

**(Re)negotiating Memory:
Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force,
or the Black Boxer vs. the Graphic Novel**

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On a freezing Manhattan morning in November 1950, a police patrol stopped by 42nd street near Times Square; in spite of the biting cold, a black homeless man was lying in the middle of the sidewalk. When the policemen nudged his body, the vagabond did not move, nor did he speak, and the patrol was compelled to take him away. After a few hours at the local station, the homeless man was still fully unconscious in his cell; in a state of confusion and panic, an ambulance was called. Six months later, on April 11, 1951, in a grim Staten Island hospital, the destitute man passed away, knocked out by tuberculosis. His name was Alfonso Teofilo Brown, former bantamweight champion and first Latino to ever claim a boxing world title. The medical superintendent, Dr. Klein, informed the press that the champion died penniless, « sans un ami ou un parent connu et, si personne ne le réclame, son cadavre sera enterré comme on enterre les indigents » (Boisse 24). The very next day, a group of three unknown men arrived at the hospital to collect Al-Brown's body. They loaded the coffin in a white van and drove straight to Harlem. All night long, the men visited one bar after another, and with the casket open, begged patrons to buy them and the late champion one last drink. The next day, they did the same. Finally, the coffin was returned to the Staten Island hospital, the body buried near Long Island City, eventually exhumed, and shipped to Panama City.

The story of boxing dilettante Alfonso 'Panama' Al-Brown, perhaps one of the most ubiquitous and electrifying figures of both the Parisian sport and nightlife scenes during the *Années Folles*, remains contested and – at times – hidden from the general public. Spanish painter and essayist Eduardo Arroyo completed the first biography of the boxer in 1981, three decades after the black champion's death. More recently, essayist and historian José Corpas elucidated some of the shadowy details of Al-Brown's life in his book *Black Ink* (2016). While both biographies did justice to the late boxing champion, a missing link remained all too visible. What happened to the French cultural contributions to Al-Brown's memory? How could there be no trace of the man who dwelled in Paris for years, and considered the city one of the greatest loves of his life? Had the memories of Brown simply faded, or had we consciously avoided them?

A partial response ultimately appeared with Alex Inker's *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* (2017), a graphic novel joining the long tradition of comics dedicated to the sweet science of prizefighting. Since the early publications of the 1930s and the cult figure of *Joe Palooka*², the connections between boxing, the

graphic novel and social issues have extended far beyond borders of time and space, as recent examples demonstrate.³ With the aim of renegotiating the memory of the boxer of color, Alex Inker takes his readers further with a *bande dessinée* that echoes the methods of the *reportage*. By doing so, *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* demonstrates the graphic novel's position as a literary medium embedded in a fabric of intermediality, stressing "the interconnectedness of modern media" as "constituents of a wider social and cultural environment" (Jensen 1). As a result, Inker's work complicates our understanding of post-colonial history and therefore reshapes our approach to its discourse. In the following pages, I examine the particular significance of the French graphic novel as both an aesthetic and political medium (Clark and Cromer; McKinney, *History, Redrawing*) capable of reconstructing and empowering the memory of marginalized identities such as that of Panama Al-Brown. Using Inker's *bande dessinée* as my main focus, I demonstrate how both the body of the text – or hypertext (Purves), integrating images and words in symbiosis – and the body of its main character Alfonso Brown are combined to offer new possibilities for the depiction and the understanding of blackness, immigration, racism and resistance in France during the interwar period. A character simultaneously admired and reviled, Al-Brown's multifaceted personality displays the fundamental paradoxes and the genuine complexity inherent to the life of the boxer of color during the *Années Folles*, a puzzle most eloquently explored through the prism of a literary medium such as the graphic novel.

To begin, a brief introduction of Al-Brown's sinuous journey to and within Paris will be superimposed on the French historical and social climate of the 1920s and 30s. The Third Republic's ambivalent stance towards color and race certainly affected the memory of the Panamanian boxer in France and deserves to be underlined. Given the importance attributed to the medium of the graphic novel in this work, I then proceed to a swift analysis of the early cultural significance of the *bande dessinée* during the same time period in France. Finally, I turn to Inker's work and analyze it as a particularly noteworthy example of the graphic novel's aptitude to renegotiate memory thanks to the concept of *reportage*, thus not only partaking in the reworking of the French post-colonial and post-modern literary landscape (Miller; McKinney, *Redrawing*) but also functioning as a perfect instance of intermediality. By drawing on the theories of Said and Groensteen (*Comics*), I demonstrate that Inker's *modus operandi* is to playfully yet authoritatively destabilize the reader's vision of history and memory through characteristic components of the *bande dessinée* such as rhythm and framing.

A study in contrasts, confronting the literary canon on the one hand and hegemonic social constructions on the other, this article underlines the value of non-linear, fluid readings of both texts and identities made possible by the graphic novel, a literary medium which celebrates them and their "hybridity as a way of looking at the Self and the Other and their variegated appearances" (Iggers, cited in Cromer and Clark 575). I logically conclude by suggesting that such hybridity, by challenging the normative spaces of high literature and white-centered, heteronormative self, functions as an apt platform to encourage a renewed understanding of both memory

and history and their subsequent teaching (Cromer and Clark, *op. cit.*).

Paris and the dark side of blackness during the interwar period

What did the French people even know about boxing, and what was the status of the sport in France during the 1920s? In a few words, they adored it. Or more precisely, they loved boxers, and considered them to be as important as any popular actor or singer. For instance, the social and cultural impact created by a boxer such as Georges Carpentier⁴ can hardly be measured: hundreds of fights in Paris and around France, tens of thousands of spectators, and more money that organizers could count. Yet, for all the distractions boxing brought to the urban life of the French capital and other cities, the impact created by one's skin color was fundamental to the perception of the audience: invariably, white prizefighters were hailed as heroes whereas men of color were seen as hereditary foe. While historian Tyler Stovall assertively claimed in his masterful *Paris Noir* (1996) that the many African-Americans who immigrated during the interwar period found a peaceful and colorblind society when arriving in the French capital, we must be wary of such strong allegations. Undeniably, the likes of dancers and entertainers such as Josephine Baker and Ada Bricktop, along with the many Jazz musicians who dwelled in France for many years, enraptured Parisian society: the *Tumulte Noir*, as Jody Blake coined it,⁵ was a welcomed break for a shaken French society who lost an entire generation during WWI.

Nonetheless, the black body remained a source of anxiety, especially when juxtaposed to white masculinity. As studied by Sylvain Ville, the first wave of black boxers who took over Paris in the 1910s was met with a mixture of great respect and untenable fear. Men such as the mighty Jack Johnson, nicknamed the 'Galveston Giant,' turned Parisians on their heads for multiple reasons. Firstly, their success in the ring earned them a new social status and quite a bit of money. But more importantly, and all too suddenly, a black man could, by the mere use of his fists, transform an entire history of racial domination used to justify the Imperialist drive of a country like France. One can easily forget, in the liberating context of the *Années Folles*, that this time period was also the apex of the French Colonial Empire. In addition to the temporary Universal Exhibitions of 1900 and 1937, the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* served as a permanent structure in northeast Paris, which put on display families of diverse races from around the world for over 70 years, subsequently "turning the myth of the savage into a reality" (Bancel 5) to emphasize the so-called superiority of Western civilization. As Tyler Stovall suggested, perhaps African-Americans were never considered to be as primitive as other people of color hailing from the French colonies; yet, the racial and cultural biases remained remarkably strong against the black men donning gloves. As Marjet Derks astutely claimed, "boxing contributed to the knowledge that white Europeans formed about blacks in pre-war modernity, next to constructions that were based on the jazz and music scene" (198); notably, this construction only created greater prejudices towards men of color. Theresa Runstedtler phrased it to perfection in her essay on Jack Johnson: if "French sportsmen enjoyed gazing at African American pugilists on stage and in

the ring, they ultimately viewed black men not only as different from white men, but also as fundamentally removed from Western civilization” (441). This notion was certainly visible in art and literature, part of which was the unique genre of the *bande dessinée*.

During the interwar time period, this particular literary medium had “already been collected in high-quality albums”⁶ according to Christopher Murray, and with themes and styles relevant to its era, the graphic novel played a central part in shaping the literary mind of young adults in twentieth-century France. One certainly recalls the beloved work of Hergé, whose famous reporter Tintin and his faithful dog Milou came to life in the late 1920s. While Belgian, Hergé’s drawings immediately found a home in *l’Hexagone* since Tintin spoke French, incidentally still considered the world’s most important language during the time period. A glimpse at one of the artist’s early works suffices to re-contextualize the connection between popular culture and racial beliefs during the interwar period. Published in 1931, *Tintin au Congo* presented its readers with a clear representation of the colonial and civilizing mission entrusted to the white man. In Hergé’s work, black characters were unsophisticated, spoke an imperfect French, and were depicted as childlike, in other words, as entirely primitive. The album contained enough racism that the original version has since been modified. Compelled to apologize in the wake of decolonization, Hergé claimed his work simply mirrored the racial zeitgeist of imperialist times:

« Les nègres sont de grands enfants... Heureusement pour eux nous sommes là, etc. ». Je les ai dessinés, ces Africains, d’après ces critères-là, dans le plus pur esprit paternaliste qui était celui de l’époque, en Belgique. (Sadoul cited in Girard, 81)

It is in this context that Panama Al-Brown set sail from New York to Paris in October 1926, after spending four years in the United States. As opposed to his first journey between Panama and Harlem, Brown had a suitcase and a passport this time around and was expected to step in the ring as soon as possible. As World War I came to an end, a number of American boxing organizers migrated to Paris, including the turbulent yet clear sighted Jeff Dickson. While the United States raved about heavyweight fighters, France certainly enjoyed the tenacity of smaller boxers. In his *Encyclopédie de la Boxe*, Claude Droussent quotes Dickson: « ici, il n’y a pas de sport, pas de spectacle. On peut tout faire » (Droussent 85). The American organizer understood that fighters like Al-Brown were France’s new Eldorado. And surely, it took the Latino fighter less than three months and as many victories to become a known figure of the Parisian world, in and out of the ring, for over a decade.

Nevertheless, and despite his status of great champion in the Paris of the *Années Folles*, no remarkable novels, plays or cultural productions focusing on Al-Brown were penned during the time period. A close analysis of the boxer’s multidimensional self helps illuminate some of the reasons which led to these mishaps and their subsequent forgetting, especially visible in the French cultural and literary

discourses. This threefold analysis, examining Al-Brown as boxer, entertainer and lover, is fundamental in our study, as it emphasizes the subsequent reworking of history and memory achieved by Alex Inker in his graphic novel as both a cultural and a political gesture.

Panama Al-Brown: boxer, entertainer, lover

Certainly, Panama Al-Brown was an authentic champion and proved it in the ring over two decades. His size and his reach were so unconventional for a bantamweight that he surprised the vast majority of his opponents who often underestimated the power contained in his slender body. As a result, « ce poids coq à la morphologie étrange, tout en jambe et en bras, le corps épais comme un fil de fer » (Droussent 85), managed to record some of the most outrageous wins the sport ever witnessed at the time. On January 29, 1929, the up and coming Gustave Huméry, depicted as a young « tueur » (Droussent 89), squared off against Brown, who lethargically stepped in the ring, taking a drag from his coach's cigarette. Yet, at the sound of the bell, the Panamanian took two steps forward and knocked Huméry unconscious at an impossible speed with his favorite right hook. The fight lasted a mere 18 seconds, count included, and left the French public baffled, screaming for a refund. A few months later in 1930, the swift and brash Eugène Huat, nicknamed « le chat tigre », decided to insult Al-Brown in the press, calling him a nobody, a monkey who fell from a coconut tree. This example demonstrates that despite his boxing abilities, Al-Brown first and foremost mirrored the fear and loathing of white French fighters, and this, throughout his entire life. Moreover, while the French Press acknowledged his victories, it rarely showed respect for Al-Brown as a man worthy of respect. In his *Champions dans la Couloisses* published in 1944, the prominent journalist Gaston Benac described Al-Brown as « un nègre étrange » (127), incapable of fighting scientifically, with little to no endurance, and virtually no regard for the sport. More importantly, the racial overtone of Benac's words and his stereotyping of Brown were hard to miss: « les cheveux ébouriffés, dépeignés depuis l'heure du corps à corps, accrocheur en diable, M. Alfonso n'était alors pas beau à voir » (127). Nevertheless, in the span of 12 years, Al-Brown stepped in the ring 40 times in France. He consistently drew large crowds, as many as 20.000 spectators one night in April 1927 at the Vélodrome d'Hiver. He left *l'Hexagone* claiming 33 wins over 3 draws and a mere 4 defeats. His record may not be stellar, but his accomplishments in the ring undeniably possessed a bit of magic. Not simply because he conquered France, almost proceeding to a reversed form of colonization by showing how tenacious and resilient black boxers could be, but also because Al-Brown was more than a fighter: he was a man full of life, easily influenced and, most of the time, a slave to his ominous passions.

Indeed, the electric fighter in the ring was purely the reflection of the man outside of it. Al-Brown was one of Paris' most prized entertainers during the interwar period. And there was nobody Al-Brown enjoyed entertaining more than himself. He knew Montmartre like the back of his hand, and frequented Paris' finest nightclubs

as well as its sleaziest bars. Brown was certainly no fan of the prohibition reigning supreme in the U.S. One day, he famously claimed that «une journée sans champagne n'est pas une journée» (Droussent 87), and while most boxers celebrated with champagne once victorious, Al-Brown grew accustomed to drinking it before stepping in the ring. Over time, owning multiple luxurious cars and betting on horses became part of his lifestyle, too. And when the opium came, the life of the boxer began to spiral out of control. Brown remained an efficient boxer, but his multiple managers, including the scandalous Robert 'Bobby' Diamant, knew how to exploit his weaknesses. To fulfill his passions, Brown needed money and had to keep fighting; fighting despite a broken right hand that never fully healed; fighting despite the unquantifiable amount of pain medication present in his system at all times. Rather than a boxing manager, Arroyo described Bobby Diamant as a chemist, «tant il adorait les drogues, les potions et les remontants» (Boisse, 9). The manager's methods, Arroyo continued, were akin to modern slavery. Al-Brown did have a share of responsibility in his exploitation, for he signed the contract tying him to Diamant that gave his manager 75% of any cash prize earned during his fights. More than anything, Al-Brown was a slave to his own passions, in a world with little to no guidance for men of color, in a sport run by white businessmen who knew how to make money off colored bodies. Against all odds, it was one of Brown's most contested passions which enabled his return to boxing and transformed him into a legend of the ring.

In 1935, after a terrible disillusionment and the loss of his world title in Spain, the Panamanian dropped out of the ring. A keen entertainer and a great dancer, Al-Brown had decided that he would instead play music in cabarets all night, then sleep and smoke opium all day. A year later in 1936, Jean Cocteau stepped into a Parisian club, the Caprice Viennois, and saw him perform. The two men fell in love. Indeed, if Al-Brown's skin color and extravagant lifestyle had much to do with the constant adversity he faced throughout his life, his homosexuality did not make things less complicated. Undeniably, the Paris of the *Années Folles* was a vibrant city, where the queer community felt at home and thrived (Tamagne). Evidently, the transgressive nature of Al-Brown's sexuality had much to do with his professional occupation. It was unthinkable that a black boxer knocking out France's white hopes and virility all at once could be a charming man's man. Cocteau, who called the boxer his «poème à l'encre noire, un éloge de la force spirituelle qui l'emporta sur la force tout court» (Peeters 12), took it upon himself to become Al-Brown's manager. In an effort to clean up their lives and keep off the champagne and the drugs, both men moved to the countryside thanks to a pension provided by none other than Coco Chanel. After months of training, and to the surprise of many, the boxing magic reappeared. At the advanced age of 36, Al-Brown reclaimed the bantamweight World Title in Paris, by defeating Baltasar Sangchili at the Palais des Sports in 1938. Cocteau and Al-Brown remained friends, but their story ended abruptly. Jean Marais, Cocteau's newest lover at the time, steadily pushed Brown away. The ex-lovers nonetheless traded letters in the newspapers *Ce Soir* and *L'Auto*, where the writer begged the fighter to retire at the helm of his success:

Tu m'avais promis de reconquérir ton titre et je t'avais promis de t'aider jusqu'au bout dans cette étonnante entreprise. La chose est faite. [...] Profite de ton triomphe. N'imites pas les vedettes qui se prolongent et qui s'accrochent [...] jamais personne n'accepte de sortir à la bonne minute. Sois un sage, n'imites personne, sors de scène. C'est mon dernier conseil. (*Ce Soir*, April 5, 1938, 2)

In 1939, after a final fight in Paris, Al-Brown set sail for New York, never to return to France. The Panamanian champion quickly vanished from the French cultural landscape: his complex and controversial identity as a black man who was at once a boxing champion, an entertainer consumed by his passions and an open homosexual, made his memory all the more frightening to a rebuilding France post-World War II, at a time when the country strived to salvage its national pride and keep its colonial empire alive. In other words, the black boxer was problematic actor of the French cultural landscape of the interwar period, and for this reason, his memory was soon erased. Recollections of Al-Brown only re-emerged in France recently, thanks to Inker's *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force*, published in 2017. How, and to what extent does this graphic novel contribute to the revamped memory of the black champion will be my main examination, and its answer my primary focus, for the remainder of this study.

***L'Énigme de la Force (2017) : from the canvas of the ring
to the canvas of the graphic novel***

Interviewed by the newspaper *L'Auto* on the day of Al-Brown's return bout for the World Title against Sangchili, Jean Cocteau, in his capacity as manager and writer, offered the following words to the reader:

Je me suis attaché au sort d'Al-Brown, d'abord parce que Brown me représente le sommet de la boxe, une sorte de poète, de mime, de danseur et de magicien qui transporte entre les cordes la réussite parfaite et mystérieuse d'une des énigmes humaines : l'énigme de la force. (*L'Auto*, March 4, 1938, 1)

The concept of enigma brought up by Cocteau likely guided Alex Inker throughout the conception of his *bande dessinée*. The illustrator's decision to shape his graphic novel as an ongoing journalistic investigation or *reportage* taking place in 1955, the year Cocteau received his appointment at the *Académie Française*, is not simply telling, but also strategic. In his introductory discourse to *l'Académie*, Cocteau, an influential French writer, painter, and filmmaker acclaimed during his lifetime, briefly mentioned the name of his black lover who passed away four years earlier in complete anonymity (fig. 1). Placed between literal parentheses in the text, the name of Al-Brown was most likely overlooked by the distinguished attendance. However, Cocteau's remark does not go unnoticed by Jacques, Inker's fictional,

ingenious and good-natured reporter who then elects to connect the dots of Al-Brown's life so as to revamp the memory of the boxer. The illustrator makes use of several ingenious and distinctive techniques to convey the rehabilitated portrait of Al-Brown's memory through the medium of the *bande dessinée*. His first discernible gesture is to engage his readership in his graphic novel by entrusting the mission of uncovering Al-Brown's secrets and forgotten existence to a journalist such as Jacques. Indeed, and while his character initially strikes the reader as a reporter lacking seriousness, with his indolence and apparent casual interest toward his profession, we gradually discover a man whose beliefs evolve, and who subsequently strives to erase any prejudice caused to the memory of the boxer (fig. 2). The reporter becomes so obsessed by the ghost of Al-Brown's presence that he refuses to let any impediment stop him from unveiling the truth about the fighter. By discovering the value of pushing against the discourse, or *status quo*, in order to re-inscribe his subject in the cultural memory of the interwar period, Jacques' valiant attitude and effort serve as a teaching moment for readers and scholars alike. As a result, a new vision of the medium arises, which focuses on its intermedial nature in regard to the notion of *reportage*.



Fig. 1. Jean Cocteau's speech in *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* (19). Reprinted with kind permission from Editions Sarbacane.

As explained by Ann Miller in her comprehensive study *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (2007), "reportage, in a fictional version, is an indelible part of the history of *bande dessinée*, having provided the pretext for Tintin to open up the world [...] As a non-fictional genre, it became prominent in the 1990s", and "has since been pursued by French-language artists" (57). In opposition to the colonialist and self-righteous style of Hergé, contemporary instances of *reportage* are now used in French graphic novels to prompt "a revisionist treatment of history which has sought to uncover some areas that had been repressed" (Miller 57). Alex Inker makes an apt demonstration of Miller's theories in his graphic novel. To solve Al-Brown's enigma, the reporter Jacques engages in a lengthy investigation: his journey to Panama, Harlem, and of course all over Paris, takes the form of a time-consuming and demanding battle, a

metaphor echoing the numerous bouts, real and symbolic, Al-Brown engaged in throughout his lifetime. Situated in the context of the graphic novel, the conceptualization of *reportage* as an ongoing battle, a fight for truth and memory, is facilitated thanks to the particular element of rhythm.



Fig. 2. Reportage in *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* (25).
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According to Thierry Groensteen in *Comics and Narration* (2011, trans. 2013), “the ‘text’ of comic art obeys a rhythm that is imposed upon it by the succession of frames. This is a basic beat that, as in music, can be developed, nuanced, layered over by more elaborate rhythmic effects emanating from other ‘instruments’ [...]” (241); as such, the process of reading and interpreting any graphic novel can be understood as a “rhythmic operation of crossing from one frame to the next” (Groensteen 241). Following Groensteen’s definition, I contend that the unique rhythm of Inker’s *bande dessinée* stems from its connection to the notion of battle I previously described. By alternating the size of his frames and avoiding any structural repetition in his pages, Inker’s rhythmic process echoes what Groensteen coined as “periodic alternation” (263), which both destabilizes and signals the vastly different forms of experiences undergone by the characters in the graphic novel, and consequently by the reader. Indeed, the latter begins to apprehend the difficulty one encounters through journalistic research by following Jacques’ arduous battles to collect the fragments of Al-Brown’s life. The journalist’s efforts to rehabilitate the

memory of the boxer of color are mediated by the unpredictable rhythm of a graphic novel whose frames accelerate or slow down his progress. In contrast with the high intensity experienced by Jacques during Jean Cocteau's discourse, made visible by the multiplication of small frames which underline the rapidity of the events unfolding before his eyes, the successive visits of the journalist in Panama or New York are marked by larger, more detailed and slower frames, emphasizing the sizable task of his investigation. By creating these nuances in rhythm, Inker's *bande dessinée* not only renders visible and appealing the content of the issues that Jacques strives to elucidate; it is also the form of the graphic novel, and the use of multiframes which creates a "power of attraction that entices the reader forward" (Groensteen 247), thus helping the reader experience the laborious nature of Jacques' mission.

Building on the complexity of Inker's frames, I suggest that the illustrator's work is also attentive to the ways in which memories of Al-Brown are presented to the reader. As opposed to the strictly squared frames found in traditional graphic novels, Inker inserts wavy frames to distinguish between the past and the present in his work (fig. 3), thus highlighting the sometimes fuzzy nature of our recollections: in the *bande dessinée*, past images and remembrances of Al-Brown are intertwined with their present state, showcasing the role of the literary medium as one able to reconcile and restructure our memories. Put in contact, the lines of each frame are juxtaposed to create what Mark McKinney describes as an "a-frontier" (*Redrawing* 33), a delicate boundary that acknowledges the separation of time and space yet brings these categories much closer than is possible in a traditional novel. Beyond the rhythm imagined by the illustrator, the graphic novel encourages its readers to let their eyes wander beyond the simple textual elements, in order to seize the particularities of each frame, thus allowing each of us to construct connections and reconstruct meanings based on our own sensibility.



Fig. 3. Remembrances of Al-Brown (89).
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Consequently, delving into a *bande dessinée* is at times akin to a voyage where reading and viewing collide into each other. The notion of voyage, in relation to both Al-Brown's story and the medium of the graphic novel, carries a central connotation in this study. In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said discusses the expression of the *voyage in* – which characterizes the return journey made by migrants towards formerly colonized countries and spaces, a homecoming usually tinted with the hope to repair the past, or at least, better understand where one comes from. This notion, since reprised by Mark McKinney (2013), finds natural echoes in my study and provides a renewed understanding of *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force*. In the graphic novel, Panama Al-Brown's voyage to Paris and his meandering must be interpreted as a unique type of *voyage in*, where the boxer returns to the mind of the reader – this space previously colonized by assumptions or prejudices – to transform it, and change the reader's perception of how a black man ought to behave and what a black boxer ought to look like. This *voyage in* created by the graphic novel also complicates the relation previously established between color and immigration in France, for the champion was no ordinary migrant; Panamanian by birth, Harlem-resident by necessity, Parisian by heart, the character of Al-Brown was by essence unbounded, thus proving that “genealogies produced in comics [...] contest or otherwise rework the racist closing off of French national belonging and, perhaps more rarely, the masculinist gendering of nationalism and national “patrimony” including the colonial heritage of French comics” (McKinney, *Redrawing* 16-7).

Certainly, and while noting that Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (1999, trans. 2007) calls the graphic novel an “art of space and an art of time” and emphasizes that “these dimensions are indissociable” (36), I posit that the graphic novel also functions as an art of contest, made especially visible in *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force*. Indeed, if both boxing and *reportage* are reflections of the literary medium as unique arts of space and time, all three are also integrated to the essential concept of *agon*⁷ theorized by Roger Caillois in his canonical *Les jeux et les hommes [Man, Play and Games]* (1958, trans. 1961). In Inker's work, the notion of *agon* is placed at the intersection of the graphic novel, the journalistic investigation and the sport of boxing, and underlines the deliberately competitive nature found at the heart of these enterprises. Caillois defines the agonistic drive as “the desire to win,” made possible by “discipline and perseverance,” leaving the participant “to his own devices, to evoke the best possible game of which he is capable, and it obliges him to play the game within the fixed limits, and according to the rules applied equally to all” (15). In order to win the contest of reaching a renewed truth regarding the boxer of color, the illustrator must proceed methodically as he depicts Al-Brown and his companions, mixing artistry and political engagement.

Without a doubt, the illustrative qualities of the *bande dessinée* carry as much significance as the textual content in communicating the revamped story of the black champion for Alex Inker, and as such, the visual discourse representing the boxer and other actors in *Panama Al-Brown* deserves to be highlighted. To begin, I

contend that the character of Jacques could not possess a more stereotypical demeanor than the one imagined by the illustrator. His round body and affable face, his naïve gaze, along with distinctive markers such as his old hat and a thin moustache are truly reminiscent of the caustic appearance of *monsieur tout-le-monde* in the 1950s. Such outward form not only makes Jacques all the more relatable to a general audience, but also underlines the fact that the transformation of the unremarkable journalist into an engaged advocate for the unjustly forgotten in the course of the story is attainable by anyone. The illustrator furthermore plays with the exaggerations formerly used to describe Al-Brown back in the 1930s in order to create a compelling image of the black champion. The many conversations initiated by Jacques with strangers, offering the reader fragments of the boxer's past life, trigger an array of memories and tales immersing the reader into a unique and multidimensional portrait of the Panamanian. Under the illustrator's pencil, Al-Brown's slender physique first appears to be the object of parody. Inker's lines often make the boxer's heavy gloves look disproportionate in comparison to his slight frame, or his suits too wide for his lean body. However, if the facial features emphasize the boxer's flat nose, large smile and pronounced forehead, we understand these traits as a particular gesture made by the illustrator to mock the physical description once purported by writers such as Gaston Benac; indeed, this time around, Al-Brown never fails to walk around with a gracious air in his impeccable and bespoke clothing, constantly catching eyes from the crowd in and out of the ring, while typically being placed in the center of the frames. In this sense, and going back to the non-ironic and scornful depiction of black figures like king M'Hatuvu⁸ in *Tintin au Congo*, similar visual techniques of exaggeration and flamboyance are used this time around by Alex Inker in his contemporary graphic novel as a way to enforce an ameliorative vision of the black man. By doing so, the *bande dessinée* proceeds to a conscious reversal: by humorously yet authoritatively playing with the reader's expectations, in what could be described as a pastiche, cultural codes are subverted in the graphic novel and the figure of Al-Brown duly empowered. This idea is taken further by the illustrator thanks to his use of a minimal black and white color palette. Surely, if the use of these two colors mirrors once again the style of the original comics of the 1930s, it also underlines the constant dichotomy of the racialized world in which Al-Brown lived, which, put in today's post-colonial context, underlines the constant divide created by the color line. These visual elements are essential but only frame the main thread of Alex Inker's work. Even more ingenious is the storyline, which reuses through the categories of the *bande dessinée* and journalism two of the main tools traditionally used during the interwar period to undermine people of color, only this time, to revalorize the memory of Al-Brown, and complete this notion of pastiche, aptly defined by Ann Miller:

Jameson has argued that in the postmodern period, parody, which has a political and moral intent, has given way to pastiche, just as a sense of history has given way to the nostalgic recreation of the past through retro styling and the imitation of surface appearances (142). By playing with rhythmic, structural and "retro" codes in his work, Alex Inker presents both a political and cultural critique of

the original use of the graphic novel, perfectly contesting what Mark McKinney in *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (2013) defines as “the pervasive but insufficiently acknowledged presence of colonialism within a canon of French comics” (30). In this sense, *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* can be construed as an act of resistance echoing those performed by Al-Brown, as a homosexual and man of color, both in and out of the ring during the 1930s. Concurrently, « l'Énigme de la Force » raised by Jean Cocteau found an apparent solution uncovered by the medium of the graphic novel. An intermedial assemblage of texts and images, the literary medium of the *bande dessinée* teaches us that one cannot look at memories from a fixed perspective, and that rather, a multiplicity of vantage points creates a more compelling understanding and appreciation of the multifaceted lives of marginalized characters such as Al-Brown. In connection to the many possibilities created by the graphic novel to rehabilitate or transform memories, one last uncanny yet formidable intervention imagined by Alex Inker in his work deserves to be underlined.

At the end of his journey, Jacques, unable to complete his investigation of Al-Brown, is fired by his newspaper company. On a starry night in Paris, a bottle of champagne in his hand, the journalist takes a seat on a bench overlooking the river when the ghost of Al-Brown appears. The conversation between the two men is brief. Jacques apologizes to the boxer for failing to complete his mission and remind the world of the fantastic fighter, entertainer and lover Al- Brown used to be. In return, the Panamanian laughs heartily, and claims that he forgot a number of people himself, because such is life. While everyone eventually ends up forgotten, Al-Brown continues, one should simply strive to live liberated from people's expectations in order to experience no regrets (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A conversation between the journalist and the boxer's ghost (151).
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By imagining this conclusion to his graphic novel, the author-illustrator reaches far beyond the philosophical advice pronounced by the black boxer. In *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force*, the boxer has the last word, and thus concludes his own story, an ending that, as explained by Ben Carrington in his book *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (2010), hardly ever occurs throughout history:

The meaning of the black athlete has been contested from within and without [...] During certain historical periods the black athlete has been despised and lionized, blamed for the woes of the black community and held up as its savior, seen as signaling a post-racial future and confirming the indisputable facts of racial alterity in the present. (13)

Remarkably, Carrington continues “only rarely has the black athlete spoken, or been allowed to speak. It is normally spoken for” (ibid.). In *Panama-Al Brown*, this discourse of silence is rejected, and gives way to a novel and revised vision of history, in the form of a graphic novel which brings the voice of the black man back to the center stage, with an emphatic punch.

Conclusion: reclaiming history, informing teaching practices

Giving his voice back to the black boxer functions as a powerful way to rehabilitate the memory of Al-Brown, and offers a necessary corrective to the biographical works of both Eduardo Arroyo and Jose Corpas. In his work, Alex Inker demonstrates that the medium of the graphic novel has the potential to push back against oversimplification and deserves to be treated as a significant contribution to various academic fields. By demanding a transdisciplinary approach from scholars (Bandy, 2016), the study of *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* is placed at the intersection of both history and literature. As Clark and Cromer remind us in their essay titled “Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History,”

In a graphic novel, the print is incomplete without the visual text, and the visual text is incomplete without the print. One form does not simply accompany and expand the meaning conveyed in the other; rather, the two are co-dependent, with each equally necessary to meaning-making. (579)

Much like the story of Panama Al-Brown, the strength of the graphic novel is found in its multidimensional character. By stressing the importance of inclusion – both in its form and its content – the graphic novel caters to a larger, often younger and more diverse audience, thus multiplying the effect generated by both history and literature as it renders stories once overlooked finally accessible to all. If “graphic novels are rich and multi-layered” and “are one means to help students appreciate the

complexity of history” (Clark and Cromer 583), they also deserve to be perceived as genuine creations enabling both the reworking and the critique of history not only thanks to their content, but also their form, making them an art of resistance. Subsequently, I conclude this study by stressing the critical importance of a work such as *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force*, which invites us to rethink our approach not just to research but also teaching, for the medium of the graphic novel epitomizes the value of looking at the world from different perspectives, something we should always encourage ourselves and our students to pursue.

Notes

- ¹ Alex W. Inker, M.A (Film Studies), graduated from *l'École Supérieure des Arts de Saint Luc* in 2006 (Tournai, Belgium). His publications, which include *Apache* (Sarbacane, 2016), *Panama Al-Brown ou l'Énigme de la Force* (2017) and *Servir le Peuple* (2018), all demonstrate a particular attention to the reworking of French historical and cultural discourses. Credited for the graphic novel, Jacques Goldstein's contribution consists of a separate biographical conclusion placed at the end of the work.
- ² Imagined by Ham Fischer, *Joe Palooka* recounts the story of a naive yet good-natured boxer, which we may perceive as emblematic of American middle class values: hard work, politeness, social obedience. Published in installments between 1930 and 1984 in several newspapers, the comics was publically acclaimed and even served as inspiration for a dozen films.
- ³ Recent examples include but are not limited to: *Le Chemin de l'Amérique* by Baru, Ledran and Thévenet (Casterman, 1990), *L'Enragé* by Baru (Dupuis, 2006), *Le Boxeur* by Kleist (Casterman, 2013), *Young: Tunis, 1911 – Auschwitz 1945* by Vaccaro and Ducoudray (Futuropolis, 2013) or *Succombe qui doit* by Rica and Ozanam (Casterman, 2014).
- ⁴ Active from the 1910s to the 1930s, Georges Carpentier was widely considered to be the first French athlete to reach the status of global superstar. Thanks to his boxing prowess, which included a light heavyweight world title in 1920, Carpentier rose to preeminence to embody a certain vision of Frenchness in the public eye; consequently, his image was used in commercials, films, and other commercial ventures. For more on the subject, refer to Sylvain Ville, « Georges Carpentier, Naissance d'une Célébrité Sportive », *Genèses* 103 (2016): 49-71.
- ⁵ Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900–1930* (Pennsylvania State UP, 1992).

- ⁶ ‘Graphic Novel’ by Christopher Murray, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2019, online, www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel
- ⁷ Sociologist Roger Caillois defined *ágon* as one of the central component driving mankind towards play, alongside *alea* (luck), *mimicry* (role playing) and *illinx* (vertigo).
- ⁸ “M’Hatuvu” or “m’as-tu-vu”, a play on word imagined by Hergé, functions as a derogatory expression meaning “have you seen me?” otherwise used to describe an attention-seeker.

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