In the late fifties and early sixties in the United States, artists Öyvind Fahlström and Jess were separately creating a new form of comic art that consisted of physically disassembling existing comics, frame by frame, and reassembling them in a new order. Fahlström and Jess referred to their efforts as "performances" and "assemblies," respectively. The effect was simultaneously cryptic, surreal, and dada-esque, and was reflected in both the textual and pictorial elements of the reassembled comics. Today, New York artist Chitra Ganesh has begun to engage in the comic medium, and the resulting work, Tales of Amnesia, 2002-07, evidences an undeniable extension of Fahlström and Jess's experiments. However, Ganesh's "assemblage" occurs not in the physical cutting and pasting of another artist's work, as Fahlström and Jess did, but rather in her piecing together of multiple cultures, sub-cultures, and ideologies. It is in this way, coupled with the very nature of the comic medium and Ganesh’s chosen manifestation of it through a combination of digital collage and painting, as well as her use of automatic

writing, that *Tales of Amnesia* becomes a prime representation of hybridization in contemporary art.

Ganesh crosses cultural borders in her work, committing herself to no single dogma, but rather creating her own. Her identification as a lesbian woman removes her from the mainstream via both her sex and sexuality, molding her approach into that of the outsider, a course further supported by the fact that she was born to Indian immigrant parents,³ but raised in Brooklyn. It is this feeling of separation from the mainstream, along with her dual heritage, which gives Ganesh the mobility to draw from multiple sources in both the media and content of her work. In order to analyze *Tales of Amnesia* properly, a visual and contextual analysis of the work will be presented here in light of her dual Western and Eastern heritage and her sexual orientation. Her work will be compared to both Fahlström and Jess and discussed in the context of new media and its influence on the comics.

Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, most certainly provided Ganesh with a diversity of sources from which she could draw inspiration for her artwork. As a result, one can find Western literary and popular culture references alongside multiple-armed Hindu goddesses in *Tales of Amnesia*. Like many others who are part of the South Asian Diaspora, the *Amar Chitra Katha*, an Indian comic book series distributed throughout South Asia and the West, played a part in Ganesh’s childhood.⁴ Though she intentionally references the *Amar Chitra Katha* style in *Tales of Amnesia*, and echoes the use of Hindu

imagery in the series as well, Ganesh does not feel as if this choice entirely defines the
work.⁵

Although reducing an artist to their biography is a common trap, particularly for
women artists, the hybrid elements of Ganesh’s artwork call for some discussion of her
background. Her art, however, is also a meditation on global visual culture. As Ganesh
stated in a recent interview for Art & Deal Magazine, "My work is more about using
different tropes and visual languages like comic books and iconic goddess imagery and
figures to talk about things that are broader than being located within a South Asian
framework."⁶ As an active member of SAWCC, the South Asian Women's Creative
Collective, pronounced "saucy," Ganesh embraces her heritage in her politics and in the
creation of her work, but rejects the notion of limiting its interpretation to South Asian
issues. It is perhaps this duality, in part, which defines Ganesh's artwork in a cultural
context and necessitates the evaluation of other aspects of her cultural reality in the
service of more completely understanding her artistic endeavors.

Ganesh’s multiple references to the Amar Chitra Katha style and to Indian culture
in general is a big part of the appearance and initial reading of Tales of Amnesia. The
dress of Ganesh’s characters, as well as the decorative elements of their environments,
such as veils, textiles, a hookah, jewelry, headpieces, discuses and an instrument
resembling a sitar, mirror that of the Amar Chitra Katha. Ganesh has spoken about her
perception of these aspects of the Amar Chitra Katha style, saying,

They have that Satyam Shivam Sundaram feel – that idyllic, rural India, ‘viva la
rural Indian-’ aesthetic, especially with regard to the clothes too. And so, I think

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⁶ Bissonauth, Natasha. “Storytelling: Natasha Bissonauth in Conversation with Chitra Ganesh”. Art &
they came from that time period. It coincided with the time that people started leaving and immigrating to the West.\(^7\)

In this quote, Ganesh references the film directed by Raj Kapoor, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, released in India in March of 1978.

Like the *Amar Chitra Katha, Tales of Amnesia* makes specific allusions to Hindu mythology. On page two, for example, Ganesh shows an image of a fallen elephant with its trunk cut in half along with a pair of headless birds and a stabbed male torso in a pool of water. The caption below reads, “...A SERIES OF SUCCESSIVE ILLUSIONS SHATTERED THE OLD COUNTRY”. The elephant appears multiple times in Hindu mythology, one example is the cursed Indradyumna who had been turned into the elephant Gajendra (meaning *king elephant*) and was subsequently rescued from a crocodile and turned back into his human form by the god Vishnu.\(^8\) The elephant appears again in Indian mythology as one of the most popular Hindu deities, Ganesha, cursed with the head of an elephant by the goddess Pavarti.\(^9\) This tale of a hybrid animal-human certainly echos and fits in with Ganesh’s more overarching uses of hybridity.

The concept of Ganesh’s “monkey girl”, pictured on the front and back cover of *Tales of Amnesia*, has roots in Hindu mythology as well. The monkey deity Hunaman was born to the monkey queen Anjana, who, according to one version of the myth was “ravished” in the forest by the wind god Vayu. The brothers Sugriva and Bali were also said to have been born of a monkey queen.\(^10\) The *Amar Chitra Katha* series devotes one volume, titled *Jataka Tales: Monkey Stories*, to the stories of Budda’s previous lives in which he is a monkey. In her 2007 article in *Art India*, Arshiya Lokhandwala draws a

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parallel between Ganesh’s monkey girl and the question historically asked of Indian women who refused to fit in with the accepted norms of society, “Tu jungle hai kya?” (Are you an untamed woman?). Ganesh’s monkey woman on the front cover of Tales of Amnesia (Plate 1) soars above a village scene, arms outstretched to catch hold of a large pink sun, while the monkey-girl on the back cover holds a bloody orange with the text below reading, “Thank you for flying with Monkeygirl Travels. We hope you enjoyed your journey.”

Page sixteen of Tales of Amnesia features another allusion to a Hindu deity, the goddess Devi. The frame displays a decapitated woman with a seemingly infinite number of arms who appears to have just eliminated a number of warriors with beams of light emanating from a cloud at her feet, their weapons, a discus and several snakes, left floating in the air. She holds a roman style cloak in one hand and masturbates with another. The caption above reads, “THE MYSTERY KEPT HOWLING AT ME…I HADN’T YET CONSIDERED THE POSSIBILITY OF MY BODY SPLITTING IN TWO,” (Plate 2). This multi-armed figure is a link to Devi, the wife of Shiva, who memorably grew a thousand arms to assist her defeat of an army headed by the demon Durga. In another campaign by Devi, in which she is known by the name Durga for the demon she destroyed, she is created fully-grown by flames from the mouths of the gods. This frame seems to be a combination of these two campaigns by Devi, for in the second she possesses ten arms, each carrying the weapon of a different god, including the snakes and discus of Shesha and Vishnu. This armed goddess brings to mind such feminist imagery as Betye Saar’s The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972, or even Action Pants: Genital Panic, 1969, by Valie Export, both

picturing stereotyped minority women with rifles. There is also a deeper meaning present in this frame that stems from the juxtaposition between the Western element of the Roman cloak, and the Hindu element of Shesha and Vishnu’s weapons. Highlighted by the text of this frame, one could gather a feeling of division within the character of Amnesia, stemming from the dual cultural experience of Ganesh herself. There is an underlying feminist message in this frame, for the Devi-figure is pleasuring herself while defeating the male gods of Hinduism, and thus becomes a representation of feminine power.

In addition to the Roman cloak, Ganesh makes other references to Western literature and popular culture in Tales of Amnesia. Ganesh names Sappho, the ancient Greek poet from the Island of Lesbos, in frame twenty-eight (Plate 3). The text of this frame reads, “THEY SAY SAPPHO JUMPED OFF A CLIFF FOR LOVE. DO YOU GET IT? (RATHER THAN THROW UP OR THINK OF)—I SPILLED MY GUTS INTO THE TOILET THEN SAT DOWN AT THE COMPUTER TO WRITE.” Sappho lived around 600 B.C.E. and surrounded herself with a circle of young women and girls from whom she drew inspiration for her love poetry. Her work is described as “intensely feminine,” so delicate and subtle in its feeling that translation is seemingly impossible.13 This reference most certainly pays homage to this pillar of lesbianism, but Ganesh subverts Sappho’s classification as ideally romantic through her stream-of-consciousness musings in the text. Ganesh leads the reader to question if a real woman would actually do such a thing, or rather if Sappho has been the victim of stereotyping. Ganesh makes reference to Godzilla (frame 2-3), the star of the Japanese science fiction film series and Marvel comic book series and to Roxanne (frame 28), the love object of Cyrano de Bergerac in Edmond Rostand’s famous French play by the same

name, written in 1897. Consistent with her feminist agenda, Ganesh has purposely chosen Western figures and stories in which the women are mostly cast as typically feminine, thus creating moments of hybridity while simultaneously challenging gender norms.

Ganesh's work, a product of her gender and sexuality, perhaps amplified by the high lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population she grew up with in New York City, is ripe for a feminist interpretation. In addition to cultural blendings in the images, Tales of Amnesia features multiple images of disembodied and bloodied female arms and headless women, as well as nudity and women performing sexual acts on one another. In his book Compulsive Beauty, Hal Foster describes Die Puppe, 1934, a series of photographs by Hans Bellmer in which he disassembles female mannequins and reassembles them in disjointed, visually jarring ways, a process Foster deems as sadomasochistic and fetishistic. In the case of Tales of Amnesia, though they are violent in their presentation, the severed limbs are instead a metaphor for the physical and mental violence of subjugation that women have experienced for centuries. Arshiya Lokhandwala mentions in a 2007 article that Ganesh's work shows the influence of lesbian pulp novels. Several frames in Tales of Amnesia place one woman lounging on a bed with another woman standing nearby, which does, in fact, bring to mind the cover imagery of lesbian pulp novels (Plates 4, 5) from the nineteen fifties and sixties. Lesbian pulp novels were, like comics, not respected and considered "lowbrow," and their influence on Ganesh's work is another example of her intentional operation outside the barriers of mainstream culture.

Furthering the idea of Ganesh’s attraction to pulp fiction is the fact that in all of the occurrences of sexual acts in this work, there is a concurrent expression of anxiety in the accompanying text. The artist stated in a recent interview,

“I’m interested in people precariously positioned in between categories and locations, whether it is in between this world and another or other power struggles...So, I guess the possibility of a certain kind of mobility, both lateral and hierarchical, through transgression is something in which I’m interested.”16 The artist’s interest in transgression is illustrated by this pairing of sexual acts between women and anxious text (Plate 6). Lines like “WHY ARE INSECTS ALWAYS CRAWLING UNDER MY SKIN” and “WHEN THEY CREMATED YOU, DID YOUR TEETH DISSOLVE IN THE FIRE,” display knowledge of the transgressive nature of these sexual acts. Ganesh brings home her point in frame thirty-seven which shows a figure hiding behind a tree with her arms outstretched to pleasure a second woman lounging in the foreground. The accompanying text reads, “…ITS MY NATURE TO STAY ON THE OUTSIDE OF THINGS.” The consistency of these pairings evidences the purposeful nature of this sub-narrative in Tales of Amnesia. Foster also describes Die Puppe as an exploration of gender identity on Bellmer’s part—the artist fetishized his subjects, but he also identified with them as they became his “spectral doubles.”17 Though Ganesh sexualizes her dismembered, amorous women, she uses the fetish to the advantage of feminism, giving her women power over their own sexuality.

Feminist elements take precedence in Tales of Amnesia, conveyed through both its text and imagery. At times there is a clear attempt by Ganesh to reclaim power for women. The cover of the work, for instance, features the image of the leaping monkey girl who appears so strong and confident, coupled with the phrase, “HER NAME WAS AMNESIA, AND IT FIT HER LIKE A BRAND NEW BOXING GLOVE.” When Ganesh makes mention of

Godzilla in frame 2-3 (plate7), she does so in a speech bubble emanating from a woman who appears coyly vicious, saying, “GODZILLA, YOU DON’T STAND A CHANCE.”

The accompanying segment of this frame shows a group of women tossing a bloody, severed forearm adorned with multiple bangle bracelets back and forth to each other as part of some kind of game. Bangle bracelets are used in Indian culture, in part, as a signal to society of a woman’s marital status, and their use in this instance shows a disregard for those customs which have the potential to suppress women. Elaborating on the severed limbs previously designated as a symbol of the oppression of women, the strength of the women in this instance subverts the oppressor, turning this frame into a metaphor for reclaimed power.

In a recent interview, Ganesh discussed her reaction to the original *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, and her feminist response with *Tales of Amnesia*. She states,

“When I was looking at the original comic strips, again I noticed that representations of sexuality were couched in lots of contradictions that I found extremely irritating and insidious. What I was able to point out so obviously as an adult, I never thought about it while I was reading them in the loo for so many years as part of growing up. Purity, for example, is centered on specific female characters in various narratives with Mirabhai and Sita. And whether they were iconic figures or not, all were dressed in a very ‘I dream of Genie’ fashion which channeled and aligned itself with exotic South Asian dancer types.”

One frame in particular in *Tales of Amnesia* shows Ganesh’s response to this “I dream of Genie” idea she refers to. Frame nineteen (Plate 8) shows a group of women in various states of undress assisting each other with the putting on of wispy, draped garments. One particularly attractive woman is pictured in the foreground with her arms above her head in a pin-up model pose, her left arm severed at the elbow. Another woman leans over, extending an arm to the injured beauty, while she is simultaneously pleased by a

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disembodied hand. The scene is reminiscent of the skewed Western perception of an
Eastern harem, luxurious with the potential for tantalizing lesbian activity. Ganesh
pushes this a step further using the severed limb this time to refer to Lacan’s idea of
“symbolic castration”,19 by actually cutting of a piece of this woman who so blatantly
embodies the sexualized stereotype of the exotic ‘other’. Ganesh continues,

“Thinking about South Asian-ness and the contradictions of racial purity within
the nation, the kingdom, caste and religion, it was equally interesting to me the
way the characters were so white. And, the whiteness is not just in skin color.
There is also a focus on certain features that seemed very specific. And since
their breasts were practically hanging out anyhow, I wanted to see what it would
be like if it actually looked like what it was implying and playing with that. Also,
although never consciously, I am also trying to place the figures within a sexually
explicit frame while not conforming with what is seen as sexually explicit or
pornographic, etc.”20

By exposing her women, Ganesh is exposing the underlying objectifying narrative in the
Western view of the exotic other, forcing the viewer to literally face the sexualized nature
of the West’s perception of South Asian women specifically, in addition to women in a
more general sense.

Ganesh earned her BA in Comparative Literature and Semiotics at Brown
University, and her MFA at Columbia University. Ganesh's higher education instilled
her with an awareness of the theoretical and historical choices she makes in her work.
Tales of Amnesia, in particular, establishes an understanding of the history of Western
comic art. This understanding is demonstrated in the artist's blatant reference to the
assemblages of Öyvind Fahlström and Jess, the two comic artists working during the
mid-twentieth century in the United States, who reassembled the works of George
Herriman and Chester Gould, respectively. This reference is established via the artist's

pp. 379.
20 Bissonauth, Natasha. “Storytelling: Natasha Bissonauth in Conversation with Chitra Ganesh”. Art &
insertion of background images from the *Amar Chitra Katha* directly into *Tales of Amnesia*, and through her use of automatic writing for the composition of the text in *Tales...* This awareness of her artistic choices is further exemplified by her incorporation of Western literary and popular culture references. It is her allusions to popular culture, as well as her participation in the "lowbrow" comic medium, which become emblematic of her supposed "outsider" status.

At a time when the “golden age” of comics seemed to have past, Öyvind Fahlström began chopping up and reassembling George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comics. This reconstructing of *Krazy Kat* took the focus away from the original narrative and placed it on form, which in turn lent the text an iconic quality.21 Jess’s *Tricky Cad* assemblies also transformed the original Dick Tracy comics by Chester Gould into something that privileged form over narrative. A member of San Francisco’s gay population, Jess played with the text of Gould’s originals, transforming it into surrealist poetry that took on a creepy, nightmarish quality. The effect was something like playing a record in reverse to reveal hidden messages from the unknown. Prompting all of this exploration of meaning was psychoanalyst Fredric Wertham’s 1954 publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he proposed that crime and horror comics were contributing to juvenile delinquency.22

Ganesh, like her comic predecessors, borrows images directly from her narrative source, the *Amar Chitra Katha*. Unlike Fahlström and Jess, however, Ganesh uses digital means to cut and paste the images, adding her own creations into the mix. Frame five of

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_Tales of Amnesia_, for example, shows a smoking pyre that was taken directly from page twenty-three of _Tales of Vishnu_ (Plate 9, 10). In another example, rather than re-contextualizing an element of an image, Ganesh borrows the entire background of a frame and overlays new content within it (Plate 11, 12). The _Vishnu_ version of the image shows Vishnu at the top of the hill with a worshipper kneeling at his feet, with a blue pot and a scepter at his sides. Vishnu and his worshipper inhabit a zigzag shoreline separating a snowy plain culminating in white, snow covered mountains in the upper left of the frame, and a deep blue body of water on the lower right of the diagonal. Ganesh removes the pair from the original comic and replaces them with a set of majestic-looking female arms listing along the same diagonal as the shoreline.

It is in this borrowing that Ganesh rewrites history—or history as it was represented in the mythological narratives present in the _Amar Chitra Katha_ series. This rearrangement of existing narratives into a configuration that is infinitely more meaningful than the original is something that Fahlström, Jess, and Ganesh’s works all share. Ganesh utilizes her literary background to combine automatic writing with poetry in a reference to the surrealist quality of the Jess’s _Tricky Cad_ text, in essence remaking what he accomplished in a manner that serves Ganesh’s own agenda. In addition, it is through her critique of the _Amar Chitra Katha_’s representation of women with her work, _Tales of Amnesia_, that Ganesh actually adds an addendum to Hindu mythology and creates her own volume to add to the _Amar Chitra Katha_ series.

Globalization and hybridity can be viewed as the fragmentation and reassembly of cultures and peoples into new, more diverse forms—and it is this concept that is most
flawlessly represented in content, form, and media by Chitra Ganesh in *Tales of Amnesia*. In his essay, *Another Country*, Homi Bhabha speaks of the layering of media and traditions of manufacture in the context of the work of artist Shirazeh Houshiary, saying “layered transitions across various mediums of manufacture echoes the artists’ complex and displaced relation to territoriality-exile and belonging, habitation and homelessness.”\(^{23}\) There are other examples of artists today that were born in, or have immigrated to Western nations that embrace digital media in the reorganization of historical content and methods of art production. Shahzia Sikander, for example, a New York artist who was born in Pakistan, was trained in the art of Persian miniature painting techniques and uses digital means to break up her paintings and digital animations. Another example is Marjane Satrapi, a French citizen born in Iran. Satrapi takes a more narrative historical approach in her autobiographical comic book series, *Persepolis*, in which she gives her account of growing up in Tehran during the Iranian revolution and the social issues of being an Iranian expatriate. The comic books were made into a French animated film in 2007. Both Satrapi’s comics and her film make Iranian history and the immigrant experience accessible to international audiences during this time when such knowledge is extremely relevant.

It is Ganesh, however, who furthers the language of these contemporary artists with her insightful work. One can only speculate how this recent marriage of contemporary issues and new media will be continued and rearranged by artists in new and different ways. Ganesh’s attempt at this combination utilizes feminist ideals in concert with post-colonial narratives to draw from different areas of history. She

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eradicates borders erected between East and West, challenging what can be placed neatly into categories, and what exists somewhere in-between. Chitra Ganesh occupies this in-between space gladly; forcing the viewer to reconsider their own previously held conceptions. Echoing the work of Fahlström and Jess gives Ganesh the canvas on which to place her narratives, and in the end, it is this tessellated format that lends Ganesh’s work an effectiveness it could not otherwise have had.

At a time when globalization and the recombination of cultures has become almost become old news, artists like Chitra Ganesh serve an important function. Amelia Jones perhaps puts it best in a 1993 essay, “By acknowledging multiple feminist subjects of infinitely variable identities, we can perform reinvigorated feminist art histories and practices that are radically empowered through the newly recognized diversity of feminisms.”

The time of sexism and ignorance has not past, and with her work, Tales of Amnesia, Ganesh reminds the viewer that a wide variety of narratives still exist that must be brought to light.

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Works Cited


Ganesh, Chitra. Tales of Amnesia, 2002-2007


Plate 1

Chitra Ganesh, Tales of Amnesia (cover detail), 2002-2007
Plate 2


Plate 3

Plate 4

Kimberly Kemp, *Private Party*, 1965

Plate 5

Plate 6


Plate 7

Plate 8


Plate 9

Plate 10


Plate 11

Plate 12