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PICTUREBOOKS AND COMICS

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Although major picturebook studies have briefly noted the connections between picturebooks and comics (Nodelman 1988; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; op de Beeck 2010), the emergence of in-depth comparative studies of the two genres is a relatively new development. Such recent work tends to emphasize that distinguishing between the two forms is no easy task. Rather than shoring up the line between picturebooks and comics, scholarship points to the permeability of this boundary. The 2012 symposium "Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Books," edited by Charles Hatfield and Craig Svonkin, emphasizes the broad intersections between the two genres. As Philip Nel, one of the featured essayists, puts it, picturebooks and comics "are not fundamentally different genres [. . .] [they] differ in degree, rather than in kind" (2012: 445).

The symposium, however, also proposes that picturebooks and comics ultimately differ in ideological framework rather than form. While both are visual-verbal narratives that frequently appropriate formal elements from one another, each maintains different assumptions about childhood and presumed (child) readers. Ideological contexts, specifically the ways each genre is shaped by and participates in contemporary cultural constructions of childhood, have been explored by other scholars (Gibson 2010; Beaty 2012: 40; Sanders 2013). In "Watch This Space: Childhood, Picturebooks and Comics," a special issue of *The Journal of Comics and Graphic Novels*, edited by Mel Gibson, Golnaz Nabizadeh, and Kay Sambell (2014), several articles demonstrate how ideological as well as historical and cultural contexts are vital to comparative studies of picturebooks and comics.

This chapter seeks to contribute to this ongoing, lively discussion of picturebook-comic relationships. It reviews existing studies that compare and contrast the formal elements of the two genres, and proposes that rather than maintaining a focus on identifying formal overlaps, scholarship should also examine the purpose of appropriation of narrative techniques and devices. The chapter also argues that a deeper and deliberate consideration of the histories of comics is necessary to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of how picturebooks and comics converge and diverge. As comics' status has changed across time, the notion that the genre is necessarily subversive needs to be interrogated. Moreover, as comics have branched out into various formats, styles, and systems across time and geography, the diversity of comics in Western and global contexts needs to be acknowledged when comparing and contrasting picturebooks and comics.

A focus on form

Picturebooks and comics are generally understood as two distinct genres, and scholars have carefully parsed texts and contexts in attempts to identify exactly how the two differ from one another. Critics

concede that delineating between picturebooks and comics is not without its challenges. As Joe Sutliff Sanders reminds us, definitions of picturebooks and comics are virtually interchangeable: both tell narratives by placing images in sequence, creating interplay between verbal and visual modalities, and utilizing the page turn (2013: 57). Hybrid texts further confound efforts to distinguish between the two. Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman* (1978), Jan Ormerod's *Sunshine* (1981), Peter Sís's *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007), and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2007) are just a few of the many titles that straddle – and trouble – the boundary between picturebooks and comics. Furthermore, artists such as Crockett Johnson, Dave McKean, David Small, and Art Spiegelman have published both picturebooks and comics, an indication that practitioners themselves recognize the fluidity between the two genres.

Still, efforts to distinguish between picturebooks and comics persist, especially when those that consider formal elements. One aspect that is often identified as key to differentiating between the two is the use of panels. In comics, each page is typically divided into multiple panels, while in a picturebook, a page or spread is often occupied by a single panel. Although comics narratives sometimes use a "splash page" – a panel that takes up a single page or spread – this device means to provide emphasis. Juxtaposed with smaller panels that precede and proceed it, the splash page serves to capture the reader's attention or create a sense of surprise, awe, or climax. Panels also shape a reader's sense of time. As each panel represents what Hillary Chute calls a "[box] of time" (2010: 9), the number of panels helps pace the narrative. Hence, in comics, multiple panels create a sense of time passing in a single page, while in picturebooks time "tends to unfold over many pages" (Nel 2012: 445).

Another aspect that is frequently used to differentiate between picturebooks and comics is the types of connections between visual and verbal modalities. Scott McCloud proposes that in comics, words and pictures combine in seven ways: (1) word specific, in which pictures illustrate, but do not elaborate on words; (2) picture specific, in which words primarily serve as auditory accompaniment to pictures; (3) duo specific, in which both text and image communicate the same idea; (4) additive, in which one modality elaborates the other; (5) parallel, in which words and pictures do not appear to follow the same narrative line; (6) montage, in which the words are integrated into the fictive visual world; and (7) interdependent, in which both modalities work together to arrive at a meaning that neither the visual nor the verbal could express independently (1993: 153–155). For Hatfield, comics depend on a "tension" between text and image: verbal and visual codes work "to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other" (2005: 133). But neither McCloud's nor Hatfield's discussions of the relationships of words and pictures seem exclusive to comics. In fact, picturebook terminology used to describe the interplay of words and pictures, such as congruency, symmetry, complementation, elaboration, amplification, extension, contradiction, deviation, and counterpointing (see Schwarcz 1982; Doonan 1993; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001), echo the descriptions offered by McCloud and Hatfield.

A clearer difference emerges when considering how each genre defines spatial relationships between words and pictures. Often, text and image are more closely integrated in comics than in picturebooks. As Neil Cohn (2013) puts it, visual and verbal modalities are linked in comics in three ways: in inherent relationships, words exist as part of the visual world; in emergent relationships, words are not "embedded" in the visual world but are implied as originating from a "root" visual source, as in speech balloons and sound effects emanating from a character or object; in adjoined relationships, words are not directly attached to the pictures, although there is an implied connection between the two modalities, as in images accompanied by narrative captions. Thus comics employ multiple kinds of text-image relationships. Although Cohn does not consider picturebooks, his description of adjoined relationships is most fitting when thinking about the spatial relationship of visual and verbal modalities in the genre. Additionally, there is less proximity between words and pictures in picturebooks than in comics. While narrative captions in comics are often overlaid on an image, the verbal text in picturebooks frequently appears above or below the image, or on the opposite page.

Breaking formal boundaries: not only how, but also why

Of course, one does not have to look far to find titles that disregard the formal conventions discussed earlier. Lat's *Kampung Boy* (1979) and Renee French's *h day* (2010), marketed as graphic novels, feature single-panel pages and spreads. Pascal Doury's comics narrative *Paul* (1989) not only uses single panels per page but also relies on adjoined relationships between words and pictures, with narrative captions appearing outside and below the panels. Conversely, picturebooks also borrow formal devices associated with comics. Barbara Lehman's *The Red Book* (2004) and David Wiesner's *Flotsam* (2006) include pages that are divided into multiple panels. Mini Grey's *Traction Man Is Here!* (2005) uses inherent, emergent, and adjoined word-picture relationships, with words appearing in speech balloons, sound effect bubbles, and caption boxes, as well as in the world inhabited by the characters.

These hybrid titles remind us that the border between picturebooks and comics are permeable, even artificial. It may dissatisfy some to think that distinguishing between the two genres is a problem without a clear solution. But as Nel suggests, this predicament also reminds us that "genre itself is multiple, unstable, and always evolving" (2012: 453). In other words, the tricky issue of differentiating picturebooks and comics enables us to question the assumption that establishing rigid categories is necessary to the scholarly enterprise.

Another vein worth exploring is *why* artists co-opt tropes and conventions often associated with another genre. What narrative purpose does such formal appropriation serve? Such a question could perhaps add nuance to studies of hybrid books like *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007), Peter Sís's account of his boyhood in Communist Czechoslovakia. As *Booklist* puts it, the book is "a powerful combination of graphic novel and picture book" (Mattson 2007). As with many picturebooks, the illustrations in *The Wall* are accompanied by narrative captions at the bottom of the page. Occasionally, text also appears along the margins. Written in a documentary-like tone, these marginal notes describe the rules imposed upon Czech citizens. The book also recalls comics, as it occasionally features balloons and multi-panel pages. *The Wall*'s blending of different genre conventions can be understood as necessary to its effort to comment on political ideology. By splitting some pages into several panels, Sís emphasizes how the government sowed social division among its citizenry. The multiple, separate panels also serve as a graphic representation of how, in an atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance, Czechs resorted to isolating themselves from one another in order to avoid the prying eyes of relatives, neighbors, and the secret police.

The physical separation of text and image in *The Wall* also creates a sense of social estrangement and fragmentation. Text and image occupy different spatial planes, and the limited interaction between the two narrative modes expresses Sís's struggle with confronting his childhood memories. In order to tell his story, he uses a collage of texts and images, pasting together short narrative captions, marginal annotations, journal excerpts, black-and-white illustrations, photographs, paintings, and sketches. His reliance on multiple types of verbal and visual texts implies that as an adult artist, he recalls the traumas of his past in a disjointed rather than a cohesive manner (Saguisag 2012).

While the comics elements in *The Wall* are used to explore themes of suffering and alienation, Mo Willems's picturebook *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (2003) uses comics devices to create humor and a sense of immediacy. Willems sets the stage for comedy through the use of a cartoonish style commonly found in humorous comics strips and cartoons. The book's protagonist, an anthropomorphized pigeon, is also reminiscent of characters in 'funny animal' comic books. Meanwhile, word balloons help build intimacy between the characters and the reader. The use of balloons 'attaches' speech to the characters and sustains the illusion that the driver and the pigeon are speaking directly to the reader. While Sanders asserts that comics are typically difficult to read aloud (2013: 74), *Don't Let the Pigeon* arguably uses word balloons to imply an 'audible' dialogue between character and reader; the reader is encouraged not only to read aloud the pigeon's lines but also to respond to him. Willems also uses multiple panels to establish plot and characterization. Most of the pages feature a single panel, but Willems builds toward the climax by suddenly dividing

a spread into several panels (Figure 30.1). These multiple panels also characterize the pigeon as persistent and manipulative, showing how he employs several strategies to convince the reader to let him drive the bus.

Comics narratives also borrow picturebook conventions. Jenny Allen's *The Long Chalkboard and Other Stories* (2006), a collection of three short stories illustrated by Jules Feiffer, is marketed as a graphic novel, yet its format recalls that of a picturebook. Most of its pages contain a single discrete image with narrative captions appearing above or below it. Allen's straightforward, 'simple' prose may also remind readers of the 'easy' language of picturebooks. Especially notable is "What Happened," the second entry in *The Long Chalkboard*, as it is a picturebook-like narrative *about* making picturebooks. "What Happened" tells the story of Audrey, a children's book author who enters into a professional and romantic partnership with another author whom she previously viewed as a rival. The story

Figure 30.1 Spread from Mo Willems's *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* New York: Hyperion, 2003.

also references activities that have become institutionalized in the world of picturebook publishing, including editorial meetings, book signings, promotional events, and awards banquets.

Ultimately, "What Happened" presents a reductive view of picturebooks. Allen's story characterizes picturebooks as clichéd narratives that contain "Valuable Lessons." It also implies that adults involved in the children's publishing industry tend to act juvenile: Audrey is deeply insecure and "thin-skinned," and the "coveted Kenny Award" is named after a man who is "forty-three years old [and] still lived with his parents." That *The Long Chalkboard* is classified as a graphic novel rather than, say, a picturebook for adults, is clearly an effort to disassociate the book from a so-called childish genre.

Reconsidering the conservatism of picturebooks and the radicalism of comics

While "What Happened" implicitly criticizes picturebooks as formulaic and didactic, many adults hold a positive view of picturebooks precisely because these texts are assumed to be safe, predictable, and effective in teaching literacy and morals. Comics, on the other hand, have been historically viewed as crude, anti-intellectual, and even dangerous materials. Reformers in early twentieth-century America denounced newspaper comic strips for supposedly encouraging bad behavior in children (Saguisag 2015). In the mid-twentieth century, campaigns against so-called vulgar comic books emerged in countries in Asia, Europe, and North America (Lent 2009). The most widely documented of these attacks on comic books was led by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, whose book *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* (1954) and testimony before the US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency helped popularize the view that comic books cause juvenile delinquency and sexual deviance.

As some scholars suggest, the contrast between the ways picturebooks and comics are valued is what ultimately solidifies the boundary between the two genres. While picturebooks are generally embraced as socializing, edifying texts that "commemorate childhood and grant knowledge in culturally sanctioned ways" (op de Beeck 2012: 475), comics are weighed down by the connotation that they miseducate the young or prematurely introduce children to themes that 'naturally' belong in the sphere of adulthood. Picturebooks and comics are also shaped by different assumptions about their readerships. As Sanders states, picturebook reading is typically mediated by adults and "anticipate being read aloud by a proficient reader/viewer to a preliterate reader/viewer" (2013: 74). Comics, however, are not "chaperoned" by adults and instead assume a solitary, independent child reader (Sanders 2013: 74). For Sanders, the removal of adult mediation in comics reading is what makes the genre suspect in the eyes of adults (2013: 75–76).

Scholars seem to find the anti-authoritarian aura of comics to be particularly appealing. Op de Beeck, for example, implies that comics are more empowering and liberating for child readers when she states that the genre "retains its 'seduction of the innocent' status, whereas well-behaved picture books participate in the socially acceptable indoctrination of the innocent" (2012: 476). But the claim that picturebooks tend to be conservative and comics tend to be subversive limits our understanding of both genres. Kimberley Reynolds reminds us that despite being "highly regulated" and "orthodox," children's literature (including picturebooks) can be and has been a "breeding ground and an incubator for innovation" (2007: 15). She not only illustrates how such innovation can be seen in terms of formal experimentation, but also points to Julia Mickenberg's research on how children's literature introduces young readers to "visionary thinking and [. . .] political engagement" (16). Reynolds specifically cites the juxtaposition of verbal and visual modalities as key to radicalism in children's literature. While she identifies comics as distinct from children's literature, we can infer that picturebooks and comics, both being visual-verbal narratives, are cut from the same subversive cloth.

As we consider the radical promise of picturebooks, we also need to reexamine the assumption that comics inherently have what op de Beeck refers to as a "countercultural function" (2012: 476). Bart Beaty cautions against the "essentialism" of equating comics with subversion:

> [t]he idea that comics are subversive [. . .] seems to be little more than a defence mechanism. Condemned for much of their history by proponents of legitimated cultures, participants in the comics world have themselves adopted a rhetoric that purports to make a virtue of their marginalized social position.
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To insist that comics are fundamentally countercultural glosses over the fact that these texts have been deployed to reproduce and perpetuate the values and prejudices of dominant cultural groups. American comic books, for example, have reinforced patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon, and imperialist ideologies through sexist, racist, and jingoistic images. Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin* series (1930–1976) is a global phenomenon that still confounds critics because of its racist typographies of Chinese, Congolese, Arabs, and other non-white peoples. Moreover, mass-market comics arguably induct young readers into the culture of capitalist consumerism. While comics allow children to exercise purchasing power, agency, and independence (Kline 1993), they are also commercial products that define children's public participation as consumerist.

Moreover, it is important to note that in the twenty-first century, so-called subversive comics have become mainstream (see Saguisag 2017). From the 1970s to the 1990s, underground comix artists such as Robert Crumb, Justin Green, and Trina Robbins and alternative comics pioneers such as Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman rallied to demonstrate the artistic, social, and political significance of what was then a peripheral genre (Mouly and Spiegelman 2016). Their efforts have not been in vain: today, comics, especially in the graphic novel format, are now upheld as an important literary and artistic form. It was the critical and commercial success of comics among adult readers that motivated gatekeepers of children's literature to reexamine and eventually elevate the status of comics for children (Hamer 2013: 167–168). Comics are now promoted as appealing material for emerging and reluctant readers. The genre is also seen as effective in developing visual-verbal literacy, a skill that is perceived to be essential for young people growing up in the digital age (see Jaffe 2014). But the comics endorsed by today's teachers, librarians, and industry leaders no longer resemble the ten-cent magazines that children purchased in drugstores and newspaper stands in mid-twentieth-century America. As comics have become reconfigured as educational tools, they now resemble picturebooks more than 'forbidden' comic books. It is quite telling that the children's comics imprint TOON Books, founded by comics 'rebels' Mouly and Spiegelman, unabashedly declare that "[e]ach TOON Book has been vetted by educators to ensure that the language and the narratives will nurture young minds" (Mouly and Spiegelman). Thus children's comics in the twenty-first century are being tamed to resemble well-mannered picturebooks.

This domestication of comics has also redefined children's interactions with the genre. While earlier forms of children's comics enabled young people to engage in a private peer culture that was largely insulated from adults, they also empowered children by inviting them to participate in public culture. Certainly, the comics industry encouraged children to take part in economic culture through the act of consumption. But comics producers also coaxed young readers to play a role in cultural production. In the United States, creators and publishers of comic strips and comic books frequently entered into dialogue with their young audiences, soliciting ideas through contests and letters columns and encouraging readers to co-opt characters and narratives by including "From Our Readers" pages, in which readers' drawings and stories were published (Pustz 1999, Saguisag 2015: 117–120). So while it is commonly held that comics remove adults from the equation, history shows that producers turned comics into spaces in which children and adults could communicate and collaborate.

At first glance, it seems the collaborative aspect of comics is a feature that sets apart comics from picturebooks: while picturebooks imagine children to be relatively passive receptors of culture, comics address children as active producers and creative partners. In the graphic novel *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby* (2002), author-artist Dav Pilkey relishes in highlighting children's roles in comics-making. The cover of the graphic novel declares that authorship belongs to two young boys, George Beard and Harold Hutchins (Figure 30.2). The book also begins with an "origin story" that explains

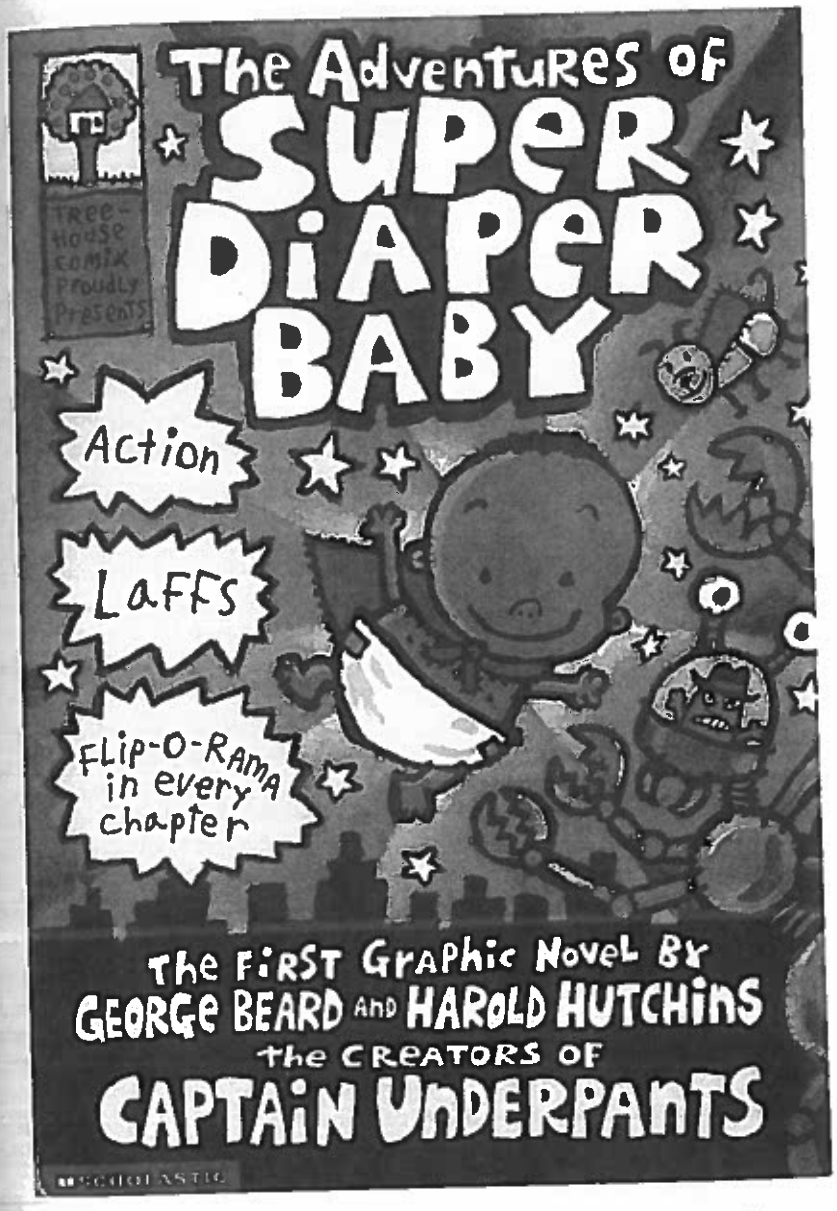

Figure 30.2 Cover of Dav Pilkey's *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

how the young author-illustrator team came to "write a comic about [a new super hero]," exemplifying young people's ability and desire to produce narratives. *Super Diaper Baby*'s unabashedly 'vulgar' content and celebration of scatological humor also implies that comics is a medium in which children can freely express their tastes and values. Furthermore, the final pages include instructions on how to draw the characters, thus encouraging child readers to appropriate the characters and create new narratives. Yet even as *Super Diaper Baby* champions the image of the child as comics creator and makes a case for comics' capacity to subvert adult authority, the book is, of course, authored by the adult Pilkey. In other words, the figure of the creative, subversive child in *Super Diaper Baby* is a fiction imagined by an adult. It seems that as today's children's comics become increasingly adult-mediated texts, they shed the collaborative aspects that marked earlier forms of comics (see Saguisag 2017).

Paying attention to the pluralities of comics

The preceding sections emphasize why it is crucial to historicize comics when comparing them to picturebooks. Comics (and picturebooks, for that matter) are dynamic rather than static, and their cultural status and relationship with child readers are not the only aspects that have undergone change. Across time and geography, comics have appeared in diverse formats and styles. In the American context, for example, comics have been published in the form of newspaper comic strips (in single tier and multiple tiers), magazine cartoons, mainstream comic book magazines, small-press and self-published comic books, graphic novels, and webcomics, with each form bearing particular connotations. Various types of comics have emerged all over the world, including Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, Italian *fumetti*, Spanish *historieta*, Japanese *manga*, Korean *manhwa* (see Mazur and Danner 2014), and comics in the African diaspora (see Repetti 2007).

Thus, when comparing picturebooks to comics, we need to begin identifying the specific type of comics we are referring to. Although panels and word balloons are often considered to be standard elements of the language of comics, there are actually multiple, unique comics language systems. In his study of American comic books and Japanese manga, Cohn acknowledges "language contact" in comics, in which one comics system appropriates techniques and signs from another system (2013: 170). However, he also carefully outlines the different grammars and morphologies of American and Japanese comics, and highlights how each language system has different "dialects" (137–171). For his part, Thierry Groensteen, who primarily studies Franco-Belgian comics, states that the assumption that comics has a universal system can be "reductive or problematic" (2011: 5).

Comparative studies of picturebooks and comics have largely ignored the multiplicity of comics languages. Future scholarship can perhaps examine more closely how and why particular comics systems are included or excluded in picturebook practices. It is likely that the enduring notion that picturebooks are 'innocent' texts determines why certain comic styles and techniques are resisted by picturebook practicioners. Perhaps the hypermasculine and hypersexual bodies that dominate American superhero comic books are perhaps too sexual (and sexist) to reproduce in 'wholesome' picturebooks.

Cultural bias could also be at play. Despite the popularity of manga among young readers, picturebook artists in the West have yet to embrace the aesthetics of Japanese comics. While there are examples of picturebooks that have adapted manga techniques (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2015: 107–111), they appear to be exceptions. Adult gatekeepers may still perceive manga as dubious texts whose language is too difficult to police. For example, a common manga technique is to draw a character with animal ears and whiskers as a means of characterizing her as a mischief-maker (Cohn 2013: 157). It may be that such manga morphology is too 'strange,' 'unsettling,' and 'foreign' to include in the purportedly comfortable, familiar realm of the picturebook.

More focused attention on picturebooks and comics in non-Western contexts can also enrich current research. For example, one can look at the unique developments of these cultural forms in the Philippines. Both genres are heavily influenced by trends in American publishing: as in the United States, picturebooks are generally embraced as educational, innocuous texts while Philippine

komiks connote crude art, slapstick humor, and cliché adventure stories. Moreover, picturebooks are more likely to be purchased by middle class families while mass-market komiks are typically purchased (and rented) by working class and poor readers. Yet komiks have also been used as a platform for political protest while picturebooks – often funded or purchased by Philippine government agencies – typically avoid questioning the political status quo. Such openness to the specific histories and contexts of picturebooks and comics outside of the global North is necessary to add nuance to scholarship. If picturebook studies and comics studies mean to rescue texts from the periphery, they need to be more purposeful in putting an end to the persistent marginalization of texts produced in the global South.

Conclusion

Comparative studies of picturebooks and comics have made significant contributions to our understanding of both genres. Some may say that scholarship is close to exhausting all possible avenues of identifying the similarities and differences between the two. Current research, however, tends to be hindered by a dehistoricized view of comics. In order to complicate and deepen our analyses of picturebooks-comics relationships, we need to put more effort in recognizing the pluralities of comics. Paying more attention to the development and diversity of comics across history and culture will allow us to generate new perspectives in picturebook and comics research.

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