

Back to the Roots: Contemporary Kazakh And Mexican Graphic Novels

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## **Abstract**

The pre-colonial setting has been a great source of inspiration for young comic book artists in Kazakhstan and Mexico. If artists such as Eduardo Ancer and Gonzalo Alvarez use pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, its ancient culture, and mythology, Kazakh artists such as Madi Musabekov and Orazkhan Zhakyp heavily focus on Turkic mythology and the formation of the Kazakh Khanate in their works. The trending search for cultural background and ancestral reconnection can represent an interesting stage of postcolonial development and the formation of cultural identity among the youth. Unlike Mexico, which has fought for its acknowledgment in postcolonial studies, Kazakhstan still cannot redefine its post-Soviet experience as postcolonial. Both countries, similarly to many other postcolonial nations, have been experiencing a crisis of cultural and national identity, particularly the youth that stays in-between cultures. With the reemergence of transculturalism, which proposes acceptance of cultural fluidity, there is a challenge in its co-existence with the reinforcement of precolonial history through graphic novels. Since the project focuses on the cultural identity of youth, graphic novels demonstrate a promising discussion of postcolonialism and contemporary youth resistance. Thus, with this project, I attempt to redefine the concept of ‘postcolonial graphic novels’ and analyze the reconstruction of Kazakh and Mexican cultural identity through postcolonial and transcultural perspectives.

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### ‘Back to the Roots:’ Contemporary Kazakh And Mexican Graphic Novels

As an interdisciplinary field – postcolonial studies have gone through continuous adjustments and expansions to include neglected areas and propose new perspectives considering sociopolitical changes. Despite the constant development of the field, a growing number of scholars refer to the missed opportunities for the ‘English-language postcolonial theory’ or the North Atlantic postcolonial authors to acknowledge the contributions of Latin American critics and writers such as Angel Rama and Fernando Ortiz. While Latin American post-coloniality has been established through the fight of numerous writers and has been continuously developed to this day by various scholars of political science, anthropology, literature, sociology, and other disciplines, Kazakhstan’s role in the field stays extremely ambiguous. Due to the country’s lacking effort in fighting for the acknowledgment of its colonial experience and the field’s neglect of the ‘post-Soviet,’ a comparative analysis of Mexican, as a representation of Latin American post-colonialism, and Kazakhstani literature, as one of the post-Soviet and Central Asian examples, demonstrates a promising and a unique analysis in the field. The colonial heritage of both the Spanish and the Russian conquests has evidently produced “important and lasting effects on national identity and cultural formations of Latin American” and Central Asian nation (Salvatore 2010, 340). The issue of the contemporary legacy of colonialism – a challenging reformation of cultural and national identity, or as Salvatore refers to it ‘past-in-present,’ is the condition that can “help understand contemporary concerns relating to neoliberalism, globalization, international migrations, new social movements, and the cultural hybridity that impregnates most global cities” (339).

The search for cultural background and ancestral reconnection has inspired writers and artists around the world to incorporate myths and symbols of the culture in which they

grew up. While some creators use mythological elements in their artistic production unknowingly, others deliberately aim for their projects to be mediators between modern audiences and ancient cultures. Saadi-Nejad explores the use of ancient period as a trending setting in contemporary artistic projects (either a novel, a comic book, a painting or a film), and finds out that artists often “reinterpret” and “reuse” prehistoric motifs rather than retell the factual history of their ancestors (2009, 236). Due to their combination of both visual and textual forms of entertainment, graphic novels become an essential source of such representation. Additionally, graphic novels, not being necessarily targeted at a particular age group, still end up being a literary form more appealing to children and young adults than to older generations. The age group that constitutes the major part of the audience is a significant aspect in our understanding of graphic novels’ aims and functions across cultures since they either present the universality or the uniqueness of the pre-historic theme in contemporary literature. Furthermore, “unintentionally” targeting the younger generation, graphic novels thematized as ‘back to the roots’ in this work, immediately acquire educational and nationalistic purposes, which raises questions of the deeper motivation of the creators and wider connotations of the readers’ perception. As postcolonial nation-states experiencing crises of cultural identities, Kazakhstan and Mexico demonstrate the reinforcement of ancient mythology and history that challenges the current objectives of the transcultural approach in understanding nationhood and culture.

#### Kazakhstan And Mexico’s Post-Coloniality

The role of both Mexico and Kazakhstan in the postcolonial world, although on various conditions and due to different sociopolitical reasons, is a debatable and a long-lasting argument. The internal colonization of the Kazakhs, from the period of the Russian tsarist empire to the Soviet Union, created ambiguity and continuous debates on Russia’s ‘modernizing role’ that distanced the Russian-Kazakh experience from traditional

colonialism. By traditional colonialism, we often refer to the European expansion into Africa and Asia, while Kazakh-Russian experience has been interpreted as “voluntary annexation” (*dobrovol'noe prisoedinenie*) to Russia<sup>1</sup> (Noda 2016, 35). Kazakhstan’s (post)colonial conceptualization is a “complex and messy process,” the future of which seems to be complicated due to the “continuing relations with Russia” and “dependency on both ‘our [Kazakhstan’s] geography and demographics” (Kudaibergenova 2016, 920, 918). Neither of these complications has been present in independent Mexico’s fight for acknowledgment in the postcolonial discourse. Evidently, the 300 years of Spanish rule (1519-1821) left its strong cultural legacy with the settlement, Spanish language, and Catholicism. However, the geographical and political relationships of today’s Russia and Kazakhstan create a different connection and a stronger dependency between them than the ones between today’s Spain and Mexico. Unlike Central Asia’s experience under the Russian rule, Latin American encounter with the Spanish Empire has usually been perceived as colonialism. However, as the development of the field suggests, the general acknowledgment of colonial experience does not constitute the acknowledgement in the postcolonial discourse. Specifically, in *La Invención de América*, Edmundo O’Gorman, one of the most influential figures in the establishment of Latin American post-coloniality, argues that America was not discovered, but invented or created<sup>2</sup> (1995). “A book with a big de-colonialist burden” discusses the myth of the Eurocentric ‘discovery’ that led to the ambiguity of post-colonial conceptualization (Ramirez 2010, 26). Despite multiple authors’ active contribution to acknowledge Latin

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Kazakh Khanates between the Russian and Qing Empires*: “A conference was held in September of 1981 that celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abulkhair khan’s 1730 petition for Russian subject status as ‘voluntary annexation into Russia” (Noda 2016, 35). This is a reference to the 1981 speech by D. Kunaev, the First Secretary of the Communist party of the Kazakh SSR.

<sup>2</sup> Edmundo O’Gorman in *La Invención de América [The Invention of America]*: “Hacía falta sujetar a un examen crítico los fundamentos de la manera habitual de entender el suceso, de suerte que emprendí una investigación con el objeto de reconstruir la historia, no del “descubrimiento de América,” sino de la *idea de que América había sido descubierta*” [It was necessary to hold a critical examination regarding the foundations of the understanding of the event, so that we undertake an investigation in order to reconstruct history, not of the “discovery of America,” but of the *idea that America had been discovered*] (1995, 10). All the translations are the author’s own if not otherwise indicated.

American role in postcolonial studies, Ramirez and other scholars such as Mignolo and Klor de Alva believe that the scholars did not create a structured discourse but rather “established the Latin America’s postcolonial bounds” and set a “prototype of what will eventually come to be known as ‘postcolonial discourse’” (Ramirez 2010, 25; Fiddian 2000, 8). Therefore, Mexico and Kazakhstan, due to generally similar, yet significantly unique reasons, have been facing complications in becoming fully-fledged members of the postcolonial discourse.

Obviously, as a post-Soviet country for less than three decades, Kazakhstan is in its early stages of the fight for the acknowledgment in the field, while Mexico that gained its independence 200 years ago, had already built a strong foundation in postcolonial studies. Despite the newly gained independence, Kazakhstan’s, and generally Central Asia’s, role in postcolonial studies is receiving more scholarly attention. John Heathershaw questions the long-lasting emergence of transition and democratization literature in Central Asian studies. In his article “Central Asian Statehood in Post-Colonial Perspective,” Heathershaw discusses the comparability of Central Asian post-Soviet experience with the academically established postcolonial nations such as India and numerous African states. Similarly, scholars on Latin American post-coloniality often refer to the radical difference between American and Indian or African colonial experiences that constrains (or should constrain) us from reusing the established framework universally. In the case of Kazakhstan, the issue of applying theories developed for British colonialism becomes secondary as even Kazakhstan’s postcolonialism “is not universally accepted” yet, and questions such as “when or to what extent Central Asia was, is or will be historically postcolonial” are still open (Heathershaw 2016, 2). Central Asia’s lack of engagement with postcolonial theory and “the failure of postcolonial studies itself to engage with the former Soviet Union” results in the increasing complexity of youth’ perception of the Soviet experience, as well as the contemporary, independent, and now globalized identity formations (2016, 3). Although ‘post-Soviet’ is not widely considered as

‘postcolonial’, scholars such as David Chioni Moore also question the neglect of the post-Soviet experience in postcolonial discourse. In his article “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?” Moore is curious in “how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet Union are and how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact” (2001, 114). Hence, due to the increasing acknowledgment of Kazakhstan’s post-coloniality and despite the “major anomaly in the field of postcolonial studies” of not considering post-Soviet countries in line with others (“although the discourse is supposed to recognize the multiple and overlapping colonialisms elsewhere”), I consider Kazakhstan a previously colonized nation in its unique post-colonial development process (Heathershaw 2016, 3).

The lack of postcolonial literature, to which Heathershaw is referring in his article as one of the “prominent explanations for the absence [of post-colonialism in Central Asian countries],” itself demonstrates an effect or the aftermath of the colonial enterprise (Heathershaw 2016, 2). Specifically, in Kazakhstan, there is a widely accepted notion of the “positive aspect of the Soviet experience” and the general modernizing role of Russia. The relative absence of the Soviet experience in the postcolonial discourse thus can be considered as a consequence of mutual (mis)representation of shared history. One of the strongest reasons used to separate Russian expansion from postcolonial studies is internal colonization<sup>3</sup>. Since Russia’s internal colonization “blurred the classical understanding of colonialism” and Kazakh subjugation (the ‘voluntary association or annexation’) keeps creating ambiguities, there is a mutual denial of the colonial relationships that seems to complicate the reformation of the cultural and national identity of the Kazakhs (Kudaibergenova 2016, 920). Moore underlines that Soviets might be considered as “simply differently configured colonists’ referring to the “mass and arbitrary relocation” of both

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<sup>3</sup> See A. Etkind’s *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011), especially Parts I and II for an insightful and detailed analysis of the concept

Russians and non-Russians,” “the ironic Soviet national fixing of countless formerly less defined identities,” the fact that the Soviets were “often as lethal to their Russians as to non-Russians,” and the devaluation of specifically Russian identity (2001, 123). The complexity of post-Soviet post-coloniality thus presents continuous denial not only from the former colonist side, but also from the ex-colonies, which causes the lack of postcolonial literature that Heathershaw refers to in his article, and the continuous crisis of cultural and national identity. The mental enslavement that remains during the post-colonial period creates a non-acceptive behavior as a power acquisition from the imperial forces. Thus, denying the colonial experience, redefining it as a post ‘union’ period, and alienating from the global postcolonial literature phenomena, the newly establishing Kazakh identity entered a challenging route that we can investigate through the postcolonial lens.

The concepts of mental enslavement and emancipation are also widely discussed among scholars on Latin American post-coloniality. The complexity of Mexican identity development reflects various stages of the nation’s history and demonstrates the issue of repeated forced assimilations. Spanish conquest restructured the political system, destroyed old buildings, implemented the Spanish language, and Roman Catholicism so that the combination of Indian with Spanish traditions gave birth to a new country with its own national and cultural identities. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the newly established Mexico had been creating and settling down with the blended culture, when French and English invasions left a strong cultural legacy too. Subsequently, the geopolitical and sociocultural influences of the USA have created another wave of “struggle for self-definition that continues to this day” (Fiddian 2000, 121). In *La Filosofía Como Compromiso y Otros Ensayos*, Leopoldo Zea states that “la emancipación política debe seguir otra emancipación, lo que llaman *emancipación mental*” [political emancipation should be followed by another emancipation that is called mental emancipation] (1991, 57). Undoubtedly, Kazakh and Mexican

experiences with mental emancipation and cultural identity (re)formation have been going through different complications, but none of the existing frameworks can predict or structurally and ‘usefully’ analyze the following development of both nation-states, including their literature. Claiming or fighting for the acknowledgment of only “North America, Anglophone European settlers, Native Americans, and contemporary Francophone populations” as post-colonial people, we are diminishing not only the previous inferiority and subjugation experiences of other cultures, but also limiting the theoretic possibilities of postcolonial studies as a field (Heathershaw 2016, 3). Thus, despite the general acceptance of Latin American postcolonialism that “suggests the existence of a regional body of knowledge under that name”, there is no structurally established corpus of work on Latin America commonly recognized as ‘postcolonial’ (Coronil 2006, 221). Dealing with the issues of acknowledgment in postcolonial studies, both Kazakhstan and Mexico, although on significantly different stages, are in the state of postcolonial re-reading of previously written literature and (re)establishment of postcolonial nature of the contemporary one.

#### Graphic Novels as the Means of Reconstructing Youth Identity

Expressing postcolonial trauma, rewriting colonial history, and illustrating the political/social aftermath of external domination, postcolonial comic books such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* became the central case studies in the discourse. These works also became one of the most notable graphic novels that contributed to the legitimization of contemporary sequential art. Starting from the “unnatural alliance” of the “juxtaposition of text and image on a printed page,” postcolonial comic books and graphic novels became “not just art, but a radical form of political, economic, and social” representation (Groensteen 2009, 8, 1-2). Although the concept of ‘postcolonial comic books’ is present in the scholarly discussion, labeling works as ‘postcolonial’ “can be confusing

when applied to particular contexts in particular comics” (Dony 2014, p. 12). For example, *Maus* illustrates the life of a Polish Jew during the Holocaust, and *Persepolis* presents Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. Neither of the two works is associated with traditional colonization as it referred to European expansion into Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, the post-coloniality of the works is rarely, if never, doubted.

What defines graphic novels’ post-coloniality, and possibly other literary forms’ as well, is not only the depiction of traditional colonization but also the traumatic experience caused by the inner (inside the country such as revolution) or outer (conflict with foreign countries such as war) dominance. The depiction of traditional colonization, as Dony suggests, can even encounter more criticism in being labeled as postcolonial than works such as *Maus* and *Persepolis*. He discusses *Bitterkomix*, a South African underground comics journal, which primarily criticizes Dutch settlers in an extremely radical way. Although *Bitterkomix* is relatively obvious to be labeled as postcolonial, scholars, like Dony, still demonstrate the challenges of such labeling. One of the reasons to doubt *Bitterkomix*’ post-coloniality is in the fact that the graphic novel has not emerged from artists who “belonged to the marginalized black or colored part of the population,” but came from within the “then dominant culture of the Apartheid regime itself” (Dony 2014, p. 12). Therefore, the ethnic background of writers, artists, or generally founders of works that claim to express ‘post-colonial’ ideas presents an extreme importance in the establishment of their post-coloniality. Indeed, the founders of *Bitterkomix* come from “a white middle-class background and were raised in the traditional Afrikaner context” (Dony 2014, p. 12). This example, thus, demonstrates how graphic novels can complicate our discussion of post-colonial labeling and what postcolonial comic might be. The trend for pre-colonial setting in Mexican and Kazakh graphic novels and comic books itself is an example of such complication. There is an increasing number of works about Mexican history, the Aztec Empire, the pre- and the post-

colonial experience, current US dominance, and other aspects of its struggle by non-Mexican artists. Meanwhile, Kazakh experience with coloniality issues has expanded only into scholarly articles in various fields from sociology to anthropology but is still far from expanding to graphic novels and other children's and young adults' literature.

*Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* and *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* are representative examples of the general trend for the pre-colonial setting. Having them as case studies, we can see how the already established postcolonial framework can or cannot explain the progression of identity reformation in newly (Kazakhstan) and early (Mexico) independent countries. Franz Fanon, one of the pioneers of postcolonial theory, widely discusses every major aspect of postcolonial development, including the strive for the roots, in his works such as *The Wretched of the Earth*. The three-stage process of resistance against a colonial enterprise that he proposed in the essay "On National Culture" (from the collection mentioned above) written in the early 60s' targets colonial intelligentsia, who, in his view, should be in the lead of rebuilding national culture. The three stages of resistance include mimicry of colonizers, going back to roots untouched by the colonizers, and active resistance and liberation<sup>4</sup>. Fanon's theories and arguments examine African nations and the concept of colonial literature and the revival of ancient cultures as an act of liberation from the colonial domination might seem as easily and absolutely correctly applicable perspectives on any post-dominance nations. However, previously colonized or heavily dominated nations present their unique experiences and challenges, even though the broader issues with establishing identity are universal. Without diminishing the role and importance of Fanon's model, I would argue that neither Mexican nor Kazakh post-coloniality should be limited to

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<sup>4</sup> See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth*. 1961. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1967

the early theories that cannot consider contemporary changes in the understanding of culture, newly developing approaches, and the specificities and capability of graphic novels.

Other prominent figures of postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said, also discuss the concept of a post-colonial writer. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak continually argues that colonists should not and cannot express and reproduce the colonial experience of the subalterns<sup>5</sup>. Postcolonial works that are supposed to give voice to the voiceless and demonstrate the perspective of the oppressed on their own history, become a subject of constant doubts, and arguments. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon also draws attention to the key aspect of post-colonial works – the perspective of the colonized. He says that “the colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope,” which cannot be the case if a colonist or a non-oppressed party decides to contribute to the post-colonial writing (Fanon 1967, 231). The questions of who can write post-colonial works, how those works should be written, and what should they aim to represent are an open discussion since ‘postcolonial’ remains a much “contested label in itself even to this day” (Dony 2014, p. 12).

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica has been a great source of inspiration for contemporary comic book creators in and outside Mexico, among both Mexicans such as Eduardo Ancer, Cristina Betancourt, Rodolfo Perez Garcia, Gonzalo Alvarez and foreigners of other ethnicities such as Paul Guinan from the US. Although on a lesser scale due to its early stages of development, Kazakh graphic novels have also been utilizing themes of Turkic mythology and history. However, unlike pre-Hispanic themes, early Kazakh culture has not yet found enough interest from Kazakh immigrants and foreigners worldwide to be illustrated in an

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<sup>5</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” from C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313.

outside production. Works such as *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times*, *Erketai*, *Tomiris*, and *Zhetisu*, are all published by ethnically Kazakh artists in Kazakhstan, but in the Russian language, which in turn provides us with different questions for the discussion of postcolonial language utilization. While the graphic novels produced in the US by ethnic Mexicans can create a discussion of a modern wave of domination from the US pop culture or/and English language, works that have been published in Mexico in the Spanish language provide us with a completely different, yet closely related, the notion of going back to the roots. Illustrating precolonial, which are the Aztec Empire and Kazakh Khanate, periods, artists incorporate historical figures and events that are considered to be ‘national treasure’ in modern Mexico and Kazakhstan. Although there is no possibility to pinpoint a period in a particular culture when it had zero external influence, such as trading, war, migration, etc., the notion of ‘cultural purity’ finds its place in a discussion of roots and identity. Thus, if a period can be labeled as ‘free from external mentality’ or ‘authentic’ there is an adequate reason for a pre-colonial time to be perceived as such by contemporary generations in their route for cultural/national identity establishment. Saadi-Nejad, who was mentioned previously, claims that mythological themes in contemporary art often presented as something ‘forgotten’ and thus important to be revived. He also mentions that “in a general sense, the collective rituals and customs... with their deep, often forgotten roots, have a clear and profound presence in” contemporary works, where usually “a divine figure from prehistoric times is re-imagined” and “mythological themes are... re-interpreted and given new meanings and significations” (2009, 236; 232). Neither of the graphic novels claims historic accuracy, but rather underline the fictional and imaginative nature of the plot and characters mixed with documented legends, rituals, historic events, and real figures. They are fictional stories that focus on ancient mythology and history while showing the adventures of the protagonists. The relatively peaceful plots that do not imply colonization, the aftermath,

or any traumatic experience, can still constitute as post-colonial writing since the primary function of the works is to educate younger generations on the richness of their roots, raise awareness of pre-colonial traditions, and locally replace or level off with comic books produced in the US, Europe, and Japan.

*Aztlán: La Leyenda De Los Cinco Soles [Aztlán: The Legend of the Five Suns]*

The creative team of *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* places the readers into an era of the Fourth Sun, a cycle of creation in Aztec doctrine, under whose light Mesoamerican empires had flourished. Although based on certain historic events, *Aztlán* is a fictional history, to which the writer of the work refers as “todo un mundo nuevo [...] que fuera basado en nuestra cultura [...] y que no debería estar ubicado en la vida real” [a new world based on our culture that should not be located in real life] (Solis 2018). In the interview given to Camilo Solis, the coordinator of Mexican *Illustrations Historietas Fair*, Eduardo Ancer point out that *Aztlán* was an “un ejercicio de imaginar qué hubiera pasado si nunca nos hubieran conquistado, [...] qué hubiera pasado si la gran ciudad de Aztlán existiera” [an exercise to imagine what would have happened if they (Spaniards) had never conquered us (Mexicans), what would have happened if the great city of Aztlán existed?] (Solis 2018). Thus, the artists were able to invent history based on ancient beliefs and myths, and as Ancer told the interviewer, paying careful attention to “su cosmovisión, sus vestuarios, sus herramientas, sus armas, cómo comerciaban, cómo peleaban” – “todo eso que nos hace únicos” [their worldview, costumes, tools, weapons, how they traded, and how they fought – all that makes us unique] (Solis 2018). The interview gives the audience an opportunity to place themselves apart from the graphic novel itself and see what has been behind all the process of writing the story and illustrating it until the end product. There is a vivid emotionality from Ancer when he is asked about the motivation to represent particularly Pre-

Hispanic times. “Siempre me he cuestionado ¿por qué la gente no se siente orgullosa de nuestras raíces? ¿Por la derrota con los españoles? Nuestros pueblos fueron grandes, sabios, hermosos y es hora de que todo el mundo lo sepa.” [I have always wondered why people do not feel proud of our roots. For the defeat with the Spaniards? Our villages were great, wise, beautiful and it is time for everyone to know it] (Solis 2018). Ancer’s outrage explains that illustrating the pre-Hispanic period, the creative team was not trying to deny the conquest by deliberately skipping the colonial period and “jumping” far to the ancient time, but rather attempted to celebrate their history and pre-colonial identity in order to educate the younger generation on history and mythology in an entertaining way.

Although Mexico gained its independence 200 years ago and traces of Spanish conquest such as language have emerged into the national identity, contemporary influence from the US generates an identity crisis in Mexico. Due to foreign cultural influence, Ancer claims that it is their [artists’] responsibility to “contar historias de nuestras raíces” [tell stories from our (Mexican) roots] (Solis 2018). *Aztlán: La Leyenda De Los Cinco Soles*, as a significant majority of Mexican comic books and graphic novels, is published in the Spanish language. The concept of Nahuatl literature, or *Yancuic tlahtolli*, appeared only recently, in the 1980s<sup>6</sup>. Although a considerable part of the Mexican population preserved the language and use it on a daily basis, the disappearance of Nahuatl literature for more than 250 years had obviously influenced the continuous diminishing of its status. The intention to promote roots and pre-colonial culture can definitely be strengthened if written in the native language. Although the question of using the colonist language, which already became a part of the modern national identity and blended into the mixed cultures, is not an active issue among comic book publishers, I assume that Spanish language presents a list of reasonable

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<sup>6</sup> See Jongsoo Lee, “Emergence and Progress of Contemporary Nahuatl Literature,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol.39(1), pp. 29-58

advantages. Similarly to Chicano/a literature in the US that usually uses code-switching of English and Spanish languages, Mexican comic books have an opportunity to code-switch between Spanish and Nahuatl. In “Chicano/a Literature: ‘An Active Interanimating of Competing Discourses,’” Hepworth claims that “code-switching can have a ‘boundary levelling function’ since it caters to both Spanish and English and thus allows for the ‘widest possible audience participation’” (1999, 176). Since the number of Spanish speakers is significantly higher than of Nahua speakers, Spanish becomes a safe language for a developing genre such as comic books, allowing the widest possible audience. While more attention is being paid to Nahua literature, it does not yet include comic books that are in the process of legitimization as a genre/form. Thus, using native Nahuatl language that is supposed to strengthen the idea of cultural revival, can oppositely cause risks of limiting the diversity of readers. As one of the major languages in the world, Spanish also gives opportunities to young artists to raise awareness of their works and contribute to the international legitimization of specifically Mexican comic books, which is less likely to happen with Nahuatl. Therefore, native language as a resistance tool in literature can demonstrate its effectiveness with genres such as novels, while comic books are first in a greater need to be recognized academically before limiting its already limited audience.

Comic books provide artists with both textual and graphic elements to represent the cultural uniqueness of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. While the use of the Spanish language is reasonably ‘justified’ due to production efficiency, the abundance of popular drawing styles in relation to indigenous pictorial traditions is an ambiguous issue. *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* demonstrates an influence of Aztec Codices in its portrayal of mythological characters and legends, while the predominant style of visual narrative is based on the mixture of European and the US models. In “The Path from Aztlán to Mexico,” Navarrete discusses the visual narration in Mesoamerican codices and points out that it is surprising that

“few historians have analyzed Mesoamerican codices systematically as visual narratives, although parallels with other similar genres, such as comic strips, film, or even animation storyboards, have been suggested by several authors” (2000, 31). Although the role of codices in popular genres has received more attention since Navarrete’s article, the primary question they refer to is if comic books are the precursors of modern-day comic books. However, a comparison between the modern portrayal of roots in graphic novels and the Mesoamerican pictorial traditions “can be quite enlightening” especially in regard to their role in reinforcing the precolonial cultures as a tool of resistance (Navarrete 2000, 36). One of the key features of Mesoamerican codices is a complex and varying depiction of time and space that radically differs from the “western tradition, such as annals and maps” (31). Modern comic books also demonstrate incorporation of space and time into a single visual narrative, but with a significant legacy of colonial adaptation, “which preserved their narrative foundations while incorporating many of the conventions of European art” (31). The creators of *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* have pointed out that their “principal fuerza narrativa” [main narrative strength] is based on “Códice Borbónico, El Códice Vindobonensis y el Borgia” [The Codex Borbonicus, Codex Vindobonensis and the Codex Borgia] while their drawing style remains a mixture of native and foreign traditions (Solis 2018). Explaining their motivation, the artists also refer to “la invasión de la cultura pop norteamericana y japonesa” [the invasion of North American and Japanese pop culture] that in their view should not be the only things consumed by the youth – they need “un héroe de sus raíces” [a hero from their roots] (Solis 2018). Gonzalo Álvarez’s *The Legend of Polloman* is exactly the fusion of Japanese, North American, and Mesoamerican styles into Mexican folklore. The story also unravels around the Aztec underworld and shows the adventures of a young boy in search of his destiny. Alvarez points out that although his work is based on “Nahua culture, Mesoamerican mythology, and the beautiful surviving Codices such as the

Codex Borgia and Codex Fejérváry-Mayer,” his graphic novel was also inspired by *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Studio Ghibli* (2019). Being produced in the US, the graphic novel is written in English, but with names and spells being written in Nahuatl “much like how Harry Potter uses Latin for its spells,” says the artist in one of his interviews (Hernandez 2018). Whether the artists’ intention is to resist Spanish or the modern US influence is an important factor that defines their motivation and clarifies the role of these works in the formation of the Mexican youth identity. As a “product of two colonial contexts,” Mexico demonstrates a highly hybridized cultural identity, especially of younger generations that experience stronger influence from popular culture (Arteaga, 1997, p. 81). The reinforcement of pre-Hispanic culture with a visible influence of the US popular culture in comic books can represent an identity that is being formed in relationship of difference to the contemporary US and former Spanish Empire. The resistance, thus, becomes a statement of the hybridized culture against the generalized colonist culture.

*Ermek The Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times*

Co-created by Madibek Musabekov and Bekzat Myrzakhmetov, *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* is one of the first Kazakhstani comic book ever produced. The story is set in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in the steppes of Central Asia. As it frequently portrayed in Turkic and other world folklore, the protagonist is the youngest son, who returns home after years of wandering to ‘find his destiny.’ The graphic novel includes superstitious, magic, ancient beliefs, rituals, curses, and different mythological creatures, but most importantly, the work is vividly setting an educational tone in its narration. In his interview to *The Astana Times*, Aidiye Aidarbekov, a co-owner of Kazakhstani comic book publishing house “Tengri Comics,” mentions that what motivated the creative team to produce *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* was the idea that “our land was forged in the midst of

cultural clash of great nations of Europe, China and Great Steppe,” thus, there was a need to “bring them to light” through a graphic novel (Shayakhmetova 2018). Similarly to the interview of Eduardo Ancer with Camilo Solis, the creators of the Kazakh graphic novel refer to the need of “rediscovering the old tales of courage and glory” that represent the entire country (Shayakhmetova 2018). According to both interviews, the purpose of creating *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* and *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* was to show “the rich and diverse traditions and culture,” thus the graphic novels acquired educational and nationalistic images (Shayakhmetova 2018). Furthermore, Aidarbekov mentions other works such as the adaptation of Kazakh folktale *Yer Tostik* in “modern superhero style” that adds to the list of other Kazakh comic books inspired by folklore and mythology (Shayakhmetova 2018). Opening the websites of either “Tengri Comics” or “Khan Comics,” the only comic book publishing houses in Kazakhstan, and browsing over the titles and visuals of their works, any reader can wonder why does practically every graphic novel focus on early Kazakh or Khanate periods only. Madibek Musabekov and Bekzat Myrzakhmetov’s interview to *Forbes Kazakhstan* reveals their intentions in creating *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times*, struggle during the initial production, and further plans in the industry. The illustrator, Musabekov, tells that drawing a comics hero based on Kazakh folklore but equally popularized as Marvel characters was his childhood dream<sup>7</sup> (Baytelova 2018). The creative team also thinks that “the formation of Kazakh Khanate in 15<sup>th</sup> century is still one of the most important periods in our history”, and since “Kazakh mythology is very rich for original tales, imbued with Kazakh soul”, “there is an immense potential for Kazakh comic books” (Baytelova 2018). Based on the quotes of both graphic novel creators, we can create a general picture of their extremely similar intentions to

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<sup>7</sup> See Musabekov and Myrzakhmetov’s interview to *Forbes Kazakhstan* conducted by Zhanna Baytelova. “Amazon starts selling Kazakh Comic Books for the First Time” («На платформе Amazon впервые начали продавать казахские комиксы»), *Forbes Kazakhstan*, 2018. [https://forbes.kz/made\\_in\\_kz/na\\_platforme\\_amazon\\_vpervyie\\_nachali\\_prodatv\\_kazahskie\\_komiksyi/](https://forbes.kz/made_in_kz/na_platforme_amazon_vpervyie_nachali_prodatv_kazahskie_komiksyi/)

revive the forgotten history for the younger generations through comic books, the form of literature experiencing its own struggle in being acknowledged.

*Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times*, and other Kazakhstani comic books such as *The Golden Warrior*, *Zhetisu*, and *Erketai*, are all written in Russian language and later translated into Kazakh. As the most popular work, *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times*, was even translated into English, transformed into a webcomic, and found some readers abroad. The use of the Russian language has similar reasons of wider audience and production efficiency as the Spanish language in the case of Mexican graphic novels. However, unlike Mexico, Kazakhstan is under a significant geopolitical and socio-cultural influence of Russia – the same colonizer against which the artists are resisting through their works. While narrating the story, the graphic novel uses Kazakh terms to accurately express their role in culture and possibly promote Kazakh language. Words like *quriltai* that mean “formal consultation meetings of great socio-political importance in Inner Asian history” are seemingly not possible to translate accurately enough to express the role of the custom in the culture (Hodous 2012, 87). Along with the mixture of Kazakh terms and phrasal verbs, *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* demonstrates a mixture of myths and legends from different periods and cultures such as ancient Scythian beliefs, Turkic mythology, and some elements of Kazakh folklore. The mixture of various proto-Kazakh cultures, in some ways similar to the Aztec presence in Mexican works, represents a phenomenon of identity construction in relationship of difference to the Russian influence. The search for “the authentic history and the truth about the nation” has been a focus of twentieth-century writers and artists, which is evidently present in the contemporary development of Kazakh literature (considering the works written in Russian a part of national literature) (Kudaibergenova 2017, xviii). As one of the “most turbulent periods,” Soviet experience builds contemporary Kazakh literature “interwoven with dilemmas of nation-building and finding and establishing

the national identity of the country” (Kudaibergenova 2017, xviii). Although there is no longer a colonial policy “aimed at weakening of the Kazakh language, religion, literature, and culture,” the postcolonial crisis of cultural identity among the youth creates a necessity for the revival of roots (Aubakirova 2015, 14). Psychologists Darongkamas and Lorenc, in their article “Going back to our roots,” create parallels between people’s desire to “fill in the branches of their family tree” and adoptees’ curiosity “in their biological roots” (2008, 1022). The scholars define the motivation behind the intense interest in ancestral culture and generally their own roots as “a sense of a wider connection to see how they fit into a larger world, both currently and historically” (2008, 1022). The interviews with the artists showed that the core idea and motivation was to represent the richness of culture, ‘feel proud of the roots,’ and rediscover everything that ‘makes them unique. The trend of going back to the roots through literature is one of the key ideas of Fanon’s theory on the reconstruction of identity. As the middle stage of a three-stage resistance, ‘going back to the roots,’ seems to be a complex process that needs to be subdivided into several stages itself. While Mexico produces a rapidly increasing number of comic books, with a special focus on contemporary immigrant issues and cultural identity, Kazakhstan has only produced works set in 14-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Seemingly, the trend for pre-colonial history itself is different in the two countries. Drawing attention to various issues in various time periods, without an overemphasis of precolonial events, Mexico demonstrates a later stage of the ‘going back to the roots’ process and transition to the next stage – active liberation.

#### Using Colonist Literature for Resistance – New Type of Postcolonial Graphic Novels?

While the concept ‘postcolonial graphic novel’ creates complicated discussions in the field, the term ‘graphic novel’ itself presents imprecise definitions and thus confusions, arguments, and doubts of labeling. Eddie Campbell, a comics artist and cartoonist famous for his co-created work *From Hell* Alec, provides us with four “different and mutually exclusive”

usages: 1) “it is used simply as a synonym for comic;” 2) “it is used to classify a format (bound book of comics either in soft- or hardcover);” 3) “it means, more specifically, a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel;” 4) “a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition - indeed, a new medium altogether” (2007, 13). Both *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* and *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* can thus constitute as either comic books or graphic novels, however, in the frames of this study, there is no significant issue in identifying either of the terms as the only correct reference. What presents significance to this study is the emergence of graphic novels. Comic books and graphic novels, a visual narrative form popularized in western cultures, are now expanding its function from general entertainment to socio-political statements and resistance to a colonial enterprise. Although Mexico has a long history of producing *historietas* that ties with the US industry in 1930s’, the works discussed in this project, as well as the majority of contemporary comic books, are based on the popularized North American, European, and Japanese models. Ironically to Fanon, Spivak, and Said’s arguments against the colonist’s voice in postcolonial writing, contemporary artists from postcolonial areas use the western comic models as an act of resistance to colonial oppression of language, history, and culture. Borrowing tropes, themes, and techniques to ‘write back’ to the literary forms embedded in America and European genres, artists from Mexico and Kazakhstan, as well as other postcolonial nation-states, create an interesting type of postcolonial comic books. Using specifically comic books and graphic novels is also argued to be “instrumental to their [artists’] own success,” since they operate in an inverse way to the “commercial style of European or North American predecessors” (Atia and Houlden 2018, 75). Integrating western form of literature and the postcolonial idea of reviving the roots, *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* and *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* undermine certain lines of difference between the ‘colonist’ and ‘(post)colony’ cultures by

drawing new lines of connection between them. “By showing how different elements exist in a relation of domination/subordination within a system,” the graphic novels also demonstrate how Mexico and Kazakhstan work to suppress “some cultural subsets in favor of others,” which challenges the contemporary idea of cultural fluidity widely discussed in transcultural studies (Atia and Houlden 2018, 75).

#### Transcultural Perspective on the Postcolonial Urge to go Back to the Roots

The concept of transculturality/transculturalism was first discussed by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his book *Cuban Counterpoint* originally published in Spanish in 1940. Transculturation was initially used to “explore processes of cultural transformation and exchange within a framework of fundamentally unequal and hierarchical relations between powerful nations and less powerful ones” (Schelze-Engler 2009, x). In the attempt to move away from nationalist stances and the binary oppositions within postcolonialism such as periphery–center or pure–hybrid, the concept of transculturation expanded from the Latin American focus and evolved into what Dagnino refers to as a “new borderless comparative methodology” (2011, 1). Transculturation was initially proposed “within a postcolonial paradigm” as a new interpretation of culture, “particularly related to Latin America and deriving from Latin America” and “recognizing the importance of Latin American authors” (Dagnino 2014, 30; Mančić 2014, 368). Although the concept of transculturation is still closely related to Latin America, the general transcultural studies expanded their “range of action and analysis by transcending” the over-emphasized dichotomies of the colonizer versus colonized cultures (Dagnino 2014, 30). Deriving from postcolonial studies, transculturalism stays as an integral part of it and thus needs to be addressed in the discussion of contemporary identity formation. Transcultural and postcolonial studies mutually complement each other, and especially with all the “cultural complexities of the twenty-first century,” transcultural theoretical paradigm provides us with

the accordingly complicated perspective on culture, nationhood, and youth identity (1). Undoubtedly, postcolonialism has encountered global challenges in viewing the formation of contemporary youth identity. Mingisheva discusses the challenges of identity construction and nation-building among Kazakhstani youth and refers to the particularly significant role of younger generations that usually “absorb notions and can reinterpret new ideas more successfully than adults” (2013, 83-84). While the reinforcement of pre-colonial culture is an inevitable stage in postcolonial development that promotes national identity over cultural fluidity, transculturalism proposes innovative ideas that present contradictory points to the revival of the roots. Epstein described transculture as “a process of self-distancing, self-estrangement, and self-criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions” (1999, 307). It is seeing oneself in the other by erasing cultural and national boundaries, which makes the concept of culture “fluid and intermingled” (Dagnino 2011, 2). We can observe how young artists are in the challenging process of balancing in-between the postcolonial idea of going back to the roots and transcultural direction of diversifying the concept of culture. For example, the previously discussed artists are using global languages such as Spanish, English, and Russian as their “preferred non-native language of creative expression” – paradoxically, an expression of praising ‘all that makes their pre-conquest culture unique’ and of ‘feeling proud of the roots’. Simultaneously addressing the importance of one’s pre-colonial culture and existing in the age of transculturalism is not necessarily impossible or in any way ironic move, but rather the one that further demonstrates the complexity of our view of culture. The “inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures” creates a quest for identity among the postcolonial youth around the world (Welsch 1999, 197). Interconnected with global cultures, the culturally hybridized youth in both Mexico and Kazakhstan “transcends... monocultural standpoints” (1999, 205). During the formation of various directions (nationalistic, international) in the search for cultural identity, young generations

are experiencing a crisis of belonging. While the youth is in-between of absolute universalism and particularism, the transcultural approach of looking into the issue of identity formation is supposed to blur the boundaries and provide attentiveness in establishing “what is common and connective between different cultures” that have been synthesizing over centuries.

Today, while Mexican youth is reviving the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures, the more recent waves of North American cultural influence is creating a challenge to the identity reformation. Meanwhile, Kazakh youth is exploring the boundaries for the presence of early cultural elements such as Tengrism, as an example. The two experiences demonstrate similarities in the process of their reconnection with the roots and the challenges they encounter while balancing between cultural universalism and particularism. Bernstein proposes a peculiar interpretation of the notion of ‘interculturality’ that seems to describe the young artists’ strive for a pre-conquest heritage: “We are sensitive to the sameness of ‘the Other’ with ourselves and the radical alterity that defies and resists reduction of the ‘the Other’ to ‘the Same’” (1991). In the article “The Multicultural, Intercultural and the Transcultural Subject,” Marotta explains Bernstein’s formulation as “a subtle balancing act between recognizing the similarities underlying Self and Other – which will become the foundation for dialogue across difference – while maintaining difference and thus sustaining boundaries between Self and Other” (2014, 8). Thus, with the overemphasis of pre-coloniality in contemporary graphic novels as an act of cultural resistance and revival of the roots, the artists are paradoxically adopting “universalising (identifying commonalities) and particularising (acknowledging distinctions) practices” (2014, 8). The complexity of defining the postcolonial behavioral patterns of the youth, and especially the artists’, stems from various factors such as the neglect of postcolonial Latin American and post-Soviet Central Asian cultures (that could have provided contemporary scholars with the established studies of the cultures’ specificities in the postcolonial world) and the overlapping and falsely

interchangeable terms - “multicultural,” intercultural,” and “transcultural.” If interculturalism considers cultures independently from each other, multiculturalism sees groups of mobile cultures living on the ‘boundary,’ and transculturalism demonstrates an interpenetration of cultures (Marotta 2014, 3, 7, 9). The formation of youth identity in postcolonial Mexico and Kazakhstan shows us the juxtaposition of these processes, which creates a plausible opportunity for a negative interpretation of cultural adjustment. Marotta discusses Malinowski’s positive and Ortiz’s (“overlooked”) negative interpretations of transculturalism (2014, 10). While the process can produce a “cross-cultural contact” as “a cooperative and equal exchange,” it can also end up producing issues of “disadjustment and readjustment, of de-culturation and acculturation” (Marotta 2014, 10-11; Malinowski 1947, xi; Ortiz 1947, 98). Thus, the extreme complexity of defining and approaching the highly hybridized youth identity in postcolonial cultures indicates a challenging process of development. Balancing in-between the signification of pre-colonial cultures and accepting the contemporary fluidity, comic book artists are expanding the bridges of postcolonialism and demonstrating the challenges of drawing a distinct line between the replacement of cultural influences and raising awareness of their own.

### Conclusion

The effect of academia’s neglect to acknowledge Russia and Spain’s colonial expansions transcends the interdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies. What was viewed as “a process of unification and consolidation” has started to develop into a separate discourse in Central Asian countries and is actively being structured by scholars regarding Latin American nations (Hunczak 1974, ix). The resistance against colonial legacy has inspired artists around the world to challenge the concept of postcolonial literature. Although the concept of postcolonial graphic novels/comic books exists in the discourse, the role of graphic novels in reconstructing cultural identity in postcolonial countries is yet to be investigated. Unlike

graphic novels undoubtedly (or less doubtfully) labeled as postcolonial, *Aztlán: La Leyenda de Los Cinco Soles* and *Ermek the Batyr: Legends of Forgotten Times* do not represent the postcolonial struggle, sensitive events, and intellectually advanced content. These works target a younger audience and demonstrate solely educational and entertaining purposes. Nevertheless, the abundance of graphic novels set in ancient periods creates a debate over their role in the postcolonial path of the two nations. Therefore, the discussion of how graphic novels that are not directly postcolonial in their context represent postcolonial development of Kazakhstan and Mexico reveals that the co-existence of the revival of the roots and the contemporary strive for transculturality are simultaneously challenging and productive as it stimulates further research in the field. The idea of transculturality has not paused with a solid interpretation and the field of postcolonial studies is in the constant process of development. Thus, the discussion of postcolonial youth resistance, reformation of cultural identity, and balancing between cultural particularism and universalism will keep creating further directions of development for various disciplines to improve cultural inclusiveness and flexibility with contemporary adjustments.

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This project represents my own original work in accordance with Nazarbayev University's

Student Code of Conduct

Signature: Malika Kanasheva