Playgrounds, Gardens, Communities, Worlds: Dylan Horrocks’s Hicksville

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If New Zealand fiction over the course of the twentieth century exhibited an anxiety about its place in the world that the possession of a national literature was supposed to assuage, then perhaps it is appropriate that among the most compelling works to address that concern in post-nationalist terms is one written in a form doubly marginalised: the local graphic novel. In Hicksville (1998), Dylan Horrocks uses the comic form not only to make his case for a broadening of the definition of art and an expansion of critical focus, but also to register the changing relationship between the regional and the international in an increasingly globalised world. While critical of the homogenisation of art in accordance with international market forces and wary of the assimilation of regional difference into dominant global structures, Horrocks rejects the introspective self-seriousness of nationalistic literature. In Hicksville the destabilisation of national identity and the changing role of New Zealand in the international community give way to a new paradigm for national identity, wherein cultural information specific to New Zealand can be introduced to international artistic dialogues without the burden of an insular nationalistic imperative. Hicksville dissolves the cultural prejudice that marks the comic as an inferior, sub-literary form by investing the narrative with levels of complexity usually associated with the densest high modernist texts; at the same time, it admonishes the protectionist instincts of cultural nationalism by its utopian
location of a vast store of cultural capital at the very margin of the margins.

In addition to his artistic endeavours, Horrocks has assumed the role of cultural historian, situating his work in relation to the history of comics and other art forms in New Zealand. As he notes, comics have long been associated with social concerns about the influence of immoral content on impressionable readers and, historically, reactions to comics in New Zealand have been no exception. Particularly in the 1950s, comics were widely attacked in the media, largely by concerned social campaigners and intellectuals who feared that their violent and propagandistic content, in combination with their accessible form, would pervert the nation’s children.¹ The comic artist and critic Tim Bollinger has suggested that comics were objectionable both to New Zealand’s monolithic sporting culture and its liberal dedication to ‘social and moral enlightenment’.² Bollinger notes that, in response to this repressive atmosphere, comics in New Zealand (as elsewhere) have necessarily developed outside the mainstream: ‘New Zealand comics have evolved despite, rather than because of their role in the popular consciousness—which is virtually non-existent’.³ Similarly, in his notes for ‘Comix’, a 1996 exhibition of New Zealand comic art, Horrocks contends that from the 1950s to 1970s a rebellious underground fervour for comics was kindled in response to ‘the repressive atmosphere of a country all too keen to ignore or silence voices from its margins’.⁴ The moral condemnation of comics was not simply the fearful reaction of a conservative middle-class; on the contrary, social liberals were vocal in the charge against comics, suspecting, as Bollinger concedes, that they were potentially ‘as ideal a medium for propaganda as they are for pornography’.⁵ As Horrocks notes, ‘the campaign was not limited to conservatives; in fact, some of the most active anti-comics crusaders were socialists and social liberals, shocked by the violence and jingoistic anti-communism found in many American comics’.⁶ Warren Feeney suggests that public
'condemnation of comics and popular art' by critics such as A. R. D. Fairburn and Margaret Dalziel represented a 'wider mission to raise aesthetic standards while advocating the principles of the left'.7 More recently, however, the influence of comics on fine art (such as that manifested, for example, in Colin McCahon’s famous language-infused paintings) has finally gained unqualified critical praise,8 and contemporary New Zealand artists such as Saskia Leek and Violet Faigan have openly discussed the centrality of comics to their work.9 Despite the increasing acceptance of the comic form among ‘serious’ artists and critics alike, however, the stigma attached to comics has not entirely disappeared. Feeney recalls the draconian approach of the Fisher Gallery towards the 1996 exhibition ‘Comix’—the very platform from which Horrocks attacked New Zealand of the 1950s to ‘70s as repressive and monolithic:

Participants were given guidelines regarding the censorship of their art and reminded of the Censorship Act 1993, as it related to pornography. Would the gallery have raised such issues if the work in question had been painting, printmaking or sculpture? Their concern over pornography in the exhibition indicated a lack of confidence in the comic book to deal with little more than content attributable to children.10

In the face of such enduring subordination of the comic form relative to other mediums, and a pervasive critical fixation with the moral content of comics, Horrocks addresses morally-centred criticism of the form in which he works with a pointed silence.

In his article ‘The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and Word-Building’ Horrocks notes that, in addition to comics, ‘troubadours, poets, the theatre and, of course, the novel have all been the target of moral panic at various times in the past thousand years’.11 When discussing comics, Horrocks prefers to focus on assumptions made about the inherent value of various
forms of art, pointing out that much of what we consider canonical now has previously been decried as morally repugnant, un-artistic, and unworthy of serious critical consideration:

My intention [...] is not to dismiss such moral concerns. It may be perfectly true that all of these media have been responsible, over the centuries, for [in the words of critic Bill Pearson] ‘eroding the most fundamental habits of humane, civilized living’. What interests me, however, is the tendency of contemporary commentators to dismiss [various] art forms as unworthy of ‘serious consideration on aesthetic grounds’, a judgement that has been levelled at some time at much of the work currently included in the so-called canon of great art and literature.12

Horrocks’s refusal to deal with ‘moral concerns’ represents, therefore, not a refutation of the ethical anxieties which have historically been associated with comics, but a request for the emancipation of medium from content. In noting the historical tendency to reject new and unfamiliar forms of art, Horrocks recognises that to judge a medium based on the ideas traditionally expressed within it is to dismiss potentially valuable new forms of expression, and therefore to stifle artistic progress. Fredric Jameson makes a similar point about the most controversial modernist artists, noting, as Horrocks does, the initial rejection of various now-canonical works of art, and arguing that the assimilation of ‘formerly oppositional’ movements into the canon of art is a necessary precursor to the progression of artistic ideas and values:

Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us as rather ‘realistic’, and this is the result of a canonization and academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally that can be traced to the late 1950s. This is surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself,
since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which ‘weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living’, as Marx once said in a different context.\textsuperscript{13}

As for Marx, with his weighty ‘traditions of the dead generations’, for Jameson the new aesthetic forms of a given epoch must be accepted, contextualised, and then questioned if art is to be progressive rather than stagnant. Horrocks, in requesting consideration of the potential of art forms independently of specific examples of content, seeks to uncover and surpass stagnant tendencies in art and criticism; his caveat is that we should not judge a genre by its content. Scott McCloud, in his seminal book \textit{Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art}, makes a similar point, underlining the distinction between ‘medium’ and ‘message’:

![Diagram of comic artform](image)

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With regard to the conflation of message and medium, Horrocks's diagnosis is that 'we unthinkingly apply whatever aesthetic paradigm is our most familiar, regardless of whether it's relevant to the works we're dealing with'. He goes on to suggest that 'misunderstood' art forms, such as comics and more recently video games, may be operating within entirely 'different aesthetic paradigm[s]' \(^{14}\).

New artworks bring new aesthetic paradigms. Those who fail to recognise this tend to miss the point of the work altogether, dismissing it as frivolous, bad, or even dangerous. Which is why, when the generation of writers and artists who've grown up immersed in virtual playgrounds begin using the medium of the video game itself to 'boil in the intensity' of their experiences, many
Horrocks argues that ‘much of the “action” in narrative art today is going on in places that are below the radar of most criticism and theory’; in discussing modern aesthetic paradigms which have largely evaded critical attention, such as role-playing games and computer simulations, he makes a case for expanding the scope of literary and artistic criticism. If Horrocks is unsettling when he talks implicitly of ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ and ‘The Sims’ as the unacknowledged aesthetic paradigms of the future, his point remains crucial: that it is foolish to dismiss aesthetic paradigms as invalid while judging them based on a set of values which is alien to the work in question.

Horrocks talks, for example, of ‘world-building’. Taking his cue from J. R. R. Tolkien, whose notion of ‘sub-creation’ emphasises fictional environments (“Secondary World[s]”) over plot, he offers an insight into several aesthetic paradigms which he sees as having been unfairly judged from irrelevant critical perspectives. Referring in particular to interactive media and narrative-based games, Horrocks uses the term ‘geographical narrative’ to describe the construction of a ‘virtual environment’ and the subsequent interaction of an audience with that environment. In this analysis, role-playing games such as ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ and computer simulation games such as ‘The Sims’ take on an aesthetic value overlooked by commentators looking for more traditional aesthetic values, such as the transference of a clear idea from artist to audience. Engagement with a ‘text’ here becomes a process of navigation, not an act of transmission from artist to audience—ideas rehearsed by Horrocks’s father, Roger, in the magazine And in the 1980s. Horrocks fils uses this idea to conceptualise the role of audience interaction in art, describing artwork as ‘a kind of playground’ which, although built to an artist’s specifications,
when completed becomes an object for others to interact with on their own terms:

If you put up swings, people will come and swing on them. But equally, some will use them as imaginary rocketships, 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.21

Narrative here transcends didactic, or even transactional, values to become a combined act of creation and exploration shared by artist and audience. Such interactivity in art is crucial to Horrocks’s conception of the comic form, which he describes as ‘the art of playing’.22 Mark Nevins, too, notes the centrality of ‘geographical narrative’ to Horrocks’s work, saying ‘to me, Dylan’s work is about creating a space, and then inhabiting it’.23 In opening up such concepts as ‘world-building’, Horrocks invites reconsideration of new aesthetic paradigms and asks us to expand our conception of what constitutes ‘art’.

If Horrocks advocates an expansion of the ‘critical radar’, he also makes a case for the expansion of content within established mediums both in his artistic work and his critical writing. Within Hicksville, in an ‘autobiographical’ comic by the character Sam Zabel, the stock characters Moxie and Toxie confront a small-minded editor demanding that they be liberated from the restrictive requirements of a low-brow humour magazine:24
While this is tongue-in-cheek, the underlying point is that comics do not have to consist merely of flippant comedy. Expectations of what content is appropriate to particular genres or mediums, while they may be influential on the demands of market-driven publishers, are ultimately for Horrocks abstract impositions with which artists are under no obligation to conform. As McCloud declares:

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 3

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Horrocks expresses exasperation with artists who ‘feel constrained by the medium they work in’, describing such self-imposed restriction as ‘bullshit’. The cartoonist Scott Gilbert expressed a similar sentiment at the 1999 roundtable ‘New Voices in Comics’, directing his frustration at prevalent, limited preconceptions of the comic medium amongst the general public:

I think there’s a stigma attached to comics, somehow, by our culture as it is today, at least that’s something that I pick up on. I tend to run into it a lot with people: they’re like ‘You do comics?’ and they expect the comics, or you, to be a certain way.

A response to this notion of medium- and genre-specific constraint can be found in Horrocks’s fictional town of Hicksville, where a majority of the population both read and create comics. Through this normalisation of comics as a means of expression, Horrocks suggests the potential of the comic form when emancipated from preconceptions of what content the genre should entail. In his own accounts, Horrocks sees the form of his work as almost incidental, separate from and certainly subordinate to the content he wishes to convey. As he commented at the ‘New Voices in Comics’ roundtable: ‘we’re not all just trying to do good comics. We’re actually just doing the stories, or the poems, or whatever it is that we most want to do, and we happen to be doing them in a style that is usually identified as comics’. In Horrocks’s view, ‘genre’ is a theoretical construct which is applied to work post hoc, but which is irrelevant to its construction and in fact disappears like mist when one approaches the complexity, and the idiosyncrasy, of a text. He states: ‘although we will talk endlessly about comics, and how they’re structured and form, and everything, the bottom line I think is not actually there’. Unlike McCloud, who aspires to define what comics ‘is’ (albeit in the broadest possible sense), for Horrocks there is no ‘essence’ to comics. Horrocks values the
ability to utilise a medium in any way possible, regardless of externally-imposed expectations of content:

Part of the advantage of comics to me is being able to do anything I want, anything at all. So if what I have is a book with paper, I can fill that using pictures, words, text, maps, drawings, diagrams, just whatever. To me doing comic books just means filling paper with any tool that suits my purpose.30

The expansion of possible content within established mediums is thus reliant on the breaking down of boundaries between different genres; for Horrocks, an artist’s choice of technique should be considered only in relation to the ideas they wish to explore, rather than abstract theoretical templates.

The sheer complexity of the structural and narrative techniques employed by Horrocks subverts any preconception of the comic book as a simple or base form. Hicksville itself operates as a ‘meta-text’ of sorts, a collection of subordinate comic ‘texts’, none of which claim narrative centrality but which together comprise the gestalt as the reader navigates through various textual layers. The characters themselves are creators, and are characterised primarily through their creations as the reader moves freely in and out of their ‘texts’. Sam’s experiences, such as his dealings with the high-flying cartoonist Dick Burger, are chronicled in his ‘autobiographical mini’ comics titled Pickle—a title shared, incidentally, with Horrocks’s own earlier comic serial, on which Hicksville was based. Even within these editions of Pickle, Jim is characterised by his corny, overtly Marxist satire, and Lou Goldman enters into the text through his ‘very moral and humane’ Lady Night comics, as re-constructed by Sam. Burger’s Captain Tomorrow comics, likewise, are presented to the reader without authorial interference. In this respect, Hicksville is similar in structure to Flann O’Brien’s novel At Swim-Two-Birds (1939), in which the ‘primary’ character, a young student, his literary creations, and their literary creations in turn
continually strive to gain control of the narrative.\textsuperscript{31} In Hicksville, however, there is no ‘primary’ character through which successive layers of textual depth are explored, but a range of characters and sub-creations which interact with a dynamic that is deceptively simple, but in fact enormously complex. The structure of Hicksville is what M. M. Bakhtin might call ‘visual heteroglossia’; it is a network of dialogues represented both visually and linguistically, and as such arguably affords more narrative potentiality and encourages more active engagement on the part of the reader than a traditional linear narrative. Horrocks’s disregard for considerations of genre results in a text which defies categorisation. Nevins has commented on the inability of Horrocks’s work to be contained within preconceived structures of either form or content:

Whenever I try to describe Dylan’s work I find it very difficult to do, because he’s playing around a tremendous amount with both the form of comics and the content of comics—visually and also in narrative structures.\textsuperscript{32}

Horrocks also disavows absolute resolution of his text. The reader, along with Leonard Batts, will never know the true significance of the baffling comics starring Captain Cook and Hone Heke which turn up repeatedly throughout Hicksville. Likewise, the identity of the mysterious narrator who emerges to recount Grace’s travels in Cornucopia (which Horrocks makes a country in South America) remains pure speculation. These bizarre interpolations and unresolved narrative excursions are not entirely anomalous, however: while they cannot easily be placed within a linear narrative, it is still possible to extract meaning from these passages which feeds into wider themes explored in Hicksville. By leaving the significance of several elements of the text ambiguous, Horrocks assigns to the reader the task of integrating disparate information in meaningful ways. In this sense, Hicksville is like the playground Horrocks talks of: while the same textual apparatus is in place for every reader, each
person is free to utilise this apparatus as they see fit, much as a child might use a set of swings as a pretend rocketship or a climbing frame.

For Horrocks, another important precursor to the liberation of content from expectation is the reconsideration of the traditional distinction between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’. His advocacy of this sentiment is expressed in his admiration for the boundary-transcending cartoonist Cornelius Stone:

To [Stone] there’s like just one big cultural plane, whether it’s Picasso or a comic book, or Spiderman, or an advertisement for Four Square or something. It’s all just a part of this enormous big scene, and he feeds off all that without that kind of self-conscious awareness that a lot of high-brow have when they dabble in ‘pop culture’.33

Such a non-hierarchical conception of the ‘cultural plane’, however, does not imply that all art is of equal worth; in Hicksville, after all, the ‘pin-ups and splash pages’ of Burger’s Captain Tomorrow series, and the humour magazine ‘Laffs’, are decidedly substandard in their homogeneity, banality, and conscious marketability. For Horrocks, the levelling of traditional artistic hierarchies is not an excuse for inferior work to pass itself off as equally worthy but, once again, a challenging of established paradigms. Kupe’s library, full of never-released ‘masterpieces’ of the comic medium, represents, like the town of Hicksville itself, a world of possibility for an unrealised art form. The comic books harboured by Kupe, including works by Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, raise the question of what actually separates ‘high art’ from ‘low art’: the implication is that it is not lack of potential which prevented works such as these from being produced in the real world, but rather a lack of recognition of the medium by critics, audiences, and artists alike. These secret comics, created by eminent artists, embody a sense that the comic form itself, if given the attention and recognition

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received by more mainstream art forms, could potentially provide as powerful a vehicle for ideas as any better-accepted medium such as painting or poetry. This is in contrast to ‘the official history of comics’ which, as Kupe remarks, is a saga of ‘frustration’, ‘unrealised potential’, untold stories, and the ‘bowdlerisation’ of great art by ‘small-minded editors’. In Hicksville, then, the failure of the comic medium to achieve mainstream success or, until recently at least, to produce significant works of aesthetic import, is the result not of a lack of potential, but rather of cultural stigma, commercial censorship, and critical ignorance. As Kupe puts it, the comic has been ‘a medium locked into a ghetto and ignored by countless people who could have made it sing’; as comics have historically been neglected by ‘serious’ artists due to stigmatisation and underestimation, limited expectations of what can be achieved in the comic form have become, as McCloud remarks, a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.34

Hicksville also registers the changing relationship between the regional and the global in the face of an increasingly globalised economy and the increasingly international traffic of ideas. Like the experience of unfamiliar aesthetic paradigms, such change often elicits anxiety. In his essay ‘Spectacular Babies: The Globalisation of New Zealand Fiction’, Patrick Evans talks of ‘a professionalisation of the role of the author and the commodification of the book’ and raises concerns that regionally-relevant art and literature will be subsumed into the dominant, homogenous structure of a ‘globalised publishing economy’.35 This concern about homogenised, market-driven art is closely linked to anxiety about mass-production and commercial globalisation. Evans ‘cynically’ refers to the products of Bill Manhire’s writing school as ‘McManhire’.36 Feeney recounts a similar critical resistance to the comics-influenced work of New Zealand artist Dick Frizzell: the critic Keith Stewart denounced his retrospective exhibition Portrait of a Serious Artiste as ‘McArt’.37 In Hicksville Horrocks critiques any such
homogenisation of art, be it the ‘banal house styles’ imposed by audience- and profit-conscious editors or, more broadly, the standardisation of art in accordance with dominant, global cultural norms. This is most explicitly addressed through the saga of Dick Burger, who plagiarises Mort Molson’s earlier, more nuanced, Captain Tomorrow comic books and adapts them in accordance with marketable stylistic norms:

Burger’s treachery is rewarded with fame and fortune unprecedented in the comics industry. His saleable and standardised works not only eclipse the originals but win awards, spawn films, and earn Burger an estimated ‘nett personal wealth’ of 20 million dollars, a ‘controlling interest’ in an ‘entertainment empire’, and a place in the Comic Book Hall of Fame. The only drawback, apparently, is the hatred of those he betrayed back in New Zealand, an issue Burger seems content to live with. It is apparent nevertheless that Burger did in fact possess a great deal of natural talent; Mort Molson implies that the young Burger had
the potential to become ‘the William Shakespeare of comic books’. His plagiarism, then, is driven purely by greed for artistic recognition and financial success. Horrocks portrays the temptation provided by international market forces as being akin to the temptation of supernatural power to superheroes, with Burger describing his embrace of artistic prostitution in the dramatic terms of a comic book:

In this light, too, Captain Tomorrow’s eager acquisition of godlike power in Burger’s comic, as opposed to his moral rejection of it in Molson’s original, may be seen as being indicative of an increasing propensity towards commercial viability over integrity in art. In the face of such commercialisation of art, Horrocks sees something ‘heroic’ in artists who ‘strive to really master a craft even when there’s no hope of making it their profession’.38 Although satirical of pompous truth-seeking in art, Horrocks values the likes of his character Tisco George, who ‘won’t even talk to publishers’ (emphasis Horrocks’s), over cash-cows such as Burger.
Behind the fear of American-driven commercialisation expressed by Evans and others lies a concern about the loss of a unique New Zealand identity through assimilation into dominant cultural and economic structures. The native New Zealander Burger, at the ceremony marking his induction into the Comic Book Hall of Fame, is honoured for his contribution to ‘American comic art’ (emphasis added). Horrocks himself recounts a similar scenario in his own career: ‘I’ve even been invited to be on a panel entitled “New Voices in American Comics,”’ he recalls. ‘That made me chuckle; not only am I a New Zealander, but my publisher is Canadian’.39 Horrocks notes too the seeming inevitability of emigration for talented New Zealand comic artists of the past: ‘most of the very earliest New Zealand comic book creators found success by emigrating to Australia—people like Noel Cook, who became one of Australia’s most successful cartoonists’.40 Cook, along with Colin Wilson (perhaps New Zealand’s other most successful cartoonist), found greater success as an expatriate, working and publishing outside New Zealand.41

Although publicly nonchalant about the role of New Zealand in international artistic movements, Horrocks registers these concerns in his work. In Hicksville he addresses not just the subjugation of idiosyncratic and regionally-relevant work on the global market, but also the flooding of the local market with international culture. Grace’s garden can be seen as a metaphor for the changing nature of New Zealand in a world increasingly inundated with international ideas, values, and standards. The young Grace conceives of her garden as a ‘community’ and a ‘sanctuary’; when she spends a period overseas working at a botanic institute, she occasionally receives native specimens ‘like letters from home’. When she returns, however, she finds it transformed ‘beyond recognition’.
It is simplistic, however, to characterise Grace as a stickler for national tradition or a cultural Luddite longing to stake out a stable territory against a world of increasing diversity. She also displays an attraction towards transience, change and ambiguity, if only the illusion of such:

It would also be misleading to suggest that *Hicksville* is an unequivocally nostalgic or nationally-concerned text. Horrocks is mocking of self-serious, nationalistic soul-searching, such as the sentiments of Tisco George’s ‘Magnum Opus’, the title of which ‘changes daily’:
Horrocks’s ambivalence about cultural nationalism can be construed as a reflection not on the merit of representing cultural values in art, but of the politics entailed in such representation. As Lydia Wevers says of a collection of New Zealand stories edited by Frank Sargeson:

In raising the possibility of speaking for ourselves, he also raised the question of who that might be. To say anything about who ‘we’ are is inevitably deeply political, especially when it carries a duty of articulation.42

It is this ‘duty of articulation’ of national identity which Horrocks evades in Hicksville. Much as he seeks to emancipate the form of art from its content and liberate artistic creation from expectations of genre, in Hicksville Horrocks presents an aesthetic paradigm which rejects expectations of literature as the affirmation of national identity, but which nevertheless is infused with regionally-relevant content.
Horrocks acknowledges that cultural knowledge may be meaningful only in its native context, and toys with the interpretative flexibility of information specific to New Zealand when viewed by an international audience. For example, Mrs Hicks’s inconspicuous reference to a ‘Dr Ropata’ can be construed in a number of different ways by readers with different cultural backgrounds. Many New Zealanders, of course, will recognise this as an allusion to the local soap opera Shortland Street. While the occasional international reader might recognise this as a reference to New Zealand’s pop-cultural legacy, they would more likely interpret ‘Dr Ropata’ simply as a Maori name, or pass it by entirely. While Horrocks accepts that some cultural information is inevitably lost in translation when presented to an international audience, this can be seen not as an unavoidable loss for audiences outside a particular sphere of cultural awareness, but rather a recognition that understanding of art is always enriched by knowledge of the cultural context from which it arises. By introducing regionally-specific cultural information in its own context to the international market, there is an acceptance that the information will not always reach its audience untransformed, but there is also a hope that such material will encourage international readers to enhance their knowledge of the culture in which the text is rooted. Horrocks acknowledges the increasing globalisation of art, but rather than seeing this as a movement towards the homogenization of regional differences, he looks forward to a world in which national identity feeds into a global exchange of ideas without being the sole rallying point for artistic expression:

Even so clearly a ‘national’ style as Japan’s ‘manga’ is becoming internationalised. [...] But I don’t mean to suggest that comics around the world are becoming the same. The fact that I can read the Korean X-Men comic as a hybrid is only possible because comics are not one universal language; they come in a range of dialects.
Some of those dialects are concentrated in a particular place and others are located around a particular sensibility, but it's that diversity which makes comics a constant source of wonder to me.44

Here, the affinity of ideas or 'sensibilities' is a major grouping force for artistic movements or 'dialects', while regional difference provides valuable diversity in international artistic dialogues. Horrocks describes being an artist as 'belonging to a community—or perhaps to several communities'.45 In a globalised society the boundaries of these 'communities' of ideas may transcend national borders, but for Horrocks this does not render regional difference obsolete.

Compounding Horrocks's rejection of insular nationalism is a recognition of the fluidity of national identity. In Hicksville Horrocks presents a world where traditional ideas of stable national identity are dissolving. In the recurring 'Captain Cook' comics, Cook and Hone Heke discuss Heke's observation that the landmass of New Zealand has begun to drift free:
This can be seen as a metaphor for both the changing role of New Zealand on the global stage and the destabilisation of traditional notions of national identity. It is significant that the characters in this drama of instability are Captain Cook, Hone Heke and Charles Heaphy, figures deeply embedded in the popular consciousness of New Zealand history. Through his unfixed and ambiguous use of such figures, Horrocks ungrounds orthodox conceptions of New Zealand history and identity. Likewise, the mythologies which underpin national identity, such as the legends of Maui, are also shown to be in flux:

In the face of such instability, Horrocks presents a new paradigm for national identity on the international stage through his reversal of the geographical relationship between the stable and the shifting. The lighthouse at Te Reinga, originally a point from which New Zealand is seen by those approaching from overseas, becomes a ‘crow’s nest’ for Cook, Heke and Heaphy, as they watch for signs of terra firma from the drifting islands. This geographical reversal suggests a reversal of New Zealand’s cultural temperament, from insular national introspection towards a more outward-looking philosophy; the emergence of
land, sighted by Heke from Te Reinga at the end of *Hicksville*, can be interpreted as the emergence of New Zealand onto a new world of opportunity. While New Zealand is geographically remote, and removed from traditional centres of cultural vitality or avant-garde scenes, Horrocks seems to suggest that in a world where advances in technology, communication, and travel have minimised the role of geography, marginal places such as New Zealand can more easily take part in international dialogues without necessarily losing their regional heterogeneity. This world, as Horrocks envisions it, thus provides not an abolition of regional idiosyncrasy but an unprecedented opportunity for the expression of regionally-relevant ideas within the wider structure of international artistic dialogues.

In *Hicksville*, Dylan Horrocks presents an aesthetic paradigm emancipated from genre-specific expectations of content, and a national literature emancipated from what Wevers calls the ‘duty of articulation’. In his critical writing, Horrocks addresses a tendency amongst literary and artistic commentators to reject new forms of art while judging them against criteria irrelevant to the work itself, and goes some way towards explaining the techniques by which various new, largely overlooked aesthetic paradigms operate. Horrocks thus seeks reappraisal of misunderstood art forms, including comics, and argues for an expansion of critical focus. He also argues for an expansion of content within established art forms: in *Hicksville* he employs a complex array of structural and narrative techniques which subvert simplistic preconceptions of the comic medium, and explicitly challenges the imposition of limiting artistic templates by the publishing industry. For Horrocks, theoretical considerations such as genre are irrelevant to the construction of work, and in *Hicksville* he utilises artistic techniques in accordance with the ideas he wishes to explore rather than abstract templates, resulting in a work not bound by traditional definitions of genre. In *Hicksville*, Horrocks also registers the changing role of New Zealand on the international stage and the

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destabilisation of traditional notions of national identity. He rejects any expectation that art and literature necessarily convey an affirmation of national identity, but nevertheless asserts the validity of regionally-relevant content in internationally-circulated art. Horrocks dismisses the notion that the globalisation of art will destroy regional idiosyncrasy, instead looking forward to a future where artistic ‘communities’ are based not necessarily around national identity, but around ‘sensibilities’ into which varied cultural perspectives can feed.46

Notes

7 Feeney, ‘Born Under a Bad Sign’, p. 3.


See, for example, Roger Horrocks’s essay “Natural As Only You Can Be”: Some Readings of Contemporary New Zealand. Poetry’, in And, 4 (1985), 101-123.


Hicksville is not paginated. Unless otherwise stated, all images are reproduced from Dylan Horrocks, Hicksville, 2nd edn (Montreal, Quebec: Drawn and Quarterly, 2001).


Nevins, ‘New Voices in Comics’, p. 221.


35 Patrick Evans, ‘Spectacular Babies: The Globalisation of New Zealand Fiction’, Kite, 22 (2002), 4-14 (pp. 4-5).
36 Evans, ‘Spectacular Babies’, p. 4.
43 Horrocks actually provides a glossary which includes translations of Maori phrases and New Zealand vernacular used in the book, and brief descriptions of (internationally) obscure historical figures and places alluded to – both factual and fictional. Reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s notes to The Waste Land, Hicksville’s glossary apparently serves to bolster the international currency of the regionally-specific cultural information it contains, as well as mimicking the self-conscious sophistication characteristic of high modernist literature.
46 The author would like to gratefully acknowledge Prof. Mark Williams from the University of Canterbury for his valuable input.

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