

What is a postcolonial comic?

PAR CHRISTOPHE DONY

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

vation 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 *Bitterkomix* (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, *Bitterkomix* could be argued to more effectively *wake 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 *Bitterkomix* is also largely indebted to the American and European underground comics scenes of the 1970s and later in terms of style and thematic content.

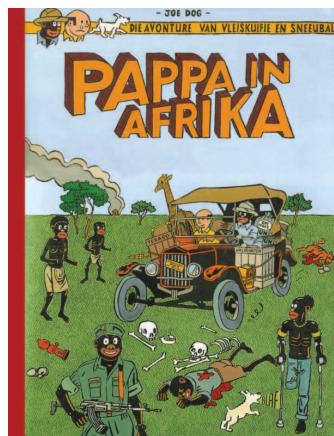
Characterizing comics as postcolonial simply because they are produced, published, and distributed in actual postcolonial spaces seems to be problematic. India's largest selling comics series *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967-present, created by Anant Pai), for example, can undoubtedly be said to have maintained 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-engaging 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-

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. If 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 legitimate 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 nonexistent 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 Abouet (originally from Ivory Coast), or many Congolese artists such as Barly Barutti, Pat Masioni, Tembo Kash, or Mongo Sisé.

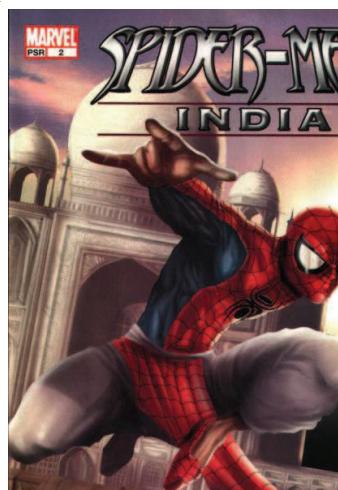
Obviously though, the migration of African artists to Europe or the fact many of them find tutorship under foreign masters – both Barutti and Sisé have followed training in the Brussels-based Hergé studio, for example – is certainly not the only transnational phenomenon that one can witness in the comics world. For instance, the Indian comics creator and filmmaker Vishwajyoti 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, Sarnath Banerjee, Amitabh Kumar and Parismita 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 DeZuriga, Ernie Chan, Gerry Talao, 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 Rat Comics and via Marvel's 2004 transcultural adaptation of one of its flagship character 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 Bitterkomix 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 metaphors



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.

rical 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: xvii).

I wish to thank Gert Meesters whose insights provided invaluable for the writing of this article.

WORKS CITED

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- . "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Edited by Mike Featherstone. London: Sage, 1990. 295-310.
- Cassiau-Haurie, Christophe. *Histoire de la BD congolaise*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2010.
- . Quand la BD d'Afrique s'invite en Europe : Répertoire analytique. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2012.
- Denson, Shane, Christina Meyer and Daniel Stein. "Introducing Transnational Perspecti-
- ves on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads". *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*. Edited by Shane Denson, Christina Meyer and Daniel Stein. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 1-14.
- Foster III, William H. *Looking for a Face Like Mine*. Waterbury: Fine Tooth Press, 2005.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- Howes, Franny. "Imagining a Multiplicity of Visual Rhetorical Traditions: Comics Lessons from Rhetoric Histories". *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. 5.3 (2010). Department of English, University of Florida. Accessed on June 4, 2014. <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_3/howes/>.
- Lent, John. "Introduction". In *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*. Edited by John Lent. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.
- . "Out of Africa": The Saga of Exiled Cartoonists in Europe". *Scan: Journal of Media and Culture*. 5.2: (2008). Accessed on June 3, 2014. <http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?jounal_id=116&j_id=14>.
- . "Foreword". *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*. Edited by Shane Denson, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. xiii-xvi.
- Repetti, Massimo. "New Comics from Africa". *Africomics*. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006. 241-250.
- Sheyase, Michael A. *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study*. Jefferson:
- McFarland and Company, 2008.
- Spiegelman, Art. "Those Dirty Little Comics". *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America's Forbidden Funnies, 1930s-1950s*. Edited by Bob Adelman. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.
- Sreenivas, Deepa. *Sculpting the Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha*. New Delhi and Oxford: Routledge, 2009.
- Stoll, Jeremy. "A Creator's History of the Comics Medium in India". *International Journal of Comic Art*. 15.1 (2013): 363-382.
- Strömberg, Fredrik. *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003.

Christine Pagnoule vue de Lettonie

PAR ASTRA SKRĀBANE

Ma première rencontre avec Christine Pagnoule est d'avoir vu son nom cité dans un livre de Rose-Marie François.

Quelle peut être la personne dont le nom réunit, dans mes associations, deux régions bien différentes - le Nord et le Midi. Le Nord - Christine, Kristine (prénom emblématique dans la littérature lettone idéalisé par le personnage de Rūdolfs Blaumanis : une jeune femme qui sacrifice sa vie sur l'autel de l'amour qu'elle porte à Edgars - jeune homme victime de ses humeurs, de l'alcoolisme et, surtout, de sa fierté), puis Kristin Lavransdotter de Sigrid Undset - une femme consciente de sa propre valeur, forte et indépendante. Le Midi s'impose par la question - ai-je bien lu « Pagnoule », ne faudrait-il pas écrire « Pagnol » comme Marcel Pagnol, maître du rire ensOLEillé ?

Je reçois un courriel signé bien clairement - Pagnoule, pas de doute, (point) Cette personne connue par l'intermédiaire de Rose-Marie lance un appel à communication au colloque international *Traduire la diversité* du 6 au 8 mai 2010. Le programme est très intéressant, j'y vais! Et c'est comme cela que pour la première fois, je fais la connaissance de Christine Pagnoule en personne. Dès lors, une nouvelle association s'impose. Cette fois, c'est le dicton „Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse“. Mais, à ma grande surprise, le site <http://www.internaute.com/> propose de nombreuses explications de ce proverbe, très contradictoires, dont aucune ne correspond à ce que j'avais imaginé.

L'avant de Jamil Nehmé (Ottawa, Canada)

Perséverer dans son emploi

«À mes connaissances, ce proverbe fait allusion à toute personne qui change continuellement d'emploi (qui ne demeure donc pas

assez longtemps dans une même place pour avancer, monter de rang) pour amasser une fortune. Elle ressemble donc à une pierre qui roule constamment, empêchant ainsi la mousse de pousser autour d'elle." (06 mai 2013)

L'avant de Santia Dalias (Haïti)

Explication

„Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse“, ce qui veut dire qu'on ne peut jamais faire deux choses à la fois, il y en a une qui va être négligée...." (30 avril 2013)

L'avant de Hmp (Saint Jacques De Compostelle)

Matiérialisme pour certains, spiritualité pour d'autres

„Celui qui avance est réceptif aux ondes positives et se débarrasse des négatives. La pierre roule à vitesse constante produisant son énergie vitale minimum nécessaire sans se charger de superficiel. La notion de patrimoine ne doit pas être ramenée au matériel mais au spirituel.“ (18 avril 2013)

L'avant de Franck Wagrez (Antibes)

Le sens premier

“A trop se disperser on ne bâtit jamais rien. Il faut s'établir pour amasser un patrimoine. Voilà pour moi le sens premier de ce dicton. Mais on peut effectivement le prendre à l'envers et dire : celui qui bouge ne s'ankylose pas.” (13 mars 2013)

L'avant de Lena Lena (Lille)

“On ne fait rien de bon dans la précipitation et trop de mouvement tue la progression ? C'est bon ça!” (30 décembre 2011)

L'avant de Metissé (Congo)

“Je (e miuscule) suis d'accord avec l'explication du jeune Africain qui roule sa pierre. Il ré-

sulte de cette explication que les hommes noirs sont robustes car la pierre ne les blesse pas . On pourra même dire que ce proverbe explique la raison pour laquelle ce sont toujours des hommes d'origine noire qui gagnent les 200 mètres." (07 novembre 2011)

L'avant de Lionel Oliveira Oliveira (Aubervilliers)

réflexion moderne

“ici on traite de l'histoire de Mousse, un jeune Africain (A- majuscule) qui devait débarrasser son champ d'une énorme pierre pour construire une hutte. Le chef du village lui a demandé de la faire rouler jusqu'en haut de la montagne, d'où elle provenait. Calée avec un simple os de poulet, elle tomba et roula jusqu'au bas de la montagne et sur le pauvre Mousse qui s'en tira avec seulement trois point de suture. D'où l'expression: Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas Mousse.” (02 novembre 2011)

L'avant de Dalila (Saint-Étienne)

La terre qui roule

“Une pierre qui roule c'est excellent, mais quand elle amasse de la mousse c'est encore mieux. Elle est productive et donne à la nature, un peu comme la terre, elle roule dans le cosmos et elle a amassé beaucoup de forêt, grâce à quoi nous sommes vivants. Donc j'y vois une action de générosité.” (10 juin 2011)

L'avant de Teresa (Madrid)

“Le français n'étant pas ma langue maternelle, ce proverbe a toujours frappé mon imagination. Je lui donne un sens positif. J'attribue au mouvement constant et à la disposition du voyage et au changement la vertu de ne pas devenir un poids mort.” (10 juin 2011)

Il paraît que pour les étrangers seulement (comme moi) ce proverbe réveille l'imagination et la dirige dans le sens positif. D'ailleurs, les Rolling stones roulent toujours et il se massent, de la mousse!

Bien, cessions de tourner en rond, quelles sont les qualités de Christine Pagnoule ?

Son hospitalité, bien sûr. Je ne sais pas combien de fois sa maison s'est transformée en campus étudiantin ou universitaire abritant les invités des conférences et des colloques. J'en ai bénéficié plusieurs fois. La première - lors du colloque organisé à l'occasion de l'anniversaire de Rose-Marie François. Dagnija Dreika et moi, nous avons logé dans une petite pièce à propos de laquelle le premier commentaire de Dagnija était „enfin on est comme chez les gens normaux où tout n'est pas rangé à l'exemple d'un musée“. Le matin, je surpris Christine dans le jardin en position du „salut au soleil“, elle dit que quelques exercices lui font du bien. Moi aussi j'aimerais saluer le soleil, mais la paressa (quotidienne) m'en empêche. Par contre, au petit déjeuner, je trouve bien vite ma place devant la table richement servie.

Encore un séjour chez Christine. Je viens pour la Biennale de poésie de Liège 2012 et je dois repartir dans la nuit, vers trois heures du matin. Je rencontre Christine à la biennale, et, quelle surprise! - ma „pierre qui roule“ est sur une chaise.. roulante ! Elle s'est cassé la jambe mais cela ne l'empêche pas de m'héberger - toujours cette hospitalité notable ! Une qualité de plus : sa capacité à rassembler des gens du monde entier autour d'un thème lors d'un colloque puis autour d'une table après une journée bien saturée en idées. Je ne sais vraiment pas comment elle réussit à tout faire, mais la solution de cette énigme se trouve dans une qualité supplémentaire : une capacité de travail extraordinaire (il n'y a qu'à regarder les heures auxquelles elle envoie ses messages courriels !)

Pour résumer, vue du Nord européen, Christine, alias Kristine, alias Kristin, roule bien pour le grand plaisir de ses amis, ses collègues et ses connaissances, ce dont je la félicite!

NOS LANGUES

MÜSU VALODAS

Un arbre sans pluie,
ses racines vont boire
au profond de la terre.
Nos langues d'enfance
irriguent notre souffle.

Un plant acclimaté
veut l'arrosoir, l'engrais.
Nos langues de jeunesse
nous viennent par l'étude,
nous restent par l'usage.

Une fleur coupée
orne le vase qui la fane.
Nos langues vite apprises,
s'ôt déprises, languissent
dans les cachots de la mémoire.

Les premières ont voix de sang.
Les deuxièmes disent l'amour.
Les troisièmes flirtent sur la plage.

Une nuit en rêvant, on les entend
rire ensemble. Nos langues
se parlent, se reconnaissent,
se moquent de nos palmarès !

Elles écrivent à la même table
un cours, des courses, un agenda,
un article savant, une lettre amicale,
un vaste projet de trag-comédie
et, les jours fastes, un cri de poésie.

ROSE-MARIE FRANÇOIS (INÉDIT)

Koks cieš bez lietus,
tā saknes smēj valgmi
dzīdzīj zem zemes.
Kā bērnības valodas
atveldzē elpu.

Un kultūras augs
grib tikt aplieņi un barots.
Mūsu jaunības mēles
ar studijām atrāk
un palek, un kalpo.

Nogrieztā puķe
vist vāzē, ko grezno.
Tās mēles, kas žiglī nāk,
žiglī zūd, slēpjās
atmīgas kambaros tumšos.

Tām pirmām ir asipu balss.
Tās otrās runā par milū.
Trešās vērpj pludmales flirtu.

Kādu nakti pa sapņiem mēs dzirdam
tās smejamies kopā. Tās mēles
gan runā, gan pazīst, gan neatziſ
ierindošanu vietā!

Pie viena un tā pašā galda
Tās raksta lekcijas, pirkumus, darbus,
Zinīgu rakstu, draudzīgu vēsti,
plāša vēzīenu traīkmēdiņu,
bet vēlīgās dienās – dzejas kliedzienu.

(TRADUCTION LETTONE PAR ASTRA SKRĀBANE)

SILVA EUROPANTO

Willows
like William
like Ophelia
like Desdemona
speak English.

Ozoli
mākoņos
un netikai Jāņos
runa
latviski.

I pioppi
luminosi musici
tremendo nell'estate
parlano
italiano.

Birken
beschämend schön
am Sumpfrand
flüstern
auf deutsch.

Dennen
uit Holland
met hun tenen vol zand
praten
Nederland.

Buchen
im Wald
erröten
und schweigen.

La langue
des pins des landes
chaque pomme le sait
c'est le français.

Les pwōriērs
avē yeus pwōres
su le cuirois
pal'tē picārd.

En
bara en och än
bokstäv
så kort men så stor
när enen dofta
på svenska.

La palmera
no es un arbol
pero en la playa
habla español.

Wenn Erlen
Könige krönen
stöhnen sie
im Wolfgang.

Taxus baccata
et rosa Baccara-e:
asperges eis
aestatis omnis.

Le taxi de Bacchus
où la rose baïsa
l'asperge...
(i' n'font
même plus d'latin_!)

Napban
fa van.
Jól van!

В саду я гада
калиника
была.

Populus niger:
noctis foro;
populus alba:
lucis arbor.
Et quare loquor_?

If
you
sign
yew
you will be
un arbre
mon if.

ROSE-MARIE FRANÇOIS,
POUR FÊTER
CHRISTINE PAGNOULE