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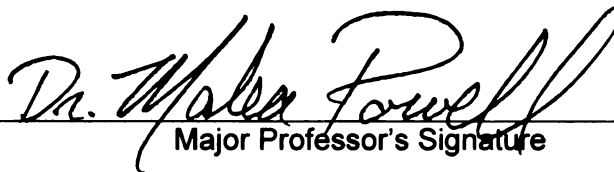
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NONSENSE COMIX PRESENTS: THE CULTURAL RHETORIC OF COMICS

By

Frances Amelia Howes

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

NONSENSE COMIX PRESENTS: THE CULTURAL RHETORIC OF COMICS

By

Frances Amelia Howes

This thesis takes a decolonial perspective on the growing field of comics studies, and proposes new theories of how to study, make, and interact with comics outside of the paradigm of academic colonialism. Two theories are proposed, that come together to form a cultural rhetorics theory of comics. The first is a theory of visual rhetorical traditions, shared ways of representing through visual rhetoric, with a specific emphasis on looking to indigenous visual rhetorical traditions to learn new ways to read and write contemporary comics texts. The second theory proposes that comics are a technology, and situates them within the context of literacy technologies. This theory lends itself to finding places where comics can be used for rhetorical action, specifically within the academy. Two bodies of work are analyzed with these theories in mind: the comics of the theorist-practitioner Scott McCloud, and the long-running serial *Dykes To Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel. McCloud's work is analyzed in the context of appreciating the confluence of theory and practice in comics, and Bechdel's work is analyzed as an example of the benefits of the cultural rhetorics perspective in appreciating the engaged lesbian visual rhetorical work done by her comic strip. The thesis concludes with the decolonial imperative as applied to comics: that those who study comics should challenge logocentrism and make their own comics.

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INTRODUCTION

DECOLONIZING COMICS

Biff bam pow. Comics aren't just for kids anymore. Biff bam pow. Comics are useful for something. Biff bam pow.

"Biff bam powism" is without a doubt the biggest cliché of comics discourse. It is a metonym that uses something from comics that we pretty much all agree is incidental, to represent them as a whole. To me, it is indicative of a particular notion of comics, one frustratingly incomplete and usually pretty shallow.

Biff bam pow is a symptom of discovery. Both journalists and academics perpetually "discover" comics, and write about the strange, exotic people and customs found there.

Here's a thing I've learned from Indians: being discovered never works out well for anybody.

In the Miami theorist Malea Powell's "Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed Blood's Story", I was first clued in on the colonial project of the academy: to civilize the unruly subject—to travel into uncharted intellectual territory and set up a rhetorical homestead. She writes, "We are trained to identify our object of study in terms of its boundaries, its difference from other objects of study, and then do everything within our power to bring that object into the realm of other 'known' objects" (3-4). My work has taken the direction it has partially because I intend it to resist colonial action in both its form and its content. And: the form is always part of the content.

So: it bothers me when people enact academic colonialism on the thing that I do and love and practice. In a literal way, this represents the complicity of the academy in the material colonization of the world. However, I am more concerned with colonialism as a set of social relations--patterns of thinking that occur and often go unrecognized. It's not only physical spaces and bodies that bear the weight of the legacy of imperialism but our patterns of thought as well, even when thinking about things that aren't explicitly or obviously connected to colonization. Comics are a kind of Other, and in order to deal with them in the most just way possible, we have to intentionally avoid replicating what is typically done to the Other.

There are many facets to colonial thinking in the academy. They are particularly well elaborated in the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's crucial book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Her book deals explicitly with research strategies for indigenous scholars to do work that resists colonial stances and furthermore, heals the damage done to indigenous people, land, and culture by colonialism. However, I think that her perspective on how academia assimilates and appropriates that which it has contact with, and how it subordinates unfamiliar ways of knowing, can and should be taken into consideration by anyone whose field of study is considered "new".

When you see your work as civilizing something unruly, that is a colonial impulse. The converse is also colonialist: assuming that seemingly unruly things are inferior to things with an evident hierarchical structure. Colonial thinking sees history as binary, as having an articulable beginning, before which things are "prehistoric", and being concerned with the "discovery" of some key concept that divides time into pre- and post- (such as literacy) (31). The myth of "The 'Authentic, Essentialist, Deeply Spiritual'

Other” is pervasive--the perpetual questioning of “who is a ‘real indigenous’ person” and the perpetual contest and verification of indigenous knowledge and values by “‘authorities’ and outside experts” (72).

To pick on one recent example, the Modern Language Association’s new guide, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen Tabachnick, embodies almost every one of these problematic impulses. You don’t get much more institutionally authorized than the MLA, and the way in which their gaze has turned to comics unsettles me. I find it particularly interesting that the MLA has published this book in the same year (2009) that they have published *Teaching World Literature* and *Teaching the African Novel*.

Discovering comics and immediately applying external ways of knowing and understanding to them is a colonial impulse. One particularly trouble place I see this action happening is in the establishment of a comics-equivalent of the literary canon. As much as indigenous scholars Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) and Craig Womack (Creek) are concerned with American Indian literature only addressing the “fab five” or “noble nine” writers, I am concerned that there is also this impulse in comics studies. Where does it come from? There is certainly depth and breadth of material, so much so that no one needs to write any more articles about Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* for lack of many, many other works.

To be sure, regular old colonialism and imperialism are present in comics studies as well. The introduction reiterates the common and self-perpetuating assumption that “the three outstanding comics-producing cultures have been the American, the Japanese, and the Franco-Belgian” (3) The front of the book identifies the “graphic novel proper” (whatever that means”) as being born out of the American underground comix movement

of the 1970's (13) while, all the way at the back of the book, in a chapter about graphic novels of the "Hispanic world", Ana Merino asserts that the graphic novel was invented in Argentina by Héctor Germán Oesterheld, earlier than any of the creators mentioned in the introduction's Euro- and America-centric narrative (272). Especially aggravating is Tammy Horn's chapter, "The Graphic Novel as a Choice of Weapons," which purports to be about using comics to teach social justice. However, her first recommendation is that Jack Jackson's extremely problematic *Comanche Moon*, a captivity narrative about Cynthia Ann Parker (Naduah) and her son Quanah Parker, be used to teach American Indian history. She even admits her students found the book disturbingly racist and sexist in its portrayal of "beefy noble warriors" and "stoic Indian princesses", but asserts that it should still be taught because she claims "there are no other graphic novels accurately portraying the diversity of nineteenth-century Native American culture in Texas" (93).

Regarding the authentic, essentialist, deeply spiritual other: this bit of colonial thinking translates into seeing comics as a magic solution to pedagogical problems. Horn's chapter is one example of this approach: that comics are so pedagogically magical, even a problematically racist one is worth teaching *just because it's a comic* and there aren't any other comics on the subject. This also shows up throughout the MLA text as many different ways to teach Western literature somehow using comics, be they Frank Miller's *300* (Streufert 208-213) or Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Ferguson 200-207). I am concerned that many of these approaches to comics pedagogy see the graphic novel as somehow more pure and virtuous than text, inherently more fun, and some kind of silver bullet that will make kids love Shakespeare.

All this discourse brings with it some serious unexamined assumptions about textual complexity. When comics are *useful*, it's so often because of their simplicity. I am concerned that much work on comics, especially comics and literacy or pedagogy, carries the weight of logocentric cultural assumptions about images being easier THAN, simpler, less developed, prior to, alphabetic words. As a good grad student who has taken her Derrida to heart, I just can't accept these premises.

Now, there are scholars in comics studies who explicitly take issue with this assumption. I cannot go without mentioning who I think is the best person doing work on this subject right now: Charles Hatfield. His book, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* pervasively addresses the complexity of comics texts, as well as directly addresses the "otherness" of comics reading. In fact, one of the strongest positives about the MLA *Teaching the Graphic Novel* book is that Hatfield writes the first chapter (after Tabachnick's introduction), a survey of approaches to defining comics, that ultimately suggests that it's best to focus on the *tactical* nature of definitions, rather than spend so much time trying to impose one definition on what a "graphic novel" is. He concludes his short essay: "In our haste to confer literary respectability on comics narrative, we ought not to give students the false impression that comics have a history neatly encapsulated by a single definition. To do so would be to undercut our very claims about the artistic vitality and importance of comic art" (26). Unfortunately, this good advice is undercut many places elsewhere in the very same anthology by contributors who frame comics as, for example, a "logical and evolutionary step in the history of pictorial art" (Barr 81).

What is to be done about this? I want to quote Malea Powell again: “If dominant narratives only attain dominance through imagining themselves whole in contrast to other/Other narratives, then we must imagine those narratives differently, imagine ourselves in a different relationship to them. The challenge, then, is to imagine an alternative, not an Alternative, one that confronts difference and race, racism and empire, in the very discourses that bind us.” (“Listening” 18)

I want us to imagine comics as whole. Rather than the colonial metaphors of the academy, of discovery and homesteading, or the perpetually aggrieved narrative of “being taken seriously”, my work embodies a different ideology. By both talking about comics made by other people and making them myself, as an intellectual and an academic, I want to demonstrate that comics have always already been capable of addressing complex ideas. My work doesn’t intend to uplift comics as a form, but rather, to demonstrate that they were never not there.

So. How do we do this? What do we as rhetoricians, we as comics scholars, we as comics creators do?

Never forget the cultural dimensions of our work: the rhetoric we study and the rhetoric we make. This is the twin of my imperative that we imagine comics as whole. Comics have never not been culturally situated, and can't not be today. The same is true of any rhetoric.

Never forget that our work is part of a complex web of power relations. I expect, should anyone read this text as it is now, that some people will be offended, especially when I call them colonially naïve. At the same time, my own whiteness is a critical part of how the theory I am articulating came to be. I am a scholar implicated in the

American colonial project because of my own ancestry, and because of this I believe the decolonial imperative applies to me as much as it does to anyone working against injustices done to their own peoples.

All rhetoric is cultural rhetoric. The machinations of privilege allow some people's discourses to exist in unmarked categories. As I will reiterate later: rhetoric is not just about acts of saying, but acts of doing. Cultural rhetoric does something that is meaningful within the context of a community, whether it is a question of representations, of advocacy, of survivance, definition, resistance, transgressive reappropriation, or decolonization.

Cultural rhetoric is rhetorical production that echoes valued discourses within a community. Every choice made in the process of doing rhetoric is meaningful not just as a rhetorical device, but in the context of why it is significant, wise, risky, effective, subversive, attendant to hegemonic discourses, resistant to them, or both by an acting subject. A cultural rhetorical theory of comics posits that the choice to make a comic and to use the technology of comics always happens within a meaningful cultural context. Cultural rhetorics as a theoretical sandbox draws attention to historically marginalized cultures ignored by master narratives. This lens draws attention to the role of culture in the creation of comics, with less emphasis on comics' role in the creation of culture. However, it recognizes that changing, challenging, or redefining aspects of culture can be the rhetorical work that a comic does.

Through this thesis, I will explain in parts my own theory of comics. It is certainly one example of a cultural rhetorics theory of comics, but I do not intend it to be *the* definitive example. I believe that a comic consists of the layering of the technology

of the comic that reunites the logocentric tectonic plates, and the rhetorical traditions (visual, verbal) the rhetor chooses to participate in. These are not the only components of a comic, but I believe that this lens is very widely applicable. Every comic has a form and a structure, and the even the most iconoclastic rhetor (or team of rhetors) is formed by a culture and part of one.

Chapter one of this thesis explores the idea of rhetorical traditions, and specifically, the existence of indigenous visual rhetorical traditions. I argue that paying attention to indigenous visual rhetorical traditions can enrich our understanding of what comics are doing now as well as enrich the kinds of comics we can think about making. This chapter is rooted in a critique of the notion of the “rhetorical tradition”, the supposedly contiguous history of writing in the West; however, it is primarily intended for other comics scholars to read, and was originally presented (in a much different form) at the 2009 University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels. It proposes what comics scholars might do differently to enact the decolonial imperative.

Chapter two explains the second part of my theory: the idea that comics are a technology. This is largely inspired by the work of Dennis Baron on the development of literacy technologies. It is targeted at rhetoricians when “we” is invoked. Both chapters one and two include material that discusses the comics that I have created.

Chapter three originated in research I was doing on underground women’s comix of the 1970’s and 1980’s, which strangely turned into a chapter about Scott McCloud. However, the more comics I read for that particular project, the more I realized the significance of McCloud’s comics, which I had previously read only as instrumental explanatory works, rather than demonstrations of praxis. Despite the fact that very much

has been written about his work, his status as a theorist-practitioner of comics has really been given the significance it deserves, and I hope this chapter can remedy that. I also apply my previously articulated theories to a reading of his body of work. McCloud's work has been discussed and used widely, so when I say "we" in this chapter, I mean it in a very broad sense.

Chapter four also came out of my work on women's comix. In this final chapter, I analyze Alison Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For*, a very long-running serialized comic strip that has great significance to the lesbian community, but has received comparatively little scholarly or critical attention compared to her recent graphic memoir, *Fun Home*. In this chapter, I apply all my theories and use every tool in my toolbox to make the case that the comic strip in question is doing significant rhetorical work that is not visible through the lenses commonly being used to read comics. This chapter is in opposition to literary readings of Bechdel's work, and I mean it as a call for more cultural rhetorics work on comics.

Throughout each of these chapters, I may stray from explicitly addressing the subject of colonialism and comics. However, I will let you know now: even when it seems like I'm not talking about colonialism, I am. I intend that this work embodies resistance to academic colonialism as well as spars with it verbally.

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CHAPTER ONE

IMAGINING A MULTIPLICITY OF VISUAL RHETORICAL TRADITIONS: COMICS LESSONS FROM RHETORIC HISTORIES

Introduction

In the academic field from which I study comics, rhetoric and composition, we have a foundational narrative that we call “the rhetorical tradition”—a story that traces the evolution of rhetoric from ancient Greece and Rome, to the Renaissance, to the Scottish Enlightenment, to American writing instruction, to the “rediscovery” of ancient rhetoric, to today. It is seductive and its affordances are great; and yet, it is highly Eurocentric and not contingent on its own evidence.

Comics studies and the study of visual rhetoric have the opportunity to do something different with the way we see our history and how we got here. Our narratives often concern themselves with the value of comics as objects of study and as a mode of communication, and we often struggle with the lack of seriousness and complexity assigned to comics work. Our histories are often highly Eurocentric, tracing the origins of what we know as comics in Europe and the United States. Does it have to be this way? We as comics scholars, in a young field of study, have the opportunity to open up new modes of looking at our past and taking a decolonial approach from very near the beginnings of our field.

Reading indigenous histories of rhetoric, of meaning-making practices, of history, and of writing provide a valuable insight into what comics can do for us today. Through this chapter, I will explore how the multiplicity of histories can provide new ways of reading comics texts, and places that suggest invention in new or underused modes. They

can help us ask what comics are or can be for, and decolonize our thinking about comics studies.

Histories of rhetoric

The Rhetorical Tradition can refer to both the foundational narrative of the academic field of Rhetoric and Composition and the mammoth text used to teach it, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. In their introduction to the work, they explain their approach and how they trace “the historical development of rhetoric”. It is divided into “conventional chronological periods: the Classical (from about the birth of rhetoric in ancient Greece to about 400 C.E.), the Medieval (to about 1400), the Renaissance to about 1700), the Enlightenment (from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth century), the Nineteenth Century, and the Modern and Postmodern (the twentieth century)” (1).

This narrative directs the attention of people who study the history of rhetoric. It is required reading for most graduate students being socialized into disciplinary conversations about rhetoric and related areas. It silences by defining the scope of what is the history of rhetoric, and what is something else. It also solely attributes the invention of rhetoric to ancient Greece, without consideration of the independent development of writing systems and accompanying strategies for effective use of said systems in other ancient cultures.

Entire literate intellectual traditions are ignored to situate the core of the discipline in Western antiquity. This problem is not repaired by adding a few people of color to the narrative as has happened in later editions of the text. Gloria Anzaldúa’s critique of this narrative and of ethnocentrism now appears at the very end of this book, page 1592 of

1673. What does it mean to situate a narrative about how the history of writing also begins with the Aztecs' "*tlilli, tlapalli*" at the very end of the history, rather than the beginning?

What is required to really decolonize this narrative, and by rights, the discipline of Rhetoric, is rethinking the history of writing and whose traditions and literacies are important and significant. A critical part of this decolonization is the serious consideration of *visual rhetoric*, of pictographic and ideographic traditions, as part of this history: "*tlilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de su códices* (the black and red ink painted on codices)" as identified by Anzaldúa is a visual cue, identifying writing by the metonymy of its color (1591). The study of literate rhetorical productions of indigenous people in the Americas is itself the study of the history of visual rhetoric and its legitimacy as an intellectual practice.

The idea of codex rhetorics has developed out of the theoretical and cultural work of Anzaldúa, at the intersection of Chicano/a Studies and Native Studies; these texts and practices have been studied before, but by anthropology, archaeology, or history. Naming them as rhetoric cements their connection to writing practices historical and contemporary.

What are casually referred to as Mexican or Aztec codices are really a group of rhetorical practices done by people in the Americas prior to and contemporaneously with colonization. According to Miguel Leon-Portilla, "Mayas, Mixtecs, Toltecs, and Aztecs succeeded in developing their own systems of writing" (xlv). Mexica (Aztec) texts were referred to as *amoxtli*; Mayan texts were called *vuh* (Mignolo, "Signs" 222-223). Significantly, all of these texts were highly pictographic (for example, Mexica texts were

constituted by “a combination of pictographic, ideographic, and partially phonetic characters or glyphs” (Leon-Portilla xlv). In Mexica traditions, “*in xochitl, in cuicatl*” , or “flower and song”, was used as a metaphor to refer to the beautiful use of language by poets and scholars, *tlamantinime*, or wise men (Mignolo, *Darker Side* 97). Fewer than thirty pre-contact examples of these texts exist today, due to their mass destruction during colonization, along with about fifty others contemporaneous with colonization (Chagoya no pag.).

In a broad sense, much of this theoretical and historical work challenges definitions of literacy. Along with Anzaldúa, the semiotician and scholar of colonial history Walter Mignolo is a crucial theorist to subverting colonialist narratives of rhetoric. In his crucial work *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, Mignolo explodes the role of language in the Spanish colonization of the Americas. “The relationship between discourse and power during colonial expansion” is contingent, in his analysis, on competing and conflictive literacies, the presupposition by the Spanish that letters can tame speech (but pictographs cannot), and the very definition of “book” itself (7, 42). Mignolo draws the distinction between utterly different conceptions of reading: the western notion of “reading the word”, of discerning, and the indigenous notion of “reading the world”, of reading as discerning meaning from something perceived rather than decoded. It is these theories of reading visually that lead most productively into comics-related analysis.

Indigeneity and comics studies

The preceding critiques of the received history of Rhetoric are thoroughly grounded in Native Studies and ideas of indigeneity. There exists previous scholarship

that makes the connection between comics and indigenous people, but it seldom makes the connection to visual rhetoric. The most prominent stance taken is that of the stereotype collector: this mode of analysis looks at images of Native Americans and indigenous people and evaluates the qualities of their portrayal. The evaluations given can be negative, positive, accurate, inaccurate, racist, gendered, or more nuanced descriptions. Michael A. Sheyashe's *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* is currently the only book-length work that takes this approach specifically to comic books, and scholars including Audrey Schwartz have attempted to build on this work in rhetorical directions. As comics studies develops its breadth, critiques of portrayals of indigenous people such as Melissa L. Mellon's "Our Minds in the Gutters: Sexuality, History, and Reader Responsibility in George O'Connor's Graphic Novel Journey into Mohawk Country" may become more common. As yet, they are still rare.

There are even fewer historical or theoretical works on comics that incorporate indigenous approaches and concerns. Oddly, one of the few places where an indigenous text is taken seriously in a comics studies context is in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. The book that has been a gateway to the analysis of comics for so many of us begins with an analysis of several sequential visual texts in order to develop a formalist definition of comics, including the Aztec narrative of 8-Deer Ocelot's Claw. McCloud reads the text (as translated by Alfonso Caso) and proclaims that it is, in fact, a work of comics. He moves on to call the Bayeux tapestry comics, and Egyptian tomb painting, and European printmaking (10-19).

The global perspective utilized in this brief portion of the work acts as a legitimizing narrative for the existence of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in

deliberate sequence” (9). McCloud naturalizes the production of comics by attributing them to cultures across the globe, spanning thousands of years. In fact, it may be seen as a colonial act to use indigenous work as part of your foundational narrative, but then never revisit the issue or give further consideration to the work beyond appropriating it as part of your history.

Reading a few individual visual texts from a diversity of locations outside of their cultural contexts is a surprisingly effective introduction to a book largely about American, European, and Japanese comics traditions. But, almost no one else in comics studies is running around calling codices comic books, or vice versa. Robert C. Harvey has criticized McCloud’s definition of comics for including things that are not recognizable as comics to a contemporary audience: “By his definition, the Bayeux tapestry and Mexican codices are comics. So is written Chinese. McCloud’s definition includes what we call comics just as ‘quadruped’ includes horses” (75). It has become much more common to define the beginning of comics’ history as beginning with the nineteenth century Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer, who not only made cartoons but wrote about how they should be constructed (Kunzle 17-23).

Visual rhetorical traditions

If you begin with the assertion that the thing contemporary readers collectively recognize as comics first begins to be articulated in the 1830's by Töpffer, but other things can still be meaningful ancestors or predecessors, how have we determined which ancestors, which relations, it is important to pay attention to? Who have we paid attention to in the past, and who and what are currently within our scholarly attention? Throw a dart at current scholarship and you will hit an American or a European, maybe a

printmaker. There remain many lacunae in this site of cultural memory, unraveled parts of this tapestry. More needs to be said about past, present, and future connections between comics as we know them and the history of visual rhetoric.

I do not mean to imply that European printmakers should not be explored further in the context of this field of study: our discipline is so new that branches can grow in any direction. In fact, I believe this kind of work can invite parallel explorations of indigenous visual rhetoric in a comics context. One particularly good example of this kind of work is the Winter 2007 issue of *ImageText* itself, focused on the works of William Blake and their relation to the visual. The introduction to that special issue gives a multifaceted justification of why a journal focused on comics and cartoons would give a whole issue to something that isn't either of those. "There issomething deeper, however, a Broglieian-Blakean-Deleuzian mole tunneling beneath contemporary comic culture, driving creators to aesthetic innovation with visions of brimstone and apocalyptic nightmares contesting the bourgeois dream life of spandex-clad defenders of the status quo" (Whitson 3). The connection between Blake and comics is weird but intuitive, and further justified by William J.T. Mitchell's conception of "imagetext" itself, originally developed based on Blake (4).

William Blake did not make comics, but he did make imagetext, and his imagetext resonates with current makers of comics in many complicated ways. Pre-conquest Mexica *tlamantinime* did not make comic books either, but they certainly did make imagetext, and the relationship between ancient texts and contemporary texts can be constellated in a similar way.

If *amoxтли* and *vuh* are not comics, how do we talk about them in this context? Imagetext is certainly available as a theoretical tool, but a concept drawn from Mignolo may be more useful in a context laden with cultural issues. In the preface to *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* he describes the impetus behind his frequent and recurring use of the word “tradition” in the text. He invites the reader to understand a tradition as “not something that is there to be remembered, but *the process of remembering and forgetting itself*” (xv). They are “a multiplexed and filtered ensemble of acts of saying, remembering, and forgetting.... ‘traditions’ are the loci where people are bonded in....ways of organizing and conceiving themselves in a given space (by country or border) by constructing an image of both the self and the other” (xv).

I propose a theory of visual rhetorical traditions—a tool to investigate ways people are bonded in representing themselves and others in a visual way. Visual rhetorical traditions need not be unbroken chains of ways of doing; accessing Mignolo’s conception, traditions are also acts of remembering, forgetting, reinscribing, and reforging of memory. Looking at the connection between Blake and comics is the remaking of a memory of cultural practices in our comics community. Looking at the connections between codex rhetorics and comics made today is an act of remembering.

This theory seeks to recognize and name commonalities in a broader sense than comics form, although such structures can fall under this umbrella. By that, I mean to extend this tool beyond the formalist approaches widespread in comics studies right now: the use of panels and certain conventionalized representations of space and time can be one visual rhetorical tradition that we are making a memory of by looking back to Töpffer, this theory encompasses any visual act of saying that can be repeated and reused.

This theory looks for consistencies and strategies between texts or across them rather than within any given iteration of a text.

The title of this paper, “Imagining a Multiplicity of Visual Rhetorical Traditions”, suggests an alternative to “the Rhetorical Tradition” as the locus of the history of writing. A multiplicity of traditions stands as a kind of “pluritopic hermeneutic” in opposition to the monotopic way of understanding history that currently dominates the study of rhetoric (Mignolo 11). A theory of multiplicitous visual rhetorical traditions has the potential to explore the relationship between comics and other visual media that are not comics but exist in a similar social location, or within a culture or discourse community. Ways of making meaning through visual representation carry across genre and form, yet formalist comics definitions deprecate relationships across forms (possibly because comics have so often been looked at as derivative of other forms).

As Mignolo says regarding tools: “We not only use a tool; we justify its uses as selected from among many possibilities. The use of the tool is as ideological as the descriptions intended to justify its use” (24). This is an ideological description of an ideological tool: this tool is intended for decolonial inquiry that decenters the teleological history of writing in the west and values literacy in visual rhetorical forms. Thus, I intend to focus my analysis specifically on the use of *indigenous* visual rhetorical traditions rather than traditions being forged and rewoven by other comics scholars.

Applying the theory of indigenous visual rhetorical traditions: theory and praxis

Indigenous visual rhetorical traditions can speak to many aspects of comics. In a broad sense, they can ask the question of rhetorical purpose: what are comics for? Can purposes currently being accessed through the medium be complicated by these

traditions, and can these traditions serve as a springboard for invention for new modes of comics?

Two comics-identified works within the reach of my analysis and description speak back to these questions. (By “comics-identified”, I mean that the creators of the works have named them in their own words as comics, and this analysis takes them at their word, without feeding them through a definitional filter.) One work is an ambitious collaborative project by a team of professionals with art-world prestige, published and distributed at first on a small scale, and then for the broader market through a large publisher. The other is a small project for a micro-audience designed by me, the author of this paper, specifically to put some of these theoretical ideas into practice. Both of these works specifically access visual rhetorical traditions exemplified by Mexica codex traditions in order to serve purposes not often considered in the context of comics: as works with a functional relationship to memory as well as performance.

Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol is a collaborative book art project, self-identified by co-creator as a “post-Columbian Spanglish comix/codex” (Gomez-Peña no pag.). It is the work of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, a performance artist, Enrique Chagoya, a painter and collage artist, and Felicia Rice, a book artist and typographer. It was first printed in 1998 a limited-edition artists book, but later adapted for a wider printing. The original version of the text was printed using *amatl*, or traditional Mexican bark paper, and letterpress. Felicia Rice identifies in the introduction: “In a sense, the printing process forced a compromise between a native material and a tool of colonization, the printing press” (no pag.). The book has the accordion-fold form of the surviving Mexica codices, and takes up many of the visual

tropes of such works, including ways of representing human figures. The book also collages liberally from the American comics tradition, including snippets of Mickey Mouse and Superman. (In particular, identifiable elements and dialogue quotes from the Superman story “For the Man Who Has Everything” by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons appear, as well as pieces of the Death of Superman as drawn by Dan Jurgens: see Figures 1 and 2.)

I was first introduced to the book, and by extension to the opus of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, through the work of Damián Baca. In his book *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*, he describes the book in detail in a chapter regarding Chicano codex rhetorics: “By intertwining Mesoamerican pictography with Mexican murals and Chicano iconography, codex rhetorics at once look back to the Mesoamerican past while critiquing the present and inventing possible shared futures” (79).

A theory of visual rhetorical traditions asks, what does this book do? How can understanding indigenous visual meaning-making practices and uses of visual rhetoric enrich our understanding of this work and the rhetorical action it takes? In this case, key to appreciating the work being done by *Codex Espangliensis* is some understanding of the role of performance in relationship to the reading of codexes, and Mexica notions of reading in general.

Codexes are notoriously “laconic texts”, as described by Elizabeth Hill Boone. When trying to read one of these texts in the same way one would read a contemporaneous European text, a great amount of detail seems to be lacking. The images that communicate meaning seem very terse in comparison. However, the idea of

sitting down individually with a book as an alphabetically literate individual and consuming a fully conceived message transmitted by an author is antithetical to literacy practices in this cultural context.

Codexes were not necessarily consumed by individuals, but rather, were performed by wise men who knew how to interpret their images in the correct way, and knew where to elaborate on the seemingly laconic images. The books were mnemonics for a larger performance: the images acted as shorthand, capturing the essential details of topics such as history and social order, while giving structure to the story. "...the pictorial histories were read aloud to an audience, they were interpreted, and their images were expanded and embellished in the oration of a full story. The pictorial histories were painted specifically to be the rough text of performance" (Boone "Aztec" 71).

Thus, I argue *Codex Espangliensis* accesses this visual rhetorical tradition: the use of a laconic visual text as script and mnemonic for a performance, rather than an intentionally autonomous work. I intend for this interpretation to be additive, rather than dismissive of other literary and rhetorical readings of the work. In a literal sense, the book contains the script of a performance; but in a figurative way, the book stands as a reforging of the connection between visual rhetoric and performance, picking up comics elements along the way.

A further commonality between the indigenous texts produced contemporaneously with colonization that Mignolo analyzes and this text is the notion of the "coexistence and conflicting interactions of alternative and conflictive literacies" (Mignolo, "Signs" 273). Texts produced under the watch of colonial powers combined both the visual rhetorical traditions of indigenous sign systems with alphabetic writing

introduced as part of the colonial project. Many of these texts document the conflict of colonization itself as their subject. “Conflictive literacies” adroitly describes the collision of word and image in *Codex Espangliensis*. Words are in places bold, and in other places barely legible, and are in both Spanish and English; some of the text is denotative and some imaginative, drawn from a performance by Gomez-Peña that re-imagines Europe being colonized by the people of the Americas.

The images of the book are laden with violent conflict themselves. Superheroes collaged from other contexts float through the work, engaged in bloody violence. These interactions contain some text, also collaged from other comics (including some very noticeable Alan Moore dialogue) and yet they do not necessarily supply a complete sequential story. Even the order of the pages itself is brought into question by a conflict of literacy practices. Should the book be read from right to left or left to right? The introduction to the text suggests that both happen at once, and that the conflicting meanings produced by both readings, “in fragments and in recurring episodes” reflect the way history itself unfolds (Gonzales n.p.). The laconic nature of the codex tradition once again comes to bear: while the images and their juxtapositions exist as ambiguous, violent tableaux, they also serve as mnemonics of stories that readers already know, whether they are comfortable being reminded of them or not.

There is no uninterrupted history of codex-making practice that connects the rhetorical work being done by Gomez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice with pre-conquest manuscripts. However, *Codex Espangliensis* is a massive act of memory, reaching into both American popular cultural imagery and indigenous imagery to invent a way to represent the ongoing struggles of colonialism in a way that is both new and old. The

book engages the rhetorical traditions of the Americas and transmits them to future visual rhetors: by identifying itself as a work of comix, as well as a codex, it suggests that memory work and performance work can be tasks done by other visual texts.

Codex Espangliensis is the best mass-distributed work that I have encountered that exemplifies this theory, in the context of indigenous traditions. However, I began a comix-creating odyssey of my own around the same time that I began working with this theory. I would like to discuss one of my own works in order to further demonstrate how comics and visual rhetoric can engage memory in productive and useful ways, building off of indigenous rhetorical traditions.

In 2008, as part of a graduate seminar on the history and theory of rhetoric taught by Dr. Malea Powell at Michigan State University, I had the opportunity to create a synthetic final project. Rather than writing seminar papers, we were assigned to create something more akin to a “collage essay”, where multiple voices, narratives, arguments, and styles can intersect and overlap. However, the specific form and genre of the piece we were to create was up to us: non-alphabetic projects were welcomed.

Over the course of the semester, we had swept through several thousand years of human history, moving from Aristotelian rhetoric to Iroquois wampum hypertextual practices (Haas 77), and from the *Belle lettres* era of rhetoric to the postmodern and postcolonial (or paracolonial) era. When dealing with such a vast amount of information, the critical faculty I wanted my final project to address was memory. How do you remember all the things you have learned in such a broad survey? The question deviled all of us in the course of the semester. However, we also encountered memory as it lives in the history of rhetoric, in Europe and in the Americas: in the “memory palaces” and

mnemonic devices used in medieval Europe to extend and organize human memory before the dawn of print, in the use of sequential images in codexes to give “armature” to a work that relies on human memory for its performance (Boone 55). Indeed, memory is often described by rhetoricians as the “lost canon”, as it was considered crucial in ancient Greek rhetoric, but ascribed less significance as time went on; however, as is conclusively demonstrated by scholars of indigenous rhetorics such as Angela Haas and Damián Baca, memory remains crucial to understanding the function of many indigenous rhetorical traditions.

After much internal debate over what I actually wanted to make (my original plan was to make a talking accordion-fold codex that used the same technology as musical birthday cards, but I wasn’t able to pull that off) I wrote, drew, collaged, and assembled a 16-page zine mini-comic. While the work is titled “Nonsense Comix 6: Oh shit, I’m in grad school...” the purpose of the text is serious. Through weaving sarcastic humor with allusions to the history of rhetoric, I attempted to create a comic that was also a mnemonic for what we learned and theorized together as a class over the course of a semester. I transformed what I considered the most significant ideas from the course into drawings and collaged images, as well as hand-lettered and collaged text. Furthermore, the comic I created was an artifact that would go home with each member of the class. It was my hope that the comic I created would be *useful* as well as interesting, as something that could be revisited as a trigger for our poor frazzled grad student memories when we needed to remember something about, say, Hugh Blair.

I would like to describe the second inside page of my comic, because it is an example of a page that combines original drawings and text, along with collage, to hold

memories of many significant moments of learning. The page takes its layout, with a primary image/text surrounded by small blocked off images and texts, from the Codex Borgia, a pre-conquest divinatory manuscript. First and foremost, the page it contains my personal definition of rhetoric being spoken aloud by a human figure (creating such a definition was an assignment in the course): “the multiplicity of voices and images engaged in making meaning”. Below this definition is an image of a bird saying, “This is a thing you do in grad school. You define things. Kenneth Burke talked about man as the symbol-using animal, goaded by hierarchy, but he could have as easily meant grad students.” The bird is intended to be the wren mentioned at the very beginning of Burke’s “Definition of Man”.

Surrounding this primary panel are other mnemonic images and quotes referencing other related ideas, as well as jokes and stories from the course. The triangle in the upper-right hand corner of the page that shows the letters L, E, and P and the phrase “whence blackmail?” refers to the rhetorical triangle of logos, ethos, and pathos, and a story I shared about trying to teach this for the first time to freshman writing students. (I tried to have my students brainstorm ways that one might be persuasive, in hopes that we could then derive the Aristotelian triad from their ideas. It almost worked, except one group of students were really hung up on blackmail as a persuasive force, which didn’t really fit into a lesson on essay writing. Maybe it’s a form of ethos? Who knows.) An image excerpted from an episode of the webcomic XKCD appears in the lower left hand corner of the page, showing a sweating stick figure about to enter a room full of playpen balls, with a dialogue balloon appearing from the right reading “Are ya scared yet?” This represents a metaphor I brought up in class based on that comic strip.

While the original comic represents adulthood and being “grown-up” as the ability to define what grown-up means, including defining it as the ability to fill your living room with playpen balls and jump in, I often looked at the avalanche of ideas coming at us as first-year graduate students as playpen balls that we had the right to jump in. The ball pit metaphor transformed several times over the semester, but it is one of my most memorable metaphoric images from the class (along with Timmy the Terministic screen, a character who shows up later in the comic as well).

The pages contains other laconic images and terse phrases that are intended to trigger memories about rhetorical theory: the monkey in the upper right hand corner, as well as the phrase, “Reading is a form of life.” in the lower left hand corner, allude to Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey*; similarly, other text on the page alludes to Lacan and to Derrida. The expressive image of the *New Mutants* character Danielle Moonstar, as drawn by Bill Sienkiewicz, serves in part to represent the bewildered and alarmed graduate student taking in all of this for the first time. (Really, the first time you read Derrida you might as well be studying at the Xavier mansion or Hogwarts: it is certainly bewildering.) It’s also intended as an ironic inclusion of a fictional indigenous comic book character, created by white folks, in a comic that attempts to embody some indigenous visual rhetorical traditions, made by a white academic.

That is a really wordy elaboration of what goes on in just one especially meaning-laden page of the comic. However, as it is intended to play out, this chain of remembering would take place mentally, after the end of the course, as a way to refresh and revisit what we learned (with an emphasis on what I, as the comic’s creator, contributed and thought was most important, to be fair). It is somewhat difficult to

measure the success of such a venture. I have found returning to this text useful in my later studies and scholarship as a reminder of what I had already read. The comic has also been used by colleagues at Michigan State University and Texas A&M to teach rhetoric and multimodal composition. And I have returned to the strategy of using mnemonic images in later comics I have created, although not in quite as explicit a way as I attempted in this work. Overall, I am pleased to consider it a successful experiment, and an encouraging one.

Instead of producing a modern-day artifact that looks anything like a codex, what I attempted to do was to use codexes, as well as other mnemonic indigenous visual texts such as Lakota winter counts, as springboards to ask the question: what are comics for? What can a comic be for? If the extension of human memory was key to such visual texts, can this also be done in a comic?

It is in this way that I believe my project and a larger work like *Codex Espangliensis* share common ground. Both works use indigenous visual rhetorical traditions as a starting point to extend the potential of contemporary textual production: the codex accesses the relationship between visual rhetoric and performance to tell a new and transgressive story of resistance to colonization, and my comic accesses the relationship between visual rhetoric and memory to serve as an mnemonic for a large amount of rhetorical history and theory. At the same time, both texts remain coherent sequential narratives (as ambiguous as the one presented in *Codex Espangliensis* may be). Finally, I hope that this pair of examples shows how thinking about visual rhetorical traditions, shared acts of remembering and forgetting, of reforging of connections, can be

useful in both interpreting what is going on in a text with obvious historical connections, as well as in imaging what can be done with a text as a writer, artist, or creator.

The legitimacy of visual texts

To conclude, in viewing decolonial histories of writing and the history of comics side by side, there is a clear duplication of effort to define visual texts as serious and legitimate, in different academic contexts. In both cases, the evolutionary model of writing that labels communicating with pictures both primitive and childish has caused harm to producers of visual rhetoric. However, the scale of the harm done becomes exponentially larger as a force of colonial power, to destroy the libraries of entire civilizations, than as a force that merely reifies the canon of literature and privileges alphabetic text as more worthwhile than comics.

In Thierry Groensteen's essay "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization", reprinted in *A Comics Studies Reader*, he decries the comic's lack of legitimacy: despite the comic's continuous existence since Töpffer, "it is curious that the legitimizing authorities (universities, museums, the media) still regularly charge it with being infantile, vulgar, or insignificant" (3). He describes comics as enacting the "imprisonment of verbal expression in the visual system" and claims that "the champions of a culture which postulates the supremacy of the written word over all other forms of expression could only take this inversion as an attack" (6-7). Walter Mignolo also deals extensively with the devaluing of non-alphabetic writing by power structures and legitimizing authorities. In his afterward to *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, he describes that "one of the consequences of alphabetic writing in the history of the west was its close association with speech and the

increasing distinction between writing and drawing” (293). In this case, “the Greek legacy of the power of the letter to represent speech” is the legacy that indigenous texts contend with (300).

In both cases, the authors access Derrida’s critique from *On Grammatology* that logocentrism leads to the fallacy that writing copies speech. However, Groensteen largely elides the part of Derridean critique that identifies ethnocentrism as well as logocentrism in the elevation of alphabetic texts as the highest of all intellectual forms. Additionally, Mignolo is writing about the material extermination of all but a few dozen manuscripts from before colonization, while Groensteen is largely writing about texts being accorded the same respect as literature. In fact, Groensteen’s complain that, in regards to a particular history of comics “over a half a century of French, English, Dutch, Spanish, and even American comics denied existence because they weren’t mass-produced!” seems downright petulant in comparison to the destruction by fire of Mexica, Maya, Mixtec, and Toltec works en masse by colonial authorities such as Diego de Landa so that only a handful remain today (Mignolo, *Darker Side* 71).

Rather than set up an argument about whose visual texts are the most marginalized and why, it is more important to let this comparison force the question, can we address how the power structures of colonialism work with logocentrism to marginalize visual rhetorical traditions? Is it possible that the same forces that led to the destruction of indigenous works are still marginalizing visual works, in different ways, through different material and historical processes. This possibility is a fruitful and interesting space for people working in comics studies, rhetoric and composition, and indigenous studies to build theory and interdisciplinary conversation. I have only begun

to suggest brief examples of places where this has happened already in the crafting of visual rhetorical texts; more probably exist already, and many more can be produced if this framework is used as a springboard.

In the end, there can never be only one history of comics or rhetoric, but many narratives grounded in time and place. We are constituted by the multiplicity of stories we tell about ourselves, within and without our scholarly work. Through this work, I would like to imagine comics studies as a place where decolonial work can happen to constellate our field as broadly as possible, and to draw productively from as many places as possible, to craft a truly interdisciplinary field of study that does justice to visual rhetorical traditions practiced by people throughout space and time.

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CHAPTER 2

COMICS AS A LITERACY TECHNOLOGY/LITERATE TECHNOLOGY

“I’ve been thinking of cartooning as a kind of visual compression algorithm lately. They travel in such a simple, reduced state, but when unpacked in the mind of the viewer, even a few simple lines can yield a huge set of ideas and emotions.”

Scott McCloud, “Art Compressed”

Introduction

I recognize that I see comics differently from most people in the field of Rhetoric. In this chapter, I would like to explain the context in which I see the comics. I will also build on the theory and critique I articulated in chapter 1, and develop a complementary theory: that comics are a technology in addition to everything else that they do. This lens calls attention to the sophistication, inventedness, and materiality of comics as well as their ability to bridge the image/word divide that has besotted Western intellectual traditions for millennia.

In order to do this I will first discuss some prior theory on the technologies of literacy and the adequacies and inadequacies of these theories for my own comics related purposes. Then, I will explain my own reasons for seeing comics as a technology and what that lets us do, and furthermore, how this theory has enabled my own academic comics praxis.

Technology and literacy

The field of rhetoric and composition has a strong commitment to the study of technology and literacy. This movement runs from Christina Haas’s work addressing “The Technology Question” to Adam Banks’s work on the digital divide. This work largely focuses on computing

technology and literacy. In his essay “From Pencils to Pixels”, Dennis Baron briefly defines a technology as “a way of engineering materials in order to accomplish an end” (16). Baron goes on to frame computers as only the latest in a long history of literacy technologies that have affected humans’ composing practices since the invention of writing.

At the same time, there is much less scholarship in our field on comic books and literacy. In his 2007 CCCC paper, “Marveling at the Man Called Nova: Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal Literacy”, Dale Jacobs begins to elaborate a theory of comic books and multiliteracies against a largely blank backdrop. As he acknowledges, visual rhetoric, while a vibrant set of theories and practices, has had very little to say regarding comics. Yet, they are critically important to the study of multimodal literacy, in theory as well as in the practice of literacy education. He offers a broad definition of terms, as well: “comics are a cultural idiom; a publishing genre; a set of narrative conventions; a kind of writing that uses words and pictures; a literary genre; and texts” (“Marveling” 181).

What are the potential benefits of adding “technology” to the already lengthy list of ways to look at comics?

First of all, the act of recognizing technologies as such is part of the decolonization imperative. Contrary to popular understandings, a technology is not by definition electronic or computer-oriented. It can be any way humans innovate and shape their environment. Nor is technology confined to the modern era. Despite colonial history’s relegation of them to an a-technological past, indigenous peoples have always done so, and done so in ways that remain relevant today. The work of Cherokee rhetorician Angela Haas epitomizes this effort to name and claim. One crucial move in her body of work is to situate wampum as hypertext, and by implication an invented technology that is a part of American Indian intellectual history.

In Iroquoian tradition, purple and white wampum beads, created from the shell of the quahog clam, are strung in belts and strands in order to extend human memory and symbolize important events and agreements. Haas’s analysis links function of this native invention to

Western narratives about the “invention” of hypertext--as a technology that extends human memory.

Although there are certainly some potential benefits hypertext theory can reap from the study of wampum as hypertext, to be clear, I am not asserting that wampum is the origins of hypertext. After all, if I am suggesting that there are other stories that tell tales of hypertextuality that have gone untold, adding the story of wampum alone will not remedy this absence. But it does make one absent story present in our discussions of hypertext. And the addition of this story may lead us to better understand the theory of discovery. (Haas 96)

She goes on to explain that distinguishing between technologies invented and one place and the independent invention of technologies in disparate historical sites is an ongoing problem--and that this ties to ideas of “discovery”. This is significant, because by introducing a technological lens to the study of comics, I do not intend to reiterate dated early modern ideas of heroic individual inventors, nor do I put much stock in any claims that one person discovered or invented comics.

A decolonial view of technologies acknowledges that indigenous technologies have contemporary value, alongside and within technologies not widely considered to be native in origin. The consequences of this for comics are that it allows us another path to acknowledge all the many ancestors of the comics written today. Haas makes the story of wampum present in and alongside discussions of hypertext, enriching the conversation as well as doing decolonial work. It is my hope that similar work can be applied to comics, exploring their many roots as well as encouraging a decolonial view of their origin, their present, and future.

Secondly, such a lens allows for comparative analysis with other forms of literacy technology; to invite the question, what are comics doing differently or better than other

technologies of writing? Dennis Baron has outlined a theory of the development of such literacy technologies:

When we write with cutting-edge tools, it is easy to forget that whether it consists of energized particles on a screen or ink embedded in paper or lines gouged into clay tablets, writing itself is always first and foremost a technology, *a way of engineering materials in order to accomplish an end* [emphasis mine]. Tied up as it is with value-laden notions of literacy, art, and science, of history and psychology, of education, of theory, and of practicality, we often lose sight of writing as technology, until, that is, a new technology like the computer comes along and we are thrown into excitement and confusion as we try it on, try it out, reject it, and then adapt it to our lives—and of course, adapt our lives to it. (16)

Baron historicizes the ways humans have engineered materials for purposes of recording information (not just for the recording of speech), and how new technologies are often feared and found to be untrustworthy--that people freaked out in similar ways to the invention of pencils, or God forbid, pencils with erasers as they did to the invention of word processing, spell check, and the modern digital writing apparatus.

It is interesting to imagine where comics or the comic book would fall in the chronology he marks out for the evolution of a literacy technology. As he tells it, it begins with the technology having a “restricted communication function” that only a few people have the skills or knowledge to use (such as scribes). They keep it to themselves at first, either because it is too complicated to teach people or too expensive to be widely used.

The technology expands beyond this “priestly” class when it is adapted to familiar functions often associated with an older, accepted form of communication. As costs decrease and

the technology becomes better able to mimic more ordinary or familiar communications, a new literacy spreads across a population. Only then does the technology come into its own, no longer imitating the previous forms given us by the earlier communications technology but creating new forms and new possibilities for communication.

Additionally, he brings up the issue of trustworthiness. He claims that negative reactions spread in parallel to new literacy technologies, “from supporters of what are purported to be older, simpler, better, or more honest ways of writing.” This history of reactions runs from Plato’s mistrust of the written word (very familiar to students of Rhetoric) to worries about internet plagiarism today.

To be honest, when I first encountered Baron’s essay, I thought that this would perfectly match the narrative of persecution set up by people like Thierry Groensteen and everyone else in comics studies (as explained in the introduction to this thesis), and explain definitively why people mistrust/have mistrusted comics in the past and present.

However, I am not quite so inclined to do this anymore. One aspect of Baron’s analysis that precludes applying it to comics is that he only concerns himself with technologies that “caught on”, so to speak--things that made themselves ubiquitous for the day to day practice of literacy in the west. The alphabet caught on (to put it lightly); the pencil caught on; the telephone caught on. They all triumphed in the face of anxieties, rising beyond the use of a priestly class and came to the homes of everyday Americans. What would this look like for comics? Would it mean that everyone reads comic books, or that everyone makes their own comic books?

Are comics even the kind of technology that strives to be ubiquitous? It is hard for me to imagine comics “going viral”--I am not sure they are so fundamentally different from what came before them, or that you can clearly delineate the invention of comics (although some have tried) in order to make the comparison. I think if anything, comics as they are today are more tied to a shift to the visual in Western culture in general.

But, Baron does ask interesting comparative questions, and invites us to think of technology before and beyond the digital age. While his work does not enter into any conversations about colonialism and literacy technologies outside of the western trajectory from Ancient Greece to today, such conversations can dovetail well from his theories because of his definition of technology: an engineering of materials to achieve an end.

The technology of the comic: fighting logocentrism

If you see a technology as an engineering of materials to achieve an end, what end does the technology of the comic book serve?

I believe that it is a technology that reunites word and image, a technology that allows for seeing the word as itself another kind of image. In this, it is a technology to overcome and to heal the damage that logocentrism has wrought to our capacity as rhetors. In this sense, rather than any theorist explicitly associated with the technology of literacy, I find the work of Jacques Derrida to be an extremely useful tool to understand what comics are doing, what they are and can be for, how they are different.

In fact, understanding comics is all about understanding the absent present. In fact, if you're having trouble understanding the Derridean notion of absent presence, and the constant there-and-not-there nature of signs, look at a sequential narrative. Meaning is on the page, and also somewhere else. Something is happening between the panels, in the "gutter". Images are laconic--similarly to how Elizabeth Hill Boone describes the visual rhetoric of Mexica codexes, not all of their meaning is encoded literally in the signs inscribed on the page.

Comics as a technology that is used to collapse the distinction between image and word is, perhaps, the redemption of Biff Bam and Pow. In my introduction to this thesis, I brought up the concept of "biff-bam-powism"--a clichéd symptom that someone has just "discovered" comics. Biff, bam, and pow are words, of a sort. They contain letters, but they have no real

definition. They are onomatopoeia. But, because of this lack of definition, they also function as images. No one “says” these words in a comic. They happen because of action. The technology of the comic allows for alphabetic text to function in ways underutilized in other print discourses—to embody action, rather than describe or explain it. Comics, like all other forms of rhetoric, are not just acts of saying, but acts of doing.

Is a codex a comic? Returning to definitions brought up in Chapter 1, as far as Understanding Comics is concerned, it is. Under most scholarly definitions produced after McCloud, it is not. But, if the comic is a technology that overturns the logocentric fallacy and reunites the separated image and word, literate intellectual traditions that never developed such a separation would have no need to invent such a thing. Codexes contain visual rhetoric, for certain, but they are not comics not because they don’t operate in a very similar way, but because they come from a culture of *tliilli*, *tlapalli*, that conceptualized writing and drawing as “the black and the red ink” and had such a separation forced on with the violence of colonization.

What is the absent present in the sign that is this definition? Literature opposes Not Literature. Writing opposes Not Writing. Art opposes Not Art. A technological definition carries the baggage of those who naturalize comics—teleological notions of writing which see pictographic writing as the first stage in a rightward marching arrow of progress, that at the same time attribute visual representation as uncomplicated and inherent to human expression.

Seeing comics as a literacy technology means seeing them as intentional, invented, and intellectual. The ideology of using the tool of comics is that images *are* literate. Making a comic means that you believe comics can and should be made, and read.

The black box

If comics are a technology, what are the components of the technology? What materials are engineered? Where does it end and something else begins? How concerned do we have to be with *how* the technology works?

A print comic is images and words on paper, printed with ink (or toner); they can be black and white, or color. You can have a stand-alone comic book. It's a simple enough place to start our analysis. They can contain both words and images, and by definition blur the distinction between words and images. Compositionally, they can be treated as equal elements of the page. While it is relatively ordinary to see a comic that doesn't have any words at all, it is much rarer (but possible) to have a comic that doesn't have any images at all, other than comics-specific visual devices and words.

Furthermore, there exists a class of meaning-laden images, or visual devices, that the comic uses to communicate. This is one of the things that distinguishes a comic from an illustrated book. Speech is delineated by dialogue balloons, and thought is marked by lumpy-edged thought balloons. Narration is often placed in rectangular boxes. Text can live in other places as well, especially when it is onomatopoeic.

Comics also have their own units of meaning: primarily, pages and panels. While a page is as subjective of a unit of information as a page in an alphabetic book, a panel is the smallest division of information available. The use of panels to organize images and words, as opposed to paragraphs or bullet points or slides, is one of the primary elements of the technology of the comic.

One can go much further in describing and cataloguing the minutiae of how a comics page works. As is probably evident from my analysis so far, it would be hard to call me a formalist. I am concerned with form to the extent that it is rhetorical, that is, intentionally chosen to coincide with an external audience and purpose, or for the purpose of putting into practice certain meaning-making strategies.

There is a branch of comics studies, embodied by Thierry Groensteen, that pays extremely close attention to form, attempting to systematize description of everything that can happen on a page. I find this kind of study distressingly positivist. Nailing down a glossary of terms for everything that one sees on a page may be one way of answering the question of how comics work, but I do not believe it answers the question of what they are for, or what they can do in a gestalt sense. However, seeing comics as a gearbox and the technology of the comic as the individual gears may be tempting.

Rather than taking this approach, I am going to borrow a term I learned from some computer scientists: the “black box”. A “black box” technology has its internal functions obscured from view; sometimes something is literally in a black box or blob of resin that can’t be opened, to keep proprietary technology a secret. Sometimes, this phrase is used as a criticism of someone’s understanding of a technology--that they are only concerned with inputs and outputs and not with what is actually going on inside.

I would like to intentionally think of comics as a black box technology, in order to avoid the trap of excessive preoccupation with form. I see the technology of the comic as a whole, as a choice among many that has material consequences (paper, page size, color) as well as specific features lacking in other materially similar technologies (the lack of panels as an organizational unit in a print book, for instance).

The materiality of the print comics is also significant to analyzing them as a technology. The print comic has the ability to be made cheaply. Now, not all comics are cheap, and publishing and distributing one on a wide scale is certainly expensive. But, there is a low barrier to entry. All that is needed to make and distribute a comic is a pen and blank paper, and a photocopier. (The photocopier being a truly underappreciated literacy technology, in my humble opinion.) They are also, as print objects, delightfully analog. This sets them apart from most of the literacy technologies that are currently under critical scrutiny, which exist largely in the digital realm. While many things can, of course, go wrong in the process of making a comic,

once they have been printed they are very stable. I sometimes think of a print comic with a small distribution as “semi-private publishing”--one’s information can get some circulation, but lives outside of the copy-and-paste realm of infinite reproducibility. Granted, this only applies to something with a small circulation--but the nature of the print comic is that one has options about how many copies will be made and where they may go.

Finally, the technology of the comic combines well with the notion of visual rhetorical traditions. A visual rhetorical tradition can happen in and outside of the technology of the comic. They exist separately from the “invention” of comics, or codexes, or the internet, or ink. As I stated in chapter 1, a visual rhetorical tradition is a tool to investigate ways people are bonded in representing themselves and others in a visual way, as well as a method for re-forging connections that may have been damaged by colonial violence.

Using the technology of the comic in the academy

I will conclude this chapter by sharing my own experiences of using the technology of comics, of engineering materials to resist logocentricity, in an academic setting. My own experiences have shown me that the technology of the comic pairs very well with the material reality of being a graduate teaching assistant, and a graduate student embarking on an academic career. Through actually making comics as a strategic part of my research, I was inspired to detail this very theory.

To review, some of the attributes of the technology of comics is the unification of the visual and the verbal; the division information into panels and pages; and the potential cheapness of production.

Combining words and images, chunking information into smaller units, and doing so in a way not dependent on the fickle nature of digital presentation technologies are all attributes that

led me to using comics instead of PowerPoint presentations in settings where I had to present my research.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, my first comic done in an academic setting experimented with explicitly engaging indigenous visual rhetorical traditions in a comics context. Following that project, a seminar project, I encountered another academic genre: the research presentation, both in-class and at conferences.

Microsoft PowerPoint is an ubiquitous software technology, often used to direct the attention of listeners. It is verbal/visual, and chunks information into slides and bullets. It relies on digital projector technology and software compatibility...unless you print it out. Now, this particular medium has been very thoroughly critiqued, and with very much hand-wringing, in many different fields and venues. For my purposes, it will suffice to say that making a PowerPoint is easy to do badly.

The idea of using a short print comic where I might be expected to make a PowerPoint or some other kind of digital slide presentation dawned on me through my readings on the connection between visual texts and oral performance in indigenous visual rhetorical traditions. In these traditions, visual and verbal texts complement oral performance.

What are comics for? What can an academic use comics for? I believe this visual rhetorical tradition suggests we may use them to complement our own brand of oral performance. They are especially good at accompanying the kind of performance where the audience may be expecting some kind of print artifact, such as a more typical bullet-pointed handout or outline.

The materiality of making a comic to go along with a conference presentation lends permanence and gravity to what can often be a very fleeting genre. While handouts are often discarded, a comic book has some cultural value that encourages the audience to keep it. The visual orientation of the comic's technology leads in interesting directions, away from a rigid sales-presentation like form that is the default setup for digital slide presentation technologies.

As Scott McCloud recently wrote in his blog: “The trick in either comics or animation is to embody your ideas rather than sugarcoat them; to make plain, through images, the patterns and concepts you see clearly in your head, secure in the knowledge that even the most byzantine, advanced, jargon-laced topic probably rests on a few fat visual metaphors almost anyone can grok with a little explanation” (“What Learning”).

This is but one site where the technology of the comic lends itself well to work we already do in the academy. Composing comics embodies the belief that comics and visual genres are as intellectual and as literate as alphabetic text. Doing so within the bastion of logocentricity that is academia is a powerful gesture of resistance, at the same time that it is also practical. The technology of the comic is useful, alongside any artistic or literary merit that may be ascribed to comics or graphic novels. I continue to be interested in what comics do, and what they can do, and to recognize the *acts of doing* performed by visual rhetors and creators of comics.

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CHAPTER 3

THE THEORIST-PRACTITIONER IN COMICS: SCOTT MCCLOUD

REVISITED

“We are of the mindset, as are many theorists, that theory is not cancelled out by application or praxis; nor does it cease to be theory in the event one actually discovers something meaningful about it, something that can be applied to the real world or to a particular work of literature.

We believe theory, in fact, can emerge from novels, poems, plays, and many other forms, including life itself.”

Craig Womack, “A Single Decade”

Scott McCloud is comics' most influential theorist and preeminent student of form. To my knowledge, he's never held an academic position (although he frequently tours colleges). He makes nonfiction book-length comics that theorize and teach how comics work (although he has also produced fictional comics). He is extremely widely read as well as widely taught. I don't mean to say he is the greatest theorist of comics, or the most popular, but there exist few works of comics scholarship or pedagogy that do not reference or wrangle with some of his texts or ideas in some way.

McCloud has even made his way into the theoretical toolbox of Rhet/Comp, beyond those who specifically study comics. People either love him or love hating him. I have historically been a hater. In this chapter, I would like to explore how I stopped

hating McCloud and what I think is an underappreciated and undercritiqued aspect of his work: his status as a theorist-practitioner of comics, someone creating theoretical work in the form of comics, rather than writing in an alphabetic text genre.

McCloud's first explicitly theoretical work, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (or "UC" for short), was published in 1993. At the time, there was very little critical work in English specifically on comics, although he cites a few examples. *UC* covers an immense swath of history and makes grand theoretical gestures.

Two theories that came out of the book predominate and remain widely used: the theory of the icon, and the theory of closure.

The "icon" theory proposes that cartoon imagery creates an emotional response stronger than photorealistic imagery because of its abstraction: the more abstract an image is, the more any given reader/viewer can relate to it (24-37). The logical extent of this theory of abstraction, according to him, is the alphabet: completely abstracted, and universally applicable (47). He then maps out a triangular plane on which all comics can be plotted. There are two axes of abstraction: realistic vs. cartoon abstraction, where the image still intends to represent a real object, and realistic vs. "picture plane" abstraction, "where shapes, lines and colors can be *themselves* and not pretend *otherwise*" (51, emphasis original). The classic example of the application of this theory is a common interpretation of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which uses cartoon animals of different species (cats, mice, dogs) to represent people in a narrative of the Holocaust. According to the icon theory, by using images that are abstracted along the cartoon plane (mice that are

largely featureless and mostly distinguished by their clothing or attributes) he has created a strong emotional connection to the reader (Barr 80).

McCloud's other influential theory from *UC* is “closure”, what he describes as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). He compares the closure that happens when we cease to see an object in our frame of reference but assume/know that it continues to exist (what might elsewhere be called the persistence of memory or vision) to the process that connects panels together in the mind of a reader. It is in this chapter that he describes comics as “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious *collaborator* and closure is the agent of *time, change, and motion*” (65, emphasis original). He goes on to describe and name the different possible transitions that can happen between panels, ranging from “moment to moment”, where a short interval of time is depicted, all the way to “aspect to aspect”, where multiple views of places within the same general scene are juxtaposed (70-74).

McCloud's second critical work on comics, 2000's *Reinventing Comics*, has been much less influential, although still referenced. It remains one of the few critical works that addresses digital comics and webcomics at all. In this work, produced after the boom of speculation in comic book collecting in the 1990's and the subsequent crash in the market, proposes twelve directions that he proposed the comics world of 2000 could grow in, ranging from ethnic and gender diversity to seeing comics as art and literature to digital delivery, creation, and distribution.

Finally, McCloud's most recent critical work is *Making Comics*, from 2006. This work, rather than a descriptive or imaginative text, is explicitly intended as a pedagogical text, with material ranging from “writing with pictures” to “tools, techniques, and

technology". The move made in this text is to take descriptions and turn them into heuristics for production. For example, rather than writing about how panel transitions *do* happen and cause closure (as was the case in *UC*), he offers a list of them as options that a comics creator can choose from intentionally to cause a certain narrative or emotional effect (15).

For a long time, I retained many critiques of McCloud that prevented me from taking him seriously as a theorist. I was bothered by his use of terminology, and its intersection with other extant theories. I first read *Understanding Comics* same semester of my undergraduate education that I was learning about semiotics for the first time, although I had known of the book's existence for some time. McCloud uses "sign" and "icon" in exactly the opposite way that mainstream semiotic theory does, and this frustrated me to no end. How could he not be aware of this theory, that works so similarly to his? Additionally, his theory of "closure" is extremely similar to the Lacanian film theory of "suture". Why couldn't the body of film theory (which I was learning about at the time, as a film student) be applied to comics? Wasn't it obvious?

As I have matured as a scholar and critic, I have realized that having some distance from the vagaries of semiotics and critical theory is at times a virtue, especially if one is aiming for a wide audience. Arriving at similar conclusions to people who do use these theories via a totally different analytical pathway may in fact be a validation on both ends. And, as long as you are able to keep in mind that when McCloud says "iconic" he really means "cartoony" (as Charles Hatfield helpfully notes in *Alternative Comics*), the terminology is not as large of a barrier as it was when I first formulated the opinion (115).

I also have at various points felt a certain degree of elitism towards the man: who does this guy think he is? He's not a professor. How can he say all these things? Suffice to say, now that I've become someone who comes up with her own theories about comics, and am not a professor, I've had to rethink whether this is really grounds to disagree with him.

Furthermore, as I briefly addressed in Chapter 1, there is periodic debate over the definitions he proposes for what comics are—whether they are images arranged in deliberate sequence, or the “temporal mapping” he has come to embrace later in his theoretical career. The more I try to withdraw from definitional arguments, the more I am pulled back in.

For a long time, the nicest thing I could come up with to say about McCloud is that he was really good at drawing hands. And he really is. When I have to draw my own hands or someone else's, I flip through my copies of his books and try to find a pose I can reference.

This is actually a significant statement: Drawing hands makes you credible—drawing well in general makes you credible. Scott McCloud has what I am naming as “visual ethos”. He makes beautiful, precise, architecturally crafted comics. He draws well, and composes well. So well, it has become nigh invisible to comix scholars—there exist few critiques of any of his theoretical books that focuses on his own form and imagery. Works of criticism are not the first and foremost targets *of* criticism, but it can be a fruitful and productive pursuit to do so.

McCloud theorizes how comix is good for conveying emotion, and telling a narrative story. But, he's not telling a story, is he? He is teaching, theorizing, and

making an argument. McCloud's earliest theoretical work could easily be described as preoccupied with form. But *Understanding Comics* has a form of its own that is often made invisible due to its theoretical nature.

If defining is the theorist's aria, the comic artist's aria is drawing themselves, maybe specifically drawing themselves at their drawing board, breaking the fourth wall. The cornerstone of how *Understanding Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Making Comics* function is the image of Scott McCloud himself, beginning and ending in his studio, talking to the reader. All of the theory espoused within the works is framed as a monologue to an invisible audience. He has constructed a fictive self to literally enter the discourse, to conduct the swirling discourse. As Christopher Irving notes in a recently conducted interview on the blog *GraphicNYC*, "Rather than going the dry textbook route, McCloud narrated *Understanding* with his own cartoon-style avatar, illustrating his examples in the format he was dissecting. That McCloud avatar has changed with Scott and inadvertently become his brand image."

The quintessential image from any of these works, then, is not any of the panels where he is making an illustrative point, or mapping out an idea (although the pyramidal image of the picture plane diagram might come close). The key image from his books is the character of Scott McCloud—the cartoon of him talking with his hands in the air.

This is an important rhetorical choice in the process of making a comics-based argument. *Who is arguing?* Does this matter? Anyone versed in ancient Greek rhetorics would, of course, label this as a question of *ethos*. But, if *visual ethos* is the act of establishing your credibility by showing you know what you are doing by showing your

skills, what does it matter that he draws himself? A well-constructed comic with no on-panel narrator could communicate the same sense.

I believe McCloud is taking part in a larger rhetorical tradition in underground comics of cartoonist self-representation. In this sense, *Understanding Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Making Comics* are autobiographies, at the same time they are theoretical.

Charles Hatfield charts and problematizes the development of autobiographical alternative comix and graphic novels in his book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. With special emphasis on the work of Harvey Pekar and his long-running occasional series *American Splendor*, Hatfield addresses the problem of truth claims in such works, as well as the ideology that encompasses them. “It is here, on the activist end of comic book culture, that autobiographical comics have flourished, overturning the corporate comics hero in favor of the particularized and unglamorous common man or woman” (111).

McCloud is certainly an entrenched figure in this activist scene; having his theoretical work narrated by this unglamorous man participates in a culture of, if not antiheroism, aheroism. McCloud is an ordinary nerd in a superhero t-shirt (even if the shirt is from his own early deconstructive superhero, the eponymous *Zot!*).

Hatfield theorizes that “the cartoon self-image...seems to offer a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her own subjectivity” (115). Hatfield then invokes McCloud’s theory of iconicity and critiques it as a “naïve model of a reader response”. However, he does argue that while there may be no necessary connection between the reader and a cartoon, there is a connection between the *cartoonist* and the

cartoon. “The crux of the matter is the way the cartoonist chooses among expressive conventions to create a cartoon ‘likeness’ (more accurately, sign) that conforms to his/her sense of self” (116). It is ironic, then, that Hatfield invokes *Understanding Comics* to discuss the phenomenon of cartoonists drawing themselves without mentioning that it happens to be McCloud’s cartoon version of himself who delivers that very theory.

This reflects interestingly upon what McCloud has to say about his own cartoon self (again, quoting from Irving’s interview):

“ ‘My cartoon avatar is definitely separate from me,’ Scott reflects. ‘I know it’s unnerving for people to meet me. I can tell there’s always that adjustment period, like when I go to speak at a University, that they obviously have to admit ‘This guy isn’t what I was expecting.’ Then they have to go ‘Who was I expecting? This guy with blank eyes and black hair and line drawing?’ There actually aren’t any human beings who look like that at all. The fact that I’ve made my cartoon character a little heavier and given him the graying temples doesn’t matter, because I’m still very different than the character.’”

At the same time that he expresses puzzlement over people confusing him with his avatar, I believe McCloud is enacting his own theory of iconicity, and has done so throughout all of his theoretical works.

Cartoon Scott McCloud is our guide. He is our enigma. Sometimes he feels like the equivalent of the talking paper clip in Microsoft Word. He is telling us a story about how comics work.

Charles Hatfield truthfully notes, “If alternative cartoonists acknowledge any sort of heroism, it consists in a collective effort to assert the versatility of comics as a means of expression, apart from the diversionary trappings of the escapist genres so entrenched in the American industry and fandom” (111). There is a tradition of asserting that comics are capable of much more than action and adventure, and this tradition is explicitly embodied by the critical works of McCloud. As Kenneth Burke notes in “*Lexicon Rhetoricae*”, form is ideological. “The artist’s manipulations of the reader’s desires involves the use of what the reader considers desirable” (146).

McCloud’s works participate in a visual rhetorical tradition of autobiographical cartooning at the same time that they demonstrate theories of how comics work. Furthermore, they embody the idea that comics *do* work, and the technology of the comic—the long-form “graphic novel”—has the intellectual capacity to explicitly comment on itself.

I am again reminded of the lessons of American Indian rhetorical theory. Western academic thinking proscribes a strict separation between theory and practice. Capital-T Theory is monolithic. The decolonial imperative that resists this has led to a welcome and necessary perspective that recognizes the many sources of small-t theory—and that theories are stories. I included a quote from Craig Womack as the epigraph for this chapter: he is but one American Indian (Creek) theorist-practitioner, who writes in “creative” genres as well as recognizably academic essays.

The view that theory is separate from practice is anathema to the theorist-practitioner, and only functionally serves to pigeonhole their work. While I would not point to Scott McCloud as an anti-colonial activist, his work is the prime example of

explicit theory-practice work being done in comics already. The significance of the analysis in this chapter is to point out that McCloud's books are worth reading *through* a lens of textual criticism, rather than as a textbook or theory play-book outside the realm of a critical visual reading, cultural reading, or other analysis.

In the end, one potential decolonial view of the present state of comics consists of listening and watching. Like Malea Powell's methodology of listening to ghosts, this approach demands that we watch what comics are doing, instead of just what they seem to be saying (a text-only view). This will allow us to read the work of theorist-practitioners with the complexity that it deserves: rather than just listening for arguments, we can also see demonstrations, and how they may intersect or overlap.

In other words: don't take McCloud's comics at face value—see value in his faces.

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CHAPTER 4

THE CULTURAL RHETORIC OF *DYKES TO WATCH OUT FOR*

Sydney, proposing to Mo: “Will you do me the honor of paradoxically reinscribing and destabilizing hegemonic discourse with me?”

Alison Bechdel, *Dykes To Watch Out For*

To most of the world, Alison Bechdel exploded onto the comics scene as the hot white lesbian of the moment with the release of her 2006 graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Laboriously illustrated over the course of seven years, *Fun Home* has since its release garnered an astonishing amount of acclaim. The book tells the story of the author's relationship with her closeted gay father, his suicide, her coming out as a lesbian, her own childhood obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the autobiography of her gender identity. It is dense with literary allusion and explicitly connects the author's struggle with her father to Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and the myth of Icarus and Daedalus.

Fun Home was named Time Magazine's Book of the Year with the aside: “Oh, and it's a comic book”(“10 Best”). An entire conference and accompanying scholarly publication (of the journal GRAAT) were put together at the Université Francois Rabelais de Tours in France in 2007. Further scholarly attention has been paid in Women's Studies Quarterly, Modern Fiction Studies, MELUS, Biography, and in my field of Rhetoric and Composition, at the Feminisms and Rhetorics conference.

Most of these scholarly and critical treatments only mention Bechdel's previous work in passing. However, it is this work that established Bechdel as an outspoken voice within the queer community and as a well-loved cultural figure. From 1983 through 2008, Bechdel drew a bimonthly comic strip called "Dykes to Watch Out For" (which will be abbreviated DTWOF in this text). In my search for lesbian visual rhetorical traditions, and what is potentially reusable about lesbian comix discourse, I came back again and again to this work. In order to demonstrate a cultural rhetorics reading of comics that considers their materiality and situatedness, in this final chapter, I am going to discuss Alison Bechdel's DTWOF as important lesbian visual and cultural rhetorical work.

DTWOF is a comic that is very meaningful to a cultural community, but has been ignored in favor of *Fun Home* by most of the academic establishment. DTWOF has 25 years of lesbian history embedded within its panels; *Fun Home* has Proustian allusions. DTWOF has detailed, long-term continuity with locations and characters; *Fun Home* has themes of coming of age and parallels to *Ulysses*. DTWOF was serialized over a long period of time in queer and often specifically lesbian venues; *Fun Home* is a monograph published by Houghton Mifflin.

The devil of academic colonialism directs attention to things that it already values. *Fun Home* looks like the literature that is already valued by the establishment; it does some of the same things, but in visual form. It even references the same literary canon. However, DTWOF is a site of significant and meaningful cultural rhetorical action, and deserves more credit than it has ever received. This analysis intends to give

an overview of the scope of the comic, its publication history, and to identify the cultural rhetorical moves being made that have made it so significant to the lesbian community.

DTWOF was published at first in gay and lesbian alternative and underground newspapers, newsletters, and magazines, starting with *Womanews*. In the first five years of publication, the strip appeared in *Chicago Gay Life*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Gay Community News*, *Hot Wire*, *Lesbian Contradiction*, *Philadelphia Gay News*, *Chicago OutLines*, *Coming Up!*, *Equal Time*, *Gay Scotland*, *off our backs*, *Out Front*, *Valley Women's Voice*, *Vancouver Angles*, and *Visibilities*. (This is demonstrated in the copyright pages of the individual trade paperback publications of the series, explained below.) They also appeared in *Gay Comix*, Howard Cruse's gay and lesbian underground comics anthology series published by Kitchen Sink Press.

In addition to being serialized in many periodicals, the comic was collected into eleven trade paperback editions. Most of these contain additional back matter, usually a longer-format story about the characters. In fact, important plot points happen in these additional stories: one of the main characters gives birth, another one finishes her doctoral dissertation (in English, of course), people cheat on each other, houses are purchased. Finally, a hardcover collection called *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* was published in 2008. As explained on Bechdel's website, this volume contains 390 of 527 total strips, as well as a "Cartoonist's Introduction" (Bechdel, "Dykestowatchoutfor.com"). It does not reprint any of the back matter from the paperback collections.

The strip, while best known for its serialized lesbian soap operatic narrative, was at first a gag strip without fixed recurring characters or metaplot. Many early strips,

reprinted in the paperback *Dykes To Watch Out For*, were devoted to humorously cataloguing types of lesbians (“Literary dykes to watch out for” such as “Floppius discus, able to function creatively only while using her word processor” (36)) and offering faux Miss Manners advice from fake experts like “Chloe B. Desnail” (an anagram of Bechdel’s own name) (6).

The comics that are considered part of the DTWOF continuity began in 1987 with the strip “One Enchanted Evening”, reprinted in *More Dykes To Watch Out For* (32). This strip introduces the neurotic Mo, Bechdel’s stand-in for herself, as well as the libidinous butch Lois. These strips continued in sequence until Bechdel put the series on indefinite hiatus in 2008 with the last strip, “sing, cuccu”, strip #527 (*Essential* 390).

In some ways, DTWOF can be described as a lesbian version of the popular newspaper comic “For Better or for Worse”. Lynn Johnston’s strip is very well known for, rather than fixing its characters in timeless perpetual youth, letting them age in real time. Similarly, DTWOF progresses over time in a real way. Characters reflect and participate in the current political moment. Children grow up. Pets die. (Raffi, the child born to two characters in 1993, is old enough to vote in the 2008 election at the end of the series.)

The strip portrays the lives of lesbians and others living in an unspecified college town: their relationships, anxieties, opinions, and activism. She dramatizes their love lives, friendships, and sex lives, including the graphic depiction of lesbian sexuality. In fact, such a depiction problematizes the term “graphic” as a signifier of the visual and sexual. There is certainly plenty of sex being had by characters (although sometimes their lack of sex is the source of drama), and probably more dildos appear than in any

other non-pornographic comic ever made, but the usual connotation of “graphic sexuality” seems inappropriate.

Most of all, as Bechdel explains in the introduction to *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, “I saw my cartoons as an antidote to the prevailing image of lesbians as warped, sick, humorless, and undesirable” (xv). This comic strip is a positive (as problematic as that term may be) expression of lesbian identity: that lesbian women are funny, sexy, and worthwhile of being represented on the page.

Read from a contemporary standpoint, it would be easy to read DTWOF as thoroughly a part of the discourse of “political correctness” that was a hot topic of the late 1980’s and 1990’s. Cataloging the identities of characters that appear in the strip provides an evenly-banded cross section of diversity: white lesbians, black lesbians (more than one!), Latina lesbians, Asian-American lesbians, disabled lesbians, Jewish lesbians, bisexual lesbians, partnered lesbians, vegetarians, single women, swingers, polyamorous lesbians, working class lesbians, academic lesbians.

This could be a white cartoonist striving to be as P.C. as possible. Katie Brown noted in a 1995 interview with Bechdel, “her community is so varied that Publisher’s Weekly called ‘Dykes’ ‘politically correct and racially diverse to a fault.’ If that’s a criticism, it doesn’t bother Bechdel” (21). However, stopping at the P.C. label is a shallow reading of a more complex visual/cultural rhetorical move. DTWOF is *an act of imagining* a community that is as progressive and diverse as lesbians desire to live in. It is utopian, although the strip became less so over time.

A purely formalist reading of DTWOF generates very little to illuminate how the strip works, or why. It is typically divided into four rows of panels due to its printing

constraints—when laid out this way, it could be printed across two shallow pages, or as one deep block. As she explained in a 2006 conversation with another comics artist, Craig Thompson, “The comic strip is a very constrained format. I have ten panels, and I have to get a whole story into them every other week. I don’t have room to spread out at all. I can’t use different size panels or shapes even” (“Alison Bechdel Meets”). Neither does the theory of iconicity really apply. How simple or abstract are the people in DTWOF? If the purpose was maximum reader identification, they ought to be more abstract. It is clear, whether you’re familiar with that particular McCloudian formation or not, that readers identify with the DTWOF characters through other means than their iconic nature.

The technology of the comic, as Bechdel uses it, is the materiality of the comic strip, its panels and the joining of words and images, and using words as images. It also encompasses the relatively low cost of comics (discussed explicitly as an advantage of the medium by Bechdel in *Gay Comics #19*, an issue devoted to her work), their easy reproducibility, and the potential for large circulation of imagery (especially one page or less black and white strips). Indeed, Bechdel is an artist conscious of the materiality of drawing: as she addressed a French academic audience in 2007 regarding *Fun Home*, “I’m going talk to you a little bit about how I drew this book, because it’s hard to talk about a graphic novel apart from its physical existence.” (Bechdel, “Alison Bechdel on *Fun Home*” 40).

One of the roles of texts in the lesbian community, and the queer community at large, is to mediate the introduction of new members to the very existence of other people like them, as well as community values and norms. Rather than communities into which

one is born, one becomes or realizes they are queer, and may not have any human connections to real life queer people. Thus, there is a significant lesbian rhetorical tradition of representation, specifically *just* representation.

The intersection of the technology of comics and this tradition is one place where DTWOF really shines. The visual frame positions the reader as, if not a voyeur, as a third party to all conversations. This may or may not be the case in comics that do not work to detail the physical setting of their action. However, with *very* few exceptions, DTWOF takes place in stable, recurring locations: the shared house owned by three characters, Mo's apartment, Madwimmin Books and later Bunns and Noodle Booksellers, the Lentile D'Or (a local vegetarian restaurant), Java Jones, and the Thalia Theater. (A map of this imaginary place is the lining of the front and back cover to the hardcover book *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*.) She noted in a 2007 talk: "And I'll end by saying that maps for me function in the same way that cartoons do. I think of cartooning as a way of taking a complicated reality from the three-dimensional world, and ironing it up into a simple, accessible image" ("Alison Bechdel on *Fun Home*" 42).

Rather than how the written word, even in a lush description, may create a place in a reader's mind, the comic allows the reader to perceive a fictional space in the same way real space is perceived—visually. However, this space is not all inclusive. We do not get to walk around inside Madwimmin Books ourselves, for example. The frame of the panel delineates (literally) what we can see. It is the apparatus that directs our gaze. However, rather than seeing it as an oppressive force that keeps us from looking elsewhere within a panel, I see it as a window, literally, into a shared world. Through the technology of comics, Bechdel creates *analog virtual space*.

There is something there, in this space for us, the readers, to share.

Conversations, discourses, collective definitions of what it means to be a lesbian.

Bechdel has discussed this definitional aspect of the strip in various places. As for her participation in the evolving notion of what it means to be a lesbian, and what lesbians *are*, she addresses it directly in her introduction to *Essential DTWOF*: “I set out to name the unnamed, to depict the undepicted, to make lesbians *visible*, and I had done it!”

However, she goes on, she forgot to account for the observer effect—“you can’t pin things down without somehow *changing* them” (xvii).

A quote from Bechdel in an interview give in 1995 goes far to further illuminate the creation of community that she engages in through the strip (and I reproduce it here in full):

“I feel like ever since I came out, I’ve been in search of this elusive lesbian community, in which I’d have a close-knit family of friends, be able to walk together, do things together, know everything about one another’s lives. I’ve never found it. My real friends never seem to like each other. Most are caught up in their own projects and ideological differences. Not only is the strip utopian, it’s also utopian in that it’s a much more cohesive community than I’ve ever found” (Brown 21).

This is not the case of any random cartoonist creating a space—although I am willing to venture that comics can function this way in many places. It is the confluence of this function of the technology of the comic and the lesbian rhetoric of self-representation that produces the specific effect of analog virtual lesbian space. In other arenas, I’m not sure it would be as significant for a comic to invite a reader into an imagined space. In the case of DTWOF, however, the space is such that it *might* exist,

but readers might not be able to access it in the material real. As Bechdel notes, she never herself found the mythic “lesbian community” where she would be as supported as she once hoped. But, she did at least have access to physical lesbian spaces, moving to New York City and participating in lesbian events and organizing. And when any of us read DTWOF, we are the fourth wall of this lesbian community, that is made real through the materiality of the comic that is before us.

I began this chapter by wondering what is reusable about lesbian comix discourse: I think the lesson that can be taken from DTWOF and Bechdel’s cartooning is that the technology of comics has the ability to create and organize virtual space, and it can be deployed in service of a marginalized community. While the plots of DTWOF may be melodramatic, there is something more complicated than dyke drama going on--the setting of the comic and the space that the characters live in, and the very fact that they have their own space to move around in, is a triumph of cultural rhetoric.

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CONCLUSION:

NONSENSE COMIX PRESENTS

Comics can be for the expression of complex theoretical ideas, the creation of community, and the transmission of norms. They can also tell stories. They can be intellectual and theoretical and tell stories at the same time. Making comics, taking up the technology of comics and enacting visual rhetorical traditions, is always a culturally situated practice. Comics are useful. We can use them to do things, for rhetorical action.

Making comics has changed the way I think about comics.

Making comics makes me want more comics, and want to encourage more scholars and cultural rhetoricians to see comics as something that already fits into the work that they do.

Part of academic colonialism is imposing external structures on the subject being studied. I am worried about this happening to the vibrant community of people who read, make, create, and think critically about comics. However, I hope that this work has shown that a colonial model is not the only option for interacting with comics as an academic.

Comics aren't owned by any one culture. And the membrane that surrounds anything that might be called the "comics community" is permeable. The technology is there to be used. We, and I'm talking about academics here, all have permission to try-- the only boundaries being self-imposed.

I've been thinking a lot about the concept of the "decolonial imperative", as articulated by Daniel Heath Justice, as I have concluded my work on this thesis. The driving necessity of resistance to colonialism, in his case through literary nationalism,

resonates with my desire to imagine comics as whole. As long anyone imagines a divide between the people who do comics and the people who study comics, I don't think we will be whole.

We, and I mean all academics who care about comics in any way, need to mount a sustained challenge to the logocentric norms of academic output: we need to make comics, we need to invite our students to make comics, we need to publish comics. We need to make it easier to do comics in the academy and to rewrite rules and regulations that assume all academic production comes in a form that can be expressed in words. This imperative carries forward to all other visual media that my own discipline and others may be trying to understand: you can't theorize it unless you do it. And I believe this can be a part of the decolonial imperative. Colonialist logocentrism has long asserted that alphabetic text is the highest form of expression, of intellect on paper, and even though this assertion has been thoroughly deconstructed at this point, it still drives the structure of our institutions. This thesis has the form that it does because of these structures.

The title of this thesis is "Nonsense Comix Presents: The Cultural Rhetoric of Comics". While this work is in alphabetic form, I named it this to consider it part of my comix output. I started making a series of zines (short, self-published print comics) years ago. I named the series "Nonsense Comix". "Nonsense" came because the first issue, which was only four pages, was totally nonsensical. "Comix" is a spelling associated with underground and alternative comics, typically of the 1970's, that intentionally distanced themselves from mainstream comic books. The name stuck, and remains the

imprint I use for every comic I make. The subtitle “Oh Shit, I’m in Grad School” came later.

It was hard to title this work. But I chose the title I did to remind myself, and anyone who reads this, that no matter how many words I type, I am a person who makes comics, and I present my work to the world through this lens. And so, I present it to you.

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