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LAYERS OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN
JAPANESE POP CULTURE

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 7 – AUTUMN 2019

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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LAYERS OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN
JAPANESE POP CULTURE

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Gaijin Mangaka:

The boundary violating impulse of Japanised “art-comics”

Ana Matilde DE SOUSA | Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the artistic strategies of Japanised visual artists by examining the emerging movement of manga-influenced international “art comics”—an umbrella term for avant-garde/experimental graphic narratives. As a case study, I take the special issue of the anthology š! #25 ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ (July 2016), published by Latvian comics publisher kuš! and co-edited by Berliac, an Argentinian neo-gekiga comics artist. I begin by analysing four contributions in ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ to exemplify the diversity of approaches in the book, influenced by a variety of manga genres like gekiga, shōjo, and josei manga. This analysis serves as a primer for a more general discussion regarding the Japanisation of twenty-first-century art, resulting from the coming of age of millennials who grew up consuming pop culture “made in Japan”. I address the issue of cultural appropriation regarding Japanised art, which comes up even on the margins of hegemonic culture industries, as well as Berliac’s view of ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ as a transcultural phenomenon. I also insert ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ within a broader contemporary tendency for using “mangaesque” elements in Western “high art”, starting with Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno’s No Ghost Just a Shell. The fact that the link to Japanese pop culture in ‘Gaijin Mangaka’ and other Japanised “art comics” is often more residual, cryptic, and less programmatic than some other cases of global manga articulates a sense of internalised foreignness, embedding their stylistic struggles in an arena of clashing definitions of “high” and “low,” “modern,” “postmodern”, and “non-modern”, subcultures and negative identity.

KEYWORDS

Alternative comics; Art world; Cultural appropriation; Global manga; Japanisation; Kuš!; Millennials; Postmodernism; Transculturalism; 21st Century visual arts.

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š! #25 *Gaijin Mangaka* (July 2016) is a special issue of the celebrated pocket-sized comics anthology š!, published by the Latvian comics publisher kuš! (Fig. 1). The volume was co-edited by Poland-based Argentinian comic artist Berliac, together with David Schilter, the regular editor of kuš!, and has an introduction by British journalist and comics critic Paul Gravett (author of *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*). In the span of its 164 pages, *Gaijin Mangaka* features works by 15 contributors: Berliac (Argentina), Andrés Magán (Spain), Aseyn (France), Ben Marcus (USA), Daylen Seu (USA), Dilraj Mann (UK), GG (Canada), Gloria Rivera (USA), König Lü.Q. (Switzerland), Luis Yang (Spain), Mickey Zacchilli (USA), Nou (USA), Vincenzo Filosa (Italy), xuh (Poland), and

myself, Hetamoé (Portugal). Underlying this selection of authors is the awareness of an emerging movement of manga-influenced “art comics”. According to comics scholar and critic Pedro Moura, “art comics” is an umbrella term for a subset of alternative comics or alt-comics. These are united by an overall, if highly diversified and often situated and contextual, attitude of conflation between the mass and street-cultural field in which the medium of comics has historically thrived due to its target audience and modes of circulation, and “high” or experimental art (Moura, 2013: para. 2-3).¹ Examples of comics authors fillable under this banner include the likes of Christopher Forgues, Aidan Koch, Simon Hanselmann, Michael DeForge, Blaise Larmee, Margot Ferrick, Noel Freibert, or Leon Sadler, among many others. In this sense, the term “art comics”, while necessarily vague, ambiguous, and indeterminate, shares some similarities as an analytical handle with the “art film”, gesturing to a deviation from the conventions of the mainstream (and mainstream alternative) industry. Today, “art comics” have dedicated publishers like kuš! in Europe (since 2008) or 2dcloud in the United States, the latter founded in 2007 by artists Maggie Umber and Raighne Hogan (Morley, 2017: para. 2).²



Figure 1. š! #25 *Gaijin Mangaka*, published by kuš! in July 2016.

¹ The quotation marks in “high” will be used throughout this paper to signal that, following Andreas Huyssen, I am not alluding to any static or essentialist definitions of “high” and “low”, but to the highly contested “high art”/mass culture binary that has nevertheless been ‘a central conceptual trope and energising norm of the post-World War II period that took hold in the context of Cold War cultural politics and the explosive acceleration of consumerist and television culture’ (Huyssen, 2002: 367). Moreover, the term “art comics” does not mean to revert to any discussion on the legitimacy of comics in general as an art form, which—even though the art historical canon continues to neglect them—should by now be a settled issue. It is simply used to index a specific trend within the contemporary production of comic books.

² Umber also runs the influential Tumblr blog *Altcomics*, showcasing the variety of sensibilities, visual/narrative approaches, and bridges with contemporary art in “art comics”.

The fact that the artists in *š! #25 Gaijin Mangaka* were all born between 1980 and 1995 suggests that this demographical cohort, labelled “millennials” by researches and popular media alike, may be relevant in understanding and contextualising their works. Although narrower definitions enclose the millennials within 15 years ranging from 1981 to 1996 (Dimock, 2019: para. 5), the exact birth years vary and looser definitions describe them as “people reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century” (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). To be sure, categorising culture by “generation” is not without its contradictions, as it glosses over the many diversities of class, gender, race, nationality, and other socio-economic and political divides that factor into the creation of individual and group identity.

Moreover, most artists generally published by *kuš!* were born from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, so *Gaijin Mangaka* does not stand out much in this respect. Still, the exact coincidence of *Gaijin Mangaka* artists with millennial years becomes more significant when put against the broader backdrop of the contemporary art world. Here, the appearance of “mangaesque” (Berndt, 2014: 77–78) elements—which, in the formulation of art historian Jaqueline Berndt, comprise “the amalgam of texts, discourses, institutional contexts, and audiences that gives rise to notions of ‘manga proper’” and “including both positive and negative connotations” (Berndt & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014, 5)—and other Japanese pop-cultural references in the works of Western artists is almost exclusively the turf of millennials, i.e., artists presently in their twenties and thirties (I will address the exception of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno later in this paper). The reason for the pervasiveness of the “mangaesque” among the millennials is that they were the first group of children and adolescents outside Japan to witness the rise of Japanese pop culture to global soft power. For instance, as scholar Casey Brienza points out, manga did not significantly penetrate the American market until the late 1980s, and sales did not boom until well into the 2000s (2009: 103) when millennials came of age. As manga, anime, videogames, and other products of Japanese pop culture began to seep into Western mediatic milieus and consciousness, increasing their presence on television, bookshelves, and the Internet, the cultural influence of Japan became capable of challenging the hegemony of the United States and Europe. Series like *Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, *Pokémon*, *Naruto*, *One Piece*, and many others imprinted the taste of 1980s and 1990s children all across the globe, from North and South America to Europe and Africa, brought together on an unprecedented scale by the Internet and social media.

In this sense, millennial fans of Japanese pop culture illustrate the latest stage of what media theorist Iwabuchi Kōichi calls the “shifting meanings of Japanization from colonial contact zone to domestic indigenization to exportable glocalization” (GARAGEMCA, 2018: 34'37"), marked by the emergence of soft power discourses and Cool Japan governmental policies. That is why, as argued by Yoda Tomiko, the “J-” in “Japanese pop culture” nowadays has a significant degree of separableness from the national, indexing a global subculture of fans centred around consumer commodities like manga, anime, videogames, and so on. As Yoda puts it, “Rather than assuming that the Japanese popular culture today ultimately refers to some form of larger national frame, we may understand the prefix *J-* as inscribing the subculturation of the national” (2006: 46). This subcultural dimension of Japanisation, connecting the social and self-identities of artists who are also generationally connected, is reinforced by the introductory blurb of *Gaijin Mangaka*. It also introduces the idea that the increased accessibility of Japanese comics and animation translated into the discovery, by millennials in their early adulthood, of alternative kinds of manga circulated in magazines like *Garo* and *Ax*,³ that helped sediment and evolve their childhood interests:

Imagine a parallel dimension in which a whole generation was raised on Sailor Moon for breakfast, and Akira was the first thing they saw on the comics rack. And just when they were about to grow out of it, in the space of a decade, they were bombarded by more alternative, adult-oriented manga—what connoisseurs call Gekiga—reaffirming their love for the devices and aesthetics of the comics medium in the Land of the Rising Sun. What a bunch of freaky hybrids would result! (Schilter, Berliac, & Muizniece, 2016: 3)

The trend of manga-influenced “art comics” is in no way restricted to the artists in *Gaijin Mangaka*. As Paul Gravett points out, “They are not alone—others include Lala Albert, Julien Ceccaldi, Gabriel Corbrera, Sascha Hommer, Hellen Jo, Joe Kessler, Jonny Negron, Jillian Tamaki and Bastien Vivès to name but a few” (2016: 4). According to Gravett, this heterogeneous group of artists is “unanimous in their admiration for and inspiration from manga, but their own expressions in response are dynamically diverse and personal, and are all the stronger, and sometimes stranger, for this” (2016: 4). Indeed, a cursory look across the pages of *Gaijin Mangaka* is enough to grasp the variety of artistic approaches and influences in the volume. From the alternative comics of *Garo*

³ Founded in 1964 by Nagai Katsuichi, *Garo* was a manga magazine specialising in alternative/underground/avant-garde manga. Artists associated with *Garo* include Katsumata Susumu, Sugiura Hinako, Yamada Murasaki, Shirato Sanpei, Maruo Suehiro, Nananan Kiriko, King Terry, Tsuge Yoshiharu, Tatsumi Yoshihiro, Nekojiro and Furuya Usamaru, among various others. *Garo* published its final issue in 2002 and was succeeded by *Ax*.

to mainstream *shōjo* manga, the contributions abide by, subvert, reinterpret, parody, or otherwise manipulate and employ the categories of manga and Japanese pop culture. For a taste of such diversity, I offer a brief overview of the works in *Gaijin Mangaka*, as well as of other parts of the book, such as its cover and artist biographies.

Themes and styles in *Gaijin Mangaka*

In this section, I address the contributions of *Gaijin Mangaka* authors Berliac, Luis Yang, Nou, and Gloria Rivera. Berliac's contribution, titled "Moriyama's Dog" (12 pages), is rendered in the author's trademark neo-*gekiga* style, embedded in the *gekiga* and *seinen* traditions of alternative manga for mature audiences, popularised by Japanese comics artists like Tatsumi Yoshihiro (Fig. 2). It tells the story of an agoraphobic *mangaka* ("manga artist") in a creative slump, forced to look after the dog of his upstairs neighbour, Mr. Moriyama, who has passed away. Although reluctant at first, the *mangaka* comes to believe that the dog enabled him to overcome his writer's block and becomes obsessed with it. When the dog manages to escape the apartment, he desperately searches for it outside; only to end up brutally beat up by a gang of delinquents. Throughout the story, Berliac represents the dog as a pastiche of Moriyama Daido's 1971 photograph of a stray dog. Moriyama's iconic picture alludes to the pariah status of renegades and rebels in Japanese society (Rubinfien, 1999: para. 7), echoing Berliac's own experience as an outsider of the Argentinean comics canon for working in the language of manga. More broadly, the theme of pariahhood relates to the "foreignness" inherent to the concept of *gaijin mangaka*, which I will address in the next section.



Figure 2. Excerpt from Berliac's "Moriyama's Dog" in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

Berliac's contribution stands out in *Gaijin Mangaka* as one of the most clearly identifiable as “manga proper” (or “*gekiga* proper”). Other contributors like Yang, Nou, and Rivera, gravitate more towards the style, and deconstruction, of *shōjo* aesthetics. Luis Yang's comic “Tabako” (14 pages) is a *kokuhako* or “love confession” story in a high school setting, narrating the blossoming love between a teenage girl called Rumiko and her upperclassman, a boy called Yamada (Fig. 3). Yang makes extensive use of pastiche elements from *shōjo* manga, rendering his story in the typical black and white style of Japanese comics, with copious amounts of starry screen tones, sailor and *gakuran* school uniforms, and Japanese suffixes like *-chan* or *-senpai*. The character design is also deconstructive, parodying the commercial beautification of girl-oriented comics. For instance, Yang reduces the characters' sparkling eyes to ill-defined masses, their chins are overly long, and the linework is intentionally sketchy. Each page is divided into two panels, in which the bottom panels tell a relatively linear, clichéd love story—Rumiko-*chan* frets over Yamada-*senpai*'s request to meet on the rooftop, eventually confessing her feelings for him—and the upper ones portray a weirder, dream-like silent narrative with no dialogues. In the latter, Rumiko finds her classmates unconscious (dead?) inside the classroom, picks up a discarded cigarette from the floor, and smokes it. The juxtaposition of these timelines effectively unveils the haunting uncanniness of *shōjo* manga's reification of feelings into sentimental stock phrases and settings, that “Tabako” seems to both adore and poke fun at.



Figure 3. Excerpt from Luis Yang's “Tabako” in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

This uncanny experience is also central to Nou's “Ring Mark” (10 pages). “Ring Mark” is a wordless abstract story involving identical cute girls who are left blank or uncoloured against colourful, flat environments populated with floral motifs—a

recurring element in Nou's work, derived from her interest in botanical illustration and photography (Nou, 2016: Artist Interview: Nou, para. 4; Fig. 4). Depicted in Nou's bold *ligne claire*,⁴ the girls in the story fuse, mutate and change scales among themselves and the flowers. Sometimes they cry, but it is unclear whether this is a result of genuine emotion, or if they are overflowing with material fluxes; the fact that the tears turn to pollen, blending with the flowers, points towards the latter. Nou depicts a queer ecology where the distinction between organism and environment threatens to disappear, and the gender/sexuality of these androgynous "girls" becomes as fluid as their surroundings. "Ring Mark" is the contribution in *Gaijin Mangaka* most focused on pure formal play, rejoicing in the transformative beauty of metamorphoses represented in the medium of comics.

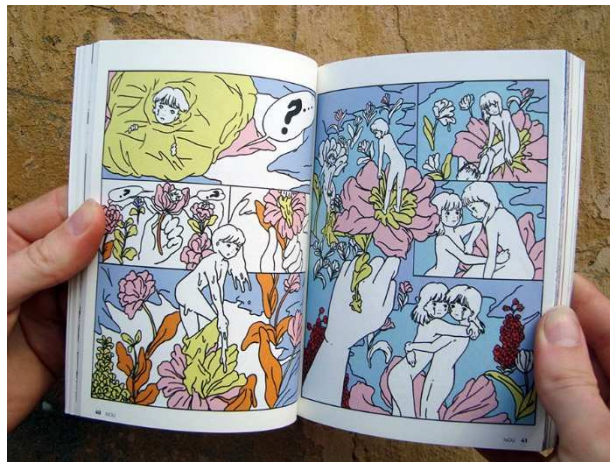


Figure 4. Excerpt from Nou's "Ring Mark" in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

In turn, Gloria Rivera's contribution "Domestic Scene" (12 pages) is about a lesbian couple and their emotionally loaded conversations about college memories, coming out, sexuality, and love (Fig. 5). Rivera renders the comic in a painterly style, whose murky ambiances in subdued pastel and brownish hues evoke the weightier subjects found in some *josei* manga (women's comics), which Rivera cites as a significant influence (Gravett, 2016: 6). The contours of Rivera's manga-style characters are sometimes barely defined, with the characters, their environment, and their words

⁴ *Ligne claire* (French for "clear line") is a term coined by Dutch graphic designer Joost Swarte to describe a drawing style pioneered by and typically identified with Franco-Belgian comics authors such as Hergé (*Les Aventures de Tintin*) and the School of Bruxelles, consisting of uniform black lines, with no hatching or ink shading. Although with roots in black and white comics from the 1920s, the *ligne claire* is often combined with bright, flat colours, as in Hergé and his collaborators' do-overs of *Tintin's* stories from the 1950s onwards (Knudde, 2019, 'Clear Line').

becoming a kind of melting patchwork, resonating with the couple's dissolving and fragile relationship. Unlike Nou's girls, who are more of a blank slate in permanent flux, Rivera's characters are burdened with personal stories and memories, seemingly embedded in the deep stratigraphy of lines and paint that gives them shape.



Figure 5. Excerpt from Gloria Rivera's "Domestic Scene" in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

Other contributions in *Gaijin Mangaka* attest to the variety within the book. Vincenzo Filosa's "Don't Touch This Gamela" is finely detailed, contrasting with the brutalism of Ben Marcus's "Fool of Memory," whose figures are heavier and more concise. "Deep Shit Honey" by Aseyn is short and sweet, like a slice of life lullaby, while Mickey Zacchili's revels in the cuteness of raw computer drawings. GG's "Lapse" is quietly meditative and sophisticated, whereas xuh's black-and-red imagery evokes the tradition of female gothic manga. Others, like Andrés Magán ("Day 57"), Dilraj Mann ("Everyday") or Daylen Seu ("Codependent Cunt"), display an array of murkier influences resulting in idiosyncratic, eclectic works. My contribution, "Trance Dream Techno," combines pictures, text, and *kaomoji* (Japanese emoticons) in a one-panel-per-page narrative; it also includes an *omake* ("extra"), playing with the popular *yonkoma* ("four-panel") format (Fig. 6). As one reviewer points out, because the artists' engagement with the languages of manga varies greatly, *Gaijin Mangaka* demonstrates, if anything, "the futility of taking 'manga' to mean anything other than a comic produced in Japan" (Hennum, 2016: para. 7). But, in today's global market, even such clear-cut definitions are fated to be quickly troubled (Brienza, 2015a: 106).



Figure 6. Excerpt from Hetamoé's "Trance Dream Techno" in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

The inherent difficulties of tackling a global "Japanese" pop culture lends a tongue-in-cheek undertone to Berliac's cover for *Gaijin Mangaka* (Fig. 7). The cover features a collage of stereotypical Cool Japan elements, from *maneki-neko* and origami to noodles and schoolgirls, from *kinbaku* bondage to manga mascots and *ukiyo-e*, among other recognisable icons of Japaneseness. On the inside, however, there is no such nation branding, but a more diluted, diverse, and sometimes cryptic approach to Japanese comics. The diversity of influences is evident in the authors' bios at the end of *Gaijin Mangaka*, where contributors were asked what their favourite manga is (Fig. 8). The responses range from beloved hits like *Ranma ½* and *Captain Tsubasa* to cult classics like *Akira* and other works by Ōtomo Katsuhiro (*Speed*, *Domu*). From interwar manga like *Norakuro* to horror masters like Itō Junji (*Tomie*). From "golden age" *shōnen-ai* by Hagio Moto (*Thomas no Shinzō*, or *The Heart of Thomas*) to psychological *josei* manga by Okazaki Kyōko (*River's Edge*). From light-hearted comedies like *Yotsuba&!* to underground comics by authors of *Garō* fame like Tsuge Tadao (*Burai Heya*), Tsuge Yoshiharu (*Muno no Hito*), and Hayashi Seiichi (*Sekishoku Erejii*, or *Red Coloured Elegy*). And *seinen* manga ranging from Matsumoto Taiyō's slice of life drama *Sunny* to Urasawa Naoki's sci-fi thriller *Nijūseiki Shōnen* (*20th Century Boys*), or Sonoda Ken'ichi's action-packed *Gunsmith Cats*.



Figure 7. Berliac's cover and backcover for *Gaijin Mangaka*.

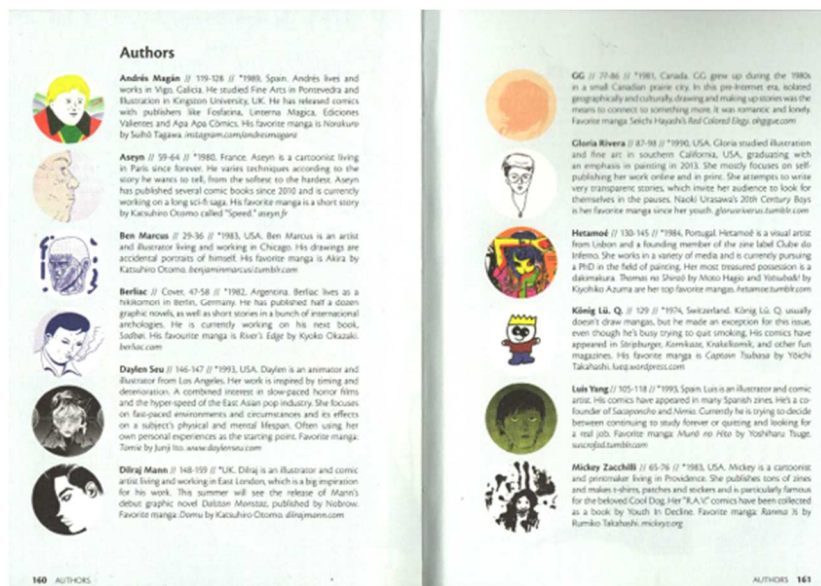


Figure 8. Artists' bios in in *Gaijin Mangaka*.

This kaleidoscope of influences and the examples of contributions presented above reveal that, not only are the artists in *Gaijin Mangaka* not detached observers of Japanese pop culture but that they bring their familiarity with both mainstream and alternative manga into the field of “art comics” in a variety of expressions. This mixture poses important if complex questions concerning authenticity and artistic purity in a globalised age when the parameters of cultural membership are potentially more fluid but also more gatekept than ever. In the next section, I address the issue of manga appropriation in *Gaijin Mangaka* and argue that it manifests, and is aligned with, the “boundary-violating impulse” of “art comics”.

Gaijin Mangaka, appropriation, and transculturalism

According to scholar Casey Brienza, the term “global manga” describes “a medium which has incorporated requisite cultural meanings and practices from Japanese manga but does not otherwise require any Japanese individual or collective entity in a material, productive capacity” (Brienza, 2015b: 5). In the context of global manga, Manfra (French manga), Euromanga (European manga), Amerimanga (American manga), and original English-language (OEL) tend to emulate the stereotypical style of mainstream *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga or negotiate a stylistic middle ground with Western indie comics. Other movements, like Nouvelle Manga, have joined artists from Europe (Frédéric Boilet, Vanyda) and Japan (Taniguchi Jirō, Nananan Kiriko, Hanawa Kazuichi), combining *bande dessinée* with “realistic” manga. Frédéric Boilet’s *L’épinard de Yukiko* (2002) and Vanyda’s *L’Immeuble d’en Face* (2005) are two of the most celebrated non-Japanese works of Nouvelle Manga, while examples of OEL manga include Adam Warren’s *The Dirty Pair* (1988–2002) or Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon* (2005–2007) (Chmakova, 2017). The title *Gaijin Mangaka* thus carries an irony considering that what is typically associated with the expression “foreign comics creators” are global manga movements such as these—not the field of experimental comics. Nevertheless, what these various expressions have in common is the “appropriation” (between quotation marks, for reasons I will discuss shortly) of the language and culture of Japanese comics, in various senses and to different degrees.

The appropriation of culture, or “cultural appropriation”, can refer to a diverse set of phenomena that bring into play issues of “*misrepresentation, misuse, and theft* of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized” (Matthes, 2016: 343). When applied to artworks, this often translates into the “use of artistic styles distinctive of cultural groups by non-members” (Matthes, 2016: 343). In the 2010s, the term “cultural appropriation” took on a life of its own in the social media, as part of the broader fourth-wave social justice movement and hashtag activism. While accusations of cultural appropriation tend to target the mainstream culture industry (Asega *et al.*, 2017), alternative or underground art is also not immune. Figure 9 shows a screenshot of a *Tumblr* user asking kuš!, the publisher of *Gaijin Mangaka*, the following question: “do you not think that Japanese people are going to find ‘gaijin mangaka’ deeply lame at least and a bit offensive at most? I love all of your other books but am finding this a bit gross” [sic] (stomachbees, 2016).

The back-and-forth that followed among the editors of *kuš!*, co-editor Berliac, and the asker, illustrates how tense the debate around cultural appropriation can become even on the margins of mainstream culture industries, as is the niche of “art comics” (Fig. 10).

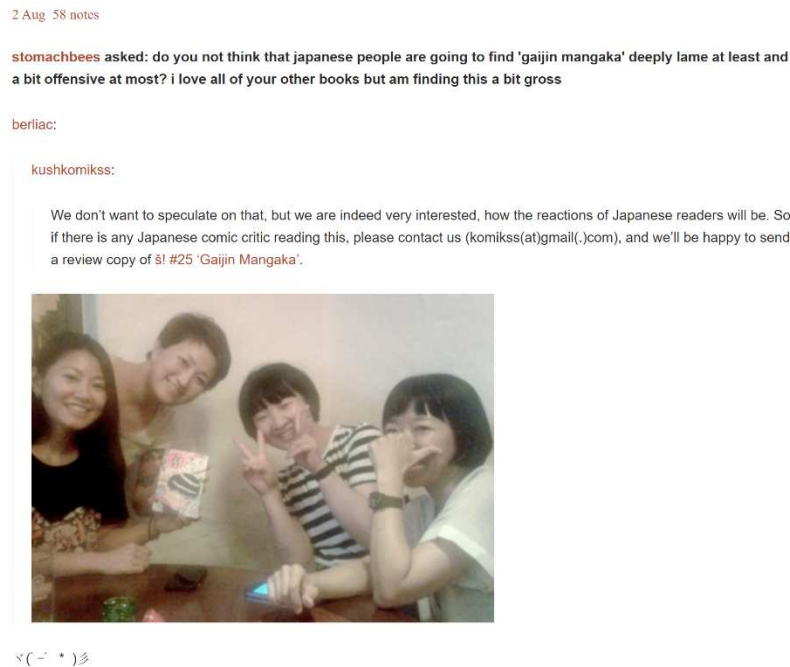


Figure 9. Screenshot of *kuš!* replying to *Tumblr* user *stomachbees*: “We don’t want to speculate on that, but we are indeed very interested, how the reactions of Japanese readers will be. So if there is any Japanese comic critic reading this, please contact us, and we’ll be happy to send a review copy of *š!* #25 *Gaijin Mangaka*.”



Figure 10. Screenshot of the back-and-forth between *Tumblr* user *stomachbees*, *Gaijin Mangaka* co-editor Berliac and *kuš!*.

Cultural appropriation in art is a thorny issue which, ideally, involves acknowledging and balancing the “appropriative harms” (Matthes, 2016: 346) of artworks while avoiding the trappings of cultural essentialism—that is, separating cultural insiders and outsiders on the basis of “criteria [that] construct ‘essential’ or ‘necessary’ boundaries with the propensity to falsely represent cultures as homogeneous, static, and monolithic” (Matthes, 2016: 355). In the case of manga, gatekeeping cultural membership based on the artists being or not being Japanese entails the “construction of Japan as an authentically discrete, ethno-racial category” (Brienza, 2015a: 97), particularly problematic as it resonates eerily with the country’s own nationalist myths of ethnic, racial, and cultural homogeneity. Indeed, various scholars and artists have pointed out that this manner of thinking risks replicating the logic of ownership and domination underlying the very power structures it seeks to resist (Asega *et al.*, 2017: 2, 10; Matthes, 2016: 346). Moreover, as Iwabuchi Kōichi puts it, articulating “Japan” and “West” in binary terms presupposes that exchanges take place between two stabilized units, which “not only homogenizes the two cultural entities but also directs our attention away from the doubleness of the Japanese (post) colonial experience as a non-Western colonizer” (2002: p. 61). The latter troubles the straightforward assigning of Japan’s position to that of a dominated or marginalized subject.

Also, it is well known that manga itself is “not stylistically or culturally ‘pure’ and free of non-Japanese influence” (Brienza, 2015a: 109), but the product of a long process of cultural cross-pollination in a globalised market. Scholars like Iwabuchi have challenged the “Japaneseness” of manga and anime through the concept of *mukokuseki*—“stateless” or “culturally odourless” commodities. In Iwabuchi’s view, although anime characters may speak Japanese, attend *matsuri*, or sleep on *tatami*, their appearance and the worlds they inhabit are fundamentally “expressing non-nationality” (2002: 105), constructing “an animated, race-less and culture-less, virtual version of ‘Japan’” (2002: 33). Indeed, as Iwabuchi explains, the term *mukokuseki* was coined in the early 1960s to describe a series of Japanese parodies of Hollywood Westerns with a Japanese gunman (2002: 215), thus alluding to a product that manifests, more than anything, the “impurity” of such commodity forms. Moreover, Japanese pop culture has been actively deployed by the Japanese government as a form of soft power in nation branding campaigns like Cool Japan (Iwabuchi, “Pop-Culture”: 422–27), exploiting a nationalist euphoria for its distinctive “Japaneseness” (Iwabuchi, 2002: 30–31) in a globalised landscape more and more marked

by the rise of other non-Western cultural industries (Iwabuchi, 2002: 48) in the Global South and East Asia.

Lastly, if one considers that, as argued by scholars like Neil Cohn, manga is a visual language (Cohn & Ehly, 2016: p. 17), learning its styles and conventions would be akin to learning how to speak and write Japanese, or any other language. Against this backdrop, it becomes exceptionally hard to pinpoint how manga can be “misused” or “stolen.” If there is a criterion for belonging to manga culture, it should not be an ethno-racial one, but that manga “belongs” to anyone who participates in manga culture to whatever degree as an artist, fan, critic, publisher, researcher, or educator, independently of their nationality. As such, for Berliac, *Gaijin Mangaka* is more adequately described by the term “transcultural.” As he puts it,

calling some of the artists in this issue “Hybrids” is, in my opinion, a bit euphemistic. To me they seem more like artistically torn, schizoid... two or more artistic personalities at war with each other. “I wanna do this, but without quitting this.” And that’s great, that’s what makes their work so interesting and unique... They make these stylistic struggles an artistic asset. (Berliac & Schilter, 2016: para. 21)

The concepts of transculturalism and multiculturalism take on different meanings depending on the context. Berliac’s emphasis on the “stylistic struggles” of *gaijin mangaka* aligns with Jeff Lewis’s definition of “transculturalism [that] acknowledges the instability of all cultural formations, discourses and meaning-making processes” (2002: 437), highlighting a permanent negotiation of consonances and dissonances resulting from the lived experience of cross-cultural contamination. According to Lewis, this “may be good, bad or both” (2002: 137), depending on its implementation. Generally speaking, transculturalism appeals to critics of two central multiculturalist metaphors: the “salad bowl” metaphor where cultures mix but do not blend (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2012: 109) and the alternate “melting pot” theory of cultural homogenization. In Berliac’s view, the works in *Gaijin Mangaka* represent a third-way alternative to both global manga that seeks to become “authentic” by erasing its non-Japaneseness and a multiculturalist hybridization aligned with the values of global free-market capitalism (2017: para. 6). In contrast, *Gaijin Mangaka* strikes a perilous position in which the tension between the Japanese and the Japanised, the insider and the outsider, is neither resolved nor eliminated, but evolved into a messier form of artistic expression.

Japanised Western “art comics” and contemporary art

What innervates the “stylistic struggles” in *Gaijin Mangaka* and other Japanised “art comics” from authors such as Lala Albert, Julien Ceccaldi, or Jonny Negron, is their filiation within a broader trend of non-Japanese contemporary art incorporating Japanese pop-cultural elements alongside other twenty-first century aesthetic novelties, like digital and Internet aesthetics. Nichole Shinn’s *Kiss Me* is an excellent example of this fusion, an artist’s book consisting of digital collages created from sets of virtual “paper dolls,” called Kisekae Set System or KiSS, prevalent in otaku fan communities during the Internet’s early years (Shinn, 2016: final insert; Fig. 11). Those same associations are present in the paintings, drawings, and videos of artists like Jon Rafman, Michael Pybus, Sven Loven, Lauren Elder, Rachael Milton, Sua Yoo, Yannick Val Gesto, or Bill Hayden, among others, in whose work the references to Japanese comics, animation, fandoms, and videogames emerge organically as part of their broader millennial identity (Fig. 12). Another example is the recent collaborative project *Still Be Here* by musician Laurel Halo, artist Mari Matsutoya, digital artists Martin Sulzer and LaTurbo Avedon, and choreographer Darren Johnson, a media performance and installation featuring the Japanese cybercelebrity Hatsune Miku, commissioned by the Transmediale/CTM Festival and first presented at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2016.



Figure 11. Excerpt from Nichole Shinn’s artist’s book *Kiss Me*.



Figure 12. Example of a contemporary painting referencing the "mangaesque." Sven Loven, *Augury*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 71 x 58 cm.

Historically, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002)—the title is a pun on the iconic 1995 cyberpunk anime film *Ghost in the Shell*—was the first Western artworld project to employ “mangaesque” visuals, 20 years ago, even though its *modus operandi* does not precisely align with that of *Gaijin Mangaka* or the above-mentioned artists. French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno acquired the legal rights to a manga character called Annlee, and each produced an individual piece starring her: Parreno's *Anywhere Out of the World*, in 2000, and Huyghe's *One Million Kingdoms*, in 2001. They also commissioned others to use Annlee free of charge, gathering an impressive array of artists including Henri Barande, Francois Curlet, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Joseph with Mehdi Belhaj-Kacem, M/M, Melik Ohanian, Richard Phillips, Joe Scanlan, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Anna-Léna Vaney. Notwithstanding the groundbreaking and artistic value of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, to some extent, it illustrates an outsider mentality that externalises the viewer from Japanese pop culture. Huyghe and Parreno essentially propose to rescue Annlee from the Japanese mass-cultural environment, where, according to them, she would fade away and disappear, by entrusting her to the more capable hands of Western “high art”.

This outsidersness is unsurprising, given that Huyghe and Parreno (born in 1962 and 1964) belong to a generation that, unlike the millennials, was not extensively exposed to anime and manga. Arguably, instead of a taste for Japanese animation per se, *No Ghost Just a Shell* stems from the artists' interest in the late 1990s zeitgeist, marked by the fascination

with digitality, Japan, and anime. At the time, it was erupting everywhere in pop culture, from Wamdue Project's "King of My Castle" music video, which was also composed of *Ghost in the Shell* footage, to Playstation's famous "alien girl" commercial in 1999, that resembles Parreno's alienesque restyling of Annlee in *Anywhere Out of the World*. However, even now this externalising discourse continues to be reproduced, for instance, in Haus der Kulturen der Welt's promotional blurb for *Still Be Here*, although it does not seem to reflect the thoughts and opinions of the artists' involved (Jones, 2017). In the blurb,⁵ the phrasing attributes special deconstructive abilities to the Western "high art" performance while seemingly erasing a decade's worth of deconstruction, transgression, and appropriation of Hatsune Miku by the Japanese fan community.

On the other hand, Japanised Western "art comics" and contemporary art differ from the incorporation of manga and anime visuals by Murakami Takashi, Nara Yoshitomo, and other Japanese artists associated with the Superflat and Neo-Pop movements, from which the element of "gaijiness" (foreignness in relation to Japan) is naturally absent. Moreover, while the negative identity of being not-Japanese is a defining element for artists practising what Casey Brienza calls "manga without Japan" (2015b: 1), an additional layer of negativity is at stake when Western "high art" references Japanese pop culture. In the West, twentieth-century modernism was shaped by what art and literary critic Andreas Huyssen famously called "the Great Divide" (1987: viii) between "high art" and mass culture. Emerging in nineteenth-century Europe, this divide was not only challenged and destabilized as soon as it surfaced—by the historical avant-garde and postmodernism from the 1960s onwards—but rests on hypocritically "insisting on the divide while time and time again violating that categorical separation in practice" (Huyssen, 2002: 367). Regardless, as Huyssen points out, "the opposition between modernism and mass culture has remained amazingly resilient over the decades" (1987, xvii), to the point that today's artists, critics, and institutions continue to struggle and shape their practices in relation, and opposition, to that paradigm.

⁵ The blurb reads as follows: "*Still Be Here* explores Hatsune Miku as the crystallisation of collective desires, embodied in the form of a teal-haired virtual idol, forever 16. In watching the deconstruction of this perfect star, the audience comes to the uncanny realisation that Miku is simply an empty vessel onto which we project our own various fantasies. In this void, the topology of desire within a networked community becomes tangible and Miku becomes an allegory of the commodified female body as governed by corporate regulation and normative social etiquette. The performance critically deconstructs this body and speculates on opportunities to transgress it through means of appropriation" (*Still Be Here*, 2016).

Japan occupies a particular position in this respect, as the country became a sort of postmodern symbol, both in the eyes of the West and domestically. For instance, Roland Barthes memorably called Japan the *Empire of Signs* (1970), while Alexandre Kojève, in a famous 1968 footnote to *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, claims that Japan is a “totally formalised” society whose encounter with the West will “lead not to a rebarbarization of the Japanese but to a ‘Japanization’ of the Westerners” (1980: 162). Murakami Takashi’s “The Super Flat Manifesto” also taps into such portrayals of depthless Japan by Western philosophers, opening with a promise-threat that “The world of the future might be like Japan is today—super flat” (2000: 5). This line echoes both the techno-orientalist dystopias of science fiction films like *Blade Runner*, in which Japan appears “as an almost comforting figure of danger and promise” (Ivy, 1988: 21), and the country’s “complicit exoticism” (Iwabuchi, 1994) in the construction and commodification of Japaneseness—not least *postmodern* Japaneseness, or the Japaneseness of postmodernity. Indeed, according to anthropologist Marilyn Ivy, “postmodernism” itself became a widely circulated informational commodity in 1980s Japan, propelled by the boom of “new academicians” or “postacademicians” like *Structure and Power* (1983) author Akira Asada (1988: 26–33). The popularity of postmodernism in Japan implicitly celebrated “the nation’s triumph over modernity and over history”, from which the country had been denied “a full-fledged subject position and historical agency” (Yoda, 2006: 34).

Going back to *Gaijin Mangaka*, even if (as argued in the previous section) manga cannot be culturally appropriated, paradoxically, the adoption of “mangaesque” elements in “art comics” still does, in my view, indicate a “boundary-violating impulse” (Iwabuchi, 2002: 17) in which the transgression of ethno-racial and national boundaries overlaps with an avant-gardist or experimental ethos. Because “art comics” in general tend not to stick to the conventions of mainstream comics, Japanese or otherwise, most of the works in *Gaijin Mangaka* have more intricate or subtle links to the “mangaesque” than a typical work of Euromanga or OEL manga. In conflating with notions of “high” (i.e., experimental, avant-garde, arthouse, etc.) art, “art comics” necessarily engage with the historical “baggage” of contestation that this category carries. As such, while manga and anime may generally operate as *mukokuseki* commodities in globalised mass culture, concerning the modernist “anxiety of contamination” (Huyssen, 1987: vii) that shaped and continues to shape definitions of “high” and “low”, they remain the Other of taste and the West. Especially so, given that Japan was posed and posed itself as a postmodern antidote to Western history

and modernity. Much like Pop Art in the 1960s, Japanese pop culture in the West today has become—along with digital aesthetics, Internet culture, and 1990s and 2000s subcultural trends, which often appear mixed in artworks—a “synonym for the new lifestyle of the younger generation” (Huyssen, 1987:141). Japanised millennial artists adopt a negative identity towards Western modernism by identifying instead with the postmodernity or “modernity of the geographically ‘non-modern’” (Huyssen, 2002: 364). Moreover, the statelessness or odourlessness of much Japanese pop culture renders these cultural commodities even more menacing by disavowing a superficial inscription in the continuum of traditional, reassuring Japan. A menace that, for instance, Murakami Takashi, in view of maximising Superflat’s entrance into the Western art market, attempted to mitigate by inserting Superflat into a lineage of “eccentric” Japanese artists from the Edo period (Murakami, 2000: 9–15).

In Kristevian terms, one may say that the works in *Gaijin Mangaka* and other Japanised “art comics”, because of their insiderness to “high art”, somewhat apart from other expressions of global manga, engage more powerfully with the ‘inside/outside boundary, and... the threat [that] comes no longer from the outside but from within’ (Kristeva, 1982: 114). In other words, such works problematise, in multiple or even contradictory ways, the phantasmal leakage of linguistically and geographically contained Japaneseness into the Western consciousness and art canon. They, therefore, replace the pacifying and cooptable discourse of hybridism (Iwabuchi, 2002: 219; Shohat & Stam, 2013: 43) with an abject phenomeno-poetics of internalised foreignness. That is why, for Berliac, the *gaijin* in *Gaijin Mangaka* must be de-essentialised from its national frame:

Gaijin (“foreign”) Mangaka (such as the artists in *š!* #25), are not such for the country they were born in, but rather in a broader, philosophical and artistic sense: they don’t feel at home in their own bodies of work, therefore they’re always in transition, always walking the thin line of “not this/not that” and “this and simultaneously that”. (Berliac, 2017: para. 6)

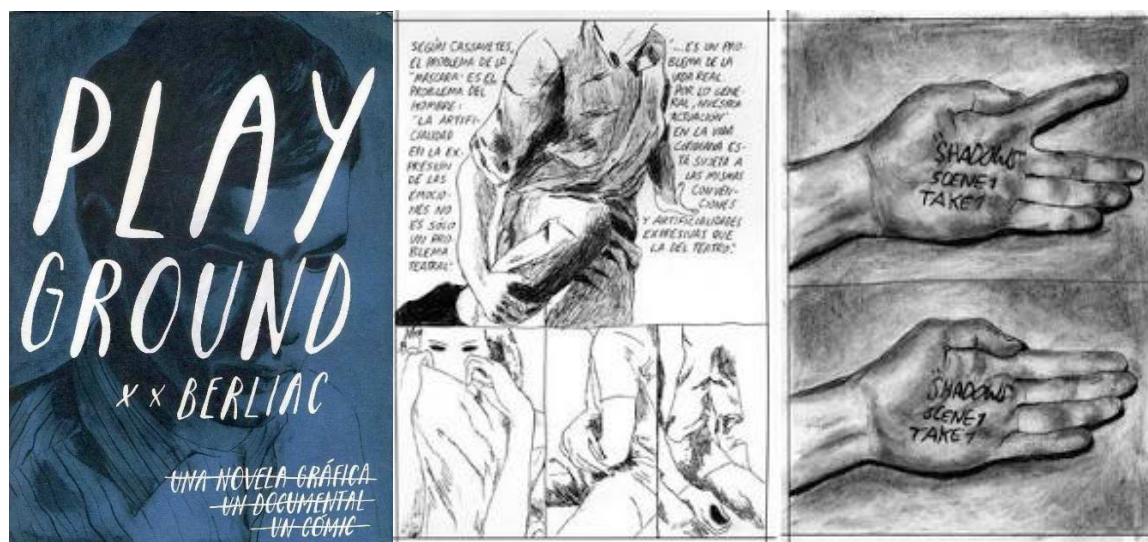


Figure 13. Left: Cover of Berliac's *Playground* (Ediciones Valientes, 2013). Right: Excerpt from *Playground*.

In this light, Berliac's case is particularly impressive. Among the works in *Gaijin Mangaka*, "Moriyama's Dog" is (along, perhaps, with Filosa's "Don't Touch This Gamela") the one that, being straightforwardly gekiga, does not fit into the category of "art comics". However, a look at Berliac's background troubles this straightforwardness, as he is the author of *Playground* "Una novela gráfica. Un documental. Un cómic" (in English, "A graphic novel. A document. A comic"), a highly acclaimed work of "art comics" based on John Cassavetes's *Shadows*, itself an iconic piece of experimental cinema (Játiva, 2016; Santoro, 2014; Fig. 13). After publishing *Playground* in 2013 with Ediciones Valientes, Berliac suddenly shifted his style from the visual and narrative language of "art comics" to the one of *gekiga*, as if shedding his skin to reveal a truth hidden beneath it. In *Seinen Crap 2*, a zine published 2015, Berliac wrote—not without controversy⁶—that "to begin making manga was to me the artistic (that is, existential) equivalent of 'coming out of the closet,'" entailing "a rejection towards my previous self" (Berliac, 2015). Regardless of one's opinion on the appropriateness of Berliac's comparison, it effectively conveys how works such as "Moriyama's Dog," which on the surface are "simply" (global) manga, are in fact rooted in a negative relation to Western notions of "high art".

⁶Writer and artist Sarah Horrocks (mercurialblonde, 2015) started a polemic with Berliac's text, which led to the abrupt cancellation of his comic *Sadbøi*, a graphic novel about the immigrant experience—coincidentally, a different iteration of the "inside/outside" boundary—by Canadian publisher Drawn & Quarterly in 2017 (Drawn & Quarterly, 2017).

Conclusion

The comics anthology *š! #25 Gaijin Mangaka* is a thought-provoking collection of transnational graphic narratives, posing important if complex questions concerning authenticity and artistic purity in a globalised age. It is also symptomatic of the Japanisation of millennials—the first Western generation to grow up immersed in a mediatic milieu where anime and manga proliferated on television, bookshelves and the Internet. No longer discrete observers of Japanese pop culture, these young visual artists now bring their familiarity with anime, manga, and other Japanese pop-cultural forms into the various media in which they work, including “art comics”.

In the first part of this paper, I discussed four *Gaijin Mangaka* contributions (Berliac’s “Moriyama’s Dog,” Luis Yang’s “Tabako,” Nou’s “Ring Mark,” and Gloria Rivera’s “Domestic Scene”) to exemplify the diversity of approaches in the book, incorporating a wide range of manga genres like *gekiga*, *shōjo* and *josei* manga. I argued that the cover and title of the book establish a tongue-in-cheek relation to both the nation branding elements of Cool Japan, and other types of global manga like Manfra, Euromanga, Amerimanga, and OEL manga. As co-editor Berliac explains, the “foreignness” in *gaijin mangaka* refers less to the countries of origin than to the struggles of transcultural art.

In the second and third part of the paper, I took a closer look at the question of appropriation and transculturalism regarding global manga, in general, and Japanised “art comics”, in particular. I argued that, while one should not dismiss the issue of cultural appropriation, it is questionable whether any appropriative harms take place when it comes to manga: an ever-evolving transcultural visual language that has been actively exported to enhance Japan’s soft power in the global market. I also inserted the *Gaijin Mangaka* phenomenon within the broader scope of Japanised visual arts in the twenty-first century, in which references to “mangaesque” imaginaries increasingly appear in “high art” contexts. In the end, the “gaijiness” of *Gaijin Mangaka*, in its multiplicity and contradictions, articulates a three-fold sense of internalised foreignness. On the one hand, even if one admits that manga is *mukokuseki*, global manga is always somewhat at odds with the phantasm of “genuine” (Japanese) manga. On the other, non-Japanese and non-Japan-based manga artists can experiment an estrangement in relation to their countries’ national canons (e.g., Argentine or Franco-Belgian comics). Finally, Japanised “high art” mobilises a foreignness from within the Western art canon to deliberately

forefront the categorical instability of “high” and “low,” “modern,” “postmodern,” and “non-modern”, of subcultural and negative identities.

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