POSTCOLONIAL COMICS

TEXTS, EVENTS, IDENTITIES

EDITED BY
BINITA MEHTA & PIA MUKHERJI

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

ROUTLEDGE

Postcolonial Comics

Texts, Events, Identities

Edited by
Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Postcolonial comics : texts, events, identities / edited by Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji.
pages cm. — (Routledge research in postcolonial literatures ; 53)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism. 2. Graphic novels—History and criticism. 3. Postcolonialism in literature. I. Mehta, Binita, 1962- editor. II. Mukherji, Pia, 1966- editor.
PN6714.P676 2015
741.5'9—dc23 2014045621

ISBN: 978-0-415-73813-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-81757-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Publishers Graphics, LLC on sustainably sourced paper.

Postcolonial Comics

This collection examines new comic-book cultures, graphic writing, and *bande dessinée* texts as they relate to postcolonialism in contemporary Anglophone and Francophone settings. The individual chapters are framed within a larger enquiry that considers definitive aspects of the postcolonial condition in twenty-first-century (con)texts.

The authors demonstrate that the fields of comic-book production and circulation in various regional histories introduce new postcolonial vocabularies, reconstitute conventional "image-functions" in established social texts and political systems, and present competing narratives of resistance and rights. In this sense, postcolonial comic cultures are of particular significance in the context of a newly global and politically recomposed landscape.

This volume introduces a timely intervention within current comic-book-area studies that remain firmly situated within the "U.S.-European and Japanese manga paradigms" and their reading publics. It will be of great interest to a wide variety of disciplines including postcolonial studies, comics-area studies, cultural studies, and gender studies.

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Introduction

Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji

The edited volume *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities* examines new comic-book cultures, graphic writing, and *bande dessinée* texts[1] as they relate to postcolonialism in contemporary Anglophone and Francophone settings. As we attempt to describe our work in relation to established comics' scholarship on minority, ethno-racial, postimperial, and multicultural themes, the key terms under investigation in this introductory essay will include two basic categories: multimodal comics narratives and their surrounding postcolonial moments. The readings in this collection will be framed, therefore, within a larger enquiry, one that considers definitive aspects of the postcolonial condition in twenty-first-century contexts.

To introduce such graphic forms and practice as "meaningful postcolonial work,"[2] we first look to a field of research that has broadly employed two distinct approaches to think about comics: first, in terms of (visual/verbal) textualities,[3] and next, in relation to (social/popular) cultures. Early structural and semiotic studies of graphic language systems and grammars, image-semiologies, and comics-narratologies, primarily in French scholarship, designated comics as complex, encoded texts and located them within a theoretical paradigm of "meaningful" structures.[4] Comics codes were then made problematic and characterized variously as ideological, deep, or (de) constructive by later Marxist, psychoanalytic, or postmodern/poststructuralist revisions within a continuing critical tradition.[5]

The second paradigm of comics analysis is usefully outlined in Jean-Paul Gabilliet's authoritative cultural history of American comics. Gabilliet studies the development of the "forms of modern comic art"[6] as related problems of definition and periodization. To determine if comics were indeed "born with the mass production of the American comic strip in 1896,"[7] Gabilliet proposes that we first define the medium by examining the historical limits of comics art and narrative. The basic picture-narrative theory of comics indicates a vast inventory of formal pretexts that evolve from diverse iconographic traditions, histories, and media.[8] How, then, should we locate the specific category of comics within this comprehensive register? Gabilliet suggests that a precise differentiation requires the expansion of the term to accommodate extra-aesthetic criteria. "Comics as a medium ... is a result of a multiplicity of endogenic (aesthetic) and exogenic (technological, economic, social) factors."[9] While noting

David Kunzle's assertion that the origin of modern comics started in 1453 with a technological breakthrough, the standardization of the mobile printing press, Gabilliet further examines comics history in relation to technological, economic, and cultural shifts in the context of mass publishing since the 1830s.[10] In naming comics as a cultural medium of the long twentieth century, we find that its politics can be identified variously: as the incorporated visual economy of a conservative mass culture or within a critical history of recuperating comics from a mass to a 'popular' cultural product.[11]

Crucially, these distinct methodologies of reading comics, as textual compositions and as cultural forms, are both organized around a common enquiry: how can we think about comics as both meaningful and political? Can we further elaborate these notions of comics more specifically, as instances of postcolonial textuality or as aspects of public culture in the postcolony, for example? It is precisely in such interrogations that we may perhaps find a way to address the question central to our own study: how do comics studies connect to postcolonial histories, criticism, and writing?

POSTCOLONIAL COMICS: TEXTUALITIES AND PUBLIC CULTURES

Colonial textuality has long been identified as a persistent and strategic practice of epistemic violence: self-identifying as legitimate systems of knowledge, engaged in naming the self/other binary, and encoding names in hierarchies of significance in (post) imperial contexts.[12] Historically, "imperial relations ... were always crucially maintained in their interpellative phases by textuality, both institutionally [and] informally,"[13] working as "ensembles of linguistically based practices [deployed] in the management of colonial relationships."[14] These operations attempted to simultaneously legitimize colonial discourse as well as to erase and contain subversive textualities. In postcolonial negotiations of such a "vast semantic field of representations"[15] that supported Western colonial enterprise, the most effective interventions seem to proceed from an understanding of the notion of unstable systems and signification; in fact, in the recognition of "colonialism both as a set of political relations and as a signifying system, but one with [the] ambivalent structural relations"[16] that mark colonizing encounters. Postcolonial textualities, therefore, enter colonial discourse deconstructively, inhabiting its ambiguities and fissures, and thus initiate a "persistent questioning of the frame, which at one level, is the space of representation, and at another level, the frame of western modernity itself."[17] The essays in this volume demonstrate that graphic writing, particularly enabled by complex signifying resources, may be read as an effective category of "postcolonial textuality," foregrounding colonial legacies and (re)scripting missing or misrepresented identities in their precise contexts. Additionally, we propose postcolonial comics are uniquely able to perform the characteristic

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"deconstructive image functions" that remain a central paradigm of resistance in Timothy Brennan's critique of dominant "economic image-functions" signifying cultures of current global neo-liberalism. Brennan argues that established textual visualities encode rules of perception that regulate and determine "usable" ideas of global peripheries in the present "information" age. The political utility of these perceptions to new systems of imperial power are tied to their figurations as "calculated zones of invisibility," "serviceable abstractions," or "repositories for counter-modernity."[18] The critique then prescribes the important postcolonial work of decoding and contesting image-objects of everyday ideology within resistant postcolonial visual cultures and in the deconstructive textual strategies of postmodern iconographics. The essays in this edition examine how comic-book production and circulation in contemporary regional histories usefully employ and introduce precisely such new postcolonial vocabularies. These scripts employ visual grammars, image-texts, and graphic performances that reconstitute conventional "image-functions" in established social texts and political systems and thus, perhaps, re-envision competing narratives of resistance or rights. In this sense, new comic cultures are of particular significance in the context of a politically recomposed global landscape. The "creolization" of contemporary comics forms and their reading publics arising from "the global flux of ideas and images [within which] voices and registers overlap" necessarily creates a "proliferation of genres and cultural exchanges within contemporary visual cultures" and places local texts within an "expanding global public sphere [where] the imperatives of the sign – drawing, art, photography, images or comics – can now no longer be perceived as cultural symbols [that communicate] obsolete authenticities."[19] The postcolonial comic thus becomes a particularly appropriate venue that offers radical and progressive alternatives to the notion of obsolete authenticities, and, as such, "bears witness – to testify, to accuse, to archive."[20] The readings of text, event, and identity in the essays that follow seek to clarify precisely these moments of postcolonial elucidation.

Apart from reading comics textualities, our studies of new comics cultures from, for example, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, or India may be usefully allied with the theoretical expression of a new category, that of public culture as a condition of modernity in the postcolony. Drawing on recent studies on South Asian public culture as a late-modern formation distinct from Western histories of elite, mass, and popular cultures[21] or public spheres where consumer practices depoliticize communicative action,[22] we propose that current transnational comics scenes may be contextualized within "new public modernities"[23] which particularly emphasize cultural registers such as the circulation of images, the political roles of visuality, "the importance of symbolic actions as opposed to rational speech, and the links between mass media and the emancipatory dimensions of art, display and performance."[24] In contrast to familiar notions of the dominant 'mass-manufactured' or the marginal/subcultural 'popularized' in Western

culture theory, Appadurai and Breckenridge describe public culture as a way to enter "modernity within particular historical frames," characterized by a "mainstream quality" and occupying spaces created by new media, "nomad technologies," and the "current manipulation of signs" in a field of global cultural flows.[25] By linking "the forms of the popular to the problematics of the public sphere," postcolonial public cultures escape "specific Euro American master narratives"[26] of civil society[27] and uncover "zones of contestation, incorporations and exclusions," as well as "sites of resistance, contested cultural assumptions, and subversive political possibilities."[28] The reconstitution of new visual grammars, iconographies, and performances appears central to the projects of postcolonial public cultures, as recorded in several studies. For example, Deborah Poole replaces the notion of common visual cultures characterized by shared symbolic codes with the idea of a postcolonial visual economy as "fields of vision structured systematically in terms of inequalities and disadvantages flows."[29] Sandria Freitag studies how various visual and spectacular/bodily performative registers and practices underwrote India's emerging spectacles of modernity, including, for instance, South Indian "courtly cultures [and] live performance traditions"[30] Ranajit Guha's concept of the "third idiom" in modern Indian popular culture erases given binaries of tradition/modernity, metropolis/periphery.[31] Kajri Jain studies the history of mass-manufactured "calendar" or "bazaar" art in the (post)colonial Indian culture industry to emphasize differences in "the contexts of mass culture in modern Europe and modern India," especially in relation to the "cultic image" and other visual idioms in the (post)colonial Indian market economy.[32] Using this critical frame of reading, the idiomatic, political, and situated aspects of postcolonial comics texts and histories may be examined as expressions of emergent public cultures that demonstrate how "modernity can become a diversely appropriated experience" in different (post)national imaginaries.

COMICS SCHOLARSHIP

In this section, we will mark the theoretical ground for this project by situating our enquiry within, first, the field of mainstream comics research, and next, comics studies that relate more specifically to the legacies of imperialism. The distinct agendas in *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities* may be introduced by looking to the useful notion of "canonicity" to help place and then differentiate the present project in relation to an established body of contemporary comics criticism and texts that reference Western (post)imperial and mainstream cultures and concerns. In keeping with this objective, this project seeks to introduce a timely intervention within current comic-book area studies that remains firmly situated within the "US-European and manga paradigms"[33] and their reading publics. Recent work in comics scholarship is characterized by a wide range of critical methods

and approaches, and may be somewhat broadly organized into social histories of comics production,[34] representational and semiotic criticism,[35] and thematic studies, as, for example, in the super-hero genre or autographics.[36] The readings in each category are often analytically rigorous, insightful, and varied. But an overview of the field must bring to our notice that the "comics exceptionalism"[37] of current scholarship in such Anglo-American or European traditions misses how contemporary "ninth art" production in global contexts records historical critique, political action, or emergent transnational narratives of trauma, gender, protest, and global exchange. Chute and Dekoven's recent introduction to contemporary "Comic Books and Graphic Novels" in *The Cambridge Introduction to Popular Culture* is illustrative in that the survey is presented as a comprehensive summary of existing criticism on comics format, genre, and history. The essay constructs a dominant frame of analysis using studies of European pretexts leading to a largely American history of modern graphic cultures. The trajectory describes popular Western print and newspaper comic texts at the turn of the nineteenth century, the stand-alone American drawn strips and the superhero genre of the 1930s, political comics in the Anglo-American and European 1940s tradition, the mid-century underground comic movement following the federal censorship code of 1954, and comic autobiographics from the 1970s. The extreme significance, in the twenty-first century, of an international range of regional graphic texts and "the global circulation of narratives mapping both individual lives and world-historical events" is only briefly noted at the close, as the focus remains firmly on the contemporary American scene and the work of Ware, Bechdel et al.[38]

A possible second comparative frame allows our approach to position itself as distinct from yet related to an established corpus of engaged scholarship that questions the politics of minority/marginal representations within mainstream comics traditions, investigates events of colonization and decolonization in (post)imperial graphic cultures, or studies the subcultures and spaces of resistance occupied by Western alternative comics histories.[39]

Some of the best-known and often cited graphic novels that focus on themes of otherness in recent years have been Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003, 2004), Art Speigelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986, 1991), and Joe Sacco's graphic journalism. Apart from an interest in Satrapi's Iranian-French history, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust in the case of Speigelman, and the Arab world in the work of Sacco, most studies that examine multicultural and minority/marginalized themes and communities seem to reference comics representations that are set largely within a US context as narratives of national identity politics. There have been several book-length studies that either point to the stereotypical portrayal of non-white ethnic groups or lament their absence in comics written in the United States. Among these are Michael A. Sheyahshe's *Native Americans in Comic Books* (2008), Fredrik Strömberg's *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (2003), and William H. Foster III's *Looking for a Face like Mine* (2005).

In *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, Strömberg suggests that some believe that "cartoonists depict people from other ethnic and racial groups with stereotypical traits simply because it is harder to differentiate between persons from a national group other than one's own" and the cartoonist's work merely reflects "what society has deemed acceptable at a certain point and time."[40] Dr. Charles Johnson, a black cartoonist and scholar, does not "buy the idea that an artist is merely a creature of his time, a *tabula rasa* inscribed with the bigoted beliefs of his Zeitgeist." For him, the use of stereotypes suggests a "lack of invention, daring, or innovation" on the part of the cartoonist who "is content to uncritically work with *received*, prefabricated imagery and ideas minted in the minds of others. ..."[41] One of the reasons for such stereotyping, explains Johnson, was that blacks were never part of the "artist/audience equation" since comics were written by whites for white audiences.[42] Although black presence in comic books continues to be small, their portrayal is less stereotypical, even though they are often included "just to be *the* Black character in a certain context."[43] Like Johnson, Native American comic book writer and filmmaker Jon Proudstar tells Michael Sheyahshe that cartoonists do not "want to do the homework" of differentiating the various Native American tribes, thus portraying all Native people alike.[44] Both agree that this will change when more black, Native American, and other non-white, ethnic minority comic-book artists start telling their own stories. William H. Foster III adds: "although slow in coming and certain [sic] still fraught in stereotypes, the portrayal of Black characters in comics is evolving."[45] In the Francophone context, the Belgian comic-book artist Hergé's (real name Georges Remi) comic book *Tintin au Congo* has been criticized for its stereotypical and racist representations of the black Congolese. We will discuss this in more detail later in this introduction.

Other books that are concerned with multicultural themes in comics often study them within a U.S. context, although some do discuss the adaptation of such representations in other countries, for example, by examining the transposition of popular U.S. superheroes into other cultural locations. Recent multicultural studies include the 2007 special issue of the journal *MELUS*, entitled *Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative*, Frederick Luis Aldama's *Multicultural Comics: From 'Zap' to 'Blue Beetle'* (2010), and *Transnational Perspectives in Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (2013), edited by Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein.

Derek Parker Royal, in the introduction to the special issue of *MELUS*, explains that the essays in the journal study the representation of ethno-racial characters and subject matter in U.S.-based comics, addressing "the possibilities, and even the potential liabilities, of comics when representing ethno-racial subject matter. ... It is a response to what several critics of graphic narrative have seen as a defining mark of American popular culture: its problematic relationship to ethnic difference."[46] He adds that the contributors of his issue "map out the theoretical, literary, and historical contexts of

graphic narrative and their links to multi-ethnic subjectivity." [47] However, the engagement with the ethno-racial other in this essay collection remains positioned primarily within a domestic context.

Some of the essays included in *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives*, especially in the section of the book entitled "Transcultural and Transcultural Superheroes," venture beyond the U.S borders. In the foreword to the book, John A. Lent states that the book's contributors "broaden literature searches beyond the United States and superheroes, draw upon Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and North American works for analysis, and scrutinize issues of transnationalism ... as well as others such as hybridity and globalization."[48] The editors, all American Studies scholars, state that the goal of their book is to "address two critical blind spots: the overall neglect of graphic narratives in the increasing transnational field of American literary and cultural studies ... and the relative dearth of transnational investigations of graphic narratives in the growing field of comics studies. ..."[49] Their volume "concentrates on largely American genres and productions as an exemplary field of transnational exchange"[50] and their aim is "to train a transnational focus ... on American productions and genres, ... to 'do national American studies with a transnational consciousness'."[51] For example, the book contains chapters on Indian and Japanese manga versions or "transcreations" of the American comic superhero Spider-man. Shilpa Davé, in her essay entitled "Spider-Man India: Comic Books and the Translation/Transcreating of American Cultural Narratives," concludes that although the "development of the *Spider-Man India* series as a transcreative product shows the limitations of working with an established icon because the creators were bound by the dictates of American narratives and conventions of storytelling," the series "also opened up the possibility of creating new venues in the form of graphic narratives that pave the way for creative hybrid projects. ..." Following *Spider-Man India*, publishing companies in India such as Liquid Comics decided to develop and market comics "rooted in Indian culture and mythology" rather than "trying to translate or transcreate other American heroes." [52] While Davé suggests that America remains the context for the transplanted American comic book superhero in India, the essays in our volume on *Postcolonial Comics* remove a dominant reference from the equation altogether as they explore political and social phenomena in various geographical regions, examining how specific colonial and postcolonial histories shape their politics and aesthetics, and how these then translate into graphic storytelling.

The essays in Aldama's *Multicultural Comics: From 'Zap' to 'Blue Beetle'* focus mainly on comics created in a multicultural U.S. context, analyzing racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities as characters and themes in American comics, although one of the book's "strengths," as Derek Parker Royal puts it in the foreword to the book, is its "willingness to enlarge our understanding of 'multicultural' (a term usually linked to U.S.-based culture) and expand its scope beyond the confines of comics produced in

or related to American ethnicity."[53] One such essay in the book, Suhaan Mehta's "Wondrous Capers: The Graphic Novel in India," analyzes recent graphic novels written by Indian writers that break away from the mainstream Indian comics industry dominated by the Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) series that present an "airbrushed view of India's past and present" to create an "alternative space by accommodating voices that habitually fall outside the realm of Indian socio-politico-cultural discourses."[54]

While the books examined above are primarily concerned with studying comic books that address multicultural themes and ethnic minorities in the U.S., the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* or French-language comic book, often tackles subjects that deal with issues of French colonialism and postcolonialism, including those involving scenes of contemporary multiethnic and multicultural France. There have been several critical and historical studies of the French-language comic book: a collection of essays, *The Francophone Bande Dessinée* (2005) edited by Charles Forsdick, Laurence Grove, and Libby McQuillan; Ann Miller's *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to the French Language Comic Strip* (2007); Lawrence Grove's more recent *Comics in French: the European Bande Dessinée in Context* (2010); and Joel Vessels's *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic* (2010).[55]

More closely related to our project, the Belgian critic Philippe Delisle has two books that analyze the Francophone Belgian *bande dessinée* written during the colonial period. The first is *Bande dessinée et imaginaire colonial: Des années 1930 aux années 1980* (2008), in which, in addition to examining the well-known and much discussed *Tintin au Congo* where the detective hero visits the Belgian colony of the Congo, he studies other "espaces coloniaux mis en valeur par la bande dessinée franco-belge 'classique'" (other colonial spaces emphasized by the "classic" Franco-Belgian comic book). Delisle also analyzes the representation of the "indigènes" or the native Congolese in these comic books. They sometimes seem like "de 'grands enfants' très craintifs" (very fearful "big children"), sometimes like "des êtres perfides et violents" (perfidious and violent beings), and the enterprise of colonialism is analyzed as a system understood as bringing progress and civilization to these native people. Finally, Delisle also analyzes *bandes dessinées* published during the 1980s to show how a new generation of Belgian BD artists, influenced by their predecessors, represent colonialism in their work. [56]

In his second book, *De "Tintin au Congo" à "Odilon Verjus": Le missionnaire, héros de la BD belge* (2011), Delisle examines the recurring figure of the Christian missionary in fiction between 1920 and 1960 – although at the end of the book, he analyzes the more recent series "Odilon Verjus" in which an apostolic worker becomes the hero of the series. Delisle's study focuses on the missionary character, who often plays the hero in Belgian colonial-era *bandes dessinées* and other literary forms, in order to analyze the function of religious propaganda represented by a proselytizing Christian mission.[57] Delisle concludes that the romantic figure of the adventurous and civilizing

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