Review


Eleanor Ty’s edited collection Beyond the Icon: Asian American Graphic Narratives (2022) looks to the visual form of graphic narratives to unravel Asian American representation beyond stereotypical images and iconography. While comics and graphic novels have tended to rely on stereotyping as a visual shorthand, a tendency that often reinforces racist and xenophobic tropes and caricatures, Beyond the Icon advocates for graphic narrative’s potential for picturing racial power dynamics, providing counternarratives, and combating misrepresentation.

Ty situates the collection within two historical movements. First, rather than studying graphic narrative as an isolated form, she historicizes the development of the graphic novel alongside the growing field of Asian American literature. These twin trajectories not only coincide historically, following the civil rights movements of the 1960s; they also share, although are not limited to, an autobiographical impulse, a desire to make visible individual and collective experiences for aesthetic and political purposes. Second, Ty situates the volume within the contemporary realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of anti-Asian racism and violence. Again, rather than discussing this violence as an anomaly, Ty understands it as “evidence of a history of racism against Asian Americans dating back to the late nineteenth century” in which Asian Americans have been consistently excluded from the full benefits of citizenship and national belonging (2).

In addition to this historical framing, the introduction also theorizes the comics form as one that is fundamentally about perspective. Ty explores how comics’ framing devices, such as the use of panels, and its collaging of the visual and verbal might ask readers to see difference from below. Beyond the Icon highlights the heterogeneity within Asian American experiences and uncovers the intersectional interstices therein, attending to the difference that gender, sexuality, and disability make to understandings of racial, ethnic, and national identity. The collection’s deep sense of historicity and clear commitment to intersectional analysis make it a vital contribution to conversations about ethnoracial identity within comics studies. Rather than focusing narrowly on

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positive/negative representation, Ty’s volume offers a more nuanced perspective that “opens up and provides vital conversations between Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and comics studies scholars” to explore how “graphic novels offer exciting new ways of envisioning Asian Americans as multiply constituted subjects” (22).

Beyond the Icon is organized into four sections. Part 1: Retelling History focuses on graphic novels that act as counternarratives to official state histories of war and displacement. Monica Chiu’s chapter puts comics studies in conversation with visual studies to theorize how George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker’s They Called Us Enemy creates a countervisuality wherein the incarcerated Japanese Americans portrayed reclaim their right to look within the space of these American World War II concentration camps.1 Chiu analyzes the repeated imagery of barbed wire, guard towers, and latrines—visual markers that were prevalent symbols of the lack of privacy and constant surveillance that Japanese Americans experienced in the camps but were often excluded from state-sanctioned War Relocation Authority images. Chiu’s analysis of these three iconic yet underexamined images exemplifies how the visual language of comics can counter dominant narratives and picture underrepresented histories.

Part 2: Subverting Stereotypes examines how Asian American characters and creators sometimes invoke harmful stereotypes in order to “rework, rewrite, and resituate them” (Ty 5). Jeanette Roan’s chapter on the Image Comics series Bitch Planet is unique in that the series’s creative team does not feature an Asian American author or artist. The series does center a multiracial cast of women of color, however, and, according to Roan, “critiques patriarchy through an intersectional feminist lens upon a dystopian world” (68). Roan’s cross-racial analysis attends to the distinctive racialized gendering of Asian American women and Black women while also drawing out the possibilities of coalition building both within and beyond the text. Melinda Luisa de Jesús’s chapter is one of few in the collection to center a lesser-known, indie comics artist, Trinidad Escobar, whose work she reads alongside that of Malaka Gharib to explore Filipina feminist, or “Peminist,” perspectives on girlhood. Both Roan’s and De Jesús’s chapters, two of my favorites in the collection, insert Asian American women into narratives of collective resistance, subvert the model minority myth, and ground the collection in intersectional feminist approaches.

Part Three: Superheroes and Race underscores how Asian American superheroes challenge generic assumptions. Given the iconic status that Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel has, particularly now that she has entered the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Shilpa Davé’s

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1 Following the lead of many Japanese American activists and scholars, I use “concentration camp” rather than the euphemistic internment, relocation, or assembly center that was often used by the state to cover up the violent reality of the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII.
chapter offers a refreshing perspective on the Pakistani American Muslim character and the ways she “expands the idea of what brown and/or South Asian American brownness looks like in popular culture” (129). Ms. Marvel’s “focus on cultural difference,” Davé argues, “draws attention to constraints of the superhero genre to challenge systemic hierarchies related to religious and racial discrimination” (135). Both of the chapters in this section show how superhero comics are shaped not only by generic conventions but also by political and visual discourses of ethnoracial identity and national belonging.

Part Four: Ecology, Otherness, and Inclusivity is the most capacious section and points to exciting avenues of inquiry within both ethnic studies and comics studies, including ecocriticism, posthumanism, and disability studies. Ty’s own chapter exemplifies the collection’s desire to move beyond simplistic discussions of race and representation. In her analysis of Jillian Tamaki’s Boundless and Adrian Tomine’s Killing and Dying, two collections of comic vignettes that “do not always feature Asian American protagonists or issues,” Ty argues that “both works go beyond the iconic and the expected by not reacting to specific racial stereotypes, sometimes by erasing racial markers altogether” to look at various human and nonhuman “others” (160). Ty brings a feminist posthumanist perspective to the animal and environmental actors within the stories to underscore the multiply constituted nature of all subjectivities and thus deconstruct hierarchical divides: racial, anthropocentric, and otherwise.

In Beyond the Icon, Ty and her contributors analyze Asian American graphic narratives on their own terms, looking beyond the iconic images that have historically shaped popular culture. Once we look, really look, beyond the surface of those stereotypes, we cannot ignore the multifaceted realities and multiply constituted layers of Asian American subjectivities, experiences, and narratives. This type of recognition demands an intersectional approach, one that is grounded in both historicity and futurity. Thankfully, Eleanor Ty’s Beyond the Icon models just that.

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