

# Drawing New Color Lines

Transnational Asian American Graphic  
Narratives

Edited by Monica Chiu

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# Introduction

## *Visual Realities of Race*

Monica Chiu

The eponymous Japanese Canadian protagonist in Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's graphic narrative *Skim* is visually contrasted against her blonde-haired, fair-skinned Canadian peers. However, Western-based assumptions of the challenges she faces because of her racial difference are overlooked by many Japanese readers, who find *Skim*'s image disconcerting in the novel's Japanese translation. An Orientalist reading of character Chin-kee in Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*—a buck-toothed, yellow-faced high school student speaking pidgin English and sporting a queue in a twenty-first-century classroom—is lost on Chinese students in Mainland China. The irony of Chin-kee's representation is overlooked by these readers in favor of criticisms leveled at Yang's irreverent representation of another character, the Monkey King, protagonist of the sixteenth-century classic *Journey to the West* whose beloved image has been replicated in numerous Chinese books and TV shows. These and other transnational interpretations of Asian American graphic narratives are the motive for this collection. Little current scholarship allows for such necessary readings that exemplify the reception and impact of comics (used interchangeably here with graphic narratives) across the Pacific, including manga's exportation and reinvention in North America.<sup>1</sup> The essays in *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives*, authored by scholars in both North America and Asia who hail from different interpretive communities, demonstrate the instability of accepted interpretation of these texts, their representations of race, and therefore the instability of the concept of race itself. The essays encourage tempered cross-cultural interpretation and fertilization in order to forge new images in graphic narratives, new ways of imaging, and thus new ways of seeing and being seen.

In his essay “Masticating Adrian Tomine,” Viet Thanh Nguyen identifies the challenge of representing visual registers of race in the prose of Asian American literature: “The problem for an Asian American literature composed purely of the written word is that there is no formal way for it to deal with race’s visual dimension, only its narrative dimension” (12). He then argues that graphic narratives are one venue that can effectively visualize race: “This is where Tomine’s pictorial work in *Summer Blonde* has the advantage over written literature. He not only writes and rewrites the stories of race, but draws and redraws the look of race as well” (12). Nguyen’s argument raises a host of fascinating issues about Asian American graphic narratives that will be discussed in this collection. These include how contemporary graphic narratives depict the “look” of race in expected and usual ways to new interpretive results, and how such a rewritten or redrawn “look” promotes or overturns the assumption that Asian American authors are expected to write about or depict race in particular, acceptable ways.

Much current scholarship on graphic narratives addresses how the medium’s unique confluence of image and text, a verbal-visual conflation, creates meaning. Scholars invested in defining comics and graphic narratives have argued over which of the two is more relevant, image or text. *Drawing New Color Lines*, however, is less concerned with defining what comics are and more interested in investigating what comics do. The title of the collection references Frederick Douglass’s “The Color Line” (1881), whose objections to the immorality of race prejudice particularly affecting freed slaves is revisited in W. E. B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Acknowledging this lineage in the twenty-first century, the collection demonstrates how we now grapple with issues of pluralized color lines, those beyond the challenges of black and white social and political relations, through the colored lines of comics. Furthermore, Asian American comics’ contemporary re-visioning (re-drawing) of raced characters demands an investigation into their transnational reception and impact overseas.

Susan Sontag’s recommitment to the impact of the visual—after once proclaiming that viewers grow accustomed to images of atrocities and thus they no longer affect our moral core<sup>2</sup>—announces that images are powerful emotional and psychological forces of documentation in our current moment. To the wider US population, Asian American literature, whether prose or graphic narrative, has become a cultural documentation of sorts. It shoulders the baggage of showcasing the expected but often reductive portraits of Asian Americans, what Yoonmee Chang calls the “ethnographic imperative” (7) or what the narrator in Nam Le’s short story “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion

and Sacrifice” calls the ETHNIC STORY (17; capitalization in original). As Chang and Le unfortunately discover, a successful ethnic American story requires public sanction: the suffering refugee who finds succor and success in America, the model minority encouraged by US opportunity, an adherence to what the majority accepts as typically ethnic American, sometimes more fiction than fact. Thus, in extending Charles Hatfield’s “reader’s requirement” in creating a narrative from the images and text of comics, David Carrier argues that “[t]he meaning of a comic is determined not by the artist but by the audience; to interpret a comic we need to identify the ways in which it reflects the fantasies of its public” (7). The essays in *Drawing New Color Lines* thus acknowledge an historical gallery of visual representations of Asians and Asian Americans—visual imperatives—produced from public fantasies about them that have been shaped by material history and popular culture, politics, social science, and economics. The discussions collected here reference these enduring representations, sometimes overtly and sometimes surreptitiously, subsequently conjuring new ones. There exists provocative imagining in comics’ imaging.

Graphic narratives introduce an exciting visual dimension to a field of expected narrative trajectories about Asian Americans. The collection grapples with the weighty questions and new expectations that arise from the innovations of the genre: Do Asian American graphic narratives defy or uphold the ethnic imperative? What are so-called new visual representations of race? How do they operate, and what are their scholarly contributions to the fields of race and ethnic studies, American studies, cultural studies, visual culture, media, and narrative theory?

Given Asian American studies’ 1990s transnational turn, the collection complements studies in transnationalism, globalization, and postcoloniality. Scholars in Asian American studies at the cusp of the twenty-first century looked beyond experiences of so-called domesticated Asian immigrants and their subsequent generations to address narratives about transnational refugees and adoptees, expatriots, American imperialism,<sup>3</sup> and what Aihwa Ong calls flexible citizens, those who make their homes in more than one country, defying strict assimilative expectations. The globality of Asian and Asian American subjects questions a US-produced “look” of race, those fantasies dictating what representations qualify as Asian American. Furthermore, transnationalism asks how this look is interpreted beyond North America. What occurs when American-based visual representations of Asians and Asian Americans travel to Asia? Inversely, how do Asian graphic narratives influence future US publications?

As a case in point, Japanese manga increasingly affects US audience expectations and comics production (North American readers are eager manga consumers), especially through the rise of original English language (OEL) manga, to be discussed in three of the collection's essays. Japanese manga artists have made a concerted effort to produce "culturally odorless" or raceless manga, those that eliminate characters' Japaneseness both in facial features as well as in references to Japanese culture. At the same time, however, manga relies on a culturally-specific (Japanese) visual language of which many non-manga readers must be apprised for narrative comprehension. These globally circulating representations of so-called racelessness emerge as salient challenges to US-based racial representations. Indeed, race is sometimes irrelevant in the medium of Asian comics, less important to cultural productions than meeting fan requirements, for example, or adhering to manga's doe-like eyes (which are "mostly signifiers without Caucasian signifieds," as argued by Jaqueline Berndt in this collection). If so, then visual references to raced, Asian characters in US-based graphic narratives resonate quite differently with Asian audiences.<sup>4</sup> Manga may be seemingly raceless, but it is strongly national in its references to location, culture, and custom. The visual and narrative cues intimating racial differentiation in Asian (North) American graphic narratives contrast, then, with so-called odorless Japanese manga. In comics' globality, these cues require Japanese audiences to note, at minimum, racial representation in other forms of Asian American graphic narratives.

### **Drawing the Face, Re-constructing "Big" Statements about Race**

Indeed, through the circulation of Asian American (US) graphic narratives within an Asian (overseas) readership, *Drawing New Color Lines* asks what new meanings and what "other" racial looks reside in critical works for interpretive reading communities abroad. They do not, the authors find, resonate with what the protagonist of Tomine's *Shortcomings*, Ben, asks with acidity, "Why does everything have to be some big 'statement' about race?" (13). Rather, interpretations in Asia suggest that what is regarded as an important scholarly debate in one nation might be less charged in another, each national reading audience being focused on culturally driven arenas that do not resonate across international borders. The result is a refreshing stance from which to discuss the matter of race: when does it matter, to whom, and why?

Both Ben's hesitation over any "big" statement about race and Nguyen's ideas about race in Asian American graphic narratives lay the foundation for approaching vexing questions of US-based sequential art that ironically relies on just the racial stereotypes that Asian American graphic narratives attempt to combat.<sup>5</sup> In an ethnic studies context, race is a ubiquitous ideological framing device in the United States related to what Nguyen names the "visual reflex of race" (12). That is, US readers rely on the efficacy of typing in the medium of comics, a visual approach to quickly recognizing raced characters. Initially effective to the reading process, typing might, however, be relegated as an insufficient (exaggerated, limited, even grotesque) visual marker beyond the frame and in comics' interpretations abroad.

Countless scholars accept comics writer and artist Will Eisner's assessment that comics characters cannot but rely on stock images to convey characters' identity. Eisner argues in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* that "the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium" (11). This "simplification of images into repeatable symbols" is "an accursed necessity" because comics rely on economic (streamlined) representations. Readers' accumulated memories and past experiences—including multiple situations with similar outcomes or numerous observations of procedures that create social types—coalesce to assist in visualizing an idea or process (17, 11); but his arguments assume particular readerly experiences without which one might not comprehend an image, a point to which I will return shortly. Derek Parker Royal accepts that comic stereotypes "communicate quickly and succinctly," but qualifies stereotype's usefulness only if the artist avoids "slipping into the trap . . . of inaccurate and even harmful representations" ("Drawing Attention" 68), a statement suggesting that authors and readers know, perhaps even agree on, the point at which stereotypes become harmful, if they do indeed. Jared Gardner quotes comics illustrator Chris Ware, "If you treat comics as a visual language and trace their origins, they point back, essentially, to racism" (135). That is, they point to caricature, the peeling away of "inessential elements" to reveal what Joseph Witek argues is "a hidden truth about its subject" beneath the outer trappings, or how images are substitutes for "concepts," (32), which I understand to be, for example, accepted concepts circumscribing race, gender, national affiliation, intelligence, etc.

Gardner thus inquires "whether one can deploy a racial stereotype without empowering it . . . can Asian American comics creators tell stories of Asian Americans without [stereotypes]?" (133).<sup>6</sup> Gardner answers his own question

by referencing the valuable “graphic alterity” of sequential comics, positioning the latter against the “cartoon racism” of single-panel cartoons. He argues that “sequential comics have a unique and contrasting ability to *destabilize* racial stereotype” (135; emphasis in original). He provides several examples from the comics strip medium in which the strip’s intentional sequence unfolds across time, space, and gutters (the gaps between frames) to guide the reader through any “ambiguity” over what and how images mean. To exemplify how comics ultimately resist the “static” image typing of “a single-panel cartoon gag” (136), Gardner uses Frederick Opper’s 1900 strip *Happy Hooligan*, featuring the eponymous, simian-looking Irish tramp who is drawn according to early twentieth-century Irish stereotypes. His daily struggles to live ethically are continuously thwarted by baseless police action against him. Gardner argues that readers initially and handily locate Happy in his stereotypical Irishness, guided by frequent former visual and narrative Irish stereotypes they have encountered in other mediums; they identify and think they “know” Happy through social typing, bringing about their initial mirth over recognizing his “sort.” But across multiple panels and repetitions that depict police injustice against him, readers re-view Happy, eventually identifying with him and, in a narrative reversal, against law enforcement (135–36). In Gardner’s insightful example, the visual stereotype efficiently sets the scene per Eisner’s argument that readers draw on “past experiences” to understand current images. But the strip’s repetition, over time and panels, of legal harassment against the do-good Happy advances the possibility of more gracious readings, those that move beyond the Irish gag track to those that regard Happy as an Irish man, a particular individual, and not an *Irishman*, a derogatory term denoting the collective sum of his stereotyped “Irish” hooliganism.

Hye Su Park’s reading of Tomine’s *Shortcomings* offers another approach to how comics’ repetitive images (its visual serialization) might combat racism. Like Gardner, Park indicates how a narrative’s effective use of multiple panels—in *Shortcomings*, such panels are those that ceaselessly highlight Ben’s habitual social disconnection—contributes to readers’ empathy toward this character and the (racial) trials he endures. Park argues that “intimate empathy between readers and the character is gradually developed. Through simultaneous disengagement (anti-heroic characterization) and engagement (the directness of visuals) that happens simultaneously, Tomine’s ideal reader-viewer is both repulsed by and sympathetic to the protagonist” (103). Both Gardner and Park argue that narrative serialization, unlike the single-panel cartoon, contributes



to defusing ethnic typing.<sup>7</sup> For Henry Wonham in his study of late nineteenth-century ethnic caricatures in the literary works of American realist writers, the caricature itself presents a paradox in which the laughing reader also grasps the idea that “ethnic identity . . . [is] an insidious cultural fiction” (35).<sup>8</sup> In late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century graphic narratives, Wonham’s theory finds purchase in various interpretations of how types work and what they do to suggest possibilities for further scholarly investigation.

Alongside US scholars’ often uncritical acceptance of Eisner’s and Ware’s adherence to the utility of typing resides an equally uncritical embrace of Scott McCloud’s oft-quoted pronouncement that “when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself” (36). In his discussion of comics, drawn in comics form, he argues that a highly simplified face created from “a circle, two dots and a line” (31), which one might think too primitive to invite anything more than a recognition of face-ness, provides readers the unique opportunity to see themselves projected on the page. McCloud’s “amplification through simplification” (30) “creates the space of an almost unconscious empathy with the characters in the story,” argues Jessica Knight, “and thus the potential for students to identify intensely with others’ experiences, however different from their own” (97).<sup>9</sup> Key to reading many of the primary sources discussed in this collection is Knight’s critique of the “dangers in the empathic response,” those which can garner “a kind of cultural tourism in which the ideals of respect and tolerance ultimately foster an atmosphere of dangerously depoliticized indifference” (97), at the same time that readers accept the tenets of McCloud’s argument that simplification (the face that emerges through a mere four swipes of the pen) allows for (easy) interpretive amplification.

## The “Universal” Face in Asia

The transnationalism of Asian American literature invites pause over how (often) passively accepted US stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans contribute to or detract from efficient and effective reading practices of graphic narratives across the Pacific. For decades, US brands, films, products, and ideas have found eager audiences abroad, customers that are willing to consume, both literally and figuratively, America, sometimes in unaltered form, other times adjusted to local tastes.<sup>10</sup> The notion of transnational Asian American studies, however, is still relatively recent. It was discussed by Sau-ling Wong in her 1995 “Denationalization Reconsidered,” but as a call for academics to focus on

domestic issues lest scholars lose sight of Asian American literature's continued investment in acceptance by the US national body. As part of a rapidly emerging academic impulse to incorporate overseas (Asian) narratives that limn characters' US experiences and influences, Wong's appeal was met by Susan Koshy's 1996 counter argument in "The Fiction of Asian American Literature." She exhorted scholars to set their sights beyond national borders, necessarily expanding the definition of Asian American literature and Asian American studies whose transnational reach, she urged, was outgrowing domestic containment.

By 2000, scholars in Asian American and other ethnic and area studies, including American studies, were rapidly publishing works related to transnationalism: bodies in diaspora or in stages of statelessness (refugees, adoptees, migrants, and immigrants); those moving along postcolonial streams or crossing borders (as legal or illegal immigrants); American colonialism, imperialism, and occupation; the Englishes and "weird English"<sup>11</sup> of adaption and of neo-colonized subjects. In the field of Asian American studies before and after the turn into the twenty-first century, scholars from Asia visited the United States and vice versa, each leaving behind books, ideas, and pedagogical approaches while also returning home with foreign concepts that influenced the scholarly arena. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa's 2001 anthology of essays, *Orientalisms: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*, speaks to this phenomenon; it focuses on the necessity "to 'globalize' academic practices by thinking across disciplinary and areal boundaries" (5), the collection itself following on the heels of numerous overseas projects tracing Asian American literature abroad. Wong references many of these scholarly enterprises in her essay, "When Asian American Literature Leaves 'Home,'" including a discussion of emerging study groups in Japan on this topic; conference panels organized at venues in Taiwan or essays in European and US collections about teaching Asian American literature abroad; as well as references to single-authored works on the topic of Asian American literature abroad (29–30).<sup>12</sup> Her essay appears in a 2004 collection edited by Noelle Brada-Williams and Karen Chow: their *Crossing Oceans: Reconfiguring American Literary Studies in the Pacific Rim* maps just the de-domestication of Asian American literature (as it circulates in Asia and the Pacific Rim, including California) against which Wong once cautioned. In a co-edited collection led by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Transnational Asian America* (2006), the editors specify an assumption in their own work that is relevant to *Drawing New Color Lines*: "Asian American literature can no longer be viewed as merely a minor ethnic province of a domestic American canon. The transnational

texts discussed in this [Lim et al.] volume [texts by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Ha Jin, for example] . . . feature decentering themes and aesthetics that reflect the dynamics and trajectories of Asian American transits” (22).<sup>13</sup> In 2008, *Amerasia Journal* published a special issue called “Word Travels: Asian American Writing in China, Germany, Korea, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Singapore & the US” that builds on Rocío G. Davis’s numerous contributions to investigating Asian American literature in Europe.<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 2012, the *Asian American Literary Review* launched an issue entitled “On Teaching Asian American Literature Outside the US,” in which scholars who taught Asian American literature in Asia discuss their experience. In this forum, Donald Goellnicht’s contribution investigates what matters for scholars in Taiwan who are reading and teaching Asian American literature, which is “not so much the personal trials of immigration or of a sense of displacement and dislocation that occurs when Asian American subjects are caught between cultures, but rather the larger experiences of macro-politics, of colonialism and imperialism in Asia, in which the US and Canada have been deeply implicated” (n.pag.). In its consideration of cross-Pacific audiences that de-territorialize graphic narratives, this collection investigates what matters in visual and discursive contexts to American and Asian readers. This project of contextualizing “Asian” and “American” through graphic narratives redefines the field of Asian American studies. The Asian impact on US soil is as important as the American and Asian American imprint on Asian soil.

In their post-national debut, therefore, graphic narratives’ approach to visually representing race resonates in new ways; stereotypes do travel, but their mitigation processes abroad might be quite different from the critique and dismantling of typologies practiced by Asian American readers in the United States. For example, the 2005 cartoon depictions of the prophet Mohammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*—simple representations with decidedly complex interpretations—evoked much laughter in the Western world but provoked anger and concomitant violence in the Middle East as protestors objected to the artist and the newspaper that printed his work.<sup>15</sup> Given the latter’s reaction, we can question if comics’ typing of race presents a universal face (McCloud), provides an intellectual understanding of ethnic caricature’s representation of “an insidious cultural fiction” (Wonham), or offers an “empathic response” (Knight). As these examples suggest, studying what kind of cultural work comics do on both sides of the Pacific is a project whose outcome extends beyond the academic realm; in fact, it circles back to the popular audience from which comics arise, drawing in manga fans, reader-protesters, and engaged

citizens who care deeply about how images mean and their acquired national, cultural, and transnational understandings.

A more domestic, less explosive example of the work graphic narratives might do in the United States and abroad is evident in the most popular Asian American graphic narrative to date, Gene Luen Yang's award-winning *American Born Chinese*.<sup>16</sup> Yang uses stereotypical images of the "heathen Chinese" which first gained popularity in widely circulating late nineteenth-century magazines, like *Harper's Weekly*, *Puck*, and *Wasp*, that were geared toward a white, middle-class readership;<sup>17</sup> it recasts China's revered Monkey King, a figure borrowed from the well-known and admired sixteenth-century Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, as a simpering, wannabe deity. By and large, an American readership grasps Yang's ironic representation of Chin-kee, perhaps because this audience has been schooled in how individual identity-making is key to national cultural citizenship, and *American Born Chinese* tells the pictorially-based tale of ethnic teen self-acceptance. However, according to Kuilan Liu's essay collected here, for Chinese readers, Yang's narrative has been regarded as reprehensible for its racist depiction of Chinese subjects; even more so, Chinese undergraduate readers find repugnant its representation of the noble Monkey King, a figure that hardly registers (except to be searched on the web) for an American audience. As such, this collection demonstrates that culture encourages or inhibits certain translations, thereby garnering others. As a case in point and mentioned above, when Asian Canadian Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim* was reprinted in Japan, Japanese manga reading audiences found the Japanese Canadian protagonist to be "unsettling" and "ugly."<sup>18</sup>

## Considering Manga's Conventions in the United States

American comics greatly influenced Japanese manga when the former arrived with American occupiers in 1945, argues Paul Gravett (12–13); likewise, North Americans and Europeans became enamored of manga and anime in the early 1990s despite initial printing and cultural barriers (152, 154), resulting in the current mass consumption of the genre in the West. Thus begins a brief introduction to the discourse between North American graphic narratives and manga and their movement in both directions across the Pacific. I heed Berndt's warning that scholars of manga (Japanese and non-Japanese alike) should refrain from focusing on ideological themes at the expense of publication and consumption (fandom) trends, aesthetic and technical form, and intertextuality, all of

which significantly influence manga storylines and production (Berndt 297). In this section, *Drawing New Color Lines* intends to critically “mediate between different fields of knowledge”—Asian American and ethnic studies, literary and cultural criticism—with and against the field of manga studies (Berndt 300). While I do not want to essentialize manga, naïve readers of the medium must be apprised of its unique Japanese visual language (VL) (Cohn, “Japanese Visual Language” 187). This medium-specific vernacular is comprised of symbols that non-Japanese readers and non-manga fans worldwide might find unusual: for example, that nosebleeds indicate a character’s lust; or that smaller, chubbier, “superdeformed” depictions of characters (called *chibi*) portray “a spontaneous general lack of seriousness” (192) or “indicate anger or frustration” (Johnson-Woods 7).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, manga subjects that are regarded as pure entertainment in Japan (depictions of naked children, for example) might provoke ire and legal investigations in other countries.<sup>20</sup> Different from American comics’ fan base is manga’s zealous overseas enthusiasts; the latter retain a strong influence over forthcoming publications, some resorting to illegal scanlation (scanning and translating manga into fans’ native languages) in their fervor to make available quickly the latest publications (Johnson-Woods 8). The ubiquitous saucer-like eyes of many female manga characters propose an inherent utility to McCloud’s universal face: Japanese readers do see themselves reflected in their wide-eyed manga protagonists at the same time that the eyes’ expanse provides, literally, a large field in which to convey characters’ emotions scene to scene.<sup>21</sup> Frederik L. Schodt names this both “a remarkable flexibility” in Japanese self-depiction as well as a lucrative retail advantage in the export industry in which Caucasian-looking characters find easy purchase in Western markets (62); that is, a typically white Western reader identifies with (sees herself in) characters who look like she does. Manga presents an effective use of what McCloud names “masking,” enabling readers to identify with characters.

The erasure of racial or ethnic identifying conventions (drawing so-called or qualified Caucasian eyes rather than Asian ones), among other elimination of indices of Japaneseness, is what Mark W. MacWilliams names manga’s cultural odorlessness, briefly examined earlier (16). This might explain the disgust with which Japanese readers regard Tamaki and Tamaki’s Japanese-looking protagonist Skim, the “odor” (visual markers) of her Japanese Canadian nationality evident in her almond-shaped eyes.<sup>22</sup> They do not identify with her; in fact, they do not consider her Japanese at all. Thus, we might conjecture that Japanese readers reject McCloud’s proclamation that a simple face is also a universal one,

adding yet another complex dimension to the global circulation of visual racial idioms. Such a reading suggests that Japaneseness can be shorn of its “odor” and incorporated into what Japanese manga readers regard as the neutrality (odorlessness) of large-eyed protagonists. If so, then something is lost for that reading audience—while other interpretations are gained—through a deliberate (US or Western) emphasis on visual, racial difference by Asian American comics authors who intend to dismantle the politics of racial, ethnic, gendered hierarchies.

Certainly, US literary investigations into how American texts travel abroad are not new. But inquiries into how Asian American sequential art is read outside North America anticipate the questions *Drawing New Color Lines* asks of race, representation, cross-cultural interpretation, and transnational circulation. Gillian Whitlock offers one of the few critiques of a wholesale (US-based) acceptance of Eisner’s and McCloud’s arguments; her point is even more relevant to this discussion as she addresses how images in transit, or their transnational circulation, meet with decidedly non-universal (non-uniform) interpretations:

The technology of comics draws our attention to the semiotics of sequential art, and its unique demands on the reader. Nevertheless the recent cartoon wars are a reminder that as critics we must go beyond Eisner and McCloud to place readers and texts in context, and to be wary of claiming universality in mediations of comics and cartoon drawings. Translating comics and “throwing copies [of comics] on the streets of Baghdad” (as Pax enthusiastically suggests [he was blogging during America’s war in Iraq]) is a euphoric gesture of cross-cultural communication that forgets the complex transits that must occur for comics to engage readers in very different contexts. Late in 2005 cartoon representations of the prophet Mohammed published in the Danish press caused outrage and initiated violent protests and death on the streets of some Muslim societies—as Spiegelman memorably remarks: they added more very real injury to an already badly injured world (“Drawing Blood” 43). This is a reminder, if we needed one, of how all kinds of images and representations are now caught up in the “war on terror” and lives are at risk, quite literally so. (970)

Thus, while many US scholars advance the role of comics’ representation to effectively and efficiently contest racism in America, the essays in this collection point to the consequences of too hastily embracing the idea that graphic narratives destabilize stereotypes, where readers might find irony in the narratives, or how formal aspects of graphic narratives lend themselves to particular, directed readings. Rather, this collection iterates the reigning arguments in the

field of graphic narratives criticism only to question their foundations through incisive readings about visualized racial subjectivity here and abroad.

## Frame by Frame: Chapter Summaries

Here I indicate what this collection will not discuss. It does not propose to fill a gap in current graphic narrative scholarship, one that focuses on an American medium once dominated by white superheroes. That said, it also is not a catalog of new Asian American graphic narratives and their scholarly interpretations. Rather, many chapters discuss novels by well-known Asian American authors (specifically Adrian Tomine and Gene Luen Yang) whose work has enjoyed much scholarly attention already. It also necessarily investigates those who have been publishing important work without concomitant recognition (Ann Marie Fleming, Derek Kirk Kim, Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, Fred Chao, Tak Toyoshima) and introduces new authors/artists (June Kim, Shaun Tan, Jenifer K Wofford). *Drawing New Color Lines* argues how Asian American graphic narratives are already redefining a field still under nascent definition.

The collection begins by discussing race and Asian American graphic narratives in a US framework, moves to the narratives' reception in Asia, and then circles back to essays about decidedly transnational aspects of particular Asian American graphic narratives. In the first section, Monica Chiu, in "A Moment Outside of Time: The Visual Life of Homosexuality and Race in Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim*," avers that *Skim*'s visual conventions are non-prose, textual interventions into social heteronormativity and race. The narrative's strategically engineered visual interruptions demand that the reader stop at key textual moments, moments outside of diegetic time, to appreciate homosexual encounters or subtle forms of racial discrimination that are present in the illustrations but absent in the novel's prose. Images "speak" more loudly than prose, driving a narrative in which homosexual encounters become fantastic, meaning both potentially fictional and irrepressible, and race emerges as *Skim*'s salient, but textually silent, difference in stark contrast to her blonde-haired, blue-eyed peers. In her essay "Asian/American Postethnic Subjectivity in Derek Kirk Kim's *Good as Lily*, *Same Difference and Other Stories*, and *Tune*," Ruth Y. Hsu argues that Kim's graphic narratives are a complex and ambivalent reaction to the emergence of postethnicity, the popular belief that racial and ethnic identities have become much less important to how Americans describe the nation. Kim's



writing and art—by reimagining the literary trope of rite of passage and maturation—are ironic and subtle depictions of how race and ethnicity still matter. While Gene Luen Yang is well known for his Printz Award-winning graphic narrative *American Born Chinese*, Lan Dong examines his lesser-known work in “The Model Minority between Medical School and Nintendo: Gene Luen Yang and Thien Pham’s *Level Up*.” She first calls attention to the nuances and impact of the model minority myth on Asian Americans and then demonstrates how *Level Up* re-visions Asian American representation through interactive racialization in video games. *Level Up*’s discursive and visual elements provide multiple opportunities for protagonist Dennis Ouyang to conform to, play with, or challenge the rules of his status as a model minority, haunted by his deceased father’s wish that his son become a doctor. The novel also demands that readers confront their discomfort with racial stereotypes when these types appear in varied recognizable forms (the model minority, for example). The reader’s and Dennis’s position of mediating among troubling ethnic identities presents a gamification of social and cultural life. Aptly closing this section is Ralph Rodriguez’s essay on Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings* which advocates for readings that are mindful of the systems, conventions, and expectations that affect our (Western) reading of texts. Rodriguez’s “surface reading” cautions against immediately seeking and finding race and/or racism in Asian American literature or using the snap judgments about race that Tomine’s characters consistently reference. Rodriguez proposes that we de-naturalize this now-naturalized reading impulse.

The second section, “North American Representations of Race across the Pacific,” examines the effects of transnationalism on Asian American graphic narratives and their interpretations. What occurs when Yang’s popular, *American Born Chinese* is read by Asian audiences in Asia? What other graphic representations of Asians and Asian Americans exist in other Anglo-dominant countries (Australia), and how might we read race within them? Kuilan Liu’s essay finds Yang’s image of the Monkey King in *American Born Chinese* offensive, as briefly mentioned above, given the rich history, both in Chinese literature and media, of the revered Monkey King. Her essay examines the meanings appended to Yang’s decidedly ugly and dishonorable Monkey King, interpreted through Chinese reviews and her undergraduate students’ gut reactions to the text’s images. What does not get translated across nations becomes Liu’s focal point. In “Maybe It’s Time for a Little History Lesson Here’: Autographics and Ann Marie Fleming’s *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*,” Stacilee Ford finds that while the “cartoonification of history” assists students



in grasping the past by cutting through dense historical narratives and eliminating jargon, Fleming's filmic and graphic biography of her great-grandfather, Long Tack Sam, a famous but now forgotten Chinese-born vaudeville magician and performer, poses unique issues for her students. Under Ford's scrutiny, Fleming's undercurrents of self-orientalism mirror those of her great-grandfather. They are both performers of sorts, one consciously for entertainment reasons (Long Tack Sam), while Fleming the documentarian is, unfortunately, unconscious of her own filmic and literary tricks, thus both using and misusing the past. Jeffrey Santa Ana argues how the work of Australian-Chinese-Malay Shaun Tan figuratively illustrates how Australia has been slow to acknowledge its past discrimination against Chinese immigrants and Aboriginal people prior to and under White Australia Policy (from the 1850s to 1973). His images suggest that to forget this racist century is to be dislocated and alienated from history and from the land. In his essay "Emotions as Landscapes: Specters of Asian American Racialization in Shaun Tan's Graphic Narratives," Santa Ana makes further connections to the discrimination suffered by Chinese laborers to North America, referencing Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, to forge connections between two histories of Chinese immigration across two continents. In "From Fan Activism to Graphic Narrative: Culture and Race in Gene Luen Yang's *Avatar: The Last Airbender—The Promise*," Tim Gruenewald uses Yang's earlier graphic narratives, such as *American Born Chinese* and *Level Up*, to explore the conflict among cultural inheritance, imagined racial categories, and identity formation. Using the casting controversy surrounding *The Last Airbender*, M. Night Shyamalan's filmic adaptation of the TV series *Avatar: The Last Air Bender*, Gruenewald explains that because Yang and other *Avatar* fans regarded the cultures they viewed in the graphic TV series as Asian and Inuit, their protests against Shyamalan's casting of non-Asian actors suggests an uncomfortable one-to-one-correspondence between culture and race. However, Gruenewald's careful readings of Yang's graphic narrative oeuvre argue that Yang's creative work is more sophisticated than the simplifications of the (political) fan protest movement. Bloodline or race is hardly inherent in Yang's comics work, but rather taught or adopted, and thus Gruenewald explores the thorny relationship between culture and race to reveal Yang's own ambivalence about their tight correspondence. Cathy Schlund-Vials examines how two issues of Spiderman recount and thus re-imagine (visually) the consequences of an American policy of Vietnamization instigated by President Nixon. In Nixon's proclamations, made thirteen years into American involvement in

the war, the United States was to cede control of military operations to the South Vietnamese government. However, this stance of withdrawal and non-interventionism unraveled in the eventual revelation of the devastating, clandestine bombings of Cambodia and the “secret war” in Laos. In her essay “(Re)Collecting Vietnam: Vietnamization, Soldier Remorse, and Marvel Comics,” *The Amazing Spider-Man 108* (“Vengeance from Vietnam!”) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 109* (“Enter . . . Dr. Strange!”) illustrate what she calls a “multivalent American policy catastrophe” that conjures up typical or accepted narratives of the soldiers’ return (especially the Vietnam veteran), Southeast Asian refugees, and the Asiatic character. Schlund-Vials devastates the expected trajectory of these concepts, arguing how both of these Spiderman issues highlight, instead, domestic (atypical, unexpected) anxieties about Southeast Asians on US soil, US foreign policy abroad, and the outcome of the war itself. In her essay “The Awesome and Mundane Adventures of *Flor de Manila y San Francisco*,” Catherine Ceniza Choy offers a close reading of Jenifer K Wofford’s 2008 graphic novel and kiosk poster project *Flor de Manila y San Francisco* in the historical and contemporary context of international health worker migration and, specifically, the immigration of Filipino nurses to the United States. *Flor de Manila y San Francisco* imagines six years (1973–78) in the life of the fictional Flor Villanueva, a young woman who has emigrated from Manila to San Francisco. Wofford’s graphic novel was also exhibited as public art, as part of the San Francisco Arts Commission’s “Art on Market Street” in 2008. Choy argues that a significant contribution of Wofford’s *Flor de Manila y San Francisco* is its ability to humanize the Filipino immigrant nurse and by extension health worker migrants for a general public. Although such migrants are featured actors of globalization in public policy studies and scholarly books and articles, they are often barely visible to the general public except as stereotypes and sound bites.

The final section, “Manga Goes West and Returns,” focuses on the influential medium of manga in relation to Asian American graphic narratives. To what end does relying on the “Japaneseness” of OEL manga contribute to or deviate from Asian American identity politics and graphic narratives, asks Angela Moreno Acosta. While Asian American graphic artists often grapple with the politics of identity, as iterated throughout this collection, Acosta argues that OEL manga, an amalgamation of Asian American and Japanese popular print cultures that might provide a ready and authentic Japaneseness for Japanese American artists, is a visual style and not a politics. She charts the failure of

several contemporary artists of Japanese heritage whose supposed “authentic” Japanese identity was imagined to contribute to “authentic” manga. This was not the case. Such an expectation (perhaps a “deep reading” rather than a “surface reading,” as defined in Rodriguez’s essay in this collection), subscribed to by numerous scholars of Asian American texts, discounts the fact that manga’s Japaneseness must be ascribed to form, not content. After thoroughly explaining manga’s conventions (reading practices, visual cues, page layout, and the driving influence of a strong fan base), and after mapping the rocky history of manga and OEL manga in the United States, Acosta’s argument revisits and revises how race and manga work, or how manga’s iteration of an “authentic Japaneseness” interrupts the American notion of an “ethnic” work created by an “ethnic” author. Rather, she concludes, OEL manga contributes to the changing parameters of American comics not by introducing a Japanese perspective and thus limning an artist’s so-called inherited Japanese sensibility, but by adhering to accepted manga conventions and referencing Asian media and pop culture material objects that find their way into OEL manga. This resonates with Shan Mu Zhao’s essay, the concluding piece in the collection. In a separate chapter, Acosta contributes her own hand-drawn, manga-esque version of a scene from Yang’s *American Born Chinese* while Jaqueline Berndt discusses how it depicts differences between the two genres, especially manga’s ability to highlight characters’ emotions and their private interpersonal relations, through technical and artistic means. “Manga-fying *American Born Chinese*” demonstrates and argues how these artistic approaches invite affective participation over critical observation, the latter more typical of Western comics scholarship. Berndt, in her “*Skim as Girl: Reading a Japanese North American Graphic Novel through Manga Lenses*,” interprets the reception of Tamaki and Tamaki’s *Skim* within a Japanese manga audience once it was translated into Japanese. But the translated version suffers from aesthetic losses and misunderstandings, argues Berndt. She carefully investigates how manga conventions (large eyes, monologic script, non-realist representation, among other manga elements) and Japanese readers’ expectations, including standard responses to a subject who is deemed “other,” stymied the book’s success abroad as the audience struggled to decipher Tamaki and Tamaki’s graphic reading cues uniting and separating *Skim* from her peers (by facial features or hair), reactions reminiscent of Rodriguez’s argument concerning understanding and employing interpretive contexts (cultural and literary) that heavily influence interpretation. According to Laura Anh Williams’s “Queering Manga: Eating Queerly in *12 Days*,” Asian Americanness is usually

associated with heterosexuality while queerness is associated with whiteness. June Kim's OEL manga *12 Days*, however, queers manga tradition to valorize the same-sex love at the novel's core. Its disorienting temporalities and often confusing visual style re-locate it within queer time and place. Concluding the collection is Shan Mu Zhao's "Conveying New Material Realities: Transnational Popular Culture in Asian American Comics," which looks at how raciality is made visible not only through the Asian American bodies of characters in four graphic narratives—Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Kim's *Good as Lily*, Fred Chao's *Johnny Hiro*, and Tak Toyoshima's *Secret Asian Man*—but also in practices, media, and material culture, specifically Asian-manufactured and Asian-themed items, that appear in the narratives. She argues that these narratives create new visual conventions and meanings of Asianness, moving them away from a rootedness in tradition and single-nation status to practices related to popular culture and transnationalism, forging identities for Asian Americans that are no longer based on mutually incompatible Asian and American frameworks.

Zhao's work is an apt argument for rounding out a collection about representing race domestically (in North America) and across the Pacific. *Drawing New Color Lines* addresses transnational publication and transnational readership challenges and considers the thoughtful solutions to them drawn on the pages of Asian American comics. The essays advance approaches to reading representations of race, caution against reading too deeply, and encourage critical trans-Pacific interpretations and collaborations by which we might imagine (and thus image) anew the self and other.

## Notes

1. Scott McCloud's definition of comics, "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (20), sparked a host of others. David Carrier argues that the genre is a "composite art, [in which] verbal and visual elements [are] seamlessly combined" (4), while Charles Hatfield names comics' unique amalgamation of images and words a "visual/verbal tension . . . [its] clash and collaboration of *different codes of signification*" (41; emphasis in original). Is Carrier's notion of "seamlessness" at odds or in consort with Hatfield's tension? For David Harvey, comics must contain words (25); Thierry Groensteen argues for "the primacy of the image" in his designation of a system of comics, the title of his book (3). Such definitions exclude wordless novels by Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward, and Giacomo Patri. The debate in defining comics and its successors (graphic novels, graphic narratives) is wide and far-reaching, and too unwieldy to unpack here.
2. In her "Collateral Damage," Marianne Hirsch discusses Sontag's return to acknowledging that photographs of atrocity persuasively impact our moral reasoning in the latter's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (1212).

3. In Stacilee Ford's discussion about teaching Asian American history and literature at The University of Hong Kong for nearly two decades, "where places and people have been connected for centuries—well before either the US or Hong Kong came into being as bordered locales," she finds that "[f]inally, it is Asian American literature and history that puts flesh on the bones of the question 'In what ways was/is the US an empire?'"
4. In manga, the eyes are literally windows into the soul; their large, empty spaces are used to project characters' emotions. See Paul Gravett (77) and Deborah Shamoan (141); in Shamoan's essay, the "flat" eyes of characters in manga artist Kiriko Nananan's work prompt readers to look elsewhere for emotion (151).
5. While Tomine's character Ben imagines his own liberation from thinking about race, he possesses an unconscious fascination with and (sexual) desire for white women.
6. As noted by Derek Parker Royal, even literary scholars like Sheng-mei Ma remark on the use of stereotypes in prose works. Ma writes, "Orientalism and Asian American identity were strange bedfellows" because "in order to retire racist stereotypes, one is obliged to first evoke them; in order to construct ethnicity, one must first destruct what is falsely reported as one's ethnic identity," yet, Ma continues, "[b]oth result in an unwitting reiteration of Orientalist images" (xi).
7. David Carrier's arguments about caricature, however, do not accord with those of Gardner and Park, for he demonstrates how comics do not create "unambiguous pictures" or types, and others "are protocomics because understanding them requires imagining a later moment of the action," a sequencing in assumed stasis (16).
8. Wonham argues, "An effective caricature may signify the inferiority of some individual or group by elaborating on 'deviations' from the social norm, but the insubstantiality of the caricatured image, its exaggerated artificiality, is itself a rebuke to the very idea of the norm" (32).
9. In Michèle Hannoosh's study of Baudelaire and caricature, artistic caricatures, versus historical ones, are beautiful to Baudelaire even as they return "an image of one's own ugliness" (13).
10. See, for example, Rocío G. Davis's edited collection *The Transnationalism of American Culture*.
11. "Weird English" is the title of Evelyn Nien-Ming Chi'en's study of the "weird" (linguistically inventive) English words and pronunciations found in books by what we might call ethnic American writers such as Junot Diaz, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Arundhati Roy. Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution* provides a creative and fascinating example of a constructed language, of Hong's own neologisms and syntax, emerging from her book's futuristic city of immigrants, political uprisings, and neocolonialism.
12. Wong lists Chinese American literature collections edited by Shan Te-hsing. The circulation and interpretation of Asian American texts across the Pacific is well documented, beginning with frequent readings of and reception by Chinese scholars (in the late 1990s and early 2000s) of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, a seminal text in the field.

13. As a point of distinction, the term "transnationalism" in Lim's collection refers to the authors of the primary sources or the postcolonial, diasporic, or migrant characters in the primary works discussed.
14. Davis edited a special issue of *Hitting Critical Mass*, "European Perspectives on Asian American Literature" (no longer available online); her *Transcultural Reinventions* investigates the short story cycles of Asian American and Asian Canadian works. See also her collection with Sāmi Ludwig called *Asian American Literature in the International Context: Readings on Fiction, Poetry, and Performance* (Davis and Ludwig edit the Rodopi series *Contributions to Asian American Literary Studies*).
15. Interestingly, Jytte Klausen, author of *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, was prohibited by his publisher, Yale University Press, from including replicas of the cartoons about which he writes, echoing Donald Rumsfeld's (eventually ineffectual) refusal to circulate images of abuse in Abu Ghraib and Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to manage internet postings of 9/11 victims who jumped from burning skyscrapers to a different kind of death, as argued by Hirsch (1210). After the 2012 release of a film created by an American depicting Mohammed in self-compromising positions, a host of riots occurred in the Middle East.
16. Yang's was the first graphic narrative to be named a National Book Award Finalist for Young People's Literature (2006); it won the 2007 Eisner Award, among others.
17. See *The Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* edited by Philip K. Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon K. Hom. Also see Wonham's introduction to his book *Playing the Races* for an explanation of these humor magazines' popularity during the rise of realism ("Introduction: The Age of Caricature, the Age of Realism," 3–40).
18. See Jacqueline Berndt's essay; for more on *Skim*, also see Monica Chiu's essay, both in this collection.
19. Johnson-Woods argues, "[Manga] is a visual, textual, and intellectual challenge," but "once the skill of 'reading' manga is conquered, the manga is a rich experience" (6).
20. Patrick W. Galbraith says, "There is a gap between what fans think they are doing and how regulators understand their actions. This is all too obvious when images from manga, anime and games are extracted from the specific lifeworld context of fan communities and scrutinized with regard to abstract and universal notions of child abuse. Despite the possibly criminal nature of the representations, fans do not understand highly stylized characters as 'real' or sexualized representations of young characters to be 'child pornography'" (92). Thus, Mark McLelland notes, fans "militate against any kind of real interpretation of these stories" (qtd. in Galbraith 92). Galbraith continues, "Manga, anime and games in Japan have historically been able to depict a variety of sexual scenarios insofar as pubic hair and genitals are hidden or effaced . . . The ability to make genitalia graphically simple, to erase or replace them, made manga an obvious choice for skirting obscenity laws" (95).
21. Jennifer Prough notes that Osamu Tezuka, creator of *Astro Boy* (the *Mighty Atom* in Japan) was "inspired by Disney" in his creation of large-eyed characters, but provides nothing further by which to qualify this (97).

22. While outlining the history of *shōjo* (girls') manga, Mizuki Takahashi offers another explanation: the wide-eyed look was championed by Jun'ichi Nakahara to express dreaminess (119); other *shōjo* creators used the eye's expansive space, as well as other aesthetic conventions like intricately designed frames, to "show the complex inner psychology of the characters" (122).

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