



**COMICS-MAKING AS POSSIBILITY-MAKING:
RESISTING THE INEQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF IMAGINED FUTURES**

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Abstract

In this writing I investigate three mechanisms of comics that can support expanded possibilities for students in art classes: the combination of words and images, gaps (or spaces between images where meaning is formed in comics), and the technique of masking (or representing reality through fantasy). Respectively, these qualities may facilitate possibility by offering unique modes of communication with self and others; providing agency through choices of emphasis and omissions; and escaping the confines of rationality into a boundary-pushing narrative flow. These possibilities are particularly supportive of outsider students, defined as being unrecognized by normative culture, pressured to change their usual behaviour, and dissuaded from perceiving their own value. This writing is supported by personal stories, excerpts of my own comics art, and scholarship in the fields of art education, critical disabilities, and comics studies.

Keywords: art education, comics, accessibility, Thirdspace, gutter, masking

Points of Access: From IEP/PPs to Possibility

In this writing I consider comics-making as a medium that may accommodate art students in grade schools by providing expanded capacities to imagine possibilities. Critical disabilities scholar Carrie Sandahl (2002) defines accommodation as “making modifications of the norm for the exceptional body” (p. 23). Sandahl holds a position similar to that of professor of disability studies Jay Dolmage (2017) who asserts that the presence of accommodations is an indicator of inaccessible contexts, since accessible contexts are already accommodating. Accommodations are not designed to provoke the systemic transformation required for educational justice; they can however enable survival in the meantime. While working toward the goal of systemic transformation, I employ accommodations as part of a harm reduction approach to teaching. My use of accommodations is not intended to emphasize the exceptionality of bodies, but rather the inaccessibility of the educational systems through which bodies move. As an instructor, I encourage the pre-service teachers in my classes to expand their thinking about what can and must be accommodated beyond the current menu of options on Individual Educational or Program Plans (IEPs or IPPs). I believe that art educators are uniquely positioned to offer necessary but unconventional learning supports such as expanded capacities to imagine possibilities.

Art education scholarship has a history of employing comics to support a variety of possibilities including: disability rights (Karr & Weida, 2013; Seidler, 2011), carceral justice (Williams, 2012), remixing the relationship between queerness and religion (Cosier, 2017), overcoming isolation in rural early-career teachers (Lawrence, Lin, & Irwin, 2017), and expanding forms of academic scholarship (Carpenter & Tavin, 2012). Scholars concerned with gender and visual culture have also noted the inculcation of comics in unjust possibilities of toxic masculinity (Johnson, 2014) and sexual objectification (Weida, 2011). In what follows, I explore possibility as a vital part of accessible, trauma-informed art

education,¹ accepting that outsider experience, or marginalization, is a source of trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Kiser & Black, 2005; Russell, Bohan, McCarroll, & Smith, 2011). Specifically, I focus on comics-making as a mode of imagining possibilities on a personal scale for art students.

The human need for possibilities is universal, and yet also unique for those with a disproportionate array of unjust potential futures. Indigenous and refugee people face life threatening possibilities both in staying and leaving home (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; United States Immigration and Customs, 2019). Transgressing possibilities of gender can be equally fatal (Transgender Day of Remembrance, 2018), while the possibilities of Black lives are brutally and disproportionately policed (Tedeneke, 2016). Creative activity has been explored in art education as a human right, entailing a capacity to imagine (Kraehe, 2017), but art educators operate in a larger context where the examples above illustrate that particular groups are violently taught not to imagine the possibilities that bring us joy.

I use the word “outsider” (further defined below) in reference to those who are policed away from joy. Regardless of diagnoses, or involvement with student support staff, these are the students that might benefit most from support to expand imagined possibilities. This accommodation does not address student deficits. Rather, I attempt to supplement a deficient system that makes it hard for specific groups to engage with hope.

Below I mix my own story with comics, art education, and critical disability scholarship to reflect on the ways that comics-making can support students to more equitably access their own imagined possibilities. I begin by relating the ways that comics-making has been a teacher to the outsider in me. I then propose the concept of Thirdspace as a support for outsider students and recommend several comics-education resources for teachers. In the subsequent

¹ While there is currently no agreed upon framework, trauma-informed education in schools involves “trauma-sensitive classroom practices, positive and restorative responses to behavior, policy and procedure changes, teacher and staff professional development, and strong cross-system collaboration among school staff and mental health professionals” (Thomas, Crosby & Vanderhaar, 2019, p. 423). In art education these practices have been described by Abramson, and Abramson (2019), Kay and Wolf (2017), and Reeves (2019). In this article trauma-informed comics-making is briefly described under the heading “Agential (Dis)engagement and Storying Self.”

section on “The Mechanics of Possibility in Comics,” I discuss three technical properties that may give students greater access to imagined possibilities: the combination of words and images, gaps, and masking. These qualities operate by overcoming difficult relationships with words, enabling re-storying of self and world, and prompting explorations of reality that are not bound by literal logics. I briefly discuss trauma-informed ways to engage students in personal narratives through comics before the essay concludes with a call for forms of art education that explicitly support just possibilities for outsider students.

Comics as Teacher to the Outsider in Me

The qualities of outsidership in this writing, are: (a) being minoritized or (un)seen as an exception to the dominant norms in schools, (b) having to code switch (Cross, et al., 2017) or distort ones usual behaviour in majoritized settings, and (c) having the value of self repeatedly challenged by cultural hegemony. Similarly to scholar of educational access Katherine Cumings Mansfield (2015), I use the suffix “-ized” to modify the word “minority” in order to emphasize the constructed nature of this descriptor. Although some anti-oppressive social change has been advocated through the minority model of disability, which frames disabled people as a distinct cultural group (Sandahl, 2002), the word “minority” is often not preferred by those to whom it is applied. Minority status is not only contextual but, also, expresses an intentional emphasis on the quantity of a population over that group’s more celebrate-able features (such as country of origin or affectionate orientations). In cultures where political decisions are made by majority rule, minoritizing a group imposes a statement of political inefficacy and potentially overwrites sources of joy.

My own outsidership arises from queerness and disability, as well as from class and geographic locations that did not readily provide me with words to understand these experiences. When I was nine, I heard my father wondering if my ongoing interest in picture books might not be a sign that I was “special,” a euphemism for cognitive delay that was popular in the 1980s. Descriptively my cognition *is* occasionally delayed. I fit the description of “twice exceptional” (Winebrenner, 2003), meaning that I have difficulties that often come as a surprise in relation to my achievements, as well as abilities that can make these difficulties less conspicuous. Personally, I resist the qualifier “twice,” as it

creates a problematic binary between “valuable” and “deficient” exceptions, and may be interpreted as subtly reinforcing the false assumption in education that, unless otherwise stated, impairments preclude skills. However I claim the word “exceptional,” even while I recognize that exceptionality, as a concept, is flawed when used to imply that normalcy is a natural state from which disabled people deviate.

This unresolved tension between language use and language problems is part of a critical approach to disability studies that values the partial coherency of stuttering in service of survival. I use the word stutter here as a literal and appreciative description of speech that would be unable to serve important functions without its faults. In my past, stuttering has caused me to grasp, release, and re-grasp words in ways that frustrated me but ultimately led to slower, more fully developed thoughts. Contemporary disability scholars like Alison Kafer (2013), Aimi Hamraie (2017), and Jay Dolmage (2017) productively disable various models of disability while employing what I would call the stuttering of

each in service of access. Just as Kafer (2013) lovingly disables Haraway’s cyborg, I uncouple the term “exceptional” from its euphemistic usage as a synonym for “special.” As a teacher, any extent to which I become exceptional is owed to the necessity of adapting to student needs that I had not anticipated, needs that pose an exception to my own expectations. As a graduate student, the word exceptional has signposted the friction and slipperiness I experience as I move through spaces that are explicitly not made for me.

I lacked this understanding and pride in disability when I was a child and was intuitively vigilant for signs that something might be “wrong with me.” Without fully understanding why, I stopped drawing comics when my love of picture books became suspect. It was only as an adult, in the aftermath of a burnout that led to my first disability related diagnosis and left me unable to sustain the focus to read for several years, that I rediscovered comics and began to make the kind of work seen in Figure 1. As a child with undiagnosed attention deficits and an adult in recovery from disabling burnout, I needed the access that



Figure 1 is an excerpt from a zine called *Sometimes Words Swim*, that I wrote about the experience of studying with an undiagnosed learning disability.

See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/sometimes-words-swim/> [Link to accessible image description]

comics provided to my own imagined possibilities.

I had completed a Master of Education by the time I understood the link between my own learning needs and the affinity I have for teaching exceptional young people whose differences are frequently misread as defiance or laziness. In my experience, such students are often rightfully wary of teachers and initially difficult to reach. However, once a connection is made, we typically excel, particularly in terms of commitment.

As a comics-maker, I feel such a committed loyalty to this medium that finally enabled me to express the stories I need to see and to be seen. Making comics has also given me access to the possibilities of previously unrecognized parts of myself (see Figure 2). In this way, comics have been an important teacher to the outsider in me.



Figure 2 is a panel from *Fish Head*. The fish on the head of the main character is never explained, and neither is their gender. The character has an unspoken otherness that is both very obvious and also hard to describe. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/fish-head/> [Link to accessible image description]

Thirdspace as Access

In educational practice, teachers work toward a future that is different

than would be otherwise. This sentiment may seem aspirational, and it could be, but in practice the alternative futures we engender are often mundane and even occasionally harmful. When we support students to overcome barriers to success, educators may be working in service of emancipatory possible futures, but we also work toward pragmatic futures defined by test scores, and sometimes futures of personal solace defined by the expulsion of a disruptive student. Teachers listen, provide extra help, and exercise particular modes of discipline with the intention of achieving specific kinds of tomorrows in our own classrooms. These choices, big and small, impact the future of our students for better or worse. In this way, we already educate in the service of possibility, but for whom and within what limits? I propose that comics can help art educators teach in service of joyful possibilities that are so often kept out of reach for outsider students.

It is particularly the Thirdspace of comics that makes a powerful contribution to accessible art education. Post-colonial scholar of identity Homi Bhabha, first proposed third space to identify co-existing, conflicting meanings in a way that does not absorb or contain differences (Rutherford, 1990). Critical geographer Edward W. Soja (1996) later distinguished an iteration of Thirdspace “that builds on a Firstspace perspective [...] focused on the “real” material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality” (p. 6). While sharing Bhabha’s focus on “radical openness and ‘hybridity’” (p. 14), Soja draws more heavily on the work of philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Comics scholars Rikke Platz Cortsen and Erin Lacour (2015) build on Soja’s work to write about the ways that comics can enact Thirdspace to critique systemic power dynamics:

The disruption and deconstruction of binaries is central to the notion of “Thirdspace” because it offers a spatial opportunity for subversion and resistance that is not different from but includes elements from these binaries in an open and productive relationship. (p. 112)

This ability to combine the here and now with what could be, without demanding a choice between the two, is the dynamic accommodation of Thirdspace (see Figure 3).

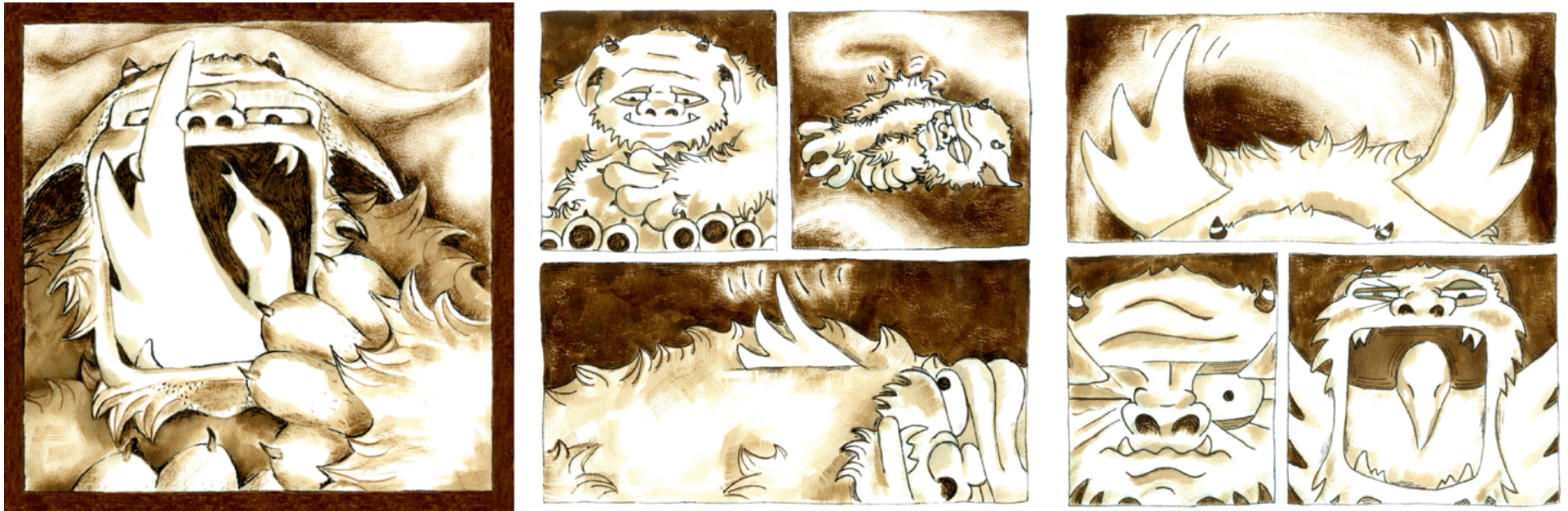


Figure 3 is an excerpt from a silent or wordless comic called *Oni & Tori*. These are anglicized names based on the Japanese words for monster and bird. I wrote the original version while I was living in Japan and experiencing culture shock. This story illustrates the meeting of two conflicting things that can not contain or deny each other. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/oni-and-tori/> [Link to accessible image description]

The adage of accessible teaching that we must “meet students where they are” is similar to Thirdspace’s Firstspace focus on the ‘real’. Consider, for example, an autistic student who will not draw anything but a single, specific interest such as popular cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants. From an allistic (or non-autistic) perspective, copies of cartoons or comics are often not considered “good art,” and likely do not meet curricular outcomes. Teachers of such students may fall prey to the limited pedagogies offered by a false binary; they may be tempted to wage war on the Firstspace of the student’s disengagement from class activities, or conversely to surrender to the Secondspace of excluding the student on the basis of difference. Teachers may then attempt to force the student to produce allistic work or abandon the student to sit alone with their special interest. Students who are segregated in this way, by the exercise of incurious discipline or exclusion from learning activities, experience a variety of negative effects including social isolation, educational gaps, and internalized

stigma or shame in relation to interests that had formerly been sources of joy. Consider instead what it would mean to build on the student’s reality rather than resisting it. What is it about SpongeBob that has captured the student’s attention? From there, what possibilities might emerge?

What would it mean to allow a student’s interest to influence whole class instruction as you move toward curricular goals? How could such an influence invite other students to shape their own learning spaces? As teachers, can we find ways to truly perceive our students as they are and also to enable them to perceive themselves with all the possibilities that we hope for them? Can we do this without using the kind of discipline or isolation that can shame students? What if we prioritized student engagement not only in curricular activities, but in their own experiences of joy? (see Figure 4)



Figure 4 is an excerpt from a silent or wordless comic called *Legs*. I wrote it as I was moving away from my hometown. It represents the risk and joy involved in imagining possibilities. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/legs> [Link to accessible image description]

There are a number of resources for engaging with comics as an extension of student interest in cartoon characters. Lynda Barry's *Syllabus* (2014) and *Making Comics* (2019), Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning* (2011), and Scott McCloud's (2006) *Making Comics*, each suggest specific activities, while the general principles described by Nick Sousanis' (2015) *Unflattening* and McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics* can inspire lessons and independent work. In *It's ok, feelings, I got you*, Tikva Wolf (2018) describes a comics practice that is accessible to students of any level. An incomplete list of excellent comics artists include Ben Passmore, Jillian Tamaki, Maia Kobabe, Erica Henderson, and Aaron McGruder. Dan Berry's podcast *Make it and Tell Everybody* (2012-ongoing) is an excellent resource for comics techniques, artists, and ideas. The mechanics of Thirdspace in comics, explored below, can be considered alongside the activities in the resources suggested here as a way of deepening engagement, particularly for outsider students who are often policed away from imagining their own joyful possibilities.

The Mechanics of Possibility in Comics

While vending my own comics at a queer zine fair in 2019, I had an interaction with a reader that piqued my curiosity about the unique communicative qualities of comics. The reader went through the images of my short wordless comic called *Nest* and interpreted the narrative to their friend using terms like "internalized trauma" and "insecure attachment style." They pointed out that parent birds do, in fact, abandon eggs that smell like predators (see Figure 5.1). Of the

chick's eventual snake-like behaviour (see Figure 5.2), they said something like, "and they return to these toxic patterns, because that's what's familiar." Then they turned to me and wanted to know if they were right. "There are probably lots of ways to be right," I said, although the word "toxic" does not reflect the resilience that I see in the story. It was interesting to me that the reader's linguistic translation felt so narrow. How did the story change so dramatically as it moved from the medium of comics to theoretical language?

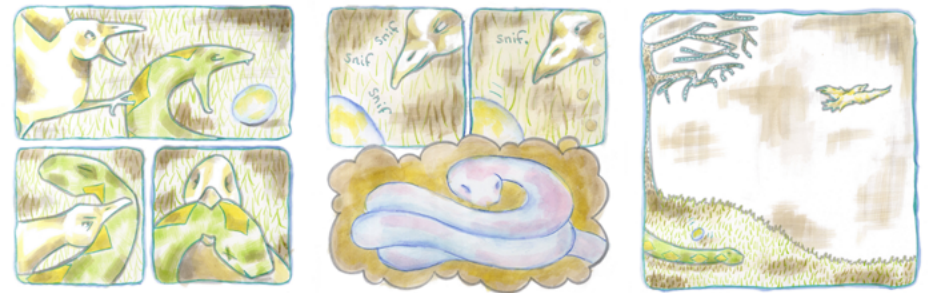


Figure 5.1 is an excerpt from a silent or wordless comic called *Nest*. I wrote it as I was reconciling some difficult personal histories. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/nest/> [Link to accessible image description]

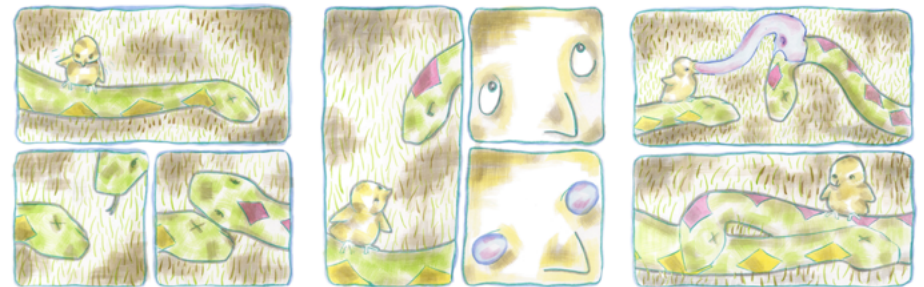


Figure 5.2 is another excerpt from *Nest*. I like to watch readers encounter these pages at zine fairs. People sometimes look confused and sometimes laugh out loud. I am regularly asked to explain this story. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/nest/> [Link to accessible image description]

Art educator and comics artist Nick Sousanis' (2015) has stated that “We draw not to transcribe ideas from our heads but to generate them in search of greater understanding” (p. 79). It is only after making *Nest* that I can describe it as about the ways that home becomes different after something hard happens there. The previous sentence is a retroactive explanation of the comic that I could not have formulated without the making process.

I imagined a Thirdspace through *Nest*. Grounded in a painful reality but culminating in a more empowered relation to home, making *Nest* allowed me to acknowledge both belonging and alienation, as well as pain and gratitude for inheritances that enable my survival. My interaction with the articulate reader at the comics fair drew a contrast for me between the story of *Nest* as they translated it and the meaning that the comic holds for me. I began to wonder about the characteristics of comics that could enable a meaning so much fuller than language, and how this understanding of comics might be useful in art education settings. To that end, I investigate three mechanisms below, which contribute to the unique expressions of comics: the combination of words and images, gaps (or the spaces between images where meaning is formed), and the technique of masking (or representing reality through fantasy).

Write-drawing Image-words

Lynda Barry (2008) described the effect that drawing has on the process of making words: “Something happens to my thinking when I start to draw. It becomes more like listening than formulating” (p. 157). Sousanis (2015) has stated that comics require simultaneous modes of reading and looking that create an “electric tension” (p. 63) that “generates a kind of multiplicative resonance—a dynamic cycle of read=look, look=read. ... Each enriches the other to achieve meaning” (p. 64). Where images meet words in comics a connection is formed that cannot be neatly parsed (see Figure 6).

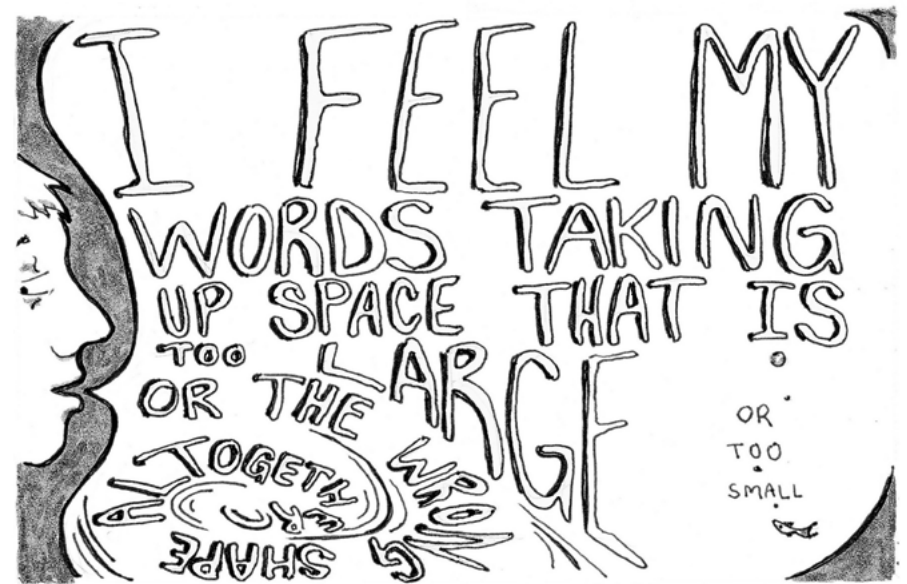


Figure 6 is an excerpt from a zine I wrote called *Sometimes when I Talk to People*.

The words on this page convey graphic as well as literal meaning, while components of the image like the speech bubble are more literal than graphic. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/when-i-talk-to-people/> [Link to accessible image description]

Interestingly, the most widely used definition of comics that I have encountered does not involve words at all. Author and artist Scott McCloud (1993) defined comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). McCloud (1993) goes on to illustrate the process from which this definition arose, noting that without the word “pictorial” this description applies equally well to letters in the form of a word. Brunetti (2011) also references this similarity between the narrative communication of comics and written language, by describing comics-making as the act of “writing with pictures” (p. 1).

The exclusion of words in comics like *Nest* or Shaun Tan’s (2006) *The Arrival* does not undo the chemistry of text and pictures. Rather, in “silent” comics, containing no words, text-style reading is still enabled by the sequential

use of space, and coded expressions of symbolic meaning through color and line quality. The presence of these conventions independent of language creates a kind of uber-textual medium. The linguistic quality of such comics appears indestructible because textuality cannot be removed even in the absence of words. As McCloud (1993) stated, “Elements omitted from a work of art are as much a part of that work as those included” (p. 82). The profound ethereality of silent comics, to me, is this quality of being haunted by the (very present) absence of words.

Dolmage (2017) notes that literacy rates are not neutral or fixed measurements, but rather depend on the language of testing as well as systemic barriers to education, thus literacy is a gateway that can be more or less vigilantly guarded against particular groups of people. While systemic misunderstandings of all communication, including images, often accompany experiences of marginalization, the stakes can be particularly high when it comes to linguistic literacy in school settings, resulting in negative associations with text narratives for some students. The multimodal approach of comics is inadequate to the task of systemic transformation required to truly address such injustices (Dolmage, 2017). However, a combination of images and words may serve as an entry point for individual students into a Thirdspace of stories where imagined transformations could meet unjust realities.

There are many ways into a difficult relationship with words. My own trouble is not only an issue of attention, but the fact that words have frequently been used as weapons in my family. As a result, my use of language is habitually protective. It is easy for me to use words to dissipate conflict, solve problems, and critique arguments. However, involving words in understandings that require vulnerability is a challenge. It is easier to bring my unguarded self forward through drawing. The place from which I draw baby birds, like the one in *Nest* (see Figure 7), is a nexus between a pregnable self and the material world. Relatedly, making opens a dialogue with an inner authority, or gut feeling, that I find difficult to access otherwise. This powerful connection to intuition is a source of great possibility.

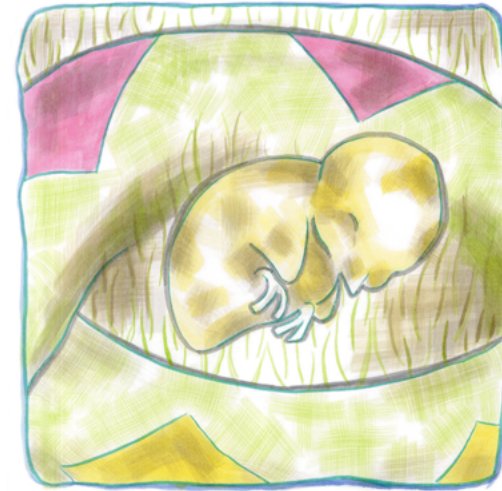


Figure 7 is the final page of the comic *Nest*. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/nest/> [Link to accessible image description]

A connection to the inner voice of the gut may be particularly valuable for outsiders who have to change our habitual behaviours in order to be accepted in majoritized settings, since this kind of code switching can be disorienting. Gaps, the feature of comics examined below, also address this need for self by requiring the participation and discernment of comics readers and makers.

Gaps

The spaces between the images in comics are called “gutters.” These gaps, like pauses between musical notes, determine the ways that comics become coherent in the minds of readers. Professor of education David Low (2012) believes that students undertake comprehension processes in the spaces between the sequential images of comics. McCloud (1993) has said that gutters form the grammar of comics. Comics scholar Barbara Postema (2013) concurs that gutters produce “the conditions by which discontinuous images become a continuous stream of signification” (p. 51). The magic of meaning-making happens in the gutter.

Postema (2013) has stated that gutters open gaps for comics readers to fill. Gaps that invite or require reader input exist metaphorically in all literary

works, however, in comics these are made explicitly visible on the page as gutters. McCloud (1993) refers to the process of filling such gaps as “closure,” defined as the “phenomenon of observing the parts and perceiving the whole” (p. 63). Humans depend on closure daily to comprehend and communicate. According to McCloud (1993), the extensive use of gaps in comics enables a greater sense of intimacy than most instances of closure. By stating that “to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (p. 69), McCloud has made vivid the endless variations by which readers may fill in such gaps (see Figure 8).

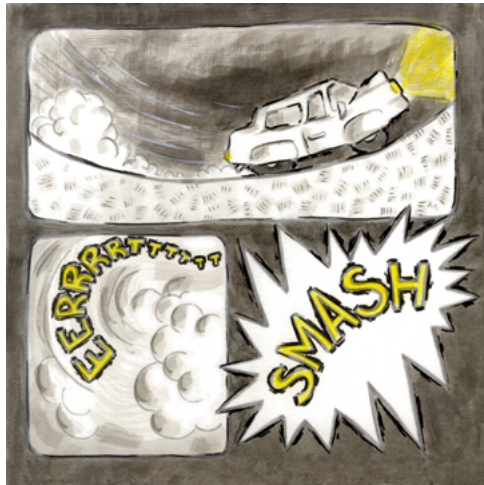


Figure 8 is a page from my comic *Smash*. The accident is explicit and yet there are gaps in the narrative that I did not want to fill. Readers are compelled to include or exclude their own details. See the full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/smash/> [Link to accessible image description]

For both readers and makers, gaps in comics facilitate particular experiences. Sousanis (2015) has described the comics-reading process as: “traversing the gaps between fragments and stitching them together” (p. 61). Arts-based researcher and art educator, Jeff Horwat (2018) states that these gaps, particularly in wordless narratives, invite readers to interject their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in order to complete comic narratives. How does this reading process of shifting static to kinetic work in reverse for the maker? What does it mean to create stories in a medium that inherently requires stasis and holes?

The transformation of kinetic to static through comics-making can be a

way for creators to distill meaning and preserve emphasis, intimately reflecting personal experience. There are few other forms that can share so directly the image of a frozen memory and the complete omission of details that are either irrelevant or overwhelming. In this way, I experience comics-making as an affirming amplification of my experiences, particularly in relation to stories that are difficult to tell. It is this intimacy and potential to amplify personal truth that opens up possibilities through gaps in comics.

Students who are required to alter more comfortable behaviours into ill-fitting, school-appropriate forms may particularly value such agency over personal reflection. Autistic stimming, particular forms of colloquial language, and styles of dress are examples of student behaviours that are commonly disallowed in schools. Comics-making can put students in the powerful position of re-storying a narrative, exercising agency through decisions about emphasis and omission.

Masking

The final mechanism of comics I discuss in this essay is masking, or the representation of reality through fantasy, which opens possibilities by disabling rationality. Just as gaps invite the intimate self-expression of makers and the co-authorship of readers, the obscuring effect of masking leaves symbolic spaces to fill. Masking enables an intuitive narrative flow that frees making from the constraints of reality and allows readers to navigate the interpretation of comics. This exercise can be a powerful reinforcement for outsider students who may experience consistent challenges to the value of self, particularly if they identify with a group—like Muslims or disabled people—that is commonly maligned in popular media.

Cortsen and Lacour (2015) discuss “unmasking through masking” (p. 124), by which fantasies or distortions are depicted in order to more clearly convey certain aspects of reality. Linguistic scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) discuss a similar combination of real and unreal as the operative mechanism of metaphor. In metaphor, an imagined source concept, like a gem, stands in for a real target, like “my friend,” in the phrase “my friend is a gem.” Thus, the valuable aspects of my friend are brought into focus, while faults are de-emphasized. Masking in comics similarly creates focus and omissions of meaning (see Figure 9).



Figure 9 is another excerpt from *Smash*. The cat was a casualty in the accident from figure 8. This relatively simple narrative is a mask for a much more complex grief that I was experiencing as I wrote it. Externalizing a terrible loss into this children's picture book aesthetic made my situation feel manageable. See full comic at <https://gh-greer.com/#/smash/> [Link to accessible image description]

Through masking, the relationship between real and imagined may be tenuous, unclear, or shifting. Additionally, masking may be applied to objects or entire narratives, thereby serving allegorical as well as metaphorical functions. Contradictory masks may also be employed simultaneously. This complexity lends itself to an intuitive, wholistic effect that may resist rational analyses. Unintentional masking may be part of coming into understanding through making, as I experienced with *Nest*. When employed intentionally, masking can be part of the trick of gaps. For example, the cat in Figure 9 is a gap that readers may fill with their own literal lost cats or private abstract losses. The logic of masking is dream-like, enabling comics readers and makers to create personal significance, which may shift between readings.

Cortsen and Lacour (2015) examine the use of masking to address societal power dynamics. In Sara Granér's (2008) *Det är bara lite AIDS* (It is only a little bit of AIDS), anthropomorphic animal characters provide levity in a grim context. This form of masking reduces the confronting edge of challenging scenarios,

possibly involving readers in less guarded processes of understanding. Lynda Barry (2008) describes masking in childhood play through an imaginary monster that enabled affection through a challenging parental relationship:

I never talked about the Gorgon. [...] That I had a very Gorgon-like mother never occurred to me, and if it had, I would have been lost. Did the Gorgon help me love my mother? I think she helped me very much. (pp. 64-66)

Similarly, Hannah Eaton's (2013) graphic novel *Naming Monsters* weaves a difficult coming-of-age story through preoccupations with mythical creatures to express the eerie isolation of youth. In these examples, masking has been used to touch on truth that is necessary but also personally or politically risky. In relation to personal possibilities, masking can enable titration, or engagement by small degrees, for students and their own stories. Finding a Thirdspace in this way between engagement and avoidance is a powerful mode of supporting student agency.

Agential (Dis)engagement and Storying Self

The mechanisms described above may give rise to the kind of self-reflection that can be difficult for students. Engaging with personal experience is not universally beneficial and will always be more work for some than others. Specifically, assignments that mandate the disclosure of personal histories or the details of home lives risk prompting unexpected student memories of trauma and the public exposure of stigmatized circumstances. This can result in psychological harm or bullying. Students should always have choices about when and whether to communicate about their own lives. Thirdspace, through the mechanisms described above, can allow for a safer engagement with personal narratives, leaving room for varied degrees of fiction and non-fiction.

Tikva Wolf (2018) notes: “It’s very important to remember the inherent power imbalance when interacting with children. You DON’T want to encourage them to question their reality” (p. 36; emphasis in original). Wolf’s comment references gaslighting, a form of psychological harm that happens when a person with social power, like a teacher, raises unfounded doubts about a less powerful person’s ability to perceive reality (Sweet, 2019). While it may be appropriate in some cases to raise doubts *with* students as part of a process of critical thinking, it is never alright to raise doubts *about* students’ ability to perceive their own experience.

Choice about whether or not to engage is another important aspect of trauma-informed work with personal narratives. Lynda Barry (2019) relates her comics teaching experience: “Sometimes we may encounter strong feelings and unexpected memories. We are free to follow them or to turn away from them or to change them with fiction” (p. 110). Art educators must be mindful that the power differential inherent to teacher-student relationships gives us the capacity to cause harm if we are not careful. Teachers should never push students to engage with subject matter that may be a source of trauma.

Call to Practice

When I moved to Montreal in 2016, during my first month in the city, I attended my first queer zine and book fair. There I encountered comics, art, and people that pushed and played with binary gender roles through delightfully

incongruous colours, celebratory body modifications, and expressions of pride in conventionally shamed bodies. In the bathroom I found a heartening, zine-style flyer, affirming that crying in public washrooms is a normal thing to do, and offering some tips for getting through it. I needed the flyer that day, moved as I was by the freshly-sparked hopes and fears of a newly-urban genderqueer. I felt my own possibilities expanding. I hope to pass along analogous possibilities to my students, which I hope that they will pass along in turn.

Joyful imagined futures may be systemically kept out of reach for the students who need them the most, but as teachers we can serve on the frontlines of student capacity-building with regard to joy and possibility. While we organize for change, can we also accommodate our students’ need for possibilities within the current faulty system? Can you envision “imagining” as student support in the same way we offer “simplified learning outcomes” or “mandated activity breaks?”

On the potential of comics, Sousanis’ (2015) states: “A changed approach is precisely the goal for the journey ahead: to discover new ways of seeing, to open spaces for possibilities, and to find ‘fresh methods’ for animating and awakening” (p. 27). For me, Sousanis’ sense of adventure reflects not only on the medium of comics, but also the potential of art educators to create and support equitable access to possibilities with students.

If you are an art educator, through what media do you feel this call?



Figure 10 is another excerpt from *Sometimes Words Swim*. To me, this is a hopeful representation of what accessible education could do. See the full text at <https://gh-greer.com/#/sometimes-words-swim/> [Link to accessible image description]

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Accessible Image Descriptions

Figure 1: There are two black and white ink-drawn images laid out left to right. On the left is a close-up view of the eyes and nose of a face behind a book that is open, as if being read. There is text above the image and coming out of each eye to form the phrase: "I think if I could just look hard enough." On the right, the book has grown very large and the person is very small. The background is filled with the word "HARDER!" The title of the book is "Big Book of Things You Don't Know" and the back cover has the words "About the Author: smarter than you"

Figure 2: There is a single ink-drawn panel with a gray wash from the perspective of a worker behind a service counter. The worker's hand, holding up a passport is in view. There is a customer standing on the other side of the counter who can be seen from the chest up. The person in front of the counter has a large fish on their head. The picture on the passport is of the customer but the fish is cropped out of view. The worker is saying "I guess everything is fine, uh, sir. We'll call your zone"

when it's time to board." The customer is saying "um, thanks."

Figure 3: There are three ink-drawn pages laid out from left to right. On the first page a monster is eating a bird who is trying to escape. On the middle page there are two comic panels across the top half of the page. On the left, the monster looks satisfied and is patting its belly. In the right-hand panel the monster is lying on its side looking irritated by some motion coming from its belly. There is a single panel across the bottom of the page that is a close up of the monster with a wing tip beginning to emerge out of its side. On the last page there is one panel along the top that shows two wings coming from the monsters back. Across the bottom there are two panels, on the left is a close up of the monster's surprised face and in the second the monster opens its mouth to reveal that the bird is alive, and still attached to the wings that are sticking out from behind the monster. The bird appears to be wearing the monster like a costume from inside the monster's mouth.

Figure 4: There are three pages of line drawings laid out from left to right. In the first there are four panels showing an owl on a tree branch waking up and looking around. In the fourth panel the owl is lifting one of its legs as if to step off the branch. The second page is two panels, one on top of the other. The top panel is the owl's face looking down with beak hanging over the bottom of the panel. The bottom panel is a close up of the owl's legs with one leg extending in front of the branch down toward the bottom of the frame. One toe is extended as though cautiously testing or reaching toward something. The final page is one image that is also a close-up of the owl's legs, this time the extended leg disappears beyond the bottom of the panel, much longer than the leg originally appeared to be.

Figure 5.1: Three ink-drawn pages are laid out from left to right. In the top half of the first page there is one panel where a yellow bird moves to attack a green snake that is about to eat a blue egg. On the bottom of the first page there are two panels in which the bird first bites the snake, and then the snake hangs limply in the birds beak with "X"s in place of eyes. On the second page there are 2 panels along the top in which the bird sniffs the egg and then the bird looks thoughtful. A thought balloon comes from the bird in the second panel to fill the bottom of the page. The thought balloon contains an image of a blue snake. On the final page there is a single image of the bird flying off into the distance, leaving the egg and the dead snake behind.

Figure 5.2: Three ink-drawn pages are laid out from left to right. In the top half of the first page there is one panel in which a yellow baby chick stands on a dead snake. On the bottom there are two panels. On the left a new snake appears and discovers the dead snake. On the right, the new snake lays its head near the head of

the dead snake. On the second page there is one tall panel along the left side where the new snake angrily looks down at the baby chick who is standing on the dead snake. Along the right side there are two panels on top of each other. The top panel is a close up of the chick's face looking up. In the bottom panel the chick's pupils disappear and its eyes are entirely filled with blue. In the third page there is a top panel in which a blue snake (like the thought bubble snake from Figure 5) emerges from the mouth of the chick and attacks the new green snake. In the bottom panel the blue snake is gone and the chick stands on the dead body of the new snake that is lying next to the body of the original dead snake.

Figure 6: There is a single comic panel in which a face appears at the left side. The majority of the space is taken up by a speech balloon. The words "I feel my words taking up space that is too large or too small or the wrong shape all together" fill the word balloon. The shape of the letters imitates the meaning of the words. For example, the phrase "too small" is written in small letters, and "wrong shape" winds into a spiral. There is a tiny fish in the lower right-hand corner of the page looking toward the words.

Figure 7: There is a yellow baby bird curled up in the middle of a single comics panel, as though sleeping. The chick is surrounded by grass as well as the middle portions of two large arched green cylindrical or tube shapes, each shape is larger than the bird and curved into a semi-circle around it. Together the tube-shapes resemble a nest. In the context of the rest of the story, these shapes can be identified as two snakes who were killed earlier.

Figure 8: The single comic page has one panel along the top and two on the bottom. In the top panel, a side view of a car has speed lines and smoke behind it. On the bottom left, the panel is full of smoke and motion lines with the yellow letters "EERRRRTTTTT" written through it. The right panel is shaped like an irregular 19-pointed star with the yellow word "SMASH" written in it.

Figure 9: Three ink-drawn pages are laid out from left to right, each page is a single image with no panels. On the first page there are two people at the bottom of the frame, pictured from behind sitting on the ground with the body of a white cat between them. Each person has one hand on the cat. There is a cloud-shaped speech balloon coming from the person on the left. The speech balloon floats over the people and takes up about two-thirds of the image. Instead of words, the speech balloon has an image of a white cat with wings flying toward the moon. The image outside the speech bubble is grayscale. Inside the speech bubble is a mix of muted blue, purple, and yellow. The second page is a close-up of the speech bubble with the same white, winged cat floating or flying with its paws reaching upward. The

third page is a close-up of the two people and cat from behind. The person who was not the source of the speech balloon asks: “Is that supposed to make it ok?”. The person who was the source of the speech balloon says “No. That’s how I’ll be ok though. How will you be ok?”

[Figure 10](#): There is one line-drawing of a sign-post with four signs pointing in various directions. The words on the different signs come together to form the sentence “There are other ways 2 learn.”

About the Author

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