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Manga as Mukokuseki (Stateless)? Hybridism in Original Non-Japanese Manga

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Manga has developed as an exercise in hybridity in postwar Japan, stretching from the Disneyesque character designs of artist Tezuka Osamu to the assimilation of non-Japanese thematic content. Female mangaka such as Ikeda Riyoko and Hagio Moto, for example, entwined foreign settings and the conventional Japanese comics style. But how “Japanese” is manga after all? Sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi has argued that Japanese products meant for material and cultural consumption, like anime and games, should be ultimately considered *mukokuseki* (stateless) or rather “culturally odorless.” Perhaps, manga could also be included in this ambit due to its propensity for hybridity. With the word “hybridity” I refer to literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s “polyphony;” a multitude of individual voices in a competent “novel of ideas.” Bakhtin’s analogy to polyphonic music proposes these voices to be synergetic yet distinctive in the discourse of narratives. In my ongoing doctoral thesis, I attempt to study whether disparate elements in manga (setting, indigeneity of a character, ethnic affiliation of the artist, etc.) exhibit affinities for such a polyphonic hybridity.

In this article, the texts under scrutiny are Original Non-Japanese (ONJ) works created by artists who are not ethnically Japanese. The texts have been either conceived in English, or they have received scanned¹ English versions available online. More specifically, they have all been created in the 2000s. Through these texts, I shall endeavour to study how non-Japanese artists work with the already globalized conven-

¹ A portmanteau term comprised of scanning and translation.

tions of manga. One might inquire as to why these particular texts have been chosen among all others. Can there be a palpable thread that interconnects these non-Japanese artists and their productions? The texts in consideration are the following:

The Three Times (2007): A manhwa webtoon created by the South Korean artist Jung Goo Mi who has been brought up in Japan, it is about the challenges faced by the bi-ethnic college student, Minami Hina.

12 Days (2006): A story of two female lovers that narrates the process of coping with grief after the death of a beloved. It has been created by June Kim, a South Korean artist residing in the USA.

Another Summer Day (*The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* 2, 2007): An uncanny tale by Nana Li, a Chinese-Swedish artist who weaves the narrative across three different timelines in three separate settings; Japan, England, and Germany.

Language (*The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* 2, 2007): A tender account by a Malaysian artist who goes by the nom de plume Cubbie. It involves two individuals with special needs who use sign language.

Sojourn (*The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* 2, 2007): Fashioned by the British artist Paul Duffield, this concise text is a rendition of the loneliness of a man who rejects civilized modernity.

White (*The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* 3, 2008): A subtle and queer love story by the Swedish artist Sofia Falkenheim.

Beginnings (*The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* 3, 2008) and *The Non-Savvy Non-Commuter* (2007): Autobiographical accounts by Asia Alfasi, a Libyan artist who moved to Scotland at an early age.

Dramacon (2005-2007): A three-volume graphic narrative by the Canadian-Russian artist Svetlana Chmakova who captures the experience of being a fan in North America.

One might wonder why I haven't included Indian artists. After all, India does have a rich tradition of multilingual comics, as well as of comics scholarship. However, the engagement with manga, within academia and outside, is only slowly on the rise.

Apart from *The Three Times*, *12 Days*, and *Dramacon*, my examples are brief one-shots anthologized in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga* (vols. 2 and 3). Some of them are winning entries from various manga contests. While several creators have remained faithful to the manga cosmos, others have turned to manga-inspired comics. At a glance, they all seem quite diverse. It is as if their similitude can only be asserted through

negation. None of these artists have undergone the experience of continuous serialization in a manga magazine. None of these texts are exclusively set in Japan. Nevertheless, once I proceed through them, a tangible sense of isolation emerges. In certain cases, the alienation or withdrawal arises specifically from the ethnic context of the character or the artist. From a different angle, the interconnection between them might be found in the Japanese “lost decade” of the 2000s. Literary scholar Tanaka Motoko (2014) refers to sociologist Ōsawa Masachi, who has identified the years following 1995 as an “age of impossibility,” which is different from the preceding “idealistic” and “fictional” ages.

After the catastrophic incidents such as the Kobe earthquake and the Aum sarin subway attack, a sense of hopelessness, seclusion and paranoia was all-pervading. According to Tanaka, the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson, 1983) was dismantled. Consequently, Japanese fiction from the 2000s, including manga, exhibited certain thematic trends such as social alienation, a dystopian worldview, a “hypertrophic self-consciousness,” an emphasis on uncomplicated “slice-of-life” stories and so on. It is possible that ONJ texts from the same decade have absorbed these thematic refractions. They do not necessarily replicate their Japanese counterparts. Among the selected texts, *The Three Times* and *Beginnings* approach the “slice-of-life” genre as they focus on mundane student life, interpersonal relationships, and coming of age. But neither are they frivolous, nor fannish. In fact, both these tales engage with serious issues such as peer group alienation and racial identity crisis, and the search of a community to belong to.

Comics researcher John Lent has remarked upon the love-hate relationship Koreans have had with manga, and its influence on the evolution of manhwa in the 20th century (Lent, 2008, 31). Jung Goo Mi’s webcomic *The Three Times* partially delves into the tense relationship between the two nations through the dilemma of Minami Hina, a character of bi-ethnic origin. The artist herself is a Korean raised in Japan. Her protagonist Hina has a Japanese father and a South Korean mother. She is fluent in both languages. Despite that, she struggles to validate herself in the two different ethno-cultural spaces. The narrative is primarily set in Seoul, where Hina moves to attend a fine arts and design college. But the reader is provided with flashbacks of her life in Japan. Throughout the series, the artist resorts to conventional mangaesque visual cues, especially in the humorous scenes where Hina behaves clumsily due to her social awkwardness. Her eyes exaggeratedly pop out, and her visage is distorted with vertical lines. But unlike manga, a colored format and

linear panel sequencing are used.

The root of Hina's social ineptitude lies with her unconventional name. Her mother likes the name Hinata, a sunny place, and wishes to name her so. But her father cannot find an appropriate *kanji* representation for the choice. Therefore, he writes her name in *hiragana* syllabary which is unorthodox. In a few subsequent panels in chapter 11, where Hina's father contemplates the *kanji* options available, the face of Hina's mother has been rendered unrecognizable. This could come across as diminishing her presence, but it can also suggest her relenting to the father's unusual decision. Hina's peers in her Japanese high school readily assume that it is her foreign mother who is responsible for her name. They consider her to be ignorant about Japanese customs and the system of *kanji*. Hina is mocked as a "fake Japanese" and bullied. Throughout the episode, she spends solitary moments in the remote corners of the school, trying to control her emotional meltdown. However, the artist does neither villainize Hina's entire Japanese peer group, nor does she fanatically glorify all the Koreans Hina meets in Seoul.

For instance, Hina's Korean classmate from design college, Jun Ho, is obsessively patriotic. After completing his army conscription period, he has been re-admitted into college. During a discussion regarding national affiliation and military pride, Hina opines that "allegiance is an unfamiliar action to us" (chapter 15, 3). This leads Jun Ho to assume that Hina is unpatriotic and callous, as Japan has no traditional standing army. But naturally, Hina's sense of allegiance or a communal "us" might be different from the traditional, ethnically pure, martial esprit de corps that he advocates, as the artist's ironic overtone suggests. In chapter 19, Jun Ho puts on his old military uniform as a mere costume for the annual school festival, claiming it to be "marine corps cosplay." But the actual reason for donning it is to get rid of the period drama attire that he has been assigned by his classmates. Cosplay is a performance art often associated with Japan, which Hina had suggested in the first place. Thus, Jun Ho himself ends up as a hybrid entity who has borrowed from the cultural practice of cosplay, which belongs to a nation he is not particularly fond of. At the festival, Hina wears a *hanbok*, i.e. classic Korean attire.

Another narrative from Korea is June Kim's Original English Language manga *12 Days*. Kim had studied Japanese language and literature in Seoul, before migrating to the US. She prefers to identify her work as "global manga" rather than situating it in the tradition of Korean manhwa. Incidentally, in an interview conducted in 2014, manga historian Ryan Holmberg suggested that the name "comics made in Japanese style" could

be appropriate for the corpus of Original Non-Japanese texts, until manga style becomes a part of the “DNA of comics in general.” But the question remains whether the persistent use of the Japanese tag undermines the eclectic spectrum of global manga. Unlike Jung Goo Mi and other Korean webtoon artists featured on websites such as Comic Naver, *12 Days* is not originally penned in Korean. Although the artist has preferred a mangaesque black and white visual format, her panels are to be read from left to right, not mimicking the Japanese right-to-left orientation. Like herself, her characters are Korean expatriates in the US. If not bi-ethnic, they could be bi-nationals. As gender studies scholar Laura Ahn Williams points out in “Queering Manga: Eating Queerly in *12 Days*,” Jackie and Noah are not conventional Korean names. Jackie mourns her former lover Noah’s demise in an unusual manner. She decides to drink her mortal remains in smoothies for a period of twelve days.

In the third chapter, Jackie admits to being raised as a Buddhist, to which this ritual has no viable resonance. In order to negotiate grief, she follows the example of ancient Queen Artemisia II of Caria, who allegedly had performed a similar ritual upon losing her endogamous brother-spouse, Mausolus. The theme of female homosexual love in manga is usually identified with the genre of *yuri*. According to Ahn Williams, Japanese *yuri* manga fall mainly into two categories: (i) homosexual romance, or “self-sameness” (Shamoon, 2008), where the leads are physically similar or even identical to one another, and (ii) hypersexualized eroticism. But she further suggests that *12 Days* puts forward an alternative version of *yuri*. The two lovers are not alike in appearance, and their love for one another is not expressed with boisterous titillation, requiring nudity as would be typical of *yuri* conventions. In chapter 2, the hyperframe (Groensteen, 2007), or a single panel that takes up the entire page, consists of a solid black backdrop, featuring four monologue lines: “Her curly hair that stubbornly covered her face./ Her long limbs that coiled into my dreams./ Her warm neck and breasts against my back./ Her pulse I couldn’t tell from mine” (Kim, 2006). These lines evoke a far more erotic image than the visible images actually do.

A sizeable corpus of *yuri* manga is set in all-girl boarding schools, often acknowledged as ‘Class S’ stories. The relationship depicted is often between a senior and a junior belonging to different grades. But in *12 Days*, Jackie and Noah are adult women of almost the same age. Multiple *yuri*-themed manga have a tragic plot, where one of the partners dies. But *12 Days* begins with the demise of Noah, intermittently inserting flash-backs about the former partnership. Hence, the focus is more on Jackie’s

lonesome journey through grief, rather than romance. There are long stretches of quietude where Jackie does not speak at all. In the first chapter, she stays silent across several pages as she lounges in her apartment, with only her cat for company. The sole human interaction she allows herself is with Nick, Noah's half-brother. The story opens with the sentence in an empty white page, "Noah is coming back," albeit as ashes in a stoppered jar.

One might argue that Ahn Williams' account of *yuri* overlooks texts that go beyond the two categories, like *Pieta* (2000) by Haruno Nanae. What makes *12 Days* exceptional is not just deviation from the proposed binary, but also the nonlinear narrative style, entangled temporality, unorthodox usage of the monochromy, and sequences of silent panels – all seemingly incompatible with the romantic unravelling expected of *yuri*. The surreal visuality weaved by the artist serves to heighten Jackie's loneliness, persecuted by the memories of Noah in her dreams. Ahn Williams appositely comments that "these vignettes suggest elements of the story outside the realm of visibility or representation" (2014, 286).

The dreamlike lucidity is also perceptible in Nana Li's *Another Summer Day*. Li is a Chinese-Swedish artist who currently lives in London. Her English-language narrative comprises three summer days from diverse historical moments: rural England in 1915, Hiroshima in 1945, and Germany in 1989. Across these narratives, there are three pairs of children, a boy and a girl each, who are being persecuted by someone; a governess, a group of bullies, and a local cop. The timelines overlap visually, through images like leaves blowing in the wind across the stories (23-24), birds taking simultaneous flights (37), and sharing a coordinated soporific state (19-20), as each pair hides away from their respective tormentors. Li's portrayal is faithful to manga visuality, including huge pupils, motion lines, an emphasis on the "amorphic" (Cohn, 2013), minutiae of the background and so on. Her self-portrayal as a haggard, geeky mangaka, possibly hounded by her editor to meet deadlines, also fits in as mangaesque. But Li is not situated within the scope of the Japanese manga industry.

Hence, her self-portrayal might come across as an attempt to legitimize herself as an authentic manga artist, especially since her text is in English. But what sets her story apart as an example of "global manga" is her use of narrative polyphony, forming one reverberating sound across the timelines. When the nuclear bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, it is as if the catastrophe is echoed in the other two time-spaces. The juxtaposition of the atomic cataclysm with other crucial historical catastrophes, delivered in English, hints at an exercise in hybridity of representation. The

most impressive image in the tale is also the most austere: on the title page, against a background of solid white, black silhouettes are visible; three pairs stand on a cliff, apparently sharing the same space. Yet symptomatically, it is as if they have been placed on a laterally inverted podium. On closer inspection, the reader might conclude that their ranks have been assigned according to the assumed magnitude of the respective disaster. The central position is occupied by Japanese toddlers, followed by the English children on the right and the German children on the left. The silhouettes serve to erase details which signify ethnicities.

Cubbie's text titled *Language* is rendered in color. The artist uses soft shades of pastels, unlike manga. The geographical specifics of the setting are elusive. As if in response to globalization, the use of verbal language, as a marker of ethno-cultural difference which can engender prejudice, is rejected. *Language* is a short story involving two people with special needs who use sign language. In a library somewhere, a man with impaired hearing regularly notices a woman but does not have the confidence to approach her. The woman's visage is sans eyes, which in many manga signals an intense emotional reaction, but in this case, it rather indicates the insecurity of the differently abled man, who is reclusive and awkward when it comes to social interactions. For the major part of the story, his visual presence is self-effacing. The panels solely concentrate on the woman, as he keeps looking at her from afar, using words sparingly. Upon seeing her communicating in sign language, he feels a tad relieved. In the final page (240), the couple sits with their legs folded, imitating a nuptial posture. Instead of ceremonial vessels, they hold communicating devices that connect them intimately. Defying the vantage of the spoken word, they connect with each other through the vibrations of their beating hearts.

Unlike *Language*, where the characters find quiet company, Paul Duffield discards communication altogether. His short story *Sojourn* depicts the journey of a man who shuns human company. He leaves a note for his female partner as he departs, the content of which is not revealed. As the man abandons civilization, he also discards his mobile phone. In the manga, the pages mostly consist of single hyperframes. Duffield's illustration tends towards realism; nonetheless, he employs close-ups and amorphic panels. While the manga appears in a grayscale screentone version in the collection *ILYA 2*, a colored version exists on the artist's website. One can peruse the narrative by scrolling horizontally within a single web page. The most significant image that echoes the man's need for isolation can be found in frame no. 15. Herein, one cannot

see him at all. But his tent is conspicuously pitched on the surface of the earth. The panel resembles a satellite image captured from outer space. It is as if life on earth has been obliterated, leaving one sequestered man in his tent.²

The introduction page for Sofia Falkenheim in the collection *ILYA 3* (2008) states that Sweden has a lively manga scene. But English language is used in Falkenheim's short story *White*, which she herself identifies as a boys' love (BL)-themed story. BL in Japanese manga is a genre that stages homosexual relationships between male characters. Writer Antonia Levi describes BL narratives as passionate and erotic, with sexually ambivalent characters (Levi, 2010). But in *White*, the sensuality is not ostentatious. Falkenheim's patchwork of black and white succinctly aids the tantalizing progress of the narrative. Two students start bonding over their respective opinion of cigarettes. In the snowy white landscape, smoke billows across panels. The partner starts to recognize the narrator from the smell of smoke, each time he is in the vicinity. The artist uses words abstemiously, choosing to employ a lucid cursive font in sentence case which complements the curling smoke visually, while deviating from the bold, uppercase font usually found in scanlated manga. The tentative relationship between the characters is disrupted, as neither takes a step forward. The narrator yearns to call the other person, but refrains out of awkwardness. Unlike many conservative boys' love titles, the characters do not feature orblike eyes, long tresses, and svelte figures. There is no erotic crescendo when they engage in amorous rapture. The narrator's gaze traces the body of his companion – mouth, clavicle, fingers (399) – limiting his gratification to the ocular. ONJ artists like Falkenheim and Kim self-identify their works in relation to established manga genres, as if committing to the manga prosumer community, but their traits of individuality remain decipherable, rendering their texts products of a hybrid creative exercise.

The idea of raising a community through one's active participation in the process of manga-making, a fan-creator reaching out to a larger group of like-minded people, is not unheard of in manga stories. *Beginnings* by Alfasi and *Dramacon* by Chmakova self-reference manga fandom, as the artists carve out experiences of the manga geek outside of Japan. Alfasi's Ewa, her recurrent autobiographical character, is initially alienated for her

²The trope of ubiquitous silence in manga is also noticeable in other ONJ artists, for example, German artist David Füleki's *one-shot Mutter's gelber Schirm (Mother's Yellow Umbrella.) There is also the annual Silent Manga Audition.*

ethno-religious background. *Beginnings* subtly demonstrates how manga can aid in the formation of trans-communal niches based on shared cultural interest. For “Muslim Libyan Arab British graphic novelist” Alfasi (Viene, 2015), manga originates from a “third continent” instead of Japan. When she moved to Scotland as a child, she had a tough time assimilating, but her manga art helped to get closer to her Scottish peers who adored her work. *The Non-Savvy Non-Commuter* does not strictly reminisce about her journey as an artist. In 2007, the year following the bombings in London, *Beginnings* was exhibited in the Piccadilly Circus tube station as a part of the rehabilitation project named Twin Cities. Ewa upholds her roots by refusing to give up her *hijab* and continuing to speak Arabic in public. But she does not condemn her chic friend Yasmin, who has undergone a “tactical rebranding” (16), perhaps in similitude to global manga itself. Rather, she advocates for the “symphony” (20) of diversity, wherein the hyperframe is an aqueous canvas of commuters who belong to different ethnic backgrounds. Ewa’s metonymic, unassuming presence is noted through her signature pair of glasses, as she blends into a sea of faces like any other. The polyphony of expressions on their faces conveys Alfasi’s sensitive regard for multiethnicity in a globalized world.

As opposed to Alfasi, Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon* underlines the bigotry that exists within the North American manga fandom. The narrative takes off with the female lead Christie’s debut participation in a US-American convention. The introverted, novice girl is overwhelmed by the astounding cosplayers. Words like noob and loser literally hang upon her person (vol. 1, 14) to heighten her naivete. The convention is a prototype fan space which synchronously welcomes and rejects. Matt, the male lead, is never seen without a pair of shades that hide his optical injury. At the con, it is easy for him to blend in. But other participants gawk when he accidentally loses his cover (vol. 2, 85). In this frame, it seems as if no one wishes to share the same space as Matt, especially when his wound is visible. Within the OEL fanbase, prejudice is often related to the idea of authentic “Japaneseness.” For example, when Bethany, an African-American illustrator’s work is praised, it vexes a fan (vol. 2, 75). For the young boy, the quality of the work matters less than the descent of the artist. But if Japaneseness is his concern, it should not matter whether Bethany is white or not. As sociologist Casey Brienza (2015) has underlined, the pursuit of community building cannot be considered arcadian, as the community itself might be a dystopic space.

With the emergence of ONJ artists, the idea of *mukokuseki* manga has approached the counter orbit of the Mobius strip of hybridity. The con-

temporary transnational practice of manga is a bricolage and defies the idea of a positivist definition. Casey Brienza claims that “[...] it is virtually impossible to comprehensively define what constitutes the ‘manga style.’ Some Japanese comics might feature characters with ‘stereotypical’ ‘big eyes’ and ‘small mouths,’ but many others do not” (2015, 105-06). Popular culture researcher Toni Johnson-Woods (2010) regards manga as a text with an impalpable recognizable sensibility. This sensibility might also be viewed as a polyphony. As manga evolves, so does the associated discourse. One might approach it through the lens of Wittgenstein’s idea of unquantifiable “family resemblances;” he enunciated that “the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some *one* fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.” (1953:2009, 36) (emphasis: mine). This “overlapping” plausibly manifests in the quest of hybridity in works of manga across the universal fandom, Japanese and ONJ texts alike.

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