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Skim as *Girl*

Reading a Japanese North American Graphic Novel through Manga Lenses

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Introduction

In recent years, graphic narratives[1] in general and manga in particular have attracted critical attention from a variety of fields, including media and globalization research as well as Japanese, gender, and ethnic studies. This broadening of topic-oriented interest usually leads to two lines of contestation, one pertaining to manga-specific expertise and the other to culturally divergent mediascapes as contexts of productions and use. Taking a typical case of discordance—the ethnic identity of manga characters—opinions differ notoriously as to whether mangaesque faces and physiques are to be regarded as "stateless" (*mukokuseki*) or "Caucasian." The latter position may meet manga experts' resistance if it leans on a preference for visual clues over verbal markers of race. In addition, manga researchers show a strong inclination to tie the meanings that specific graphic narratives imply to the respective mediascape, emphasizing the gap between different national comics cultures or, within those, mainstream and alternative comics as well as manga genres.[2] Recently, they have also questioned the significance of representational content, for example in consideration of the increasing role of non-representational usages of manga texts in the form of fan art and CosPlay. From such a pragmatic perspective, mangaesque faces appear to be transcultural platforms rather than manifestations of Japanese Occidentalism[3] or representations of Japan's obliviousness of its past as an invader and colonizer in Asia. Yet, contesting the pragmatic approach by means of representational critique or vice versa does not seem to provide a satisfactory solution. After all, mangaesque faces are neither "neutral" nor "Westernized" but both, and it is precisely their ambiguity which calls for consideration. An interesting case in this regard is *Girl*, the Japanese translation of Jillian Tamaki[4] and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim*, which shall serve as my example below.

Girl is one of only two comics volumes by Japanese (North) American artists that have been published in Japanese so far, the other being Adrian Tomine's *Sleepwalk and Other Stories*. Neither of them has attracted much attention in Japan[5] despite the fact that they both are rendered in black and white and thereby recommend themselves to a Japanese readership for whom monochromy is more familiar than full color.[6] But while Tomine's publisher refrained from conforming to Japanese manga conventions, the editor of *Girl* excelled in trying to adjust a foreign graphic novel to domestic standards: the hardcover Groundwood edition[7] was transformed into a handy soft cover *tankōbon*[8] and girted with a typically Japanese paper belt (*obi*) which announced, "It sucks to be 16" (Plates 20 and 21). Further noteworthy as a difference from the Japanese edition of *Sleepwalk*, whose lettering looks even more hand drawn than in the English language original, is the replacement of the freehand font in *Skim* by phototypesetting in *Girl* (Figures 16 and 17).[9] Yet, as well-intentioned and courageous as such assimilative efforts were, they did not succeed in appealing to manga readers. This chapter pursues why, highlighting the importance of media-cultural considerations as an intermediary between social discourses—on ethnicity for example—and the comics form.

The first section reviews English-language scholarship on Asian American graphic narratives from a manga studies point of view. The second section takes a closer look at *Skim* as *Girl*, foregrounding the way in which it evokes similarities with Japanese girls' comics (*shōjo manga*) and escapes generic frameworks at the same time. To non-manga experts, manga appears usually as one genre within the larger arena of graphic narratives, but manga readers in and outside of Japan regard it as a media which encompasses a wide variety of genres. As such, manga is comparable to Hollywood cinema although categorized less by subject matter (romance, science fiction, mystery, etc.) than by readerships' gender and age (*shōnen*/boys' manga, *seinen*/youth manga and others). In contrast to the second section's focus on genre, the third and final section turns to issues of realist representation and visual identity, precisely protagonist Skim's conspicuously "Japanese" visage which, deviating from mangaesque faces as it does, may serve as a gateway to questioning the post/racial condition of both Skim's world and that of manga, especially shōjo manga.

"Asian American Graphic Narratives" in Focus

The term "Asian American graphic narratives" implies a two-fold interest: an interest in comics as graphic narratives and an ethnically specified interest

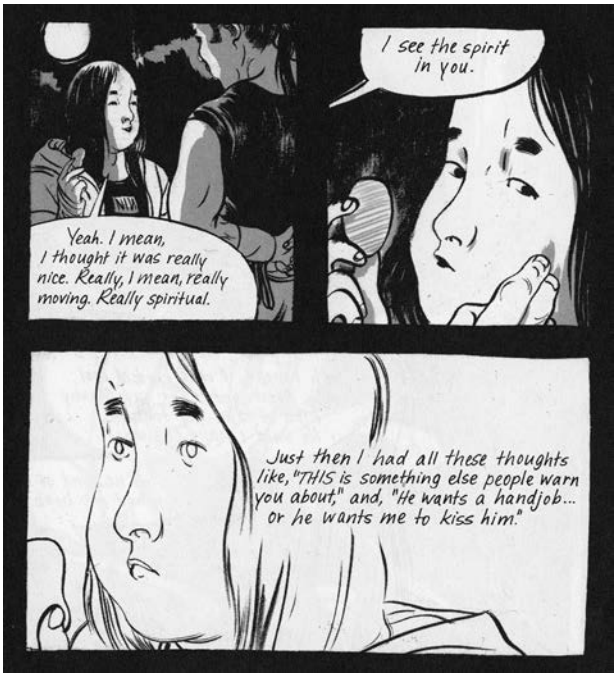

Figure 16

Hand lettering in *Skim*, p. 19. House of Anansi Press/ Groundwood Books, 2008.

Figure 17

Phototypesetting in *Girl*, p. 23. @ Sanctuary 2009.

in such narratives. Shan Mu Zhao, for example, defines Asian American comics as "part of an ethnic subculture" (12). In North American academia, such comics have been attracting scholarly attention mainly with respect to their possible contribution to "recent debates about the politics of race within a supposedly post-ethnic or post-identity context" (Oh 131).[10] Approached from a different location, this critical orientation reveals limitations, on the one hand, with respect to the cultural (i.e., geopolitical) scope of its topic, and on the other hand, with respect to the "general emphasis on content and representation" (LaMarre, qtd. in Smith 143). To begin with the latter, scholars engaged in comics studies face the following problem:

> [I]nvestigating comics' intersections with, say, theories of gender or postcolonialism, political and social issues, accounts of history and psychoanalytical methods . . . reveal[s] more about those discourses and social structures than they do about the comics medium per se. (Miodrag, "Narrative, Language, and Comics-as-Literature" 265)

Increasingly, however, the paramount concern with how Asian Americans are represented in graphic narratives does not always privilege artists' descent, characters' phenotypes, and ethnicity-related subject matter. More and more essays in literary studies exhibit an awareness of the aesthetic properties of graphic narratives, intertwining their topic-oriented findings with the distinctiveness of comics. Exemplary in this regard is Sandra Oh, who asserts, "As such, both racial identity and the graphic novel depend on hegemonically determined narratives, or closure, and the reiteration of these narratives" (144). Referring to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, her analysis of Tomine's short stories concludes that they are "working against closure within a medium enabled by closure" (149). Likewise, Derek Parker Royal finds a

> paradoxical effect of ethnic identification in comics: Graphic narrative, in allowing the reader to "mask" him- or herself in its non-mimetic figuration, invites empathy with the nondescript "Other" on the comic page, thereby encouraging the reader to connect to other experiences and other communities that might otherwise have been unfamiliar. (10)

Remarkably, McCloud's notions of closure and masking effect are presumed to apply universally to any reading of graphic narratives. This inclination dovetails with Hillary Chute's sophisticated account that comics hold a "particular value for articulating a feminist aesthetics" due to their fragmented form (8). Aesthetically characterized by the interplay between the visual and the verbal

and, closely related, the interrelation between presence and absence, comics as such are ascribed a special potential to challenge binary classification. Chute "understand[s] the very form of comics as feminized" (10), reminiscent of earlier attempts at claiming an *écriture féminine* for literature.[11] It is important to note that Chute's argumentation addresses itself implicitly to non-comics readers. Against the assumption that graphic narratives do not provide complex stories, she calls for acknowledging them as "a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation" (9). This, however, can apparently be achieved only by works that "push against easy consumption" (26), a bias which implies a constraint of the initially claimed universals. If aesthetic universals existed, they would have to hold for all variants of comics, from the highly idiosyncratic to the easily consumable.

Critics' penchant towards universals often coalesces with uncritical references to the few available theories of graphic narratives and with a certain ignorance towards discussions of these theories' shortcomings by comics studies experts. This applies, first of all, to McCloud. His initial definition of comics has been criticized for overemphasizing the pictorial aspects of graphic narratives at the expense of the interplay between image and script.[12] Furthermore, its formalism and disregard of "how and where a comics was published, in which materiality a specific sequence of signs manifests itself, in which context it operates," have prompted German critic Ole Frahm to speak of "semiotic idealism" (*Die Sprache des Comics* 17). A. David Lewis, for example, has additionally highlighted the "omitted viewer/reader" (75).

Encompassing publication sites, genre traditions, and reader expectations, mediascape elements sway the potential of a specific graphic narrative to facilitate resistance against racialized identity, a potential often tied to the supposed capability "to train readers to accept narrative ambiguity and to see a story as more than a linear progression from a beginning to an end" (Chin 250). One of these elements can be found in serialization. Manga that run longer than a decade and fill dozens of tankōbon volumes may confront their readers with the temporary suspension of linear progression, initially due to commercial considerations, that is, to stretch a successful series as long as consumers remain unexhausted. In the early twenty-first century, this has become part of the game, so to speak. Today, the success of the longest running manga series is based as much on their stories as on their usability within fan communities (especially in fan art, fan fiction, and CosPlay) and their availability to media-convergent franchises (manga, animated series and movies, video and computer

games, merchandise goods, novelizations, etc.) for which narratives are often just a vehicle. Under such conditions, "working against closure within a medium enabled by closure" does not easily become part of a critical enterprise, as it deviates from representational endeavors in the first place.

McCloud's notion of closure has been criticized also for its underlying inclination towards closing gaps instead of accepting them as a source of both fun and resistance against stereotypes.[13] Here instead I draw attention to something beyond McCloud's own concern, that is, the often assumed universality of critical effects. Accepting, or even appreciating, lack of closure connects no more (and no less) to non-conformism than McCloud's "masking" mediates unfamiliar experiences. Favoring empathy and participation, contemporary mainstream manga leans extensively on "masking." In *Making Comics*, McCloud himself noted that "all of these [narrative] techniques amplified the sense of reader participation in manga, a feeling of being part of the story, rather than simply observing the story from afar" (217). Yet "masking" in mainstream manga serves more often as self-confirmation than "empathy with the nondescript 'Other'." In general, today's manga culture exhibits a striking avoidance of ideology and politics. This should not come as a surprise, as engagement with such arenas has been characteristic of countercultures but not subcultures in the first place. And manga is subculture in the very sense of remaining ambiguous and privileging the "meaning of style," even in Japan where it seems to be a dominant culture in terms of quantitative output and social acceptance.[14]

Manga culture's post-critical inclination[15] may tempt instructors to replace fans' primarily genre-oriented and representation-resistant consumption with more sophisticated readings, or to confront them with non-familiar visual and narrative forms. No doubt, close readings of graphic narratives are important, but equally important are considerations of an invisible dimension which resides beyond the gutter and its narrative implications, that is, the cultural position of the comics in question, especially in relation to genre. Points of departure for such an approach can be found in Zhao, mainly with respect to the following three aspects.

First, instead of relating her examples directly to social discourses, Zhao examines how they interact with and within popular culture. From the outset, she chooses comics which occupy "both a popular culture position and a 'literary' position"—for example, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* and Fred Chao's *Johnny Hiro: Half Asian, All Hero*. Second, Zhao does not confine her discussion to highly realistic graphic narratives, but rather she focuses on

challenging the mainstream through play, which provides the opportunity to ponder ambiguous, fluid identities from an aesthetic perspective—on the one hand, with respect to the interplay of the visual and the verbal, and on the other hand, with respect to comics' fundamental non/seriousness, or parodic nature.[16] Third, she poses the question of how "the notion of popular culture and globalization as exclusively Americanization" (13) is being contested. This relates to manga culture in regard to both Japanese editions of American comics which have to gain acceptance in a foreign environment and comics preferences of young, especially female, American readers, which are increasingly influenced by their experiences of reading manga in translation.

Skim/Girl within the Manga Mediascape

Set in Toronto in 1993,[17] *Skim* relates, in diary form, several months in the life of a 16-year-old Japanese Canadian who experiences a general state of alienation among her divorced parents, her teachers, and her classmates at an all-girl high school. Viewed in this light, *Skim* tells a rather universal story about a girl from a girl's perspective. By mutual agreement with the authors, the title of the Japanese edition was altered respectively: the mysterious and, as we learn, highly personal nickname Skim, which when rendered in Japanese *kana* syllabary would not trigger the English connotation of being light or thin, was turned into the typecasting and easy-to-grasp Anglicism *Girl*. Although printed in Latin letters and thereby retaining a certain Otherness, the new title within the Japanese mediascape links this graphic novel to the discursive realm of girls' culture, or more precisely, shōjo manga, even if the editor, as he testified in an interview, aimed at a readership beyond dedicated fans of a specific manga genre (Nagai).

Against the backdrop of Japan's vast domestic manga output, generic contextualization is vital, especially with respect to unknown artists. Usually, magazine serializations assume that task. Since the late 1950s, Japanese readers have grown accustomed to graphic narratives appearing first in specialized weeklies or monthlies and, if successful, subsequent tankōbon editions. Expediting generic compartmentalization and, in consequence, readers' segmentation, the magazines have been serving both as the industrial backbone of Japan's manga culture and sites for imaginary communities.

Girl cannot lean on such manga-specific context as it was published by Sanctuary, a medium-sized firm specializing not in manga, or manga magazines,

but in non-fiction books.[18] Yet despite this publication site and the fact that the Western reading direction was maintained out of cost concerns, *Girl* approaches shōjo manga, by its title as well as stylistically, with its "nesting" of bordered and unbordered panels, numerous monologues, and, in part, decorative (i.e., not necessarily representational) use of flowers, stars, and swirling leaves. In the 1970s when shōjo manga began to tell complex stories which privileged emotions over action and presented dreams as another reality, it came to distinguish itself from male manga genres by the amount of verbal text placed outside of speech balloons, extra-diegetic, allegedly excessive floral background designs, and collage-like multilayered page layouts.[19] Referring to the shōjo-manga device of body-length girl images superimposed over horizontal tiers of panels, critic Gō Itō[20] has accentuated the "indeterminacy of the frame" (*Tezuka izu deddo* 225), that is, the fact that comics tend to compel their reader to incessantly decide whether to focus on the single panel or the entire page and double spread. According to Itō, the male manga genres opted against this indeterminacy in the name of cinematic realism, whereas shōjo manga, with its affinity to literary realism, accepted it in favor of highly subjective and introspective narratives. As a result, shōjo manga became appreciated as a genre which leaves the framing more or less to its readers, thereby granting them a specific kind of imaginative participation.[21]

Skim exhibits a visual flow which is indeed reminiscent of shōjo manga. Employing only a minimum of verbal text, to say nothing of the absence of "talking heads," artist Jillian Tamaki proves to be a visual storyteller in the true sense of the word as she guides the reader's gaze over the pages, altering not only the optical angle panel by panel, but also the focus on page and panel, inviting readers to "zoom-in" and "zoom-out." In many cases, the space of the page provides the uniting ground for inserted panels that observe temporal succession. The resulting interconnectedness, distinct as it is from the generically male grid, gives a highly "feminine" impression. Likewise relatable to shōjo manga is the importance of monologue. *Skim* features two different sorts, one being retrospective and the other one serving as concurrent commentary.[22] However, due to the previously mentioned phototypesetting and, furthermore, its undifferentiated employment, the difference between the two sorts of monologues grows hazy in the Japanese edition. Readers of shōjo manga are used to being guided by font variations, but the phototypesetting in *Girl* stays uniform, and thus it invites them to read the retrospective monologue as if it were the commenting type. In addition to typography, contemporary manga employs

pictorial alterations to distinguish between first-and third-person perspectives. One and the same character may appear on the same page, even in the same panel, with a completely different physiognomy (beauty/grimace), rendered in two disparate styles (fine-drawing/doodle).[23] Occasionally mistaken by unfamiliar viewers as two distinct characters, such juxtapositions of external view and self-image, or "out-of-body" shot, facilitate the impression of fluid identity.

In contrast, the protagonist of *Skim/Girl* remains facially always the same, and this representational realism also applies to her hair. In shōjo manga, black hair is not necessarily rendered black; changes of hair "color" may indicate varying emotional states of the same character or help to distinguish characters from each other. That is to say, signifier and signified, as well as different signifiers in their interrelation, do not primarily refer to an extra-textual reality. Yet, Skim's hair color—visually contrasted to her blond classmates' and narratively highlighted by her bleaching experiment (2008, 126–27)—is to be taken literally, as are the blackened pages. In *Skim*, the blackness denotes night-time and connotes the protagonist's darkness or "dark" inclinations toward Goth and Wiccan subcultures; in manga however, and especially in shōjo manga with multiple time lines, blackening is conventionally used as an indicator of flashbacks.

For its cover illustration, *Girl* employs a double spread, featured within the narrative, which depicts Skim's imagined kiss with her teacher Ms. Archer in the woods, at the end of part I (2008, 40–41).[24] Not only flipped, but also drenched solely in red, this cover suggests a novel rather than a manga, as a manga would carry an eye-catching polychrome illustration. The color red, however, points to femininity and raises expectations about a story set in a self-contained female realm, or perhaps, inferring from the image, even a lesbian one. Fictional homoerotic relationships between girls have a long tradition in modern Japan, dating back to prewar girls' novels serialized in girls' magazines and to the all-girl Takarazuka musical theater. But in shōjo manga, it was male homosexuality that gained momentum in the 1970s and later became the core of the so-called Boys' Love (BL), or *yaoi* (sub)genre.[25] On a side-note, the editor of *Girl* won initial fame with *Tonari no 801-chan* ("My Neighbor Yaoi-chan"),[26] a collection of funny vertical strips featuring a male nerd whose girlfriend is a BL fan. Some manga artists also ventured into depicting lesbian love. Ryōko Yamagishi was apparently the first to draw a respective bed scene in 1971.[27] At that time, shōjo-manga magazines tolerated homosexual bed scenes contrary to heterosexual ones, because editors found them to be further afield from reality. As a matter

of fact, manga featuring beautiful homosexual boys have been enjoying more popularity with heterosexual female readers than narratives about lesbian girls, which hints at the fantasy factor prevalent in most manga accounts of "homosexuality," including the more recent genre of Girls' Love (*yuri*/lilies or GL).

Preconditioned by highly codified simulations of homosexuality in female manga, Japanese readers are not likely to read *Girl* as a story about lesbianism, at least unless they deliberately embrace it as a graphic novel in the strict sense, that is, a narrative residing beyond popular media culture, a well-planned and self-contained work informed by modern authorship in which every detail seems to be remarkable and meaningful.[28] *Skim* contains no allusions to Japanese popular culture and no references to manga style. Admittedly, its narrative is set a few years before the manga boom in North America took off. However, a general distance from manga on the part of its creators can be felt as well. Born around 1980, Jillian Tamaki must have had exposure to manga, but interviewed about her childhood reading, she recalls girls' comics such as *Archie* or *Betty* & *Veronica*, and as later inspirational sources she names Will Eisner, Seth, Chester Brown, Daniel Clowes and Adrian Tomine (Randle; Chan). The graphic novel *Skim* may draw attention to social issues concerning sexuality and gender, ethnicity, peer pressure, and forced sameness, and it holds the potential to do so across genre divides and cultural borders. Yet the graphic novel approach towards graphic narratives is not the only option for critically addressing these issues. Equally worthy of consideration are readings which lean on particular (sub)cultures, or readerships, and favor sharing over idiosyncratic expression as well as affective impact and intertextual play over representational weight, such as the above-sketched reading through shōjo manga lenses.

Too "Japanese" to Be Shared

The Tamakis "choose not to foreground race or ethnicity in Skim's day-by-day coming-of-age narrative" (Aldama 8–9). Their protagonist does not address such issues verbally, and only her middle name, Keiko, suggests Japanese roots. However, pictorially, on the level of *monstration* (Badman), "Japaneseness" is clearly indicated, first of all through Skim's face. This constitutes another impediment to acceptance by manga readers, as her eyes are too small to mark the position of protagonist. The North American-published Groundwood edition features Skim's face prominently on its cover, while readers of *Girl* encounter her first close-up on the bottom tier of page 13 (2008). In addition,

Skim's eyes do not prompt empathy as do the wide-eyed characters typical of manga. Combined with her minimalist facial expression, these eyes make it hard to access her affective states visually, and their specifically Asian look hampers identification in particular. In short, Skim's face has an unsettling impact, not only on Japanese consumers. As well, North American non-manga readers describe Skim's look as ugly rather than stylized (Randle). Such rejection occurs whenever readers who aim at diving into the fictional world instead of letting themselves in on Otherness find Skim's face too particular for what McCloud calls masking. This face balks at being appropriated; it demands to be acknowledged in its own right—as an individual one, and as a phenotype different from the majority of her classmates. At one point, even the narrative marks Skim as Asian when she and Vietnamese peer Hien Warshowski are both excluded from a birthday party (2008, 83–87).

However, the indication of "Japaneseness" is not only a matter of representational content; pictorial style itself plays a significant part, especially as it invokes art-historical references. The cut-off close-up of the protagonist which adorns the cover of the Groundwood edition looks, at first glance, like a representation of Skim's social situation—she is "boxed-in"—and, closely related, of her ethnic identity. But it marks Skim as Japanese on two different levels: representationally, through the shape of her eyes, and stylistically, through the composition itself, the color planes and the brush-like swelling line work. This style connotes mainly *ukiyoe* woodcut prints, the emblem of Western Japonisme, even if the book equates Skim's face twice with a Noh mask (2008, 48, 73),[29] which belongs to a different era. Comics critic Paul Gravett, for example, rediscovers Utagawa Kuniyoshi's "sensitive faces of women" in Skim, and he quotes Jillian Tamaki admitting that "it seems the ukiyoe influence is deeper in my subconscious than I gave it credit for." But Tamaki also mentions that she never intended her character to reflect Japanese prints, and while Gravett fancies the triangle of Kuniyoshi, *Skim*, and contemporary manga, Tamaki herself remains silent on that topic.

The Groundwood cover's reference to Japonisme dovetails, remotely, with the citation of Manet's *Olympia* inside the book, at the beginning of Part II (2008, 44) (Figure 18). This painting, too, evinces ukiyoe influences stylistically with its abandonment of pictorial depth, the layering of space, the decentered composition, the unmodulated color planes, and the dark outline of the nude's body, to name just a few elements which triggered contemporary reception of Olympia as a coalminer's daughter (Clarke 79–146). When Japanese artist

Figure 18

Manet's *Olympia* as quoted in *Skim*, p. 44. House of Anansi Press/Groundwood, 2008.

Yasumasa Morimura appropriated Manet's painting more than one century later, he titled it *Portrait—Twin (Olympia)*.[30] Masquerading himself as the prostitute—blond-wigged and hiding his genitals—as well as her black servant, he appears as the twin of both the white woman and the black maid. In view of the concurrency between the scandalous exhibition of Manet's work and the beginning of Japan's modernization in the 1860s, art historians have linked Morimura's staged photograph to the Westernization inherent in the latter. In particular the emphasis on self-feminization met with critical acclaim (Bryson). Thus, *Portrait—Twin (Olympia)* matched the concerns of the New Art History in North America, where it was read in relation to "Asia (Japan) as woman," and the racial dimension overlooked in previous studies of "the painting of modern life."

Japanese viewers and those familiar with Japanese art history may link Skim's round face and small eyes less to the heyday of ukiyoe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, and rather to a previous era, historically closer to Noh, which took root in the fifteenth century. In the first half of the twentieth century, traditionalist painters turned to this past in search of a specifically Japanese modern beauty.[31] Yet, after WWII such high-cultural endeavors succumbed eventually to the preference for Western disguise in daily life as Morimura's pseudo-painting suggests with its references. This pop culture-driven pervasion of Westernization can, among other things, be confirmed by manga's strong inclination to leave the ethnic identity of its protagonists vague.

Whether manga faces are ethnically specified differs according to genre. While shōjo manga shows a particularly strong penchant towards Westernization and employs Japanese as Asian faces mostly for the characterization of supporting characters (for example, to indicate sneakiness or other flaws), male manga, especially realist ones for non-infant readers (*seinen* and *gekiga*), feature Japanese, or Asian, faces occasionally as do Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *AKIRA* (1982–90), Naoki Urasawa's *Billy Bat* (2008–12), and Kaiji Kawaguchi's *Eagle: The Making of an Asian-American President* (1998–2001). But as Betsy Huang observed in her review of the latter, the penchant to universalize, that is, de-racialize (at least the protagonist, in contrast to some of his female partners), cannot be overlooked. This points to the Japanese context in a two-fold way: first, with respect to representational conventions which undermine straight content-oriented readings, and second, with respect to the more general cultural significance of race and racialization. Japanese manga discourse, for example, pays little attention to issues of race and ethnicity. If at all, these issues are being addressed by scholars located in North America, or with strong ties to North American

academia.[32] One of them, American anthropologist Ayako Takamori, points out that the mangaesque "statelessness" is often mistakenly read as "white" from a perspective which misrecognizes visual cues as raced or as racial representation. But while calling for a consideration of such intercultural "semiotic gaps," she also maintains that "racialization is nonetheless still present . . . within the Japanese mediascape." Skim's case, for example, suggests the persistence of ethnic or racial assumptions, or in other words, the denial of a post-racial world.

Two positions on racial representation can be found in contemporary scholarship, usually in biased form. Some researchers, especially in the social sciences and historiography, emphasize that modern Japan adopted Western concepts of race and racism (Kowner and Demel), while others highlight that in modern Japan, caste-based discrimination outweighed race-based discrimination, as epitomized by the assimilationist policy of imperial Japan in Asia in the 1930s and early 1940s. In an attempt to employ the latter for discussions of Japanese manga and animated films, media theoretician Thomas LaMarre has developed his concept of speciesism, "a displacement of race and racism (relations between humans as imagined in racial terms) onto relations between humans and animals . . . and vice versa" ("Speciesism, Part I" 76). According to LaMarre, the fictional focus on species instead of races has always entailed the possibility to move beyond the logic of segregation altogether. And he attributes this possibility not to another, non-racialist kind of representation, but to "a movement away from referential and representational strategies," asserting that "[t]hus we return to the problematic of cute little nonhuman species, not merely as allegorical accounts of Japan or the United States but as biopolitical [instead of geopolitical] operations" ("Speciesism, Part II" 77). Informed by a cultural studies perspective, Ella Shohat, too, points out limitations of representation-oriented approaches towards ethnicity as they tend to focus on stereotypes and distortions at the expense of media-specific aspects, from style and genre conventions to the social positioning of both creators and the audience (23). Yet, slightly different from LaMarre, she calls for intertwining the two positions, of privileging realist representation on the one hand and favoring anti-representationalist, poststructuralist accounts of mediation on the other hand. In relation to cinema, not comics, she notes: "While on one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers" (26).

In view of these suggestions about representation, we may trace the abovementioned discomfort with Skim's face, especially but not exclusively among

Japanese manga readers, back to two aspects: the representational link to Japanese, or Asian, ethnicity, and representation in general as a barrier for easily investing imagery with fantastic visions or experiences of one's own everyday life. Skim's face is apparently too ethnically specific to be easily used and shared. In this regard, it is interesting to note how Fusami Ōgi determines the potential of Westernization in shōjo manga. In striking contrast to critical accounts which relate manga readers' disconcert with "Asian" faces to a fundamental disavowal of race and ethnicity as social and political issues, she reads the two central stylistic characteristics of shōjo manga—"Europeanization" and "feminization"—less as representations of Europe and woman, but rather as tools to erase "Japan" and masculinity. Since the late 1960s, shōjo manga imagery provided Japanese girls with the opportunity to appropriate the "West," with the masculine connotation manifested in Japan's modernization, granting them distance from the dominant discourse of Japanese femininity within their own imaginary communities. As such, Westernization in shōjo manga cannot simply be equated with Occidentalism as an equivalent to Western Orientalism. Unsurprisingly, Ōgi demonstrates this by reference to the beautiful protagonists of Boys' Love narratives who indulge in homosexual relations on manga pages and who have been given mainly "Western" looks.

The initially inherent criticality towards specific representations, however, is not prevalent anymore, last but not least due to the decreased significance of representation as such. Today, Caucasian-looking characters are mostly signifiers without Caucasian signifieds. Precisely this makes them available to consumerist play as well as post-ethnic projections, for example by non-Japanese fans of various ethnicity and race. Introducing Kaoru, a Malaysian manga-style artist of Chinese descent, Sheuo Hui Gan substantiates the potential of manga style for creating cross-ethnic spaces when she asserts with regards to the representation of localities that ". . . aspects of Japanese manga culture are used to create imaginary places that provide a space which is relatively free of the ethnic tensions of everyday life" (174). Under "Malaysia's complex situation [which] can easily lead to a biased reading of recognizable localities" (174), Japanese-looking locales and characters seem to connote ethnic (and religious) neutrality rather than Westernization.

To sum up, the above aspects address manga's ethnic abeyance to at least two sets of issues: first, topic-centered readings of ethnic representations in Japanese society as contrasted to non-representational uses of manga, or affective investment in characters and fictional worlds on both individual and

collective levels; and second, realist representation in manga as contrasted to technical, or material, requirements. Huge eyes, for example, may under certain conditions connote Caucasianness, but they are also an expressive requirement of manga as a visual media. Foreign critics tend to understand especially the infamous saucer eyes of shōjo manga in a representational way, conceiving them as exaggerated "mirrors of the soul" or manifestations of an "Asian" inferiority complex against Caucasians. However, their perceptional and technical function often goes unnoticed, as Itō points out ("Manga no futatsu no kao" 473). According to him, it is precisely the device of huge eyes which allows for a shift of focus from single panel to entire page and thereby for foregrounding the always already given "indeterminacy of the frame" mentioned above. In today's manga, close-ups with wide eyes often guarantee the unity of a page, across verbal and pictorial parts: they attract the reader's attention and entice him or her to relate fragmented images and lexia to one and the same character; in other words, to stitch the parts of the page together in a highly ambiguous, imaginative way not necessarily tied to characters' gazes.

Ambiguity in a broader sense leads Betsy Huang in her review of *Eagle: The Making of an Asian American President* to concede that "a dialogic quality persists throughout the series, so that one is never quite sure if Kawaguchi is reinforcing or demystifying the powerful mythologies of the American Dream" (287). Related also to Chute's concern with the "demystification of the project of representation," we arrive at the tentative conclusion that graphic narratives balk at being subjected to either representation- or use-related analysis but call for both, just as mangaesque faces can pass as both ethnically neutral and specified, depending on context.

Notes

1. In this chapter the words "graphic narrative" and "comics" are used conterminously, due to my underlying manga-informed perspective. Whereas the Japanese term *manga* initially encompassed a whole range of meanings, from caricatures and four-panel strips to large-scale graphic narratives and even animated films, today, it signifies primarily magazine-based serializations called *story manga* in Japanese.
2. See Terry Kawashima, "Seeing Faces, Making Races," Casey Brienza, "Beyond B&W?" and Olga Antononoka, "Blond Is the New Japanese" as representative of media-specific considerations.
3. As I explain in the last part of this chapter, Japan's modernization took, in part, the form of a Westernization which manifested itself, among other things, in Occidentalisms; Toshio Miyake, leaning on Fernando Coronil's "Beyond Orientalism," discusses this phenomenon in "Doing Occidentalism in Contemporary Japan."

4. The Japanese manga industry privileges artists over authors; accordingly, Jillian Tamaki's name appears above Mariko Tamaki's on the cover of *Girl*.
5. Tomine's book (at a cost of ¥1,420) saw a print-run of 2,000 copies (Yamada); the Tamakis' book sold only approximately 20% of the initial print run, which stayed below 10,000 (Nagai). The book's affordable retail price of ¥800 would have required a print run of more than 10,000, according to the manga industry's rule of thumb.
6. This can be confirmed by *Billy Bat*, by cartoonist Kevin Yamagata, a rare example of a manga featuring a Japanese American protagonist, rendered in full color and thus marked as non-Japanese (Urasawa and Nagasaki 3–26).
7. 18 cm (w) × 26 cm (h).
8. The *tankōbon*—slightly different from B6, in this case 12.7 cm × 18.8 cm, and containing about 200 pages—is established globally as one of the major comics formats next to the American "comic book" and the Franco-Belgian "album." Japanese terms used in this chapter are written without 's' in their plural form. Their romanization follows the modified Hepburn system.
9. As was done for the Japanese edition of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Phototypesetting is the norm to ensure the legibility of Sinojapanese characters on shoddy magazine pages. Handwriting is avoided or allocated to the magazine margins (in book editions, it appears mainly in newly added epilogues). Hannah Miodrag asserts that "the visual apparatus categorizes typescript as narration and freehand as diary" ("Fragmented Text" 316); yet, this is not the case with manga, as *Girl* attests.
10. See also Anne Cong-Huyen and Caroline Kyungh Hong, "Teaching Asian American Graphic Narratives."
11. See Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* for a critique of the essentialism inherent in claims of an *écriture féminine*.
12. In her essay "Fragmented Text," Hannah Miodrag demonstrates that the spatial arrangement of text segments is actually part of comics' visual arsenal. For example, see the top-left corner of page 10 of *Skim*, where a framed photograph of the protagonist's parents as a couple is accompanied by two verbal segments which indicate their separation spatially and thus visually. Due to its smaller size, the Japanese edition places the two lexia one below the other and thereby reduces the connotative range.
13. See Ole Frahm's "Weird Signs" for the critique, and Jared Gardner's "Same Difference" for illuminating the critical potential of the gutter.
14. For a discussion of subculture, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, and Ken Gelder, *Subcultures*.
15. The way in which manga responded, culturally and industrially, to the Triple Disaster of March 11, 2011, was highly symptomatic in that regard; see Jaqueline Berndt, "The Intercultural Challenge of the 'Mangaesque.'"
16. As discussed by Frahm in "Weird Signs," which is not, however, referenced by Zhao.
17. See the newspaper image in the inserted panel on page 89 (2008), bottom-right corner.

18. Under the label Sanctuary Books New Comics, nine titles have been published so far, including Yumiko Shirai's *TENKEN*, the first fanzine (*dōjinshi*) manga to be given a Japan Media Arts Awards by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2007, Joan Sfar's version of *The Little Prince* (*Hoshi no ōjisama*), and several instructional manga.
19. See Fusanosuke Natsume (48–49).
20. This chapter references Japanese names in the Western order, with first name followed by surname, in order to avoid confusion, for example, related to Japanese (North) American names.
21. Incidentally, the gendered genres have engaged in various exchanges since the 1990s (Itō, "Manga no futatsu no kao" 482), a discussion beyond the confines of this chapter.
22. Both are part of the employed diary style, which, however, is not easily discernable in the Japanese edition. The appellation "Dear Diary" was removed in *Girl* as it could not be translated directly, and the crossing-out of words in the English original, which facilitates the impression of a handwritten diary, was not reproduced either, obviously due to technical conditions related to phototypesetting.
23. See, for example, the rendering of the female character Sakura in the manga series *NARUTO* by Masashi Kishimoto.
24. See Monica Chiu's essay in this collection, "A Moment Outside of Time," in which she explains how the text's diegesis supports ways in which this kiss is wholly imagined.
25. Boys' Love (BL) is the common designation in contemporary Japanese; Western fans prefer the names *shōnen'ai* (literally, love between boys) and *yaoi* (an abbreviation of *yama nashi, ochi nashi*, *imi nashi*/no climax, no punch line, no meaning). In Japan today, shōnen'ai signifies the early phase of the genre, and yaoi—also written 801 (pronounced *ya-o-i*)—is used to denote more recent fan creations as well as sexually explicit content (see Kazumi Nagaike, and Akiko Mizoguchi).
26. A webcomic by Ajiko Kojima first printed in 2006.
27. In "Shiroi heya no futari" (The pair in the white room), in *Ribon*, February 1971.
28. I am well aware that the meaning of "graphic novel" has become less emphatic, signifying simply books with more than 100 pages, which include even mainstream manga translations such as *NARUTO* (Kishimoto).
29. Whoever is familiar with discourses of "Japaneseness" related to Techno-orientalism may link this mask—which in *Skim* echoes the mimic inexpressiveness of the protagonist—to *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982): the dystopic, Asian-looking Los Angeles is furnished with, among other things, a huge advertising screen featuring a *maiko* (a "dancing girl," often mistaken for a *geisha*) with a heavily white-painted, mask-like face and an artificial, allegedly inauthentic, smile.
30. Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photograph, chromogenic print with acrylic paint and gel medium, 210.19 cm × 299.72 cm.
31. Female painter Shōen Uemura (1875–1949), for example, acquired renown by combining Noh and generic beauties (*bijin*). For a discussion of the representation of

"Japaneseness" in Japanese painting and posters in the early twentieth century, see Berndt, "Nationally Naked?"

32. See Fusami Ōgi and Kazumi Nagaike.

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Drawing New Color Lines

Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives

Edited by Monica Chiu

HKU PRESS
香港大學出版社

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

© Hong Kong University Press 2014

ISBN 978-988-8139-37-8 (*Hardback*)
ISBN 978-988-8139-38-5 (*Paperback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by XXXX in Hong Kong, China

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