

Conceptualizing Comics: Studies on the Nature of Spatiality

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Biboswan Bose

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC)

Jadavpur University

Kolkata

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Supervisor: Dr. Anirban Das

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

Certified that the Thesis entitled

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submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of _____

DR. ANIRBAN DAS

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor : *Anirban Das*

Dated : 30/12/2024

Associate Professor
CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN
SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

Candidate : *Nilosuman Bose*

Dated : 30/12/2024

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Introduction

This thesis attempts to conceptualize a certain problem of spatiality from the formal specificity of the medium of comics. As such, it does not seek to be a taxonomic or historical study, that is, it does not attempt to provide either a historical overview of the development of comics as media, nor does it attempt to provide a classification of comics in terms of genres or historical ‘movements’ or ‘schools’. Neither does it delve into a close textual reading of a variety of comic books (in fact, only two comic books appear in the whole thesis, the latter of which, Orijit Sen’s *The River of Stories*, informs the entirety of the second part of this thesis, and the former, Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, takes up a majority of the first part). Rather, what this thesis aims to achieve, is to conceptualize an aporia pertaining to spatiality that is inherent to the nature of comics as a medium, and it argues that this problem is not only restricted to comics, but rather that it is a *general ontological* problem that refers to an aporia of space and time – and also, along with it, an aporia of being in general. And further, that this ontological aporia – and the problem of spatiality that we find in comics – holds a conceptual relevance in the theorization of decoloniality.

This problem of spatiality makes itself felt in the fact that, in comics, the ‘movement’ of time – the ‘passage’ of the past to the present, and towards the future, the flow of the narrative from element to element, panel to panel – must also be ‘static’, given on the ‘same’ space of the comic book page – the elements or ‘moments’ of time which must annihilate each other to appear, must also be conceivably simultaneous with each other. In comics, a narrative – or any sequence of elements – is presented through their juxtaposition on space, on the spatial surface of a comic book page. And such a sequence stands for a temporal passage, it represents and must be perceived through a movement of time. Here in this thesis we take this to imply more than just a simple spatialization of time – the depiction of ‘points’ of time through discrete spatial images – rather, we hold that the spatial nature of time in comics also implies a general aporia of space and time: that the movement of time from moment to moment must also indicate a simultaneity

between moments. Time must unfold *spatially*, and each element must be related to the other, not only through the annihilation of time, which is also an ‘opening’, a passage into the other, but also through a simultaneity, a holding together which is also the static discreteness of space. And perhaps this problem cannot be resolved, cannot be fully explained, through either the image of a ‘dialectical’, eternal ‘now’ *within* which the becoming of time takes place, *or* the absolute otherness of the other, the trace of the other which hollows from *without*, the ‘inside’ of the present. It calls for us to stay with its difficulty, to keep thinking further.

Moreover, we contend that this conceptualization of the spatial that we find in comics is not without consequence for a theorization of the decolonial. Any decolonial act must – at an epistemological level – confront the universal and universalizing effect of the colonizer, which it must oppose through its own anticolonial or decolonial position. Yet any discrete opposition returns us to the logic of the colonizer, the logic of one against another one – here the decolonial must try to take up the position of the ‘other’, an other which is always entangled with the universal, and yet always moving away, as if dissipating itself vis-a-vis the universal: and yet, the decolonial must attempt to take this position of the other, to think of the impossible ‘presence’ of such a position. We find a similar ‘movement’ in the medium of comics. In comics, any element only comes into being through its relation to another, through a juxtaposition which is constitutive of the medium of comics – this means that any ‘present’ element in comics (any element which one ‘presently’ perceives) is always related to its ‘past’ or ‘future’ element, such that the ‘presence’ of the present is spoiled by the necessary trace of the other, by this opening towards its others that is *within* it. Yet, in comics, this ‘movement’ between the present and the past/future, the ‘difference’ between the present and its others, is *also* a simultaneity, a spatial continuity that must also imply a ‘same’. The open-present, as open, must also bring the ‘other’ *inside* as the ‘same’ – and here we must not only think of a disappearing, dissipating other, but also of an impossible ‘presence’ of the other. This impossible ‘presence’ cannot be thought of without the ‘effect’ of the spatial, and we argue in this thesis that the specificity of comics lies in the fact that it forcefully expresses this spatiality – which holds relevance in the thinking of the decolonial.

And we should make clear that the concepts which we will develop in this thesis – and there will be a few, such as *spatial repetition* or *juxtaposition*, *transadequation*, *decolonizational*

pluriversality – these should not be taken as conceptual facts, but rather that our attempt in this thesis will be to pose these concepts strategically, as contingent instruments in order to keep alive the conceptual work, to reiterate, again and again, the difficulties that are inherent in the subject matter of our study. In a certain way, the demand for conceptual work must take precedence to the concepts themselves – which are to be posed only tentatively, perhaps even tactically – and our attempt in developing concepts will be less to provide conclusive statements or solutions, and more to open up our field of study, to remain with the inherent yet constitutive difficulties given in the questions related to space, time, and being in general – and in the latter half of our thesis, decolonization – to remain with their power to provoke.

Needless to say, this thesis takes the form of comics to be a complex, generative artform which invites sustained conceptual work – this position we will take for granted in our attempt to conceptualize and study comics as a medium of representation. However, let us note that this view on comics is a relatively recent phenomenon around the globe, marked by a proliferation of writing and scholarship on the medium, accompanied by the appearance of journals, departments, and societies dedicated to ‘comics studies’. In his book *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield shows that the initial academic research on comics was anything but sympathetic, that the traditional critical opinion on comics was that comics is a juvenile diversion, which only anticipates and even spoils, the eventual experience of ‘real’ reading. From the 1930s to the mid-1950s, especially in American academic writing, there was a certain apprehension and sometimes downright antagonism regarding comics as a ‘competition’ for real reading, and its potential adverse effects on the cognitive development of children.¹

This view is typified by Fredric Wertham’s 1954 text, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which argues for a causal connection between the reading of comics and delinquency, and devotes a full chapter on the effect comics has on reading skill. According to Wertham, comics disrupts the ability to read, causing ‘reading disorders’, and that comic readers do not engage in proper reading, but a more reduced activity which he called ‘picture reading’, where the reader only looks successively at the pictures, paying minimal attention to the printed letters. Comics ‘seduces’ children into picture reading, rather than engaging in the more fruitful endeavor of

¹ Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (University of Mississippi, 2005), 32-3.

decoding written text.² Hatfield shows that this view of comics as a primitive, simplistic form, put forward so forcefully by Wertham, made it impossible to address the many complex questions comics raises about the reading and its effects – and only recently, with the rise of a variety of alternative comics and of comics theory and criticism, has it been possible to take comics seriously as a form of representation.

Hatfield goes on to show that comics are a complex means of communication, which are ‘always characterized by a plurality of messages’ which arise from their heterogeneous nature, and the co-presence of various codes. From the reader’s perspective, comics is ‘radically fragmented and unstable’, demanding a suspension of judgment from the readers – *inherent* to comics are a number of tensions, between image and text, sequence and surface, materiality, etc. – which we find distilled in what Hatfield calls *timing*: the tension between ‘seriality’ and ‘synchronicity’, that is, between the temporal dimension of a series of elements in comics, and the spatial or atemporal aspect of their coexistence. For Hatfield, these tensions necessarily indicate a ‘complexity of form’ that opens up a multiplicity of interpretive options, and they need to be addressed through the question of reader response in comics.³ And here we must distinguish our position from Hatfield’s – while we agree with the necessity to engage with the ‘complexity of form’ of comics, and that this complexity is exemplified in the tension between the temporal and atemporal (spatial) dimension of comics, we must by the same token insist that this tension is not simply a matter of reader response in comics – although it also encompasses the matter of reader response. Rather, in this thesis we hold that this tension is *necessary* and *constitutive* of the medium of comics and informs every element, every experience related to comics, including but perhaps not restricted to both the experience of reading, as well as that of ‘making’ or creating comics. It calls for a conceptualization of the medium of comics in its formal specificity.

Here we should clarify that by a ‘medium’ we do not hold the view that comics stands as an in-between, only as a provisional means of access, between the observer and the observed, subject and object, self and the world, and so on. The traditional structure of such a view would hold that any ‘medium’ – and here one would think of the ‘medium’ as re-presentation, as that

² Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (Rinehart, 1954), 126,139.

³ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 35-6.

which presents ‘again’ – would only be a means of access to the world, as a system of signs that stands in for or substitutes the ‘thing’, a ‘thing’ which would both be the meaning and the referent ‘out there’ in the world. The ‘medium’, in this case, would only be *secondary* and *provisional* to the presence of the world, secondary because it would only be a substitute whose ‘sense’ emerges from this presence, and provisional because it constantly strives, moves towards this presence. Let us observe that this difference, between the medium and presence of the world, between the subject and object that animates this economy of signification, is not provisional but rather *necessary* – any ‘act’ of representation (and this ‘act’ may be just as passive as it is active) must function in a ‘field’ marked by *irreducible difference*, between the subject and object, the sign and the thing, and we do not possess any means of direct access, any direct intuition into the world.

This does not mean that the world is necessarily ‘subjective’, or a product of subjective ideas – we do not have to choose here between the subject and object, the ideal and the real, it is perhaps not possible here to determine whether the ‘medium’ is the effect of subjective or objective forces, and we will not try to address this issue – what matters to us here is that the ‘world’, ‘reality’, appears to us necessarily through a ‘medium’, necessarily conditioned by a network of differences, and that this difference also applies to different mediums of representations – including writing, cinema, comics, etc., and also between instances of the ‘same’ medium – and this would imply that ‘reality’ appears to us differently, marked by a certain difference, through each medium. Not a ‘primary’ reality which appears in different ‘modes’, but rather *reality itself* must differ, must be displaced between each medium – this would not mean we have separate, discrete realities, but rather that the ‘same’ reality must nevertheless go through an impossible, irreducible displacement with each appearance – that it must be real *qua* this difference.

We hope to pursue in the thesis this opening in comics, that as a medium it must bring to the surface, it must be able to articulate, a certain difference, a certain ‘aspect’ of the world – and that this must refer to a general ontological aspect, an ontological difference which is brought forward by comics.⁴ It does not escape our notice that our attempt must be an act of *translation*,

⁴ We are not arguing here that the ‘aspect’ of reality that appears in comics, that is expressed in its specificity as a medium, is a specific ‘representation’ of the world. Rather, we are arguing that the experience of ‘reality’ or world itself is produced ‘through’ a medium – and this applies both to

that in our articulation we must displace this aspect in comics into writing, into a language close to philosophy, and theoretical social science. Perhaps this aspect in comics cannot be articulated as well through another medium – certainly not in the ‘same’ way – but our attempt will be to translate this aspect, to suture this difference of the real, so that it might illuminate something of the ontological – and also, in our thesis, of the decolonizational. We will pursue this project.

And we will pursue this aspect as a problem of spatiality in comics. Here we will follow a certain scholarship in comics studies which attempts to define comics – especially the work of Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and that of Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt. In their essay ‘What is Comics?’, Hayman and Pratt insist on the spatial nature of comics, especially as it pertains to its definition – what separates comics from other mediums, for Hayman and Pratt, is *spatiality*. They define comics as: ‘x is a comic if and only if x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right, or when combined with text.’⁵ And what distinguishes this juxtaposition in comics from other mediums such as film, or animated shows, that in comics juxtaposition is *spatial*, not temporal – that is, in film, images appear in time successively, one image only appears by annihilating the other, but in comics, the narrative unfolds spatially, and each element of comics can be conceivably laid out on a single surface. What characterizes comics is *spatial juxtaposition*.

Here we ask: what does it mean to unfold in space? Unfolding refers to an act, a movement, which necessarily takes place in time, successively – how can it occur *in space*, in the static coexistence of the spatial? Hayman and Pratt do not ask this question, perhaps for them spatial juxtaposition simply refers to the appearance of comic book elements on the surface of

‘representational’ and ‘non-representational’ comics. The ‘aspect’ of reality that comics expresses, which we hope to pursue in this thesis, is a certain problem of spatiality – that the temporal succession of element-to-element in comics is *simultaneously* a spatial co-existence. And this holds true for abstract, non-representational comics as well. Neil Cohn, in speaking of the collection ‘*Abstract Comics*’, says that in non-representational comics, usual structures of semantic meaning-making are not applicable. That is, abstract comics no longer provide the sense of a representational narrative – and yet, Cohn admits that what remains in abstract comics, is the ‘navigational system’ of moving through a page layout. And we must insist that this ‘navigational system’ indicated by Cohn, can only function through spatial juxtaposition in comics. That the ‘navigation’ in comics – the temporal ‘movement’ from element to element – must encounter a spatial simultaneity between these elements. (See: Neil Cohn, “Abstract Comics and Visual Language,” Visual Language Lab, <https://www.visuallanguagelab.com/2009/08/abstract-comics-and-visual-language.html>.)

⁵ Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, “What Are Comics?,” In *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, eds. David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (Pearson, 2005), 423.

the comic book page – but we will quickly see that this aspect of spatiality refers not only to the apparent specificity of comics, but also to a general ontological aporia regarding space and time. Moments of time must appear by annihilating each other, that is, each ‘present’ must appear by succeeding the ‘past’ moment which is irreducibly left behind, and moving towards a ‘future’ moment which is not yet – and yet this succession of time must imply a simultaneity, an ‘overlap’ between moments in time without which the moments would not ‘pass’ into each other. The specificity of the link between this general aporia and its appearance in comics is worked out in the first part of this thesis, especially in the later half of the second chapter – for now, let us say that in the same way that in comics, temporal unfolding of elements must also imply a spatial coexistence, the conceivable bringing together of the narrative on a single surface, *time itself* must also go through this impossibility, moments in time must also be simultaneous, impossibly spatial. Repetition, the act of repeating which must happen over time, which appears to necessarily refer to the succession of moments in time, must also suffer a kind of spatiality, a simultaneity of the repeated elements – and *spatial juxtaposition* must also be related to the impossible possibility of *spatial repetition*.

The spatiality that we are pursuing here must be distinguished from given, empirical space. When Hayman and Pratt speak of spatial juxtaposition, they refer to the spatial in comics as given space, as the pre-given space of the comic book page upon which the elements of comics appear. But this given space of the comic book page is not the same as the spatial, even though the latter must be intimately related to it, perhaps even ‘derived’ from it. Empirical space appears as a continuous surface, an atemporal givenness – yet this ‘givenness’ does not precede the divisibility of time. Rather, our experience of space must be in ‘snapshots’, as a synthesis of fragmentary, temporal experience of space – the so-called ‘givenness’ of space, its continuity, is a result of a synthesis and not a pre-existing category. Yet, this temporality itself, the divisibility of temporal experience which has to be retroactively synthesized, must also suffer a simultaneity, a continuity between moments without which moments would not ‘pass’ into each other. Spatiality, for us, is this strange ‘logic’ of continuity that is supposed by the divisibility of time, not a pre-given space or synthesis but an impossible continuity that must inform divisibility *as* divisibility. In a certain way we must ‘derive’ this spatiality from given space, from the ‘image’ of the continuity of space – but let us be careful that spatiality is not reducible to this space.

Also we will – unlike Hayman and Pratt – not relate this problem of spatial juxtaposition necessarily with the attempt to define comics. We will not try to define comics in this thesis; the problems related to such an attempt at defining the medium are well-known. In his text ‘Defining Comics?’, Aaron Meskin demonstrates how the formal definition forwarded by Hayman and Pratt is open to a number of flaws, especially that of ahistoricity – a flaw that is common, according to Meskin, in all extant attempts to define comics. Simply speaking, spatially juxtaposed graphic narratives existed much before the ‘birth’ of comics in the nineteenth century, and to define comics in this way opens up the possibility of a number of counterexamples – narrative sequences by painters such as Hogarth in the eighteenth century, the Bayeux Tapestry, and pre-Columbian picture manuscripts from eleventh-century Mexico. Meskin states that ‘it seems perverse... to call these comics’, although he does admit that one person’s perversion could be another person’s ordinary practice, and that theorists such as McCloud explicitly champion these examples as works of comics. In order to address this anachronism, Meskin proposes that we refer to ‘comics’ as a historical category rather than as a formal object, as an artform that developed out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature and British humor magazines such as *Punch*, and that they should be understood in terms of their own history.⁶

But this attempt at referring to ‘comics’ through a specific history of its development as an artform itself throws up certain problems. As John Holbo shows in his essay ‘Redefining Comics’, treating the term ‘comics’ as a result of a development of Anglo-American and European history leaves out many traditions of ‘comics’ such as the Japanese *manga* which share many characteristics with comics and are virtually treated as being comics all over the world. And even though, as Holbo shows, the definition that McCloud (or Hayman-Pratt) provides for comics can slide into the slippery slope of referring to *all* representation, to *all* systems of signs – that even novels can be considered to be graphic narratives if alphabets are seen as graphic images – we may argue here that restricting the reference of ‘comics’ to a specific historical instance may leave out many works that exist in the margins of representational genres, between comics and other ‘mediums’, such as concrete poetry, calligrams, etc. Rather, as Holbo shows, these two approaches – the historical and the formal – should be considered complementary, and

⁶ Aaron Meskin, “Defining Comics?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Volume 65, Issue 4 (Fall 2007): 369-79.

in certain ways, the latter enjoys an ‘insightful edge’, even if it tends to produce more counterexamples than examples.⁷

What is important to us in this thesis, is not the practicalities of setting up strict parameters in the usage of the term ‘comics’, but rather that it is *through* the study of comics that the problem of spatial juxtaposition or repetition is brought forcefully to the fore. We will use the term ‘comics’ broadly, and flexibly – and by doing so perhaps unwittingly taking up the ‘complementary approach’ that Holbo prescribes – the manner in which ‘comics’ is used to refer to a general body of sequential graphic art in the term ‘comics studies’. That the signifier ‘comics’ is used in this broad fashion is readily apparent in the mission statement of the largest online comics studies collective in the world, The Comics Studies Society: in the statement ‘comics’ is described both through a number of specific terms, as including ‘comics strips; comic books, papers, and magazines; albums, graphic novels, and other graphic books; webcomics and other electronic formats; single-panel cartoons, including editorial and gag cartoons; caricature’, but also as ‘animation; and other related forms and traditions’, and ends by broadly stating that ‘All types of sequential art, graphic narrative, and cartooning are relevant to our mission.’⁸

But let us note that in one sense, our use of the term ‘comics’ will be quite specific, and perhaps even singular – that is, in its relationship with the problem of spatiality. Certainly, spatial juxtaposition cannot strictly be called a feature of comics – it functions even in disparate mediums such as novels, or cinema, in the former through the juxtaposition of words and alphabets on its pages, and even in the latter, between different elements of a ‘single’ frame – without spatial juxtaposition, there would be no space, and no experience whatsoever. But we will contend that it is specifically the medium of comics, which produces the effect of the coexistence, in a single space, of successive moments of time. In being overwhelmingly pictorial, a comic book page reproduces the ‘look’ of a space – images as ‘objects’ exist, as if ‘populate’, the space of a comic book page – where each ‘object’, in being divided through various figures such as panels, are also simultaneously represented as ‘moments’ of time. In novels, the ‘rules’ of decoding the text takes precedence over its appearance as a populated,

⁷ John Holbo, “Redefining Comics,” in Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook eds., *The Art of Comics: A philosophical Approach* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5-25.

⁸ “Mission,” The Comics Studies Society, comicsstudies.org.

static space, and in cinema, each ‘moment’ (frame) appears only by annihilating other moments, and the diegetic space that is created therein does not produce the effect of the simultaneous coexistence of these ‘moments’.

We are not claiming that the problem of spatial juxtaposition is restricted to the medium of comics – quite on the contrary, our claim is that it refers to a general ontological problem. Rather, what we are observing here is that it is perhaps the medium of comics which is most suited to bring this problem forcefully to the surface for us. And it is the proliferation of comic books, and the burgeoning scholarship on the medium, that brings to our notice the problem of spatiality – as an ontological problem that demands conceptual work, which informs all of experience including that of other mediums of representation, and of ‘counterexamples’ such as the Bayeux Tapestry or picture manuscripts from Mexico. It is in this sense that the term ‘comics’ remains relevant for us.

This thesis is divided into two parts: the first part, titled ‘Comics and General Ontology’, develops the problem of spatiality in comics and attempts to pursue its strange ‘logic’ at an ontological level, it tries to find and develop philosophical figures or concepts which may help to elaborate the stakes of this aporia; and the second part, ‘Comics and the Decolonial’, finds the elaboration of this aporia to be valuable in the theorization of the decolonial – here we study a three-page spread in the comic book *The River of Stories*, where a call for decolonization is made, and represented through an aporia of space and time. The two parts are further divided into two chapters each, making a total of four chapters in the thesis.

The first chapter, ‘The Problem of Spatiality in Comics’, begins with a reading of Scott McCloud’s celebrated text *Understanding Comics*, where McCloud runs into a problem of space as soon as he tries to analyze the function of time in comics. We contend that this confusion is rooted in McCloud’s concept of ‘closure’ – which is the name McCloud gives to the act of ‘stitching together’ fragments of reality in perception into a continuous whole. For McCloud, such an act of ‘closure’ is necessary in the perception of comics, where the ‘movement’ of time between panels have to be sutured in perception – if each panel in a comic represents a moment in time, then they must contain between them a spatial ‘gap’, called the ‘gutter’, and the temporal flow of the narrative must be grasped *through* and *despite* this spatial gap between moments. It is

because of this that McCloud conjectures, that in comics, *time has to be perceived spatially*.⁹ This insinuation – we might say a certain preeminence – of the spatial in the functioning of time in comics, is taken up further by Thierry Groensteen, and Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt. As we have seen before, they attempt to employ the spatiality of comics to provide a definition for comics, and we find two interconnected claims in their work: first, that comics is to be defined through a *spatial juxtaposition* of images, that is, each element in a comic that represents a ‘moment’ in time must also appear ‘simultaneously’ in space; and second, that the ‘repetition’ of elements in comics must happen on a ‘singular’ spatial surface.¹⁰

We take this to imply that *spatial juxtaposition* must imply a *spatial repetition*, that is, the ‘repetition’ between moments in time – between the ‘dimensions’ of time that is the past, present, and the future – must also suppose a continuity, an overlap of a ‘single’ dimension, an impossible coexistence in the manner of the spatial which must nevertheless maintain the temporal divisibility of moments. *Both* the divisibility of repetition, *and* the singularity of the spatial have to be maintained, and this strange ‘logic’ or ‘problem’ is the *condition* of experience, it constitutes and ‘produces’ the experience of empirical time and space as we conceive them – and any simple notion of continuity and difference, any notion of the one and many, part and whole, will not suffice to ‘explain’ this problem – and neither can we reduce this spatial to the idea of empirical space although we must derive the spatial from it. How should we conceive of this strange continuity, a continuity which we may only conceive *qua* its divisibility but which nevertheless makes the divisible intelligible *as* the divisible? How should we conceptualize the ‘logic’ of this problem, this aporia which is at the heart of all experience, all worlding of the world, which ‘constitutes’ the notions of time, space, and being as we generally understand them?

In the chapter we look towards two figures, two potential articulations which may illuminate the stakes of our problem – both taking on the form of the eternal presence of the Now. The first articulation comes from McCloud’s own text, where McCloud claims that not only comics, but all reality takes place in the everlasting Now. For McCloud, the Now makes

⁹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (HarperPerennial: 1994), 94-100.

¹⁰ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Ngyuen (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 21-22; and Hayman and Pratt, “What Are Comics?,” 423.

itself felt in comics when, in focusing on a specific element in a comic, one has to ‘take in’ the surrounding elements – the ‘present’ is also surrounded by a ‘simultaneous’ ‘past’ and ‘future’ – moments in time are simultaneous and exist in comics together, they appear at the same time.¹¹ Yet in McCloud it seems that the simultaneity and divisibility of moments remain themselves divided, distinguished as if into two ‘moments’ – the ‘past’ and ‘future’ are simultaneous with the ‘present’, but they also remain *outside*, as elements that must be ‘taken in’ – and most importantly, McCloud does not describe this as an ontological problem, but rather as the basis for multiple directionality of reading that is made possible in comics. To find a figure of the Now that addresses the problem at a general ontological level, while retaining the co-implied tension between the present and its others, we turn to *The Philosophy of Nature* by Georg W.F. Hegel, where Hegel articulates the Now as a result of the ‘dialectical’ movement between space and time, where a certain spatial ‘enveloping’ of the temporal takes place.

In *The Philosophy of Nature* Hegel describes space as that abstract universality which expresses the self-externality of Nature, and as the expression of self-externality it develops difference within itself, in the figure of the point. Yet this point – this abstract, minimum figure of difference ‘within’ space – is itself spatial, and must also dissolve into the indifferent unity of space; to develop self-externality, that is, externality from itself, space must develop a point which absolutely annihilates all other points, whose coming into being must refer to a wholly separate dimension for itself – and this, for Hegel, is the logic of moments of time, where each individual present must only appear by annihilating the earlier, ‘past’ moment and by anticipating its own annihilation by the next, ‘future’ moment. There is no individual moment that is also not passing away, already not in the temporal unrest of becoming – the present *itself* is this passing – yet the separate dimensions of time must also imply a continuity, the eternal presence of Now that indicates a singular dimension. The eternity of Now is not to be equated to the individual present, but rather it is the *presence* that ‘envelops’ the unrest of time – constant becoming and dynamism is experienced *within* an eternal Now, always ‘occurring’ in the Now which persists through time.¹²

¹¹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 104-6.

¹² Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Clarendon Press, 2004), 15, 28-40.

In the Hegelian Now we seem to come across a figure which ‘contains’ the tension between the divisibility of time, and the continuity of space which must be *given in* time. Yet the Hegelian dialectical figure comes into being through an ‘enveloping’ of the otherness of time – it develops the point as that Eternity which appropriates temporal unrest. In a certain way, the spatial in time, the strange continuity or overlap which must be constitutive of time, takes on the image of space, a place *within* which the elements of time subsist as if as ‘objects’ in empirical space, no matter how dynamic, and Hegel himself writes of the Now as that point which develops itself into Place. To think of this in terms of comics, it would be to conceptualize the spatial in comics in terms of the space of the comic book page which ‘holds’ together its elements – but the problem that we are pursuing in comics is not that of this space, but the *spatial* which ‘produces’ this space. Even though this spatial is derived from space, from the fact that panels in comics, which represent ‘moments’ in time, appear simultaneously on the surface of a comic book page, this spatial is not reducible to this space. To think of the spatial as this space would be to reduce these ‘moments’ to ‘objects’ – but moments in time are not simply present together like objects, they necessarily and irreducibly refer to otherness, a divisibility and negation which must be taken into account – the task is to conceptualize a spatiality that maintains the otherness of temporal moments, not to ‘envelop’ moments of time within a space which reduces them to present objects. And to maintain the otherness of time, is to conceive of a spatial that cannot appropriate the other within itself, even if the other *within* is endlessly dynamic, endlessly becoming-other *inside* a dialectical Now. It is to pursue the ‘logic’ of a strange continuity that persists with and makes possible the divisibility of time.

In the second chapter, ‘Spatiality and the Trace of Difference’, we attempt to follow the stakes of this ‘logic’ in the work of Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, the Hegelian dialectical sublation of space and time only develops another present – the Now in this sense is not the synthesis of the past and the future but simply another present as the past-retained uplifted. The distinction between the individual present and the Now as presence of the present does not ultimately hold – the sublated Now is also developed as a ‘concrete Present’ or Place, it takes us to the site of another present. Derrida’s own description of the ‘scene of presence’ differs significantly from that of Hegel: Derrida shows that for the present to be itself, for the present to be present, it *must* necessarily be differentiated from the past and the future, a gap or ‘*spacing*’ must separate them from each other. And here it is not a matter of being otherwise – being

otherwise than the present in its continuity with the past and the future – but rather that the effect of being *not otherwise*, this relation of difference, which hollows the present from within. The present is already vitiated by the trace of the past and the future, it appears on the scene of presence only as a synthesis of marks, of traces of the other (past and present) which are maintained *as* the other.¹³

For both Hegel and Derrida, the present must be in a certain continuity with the past and the future, in that in its very being it must imply the being of others. For Hegel this means a spatial simultaneity, a coexistence of dimensions of time in the singularity of the Now, which is the sublated presence of the present, a point which ‘envelops’ the unrest of time – this does not cease time but rather indicates a place *within* which the becoming of time takes place. For Derrida, on the other hand, this implies the trace of the past and the future – he *maintains* the otherness of the other, formulates a co-implication which nevertheless holds on to the irreducible otherness of the past and the future. Derrida calls this economy of traces *differance*: that is, any element which appears on the scene of presence, any ‘present’ element, must appear only by virtue of its difference or a ‘spacing’ from other elements, and that its own identity must not be fully present but constantly *deferred*. This ‘temporizing’ principle of deferral means that the fulfillment of any ‘desire’ or ‘will’ must be submitted to a temporal detour, a taking into account of time which defers its fulfillment, and this also defers the appearance of any ‘full’ identity of space and time – that is, *temporization* ‘constitutes’ space and time in a process of constant becoming, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time.¹⁴

But here we may ask: what ‘becomes’ of the spatial in Derrida? On the one hand, it seems that ‘spacing’ in Derrida only refers to a gap, a difference, and the implication of this *spacing* is entirely assumed within *temporization*, within the economy of deferral which could not function without already having assumed this gap. And on the other hand, space is submitted to a deferral, a ‘becoming’ which entangles space and time – where space and time are constantly ‘becoming’ each other *within* the economy of temporization. But should this deferral of the presence of space and time be thought only in terms of becoming? To push this ‘logic’ further, can it be thought strictly on the basis of temporal deferral? Would not the ‘becoming’ of

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), 13.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Margins*, 7-8.

this entanglement also imply a ‘simultaneity’, a certain bringing together or contraction of moments of time in the manner of the spatial? Could we think the co-implication of space and time as a co-implication of becoming and simultaneity, a certain imagining of the Hegelian ‘return’ alongside Derridean deferral? Yet this is precisely what is forbidden by Derrida – the only ‘forbiddance’ that appears in Derrida’s description of the economy of differance. The ‘logic of delay’ – *temporization* – forbids that the trace be made into a dialectical synthesis, the kind that would gather back on itself. Differance takes us to a general economy where ‘presence’ suffers an irreducible loss, it marks the trace of an excess that cannot be recovered, made a profit of – which is what the Hegelian sublation attempts to do, it conceptualizes the other as another self, the other *of* the self becomes another self, the past becomes that which is continuous with the present, and hence everything which is surreptitiously derived from the present must return to the present. The trace, on the other hand, is a ‘past that has never been present’, not even as a modified present – it refers to the otherness of the past that is wholly other, it *maintains* this otherness.¹⁵

But how can we think of a past that has never been present? Even common sense will tell us, that for the past to be past, it must have been present – and this is not simply a naive notion. If we do conceive of a past that has never been present, we run the immediate risk of posing a ‘present’ past, a discrete past whose borders can be defined. To put it in other words: if the full sense of any element is deferred, then how do we know that the past has never been present? Would not the absoluteness of this absolute past itself be deferred? And even more importantly, to turn deferral back on itself, how would we fully forbid the Hegelian return or even a full presence of the present? Would deferral not defer itself? Would it not defer, along with full presence, that which would defer full presence as well? Would it be possible at this point, to think of presence, not only a deferred presence but also an enveloping presence, *within* or *alongside* the logic of differance?

Here our theorization must remain tentative. We are attempting to think Hegel and Derrida together, precisely at a point where this thinking appears to be forbidden. We are attempting to think the absolute past of difference along with that of continuity. And perhaps we are approaching the ground, not of the trace but in terms of the trace, of an *indeterminate*

¹⁵ Derrida, *Margins*, 19-21.

indifference between presence and absence, where the otherness of the other is maintained, but also simultaneously annihilated. What we are posing here is not necessarily a concept but an opening – and we have derived this ontological opening from our conceptualization of comics. To think of a ‘moment’ in comics, a panel that represents this moment in time, one must also ‘take in’ the panels around it – as McCloud claims, the ‘present’ panel is always constituted by a simultaneous ‘presence’ of the ‘past’ and ‘future’ panels. And any present element in comics must be read through this trace of the other, it is constituted by its co-existence with its other – any perception of a panel must be hollowed out by the trace of the other. And yet, in its coexistence with other panels, it also refers to a simultaneity, any ‘present’ panel is *simultaneous* with the ‘presence’ of the entirety of the spatial surface of a comic – which is conceivably the entire comic, and which ‘contains’ its ‘others’ in the singular spatiality of the ‘same’. The deferral of the ‘present’ – any deferred-object or -identity – must appear, impossibly, *together* with a kind of ‘return’ of its ‘other’, an impossible ‘presencing’ of the same.

A phenomena of *transadequation* must accompany deferral. Any deferred object must be elaborated over time, that is, any X must be elaborated as an infinite series (X1, X2, X3, ...), and even though this series will never exhaust the sense of X, the series also *is* X and X must be understood as this series rather than in-itself as X. *X-itself is this elaboration over time*. And within this series, each element, like X1, must be a deferred-X, not adequate to either X or the X-series. Yet, each deferred-X must also refer to the entirety of X, otherwise it would not be a deferred-X but simply another discrete object – *X1 must be impossibly adequate to X* and also the entire X-series. Each ‘stringing’ of the X-series must also happen ‘within’ a deferred-X, that is, the sense of the X-series must also be reconstituted each time in a ‘deferred’ moment. A certain ‘logic’ of temporality divides X, it *must* be conceived of as an X-series – X-itself has to be conceptualized *qua* this difference between deferred-Xs in an X-series – yet simultaneously, a spatial ‘logic’ overdetermines this ‘system’, each element must also be in an impossible continuity with the whole, it must ‘envelop’ its difference with others. A strange ‘logic’ of spatial continuity must co-exist with the trace of difference – the deferred-object, that which is eternally to-come, must also impossibly ‘arrive’ at the same time, not only as an other-arrivant but *itself* as this other-arrivant.

We have not presented a concrete concept for this in our thesis – rather our attempt has been to follow the strange ‘logic’ of continuity that we find in the spatial problem expressed in comics, and we have focused on the conceptual work that is required to elaborate the stakes of this ‘logic’. The tentative ‘concepts’ which we have posed – such as *spatial repetition* or *transadequation* – are meant to further this conceptual work rather than provide any ‘final’ conceptual ground. We contend that the problem of spatiality that we encounter in comics takes us to the ground of a general ontological problem – that of the general notions of space, time, and being itself – and that it gestures towards an opening, a difficulty which is perhaps not fully exhausted either by the figure of dialectical sublation or that of the trace as deferral. It provokes us to think further, to remain with its difficulty.

In the second part of our thesis (‘Comics and the Decolonial’), we attempt to relate this problem of spatiality that we find in comics, with the theoretical discourse of decoloniality. We contend that any thinking of decolonization must grapple with the impossible demand to conceptualize the ‘presence’ of other – and that perhaps the ontological spatiality that we find in comics indicates one way of imagining this impossible presence. In the third chapter, titled ‘The space/time of decoloniality and *The River of Stories*’, we attempt to pursue this intersection of comics and the decolonial through a reading of a three-page spread in the comic book, *The River of Stories*. The spread appears near the end of the comic book, and is designed as a map, a map of the valley of River Rewa – which is the site for a massive dam construction project that threatens to displace a large population of *adivasis*, the original inhabitants of the land. Embedded within the map, there appears two sets of panels, one depicting a large protest march that took place at Manigram against the dam construction project, and the other depicting Malgu Gayan, the legendary singer of the *adivasis*, who according to *adivasi* legends, chased away beasts from the valley in the past and allowed Rewa to flow to the sea.¹⁶ The two sets of panels depict discrete narratives, two ‘flows’ or ‘moments’ of time – the ‘present’ protest movement and the cosmological ‘past’ – and yet by embedding them *within* the design of the map, these ‘moments’ are also represented as ‘objects’ on the map. A spatial ‘logic’ overdetermines their temporal discreteness and dynamism, they are at once made ‘static’, but also held together – they are made to co-exist *at the same time*. Two temporalities are made simultaneous where a call for

¹⁶ Orijit Sen, *The River of Stories*, (Kalpavriksha, 1994), 48-9.

decolonization is made, the present demand for decolonization is made to co-incide with the legendary past where the land was made free – and perhaps the ontological impassage of space/time that appears here is not simply a ‘vehicle’ meant to illustrate decolonization but an impassage that illuminates the stakes of decolonization itself.

In our readings we find that this impassage cannot simply be ‘solved’ – the spread does not lend itself to any easy interpretation. Any attempt to ‘resolve’ the tension, such as reading the spread as an analogy between the past and the present, or a bearing of the past on the present, is spoiled by the spatial ‘logic’ at work in the spread – the simultaneity makes it such that any one-sided interpretation appears inadequate. We then turn to the notion of ‘re-emergence’ in Walter Mignolo’s decolonial theory – which refers to an act of re-constituting a pre-colonial past, where a decolonial act ‘delinks’ from the immediate past of Western modernity, to reach to, and enact an abrupt re-emergence of a much distant past. For Mignolo, such an act breaks radically from Western unilinear concept of time, which functions on an entity-based ontology, and is unable to articulate the non-linear nature of the world which is in flux. Entity-based ontology allows the West to pose itself as the universal, and to project the Western rhetoric of modernity without taking into account its necessary entanglement with the logic of coloniality. The task of decoloniality is to ‘delink’ from this network of modernity/coloniality – to enact a re-emergence of a much distant, pre-colonial past.¹⁷ We could read the three-page spread as such an act of re-emergence, where a call is made to re-enact the legend of Malgu Gayan, to chase away the beasts of the dam construction project from the Rewa valley – but we quickly see that this reading does not exhaust the possibilities opened up by the spread. For a much-distant ‘past’ to appear in the ‘present’, a certain *continuity* must be supposed between the two, a necessary continuity that does not only follow the logic of ‘delinking’ or a radical break. For the past to re-emerge, a certain re-petition has to be made, a *futural movement* must accompany the movement towards the past – and this ‘double movement’ makes it such that ‘re-emergence’ is as much a movement towards the future as it is a reaching out to the past. Empirically, this becomes evident in the fact

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts Analytics Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 135-9; and Walter D. Mignolo, “Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts,” Interview by Alvina Hoffmann, *E-International Relations*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts>.

that the legend of Malgu Gayan is appropriated creatively by the present, in certain ways it is altered and reinterpreted to ‘fit’ the narrative of the Rewa valley protests.

None of the narratives – neither the cosmological ‘past’ nor the contemporary ‘present’ – can be thought to give access to a pure subjectivity ‘outside’ the Western modern, a ‘delinked’ presence of the decolonial. Yet this does not mean that they remain ‘inside’ the Western modern – inside a ‘pure’ Western modernity which itself is an impossibility – rather they appear as entangled subjectivities, they emerge as contingent, particular forms marked by the othering of the universal modern. Yet this ‘universal’ itself must appear only through this othering, through a constitutive relation of difference with its others – the universal itself must be a particular form, which has assumed the status of a universal. Conversely, any particular subjectivity, any contingent other, must also contain ‘within’ itself the power to be raised to a universal. This structure, this possibility of an impossible universality and ‘presence’, is forcefully expressed in the medium of comics, it is made possible through the work of spatiality which makes the deferred, traced present *simultaneous* with others, enacting an impossible ‘return’ of the ‘other’ to presence. And perhaps this ‘logic’ of spatiality holds relevance for the thinking of decolonization, which must try to imagine such an impossible ‘presence’ of the other.

In the fourth chapter, ‘Spatiality, Decoloniality and Decolonization’, we try to conceptualize the movement of the much-distant past through a reading of the ‘deferred-effect’ in Derrida, where a past, similarly to decolonial re-emergence, comes to affect the present – as if ‘skipping over’ any immediate past that lies behind the present.¹⁸ But unlike in Mignolo, the deferred-effect takes place because of the logic of the trace, a certain mark or synthesis that defers the fullness of the present and its relationship to the past – and we hold that this deferral must also imply a continuity, a spatial overdetermination or simultaneity of the present with the past, which co-implies the present-itself with its other. This continuity must accompany the ‘break’ that decolonial re-emergence seeks to enact, and this tension between continuity and divisibility underlies the very attempt at ‘delinking’ in decolonial discourse. On the one hand, decoloniality seeks to remain with becoming, a non-linear flux that is capable to describing the world as entangled, as in the case of the co-implication of modernity/coloniality – yet on the

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002), 65-7.

other hand, it wants to enact a radical break, a clean ‘delinking’ with the modern (and the colonial) to ‘return’ to a ‘pure’ pre-colonial past. But to enact a ‘break’, is to risk a return to Western notions of entity-based ontology and universality, it is to imagine the world in terms of discreteness and not in terms of a decolonial flux or belonging. In a certain sense, it is to pose one totality against another – to be in the logic of the one and the many, one and the other one.

And this tension of the continuous and the discrete, of the spatial and the temporal, must inform any thought or act of decolonization. Any attempt at decolonization must begin with the impulse to overturn the colonizer, to oppose the colonial and its oppressive force – this is the first step that animates decolonization. Yet soon it becomes apparent that this does not ‘complete’ the process, that to pose a simple anti-colonial opposition to the colonizer is to remain within the epistemic stakes of the colonizer – to simply overturn the colonizer is to move from one power to another. To imagine a future of decolonization, there is a need to think in totally different terms altogether; the task is to imagine *an-other* paradigm, where otherness cannot simply be thought in terms of opposition. This is the task that thinkers of decolonization have tried to pursue, to imagine the world not simply populated by discrete entities or subjectivities, but to conceive of it through entanglements – and here it is no longer possible to access a ‘pure’ pre-colonial, but any imagining of the pre-colonial has to always take into account the subject-position of the modern, that our imagination of any pre-modern or indigenous is also already modern, in certain ways entangled with and ‘produced’ by Western modernity. And this holds true for modernity itself, which is not a monolith but is rather ‘produced’ by its entanglement with the ‘non-modern’, already hollowed out in its claim to totality. And yet this entanglement, imagining the world in this way, risks dissipating the charge of anti-colonial opposition – there is a need to pose a discrete opposition, a ‘presence’, but this cannot be the presence of a discrete present, the reiteration of the colonizer’s episteme. This ‘presence’ must gesture towards the presence of an other, an impossible ‘presence’ of a dissipating figure.

Perhaps the decolonial call to ‘delink’ indicates the need to think of such a presence. Here we follow a question posed by Anirban Das in pursuing the ‘logic’ of the decolonial: that is, how is politics possible in a dissipated field? The thought of ‘delinking’ forces us to consider another paradigm, to imagine an ‘alternative’ to the Western modern – if the entirety of the field is entangled and dissipated, then how can we imagine this alternative? Das conjectures that it might

move us towards a logic of the two – not that of the two as two ones, but rather the two-one, which retains the difference of the two within each one.¹⁹ We follow a similar logic, but we conceive of this difference through our reading of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of hegemony and the democratic invention, where each hegemonic universal – and we consider the Western modern as *the* hegemonic universal – is also necessarily a particular social formation, that any universal itself *must* also simultaneously be a concrete formation, necessarily functioning in a field of differences with other formations.²⁰ And we hold that, each concrete formation must also necessarily be impossibly universal – it must suffer this im-possibility – that in a certain way, it must be *transadequate* to itself, spatially implied with the whole field that it finds itself in. In the same way that it must be contextualized, concretely ‘within’ the field, it must also be possible to contextualize the field ‘within’ or ‘through’ it. We argue that such a field might be thought of as a pluriversal – not the decolonial pluriversal, where each ‘universal’ is delinked or discrete – but rather an entangled field where each concrete element or subjectivity is capable of assuming the status of a universal.

And this ‘logic’ of spatiality appears forcefully in comics, it marks the formal specificity of the medium. In comics, each ‘present’ element must appear only through a relation of juxtaposition, through a relation of difference with other ‘past’ and ‘future’ elements – and this *constitutive* relation of difference marks an opening toward its others, it defers the presence of any ‘present’ element. Yet, at the same time, this ‘present’ element in comics must also be *simultaneous* with the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ – it must bring these ‘others’ *inside* in the spatiality of the ‘same’. It must maintain a logic of strange continuity and ‘presence’, an impossible ‘presence’ of a deferred-present which is effected through the ‘presence’ of its ‘other’ in the ‘same’. The three-page spread in *The River of Stories* reinforces the strange ‘logic’ of continuity and presence. The two ‘temporalities’ – the contemporary ‘present’ and a much-distant ‘past’ – are submitted to a ‘double movement’, a re-emergence of the past which is simultaneously a movement towards the future, the past animates the present just as the present animates the past. Yet neither of these ‘movements’ explain or exhaust the aporia of space and time in the spread,

¹⁹ Anirban Das, “Twoness and Difference: In Search of a Logic for the Decolonial,” at the lecture series “After the Colonial: Critical Responses,” The Center for Comparative Social Theory, West Bengal State University, 9 August 2024.

²⁰ Ernesto Laclau, “The Politics of Rhetoric,” at the conference “Culture and Materiality,” University of California, Davis, 23-25 April 1998.

the simultaneity or 'spatial' continuity of the two 'temporalities' makes it such that both 'movements' must refer to this 'ground' – this opening or problem given in the non-passage of the text. At the same time, each 'movement' must also imply the whole, must be made possible by the generative force of the problem or aporia that 'grounds' it – and this 'ground' is nothing by itself, it must be demonstrated, articulated each time *through* a movement, either as dynamic or static, either as the futurity of the past, the pastness of the future, and so on. It must be reconstructed contingently, understood and grasped *qua* this difference, where each difference must nevertheless refer to the whole, it must be 'caught' in this strange 'logic' of continuity.

Part One: Comics and General Ontology

Chapter One: The Problem of Spatiality in Comics

In the first part of this thesis, we will attempt to conceptualize a problem of spatiality that is inherent to comics – and our contention will be that this spatial problem is not restricted to comics, but is rather a general ontological problem that is applicable to all experience, and has to be conceptualized and addressed at this ontological level. We will derive this problem from a certain scholarship in the field of comics studies, specifically, from the works of Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt. All of these theorists attempt to provide a formal or structural description of comics – indeed, to the extent that each of them provide their own definition of comics – and in this thesis we argue that what is in common in their description of comics, what marks their approach towards the theorization of comics, is a preeminence of the spatial.

In all of their descriptions, we find the claim – sometimes explicitly, like in Groensteen, or Hayman and Pratt, or implicitly, like in McCloud – that the movement of time in comics must take on a spatial character, that is, the ‘succession’ of time between each element or panel in comics, must also be ‘simultaneous’. Since comics is presented as a sequence of images on a spatial surface, and this sequence also stands for a passage of time, this ‘passage’ or ‘duration’ of time must also take place *at once*. Conceivably, the entirety of a comic, that is the entirety of its ‘temporal duration’, can be laid out on a single surface, made to appear simultaneously or at the same time. Consequently the function of repetition in comics also takes on a spatial character. The repetition of time, from one element to another, must take place on a ‘single’ surface, and this spatiality of repetition or movement of time, comes to be an integral part of the structural description of comics in these theorists.

Where we deviate from these theorists is in the fact that we consider this conceptualization of the spatial to be a general ontological problem. Within this scholarship, this preeminence of the spatial is either implicit, as in McCloud, where the emphasis is on the entanglement of time and space in comics, even if time, in his own description, must be perceived spatially in comics – or, where the spatial nature of comics is explicit, such as in the

work of Hayman and Pratt, and Groensteen, ‘space’ is employed as that which separates comics from other competing mediums such as cinema or animated shows. As a consequence, the spatial in comics is seen simply as empirical space – the given space of the surface of a comic book page. In this thesis, we distinguish the spatial from the notion of a given, empirical space, even though the notion of the spatial is derived from given space.

For us, the spatial refers to a strange ‘logic’ of continuity that must be supposed by any ‘movement’, by any passage of time, and hence, by any experience in general. Any and all experience must be temporal, it must occur ‘within’ a becoming or passing of time, and this passage implies a divisibility, a discontinuity ‘within’ any experience or identity – yet any passage of time must also imply a continuity, an overlap or simultaneity between moments without which time would not pass. Any experience of ‘space’ must be temporal, must be ‘split’ by time, yet any experience of time also demands a ‘spatial’ continuity – an impossible ‘logic’ of continuity that is supposed, yet sundered, by time. Such spatiality is a general condition for any experience of the world, and must constitute an ontological problem that has to be addressed at this level. And we find this problem of spatiality to be expressed forcefully in comics – which appears as a certain preeminence of the spatial in the work of comic theorists who try to conceptualize the formal structure of comics.

In perhaps the most well-known theoretical text on the medium of comics, called *Understanding Comics* – a text which is itself a comic book, that is, it is designed and presented as a comic – Scott McCloud runs into this problem of spatiality as soon as he attempts to conceptualize the working of time in the medium. At first, McCloud tries out the simple metaphor of a line connecting two points to describe time in comics. He conjectures that each panel in a comic book represents a single moment in time, and that the gutters – the gap between panels in a comic – help us imagine the intervening moments, thus activating these frozen moments and creating the illusion of time and motion. Immediately however, he rejects this conjecture, and asserts that time in comics is in fact not like a simple line drawn between two points – time in comics is, as McCloud puts it, ‘infinitely weirder than that’.²¹

²¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (HarperPerennial, 1994), 94.

For McCloud, this weirdness of time makes itself known in comics through the difference in the temporal duration of words and images. When observing a panel in a comic, McCloud shows that the *sounds* which appear in the panel take up a certain duration, and even the brief ‘paf!’ of a flashbulb is not instantaneous, but refers to a certain passage of time. Our perception of an image, conditioned by our exposure to photography and representational art, sees in any single continuous image the representation of a single moment. Yet the inclusion of words in comics, through dialogue contained in word balloons, or narrations in narrative boxes, or even through sound effects, introduces an element – sound – which can only exist in time as a certain duration. The instantaneity of images must coexist with duration of sound in comics, not as an instantaneity that is made dynamic by a duration or made to move in time, but rather an instantaneity and duration *at once*, simultaneously static and dynamic.

This paradox of image and sound, then, is not simply a problem of duration – that is, it is not simply a problem of time, but a problem of the spatial that is related to time: a certain simultaneity and stasis that accompanies temporal narrative in comics. It affects the relationality of every element in comics – to the relations of panels, of images and words, of each and every distinct element of a comic book – and pertains to the way each fragment in a comic is related to the whole, in a process which McCloud calls ‘closure’. This notion of closure McCloud draws from a much larger reflection on the nature of our perception of the world – for McCloud, we perceive the world in parts and fragments, never as a whole, yet we continue to believe in the wholeness of the world. Even the most traveled person in the world, says McCloud, has only experienced a small part of the entirety of possible phenomena in the world, but this does not convince them that the world is in fact not whole – even if we never perceive the world as a whole, we construct from our fragmented experience an imagined wholeness, without which we would only have a scattered and chaotic experience of the world. At the very foundation of our perception of ‘reality’, then, is an act of faith, an act of imagination which completes the world for us and ‘fills in’ the phenomena that we do not perceive but believe to exist. McCloud calls this act *closure*.²²

We will not put into question here this concept of closure, although a number of queries may immediately come to mind – not least regarding the nature of the relation between the

²² McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 60-3.

fragment and the whole as it is affected by the persistence of the fragment in perception, that is, whether the perception of ‘incompleteness’ affects the ‘faith’ of the whole, and also, about the perception of self in encountering the world as fragments, and so on – we will put aside these philosophical enquiries regarding the nature of perception which may arise from McCloud’s drawing of the concept of closure from a broad epistemological ground. Rather, what interests us at this point is that McCloud describes the formal functioning of comics through this concept of closure, and further, that this description is made through a certain working of time which has to take into account the persistence of space.

Soon after theorizing closure as an act of faith, McCloud describes comics as a medium of expression which uses closure ‘like no other’, where closure is the ‘agent of change, time and motion’ – where the space between two panels in a comic, the gutter, acts like a limbo of human imagination, transforming two separate images into a single narrative or idea. Even though nothing can be seen between the panels, we assume that something must be there. Comic panels break apart time and space, it fractures the surface of comics into seemingly unconnected images or moments, yet the act of closure allows us to connect these moments into a structured, continuous, and unified reality.²³ Let us be careful here. According to McCloud, comic panels *break apart time and space*, which closure unifies, submits to a continuous narrative sequence – yet closure itself works through a *space*, the space between two panels called a gutter. What is the nature of this space that activates time in comics – that can take broken space and time and apparently unify them in a continuous temporal narrative? And even more, if time itself is activated or connected spatially in comics, that is to say, if this *spatiality in comics* is not simply given space but a principle or element which makes possible the working of time itself, then can we think of the space and time of comics in a simple or unified way? Space or spatiality – which is the other of time, a matter of coexistence as opposed to succession – what does it mean for this other to be entangled with the temporal, and even further, what does it mean for this spatiality to not only be entangled with time but also to be that which in a certain way makes temporal unfolding possible? How should we conceptualize this spatiality of comics?

In this context – in this context of closure, which is the basis for McCloud’s enquiry into time, but also in the context of this spatial problem that emerges from closure – it should not

²³ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 65-7.

surprise us that McCloud finds the metaphor of a simple line between two points to be woefully inadequate to represent time in comics. Having abandoned this metaphor, McCloud subsequently attempts to describe the working of time through the image of a rope, where each inch on the rope represents a second. McCloud then passes this imaginary rope through a busy comic panel, which contains a number of characters, word balloons, and sound effects. As the rope is passed through words – through their sounds which represent durations of time – it represents a rather simplified but workable image of the durations of time each unit of sound takes up. But along with this, McCloud also tries to ‘hang’ or attach each character in the panel to a given point on the rope – since the ‘frozen’ image or drawing of each character represents a moment in time which should fall somewhere within the time of the words they are speaking. Then McCloud maps the passage of time on a graph, and this entire exercise falls apart. McCloud maps the durations of time on the horizontal axis, and the sounds in the panels fall across this line since they take up time, yet the images of every character on the panel belong instantaneously to the same moment – all of them appear ‘frozen’ in the same instant, and fall on the same vertical axis. This snaps the rope back to the vertical axis, and ‘tangles up time beyond all recognition’.²⁴

McCloud writes that the panels or ‘frames’ of a comic have no fixed, absolute meaning, and only work as a general indicator that space and time are being divided – the specificity of the functioning of time and space that appear in comics depends more on how the content is being represented. The entanglement of space and time in comics is not simply a matter of the dissonance between the durations of sounds and images, but rather a constitutive entanglement of the medium itself: ‘In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same.’²⁵ For McCloud, there is no conversion chart between time and space in comics, only a vague sense as a reader that as our eyes move in space there is also a simultaneous movement in time.

On the one hand, McCloud seems to resolve this tension between time and space in comics through a certain vagueness, by saying that in comics time and space are one and the same, that there is no conversion chart, the working will depend on the specific content, and so on. Yet, on the other hand, he seems to raise certain problems, a certain ‘weirdness’ or aporia,

²⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 97.

²⁵ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 100.

that appears to demand our attention. We may ask: is the spatial perception of time – the fact that in comics we learn to perceive time spatially – is this the *same* as time and space being one and the same? Certainly, there must be a commonality, some overlap between the two for time to be perceived spatially. But does this necessarily reduce them to each other? Or is there an aporia at work which maintains the distinction between time and space even as time is perceived spatially, even as time becomes spatial in comics?

To think of it in another way, if time is indeed becoming spatial in comics (whether it be in perception or in presentation, the matter appears synonymous here to us in this regard), then there seems to be a certain primacy of space at work in the description of the medium. Time becomes space in comics, in its perception or presentation, comics is a medium where the temporal narrative has to unfold spatially – the temporal narrative is activated and unfolds only as panels or elements in space. What is at stake in closure is the relation of the fragment to the whole, and in terms of comics, the relation of the panel with time and motion, with another panel and the book as a whole. What connects these elements, the panels or ‘moments’, is the gutter or the *space* between panels, and not only that, but the elements themselves are situated in space, they appear on the space of the comic book page – the panels or ‘moments’ in time are thus not only connected or activated by space, but are themselves spatial, they appear as spatial elements. In this sense, we may say that it is not that time is perceived spatially in comics, but rather it is *space that is perceived temporally*, that in the act of perceiving comics, we transform and ‘convert’ spatial elements into temporal ‘moments’ in order to impose a narrative sequence to the text.

Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, in their text ‘What Are Comics?’, insist on this primacy of the spatial in the medium of comics. They derive this primacy from the very definition of comics – from the fact that, in their view, spatiality becomes critical in attempting to distinguish comics from other mediums such as films, television, or animated shows. They define comics as: ‘*x* is a comic if and only if *x* is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right, or when combined with text.’²⁶ Indeed, the major outline of this definition comes from McCloud’s own definition of comics (‘juxtaposed pictorial

²⁶ Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, “What Are Comics?,” In *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, eds. David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (Pearson, 2005), 423.

and other images in deliberate sequence'²⁷), but where they take off from McCloud is in their description of juxtaposition, and the emphasis they give to the notion of spatiality. The major motivation for their extension of McCloud's definition, is the necessity to be able to distinguish other mediums such as film or television from the definition of comics, something that McCloud's definition is unable to do – conceivably, film could also be described as a juxtaposition of images in deliberate sequence.

Hayman and Pratt are able to avoid this pitfall by qualifying the nature of juxtaposition in comics as *spatial*. They write: 'The term "juxtaposition" is a technical one. In comics, the visual images are distinct, (pragmatically) side-by-side, laid out in a way such that they can conceivably be seen all at once. Between each pictorial image is a perceptible space: we'll call this the "gutter".'²⁸ They relate this spatial juxtaposition to the work of closure, which is by now familiar to us, that the reader must imagine the action that takes place in the gutter (and we might add, this is no less valid for the creator, the artist), to provide the discrete images with a continuous narrative or flow. They then say: 'The process of closure in comics is unique to them as a result of the particular *kind* of juxtaposition that they exhibit. In comics, panels are placed next to each other in a way that is *spatial*, not temporal.'²⁹

This is what distinguishes comics from other competing mediums – the fact that the nature of juxtaposition is *spatial*. Hayman and Pratt admit that in certain cases, the process of closure is at work in other mediums such as film or animated cartoons, such as when the viewer has to imagine the action during a scene change, or in a jump cut or montage, and in many cases such an act of closure is deliberately put forth in film to provoke the audiences into imagining actions that are not explicitly depicted, or to open up the possibility of a variety of interpretations of the narrative. Even though the process of closure may be analogous, what differentiates comics from film and television is that juxtaposition in film happens in the same space of the image cell, the images are not laid out side-by-side in space. Film, television, and animation takes place in time, in a manner of succession where each image, each moment in time succeeds the preceding moment, annihilates it and takes its place. Conversely, in comics the juxtaposition

²⁷ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 9.

²⁸ Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?," 423.

²⁹ Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?," 423.

is spatial, where the images are placed side-by-side, where they coexist – the entirety of a comic could conceivably be laid out on a surface in such a way that every element or panel of a comic appears simultaneously, together and at the same time. To put it in another way, if film and television unfolds in time, then comics unfolds in space.

But here we may ask: what is it to unfold in space? It appears to be an impossible proposition – the very act of unfolding, the very process of going, in this metaphor, from being folded to unfolding refers to a movement in time, a duration or passage of time. Or are we mistaking something here, perhaps Hayman and Pratt only mean to say that comics can be laid out in space, that it has nothing to do with unfolding, but is this the case? Or is it that in the very act of juxtaposition, of putting together elements side-by-side, there is already an unfolding, a repetition or reference to time? Then is the notion of spatial juxtaposition simply a misnomer, a reductive manner of grasping juxtaposition which does not take into account the work of time? Or is it that it gestures towards an impossibility, an aporia that may be worthwhile to pursue, which may have consequences for the ontology of time and space in general?

Before we can address this question – and perhaps we can never conclusively address it – let us remain a little longer with the theorization of comics. Let us look at another text which gestures towards the primacy of the spatial in the medium of comics, in perhaps a different way from Hayman and Pratt, but we will see that certain suppositions nevertheless remain strikingly similar. In *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen defines comics through the notion of ‘iconic solidarity’, a certain tying together of various kinds of images, texts, and figures, which in turn he defines through the notions of *arthrology* and *spatio-topia*. Arthrology refers, for Groensteen, to the fact that comics submits images to a number of different kinds of relations and networks, whereas spatio-topia forms the ontological, spatial ground for the network of relations through which the images are to be distributed. Here Groensteen makes a number of claims which bear a resemblance to the arguments of Hayman and Pratt. Every image, says Groensteen, is displayed in a space, and contrary to the temporal image of cinema, the images in comics only exist in a single dimension – that is to say, they do not exist in the succeeding dimensions of past, present, future like time, but all appear at the same time. ‘Comic panels, situated relationally, are, necessarily, placed in relation to space and operate on a share of space. These are the fundamental principles of this spatial distribution that will be examined at the sign

of the spatio-topia'.³⁰ The *relational* nature of arthrology is submitted here to the *spatial* nature of spatio-topia: images in comics are necessarily in space, and hence their relationality is also necessarily spatial. It appears that for Groensteen, the analysis of the various icons of comics, whether they be word balloons, images, the panels or the strip, must occur in the context of this spatial idea – that they subsist not in the successive dimensions of time, but in the single dimension of space.

At this point – we can perhaps say, at this point of general ontology regarding comics – Groensteen comes very close to Hayman and Pratt. Both texts attempt to structurally define comics through the ontological grounding of spatiality, and seek to differentiate comics from other competing mediums like cinema or television through the claim that, in comics, elements appear in a single dimension, that of space. But where the texts diverge, is in their position regarding the perception as opposed to the creation of comics. For Hayman and Pratt, as well as McCloud, what marks the notion of closure is that the gutter is perceived by the reader as a space of imagined activity, and that temporal narrative in comics has to be perceived spatially as a deliberate act of the reader. Groensteen, on the other hand, situates the notion of spatio-topia at the level of the author. He argues against the notion that, in comics, the spatial organization is pledged entirely to the narrative strategies or has to be led by them – rather, from the moment an author conceptualizes a work as a comic, they are already committed to working within a spatio-topical apparatus. The ‘preliminary condition to any beginning’ in comics, says Groensteen, is a taking into account of the form and mode of spatial organization that has to be adopted into narrative strategies; that is to say, any attempt at the creation of comics already has to contend with the spatial nature of the medium, without which the medium, along with its narrative distributions, cannot be conceived.³¹

The spatiality of comics, then, is not simply a matter of the perception of the reader as it pertains to the act of closure. It is already functional, already supposed in the medium even as the narrative is ideated; it is the minimum form that must be contended with when one attempts to grasp the nature of comics, and cannot be reduced to something akin to a reader response.

³⁰ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 21.

³¹ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 21.

Groensteen calls this nature of spatio-topia a ‘mental form’, and any narrative ideation in comics, no matter how improvisational, cannot be developed without a dialogue with this ‘preliminary idea of the medium’. Perhaps we can say, staying in a sense between Groensteen and McCloud, that this structural, preliminary spatiality of the medium, is not simply a matter of choosing between the reader and the author, between ‘perception’ and ‘mental form’, but as an ontological basis must pervade every experience of the medium. Within this scholarship, it is the structural kernel which informs every analysis of comics in the last instance.

But let us go on. Groensteen describes this ‘mental form’ of spatio-topia as the preliminary structure of any imagination regarding comics, that any idea of a narrative in comics has to necessarily pass through the spatio-topical moments of a page layout or spatial distribution into images or panels. When the author imagines a comic, they are already imagining panels or images distributed in space. But comics is not only a medium of distribution, of scattering, but also that of linking together, of repetition and continuity – Groensteen calls this principle of linking together *arthrology*. For Groensteen, arthrology operates at two levels in the medium: at the first level are elementary, linear relations between elements which are juxtaposed to each other, most often subordinated to narrative ends, which Groensteen calls restricted arthrology. Beyond this restricted arthrology lies a more ‘translinear’ or distant level of relations, called general arthrology, which links together images or icons in comics across a text, and represent a ‘more elaborate level of integration’ between the flux of the narrative and the spatio-topical apparatus.³²

For Groensteen, it is not a matter of the spatio-topia on the one hand and the narrative content of arthrology on the other – rather, the two are intimately combined, and the articulation of comics is indistinguishable from ‘the content-incarnated-in-space, or, if one prefers, the spaces-invested-with-content’.³³ Indeed, arthrology only works within the spatio-topical operation – that is, within the space that is developed in comics. And this is what is of interest to us here, in this thesis, the fact that Groensteen does not divide the spatio-topical apparatus and arthrology into principles of space and time respectively, that is to say, he does not simply equate the repetition and the linking together at work in arthrology to a temporal duration, even as he

³² Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 22.

³³ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 22.

calls general arthrology a linking of narrative flux. He remains stubborn – or rather, we should say, his articulation betrays a stubbornness – regarding the ontological basis of space and spatio-topia, and forwards arthrology only as a network of relations that work on this spatial grounding. But how should we understand arthrology as being grounded in spatio-topia? Let us proceed slowly.

Spatio-topia refers to the spatial in comics, it is the ‘mental form’ that has to be referred to in the last instance, and the preliminary ontological basis of the medium. It stubbornly reminds us of the fact that, in comics, elements are placed side-by-side on space, that they appear not in the successive dimensions of past-present-future but coexist within the same dimension – that all the elements of a comic book can pragmatically be placed on the same surface such that they appear simultaneously together at once. Arthrology, on the other hand, is the principle of linking together, of repetition and resonance between elements in a comic that is both linear and translinear, relates elements beside each other as well as those across a text. Repetition, it seems, necessarily takes place in time, it refers to a movement between the dimensions of the past and the future – yet arthrology, as it is articulated in *The System of Comics*, is grounded in spatio-topia, in the spatial principle which brings us to the single dimension of space. How are we to articulate this repetition – repetition, which appears in time, takes up a duration of time – in the single, simultaneous dimension of space? How do we think of repetition and linking together where elements are repeated *at the same time*? Here we return to the question we had raised regarding Hayman and Pratt, to the question of spatial unfolding that accompanies, in a certain way, the notion of spatial juxtaposition. Let us formulate it again: It appears that the notion of spatial juxtaposition (and spatio-topia) is related to a repetition that takes place in the dimension of space. This spatial repetition – if we can call it that – confronts us with an aporia, the impossible idea that, in repetition, in the movement from the dimension of the past towards the dimension of the future, which is also the present annihilating the past and anticipating the future – that in the movement between these dimensions of the past-present-future there is nevertheless a simultaneity, a singularity of the spatial dimension. How should we address this problem? A problem that seems to take us, from the specificity of a scholarship on comics, to a more general ontological horizon – to the stakes of space, time, and being itself.

Let us note here that neither Groensteen, nor Hayman and Pratt formulate the problem in this way. For them, the spatiality of comics – in spatial juxtaposition or spatio-topia – is ultimately simply a matter of the space of comics, the surface or the page of the comic book. To put it in another way, the problem of spatial unfolding which appears in their work is submitted finally to the work of an unfolding or repetition in given space – just as things unfold in their spaces, so too does comics unfold in its space, on the surface of the pages of comic books. Groensteen relates arthrology and spatio-topia simply by saying that arthrology takes place ‘within the spatio-topical operation – that is, within the space that comics appropriates and develops’, and for Hayman and Pratt, the spatial nature of juxtaposition is theoretically necessary only to distinguish it from other mediums such as film or television. *Neither of them forward the question of spatiality in comics as a general ontological question.* Both texts establish an aporia, which we may signify here with the name, spatial juxtaposition, yet both also elide this problem, they sidestep it and resolve it in a manner that appears both simple and obvious. For what could be more obvious than the idea that the relation between the elements in a comic takes place within a given space, that the act or event of juxtaposition that defines comics has to occur in a pre-existing space, which is the surface of the comic book page. What could be complicated about placing images side-by-side on a comic book page: here the function of both space and time in comics is obvious – space is that surface on which elements are juxtaposed, and time is the medium through which the juxtaposed elements unfold within this given space.

Before we once again complicate matters – before we indicate again that space and time are in a certain way entangled in comics, which is already established in these texts, forcefully, as have seen, in McCloud but also indicated in Groensteen – and before we reiterate that in this scholarship, a certain primacy of the spatial emerges in the medium of comics, that it seems that comics brings to surface the spatiality of the entanglement of time and space – before we enter questions once again, let us first look at the matter of juxtaposition more closely. Especially, the matter of the event of juxtaposition as it takes place on the space of the comic book page. Here we may enquire, in a way that the texts we have been reading do not, about the following: If juxtaposition is the act which defines comics, if it is the event that brings comics into being, then how can any space preexist its existence? Does juxtaposition not refer to an act which precedes and constitutes all elements in comics? And more insistently, if it precedes the very space that it

occurs on, then where does juxtaposition take place? Could we even conceptualize it as an act, or as an event? How should we theorize spatial juxtaposition in this context?

Let us make the question more specific. Juxtaposition of elements is made possible in comics only if each element in comics appears as distinctive, related to elements other than itself and placed side-by-side with other elements, differentiated from them by a necessary gap or interval which separates one element from another. This relation over an interval, over this distance or separation – which, for example, could be the gap of the gutter between two panels – constitutes the act or event of juxtaposition, and brings into being every possible constituent or content of comics. Juxtaposition is the necessary condition for comics to come into being, for comics to exist at all, and every function of space and time is made possible by this act. In a certain sense, it is neither an act nor an event, since it is neither active nor passive, nor can it be broken down into parts or observed as a process of production. Nevertheless, it ‘precedes’ and ‘produces’ the time and space of comics – there is no temporal narrative in comics without this preceding ‘act’ of juxtaposition, neither can a space be called the space of comics before the ‘event’ of juxtaposition takes place – there is nothing in comics more ancient than this ‘event’; it brings into being comics itself, no surface or space comes before it in comics.

Yet juxtaposition is no less spatial. The elements related through juxtaposition appear on the space of comics, on the surface of the pages of a comic book and no more does juxtaposition predate this space than this space predates juxtaposition. On the one hand, there is no surface or space in comics that is not already marked by the event of juxtaposition, only after this event does a space become the space belonging to comics – there is no *tabula rasa* in comics. But on the other hand, the very act of juxtaposition can happen only on the surface of comics, on its space and within its pages. Even as juxtaposition produces the time and space of comics, even as the entirety of comics is brought into being by it, it itself continues to remain enduringly spatial, the elements and intervals involved in the ‘act’ of juxtaposition only taking place on the body of the comic book. Yet this spatiality of juxtaposition is not reducible to the space of the comic book, it is not simply the given, present space of a comic book page – rather, it is a spatiality that produces the very space on which it takes place. Taken in this sense, spatial juxtaposition indicates for us a certain spatiality which produces space, a certain spatiality that ‘precedes’ and ‘generates’ the time and space that is functional within comics.

But perhaps the matter cannot be stated quite so simply. Till now we have been emphasizing only one side of the problem, which appeared to us to be forcefully put forward by the theoretical scholarship which we have followed till now – that of the spatial in juxtaposition. But now we must also take into account the function of time at the level of this spatiality, especially as it pertains to the question of repetition. Let us elaborate: If the act of juxtaposition necessarily involves a minimum of two distinct elements, which must be related to each other, then it also necessarily involves an act of repetition between two elements. One must perceive one element from the other, and this insinuates a passage of time, a duration without which repetition cannot take place. Even if it seems that elements can be placed side-by-side, simultaneously on the same surface at once, this notion only elides the fact that a temporal duration must intrude upon the experience of juxtaposition. To put it in slightly different terms, there is no experience in the world that does not involve a duration – and to say that elements are juxtaposed only on space is to articulate an abstract, empty notion that cannot be justified in a rigorous account of any phenomenon.

We can take this criticism further – that if one tries to defend against this external repetition of elements in juxtaposition, by arguing, say, that even if the passage between the elements in juxtaposition imply a duration, the elements themselves, being moments in time, are static or ‘present’ – we can simply take our argument further into a matter of internal repetition. We can say that the necessity of temporality implies that even if one moment has not passed into the next, that ‘within’ this moment there is already an ‘anticipation’ of the next moment – not the anticipation of sensibility but an ontological ‘anticipation’: the moment is already marked by this necessary temporal relation with another moment or element that it must be related to. Repetition is already at work, internally, in each and every element that appears in the world, including in those involved in juxtaposition. And one has to address this matter of repetition, of repeatability – both external and internal – if one is to properly contend with the notion of spatial juxtaposition. Even if our emphasis on spatiality till now was justified, given our readings of a certain comic studies scholarship, we cannot move forward any longer without engaging with this question.

In order to address this question – that of repetition, both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ – first let us observe that these two notions are dependent on each other, that even if the argument

regarding internal repetition seems to be distinct from that of external repetition, they finally depend on the same ontological basis, that of the necessity of temporality in the experience of repetition. The initial criticism, that juxtaposition implies a separation of elements and hence a movement in time, is simple enough to answer: we can simply state that it is conceivably possible to perceive two distinct parts at the same time, and in a single dimension. There is no apparent contradiction in saying that juxtaposition must refer to separate, discrete elements, and that they may be perceived at once and simultaneously on the same surface. The second part of the argument of external repetition – that experience of a phenomenon necessarily involves temporality and hence repetition – is more difficult to contend with. Let us proceed slowly. Every phenomena in experience is necessarily in time, and this involves a movement, a repetition, from one moment to another – there is a gap, an interval between two moments, the dimensions of time, such as the past, present, or future cannot appear together, or else the entirety of time would appear simultaneously. Yet, and at the same time, there *must* be a simultaneity between two moments, between the dimensions of time, or else time would not pass at all. In a certain sense, and necessarily, two moments in time must be simultaneous and appear at the same time.

This is not a simple contradiction but a constitutive aporia of time, which simultaneously involves and includes the spatial – that which is the non-temporal – into the working of time itself. Repetition, in this sense, between two elements is not simply temporal or a passage of time but must also imply a constitutive simultaneity between the elements. Without this constitutive simultaneity, without this spatiality, time would not function. Similarly, even in the case of internal repetition, we may observe that the ‘anticipation’ of another moment which marks the element does not occur after a moment of time, after a shift from one moment to the other but must occur simultaneously with the element. This is not simply a reduction of the element to spatial simultaneity but a result of the fact that this simultaneity is at work in external repetition. To put it in other words, internal repetition is dependent on the ontological necessity of external repetition – because external repetition is necessary to phenomena, its ‘anticipation’ internally is also legitimate. By the same token, since external repetition must contend with a constitutive spatiality and simultaneity, its ‘anticipation’ is also similarly simultaneous in this respect. Understood in this way, we must contend that repetition is not only temporal – that since temporality itself is in a constitutive tension with spatiality, repetition must also contain a

necessary simultaneity and spatiality as a condition of its operativity. One can think here – one can conceptualize, a notion of spatial repetition, of a certain spatiality that must accompany repetition in all its aspects.

And this spatiality must not be confused with the notion of empirical space, although in a certain way, it is derived from the latter. In the same way that we distinguished the concept of spatial juxtaposition from the ‘space’ of a comic book page – by contending that in comics, a certain spatiality ‘precedes’ and ‘produces’ space and time – we must now differentiate the concept of *spatial repetition* from the idea of a given, empirical space. The *spatiality* of juxtaposition is what ‘produces’ comics *as* comics – before juxtaposition, the space (and time) of comics does not exist, rather it comes into being through this act, which is itself spatial. A certain space, then – the *spatiality* of spatial juxtaposition – ‘produces’ the time and space of comics, ‘precedes’ the existence of the space of the comic book page while also being derived from it. And this phenomena is not just restricted to comics, but is a constituent feature of our ‘real’ experience of time and space. Any ‘empirical’ experience of space is necessarily temporal – that is, we must experience any space as a series of temporal experiences rather than as a ‘singular’ dimension – this is an irreducible aspect of our cognition of space, the ‘continuity’ of space is not a given fact but a consistency of the endurance of certain elements in time which are also constantly ‘lost’ in the past and ‘arriving’ from the future. Space, then, is necessarily given ‘within’ such an experience of temporal repetition – the ‘external’ repetition of the experience of space ‘in’ time, and the ‘internal’ repetition of an inherent, pre-figured temporal shift which no experience be without.

Our general supposition of the nature of empirical space – that of a pre-existing being or object that is simply ‘given’ in time – is not fully guaranteed by experience. Yet, as we saw before, this ‘movement’ or ‘succession’ of time must also indicate a ‘simultaneity’, a spatial coexistence between moments without which time would not ‘pass’. This *spatial* is not reducible to empirical space, although it is in a certain way derived from it – the ‘passage’ or consistency of time is derived from the ‘continuity’ or sameness of space, but the spatial that we are attempting to conceptualize here is not the empirical space that pre-exists time but a simultaneity that makes the functioning of time possible. Not a pre-given element that is then ‘submitted’ to time and temporal ‘changes’, but rather a strange continuity that holds together the divisibility of

time *as* divisibility. A *spatial repetition* must accompany any temporal repetition – the multiplicity of time, the different dimensions of past, present, and future, must also imply a ‘singular’ dimension, a continuity which overdetermines the irreducible discontinuity of the dimensions of time. In a certain way – and through an apparent impossibility, an absurdity – any occurrence or duration of time must also take place *at once*. Not as a reduction of time ‘inside’ a space, that is, not as the obvious impossibility of all of time appearing at the same ‘place’ – but rather that this ‘absurdity’, this strange ‘logic’ of continuity must accompany the discontinuity and dynamism of time in some way. In this thesis our attempt will be to pursue this ‘logic’, this continuity which must remain with, and animate time and experience – which must be supposed in, and ‘produce’ the most general notions of space, time, and being. And we contend that it is comics which ‘expresses’ this strange continuity most powerfully.

This is not to say that, at any ‘final’ ontological level, spatiality holds primacy over the temporal – that the ‘logic’ of continuity holds any necessary preeminence in the tension between the continuous and the discontinuous, the spatial and the temporal – not at all. Nor is it even that the notions of spatial juxtaposition and repetition that we have extracted from a certain scholarship on comics, from Hayman and Pratt, Groensteen, and McCloud, would necessarily provide us a more secure basis to conceptualize phenomena in a general ontological sense. But rather that it appears to us, following this literature, that the medium of comics brings to surface the problem of spatiality in a powerful way, that it illuminates a certain aspect of the aporia of dis/continuity, of space/time, which may be worthwhile to pursue for us not only within the context of comics studies, but also perhaps in a more general, ontological sense. And we have conceptualized this ‘aspect’ which comics expresses, as a ‘problem’ of spatiality, a strange ‘logic’ of continuity that appears in the unfolding of comics which we have tried to call by the names of *spatial juxtaposition* and *spatial repetition*. For us, these notions bring forward the ontological necessity of the spatial in the constitution of the temporal, and it is not enough here to say simply that space and time are conjoined – this is not simply a ‘fact’ or evidence that can be stated, but an aporia that must be pursued, worked with. Neither is it enough to say here that time and repetition works over and above the spatial – in the way we have tried to articulate it with the arguments of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ repetition – since it reduces the spatial simply to being a site of temporal work, simply to a ground on which things move in time. Let us stay,

then, a little longer with the notions of spatial repetition and juxtaposition, with the problem of spatiality in comics and its relation to the temporal, along with its import for general ontology.

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Soon after McCloud encounters the problem of the spatial in his analysis of time, and after he states that in comics space and time are one and the same, McCloud makes an attempt to conceptualize the simultaneity that time suffers in comics – but interestingly, he does this in strictly temporal terms: in the figure of the Now. Here McCloud returns to his earlier conjecture that each panel in a comic book represents a moment in time, and that as the reader moves from panel to panel, they also move through successive moments in time. McCloud returns to this model in order to demonstrate the enduring nature of a Now in comics – indeed, he begins with the claim that not only in comics, but even in film and television, and also ‘real life’, one is always in the Now – in the present which endures over time, within which we are always situated. McCloud then goes on to argue that if any current panel, one which the reader is perceiving, can be thought of as the present, then all panels preceding it must be thought of as the past, and the panels which are to come, for instance the next panel in the reading order, would represent the future. But in comics, unlike other media, this past-present-future appears *at once*, on the same surface – both the past and future, says McCloud, are visible all around us.

Wherever the reader focuses their eyes is the Now, but *at the same time* their eyes take in the surrounding panels which represent the past and the future. McCloud calls this movement of the eye over panels a ‘storm front’, as if the reader leaves a cool, low-pressure past behind them and keeps moving towards a warm, high-pressure future ahead of them; and like a storm, says McCloud, this reading can change directions. In comics, unlike film or even novels, there is no fixed direction that the eye has to necessarily take – the usual reading directionality, left-to-right and up-to-down is only a convention – since the past and future panels are visible on the same space, in the same dimension, which McCloud calls the Now, a reader may choose to read in any direction they prefer. Conditioned by film and even the experience of ‘real life’, a reader expects

a linear progression of time, but comics belies this expectation, and invites the reader to engage with a non-linear progression of its narrative.³⁴

Yet does this notion of a non-linear progression of reading exhaust the sense of spatial juxtaposition or spatial repetition that we have set out to pursue? To make the question more specific – we are attempting, with the notion of spatial repetition, to pursue a spatiality that is constitutive of the temporal while being ‘simultaneous’ with it, we are trying to conceptualize this spatialization that irreducibly informs every phenomenon. There is a certain aporia of time and space at work here, whose consequences are not exhausted by simply stating that we can take different directions in time. For if we look closer at McCloud’s metaphor of the ‘storm front’, we will quickly realize, that this storm does not move non-linearly over the comic page, but simply changes directions – that is to say, when the storm ‘turns back’, for example, it is not turning literally back towards the past but rather that, the panel that represented the ‘past’ for this storm now simply represents the ‘future’. Even if the reading changes directionality, the linear progression of time remains. Maybe we can speculate here, taking a slight detour, that any attempt at a ‘non-linear’ description of time would have to contend with a paradox – that a simple ‘going back’ or ‘splitting off’ of time would not fully constitute a non-linear progression, since the linearity of a past-to-present-to-future would remain – it would still be in a line going from past to the future; to be properly non-linear, time would have to take ‘another’ direction, an other direction that appears structurally impossible for us to imagine – even if the world were to suddenly start ‘rewinding’, let’s say, even then, it would still be a matter of backwards motion rather than an other directionality of time.

But let us return to the matter of the Now. Here we might have a ground to further our conceptualization of spatiality in comics, and even more, relate it to the general ontological question regarding space and time. Since as McCloud says, all our experience happens in the Now, the temporal passage from the past towards the future must also always be in the Now, in the present where we experience everything – McCloud demonstrates this in comics by showing that the panels representing the past and future are visible all at once. This simultaneity of the past, present, and future in the Now insinuates a spatiality, a spatial dimension to the unfolding of time – but McCloud does not pursue the ontological implications of this spatiality, except in

³⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 104-6.

arguing for a certain ‘non-linear’ reading order within comics, nor does he dwell upon the spatial nature of the Now. How should we think about the Now? On the one hand, McCloud says that we are always in the Now, that the passage of time must also always take place in this single dimension, but on the other hand, McCloud also seems to imply that this Now in comics is the present, wherever the eye lands on the reading order, which also takes in the past and future surrounding it. But if the Now is the present, which simply ‘takes in’ the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future, then this implies a discontinuity, a discontinuity of our experience in the Now with our experience of the past – but we must always remain in the Now. Conversely, if we think of the past and the future continuous with the Now, then all moments of time would have to coexist with us here and now – which is an impossibility. Then what should we make of this Now? How should we theorize this present, which is the ground of our experience here and now, but also simultaneously holds together the past and future?

Here we may take recourse to a text – a more directly philosophical, ontological text – where the notion of the Now appears by name, and within a dialectical analysis of space and time, as the presence of the present: that is, *The Philosophy of Nature* by Georg WF Hegel. There Hegel describes the Now as Eternity – which is also synonymous, for Hegel, with the Idea and Spirit – which is not before or after time, but rather an eternity that is the absolute present without the before or after.³⁵ Hegel derives this concept of Now from an exegesis of space and time, which he places at the beginning of ‘Mechanics’, in the first part where space and time are considered the fundamental categories of Nature as self-externality. To put it briefly, Hegel conceives Nature as the other of the Idea, which at the end of *Science of Logic* is the Notion that unites the subject and the object, the self and the other – but Hegel says that Idea thus put forward is only one part of the whole, it has only been demonstrated as the ideal, subjective Idea; it must also prove itself in the objective world, must freely release itself to its other and return to the self as Idea.³⁶ Nature is this Idea that has freely released itself in the objective world, it is the self-externality of Idea – and space is the being-outside-itself of Nature, positive self-externality that is indifferent to itself. What follows is a tortuous analysis – but let us follow it here, at least

³⁵ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Clarendon Press, 2004), 15.

³⁶ Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 752-53.

in its outline, since it reveals a number of ontological features regarding the nature of space and time which may be helpful for us.

Nature, then, is the Idea outside itself – to the extent that this very self-externality is what defines it, which is immediately intuited in the abstract, universal notions of space and time. Space, being the positive side of this self-externality, is the Being-outside-itself of Nature, it is the utter externality and indifference that Nature as self-externality must be. Let us go slowly. Since Nature is pure self-externality, it is utterly indifferent to itself, and expresses itself as space, which wholly expresses abstract, mediationless indifference. Space is an ideal side-by-sideness, which is absolutely continuous and contains no difference within itself. For even if we consider a concrete space within space, let us say, a certain Here – then this Here is not yet a place, but rather one Here among others which are abstractly side-by-side; it is only a possibility of place, and is completely the same as any other Here – all of the Heres are spatial and are in the final instance, space itself. Space expresses this positive externality, which is utterly indifferent to itself and wholly continuous.³⁷

But self-externality is not pure externality, rather is it that which is external to itself. Within self-externality, there must be a difference, a difference within indifference which makes the purely external, purely self-external – self-externality must be different from, and external to itself. A difference, then, has to be introduced into the indifference of space, and Hegel calls this the first *negation* of space – which is the *point*, a minimum difference within space. This negation is essentially a determinate, qualitative difference – the point is a determinate, discrete element in space. Yet the point is still spatial, it is still akin to a Here and must return to the indifference of space; the point is incapable of fully negating the indifference of space, and hence must negate itself, move out of itself. This moving of the point itself outside itself is the line, which is the point extended to another point – the negation of negation. Yet this negation of negation, the line as it negates the point (negating space), is not fully negation-of-negation, since it does not return the point to the indifference of space – which would be the proper negation of negation – but only extends it to the discrete figure of the line. Hence, the line must negate itself and transform into a plane, and continuing with the same logic, the plane negates itself into the three-dimensional surface of space. This final negation completes the movement, and restores the

³⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 28-9.

spatial totality which now envelops the negative within itself – it encloses its difference and separates off a single whole space.³⁸

This dialectic of space, this process of negation-of-negation – which is a pervasive movement in the entirety of the Hegelian corpus, generally called *aufhebung* or ‘sublation’ – is not necessarily directional, but rather represents a circle of negations; one may very well speak of this movement from space to the point, going through the surface, plane, and line. What is of relevance here, is that space contains a certain tension between difference and indifference, a tension of self-externality that space expresses positively: the emphasis in space, is on the positive indifference or continuity of the spatial surface. For even the point, which is the element of difference within space, is ultimately spatial, it subsists on the same dimension as other points and must return itself to the indifference of spatiality. For self-externality to properly express its negativity, it must transform itself logically to time – where each ‘point’, that is, each moment, only appears by annihilating other moments, and exists in a relation of pure negativity with them. Time, then, is the abstract, universal intuition of self-externality in its negativity.³⁹

Here Hegel makes certain classically philosophical observations regarding time and finitude. Time is a purely ideal intuition of the negative unity of self-externality, where the point actualizes itself – difference has moved out of space, and is no longer submitted to indifference, no longer paralyzed but now given to itself in all its unrest. Time is that being which, inasmuch as it is, *is not*, and inasmuch as it is not, *is*; it is the direct intuition of Becoming, where differences are momentary, but external to themselves. Each moment in time appears, only by annihilating the earlier instance and by anticipating, constantly moving towards its own destruction by the next instance – time is this unrest of finitude where things are in a perpetual movement of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. Everything, it is said, comes to be and passes away *in* time, but it is not *in* time that things come-to-be and pass-away, but rather it is time itself that is this constant process: *time itself is this becoming*, an actually existent abstraction where things are born and destroyed. Time, in this finitude – as a process of coming and going of

³⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 29-31.

³⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 33-4.

natural, finite things – expresses only a one-sided negativity, where the Other is purely outside itself, as an external difference.⁴⁰

All finite things are temporal because eventually they perish or become subject to change, and thus possess only a relative duration. The Eternal, on the other hand, endures – but it must not be grasped outside of time, as that which comes before or after time, rather Eternity is the Now which gestures towards the whole process, not simply moments of the process. This Now, says Hegel, holds a ‘tremendous right’, yet it is nothing as an individual Now – as an individual moment in time – ‘for as I pronounce it, this proudly exclusive Now dissolves, flows away and falls into dust’.⁴¹ Duration is the universality of such individual Nows, of individual moments or presents, where finite things come to be and pass away. But eternity is distinct from duration, it is absolute timelessness from which finite, natural time is absent. It is the Notion of time, and time as such – apart from its determination in individual presents – is a process which endures, and even if finite things are constantly in the process of becoming, the process of becoming itself is nevertheless constant, it refers to a Notion that is eternal and enduring. This eternal Notion is not outside time – since then it would have to come before or after time, and would become a moment in time – but as this temporal becoming itself, persists as an in-finite Now.⁴²

At this point in the analysis, Hegel forwards a set of arguments which may appear familiar to us, and come close to the way we have tried to grasp spatial juxtaposition. Hegel makes an attempt here to logically establish Now as Eternity – not simply as the Notion of time, the entirety of the temporal process taken as a whole which is processless, etc. – but *within* the dialectic of space and time as a certain *spatial* temporality. If the dimensions of time, says Hegel, the past, present, future, are external to each other in becoming – as a resolution of being, which passes from being to nothing and then again from nothing to being – then these multiple dimensions also vanish into the *singularity* of the present as Now. This singularity is at once exclusive of these moments, it is not reducible to these moments, but is utterly continuous in them – it is this movement from being to nothing and nothing to being.⁴³ It is fully continuous in becoming, enveloping it as this becoming itself, yet it remains exclusive from individual

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 33-5.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 36.

⁴² Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 35-6.

⁴³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 37.

dimensions of time. Even as time passes, even if things in their finitude perpetually change and are in a process of becoming, all of this becoming nevertheless takes place in the Now, in the experience of a Now that endures this becoming.

Such a conceptualization of the Now may seem known to us, may appear close to the spatial problematic we have articulated thus far through spatial repetition; but let us note that there are certain crucial distinctions, which may have consequences for our theorization of spatiality. In McCloud, for instance, the Now was simply the ground on which all of ‘real life’ takes place and which makes the past-present-future simultaneous on the pages of comics, which makes possible different reading orders. With McCloud, then, we have on the one hand a complete continuity of the dimensions of time, which reduces the otherness of temporal instants to an individual Now, and then on the other a malleability of reading order which gestures towards a dynamic movement of time within space – and our own problematic has so far been articulated in an analogous manner. On one side we have formulated the necessity of temporal repetition, which must be operable within any element, and divide it or open it up to a temporal movement – and simultaneously we have referred to the singularity or continuity between moments in time, which must constitute the movement of time itself; that which we have forwarded as a *spatial* principle or as a spatial repetition. But here our efforts have remained divided, we have demonstrated either that space must be temporal, or that temporality must be spatial. The Hegelian Now, however, appears to be a figure or concept which unites these two impulses, these two problematics which we have been pursuing. It manages this by separating the Now as *presence*, by separating this presence from any individual present; it marks a difference between the Now as Eternity and the individual Now which passes away, passes away even as it is pronounced.

Let us proceed slowly. The Now is the continuity of the passage of time, it is that through which time passes and not one of its moments, not one of its individual determinations which come to be and pass away. The finite present fixes the Now as *being* – it fixes it as individual present – it is transformed into an affirmative being which may then be negated, which may then pass away in the process of Becoming. But Now is this in-finite which is neither affirmative nor negative, but rather that eternal where the process of affirmation and negation takes place. The dimensions of time appear exclusive from each other – the present must not be the past or the

future, it cannot be its own before or after, its coming and going would only give rise to other exclusive presents – yet Hegel claims that the Present, if considered concretely, can never be fully exclusive from the past or the future. The Present *is*, because the Past is not, and simultaneously, because the Future is not-yet: ‘The non-being of the being which is replaced by the Now, is the Past; the being of the non-being which is contained in the Present, is the Future... the concrete Present is the result of the Past and is pregnant with the Future.’⁴⁴ The true Present, then, is eternity – it is the Now where becoming occurs, which is capable of holding together Past and the Future without paralyzing the unrest of time. The simultaneity of the past, present, and future does not reduce them to a static, singular spatial dimension, but rather their dynamism is overdetermined by this spatial singularity, this eternal Now where their dynamism is perpetually at work.

Do we have, then, in the Hegelian Now a figure which can provide an ontological ground for spatial repetition? Can we think of our problem – that of the spatial overdetermination of the movement of time – as being finally resolved in the Now? Certainly, it appears that the Hegelian Now addresses this problem comprehensively, and does so at a general, ontological level – by distinguishing between the individual present and the presence of Now, by separating the presence of the present from the present itself, and by articulating this presence as a *spatial effect* on the motion of time. But if we stay with this figure, if we continue to observe it further, we will soon see that it does not exhaust the issues raised by spatial repetition – at least two issues become immediately apparent to us regarding the Hegelian Now. The first involves the nature of this spatiality; we may ask: what is this spatiality of the Now where the dimensions of time occur? Is this distinguishable in any rigorous sense, from a given space where finite things are in motion? Are we simply resignifying what we understand as enduring, empirical space and giving it the name of the Now? Certain indications in this regard are given by Hegel himself. Elaborating on the spatiality of time, Hegel writes that time immediately collapses into indifference, since the difference if its moments are held together in the Now, and this is also synonymous with the logical development of the *point* – which is the negative determination of

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 39.

space. In the Now, the point becomes concrete, no longer as the negation of space but positively through the negativity of time – and thus is transformed itself into Place.⁴⁵

The Now, then, develops the point positively, which is also Place – and after this *The Philosophy of Nature* enters into a discourse regarding the logical development of Place and Motion. Should we then understand this Now as Place? How would we distinguish the spatiality of Now from any abstract consideration of a given space, a given surface or place? If we try to think of this in the context of comics, in the way that we have developed the notion of spatial repetition through comics, we will soon see that the Hegelian Now risks taking us to the image of empirical space rather than that of spatiality as we have conceived it. Let us imagine a comic book page – it appears as a space which contains multiple elements, which are generally organized into a series of panels, where each panel stands for a moment in time. We might imagine this space as a Hegelian Now, which ‘contains’ the dynamism of time, where the succession of moments takes place ‘within’ a simultaneous ground. Yet to think of this space in this way, is to already imagine the comic book page as a given, empirical space, and to reduce moments of time into spatial ‘objects’ – it is to entirely reduce time out of this image. For if we take seriously the nature of time *as* time, then we must admit that each ‘moment’ of time, that is, each panel in the comic, refers to a ‘separate’ dimension – that the ‘passage’ of time in the series of panels given in a comic must refer to a multiplicity of dimensions, that each panel gestures towards an otherness – an ‘outside’ *within* the page. This ‘outside’ cannot be fully thought of as an ‘inside’, in the same way that ‘time’ cannot be thought of as belonging entirely ‘inside’ a ‘space’. The ‘logic’ of spatiality that we seek to pursue in the spatial repetition, is not a ground akin to empirical space where ‘objects’ are gathered, but rather a continuity and gathering of moments of time, a continuity which must function *impossibly, despite and alongwith* the otherness of time. The elements of a comic book page cannot be thought of simply as objects, but must be conceived of as moments of time, and the problem of spatiality in comics must also take into account the otherness of time in comics. And continuity of the spatial cannot be conceived of as fully ‘inside’, even as a Now, Place, or Eternity.

Perhaps we may argue that the development of the point in Hegel is not reducible to the image of empirical space, by pointing out that the Now is not simply a given place, but the

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 40.

movement of time itself, that this time itself as becoming is demonstrated to be spatial – even then a second query may be raised: one regarding the reduction of negativity in the Now as a developed point. In other words, we may ask whether it is possible at all to reduce the negativity of temporal becoming within a developed, yet circumscribed figure of a point. The Hegelian argument to substantiate the Now seems to be twofold – at once, Hegel seems to argue that there is a continuity of past, present, and future, that the Now is the sublated Present where time comes to pass, the becoming of time itself; and also, that the Present comes to be only because the Past is no longer, and that the Future is not yet, that the Present is the ‘result of the Past and pregnant with the Future’. Certainly, these two arguments are not the same – the former implies a full continuity and simultaneity of the dimensions of time, while the latter is premised upon the otherness of the past and the future, the Present is the result of the Past, and is pregnant with the Future, only because the Past is no longer and the Future is not yet – it refers to a synthesis that is not the simple simultaneity of a given space.

In a sense, we may say, that the ‘split’ that we found in McCloud’s conception of the Now, is perhaps not entirely resolved in the figure of the Hegelian Now. In McCloud, the fracture emerged in his description of the act of perceiving comics (and here we should point out, that this ‘act’ should not be limited to reading, but must cover *all* experience of comics), where it seemed that McCloud was indicating two distinct ways to conceptualize the perception of comics. On the one hand, it seemed that in reading a comic, any point that the reader was ‘currently’ experiencing could be regarded as the ‘present’, and the elements preceding and coming ahead should therefore be considered the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ – here, the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ appeared to be referring to an otherness, an *outside* of the present. On the other hand, *everything* in the perception of comics and in ‘real life’ must be Now, in the presence of a present – here, the past, present, and future are simultaneous, and in comics, all the elements, all ‘moments’ must appear together, simultaneously and at once. We have, then, a simultaneity and dynamism, a continuity and discontinuity – a certain ‘split’ between space and time that we sought to find a resolution of, in Hegel’s Now. Yet in Hegel, these are ‘resolved’ only through a circumscribing, where the negativity of time is reduced to the figure of a developed point. The past and the future, which indicate an ‘outside’, are brought ‘within’ the Now, they are fully contained ‘inside’ the presence of the present. *This* is why we claim that the Hegelian Now must refer finally to the image of empirical space – to imagine spatial repetition in comics through the

figure of Hegelian Now is to think, in a certain way, of the comic book space as an ‘inside’. Yet, each element of a comic must also refer to a ‘moment’ of time, an otherness which cannot wholly be thought of as belonging to ‘one’ space – this belonging, this impossible gathering must be conceptualized *as* an impossibility (as well as a necessity) only because it brings together, maintains, the negativity of time. To imagine a series of panels in comics as dynamic, as a ‘succession’ of time, is to *already* suppose otherness and an ‘outside’ – to imagine this dynamism as an unfolding or becoming that takes place ‘inside’ is to reduce spatiality to space.

The *ontological* stakes of spatial repetition makes this clear. Moments in time are distinct; one now can only appear, can only be present, by destroying the preceding now which becomes thereby the past now, and by anticipating or moving towards its own destruction at the appearance of a future now. At the same time, two nows must be simultaneous in some regard, they must imply some continuity between themselves other than which time would not pass – otherwise moments of time would be utterly separate and unable to pass into themselves. Yet this simultaneity must not be a complete convergence, it would not be able to contract into one space all nows of time – in which case time, all of history, would be simultaneous with us here and now. An impossible simultaneity, coupled with an impossible becoming – an impossible ‘logic’ of continuity that ‘prefigures’ the otherness of becoming. Perhaps we are moved to a maintenance, a maintaining of nows, of dimensions of time, which nevertheless does not let go of its negation, of the otherness of time that marks its becoming and flux. Would it be possible to think of the Hegelian Now in this context, of the Hegelian *aufhebung* which returns the otherness of time to the spatiality of the point? Does the presence of the present not refer back, does it not fall back into the image of the individual present? Maybe we can think this *aufhebung*, this return of otherness – which is also the return of the temporal to the spatial – without the enclosing figure of the Now as point, without returning the impossibility of the spatial to the givenness of empirical space. It would require us to conceptualize a maintaining of nows which would nevertheless remain open to temporality – to the otherness of temporal dimensions; we would have to move toward a ground marked by an open maintenance. Let us make this attempt in the next chapter – by turning towards a text, a set of texts, that also makes the attempt to reimagine the stakes of the Hegelian *aufhebung*.

Chapter Two: Spatiality and the Trace of Difference

Our attempt in the first part of this thesis, is to conceptualize the problem of spatiality in comics and to demonstrate that it constitutes a general ontological problem, and we hold that the conceptualization of this spatial problem which we find in comics, is valuable not only for the theorization of comics, but also for the understanding of the most general notions of time, space, and being. In the earlier chapter, we derived this spatial problem from a certain scholarship in the field of comics studies – from the work of Scott McCloud, Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, and Thierry Groensteen – but we found that in their work the spatial appeared only so far as it contributed to a structural description or definition of the medium of comics, either in the sense of a vague entanglement with time in comics, or as the given space of a comic book page.

For us, such a conceptualization of the spatial does not address the problem of spatiality at an ontological level, that is, it does not take into account that spatiality in comics refers to a general aporia of being and as such, must be addressed at this level. We use the name ‘spatial repetition’ to refer to this problem, to gesture toward the impossible necessity that, any ‘repetition’ – repetition, which by its nature refers to at least two, to a passage of time between the two – must also imply a spatiality, a ‘simultaneity’ which overdetermines the passage of time. In our attempt to pursue the stakes of spatial repetition, we initially looked at McCloud’s notion of the Now, but we soon found an unresolved ‘split’ in this notion – between the idea that, in comics, everything appears within the ‘present’ or the Now of the comic book page, and McCloud’s claim that, this ‘present’ must continuously be marked by a relationship to a ‘past’ and ‘future’ element.

In order to ‘resolve’ this tension between the inside and outside of Now, we turned towards a more explicitly philosophical text, *The Philosophy of Nature* by Georg WF Hegel – where Hegel also attempts to resolve the dialectical tension between space and time in the figure of a Now. For Hegel, the Now emerges as the *aufhebung* of the dialectic between space and time, an eternal point which encompasses the unrest of temporal becoming. Even though the Hegelian Now seems to forward a figure which ‘resolves’ the tension of space and time, we saw that – in

fully circumscribing the dimensions of time *within* a singular dimension of the Now – the Hegelian Now returns the otherness of time to a presence. The ‘logic’ of spatial repetition, however, demands that we try to conceptualize a continuity or spatiality that *maintains* the otherness of the other, that retains the otherness of time while impossibly (yet necessarily) implicating it with the simultaneity of space.

In this chapter, we will try to pursue the conceptual stakes of spatial repetition by turning towards the work of Jacques Derrida, and especially his notions of *differance* and *trace*. Within the ‘conceptual’ network of these notions – notions which Derrida hesitates to describe as words or concepts, since the very term ‘word’ or ‘concept’ imply a certain presence, a certain reduction of the other which he seeks to avoid, but which perhaps nevertheless itself implies a conceptual work – Derrida tries to maintain the otherness of time in the tension between the functions of time and space, which Derrida calls *temporization* and *spacing*, respectively. Moreover, we find in Derrida – through and alongside his reading of Martin Heidegger – a critique of the Hegelian *aufhebung*, especially in Hegel’s retention of the presence of the present in the ‘process’ of sublation, which perhaps returns us, in a certain way, to the individual present.

Derrida makes this point forcefully in an essay titled ‘*Ousia and Grammē: Note on a Note from Being and Time*’, where he writes that the Hegelian *aufhebung* simply moves to another present – that as the negation of negation, it posits an other present as the past-retained uplifted. This new position of the present, the now-sublated present, assures for the process of *aufhebung* its claim on *truth*. For Derrida, however, it is a question of something entirely other: he attempts to pursue a thought which puts into question the tie between the truth and the present, which perhaps does not itself need to be true in the sense of its being-present – a thought which seeks to shake the very history of philosophy which has been authorized by the ‘extraordinary right’ of the present.⁴⁶ Derrida derives this question from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, from a footnote in the subsection ‘Hegel’s Interpretation of the Connection between Time and Spirit’, which is by far the longest footnote in *Being and Time*. There, Heidegger speaks of a *historical filiation* which has an enormous ontological import, that between Hegel and Aristotle, but which operates throughout the history of ontology in general – that of the interpretation of

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), 38.

Being on the basis of the present as a point, as a series of points, which Heidegger calls the ‘vulgar concept of time’.

For Heidegger, the entire Hegelian interpretation of the link between time and spirit is dependent upon the concept of time which Hegel introduces in *The Philosophy of Nature* – and that this interpretation of time happens through a ‘leveling’ of time and the extraordinary privilege of the Now as point. Since the Now is a developed point, and since the entire problematic of space and time in Nature, as Heidegger sees it, revolves around the problem of the point – that is, the transition from space to time, which is the difference in space as point transforming itself into the negativity of time, and then again from time to space, where the continuity of the Now is mediated once again through the figure of the point – the presence of the Hegelian Now seems to be reduced to that of an individual present. The opening of the present, towards the future and from the past, seems to be ‘leveled off’ in the closed figure of the point, which also implies a general ontological closing of the negativity of time. This ‘vulgar’ determination of time is not a novelty in Hegel, but an inheritance which operates in the history of metaphysics and ontology in general. The priority which Hegel gives to the leveled off ‘now’ – writes Heidegger – ‘makes it plain’ that Hegel is under the influence of the *traditional* concept of time, time as it is ordinarily understood, and the whole analysis of space and time in Hegel can be demonstrated to be a ‘*paraphrase*’ of Aristotle’s essay on time, the *Physics IV*.⁴⁷ Here Heidegger goes on show a number of similarities: that Aristotle sees the essence of time in the *nun*, Hegel sees it in the ‘now’, Aristotle takes the *nun* as *oros*, Hegel interprets the ‘now’ as ‘boundary’, Aristotle understands the *nun* as *stigmē*, Hegel takes the ‘now’ to be ‘point’, etc.

Of course, Derrida is quick to point out that the ‘fundamentally Greek gesture’ in Hegel – that of the concept of the Now – is not simply a vulgar determination of time, it is not simply the atemporal but the atemporal *within* the temporal, not quite the individual present but the presence of the present, the in-finite which appropriates this finite present and so on.⁴⁸ But what Derrida inherits from Heidegger, his own ‘historical filiation’, is a *task*, a need to move away from the historical filiation in Western metaphysics – that which is evident between Hegel and Aristotle –

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 416-17.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 45-6.

and here the Heideggerian interpretation of Hegel appears legitimate. This ‘enormous task’ which appears in the footnote in *Being and Time*, calls for a *need to think of being and time otherwise than on the basis of the present*. But how could we think of time, how could we conceive being, otherwise than in the present? The history of philosophy, the entirety of Western ontology, has operated on the basis of this privilege of the present – this is not only self-evident, but the very basis of self-evidence outside of which it seems ‘thought itself must suffocate’. Derrida asks: how can we think of being and time, *otherwise* than in the form of a certain *now in general*, which, by definition, is the very condition of experience?⁴⁹

There would be no question, then, of thinking otherwise in the form of another thing – in the form of another present, of some other now outside the now. And here Derrida forwards, drawing from his reading of Heidegger, an argument of *difference*, which does not need to be otherwise to make the present tremble: that is, this thinking which cannot be otherwise from the form of the present, which could not have been thought otherwise, nevertheless produces in the thought of the impossibility of the otherwise, in the *not otherwise*, a certain relationship of difference which de-centers the present. This thought, that seeks to be otherwise, yet cannot be otherwise, produces a difference, a difference of the same in it being not-otherwise – and this difference, this certain trembling of the present, does not take the position of an other center, of another present.⁵⁰ It is in this context that the Hegelian *aufhebung* seems utterly inadequate to Derrida. For the Hegelian *aufhebung*, even in the process of retaining the other and sublating it, nevertheless poses another present – it is, as Derrida puts it, the present past-retained-uplifted. The Now, even as it appropriates the unrest of time, even as it sublates in the present the otherness of past and future, nevertheless posits another present, it develops itself as a point that is strictly separated from the individual present. The task is not to pose another present – even in the form of the presence of the present – but to make the present itself tremble, to introduce a thought of *difference* which would wholly reinterpret the scene of presence.

In another text, Derrida writes of this other ‘scene of presence’ which makes the act of signification possible – and Derrida presents this scene in terms of the ‘movement’ of time, in terms of the relationship between the present and its others, the past and the future; and his

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 38.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 38.

description here bears a striking resemblance to the Hegelian account of this relationship – in many ways, we can say, it takes off from it. Each ‘present’ element appears, says Derrida, in the scene of presence only by being in a relationship of difference with other elements, in a strict relationship of difference from the past and future elements. An interval or a ‘gap’ must separate the present from the past and the future, from what it is absolutely not – not even a past or a future as a modified present – this relationship of absolute non-relation between them establishes the present as present. Yet this relationship of difference – this absolute gap – must also be constitutive of the present, since it is absolutely necessary for the production of the positive identity of the present. And since this relation of difference with the past and the future is constitutive of the present, then by the same token, it must also divide the present; the present already keeps within it the mark of the past element, and is spoiled by the mark of its relation to the future element.⁵¹

Here the Derridean account of a ‘scene of presence’ comes very close to the Hegelian account which we have encountered before, where Hegel speaks of the being of the ‘concrete Present’, which *is* only because the Past is not and the Future is not-yet – the concrete Present which is the ‘result’ of the Past and is ‘pregnant’ with the Future. Indeed, immediately after his description Derrida cites Hegel – not from the *Philosophy of Nature* but from *Jena Logic* – from a passage on the *quantum* which we may call ontologically analogous to the description of the concrete Present. There Hegel relates the infinite in its simplicity with the *quantum*, which is extended in itself but also contains an undetermined moment, a diversity that is exterior or indifferent in itself, is intimately related to the other and in this relation is absolutely distinct from the simple; and Derrida contends that this description in Hegel – this ‘absolutely decisive point in his discourse’ – is not explained by Hegelian *aufhebung*, is not grasped fully in the sense of the Eternity or Idea, but must be interpreted as a synthesis of relations of differences, a system or economy of differences which Derrida calls: *differance*.⁵²

To return to the Derridean ‘scene of presence’; if the present is itself only through a constitutive relation of difference with the past and the future, and if this in turn divides the present in and of itself, then this must also divide, along with the present, everything that is

⁵¹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 13.

⁵² Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 14.

thought on the basis of the present, that is, ‘in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or subject’.⁵³ The present is constituted as an ‘originary’ nonsimple (and hence non-originary in the strict sense) synthesis of traces or marks of the past and the future, and this description of the present not as presence, but as an open assimilation or synthesis of traces seeks to forward a notion that reinterprets the entire history of philosophy; put to question the ‘extraordinary right’ of the present that has characterized Western ontology.⁵⁴ If for Hegel the ‘concrete Present’ implies the continuity of the Now, the present being the result of the past and the anticipation of the future, which gestures towards a spatiality which consequently becomes the developed point, then for Derrida this same opening is the theater of non-simple traces that refers to a ground of differences, a ceaseless and perpetual *deferral* of the fullness of any present element. Unlike the Hegelian *aufhebung*, we are not moved to the position of another present, a new location – whether it be the developed point, the Now as presence of the present, and so on – but rather the present itself is submitted to the ‘law’ of difference, it is itself made to tremble in its own constitution.

It is this ‘law’ of difference – which is not a law in any traditional sense since it does not hold itself to the privilege of the present – this economy of difference where the fullness of each present element is deferred, that Derrida gives the name of *differance*. In the essay, Derrida attempts to provide an ‘approximate semantic analysis’ of differance, to provide a conceptual grounding of this notion – and here Derrida begins from the Latin verb *différer*, which contains within itself two distinct senses: to defer and to differ. The first of these two senses – that of deferral – the ‘action’ of putting off for the future, refers to a taking account of time and implies an ‘economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve’ – concepts which Derrida brings together under the term, *temporization*. To take recourse to temporization, in this sense, given in differance, is to take recourse to the ‘temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour’ that ‘suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of “desire” or “will”’.⁵⁵ That is, the fulfillment of any element in its full presence, or that of any desire or will, is perpetually suspended or deferred under the influence of temporization, put off until later in the form of a temporal detour or delay – to the extent that it affects itself, tempers its own effect. And further, Derrida argues that

⁵³ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 13.

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 13.

⁵⁵ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 7-8.

temporization is the principle that governs the ‘originary constitution’ of time and space: in a set of processes that Derrida calls temporalization (becoming-time of space) and spacing (becoming-space of time). The entanglement of time and space – their ‘originary constitution’ in differance – is a deferral, it falls securely under the effect of temporization, which suspends any attempt to secure a ‘full’ sense of time or space that might precede this temporizing function. And the other sense of differance – that of difference – appears as the ‘more common and identifiable one’; to be not identical, to be discernible – it is a question of otherness, and refers to the figure of a gap, an interval, or separation, which Derrida calls *spacing*.

Differance, then, given by its conceptual classification or ‘semantic analysis’, is both deferral and differing – to defer and to differ – which Derrida calls *temporization* and *spacing* respectively; and further, within the act of deferral, within the ambit of temporization, lies two processes of becoming: that is, temporalization, the becoming-time of space, and spacing, the becoming-space of time, which together refer to the originary constitution of time and space in differance. ‘Spacing’ here appears by name twice, once outside temporization, as difference, gap, or interval, and then again as a temporal process, the becoming of time which is space. How should we read the spatial here? In a certain way, it appears that the spatial is *both* outside time, a separate principle as a gap, but also within it, as a process of becoming – and to push this argument further, perhaps we can see that the entire problematic of differance appears here in the semantic analysis as a *temporal* problem. For the spacing which is outside temporization is *already supposed by it*, without which the question of deferral, the question of a temporal detour, would not arise. We may ask: is the spatial, the working of space, only the gap which appears within moments of time? Is the ‘originary constitution’ of space and time, the aporetic entanglement of their dimensions, entirely a temporal matter – can it fully be subsumed under the concept of temporization?⁵⁶

⁵⁶ A certain privileging of time within the conceptual entanglement of time and space is not an exclusive feature of Derridean thought, rather it is a hallmark of almost the entirety of the tradition of modern Western philosophy, especially evident in the twentieth-century traditions of Heideggerian phenomenology and Hegelian thinking. Perhaps this privilege can be found to be implicit in Immanuel Kant’s first *Critique* where time takes on the role of the ‘form of inner sense’ of the transcendental subject, while space remains the ‘form of outer sense’ of the world (which is ‘produced’ by the transcendental subject). Heidegger argues that this formulation of time as a form of intuition in the first *Critique* must be reconciled with the three syntheses found in the A-edition Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique*. This analysis bears a striking resemblance to the ‘originary temporality’ of Dasein found in *Being and Time*, which forms the basis of Dasein’s care-structure. This ‘originary temporality’ is the ‘time’ that Heidegger

In certain other places, Derrida speaks of this originary constitution of space and time not as temporization, but as spacing – but even there, the articulation is not in spatial terms but as ‘becoming’; *spacing* in those places appears as the ‘becoming-time of space’ and the ‘becoming-space of time’.⁵⁷ Even if the terminology changes, the conceptual stakes do not budge, the entanglement of time and space are articulated – even as ‘spacing’ – as a certain becoming, a

finds at the root of ‘Being’, which animates ontological difference, or the difference between Being and beings – and this temporal primacy in ontological difference remains even after the so-called ‘turn’ in Heideggerian thought, where the earlier concern for fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* gives way to the thinking of *un-concealment* of (epochs of) Being. Derridean thinking of *differance* takes in significant ways from Heidegger’s thought – especially in the attempt to develop a critique of presence, and in thinking of difference through temporality (although the influence of Edmund Husserl’s notion of *temporalization* on young Derrida is perhaps just as significant in this regard) – with the crucial distinction that, for Derrida, *differance* refers to a ‘difference’ that is more ‘originary’ than ontological difference, which is still, in Heideggerian formulation, a determinate difference which maintains the primacy of the ontological over the ontical.

Bergsonian theory, on the other hand, begins its development in direct opposition to Kant’s description of time in the first *Critique*. Henri Bergson, in *Time and Free Will*, argues that Kant secures the status of causality in the natural world by relegating freedom to the realm of things-in-themselves, that is, outside of space and time. For Bergson, this occurs because of a fundamental misunderstanding in Kant – Kant conceives of time in terms of space, in the mathematical model of quantitative increase, whereas time in itself refers to a qualitative multiplicity, a principle of pure heterogeneity. In later works, Bergson transforms this initial conceptual duality between time and space in his thinking into a monism through the notion of *duree*, an open vibrational whole, whose contraction and dilation produces time and space as we understand it. The Bergsonian universe is this open multiplicity of matter-movement – this *duree* – which contracts to produce discrete, spatial entities, and dilates into the movement of time from the past into the present and towards the future. Yet, even within this so-called monism, the ‘spatial’ remains the principle of discrete entities, of empirical space, whereas ‘time’ or duration is the ontological elaboration of this ‘content’, the principle through which the qualitative multiplicity of matter-memory must be grasped. This privileging of time as matter-memory is directly inherited by Gilles Deleuze in his treatise on cinema, evidenced in his theorization of cinema through the concepts of ‘movement-image’ and ‘time-image’.

We will not compare, in this thesis, our conceptualization of spatiality in comics with the conceptualization of temporality in Deleuze’s theorization of cinema. Let us simply note that this might be a productive work to undertake, and to do so one would probably have to contend that, in the elaboration of matter-memory, the spatial is not simply the quantitative ‘content’ which is submitted to the multiplicity of duration, but also that this multiplicious elaboration *itself* must imply a spatiality which is not reducible to the givenness of discrete ‘matter’. Our endeavor in this thesis is not to provide a comparison between comics and cinema or writing – even our reading of Derrida, for example, does not focus on his theorization of writing – but rather to follow closely the stakes of the problem of spatiality as we find it in comics. We have taken recourse to Hegel because, firstly, the Hegelian concept of the Now bears a resemblance to the formulation of Now in McCloud, and it seeks to address the same problem, that is, it attempts to reconcile the tension between space and time – and secondly, because the implicit preeminence of the spatial in McCloud’s Now is expressed more explicitly in the Hegelian *aufhebung* of space and time, and here Hegel stands perhaps as the exception in the Western philosophical canon, as a thinker who gives prominence to the spatial rather than temporal in matter of their entanglement. Yet, we find that the figure of the Hegelian Now cannot not fully encapsulate the stakes of the spatial problem that we derived from comics – specifically, that it reduced the otherness of time – and it is in *this* context that we turn towards Derrida, as a thinker who provides a cogent critique of the Hegelian reduction of otherness, and to see whether we can find, in Derrida, another formulation of the tension between space and time, one which can maintain the otherness of the temporal.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 13; also in Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1982) 27-8.

becoming of the other and a deferral of their full presence. How should we read this spacing? This spacing which is also the 'originary constitution' of time and space? Would it be possible to read a spatial principle here already within difference, or do we have to re-introduce this problem, re-introduce the spatial which already lies within temporization and becoming? When we formulated spatial juxtaposition within the context of comics, we had thought of a *certain spatiality* that 'produces' the time and space of comics – since the 'event' of juxtaposition at once preceded any space or time of comics, but was also simultaneously spatial. And soon afterwards we saw it as 'one side' of the problem, which was nevertheless fundamental and necessary – a simultaneity or spatiality between the moments of time, a 'spatial repetition' which is at the heart of the constitution of given space and time as we ordinarily receive it. In Derrida, it appears to be precisely the other: a certain temporization or 'becoming' that constitutes and conditions the appearance of time and space. In both cases, a certain 'principle' or 'movement' appears to precede time and space, 'govern' their emergence or being. How should we think of this conditioning principle of the appearance of time and space? Should we think of it as a 'becoming', a *temporization* where any sense of their fulfillment or completion is deferred, or can we perhaps think of it, not as spacing but as a certain *spatialization*, which also gestures towards a certain simultaneity of being?

The word 'simultaneously' appears in Derrida – albeit within parentheses, which marks a certain distancing, a certain putting off of simultaneity – at a point where it is a question of the coming together of difference, the joining of deferral and difference, temporization and spacing. For it is in no way evident that these two concepts should be conjoined ontologically. If difference is the opposition of things, the separation of elements into discrete identities, then it is difference that guarantees the presence of the present, and in no way does it establish that beings in difference should suffer a deferral of their presence. This is exactly the issue that the Derridean description of the 'scene of presence' is meant to address. It introduces the *trace* that spoils the discreteness of difference. If it is difference that separates any 'present' element from the past and future element, makes it discrete and gives it its presence, Then it is also this difference that establishes a constitutive relation of the 'present' with the other, with the past and future, which vitiates the present with the *trace* of the other – 'produces' the present not in the image of a discrete being, but as a ground of non-simple synthesis of traces. This 'movement' or 'synthesis' is what conjoins the two concepts of 'difference': 'Which (is) (simultaneously)

spacing (and) temporization'.⁵⁸ A simultaneity works in the conceptual ground of differance – even as it remains in parentheses – it conjoins deferral and difference, relates itself with the opening of the present through the *trace* of its others. Can we relate this simultaneity in turn, with the Hegelian *aufhebung* – not as another present, but perhaps as a 'process' of return of the other; a spatial enveloping of the other in presence? Would it be possible here to insinuate a 'return', an enveloping presence, within differance?

This is precisely what is forbidden in differance – the only prohibition that we find in differance, in the essay by that name. Let us quote Derrida as this point. 'The structure of delay in effect forbids that one make of temporalization (temporization) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and unceasing synthesis – a synthesis constantly directed back on itself, gathered in on itself'.⁵⁹ And it is with this question, says Derrida, that 'we are touching upon the point of greatest obscurity, on the very enigma' of differance. This 'very enigma' of differance, this 'point of greatest obscurity', involves the relation of differance with presence, the return of presence and a certain simultaneity, and let us note that here Derrida speaks of temporalization together with temporization, that is, he speaks synonymously of becoming-time (of space) and delay. Temporalization – becoming-time – is to be equated here with temporization – delay – and it is this structure that *forbids*, absolutely forbids that the synthesis of *trace* be reduced to a dialectical synthesis, which is constantly directed back on itself.

Elsewhere, in an essay on Georges Bataille, Derrida had referred to the difference between a *restricted economy* which always makes a profit of that which it loses, and had related it 'scientifically' to a *general economy* that takes into account this nonreserve, that opens itself to nonmeaning. The same question circulates in the forbiddance of a Hegelian synthesis or return, the relation between a *differance* that can 'make a profit on its investment' and a *differance* 'that misses its profit, the *investiture* of a presence that is pure and without loss here being confused with absolute loss'.⁶⁰ The question here is to think simultaneously, on the one hand, differance as an economic detour that comes back, that always aims to come back to the presence that it

⁵⁸ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 13.

⁵⁹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 21.

⁶⁰ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 19.

defers, and on the other, a differance that maintains its relation to an impossible presence, ‘as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy’.⁶¹ This relation of restricted and general economy that differance brings us to, makes it impossible for us avoid, displaces the ‘very project of philosophy, under the privileged heading of Hegelianism’ – it makes us consider the economical and the noneconomical, the self and the other *together*.

For it is in no sense certain that the character of delay in differance implies a return, that the deferred presence may be found again, or that presence in differance works like an investment which may be put off until later, only to be delayed in perception, for the time being. Contrary to the Hegelian dialectic, says Derrida, we have to conceive of the economy of differance as a play in which whoever loses wins, where one keeps losing and winning at every turn. ‘If the displaced presentation remains definitively and implacably postponed, it is not that a certain present remains absent or hidden. Rather, *differance* maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence.’⁶² Deferred presence, within the economy of differance, does not remain *elsewhere* as another present – hence it is never a matter of reaching another present – neither does it reduce the present to absence, but rather it seeks to exceed the alternative between presence and absence, bring forth a present that is marked by the trace of its other, the trace of absence. This presence is perpetually delayed, perpetually temporized which is also a temporalization, a constant becoming-time, elaboration of the present in time – a temporal ‘flux’ or ‘movement’ that the present must suffer.

This is why differance must forbid any attempt at a Hegelian *aufhebung*, it must prohibit a generalizing synthesis which gathers upon the present all of its others, the past and the future. And here it not a matter of the past and the future as a ‘modified present’, but rather, a ‘past’ *that has never been present*, which will never be present, whose future to-come will never be a representation or reproduction in the form of the present, or the presence of the present. This past-that-has-never-been-present, this *absolute past*, is in turn intimately related to the *trace*, which is why the trace can never be a simple retention of the past, and is incompatible with the

⁶¹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 19.

⁶² Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 20.

mark of a past that is a modified present – there *remains something irreducibly other* in the trace. One cannot think, here, of a simultaneity of the past with the present, which would make a general synthesis of the past and present possible – one cannot reduce the past to the present in the simultaneity of a single dimension, in the image of a spatiality: something of the past remains, within difference and as an absolute past, *outside* of the present, and continues to produce a future that never resembles the present.

But how could we think of a past absolutely not modified by the present, an absolute past that has never been present? Even common sense will tell us, that even if the past remains out of reach, that the past can only be the past if it has once been present, only if it is the ‘collection’ or ‘memory’ of presents that once were. Let us say, that there is something irreducibly other about the past, a kernel without which we cannot think the past – that in every moment or present, a sense of the inaccessible past remains – what does this do for difference? If difference is that economy which does not participate in the sense of a deferred present which simply remains hidden, if it seeks to exceed the alternative between presence and absence, not move to another present but remain with the trace of the other in the present – then does not the notion of an absolute past return us to the sense of another present? What else could it imply: the utter asunderness of the past from the present, the absolute otherness or ‘absence’ of past as it relates to the present, what could be other than another present, another position? Let us be careful. On the one hand, the Hegelian dialectic reduces the other, it synthesizes the other in a dialectical process, and in this regard, there is a necessity to maintain the otherness of the other, a certain otherness which cannot be synthesized or returned to presence – here we encounter the necessity to pose a past that has never been present, a future which is never the modified present; yet, on the other hand, if we think of this past as utterly dissociated, utterly divided from the present, then we run the risk of returning to the alternative of presence and absence, pose this ‘past’ as an absence which carves out once again the form of the present in its presence. In order to exceed the alternative between presence and absence, we need to maintain the otherness of the other – or else we risk returning wholly to presence – yet we also need to maintain – simultaneously – the implication of otherness, *perhaps in its entirety*, with presence. How can we think here, this simultaneity – this *indifference* of presence and its other, without returning, without submitting our discourse to a Hegelian *aufhebung*? Are we prepared to do so?

Let us think again of spatial juxtaposition. Let us once again consider the relating of the past, present, and future and the implication of the spatial that unmistakably informs this ‘movement’ – since this is the point at which Hegel and Derrida diverge, where they come the closest only to split off and assume two distinct positions. There is no element, no object, no subject that is not in time, that is not ‘caught’ within the movement of time, passing from one moment to another, which are ceaselessly passing away and coming to be – within the economy of this ‘movement’, the past and the future must be distinct from the present, or else all concrete moments of time would become simultaneous, that is, this ceaseless temporal ‘shift’ must shift us constantly from one dimension to another, which are absolutely discontinuous with another. Yet, these ‘dimensions’ or moments in time must also be continuous, this ‘movement’ of time must imply a simultaneity between two moments, without which there would be no passage of time, without which time would be ‘stuck’ in innumerable ‘frozen’ moments or dimensions – and if two moments are continuous, then where does this continuity stop? Is it possible ontologically to cease this simultaneity of time?

The present must be in continuity with the past and the future, in its very being it must already imply the being of its others. For Hegel, this means a spatial simultaneity, a continuity between the dimensions of time in the singularity of the Now, which develops itself as the presence of the present, as the point within which the dynamism of time occurs – this single, spatial dimension entirely appropriates the unrest of becoming, does not cease time but rather marks the place *within* which becoming takes place, it reinstates the presence of the present as Now. For Derrida, this implies the trace of the past and the future, the elements other – he *maintains* the otherness of the other, formulates a co-implication which nevertheless holds on to an irreducible otherness of the trace, which is necessarily related to the figure of the past (or future) that is never the modified present, which has never been present. Even if the other is co-implicated in the present, this does not reduce the other to the present, but implies a synthesis of traces or marks which keeps the other as other. But how could the *trace* cease the overlap of the present and its other? Where does this simultaneity stop – how can it stop without cutting up the ‘scene of presence’ into discrete elements, into clear divisions of presence and absence which is the very thing that Derrida attempts to avoid? Conversely, how can this overlap occur, how can the present overlap fully with its other, without positing a sense of full presence, without

returning to an *aufhebung* which is to return to the same alternative between presence and absence?

Perhaps we are approaching the ground, not of the *trace* but in terms of the trace, an *indeterminate indifference* between presence and absence, which nevertheless does not necessarily reduce one to the other – an indeterminateness which does not take us entirely to the ground of indifference between the two; something akin to the relationship between the point and space in the Hegelian dialectic, where the difference between the point and space, is also an indifference, there a spatial indifference, but we can perhaps think of the relation between difference and indifference, time and space with this image. Here our theorization must remain tentative. For what we are pointing out here is not a concrete concept but a potential opening.

And here we are touching, once again, upon the ‘most obscure point’ of differance: that of the matter of *relating* a differance which makes good on its investment, and one which is prepared to lose, which submits itself to nonmeaning – which is also the point of relating the return of the present, the Hegelian dialectical economy, with an irreducibility of reserve or otherness. Derrida relates the two by prohibiting the Hegelian return, by positing the impossibility of a simultaneity of the present and the past (the future), by maintaining the trace as that which keeps the otherness of the other in reserve. But perhaps we can think here, through the problematic of spatial juxtaposition, the necessity *also* of the simultaneity of the present with the past, the necessity of the movement from the past towards the future, which is also the movement of the present, of being something akin to a *probability*, an indetermination between splitting (between the past and the future, and also between the present and its others) and congealing (of the now or present within which the split of the movement appears). In Derridean terms, it would involve *both* the deferral of a ‘desire’ or ‘will’, and its indeterminate fulfillment – fulfillment because, there would be no way to point out any zone of the other which would also not be potentially simultaneous, and indeterminate because it would not be able to mark out a clear boundary, a clear zone of its presence which would pose once again another present or other.

And perhaps this indeterminate indifference, this dilemma or indeterminacy between the splitting and congealing of the present, appears forcefully in comics – the very form or structure of comics makes us confront this aporia, since in comics, the very ‘movement’ of time, the passing and splitting of the present, happens through an apparent impassage, through the

simultaneity of a ‘singular’ spatial surface – where the movement of time, the splitting of moments also appears *at once*, is congealed and contracted on a spatial surface. This phenomenon we described as *spatial repetition*: where the ‘repetition’ of elements occurs impossibly in a contracted simultaneity. Any ‘present’ element in comics – let us say, a panel – *must* be related to other elements, to panels that precede it as ‘past’ and come after it as ‘future’, and it is only *through* this relation to its other that a panel in comics derives its meaning, we might even say that it derives its existence from this relation. Yet this ‘present’ is also ‘simultaneous’ with its other, with the ‘past’ and ‘future’ elements, since it appears on the same spatial surface – this gestures towards a spatiality that, not only connects the present and the past/future, but also that this strange ‘logic’ must make it such that any ‘present’ fragment must also be simultaneous with the ‘present’ that encompasses all of the elements – and here it is impossible to determine whether these elements are ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ the present, if we can refer to here to any ‘present’ at all. The Derridean ‘deferred’ element must appear here *alongwith* a kind of Hegelian ‘return’, and if not a return then a kind of impossible adequation where the present is simultaneously a ‘fragment’ (maintaining an impossible trace of its other) and the ‘whole’ (all of its ‘outside’ must also be ‘inside’, and not only as ‘other’).

This is the indetermination that we find in McCloud when we talk about the ‘split’ in McCloud’s formulation of the Now. On the one hand, for McCloud, all of comics and also ‘real life’ occurs in the Now, where both the past and the future is real and visible – all of the moments in a comic narrative are visible at once and on a single surface. Yet, on the other hand, wherever the eye focuses is the Now, where it must *take in the surrounding landscape* of the past and future, which implies a discontinuity between the Now and the past and the future which surrounds it. This ‘split’ in McCloud presents us with an impossible choice – the difference between the Now and the past/future must be necessary for any reading, any narrative or meaning-making to occur (indeed, any experience must necessarily imply this temporal difference, whether it be a meaning-making endeavor or not), yet, the *necessity* of this difference must imply a continuity, a simultaneity between the differing elements. This continuity or spatiality in comics is felt in the empirical appearance of the space of the comic book page, where panels representing ‘moments’ in time must appear simultaneously. Let us observe that for McCloud, what *connects* the Now with the past and future (which must also be distinct from it) is the figure of a *landscape* – the past and the future is a ‘surrounding landscape’, it must belong

to the same space as the Now. The distinctness of dimensions of time is also the landscape of space in comics, where the ‘present’ is simultaneous with its other, it is open to its other and this *opening* must make us confront the impossibility of being able to distinguish between the present and the other, between deferral and return, presence and trace.

Let us take, for instance, the passage where McCloud discusses the ubiquity of the Now. The passage contains three panels, and appears on the top of the page, where in the first panel, we find the cartoon-McCloud telling the reader, ‘In comics, as in film, television, and “real life,” it is always Now.’ The next panel shows McCloud again, this time gesturing with a raised finger, saying, ‘This panel and *this* panel Alone represents the Present.’ – and the final panel shows McCloud pointing back with his thumb, saying, ‘Any panel Before this – the Last one, for instance – represents the Past.’ We can imagine these panels as a McCloudian ‘storm front’, where the eye expects to move forward from wherever it lands, and much like McCloud claims, the storm can change directions – it is perfectly possible to read this set of panels backwards, the imagery and the writing would continue to make sense if we were to read it in the reverse order. Let us observe that even though this particular set of panels is particularly conducive to be read in this way, it is still a possibility that is given for any set of panels. It is still technically possible to read any passage in a comic book in a reverse order, or in a different order than overtly intended by the presentation of the narrative – the narrative might not make perfect sense in every case as compared to the example we have taken up, but it would still be possible to read any set of panels in a comic in multiple directions. Neither would it make a difference if the comic in question is non-representational, that is, if it does not contain an intelligible narrative or figuration – indeed, an abstract, non-representational comic would perhaps much more readily invite the reader to engage with the comic in different ways.

But we must clarify here that multiple reading orders does not necessarily imply a non-linear progression of time, as McCloud seems to suggest. For McCloud, we expect time in comics to works in a linear progression, from point A to point B, because we are conditioned by other media and ‘real time’ – the implication here is that comics, in presenting an image of a series which can read in various ways, forwards the possibility of non-linear progression of time. In terms of the strict, empirical experience of comics, this claim seems to be somewhat inaccurate – what we seem to get, in terms of reading the text of a comic, is not an empirically

non-linear experience but rather the possibility of multiple reading orders, where each reading ‘order’ is a linear progression from point A to point B, and we can read the ‘same’ text multiple times in different, linear orders. A certain ‘freedom of choice’ seems to be at work, rather than what we may strictly call non-linear progression. However, we *can* argue perhaps that comics here is presenting an ‘image’ – perhaps we can think of it as metaphorical – of non-linearity, and this ‘image’ of non-linear time emerges because the temporal in comics is presented as *spatial* – it appears as an effect of what we have called spatial repetition.

If we consider each panel in a comic as a ‘moment’ of time, then any given reading order decides the ‘progression of time’ in a comic narrative, we already know which panel should precede or come after a certain panel. Yet, since this temporal progression is *also* spatial, since succession in time is also, in comics, the co-existence of elements in space, it is *as if* one can ‘take off’ or ‘break away’ from the progression of time, take a detour from the given, linear temporal sequence. And even though, as we saw, this ‘image’ is not strictly empirically accurate, what is at stake in the image is a certain spatialization of time, which shakes up, displaces our usual suppositions regarding time, and the relationship between time and space, and also the relationship between space and the spatial – between the persistence of a given object or world and the ‘logic’ of continuity across and despite the divisibility of time which the givenness of the object seems to express, but which cannot be reduced to this pre-existing givenness. The ‘space’ of a comic book page ‘holds together’ panels as ‘moments’ of time, and this impossibility of the simultaneity of moments of time presents a problem – which we have referred to as the problem of the spatial, an impossible simultaneity across moments of time which must be taken into account if we are to think about the nature of time, space, and being – it refers to a general ontological problem that finds its expression in the form and structure of comics.

And we cannot simply explain the contours of this spatial problem through the figure of a Now. Panels in a comic, as moments of time, do not *only* refer to a single dimension of the Now, to a circumscribed ground or space within which they subsist, but *also* imply otherness, they refer to multiple dimensions of time, where each moment successively annihilates the ‘ground’ of the earlier moment. To consider the matter ontologically, we may say that since any element in comics must come into being through a *difference* – through an ‘act’ of juxtaposition without which there is no comics – the trace of its other is already operative within any element in

comics. Indeed, we may extend this to say that any experience of comics whatsoever has to engage with a certain otherness, a certain deferral of presence. To take the instance of the three panels where McCloud speaks of the Now, every way of considering the work has to take into account the trace of an other – any panel considered as the ‘present’ must take into account the panels ‘past’ and ‘future’, indeed, any element within or without the panels also appear only through juxtaposition, through a necessary relation with elements other, and even, as we saw, the entirety of a surface containing multiple panels must also take into take into account the otherness of what the panels represent, and this perhaps serves as an effective illustration of the otherness that is already ontologically operative *within* each element. Yet, this same image of the surface containing separate panels, also perhaps ‘expresses’ the ontological necessity of the simultaneity of temporal elements, and the impossibility of entirely eliminating the image of a Hegelian return when thinking of Derridean deferral and trace.

Any ‘present’ element in comics is related to its other, to its ‘past’ and ‘future’ elements, and this is a *necessary* relation of difference, yet this (temporal) difference is also marked by a simultaneous spatiality, where all of these ‘moments’ in time appear *at the same time*. Each element in comics is also ‘present’, as is, conceivably, the entire space of the comic – in a certain way, any ‘present’ element is *simultaneous* with the whole. Of course, this is not strictly empirically true. The perception of a single panel must be distinct from the experience of the whole, we cannot perceive both (in their distinctness) at the same time – even though we do perceive the panel within the whole when we take in the whole page, this is not the same as the distinct experience of a single panel, and neither should we equate the fact that we do ‘anticipate’ or ‘construct’ a whole every time we experience a part of any object, with the experience of the ‘whole’ of the object (even though this experience is also never whole). What we are pursuing here is not an empirical fact given in comics, but rather a problem that seems to emerge in comics, that seems to be expressed most forcefully in comics – that the ‘movement’ or ‘flux’ of time necessarily implies a spatial simultaneity, and not just the spatiality of an object that is given in and hollowed out by difference, but also a ‘logic’ of simultaneity which must inform and overdetermine this necessary ‘hollowing out’ of difference. The movement of time implies a trace of the other in any element or identity, it opens it up to the other ‘outside’, yet this opening also implies an overlap, an ‘inside-ing’ of the ‘outside’ – the deferral of any element also implies its presence, and not only as a deferred presence but perhaps in the sense of a Hegelian ‘return’.

Any ‘present’ element – which is necessarily deferred, because of the trace of its other – must also be ‘continuous’ with the other, which is perhaps no longer thinkable only as other, and in this sense must also imply the ‘whole’. A deferred object must be in some way adequate to its presence, and this adequation must also imply full presence (while also impossibly maintaining deferral) – there is a need to think of this strange ‘logic’ of continuity or adequation.

We take comics to ‘express’ this logic of continuity or adequation, where any ‘present’ element is also simultaneous with the whole, where the entire surface also seems to refer to the ‘same present’. We might perhaps try to think of this ontologically, as implying a need to conceive of a deferred object along with a dialectical ‘return’ – as gesturing towards an opening, ontologically, where we might think Derrida and Hegel together. We are not prepared, in this thesis, to pursue or conceptualize how such a way of thinking may look like. However, we may observe that this thinking would have to, in a certain way, both remain ‘between’ Hegel and Derrida, *and* indicate an opening – a need to think of an *aufhebung* which maintains otherness, and a *differance* which also implies a ‘return’. Our attempt at this part of the thesis has been to pose this opening, a conceptual opening at the general ontological level, and let us note that we have attempted to derive this opening from a reading of the operation of time and space in comics, from a certain scholarship in comics which emphasizes on the effect of the spatial in the medium – indeed, a scholarship which *defines* the medium through spatiality. This seemingly restricted analysis of spatiality in comics indicates, for us, an opening in the general, ontological level, at the level of the most general and universal concepts, such as time, space, being, and difference. And we have contended that the stakes of this spatial problem is perhaps not fully exhausted, by either the enveloping movement of dialectical sublation, or the deferring detour of differential trace. It takes us to an opening, and provokes us to think further.

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In the first part of this thesis, we have tried to follow a certain problem of spatiality that emerges in comics, and we have argued that this spatial problem has consequences for general ontology. Here our supposition has been that the ontology of comics – the study of its being and

the ways of being of entities that populate it – has an implication for general ontology, that is, the ontological problems that arise from a study of comics can reveal certain problems at the level of conceptualization of the basic nature of things. This is in no way self-evident – in fact, at first glance, the opposite may seem to be true. In an essay titled ‘The Ontology of Comics’, for instance, comic theorist Aaron Meskin argues that comics is only a particular class of popular artifacts, and that the ontological study of comics has no relevance for understanding the basic nature of fundamental things: ‘An exploration of the ontology of comics does not involve an attempt to describe fundamental entities; rather, it is an attempt to describe the most general features of a particular class of artifacts.’⁶³ For Meskin, the question regarding the ontology of comics broadly takes two forms – the first involves asking, what kind of a thing is comics? And this question is distinct from the definitional, structural question that, let us say, McCloud or Hayman and Pratt ask – rather than asking necessary and sufficient conditions for being a comic, Meskin only wants to know where comic belongs in the border classification of metaphysical things. The second form of the question asks about the linguistic and cultural practices that comics participate in – and this where, we may say, the ontology of comics becomes for Meskin a *restricted ontology* – since Meskin argues that for a question regarding the basic nature of things, for *general ontology*, the question regarding linguistic and cultural practices ‘may be largely, or perhaps completely, irrelevant’.

We will not put into question here the distinction Meskin draws between a study of the fundamental nature of things as opposed to the study of linguistic and cultural practices – any cursory investigation will show that universal, ‘fundamental’ notions regarding things cannot ignore the cultural, linguistic context they emerge from – rather what interests us is that, according to Meskin, the ontology of comics should restrict itself to making claims about the particular class of things that comics belongs to, and that this ontological study should remain distinct from any definitional study of comics, that is, any attempt to delineate the necessary and sufficient condition for the being of comics. The precise route forbidden here is the one that we have taken. For it will become apparent, that even in being a particular class of artifacts, the being of comics participates in reality and hence is real, its being is not utterly separate from being in general but must share something in common with it – and furthermore, that as a distinct

⁶³ Aaron Meskin, “The Ontology of Comics,” in *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach*, ed. Aaron Meskin (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 32.

artform or ‘medium’ it represents the world in a certain way, it ‘expresses’ the world in a way that is specific to comics, and that since its being belongs to the world in general, this ‘expression’ that belongs specifically to comics must also belong to the world in general, must reveal something to us about the fundamental nature of things. This tension, this ‘dialectic’ between the particular and general, between representation and reality, is a fundamental tension that cannot be closed on the basis of a restrictive ontology – and that the *restrictive ontology* of any class of objects may have the potential to reveal something of a *general ontology*; let alone a class of objects, such as comics, which holds the status of a distinct ‘medium’.

And we have sought this specificity of comics – its specificity as a medium – in a certain scholarship of comics theory which seeks to provide a structural description of comics, and we have found that a certain preeminence of the spatial emerges in their description of comics, to the extent that a majority of them attempt to *define* comics through the notion of *spatiality*. That is, from theorists such as Hayman and Pratt, and Groensteen we have derived that the specificity of comics lies in the fact that images in comics are placed on space, side-by-side, such that they may pragmatically be seen all at once. This means that, firstly, time in comics must be perceived spatially – that any ‘movement’ in time, any occurrence or event in comics must also appear *at once*, on the singular surface that is the space of the comic book page. And secondly, that any repetition in comics, any repetition of words or of images ‘externally’ in terms of ‘stringing’ of a narrative or ‘internally’ in their anticipation of other elements, must take into account the effect of this spatiality or simultaneity. Any repetition – repetition, which seems to occur necessarily in time, which seems to refer necessarily to the minimum of the two – in comics must also imply a simultaneity, a taking-place of the two ‘within’ a single spatial dimension; and this spatiality is not simply the given empirical space of the comic book page but a spatiality that conditions and ‘produces’ this space, it holds together and makes possible the time and space of comics.

This is not to say that other mediums do not participate in spatiality; indeed, in novels words are placed side-by-side on a page, whereas even in films, where images unfold in time, each image must still contain spatial distinctions for its elements to be readable. But it appears to us that in comics, this *spatiality* comes to the surface more forcefully than in other mediums: certainly than that of film where the images obviously move in time, but also perhaps, more than in novels or the written medium, where the space is more readily submitted to the directionality

of a reading order, given in the arrangement of words on a line, syntax, etc. The appearance of images in comics, makes the page of a comic more readily apparent as a *space* – a space populated by ‘things’ – and the fact that the images appear as static and simultaneous, yet represent an unfolding or temporal movement – that each ‘thing’ may also represent a ‘moment’ in time, and hence a simultaneous surface or space may come to represent movement in time – brings to the surface the work of a spatial simultaneity on temporal movement. This effect of the spatial – which is not the same as the empirical space of the comic book page, even though it is derived from it – must be functional in the work of time, we have called *spatial repetition* or spatial juxtaposition.

And we have argued that the notion of *spatial repetition* indicates a difficulty, a general aporia of space and time that has relevance for thinking at the level of *general ontology*. Spatial repetition indicates that, even if any element or experience in the world must necessarily be temporal, that any ‘present’ identity must be ‘divided’ in time, this ‘division’ of time itself, this ‘movement’ from one dimension of time to another, must also imply a simultaneity, a co-existence of moments of time without which time would not pass. We pursued this spatiality in the Hegelian Now, which is also the presence of the present, the continuity between the past, present, future where the unrest of time takes place – it indicates a co-implication of the past and the future with the present, that the present is the result of the past and anticipates the future – yet we saw that this Now develops itself into a point which *appropriates* the otherness of time, reduces it to a single spatial dimension. To address this reduction, we then turned to Derrida, where the implication of the past and future in the present does not immediately indicate a simultaneity of presence, but rather moves us to the ground of non-simple synthesis of traces, which retains the otherness of the other – retains a past that has never been present – while also opening up the present through a relation of difference which defers the full presence of the present, absolutely forbids that the other might return, in a Hegelian *aufhebung*, back to the fold of the present.

At this point we contended that perhaps this economy of difference, which Derrida calls *differance*, would also have to be overdetermined by a certain *indeterminate indifference*. That the trace which opens up the present, towards the future and from the past, must also insinuate a simultaneity, a potential for total indeterminate overlap of any ‘present’ element with its other –

the elements of time must also co-exist in some way, to put it in terms of spatial juxtaposition – and that *alongside* deferral, there must also be an indeterminate fulfillment of the present element, which must simultaneously overdetermine the deferral of presence. And we found such an indeterminate indifference to be powerfully expressed in the structure of comics, specifically in the working of spatiality in the medium. In comics, any series of elements – let us say, a set of panels – refers both to a succession in time, and a coexistence in space. That is to say, any and all ‘movement’ of time in comics, must also be simultaneous and take place at the same time – the dynamism of time must be circumscribed ‘within’ the presence of a present. We refer here to the image of a comic book page, with a multiplicity of panels, each representing a moment in time and the entire series representing the possibility of multiple ‘movements’ in time, which must nevertheless appear ‘inside’ the single space of the comic book page. Yet these panels ‘within’ the page do not only ‘represent’ an inside, but in standing for moments of time, they also refer to an otherness, the otherness of moments of time which can only appear by annihilating other moments. Any ‘present’ element in comics must necessarily be entangled with, spoiled by, its ‘past’ and ‘future’ elements – without this relation of difference comics does not exist, which means that the ‘fullness’ of any ‘present’ identity in comics must be deferred, must be formed only through an opening which ‘invites’ its others *within* itself. Yet this ‘opening’ – this trace – is also in comics a simultaneity, a convergence of the other which is impossible to distinguish from the self, an indetermination between presence and trace. Any ‘deferred object’ in comics must also imply, and be impossibly adequate to the ‘whole’ – any ‘present’ panel (which must be deferred, traced by its other) must also be *simultaneous* with the whole (refer to a presence where the other also somehow ‘returns’).

Let us try to articulate this in other terms; terms which might appear too ‘present’ from a Derridean perspective, but which might help us give a little more shape to our tentative theorization. Let us speak of the deferred element. That is, if the presence of any element – let us say, ‘X’ – is perpetually deferred in time, that it is constantly affected by the other and must become its other, be in this ‘process’ of time, then it must hold that conceivably, this X can suffer everything – indeed, there is no ‘other’ which it cannot potentially come into a relation with, no determinate time or space where its identity must cease. This identity X must be elaborated over a time series, such as (X1, X2, X3...) where each instance stands for a deferred state of X in time. This series can never be adequate to X, since ‘X’ refers to a presence of an

identity, and the series (X1, X2, X3...) must remain incomplete, to be perpetually elaborated over time; yet, X itself is this series, it is this series and has no concrete identity without this time-series, hence this time series *must* be adequate to X, must in a certain sense even be superadequate to X. We will soon see that it holds true for any individual element in the series as well. If we consider any one element in the series – say X1 – it becomes apparent that it must not be adequate to X, since X in X1 is deferred, and only due to this deferral must it necessarily move into X2 and so on; yet, at the same time, the identity of X in X1 must not be piecemeal, for in that sense X would not refer to the entire time-series but would break apart into separate identities in X1, X2, X3, etc. In a certain way, the deferred-X in X1 must also imply X-itself – must imply the entirety of X and the entirety of the time-series. A certain indeterminate simultaneity must inform X1 in its relation with all others in the time-series, and while this does not *equate* X1 to X, it must nevertheless imply all of X: a ‘process’ of *transadequation* must be at work between X1 and X.

In a later text, Derrida speaks of something similar, as ‘X Without X’, as a ‘spectral necessity’ or conditions of *phantasma* – which allows what does not arrive to arrive, which makes possible the arrival of what one believes does not arrive. This arrival takes place within a ‘virtuality’, but not a virtuality that can be strictly opposed from ‘actual reality’ – the arrival of what does not seem possible to arrive is as real as the reality of the actual world. Of course, there Derrida speaks of the arrival of the other, the context being that of the ‘fiction’ of the literary which must always arrive, always function within the ‘evidence’ of testimony and within the evidence of self-evidence itself.⁶⁴ But where does this arrival stop? If the arrival of the other implies the arrival of that which must not arrive, then can we say the same of the Derridean prohibition? Can we speak here of perhaps an indeterminate simultaneity between the present and its other, between the past and future in the ‘movement’ of time, which implies for us not only a *temporization* – not only a temporal detour that must defer and suspend the fulfillment of any ‘desire’ or ‘will’ – but also a *spatialization* – a spatial simultaneity which must nevertheless make the other indeterminately continuous with the present, make possible an indeterminate fulfillment.

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Demeure,” in *Instant of My Death/Demeure*, Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 2000), 92.

In indicating these ontological difficulties, these potential openings in the field of what we may call general ontology, we have not simply ‘exceeded’ the formulations of Derrida or Hegel, attempted to go beyond the contours of their thought, but in a certain sense remained ‘within’ and between the two – we have not attempted to dismiss either the notion of a simultaneity or continuity in the Hegelian Now or the trace-synthesis of the Derridean deferral, but rather, we have sought to work *with* them. Yet in our attempt to *hold them together*, to think these positions together, certain openings in them have appeared to the surface, have called upon us to address them, and indicated potential ways to think further. The problem of spatiality that has made itself felt to us – the problem of spatial repetition, and that of what we may call transadequation – compels us to conceptualize, on the one hand, the movement of dialectical *aufhebung* while maintaining the otherness of the other, and on the other hand, it calls for us to conceptualize the temporal detour of differance *simultaneously* with the presence of the present. This problem of spatiality that is expressed by comics, takes us to a *general horizon*, to an opening at the most fundamental, ontological level – and we contend that this spatiality must be supposed in, and must condition the most ‘general’, that what is at stake in this problem is a difficulty that is at the very heart of the ‘constitution’ of space, time, being, and difference. We have tried in the first part of this thesis to demonstrate the *ontological relevance* of the spatial character of comics, that the conceptualization of the spatial in comics is relevant for our understanding of the fundamental nature of the world and being, and that it indicates an opening, a difficulty at the level of ontological thought. It calls for us to stay with this difficulty, to keep thinking further.

Part Two: Comics and the Decolonial

Chapter Three: The Space/Time of Decoloniality and *The River of Stories*

In the second part of this thesis – which includes the third and fourth chapters – we will attempt to relate the spatial problem that we derived from comics with the theory of decoloniality, specifically as it appears in the work of Walter D. Mignolo. We contend that any thought of decolonization, which includes that of the decolonial, must take into account the aporia of time and space – of divisibility and continuity – and that our conceptualization of the spatial (which we derived from a structural analysis of comics) might hold relevance for the theorization of the decolonial as well. Any thought of decolonization must confront this problem, since it has to simultaneously pose an opposition to the colonizer while maintaining a politics that takes the side of the other, which cannot allow the other to simply become another ‘one’, which would be to return to the image of the colonizer. The thinking of decolonization must attempt to conceptualize this impossible ‘presence’ of the other.

This problem appears forcefully in Mignolo’s theory of decoloniality, where it appears to split his thought into two: on the one hand, Mignolo seems to want to imagine the world in temporal flux, to demonstrate the entanglement of Western modernity with the devastation of coloniality, yet, on the other hand, Mignolo wants to ‘delink’ from this entanglement with modernity, to enact an emergence of a pre-colonial, indigenous past. It seems that these two ‘halves’ never come together in Mignolo; he keeps wanting to maintain the temporal image of the world, while simultaneously enacting an atemporal break. In this part of our thesis, we will try to see whether we can think of a ‘presence’ or ‘universalization’ of the other while maintaining the image of entanglement – that is, whether we can think of the ‘discreteness’ of the indigenous without resorting to a full ‘delinking’. And we will argue that to undertake this project, one has to account for the continuity of the spatial, that the ‘entanglement’ that the decolonial must imagine is not only the othering of time, not only a temporal flux, but *also* the simultaneity of space. And we insist that this ‘logic’ of continuity is most powerfully expressed by the medium of comics.

Throughout the third and the fourth chapters, we will remain with a single image, a single three-page spread that appears near the end of the comic book, *The River of Stories* by Orijit Sen. And we will see that this spread makes a call for decolonization, that it invites the reader to engage in an act of decolonization, and that this act of decolonization appears in this spread through an aporia of space and time – where the constitutive problem of spatial repetition is reinforced and made apparent by the design of the spread. In this chapter and the next we will continue to remain with this image, we will keep returning to this three-page spread in *The River of Stories*, and we will try to relate the call for decolonization that appears in this spread, with the spatial (and temporal) aporia through which this call emerges. In restricting our subject matter in such a way, our intention is not to simply separate the spread from the rest of the comic, to simply slice it apart from its context, but to stay attentive – while enacting the necessary violence that accompanies such a separation – to the fact that the distinctiveness of each element within a comic, whether it be a spread, a panel, or a word balloon, only comes into being through its relation to other elements, through a relationship of difference with other elements which is also a simultaneity, where each ‘fragment’ of a comic must also imply the entirety of the text.

The spread appears at the end of the second part of *The River of Stories*, and is a three-page display centerfold that must be physically unfolded by the reader to see in its entirety. The spread itself is designed as a ‘map’, it appears as a figure of a topographical map within which comic panels are embedded, such that the narrative flow between panels is transformed simultaneously to a static co-existence of panels, *as if* the panels are also ‘topographical features’ on the map. This design of the spread reinforces the problem of spatial repetition, it appears as both a dynamic temporal narrative, a movement of ‘moments’ which lead from one panel to another, and *simultaneously* as a ‘static’ space, a single moment or image – which is both spatial and temporal, somehow both static *and* dynamic. The ‘map’ depicts the valley of River Rewa, the old name of the River Narmada, and on the top right of the spread, the map is drawn as if it folds away from the page, revealing beneath it the title of the spread: ‘Rewa: a map of stories told and as yet untold’. The river Rewa cuts through the map in a diagonal from the top left to the bottom right – from the top left where it diverges from its sister river, Vijali, at Ambarkhant, to the bottom right where it trails off from the page, and one can see the image of the Rewa Sagar Dam under construction. And although the spread is titled as a ‘map’, one can soon observe that it serves an entirely different purpose than any formal, abstract map-making

endeavor – *The River of Stories* unfolds as a story that is intensely political, describing sometimes in painstaking detail the violence of the dam construction project and of the landed elite on the Adivasis – the ‘original’, indigenous inhabitants of the land – and also the simultaneous resistance of the people, which is framed in the context of a history of struggle.

The ‘map’ reflects this history, and it simultaneously weaves this history with contemporary instances, it braids the past and the present in knots of violence and resistance. Various places are marked which intensify this historical struggle: we find that Ambarkhant, where Rewa and Vijali diverge, is also described as the spot where ‘Khajya Bhil, the rebel tribal chief, was murdered... in his sleep by the Rajput rulers of this area’, and Mandi is marked as a ‘Ruins of a once-proud city built to commemorate Mughal might’ which, long after the ‘conquerors’ have disappeared, continue to be inhabited by ‘small tribal settlements’. And along with this history of struggle, we find contemporary instances, indicated by places such as ‘Rathore’s house, built on the land where Relku’s house once stood’ (in the first chapter of the comic, we find the tortuous telling of the way Relku’s house was taken by Rathore) – and also places which mark the instances of collective resistance against the construction of the Rewa Sagar Dam, such as Manigram, ‘Where the people of Rewa valley pledged never to desert their lands and waters’.⁶⁵ This braiding of the past and ‘present’, of distant and contemporary struggle, does not only come to the surface in the three-page spread but is enacted continuously throughout *The River of Stories* – the comic book constantly sutures narratives together, the past and present, cosmology and history; and among these, it juxtaposes two major narratives: that of the legendary singer of the Bhilala Adivasis, Malgu Gayan, and of Vishnu, an urban journalist who travels to Ballanpur and Manigram to cover the protest movement taking place against the construction of the Rewa Sagar Dam.

To give a bit of historical context: the Rewa Sagar Dam as it appears in *The River of Stories* refers to the Narmada Dam (now known as Sardar Sarovar Dam) which is part of the Narmada Valley Project, a massive dam construction project conceived by the Indian government as far back as 1946 to harness the waters of Narmada, and finally initiated in 1985 after the World Bank decided to partially fund it. The Project included the plans to construct 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 minor dams, and submerge approximately 37,000 hectares of land,

⁶⁵ Orijit Sen, *The River of Stories* (Kalpavriksha, 1994), 48-9.

displacing more than a million people from their habitation.⁶⁶ Of the people to be displaced, about 60-70 percent were to be Adivasis – the ‘original inhabitants’ of the land – officially recorded as Scheduled Tribe population by the Indian Constitution, as those who live primarily by subsistence-oriented agriculture and/or hunting and gathering.⁶⁷ In response to the Project, and against the widespread Adivasi displacement and ecological impact of such a programme, a popular social movement called Narmada Bachao Andolan developed, which included adivasis, certain landed farmers called Patidars, and a number of urban activists and intellectuals. In *The River of Stories*, journalist Vishnu goes to the Narmada valley to report on this Andolan and the issues it raises, to write an article for the magazine ‘Voice’.

The three-page spread depicts this Andolan in a series of panels, specifically the protest march taking place at Manigram, the first place scheduled for submergence in order to construct the Rewa Sagar Dam. The river Rewa cuts the spread or ‘map’ in a diagonal, splitting the space into two roughly triangular shapes, two sides or banks of the river, and within these spaces two sets of panels are embedded. The top set of panels represent the protest march at Manigram, as a montage of ‘moments’ or a vignette – we see distinct ‘slices’ of the march as it occurs: one of the panels shows a reporter asking the protestors why they are marching against the Dam construction, and one of the protestors tells him, ‘Because our minds are made up. If the sarkar won’t stop this dam, they’ll have to do it on our dead bodies!’; another panel shows protestors accosting the policemen for being fellow children of Rewa, yet hurting their brothers and sisters to keep their job – and the final panel, the one on the top right of the spread, shows a crowd of protestors marching down a path, chanting, ‘What started as a trickle, has become a stream. What was a single stream, has been joined by myriad streams! What was once a rushing current, has become a broad river! And I dreamt what is today a river will tomorrow join the vast sea!’⁶⁸ And this last panel is drawn in such a manner, that the perspective of the people marching, appears to blend with the perspective of the ‘map’ given beneath it, as if the march is taking place on the map itself, as if the map is not simply a ‘backdrop’ to the series of panels but rather the *ground* on which the panels are also embedded, where they also appear as elements.

⁶⁶ Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts Over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 199-200.

⁶⁷ Judith Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley* (Pearson, 2010), 4.

⁶⁸ Sen, *The River of Stories*, 48-9.

This blending of the panels with the map is further intensified in the bottom set of panels, which depict Malgu Gayan singing the song of Rewa, ‘the river of stories’. In Bhilala cosmology, there was a time when the land (now known as Narmada valley) became suddenly filled with rampaging beasts and monsters, and it was only once Malgu started playing on his *rangai* – his musical instrument – did the land return to harmony, and the river Rewa was able to flow out to meet the sea, her husband. Within these panels, Malgu re-enacts this singing, but only as a commentary – he sets out to describe the manner in which Rewa flowed to the sea, and how she transformed the land of the valley in the course of her journey. The first ‘panel’ in this series has no frame, is not represented as a traditional comic book panel but rather depicts Malgu in front of the map, telling the audience that he will sing ‘the song of Rewa, the river of stories’ and he tells the reader to ‘listen well’. The subsequent panels depict Malgu in various postures, singing this song which is also a narration of Rewa’s journey to the sea – sometimes we see a close-up of Malgu’s face, sometimes we see him from the back with an outstretched hand, as he describes how Rewa bestowed names to the places marked on the map, and gave them ‘life-giving gifts’ from the creatures in her belly. The final panel again shows Malgu without the framing device of a panel, and here we see Malgu literally placed on the map, as he sits on a mattress on top of the land represented by the map, where Malgu describes how Rewa had ‘finally’ reached Manigram, which was turned ‘green and beautiful’ by her.⁶⁹

In a certain way, the narrative of *The River of Stories* reaches a culminating point in this spread. Not only as a culmination, a climax of certain strands of the comic, but also – and here I borrow the term ‘culminating point’, as a metaphor, from military strategy – where the narrative reaches a point where the relevant elements can no longer function in the way they had been operating before in the text. This is not to say that the text comes to a halt, not at all, rather the juxtaposition of the map with the two distinct series of panels opens up a range of interpretative possibilities, some of which we shall try to discuss in this chapter. Yet this opening of possibilities, and the range of interpretations and readings that it offers, is itself made possible only through a non-passage – an absolute spatial impassage that makes the ‘moments’ of the narrative halt as ‘elements’ of a space – interpretative possibilities are only opened up by this aporia of time and space that operates within the spread.

⁶⁹ Sen, *The River of Stories*, 48-9.

The two major narratives of *The River of Stories* – one showing Malgu Gayan, who sings the song of the river of stories, speaking directly to the reader and inviting them to participate in the events of the comic, and the other depicting the story of Vishnu, the journalist who travels to report on the movement against the construction of the Rewa Sagar Dam – up until the spread, these two narratives are depicted in two distinct art styles. The pages with Malgu Gayan is rendered in soft pencil shades, fleshing out the forms in a naturalist, or realist manner, yet the softness of the rendering gives these panels an ethereal tinge, while the parts with Vishnu and the present movement is drawn in ink, the figures being a little more cartoony or caricature-like, yet the solidity of ink gives them a more concrete appearance. However, when these two strands are brought together in the spread, as a series of panels embedded in a map, the artstyle is unified through inks, which gives the added effect of the panels appearing also as elements belonging to the map. This unification of artstyle, the bringing together of elements as on a map works, as we have seen, alongside another unification – a certain kind of merging of space and time – where the two series of panels, themselves being temporal flows of narrative, are placed on the center-spread as *static* objects belonging to the map. By embedding the series of panels on the map of Rewa, the text invites us to read the panels as spatial, static elements, appearing simultaneously and together on the surface of the map, and the comic book page. By being both a series of panels that appear successively in time, and a map that holds its elements simultaneously in space, the spread stands as an image that is *both dynamic and static*: the ‘movement’ of this page is ‘simultaneously’ temporal and spatial.

How should we read this three-page spread? How should we interpret this ‘map’, where Malgu Gayan begins to sing the song of the river of stories, where he invites the reader to ‘listen well’ and where also the protest movement at Manigram unfolds? How should we relate these two sets of panels which are ‘simultaneously’ temporal and spatial – which relate the past and the present, but also the cosmological with the historical and the contemporary, *within* this aporia, not simply temporally, but by the work of the spatial on the temporal? How would we think of this weaving, this ‘temporality’ which is *at once* spatial? Perhaps we could think of the two narratives of *The River of Stories* as parallels, juxtaposed in the text to intensify their effects, where the story of Malgu Gayan acts as an analogy of the contemporary protests, the ‘past’ intensifying the ‘present’ in order to highlight its character as an attempt at a ‘break’ with the

world which obstructs the flow of Narmada, enacting an irreversible violence on the people of the land.

Yet, any cursory reading of the comic will show that narratives in *The River of Stories* appear not simply as analogical – which they also are – but as events that occur *with* each other; in many instances the book depicts the ‘past’ and ‘present’ as *contemporary*, happening as if in the same time. Even as the contemporary events unfold in the comic, as we see Vishnu preparing to leave for Ballanpur and then report on the protest march at Manigram, as we read of the way in which Rathore appropriated Relku’s house by beating up her uncle and burning down the building – even as these contemporary events take place, the cosmological tale of Malgu Gayan also ‘happens’ in the comic. The first chapter begins with Malgu directly addressing the reader, narrating the beginning of all existence and the universe, along with the tale of how Kujum Chantu, the universe, decided to create a world for humans. And even more, the second chapter begins with the image of the Rewa Sagar Dam under construction, but the narration speaks of how suddenly the land had been taken over by tigers and bears, as if directly equating – or at least juxtaposing – the construction of the dam with the filling up of the land with violent creatures. The scene then cuts away to a small shanty, from the inside of which someone narrates how Ratukamai called for Malgu Gayan, told him that the mountains were changing, and that their ‘task is big’. Immediately this cuts again to the dam construction site, where we see an officer telling off the workers for falling behind schedule, and that they should not ‘cut a sorry figure’ in front of the aid agency team that will visit them next month. And once again, we see the shanty, from which Malgu appears to walk out, narrating his own story, telling how Malgu Gayan had made a letter from the dust of his own chest, sending it to Relukabadi, asking him to make a *rangai* so Malgu may begin to sing. And as Malgu describes how the letter fell on Relukabadi’s chest, who picked it up and started reading, the panel is suddenly dislodged, drawn like a piece of paper held by a hand from the perspective of the reader – and Malgu addresses Relu, here, as if directly addressing the reader as Relu, telling them that ‘the time has come again to pick up the *rangai* so that the river of stories which rises from the soul can flow out.’⁷⁰

These two narratives in *The River of Stories*, then – these two ‘times’, the much-distant cosmological ‘past’ of the legend of Malgu Gayan, and the contemporary ‘present’ of the protest

⁷⁰ Sen, *The River of Stories*, 30-1.

movements of the Andolan – are not simply drawn in the comic as parallels, as two distant moments in time resonating with each other, but rather, they are also made to *occur together*. By being juxtaposed in the pages of the comic in this way, the narrative ties together these two ‘times’, makes Malgu appear on the pages simultaneously with the contemporary construction and protests, and places the reader in the shoes of Relukabadi. This weaving of the past and the present culminates in the three-page spread, where the protest march in Manigram is made to appear ‘simultaneously’ with the re-enactment of the song of Malgu Gayan. Just as the ‘map’ of Rewa marks different locations on the Rewa valley, brings together the history of violence and tribal resilience and ties it together with contemporary events – in the same way it also brings together the two sets of panels, the two narratives of Manigram march and Malgu’s song, as ‘physical’ objects embedded on the ‘map’. It is as if the land itself holds all of these together. The historical, the cosmological, the contemporary; and weaved through all of these temporalities an entire topography of colonization, along with the urgent but enduring call to decolonize.

Maybe we could think here that the three-page spread in question represents a certain bearing of the past on the present, not simply as an analogy or a parallel, but as a *call to enact* the legend of Malgu Gayan itself – in the same way that Malgu drove away the ‘tigers and bears’ that had suddenly come to encroach upon the land and allowed the Rewa to flow to her husband the sea, in the same way *The River of Stories* implores the reader, it calls out to the protestors to drive away the ‘tigers and bears’ of the dam construction project. Certainly, such a reading bears weight, and the text itself invites such a reading in multiple instances. In the spread itself, Malgu addresses the reader directly when he instructs the reader to ‘listen well’ to the song of the river of stories, and when he sends the letter to Relukabadi, the reader is made to take up his place. Moreover, in a scene where Vishnu the journalist is going towards Manigram with the Andolan activist, Anand, Vishnu talks about how he can ‘sense a mood’ that is growing among the people, a kind of ‘upsurge of tribal consciousness’ – that even as every day the dam grows higher, the people’s determination for it not to be built grows along with it. To this Anand says, ‘It’s almost as though the legendary singer, Malgu gayan, has picked up his rangai, and was telling his people to rise, to unite!’ Vishnu then says that this is ‘an interesting thought’ and that perhaps Anand had heard Malgu’s voice as well, to which Anand says, ‘I think you’re beginning to hear it too’. After this they speculate that maybe this time, Malgu’s voice will be heard not

only by his people, but all over the world, and Anand says, ‘... And people will drop all their crazy madness and racket, and the earth will become peaceful and still again...’ After this, in a transition typical of *The River of Stories*, we see a panel with the landscape of the valley, with the river Rewa in the distance, and the silhouette of the figure of Malgu sitting on a cliff in the foreground, holding his rangai.

In certain ways, the text gestures us towards such a reading of the ‘bearing’ of the past – that the cosmological past comes to bear upon the contemporary protests, that Malgu’s voice can be heard all over the world as an ‘upsurge’ of ‘tribal consciousness’, calling to his people to drive away the beasts of the dam construction project and return to the adivasi way of life, where the earth is peaceful and still again. We will not doubt the validity of such a reading which is heavily suggested by the text. However, let us note at this point, that this reading does not exhaust the possibilities of the center-spread that we set out to discuss. By juxtaposing moments from the protest at Manigram with the song of Malgu Gayan, the center-spread seems to gesture towards a certain call for action, and yet at this decisive point – where Malgu Gayan begins to sing the song of the river of stories, where ostensibly a call is made to decolonize, to turn back centuries of oppression and colonization of the adivasis, to turn back the clock on a dam construction project that not only symbolizes that oppression but also the colonization of the global south by Western capitalism and ideas of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ – *at this decisive point in the comic we are faced with an aporia*. The call to decolonize – the song of the river of stories – emerges in an aporetic space, is entangled with a certain non-passage.

The text does not offer us any simple solutions. Rather, by embedding the panels as spatial elements in a map, it offers us a dynamic narrative that is ‘simultaneously’ static, where moments of time – the past, present, and future – are not only related causally to each other as temporal elements, but also through a stasis, simultaneously together as objects in space. This cannot simply be a temporal passage where the past bears on the present – the cosmological or imagined past affecting the present in its movement – rather it refers to an-other temporality, a bearing of the spatial on the temporal, where the ‘past’ and the ‘present’, the ‘cosmological’ and the ‘historical’ suffer a co-incident, are held together, as if ‘physically’, on the aporetic space of the ‘map’ of Rewa.

And let us observe here that this tension between the ‘past’ and ‘present’ – in the question of the ‘bearing’ of the cosmological past on the contemporary ‘present’ – is also a necessary tension between the particular and the universal, a *constitutive* tension that must accompany any interpretative attempt in the context of a text – which is also perhaps, and we will not go into it here, the context of representation and ‘reality’ in general. If the past – the generalized act that represent the past in the song of Malgu Gayan – bears upon and transforms the future in its image, then we have to say that it is a matter of a particular formation, a particular act, which is taking on the *image of the universal* in our interpretation; between two particular events – between the contemporary protest and the legendary song of Malgu Gayan – the latter takes on an universality that ‘bears upon’ the other, molds the other in its image.

A difference divides the ‘past’ and the ‘present’, which is bridged by interpreting one particular as the universal, as having a determining effect over the whole – yet this difference is also a *constitutive* difference, without this difference we would not have the formation of these particulars in their identity as we find them here, and hence the ‘past’ must also, by this right, be ‘constituted’ by the ‘present’, by the ‘bearing’ of the present upon it. And we can observe this double movement in the center-spread: since it is not only the song of Malgu Gayan that transforms the present, but rather also that the Andolan in the ‘present’, the contemporary protests call upon Malgu in this manner – we see in Malgu, hear in his song, a call to decolonize, not because this interpretation was already given in the legend, but because it interprets and activates the legend in a certain way, makes it relevant for us in the present. Certain displacements mark it clearly. When Malgu sings his song, for instance, in the three-page spread, it is not the song he sings to drive away beasts but the song of the river of stories, he sings of how Narmada flowed out to the sea – a certain conflation is made here, a certain implication, that the song of Malgu Gayan, which drove away the beasts from the land, also allowed Rewa to flow, *just as* the protestors must drive away the beasts of the dam construction project and allow Rewa to meet the sea. Yet in the legend we see, that Rewa and her sister Vijali, were accidentally caught up when Relukabadi’s matli broke, and the water gushed out from there and took them to the sea – the song of Malgu Gayan, in the contemporary interpretation, takes on the appearance of an act which had the purpose of allowing the waters of Rewa to flow uninterrupted – and this displacement is effected, we can say, by the ‘bearing’ of the ‘present’ on the ‘past’, by a certain interpretation of the cosmological legend in the image of the contemporary protests.

Yet what is at stake here – in the tension between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’, between the two particular instances and the universality of interpretation in this regard – does not get exhausted by this demonstration, by simply showing that the ‘present’ is as operational on the ‘past’ as the ‘past’ bears upon the ‘present’. For what is at stake here is the relationship between the particular and the universal in general; just as the two particulars are in a constitutive relationship of difference with each other, the same holds true for the relationship between the particulars and the universal – the universal itself, being that which is ‘in common’ between all particulars, must be derived from these particular elements – without which it does not have any independent existence of its own. In a sense, this ‘universal’ itself must be articulated in a ‘particular’ form, the universal itself must be ‘particular’ in this way, a particular raised to the power of the universal – which must imply that the ‘universal’ in this sense retains a sense of finitude of the particular. This finitude of the universal does not only imply its impossibility – the impossibility of it to be the ‘final’ point which fixes meanings through a fundamental universal – but rather this impossibility is the condition of possibility for the universal to be universal. Within the three-page spread in *The River of Stories*, the two narratives are in this fundamental tension, which is simultaneously a tension of time and space – a tension where each of the narratives are in a relationship of difference but also indifference, a simultaneity whereby they are in continuity with each other – they affect each other and ‘bear upon’ the other in their own image, but even more so, that they remain ‘open’ to the other; maintain a certain *openness* to the other within an aporetic space of difference and continuity.

Let us observe that this ‘opening’ between the past and the present, between the universal and the particular, is not only a temporal opening, not only in the image of a difference between two ‘moments’, but also a spatial opening, a simultaneity between elements. This means that the ‘universal’ is not only ‘particular’, but that any ‘particular’ must also refer to everything else, it must be continuous and be ‘in common’ with everything else – that is, each particular must also necessarily contain the quality of a universal, the ‘potential’ to be articulated as a universal. If the condition of possibility of an universal is its impossibility, then it must hold for a particular as well – and this implies that the condition for impossibility for anything, must be its possibility, that is, its impossibility must imply the possibility of its ‘presence’. This ‘movement’ appears powerfully, as we have seen, in the phenomenon of spatial repetition in comics. In comics, any element appears only in being juxtaposed with other elements, through a relationship of

difference which ‘opens’ the element to its other – and any experience of comics must take into account this ‘opening’ of a comic element to its other. Yet this ‘opening’ in comics also implies a simultaneity, where any deferred ‘present’ element is simultaneous with the ‘presence’ of the entirety of the comic – the ‘opening’ is not only open towards the difference of the other but also a simultaneity with the ‘whole’. This ‘opening’ – this aporia – is not exhausted by simply saying that one narrative bears upon the other, by fixing their relationship in this way, rather what the spread from *The River of Stories* brings us to is this ‘opening’ itself, this tension between the ‘past’ and ‘present’, between the particular and the universal, which appears here also, as a *call for decolonization*, as an insistent call to decolonize. This call for decolonization occurs in *The River of Stories*, is represented in the comic through a tension – through an aporia: and this is not without relevance for us.

And we should quickly note here, that we cannot resolve this aporia by presenting it as a straightforward case of a conflict between ‘form’ and ‘content’ – where the content or the narrative ‘plot’ of the comic wholly endorses a reading of the cosmological past bearing on the contemporary protest, which is then undercut or made uncanny through a formal play of the medium of comics, in the process producing an aporia and opening up other ways of reading the narrative. Rather, the very ‘content’ of the comic already supposes this aporia. As we have seen, Malgu Gayan appears in the narrative not only as an enactment of the cosmological past, but multiple instances in the text indicate his contemporaneity with the protest movement, a simultaneity of the past and the present, the cosmological and the actual – and perhaps the modern and non-modern – in the narrative plot of the comic itself. And this ‘contraction’ of the past and the present which marks the ‘content’ of the comic, is also an inherent aporia in the very ‘form’ of the medium of comics, where the temporal unfolding of narratives necessarily takes place through a spatial juxtaposition of elements, which ‘brings together’ different moments of time on the ‘same’ plane. As such, the ‘content’ of *The River of Stories* is necessarily entangled with the ‘form’ of comics, which reaches a culminating point in the center-spread we are attempting to study in this part of the thesis, making explicit the tension of time and space which underlies the form/content of the text throughout.

How should we understand this aporia in the context of the comic? Within the three-page spread, which is the culminating point where *The River of Stories* flows out, where a call for

decolonization is made in the text – which is also a non-passage of time and space, of the past and the present, and of the particular and the universal? We will not try to ‘solve’ this problem in these chapters, we will not attempt to ‘resolve’ this generative aporia – rather, let us try to pursue the difficulty it poses for us, a certain ground of impossible possibility that brings out the question of space and time, of the effect of spatiality in bringing together time, here in the pages of a comic book that calls for an act of decolonization. Let us attempt to remain with this difficulty and its power to provoke.

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In an interview given on the ‘key concepts’ of decoloniality, Walter D. Mignolo states that the ‘de-’ of decoloniality refers to the need for a ‘re-’, a re-emergence, resurgence, and reconstitution. The specific context of Mignolo’s formulation of decoloniality as a ‘re-emergence’ is an attempt to separate decoloniality from post-coloniality, but Mignolo frames his articulation as a polemic against Western conception of time. He says, ‘Conceptually, the ‘post’ keeps you trapped in unipolar time conceptions... Therefore, what comes after X has to be conceptualized as post-X. Decoloniality instead opens up to the multiple times of cultures and civilizations upon which Western Civilizations impose its conceptualization of time. The ‘de-’ indicates above all the need and the goal of the re-: epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence. That is, neither new nor post.’⁷¹ To engage in such reconstitution or re-emergence, Mignolo states that it is necessary for decoloniality to ‘delink’ from Western metaphysics and constitution of knowledge, which means to engage in an act of radical break or rupture. The ‘postcolonial’ or ‘postmodern’ is unable to do this because it is caught in a unilinear concept of time, a time which moves in a straight, teleological fashion, where coming after coloniality in time means necessarily to be a post-coloniality, to be in the wake of coloniality. Decoloniality, on the other hand, causes a radical break and is able to enact a resurgence or re-emergence, and is not trapped in a liner coming-after.

To follow Mignolo here, at this point, is to encounter a difficulty, a tension between the past and the present and a certain attempt to broach a non-linear model of time, which may be

⁷¹ <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/>

productive in our reading of the three-page spread from *The River of Stories*. Let us point out that the question of ‘re-emergence’ as Mignolo articulates it cannot be reduced to our prior considerations regarding the spread: that is, in decolonial re-emergence, it is neither a matter of a ‘parallel’ between the past and the present, nor is it a question of the ‘bearing’ of the past on the present. The former, we saw, could not be sustained as a reading since the text forcefully posits a certain contemporaneity between the past and the present, between the legend of Malgu Gayan and the contemporary protests in the Rewa valley. The latter, on the other hand, certainly bears a certain weight – and appears to be intimately related to the question of ‘re-emergence’ – yet it cannot exhaust the interpretative possibilities opened up by the three-page spread, since in it, it is a matter of *openness* to the other, between the past and present (and also time and space), rather than a simple ‘bearing’ of one on the other. Both these readings – the ‘parallel’ between the past and the present, and the ‘bearing’ of the past upon the present – fall short in the face of a certain *contemporaneity* or simultaneity of the past and the present that animates the text. Decolonial re-emergence, however, refers to an irruption of the past in the present, a certain re-constitution of the present that cannot be reduced to a ‘bearing’ of the past – that is, decolonial re-constitution is not a re-interpretation of the past in the image of the present, but rather a non-linear ‘resurgence’ of the past.

For Mignolo, the linear model of time rests on the foundation of Western ontology, which privileges entities and beings as autonomous, transcendent things which may be named and marked by grammatical nouns. What this privileging obfuscates is that all ontologies are cosmological, that is, they tell a story about the coming into being of the world, and in this sense, they are epistemologies – they produce knowledge. Western epistemology produces its favored objects as transcendental entities, as unilateral identities beyond reproach or reinterpretation. Decoloniality seeks to focus on the relations between entities, to show that the world is a network of relationalities, that all objects of knowledge are fluid and relational, and liberate knowing and becoming through transforming the very terms of knowledge production itself.⁷² In fact, for Mignolo, the task of decoloniality – which operates at this level of knowledge production, the domain traditionally marked off by the Western term, ‘epistemology’ – must be distinguished from the act of decolonization, which Mignolo views as a merely political or

⁷² Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts Analytics Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 135-137.

historical act of seizing the state. Without going into the question of whether an epistemological level can be accessed at all without necessarily having to go through the historical and the political, let us note that for Mignolo, the work of decoloniality is at the level of knowledge production, at the level of the metalanguage of Western modernity, which may persist in the global south even after the political act of decolonization. And this metalanguage of Western modernity is linked to *an ontology of discrete entities*, which decoloniality ‘delinks’ from, in order to liberate knowledge and represent the world as fluid and *relational*.

The relational network that governs Mignolo’s theory of decoloniality is the conceptual dyad ‘modernity/coloniality’, which he borrows from the work of Anibal Quijano, but distinguishing between the *rhetoric* of modernity and the *logic* of coloniality. Mignolo finds modernity to be a rhetoric, or a set of discourses meant to persuade people, promising a global project of salvation and progress, which includes Western ‘secular de-Goding narratives of science, economic progress, political democracy, and lately globalization’.⁷³ Yet this rhetoric of modernity, as a discourse of salvation, is inextricably bound with the logic of coloniality, which names the destitute and the process of destitution. Mignolo shows that the progress of modernity, and the expansion of the West between the sixteenth and the twenty first centuries, was marked by a dimension of events which suggests the destitution of human life across the world, beginning with the economic exploitation associated with colonization and the Industrial Revolution, the enslaving of Africans and the destruction of civilizations in the Americas, and up to the exclusion and marginalization of the Third World and the global South today.⁷⁴

The rhetoric of modernity obscures this logic of coloniality, as a field of representation it promises universal progress and growth, and its power to persuade people is founded on the Western ontological privileging of transcendent entities – it imagines the world as a set of entities which are simply to be denoted or named, and names the world in its own terms,

⁷³ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 139. Of course, modernity is not a monolithic entity, and the history of Western modernity is full of instances of breaks, innovations, and ‘paradigm shifts’. Mignolo himself gives a general account of certain distinct stages through which modernity has progressed. However, what appears to be important for Mignolo here is that throughout the history of such ‘breaks’, the underlying terms of the *rhetoric of modernity* remains the same. We will attempt to see in this chapter whether Mignolo’s own ‘break’ – decolonial delinking – enacts a decisive break with modernity, or whether it re-enacts, in certain ways, the underpinnings of Western epistemology.

⁷⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1-24.

appearing as a set of monolithic global designs that set aside any impediments to its growth, all the while hiding the logic of colonial exploitation and global conflicts, refusing to recognize that the world – including its own rhetoric – is relationally bound with its other, in a fluidity and becoming. Modernity is always entangled with the logic of coloniality, they always appear together, not only incidentally or historically, but at the level of enunciation, they are constitutive of each other to the extent that modernity cannot be rigorously conceptualized without its relation with, and difference from, coloniality. Colonial difference constitutes modernity and its narrative of economic progress and globalization.

Such a formulation seems to describe the context of the Narmada valley protests quite well. Immediately after decolonization, a majority of Indian nationalists believed that the way for India to overcome its colonial past would be to heavily urbanize and industrialize itself, and this approach was reflected in the policies of the Indian National Congress, the party in power at the time, which adopted the model of ‘industrialize or perish’ from its Second Five Year Plan.⁷⁵ This was the environment in which the Narmada Valley Project was conceived, whose antecedents can be found as far back as 1946. The construction of dams were planned in areas mostly inhabited by adivasis, whose land rights had been denuded from the British colonial era, when laws such as the Land Acquisition Act of 1864 had made it legal for the state to appropriate land for ‘public’ good – and this approach was directly continued even after decolonization of the state, and the initial plans for the Project entirely skipped the matter of compensating those who would be displaced.⁷⁶

It was simply understood that the adivasis being displaced would make way for the development of the nation. According to S.C. Varma, the former chairman of the Narmada Valley Development Agency, ‘No trauma can be more painful for a family than to get uprooted... Yet the uprooting has to be done. Because the land occupied by the uprooted family is required for a development project which holds promise of progress and prosperity for the country and the people in general.’⁷⁷ In response to such a popular rhetoric of national ‘development’, the social movements that grew in the Narmada valley – especially the Narmada

⁷⁵ Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, 21-22.

⁷⁶ Whitehead, *Development and Dispossession*, 16.

⁷⁷ Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, 223.

Bachao Andolan – emphasized in its discourse the class character of capitalist development, and the appropriation of natural resources by the state in the interest of national industrialists and elites. The Andolan also suggested that the paradigm of ‘development’ was an ideology that, while upholding notions such as ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’, helped accelerate the more gradual processes of commodification and resource-accumulation.⁷⁸ This accumulation supposes widespread ecological destruction, and dispossession of adivasis and their way of life, a way of life which is based on more sustainable models such as subsistence-oriented agriculture and hunting-gathering. The Andolan’s critique of the Narmada Valley Project consisted in exposing the social injustices and ecological deprivation inherent in the Project’s rhetoric of development, in an attempt to halt the construction of the dams and preserve the rights of the adivasis who inhabited the land.

Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar, in an essay titled ‘Material Development and Human Regression: A Decolonial Reading of Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*’, forwards an explicit reading of the narrative of *The River of Stories* through Mignolo’s decolonial theory. For Ghosh Dastidar, the text takes an obvious ‘decolonial stand’, and that it works to point out ‘futile elements’ of Eurocentric notions of development. Ghosh Dastidar’s reading hinges on Mignolo’s notion of Totality – that is, the idea that Western ontology forwards its notion of universality as a single, discrete Totality – and that it works to suppress other numerous ‘non-Western concepts of Totality’ which decoloniality seeks to bring forward. Decoloniality attempts to express and enact a ground of *pluriversality*, where other Totalities may contest and find space alongside Western notions of Totality and universal modernity. Ghosh Dastidar argues that the text of *The River of Stories* actualizes a ‘problem’, which brings to the surface the existence of silenced Totalities – the ‘problem’ being ‘a rift in lifestyles between city-dwellers and bureaucrats on the one hand and village-folk and tribal communities on the other’.⁷⁹ This conflict takes on the form of a political and economic power struggle, which for Ghosh Dastidar is ‘undeniably the reproduction of coloniality’, where the village-dwellers are transformed into ‘non-beings’, given a stature of sub-humans on whom violence may be freely enacted by the ‘materially developed humans’.⁸⁰ In

⁷⁸ Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, 222.

⁷⁹ Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression: A Decolonial Reading of Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*,” in *History and Myth: Postcolonial Dimensions*, eds. Arti Nirmal and Sayan Dey (Vernon Press, 2021), 7.

⁸⁰ Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression,” 8-9.

this economy of modernity/coloniality – where the colonial logic of deprivation works through the division between the ‘humans’ and ‘sub-humans’, governed by the rhetoric of modernity and Western Totality – the voice of Malgu Gayan appears as ‘perhaps the most significant’ voice of the many silenced Totalities, calling for a decolonial task of undoing the human regression (coloniality) perpetrated for the sake of modern development (modernity).⁸¹

Should we think, then, the Narmada valley protests as an instance of decolonial re-emergence? More still, should we read the center-spread from *The River of Stories* through this theoretical apparatus? Since the formulation modernity/coloniality appears to describe the context of the movement so well, should we take the next step and imagine it as a moment of re-emergence and re-existence? No doubt the andolan in the valley sought to preserve adivasi habitation and living, to enact a kind of ‘going-back’ from the plans of dam construction already set into motion by the Project, and to uphold the values and advantages of a way of life that is understood as ‘prior’ to modernization in a linear model of development. The three-page spread from the comic book, too, can be seen as a narrative of re-emergence, where an imagined cosmological past is made contemporary and brought to bear upon the present struggle – the song of Malgu Gayan and the river of stories can become a symbol, a synecdoche of re-enacting Malgu Gayan’s feat of bringing harmony to the world, chasing away the beasts of modernity and preserving the adivasi way of living.

Let us not be hasty here. Let us remind ourselves that in the theoretical apparatus of decoloniality, the articulation modernity/coloniality is not enough to enact re-emergence, a further step of ‘delinking’ is required, which radically breaks away from Western modernity and hence from the logic of modernity/coloniality itself. And, according to Mignolo, it is this act of ‘delinking’ which separates the de-colonial from the post-colonial or the post-modern, it forms the basis of decoloniality’s specificity, and is fundamental to decolonial pluriversality. The post-colonial, following the post-modern, critiques Totality itself – and this critique, for Mignolo, is merely an ‘internal’ critique of Western modernity – but it does not take into account the power struggle within distinct Totalities, where various non-Western Totalities are suppressed by the universal Totality posed by Western modernity.⁸² The *act of delinking* breaks away from

⁸¹ Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression,” 7, 15.

⁸² Walter Mignolo, “DELINKING,” *Cultural Studies*, 21:2 (2007): 435-55.

Western Totality (modernity), from the logic of modernity/coloniality itself, in favor of other Totalities and non-Western epistemic formations – which creates the ground for pluriversality, the affirmation of the existence of multiple Totalities or universalities.

Yet we may observe that there is a tension here – between the relational, fluid nature of the formulation ‘modernity/coloniality’, and the demand for a radical break in ‘delinking’ and ‘decoloniality’. These two moments do not imply a continuity in Mignolo’s thought, but rather a tension or dilemma which cannot be resolved through any simple means. The formulation modernity/coloniality seeks to forward the decolonial worldview that opposes Western ontological privileging of objects as entities (the basis of Western epistemic Totality), to show that the world is relational and fluid, marked by temporalities and becoming, constantly entangled with its other. To emphasize this nature, Mignolo even forwards decoloniality as part of a triad: modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. If we have to take the relational nature of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality seriously, then we cannot enact a simple break from modernity/coloniality. To mark here a simple break, no matter how radical, which would completely do away with the stakes of modernity, would be to conceptualize decoloniality as a transcendent entity, to submit it to the foundations of Western ontology and knowledge. To put it in terms of the pluriversal, we may say, that the contesting Totalities would not simply be discrete from each other, but rather they would also have to be entangled, in a fluid relation with each other – this would raise the need to formulate a pluriversality that is far more complex, perhaps even fragile, tentative, compared to a simple ground of oppositional entities. This would be to take the nature of a Totality or universality seriously, which implies a total, universal effect – each so-called ‘contesting’ or oppositional Totality would have to have a claim on other such Totalities or universalities.

To return to the matter of re-emergence: The prefix ‘re-’ – which Mignolo ties so intimately with the ‘de-’ of decoloniality to separate it from the ‘post-’ of postcoloniality – implies a ‘going-back’, a resurgence or reemergence, but it also supposes a ‘doing-again’ or repetition, a ‘going-forward’ without which it would not be possible to emerge again. In order for the past to emerge, one needs to repeat the past in a future moment, it requires this necessary movement from the past to the future, or rather from the future towards a past – the past affects the future in being enacted again, in a moving-forward and in being repeated. And repetition

itself – the process of the past moving into the future – supposes a passage of time, where a ‘present’ moment is constantly becoming-past, constantly being held and reserved in another moment, always in this movement, caught in the past-ing of the future, ‘present’ moment. Any element, being, or entity that appears in the world is caught by this movement, where it is reserved and represented in another moment, always in a relation with an other, and this necessary relationship which constitutes an element also divides it in itself, produces a difference from itself in its very being. The ‘re-’ spoils the notion of a simple break, rather it enacts a necessary and non-simple break, here and everywhere, which is also a relation, a holding in reserve in others and being kept in reserve – no ‘entity’ can appear without this break/relation, divided and related with others and in itself.

The center-spread from *The River of Stories* operates through such a relation of non-simple repetition, the appearance of decolonial re-emergence in the comic is made possible by and functions through this im-possible relationality. At a point in the comic where Malgu Gayan finally begins to sing the song of the river of stories, where we are called to participate in a moment of decolonization, we are faced – at the same time – with a textual difficulty which does not allow for any simple reading or solution. The song of Malgu Gayan is brought together on the page of the comic, simultaneously as elements on a map and dynamically as a successive series of panels, with the ongoing protest movement at Manigram in the Narmada valley, and is itself produced by the collective imagination in the present, a past that is produced retroactively by the telling of a legend in its future, here in the page of the comic where both moments are held together, both producing each other in the narrative and being produced in the text as a coming together of the spatial and the temporal. The legend refers to a past, an imagined past that is not immediate to the present, but a much distant past, which appears with the present and affects it, suggesting not only the attempt to continue the adivasi way of life in the valley, but an emergence of the distant past – the demand for continuity is also a break with the linear time of modernity, a demand to ‘return’. Yet a break with linear time already breaks away from any model of a simple discontinuity.

For a much distant past to affect the present, there must not only be a discontinuity from the immediate past, but also a radical continuity – the distant past must be continuous with the present, only then is it possible for it to re-emerge in the present. Time must ‘pass’ *at the same*

time, through an impossible spatiality. In the passage of time, the present is discontinuous from its past, even its immediate past, yet the ‘present’ itself is this passing, a continuous passing away and reserving itself in other moments; for the present to be ‘present’ – for any object or entity to be present-to-itself or accessible in any form of immediacy – it must be reserved in other ‘presents’, in other moments. The *itself* of any present element is perpetually given in another, that which is ‘present’ is itself only by ‘being’ in another – the discontinuity between moments *must* imply a continuity and reserve, a spatial simultaneity which holds together the ‘present and its ‘other’ – and this contradiction is *necessary* in conceptualizing non-linear time. The scene of decolonization that we find in the comic book, supposes a certain non-simple relation *that makes possible the appearance of decolonial re-emergence, but is not reducible to it*. It gestures us towards something else. Decolonization appears in the text of *The River of Stories*, not as a simple moment of breaking with the colonial and going back, but rather, by the work of an impossible spatialization of time – it appears through and makes itself felt in this impossibility.

In this thesis we have insisted that this impossible spatiality is expressed forcefully by the medium of comics – that the structure of the medium of comics is such that any ‘unfolding’ in time must also be simultaneously spatial. Any passage of time, any narrative or non-narrative duration in comics must also appear simultaneously on a single surface, and this implies an indeterminate indifference between: first, a relation of difference which hollows out any presence, that is, any element in the whole must refer to others outside itself and its own presence must be spoiled by this relation, and second, that this relation of difference must also be simultaneous, such that such ‘spoiled’ presences in comics must also be continuous with the (indeterminate) ‘whole’, that the others ‘outside’ must also simultaneously be ‘inside’, that they must also refer to a ‘same’. We conceptualized this, in ontological terms, as the need to think trace-deferral together with dialectical sublation. This relation – this problem of entanglement and spatiality – is reinforced by the design of the three-page spread in *The River of Stories*, where the two sets of panels are brought together simultaneously as spatial ‘objects’ within the design of the map. Neither the cosmological ‘past’, nor the contemporary ‘present’ can be thought to have an universalizing effect on the other – as an effect of their spatial simultaneity they must also be brought on the ‘same’ level – and this applies for any interpretation that attempts to ‘solve’ their impasse – the universal claim of any such interpretation must also

bear a particular form, it must also take the form of a concrete articulation. But this does not mean they are only ‘partial’ – rather, each ‘fragmented’ articulation must also contain the potential for a universal claim, each ‘particular’ must contain the ‘power’ of the universal – that is, it must be possible to raise it to the power of the universal. And this is not without consequence for the thinking of decolonization.

To think of the matter of ‘re-emergence’ in the Narmada valley protest: it is immediately clear that there is no way to ‘go back’ to the pre-colonial past, nor is it possible to fully recreate the mode of living which the pre-colonial past stands for. Firstly, the protest movement is already a modern form of protest, organized and articulated in discourses of social activism which cannot be fully separated from the history of Western modernity. Secondly, and more importantly, the ‘image’ of the pre-colonial itself is already one that takes into account the effect of modernity, that is recreated and conceived through its relation to the colonizing and universalizing force of Western modernity – both positively and negatively. In *The River of Stories*, the ‘effect’ of the ‘present’ can already be seen in the way the contemporary protest movement is seen to subtly reinterpret the legend of Malgu Gayan for its own purposes – to say nothing of the fact that the legend in the comic itself is a modern interpretation, a re-telling of the pre-colonial cosmological by a modern comic-creator in a modern medium such as comics. Yet, this does not mean that the Narmada valley protest is simply ‘within’ Western modernity – and this is made forcefully evident by the three-page spread in question. In bringing together the modern protest with the cosmological legend of the past, it ‘weaves’ the two together, it shows that this protest must be entangled with that which is outside the modern, that this ‘outside’ must also be simultaneously ‘inside’. In a way this movement must be a ‘hybrid’ – of the modern and cosmological, of the past and the present – it must simultaneously be a re-emergence of the pre-colonial and an attempt at enacting a modern reimagination of the future. It must have this ‘entangled’ status which is not simply ‘within’ the modern, and this applies not only to the movement but also to the comic-creator and the medium of comics.

Nor does it mean that its ‘entangled’ status is ‘partial’ in relation to the ‘complete’ universal of the Western modern – that is, we are not claiming that the movement only articulates a subjectivity which is ‘othered’ by the ‘universality’ of the modern. Rather, Western modernity must itself also be such a ‘hybrid’, a particular social formation which takes on the

status of the universal – and the suppression of other subjectivities, the logic of the colonial that accompanies it, is in no way an ontological guarantee of absolute universality. Each such ‘entangled’ form of subjectivity – no matter how fragile its existence in the world – must also be a ‘universal’, must also be simultaneous with the ‘whole’ with which it is entangled. In empirical terms, it must be possible to raise each such subjectivity to the power of the universal – since at an ontological level, they must already ‘be’ universal – without having to resort to a forceful act of ‘delinking’, which returns us to the colonial (modern) logic of opposition of discrete entities. Even an ‘entangled’ subjectivity, one which is entangled with the West – with the logic of the Western modern – poses its own articulation, forwards its own position while being entangled, which is nevertheless ‘universal’, which is simultaneous with and common to the ‘whole’. The deferral of any ‘present’ subjectivity must also imply an indeterminate presence that brings all its others ‘inside’. This ‘movement’ gestures towards a ‘presence’ – an impossible, indeterminate presence – that is not enacted through a full break, through a closing of borders, but rather through the necessary simultaneity of the deferred with the whole, of the particular with the universal.

In the next chapter, we will try to pursue this impossible presence – this impossible ‘presence’ of the other which cannot be reduced to a ‘delinking’, which would be to return it to the presence of the present. And to do this, we will once again turn to the three-page spread in *The River of Stories*, to the aporia that it represents: where the ‘entanglement’ of its elements, of the past and the present, universal and particular, happens not only through the movement and slippage of time, through the temporal passage of others, but also through a simultaneity, where the other is also brought together into the same. We will attempt to follow the implications of this problem of spatiality that appears in the comic – that is ‘expressed’ in the medium of comics – which is not without consequence for the thinking of the decolonial, and perhaps also for any thinking of decolonization in general.

Chapter Four: Spatiality, Decoloniality and Decolonization

In the third chapter, we looked at a three-page spread from the comic book, *The River of Stories*, where a call for decolonization appears through an aporia of time and space. The spread depicts two narratives – two sets of panels – one representing the contemporary protest movement against the Rewa Sagar Dam, and the other depicting the cosmological legend of the song of Malgu Gayan. By embedding these panels in the figure of a map, the spread presents itself as an image that is both spatial and temporal, dynamic *and* static. We attempted to read this spread through the notion of decolonial re-emergence found in the writing of Walter D. Mignolo, which indicates a sudden emergence of a much-distance, pre-colonial past in the present, ‘skipping over’, as it were, the effects of colonization and Western modernity. However, it became evident to us that such ‘re-emergence’ cannot fully exhaust the possibilities of an image where the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ are also made simultaneous, made to converge on the ‘same’ space. This seemed to indicate to us a fundamental contradiction in decolonial theory, where the attempt is to think, at once, the world as entangled, in a temporal flux, and yet *also* enact a full break, a pure ‘delinking’ from the universalizing presence of the colonizer.

The spatiality of the spread from *The River of Stories* prohibits any such pure break, it necessarily entangles the ‘past’ with the ‘present’ – yet we saw that this continuity or entanglement between the past the present, between the modern and the colonial, does not necessarily bring everything ‘inside’ the universality of the modern – that it is perhaps possible to think of an impossible ‘presence’ of the other without having to resort to the notion of a delinking, a full break which returns to the epistemic logic of the colonizer. In this chapter, we will attempt to follow this impossible possibility of the ‘presence’ of other – not only in terms of decolonial theory, but as a constitutive problem that any attempt at decolonization has to confront. And we contend that this ‘logic’ is intimately related to the problem of spatiality that we find in comics, which we find to be powerfully ‘expressed’ in the formal specificity of the medium of comics. But before we directly address this ‘logic’ of presence, its relation to the problem of spatiality and to decolonial theory and decolonization in general, let us once again

turn to the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* – to another article which discusses this spread.

The article, titled ‘Wondrous Capers: The Graphic Novel in India’, is written by Suhaan Mehta, where Mehta discusses the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* as an instance of the plural ‘interpretive options’ that graphic novels from India can offer, and observes that the spread has both a ‘dynamic’ and an ‘atemporal’ aspect, which ‘invites both synchronistic and serial readings’.⁸³ The context for Mehta’s discussion is the phenomenon of graphic novels in India, and the multiplicity of possibilities opened up by such texts, which, given their ‘countermainstream dimension’, Mehta strictly demarcates from the more populist ‘comic book’. Here Mehta appears to follow the theorization provided by Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics: Emerging Literature* – even though Hatfield himself articulates the distinction in terms of ‘comics’, that is, between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ comics – Mehta nevertheless seems to pick up on Hatfield’s description of how in the American context, the popularization of comic book shops in the 1980s allowed for readers and creators to buy and sell alternative comic books, and compares this with the emergence in India of companies such as Phantomville, which exclusively publish graphic novels, similar to certain American independent publishers and their comic books.⁸⁴ We will not dwell here on the distinction between the ‘graphic novel’ and the ‘comic book’, rather, what is relevant for us here is that both Hatfield and Mehta seem to refer to

⁸³ Suhaan Mehta, “Wondrous Capers: The Graphic Novel in India”, in *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (University of Texas Press, 2010), 173-7.

⁸⁴ Mehta’s essay is a text that exemplifies a turn in the field of Indian comic studies – if indeed one could refer to something like a field of ‘Indian comic studies’, given the relatively small body of literature – in that it attempts a socio-historical analysis of the comics it studies through a close reading of the formal representation of their narratives. A large majority of the literature on comics in India focuses on the Amar Chitra Katha series of books (see: Karline McLain, *India’s Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Deepa Sreenivas, *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha in India* (London, New York, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); etc.), and the emphasis has been on a sociological analysis, to show how the narratives presented in the Amar Chitra Katha series has contributed to the discourse of nation-building in India. A ‘turn’ is seemingly taking place in the study of comics in India where now the object of study is shifting to graphic novels and independent comics coming from India, and these comics are being studied as literary texts, with an eye towards the specificity of the medium which allows for an opening up of interpretative possibilities of any given narrative, typified by works such as the essay by Mehta (also see: Pramod K Nayar, *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, history and critique* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016)). One might perhaps take a further step here, and suggest that the representational specificities in comics allude to a possibility of transforming the very foundations of our understanding and practice, including the notions of being, time, becoming, space, history, process, etc., and that this in turn would produce significant effects in disciplines such as the social sciences and cultural studies. The current thesis attempts to be a step in this direction.

a certain kind of comic books – which Mehta calls ‘graphic novels’ and Hatfield calls ‘alternative comics’ – which open up a range of interpretive possibilities in the presentation of comics, and that this opening is intimately linked with the inherent nature of comics as a medium of representation.

Mehta follows Hatfield in delineating a number of these inherent ‘tensions’ that characterize the medium of comics, which make reading comics, according to Hatfield, a ‘radically fragmented and unstable experience’. Running through these tensions – of which there are four, between image and word, between single image and image series, between sequence and surface, and between the content and the material dimension of comics – is the question of what Hatfield calls *timing*, or the tension between ‘seriality’ and synchronism’ in a text, which is the tension that exists between the representation of a sequence by a series of panels, and the possibility of representing a sequence of events through a single panel. This tension between seriality and synchronicity, between representation as a series and as a single point is what comes to characterize for Mehta the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* – and he describes the spread as ‘an instance of the undivided polyptych that invites both synchronistic and serial readings’.

Yet, at the same time, Mehta seems to ‘solve’ this tension – this inherent tension between the serial and the synchronic, between the temporal and atemporal – by dividing the synchronistic and serial readings into separate elements in the spread. For Mehta, the ‘atemporal dimension’ is embodied in the legend of Malgu Gayan and the song of Rewa as a life bestowing force, while the ‘dynamic aspect’ is suggested by the movement of the river, the arrangement of panels, and the collective solidarity of the protestors. Hence, even though Mehta comments on the ‘close relationship’ of the synchronistic and the serial, the atemporal and the dynamic, in the spread, mentioning especially the arrangement of the text on the spread, which moves the reader’s attention from the bottom to the top of the page in a circular fashion, he still ‘divides’ the tension between two halves – between the legend of Malgu Gayan on the one hand and the contemporary protest on the other. Mehta sums up his analysis neatly by stating, ‘The close link between a timeless legend and ongoing conflict suggests that the Rewa andolan is a struggle for preserving a way of life.’⁸⁵ The seeming theoretical contradiction inherent in the medium of

⁸⁵ Suhaan Mehta, “Wondrous Capers”, 177.

comics finds a quick resolution in Mehta's hands – the contradiction is broken into two halves, the temporal and the atemporal, and divided between the elements found in the center-spread. The legend of Malgu Gayan is 'timeless' and hence atemporal, static and synchronistic, while the arrangement of panels and the 'ongoing' protests are dynamic, still going, moving in time, and there is a 'close link' between the two halves, which are placed side by side in the page to show a struggle for preserving the adivasi way of life.

But an attentive reading of the page in question can quickly make it apparent that the division of the halves is not so clear as Mehta suggests. The 'ongoing' struggle is shown in snapshots, each panel depicting a moment in the protest but with no clear sequence or reading order, showing different events within the protest, including a panel with the protestors accosting the police for being prepared to hurt their brothers and sisters despite being fellow children of Rewa, one with a protestor giving an interview to the media saying that the government would have to build the dam on their dead bodies, and so on – these 'snapshots' have no sequence or order, and appear to be moments placed beside each other, as part of the static design of the map. The panels depicting the 'timeless' legend of Malgu Gayan, on the other hand, show a clear sequence and reading order, as Malgu narrates the song of Rewa the river of stories, each sequence or panel appearing after another from left to right, allowing for a continuity and a temporal flow within the narrative. The tension between the temporal and the spatial is *inherent in every element* that appears in the spread, and every panel, image, or text can be read *both* as part of a sequence and as a static element on the page. Moreover, by the token of being brought together on the comic book page, the distinction between 'timeless' and 'ongoing' itself becomes difficult to maintain – it is not simply a matter of a 'close link' between the two, but as elements that appear on the page together, the 'timeless' and the 'ongoing' become simultaneous.

Certainly, the tension between temporality and spatiality is not only a *necessary* tension in the medium of comics, it is not only inherent in it, but also a *constitutive* tension, it 'produces' the medium of comics as much as it inheres in its every element. This structural tension in comics, as we saw in the earlier part of the thesis, appears as a spatial problem in comics – where a 'movement' or passage of time must also simultaneously take place on a spatial surface, the absolutely distinct dimensions of time must also be continuous. This means that any 'repetition' – the repetition of elements which must imply the minimum of two – must also somehow

impossibly take place *at once*, must appear ‘within’ a single dimension: and we called this phenomenon spatial repetition. And it is not only that the two sets of panels in the spread, which might represent the ‘timeless’ and the ‘ongoing’ – it is not only the simultaneity of the two sets of panels that represents an indeterminacy, a difficulty in distinguishing between the timeless and the ongoing, but rather that this distinction itself, between the *sense* of what it means to be ongoing and timeless, this sense itself is submitted to a certain indetermination. The ‘ongoing’, which necessarily implies a passage of time, the going-on which is a duration or a repetition, must also be ‘timeless’, it must imply an impossible spatiality and simultaneity – a continuity which is ‘timeless’ *despite* and alongwith the divisibility of the repetitive, the happening ‘ongoing’.

This tension – between the temporal and the spatial, or atemporal, which Hatfield calls the tension between the ‘serial’ and the ‘synchronistic’ – is posed forcefully in Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics*, and it appears to be constitutive of every other textual tension in comics; between the word and image, between the single image and image-in-series, between sequence and surface, and between the text as experience versus object. Hatfield attempts to enumerate these tensions to bring to the surface the literary potential of comics, as opposed to the general view – according to Hatfield – that comics are a ‘subliterary and juvenile diversion’ meant as a preparation for ‘real’ reading. What Hatfield tries to demonstrate is that comics can be a complex means of representation, which are always ‘heterogenous in form, involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes’.⁸⁶ From a reader’s perspective, writes Hatfield, comics appears radically unstable and fragmented, and this appears as comics’ ‘greatest strength’: that comics is composed of several kinds of tensions – which Hatfield interprets as ‘various ways of reading – various interpretative options and potentialities’, an interpretation which Mehta adopts almost in its entirety. For both Hatfield and Mehta – Mehta following Hatfield – comics as a medium of representation is marked by *tensions*, tensions which are inherent in the medium and make the medium necessarily heterogeneous in form, and these these tensions appear as a radically unstable experience for readers – opening up a multitude of interpretive reading options and codes.

⁸⁶ Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (University of Mississippi, 2005), 36.

To this end, Hatfield enumerates four kinds of tensions that are ‘fundamental to the art form’, and all for of these ‘tensions’ appear to be marked by the tension between the temporal and the spatial, in a certain way the co-implication of space and time appears to be constitutive of all of them. The first of these tensions – that between the image and the word – appears at first glance to be a distinction between receptions of two different kinds of codes, between the transparency of the image and complexity of the written text. Hatfield shows that McCloud makes this initial distinction between pictures as received information and words as codes whose meanings must be perceived, and yet, as Hatfield goes on to demonstrate, this opposition between pictures as easy, and solicitous, and words as coded, abstract, does not hold, since in comics words can appear as images or graphic elements, and pictures can be simplified, turning them into units of codes.⁸⁷ Still, this entanglement between the nature of image and word does not take away from the tension between the received and the perceived, or rather, between the *instantaneity* and the *temporality* of the experience of a code or representation. It makes itself felt forcefully when Hatfield discusses words and images in the section on what he calls *timing* – the tension between seriality and synchronicity – where he mentions the problem that McCloud encounters in his reading of the timing of words and images, that an image in comic can be *simultaneously* temporal and spatial, static and dynamic: a ‘frozen’ frame of a ‘received’ image can *at once* be temporal in being implied along with words, a set of codes which must be ‘perceived’ over time.⁸⁸

This tension in *timing* – that is, the tension between synchronicity and seriality, which is also the tension between the atemporal and the temporal, a tension which perhaps is not wholly exhausted by the signifier ‘timing’ – plays an explicitly significant role in the functioning of the second and third ‘tensions’ listed by Hatfield: that between the single image and image-as-series, and between the sequence and surface. In comics, the representation of time or a temporal sequence seems to occur through the appearance of a series of panels, which is usually called a *breakdown* – that is, the breaking down of an event into ‘snapshots’ of comic panels – yet, this series of discrete panels must also be experienced as a continuity, and this requires that the comic be perceived as a sutured whole – a process which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, McCloud

⁸⁷ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 36-7.

⁸⁸ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 52.

calls *closure*. Although Hatfield does not argue in this fashion, we may observe here that this tension between breakdown and closure, is not simply a tension between a single-image and image as series but between the spatial ('synchronic') and the temporal ('serial') – in the same way that a series of panels must be perceived as a whole through the act of closure, a single panel would also have to be perceived as a passage in time, especially if it contains words which require a duration of time; that is, in the same way that a series of panels would also function *as if* as a 'single panel', a single panel would also be able to function *as if* as a 'series', and this is not an incidental but a necessary and constitutive aporia in comics. And this is because successive images in comics must be laid out on a spatial surface, where each surface organizes the discrete units – such as panels – *at once* as a 'moment' in a sequence of events, and as a graphic, 'spatial element' on the body of a comic book page. Each 'moment' in time must also be an 'object' in space – and this is the basis of the 'fourth' tension discussed by Hatfield, between the text as experience versus the text as object – that is, the elements of time such as the past, present, and future, must also appear 'at the same time', as if they are objects in space. In comics, a 'movement' in time is also a 'coexistence' in space and vice versa.

The three-page spread in *The River of Stories* brings this aporia forcefully to the surface of the text – and here we must admit that not only is it impossible to fully separate the temporal and the atemporal in the spread into the 'timeless' legend and 'ongoing' struggle as Mehta does, but also that it is perhaps impossible to exhaust the aporia of space/time in the spread by conceptualizing the temporal as the 'dynamic movement' of the narrative in panels and the spatial as the 'static topography' of the map of Rewa. In a certain way we have been leaning on such a conceptualization – no doubt it helps bring the aporia to the surface. Yet let us observe here that in the same way that the passage of time in the series of panels in the spread is made 'static' by the graphic element of the map, by the panels also being arranged in a fashion that they appear as 'elements' of the map – that the temporal passage must be read also as a static space – the converse also holds, that the map of Rewa, in representing the 'static' space of a map, must also necessarily be experienced as a 'passage' of time – that the image cannot be experienced simply at once, but only through a certain 'work' of reading or perceiving, which necessarily implies a duration of time. And here we must distinguish between the given 'space' of the map, and what we have been calling 'spatiality'. The empirical space of the map is experienced as a passage of time, through a 'fragmentary', temporal experience without which it

cannot be experienced as a ‘whole’ – yet this temporal experience itself, this ‘passage’ must imply a continuity, a spatiality. And even though the notion of such spatiality must be derived from and refer to empirical space, the continuity of space which is the ‘image’ for this passage, this spatiality is conceptually distinct from given space and cannot be reduced to it.

And the aporia that suggests itself to us here is *inherent* to the medium of comics. It is not exhausted by a reader-response, by simply showing that the medium of comics brings to the reader a variety of ‘interpretive options’ as Hatfield and Mehta tend to imply. Rather, this aporia inheres in every element of comics in its representation, and must inform every ‘experience’ of comics, including that of creating and reading. Moreover, what this aporia suggests to us is a general ontological problem, that of the relationship of the temporal with the atemporal, the spatial. It moves us to a *general* horizon. The passage of time in its general structure is a movement from moment to moment, where a ‘present’ moment is destroyed by a new ‘present’, it is made to pass away incessantly – a single moment, a ‘present’, cannot coexist with another moment, another ‘present’. Yet the passage itself implies a continuity, for time to pass *through* two moments, they must be continuous and held together, appearing in a ‘now’ or ‘at the same time’, simultaneously. Distinct moments of time or ‘presents’ must be continuous, open, and this opening or continuity is a holding together, in a ‘now’ or simultaneously, as if in a single, spatial dimension: *such spatiality is the condition for the functioning of time.*

The distinction between the ‘timeless’ legend and ‘ongoing’ struggle that Mehta establishes in his reading of the spread from *The River of Stories*, is no longer tenable here. The implication in referring to Malgu Gayan’s legend as ‘timeless’ is that it endures over time, repeats itself and keeps itself relevant throughout the passage of time, yet this enduring of itself over time necessarily makes it ‘ongoing’, a maintaining of itself in the spatial. In bringing together the two narratives in the page of the comic, the text *already* produces the legend of Malgu Gayan in a spatial continuity, side-by-side and along with the Narmada valley protests, and this timelessness is not simply the persistence of a linear progression, but suggests a non-linear working of time: both in the opening up of the reading order in the page of the comic, and in gesturing towards a breaking away from the linear time of modern development, towards a ‘going-back’ or re-emergence. But neither senses exhaust the aporia in the page. The simultaneous occurrence, the spatialization of past-present-future and their impossible

‘continuity’ *makes possible* both the senses of timelessness and non-linear temporality – it constitutes the structure of both a persistence and endurance over time, and a radical break/relation in the progression of time – yet it itself appears only as this aporia, as a problem, the problem of spatiality – which we called in the earlier chapter by the name, *spatial repetition* – which does not lend itself to any immediate identity or solution. It calls us to remain with the problem, here at the level of a general problem, a problem of being, knowledge, difference, and everything that comes with it, it calls for us to think in an-other way. Here at a moment where space, time, and decolonization come together in the page of a comic book.

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Let us invoke, perhaps as a catachresis, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the problem of deferred effect in Freud, which at first glance may seem to bear a remarkable resemblance to Mignolo’s notion of decolonial re-emergence. The context for Derrida’s discussion here is the account of temporality found in the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, where Husserl shows that the structure of time is not composed of distinct nows or present moments, but rather that, within the structure of time, the present is always constituted and affected by a past moment and a future moment, thereby dividing it in its self-presence. Husserl refers to this movement as retention and protention: the present *retains* the past and *protends* towards the future, a movement and self-division that is the transcendental condition for the present to appear as present. Derrida contends that, for all its complication, such a phenomenological account of time remains homogeneous and fundamentally successive, linear – for Derrida, even if a *Now-B* is produced by an originary retention of a *Now-A* and protention of *Now-C*, for all the play that this mode of time would provoke, its direction of succession would remain linear, as *A-B-C*, and would prevent the appearance of, for instance, a *Now-X* which could come from a much distant past, and take the place of *Now-A*, hence marking the event of an impossible delay and affectation of the present, not by its immediate past, but by a past much ‘anterior’ to it, which is the case in the problem of Freud’s deferred effect.

This problem of deferred effect, where a much distant past *Now-X* comes and affects the present, replaces its immediate past, seems to refer to an operation of time which we find in Mignolo's decolonial re-emergence, where decoloniality breaks away and 'delinks' from its immediate past of modernity/coloniality, and enacts a resurgence. But for Derrida, what accounts for the problem of deferred effect, is not a complete break or 'delinking' but the idea of an 'absolute past' of difference. Any element that appears to be intelligible, that is 'present' to us or accessible, is intelligible by the token of being different from others, by being in a relation of difference with others – and this difference is always already with an element, as its 'absolute past', not a past that was once present, but the accompaniment of a difference that always affects the present as its 'past'. Such an 'absolute past' forces to reconsider the notion of 'past', since it is no longer a modified present, no longer a past-present, and along with it, transforms the metaphysical structure of time itself, the concept of present, past, future, and everything that is implied through it, all of time and history.⁸⁹

In a previous chapter we argued – and there our position was tentative – that perhaps such a notion of an 'absolute past' takes us to the sense of another present, that there is a need to conceptualize an *indeterminate indifference* of presence with its other, along with and against the 'absolute past' of trace. We will not be quick to reach such a conclusion here. Rather, we will try in this chapter to follow the complicity of such an 'absolute past' with continuity, that even a past that has not been present, that has never been present, must be imbricated with the present – that the 'trace' of the past must imply an 'opening', which cannot disregard a continuity between the past and the present. Our effort will be to juxtapose the theorization of 'deferred effect' with the notion of 're-emergence' in Mignolo, to show that the 'full break' of re-emergence must also necessarily imply and be entangled with, a radical continuity and spatiality.

We will remember – and let us recount here a narrative that we have gone over before – that Derrida elaborates on this by writing that any movement of signification is possible only if an element which appears on the scene of 'presence' – that is, for Derrida, any element that is intelligible or accessible to us as an autonomous, distinct entity – is not simply by itself or autonomous, but related to elements other than itself. Each such 'present' element is already

⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002), 65-67.

related to a past element, and a future element, through a relation of difference, through what it is not – it is *not* a past element or future element, and this gap or interval from the past and future constitutes it as what it *is*, the difference giving it its identity as itself. Yet this difference is originary in the scene of its identity, in the production and constitution of itself as itself, and hence its own identity – its seemingly autonomous identity – is vitiated and divided in itself, marked by the *traces* of past and future elements, always produced through the tracing of difference and otherness. The constitution of the ‘present’, of any intelligible and distinct element, is made possible by an irreducibly non-simple synthesis of marks, a synthesis of traces of other elements, of the past and the future. And Derrida calls this ‘movement’ of signification, this synthesis of traces, by the name *differance*: a simultaneous differing-deferring. Since signification is made possible by difference, an interval, distance, or gap between elements which produces the identity of the elements themselves, the signification of the elements in full is also deferred, it is put off for another time, never fully ‘present’ – any ‘desire’ or ‘will’ that attempts to accomplish or fulfill the signification of an element, is suspended through this detour of deferral. Each thing that participates in this scene of signification, each thing that has meaning, has to take recourse to this temporal and temporizing detour, its full sense deferred, perpetually.⁹⁰

The occurrence of a deferred effect, of a *Now-X* from a much distant past affecting the present *Now-B* after an inadmissible delay, is made possible because the movement of signification, and the structure of time, operates in a field of non-simple traces, in relations of difference. For the Derridean economy of traces to occur, a certain impossible relationship to the past must be maintained – the past is, at the same time, both an ‘absolute past’, something that is entirely the other of the present to the point where it cannot even be thought of as a modified present, and *as* entirely other, the other without which the present cannot be articulated or signified, the past is also that which is perpetually traced within the present, it affects the present and constitutes it as a non-simple synthesis of marks. Difference is that which produces the present as present, as a synthesis of traces and affectations of past and future elements, yet this difference itself is not a simple determination – it cannot be a simple absence which separates

⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), 7-13.

two ‘present’ elements – rather the economy of traces implies that difference itself is ‘produced’ by *differance*, a system of differing-deferring.

The problem of deferred effect occurs in this economy of *differance*, not as a determined, given possibility, but as one impossible possibility among others, *made possible* by the aporetic function of time in the economy of *differance*. The phenomenon of decolonial re-emergence, on the other hand, occurs through a radical break, a ‘delinking’ from the rhetoric of modernity, which obscures within it the logic of coloniality – re-emergence is made possible by breaking away from modernity/coloniality itself. For decolonial re-emergence to occur, the immediate past of Western modernity must be replaced by a much anterior past – and this structure bears remarkable similarity to that of the deferred effect – but for Mignolo, this replacing must mark an absolute break, a *determinate* act of delinking that fully breaks away from modernity, not as one possibility among others in a system of non-simple marks, but as a determined and total break that makes possible the working of decoloniality. The economy and work of decoloniality is made possible by this total break, by delinking. Yet such an act of delinking – in attempting to decolonize at the level of knowledge production, which is the goal of the decolonial – runs the risk of replacing one ‘present’ entity with another, and returning to the epistemological stakes of Western modern world-sense.

We will remember that for Mignolo, the rhetoric of modernity, that which decoloniality seeks to delink from, is a *field of representation* promising a project of progress and salvation, whose power of persuasion is founded on the Western ontological privileging of entities as autonomous objects, as if representations of things denote the full sense of an object already existing, thereby implying that objects of knowledge are exactly as the rhetoric of modernity describes them to be, autonomous in their identity, and monolithic in their defined sense. The task of decoloniality is to liberate knowledges at this level of ontologizing, and to show that objects are not monolithic, determinate entities but are rather *relational* and *fluid*, they work within a network of relations and becoming that undercut their status as transcendent entities. Decoloniality attempts to ‘delink’ from this privileging of entities as monolithic objects of sense, yet, perhaps in desiring such a clean break, it repeats the foundation of Western ontology, returning decolonization to the thought of entities. We may ask ourselves: what is a clean break? How does it pertain to entities?

We will notice immediately that the notion of a clean break or gap brings us back to transcendent entities. For an entity or element to be itself, it requires a break from other elements, to be different from others – to imagine this difference in the fullness of a break is to imagine the fullness of the entity, to envision the entity as a unity unto itself, dependent on no others, no relation. This hides the constitutive role of difference or gap in the appearance of the entity, in its appearance as a unity, and obscures the synthesis of non-simple traces that produces an element as self-present. A full break, an absolute difference, is no different from a full entity. In attempting to break away completely from Western modernity, one is returned and submitted to Western ontology, to the contours of Western imagination. The need to liberate knowledges and represent the world as relational and fluid, to open knowings and becomings to a horizon of im-possibilities, is in inherent tension with the enactment of a break, and it is within this tension, or alongside this tension, that we must think of decolonization. There is a need to break away from Western modernity, from its historical, political, and epistemological colonization, and yet this break bears the risk of re-enacting the stakes of Western modernity. This is precisely the risk that Mignolo seeks to avoid, when he writes that the simple act of seizing territory or state from Western colonizing powers does not complete the task of decolonization, a further step is required to decolonize knowledge – the decolonial task. Yet in attempting to fully ‘delink’, the decolonial appears to return to this very risk, of reiterating the stakes of Western epistemology and imagination.

Decolonial re-emergence, when tied to a full break – a ‘delinking’ from the new and the ‘post-’, from the post-colonial and the post-modern, which for Mignolo function within Western unipolar concept of time – itself enacts a certain unipolar time, a certain linearity in its progression. For all its fracturing from an immediate past, from the immediate past of modernity and coloniality, and in the re-emerging of a much distant past, which is not the immediate past of linear time, the act of ‘delinking’ itself refers to a predictability, a linearity – one knows that decoloniality breaks with Western modernity and reconstitutes knowledge through the resurgence of a past that has nothing to do with modernity, a reconstitution that is not new at all but simply a ‘going-back’ – the stakes are known to us, the break and re-emergence being full entities, carrying the exact meanings that are ascribed to them. The temporal progression begins from a decolonial past – here a full entity – and ‘jumps’ over the modern past, another full entity, to reach the present and engage in a reconstitution, and nothing new or ‘post-’ takes place. We

may read *The River of Stories* as such a narrative of re-emergence, where the legend of Malgu Gayan ‘jumps’ over time and affects the movement at Narmada valley, shaping the present in its image, just as Malgu Gayan drove away the rampaging beasts in the beginning of the world by playing his rangai and brought harmony to the valley, such that Narmada may flow unimpeded, so is the movement called to chase away the disaster of the dam construction project, quell the beasts of modernity and development.

No doubt this is a fair reading, and there is more than one instance in the comic which supports it, throughout the comic Malgu speaks directly to the reader, reenacting the legend and perhaps inciting the reader to participate in this event. But let us remember that the song of Malgu Gayan is a narrative of *linear progression*, it begins with a state of disharmony and reaches a world of harmony, the promise of its reenactment is a promise of salvation and progress. This is not to dismiss the value that the legend of Malgu Gayan holds for the Narmada valley protests, nor is it to repudiate the adivasi way of life and practices, including the ecological and sociological benefits of thinking about kinship relations and subsistence agriculture practices,⁹¹ but simply to indicate that, to think of re-emergence as a ‘full’ break, always carries with it the risk of returning itself to Western thought. The terms we use, such as ‘re-emergence’, or ‘break’, or ‘kinship’ – when used in their immediate, ‘present’ sense – always remain susceptible to the contours of Western ontology and knowledge production.

However, we will remember that the song of Malgu Gayan appears in the center-spread, not simply as a past that bears itself on the present, but *simultaneously* with the contemporary protests. The two temporalities, the two moments – the past and its future – is presented here as both a succession of panels and a co-existence of elements, the incessant movement of the past to the future is *also* simultaneous, the moments and elements of time appear *also* ‘at the same time’. Here it is not only Malgu Gayan’s legend that bears on the present, but also the present that constitutes the legend, the protest movement at Manigram appears as an event which invokes the river of stories, it disrupts the narrative of development associated with the Narmada Valley Project, and *this disruption opens up another horizon*. Re-emergence, the appearance of a much anterior *Now-X* in the present scene, here in the pages of *The River of Stories*, suggests not only a

⁹¹ Even though, as Amita Baviskar shows, the land on the Narmada valley has been so damaged over the years, that even subsistence agriculture practices of the Bhilalas are no longer enough to halt the process of degradation. See: Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, 168-169.

break with the immediate past, but the constitutive and ‘originary’ relationship of the temporal with the atemporal, a necessary synthesis of non-simple traces at the ‘origin’ of any thought, sign, or appearance of any element, which *makes possible* the impossible act of breaking with the immediate past, breaking with a simple, linear model of time. Re-emergence or return here is not the paradigmatic movement given in the image, rather it appears as one possibility among others, as one non-linear articulation made possible by a multiplicitous network opened up in the center-spread.

Here it is no longer tenable to dissociate the ‘re-’ from a ‘post-’ or the new: the prefix ‘re-’ itself is as much a ‘moving-forward’ as it is a ‘going-back’, a ‘doing-again’ or repetition that is necessarily futural – the title of the spread, ‘Rewa: a map of stories told and as yet untold’, refers to this futurity, towards a horizon where stories remain to be told – re-emergence refers already to an-other temporality, it traces *within itself* other ways of being. Decolonization always refers to this an-other temporality, which not only listens to the murmurings of the ‘past’ in the ‘present’, both as a possibility of re-emergence and as a contemporaneity of the intractable, non-modern other in the self of the universal modern, but also gestures towards a ‘future’ in the necessity of a creative act. No past can be listened to without the futural: in fact, even within its own terms, the act of ‘re-emergence’ in decolonial theory derives its value from being posed as a radical, creative act – it attempts to show new ways of dealing with the Western modern. Of course, such a reading of a double movement within the act of re-emergence goes against the explicit intentions of Mignolo, but let us observe that ‘re-emergence’ necessarily supposes such an other-temporality. It makes us think of decolonization, not as an attempted ‘total’ break from modern colonial past or a linear model of time – which returns us to the same Western universals – but as a scene of non-simple traces, relations of difference which produces decolonization *as* decolonization.

Any attempt at decolonization, whether it be historical, epistemological, or literary, is an attempt to break away from Western modernity and the effects of colonization, to produce a different time and space, yet this very difference constitutes it as an act of decolonization, the identity of decolonization *as* decolonization is produced by its difference from colonization and the West, thus marking in it the trace of its other, the universal and universalizing force of

Western modernity.⁹² But modernity itself is produced by the history of colonization and the epistemological exclusion of the colonial – modernity/coloniality, or colonial difference – the ‘origin’ of the West lies in this colonial difference, in the production of universal ‘progress’ through the destitution of the colonial, and the production of universal ‘man’ through the exclusion of the colonized and marginalized. We do not have the space to discuss here all the consequences of colonial difference for Western modernity, but let us note that the universalizing force of modernity is caught in this difference, with its outside and with others, gesturing towards other universals – modernity is always in this multiplicity, this scene of entanglement, where the ‘full’ sense of modernity, the fulfillment of its universal project, is always deferred, always submitted to a temporalizing detour. And perhaps such a scene of modernity and decolonization, refers not only to a deferral or temporalization but also a *simultaneity*, where deferral defers itself – deferral, which requires a passage of time as successivity, where a ‘sense’ is deferred by passing through moments, is also caught in simultaneity and spatiality, where two moments are ‘at the same time’ even as it passes, deferring perhaps the sense of deferral itself.

In this chapter we have attempted to remain with this difficulty. We have noted that the two narratives that appear in the center-spread of *The River of Stories* appear not only as a series of panels, temporally, but also as static elements in a map, spatially, and the ‘simultaneous’ appearance of the temporal and the spatial – of different moments of time or ‘nows’ together in the spatial – is an irreducible aporia that marks every element, every sign on the page. The

⁹² This is the ‘post-colonial’ position that Mignolo tries to do away with, forwarded in the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others. Spivak, for example, in the essay titled *The Rani of Sirmur*, argues that any resistance mounted against Europe, which attempts to provide an ‘alternative’, must take into consideration the ‘worlding’ of the ‘Third World’ that Europe has already instituted. The sovereign subjectivity of the West exerts a universalizing force which any ‘other’ subjectivity has to necessarily work through. For Mignolo, this position emerges from *within* modernity, and must be seen as an *internal* critique and resistance against the West. Against this, Mignolo calls for ‘delinking’, the need to break away from modernity. As we have seen, this act of ‘delinking’ risks returning to the mode of the colonizer – to the worldview of discrete entities and a singular universal. We hold in this thesis that the necessity of having to go through the universalizing effect of the West – the ‘post-colonial’ position – is a necessity in any decolonizational endeavor, which has to confront and resist the universalizing force of the colonizer. And that this ‘entanglement’ of the colonized and the colonizer, does not mean that all subjectivities are ‘inside’ the subjectivity of the colonizer, but rather that the universalizing subjectivity of the colonizer itself must be produced through such entanglements. ‘Europe’, or the Western modern is itself a product of such entanglement, a particular form ‘raised’ to the power of the universal – and this means conversely that, any particular form of subjectivity, any ‘other’ subjectivity is also implicated in this entanglement, and has the ‘power’ to be raised to a universal. Entanglement with the West does not necessarily imply a co-option. We will turn towards this issue, address this issue, in the next section of this chapter. (See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory*, 24:3 (October 1985): 247)

legend of Malgu Gayan, a much distant, imagined past, appears alongside the contemporary protest movement against dam construction in the Narmada valley, and calls for a re-enactment, it impresses upon us to imagine this scene of decolonization as a re-emergence of a much anterior past, and an act of breaking with Western modernity and ontology. But this very act of re-emergence itself points us towards an impossibility, it is made possible by the impossible coincidence of identity and difference, by the ‘fact’ that any ‘present’ element is originally constituted by its difference from other elements, from past and future elements – yet this very constitution of a present element through the trace of the other, which perpetually defers any attempt to provide it with fullness, is necessarily an opening that also implies a simultaneity, a co-occurrence of the ‘present’ and its ‘other’, where it is no longer possible to determine the other from the present: it also implies, along with deferral, an impossible presence – an impossible deferral of deferral itself. We saw that this impossibility – the ‘logic’ of spatial continuity that overdetermines the temporal – is ‘expressed’ in the very structure of the medium of comics, and that it is brought forward powerfully in the spread from *The River of Stories*, and we contend that this problem of spatiality is not without consequence for the conceptualization of decolonization.

We have not attempted to ‘solve’ this problem, to give to decolonization a distinct temporal direction, such as, perhaps, re-emergence, or enact an absolute break with modernity – which would be to return, in a certain way, to modern ontology – but we have tried to sketch the shape of its difficulty, to return to it its power to provoke. Let us note that to engage with this difficulty is to already engage in an act of decolonization. And this ‘act’ of decolonization is *both* theoretical *and* practical – it enacts a transformation in the understanding of ‘present’ entities, ‘spoils’ it by entangling it with difference – and this difference is enacted through a spatio-temporal ‘movement’, a history and politics, which is attentive to the traces of intractable others in the presence of the same. Decolonization cannot be thought without this entanglement of the ontologico-epistemological with the historical and the ethico-political: ontological being itself – and its epistemological stakes – is bound up in the ‘movement’ of history, in spatial and temporal differences, and this implies the inclusion of others, the ethico-political, which in turn is the ‘origin’ of the ontological opening, the ‘source’ of the impulse to take into account the exclusion of others in the production of the self and the universal, to include this other, attempt to imagine an impossible ‘presence’ of others. This entanglement of entities – including what we understand as the ontological, the political, the historical, and so on – is already given in decolonization –

each ‘fragment’ is already implied in, and continuous with the ‘whole’. It breaks away from Western epistemology and the privileging of ‘present’ entities, yet in breaking from the notion of fullness of sense, it enacts a ‘break’ from a full break itself – it necessarily remains in an impossible continuity, as an inside/outside. Decolonization is always given with this difficulty, it moves us to this difficulty.

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In the same essay that we have discussed before, Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar, emphasizing on the decolonial stand that *The River of Stories* takes up, formulates ‘four mighty pillars’ that the text relies on to initiate its decolonial ‘movement’. For Ghosh Dastidar, the text of the comics itself takes up a stand in resistance to the modernity/coloniality network, and it accomplishes this through certain ‘visual aids’, and by showing how certain plot points and characters ‘break the colonial/capitalist fabrication’.⁹³ The first ‘pillar’, according to Ghosh Dastidar, is the mythical narrative of Malgu Gayan, and the way Malgu’s story stands as a ‘bold statement of decolonial pride’ in the face of the oppression of the modernity/coloniality framework. The second and third ‘pillars’ are constituted by memory and silenced stories respectively, and Ghosh Dastidar shows how memory links past and present, space and time – that the colonial project uproots memories such that the authentic past of the indigenous people is lost to them forever. Yet silenced stories abound, and people develop alternative narratives opposed to the rhetoric of modernity, stories which show ‘ecological awareness, sustainability, and humanitarian sentiments’.⁹⁴ These three ‘pillars’, in a certain way, culminate in the fourth and final ‘pillar’, which is the topographical map of Rewa depicted in the text, the three-page spread which we have been discussing so far. Ghosh Dastidar argues that the spread stands as an exemplary act of decoloniality, where the narrative plot and the mythic plot coincide, creating sites of ‘pluriversality’ through ‘border thinking’ – both terms, pluriversality and border thinking, being intimately related to the

⁹³ Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression: A Decolonial Reading of Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*,” in *History and Myth: Postcolonial Dimensions*, eds. Arti Nirmal and Sayan Dey (Vernon Press, 2021), 10-11.

⁹⁴ Ghosh Dastidar, Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression,” 11-13.

decolonial theoretical apparatus. Hence there seemingly remains no doubt that the map of Rewa represents ‘a fine example of a successful and straightforward attempt at decolonial thought and representation’.⁹⁵

Before we can comment on whether the map of Rewa in question really does stand definitively as an example of decolonial thought – and by now our position in this thesis is clear, that even though decoloniality may work as a powerful tool in interpreting this three-page spread, it does not exhaust the possibilities of this image, that rather the aporetic (non-)passage opened by this moment in *The River of Stories* makes the thought of decolonial delinking and re-emergence possible – before we reiterate this point, and perhaps we may avoid going into it here altogether, let us first look at the two terms of decoloniality introduced here, that is, ‘pluriversality’ and ‘border thinking’, and try to see how they affect the stakes of decolonial theory as we have constructed it for ourselves so far. Following the work of Anibal Quijano, Mignolo contends that the critique of the framework modernity/coloniality has to take into account its complicity with the exclusionary notion of Western Totality – a Totality that negates and occludes the possibility of other competing totalities. And in addressing the notion of Totality, decolonial thought has to grapple with two directions of its own working – the *analytic* and the *programmatic*. The analytic has to open up and reconstitute silenced histories, subaltern subjectivities, and knowledges, which are suppressed by the Totality of Western thought under the rhetoric of modernity, and open up a ground of *pluriversality*, where multiple notions of totality and universality may coexist.

Mignolo acknowledges that post-modern and post-colonial thought provides a critique of such Totality, but for Mignolo, the postcolonial critique simply comes from *within* Western modernity. The de-colonial separates itself in its critique of Totality through the *programmatic*, where it takes recourse to an act of delinking, where the analytic of the decolonial moves away from the postcolonial.⁹⁶ The ‘grammar of decoloniality’ emerges where languages and subjectivities have been denied the possibility of participating in the production and distribution of universal knowledge, and for decoloniality to be operative at the level of the universal – at the level of pluriversality – there is a need to create *alternatives to modernity*, what Mignolo calls

⁹⁵ Ghosh Dastidar, Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression,” 15.

⁹⁶ Walter Mignolo, “DELINKING,” *Cultural Studies*, 21:2 (2007): 451-2.

‘an-other paradigm’. The first step in such a creation would require a delinking from modernity/coloniality, that is, to delink the rhetoric of modernity from the logic of coloniality. This, for Mignolo, would open the door for all forms of knowledge that have been ‘colonized, silenced, repressed, denigrated by the totalitarian march of the genocidal dimension of modernity’. Such an opening would be made possible by the ‘connector’ or node between diverse experiences of locals who were subjected to the colonizing power of the West, that is by their shared experience of the logic of coloniality, which is simultaneously an *exteriority* to the rhetoric of modernity and a shared experience of *border thinking* between a range of suppressed epistemic subjectivities.⁹⁷ Even as the Western imperial expansion has universalized each region, their local histories have nevertheless responded in unique ways, creating diverse languages, memory, political theory and economies – and these diverse epistemic formations, which share the experience of coloniality, can form the basis of a pluriversal ground constituted by this shared border thinking, which are nevertheless distinct from the monolithic Totality of Western modernity, and can gesture towards an-other paradigm, an-other subjectivity.

Two tendencies seem to emerge here within decolonial theory – as a parallel, it seems, to the tension between ‘modernity/coloniality’ and ‘decoloniality’ which we have discussed in the preceding sections of this thesis – on the one hand, there is a need or a call for ‘border thinking’ which connects colonial epistemic subjectivities, those who have been indelibly marked by the project of modernity and its corollary of coloniality, and on the other hand, there is a call to delink, a call for a re-emergence which would enact a non-linear reconstitution of a pre-colonial past, ‘skipping over’, as it were, the effects of Western modernity and Totality. How should we think of pluriversality in this context? How should we reconcile *border thinking*, which acts as a connector between colonized and suppressed knowledges which have been marked by the project of modernity, with *re-emergence* and the need to delink, to skip over the linear mark of the ‘post-’ and arrive at pre-colonial knowledges? Should pluriversality refer to a ground of epistemic formations connected by the experience of modernity/coloniality, or should it refer to delinked, discrete, decolonial knowledges marked by a ‘clean’ break from modernity? And perhaps, underlying all this, is the question of ‘an-other paradigm’, of an-other subjectivity. To imagine a discrete other here, to conceptualize ‘an-other paradigm’ to Western Totality, would

⁹⁷ Mignolo, “DELINKING,” 492-8.

be to return to the world of discrete entities, to the image of a universal, singular Being – by having multiple ‘entities’, one imagines these ‘many’ entities (knowledges) in the image of the One, in the image of Western rationality. But to imagine these knowledges as entangled, as connected through a common experience of totality, as the indigenous being constituted through this experience with the West, would perhaps be to entangle them again with Western modernity, to lose some charge of the political opposition given in decolonial thought – the opposition between Western Totality and ‘an-other paradigm’.

Anirban Das raises this problem in a talk titled ‘Twoness and Difference: In Search of a Logic for the Decolonial’: there, Das characterizes the decolonial through a certain logical move, or rather, he characterizes the ‘logic’ of the decolonial through a certain question – that is, *how is politics possible in a dissipated field?* If, let us say, the Western project of modernity has had such a pervasive and universalizing effect that it is impossible for a decolonizing politics to access any ‘pure’ indigeneity, that is, if any decolonial political act has to necessarily access the indigenous as already-affected by modernity (by modernity/coloniality), then how should we articulate the opposition between the colonial and the decolonial? Das proposes two general ways of imagining this opposition – through the image of the Two, or through the image of the Many – and goes on to demonstrate the difficulty in articulating the decolonial in either mode. If one tries to oppose the One (Western Totality) through the Many (many knowledges), the field always runs the risk of being appropriated by the logic of the One. The Many, in this case, may simply become Many Ones, where each element of the Many function as discrete Ones, and here, the Many and the One would function at different level of abstractions – the One would take on the role of the universal, governing the Many which would each become more concrete forms of the universal One. A similar problem emerges with the Two, that the image of the Two may turn into an opposition between two Ones. Both alternatives, then – the Two and the Many – suffer from the same problem, the universal and universalizing effect of the One.⁹⁸

Thinking of pluriversality within this context, we may contend that Western Totality (One) cannot simply be opposed by the Many or the Two. The ground of pluriversality cannot be conceived as a simple field of many knowledges, neither can ‘an-other paradigm’ be posed as a

⁹⁸ Anirban Das, “Twoness and Difference: In Search of a Logic for the Decolonial,” at the lecture series “After the Colonial: Critical Responses,” The Center for Comparative Social Theory, West Bengal State University, 9 August 2024.

direct opposed alternative to the paradigm of Western universality – opposition at this level always runs the risk of being appropriated by the universalizing power of Totality or the One. At this level, Das nevertheless attempts to forward a certain model of the Two, following the work of Luce Irigaray – Das argues that perhaps we can think of the Many in terms of the Two, which would be to conceptualize each One as a Two within the Many; not Many Ones but rather Many Twos. To think of the Two at this level of abstraction – and Das does not explicitly articulate his argument in these lines, in fact he does not refer to the pluriversal at all in his talk, but we may anticipate his logic here, or at least take off from it – to think of the Two at this level of abstraction would be to conceptualize the Two as necessary to the constitution of the One. Each One would only be One by the token of its difference to others, and this would imply a necessary relationship of the One with the Other, a certain Two (or Many) that is already functional ‘within’ the One. The ‘universal’, in this respect, is already entangled with the ‘concrete’ – the One at the highest level of abstraction is necessarily related with the Two or the Many which exist in ‘lower’ levels of abstraction – Western Totality, within the network of the pluriversal we are trying to imagine here (let us call it, for lack of a better term, decolonizational pluriversality), is necessarily one position among others, since any universal must necessarily already be posed as a particular moment among others, not as a ‘One’ but as a ‘Two’. Universality, in this field of decolonizational pluriversality, cannot be fully separated from the concrete or the particular, but this does not reduce it to the concrete or the particular. Each universal must be thought of as universal *qua* difference, *qua* concrete differences, and only then can we think of the pluriversal as a ground of competing universals. Pluriversality must be thought within this impossibility.

Perhaps we are coming very close here, with decolonizational pluriversality, to the notions of hegemony and democracy in a certain strand of thinking which has occasionally been referred to as ‘post-Marxist’, especially in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Laclau speaks of hegemony almost in the precise terms that we have been using to articulate the ideas of universality and totality thus far – for Laclau, ‘hegemony means the representation, by a particular social sector, of an impossible totality with which it is incommensurable’,⁹⁹ and this incommensurability, between the universalizing function of hegemony and its status as a particular social formation, is not the limit of hegemony but rather the condition of its possibility.

⁹⁹ Ernesto Laclau, “The Politics of Rhetoric,” at the conference “Culture and Materiality,” University of California, Davis, 23-25 April 1998.

The specificity of the ‘democratic invention’ lies in allowing this hegemonic logic of power to operate freely, that is, what is generally considered an obstacle to the function of power, is in democracy the condition of the functioning of power. The gap between the place of power and the particular social sector that exerts it – is acknowledged within the structure itself, and democratic society is nothing but the various configurations of democratic society that emerges in its history. Democracy and hegemony, in this conception, are not singular, universalizing identities which are fully adequate to themselves, but must be understood *qua* differences.¹⁰⁰ Since the ‘fullness’ of society is unachievable – that is, since universality is impossible to arrive at fully – attempts to reach it will inevitably meet with failure, but this failure itself opens up the horizon, the possibility to keep addressing a variety of partial problems in a contingent manner.

Hegemony, then – and we may think of Western Totality as *the* hegemonic form that we are attempting to address here, within the concepts of decolonial or decolonizational pluriversality – is not an all-encompassing universal totality but rather a contingent social formation that takes on the image of a totality. This much is well understood within decolonial theory. But what this conception also allows, which is perhaps not addressed entirely in decolonial thought, is that ‘an-other paradigm’ may nevertheless be thought despite the impossibility of a full break, a full delinking from Western modernity. Since Totality itself must be conceived in its relationship with others, within its difference with others, not in the image of a monolithic One but in the One that is Two or Many Twos, the possibility of posing ‘an-other paradigm’ does not necessarily call for a full break from it – the possibility of other paradigms is already given in the possibility of Totality itself. One does not need to access a ‘purely’ indigenous in order to arrive at another paradigm, but rather otherness is always given in the field, in contention with and through the form of universals. A decolonizing act is already in the horizon of the colonial, it addresses and opposes the effects of colonization – and epistemic

¹⁰⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!,” in *Contingency Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (Verso, 2000), 92-95. Our reading of Laclau is mostly predicated upon the reading provided by Žižek in this essay. It must be pointed out here that Žižek’s reading here is not simply a commentary, but rather a certain questioning of Laclau’s notion of universality within his concept of hegemony. This debate hinges on the difference in interpretation, between Laclau and Žižek, of the Lacanian notion of the Real. We will not go into this debate here. But we will attempt, in this section of the thesis, to approach the possibility of arriving at the universal, not through a contingent ontologizing of the Real as Žižek does, but rather by following Gayatri Spivak’s notion of ‘invagination’, and by relating this notion to our conceptualization of spatiality in comics.

decolonization must, at all times, be sensitive towards the effect of the One, of the epistemic stakes of the colonizing One. In posing an opposing paradigm, in posing an alternative episteme, it must stay attentive to its own entanglement with others, including its entanglement with the One – otherwise it risks being reduced to it.

Yet, in conceptualizing decolonizational pluriversality in this way, do we lose the charge of opposition that is contained in the decolonial ‘an-other paradigm’? If we remember, Das had insisted on precisely this: that even among the entanglement of modernity/coloniality, in the field where each indigenous formation is indelibly entangled with its Western other, with the universalizing mark of the Western modern, there is still a need to pose the opposition of an alternative subjectivity – this is what the ‘logic’ of decoloniality moves us towards. Perhaps we can think of the Two, in the field of Many Twos, as containing not only a relationship of difference with the other, opening it up to the other, but also as the One containing Two in a distinct, discrete opposition. But this would once again bring us to the problem of the One, where each One would simply be turned into a dyad of two Ones – even if each element is broken up into myriad pieces, the field would still remain susceptible to being appropriated by the logic of the One. Rather, what we need to retain, insist on, is the ‘force’ of this opposition within the conceptual ‘movement’ of the decolonizing pluriversal – to show that, even the universal in such a pluriversal is necessarily inadequate to itself (since it is simultaneously a particular formation), that it must also, by the same token, be impossibly adequate to itself (the particular, nevertheless, takes on this impossible universal status).

We have already sketched a preliminary picture of how this may be possible. And we may take recourse to a network of concepts, which may not appear immediately relevant for our purposes, but which may nevertheless help us develop our point further: we refer here to the notions of *dvaita* and ‘invagination’ as it appears in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In the essay ‘Moving Devi – 1997: The Non-Resident and the Expatriate’, Spivak writes of the feeling of *dvaita* as the way in which ‘polytheist imagination negotiates with the unanticipatable yet perennial possibility of the metamorphosis of the transcendental as supernatural in the natural’.¹⁰¹ For Spivak, in polytheism each god or goddess is the god or goddess of *everything* when they are cathected in devotion or worship, and the same holds true for any moment in the

¹⁰¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Blackwell, 2008), 177.

natural – and Spivak used the word *dvaita*, or two-ness, to gesture towards this impossible possibility. This ‘two-mindedness’ is a radical alterity that is in an ‘impossible invagination in every instance of the other’. That is, any (natural) element in such an economy is already infected, contaminated by the presence of the other – here we are thinking of the two, once again, as a twoness of the one that is opened to the other – this contamination, this *invagination*, creates a internal pocket within the natural that is ‘larger than the whole’, that always contains ‘within’ itself the impossible possibility of metamorphosing into the supernatural.¹⁰²

We may think of each particular moment in the pluriversal – each particular formation which may be competing as one of the many ‘universals’ – as being similarly invaginated by the whole, as being, in a certain sense, ‘larger than the whole’. If the decolonizing pluriversal can be a pluriversal – that is, a collection of competing universals – only by the dint of the inadequacy of an universal to itself, of the impossibility of the fullness of totality, which is always the representation of some particular social element or subjectivity, and if the pluriversal must be understood within this tension of the one and its other, then each element within this field, each so-called particular element, must necessarily be open to and entangled with others, which includes the otherness of Totality or the whole. We can imagine this tension at least at two levels, and they refer perhaps, in the last instance, to the ‘same’ level: first, that each particular element in this field would have to be in a relationship of difference with other particulars, and hence be open towards, and spoiled by the otherness of these other elements, in a certain way it must refer to the ‘whole’ of the field at every given point; and second, that each ‘universal’ must elaborate itself in a series of particulars, not as so many incomplete representations but that the One must be given *qua* differences, that each particular must represent the universal at every given point, must refer to the ‘whole’ of the ‘series’ of elaborations of the One.

We must be careful here regarding the status of the ‘whole’. The wholeness of the whole here is not akin to the Totality of a discrete, bound set, but rather an ‘effect’ of an impossible adequation – we must not equate it with the logic of discrete entities. Also, we should perhaps insist here that the ‘effect’ of invagination or *dvaita* in the field of pluriversality does not only refer to the unanticipatable and perennial possibility of an impossible metamorphosis – that is, its effect is not only temporal, futural, but also spatial, and *simultaneous*: the ‘pocket’ of alterity that

¹⁰² Spivak, *Other Asias*, 178.

is created in the ‘movement’ of invagination must refer to the impossible simultaneity of the other and the whole. We had referred to this phenomena in the earlier section of our thesis as *transadequation*, and our theorization there had been tentative, and it must be so here as well. If the universal must be represented via an elaboration of different particular moments, then each of those moments must also be the universal in some impossible sense – despite being at each instance ‘less’ than the ‘whole’, we must insist that nevertheless the whole is implicated at every instance of the series. Firstly, the series *itself* must stand for the whole, for the identity of the universal, and secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, each element in the series must also stand, in a certain impossible way, for the whole of the series and the universal, not only because the universal cannot be thought of *as* the universal without its representation in a particular, but also because the series itself, the stringing of any series must also refer at each instance to a particular moment – there must be a multitude of ‘particular’ ways of stringing the same series.

To return to the problem of pluriversality, we may say, that we perhaps don’t have to split the decolonial tension between the ‘connector’ of border thinking marked by modernity/coloniality, and the call for delinking characterized by a need for a radical break. That we can imagine a decolonizational pluriversality where ‘an-other paradigm’ can be conceived in a field of entanglement, ‘within’ and alongside the effects of modernity/coloniality – that opposition and alterity does not have to necessarily fall back to the logic of the One, to that of discreteness and a full break. This is the horizon that the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* takes us to – and we must conceive of pluriversality in this horizon, not simply as a re-emergence or ‘break’ from the Western modern which would itself pose another One, but within a field of epistemic oppositions and alterity which the Western modern itself cannot escape. To be entangled with the Western modern here is not only to be ‘within’ the modern but also simultaneously ‘outside’ it – the entanglement of the colonized with the colonizing force of modernity does not reduce its force as ‘an-other paradigm’ – yet also, in being ‘continuous’ or transadequate to the whole, each subjectivity can also be raised to a ‘universal’, indeed, it must in a certain sense already ‘be’ universal and common to all. And here perhaps we can think of a certain ‘presence’ of the other, not as the presence of a discrete break or delinking, but through the continuity – the spatial simultaneity – of every ‘other’ in each subjectivity, an indeterminate presence that must mark every subjectivity.

We have found that this ‘logic’ of spatiality is powerfully expressed by the medium of comics, that it marks the formal specificity of comics. In the earlier part of this thesis, we derived this ‘problem’ of spatiality from our reading of a certain scholarship in the field of comics studies, and we gave this problem the name of spatial repetition, or spatial juxtaposition. In comics, we found, elements are juxtaposed spatially, such that any ‘movement’ of time – which must imply the multiple moments, the passage from the ‘dimensions’ of past to the present – must take place in the ‘single’ dimension of the spatial, that the multiplicity of time must suffer a simultaneity. This means, firstly, that any element in comics must appear only through a relation of juxtaposition with other elements, that this relationship of difference between elements is constitutive of any elements in a comic, which ‘opens’ each element to the trace of its other – any ‘present’ element in a comic must be related to its ‘past’ and ‘future’ element, its fullness or presence must be deferred, spoiled by the trace of its other. Yet, at same time, this ‘opening’ is also a simultaneity, a bringing together of the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ in the ‘present’ – this not only means that any movement in time, any deferral or temporal slippage must also suffer a simultaneity, but also that, each deferred ‘present’ must also be continuous with all its others, that the ‘trace’ of its others must also be brought ‘inside’ – an indeterminate ‘presence’ must accompany deferral, not only as a deferred presence, but also as the presence of the present. Perhaps we can think here, of the ‘presence’ of the other, not simply as the necessary othering or hollowing of presence, but as a necessary ‘presencing’ of the other that must accompany this process.

We find this to be at work in the three-page spread from *The River of Stories*. The embedding of the sets of panels – the cosmological ‘past’ and the ongoing ‘present’ – in the design of the map holds the two ‘temporalities’, ‘catches’ them in a spatial surface, confers upon them a simultaneity and continuity. On the one hand, this is an entanglement of two, a relationship of difference between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ where each is implied in the other in such a way that any attempt at interpreting this entanglement must encounter its own deferral, that any attempt to provide a ‘universal’ interpretation must also have to account for an other in itself, that it also must be a ‘particular’ or fragmentary manner of interpreting the spread. Yet this ‘past’ and ‘present’ is also continuous – given in a spatiality where the ‘opening’ of the trace also implies a ‘single’ dimension – such that any such ‘particular’ formation must also refer to the ‘whole’, not only as an invagination of the other but also as the transadequation of the deferred

present to its presence. The ‘trace’ of the other has to be conceived *with* an impossible ‘return’ to presence.

Any attempt at providing an interpretation of the relationship between the two sets of panels immediately makes this apparent. If we take, for instance, the matter of ‘re-emergence’, we will see that the reemergence of a much-distance past in the present must not only suppose a break – a break with the immediate past – but also a continuity between the past and the present, which ‘spoils’ the ontological purity of this putative break or delinking. It also requires, not only a ‘going-back’ to the past, but also a ‘moving-forward’ towards the present, a futural movement which is indissociable from its possibility – without which the past cannot ‘appear’ in the present. So, at the same time that this attempt at providing a ‘universal’ interpretation of the spread falls short, that it must be a ‘particular’ interpretation that is entangled in a relationship of difference with ‘others’, we must also insist that this ‘particular’ interpretation must also refer to the ‘whole’, it must also imply these ‘other’ movements – as if the possibility of its other (of all its indeterminate others) is also given ‘within’ the form of reemergence. And this is true even if we try to refer to the ‘whole’ of the spread – to the ‘entirety’ of the aporia which we see as a tension between temporality and spatiality. To speak of the spread in this way – as representing the aporia of the spatial and the temporal – also says nothing, this articulation is ‘divided’ between two ‘particulars’, it attempts to refer to the ‘whole’ but can only ‘speak’ through these particulars and cannot bring them together conceptually. It itself is a particular way of referring to this aporia. Yet each of the ‘particulars’ that this articulation poses – that is, the temporal and the spatial – must also in their own ‘being’ refer to the ‘whole’, in the sense that when we speak of the temporal, we must also suppose the effect of the spatial and vice versa.

The subjectivity which emerges in the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* – and here perhaps we must speak of subjectivities, of a pluriversal field of subjects – are at once ‘entangled’, dissipated perhaps in a ‘hybridity’ and implication with others, and yet also ‘universal’, at each point they contain the power to be raised to a universal. The entanglement of the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ in the spread is not separable from the entanglement of the pre-colonial with the modern, with the colonizer and the colonized. The two narratives of the spread show this: the cosmological tale of Malgu Gayan appears, also as reinterpreted to suit the needs of the modern protest, and the contemporary protest also takes on a certain modern form, it refers

to a present which cannot simply ‘go back’ to the pre-colonial past. But this does not mean that they are ‘inside’ the logic of the Western modern – indeed, neither the legend of Malgu Gayan nor the Narmada valley protest movement can be thought of as simply an ‘instance’ of the rhetoric of modernity. In a certain way, they remain ‘outside’, even as they are entangled with the modern, and not only as ‘alternatives’ or as only the ‘other’ of the Western universal – rather, the Western modern itself must also be similarly entangled, ‘hollowed out’ by this relation of difference with its others, a deferred series of particular formations which has been raised to the power of a universal. Any such ‘universal’ must be particular – must contain the trace of its other, and hence never ‘fully’ universal – yet this trace and opening to the other also implies a continuity, the ‘inside-ing’ of the particular with every other particular, such that each such particular, entangled subjectivity must also ‘be’ universal. A certain ‘presence’ makes itself felt here, an indeterminate presence that is also the ‘presence’ of the other – not only because it suggests to us a ‘presence’ of otherized subjectivities, but also because it gestures towards the ‘presencing’ of the other. And here perhaps it is possible to think of the ‘presence’ of ‘an-other paradigm’ *alongwith* the entanglement of relations of difference, but the result of a spatiality that makes the deferred-present *simultaneous* with its other, simultaneously making this other ‘present’. And we find that the ‘logic’ of this spatiality is expressed powerfully in comics. In this part of the thesis, we have tried to follow this ‘logic’, and its repercussions in the theorization of the decolonial – and we have found a representation of this strange ‘logic’, along with a call for decolonization, in a three-page spread in the comic book, *The River of Stories*.

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In the second part of our thesis, we have attempted to follow a certain aporia of space and time that appears in the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* – and this aporia seems to refer simultaneously to a problem of spatiality that we found to be inherent to medium of comics as well as to a certain thinking of decolonization. *The River of Stories* seems to forcefully bring the two – the specificity of comics and the epistemic politics of decolonization – together. The organization of the two series of panels on the map of Rewa, that of the song of Malgu Gayan

and of the contemporary protest movement, is designed such a way that appear both as a set of narratives moving through time, and *at the same time*, as spatial, static elements belonging to the topography of the Rewa valley, scattered alongside the river Rewa as if they were places in the valley. This organization of panels calls for us to consider the problem of spatiality, which is *constitutive* of the medium of comics and theorizations of its form, including McCloud's 'closure', Hayman and Pratt's 'juxtaposition', Groensteen's 'spatio-topia', and Hatfield's 'tensions', and that this problem is at once a general ontological problem: that any 'movement' of time must also refer to a simultaneity between its elements, a 'static' organization or framing must accompany the 'dynamism' of the dimensions of time. And it is 'within' this problem of spatial juxtaposition that a call for decolonization is made in *The River of Stories*, when Malgu Gayan begins to sing the song of the river of stories, when the protestors at Manigram make their grievances felt. The representation of decolonization in this way, within a certain *spatiality* that refers to an aporia of space/time, does not allow for any easy 'solution' – to read the relationship of the cosmological 'past' and the ongoing 'present' in any simple, exhaustive way, either as an analogical representation of the two or as a case of the past bearing on the present – and we have not tried to solve it here. Rather we have attempted to remain with its difficulty, to intensify its power to provoke.

And we saw that the difficulty given in the three-page spread from *The River of Stories* cannot be fully interpreted as a moment of decolonial re-emergence. We derived this notion – decolonial re-emergence – from decolonial theory forwarded by Walter D. Mignolo, who claims that the 'de-' of the decolonial is intimately linked to the 're-' of a reemergence, reconstitution, or resurgence. For Mignolo, decoloniality does not function through a unilinear movement of time, that is, it does not necessarily come after the colonial – in the sense of a 'new' or a 'post' – but rather that it seeks to enact a re-emergence of the past, of the pre-colonial, through a 'delinking' or a radical break from the colonial and the Western modern. Perhaps we can read the spread as an instance of decolonial re-emergence, as a call for a return to the cosmological, pre-colonial past of Malgu Gayan, to an adivasi way of living. But it appears to us that this does not exhaust the possibilities given in the spread: at the moment when the call for decolonization is made in *The River of Stories*, the two narratives are *spatially juxtaposed*, they are brought and held together, in the 'same' 'moment' – and as much as the 'past' bears on the present, the 'present' also bears on the past, it repeats the past in its own image, interprets it and activates it

in creative ways; the ‘re-’ of decoloniality must also refer to a ‘re-petition’, a movement that is simultaneously a re-emergence of the past and an enactment of the *futural*. And that even this ‘double movement’ does not explain the aporia of space/time given in the spread, but rather is made possible by it – both re-emergence and the futural, both the decolonial and the ‘post-’, function ‘within’ this spatial juxtaposition.

There is perhaps no ‘pure’ indigenous or pre-colonial to access, no pure past to recover, re-constitute, but rather an entanglement, an overdetermination of the ‘pre-’ with the ‘post-’ that any act of decolonization must take into account. And this is relevant to the epistemological stakes of decoloniality in the manner that Mignolo establishes them, to the opposition between Western epistemic notions of universality and discrete identity-oriented thinking and the decolonial task of imagining the world as a flux on the one hand, and the entanglement of modernity/coloniality and the need to ‘delink’ on the other. There appears to be a dilemma or contradiction between the two: if the epistemological politics of decolonial calls for us to think the world as a flux or entanglement, then we have to take into account the effect of modernity/coloniality, that is, the co-implication of the modern with the colonial, with the experience of coloniality and its multiple expressions and resistances, and yet, if we attempt to formulate these resistances or alternative paradigms as ‘delinked’, as utterly apart from the experience of modernity/coloniality, then we risk returning to the thinking of the One, to the rationality of the Western modern. We have argued that there is no need to ‘split’ this difference, to either pose a radical other to the Western modern (and thus return to the Western universal) or work through entanglement *within* the modern – we have tried to argue that this difficulty of decolonization is not restrictive but generative. Decolonization must encounter the colonial, it necessarily works through and against the experience of colonization and the universal and universalizing effect of the Western modern, but this entanglement is not only true for the colonized but for modernity as well – modernity must exist within this colonial difference, and to be entangled with the modern is not only to be ‘inside’ but also ‘outside’, it refers to an inside/outside. We have forwarded such a notion of decolonization which remains vigilant to the inside/outside, spoiling the universal One, enacting at once the re-emergence of the ‘pre-’ and the futurity of the ‘post-’.

Our attempt in theorizing decolonization in this way has been to retain the oppositional charge in decolonial delinking alongside the entanglement given in postcolonial thought – and here we have followed the ‘logic’ of a question forwarded by Anirban Das, that is: how is politics possible in a dissipated/entangled field? Can we imagine an-other paradigm, an alternative to the Western modern when the field is dissipated and colonized subjectivities are necessarily entangled with the modern? We have tried to imagine such a field through the notion of decolonizational pluriversality, which allows for the subsistence of multiple universalities as alterities, rather than as delinked, discrete knowledges. Pluriversality would imply that, the hegemonic universal – and here we consider the Western modern as *the* hegemonic universal – would necessarily be a concrete formation, a particular social formation, and this *difference* within the universal, its own inadequacy to be itself, is not a hurdle but rather the condition of possibility for a universal to be a universal. A universal would be one particular formation among others, would be constituted by this difference with others, and this would mean not only that each universal would be particular and hence inadequate to itself, but also that each particular must have the ‘potential’ to be universal, must be superadequate to itself, or, as we have called it, transadequate. And this transadequation – the invagination of the whole ‘within’ the particular – is not only a temporal possibility, a ‘potential’ in the future, but must also imply a *spatial* indetermination, a simultaneous overlap with others which makes invagination possible. Decolonization must be thought as such a pluriversal economy, where knowledges and subjectivities function in this tension between the particular and the universal – where the universalizing effect of a One must be resisted, yet where each resistance must also take into account several subjectivities which may engender universalizing effects.

And we found this ‘logic’ of spatial indetermination to be inherent to the formal specificity of the medium of comics. In comics, elements are juxtaposed spatially – this is a constitutive fact of the medium, and it implies that any passage or duration of time in comics must also suffer a spatial simultaneity. Firstly, any element in comics comes into being only through a relation of juxtaposition, through a relation of difference which is also a temporal relation – any ‘present’ element in comics must be constituted by its relation to its ‘past’ or ‘future’ elements, its ‘presence’ hollowed by the trace of its ‘other’. Yet, and at the same time, the elements ‘other’ are also *simultaneous* in comics, they are implied in the ‘same’ spatial surface – any ‘present’ element is implied in the ‘same’ surface, the ‘same’ ‘present’ as the rest

of the comic: the ‘other’ outside is also made ‘present’ inside, and this must hold true for the other ‘inside’ as well. Ontologically, we tried to think of this as the co-incidence of temporizing deferral with that which it seemingly prohibits, that which it must prohibit – a spatializing return of the other to the self. And this ‘movement’ is not without consequence for the thinking of decolonization. Any attempt at decolonization must oppose the colonizer, yet to enact this opposition is to repeat the logic of the One, the logic of the universalizing colonizer – decolonization must imagine a world ‘against’ the logic of the One, as a world of entanglement and flux, and yet this risks a dissipation, it risks the disappearance of opposition which the logic of One seemingly allows. Decolonization must try to take the position of the other, the position of the other which by its own constitution constantly disappears, is constantly ‘lost’, yet it must try to imagine a presence of this other – it is a persistent attempt to imagine an impossible presence of the other.

And we insist that this ‘presence’ of the other cannot be imagined as a full break, as a ‘delinking’ – which is to return to the presence of the present. Rather, we have tried to forward a ‘presencing’ of the other through the spatial simultaneity of the present with the other – a strange ‘logic’ of continuity which must accompany temporal difference, and we found this ‘logic’ to be powerfully put forward in the medium of comics in general, which is expressed, and reinforced in the three-page spread from *The River of Stories*. It is impossible to ‘delink’ the effect of the modern from the spread, from either the depiction of the protest movement or the song of Malgu Gayan. But this ‘entanglement’ with the modern does not necessarily mean that the subjectivities which emerge in the spread are ‘inside’ the rhetoric and logic of Western modernity. Rather, even in their ‘hybridity’ they stand as subjectivities distinct from the modern – from any imagination of the fully modern which must itself be spoiled by the trace of its others. Even as particular forms of subjectivities, they must also necessarily ‘contain’ the power to be raised to the universal, in the opening of their entanglement they must also be simultaneous with all others, enact an impossible ‘presencing’ of the other.

We can perhaps think here of a resonance – not a direct, causal link, but a kind of ‘conceptual resonance’ – between the medium of comics and the thinking of decolonization as we have theorized them in this thesis. This is not a causal link, the derivation of one as an ‘effect’ of another, but rather a structural analogy between the two – and we have claimed that

this structure may be grasped through the notion of *spatiality*, a notion that is powerfully brought to the surface by comics, which marks the specificity of the medium of comics. We might think here that comics holds a certain potential, that as a medium it is capable of representing decolonization in a powerful way – although we cannot conclusively speak of comics as *the* privileged medium for this task. In his essay Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar writes of the ‘decolonial potential’ of comics¹⁰³ – and there he cites the work of Dominic Davies, who in his text on urban comics argues that ‘comics are engaged with a range of decolonial projects’, and how comics in its form and content is capable of radical revisioning of urban spaces – Davies cites Orijit Sen, the creator of *The River of Stories*, as one who crafts his comics like designing a city which can be constantly de-established and re-invented.¹⁰⁴ Ghosh Dastidar, in turn, claims that *The River of Stories* is a testament that decolonial practices are not limited to cities or urban planning alone.

We will, to a certain extent, agree with Ghosh Dastidar and Davies here, although our position will not be quite the same. Firstly, what we have tried to conceptualize here is not limited to the decolonial, but rather we have forwarded a certain notion of decolonization – and the ‘conceptual resonance’ we speak of is not between comics and the decolonial, but rather between comics and this notion of decolonization. We have contended that the logic of spatiality that is expressed in comics, might be a potential way of thinking of the ‘presence’ of the other, a way which is distinct from the method of ‘delinking’ found in decolonial theory, which reduces the matter of the ‘presence’ of the other to the presence of the present. And secondly, more importantly, our reading of decolonization in comics is not predicated upon the capability of comics to ‘de-establish’ and ‘re-invent’ its narratives, we see this as a symptom of the spatial aporia inherent in the form of comics. Perhaps, following Ghosh Dastidar, we can speak of the ‘decolonizational potential’ of comics. And let us observe that the general ontological problematic that we derived from our conceptualization of *spatiality* in comics, holds value for the theorization of decolonization. That the ontological ‘structure’ and ‘logic’ of spatiality that we derived from our reading of the formal specificity of comics has a conceptual resonance with

¹⁰³ Ghosh Dastidar, “Material Development and Human Regression,” 10.

¹⁰⁴ Dominic Davies, *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (Routledge, 2019), 4, 181.

our reading of decolonization – and our reading of decolonization began, and has been based on, a three-page spread from a comic book, *The River of Stories*.

Conclusion

In this thesis we have conceptualized a problem of spatiality from the formal specificity of the medium of comics. And even though we have characterized the specificity of comics *through* such spatiality – even though we contend that the specificity of comics lies in the fact that it most powerfully ‘expresses’ this spatiality – we have insisted that this problem of spatiality is not restricted to the medium of comics, but is rather a general, ontological problem that informs our most fundamental experience of space, time, and being. Further, we have argued that this ontological conceptualization of spatiality holds relevance for the theorization of decoloniality. Consequently, we have divided this thesis into two parts – the first relating the problem of spatiality that we derive from comics to general ontological problems of time, space, and being; and the second relating this ontological conceptualization of spatiality to decolonial theory and also the thinking of decolonization in general.

This spatial problem makes itself felt in the medium of comics through the fact that, comics comes into being through the spatial juxtaposition of its elements. That is, elements in comics are placed side-by-side on a spatial surface, on the space of the comic book page, and temporal narrative in comics must be represented through such a spatial juxtaposition of elements. A series of elements in comics, such as a series of panels, stands for – it generally represents, and must be experienced through – a duration of time, yet this duration of time appears in comics as a juxtaposition of objects in space. The movement of time, which generally refers to a succession of elements, is submitted in comics to a spatial coexistence – it appears *as if* the past, present, and future all appear *together* in space. And we have argued that this indicates a general ontological problem, that it gestures towards a general aporia regarding the nature of time and space.

Temporal duration must function through succession, its elements can only appear through the act of annihilating other elements – any ‘present’ moment can only emerge by destroying the ‘past’ moment, and anticipating its own destruction by a ‘future’ moment – this discontinuity between dimensions of time is a necessity, otherwise all moments in time would

occur at the same time, which is an absurdity. Yet for the ‘past’ to pass into the ‘present’, for the passage of time to occur, these discontinuous dimensions of time must also come into a continuity, they must be implied in the ‘same’ – a spatial simultaneity – otherwise time would not ‘pass’, reality would be divided into frozen, self-contained moments without any relation to each other. And we must imagine this simultaneity, this spatiality to be continuous throughout time: there is no way to logically ‘cut’ this overlap between moments – it gestures towards an impossible continuity, a strange ‘logic’ of spatiality that must overdetermine the discontinuity and divisibility of time.

This ‘logic’ of continuity and spatiality is not without consequence for the thinking of decoloniality and decolonization. Decolonial theory – as it appears in the work of Walter D. Mignolo – suffers from a certain tension or contradiction of temporality, and also, implicitly, of the spatial. We have seen that this appears through Mignolo’s claim, on the one hand, that Western modernity works through a universalizing ontology of discrete entities, of imagining the world as a space populated by discrete identities. Opposed to this, Mignolo attempted to forward a worldview of temporal flux, of entangled identities in the process of becoming – this shows the ‘darker side’ of so-called universal identities such as ‘modernity’, and exposes the fact that it is intimately tied to its other, to the logic of ‘coloniality’. Yet, on the other hand, Mignolo argues for the need to ‘delink’, to break away entirely from the effects of modernity/coloniality, and to ‘go back’, to enact a re-emergence of the ‘pure’ pre-colonial indigenous. As we saw, this contradiction in Mignolo appears unresolved – whether it be between modernity/coloniality and reemergence, or between border thinking and delinking – that in decolonial theory there exists an uneasy, perhaps uncritical, dilemma between the need to imagine the world as entangled, and the call for a full break with the universal modern, a break which risks returning to the epistemological form of the colonizing modern.

Yet this dilemma, between the discrete and the entangled, between the space-like and the temporal, is not only a dilemma specific to decolonial theory, but rather a constitutive tension of any attempt at thinking decolonization itself. Any attempt at decolonization must, firstly, attempt to overthrow the colonizer, to pose a strictly anti-colonial opposition to the colonizer – yet this attempt returns, it marks in the last instance a return, to the epistemological form of the colonizer – in posing a discrete, anti-colonial opposition the decolonizational ends up opposing the

universal One with another, competing One. Faced with this it seems, that the decolonizational must attempt to take up not the position of the One, but rather the position of the other, that the 'de-' in 'de-colonization' must not be a discrete opposition but rather the attempt to keep alive the figure of the other, the figure of an entangled, precarious other that is always kept 'within', yet disappearing from, the One. But this entangled figure risks dissipating the oppositional charge of the anti-colonial, it loses, it seems, the power of the universal in discrete opposition. Decolonization faces this constitutive dilemma at every stage – to take up the position of the other, to imagine the world not as populated by discrete elements in the image of the universal One, but as an entangled world in the process of becoming, of emerging contingent subjectivities – yet it must also attempt to pose an impossible 'presence' of the other, an impossible universality of contingent subjectivities.¹⁰⁵

We have argued in this thesis that perhaps we can think of such a precarious 'presence' through the spatial, that perhaps there is no need to 'divide' this tension between space-like discreteness on the one hand, and temporal entanglement and becoming on the other, but rather that we may be able to think of a strange 'logic' of continuity that informs and remains with the entanglement of the temporal, an impossible 'presence' indicated by the spatial. And we contend

¹⁰⁵ Here our position is allied with, but also distinct from the notion of a 'doubling' of time that has found expression in certain works associated with the postcolonial. We are reminded of the concept of 'subaltern pasts' by Dipesh Chakrabarty as well as the reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's 'ghostly temporality' in Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. For Chakrabarty, 'subaltern pasts' refer to marginalized histories which develop a degree of intractability or opaqueness with regard to modern, professional history which seeks to incorporate them in its larger narrative. Bhabha, on the other hand, speaks of a 'ghostly' temporality which haunts the 'national present' – the attempt of any nationalist narrative to give the past, as well as the future, an image of predictability according to its own demands. In both cases, a certain doubling of time vitiates the modern narrative of a continuous, present-oriented temporality. (See: Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Minority histories, subaltern pasts," *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1: 15-29; and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 142-3.)

In this thesis, in our own attempt to imagine the 'presence' of an other, we also hold the view that it is imperative for the decolonizational to take into account the haunting of the other – only we contend that the 'doubling' of time must *also* be accompanied by a strange spatial continuity that makes this haunting possible. A similar 'movement' is articulated by Chakrabarty, where he speaks of a 'now' which necessitates a 'contemporaneity' of the modern with the non-modern, which resists the modern historian's distinctions between the 'here-and-now' and the 'there-and-then'. It will not escape our notice that this 'now' refers to a spatial 'logic', a single dimension which holds, which *takes in* both the modern and the non-modern, and is reminiscent of the Hegelian Now which we have discussed before. There we argued that such a 'now' risks appropriating the otherness of the other – in this instance, the intractability of subaltern pasts seems to dissolve in the now where the modern and the non-modern are contemporaneous, and hence present to each other. We have attempted to conceptualize the 'logic' of spatial continuity through the notion of *transadequation*, where the distinctiveness of the other must be impossibly 'present' or adequate to the 'same'.

that this ‘logic’ of the spatial is ‘expressed’ in the form of comics, that it ‘emerges’ more powerfully in comics than in any other medium. We derived this spatiality from a certain scholarship in the field of comics studies, from the work of Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt – all of whom attempt to provide a structural description of the form of comics. In McCloud, we found that through the act of ‘closure’, any movement or motion in comics is tied together through a spatial ‘gap’ – that temporal unfolding in comics is unified through the space of comics, such that time in comics must be perceived spatially. In Groensteen, and in Hayman and Pratt, we found that what distinguishes comics from other mediums is its spatiality, that elements in comics are juxtaposed spatially rather than temporally, and that any repetition in comics must take place in the singularity of a spatial dimension. We called this phenomenon *spatial repetition* – the fact that, repetition in comics, repetition of elements which must refer to the minimum of a temporal ‘two’, the passage of time from moment to moment, must appear in ‘one’ spatial surface – that it must refer to a strange contraction in the singular.

And we contend that spatial repetition refers to a general ontological problem, and that its stakes must be worked out at this level. The comic theorists we refer to do not articulate the problem of spatiality in this way, rather for them the spatial is a matter of the given space of the comic book page, where elements of comics are juxtaposed. We have argued, on the other hand, that spatial juxtaposition refers to a problem of spatiality that is distinct from given, empirical space. That the notion of empirical space refers to a pre-given entity which appears to ‘precede’ time, yet this pre-given space is a totality that must be constituted in retrospect, by synthesizing the discontinuous temporal experience of this ‘given’ space. Spatiality, on the other hand, is a strange continuity that must be supposed by temporal experience, an impossible simultaneity between discontinuous moments without which time would not ‘pass’. This is not simply a given notion of space but a constitutive problem of all experience of ‘reality’, and must be addressed at the most general – ontological – level.

To address this problem of spatiality at the ontological level, to pursue the stakes of this ontological problem, we turned to the works of Georg W.F. Hegel and Jacques Derrida. Both of these thinkers wrestle with this problem at an ontological level – the fact that, any ‘present’ moment in time must necessarily refer to, that it must be open to a ‘past’ moment and a ‘future’

moment, that the notion of any ‘presence’ is necessarily caught in this ‘movement’. For Hegel, this opening of the present indicates a spatial simultaneity, a ‘return’ of the past and future in a spatial Now, where the past, present, and future are simultaneous – the eternal Now stands as the ground within which the dynamism and otherness of time ‘takes place’. Derrida, on the other hand, ‘prohibits’ any such return – rather, the ‘opening’ of the present to the past and the future stands for an opening towards an irreducible other, where the ‘trace’ of the other spoils the ‘inside’ of any presence with the mark of its ‘outside’, deferring any attempt at attaining full presence. In this thesis we have argued, following the stakes of the spatial problem we have developed from comics, that perhaps at this point we can think of Derrida and Hegel together – that we may think of the Now along with a maintenance of the other *as* other, and that perhaps we can think of the deferred-present, alongside a ‘return’ of the other ‘inside’, that we can think of the ‘opening’ of trace also as a simultaneity of the deferred-present with the whole, that the ‘other’ which defers the present, is also impossibly implied ‘inside’ it as the ‘same’.

And we found that this ‘movement’ – the simultaneity of a temporizing deferral and spatial return – comes forcefully to the surface in the medium of comics, through the function of what we called spatial juxtaposition or repetition. Spatial juxtaposition implies that any element in comics only comes into being through a juxtaposition with other elements, through a relation of difference that is constitutive of it – and this necessitates a constitutive ‘movement’ between elements, between a ‘present’ element and its ‘past’ or ‘future’ element; any element in comics is already marked by the trace of its others without which it cannot come into being. Any act of meaning-making in comics, any attempt to ‘pin down’ the presence of an element, must necessarily confront this otherness, its ‘desire’ or ‘will’ deferred indefinitely. Yet, and at the same time, any ‘present’ element in comics is also *simultaneous* with all other elements, all its ‘others’ – the ‘presence’ of all ‘others’ must be given in the same ‘present’. The deferred-presence of any ‘present’ element in comics must be simultaneous with all its others, with the ‘presence’ of its others and the ‘whole’. Of course, we do not find this to be empirically illustrated in comics, but nevertheless, the structure of spatiality in comics indicates this ontological problem. Any consideration of a deferred-element must, at the same time, also refer to its presence – otherwise, it would simply be reduced to a ‘part’ of the ‘whole’ identity, which returns it to the logic of present identities – rather, a deferred-presence must also refer, impossibly, to an indeterminate ‘full’ presence, a ‘full’ simultaneity of all its others ‘within’ it.

We call this impossible possibility: transadequation – the thinking of deferral alongside a ‘movement’ or ‘function’ of ‘return’ which defers deferral itself.

This spatial ‘logic’ that we developed from comics, that we found to be powerfully expressed in the formal specificity of the medium of comics, helped us think through the stakes of decoloniality and decolonization – it seemed to us to be valuable in thinking of an impossible ‘presence’ in a field of entanglement and flux. Perhaps it is not only an alternative between, on the one hand, space-like discreteness and oppositional subjectivity of the anti-colonial, and on the other, the flux and contingency of an entangled field – which is the alternative between ‘delinking’ and modernity/coloniality in decolonial theory – but rather, one might think here of an impossible ‘presence’, an impossible ‘universality’ of the contingent other through spatiality, through the ‘logic’ of spatiality which we have tried to develop. To be ‘entangled’ with the modern, to be affected and shaped by its universalizing effect is a necessity that any attempt at decolonization must confront, yet this does not mean that such a subjectivity is ‘inside’ the modern – rather, modernity itself must be given in this entanglement, the ‘universality’ of its presence must be the trace of others. Any ‘universal’ must be given in this relation of difference, hollowed out by its relation to others, it must be a particular form that is raised to the power of a universal. This is true for modernity – that it is a particular form of subjectivity that has assumed hegemonic status. And this hegemonic modern is at once in a field of entanglement, of flux or becoming with other subjectivities – these subjectivities are particular formations, they are entangled with the universal modern, yet this does not mean that they are entirely ‘inside’ the modern, rather they represent entangled subjectivities which are also discrete, given ‘outside’ the modern. Neither does their contingency refer to the fact that they cannot have the power of universality – their entanglement with others is an opening, which must also imply a simultaneity, an impossible logic of spatiality which makes them ‘continuous’ with the whole. Every particular within an entangled field must *also* be ontologically universal, the deferred presence of their subjectivity also simultaneous with the ‘entirety’ of the field, bringing every ‘other’ *inside* the ‘same’. An impossible ‘presence’ of the contingent, along with an impossible ‘presencing’ of the other, of all ‘others’.

We found this ‘logic’ of the spatial – the impossible ‘continuity’ of the temporal and the impossible ‘presence’ of the other – to come together in the three-page spread from *The River of*

Stories. There a call for decolonization is made precisely where the ‘present’ and the ‘past’ is entangled in the spatial continuity of the same, where the pre-colonial ‘past’ cannot be separated from the contemporary ‘modern’, yet neither of these subjectivities can be reduced to the image of the Western modern. An impossible ‘outside’ is maintained which is also simultaneous with the ‘whole’. The design of the spread is such that any element is necessarily entangled with its others, where the force of spatial repetition is reinforced and brought out forcefully – the ‘present’ is entangled with the ‘past’ and the reverse is also true, while they are *both* simultaneously given in the ‘presence’ of a spatial surface. The function of this spatiality is also the ‘ground’ for the emergence of subjectivities, where the discreteness of each is ‘open’ to the effect of the other, but this opening is also a simultaneity, where each emergent, entangled subjectivity is also ‘continuous’ with the whole – ontologically ‘universal’ in this way. They are particular forms, contingent in their otherness, slipping away, deferring their presence, and yet this deferred presence must also imply a ‘presence’ of this otherness, an opening towards the other which is also a simultaneous, impossible ‘presence’.

In this thesis, we have tried to conceptualize the ‘logic’ of the spatial in this way, and we have found that this spatial is powerfully brought forward by comics: for us the specificity of comics lies in the expression of this spatial ‘logic’. And we found, on the one hand, that conceptualization of this ‘logic’ of the spatial allowed us to address an ontological problem – that the precarious existence of temporal entities, the deferred-presence of any identity in the world, must also imply an impossible ‘continuity’ or ‘presence’, that the ‘otherness’ of time must also be given in the ‘sameness’ of the spatial; and on the other hand, we found that this spatial ‘logic’ allowed us to conceptualize an impossible ‘presence’ of the other, not in the sense of the discrete presence of the present, but in the spatial simultaneity of the other with the self, which might allow us to imagine the ‘universal’ power of decolonizational subjectivities. Consequently, our thesis is organized, or divided, into two parts – addressing the ontological and decolonial, respectively – but let us note that both ‘halves’ are animated by a ‘problem’ or strange ‘logic’ of spatiality that we derived from the medium of comics. And even more so, that we found the specificity of comics to be given in this spatiality, that it is in comics that we find the most explicit, powerful expression of this spatiality.

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