

EDITORIAL

COMICS WERE NOT CONSIDERED TO BE ESSENTIAL, and it was for this reason that their importation was prohibited under the War Exchange Conservation Act of 1941. This law made it possible for Canadian publishers to produce their own comic books for the domestic market, and many of them introduced characters that seemed to embody national qualities or characteristics, such as Brok Windsor, Nelvana of the Northern Lights, Derek of Bras d'Or, and Johnny Canuck. As cartoonist Leo Bachle recalled: "We used to look in the American books and see all the heroes. Every book had a hero; every country had a hero. We never had a hero here." Unfortunately this project was short-lived, as none of the titles were able to compete with the American comics that flooded the market after the ban was lifted in 1945.

In the early 1950s the Massey Commission reported that Canada's cultural development was threatened by the influx of American culture, and it recommended increased funding for the arts, including the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts and the expansion of the National Film Board. It did not recommend any subventions for comics, however, as it concluded that popular culture "prosperes best in the field of free enterprise."

It was not until the 1960s that Canadian publishers began to produce underground comics for the newly emerging counterculture. This led to the "alternative boom" of the 1970s and 1980s, when numerous companies entered the market, but this period of rapid expansion was soon followed by an implosion, as most of the companies either went out of business or were purchased by American competitors. The only titles that survived the collapse tended to be small-press comics, as independent artists had effectively established a parallel economy that was impervious to market trends. In Winnipeg, for example, the Free Kluck Comix Group published *The Notorious Hatte Brothers Gang* (1980), *Snapshots* (1981), and *Drunk Comix* (1981), and Kenny Moran published *Lil Elzonian Spacenaut* (1982). In Toronto, Chester Brown published *Yummy Fur* (1983-1985), Peter Dako published *Casual Casual Comics* (1983-1985), and K. G. Cruikshank published

No Name Comix (1984). In Vancouver, Colin Upton published dozens of minicomics, including such titles as *Self-Indulgent Comics* (1985-1989), *Famous Bus Rides* (1986-1987), *Tales of the Terrible Teatotaler* (1987), and *Canadian Squalor* (1988). In Montreal, Julie Doucet also published *Dirty Plotte* (1988-1989). These minicomics offered an alternative to mainstream comics not only because they were free of editorial constraints, which encouraged formal experimentation and allowed for content that was often considered obscene or taboo, but also because they expanded the range of possible genres for graphic narratives, including autobiography, journalism, and history.

Several new publishers entered the field in the 1990s, but most of them published only a handful of issues. One of the few exceptions was Chris Oliveros' *Drawn & Quarterly*, which began publishing minicomics as alternative comic books, including Brown's *Yummy Fur* (1991-1994) and Doucet's *Dirty Plotte* (1991-1998). *Drawn & Quarterly* also repackaged some of this material in the form of graphic novels, such as Brown's *The Playboy* (1992) and Doucet's *Lift Your Leg, My Fish is Dead!* (1993), and the success of these books clearly demonstrated the appeal of the new format, as they granted comics a certain degree of cultural respectability. The most telling sign of this shift was that cartoonists like Brown and Doucet also began to receive grants from the Canada Council. The postwar initiatives designed to nurture Canadian culture were thus applied to comics as well, as they were finally seen as essential.

Our summer issue features a selection of alternative Canadian comics that reflect a wide range of different genres. The section begins with an interview with artist Fiona Smyth, who reflects on the history of Canadian minicomics, the function of comics as a form of political critique, and the relationship between comics and the art world. Her comic "The Somnambulae" also illustrates the kind of formal experimentation that was possible in minicomics, as it deals with the themes of trauma and recovery through a surreal tale of death and rebirth. Michel Rabagliati's comic "Les Paulardises"—a parody of the popular Quebec cooking show *Ciel, mon Pinard!* (1998-2000)—similarly deals with the themes of death and rebirth through the story of a chef who magically brings his grandmother back from the grave to teach him her legendary risotto recipe; however, this recipe proves to be merely a springboard for a more serious conversation about the nature of life and death. While Rabagliati's story presents a positive depiction of the

immigrant experience, the excerpt from Tings Chak's graphic novel *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* (2017) examines the experiences of immigrants placed in detention centres, and it clearly describes the alienation experienced by many detainees as well as their efforts to protest the practice of indefinite detention. The excerpt from Sean Karemaker's graphic novel *Feast of Fields* (2017) also addresses the immigrant experience, as the artist describes how he first learned about his mother's childhood in Denmark and how he subsequently began to visualize his mother's homeland in his dreams. Colin Upton's comic "The Digital Divide" similarly explores the relationship between dreams and reality by contrasting the artist's imagined version of what life must be like on a contemporary university campus (based on what he reads online) with the actual conditions on the ground. Diane Obomsawin's comic "October's Story" also describes a friend's personal account of how she first realized that she was gay, and Alison McCreesh's comic "Shack Mama" describes the experience of motherhood from the perspective of someone living in the far North. Rebecca Roher's comic "Joy" is a journalistic essay that describes an interview with a 99-year-old woman who still lives on her own in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. This moving portrait of quiet resilience is contrasted with Susan MacLeod's comic "Relative Strangers," which relates a more humorous anecdote about her experience visiting a distant relative in a labyrinthine health care facility. The excerpt from Donald Calabrese's forthcoming graphic novel *Coady* also describes the history of Rev. Dr. Moses Coady, a Catholic priest who was best known for his role in the Antigonish Movement and whose work inspired a wave of co-operative development across the Maritimes. This section then concludes with two essays that address the topic of alternative Canadian comics in different ways. While Dominick Grace's "Collecting, Preserving, Hoarding" examines how one of the leading figures in contemporary Canadian comics distances himself from the realm of mainstream comics by critiquing the commodification and fetishization of comic books, Laura A. Pearson's "Alternative Canadian Comics" argues for a narrower interpretation of this term as a category that explicitly promotes multiculturalism and challenges unitary identities.

Our summer issue also features two new chronicles: Christopher Elson's review of recent concert and festival highlights and Jerry White's review of Spike Lee's film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) and a new retrospective of Jim Henson's early work.