5. Drawing Attention

Comics as a Means of Approaching
U.S. Cultural Diversity

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Comics are a composite text made up of words and images that, taken together, can have an impact far different from that produced by more traditional modes of narrative such as the short story or the novel. Much like films, comics rely on a visual language that encourages a more immediate processing time within the reader and, on the level of interpretation, a more “efficient” exchange between author(s) and audience — at least when compared to purely language-based mediums. This is not to suggest that comics are a more passive means of narrative (as many of its detractors have historically argued), nor does it assume any lack of ambiguity of intent or indeterminacy of meaning in graphic narratives. The images that serve as referential icons fall prey to the same kind of semantic slippage found in linguistic codes, which themselves, in the form of letters and words, also function as icons of meaning. Nonetheless, there is something relatively “direct” about an image in its ability to affect reader response. The figures that make up the comics rub up against reality in ways that words cannot, revealing the various assumptions, predispositions, and prejudices that authors and illustrators may hold.

This power underlying the comic image becomes all the more evident when placed within the context of race and ethnicity and the ways in which authors represent their subjects. As legendary writer and illustrator Will Eisner points out, comics is a heavily coded medium that relies on stereotyping as a way to concentrate narrative effectiveness. He argues that unlike film, where characters have more time to develop, the graphic narrative, with its relatively limited temporal space, must condense identity along commonly accepted paradigms. Typing characters along physical, gestural, and even occupational assumptions “speeds the reader into the plot and gives the teller reader-acceptance for the action of his characters” (Eisner 20). However, the “accursed necessity,” as Eisner puts it, of narrating through stereotypes takes on critical resonance when filtered through an ideological prism (17). Authors may expose, either overtly or through tacit implication, certain recognized or even unconscious prejudices held by them and their readers. Such art should not be taken lightly, for as history literally illustrates, the attitudes and prejudices of a culture can be greatly shaped by its caricatures, cartoons, and other forms of manipulated iconography. This is especially the case when it comes to the representations of minority populations, groups and individuals who live on — or who have been relegated to — the fringes of a society.
and whose place has historically been dictated by a more dominant culture. In comics and other forms of visual art there is always the all-too-real danger of negative stereotype and caricature, the kind of illustrative strategy that strips others of any unique identity and dehumanizes by means of reductive iconography—the big noses, the bug eyes, the buck teeth, and the generally deformed features that have historically composed our visual discourse on the other. Witness, for example, the depiction of Africans in *Tintin in the Congo* (1931), the second Tintin adventure story from Belgian writer Hergé; supportive figures such as *Mandrake the Magician*’s Lothar, *Red Ryder*’s Little Beaver, and *Wonder Woman*’s Egg Fu; Angelfood McSpade, the “lovable darkie” created by Robert Crumb for *Zap Comix* in 1968; the racially-tinged violence of Barry Blair’s comic book mini-series, *Ripper* (1989–1990); and, more recently, the twelve editorial cartoon depictions of Muhammad published in the Danish paper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in 2005 and the 2009 controversy surrounding Sean Delonas’ cartooned allusions to President Barack Obama in the *New York Post*.

To put it bluntly, comics—by necessity—employs stereotypes as a kind of shorthand to communicate quickly and succinctly. This being the case, it is up to the comics artist to tell her or his story as effectively as possible without slipping into the trap, even inadvertently, of inaccurate and even harmful representations. To paraphrase Stan Lee, with great visual power there must also come great responsibility.

This being the case, the focus of this essay is to highlight the possibilities and even the potential liabilities of using comics when teaching on matters of minority subjectivity and marginalization. It will underscore some of the broader, more general issues surrounding comics’ abilities to highlight important questions underlying race and ethnicity in America, and then move in more closely to look at a few of the comic books and graphic novels that effectively, and literally, illustrate these questions. In many ways, this study is a response to what several critics of graphic narrative have seen as a defining mark of American popular culture: its problematic relationship with ethnic difference and its responsibilities underlying racial signification. For example, in her review of the growing body of scholarship on comics, Rebecca Zurier implies that scholars should focus less on the impact made by a few “exceptional talents” or “major figures,” and more on the ways in which comics have excluded a number of marginalized voices (102). Scott McCloud has argued that in order to fulfill its creative potential—that is, be taken seriously as a creative art form and stand alongside more traditional forms of literary narrative—contemporary comics should not only directly address the current state of race relations in the United States, but also reclaim the history of minority participation in the comic book industry (*Reinventing Comics* 109). Similarly, Matthew J. Pustz sees comics as a potential medium to take on issues of diversity and otherness. “America would be a better place,” he asserts, “if [alternative] voices could be heard in forums that were more accepting of outsiders.... The truth is, we as a country need both a common (although diverse) cultural language that is used in a public forum in which everyone can participate and specific cultural sites where quirky, nonmainstream tastes and views can be allowed to grow and develop” (24–25).

An appropriate forum for this kind of cultural discussion, especially as it can reveal itself in the classroom, is the terrain of comics. There are many contemporary artists who have taken up this cause and have used their comics as a way to discuss ethnic diversity and the political issues generated by difference. In this way, they follow up on a promise made in the silver age of American comic books (roughly between the late-1950s and 1970), articulated most famously in an issue of Denny O’Neil’s *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (no. 76, April 1970). In it, an elderly African American man admonishes the Green Lantern for his
selective heroism: “I been readin’ about you.... How you work for the blue skins.... And how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins.... And you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there’s skins you never bothered with....! The black skins! I want to know.... How come??” And to this, the superhero shyly responds, “I ... can’t....” In the shadow of such sentiments, it becomes important to understand how various artists and writers use their comics to map out the cultural and historical contexts of multiethnic subjectivity (and similarly, how educators can use those illustrated contexts to teach about the ever-evolving ethno-racial dynamics of America.

In other words, despite the risks of exposing our grossest forms of objectification, based largely in caricature and stereotype, comics as a medium has the enormous potential to visualize, literally as well as figuratively, the stakes involved in ethnroracial discourse. Because of its foundational reliance on character iconography, graphic narrative is well suited to dismantle those very assumptions that problematize ethnic representation, especially as they find form in visual language. They can do this by particularizing the general, thereby undermining any attempts at subjective erasure through universalization. As Art Spiegelman makes clear, “Cartoons personalize; they give specific form to stereotypes,” an aesthetic move aptly illustrated in his Pulitzer Prize–winning Maus: A Survivor’s Tale (1986, 1991), where the mouse heads become masks, “a white screen the reader can project on” (46). Indeed, Scott McCloud points out this almost counterintuitive ability of comics to specify, and personalize, through the indeterminate. He notes that the broader or more abstract a cartoon figure is depicted—that is, the more iconic its features are drawn—the closer we come to identifying with that subject. As a result, nonrepresentational illustrations invite readers to “mask themselves” in a character and identity with his or her (or its) world. Conversely, a more photo–realistic style, which should theoretically emphasize the particularity of its subject matter, has the tendency to objectify identity by creating a distance between reader and character, and in doing so it emphasizes the “otherness” of the subject (Understanding Comics 43–44). What both McCloud and Spiegelman are describing here, in essence, could rightly be called the paradoxical effect of ethnic identification in comics. Graphic narrative, in allowing the reader to “mask” him– or herself in its non-mimetic figuration, invites empathy with the nondescrip “other” on the comic page, thereby encouraging the reader to connect to other experiences and other communities that might otherwise have been unfamiliar. In what, on the surface, may be interpreted as an exercise in passively and safely assuming a generalized or more universal (i.e., non-ethnic) perspective can actually invite(paradoxically enough)identification with a more particularized marginalized figure. Similar to the way that Gilbert Hernandez, one of the creators of the comic book Love and Rockets, puts it in a recent interview, “the more ethnic a piece is ... the more universal it is” (229).

The significance of this phenomenon to multiethnic graphic narrative cannot be overemphasized. There are many contemporary examples that bear this out, with some of the most successful comics relating to ethnic difference depicting their protagonists in the broadest of strokes. In addition to Spiegelman’s Jewish mice (playing upon the long tradition of “masking” the human in animal form) there is the minimalist style of Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis books (2003, 2004), the broadly stylized and Dan DeCarlo– and Charles Schultz– inspired work of Jaime Hernandez, the simplicity underlying Aaron McGruder’s Boondock strips, the whimsical and large-eyed moé style found in the works of Osamu Tezuka and other manga artists, the expressive and almost “cartoony” exaggerations of Kyle Baker’s comics, and the abstracted collage technique found in the works of Ho Che Anderson and Wilfred Santiago. And of course there is the ubiquitous superhero, whose “masked” identity
and abilities, and their links to American race and ethnicity, have been used in a variety of recent cases—for example, the Black Panther, Storm, Blue Beetle, Firestorm, the Atom, Luke Cage, Echo, Wolverine, the Escapist—not merely to give voice to minorities in a trite affirmative action manner, but to present a textual canvas onto which ethnic identity can be projected, debated, and even taught.

However, the significance of ethnic identity in comics is by no means limited to iconography or static imagery. The way figures are contextualized within a panel or laid out upon the page, and the manner of their physical or speech behaviors, can tell us much about how the ethnic subject is constructed. Because time is spatialized in graphic narrative, where readers see the process of character development across panels, comics can underscore the fluidity and sheer variability of ethnic identity. The breakdown of space into continuous images—that is, the paneled framing of the comics narrative—suggests the changeability of the subject, that an individual can be represented from multiple perspectives and that “the self” is less stable that we normally imagine. In this way, the formal system of comics can help reveal the dynamics of ethnoracial discourse. The very spaces of graphic storytelling—such as the word balloons, the frame of the individual panels, the gutter (that “blank” space between panels), the strip (the horizontal ban of panel arrangement), and the entire page layout itself—can foreground relational perspective between and among individual subjects. Such visual strategies are an essential component of multiethnic narrative, writing that by its very nature relies upon themes of cultural context and contingency to generate meaning. And in the classroom, the visual contexts of comics, the way that meaning is contingent upon proximity and surroundings, can be analogized with our understanding of ethno-racial identity and its reliance on perspective and environment.

The examples that follow should not only to introduce readers to a facet of ethnic and racial discourse with which they might not otherwise be familiar, that of comics, but also to encourage teachers of multiethnic writing to consider using comics in the classroom and in all of its forms. The graphic narrative is a varied medium. As such, scholars would be well served by expanding their understanding of ethnic American writing, as well as the developing “canon” of comics itself, to include a wide range of graphic narrative—from its most pedestrian expressions in the popular media, to its fanboy base in mainstream comics, to its most obscure manifestations in the niches of art culture.

One way in which we can approach comics and the way they can open up the classroom experience is by looking at how they focus on our understandings of the ethnic self. Gene Luen Yang’s 2006 graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, is a good example of this. It is the story of Jin Wang, a native-born American who grapples with his Chinese heritage and the way he is seen by his non–Asian classmates. His story is interspersed with that of the Monkey King, a figure from the classical Chinese epic *Journey to the West*, and the story of Danny, whose Chinese cousin Chin-kee is a constant source of embarrassment. Chin-kee, in fact, is the epitome of about every Asian stereotype imaginable, and Yang uses this figure to point out how racial difference is projected onto others and the discomforts it brings. Throughout the course of the novel, Jin Wang desperately tries to whitewash his identity, to rid himself of ethnic signifiers that marginalize him in the eyes of others. In a way, he is temporarily able to do so, but by the end of the graphic novel, the various storylines come together in a telling manner. When Jin Wang, who is fantastically transformed into the white Danny, fights Chin-kee and is made to confront his Chinese heritage—represented not only by the blatant stereotype of Chin-kee but also the legend of the Monkey King—he comes to a better understanding of himself and his relationship to his ethnic community.
Adrian Tomine focuses on some similar issues of ethnic identity in his 2007 graphic novel, *Shortcomings*. This is the story of Ben Tanaka, a young American of Japanese descent who is uncomfortable with being pigeonholed as an Asian. His girlfriend, Miko, is very race-conscious and vehemently supports the arts created within the Asian American community. Ben is suspicious of the emphasis on hyphenated America, and both Miko and his friends accuse him of ethnic self-hatred and of being ashamed of who he is. In a telling conversation he has with Alice Kim, a close friend whom he constantly uses as a sounding board and confidante, he reveals some of the underlying anxieties he harbors about being Asian. His relationships with women, he feels, are always compromised by the various prejudices imposed on him by others. In this particular instance, he is self-conscious about his own abilities to satisfy his lovers and wonders if there may be something to a particular stereotype, one embedded in the very title of Tomine’s graphic novel that causes him not to “measure up.” (Figure 5.1)
Indeed, racial prejudice and the struggles for equality are the defining themes in several other recent comics. In a graphic novel published in 2009, writer Robert Morales and artist Kyle Baker transform the legend of Captain America — who, along with Superman is most closely linked to the American ideal — not only to bring attention to the history of race in our country, but also to draw connections between the forms of marginalization and disenfranchisement experienced by various ethnic communities. In *Captain America: Truth*, Morales and Baker reveal the untold story of Isaiah Bradley, the black version of Captain America whose powers were the result of secret government tests on African Americans during the Second World War. In this way, the authors are able to bring into their narrative the historical facts surrounding the Tuskegee syphilis experiments conducted on black Americans between 1932 and 1972, as well as reference the more recent rumors of nefarious government involvement in the cocaine and AIDS epidemics within the African American community. Morales and Baker also use their superhero comic to draw parallels between the plight of black Americans and the various horrors experienced by European Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. Such comparisons are not intended as a way to “one up” the Jews or show that some ethnic communities have it worse than others. Far from it. The way that the authors present their version of Captain America has everything to do with the solidarity experienced by certain marginalized communities where a discussion of the tragedies experienced by one draws much-needed attention to the injustices experienced by the other. (Figure 5.2)

Other recent authors also use African American history as the gist of their comics. James Sturm and Rich Tommaso tap into the biography of the famous black baseball player, Satchel Paige, as a way of discussing the Jim Crow laws in the first half of the twentieth century. Their graphic novel is told from the perspective of Emmet Wilson, a black Alabama sharecropper who at one time dreamed of making it big in the Negro Leagues. Due to a knee injury he suffers early in his career, he is now relegated to the sidelines where he can only observe the game from a distance. We see the dynamics of southern race relations, and its expression on the baseball diamond, through Emmet’s eyes, and through him we witness the prejudice that the historic Paige was up against. (Figure 5.3) Canadian author Ho Che Anderson is also concerned with history and comics in his graphic biography of Martin Luther King. His is not a mere fawning admiration of King, but one that attempts to illustrate the many facets of the Civil Rights leader. Anderson’s version begins, in fact, with an account of Martin Luther King as told through the words of witnesses. The many narrating
voices that populate the first part of this graphic biography emphasize the many dimensions of the man, the admirable as well as the suspect. These varying perspectives of King are given added credence through the very style that Anderson employs. Throughout his text Anderson presents the Civil Rights leader though a collage format, overlapping his drawings — many of them revealing strikingly different artistic styles — with photographs from historical archives as well as illustrated versions of historical documents. Much like the cubist artist, Anderson uses the collage technique to present his subject from different angles and through a variety of perspective, demonstrating a more fluid(and human)understanding of King that resists any attempts to definitively pin down or monumentalize the man as mere legend. These kinds of cartooning strategies emphasize the sheer magnitude of Martin Luther King, not only the actual man, but a figure whose significance is based on the very way we tell our narratives and what they say about the history of race in this country.

The examples mentioned above highlight a wide variety of comics, briefly touching upon some of the historical themes and race-related issues raised in their composition. Next we turn to two different graphic novels and provide a closer reading of how they construct the ethnic other and how those constructions are anchored both to our own subject positions and to geographic space. In this way, we can see how comic artists can use their medium as a way to — literally — draw attention to the problems faced by minority cultures, bringing critical focus not only to the process of ethnic identification, but to the very limitations faced when representing the other. In Jessica Abel’s La Perdida, we have a text that illustrates how we represent individuals from ethnic communities other than our own, and how we may attempt to “place” ourselves within certain marginal contexts. In this 2006 graphic novel, Abel demonstrates the limits of ethnic representation and does so through the problematic desires that her protagonist embodies. La Perdida is the story of Carla Olivaress, a young twenty-something woman who, as the title suggests, is a lost girl, estranged from her Mexican father yet uncomfortable with her privileged American upbringing, which is linked to her mother. She travels south of the border to discover the Mexican half of her family roots, filled with idealistic and even distorted notions about what she might find. In an effort to escape the label of “tourist,” she takes a teaching job in Mexico City and becomes deeply involved in the lives of several working-class locals who live on the edge of the law. This form of dialectical engagement with Mexican culture is underscored throughout La Perdida. There are several occasions where Carla is forced to confront the true nature of her stay in Mexico City. In one scene, for example, she meets her former boyfriend, Harry, and his expatriate friends at a local bar, and there they have a violent argument. She accuses him of exploiting the culture for his own artistic purposes — he is a journalist who wants to be a writer like Jack Kerouac — and he condemns her as a simple-minded tourist. He asks her at one point, “You think because you go to art galleries and the fucking pyramids you know what’s going on in this country? You ... poseur. You tourist. You don’t even speak the language” (57). And he’s right. At this point in the narrative Carla doesn’t even know the language of the culture she wishes to embrace. This irony is brought home later in the novel during a conversation with Memo, an older native of Mexico City who subscribes to an antiquated, albeit incisive, Marxist ideology. Although Memo stands as the polar opposite of the journalist Harry — each despises the other — he, too, sees the precariousness of Carla’s situation and even frames her as a cultural colonizer, using language similar to that of Carla’s condemnation of Harry. “You come in here bringing your cultural assumptions,” he accuses her, “and then you think you can pick and choose nice bits of our messy culture! ... You make judgments and you take what you want!” (104). In these scenes, Carla comes face to
face with the reality underlying her Mexico experiences and her desires to adopt a Chicana identity. And what Carla is slow to realize, but what we as readers see through Abel’s critical presentation, is that she has more in common with Harry and consumer culture than she cares to admit. (Figure 5.5)

She discovers through the course of the graphic novel that instead of finding herself through an acquisition of ethnic signifiers — of picking and choosing the “nice bits of our messy culture,” as Memo puts it — she actually loses sight of the person she once was. Abel presents this effectively in the visual contexts that frame her text. The story of Carla’s experiences in Mexico City is narrated through flashbacks. When the novel begins, we find that Carla lives in Chicago, having once resided south of the border and returned to reflect upon her past. The memories of her Mexican experiences are triggered during a visit to Chicano neighborhood. In the first part of the narrative frame, Abel intersperses representations of Carla having lunch at a Chicago taqueria with images from her time spent in Mexico — actual paneled images that we will encounter later in the novel — setting up the textual space where Carla as a figure in her own narrative visually exists in both the present and the past. However, she closes out her narrative frame at the very end of the book by having her protagonist fade from sight. After telling her story, Carla’s face becomes lost in the crowd, leaving us with only her voice presented in subjective narration boxes, the comics

Figure 5.5 Jessica Abel. *La Perdida*. New York: Pantheon, 2006. 217.
equivalent of a cinematic voiceover. We see her in the upper two panels of the closing pages, but as the focalizing “eye” of the cartoonist pulls back, we find it difficult to locate her, so that by the close of the novel, she has completely exited the narrative space — and has literally been exiled from the text’s visual narrative. Her attempts to embrace her Mexican heritage are aborted, leaving her subjectively with nowhere to go. In these closing scenes, at least visually, Carla literally becomes a “lost girl.” (Figure 5.6)

The risks of ethnic representation is also one of the central themes in Ben Katchor’s 1998 graphic novel, The Jew of New York, a sprawling narrative that is set in 1830s New York City and deals with a host of eccentric characters. In it, Katchor critiques various acts of racial objectification and argues against an essentialized ethnic identity. He does so by linking qualities that have traditionally been used to define the Jewish subject, such as those surrounding the physical body to those of geography. Indeed, as we notice from the very beginning of Katchor’s text, in an extended spread that consumes both the inside front cover and its facing page, physiological and geographic space are inextricably linked when defining his version of New York — a city that has historically been linked to Jews in America. What we see in the opening pages is a schematic drawing of the Lake Erie Soda-Water Company, the brainchild of Francis Oriole, one of the many unconventional characters in Katchor’s novel, whose dream is to carbonate all of Lake Erie and then pipe the seltzer directly into the homes and businesses of New York City. The proposed pipelines are repro-

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Figure 5.6 Jessica Abel. La Perdida. New York: Pantheon, 2006. 5.
duced as arterial passages, pumping the “healthful” soda water that will aid the digestion (and benefit the body politic) of all city residents.

*The Jew of New York* is a meandering and heteroglossic narrative, comprised of several storylines that weave to and fro and interlink in ways reminiscent of a Robert Altman film. In the graphic novel, Ben Katchor brings together all of his diverse voices to address the question: what does it mean to be a Jew? In answering that question, Katchor metaphorically connects the body of the Jew and the “body” of nineteenth-century New York in order to map out the possibilities of Jewish identity in late twentieth-century America. Indeed, throughout *The Jew of New York* Katchor presents a series of characters who refuse to be pinned down to any one place or who seem to carry their “home space” with them, turtle-like, in their many wanderings. For example, Enoch Letushim, the Palestinian Jew and recent immigrant to the city, takes his homeland with him. He appears sorely out-of-place when he first arrives, wearing apparel that not only draws attention to his status as “other,” but also leads some to question his authenticity as a Jew, a “professional imposter,” as one of the city dwellers calls him (42). He carries with him a bag of soil from the Holy Land, selling it to place in burial sites, assuming that New York Jews will want to be laid to rest within proximity to the real Jewish homeland. Not only does Enuch’s modest occupation foreground the problem of a centered Jewish space—his “Holy Land in a bag” is more or less a “portable” homeland—but his uncertain status as a Jew, at least to those in New York City, raises questions about ethnic authenticity and how we define it.

Another philosopher of ethnic difference is Vervel Kunzo, the Jewish Berliner working for the German organization, the Society for Culture and Science of the Jews of New York City. At one point in the narrative he explains to Nathan Kishon—once a kosher butcher, but now a man known for his near-naked form—that the fleshing has helped accelerate Jewish assimilation. The silk full-body stocking, worn by those in the dramatic arts, gives the illusion of nakedness, thereby enticing Jews to leave their ghettos and enjoy the titillation of urban culture. What is important here, especially as it relates to the ethnic body and space, is not only that Jews are being drawn out of their geographic enclosures, but that physical distinctions, through the use of fleshings, are being erased. If we consider a Jewish body clad in these theatric garments, where differences of appearance are under erasure, it leads us right back to a question raised in the case of Enoch Letushim: is or isn’t this person a Jew?

And it is Vervel Kunzo, the philosophic Berliner visiting the United States, who sheds light on the significance of all of this, bringing together references to space and Jewishness as well as the themes of assimilation and authenticity. He tells Nathan Kishon toward the end of the book that the Jew is not like a museum piece, fixed and preserved in space, but ever-changing and subject to ongoing metamorphosis, depending on where he or she might be at the moment. Such an observation is significant coming from Kunzo, a man who is miles from his native land of Berlin and who himself is clothed in an Indian rubber suit. As is the case with the theatric fleshings; Kunzo’s rubber suit completely erases any bodily distinctions of difference, and this, along with his separation from his native land, makes him in many ways a wandering or unanchored Jew. What is more, Kunzo literally has the last word in the graphic novel, and he does so reading from a pamphlet concerning the Jewish origins in America. (Figure 5.7)

This brings us back to the issue of ethnic identity as a function of geographic space. As the last half of the novel unfolds, and there are more frequent ruminations on Jewish links to the New World, Katchor forces us to question not only the foundations of Jewishness, but our conceptions of American origins in a larger sense. These speculations are
brought to a head, appropriately enough, with the American Hotel, a location where most of the action in the novel takes place and the nexus for almost all of the book’s characters. Enoch Letushim asks a porter about the history of the hotel. (And it’s not insignificant here that we have a recent immigrant asking an African American porter about the origins, and the ownership, of a hotel bearing the name of the nation.) The hotel employee describes the property’s history, taking Enoch back to the times of Dutch settlers, when it was nothing more than a “ropewalk on the outskirts of the city.” But he doesn’t stop there, for in the last panel on that page, looking up at a Native American comes down the hotel staircase, the porter says to Enoch, “and before that ... you’ll have to ask an Indian” (48). By linking Jews and Native Americans in this way, Ben Katchor is “legitimizing” the American credentials of the Jews. What is more, given the sheer fluidity of identity throughout this graphic narrative, especially as it applies to space and the ethnic subject, Katchor is also expanding our understanding of Jewish identity in America, and spatializing it within the context of other marginal groups. There are few images more powerful in The Jew of New York than the last panel of the history of the American hotel: the Native American is descending from his hotel space, the Jewish immigrant is asking about the space, and the African American porter is situated in-between carrying someone’s bags. Here, as throughout The Jew of New York, Ben Katchor uses the space of the comics panel to map out the ever-changing arrangement of the ethnic, specifically Jewish, subject in America. (Figure 5.8)

These are just some of the ways in which comics and graphic novels raise ethno-racial awareness and illustrate, literally, how we represent various ethnic communities, the process of racial marginalization, the dynamics underlying class and minority status, and the links between physical space and the multicultural community. For the educator, these comics can become engaging points of debate for how we have come to frame our understanding
of “the ethnic” and “otherness.” The graphic narratives mentioned in this essay, those used as illustrative examples, are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many, many other examples of comics that highlight, either intentionally or unintentionally, the ways in which race and ethnicity(and along that those, class, gender, and sexual orientation) have informed our understandings and definitions of Americanness. For both the scholar and the teacher, comics can be an invaluable resource in exploring cultural diversity and how it has historically defined our nation. Given the visual nature of the medium, and given the sheer volume of genres and styles to choose from, comics can effectively draw our attention to some of the most pressing cultural issues facing us today. They are for many educators an untapped resource of boundless classroom potential.

WORKS CITED