

Breaking Barriers: Moving Beyond Orientalism in Comics Studies

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Abstract Because the field of comics studies is still relatively new, critique of the rhetoric used by luminaries such as Scott McCloud and Paul Gravett pushes the study of comics closer to legitimation. Taking as my premise the assumption that criticism affects the development of its object of critique, I argue that Orientalism in the discourse of comics studies has been detrimental to the evolution of comics in the US. Orientalist rhetoric inscribes and partitions the East from the West, foreclosing the possibility of using Eastern subjects or styles in Western comics, and also presenting comics in both the US and Japan as monolithic and homogenous. If those who study US comics want to encourage further growth in their medium of study, then rather than perpetuating Orientalism, they need to recover cultural flow and the diversity of both manga and comics in the US. As critics open the door to cultural flow in their rhetoric, comics artists will be able to do the same for their techniques and subjects, learning from each other and growing the medium to reach its full potential.

Key words manga; cultural flow; Orientalism; comics

You see a photo of a businessman on a train, reading. He is dressed in a grey suit, white collared shirt, and a single colored tie. At first glance, the photo appears to be nothing special, but then you take a closer look at what he is reading. The magazine-like text in his hand is a comic book with cartoon images. How odd! A businessman reading comic books? In public? Aren't comic books supposed to be for kids? The image of the businessman reading manga (the Japanese name for comics) on the train is the first image evoked in many Western discussions of manga, including work by Schodt, Gravett, and Patten. Rhetorically, these authors use the image to differentiate the history of American comics from the history of manga, making a point about the wider audience for manga in Japan. They begin with the image to situate manga as exotic and alien, essentially different from American comics, distancing the two cultures from one another.

In fact, the distancing of American comics' history from manga history is a general trend in the rhetoric of discussions surrounding manga conducted by English speakers, from Frank Schodt's *Manga! Manga!*, to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, to Paul Gravett's *Manga*, published twenty one years after Schodt's text. As English speakers who discuss manga emphasize the diversity of the genre that is their

subject, they define manga in opposition to comics in America, in the end essentially claiming that while manga appeal to diverse audiences because they cover a variety of subjects, American comics are only superhero stories written for children.

I argue that this Orientalism, where manga are cast as the exoticized Other of American comic books, has been detrimental to the growth of comics in the US for two reasons. First, the rhetoric perpetuates a homogenous view of comics in America as being for kids, an image that led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. Second, Orientalism implies a partitioning of the two cultures, making the characteristic attributes of one culture unavailable to the other culture. In the case of manga and American comics, techniques employed and genres used in manga are cast as inaccessible to American comics artists. I propose that the Orientalist rhetoric needs to stop and cultural flow between manga and American comics needs to be recovered. In other words, that the partition, the barrier, needs to be broken down and the cultural flow between manga and American comics recovered. The stakes are economic as well as cultural. Perhaps if American comic book artists explored other genres and techniques, comics in the US would be more economically successful. Comics in the US have much to learn from manga, and the more we identify aspects of manga in opposition to Western comics, the less likely it is that US comics artists will experiment with techniques deemed essential to manga.

This article, after exploring the different Orientalist rhetorical moves used by those who discuss manga, examines how the opposition between Japanese and American comics has been detrimental to the understanding of comics in both cultures and begins to recover the cross-cultural exchange that gets eclipsed by that oppositional stance. My goal is not to tear down the burgeoning field of comics studies, but to urge its members to look critically at the distance they have created between manga and comics in the US and at how Orientalism in the rhetoric surrounding comics has limited the scope of comics in the US.

Orientalist Rhetoric

In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines his title term from three separate angles. First, he highlights the way Orientalism divorces ideas about the exotic culture from the realities of that exotic culture, that an Orientalist move deals not “with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient. . . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a ‘real’ Orient” (5). Second, he indicates that “[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination” (5). And third, that the perception of the Orient in the West is ingrained in and perpetuated by “cultural hegemony” in an effort to situate the West as superior to the East (7). Strange as it may seem, I’m less interested in the power dynamics the term usually indicates—though those dynamics could be at play when American and British academics profit from explaining Japanese culture—and more interested in the constructed, often homogenized picture Orientalism can create of both the cultures involved, a characteristic that is tied to Said’s first aspect of Orientalism.

Said claims that one who performs Orientalism “comes up against the Orient as a

European or American first, as an individual second,” that an us gets set against a them rather than a me against a him or her (11). This homogenization of both the West and East can be detrimental to both cultures as the hegemony absorbs and overshadows individual voices that do not fit its paradigm. Often, conversations about Orientalism focus on the detrimental way in which the East gets homogenized. I want to turn the tables and look at how the homogenization caused by Orientalism in comics studies has been detrimental to the view of comics in the West, particularly in the US. In this case, manga, presented from a defensive standpoint as a diverse genre, get pitted against the homogenized construction of American comic books, a construction that has been detrimental to the growth of the American comics industry. First, let us look at the Orientalist rhetoric that operates when English speakers (from both the US and Britain) discuss manga. My focus in this section is on the way that these authors, in their glorification of the diversity of manga, imply and sometimes even claim outright that comics in the US are a homogenous genre.

Schodt, whose *Manga! Manga!* was one of the first books published in America about manga, begins the Orientalist trend (with both *Manga! Manga!* and his second book, *Dreamland Japan*), homogenizing American comics both implicitly and explicitly in his effort to draw distinctions between manga and comics in the US. The homogenous construction of American comics begins implicitly as Schodt tries to differentiate manga from comics in the US. The statement, “The comic magazines—where most Japanese comics first appear—are targeted separately at boys, girls, men, and women, but all are today characterized by an increasing crossover of readership. They bear little resemblance to American comic books,” implies that American comic books do not target a diverse readership (*Manga! Manga!* 12). The fact that manga target different audiences makes them different from American comic books, implying that American comic books are not diverse in terms of their targeted readership. The homogenous view of American comic books is more explicit in Schodt’s later work, when he claims that “Japanese manga offer far more visual diversity than mainstream American comics, which are still shackled by the Greek tradition of depicting the human form and still reveal an obsession with muscled males and full-figured females” (*Dreamland Japan* 21). According to Schodt, American comics artists draw figures in only one style. While manga come across as diverse, American comics come off as homogenous, limited, and, most importantly, separate from Japanese comics.

Schodt increases this separation with claims that there is something essentially Japanese about manga—a claim that Theisen points out is characteristic of the way Japanese critics discuss manga—that only the Japanese could have produced the genre.¹ He emphasizes the essentially Japanese nature of manga by situating the art form in a long line of Japanese art dating back to before the Edo period, highlighting calligraphy specifically. “It is possible that to an extent the Japanese are predisposed to more visual forms of communication owing to their writing system. Calligraphy—still practiced in Japan—might be said to fuse drawing and writing” (Schodt, *Manga! Manga!* 25). The Japanese, unlike Americans, see drawing and writing as connected processes, therefore, according to Schodt, American comics have not enjoyed

the same success as Japanese comics. In addition, there is the idea that “Japanese art styles can bewilder Westerners” and the separation between manga and comics in the US is complete (*Manga! Manga!* 22).

So Schodt started the Orientalism and erected the barriers (ironically, some might say, given his project to introduce this foreign art form to Westerners) and others followed suit, reinforcing the separation between American and Japanese comics, and consequently reinforcing the view that comics in the US deal only with one style and subject matter. Scott McCloud, an author who has been influential, if controversial, in the field of comics studies, continues to perpetuate the barrier in *Understanding Comics*, emphasizing that “[c]omics in Japan have evolved very differently from those in the West” by separating his discussions of manga techniques from his discussion of the comics form in general (44). He even goes so far as to visually depict all the differences between comics in Japan and comics in the West in a splash page summary towards the end of the book (210). Like Schodt, he espouses the concept of the essentially Japanese nature of manga by situating the form in the lineage of Japanese art, a lineage unavailable to the West when he says that “[t]raditional Western art and literature don’t wander much. . . . But, in the East, there’s a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art” (81). He repeatedly hammers home the fact that manga are different from American comics, reinforcing the barriers that Schodt erected and closing off techniques employed in manga to comics artists in the US.

While Schodt and McCloud are the strongest perpetrators of separation of manga from American comics, many have followed their lead in drawing distinctions between the two cultural forms. In most library guides to comics, manga are segregated in their own chapter, often with introductions similar to this one from Fingeroth’s *Rough Guide to Graphic Novels*: “[a]lthough manga might resemble Western graphic novels at first glance, there are many differences that distinguish them from their Western counterparts” (246). Even Gravett, who has written books on both manga and various genres of Western comics, contributes to the barrier between Japanese and American comics in his chapter on shonen (action manga aimed at boys) by saying, “Crime-fighting costumed superheroes. . . have dominated American comic books since the 1960s. Few American superheroes have made much impact in Japan, however. . . . Japan’s unlikely champions are mostly aliens and androids” (57).

The Orientalism these kinds of statements perpetuate not only sets up a barrier between manga and comics in the US, but also, as with Said’s Orientalism, but also is based on imaginative conceptions both of the homogenous nature of American comics and of the separation of manga and comics in the US. American comics—though admittedly less full of variety than they are today—were not only superhero stories for children when Schodt and McCloud were writing. The underground comix movement of the sixties (spelled with an ‘x’ to indicate some of the more explicit adult material that those comics contained) had already happened when Schodt wrote *Manga! Manga!* in 1983, and Art Spiegelman had already won a Pulitzer Prize for *Maus* when McCloud published *Understanding Comics* in 1993. Both the examples of underground comix and of *Maus* indicate the prevalence of the genre of autobiographical comics, a

genre which used different stylistic techniques from those used in superhero comics.

Beyond the imaginative idea of a lack of genre variety in American comics, the separation enforced by these authors is fictional. In Japan in the sixties and seventies, “boys in particular were enthralled by American Heroes such as Tarzan, which were repackaged Japanese-style by the mangaka, and countless stories set in the United States invaded the market” (Koyama-Richard 138). Chip Kidd has compiled and translated some of these American influenced manga in his volume *Bat Manga!*, and Ikegami’s manga version of America’s Spider-Man, which was translated and published by Marvel in the US, ran in *Monthly Shonen Magazine* (a Japanese manga magazine featuring boys manga) in the early seventies (Bainbridge and Norris 244). Thus, Gravett’s claim that “few American superheroes have had an impact in Japan” sets up an imaginary barrier that separates Japanese from American comics unnecessarily (57).

The Orientalism that English-speaking authors perpetrate when writing about manga has resulted in two imaginary constructions that have been harmful to the conception of comics in the US. First, the barrier has separated manga from American comics, implying that the techniques and genres available to manga artists are not likewise available to comics artists in the US. Second, as Said claims Orientalism is wont to do, these authors have created a homogenous view of American comics, a view that has stunted American comics’ growth as an art form.

Effects of Orientalism

But why do these barriers matter? Can’t we just say that manga and American comics are different genres and they need to be discussed separately? That these claims are descriptive rather than prescriptive? My answer is that, yes, manga and American comics are (or at least have been) separate genres, but the rhetoric used to differentiate between them has been detrimental to American comics because it has served to perpetuate a homogenous view of American comics that has historically been harmful to their success, and it has closed off Japanese techniques and genres that comics in the US could use to become more diverse. Comics in the US have endured a long struggle for recognition as an art form and the effects of this Orientalism continue to impede their progress.

Most books about comics still begin on the defensive with the assertion that comics are not just about superheroes and for kids anymore, mostly because that view has historically been detrimental to the growth of comics as an art form and as an industry. Lopes’s statement in his introduction to *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* highlights the way in which this perception of the form as being limited and directed at children led to its downfall in the US with the establishment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954:

While readers of all ages actually enjoyed comic books, the perception in the popular imagination of comic books as a children’s medium won over the reality. And where once the comic book faced the stigma of being a danger to the youth of America, after the new code, it faced the stigma that it could not conceivably

be anything but a medium suited only for children or readers suffering from arrested development. (xi)

The Comics Code authority, developed by comics' publishers, was established to regulate explicit material in comics. By establishing the code, publishers implicitly admitted that comics were directed at kids, and by strictly regulating sexual and violent content, they lost whatever adult audience they may have had. As McCloud points out, this limiting of both audience and subject matter led to an economic downturn for comics (*Reinventing Comics* 86 – 88).

Those who discuss manga sustain this homogenous view of comics that has been detrimental to their economic and cultural success. I do not mean to suggest that these writers on manga caused the downfall of American comics, only that they have perpetuated a perception that has been harmful to comics in the US, that they have not done anything to bolster a form struggling for legitimacy and, if anything, have set that form back.

Similarly, the perception of a lack of diversity in comics in the US, a quality remarked upon by those who write about manga, has been detrimental to the economic growth of the form. I have already mentioned that, when Schodt claims that American comics are only superhero stories, he ignores the underground comix movement. What I have not mentioned is that the underground comix movement included many women artists, like Phoebe Gloeckner and Lynda Barry, whose stories fall into the autobiographical genre. Thus, by ignoring the underground comix movement, Schodt sustains the perception of comics as a masculine art form and eclipses female involvement in the history of comics. In *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud points out that this perception of comics as a male-dominated industry has prevented comics from reaching a larger audience, which would in turn lead to increased economic success (98). Again, the limited view of American comics that Orientalism maintains has not helped comics in the US reach their full potential.

Along with the homogenization, the barrier that closes off techniques and genres used in manga has been detrimental to the growth of American comics. For example, both Petersen and Schodt point out that American comics artists lag behind Japanese artists in terms of sound effects. Since Japanese versions of sound effects have remained unavailable to comics artists in the US because of the barrier between manga and American comics, US comics artists have not experimented with sound in the way the Japanese have. Such experiments with sound could increase the dimensions of expression available to American comics.

Another way that the separation of American comics artists from Japanese manga has been detrimental to American comics is in the avenue of genre. In *Graphic Novels: A Genre Guide to Comic Books, Manga, and More*, the chapter concerning romance, contains 67 entries, and only seven are for American comics. The rest are examples of manga. Comics artists in the US have not experimented with the genre because it is claimed by manga. Clearly, the US can learn about how to write romance in comics form by studying manga, but first the barrier between the two cultural forms must be broken.

Based on these effects, it seems that those who write about manga, who should have been advocates for the development of comics in the US, have actually contributed to its continued lack of success by perpetuating a homogenous view of the form. They have also made sure that that form has stayed limited by closing off possible avenues in which American comics artists can learn from manga.

Solutions: Recapturing Cultural Flow

Now that I have pointed out the problems in this Orientalist rhetoric, let me begin to propose some questions that might guide us to solutions. The barrier between American and Japanese comics needs to be dissolved. I propose that we accomplish this dissolution through an examination of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as flows between the two cultures. This entails looking at how comics in the two cultures can and have learned from one another. Such an analysis will not only serve to break down the barrier between American and Japanese comics, but also to recapture the diversity of comics in both cultures.

Appadurai, in discussing fashion, situates the origin of flow in the colonial context where “the urge to imitate the new powers” is “often integrated, for better or worse, with traditional sumptuary imperatives” from the home culture (39). The old culture and the new culture coalesce to create a new form that contains remnants of both the old and new cultures. While the current relationship between America and Japan is not a colonial one, the origins of manga mark it as one of these forms made from a combination of old and new. In its current form, manga stems from the influx of American animation during the occupation following World War II. Osamu Tezuka, referred to by many as the God of Manga, references both the Japanese tradition of scroll painting from the Edo period and the figures of Disney animation, both the old tradition and the new culture. The Disney’s influence on Tezuka is generally the only mention of America’s influence on the development of manga, the only instance of acknowledged cultural flow.

After that, the quick growth of manga that basically coincides with the demise of comics in the US under the Code, causes those who write about manga to erect their Orientalist barriers. But what about the manga versions of American properties I discussed earlier, like *Bat Manga!* and the manga version of *Spider-Man*? What effect did they have on the development of the art form? Again, these examples seem to be evidence of the cultural flow in that they take the new American property and assimilate it in an old manga form. Looking more closely at how these manga versions of American properties were received in Japan and at how they may have influenced subsequent manga seems crucial to recapturing the cultural flow of comics.

And how have manga influenced American comics artists? One of the first manga published in the United States was *Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa in 1978, which details the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima in graphic detail. It was published by the activist organization called Project Gen, who paid for its translation and distributed the book on a not-for-profit basis (Patten 25). What was the organization’s motivation for publishing a book where the US is responsible for such destruction? Did this seemingly anti-American stance (along with the graphic violence) result in the

distancing of American comics from Japanese ones? Unfortunately, there is currently little information on Project Gen and their motives, but I believe the recovery of this particular moment is also crucial to understanding cultural flow between manga and American comics.

Thankfully, recent publications have begun to consider cultural flow more thoroughly. Koyama-Richard situates manga in the context of both traditional Japanese art and American influence, and Napier considers manga and other modern Japanese cultural forms, such as anime and video games, a form of soft power. The various essays in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, a volume edited by Toni Johnson-Woods, also look at how manga has traveled around the world and how it has been influenced by that travel. This is a good trend. In order to encourage the growth of comics studies as a field, as critics, we owe it to comics as a medium to cease and desist with the Orientalist rhetoric. As we open up the door to cultural flow in our rhetoric, comics artists will be encouraged to do the same for their techniques and subjects, learning from the more successful Japanese genre and growing the medium to reach its full potential.

Note

1. See the forthcoming article “The Problem of Manga Theories as Theories of Japanese Identity.” by Nicholas A Theisen.

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