

Border Studies in the Gutter

Canadian Comics and Structural Borders

In spite of the literal and metaphorical relationship between borders in comics and in culture, there is little overlap between border studies and Canadian comics studies. The history of the Canada-US border looms large over the history of English-Canadian comics; indeed, for English-language comics, American comics are the primary influence, and the Canadian mass-market comics industry came into existence largely as a matter of border trade rather than artistic intent. Borders, and their corollary gutters, are also part of the vocabulary of comics, and their literal depiction on the page helps the comic consumer to both read and understand. This paper uses readings of three contemporary Canadian comics—*Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* by Chester Brown, *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (and the rest of its series) by Bryan Lee O'Malley, and *Red: A Haida Manga* by Michael Yahgulanaas—to argue for the productive intersection of border studies and comics scholarship. These three comics offer varying readings of nation and also represent a range of use of the literal borders and gutters of the comic. The borders as depicted visually in contemporary Canadian comics serve to deconstruct, trouble, and reinforce the discussion of the narrative use of the same liminal space. As Reingard M. Nischik notes, “to enter a border region consciously means entering a liminal space” (74) where one “lies between boundaries” (213). Where the narratives of these comics address border liminality in the lives of the characters, their structures underscore both the limitations and possibilities of this in-betweenness, offering a new site of inquiry for scholars of both border studies and Canadian comics studies.

In his *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines the structural concepts of borders and gutters. The basic unit of language in comics is the panel; a comic can be a single panel, as typically seen in editorial cartoons, or a sequence of panels linked together to form a strip, a page, or a book. The edges of the panels, whether strongly defined or not, are the borders of the panel; they frame the comic's content. When panels are strung together to tell a story or frame a larger narrative, the term for the space between the borders is called the gutter. As McCloud notes, this space is where the brain perceives "two separate images and transforms them into a single idea," a concept he labels "closure" (66-67). If the visual structure of the borders and gutters, however constructed, is what makes the text a comic, then it is across the space of the gutter that readers achieve McCloud's version of closure, completing the work of the comic. In this way, borders and gutters work together to arrange the visual elements of a comic into their larger meaning. This process is part of the grammar of comics. It is the reliance on the liminal space between borders that makes comics a uniquely participatory art form.¹ But this is not a value-neutral reading of the comic page. Mila Bongco, in her work that builds upon McCloud's theory, notes that the gutter "depends on reading and understanding 'empty spaces,'" which may have very different resonances for European and Indigenous comics readers, for example (66). Likewise, Thierry Groensteen theorizes the panel "as a portion of space isolated by blank spaces and enclosed by a frame that ensures its integrity," again foregrounding the emptiness of the gutter and here asserting the line of the frame as the root of meaning-making (25). Groensteen's reading differs from McCloud's, but still suggests the primacy of a border-space in comics. Either way, then, the borders and their attendant gutters are important to the comics page, and yet go largely unconsidered by the average reader. A careful examination of the space between borders in comics offers a useful way to probe the border as a literal and metaphoric structure that has participated in the shaping of Canadian literature and culture, and to question "for whom the border performs legitimately in the first place" (Roberts and Stirrup 22). In each case in this study, the comic artist uses the visual representation of the panel border to underscore a troubled relationship to national borders.

The comics outlined in this study represent a range of approaches to the border, both structurally and narratively. In *Louis Riel*, Chester Brown uses a rigid border-and-gutter structure that serves to underscore the colonial national borders used to literally police the Métis people, in spite of the

historically ambivalent relationship between the Métis and the Canada-US border.² In *Scott Pilgrim*, Bryan Lee O'Malley offers a more playful approach to the Canada-US border that sees the border as permeable, and transgression as both possible and aspirational for young people seeking mobility and opportunity. And finally, in *Red*, Michael Yahgulanaas deconstructs the very concept of the comic border in order to redefine nationhood in an Indigenous context and underscore the imposed colonial border's impact; in so doing, Yahgulanaas develops an entirely new hybrid form he calls "Haida Manga."

What we can trace across these comics is a changing relationship to border and gutter, both structurally and thematically, from the traditional European mode of Brown's work, to the steps towards a hybrid manga-inspired mode in O'Malley's work, to a use of Japanese manga in Yahgulanaas' work that fully deconstructs the European understanding of gutter. Taken together, they demonstrate the range of approaches to border both narratively and structurally, and offer evidence for the need for more careful consideration of this space. The three comics presented here have a key similarity that shapes this reading: they are all independent artist-authored comics rather than works that separate these roles, as is common in mainstream work from publishers like Marvel, DC Comics, and Image. It is easier, perhaps, to attribute intent and purpose to the border/gutter structures of artist-authored comics created for indie presses than to those of major commercial titles that need to adhere to a house style or editorial expectations. There are also key differences in the audience for these comics: Bryan Lee O'Malley's work is created for a wide popular audience, Chester Brown's is much more literary, and Michael Yahgulanaas creates primarily for a visual arts audience (*Red* was a mural first, and the mural form continues to tour major art galleries around the world). Despite these differences, however, each comic effectively engages with the notion of border through the structural use of gutters on the page, echoing the discipline of border studies and its "complicated webs of interrelated gestures" (Roberts and Stirrup 22). In each case, the structure of the comic offers an additional space to interrogate the thematic notions of border represented in the comic and to reify the way nation and border are used narratively in the comic. The unique visual depictions of border in three comics that are all, to a greater or lesser degree, about geographical borders, allows for three comparative case studies for how comics can productively be used in border studies, and vice versa.

The Border and the History of Canadian Comics³

The Canada-US border is a significant presence in many aspects of Canadian literature, but its legacy looms especially large over the history and development of English-Canadian comics. Early comics, like politically-minded editorial cartoons, were obsessed with issues of the Canadian nation and the border. In her thorough reading of one of these comics, J. W. Bengough's "A Pertinent Question" published in 1869, Jennifer Andrews notes how the nation and the border are represented in such classic editorial cartoons. In this particular comic, Mrs. Britannia, Miss Canada, and Cousin Johnny are all represented, with Miss Canada's virtue in question as a metonym for her borders; Bengough's comic concerns itself with the question of Canada's vulnerability to America's philosophy of Manifest Destiny. Andrews notes that this comic "emphasizes the importance of this neighbourly relationship between Canada and the United States, cemented by the shared border, in sexual and financial terms" (30). This is a recurring trope in editorial cartoons of the late-nineteenth century, particularly in the years immediately following Confederation. Given the role of the editorial cartoon as the earliest version of the development of the comics medium in Canada, the historical fascination and obsession with the border as a site of conflict and anxiety from these earliest moments ascribes Canadian comics with an attention to border.

During World War II, the popular American superhero comics were no longer available for purchase in Canada due to wartime paper rationing and restrictions. Because of the huge numbers of young comics fans, Canadian artists like Adrian Dingle and Joe Bachle stepped in to fill the vacuum with comics produced in Canada. To meet the expectations of a wartime audience sacrificing for a greater good, these comics were nationalistic and patriotic in content and tone. While the comics—known as Canadian Whites in reference to the cheap paper used to print and produce them—sold well, the fledgling Canadian industry did not survive the return of American comics following the conclusion of wartime paper rationing in 1945. English-Canadian comic books would not re-emerge again until the 1970s. Indeed, not a single comic book was published for market in English Canada in the 1950s and 1960s. That comics were still purchased throughout this period, especially en masse by young people, demonstrates the economic stranglehold US comics artists held over the medium—and particularly the genre of the superhero—for two generations of fans. Since the 1970s, like many other art forms in Canada, English-language comics—now a vibrant

contribution to the literary and cultural conversation in this country—continue to be heavily influenced and sometimes overshadowed by the trends and developments of comics in the US.

The Canada-US border shapes the content citizens on either side read, not only by virtue of US sales driving much of the publishing industry generally, but because of the ways identity and representation can be challenged by the laws that govern the border. Comics are vulnerable to censorship under obscenity laws both because of their visual nature and because the audience of adult-oriented comics is regularly misunderstood to be juvenile. Indeed, the history of comics in Canada is full of examples where comics were uniquely targeted for censorship. For example, federal Bill 10 in 1949 outlawed crime and horror comics, and through the 1950s and 1960s municipal and provincial boards of inquiry into comics were created. Frequently, Canadian legislators and lay moralizers concerned themselves with the bad influence of comics from the US on innocent Canadian children (Lent 70; Ryder 149). Those involved in censorship efforts worried that the visual nature of comics made them more attractive to children and more likely to find their way into vulnerable hands. But the impact of this misguided desire to protect has been far-reaching. For example, Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium in Vancouver, BC, a bookshop specializing in queer content, has regularly run afoul of Canadian customs laws and practices, including a substantial court case regarding the importation of the *Meatman* comic book series. Proceeds from Arsenal Pulp Press' two-volume *What Right?* and *What's Wrong?* collection, which features comics artists speaking out against censorship and the chilling effect of border control, have been put toward Little Sister's legal defence.

In their recent collection of essays, *Parallel Encounters: Culture at the Canada-US Border*, editors Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup note that “the subtle distinctions between Canada and the United States have long exercised Canadian cultural producers,” and that in a global age and a post-9/11 context, the border is “paradoxically both circumvented and rendered more visible by the forces of globalization” (2). Significantly, Roberts and Stirrup acknowledge the constructed and metaphoric nature of the border while allowing for its psychological and political significance. There is space for “simultaneous acknowledgement of the absurdities of cartography and its insistence upon the national implications engendered by the imaginary line between Canada and the United States” (4). This is a useful parallel for looking at the borders in comics: where we view geopolitical borders

as cartographic choices with far-reaching cultural implications, so too the borders and gutters of comics are artistic choices that impact our reading and understanding of the comic.

Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography

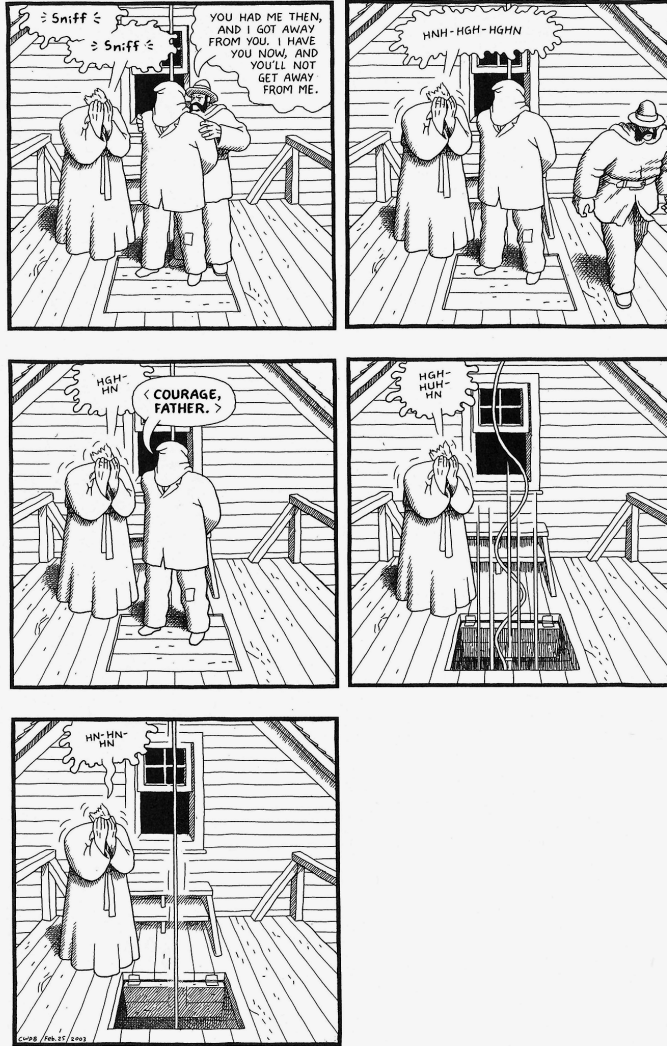
Easily the most well-regarded of Chester Brown's compositions, *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* tells the story of the Red River Rebellion and the Battle of Batoche by focusing on the rise and fall of Métis leader Louis Riel. Brown is a settler writer who positions himself as sympathetic to Riel's story: Riel's hallucinations and religiosity align with two abiding interests in Brown's work and personal life (Bell 164). Brown's careful historiography in the endnotes strives to make his process transparent, and Brown is clear that Sir John A. Macdonald is very much the villain in this sympathetic, though not one-sided, portrayal. First published as single issues beginning in 1999 before being collected as a single volume in 2003, *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* is as notable for its use of a rigid border-and-gutter form as it is for its plotting and thematics.

Nation and border are both essential to the story of Louis Riel and the Métis people, and thus are narratively important to this comic. Riel's right—and indeed obligation—to rebellion is rooted in his sense of the Métis nation as a sovereign people; it is a rejection of the British North American (BNA) definitions of nation and border. At the same time, Riel is able to use BNA-defined borders to his advantage when he must hide from those same forces, as when he escapes to Montana where Canadian institutions have no jurisdiction. Given the historical and political context, Riel is both dismissive of the border and willing to use it to his advantage. In this way, there is at least a perception that the border is flexible, in that it can be used to fulfill particular ends for Riel's project.

And yet, in his retelling of Riel's life and death, Chester Brown chooses to construct one of the most rigid panel-gutter structures of his career up to this point, in an effort to reflect the ways in which borders govern this historical figure's narrative. Form mirrors content and the reality that Riel faces as a Métis man who is ultimately hanged for his defiance of a colonial power. While Brown typically works in a consistent square panel form, his earlier works like *I Never Liked You* (1994) demonstrate a willingness to experiment with panel size and placement and, by extension, gutter size and placement. Even in his later comics with more rigid panelling, as in *Paying For It* (2011), the number of panels per page can vary. But *Louis*

Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography functions differently: each page is identically structured with six identically sized panels per page, and the gutters never change shape, even when the comic's content traverses them; in other words, though content can span over two panels, the panel itself remains rigid and unyielding to the needs of the plot. Other than the preparatory map pages, Brown transgresses this structure only twice: when Louis Riel is hanged, Brown omits the final panel; and in the epilogue, the panel that tells of the death of the Riel lineage is expanded to cover two panels (see Figure 1).

In this first example, the impact of the missing panel after Riel's hanging is visceral. Everywhere else in the comic, as Ben Lander notes in his review article, "uniformity provides a steady speed to the book, like a metronome or a heartbeat" (117). When the final page ends with this missing panel, the reader experiences it therefore as the cessation of a heartbeat. Louis Riel's death signals unfinished business and a life cut short. The absence of its visual representation is the literal manifestation of this silencing of a powerful voice and vision. As Andrew Lesk interprets it in his article, "Redrawing Nationalism," the absence suggests that "Riel's death transcends the visual medium itself" and "cannot be contained" (79). It also gestures to the many decades of silence that would follow the death of Riel vis-à-vis the Métis people and their relationship to the Canadian state. The silence echoes in the panel that tells of the end of Riel's family line, which extends across two typically-sized panels with no accompanying gutters. The Epilogue is dark and sad in tone, informing the reader of the loss of Métis independence, Gabriel Dumont's second career as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and the political successes of Macdonald. In the centre panel, the reader is told of the deaths of Riel's wife and children, accompanied by an image of Louis Riel's wife, Marguerite, with a single lamplight (Brown 241). The panel is desperate and desolate, and Brown's intended message is clear in the care he takes to underscore the tragedies: with the death of Riel comes the death of Riel's familial line. Taken together, the panels of the Epilogue serve to remind readers of the tragedy of the Métis and the victory of Macdonald's version of nation over their own; while we know this not to be the lasting legacy of the Métis people, it is the version Brown chooses to conclude his story with. While the Epilogue could have fast-forwarded to the vibrant Métis culture of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, it does not. In both cases where Brown interrupts his own rigid structure, he underscores the hopelessness of Riel's situation within this narrative.



238

Figure 1
 Copyright Chester Brown, used with permission from *Drawn & Quarterly*

The meaning in these panels exists in the slippage between Riel's culturally appropriate and politically motivated desire to view the border as a flexible construct (and his use of the border to his advantage as though he has ultimate control over the situation) and the rigidity of Brown's visual representation of the borders and gutters as structural components of the comic. The borders Brown uses are imposed upon Riel regardless of his cultural values or beliefs, and the structure they represent is immutable. In the end, the only option for transgression of these imposed structures is death: not only death for Riel, but death for his culture and people as Brown chooses to represent them in the panel quoted above. There is no triumph within this narrative, and no way to transgress the BNA-imposed borders that frame and limit Riel's life. In this way, Brown uses the structure of the comic to reinforce the political reality of the historical moment he is retelling in this story, and successfully employs the structure of his comic to comment on the role of the Canadian national borders in the narrative.

In *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, Chester Brown creates rigid panel structures in order to underscore the importance of the imposed border on his protagonist. Conversely, in *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (and indeed, in the entire series), Bryan Lee O'Malley borrows the more flexible border-gutter structure from manga comics to demonstrate the permeability of the Canada-US border, in spite of his protagonist's aspirational sense of the US as an inaccessible other.

Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life⁴

In the world of independent comics, the *Scott Pilgrim* series by Bryan Lee O'Malley has been a phenomenon for publisher Oni Press. It has garnered massive sales, critical acclaim, expensive full-colour re-issues, product tie-ins, a major Hollywood film adaptation, and even a video game. Unlike *Louis Riel* and its self-consciously serious graphic narrative style, *Scott Pilgrim* is meant to stylistically echo the manga pulp comics popular in Japan; it features the smaller (compared to typical Western publications), pocketbook-sized form of the manga comic, black-and-white images on inexpensively mass-produced paper, margin bleed and lack of a gutter surrounding the page, and characters drawn with large eyes and small mouths. The use of margin bleed and cheap paper make the comics feel disposable and ephemeral, with text frequently cut off by the edge of the page; the result is a comic that feels like it is to be consumed, in contrast with the weighty literary presentation of *Louis Riel*. The most important

characteristic of manga that O'Malley has retained, however, is the more fluid relationship in Japanese comics between panel and gutter and ordering than in Western comics. Indeed, there is no rigid or recurring structure in this series, and the number of panels and their layout changes with every page: for example, when panels appear superimposed above other panels to demonstrate the significance of a particular moment. By using this technique, O'Malley is able to play with the notion of border much more overtly than Chester Brown does.

In the *Scott Pilgrim* series, America is an aspirational destination, epitomized through the figure of Ramona Flowers, whose exoticism comes from her outsider status and cultural cachet as an American who befriends the Canadian protagonist, Scott Pilgrim. Ramona's ever-changing colourful hair, her secretive past life, and her ability to use the "subspace highways" that they "don't teach in Canadian schools" all mark her as different from Scott (*Precious Little Life* n. pag.); Scott cannot cut or change his hair out of a superstitious fear of consequences, and everyone in his world already knows all there is to know about him. Where other characters, like the aptly-named Envy Adams, aspire to obtain American citizenship and escape Toronto, Ramona has chosen to relocate to Toronto, marking her again as something Other. She chooses Canada at the same time as she mocks it. With its explicit situating in Toronto, the comic itself is doing the same.

Scott Pilgrim, as a series, is self-consciously Canadian; indeed, it can be read as O'Malley's love letter to Toronto. Within the cultural context of mainstream popular comics, it is rare to see explicit representations of Canada. As Ryan Edwardson notes, comics—like so much other mass media—remain "a cultural arena where New York overwhelms New Brunswick, and one rarely sees a maple leaf" (199). For this reason, the explicit celebration of Toronto and Canadian culture in *Scott Pilgrim* is significant in itself, particularly given the sheer popularity of the franchise. Canadian-ness is represented in the comic by the kind of cultural reference points that writer Douglas Coupland has termed "secret handshakes" of Canadian identity (*Souvenir of Canada*) consisting of ephemera like posters and t-shirts that reference specifically Canadian restaurants, bands, and institutions. These moments are sometimes plot points, as when Casa Loma is used as a big American movie set, but more often are left as Easter eggs for the savvy reader to find, such as Scott's CBC logo tee. As the secret language of the comic, they render the quotidian Canadian landscape cool by making it accessible only to an in-group subset of the comic's readership.⁵ In this way,

although the character of Scott Pilgrim thinks himself trapped in a Canada that is much less exciting than the aspirational US, the comic book series *Scott Pilgrim* positions Canada as a cool alternative to its southern neighbour.

Where the major characters of *Louis Riel* see the border as fluid, for Scott and his friends the opposite is true. In his article, “Scott Pilgrim vs. Hegemony: Nostalgia, Remediation, and Heteronormativity,” Ryan Lizardi argues that “the difference between Canadian and American characters . . . is never given much weight in the series” (255), but a reading informed by border studies productively reveals the subtle but significant experiences of place for Canadian and American characters. In *Scott Pilgrim*, one does not ever cross the border without a great cost. Ramona, for example, crosses the border as an attempt to escape her past, but her choice visits doom and destruction upon Scott who now must fight the (mostly American) Seven Evil Exes; her border transgression brings with it violence and the disruption of Scott’s world. In a later volume, Scott’s ex-girlfriend Envy Adams gains success and coolness in the US, but at the expense of her soul. Envy breaks Scott’s heart when she leaves, and returns cruelly cold to his plight and his desire to be with Ramona (O’Malley, *Infinite Sadness* n. pag.). Envy’s name is aptly chosen, because envy of her fame in the US shapes the response she receives from her old friends. It is also a name she has chosen for herself after leaving Canada, where she was Natalie V. Adams—the nickname Envy, from N.V., is emblematic of the attitude all the Canadian characters in the series have to the US. The other characters are effectively trapped in Toronto, even as they envy and desire the cultural cachet that characters like Ramona as an American, or Envy as an escapee, possess. Scott and his friends see the border—and all it represents—as rigid and fixed. They cannot cross it, and envy those who can (see Figure 2).

And yet O’Malley’s use of gutters and panels is so fluid in this book. No two pages have the same layout, and O’Malley allows characters to transgress these non-traditional gutters, as is particularly emblematic of manga. Notably, the character who does this most often is Ramona. In fact, she is the first character in the comic to do so (in response to Scott complimenting her shoes, she sticks one foot out of the panel), simultaneously reinforcing her transgressive power and her power to inspire the same kind of transgression in the other characters. The characters who most wish to emulate Ramona in order to fit in, like Knives Chau, also use this trope commonly. Because at the end of the series we realize that Ramona gives Scott the power to understand himself, Ramona is deeply tied to Scott’s understanding of his



Figure 2

From *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* by Bryan Lee O'Malley, published by Oni Press, Inc. Scott Pilgrim TM & (c) 2016 Bryan Lee O'Malley.

own identity. In this way, O'Malley uses the fluid borders and gutters of his comic to suggest that the limitations by which Scott feels controlled and restrained are ultimately of his own construction. This is the larger message of the comic's structure: what Scott realizes in the end is that his battle has never been with Ramona's Seven Evil Exes but with himself and his own insecurities, represented by the Negascott. The framing of each panel and the comic's fluid notion of gutter, border, and limitation underscore this point. Here, O'Malley uses this pop-manga adaptation to move away from the rigidity of the kind of imposed borders used in Brown's *Louis Riel*, where constructions of national borders are imposition and destiny for the protagonists. Here, the structural borders invite a reimagining of the impermeability of national borders; Ramona and Envy's transnational mobility is never questioned. It simply is.

Indeed, both Ramona's active choice to live in Toronto and Envy's ability to move between Canada and the US at will demonstrate a permeability

of border that is more apparent in the structure than the plot of the comic. Scott and his friends believe themselves to be trapped in Toronto and look upon people who transgress the border as exotic Others, but the structure of the comic itself demonstrates that borders are a flexible construct, and that those who want to traverse them can. As Scott achieves character growth over the course of the narrative, he likewise begins to see his life as less restrictive and more open, and the US becomes less of an impossible destination as his relationship to Ramona becomes more real. Simultaneously, by subtly rendering Canadian culture “cool,” O’Malley’s visual representation of Canada makes the US less of an aspirational destination. Scott can now cross the border, but he can also choose not to. This use of border is different again from a comic like *Red: A Haida Manga* that requires a radical re-envisioning of the concept of border itself.

Red: A Haida Manga

The most formally innovative of the three comics in this study, *Red: A Haida Manga* by Michael Yahgulanaas, pushes the type of engagement with manga seen in O’Malley’s work even further to create a hybrid art form that disrupts any pre-existing notions of the role of borders and gutters in comics. Here, the borders and gutters actively engage in storytelling. The comic itself is created not panel by panel, as in the traditional comic book mode, but as a mural that has been carved up to form a book; it is fine art first and comic book second. When the mural is re-formed with the pages of the book (Yahgulanaas notes that it takes two copies of the comic, once torn apart, to accomplish this), the borders and gutters take on a new life as the outline of traditional Haida animal figures. This mural form of the comic has been shown at galleries such as the Seattle Art Museum⁶ and can be recreated by any reader with two copies of the comic, disrupting the border between the accessible art of comics and the refined viewing space of a fine art gallery. In both form and content, then, *Red* is an act of disruption (see Figure 3).

Yahgulanaas is explicit about his desire to disrupt traditional modes of comic book creation in a Canadian context. He notes that traditional Canadian or North American forms are, by definition, part of a larger legacy of European colonialism. In his article “Seeing and Nothingness,” Richard Harrison argues that Yahgulanaas is explicitly critiquing “the gutter as a European, culturally-based delineation of empty space” and challenging the original European perception of “Turtle Island” as “a nothingness to be used as the observer sees fit” (68). In moving outside of a North American comic

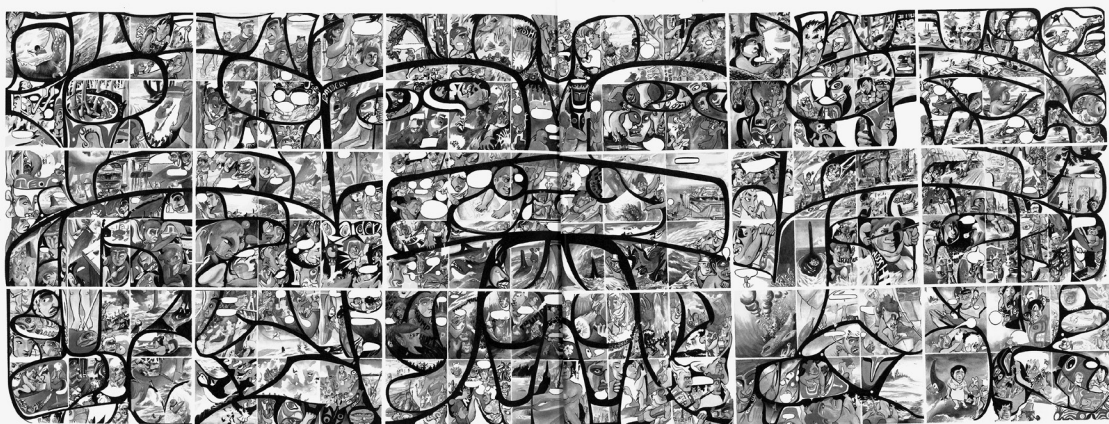


Figure 3

Red: A Haida Manga by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, 2014, Douglas and McIntyre. Reprinted with permission from the publisher. www.mny.ca

arts tradition and towards a Japanese one, writing from British Columbia, Yahgulanaas seeks to challenge the colonially imposed borders on his nation by demonstrating a hopeful Western-directed gaze towards Japan rather than an Eastern-directed gaze back across Canada. Raised in a sealing community, his childhood perceptions were shaped by the fond stories his elders told of their experiences in Japan, which represented a physical security Haida people did not experience in Canada:

[In Japan, they could] walk through the streets just like an ordinary human. They could go to the restaurant, could use public restrooms, they could shop and move freely and live freely as regular humans. Of course, that [was] not the situation here in British Columbia, in Canada, where if you're even allowed in the movie theatre you had to sit in the Indian side. (qtd. in Medley n. pag.)

Japan works here as an imagined space of distance from Canada's colonial history and the racist imperatives that underscore Britain's colonial legacy regarding Indigenous people. Japan, then, is anti-colonial only in relation to the Haida experience; and Yahgulanaas makes use of this imagined geography and constructed history to expose a larger point about using North American comics' traditions to tell Indigenous stories. To borrow Audre Lorde's phrase, Yahgulanaas resists the possibility of dismantling the

master's house with the master's tools. Japan is a useful Other that allows Yahgulanaas to step outside the British colonial frame, but Yahgulanaas does not negotiate Japan's own colonial legacy; it is not germane to his purpose. As a hybrid form, then, *Haida Manga* is removed from one colonial experience, but not all.

Yahgulanaas goes further than Lee O'Malley's fannish borrowing from manga art styles as a way to create a space of play in the *Scott Pilgrim* series; rather, Yahgulanaas' borrowing is rooted in a political and ideological argument that requires the manga tradition to work. His belief in a deep cultural connection results in a hybrid *Haida Manga* form where borders and gutters do not merely give metaphorical representation to the colonially imposed Canadian border; instead, the very construct of border is superseded by the distinctive figures of the Haida nation, visually representing the text's larger thematic interest in nation-shaping and the impact of colonialism that consumes the plot of the comic.

Red: A Haida Manga is rooted in Haida mythology. As Yahgulanaas notes, "[o]nce upon a time this was a true story," highlighting the allegorical and historical duality of the story and its role in Haida culture (1). In the comic, the protagonist, Red, allows his anger and thoughts of revenge to draw his community into a deadly alliance with a carpenter whose influence decimates the natural world and inter-tribal relationships upon which the community relies; the community becomes dependant and indebted instead to traders from outside. Red loses the ability to trust and can no longer distinguish between his enemies and his brother (Yahgulanaas 72). The message throughout the comic is that to turn away from the community and its traditional practices is to bring tragedy to the community: that the force of destruction takes the form of the carpenter suggests a connection to Christian missionaries; that the destruction is weaponized and technological suggests the material impact of colonization and its inherent violence.

The structure of the comic, however, forces the reader to consider a path out of colonization and a return to a more fulfilling way of life; the borders and gutters become, rather than the tools of oppression we see in *Louis Riel*, a representation of the lifeline of the Haida people. When viewed in mural form, what is most apparent is not the narrative of the comic but its unique structure: the borders and gutters become the spiritual Haida figures recognizable across Pacific Northwestern Indigenous art. In using the border and gutter lines to represent traditional animals and their attendant cultural significance, Yahgulanaas forces the colonial implications of the border to recede into the

background. This is in turn underscored in the narrative arc, as the border of the comic also comes to represent the through-line of Red's life. As Miriam Brown Spiers suggests, "Red finally, tragically, uses the formline as it was meant to be used: he allows it to control his life instead of attempting to manipulate it, and he demonstrates that he has become aware of his community and the importance of respecting its values" (57). In this moment, Red dies—or at least we infer that he has died. Here our reading does the work of closure, in McCloud's sense, by interpreting Red's death in concert with Yahgulanaas' thoughtful use of the gutter as Red's literal and metaphoric lifeline. But unlike the finality of Riel's death in *Louis Riel*, where death becomes the only escape from the nationalist construct of borders and gutters, in *Red* the protagonist's death represents a turning away from colonial power and a reconnection to traditional practice. Yahgulanaas disrupts expectations of what a border represents in a comics context, and in so doing makes a powerful critique of national borders as they have been imposed upon Indigenous people in Canada. Indeed, Yahgulanaas radically rejects and re-envision the border as a construct. Here, it makes meaning only when reframed from an Indigenous perspective. The border in *Red* does not rigidly impose a colonial definition on the community but instead offers a person who has, with the help of the colonizers, transgressed against the community a pathway back to self-definition. In this way, the Haida-defined border and gutter is a space of healing and true closure, far beyond McCloud's sense of the term.

Conclusion

These are just three examples of how visual depictions of the border in contemporary Canadian comics serve to reinforce, trouble, and disrupt, respectively, narrative discussions of the same liminal space. There is nothing new to the suggestion that CanLit is particularly engaged with the Canada-US border and its impact on identity, but we can nuance our understanding of these ideas by paying attention to how comics deal with similar constructs. Comics are exciting as a site of discussion for cultural ideas in part because of the space that exists between the textual narrative and the visual depiction: in this slippage, or indeed this gutter, we are required to do the work of closure to make meaning, and also to negotiate the spaces where meaning remains contradictory and open. Attending to how comics artists manipulate these borders structurally is critical work, because engaging with literal borders and their attendant gutters makes explicit our theoretical understanding of the significance of borders in literature. On the

page of a comic, the border cannot be ignored: it is grammar and narrative at once. For border studies scholars, the literal borders and gutters of comics offer a site of inquiry for the irony and slippage that occur in the figurative gutter that comes with the forty-ninth parallel.

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NOTES

- 1 McCloud offers the example of two panels of a comic: the first shows a man wielding an axe and a would-be victim, and the second shows a scream. In the space between the two panels, the reader must manufacture the murder for him- or herself. While all media make use of the viewer's imagination to a certain extent, in comics this participatory act of meaning-making is the "primary means of simulating time and motion" (McCloud 69).
- 2 For a good discussion of the history of the Métis relationship to the Canada-US border, see Michael Hogue's *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People*.
- 3 This history of Canadian comics draws upon my research for "Canadian Comics: A Brief History," published in *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (Gray 62-69).
- 4 In keeping with manga style's margin bleed, the books in the original run of the *Scott Pilgrim* series are not paginated. Unless otherwise stated, all references come from the first edition of Volume 1, titled *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*.
- 5 I had the opportunity to experience this first-hand at the Comics Forum conference in Leeds, UK, in 2012, where few people in the almost entirely European audience knew that *Scott Pilgrim* is Canadian or explicitly set in Toronto, though all were familiar with the comic; those readers who did make this connection were almost exclusively Canadianists or border studies scholars. This suggests the different registers upon which the comic operates, but perhaps more importantly underscores the significant role border studies has to offer critical readings of Canadian comics.
- 6 I had the pleasure of viewing the mural form of *Red* at this exhibition on April 3, 2015. Seeing *Red* "live" in this format allows the viewer a clear sense of how it exists simultaneously as a piece of visual art and a comic, especially because in the mural form the text is roughed-in with pencil, thereby decentering the narrative and foregrounding the larger work of art.

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