Henry Jenkins

What We Do with Comics

The Agency of Collectors in Dylan Horrock's *Hicksville*

Somewhere on the other side of the planet, closer to Antarctica than to Australia, there lies a town – Hicksville – where comics are treated with the respect they deserve. In 1998, Dylan Horrocks's *Hicksville* (1998) burst onto the comics scene, almost literally from nowhere, and focused American and British attention on Oceanic comics for the first time. *Hicksville*, the graphic novel, is Horrocks's meditation on the nature of comics, the industry's lack of respect for its own history, the willingness of creators to sell their souls for commercial success, and the narrow, myopic, and xenophobic space from which most readers construct their canon. In that sense, *Hicksville* continues the tradition of utopian literature; the creation of a utopia to turn real-world conditions on their head.

People in Hicksville are anything but hicks: They are pop cosmopolitans who read and discuss comics from all over the world; they know their medium's history and they enshrine it through local festivals; they name a local cafe after Winsor McCay's Rarebit Fiend. *Hicksville* captures Horrocks's experience of reading comics in New Zealand, a country on the periphery, but also, as a consequence, at the crossroad between many different comics cultures. From the opening line, a quote from American superhero artist Jack Kirby warning that "Comics will break your heart" (Horrocks 1998), Horrocks raises the possibility that things might be otherwise. My analysis of *Hicksville* here is an extension of the conceptual framework I introduced in my recent book, *Comics and Stuff* (Jenkins 2020), a book which drew on recent writings about collecting as a meaning-making and identity-forming activity as we construct ourselves in relation to the "stuff" with which we choose to surround ourselves.

When I wrote my book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Jenkins 1992), which celebrated the collective and individual agency of media fans, I struggled with how to discuss fans as collectors of various media artifacts. The book opens with a critique of the infamous *Saturday Night Live* sketch where William Shatner told *Star Trek* fans to "get a life," and their inappropriate desires for worthless trinkets and artifacts was a major target of its stinging satire. When I published *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who* (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), I almost removed my author's byline because I was so offended by the publisher's decision to put a picture of action figures on the cover, again representing fans as obsessive and immature consumers. I was interested in the creative expression of fans, focusing on fan

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production rather than consumption. Behind all of this was a certain degree of shame about my own collecting habits. I was not ready to share with the world what an incurable pack rat (bordering on hoarder) I am, and I lacked conceptual tools to discuss collecting and hoarding as meaning-making activities.

Through the years, my thinking started to shift as I read accounts of collecting cultures by Lincoln Geraghty (2014), the work of consumer culture scholars such as Grant McCracken (1990) or Robert Kozinets (2009), and Jared Gardner's (2012) discussion how collecting practices inspired the work of some of my favorite alternative comics creators. But it was the discovery of the work of Daniel Miller, especially his books *Stuff* (Miller 2009a) and *The Comfort of Things (*Miller 2009b), which opened me up to a growing body of writing across anthropology, sociology, museum studies, archeology, literary studies, consumer studies, and art history, among other fields, which deals with the ways we forge our identity through the objects we assemble around us, mapping our sense of belonging onto our belongings. Here, I found accounts of collecting which did not simply see it as commodity fetishism but rather as a central element in the way contemporary and historical cultures have functioned.

In *The Comfort of Things*, a series of portraits of the ways different British households along the same London Street organize their stuff, Miller writes,

> [t]hey put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishing and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy; they made the room minimalist or crammed to the gills. These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of the person or household. (2009b, 2)

These configurations of objects are an aesthetic project, just as much as Joseph Cornell's boxes were, although of a much more everyday fashion. These people are curators of their own life worlds, authors of their own identities, through materials they have collected, assembled, and transformed across their lifetimes, negotiating with others in their household about what should be displayed and cherished, and what should be culled and discarded. As Miller continues,

> [t]he aesthetic form that has been located in these portraits is not simply a repetitive system of order; it is above all a configuration of human values, feelings, and experiences. They form the basis on which people judge the world and themselves. It is this order that gives them their confidence to legitimate, condemn and appraise. These are orders constructed out of relationships, and emotions and feelings run especially deep in relationships. (2009b, 2)

Some of these choices are idiosyncratic, reflecting our unique personalities and interests; others are subcultural or perhaps broader still, reflecting shared

assessments amongst a larger community of people. As Miguel Tamen writes in his book *Friends of Interpretable Objects*,

> [a]ll over the world, different groups of people gather around various bits and pieces of the same world, attributing to them intentions, dispositions, and even languages. Some of these activities appear to be, to me at least, a little eccentric [. . .] but this may only mean that I am not a member of certain groups [. . .] There are no interpretable objects or intentional objects, only what counts as an interpretable object, or better, groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable and who, accordingly, deal with certain objects in recognizable ways. (2004, 3)

There is agency aplenty in these accounts of the logics that shape our relations with material objects and of collecting culture more generally.

Comics and Stuff (Jenkins 2020) grows out of my recognition that, while some of these conceptual frameworks have informed rich and nuanced writing about literature and the visual arts, much less has been done applying this approach to the study of popular culture, even though this focus on everyday meaning-making has been central to cultural studies, going back to Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and many of its other founding figures. As someone who still clung to the battered and torn comics I had acquired during my childhood, not to mention some of the vintage Pogo books belonging to my father that dated back to before I was born, I knew that collecting, memory, and meaning were vitally connected where comics were concerned. Comics were among the interpretable objects around which I had forged so many friendships. And because the readers, authors, and artists within comics culture were all collectors who shared overlapping frames of reference, these curatorial practices were informing what kinds of collecting stories and telling objects made their way into contemporary graphic novels. I was fascinated by the increasingly cluttered yet always meaningful mise-en-scène in contemporary graphic novels and how these depictions might shed light on how we navigate a world awash with stuff.

Comics and Stuff represents an attempt to explore the relationship between contemporary graphic novels and "stuff," understood as both material objects and the emotional baggage they carry for us. It consists of a series of essays about graphic storytellers and their relationship to the stuff in their lives, an attempt to demonstrate a new approach to comics studies that is located somewhere between formalist analysis of narrative and mise-en-scène, on the one hand, and cultural studies of everyday material practices, on the other. Such an approach allows us new ways of looking at comics composition (as much focused on what's within individual images as with the sequential dimensions of this artistic form), one which asks us to reconstruct the mental frames which collectors and hoarders alike map onto their beloved objects. This approach

recognizes that every object we see in a panel was drawn with intentionality, even as doing so adds to the creative labor the artist must perform.

In the book, I make three basic claims that make this mode of analysis possible:

1. Comics are stuff – material objects in their own right, which are appraised, collected, interpreted, displayed, bagged, stored, sold, etc., in a complex set of cultural negotiations within the context of everyday life.
2. Comics depict stuff – in ways that help bridge between the depicted world and our own, often with great virtuosity as a curatorial and citational practice, connecting graphic novels to a broader range of artistic practices (from still life paintings to scrapbooks).
3. Comics tell the story of our relationship with stuff – describing how collectors collect but also struggle over objects, how interpretable objects get passed along as gifts or inheritance signaling connections across generations in the family.

Each of my readings place different emphasis on these three claims, modeling a research agenda that I hope others will deploy in their own analysis of favorite graphic works, since it is clear that my readings come nowhere close to exhausting the implications of these basic claims.

My corpus in this book reflects a broad range of different artistic projects, but they all come from the realm of alternative comics. I am often asked whether this approach could also be applied to mainstream superhero comics, and the answer is yes and no. Yes, mise-en-scène is a source of meaning-making within the superhero tradition, but interpretable objects are more often aligned with characters and their displays of memorable artifacts from their crime-fighter careers than having specific significance for the individual artists. Because these characters and their possessions are themselves the possessions of DC, Marvel, and the other corporations, they accrue collective meaning over time, and they may take on meaning in the imaginations of individual collectors; however, they are less likely to carry idiosyncratic associations for creators who are doing work for hire and may only have temporary custody of these assemblages of souvenirs from other people's stories. I have no doubt that something meaningful can be found through looking at the stuff Batman displays in the Batcave, for example, or the various objects from Krypton that keep cropping up in Superman's life, but the tools for mapping those meanings are necessarily different as a consequence of the corporate mechanisms that give birth to superhero comics.

For the artists I discuss in the book, their "stuff" is often literarily their own belongings, as we see when Bryan Talbot shares the wonder cabinet of pop culture artifacts that I saw in his house when I visited him in Sunderland, when

Kim Deitch depicts his wife Pam's collection of black cats purchased on eBay, or when Carol Tyler shares materials from her father's scrapbooks in tracing her family history or her own scrapbook in mapping her teenage obsession with the Beatles. Their collections get raided for visual references as they are crafting their panels, and often they share the history of how these objects came in and out of their lives as materials from their collections or as inheritance passed down from previous generations. Stuff, thus, shapes the choices they make about what to depict in their panels and how to tell their stories.

Here, I am extending the book's discussion of comics *as* stuff, looking at the way *Hicksville* explores the different archival and repertoire cultures that have grown up around comics, and what it says about the experience of collecting comics. I am also interested here in what Horrocks has to say about the relationships between authors and readers within this broadly defined comics culture, a theme he expanded upon in *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015). But, first, I want to situate Horrocks's works within the particularity of New Zealand as a crossroads in the global circulation of comics.

The Utopian Imagination

The Canadian comics artist Seth captures the feeling of *Hicksville*'s many fans:

> I wish there was a Hicksville. If there was, I'd find it. I might not want to spend the rest of my life there [. . .] but I'd certainly like to visit for a month or two each year. Sometimes, when I'm reading this story (and I've read it many times) I can almost believe there is such a place. Far back, in the dustier parts of my brain, there is a tiny inkling of an idea that perhaps Dylan is writing about a real place – a safe haven for the broken dreams of all those great cartoonists who came before me, a place unsullied by the realities of the comics "industry." Of course, there is no such place. (Seth 1998, n.pag.)

Seth's hesitations say much about the utopian tradition: There is "no such place" as utopia, yet we would love to visit it if there were. Constructed as a thought experiment, the well-crafted utopia can live so vividly that readers become uncertain of its ontological status.

The central mission of the utopian tradition, Steven Duncombe suggests, is to explore alternatives:

> We need utopian thinking because without it, we are constrained by the tyranny of the possible [. . .]. To imagine something other than this takes a bold leap [. . .]. This sort of unrealistic Utopia, in its true meaning of no-place, still retains its political function as an ideal: a loadstone to guide us and a frame within which to imagine, yet it never closes off this imaginative journey with the assertion that we are there. (Duncombe 2012, n.pag.)

Duncombe argues that the utopia is not best understood as a "plan," a blueprint for a better society, but rather as a "prompt" (2012, n.pag.), which encourages people to consider other possibilities. The no-place "creates a space for the reader's imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be, and what a radically different sensibility might be like" (Duncombe 2012, n.pag.). And the utopia functions as a prompt because we do not know how to get there.

Horrocks makes a similar point when he speaks of his comics as mapping "our internal landscapes: the daydreams, the fears, the fantasies, the experiences" (quoted in David 2011, n.pag.), or, in this case, as outlining a particular vision for the future of comics:

> That's true that maps are definitions and limit the interpretation. They imply a particular interpretation and suppress the alternative interpretations. But that's why I never want a single map. What I want is an infinite atlas, an infinitely open atlas of maps. So I'm always open to looking at a new map from the same familiar landscape and finding out new things about it that I never would have thought of before.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in David 2011, n.pag.)

Maps are representations (interpretations even) of physical space; different maps of the same territory show different aspects of the depicted environment. Moreover, Horrocks imagines such maps as exceeding the limits of the printed page, as having multiple affordances, and supporting multiple layers of annotation:

> A map is not even a three-dimensional world transformed into two dimensions, it's a multi-dimensional world that includes layers of politics and history and people's emotional attachments to certain aspects of the landscape – all sort of things are feeding into the decisions that a cartographer makes about what to include in your map, what to highlight in your map, effectively what story you're telling about this landscape with the lines and colours and so on. And so you get all kinds of maps telling different things about the same landscape. (Horrocks, quoted in David 2011, n.pag.)

Hicksville offers alternative visions of comics archives, libraries, and collections, each portraying different material and meaning-making practices that might grow up around comics. In his book *Avatars of the Word*, James J. O'Donnell tells us,

> historically, cultures dependent on the written word have all shared the fantasy of the virtual library – that is, they have cherished some notion of total inclusiveness. What they achieve is always far short of anything that might be considered the totality of output of the written word for even a brief period. (1998, 40)

O'Donnell is interested in how cultures negotiate the gap between their imagined ideal of the all-inclusive collection and the reality of actual library holdings, suggesting that fantasies about libraries tell us much about what different societies value about print culture. O'Donnell defines inclusiveness in terms of

the works that the library contains, but, in the case of comics, it might include which readers are invited to engage with comics, given historical shifts that have narrowed comics readership. For Horrocks, imagining the ideal comics library doesn't just involve imagining alternative collecting and circulation practices: It also involves imagining alternative comics that have not and may never be produced because of constraints on creative expression.

Horrocks has been an active participant within those debates about the future of comics, writing an important critique of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994). Horrocks praises McCloud for modeling "a way of talking about comics that affirms and supports our longing for critical respectability and seems to offer an escape from the cultural ghetto" (2001, 1). Many people have seen McCloud as offering an expansive vision gesturing towards all the things the medium might do. Horrocks, however, called attention to the ways McCloud's definition also sets borders:

> Nowhere in *Understanding Comics* does Scott attempt to justify why 'Sequential Art' should be seen as the one definitive element in comics to the exclusion of all others: the combination of words and pictures, the use of certain conventions (e.g. speech balloons, panel borders), particular formats, styles, genres, etc. (Horrocks 2001, 2)

Horrocks, for example, explores the consequences of McCloud's emphasis on the pictorial rather than the verbal dimensions of comics or his insistence that children's picture books and single-panel cartoons were not included. Once again evoking maps and atlases, Horrocks writes about *Understanding Comics*:

> For all the exciting new territory it opens up, it is still only one map. Like any map, it presents only one way of reading an infinitely complex landscape, thereby suppressing other possible readings [. . .] The maps I use most often are those which allow me to go wherever my work takes me. (Horrocks 2001, 6)

Given his rejection of fixed borders and his desire for multiple escape routes, *Hicksville* represents a range of possible histories – and possible futures – for comics.

Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo have described *Hicksville* as offering a robust depiction of "the field of comics," documenting "the relationships between different modes of production, the role of creativity, the importance of the past, and [. . .] ethics in the future" (2016, 134). In their sociological analysis of comics culture in *Hicksville*, they chart the different characters, their values, and their discoveries over the course of the narrative. I will consider similar issues but in terms of locations rather than events, an approach consistent with Horrocks's recurring cartography metaphors. By showing us the different locations comics occupy in Hicksville and beyond, Horrocks offers alternatives for what

might be required to "save" comics, though, ultimately, he proposes a deceptively simple idea – it takes a village.

"The Ass-End of Nowhere": Comics Culture in New Zealand

Hicksville opens with the journey of Leonard Batts, journalist and critic for the expansively named *Comics World Magazine*. Batts travels to Hicksville in search of a backstory for Dick Burger, a local artist who has found success in the American comics industry. Burger discouraged Batts from making this trip: "I'm pretty sure no-one will want to know about a small town in the ass-end of nowhere [. . .] There's nothing interesting about Hicksville" (Horrocks 1998, n. pag.). The local bus dumps him on the roadside, offering no service beyond that point. He flags down a passing car, but, when Batts tells its driver his goal, the woman (who later turns out to be Grace) also refuses to take him to his destination. His laptop stops receiving signals the minute he arrives, and there are no fax machines. Horrocks depicts Hicksville as a one-street town, with the road dead-ending in the ocean. As far as Batts is concerned, Hicksville is certainly "the ass-end of nowhere" – just where we would expect to find a utopia.

But, for Horrocks, Hicksville stands for something rather different. Horrocks first conceived of Hicksville when he had been living in England for several years and began to feel homesick for the country of his origins. He wanted to draw New Zealand's beaches and buildings in his mini-comics, and, as he did so, he began to invent an imprint:

> You know, just for fun. I made up a publisher named Hicksville Press, which was run by this old lady Mrs. Hicks. I started to develop a backstory, that it was in this old store in this tiny town in Nowhere, New Zealand. And this old lady ran this press where she turned out strange comics and it really expanded from there.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in David 2010a, n.pag.)

When he returned to Auckland, Horrocks deepened his understanding of this location's potentials for his storytelling:

> As *Hicksville* also evolved, it became a story about what Maori call "turangawaewae" – which means "a place to stand" – something like a spiritual home, the place where your roots are buried deep in the earth. I was very aware that New Zealand is at the very margins of the world, just as comics are at the margins of the literary and art worlds. But both New Zealand and comics are, for me, home. They're where I come from, and where I've

> always chosen to return. *Hicksville* is about making the edge into the centre – and then seeing how the world looks. (Horrocks, quoted in PW Staff 2010, n.pag.)

Writing from the periphery has allowed Horrocks to invite readers to reconsider what they think they know about the comics medium.

Horrocks also published *Nga Pakiwaituhi o Aotearoa* (2000b), a guidebook cataloging the work of more than fifty local comics artists, coming from Hicksville Press (now the name of an actual imprint controlled by Horrocks). In the booklet's forward, Horrocks notes, "I never thought there was anything unusual about the comics scene here; it seemed small enough to me when I was growing up and I imagined there were much bigger and better ones everywhere else" (2000a, 2). As an adult, he appreciated the particular and sometimes paradoxical qualities of his country's comics culture. Tim Bollinger, another local artist, explains:

> because of the almost complete absence of a commercial framework within which the art form has developed in the United States for example, New Zealand comics have developed as something akin to a "cottage" industry [. . .]. What New Zealand comics have in common, if anything, is their environment of isolation and cultural hostility.
> (Bollinger 2000, 17)

For most of its history, Bollinger notes, New Zealand was defined primarily as a market for comics produced elsewhere – especially in Great Britain – but, even then, the flow of comics into the country was erratic. Protectionist regulation largely blocked American comics from this market until the final decades of the twentieth century. As late as 1958, the national government maintained a list of more than 260 comics titles that could not be sold there, including virtually all superhero titles. Some American adventure strips – notably Lee Falk's *The Phantom* – did remain available in New Zealand long after comics fans in the west had lost interest, and some of the country's first comics publishers started in order to gather and reprint (often illegally) these prized strips. With the rise of underground and alternative comics, a generation of younger artists emerged through the student press and self-publishing comics, especially mini-comics, for the local market.

In "A Letter from Hicksville," Horrocks described how he first encountered the work of his American contemporaries. Writing about his friend and fellow cartoonist Cornelius Stone, he explains,

> [w]e discovered *Raw* together, when a local book-exchange owner came back from a trip to the States with a suitcase full of Underground comix, which he sold from under the counter by word of mouth [. . .]. As soon as we caught sight of *Raw #3* we knew the world had shifted on its axis. In New Zealand you had to work hard to find that kind of treasure.
> (Horrocks 2000a, 27)

Most New Zealand comics are self-published, created out of passion, rather than as a means of making a living:

> We have the people who try cartooning for a while and then give it up – because it doesn't pay, it earns them no respect, they've been burned by the industry or it's just too much hard work. Some of whom are painfully talented. And we have people who spend years working on comics that no-one will ever hear about [. . .] Because here, cartoonists really do *love* comics. (Horrocks 2000a, 33, original emphasis)

From his childhood belief that there must be someplace else where comics thrive, Horrocks had come full circle, so that in *Hicksville*'s closing pages, he depicts 1950s American cartoonist Mort waking from a daydream, "I tell ya', Lou – somewhere in the world there are people who care about comics as much as we do waiting for people like me 'n' you to take 'em into places they've never been, even if no one's paying" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). If ever such people existed, they are the residents of Hicksville, as Horrocks imagines them.

Mrs. Hicks's Lending Library

Having failed to make it to Hicksville by his own will, Batts collapses and awakes in the bed of the grandmotherly Mrs. Hicks, who functions as his tour guide. "I couldn't help but notice you have a few comic books yourself, Mrs. Hicks," he observes. "Oh good heavens – doesn't everyone" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), she responds, without the slightest hesitation. In Hicksville, everyone – men and women, young and old – reads and knows a great deal about comics. Whereas Horrocks's autobiographical writings describe scarcity growing up in New Zealand, we find here only plentitude, with more shipments of new comics from around the world arriving every day. Today's batch includes a new issue of *Khalkha Komiks* from Mongolia and "some new undergrounds from Helsinki" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), suggesting a degree of comics cosmopolitanism unmatched anywhere else. The postman tolerates Batts's interest in American superhero titles, but what he really loves are British mini-comics. Hicksville can embrace a range of tastes and interests, as long as everyone loves comics in some form.

There, in the center of this one-street town, lies Hicksville Bookshop and Lending Library, curated by Ms. Hicks, and open to all on a self-serve basis: "If there's anything you're interested in, don't hesitate to borrow it" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), she explains, as Batts stares in astonishment at the rare and highly collectible comics on display. As he explains later, "I don't understand it. You've got multiple copies of every issue of *Action Comics* since Number One! [. . .] There are thousands of comics in there! Things so rare I've only read

about them!" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Batts breaks out in a cold sweat just holding some of these titles, but Mrs. Hicks takes it all for granted, "We do try to keep a good range, dear, as any library should" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.).

At a time when comics were being collected by speculators as an investment, when price guides shaped conversations amongst comics fans, and when publishers were sometimes cynically producing alternative covers or renumbering their issues to create more collector's editions, Mrs. Hicks seems totally uninterested in comics' exchange value: "We don't pay any attention to that sort of thing in Hicksville, although I understand some of the early numbers are rather hard to come by these days" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Part of what gives this imaginary library poignancy is the sense of precariousness, as we imagine how these precious objects would be handled by people elsewhere – how many of the rare titles would walk away in a system where there is no oversight, how many of the pages would be smudged and damaged in a world where comics retain their value only in pristine condition. Implied here is the idea that a different comics culture would generate an alternative set of collector ethics – one based around a sharing rather than hoarding economy, one based on cultural rather than economic value.

While in the real world, there are some material libraries and archives with important collections (The U.S. Library of Congress, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at the Ohio State University), Mrs. Hicks Library, lacking any formal institutional status, is much closer to what Gail De Kosnik (2016) describes as a "rogue archive," one which develops its own norms and practices to reflect the fan community in which it is embedded. De Kosnik defines "rogue archives" in terms of a set of digital practices, but leaves open the possibility that it could also refer to a material collection like this one. She writes,

> constant (24/7) availability; zero barriers to entry for all who can connect to the Internet; content that can be streamed or downloaded in full, with no required payment, and no regard for copyright restrictions (some rogue archivists digitize only what is already in the public domain); and content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution. (De Kosnik 2016, 2)

Just as De Kosnik sees the "rogue archive" as modeling an alternative to existing libraries, Mrs. Hicks's material practices – freely accessible, widely circulating, without regard to copyright constraints, outside traditional institutions, etc. – also suggest other ways archives and libraries might operate.

Dick Burger's Stash and Emil Kopen's Studio: Commerce and Art

Horrocks contrasts Batts's trip to Hicksville with two other journeys: Sam Zabel's trip to America to visit his boyhood friend Dick Burger and Grace's adventures in the mythical country of Cornucopia. In the first instance, we see Sam standing in Dick's private vault, looking through long-boxes of rare superhero comics. "Not a patch on Mrs. Hicks, of course, but not bad considering" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), Sam concludes. If comics in Mrs. Hicks's collection are a shared social good, Burger's comics are his own personal stash, a privatized resource from which he can steal ideas for future issues of his *Lady Night* titles. Cut off from a larger social context, comics become "licensed properties."

From the moment Batts arrives, it is clear that Burger has done some unspeakable wrong for which his hometown community cannot forgive him. This subplot recounts his futile efforts to win back Sam's respect so that Dick's boyhood friend will share some hometown stories at the gala inducting Burger into the Comic Book Hall of Fame. Batts admires Burger as a creative genius, but Burger embodies everything Horrocks sees as wrong with contemporary comics. Burger's commercial success is undeniable: He flies around on a private jet, owns a major media empire, hangs out with top film stars, hires Dire Straits to perform at his pool party, and treats Stan Lee as his flunkie. Burger embodies the franchising of contemporary comics culture, his formulaic stories are important only as intellectual property for other media sectors. Burger generates brutal and semi-pornographic versions of a simple, earnest Golden Era superhero, "Lady Night." The big-screen movie based on Burger's highly popular "Arterial Spray" storyline, for example, depicts the scantily clad Lady Night – "the tits are part of the costume" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.) – decapitating her foe, Deathscum, with dental floss. Burger's soulless search for fame and fortune is contrasted with another local artist, much more respected by the community there – Tisco. Grace explains: "His magnum opus keeps getting longer and longer, and the title changes daily" (Horrocks 1998, n. pag.). Tisco only shows one page at a time to some lucky reader, only to box it and never share it again, and, above all, he never talks to publishers. Tisco produces purely from a love of comics, uncompromised by market expectations.

While Sam Zabel in *Hicksville* rejects Burger's offer to join his Eternal Comics empire, Dylan Horrocks was seduced by DC's advances in the wake of *Hicksville*'s success, spending several frustrating years writing for DC (*Batgirl* #39–57 [2003–-2004]) and Vertigo (*Hunter: The Age of Magic* #1–25 [2001–2003]). Horrocks, ultimately, learned the hard way what Sam Zabel grasps in only a few pages:

> DC really doesn't exist anymore to create great comics. It doesn't even really exist to sell comics. The primary existence of DC now is to serve as an intellectual property platform for Time Warner. (Horrocks, quoted in David 2010b, n.pag.)

For those who saw *Hicksville* as a manifesto for an alternative comics culture, his time in the commercial mainstream was seen as selling out, whereas Horrocks was frustrated by the lack of creative opportunities when working with other people's franchises.

Horrocks describes Cornucopia as somewhere near Peru or Africa; "It's hard to keep track after a while" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Here, comics are not treated as industrial product; they are an art form, perhaps even a philosophy, as Grace discovers when she visits the studio of Emil Kopen, the country's greatest comics artist. Kopen shares with Grace what he sees as the strong parallels between comics and maps:

> These maps tell stories, which is to say they are the geography of time [. . .]. These days I have begun to feel that stories, too, are basically concerned with spatial relationships. The proximity of bodies. Time is simply what interferes with that, yes? [. . .]. You are here near me, like a bright flame. That is more important than why or how you are here. The things we crave are either near us or far. Whereas time is about process [. . .]. Behind such processes there is a stillness; and in that quiet exists spatial relationships which transcend time. (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.)

Whereas Burger and his contemporaries in the American comics industry pursue dynamism, Kopen sees comics as transcendent and contemplative: Words and images work together to map the relationship of objects and bodies across space and time. Horrocks had originally sought to extend this short chapter about Kopen and Cornucopia into a full-length graphic novel, "Atlas," but this work remains unfinished, leaving these few pages as a tantalizing glimpse into another comics-utopia. In *Hicksville,* Horrocks provides his most vivid representation of comics as art and philosophy, as a means of individual creative expression, as an extension of national culture, and as a means of reflecting on the human condition. One would be hard pressed to apply any of these values or functions to *Arterial Spray*.

Kupe's Lighthouse: A Beacon for Comics Creators

By the book's concluding chapters, Batts has fallen over a cliff and been rescued from the sea, waking up in yet another library – this one, the secret library housed in the island's lighthouse. Here, he discovers room after room of treasures, "all of these hundreds of important comics that nobody's ever heard of"

(Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Here are previously unsuspected works by the medium's greatest artists – Harvey Kurtzman, Wally Wood, Rodolphe Topffer, Winsor McCay, and Jack Cole among them; such works were never produced in the real world because these artists had no outlet to pursue such projects. The library also contains comics by fine artists, such as Picasso, Dali, and Lorca, who, in reality, never produced comics because of the form's debased cultural status. The fantasy is that, across the twentieth century, the best comics creators sent their brain children, often still in manuscript form, to the lighthouse for safe keeping. Sometimes, Mrs. Hicks prints a limited run, and they circulate amongst local residents. But, often, these artifacts are simply stored away, awaiting a more appreciative readership someday, somewhere. As Kupe, the lighthouse keeper and librarian, explains:

> The official history of comics is a history of frustration, of unrealised potential, of artists who never got the chance to do that magnum opus, of stories that never got told – or else they were bowdlerised by small-minded editors, a medium locked into a ghetto and ignored by countless people who could have made it sing. Well, here it is. The other history of comics. The way it should have been. The masterpieces. The great novels. The pure expressions. Going back hundreds of years. (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.)

Kupe has a calling, not simply a job: to preserve and protect this "birthright." Kupe is named after "the mythical first settler of Aotearoa, the Maori name for New Zealand" (Pilcher and Brooks 2005, 278). Not coincidentally, Kupe was the pen name Horrocks used for some of his own earliest comics. By the book's end, Batts has returned, transformed by his experiences in Hicksville, planning to lock himself away in the library and read to his heart's content. When Seth and others say they want to go to Hicksville, this is the library they have in mind.

Kupe also answers Batts's questions about how Dick Burger alienated this community of comics lovers, whose ethos stresses collective good rather than personal gain. As a young man, Burger had shown real potential and serious ambitions, but when others read his work as autobiographical, Burger felt exposed. So, he began to copy comics from the library, at first to master his own technique, but later to gain more creative distance from his work. He sold out his artistic ambitions for commercial success, violating Hicksville's taboos by stealing a text from the secret library, adapting it for a more "contemporary" readership, and publishing it as his own. In doing so, Burger made his fortune in America, but lost his way back home.

Here, we see a somewhat romantic conception of art – one that celebrates art primarily in terms of individual expressive genius. Great artists produce great art, and great art endures, even if, or especially if, the culture is not ready to embrace it. Such a perspective risks oversimplifying the relations between

culture and commerce – commerce is the enemy of creativity – rather than seeing commerce as sometimes providing the preconditions for meaningful expression. The lighthouse keeps the public at bay, but Horrocks is also interested in what happens when the public embraces cherished cultural materials as resources for expressing their own identities.

Hogan's Alley Day: Rituals and Repertoires

Kupe's library is an archive, a bounded collection of materials that gain value primarily by being removed from circulation. James J. O'Donnell (1998) describes such collections as reflecting the particular status of knowledge in a print-based culture:

> Surely it is not self-evident that the words of other times and places, frozen forever in unchanging form, should live on indefinitely, in ever accumulating, geometrically expanding heaps; even less self-evident that human beings preoccupied with the real problems of their present should spend any appreciable amount of time decoding and interpreting the frozen words written by people long dead. (O'Donnell 1998, 32)

The emergence of print, in this account, supports a conception of knowledge as something that can be accumulated and stored, researched and catalogued, outside the flow of time.

Diana Taylor has contrasted the archive with the repertoire, which, she tells us

> enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge [. . .]. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (Taylor 2003, 20)

Print culture encourages archives, but repertoires thrive in oral-based cultures. When we describe comics (and often their readers) as "semi-literate," a slander thrown their way by many through the years, we may be signaling the ways comics readers negotiate between the textual and the performative, between the archive and the repertoire. Many aspects of embodied knowledge reach the page through the depiction of characters' gestures, stances, and proximity to each other: Meaning emerges in the space between characters, as Kopen suggests, but also in the gaps between words and pictures. Comics artists convey emotional states through bodily signs that depend on shared social knowledge; they show us more than any author could tell us.

A *Hicksville* sequence set during the town's annual Hogan's Alley Day party envisions comics culture as a repertoire, as townspeople perform their relationship to beloved comics texts. As depicted by Horrocks, the event breaks down the boundaries between different forms of comics – characters from underground comics (Ziggy the Pin-head) co-exist with the American comic strip tradition (Popeye, Charlie Brown), superheroes mingle with characters from Herge's *Tintin*, and Grace even shows up dressed like a figure from Kopen's art comics. Some costumes are worn year after year, a central aspect of the townspeople's identities, while others are handed down or swapped off, bearing memory traces of their previous performers. Sam surprises his neighbors by dressing as Charlie Brown after many years as Robin, whereas Helen has borrowed Grace's Batgirl costume, which she has long admired. Wearing these costumes involves a step outside of normal social relations – a mild form of carnival – yet it also solidifies those relationships, making each community member's fantasy life visible to the others.

Batts's presence is disruptive – he literally does not know his place; he has no history in this community; people do not yet know what he values. Batts dresses as Dick Burger's Captain Tomorrow: "I figured if I can't get anyone to talk by being friendly, I'd try being provocative. People let all kinds of things slip when they're angry" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Batts almost comes to blows with several hot-headed townies. The repertoire is more fluid than the archive; it evolves over time, allows for new meanings and identities, but its underlying logic must be respected if the community is going to maintain its coherence.

Understanding comics culture as a repertoire of social practices, rather than an archive of collected texts, reflects Horrocks's growing recognition of what comics mean from the perspective of their readers:

> I don't believe I have the right to set the terms by which people access my material, nor where they take it from there. Once I've written a story or drawn a comic – certainly once I put it out into the world by publishing it (online or on paper), that comic is out there living its own life and interacting with all the people who come across it. It's like having kids. Once you've brought them into the world, they're not actually your property to do with as you will. You have a very important relationship with them, and you deserve to have people respect that relationship. But in the end, they're in the world and they have their own life. Eventually other people will have relationships with them as important as yours – and it's not fair to try to dictate those terms until the day they die.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in Spurgeon 2011, n.pag.)

The Hogan's Alley Day sequence illustrates what happens when comics become a vital dimension of their readers' social lives – not something to be preserved but something to be performed. Here, we see a classic example of what Lincoln Geraghty calls "transformative nostalgia," describing the ways that fan communities may shift the meaning and status of objects (whether Lego sets in his

case or comics in ours) "from childhood to adulthood" (2014, 164). in Hicksville, adults come together to play with images and costumes drawn from those comics that had been meaningful to them as children and deploying this iconography to reconfigure their social relations with each other. *Hicksville* suggests that no matter how much we seek to shift the status of comics into the realm of art, there still remain vital links to a prepubescent world where such questions felt less relevant than the secret identities and powers of our favorite superheroes.

The Readers' Playground: *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*

This alternative conception of comics readership forms the backbone of Horrocks's most recent graphic novel, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015) – a several-decades-belated sequel of sorts to *Hicksville*. Expanding upon his conception of comics as closely related to maps, Horrocks has discussed the place of world-building in contemporary popular culture, a concept he traces from literary utopias and "fairylands" through comics and video games. Artists construct worlds as "playgrounds" in "an attempt to understand something" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.). But "once the playground is built, others can come and try it out – hopefully gaining their own insights and understandings along the way" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.). Such an approach regards "viewers, readers and users as active, interactive participants" as each person "brings their own contribution" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.), modifying the work – if only in their imagination – to make it a better vehicle for personal and collective needs. Horrocks concludes,

> [t]his is not to say that the artist has no influence on how his or her artwork will be experienced [. . .]. If you put up swings, people will come and swing on them. But equally, some will use them as imaginary rocket ships, others will twist the chains to see them spin and some adventurous souls might even shinny up to the top of the poles, using them as a climbing frame and not a swing at all. (2003, n.pag.)

Here, we may come back to Duncombe's idea that the utopian novel serves as a "prompt" for speculation and a resource for conversations. All imaginative works open worlds that are only partially contained within their pages.

In *The Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015), the central archive is a selection of comics from across history, representing a mix of genres, all contained within an Otaku girl's book bag. Readers can enter fully into these comics' worlds, taking

the stories in their own directions, integrating their visions into their own dream life. Early on, Horrocks pokes fun at the pretensions of Alice, who shares her fan fiction with Sam:

> It's mostly a collection of nerdy wish-fulfillment fantasies – inserting my thinly disguised alter ego into movies, books, comics, or TV shows I like. But I also try to unpack the underlying ideologies of pop culture tropes and genres, the gender politics, racism, heteronormative bias. (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.)

Sam's eyes pop as he sees what she's done with Harry Potter. By the end, Sam appreciates that, where pop culture fantasies are concerned, one size does not fit all. Sam has the discomforting experience of being transported into one comic book after another whose world view jars with his own, finding it frustrating to get caught up in "someone else's fantasy" (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.). "Ha! Welcome to my life!" Alice explains,

> I'm a geek, but I'm also a girl. Fantasy is what I live for. But most of the imaginary worlds I spend my time in were made up by men – often with some pretty icky ideas about women. So I've learned to take those imaginary worlds and make them my own – subverting them to serve my fantasies – not theirs. (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.)

Such a perspective would not have seemed out of place in *Hicksville*, where women are just as apt as men to read comics and their content reflects this more diverse audience. But Alice's identity pushes against our world's comics market. She has to work harder to situate herself and her fantasies in the comics she enjoys.

If *Hicksville* defends the rights of artists to make the comics they want, *The Magic Pen* suggests that those rights extend to the reader. By the end, Horrocks more or less completely breaks down the walls separating the two. Comics are a resource, he suggests, through which many different people map their experiences and express their fantasies. The new utopia is not simply a library of the great comics that were never produced, but rather a space where diverse people have the capacity to tell their own stories. Yet, this more expansive role of the reader involves some loss, since he understands these readers in highly individualized terms: Despite the reference to gender and subcultural identity as shaping how Alice reads comics, Horrocks imagines each reader pursuing their own tastes which cannot be fully appreciated by others around them. The reader's interpretive freedom destroys the "village" represented in *Hicksville* – a small town where, regardless of their tastes, everyone shared a common love of comics. But *The Magic Pen* and *Hicksville* embrace an expansive notion of the stories comics might tell – with his protagonists finding themselves inside everything from mid-century space opera to schoolgirl manga, from medieval broadsheets to countercultural fantasies. Taken as a whole, these imaginary worlds represent an appreciation of

graphic storytelling every bit as broad as that displayed by Mrs. Hicks's lending library.

Hicksville and *The Magic Pen* both tap a body of vernacular expertise and shared experience between readers and storytellers alike. Dylan Horrocks assumes a reader with a broad knowledge of the history and culture of comics, with a shared critique of how contemporary comics publishing operates, with shared fantasies about what a better alternative might look like, and with a mutual longing for a place – maybe multiple places – where comics received the respect they are due. These relationships to comics are expressed here both with regard to the material objects – comics as stuff – and to the repertoire of practices, performances, and fantasies that represent the diversity of the community that has grown up around that stuff. Across the two books, Horrocks pays tribute to the diverse kinds of stories comics have told (or might have told) in different historical and national contexts and the diverse communities of readers they have (or might have) attracted.

How's stuff with you?

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