

What is a postcolonial comic?

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According to Franny Howes (2010), "the most prominent stance taken" by scholars attempting to combine comics scholarship with ethnic, multicultural, and/or postcolonial studies remains that of "the stereotype collector" (2010: par. 11). Howes explains that this mode of inquiry most generally involves that the researcher "looks at images of [...] indigenous people and evaluates the quality of their portrayal" (2010: par. 11). Book-length studies using this approach and commenting on the misrepresentation of certain minorities in comics indeed abound. They notably include Michael A. Sheyahshe's *Native Americans in Comic Books* (2008), Fredrik Strömberg's *Black Images in the Comics* (2003), and William H. Foster III's *Looking for a Face like Mine* (2005). The recurrent character of such scholarship is not surprising since "the stereotype is the basic building block of all cartoon art" (Art Spiegelman, 1997: 3). However insightful and necessary in that they denounce essentialist, reductionist, and demonizing representations of the other – racial or otherwise –, these studies nevertheless fail to critically engage in discussions which might "decolonize our thinking about comics studies" (Howes, 2010: par. 3).

In my view, Howes' line of reasoning is crucially important to comics studies for several reasons. Her suggestion first and foremost reminds us that comics scholarship has overlooked much of comics production worldwide because it has remained firmly grounded in paradigms linked to specific productions and their reading publics, namely European *bande dessinée*, Northern American comics, and Japanese manga. In so doing, Howes implies that comics scholarship may have (un)consciously created a conservative canon and maintained a rather reactionary critical apparatus that fails to challenge dominant methods of inquiry focusing on genres, aesthetics, narrative strategies and historical considerations within particular cultural and geographical horizons and socio-economic market places. In light of these observations, then, Howes' remark about the decolonization of comics studies seems to pave the way for a new critical framework, one

of variation and patrimonialization deployed by the artists, publishers, and distributors behind the *Amar Chitra Katha* project are especially significant when one considers that prior to the series, one could hardly talk of an indigenous comics field in India. As Jeremy Stoll has observed in his creator's history of comics in India: "[b]efore the early 1970s, the only comic books in India were Western ones, including [...] *The Phantom*, *Archie*, *James Bond*, *Flash Gordon*, [...] as well as those published by Diamond Comics," that is North America's largest comics distributor (2013: 363). On the other hand, the series has often been criticized for presenting a very conservative, simplified, and pro-masculine version of India's cultural heritage. More specifically, in portraying both women and religious minorities as subalterns as well as in heavily relying on conventional binaries such as good vs. evil (cf. Sreenivas, 2009), many stories emanating from the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics have employed narrative and visual strategies that are at odds with some of the tropes traditionally embraced and/or promoted by postcolonial studies and scholars, namely hybridity, multiculturalism, and resistance. Thus, the *Amar Chitra Katha* series has to some extent distanced itself from some of the social, historical, and cultural remnants of the colonial regime and it has carved a niche for indigenous comics in India. However, it has simultaneously produced a very conservative historiography and supported a nationalist agenda that was arguably influenced by the former colonial rule.

Assigning the postcolonial label to the South-African magazine *Bitterkornix* (1992-present, created by Conrad Botes and Joe Dog, aka Anton Kannemeyer) is also ambiguous, albeit for different reasons. In contrast to the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics series, *Bitterkornix* could be argued to more effectively write back to colonial legacy and the nation's dominant Afrikaner culture during the Apartheid regime. Since its creation just after the fall of Apartheid, the magazine has focused on the demystifying of white hegemony. Telling provocative stories in notably employing Hergé's *ligne claire* style and in borrowing racial stereotypes from the latter's *Tintin au Congo* (1931) – the colonial comic par excellence – the magazine

has used the Afrikaans language and its associations with the repressive Apartheid regime in order to retell history and parody the national myths and narratives often used in Afrikaner culture to legitimize and justify the discrimination of non-white racial groups. Hergé's work and aesthetics are often used to present a challenging treatment of societal and cultural taboos connected to violence, sex, and religion, for example (see fig. 1 and 2). Therefore, it goes without saying that *Bitterkornix* is also largely indebted to the American and European underground comics scenes of the 1970s and later in terms of style and thematic content.

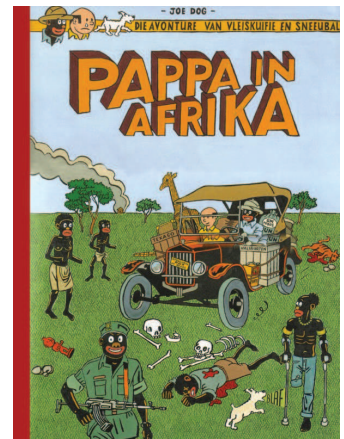
Thus, while *Bitterkornix* has used the very essence of colonial culture against itself, it has also exploited the heritage of counterculture of former colonial powers to decolonize the cultural discourse of its own country. The subversive character of the magazine may thus well suit the postcolonial label as traditionally understood in terms of mimicry and resistance to past hegemonic discourses and practices. Surprisingly enough, however, the *Bitterkornix* endeavor has not emerged from artists who belonged to the marginalized black or colored part of the population, but from within the then dominant culture of the Apartheid regime itself. The founders of the comic series indeed come from a white middle class background and were raised in the traditional Afrikaner context. As such, the example of *Bitterkornix* shows how a comic from

a postcolonial space can complicate what a postcolonial comic might be, especially in regards to how postcolonial studies have generally focused on non-white groups and minorities.

Of course, the examples I have briefly discussed here specifically underscore how the postcolonial label can be confusing when applied to particular comics in particular contexts. Further investigation of productions from other regional markets might reveal different trends that better suit the postcolonial denomination as it is conventionally understood in relation to tropes and themes of difference, cultural hybridity, protest and trauma, for instance. In trying to do so, the researcher might nevertheless rapidly be confronted with cultural and socio-economic phenomena that further problematize a traditional understanding of postcoloniality in relation to the comics form. Notwithstanding a few disparate projects and cartoonist cooperatives, many postcolonial spaces indeed lack schools, government funding, and/or publishing structures that gather and legitimize to a certain extent the works of indigenous comics artists and, by the same token, the development of various local comics fields that might challenge some of the structuring forces of leading comics industries worldwide. Because of this quasi-non-existent institutional support, a poor publishing industry, and sometimes politically adverse environments, postcolonial artists wishing to finetune their craftsmanship and/or find more financially-viable projects have often turned to more established and generally Western environments, industries, markets, and influences. As is well recorded (cf. John Lent, 2008; Christophe Cassiau-Haurie, 2010, 2012; Massimo Repetti, 2006), this is notably the case of numerous African cartoonists such as Cameroonian Issa Nyaphaga Marguerite Aboutet (originally from Ivory Coast), or many Congolese artists such as Barly Baruti, Pat Masioni, Tembo Kash, or Mongo Sisé.

Obviously though, the migration of African artists to Europe or the fact many of them find tutelage under foreign masters – both Baruti and Sisé have followed training in the Brussels-based Hergé studio, for example – is certainly not the only transnational phenomenon that one can witness in the comics world. For instance, the Indian comics creator and filmmaker Vishvajyoti Ghosh has worked with the internationally renowned French cartoonist Guy Delisle as well as with the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. Moreover, the works of contemporary Indian cartoonists among whom Ghosh, Samath Banerjee, Amitabh Kumar and Parimita Singh are without any doubt aesthetically and narratively indebted to the predominantly Anglo-American rise of the 'graphic novel' which, if nothing else, originated as a Western genre. Worth mentioning is also the fact that during the 1970s, many Filipino artists such as Tony DeZuniga, Ernie Chan, Gerry Talaoc, and Alex Niño started working for the American mainstream comics industry, a phenomenon usually referred to as the Filipino Invasion (cf. John Lent, 1999). Finally, it goes without saying that the superhero genre has encountered many (re-)adaptations across various cultures, notably in India via the publishing house Raj Comics and via Marvel's 2004 transcultural adaptation of one of its flagship characters in *Spider-Man India* (see fig. 3). In a similar logic of cultural transformation and appropriation, one could also mention *The 99* (2006-present), a successful Kuwaiti comics series featuring superheroes based on Islamic culture.

It might be said that this by no means exhaustive list of examples illustrates a particular version of cultural and media imperialism according to which some of the 'colonial' centers of the comics world – including Europe and North-America – influence the production and career paths of artists from regions of the periphery whose local comics culture is jeopardized and/or submissive precisely because of these power relations. But before claiming so, one would need to further investigate the ways in which the travelling and dispersal of comics creators, genres, techniques, and capital has severely affected worldwide comics production and how, as Appadurai would have it, "[t]he globalization of [comics] culture is not the same as its homogenization" (1990: 307). One way to do so would require that comics studies account for what the critic would refer to as the "complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes" that permeate the comics world on a global scale (1996: 31).



The cover of the Bitterkornix Anthology *Pappa in Afrika* (2010), by Anton Kannemeyer (Joe Dog).

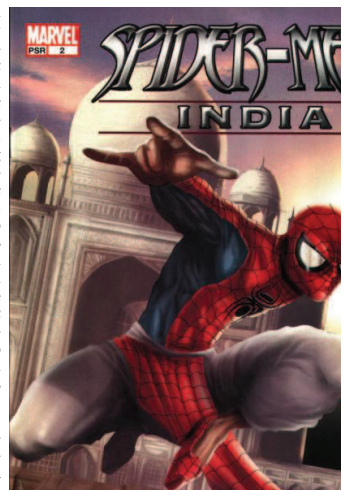
More precisely perhaps, if the phrase 'postcolonial comics' is to stick and be of significance for future research, comics scholarship will somehow need to investigate and complicate what Charles Hatfield interestingly called "the otherness of comics reading" in his exploration of primarily American alternative comics (2005: 32). In fact, if a broadly-defined 'postcolonial framing' is to thrive in comics studies, it will have to go beyond the primarily formal "tension" between the "representational codes" that the verbal-visual otherness of comics (reading) "enacts" (Hatfield, 2005: 168). This means that a postcolonial approach to comics will need to take into account the ways in which the numerous processes of transfer animating comics production on a global scale can challenge the theoretical assumptions as to what a postcolonial comic can be or do, that is how 'postcolonial comics' not only relate to postcolonial issues in actual postcolonial spaces and in diasporic cultures, but also entail – as Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein have suggested (2013: 1-14) – transnational notions of authorship and revisions of popular genres, series, and characters across cultures. Moreover, if one acknowledges that the term 'colony' is intrinsically connected to the notion of space, then the postcolonial (comics) scholar might need to explore the ways in which comics publishers and/or imprints compete for metapho-



"I see by your resume that you're a black woman." Nine-Colour Lithograph by Anton Kannemeyer (Joe Dog), 2011.

which would consider comics and their academic scrutiny under the aegis of 'postcolonialism'. This allegedly new method of inquiry nevertheless raises an important question: What is exactly a postcolonial comic?

Characterizing comics as postcolonial simply because they are produced, published, and distributed in actual postcolonial spaces seems to be problematic. India's largest selling comics series *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967-present, created by Anant Pai), for example, can undoubtedly be said to have maintained a vexed relationship with the postcolonial label which, needless to say, remains a much contested label in itself even to this day. On the one hand, *Amar Chitra Katha* is often mentioned to have participated in the preservation of Indian folklore, mythology, and epics, thereby "re-engag[ing] with tradition" and "attempting to rebuild a sense of confidence and pride" in the post-independent yet troubled cultural politics of India since the 1970s onwards (Deepa Sreenivas, 2009: 4). The arguably 'postcolonial' efforts of preser-



The cover of *Spider-Man India # 2* (2004), by Shavan Devarajan, Suresh Seetharaman, and Jeevan J. Kang with Marvel Comics. © Gotham Entertainment Group/Marvel Entertainment.

tical territories in particular fields or subfields and how, in so doing, some of them might be said to demystify the hegemonic practices of particular media ecologies. It is only then that comics studies will be better equipped not only to assess what the possible tensions and otherness of 'postcolonial comics' might reveal in terms of economic, political, aesthetic, and cultural concerns, but also to whom the "transnationalism of comics itself [...] benefits and at what costs" (Lent, 2013: xvi).

