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Mapping World Comics: a Review of *How Comics Travel: Publication, Translation, Radical Literacies*

Katherine Kelp-Stebbins, *How Comics Travel: Publication, Translation, Radical Literacies.* The Ohio State University Press, 254 pages, 2022, ISBN 9780814215043, 19 b & w illustrations

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This review responds to Katherine Kelp-Stebbins' monograph 'How Comics Travel: Publication, Translation, Radical Literacies' (Ohio State University Press, 2022). This book integrates cultural, translation and comic studies to map out the uneven power distance in international cultural circulation from a 'translational and anticolonial' perspective. It puts comic reading in a worldly frame that draws attention to the uniqueness of each culture and rethinks the understanding of comics' contribution to reinforcing or shattering the borders between cultures, which makes it an inspiring reading for readers from both translation studies and comics studies, especially those who are interested in post-colonial research on cultural interactions and power dynamics.

Graphic literacy and comic culture are not universal. In her comprehensive research on the translation, spread and acceptance of comics, manga and other graphic literature, Katherine Kelp-Stebbins examines how comics can be challenged, or used to pose a challenge, when entering a new culture. Unlike other cross-cultural comic studies that take on a linguistic approach and focus on the visual aspects of texts (such as Neil Cohn et al.'s study (2012) of the differences between comics and manga), *How Comics Travel* (**Figure 1**) combines visual and cultural perspectives, engaging with a wide context that covers the entire process of producing, translating, reading and circulating a comic: both 'market logics and academic critiques' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 2). By tracing the publication history of several representative 'world comics' (comics that feature multicultural influences in their creation, publication and spread), Kelp-Stebbins integrates cultural, translation and comic
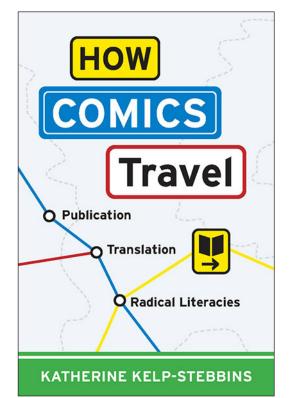

Figure 1: Cover of Katherine Kelp-Stebbins, *How Comics Travel: Publication, Translation, Radical Literacies* (Ohio State University Press, 2022). © Ohio State University Press.

studies to map out the uneven power distance in international cultural circulation from a 'translational and anticolonial' perspective (Stebbins 2022: 2, 12–14). With a high sensitivity to connectedness and difference, *How Comics Travel* serves as a contrast to comics research that emphasises transnational mechanisms and similarities from the perspectives of modernism and global comic history, such as *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* (Stein, Denson and Meyer 2011) and *Comics as History, Comics as Literature* (Babic 2013). It puts comic reading in a worldly frame that draws attention to the uniqueness of each culture and rethinks the understanding of comics' contribution to reinforcing or shattering the borders between cultures.

In Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, *Tintin* and *Metro* (themselves frequently discussed cases in postcolonial studies) are analysed under a long-term perspective that not only discusses the production and reproduction of the works but also follows their détournements and translations, in other words, how they are processed and responded to by other cultural products. Influenced by Edward Said's theories about power and the formation of ideas,

Kelp-Stebbins begins her analysis of imperialism in *Tintin* as world literature based on three representative readers, namely Scott McCloud, Bienvenu Mbutu Mondondo and Charles Burns. In *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* (1993), McCloud writes about Ligne Claire (the clear-line style), which is the major artistic style used in the *Tintin* series, highlighting its effectiveness as a visual language element that inspires identification. Kelp-Stebbins, on the other hand, points out that such an uncritical reading makes unwarranted assumptions of the legibility of Ligne Claire worldwide (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 26–32). As Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey argue, '[t]he Clear Line aesthetics cannot be reduced to a kind of stylisation of the drawing' (2017), because its readability and acceptance, especially in the case of *Tintin*, is decided by not only the image itself but also the European-centred narratives for which they were initially applied. This finding coincides with *How Comics Travel*'s argument that promoting the visual language in *Tintin* as universal can further reinforce imperialism, since the often-criticised racist caricatures of non-'white European colonial' cultures in this series, simplified to serve the linear story-telling model, can represses such cultures by spreading images 'justifying colonialism and other state-based discrimination' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 29–31). In this sense, the popularity of Ligne Claire after *Tintin* cannot be read as an innocent aesthetic preference, and by overlooking potential cultural differences, this (probably unintentional) blind spot itself is inherently imperial. This discussion of McCloud's work draws attention to the possible heterogeneity of reader groups in the studies of visual language, encouraging researchers to develop sensitivity for the close connection between stylistic features and narratives, and thus avoid assumptions about universal understandings.

In contrast, Kelp-Stebbins studies Mondondo's appeal to a court in Belgium against the stereotypical depiction of Congo in *Tintin au Congo* as an act of resistance to its one-directional worldliness. Compared to McCloud, Mondondo, as a Congolese national, provides a first-hand reading that 'rejects the authority and normalization of *Tintin* as visual imperialism' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 25). By synthesising a series of studies of graphic novels, especially *Tintin*, from approaches including ideogrammatization, 'the Other,' comic circulation and travel-tracking, Kelp-Stebbins confirms that Mondondo's interpretation is not unreasonable, forming a clear comparison with the ambiguous reasons the court used to reject his claim (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 52–54). Beyond the detailed theoretical references and background events that support the challenging reading, it is particularly interesting that the author sensitively notices the parallel between how Tintin 'educates' Congolese children and how the Belgium court's decision overrules a Congolese reader's response, providing a convincing support to her argument (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 54). Jogchum Vrielink (2012) points out that the result

of this lawsuit led to a commercial surge and a one-sided opposition that went exactly against the initiator's intention, which is also mentioned in this book as 'condescension and even outright hostility toward Mondondo' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 54). Considering the social and economic factors discussed in Vrielink's study, *How Comics Travel* could have explored the cause of the rejection of the lawsuit beyond simplifying it as a result of misreading an anti-imperialistic interpretation as 'an attack on Belgium's cultural heritage,' (ibid.) which would have further enhanced the multi-dimensional approach the author intends to develop.

Shaking the authority of *Tintin* yet more, re-creations using its characters, style or even the same pictures are made to re-interpret its story and reveal its colonial power of shaping the images of cultures as 'others.' Charles Burns's *Nitnit* trilogy (discussed in the book) not only visualises the white mask *Tintin* wears but also applies self-plagiarism to blur the boundaries in the unbalanced cultural power dynamics (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 64–66). By tracing these two examples, Kelp-Stebbins brings the discussion from the level of postcolonial criticism to the following stage: asking what efforts have been made to destabilise imperialism. The testimony from the people depicted rather than the people depicting gives an insight into how readings are in no way ubiquitous. The power of remakes and parodies further facilitates the voice of challenging views.

The book then turns its attention to *Metro: A Story of Cairo*, the first Egyptian graphic novel to target adult readers. *Metro* is heavily loaded with its local culture and sheds 'light on the profound changes that have flourished over Egypt in the last few years' (Hanafy, 2016). Its tight connection to its domestic situation poses challenges to its global spread. Centred on analysing the implied power imbalance in translation strategies using Lawrence Venuti's domestication and foreignisation theory (1995, 2019), Chapter 2 discusses the importance of *Metro*'s graphic and non-verbal elements such as layout and formatting, and undertakes case studies on the translation decisions made in the British, German, Italian and US versions for onomatopoeia, space, maps, the sequence of images and page formatting. When discussing the translatability of such a culture-loaded source text, Kelp-Stebbins does not dwell on individual word choices but rather draws attention to the translator's mediation in the interconnectedness of textual elements. *Metro*'s translations thus represent different interpretations, 'not only of the plot and its relevance but also of the book as a whole' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 102). Kelp-Stebbins points out that though the direction of panels of *Metro* is standardised in the US translation, the maps it includes are left unchanged at a cost of narrative coherence and compositional effect. This leads to effects such as how the US version's change to juxtaposition of images lacks the original emphasis on 'the important difference between the subway and the street' (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 98).

Based on the target reader group who would overlook such a difference, it is suggested that maps, albeit containing textual information, are not perceived as texts but images in the target culture (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 96–100). While *How Comics Travel* intends to focus on the overall re-formatting in translation, the analysis of narratives is made on a relatively micro level of images and panels, giving a valid example of using textual analysis to develop an argument while avoiding over-generalisation.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on comics terms and the publishing industry. In these two chapters, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaa's Haida manga and the Lebanese trilingual comics journal *Samandal* are used to explore the challenging impact comics practices from various cultures bring to readers. Yahgulanaa's manga utilises Japanese comics traditions in its artistic practice, which 'intervenes in comics traditions, visualization paradigms, and the book as a commodity object'(Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 20). A similar expansion of readers' horizons can be found in *Samandal*, where horizontally and vertically symmetrical alignments of images ('flippy pages') and texts in different languages are applied to visualise not only what readers can understand but also what is absent in their literacy systems (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 206–219). Both studies closely link the revision of comics form to political action. As Carla Calargé and Alexandra Gueydan-Turek suggest, *Samandal* as an experimental comics journal cannot be conceived without considering how it 's'inscrit dans une approche socio-politique critique' ['is part of a sociopolitical critique'] (2017), which is also reflected in Jacob Høigilt's (2019) discussion of the recurring politicised topics in *Samandal*. Compared with studies that heavily rely on textual analysis, Kelp-Stebbins's research draws attention to the often-ignored topic of form, identifying the interaction between artistic skills, form and political messages.

Finally, the interweaved relationship between publication and economy is explored in Chapter 3. This chapter traces the publication history of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and how it was related to *Maus* in the critical discussion, before analysing how target markets form the link between Satrapi's work and Zeina Abirached's graphic novel, *A Game for Swallows* (2012), which is also centred on Middle Eastern immigrants and was first published in French before being translated in the US. Grouping works of Satrapi, Abirached, Magdy El Shafee and other West Asian comic artists as a 'genre' is a common practice in critical writing and academic research, especially for the studies that focus on the spread of and resistance to ideologies. For example, Chris Reyns-Chikuma and Houssem Ben Lazreg (2017) point out that as these comics are consumed outside their contexts, the resistance power in the messages they attempt to deliver can be twisted into solidifying stereotypes with an anesthetised depiction of the Middle East, without realising that it is also a subtle act of imperialism to categorise a variety of comics simply based on their cultural contexts. To challenge this kind of categorisation,

Kelp-Stebbins (2018) has previously argued that by emphasising similarities and obscuring differences between these two comics, the reviewers forge an assumed image of West Asian Comics and orient them as alienated, consumable products that fit into the economy of the target culture as a niche collection of 'others' catering for a pre-set exception.

Chapter 3, which follows a clear development line from this earlier journal article, adds comparative visual analysis of the covers and formatting of *Persepolis*'s French and US versions, illustrating how a cross-cultural comic is adapted to suit readers' preferences on form and content. For instance, the US version's cover changes the action figures on the original French version's cover into a veiled Iranian child, whose image 'represents the "radical other"' but also a universal concept of a child (Kelp-Stebbins 2022: 128). Compared with her previous article, this development is an important completion of the explanation of *Persepolis*'s commercial acceptance. However, by setting this section after the discussion of comparisons between Art Spiegelman and Satrapi, the chapter raises readers' expectations for more textual, or at least text-based, analysis for the following sections, while the book turns back to the publication history of the comics of Satrapi and Abirached. As this is the very chapter that involves capital and markets as a factor in the publishing industry of international comics, personally I would also have liked to read more about relevant market status and the engagement of economic and marketing theories.

To conclude, *How Comics Travel* gives a comprehensive overview of the spread of comics, encouraging its readers to develop an understanding of the difference between 'universalness' and 'worldliness,' with the latter explained as being transmitted, shared and possibly resisted among heterologous rather than homologous cultures. For such an emphasis on challenging readings that are assumed to be ubiquitous, I would recommend this book to readers from both translation studies and comics studies, especially those who are interested in post-colonial research on cultural interactions and power dynamics. This book's analytical approach reflects Kelp-Stebbins's solid scholarly foundation and her ability to combine analysis of textual factors, such as translation and editing, and non-textual influences such as economy, politics, historical backgrounds, and the publication industry, which inspires readers to incorporate contextual elements into literary studies. The breadth of the scope of this research is also reflected in the choice of case studies, which include not only texts and translations but also historical and social events. That is to say, translations, reactions, re-creations, and even revisions to comics as a genre are all analysed to explore the differences among interpretations and the reader group they represent. This book is indeed what its keyword 'worldly' suggests: different, but organically intertwined.

Editors' Note
This article is part of the Special Collection: Translation, Remediation, Spread: The Global Circulation of Comics in Digital Distribution edited by Jonathan Evans and Ernesto Priego.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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