



*The Journal of
Multimodal Rhetorics*

Vol. 3, Issue 1

**Special Issue: Comics and/as
Rhetoric**

Vol. 3, Issue 1: *JOMR* Special Issue Comics and/as Rhetoric

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Editor's Introduction

Dale Jacobs, University of Windsor



In “The Critique of Everyday Life,” their introductory essay to the first issue of *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, Christina V. Cedillo and M. Melissa Elston write, “Multimodal practices not only facilitate communication; they also transmit values and traditions.” Like other multimodal texts, comics act as such sites of communication and complex rhetorical practice, with meanings, values, and traditions continuously negotiated between comics creators, publishers, and readers. Comics provide a rich terrain through which to explore the ways in which multimodal rhetorics and literacies are and can be enacted in everyday life.

This intersection of comics and rhetoric is an area of research that has not, as yet, been explored as much as it needs to be. This special issue of *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* is an attempt to push the conversation on comics and rhetoric forward by presenting five pieces of scholarship that examine the rhetorical uses of comics and the rhetoric surrounding comics in order to think through important questions of multimodality and rhetorical theory. These essays address not only the rhetorical purposes for which comics have been used, but also their rhetorical situations and audiences.

We open with Rachel Rys’s “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship Through Comics,” a piece of scholarship in comics form that showcases the affordances of comics as part of a scholar’s available means of creating and communicating knowledge. In both its argument and form Rys’s work presents a convincing case for the production of scholarship in comics form. In “Disidentification, Disorientation, and Disruption: Queer Multimodal Rhetoric in Queer Comics,” Rachel Ryerson demonstrates how comics can be used as a site for a multimodal queer rhetorics that disrupt normative rhetorics and provide a space for the rhetorical construction of queer identity. Jessica Boykin’s “Filling in the Gutters: Graphic Biographies Disrupting Dominant Narratives of the Civil Rights Movement” examines specific comics—*King*, *March*, and *Malcolm X*—as a way to examine the political rhetorics they present and to show how they can contribute to a re-examination of specific Civil Rights figures through the application of a critical multimodal literacy. Michael Faris, in “Sex-Education Comics: Feminist and Queer Approaches to Alternative Sex Education,” shows how sex-education comics can teach sex and sexuality as civic and relational practices, rather than merely as technical information. In doing so, Faris shows that graphic medicine can act as a form of civic rhetoric as it engages in the rhetorical creation of knowledge. Finally, Tara Hembrough’s

“Rural and Native American Students’ Utilization of Autobiographical Comic Strips to Explore Their Identities through Digital Storytelling in the Multimodal Writing Classroom” presents a case study of her own classroom to examine the inclusion of making of comics in the composition classroom. She convincingly argues that such an inclusion not only increases multimodal literacy, but also contributes to the rhetorical construction of identity, especially for marginalized students.

Taken together, these essays address the important question: what if we think about the processes of creating and reading comics as fundamentally rhetorical? In presenting these essays, my hope is that we can begin to explore how comics can complicate our ideas of rhetoric and how rhetoric can complicate our ideas about comics.

Powerful Marginality:

Feminist Scholarship through Comics

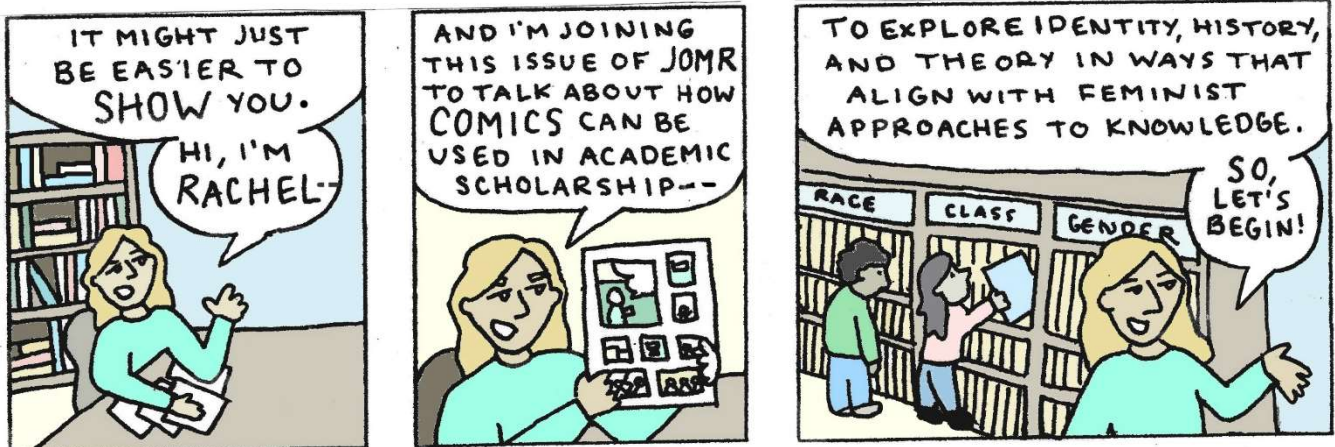
Rachel Rys, University of California, Santa Barbara

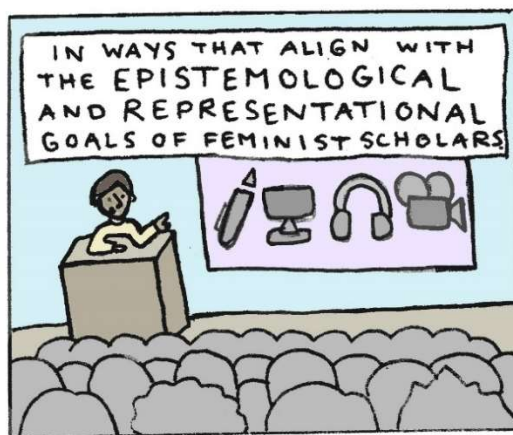
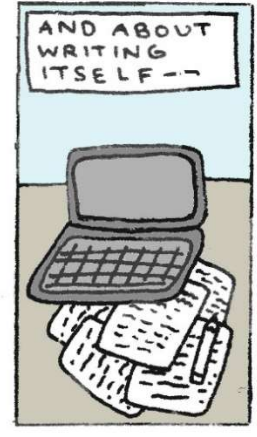
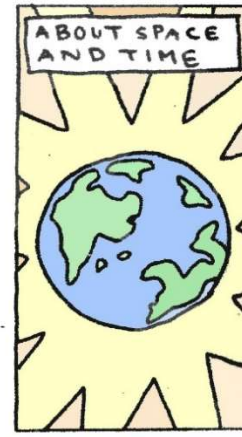
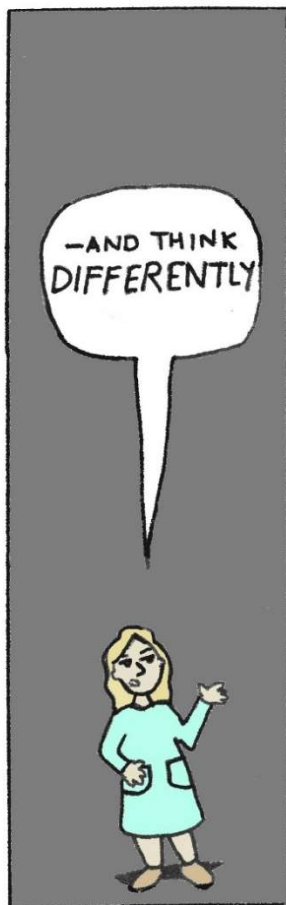
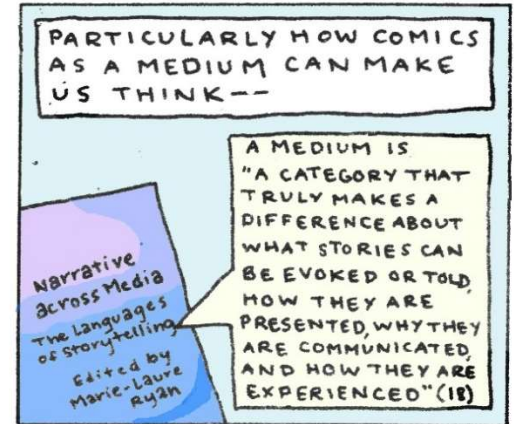
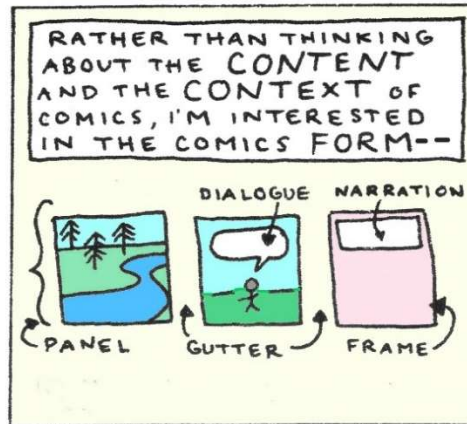


This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of scholarship presented in comics form, I develop my argument through both comics and prose. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to create meaning in ways that center positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than just telling you about it—

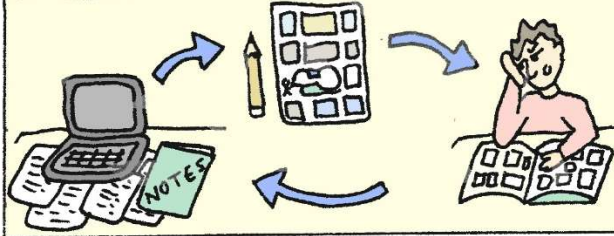




SO, IN THIS ARTICLE, RATHER THAN FOCUSING ON A SPECIFIC TEXT OR GENRE OF COMICS—



I WANT TO FOCUS ON WHAT THE CONVENTIONS OF COMICS DO, HOW THESE STORYTELLING PROPERTIES MIGHT ALLOW SCHOLARS TO CONSTRUCT AND SHARE THEIR WORK DIFFERENTLY.



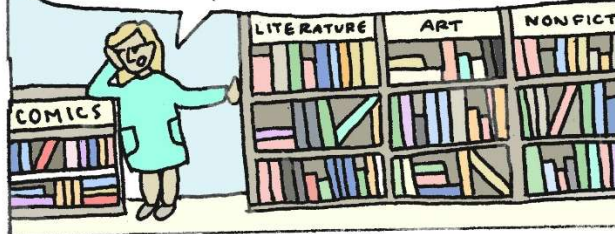
CERTAINLY, THE PRODUCTIVE INTERSECTION BETWEEN COMICS AND FEMINISM ISN'T NEW.



FOR DECADES, FEMINIST AUTHORS HAVE USED COMICS TO DISCUSS ISSUES OF POLITICS, IDENTITY, AND TRAUMA.



IN FACT, ROCCO VERSACI ARGUES THAT THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF UNDERGROUND COMIX HAS INFUSED THE MEDIUM WITH A "POWERFUL MARGINALITY" THAT ALLOWS AUTHORS CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY (27).



THESE SAME STORYTELLING TOOLS ARE ALSO DEEPLY RELEVANT FOR FEMINIST RESEARCHERS WHO WANT TO PRESENT THEIR WORK IN COMPLEX, NUANCED, AND REFLEXIVE WAYS.



INDEED, FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS WHO ARE DEDICATED TO TELLING STORIES FROM THE MARGINS—STORIES THAT LISTEN TO AND AMPLIFY THE VOICES OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE—



THIS POWERFUL MARGINALITY IS ALSO RHETORICALLY POWERFUL, ALLOWING WRITERS TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF THEIR SCHOLARSHIP AND REACH NEW AND DIFFERENT AUDIENCES.



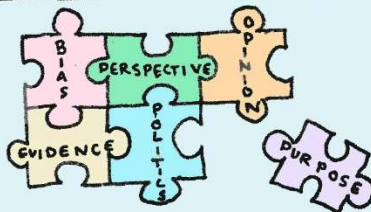
ALTHOUGH I COULD MAKE COUNTLESS ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE USE OF COMICS IN ACADEMIC WORK, I'LL FOCUS ON THREE MAIN POINTS HERE:



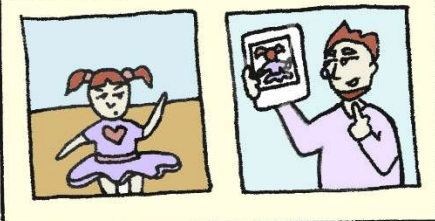
FIRST, THE COMICS MEDIUM PROVIDES VISUAL CLUES ABOUT PEOPLE AND CONTEXTS THAT PROSE ALONE CANNOT.



SECOND, THE COMICS MEDIUM ALLOWS THE AUTHOR TO PRESENT MULTIPLE TRUTHS AND TO CALL ATTENTION TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEXT.



AND FINALLY, THIRD, THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN MOVE QUICKLY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE, CONNECTING SEEMINGLY DISPARATE CONTEXTS AND IDEAS.



PART I:
REFLEXIVITY
&
EMBODIMENT

FEM ST 101

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY ARE ESSENTIAL FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH AND WRITING.

SINCE THE EARLY DAYS OF ACADEMIC FEMINISMS, SCHOLARS FROM A RANGE OF DISCIPLINES HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVE RESEARCH AND WRITING PRACTICES REQUIRE THE AUTHOR TO REFLECT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES AND TO CONSIDER HOW THEIR POSITIONALITY SHAPES THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR ARGUMENT.

REFLEXIVITY (POSITIONALITY)

- Wilkinson (1988):
↳ "Disciplined Self-reflection" (432)
- Attention to personal involvement and power in research & writing
- Look @ how identities 'position' perspective
- England (1994)
↳ Expose "the partiality of our perspective" (86)

KNOWING WHO AN AUTHOR IS GIVES THE READER CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT THEIR PERSPECTIVE AND MOTIVATION FOR WRITING.

IN PROSE ACADEMIC WRITING, WE ONLY REALLY KNOW WHAT THE AUTHOR TELLS US ABOUT THEMSELVES IN THE LINE OF ARGUMENT.

OF COURSE, SOME WRITERS MAY CHOOSE TO DISCUSS THEIR PERSONAL IDENTITIES OR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CONTENT IN THEIR TEXTS.

As a queer Chicana woman...

After living in this community for over ten years...

BUT OFTEN, THE ONLY INFORMATION A READER HAS ACCESS TO IS THE WRITER'S NAME AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION.

Powerful Marginality:
Feminist Scholarship
Through the Comics
Medium
Rachel Rys & UCSB

EVERYTHING ELSE MUST BE RESEARCHED OR ASSUMED AND, FREQUENTLY, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THEIR TEXT...

JUST FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND

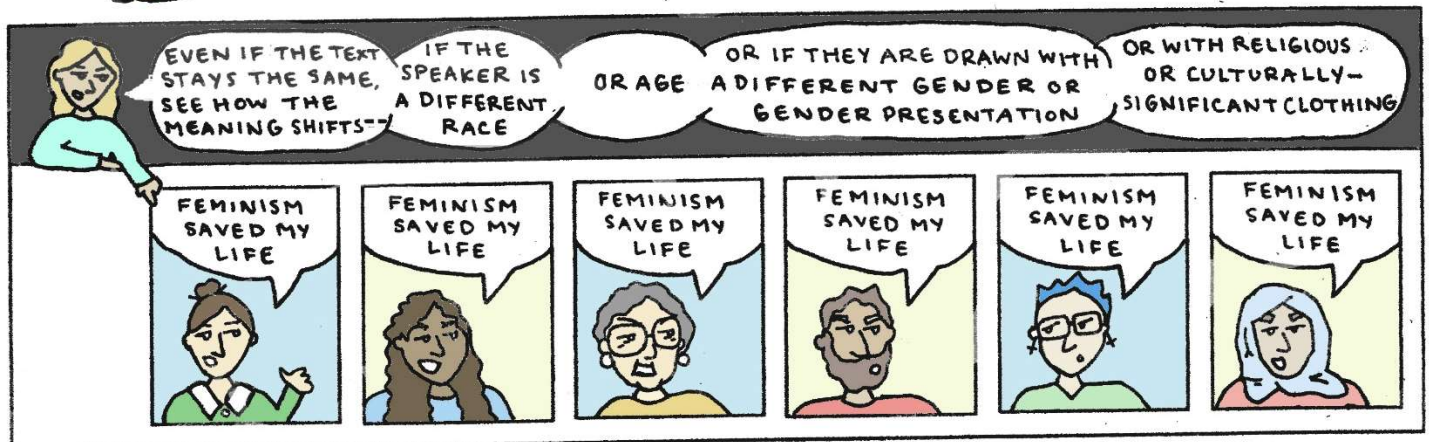
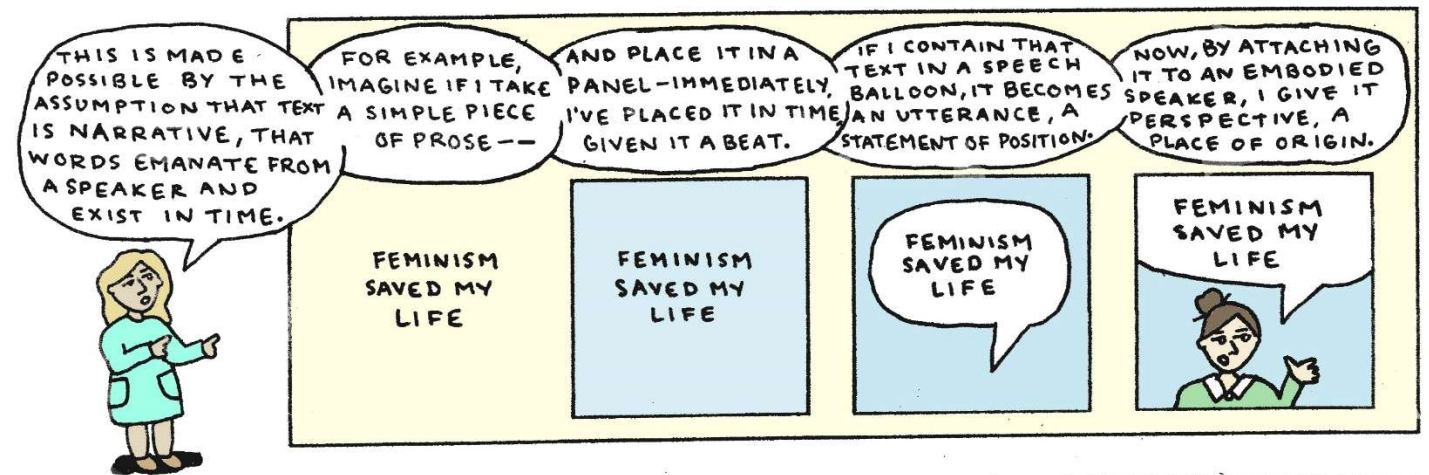
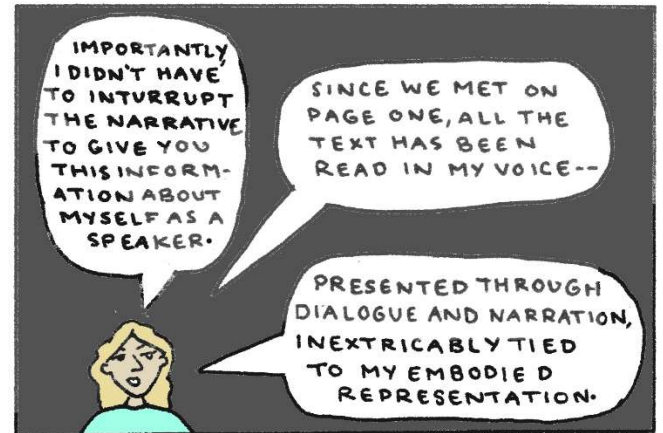
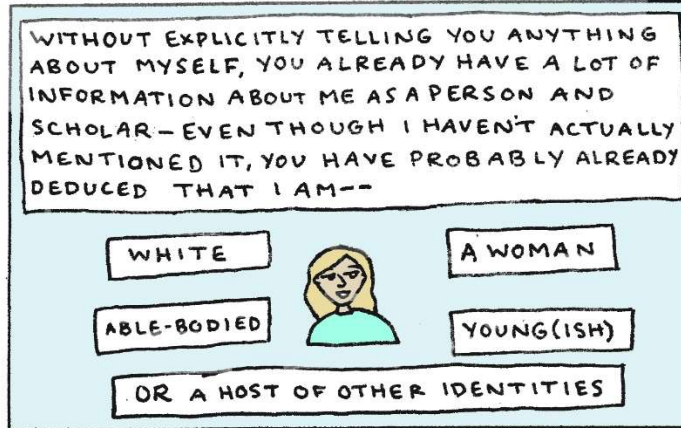
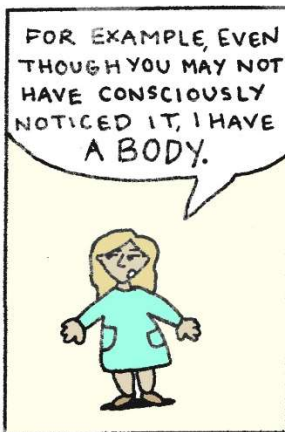
THE COMICS MEDIUM, HOWEVER, MAKES IT SIMPLE—AND OFTEN NECESSARY—TO INCLUDE VISUAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SPEAKER AND CONTEXT.

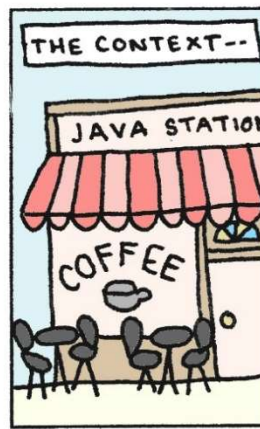
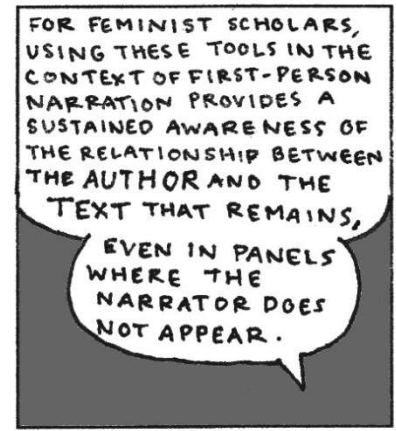
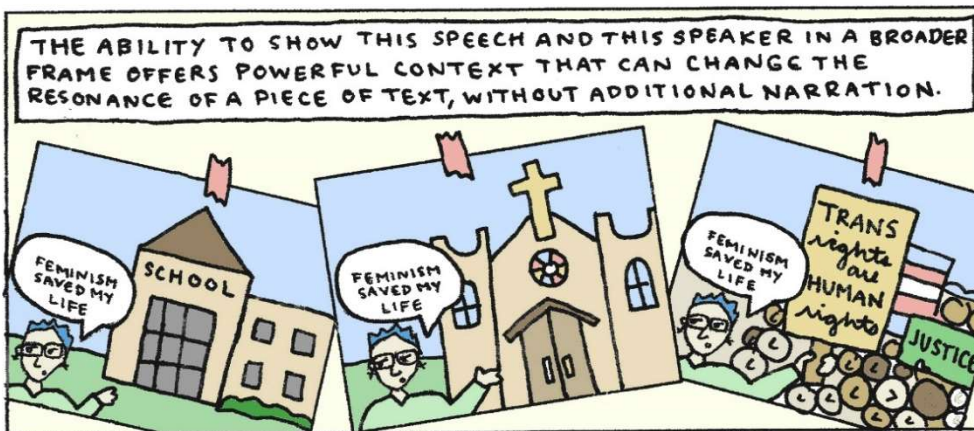
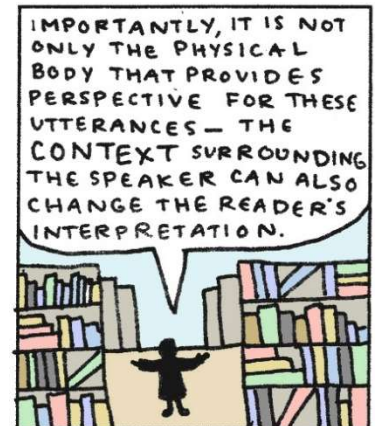
BECAUSE THIS MULTIMODAL FORM TYPICALLY INCLUDES A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE NARRATOR AND/OR THE CHARACTERS, MOST COMICS TEXT IS DIRECTLY LINKED TO A DISTINCT, EMBODIED SPEAKER.

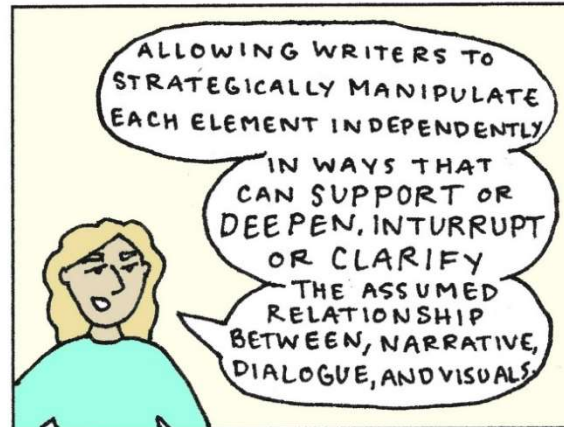
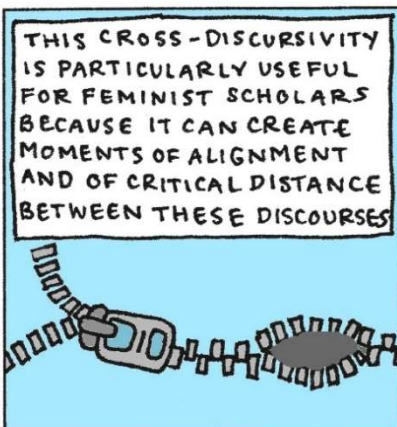
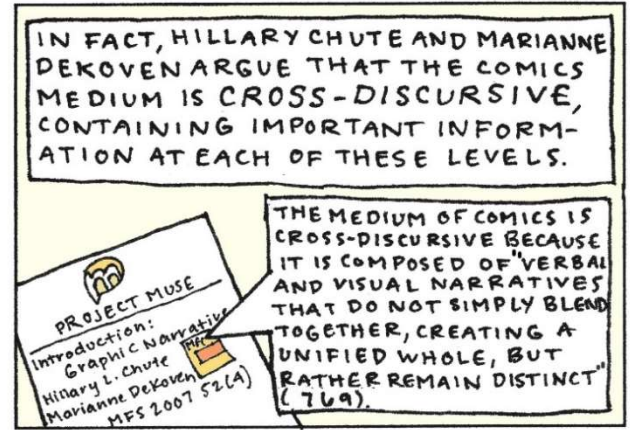
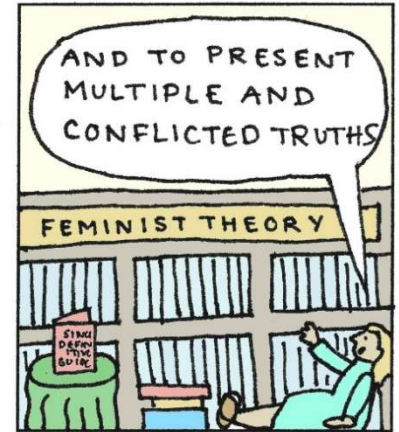
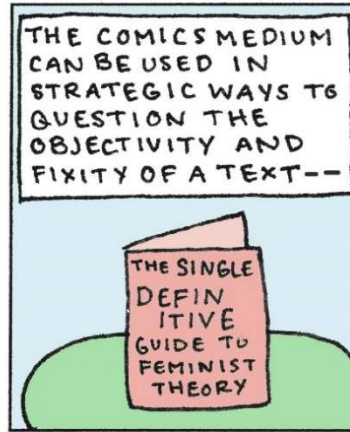
LIKE ME

AND ME


AND ME!







LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER EXAMPLE HERE, ONE THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE FUNCTION OF CROSS-DISCURSIVITY BY SLOWLY LAYERING DIFFERENT ELEMENTS ON THE PAGE.




TEXT
CONTEXT
DIALOGUE
NARRATION

WE CAN TAKE A PIECE OF TEXT OUTLINING A COMMON NARRATIVE OF FEMINIST HISTORY (ONE THAT SCHOLARS HAVE CRITIQUED AS OVERLY SIMPLISTIC)--

Waves of Feminism
 1st Wave- 1840? → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd Wave- 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd Wave- 1990s → 2000s
 Bodies, diversity, represent.
 4th Wave- 2000s → now
 Sexual harassment, tech

AND PLACE IT IN CONTEXT, PROVIDING ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE RHETORICAL SITUATION IN WHICH IT APPEARS.




Waves of Feminism
 1st Wave- 1840? → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd Wave- 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd Wave- 1990s → 2000s
 Bodies, diversity, represent.
 4th Wave- 2000s → now
 Sexual harassment, tech

FURTHERMORE, WE CAN SHOW HOW THIS PARTICULAR NARRATIVE IS MAINTAINED

BY ADDING INTO THE PICTURE AN INSTITUTIONAL VOICE AND CONTEXT

THAT DEPICTS HOW THIS NARRATIVE IS VALUED, REINFORCED, AND DISSEMINATED.

AN IMAGE LIKE THIS REMINDS US THAT THESE NARRATIVES AREN'T NEUTRAL- THAT THEY GAIN CONSENSUS THROUGH PASSIVE REPETITION AND ACTIVE EFFORT.



Waves of Feminism
 1st Wave- 1840? → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd Wave- 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd Wave- 1990s → 2000s
 Bodies, diversity, represent.
 4th Wave- 2000s → now
 Sexual harassment, tech

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT- MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

Waves of Feminism
 1st Wave- 1840? → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd Wave- 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd Wave- 1990s → 2000s
 Bodies, diversity, represent.
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 Sexual harassment, tech

IMPORTANTLY, BY STRATEGICALLY MANIPULATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VISUALS, DIALOGUE, AND FRAMING NARRATION, THE WRITER CAN TELL A STORY THAT ALIGNS WITH THE IMAGE AND DIALOGUE OR THAT SUBVERTS THE IMAGE AND DIALOGUE ENTIRELY- CREATING A CROSS-DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION THAT EITHER REINFORCES OR DISRUPTS.

IF THEY LEARNED NOTHING ELSE IN THIS COURSE, AT LEAST THEY'D KNOW THIS HISTORY.

ALTHOUGH THIS MODEL WAS NO LONGER POPULAR, AS A FEMINIST HISTORIAN, I THOUGHT KNOWING THIS CONTEXT WAS WORTH THE EFFORT.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THESE ELEMENTS IN A SINGLE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS PANEL--

GIVES A GLIMPSE OF INTERIORITY & PERSPECTIVE--

ALLOWING THE WRITER TO CIRCULATE COMMENTS, CLARIFICATIONS, AND CRITIQUES ALONG WITH THEIR SEEMINGLY STATIC PROSE.

AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT THIS WAS ACTUALLY REALLY IMPORTANT; IT WASN'T UNTIL LATER THAT I REALIZED HOW REDUCTIVE THIS MODEL WAS.

I DIDN'T REALLY THINK THIS WAS IMPORTANT, BUT I WAS REQUIRED TO TEACH A TEXTBOOK THAT DOUBLED DOWN ON THIS METAPHOR.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT- MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

Waves of Feminism
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 Sexual harassment, tech


NOT SO FINAL DRAFT

PART 3:
MEMORY
&
TEMPORALITY

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT STORIES ABOUT THE PAST ARE NEVER NEUTRAL BUT, RATHER, REFLECT THE WRITER'S PRESENT CONCERNS AND FUTURE DESIRES.

AS FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIALIST SCHOLAR GAYATRI SPIVAK ARGUES, "THE PAST IS A PAST PRESENT. WHAT IS MARKED IS THE SITE OF DESIRE" (119).

WHILE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST ARE NEITHER NEUTRAL NOR OBJECTIVE, WRITERS OFTEN EMPLOY RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES THAT ERASE THEIR ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING THE TEXT.

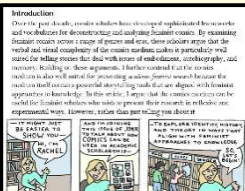


WRITING THAT ATTEMPTS TO MAKE CLAIMS ABOUT THE PAST (INCLUDING MY OWN INTRODUCTION TO THIS ARTICLE) IS ALWAYS MOTIVATED, REFRAMING HISTORY TO MEET THE WRITER'S NEEDS--

MARKING TEMPORAL SHIFTS

CATEGORIZING AND COLLAPSING VIEW POINTS


CREATING GAPS IN ORDER TO FILL THEM.



TO CHALLENGE THESE POLITICAL ERASURES, FEMINIST SCHOLAR CLARE HEMMINGS CALLS FOR A TACTICS OF MEMORY THAT WILL ALLOW WRITERS TO FOLD IN AND RECOMBINE TRACES OF ERASED HISTORIES.

"DEVELOPING A TACTICS OF MEMORY...MIGHT ALLOW US TO CHALLENGE SOME OF THE POLITICAL ERASURES THAT THESE STORIES EFFECT. THE INTENTION IS MODEST IN THAT RESPECT, WANTING TO SURFACE WHAT IS POTENTLY ABSENT THROUGH RECOMBINATION" (75).

What is a feminist theory responsible for?
Clare Hemmings 2007

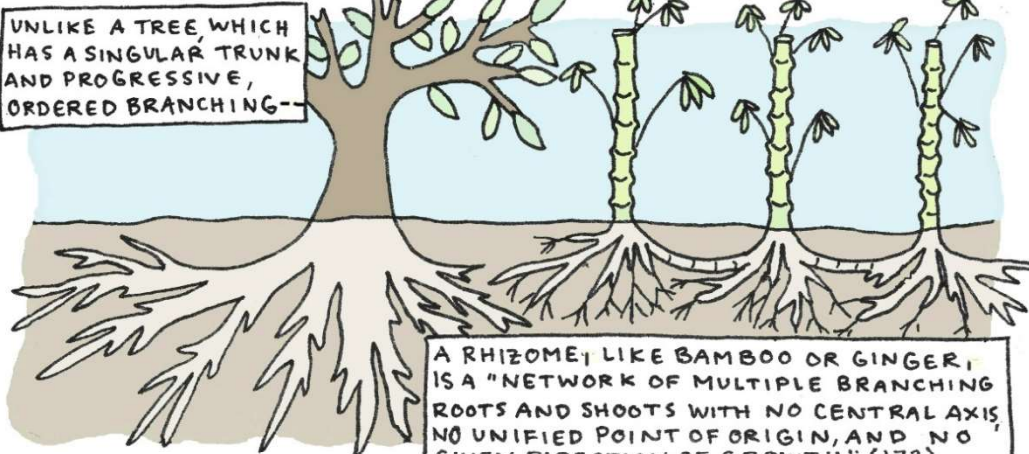


OTHER FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE CALLED FOR RHIZOMATIC READING AND WRITING PRACTICES, A FRAMEWORK ADAPTED FROM GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI EMPHASIZING NONLINEAR AND NONHIERARCHICAL CONNECTIONS.




UNLIKE A TREE, WHICH HAS A SINGULAR TRUNK AND PROGRESSIVE, ORDERED BRANCHING--

A RHIZOME, LIKE BAMBOO OR GINGER, IS A "NETWORK OF MULTIPLE BRANCHING ROOTS AND SHOOTS WITH NO CENTRAL AXIS, NO UNIFIED POINT OF ORIGIN, AND NO GIVEN DIRECTION OF GROWTH" (173).



SCHOLARS LIKE ELIZABETH GROSZ AND JUANA MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ HAVE INCORPORATED THE RHIZOME INTO A DISTINCTLY FEMINIST PRACTICE, ARGUING THAT IT CAN BE USED TO DRAW CONNECTIONS ACROSS

IDENTITIES
TRAJECTORIES
AND MOVEMENTS.



SUCH READING AND WRITING PRACTICES EMPHASIZE CONNECTION, HETEROGENEITY, AND MULTIPLICITY.

GROSZ (1993)

Connection: Bring together diverse fragments theories, objects, and practices

Heterogeneity: Multiple connections across levels, domains, dimensions, functions, effects, aims

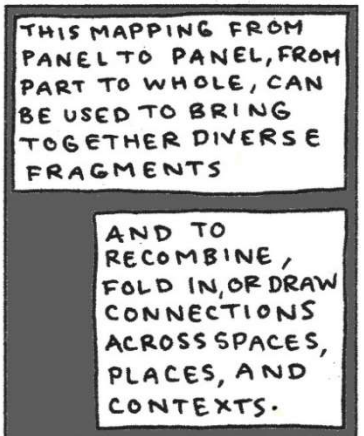
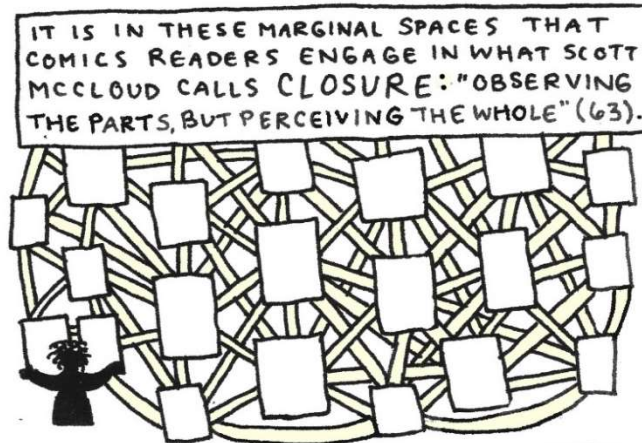
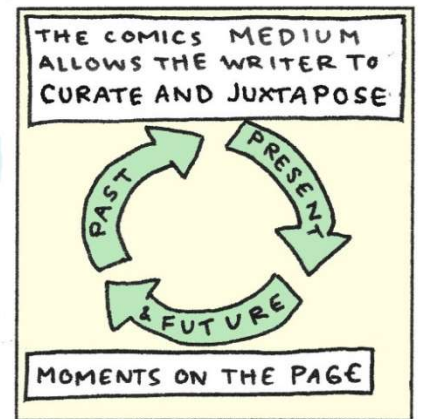
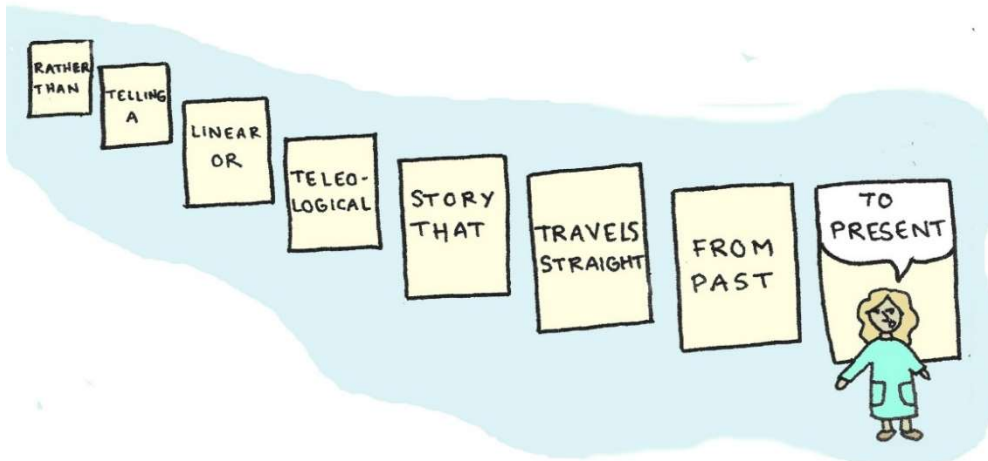
Multiplicity: A proliferation of processes



DUE TO ITS FLEXIBLE TOOLS FOR REPRESENTING TEMPORALITY AND SPATIALITY, COMICS CAN SERVE AS A TACTICS OF MEMORY-- ONE THAT IS BOTH RECOMBINATORY AND RHIZOMATIC --

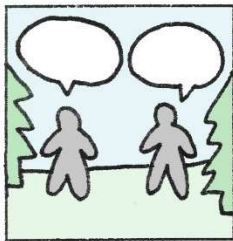
ABLE TO COMBINE AND REARRANGE TEMPORAL TRACES ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE.







PROVIDING CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT SPEAKER AND SETTING THAT SITUATES THE TEXT--



DEVELOPING RICHLY LAYERED PANELS THAT REINFORCE OR SUBVERT--

CREATING NARRATIVE LINKS ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE



THROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE I'VE MADE THE RELATIVELY VAGUE CLAIMS THAT THE COMICS MEDIUM IS "ALIGNED WITH" FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY OR "CAN BE USEFUL" FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS.

WHILE I'VE DELIBERATELY LEFT THESE CLAIMS OPEN-ENDED, THE QUESTION REMAINS:

WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

FIRST OF ALL, IT IS A CALL FOR RESEARCHERS TO EXPRESS AND SHARE THEIR WORK IN COMICS--ADDING COMICS TO THE RANGE OF METHODOLOGICAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL TOOLS AVAILABLE TO SCHOLARS--



AND CONTRIBUTING TO A GROWING CANON OF WORK THAT USES THE COMICS FORM TO TALK ABOUT COMICS OR TO PRESENT OTHER RESEARCH.



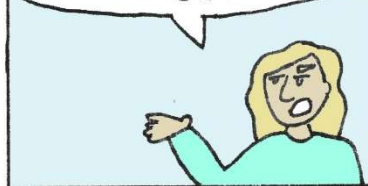
AS COMICS SCHOLARSHIP BECOMES MORE READILY AVAILABLE, USED, AND DISCUSSED

IT BUILDS A CASE FOR THE THEORETICAL AND RHETORICAL COMPLEXITY OF THE MEDIUM.

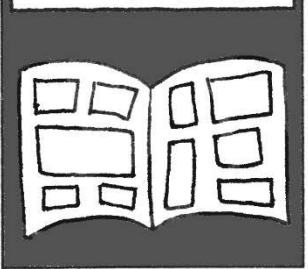
FOR RESEARCHERS WHO ARE UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO DABBLE IN THE COMICS FORM, THIS MAY ALSO MEAN PURSUING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND COMICS CREATORS--



BEYOND THE CREATION OF NEW COMICS, THIS PIECE ALSO ECHOES CALLS TO CONSIDER EXISTING COMICS AS EXAMPLES OF COMPLEX SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORY IN THEIR OWN RIGHT--



OFFERING CONTENT AND STORYTELLING TOOLS THAT ARE BOTH THEORETICAL AND POLITICAL.





Notes

As I hope this exploratory comic has conveyed, my goal here is to gesture to some of the productive possibilities of the comics medium for feminist researchers who wish to create and share knowledge through emergent and experimental forms. Translating research across medium allows us to explore new rhetorical and representational tools—and to reflect on both the strengths and limits of our current approaches. As this is my first foray into experimental writing *and* my first attempt at making comics, these twelve comics pages have opened additional lines of both questioning and possibility.

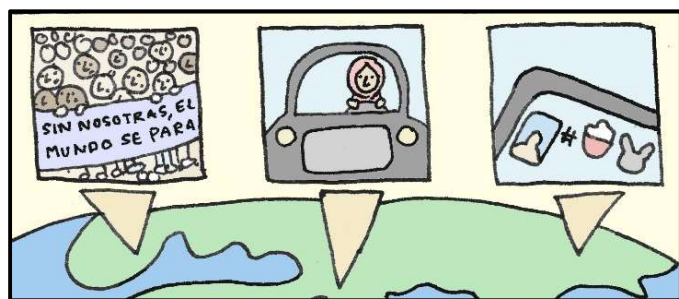
The reference to “lines of flight” in my conclusion draws once more from Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that ruptured rhizomes can sprout anew along old lines or create “new lines of flight... directions in motion” (p. 35). This relationship between rhizomes and comics has been explored in multiple works and ways, including as a theoretical framework for analyzing comic book culture (Jeffery, 2016), as a visual metaphor (Sousanis, 2015), and as a flexible storytelling (non-) structure for the digital project *Rhizcomics* (Helms, 2017).





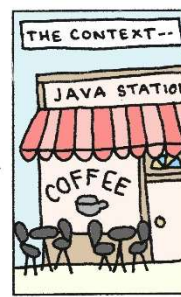
Importantly, metaphors of connection and rupture, of roots and motion, offer powerful metaphors for critically examining identity and identity formation (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 22). Because reflexivity plays such a significant role in feminist studies scholarship, it comes as no surprise that many of the storytelling tools I analyze in this piece have been primarily discussed within the context of autobiographical and life writing comics. In fact, the first sections of my argument refer to a specific subset of narrative tools that are often used in first-person, single-authored comics—those that include an embodied version of the author-narrator on the page.

For feminist scholars, this close attention to the embodiment, practices, and habits of everyday life is essential. As Tolmie (2013) argues, comics are “precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level...” (p. xvi). Hillary Chute (2010) further argues that the ability to visualize the “ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political” (p. 140). This visuality facilitates a political reading of everyday events, such as the panel below that brings together scenes from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, the repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi



Arabia, and the covert participation of Chinese women in the #MeToo movement (when the hashtag #MeToo was censored by the government, women continued to connect and share by substituting the characters or emojis for Rice 🍚 (“Mi”) and Bunny 🐰 (“Tu”).

The comics medium offers a tactics of memory that pictures and recombines traces of everyday life. These same narrative tools are also available to feminist scholars—leaving an open opportunity for scholars to share not only their research *products*, but also their *process*: the situated interaction, decision-making, and thought processes that underlie scholarly work.



References

This project is indebted to the important work done by feminist comics scholars to identify specific narrative tools and to initiate conversations about the connections between identity, power, and form. While the comics medium offers incredible argumentative density, I have found it to be spatially and logistically challenging to incorporate the breadth of references expected of scholarly work into the comics form. Undoubtedly, the practices and politics of citation for scholarship written in the comics medium will require additional examination and experimentation—another line of flight perhaps?



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Powerful Marginality:

Feminist Scholarship through Comics [Transcript]

Rachel Rys, University of California, Santa Barbara



PAGE 1

This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of scholarship presented in comics form, I develop my argument through both comics and prose. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to create meaning in ways that center positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than just telling you about it—

Panel 1.1

(The article transitions mid-sentence from prose to a single row of comics panels at the bottom of the first page. Rachel, a white woman in her early 30s with blonde hair and a teal dress, sits behind a table, waving at the reader.)

RACHEL: —it might just be easier to *show* you.

RACHEL: Hi, I'm Rachel—

Panel 1.2

(Rachel holds up a page of comics.)

RACHEL: —and I’m joining this issue of *JOMR* to talk about how **comics** can be used in academic scholarship—

Panel 1.3

*(Rachel walks past a row of bookshelves where two people are examining the books. The three shelves are labeled **Race**, **Class**, and **Gender**, respectively.)*

RACHEL: —to explore identity, history, and theory in ways that align with feminist approaches to knowledge.

RACHEL: So, let’s begin!

PAGE 2**Panel 2.1**

(Rachel leans against a bookshelf, arms folded across her chest.)

RACHEL: As I was saying, I’m taking a slightly different view of the relationship between **comics** and **feminism**.

Panel 2.2

*(Three small inset panels. The first inset panel shows a nature scene containing a stream and trees. The second inset panel contains a stick figure and a speech balloon. The third inset panel contains a narration box. Different elements of the comics medium are labeled, including **panel**, **gutter**, **frame**, **dialogue**, and **narration**.)*

CAPTION(RACHEL): Rather than thinking about the **content** and the **context** of comics, I’m particularly interested in the comics **form**—

Panel 2.3

*(Close-up on the cover of the book **Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling**, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): —particularly how comics as a medium can make us think—
 QUOTE FROM BOOK: A medium is “a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated and how they are experienced” (18).

Panel 2.4

(Rachel stands at the bottom of a tall, skinny panel against a dark background.)

RACHEL: —and think *differently*—

Panel 2.5

(A white woman with brown hair and glasses gazes at her reflection in an oval wall mirror.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —about bodies and identity—

Panel 2.6

*(A group of protesters outside of the Supreme Court Building. One protester holds a rainbow flag and others hold signs that read **Resist**, **BLM [Black Lives Matter]**, **No.**, and **Stop It.**)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): —about politics—

Panel 2.7

(A globe surrounded by colorful light.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —about space and time—

Panel 2.8

(A laptop sits on top of a messy stack of papers.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —and about writing itself—

Panel 2.9

(A Black woman with short hair stands at a lectern onstage in front of an audience, gesturing at a projection screen. The screen contains images of a pen, a computer, a pair of headphones, and a video camera.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —in ways that support the epistemological and representational goals of feminist scholars.

Panel 2.10

*(Rachel sits on the floor to the right of a tall stack of comics and graphic novels. The spines on the books read: **Fun Home**, **Persepolis**, **Bitch Planet**, **The Best We Could Do**, and **The Big Feminist But.**)*

RACHEL: The comics medium is not only useful for telling fiction and nonfiction stories with feminist and social justice themes.

Panel 2.11

(A small silhouette of Rachel.)

RACHEL: Rather, I argue that the comics medium is *uniquely suited* for talking about and *enacting* feminist approaches to knowledge

RACHEL: because it offers storytelling tools that can—

Panel 2.12

(A woman sits at a table behind a laptop, with a coffee cup in easy reach.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —encourage reflexive and situated writing—

QUOTE FROM LAPTOP: As I sit down to write this draft...

Panel 2.13

(A paper with the title “Conclusions” written at the top” is covered with colorful post-it notes with questions like: What if?, How do we know?, Proof?, Second opinion, Says who?, What about...?, and Who decides?)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —enable the circulation of contested narratives—

Panel 2.14

(A globe with three magnifying boxes. In the first box, two people hold hands with a heart above them. In the second box, a person holds a basket while harvesting a garden. In the third box, a person begins to write “I +” on a blackboard.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —and connect experiences across time, space, and scale.

PAGE 3

Panel 3.1

(Rachel holds up one finger.)

RACHEL: So, in this article, rather than focusing on a specific text or genre of comics—

Panel 3.2

(Three images connected in a cycle of arrows. The first image shows a computer, a stack of paper and a folder labelled Notes. The second image contains a page of comics panels and a pencil. The third image contains a person seated at a table, reading a book of comics.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): I want to focus on what the conventions of comics *do*, how these storytelling properties might allow scholars to construct and share their work differently.

Panel 3.3

*(An intersecting street sign, containing **Comics** in one direction and **Feminism** in the other.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): Certainly, the productive intersection between comics and feminism isn't new.

Panel 3.4

*(A pile of overlapping comix covers. The visible titles include: **It Ain't Me Babe**, **Tits and Clits**, and **Wimmen's Comix**.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): For decades, feminist authors have used comics to discuss issues of politics, identity, and trauma.

Panel 3.5

*(Rachel leans on a small bookshelf labelled **Comics** that stands on its own. Several feet away is a set of connected bookcases labelled **Literature**, **Art**, and **Nonfiction**.)*

RACHEL: In fact, Rocco Versaci argues that the history and legacy of underground comix has infused the medium with a “*powerful marginality*” that allows authors creative flexibility (27).

Panel 3.6

(Rachel gestures at a room full of bookshelves.)

RACHEL: These same storytelling tools are also deeply relevant for feminist scholars who want to present their research in complex, contested, and reflexive ways.

Panel 3.7

(Rachel stands in a borderless panel, shouting through a megaphone. A speech balloon emerges from the megaphone, extending across the gutter into Panel 8, connected to the next speech balloon.)

RACHEL: Indeed, for feminist scholars who are dedicated to telling stories from the *margins*—stories that *listen* to and *amplify* the voices of marginalized people—

Panel 3.8

(An ivory tower appears at the top of a hill with a winding path leading down to the foreground. At the bottom right-hand corner, a woman with short brown hair and a headband pushes against the panel boundary, causing it to extend into the gutter.)

RACHEL: —This powerful marginality is also **rhetorically** powerful, allowing authors to push the boundaries of their scholarship and reach new and different audiences.

Panel 3.9

(Rachel holds up the megaphone.)

RACHEL: Although I could make countless arguments about the use of comics in academic work, I'll focus on three main points here:

Panel 3.10

*(A party scene under a banner reading, **Congratulations**. To the left, a man holds hands with a smiling young girl next to a cat. To the right, a person with a tall punk haircut talks to a woman seated in a wheelchair.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): **First**, the comics medium provides visual clues about people and contexts that prose alone cannot.

Panel 3.11

*(A jigsaw puzzle, where each puzzle piece contains a word related to the research and writing process, including: **Bias, Perspective, Opinion, Evidence, Politics**. The final puzzle piece, **Purpose**, has yet to be fitted into the puzzle. The edges of the puzzle are not square, but still contain unfitted edges.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): **Second**, the comics medium allows the author to present multiple truths and to call attention to the construction of the text.

Panel 3.12

(Two inset panels. The first inset panel shows a young, redheaded girl posing in a purple heart T-shirt and tutu. The second inset panel shows an older, redhead masculine person with short hair and a beard holding a photograph of the young girl and pointing to themselves.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): And finally, **third**, the comics medium can move quickly across time and space, connecting seemingly disparate contexts and ideas.

—PART 1—
PAGE 4

Panel 4.1

(Rachel gestures at a blackboard with the heading FEMST 101 written at the top.)

- CAPTION (NARR): Part 1: Reflexivity & Embodiment
- RACHEL: Feminist scholars have argued that *reflexivity* and *positionality* are essential to feminist research and writing.
- RACHEL: Since the early days of academic feminisms, scholars from a range of disciplines have argued that reflexive research and writing practices require the author to reflect on their identities and experiences and to consider how their positionality shapes their relationship to their argument.
- TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Reflexivity:
- Wilkinson (1988): ‘Disciplined self-reflection’(432)
 - Attention to personal involvement and power in research and writing
- TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Positionality:
- Look @ how identities ‘position’ perspective
 - England (1994): Expose ‘the partiality of our perspective’(86)

Panel 4.2

(Rachel holds up two books to show the back cover of each containing an author bio.)

- RACHEL: Knowing who an author *is* gives readers critical context about their commitments and motivations for writing.

Panel 4.3

(A shadowy figure with a question mark on its featureless face sits at a computer.)

- RACHEL: In prose academic writing, we only really know what the writer tells us about themselves in the line of argument.

Panel 4.4

(Two pieces of writing with text boxes extending from each.)

- CAPTION (RACHEL): Of course, some writers may choose to discuss their personal identities or relationship to the content in their texts.

QUOTE FROM PAPER 1: As a queer Chicanx woman...

QUOTE FROM PAPER 2: After living in this community for ten years...

Panel 4.5

(A computer screen displaying the first page of this article.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): But often, the only information that a reader has access to is the author's name and professional affiliation.

TEXT (COMPUTER): Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through the Comics Medium, Rachel Rys ♦ UCSB

Panel 4.6

(Rachel stands in the lower left-hand corner of the panel. The bottom of the speech balloon fades into the gray background.)

RACHEL: Everything else must be researched or assumed and, frequently, the relationship between the author and their text...

RACHEL: just fades into the background.

Panel 4.7

(A split panel showing two characters in different locations. On the left-hand side of the panel, a person stands in front of a mountain range, wearing backpacking gear. In the right-hand side of the panel, a smiling woman in a tank top stands in front of a busy city scene.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): The comics medium, however, makes it simple — and often **necessary**—to include visual information about the **speaker** and **context**.

Panel 4.8

(Three characters appear: a balding man, a woman in shorts and a T-shirt, and a person wearing a mohawk and skirt.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Because this multimodal form typically includes a visual representation of the narrator and/or the characters, most comics text is directly tied to a distinct, embodied speaker.

PERSON 1: Like me!

PERSON 2: And me!

PERSON 3: And me!

PAGE 5

Panel 5.1

(Rachel stands with her arms out straight to her sides.)

RACHEL: For example, even though you may not have consciously noticed it, I have a **body**.

Panel 5.2

(Rachel's head and torso, surrounded by narration boxes that describe her.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Without explicitly telling you anything about myself, you already have a lot of information about me as a person and scholar. Even though I haven't mentioned it, you have probably already deduced that I am:

CAPTION (RACHEL): white

CAPTION (RACHEL): a woman

CAPTION (RACHEL): able-bodied

CAPTION (RACHEL): young(ish)

CAPTION (RACHEL): or a host of other identities.

Panel 5.3

(Rachel stands in a classroom behind a lectern that has a sign on the front reading "UCSB." Over her right shoulder, a window looks out over a beach with a palm tree.)

RACHEL: You may also be able to make guesses about my age, location and profession based on clues from my clothing and environment.

Panel 5.4

*(A sketchbook titled **Sketches** containing scribbled drawings of people.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): These choices have absolutely been deliberate.

Panel 5.5

(Rachel continues to lean on the lectern.)

RACHEL: By this point in the article, I have already been drawn 17 times (and erased 300 more...**yikes!**).

RACHEL: Trust me, the author has thought really hard about what I look like.

Panel 5.6

(Rachel, talking over a dark background.)

RACHEL: Importantly, I didn't have to interrupt my narrative to give you this information about myself as a speaker.

RACHEL: Since we met on page one, all the text has been read in my voice—

RACHEL: —presented through dialogue and narration, inextricably tied to my embodied representation.

Panel 5.7

(Rachel points at panel 5.8. Her speech balloon extends over the gutter into that panel, making one long string of speech balloons.)

RACHEL: This is made possible by the assumption that text is narrative, that words emanate from a speaker and exist in time.

Panel 5.8

(This panel contains 4 inset panels, each containing the words, "Feminism saved my life." The first inset panel is borderless. The second inset panel has a border around the panel. The third inset panel contains the text inside a speech balloon inside of the bordered panel. The fourth inset panel now shows this speech balloon being spoken by a white woman with brown hair and a green sweater.)

RACHEL: For example, imagine if I take a simple piece of prose—

RACHEL: —and place it in a panel. Immediately, I've situated it in time, given it a beat.

RACHEL: If I contain that text in a speech balloon, it becomes an utterance, a statement of position.

RACHEL: Now, by attaching it to an embodied speaker, I give it perspective, a place of origin.

Panel 5.9

*(Rachel leans over and points at inset panel containing six different inset panels, each containing a face and a speech balloon reading: **Feminism saved my life**. The text remains consistent throughout, but, as Rachel narrates, the drawings shift to match the described characteristics. The first inset panel shows the same woman from panel 5.8. The second inset panel shows a woman with darker skin and hair. The third inset panel shows an older woman with glasses. The fourth inset panel shows a man with a beard. The fifth inset panel shows a person with short blue hair, glasses, and earrings. The sixth inset panel shows a person wearing a head covering.)*

RACHEL: Even if the text stays the same, see how the meaning shifts—
 RACHEL: —if the speaker is a different race
 RACHEL: or age
 RACHEL: or if they are drawn with a different gender or gender
 presentation,
 RACHEL: or with religious or culturally significant clothing.

PAGE 6

Panel 6.1

(A diagonal line divides the panel. On the left side of the dividing line, a silhouette of a person in a dress stands next to the silhouette of a person in pants, both with arms outstretched. On the right side of the line, their reflections are visible, with swapped clothing.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Granted, someone's visual form may not capture the complexities of self-making or someone's disputed relationship to their body.

Panel 6.2

(A clothesline containing a vest, a gown, a suit, a pair of plaid pants, and a dress, along with multiple pairs of shoes.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): However, as comics scholars like Jane Tolmie and Elisabeth El Refaie have argued, the comics medium is particularly well-suited for stories that contest the meaning of bodies and objects because it requires a careful attention to materiality.

Panel 6.3

(Rachel stands in the middle of library stacks, in silhouette.)

RACHEL: Importantly, it is not only the physical body that provides perspective for these utterances — the **context** surrounding the speaker can also change the reader's interpretation.

Panel 6.4

(Rachel points to an inset panel containing a picture of the person from panel 5.8 with short blue hair, glasses, and earrings. As in panel 5.8, the person says, "Feminism saved my life.")

RACHEL: For example, I can take a simple panel like this—

Panel 6.5

*(Rachel stands in the middle of the panel with her back to the reader, hands clasped behind her back, looking at two inset panels. In the left inset panel, the blue-haired person is seated in a wheelchair next to a ramp leading to a building. In the right inset panel, they are holding an infant next to another adult and baby under a banner reading **Queer Parenting Group**.)*

RACHEL: And **zoom out**, depicting the speaker in a broader context
 RACHEL: and providing a more complex picture that reinforces the relationship between *speech* and *speaker*.

Panel 6.6

*(A series of three photos taped to the wall, all showing the blue-haired person saying, “Feminism saved my life.” In the first photo, they appear in front of a school building. In the second, they appear in front of a church. In the third, they appear in a protest scene, holding a sign that reads **Trans rights are human rights**.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): The ability to show this speech and this speaker in a broader frame offers powerful context that can change the resonance of piece of text, without additional narration.

Panel 6.7

(An all-black panel.)

RACHEL (OFF-PANEL): For feminist scholars, using these tools in the context of first-person narration provides a sustained awareness of the relationship between the *author* and the *text* that remains,

RACHEL (OFF-PANEL): even in panels where the narrator does not appear.

Panel 6.8

(Rachel sitting at a table with several sheets of paper and a recording device, pointing at herself.)

RACHEL: In so doing, comics can provide a more nuanced and situated account of the research process, depicting the author—

Panel 6.9

(The blue-haired person is shown sitting at a table with a cup of coffee in front of them, waving at the reader)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —their research participants or interlocutors—

Panel 6.10

*(A coffee shop storefront with several small sidewalk tables and chairs out front. The building sign reads **Java Station** and a sign on the window reads **Coffee**.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): —the context—

Panel 6.11

(Rachel and the blue-haired person sit across from each other at a table inside of the coffee shop.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —and, ideally, the site of interaction where these elements converge.

CAPTION (RACHEL): ...But more on that later.

—PART 2—
PAGE 7

Panel 7.1

(Rachel sits, leaning against the panel frame, with a stack of books at her feet.)

CAPTION (NARR): Part 2: Contested Narrative and Cross-Discursivity.

RACHEL: Beyond offering an opportunity to reflect on the situated position of the author or interlocutors—

Panel 7.2

*(A book on a round table. The cover reads **The Definitive Guide to Feminist Theory**.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): —the comics medium can be used in strategic ways to question the objectivity and fixity of a text—

Panel 7.3

*(Zoomed out from the previous panel, **A Definitive Guide to Feminist Theory** sits in front of a large bookcase with the sign **Feminist Theory**. Rachel sits on the floor in front of the bookcase.)*

RACHEL: —and to present multiple and conflicted truths.

Panel 7.4

(Rachel holds the book in her left hand and a polaroid in her right hand.)

RACHEL: In prose academic writing, it can be challenging for a writer to present an argument and their reaction to it, their comments and reflections, their hesitations and caveats.

Panel 7.5

(A pair of scissors sits on top of a pile of papers with sections cut out.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Even when a writer wants to include metacommentary, it is often situated outside the line of argument, relegated to endnotes or cut completely.

CAPTION (RACHEL): In the absence of this authorial context, academic research is often read as objective, fixed.

Panel 7.6

(Rachel sits behind a laptop. Behind her is a garbage can full of balled-up paper.)

RACHEL: However, the comics medium contains storytelling tools that can enable the circulation of contested narratives, those that present knowledge while maintaining a focus on the construction of the text.

Panel 7.7

(Overlapping speech balloons.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Because the comics medium is inherently dialogic—

Panel 7.8

(An inset panel showing a figure near a moon and trees with a narration box and dialogue balloon.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —it can incorporate multiple voices into a single comics panel by overlaying

CAPTION (RACHEL): the narrative voice

CAPTION (RACHEL): the speaking characters

CAPTION (RACHEL): and the visual components.

Panel 7.9

(The Modern Fiction Studies article “Introduction: Graphic Narratives” by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): In fact, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that the comics medium is **cross-discursive**, containing important information at each of these levels.

QUOTE FROM ARTICLE: The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of “verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather, remain distinct” (769).

Panel 7.10

(A zipper that is partially zipped, with a separated section in the middle.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This cross-discursivity is particularly useful for feminist scholars because it can create moments of alignment and of critical distance between these different discourses—

Panel 7.11

(Rachel, speaking to the reader.)

RACHEL: —allowing writers to strategically manipulate each element independently

RACHEL: in ways that can *support* or *deepen*, *interrupt* or *clarify*

RACHEL: the assumed relationship between narrative, dialogue, and visuals.

Panel 7.12

(Rachel leans over the panel border of an inset panel. A second Rachel inside that panel looks up, annoyed.)

RACHEL 1: Because these discourses don't automatically blend, the writer can stage moments where multiple selves interact and conflict.

RACHEL 2: Hey.

PAGE 8**Panel 8.1**

*(Rachel gestures toward a stacked set of blocks labeled **Text**, **Context**, **Dialogue**, and **Narration**.)*

RACHEL: Let's look at another example here, one that highlights the function of cross-discursivity by slowly layering the different elements on the page.

Panel 8.2

(Close-up on a blackboard full of text.)

RACHEL: We can take a piece of text outlining a common narrative about feminist history (one that scholars have critiqued as overly simplistic)—

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Waves of Feminism:
1st Wave - 1890s-1920s, suffrage, basic rights
2nd Wave - 1960s & 1970s, sex, birth control, work
3rd Wave - 1990s-2000s, bodies, diversity, represent.
4th Wave - 2000s-now, sexual harassment, tech.

Panel 8.3

(The same blackboard from panel 8.2, in a classroom with a podium.)

RACHEL: And place it in context, providing additional information about the rhetorical situation in which it appears.

Panel 8.4

(Rachel 1, operating a crane, which extends into panel 8.5. Her dialogue balloons also extend into panels 8.5 and 8.6.)

RACHEL 1: Furthermore, we can show how this particular narrative is maintained
 RACHEL 1: by adding into the picture an institutional voice and context
 RACHEL 1: that depicts how this narrative is valued, reinforced, and disseminated.

Panel 8.5

(Rachel 2 clings to a rope as the crane from Panel 8.4 lowers her into the classroom scene from panel 8.3.)

Panel 8.6

(Rachel 2 points at the blackboard, which still lists the waves of feminism.)

RACHEL 2: This is very important—make sure you study it.

Panel 8.7

(Rachel 1, wearing a construction hat, speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL 1: An image like this reminds us that these narratives aren't neutral—that they gain consensus through passive repetition and active effort.

Panel 8.8

(Rachel, in silhouette, speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL 1: Importantly, by strategically manipulating the relationship between the visuals, dialogue, and framing narration the writer can tell a story that *aligns* with the image and dialogue

RACHEL 1: or that *subverts* the image and dialogue entirely

RACHEL 1: creating a cross-discursive representation that either reinforces or disrupts.

Panel 8.9

(Inset within Panel 8.8, this is a repeat of Panel 8.6—Rachel 2 pointing at the blackboard. Her dialogue is repeated as well, but a new caption is added to show new context, which plays off the speech balloon in 8.8 right next to it.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): If they learned nothing else in this course, at least they'd know this history.

Panel 8.9

(Also inset within Panel 8.8, this is another repeat of Panel 8.6 with another new caption.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): Although this model was no longer popular, as a feminist historian, I thought knowing this context was worth the effort.

Panel 8.10

(Again, another repeat of Panel 8.6 inset within 8.8. This one, sitting on another row, corresponds to the “subversion” mentioned in the dialogue of 8.8.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): At the time, I thought this was actually really important; it wasn't until later that I realized how reductive this model was.

Panel 8.11

(One more repeat of Panel 8.6 inset within 8.8.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): I didn't really think this was important, but I was required to teach a textbook that doubled down on this metaphor.

Panel 8.12

(Rachel 1, still in her hard hat, holds one caption from this panel over her head with her left hand, the second caption tucked underneath her right arm.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): The interplay between these different elements in a single autobiographical comics panel—

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): gives a glimpse of interiority and perspective—

Panel 8.10

*(A piece of paper titled ***Not so ~~final~~ draft** on a desktop, covered in post-it notes, with a pencil next to it.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): —allowing the writer to circulate comments, clarifications, and critiques along with their seemingly static prose.

—PART 3— PAGE 9

Panel 9.1

(Rachel stands in the back rows of an empty lecture hall.)

CAPTION (NARR): Part 3: Memory & Temporality
 RACHEL: Feminist scholars have argued that stories about the past are never neutral but, rather, reflect the writer's present concerns and future desires.
 RACHEL: As feminist and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak argues, "The past is a past present. What is marked is the site of desire" (119).
 RACHEL: While representations of the past are neither neutral nor objective, writers often employ rhetorical techniques that erase their role in constructing the text.

Panel 9.2

(The text of the introduction to this article, overlaid with narrative captions to show it in a new context.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Writing that attempts to make claims about the past—including my own introduction to this article—is always motivated, reframing history to meet the writer's needs
 CAPTION (RACHEL): marking temporal shifts
 CAPTION (RACHEL): categorizing and collapsing viewpoints
 CAPTION (RACHEL): creating gaps in order to fill them.

Panel 9.3

(The title page of “*What Is a Feminist Theorist Responsible for?*” article by Clare Hemmings.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): To challenge these political erasures, feminist scholar Clare Hemmings calls for a tactics of memory that will allow writers to fold in and recombine traces of erased histories.

QUOTE (ARTICLE): “Developing a tactics of memory... might allow us to challenge some of the political erasures that these stories effect. The intention is modest in that respect, wanting to surface what is potently absent through recombination” (75).

Panel 9.4

(Rachel, gesturing toward the bamboo in panel 9.5.)

RACHEL: Other feminist scholars have called for *rhizomatic* reading and writing practices, a framework adapted from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasizing nonlinear and nonhierarchical connections.

Panel 9.5

(A cross-section of a tree, above and below ground, next to a similar cross-section of bamboo.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Unlike a tree, which requires linear, progressive, and ordered branching—

CAPTION (RACHEL): —a rhizome, like bamboo or ginger, is a “network of multiple branching roots and shoots with no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth” (173).

Panel 9.6

(A close-up of the interconnected networks of a rhizome.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and Juana María Rodríguez have incorporated the concept of the rhizome into a distinctly feminist practice, arguing that it can be used to draw connections across

CAPTION (RACHEL): identities

CAPTION (RACHEL): trajectories

CAPTION (RACHEL): and movements.

Panel 9.7

(Rachel points at a blackboard in the lecture hall from 9.1.)

RACHEL: Such rhizomatic reading and writing practices emphasize connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Grosz (1993)
Connection: bring together diverse fragments: theories, objects and practices
Heterogeneity: Multiple connections across levels, domains, dimensions, functions, effects, aims
Multiplicity: a proliferation of processes

Panel 9.8

(Rachel, speaking to the reader.)

RACHEL: Due to its flexible tools for representing temporality and spatiality, comics can serve as a tactics of memory—one that is both recombinatory and rhizomatic—

RACHEL: able to combine and rearrange temporal traces across time, space, and scale.

PAGE 10**Panel 10.1**

(A series of captions over an abstract blue background meander toward Rachel, who speaks the last line in a dialogue balloon.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Rather than
 CAPTION (RACHEL): telling a
 CAPTION (RACHEL): linear or
 CAPTION (RACHEL): teleological
 CAPTION (RACHEL): story that
 CAPTION (RACHEL): travels straight
 CAPTION (RACHEL): from past
 RACHEL: to present—

Panel 10.2

(A loop of arrows titled “Past” “Present” and “Future”.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —the comics medium allows the writer to curate and juxtapose
 CAPTION (RACHEL): past, present, and future

CAPTION (RACHEL): moments on the page.

Panel 10.3

(A person with short hair, viewed from behind, studies the space between two blank comics panels.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This flexible narrative structure is produced through elision and absence, through the essential gaps created by the comics gutter.

Panel 10.4

(A giant web of interconnected blank comics panels.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): It is in these marginal spaces that comics readers engage in what Scott McCloud calls closure: “observing the parts, but perceiving the whole” (63).

Panel 10.5

(A solid gray panel.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This mapping from panel to panel, from part to whole, can be used to bring together diverse fragments—

CAPTION (RACHEL): and to recombine, fold in, or draw connections across spaces, places, and contexts.

Panel 10.6

*(Three inset panels, with arrows pointing from them to different spots on a globe. The first shows a scene from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, with a banner reading **Sin nosotras, el mundo se para**. The second inset panel shows a Saudi woman driving a car. The third shows a smartphone, depicting the covert participation of Chinese women in the #metoo movement (when the hashtag #metoo was censored by the government, women continued to share their stories via a localized code of that combines the emojis for Rice 🍚 (“Mi”) and Bunny 🐰 (“Tu”).)*

RACHEL: For example, a writer can explode a single moment across geographic distance, using the comics medium to both represent and create connections.

Panel 10.7

(Rachel, pointing at panel 10.6. and 10.8)

RACHEL: Or, the writer can shift the scope and scale of the story between panels—

Panel 10.8

(Over a gray background, the next four panels are inset, overlapping each other, with captions juxtaposed above each.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —moving seamlessly from the personal to the local

CAPTION (RACHEL): From the local to the global

CAPTION (RACHEL): And back again—

Panel 10.9

(Inset from 10.8, another Rachel, in a pink dress, draws a comic.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): I drew my first comic on 11/8/16.

Panel 10.10

(Also inset from 10.8. Close up on a group of protesters—one holds a sign reading “Not my president.”)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): It was election night and protests raged outside all night.

Panel 10.11

(Also inset from 10.8. A huge throng of protesters, zoomed out, in front of a large building. Above the crowd floats a balloon depicting Donald Trump as a baby.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): Around the world, people gathered, marched, wondered.

Panel 10.12

(One more inset from 10.8. A blank grid of comics panels on a page.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): In the stillness of my apartment, I drew heavy, black grids.

Panel 10.13

(Rachel 1 speaks directly to the reader.)

RACHEL: Allowing the writer to draw together ordinary and extraordinary events and circumstances,

RACHEL: reinforcing the connection between *personal* and *political*.

—PART 4—
PAGE 12

Panel 12.1

(Rachel stands between three bamboo shoots with visible roots and rhizomes.)

CAPTION (NARR): Conclusion: Lines of Flight

RACHEL: I hope that this article is read as an opening, one possible “line of flight” that connects comics, feminism, and academic writing practices.

Panel 12.2

(Rachel speaks directly to the reader.)

RACHEL: I’ve argued here that the comics medium contains powerful storytelling tools that align with feminist approaches to knowledge—

RACHEL: and which productively address many key concerns within academic feminist writing and writing—

Panel 12.3

(Two silhouettes, each with a dialogue balloon, surrounded by trees.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —providing critical context about speaker and setting that situates the text—

Panel 12.4

(The silhouettes, trees, and dialog balloons from the Panel 12.3 lay disassembled and scattered across a work surface, next to a tape dispenser.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —developing richly layered panels that reinforce or subvert—

Panel 12.5

(The same scene of speakers, dialogue, and trees from panel 12.3, but with a more richly colored mountain scene extending outside of the panel confines.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): —creating narrative links across time, space, and scale—

Panel 12.6

(Rachel stands before a dark background.)

RACHEL: Throughout this article, I've made the relatively vague claims that the comics medium is "aligned with" feminist epistemology or "can be useful" for feminist scholars.

RACHEL: While I've deliberately left these claims open-ended, the question remains:

Panel 12.7

(A light blue panel with an un-bordered caption inside.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): What might this look like in practice?

Panel 12.8

(Rachel stands in the middle of a path with dense bamboo on either side.)

RACHEL: First of all, it is a call for researchers to express and share their work in comics—adding comics to the range of methodological and representational tools available to scholars—

Panel 12.9

*(Two books: **Unflattening** by Nick Sousanis and **Understanding Rhetoric** by Elizabeth Losh, Johnathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, Zander Cannon. Additionally, the digital journal **Sequentials** by the TRACE Innovation Initiative is displayed on a tablet.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): —and contributing to a growing canon of work that uses the comics form to talk about comics or to present other research.

Panel 12.10

(A gray background covered with a pattern of blue dialogue balloons.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): As comics scholarship becomes more readily available, used, and discussed

CAPTION (RACHEL): it builds a case for the theoretical and rhetorical complexity of the medium.

Panel 12.11

*(Three books: **Queer: A Graphic History** by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele; **A People's History** by Howard Zinn, Paul Buhle, and Mike Konopacki; and **Comics for Choice**, edited by Hazel Newlevant, Whit Taylor, and Ø.K. Fox.)*

- CAPTION (RACHEL): For researchers who are unable or unwilling to dabble in the comics form, this may also mean pursuing partnerships between researchers and comics creators
- CAPTION (RACHEL): that combine specialized content knowledge and storytelling craft to develop compelling texts.

Panel 12.12

(Rachel speaks to the reader.)

- RACHEL: Beyond the creation of new comics, this piece also echoes calls to consider existing comics as examples of complex scholarship and theory in their own right—

Panel 12.13

(A dark background with a comic left open to show the panels.)

- CAPTION (RACHEL): —offering content and storytelling tools that are both theoretical and political.

PAGE 13

Panel 13.1

(Rachel's silhouette stands with arms open in front of a green patterned background.)

- RACHEL: Finally—and importantly for my home discipline of feminist studies—it is a call to critically consider the dominant forms and practices of academic writing.

Panel 13.2

*(The cover of **Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies**, ed. Mona Livholts)*

- CAPTION (RACHEL): Mona Livholts argues that the relative scarcity of conversations about the form of academic writing points to the—
- QUOTE FROM BOOK: “dominance of mainstream textual form that does not need to name itself” (6).

Panel 13.3

(A stack of papers on a table including comics, text, images, and charts.)

- CAPTION (RACHEL): By seeking out new rhetorical and representational tools and exploring scholarly research through emergent and

experimental forms like comics, these unnamed forms become named, available for both question and critique.

Panel 13.4

(Rachel speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL: Feminist scholar Eva Bendix Petersen writes, “As research continues to be a privileged form of knowledge production, or story-telling,
RACHEL: we are expressly obliged to attend to the stories that we tell and how we tell them” (Petersen 2016, 6).

Panel 13.5

(A background of bamboo)

CAPTION (RACHEL): By attending to these stories, and by implementing multimodal argumentative and narrative tools that self-consciously connect identities, practices, and histories
CAPTION (RACHEL): feminist scholars can draw on the powerful marginality of the comics medium
CAPTION (RACHEL): to disrupt expected practices of scholarly writing and to center forms that align with feminist approaches to knowledge.

Notes

As I hope this exploratory comic has conveyed, my goal here is to gesture to some of the productive possibilities of the comics medium for feminist researchers who wish to create and share knowledge through emergent and experimental forms. Translating research across medium allows us to explore new rhetorical and representational tools—and to reflect on both the strengths and limits of our current approaches. As this is my first foray into experimental writing *and* my first attempt at making comics, these twelve comics pages have opened additional lines of both questioning and possibility.

Panel 13.6

(A cropped version of panel 12.1 where Rachel stands between three bamboo shoots with visible roots and rhizomes.)

RACHEL: I hope that this article is read as an opening, one possible “line of flight” that connects comics, feminism, and academic writing practices.

The reference to “lines of flight” in my conclusion draws once more from Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that—if ruptured—rhizomes can sprout anew along old lines or create “new lines of flight... directions in motion” (p. 35). This relationship between rhizomes and comics has been explored in multiple works and ways, including as a theoretical framework for analyzing comic book culture (Jeffery, 2016), as a visual metaphor (Sousanis, 2015), and as a flexible storytelling (non-)structure for the digital project *Rhizcomics* (Helms, 2017). Importantly, metaphors of connection and rupture, of roots and motion, offer powerful metaphors for critically examining identity and identity formation as well (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 22).

Page 14

Panel 14.1

(A cropped version of Panel 4.3)

Because reflexivity plays such a significant role in feminist studies scholarship, it comes as no surprise that many of the storytelling tools I analyze within this piece have been primarily discussed within the context of autobiographical and life writing comics. In fact, the first sections of my argument refer to a specific subset of narrative tools that are often used in first-person, single-authored comics—those that include an embodied version of the author-narrator on the page. For feminist scholars, this close attention to the embodiment, practices, and habits of everyday life is essential. As Jane Tolmie (2013) argues, comics are “precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level...” (p. xvi).

Panel 14.2

(A cropped version of panel 6.1)

Hillary Chute (2010) further argues that the ability to visualize the “ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political” (140).

Panel 14.3

(A cropped version of panel 11.6)

This visuality facilitates a political reading of everyday events, such as the panel below [referring to panel 11.6] that brings together scenes from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, the repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia, and the covert participation of Chinese women in the #MeToo movement (when the hashtag #MeToo was censored by the government, women continued to connect and share by substituting the characters or emojis for Rice “Mi”) and Bunny (“Tu”).

Panel 14.4*(Repeat of panels 6.8-6.11)*

The comics medium offers a tactics of memory that pictures and recombines traces of everyday life. These same narrative tools are also available to feminist scholars—leaving an open opportunity for scholars to share not only their research *products*, but also their *process*: the situated interaction, decision-making, and thought processes that underlie scholarly work.

References

This project is indebted to the important work done by feminist comics scholars to identify specific narrative tools and to initiate conversations about the connections between identity, power, and form. While the comics medium offers incredible argumentative density, I've found it to be spatially and logistically challenging to incorporate the breadth of references expected of scholarly work into the comics form. Undoubtedly, the practices and politics of citation for scholarship written in the comics medium will require additional examination and experimentation—another line of flight perhaps?



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Disidentification, Disorientation, and Disruption:

Queer Multimodal Rhetoric in Queer Comics

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Queer characters must be allowed to live in a queer world doing queer things with the dominant culture playing a marginalized role. —Edward Sewell.

Introduction

Both comics and queerness have occupied the margins, culturally, historically, and academically. While both have made forays to the center, finding value and currency in academia in particular, many consider both comics and queers too outside the realm of respectability to be granted voice and legitimacy. And perhaps they should remain on the margins because, as Harriet Malinowitz (1995) observes, the margin is “a site both of annihilation and actualization, of disempowerment and electrifying resistance,” capable of producing “not only abject outsiderhood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting” (p. 251). In this essay, I suggest that the multimodal affordances of comics are also capable of producing profound expressions of queerness and queer world-making. Indeed, in analyzing several queer comics, this essay demonstrates how comics produced by and for queers become a site of multimodal queer rhetoric, a rhetoric that disrupts and remakes (hetero)normative discourses through combining multiple modes of meaning making.

Scholarship on multimodality and queerness remains scant, but a few scholars have noted the link between the two. In their 2004 webtext, Brian Houle, Alex Kimball and Heidi McKee describe how multimodal spaces and composition can allow for fluid gender expression. Their article presents Alex Kimball’s (their student’s) project which traces Kimball’s transgender negotiation with Robin Hood by his side. Houle and McKee find that “through Alex’s use of multimedia, his composition evokes and challenges simultaneous senses of identity placement and displacement, identity location and dislocation” (Houle et al., 2004, n.p.). In other words, the multimodal and multimedia form of his text help Alex negotiate his identities, past and present, where the form itself demonstrates the fluidity of identity and sexuality.

Similarly, when teacher-scholars Jennifer DiGrazia and Michel Boucher (2005) experimented with queering a writing class, they encouraged students to include multimodal elements in their text, because they wanted students “to experiment with and explore new and more nuanced ways of representing self” (p. 30). They discovered that “in order to write queerly (to represent new identity configurations...we had to expand our ideas of what it meant to write” (DiGrazia & Boucher, 2005, p. 40). Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2011) have made similar arguments:

If queerness means more than just one more static representation of “diversity,” containable in its knowability, then it must *move* in multiple directions at once, embracing multi-modality, multi-genre texts, and even, when available or perhaps necessary, multi-media. (p. 183)

Like DiGrazia and Boucher (2005), Alexander and Rhodes connect queerness with an expanded notion of writing that, like queer, is fluid, transgressive, excessive, multi-faceted, and multimodal.

In “Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation,” Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) are more specific, suggesting that multimodality and queerness are inextricably linked, mutually constructed and construed. Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) explore how queer and multimodality intersect in multi-mediated space(s), and to view this intersection, they physically juxtapose two narratives side-by-side: on one side of the book, they offer a narrative of how scholars have examined queerness represented online and through multi-media texts, and on the other side of the page, they offer a narrative of Jean Cocteau as unacknowledged queer and multimedia artist. Ultimately, they see in “multimodal composition of queerness possibilities for reorienting our understanding of sexuality and how it moves in the world, and for how it orients us along certain paths, particular trajectories on which we may, or may not, wish to travel” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012a, p. 189). Those trajectories, futurities, and dis/re/orientations function as queer rhetoric, as channels for queer expression and queer world-making.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) define queer rhetoric as “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences” (Introduction). Queer rhetoric in action means challenging staid norms and values, especially as they relate to sex/uality and gender. Their webtext forms a queer rhetorical archive, where they collect and describe examples of queer rhetoric in action, like singer Gay Pimp’s “Soccer Practice” video which reworks masculinities associated with the gym and working out into a queer discourse that associates sex/uality and the erotic with those performances of hypermasculinity; too, this video highlights the homoerotic nature of highly masculine realms like sports, frats, and the military (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012, Disidentifying). Gay Pimp’s video, as an example of queer

rhetorical practice, critically engages with normative discourses of masculinity, and it offers a counter discourse that queers and disrupts silent (normalized) boundaries that would cordon off queer sex and desire from such highly masculinized environments. In effect, the video torques masculinity to suggest that desire and sex between men does not eschew the masculine and offers other trajectories or futurities for queer masculinity.

The queer rhetoric of Gay Pimp's "Soccer Practice," found in other examples like the ACT UP "Silence Equals Death" logo with a pink triangle on a black background aimed to raise awareness for the AIDS crisis (See Figure 1), and a Lesbian Avengers black and white poster that features a stereotypical housewife holding a bomb next to the phrase, "We Recruit," have in common that they all convey queer rhetoric through multimodal means. In combining the visual, the gestural, the aural, the textual, and the spatial, these texts engage in queer rhetorical practices that undermine (hetero)normative discourses to suggest other ways of being in the world. Importantly, this queer rhetoric would not be conveyed in quite the same way were these texts largely constructed in the linguistic mode, because, as Gunther Kress (2005) observes, different modes offer different affordances and possibilities for meaning. In other words, writing/typing *queer* versus visually representing *queer* does not offer an equivalent meaning; rather, representing queerness multimodally matters, especially in terms of queer rhetoric. Moreover, queer, multimodal rhetoric, while present in posters, photos, and even material texts like the AIDS Quilt, can also be found in the multimodal medium of comics, a medium that has, at least in/through underground comix, provided "an uncensored, internal conversation within queer communities, and thus provide a unique window in to the hopes, fears, and fantasies of queer people" (Hall, 2013, n.p.).



Figure 1: Silence = Death poster (1987), created and circulated by ACT UP during the AIDS years.

Queerness and comics have history, which is not all too surprising because they "both tend not to get any respect" (qtd. in Hall, 2013, n.p.). Marginalized by mainstream comics publishers, early queer comics artists had to rely on community support and resources because they lacked the commercial infrastructure of powerhouse comics producers. For example, Mary Wing's 1973 *Come Out Comix*, the first lesbian comic book, was created much like a zine, "on a photocopy machine in the basement of a local radical women's karate school" (Hall, 2013, n.p.). Too, LGBTQ comics often were not granted shelf space in many comic book stores and awards ceremonies, and were primarily produced, published, and promoted by LGBTQ people (Hall, 2013). Yet, queer comics—underground comics/comix made for and by queers—have been an important social, cultural, ideological outlet for the LGBTQ community. For example, Howard Cruse's pivotal *Gay Comix*, with the "x" of comix signifying adult content, critiqued and challenged socio-cultural norms around sex and sexuality. The

first issue, published in 1980, includes a man in a literal closet (indicated by the hangers stuck in the door, and the dangling clothing) who, through eye-hole cutouts, ogles a muscular, scantily clad male in the process of eating an obviously phallic hotdog.

Alison Bechdel, who had been cartooning since her childhood and who had been an out lesbian for a couple of years, found the first issue of *Gay Comix* and realized, “You can do cartoons about your own real life being a gay person” (Chute, 2017, p. 358); she went on to create one of the longest running (28 years!) LGBTQ comic series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and arguably, one of the most important graphic memoirs of the 21st century, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The latter explores her own lesbian sexuality vis-à-vis her father’s closeted gayness and subsequent death/suicide, while the former follows a group of lesbian women as they navigate city-life in the 80s, 90s, and early aught years. In this way, *Dykes to Watch Out For* acts as a political touchstone and as a queer archive that collects the histories and experiences of LGBTQ lives over time (Galvan, 2018a). Likewise, queer comics during the AIDS plague years provided a space for rage, sarcasm, political and social commentary, therapy, and awareness raising (Hall, 2013, n.p.). The 1990s ushered in important lesbian comics like Diane DiMassa’s *Hothead Paisan* series and Jennifer Camper’s *Rude Girls* and *Dangerous Women*, with Camper’s comics promoting community and activism (Galvan, 2018b), and DiMassa’s series following “its unhinged lesbian heroine as she wreaks havoc on the White male straight world” (Barounis, 2018, p. 1). In her recent essay on *Hothead Paisan*, Cynthia Barounis argues that the main character—who DiMassa describes as a “Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist”—remains timely as a response to a racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic Donald Trump being elected to the highest office in America.

Since the 1990s, LGBTQ comics have become more and more common, with Hillary Chute (2018) recently suggesting that queer comics might be the fastest-growing area in comics right now (p. 349). More and more mainstream comics, too, are including LGBTQ characters in positive ways. Series like Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine DeLandro’s *Bitch Planet*, a sci-fi prison comic, Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda’s *Monstress*, and Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staple’s sci-fi space opera, *Saga*, includes non-binary, non-normative sex and sexualities as part and parcel of a well-rounded cast of characters. That is not to say that LGBTQ characters have not been in mainstream comics because they were and are, as Morris E. Franklin III (2001) discovers in his analysis of mainstream comics between 1988 and 1993. Franklin (2001) sees gay and lesbian characters come out in DC and Marvel comics, move from minor to major roles, and be represented as normal people who are not evil, deranged, or abnormal (p. 224). However, this normalization, while it includes queer characters, also has the effect of assimilating these characters, of muting and mitigating their queerness to make them more palatable to mainstream, straight audiences. Edward H. Sewell, Jr. (2001) observes a similar trend in mainstream comic strips, where queer characters “are well integrated into heterosexual society in that they look an act ‘straight’ before coming out as queer, and they

look and act in a manner appropriate to the dominant heterosexual culture after coming out” (p. 253). Moreover, when queer characters appeared in comics like *Doonesbury* and *For Better or For Worse*, some newspapers replaced the strip or dropped it altogether.

In contrast, queer comics made by and for queer people focus not on assimilation, but on representing a queer culture that often directly opposes or conflicts with dominant heterosexual culture (Sewell, 2001, p. 271). Indeed, many of the essays in a special issue of *American Literature* devoted to queer comics demonstrate comics’ “capacity to represent or make visible nonnormative desires, intimacies, and affiliations in ways that might elude other mediums” (Scott and Fawaz, 2018, p. 211). The unabashed, celebrated portrayal of LGBTQ lives and desires in queer comics is what makes them such a rich site of queer rhetorical practice in a multimodal medium. And comics are multimodal texts, as Dale Jacobs (2007) argues in his essay on teaching multiliteracies through comics: “in comics, there are elements present besides words, but these elements are just as important in making meaning from the text. In fact, it is impossible to make full sense of the words on the page in isolation from the audio, visual, gestural, and spatial” (p. 22).

In other words, comics rely on a variety of modes to make meaning: the linguistic in printed words and font choice(s); the gestural in facial expressions and body language; the aural in bolded words, ellipsis suggesting a pause, or onomatopoeias; the spatial in arrangement of panels and the space between panels; and most obviously, the visual in the images and color palette. Comics purposefully combine multiple modes to make meaning, which, as the New London Group (NLG) (1996) has observed, “is of a different order to the other five modes of meaning; it represents the patterns of interconnections among the other modes” (p. 78). But how do queer comics combine these modes of meaning making as acts of queer rhetorical practice? This essay shows that the multimodal rhetoric of queer comics give voice to silenced and elided desires and sexualities, and that reorient viewers through disidentification with normative discourses, disruption of heteronormativity, and depiction of marginalized sex/ualities.

Disidentifying Fairytales and Undermining Heteronormativity

Disidentification is a queer rhetorical practice that, as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) explains, remakes and rewrites dominant, socio-cultural scripts by reworking those scripts to represent and reflect minority lives and worlds. (p. 23). In the many examples Muñoz (1999) provides in his book on disidentification and performance among queer people of color, Muñoz shows how disidentification offers a third avenue for historically disenfranchised groups to make meaning—they neither identify with or counter-identify against the dominant culture, preferring instead to work on or against the dominant ideology by undermining and transforming that ideology’s cultural logics from within (p. 11). The work of disidentification

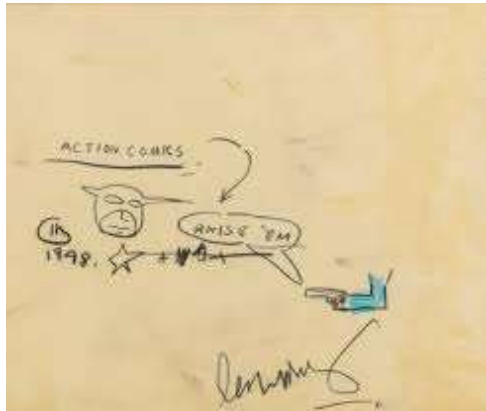


Figure 2: *Action Comics*, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1987).

is accomplished through recycling and rethinking hegemonic social scripts, and “the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). Said differently, disidentification involves remixing normalized, hierarchical structures to both expose their naturalized and unmarked status, and to make space for those individuals who have been marginalized from such structures.

The vast majority of disidentification examples that Muñoz (1999) provides are multimodal texts, ranging from pop art to film to theatrical performances to drag. In one example, Muñoz describes a Jean-Michel Basquiat (1987) drawing titled, *Action Comics*, that is a reproduction of the original cover art for the first issue of *Superman*. As can be seen from Figure 2, Basquiat’s *Superman* is not a bastion of white male perfection in muscle-bulging lycra. Rather, Basquiat offers a rough, child-like version where the “disidentificatory strokes here retain the vibrancy of wanting to be *Superman*, of wanting to be able to accomplish the awe-inspiring feats that only the Man of Steel can accomplish, without retaining the aestheticism of the image” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 41). Basquiat does not disavow *Superman* entirely, but instead re/presents *Superman* in such a way as to draw attention to underlying normative discourses inherent in and attached to the figure of *Superman* over time.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) provide another example of disidentification in their analysis of the 1950s muscle magazine, *Physique Pictorial*. These magazines were intended to represent hypermasculine ideals like strength and dominance to a straight male audience, but they were often circulated among gay men, serving as an early form of gay pornography (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012b, Disidentification). Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) perceive of this repurposing as a “form of disidentification—a simultaneous identification with the masculinity represented and yet the use of that masculinity for homoerotic ends and interests, running counter to the starkly heterosexist aims of most muscle magazines” (Disidentification). Gay men reworked the cultural logics of masculinity from within to reveal gender norms and to produce a counter-public suited to their own needs, interests, and lives.

In both examples, disidentification occurs through multiple modes, where visual, spatial, and gestural elements are changed to offer a dissident narrative that “works on or against dominant ideology...a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (Muñoz, 1999, p.

11). In the examples briefly outlined here, and in so many other sites of queer resistance, the work of disidentification occurs multimodally. The AIDS Quilt is a material, multimodal example of disidentification that torques the domestic and familial rhetoric associated with quilting to bond the LGBTQ community in honoring lives lost to the plague. Instead of nice, neat squares perfectly aligned to form a distinct pattern, the AIDS Quilt is a hodgepodge of materials and memorials, a multimodal tapestry, colorful and chaotic in its expressions of celebration and sorrow. Again, in this text, and in so many queer texts, the transformative, disruptive effects of disidentification occur through a combination of modes operating in concert to create specific, social, ideological meaning about queer being, living, and dying that could not be conveyed otherwise.

In queer comics like Emily Carroll's "Anu-Anulan and Yir's Daughter," for example, the larger message of the comic hinges on a multimodal moment (or more likely, moments) of disidentification. This fairytale-esque webcomic is told in three parts, with the goddess Anu-Anulan disguising herself as a crow, a young child, and a knight to trick Yorenn, Yir's daughter, into parting with braids of her long, silvery hair. In the final sequence, Anu-Anulan appears to Yorenn as herself and the two end up together instead of the predictable marriage of a damsel in distress to her knight in shining armor. In telling a queer love story where two women fall in love, Carroll disidentifies with fairytales, with the understanding that disidentification aims "to intervene in publicly circulating images and norms to critique and open up alternative pathways for desire and identification" (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012b, *Disidentifying*). Anu-Anulan, in being a female who occupies a typically male role, and in pursuing and falling in love with a woman, works on and against the cultural logics of the fairytale genre to suggest other, queer ways of being in the world. If, as Muñoz (1999) claims, "Disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (p. 25), then this queer comic multimodally de/records the fairytale genre from the perspective of a queer woman, a minority historically omitted from a romantic genre so ensconced in the heterosexual paradigm.

This webcomic's queer rhetorical practice of disidentification—where the socio-cultural



Figure 3: Anu-Anulan from Emily Carroll's "Anu-Anulan and Yir's Daughter" (2011).

script is flipped—functions multimodally. Readers do not actually see Anu-Anulan until the final sequence when she appears to Yorenn, with the only clues to her gender identity being the first line of the comic, “The Goddess Anu-Anulan was in love.” Readers, like previous students of mine, tend to promptly forget that she is a Goddess and assume she is male, an assumption affirmed by Anu-Anulan’s role in the comic and her masculine appearance (See Figure 3). In contrast, Yorenn, as a typical female protagonist in a fairytale, reads as hyper-feminine with her willowy frame, red dress, and waist-length, silver hair, but Anu-Anulan is the butch to Yorenn’s femme. Anu-Anulan presents as genderqueer, performing as both masculine and feminine and her blurring of gender boundaries is multimodal. Her masculine appearance is accompanied by female pronouns, and Figure 3 shows that juxtaposition as written, quite literally across her body. This contrast requires several modes—the visual, the linguistic, the spatial, the gestural—to create a moment where gender norms are troubled and undermined; this an example of queer multimodality in action. Queer/ness seeks to expose and challenge gender and sex norms, and queer comics accomplish that disruption multimodally.

Reworking these social, sexual values from within the fairytale discourse and through multiple modes of meaning makes sense, considering that multimodal composing is a social, semiotic process where designers draw on available resources to (re)make meaning. According to Gunther Kress (2010), “in a social-semiotic account of meaning, individuals, with their social histories, socially shaped, located in social environments, using socially made, culturally available resources, are agentive and generative in sign-making and communication” (p. 54). Composers create and make meaning using affordances available to them, or what the New London Group (1996) calls, “Available Designs.” These designs—both discursive and non-discursive—are socio-culturally bound, and from which we fashion our sense of the world and ourselves. Judith Butler (1993) explains it from a queer theoretical perspective: “where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will” (Butler, p. 171). Yet, the NLG (1996) finds that in the process of sign-making, in the process of using available multimodal designs, signers create new designs, or *The ReDesigned* (New London Group, 1996). In “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter,” Emily Carroll draws on the familiar tropes of the fairytale genre, tropes she multimodally redesigns through the butch/femme dichotomy of Yorenn and Anu-Anulan, to re/present an “I” that reflects queer lived experiences; in addition, her multimodal modifications have the queer rhetorical effect of disidentifying with a genre whose hallmark is heterosexuality.

Additionally, multimodality in this queer comic undermines heteronormativity, which can be defined as the institutions and discourses that normalize and privilege heterosexuality. Challenging heteronormativity is queer rhetorical move that continues to be of import because heteronormativity is often unmarked and invisible, and yet, inflicts violence on the lives of so

many LGBTQ people. Gust A. Yep (2003) likens this violence to soul murder, and explains that it occurs discursively, with “words, gestures, tones, images, presentations, and omissions used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay subjectivity and experience” (p.23). Because “heteronormativity ... is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others” (Yep, 2003, p. 18), a number of queer rhetoric and composition scholars have emphasized the significance of recognizing, naming, and disrupting heteronormativity (Sumara & Davis, 1999; Alexander, 2008; Wallace & Alexander, 2009). Carroll’s web-comic accomplishes this queer rhetorical move of disruption through a multimodal montage sequence. After Anu-Anulan appears to Yorenn as herself, she stays with Yorenn, but instead of being told about their relationship, readers are shown it. As can be seen in Figure 4, no words are used to express the intimate moments and love experienced between Anu-Anulan and Yorenn. They share laughter, sadness, the same bed, cups of coffee, kisses, hugs, meals, and those instances are conveyed through multimodal means. Readers experience the gambit of their relationship through facial expressions, body language, gestures, and images collaged together, all of which work together to convey meaning. Indeed, Carroll expresses the sense that time is passing or has passed through the spatial and visual modes in the juxtaposition of images relating Anu-Anulan and Yorenn’s love story. The montage sequence begins and end with a similar image of Anu-Anulan and Yorenn sitting together, with the only difference being Yorenn’s hair is short in the first image and long in the last image, which



Figure 4: Anu-Anulan and Yorenn relationship montage, Emily Carroll (2011).

indicates that time has passed, knowledge of their queer relationship that is only conveyed multi-modally.

Rhetorically, this sequence has the effect of unseating heteronormativity. Instead of a man and a woman sharing a bed, holding each other, and kissing one another, this comic portrays two women loving each other in ways typically attached to heterosexual couples. In one respect, queer scholars might claim that this relationship is homonormative, or to summarize Lisa Duggan (2002), representative of and assimilated into heteronormative values and institutions, domesticated, consumer cogs in the capitalist machine (p. 179). The happily coupled and monogamous Anu-Anulan and Yorenn do seem to represent an idealized queerness that reflects heteronormative values over radical, queer values; however, from another perspective, the multimodal collage of their love affair can also be viewed as an act of disidentification, in that it “is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 28). Instead of identifying with our counter-identifying against the heteronorms of fairytales, Carroll torques those norms to alter them from the inside out, and she does it multimodally.

Sex/uality, Disorientation, and Queer Comics

Although queer rhetorical practices do not have to be wholly sexual in nature or performance, to leave the sex out somewhat sanitizes queerness, partially stripping it of its critical, radical power. It is true that queer theory and praxis “maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Jagose, 1996, p. 99), or as Michael Warner (1999) puts it, “queer gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (p. xxvi), but queerness is also about sex and sexuality. Indeed, one origin story for queer theory is it developed as a post-structuralist response to the truncating of alternative sexualities into a lesbian/gay binary (Jagose, 1996, p. 76). Queer resists the essentializing of desire and sexuality and seems most disruptive to understandings of identity and politics when it interrogates norms that have formed around sex, gender, and sexuality (Jagose, 1996, p. 99). A good example of how this disruption can occur at the level of discourse is “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition,” Alexander and Rhodes’ (2011) essay that playfully, multimodally performs queer rhetoric in both form and content, and much of that material is sexual in nature. The authors include, alongside their academic, theoretical discussion of queer theory and composition, lyrics from Eurythmics, “Sweet Dreams,” narrative asides, single-sentence paragraphs, multiple genres, the word “fuck,” and their sex/uality. Several images and sentences are quite provocative and disruptive in the academic space of an article, especially considering sex and sexuality have long been excised from school and associated institutions (Alexander, 2009). Yet, when Alexander and Rhodes (2011) say things like “we seduce you” (p. 201), and “queerness is a disruption in the service of nothing, pure in its joyful

enrage body, sexed-up and inappropriate” (p. 186), they intend for their readers to be unsettled and shocked into recognizing the (de-sexualized) discursive norms in which they unconsciously participate and perpetuate.

Alexander and Rhodes also highlight the intimate connection between sex and queerness, wondering “What behaviors, what subjectivities, what possibilities, and what impossibilities are created through the intersections of sex and text?” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011, p. 199). I wonder what im/possibilities are created through intersections of sex and multimodal texts like queer comics, because undeniably, sex/ualities run(s) rampant in queer comics? But before proceeding, a little about sex in comics and then a trigger warning: mainstream comics that include queer characters do not typically show sex acts. They might show them kissing, as in *Young Avengers: The Children’s Crusade*, #9 (2010) when Teddy Altman (Hulking) and Billy Kaplan (Wiccan) finally kiss, but readers usually see nothing further, and they almost never see genitalia. Of course, there are exceptions like Image’s popular *Saga* series that does show a full-frontal nude shot of a transgender person (issue 31), along with a number of sex acts, gay and straight alike, but by and large, sex, and especially sex associated with queer lives tends to be left out of mainstream comics. In fact, for sex to be represented in comics post the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (1954), they had to move underground, and become *comix*, with an “x.” Robert Crumb and Aline-Kominsky Crumb are well-known for their cartooned depictions of taboo, gritty, and in the case of R. Crumb, sometimes violent sex, for which they have received criticism and their work has even been banned (Chute, 2018). They had to represent sex in alternative comics because mainstream comics tend to assume heterosexuality is the norm and avoid representing or discussing sex and sexuality. On the other hand, queer comics/comix cross a number of (straight) lines to have conversations about queer sex, sexualities, genders, desires, and lives and to speak into the silence surrounding these topics and minority groups.

Now for the trigger warning (that one must be included says a good deal): the following discussion explores the multimodal rhetoric of queer sex and eroticism in queer comics, attendant with images, not to be salacious or titillating, but to demonstrate that queer rhetoric is an embodied, sexual practice that has the potential to disidentify with and undermine (hetero)normative discourses and engage in queer world-making. I offer the trigger warning because sex and desire in queer comics are not linguistically bound—they are multimodally figured, and not ashamed or quiet either. Indeed, the sex in queer comics seems to affirm the queer mantra popularized by Queer Nation, “We are here, we are queer, get used to it!” One of the more well-known sex scenes in a queer comic can be found in Alison Bechdel’s (2006) graphic memoir *Fun Home*, and it is precisely these scenes (along with including a shot of a male cadaver’s genitalia) that have been a source of controversy largely because Bechdel’s text has become mainstream. *Fun Home* has been turned into a Broadway musical, and is often required reading for college courses. When it was required for a freshman class at Duke, Brian

Grasso (2015) wrote a *Washington Post* article to explain why he refused to read the book, describing the oral sex acts in the book as pornographic and in conflict with his religious beliefs. He further remarks, “I think there is an important distinction between images and written words...viewing pictures of sexual acts regardless of the genders of the people involved, conflicts with the inherent sacredness of sex” (Grasso, 2015, para. 4). He is right on one point: images of queer sex do seem to elicit a different affective response compared to reading about queer sex, but this essay is less interested in the morality of these images and more curious about their rhetorical role in queer, multimodal meaning making. How do graphic (in both senses of the word) representations of queer sex function rhetorically to both embody LGBTQ lives and resist discursive norms?

Queer sex and sexualities, simply in being present in queer comics, undermine heteronormativity, but in being multimodally represented, they have the potential to figure queerness in complex, capacious, and disorienting ways. For example, in Howard Cruse’s



Figure 5: Billy and a personified penis in “Billy Goes Out” by Howard Cruse (1980).

(2013) comic, “Billy Goes Out,” a comic that appeared in the first issue of *Gay Comix*, also edited by Cruse, relates Billy’s night out at a gay bar, pre-AIDS epidemic, when many more gay men freely engaged in anonymous sex at such sites. Billy does the same, performing oral sex on a stranger and having a different person, also a stranger, perform oral sex on him. This comic is sexually explicit, depicting oral sex, including many visual representations of penises, and personifying a penis so it is a character in the comic (see Figure 5). Sex is not hinted at, but graphically represented, and is accompanied by no less than a dozen penis illustrations throughout the comic. LGBTQ readers are likely to identify with Cruse’s comic, even if they aren’t a white male who has anonymous sex with other men, because this comic represents disrupts heteronormativity and committed monogamy. However, when straight, sexually seeking, or newly-LGBTQ identified readers, literally *see* queer sex accompanied by a barrage of personified penises, they might experience disorientation, which is more rhetorically productive than it sounds.

Sara Ahmed (2006) believes “moments of disorientation are vital” precisely because those unsettling occasions not only expose norms by forcing

an encounter with difference, but because they can also allow for re-orientation (p. 157). Alexander and Rhodes (2012a), summarizing Ahmed (2006), clarify that disorientation, usually brought on by the emergence of the queer or that which is not oriented along normative lines, can make us critically aware of how we are all socially, culturally, and even politically oriented to want, to desire, certain things and not others. Disorientation, in other words, reveals the normative and the normalizing in action—the powerful forces that make some lives seem so natural, others seem unthinkable. (p. 201)

With this understanding in mind, disorientation can be considered a queer rhetorical practice as it uncovers sex/uality and gender norms while it simultaneously proposes alternative, queer ways of existing in the world. Representing queer sex through the combined visual, gestural, spatial, aural, and linguistic modes, is rhetorical and affective, with the intended impact being, if not identification, then disorientation. When readers are disoriented by these multimodal representations of queerness in comics, their inclination will be to move toward being oriented, toward finding the ground that has been pulled out from beneath them. Ahmed (2006) warns that “bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorient their relation to the world” (p. 158); however, that they *can be reoriented* is significant. Moments of disorientation offer hope for new directions and richer visions of ourselves and the world around us. Said differently, these moments of disorientation have the potential to expand one’s available designs, either by disrupting norms around sex and sexuality, or confirming and creating space for one’s identity. Cruse, in bombarding viewers with cartoon penises, several instances of anonymous gay sex, and even an illustrated orgasm, simultaneously disorients viewers and engages in queer world-making.

“Billy Goes Out” disorients and reorients through multimodal means, not only in the sexual images present in the comic, but through the juxtaposition of Billy’s thought bubbles with the literal actions he carries out in the comic. As Billy listens to the television, talks on the phone, dresses for a night out, goes out, meets a nice man he ultimately ignores, engages in sexual activities with other unknown men, and makes his way home to bed, he is in constant dialogue with himself, his personified penis, his dead uncle, his mother, his dead dog, Roffo, and past bullies. This multi-layered meaning happens structurally and multimodally: through the spatial juxtaposition of co-occurring narratives, the linguistic text linking those narratives, the visual images that center around queer sex and desire, and the gestural engagement in queer sex acts. Add to this the simultaneous, affective, disorienting experience of these narratives all at once that also include abrupt and quick shifts in time. Billy’s thought bubbles are spatially situated above the actions he carries out, with his actions moving forward in linear time and his thoughts seamlessly shifting among Billy’s past, present, and potential future. The plurality of the concurrent, multiple narratives along with the shifting temporality disrupts readers in asking them to make meaning in non-linear, excessive, and fragmented ways. Alexander and

Rhodes (2011) describe such moves as queer for composition, as work that unsettles readers in being myriad, multi-faceted, mutable, and in this case, multimodal.

Another queer comic that multimodally disorients and disrupts readers is MariNaomi's (2014) "Three's a Crowd." This comic relates the story of a bisexual woman, Mari, who questions her six-month, non-exclusive relationship with a woman, Rachel. They have yet to be intimate, but that all changes at a house party that Mari hosts. Toward the end of the party, Mari and Rachel have sex with another woman, and Rachel later notes that "It's funny, isn't it, that the first time we're intimate, there's another woman there?" (MariNaomi, "Three's" 43). The threesome itself did not create conflict between Mari and Rachel, so much as it exposed how differently Mari and Rachel feel about each other. Post-coital, Rachel tells Mari she loves her, and Mari laughs in response. The comic ends with Mari cleaning up from the party the next morning and apologizing to her cat for last night's activities. "Three's a Crowd," like many queer comics, disrupts heteronormativity in portraying and foregrounding queer relationships. In this way, this comic offers LGBTQ people like myself a text with which we can identify, and for straight readers, this array of identities and sexualities can be disorienting because they call into question staid sex and gender norms.

Perhaps more disorienting for some, however, are the sex scenes in this comic. In addition to representing complex, well-rounded characters, MariNaomi also multimodally represents queer sexual orientations and experiences. Notice these two pages from the comic (Figures 6 and 7) contain very little text, and instead, the meaning is largely conveyed through visual images and the gestures and facial expressions of the characters, including the cat. These panels are what Scott McCloud (2006) categorizes as "picture-specific" because the images carry the meaning and words, if present, only help accentuate that meaning (p. 130). Notice the text that appears in Figure 6 only adds minimal meaning, and if it wasn't there, readers would still understand what these panels mean in sequence because of the meaning-laden images in these two comic pages. The audience doesn't simply read about a lesbian relationship and a sexual situation involving multiple partners, and instead they *view* it. They see breasts, they see three women engage in sexual play, and by position of the woman in Figure 7 above, they can assume the women are engaging in oral sex or more. According to Alexander and Rhodes (2012a), "this sudden, discomfiting engagement with the sexual may inaugurate a critical engagement, and 'disorientation' is designed to play with that engagement by asking us to think about where the erotic is allowed, and where it is perhaps allowed but simultaneously disavowed" (p. 206). Encountering multimodal representations of queer sex has the potential to disorient, which means it has the potential to put a reader in direct confrontation with taken-for-granted norms that erase queer sex from popular culture.

Because so much of the meaning from these two pages combines the gestural, spatial, visual to make meaning, they are heavily freighted with social, embodied cues. Meaning is made



Figure 6: MariNaomi (2014). "Three's a Crowd," p. 41.

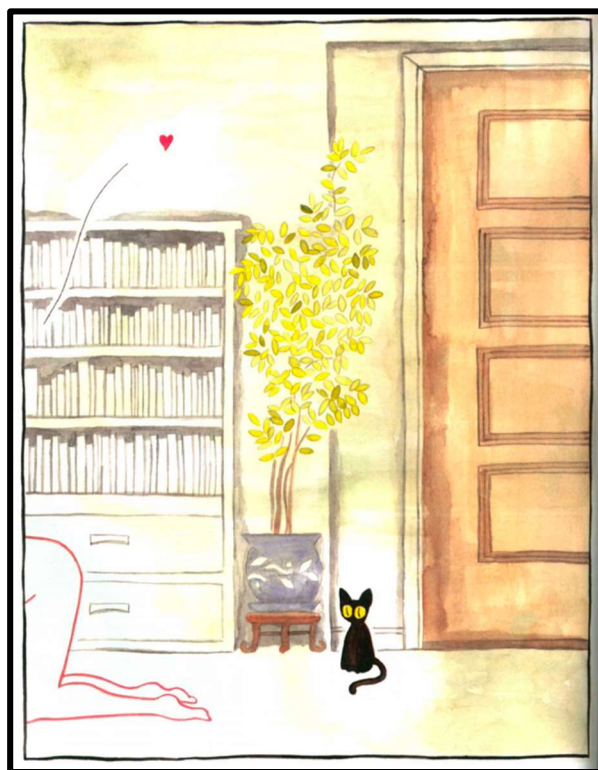


Figure 7: MariNaomi (2014). "Three's a Crowd," p. 42.

from color choice, spatial arrangements, facial expressions (especially the cat's), and postured bodies and their gendered representations. Joddy Murray (2009) describes this type of sign-making as nondiscursive rhetoric, "a theory of rhetoric that relies on image (made up of all the sensual inputs) and non-discursive meaning in order to persuade, move, and/or create unsayable (or word-dependent) meaning for an audience" (p. 137); familiar examples of non-discursive rhetoric are bubbles around a character's head signifying drunkenness, or in the case of Japanese manga, blood coming from a character's nose conveys lust while a bubble from their nose signals sleepiness (McCloud, 1994, p. 131). In Western comics, sleepiness is often conveyed through an onomatopoeia (zzz's), which indicates how non-discursive rhetoric is made up of culturally and socially (re)made signs. Non-discursive rhetoric in MariNaomi's comic, in addition to facial expressions and body language, is the heart that appears in both Figure 6 and Figure 7. This small heart, seemingly insignificant and one readers might not register as "language," adds meaning to the panels it occupies. This meaning seems even more apparent in Figure 7 in the line connecting the heart to the nude backside of one of the women, indicating that the sexual intimacy among the three women has reached a new level. The symbol of a heart typically signifies love, closeness, or happiness, and in the context of this sexual experience, suggests these three women are becoming more intimate.

Yet, the heart, which typically suggests love between two members of the opposite sex, is queered in being connected to not only two people of the same sex, but three people engaging

in sex. MariNaomi torques the (hetero)normative discourses associated with symbols like a heart to work with and against those social scripts. Anne Frances Wysocki (2012), in an essay that explores the multimodal possibilities for identities and bodies in comics and graphic novels, particularly through Bechdel's *Fun Home*, explains that because the combination of words and pictures have histories, because they come with attached discourses, "how one articulates words and pictures...can play with—or against—those discourses" (p. 26). Wysocki, like the NLG (1996), contends that words and pictures are combined from available designs, but that play and act of composing can craft new designs which impact one sense of self and the world around them. In this instance, MariNaomi, in attaching the heart to three women engaged in sexual play, plays with *and* against straight discourses to critique them as well as illustrate alternative sexualities and identities.

Furthermore, readers make meaning from symbols like the heart because of their socio-cultural reference. Joddy Murray (2009) concurs with Wysocki, the NLG, and Gunther Kress in viewing language, which he describes as *image* to include both discursive and non-discursive signs, as social, emotional, and multimodal, and as responsible for how composers/designers construct their identities and perceptions of others (pp. 118-120). In MariNaomi and Cruse's comics, identity, sex, gender, and sexuality and more are conveyed multimodally, and the meaning and affect these elements convey, especially the humor captured in MariNaomi's cat, cannot be delivered quite the same way linguistically—they cannot be swapped one-to-one as if their meaning is equal. The multimodality of these comics supports their queer rhetoric: readers disrupted, disoriented, and perhaps reoriented through the purposeful combination of multiple modes. Be it through graphic (literally) images of sex, layered meaning making, or non-discursive rhetoric, these queer comics, and many like them, rely on multimodality to capture and express queer being, lives, and desires.

Conclusion

In this essay, I analyze only a few queer comics with the understanding that rhetorically, these comics include moments and offer experiences, if not identical to, at least similar to those that can be found in many other queer comics. That being said, there are a number of queer rhetorical practices like ambiguity, drag, excess, intersectionality, and even queer rage not explored in this essay, but they are equally important in understanding rhetorical possibilities of multimodally figuring queerness in comics. And the queer rhetoric expounded upon in this essay is but a beginning—what rhetorical possibilities (have yet to) exist for multimodal queerness in comics? Disidentification, or the reworking of cultural logics from within, is a queer rhetorical practice that resists and reframes normative discourses, as "Anu-Anulan and Yir's Daughter" demonstrates, but what are other examples of disidentification in queer comics, what is the rhetorical impact and values of those instances, and what do those moments offer queer composers and the queer community? Multimodal representations of queer sex/ualities can expose and undermine heteronormativity, dis- and reorient audiences,

and support alternative ways of being in the world, but how might other queer rhetorical practices in queer comics simultaneously interrogate norms and build community? There is also a great deal to be said about how queer comics might function in the classroom, but that is another essay. Finally, the comics represented in this essay are not racially diverse, and work like André Carrington's (2018) essay, "Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's Black Panther," indicates how much more work can be done at the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and rhetoric.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) wonder, "What kinds of [queer] representational acts figured multimodally and through multimedia contribute substantively and materially to understanding queerness in rich, varied, capacious, and (perhaps most importantly) challenging ways?" (p. 200). Through the multimodal medium that is comics, queer creators can draw on and combine expressive affordances to make meaning queer(ly), sexually, affectively. This essay demonstrates that queer comics figure queerness multimodally in complex and disruptive ways, and in representing queer bodies, fantasies, and sexual experiences, engage in queer worldmaking; they show the possibilities for queer being in the world. Not only do we need to see ourselves in the world and in the texts we encounter, but we need the multimodal means and affordances of expressing ourselves. Queer comics offer LGBTQ composers and readers the means and the medium to craft and represent their own lives and desires. Finally, queer comics are rich sites of queer, multimodal rhetoric, as they expose social, sexual norms, and illustrate (literally) the im/possibilities for queer meaning making through multiple modes.

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Filling in the Gutters:

Graphic Biographies Disrupting Dominant Narratives of the Civil Rights Movement

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Introduction

The African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s is often used to exemplify the power of social movements and protest to create change. Martin Luther King, Jr has come to represent nonviolent resistance and the dream of racial equality, and his memory has been honored with a national holiday, a monument at the National Mall, and countless local memorials. However, the speeches and biographies of King and other civil rights leaders are often altered to fit progress narratives that tend to erase the networks these leaders worked within and instead promote the sense that these Great Men single-handedly achieved civil rights victories. This move toward progress narratives can be particularly dangerous since memorials and memory narratives that preserve rather than contest memory are less likely to inspire “social action such as protesting, voting, debating, arguing” (Gallagher, 1999, p. 313) and instead promote complacency.

Narratives of the civil rights movement often present an oversimplified and sanitized version as part of what Maegan Parker Brooks (2014) describes as the “conservative master narrative of civil rights history”: “The master narrative’s focus on a few larger-than-life leaders, its emphasis on national victories, and its triumphalist overtones belie the work that remains to be done, conceal the range of advocates with the potential to participate, and mask the ideologies that perpetuate white privilege and continue to disempower African Americans” (p. 4). Rhetorical choices to eliminate certain details from narratives of the civil rights movement are not innocent or harmless but in fact preserve systems of white supremacy.

Beyond the more overt memory artifacts such as museums and monuments, textbooks and popular culture texts promote a narrative that expunges inconvenient details that might challenge the conservative master narrative of the civil rights movement. In his work examining composition textbooks, Cedric Burrows (2017) found that by changing the biographies and even the language of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the textbooks remove any offensive (to white readers) language from their speeches, replace informal language to create a more “formal (i.e. ‘white’)” tone (p. 177), and shape King and X to be

speakers that represent all of black America (p. 174-5). Thus, when educators do teach students about these leaders, the textbooks are delivering a rhetoric and biography that erases transgressive elements for the sake of keeping white students and teachers at ease.

David Holmes (2013) draws attention to the role of popular culture in memory of the movement, arguing that “because the civil rights movement has long been enshrined in the American imagination, mainstreamed beyond recognition by politicians, popular cultural films, and television from the 1980s to the present, many have forgotten that it was a subversive undertaking” (p. 171). Examining contemporary popular culture texts can reveal how these texts further contribute to or challenge streamlined and depoliticized narratives. Contemporary popular culture texts such as graphic biographies can be particularly enlightening memory artifacts to study.

Examining nonfiction comics like these can lead to a better understanding of the audience’s creative role in public memory and how individual rhetorical experiences are shaped by interacting with public memory artifacts. Public memory scholars (Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, 2010; Gallagher, 1999; Zelizer, 1998; Vivian, 2010; Biesecker, 2002) have demonstrated how public memory projects can challenge grand narratives by cultivating a more complex and nuanced understanding of past events and figures. However, much of the scholarship on the rhetoric of public memory has focused on museums and memorials, rather than popular culture texts. While monuments and museums invite interpretation from the audience, they largely present themselves as whole and try to make a comprehensive statement or provide an accurate account. Comics are radically invitational in their explicitly incomplete construction, as evidenced by the gutters between panels. Conventional memorials typically function pedagogically, while comics situate the reader as a collaborator; this relationship between the audience and author challenges traditional concepts of authorship and provides unique possibilities for interpretation.

In this paper, I examine how the rhetoric of three graphic biographies invites readers to participate in the construction of memory narratives. I begin by discussing the rhetoric of the medium of comics and the rhetoric of artistic techniques in comics. I then rhetorically analyze three graphic biographies to demonstrate how these rhetorical strategies unique to comics facilitate their function as vectors of memory. The first graphic biography, *King*, written and illustrated by Ho Che Anderson, narrates the life of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. In the second graphic biography, *Malcolm X*, writer Andrew Helfer and artist Randy DuBurke tell the life story of Malcolm X, the Black Nationalist leader who is often presented as the counterpart to King. The third graphic biography, *March*, is written by civil rights activist John Lewis and Andrew Aydin with art by Nate Powell. These three comics challenge the perception of these men as superheroic vigilantes defeating racism and instead depict these highly-mythologized figures as complex individuals working within networks of activists. In

depicting the nuances of these leaders, the graphic biographies challenge simplified, conservative narratives of the movement and reveal the relevance of these narratives for contemporary audiences.

The Rhetoric of Closure and Artistic Techniques in Comics

Though there are many styles, genres, and formats of comics, comics share certain traits and conventions, the primary features of which are *panels* and *gutters*. *Panels* are frames that contain the words and images of each depicted moment of a comic, and *gutters* are the spaces between panels that signify transitions between depicted moments. In a traditional comic, panels and gutters might appear like the image in Figure 1. In this image, each rectangle represents a panel, and the margins between the rectangles represent gutters. In comics, panels are usually filled with images and words, while gutters are left blank.

In comics, gutters represent moments in the sequence that are not depicted by the artist. From a rhetorical standpoint, gutters indicate the need for the reader to cognitively fill in the narrative gaps produced by the gutters to generate a coherent narrative. This “filling in” is facilitated in part by the artist’s use of text and image to encourage a particular interpretation of the content depicted. What is significant about this structure, explains comics scholar Thierry Groensteen (2007), is that it grants the reader choice: she is free to either observe or ignore the interpretative cues provided by the artist (p. 56). This choice makes the reader a collaborative partner in the comics artist’s construction of the narrative. Comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud (1993) echoes Groensteen’s point, asserting that processes of meaning-making and narrative construction in comics provide room for readers’ agency and consent (p. 68-69). Like Groensteen, McCloud (1993) argues that the “audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” with the comics artist as they fill in the gutters with the actions the artist has implied in the scenes depicted within the panels (p. 65). He refers to this process of collaboration as *closure* in that the work of “observing the parts” of the narrative to “perceive the whole” produces a completed storyline (McCloud, 1993, p. 63).

In a sequence of two panels, McCloud demonstrates how a reader might perform closure when reading a comic (see Figure 2). In the first panel, a man wielding an axe shouts “Now

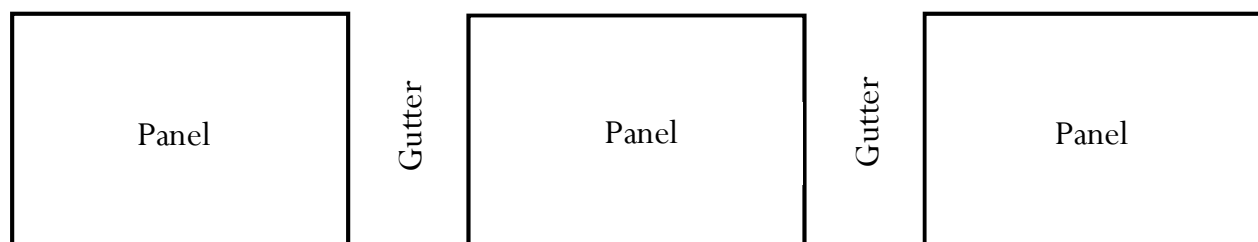


Figure 1. Sequence of panels and gutters.



Figure 2. The process of closure. McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: An Invisible Art*, p. 68.

you die!!” while the man in front of him holds his arms up defensively. The second panel depicts a nighttime cityscape with large bold letters spelling “EEYAA!!” across the sky. The reader will likely interpret from the artist’s cues that the man wielding the axe is murdering the man who shouted no causing him to scream (“EEYAA!!”), even though the murder is not explicitly shown in the second panel.

For McCloud (1993), the reader operates as “an equal partner in crime” (p. 68) on account of their need to fill the narrative gap with the act of murder to make the sequence coherent. In these panels, the author provides cues for the reader; however, it is up to the reader how they will factor those cues into the story as they construct the narrative. For example, in the excerpt from McCloud’s text, there are possibilities besides the man who had screamed “no” dying at the hands of the man wielding the axe. The reader can ignore cues or interpret cues from the comic in ways the author had not intended. Resultantly, the possibilities for narrative variation increase based on techniques utilized by the artist as they depict the moments of the sequence.

Artistic Techniques in Comics

Beyond the rhetoric inherent to the dynamic of panels in gutters in comics, artistic techniques provide additional rhetorical elements. Artistic techniques are rhetorical in that they can significantly affect the way the reader reads a comic. Narrative disruption is a common rhetorical technique in comics that interrupts the reader’s anticipated narrative flow with the effect of driving them to reflect on previous material. Each interruption in the comic has the

potential to make the reader more aware of their presence in the co-creation of the narrative. The effects of narrative disruption are especially profound in comics because comics have a relationship with time unlike other mediums such as photographs, film, and alphabetic text. Panels in a comic vary in their representation of time due to their shape and the way elements like sound, dialogue, and motion are depicted within the panel (McCloud 27). Time has an important function in public memory narratives, as “sequentiality, linearity, and chronology, become used up as resources for the establishment and continued maintenance of memory in its social collective form” (Zelizer, 1998, p. 222). Comics artists use techniques that can challenge the structure of time and an overall sense of linearity in the comics narrative. Through certain artistic techniques, the authors can emphasize or overlook certain moments in the narrative. These techniques demonstrate how artists contribute to the production of memory as they select what is remembered and what is forgotten.

BRAIDING

In *The System of Comics*, Groensteen introduced the term *braiding* to describe a visual technique similar to a frame in prose narratives. Braiding creates “webs of interrelation” (Miodrag, 2013, p. 134) by repeating a technique throughout the text, which can sometimes involve a secondary narrative (Groensteen, 2007). Braids are associations in the network of panels of the entire comic that go beyond the parameters of strictly linear storytelling as panels echo those the reader has encountered before. Though it is perhaps only noticed on a second reading of the text, a braid supplements the linear narrative, often providing thematic or narrative depth to a comic. In the comic *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, for example, the braided narrative is of the author’s interactions with his father while he is writing a comic about his father’s experiences during the Holocaust. In *Maus*, the braid connects the events of the past to the present, showing contrast as well as the consequences of the events of the Holocaust on the author’s father and his relationship to the author.

WEAVING

Readers weave as they move backwards and forwards in the comic to piece together narrative sequences (Postema, 2013, p. 66). Though *weaving* refers to the reader’s action, artists use techniques that encourage this behavior, often by leaving out or minimizing significant cues and creating a sense of ambiguity that leads the reader to become curious about the events in the sequence. Unlike Groensteen’s concept of braiding, which connects discursive elements of the series to create underlying meaning, weaving deals with the more immediate narrative construction process of the sequence in that it connects sequences of images in the comic to form the story. Weaving directs the reader to previous and/or subsequent panels to perform meaning-making within sections of the narrative. For example, a comic could use this technique if the artist depicts the following sequence: Two friends are sitting on a sofa chatting as the space around them gradually grows darker. Eventually, the characters smell smoke and they panic as they realize flames are overtaking the corner of the room. The reader could

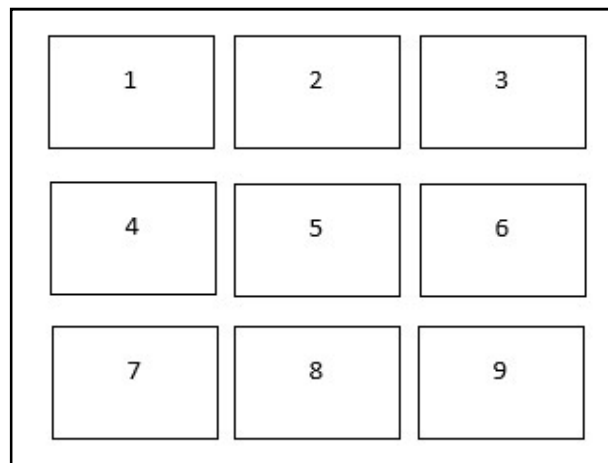


Figure 3. Conventional panel/gutter structure of comics page.

return to an earlier panel where they saw one character toss her cigarette in a wastebasket, unknowingly starting a fire.

BREAKDOWN

Breakdown describes the way authors arrange panels on a page, which can strongly influence the way a person reads a comic (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41). A conventional comic book page might resemble the following image (Figure 3), in which the panels are similarly shaped and spaced apart, creating an easy to follow visual narrative sequence from panels 1 to 9.

However, artists often break away from this conventional layout using ambiguity and complexity, which influences how the reader experiences the comic. A common element of a complex breakdown, overlapping panels on a comics page, can “frustrate any sense of linearity, allowing for an impossible and provocative at-onceness” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 51). For example, the artist can use overlapping to show how a person is so busy it felt like she was doing ten different things in a single moment. The authors of *Waitress* use this technique when they situate the waitress’s body over multiple panels on a page, showing how she seemed to be in multiple places at once since she was such a quick and able server (Hatfield, 2005, p. 51).

Artistic Techniques in *King*, *Malcolm X*, and *March*

KING

In describing the way Martin Luther King is remembered in contemporary America, Keith D. Miller (2012) writes that “through some strange alchemy, many now remember the most controversial figure of the 1960s—a decade overflowing with controversies—as little more than a walking marble statue or an African American Santa Claus” (p. 23). Ho Che Anderson’s comic *King* challenges simplistic and sanitized portrayals of King through its depiction of

events in King's life from the bus boycotts to his efforts in Chicago to his assassination in Memphis. While the comic focuses on King's time active in the civil rights movement, it also explores King's private life, which shows King was capable of human error—unlike his mythological image. Anderson writes about King's conflicts within the civil rights movement, revealing not only King's complexity but also the complexity of the movement. As the comic reveals these more and less familiar events in King's life, the details in the narrative go beyond the frequently celebrated quotes and moments of his legacy to portray King's more complicated angles such as his infidelity and pride, along with his resolute nature and political insight.

Anderson uses the artistic technique of braiding as he incorporates witness testimony throughout the comic to challenge simplified and celebratory narratives of King. The witnesses function like a Greek chorus in how they narrate events in King's life; however, instead of one united voice, they provide a diverse array of perspectives that draw attention to the ways King's contemporary audience perceived and interpreted his actions. Anderson explains that he used witnesses throughout the comic to “offer a running commentary on the action, sometimes providing context, other times a counterpoint to the unreliable characters who were the story's primary players” (Jacobs, 2006, p. 378).



Figure 4. Witnesses. (Anderson, 2005, pp. 8-9).

The witnesses catch the reader's eye, standing in contrast to other panels in the comic. This is due to the fact that they seem to be frozen in time; their visual depiction, even when they are portrayed in a sequence of panels, is a static portrait. This has an effect similar to a voiceover in a documentary, where the filmmaker puts a photograph of the speaker on the screen while the audio of their voice plays. However, while in a film, the static image could be accompanied by a steadily playing audio, with a comic, the reader must cooperate in order for time to continue; this factor, combined with the fact that both the image and the written text must fit into a panel, means that in the comic, Anderson needs to use multiple panels to deliver the verbal content. Consequently, this technique highlights his choice to keep the speaking character a static portrait, since in depicting them in multiple panels, the reader senses time passing and could conceive that the person is interacting with them, telling their story directly. However, Anderson has created a sense of recorded testimony as opposed to witnesses directly speaking to the reader. Drawing attention to this artistic technique creates the sense that the comic is compiled from many interpretations of King, further inviting the reader to participate in interpreting the events of the narrative.

There are nine different witnesses introduced in the eighteen panels of the comic following the title page, all of whom present different impressions of King. The first panel portrays Witness 1, a person whose face is brightly illuminated to show deep lines around their eyes, saying, “‘My God, is he small.’ First thing that popped into my head when he drove by. Small, but pretty—ridin’ through town like a prince, in a limo... My girlfriend told me it was because of that car. I won’t deny success looks good on a man” (Anderson, 2005, p. 8). In the third panel, Anderson introduces Witness 2 whose face is almost entirely obscured by shadows. Witness 2 says, “Haven’t lived in ‘Bama since I was young, but my shoulders still bear the South’s weight. Not every [n-----] this side’a the Mason-Dixon thought of this man as the Messiah. Some of us saw him as a troublemaker. Too much trouble made them devils angry”



Figure 5. Two women witnesses. (Anderson, 2005, p. 9).

(Anderson, 2005, p. 8). The reader is immediately challenged by these first two witnesses as their depiction as static portraits defies the typical panel-to-panel transitions of comics, but more importantly because their clashing descriptions of King—and not particularly flattering descriptions of King—challenge the reader's ability to create an easy linear narrative.

Though these first impressions suggest a negative perception of King, some of the witnesses introduced on these first two pages offer more positive statements (Figure 5). However, even these more positive witnesses complicate simplified narratives of King's life because they provide more detail of King's behavior and of his influence on the witnesses. For example, one of the women in the witnesses section describes herself as embarrassed by her memories of her interactions with King: "I vividly remember making such a *buffoon* of myself at the sit-ins. I had such a crush on Dr. King. My girlfriends thought he was too dark, but I just *threw* myself at him, my God" (Anderson, 2005, p. 9). The panel after this one portrays another woman with a different perspective of King: "I saw the struggle he had to endure, giving out constantly, rarely stopping to take anything in. That kind of existence, you take comforts where you can find them. I'm a woman—I'm not condoning some of his actions on the road. But I can't bring myself to judge. Maybe he didn't always do the right thing—but he always *tried*" (Anderson, 2005, p. 9).

Anderson takes a risk by providing the reader with multiple perspectives rather than promoting one version of the truth. Some of the witnesses are unreliable and some of them even express hatred, but the witnesses cumulatively function to challenge the way society has thoroughly mythologized King's life. Anderson even includes the perspectives of white supremacists whose shockingly racist monologues demonstrate the blatant racism of some of the witnesses of King's life. However, most of the witnesses are more moderate and demonstrate through their testimony nuances of King's actions and people's perceptions of those actions. For example, the fourth witness introduced in the comic says, "We weren't exactly friends. I'm not going to lie to you about that. You're in for a long wait, you expecting me to start singing his praises, 'cause papa don't guild no lilies. Now—if perchance the *truth* is more to your liking—" (Anderson, 2005, p. 8). This witness is perhaps representative of the general attitude of the comic, which doesn't hold back from exploring King's vices but still captures the power of his rhetoric and the strengths of his character. By giving the reader a lens to observe and respond to the environment surrounding King, Anderson invites the reader to gain a better understanding of King's attitude and behavior through the witnesses' testimonies. Presenting the witnesses this way shows the controversial response to King and the radical nature of his actions—controversy currently obscured in the national memory of King.

Anderson's rhetorical strategy of including recurring witness sections in the graphic biography is an example of the artistic technique braiding. The witnesses reappear throughout the comic,

but they are not necessary for tying together sequences of panels in the main narrative; in fact, the witnesses braided throughout the comic disrupt the narrative to create breaks in the text. By braiding these witnesses throughout the narrative of the graphic biography, Anderson reminds the reader of the people involved with the events in the narrative who experienced the depicted events directly or indirectly. Anderson's presentation of the witnesses side-by-side with none of them elevated or emphasized suggests that there are multiple ways of remembering King, since the witnesses provide diverse and often contradictory perspectives. This in itself challenges the monolithic remembering of King and his legacy. Presenting the witness testimony in this inclusive way, Anderson highlights his own standpoint and the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in memory texts like biographies.

MALCOLM X

Helfer and DuBurke's graphic biography, *Malcolm X* is only about 100 pages long and covers X's entire lifespan; consequently, it is not as thorough as the other two graphic biographies examined here. Half of the graphic biography focuses on Malcolm X's childhood and time in prison, while the second half of the comic tends to X's work as an activist. Because *Malcolm X* is written in a more traditional comic book style—with onomatopoeia, standard quadrilateral panels, and a focus on action—the unusual elements of the comic stand out.

One rhetorical technique Helfer and DuBurke use in *Malcolm X* is out-of-frame action sequences. Mainstream comics tend to capitalize on action sequences by drawing them out and zooming in on and exaggerating the effects of violence, but Helfer and DuBurke frequently opt to leave out moments of violent action. Instead, the authors often show only the instrument of violence—such as a gun, an arm wielding a baton, or some other force—or they only portray the perpetrator or victim before or after a violent act rather than showing the violent action as it occurs. These techniques create an opportunity for the reader to construct the implied moments of violence from the cues provided by the author, often having to move back through the comic to piece together information presented in previous panels.

Malcolm X includes scenes in which a Los Angeles police officer murders Ronald Stokes, an LA officer of the Nation of Islam. By depicting a scene that is left out of the primary canonical text on X's life, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Helfer and DuBurke challenge the simplified depictions of Malcolm X. For instance, when Helfer and DuBurke depict Stokes' death, they show a police officer approach and grab Stokes but they don't show Stokes being murdered. In the first and second panels on page 67 (see Figure 6), Helfer and DuBurke show Stokes walking to the mosque with dry cleaning and being approached by a police officer. The officer who will eventually shoot Stokes grabs and twists Stokes' arm behind his back in the third and fourth panels on page 67 (Figure 6), but the authors do not at any time depict the officer pulling out his gun and shooting Stokes. In fact, the officer's gun is never shown. The first panel on the next page (p. 68, see Figure 6) of the comic transitions to a nearby scene where



Figure 6. Murder of Ronald Stokes. (Helfer & DuBurke, 2006, pp. 67-8).

NOI members hear gunshots being fired: “Blam Blam.” These gunshots are heard away from the scene of the murder, while the moment of the murder itself is not visually depicted in the sequence. In the second panel on page 68, a woman cries, “Allah! I think they’ve shot Ronald!” The next two panels stretch across the width of the page, showing two parallel scenes—one where people are discovering Stokes’ body and one where the group of NOI members at the nearby scene are being shot at. The final panel on 68 (Figure 6) and the first three panels on page 69 (Figure 7) show the NOI members being beaten and arrested. After this sequence, the authors return to an image of Stokes laid out in the street that reads, “Ronald Stokes died in a pool of his own blood from a gunshot to the head” (Helfer & DuBurke, 2006, p. 68) (Figure 7). The sequence is not merely jumbled here. The authors have intentionally constructed this sequence of the narrative to move back and forth from the setting of Ronald Stokes’s murder to the NOI members nearby who were assaulted.

In this narrative sequence depicting the police murdering Stokes and assaulting other NOI members, Helfer and DuBurke disrupt the flow causing the reader to weave to perform closure. Helfer and DuBurke’s narrative sequence provides the reader with enough information to infer the cause and/or outcome of the violence while at the same time requiring them to imagine those moments of violence for themselves. To do this the reader

When the reader makes inferences about what happened in ambiguous or undepicted moments, they connect the cues provided by the author with their own experiences. In their search for a logical explanation for what happened in those moments, the reader assembles the details they have gathered from the author's cues. For example, in *Malcolm X*, they saw the police harassing and assaulting Stokes, and they likely have also heard of recent police violence against black men in America. Gathering evidence from the comic and their prior knowledge and experience, they can fill in that the police officer shot Ronald Stokes. Because the sequence prevents an easy linear narrative, the reader must do more work than usual to connect the pieces of the sequence to form a coherent narrative, thus making these moments stand out as both significant and memorable.

Malcolm X expands the reader's understanding of X because it draws attention to his social political context and connects it to the reader's contemporary perspective. Rather than portraying his actions out of context, the authors demonstrate the violent injustice of Stokes' murder before Malcolm X arrived and responded to the situation. As the reader weaves to fill in the undepicted moments of Stokes' murder and the police assault of the NOI members, the process of drawing from their experience and knowledge helps them connect their social political context to X's, challenging simplified notions of X and encouraging them to see how these historic events relate to the present day.

MARCH

The *March* trilogy has become one of the most popular comics taught in high school and college classrooms, following texts like *Maus* and *Persepolis*. It was the first comic to win a National Book Award, and *Books Two* and *Three* received Eisner Awards. The comic is entirely in black-and-white with art by established comics artist Nate Powell, whose work in *March* illustrates his familiarity with and mastery of comics techniques such as those explored in the previous sections. *March*'s reception—as well as its production by a writer who is also a major figure of the civil rights movement—separate it from the other two graphic biographies analyzed here. *March* has acquired a spot in the canon of comics and in the canon of literature for young adult readers, and its canonical status makes it a particularly interesting text to study through the lens of the rhetoric of public memory.

The trilogy tells the story of John Lewis, who served as chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963 to 1966. Though *Book One* does offer some of the biography of Lewis's early life, most of the trilogy focuses on Lewis's work in the civil rights movement between the years of 1959 and 1965. The graphic biography builds up to the most momentous event in Lewis's life, Bloody Sunday, and concludes with Lyndon B. Johnson signing the 1965 Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965, which Lewis refers to as "the last day of the movement as I knew it" (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2016, p. 244).



Figure 8. John Lewis struggles to remain conscious and get up on Bloody Sunday. (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2016, pp. 202-3).

In *March: Book Three*, the authors depict the struggle for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, where John Lewis led hundreds of marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, better known as Bloody Sunday. The comic shows the tense confrontation between the hostile state troopers and the nonviolent demonstrators before the troopers attack. The moments of the attack are remarkably wordless apart from the depicted sounds of the batons striking the protestors. Lewis is struck over the head twice, and he falls to the ground, struggling to remain conscious, a scene depicted in a two-page spread (Figure 8).

In the top left corner of the first page, the comic zooms in on Lewis's face on the pavement. There is blood streaming from his head and pooling on the street, his eyes are rolling back, and he is muttering incomprehensibly. A flash of white stretching across the page narrates from Lewis's perspective, "I thought I saw death" (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 202). A panel interrupts the white streak on the page with Lewis's outstretched hand below a layer of spreading tear gas. An overlapping panel shows Lewis's face, his eyes nearly shut. The bottom-third of the page is heavily inked in black, with simple white text reading, "I thought I was going to die" (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 202).

The top half of the second page zooms out of the scene, showing Lewis's body on the street. His backpack is several feet away from him and looks disheveled. There are several troopers wielding batons and wearing gasmasks as well as demonstrators running, and a dense cloud of tear gas frames the panel. A thick black wave sweeps below the panel, blending into the dark clouds of tear gas. White script in the black wave reads "Get up...Keep moving" (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 203). A roughly-outlined panel near the center right of the page shows Lewis's eyes opening wide, his expression alert. In the overlapping, neatly-lined panel below, Lewis struggles to lift himself up as blood flows from his head. The bottom-third of the page is blanced white and shows Lewis walking through the clouds of tear gas, back towards the bridge.

The two-page spread stands out in the comic due to its unusual format, which is significantly different from the conventional layout of a comic page. Through one technique in particular, *complex breakdown*, Powell uses the page to convey a sense of the chaos and violence of the events of John Lewis's testimony in a way that evokes the reader's sensory and emotive responses. This two-page spread in *March* uses overlapping in the panels towards the center of the page that zoom in on Lewis's face and body. The overlapping of these panels, along with the fact that the panels are depicting very small but significant actions—such as eyes opening and closing—creates the effect of slow-motion.

This effect of time slowing down is amplified by the overall complex breakdown of the page. The panels are mostly undefined, and even in taking the time to carefully analyze the page, it is difficult to assert how many panels are present in this spread. The four panels that occur in the center of each of the pages resemble conventional panels closely enough to identify them, but the panels at the top and bottom of each page are less clearly defined. There are also fewer visual cues that help the reader determine the passing of time in the sequence, such as dialogue, interaction between characters, or action, and "without language acting as a 'timer' or contextual cue for understanding the image, every visual change causes the reader to stop and assess what exactly is happening, and how long it's supposed to take" (Wolk, 2007, p. 129).

Though the actions in the series of panels are mostly small, Powell has infused the sequence with a sense of violence and chaos. This is in part due to the use of stark contrast, such as the generous use of whitespace on the page, which juxtaposes black and white. The chaos of the moment is imbued in the scene through the indeterminate boundaries between panels which confuse the reader's sense of chronology, as well as through the odd angles and transitions between panels, such as the panel depicting only Lewis's hand. The straightforwardness of the captions contrasts with the chaos and ambiguity of the art on the page. Through this technique, Powell brings the reader into the eye of the storm with Lewis as he's telling the story of how it felt to practice nonviolence while surrounded by violence.

Through this sequence in *March*, the reader “gains access to a range of processual, sensually immersed knowledge that would be difficult to acquire by purely cognitive means” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 113). While the reader will never be able to fully understand what Lewis went through on Bloody Sunday, Powell’s art takes advantage of the comics medium’s ability to manipulate time, giving the reader a sense of the commotion and resolve of that moment. The reader gains access to Lewis’s perspective as a witness to those moments, as Powell portrays moments that no photo or video could capture in the same way. Working with Lewis, Powell interprets these moments using complex breakdown to manipulate time and create a sensory and emotional connection to Lewis’s memory.

Conclusion

King, X, and Lewis often function as icons of progress, leadership, and human rights. Public memory of these leaders glosses over the intricacies of their lives, focusing on their legacy and ignoring their humanity. Narratives of the civil rights movement often overlook the extensive networks the leaders were involved in, letting the leaders stand for the movement and oversimplifying the work involved in organizing and creating social change. The three comics analyzed in this paper depict the lives of three civil rights leaders in the complexity often excluded from the public memory of their legacies.

The authors of these graphic biographies effectively challenge simplified narratives of King, X, and Lewis through the artistic techniques they utilize in their comics. The witnesses braided throughout *King* present a sense of the complexity of King’s character that is often left out of memory narratives. The weaving in *Malcolm X* disrupts the sequence of the narrative in a way that grants the reader greater creative license in reconstructing the sequence to form a coherent story of X’s experiences and better understand his rhetorical situation. The use of complex breakdown in *March* creates sensory and emotional pathways for the reader to connect with Lewis’s experiences in Selma.

The rhetoric of comics presents a challenge to static notions of history, as the artist and reader collaborate to construct a coherent narrative in real time. The collaborative reader-writer narrative process in comics closely resembles the dialectic between author and audience through which we construct public memory. Public memory projects often embrace, if not encourage, opportunities for the community to actively remember the past (Gallagher & LaWare, 2010). Like other mediums of public memory, graphic biographies recall the past in ways that disrupt concepts of authorship in that they allow for the “supplemental rhetorical activity” of readers (Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci Jr., 1991). Rather than taking a passive and receptive role, the audience contributes their knowledge to the rhetorical experience of the memory text.

Comics are unique as memory texts due to the explicitly incomplete nature of the medium that is indicated by the gutters between panels that reveal gaps in the narrative. The

collaborative meaning-making processes in comics can promote challenges to oversimplified or forgotten elements of history as the reader is granted access to a creative role that encourages them to imagine these undepicted moments. Elevating the reader to a more directly creative role in the interpretation of the narrative, comics encourage readers to use their own knowledge and experience to inform the ways they will perform closure. This process of closure has significant consequences due to the ways that readers will connect the historical events in the comic to their contemporary experience in order to create a coherent narrative, potentially challenging notions that the types of events depicted are isolated to the past and unrelated to current events.

Maurice Halbwachs' (1952/1992) claim that "the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (p. 40) is particularly resonant when studying the memory narratives of contentious moments in history that uncover feelings of guilt and shine a light on America's troubled past. The way we remember the civil rights movement speaks directly to our values and shapes the way we understand contemporary racial violence and inequality. Due to the collaborative interpretive process inherent to the medium, as well as the artistic techniques that amplify the effects of this process, comics present a unique opportunity to disrupt dominant narratives of the civil rights movement by connecting the moments of the past to the present day, challenging the complacency that comes from believing racial inequality is in the past and instead inspiring social action to address the injustices we face today.

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Sex-Education Comics:

Feminist and Queer Approaches to Alternative Sex Education

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This article argues that sex-education comics serve as sponsors of readers' sexual literacy and agency, providing an inclusive, feminist, and queer positionality that promotes sexuality as a techné, one that is not merely technical but also civic and relational. These comics don't solely teach technical information about sex (like anatomy and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases); they also provide material that explores the significance of sexuality in developing one's identity and in being in relation with others. These comics take a feminist, queer, and inclusive positionality (in opposition to mainstream sex education and to normative regimes of sex, sexuality, and gender), deploy autobiography, prioritize emotions and relations, and provide technical information that shapes the attitudes of readers. Consequently, through the use of multiple modes in comics form, they teach sex and sexuality as a techné—civic practices that are generative of new ways of relating with others and being in the world.

Introduction

Mainstream school-based sex education has come under numerous critiques from scholars and activists for its ineffectiveness and harmful effects on youth. As critics have argued, sex education typically frames sex in terms of danger and risk, positioning youth as needing protection from those dangers and risks rather than treating them as sexual agents in their own right (Allen, 2007; Bay-Cheng, 2003). Further, these programs often reinforce heteronormativity (treating sex almost exclusively as penile–vaginal intercourse) and rigid gender norms. Because most sex education programs depict male sexuality as “individualized and seemingly automatic and unstoppable experiences of desire and pleasure” yet focus on female sexuality as a means of reproduction, they “leave little room for the expression of agency on the part of girls without risk of being labeled as deviant” (Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 69). The “official culture” of schools often positions students as “‘ideally’ non-sexual”—which “ultimately den[ies] young people as sexual subjects and divest[s] them of the kind of agency necessary to look after their sexual well-being” (Allen, 2007, p. 222). In effect, school-based sex education is too often a pedagogy of “plumbing and prevention” (Lenskyj, 1990) that is de-eroticized, sanitized, and mechanical, ignoring emotions and relationships (Allen, 2007).

In contrast to school-based sex education, comics artists have, since the 1970s, used the medium of comics to educate readers about sex, sexuality, and gender in ways that promote their sexual agency and literacy. These comics encourage understanding sex as a site of pleasure and agency, one that includes the full complexity of lived experiences with sex, gender, and sexuality. Susan M. Squier (2014) has argued that “comics as a medium encourages a broader, more accepting, and distinctly non-normative understanding of human sexuality” (p. 229). Likewise, in this article I argue that sex-education comics serve as sponsors of readers’ sexual literacy and agency, providing an inclusive, feminist, and queer positionality that promotes sexuality as a *techné*, one that is not merely technical but also civic and relational.

Dale Jacobs (2013) has argued that comics can serve as sponsors of multimodal literacy for readers, teaching them how to navigate “a complex environment that requires interpreting material that is presented in a number of different modes simultaneously and in combination with each other” (p. 170). The comics I discuss in this article are sponsors of what Jonathan Alexander (2008) has called *sexual literacy*, or “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (p. 5). That is, sex-education comics teach not only technical information about sex (like anatomy, how to use contraceptives, and how to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections, or STIs); they also provide material that explores the significance of sexuality in developing one’s identity and in being in relation with others, and they foster a positionality critical of sexual and gender norms, allowing for the recognition and validation of a wide variety of experiences and identities.

I first situate my analysis in a brief history of comics, sexuality, and grassroots sex education, highlighting how sex-education comics arise out of underground comix movements and grassroots activism. From there, I focus on a repertoire of strategies used by comics artists to teach sex education. First, many of these comics take an oppositional positionality to mainstream sex education. Second, this positionality is a feminist and queer one that challenges normative sex, gender, and sexuality, providing inclusive and social-justice-oriented material. Third, in contrast to a “plumbing and prevention” (Lenskyj, 1990) approach to sex education, these comics instead take into account the whole being, working through autobiography, teaching less didactically and more through sharing lived experiences with sex, sexuality, and gender. And fourth, these comics provide relatively easy-to-understand (yet still complex) technical information that is also attitudinal in nature, rather than simply dry and mechanical. I close with a discussion of sexuality as a *techné*, or a lived set of civic and ethical practices, as it is taught through these comics.

Comics, Sexuality, and Grassroots Sex Education: A Brief History

While a full history of comics is beyond the scope of this article, I provide a brief (and admittedly incomplete) history of comics and their relationships to sex, sexuality, and grassroots sex education.¹ Sex has been a consistent theme and subject matter for comics for the last century. As Hillary Chute (2017) observed, “Comics have long been connected to the sexually taboo—and still are” (p. 103). Darleck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz (2018) have similarly argued, “At every moment in their cultural history, comic books have been linked to queerness or to broader questions of sexuality and sexual identity in US society” (p. 198). Depictions of sex in comics go back at least to the late 1920s when comics artists published (illicitly and illegally) the “Tijuana Bibles,” short eight-page pornographic comics that often repurposed other comics characters and celebrities into sexual adventures (Chute, 2017; Pilcher, 2008).

Historically, though, most comics have not been explicitly sexual in nature (though see Pilcher, 2008, for a history of erotic comics; see also McGurk, 2018, for a discussion of women comic book characters coded as lesbian in early twentieth-century newspaper comics). But they were often tied to sexuality in the public imagination, especially during the moral panic around comics in the late 1940s and '50s. This moral panic was largely led by psychologist Fredric Wertham, whose articles and 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* argued that comics were corrupting children and leading to criminal deviancy. Sexuality was central to his argument; for example, he charged the famous Batman and Robin duo with being “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (p. 190) and Wonder Woman with having a “homosexual connotation” (p. 192) and being a “morbid ideal” for young girls (p. 193). He further charged that comic books were dangerous to youths’ sexual development as they provided “sexual arousal which amounts to seduction” (p. 175). Wertham’s book and his subsequent testimony before Congress about the dangers of comics to youth led to the Comic Magazine Association of America’s creation of the “Comics Code” in 1954. This code provided a series of standards that effectively censored mainstream comics, forbidding depictions that might “create sympathy for the criminal,” show “excessive violence” or nudity, or hint at or portray sexual perversion or illicit sexual acts (quoted in Nyberg, 1998, p. 166).²

¹ Readers interested in fuller histories of comics might consult the following: Hatfield (2005) on alternative comics and graphic novels; Estren (2012) on underground comix; Jacobs (2013) on comics as sponsors of literacy; Lopes (2009) on American comic books; Chute (2010b) and Robbins (1999, 2013) on women and girls in comics; Pilcher (2008) on erotic comics; and Hall (2012) on queer comics. For more on queer and lesbian perspectives on comics, see recent special issues of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Abate, Grice, & Stamper, 2018) and *American Literature* (Scott & Fawaz, 2018).

² For a rich discussion of the Comics Code, see Nyberg (1998); on moral panics about comics, see Jacobs (2013); see Tilley (2012) for a discussion of “how Wertham manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence” for *Seduction of the Innocent* (p. 386) and Tilley (2018) for an analysis of how Wertham viewed strong women comic book characters like Wonder Woman as non-normative, deviant, and intricately tied to violence.

Underground Comix and Feminist Sex-Education Comix

While the Comics Code prevented depictions of explicit sexuality in mainstream comics, the underground comix movement of the 1960s and '70s provided an avenue for comics artists to explore sexually explicit themes (as well as other political and social issues, often of a taboo nature). At the forefront of the movement was Robert Crumb and his comics like *Zap* and *Snatch Comics*. Crumb's comix were "openly carnal and scatological" with "detailed drawings of male and female genitals" and subversive content (Chute, 2017, p. 113). Squier (2014) observed that underground comix "challenged the silencing effects of enforced normativity by defiantly imaging and voicing previously taboo personal experiences from defecation, condom use, and the use of sanitary napkins to fornication, masturbation, sodomy, and cunnilingus" (p. 228). Underground comix became a new site of "informal sex education" for many readers (p. 228).

Many women underground comix artists saw much of Crumb's and other male artists' work as hostile toward women. While these artists were trying to be politically subversive, feminist artists like Trina Robbins found them sexist and "politically *oblivious*" to gender and power issues (quoted in Estren, 2012, p. 134). Feminist underground comix artists subsequently created women-centered comics like *Wimmen's Comix* (which ran from 1972 to 1992) and Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli's *Tits & Clits* (1972 to 1987) (Chute, 2010; Robbins, 1999). As Paul Lopes (2009) explained, these comix, by providing feminist perspectives, offered "a more coherent politics in their intervention in the underground comix movement" than other underground comix did (p. 84). Many feminist comix explicitly addressed women's sexual health and sex education as part of the larger feminist movement that challenged medical and scientific communities for failing to meet the needs of women (Elbaz, 1998). For example, in 1972, Lora Fountain published *Incredible Facts o' Life: Sex Education Funnies*, which featured comics about venereal diseases, abortion, and birth control. The following year, Farmer and Chevli (1973/2018) published *Abortion Eve*, a comic that featured fictional narratives of five women receiving advice on abortion services. Comics, then, became a site of feminist sex-education activism.

The underground comix movement had important influences on future comics by developing new, alternative styles and approaches to comics, being explicitly political, developing new production and distribution models that weren't tied to regular periodical publishing, and re-imagining comics as sites of intimacy between creators and readers (Hatfield, 2005). Chute (2017) has attributed underground comix artists like Crumb and his partner Aline Kominsky-Crumb, creator of comics like *Twisted Sisters*, with pioneering a style of "intimate, body-focused self-expression" (p. 127) that would be implemented by comics artists in the following decades.

Grassroots Activism Sex Education: Safer Sex Comix

These influences helped to shape the sex-education comics I discuss in this article. Before discussing my examples, I turn to another historical example of sex-education comics: *Safer Sex Comix*, published by the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in 1986. *Safer Sex Comix* was one of the many grassroots sex educational materials produced by AIDS activists in the 1980s. As Jan Zita Grover (1995) recounted, the stigmatizing rhetoric of mainstream media around AIDS "was countered in gay communities by massive campaigns to affirm the values of gay liberation: *resexualizing* gay men by *redefining* sexual pleasure and sexual acts," often through safer sex educational materials (p. 366–367). By 1985, organizations like GMHC began producing sex-education materials that weren't solely textual/alphabetic in nature: videos, safe sex calendars, and comics. Grover explained, "All these materials reaffirmed the pleasurable of gay sexuality and gay identity in the face of medicine, epidemiology, and... popular media's massive assault on gay sexuality" (p. 368).

Safer Sex Comix was an eight-page mini-comic (in the style of the Tijuana Bibles), distributed at gay bars by GHMC volunteers called "bar fairies" (Grover, 1988, n6). The comics didn't shy away from the erotic in promoting condom usage. Issue #4, for example, featured a sex scene between two men, one a plumber who refers to condoms as his "plumber's helper" (cited in Crimp, 1987). As Douglas Crimp (1987) has chronicled, *Safer Sex Comix* gained national attention when, in 1987, Senator Jesse Helms responded to its publication by introducing a bill that prohibited the use of federal funds for AIDS prevention materials "that



Figure 1: First panel from *Safer Sex Comix* #4 (1986). Reproduced under fair use.

Alt Text: Comic panel depicting a plumber under a sink saying, "Well, that pipe's all fixed." A man wearing short shorts, viewed from behind, responds, "Oh?"

promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual sexual activities”—a bill that passed by an overwhelming majority of 94 to 2, even though no federal grant money had been spent on the comic (quoted in Crimp, 1987, p. 264; see also McAllister, 1992).

Safer Sex Comix highlights that sex-education comics can be produced and distributed within a broader culture and political climate hostile to the livelihood and sexual health of their readers. As Crimp (1987) concluded in the 1980s, the Helms amendment and other anti-gay rhetoric left queers “forced to recognize that all productive practices concerning AIDS will remain at the grass-roots level” (p. 265). Government-sponsored AIDS education, he observed, was unable to consider “any aspect of the psychic but fear,” despite the advertising industry’s ability to eroticize just about any product—except condoms, it seemed (p. 266). Grassroots comics like *Safer Sex Comix* were effective because they appealed to the psychic lives of gay men—they encouraged condom usage as an erotic act rather than appealing to fear or educating through sterile, desexualized advertisements.

As with the comics I discuss below, *Safer Sex Comix* worked as a site of sexual literacy through multimodal rhetoric, including linguistic, visual, gestural, and spatial modes. Jacobs (2013), drawing on the New London Group (1996), argued that comics make meaning not solely through words but also through “visual, gestural, and spatial elements” (Jacobs, 2013, p. 14). In Figure 1 above, the cartoonist depicts an eroticized scene that works through the combination of multiple modes working together. Linguistically, readers encounter a plumber concluding, “Well, that pipe’s all fixed” as the other character responds, “Oh?” This text, however, works for readers (suggesting sexual innuendo) only because it is in conjunction with the visuals—an attractive plumber positioned under a sink, his body open to the second character and readers, and the second character, seen from behind from below the waist, his hand on his own butt cheek and wearing cutoff jean shorts. These visuals work in conjunction with both gestural and spatial elements, eroticizing the moment and leading to future panels that eroticize condom use. The scene becomes erotic gesturally (tapping into both mundane experiences of having a plumber fix a sink and erotic scenes from pornography): the plumber’s open posture reveals emphasizes the bulge of his genitals, and readers voyeuristically look at him, identifying with the gaze of the man readers see only from behind (similar to yet a queer take on classic identification and objectification in film; see Mulvey, 1975/1999). And spatially—“the environmental and architectural space” of panels and page layout (Jacobs, 2013, p. 14)—the comic works through eight panels spread out over eight small pages in the vein of the Tijuana Bibles to narrate a sequence of events that eroticize condom usage as the plumber introduces the other man to his “plumber’s helper” for his “pipe” (see Crimp, 1987, pp. 260–263 for a reprint of *Safer Sex Comix* #4). Through the combination of linguistic, visual, gestural, and spatial modes, comics like *Safer Sex Comix* provided an alternative to the sterilized, de-eroticized approach of mainstream sex education.

As I show through my discussion below, sex-education comics are often responses to the limitations of professional sex education. Cindy Patton (1987) has stressed that it is important to remember that sex education was developed by feminist and gay and lesbian activists so that sex education does not fall solely into the domain of medical experts and so that activists can continue to take risks that lead to effective education and changes in sexual practices. (Patton also published *Making It: A Woman's Guide to Sex in the Age of AIDS* [Patton & Kelly, 1987], which featured comic illustrations by Allison Bechdel.)

Since the 1970s, comics have been a site of grassroots sex education, often taking an oppositional approach to mainstream sex education and making sex education personal, erotic, and often funny. In the following discussion, I turn to more recent examples of sex-education comics produced over the last decade, showing how they work to sponsor readers' sexual literacy and promote their sexual agency through their oppositional positionality, use of autobiography and inclusion of emotions, and technical material that also shapes attitudes.

Oppositional Positionality to Mainstream Sex Education

Many sex-education comics take an oppositional positionality to mainstream sex education and to normative regimes of sex, gender, and sexuality. These comics artists and writers understand that mainstream sex education—both formally in schools and informally in mass media and through many families—is lacking because it fails to provide full information, often provides inaccurate information, lacks attention to the emotional and erotic aspects of being sexual agents, and fails to meet the needs of women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities.

Sex-education comics artists often take the limitations and disappointments of sex education (whether at school or in culture more broadly) as an exigence for their projects. For example, in the alphabetic/textual introduction to *Not Your Mother's Meatloaf: A Sex Education Comic Book*, Saiya Miller and Liza Bley (2013) situated the need for a sex education comic collection by discussing their own experiences with school-based sex educations. Miller wrote of being segregated by gender for sex ed: "I wondered why we should only have to know about one set of bodily functions" (p. 13). Further, while some of the information she learned was useful, her lived experiences didn't seem to match up to the "map" provided by sex education: "There were many discrepancies between what I had been told about sex and what I had experienced at that point. I had been thoroughly instructed about the functions of the reproductive system, but I had very little idea of what to expect when it came to my heart and mind" (p. 15). As a response to the limitations of sex education, *Meatloaf* (as I'll refer to it) doesn't provide a traditional sex education experience; it's not an instructional manual or traditional guide. Instead, it collects over 40 black-and-white comics that explore a wide array of issues and experiences related to sex, gender, and sexuality, often from the perspectives of personal experience. Contributors share experiences about first kisses, body image issues, never having

an orgasm, unethical gynecologists, alcohol and sex, STI testing, attending fetish conferences, sex and aging, relationship breakups, and more.

Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan likewise understand their webcomic *Oh Joy Sex Toy* (*OJST*, www.ohjoysextoy.com) as fulfilling a need because of the failures of society to adequately educate about sex. Moen's work in sex-education comics dates back to her 17-page zine *GirlFuck*, published in 2005, which was "a quick 'n' dirty introduction to some of the most popularly misunderstood concepts regarding girl-on-girl sexin'" (p. 1). She and her partner Nolan began *OJST* as a weekly sex-education webcomic in 2013. *OJST* provides reviews of sex toys in comics form and frequent sex-education comics created by Moen or by guest artists. With *OJST*, Moen was driven by a desire "to make the sex education that I needed when I was learning about sex. I want this to be a friendly, accessible resource for anybody who's got questions about sex" (quoted in Anderson-Minshall, 2018). Moen and Nolan have published four print volumes of their webcomics (Moen & Nolan, 2016–2017) and a subsequent book featuring only their sex-education comics, titled *Drawn to Sex: The Basics* (Moen & Nolan, 2018a), which promises to provide sex positive "comics we wish we could have read when we were learning about these subjects" (Moen & Nolan, 2018b). As Moen explains in the comic announcing the Kickstarter for *Drawn to Sex*, "Sex is a social, political, artistic, cultural, philosophical, anthropological, technical, medical, performative, legislative, scientific thing," yet "our modern day society fails *spectacularly* in teaching us how to navigate it" (Moen &



Figure 2: Panel from Erika Moen and Matt Nolan's (2018b) *Oh Joy Sex Toy* (www.ohjoysextoy.com) comic announcing the Kickstarter for *Drawn to Sex*. Reproduced with permission.

Alt Text: Panel featuring Erika Moen explaining in four speech bubbles that sex is complex and touches our lives in many ways, yet "society fails spectacularly in teaching us how to navigate it."

Nolan, 2018b). Moen's and her guest artists' comics on *OJST* explore a wide range of topics related to sex, sexuality, identity, and gender, including explanations of sexual anatomy and health; birth control methods; practices like oral sex, masturbation, and water sports; and concepts and identities like queer, asexuality, and puppy play.

Sex-education comics, then, take an oppositional positionality toward mainstream sex education, often seeing its limitations as an exigence for their own work. Comics artists respond to these limitations in mainstream sex education—lack of information, failure to take into account full lived experiences, and failure to address the needs of those marginalized in society—by providing information and experiences through the medium of comics, often from a feminist or queer perspective that stresses inclusivity.

Feminist, Queer, and Inclusive Positionalities

The feminist and queer positionality of these comics often takes an inclusive and social-justice-oriented approach to their sex-education materials. As Miller and Bley explained on their now-defunct blog for their zine—which ran for six issues before being compiled into the book *Meatloaf* (Czerwicz, 2013)—their hope was that these comics would “challenge hetero and gender normative practices in sexuality education” (*Not Your Mother's Meatloaf*, 2012). If we understand positionality as the interpretation of one's position in society—how one is positioned in relationship to others, culture, and power (Alcoff, 1988; Sánchez, 2006)—these comics artists often take a positionality that understands that cisgender women and sexual and gender minorities are often underserved, underrepresented, and marginalized in a society that attempts to deny them sexual agency. These comics artists respond to this marginalization by being radically inclusive in their sex-education comics.

Isabella Rotman (2016b), for example, opens *You're So Sexy When You Aren't Transmitting STI's* with a discussion of pronouns and the challenges of writing about sexual organs, which carry “gendered connotations” (n.p.). *You're So Sexy* is a saddle-stapled print comic featuring explanations of consent, STIs, contraceptives, barriers, and breast and testicular exams—a discussion guided by a character named Captain Buzzkill, a buff man donning briefs underwear and a tight shirt, thigh-high boots decorated with hearts, and a utility belt holding condoms, lube, and dental dams. Rodman's opening explanation is meant “to prevent anyone from feeling that their sexual orientation or identity has been overlooked” (n.p.), an attempt at making the guide as inclusive for people of all genders and sexual orientations.

Rotman's other comics are also designed to be inclusive of transgender experiences. She has collaborated as an artist for *Dr. RAD's Queer Health Show* (RAD Remedy & Rotman, 2016a, 2016b), a sexual health comic produced by RAD Remedy, a nonprofit that provides health information for transgender, gender non-conforming, queer, and intersex folks. The *Intro-*



Figure 3: Dr. RAD's explanation of terminology from the *Introduction to Terms and Disclaimer* issue of Dr. RAD's *Queer Health Show* (RAD Remedy & Rotman, 2016a, p. 3). Reproduced under Creative Commons.

ALT TEXT: Page featuring multiple panels in which Dr. RAD explains that the comic will focus on transgender readers and that she will use the term "bits" to refer to genitals, but will occasionally use medical terms for clarity.

duction to Terms and Disclaimer issue of the comic (RAD Remedy & Rotman, 2016a) opens with the character Dr. RAD, who narrates these guides, explaining that the guides are for everyone, but the focus will be “on people whose gender may be different than what they were assigned at birth, because those folks often find it difficult to find this kind of information” (p. 3). Because many transgender and genderqueer people often use different terms to describe their genitals, Dr. RAD validates that experience (it’s “FANTASTIC”) and explains that the guide will be using the term “BITS to describe genitals and other body parts associated with sex or gender,” though at times for medical purposes they use terms like “penis” and “vagina” for medical clarity (p. 3).

Not only are these comics inclusive in their terminology and audience, but they’re also inclusive in their depictions of characters. Moen has explained that it’s important for her comics to be inclusive of a wide variety of genders and body types because “That’s what the world looks like” (quoted in Anderson-Minshall, 2018). This ethic of inclusivity plays out in her comics and guest comics for *OJST*. Niki Smith’s (2017) guest comic on period panties (multi-layered underwear meant to catch leaks on heavy menstrual days) features characters wearing those panties and explaining that they look and feel like real underwear and come in a variety of styles. These characters are inclusive of body types and genders: of these three underwear models, one is a man, most likely a transgender man who menstruates (see figure 4). Moen’s own comics show bodies of a variety of races, sizes, genders, and abilities. For example, her comic “How to Suck Cock” features drawings of a variety of bodies asking questions and giving and receiving fellatio. One character is a man in a wheelchair receiving head and saying, “Oh yes, like that, like that” (Moen & Nolan, 2014). These comics are a refreshing turn toward inclusivity, as disability is almost always equated with asexuality, sex education typically constructs sex as able-bodied, and medical discourses often fail to address the sex lives of many with disabilities (Tepper, 2000; Wilkerson, 2002). These comics artists start from the assumption that we should design materials and politics starting with those most marginalized in society, as various queer theorists, disability scholars and activists, and universal design scholars have argued we should (e.g., Dolmage, 2005, 2008; Rose, 2016; Warner, 1999).³

These sex-education comics respond to cultural and systemic exclusion of cisgender girls and women and sexual and gender minorities by being radically inclusive of body types, genders, sexual orientations, disability, and sexual desires and pleasures. This feminist and queer

³ While these comics are often radically inclusive, due to their visual nature they are often not accessible to blind and low-vision readers. Most webcomics artists don’t provide alternative ways to access their comics, like descriptions and transcripts. Casey Boyle and Nathaniel A. Rivers (2016) have argued that designing for accessibility involves the creation of multiple versions of a composition. Accessibility in this view means “offer[ing] different versions that operate according to their own specific medial logics” (p. 31). Many webcomics could be more accessible through providing a different, text-based version for blind and low-vision readers.

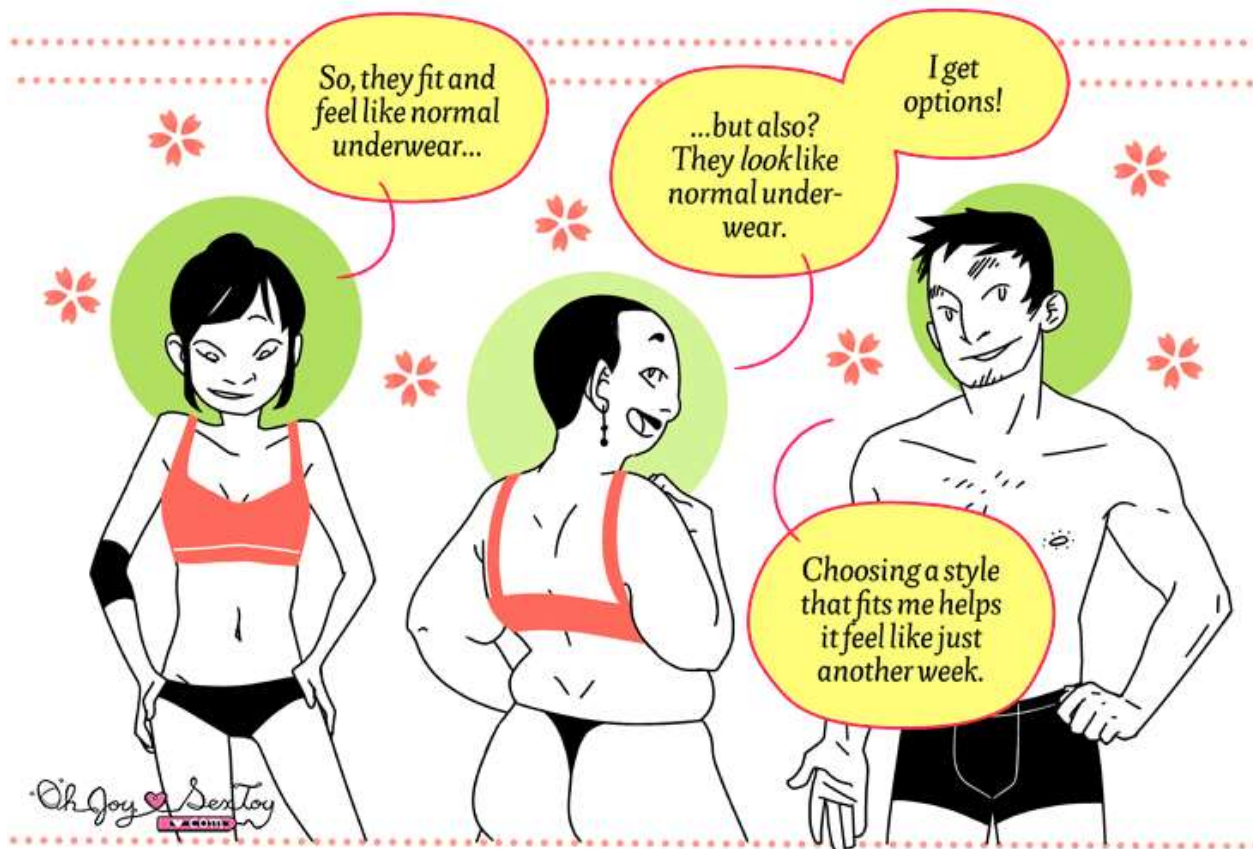


Figure 4: Panel from Niki Smith's (2017) *Oh Joy Sex Toy* (www.ohjoysextoy.com) guest comic, "Period Panties." Reproduced with permission.

ALT TEXT: Comic panel featuring three underwear models explaining that period panties look and feel like normal underwear and come in a variety of styles. Two models appear to be cisgender women of different body sizes; one appears to be a transgender man.

positionality often results in a turn to the autobiographical in these comics, which allows for sex-education that explores emotions, ambiguity, and complexity.

Ambiguity and Complexity: The Roles of Autobiography and Emotions in Sex-Education Comics

Many sex-education comics are driven by autobiography rather than simply explaining sexual concepts or practices in a technical, distanced manner. The use of autobiography allows for sex-education comics to incorporate emotions and provide a more complex (and sometimes ambiguous) understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender than traditional sex education. Comics scholars have argued that comics are an ideal medium for displaying ambiguity and complexity, especially in relation to personal experience and emotions. Ian C. M. Williams (2012) suggested that comics are useful for "the discussion of difficult, complex or ambiguous

subject matter” (p. 21), especially related to health and medicine, because of the interpretive work necessary to read “a medium of fragments” (p. 22). Nick Sousanis (2015) argued that comics’ multimodality allows for a sort of “refraction” of perspective, helping readers to view the world with more complexity—what he called “unflattening,” or “a simultaneous engagement of multiple vantage points from which to engender new ways of seeing” (p. 32). And because comics are read both synchronically (all at once as we take in the whole page) and diachronically (in sequence, panel to panel) (Eisner, 2008; Squier, 2015), emotions can be depicted as multiple, simultaneous, and contradictory. Jenell Johnson (2018) wrote, “Emotions are usually discussed in isolation from one another, but many comics . . . illustrate their characters experiencing simultaneous, and sometimes contradictory, emotions” (p. 11). For Scott and Fawaz (2018), the ambiguity and multiplicity of comics makes it a “*formally queer*” medium (p. 202) in that “comics self-consciously multiply and underscore differences at every site of their production so that no single comics panel can ever be made ‘to signify monolithically’” (p. 203, quoting Sedgwick).

Sex-education comics often deploy autobiography in ways that allow for complexity and ambiguity. For instance, Kiku Hughes’s (2015) *OJST* guest comic, “Ace,” shares her experiences with a lack of libido and learning about asexuality. As Hughes narrates, the commonplace explanations available to her for her lack of libido—like being scared of sex or being “broken”—didn’t help her to understand why she wasn’t interested in sex. However, “Reading about asexuality finally gave a name to my experiences.” Later in the comic, Hughes explores her struggle with coming to terms with this identity category, representing this struggle through a dialogue between two versions of herself.

Hughes’s (2015) difficulty with adopting the identity asexual (which asexual people often shorthand as “Ace,” thus the comics’ title) shows two versions of Hughes struggling with what the identity category means in terms of her lived experience. Through gestural and visual modes in combination with the linguistic mode—Hughes facing away from the reader, then in conversation with herself, pointing in accusation that she masturbates, standing in opposition with clenched fists, looking upward as she shouts with tensed up fingers—Hughes conveys the internal dialogue and helps readers to explore the contradictions about an Ace identity she had to work through. She has to dispel misunderstandings that she has internalized—like that Ace people never get crushes or never masturbate—and she eventually “stopped being so afraid.” Her comic concludes by explaining that being asexual doesn’t equate to loneliness, and in fact, she’s “met amazing, loving people who also identify as Ace” who are quite diverse in their understandings of asexuality. Hughes’s final move in the comic—made possible through the spatial layout, as frames progress from internal dialogue to Hughes contrasting her fears of being alone forever in one panel to a collective of Ace individuals and a text box explaining how she’s met many other Ace people—pulls away from



Figure 5: Final panels of Kiku Hughes's (2015) *Oh Joy Sex Toy* (www.ohjoysextoy.com) comic "Ace," in which she shares her internal arguments with herself as she attempts to understand asexuality and then finds a community of others who identify as Ace. Reproduced with permission.

ALT TEXT: A series of comics panels in shades of purple in which a young woman argues with herself over understandings of asexuality and then subsequently explains that she's met others who identify as asexual, who have "taught me to be much kinder to myself."

herself as an isolated individual and encourages a collective experience that is diverse and inclusive. Through an intimate personal narrative made possible through the combination of linguistic, visual, gestural, and spatial modes, Hughes's comic allows for both intimacy and distance, as readers are drawn to her interior world but also see a connection to a broader social world.

This autobiographical and multimodal approach allows for the inclusion of emotions into sex education, features that are too often lacking in school-based and other mainstream sex education (Lenskyj, 1990). For Miller and Bley, it is important to learn from the experiences of others, and they purposefully didn't make a sex education textbook or manual because those genres often have "a lack of humanized information" (Miller, quoted in "Not Your Mother's," 2013).

Most of the comics included in *Meatloaf* work autobiographically and multimodally, allowing for complexity, ambiguity, and even ambivalence. Sparky Taylor's (2013) two-page "My Body, Myself" shares her experiences with body and gender image as she tries to gain self-acceptance and acceptance from society. This acceptance, though, depends on ambiguity, an acceptance that she can be "pretty, sturdy, girly, scruffy, voluptuous [sic], tough, handsome, beautiful, a woman, a boy, both, or none of the above," as she explains in the last panel (p. 48).

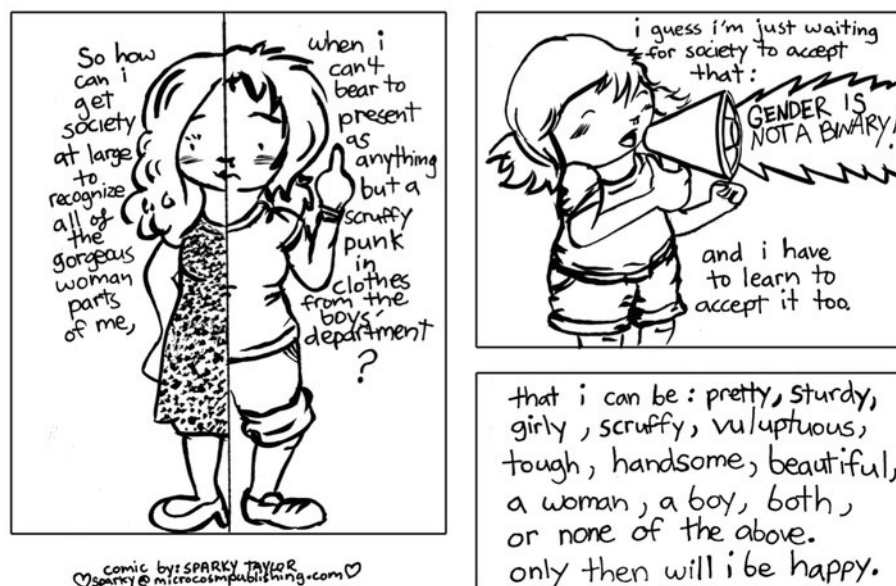


Figure 6: Final panels from Sparky Taylor's (2013) "My Body, Myself" (p. 48). Republished under fair use.

ALT TEXT: Three panels: the first features a short girl split in half, the left half wearing a dress and the right wearing shorts and a t-shirt; the second features the same girl shouting through a bullhorn that GENDER IS NOT A BINARY; the third panel is text explaining that she wants to be accepted for being "pretty, sturdy, girly, scruffy, voluptuous, tough, handsome, beautiful, a woman, a boy, both, or none of the above."

Taylor's comic explores ambiguous and conflicting feelings about gendered and embodied performances, portraying alternative versions of herself. In one panel, she explains that she desires to be seen as feminine sometimes, but she doesn't like to wear traditional feminine clothes or perfume. This explanation accompanies a drawing of herself wearing a print dress and heels, looking down at her body with a facial expression that might convey disapproval, disappointment, or confusion. The following panels, reproduced in figure 6, express Taylor's ambivalence by splitting her body in two, representing her conflicting desires to be seen both as a "gorgeous woman" and as a boyish punk (p. 48). Through recognized gendered visual elements (heels and a dress versus sneakers, shorts, and a t-shirt) and gestures (the raising of a middle finger), Taylor presents an internal conflict and then depicts an integrated version of herself that allows for ambiguous gender performance and identity as she shouts "GENDER IS NOT A BINARY" through a bullhorn. Taylor's comic thus explores ambivalence and ambiguity of gender expression through a multimodal comic in which linguistic explanations, gestures, visuals, and spatial progression of her internalized experiences (visualized and externalized through her bodily representations) work in conjunction with each other.

Likewise, Katrina's (2013) two-page untitled comic in *Meatloaf* explores complexity around being queer through a multimodal personal narrative. The first page of her comic provides a drawing of a person passed out in a bed in a messy room accompanied by text:

The story of a blossoming, progressive & successful queer maturity & actualization is a stage set for disappointment. It won't get better because I will likely eternally deal with some version of the same shit which undeniably shapes my understanding of my body—and my ability to relate to others. But I am a queer adult and that means I can stay up til' [sic] 5 AM and fuck with my clothes on and put my whole hand in someone's warm body. (p. 164)

The second page features a spatial collage of drawings: a self-portrait, a gravestone, hand-holding, masturbation with clothes on, flowers, and a cityscape. The gravestone, partially hidden by the portrait, appears to read, "HERE LIES THE FUTURE." Text wrapping around the drawings explains that because Katrina is a "shy top," she doesn't have to explain "her ambivalence to being penetrated" to others—an ambivalence that's the result of sexual trauma from high school (p. 165). Katrina explains that "There is a negative, inverted aspect to my sex and assembled exterior—difficulty presenting multiplicity" (p. 165). Katrina's queerness is anti-social: she calls herself "socially infertile" and the potential murderer of her "father's blood line" (p. 165). She concludes, "As my queerness divorces me further from widely accepted life narratives, it becomes even more important to validate queer narratives & shift personal expectations" (p. 165).

Katrina's (2013) comic, like Taylor's, doesn't teach didactically, but rather provides an ambivalent and complex experience of being queer in the world. These comics teach that



Figure 7: The second page of Katrina's (2013) two-page untitled comic exploring her queer identity and sexuality (p. 165). Republished under fair use.

ALT TEXT: A collage of images like a self-portrait, a gravestone, hand-holding, flowers, a cityscape, and masturbation with clothes on, accompanied by text that wraps around the images.

bodies are complex and messy, deploying multiple modes to convey this message. Chute (2010) has explained that comics is “a procedure . . . of embodiment” (p. 193) in which subjectivity is inscribed on the page as “Handwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author” (p. 11). Through the intimacy of reading Katrina’s handwriting (a visual and linguistic

explanation of her abject subject position) and experiencing the visual and gestural representations of her embodiment—in bed, or later in a punk jacket, or holding hands, or masturbating with her shorts on, spatially juxtaposed against each other—readers gain a sense of the complexity of queer embodied experiences. The multimodal rhetoric of Katrina’s comic further works to bring the past (linguistically through her handwritten narration about boyfriend trauma), present (visually through her self-portrait), and future (the visual gravestone and linguistic explanation of her social infertility) together in one visual-spatial space, which consequently integrates trauma into understandings of queerness, embodiment, and sexuality—understandings that allow for complexity, validation, and exploration of identities that can “fuck around in a million directions” (Katrina, 2013, p. 165). (On the possibilities of comics to queer temporality, especially in regard to trauma, in ways that create complexity for identities, see Chute, 2017; Cvetkovich, 2008; Wanzo, 2018).

Through personal, multimodal, autobiographical accounts that incorporate relational, emotional, and contextual aspects of sex and sexuality, these comics allow for a more complex and thorough sex-education experience for readers that incorporates desires, pleasures, identities, and situated contexts.

Instructions and Technical Information

In addition to exploring sex and gender through autobiography, sex-education comics also present easy-to-follow, though still complex, instructional and technical information regarding sex. In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner (2008) explained that comics are an ideal medium for conveying procedures or processes because of comics’ sequential nature. More recently, Han Yu (2016) has argued that comics can be a productive medium for technical communication, including relaying educational and instructional material.

Sex-education comics typically provide technical information in one of two approaches: either technical illustrations and explanations of body parts and processes, or instructional material that explains a process. The first is quite frequent, as many sex-education comics provide annotated diagrams of sexual anatomy. Chute (2017) has observed that comics lend themselves to the diagrammatic, allowing for the “display [of] otherwise hard-to-represent realities and sensations” (p. 241) because of the affordances of drawings for showing both interiority and exteriority simultaneously. For example, Moen’s illustrations in “Vulvovaginal Anatomy” on *OJST* (Moen & Nolan, 2018c) display detailed drawings and diagrams of both external and internal female sexual organs. In figure 8 below, Moen provides a cross-section diagram of female anatomy, allowing for annotations of both interior and exterior organs. As a sort of peer teacher—a frequent strategy in instructional comics (Yu, 2016)—Moen explains to another character (and the readers) that “The outside is just the tip of the iceberg.” The rest of the comic proceeds to provide a “quick tour” of the vulvovaginal system as Moen traverses interior organs and explains the functions and of these organs and how they work.

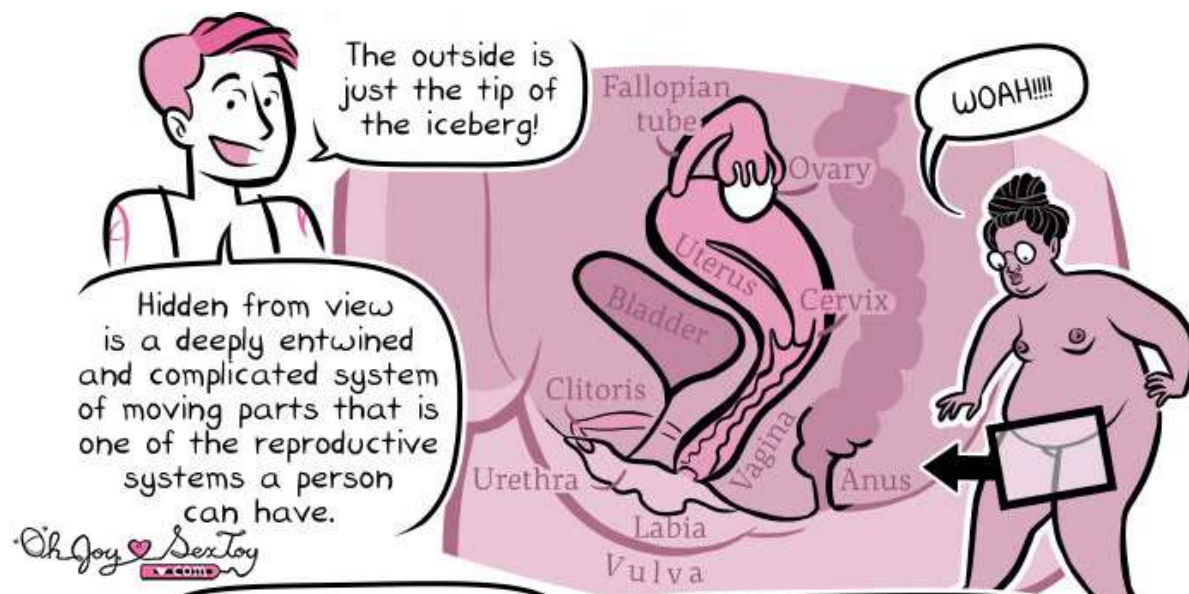


Figure 8: Panel from “Vulvovaginal Anatomy” (Moen & Nolan, 2018c) on Oh Joy Sex Toy (www.ohjoysextoy.com). Reproduced with permission.

ALT TEXT: A diagram of vulvovaginal sexual organs with labels as Moen’s character explains that “Hidden from view is a deeply entwined and complicated system of moving parts that is one of the reproductive systems a person can have.”

But these technical comics are not solely technical; they are also attitudinal in nature. As both Eisner (2008) and Yu (2016) have shown, instructional comics can also be attitudinal instructions: they shape expectations, beliefs, values, and attitudes towards processes or procedures. Instructional comics often don’t simply explain how to do something, like put on a condom; they also shape attitudes toward the topic through the combination of multiple modes.

For instance, in the tradition of *Safer Sex Comix*, these comics also eroticize condom usage. *OJST*’s “Condom Basics” (Moen & Nolan, 2015) eroticizes condoms in multiple ways, drawing on the combination of multiple modes in order to do so. First, it opens with Nolan explaining how at the age of 14 he snuck out of a movie to purchase a condom in the theatre bathroom’s condom machine. The comic begins with a single frame in which Nolan holds up a comic and begins narrating and then proceeds spatially through a series of frames in which Nolan is depicted as a character sneaking out of the movie in search of the condom machine. Text above each panel narrates his adventure, as he explains that he didn’t have *intentions* of having sex soon, but “HAVING a condom, becoming PREPARED, brought me one step closer to actual sex.” So, first, condoms are erotic objects before one ever has sex because they make sex a potential actuality. Second, as Nolan explains in subsequent panels, returning visually and gesturally as a narrator and peer teacher, condoms are “little reminders of the future sex you’re going to have. And *that* makes them sexy.” And third, in response to another character



Figure 9: Panels from “Condom Basics” (Moen & Nolan, 2015) on Oh Joy Sex Toy (www.ohjoysexttoy.com) explaining that condoms can “INCREASE visual and mental stimulation.” Reproduced with permission.

ALT TEXT: Top: Drawing of a man saying that condoms desensitize, while another man responds that that’s “not an excuse to act irresponsibly”; Bottom: Dialogue bubbles explain that condoms “INCREASE visual and mental stimulation,” accompanied by a drawing of someone putting a condom on someone else.

objecting that condoms decrease sensation, Nolan argues that “they INCREASE visual and mental stimulation.” The act of having a condom rolled on, Nolan suggests, is “hot as fuck!” Through the combination of linguistic explanation and narration in speech bubbles; visual diagrams and examples; spatial movements between Nolan as a character, Nolan as a peer teacher, diagrams, and example of condom use (as in figure 9); and gestural modes (including the second character’s resistant stance and the act of putting on a condom), “Condom Basics” works to provide technical information while also providing an attitudinal, multimodal argument.

Sex-education comics, then, provide technical explanations and instructions while shaping the attitudes of readers toward those practices: They eroticize and make accessible complex human anatomy and practices like condom usage, birth control methods, safer sex practices, and more.

Conclusion: Toward a Sexual *Techné*

Sex-education comics, by personalizing sex education through autobiography and by sharing technical information that shapes attitudes, help to develop their readers’ sexual literacy and agency. And by taking feminist and queer positionalities, sex-education comics re-orient readers to their bodies and to society, a re-orientation that challenges and critiques norms and “probe[s] the intermingling of sex and power” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012, p. 202). This sexual literacy and agency becomes a sort of *techné*, a contextual *practice* that is both individual (related to identity and one’s own sexual interests and desires) and shared. The sexual literacy and agency encouraged by these comics is ultimately a civic one. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2012) have described *techné* as “a sort of generative lived knowledge,” a view of *techné* “that points less to the prescribed how-to sense of the term and more to the ethical, civic dimension” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012, pp. 211–212). Unlike traditional sex education, which can focus on avoiding risks and makes sex and reproduction mechanical, these sex-education comics have a civic component.

One last comic to exemplify this point: Maisha Foster-O’Neal’s (2010/2015) “Sex Talk” (which was also printed in Miller and Bley’s 2013 *Meatloaf*). “Sex Talk” is a three-page explanation of consent that incorporates discussions of boundaries and pleasures. Consent is a frequent topic for sex-education comics, and importantly so. Moen has argued that consent has not been adequately taught in school-based sex education, and that consent is intimately tied to pleasure: “pleasure is not taught. It’s not explicitly said. Another huge problem, is if you aren’t teaching about pleasure, then you’re not teaching about consent either” (quoted in Zaloker, 2014). And further, given a culture that doesn’t adequately teach about consent and respecting bodily integrity and boundaries, it’s necessary to continue to teach consent as an ethical, relational practice. Kathleen Ann Livingston (2015) has argued that consent education



Figure 10: Part one of Maisha Foster-O'Neal's (2010/2015) "Sex Talk." Reproduced under Creative Commons.

ALT TEXT: A page of comics showing a variety of characters exemplifying that "Consent is when you discuss and respect boundaries" and "an enthusiastic yes means yes"; bottom panels provide advice about sharing what one likes and dislikes, sharing risk factors, and asking permission.

is community-based, arising out of feminist and queer spaces, and that we should understand consent as a “rhetorical process by which we learn to play carefully with power and each other, to articulate our boundaries and desires and ask for what we need” (p. 18). Thus, consent is a set of ethical practices, not simply a matter of risk and danger, but also of pleasure and boundaries. Further, as many sex-education comics argue, consent is not solely tied to sex: it is an ethical practice, a *techné*, for being in relation with others. Comics that teach sex education and consent become “alternative” sites of extra-curricular rhetorical education (Cavallaro, 2015; Gere, 1994), teaching readers to effectively communicate about needs, pleasures, boundaries, and desires.

As do other comics (like Rotman’s 2016b *You’re So Sexy* and 2016a *Not on My Watch*), Foster-O’Neal’s (2010/2015) “Sex Talk” explains that “Consent is when you discuss and respect boundaries” (part 1). It involves conversation with others about your pleasures, dislikes, risk factors, and boundaries. As Foster-O’Neal’s comic explains, consent is an ethic for “everyday situations” (part 2). In a light-hearted example, Foster-O’Neal shows a young woman asking someone, “May I pet your dinosaur.” He responds, “Ask **her**,” which she does, and the dinosaur *thinks* in the ethic of consent being exhibited: “May I **EAT YOUR FACE**” (part 2).



Figure 11: The first panel in part two of Foster-O’Neal’s (2010/2015) “Sex Talk.” Reproduced under Creative Commons.

ALT TEXT: A full-width panel featuring a young woman asking “May I pet your dinosaur?” to a man, who responds, “Ask her”; she subsequently asks a small dinosaur, held on a leash, and it responds by thinking, “May I EAT YOUR FACE.”

The sort of *techné* taught by “Sex Talk” and other sex-education comics is a relational and embodied practice—an ethic of both self and relationality. That is, it is not reducible to simply skill or technical knowledge, but is rather generative of new relationships and ways of being in the world. Such a view of sexual *techné*, then, combats shame and ignorance as well—not by denying shame and replacing it with pride—but by admitting shame and ignorance and learning new ways to experience pleasure with our bodies. Michel Foucault (1997) has famously argued that what was radical or disturbing about homosexuality was not two men having sex—it was men finding new ways to be intimate. That is, what makes nonnormative sexuality radical is that it affords the possibility of new ways of relating to each other. Sex and sexuality, then, become sites of invention, a *techné* that is, as Alexander and Rhodes (2012) put it, “generative” (p. 211). Sex-education comics teach sexuality as a generative practice through their multimodal rhetorics, opening the possibility for readers to explore how sexuality is related to their identities, how they can create new and different relationships, how they can understand their own bodies differently, how sex and sexuality is a “knowledge complex” (Alexander, 2008, p. 12) that is, indeed, complex, involving not solely sexual behaviors but also identities and social relations.

It is worth noting that Foster-O’Neal created her comic for her Gender in Relational Communication course at Lewis & Clark University. She persuaded her professor to allow her to research consent and create a comic rather than a traditional 15-page paper, and when she finished, she posted the comic all over campus and then co-facilitated a workshop on consent and sex (“Student Pens,” 2010). Rhetoric and composition scholars have persuasively argued that comics can and should be sites of multimodal composition in our writing courses (Jacobs, 2014, 2015; F. Johnson, 2014; Wierszewski, 2014). In closing, I want to join these calls by suggesting that comics—grassroots and amateur—are important sites for analysis in our classes and for student production that responds to real-world exigencies. Not that these comics studied and created by students need to be sex-education comics (though they can be!). But comics are important sites of civic education and engagement that, through their ability to present information in a variety of modes and engage readers, can address real civic problems in communities, on our campuses, and in our world.

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Rural and Native American Students' Utilization of Autobiographical Comic Strips to Explore Their Identities through Digital Storytelling in the Multimodal Writing Classroom

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Keywords: comic strips; identity discourses; rhetorical construction of identity; digital storytelling; multimodal composition; place-based composition; Native American or Indigenous students; rural students.

In the writing classroom, presenting a curriculum in which students read and create comic strips in order to explore their identity, via the course design, represents a strategy that has grown in popularity. Yet, for teachers and writing program administrators, what are the benefits and drawbacks in asking students to interact with graphic novels and comic books and to fashion autobiographical, digital, comic-strip narratives as a rhetorical construction of their identity? How does implementing multimodal assignments and digital storytelling practices by generating narrative comic strips affect students' reading, writing, critical thinking, research, collaborative, and other related processes as writing course outcomes? This article discusses a case study at a rural, Southwestern university of an experimental unit assignment involving 60 students, including many rural students and Native Americans. Students engaged with graphic novels and comic books in an upper-division, Written and Visual Media class. This article includes a description of the first assignment, a comic strip and corresponding reflective essay, as well as the comic's assessment criteria, with raters measuring students' writing outcomes. To compose their comics, students utilized the Pixton company's digital, comic-generating program. Overall, employing digital storytelling practices in creating autobiographical comic strips provided students with a cohesive, relevant approach to the course's overarching multimodal writing curriculum by assisting them in developing and formatting their comics together; contemplating and composing about diverse spaces, people, and histories related to their backgrounds, majors, and futures; and communicating their work to a greater audience. The study's results have implications for reading and generating digital comic strips in multimodal writing classes in enacting a critical multimodal literacy.

Today, the range of comic book writers and their topics has grown more diverse. Nonetheless, Native Americans remain the most stereotyped racial group, with their images and depictions appropriated for various media, including comics (Aurylaite, 2015), where tribal characters are cast as “sidekicks and caricatures” (Kamerick, 2017).¹ In the United States, there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), yet many comic creators rely on pan-“Indian” or generic representations of Native American characters located in either Western or historical settings² (Noori, 2010; Sheyahshe, 2008; Stedman, 1982) and portrayed as being either noble or savage, drunk, and featuring a “loincloth, feathered headdress, and truncated vocabulary” (Royal, 2010). Contrastingly, in the state of Oklahoma and surrounding territories, the Choctaw Nation describes its people as “a tribe of artists, professionals, musicians, storytellers, innovators, leaders, athletes, warriors, and caregivers” (Choctaw Nation, 2018),³ and from the time of America’s Civil Rights era, the Choctaws have committed to remembering their historical heritage (Howard & Levine, 1990).

In conducting a study and teaching at an Oklahoma university serving rural and Native American populations, I decided that students would produce a comic strip about their identity as the initial unit assignment for the upper-level course, “Written and Visual Media.” Along with reading comics and graphic novels, students would fashion a comic strip in order to engage in class interactions; compose a written and visual media text introducing them in a personal, diverting manner to fashioning work based upon their experiences; and employ storytelling as an artistic, communicative forum for their worldviews and circumstances. The last objective’s fulfillment, I foresaw, would interest English majors familiar with the story genre’s typology, including fiction and nonfiction writers, and some Native American students who had expressed their enjoyment and knowledge of storytelling.

Because graphic novels possess their own language, grammatical structures, and conventions in combining words and pictures to formulate a story (Rothschild, 1995), engaging them is consistent with employing multimodal literacies (Chu & Coffey, 2015; Comer, 2015; Jacobs,

¹ For instance, see C. Richard King (2009), Cornel Pewewardy (2002), and Michael Sheyahshe (2008) for discussions of Native American representations in comics.

² Comparably, in a presentation, area Choctaw and children’s book writer, Tim Tingle, claimed that most pictures of Native Americans today are ones of those “dead,” and the pictures may also depict scenes from the 1800s. In the kindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms Tingle has visited as a speaker, he explained further, he found no representations of living or recent Native Americans framed in pictures as “role models.” Thus, Tingle implored, Native Americans, including college students, must tell stories about themselves, including current depictions of themselves, in order to share their identities with a larger audience.

³ In an advertisement by the National Congress of American Indians, reacting to the Washington [R-----] football team’s refusal to change its name, Native Americans describe themselves as being parents, children, and a “forgotten” people, who are “struggling” but remain “resilient.” While Native Americans utilize many names for themselves, they do not refer to themselves by this slur.

2013; Kress & Jewitt, 2003) in order to tell discuss media topics (Watts, 2015); critique stereotypes (Horn, 2010; Short & Reeves, 2009); detect racism (Chaney, 2010; Schieble, 2014); and present cases of conflict, struggle, and injustice (Versaci, 2010; Yildirim, 2013; Watts, 2015) and other complicated stories via a limited number of frames (Watts, 2015). Indeed, comics and graphic novels provide voices for minority authors and those with alternative viewpoints, as well as giving student writers opportunities to delve into subjects connected to their gender, race, family, and community as subjects that they might resist covering in other educational settings (Lavery, 2018; Watts, 2015). As components related to my course's larger structure, reading comics can assist students' comprehension and synthesis of information, including literary selections (Webb & Guisand, 2007), while producing comics supports students' intellectual, social, cultural, and cognitive skills; promotes engagement with multimodal texts generally; undergirds peer collaborations; and ignites creativity (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Jacobs, 2013; Yildirim, 2013).

To propel students, including Choctaws defining themselves as "artists," "storytellers," and "innovators," to depict a facet of their identity, I assigned a comic utilizing Pixton's digital program. By generating autobiographical comics, authors can foreground their culture and upbringing (Downey, 2009),⁴ and by employing pictorial and written digital formats, students can illustrate their relationship with their greater community as an oppositional maneuver against having their representations assumed by others (see Kamerick, 2017). Of available applications, Torrey Truth and university staff argue that implementing Pixton to create comics as a "learner-centered tool . . . allows students to construct their own knowledge and display it in a [significant] way" (Truth, 2018). Likewise, in formulating comics via Pixton, students can collaborate in composing work; utilize their comics in discussing course readings; and define how they can employ the comic genre's attributes in communicating their personalities, families, and circumstances with future academic and outside audiences (Appling, Weaver, & Lay, 2009).

This article discusses a two-year, case study of a "Written and Visual Media" class, and it explores a comic strip and reflective essay unit and their assessment as a mechanism by which students might establish a positive self-representation (see Henzi, 2016; Sheyahshe, 2008). With the study, I posed these research questions: How does foregrounding multimodal reading and writing assignments, including an autobiographical comic strip with a digital storytelling emphasis, affect students' critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing outcomes in enacting a critical multimodal literacy? Would students, including Native Americans, benefit from the comic assignment's identity-related, multimodal, and reflective focus, or would the potentially negative consequences include their inability to connect with comics and identity topics?

⁴ Sousanis explains that through the composing of comics, "not only space, but time and experience too, have been put into boxes" (2015, p. 10).

The Institutional Context and a Literature Review

Oftentimes, teachers' curricula fail to meet tribal students' needs by recognizing their backgrounds and native knowledge constructs (see Munroe, Borden, & Orr, 2013; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007), yet instructors must tailor their curricula to meet their students' specific preferences, as opposed to simply reflecting Western educational styles and strategies (Fletcher, 2008). To succeed, Native American students require an institution that values their identity (Mosholder, Waite, Larsen, & Goslin, 2016), as well as opportunities to interact with and instruct their peers and implement their favored learning styles (Conley & Bryan, 2009), a scenario that potentially might include students' reading, fashioning, and sharing of comics. When tribal college students feel confident about employing their customary skill sets in fulfilling academic tasks, they perform better (Guillory, 2009), and scholars who discuss featuring comics as part of high-school and college students' curricular subjects delineate positive outcomes for both groups. In one study involving a high school, Native American students collaborated to generate graphic novels as a task that raised their sense of course investment, promoted multimodal learning, and led them to understand that by sharing their cultural backgrounds, they could combat stereotypes (Brown & Begoray, 2017). Likewise, in studies of college students, those enrolled in an advanced composition course covered the graphic memoir's genre and composed comics to raise their class participation and rhetorical meaning-making levels, and engagement with critical multiliteracies (Comer, 2015), while students in a literature course undertook literary analyses of comics and graphic novels and generated comics for outside audiences to practice multimodal composition processes reliant on their analytical, persuasive, and organizational skills (Misemer, 2015).

In teaching "Written and Visual Media," I focus on students' attainment of written, visual, and digital literacies required for advanced composition purposes, and I adopted principles for instructing tribal students and employing comics by designating my first assignment as a comic denoting some aspect of students' identities (see Delpit, 1995) that they desired to share for civic engagement purposes (see Deer, 2013). At my locale, many Native American students require distinct curricular formats and assignments in order to thrive and make their voices heard (see Bowman, 2018), and comics assist students in communicating in authentic, meaningful ways (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002) as students reference important topics, experiences, and places for themselves of racial and cultural concern (Battiste, 2013). Studying and creating comics are beneficial practices for students whose learning style is visual-verbal, too (Short & Reeves, 2009), including those from area tribal cultures valuing pictorial and oral communication styles. Likewise, comics draw interest from reluctant readers (Downey, 2009), which could represent students from the study's nearby, low-rated

schools.⁵ Largely, by reading and generating comics⁶ in the college writing classroom, students can investigate both the traditional (see New London Group, 1996)⁷ and visual literacy practices (see Kress, 2003; Kress & Lewewen, 2001) attached to all multimodal texts (Jacobs, 2007a; Jacobs, 2013).

In delineating my comic unit's objectives, I wished to instigate class interactions; introduce students to composing texts with written and visual media elements in a personal, diverting way (see Conley & Bryan, 2009) that was reliant on their experiences (see Battiste, 2013) instead of an intensive research component, and foreground storytelling as a forum for students, including the tribally affiliated, to communicate their worldviews (see Munroe, Borden, & Orr, 2013). As my first goal, I wished to promote class dialogues providing an avenue for me, the teacher, to understand students, as well as for them to build peer relationships, since Native students require tribal mentors and a community of learners' support (Fletcher, 2008). As practices contributing to classroom exchanges, during the unit, students would participate in discussions, collaborate in groups, and peer review one another's drafts. Even as tribal cultures are diverse and unique (2008), formulating cohort relationships based upon common subjects, building community, sharing power, and orchestrating a constructive relationship with one's locale are valuable practices for Native American students (Cajete, 2005; Espino & Lee, 2011; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007), including those within my area. Although the local culture is welcoming, most students live off campus and divide their attention amongst attending college fulltime, which could entail driving up to an-hour-and-a-half one way; working 40 or more hours weekly; raising their families, with students boasting up to eight children⁸; and acting as caretakers for their extended families. Because students keep busy, with the first unit involving a comic concerning one's identity, I hoped to assist members in acknowledging their commonalities, a circumstance that might prompt greater student collaborations from the outset.

⁵ One student tells about growing up in a household with only one book, *The Bible*, a valued text. Her parents had no newspaper subscription. Indeed, the nearest town with a newspaper was two hours away. Consequently, five area families shared a paper, with one person making the weekly trip to the gas station 20 miles away to purchase it. The first neighbor would read and pass the newspaper along the line to the families. Sometimes the comics "went missing," as one could wrap presents in them. Indeed, the student's great-grandmother joked to her, until the 1960s, the comics section had three important functions, with its last being toilet paper.

⁶ While Scott McCloud contrasts cartoons as "an approach to picture-making" with comics, which utilize a cartooning approach via "amplification through simplification" (1994), I utilize these terms interchangeably as do other scholars referenced in this paper. Additionally, Hillary Chute employs the term "graphic narrative" (2008). Indeed, on this topic, Charles Hatfield portrays the difficulty in defining comics and graphic novels in academia (2009).

⁷ The NCTE defines "traditional literacy" in *Standards for the English Language Arts* (2009), while Carol Westby calls "traditional literacy" the "reading and writing of printed texts" (2010, p. 65).

⁸ The number of persons, averaging 3.41, in Native American families is greater than the national rate (U.S. Census, 2012).

As my second priority in employing the comic assignment, I wanted to address English majors who did not enjoy integrating multimodal elements into their work. Prior to enrolling, one student expressed that he had “avoided” multimodal textual configurations “entirely.” Still, comics combine pictorial images with alphabetical text; are read non-linearly; and implement color, panels, text, gutters, and other discrete features, rendering them the perfect genre for students’ exploration of multimodal texts (see Ajayi, 2009; Groensteen, 2007; Jacobs, 2013; McCloud, 2006; Misemer, 2015).⁹ In deeming the first assignment a comic strip, I hoped to provide students with a curricular task that they might find both “diverting” as an initial step to incorporating visual and written elements into a text and personally relevant as they drew upon their backgrounds in conveying an argument. Notably, by creating a comic, students can address future multimodal composition concerns, including how to interact with complicated multimodal texts for varied rhetorical purposes (see Chu & Coffey, 2015; Jacobs, 2007b; Misemer, 2015; Serafini, 2014).

As my third directive in selecting a comic strip as the introductory unit, I desired to foreground storytelling as a purpose in composing creative, visual, and written texts in a class containing some fiction and nonfiction writers, and Native American students for whom crafting tales featured largely. Within this discussion, it remains important not to stereotype Indigenous worldviews, as Anglo visions of Native Americans often delineate the latter (Aftandilian, 2011; Harkin & Lewis, 2007; Porter, 2012). Still, Western science foregrounds observation and experimentation, while Native outlooks value observation and lived experience (Bahr, 2015; Hain-Jamall, 2013), with many tribal groups relying on language, visuals, and stories to depict community members’ concerns (Brown & Begoray, 2017). According to a Choctaw elder, who shared histories, tales, and myths¹⁰ with my prior classes, area tribal stories feature both real and mythical beings and elements, and they provide one with lessons, including how to build domestic structures, grow crops, live within nature, and practice warfare, or warn of the forces one may encounter, such as natural disasters. Additionally, stories explain one’s birth, depict how to interact with mentors, and provide conduct codes and approaches to finding one’s fate.¹¹

⁹ Comics represent multimodal texts that render their argument through linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial aspects, producing effects that neither print or visual texts can create alone (Jacobs, 2013). According to Stephen Hoover, it is necessary now for students to engage with multimodal texts, such as graphic novels, since today’s consumers of information rely on fewer alphabetic-text sources than in the past (2012).

¹⁰ If the orally conveyed information that the Choctaw elder provided has been documented elsewhere, I have been unable to locate it.

¹¹ Focusing on Native peoples’ skills and paths, as the elder remarked, remains vital in a mainstream culture where tribal peoples are presented negatively or not featured at all. One traditional Choctaw ceremony affirming one’s strengths involves the “naming” of a pre-adolescent child based upon some quality. This ceremony, practiced informally now, assists children in accounting for their noteworthy traits. Comparably, tribal storytellers and creative writers denote a person’s or character’s central trait before drawing a sketch. Thus, for the first assignment, I decided that students should employ a comic’s word and image combinations (see Kharbach, 2018; Misemer, 2015) to document proclivities and biographical events associated with their identity.

Even now, upon entering college, Native American students suffer from the diminishment of their traditions based upon historical actions involving genocide, as well as tribes' legal and social marginalization (Hartman & Gone, 2014). Indigenous peoples have been called the United States' most disenfranchised population (Smith, Stinson, Dawson, Goldstein, Huang, & Grant, 2006), and they meet with intergenerational trauma as a factor impacting their overall status, including their educational expectancies (Tuihawai-Smith, 2012). Of any race, Native Americans possess the smallest secondary and postsecondary graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and as is true at my institution, tribal students face hardships in transitioning to a university setting (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005) and in associating their beliefs with the institutional norms found in course pedagogy and campus philosophy (Hankes, 2002). Instead of blending in, often, tribal college students experience feelings of academic inadequacy, isolation, and ostracism (Guillory, 2009). Moreover, many require not only social but also academic assistance in tackling core subjects, including English and writing, and in becoming critically literate, critiquing paradigms, working for social change, and continuing with their self-development (Brown & Begoray, 2017).

Since the 1990s, more faculty have been integrating graphic novels and comics into university courses, including writing classes, than ever before (Comer, 2015; Hoover, 2012; Tabachnick, 2007).¹² Thus, the article's reviewed scholarship provides information for teachers assigning the reading and composing of comics to students, and additional studies exist concerning utilizing comics in other academic settings (Ajayi 2008; Ajayi, 2009; Carter, 2007; Chun, 2008; Comer, 2015; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Harris-Fain, 2009; Jacobs, 2013; Misemer, 2015; Tabachnick, 2009). Yet, these authors make no formal assessment of students' work in measuring their academic outcomes, and none offers a case study centered

Asking tribal students to introduce themselves by rendering their identity through a cartoon strip, including the requisite to select its frame sizes, language, flow, and characters' positions and props (see McCloud, 2006), I believed, would reinforce composing premises connected to the tribal "naming" ritual and the creative writers' construction of character outlines shaping protagonists' goals.

Another historically relevant phenomenon for affirming tribal members' attributes, the elder noted, was the young person's engagement of a journey initiating him/her from childhood into adulthood. Besides being concerned with a person's or character's qualities, both tribal storytellers and creative writers generate a tale's plot by sending their main figure upon a quest involving some obstacle to overcome. Likewise, in assigning a cartoon, I believed that some students would employ a familiar narrative device to them by devising an episode concerning their fate, with the student-as-character establishing an identity upon pursuing a chosen road. Over time, many Choctaw students had told stories about their ancestors' "Trail of Tears," removals in which an estimated 4,000 people died on a government-forced march leading from the Choctaws' ancestral homeland to Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. By retelling such tales and inventing others, the Choctaw people strive to ensure that their origins and cultural conceptions, including how to abide in nature with balance and positivity, will not be lost.

¹² Incidentally, the graphic novel is also the only type of novel with a growing readership today (Chu & Coffey, 2015; Short & Reeves, 2009).

on students' identities and a comic-strip-narrative assignment design, especially in an upper-division, multimodal writing class. Indeed, past academic research about comics and graphic novels centers around "literary," "theoretical," or "pedagogical studies," with a limited focus on students' comic composition processes, excepting examples such as McCloud (2006) and Nick Sousanis (2015) (Bahl, 2015). Additionally, researchers have explored comics based upon superheroes, women, and Jewish trauma narratives (Baskind & Omer-Sherman, 2010; Gardner, 2012), but little information is available concerning Native Americans in comics, as well as tribal college students as a population reading and producing them. It is necessary that administrators and faculty locate the best curricular formats for aiding tribal students in their matriculation rates (Battiste, 2013; Guillory, 2009), as well as for instructors to offer designs matching students' cultural identities and learning-style preferences (Brown & Begoray, 2017), including ones related to multimodal reading and composition processes.

Thus, in this article, I discuss a Written and Visual Media course, and its comic strip assignment, as an unexplored curricular design. This study, located at a public university, involves 60 students, including many Native Americans. Accounting for scholars' dialogues about assisting students to explore their inner conceptions and express them via multimodal composition acts, I investigate how a comic strip unit might be conceived to meet advanced writers' needs. Specifically, I consider how the comic assignment impacted students' engagement with multimodal writing, as well as identity topics, and how the outcomes could be measured. This paper presents ways to promote students' investment in comic-strip evaluation and design, with students reflecting upon the genre. Overall, findings indicate that the unit assignment benefitted many students' critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing practices, along with building their identity conceptions.

Method

RESEARCH SITE AND COURSE CURRICULUM

From 2016 through 2018, I conducted a study at an Oklahoma university serving the state's lowest income county. The institution is rurally located, and the state has a Native American population of almost 9%. The town where the university resides represents the Choctaw Nation tribe's capital, but the college itself is outside of tribal nation jurisdiction. Many undergraduates have low-income backgrounds, 57% are first-generation students, and 30% are registered Native Americans, mostly Choctaws and Chickasaws¹³ (Deidentified University "Factbook," 2018). Academically, only a little over 11% of students graduate within five years, and 28% finish at all, even though, according to prospects at similar institutions, students should be graduating at a rate of over 39% (2018). Thus, at the study's university, like elsewhere, some students, including those with rural backgrounds and those who are

¹³ Tribal students come from the "Big Five," and the state is home to 31 tribes.

Native American, face persistence issues as marginalized groups. Indeed, students tell stories of relatives who congratulate them on being the first in their extended family to attend college, yet many students feel unprepared for the university's academic standards because the state ranks second lowest in education nationally, having the lowest paid teachers likewise. Additionally, regionally, high-speed, internet service remains mostly unavailable (for the area's "digital divide," see Hembrough, Madewell, & Dunn, 2018). Consequently, upon enrolling at the university, many students possess little experience with composing with computers, do not own computers in their households, and must drive to campus to utilize computer labs with restricted hours.

To fulfill degree requirements, English majors take "Written and Visual Media," a course where they engage with and compose multimodal texts. The first unit covers graphic novels and comics,¹⁴ and students generate a comic strip introducing themselves and their lives in this area to a general audience, including class members (see Appling et al., 2009) hoping to learn more about them and be entertained in the process. In imagining their comic, students choose whether they want their story to be serious or humorous; whether the plot took place in the past, present, or future; and whether the setting and focus include realistic or fantastical elements. Besides generating a cartoon strip, students write a reflective essay, an assignment critique discussing how they composed their cartoon, its strengths and weaknesses, and the effect on viewers they hoped to produce and why (see Misemer, 2015). (See Appendix 1 for questions that students addressed). Separately, students also complete a literary analysis paper about a graphic novel the class covers (see Clark, 2013).

To facilitate students' engagement with Pixton's comic-producing program, I created a class account and informed students that they could also opt to draw their comic by hand or use another digital program if they wished. Only one, citing her love for drawing, selected the former route, leveling the playfield for the others, who embraced Pixton. The comic strip assignment's learning objectives included students' display of creativity; critical thinking; multimodal prowess in rendering and integrating visual images with alphabetic text; and dexterity in drafting, collaborating, revising, and furnishing a completed narrative about one's self (see Bahl, 2015). Within the reflective essay, students discussed how they had explored and researched aspects of their identity and background as established in their comic and contemplated their work, including its appeal to potential audiences. Finally, because students would complete three out of four multimodal assignments, with the others being unrelated to comics, two opted not to compose the comic strip, submitting only the literary analysis segment instead.

¹⁴ By placing this unit first, I was able to prevent students from viewing the course's alphabetic texts as more important than the visual and auditory ones (see Misemer, 2015; Nichols, 2009).

To begin the unit, students read autobiographical graphic novels and comic book selections,¹⁵ including Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007),¹⁶ Robert Kirkman's and Tony Moore's *The Walking Dead: Volume 1* (2013), and Matt Dembicki's *Trickster: Native American Tales, A Graphic Collection* (2010), as well as studying examples of Native American comic superheroes.¹⁷ Furthermore, students learned about comic books' history, comic superheroes (see Leibold, 2007), and the conventions for reading and authoring comics. The class also critiqued the Pixton program by analyzing student examples posted and exploring the program's pros and cons. Specifically, for Paula Ureta (2015), an instructor of English language learners, Pixton's strengths involve the program's potential to formulate "colorful, expressive, creative" comics with a "wide range of increasingly realistic characters, which can be easily modified" and possess a "wide emotional range" through "preset expressions." Users may implement standard templates or start from the beginning (Appling et al., 2009; Truth, 2018). Moreover, since Pixton is a digital, comic-generating program, "less artistically inclined students" can be motivated to produce work also (Truth, 2018).

After viewing examples of comics and investigating comic design techniques, students began the comic strip and reflective essay. To foster critical thinking skills and express a storyline, they brainstormed for topics connected to their personal identity, including the nature of their hometown, family and friends, college disciplinary focus, jobs, and hobbies, while noting the stereotypes associated with these phenomena and researching their heritage's roots and the area's history. Notably, for their comic, many students were concerned with the rationales and subject matter that the Choctaw elder had outlined as being central to area storytelling principles. After the students decided upon a storyline, they storyboarded their narrative utilizing Pixton's storyboarding application and considered their comic's tone, whether funny or serious. Then, students created their cartoon with digitally constructed characters, settings, props, and any outside photos or images they wished to insert. To match their cartoon's visual images, the students wrote captions and dialogue, with a minimum of ten panels. Lastly, implementing digital rhetoric and multimodal writing theory, students composed a reflective essay examining their work's design, focus, and significance. At the semester's end, I built a class website to showcase students' comics and reflective essays, amongst their other multimodal projects, for public view (see Brown & Begoray, 2017), and some students also submitted their work to the student literary journal.

¹⁵ According to the New London Group, in contexts involving reading and composing, students should both critique existing textual meanings and patterns and also design their own in documents (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

¹⁶ See Marla Harris for a discussion of utilizing *Persepolis* to explore multicultural contexts in the classroom (2007).

¹⁷ Comics represent a good option for multimodal narrative studies (Chu & Coffey, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODS

Having Institutional Review Board approval, I designed the study as an exploratory case study, which offers an “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 6).¹⁸ Concerning the study’s aims and based upon the existing literature, I explored how fashioning a comic strip positioning one’s identity would impact students’ ability to implement multimodal composition practices, as well as portray aspects of themselves. Likewise, I considered how the comic assignment might be assessed to measure writing outcomes. A case study involves collecting data from multiple sources to formulate a case description and themes (Cresswell, 2012), and I utilized diverse data forms to produce results (see Yin, 2009), including a post-assignment survey with Likert-style and open-ended questions, student assignments, and classroom observations. Via the surveys, students revealed their engagement with collaborative acts, critical thinking, research, and multimodal reading and writing practices. Furthermore, I evaluated students’ comic strip for themes related to their identity’s portrayal and their reflective essay for themes connected to their comic assignment’s outcomes, as well as students’ discussion of their backgrounds and personal, educational, and career goals. Finally, during the unit, I took field notes to capture my classroom observations.

To provide for flexibility and adaptation, I applied a grounded theory methodology to collect data and formulate themes in the data linked to the study’s research questions (Strauss, 1987),¹⁹ and I also created a rubric to measure students’ academic outcomes for the comic strip. Utilizing current literature on the study’s subject and the study’s themes, I selected an analytical framework to connect the data and build a storyline (Yin, 2009) about the study’s setting, participants, and chronology to describe the case’s details (Cresswell, 2012). Additionally, I orchestrated a rubric to calculate multimodal writing outcomes for the comic strip. I selected the comic unit assignment for assessment because in producing it, students discussed their identity, and the unit also represented a measure of their interaction with multimodal discourses. Acting as raters, another writing researcher and I compared students’ work. On a five-point scale, we rated each cartoon strip’s organization; development and

¹⁸ Via a case study, one can evaluate a programmatic design holistically and fully to generate a comprehension of it and its relation to participants, and to describe the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this study, I desired to investigate students’ positioning of their identity through their construction of a comic strip and coinciding reflection on it (see Baskarada, 2014).

¹⁹ To investigate common strands in the study, I applied a thematic analysis to the data by following these steps: reading and annotating the documents, identifying themes, formulating a coding scheme, which entailed determining the themes and codes to be utilized; and coding the data (Bricki & Green, 2007). As part of this process, another writing researcher assisted me in generating codes connected to the study’s research questions to define preliminary themes and findings, and we coded datasets involving students’ comic strip and reflective essay to create internal consistency. In all areas, correlation coefficients used to assess inter-rater reliability within the dataset ranged from good to adequate in all areas.

clarification of ideas; diction, style, and voice; audience and genre features; artwork; and synthesis of information and cohesion.²⁰

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

In the study, the 60 participants completing comic strips and reflective essays ranged in age from 19 to 48, with the majority being in their early twenties. Furthermore, males represented 38% ($n = 23$) and females 62% ($n = 37$) of participants. Caucasian students were the majority, with Native Americans, mostly Choctaw and Chickasaw, ranking second. Additionally, more than half of students ($n = 30$) had a combined household income of below \$30,000, thus living at the poverty level, and most came from rural backgrounds. Refer to Appendix 2, Table 1, for group demographics.

Findings and Discussion

INTERACTING WITH CARTOON STRIPS AND THE SHARING OF ONE'S IDENTITY

In composing a comic strip and reflective essay, students engaged with multimodal composition and reading practices by considering, researching, and writing about identity-related issues, as well as critiquing one another's comics and reflective essays. At the unit's outset, according to classroom discussions, many students, asked to create comics about themselves, could generate few ideas. Likewise, the requisite to utilize the Pixton program or draw a cartoon themselves for the assignment posed issues for some, who did not believe they had any aptitude for computer-generated art programs or hand-drawn figures. Yet, once students began to explore their identities and decided upon a storyline, they were eager to produce comics, distilling an idea into a limited number of frames while offering an entertaining premise (see Abel & Madden, 2008; Appling et al., 2009; McCloud, 2006). For their digitally rendered cartoon, some students also inserted pictures of themselves and their families, pets, and houses in order to make their work more individualistic. Furthermore, the process of peer reviewing the comic strip's rough draft, as well as receiving input from me, assisted students in collaborating and producing a final version. Finally, students brainstormed ideas for their comics and showed one another how to perform techniques related to the Pixton program together, prompting more unity of intention in their group interactions than usual (see Appling et al., 2009). After the unit's end, four students retained their Pixton memberships by assuming the cost themselves, with one describing how he and his children had employed the program to fashion other comics. The unit also led one Choctaw student, Tara, who liked Manga cartoons, to decide she wanted to draw and produce comics

²⁰ Inter-rater reliability coefficients indicated that we raters correlated perceptions of students' achievement in the cartoon strip's "development and clarification of ideas," and "organization" most closely. Correlation coefficients used to assess inter-rater reliability within this dataset ranged from good to adequate in all areas.

professionally. (See Appendix 3.1 for Tara's comic). Similarly, in their reflective essays, many Teacher Education majors described how they planned to assign future students to read graphic novels, as well as create comics via a digital, comic-generating program²¹ in their own classrooms.²²

In the reflective essay, students identified having achieved specific academic outcomes upon engaging with the comic strip assignment. Overall, many reported that the unit facilitated advancements in their critical thinking, researching, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing practices, all target course goals. Furthermore, most students relayed that their knowledge of and interest in comics had increased. As the largest academic outcome categories, over 90% of students ($n = 55$) reported that the unit supported both their multimodal reading and writing skills' growth. Likewise, more than three-fourths ($n = 47$) noted that completing the comic strip improved their understanding of reading and writing comics, and other multimodal texts more generally, and heightened their critical thinking, research, and collaborative skill levels. Proceeding, almost two thirds of students ($n = 39$) believed that the unit promoted their educational and personal interests, and almost a third ($n = 19$) agreed that they might fashion future comic strips on their own. Specifically, many Native American students explained that it had been a valuable act for them to describe and render themselves, as well as the people and places relevant to them, through a cartoon strip. Notably, this ultimate finding is significant in affirming the Choctaw elder's position on the importance of storytelling performances for area tribal members in constructing their identity. In the reflective essay, one Choctaw woman wrote, "In my family, we write down our stories and save clippings and pictures in boxes. A cartoon is like a story with a picture, but you can remember it how you want. This way, history does not write us or erase us." On a related, those students who discussed formulating their comic strip in a more positive manner in the reflective essay also performed better on the unit assignment overall. See Appendix 2, Table 2, for students' self-reported unit assignment outcomes as drawn from the reflective essays.

²¹ Since many women students represented pre-service teachers, and 60% of graphic novel readers, nationally, are women (Masters, 2006), this assignment proved valuable and interesting for the former, too.

²² Indeed, one pre-service teacher, who foresaw her reliance on comics in her own classroom and the important links one could make to identity, gave an account about having taught a comic-strip creating session at the local Boys and Girls Club, where a 10-year-old boy, who enjoyed the experience, exclaimed, "I like Batman, and I like cars. I didn't have to write about Columbus and Indians, Puritans and Indians, or cowboys and Indians in my comic." Note: I realize that using the term "Indian" to indicate a Native American may be seen as pejorative in some contexts, yet in my area, this term is often used by Native Americans across all generations, and I wanted to preserve the club member's voice in this quotation.

FACING THE CONFLICTS

Jeff Appling, a teacher implementing the Pixton program at his university, had worried about the experiential circumstance that neither he nor his students had constructed a comic strip before the class's start (Appling et al., 2009). Similarly, as the semester began, I also wondered if the assignment would serve as a good idea, since only two of my students had created comics previously, but outside of Pixton, while the rest of us were beginners. Indeed, as elements impacting students' unit involvement overall, their past reading and writing experiences and familiarity with comics influenced their perception of the assignment (see Jacobs, 2007b). Some students, who indicated, at the outset, that they "did not know how" to formulate a cartoon starring themselves had also reported possessing limited experience with reading comics. Others admitted to feeling "nervous" about addressing the project's visual aspect. Yet, because the comic assignment's focus in depicting one's identity remained open, students found that they could portray different relevant concerns in their digital texts.

As the unit progressed, students discussed the comics we were reading in an increasingly complex manner.²³ Nonetheless, not everyone liked interacting with comics, as it became apparent during the first week of one class's section. As I reviewed the syllabus, an older student interrupted me to read the *Oxford Dictionary's* definition of "literature" and argue that comics did not fit within it.²⁴ Calling the graphic novels and comics we would be covering "low work," this student opted subsequently to write the literary analysis paper related to the class's graphic novels only but not to create his own comic. (Because students completed three of four multimodal class assignments offered, he faced no grade penalty.) Indeed, as it became clear to me, stereotypes about comics still exist as to their being unsuited for advanced readers desiring to investigate complicated topics (Hoover, 2012; Richardson, 2017), while other readers prefer "traditional" print novels to graphic novels, since they enjoy formulating the plot in their mind while relying on the author's language for the backdrop (see Frey & Fisher, 2013). Yet, having an established literary merit and cultural significance, graphic novels as a genre can play a lifelong role in students' reading practices (Crawford, 2004), providing concepts and patterns that readers might not encounter otherwise and promoting transitions to more print-oriented texts (Gallo & Weiner, 2004; Gravett, 2005; Schwarz, 2002a). Likewise, when teachers bar comics from the classroom, or readers overlook their worth, they send the message that they do not value those "who think, read, and decode differently from the narrowest notion of reading and literacy" (Cater, 2008).

²³ In one study, a professor of Developmental English courses asked students to select which version of a particular text they wished to read for the class, the graphic novel or the traditional format. Most students chose to read the graphic novel but then later decided to read the traditional version, too, in order to compose a compare and contrast essay of them (Schmidt, 2011). Thus, once students are introduced to one format of a text, they may be willing to view it in another.

²⁴ Later, he went to the department chair with his "complaint," which the latter did not support. Still, by the next unit, this student had chosen to write a detective story and selected online graphics to illustrate it, surpassing the assignment's original expectations with his focus on multimodality.

According to the Pixton website, program users can craft entire comic books by implementing approaches, such as blurring, transparency, silhouetting, and custom speech bubbles, and applying more than 4,000 backgrounds, 3,000 props, and 700 topic-specific settings (2018). For Truth and colleagues, Pixton offers a “wide variety of characters, both male and female, in various roles that do not adhere to stigmatizing stereotypes,” with the program being “more equitable than other comic creator sites” (Truth, 2018). Still, during my class and within the reflective essay, some students discussed their dilemma concerning how they might best portray their jobs, hobbies, and home, as well as their racial and sexual identity, and body type. As a drawback of Pixton’s program, Appling identifies that “although the props are increasing in number and variety, they still are lacking” (Appling et al., 2009).

In one class, a Choctaw student, rolling her eyes, searched for props, including feather headdresses, canoes, and hatchets, as well as settings featuring buffaloes and teepees. Indeed, for some time, the student attempted to locate items and backdrops holding “the right meaning” for her, as she deemed it, with her scenario being reminiscent for me of the Choctaw elder’s description of the “naming” ceremony’s significance, with its need for accuracy in ascribing values to individuals with which they would frame themselves. In the classroom, the woman and other tribal students discussed how the subject matter and backgrounds they found for their cartoon strips did not reflect their lives and times.²⁵ “So, I looked for settings like bars, trailer parks, and casinos²⁶ instead,” one male Choctaw student, sitting at his computer, joked.²⁷ Indeed, another Choctaw student, who worked as a blackjack dealer, did focus her cartoon on her full-time job at the local casino, where, as she relayed in her reflective essay, the patrons depicted turned into actual zombies “out to win it big.” (See Appendix 3.2). Likewise, a second student working as a server at this casino described the stressors involved as being daunting in kind. (See Appendix 3.3).

Some students who were of a mixed race, tattooed and inked, and/or women also ran aground with defining themselves via Pixton’s program. Bryant, who was Choctaw and African-American, argued in his reflective essay that in his comic strip, he had wanted to avoid foregrounding “typical” symbols related to both ethnicities altogether, since, as he stated, the “near past does not look so great for me.” Instead, Bryant chose to focus on his hobbies,

²⁵ The Native American students discussed their experiences with tribal stereotypes in some depth. One male Choctaw student said, “When I go on vacation, people tell me how they have a Cherokee great-grandmother and say that I am their blood brother. They smile, and I don’t.” Another continued, “People ask me if I have been solicited to act in Westerns. But you wouldn’t ask a Jewish person if they were solicited for a Holocaust movie.”

²⁶ The Choctaw Nation owns 7 casinos, 14 smoke shops, 13 truck stops, and 2 fast-food restaurants, and it has helped increase the county’s per capita income to \$24,000 (Choctaw Nation, 2018). Nonetheless, some area Native Americans have a quality of life similar to people living in developing nations (see Anderson, 1995).

²⁷ Indeed, one criticism of some comics portraying Native Americans is the latter’s association with poverty, unemployment, welfare dependence, crime, violence, and substance abuse (Aurylaite, 2015; Royal, 2010).

including sports, traveling, and reading,²⁸ to depict himself in a positive, self-possessed light. (See Appendix 3.4). Similarly, another Choctaw student described how Pixton did not feature tattoos for application on a character's body, and neither did any of the skin colors and hairstyles seem right for her. Furthermore, as an older Caucasian student expressed to her dissatisfaction, none of the female characters was "curvy or big without being grotesque" in body type to act as her equivalent.

In continuing with a discussion on representation issues, in the reflective essay, a Choctaw veteran expressed how he had desired to investigate his veteran identity in his comic strip but did not care to feature a gun as indicating his infantryman past and also felt "ambivalent" about including the American flag and national edifices, such as the White House, too. Finally, this student decided to portray his relationship with one of his eight children instead.²⁹ Comparably, another veteran did opt to utilize a poster of Uncle Sam's call for military recruits to display her past Army career, yet she gave this aspect of her identity only a single frame in order to concentrate on other aspects of herself, including her family and career. Notably, at the study's university, student service-members/veterans play a significant minority group, even though nationally, Native Americans are a valuable military portion that is often overlooked, while the majority of current military service-members hail from lesser known rural locations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018).³⁰ With tribal student-veterans' identities being an almost unknown factor for many outsiders, I believed it had proven worthwhile for those in my class to position themselves positively via their comic.

Overall, concerning students' interaction with the comic unit, in composing the reflective essay, only four reported their dislike of it, with two calling their engagement with comics "irrelevant" and "off topic," and two dubbing the comic strip assignment "difficult" or too "time-consuming."³¹ Similarly, responding to the post-survey that Barbara Weaver gave to her own college students for their comic assignment, only two believed that the program had been "too difficult to learn and took too much time" to implement (Appling et al., 2009).

²⁸ Similarly, in Brown & Begoray's study, in creating their graphic novels, students addressed stereotypes of Indigenous teens as being "drunk" or "violent" (see also Friedel, 2010).

²⁹ While the student seated next to him was crafting a superhero's identity, in his own reflective essay, the veteran mentioned that he himself, having served for 11 years, believed the "only true heroes were the dead ones," and he "did not want any dead bodies" in his cartoon.

³⁰ Although the nation's smallest pan-ethnic segment, signifying 1% of the population, Native Americans possess the highest per capita military participation rate of any racial group (2018), with one in three active in some capacity (U.S. Census, 2010).

³¹ As a side note, Pixton does not have a spelling or grammar check, either, which made the peer review process arduous in that aspect.

EXPLORING IDENTITY-RELATED THEMES IN THE COMIC STRIP

Frequent topics for comics include politics and history, as well as family matters, romantic relationships, and instances of abuse (Goreman, 2002), and in the unit's reflective essay, many students discussed the generation of their comic's aspects in a manner underscoring the Choctaw elder's listing of tribal stories' subject matter, which emphasized one's birth³² and character, one's embarkment on a quest-like journey to enter adulthood, one's discovery of how to thrive as a result of one's toil, one's interaction with family, and one's attempts to commune with nature. As mentioned, students' backgrounds, hobbies, majors, and knowledge of and interest in comics and graphic novels impacted the identity traits and paths they portrayed in their cartoon. For example, students revealed important life events, from personally traumatic experiences, including cancer diagnoses, depressive episodes, divorces, family members' jail stints and deaths, and the drug culture's impact, to natural disasters, including fires, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Likewise, hoping their college educations would prove valuable, many, including those living below the poverty line, detailed low-income jobs, busy family and social lives, and dream careers ($n = 17$), as well as the necessity of relying upon family members and friends to assist them in achieving their goals ($n = 7$). In fact, with more than half of students overall representing first-generation college attendees, 50% decided to dedicate their comics to the steps they were taking to gain a degree ($n = 30$), while others foregrounded their multiple roles as students, parents, and workers, the combination of which made them feel perpetually "tired"³³ ($n = 8$). As a related focus, with their comics, some students also identified generational and tribal connections to the rural lands, small towns, and homes they occupied ($n = 22$), with four describing a local myth, one depicting a forest walking path, and 22 portraying farms or ranches. Concentrating on place represented a major theme for students, with more than half of those surveyed originating from villages of fewer than 5,000 people ($n = 31$).

Adopting varied tones for the comic, students delineated funny, ironic, and controversial life issues as impacted by their surrounding society, including instances of racism, sexism, and classism, especially in the workplace. Additionally, more students created realistic, rather than fantastical, comic strips (80% versus 20%), with few representing themselves as superhero-like ($n = 7$), either in "actuality" or in some everyday aspect,³⁴ even though we had studied some examples of superheroes in the course. Indeed, continuing with the class sections' sarcastic and self-reflexive stance toward completing the comic assignment, one student joked to the others that his only superpower was his ability to "withstand" the draw

³² Native American infants suffer from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at twice the rate of Caucasian babies (Office of Minority Health, 2013).

³³ Notably, tribal peoples report themselves as being under "frequent mental stress" 20% more often than other groups (Kalt, Henson, Taylor, Curtis, Cornell, . . . & Nelson, 2008).

³⁴ Comic book superheroes, with their American aura of self-confidence, gained popularity at the Great Depression's end and World War II's beginning (Karp, 2011; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013).

of meth, a drug, proving kryptonite-like, that destroyed his family.³⁵ Likewise, of the two plotline types calculated, more students' journeys represented comedies than tragedies (79% versus 21%), indicating their arguable willingness to remain positive about their identities and circumstances, if presenting their situations with irony or black humor. Overall, as a central theme, students showed themselves as being supportive of their families and communities (see Brown & Begoray, 2017), even if they themselves felt undervalued, and many of their comics featured the subjects of educating others, including as future teachers³⁶ ($n = 8$) and the parents of small children ($n = 11$). For instance, Olivia, with her cartoon, shows her struggles with justifying her decision to be a high-school teacher to her family. (See Appendix 3.5). In her reflective essay, Olivia explains her comic's purpose, which, she writes, "is meant to show a more satirical side to the constant questioning I receive for wanting to become a teacher. My strip follows my character, Olivia, as she listens to the more common reactions people give her when she explains her major. The strip ends on a positive note, as Olivia decides to ignore her critics and follow her dreams to become a teacher anyway." Overall, Olivia's comic represents an example of how some students delineated their identities as a confirmation of whom they were and how they wished others to perceive them.

Finally, five students utilized their comic as a self-reflexive glance at composing within the genre itself, as well as addressing the assignment's multimodality. For example, Noah, through her comic, explored the milestones in her life and then undercut them by explaining that she was implementing the comic strip medium as a means to provide this information to audience members, even if this genre was not her "preferred" one. In the last frame, the author-as-character sits in a chair on stage, as if being interviewed on a television talk show, and admits, "Now, I'm here telling you about my life in a stupid cartoon strip." (See Appendix 3.6). In her reflective essay, Noah relays, "In this comic, I wanted to tell you my backstory in a straightforward but humorous way. It accurately describes my journey through life thus far, and showcases some highlights. Obviously, the artwork is mediocre at best, but that's why I'm an English major and not a Graphic Design major. Overall, I feel that this derpy little comic does a good job of reflecting who I am."

While the majority of students, as English majors, reported their preference for reading and writing alphabetic texts, almost all were willing, especially the creative writers and many tribal students, to attempt a digital comic strip for the course. See Appendix 2, Table 3, for

³⁵ Native Americans possess the highest rates of illegal drug abuse of any demographic group, and methamphetamine abuse is a major concern (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). As a point of interest, in the study's county, a reported 25% of babies born at the hospital contain methamphetamines in their system.

³⁶ According to the Choctaw elder, elders were to be respected, with their function being to impart knowledge. Guides, teachers, mentors, and religious leaders were also important similarly and relied upon for spiritual, day-to-day, and medical information.

the themes that raters generated concerning students' rendering of character traits, plotlines, genre aspects, secondary characters, and settings in their comic strip.

MEASURING WRITING OUTCOMES FOR THE COMIC STRIP

As described in the methodology, the other rater and I assessed students' outcomes for the comic strip, including ones involving multimodality. We ascertained that students performed highest in the areas of 1) "synthesis of information and cohesion," with 90% of cartoon strips fulfilling the objective, and 2) "audience and genre requirements," with 80% satisfying the criteria. Findings suggest that the assignment's multimodal focus also aided most students in addressing the comic's other components, with 75% meeting outcomes for "development and clarity," as well as for "diction, style, and voice." Overall, students were able to meet all of the comic strip's requisites at least 60% of the time, with the category of "artwork" being ranked lowest. A focus on multimodal composition assists students in completing an array of assignments (Applying et al., 2009; Misemer, 2015), including comics, and this study indicates that when students interact with comics involving personal identity conceptions, they can produce satisfactory work for various, multimodal-related composition aspects. See Appendix 2, Table 4 for raters' assessment of students' outcomes upon completing the comic strip assignment.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To navigate within various "systems of meaning making" (Jacobs, 2007b), students must learn to read and compose work in multiple textual modes. Yet, writing teachers selecting comics for their curricula can present students with the opportunity to gain the critical-literacy skills they require, as well as addressing a need for critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing processes. Likewise, due to the types and natures of area Native Americans' mythologies, histories, traumas, cultural practices, and communication styles and preferences, including the emphasis on oral and visual communication patterns, some associated tribal writers might find that comics function well as a forum for their stories, too (see Royal, 2010). Indeed, a few nationally known, Native American authors have adopted the comic's genre to their benefit (Sheyahshe, 2008).

In the writing classroom itself, incorporating comic assignments into one's course design can be difficult, especially when faculty do not possess digital-technology backgrounds (see Selfe, 2004), as well as models demonstrating how computer-based assignments can be integrated (see Sealey-Morris, 2015). Nonetheless, by utilizing comics as focal texts for reading and writing assignments, teachers and students can not only address multimodal composition literacy requisites, but also investigate personal and larger, identity-related conflicts, with students opting to compose comics as a creative replacement for some traditional writing assignments (see Comer, 2015). Significantly, autobiographical comics allow students to

convey their stories through the use of metaphor and the inclusion of topics that are difficult to present or that might not hold readers' attention in another medium (see Eisner, 1996). Just as importantly, through a comic's narrative structure, students may make sense of their story's fragments (see Postema, 2013), mixing every day and extraordinary happenings (see Chute, 2010a) and portraying the relationship between their past and present life episodes (see Gardner, 2006), which, when interwoven, may define one's identity in a manner with which audiences, including one's peers, empathize (see Chaney, 2016).

Regardless of the struggle on some students' part, the production of a comic strip and reflective essay led most to improve their critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing processes, as well as considering facets of their identity related to their personality, major, family, job, and hometown. When the unit began, almost all students possessed only a limited experience with graphic novels and comics. Still, most were able to grasp and implement identity-related discourses within a rather difficult multimodal assignment all on its own, as only two students possessed prior experience with generating comic strips. Thus, this article provides writing teachers and administrators with information about the benefits and obstacles involved in employing a comic strip and reflective essay within a multimodal composition course's curriculum, especially in addressing critical multiliteracies (see Schwarz, 2002b; Yildirim, 2013). Additionally, the study offers new knowledge concerning the region's rural and Native American students' assessed outcomes upon their interaction with comics at a Southwestern university. For Native American students, particularly, the ability to assume new values and attempt innovative practices while relying upon their traditional Native identity can contribute to their academic and personal successes (see Demmert, 2001). In the study, tribal students orchestrated comics as digital, multimodal texts showcasing their academic and career goals; racial backgrounds; and personal, family, and communal concerns. Moreover, by posting their work on a website to reach a larger public in order to change and shape the ways in which tribal peoples are depicted, students demonstrated a sense of civic and group engagement (see Brown & Begoray, 2017). Altogether, the study's findings support researchers' claims about the value of asking students to read and produce comics as having significant effects upon their critical thinking, research, collaborative, and multimodal reading and writing outcomes, as well as their comprehension of valued identity dimensions.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study possesses two notable limitations for scholars pursuing future directions. As one limitation, I did not survey students utilizing an acculturation scale in order to determine how influential of a factor their Native American heritage plays in their overall identity formation, according to larger cultural constructs. However, implementing the American Indian Enculturation Scale (Winderowd, Montgomery, Stumblingbear, Harless, & Hicks, 2008) or the Native American Acculturation Scale (Garrett & Pichette, 2000) might provide an

additional method of gathering information about students' values and backgrounds compared with their own and other tribal groups. On a separate note, as most students in the class decided to produce realistic, autobiographical narratives of themselves, in future courses, I may exclude superhero-based texts in order to determine whether this adjustment alters course outcomes concerning how students depict themselves (see Misemer, 2015). Moreover, future studies could include other racial, minority student groups and provide more geographical diversity, as well investigating the impact of reading and writing comics for Native American college students directly from or living on reservations.³⁷

Conclusion

In my classes, many Native American students, upon introducing themselves to classmates, list their lineage by naming their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and others tracing back. Students delineate when their ancestors arrived in Oklahoma and whether or not they signed the Dawes Act (circa 1887 to 1906) to become designated tribal members; what percentage of tribal membership they, the students, possess; and what famed, area figures constitute students' family relations. Indeed, students know stories about their ancestors' trials in walking the "Trail of Tears," yet the former also require the means to explore their own journeys, an avenue with which the comic assignment provided them. Notably, by formulating comics and utilizing digital storytelling practices, students believed that they could resist and shift the stereotypes attached to them. In their comics, many Native American students implemented humor mixed with social commentary in recognizing their need to depict a shared tragic history while denoting the importance of remaining resilient during their own current hardships. As one student, enrolled simultaneously in a humanities course, ventured, "Those ancient Greeks marrying their mothers and murdering their fathers, with thunderbolts crashing from the mountain in warning, the snaky women, and a giant one-eye, they ain't got nothing on us with our stories, real stories, about war, death, and how to live with self-determination. . . . I don't go [to museums around here] to learn about myself, . . . my life is not some myth."³⁸

According to the Choctaw elder, tribal stories exist on realistic and proverbial levels. Still, the tales told had to be entertaining for audiences to listen to and repeat them, and it remained vital to select uplifting stories about one's self when one's surrounding culture and even language structures were disrupted at the most elemental levels. For the elder, the Choctaws must continue to spin their yarns not only to indicate their universal concerns but also to

³⁷ For instance, students might critique comics, such as Jason Aaron's *Scalped* (2007), portraying reservation life.

³⁸ According to Samuel Cook (1994), "In the context of Indian affairs, self-determination is a tribally-derived term. By the same token, the concept of self-determination entails a totality of tribal goals. These goals can be placed in three interrelated categories: 1) tribal self-rule; 2) cultural survival; and 3) economic development."

counteract typecasts, including ones portraying them as silent and violent-natured in their communication patterns. Today, the number of Native Americans enrolled in higher education has grown to 0.7% of all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Meanwhile, since the Vietnam draft, the number of active duty military service-members has lessened to an all-volunteer force consisting of less than 1% of adult citizens (Bialik, 2017). Discussing other groups associated with the 1%, with the Occupy Movement ignited in 2011, a majority fingered a 1% representing Wall Street's interests. Given this dynamic, the question remains in play: Whose narratives are being expressed, and whose are being heard? Depicted by the 1850's government as being associated with "the Indian Problem," present-day Choctaw Nation members "pride" themselves "on preserving and celebrating" their "unique traditions" and "not only want to pass these traditions to" their "youth," but also "share them with all people" (Choctaw Nation, 2018), a telling and visualizing act made possible in the present scenario by student members' production of comic strips evoking their identity.

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Appendix 1: Major Questions Students Addressed in the Reflective Essay

1. Discuss how you composed your cartoon, with its strengths and weaknesses, and the effect on viewers you hoped to produce and why.
2. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your critical thinking and research skills? If so, how?
3. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your multimodal reading skills? If so, how?
4. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your multimodal writing skills? If so, how?
5. Did the Comic Strip assignment prove useful in your learning more about comics as a multimodal genre? If so, how?
6. Did the Comic Strip assignment strengthen your collaborative practices? If so, how?
7. Did the Comic Strip assignment promote your educational and personal interests? If so, how?
8. Did the Comic Strip assignment prompt you to consider continuing to make comics in future? If so, why?
9. Describe your Comic Strip's main character and his/her main motivation or goal.
10. Describe your Comic Strip's setting.
11. Describe your Comic Strip's secondary characters.

Appendix 2: Selected Tables

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

N = 60 students

Race	Caucasian 51% (31)	Native American 40% (24)	Hispanic/ Latino 4% (2)	African- American 3% (2)	Asian/Pacific Islander 2% (1)
Age	18-21 60% (36)	22-25 43% (>26)	26-29 1% (>1)	35-39 1% (>1)	45-49 3% (>2)
Annual Household Income	\$0-15,000 24% (14)	\$16,000- 30,000 27% (16)	\$31,000- 45,000 12% (7)	\$46,000- 60,000 15% (9)	> \$60,000 22% (13)
Permanent Residence	Oklahoma 79% (47)	Texas 21% (13)	NA		
Town Size	Under 5,000 52% (31)	5,000- 10,000 22% (13)	11,000- 20,000 13% (8)	30,000- 50,000 11% (7)	60,000 + 2% (1)

**TABLE 2. STUDENTS' SELF-REPORTED OUTCOMES IN THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY UPON
COMPLETING THE COMIC STRIP**

N = 60 students

Academic Outcomes for Comic Strip and Reflective Essay Assignments	
Strengthened critical thinking and research skills	85% (51)
Strengthened multimodal reading skills	92% (55)
Strengthened multimodal writing skills	95% (57)
Proved useful in learning more about comics as a multimodal genre	78% (47)
Strengthened collaborative practices	75% (45)
Promoted educational and personal interests	65% (39)
Prompted student to consider continuing to make comics in future	32 % (19)

TABLE 3. THEMES FOR CHARACTER TRAITS, PLOT LINES, GENRE ASPECTS, INCLUSION OF OTHER CHARACTERS AND SETTING THAT STUDENTS GENERATED IN THE COMIC STRIP

Main Character's Traits
Character has a secret power/skill (1) or special prop, like a crown (2).
Character has a known flaw/weakness (2).
Character represents a superhero (3); an everyday hero at home (3) or work (1); or an immigrant (1).
Cartoon Strip Plotline Type
Comic relies upon causal events, with a beginning and ending, and the story is a comedy (15); tragedy (4); or mystery (1).
Comic is a slice-of-life description of the character and shows a series of standalone moments or events (37).
Story is about a traumatic event, including a death in the family (1), a divorce (1), cancer (1), or an injury (1); a mental condition, such as depression (1) or being tired (8); an existential fugue state (2); the area's drug culture's negative effects (2); or a natural disaster, including a fire (1), a tornado (1), or a hurricane (1).
Genre Aspects
Comic involves a lesson (3) or town myth (4) the character learns.
Story is realistic (48).
Story has supernatural, dream, or fairytale-like aspects (12).
Story includes a self-reflexive look at composing the comic strip (4) or anime themes (1).
Secondary Characters
Story is about/mentions the author's child/ren (11).
Story is about/mentions the author's spouse/significant other (9), siblings (5), or friends (15).
Story is about/mentions the author's pet(s) (3).
Story has a guide, including a parent, god figure, coach, etc. (7).
Settings
Story is about a job, past or current (6), including at gas stations (2), construction (1), casinos (3), offices (1), daycares (1), fast food (2), and in the Army (1).
Story is about/mentions the author's home (9), including a farm or ranch (13).
Story is about/mentions attending school (1), including home school (4), attending college (30), and making career plans (24), including teaching (8).
Story is about a hobby, including sports (8), racing (2), acting (1), singing (2), baking (1), drawing (1), reading (3), writing (3), traveling (4), or visiting theme parks (2).

TABLE 4. RATERS' ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' OUTCOMES UPON COMPLETING THE COMIC STRIP

N = 60 students

Writing Outcomes for the Cartoon Strip	Percentage of Assignments Associated with Each Outcome, with "1" Being the Lowest and "5" the Highest				
	Fails to Meet Requirements 1	Fair 2	Meets Requirements 3	Good 4	Excellent 5
Synthesis of Information and Cohesion	5% <i>n</i> = 3	5% <i>n</i> = 3	50% <i>n</i> = 30	20% <i>n</i> = 12	20% <i>n</i> = 12
Development and Clarity	5% <i>n</i> = 3	10% <i>n</i> = 6	25% <i>n</i> = 15	20% <i>n</i> = 12	30% <i>n</i> = 18
Diction, Style, and Voice	10% <i>n</i> = 6	15% <i>n</i> = 9	35% <i>n</i> = 21	25% <i>n</i> = 15	15% <i>n</i> = 9
Audience and Genre Requirements	5% <i>n</i> = 3	15% <i>n</i> = 9	35% <i>n</i> = 21	25% <i>n</i> = 15	20% <i>n</i> = 12
Artwork	5% <i>n</i> = 3	35% <i>n</i> = 21	40% <i>n</i> = 24	10% <i>n</i> = 6	10% <i>n</i> = 6

Appendix 3: Selected Images

APPENDIX 3.1: “A TALK WITH TARA”

Tara is Choctaw student majoring in English with a Writing Emphasis. Tara, who likes the anime genre and Manga cartoons, decided she wanted to draw and produce comics professionally after completing the comic unit. In one of her cartoon panels, Tara depicts herself at an anime convention.

Hi. I'm Tara, and in this comic strip, you will find out a little bit about me and what I like. Let's begin!

First is Anime. I absolutely love it.

Second is Manga (the book version of anime).

I also like to play Otome games. I only have two.

I loved going to Tokyo in Tulsa (anime convention).

I also enjoy drawing. This is some of my work.

Some websites that I am often on are...

Here are some shows that aren't anime that I really like.

I have six siblings, but this is me and my little sister.

These are just a few things that I enjoy.

IMAGE SOURCE(S):
 2: Slide1.JPG / Google Images
 3: Slide2.JPG / Google Images
 4: Slide7.JPG / Google Images
 5: Slide3.JPG / Mine
 6: Slide4.JPG / Mine
 7: Slide5.JPG / Google Images
 8: Slide6.JPG / Google Images
 9: Tara and Tori.jpg / Mine

APPENDIX 3.2: “DEALERS FOR DESSERT”

A Choctaw student, who works as a blackjack dealer, focuses her cartoon on her full-time job at the local casino, where the patrons depicted turned into actual zombies “out to win it big.” This student has worked full-time at night and carried a full course load. With her upcoming degree, she wants to start a publishing house for children's books.

Dealers for Dessert

by Naughtorious



APPENDIX 3.3: “MY TWO JOBS”

Another student working as a server at the same casino described the stressors involved as being daunting. Simultaneously, this student also acts as a waitress at a separate restaurant. Meanwhile, at the university, she is an honors student.



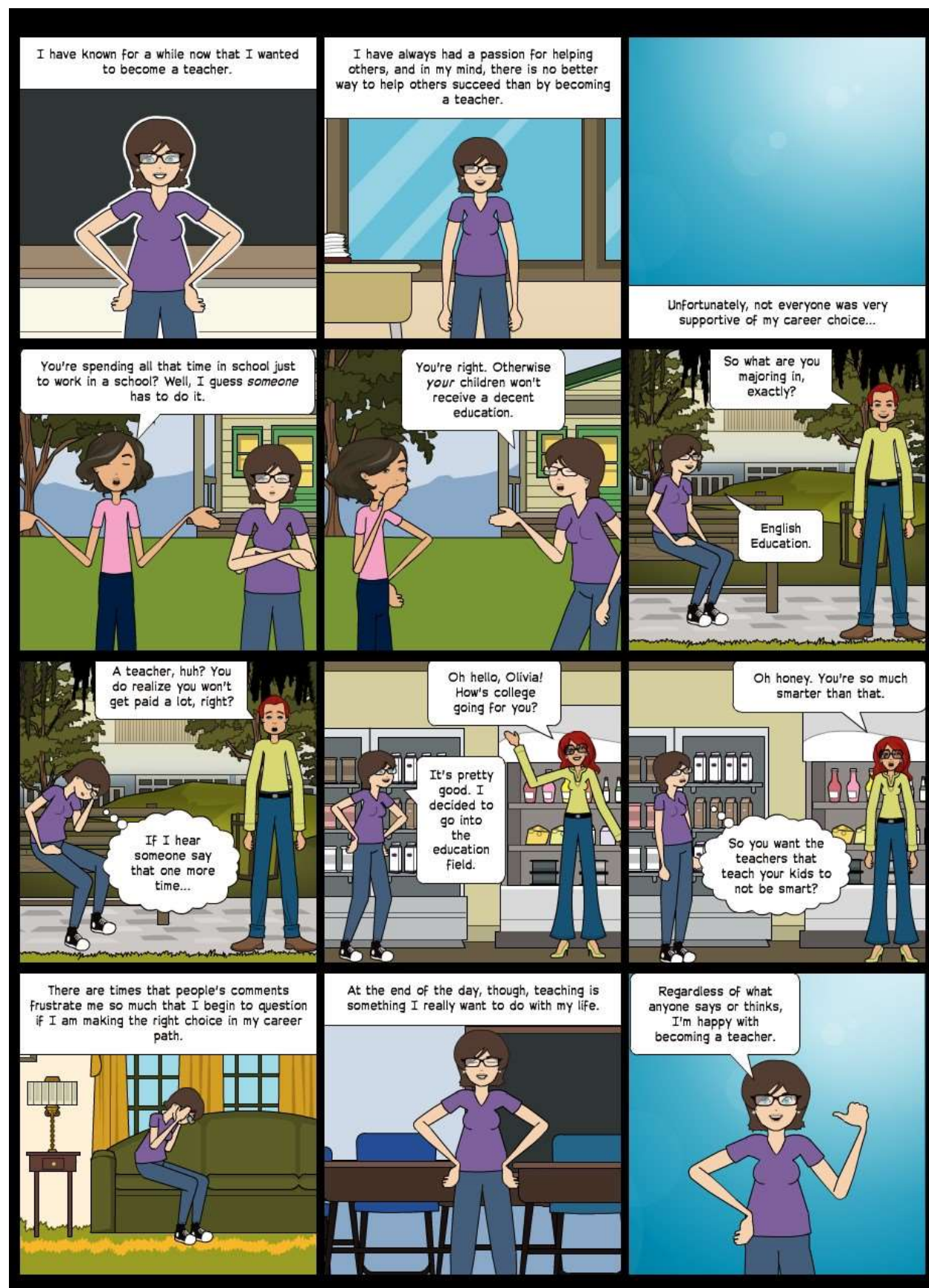
APPENDIX 3.4: “MY FIRST COMIC”

Bryant chooses to showcase his hobbies, including sports, traveling, and reading, to depict himself in a positive, self-possessed light in his cartoon.



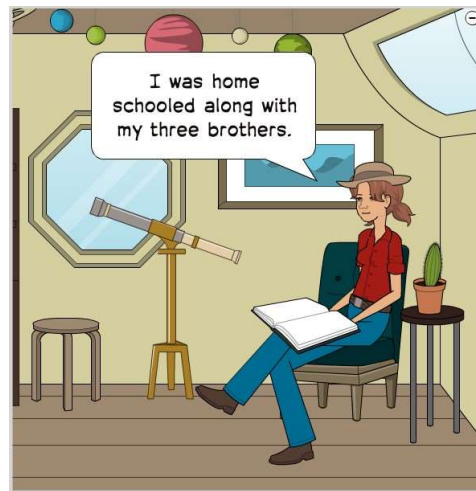
APPENDIX 3.5: “DEALING WITH CRITICS”

Olivia, with her cartoon, shows her struggles with justifying her decision to be a high-school teacher to her family. Incidentally, teachers in our state are the lowest paid in the nation.



APPENDIX 3.6: “MY INTRODUCTION COMIC”

Through her comic, Noah, a Native American student, explores the milestones in her life, including being homeschooled, living on a farm, working at an Amish specialty food shop, and deciding to become an English major.







The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics

About the Journal

The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics, or JOMR, is a completely online, open-access journal featuring essays and other items that examine multimodality in all of its cultural, material, temporal, and pedagogical manifestations. While we do welcome work that focuses on the digital, we stress that multimodality does not automatically refer to digital tools or the use of specific (new) media. We are especially interested in perspectives that complicate typical views of multimodality and that highlight those traditional multimodal practices and praxes that sustain our cultures and everyday lives. We welcome compositions that draw attention to the political dimensions of under-/privileged modes and the ways that media perpetuate or contest dominant attitudes and hegemonic norms.

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