Movement and Mobility: Representing Trauma through Graphic Narratives

By Stella Oh

Introduction

In her book Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics, Hillary Chute argues that the “rich visual-verbal form of comics” is an ideal way to “represent trauma productively and ethically” (Chute 3). She analyzes the works of several female authors who narrate stories of trauma through the medium of the graphic narrative. Chute suggests that these female authors who recount their traumatic experiences “return to events to literally re-view them, and in so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight” (Chute 2). From Busan to San Francisco (2012), a collective graphic narrative produced by twenty-one students at Stanford’s Graphic Novel Project, and Mail Order Bride (2001) by Canadian writer Mark Kalesniko both perform similar acts of revisiting traumatic events. From Busan to San Francisco and Mail Order Bride narrate the stories of young women from South Korea who are trafficked as sex workers and mail-order brides to US and Canada respectively. Both graphic narratives shed light on the industry of human trafficking which represents the third largest criminal enterprise in the world with an estimated 700,000 individuals, mostly women and children who are trafficked each year.

While both works address topics dealing with the trade and traffic of South Korean women to countries in the West, they also diverge and differ. The collaborative process of undergraduate students who composed From Busan to San Francisco differs greatly from Kalesniko’s single-authored Mail Order Bride. In an interview with John Seven, Adam Johnson who heads the Stanford Graphic Novel Project along with Tom Kealy and Dan Archer, stated that students in the class base the graphic novel project on a true story that deals with issues of social justice. Students then research the story


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and engage in a graphic interpretation of the true story. Emphasizing narration and interpretation, Johnson notes “you have a duty to tell the story of others who for whatever reason can’t tell a story” since “people who have been through traumatic experiences in their lives are often the least able to speak of their experiences, and they’re the ones we need to hear from the most.” Speaking for those who are “the least able to speak of their experiences” harkens to Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” What does it mean when Western voices speak for the subaltern? How does authorship by students at an Ivy Leave institution like Stanford shape this graphic narrative? In a similar vein, how do we read the representation of Kyung in Mail Order Bride, by Mark Kalesnioko, a white male Canadian writer? What are the politics of speaking for the subaltern other? Both the students at Stanford and Kalesnioko come from positions of economic and racial privilege. In “speaking for the subaltern” to borrow a phrase from Spivak, Kalesnioko and the students at the Stanford Graphic Novel Project promote the mobility and visibility of “stories that haven’t come to people’s attention” through their narration, illustration, and circulation of those stories. Yet, it is a complicated and contested process that involves both the representation of the voices of the subaltern as well as its appropriation. These graphic narratives negotiate the complex relationship between giving voice and appropriating voice, as the female protagonists From Busan to San Francisco and Mail Order Bride are both “object[s] of looking and creator[s] of looking and sight” who struggle to “represent trauma productively and ethically” (Chute 3).

As fictional works that attempt to narrate the experiences of a racialized and sexualized Other, both From Busan to San Francisco and Mail Order Bride address what Immanuel Levinas calls “ethical optics,” an optical responsibility and optical demand of the face that is a “relation without relation” (Levinas 23). This optical demand of the face of the Other is a “relation without relation,” that is, the subject that desires to understand and know the Other yet goes beyond its relational capacity (23). According to Levinas, reciprocity is what makes this visual investment ethical. The mutual engagement between the visualizing self and the visualized Other is at the core of the ethical relationship.

Levinas’ notion of ethics as an optical demand is a useful starting point for thinking about how panel movements in comic structure can allow for ethical spectatorship. In particular, From Busan to San Francisco and Mail Order Bride reveal how movement functions as a form of ethical spectatorship that provides opportunities to rethink the processes and power relations in observation, representation and identification. The geographical movements of the protagonists from South Korea to US and Canada as well as the graphical movements of the panel arrangements provide a form of ethical optics that allow us to reconsider narratives of trauma and commodification and even be affectively moved. Depicting the surveillance of Asian female bodies as they move from South Korea to US and Canada, these texts provide a form of ethical optics that prompt us to reconsider the mobility and legibility of racialized and gendered individuals. In addition, panel configurations and spatial arrangements are used to interrogate identity and question how we come to see ourselves as subjects in relation to other subjects, ourselves, and the tools by which we measure such relations.

3 Ibid.
Transnational discourses of cartographic authority and female sexuality and domesticity are written upon the Asian female body as she moves between national borders and transnational economies. Racially and sexually marked, these bodies problematize and interrogate categories of legibility and visibility. These movements map an affective geography that addresses the procedure of mapping time, space, and trauma in the graphic narrative.

**Geographic Movements**

The specter of economic and cultural exchange between Asia and Western countries serves as the backdrop against which the movement of female bodies occurs in trafficking and mail-order bride industries. The interactions between South Korea and US and Canada reveal the implications of global capitalism and traumatic legacies of militarism and colonialism in Asia. Engaging in a visual and textual critique of the global economy that trades in feminine identity, *From Busan to San Francisco* and *Mail Order Bride* interrogate the visibility and surveillance of those who are trafficked. In both works, narratives foreground the movement of women who undergo some form of trauma and are caught up in transnational circuits of capitalism and misogynistic ideologies. Feminist scholars note the relationship between systems of capitalism and patriarchy as a partnership that works together to oppress women in capitalist societies (Val Burris 1982; Zilla Eisenstein 1999; Martha Gimenez 2009; Heidi Hartmann 1982). Patriarchy produces and perpetuates female subordination that have material base particularly in women’s labor. While artistically distinctive from each other, *From Busan to San Francisco* and *Mail Order Bride* overlap in their focus on depicting women’s labor and the complex political and economic forces that inscribe and prescribe the bodies of women as commodities for Western male scrutiny and consumption. Women who are trafficked from Asia to Western countries such as US and Canada symbolize fantasies of sexual submissiveness, seduction, as well as racial anxieties and shame that shrouds global capitalism.

*From Busan to San Francisco* narrates the story of Mido who during her first year as a student at Busan University in South Korea responds to a job ad for a hostess position in a Korean bar in the United States. Seeking to rise from a life of poverty and credit card debts, she falls victim to false promises of riches and is trafficked to Mexico, then Koreatown Los Angeles, and later to San Francisco. The dedication page of the narrative states that “*From Busan to San Francisco* was inspired by the feature story ‘Diary of a Sex Slave’” by Meredith May that was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2006. The story chronicled the experiences of You Mi Kim, a young woman who was trafficked from South Korea to San Francisco. In the fictional recounting of this narrative, the students at Stanford Graphic Novel Project depict Mido undergoing strict surveillance by her smugglers and pimps as she travels from South Korea to Mexico and to the United States. Peering out of the car window as she crosses the US—Mexico border, Mido sees the chain linked fences that not only separate Mexico from the US, but also foreshadows her own entrapment in the sex trade. There is ironic interplay between Mido’s assumed mobility as she crosses national borders and her lack of real mobility as indicated by the barbed fences that enclose the panel around her. As she traverses between national borders, Mido is scrutinized under the gaze of border

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4 Scott McCloud identifies comics as a temporal map. According to McCloud, all comics necessarily involve drawing a map of time. Hilary Chute notes that “comics is a procedure of mapping: mapping time into space” (Chute, 191).
patrol agents as well as her smuggler. In one particular panel, the words “United States Customs” is prominently highlighted as Mido’s smuggler peers at her through the back mirror of the car (figure 1). In the six panel sequences that follow, the face of a male border patrol agent is captured at various angels looking at Mido. While the smuggler and the border patrol agent are featured looking directly at Mido, she is depicted with her back turned or looking passively sideways, tears rolling down her face.

This panel in which Mido is under strict surveillance is contrasted with one in which we see a close-up of Mido’s frontal face. Positioned as layers upon the larger panel of her face are smaller panels portraying border crossings, border patrol guards, guard dogs, and her smuggler (figure 2). Mido’s varying angles of vision signal to her struggles against the immobilizing surveillance that surrounds her and the vexed
relationship between how she sees and how she is seen by others, namely male smugglers, border patrol agents, and her customers.

Kalesniko’s *Mail Order Bride* recounts the story of Kyung Rin Seo who comes from South Korea to Canada as the mail-order bride of Monty Wheeler, a middle-aged white man who is an avid collector of Asian pornography, comics, and toys. While mail-order brides are usually from countries in the global south migrating to countries in the global north for better economic opportunities, they are still considered by many
as selling themselves. Re-conceptualizing how we think about human trafficking, Grace Chang and Kathleen Kim also argue for a definition of human trafficking “within a broader framework of labor migration, human rights, women’s rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, and globalization” so as to identify “trafficking as coerced migration or exploitation of migrant workers for all forms of labor, including a broad spectrum of work often performed by migrants, such as manufacturing, agriculture, construction, service work, servile marriage and sex work” (6). The sex trade and mail-order bride industries in From Busan to San Francisco and Mail Order Bride are just some representations of real-life commodifications embedded in and enabled by globalization such as surrogacy in India and other developing nations and black-market organ transplantations.

Alluding to the market economy that trades female bodies, Kalesniko intersperses visual ads for mail-order brides throughout his graphic narrative. Ads such as “Asian Sex Secrets” appeal to the desires of white men and the ideology of the submissive “Pink Lotus.” Boasting that they can connect Canadian men with “Traditional Girls From Japan! Korea! China! Vietnam! Philippines! Thailand!” who are “Hardworking, Loyal, Obedient, Cute, Exotic, Domestic Simple Girls,” these ads influence Monty’s racialized and gendered expectations of Kyung, his mail-order bride (Kalesniko 8). The panel that frames the “Asian Sex Secrets” ad takes up half the page. Below the ad are two smaller horizontal panels that feature close-up shots of the faces of two Asian women who we presume one can obtain through this company. The next page features a close-up shot of Kyung in a similar horizontal panel as the previous two women from the “Asian Sex Secrets” ad. The close-up of Kyung’s face is followed by a medium shot of her face and neck. This scene is then followed by Monty holding a photograph of Kyung. Just as the images of the two women in the “Asian Sex Secrets” ad were not real women but photographs used to advertise the match making company, we realize that what we are seeing is not Kyung, but a photographic representation of her.

Photographs are the product of specific and significant alterations of reality; as such, critical discussions of photography raise questions regarding the relations of power and the social practices within which photographs are taken. Photographs have historically been used as visual media to control identities and movements of people, particularly Asian female immigrants to the US. Photographs used as forms of recording and surveillance bore direct effects on social and material bodies and promoted the circulation of negative sexualized stereotypes of Asian women as promiscuous, sexually deviant, and a threat to American health and family. Sexualized stereotypes of Asian women were constructed through American immigration policy and practices wherein their bodies were scrutinized and placed under panoptic surveillance.

Photographic images of Kyung and the women in the ads for mail-order brides mirror the iconic stereotypical image of the sexualized Asian woman, epitomized by the

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character of Suzie Wong in the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong*. Suzie Wong is an Asian sex worker in Hong Kong who falls in love and is rescued by Robert Lomax, a white expatriate Westerner. Like Suzie Wong, the female protagonists in *From Busan to San Francisco* and *Mail Order Bride* are rescued by white men who fetishize them as objects of desire and consumption. Whereas Asian women immigrating to the US during the nineteenth century were presumed as sexually deviant prostitutes outside the margins of American society and wholly unassimilable, Mido and Kyung are seen as victims of sex trafficking who are redeemed by white men and amendable to Western assimilation and domestication. The characters of Mido and Kyung echo the Suzie Wong stereotype that developed in tandem with immigration reforms of the mid-twentieth century that emphasized marriage and domestication of Asian women to US servicemen. With the ushering of the War Brides Act of 1945, the Asian female immigrant moves from being an object of scrutiny deemed as a moral and sexual threat to the American family and way of life to a submissive and obedient spectacle, a “sexual model minority for consumption, study, and emulation” (Chang 331). Stewart Chang argues that in contrast to the nineteenth century policy of excluding Asian women from national borders, in the twentieth century “the alien prostitute evolved into the sympathetic subject of rescue, inclusion, and assimilation. In its most recent permutation the trope of the hooker with a heart of gold who can be redeemed and assimilated” has resurfaced with the T-visa under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 (Chang 304). This new narrative script of the rescued Asian woman from the sex trade and her native culture and country promoted conservative norms regarding female sexuality and domesticity.

In *Mail Order Bride*, such hierarchies are complicated as traditional gender roles are at times reversed between Kyung and Monty. Whereas Kyung is initially framed as submissive and quiet and Monty as the aggressor, we find Kyung to be more assertive than Monty as the narrative unfolds. Kyung berates Monty for being a coward and not standing up to the neighborhood bully and tacitly being scammed by a car dealer. It is Kyung who voices her dissatisfaction with the car dealer and gets him to sell them the car at the originally agreed price while Monty remains silent. We are told that Monty is a virgin when he marries Kyung but do not know about Kyung’s sexual history or experience. Monty’s lips are described as “very full. Very feminine. To show his weak side” (Kalesniko 131). The stereotype of the virginal, quiet, submissive Asian woman is actually performed by Monty who is ascribed several feminine traits. While naked in bed with Kyung, Monty dons an Asian mask (Kalesniko 65-67). The panels depict Monty, naked and in yellowface. In this scene, Kyung is covered with a blanket while Monty is fully naked. This is the only time we see Monty in full frontal nude. The sexualized body in this scene is Monty’s naked white male body albeit with an Asian mask (figure 3). Monty is depicted in full frontal nude, a pose commonly reserved for women. More women are depicted in full frontal nude in photography, film, and art than men, motioning to the power of the male voyeur who has historically been at the commanding end of the gaze (Berger 76-77). Monty’s male body is sexualized and feminized as he dons an Asian mask motioning to historical underpinnings of the asexualization of Asian men in America.

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Looking at the history of how Asian masculinity was underwritten in the US, we find that the hegemonic discourse of Asian masculinity was feminized and emasculated. In his seminal work, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, David Eng theorizes the histories that fashioned Asian American masculinity. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Asian male immigrants were as Eng suggests “racially castrated” (2). Eng notes that the nation-state’s sustained economic exploitation and political disenfranchisement of Asian American male immigrants “is modulated precisely through a technology of gendering not adjunct but centrally linked to processes of Asian American racial formation” (17). Asian men in America faced legal restrictions that prevented their migration, movement, and sexual relations. In addition, they were subjected to physical violence in the form of beating, lynching, and castration. Under the framework of what Edward Said has termed Orientalism, those from the East were defined in contrast to the West. If the West saw itself as powerful and strong, stereotypically masculine traits, then it rendered the East as weak and submissive, traits typically associated with the feminine. Asian men were represented as emasculated and Asian women were rendered hyper feminine. This history shaped
and continues to influence how Asian Americans’ racial identity was and continues to be produced and secured through mechanisms of gendering. Racialization and sexualization work in tandem with each other as Monty performs yellowface in the nude revealing much about his political and cultural (mis)understandings of Korean women that he desires. Yellowface which commonly refers to a theatrical convention of white actors applying makeup to look “oriental” or what is imagined to be Asian is not merely a racial performance but also a gendered act.

In comparison to Monty’s nude photos, we see Kyung in the nude only when she is photographed by Eve. Eve photographs Kyung’s naked body against the background of steel machinery in the old railroad tracks. Images of naked vulnerable Asian female bodies that we have seen throughout the novel through various sex ads and pornography are contrasted with images of Kyung’s body. Kyung’s nakedness is rendered provocatively powerful rather than submissive and meek. Although photographed in the nude, Kyung is depicted as strong and sleek, similar to the machinery with which she is photographed. These technologically transgressive images motion to the movement of Asian women from labor in low wage assembly lines of global capitalism to sexual labor in the home as mail-order brides. Stereotyped by her dexterity in the public factory and her traditional feminine nature in the private realm, the figure of the Asian female immigrant “enables the nuclear family as well as the US nation-state and the global corporation to flourish” (So 410). The performance of racialized femininity marks the Asian female as a symbol of both racial and patriarchal anxiety surrounding globalization.

Both Monty’s full frontal in yellowface and Kyung’s nude photos are performative and staged. Gender is not a natural or stable category but constructed through a series of reiterated performative acts. Both Monty and Kyung’s nude bodies perform in ways that are not governed by “punitive and regulatory social conventions” that conform to gender expectations but depict deviant sexual actors that problematize gender conventions (Butler 1988, 525). The medium of graphic narratives allows us to ironize, challenge, and re-imagine preconceived visual understandings of race and gender. Graphic narratives communicate and problematize our reliance on visually constructed categories of race and gender that normalize social behavior and expectations. As multimodal texts that braid together art and text, graphic narratives engage the reader and experiment with new ways of thinking about how identities transform, transgress, and travel.

**Graphic Movements**

The title page of From Busan to San Francisco depicts Mido laying sideways on a bed as her body is literally and figuratively etched with the landscape of her hometown Busan and the city where she is trafficked to – San Francisco. A dim silhouette of a windowpane casts a shadow over her face alluding to the multiple frames and lenses through which we see Mido in the narrative. The two-page layout that illustrates Mido’s arrival to San Francisco visually juxtaposes San Francisco with Busan, “the

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10 Eleanor Ty discusses the politics of the visible and the “hieroglyphs of race” that construct a visual protocol of Asians that includes the color and shape of the eyes as well as the phenotypical characteristics of the nose, hair, and body. See Eleanor Ty’s The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives (2004).
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streets of San Francisco remind me of the glass houses in Busan’s red-light district” (Stanford Graphic Novel Project 73-74). The background depicts the city of San Francisco with its skyline and iconic buildings that bleed across these two pages. Smaller panels depicting Los Angeles and Busan overlap the background image of San Francisco, spatially and temporally transcribing and translating Mido’s travels from Busan to Mexico, to Los Angeles, and to San Francisco. In this cityscape, all of the panels as well as the backdrop are dipped in a pale pink watercolor hue that pervades the text. There is however, a single panel that is drawn in black and white – that of Mido’s face gazing with anxiety at the urban landscapes and the economic and cultural landscapes that she has traversed. The larger images inked with pink depict Mido being watched while the smaller image in black and white illustrate Mido doing the watching.

Visual strategies employed in the graphic narrative gesture efficiently back and forth across the Pacific, mimicking the passage of geographic space as well as time. The visual narrative illustrates multiple crossings both temporal and geographical from the South Korean peninsula to North America bringing attention to the braided relationships between South Korea’s postcolonial past and the political economy of US and Canada. The panels that depict Mido’s first four nights in a motel in Tijuana are organized in a series of eighteen panels on a single page, creating the effect of cramped closed off quarters. The restrictions placed on Mido’s geographical, physical, and psychological movements are foreshadowed here.

All eighteen panels repeat the image of the motel room in which she is imprisoned until human traffickers smuggle her to the US. The last eight panels are images of the bed with Mido lying in them in different positions. The pattern of repetition in these panels has the effect of protracting time and effectively creating a sense of prolonged captivity and trauma. While Mido is transnationally mobile, she is not able to move about in the US as she is ghettoized and circumscribed within the confines of various motel rooms and beds within Los Angeles and San Francisco. The transnational movement and flow of bodies privileges certain bodies within the capitalist global economy and restricts other racialized and sexualized bodies. Recognizable within the structures of global capitalism and human trafficking are the gendered effects of geopolitical power and transnational capital.

From Busan to San Francisco explores the effects of global capitalism on women like Mido. The panels that depict Mido’s realization that she has been sold to human traffickers are composed of three long horizontal panels that stretch across the page. Here, global capitalism represented by images of receipts and credit cards Mido has run up in order to buy herself a trendy global identity is juxtaposed with her traveling to the United States. The third horizontal panel depicts the frowning face of her pimp. The bottom half of the page is an image of Mido pushed up against a door, enveloped in a dark circle. Two pairs of ghastly claws grab at her through the door, imprisoning her (Stanford Graphic Novel Project 57). Hannah Miodrag claims that what is unique to

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11 Mido’s hometown, Busan, South Korea is the city where the first brothels were established by the Japanese who invaded the Korean peninsula in 1904. In South Korea, sex work accounts for approximately 4 percent of its domestic product. In 2007 the Korean government outlawed sex tourism by Koreans as well as Korean women going abroad as sex workers. However, enforcement of this policy is weak and widespread corruption prevents this law from being effective. While women from Korea migrate to countries in North America as mail-order brides, approximately 2,000 to 3,500 mail-order brides come to South Korea each year. See Ji-Yeon Yuh’s Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America (2002).
the graphic narrative is that “spatial arrangement informs the way text reads, assisting in creating literary effects” (66). The arrangement of the top three long horizontal panels on this page breaks away from the convention of the left-to-right reading sequence. In doing so, the reader lingers longer on each horizontally thin panel feeling the full effect of shock that Mido may have experienced upon realizing that she was duped. The inter-frame space of the gutter, a crucial element for the process of “closure,” is blackened by the dark cloud that circles the last panel on this page which bleeds through to the other panels (McCloud 66-67). Interestingly, there are no page numbers in this graphic narrative giving us a sense of being lost where we are in the text as we navigate the story about Mido’s displacement in a country and culture she is not familiar with. Here, referentiality of spatial contiguity—how readers move through time and place on the page—mimic an affective identification with the female protagonist.

Although Phil, one of her regular customers, pays Mido’s debt and frees her from her work as a prostitute at the Sun Spa, she is indebted to Phil and stays as his girlfriend. Mido’s lack of mobility is further highlighted in the two-page scene in which she travels on a bus to her new work as a waitress in a restaurant. A long horizontal panel depicts Mido traveling across town on a bus. This panel overlaps small rectangular shapes representing the streets of downtown San Francisco. Miniature rectangles represent buildings and tinier shapes depict the contours of beds and sofas within the buildings. On the bottom right corner Mido’s body is divided and compartmentalized into small rectangles. While Mido’s body bleeds and blends with other rectangles in this illustrated urban map of San Francisco, her body is also trapped behind cage-like bars that are produced from the gutter spaces of the rectangles. Although Mido is in transit moving from her work at the Sun Spa to her new job as a waitress, she realizes that “maybe I’m not as free as I think I am” (Stanford Graphic Novel Project 133-134).

The intersections between the flow of capital, goods, and peoples are also echoed in Kalesniko’s Mail Order Bride. As a mail-order bride, Kyung exemplifies a booming bride market that “is evidence of how emotional and sexual relations within the larger power scheme based on economic imbalances are being commercialized” (Biemann 253). The global economy’s definition of Kyung’s identity as a submissive mail-order bride is created by capitalism and the global economy and characterized by exaggerated gender stereotypes. The image of the Asian woman as a sexualized and racialized figure is also used to censure other less subordinate women, regardless of race, as feminists. The backlash against the feminist movement and America’s nostalgia for the nuclear family contributes to the myth of Asian women as a sexual model minority. Stereotypes of Asian women as deferential and hyper-feminized geisha girls poses them against their independent and more aggressive Western counterparts. Mail-order bride businesses explicitly target this sentiment to attract potential customers marketing Asian women as ironically both exotically hyper-sexualized and subscribing to conservative ideas of hyper-domesticity (Ling 294).

Like the commodities he collects in his toy store, Monty sexually and racially objectifies Kyung as “my little ornamental” and “the prettiest doll in the store”

12 According to Scott McCloud, closure in comics functions to mentally fill the gaps between the panels. It is the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud 63). The process of closure necessarily involves active reader interpretation.
(Kalesniko 41). Kyung’s “ornamental” and oriental commodification and the impediments to her mobility are also echoed through the formal compositional strategies in the narrative. The paneling in Mail Order Bride is overcrowded creating a sense of claustrophobia to parallel Monty’s store which is packed with fetishized Hawaiian dolls, “I am horny” masks, comics, and other sexualized toys (Kalesniko 36). Such panel arrangements create visual overload and discomfort for the reader. In addition to individual panels being overcrowded with knick-knacks and toy dolls, there are multiple panels within a given page. The tabulation exceeds the usual six-panel grid, often having fourteen to eighteen panels on a single page. The fast paced movement from panel to panel creates a sense of overwhelming excess that the protagonist feels as someone in a new culture, language, and with a new husband.

Tabularity, the arrangement of panels on the page, functions as a formal compositional strategy to represent racial and gendered differences. The comic medium allows the reader to view the page in its entirety as well as through specific panels. The reader can skim over an entire page then focus in on individual panels in a non-linear manner. The reader enters the intersecting flow of the graphic narrative’s visual grammar – lines, colors, icons, panel configurations – creating meaning across the interconnections of what Thierry Groensteen calls a comics arthrology that collaboratively builds upon and supports how and what the narrative means through “relationships of position, contiguity, intensity […] as well as dynamic relationships of rhythm and interwovenness” (12). Zoom-out images of toys in the store are juxtaposed with close-up images of breasts, vagina, and hanbok and echo the commodification of the Asian female body. The compositional placement of images such as ads for mailorder brides and close-up shots of female body parts speak to a highly racialized and sexualized lens through which we see Kyung. The panel compositions put into question how discourses of racial visibility—how we read and interpret race—are reawakened and examined in contemporary graphic narratives.

While most of the panels are crowded and multiple paneling is utilized in the majority of the novel, the beginning and ending scenes are relatively bare with an average of four to five panels on a page. The beginning and ending scenes are in the present moment while the bulk of the narrative recounts Kyung’s traumatic memories of her arrival to the US and her subsequent struggles. The rhythm of the narrative shifts from the present moment when Monty and Kyung are at home to that of Kyung’s recollection of the past. As opposed to the overcrowded panels that prompt the reader to gaze quickly from panel to panel, the reader’s eyes linger longer on these beginning and ending pages with fewer panels, slowing down the reading pace as well as time. These bookend scenes that are in the present moment are almost devoid of dialogue and depict the lack of communication in Kyung and Monty’s relationship. The silence between the couple is only staccatoed by Monty screaming “Kyung!” and by images that resemble white noise. A multiplicity of black and white dots on a television screen conveys a sense that both noise and image have somehow been stifled.

*Mail Order Bride*’s narrative structure is framed by beginning and ending scenes in which Monty and Kyung sit together yet on opposite ends of the sofa looking blankly
at white noise on a television screen. The image of white noise is repeated in several close-up panels drawing our attention to them. Like the hum of white noise, there is constant vibration in the narrative. Cars are running, music is playing, and people are walking and dancing. This cacophony of sound and movement echo the drone of white noise. White noise filters into the text and gestures toward the various hum of movements that are part of the narrative. Whereas panels that frame white noise are large and horizontal, at time taking up half the page, panels that frame Kyung’s rebellion are cramped and vertical.

The overcrowding of panels and its rapid movement also signal the trauma experienced by the protagonist of Mail Order Bride. The climax of the novel in which Kyung attempts to destroy Monty’s shop and symbolically her commodification as one of his sex dolls is reflected in the rapid vertical movement of the panels. Kyung’s display of physical violence is painstakingly repeated over twenty-four pages. This “necessity of repetition [of the violent moment] which ultimately may lead to destruction” marks the traumatic moment in the narrative (Caruth 63). As Cathy Caruth notes, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Long vertical panels whose outline resembles prison bars depict Kyung breaking various objects in the toy store. The reader is prompted to move quickly from frame to frame as the violence of smashing, hitting, and throwing both objects and persons repeat over and over for more than twenty pages. The act of physically destroying the toys in Monty’s store goes against Kyung’s prescribed performance of femininity. Throughout the narrative, we see Kyung increasingly becoming more aggressive and asserting agency. Kyung’s violence gestures to the violence enacted upon the bodies of Asian women who are trafficked as well as to the history of colonial violence that contributes to the social and economic conditions that enable the trafficking of individuals.

At the end of this violent encounter, Kyung sits slumped and defeated tears streaming down her face; she decides not to leave Monty due to fears that she will not be able to economically sustain herself. This scene starkly contrasts with the earlier gendered performance of Kyung as assertive and aggressive and Monty as weak, feminine, and cowardly. Kyung’s rebellion is incomplete as she is figuratively and literally imprisoned in and by the panel frames and the weight of her socio-economic situation.

Trauma functions as a trope of fracture. There is no neat closure that ends Mail Order Bride or From Busan to San Francisco. Closure that creates what McCloud calls a “unified reality” in the comic structure is undermined by perpetual destructions and fractures in these narratives (McCloud 67). As Susan Gardner suggests, the comic’s “unique ability to represent the impossible demands of trauma, memory and narration” makes it a dynamic medium (145). Rather than the actual traumatic event, the aesthetic representations of the traumatic event as expressed through cultural practices of art and literature allow for possibilities of memory and mediation. Our acts of reading trauma are affective movements that cannot but fail. In reading, seeing, interpreting, and repeating through the medium of the graphic narrative, we interrogate social and political histories and its various traumatic ruptures. The transgressive and

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13 While all women are susceptible to domestic violence, immigrant women whose ability to remain in the country is dependent upon her spouse are further disempowered. Exploitation and economic pressures faced by those who are trafficked make it very difficult for them to be free from violent and abusive relationships. See Uma Narayan’s "Male-Order" Brides: Immigrant Women, Domestic Violence and Immigration Law” (1995).
transnational movements that are involved in *Mail Order Bride* and *From Busan to San Francisco* help us consider how graphic representations interrogate identity and prompt us to question how we come to see ourselves and others. The movement of the panel frames and the geographical and emotional movement of Kyung and Mido examine how we move and are moved.

**Works Cited**


