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## ALTERNATIVE CANADIAN COMICS/ ALTERNATIVE GRAPHIC FICTION

IT'S CANADA'S 151ST BIRTHDAY, and I'm trying to come up with the perfect alternative Canadian comics character. Is she the haunting mother-earth heroine Láska Sedmíkráska from Tin Can Forest's *Wax Cross* (2012) or Matthew Forsythe's hungry and taunted Voguchi in the whimsical *Jinchalo* (2012)? Maybe he's Margaret Atwood's action hero *Angel Catbird* (2016), Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas' tragic hero *Red* (2009), or Nina Bunjevac's fantastically dark catwoman Zorka in *Heartless* (2012). Hamachi, the gender-bending protagonist of Nina Matsumoto's English-language manga *Yōkaiden* (2009), fits the category too. Perhaps the most alternative characters aren't protagonists at all but rather the ones in the false background, like the recurring and vital rather than just symbolic cats in Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Lost At Sea* (2002) or the dream-world/real-world horses in Hope Larson's *Gray Horses* (2006). Whichever figures might fit the category, I can't help but harbour the feeling that if you were to ask them about their alternative Canadian comics characterness, they probably wouldn't know that such an identity category even existed.

Most readers probably understand that "alternative"—as a category—can be a maddening, teeth-gnashing word. Depending on where you're standing, transgressive efforts of all kinds—presenting readers with so-called "alternatives"—can work both to undermine and reinforce an always slippery and sometimes bullying "norm." This can make "alternative" a radical, romantic, or even activist term, as it can be about possibilities and choices, mutual exclusivity, or challenging traditions.

For an example of the latter, I like how Rebecca Solnit links "alternative" to "hope" in the following passage: "Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, *an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists*" (emphasis added). A dissection of hope is outside the present scope

of this essay, but the take-away is the promise of imagining unknown alternatives. Graphic fiction can—and does—help us do that.

If we turn to academic scholarship on the theme of alternative identity, concepts like “alterity” (i.e. the other’s material position) and “the Other” (i.e. the abnormal or weird) self-activate in close, critical readings. Additionally, “alter/native” will be a familiar concept for students of North American studies and beyond. See, for example, C. Richard King’s “Alter/native Heroes: Native Americans, Comic Books, and the Struggle for Self-Definition,” which describes comic books as both “an exemplary instance of the American imperial imaginary” and “an important illustration of indigenous efforts to refuse it and reimagine themselves.”

In taking a closer look at this trio of terms—alternative Canadian comics—which one *should* be stressed or, more properly, scrutinized? Multiple enquiries start to spin off. For example, what exactly is “Canadian”? And aren’t Canadian comics always already “alternative” by virtue of their not being American—that is, by posing an “alternative” to American comics? This is suggested by the title of the anthology *The Canadian Alternative: Cartoonists, Comics, and Graphic Novels from the North* (2018), which flags the automatic association of “American” with “comics.” Maybe we should push it further, defining alternative Canadian comics by what they are not, including not just not American but also not Japanese, Korean, French, Belgian, Swedish, South African, Mexican, Indian, Dutch, Iranian, etc. Such an approach might reveal some of the questions that underlie the history of power relations with regard to the comics medium—a medium that is still often narrowly identified with American popular culture. With that said, whether labelled as “Canadian” or not, comics are no longer (if they ever were) nationally bound. Can we even ask, then, what are alternative Canadian comics?

Yes, we can. And here’s an easy answer: you’ll know one when you read one.

**Example one.** Against the backdrop of an enchanted forest, a wild goat stands astride a surreal, leafy globe that’s matched by another in the inky sky above. The black-and-white tinged with green shade of *Wax Cross*’ cover is intriguingly but gently sinister. The goat’s mouth is open. Inside, the oversized graphic text begins with a chilling incantation “to summon the infection out of the body.” While the literal body may be Láska’s, *Wax Cross* not only dramatizes the invisible risks of late modernity—including

radiation, pesticide, and toxins—but also plays these threats out differently in each chapter, drawing attention to the invisibility of different “terrors” that are “slowly seeping into the collective unconscious” by means of “unverifiable reports.” This emphasis on the imperceptible is evident in much of the visual language of the text, such as when readers see the words of the incantation literally unravelling from the sky and then hovering over the house in which Láska is undergoing an intense wax-pouring ceremony. Rich in folkloric associations, the chant resonates throughout, often with unsettling implications.

Remarkably, unlike a traditional North American comic, there are no blank spaces or gutters between frames or panels, and, as a consequence, uncanny gaps and estrangements abound. While it appears to be an eclectically alternative graphic fiction that advertises its own non-conformity, its glossy texture, atmospheric style, and gutter-less pages make it feel more like an art book. *Wax Cross* also relies heavily on a historical tradition of intermixing found in Russian history, contemporary animism, Ukrainian-Canadian traditions, and ancient Slavic art, as the artists, Marek Colek and Pat Shewchuk (otherwise known as “Tin Can Forest”), draw heavily on their Czech and Ukrainian backgrounds.

**Example 2.** Reminiscent of the famous English fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which is evoked by the sprawling tree on the red-and-white cover, *Jinchalo* presents readers with Voguchi and Jinchalo—a little girl and a magpie whose fluctuating fortunes are tracked throughout the text. The story is set in a fantastic and chimerical world that could be imagined as coming from almost anywhere, although the architectural details—at least when Voguchi is on the ground and not in the sky—nevertheless suggest a setting in the Korean countryside. The monochromatic colouring and outline-type drawings also give Forsythe’s cartooning a light, whimsical, and sometimes even comically twisted tenor, and his methods draw heavily on Korean folklore, likely reflecting his past vocation as an English teacher in Seoul.

Already crossing boundaries between children’s and adult fiction, we see similar overlaps in Forsythe’s play with visual-verbal language. The opening inscription is the only place where readers learn the characters’ names, as Voguchi is described as the “hungry heroine” and Jinchalo as the “mischiefous shapeshifter.” The main storyline loosely follows Voguchi’s journey to a market and her subsequent adventures after Jinchalo hatches from the

egg she buys. Free-floating pictures and peeps of sound jump in and out of the bubbles in both Korean Hangul and the English alphabet, so those who read Korean will understand the text on a different level than those who only read English. However, Korean language skills are not required to follow the quest plot of *Jinchalo*, which itself appears to shapeshift—especially at the end when Voguchi transforms into a magpie, leaving readers to wonder whether Jinchalo was the main character after all.

**Example trois.** Atwood's three-volume collection *Angel Catbird*, co-created by Johnnie Christmas (illustrator) and Tamra Bonvillain (colourist), contains a conspicuous pro-animal message in the footnotes, but the text's central point is to present readers with an alternative to a simply "hybrid" (i.e. two-culture/animal-human) identity. It tells the story of a genetic engineer named Strig Feleedus whose DNA becomes fused with that of a cat and an owl—a mutation that is foreshadowed by his name, which is also an amalgamation of the Latin names for cats and owls. Following this, the protagonist's choices and actions are never entirely clear-cut: he is part bird, part cat, and (judging by his feathery wings) also part angel. Or is that still the owl part? While at first it may seem like a trite action story, the series does pose some interesting questions. When Angel Catbird contemplates whether or not he should eat a baby bird, for example, his ethical dilemma raises questions about the nature of instincts, greed, altruism, and cannibalism. The series also addresses the nature of greed by stereotypically associating gluttony (among other things) with ugly, evil rats. A few of the book's critical questions also circle back to animal-human myths and contradictions, such as questions about multispecies extinction as well as questions about how animals and animal-human hybrids disrupt ideas of identity, citizenship, and denizenship.

**Example iv.** Yahgulanaas sloughs off the term "comics" while turning his crazed hero on his head, so to speak, in *Red: A Haida Manga*. Published as a graphic novel, *Red* blends Haida artistic practices with oral narrative and Pacific Northwest coast art to create a resonant and timely allegory about how violence feeds violence. Multilayered storytelling is a method easily found in Yahgulanaas' stylistic use of black Haida formlines and icons, which not only replace traditional panels and frames but also encase bursting action scenes and beautiful colours. Along with the apparently ironic use of the traditional comics font *comic sans*, the text also makes use of political satire and trickster figures in a number of ways in order to articulate a cul-

turally specific Haida way of life.

*Red* also graphically engages with entwined social and ecological issues—particularly those that resonate not only with the Haida Nation but also at regional, national, and global levels. Throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, Yahgulanaas served the Haida Nation in campaigns against mining and logging giants, and he helped to secure political rights for the Haida people. According to the Council of the Haida Nation: “Yah’guudang—our respect for all living things—celebrates the ways our lives and spirits are intertwined and honours the responsibility we hold to future generations. Haida Gwaii Yah’guudang is about respect and responsibility, about knowing our place in the web of life, and how the fate of our culture runs parallel with the fate of the ocean, sky, and forest people.” Red’s quest is clearly about learning this sense of respect. In addition, Yahgulanaas’ engagement with histories of settler/indigenous cultural encounters draws attention to a whole host of myths that police the lines of difference between these two broadly-defined cultural groups (e.g. the Western myth of the “noble savage”). These myths feed more or less directly into policies that have presented labels such as “aboriginal” or “Indian” as stable and uniform (as opposed to diverse and highly political) categories.

Turning to a different point, what if a writer or artist identifies as Canadian, or that and something else (i.e. a hybrid Canadian), but the publisher is American or otherwise? Nina Matsumoto’s *Yōkaiden* fits this category, as does Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Lost At Sea* and *Scott Pilgrim* (2004-2010). Hope Larson is originally from Asheville, North Carolina, but she produced some of her comics, like the dreamy coming-of-age *Gray Horses*, while living on the east coast of Canada near Halifax. Bunjevac was born in Canada but raised in the former Yugoslavia (now Serbia) and later returned to Canada as a young adult. Her debut collection *Heartless* and follow-up *Fatherland* (2014) are semi-autobiographical, vivid in “underground” detail, and explicitly about exile and specific forms of nationalism.

These are all examples of alternative Canadian comics, yet the word “comics” is clearly a misnomer, as these texts are not always funny or stereotypically childish. Cultural context is important when dealing with the word “comics,” and this becomes even more complicated in a medium that is often (falsely) equated with both humorous genres and (non-literary) visual media—that is, lowbrow culture as opposed to hoity-toity opera (you know what I mean). In this context, “alternative graphic fiction,” as a moni-

ker, makes allowances for different, farther-ranging questions. It captures a sense of the actual graphicness of a text, be it an isolated piece of cave art, a single or multipanel cartoon, a serialized comic strip, or a bound graphic novel. In this way, “graphic fiction” advertises its own tangible fiction by foregrounding and somewhat fracturing its own storyness. It announces itself as a text—a text with, shall we say, relationships.

This exposes my interest in debates over definitions of storytelling. Put simply, and I don’t think I’m the first to say this, what alternative graphic fiction does is transformative storytelling with pictures. And, importantly, the producers, readers, and various mediators are all active participants in the construction of meaning. This means that the question “what are alternative Canadian comics?” isn’t really the question I want to answer. These are not things that can be reduced, as they have too many crevices, nooks, and crannies. Of course, there will be arguments and interventions, as there are with any definition, but for the moment (thank goodness!) the future is in the process of becoming. We are free to imagine unknown alternatives.

It’s Canada’s 151st birthday, and I’m trying to come up with the perfect alternative Canadian comics character. If I could draw one for you right now, I would draw a minicomic about my 91-year-old-grandmother, whom I just visited. It would be about her and her best friend celebrating Canada Day in the air-con, sporting red-and-white Hawaiian style leis around their necks and wearing festive maple-leaf t-shirts. They have just gotten new perms, and they are talking about how their walkers save them, these days, from having broken legs. They are different kinds of heroes, but they are heroes nonetheless.

I don’t think it’s a stretch to point out that graphic fiction is proving to be an apt medium when it comes to picturing, teaching, and inspiring alternatives, as it puts everything under a microscope, including culture, language, the environment, xenophobia, etc. One might rightly say that alternatives are forever in a dance with what they are not.

So go on now—seek out the alternatives. You can find them. This land and its waters are amazing. Listen to them and their elders—especially when artists try to help them speak.