

Two Distant Soils: Colleen Doran's Authorial Journey

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Abstract

THIS article considers the publication history of Colleen Doran's sci-fi series *A Distant Soil* (*ADS*), which first appeared at WaRP Graphics and was discontinued after nine issues. Instead of taking her work to another publisher, Doran discarded her promising but amateurish pages and went on to redraw the entire story, thus creating the definitive version of *ADS*. In the eight years separating the two iterations, Doran's vision crystallized, and the story's journey in time was paralleled by Doran's own journey as she honed her artistic and editorial vision. The first version of *ADS* documents Doran's artistic growth and constitutes an overlooked landmark in the history of manga reception in the United States. As it showcases Doran's progressive mastery of ink, tone sheets, decorative backgrounds, complex layouts, and decompressed storytelling, *ADS* provides evidence for the possibility of a comics style which is both indigenous to the USA and similar to manga in form and intent. Furthermore, the process of redrawing and retelling one's own work allowed Doran to truly appropriate a series whose crafting had been largely shaped by external forces. That Doran's unique artistic voice was hindered, rather than helped, by her small independent publisher is also testament to the reality behind idealized perceptions of the small press movement in the 1980s.

Introduction

COLLEEN Doran is a prolific, Eisner Award-winning comic artist who has had extensive experience working for both mainstream and independent publishers. She made her professional debut in the early 1980s, when she was a teenager. Her first published series was *A Distant Soil* (*ADS*), a space opera of epic proportions born out of Doran's childhood enthusiasm for superhero comics and animated shows.

A Distant Soil is the story of Liana, a 15-year-old girl who is heiress to the psychic powers of the Avatar, a spiritual leader on the alien planet of Ovanan. The current Avatar, Seren, is controlled by a group of ruthless politician leaders known as the Hierarchy. Because Liana's powers interfere with Seren's, the Hierarchy

want her dead. Fortunately, Seren and his bodyguard-cum-lover D’mer are secretly plotting to save Liana and bring down the Hierarchy with the help of Liana’s brother Jason, exiled knight Galahad, and a host of other characters.

Over the years, *ADS* was refined into a tightly woven science-fiction narrative which Doran still writes and draws to this day, despite major setbacks, such as the printer losing all photographic negatives of the original art. Indeed, *ADS*’s publication history has been particularly eventful, as demonstrated by the table below (table 1), which serves as an overview of the sequence of events described in this article.

Date	Publisher	Contents
Early 1980s (?)	Fanzines	Early versions of the story.
1983–1986	WaRP Graphics (Wendy and Richard Pini)	First published version: nine black-and-white issues, mostly in pencil.
1987 and 1989	Donning	Entirely new version of the story: two graphic novels in full colour.
1991–1996	Aria Press (Doran)	The series restarts with black-and-white artwork adapted from the Starblaze graphic novels (14 issues).
1996–present	Image Comics	The series moves from Aria to Image starting with no. 15 in 1996. The series has been on hiatus since no. 42 in 2013, but publication is due to resume soon.

Table 1. Publishers of *A Distant Soil*.

The publication of *A Distant Soil* first began in 1983 at WaRP Graphics. WaRP (named after its creators Wendy and Richard Pini) was the small independent publishing outfit which the Pinis had put together in 1978 to publish their own series, *Elfquest*, after the project was rejected by all mainstream publishers. *Elfquest* became an instant hit on the direct market—by 1984 it was selling 100,000 copies (Reed)—allowing the couple to expand their ambitions and start publishing other creators’ work.

However, in 1986, after nine issues of *A Distant Soil*, Doran resigned from her job at WaRP, citing both contractual violation and dissatisfaction over the way she was treated personally (Groth 7). As she left, the Pinis tried to claim partial ownership of the series as well as merchandising and licensing rights—indeed, under the initial arrangement, copyright to *ADS* was jointly owned by Doran and by WaRP. However, Doran, who was the main creative force behind the story,

insisted on sole ownership. She eventually regained control of the series through an undisclosed out-of-court settlement in the summer of 1986 (Fryer 17). Despite having won her case, Doran discarded the hundreds of pages of the first *Distant Soil* and decided to start again from scratch. These efforts resulted in the two full-colour graphic novels published by Donning under their Starblaze imprint, a collaboration which also ended with a legal settlement. The Donning books formed the basis for Doran's subsequent development of the series. *ADS* restarted as a self-published black-and-white monthly in 1991 at Aria Press, with minor alterations to the art done for Donning. Five years later, in the context of the collapse of the distributor system (Dietsch), the series moved from Aria Press to Image comics, which still publishes it today.

Looking at this sequence of events, Brannon Costello and Brian Cremins comment: "The dramatic transformation of Doran's series over the course of just a few short years emphatically underscores how the 1980s were an era of transformation, flux, and possibility for comics" (3). Yet if *ADS* is a product of its time, it is also symptomatic of Doran's personal struggle to maintain legal and creative control of her work. As far as Doran was concerned, the '80s were a time of opportunity, but most of all of challenges. She has spoken out about the hardships she endured in the early years of her career, as a young woman finding work with independent publishers. The scenes she describes, which involve routine misbehaviour and even sexual harassment on the part of various unnamed industry professionals (Wiater and Bisette 234), shed light on the darker side of the direct sales market of the '80s. Indeed, Doran's experience with WaRP is but one example of how the independent movement, despite its claims to contractual fairness and creative freedom, reproduced the exploitative practices of major publishers. Doug Moench recalls that he was offered an excellent page rate at Eclipse Comics in the 1980s, only to be asked to agree to a pay cut when his book *Aztec Ace* did not sell enough to cover the agreed fee (Kunka 51n6). Similarly, when Howard Chaykin decided to stop working on *American Flagg!*, his publisher Pacific Comics decided "to keep publishing the series with a new creative team, as though it were just another Marvel or DC property" (Costello 73).

What is more, Doran's work is also an integral part of the history of manga reception in the United States. When Doran started working on *ADS* with WaRP, the only existing manga available in English translation was *Gen of Hiroshima*, which came out in 1980 with Educomics (Brienza 44). Animated series from Japan had begun airing on US-American TV networks as early as the 1960s but were "stripped of all visual and plot references to Japan" (McKevitt 180), so that audiences were unlikely to identify their origin. It was only in the final decade of the twentieth century that manga began to flourish on the international market. Yet, as early as the 1980s, forerunners like Wendy Pini, Frank Miller, Barry Blair, and Reggie Byers explicitly borrowed from Japanese masters, emulating the works of Osamu Tezuka, Goseki Kojima, or Rumiko Takahashi (Cremins 107). Doran's case is rather different, as she hardly sought to imitate manga, yet underwent parallel evolution. Her own sensibility, shaped by Art Nouveau and nineteenth-century illustration,

led her to favour the expressive backgrounds, glamorous character designs, and decompressed forms of storytelling which we retrospectively associate with manga.

As *ADS* moved through time, the plot remained almost unchanged (except, perhaps, for a couple of characters who had slightly different personalities in the newer version, the extreme example being D'mer, who went from silent, hot-blooded bodyguard to exuberant, likeable rogue). Thus, the lesser-known WaRP series offers valuable insights into the genesis of Doran's sprawling epic; it features the unpolished pencil drawings of a gifted amateur who would become one of the most accomplished comic artists of her generation. The art style, the narrative pacing, and the stylistic choices are all markedly different because of Doran's artistic maturation and increased authorial and editorial control.

My intention in this article is to shed light on the value of WaRP's *Distant Soil*, which, despite its many flaws, is a valuable document of Doran's artistic growth, as well as an exception in the history of manga reception in the USA. As it showcases Doran's progressive mastery of pencil, ink, tone sheets, decorative backgrounds, complex layouts, and decompressed storytelling, *ADS* also provides evidence for the possibility of a comic style that is both indigenous to the USA and strikingly similar to manga in form and intent. The fact that Doran's artistic development and creative freedom were hindered, rather than helped, by her small independent publisher is also testament to the often harsh reality behind idealized perceptions of the small press movement in the 1980s.

First, I will examine the series' journey in time as an artist's progress towards full creative ownership, as can be seen with particular clarity in the paratexts of the various editions of *ADS*. Then, I will consider Doran's artistic maturation, using the first *Distant Soil* as genetic evidence. Finally, I will discuss this journey against the wider backdrop of transnational circulation and commercial changes in the late twentieth century, showing how Doran processed what her readers increasingly identified as manga aesthetics.

Regaining Control: WaRP Issues as a Locus for Negotiating Authority

IT might seem paradoxical at first that Doran's work with an independent publisher should have been synonymous with lack of authorial control. Indeed, WaRP had been set up by the Pinis precisely because it enabled them to publish *Elfquest* according to their own tastes and schedule, free of external interference. But when WaRP began to publish other people's work, starting with *ADS*, *Elfquest* and the massive success it had garnered served as a constant point of reference.¹ This holds true for the numerous fans of the series, as evidenced by the letter column of issue no. 1, which features letters written by *Elfquest* readers reacting to the preview appearance of eight pages of *ADS* in *Elfquest* no. 16. As can be expected, most readers draw a comparison between the two series: "the artwork looks a bit two-dimensional next to ELFQUEST", writes Nancy Shapiro (*ADS* [WaRP]

¹ This article does not seek to ascribe motives to the various actors involved, or to arbitrate between the Pinis' and Doran's versions of the events, but simply to analyze the WaRP issues of *A Distant Soil* in the retrospective light of Doran's current career.

1: 33), while David A. Farnell complains about the addition of a preview: “I prefer my ELFQUEST to be ELFQUEST, not ELFQUEST and. . .” (*ADS* [WaRP] 1: 33).

Crucially, *Elfquest* may have served as an early point of reference for both Colleen Doran and Richard Pini. In a joint interview they gave to Brian Talley, Doran repeatedly brings up *Elfquest* to describe what her own story will be like in terms of character evolution (51), artistic influence (56) and length (61). Richard Pini himself was self-taught as an editor and publisher, and his close collaboration with his wife may have informed his approach to other series published by WaRP. In this regard, his foreword to the first issue of *ADS*, “W.a.R.P. Words”, is strikingly ambivalent:

the initial reaction to W.a.R.P. Graphics’ decision to branch out into publishing other comic magazines was along the lines of “What?! But you do ELFQUEST!” As if that’s all we should be doing.—or as if EQ were the only child W.a.R.P. should birth. [. . .] So say hello to the newest member of the W.a.R.P. family. (Inside cover)

Although Pini specifies that *ADS* is “the brainchild [. . .] of Colleen Doran”, it is hard not to read the familial imagery as a declaration of intellectual paternity. Even as he strives to convince his readers that WaRP can serve to showcase the work of other creators, the constant comparisons with *Elfquest*’s format and narrative structure make that an ambiguous goal at best.

Most telling of all was the decision to have Richard Pini on board not merely as an editor, but also as co-plotter, which is the function he had served on *Elfquest*. Although the storyline was entirely Doran’s creation, the dialogue in early issues was written by Richard Pini: he was credited for “script and editing”, while Doran provided “plot and art” (*Distant Soil* [WaRP] 1: 1). Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette explain: “[Doran’s] undeniable youth and relative inexperience in the field initially prompted the imposition of an older writer upon her creation—a situation Doran found completely intolerable” (232). The phrase used by Pini in issue no. 1 seems to confirm that this was primarily his decision, as he explains, “until I hear otherwise, I plan to be the scripter for *A Distant Soil*” (*Distant Soil* [WaRP] 1: 33).

And indeed, on the surface, there were reasons to believe *ADS* was just another *Elfquest*: the young female creator with a vision, the sci-fi/fantasy setting, the epic proportions of the narrative, the eroticized treatment of male bodies, and the taste for strong female characters were obvious common points between the two books. But this was largely accentuated by editorial choices such as the slow publication pace (four times a year to fit the schedule of a solo artist), the magazine format (21 x 28 cm, larger than a standard comic book), and of course the stylish black-and-white artwork, which had made *Elfquest* instantly recognizable on the shelves of the direct market.

In those early issues, Doran’s editorial invisibility is complete; she did not write a line of the paratext, which makes for a striking contrast with her current authorial persona. More importantly perhaps, she was not fully in charge of the covers. The reasons are unclear: this may have been due to lack of time (a problem

repeatedly mentioned in the editorials), or to Doran's perceived inexperience with colours. In no. 2, Pini explains: "Issue #1's cover was drawn by Colleen Doran and finished and coloured by Wendy Pini. [Issue #2's] cover was designed by Colleen, and rendered and coloured by Joe Barruso" (inside cover). No. 3 also featured a collaboration between Doran, Pini, and M. Lucie Chin. For readers, this resulted in a contrasted experience: no. 3 is marked by Pini's unmistakable inking (although the character is obviously Doran's) while the character on the cover of no. 2 is barely recognizable as D'Mer. Since covers are the most visible part of the comic and play a great part in allowing readers to identify the book, the high level of collaboration involved was bound to create the impression that *ADS* was a team effort, and not the work of a single creator.

The same dynamics were at work on the back covers; in *ADS* nos. 1 to 3, back covers were identical to the front covers, with a different text. However, starting with issue no. 4, WaRP introduced a portrait gallery featuring pinups of the main characters (Jason in no. 4, D'mer in no. 5, etc.). This move further approximated *ADS* to *Elfquest*, whose portrait gallery had been part and parcel of its graphic identity. Richard Pini ascribed the move to readers' requests, explaining in no. 3: "some of you have written to ask why W.a.R.P. doesn't do—a la ELFQUEST—back covers with different art for its other books. [...] Until now, neither Colleen nor Phil Foglio [the artist on *Mythadventures*, another series published by WaRP] has had time to do the second piece of art needed" (inside cover). In other words, the desire to create a shared identity for all WaRP series resulted in the duplication of some of *Elfquest*'s key features.

All these elements suggest that although Doran was duly credited as the artist for *ADS*, she was never established as an author in her own right. Auteur theory, as it emerged in the field of cinema studies, posits that despite the necessarily collaborative nature of filmmaking, directors remain the authors of their films because they retain control over the entire process to achieve their personal vision (Assayas and de Baecque 7). Schumer has suggested that auteur theory could be applied to comics, positing that artists who collaborate with comics writers do nonetheless possess authorial status because they execute their vision through drawing (447). Paradoxically, in *ADS* the artist's role was downplayed, as control over the final product partly eluded her.

This situation changed, to an extent, as Doran honed her skills. Starting with issue no. 6, she gained sole control of the scripting, with Richard Pini credited as editor only. Pini explained that this was a consensual move: "we both decided it was time to make A DISTANT SOIL a truly 'creator created' title" (inside cover). However, the storytelling remained rather similar to previous issues, with a lot of narrative captions. Those are significant because they are endemic in the early WaRP issues, but much scarcer in the later *Aria* version. Looking at issue no. 6, we find a total of five silent panels (three full panels and two inset panels). By way of comparison, the issue that features similar events in the *Aria* version, issue no. 5, which was published in 1993 with the same cover illustration as WaRP no. 6, has twenty-one panels with no balloons and no captions.

This could be due to Doran's adoption of Pini's writing habits—*Elfquest* also uses many captions—, or it may be the consequence of a high level of editorial intervention on his part. Interviews given by Doran seem to point towards the latter: when interviewed following her resignation from WaRP, Doran stated that Pini made “99 changes” to the twenty pages of issue no. 6, without consulting her. Specifically, she complained: “Richard inserts captions with ungracious abandon. One of his favourite things is that every panel should have words” (Groth). In his response, Pini did not deny the facts, but disputed the claim that many of these changes were unfounded.

Beyond issues of artistic integrity, the reading experience of WaRP's *ADS* is also shaped by the format changes that occurred over time: one of those was the switch to a smaller size beginning with issue no. 6 (which returned to a standard comics format). The second was the addition of a backup strip, *Panda Khan* by Monica Sharp and Dave Garcia, which bore no relation to *ADS* and took the place of what was originally meant to be behind-the-scenes material. One final aspect of the book which eluded Doran was the choice of the *Distant Soil* logo. The latter seems to have been modelled after that of *Star Wars*, although in a slightly blockier font. The capital letters, the ligature connecting the *S* and the *T*, and the use of perspective (as in the film's famous opening crawl) all contribute to that effect. References to *Star Wars* are also abundant in the dialogue of early WaRP issues, and were probably meant to exploit public enthusiasm for George Lucas's saga, as *Return of the Jedi* was released the same year as *ADS*'s first issue. Doran's later version features no such allusions, and the new logo, done in a calligraphic style, is much more evocative of fantasy than of science-fiction.

As we have seen, the nine WaRP issues bear the traces of the tensions between the creator and her editor, and attest to the complex publishing environment within which she operated. As I shall demonstrate now, these texts are also valuable from a genetic point of view: they reveal Doran's growth as an artist, as she went through a range of different visual and narrative techniques over the course of her work at WaRP.

Formal Experiments

THE most prominent visual feature of WaRP's *ADS* is probably the fact that it was reproduced directly from Doran's pencils. The books have very few solid black areas, which creates a strikingly distinctive look but also contributes to the feeling of amateurism, especially as her command of anatomy and body language was still a little shaky. The pencil technique later became one of Doran's fortes; throughout her career, and especially on *ADS*, she produced excellent pencil portraits of the characters. However, WaRP's *ADS*, in particular the first issues, have an almost fanzinesque quality. The all-pencil look also comes with drawbacks. First, it is time-consuming: textures such as glossy hair (a mainstay of the Doran style) can take hours, and edits are difficult to make. Second, it involves repetitive

movements which can cause injuries, as Doran explains in the afterword to *A Distant Soil: Immigrant Song*, the first of two graphic novels published by Donning:

The artwork of the first run of the series was [...] rendered in pencil. This taught me a valuable lesson—never do anything like that again! The logistics of doing a series in pencil only were nightmarish. I know a lot of readers enjoyed the textured look of that, but after a few too many nights of a cramped hand soaked in Epsom salts, I had to beg off this technique.

A third and final problem was that the all-pencil approach lacked versatility. To circumvent this limitation, over the course of the first series Doran started to introduce ink for specific purposes. For example, in issue no. 2 the main hall of the spaceship, a monumental splash page with complex perspectives, numerous straight lines, and intricate motifs, required sharp contrasts for which the pencil is not suited. That specific page was rendered in ink (like the lettering itself), with only a small inset panel done in pencil as it features characters, not architecture (26).

Even though this version of *ADS* is remembered for its look and is frequently described as pencil-only, upon closer examination the artwork involves a much more complex mix of materials. In the later issues, many grey tones are still in pencil (especially for textures such as fabric and hair), but Doran also resorts to watercolour, especially for grey backgrounds, and to ink or paint for solid blacks; issue no. 6 features both techniques (17). The result—sharper contrasts, cleaner backgrounds—is typical of Doran's later style for *ADS*, which favours the bare eloquence of white spaces over the lush texturing of pencil. Paint appeared early on for specific effects; in issue no. 1 it was used to render the flare of the sun rising over the Earth seen from space (28). In later issues, it also featured in depictions of explosions and eerie, shiny textures.

In fact, from no. 6 onwards, every issue has its fair share of novelty. The last page of issue no. 7, an intimate scene where Jason and Beys are about to make love for the first time, is of specific interest as it introduces two elements that played a major role in Doran's later art (see fig. 1). The first is the use of decorative backgrounds, inspired by Art Nouveau curves, as the two lovers are engulfed by a sort of wave combining expressive lines and a spiral pattern evoking stylized flowers. The second is the use of silent and almost abstract panels. In the lower half of the page, there is a close-up on the two characters: the centre of the image is almost completely white, but with just six fragmented lines, Doran evokes Bey's shoulder, Jason's chest, shoulder, neck, and jaw, with a few additional strokes for hair. The characters' profiles are relegated to the top of the panel, over a slender strip of black background. The outline of the panel merges with the two bodies, and whiteness engulfs the bottom of the page, suggesting suspended time.

Both strategies are abundantly used in the *Aria* version, where Doran devotes full silent pages to a single moment or image. It may be useful in this regard to compare the beginning of *WaRP's Distant Soil* (see fig. 2) with the beginning of *Aria's* version. While the former opens on a five-panel page, with the flashy

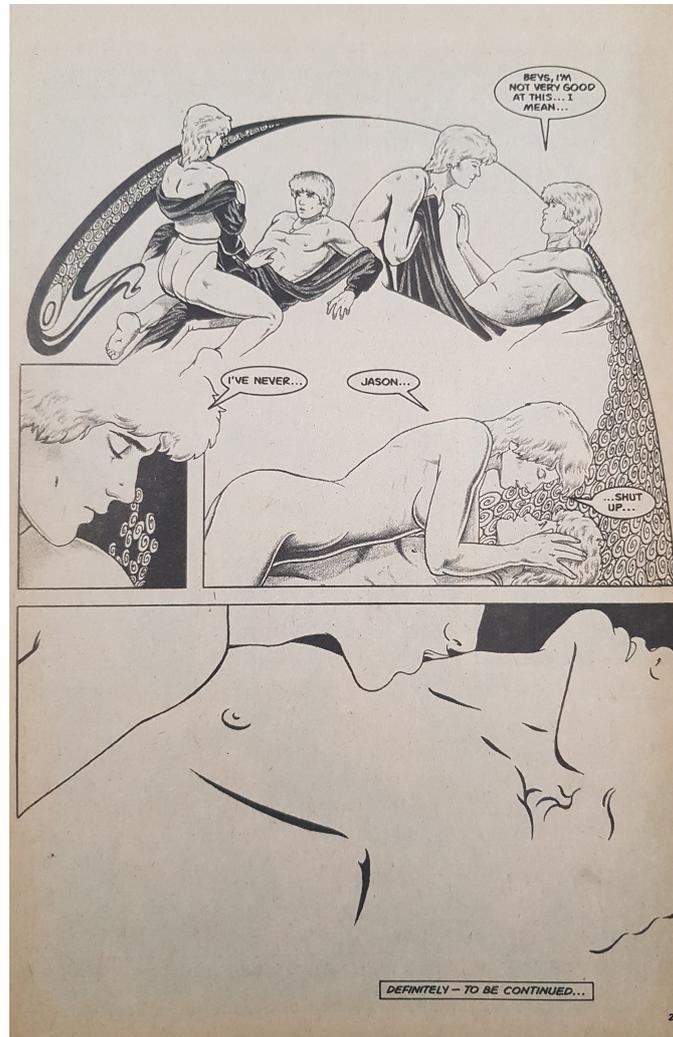


Fig. 1. Intimate scene between Beys and Jason. Colleen Doran. *A Distant Soil*, no. 6, p. 20. Reproduced with permission of the author.

entrance of D'mer and Rieken, the latter shows Liana sitting alone on her bed at the institute where she is held captive. One is heavily shaded and textured, with every pencil stroke visible on the brick wall behind the characters; the other is its polar opposite, a silent splash page where light falls on a solid white floor and wall occupying half the page. Here, as in the love scene between Beys and Jason, there are no textures, no pyrotechnics but the bare beauty of Doran's line art.

Narratively, too, the contrast between the different versions of the story is striking, with a more leisurely pace and a far less convoluted style of storytelling in the later version. The WaRP series begins *in medias res*, with the characters in grave danger; it introduces seven or eight major characters at once, and tends to tell, rather than show, either through narrative captions—half the plot of the

first issue is crammed into six boxes on the first page—, or through “talking heads”, where characters expose the plot. Analepses are frequent, notably with the character of Galahad, who is introduced in issue no. 3 and then remembers his past in a later sequence. Here too, the Aria issues do the exact opposite, as they tend to deal with issues chronologically—they expose Galahad’s past first, and he only meets the rest of the group in issue no. 8—, letting the images tell the story and delighting in contemplative pauses that suspend the flow of the narrative.



Fig. 2. The first page of the story, with pencil art and abundant narrative captions. Colleen Doran. *A Distant Soil*, no. 1, p. 1. Reproduced with permission of the author.

Retrospectively, it would be tempting to cast the Aria version as the “real” *Distant Soil*, the pure expression of its author’s will, and the WaRP issues as a half-hearted compromise between different creative outlooks. This is, understandably, the approach which Doran herself seems to favour as she explains in the afterword to the Starblaze volume: “Well, it’s hard for me to consider the original version the ‘original version’. It was never quite what I envisioned as my story” (*A Distant*

Soil: Immigrant Song). However, the analysis of issues no. 6 to 9 paints a much more contrasted picture, as they clearly show Doran experimenting with the slower storytelling and pared-down art that were central to the *Aria* version.

Issue no. 9, the last one before Doran's resignation from WaRP, constitutes yet another step in the refinement of her style, as she abandons the all-pencil look in favour of inks and tone sheets. The tone sheets are used lavishly in this issue, and the pages still feature large amounts of grey, as if trying to mimic the rich greyscale of the pencilled issues. When she returned to tone sheets in her re-design of the series for the *Aria* black-and-white version, Doran used them much more sparingly. However, no. 9 constitutes a first attempt.

Richard Pini's editorial column confirms that one of the goals of the shift to ink and tone was to save time (*Distant Soil* [WaRP] 9: inside cover). But he also makes an interesting comment on the artwork, calling it a "fusion of the style of issues 1–8 with design that comes straight from Japanese *manga*." The proximity to *manga* is evident in the use of tone sheets and, most importantly, of expressive backgrounds, which often feature abstract patterns echoing the characters' state of mind. The connection between *ADS* and *manga* arguably became stronger in the more recent version of the narrative, but it was also digested and reinvested in specific ways. Thus, once again, WaRP's *ADS* serves as a testing ground allowing Doran to refine her techniques in the context of her growing familiarity with *manga* artists, as I will demonstrate in the final section of this article.

Manga Influences

WHAT I refer to as "manga influences" here does not extend to Colleen Doran's character design. While she is fluent in the *manga* graphic idiom, and especially in the *shoujo* style—as demonstrated by her work on the how-to-draw book *Girl to Grrrl Manga*—, the characters in *ADS* are much closer to the mainstream American graphic idiom than they are to *manga*. Conversely, the backgrounds, pacing, clothes design, and some aspects of the characters' personalities deeply resonate with the work of Japanese artists.

ADS was not initially inspired by *manga*. Doran has repeatedly stated in interviews that she mostly read superhero stories as a child (Dietsch). Similarly, the initial inspiration for the story that became *ADS* was taken from superhero comics: "it all began as Aquaman fan fiction" (Morris). However, she started to develop *manga*-like techniques as she found herself influenced by Art Nouveau, nineteenth-century illustrators like Aubrey Beardsley, who was inspired by Japanese prints himself, and children's book illustrations (Dooley 30). In a tweet, Doran stated that she also looked at the work of Spanish artists who drew horror comics in *Creepy* and *Eerie* ("Absolutely"), and frequently used expressive layouts and art. So, in the initial project, *ADS* was a distant cousin of *manga*, connected to Japanese comics art through common tastes and tools, but not inspired by it. The family resemblance grew closer as Doran became a fan of several *manga* series, recognizing in it many of her own tastes.

In a later letter column to the version of *ADS* published by Image Comics, she explains:

When I first started publishing *A Distant Soil*, I had never seen a Japanese comic. However, my friend Leslie Sterbergh (of *Mad magazine* fame), gave me some copies of a Japanese comic entitled *From Eroica with Love*, and she said: “this reminds me of your work.” I was really amazed. Everything I was being told I shouldn’t do in my comic art was being done in Japanese comics! The calligraphic line, the symbolism in the backgrounds, romantic art, handsome heroes—it was all there. (*Distant Soil* [Image Comics] 31: 28)

Doran’s enthusiasm grew to the point that references to *From Eroica with Love* soon made it into her work: issue no. 6 features a character named “Lord Drian”, who looks stunningly like Dorian from Yasuko Aoike’s manga series (13)—the borrowing was later confirmed by Doran in her response to a reader in the letter column. This trend continued in the *Aria* version, where many costumes were directly inspired from the clothes Oscar wears in Riyoko Ikeda’s shoujo manga *The Rose of Versailles*.

These two manga references point to another important element, which is the increasing role played by gender confusion—the “handsome heroes” Doran alludes to—and pansexual romance in *ADS*. In *From Eroica with Love*, the main character is an openly gay art thief from the British aristocracy, while *Rose of Versailles* tells the story of a woman who passes as a man during the French revolution. By including references to these titles, Doran also signals that her own narrative is likely to contain elements of male homosexual romance, which is a frequent theme of girls’ manga and came to form an entire subgenre known as “boys’ love” (yaoi). In this sense, Doran stands as a forerunner of a trend which only reached the USA in the mid-2000s (Pagliassotti), in the form of translated manga.

Doran’s degree of narrative engagement with this theme changed over time. In the *WaRP* issues, homoerotic elements are strongly implied. For example, the Dorian lookalike who appears in issue no. 6 makes a pass at Jason, the hero, asking if he would like to “come up with [him] to the upper levels” (13). However, there are no visually explicit passages and none of the sex comedy that characterizes certain issues of the later version, notably revolving around the relationship between D’mer and Seren. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Doran’s initial readership at *WaRP* may have played a role in the development of this aspect; the readers that found *ADS* through *Elfquest* were likely to be open to gay-friendly storylines, or at least comfortable with the idea of non-heterosexual, non-monogamous relationships—as *Elfquest* itself featured an ambiguous bromance between its two male leads and notoriously included a scene of collective lovemaking (Licari-Guillaume 30).

Another striking manga-like feature in *ADS* is the use of tone sheets. Of course, Doran wasn’t the only Western artist using this technique in the early 1980s: it also featured heavily in Dave Sim and Gerhard’s *Cerebus* (Robinson), and appeared in Eddie Campbell’s comics of the same period. However, while many artists dropped this frustratingly time-consuming method as soon as they were able to switch to digital, Doran chose to keep on using tone sheets to preserve

the book's visual consistency. In an interview with Tom Spurgeon, she confirmed: "we've been using Japanese tone sheets for decades now—oh God, I can't believe I said that out loud. [laughter] Yeah, really. Oh, how sad. [laughs]" (Spurgeon). In this sense, thus, issue no. 9 of the WaRP version, which marks Doran's first experiment with tones, can be seen as the starting point for her signature use of the technique. Although the initial series ended abruptly with that issue, I would argue that it provides a valuable insight into the development of Doran's unique art style: her masterful inking, her striking use of contrasts, her taste for elaborate page and character designs. Her evolution is sometimes influenced by, and sometimes parallel to, manga—and nowhere is this more visible than in the WaRP issues.

One final and perhaps more elusive piece of evidence in Doran's relationship to manga lies in her use of layouts in *ADS*. In this respect, there is no rupture between the WaRP version and the *Aria* version: in both cases, the layout is used rhetorically, which means that the shape and arrangement of the panels vary according to the events and states of mind conveyed (Peeters 48–53). In issue no. 6, for example, Galahad's disappearance through a magic portal leads to a disruption of the expected alignment of the page, so that the rows of panels become curved and oblique to reflect the disruption of the laws of physics (8). Similarly, when Beys tells Jason the story of Aeren, one single panel depicts the two characters who are conversing, the portraits of Aeren and Liana, and one specific murder scene, also mentioned in the narrative. This tendency was refined in the second version of *ADS*, where Doran crafted increasingly complex layouts.

These examples bring to mind Thierry Groensteen's observations about the "neo-baroque" layouts which he identifies as a trend that "exacerbates the rhetorical intention, resulting in a new conception of the page" (47). Although Groensteen's book focuses explicitly on early-twentieth-century French comics, I find his analysis to be an exact fit for Doran's work. Groensteen underlines "the deconstructing of the hyperframe by images that bleed off the edge of the page and intrusions into the gutter, the use of multiple insets, the maximization of the contrast between large background images and the inset panes, the vertical or horizontal elongation of panels" (47). He posits manga as one possible point of origin for this trend, and elsewhere in the book demonstrates that manga—shoujo manga in particular—indeed exhibits similar traits. Yet hidden in a footnote we find Groensteen's observation that "Apart from manga, another source of the 'neo-baroque' can be found in some American comic books of the 1980s" (182). Although nothing suggests that Groensteen was thinking specifically about Doran's work, his comment underlines the importance of transnational circulations within the comics field. It also raises the question of whether such circulations can be cast in terms of "sources" having a definite influence on creators, or whether it would be more fruitful to think about these developments in terms of synchronicities and mutual exchange. The latter is what Doran argues in her own case; this is supported by the early issues of *ADS*, which increasingly aligned with manga's expressive layout and distinct use of greyscales over the course of its nine issues.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the WaRP issues of Colleen Doran's *A Distant Soil* are an extraordinary document in the sense that they provide us with the genesis of an entire project, which in many other cases would have been largely inaccessible to the public. These issues document Doran's growth as she reaches professional level, experiments with new techniques, and is exposed to new influences; but they also attest to the difficulties that Doran faced in her professional environment, where, despite much talk about creators' rights, the independent press failed to nurture and support her budding talent. What is more, *ADS* also complicates the history of early manga reception in the United States, showing that although the visual conventions associated with Japanese comics had not yet been incorporated into the US-American mainstream, creators like Doran had arrived at comparable propositions, not by imitation but by looking at the same source material as manga.

Conversely, the visual inconsistency of the WaRP issues underlines the remarkable stylistic consistency of the latter series, which was published over a twenty-year period while retaining unity in tone and style. This confirms John Bryant's observation that "the multiplicity of versions is not a condition one can wish away, for authorial, editorial, and cultural revision is in the nature of literary phenomena; nor is it merely a 'corruption' to 'correct' [. . .]. Rather, it is something to celebrate, study, and interpret" (4). In this sense, although Doran's publishing experience with WaRP ended in a bitter feud, we as fans and scholars are lucky to have the WaRP issues, as the Doran they show is a very different artist from the Eisner-winning professional she later became. From a genetic point of view, this first *Distant Soil* reveals, if not the whole genesis of the project, at least the choices that Doran got to make in her journey from the constraints of the first version to the hard-won creative agency of the second.

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² As explained in this essay, the role of Richard Pini in early issues of *ADS* is subject to debate. For clarity's sake I have chosen to follow the credits indicated in each issue.

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