



Frederick Luis Aldama (Hrsg.): *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. 271 Pages. Hardcover (978-0-292-72281-1), \$55.00; paperback (978-0-292-73743-3), \$25.00.

Much critical ink has been spilled in recent years about the emergence of comics studies as a new and vibrant academic interdisciplinary. As the research collected in publications such as Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009), Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith's *The Power of Comics* (2009) and Smith and Duncan's *Critical Approaches to Comics* (2012) indicates, scholars across a variety of disciplines and institutional backgrounds are devoting much attention the study of comics. In Germany, this trend is reflected in the work of the Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (ComFor) and the prodigious scholarship produced by many of its members, published in conference proceedings, essay collections, and monographs that will undoubtedly leave an imprint on the perception of comics in academia and beyond.¹

In the United States, the situation is even more advanced, and high-profile scholarly monographs published by major university presses are becoming increasingly common – think, for example, of Hillary Chute's enlightening *Graphic Women* (2010) and Jared Gardner's superb *Projections* (2012). What these and similar works suggest is that we are entering a new phase of comics studies, a phase in which scholars no longer feel the need to justify or apologize for their research interests and choice of subject matter. In this new phase, addressing questions about the place of comics within specific academic disciplines and research traditions and discussing how the analysis of comics can broaden our understanding of these disciplines and traditions is more pertinent than repeating the old adages that “comics are worthy of study, too,” and that “comics are not just for kids.” Matthew Pustz's *Comic Books and American Cultural History* (2012), for instance, aims to integrate comic books into the field of historical analysis; Michael Chaney's *Graphic Subjects* (2011) unites comics studies with autobiography theory; and the latest special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, edited by Christina Meyer, Micha Edlich, and myself, approaches comic books and graphic novels from various American studies perspectives.²

The essay volume *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010), edited by the Ohio State University English professor Frederick Luis Aldama, is a reflection of, as well as an active participant in, the collective effort towards a post-apologetic interdisciplinary comics studies. It follows on the heels of Aldama's much-appreciated *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009), which focused on a diverse roster of Latino/a comics creators and their works. *Multicultural Comics* is also interested in the works of Latino/a creators, but it expands the scope to include a wide range of mainstream, alternative, and independent comics created

by and/or about Latino/a, African American, Asian (American), and Native American authors, characters, and subjects. As such, it builds on the relatively scarce research on graphic representations of race and ethnicity in American comics historiography and scholarship – Jeffrey Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001), Fredrik Strömberg’s *Black Images in the Comics* (2003), Derek Parker Royal’s *MELUS* special issue *Coloring America* (2007), and Michael Sheyahshe’s *Native Americans in Comic Books* (2008) come to mind in this context.

In his foreword to *Multicultural Comics*, Derek Parker Royal writes that “one of the book’s greatest strengths is its willingness to enlarge our understanding of ‘multicultural’ (a term that is usually linked to U.S.-based culture) and expand its scope beyond the confines of comics produced in or related to American ethnicity” (x). Royal makes an important point here, suggesting that any adequately sophisticated and self-aware assessment of multicultural American comics must necessarily move beyond encrusted boundaries of race and ethnicity and entrenched notions of cultural and national difference. *Multicultural Comics*, I would argue, manages to do so in several ways. For one, the chapters on Latino/a creators and/or characters discuss a diversity of cultures that include the Filipina American world of Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*, the Puerto Rican consciousness of Wilfred Santiago’s *In My Darkest Hour*, and the vastly different views of Mexico in the works of Los Bros. Hernandez and Jessica Abel. Moreover, the volume contains a chapter on Indian comics as well as a chapter on graphic narratives by members of various Anishinaabeg tribes of the Great Lakes region, both of which underscore the need for a transnational understanding of multicultural American comics. One of the very few and rather minor drawbacks of Aldama’s timely and important volume is the fact that it does not really spell out the formal, cultural, and socio-political implications of this multicultural transnationalism.

Multicultural Comics is divided into two sections, the first of which is titled “History, Concepts, and Methods” and focuses “on how author-artists resist, complicate, and occasionally capitulate to simple scripts of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.” The second section, “A Multicultural Comic Book Toolbox,” makes suggestions “for analyzing and evaluating the visual and verbal elements used by author-artists to cue, trigger, and move reader-viewers to engage with complex schemas of race and ethnicity” (20). The generously illustrated thirteen essays in these sections are preceded by Royal’s foreword and Aldama’s introductory chapter. Royal raises two issues that will appear again and again throughout the volume and add to its overall cohesiveness. First, he maintains that all forms of graphic narrative use stereotypes to create visual meaning, which makes them an especially vulnerable but also a particularly powerful medium for racial and ethnic representation (cf. ix). Second, he suggests that comics’ “reliance on symbols and iconography” increases their potential to “transcend [...] many of the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries imposed by other media.” According to Royal, this means that they do not only lend themselves to the depiction of marginalized communities but that they also possess an inherently democratic potential (x). While several chapters provide ample evidence for the first assumption, the question of comics’ democratic potential remains somewhat undertheorized – unless one is willing to read the growing racial and ethnic diversity of comics creators and characters as an already sufficient expression of democracy (Jared Gardner’s “Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim” speaks eloquently to both concerns).

Aldama’s introductory chapter connects the creative possibilities of comics with the multicultural realities of American life. As a medium that encourages imaginative flights of

fancy and fantasies of self-transformation, comics facilitate the aesthetic reframing and transposition of lived experience into fictional storyworlds as much as they allow author-artists to venture out of the narrow confines of fixed racial and ethnic categories and explore multiple identities and vantage points (cf. 2). What is more, Aldama asks pertinent questions about what we mean when we speak of multicultural comics. Do we base our assessment on particular author-artists, characters, styles, plots, and narrative types? And in how far are multicultural comics determined by the sociological or political issues they raise? (cf. 19). Aldama is careful (and rightly so) to avoid any essentialist notion of multicultural comics, emphasizing instead the collaborative process through which comics attain their multicultural meanings: "What the artist-author [...] does is create a blueprint: he or she imagines, then writes and draws (alone, or collectively [...]), little by little in sequential manner the blueprint that is going to be one way or another read-viewed and assimilated" (19).

Since the field of multicultural comics is still largely unmapped, Aldama provides a useful overview "of what has shaped multicultural comic book author-artists working today and [...] their innovations" (18). Dividing the field into genre mixtures, coming-of-age stories, autobiography, memoir, biography, historical fiction, realism, and erotica, he demonstrates that multicultural comics operate across different narrative modes and genres and that they frequently engage with, and interrogate, the very conventions that have come to shape these modes and genres. Autobiographical comics like Barry's *One Hundred Demons*, for instance, use personal experience as the starting point for a visual-verbal investigation of what it means to tell the life story of a hyphenated person, a Filipina-American with unusually white skin and red hair, in Barry's case. What results from this investigation is not just a multicultural story told in words and images. Rather it is a new form of autobiographical narrative that employs the specific means of comics storytelling to create a curious mixture of factional and fictional elements (autobifictionalography," in Barry's words).

Rather than go through the thirteen chapters of the volume chronologically, I will assess them in thematic clusters in order to show the many ways in which individual chapters speak to each other. Leonard Rifas's "Race and Comix" discusses the depiction of black characters and the underlying racial assumptions of underground artists such as Robert Crumb, Justin Green, Gilbert Shelton, Bill Griffith, Trina Robbins, S. Clay Wilson, Barney Steel, and Guy Colwell. Aiming to complicate simplistic denunciations of apparently racist comix such as Crumb's "Whiteman" (from *R. Crumb's Zap* #1, 1968) and Shelton's "The Indian That Came to Dinner" (from *Feds 'n' Heads*, 1968), Rifas suggests that the depiction of racialized and stereotypical black characters was part of the artists' emphasis on total freedom of expression, their ruthless self-revelation, and their conscious violation of the restrictions imposed on mainstream comics by the American Comics Code (cf. 29-30). Rifas maintains that "[w]hile reviving lost traditions of American cartooning, comix artists dredged back into circulation racist minstrel stereotypes from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The meanings and struggles over these old images, however, had largely been forgotten" (33). This is an important point because it places the work of the underground artists within a cultural matrix of racialized imagery that had a long history on the North American continent. What it fails to realize, however, is that these minstrel stereotypes were anything but lost and forgotten in the 1960s and 70s. In fact, they were still part of the standard repertoire of visual stereotypes against which the Civil Rights Movement was protesting as much as it was marching for equal rights.

That questions of racial representation are always also questions of interracial relations is underscored in James Braxton Peterson's "Birth of a Nation: Representation, Nationhood, and Graphic Revolution in the Works of D.W. Griffith, DJ Spooky, and Aaron McGruder et al." As Braxton's analysis of two "responsive hip-hop narratives" (106) to David Wark Griffith's melodramatic race-baiting blockbuster *Birth of a Nation* (1915) indicate, minstrel images of chicken-eating darkies and hypersexual coons have never fully passed out of circulation in American history. Rather, their longevity and profound cultural impact is addressed in DJ Spooky's (Paul Miller) remix performance, *Rebirth of a Nation* (2004-), in which Miller recombines selected images of the film and splices them with additional visual images in order "to 'exorcise' the racial and racist demons of Griffith's film" (110). Moreover, they are satirized in Aaron McGruder, Kyle Baker, and Reginald Hudlin's comic novel *Birth of a Nation* (2004), which depicts the secession of East St. Louis from the United States and the formation of an independent Republic of Blackland as a response to the massive voter disenfranchisement surrounding the election of George W. Bush as president. Both of these critical interventions into historical representations of African Americans, Peterson concludes, aim to "shift representational resources of technology, history, and black political power toward a twenty-first-century paradigm of nationalist and socioeconomic discourses that tend toward political satire, even as they elide the abiding misogyny that inhabits too much of hip-hop culture and black nationalism" (117-18).

Peterson's observations resonate with Rebecca Wanzo's "Black Nationalism, Bunraku, and Beyond: Articulating Black Heroism through Cultural Fusion and Comics." For one, they imply that we should not confine the critical assessment of multicultural comics to the comics medium alone but must branch out into film and various kinds of performance if we want to understand the cultural work of multicultural comics in the broader scheme of things. This is why Wanzo's reading of Kerry James Marshall's multimedia project (comic book text, exhibition, performance) and her detection of a fusion aesthetics that draws on Japanese visual culture (Bunraku puppetry) and increasingly transcends more established forms of black nationalism is so important. According to Wanzo, Marshall's decision to cast predominantly black student actors for his *Every Beat of My Heart* performances allows for an embodied investment with, and infusion of black bodies into, the multimedia canons of superhero narratives, in which non-white bodies have historically been marginalized. Second, like Peterson, Wanzo recognizes a gender bias and inherent sexism (if not misogyny) that shapes the work of many African American male artists. This includes Marshall, who "looks to Africa for inspiration and neglects the heroic possibilities of female characters" (103).

One of the strengths of *Multicultural Comics* is its consideration of intersections among comic book constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Jonathan Risner's "'Authentic' Latinas/os and Queer Characters in Mainstream and Alternative Comics" offers a compelling comparative analysis of queer Latina/o characters in alternative comics such as Los Bros. Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* and mainstream superhero characters like Batwoman/Kate Kane's ex-girlfriend Renee Montoya and Blue Beetle/Jaime Reyes from the *Blue Beetle: Shellshocked* series (Keith Giffen, Cully Hamner, and John Rogers, 2006). Risner raises crucial questions about what he labels the "authentic" representation of queer Latina/o identities in comic book storyworlds. While he seems to indicate that such "authentic" identities actually exist outside of popular artifacts and that we can measure the degree to which they have been faithfully transformed into comics, he concludes that "[a]uthenticity may be best left as an open debate within communities of readers and scholars" and that "[t]o institutionalize criteria for Latina/o and/or queer figures in cultural production would

effectively fix terms that [...] provide a pluralistic space for diverse and evolving identities” (53). These are valid conclusions, of course, but one wonders whether they live up to Isabel Molina Guzmán’s more complex conception of Latinidad as “a performative and performed dynamic set of popular signs associated with Latinos/as and Latino/a identity,” which Risner quotes toward the end of his analysis (52).³

Melinda L. De Jesús’s “Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*” is less beholden to notions of authenticity. In fact, it proposes that “Barry’s cartoon explorations of Filipina American mestizanness juxtapose the binaries of liminality and mestiza consciousness in order to proffer alternative conceptions of being that contribute greatly to Filipina American visibility, agency, and decolonization” (74). As a mestiza – a person of mixed European and Asian descent – Barry is bound to interrogate essentialist notions of racial and sexual authenticity; as a Filipina with unusually fair skin and red hair, she is especially poised towards creating what Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* famously calls “mestiza consciousness”: a sense of self that strains to transcend racial binaries – being either European or Asian, either Filipina or American – and experiences liminality – always being both yet being confined by neither – as the answer to the eternal questions faced by the autobiographer, and by the ethnic autobiographer, in particular: who am I? And how do I represent myself to others?

If De Jesús’s chapter interrogates the liminal reformulation of racial binaries, several other chapters in *Multicultural Comics* zero in on the significance of interracial contact zones. In “Lost in Translation: Jessica Abel’s *La Perdida*, the Bildungsroman, and ‘That Mexican Feel,’” Patrick L. Hamilton suggests that Abel’s Mexican-American protagonist Carla Olivares’s failure to achieve intercultural understanding during her stay in Mexico is paralleled by Abel’s linguistic and narrative choices. The graphic novel may be designed to critique Carla’s inability to overcome her American naiveté and ignorance towards the lives of those Mexicans she encounters when she moves to Mexico City for a year in order to get acquainted with her estranged father’s culture. As Hamilton notes, however, Abel’s choice to represent the bulk of Spanish conversations in English, only adding select Spanish expression to spice up these conversations, shies away from creating a truly multicultural – und multilinguistic – text.

Margaret Noori’s “Native American Narratives from Early Art to Graphic Novels: How We See Stories/Ezhi-g’waabamaanaanig Aadizookaanag” expands both our understanding of comics/graphic novels and of nation. Turning to the forms and functions of visual and oral narratives in the history of various Native American tribes from the Great Lakes region, Noori urges us to read contemporary works such as Chad Solomon and Christopher Meyer’s *The Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws* (2006) and Brandon Mitchell’s *Sacred Circles* (2003) as revisions of conventional comic book depictions of Natives as sidekicks or villains and as graphic texts that draw on traditional Native techniques of visual and oral storytelling. Noori’s chapter also complicates exceptionalist perspectives on United States multiculturalism by highlighting the nation’s history of internal colonization. Suhaan Mehta’s “Wondrous Capers: The Graphic Novel in India” makes a related argument in a different context, focusing on the ways in which Indian graphic novelists like Sarnath Banerjee have “created an alternative space [of comics storytelling] by accommodating voices that habitually fall outside the realm of Indian socio-politico-cultural discourses” and “problematize [...] monolithic notions of home, identity, and history” on the Asian subcontinent (173).

All of the chapters in *Multicultural Comics* combine formal analysis with cultural exploration. Yet several contributions deserve special mention because of their extended engagement with the formal properties of comics-specific constructions of race and ethnicity. Evan Thomas approaches Grant Morrison and Philip Bond's mini-series *Vimanarama* (2005) through the lens of Thierry Groensteen's theory of arthrology (see *Système de la bande dessinée*). In "Invisible Art, Invisible Planes, Invisible People," Thomas proposes that various arthrological tools – from panel shapes and sizes to the placement and construction of word balloons and gutters – open up interpretive spaces that turn the margin into the center, privileging the perspectives of marginalized people like the Pakistani-English teenager Ali. In "It Ain't John Shaft': Marvel Gets Multicultural in *The Tomb of Dracula*," Elizabeth Nixon interprets Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan's *The Tomb of Dracula* series (1972-1979) as part of Marvel's growing roster of ethnic characters in the 1970s (the mute Indian Taj Nital, the black Briton Blade, etc.) that is accompanied by a series of new narrative techniques, for instance, second-person narration (which addresses readers directly) and subjective perspectives (where readers see the storyworld through the eyes of an ethnic character). As Nicholas Hetrick illustrates in "Chronology, Country, and Consciousness in Wilfred Santiago's *In My Darkest Hour*," the formal means of representing a multicultural – here: Puerto Rican-American – consciousness can even venture beyond the subjective point-of-view techniques of Wolfman and Colan's *Tomb of Dracula*. Santiago's protagonist is the bipolar Omar Guerrero, and readers encounter the post-9/11 world of this graphic novel not through Omar's point of view, but through his consciousness: through an intense focalization that blurs the boundaries between personal perception and public culture and thus welds questions of cultural belonging to America's post-9/11 crisis of self-confidence.

The most profound and far-reaching analysis in *Multicultural Comics* is offered in Jared Gardner's "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim." Gardner's chapter successfully integrates three areas of investigation. First, it offers substantial historical context, placing contemporary Asian American comics within a long history of stereotypical Asian cartoon representations, discussing the effects of successive Asian immigration waves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and pointing to the nativist policies these waves spawned (such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882). Second, Gardner shows that the development from the single-panel cartoon of the nineteenth century to the sequential and serial storytelling of twentieth-century comics can be traced to America's increasingly multicultural makeup. Arguing that single-panel cartoons rely on stereotype and caricature and thus reduce racial and ethnic differences to a few iconic traits that lend themselves to racism, he maintains that multi-panel sequences inevitably create narrative ambiguities – the gutter as the empty space between panels, for example, or the productive interface of images and words. They call for heightened reader involvement, in the process of which racial and ethnic depictions become dialogic and de-essentialized. As Gardner concludes, "[i]f the single-panel comic is the ultimate medium of stereotyping, it could be argued that the sequential comic is the most powerful (in part because least susceptible to authorial discipline) medium for embracing the radical consequences of the alterity that disables stereotype and the easy readings of the hegemonic gaze" (147). Third, Gardner is able to prove the validity of these assumptions in his readings of works by contemporary author-artists like Yang, Tomine, and Kim, who use the formal properties of sequential comics storytelling self-consciously in order to construct new forms of Asian American alterity.

The volume ends with Jenny E. Robb and Rebecca Wanzo's useful guide to multicultural comics research ("Finding Archives/Making Archives: Observations on Conducting Multicultural Comics Research"). Robb and Wanzo begin their chapter with brief remarks about why multicultural research matters and what problems researchers are bound to encounter. They suggest that constructing a canon of multicultural comics will be a first step towards convincing librarians to invest time and money in the acquisition and collection of significant works. One of the key questions they raise – and a question that resonates with the volume as a whole – is whether the classification of a work as a multicultural comic should depend on the ethnicity of the author(s)/artist(s) or whether it should be used for all comics that feature racial or ethnic settings and characters. Another, and equally vexed question, is whether blatantly racist comics should be part of the canon and should therefore be collected or not (cf. 203). Robb and Wanzo do not provide conclusive answers to these questions, mainly because they want to encourage rather than settle such debates. My suggestion would be to consider some of the arguments that evolved out of the controversies over the politics of canon formation, the need for multicultural studies paradigms, and the value of ethnic study programs, all of which have occupied scholars in various fields outside of comics studies for decades. I would also suggest that comics scholars interested in these issues begin to approach them from a transnational perspective reaching across national borders that situates American comics production within a larger network of cultural exchange – Shelley Fisher Fiskin's seminal call for a transnational turn in American studies is a good example in this regard, as are Günter Lenz's perspective on international American culture studies and essay collections such as Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn's *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures* (2010) and the forthcoming *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* (ed. Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein). Robb and Wanzo's chapter adds practical considerations to these theoretical concerns, discussing the viability of online research, the complicated negotiation of library holdings and catalogues, and the interaction between researcher and librarian. Along with the list of resources supplied at the end of the chapter, these discussions will surely motivate future scholars to enter the field of (multicultural) comics studies.

By way of conclusion, let me say that I find *Multicultural Comics* to be a tremendously important and rich addition to the growing number of academic studies dealing with the ways in which graphic narratives imagine, represent, construct, and negotiate notions of race and ethnicity. In particular, it is the contributors' ability to combine formal and cultural analysis that makes the volume so rewarding. We need more of this kind of scholarly writing to establish fruitful connections among comics studies, history, and cultural studies and trace specific cultural and socio-political phenomena such as race, ethnicity, and gender across narrative modes, genres, and media.

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<http://www.comicgesellschaft.de/?p=3437#more-3437>

Notes

¹ On German comics scholarship (including a list of relevant publications), see my "Comics Studies in Germany" and "Comicwissenschaft in Deutschland."

² On the apologetic strain in comics studies, see Ecke, "Comics Studies' Identity Crisis."

³ For the original quotation, cf. Guzmán, "Mediating *Frieda*" 235.

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