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Nabizadeh, Golnar

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Visualising Risk in *Blue* by Pat Grant: Xenophobia and Graphic Narrative

Golnar Nabizadeh

Department of English, University of Dundee, Nethergate, Dundee DD1 4HN, United Kingdom

Email: g.nabizadeh@dundee.ac.uk

Phone: +44(0)1382384516

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Abstract
Published in 2012, Pat Grant's debut graphic novel, *Blue*, depicts life in Bolton, a fictional Australian town that receives migrants who look noticeably different from the local community. Risk shapes *Blue* with regard to its aesthetic and formal concerns: the racism in Bolton places the foreigners at risk; Christian's uneasy nostalgia depicts a community vulnerable to the ravages of time; and the work itself was self-published by Grant as a graphic novel. The genesis of the work arose from Grant's accidental presence at the 2005 Cronulla riots in Sydney, a clash between Anglo and Middle Eastern Australians that brought to the fore questions about racism and community in Australian society. Grant has suggested that "this country has a bad record when it comes to any kind of history", and this paper argues that the graphic novel form usefully recasts local history through a 'minor' visual record. The comics form has had long-standing engagements with precarity, and I argue that comics are highly suited to exploring 'risky' narratives because of the medium's history as well as its formal properties. Comics have thus become popular vehicles for social criticism, frequently in the form of autobiography and memoir. As a highly mediated form, comics map time as space and in this article I argue that the form productively depicts the return of the past in the present—especially for pasts whose remembrance is inherently compromised or prohibited through other form of record in the visual archive.

Keywords: *Blue*, comics, risk, Cronulla, xenophobia, Pat Grant

Introduction

The question of risk arises in the context of contemporary population flows generated by wars, famines, persecution and economic collapses. The 'refugee crisis' that ensues is the signal that these events are having consequences in the first world. In Australia, a migrant country, the acceptance of migrants—and most particularly the acceptance of asylum seekers—is nevertheless highly politicised. Risk discourses are mobilised at different levels. The asylum seekers are themselves considered to be at risk, not just in relation to the conditions which they flee, but through the means by which they take flight—ruthless 'people smugglers', leaky boats, legal complexities. On the other side, risk is invoked by destination countries who feel they are the

victims of this 'external' problem. Welfare systems will be strained, social cohesion threatened, national security compromised, borders flaunted—all these are imagined within the framework of risk.

Pat Grant's comic, *Blue*, takes place in the fictional Australian coastal town of Bolton and deals with the issue of migration from the point of view of economically marginalised white Australians.[1] It follows the adolescent memories of Christian, a down-and-out local, and his encounters with the 'Blue people' who have recently begun arriving in Bolton. Christian's uneasy nostalgia depicts an insular community vulnerable to the ravages of time. As he recalls, Bolton was purpose built only a few decades earlier to accompany an industrial plant, dreamt up by politicians as 'the sort of place where lawns were mown, roads were smooth, women were pregnant and anyone looking for work was directed to the labour office in front of the plant' (np). The externalisation of social disadvantage as xenophobic resentment takes a familiar form in the narrative: 'Look at em, sitting out here on the street sucking down noodles…and when they're done they leave without picking up their rubbish…the place is a dump'. The story continues, 'You know I grew up here don't you?' before concluding, 'things are different now' (np). Over the page, we see the middle-aged Christian, sitting on a milk crate, the wall behind him partially painted. A spotlight illuminates him as he continues: 'You play "**spot the Aussie"** down here these days…it's funny, I can still remember the first time I seen one of those blue bastards…I was only little' (emphasis in original, np). And from here, we follow Christian's figure across a double spread sequence that depicts him getting 'dumped' by a wave, while tickets, stickers, photographs and other visual paraphernalia (like a ticket to the Australian music festival Big Day Out), line the top and bottom of the page. Xenophobic stickers carry messages like 'Support it or f**k off', 'We grew here

you flew here', and 'We're full' placed within a sticker in the shape of the Australian continent, continue to set the ideological scene in which the narrative will unfold.

Blue arose from Grant's accidental presence at what became known as the 'Cronulla riots' in the southern Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla. On the 11th and 12th of December 2005, large groups of male 'Anglo' Australians violently clashed with men of 'Middle Eastern' appearance. Prior to the violence, a widely circulated SMS within the former group stated:

> This Sunday every F—ing Aussie in the shire, get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb[anise] and Wog [general slur] bashing day … Bring your mates down and let's show them this is our beach and they're never welcomed back (*sic*). (Poynting 2007 cited in Bliuc et al, 2175)

The shock and emotional fall-out from Cronulla pervade *Blue*, where there is an anxious insistence on reclaiming the beach as a site of local identity.[2] Grant's witness of the events at Cronulla formed the genesis for two creative responses in *Blue* and an earlier online comic 'Waiting for Something to Happen: The Cronulla Race Riots'.[3] Grant has suggested that '[Australia] has a bad record when it comes to any kind of history', and this paper argues that the production of the comic—first as a series of online installments, and then as a book—allowed Grant to produce a work engaged that offers political commentary in a thoughtful and creative way. Rob Reiner's film *Stand By Me* (1986) was an influence on Grant's story, mixed with Grant's own teenage experience of going to see a body on the tracks. The comic was supported by Grant's success in securing an Emerging Writers/Illustrators Grant from the Australia Council for the Arts, and took around 16 months to complete.[4] As a hand-drawn work, the production of *Blue* also offers a trace of the artist's hand—its resilience evident in the text's availability in digital and hard-copy formats. The book is self-published by Grant, with distribution and marketing undertaken by Giramondo

Publishing (a literary small press) in Australia, and Top Shelf Productions in the United States. In September 2016, Pat and a number of artists and musicians performed a live rendition of the comic, described simply as a story about 'growing up racist in Wollongong' in a promotional video.[5]

Surfing looms large in the minds and mythology of Christian and his group, and discussions about surf conditions and legendary swells frequently pepper their conversations, although ironically we never observe them surfing (outside of Christian's imagination). The town of Bolton appears to be at risk – at least according to Christian's narrative. The reader observes that the town was a 1989 Tidy Towns Winner, a Keep Australia Beautiful initiative to celebrate 'sustainability achievements' across Australia. In the present, Christian laments 'you can't even get a sausage roll in Bolton these days', a signifier of the changing cultural and culinary landscape. He works as a painter, a Sisyphean task as the town walls are constantly graffitied over by small blue squiggles, which act as a reminder of the town's change, and the presence of others who undermine Christian's efforts to keep the walls 'clean' with white paint. Indeed, one of the most poignant, and repeated, reminders is the blue graffiti that inhabit the panels, and which form a kind of visual sub-narrative to the main story. From the commencement of Christian's story, the graffiti offers a counter-narrative about the interactions between the blue people and the townsfolk and Australian historical narrative. For example, in one panel, Christian states '[y]ou know I grew up here don't you?', yet the backdrop reminds the reader of a longer trajectory of Australian colonial history (Figure 1: *Counter-narrative*).

Insert [Figure 1: *Counter-narrative*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution].

In this panel, the central scene is reminiscent of Cook's arrival at Botany Bay in 1771, with the Union Jack flying next to him and a boat to his left. Other figures crowd around, seemingly flattened and scattered around the 'main' event, which seems to stand in for Australia's colonisation by the British, and the ruin they brought upon local Indigenous populations. Grant uses the pictograph of a hand to represent the actions of the British Empire laying claim to the Australian mainland, and above him rests what can be interpreted as an abstracted rain cloud. Immediately, then, this scene complicates the reader's reception of Christian's claim that he 'grew up' in Bolton, and in doing so, connects the arrival of the blue people with that of the British. The panel, then, utilises multiple layers of meaning to productively complicate Christian's assertion, and depict the inter-relationship between the blue people, and the local Bolton community.

Through a close reading of the text, the reader discovers that the differences between these two groups, while highly visible with regard to appearance, are not so fixed in other ways, and that they may be similar through deeper connective, and in this case historical, matter. Judith Butler explains this thesis by reference to wounding: 'I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control'.[6] Indeed, the graffiti that Christian continually paints over acts as a visual reminder of the unpredictability of the blue others, in the way that it reappears only moments after being painted over. *Blue* demonstrates how Christian remains wounded by his relationship not only with the blue people, but with the town of Bolton itself. Like a thorn in his side, these relationships trouble Christian, and Grant focalises these unsettled feelings through Christian's narrative.

Risk and the Other

Ulrich Beck has suggested that '[w]ithout techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, etc., risks are nothing at all'.[7] Indeed, the assessment of risk depends on how we understand its contours and contents. How do we visualise fear and threat? What does it mean to visualise these things? The techniques of visualisation that have evolved in the medium of comics have been used broach difficult and traumatic experiences, such as the Nazi Holocaust in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91), or the occupation of Palestine in Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1996). In this way comics continue their engagement with risk across several registers—from early publications in the Sunday 'funnies'—designed to last only a few days, as well as offering traces of visual record which might be smuggled to offer some record of witness, as Spiegelman discovered while researching hand-drawn images by inmates at Auschwitz.[8] Here, the risk is not only that one might inadvertently exacerbate the suffering of those originally traumatised (or their descendants), nor that one might be implicated into a debate where there is no neutral position, but that the very act of representation might have the effect of taming and stabilising what should properly remain in process and destabilised.

The distinctive shade of blue, used throughout the text, sets into motion a number of associations that intermingle to heighten the ambivalence of the narrative. Blue seems to at once signify Christian's melancholic reserve, as he reflects on the past, as well as the oceans by which the Blue people arrive in Bolton. In an Australian context, the notion of 'true blue' is slang for someone who represents the mythos of what it means to be Australian, and which acquires a particular valence in a neo-

nationalist context in which *Blue* took shape. The folk singer John Williamson captured this sentiment in song, 'True Blue', which itself was played at the memorial service for Steve Irwin, the Australian wildlife expert. Grant's decision to colour the foreign characters blue may signal a conscious choice to play with some of these associations, particularly in relation to nationalism and belonging. The inherent instability of representation within the comics form allows it to formalise risk, to register uncertainty at the visual level of its hand-made production.

In this context, it is clear that *Blue* risks being misunderstood as it explores belonging and racism in Christian's story. Grant seems mindful of the tension that fuels the text, stating, '[e]verything in my comic book *Blue* is bullshit…I am not a right-wing crank who works as a painter … [b]ut then again, all of it is true … I did wag [skip] school to go surfing with my friends'.[9] But it is the form of comic art, and its tactical naivety that allows it to cut through topics that are subject to intense politicisation, and where one's every word is liable to place one in one camp or the other. As Grant puts it: '[c]omic art seems to be the key that many people need to access a chamber of their psyche that is otherwise locked away from their adult consciousness' (np). Lauded by Shaun Tan for its 'pitch-perfect dialogue and composition'[10], and by Craig Thompson, who described Grant as 'the Mark Twain of Australia'[11], *Blue* keenly identifies a discomfiting amalgam of fear, distrust, enthusiasm, and confusion among the community it depicts.

It is only later in the text that we learn who the derided others, the 'blue bastards' are, characters Grant depicts in a muted duck-egg blue, whose names remain unknown, and are referred to only as 'blue people'. Drawn in the style of bowling pins with tentacles for arms and legs, the arrival of the blue people frequently

provokes the towns' racism, including from Christian and his friends (Figure 2: *Blue People*).

Insert [Figure 2: *Blue People*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution.]

Grant draws in an evocative aesthetic style that is reminiscent of early Australian surfing comics, with aspects of Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr Seuss), and Hokusai's wave-art forms woven into its visual tapestry. The surreal characterisation of the blue people utilises the capacity of comics to visualise difference; we don't know what they really look like, and nor does it matter, except that they are somehow different to the local population. Their appearance sets them apart from the protagonist, and the local populace, who fail to recognise the differences that abound within themselves and their community. While the blue people look strange, so too do the locals; Grant depicts Christian, Muck, and Verne unsympathetically, with protruding teeth and strangely shaped heads.

Christian's reminiscences focus on the day that he, Verne, and Muck skip school to go surfing. Along the way, they hear from a fellow truant that a body has been discovered on the railroad tracks that snake around the town of Bolton, and they decide to go see it. At the last moment, however, they change their minds, presumably overwhelmed by the gruesome facticity of the body. The reason for the change is not clearly articulated, and the ambivalence about this decision carries the echoes of other forms of ambivalence the narrator shares with us. In an extensive essay at the end of *Blue*, Grant describes a memory of a similarly planned event to witness a decimated body on train tracks. Grant writes that '[m]y memory of this event brings up feelings of unease similar to those I get when I'm brooding over the themes of *Blue*', including 'localism, racism, and the creepy politics that play out in small town

supermarkets and surf club car parks.'[12] Indeed, there is a difficult mix of nostalgia, confusion, and tension that permeates Christian's story. In hindsight, he wonders whether he 'did the right thing' by avoiding seeing the body, 'because I'm not sure that whatever there was for us to up there, past the first tunnel, could have been as bad as what we didn't see'. He adds, 'I still can't get **that** out of my head' (emphasis in original). The decision not to see the body has created its own haunting, the blood on the tracks spilling over into a frameless panel that contains the latter statement. Christian indeed appears to sense things, but his insights sometimes remains fuzzy— the unseen body haunts him, as do, I suggest, the blue bodies he encounters but, for the most part, fails to apprehend throughout the story. In this sense, there is a melancholic flavour that permeates his remembrance of the past. The colour scheme supports the way that Christian's memories are coded, the muted blue of the comic acting as a floating signifier.

Comics and Risk

Grant affirms the potential for comics to deal with difficult issues, suggesting that, '[s]inking into the story space that comic art affords us – as cartoonists, but also as readers … leaves us exposed to raw, emotive readings of time, space and form'[13]. The comics form has had a long-standing engagement with precarity, and the medium is highly suited to exploring risky narratives because of its history as well as its formal properties. Early comics were ephemera in a material sense—designed to last only a day or two after their publication in Sunday newspapers. The 1950s saw the rise of censorship in comics across the United States and Australia, as authorities became concerned with the alleged detrimental impact of comics on the social behaviour of children and adolescents. In recent decades, this trend has been reversed, as comics

have become popular vehicles for social criticism, frequently in the form of autobiography and memoir. As a mediated form, comics map time as space[14] and are frequently used to depict the interaction of the past with the present, and its persistent return, particularly in relation to pasts whose remembrance is inherently precluded from other forms of memorialization. With the conscious deployment of frames, and visual content, comics can help us explore the guises that danger might adopt, and begin to materialise a usefully relational understanding between reader and image. By actively visualizing risk in comics, their creators allow readers to apprehend danger in a self-consciously fictional form. As Art Spiegelman suggests, the boxes or frames that are mostly used to arrange the story also contain those risks within digestible portions.[15] This aesthetic and organizational device provides a useful scaffold on which to think about—and imagine—risk.

Grant notes the productive capacity of comics to respond to debates about race and racism, stating 'working in comics is good because it's easier to avoid comfortable rhetoric and boring clichés'. He adds, '[t]he traditional discourses we use to talk about race are kind of exhausted, but with comics it might be possible to say something new that hasn't been said in critical language.'[16] Indeed, as scholar Charles Hatfield suggests,

> [t]he fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different
> images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive
> options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and
> unfixable.[17]

I suggest that it is precisely the 'surfeit of interpretive options' that provides comics such as *Blue* with their particular capacity for storytelling. Readers encounter the text not only by reading each discrete element on the page, but also in they way they can digest each page in its entirety. Within these two domains, the meaning ascribed to

'images, shapes, and symbols' shifts, depending on the connections (conscious and unconscious) that each reader develops in relation to the text.

The possibility of exploring the unfamiliar through comics finds powerful expression in a sequence where Christian and his gang encounter a blue child at the train station. Grant depicts this encounter over four full pages, a testament to a fragile confusion that falls into the artificial solidity of racism. The sequence commences with a blue child breaking the fourth wall as he looks at the reader, and the next panel registers Christian, Verne, and Muck's collective shock—depicted through their surprised features and 'sweat beads'—before the sequence continues to depict the movement of the child past them. This child appears to have been adopted by an elderly local couple, as they hold one of his striped tentacles. The group expresses shock at the appearance of the child, confused about his ethnicity and place of origin. Muck asks, 'What are we supposed to call them?', to which Verne answers, 'I don't know, just blue people'. Muck wonders whether this term is racist, and Verne responds: 'Maybe. They are blue though. How can it be racist if it's true?' Soon, Christian joins the conversation and shifts the conversation into aggressive territory: 'That kid was nothing like a curry muncher. He was more like a boong' (Figure 3: *Transition*). Here, the sequence focuses on Verne and Muck's shocked expressions – which Grant depicts almost identically to their response to the blue child. The next two panels move down the page and respectively portray Christian's smiling face, and the others' reflection of his smile.

Insert [Figure 3: *Transition*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution.]

The transition in Verne and Muck's response to Christian's use of the term 'boong' – a racial slur used to describe Australian Aboriginals, describes a subtle movement of

significance. Their initial response portrays apprehension and surprise as they look up at Christian on the train platform, before being reassured through the visual cue of his smiling face. In this way, the comic carefully presents how Verne and Muck's tentative wondering is thwarted by Christian's authoritative declaration, one that derives its authority through its racism, and engulfs their speculations with aggression. This aggression is confirmed in the next panel, as Christian yells, 'Go back to Oogetty Boong-land you ugly blue dickhead!' (np). Grant depicts this statement in a larger, heavier font than the text's regular dialogue. The words escape the confines of the speech bubble to indicate the violence of the speech.

Christian's posture, with feet raised slightly off the ground in a mild upward thrust, along with the spit bubbles that travel vigorously from his open mouth, strengthen the affective vehemence of his call. In this sequence, the portrait of Verne and Muck's shock remains, and the reader can simultaneously observe this moment, as well as its placement in the overall story. The moment remains present, even while it is understood as a past event. As Art Spiegelman observes, comics are ideally suited to represent memory because they allow the reader to flit between the past and present, while being conscious of an overall sequence.[18] This comment recalls Grant's insistence on the ability of comics to leave readers' open to 'raw, emotive readings of time, space and form' as they 'sink' into the space of the story.[19] While film, literature, and other art forms also allow their viewers and readers the ability to become submerged in the text, comics are unique in their sequential qualities because of the way they traverse and hold time across the surface of the physical page.

Alongside their banter and slang, Verne, Muck, and Christian display 'quieter' responses such as fear, confusion, and trepidation, that reveal more contemplative and

thoughtful moments. Grant takes the time to depict these expressions in panels that are frequently unaccompanied by dialogue, or by Christian's reminiscence. This provides the reader with an opportunity to wonder, along with characters, about what is not being said directly, much like the decision to not approach the body on the train tracks. As Tom Gunning suggests, 'the power of comics lies in their ability to derive movement from stillness—not to make the reader observe motion but rather participate imaginatively in its genesis'.[20] In the example above, the sense of movement is derived through the transition in the affective flow of the sequence. The 'stillness' of the characters' expressions allows the reader to wonder about the change, and the processes that inform it, thereby participating in the sense of movement (emotional and physical) within the text. In itself, this requires attention from the reader, and an ability to speculate how the text drives their reading. One upshot, then, of reading comics, is that they generally require—at one time or another—the reader to slow down their reading, or to move back and forth between panels as they accumulate meaning within the text. Grant uses the phrase 'the slow drama of life' to describe his comics, and this slowing down is recreated in the ambulatory pace of the narrative and, more generally, by the way that the physical dimensions of each frame are tailored to support the action contained therein.

Christian and his friends are ineluctably drawn to the train line that lies beyond Bolton and around which the story reaches its (anti)-climax. Christian explains, 'I don't know what it was about the line but when we were young we found it irresistible' (np), and the action soon moves there. The line offers 'something different', beyond the manicured and highly surveyed streets of Bolton, and the razor wire that delimits the rail corridor paradoxically provides privacy once the kids move within its confines. Around the track, Grant depicts the Banksia in the manner of the

woodcuts of Margaret Preston, their distinctive flowering spikes mingling with other swirling vegetation. These flora contrast with the rounded iris-like forms of vegetation within Bolton, which provide a 'natural' analog to the prominent surveillance cameras in the town (Figures 4 and 5 respectively).

Insert [Figure 4: *Banksia*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution.]

Insert [Figure 5: *Town Vegetation*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution.]

The repeated images of the town vegetation enhance the quietly claustrophobic depiction of Bolton, and the reader encounters a sense of relief not unlike that the group when they move into the rail corridor. Here, the group encounters a teenage girl, who has stopped attending school altogether. After they mention the purpose of their visit to the tracks, to 'have a look at the spot where the dead guy was', she mentions that they will know where the body is ''cause the tracks are all blue' (np). When Muck asks why the tracks are '**Blue?**' (emphasis in original), her stance and intonation mirrors that of Christian's, and her response is similarly aggressive: 'Because of all the blood you dopey little faggot!'. Grant captures Muck's dismayed response, 'Oh', with a close-up of his face, worry-lines furrowing his brow. The girl has provided an important piece of information; the body on the tracks belongs to a blue person. Whereas up until now, the imagined body parts have been visualized in sepia, from this point the visual register codes Christian's memories in blue. The group soon approaches the place where the body lays. As they walk along the tracks, Christian and Muck slow down, leaving Verne ahead. After Christian calls out to Verne, Grant inserts the remembered image of the blue child the group encountered earlier. The communication between the three now slows down, becoming

monosyllabic, until Muck calls out to Verne, 'Let's just go back'. The group walks back in silence until they meet another bunch of youths whom they tell: 'Yeah, we seen it', 'It's heaps festy, ay'. As Christian reflects, 'When you start telling stories about your life, things seem more clear cut than when you were living it'. Indeed, the silences that punctuate the denouement leave much unsaid, but the remembrance of the blue child offers a significant moment of apprehension for the group. It seems, perhaps for the first time, they have recognized the would-be body of the other as something that they must confront, and grieve for, rather than an object that was afforded no liveliness (in their eyes) to begin with. This shift in thinking—the partial recognition of what I earlier described as the gruesome facticity of the dead body—is perhaps what stops the group in their tracks, unable to confront a body that has hitherto not been recognized as one.

Productive Melancholies

Judith Butler suggests that 'there are "subjects" who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are "lives" that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives'.[21] Drawing a distinction between 'apprehension' and 'recognition', Butler argues that if a life is not recognised as such, then its loss cannot be grieved. By contrast, while apprehension is 'bound up with sensing and perceiving' it is not always a conceptual form of knowledge.[22] Comics offer an ideal platform to think creatively about the notions of 'apprehension' and 'recognition' because they rely on visual data to communicate their message.

I suggest that this moment instantiates a precariousness which finds itself expressed in the melancholic quality of Christian's *recitatif*. For Butler, 'precariousness underscores our radical substitutability and anonymity in relation both

to certain … modes of dying and death and to other socially conditioned modes of persisting and flourishing'.[23] The notion of 'radical substitutability' is visually accessible in *Blue* as Grant places images of the group, and the blue child, in succession (Figure 6: *Recognition*).

Insert [Figure 6: *Recognition*. Pat Grant, *Blue*, 2012. Creative Commons Attribution.]

For a brief moment, it seems that the kids can almost imagine themselves in the place of a blue person—on the tracks or on the street—and this unspoken recognition is perhaps what prevents them from feasting their eyes on the tragic scene. The understanding that a life has been lost is only possible when its subject is recognizable, and the remembered image of the blue child provides this fragile, but significant, understanding. In the scene above, Christian clarifies his memories of encountering the blue other by letting the reader know that he only saw the adopted child at the train station, and not the second blue body on the tracks. The absence of a border around the remembered image of the blue child emphasizes the permeability of Christian's memories. Far from being forgotten, the reader can literally observe the presence of a foreign presence in his visual recollections of the past. In this sequence, the blue child's expression becomes mournful, even accusatory, as we access Christian's ambivalence about his decision not to see the body. Grant withholds from romanticizing this moment, or from making this tentative connective moment between Christian's past and present a *fait accompli*.

The final panel in the sequence depicts an imagined encounter; we understand that Christian is creating an imagined memory, one where blue blood has stained the railway, while the ever-present graffiti acts as a screen memory, standing in for the absent body. Christian goes on to wonder whether the day that they decided not to see

the body was also 'the day that locals around here started to wonder whether Bolton was worth the effort', and if 'that was when things in Bolton started going downhill'. Perhaps these statements contain displaced feelings of loss that Christian was unable to access as a youth, and which become bound up in his work as a painter. The repeated appearance and disappearance of the graffiti recalls something of the *fort/da* game that Freud proposed as a means of processing the anxiety of loss. The graffiti appears to stand in for the blue people themselves, and despite Christian's efforts to occlude this visual record from sight—and from memory—the signifier of their presence persists.

In the final sequence of *Blue*, Christian walks away from a freshly painted wall, and as he does so, a blue person comes around the corner, and starts drawing on the wall in now-familiar blue graffiti. Grant suggests that '[i]n Bolton the walls are just a symbolic battle ground for competing cultural interests like they are in any city full of stickers, tags, advertising, murals, signage and of course the squares of […] paint that guys like Christian like to put up everywhere.' In this sequence, the graffiti is suggestive of a 'life after' Christian's story, where the desire to draw remains, even when earlier efforts have been painted over. The re-appearance of the graffiti also provides a visual sense of continuity, and of a sense of liveliness that continues in the town of Bolton, even though the liveliness has taken on a different contour to its 'original' form in Christian's memories.

Conclusion: Uncertain Futures

In an interview on fear and risk society, Ulrich Beck suggests that in the face of manufactured uncertainty, risk societies must work towards establishing a 'culture of uncertainty', the key to which is in,

the readiness to openly talk about the approach to risk; the willingness to acknowledge the difference between quantitative risks and non-quantitative uncertainty; the willingness to negotiate between different rationalities, rather than to engage in mutual denunciation …[24]

Within this list, terms such as 'negotiate' and 'recognition' suggest that 'cultures of uncertainty' are structured through their unboundedness, and a curiosity about how things might be rather than how risk being the privilege of the status quo. Specifically, Beck asks '[h]ow is it possible to decipher the internal links between risk and race, risk and image of the enemy, risk and exclusion?'[25] Indeed, Christian's story is marked by hesitation, frustration, and disenchantment. His ambivalence towards the past—equal parts nostalgia and regret—registers the stasis that sits at the heart of the town's racism. From what we see, the town rarely risks engagement with the blue foreigners—they are, for the most part, locked up and disparaged, and Christian and his friends remain similarly insulated from the broader community. And yet this is not the full story, as we observe the ways in which the blue 'others' have a relational impact within the town of Bolton. This is observable through the aesthetic representation of the town, as well as the youths' responses to the blue people. As in the railway example, the presence of the blue people is felt, and visible, throughout the narrative, despite some locals' attempts to disavow their company.

The narrative concludes on an uncertain note; as Christian walks away from the freshly painted wall, his feelings seemingly remain unresolved, and as readers we are unsure what will happen to Bolton and its inhabitants. The open-ended conclusion to the story means that readers can contemplate different possibilities that might unfold in Bolton's event horizon, maintaining a 'structure of uncertainty' to use Beck's phrase. The mechanics that structure *Blue* supports such a reading, by maintaining the irresolution of the past within the present. To this end, blue—as a

pigment and an open signifier—productively colours not only the body of the foreign inhabitants and the waves around Bolton, but also the melancholic relation that Christian's past bears for him.

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[1] Melbourne: Giramondo Press, 2012.

[2] For a sociological discussion of the significance of beaches in Australian culture, and specifically in relation to the Cronulla Riots see Bliuc et al, 'Manipulating National Identity: the strategic use of rhetoric by supporters and opponents of the 'Cronulla riots' in Australia' *Racial and Ethnic Studies* 35.12 (2012): pp. 2174-94; and Anthony Redmond, 'Surfies versus Westies: Kinship, Mateship and Sexuality in the Cronulla Riot' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 18.3 (2007): pp. 336-50. The littoral zone also occupies an important location in the Australian literary context. For example, see CA Cranston and Robert Zellor (eds), *The Littoral Zone: Australian Writers and their Contexts* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2007).

[3] 'Waiting for Something to Happen: The Cronulla Race Riots' (2007), is available at http://www.patgrantart.com/content/waiting/waiting.html (accessed 28 April 2016).

[4] 'Pat Grant's *Blue*', *Surfing Life* (4 July 2011), available at http://www.surfinglife.com.au/news/sl-news/9264-pat-grant's-blue (accessed 12 December 2016).

[5] '*Blue* Live – Explainer' https://www.facebook.com/gabeclark/videos/vb.535320405/10154444499845406/?type=2 &theater

[6] 'Violence, Mourning and Politics' in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso: London, 2004, p. 46.

[7] 'Living in the World at Risk', *Economy and Society* 35.3 (2006), p. 332.

8 Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* (London: Penguin, 2011), 49. For further discussion on the use of visual archives in autobiographical comics, see, Golnar Nabizadeh, "The Afterlife of Images: Archives and Intergenerational Trauma in Autobiographic Comics", in *Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Trauma Narratives*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. pp. 171-190. Eds Dana Mihailescu, Roxana Oltean, and Mihaela Precup.

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10 http://giramondopublishing.com/product/blue/ (accessed 3 February 2017).

11 http://www.topshelfcomix.com/catalog/blue/772 (accessed 3 February 2017).

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13 Ibid.

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[24] 'An Interview with Ulrich Beck on Fear and Risk Society' Joshua Yates. *The Hedgehog Review* Fall (2001): 96-107, p. 106.

[25] 'Living in the World at Risk', p. 345.