of yōkai taps into a cross-cultural fascination with ideas of a pre-human—possibly also post-human—sentience that exist with local variations across

all cultures. Such enigmatic creatures and mysterious “humanimal” phenomena have existed from the earliest records we have. But the composite “humanimal” figure—as throughout this thesis—also runs the risk of over-valuing the human. This is significant in *Yōkaiden* because Matsumoto suggests the need to account for realms of the *nonhuman* that gesture towards the importance of ecological ontologies as well (see also Chapter Three and Five).

In this context, the cliffhanger ending of *Yōkaiden* exceeds any strategy Matsumoto might have for future volumes. As Kazuhiko Komatsu writes, “Japan has a history of creating numerous yokai or characters, which goes back to its tradition of personifying everything and creating a story for each character. [. . .] Looking at the presence of yokai today, which is well beyond fad, we find that yokai may be tools not only for viewing the past but also the future” (28). That may well be so, but by the end of Volume II, Matsumoto’s unorthodox manga has only succeeded in showing the inconclusiveness of the unruly yōkai imagination. As we have seen, this is an imagination that openly acknowledges the ultimate inexplicability of the material-spiritual realm of things. But it is also one that implicitly undercuts liberal pluralism and the utopian ideals (peace, cross-cultural harmony, etc.) it supports.

Seeing and Reading Red: A Haida Manga

Liberal ideals are also challenged—albeit more overtly—in Yahgulanaas’s *Red*, a self-styled “Haida Manga.” Like Matsumoto’s text, Yahgulanaas’s uses

multiple visual and verbal “languages”⁸⁵ that cut across different ontological realms, taking on both “humanimal” and transcultural aspects, but it does so primarily in order to articulate a culturally specific Haida way of life. As Nicola Levell aptly puts it, “By fusing Haida iconography with Japanese-inspired manga, Haida Manga operates as a hybrid idiom for circulating Haida issues, oral narratives and cautionary tales within and beyond indigenous, local and generational spheres of exchange” (98).

The second half of this chapter will explore how these different cross-fertilizations are placed in tension with one another within the overarching context of a Haida worldview. For Thomas King, “The magic of Native literature—as with other literatures—is not the themes of the stories—identity, isolation, loss, ceremony, community, maturation, home—it is in the way meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigms” (112). For Yahgulanaas, these paradigms have much to do with the legacy of racism and its perpetuation in the North American comics tradition, which, as C. Richard King argues, have served as “an exemplary instance of [an] American imperial imaginary” that has historically imagined “Native Americans as objects” (214–5). One does not need to be a comics scholar to know that the medium has relied (and often still does rely) on stereotypes—both negative and positive—of the “Red

⁸⁵ I do not wish to confuse the visual language of Haida art with the traditional Haida language, Xaad Kil or Xaat Kíl. “Haida” is the Anglicized term. For more information and relevant bibliographies see www.ydli.org/langs/haida.htm and www.haidalanguage.org. Xaad Kil, along with numerous other indigenous languages, is endangered because of the forced assimilation policies of the Canadian government, implemented through the Indian Residential School System, which took children from their parents and forced them to learn English (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Today, there is a resurgence of diverse efforts aimed at revitalizing the Haida language. See, for example, Stephen Hume, “A high-tech fight to save B.C.’s indigenous languages,” and Hannah Amrhein et al. “Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages.”

Indian.” Consider the following cover image, which is taken from a 1951 Bell Features (Canada) production of *Red Warrior: Tales From the Land of the Redmen!* (www.comics.org/series/72961/) and in which we can identify what King calls “anti-Indian racism” through the ostensibly celebratory trope of the native as warrior (215).



Figure 46. Covers: *Red Warrior* (1951) and *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009)

Yahgulanaas’s *Red*, published in 2009, explicitly takes up and transforms this “Red Man” stereotype. The text performs what we might call a strategically anachronistic (i.e. thoroughly modernized) colonial encounter that builds, like *Yōkaiden*, on trickster creation stories and mythologies. In the text’s establishing scene, the eponymous Red dives into the sea; he then comes up clutching what appears to be a clamshell (3). This transparently reflects the Haida creation story, in which human beings “were said to [have been] released by Raven from their watery prison ‘within [a] cockle shell’” (Zandvliet and Brown 209). As Lewis Hyde further explains, “On the North Pacific coast, the trickster Raven made the first fishhook; he taught the spider how to make her web and human beings how to make nets” (18). Although the image of a Raven only makes one obvious appearance in this text, it is

rendered in red and linked to Red's suicide at the end of the text (99). The colour red, as might be expected, has many different meanings in the text, ranging from bloodline to blood loss: several of these are specific to Haida cosmology. Miriam Brown Spiers elucidates: "According to the rules of Haida art, Red, as a color and a character, is expected to rely upon formlines while also being contained within those lines. Because red/Red's importance is secondary, he is responsible for respecting the naturally existing boundaries and living according to their structure" (44). As a heroic figure, Red is arguably secondary to the "formlines" that shape Yahgulanaas's story—but as a decidedly anti-heroic *trickster*, he is constantly challenging the boundaries within which he is circumscribed, with violent and ultimately tragic consequences for himself. To some extent this is of a piece with North American Native mythologies in which tricksters, who rarely maintain a singular or fixed form, fall prey to their own rule-breaking schemes, sometimes destroying themselves in the process (Hyde; West). But, as will be seen, Yahgulanaas's text is too volatile to sustain "an overgeneralized trickster theory" (Fagan 8); instead, it highlights disruptions of traditional subject-object relations, challenges conventional ideas of the authentic, and disturbs linear narratives of progress—and all within a multi-faceted, deeply iconoclastic text.

What is Haida Manga?

"Haida manga" is the idiosyncratic approach that allows Yahgulanaas to infuse Pacific Northwest Coast art and oral history with transpacific influences. Levell sees his art practice as "a kind of transpacific fusion that transculturates Haida formlines, ideas and oral histories with manga, the Japanese genre of cartoon and comic illustration" (94). In Yahgulanaas's own words,

The merger [Haida Manga] is not really of style or technique but rather intent. The first intent was to signal that the lineage of my work would not arise out of a continental American root but would be grafted onto a north Pacific literary tradition. This of course would be Haida graphic and artistic practices in the Classic era and for the Japanese side, I draw on their longstanding appreciation that complexity and diversity can be conveyed in manga, or graphic literature. (qtd. in Haines “Michael” n.p.)

In a different context, he says that he is “attracted to the idea that manga (pictures without limitations) might signal an evolution of Haida design [. . .] but need not be seen as contained within a Euro-centric world (‘comics’)” (Yahgulanaas, qtd. in Colclough 40). This speaks quite clearly to ongoing decolonization struggles in Canada and elsewhere in North America. For over a century, from at least the Indian Act (1876), the central aim of Canada’s Native policy was to eradicate First Nations cultures and ways of life. The Indian Act, Henderson explains, “was first introduced in 1876 as a consolidation of previous colonial ordinances that aimed to eradicate First Nations culture in favour of assimilation into Euro-Canadian society” (n.p.). More recently, extensive studies have found that Canada’s “Aboriginal policies” were designed to annul indigenous community’s autonomy; ignore their rights; terminate their treaties; obliterate their distinct cultures; and, through an inexorable process of assimilation, cause First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples effectively to cease to exist in Canada—a policy which has belatedly been described as “cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 1).

The more immediate context underpinning *Red* is that of Yahgulanaas’s home islands, the Haida Gwaii (colonially, Queen Charlotte Islands) archipelago off

the west coast of Canada. Historically, these islands have been exploited for their rich natural resources (Takeda and Røpke). Today, their original inhabitants find themselves “contesting the buried colonial epistemologies that enframe nature through a defining absence” (Willems-Braun 25). Over and against this colonial history, the Haida style of art has been likened to an ancient language with a visual grammar and vocabulary of animals and mythological creatures of its own. When I asked Yahgulanaas about the use of animals in his work, he replied, “I have little to say about the role [of animals] in my work particularly given their almost complete dominance as iconic and narrative roles in classic Haida Art.”⁸⁶ Carved and painted on wood, stone, and other materials, these iconic figures tell a story, identify the lineage of a social group, and explore philosophical ideas; in traditional Haida society, the visual arts have been a primary means of communication (Augaitis; Holm; Strauss).

The story of *Red* is framed by the paratext on its inside front cover. This introductory blurb is important for a number of reasons, not least because it draws attention to differently encoded methods of storytelling. As it also serves as a plot summary, I will quote it in full then discuss a few key lines:

Referencing a classic Haida oral narrative, this stunning full-colour graphic novel documents the tragic story of a leader so blinded by revenge that he leads his community to the brink of war and destruction. Red is the prideful leader of a small village in the islands off the northwest coast of British Columbia. His sister was abducted

⁸⁶ Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, communication with author, email, 4 December, 2014.

years ago by a band of Raiders. When news comes that his sister has been spotted in a nearby village, Red sets out to rescue her and exact revenge on her captors. Consisting of 108 pages of hand-painted illustrations, *Red* is a groundbreaking mix of Haida imagery and Japanese manga. Tragic and timeless, it is reminiscent of such classic stories as *Oedipus Rex* and *MacBeth*. *Red* is an action-packed and dazzling graphic novel that is also a cautionary tale about the devastating effects of rage and retribution.

Besides the obvious key words, which are aimed at a popular audience—stunning, dazzling, groundbreaking, action-packed—we can also extrapolate a series of tactically placed frames of reference that surround the eponymous character of Red. For example, the description suggests a transcultural relation between the “tragic and timeless” stories of *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth*, putting these canonical Western texts in company with a self-proclaimed “classic Haida oral narrative.” Yahgulanaas himself confirms that the story of Red is an “[o]ral narrative from my family’s history” (qtd. in Spiers 41). In addition, Yahgulanaas’s engagement with histories of settler/indigenous cultural encounter draws attention to a whole host of myths that police lines of difference between these two broadly defined cultural groups, e.g. the Western myth of the Noble Savage or “Redman.” These myths feed more or less directly into policies that have presented labels such as “Aboriginals” or “Indians” as stable and homogeneous categories. As Julia Emberley explains,

“Aboriginality” refers to the history of representation deployed by settler colonies to circumscribe the meaning of Indigenous existence, including social, political, and economic values and cultural

knowledge. This representational history, perpetuated through an oppositional and hierarchical duality of savagery/civilization and permeating European philosophical and ethnographic discourses of the late nineteenth century, came to substitute for the actual experience of Indigenous peoples and nations. Furthermore, Indigenous people were not permitted access to dominant technologies of representation, including print media and visual forms such as film, photography, and later, television. In spite of this exclusion, over the last 40 years, Indigenous people wrote, engaged in cultural production, and created a body of work that addressed both their experience and this history of representational violence. (209)

To put this in a more specifically west coast context, we might reflect on the fact that, as Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ƙi-ƙe-in put it, “As with Indigenous people, Indigenous knowledge was, through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, submerged, if not actively suppressed, from the public sphere in British Columbia” (xxxiii).

To place this now in the expansive context of *Red*, we might return to examine the title page (Fig 46)—an image that also appears directly in the middle of the book. While the title visually references Haida art, its three main terms (Red, Haida, and Manga) immediately draw our attention to transcultural contact zones, including the aforementioned idea of the Red Indian, which is indexed by the colour of the main character’s hair. This last is nothing if not a loaded signifier. And it is visually reinforced because Red virtually never looks the same way twice—his hair

colour is also the only way readers can identify him throughout the text. Below are just a few examples of several scattered across its 108 pages.

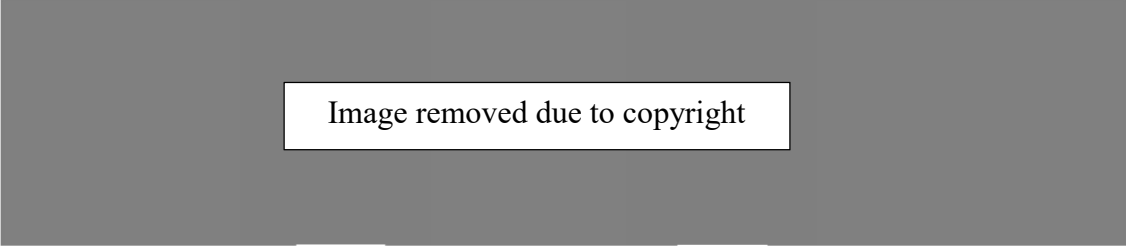


Image removed due to copyright

Figure 47. Mutating Red (32, 33, 35)

Red himself literally embodies the negative stereotype he figuratively undermines. His continually mutating state—which might also be read as a form of “graphic alterity” (Gardner)—primarily suggests a subversive transformation of the stereotype of the Red Indian by offering many shapeshifting Reds. At various points in the text, Red’s character is shot through with archetypes of the shaman (10), the warrior (40), and the tragic hero (105)—references that invite comparison with Western “high” and popular cultural figures. Alternatively, as Yahgulanaas himself suggests, since Red is an orphan figure—albeit another comics trope (see previous section)—we could choose to read him as an anomaly. Thus, when Red dramatically commits suicide towards the end of the text (he had previously beheaded his sister’s husband against her wishes, effectively “rescuing” her from a situation she had never wanted to be rescued from in the first place), the standard revenge tale becomes significantly more complicated, and Red’s overdetermined identity—both multiple and mutating—ultimately implodes.

Moreover, Yahgulanaas’s intersectional figuration of Red—one that can be read in terms of race, class, *and* transnational trickster and transregional Haida identity categories—extends to suggest a feminist interest. As Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill argue, “attending to the links between heteropatriarchy and

settler colonialism is intellectually and politically imperative for all peoples living within settler colonial contexts” (8–9; see also Chapters One and Two). Just as important in *Red*, however, are the various Haida matriarchal practices and etiological (Raven-creation) beliefs that Yahgulanaas invokes in the text. According to the Constitution of the Haida Nation, “The Haida Nation is a matrilineal society, and we recognize the prominent role of our hereditary matriarchs as part of our governing body” (11; see also Quail 697). This squares with Yahgulanaas’s “identification in the Haida matrilineal system as a Raven—the inveterate trickster of indigenous Northwest Coast mythology, who constantly creates mischief in the human realm with his subversive activities and antics that habitually expose humanity’s foibles” (Levell 99). In this last sense we may understand Red, not *exactly* as a trickster, but more properly as an aptronym, enunciating resistance through the metonym of his fiery hair and functioning as a foil that encompasses the shifting figurations of Red as character and *Red* as text.

Taking this strand of interpretation further, we might read shades of tragic mimicry in *Red*, especially in the dénouement, which provides examples of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *peripeteia* (reversal). For instance, when Red’s Kaagi, who we understand to be his mentor, tells him, “it’s time to end the fighting,” and she gives him “a great bow” to “last [him] all of [his] days” (102), Yahgulanaas gives readers just a glimmer of a happy ending. This soon reverses, however, when he shoots an arrow into the sky and dashes to the beach, forcing the arrow to pierce his chest and kill him. In a classic instance of *anagnorisis*—the moment when Red discovers his mistake of chasing violence for violence’s sake—readers realize that his hubris has led him there. Suggestively foreshadowed by the image of a Raven—which is associated in turn with the words of a death figure who says, “I, too, have come for a head” (99)—this reversal of circumstances (an

example of Aristotelian *peripeteia*), is transculturally bound up with Greek tragedy, Haida oral narrative, and Asian manga traditions while also performing a critique that looks to “exceed the moment of colonization” itself (Chow 342). As Rey Chow writes,

The agency of the native cannot simply be imagined in terms of a resistance against the image—that is, after the image has been formed—nor in terms of a subjectivity that existed before, beneath, inside, or outside the image. It needs to be rethought as that which bears witness to its own demolition—in a form that is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization. (342)

It is worth considering the extent to which *Red*, in Chow’s terms, “bears witness to its own demolition.” Certainly, the text seeks to go beyond the repeating negative cycles of (colonial) exploitation it also instantiates, as can be intuited from a comparative analysis of its opening and closing frames:



Figure 48. Opening and Closing Frames (1, 108)

Unlike the image of the boat on the first page of the story, the boat on the final page is built with many eyes and “gaze-like” figurations. At the most obvious level, this suggests alternative ways of seeing—not least Haida ways of seeing—but these are then combined with a verbal cue, “let’s go home son.” Where “home” is located—and how it is seen—will likely vary according to the cultural codes of the text’s readers, but Red’s suicide, which clearly invokes epidemic rates of Indigenous self-harm and suicide in North America (Chandler and Lalonde), asks us to consider homes that have been violently taken alongside lives that have been tragically lost.

This is further suggested in the second last sentence of *Red*, which reads, “I am truly sorry for our losses” (107), implying both shared bereavement and a solidarizing responsibility in finding alternative ways of seeing that support a people whose territory has been “viewed by outsiders largely in terms of the resources that could be profitably extracted” (Takeda and Røpke 180). As Takeda and Røpke argue, “A rapid depopulation of the Haida people in the nineteenth century, as a result of epidemics brought over by Europeans, facilitated the imposition of colonial forms of governance and subsequent European settlement and control of resources” (180). “The ensuing replacement of Haida economies with colonial economies,” they argue, “was most clearly demonstrated by the forest industry” (ibid). *Red* is a sombre reflection on these losses, but as I will now go on to show, it also offers a celebration of First Nations cultures, nowhere more apparent than in its innovative combination of manga comics and Haida art.

Transforming “Comics” with Haida Formlines and Yah’guudang

Yahgulanaas’s representation of Haida formline art is clearly represented on the cover of *Red* (see previous section), and it continues, replacing what we might more usually call comics frames and panels, to weave its abstract lines throughout

the text. In this and other ways, *Red* manifests the “intricate visual language of the Haida” (Strauss 50). Following Haida artist Reg Davidson, according to David Levi Strauss, Haida art is primarily

[a] language for representing transformation. The complex arrangement of ovoids and U-shaped designs in Haida compositions is an abstract approach to figuration, where shapes metamorphose into creatures that in turn become other creatures. The formlines are boundaries to be crossed and recrossed. The underlying “subject” of all Haida art is the great chain of being, the cyclical transformation of life forms. (50)

This “cyclical transformation” connects with the Haida cosmological concept of Yah’guudang, the informing vision for which can be described as follows:

Yah’guudang—our respect for all living things—celebrates the ways our lives and spirits are intertwined and honours the responsibility we hold to future generations. Haida Gwaii Yah’guudang is about respect and responsibility, about knowing our place in the web of life, and how the fate of our culture runs parallel with the fate of the ocean, sky and forest people. (Council of the Haida Nation, qtd. in Takeda and Røpke 183)⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Yah’guudang is also one of the key value systems that is often cited as part of ongoing “integrated marine planning initiative in northern British Columbia” (Jones et al. 12) and “collaborative ecosystem-based management” (Takeda and Røpke 178).

Red's visual language seeks, at least in part, to capture this vision. For example, in the two early scenes below, a young Red learns about Yah'guudang.



Figure 49. Red and Yah'guudang (5–7)

These panels represent a version of Yah'guudang as it forms part of Red's education. Pointing towards the ocean, the elder tells him, "Out there is where we are conceived... Here on the beach is where we are born... And in there, that is where we become adults. Red you aren't a kid anymore. You must become aware of the world outside you... and **inside** you" (5–7). Because Red is about to embark on what we later learn is a spirit quest, it seems significant here that he is walking along the top of the formline while the elder and the beetle are literally attached to it (last image). Figuratively, Red is in the process of learning Yah'guudang, which Yahgulanaas literally depicts for the edification of the discerning reader.

Nonhuman life teems in *Red*. Like the formline, it asks to be sought out. For example, on the pages above, we can find an inconspicuous bird embedded in part of the formline above the elder (center image). Another bird perched on the tree on the following page looks up at what might be hides drying in the tree (last image). Here, Yahgulanaas's high-angle method of framing, also common in manga that mimic cinematic techniques, makes Red seem very small and inferior to his surroundings. This bears out a "vision of the Haida legal system as one that prioritizes respect

between and among humans and the non-human world” (Quail 678).⁸⁸ As Susanna Quail argues in the context of Yah’guudang, “[Haida] stories are not cultural relics, nor merely works of art to admire and be entertained by, but are fundamentally tools for thinking through conflict” (674).⁸⁹

This is an appropriate way of looking at conflict in the text. At the same time as the above sequence, back in Red’s village, traders arrive selling “weapons” and “fear gear” (18).

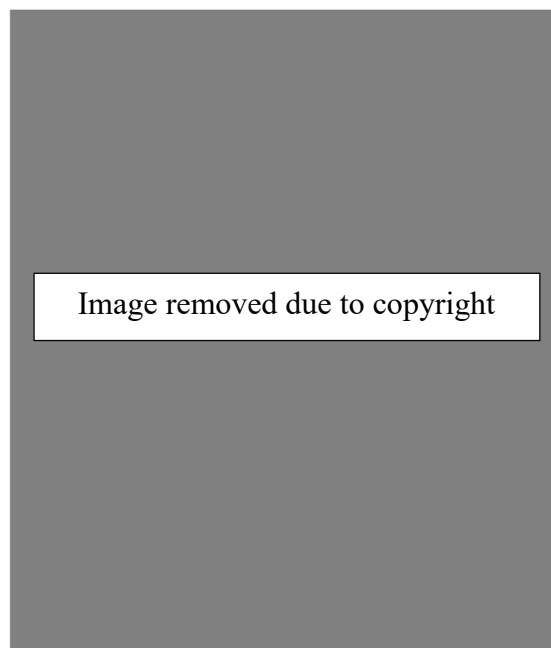


Figure 50. Red Hats and Weapons (18)

In the scene presented above, both the plot and the irony thicken. The verbal track reads: “Ladies and Gentlemen and children of all ages! Come feast your eyes on the latest in home security! Here are the instruments to make your lives worry free. / But what do we need weapons for? / Can’t sell fear gear to happy people” (18).

Typically, the text is at once obvious—satirically comical—and more complicated

⁸⁸ See Susanna Quail, “Yah’guudang: The Principle of Respect in The Haida Legal Tradition” (2014), for an intricate analysis of Haida stories in the context of law.

⁸⁹ Naomi Klein argues that “real recognition of the rights of Indigenous people to protect huge parts of the world from polluting extraction” is part of the necessary shift in “cultural context” to combat climate change (26).

than it seems. Because of Yahgulanaas's suggestive play on time, we may assume that this scenario refers to colonial history. While "Haida oral history supported by recent archaeological records traces the Haida people's connection to the land and waters of Haida Gwaii back more than 10,000 year[s]," the history of colonization is generally acknowledged to have begun in the late eighteenth century when "explorers embarked on the maritime fur trade" (Takeda and Røpke 180). However, the diction Yahgulanaas uses in phrases like "home security" and "fear gear" supports other historical readings, such as the one reviewer Robert Haines finds when he views *Red* as a cautionary tale, "woven with an eye towards former President George Bush and the policies and actions of the post-9/11 years" ("Red" n.p.).

In similar vein, we can find hints of wider ranging histories of oppression and global conflict from the red hats the men are wearing. "Operation Red Hat" was a covert United States military operation that involved a relocation of US chemical weapons in the Pacific during the Cold War in 1971 (Mitchell "Operation"). "All U.S. forces involved in Operation Red Hat wore special tell-tale headgear" (Mitchell "Red" n.p.). While there does not seem to be a specific link here to Haida Gwaii—the main locations of the chemical weapons storage were Okinawa, Japan, and Johnston Atoll, located between the Marshall Islands and the Hawaiian Islands—the "poisonous legacy of these weapons of mass destruction" remains today (Mitchell "Red" n.p.). Then there is the issue of Operation Red Hat's weapons transport, which took place across the Pacific Ocean—the same transpacific Ocean that surrounds Haida Gwaii. In still another allusion to red hats, Yahgulanaas may also be commenting on the difference between Christian and Haida worldviews: the red hat also signifies a cardinal's (OED). None of these possible allusions is fully disentangled from discourses of exploitation. However readers decide to read the red

hats, they are conspicuously antagonistic. We might also notice that the “instruments” the Traders are selling are actually piercing the formline (see Fig 50).

A few pages later, readers encounter a related scene in which the idea of increasing “hyper-separation”—divisions between people and planet (Plumwood “The Concept”)—emerges again, especially when the villagers discuss the Traders: “My wife works in accounts, says all our goods are being traded for weapons.” / “It’s part of our deal with the traders. After all they’re our friends. Our *only* friends.” / “Yeah, but ever since we got scared, everyone else’s gotten scared of us” (39). As the text progresses, Red’s quest for revenge is exacerbated by this atmosphere of increasing militarism; by a destructive mentality of divide and conquer. Yahgulanaas connects this mentality to the environment; there are also distinct capitalist undertones. For example, after Red meets a carpenter whom people are “scared of” because of his “hunting” and “killing” inventions (35), the two collude to build a giant sea vessel that Red will use in his mission to find his sister. This Carpenter, along with the Traders and their exploitative technologies, increasingly influences Red’s quest.

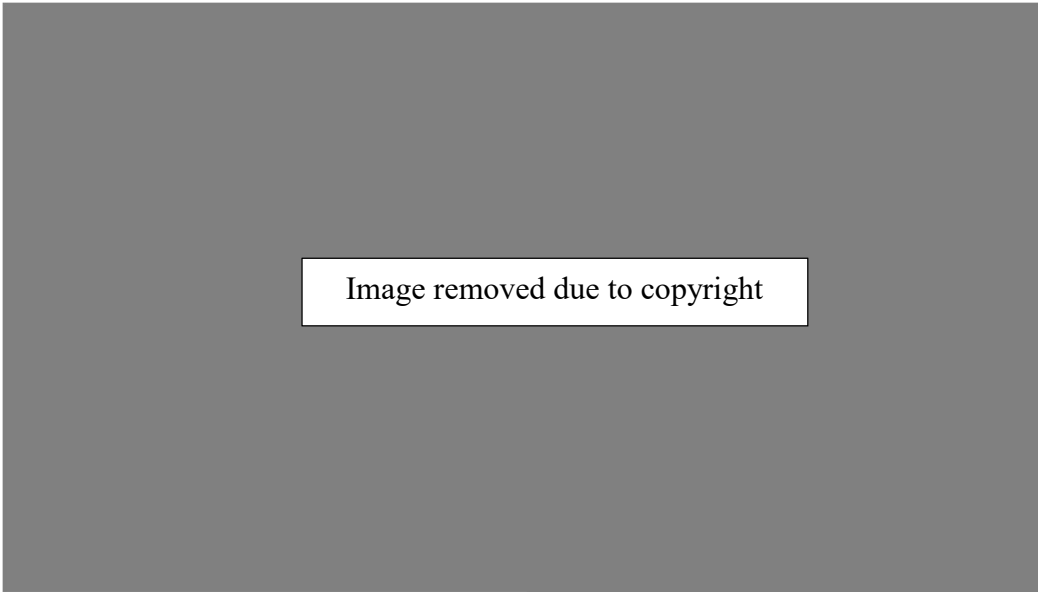


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Figure 51. Transfixed and Violence (36–7)

In the scene above, Red is “transfixed by Carpenter’s story” (36). Meaning to impale or make motionless with astonishment (OED), Red is metaphorically “transfixed” (in the latter meaning) by the representations of animals being literally impaled (in the former one). This caricatured depiction suggests a subversively non-anthropomorphic and satirical form of cartooning. Here, Yahgulanaas’s art provides another example of a not-so-funny animal representation of violence (see also Chapters One and Five).

On the following page, Red’s reflexive dialogue ponders the potential consequences of his actions, highlighting his hubristic disregard: “Wow, that’s a lot of hides. / The whales won’t be happy we’re killing all their sea lions. / We need more hides so carpenter can build us our own great whale. / Maybe we won’t need real whales anymore” (37). Yahgulanaas invites readers to imagine a world without whales while subtly undermining the (Western) anthropomorphic impulse that would second animals to the realm of human symbolism. As Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear points out, “Our traditional stories also portray nonhuman persons in ways that do not adhere to another meaningful modern category, the ‘animal’” (235). Such stories, says TallBear, “avoid the hierarchical nature-culture and animal-human split that has enabled domineering human management, naming, controlling, and ‘saving’ of nature” (235). By foregrounding his text in the Haida notion of Yah’guudang, Yahgulanaas’s satirical techniques invite readers to make links between these and other aggressive structures at work, such as militarism.⁹⁰

Red turns out, however, not to be a particularly assiduous student of Yah’guudang. Instead, the text highlights his increasing anthropocentrism, which is

⁹⁰ This recalls the colonial era’s maritime fur trade (1785–1840s), which “led to the local extinction of sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*)” in parts of the North Pacific (Szpak et al. 159).

illustrated when he is inside (and ultimately in control) of the whale submarine they have built.

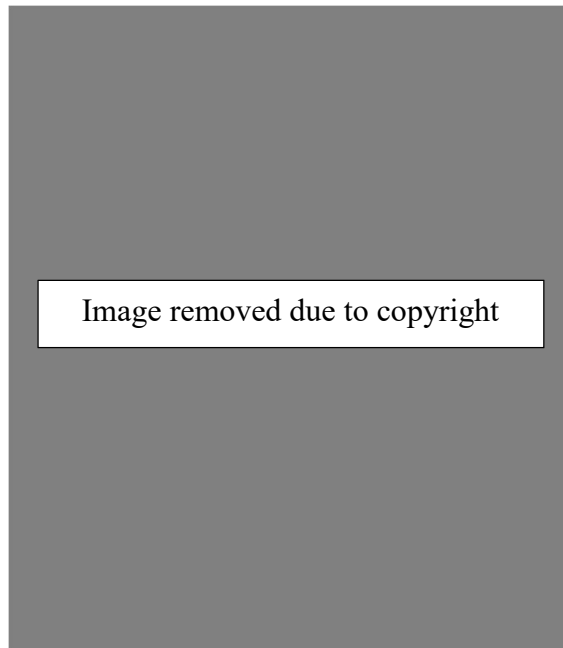


Figure 52. In the Belly of the Whale (68)

In the first depiction, Red is quite literally “in the belly of the whale.” This image has a lot of currency in the West, as Peter Wayne Moe points out, “recirculat[ing] through [the biblical] Jonah, medieval poetry and art, *Pinocchio*, a handful of Batman comics, a Bruce Springsteen song, yarns from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whalers—among other places—and, of course, [Herman] Melville’s *Moby-Dick*” (41). Moe does not mention the plethora of whale stories that occur in Haida and other Pacific Northwest myths. In one of these latter stories, the trickster Raven “pecked himself out of the body of a whale through the end of its dorsal fin” (“Mythology” n.p.).⁹¹ While this may or may not be the specific tale Yahgulanaas is alluding to, it is clear that his painstakingly detailed text has amalgamated several intertextual myths; these are all part of the text’s general aim to show interconnected

⁹¹ See also Cheryl Shearar, *Understanding Northwest Coast Art* (2000), 62–4.

social and ecological agencies while indicting anthropocentric—often invisibly naturalized—structures of domination and war.

We can push the “humanimal” whale metaphor even further if we look deeper into Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and the now-stereotypical identification in that text of Native Americans with whales (Cox 232). As James Howard Cox argues, Melville deploys the “image of the whale as [nothing less than] an avatar of Native America” (234). His famous novel thus “highlights the correlation between Natives, who represent an essentially ‘savage’ though God-given origin of human identity, and whale hunting” (234). “Paradoxically,” Cox continues, “the whalers seek to exterminate whales, which represent the source of that identity and, therefore, part of the human self” (234). This echoes Red’s suggestive comment about whale extinction. Animal extinction runs here into the deeper racist discourse that, as Cox points out, sought to distinguish “Americans” from both “Europeans” and “Native Americans” (235). But, as he also contends, Melville’s tale can be read as a more general critique of excessive violence. This has significant resonances with Yahgulanaas’s text as well, not least in its own retelling of Red being the one in the belly of the whale, a whale that he counter-intuitively thinks will enable them “to protect themselves” (45).

In the second depiction of Red on this same page (Fig 52), his ferocious expression suggests a negative kind of “humanimality” that can be read (problematically no doubt) in dehumanizing terms. Red’s grip on the black formline, which descends like a spike, is interrupted by the exclaimed word “Raider.” This word annexes part of his body, while his target—his brother-in-law—sweats in the compressed space above. As Spiers points out, Red’s “destructive behavior is both represented and reinforced by his efforts to bend the formline to his will” (44). Red’s destructive obsessions can be read, in fact, on multiple different levels of the

text and in several different social and historical contexts that allude, not just to distinctive histories of cultural and ecological imperialism in North America, but also to different ways of conceiving and interpreting historicity itself. Yahgulanaas's anachronistic tale, beginning with the archetypal yet seemingly paradoxical phrase, "once upon a time this was a true story..." suggests a multiplicity of temporal registers while obscuring the text's generic frameworks. In playing between different levels of satire and humour, between time and space, and between visual and the verbal elements, the text highlights familiar ways of reading and seeing while it "defamiliarizes" readers at the same time (Emberley 215–6).⁹²

Following the final page, readers find a postscript section entitled "overleaf." This reads: "*Red* is more than a collection of bound pages, something more than a story to be read page by page. *Red* is also a complex of images, a composite—one that will defy your ability to experience story as a simple progression of events." Here, and only at the very end, do readers discover that *Red* derives from an originally composed four-metre-long composite mural that was subsequently repackaged into the graphic novel they have just read.




Image removed due to copyright

Figure 53. *Red* in Formline Form (Bookjacket)

⁹² Emberley links her concept of the "defamiliar" to "the indigenous uncanny" and Gerald Vizenor's idea of "survivance" (215–6). All of these terms and ideas—although there is no space here to examine them more closely—are applicable to Yahgulanaas's text.

Here, in performing its own complex visual statement (the original is reproduced on the book jacket), the text assumes its own trickster-like complexity—a complexity which conveys a uniquely Haida sense of space and place through the various, often conflicting meanings that Yahugulanaas attaches to *Red*. Thus it is that, drawing on the historically “thick” contexts of Haida suppression and comics racism, *Red* self-reflexively comments on *Red* as a book, Red as an anti-heroic figure, *Red* as a Haida formline mural, *Red* as an unorthodox manga, and Red as a negative stereotype that its protagonist literally embodies but figuratively undermines.

Yahgulanaas has suggested that “[t]he study of Haida design is like the study of water because the basic theme is compression and expansion” (“Impulse” 156). The idea of fluidity is integral to *Red*, also informing its representations of the human-animal relationship. For example, Yahgulanaas describes the formline image in the mural above as “a representation of nourishing wealth. It has animal/human like attributes or more precisely structures but it is misleading or settling for too little to describe it as an animal icon” (qtd. in Spiers 59 n1). This not only recalls TallBear’s point about “the animal” being a nonexistent category in much Indigenous thought (see Chapter Five), but also suggests that *Red* exudes a kind of positive obscurity—enchantingly uncontainable—whereby non-binary understandings, interrelationships, and irreducible frames of reference are all incorporated as fluid elements of the text.

While *Red* does not specifically point readers to the purportedly 500 languages that, according to Robert Bringhurst, existed in North America when the European invasion of the Americas began (9), it does suggest the grave situation facing these now mostly extinct or endangered languages—it is significant that no words feature on the mural. Such wordlessness may also allude to the nearly extinct

Haida language called Xaad Kil, endangered in large part because of repressive policies of Canadian systems of assimilation (see note 79 above).

In this context, we might read Yahgulanaas's *Red: A Haida Manga* as a text that deliberately attempts to articulate an Indigenous worldview in a transcultural form. On the text's final page Yahgulanaas says, "I welcome you to destroy this book," i.e. he both invites a *deconstruction* and a *reconstruction* back into its original form. In asking readers to participate in his project of pictures without borders, Yahgulanaas invites resistance to an exclusionary and objectifying comics canon; spins his own kaleidoscopic web of connections; suggests ways of subverting the colonial myth of unoccupied territory; and acts out the storied search for difference and struggle within common yet shifting ground. In these and other ways, *Red* is indeed a trickster text that "bears witness to its own demolition—in a form that is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization" itself (Chow *q.v.*).

Conclusion

From the perspective of the comics mainstream, both of the texts I have been examining in this chapter deploy but also deviate from Anglo-American and Japanese manga-centric aesthetics, which continue to be the "two predominant and most distinctive forms of comics in the world today" (Schodt 22). It is tempting to read *Red* and *Yōkaiden* in line with the strand of unorthodox manga opportunism I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. For the reader, associative practices will inevitably change from wherever he or she is standing in time and space—especially if the texts are translated into different languages. Both Matsumoto and Yahgulanaas demand that their readers re-think space and place, offering resistance to natural/cultural purities through overlapping formal elements and expansive

metaphors of language, identity, and otherness. The two authors use these elements to build diverse storyworlds that make possible the kinds of discussions that might give us new ways to consider “manga” outside of a purely Japanese context and “comics” outside of an Anglo-American one.

Of course, “outside” and “inside” are loaded terms that are either explicitly or implicitly attached to ideas and ideologies of the “authentic.” As I have shown, *Red* and *Yōkaiden* both set tasks to unsettle such “authentic” contexts and the historical stratifications, modern temporalities, and nonhuman subordinations they frequently embrace. Both texts graphically perform a critique of naturalized comics categories; this also extends to underlying sources of oppression that are rooted in naturalized projects of exclusion. It may well be the case that their respective authors align themselves with Schodt’s argument that “manga offer far more visual diversity than mainstream American comics, which are still shackled by the Greek tradition of depicting the human form and still reveal an obsession with muscled males and full-figured females” (26). The overall argument of this thesis is that such “shackles” are being undone; more specifically, however, this chapter contends that *Red* and *Yōkaiden* draw on the diversity that is already embedded within the manga genre in order to excavate the tensions between transcultural graphic forms and to assess the limitations of translating incommensurable spaces, places, and identities. Both texts invite participatory readings in the interest of bridging cultural gaps; yet both also stop short of full translation. This extends to their representations of nonhuman beings and more-than-human cosmologies. In short, *Red* and *Yōkaiden* suggest—albeit tentatively—that new kinds of affinities can emerge even as they demonstrate the continuing violence of “purity discourse.” Above all, perhaps, both texts reconfirm the importance of thinking about alternative ways of being in which

the inhuman, the nonhuman, and the more-than-human are all part of the “necessary queer labor of the incommensurate” (Muñoz 209).

Chapter Five

Resituating the Animal Comic: Environmentalist Aesthetics in *XOC: The Journey of a Great White* (2012)

If the only measures available for humans and sharks are records of tragic circumstances, then a decidedly one-sided narrative will result—Christopher Neff and Robert Hueter (72)

It is all too easy for terrestrial humans to ignore the current crisis of ocean conservation as the open seas and the deep seas are so terribly distant, so unspeakably different from our habitats—Stacey Alaimo “States” (480)

You may rest assured that the British Government is entirely opposed to sharks—(Winston Churchill, 1945, in response to a parliamentary question about developing shark repellents) (qtd. in Pitcher xxx)

Introduction

Matt Dembicki’s *XOC: The Journey of a Great White*⁹³ (2012) challenges the limitations of the conceptual categories of the “humanimal” and the “transcultural” more than any of the other texts studied in this thesis. Standing alone, these two categories tend to be both anthropocentric and land-centric. But as I have been trying to suggest, graphic fiction has the capacity to open new paths to multispecies and planetary ways of thinking. Sometimes, as in traditional animal comics and beast fables, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism work to educate humans about certain codes of moral behaviour, but they tend to do so in such a way as to reinstate traditional Cartesian divisions—animal-human, mind-body—and little if anything is said about actual animals or about multispecies relations themselves. The animal *as* animal is rendered invisible, and multispecies epistemologies and planetary agencies are foreclosed (see also Introduction and Chapter One). By

⁹³ Hereafter I will refer to the text as *XOC* and the main character as Xoc.

contrast, *XOC*, targeted at audiences of all ages, creates a rich representational matrix of oceanic worlds that focuses on the unfolding drama of multispecies marine life. Using neo-realist pictorials and a part fictional, part non-fictional blend of the animal epic-cum-beast fable, *XOC* disrupts stereotypes about sharks and delivers a hard-hitting environmentalist text.

Thinking with sharks disorients the notion of the superior human. Belonging to the category of cartilaginous fish, sharks have lived in the Earth's oceans for over 400 million years (Pikitch et al. 3). Some 200 million years ago, they evolved into top predators and "by the time of the dinosaurs [they] were 'morphologically similar' to modern sharks. Today, more than 440 known shark species 'are found throughout the world's oceans—from coastal waters to the open ocean, from the surface to depths of 3000 meters'" (Jefferies 125; Pikitch et al. 3). These mind-boggling numbers call on us to consider today's depleted contexts of "[o]verfishing and habitat degradation, [which] have profoundly altered populations of marine animals [. . .] especially sharks and rays" (Dulvy et al. 2). In comparison with other oceanic mammals, Great Whites are "one of the least understood animals in the ocean," yet they are also "preeminent participants in a complicated food web" (Philpott 447–8). In the summer of 2012, the conservation group WildEarth Guardians, with the joint collaboration of Oceana, Center for Biological Diversity and Shark Stewards, registered two petitions to list the already vulnerable Northeastern Pacific population of the Great White Shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) as either endangered or threatened under the United States Endangered Species Act. At about the same time, the independent US comics publisher Oni Press released Dembicki's *XOC*, which clearly draws on this activist context, not only redefining the animal comic, but using graphic fiction as a means to promote the worldwide conservation of sharks.

In contrast with the ethereal and (outside of Japan) little-known figures of Japanese *yōkai*, which I discussed in the previous chapter, the all-too-real presence of the Great White tends to inspire a much more predictable response. Consider the iconic cover image of *XOC*, which instant recalls Will Eisner’s claim that “the stereotype is a fact of life in the comic medium” (12).



Figure 54. *XOC* Cover

As might be expected, the cover image homes in on the shark’s gaping jaws, inviting analogies with the 1975 blockbuster film of that name and the “crude anthropomorphism” associated with caricatured and “Disneyfied” representations of sharks (Garrard 155; Baker *Picturing* 174). But though the cover features the ubiquitous shark “bite-shot,” *Xoc*’s blunted teeth and roly-poly features assuage visceral thoughts of panic, while other accompanying images—an injured turtle, toxic waste drums—suggest mitigating contexts that counteract these polarized and speciesist tropes.

XOC is a non-paginated⁹⁴ shark's tale that follows the eponymous Xoc as she journeys through the perilous Northeastern Pacific waters. The main plot is straightforward. As Xoc embarks on an energetic trek through the ocean depths and open water zones of the Pacific Ocean between California and Hawai'i, we learn that both she and the loggerhead turtle she meets are on their way to their birthing grounds near the Hawaiian coast—"the purposes of our journeys align!" says the jubilant turtle, also a female (95). But neither shark nor turtle completes the round-trip. Foreshadowed by several "creaturely"⁹⁵ encounters, in the end it is the zoomorphic "creatures with twirling teeth" (74) that decide the fates of the two protagonists. A fishing net snatches the turtle as she is about to "complete her quest after swimming some 2,000 miles" (104), and Xoc is lured to her own death by a shark-finning vessel's "ready smorgasbord" (121). As the Author's Note balefully tells us, Xoc is but one of the estimated "73 million—*million*—sharks [that] are killed this way each year" (124, original emphasis).⁹⁶ We come to conclude that the other sharks in the book—including the hammerheads (78–81)—might end up this way as well.

This chapter argues that *XOC* revolves around a series of tensions that initially rely on mainstream tropes such as the talking animal and the journey

⁹⁴ To facilitate referencing, I have paginated the pages myself, starting with page 1 on the title page and ending with 131 on the author's biographical note.

⁹⁵ This word has recently come to prominence in human-animal studies. For Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics* (2011), the concept of the creaturely, as developed by Eric Santer and others, points to the shared bodily vulnerability of humans and other animals. In this chapter, I use Dembicki's text to outline an approach to human-animal (specifically, human-shark) relationships that takes the creaturely into account. For more on this term, see also Herman, "Introduction."

⁹⁶ The actual numbers are contentious. "Estimates of trade auction records from Hong Kong suggest that between 26 and 73 millions of sharks were traded for their fins annually worldwide in the year 2000. More recent estimates suggest a total mortality (including finning) between 97 and 267 millions of sharks in the year 2010" (Dell'Apa et al. 151). See also Jefferies and Dulvy et al., who claim that "[t]rue total catch [...] is likely to be 3–4 times greater than reported" (3).

narrative. I contend that Dembicki's use of these familiar devices creates a generative "planetary empathy" (see also Chapter Three). This is in keeping with the so-called turn to ethics in animal studies, which has refocused the notion of anthropomorphism, now "regarded not only as a problem but also as a potentially productive critical tool that has similarities to empathy within recent historical research" (Weil "A Report" 15; see also Chapter One). By drawing on some of the different histories and practices that surround the figure of the shark, Dembicki shows our perceptions of non-dominant nature to be constructed and conditional, not natural or universal. At the same time, and tempering a default reading of humanist constructivism (Crist), the text renders its quasi-realistic subjects "allomorphically," that is, through metaphors of otherness that suggest "a kind of superiority" (Garrard 155). Throughout the text, Dembicki uses a variety of visual and framing techniques as hermeneutic devices to suggest the "enchanted uncontainability" of graphic fiction as a medium (see Chapters Two, Three especially, and Four). As a consequence, *XOC* overturns romantic expectations of the "animal comic," using the conventional problems of anthropomorphism and framing to address the exploitative divisions underlying the environmentalist issues—real/metaphorical violence towards sharks, oceanic pollution, industrial shark finning⁹⁷—that are raised by the text.

Troubling the Talking Animal

Although Xoc "talks" with her companion sea turtle throughout the text, the text is far from a typical talking animal comic. Unlike Zorka (see Chapter One), it

⁹⁷ According to Dell'Appa et al., "Shark finning in the Galápagos Island started on a large-industrial scale in the early 1950s, due to the demand from the Asian market" (157). Jeffries writes, "Shark finning can be described as 'global-scale industrial fishing' since it is currently [as of 2012] practiced by more than 125 nations" (130).

would be a mistake to call Xoc an “alternative sharkwoman.” While Zorka’s “catness” is integral to *Heartless*’s social satire, Xoc’s oceanic journey might rather be read as a multifaceted satire of the traditional talking animal comic, the artificial form and language of which is self-consciously pitted against biological facts. According to Mark Richardson of the Shark Trust, a UK-based international shark advocacy organization, “the paradigm shift is clear in *XOC*”: moving away from the “hopelessly inaccurate—and damaging—imagery which Great Whites and other large shark species acquired post-*Jaws*,” “[*XOC*’s] narrative and images, and the science behind them (that is, what little marine biologists actually know about the Great White) comes through loud and clear” (n.p.). Indeed, while Dembicki truncates Xoc’s journey for the sake of dramatic unity, it mimics an abbreviated portion of what scientists call natal philopatric migration (Domeier and Nasby-Lucas 1). As marine biologists Michael L. Domeier and Nicole Nasby-Lucas report, mature female Great Whites usually complete two-year migration cycles (6). From this knowledge we can deduce an ambiguous function of the journey metaphor in *XOC*, suggesting perhaps “that the representational structures people work with are *derived from* the world within which the human species evolved” (Crist “Against” 9, original emphasis). From this perspective, Dembicki might be seen as providing readers with a non-anthropocentric means to contemplate the ubiquitous trope of the journey, especially as it has proliferated in North American cultural discourses over the past thirty years (Friedman n.p.).

Certain liberties are taken, of course, with the unnamed narrator pointing out that “[n]either the fish nor the turtle typically swim at such fathoms” (43). Thus, while the text’s companion pairing certainly raises the story’s empathetic stakes, the text also reminds us that such a relationship is an imaginative anomaly. Still, in such a realist text it is hard not to raise an eyebrow at the cinematically romantic notion of

coupling a top predator with a turtle sidekick.⁹⁸ Dembicki embellishes this familiar narrative trope with two details: firstly, the turtle has been injured—a zoomorphic “surface dweller...one with great speed and mass, and sharp, twirling teeth” has “shredded [her] flipper” (41). Secondly, the “surface dweller” association implies that the perpetrator in question here is a motorboat. (The turtle makes the human connection for readers through the word “creatures”—most often a term bestowed upon nonhuman animals—thereby indicating a reversed denotation of “creature”; see also Note 89 above.)

This usage marks the narrator as nonhuman as well. Even though the narrator *sounds* human—almost Attenborough-like in places—the text repeatedly undercuts such humanly endowed sagacity. For instance, during an encounter with an orca the narrator notes Xoc’s actions with uncertainty: “Whether it is a desperate move to flee or simply because she lost her bearings, Xoc swims for the surface” (37). Furthermore, he/she uses the word “creature” to indicate cage divers (22–23); to denote a submarine (65); to describe a shark-finning boat (75); to label an “unnatural” “beacon” (a shark tag for the purposes of human research) (108); and to describe the “metal creature” that is another shark-finning boat (120). This final “metal creature” is apparently the source of Xoc’s demise on the concluding page of the story.

Not only does the word “human” never appear in the text, but the narrator also disallows any obtrusiveness, however innocent, on the part of the reader. Curiosity rather than omniscience is displayed throughout, implicitly disavowing the ideas of human superiority and assumptions of direct experience that tend to follow from such contemporary “infotainment” media as nature documentary (DeMello

⁹⁸ Great White sharks do, in fact, sometimes eat sea turtles. See, for example, Fergusson et al.

153; see also Rothfels x). Rather, it is the zoomorphic—animal-like—imagination that works to reverse (human) readers’ perception of the events being presented by the text. In McCloud’s terms, there is a “masking effect” (43) at work in the text’s verbal and visual language; instead of using anthropomorphic—human-like—metaphors to describe human-like things, Dembicki strategically inspires readers to think from a “creaturely” perspective.

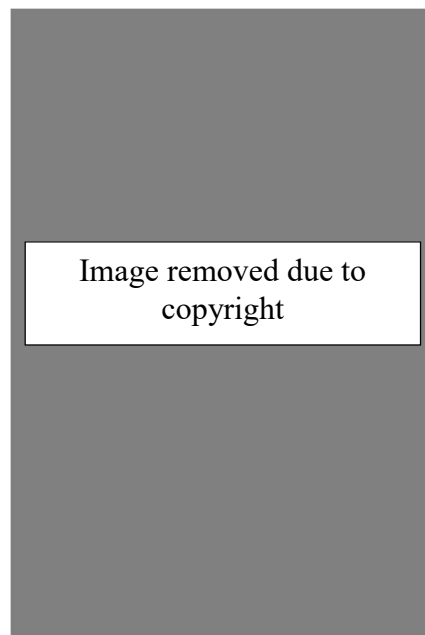


Figure 55. Cage Divers (22)

In the early sequence above, Xoc encounters two cage divers (21–25). The scene sketches out a human-animal contact zone, which in turn raises a number of different tensions. Dembicki’s biographical picture at the end of the text mirrors the diver in the top panel on the left, suggesting that this particular portion of the text is based on the author’s experience (131). Autobiographical moments such as these arguably disrupt the experience versus representation dichotomy in the text, further challenging the notion of the “dominant comics aesthetic of escapist fantasy” (Beaty “Autobiography” 232). But while readers understand the realism of the representation—which is vital to the environmentalist message of the text—they are also made aware of the text’s own “constructedness.” As we see here and

throughout, Dembicki's framing techniques are dynamic in the extreme. Near-photographic images encased within various frames—black and white, filled, and unfilled—appear in an assembled montage over a white background. The cumulative visual effect is to suggest a bond between realism and non-realism in the text—one which is crucial to its attempts to think *with* but not entirely *as* the shark.

The complications of this endeavour are revealed in the combined visual-verbal registers of the page. Across the top panel, Dembicki invites readers to imagine Xoc's gaze as she looks at the divers. The narrator speaks for Xoc here: "She gazes coldly into the eyes of the strange-looking creatures." In being invited to see through the eyes of Xoc (which is mediated in the verbal track by the narrator, and in the visual by the photorealist depiction), we become aware that this is probably *not* how Xoc would see the divers. The following panels draw out some of the tensions that derive from shark-human incompatibility: for example, in the two centre panels the juxtaposition of the disembodied stretching human arm as a synecdoche appears in a similar shape as the shark, but these two entities are clearly at different depths. Similarly, the diver *seems* close to touching Xoc in the bottom panel, but he is *actually* still far away, unable to grasp the other as Xoc's body swims off the page.

As Baker suggests, comics have the potential to enact "the reversal of the empowered gaze" and render the human "other," "dismantling their secure sense of a superior identity" (*Picturing* 158). It is this sort of dismantling that Dembicki is attempting in the text, which is indicated further by Xoc's "cold" indifference to the humans. On the page immediately following this one, readers see Xoc nibbling on the cage, appearing much larger than she actually is in an allomorphic depiction that suggests her superiority to the tiny divers contained within it; meanwhile in another allomorphic scene, we witness the visualization of Xoc's electromagnetic senses

(88). Never once do we hear (or see) a human character speak within the main text; when humans do appear they are voiceless. This reversal is in keeping with the underwater realism of the diegesis, where divers in scuba gear obviously cannot speak, but also with the narrator's pointed refusal to engage with the human perspective. The text's disruption of the "empowered gaze" is both visually and verbally apparent, as when the narrator zoomorphizes the divers: "With their flippers and sleek skin, they almost look like seals, but not quite." Their otherness is paradoxically rendered animal-like—about which Xoc is "curious" (21, 25), but also apathetic. From an ethological perspective, Xoc's response to these cage divers accords with recent shark research which indicates that Great White sharks are "curious" but "generally don't like to eat people" (Hile n.p.; see also Neff and Hueter; Philpott 448).

However, for all Dembicki's best efforts to undermine the anthropomorphic perspective, the text's language remains inexorably caught up in the anthropological web. Here, Dembicki unwittingly foregrounds the leap of "thinking as" an animal. Still, by bringing together the quasi-real "journey" and the quasi-imagined "talking animal" realms, *XOC* manages cleverly to suggest that inescapable human-animal entanglement is necessary in order to generate planetary empathy. This entangled perspective is inevitably confused, invoking both enchantment and a sense of the uncontainable at the same time (see also Chapter Three). Furthermore, by casting anthropogenic threats as cumulative antagonisms throughout the text, Dembicki succeeds in reining in the cruder kinds of anthropomorphism that might allow its animal protagonists to be mapped transparently onto a human milieu. He reverses the human gaze and, in juggling with it, invites readers to think about humanimal and multispecies relations in the mode of "the proximate other," *with* kith and *as* kin (see also Introduction).

According to ecofeminist Linda Vance,

Crafting narratives that will give voice to animals and make humans care about them in appropriate ways is no easy task. We want to avoid anthropomorphizing animals even though that has proven itself an effective tactic for mobilizing public sympathy toward them. We need to be faithful to their stories, not our own. The goal is not to make us care about animals because they are like us, but to care about them because they are themselves. (185)

In hovering uneasily somewhere between fact and fiction, caricature and “real,” *XOC* enunciates the ontological and epistemological problematics of the species boundary. In one sense, the text appears to undermine the animal-human divide in its non-species-specific portrayal of the “creaturely.” In another, however, the text firmly re-establishes the species boundary. Thus, even as it critiques human dominance through zoomorphic reversal, the text inadvertently suggests that nonhuman animals are unable to think like humans; that, in Heidegger’s suspiciously speciesist language, they remain intrinsically “poor in world” (qtd. in Wolfe *Animal* 65). It is worth pointing out, however, that this second suggestion comes through primarily in the text’s *verbal* register. After all, the text is *image-dominant*. If we were to remove the narration boxes—which are highly “texted” presences in each case—then we would again be reminded that it is only in relation to the figure of “the human,” and the technology of human language, that the category of “the animal” derives its meaning (Derrida; see also Introduction).

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, talking animals in comics and graphic novels immediately summon the charge of anthropomorphism. Yet, not all anthropomorphisms are the same; nor is anthropomorphism a stable category. As Timothy Clark points out, “To describe a specific representation as ‘anthropomorphic’ necessarily makes certain assumptions about what human nature itself *is* in the first place: for example, that certain qualities are definitively human, whether also then attributed to other creatures or not” (194, original emphasis). While Dembicki certainly deploys the trope of the anthropomorphic talking animal, the text’s verbal techniques also provoke a readerly scepticism. This is underscored by the frequently jarring exclamations that mark the turtle’s dialogue, as well as by the repetitive ellipses that appear in Xoc’s. These strategies suggest imposition and artifice. They are also reminiscent of what Clark describes as the “modernist technique of juxtaposition and cutting (‘parataxis’ and ‘ellipsis’).” Clark claims that this technique “serves some strictly ecological points, as in the jumps between Paleolithic and modern realities, or between a human perspective and those of various mythical or religious agencies expressive of the deeper natural systems in which all life unfolds” (140). Visually, meanwhile, the text boxes remain at surface level, operating much like cutouts, belying the text’s restless movement between oceanic surface and oceanic depth. Unlike the fluid imagery of the diegesis, the text’s scripted words, fonts, and enclosures are geometrical. This admittedly provides a further layer of interpretation, but it is also one that the reader seems invited to remove or challenge. A notable exception is the type-scripted report Dembicki provides on the title page. Here, the two paragraphs describing the etymology of Xoc free-float, unframed within the oceanic background. This semantic link raises the stakes to open up larger questions of agency and representation. The next section will explore how *XOC* both invokes and upsets

embedded histories of human domination—histories that are inextricable from language, comics, and cultural production as a whole (see also Introduction).

Recontextualizing the Shark: Etymology, Etiology, and Biopolitics

Dembicki's environmentalist project in *XOC* makes explicit use of nomenclature. Aware that identificatory naming can be read as an attempt to classify and control, the text notably avoids using any single shark term, employing instead a wide range of shark expressions. This suggests Dembicki's aim to diversify the vocabulary of the shark while critically assessing the reasons behind its demeaning image. Terms such as "broadtooth behemoth" (13), "the beast" (13), "white death" (14), "Carcharodon carcharias" (18), "meat eaters" (20), and "the great fish" (55) all provoke reflection on the general process of shark branding while shedding light on specific human technologies of language. They also function to dispel the myth of an essential identity: any one tried-and-trusted version of the shark. Instead, Dembicki *historicizes* this myth, linking it to linguistic morphology. Consider the etymological account of "Xoc" as it appears in the position of the text's title page:

XOC (pronounced "shock") is an ancient Mayan word for demon fish (though there are other translations) and likely the origin of the English word shark. The story behind how it entered the English language is rather interesting. Capt. John Hawkins was said to have brought a carcass of a beast that killed some of his crew while they were pirating off the coast of Mexico. He heard some of the local people call it "xoc" and he apparently brought that term back to the Old World with him. The specimen was exhibited in London in 1569 right outside a shop. [. . .] [A] broadsheet post about the fish read:

“There is no proper name for it that I knowe but that sertayne men of Captain Haukines doth call it a sharke. And it is to bee scene in London, at the Red Lyon, in Fletestreete.” (1)

In foregrounding the text in a non-Western as well as Western history of encounter and classification⁹⁹ that conducts the audience back in time to a “pre-Jaws” era, Dembicki’s etymological account gives us an early version of “man-eater” mythology that traces the exploitative phenomenon of the “shark spectacle” back to the colonial past. As Tom Jones points out, the colonial expeditions of William and John Hawkins carried “English goods south,” “obtained slaves from the African coast, crossed the Atlantic, and entered the Caribbean to sell their cargoes to the colonists of the islands and the Spanish Main” (212). Jones’s research considers the importation of the word “xoc” from Mayan culture and the glyph that purportedly represented this. As his work—which Dembicki’s text explicitly builds upon¹⁰⁰—shows, “xoc” is a co-evolutionary as well as transcultural term, inseparably bound up with both Mayan histories and the history of Western colonization; deeply engaged with a series of sometimes violent and materially entangled human-animal relations; and more recently entangled with the language and prehistory of comics and graphic fiction—specifically glyphs, which McCloud points to as an important example of a prehistoric visual-verbal meaning system (10–11).

“Xoc” has been associated more specifically with the reading of a “fish head glyph,” and the name appears among studies of “Maya personal names” (Josserand 297). This takes us deep into complex Mayan history, the significances of which I

⁹⁹ See Tom Jones, especially pages 220–222, for an historical recreation of this account. See also OED at “shark, n.1,” 1.a. 1569.

¹⁰⁰ Jones’s article appears in Dembicki’s bibliography (128).

can only briefly outline. According to Jones, “there has not been agreement regarding some specific creature intended by the *xoc*-fish;” “nevertheless, it has been consistently associated with the sea” (214). “The concept of the *xoc* as either a fresh water or marine creature, or both, appears to have existed in Yucatec, Chontal, Lacandon, Chol and Pokomchi [Mayan languages], and it further appears that the creature in question was a shark” (218). It also has a “mythological career” in which “*Chak Xok*’s” identity as a shark becomes obscured but remains as a “water-being who carries children into the watery depths and who looks like an Occidental” (218). (Jones does not expand on the “Occidental” reference, but it seems highly relevant in the context of colonial encounter).

In one particular story from the Lacandon people of Najá, “variously titled *Xak Xok*, *Ah Chak Xok*, and *Ah Chak Xok yetel Ley* (the *Chak xok* and the Boy),” Jones picks out the detail that *Chak Xok*’s grandmother is a “great turtle” (215). This history, and the multispecies kinship that lies behind it, merits attention—not least since Dembicki’s *Xoc* also has a companion turtle. Dembicki’s choice of companion also seems significant in other ways. Of all reptiles, turtles have the most ancient lineage, preceding even the dinosaurs (“turtle”). Sea turtles—ancient, endangered creatures—are, like sharks, also associated with Hawaiian *‘aumākuā*, deified ancestor guardians (Goldberg-Hiller and Silva). The turtle further suggests an allusion to the notion of the “world turtle” or turtle cosmology that appears in several cultures, as in the Native American story of the world held up by “turtles all the way down” (T. King 2).

When the turtle in *XOC* first meets the eponymous *Xoc* and says, “Oh, grand queen of the seas! It is only I, a hapless sea turtle!” (41), this suggests further associations attached to the name “*Xoc*”: for “Lady *Xoc*”—also known as “Shark Lady” and “Lady *Xok*” (Josserand 295)—was a prominent woman in Mayan

civilization. A Yaxchilán royal, “Lady Xok’s prominence at Yaxchilán [Chiapas, Mexico] is revealed in the magnificent lintels”—carved monuments that now “provide ethnohistorical records concerning Yaxchilán’s elite, especially for the Late Classic period (A.D. 600–900)” (296–7). As J. Kathryn Josserand asserts, “Lady Xok is shown with her husband the king (Shield Jaguar II) in the famous ‘blood-letting’ lintels” (297).

Along with the shark blood that is spilled later on in the text (Fig 57), it is significant that Dembicki draws on these historical and etymological roots, especially when compared with the back cover of the text, whereby “Xoc” is tellingly referred to by the impersonal pronoun “it.” The back cover blurb reads:

XOC explores the ocean’s wonders through the eyes of a great white as *it* treks from the Farallon Islands off the coast of California to the warm waters of Hawaii some 2,300 miles away. Along *its* journey, the 17-foot shark encounters natural prey and predators—from skittish seals to brazen orcas—as well as man-made impediments that threaten not only the giant fish, but the balance of the ocean’s ecology. (back cover, added emphasis)

From this objectifying perspective, what more can we say about this already fetishized animal? Moreover, the phrase “through the eyes of” promises to take the reader on an exotic and fantastical journey, tacitly foreclosing a serious engagement with the shark itself. Such “speaking for” recalls a much-cited point from Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* in which he decries the philosophical misstep of “the general singular that is *the animal*” (See also previous chapters). More to the point, he adds that “the general singular of an animal [is one]

whose sexuality is as a matter of principle left undifferentiated—or neutralized, not to say castrated” (408, original emphasis). This point, aptly illustrated in the concurrence of Xoc as “it” on the back cover and Xoc as “she” inside the text, calls attention to the misuse of the “neutralized” impersonal pronoun for animals while highlighting the importance of nuancing objectified shark narratives of both the present and the past. Dembicki’s female animals also invite us to consider what Bruno Latour has called the trope of “the Male Western Subject [who] dominated the wild and savage world of nature through His courageous, violent, sometimes hubristic dream of control” (Latour “Agency” 5). Such gendering raises the story’s stakes—both are carrying offspring—but it also stimulates reflection on Dembicki’s critical anthropomorphism. Gendered representations of this kind can work both ways, of course, both to offset stereotypes of masculine aggression *and* to reconsolidate the feminization of nature. Arguably, however, nonhuman animals in representation are not readily containable in the same categories of gender, nation, and culture that are applied to the overdetermined human. This may especially be the case in a maritime environment that reconfigures “materials across and beyond national and linguistic borders” (Mentz 998). However, it is far from *necessarily* the case: consider *Jaws*, which Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noëne K. Silva dub as a shark-hunt movie that only partly camouflages its theme of “Western fear of women’s illimitable sexuality” (433).

As Christopher Neff and Robert Hueter argue, the roots of the “man-eater” discourse surrounding the Great White go back *at least* as far as Carl Linnaeus:

The scientific system of species classification and description originated by Carl Linnaeus [sic] (1758)—the same system that identifies humans as *Homo sapiens*—was the genesis for the label of

“man-eater” for the white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*. Linnaeus’ description of this species included noting that “it strikes” (*dorfo plano*), has teeth of armor (*dentibus ferrates*), and was likely responsible for swallowing Jonah (Linnaeus 1758, p. 235), whose story had been widely published in the 1679 *Lectiones Morales in Prophetam Jonam* by Angelo Paciuchelli and Charles de Marimont. Linnaeus’ historic volumes redefined the scientific and social world, and white sharks were singled out for their motivation as a man-eater.

(66)

XOC counteracts this kind of human-shark engagement, critiquing what Clark calls “the cultural imperialism of scientific classifications (e.g., how the Linnaean system of scientific names or species discredits the authority of local names)” (149). According to Goldberg-Hiller and Silva, “In precolonial Hawaiian, for example, there was no word for the category ‘animal.’ The human/animal distinction so prominent in Western self-understanding was displaced by other ideas defining natural and cultural ontologies” (431). “After death,” the two authors proceed, “people can be transformed into ‘*aumākua* [natural guardians] such as sharks, and such ‘animals’ thus became ancestors to the descendants of that family” (ibid; See also Dell’Apa et al. 154 and Jeffries 150). Arguing that scholarship needs to be informed by indigenous knowledges without relegating these to nostalgic, “precontact forms,” Goldberg-Hiller and Silva contend that “there is a powerful yet still unappreciated meaning associated with the human/animal distinction in settler colonies such as Hawai‘i that can help us think creatively about decolonization” (432). Dembicki also suggests as much in his use of the word “Xoc,” showing a clear link between language, power, and belief systems, and providing a vivid

example of intertwined histories in which supposed knowledge, fabricated language, and “abstract constructions” go hand in hand (Jones 212).

In his introduction to *Representing Animals* (2002), Nigel Rothfels describes “the phenomenon of *Jaws* as a window into our human expectations of our relationships with animals” (vii). This case, he argues, “is revealing because it demonstrates the deep connections between our imagining of animals and our cultural environment” (vii). He goes on to discuss the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of *Jaws* (1975), based on Peter Benchley’s 1974 novel of the same name, and the subsequent anniversary release of a National Geographic article and film in which Benchley discusses his changed attitudes towards sharks and Great Whites in particular. According to Benchley, “society has changed, [and] the perceptions of animals have changed, and to write a book today in which an animal is a conscious villain is not acceptable anymore. I don’t mean acceptable from the political correctness point of view, I mean acceptable morally and ethically and every other way” (qtd. in Rothfels viii).

As Rothfels argues, our ideas about animals are clearly tied to time and place: “the way we talk or write about animals, photograph animals, think about animals, imagine animals—represent animals—is in some very important way deeply connected to our cultural environment, and [. . .] this cultural environment is rooted in a history” (xi). Forty years after *Jaws*, media representations still continue to sensationalize sharks, ignoring human involvement in the problem. This is tied to at least two issues. The first is the idea of representing “absolute sharkness” (x), while the second revolves around what Rothfels calls “creature-from-hell vocabulary” (ix). Dembicki’s environmentalist text is highly aware that, as Rothfels puts it, the “stakes in representing animals can be very high. Who controls that

representation and to what ends it will be used will be of profound importance in coming years as arguments over global climate change, disappearing and disfigured frogs, razed rainforests, hunting rights, fishing stocks, and the precedence of human needs continue to build” (xi).

In still another mainstream example, shark attributes like razorblade teeth and indiscriminate stealing typify the DC Universe comic book super-villain and infamous Batman enemy, “Great White.” Indeed, the trope of shark-as-villain continues to show up across multiple storyworlds, media representations, and mythological accounts. From a Western perspective, we can also find representations of shark-human rhetoric deeply embedded in the contemporary English language, for example the various idioms that pertain to what Garrard calls “denigrating mechanomorphism” (155). These feed in turn into a vilifying shark imaginary in which terms such as “loan shark,” “card shark,” and “sharking” all come into regular play. Characteristically, the Oxford English Dictionary’s second entry at “shark, n.2” reads: “A worthless and impecunious person who gains a precarious living by sponging on others, by executing disreputable commissions, cheating at play, and petty swindling; a parasite; a sharper” (see also Jones 211). In their article exploring the “science, policy, and the public discourse of shark ‘attack,’” Neff and Hueter likewise point to the “criminalizing” discourse on sharks “attacking” humans, isolating three labels that stand out in the historical, scientific, and public treatment of shark bites on people: “the concept of the ‘man-eater’ shark, ‘rogue’ shark, and the term ‘shark attack,’ all of which originate from scientific studies” (65). This should give pause for thought insofar as scientific practices are generally thought to denounce anthropomorphism as *unscientific* (Daston and Mitman 3; see also Garrard 164–5). Notwithstanding, this same shark discourse is ubiquitous in North American popular culture, especially in the spectacular register

of film, from *Jaws* right up to the newly released *Sharknado 4* (2016)—the viral B-movie sensation that began in the summer of 2013. Such iterations of “man-eater” and “shark attack” discourse perversely demonize all sharks, potentially lending support to “government overreactions to shark bites” and condoning indiscriminate “shark hunts” (Neff and Hueter 65–68).

In similar vein, Goldberg-Hiller and Silva tell the gripping story of fifteen-year-old Billy Weaver, who, while surfing off the shores of O‘ahu in 1959, sustained a massive tiger shark bite that eventually led to his death. In the wake of this came the “Billy Weaver Shark Control Program,” which, Goldberg-Hiller and Silva report, “killed 595 sharks, including 71 tiger sharks, around O‘ahu reefs before the end of 1959. The corpses of sharks were hoisted on scaffolds near the piers and driven through the streets of Honolulu, where they were photographed as records of vengeance” (430). Goldberg-Hiller and Silva recount the story not only as the tragic tale of Billy Weaver and the species-sanctioned slaughter that followed upon it, but also as a counterpoint to native Hawaiian cultural beliefs about sharks. They then link these latter to issues of neocolonial Hawaiian sovereignty. Billy Weaver, they point out, “who belonged to a prominent native Hawaiian merchant family,” died “three months before Hawai‘i was voted into U.S. statehood” (429). They then add, “Within native Hawaiian (and perhaps other indigenous) theories, animals play a more significant cosmological and political role, even though animals, as a linguistic and cultural category, are often conspicuously absent” (431). Sharks, they conclude, are particularly important to many Hawaiian families that recognize *‘aumākuā* or what might translate as “deified ancestors” (431).

Against the background of the Hawaiian kingdom’s “actually never ‘ceded’ lands” and precarious state government trust, Goldberg-Hiller and Silva suggest that “spectacular displays of sovereign state power [such as the US Air Force-backed

Billy Weaver Shark Control Program] may take place at the boundary between human and animal” (430–2). The enormity of this particular shark hunt is striking since sharks play a prominent role in both traditional and modern Hawaiian culture (ibid; See also Dell’Apa et al. 154). Goldberg-Hiller and Silva use licensed shark phobia to illustrate the close relationship of animality to the biopolitical: “The visceral fear of being dismembered by a shark is as much a human terror as it is the horrifying anathema of the sovereign state” (Goldberg-Hiller and Silva 433). Following Giorgio Agamben’s influential concept of the “anthropological machine”¹⁰¹ they argue, “states do things with animals” (434).¹⁰²

The state may be absent in *XOC*, but the text’s setting between the Farallon Islands and Hawai‘i still invokes this particular geo- and biopolitical context, as when hungry Xoc, in a location that clearly approximates to Hawai‘i, spies a surfer who looks like a seal.

¹⁰¹ See Agamben, *The Open*, in which he claims, “The anthropological machine of humanism is an ironic apparatus that verifies the absence of a nature proper to Homo” (29).

¹⁰² Subverting Western romantic notions that connect native peoples to nature, Goldberg-Hiller and Silva also show how “Hawaiian culture has always possessed a ready response to Agamben’s posthumanist concerns and to the violent dynamics of contemporary state sovereignty in which native land and culture dissolve in zones of indifference: a literature of body forms that moves stealthily and metamorphically within the Western preoccupation with human and animal (and plant as well as land, sea, and sky forms). The shape-shifting that enlivens these stories has always filled the voids and indistinctions that Agamben sees between animal and human with what might be experienced as an “ontological jazz,” a vibrant, intentional creation that can challenge some temporal and legal dynamics of indigenous repression and erasure” (435).

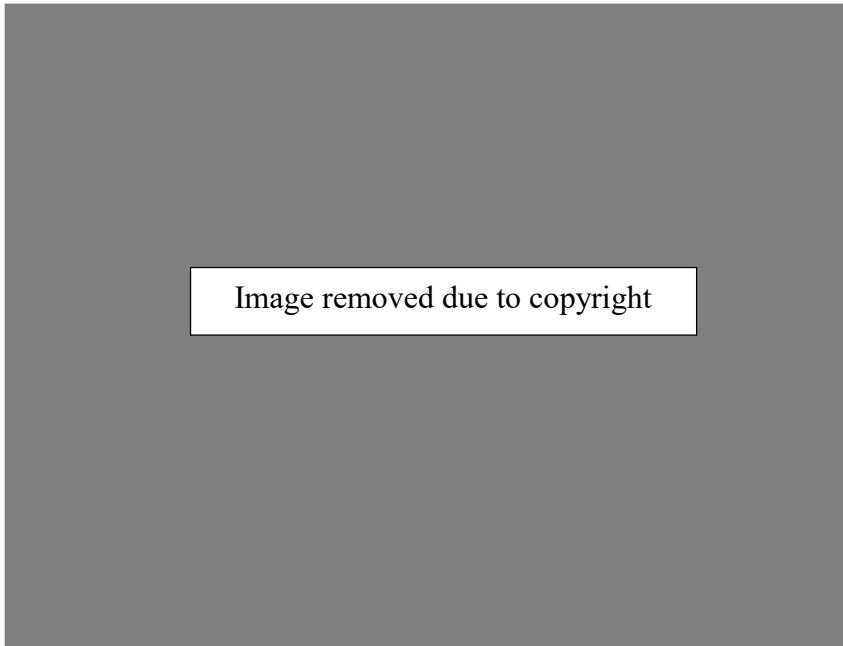


Figure 56. Xoc, Surfer, Seal (99–100)

Readers are invited to ask what the boundary between the shark, the human, and the seal might look like; and of course Dembicki plays out the scene for us. It is predictable that in an “all-ages” graphic fiction we are unlikely to see a shark seize a human. Nevertheless, the idea is implanted in the scene, raising questions that transcend the text’s dramatics and pushing readers to contemplate the shark-human boundary in a number of complicated ways. For example, what if the shark were seen to have made a mistake? And what if the supposed sovereignty of the human were to be put in question in what, after all, is the shark’s oceanic domain? Does this way of thinking require a suspension of the human, tapping into readers’ empathetic sense of sharkness? Dembicki appears to suggest this. While inspiring these kinds of questions, it also seems likely that the text is promoting the view in that the “post-*Jaws* era science stands firm on the issue: [that] sharks have not put humans on their menu” (Neff and Hueter 69). At the same time, the text seems to be encouraging the reader to assume the naturalness of Xoc’s seal hunt. The scene is clearly open to different interpretations, each of which splits off into different shark-human

perspectives; whatever their chosen interpretation, readers are made to recognize that this is a far from a one-sided equation.

Nearly half a century after the original release of *Jaws*, people are still writing about how it misrepresented the Great White and how it helped to justify shark hunting. In contradistinction to the complex portrayals by Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, the Western view of sharks has historically been one of fear and malevolence (Crawford 48–55). According to Dean Crawford, the sensationalized image that the *Jaws* myth consolidated is the third of four relatively recent instances that our descendants will analyze “when they come to write the history of the shark’s demise—assuming, as he puts it, “we haven’t mustered the imagination and the will to save them” (13). Of the earlier two, he writes the following:

In 1916, when true horror was raging in France the American media redirected public hysteria to a series of shark attacks that took the lives of four young men, and thereby created the myth of the malevolent rogue shark that preys on human flesh. In 1945 the USS *Indianapolis* sank (after delivering the atomic bomb) and, because of inept bureaucracy of the US navy, 900 survivors were left for five days in water frequented by the oceans’ greatest scavengers, with predictably horrifying results. (13)

And of the fourth:

Perhaps the most significant date, at least so far, is 1987, when the Chinese authorities determined that shark-fin soup was not so bourgeois or politically incorrect after all. Previously the Central

Committee had described it as a throwback to the imperial era. Since 1987, however, when the authorities lifted the ban on this extravagant dish, worldwide demand for shark fins has soared. (13)

We could no doubt add several other dates to Crawford's list from various other parts of the world. As Romney Philpott incisively claims, "human fear of Great Whites is not the greatest obstacle to protecting it—its economic value is. [. . .] The public's primary perception of the Great White as dangerous, instead of endangered, beautiful, and unique, hampers the creation of [enacted protections and] support" (447). Daniel Pauly cuts to the chase here: "There are simply not enough fins on presently living and future sharks to feed the growing demand for a dish whose bland taste belies its bitter nature" (xxxii).

Shark Finning

"Finning" refers to the practice of slicing off a shark's fins while the shark is still alive, then tossing the body back into the water where the shark inevitably drowns or bleeds to death (Jefferies 126; Dell'Apa et al. 151; WildAid). According to Cameron S. G. Jefferies, "Shark finning is one of the most controversial hunting or fishing activities in the world due to the cruel nature of the practice and also because fins are used for shark fin soup" (126–7). This practice is traceable "to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) as banquet cuisine for the Emperor and his Imperial family" (130). Although it is now prohibited in many countries, the international shark fin trade continues in places where shark fins are used in customary culinary practices (Jefferies 127; Clarke et al. 1115). Because of this demand, poaching and overfishing are exacerbated in unpatrolled waters, as fins sell for exorbitant prices on the international black market (Dell'Apa et al. 151). As Philpott points out, from

a fisherman's perspective shark finning is an "economically efficient operation" because "throw[ing] [them] overboard" means only using storage space "for the valuable fins" (452). Sometimes valued at up to US\$10 000 (Philpott 452),¹⁰³ "shark fins are a highly valued commodity and are being sourced globally through market channels. [. . .] Notwithstanding the secretive and wary nature of the shark fin trade, monitoring these markets may currently be the best option for determining shark exploitation levels and species pressures worldwide" (Clarke 1116).

On more than one occasion in *XOC*, readers witness Xoc and the sea turtle confronting shark finning. Dembicki's graphic renderings invite us to imagine the act as it may be encountered underwater: the result is a bloodstained scene of drowning sharks, which Xoc finds as she follows the "scent of blood" (72).

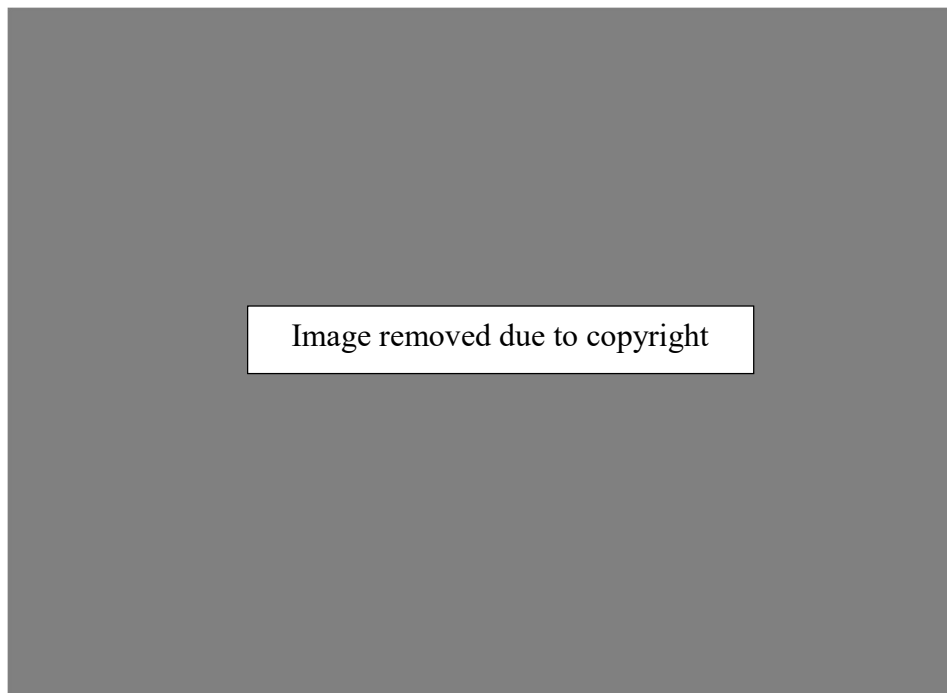


Figure 57. Finning (72–3)

¹⁰³ In terms of economic value, Philpott further points out: "International collectors have paid as much as US\$50,000 for the jaw of a Great White. Small jaws may yield US\$15,000, and individual teeth US\$600. [. . .] Unfortunately, as with fins, the value of trophies will only increase as Great Whites become more scarce" (453).

The first of two scenes of finned sharks, the one above also foreshadows the last scene of the text. It is at this point in *XOC* that the tension between the traditional “talking animal” of comics and the violence of what is being depicted is at its clearest; for unlike in a Wile E Coyote and Road Runner sequence, these sharks are not going to bounce back to life. Dembicki reinforces the “graphicness” of this scene in more ways than one, highlighted by various constructions that make use of the visual rule of thirds for effect. Again we see the technique of inset frames, with these overlaid grids this time being set against black. In this composition, and through motion lines and open mouths, the images convey a sense of visceral astonishment. For example, the top panels work in a held-framing sequence against the encasing grid, functioning through a moment-to-moment dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment. That Xoc’s body is fragmented in some panels, and silhouetted in one, vividly suggests the commodification process that this nefarious practice inflicts upon sharks. In three of these panels, especially the top right two, readers are acutely aware of the protrusions of Xoc’s fins, while in the other three panels Dembicki portrays aspects of “sharkness” through sensory details that are easily amenable to human understanding: for instance, smell, sight, and hunger.

A close-up of Xoc’s eye elicits the question: are we looking at her or is she looking at us? “Thinking itself,” Derrida says, “begins in such moments when we see an animal look at us, see ourselves placed in the context of another world, where living, speaking, dying, being mean otherwise” (qtd. in Weil “A Report” 17). A sense of the bodily and the cerebral coalesce in this sequence, with Dembicki highlighting depth perception in both literal and figurative ways. The number of open-mouthed sharks in this scene seems to multiply. Blood—repeated as a word and overpowering the graphic—explicitly brings out the violence and trauma

involved in such an act. Xoc is “shocked,” but the pun is decidedly unfunny. Are readers imagining here what it might feel like to be a drowning shark? Or are they focusing on the words—the last word of the page in particular—that send us straight back into the purview of human morality: “But something is *wrong*” (73, added emphasis)?

The shark-finning scenes in *XOC* display a kind of human-created violence that probably could not be depicted in any other manner or medium and still prove acceptable for an “all-ages” audience. This raises the question as to whether certain kinds of animal bloodshed are somehow more tolerable or acceptable than others. Would it be suitable, for example, had these scenes depicted human dismemberment or extreme violence against cats or dogs? Violence has long been a contentious topic for North American comics, with “Violence” and “Unsuited to age group” being two of the most cited reasons for “banned” and “challenged” comics.¹⁰⁴ In *XOC*, the issue is quite literally brought to the surface, with the profusion of blood and the making visible of invisible (oceanic) violence standing at the heart of a text that directly challenges the traditional civil/savage binary that exists between human and shark.

As McCloud points out, “We live in a world of colors, not just black and white. Color comics will always seem more “real” at first glance” (192). This is especially true of *XOC*, in which the fusion between “[c]olor as sensation [and] color as environment” (191) emphasizes tensions between the real and the imagined, but also reinforces the sense of empathy, in the text. The images would simply not work in black and white.

¹⁰⁴ See “Infographic Reveals the Reasons Comics Are Challenged” by the Comics Book Legal Defense Fund at <http://cblidf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/cblidf-leong4.jpg>.

Dembicki's use of the animal comic to portray violence also raises the tricky issue of victimization. According to Marian Scholtmeijer, "Culture knows animals best in their role as victims. In no other role is the animal so well prepared for anthropomorphism" (92). In the case of the shark, however, such anthropomorphism operates differently—albeit on more than one level. As Joe Chernov points out, one of the ironies surrounding sharks is that "the shark is arguably the most feared animal on the planet, yet whereas they killed 12 people last year [2011] (a peak year), we kill that many *every four seconds*" (original emphasis n.p.). In order to visualize the unfathomable number of 100 million—the estimated number of sharks killed per year—Chernov has created an infographic to make the "enormity of this fact easier to comprehend" (ripetungi.com/shark-attack/). This "shark attack" graphic, in reversing conventional shark-human rhetoric, may be the nearest equivalent to Dembicki's text.

The verbal track in *XOC* that follows the scene above is equally telling: Xoc says, "I've never seen...anything...like this before..." To which the turtle replies, "I have. It's what the creatures with the twirling teeth leave behind" (74). "Are they... so powerful... that they can kill... so many?" Xoc asks (74). In contrast to traditional comics, words like "powerful" and "kill... so many" gain a superlative currency in Dembicki's text. Again, the lexical tensions are evidenced in the turtle's eccentric yet astute observation: "The creature stains the ocean in its wake!" These same aggressive "creatures with twirling teeth" return in the final pages of the text, where the hungry Xoc cannot resist their bait. Although readers are left to imagine the conditions of her demise, the final words of the text—"Xoc circles a final time...before charging the slabs of flesh" (121)—leave little option but to expect the

worst.¹⁰⁵ Here as elsewhere in the text, the idea of the “shark victim” is turned on its head. Not that the idea of the shark *as* victim is new; rather it exists within a historical confluence of victims. As McHugh reminds us, we need not go far back in the archive to find that species extinctions and cultural extinctions are inextricably connected (“When Species Meet” n.p.). In a further entanglement of shark and human, Xoc’s translinguistic Mayan-English name comes once again to embody death.

Imagining The Great Pacific Garbage Patch

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch (also known as the Pacific trash vortex) is a massive gyre of plastic waste and marine debris (Dautel 181; see also De Wolff). This vast floating mass of refuse, stretching between California and Hawai‘i (the Eastern Patch) and between Hawai‘i and Japan (the Western Patch), is reportedly comprised of over eighty percent plastics. Sharks, turtles, albatrosses, fish, and other sorts of marine life come into regular contact with this garbage from both above and below. Purportedly doubling in density every decade, this is only one patch out of five that are centred in the five main oceanic gyres, where human and toxic wastes gather in a ghastly swirl of sludge (Dautel 181–4). According to Kim De Wolff, “For some, the garbage patch becomes a solid ‘trash island’ twice the size of Texas in need of cleanup; for others, a whole new realm of inseparable associations between synthetics and life called the *plastisphere*” (xiv).

Xoc and the turtle encounter this patch right in the middle of the text.

¹⁰⁵ The shark finning that Dembicki’s text depicts is now illegal in the US: “In August 2000, the State of Hawaii banned the landing of shark fins without the accompanying carcass. This was followed by a US federal shark finning ban implemented in February 2002” (Dalzell et al. 272).



Figure 58. Garbage Patch (56–7)

The two-page poster layout above depicts the animal characters as dwarfs next to the mass of floating garbage. Key words like “poison,” “trap,” “snares,” and “sick” verbally capture what the visuals also depict in the ten-page sequence that follows—the longest sequence in the book. Contrasting with Dembicki’s detailed framing techniques throughout most of the text, the double splash page holistically conveys the enormity of the patch; it also depicts a common problem for those engaged in oceanic conservation, for although the patch “contains an estimated 100 million tons of garbage, the debris is hard to see because it bobs just below the surface to depths of 100 feet or more” (Dautel 183; See also Alaimo “Oceanic” 187–8). De Wolff points out that much of the debris evades “attempts to measure, know, cleanup and otherwise control it, challenging the cultural and political foundations of science and ecology.” She further argues that “caring for the ocean requires responding to plastic in all its natural-cultural relationships, as it transforms humans and environments alike” (xiv).

As the sequence proceeds, the turtle almost eats a plastic bag because it looks like a jellyfish. Another turtle then swims by, entrapped in a six-pack plastic ring, its

head already turning a sickly grey. Many of the text's representations in this section suspend the need for explanation; rather the images speak for themselves. In another instance, readers witness an albatross skeleton, which commands the view of another splash page, adjacent to a mutant fish with three eyes (62–3). The deformed fish speaks to the issue of toxin ingestion, which extends throughout the food chain to humans (De Wolff 2–3; Dautel 189). Meanwhile, the albatross may have further symbolic connotations. Cassandra Eason calls albatross “actual birds with magical associations”—legendary weather prophets (63). In Japanese folklore the albatross is sacred, and in New Zealand mythologies they are related to ancestor oracles. “Killing an albatross was once believed to bring a curse” (63), as Samuel Taylor Coleridge dramatized in his late eighteenth-century narrative poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” One famous line reads, “The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen” (Coleridge 4).

Today, the Laysan albatross at Midway Atoll—“the poster-victim of ocean plastic pollution” (De Wolff 108)—suffers serious consequences from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch's marine debris. In her article “Transoceanic Trash,” Susan L. Dautel reports that “ninety percent of Laysan albatross chick carcasses that were examined contained plastics” (188). Commenting on photo artist Chris Jordan's stunning photographs of decomposing birds, Alaimo supplies a further terrible irony:

[T]he birds, like good environmentalists, will ‘reuse’ these bits of plastic, taking them from the site of the decomposed bodies, and then eating them or feeding them to their young, as one bottle cap—such a negligible bit of stuff to humans—may persist in killing birds and fish for hundreds of years. There

is something surreal, something uncanny, about ordinary human objects becoming the stuff of horror and destruction. (“States” 487–8)

Such “ordinary human objects”—along with the radiation barrels that Xoc almost tries to nibble on—punctuate Dembicki’s narrative, creating a forceful sense of the “vitality of matter” (Jane Bennett via Alaimo *ibid*) and nuancing the text’s environmentalist concerns. Dembicki’s garbage patch graphics exploit the “potential rift between imagination and empirical veracity” (Slovic 1), provoking readers to ponder the fluid connections between nature and culture, ocean and land, but also animal and human and—not least—death and life.

These false dichotomies, as the text makes clear, extend to the existence of the patch itself. When Xoc says, “It smells of death,” the turtle responds, “there is life here. It’s teeming with plants and animals!” (58). In this way, *XOC* manages to capture some of the contradictions of oceanic garbage patches, in which materials and animals leech together, and in which attempts simply to dispose of the plastic “fail to account for the marine life that has adapted to flourish with [it], or the way [it] continues to escape and travel despite attempts to regulate its movements” (De Wolff 8). *XOC* dramatizes these symbiotic relations between human waste and marine life, asking readers to question their tendency to gloss over the agency of matter in our everyday lives. Similarly, if we recall the cage divers Xoc encountered earlier in the text, we begin to get the sense of a multispecies “trans-corporeality”—a concept that Alaimo vehemently urges us to consider in terms of imagining “all creatures existing within their own corporeal crossroads of body and place” (“Thinking” 20; see also Chapter Three).

By drawing readers’ attention to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Dembicki invites this sort of multispecies and planetary empathy. As Dautel writes, “The patch

affects the whole world and requires an international solution. As plastic consumption increases and debris continues to find its way to the Patch, the ocean becomes more polluted, the marine life is destroyed, and the human population is increasingly threatened” (208). And as Alaimo goes on to suggest, “We could, as alien phenomenologists, wonder what it would be like to ‘be’ a plastic bag or a plastic bottle cap. Or, we could consider the networks of chemistry, capitalist consumerism, inland waterways, ocean currents, and addiction to high fructose corn syrup that have created the Great Pacific Garbage patch” (“Thinking” 19). Dembicki implicitly supports this view, encouraging readers to “expand and challenge the research” that went into his book, and adding that such re-thinking “begins with education and advocacy” (“Author’s note” 124–5).

Conclusion: Thinking with Sharks and Oceans

XOC is able to do what media forms like film arguably cannot: work on several scales at the same time. Mixing the animal epic, the comic, and the environmentalist fable, Dembicki reworks all of these genres and more, forcing us to “re-think the ways in which the animal, and by extension the animalistic, is presented to us,” and to imagine how “different approaches enable us to live with and act out of quite contradictory views” (Huggan and Tiffin 152). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a fable in the most prominent sense is a “story devised to convey some useful lesson; *especially* one in which animals or inanimate things are the speakers or actors” (OED, 2, original emphasis). While *XOC* uses talking animals in order to convey its views, *XOC* also confounds the traditional fable in at least two of its other conventional senses. First up, the tale is not purely “a fictitious narrative or statement; a story not founded on fact” (OED, 1). Nor is it a “classic narrative” in which animal subjects are relegated “to the background of human

activity” as “more-or-less transparent allegories of ourselves” (Huggan and Tiffin 173). Instead, *XOC* gives readers several different imaginative points of departure to understand the world in a significantly different, non-anthropocentric manner. For example, as Dembicki’s notes tell readers, “While it has [been] proven that great white sharks give birth to live young, virtually nothing is known about their mating habits, and a great white birth has never been observed” (126). This is not a problem, however, for graphic fiction.

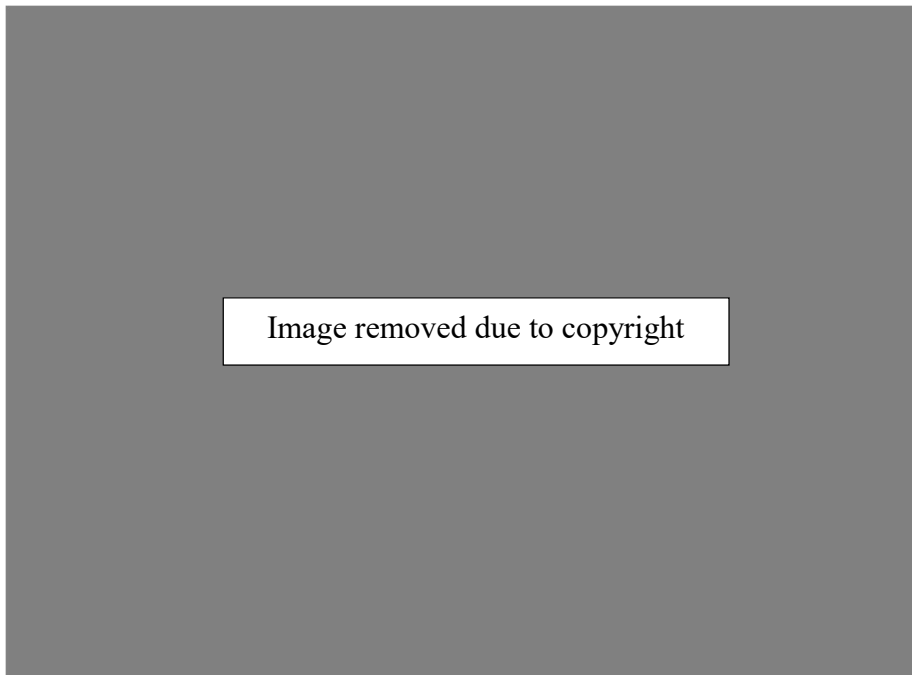


Figure 59. Picturing the Unknown (92–3)

Interestingly, the scene above breaks the “iconic solidarity” (Groensteen 128) of the surrounding text, switching into black and white and conveying a hermeneutic sense of prehistoric cave drawings and unknowable deep time. While the scene presents the presumed conditions of Xoc’s species survival, it also underlines the imagined construction of “sharkness” and its incomprehensible aspects, suggesting the enchanting yet uncontainable notion of shark alterity and deep time (see also Chapter Two). As the narrator tells us, “It is here where [Xoc’s] lineage has come to spawn for millions of years” (92). This ancient lineage imaginatively shifts readers

away from an anthropocentric worldview, envisioning history before the human and on a much different scale. Such a view requires us to take account of that which cannot be measured or controlled, precisely because it is intangible. Indeed, with an ancestry that “dates back more than 200 million years before the earliest known dinosaur,” some researchers have suggested that thinking with sharks may help us in “fathoming [the] geologic time” of the planet itself (Martin n.p.).

As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin write in their introduction to *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, “in assuming a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale” (6). They also suggest an interrogation of those subordinate constructions in which humans are positioned in a hierarchical “natural order” that has underwritten countless forms of “exploitation from the time of imperial conquest to the present day” (ibid). While *XOC* reaches out to non-scientific, cross-generational audiences, it is a text that attempts to place readers *within* as opposed to against “nature.” While *XOC* prompts a re-evaluation of our culturally informed beliefs about both oceans and sharks, Dembicki uses the unique “ability of graphic narratives to figure such differences of experience, and to prompt a re-thinking of the value hierarchies in which they have been embedded” (Herman “Storyworld” 158). As I have shown in this chapter, the material-semiotic discourses surrounding the Great White are complex, and Dembicki encourages readers to consider Western *and* non-Western, human *and* more-than-human reference points. Imaginative literature has an important role to play here. As Erica Fudge aptly puts it, “Animal tales can reinforce the status quo or they can change it. Imaginative fictions—the products of culture—have, therefore, an important role to play in the ways in which we live with and think with the non-human” (“Review” 209). As we have seen, *XOC* subverts shark stereotypes; it

challenges the traditional categories of the animal comic; and it provokes reflection on different elements of ocean conservation as well as on the incommensurable aspects of “sharkness” itself. As Alaimo says, “In the midst of the 6th great extinction, where a million species are expected to be rendered extinct by 2050, the threats to biodiversity are not something to overlook” (“Thinking” 18). *XOC* picks up on this theme, reworking the standard configurations of the journey and the talking animal and incorporating these tropes into an ethically charged narrative that is energetically brought to bear on urgent contemporary environmental themes. At the end of the text, the characters we have been “thinking with” are about to lose their lives. However, this tragic ending only encourages us to think—and act—much further than the world of the text. Such a resituating of the animal comic leads us back to the “humanimals” that we are, and in the process renders its readers’ perceptions of our fragile and fluidly connected existences all the more acute.

Conclusion: Enchantingly Uncontainable

As our improved understanding of animal lives and cultures changes, so must we change our view of the nature of the human and of the humanities—Kari Weil “A Report” (19)

If we could hear animals speak to each other, could we still do what we do to them?—Erica Fudge *Animal* (74)

“[C]ontact zone” shifts the center of gravity and the point of view. It invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect—Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes* (8)

While Kari Weil’s words imply that scholarly conversation and stories of diverse experience will produce improved knowledge of animal lives and cultures as well as their complex relationships to the human, Erica Fudge’s entail a potentially endless imagining of the extensive metaphors and material registers that surround animals, including the composite yet also reduced figure of the animal itself. Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the *contact zone*, on the other hand, offers a productive analogy that reinforces the power of relational perspectives amid different “subjects” and important shifts in “center[s] of gravity.” I have selected the three epigraphs above because they open out onto some of the provisional conclusions I want to make here. Common to these remarks is the idea that value and wonder should not be confined to the search for an endpoint to knowledge. In all of them, there is an implicit ethical relation at stake in which purism and authenticity are contested, and where interdependence and interrelation are stressed in their place. For all of them, too, there is a conditional clause, the glimmer of an enchantingly uncontainable possibility that works against the grain of the disciplinary universals and “us-them” divisions that have traditionally been used to separate human and nonhuman worlds.

Only rarely have comics studies, animal studies, and cultural studies interacted with each other, at least within an academic context. One of the most important interventions this thesis has made has been to develop Pratt's notion of the contact zone further to take in intersectional and situated perspectives that emphasize non-binary relations within the more-than-human world. A further supplement to Pratt has been to suggest that graphic fiction is itself an amalgam of critical and playful contact zones. These zones present multi-layered spaces where cultures, meanings, and species collide in ways that require a radical rethinking of conventional understandings of comics traditions; while they also require rethinking the stratifications that underpin common assumptions about human and nonhuman categorizations—stratifications challenged by the boundary-crossing figure of the *humanimal* and the equally border-hopping *transcultural* frameworks in which such figures are often found. My main aim in all this has been to better understand the changing, potentially transformative role of animal-human and nature-culture relations in the capacious medium of graphic fiction. Put at its simplest, the central premise of this thesis is this: that the different contact zones that have been opened up by humanimals and transculturalism in recent North American graphic fiction work to contest, and in some cases to transform, the hegemonic paradigms—anthropomorphism, the easy moralism of the beast fable—that still tend to underpin the North American comics tradition; and that these paradigms have significantly impeded more nuanced understandings of human-nonhuman engagements as well as of the comics medium itself.

A large part of contemporary contact-zone thinking is to excavate some of the shifting ways in which real and imaginary relationships are configured, in many cases challenging or disrupting the dominant material and semiotic systems that underlie them. In graphic texts, these configurations are often anchored in their own

distinctive visual-verbal languages, while many such texts display a range of familiar plot-driven features: coming-of-age, metamorphosis, the heroic quest. But as I have shown in this thesis, graphic fiction raises a series of broader ethical and political dilemmas that emerge from the specific worlds that its plots reveal to us. These dilemmas often revolve around the human-animal relationship. It goes without saying that in the texts I have examined here, representations of animals, however seemingly familiar, go well beyond traditional beast fable and funny animal paradigms. As I have demonstrated, such representations cast doubt on the supposedly stabilizing function of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, respectively, both of which have historically been used to marshal the spaces of identification that have been used to separate human from nonhuman worlds. They also accord with the transgressive graphic styles that render traditional comics studies frameworks unstable, suggesting beyond this that there are fundamental instabilities around the categories of the human and the animal themselves.

In a recent chapter on the funny animal in *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (2016), Brian Cremins argues that “[a]nimal tales and fables are not about real animals at all” (148). While he may be right up to a point insofar as humans “habitually use animals to help them do their own thinking about themselves” (ibid; Daston and Mitman 2), his view that tales “are not about real animals” ignores the problematic category of the animal, while also overlooking the obvious fact that human beings are animals themselves. Contemporary graphic fiction, especially of the kinds I have been looking at here, articulates an alternative view that gestures towards multispecies ontologies and epistemologies. At times, this view focuses on marginality and other kinds of creaturely vulnerability; at others, it suggests open forms of ecological agency in which various other-than-human entities not only confound the metaphysical master codes of subject and object, but also illustrate

modes of community and codependence that traverse the manufactured species divide.

What this suggests in turn is that graphic fiction is well placed to demonstrate what I have been calling here the “enchantingly uncontainable” spaces of the more-than-human world, and that it is able to do so by drawing on a toolbox that is thoroughly multimodal. For as we have seen, not only is graphic fiction simultaneously visual and verbal in its methods, but it is also synaesthetic—or, perhaps better, “multisensory” (Hague 3–4)—in its apprehension of the phenomenal world. The sometimes elaborate forms of code-switching that are typical of such graphic texts require interpretive suppleness in their turn, which has been provided here by insights drawn from such emerging inter- and transdisciplinary fields of critical inquiry as environmental humanities, posthumanism, and the new materialism.¹⁰⁶ This perhaps inevitably raises the spectre of “the Anthropocene,”¹⁰⁷ which was still fairly new as a geological-cum-cultural concept when this project was born. As the current boom around the Anthropocene shows, we now find ourselves at a stage in human history in which preconceived categories of the autonomous “natural” and the sovereign “human” are increasingly challenged, and there is even mounting scrutiny of the meaning and value to be attributed to what

¹⁰⁶ David Herman distinguishes between “interdisciplinarity” and “transdisciplinarity,” writing that a “major goal [of the latter] is to avoid the kind of unidirectional borrowing that, though commonly conflated with interdisciplinarity, in fact undermines efforts to foster genuine dialogue and exchange across fields of study” (“Toward” 116).

¹⁰⁷ There is an outpouring of recent literature surrounding this controversial term, which is generally understood as referring to a new geological epoch that recognizes humanity’s shaping influence on the planet. “Anthropocene” was coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 (OED), but the meanings and implications surrounding it are now proliferate: see, for example, Neimanis et al., “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene,” Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene,” and Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.”

some see as a hubristic notion, “life” itself (Colebrook). These are all large and abstract—if also undeniably material—categories. In her wide-ranging essays on humanism, the posthuman, and extinction, the Australian literary/cultural theorist Claire Colebrook poses questions that cut to the heart of current Anthropocenic debates:

[O]ne may say that it is precisely at the point in humanity’s history when the question of the acceptability of the species ought to be asked that this very question mutates into a defense mechanism. By asking *how* we will survive into the future, by anticipating an end unless we adapt, we repress the question of whether the survival of what has come to be known as life is something we should continue to admit as the only acceptable option. (202, original emphasis)

However, while we can, and probably should, argue over how and why grand categories such as “life” are constructed as they are,¹⁰⁸ this does not change the material circumstances of lives that are currently lived under various degrees of systemic oppression—a lesson that Bunjevac’s catwoman Zorka and her tragicomic foils, each in his/her own idiosyncratic fashion, might well be able to convey (see Chapter One). To some extent, O’Malley’s Raleigh and Larson’s Noémie are also forced to negotiate their own imposed identities, which are then transformed through particular materializations of human-nonhuman, cat-human, and horse-human becomings (see Chapter Two).

¹⁰⁸ Aristotle once said, “Life is said in many ways” (qtd. in Broglio ix).

These texts, I have argued, mount critiques of the kinds of cordoned-off identities that are both fostered and enabled by subversions of normative human and/or animal archetypes. The related theme of uprooting patriarchal modes of domination as well as revealing numinous forms of knowledge that extend beyond the realm of the human emerges, too, from Voguchi and Láska's adventures (see Chapter Three). Forsythe's and Tin Can Forest's texts both unravel some of the myths surrounding material and spiritual hyper-separations via shape-shifting manoeuvres that debunk the objectifications and self-privileging valorizations to be found in human exceptionalism. In still different ways, Matsumoto's Hamachi and Yahgulanaas's Red transform manga, the quest narrative, and the figure of the anti-hero in order to dissolve—if not entirely disavow—binary oppositions such as life and death, nature and culture, and us and them, rejecting the persistent illusions of totality and authenticity that underwrite speciesist, racist, colonialist, classist, and other sociopolitical systems of cultural intolerance and discrimination, both in the past and in the present day (see Chapter Four).

Dembicki's *Xoc*, on the other hand, provokes a more direct rethinking of the talking animal as human stand-in by advancing a kind of advocacy-oriented planetary empathy (see Chapter Five). *Xoc* resituates the animal comic within the medium of graphic fiction in such a way as to disrupt human-centric perspectives, while offering an overtly environmentalist take on marine protection, the evils of shark finning, and the scandal that is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. In markedly different ways, what all of these texts suggest is that we humans do not have to “see ourselves in everything” (McCloud 32). They destabilize and transform the conventions of the animal fable, making readers wonder about nonhuman alterity—and not just in the texts themselves, but also in our daily lives.

While the framework of transculturalism works to re-imagine *cultural* relations in a globalized world, the lens of the humanimal trains our vision on *species* relations in the context of an increasingly endangered planet. However, such ways of seeing, and the discourses that underpin them, are not easily separated. As Barbara J. King points out,

The date one chooses for the start point matters a lot less than the recognition that the trajectory of human evolution is fully bound up with animals. It's a powerful thing for those of us who feel a connection with animals today to know: our becoming a thinking, feeling species is in large part due to our coevolution with other species (some of them also thinking, feeling animals).
(206)

To put this more speculatively, "There is no 'I' separate from the intra-active becoming of the world" (Barad *Meeting* 394). To grasp this "intra-active becoming," we need to go beyond those kinds of thinking that have historically privileged the human. This is the capital H "Human" as embodied, for example, in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c1490), a figure that Haraway argues "has come to mean Renaissance humanism," portraying "High Art, High Science: genius, progress, beauty, power, money" (Haraway *WSM* 7). Via language games and other strategies of cultural imperialism, this Human has historically served to render the Other (in all its variant forms) absent, inferior, or subservient. As I have been suggesting in this thesis, we need to think carefully about how this exalted figure links to more contemporary imperialisms (such as those surrounding the Anthropocene or the global ideology of neoliberalism) and the multiple affronts that these all-encompassing systems of power have caused.

Quite unlike genre adventures, which are “intended primarily for entertainment [and] generally have negligible subtexts” (Duncan 46), the narratives I have examined in this thesis involve their readers in diverse and expansive—sometimes split-focused—animal-human subtexts. One of the primary tasks of the thesis has been to unearth some of the cultural and species particulars found in these subtexts, especially where they offer possibilities to increase cross-cultural and multispecies understandings. In looking comparatively at the heterogeneous cultural discourses that underpin current understandings of the more-than-human world, I have also argued that these subtexts stress the importance of thinking with animals. Asking questions such as who is the animal and who not, and what the conditions might be for a shared world, the thesis has challenged commonly held assumptions that comics (generically seen) are necessarily “the home of the anthropomorphized talking animal” (Witek *Comic 4*)—one possible implication of which might be that all graphic narratives and animal tales “are not about real animals at all” (*q.v.*).

The eight texts studied above all complicate this last claim, in part by using different contact zones—visual, verbal, existential—in order to examine power dynamics not easily contained within the traditional rubrics of comics or the graphic novel. These contact zones also suggest that “embedded in all pictures of the visible world are the seeds of the invisible” (McCloud 209). Much more than just “visual,” graphic fiction—with its vertiginous blend of the real and the imaginary, the plausible and the fantastical—is well positioned to substantiate the fact that “language structures how we apprehend the ontological but it does not constitute it” (Hekman 98). As John Berger writes,

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It

is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but the words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we *see* the sun set. We *know* that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. (7, original emphasis)

While we know that privileging a physiological sense of the visual can be problematic—not least with regard to positivist forms of science, the capital H “Human,” and ableist understandings of vision—graphic forms use their own techniques to render the limits of the visible, giving rise to “myriad multisensory aspects” that are frequently overlooked in “ocularcentric” perspectives (Hague 3–4).¹⁰⁹ In arguing against reductive formulations of graphic fiction, this thesis has gone some way towards articulating alternative approaches that open up new ways of seeing the more-than-human world; also new ways of *thinking* about the human-animal relationship that significantly depart from those comics traditions (and modes of comics criticism) that have tended to reinforce the anthropocentric tendencies of the genre.

More specifically, the thesis has contributed to “humanimal” research in the area of graphic fiction. In drawing together insights derived from multispecies ethnography, zoocritical scholarship, and transdisciplinary research on animal worlds and animal-human relationships, it has shown how contemporary North American graphic texts can promote new understandings of interspecies and cross-cultural encounters. Though each chapter develops its ideas in distinctive ways, my

¹⁰⁹ See Ian Hague’s conclusion to his *Comics and the Senses* for a discussion about “how blind and visually impaired readers can and do engage with comics” (175).

research collectively suggests how the unique characteristics of graphic fiction allow for critical insight into key questions that posit contact-zone perspectives and more-than-human entanglements as part of their overarching methodology rather than as their eventual goal.

The term “fiction” itself raises issues of cognitive sovereignty. Graphic fiction—when looked at from a contact-zone perspective—offsets this by foregrounding strange encounters and unorthodox relationships in which the hybrid figures of the humanimal and the transcultural are far from homogeneous, as are our readings of them; while these encounters and relationships shed insight, in turn, into essentially uncontainable categories of difference—the trans, the queer, the contradictory, the incomprehensible—that are framed and phrased in non-binary terms. Graphic texts, to put this differently, involve the strategic undercutting of tidy meanings; they re-imagine constantly changing relationships of alterity, connectedness, and difference; and they disrupt received modes of thought. Haraway reminds us that stories are, or at least can be, much bigger than ideologies (*When* 278); what I have shown here is that the particular stories—the intricate alchemies—of graphic fiction have that capacity as well.

The eight texts I have examined in this thesis disclose the enchantment, but also the violence, embedded in the unknowable, the uncontainable, and the inaccessible. They ask us what it is like to be a magpie or a bee; what it means to be a hunted Great White shark or a put-upon catwoman; what roles mischievous tricksters and unruly monsters play within different knowledge systems in and/or across different parts of the world. Through their iconoclastic mix of movement and stasis, power and vulnerability, such texts enact trans-local and trans-regional relationships that give rise to new coalitions and contradictions, inviting us for example to feel planetary empathy via the sensory organs of a shark called Xoc.

Although, as Graham Huggan has shown in a different context, concepts of planetary consciousness are neither universal nor always “socially progressive or environmentally enabling,” they are often “characteristically, even symptomatically, anxious about their own pretensions to planetarity” (“From” 75–7). As I have shown, graphic fiction is well suited to articulating these anxieties, but also to opening up new imaginative possibilities for planetary co-dependency, in part by reminding us of our human responsibilities in the making and reshaping of what still remains—and must remain—a more-than-human world. The humanimal figure offers a further reminder of these responsibilities.

Remarking on the profusion of humanimal figures in graphic fiction, Chaney asks, “Just what is it about comics that summons the human in bestial form?” (129). I can no more adequately answer this question than he can, but it seems to me that a provisional answer might have to do with what Spivak calls “imagin[ing] ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities” (73). While perceptions and representations of nature and the environment are always embedded in specific sets of cultural, historical, and social contexts, thinking more generally as “planetary creatures” gestures towards more equitable and sustainable ways of sharing the world. Thinking in this way also reveals the links between alienating individualism and contemporary hyper-consumerism. If we choose to recognize the enchantingly uncontainable characteristics of planetary phenomena instead of putting caps on knowledge by perpetuating human-inscribed hierarchies and self-privileging visions, then at least some of the ideas underwriting myths of progress, exploitation, and domination will come into question, even if there is still much work to be done before such myths and the thinking behind them are definitively undone.

Similarly, more work needs to be done on graphic fiction, and more questions asked of the particular graphic texts that feature in this thesis. Most of these texts have never been studied before even though they have all gained some kind of industry recognition. Because the various “studies” this thesis gathers around—comics, animal, cultural—are constantly on the move so as to rise to the demands of the increasingly diverse forms they aim to capture, questions seem to be the right place—the only place—to conclude. Some of these queries revolve around the cross-species ethics and politics of representation. How can we “know” other beings? Is it necessary to know them in order to live with them? How can such knowledge be imparted and represented given that representation is always partial and understanding always provisional; and given that we can never have complete knowledge about other beings, other cultures, or even ourselves? Without necessarily answering these questions, I have suggested in this thesis that contact zones are creative spaces from which new practices can emerge: “Contact zones change the subject—all the subjects—in surprising ways” (Haraway *When* 219). To repeat, “If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (Haraway *When* 244). As the texts examined here prove, one of the most powerful aspects of nonhuman presence in graphic fiction is that it defies simple categorization, while the various contact zones that link the human to the nonhuman will always exceed what we can imaginatively communicate about the dizzyingly diverse cohabitants of our multispecies world. In showing how graphic fiction has the capacity to recalibrate our relations with others—and with ourselves—my thesis offers only the smallest of steps towards this imagining. But at least it suggests that the transformative powers of the imagination

itself, which are richly represented in graphic fiction, are needed as much as they have ever been today.

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