

New Nordic comics—a question of promotion?

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Abstract

Throughout history, the cultures of the Nordic countries have at certain points been seen through a lense that stresses regional commonality, most recently with terms like “New Nordic Cooking” or “Nordic Noir.” In this article, we examine the possibility of a common concept of “New Nordic Comics” by analyzing a number of Nordic comics anthologies. We discuss in what way Nordic comics might be said to be new and how they can be considered to be Nordic. We state that the comics in the collections are not identifiable as particularly Nordic based on their themes or the stylistic or visual repertoires. In these respects, Nordic comics are part of a broader transnational comics culture. The comics, however, occasionally bear witness to a Nordic background or heritage, for instance, in the form of words in Finnish or the Scandinavian languages, names of characters or the milieux in the comics. On the whole, Nordicness in comics is variable and diverse, and rather than a phenomenon based on inherent quality or aesthetic commonality, new Nordic comics are a result of promotional strategies, cultural policies, and transnational connections between Nordic actors in the comics field.



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In September 2015, the third Argentinian Comi-cópolis comics festival took place in Buenos Aires. One of the exhibitions on show at the festival was

called Kolor Klimax. The exhibition was curated by Kalle Hakkola, the executive director of the Finnish Comics Society, and displayed comics art

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of a few artists from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The poster introducing the exhibition to the visitors stated:

Until recently, these countries were unknown in the international world of comics, but today they represent a scene, several scenes, that set them apart not only on the European continent, but in the world.¹

This text presents Nordic comics as a coherent whole and simultaneously indicates that there are internal differences within the region, without stating whether these differences are between the various national comics scenes or if the demarcation lines are drawn in other ways. The exhibition and its short description aimed at the Argentinian visitor illustrate the dynamic nature of a regional cultural construct such as “Nordic comics.” It is both something tangible that can be viewed and enjoyed at an exhibition, but it is also an arbitrary assemblage presenting “Nordic comics” through a certain way of describing it and through a specific selection of artists and their works. The ambiguity of the quote’s description—“a scene, several scenes”—is as arbitrary as the construct altogether. However, it is by no means insignificant. It is illustrative of the continuous work that is put into construing, re-creating, and dismantling “Nordic comics.”

In this article, we analyze the construction of new Nordic comics by comparing the various comics anthologies compiled with Nordic comics, in English as well as the Nordic languages. In our analysis, we wanted to inquire whether there is such a thing as a “common identity” that the Nordic comics share. In other words, judging by the anthologies used to promote Nordic comics abroad and disseminate them throughout the Nordic region, can you tell a comic is Nordic just by looking at it? However, looking at style, genres, use of color, and the narrative content in the comics being produced in the Nordic countries just now and examining the most recent anthologies, we could not identify a certain type or trend that characterizes Nordic comics as for instance is the case with ‘Nordic neo-noir’ in film and television.² In the following, we look at possible areas across the comics and the anthologies where a common Nordic identity might emerge. Our findings suggest that new Nordic comics are a multifaceted concept that can be constructed in a number of ways

although the context of promotional strategies and cultural policy are important factors.

Usually, comics in the Nordic region are defined and dealt with in other terms than as a regional construct. The comics are seen as Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish or Faroese, Greenlandic, or Sami. They are defined by stylistic attributions and references to content, as humorous, adventurous, realistic, fantastic, etc. But every now and then, and increasingly so since the 1990s, comics are also described and categorized as Nordic. This categorization can be seen in a context of Nordic cooperation across comics scenes and transnational connections between the actors of the various comics fields in the Nordic countries. The transnational ties, however, have a broader outreach, as Nordic comics are not solely an intra-Nordic affair but a concept that is being promoted, in concerted Nordic efforts, to audiences and markets outside the Nordic region. The exhibition in Buenos Aires and the fact that four Nordic comics artists also attended the festival is part of this tradition of promoting comics as specifically Nordic to an audience outside of the region of Norden.

We focus our analysis on the one hand on the comics anthologies which have been published under an explicit Nordic heading and with promotional purposes, and, on the other hand, the pan-Nordic comics anthologies, which are not labeled and promoted as such. We are *not* analyzing the individual comics in depth but rather comparing them according to certain stylistic, linguistic and thematic traits which might point toward “Nordicness” or a Nordic commonality between comics as well as between anthologies. Instead of the individual comics in the anthologies, our focus is on the level of publications, which also means that we pay particular attention to the paratexts of the publications. We place the anthologies in the context of Nordic, transnational cooperation between actors in the national comics fields as well as in the context of a common, international Nordic cultural policy that directs funding to (among other things) a continuous work with Nordic comics. The “New Nordic” with regard to the field of comics and our material has a double meaning. Firstly, the comics published with promotional purposes are presented as new and current, perhaps even as avant-garde manifestations. Secondly, the inclusion of comics in the field of culture supported by

public cultural policy is a recent development. Not long ago, the promotion of comics, or, indeed, new, Nordic comics, would have been unheard of in cultural policy.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NORDICNESS

“Nordic” is a contested term which can be viewed through the lens of geography, history, politics, economy, culture, or identity. The answer as to what “Nordic” is, often appears complex and the term itself opens for more questions than it answers. From the vantage point of geography, *Norden* and the Nordic countries are terms often used for the area of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden with the inclusion of the self-governed areas of Åland, Faroe Islands, and Greenland. Contributing to the idea of Nordic might also be other collaborations and groupings such as the idea of the North Atlantic (in Norway often called “Vest-Norden”), which designates the countries surrounding the North Atlantic sea, or the Baltic collaborations that unite the countries around the Baltic Sea. In a sense, even geographically, *Nordic* can sometimes be expanded by association, and Nordic can be viewed as a term which has several connotations depending on the position of the viewer as well as being a concept which is constructed throughout its use in different contexts.

In this article, this geographically and culturally fluid concept of the Nordic region will be mirrored in the concept of *Nordic comics* as it is defined in certain practices of the field of comics. The geographical scope of *Norden* in this case does not entail the necessary inclusion of the five Nordic countries, but can vary depending on the materials of our study.

The regional construct, *Norden*, suggests a commonality shared by the areas and cultures included under the name. In studies of the Nordic dimension of different spheres, the discussion often includes a take on whether the commonalities or the internal differences between the nation states and national cultures, as well as other, more local, entities, are greater. The constructionist perspective on *Norden* is summarized by Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, who state that Nordicness may be “seen as a permanent process of problem resolution.”³ This process entails that:

Norden exists as a construction based on history. The bricks in this construction are

the nation-states. [...] Although references have been made to a common Nordic past, and occasionally even ideas of a Nordic community of destiny have been pronounced, the Nordic element has never lastingly gone beyond national frameworks.⁴

Norden as a concept has a bearing in many cases, for example, when discussing welfare models in a comparative perspective⁵ or the Nordic child,⁶ but it is a construct that most often is subordinate to the constructions on the national, nation-state, level. This means that despite Nordic commonalities there are internal differences as well as country-specific similarities with other regions and national entities outside the Nordic countries. The idea of the Nordic is constructed not only in the Nordic area but also from outside of the region. This projection then may become more real from the viewpoint of the Nordic perspectives themselves, thus a continued co-construction of the specifically Nordic is kept up both from the inside and the outside.⁷

The regionalism of the construct of *Norden* represents an “imagined community,”⁸ which potentially competes with the dominant national identifications. But, as Sørensen and Stråth suggest, this kind of Nordic identity project has not been successful. *Norden* is a complement to the nation states of the region.⁹ Theoretically, however, regional and national constructs are similar in precisely their constructedness, in that they are created and maintained in historical processes.

TRANSNATIONALISM, INTERNATIONALISM AND NATION BRANDING

The regional construct *Norden* can also be described in terms of the conceptual couple international–transnational. It has become rather customary in studies of transnationalism to define transnational relations and connections in distinction to international social practices.

Transnational connections are limited to non-state actors’ connections that cross the national borders, whereas the term international is reserved to nation-state actors’ practices reaching outside the national borders.¹⁰ A region such as the Nordic is obviously maintained through both kinds of relations. It is a question of international relations and politics, for example through the cooperation

in the Nordic Council of Ministers, where the governments of the Nordic countries meet. The Nordic dimension is, however, also maintained on the transnational level, for example, by individuals who migrate and have cross-border family relations, companies that have a presence in the various countries, and third sector associations that are involved in shared projects, such as the promotion of Nordic comics to readers outside of the region.

The promotion of a region's cultural products may be seen as a parallel case to so-called nation branding. According to media scholar Katja Valaskivi nation branding is a form of creation of the cultural artifact of "nation-ness."¹¹ It is a practice that is particularly aimed at an audience outside of the country, but "a nation brand becomes much more than marketing measures directed toward other countries. It becomes a part of the social imaginary in the construction of national identity, at least among the elites undertaking the branding task."¹² Regional branding may lack the weight of nationalist conceptions when it comes to social imaginaries, but the promotional activities of regional Nordic culture and Nordic-ness still offer potentially successful material for identity work, both more generally and among those involved in the promotional activities. Branding may of course also fail in supplying positive material for identities.

The relationship between nation branding and popular culture, and comics, has been noted especially in research concerning Japan's "soft power," the goodwill that Japan has received overseas through the spread of its popular culture, such as anime and manga–Japanese animation and comics.¹³ Nation branding as a concept points at the international dimension of cultural exchange; it is something the national governments promote to establish a position in the global sphere. The production and distribution of popular culture or the arts, however, is also maintained by networks of artists, publishers, critics, and other gatekeepers. The distribution of arts in the name of a nation or region is a process where the international and the transnational connections are interrelated.

The promotion of Nordic comics and the simultaneous construction of a Nordic identity or brand is both an international and a transnational process. Thanks to public cultural policies in the respective Nordic countries and in their inter-governmental cooperation the cultural sphere receives public

support on different levels, not only on local or national levels, but on the regional level as well.¹⁴ The support enables certain activities in the comics field, which has regional, national, and local connections, as well as maintains transnational connections in the Nordic region. When discussing the promotion of Nordic comics outside Norden, the transnationalism involves a readership and reception outside the Nordic area and the construction of "Nordic" is strengthened by these transnational readings from the outside.

The brand effect of the Nordic can be one reason for collaboration as seen for instance in the way "Nordic Cool" was used as a headline for the Nordic Council's promotion of the culture of the Nordic countries in 2013.¹⁵ Another reason for the collaboration between artists and other actors within a specific region is that unity makes strong in the sense that the relatively small countries of the North have a better chance of getting noticed if they pool their efforts together and make their promotional strategies abroad under the heading "Nordic." This was the idea behind one of the early attempts at reaching an international audience with comics from the Nordic countries in the magazine *Nordic Comics Revue* which contained interviews, articles, and reviews in English from the magazines about comics in the Nordic countries at the time (1992): *Sarjainfo*, *TEGN* and *Bobbla*, *Seriejournalen*, and *Bild och Bubbla*. Although the magazine was short-lived, it suggests that the idea of joining forces to attract attention for Nordic comics outside the region has been on the agenda of the comics scenes for some time.

Other common initiatives have been the positioning of the national tables in the Nordic region together at the American comics festival MoCCA under the headline "Nordic Comics Alley" and the headline "Gare du Nord" for the same constellation at the big French comics festival in Angoulême, naming the transnational comics co-operation (as well as an anthology discussed later on) after the train station in Paris, where travelers depart toward northern Europe.

Canadian comics scholar Bart Beaty has described the comics culture of the 1990s as an increasingly global and transnational one.¹⁶ He describes "a shared, transnational, aesthetic disposition"¹⁷ that replaces the nation state as a key way of identifying in the field of comics. International–transnational promotional work blends in in this tendency. A regional

take on comics promotion may be seen as an example of the transnational outlook, but at the same time it is precisely that—regional, and limited—rather than indiscriminately cosmopolitan. Also, it has to be borne in mind that Nordic promotional work occurs in parallel with national comics marketing and promotion, where the goal is to have Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish comics cross the national borders and find readers in other parts of the world.

In the following, we take a closer look at how Nordic comics are presented in anthologies aimed at an audience outside the Nordic countries. After this, we contextualize these publications by relating them to anthologies collecting Nordic comics for other than promotional purposes and to promotional anthologies presenting comics of single national comics cultures.

THE PROMOTION OF NORDIC COMICS THROUGH ANTHOLOGIES

In 2011, the American comics publisher Fantagraphics Books published the comics anthology *Kolor Klimax*, which includes approximately 250 pages of contemporary comics by artists from the Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—and Finland. Although the selection delimits “Norden” to these four countries, Matthias Wivel, the editor of the book, writes in his foreword that this “is not meant as a slight to the other Nordic countries” and, envisioning that the book is the first in a series of many, that future anthologies will prepare space for artists from Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Baltic States.¹⁸

The subtitle of the *Kolor Klimax* album is “Nordic Comics Now,” accentuating the topicality of the selection and the collection being representative of the present. The newness of the comics chosen for the anthology is pointed out in the introduction: “Kolor Klimax delivers a view onto the Nordic art comics scene as it unfolds today. The emphasis is on work—whether popular or underground—that exhibits a strong personal identity and independence from traditional formats.”¹⁹ The foreword as well as the comics in the book subscribe to an alternative, artistic or avant-garde position in the field of comics and, hence, the comics in the anthology represent a “new” Nordic outlook, emancipated from “traditional formats.” This is also how the reception has viewed the collection of comics. Comics scholar and critic

Bart Beaty calls the book a “head-turning compilation of new graphic tendencies by emerging and well-established Scandinavian artists,”²⁰ comics artist Nick Abadzis thinks it is “startling and vital,”²¹ Norwegian comics critic Walter Wehus sees “collected madness from the Nordic countries,”²² and according to Fredrik Strömberg, comics critic and president of the Swedish comics society Seriefrämjandet, the book is a collection of “the more artistic, experimental comics from the 2010s.”²³ The avant-garde aesthetic, attached to the book by its editor, artists, and reviewers, brings to the fore a “New Nordic”—vibrant, talented, crazy—in a regionally demarcated comics field.

The cover of *Kolor Klimax* (Figure 1) is done by Finnish comics artist Aapo Rapi and makes reference to the Nordic in several ways as well as connotes the Nordic region’s relation to the wider world. The title refers to the Danish producer of pornographic movies *Color Climax* which is known internationally, but with an extra “Nordic” twist using a spelling that substitutes Cs for Ks. In this way, the title references both the idea of the Nordic countries as having a liberal attitude toward sex as well as referencing the perception of comics as colorful and trashy, or as Wivel notes: “It also reconfigures a great title from something not only sordid, but repellent, to something that might still be sordid, but is also beautiful. There’s a belief in the transformative power of art somewhere in there.”²⁴ The coloring of this cover is kept in blue, red, and white which are central colors in most of the flags of the Nordic nations. The cover depicts a couple of other common Nordic tropes and references such as excessive drinking, cold weather, sausages, and a shining North star. The writing on signs directly references Finland but also points to the way the Nordic countries have been influenced by other cultures through references to “Ale Pub,” “Full Kebab,” “Disco Pizza,” and “Exotique Massage.”

Kolor Klimax is published by a US publisher, but it is also a clear result of Nordic cooperation. The book’s editor comes from Denmark and the producer from Finland. In most of Europe, the book is distributed by the Finnish Comics Society. Publishing of the book has also been supported by Nordic Culture Point, which “promotes knowledge of and interest in the Nordic Region and provides the secretariat function for the Nordic Council of Ministers’ two funding programs for culture.”²⁵

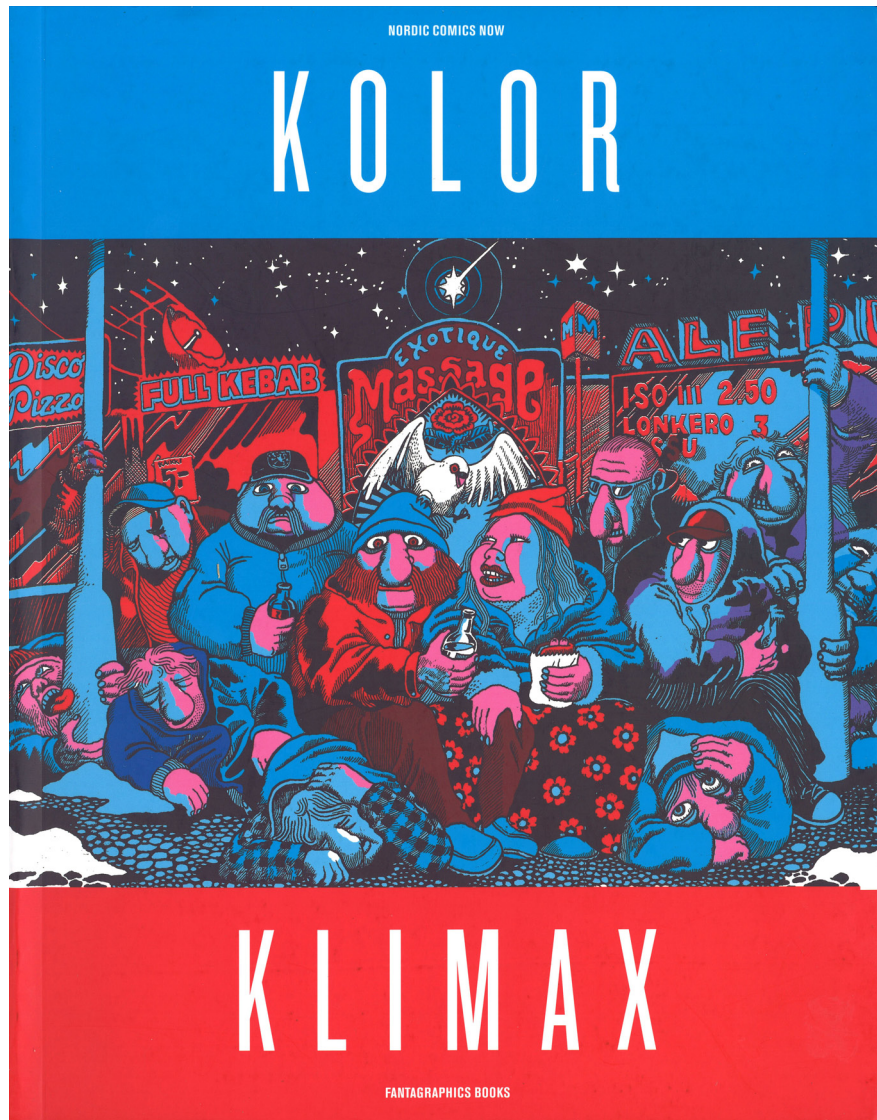


Figure 1. Matthias Wivel, ed., *Kolor Klimax* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2011), cover.

The motto “Nordic Comics Now” is repeated on the cover of the anthology *Dreambuddies. New Children’s Comics from the North*, published in 2013 by the Finnish Comics Society.²⁶ The book is a follow-up to the *Kolor Klimax* collection, but it also differs from the previous one in important respects. Its representation of Nordic comics redraws the geographic and cultural borders of the Nordic countries. The book collects children’s comics by artists from Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. One artist (Anna Fiske) is presented as a Swede living in Norway. Instead of the Scandinavian–Finnish focus in the previous book, there is now a shift toward the northern Baltic Sea.

The review of *Dreambuddies* at the Norwegian comics news site Serienett (www.serienett.no/) is

illustrative of the problems of reaching a common, consensual understanding of what Norden means. The reviewer does not consider *Dreambuddies* a presentation of Nordic children’s comics, as the selection of artists is limited:

I also find it peculiar that there are no Danish comics artists included and that Anna Fiske (whom the book itself defines as half-Swedish) is the only Norwegian represented whereas the book has 2,5 Swedes, 3 Finns and 1 Estonian (which is outside Norden). It does not spell “Nordic” to me.

It seems like a book which rather reflects the common cultural area surrounding the Baltic Sea (Sweden, Finland and the Baltic states) than “Norden.” This is an understandable priority from a Finnish perspective, but it is

just as “Nordic” as if one had published a book with only Norwegian and Danish comics. Vest-Norden is excluded and with the differences in language, culture and history in the Nordic West/East axis, it would not be possible to create a complete impression of Norden without explicitly gathering material from both sides.²⁷

According to the review, the Nordic region has a clear meaning of containing the five Nordic countries, but the text shows acceptance of the fact that what Norden means can vary depending on perspective. From a Finnish and a Norwegian perspective, Norden may look different. But this, however, is not to the reviewer’s satisfaction as a basis for presenting a collection of comics as Nordic if the usual five countries are not represented. The reviewer also discusses which Norwegian artists could have been included in a Nordic anthology of children’s comics, thus showing that the omissions and the lack of Norwegian representation is arbitrary and based on questionable premises.²⁸

While the contemporary nature of the comics in *Dreambuddies* is indicated by the motto, the presentation of children’s comics does not draw on a modernist avant-garde aesthetic, as was the case with *Kolor Klimax*, but rather connotes a traditional outlook on comics. Comics in this form turn to the perceived traditional readership, children, a central reason for comics’ low esteem and lacking legitimacy in the 20th century Western cultural sphere.²⁹ On the one hand comics in this context are as far removed as possible from the new, alternative, hip or artistic culture of *Kolor Klimax*. On the other hand children’s comics de facto represent something new: in relation to the development of the comics field in the last few decades, both in the Nordic countries specifically and in Europe and the US in general, initiatives on children’s comics represent an alternative to the adult oriented artistic inclination that has been dominant. In practice, the demarcation lines between children’s comics and adult comics in the Nordic context are not that clear. The same artists can be working in the different segments and the aesthetic ideals are not significantly different.

Dreambuddies and *Kolor Klimax* illustrate the issues at hand in the constructions of the “New” and the “Nordic” with regard to the field of comics. They are the result of regional cooperation on the

Nordic level and they both rewrite and redraw the constructions in a spatial-geographic as well as chronologic–developmental sense. They show how the constructions change and gain meaning in social processes of interaction that occur on material, practical, and discursive levels.

The two anthologies published in the 2010s have a precedent in an anthology published in 1997, the collection of comics called *Gare du Nord. An Anthology of Comics from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland*, edited by Rolf Classon and published by the Swedish publisher Tago Förlag. In his foreword, Classon writes that he had imagined that there was a common Nordic way of approaching comics, that they “were quite alike in mood and style, and that they had achieved commercial success without much use of pornography and violence,” that “[i]n Nordic countries we had developed a form of satire, wit and so-called everyday realism that was all our own.”³⁰ During his work with *Gare du Nord*, Classon realized he was wrong:

We had found nothing specifically Nordic, and our only criterion became that of high quality.

If one is to generalize anyway, it can be said in broad terms that the Danish contributions were semi-pornographic action comics, the Norwegian, humorous and philosophical bend-ers, the Finnish, inscrutable, madcap anarchist adventures, and the Swedish, absurd satires in a vein of folksy humour.

No, there is no specific trend in contemporary Nordic comics, but there does exist a very vital and original generation of creators [...].³¹

Bart Beaty—who also quotes Classon at length—considers the book an example of the transnationalism of the alternative comics scene and the efforts made by comics artists in the Nordic countries to reach out to a geographically broader readership.³² Beaty also notes that the title of the book is a nod to the French comics culture, attesting to the centrality of this, in relation to, for example, the more peripheral Nordic comics scene. Beaty describes northern Europe as having a specific comics culture, “an area where linguistic difference and geography have created a separate cartooning climate,” but, similarly to Classon’s testimony, the description does not portray the northern European comics themselves as different from comics produced elsewhere.³³ Beaty’s interpretation suggests that Nordic comics culture

is defined by linguistic and geographical characteristics and borders separating it from other comics cultures, but also by internal borders that can be traversed and be used to strengthen the concept of Nordic comics.

Gare du Nord contains 171 pages of comics by 43 artists, as well as short artist presentations and a description of the comics cultures of the five Nordic countries.³⁴ Two artists are from Iceland; five artists or artist teams from Denmark; eight, ten, and eleven from Norway, Finland, and Sweden, respectively. As in the case with the more recent anthologies from the 2010s, there are no clear signs of the collected artists and works forming a common identifiable Nordic comics culture. There is no stylistic or thematic coherence that would attest to Nordicness. *Gare du Nord* is also more varied than the latter-day anthologies; it contains comics adhering to varying generic conventions and represents traditional humorous comic strips, short adventure stories, and more experimental endeavors.

What then can be said about the Nordicness of the comics in the different anthologies if there is no common Nordic denominator, except the one delineated by the publication itself and its paratexts? Bathing in saunas, depictions of nature or alcohol consumption, or, to give an example of the combination of the latter two in Joanna Hellgren's story "Scout" (in *Kolor Klimax*³⁵), in which youngsters drink beer in a forest (and things turn awry), can hardly be seen as signs of a unique Nordicness. Obviously it is also problematic to describe a Nordic relation to, for example, alcohol in a coherent way without paying attention to local variation. Furthermore, by no means all comics in the anthologies at hand treat such themes that might be tried as Nordic. The presence of the Nordic, if there indeed is such a presence in the comics themselves, is constituted by more locally bound signs that can be seen as forming a part of a broader Nordic framework.

Although all three anthologies discussed here are translations into English, they do at times convey their connection to the Nordic linguistic communities. Sometimes the translation process has not covered the stylized rendering of the title of a comic, which has been left in its original form (e.g. Joakim Pirinen's "Lille Nallo in Slummerland" or Lars Fiske's "Fet festival" in *Gare du Nord*³⁶). Onomatopoeic expressions can also be graphically complicated and as such a challenge

in a translation process, but they may also seem too insignificant to be translated. The onomatopoeic phrases "Dripp! Dropp!" and "Tramp!," for example, expose the Swedish language background of Max Andersson's "Car-Boy in the Case of the Car Killers"³⁷ (in *Gare du Nord*).

The comics in the anthologies also contain Nordic linguistic expressions in the detail texts within the comics' diegetic story worlds. In Thorri Hringsson's comic in *Gare du Nord*, a song with lyrics in Icelandic is playing in the background.³⁸ The TV screen in Amanda Vähämäki's contribution to *Kolor Klimax* contains both English and Finnish language text.³⁹ Whereas Icelandic song lyrics and Swedish names maintain the comics' connection to one of the Nordic linguistic communities, the translations of other comics have transposed the names and places of comics.

This is most clear in the case of the pages of Charlie Christensen's "Arne Anka" in *Gare du Nord*.⁴⁰ Swedish Arne has become an American Arnie, but as translation has been limited to verbal expressions, the adaptation at times even is at odds with what would seem logical in the multimodal form of the comics: In one of the strips, the national anthem is sung and the national flag flaps in the air. The Star-Spangled Banner forms the soundscape for the Swedish flag (which in black and white can be mistaken for the Danish flag) (Figure 2).

In addition, the nuclear power plant in the third panel has a real life model in the power plant in Barsebäck, Sweden, and the M-logo in the ninth panel represents the Swedish political party Moderaterna. In an English translation positing the comic in the US, these signs lose their meaning as indications of place.

Apart from being an illustration of the problems related to the translation of comics, this example also shows how Nordic comics are influenced by other comics traditions, here thematically and stylistically by American Underground comix, the funny animal genre (very specifically Disney with the parody of Donald Duck) as well as various humorous everyday dramas and perhaps even the European album as format.

Sometimes the geographical surroundings where a comics story unfolds is mentioned in the verbal elements of the comic. In Mikkel Damsbo and Gitte Broeng's "Relocating Mother,"⁴¹ the story is located in the suburb of Rødovre near Copenhagen

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Figure 2. Charlie Christensen, "Arnie the Duck," in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997): 62.

and Thomas Thorhauge's and Johan F. Krarup's stories take place in Copenhagen.⁴² In *Gare du Nord*, Timo Mäkelä's comics adaptation of the Finnish author Juhani Aho's short story, "A Memory of the Past," is not located on a map verbally, but through panoramic views over the Helsinki cityscape in the comic's opening and ending panels.⁴³

What ties the comics in the three promotional anthologies to the Nordic domain is the presence of the Nordic languages in them as well as other visual-verbal markers that situate the comics' stories in Nordic settings. The Nordic is thus present through the singular part of the Nordic domain: the different Nordic languages, characters that have names that appear Nordic, or specific

settings or sceneries that can be recognized as belonging in one of the Nordic countries. These signs do not by necessity signify something Nordic, that is, they do not have a necessary synecdochic relation to the Nordic region or Norden as a cultural entity. In a reader unfamiliar with the differences between the Scandinavian languages, they obviously can perform just that kind of signifying relation. The signs may, however, also be interpreted on the national level or on geographically even more limited levels. A Helsinki skyline can be precisely that, a sign of the specific location that is Helsinki, not of Finland or of Norden. A Norwegian name on a character can be read as something Nordic as well as something Norwegian, or as a sign of odd parenting. A Finnish language signboard in a story's milieu may simply be seen as something foreign and unknown, or it may go unnoticed.

Although *Gare du Nord*, *Kolor Klimax* and *Dreambuddies* are unique in the way that they promote Nordic comics and in that sense Nordicness in the anthology form, they also belong to a broader publishing context and tradition. On the one hand there is a tradition of Nordic comics anthologies, which, however, have not been published with the express promotional agenda. On the other hand, promotional work for Nordic comics is done in anthologies advocating the different national comics cultures.⁴⁴

OTHER ANTHOLOGIES

Nordicness has been constructed in several anthologies that have a purpose other than the promotion of Nordic comics to an international audience. The earliest example of an explicitly Nordic comics anthology, to our knowledge, is the Danish anthology *Mastodont*, published in 1988.⁴⁵ Although its subtitle is "Comics by 24 Scandinavian comics artists," the anthology includes one Finnish artist and it is in this sense a Nordic anthology that also highlights the regional focus in its subtitle. The anthology is published by a Danish publisher in Danish and can as such be seen as an effort to promote Scandinavian comics to a Danish audience, even if people from the other Nordic countries might be able to read it too.

In 1993, a Nordic compilation of various takes on the topic of first love was published in four (slightly different) editions, in four languages, in

Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The anthology had a Swedish editor, Måns Gahrton, contributors from the five Nordic countries, and its publication was enabled by financing from the Nordic Culture Fund.⁴⁶

From the beginning of the 1980s to early 2010s the comics festival in the northern Finnish town of Kemi arranged a comics competition, first for Finnish entrants but in 1999 the competition became Nordic. The winning contributions (complemented with a few others) were published in yearly albums. These reflected the Nordic nature of the competition by including artists from the different countries as well as by publishing the contributions in their respective Nordic languages. The first Nordic album, for example, included comics by artists from all five Nordic countries, though the Finnish contributions were in majority. This reflects the participation in the competition: of the 231 contributions 188 were from Finland, 30 from Sweden, eight from Denmark, four from Norway and one from Iceland.⁴⁷ In this first multilingual album, no translations were provided, but this changed in the following years. In the 2000 anthology, one of the Finnish contributions was supplied with Swedish translations.⁴⁸ The following year Finnish language entries were published with Swedish translations and the comics in Scandinavian languages were translated into Finnish. The linguistic landscape of the 2001 volume was further diversified as two comics were in English.⁴⁹ In general, the books that followed were in Finnish and the Scandinavian languages, and the comics were not supplemented with English translations, nowadays a very common practice in the field of alternative comics in Europe.⁵⁰

A similar linguistic strategy as in the latter Kemi anthologies was adapted in the collection of Nordic comic strips published by Finnish publisher Arktinen Banaani in 1999.⁵¹ The album presents comic strips from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, all in their original language as well as in translation. In the case of Finnish language originals, the translation is in Swedish, whereas in the other cases, the translation is in Finnish.

A major Swedish anthology series during the early 2000s was *Allt för konsten*, which ten volumes were published in 1998–2012. The first two volumes only included Swedish comics, but since the third issue in 2002 the artists came from all the Nordic countries.⁵² Despite this, the anthology

was never coined as Nordic. It was rather the product of one editor's (Ingemar Bengtsson) and publisher's (Optimal Press) aesthetic preferences that included not only Swedish comics but also comics from the neighboring countries. The publisher Optimal also translated and published in Sweden complete albums by comics artists from the Nordic countries, for example, Jason from Norway and Matti Hagelberg from Finland. There was a clear Nordic dimension in the publishing activity, but no fuss was made about this in, for example, the publications' paratexts or in the marketing of the books. Therefore the Nordic aspect in this case seems a natural or self-evident one, a notion that is strengthened by the fact that comics from outside Norden were not represented in Optimal Press' catalogue.

Because of the linguistic and translational choice to limit the aforementioned books, from *Mastodont* to the *Allt för konsten* albums, to the Nordic languages their outreach is limited and the books cannot function as promotional material toward the rest of the—non-Finnish-speaking and non-Scandinavian-language—world. The Nordicness of the books does not serve a promotional purpose, other than possibly within the Nordic region. The collections, however, maintain an internal cultural understanding of the interconnectedness of the nationally and linguistically separate comics cultures in the Nordic countries. The translation of the comics is a means of overarching the internal differences and transcending the borders between more local cultures. The chosen linguistic practices, however, provide for different ways of identifying (with) Nordicness. The multilingual collections providing space for, for example, both Finnish and a Scandinavian language, maintains a sense of Nordicness despite of internal differences based on language. Monolingual translations on the other hand turn the differences into linguistic unity.

The different kinds of Nordic anthologies take part in the construction of Norden in different ways. The promotional anthologies directed at an international, interregional or global (mostly English-speaking) market make an explicit claim of, or make visible, what Nordicness and Nordic comics is or can be, in relation to the rest of the world. The anthologies limited to the Nordic public sphere, thanks to the linguistic choice of publishing in Nordic languages, rather participate in the internal maintenance of a Nordic cultural field of

comics in the sense of cooperation than make claims about what Nordicness means.

A third kind of anthologies needs to be included in the discussion, that is, those promoting national comics cultures. Such books have been produced to market Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish comics internationally. In 2009, Danish publisher Steffen P. Maarup edited an anthology for American publisher Fantagraphics with 19 artists from Denmark with the title *From Wonderland with Love* which has connotations of Denmark as a fairytale country and a fantastic place. As with the Nordic comics, the geographic origin of the comics can be difficult to discern from a first look at the Danish comics. Paul Gravett notes that: "It's hard to detect any uniquely distinctive Danishness to these works, apart from a few culturally specific elements here, such as characters' names, places, or a reference to Copenhagen's Mermaid statue."⁵³

Finnish promotional activities have reached a high-point with the anthology series Finnish Comics Annual. The first volume of this oversized series was published in 2011 by The Finnish Comics Society and the comics publisher Huuda Huuda. After another English-language volume in 2012 the following book presented Finnish comics in French translation (published by the Finnish Comics Society with French publisher Rackham). The 2014 volume was published in German (by the Finnish Comics Society and Berlin-based Reprodukt) and word is, on the promotional internet site finnishcomics.info maintained by the Finnish Comics Society, that a forthcoming volume will be in Spanish.⁵⁴

With regard to the promotion of Norwegian comics abroad, the book series *Angst: The Best of Norwegian Comics* has been central. The book series is published since 2007 by the Norwegian comics publishers No Comprendo Press and Jippi Forlag. The Swedish anthology *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights* has been published in two volumes in 2008 and 2010. The first volume was published by Swedish Ordfront Galago, whereas the second was published both by Ordfront Galago and American publisher Top Shelf. Top Shelf also translated and published quite a few Swedish comics under the header "the Swedish Invasion."⁵⁵ *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights* was also published, in collaboration between Galago and Requins Marteaux, in French as *Rayon fraïrs*.

In relation to the Nordic anthologies, the national–promotional anthologies provide an alternative interpretation of the geopolitical connections of comics’ culture. They define comics cultures as national, rather than regional. Rather than seeing these definitions and the promotional strategies that they imply as in competition with each other, they can be said to be complementary. The Nordic, regional, promotional work and published comics volumes have not erased the national level from the understanding of comics culture in the different countries. Instead the Nordic region is defined in terms of the different, yet perhaps similar, national cultures that in composite make up the Nordic comics culture. In this sense, the regional definition of the Nordic is based on internationalism, on a view that the Nordic region and its comics are a collection of the relations between national comics cultures. This is also the case for the “Nordic Comics Alley” at the MoCCA festival in New York where the representatives from the Nordic countries place themselves in the same lane as a promotional project at the festival supported by the Nordic Cultural Fund.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

When discussing the concept of “New Nordic” as it plays out in the field of comics, there are several ways in which this can be viewed, depending on what kind of new and what kind of Nordic we focus on.

Judging by the specifically Nordic and newest anthologies of comics, the material from the Nordic countries can be said to cover new ground in terms of the kinds of comics (avant garde and new in nature) and children’s comics (which is new, but also a return to a strong tradition in the medium). But it is difficult to find a thematic, stylistic, or generic common denominator between the Nordic comics. There is no such thing as “Nordic Noir” in Nordic comics judging by the anthologies we have looked at.

How the Nordicness of the comics is constructed is very much through paratextual practices and the collaboration between the Nordic comics societies and scenes in their promotion of Nordic comics anthologies as a transnational endeavor. The collaboration between the Nordic comics scenes is not new, but the extent of the

cooperation and the ambition to use collaborations as platforms for larger Nordic projects and publications is a new thing. Furthermore, the promotion of comics as Nordic outside the Norden has gained from the common, inter-governmental Nordic cultural policy. The transnational projects of the local comics societies, for example, have received financial support from the international body of the Nordic Culture Point, sorting under the Nordic Council of Ministers.

A sign of the intensive Nordic cooperation in the field of comics is the use of names or monikers indicating Nordic comics. All three English-language anthologies with Nordic comics (*Gare du Nord*, *Kolor Klimax* and *Dreambuddies*), as well as the collection of comic strips *Sanomalehtisarjakuvat/Strippar i Norden*, display the term NordiComics or its Scandinavian equivalent SeriNord as a marker for the cooperation.⁵⁷ The term has been in use for circa 20 years by now, and seems to have become a shorthand for different kinds of collaboration practices between the comics scenes within the region. “Nordicomics/NordiComics” is not used as an epithet for a stylistic or thematic commonality between comics from the Nordic countries but is instead a platform for Nordic collaboration in the comics field.

Also “Gare du Nord” functions similarly to NordiComics. Not only was the 1997 anthology called that, but the Nordic stands at the large French comics festival in Angoulême (Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d’Angoulême) are grouped as so-to-say Gare du Nord. The catalogue, called *Gare du Nord. Nordic Comics in Angoulême*,⁵⁸ produced by the Swedish Comics Association for the 2016 festival showcases Nordicness to the French festival’s visitors. The introduction states that Nordic countries’ comics cultures “share similar traits at the same time as they are distinctly different from each other.”⁵⁹ “Nordic Comics” thus continues to be constructed both as a national and a regional, transnational, phenomenon. Nordicness is a result of on-going cooperation and an answer given in promotional activities.

Notes

1. In original: “Estos países hasta hace poco desconocidos en el panorama mundial de la historieta hoy poseen una escena, varias escenas, que no solo se diferencian del resto del continente europeo sino del

- munido,” <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tecnopolis/21488776242/in/album-72157658339082469/> (accessed January 28, 2016) (the authors wish to thank Anne Magnussen for the translation from Spanish).
2. Andrew Nestingen, “Nordic Noir and Neo-Noir: The Human Criminal,” in *International Noir*, ed. Homer B. Pettey and R. Barton Palmer (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2014), 155–181: 156.
 3. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, “Introduction,” in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 20.
 4. Ibid., 19.
 5. Matti Alestalo, Sven E. O. Hort, and Stein Kuhnle, “The Nordic Model: Conditions, Origins, Outcomes, Lessons,” in *Hertie School of Governance Working Papers no. 41* (Berlin: Hertie School of Governance, 2009). https://www.hertie-school.org/fileadmin/images/Downloads/working_papers/41.pdf (accessed January 28, 2016).
 6. Helene Brembeck, Barbro Johansson, and Jan Kampmann, “Introduction,” in *Beyond the Competent Child: Exploring Contemporary Childhoods in the Nordic Welfare Societies*, ed. Helene Brembeck, Barbro Johansson, and Jan Kampmann (Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2004), 7–29.
 7. Sørensen and Stråth, “Introduction,” 19.
 8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).
 9. Sørensen and Stråth, “Introduction.”
 10. Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), 6; and Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.
 11. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4 quoted in Katja Valaskivi, “A Brand New Future? Cool Japan and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Nation,” *Japan Forum* 25, no. 4 (2013): 487.
 12. Valaskivi, “A Brand New Future?” 490.
 13. Valaskivi, “A Brand New Future?”; and Koichi Iwabuchi, “Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of ‘International Cultural Exchange,’” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 419–32.
 14. For a discussion of the similarities, dissimilarities and challenges in the regional cultural policy and an analysis of “The Nordic Cultural Model,” see Peter Duelund, ed., *The Nordic Cultural Model* (Copenhagen: Nordic Cultural Institute, 2003).
 15. See Nordic Cool 2013, <http://www.norden.org/da/tema/tidligere-temaer/tema-2013/nordic-cool> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 16. Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 111–37.
 17. Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 128.
 18. Matthias Wivel, ed., *Kolor Klimax* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2011), n.p.
 19. Ibid., n.p.
 20. Bart Beaty, “Conversational Euro-Comics: Bart Beaty On Kolor Klimax,” *The Comics Reporter* 17 (November 2011), <http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/eurocomics/35307/> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 21. Nick Abadzis, *The Return of the Best Damn Comics of the Year—Boing Boing Edition*, 2012, <http://boingboing.net/2012/12/03/the-return-of-the-best-damn-co.html> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 22. In original: “Samlet galskap fra nordiske land” (translation by the authors), ed. Walter Wehus. *Kolor Klimax: Nordic Comics Now* 2012, <http://walterwehus.blogspot.dk/2012/04/kolor-klimax-nordic-comics-now.html> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 23. Fredrik Strömberg, “Nordiska antologier på den internationella marknaden,” *Bild och Bubbla* 199 (2014): 18.
 24. Steffen Rayburn Maarup, “Wivel’s Nordic Mixtape,” *The Metabunker* (March 20, 2012), <http://www.metabunker.dk/?p=4388> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 25. Nordic Culture Point, <http://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council-of-ministers/council-of-ministers/the-nordic-council-of-ministers-for-culture-mr-k/institutions-and-co-operative-bodies/institutions/nordic-culture-point> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 26. Kalle Hakkola, ed. *Dreambuddies. New Children’s Comics from the North* (Helsinki: The Finnish Comics Society, 2013).
 27. In original: “Eg finner det òg forunderleg at ein ikkje har nokon danske serieskaparar med og at Anna Fiske (som boka sjølv definerer som halvt svensk) er einaste norske representant medan ein då har 2,5 svenskar, 3 finnar og 1 ester (som jo er frå utanom Norden). Det seier ikkje «nordisk» for meg. Dette synast meir som ei bok som reflekterer det felles kulturområdet rundt Austersjøen (Sverige, Finland og dei Baltiske landa, her ved Estland) enn «Norden». Det er ei forståeleg prioritering frå eit finsk perspektiv at ein tek ting frå deira næraste kulturområde rundt Austersjøen, men det er like lite eit «nordisk» perspektiv som om ein hadde utgitt ei bok med berre norske og danske seriar. Vest-Norden er jo i praksis ekskludert, og med dei skilnadene i språk, kultur og historie som ligger i Nordens vest/aust-akse så kan ein vel ikkje ha eit heilskapleg inntrykk av Norden utan at ein tydeleg henter inn eksempel frå begge sider.” (Translation by the authors.). Knut Robert Knutsen, “Nordiske barneserier,” *Serienett* (June 17, 2013), <http://www.serienett.no/article/1596/nordiske-barneserier> (accessed January 28, 2016).
 28. Ibid.
 29. Cf. Thierry Groensteen, “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?,” in *Comics and Culture—Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans Christian-

- sen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 29–42.
30. Rolf Classon, ed., *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s* (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 4.
31. Ibid.
32. Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 129.
33. Ibid.
34. Classon, ed. *Gare du Nord*.
35. Joanna Hellgren, “Scout,” in *Kolor Klimax*, ed. Matthias Wivel (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), n.p.
36. Joakim Pirinen, “Lille Nallo in Slummerland” (Little Teddy in Slumberland), in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 41; Lars Fiske, “Fet festival,” in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 43–8.
37. Max Andersson, “Car-Boy in the Case of the Car Killers,” in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 11–16.
38. Thorri Hringsson, “Christmas Night,” in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 75–7.
39. Amanda Vähämäki, “In the Night,” in *Kolor Klimax*, ed. Matthias Wivel (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), n.p.
40. Charlie Christensen, “Arnie the Duck,” in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 57–62.
41. Mikkel Damsbo and Gitte Broeng, “Relocating Mother,” in *Kolor Klimax*, ed. Matthias Wivel (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), n.p.
42. Thomas Thorhauge, “Suicide Joe v. Dead Tree Press,” in *Kolor Klimax*, ed. Matthias Wivel (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), n.p.; Johan F. Krarup, “Nostalgia,” in *Kolor Klimax*, ed. Matthias Wivel (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), n.p.
43. Timo Mäkelä, “A Memory of the Past,” in *Gare du Nord—Cartoons from the Nordic Countries in the 90s*, ed. Rolf Classon (Stockholm: Tago Förlag, 1997), 103–8.
44. Strömberg, “Nordiska antologier på den internationella marknaden.”
45. Freddy Milton, ed., *Mastodont* (København: Ekstra-bladet Forlag, 1988).
46. Måns Gahrton, ed., *Den første kærlighed* (København: Carlsen Comics, 1993); Måns Gahrton ed. *Den første kærligheden—En nordisk antologi* (Oslo: Semic, 1993); Måns Gahrton ed., *Serier om den första kärleken* (Stockholm: Carlsen Comics, 1993); Måns Gahrton ed., *Tarinoita ensirakkaudesta* (Tampere: Semic, 1993).
47. Heikki Porkola, ed. *Lifti ja muita sarjakuvia Kemin pohjoismaisesta sarjakuvakilpailusta 1999./Lift och andra serier från den nordiska serietävlingen i Kemi 1999* (Kemi: Kemin Sarjakuvakeskus, 1999).
48. Noora Federley and Ville Pirinen, “Musta*Naamio,” in *Musta*Naamio ja muita sarjakuvia Kemin pohjoismaisesta sarjakuvakilpailusta 2000./Fan*Tom och andra serier från den nordiska serietävlingen i Kemi 2000*, ed. Heikki Porkola (Kemi: Kemin sarjakuvakeskus, 2000), 6–10.
49. Heikki Porkola, ed. *Vuoteen omat—ja vieraat ja muita sarjakuvia Kemin pohjoismaisesta sarjakuvakilpailusta 2001./Till sängs!—eller ej och andra serier från den nordiska serietävlingen i Kemi 2001* (Kemi: Kemin sarjakuvakeskus, 2001).
50. Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 131; Ralf Kauranen, “Finländska serier? Seriekulturen som transnationellt fenomen,” *Laboratorium för folk och kultur*, no. 2 (2013): 9–17.
51. Vesa Anttonen and Kalervo Pulkkinen, ed., *Sanomalehtisarjakuvat./Strippar i Norden* (Helsinki: Arktinen Banaani, 1999).
52. Ingemar Bengtsson, ed., *Allt för konsten 3* (Göteborg: Optimal Press, 2002).
53. Paul Gravett, “From Wonderland with Love: Danish Comics in the third Millenium,” 2009, http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/from_wonderland_with_love (accessed January 29, 2016).
54. Finnish Comics, <http://finnishcomics.info/> (accessed January 29, 2015).
55. Jason Mitchelitch, “The Swedish Comics Invasion Arrives,” *Comics Alliance* (March 26, 2010), <http://comicsalliance.com/top-shelf-swedish-invasion/> (accessed January 29, 2016).
56. Fredrik Strömberg, “Nordic Comics Alley i New York,” *Serieframjändet* 2013, <http://serieframjandet.se/2013/04/26/nordic-comics-alley-i-new-york/> (accessed January 29, 2016).
57. Nordicomics is listed as the association behind the publication of *Gare du Nord*. The association Nordicomics with their public profile on <http://www.nordicomic.info> is behind the *Kolor Klimax* and *Dreambuddies* anthologies in collaboration with the Finnish Comics Society. The current Nordicomics and its projects are funded by Nordic Culture Point, Nordic Children’s and Youth Committee—NORDBUK, and the Finnish Comics Society (see Nordicomics, <http://nordicomics.info/aboutnc/> (accessed January 30, 2016)). The current association works with exhibitions, workshops, and artist residencies to promote the collaboration within Norden.
58. Fredrik Strömberg, ed., *Gare du Nord. Nordic Comics in Angoulême* (Malmö: The Swedish Comics Association, 2016).
59. Erik Falk et al. “The New Wave of Nordic Comics,” in *Gare du Nord. Nordic Comics in Angoulême*, ed. Fredrik Strömberg (Malmö: The Swedish Comics Association, 2016), n.p.