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# Comics as a Medium for Inquiry: Urban Students (Re-)Designing Critical Social Worlds

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# Comics as a Medium for Inquiry: Urban Students (Re-)Designing Critical Social Worlds

## **Abstract**

Literacy scholars have argued that curricular remediation marginalizes the dynamic meaning-making practices of urban youth and ignores contemporary definitions of literacy as multimodal, socially situated, and tied to people's identities as members of cultural communities. For this reason, it is imperative that school-based literacy research unsettle status quos by foregrounding the sophisticated practices that urban students enact as a result, and in spite of, the marginalization they manage in educational settings. A hopeful site for honoring the knowledge of urban students is the nexus of alternative learning spaces that have taken on increased significance in youths' lives. Many of these spaces focus on young people's engagements with new literacies, multimodalities, the arts, and popular media, taking the stance that students' interests are inherently intellectual. The Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC), located in a K-8 Catholic school in South Philadelphia, is one such space. The CCIC was the site of a practitioner research study from February 2012 to June 2014. For parts of three school years, students met weekly to read, write, design, and discuss *graphica*. As a practitioner researcher, the author extended pedagogic invitations for students to engage with the comics medium, and employed ethnographic tools to study learning outcomes. By examining how a group of urban students 1.) co-constructed the space of an afterschool inquiry community and 2.) mobilized the comics medium to (per)form cultural identities and engage in critical inquiries, this dissertation contributes to theories of critical multimodal/multicultural literacy education. The author surfaces ways in which students used the affordances of the comics medium to 1.) contest the silencing of race in their school, 2.) re-narrate themselves and their cultural backgrounds through resource orientations, and 3.) complicate gender discourses. (The verbal-visual form of comics has particular affordances for students to engage in acts of conscientious disruption outside the traditional literacy curriculum.) In all, this dissertation presents an argument for honoring urban students' literate and cultural knowledge through their critical multimodal engagements. Through a blend of practitioner research and ethnographic tools, this work endeavors to challenge generalizations made about urban students and their literate lives.

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H. Gerald Campano

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COMICS AS A MEDIUM FOR INQUIRY:  
URBAN STUDENTS (RE-)DESIGNING CRITICAL SOCIAL WORLDS

David Eric Low  
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in  
Education

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COMICS AS A MEDIUM FOR INQUIRY: URBAN STUDENTS (RE-)DESIGNING

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORLDS

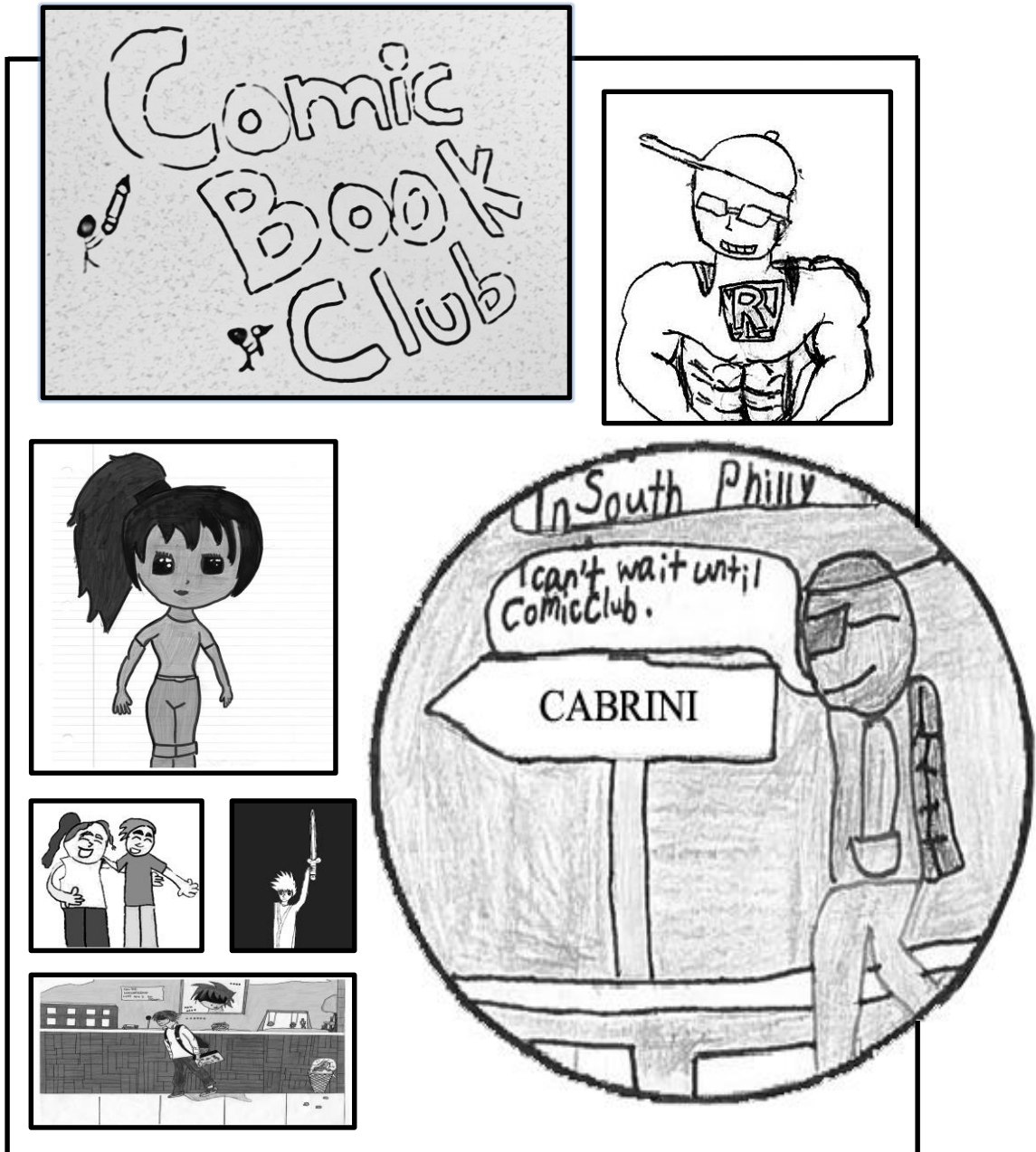
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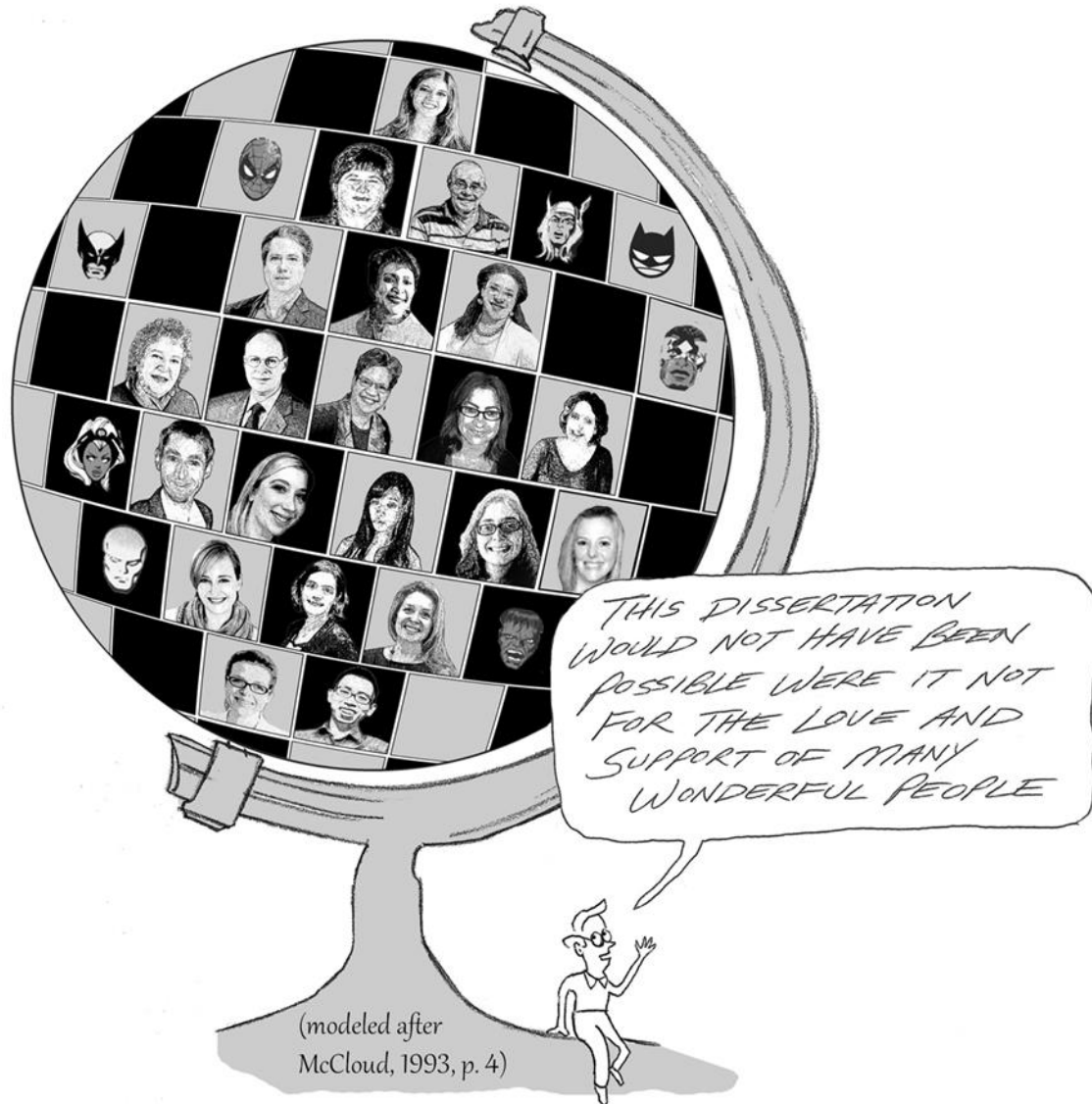
David Eric Low

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the students of St. Cabrini who invited me into their school, their library, and their literacy lives. Without the desire of these young people to build “a community of artists and writers,” this work would not exist. Indeed, it would have no reason to.



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Katie Reilly, you are my partner in all pursuits. Thank you for being my light in the darkness and my laughter in the silence. And thank you, especially, for supporting me through five long years of a PhD program. I love you very much and look forward to our lifetime together. Let us prepare to travel the globe (*entirely in the form of the Bunny Hop!*). I am so proud of all that you have done, and all that you have ahead of you.

My parents – Debra and Stuart Low – have been my steadfast advocates from the beginning. You have each provided me with examples of how to live a life of integrity and kindness without sacrificing for a moment your intellectual curiosity. Thank you for

believing in me, even when I have failed to do so myself. You mean the world to me, and I love you both without end.

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**ABSTRACT****COMICS AS A MEDIUM FOR INQUIRY:  
URBAN STUDENTS (RE-)DESIGNING CRITICAL SOCIAL WORLDS**

David E. Low

H. Gerald Campano

Literacy scholars have argued that curricular remediation marginalizes the dynamic meaning-making practices of urban youth and ignores contemporary definitions of literacy as multimodal, socially situated, and tied to people's identities as members of cultural communities. For this reason, it is imperative that school-based literacy research unsettle status quos by foregrounding the sophisticated practices that urban students enact as a result, and in spite of, the marginalization they manage in educational settings. A hopeful site for honoring the knowledge of urban students is the nexus of alternative learning spaces that have taken on increased significance in youths' lives. Many of these spaces focus on young people's engagements with new literacies, multimodalities, the arts, and popular media, taking the stance that students' interests are inherently intellectual. The Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC), located in a K-8 Catholic school in South Philadelphia, is one such space. The CCIC was the site of a practitioner research study from February 2012 to June 2014. For parts of three school years, students met weekly to read, write, design, and discuss graphica. As a practitioner researcher, the author extended pedagogic invitations for students to engage with the comics medium, and employed ethnographic tools to study learning outcomes. By examining how a group of urban students 1.) co-constructed the space of an afterschool inquiry community and

2.) mobilized the comics medium to (per)form cultural identities and engage in critical inquiries, this dissertation contributes to theories of critical multimodal/multicultural literacy education. The author surfaces ways in which students used the affordances of the comics medium to 1.) contest the silencing of race in their school, 2.) re-narrate themselves and their cultural backgrounds through resource orientations, and 3.) complicate gender discourses. (The verbal-visual form of comics has particular affordances for students to engage in acts of conscientious disruption outside the traditional literacy curriculum.) In all, this dissertation presents an argument for honoring urban students' literate and cultural knowledge through their critical multimodal engagements. Through a blend of practitioner research and ethnographic tools, this work endeavors to challenge generalizations made about urban students and their literate lives.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction, Review of Literature, Conceptual/Theoretical Frameworks, and (Hi)story of the Questions

#### Overview: What is this Work and who am I to do it?

“I’m here to talk about comic books, not how your odored feet smell,” says Jamir to Larry, and he is deadly serious (Fieldnotes, Mar. 16, 2012). Jamir<sup>1</sup> did not become a founding member of an afterschool comics-oriented inquiry community simply to crack jokes with Larry and his other 5<sup>th</sup> grade classmates. Jamir joined because he, like many of those classmates, was an enormous fan, or perhaps more accurately, a *connoisseur* – though Jamir preferred the term “junkie” – of graphica, and he wanted to maximize his time spent working in and around the comics medium<sup>2</sup>. For the entirety of his time as a member of the afterschool group, Jamir was deeply invested in reading, discussing, and creating his own comic books from the seemingly bottomless well of ideas he had been developing in the years before the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC) came into existence. He was not alone in this investment.

Fifteen years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is nearly impossible to walk a city block and not encounter superheroes in one shape or form. Whether adorning billboards, the sides of buses, t-shirts, or cellular phone cases, the iconic characters that have sprung from comic books and into the world of general pop culture are ubiquitous. The cause of this ubiquity is fairly self-evident: graphica is and has long been deeply meaningful to people

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<sup>1</sup> Participant and institutional names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the term “**comics**” in the singular (i.e. Chute, 2008) to refer to the visuo-textual medium (much in the way “film” is used in the singular when referring to that medium). I use the term “**graphica**” to refer collectively to actual texts such as comic books and graphic novels.

around the world, across boundaries of age, race, class, and gender (e.g., Brown, 1997; Danziger-Russell, 2013; Pustz, 2000; Wright, 2001). Indeed, many find a profound sense of enjoyment in these texts, and use them to construct meaningful senses of self (e.g., Bitz, 2009; Riesman, 2012). From superheroes originating in the late 1930s, such as Superman and Batman, to newer characters like Miles Morales and Kamala Khan; from the popular manga series *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto* to beloved European bande dessinée *Asterix* and *Tintin*; from “all-ages” newspaper strips to long-form graphic novels and “mature” alt-comix, the medium has made extensive claims on the public imagination. Superhero films regularly top the box office, and characters from the world of comics show up frequently on television screens as well. The traditional print medium of comics has itself garnered popular and critical recognition in recent years, producing a number of international bestsellers and even several *National Book Award* finalists. Some cultural critics refer to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as a “new golden age” of the form, though this distinction is contested. Whatever we decide to call it, the reality is that there have never been more comics fans, both diehard and casual, as there are right now. “Comics culture” is a global phenomenon that cuts across linguistic, ethnic, and cultural boundaries (e.g., Berndt, 2010; Bitz, 2009; Brown, 1997; Duncan & Smith, 2009).

I write this dissertation as a self-identifying “inside member” of comics culture. As a child in the early 1990s I spent the majority of my out-of-school time (and much of my in-school time) reading, thinking about, and creating comic books. Every penny I had went toward this pursuit. My bedroom was decorated with posters of Sam Keith’s *Wolverine* and Jim Lee’s *Wild C.A.T.S.*, and my closet was packed to capacity with comic

books ranging from *Archer & Armstrong* to *Zen: Intergalactic Ninja*. Nearly every evening I sat at my drafting table – a gift from my parents on my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday – attempting to better render the superhero physique, or at my mother’s typewriter compiling background stories for the characters I had invented. My closest friendships were with children who were as invested in comics culture as I was. We rode our bikes to flea markets, attended “shows” at rundown shopping malls, deconstructed the work of our favorite artists and writers, and collaborated on our own character designs.

Decades later, I continue to make graphica a cornerstone of my literacy life, although I engage the medium through different lenses and sensibilities than I did as a youth. Today I read as many “adult” graphic novels, by the likes of Adrian Tomine and Alison Bechdel, as I do superhero comics<sup>3</sup>, and I focus more on a cartoonist’s spatial design, symbolic representation, character development, and economy of language than on how a pectoral muscle is rendered. I rarely discuss comics with friends anymore, but I nevertheless remain a tried-and-true fan of the medium. What’s more, as an inveterate doodler who tends to process information visually, I continue to compose my own cartoons, occasionally publishing them in print venues such as *The Funny Times*<sup>4</sup>. In

---

<sup>3</sup> It is hard to believe how much the cover price of monthly superhero comic books has risen since I was a youth, from \$1.00 in 1991 to \$3.99 in 2015 (Marvel). I have no idea how children today can afford to become fans. In the early ‘90s I purchased many of my comics from used bookstores for 25 cents, but I rarely see these discount bins anymore.

<sup>4</sup> The term “cartoon” refers to a single-panel piece of visual story-art that, unlike comics, is nonsequential in nature. This format is exemplified by Gary Larson’s *The Far Side* and the drawings published by *The New Yorker*. I have been composing single-panel cartoons since 1996 and publishing them since 2002 (beginning with my campus newspaper). To date, I have created over 6,500. I provide a lengthier account of my histories with cartoons and comics in the Appendix.

order to make sense of a complicated concept, I must first draw it. I have always been this way.

The point of my including this truncated memoir is to claim that I understand what it is to be a comics “junkie,” akin to Jamir and his compatriots. In fact, I would have been a much different practitioner of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community if I did not understand this. (And realistically, the CCIC might never have come into existence<sup>5</sup>.) When CCIC members talked to me about Beast Boy, Storm, or Skaar, I knew who they were referring to, and I could convincingly respond to their comments and queries as an insider. If a child needed help drawing a character’s nose – well, I have drawn several thousand of them. Moreover, I possess intimate knowledge of what it is to spend the majority of one’s waking hours in thrall of mutants, ninjas, aliens, and other denizens of the comics multiverse. I have lived it.

My histories as a reader, creator, and fan of comics – in tandem with my experiences as a Language Arts educator – have undoubtedly influenced the values that guide me as a thinker, scholar, and researcher of literacy education<sup>6</sup>. In posing questions about why the popular medium of comics is meaningful to students in the CCIC, for instance, or how young people mobilize multimodal media for critical ends, I bring a

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<sup>5</sup> I have periodically engaged in this thought experiment: What if, when I first met the children who would come to comprise the membership of the CCIC, they had told me they were really into playing chess or making origami? I think I would have appreciated that and encouraged them to continue. But I don’t imagine I’d have worked to co-construct an inquiry community around those practices. Admitting this to myself has enabled me to think through the ways in which my own positionalities and predilections inform the work that I do (and how I direct my gaze). No research or teaching is ever conducted in a vacuum, free from one’s leanings. Practitioner research in particular brings the researcher’s own interests and sensibilities to the table. I was certainly no fly-on-the-wall researcher within the CCIC.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss my location and positionalities at length in Chapter 2.

wealth of personal and professional knowledge to the table. There are also a number of experiences I *cannot* claim lived knowledge of – such as attending an urban school in an era of unfettered testing and accountability, or hailing from a linguistically marginalized community – which contributed to the foundation of my study. In some ways, this dissertation exists within the tensions of an insider/outsider dialectic. While I was not a member of the school or neighborhood communities in which I conducted this research, I was absolutely an insider of the “comics culture” that included students from the Cabrini Mission School.

It is this bumpy insider/outsider relationship that led to the formation of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community in 2012. By merging students’ deep investments in comics culture with my own histories and investments (as a comics reader, cartoonist, critical educator, visual thinker, and literacy researcher), and simultaneously attending to ways in which we claim vastly different lived experiences and cultural identities, the members of the CCIC and I were able to co-construct an inquiry community on a foundation of mutuality and respect. I will speak at length about the formation of the CCIC throughout the next two chapters.

### **The Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community**

The CCIC was launched collaboratively in February 2012 by a group of nine 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys who attended an urban parochial school in South Philadelphia, one volunteer school librarian named Moxie, and me, an English Language Arts (ELA) educator, literacy researcher, and doctoral candidate. For the next twenty months, the CCIC functioned as a space in which these students (and many new ones) read, created, and

talked about comic books and graphic novels. The space simultaneously served as the site of my pilot study of urban children's and youth's literate engagements with graphica. In September 2014, I developed my pilot study into a fuller, more rigorous nine-month dissertation study, in which I examined specific research questions that arose during the previous twenty months. I describe the history of my involvement with the CCIC as its practitioner and documenter, as well as the slow development and refinement of my research questions, in greater detail in the "(Hi)story of the Questions" section of this chapter.

During both the pilot and dissertation phases of my study (2.5 years in total), CCIC sessions were held weekly at the Cabrini Mission School (formerly the Cabrini Parish School), a Catholic K-8 institution serving African American, Southeast Asian American, and Latin@ students in the Marian Anderson neighborhood of South Philadelphia. Throughout my research projects – and specifically my dissertation study – the words, actions, and multimodal compositions of CCIC members (i.e., the data I collected and constructed) have offered significant insights into the roles that visual literacy and popular culture play in young people's identity development and performances, their critical understandings of race, gender, and culture, and their relationships with formal ELA education. Additionally, through their critical engagements with multimodal literacies, CCIC members have directly addressed a number of continuing debates concerning urban students of color, knowledge, and literacy that have persisted for decades, and especially in the years following the No



Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

### **Framing the Problem**

Arnetha Ball and Carol Lee (2011) write that in the years following NCLB, a celebration of the diverse literacy practices of urban youth “has continued to elude our educational institutions” (p. ix). Indeed, in these times, urban students of color<sup>7</sup> regularly encounter an educational landscape that, through the imposing dyad of policy and practice, characterizes their varied cultural backgrounds and community identities, literacy practices, and epistemologies as deficient, in comparison to some implicit “benchmark” of achievement (e.g., Spencer, 2011). In this landscape, urban literacy education is typified not by celebration, but by diagnosis and curricular standardization designed to mechanically impart, or remediate, a narrow set of literacy skills, and by the evaluation of those skills through high-stakes testing (e.g., Allington, 2010; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Nieto, 2010). Too rarely is space allocated within this rigid educational model for urban students to exercise their vast literacy resources with agency and joy.

Educational scholars have argued that curricular remediation marginalizes the dynamic literate practices of urban youth (e.g., Mulcahy, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2010) and ignores contemporary definitions of literacy as multimodal, socially situated, and “intimately tied to our most fundamental identities as individuals and members of

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<sup>7</sup> The use of “urban” in this dissertation is not shorthand for African American. This should become evident when looking at the members of the CCIC, who are African American, Asian American, and Latin@. My use of the term “urban” refers to racially and culturally diverse communities located in large cities, often with sizable populations of immigrants and other minoritized, under-resourced inhabitants (Watson, 2011). Urban environments, as I characterize them in my work, are storehouses of cultural, linguistic, and epistemic resources but are frequently pathologized as hotbeds of social problems.

communities” (Ball & Lee, 2011, p. ix). For this reason, it is tremendously important that literacy researchers and practitioners purposefully “foreground the sophisticated nature of the multiple literacy practices that urban youth engage as a result and in spite of the exclusion and marginalization they typically manage in school” (Fairbanks & Price-Dennis, 2011, p. 144). Employing Rob Simon’s (2012) concept of connoisseurship as a framework for learning about and incorporating youths’ lives and literacies into pedagogy and curricula, in 2012 I identified comics as a medium meaningful to a group of students at the Cabrini Mission School (CMS), though not one with which they had been encouraged to interact. At CMS, my perception – garnered from conversations with students, teachers, and administrators – was that comics were seen as “fugitive reading competing with [and] obstructing [official] literacy” (Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012, p. 431), and which would do little to develop the students’ traditional literacy skills or raise their test scores. I will speak more to these tensions in later chapters.

When I first met Jamir in February 2012, he explained that he likes comic books because “They express me. When I was younger, people thought I didn’t like books. My 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher said that comics aren’t real books. She undermined my knowledge.” Reminiscent of the student Simon (2012) describes, Jamir “claimed an identity counter to the one ascribed to him” and demonstrated how “literacy and identity are co-extensive” (p. 516). It has been my goal throughout my dissertation research *not* to undermine the complex knowledge and literate practices of urban youth like Jamir, but to learn from and honor CCIC members as epistemologists (Bruner, 1996, p. 57) and cosmopolitan intellectuals (Campano & Ghiso, 2011), and in so doing, to co-construct a multiliterate

learning space of real possibility. By investigating the ways a group of urban students built and used of the space of an afterschool inquiry community, as well as the medium of comics itself, I endeavor with this dissertation to contribute to theories of urban multimodal literacy education.

Taking advantage of the relative freedom of an afterschool learning space (Wallace Foundation, 2009), the focus of this ethnographic practitioner research study (e.g., Cooper & Ellis, 2011) is to inquire into the CCIC members' multiliterate and cultural engagements with comics. My research questions were designed to explore the affordances of graphica for urban students to form and perform identities, to invoke cultural and community legacies, to construct diverse narratives with words and images, and, writ large, to read and write their worlds (Freire, 1987). In the following chapters of this dissertation, I provide a rationale for conducting this study (in the form of a literature review), discuss the formation and history of my project and show how that history – and other histories – inform my research questions, describe my study's methodology, and present and analyze examples of transcript and multimodal data from members of the CCIC. I share data across chapters three through five of this dissertation. In chapter three I examine how CCIC members employ the medium of comics as a mechanism for contesting the silencing of race in their school. In chapter four I foreground two Chicano students' multimodal composing practices as a means of re-narrating themselves and their cultural experiences. In chapter five I investigate a number of ways in which CCIC members make sense of gender – both challenging and reifying norms of gender identity

and performance – through their engagements with graphica. With chapter six, I close my dissertation by drawing implications from across the three data chapters.

In all, this dissertation argues for the importance of qualitatively investigating the intersections of visual (multimodal) literacy, youth identity, and popular culture, through a perspective drawn from critical urban and multicultural education (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Kinloch, 2011 & 2012; Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 1995).

### **Review of Literature**

*“A review is gatekeeping, policing, and productive rather than merely mirroring... Whether specifying the reviewer’s relation to the material is done implicitly or explicitly, the text bears marks of his/her presence... If one can let go of the idea of the ‘correct reading’ and, instead, see that every reading is a misreading, a partial, situated and perspectival reading, one can learn much about the intertextual nature of one’s work, how it can be inserted into various assemblages” (Lather, 1999, pp. 3-4).*

### **The Urban Educational Landscape**

In the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, urban schools that serve historically marginalized communities in the United States have been characterized in a variety of often contradictory ways. Despite national, state, and local policy moves that label urban students of color, en masse, as underachieving, and thus in need of curricular remediation and unrelenting test preparation (as reported in Allington, 2010; Bitz, 2006; Edelsky, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Spencer, 2011; Zacher Pandya, 2011), there has been substantial pushback emphasizing the epistemic, linguistic, and cultural resources of urban students in literacy-oriented classrooms (e.g., Ballenger, 2009; Campano, 2007a & b; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Gadsden, 1992; Groenke et al., 2015; Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Low & Campano, 2013; Luke, 2010; Morrell, 2008). Too often, however, urban

schools in working class communities – due largely to the punitive nature of school accountability and funding (Neill, 2003) – are forced to cede to the test prep paradigm, and in effect, to undervalue their students’ vast ranges of cultural, linguistic, semiotic, and epistemic resources – students’ “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) – in favor of ‘measurable outcomes’ of academic achievement (as described by Souto-Manning, 2010; Willis, 2007). Academic achievement, in this sense, is gauged almost exclusively by a student’s ability to score highly on standardized tests. Since urban students of color have historically tested less well than White suburban students (for a host of well-documented reasons that policymakers typically fail to acknowledge; see, for example, Anyon, 1997 & 2005; Biddle, 2001; Brantlinger, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010b; Harris, 2011; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2011; Mickelson, 2003; Nieto, 2010; Willis, 2007), education policies often implicitly frame urban and minoritized<sup>8</sup> students’ backgrounds and experiences from a deficit orientation, as obstacles to be overcome if ‘achievement’ is to occur (e.g., Moll, 2010; Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). In the time of NCLB and Race to the Top, policymakers’ myopic obsession with empirical evidence of student ‘achievement’ predictably leads to curricula that are steadfastly devoted to teaching to the test and little else (e.g., Berliner, 2008; Sleeter, 2005). Diane Ravitch (2010) writes that “test-taking skills and strategies [have taken] precedence over knowledge” (p. 107) in urban schools, with standardized tests frequently becoming a “protocurriculum” and teachers spending significant amounts of time

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<sup>8</sup> Given the colonial connotations of the word “minority,” I opt instead to use the term “minoritized” in order to foreground that the marginalization of social groups is an active and ongoing construct (a verb), neither neutral nor inevitable.

engaging in “mindless test prep drills” with students (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). So it is that the landscape of American urban education has become, for the past generation at least, typified by high-stakes testing, curricular standardization, and skills-based approaches to literacy (e.g., de Castell & Luke, 1986; Flood & Anders, 2005), where the “achievement of Latino and African American students has almost universally suffered” (Nieto, 2010, p. 20).

Forced acquiescence to ‘skill-and-drill’ pedagogic models has led many to view urban schools as joyless epicenters of apathy, full of listless teachers and unmotivated students, “where unruly youth rule and little learning takes place” (Nieto, 2008, p. ix). This dominant media portrayal of urban education, of warehouses of hopelessness and despair, appears woefully unsatisfactory, however, when viewed qualitatively, with respect to range and nuance, by critically-oriented classroom practitioners and researchers. As Gerald Campano (2007b) writes,

We encounter daily a system that reinforces an idea of deprivation: of community decay, teacher incompetence, parental neglect, and ultimately student failure. At the same time, daily, we encounter children, young adults, and families who are responding to their circumstances, including this pervasive discourse of deprivation, with creativity and promise (p. 3).

Indeed, those who care to look closely at urban schools see young people mobilizing their formidable cultural knowledge<sup>9</sup> to critically inquire into and counteract the very

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I refer back to Sonia Nieto’s definition of culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (2010, p. 78). I also emphasize the intersections of various aspects of identity that are dynamic, socially situated, and shifting.

discourses which would attempt to delimit them. Daily we see urban children and youth living the pursuit of hope, joy, and justice.

While official discourses of what counts as knowledge in many urban schools have narrowed over the past decades (e.g., Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Siegel & Fernandez, 2000), countless sites of hope and humanity continue to emerge and thrive under the shadows of NCLB and Race to the Top (e.g., Christensen, 2000; Rapp, Sloan, & Hostrup, 2006), as educators, students, families, and entire communities effectively work “within, against, and beyond the system” (Lytle et al., 2009). A particularly hopeful site for honoring the substantial knowledge of children and youth is the expanding nexus of alternative learning spaces in urban communities (e.g., Bitz, 2006 & 2010; Brooks-Tatum, 2012; Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Hull, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Hull & Zacher, 2004; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2009), which, in the age of high-stakes accountability, have taken on increased significance in many young peoples’ lives (Hickey et al, 2010). These alternative spaces, whether functioning inside or outside of school buildings, often operate from the standpoint that urban youths’ interests are valid and innately intellectual, and thus celebrate “the literate lives, academic achievements, and social networking systems of students of color in urban environments” (Kinloch, 2011, p. 2), and open up “worlds for meaning makers...that are frequently, if not always, silent in formal, institutional settings like schooling” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 3). Such positions, of course, stand in stark contrast to the constrictive and prescriptive curricular mandates that, following NCLB, have characterized the literacies and lives of ‘disadvantaged’ urban students as nonacademic and intellectually inferior. Many

educational scholars and practitioners have pushed back against NCLB's mandates by writing about how the arts, 'new literacies', and popular media with which students intellectually engage (e.g., Hagood, 2009; L. A. Hall, 2011; T. Hall, 2011; Jocson, 2012; Kist, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Moje, 2002) may afford culturally relevant avenues for historically minoritized youth to assert their social and cultural knowledge (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009), and to "deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices" (Morrell, 2002, p. 72). Some alternative learning spaces, such as spoken word poetry clubs (Fisher, 2007; Gregory, 2008; Jocson, 2011), digital storytelling programs (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010; T. Hall, 2011; Hull, 2003), and comic book clubs (Bitz, 2006, 2009, & 2010; Seyfried, 2008), focus on the popular media which urban children and youth actively employ to (per)form identities, engage in intellectual pursuits, and critically make meaning (Dimitriadis, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Gustavson, 2007; Hill, 2009; Kirkland & Hull, 2010; Morrell, 2002), but which students are unlikely to find on any standardized assessment of literacy skills.

### **Literacy Matters Multiply**

*"Researchers who are concerned with the social negotiation of identities are increasingly considering issues of...multiple and new literacies, and other agency- and power-related issues in the examination of identity" (Lee & Anderson, 2009, p. 187).*

Ernest Morrell (2008) writes that "A consensus seems to be emerging among educators, researchers, policymakers, politicians, and business leaders across the political and ideological perspectives that *literacy matters*" (p. 2). However, there is little consensus over what literacy is, what its purposes should be, or how to identify, impart, or assess it (Mulcahy, 2010). The discrepancy between the rich literate lives of students



and the standardized tests which narrowly attempt to measure, quantify, and rank students' literacy 'achievement' reflects the historic gulf between two major conceptions of literacy, which Brian Street (1995) refers to as the 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models. Broadly construed, the autonomous view of literacy – which has long dominated educational policy and continues to do so in the age of NCLB and Race to the Top – divorces literacy from its social contexts, perceiving it as a neutral set of cognitive skills (i.e. the ability to decode or reproduce printed alphabetic text) that a person either possesses or does not possess, and which can be evaluated as an independent variable. The ideological model, on the other hand, focuses not on literacy as a 'technology of the mind' (Goody, 1977) or a set of discrete skills, but rather on the "social structures within which the concepts and philosophies of specific cultures are formed" to make and communicate meaning (Street, 1995, p. 85).

An ideological view – gelling with the largely ethnographic field of New Literacy Studies – suggests that literacy is a social practice which cannot be severed from the lived contexts within which it is employed (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Collins & Blot, 2003; Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Gee, 1989 & 2000; Harste, 2003; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Literacy, rather than a fixed or universal *object*, has everything to do with how people participate in sociocultural contexts of meaning making, and is contingent upon a speaker or writer's purposes and cultural milieus (Edelsky, 2006, p. 106). As Nabi, Rogers, and Street (2009) explain, ethnographic studies of literacy involve "looking at literacy through the eyes of other people, how they perceive and engage in literacy practices in their daily lives" (p. 1). It is evident that a perspective drawn from the

ideological model of literacy informs much of the work currently happening in the alternative learning spaces I referenced above (also see Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Lewis, 2007), while a perspective drawn from the autonomous model of literacy – and which coheres with White, monolingual, middle class ways of knowing and being – informs the foundations of NCLB, Race to the Top, the national standardized testing apparatus, and the systemic pathologization of urban and minoritized youth.

Complementing scholarly work in the New Literacy Studies, which argues that any instantiation of literacy must be viewed within its particular social contexts, many scholars have argued that an ideological view of literacy must also encompass *multiple* synchronous meaning-making systems (i.e. multiliteracies) through an overlapping array of languages and semiotic modes (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Flewitt, 2008; Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2009; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kell, 2006; New London Group, 1996; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006 & 2010; Siegel, 2006; Siegel & Panofsky, 2009; Stein, 2003 & 2004). Kress and Street (2006) write that work in the areas of New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies/multimodalities share much in common, but that “one tries to understand what people acting together are doing [to make meaning], while the other tries to understand about the tools with which these same people do what they are doing [to make meaning]” (p. viii). The importance of multimodality, argue Hull and Nelson (2005), is that it increases the “multiplex ways by which people can make meaning in the world” (p. 226), which is “important for diverse youth if schooling is to be relevant and meaningful” (p. 225). Scholarship in multiliteracies/multimodalities comes at a time when

technological and paradigmatic shifts – i.e. the new meaning-making tools to which Kress and Street refer – are drastically diversifying the ways that mediatized information is transmitted, received, and interpreted throughout the world (e.g., Hull, 2003; Kress, 2003; Luke, 1995), necessarily affecting the ways that literacies, both locally and globally, are enacted and socially practiced. Katie Monnin (2011) refers to these shifts, which have elevated the communicative function of images and spatial arrangements in various media, as “the greatest communication revolution of all time” (p. xi). With images carrying an expanding weight across various media (Barry, 1997; Burmark, 2002; Moore-Russo & Shanahan, 2014; Serafini, 2013), droves of scholars and educators have argued that students must be engaged in critically analyzing mediatized imagery for its content, its assumptions, and its implications (e.g., Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hobbs, 1997; Janks, 2010; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Morrell, 2008), so that they are empowered actors, not acted upon. As Jerome Harste (2010) puts it, students should be “agents of text rather than victims of text” (p. 32). Many have referred to critical analysis of the visual mode (encompassing the deconstructing and reconstructing of images) as ‘visual literacy’ (Callow, 2005; Debes, 1968; Frechette, 2002; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Housen, 2001-2002; Newfield, 2011; Serafini, 2013) and note that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “the importance of students’ developing visual literacy cannot be overstated” (Versaci, 2008, p. 96). Part of visual literacy, other scholars argue, is that young people must be provided with opportunities to produce their own multimodal compositions (e.g., Albers & Sanders, 2010; Bitz, 2009; Ghiso & Low, 2013; Miller & McVee, 2012; Moline, 1995; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Whitin, 1996; Whitin & Whitin, 2012; Zapata, 2014) in order

to challenge dominant visual forms, portrayals, and narratives, and in effect, to “talk back to the dominant visual messages presented in our culture” (Harste, 2010, p. 32).

Working as a literacy educator during a time of massive media flux toward visual and spatial modes (e.g., Albers, 2010; Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), it no longer seems sufficient, if ever it did, to overwhelmingly value the ‘traditional’ or verbocentric practices of reading and writing alphabetic print text at the expense of “image-texts” (Mitchell, 1994) and artistic imaginaries (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995; Harste, 2014; Whitelaw, 2012). This is precisely what standardized testing, and its emphasis on discrete monomodal literacy skills<sup>10</sup>, continues to do. In a 2012 article, Marjorie Siegel asks:

What are the prospects for multimodality in these hard times? How might we position multimodality so teachers and students can tap its possibilities in the accountability culture? These are difficult questions that will require the collective imagination of all who are working to make room for multimodality in school literacy pedagogy (p. 672).

During the “hard times” Siegel refers to, when multimodalities are still typically sidelined in schools, many students – particularly students in schools that engage in endless test prep drills – feel compelled to turn to alternative learning spaces in order to deploy and develop their multimodal literacies (e.g., Alvermann et al., 2001; Bitz, 2006; Low & Campano, 2013; Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Jocson, 2011; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Oreck et al., 1999; Vasudevan, 2006). Much has been written of urban youths’ engagements with the creation of multimodal texts, specifically those which emphasize visual elements

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<sup>10</sup> What the New London Group (1996) refers to as “formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (p. 61).

such as graffiti art (Gustavson, 2007), tattoo art (Kirkland, 2009), lowrider art (Cowan, 2005), and digital video production (Miller, 2010) in- and outside of official school spaces (e.g., Gude, 2007). In response, Siegel (2012) writes that:

Creating opportunities for youths to draw on all the resources in their semiotic toolkits allows them to demonstrate knowledge and critical understandings far beyond that which they display when language is the sole mode of meaning-making and communication... For this reason, some educators have argued that multimodal transformations of school literacy are a matter of social justice (p. 674).

This is very much a matter of social justice. But in these times, with urban schools under scrutiny and attack by ‘reformers,’ and the testing and accountability movements refusing to budge, genuine transformations of school literacy curriculums, in the direction of multimodalities, seem far off and quixotic. On the other hand, multimodal transformations of out-of-school literacy curriculums, in less restrictive alternative learning spaces, seem like a very real and sustainable possibility. Michael Bitz (2006) writes that in cities across America, out-of-school educators are developing “publishing houses where students plan, write, design, and distribute original comic books” (p. 1), in spite of the pressures put on traditional ELA curriculums to prepare students for monomodal evaluations.

Due to issues of cost, practicality, and global popularity, comics is a multimodal (primarily visual/spatial) medium that often finds itself the focus of alternative learning spaces which either make room for or emphasize multimodal literacies (e.g., Bitz, 2010; Jacobs, 2013), both in and out of schools (for several examples, see Black, 2009; Carter, 2008; Cary, 2004; Ghiso & Low, 2013; Mandaville & Avila, 2009; Monnin, 2010;

Rosen, 2009; Tabachnik, 2009; Thompson, 2008; Witek, 2009). I will elaborate further on comics vis-à-vis literacy in the next section.

### **Graphica in Literacy Education**

In recent years, a growing number of literacy scholars have argued that comic books and graphic novels (referred to collectively as *graphica*), while not a technologically *new* medium, may provide students of all ages with an ideal medium for navigating wide ranges of literacies and modalities, and for taking an agential role in making meaning (e.g., Chun, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Griffith, 2010; Schwarz, 2006; Weiner, 2004). The inherently multimodal medium of comics, which “raise[s] complex questions bearing on semiotics, linguistics, aesthetics, textuality, representation, epistemology, narrative, and spatiality” (Witek, 2009, p. 218), does much to disrupt the autonomous, monomodal definition of literacy overwhelmingly endorsed by the testing regime (e.g., Jacobs, 2013; Low, 2012). The multiple literacies that students synchronously enact via the reading and writing/design of *graphica* are indeed vastly significant in contemporary literacy contexts; today, *graphica* fits into any discussion of what should ‘count’ as literacy in and out of school contexts (Carter, 2008). A “visuo-textual” medium, *graphica* of multiple varieties is immensely popular with children, youth, and adults throughout the world (e.g., Botzakis, 2009; Duncan & Smith, 2009; Lopes, 2009; Maslon & Kantor, 2013; McCloud, 1993; Pustz, 2000). Attending, then, to students’ interactions with *graphica* is not simply about imparting visual literacy skills, but in accordance with Street’s ideological model of literacy, may reveal much about students’ diverse identities as literate beings, and may also “provide opportunities for

increasing engagement, developing meaningful connections, and fostering innovative approaches to teaching and learning” (Simon, 2012, p. 516).

Though it is unlikely that this work has yet had much of an impact on standardized English Language Arts curriculums, there is currently a critical mass of scholarly literature discussing the benefits of employing comics in schools and in alternative learning spaces. Over the past two decades, researchers representing a variety of disciplines have argued that the medium of comics is not taken as seriously as it should be in schools, in libraries and museums, in college English, fine arts, and media classes, in academic scholarship, and by society at large (see, for example, Beaty, 2015; J. Carter, 2008; Connors, 2010; Esquivel, 2006; Griffith, 2010; Groensteen, 2009; MacDonald, 2012). Many arguments for the legitimation of graphica rely on several common tropes. The first I refer to as the *‘multimodality trope’*: that comics, as an inherently multimodal medium chockfull of productive “indeterminacies” where panels are divided by gutters (Groensteen, 2007; Henretty, 2014; Karasik & Newgarden, 2014; Low, 2012; Postema, 2013), requires readers to blend semiotic systems in order to construct meaning (e.g., Cohn, 2014; Cromer & Clark, 2007; Mikkonen, 2012; Schwarz, 2007; Sousanis, 2015; Weiner, 2004; Witek, 2009). As human societies enter further into an age mediated by images (e.g., Burmark, 2002; Kress, 2003; Serafini, 2013), proponents of visual literacy contend that comics is an ideal medium for encouraging readers to bridge multiple sign systems (e.g., Frey & Fisher, 2008; Mitchell, 1994; Tiemensma, 2009; Versaci, 2008)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> In this review of literature, I deliberately omit research into the more cognitive elements of image/text reading, such as eye tracking studies of comic book readers (e.g., Kinzer et al., 2012).

By requiring readers and creators to productively integrate an array of semiotic modes, the comics medium offers opportunities to participate in discourse through a wider range of communicative practices than through talk or writing alone (e.g., Dadey, 2009; Low, 2012; Mikkonen, 2012; Sousanis, 2015; Unsworth, 2009). Susan Honeyman (2014) writes that the visual mode communicates “extralinguistically, and thus more expansively than through verbal means” (p. 209). By combining linguistic and extralinguistic features, comics function as polysemic cross-discursive texts which require readers to “marry print and visual representations in order to read in ways that are deeply meaningful” (Cromer & Clark, 2007, p. 589), and to attend to “how comics [as a discursive medium] constitutes meaning in a way that is different from those of other media” (Tucker, 2009, p. 28). Dale Jacobs (2013) writes that comics is a medium “in which meaning is created through linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial realms in order to achieve effects of meanings that would not be possible in either a strictly print or strictly visual text,” and he argues that “by studying how comics are used to sponsor multimodal literacy, we can engage more deeply with the ways students encounter and use these and other multimodal texts” (n.p.). As the literary theorist Hillary Chute (2010) further explains,

Comics conveys several productive tensions in its basic structure. The words and images entwine, but never synthesize... [Thus,] through its hybrid and spatial form, comics lends itself to expressing stories...that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities (p. 5).

Thus, within the multimodality trope, comics are frequently positioned as an instrument for readers to develop complex skills, comprehend literary devices, and engage in



“deeper” semiosis (e.g., Chase et al., 2014; Dallacqua, 2012; Pantaleo, 2014). Students’ “learning outcomes” are frequently the unit of analysis.

Beyond the technical contrivances of the medium, there is an obvious and vast appeal of comics in global popular culture (e.g., Berndt, 2010; Petrone, 2013; Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Pustz, 2000; Wright, 2001), as evidenced in the groundswell of their profitability. Throughout the world, comics are popular with readers of all ages, and many people derive a sizable part of their readerly identities through comics, as well as the movies, TV shows, and products based on comic book characters (e.g., Boerman-Cornell et al., 2009; Botzakis, 2009; Simon, 2012). Chute (2010) writes that “it is because comics is both a sophisticated and experimental form, and because it has a popular history” that the medium is so “hopeful and invigorating” to readers and scholars (p. 11). Thus, a second common argument for the legitimation of comics is the *‘popular culture trope’*: that because comics and manga are highly meaningful to so many people, schools, libraries, and society at large should make a concerted effort to affirm readers’ interests rather than trying to subvert or modify those interests (e.g., Bitz, 2009; Black, 2009; J. Carter, 2008; Tabachnik, 2009). Simon (2012), for instance, employs the popular culture trope to argue that educators should become connoisseurs of students’ literate interests by incorporating comics into their pedagogies and curricula. An offshoot of the *popular culture trope* is the growing use of the comics medium, generally in the form of informational graphica, to teach disciplinary knowledge, from business and law concepts (e.g., Short et al., 2013), to math, science, and history (e.g., Brozo, 2013; Cromer & Clark, 2007; Hosler & Boomer, 2011). In these cases, the global popularity of comic

books is operationalized to argue that graphica can be an effective mechanism for delivering traditional content.

A third common argument for legitimizing comics ironically fails to legitimize the medium at all. By locating comics as lower than traditional verbocentric (monomodal) texts on an imaginary literacy ladder (e.g., Friese, 2013), the *'steppingstone trope'* argues that reading comics is better than reading nothing at all, so 'unmotivated' readers should be encouraged to engage with comics in the hopes that they'll move on to better texts eventually (see McTaggart, 2008). Many of the researchers who utilize the steppingstone trope recommend comics for 'reluctant' or 'struggling' readers, rather than for all readers (e.g., Brozo, 2013; Crawford 2004; Edwards, 2009; Gavigan, 2011). By perpetuating a hierarchy in which graphica is inferior to alphabetic print texts, the steppingstone trope only legitimizes comics as a means to an end. Finally, a fourth, less frequent argument for the legitimation of comics is that the medium invites readers to enact critical literacies and cultural identities (see Carleton, 2014; Chun, 2009; Hatfield & Svonkin, 2013; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004). I refer to this as the *'culturally relevant critical visual literacy trope,'* and attempt to further articulate it in my own work in this dissertation.

As James Bucky Carter (2008) writes, "It is sound practice" to include comics in schools, and "integrating them is a step toward a realization of more democratic notions of text, literacy, and curriculum" (p. 47). Indeed, the medium of comics offers unique meaning-making affordances, and the fact that so many children, youth, and adults throughout the world genuinely *enjoy* transacting with graphica should not be overlooked

by educators (Botzakis, 2009; Tabachnik, 2009). Graphica is low-tech, is relatively cheap to procure and easy to make, and it represents a format familiar to many students and their families across cultural and socioeconomic lines. As I have previously written, comics is “a medium treasured by countless youths across many cultures and which is inherently representative of multiple synchronous literacy practices, serving as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of single-definition school literacy curriculums” (Low, 2012, p. 371). In fact, the medium of comics, writes Monnin (2011), “asks us to rethink how we define reading and writing today” (p. xii). Attending to how and why people are drawn to comics, and what they do with the medium, requires educational researchers and practitioners to take up the anthropological traditions of New Literacy Studies, for comics literacies, like other literacies, are social and multimodal practices linked to the lived contexts within which people make and express meaning. Monnin (2011) warns that “A failure to adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies,” such as one including graphics, “will only create a further gap between what kinds of literacies students interact with at home or at work and those they interact with at school” (p. xii).

### **Gaps in the Literature: Urban Students, Graphica, and Identity**

Much of the literature concerning comics in literacy education focuses on graphic texts themselves, whether for being literarily significant (i.e. non-empirical literary criticism) or for imparting comprehension skills to ‘reluctant’ or ‘struggling’ readers (e.g., Carter & Evensen, 2011; Crawford, 2004; McTaggart, 2008; Thompson, 2008). This work tends to examine the affordances of the visuo-textual medium for communicating semiotic information (see, for example, Groensteen, 2007; Khordoc,

2001; Lefèvre, 2009; Tucker, 2009; Wolk, 2007), elevating text above context. While semiotics, as a study of communication and sign systems, is by definition socially situated, there is still much missing from the scholarly literature about how students, as cultural beings with diverse lived experiences, mobilize their social identities in reading and creating graphica. This is a missed opportunity, considering the ways in which the medium is “structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling” (Chute, 2008, p. 456). To empirically examine the ways that children, youth, and adults employ the comics medium – especially its interplay of presence and absence, and ability to include competing narratives in a single panel – to form and perform literate identities is relevant work in the tradition of NLS, but it is an endeavor not commonly undertaken. The majority of comics studies give short shrift to the idea that “the shaping of meanings into modes is always culturally and socially influenced” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 5).

I contend that sociocultural analyses of comics should be focused “more on the actors who make the texts than on the texts that are acted upon” (Siegel & Panofsky, 2009, p. 105), and anchor my argument in Pahl and Rowsell’s (2010) assertion that studies of multimodal texts “need to acknowledge what lies behind the meaning; that is, what meaning makers bring to texts” (p. 5). Comics-related scholarship, and especially that which is concerned with literacy and education, must better emphasize the social in social semiotics (Brienza, 2010). The reduction of the sociocultural dimension, however, is a common problem with much of the work flying under the banner of multimodalities in education. Numerous authors write about communicative modes – and the technologies which utilize the modes – rather than attempting to better understand how

people communicate and make sense, in specific cultural contexts, with and through those modes. Even scholarship that does purport to discuss a specific group of students (i.e. urban, rural, indigenous, or L2) reading or creating multimodal texts often does little, if anything, to explain why the students' particular social contexts are in any way significant to the study. Revisiting Kress and Street's co-authored piece from 2006, which discusses overlaps between New Literacy Studies and multimodalities, it becomes clear that a good many multimodalists (and comics scholars) would be well-advised to return to the ethnographic impulse to understand how people, not modes, participate in sociocultural contexts of meaning making. After all, the meaning-making "affordances" that are so frequently the subject of scholarly literature afford nothing outside of human context. And human contexts are mediated by discourses of power.

Siegel and Panofsky (2009) write that scholarship around multimodality should be located in contemporary discussions pertaining to literacy, diversity, and power, and should seek to explain how signs and modes "participate in social life as part of specific meaning-making practices, with all that implies about power and the social order" (p. 108). This sort of scholarship is infrequently taken up in regard to comics. One prime example is the shortage of empirical literature discussing non-dominant students and their reading and writing of *graphica*. Much of the literature seems to presume that *graphica* is the purview of the White, male, middle class (E. E. Thomas, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2012; Maslon & Kantor, 2013). I have a different understanding of comics culture, informed by my own experiences facilitating the CCIC and by the non-empirical literature on comics and race (Brown, 2001; Connors, 2013; Duffy & Jennings, 2010;

Foster III, 2010; Gateward & Jennings, in press; Nama, 2011), scant as it may be. Harste (2010) writes that “Different cultural groups have different ways of knowing and being in the world” (p. 29), which should make the fundamental research question of multimodality scholarship: “How are multiple sign systems used? To what end? *and* What social practices are maintaining their use?” (p. 27). These are questions that must empirically be brought to bear on young people’s transactions with and creations of *graphica*. Far from arguing that there are essential or predetermined ways in which all members of a cultural group approach a literate practice, I wonder how a medium such as comics affords opportunities for people to form, perform, and contest cultural identities.

There are several notable exceptions to my critique of the negligible presence of race, culture, and identity in the empirical literature concerning comics in education. Norton & Vanderheyden (2004) address “comic book culture” as an entry point for second language learners, while Chun (2009) and Hammond (2012) describe classroom studies in which graphic novels (Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, respectively) were used to further critical classroom discussions. Another exception is the scholarship of Michael Bitz (2004, 2006, 2009, 2010), whose work in developing afterschool comic book clubs for urban youth substantiates the notion that, when creating comics, students are engaged in “critically thinking about their roles in society and community.” Through the making of comic books, Bitz writes that the students of color who participate in the multisite COMIC BOOK PROJECT craft “creative stories about themselves, their neighborhoods, and their identities as urban youths – what

they experience, how they view themselves, how they interact with peers, and how they struggle with daily hardships” (p. 2).

Bitz avoids a pitfall that entraps many researchers studying *graphica* by focusing not on comic books as *products*, but on the literate activities behind their creation.

“Examining the process,” writes Bitz (2006), “conveys a rich story about how children think and act, and about how afterschool programs buttress children’s creative thought and their ability to engage in community action” (p. 5). For all its strengths, Bitz’s work is perhaps too great in scale and in danger of becoming programmatic; at 129 sites in nine cities, Bitz and his team of researchers are attuned to large-level questions and issues, such as training, funding, and recruitment. Bitz’s unit of analysis is the overall constellation of clubs, with the purpose of his team’s observations being “to collect and organize a wide range of information about each club in order to identify patterns and themes and then compare the clubs with one another” (p. 5). The Comic Book Project, now a part of the organization EdPath, has recently taken to packaging its curriculum and selling it to schools (\$217 for a classroom kit, \$500 for an exhibit and celebration kit). My concern is that by being bundled as a *‘This is how you teach urban kids how to make comics’* curriculum, Bitz’s (and his team of researchers’) ideas may become inflexible, sacrificing the nuanced learner-directed focus that initially made them so powerful. A project with the scope of Bitz’s could benefit from taking an inquiry stance toward itself and its practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and by reflexively examining how its “positions, histories, and desires for power [are] implicated in its questions, methodologies, and conclusions” (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 9).

In contributing to the growing field of comics in education (and literacy education in particular), it will be important for researchers to conduct smaller scale empirical studies of the types of comics clubs that Bitz and his teams oversee. The designers of these hypothetical studies may elect to employ ethnographic methods (e.g., Green & Bloome, 1997) and case study approaches (e.g., Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) to inquire into smaller groups of students' multiliterate and sociocultural engagements with *graphica*, as well as maintaining self-reflexivity about their own roles in the research process. Peggy Albers (2010) writes that "researchers and teachers collectively have shown the significance of studying the dynamic and interactive nature of [students'] image production...as a crucial part of literacy curriculum and a more complex understanding of literacy practices" (p. 161). I maintain that the dynamism and interactivity of students' image productions can become sublimated when empirical studies are large in scope.

Ethnography, a qualitative paradigm that combines the thick description of 'everyday practice' (Geertz, 1973) with a close account of people, places, and cultures (Heath & Street, 2008), can provide "a window onto meaning makers and their intentions" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 6). Visually-oriented ethnographic methods, then, would be ideal for exploring students' reading and composition of image-texts. In the case of comics in education, ethnographic lenses are necessary for literacy researchers to better understand why students from diverse backgrounds are drawn to comics in the first place (Botzakis, 2009; Dyson, 2001), and how race, gender, culture, and difference are represented in the image-texts urban students read and create (e.g., Brooks, 2006; Foster



III, 2005 & 2010; Howard & Jackson II, 2013; Moeller, 2011; Nama, 2011; Strömberg, 2003/2012; Wimberly, 2015). It may be possible, then, to adequately attend to *how* comics raises questions bearing on, among other things, representation, epistemology, and narrative (Witek, 2009, p. 218).

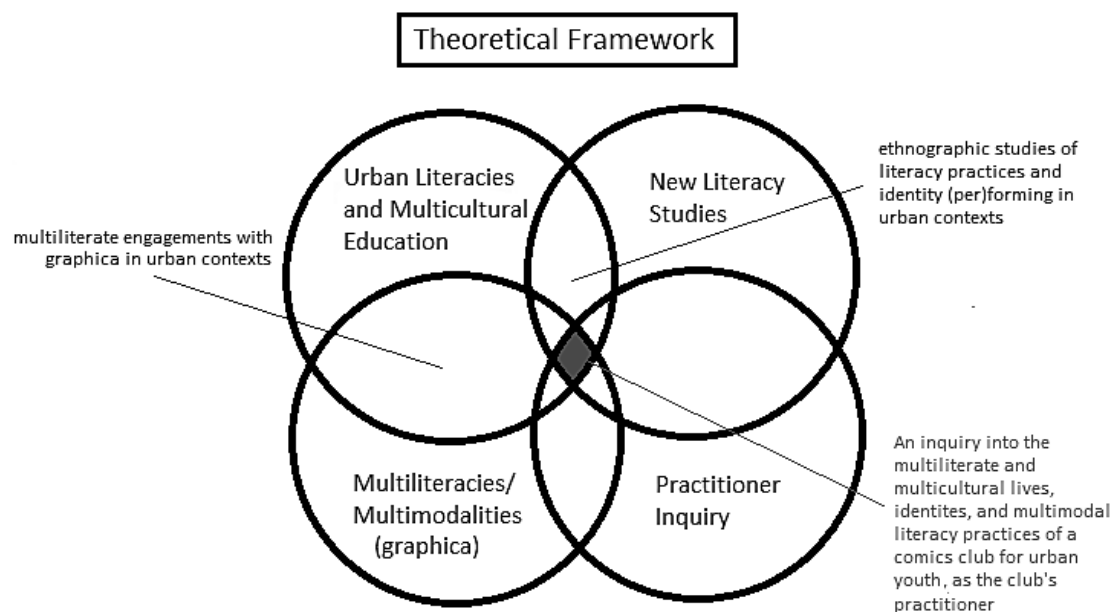
### **Conceptual/Theoretical Frameworks**

*“I am urging that we recognize how particular frames—theoretical, pedagogical, or otherwise—shape and limit the knowledge we produce” (Hesford, 1999, p. xiii).*

Ravitch and Riggan (2012) define a conceptual framework as an evolving “argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 7), explaining that a conceptual framework “allows researchers to make reasoned, defensible choices about how we might explore topics or themes heretofore underexplored” (p. xiii). I choose to adopt Ravitch and Riggan’s characterization, and believe that a conceptual framework need not comprise a discrete section or subsection of a research report, but must permeate the entire report itself. With this in mind, my conceptual framework inhabits the various sections of this dissertation, including its literature review, (hi)story of the questions, methods/contexts, individual data chapters, and implications/conclusion chapter.

Conversely, the purpose of a theoretical framework, Miles & Huberman (1994) argue, is to help researchers fill the “intellectual bins” that make up our conceptual frameworks with topical research and theory. The scholarly work that comprises a theoretical framework “represent[s] an aggregation of formal theories in such a way as to illuminate some aspect of [the researcher’s] conceptual framework” (as cited by Ravitch

& Riggan, 2012, p. 12). The diagram I provide below illustrates various ‘bins’ that comprise my conceptual framework, and how they intersect in meaningful ways. There are, of course, inherent tensions in my framework, and the fact that it is neatly displayed as a diagram with equally proportioned geometric shapes. No framework – and especially not a framework for qualitative inquiry – can be brought together seamlessly, and in particular, one that pulls from the different intellectual traditions I am invoking. Thus, the tensions in my framework have become my focus, as they are where new knowledge is generated. For instance, the boundary between my urban literacies/multicultural education ‘bin’ and my multiliteracies/multimodalities/graphica ‘bin’ is, as I explained earlier, one that is not often negotiated in the literature; multimodalists often leave the cultural dimension out of the equation. What this means to me, as a researcher and practitioner, is that I must endeavor to do a better job of understanding, navigating, crossing, and blurring these theoretical borderlands. Throughout the course of my dissertation study – from design, to data collection, to coding/analysis, to writing the final report – I have continued to read scholarship from the field, and have attempted to locate intersections in the literature pertaining to race, gender, culture, identity, urban education, new literacies, multimodalities, comics in education, and qualitative methodologies. From my position as a practitioner-researcher, I have mediated, co-articulated, incorporated, and at times critiqued this literature.



### **(Hi)story of the Questions**

In the fall of 2010, Gerald Campano, during the first semester of his associate professorship at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, became involved in a research relationship with the St. Cabrini Catholic Parish in South Philadelphia. The historic parish, serving the neighborhood for over a century, today represents several robust cultural communities (including African American, Filipin@, Indonesian, Latin@<sup>12</sup>, and Vietnamese parishioners) and offers regular mass in five languages. The issues that community members encounter are diverse but often overlapping, as many of the parish's immigrants feel intense scrutiny from government officials, and numerous parishioners also deal with issues related to urban poverty, such as joblessness and criminalization (Anyon, 1997 & 2005; Berliner, 2009; Giroux, 1996;

<sup>12</sup> The terms "Filipin@" and "Latin@" are used to refer to both Filipinos/Filipinas and Latinos/Latinas in a non-gendered manner.

Moya & Markus, 2010; Small & Newman, 2001; Wilson, 1996). The mission of the parish has long been and remains “to serve the immigrant and the stranger,” and as Dr. Campano learned, the parish’s leadership was strongly invested in issues around social justice, equity, and language and literacy education in ways that spoke to his own scholarly work, and also to the emerging work of his graduate students. I speak at greater length about the parish and its contexts in the next chapter.

Like Dr. Campano, I arrived at Penn GSE in the fall of 2010, fresh from my master’s coursework at NYU and following half a decade of teaching high school English Language Arts in Tucson, Arizona. At Penn, I knew that I wanted to continue working with young people in minoritized communities around issues of language, literacy, and justice in education. My time in Tucson had taught me much about the politicized natures of knowledge and literacy, especially in urban and marginalized communities, but there was much that I did not understand in terms of how local learning fits into the bigger national picture of testing and accountability. I decided that inquiring into the neoliberal turn in American education, and its effects on children and communities, would be a guiding pursuit during my first years at Penn. Additionally, after having taken several classes with Dr. Glynda Hull at NYU, I had become interested in theorizing the roles of multimodal texts, such as video games and comic books, through the context of literacy as a critical social practice. I wondered if there was a way to bring my various interests to bear on the work I would pursue at Penn. Midway through my first semester at GSE, while deeply immersed in coursework, I began working with Dr. Campano as a research assistant.

Early in his work with St. Cabrini, Dr. Campano invited his graduate students to become involved in building sustainable relationships within the parish's sub-communities, and to envision context-specific pilot projects we might be interested in pursuing (Campano et al, 2012). The idea was that by attending to specific literacy practices within smaller parish communities, together we could cultivate more complex multicultural understandings of the overall parish community (e.g., Street, 1984). Near the end of 2010, Dr. Campano established a research group at Penn GSE whose first major task would be to gradually build an ethical partnership, grounded in mutuality and solidarity, with the St. Cabrini community/ies. The multi-phase "Community Literacies" project would seek to add to the knowledge base by deepening our understandings of the complex experiences and cultural resources of minoritized families and by developing more sensitive, nuanced, and participatory approaches to the issues they face, specifically around education<sup>13</sup>. All research falling under the project's umbrella was intended to foster coalition with and among community members and to advance equity and social justice (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015).

I began participating in the parish in the early months of 2011 – my second semester as a doctoral student – by working with the Indonesian community's Sunday school teacher and her students on a multimodal "Penn pal" exchange, and also with several senior members of the Concerned Black Catholics activist group. Through these connections I formed relationships with many other adults and children in the parish

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of this writing, in early 2015, the research partnership is still going strong. The collaboration has resulted several research projects that are described in articles and a forthcoming book from Teachers College Press: *Immigrant families and literacies: Collaborative research and advocacy in a diverse faith-based community* (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch).

community/ies. In late 2011 I met Moxie, a White 23-year-old teacher-librarian-activist working with the parish's Latin@ and African American communities, and at the K-8 Cabrini Parish School (CPS), which serves both the parish's Asian and Latin@ communities as well as many non-Catholic, predominantly African American children from the neighborhood. Moxie had come to Philadelphia several months prior on a one-year fellowship, and part of her duties entailed assembling a school library where before there had been a large storage room. Mobilizing material and human resources from around the parish, Moxie and several collaborators removed boxes, painted walls, built shelves, and filled the shelves with hundreds of new and donated books. Soon Moxie began hosting the school's students for library time, both during and after school hours. From what I am told, the popularity of the library with CPS students was nearly immediate, which I attribute largely to Moxie's core precept that reading must be engaging and relevant (Alexie, 2011; Ivey & Broaddkus, 2007). She constructed a space where engaged reading was not only possible but highly encouraged. Standing in contrast to curricular mandates within the school's classroom spaces, Moxie's library offered students an evaluation-free zone (Elbow, 1993) within which to read the literature of their choosing and congregate in literary "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004). Dozens of students at Cabrini – almost exclusively female students at first – began to hang out in the library after school, in loosely organized book clubs.

During our initial meeting, at a youth literacy event hosted by the Concerned Black Catholics in 2011, Moxie and I began talking about her nascent school library. I was impressed that she had built and stocked a library seemingly from scratch, and had it

operational within six months. Moxie, a determinedly self-reflective educator, was unwilling to accept my kudos, and wanted to solicit my opinions on how the library could offer a better experience for every student at CPS. She was particularly concerned about male students in the school's upper grades. Moxie reported that no boys were attending the voluntary afterschool book clubs, and that during in-school library time – which all students attended weekly for 45 minutes – some of the male students in grades 5-8 sat quietly, but did not engage with books (e.g., Hughes-Hassel & Rodge, 2007; Wilhelm, 1997). Moxie wanted to see the same enthusiasm from these boys that she was seeing from other students in the library. Did I have any thoughts or suggestions?

Having recently written an article about teachers using comics in the classroom (Low, 2012), and read another article about bringing graphic novels into libraries (Mooney, 2002), the subject of graphica was fresh on my mind. I asked Moxie if the library was equipped with any comics or graphic novels, texts with which many readers actively engage. She responded that there was one graphic novel – Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* (2010) – and that it was constantly checked out. Further, Moxie added that several students had been asking her to obtain more graphic novels, but that she didn't know the first thing about them. "Where do I begin?" Moxie wondered. We continued talking, and I shared a bit of my history as a comic book reader and cartoonist, explaining that graphica, though traditionally thought of as lowbrow and nonacademic (e.g., Beaty, 2015; Groensteen, 2009; Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012; McCloud, 1993), has a legitimate place in 21<sup>st</sup> century learning spaces. I have not experienced this reaction often, but Moxie was delighted to learn of my background with comic books, and her teacherly (librarianly?)

gears began to turn. While the details of our conversation remain hazy to me, we decided that beginning in February, 2012, I would bring several graphic novels from my personal collection into the CPS library and meet with any interested students to discuss the books during in-school library time. Meanwhile, I would assist Moxie as co-facilitator of her afterschool book clubs. Moxie and I used the next several months to meet intermittently and plan. I decided to use my collaboration with Moxie as a ‘site of inquiry’ for Drs. Susan Lytle and Matt Hartley’s Practitioner Research course I was enrolled in during the spring of 2012. The focus of this small study was to understand how collaborating with a librarian in an alternative learning space could lead to educational opportunities for children outside of the official policy and curriculum of a school, i.e. “second classrooms” (Campano, 2007b).

True to our intentions, on March 2, 2012, I arrived at the CPS library on a Friday morning, ready to meet some of the school’s students for the first time. Moxie had prepared them for my arrival, and I was greeted with, “Hey, are you the comic book guy?” I wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to this question, as Comic Book Guy, in my mind, refers to a rather repellant *Simpsons* character, but I answered in the affirmative. My first time meeting the students at CPS, some of whom would ultimately comprise the core membership of CCIC, I had no idea what to expect. Would the students be enthusiastic about my presence? Would they think of me as another outsider foisting an unsolicited program on them? Would they even notice I was there? Moxie had told me that there were several devoted comic book readers among the school’s student population, but I wasn’t exactly sure what to anticipate.



I arrived on that Friday morning with a shoebox full of age-appropriate graphic novels. Entering the library, I was guided by Moxie to a table with four 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys who sat quietly, occasionally whispering to one another. This was during the regular school day, when the entire 5<sup>th</sup> grade class had come to the library for 45 minutes to “Hit the DIRT” (Moxie’s mnemonic for Daily Independent Reading Time). My initial observations confirmed what Moxie had prepared me for: at every other table in the library, girls and boys were involved in reading chapter books that they had selected from the shelves, but at this table, four boys sat rather aimlessly. They had books in front of them, but they didn’t open them. One boy, Kevin, told me he hadn’t found an independent reading book that he liked yet, but that he didn’t feel like browsing for one either. Each boy at the table seemed content with the likelihood that he would sit quietly for 45 minutes, having read little or nothing, and then go back to class. After about ten minutes, I retrieved my shoebox of graphic novels, which I had stowed near Moxie’s desk, and placed the box on the boys’ table, inviting them to peruse its contents.

We did not communicate much at first, but the boys looked through the box. They picked up books, flipped through pages, and began reading. I was reminded of Stephen Tabachnik’s (2009) proclamation that “one of the very pleasant discoveries that teachers will make is that students usually do not have to be urged to read [comics]...because they fit students’ sensibilities at a deep level” (p. 3). The boys, each of whom I’d later learn was already an experienced reader of graphica (as well as a reader of other texts and media) outside of school, stopped occasionally to show his classmates what he was reading, trying to impress his neighbors with a particularly interesting panel or page.

(Many of these “cool bits” were pictures of guns or swords.) Cedric chuckled periodically over *Lunch Lady and the League of Librarians* (Krosoczka, 2009) while Kevin admired the intense action of *The Sons of Liberty* (Lagos & Lagos et al., 2010). Raman, who was seated below the table in a beanbag chair, began crying several minutes into reading Jamar Nicholas’s graphic adaptation of Geoffrey Canada’s *Fist Stick Knife Gun* (2010). When I sat beside him and asked him about the book, Raman told me how angry he was that, in Canada’s story, a neighborhood boy was bullied for being slow. Something about Canada’s autobiography, and the way it was illustrated by Nicholas, clearly resonated with Raman. Each student asked me if he could borrow a graphic novel to take home, and I said yes. Kevin told me that he hates to read but that he loves comics. He went on to talk energetically about comics for three nearly uninterrupted minutes. “How is Kevin defining reading?” I wrote in my fieldnotes, and “Why doesn’t he consider reading graphica to be ‘real’ reading?” (Mar. 2, 2012). Kevin’s belief that reading comics does not qualify as “real” reading, and the ubiquity of this belief, has become an ongoing inquiry of mine. Before we disbanded for the day, I attempted to gauge the students’ interest by bringing up the possibility of meeting again to talk about graphic novels. The four boys were enthusiastic. They then started rattling off the names of other classmates who might want to come. Jamir, they informed me – who was absent from school this day – is the biggest comic book nut of them all. I told the boys I’d see them next Friday morning<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The story I have shared is one “creation myth” of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community. I am well aware that it reads as an idealistic story of triumph. It thus requires my saying that I do not think of comics as some magical panacea for creating engaged readers out of wet clay. Rather, on the morning that I

When I returned to the CPS library one week later, word had spread, and now nine 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys wanted to participate. We were too large and noisy a group for one table in the library, so Moxie showed us to a vacant meeting room down the hall, where we could stretch our legs and get down to the business of comics. I began our first ‘official’ meeting by asking each boy to introduce himself to me and also to talk about why he likes comics. Some of the boys’ responses touched on enjoying books *with* pictures more than books without them, on the fantastical drama they typically find in superhero stories, and on the creativity they feel when making up their own comic book characters. One thing was certain to me: comics culture was something these boys were already actively engaged in, both in and out of school, rather than something I was introducing them to. Henry told me he likes comic books because they are imaginative, and Kevin because they are suspenseful (Fieldnotes, Mar. 9, 2012). Many boys told me about their enjoyment of movies and TV cartoons based on comic book characters.

One of the more interesting and troubling things I consistently heard from the boys was that they thought of theirs as a fringe interest. They repeatedly told me that they did not think there was a community of people of color in Philadelphia who made and read comics. I mentioned several prominent African American comic book artists that reside in Philadelphia, and also the annual ECBACC convention, but I cannot say I was stunned by their belief. Despite seeing many non-White people every time I enter a comic

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brought a box of graphic novels to a table of bored 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys (each of whom was already a reader and intellectual being in his own right), I happened to have the sorts of books they were interested in engaging with in that moment. I have endeavored to depict, as faithfully as possible, my perceptions of four boys’ reactions to that box of graphic novels on that morning, not to universalize the phenomenon or declare *graphica* to be manna from heaven.

book store in Philadelphia, there are no such stores in the Marian Anderson neighborhood of CPS. Beyond that, the representation of the prototypical comic book reader – perpetuated by TV shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and *Comic Book Men* – continues to be a White male, as are the majority of mainstream comic book characters (e.g., Foster III, 2005 & 2010; Howard & Jackson II, 2013; Nama, 2011; Strömberg, 2003/2012; Wimberly, 2015). Further, in these students’ school lives, comic books have largely been relegated to the margins and gutters – terms borrowed from the medium of comics itself – as nonacademic frivolities<sup>15</sup>. When the boys have engaged in comics talk at school, they have had to do it in unofficial capacities, in the lunchroom and during recess (e.g., Dyson, 1997). Of course comics felt fringe to them.

During our remaining time together that day, the boys and I engaged in a long discussion about graphica, including graphic novels, manga (“In manga, important characters can die and they aren’t scared to kill people”), and superheroes. Jamir, I quickly discovered, was a comics and manga enthusiast nonpareil. He was quite well-versed in different characters and plotlines, which he followed religiously on online message boards (because actual comic books were too expensive and difficult to obtain), and reveled in the opportunity to share his knowledge with me and the other 5<sup>th</sup> graders. (I should add that this is also when Jamir uttered his line about how comic books express him and how an earlier teacher had undermined his knowledge.)

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<sup>15</sup> I once overheard a teacher at the school, when dropping off her class at the library, say to her students: “You need a chapter book, none of these baby books you finish in an hour.” She clarified that she was referring to graphic novels (Fieldnotes, Feb. 26, 2013).

Although I had imagined the space as primarily one for reading and discussing *graphica*, the boys challenged my preconceptions by beginning to talk about making their own comic books, as well. Within a few minutes' time they decided that they would like to do this collaboratively, rather than individually, and they began to discuss their presumed talents and 'weaknesses' (i.e. who is an author, who is an artist, who likes making up long stories, who likes writing dialogue, etc.), and who their audience might be. Larry thought that their audience would consist of other students in the school, but wondered how they could make a comic book that would be enjoyable for both younger and older readers. In a matter of fifteen minutes, several students had begun inventing a shared character that they could use across their stories. I was surprised and deeply impressed. I wondered if the boys had been wanting to do this for some time but had simply lacked the space, or if their storytelling collaboration was emerging on the spot.

It was at this point, as I observed the intellectual and creative verve these young students were bringing to *graphica*, that I determined my Practitioner Research site would not represent a standalone project that ended in May, 2012. I felt that I needed to return to this site of practice in order to develop my understanding, along with these students, of how comics fit into our epistemologies and their readings and writings of the world. Later that day, as Moxie and I met to discuss the afternoon's book clubs (which I had co-facilitated with her), I introduced the idea of starting an afterschool comics club for the students who had been so excited (and exciting) during the school day. Moxie loved the idea, and – always looking for ways to expand her students' interest in reading and writing – thought there was a good chance a comics club could attract CPS's boys to stay

after school in the library. Moxie and I began to collaboratively plan an afterschool comics club for the students, in which I would be the primary facilitator. The comics club would run concurrently with Moxie's book club on Friday afternoons, in a room adjacent to the library. I would continue to come to CPS on Friday mornings<sup>16</sup> to work with students during school hours as well.

As Katie Monnin (2011) writes, "Outside of the classroom, the world is already immersed in reading print-text literacies alongside image literacies" (p. xii), but inside the classroom, these literacies are often held apart. With this idea in mind, Moxie and I endeavored to establish an afterschool comics club whose purpose would be to bring into the CPS library the students' rich print and "image literacies," as well as to honor their cultural knowledge, social relationships, and reading predilections. The aim of the club – a subsidiary of Moxie's larger book club program – was for students "to read, write, draw, and discuss comics on aesthetic, literary, personal, cultural, and critical levels." I continued to bring my own comic books and graphic novels into CPS (acquiring more all the time), as well as various art supplies for making comics. Throughout spring 2012, the students began to talk about the comics club as a "community of artists and writers." This prompted a democratic change of the group's name from a "club" to a Comics Inquiry Community, which better reflected its co-constructed aims and origins.

Early in the CCIC's history, members began collaboratively creating a cast of characters that they could use across their storytelling in whatever ways they saw fit (see, for instance, the "Randy" character, referenced in Low & Campano, 2013). CCIC

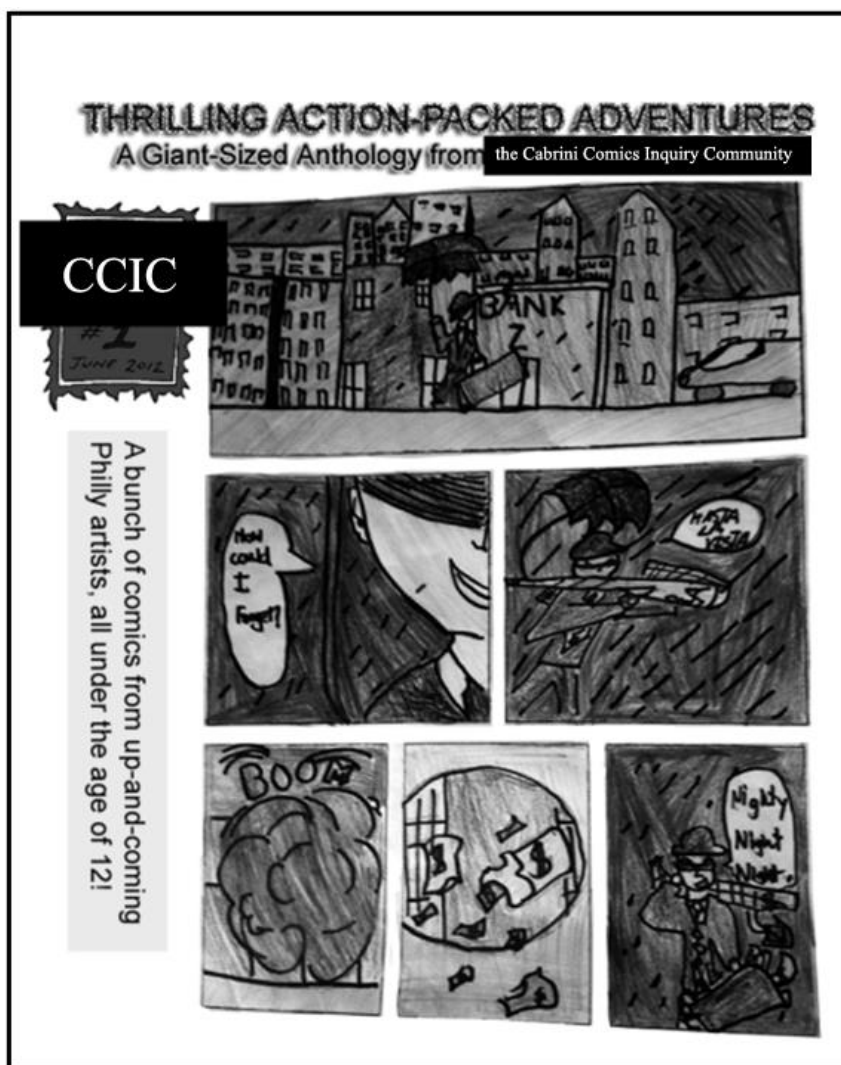
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<sup>16</sup> Friday mornings in 2011-12, Tuesday mornings in 2012-13, and Monday mornings in 2013-14

members developed rituals and negotiated their strengths as an affinity group (Gee, 2004) in order to collaboratively tell stories through the multimodal medium of comics (e.g., Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002). Affinity groups, write Hickey et al. (2010), feature “low barriers to entry, support for creating and sharing, informal mentoring of newcomers, and a strong sense of social connection” (p. 107). This description seems apt vis-à-vis the social functions of the CCIC, which also evoke Henry Jenkins’s (2006) concept of “participatory cultures,” wherein “not every member [of the group] must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and believe that, what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (p. 7). Indeed, the CCIC epitomized the sort of participatory learning community in which young people “work together to negotiate valued practices” of literacy (Laman & Sluys, 2008, p. 266). Working together, the members of the CCIC wrote, drew, revised, and critiqued one another’s work. By June, 2012, they had produced enough material that with my assistance, they self-published *Thrilling Action-Packed Adventures*, a “giant-sized” (60-page) anthology of their individual and collaborative work [see Figure 1].

The CCIC continued to meet during the summer break of 2012, as Moxie opened the library on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a few hours. Many of the boys returned, and several new students, who would matriculate at Cabrini Mission School in the fall, also began attending the CCIC. In the fall of 2012, with Moxie having returned to her hometown to take a fulltime teaching position, I began communicating with her replacement, Sandy, a graduate of the Penn GSE master’s program in Reading/Writing/Literacy. While she brought many of her own ideas to the librarianship,

Sandy was supportive of keeping Moxie’s afterschool book clubs running, and with them, the CCIC. With Sandy’s support, the group – and my pilot research project – was allowed to continue uninterrupted, and throughout the 2012-2013 school year there were numerous new developments and challenges, several of which I discuss at length in the upcoming Methods and Contexts chapter.



**Figure 1.** Front cover of the CCIC’s first anthology, designed by 5<sup>th</sup> grader Henry (Spring 2012)



One development I was particularly pleased by was that during the fall of 2012, female students joined the CCIC. While female students at CPS had always checked out books from my collection of graphica (at roughly the same rate as male students), the actual space of the CCIC on Friday afternoons had been extremely boy-gendered, with no girls having yet attended (for more on this phenomenon, see Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000; Moeller, 2011). This changed with the entrance of three 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls in November, 2012. Even after Desiree, Nellie, and Lena began attending the CCIC, it should be mentioned that gender has remained a salient topic in terms of the ways that CCIC members interact with texts and with each other. Gender is one of the focal points of this study, insofar as gender norms and identities are represented, reified, and resisted in the space of CCIC (see Chapter 5).

In many of the CCIC members' own perceptions, graphica – including comic books, graphic novels, cartoons, manga, and anime – has loomed rather large. This was evident to me following several years of pilot study (2011-12, 2012-13), when more than a dozen students chose to stay after school to continue reading comics, producing multimodal compositions, and conversing with their friends. That a group of students elected to attend the CCIC over a long period of time said something about the space and what it might mean to them. After considerable deliberation, I decided that the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community could be the site of a dissertation study if I generated new questions about the space and what went on within it. Following the 2012-13 school year, I still had a great deal of interest in exploring what the space of an urban comics inquiry community might mean to its members, as well as the ways in which *I* made sense of my

own practice as the comics club's facilitator. My pilot studies had been intellectually stimulating, and numerous new questions continued to arise for me during the time I spent with CCIC members. For instance, I wondered how the students of color who comprised the membership of the CCIC saw themselves represented (or not) in graphica, and if/how that mattered to them<sup>17</sup>. I wondered what (if any) particular affordances the visuo-textual medium of comics had to offer urban students for representing their lives and experiences. I wondered how CCIC members constructed, performed, and contested the topics of race, culture, class, gender, and citizenship through their reading, writing, and discussion of comics. And for that matter, how were literacy and identity co-extensive? As these 'wonderings' developed, so too did my pedagogic practices within the CCIC itself. All of these swirling inquiries allowed me to formally articulate a set of new research questions for a 9-month dissertation study to be set within the CCIC.

### **Research Questions**

The rifts between how members of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community understand and employ graphica in their literate lives and how educators, theorists, and policymakers position multimodalities in relation to young peoples' literacy educations (especially in urban contexts), is a rich one to be explored. I entered my dissertation study in October 2013 with several questions that genuinely interested me, and to which, after several years of pilot study, I had no definite answers:

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<sup>17</sup> Pollock (2004) writes that "research questions about race and schooling...regularly frame 'race' as something students of color own, rather than as a shared set of racializing practices involving people of all ages and 'races'" (p. 10). I have attempted to maintain this view throughout my own inquiries.

- How do the cultural identities and experiences of CCIC members inform their literate transactions with graphica? In what ways do they form and perform identities through their reading, composition, and talk about comics and other multimodal texts?
- What happens when I invite members of the CCIC to respond critically to representations of race, class, and gender in comics texts?

These questions, which are grounded both in my review of literature and my experiences as the CCIC's practitioner, serve as the anchor for the remainder of this dissertation, including the upcoming Contexts and Methods chapter, each data analysis chapter, and my final Implications and Conclusions chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Contexts and Methods

#### Introduction

Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (2011) write that a researcher “chooses a qualitative approach to understand phenomena from the participants’ perspectives and to explore and discover, in depth and in context, what may have been missed when studies were done with predetermined assumptions” (p. 77). In this case, the elements that have been missed or inaccurately reported, in both large scale research studies and the popular press, are multiple, including urban youths’ supposed disengagement in school (e.g., Flood & Anders, 2005; Harris, 2011; Morrell, 2008), the oft-lamented “achievement gap” in literacy<sup>18</sup> (Moya & Markus, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Rothstein, 2004; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004), and the countless nuanced ways in which urban students transact with multimodal texts. Valerie Kinloch (2011) poses the question, “How can critical educational research in urban settings account for dynamic interactions, practices, and literate engagements of children, youth, and adults in ways that critique popular and often unfounded notions that they are disengaged from learning?” (p. 3). It is with Kinloch’s appeal in mind that I have employed qualitative research methods, over a significant period of time, to investigate questions around urban youths’ critical engagements with graphica, and ultimately to “provide a holistic presentation” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 70) of a year in the life of the Cabrini

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<sup>18</sup> Sonia Nieto (2010) wisely calls the “achievement gap” what it more accurately is: a “resource gap” and a “caring gap,” because of “the level of care, attention, and high expectations given to children in poor schools as compared to those in wealthy ones” (p. 11).

Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC). In this chapter I will describe my study's setting, contexts, research partners and participants; explain the rationales behind my methodological framework; and define my methods of data collection and analysis.

### **Study Setting/Contexts**

The St. Frances Cabrini Parish celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010, and since its founding, the parish has remained dedicated to “serving the immigrant and the stranger” in South Philadelphia. Throughout the decades, the specifics concerning migration into and through South Philadelphia have shifted, but the parish's commitments – though its strategies certainly evolve – have remained rooted in diversity, service, advocacy, solidarity, and expressions of faith (source: parish materials and personal conversations). Early in the parish's history, the Marian Anderson neighborhood in which it is situated was comprised largely of Irish and Italian immigrants and their descendants. These Catholic families made up the core of St. Cabrini's congregation for over seven decades. Marian Anderson's demographics remained relatively static until the mid-1960s, when African American families began migrating to the neighborhood, and a subsequent “White flight” saw many of the Irish- and Italian American families relocating to Philadelphia's suburbs. Marian Anderson has since been claimed as a historically Black neighborhood. Ultimately, a group of Concerned Black Catholics played an integral role in desegregating the St. Cabrini parish and renewing its commitment to “serving the immigrant and the stranger.” In the intervening decades, and since the 1990s especially, Marian Anderson has become a major destination for Vietnamese, Indonesian, Filipin@, Mexican, Guatemalan, Bhutanese, and Congolese

newcomer families. Today, the St. Cabrini parish mirrors the transnational diversity of its neighborhood, offering regular mass in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Tagalog, as well as providing opportunities for communities to engage in culturally sustaining activities and to work together across ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015).

The Marian Anderson neighborhood is today populated with corner stores, beauty salons, and take-out restaurants advertising in multiple languages, and its side streets are densely packed with three-floor walk-ups. Like many urban American neighborhoods that have undergone concerted “White flight” over the past half-century, Marian Anderson has experienced periodic economic downturns, and has been the subject of increased police and ICE<sup>19</sup> activity. Throughout the 1970s and into the 2010s, the Philadelphia Police Department has orchestrated numerous raids and arrests to get “tough on crime” as part of a larger “War on Drugs,” which primarily targets communities of color (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015). Marian Anderson, as is the case in other Philadelphia neighborhoods where schools and social services have been gutted, and where Black and Brown bodies are subjected to recurring harassment, is routinely surveilled and occupied by the police and ICE (Goffman, 2014). The specter of mass incarceration and deportation looms large in Marian Anderson, and these

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<sup>19</sup> ICE is the acronym for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency which oversees the apprehension and eventual deportation of immigrants residing in the U.S without documentation. The department is operated under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and after 9/11/2001, has increased both its purview and its activity, forming alliances with state and city police departments in order to surveil and detain a greater number of undocumented residents. Many of the immigrant families in Marian Anderson are apprehensive about the aim and scope of ICE – having experienced deportations in their communities – and rarely, if ever, contact the police department, even when they are the victims of crime.

governmental undertakings are a frequent subject of discussion within the St. Cabrini Parish. As Campano, Ghiso, and Welch (2015) write of the neighborhood and parish today, many community members “live in social precarity, and they face poverty, lack of adequate health care, deportations, linguistic stigma, and school closings” (p. 39), representing a condition Judith Butler (2011) characterizes as “precarious” for how it negatively impacts a group’s opportunities to thrive. Many of St. Cabrini’s parishioners have cultivated activist stances, working within and across ethno-cultural boundaries to counteract the social conditions which instantiate and perpetuate precarity.

As a frequent visitor to Marian Anderson since 2010, when I began working with the St. Cabrini Parish as part of my ongoing ethnographic “immersion,” it has not been difficult to observe ways in which economic and social precarities impact the neighborhood’s residents<sup>20</sup>. While not technically a “food desert,” there are few grocery stores (i.e. merchants likely to carry nutritional items that take up greater shelf space and are perishable), and many corner stores (primarily selling cheaper snack items, soft drinks, and tobacco products). There are also several cafés and bars which cater to the recent wave of White gentrifiers. Institutions that exist to serve the public good have been shut down, either temporarily or permanently, and are not replaced in a timely manner. For example, there had previously been a branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia on a busy thoroughfare in Marian Anderson, which in 2013 was razed, along with a public health clinic, to make way for a larger structure several years in the future. In the interim,

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<sup>20</sup> Various researchers have written about the effects of urban poverty (such as criminalization and housing discrimination) on student populations (see Anyon, 1997 & 2005; Berliner, 2009; Giroux, 1996; Moya & Markus, 2010; Small & Newman, 2001; Wilson, 1996).

no alternative library has been provided for community members who used the space for community gatherings and cultural enrichment. In a wealthier neighborhood, and especially one with a higher percentage of White residents, it is unlikely that a popular library branch would be shuttered without an alternative location already in place.

Like many parochial schools in large urban areas, the Cabrini Mission School is representative of both the St. Cabrini Parish's and the Marian Anderson neighborhood's transnational diversity (e.g., Bryk et al., 1993; Green, 2010). CMS is a private, tuition-collecting mission school (approx. \$2000/yr.) in South Philadelphia, with over 95% of students on either partial or full scholarship. Many of the families whose children attend CMS struggle with poverty and other corollaries of social precarity, and would be unable to send their children to CMS without special dispensations made by various donors, and 90% of the school's students participate in a free or reduced lunch program (source: Great Philly Schools, 2013). CMS offers classes from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with one classroom and one teacher assigned for each grade, and an additional pullout ESOL classroom in a standalone trailer. During the 2012-13 academic year, the school matriculated 185 students (a 66% decrease from 2006, when charter schools began to proliferate in Marian Anderson – see Brinig & Garnett, 2012, pp. 31-33), although enrollment increased by nearly fifty students in 2013-14 after transitioning from a parish school into a mission school<sup>21</sup>, instating a new principal, and welcoming a group of Mandarin-speaking kindergarteners.

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<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1.5 years of my pilot study, CMS was operated by the archdiocese and parish. Due to an ongoing budgetary crisis, many of Philadelphia's parochial schools were shut down and combined in 2012 and 2013, and others – such as the Cabrini Parish School – were taken over by a new organization, Liberty Mission Schools (LMS). This organization, operated independently from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia,



The student body of CMS during the 2013-14 school year was predominantly African American (44.6%) and Asian American (35%), with a growing Latin@ population (20%) and a single White student (0.4%). As a mission school, CMS, while no longer aligned with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, still adheres to a Catholic curriculum – including an obligation to “take seriously the religious dimension of life” (DiGiacomo, 2007, p. 11) – although approximately 70% of its students, primarily Black students, do not identify as Catholic (source: Archdiocese of Philadelphia website, 2013; substantiated by Bryk et al., 1993; Green, 2010). Also, despite existing outside the jurisdiction of the Philadelphia public school system, and thus not requiring government funding to keep its doors open, there remains a heavy curricular and instructional emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests. Indeed, raising students’ test scores is a major element of the LMS organization’s strategy for recruitment, retention, and expansion (Fieldnotes from LMS board meeting, Nov. 8, 2013). Multiple times throughout the school year, CMS students are required to take weeklong Performance Series and Terra Nova exams. They spend many days and weeks throughout the school year preparing for these assessments.

The exact site of my dissertation research study falls both within and outside the bounds of the Cabrini Mission School, which ultimately proved to be a productive tension. The site itself was a comics-centered inquiry community co-constructed with and for urban children and youth, operating after CMS school hours (from 2:30-3:30 pm) on

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began the daily oversight of fourteen former parish schools during the 2013-14 academic year. In most cases, the schools’ original staffs were retained, although new standards and expectations were gradually implemented by schools within the LMS organization.

Monday afternoons, in and around the school's library. I have written previously about the relative curricular freedom afforded me and the CCIC's members by operating in an afterschool learning space (e.g., Bitz, 2006; Wallace Foundation, 2009), but it must also be stated that within the parish/mission school setting, the space was not *entirely* free. During her tenure as principal, Ms. Caputo repeatedly warned all adults working in the library that texts must adhere to the "Catholic syllabus," and not contain any inappropriate material<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, the prevailing feeling of the CCIC was one of curricular freedom, as students were encouraged – by the school librarians and by me – to read, create, and discuss what they wanted to, and were free from the formal evaluations of the school day. When Principal Caputo was succeeded by Principal Berra in October 2013 – a transition I describe in a later section of this chapter – the sense of unencumbered 'openness' in the CCIC was only amplified.

During the 2013-14 school year, CCIC meetings were held within the school's new library, which over the summer had migrated from the second floor to the first. I found this space to be an improvement over the small meeting room the CCIC had used during the previous year, primarily because we had more elbow room and greater access to books and materials. In the new library space – formerly a daycare room – there were three long tables (capable of sitting 6-8 students each), several small circular tables, three sofa chairs, a desk, and approximately twenty standard wooden chairs. There was also a

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<sup>22</sup> One particularly uncomfortable moment occurred in December 2012, when I was asked to defend a comic book depicting a pregnant woman in its pages. Luckily, I was able to explain that the character – superhero Kitty Pryde – had been infected by microscopic space aliens, leading to her distended abdomen and pregnant appearance (see *Wolverine and the X-Men*, vol. 1). I was perturbed by the implication that *any* image of a pregnant woman automatically indicated sexual impropriety.

large, freestanding whiteboard that I used to deliver short lessons and leave inspirational quotes. The entire library was encircled by bookshelves that were filled with hundreds of donated books from the previous two years, and one bookshelf on which I stored my collection of approximately 250 graphic novels. Every Monday, snow days notwithstanding, I arrived at CMS between 11 am and noon, and arranged the long tables into various configurations, often covering them with mural-making paper for CCIC members to draw upon. The small circular tables I used to display books – each week pulling 15-20 graphic novels from the shelf as “featured titles” – and art supplies [see Figure 1].

As I described in the previous chapter, one reason for selecting the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community as the site of my practitioner study was my ongoing involvement with the group since February 2012. When my dissertation data collection officially commenced in October 2013, I had spent twenty months there, off and on. By the end of my study, then, I had known some of the CCIC’s members for two-and-a-half years. By maintaining rigorous methods of data collection and analysis (explained in subsequent sections of this chapter), I conscientiously worked *not* to let my long-term associations with the inquiry community and its members preordain my findings. Instead, my prolonged involvement in the CCIC provided me with a more nuanced understanding of the community, the sorts of literate and cultural interactions that occurred within its space, and my own processes as a practitioner (Maxwell, 2005). I also had a longer span of time in which to generate new research questions.



**Figure 1.** Images from the CCIC in 2013-14 (clockwise from top-left): layout of the CMS library; blank pages of comics panels; art supplies and students' publications from previous years; a panoramic shot of the library space; one week's featured books.

In a similar vein, I endeavored to check my own beliefs about the relative value of *graphica* and pop culture in school spaces. While it is true that I have long been a comics culture insider, my methods of data collection and analysis were designed to mediate whatever passions I hold as a comics enthusiast, and to ground me in a manner that I was open to finding unexpected and contradictory phenomena as a practitioner researcher.

### **Researcher Location and Positionality**

In his overview of qualitative inquiry and design, John Creswell (2007) writes that when conducting interpretive research, many researchers today will “admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases” (p. 18). Susan Lytle (2000) argues that practitioner-researchers, in particular, must continually reflect on our own histories, locations, and positionalities in order to foreground issues pertinent to our teaching and research. The fundamental (and recursive) question directing the researcher’s gaze, writes Lytle, should be “Who am I to be doing this research?” Lytle’s appeals for researchers to iteratively engage in self-inquiry draws on a body of feminist scholarship that has long endeavored to relocate ‘the personal’ – i.e. narratives of subjective experience – at the heart of academic work (e.g., Kamler, 2001).

Over the past three decades, the feminist turn in research has both contested and *been* contested by a positivistic status quo in the academy. As Wendy Hesford (1999) writes, the “push for the personal voice in scholarship and pedagogy has not gone unchallenged; indeed, it has provoked fury and indignation” (p. xxxii). Much of the resistance to the narrative turn in scholarship is predicated on traditionally patriarchal orientations toward research and representation. Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) writes that

“experience has often been attributed qualities of the feminine, and therefore has been easily dismissed” (p. 2). In a traditional (i.e. masculinist) paradigm, the personal experiences of the researcher are thought to somehow dilute the rigor of the research. Thus, researchers have historically adopted what Laurel Richardson (1997) refers to as “the all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy” which conceals or ignores a researcher’s relationship to her or his research. Richardson, however, reminds us that all researchers are “always present in our [work], no matter how much we try to suppress ourselves” (p. 2). Indeed, the narrative turn is aligned with the push against so-called objectivity or neutrality in research, and asks researchers to acknowledge ourselves as culturally situated meaning-makers. A number of feminist scholars have argued that unconditional objectivity and neutrality do not exist, and thus, a researcher’s positionality or “epistemological grounding” (e.g., Lather, 1992, p. 92) must be purposefully, reflectively, and continuously explored. As researchers, we need to acknowledge the ways in which we frame the realities that we study, and also how our framings are dependent upon our own histories and autobiographical impulses. “It is not enough,” writes Barbara Kamler (2001), “to locate ourselves in our scholarship and our research...without also investigating what shaped [our] knowledge” (p. 9). In social science research, there is a moral responsibility to consider the ways in which we, as researchers, position ourselves as knowers and tellers, as subjects and objects, as authors and authorities. Thus, in the following pages, I shall provide a truncated version of a self-inquiry into my intersecting identities and positionalities as a qualitative researcher.

In engaging in research and advocacy with members of the St. Cabrini Parish and Mission School, I have been heartened by Monsignor Roland Wells's pronouncement, to my fellow researcher Robert LeBlanc, that it is "not your Catholicity that says you're welcome [in the parish], but your personhood." The monsignor's words inspire and edify me, although (and perhaps because) I am not a Catholic by any stretch of the imagination. I am a White man in his early thirties, who was raised both culturally and religiously a Jew. Were it not for the resounding truth of Monsignor Wells's words, I would not have been able to work so closely with the communities of St. Cabrini.

For the first 27 years of my life I lived in Arizona, a state where Jews comprise 1.6% percent of the total population (source: Jewish Virtual Library), and like many minoritized groups, find ways to congregate and celebrate their customs and beliefs. I lean now toward agnosticism in terms of spirituality, Ashkenazi Judaism in terms of ethno-culture, and liberalism in terms of political stance. Although I am not a theist, the experiences of my family members, who suffered pogroms and other forms of persecution in Germany, Russia, and the United States, inform aspects of my identity and epistemology, as do my childhood experiences of belonging to a synagogue, participating in Jewish rituals, and feeling generally *other* from the larger communities within which I moved (e.g., Freedman, 2005). A significant portion of my worldview – borrowing from Smedley's (2007) definition of a "culturally structured, systematic way of looking at, perceiving, and interpreting various world realities" (p. 18) – derives from the Shtetl

culture of my ancestors and its diasporic aftereffects<sup>23</sup>. I have brought this worldview into my work with children and adults at the St. Cabrini Parish (and indeed, it would be impossible for me not to), who experience vastly different circumstances, to be sure, but who similarly navigate insider/outsider dialectics in the United States.

In addition to my fluctuating identity as a nonreligious American Jew, my life as a White cisgender hetero male (who is rarely assumed to be Jewish by those not in the know) has also been complicated to disentangle. I have dedicated much of my life to reflection and inquiry into issues of systemic privilege that accompany my ascriptive gender, race, and sexuality. This impulse has been especially true of my time in graduate school, where I have been deliberate about unpacking my memories and experiences, and looking to identify ways in which my outward or ascriptive identity has impacted the outcomes of my life, and the lives of those around me (e.g., Moya, 2009). In doctoral courses taught by Susan Lytle and Vivian Gadsden, I have been encouraged to deeply interrogate my own experiences, and in doing so, I have come to recognize that throughout much of my life, I turned to image-based media to help make sense of my identity/ies through critical and reflexive enactments of visual literacy (Low, 2010). I began reading comic books seriously at the age of nine and creating my own shortly

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<sup>23</sup> I recognize certain defining characteristics in both my narrative and epistemological leanings, and feel great appreciation for writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Nathan Englander, who have enabled me to better negotiate and articulate my sense of American Jewishness and 'ways of being'. So much of my life has consisted of navigating relationships among secular and liberal customs on the one hand, and my identity as a member of a minority ethnic/religious community with conservative traditions on the other. This fluctuating identity (or rather, this intersection of identities in flux), which both resists and embraces assimilation into 'mainstream' American society, can be described like so many other diasporic identities, as simultaneously a part *of* and apart *from*.



thereafter. As I recorded in an essay for Susan Lytle's 2010 course, *Theories of Reading*, as a child, my reading and writing of comics provided me with:

a way to interact with my world, to make sense of ideas and information both new and old, to grapple with my doubts, to combine seemingly unrelated concepts, to play with language, and to read my own thinking in ways that felt comfortable to me (n.p).

Throughout my childhood, youth, early adulthood, and into the present day, I have often used the medium of comics to make sense of myself and the worlds in which I move, especially in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, and privilege<sup>24</sup>.

Another rather large claimant on my identity is my vocation as a Language Arts educator. At the age of eighteen, after a great deal of contemplation, I determined that I would become an English teacher, and specifically, one who would encourage irreverence, invite students to resist status quos, and challenge young people to “discover themselves.” I assumed that I would maintain this profession for life, as had my role model, the author-educator Mike Wehrli. At the University of Arizona, I studied English Education and was hired for my first fulltime teaching position in 2004, at the age of 23. For four years I taught in a large multicultural high school in Tucson, Arizona<sup>25</sup>.

As is the case with many teachers, the most rewarding aspect of my job was developing bonds with my students, and learning with and from them. In 2006, a group of my Mexican American students cut school to march through downtown Tucson in protest

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<sup>24</sup> In the Appendix, I provide a lengthier account of my history/ies with the medium of comics.

<sup>25</sup> The various cultures of the American Southwest, and particularly Chican@ culture – have also made significant claims on my identity. I was raised in a cultural and linguistic borderland and I feel great kinship with the border culture I grew up within. Many of my former students have done much to make me feel connected to their own border heritages as well my own diasporic legacy.

of the racial profiling of Latin@s. My students taught me to better read the handwriting on the wall, as they predicted SB 1070, the 2010 Arizona bill which would allow law enforcement officials to legally stop anyone they suspected to be an undocumented immigrant and require them to produce documentation (or else be detained). In 2007, a student of mine told me that, ‘I guess teachers don’t see Brown students’ hands go up because we blend into the brown brick walls of the classrooms. That must be why we never get called on.’ This sardonic remark was, of course, a piercing indictment of the racial prejudices that have frequently been documented in American classrooms. I see now that my student’s critique of the racist culture of Arizona’s schools foretold the state’s 2010 legislation outlawing the teaching of Mexican American Studies in public schools<sup>26</sup>. In 2008, my final year as a fulltime English teacher, my students taught me about resistance again, by writing and drawing tiny editorials to testing administrators in the margins of their bubble sheets, and attempting to force a dialogue. My students were required to take a district-specific predictive test called the DAPS – designed to predict their success on the state of Arizona’s high-stakes AIMS exam to be taken midway through their sophomore years – sixteen times throughout their high school careers. The test typically took three class periods to complete, resulting in forty-eight missed classes in total. My students understood that the DAPS – as representative of the high-stakes assessment madness that gripped the nation in the years following NCLB – had little

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<sup>26</sup> The ban on ethnic studies was approved in 2010 and subsequently imposed on all publicly funded schools in the state of Arizona. Despite showing improvements in student achievement when they are enrolled in programs which honor their ethnic/linguistic heritages and literatures, the ban – backed by a Republican legislature – claims that ethnic studies programs promote resentment toward a race or class of people (i.e. White people) by advocating ethnic solidarity instead of treating all students only as individuals.

relevance to their lives as learners, and they quite literally did not want to take it sitting down. In protest, they drew graffiti on their bubble sheets. Years later, I delivered a TEDx talk to honor these students' acts of resistance.

I am inspired now by the ways in which my former students used their words and bodies to resist the unjust and the asinine, and at the time, I assumed that I was being exactly the sort of subversive teacher I had once dreamed of becoming. In retrospect, however, it is clear to me that I upheld just as many status quos as I challenged – perhaps more – and did not always facilitate spaces in which students could feel heard. Like many teachers, I became overwhelmed with grading and committee work, and I fell behind in my lesson planning. There were days in which I became impatient with my students' energy and asked them to read quietly. Some of my lessons had the top-down feel of 'banking model' instruction (Freire, 1970) and did not reflect a critical or culturally-responsive stance. There were also times that I gave assignments that I knew to be less than meaningful. When students did not complete them, I blamed the students (by entering zeroes in the gradebook) rather than taking myself to task for not creating more relevant projects. In general, I was not critical enough about the ways I assessed student writing, and I did not often enough interrogate my own understandings of what constituted 'good' and 'bad' student writing, especially through lenses of race and class.

In the previous paragraphs, I have framed my teaching career through the dichotomy of my successes and failures, although in reality, my experiences as an educator were more complicated, nuanced, and porous than the binary construction implies. Whatever the case, writing about my teaching experiences could produce an

entire shelf of manuscripts, and this chapter is not the appropriate venue for doing that work. What is germane is that during my final year teaching in Arizona, I found myself with more and more questions pertaining to pedagogy, curriculum, and equity, and I ultimately decided to pursue graduate studies in English Education at New York University. The interests that form the backbone of this dissertation began to take shape at NYU, where I endeavored to look for intersections within English Education, the theoretical areas of multiliteracies and multimodalities, and popular texts such as comics and video games. This emerging inquiry took me to Penn GSE where, as I discussed earlier, my inchoate questions came together with existing (and still developing) interests in urban literacy education, multicultural and culturally-responsive pedagogy, teacher research, critical theory, and social justice. During my time in graduate school, and thanks in large part to the scholars I have worked with, I have become more reflexive and intentional about issues of power, knowledge, literacy, and social reproduction, and have come to think about my own histories and identities as an educator quite differently than I once did.

All of this is directly relevant to my dissertation study for reasons that I feel are self-evident. As a White man working with students of color, as a Jewish agnostic working in a parochial school, and as a former teacher working in a space populated by current teachers, it has been crucial for me to approach and conduct research in ways that

continually foreground identity and power in the negotiation of insider/outsider statuses (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015)<sup>27</sup>. As the reporter Anne Fadiman (1997) posits,

The action most worth watching is not at the center of things, but where edges meet... There are interesting frictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one. This is especially true, I think, when the apposition is cultural (p. 2).

Rather than an exercise in navel-gazing, this self-referential section has been intended to elucidate how my interweaving experiences and social positions come to shape my own “understanding of actual social worlds” (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. xi) in ways that may be similar and different from participants in my study, and at points of tangency.

## **Research Partners**

### ***Monsignor Wells and Principals Caputo & Berra***

As a parochial school prior to Fall 2013, Cabrini operated for many years under the governance of the parish. In 2011, when I began conducting my first pilot study, the school was jointly presided over by Monsignor Ronald Wells, an Irish American pastor, and Principal Janet Caputo, an Italian American educator/administrator. Monsignor Wells is what I would refer to a “dyed-in-the-wool” social justice clergyman, and he has been a pleasure to work with and to learn from. From the day I met him, Monsignor Wells has

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<sup>27</sup> The methodologists Guba and Lincoln (1988) argue that ethnographic researchers should try to “minimize their distance” or “objective separateness” from participants (p. 94), but I do not believe this possible. Rather, I contend that researchers and participants should remain attentive to their positions and subjectivities.

been unequivocal in his support of Dr. Campano's "Community Literacies" research project, giving the work (and its offshoots, such as my project) his general imprimatur<sup>28</sup>. When the Liberty Mission Schools organization took over governance of the school prior to the 2013-14 academic year, Monsignor Wells was divested of all official capacities within the building. He still held regular mass for the students, but no longer oversaw the school's curriculum, its teachers, or its research partnerships.

In contrast to Monsignor Wells's consistent support of my work, Principal Caputo sent mixed messages about her feelings toward my project's contributions to the school and parish. While she did seem to appreciate the no-cost activities I provided, Ms. Caputo told me on one occasion that CMS's students would be "better served by additional test preparation than by comic books," and asked if I might serve as a tutor. When I shared my opinion that students would not voluntarily stay after school if we switched to test prep, and explained that I had little interest in delivering such a service, Ms. Caputo told me that all extracurricular programs needed to be "detailed, defined, and data-driven.... It's all about results here" (Fieldnotes, Sept. 10, 2013). I wanted to honor Ms. Caputo's knowledge and authority as the building's principal, and not to contribute to any existing power struggles, recognizing that the "data-driven" discourse likely came from well above her. At the same time, I needed a space in which to conduct a dissertation study that had nothing to do with test preparation. I endeavored to tread cautiously and to see how the winds would blow.

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<sup>28</sup> One condition of Monsignor Wells's *nihil obstat* was that researchers not investigate topics pertaining to sex and sexuality within the parish.

I include this account not to critique Principal Caputo, but to speak to larger trends concerning high-stakes testing, big data, and what ‘counts’ as literacy in today’s urban schools. Ms. Caputo, like many others who are invested in urban education, was compelled to operate in a state of perpetual uncertainty, leveraging what she considered best for her students against the mounting expectations levied upon her.

In a similar light, Principal Caputo expressed concerns about the appropriateness of comic books in the Cabrini Mission School (as compared to canonical literature such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*). After various conversations held in 2012 and 2013, I came to understand that her attitudes toward graphica reflected traditional academic anxieties about comic books not being academically or socially valuable texts (e.g., Beaty, 2015; Clark, 2013; Fenwick, 1998; Groensteen, 2009; Lopes, 2009). As Anne Haas Dyson (1997) writes, the medium of comics, which is “so central to many children’s social and imaginative lives, is ideologically unsettling to many adults” (p. 3). I knew that Principal Caputo was unsettled by comic books (again, within a larger climate of standardization), but it seemed that she was willing to put up with them because they excited so many of her students. It was a precarious *détente*, to be sure, but one that I counted on in order to conduct my research. During September 2013, following several semesters of pilot study, I provided Principal Caputo with a number of rationales for a graphica club remaining in the school [see Appendix for a handout I provided] and lent her several books on the topic. Ultimately, my dissertation study was approved by both Principal Caputo and her superiors at Liberty Mission Schools, and I began collecting data that October.

When Principal Caputo left her job in October 2013, her successor, Tom Berra – an Italian American man with experience as an administrator in the School District of Philadelphia – quickly got to work. Wanting to avoid repeating my previous miscommunication issues with Principal Caputo, I made sure to introduce myself and my research project to Principal Berra straightaway. In November 2013 I had that opportunity. My first impressions of Mr. Berra were that he was friendly, professional, and positive; he emphasized that he was motivated to offer all of CMS’s students “state of the art learning opportunities.” To that end, Mr. Berra told me that my research sounded interesting, and that he was glad to have me at the school. Throughout the remainder of the time in which I facilitated the CCIC (until June 2014), Principal Berra and I forged a mutually respectful and supportive working relationship, with no run-ins of any kind.

***Other Partners: Librarians and Teachers***

CMS employs ten full-time teachers, a small support staff, and a part-time librarian/technology specialist. During the 2013-14 school year, all grade-level teachers and the librarian were White, and the ESOL teacher and support staff were Latina women. Originally, the position of school librarian was held by Moxie, an externally funded volunteer who built a library where there had previously been none, and with whom I initiated the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community in 2012. During her time at CMS, Moxie hosted students in the library five days a week, and implemented various literacy activities during and after school. In August 2012, Moxie returned to her hometown to take a fulltime teaching position, and a new librarian, Sandy, was hired as



part-time librarian. Sandy, a White female graduate of Penn GSE's master's program in Reading/Writing/Literacy, eagerly picked up where Moxie had left off, recommencing in-school library pullout time and afterschool book clubs. Like Moxie, however, Sandy only stayed on the job for a single school year. During the 2013-14 school year, a new position was created for John, a White man who had recently relocated to Philadelphia. In addition to overseeing the library, John was appointed "21<sup>st</sup> century learning specialist," which meant managing the school's computer lab, being responsible for implementing LMS's testing software, and occasionally teaching physical education. As it turned out, due to increasing pressures to conduct test preparation, John rarely had any opportunity to bring students into the library. During the 2013-14 school year, each class visited the library fewer than four times to check out books.

During the three academic years I spent at CMS, I got to know many of the school's teachers quite well. In general, we maintained mutually supportive relationships, and I volunteered my time in various ways. When I was at the school each week, I made it clear to CMS's teachers that they could bring their classes to the library and leave them with me, in order to give children a chance to browse books and teachers a short break. Additionally, I attended teacher in-service days (where we often previewed and discussed testing materials), performed classroom read-alouds for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, worked the cash register at the Scholastic Book Fair, assisted the art teacher with 5<sup>th</sup> grade pullout time, and periodically visited other classrooms at the request of teachers. Occasionally teachers asked for my advice about how to handle particular situations. The school's 6<sup>th</sup>

grade teacher, who was pursuing a master's degree in education, often asked me to review and discuss her assignments with her.

Through my prolonged engagement at CMS, I frequently held conversations with teachers about their students. There will be times throughout my data chapters that I refer back to these conversations, particularly with 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Mr. Hannigan. While it may appear that I am being critical of CMS's teachers, this is not my intention. The experiences of student members of the CCIC – not their teachers – are my unit of analysis in this dissertation. I include teachers' words in order to provide a greater sense of context into the conditions and discourses that impact the lives and environments of the children and youth who comprise the CCIC, i.e., the participants of this study.

### **Participants**

During the pilot phases of my research with the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community, from February 2012 to June 2013, the group's membership shifted numerous times, as students entered and exited the afterschool library space for any number of reasons. (Jamir and Kevin stopped attending CMS in 2012-13 as a result of tuition payment issues, and Henry transferred to a new school for the 2013-14 academic year.) As a voluntary inquiry group, there was no requirement for members to commit to regular attendance, and students came and went as they pleased. There has been, however, a regular group of students who are almost always present at the CCIC from week to week. This core group produced an anthology of their work, which we published together in May 2012, and continued to attend the CCIC throughout the next two school years.

What began as a relatively small group of nine 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys in early 2012 ballooned to a size of approximately thirty boys and girls between grades three and eight by December 2012. While I was thrilled at the popularity of the CCIC (especially among some students who I'd heard referred to by their teachers as "reluctant readers"), I found the group's size difficult to manage as a productive workshop space, even with the ad hoc assistance of several Penn GSE graduate students. These feelings were due to the fact that I spent far more time attending to broken pencils, spilled bags of pretzels, and questions about which of my books were checked out and to whom, than to the sorts of extended conversations I had become accustomed to having with a smaller group. My opinion that the club had become too large was shared by Principal Caputo. In face-to-face and email discussions, we agreed that beginning in January 2013, I would launch a new-look CCIC, inviting fewer than ten students (grades 5 and up) to participate from 2:30–3:30 on Friday afternoons. Principal Caputo felt that grade 5 was a suitable cutoff point because those students were old enough to walk themselves home without the accompaniment of a guardian, and that ten was the optimal number of students for a discussion-based club.

Despite having enthusiastic cohorts of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in the CCIC as of December 2012, I understood Principal Caputo's concerns, which pertained to student safety. At 4 pm, when the club had been letting out, the last thing Principal Caputo wanted was a cluster of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders waiting in the parking lot to be picked up by their guardians, who may or may not have known their children were in need of a ride. It is for this reason that Principal Caputo wanted to draw the line at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. However, when I returned to CMS in January, 2013, she had softened a bit, and told me that we could

enforce the cutoff point at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I thus spent the spring semester of 2013 with 15-20 students in grades 4 through 8, and this seemed to be a manageable group size. While the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were disappointed at their exclusion, they were excited to ‘officially’ join CCIC in 2013-2014.

In October 2013 (after securing permission from LMS to run my project), participation in my dissertation study was opened to all CMS students who met Principal Caputo’s age requirements, and was fully voluntary. As an existing inquiry community with a history, there was little need for me to publicize it or actively recruit students to join it. Still, I did come to the school on October 10, 2013 to explain to both new and returning students what the CCIC was, what it aimed to do, and how I intended to study it. For many longtime CCIC members, resuming the club constituted business as usual, and for potential members, I wanted to drum up interest. To all interested students I handed out permission forms for their guardians to read and sign, which explained the history and purpose of my study [See Appendix].

The table below includes a list of the 2013-14 participants in the CCIC, their grade levels, genders, and self-identified ethnicities<sup>29</sup>. Rather than sketching their stories

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<sup>29</sup> Leslie Bow (1995) argues that identity categories such as ‘Asian American’ are not culturally coherent or natural, because they overlook nuance and variety. However, Bow contends that such categories can also “specify a coalition based on a similarity of treatment within the U.S.” (p. 32). In that vein, Audrey Smedley (2007) positions race as the “symbol of a knowledge system” and “a way of knowing, of perceiving, and interpreting the world and of rationalizing its contents” that is influenced by cultural-historical experiences and contemporary social values and conditions (p. 15). Due to the nature of my study, I feel supported in employing racial identity descriptors to surface shared histories around issues such as racist/classist structures. At the same time, I am informed by Campano & Ghiso’s (2011) argument for the queering of identity on the basis that “students should not be reduced to a single aspect of themselves” (p. 172). Throughout my dissertation work, then, I have attempted to avoid reductive and deterministic assignments of ethnic identity, while simultaneously inviting students to claim, contest, perform, and organize around identities and ethnic affiliations as they wish.

and backgrounds here, the experiences, words, and multimodal compositions of these students will be fleshed out in detail throughout the data chapters of this dissertation, when and wherever appropriate.

Student's Name (pseudonymized)	Grade (2013-14)	Sex	Ethnic/Ancestral Group (self-identified)
1. Alexi	5 <sup>th</sup>	M	Mexican American (younger brother of Alma)
2. Alma	6 <sup>th</sup>	F	Mexican American (older sister of Alexi)
3. Bettina	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	African American
4. Cherice	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	African American
5. Desiree	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	African American and Native American (younger sister of Raman)
6. Héctor	7 <sup>th</sup>	M	Mexican American
7. Isaiah	5 <sup>th</sup>	M	African American
8. Kyrie	7 <sup>th</sup>	M	African American
9. Larry	7 <sup>th</sup>	M	African American
10. Lena	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	African American (older sister of Rhian)
11. Nellie	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	Vietnamese American
12. Nina	6 <sup>th</sup>	F	Filipina American
13. Paulo	7 <sup>th</sup>	M	Mexican (living temporarily with a relative in the U.S.)
14. Raman	7 <sup>th</sup>	M	African American and Native American (older brother of Desiree)
15. Rhian	4 <sup>th</sup>	F	African American (younger sister of Lena)
16. Teddy	5 <sup>th</sup>	M	Filipino American
17. Teresa	5 <sup>th</sup>	F	Vietnamese American (only attended first 5-10 minutes of CCIC sessions)
18. Tyler	5 <sup>th</sup>	M	Filipino American and African American

## Methodological Framework

Although I spent thirty months facilitating the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community from 2012-14, the data I emphasize in this dissertation represent work from a specific nine-month project (September 2013 – June 2014). Within this study I use

ethnographic tools to develop a detailed understanding of the CCIC as an educational space in which I was the practitioner, and which I deliberately co-constructed with students to center their multiliterate, multicultural, and critical engagements with *graphica* (e.g., Johnson, Bass, & Hicks, 2014). By examining the group members' actions and interactions as they participated in the CCIC, I am able to offer a rich analysis of the group's life over one academic year, although I do occasionally draw on events from my pilot studies in order to provide additional context. In endorsing a qualitative approach and employing ethnographic tools, I endeavor to understand phenomena from my participants' perspectives, and in effect, to complicate quantitatively-derived generalizations made about urban students and their enactments of literacy. I also seek to complicate 'common sense' beliefs about the benefits and drawbacks of bringing comics into educational contexts.

Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street (2008) write that ethnographic studies in education are often motivated by a desire to bring knowledge to bear on "reforming education policies, the school as an institution, specific subject-matter curricula, or pedagogical approaches of individual teachers" (p. 122). While this may sometimes be the case, my experiences with ethnography, as a common approach to qualitative inquiry, have framed it as one whose fundamental question is: "What is happening here?" In taking on the role of participant-observer, and investigating what is significant to people within local contexts, an ethnographer may very well bring knowledge to bear on reforming institutions. But this outcome is neither inevitable nor the essential goal of ethnography. Practitioner research, on the other hand, is more intrinsically concerned

with unsettling and disrupting educational status quos. As Campano (2009) writes, the “underlying ethical imperative [of practitioner inquiry] is to respond to students in their full humanity and dignity” and to develop practices which “aim to create more just and equitable educational arrangements” (p. 327). If ethnography’s central impulse is to document “what’s happening,” the impulse undergirding practitioner research is to actively design and modify spaces for productive change. Pulling again from Campano’s 2009 chapter, practitioner research strives to be “procreative, rather than merely analytical” (p. 332).

The methodological design of my study draws from practitioner research traditions (e.g., Campano, 2007b; Campano, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cooper & Ellis, 2011; D. Freeman, 1998; Simon & Campano, 2013; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001) and is informed by ethnographic studies in education (e.g., Erickson, 1986; Frank, 1999; Green & Bloome, 1997; Smith, 2005; Wolcott, 1999). It has been important to meld elements from these traditions in order to gain clearer insights into the perspectives of CCIC members and also my own inquiries into the group, its members’ experiences, and my own experiences. It has also been important for me to delineate the ways in which I both combined and kept separate practitioner research from ethnography. As a member of Dr. Campano’s “Community Literacies” research team, I was involved in a sustained partnership with the St. Cabrini Parish from 2011 to 2015. I used this “ethnographic immersion” – for example, attending church services and leadership council meetings, contributing to several research projects, working with the summer camp staff, operating a multiyear pen pal exchange between children from the Indonesian ministry and Penn

GSE masters students, and frequenting the neighborhood's cultural and business establishments – to direct my researcher's gaze and inform my pedagogical decision-making. Through my ethnographic immersion, I developed knowledge about the St. Cabrini parish and the Marian Anderson community at large. I also came to understand the parish/mission school as an institution and the students' experiences attending it. But if I had *only* been an ethnographer, I would not have co-created the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community with Moxie and a group of children; I would simply have documented what was already happening at CPS. As a practitioner researcher, I actively co-constructed sites of learning, rather than defining my work as the observation of lived realities. I was the teacher and facilitator of the CCIC, and I quite purposefully designed its conditions. I approached my work with certain ideas and framings, for example, that comics is a valuable medium for literacy education and identity performance, and that urban students should have “assessment-free spaces” within which to practice critical multimodal literacy with agency and joy.

Taking up the tradition of practitioner research (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), I created pedagogic conditions and curricular invitations for students in the CCIC to draw upon the medium of comics to develop their multiliterate, multicultural identities<sup>30</sup> and then examined the outcomes. Some of these invitations included writing

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<sup>30</sup> As the practitioner of CCIC, I split the club's time among group discussions of the graphics students have read, instructional activities, free time for drawing and writing, and workshopping. I often demonstrated comics-making techniques and assisted members in designing, plotting, drawing, writing, coloring, revising, and publishing their graphic narratives. I tried to offer my expertise as unobtrusively as possible in order to enable each student to maintain the utmost agency in her or his own composing. In doing this work, my personal commitment was to approach each student as a “cosmopolitan intellectual” (Campano & Ghiso, 2011) with particular knowledge borne of her or his experiences, which could be effectively narrativized through the medium of comics.



back and forth with each student in weekly response journals (where we discussed the books she or he was reading); facilitating group conversations around an inquiry topic such as “What is strength?”; designing lessons on visual storytelling; and mobilizing my own ‘expertise’ as a cartoonist to assist students with their artwork. I iteratively examined the outcomes of my curricular invitations by employing Rob Simon’s (2012) concept of connoisseurship as a framework for learning about youths’ lives and literacies and implementing them into my curriculum and pedagogy. Thus, I adjusted my teaching practice according to in-the-field analyses of data. This is just a complicated way of saying that as the CCIC’s practitioner, I listened to students and made changes accordingly.

In that vein, I also examined my own evolving perspectives on teaching throughout the course of my study. As Hesford (1999) writes, practitioner inquiry requires that I “attempt to become a student of my own practice—to develop an antagonism in myself, to step back and examine my interpretive frames and presentations. This means being open to the possibility of *unlearning* certain historical perspectives, institutional and personal” (p. xxxiii). In order to do engage in this work, I have continually inquired into my own understandings of literacy, identity, and culture throughout my fieldwork. In journaling frequently about my practice, in relation to my site, my research partners, and my participants, I have attempted to remain willing to “unlearn.” From the beginning of my fieldwork, I have tried to cultivate within myself a willingness to examine the ways in which power is enacted through my social location, positionality, discourses, ontologies, research questions, methodologies, and conclusions

(Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 9).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

*Ethnographic studies entail “watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through formal and informal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts...in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).*

As the practitioner of a comics-oriented inquiry community for urban children and youth, I collected data throughout the 2013-2014 school year at Cabrini Mission School, beginning in October 2013 and ending in June 2014<sup>31</sup>. Through my use of ethnographic tools, I compiled a thick description of the multiliterate practices of the urban children and youth in CCIC, alongside my own experiences as its practitioner (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I constructed my dataset from the purposefully unstable position of practitioner/participant-observer (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These data consisted of fieldnotes (Sanjek, 1990), analytic memos, audio transcripts CCIC sessions, transcripts of semi-structured interviews with CCIC members (Weiss, 1994), and multimodal artifacts created by CCIC members. Beginning in June 2014 I began looking across my entire data set to generate themes and codes (Saldaña, 2013; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) about the ranges of ways students interacted in the setting of the club, the

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<sup>31</sup> Prior to beginning data collection, I requested approval from a newly formed parish advisory committee (PAC), consisting of various St. Cabrini community members. The purpose of the PAC is to give parishioners an internal mechanism for determining (and communicating) the types of research that will be conducted in their community. Rather than researchers telling people how research benefits them (i.e., a traditional university/community paradigm), the PAC repositions community members as they who can decide for themselves what and how research is beneficial to them, and if/how it should be conducted. Beyond a university IRB, the advisory committee provided an additional layer of ethical accountability. The PAC also made manifest the concept of “institutional reciprocity” in transparent ways. For example: As a researcher, I discussed what I would be removing from the community (in the form of data) but also what and how I would be giving back to the community.

topics they represented multimodally, and their uses of visual and linguistic features to (per)form identities and convey meanings. My deployment of multiple data sources and analytics was designed to provide triangulation, thereby “reduc[ing] the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112). Below I will describe each of my data sources and the respective analytics I used to interpret data.

The qualitative data I constructed throughout a year of working with a core group of seventeen students have provided my interpretive mill with a considerable amount of grist: over 1500 pages of single-spaced raw data. In order to mitigate becoming hopelessly buried in data (which was perhaps always an inevitability), I attempted to remain vigilant about my units of analysis (Patton, 1987) and intentional about connecting the data I was collecting back to my research questions (e.g., Bazeley, 2013). I did not wish for my data to entail everything under the sun! Units of analysis provide a lens for looking at data and allow the researcher to ‘let go’ of things outside of that lens. Ethnography, then, builds a story (or multiple stories) around the units of analysis, which become the study’s center. In the data chapters of this dissertation, I often frame such stories as “telling cases,” in which “the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships sufficiently apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239). While not explicitly case study research, I do use methods which are not drastically different from those employed in case studies, from drawing on multiple sources of information to considering issues within a bounded system (e.g., Merriam,

1998; Stake, 1995). Nevertheless, the nature of my work leans more toward a combination of constructivist ethnographic methods than toward case study research.

Below, I include a chart that outlines the ways in which my units of analysis cohere with my research questions:

<u>Research Questions</u>	<u>Themes and Unit(s) of Analysis</u>
RQ1: How do the cultural identities and experiences of CCIC members inform their literate transactions with graphica? In what ways do they form and perform identities through their reading, composition, and talk about comics and other multimodal texts?	This question is about identity (students' understandings and performances of self and group identity) within a space dedicated to the popular multimodal medium of comics. My units of analysis are the individual CCIC member <sup>32</sup> and the group as a whole. In order to develop an understanding of these units of analysis, I examined CCIC members' text selections, their discussions about comics, and the multimodal texts they created (both individually and collaboratively) through analytic lenses foregrounding cultural identity.
RQ2: What happens when I invite members of the CCIC to respond critically to representations of race, class, and gender in comics texts?	This question is concerned with the ways in which CCIC members take up pedagogic invitations to enact critical literacy/ies. The units of analysis are again the individual CCIC member and the group as a whole. I explored these units by examining the discourses of CCIC members and their multiliterate activities within the space of the CCIC.

<sup>32</sup> From a sociocultural perspective, the concept of the individual is problematic because mind, human creations, language, and meanings are *all* understood as social. For Vygotsky, the unit of analysis was always social, never individual (1978); for Bakhtin, all utterances are filled with "dialogic overtones" of others' speech, for "our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well" (1986, p. 92); similarly, Gee (1992) writes that, "mind extends beyond the skin to mutually form and be formed by an ever-changing physical and social world" (p. xvi), and that "meaning is not in the head at all, but in the world" (p. 1). Nevertheless, in inquiring into the forming and performing of identities, I find that the individual (who operates in a social world) is an important construction to maintain.

### *Ethnographic Fieldnotes and Analytic Memos*

During CCIC sessions, I frequently jotted short notes to myself which later refreshed my memory while I wrote fleshed out fieldnotes (Sanjek, 1990). Following each weekly session of the CCIC, I used my jottings to write between fifteen and twenty-five single-spaced pages of fieldnotes describing the events from that day's session. I made sure always to write fieldnotes within one day of being at my fieldsite, so as not to give my memory a chance to become unreliable (Lareau, 1996). In my fieldnotes I described what I considered to be the salient happenings from all CCIC sessions, which both did and did not pertain to my research questions. It is important to note that my fieldnotes also mapped onto my specific location and positionality as a researcher. As Mindy Blaise (2010) writes, "It is impossible to deny [one's] desires as a researcher... (Re)visiting fieldnotes that [one] generated during the project allows [one] to see how [one's] desires were evident during data collection" (p. 91). Rather than attempt to conceal my subjectivities, I think it better to name them. My process of writing fieldnotes was intentionally interpretive, rather than bathed in a sort of pseudo-objectivity (e.g., Emerson et al., 1995). As the practitioner-ethnographer of the CCIC, my interpretation of events *is* my data, and my interpretations are a function of my intersubjective positionalities.

Writ large, my fieldnotes, as a corpus of data, tended to focus on two major areas:

1. The interactions and conversations that occurred, between CCIC members and me, and between CCIC members and one another, and
2. The graphica the students worked on reading and writing/drawing that day.

My fieldnotes also served as a space in which I documented the graphic novels that were read, checked out, and returned by CMS students in any given week. My memos, which I wrote more sporadically than fieldnotes, were typically about five single-spaced pages in length, and served a less descriptive and more analytic role than fieldnotes. In memos, I attempted to make sense of, rather than simply describe, my perceptions of what was happening in the CCIC<sup>33</sup>. I frequently memoed about “stuck points” and “puzzling moments” that were troubling or confusing to me (Ballenger, 2009).

Employing Fred Erickson’s (1986) inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, I regularly reviewed fieldnotes and memos throughout my data collection phase (October 2013 – June 2014) in order to begin constructing emerging themes and to begin assigning groupings and codes (also emergent) from “the bottom-up.” Miles and Humberman (1994) and Weiss (1994) consider it bad practice to put off analysis until after all data are collected, and I tend to agree. Developing my understandings of the CCIC throughout my 9-month process of data collection allowed me to “make sense” of data in more productive ways (e.g., Bailey & Jackson, 2003). I developed a particular interpretive framework in order to cohere with my research questions, and when I read back through my fieldnotes and memos, I did so through the lenses of urban literacies, multiliteracies, and multimodalities. Not surprisingly, my lenses did evolve in order to attend to new questions that arose throughout my year of data collection (e.g., Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). By analyzing data as an ongoing and recursive/iterative process (Bogdan &

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<sup>33</sup> Joe Kincheloe (2008) writes that “Not only is all research merely an act of interpretation, but...perception itself is an act of interpretation” (p. 57). Amen.

Biklen, 1992), my objective was to both identify emerging themes throughout my period of data collection, and to reduce the enormous cache of unanalyzed data that would be waiting for me in June, 2013. I accomplished the first of these goals, although the cache remained enormous.

### *Audio Transcripts of CCIC Sessions*

During CCIC sessions, I used an iPhone 4S with its built-in Voice Memo software to record audio of the entire hour. The device recorded audio crisply within an approximate 15-foot radius, although it did not pick up overlapping conversations well. During full-group interactions, I was able to record everybody in the library<sup>34</sup> and when the group split up into smaller groups, I made decisions about which individual conversations I wished to record. This presented me, as a researcher, with a challenge. When there were multiple conversations happening in the library simultaneously, which one did I record? I lacked the monetary resources to leave audio recorders strewn about the library – and I would not have had the time to transcribe multiple recordings anyhow – so I was forced to choose where I ‘pointed’ my recorder. Ultimately, I decided to carry the iPhone around the room with me, recording conversations that I was near, and then moving into other conversations. This reflected my own history as a mobile teacher who often assigned group work, in that my knowledge of what was happening in any portion of the classroom could only ever be local. The limitations to the recording approach I opted to take are several. One: there were conversations occurring within the CCIC that I

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<sup>34</sup> Because I am familiar with each individual CCIC member’s voice, I had no issues with proper attribution.

did not record. Two: the fact of my being present for, or in the proximity of, conversations will have impacted the conversations that were held. My presence affected things. I recognized this at the time and I decided that as a practitioner research study – and one in which I had deliberately constructed the conditions – my inquiry was never meant to be a hidden camera exposé of some naturalistic group setting. I took solace in the scholarship of feminist researchers whose work reminded me that all looking is “a partial and political act...The rooms where we locate ourselves and the directions in which we point our camera are never neutral decisions... Looking, like writing, is a kind of composing—a selecting and ignoring—a looking and not-looking” (Kamler, 2001, p. 10-11). I felt liberated as a researcher to make decisions about where I would point my audio recorder at any given moment, so long as I continually acknowledged that I was making conscious decisions and not simply documenting unfettered reality from some positivistic neutral ground.

Following each session of the CCIC (21 total sessions from 2013-14), I transcribed the  $\approx$  60-minute audio recording saved to my iPhone. Each week, I spent between four and six hours transcribing the week’s audio, making sure never to allow a backlog to form. (I knew that if I got behind, there would be no catching up.) For my transcription of audio files, I used a program called InqScribe, a pair of headphones, and an increasingly sore set of fingers. As my research focus was not the individual utterance, but rather the sociocultural implications of CCIC interactions, I transcribed at the word level, excluding linguistic ‘extras’ such as pitch, tone, pauses, and word duration. Mica Pollock (2004), a researcher of race and talk, writes of her own dissertation study that “I



did not need to recapture language at the level of grammatical detail required by most linguists” (p. 12); I felt similarly. My analysis of discourse would focus more on social and historical situatedness than on syntax (e.g., Cheek, 2004). I further decided to exclude non-words such as “uh” and “um” from my transcripts, except in cases where I felt they were significant to representing the speaker’s meaning or affect. After typing up a transcript – typically 25 to 40 single-spaced pages in length – I paired it with my fieldnotes from that day in order to build context, employing a constant comparative technique to identify patterns and connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During transcription, I again employed Erickson’s (1986) inductive analysis techniques, isolating key interactions and salient moments in order to identify emerging themes (while continuing to look through the lenses of urban literacies and multimodalities). I saw this as a precursor to the full-corpus grouping and coding that I would begin in earnest in June 2014.

Language is interactional, sociocultural, and mediated by power relationships, texts, technology, history, and people. Throughout the course of my study, I employed a collage approach to discourse analysis, using several approaches (e.g., Duranti, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Gal, 1995; Gee, 2007; Machin & Mayer, 2012; Reyes, 2011; Stokoe, 2008) to better understand how students experienced the conditions of Marian Anderson, CMS, and the CCIC, and the various ways of knowing, being, and communicating in these spaces. As Gee (2007) has written, discourses involve situated identities, ways of performing and recognizing identities, ways of both coordinating and being coordinated, and ways of acting, interacting, feeling, emoting, and valuing (p. 33). In that same vein,

Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) employ positioning theories to examine how members of groups, through their discourses, occupy specific locations wherein identities are constructed, negotiated, and understood. Attending to theories of communication and identity, then, may enable a discourse analyst to examine how *knowing* matters in a group dynamic. It has been my intention in analyzing students' language to attend to the overlapping discursive categories referred to by Gee, Harré and Van Langenhove, and others – specifically in regard to the multicultural 'border crossings' that are so prevalent at CMS. During and after transcribing the audio from a CCIC session, I often found myself focusing on the metapragmatic aspects of students' language, i.e., when they talked about their talking (Reyes, 2011; Silverstein, 1993). I found that these instances were frequently evocative of larger themes at CMS, such as race talk dilemmas (Pollock, 2004; Thomas, in press) and multilingual/multimodal code mashing (Canagarajah, 2006; Fraiberg, 2010). Throughout my data chapters, I often refer back to these sections of transcript.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews and Transcripts***

While my interactions with students in the space of the CCIC may have better illuminated the 'informal logic of actual life' (Geertz, 1973, p. 17), conducting interviews allowed me to target specific areas about which I had questions and concerns. To gain insight into CCIC members' perspectives on multimodal texts and their experiences within CMS, the CCIC, and the world writ large, I conducted semi-structured interviews with students from January through April 2014. The overriding purpose of these interviews (either 1-on-1, 1-on-2, or 1-on-3) was to consider how students made sense of

their experiences in a space that was deliberately designed to promote multiliterate engagement outside of a traditional school literacy curriculum. The questions I asked arose from themes generated by the CCIC members and the work they produced [see Semi-Structured Interview Protocol in the Appendix]. At times, I used elicitation strategies, for instance, asking interviewees to participate in ‘think-aloud protocols’ (Young, 2005) in which I asked a student to describe one or more pieces of her or his work by “talking long” about their composition processes.

As opposed to audio from the weekly CCIC sessions, which I alone transcribed, I commissioned Dr. Heather Hurst to transcribe interview audio for me. I felt that since there were fewer discrete voices in an interview (between two and four), Heather, an accomplished transcriptionist, would be able to delineate individual turns. Dr. Hurst typically returned a transcript within two weeks<sup>35</sup>, and in a process similar to my transcripts of CCIC sessions, I was able to begin recursively grouping and coding interview transcripts. I periodically analyzed transcripts in relation to one another in order to surface themes, and I also looked for parallels between interview transcripts and fieldnotes, analytic memos, and the multimodal artifacts I collected from CCIC meetings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

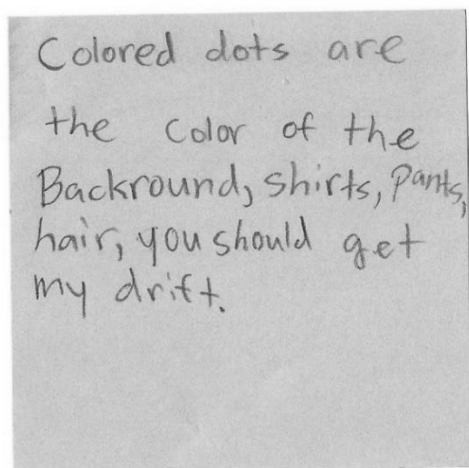
### ***Multimodal Compositions/Artifacts***

Throughout each CCIC session, I took digital photos (with the iPhone 4S camera) of any drawings and writings the members had been working on that day. I was thus able

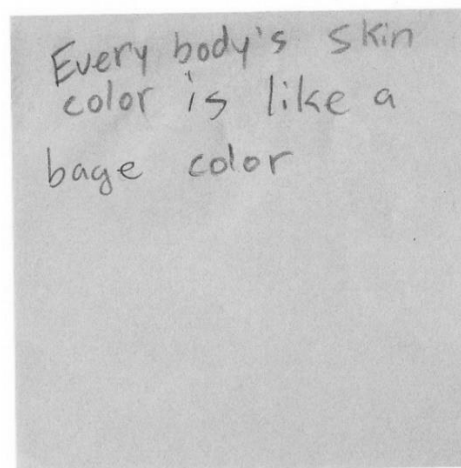
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<sup>35</sup> Beyond ‘basic’ unidirectional transcription, Dr. Hurst engaged as a collaborative “thought partner,” both transcribing and contributing ideas to my early analysis of transcripts (see Hurst, Tilles, & McCallum, 2014).

to capture many compositions throughout various stages of creation and revision, from pencil sketch to final inked/colored drawing. When a CCIC member finished a composition, I asked her or him if I could keep the page for a week and make a high-quality scan of it. From my home computer I made a high-resolution, full-color scan of the student's artwork and then returned it the following week to its creator. Occasionally, students would ask me to make copies of their work or add digital color to a drawing. In the case of the latter request, the student needed to communicate her or his coloring wishes to me. CCIC members did this by affixing notes to their work, such as Nellie's below where she devised a plan to place a colored dot inside each closed shape:



Colored dots are  
the color of the  
Background, shirts, pants,  
hair, you should get  
my drift.



Every body's skin  
color is like a  
bage color

For simple coloring jobs, I used Adobe Photoshop 6.0 to fill in the shapes. For more complicated requests, I brought my laptop into the CMS library and showed students how to use Photoshop to edit and color their own work<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> The CMS library has several computers, but these are at least a decade old and operate at a snail's pace. The computers do not have any image-editing software and are not capable of running digital comics

Analyzing CCIC members' multimodal compositions has been both challenging and highly stimulating. Johnny Saldaña (2013) writes that he has "yet to find a single satisfactory approach that rivals the tacit and visceral capabilities of human reflection and interpretation," and encourages researchers to "Trust your intuitive, holistic impressions when analyzing and writing about visual materials" (p. 57). I have taken heart in Saldaña's advice, but also felt that I needed systematic frameworks from which I could draw. Lacking a single codified system for analyzing images (Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar notwithstanding), I decided to utilize a mash-up approach to multimodal analysis. Siegel and Panofsky (2009) write that "there is no ready-made tool-kit for analyzing multimodality in literacy studies, but researchers have turned to a range of theories in search of analytic guidance" which can be "productively blended" (p. 101). I have thus merged multiple techniques of image-text analysis (Bang, 2000; Burmark, 2002; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Moline, 1995), including comics analysis (Connors, 2012; Groensteen, 2007), picturebook analysis (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Martens et al., 2013), and Sonesson's pictorial semiotics (1988) to 'read' (i.e. offer my interpretations of) the images employed by members of CCIC in their compositions.

This was not a simple or unproblematic venture. As Pahl & Rowsell (2010) note, "the shaping of meanings into modes is always culturally influenced, and it is materially and socially situated" (p. 5). Thus, looking at a multimodal text necessitates acknowledging the "sedimented identities, or traces of past experiences" (Rowsell &

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creation software, such as Comic Life. Thus, all of the students' compositions are hand-drawn, and many of them are hand-colored.

Pahl, 2007, p. 388) that lie behind its meaning. Although Siegel and Panofsky (2009) explain that empirical researchers of multimodality often elect to focus on the ways an individual's interests and modal choices shape her or his meaning-making, they warn that to do so in the absence of historical, cultural, and political theories of literacy curriculum, teaching, and learning is to "limit what a multimodal lens can offer educators" (p. 99). Echoing Siegel and Panofsky, Peggy Albers (2010) writes that "Studies of learners' visual texts as culturally situated visual representations of their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are scarce" (p. 160). My work attempts to remedy this scarcity. Through an analytic ensemble, I have closely examined CCIC members' compositions to identify the topics they represent, to see how meaning is conveyed, and also to recognize how the texts function socio-culturally in the space of the CCIC. My analysis describes the image-texts produced in the CCIC while simultaneously attempting to account for the ways these texts came into being and were being used by their creators and readers to make meaning (Christianakis, 2011; Kell, 2006; Stein, 2003 & 2004). To accomplish this goal, I employed Carini's (2001) process of "close looking," which is designed to surface nuances in, and raise questions about, students' compositional products and processes. I further attempted to understand students' culturally-situated "sedimented identities" by bringing ethnic studies and culturally-centered visual analysis (e.g., Boone & Mignolo, 1994; Cowan, 1999; Fedorova, 2009; Jiménez & Smith, 2008) to bear on CCIC members' multimodal compositions. No single framework for visual analysis (i.e. Kress & van Leeuwen's) can account for ethno-cultural particularities in design.

I paired and attempted to corroborate my analysis of student-made compositions through interviews and by asking composers to explain the meaning of their multimodal texts to me. This impulse emanated from my belief that there are definite limitations to multimodal analysis (just as there are limitations to any form of interpretive analysis). As a practitioner researcher, I was positioned in such a way that I could ask students how they thought they employed words and images in their own compositions. Beyond member checking as a form of analytic validity<sup>37</sup>, this was more about co-construction of data. All participants in the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community – myself included – have been engaged in co-constructing and sharing knowledge about our lives and experiences over a significant span of time. We have known each other for years and have built relationships and community norms which enable us to collaboratively make meaning of our meaning-making. These norms were especially useful when it came to analyzing students’ multimodal texts, which often left me feeling mystified upon first inspection. I will shed more light on the CCIC’s collaborative analytical processes within subsequent data chapters.

### *Chart of Data Sources and Analysis*

Data Sources	Data Analysis (Inductive)
Ethnographic fieldnotes and analytic memos	Lenses in urban literacies (Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Morrell, 2008), multiliteracies (Albers, Vasquez, & Harste, 2008; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000), multimodalities (Albers & Sanders, 2010; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Jewitt & Kress, 2003), and ethnic studies in education (Carrillo, 2013; Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Flores-González, 2002)
Transcripts of audio from CCIC sessions	Discourse analysis (Duranti, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2007), race talk dilemma (Pollock, 2004; Thomas, in press), language and race/culture (Brock et al., 2007; DaSilva Iddings et al., 2014; Flores & Schissel, 2014; Heath, 1983; Rodriguez et

<sup>37</sup> As a qualitative researcher, I prefer terms such as credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness to quantitative terms such as validity, reliability, and generalizability.

	al., 2010), gender talk interaction (Blaise, 2005; Gal, 1995; Stokoe, 2008); lenses in urban literacies, multiliteracies, and multimodalities
Transcripts of semi-structured interviews with CCIC members	Lenses in urban literacies, youth identity and popular culture (Dimitriadis, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Hall, 2011; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006), multiliteracies, multimodalities, and race talk dilemma
Multimodal compositions/artifacts (CCIC members' comics)	Multimodal text analysis (Bang, 2000; Burmark, 2002; Groensteen, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006); Pictorial analysis (Sonesson, 1988); Descriptive review (Carini, 2001); lenses in urban literacies, multiliteracies, pop culture, and multimodalities in cultural/historical contexts (Boone & Mignolo, 1994; Cowan, 1999; Ghiso & Low, 2013; Honeyford, 2014; Mein, 2011; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Siegel & Panofsky, 2009; Zapata, 2013)

### **Coding and Analysis**

Immediately following my period of data collection, in June 2014 I began the next step of data interpretation: coding the entire corpus. Although I had been attempting to recursively make sense of data as I collected it (as recorded in analytic memos written throughout the 2013-14 academic year), it was not until I had an entire data set that I felt I could begin looking for connections in earnest. I registered for a “Dissertation Boot Camp” at Penn’s Graduate Student Center and got to work coding the thousands of pages of data I had collected over the previous nine months. After reading many online reviews and speaking with colleagues, I decided to purchase QSR NVivo 10 for my PC, and ultimately found the coding software to be intuitive, though I kept a guidebook nearby in case I needed it (Edlund & McDougall, 2012). In all, it took me 36 real-time hours to perform a first-round coding of my data corpus. While reading chronologically through my data, I generated codes (or in NVivo’s parlance, “nodes”) that emerged (or rather, which I assembled) to fit the phenomena I was observing, and that cohered with my research questions. Because I had been deeply involved in constructing these data at their



original points of origin – between zero and nine months prior to June 2014 – I had strong memories of the interactions I was now reading through, and felt at times as if I had descended into a perpetual déjà vu cycle. Upon completing my first round of coding, and generating 58 initial codes, I immediately performed a second round in which I exploded, collapsed, and refined codes (e.g., Saldaña, 2013; Weiss, 1994), ultimately settling on six secondary codes. These I consider my large “buckets” of data. Because I double-coded certain pieces of data in my initial coding, there are sections of transcript and student-produced compositions that are represented in multiple domains. The interconnectedness of these data made collapsing them easier.

One morsel of advice that my advisor Gerald Campano frequently gives, and which has stuck with me, is that “you can’t code your way out of analysis.” This is to say that no matter how fine-tuned the coding system a researcher develops, there is still the work of actually interpreting the data, and constructing narratives through it—i.e., the human element of data analysis. The initial codes I share below helped me to sort my dataset, but not necessarily to interpret it (beyond the fact that the act of generating codes is itself interpretive). Conversely, the secondary codes were a major component of my data interpretation process, and lead directly to the data on which I focus in chapters three, four, and five.

### ***Initial Coding Matrix***

#	Code Name and Description	Number of Data Sources in which Code Appears	Total Number of References Across all Data Sources
1.	Art & aesthetics of images (in comics and elsewhere)	139	250

2.	Asian & Asian-American themes (cultural identity)	24	48
3.	Assessment (testing, grades, data, results)	22	35
4.	Autobiography (reading and composing)	41	57
5.	Behavior and discipline (and disagreed upon uses of the school space)	37	108
6.	Black & African American themes (cultural identity)	38	87
7.	Comic book history (students discuss)	11	18
8.	Character creation (students create their own characters)	90	173
9.	Class (students discuss wealth, poverty, etc.)	21	29
10.	Collaboration, compromise, cooperation, interdependence, & forgiveness	64	149
11.	CCIC and CMS library as a discrete space	47	181
12.	Community and neighborhood (students talk about Marian Anderson)	26	50
13.	Confidence and pride as students, artists, writers, etc.	23	40
14.	Content of comics texts (students discuss issues of how graphica is in/appropriate, high or low culture, etc.)	40	107
15.	Critique (students critique social/political issues in their words or work)	33	75
16.	Drawing-talk (students discuss the process of drawing)	133	323
17.	Engagement (students are engaged in some form of literate activity in the library)	51	177
18.	Expectations of school (teachers or principal discuss standards)	41	100
19.	Expert roles and professionalism (students take on the role of expert, demand professionalism from selves)	34	68
20.	Family, heritage, culture (students explicitly reference their heritages)	52	197
21.	Food & drink	23	33
22.	Gender & sexuality (students explicitly and implicitly make these topics salient. Includes discussions on gender discrimination)	61	146
23.	Goal setting (students articulate goals for their reading or writing)	19	24
24.	History of the CCIC (students invoke the history of our group and its members)	46	86
25.	Humor (students engage in jokes and insults)	66	124
26.	Identity work and play (students role play in ways that are demonstrative)	38	89
27.	Inclusivity and exclusion (students invite others to join them or prohibit joining in activities)	31	62
28.	Intelligence (students discuss the concept of intelligence or lack thereof)	10	10
29.	Language (students discuss their own language use)	22	29
30.	Latin@ & Chican@ themes (cultural identity)	32	77
31.	Multiculturalism (students co-articulate multiple cultural traditions, including language)	19	32

32.	NLS, multiliteracies, visual literacy (students create or discuss work that I considered evocative of NLS)	28	44
33.	Nonfiction and informational text (students read or discuss)	6	6
34.	Nuts and bolts (i.e. the week-to-week operation of the CMS library, including setting up)	3	5
35.	Pedagogy and curriculum (my explicit overtures to being a practitioner in the space)	29	112
36.	Penn, research, university (either I or students discuss higher education and my research project)	23	52
37.	Pop culture (students discuss pop culture outside of comic books per se – movies, TV, products, etc.)	24	36
38.	Power, authority & control (institutional or personal; adults and/or youth negotiating roles through displays of power)	39	167
39.	Prose and the written word (students write prose or discuss writing prose – can be in contrast to discussing graphica)	25	62
40.	Racism and discrimination (students surface these topics)	32	72
41.	Reading as activity and text selection (students discuss their reading processes, including how they select books to read)	69	393
42.	Realistic characters (students discuss or read graphic featuring non-fantastical and non-superhero characters)	22	39
43.	Religion, spirituality, superstition (students discuss or compose about topics of religion)	22	31
44.	Romance and relationships (students discuss)	28	47
45.	Sports and competition (student discuss)	14	21
46.	Strength (students discuss what ‘strong’ means and who is/isn’t)	12	19
47.	Superheroes (students read, write, and talk about superhero characters)	67	160
48.	Teachers and principal (a code for recording the words and doings of CMS faculty)	39	143
49.	Technology (students discuss computers, phones, video games, etc.)	39	68
50.	Text complexity (students talk about how reading a text may be easy or difficult and why)	20	38
51.	Text-to-Self Connections (students draw connections between texts and their own lives)	32	76
52.	Text-to-Text Connections (students draw connections between texts and other texts; intertextuality)	34	77
53.	Transmediation (students draw connections between texts across media, i.e., movies, TV, video games; intertextuality)	38	67
54.	Urban education issues (funding issues, dropping enrollment, no playground, etc.)	15	20
55.	Violent representations (students represent weapons or violence in their speech or composing)	64	110
56.	Vocabulary (students discuss the words they encounter in reading)	15	23
57.	Whiteness and European/Caucasian themes (students discuss	31	49

	Whiteness, either on its own or in comparison to other ethnic identities)		
58.	Writing as activity (students discuss their writing processes)	36	77

### *Secondary Coding Matrix*

<p><b>Code 1: CCIC members talking about and performing ethno-cultural identity/ies (outside of their multimodal compositions)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Invoking personal, familial, and/or community experiences through talk and action</li> <li>○ Invoking racial, linguistic, and/or religious heritage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking about racism and/or discrimination</li> <li>▪ Talking about celebrations of cultural heritage.</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Invoking multiculturalism (i.e. cross-articulating identities)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Code 2: CCIC members representing and performing ethno-cultural and classed identity/ies (through their multimodal compositions – both the content of the compositions and the composing process)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Invoking familial and community experiences; invoking racial, linguistic, and/or religious heritage; and invoking multiculturalism (i.e. cross-articulating identities) through the characters and/or storylines they multimodally compose</li> <li>○ Invoking autobiographical experiences through the characters and/or storylines they multimodally compose <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Invoking diasporic experiences</li> <li>▪ Invoking the Marian Anderson neighborhood</li> <li>▪ Invoking issues of class (wealth and/or poverty)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Code 3: CCIC members talking about, performing, and/or representing gendered identities in their multimodal compositions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Explicitly or implicitly making the topic(s) of gender and/or sexuality salient <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking about and/or representing gender norms and expectations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Border and category-maintenance work</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Talking about and/or representing the qualities of strength and weakness vis-à-vis gender (and violence)</li> <li>▪ Talking about and/or representing gender or sexual discrimination</li> <li>▪ Talking about and/or representing romantic relationships</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Code 4: CCIC members engaging in meta-talk about “academic literacy”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking about their reading habits, preferences, and text selection strategies</li> <li>▪ Talking about genre conventions</li> <li>▪ Talking about text complexity/simplicity/difficulty</li> <li>▪ Talking about vocabulary specifically</li> <li>▪ Talking about prose reading and writing (both in comparison to, and separately from, reading and writing multimodal texts)</li> <li>▪ Talking about text-to-text connections</li> <li>▪ Talking about text-to-self connections</li> </ul>

- Talking about transmedia connections
- Talking about literacies that are deemed “non-academic”
  - Talk about comics fandom, superheroes, and popular culture vis-à-vis “academic expectations”

**Code 5: CCIC members engaging in critique while reading and composing multimodal texts**

- Critiquing the visuo-textual content (i.e. representation, misrepresentation, and/or underrepresentation of characters, genres, and/or storylines) of texts (i.e. critical visual literacy)
  - Specific critiques about aesthetics and imagery
  - Specific critiques about the absence/silence of character types due to racial or gender identities
  - Specific critiques about representations of power, authority, and (un)fairness
- Critiquing the authors and/or artists of multimodal texts.
- Critiquing the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of character types by designing their own multimodal characters (i.e. critical redesign)
  - Re-narrating the self

**Code 6: Expectations of the Cabrini Mission School**

- Teachers, administrators, or CCIC members discussing issues pertinent to urban education
  - Talk about the history of the Marian Anderson neighborhood, parish, and Cabrini School (and extrapolations made to describe current residents)
  - Talk about CCIC members’ families, and assumptions made about them due to urban residency (both additive and subtractive)
- Teachers, administrators, or CCIC members discussing assessment, evaluation, and/or standards
  - Talk about testing and grading
    - CCIC members act and/or discuss assessable work as individual in nature
    - CCIC members act and/or discuss assessable work as collaborative in nature
    - CCIC members take on “expert roles” and demand “professionalism” from themselves and others
- CCIC members using and/or discussing the ‘assessment-free zone’ of the CCIC and afterschool library space (similarly and differently as during the school day)
- Teachers, administrators, or students discussing and reacting to issues of behavior and/or discipline
  - Talk about good behavior or bad behavior
    - Punishments meted out by the school (both formally and informally)
      - CCIC members’ spoken reactions to punishments
    - Punishments meted out by CCIC members to other CCIC members

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Physical violence</li><li>○ Emotional violence or teasing</li></ul> |
|---|

My multi-tiered process of coding and analysis enabled me to make meaning both during and following my data collection phase, and then to co-articulate and index the meanings I made. Revisiting the fieldnotes and transcripts that I produced over the course of an academic year allowed me to recall my initial analyses of events ‘in the moment’ as well as to identify many new themes and codes that I would not have been able to recognize without the entire corpus at hand. There were, of course, difficulties in making sense of a data set that was incredibly large (over 1500 single-spaced pages) and that was at times incoherent or contradictory (Erickson, 1986). As D. Freeman (1998) writes, practitioner research “means maneuvering between doubting what you are finding and what you are becoming certain of” (p. 86). I personally found the recursive relationship between doubt and certainty to be both productive and anxiety-causing.

Mica Pollock (2004) recalls of her dissertation study that:

Writing my fieldnotes...both brought me closer to the people I cared about and somehow distanced me painfully from them. Personalities, expressions, laughter, and struggles somehow got reduced to words on paper; yet reliving each turn of phrase, each muttered complaint, each joke and heated argument, also gave me a permanent appreciation for people, and for the complexity and importance of what they struggled with in their everyday lives (p. ix).

I have felt similarly throughout the process of reentering the fieldnotes and transcripts I produced throughout my time at the CCIC. The lively personalities and literate enactments of CCIC members do feel somewhat diminished when translated into words on a page. It has been important for me to continue memoing throughout the processes of

coding and analysis, as well as soliciting member checks from my participants, who I have occasionally visited during the 2014-15 school year. This provides me with a small measure for mitigating the ‘reduction’ of human beings into data. I have also found it necessary and helpful to remain closely involved with mentors and other researchers<sup>38</sup> to ensure that I am staying methodologically rigorous and not forcing my data to adhere to my questions, biases, or desires (Maxwell, 2005). Further, I have utilized my ‘critical friends’ as resources to collaboratively make sense of data, through descriptive reviews and informal conversations. In these ways I have endeavored to circumvent threats to the trustworthiness of my study. Of course, I attempt never to forget that coding, like all other forms of interpretive data collection and analysis, is subjective. How a researcher codes data “depends on [the] theoretical assumptions and the research interests [she or he] brings to the project” (Weiss, 1994, p. 155). This knowledge is both limiting and liberating.

### **Limitations and Liberations**

*“I may resist the dominating gaze [of traditional ethnography], but I nevertheless retain the power of representation... I attempt to sustain this reflexive quality throughout the study, examining the relational nature of power...I don’t seek to contain or fix the voices of those I’m studying, nor do I assume that by turning inward I can comprehend the totality of my experience or the experiences of others. Instead, I seek partial truths” (Hesford, 1999, p. xxxvi).*

“Qualitative inquiry,” writes Creswell (2007), “represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research” (p. 11). Mine is a qualitative inquiry into a comics-focused inquiry community

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<sup>38</sup> Drs. Katrina Bartow Jacobs, Heather Hurst, and Jodi Duffy provided an excellent feedback mechanism in the form of a writing group constructed with a feminist ethos at its core (e.g., Richardson, 1997).

in the Marian Anderson neighborhood of South Philadelphia, and I shall make no overweening claims about its replicability, generalizability, universality, or conclusiveness. As Wendy Hesford's above quote reminds me, a conscientious and ethical researcher must acknowledge the power she or he has to (re)present the words and doings of others, and the responsibility she or he has to honor the diversity of experiences that she or he bears witness to. All representation, writes Richardson (1997), "creates a particular view of reality...and constitutes the subjects and objects of inquiry. How we choose to [represent], then, involves many ethical and rhetorical decisions" (p. 58). Well-wrought qualitative inquiry, then, must be about uncovering partial truths from an unremittingly self-reflexive position, and not about making universal decrees from an unacknowledged (i.e. 'neutral') position. Therein lies much of qualitative inquiry's *power*. Doing qualitative research, and more importantly, doing it *well*, must provoke "worrying, about both research and writing...[and] worrying *about* worrying is reflexivity at its most frenzied" (Wolf, 1992). Certainly, my own worries – in particular, those concerning how I have represented the racial and cultural experiences of others, and how to avoid undertaking an exercise in paternalistic colonialism – are exemplified in the data chapters to come. Again, I am heartened by the work of feminist researchers, such as Laurel Richardson (1997), who writes that "There is no such thing as 'getting it right'; only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (p. 91).

My study is bounded by its specific contexts – in terms of its site, its participants, and its researcher – which, as Gerald Campano reminds his doctoral students, is actually quite liberating. I make no argument that what I discover in my research is representative



of all urban sites or students, nor will I argue that my experiences as a practitioner inquirer should be thought of as paradigmatic for other practitioner inquirers. As Wolf (1992) writes, ethnographic researchers “can only convey their own understandings of their observations... The better the observer, the more likely she [or he] is to catch her [or his] informants’ understandings of the meaning of their experiences” (p. 5). I have endeavored to observe well, and to offer my interpretations of what I have observed. My hope is that the interpretations I have generated in this dissertation research will be valuable, both conceptually and methodologically, to others.

While my research is not designed to contribute an assemblage of “best practices” for facilitating urban comics clubs, it is intended to represent the nuanced experiences of CCIC members as they engaged in the practice of multimodal literacy to form and perform raced, classed, and gendered identities. I would like to think that these experiences challenge various conceptions about urban children and communities, and will enable educators to better honor the rich meaning-making diversity of all our students.

I anticipate the question arising, “What is unique about urbanness to this study? Can’t rural kids also benefit from comics-oriented inquiry communities?” *Of course* rural (and suburban, and Australian, and redheaded) students can benefit from engaging with graphica, and I imagine that similar phenomena may occur across other contexts. But my focus in this dissertation, for personal and political reasons, is on the urban students, schools, and communities which are under particular national scrutiny and political siege. The children and youth who live in communities like Marian Anderson possess great

knowledge of social injustice, borne of their lived experiences and cultural identities (Gadsden, 1992; Mohanty, 1997), and I am interested in the ways CCIC members employ the affordances of the comics medium – which challenges dominant modes of storytelling (Chute, 2008) – to multimodally narrativize their knowledge. My study is deliberately framed by certain intellectual traditions, one of which is urban literacies (e.g., Kinloch, 2011; Morrell, 2008). While I am not arguing that my findings will be automatically transferrable to other contexts, neither am I arguing that they will not be. For all contexts in which practitioners and researchers are attempting to understand their students as cosmopolitan intellectuals with rich legacies and dynamic multimodal literacy practices, I hope this work will have resonance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Students Contesting the Discursive Silencing of Race with Critical Multimodal Inquiries into Comics

*“In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight.”*

-Oath of the Green Lantern Corps

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”*

-James Baldwin

#### ***Part 1: Further Review of Literature***<sup>39</sup>

#### **Introduction and Framing: When Race Talk is Silenced Talk**

In the preface to her ethnography *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (2004), Mica Pollock writes of the need to engage with the discursive construction of race in order to design solutions to systemic disparities of opportunity and power along racialized lines in American society. In studying how race labels – as opposed to the difficult-to-define quality of race itself (e.g., James, 2001; Moya & Markus, 2010) – were employed by students and teachers in an ethnically-diverse school, Pollock argues that the manifold ways race is and is not verbally signified – i.e. “the use and omission of race labels in everyday talk” – embody “all of our worries about how race matters in America” (p. x). The heart of Pollock’s methodological argument is that

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<sup>39</sup> Note: In spite of this being a data chapter, I have decided not to hew too closely to traditional demarcations of literature and data. Rather, I feel it is important to situate these data within literature in order to appropriately ground my argument about comics and the discursive silencing of race. I am not so much demonstrating my knowledge of the literature as I am ‘mapping the terrain,’ so that my argument has weight and resonance. I have thus elected to include a “further review of literature” subsection here, rather than locating it in chapter one’s more generalized literature review. I do include pieces of corroborating data within this subsection, making it a bit of a hybrid literature/data endeavor. An unorthodox collage approach has worked for me, insofar as I have been able to construct an argument anchored both in data and in case-specific literature.

there are many varieties of raced talk, and that investigating how speakers struggle through the act of talking racially reveals deeper sociopolitical realities about how race is constructed, enacted, and contested in contemporary America, as well as how privilege and inequality become perpetuated.

Pollock's argument rings rather loudly at this moment in U.S. history. In recent years, millions of Americans have taken to social and traditional media to discuss how phenomena such as mass incarceration and educational policy are (and are not) reflective of race and racism in the United States today. Within these ongoing debates, there are legions of commentators – typically representing conservative and neoliberal ideologies of individualism – who insist that anyone, and especially Black<sup>40</sup> people, concerned with naming discriminatory practices at the institutional level is simply “playing the race card.” By the very dint of discussing race and looking to address social issues, one may be labeled a racist in the public sphere (Hartigan Jr., 2010). Clearly, the continued study of race and racism as they are discursively produced, reproduced, contested, and suppressed remains an ethical imperative.

Numerous scholars have posited that race is an active and socially constructed process, rather than some fixed *quality* which people simply own or are (see, for example, Ashanti, 2007; Daiute & Jones, 2003; Graves Jr., 2005; James, 2001; Moya & Markus, 2010; Omi & Winant, 1994). As a phenomenological process continually in flux, people's understandings and performances of race are dialogically mediated by language

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<sup>40</sup> I have elected to follow the style guidelines of *Perspectives on Urban Education*, which recommend the capitalization of all racial markers.

and other forms of communication—what many refer to simply as ‘race talk’ (van den Berg et al., 2003). A range of educational researchers have taken up the study of race talk through various methodological and analytic lenses, including microethnographic approaches to classroom discourse analysis (e.g., Bloome et al., 2005; S. Carter, 2008), studies of race talk and Whiteness in teacher preparation coursework (e.g., Hytten & Warren, 2003; Jacobs, 2014; McIntyre, 1997; Willis, 2003), and historical analyses of the most prevalent American discourses about race (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Moya & Markus, 2010). Germane to this lattermost analytic on the narrativization of race, Pollock (2004) writes that:

Race is not something simply made in the past, but something we can watch being made in the present. We continue to *make race* and to *build racial orders*...each and every day in the United States, with the help of the very racialized language we use and refuse (p. 10, emphasis in original).

Of course, talking about how we talk about race and racism (Reyes, 2011), as processes that are reborn in our everyday language, often leads to significant discomfort (e.g., Bolgatz, 2005; Gadsden et al., 2014; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Stevenson, 2014; Tatum, 1992, 2008). Many predominantly White and middle class Americans find it decidedly less difficult to discuss racism if it is framed as a calamitous (but bounded) period in our nation’s history which we have collectively overcome en route to a ‘post-racial’ or ‘colorblind’ era (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Gallagher, 2003; Kaplan, 2011; Larson, 2003; Watts, 2010; Wise, 2010). This era is frequently marked by the 2008 election of Barack Obama as evidence that racism is no longer the grand concern it once was. Unfortunately, such ‘evidence’ overlooks deeply

embedded structural “patterns of discrimination within institutions *and* by individuals” (Feagin, 2000, p. 6). By locating systemic racism squarely in America’s past, post-race discourses seem designed to alleviate present White discomfort while doing nothing to mitigate future White privilege. One grand supposition of America’s post-race ethos is that 21<sup>st</sup> century racism is enacted in the form of individual bigotry; that “racism lives in the heart of particularly evil individuals as opposed to the heart of a democratic society” (Coates, 2013). It is more convenient to chastise Don Imus and Donald Sterling as racists, for instance, than to examine how our modern institutions (such as education, healthcare, housing, and the justice system) structurally maintain privilege and inequality along raced lines<sup>41</sup>. As I will explain further, the dialectics of past/present and individual/institutional racism have deeply infiltrated classroom discourses, and impact the conversations that students and teachers have about race and racism in their schools. Loosely extending Pollock’s term, and drawing upon the work of numerous scholars of color in and out of academia, I refer to this discursive phenomenon as ‘*post-race talk dilemma*,’ i.e. moments when speakers struggle to speak about race *specifically* because race has been positioned, steadfastly and erroneously, in post-racial terms.

As Moya and Markus (2010) write, “Even though race and ethnicity pervade every aspect of our daily lives, many of us become deeply uncomfortable whenever the

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<sup>41</sup> Chimamanda Adichie explains this phenomenon well in her 2013 novel *Americanah*, writing (with irony) that “In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here’s the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not... Somebody has to be able to say that racists are not monsters. They are people with loving families, regular folk who pay taxes” (pg. 389). As the author Fran Lebowitz (2015) puts it, “We now live in a society where it’s worse to call someone a racist than to be one.”

conversation turns to those topics” (p. 3). Largely on account of this discomfort, a “veil of silence” (Kirkland, 2013) is regularly imposed on classroom conversations that might otherwise invoke race and racism as salient concerns. Various researchers have studied how discursive silences regarding race are enacted in educational contexts. Alice McIntyre (1997) describes White pre-service teachers employing multiple tactics to avoid discussions of race, including “derailing the conversation, evading questions, dismissing counterarguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, and...colluding with each other in creating a ‘culture of niceness’” (p. 46). She postulates that in an effort to avoid saying anything potentially offensive and being labeled a bigot, race becomes actively eliminated from classroom talk<sup>42</sup>. Appealing to niceness, politeness, or colorblindness as justifications for maintaining racial silence is a common instantiation of post-race discourse. Such appeals assume that 1.) racial differences are only skin deep and that identifying or discussing race is rude, and 2.) race and institutional racism are no longer relevant issues that should be collectively grappled with (Bouie, 2014; Moya & Markus, 2010). Ebony Thomas (manuscript under review) employs interactional ethnography to identify two in-service Language Arts teachers’ linguistic strategies for negotiating difficult race talk that arises specifically during the teaching of literature. Building upon Pollock’s (2004) framework, Thomas finds that teacher-led discussions of literary texts are often characterized by “silence and evasion” around the topic of race, thus circumventing potentially lively intra- and intertextual explorations (p. 33). Thomas

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<sup>42</sup> McIntyre’s study with White pre-service educators remains highly relevant, as America’s teaching force continues to be predominantly White (NCES, 2013), a characteristic shared by the faculty of the Cabrini Mission School.

goes on to argue that in order to better engage the depth and multiplicity of both literature and student identities, Language Arts teachers must be able to “talk through the racial dilemmas that arise in classrooms” (p. 36). She recommends cultivating greater metalinguistic awareness of race talk among educators as one possible workaround for the production of silence.

David Kirkland (2013) also discusses silence, but through the context of students rather than pre- or in-service teachers. In examining the lives and literacies of six Black adolescent males, Kirkland argues that the young men’s silences vis-à-vis race are discursively regulated by the institutions (school, law enforcement, etc.) within which they move. Largely due to the racial anxieties of White adults in positions of authority – and not the young men’s own discomfort – the participants in Kirkland’s study had silence enforced on them as “part of a much larger politics of contested voices” (p. 27). Kirkland writes that the young men’s silences may be sorted into two separate but related categories: “forced silence (being made to shut up) and unforced silence (never being heard)” (p. 35). These categories come together in Kirkland’s ethnography to form the backbone of his assertion that the silence imposed on Black male students reifies racial oppression by preemptively silencing critique of it<sup>43</sup>. Kirkland’s argument about student silence may be productively co-articulated with McIntyre’s and Thomas’s arguments regarding teachers’ silencing of race. Further, all three pieces of scholarship are better understood within the larger umbrella of Pollock’s “race talk dilemma” (2004). In

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<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Kirkland cites instances in which the young men’s silences were agential. As opposed to the forced and unforced silences imposed upon them, Kirkland writes of “the silent dialect of Black men, the choice not to speak, a language of calm and quiet against the loud breezes of inequity” (p. 35).



essence, McIntyre, Thomas, Kirkland, and other scholars (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Bolgatz, 2005; Dunn et al., 2014; Fecho, 2000; Kaplan, 2011; Larson, 2003; Lea & Sims, 2008; Michael, 2015; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Sassi & Thomas, 2008), contend that ‘colormuteness,’ whether imposed upon oneself or upon others, does less to maintain post-racial harmony in schools than it does to maintain an archaic social order of racial inequity.

As demonstrated in the scholarship I have cited, race talk in schools – including silence – is mutually constructed and negotiated by adults and students, though its parameters are enforced more so by the former<sup>44</sup>. Typically, rules about when it is deemed ‘appropriate’ to talk about race are not formally articulated, but through continual interaction within hierarchies of power and discipline, communicative norms are both learned and regulated (Thomas, under review). During my time facilitating the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC) I observed certain discursive norms about race being enacted at various times by students, both within the CCIC and in the larger school environment. In my fieldnotes from February 10, 2014, for instance, I wrote that Alma, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade Mexican-American student, prefaces any mention of race with ‘I’m not trying to be racist here.’ I later memoed that “It’s as if [Alma] has been taught that any talk of race is inherently racist, and that she is not supposed to do it, even in exposing racism that is inflicted upon herself and her family.” I wrote this in response to a one-on-one conversation I’d had with Alma, in which I asked her if she ever saw Chicana culture

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<sup>44</sup> Although teachers at CMS (and elsewhere) tend to do the majority of race talk enforcement in school, it is important to remind the reader that CMS teachers and their language use are not the focus of my study. I am interested in how the student members of the CCIC talk about race; the teachers mainly provide situational context.

represented in the literature she was assigned in school, and she told me, “Not to be racist, but the main culture I see are, like, Whites.” I replied to Alma’s critique – one that has been levied by children’s and YA literature authors and scholars for decades (e.g., Barry, 1998; Elliott, 2010; Larrick, 1965; Myers, 2014; Stetler, 2009) – by saying, “So, you said ‘Not to be racist.’ Do you think you were being racist?” Taking several moments to ruminate, Alma responded,

No, but sometimes people interpret wrong. There was this girl in my classroom that I said something – not to be, I don’t think, racist – but she thought of it as me being racist. She told the teacher, so we had a whole entire issue. So I just always try to explain something (Interview transcript, Feb. 10, 2014).

Alma’s response – which goes well beyond a simple disclaimer – illustrates ways in which she has been conditioned to talk about race and racism at school. Assuming in advance that her race talk will be misinterpreted and that the misinterpretation will lead to trouble, Alma opts to either avoid talking about race altogether or to lace her talk with exculpatory language. Both of Alma’s discursive impulses emanate from the post-racial ‘culture of niceness’ that McIntyre (1997) describes. When the fragile bubble of ‘polite’ colormuteness is perforated by race talk, a culture of finger-pointing can rapidly develop. To avoid being implicated as a racist, Alma thus deliberately plays it safe by sanitizing or silencing her race talk.

Throughout my period of data collection, I recognized that Alma’s defensive utterances were far from unique to her. On numerous occasions, Alma’s discursive moves took root in other students’ race talk, to the degree that, upon coding my data in earnest, I was able to recognize them as a recurring pattern at Cabrini Mission School (CMS).

Often, when the subject of race was brought up in conversation within the CCIC, students would preface their statements with some variation of “Not to be racist, but...” In the context of their school, this is a learned and mutually enforced behavior stemming from the post-racial tenet that those who talk about race are racists (Pollock, 2004, p. 9). For example, when I asked Isaiah, a Black 5<sup>th</sup> grader, if he had learned anything new from reading a free-voluntary book about African American history (Krashen, 2011), Isaiah responded, “Like – not to be racist – but, like, [I learned] how Black people got treated back then... No offense” (Interview transcript, Jan. 27, 2014). As with Alma, I made a point of telling Isaiah that I didn’t consider what he’d said to be racist or offensive, but it stuck with me that he’d felt a need to load his speech with overtures to what he perceived were my own inclinations toward racial silencing, likely on account of my Whiteness. As Pollock (2004) cautions, it is important not to forget the importance of “whom one was speaking *to*” when considering race talk (p. 10). My status as a White educator undoubtedly influenced the ways in which students interacted with me and in my vicinity.

Predicated on the post-race zeitgeist of colorblindness, I understand Alma’s and Isaiah’s discursive tactics to be structured by school discourses which enact Joyce King’s (1991) concept of dysconscious racism, or the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs which reify inequality by “tacitly accept[ing] dominant White norms” and overlaying them onto communities of color (p. 135). In Alma and Isaiah’s urban school (my field site), the student population during the 2013-14 school year was 99.6% non-White, while the

regular K-8 faculty was 100% White<sup>45</sup>. Not surprisingly, the discursive norms of the school are enforced largely by the White teachers and administrators who, whether due to racial discomfort or other concerns, mostly adhere to a regimen of colormuteness<sup>46</sup>.

During the three school years in which I spent time as a literacy researcher at the Cabrini Mission School (parts of 2011-2014), I continually recorded in my fieldnotes that race was not a topic students were permitted to talk about in their classrooms, nor was multicultural literature regularly assigned. Several teachers told me that there isn't time for explorations of race if they are to meet their mandated curricular objectives<sup>47</sup> (Fieldnotes, Oct. 10, 2013; Feb. 4, 2014). Others seemed uncomfortable acknowledging students' racial backgrounds and experiences, as well as their own (Fieldnotes, Jan. 27, 2014). In effect, race talk was unsanctioned talk.

On the rare occasion that I observed a classroom discussion at CMS which included race talk explicitly, it was framed around racism, with racism treated as an historical relic and as a Black/White binary. I note these as a second and third feature of

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<sup>45</sup> While these numbers are extreme, they reflect national trends. American schools, including urban schools, continue to be staffed by a predominantly White teaching force (NCES, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> It is not my intention to blame teachers or administrators for the climate of colormuteness in American schools, but rather to describe a complicated discursive phenomenon as I have observed it. Teachers and administrators operate within the same ever-evolving discourses (and externally generated standards and curricula) as all others, and can neither be saddled with culpability for the existence of those discourses nor assigned sole responsibility for contesting them. As Buehler et al. (2009) write, "Because there is not much societal consensus about race talk, it is quite fraught, and navigating that fraughtness is extremely difficult."

<sup>47</sup> My understanding of how classroom time is structured at CMS is based on dozens of hours of observation, conversations with teachers and administrators, and a read-through of the mandated curriculum. I have come to see that classroom time is overwhelmingly spent on subject area competency and test preparation. This tends to look like students copying notes directly from workbooks or from their teacher's lesson, students taking practice tests at a computer, students silently reading religious texts, and students working independently on assignments.

‘post-race talk dilemma’: the discursive situating of American racism as a thing of the past which involved only Black and White people. Students at CMS might, for instance, receive a lesson (typically during Black History Month) about Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr., with the goal being to think about how American society has moved beyond ‘our troubled past’ due to the heroism and spiritual belief of remarkable African American individuals<sup>48</sup>. Conversely, not once during my time at CMS did I hear a teacher mention Trayvon Martin, the unarmed Black teenager who in 2012 was killed in Florida, or his killer George Zimmerman, who was acquitted in 2013. (Both of these politically charged events occurred during my fieldwork period.) Neither did I hear teachers initiate discussions about structured poverty in minoritized communities, stop-and-frisk policing practices perpetrated predominantly on bodies of color, midnight raids on Latin@ and Asian immigrant households by ICE officials, or other contemporary instantiations of racism that are salient to CMS students’ lives in the Marian Anderson neighborhood of South Philadelphia. Whether teachers at CMS were unable, unwilling, or unprepared to discuss such topics, the result is that student talk about race and racism, such as the speech events of Alma and Isaiah I shared above, is often met with discomfort and accusations of racism. Knowing this, students at CMS are forced to be highly aware of their own speech, and they take efforts to sanitize or suppress their talk about race.

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<sup>48</sup> The preponderance of the ‘post-racial America’ discourse sheds light on Isaiah’s utterance “[I learned] how Black people got treated back then [i.e. in the Civil Rights era]” (Interview transcript, Jan. 27, 2014). It is unclear whether Isaiah was being genuine, sarcastic, or deferential in locating racism against African Americans ‘back then.’

A fourth feature of ‘post-race talk dilemma’ is highly correlated with the first three: a facile variety of ‘multiculturalism’ which divorces racial and cultural identity from issues of language, power, and epistemology (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 1995). In schools, this brand of acritical multiculturalism is typically manifested in the form of depoliticized “ethnic additives and cultural celebrations” (Nieto, 2010, p. 24), rather than through a commitment to particularity, inquiry, and equity (e.g., Gibson, 1984). A primary danger of this discursive phenomenon is that it is essentializing: the discourse works to fit students’ experiences of race into neat slots, and to quash complexities and contradictions. By failing to allow students to mobilize their multifaceted identities, this feature ultimately reifies racial stereotypes – ones perceived to be both positive and negative – and silences students’ firsthand knowledge of the fluid, hybrid nature of racial identity and ever-evolving patterns of racism in America (Moya, 2009, p. 45). It is a “flattening of experience” which fails to take into account the ways that people’s understandings and performances of race are porous sites of nuance, flux, and struggle (Gómez-Barris & Gray, 2010, p. 3). Following the work of Miranda Fricker (2009), the silencing or flattening of students’ personal and intergenerational experiences of race and racism may be understood through the lens of “epistemic injustice,” or instances when people are wronged specifically in their capacities as knowers. Failing to acknowledge the knowledge of systemic racism that CMS students have as part of their family legacies and daily lives – knowledge that has been theorized as a form of epistemic privilege (e.g., Campano & Ghiso, 2011; Mohanty, 1997; Moya, 2006; Ortega & Alcoff, 2009) – constitutes an enactment of epistemic injustice. As a practitioner-

researcher at CMS, I have found that such enactments are largely the result of ‘well-meaning’ White teachers and administrators who are uncomfortable talking (and hearing) about race—what Bonilla-Silva (2006) classifies as “color-blind racism.” At CMS, as in other schools, “race dialogues maintain the status of whiteness as being both natural and unchanging,” and Whiteness thus remains “the immovable mover, unmarked marker, and unspoken speaker” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 149). The prevalence of post-race discourses in American schools speaks to the need to develop, nurture, and extend educational frameworks that center the cultural and intellectual resources of all students (e.g., Campano, 2007; Kincheloe, 2008; Kinloch, 2011 & 2012; Nieto, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999), and further, to bring students’ epistemic resources into crucial discussions on race. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) describes such frameworks as those that would “empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using [their] cultural referents...as aspects of the curriculum in their own right” (p. 20).

Another flattening or silencing of experience occurs when students are discouraged from utilizing all the discursive sign-systems at their disposal – including and beyond verbal language – to position themselves (and others) in ways which may reflect or contest dominant ideologies of race, class, and power (Sousanis, 2015). Marjorie Siegel (2012) refers to the range of one’s multimodal communicative repertoire as a “semiotic toolkit” and explains that being able to select and mix modes allows communicators to “demonstrate knowledge and critical understandings far beyond that which they display when language is the sole mode of meaning-making and communication” (p. 674). By acknowledging the range of semiotic modalities through

which speakers critically engage race, there are greater opportunities for honoring the cultural and intellectual resources of students and ‘hearing’ their efforts to speak back to silence (e.g., Cowan, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006; Jocson, 2005; Pleasants, 2008; Vasudevan & DeJaynes, 2013). For this reason, some scholars have argued that multimodal transformations of school discourses are a matter of social justice (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Siegel, 2012). Relatively few scholars, however, have studied intersections among the post-race discourse and multimodal systems of meaning-making, i.e., how communicating via nonverbal modes might enable ‘speakers’ to talk back to racial silencing. In much of the scholarly literature on multimodalities, for instance, issues pertaining to race are frequently relegated to the periphery, as merely tangential to semiosis. In spite of sociolinguists writing on the racialized nature of language for decades (i.e. Baugh; Heath; Labov), there is still a disconnect when it comes to the particularities of multimodal race discourse. Certainly there are notable exceptions in the literature, such as Pippa Stein’s (2004) multimodal framework for exploring how communication is “culturally marked” by investigating the use of Black South African participants’ hand gestures for “saying the unsayable.” Ultimately, Stein determines that multimodal communication offers a fuller collage for representing both the arc of human experience and individuals’ ways of expressing racialized knowledge. Stein writes that through multimodal race ‘talk,’ speakers have the power to create and alter the meanings of their realities, and to transform them as well. Thus, students as multimodal communicators are able to transform culture and “challenge the hegemony of language” regarding race (p. 95).



Talk dilemmas run throughout our national discourses of race as deeply now as ever before. The purpose of this chapter is to explore ways in which members of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community engaged with multimodal literacies as a workaround for the suppression of race talk in their school lives. As Patricia Enciso (2003) writes, “the discourses that support [and contest] racism...within a particular community must be interpreted through the immediate relationships, histories, and activities of that group” (p. 150). It is through examinations of various ethnographic data collected within the CCIC that I build toward an argument that multimodal literacy – and specifically the popular medium of comics – provides a wider range of opportunities (and fewer impediments) for students to contest the forced and unforced silencing of race talk in their school. If race is indeed discursively constructed and continually (re)negotiated, then verbal language cannot be the lone form of discourse theorized under Pollock’s “race talk dilemma” (see Bertrand, 2009; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). Literacy researchers and practitioners must be responsive to ways in which students use a variety of communicative practices to construct, enact, and contest race, and to multimodally engage topics that frequently lead to discomfort (Stein, 2004). It is a matter of epistemic justice.

Four features of ‘**post-race talk dilemma**’ (i.e. discursive moments when speakers struggle to talk about race *specifically* due to the erroneous positioning of race in post-race terms):

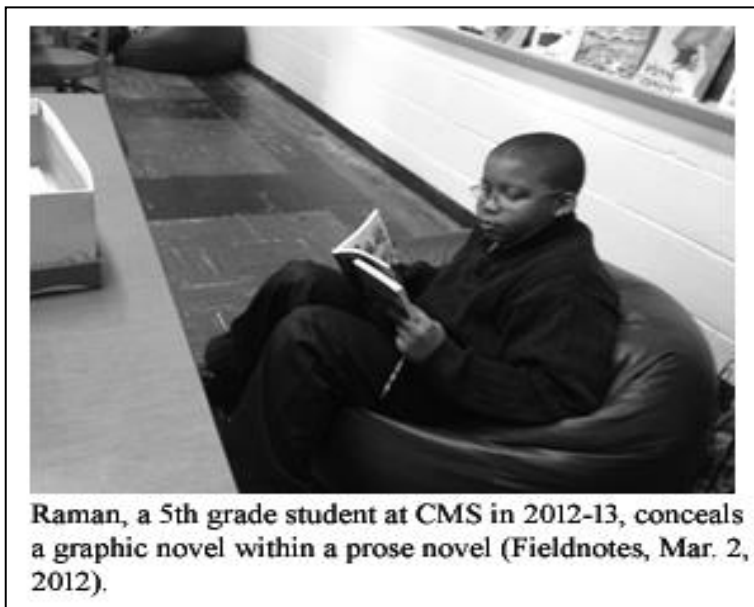
1. Appealing to niceness, politeness, or colorblindness as justifications for maintaining racial silence.
2. Maintaining that structural racism in America is a thing of the past, and that if racism exists in the present day, it is enacted at the level of the individual, not the institution.
3. Talking about the history of racism in America as though it concerns Black and White people only (and rendering other experiences of racism invisible or insignificant).
4. Imposing a form of acritical multiculturalism that ‘celebrates’ or ‘tolerates’ racial diversity, but which relies on reductive notions of identity and provides few openings for complicating those notions. Acritical multiculturalism keeps separate racial and cultural identity from issues of power and epistemology.

### **Race Talk About Comics**

*“I don't remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how liberated and subversive I felt as a result.”*

-Edward W. Said

Over the past several decades, researchers representing a range of disciplinary traditions have argued that the medium of comics is not taken as *seriously* as it should be (e.g., Beaty, 2015; J. Carter, 2008; Connors, 2010; Esquivel, 2006; Griffith, 2010; Groensteen, 2009; MacDonald, 2012). I too have engaged in this appeal for the medium's legitimacy from time to time (see Low, 2012; Low & Campano, 2013), and yet I find myself at an impasse. To be clear, I do rejoice in the critical acceptance and mainstream achievements of comics artists such as Marjane Satrapi, Kyle Baker, Alison Bechdel, and Alan Moore. Further, as a new literacies scholar, I am committed to valuing the myriad ways in which people make meaning meaningful and meaningfully, including through their literate engagements with popular media like comics. However – and this is a contradiction I cannot easily reconcile – I also believe that much of the medium's power comes from its historically subaltern position. Despite being extremely popular in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, comics, like hip hop, is still fringe in many canonical spaces, and it is from the margins that subversion arises (hooks, 2000). In school spaces, *graphica* has historically been regarded as inconsequential pulp, a type of “fugitive reading competing with [and] obstructing [official] literacy” (Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012, p. 431). In fact, the very word ‘comics’ (or ‘funnies’) implies a built-in levity which is often seen as incongruous with the no-nonsense gravity of contemporary school curriculums. And so, despite the great ubiquity of comic books, the media-and-merchandising empires comics has spawned, and



the critical identities fans enact through their literate engagements with comics (e.g., Carter, 2010; Chun, 2009; Pustz, 2000; Wright, 2001), the medium remains outré within the majority of educational establishments (see Tilley, in press; Yang,

2008b). Over the past half-century, so many children – including myself and members of the CCIC – have felt compelled to hide comic books inside of textbooks that it has become a shopworn Rockwellian cliché. Teachers who dare bring comics into their classrooms often fear they will lose credibility (Clark, 2013; Lapp et al., 2011) and hope that nobody will “question the legitimacy of their decisions” (Fenwick, 1998, p. 142). As I discussed in the Context section of my Methodology chapter, the ideological conflict around whether comic books were perceived as ‘appropriate’ reading material was certainly something I experienced during my time at Cabrini Mission School.

The notion that comics are innately equated with lightness belies the weighty social critique that is frequently borne out through the medium (Brenner, 2011; Popova, 2014; Schwarz, 2010). It may be that the exclusion of comics from scholastic spaces – whether for being unliterary or childish – actually imbues the medium with additional power to be employed in subversive ways. That is to say, perhaps it is *because* comic

books aren't 'taken seriously enough' that the medium has empowered so many writers, readers, and artists to engage in the types of critical discursive activity that may not be sanctioned in other forms<sup>49</sup>. As Homi Bhabha (1994) writes, margins "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (p. 2), i.e. for engaging in identity work. This puts comics in a similar camp as slam poetry, graffiti, and hip hop: marginalized (albeit popular) literacy practices that are not often granted canonical purchase and which are subsequently employed to critique the power structures that undervalue them (e.g., Dimitriadis, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Gustavson, 2007; Hill, 2009; Kirkland & Hull, 2010; Morrell, 2002). In examining the subversive power of hip hop, for example, Kirkland (2013) describes the 'cypha' (or circle of people engaging in lyrical improvisation) as "a ceremonial ring for contesting silence" (p. 23). I am interested in ways that graphica may serve a similar function for the students who employ the medium in subversive ways, specifically in terms of talking about race.

I posit that it is the dual *meaningfulness* of both the structural properties of a multimodal medium and the pop ethos of a global fan culture (as I have described as "tropes" in Chapter 1) that makes comics particularly salient for engaging in 'unsanctioned' racial discourse (e.g., King, 2014a; Popova, 2014). As Hatfield & Svonkin (2013) write, the comics medium "encourages the development of critical and political literacy, serving a countercultural function that rebuffs adult efforts to shape children's memories, identities, and tastes" (p. 434). As I discussed in the introduction to

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<sup>49</sup> In much of the scholarly literature, it is the books and professional comics artists that are positioned as critical, not the readers. Still, there are several studies which explore how comics encourage readers' critical faculties and which inform my thinking on the matter (e.g., Chun, 2009; Dyson, 1997).

this chapter, race talk norms are typically enforced in schools by teachers and administrators more so than by students, and those norms can serve to silence students' memories and identities. I will thus discuss ways in which my data speak to how comics are operationalized by students to contest the silencing of race in their school.

### **“He Can Turn Invisible”: Inquiries into Race in/and Comics**

*“Both comics and race are, in a sense, popular culture: comics in its history as a commercially mass produced art form, and race in its inextricable connection to social, political, and economic issues that affect the totality of the populace.”*

-Damian Duffy

In spite of documenting numerous instances of race talk suppression during the years I spent as a literacy researcher at Cabrini Mission School, I often found that when the members of the CCIC were engaged in literate practices with and through graphics, they were more liable to talk, write, and create art that directly invoked race and racism. The comics medium, coupled with the afterschool inquiry environment of the CCIC, served as a genuine entryway to conversations about race that I did not observe in the school at large. In fact, during the first sessions of the CCIC in early 2012, several of the group's original members (all 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys at that time) began sharing their unsolicited observations of comics culture with regard to race. Jamir, a self-described “comics junkie” who spent time every day reading, researching, and discussing comic books with his friends, told me that theirs was a fringe interest for people of color. Other members of the CCIC – Raman and Larry – substantiated Jamir's claim, telling me that they believed themselves to be the only Black people in Philadelphia who created and read comic books. I was stunned, and I freely registered my disbelief. From my fieldnotes:

I responded by disagreeing with them, and rattled off the names of several Black comics artists who call Philly home – Jamar Nicholas and Mark A. Robinson – and then described the East Coast Black Age of Comics Convention (ECBACC), an event held annually in West Philadelphia for fans, creators, and merchants of comics. I further added that when I visit one of Philly’s comic book stores, I see many types of people buying and selling comics, not just White men like myself (Fieldnotes, Mar. 9, 2012).

My words did little to convince the boys to alter their opinions, and upon reflection, it is not difficult to understand why. In the boys’ experiences, comics fandom had not been a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Tilley, in press) into which they felt welcomed and represented. There are no comic book stores within easy walking distance of St. Cabrini, and none of the children had at that point been taken to one by a family member. The boys’ understandings of comics culture came primarily from film and television, two media in which comics enthusiasts are predominantly portrayed as White men (as seen in TV shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Comic Book Men*) and where comic book characters tend to look like the (mostly) White men who create them.

This story reflects a critical incident – or rather, a series of critical incidents – regarding my practice in the CCIC (Griffin, 2003). Through my continued interactions with the community’s original members, and by maintaining an inquiry stance toward my teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), I came to realize that the phenomenon of race vis-à-vis comics is far more complicated than my initial response or the several published histories of racial representations in the medium reveal (see, for example, Gateward & Jennings, in press; Howard & Jackson II, 2013; Maslon & Kantor, 2013; Nama, 2011; Strömberg, 2003/2012). It is not so much important whether the boys’ impressions of comics culture in Philadelphia, media historians’ viewpoints, or my own

impressions were more correct or less correct, but that race in comics was a living inquiry topic that should transcend Cartesian binary thinking. Race in comics was a topic to collaboratively explore, deconstruct, argue over, and reconstruct. Beyond that, race was something that was being *talked* about at the Cabrini Parish School, and comic books – the good, the bad, and the ugly – provided openings for conversations to happen that did not ordinarily happen in that space. How was I, as practitioner-researcher, to seize upon and nurture the students’ critical literacies – and specifically their critical race talk – without superimposing my own critical impulses?<sup>50</sup>

During the initial phase of my pilot study in Spring 2012, as I took on the role of practitioner-researcher in the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community, my research question began as fairly broad: “How do students in an urban school engage with multimodality – both as readers and as designers of multimodal texts?” The purpose of working within a practitioner research paradigm was to learn from the epistemic locations of CCIC members how they came to form and perform identities in relation to their literate transactions (Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon, 2012). By the fall of 2013, informed by 1.5 years of field experiences, I began refining my research questions to focus on issues of race and racial identity in ways I had not initially considered. Through my continual interaction with members of the CCIC, I developed research questions for my dissertation study to specifically examine how race was performed,

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<sup>50</sup> The formation of a Comics Club as Inquiry Community owes much to Campano’s (2007) articulation of the “second classroom” as a space that exists beyond immediate classroom walls and which deliberately honors students’ “interests, desires, forms of cultural expression, and...stories” in its everyday ways of being (p. 40).

talked about, and represented in the space of the CCIC. I wanted to understand what comics – and the particular ways students engage with the medium – might reveal about the “conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown” regarding race in a contemporary American school (Chute, 2008, p. 456-457). While there is a growing body of scholarship that explores how race is represented by professional cartoonists in mainstream and alternative comic books (e.g., Aldama, 2009; Duffy & Jennings, 2010; Foster III, 2010; Gateward & Jennings, in press; Howard & Jackson II, 2013; Illidge, 2014; Nama, 2011), few scholars have attended to the roles that comics may play in how readers of *graphica* construct and contest race. This tension is how Pollock’s concept of “race talk dilemma” became salient to me as a research analytic. As I began coding transcript data from the CCIC, I noted a variety of ways in which students used comics to talk (or avoid talking) about race.

My dissertation data from the 2013-2014 school year highlight two primary ways in which members of the CCIC mobilized the medium of comics to engage in race talk. Both of these categories invoke multimodal theories of literacy, although in somewhat different forms. The first approach CCIC members took toward race talking through comics was as multimodal readers and critics. In this capacity, students held critical discussions about the content of the comics texts they were reading, and commented on visual and textual representations (including mis- and underrepresentations) of race and racism therein. These conversations occasionally extended into discussions of relevant social phenomena, such as violence and poverty, and even into critical redesign. The second major way CCIC members used comics in the service of race talk was as



multimodal authors, by creating their own visuo-textual representations of race and racism as a reproduction of or corrective for the mis- and underrepresentation of these phenomena in mainstream literature, including comic books. In the following sections of this chapter, I will explore the first of these critical multimodal impulses by analyzing several “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984) of student talk, in which the circumstances of my data “serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships sufficiently apparent” (p. 239). I will examine the CCIC members’ second major critical multimodal impulse – the creation of multimodal counter-texts – in depth in chapter four.

### *Part 2: Examination of Data*

#### **“I’ve Never Seen a Black Superhero”: Students Talking Race through the Multimodal Texts they Read**

*“There’s already a Spider-Man.... I’m not that guy. Let him do that. I’m not that guy.”*  
-Miles Morales, the Ultimate Spider-Man

Toward the beginning of my pilot study, Marvel Comics, one of the largest graphica publishers in the world, made national headlines by killing off the iconic (White) Peter Parker character and replacing him with Miles Morales, an 11-year-old biracial (Black and Latino) character from Brooklyn. Since the launch of *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* in 2011, Miles has proven especially popular with readers of color who have long been underrepresented in mainstream superhero comics. As Maslon and Kantor (2013) write, the “world of comic books was perhaps the slowest genre [sic] to recognize Blacks in any meaningful form” (p. 169), and this is confirmed by other comics historians (e.g., Brown, 2001; Foster III, 2005 & 2010; Illidge, 2014; Nama, 2011; Strömberg, 2003/2012). It is thus not particularly surprising that Miles functions as

something of a cypher for young Black masculinity within the Marvel Universe, or that many young readers closely identify with him (Cavna, 2011; Low, under revision; McWilliams, 2013). Indeed, when I asked the original members of the CCIC which actor they imagined playing Miles in a hypothetical movie adaptation, several of the boys enthusiastically responded, “Me!” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 6, 2012). One Vietnamese-American student described Miles’s appeal thusly: “He’s like me... a genius... the smart one... He’s a new legacy!” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 18, 2013). Due to the considerable popularity of comic books featuring Miles, and the claims the character makes on many young readers’ identities, the series often became a site of critical conversations about race in the CCIC.

In March 2014, Kyrie, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade Black student and longtime member of the CCIC approached some of his peers as they sat in the CMS library reading comics and engaging in banter. Glancing at his friend Raman’s choice of reading material, Kyrie noticed Miles Morales for the first time, and blurted out, “Wait! Spider-Man’s not Black!” Very quickly, all conversations at the table stopped and a new one began. I include a section of the conversation transcript here:

Kyrie: Wait! Spider-Man's not Black!

Raman: He is.

Alexi: That's the Ultimate Spider-Man!

Kyrie: No, the Amazing Spider-Man was White.

Alexi: The Amazing Spider-Man died!

Kyrie: Yeah? But there can't be another Spider-Man 'cause he ain't turned Black!

Alma: Read the story, will you?!

Raman: He died and then this kid, Miles Morales, he actually got bit by the spider, which gave him, like...it gave him the same powers as...

Kyrie: Abilities, you mean?

Raman: Yes. The same abilities as the original Spider-Man, but he also gained more abilities...

Alexi: He can turn invisible.

Raman: ...Like invisibility and venom shot.

Kyrie: So is that what the new Spider-Man is now? The Black guy? Honestly, I've never seen a Black superhero (Transcripts, Mar. 10, 2014).

Although it surprises me that Kyrie was able to go three years as a CCIC member without being exposed by his peers to Miles Morales, his disbelief that a Black Spider-Man could even *exist* is nevertheless palpable and powerful. When Kyrie claims that he has “never seen a Black superhero,” he means it. And although it isn't technically accurate to say that there are *no* recognizable characters of color in mainstream comics, there is a widely acknowledged dearth of representation in the industry (Sava et al., 2014). That a twelve-year-old fan of comics could say that he honestly knows of no Black superheroes only substantiates the problem<sup>51</sup>. Throughout the nearly hundred-year history of comics as a popular medium, Maslon and Kantor (2013) write that “When comic books deigned to portray Black characters at all, they were usually gullible, inarticulate sidekicks, caricatured physically as well as culturally” (p. 169). Nearly all of the iconic characters in both Marvel's and DC's stables – and which headline billion-dollar movie franchises and adorn countless pieces of branded merchandise – are White and male. Certainly there are exceptions, and Kyrie's schoolmates began to name them. Tyler, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade biracial student (Black and Filipino-American) brought several Black characters to Kyrie's attention, naming Falcon (a longtime sidekick of Captain America), “Nick Fury, the bald

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<sup>51</sup> Olivia Cole (2013) writes that “White men are Superman ... Our imagination and subconscious are so saturated with white supremacist notions of goodness, beauty, and heroism, that when confronted head-on with an image of a Black man who is brilliant and kind and normal and who saves the day, we transform into robotic versions of ourselves: *Does... not... compute. Hero... must be... White.*”

one” (a Black version of a White character who exists in a parallel reality), and Storm (a Kenyan ‘weather goddess’ and member of the X-Men). Listening to their discussion, I recalled my critical moment regarding the *accuracy* vs. the *tenor* of students’ arguments pertaining to race and comics culture. As I have recollected, I determined then that perception is more potent than accuracy when it comes to inspiring critical inquiry. Thus, instead of contributing to Tyler’s list of Black comic book characters<sup>52</sup>, I responded to Kyrie’s implicit critique of the nearly all-White world of comics by asking, “Are there *enough* strong superhero characters that aren't White? I think you raised the point that there aren't enough, Tyler and Kyrie. Why do you think that’s important?”

Over the next several weeks, Tyler began conducting his own mini-research project on Black superhero characters in mainstream comics<sup>53</sup>. He came into the CCIC’s library space as soon as the final school bell rang, selected his reference materials – either a hardbound *Marvel Encyclopedia* or the Wikipedia page for “Portrayal of Black people in comics” – and got to work. For a student who had once been described to me by one of his teachers as “unengaged,” Tyler demonstrated deep engagement when crafting his own invitation for critical multimodal literacy. As I recorded in my fieldnotes:

Tyler spent almost the entire session today looking up African American superheroes on his iPhone. This was a holdover from last Monday’s conversation around Miles Morales. Tyler explained to me (when I asked him why he’s motivated to learn about this) that he wanted to be able to add to the conversation if it comes up again. He began by looking up Black Panther, and saying that he’s like Batman, except he’s a king of an African country instead of a billionaire. He later found a wiki page listing Black superheroes and said he was familiar with

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<sup>52</sup> Indeed, when talking about racial diversity in comic books, the conversation often takes a checklist approach. See, for example, Stan Lee’s televised conversation with Larry King (L. King, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Tyler’s project foretold the first annual #BlackComicsMonth in February 2015 (Rosberg, 2015).

some but not all of them. I asked how he knows most of the characters and he said they're on TV shows and cartoons (he named Aquaboy, Luke Cage, White Tiger, Black Lightning, Falcon, Iron Patriot, and others). I asked if Tyler thought that African American (he prefers this label to Black) superheroes seem like they all act alike or if there's variety and he said there's a variety. He doesn't think most of the portrayals of superheroes are racist, although he critiqued *X-Men First Class* as a racist movie, since a Black hero (Darwin) is the first character to die and then the only other Black hero (Angel, portrayed by the Zoe Kravitz) becomes a villain by the end of the film. Tyler said that the sequel, which comes out this summer, is going to begin without any Black heroes on the X-Men at all (Fieldnotes, Mar. 17, 2014).

Over the next several weeks, Tyler and I had several conversations in which he shared his findings. Inspired by his self-directed organic critical inquiry (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013), I made it a priority as practitioner-researcher to continue asking him and other members of the CCIC how they perceived of racial representations in the comic books and related media they were reading. Ironically, the history of racial omissions and silencing in comics inspired the members of the CCIC to be neither omitted nor silenced on the subject of race. Rather than simply bemoaning the history of mis- and underrepresentation of non-White characters in comics, the medium's history became a powerful invitation for critical race-talking in a larger school space that rarely made room for it.

### **“This Book is Racist!”**

Students talked critically about graphica they considered to be racist for any number of reasons. Examples of these conversations range from Raman recalling a blatantly racist comic book which featured “Batman and Robin against five hundred Black men...who had guns, knives and steel pipes to just beat up Batman and Robin... It

was pretty ridiculous” (Interview transcript, May 30, 2014), to students struggling with whether a book containing racist content was necessarily racist itself or if it might be providing antiracist commentary. As an example of the latter, in April 2013, while browsing books, Isaiah shouted out, “This is racist!” He was referring to the comics biography *Satchel Paige: Striking out Jim Crow* (Sturm & Tommaso, 2007), and specifically to a page depicting a Black body hanging from a tree in 1942 Alabama (p. 37). The illustrated page, and Isaiah’s strong reaction to it, demonstrates how images relay narrative content with a visceral power that is difficult to match using words alone (Barry, 1997; Chute, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). As the cartoonist Joe Sacco (2012) writes, “For good or for ill, the comics medium is *adamant*” (p. xiv). Disturbed by the image, Isaiah told me that “God didn’t make us all the same...but He didn’t want everybody... He didn’t want Blacks to be treated differently from White people.” Isaiah’s classmate Tyler joined him at the bookshelf and, flipping through the pages together, he agreed that the book was racist. I asked the boys to explain their thinking and Tyler gestured to a page which had the ‘n-word’ written in bold font (p. 74). I asked Tyler if he thought the book was racist or if perhaps it could be *about* racism. Tyler proffered that he thought the moral of the book might be that “racism is bad,” and that he’d like to read it to find out, and also to learn who Jim Crow is<sup>54</sup>. For his part, Isaiah seemed less convinced that the book’s authors were condemning and not re-inscribing racism

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<sup>54</sup> Both Isaiah and Tyler told me they thought Jim Crow was the name of the hitter being pitched to on the book’s cover (taking the “striking out” title of the book quite literally). I asked them if they had learned about Jim Crow laws in school and they told me no, but Isaiah said he had “heard of it” from family members. Having observed many class sessions at CMS, I am not surprised to learn that the legacy of Jim Crow is not a topic that is covered in the curriculum.

(Fieldnotes, April 12, 2013). Ultimately, Isaiah decided to check the book out, and later, so did Tyler. When he encountered the book again six months later, Isaiah recalled that “I liked this book last year... It was sad because of racist people.” He further expressed that “It’s important for kids to read books about what racism is like” (Transcripts, Oct. 28, 2013). Isaiah’s statement is an example of meta-level awareness of racial erasure, and echoes various sentiments of critics many years his senior (e.g., Myers, 2014; Thomas & Ainsworth, in press; Xie, 2000).

In January 2014, Nellie, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade Vietnamese-American student, had a similar reaction to Isaiah and Tyler while reading the award-winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2008a). Yang’s multi-perspectival graphic novel is ostensibly about Jin Wang, a Chinese-American teenager seeking approval from his White peers. The book, which provides multiple interweaving viewpoints, deeply engages issues of racial identity and stereotyping in contemporary America (Hammond, 2012; Schieble, 2014). In an interview, Yang said that “Most of us have had some sort of experience when we’ve been some sort of minority for whatever reasons. It’s difficult to grow up now in a mono-ethnic culture. People are now realizing that identity is something you have to actively construct when you get older” (King, 2014b). Indeed, racial identity construction through visuo-textual interweaving is the major objective of Yang’s book. After finishing the graphic novel, Nellie told me that “It’s good, but some parts are, like, racist.” As with Isaiah, I asked Nellie what she meant by this, and whether she thought the author was *being* racist or if he depicted racism in order to critique it. Nellie told me that:

When I started reading *American Born Chinese*, I just wanted to read it because everybody says it’s such a good book. Until a bully says, “ching chong, ching

chong.” Which is kind of racist, to me... I think they just want to be racist because they might think that it’s funny to be racist because they might think that, ‘Oh, it’s not me. It’s just you.’ Just because they’re different, it doesn’t mean that they can’t have friends that are a different race (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).

Nellie accepts Yang’s multimodal invitation to engage in a discussion of identity, pulling on the text’s visuo-textual depictions of stereotyping to invoke her own ethnic identity (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2009, p. 5). She connects the text’s depictions of racism<sup>55</sup> to her own life, referencing times in which she and family members have felt othered and injured on the basis of racial stereotypes. In so doing, Nellie shows how readers give comics ‘life’ by “filling them up with ourselves...through an affective identification that allows for a sense of shared experience” (Barry, 1997, p. 111). Nellie also embodies Moya’s (2009) and Ortega & Alcott’s (2009) stances that positioning one’s identity as an epistemic resource, and mobilizing the knowledge-generating potential of that identity, ultimately does more to contest ethnic stereotypes than if one minimizes or silences one’s experiences (p. 45). Like one of the interwoven stories in *American Born Chinese*, Nellie closes with a message of coexistence, acceptance, and friendship.

Sitting next to her, Nellie’s best friend Desiree – a 5<sup>th</sup> grade African-American girl and Raman’s younger sister – doesn’t entirely buy Nellie’s interpretation of the graphic novel. Desiree offers this counterview:

Nellie: ...Just because they’re different, it doesn’t mean that they can’t have friends that are a different race.

Desiree: But Nellie, sometimes people do that because they try to be funny.

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<sup>55</sup> My own interpretation of Yang’s graphic novel is that it is highly critical of racist discourses. This dissertation study, however, is not about how multimodal texts are critical, but how the students that engage with them enact critical literacy.



Nellie: Yeah, they do.

Desiree: Most likely in a comic book, they were trying to be funny.

Desiree's response to Nellie's interpretation of *American Born Chinese* is telling for several reasons. Not only does Desiree contest Nellie's understanding of the text's portrayal of racism – a type of literary discussion I had not previously observed at CMS – she also invokes the interplay of levity and gravity that is at the heart of comics argumentation (e.g., Simonetti, 2012). As I have discussed, it is the assumption that comics unavoidably imbue a comical sensibility which affords the medium such a capacity for subversion. In taking this approach, Desiree shows an understanding of the medium's dialectic tensions. While Nellie did admit that perhaps “they just want to be racist because they might think that it's funny to be racist,” Desiree takes her understanding a step further, relocating humor from the characters or the author to the medium itself.

If it seems that I am overselling Desiree's response, I do so with support from other data in which she similarly looks toward humor to invoke her understandings of race in/and comics, using as her vehicle the complexity of her own cultural legacy. When Desiree contends that “Most likely in a comic book, they were trying to be funny,” she is not saying that racist jokes are justifiable simply because they may be humorous (a trope discussed by Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 10). Rather, Desiree expresses an understanding of racialized humor related to Glenda Carpio's (2008) contention that “humor exposes how racial conflict, and the obsessive ways that it colonizes American minds, can divest *everyone*, albeit at different registers, of a sense of reality” (p. 7). During her time in the CCIC, Desiree brought this developing understanding of race and humor to bear on

*American Born Chinese* as well as the long-running comics series *The Boondocks*, a component of her family literacy life (Gadsen, 1992; Simon & Campano et al., 2012).

*The Boondocks* began as a syndicated comic strip in 1999, and was published daily until 2006, when Aaron McGruder ‘retired’ to focus his attention on a TV adaptation. In its print format, *The Boondocks* – one of the rare newspaper strips created by a Black cartoonist and featuring Black characters – was committed to satirizing race relations and American politics (Gateward & Jennings, in press; Howard, 2013). My impression is that McGruder’s oeuvre is largely a manifestation of Langston Hughes’s infamous precept that “humor is laughing at what you haven’t got when you ought to have it.”

Although I have long been a fan of comic books, I knew little about McGruder’s print work until Desiree asked me to order a *Boondocks* treasury for the library’s collection. She told me that she watches the TV show with her mother and brother, and that they often discuss it at home. When I asked Desiree what the show means to her family, and whether it is something serious or something funny, she responded, “Funny, but it’s like... it’s both. It’s serious and funny.”<sup>56</sup> She went on to tell me about several of the characters: “Huey makes it serious, but everybody else... Riley, he doesn’t care. He’s ghetto because he thought his name was an N-word until he was three years old.”<sup>57</sup>

Desiree consumes the show with a critical sensibility. When the treasury, entitled *A Right*

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<sup>56</sup> As Aaron McGruder, the show’s creator, explains, “Our show is not *Family Guy*... The element of race changes everything.”

<sup>57</sup> I later asked Desiree to clarify what she meant by ‘ghetto’ and she explained that ‘ghetto’ means not thinking before one acts. This definition was entirely new to me.

*to be Hostile* (2003), arrived, Desiree immediately borrowed the book, and in the following weeks, began telling me about it.

David: What do you think about *A Right to be Hostile*?

Desiree: That was a very good comic book. Like Huey, he's a good character. He talks about Civil Rights and, like, how people been treating African Americans. He's more like a Civil Rights person. And Grandpa, he's funny. Like whatever Huey says, he just puts him down, like he's not even trying to listen to him, but he's funny.

David: Are there any differences between the show and the book?

Desiree: The comic book is actually better because now the show is kind of being racist. A guy named Uncle Ruckus, now he owns the Freemans. My mom and me and my brother think they used to be funny, but now they're not. Now they're just not.

David: So you think the show has gotten worse?

Desiree: Yeah, but the comic book, Aaron McGruder still writes them, so they were actually funny. And Huey was like one of the main characters. I think when he was like a main character, he talked about Civil Rights. That was actually better than the TV show (Transcript, Apr. 7, 2014).

It is significant that the two things Desiree finds most salient about the comic strip are its humor and its commitment to telling Civil Rights stories. As opposed to the television series, which, according to Desiree, has lost sight of its political agenda, McGruder's print version maintains its focus and, in Desiree's opinion, its quality. The fact that *The Boondocks* is consumable in two different media formats (animation and comics) provides Desiree an opportunity for side-by-side comparison, which she mobilizes for critique. Simply put, Desiree believes the comic strip is "better than the TV show," because the latter, once it strayed from its purpose, became racist and thus, no longer funny. In print, *The Boondocks* remains both purposeful and comic.

### “Isn’t There Another Way Besides Violence to Talk Over It?”

There were cases when members of the CCIC talked about race in the comics they read *not* to discuss textual depictions of race and racism, necessarily, but to open up spaces for critical conversations about social phenomena that are often associated with race, such as violence and poverty. After speaking with three 5<sup>th</sup> grade African-American girls – Bettina, Cherice, and Lena – I began to recognize, through inductive coding and analysis, that their conversational trajectory represented a shifting, co-constructed inquiry into several topics which concerned them greatly. Comics serves as a mechanism that the girls use as a springboard to realize their desired discursive ends. Following this section of transcript, I analyze how their conversation, at the level of the conversational turn (Aukerman et al, 2008; Foley, 1997) invokes post-race discourses (both enacting and contesting them) and collectively works toward pursuing unsanctioned inquiries.

- 1 David: In the comics and graphic novels you read, do you feel that there are enough
- 2 characters who aren’t White? Like Asian American and African American and
- 3 Latina and Middle Eastern characters?
- 4 Cherice: What do you mean by that?
- 5 Bettina: Different cultures.
- 6 Lena: Is there too *many*?
- 7 David: One big critique of comic books is that there are so many White characters
- 8 and so few characters who aren’t White. Is that something that you feel?
- 9 Bettina: No, I don’t actually think that. Because some people are negative, you
- 10 know. They are racist, you know. Against us, against you. And I think that,
- 11 because... I don’t know. I wouldn’t think that because everyone--
- 12 Cherice: Anyone is like their own color and their own person.
- 13 Bettina: Yeah.
- 14 Cherice: So if you--
- 15 Bettina: You could be green.
- 16 Cherice: Exactly. You can be purple, green, whatever.
- 17 Bettina: I wouldn’t change, you know, like anything, though.
- 18 Cherice: Yeah, I wouldn’t change... Yeah, I would say no to that, because that is just
- 19 insane, right? And it does seem kind of racist. But I mean, that’s just like not cool
- 20 at all, so.

21 Bettina: I wouldn't get it actually.  
22 Cherice: Yeah, I wouldn't get it, either. Because people is their own race. That's how  
23 they were born and raised, so you can't give them a hard time.  
24 Lena: I have a question for you two. What if like it was a book full of White people,  
25 and there was only one Black person in there? How would you all feel?  
26 Cherice: I would feel like... I wouldn't probably feel like that's racist, but I mean, I  
27 would kind of feel a little overwhelmed with the White people, even though, like  
28 – I'm not being racist or nothing – but you have to kind of mix a little bit  
29 together. I mean, that's what makes kind of like the story to be a kind of  
30 interesting, so yeah.  
31 Bettina: Well, like, sometimes I think, you know, we should all be united because  
32 without God, actually, we wouldn't be here. And you know, He could take us at  
33 any moment. So it's like, you all have to be, you know, nice and good to each  
34 other if you want to make it up to those gates, actually. So you know, it's one  
35 detriment moment, you can be mean, but I would never, ever be racist to  
36 anybody.  
37 Cherice: Me either.  
38 Bettina: You know, I might joke around, but I would never use like the term, you  
39 know, White, or that's why you're racist, actually.  
40 David: So, do you think that there should be more comic books that are made that  
41 have African American characters as the main characters?  
42 Bettina: I would say yeah to that. Maybe. But there are some people out there that  
43 are really just, you know, un-couraging. They don't like us, actually.  
44 Cherice: I would say the same thing she basically said, but like, I don't know how to  
45 really put it, but I mean, okay. Black people and White people, they're different  
46 races. But they can both unite together to make like the whole world basically  
47 great or awesome.  
48 Bettina: Peace. You know.  
49 Cherice: Seriously, because like if you – if you guys actually did that, that would be  
50 more nicer and cooler and awesome. I mean, everything would be so great.  
51 Lena: That's what we going for, like, you know, the melting – the melting pot? ...  
52 Where there's so many different cultures and races.  
53 Cherice: Yeah, I think I've heard of that before, but I mean, like, I just don't get how  
54 racism began. That doesn't make any sense to me. I don't know. Even though  
55 people told me like a lot of stories about it, I still don't get it.  
56 Bettina: Wait. A question. The violence that's happening in the world, you know. It's  
57 not safe anywhere, you know? It's not safe. So how would you, you know, protest  
58 against that? You know, not even like, you know, walking down the street saying  
59 “stop the violence.” ‘Cause I think that's going to make it worse. That's what I  
60 think when I watch the news, and they're walking down the street. “Stop the  
61 violence.” I think it helps sometimes, but I think it makes it worse because you  
62 know, you're screaming down the street. “Stop the violence!”  
63 Lena: [laughs]  
64 Bettina: It doesn't actually add up to me, you know. This -- you know, this person,

65       you know -- you shot my son, you shot my daughter. You know, you killed  
66       people. Maybe we can change your ways. I think some people can really change,  
67       but people, they're their own selves, and that's how I would occur to people. You  
68       know, be yourself. If this is what you want to be, that's how you want to be. Like,  
69       you want to grow up like this?  
70       Lena: Isn't there another way besides violence, like to talk over it?  
71       Bettina: I don't think people use that term, to talk. Face-to-face. I don't think--  
72       Cherice: --I don't think they would, either.  
73       Bettina: It's just because--  
74       Cherice: Because it would be just a big, whole entire fight.  
75       Bettina: It could turn into a fight. And then--  
76       Cherice: It'd be serious.  
77       Bettina: That's how people get shot, and then they, you know, I don't actually  
78       understand the violence. You know.  
79       Lena: So do you feel that it always turns from talking to screaming and then  
80       fighting?  
81       Bettina: More fighting. Yeah, I think more fighting, and then, you know, one day,  
82       out of the blue sky, some guy, somebody winds up dead or something, you know?  
83       Like where did this just come from? I just saw you two days ago. Happy and  
84       jolly, like you know? (Interview transcript, Jan. 27, 2014)

Throughout the section of transcript, Bettina, Cherice, and Lena cycle through several of the “eight conversations about race and ethnicity” which Moya and Markus (2010) identify as major interpretive frameworks through which people discursively construct race. Early in the transcript (lines 9-23), Bettina and Cherice maintain that they do not recognize a significant problem of racial representation in comic books. Both girls express this opinion in ways that align with my emerging definition of ‘post-race talk dilemma.’ First is the notion that to actively discuss race is an inherently racist activity (Bouie, 2014; Pollock, 2004). This defensive impulse is observable several times in the first third of the transcript, such as when Bettina, in line 9, says that one reason people might choose to focus on the representation of race is because they are being “negative”

or “racist.” In order to signal themselves as non-racists, Bettina and Cherice indicate that they wouldn’t change anything about racial diversity in comics, and that comics creators shouldn’t be criticized for creating rosters full of White characters, because that’s how the creators were born and raised (line 23)<sup>58</sup>. I believe that Bettina and Cherice were genuinely surprised that I was asking them to discuss race, and so they reacted as they would for their other White teachers – by claiming not to notice race and maintaining a ‘politely’ acritical post-racial silence.

In re-voicing a brand of acritical multiculturalism that they have been party to at CMS, Bettina takes the position that race is roughly the same thing as skin color, and therefore, is only skin deep. Rather than carrying historical or cultural weight into the present, race doesn’t matter because we’re all the same. We may look different, but “we can easily transcend the superficial differences between us” (Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 12). Cherice declares that “Anyone is their own color and their own person... You can be purple, green, whatever.” In expressing this opinion, Cherice unknowingly invokes one of the most infamous comic books of the industry’s ‘Silver Age,’ 1970’s *Green Lantern* #76. In the issue, the titular White character is confronted by a nameless Black man who tells him:

I been readin’ about you... How you work for the blue skins... and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins... And you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there’s skins you never bothered with! The Black skins!

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<sup>58</sup> This is a common defense of White comics creators (and White media creators in general) who profess to “write what they know” rather than writing characters outside of their own experiences (Riesman, 2014; Wheeler, 2014). Tracing this phenomenon back, “Editors often hire [writers and artists] they know or people just like them, and since many comics editors are straight White men, that means they hire straight White men” (Asselin, quoted in Sava et al., 2014).

I want to know... How come?! Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern! (reprinted in Cross, 2013)<sup>59</sup>.

In the span of a single illustrated page, Green Lantern's famous mantra – “In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight” – is ridiculed for its shallow quixotism, and the superhero himself is taken to task for failing to uphold his own credo. *Green Lantern* #70 is often credited for bringing ‘social relevance’ to comics. While I will not delve into the relative merits of this argument, I do find the juxtaposition of *Green Lantern*'s “purple skins” evocative next to Cherice's similar language. Cherice uses “purple skins” not to critique a medium which has historically omitted racial diversity and responsibility in favor of White superheroes and a wide spectrum of colorful space aliens, but to say, essentially, that “racial and ethnic differences are merely superficial... People are just people” (Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 7). Despite naming colors, Cherice's is very much an appeal to colorblindness. Whereas *Green Lantern* #76 critiques the history of mainstream comics (i.e. critiques itself) by showing how injustices perpetrated on Black communities are invisible to White superheroes, Bettina and Cherice seem to say that race – at least in terms of comic book characters – should not make much of a narrative difference. “Because that is just insane, right?”

In line 24, Lena, who had been quiet up to this point, enters the conversation with a question for her friends: “What if it was a book full of White people, and there was only

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<sup>59</sup> This exchange is prompted by Green Lantern (a White character) rescuing from harm's way a White slumlord in the process of evicting the Black residents of his buildings in order to turn them into parking lots. (*Green Lantern* #76 was written and illustrated by Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams, and published by DC Comics.)



one Black person in there? How would you all feel?" This is the conversation's first turning point, a critical incident that marks Bettina and Cherice shifting in the positions they had been taking. Whereas earlier, both girls had said that they did not see racial underrepresentation as much of a problem, when Lena asks them again, Cherice admits that she can find the overabundance of White characters to be "overwhelming." Still, she and Bettina are careful not to say anything that could be construed (by me, a White adult) as racist. Echoing Alma's and Isaiah's utterances in the introduction to this chapter, Cherice inserts her own exculpatory language – "I'm not being racist or nothing" – into her statements (line 28). Bettina expresses a message of universal beneficence – everyone must be "nice and good to each other" – and closes by saying that she avoids using the word 'White' altogether for fear of being cast as a racist (line 38). This impulse strongly evokes Moya and Markus's (2010) contention that "because many people believe that we are now 'post-race,' calling someone a racist involves a serious assault on his or her character" (p. 9). It is an assault that Bettina would rather not experience.

When I ask again, in line 40, if the girls would like to see more African American characters in comic books, the conversation shifts once more. Feeling supported by her friends, Bettina replies, "I would say yeah to that," a contradiction from her earlier position. I mark this as a second turning point in the conversation, as we enter a segment in which there is less discursive discomfort and more openness, as gauged by a reduction in semantic hedges (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). By line 56, Bettina seems to have tired of the melting pot conversation. Encouraged by Cherice's questions about the origins of racism, Bettina introduces the new topic of violence, which continues until the end of the

transcript section. Despite not naming Trayvon Martin directly (or even using explicit race labels), Bettina works through her legitimate fears concerning present-day violence committed against Black people, while searching for a productive response. “It’s not safe anywhere, you know? It’s not safe. So how would you, you know, protest against that?” As I explained in this chapter’s introduction, contemporary racism is a conversation topic that has been actively discouraged at CMS. Thus, students’ knowledge and questions pertaining to racial injustice in the Marian Anderson community and elsewhere are discursively silenced within their formal site of learning. The afterschool space of the CCIC, on the other hand, was designed to cultivate an ethos of collaborative inquiry, allowing members to mobilize comics to talk about issues which concern them greatly (e.g., Wissman, 2011). In the case of this section of transcript, the popular medium of comics served mainly as the platter upon which Bettina, Cherice, and Lena’s conversation was carried. While the ‘meat’ of their discussion was not about comics, *per se*, the girls used the medium as a mechanism of entrée into critical inquiry. Comics as popular culture text, combined with the space of an inquiry community co-constructed around that culture, provided a site of inquiry that invited the girls to collectively develop their understandings of social and racial phenomena, to work through discomfort, and to ‘invent what they desired’ (Rich, 1993, p. 215).

In the final corpus of data that I share in this chapter, I will explore CCIC members’ various reactions to representations of racial and cultural identity in a shared visual text. The following section both pulls together my analysis from throughout this chapter – the “That’s racist!” and levity/gravity through-lines of visuo-textual critique

persist – and also pushes into the new terrain of race talk as critical multimodal redesign (Janks, 2014).

### **Critical Multimodal Redesign: Kamala Khan to the Rescue!**

*“My name is Duaa Khan. I’m a Muslim American girl, my parents come from Pakistan. I am 10 yrs. old, live in Philadelphia. I love Kamala Khan, as I can relate to her a lot. She is adventurous and brave. I’m enjoying the read. This is my first comic series that I have started reading religiously. I think you have done a great job in writing about such a character. I love Pakistani food, my mom cooks the best. She’s like Kamala’s mom holding a doi (spoon) in her hand. Lol.”*

- Fan letter published in *Ms. Marvel* #7’s “Holla at Kamala” feature (2014)

As facilitator of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community, I was interested to learn that in February 2014, Marvel Comics planned to launch a new ongoing series, *Ms. Marvel*. Since 1968, the eponymous character has been one of Marvel’s mainstays, appearing in numerous titles for the company. Throughout the decades, several women have worn the mantle of Ms. Marvel, but the role is generally associated with the blonde-haired and blue-eyed Carol Danvers, a high-flying, hard-punching superhero and member of The Avengers. Promotional materials for the new *Ms. Marvel* series indicated a change in direction: Carol Danvers would be renamed ‘Captain Marvel’ and given a new monthly series, leaving her old moniker open for re-appropriation. This came in the form of Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani-American character from New Jersey. Created by G. Willow Wilson, one of the few female Islamic writers working in mainstream comics today, Kamala’s existence was intended to complicate the traditional comic book trope of WASP masculinity (Adlakha, 2015; Lewis, 2013, p. 2)<sup>60</sup>. Much of her life on the

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<sup>60</sup> And complicate the trope she has! In the character’s short history, Kamala has already been re-mediated for the purpose of anti-hate activism in San Francisco’s city buses (Whitbrook, 2015).

page consists of Kamala awkwardly negotiating various facets of her Pakistani-American teenage identity. She attends a multicultural public high school, is involved in a madrasa, struggles with pleasing her parents, and writes Avengers fan-fiction in her free time.

When a freak accident endows her with superpowers, Kamala commits herself to a life of heroism while attempting to remain true to her convictions<sup>61</sup>. Midway into issue #1, after sneaking out of her house to attend a party (and falling into a deep trance from her exposure to a chemical fog), Kamala has a dream sequence in which she confers with incorporeal visions of Carol Danvers, Iron Man, and Captain America – the Avengers who had earlier appeared in her fan-fiction. They have a significant exchange in terms of cultural identity negotiation:

Carol: Sakal bun phool rahi sarson, Sakal bun phool rahi... Umbva phutay, tesu phulay, Koyal bolay daar daar, Aur gori karat singaarn.  
 Kamala: Captain America... Iron Man... Captain Marvel?! You speak Urdu?  
 Carol: We are faith. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship.  
 Iron Man: You are seeing what you need to see. You stand at a crossroads.  
 Captain America: You thought that if you disobeyed your parents – your culture, your religion – your classmates would accept you. What happened instead?  
 Kamala: They – they laughed at me. Zoe [*one of Kamala's White classmates who antagonizes her and derides Islamic culture*] thought that because I snuck out, it was okay for her to make fun of my family. Like, 'Kamala's finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior Brown people and their rules to the curb.' But that's not why I snuck out! It's not that I think Ammi and Abu are dumb, it's just – I grew up here! I'm from Jersey City, not Karachi! I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know who I'm supposed to be.  
 Carol: Who do you want to be?  
 Kamala: Right now? I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you (*Ms. Marvel* #1, p. 17-21).

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<sup>61</sup> Kamala's superpowers are highly symbolic of her identity negotiation (she is able to change her physical appearance and size). When her superpowers first manifest, and before she is able to control them, Kamala finds herself looking exactly like Carol Danvers, the original Ms. Marvel, complete with blonde hair and blue eyes (p. 21).

When Kamala awakens from her reverie, she looks down to see that she has physically transformed into Carol Danvers – the first (and quite involuntary) use of her superpowers. Gazing at her newly (and temporarily) White-skinned body, Kamala remarks, “Is it too late to change my mind?”

When *Ms. Marvel* #1 hit the stands in February 2014, I had been facilitating the CCIC for the better part of two school years, and was looking for new illustrated texts that might open up vibrant conversations about race, culture, and gender. Rarely in the years prior had I attempted to assign a single common text for all members of the CCIC to read together, choosing instead to allow students to select reading material at their own leisure. I felt strongly about the new *Ms. Marvel* series, however, and believed that its depictions of cultural hybridity would be relatable to members of the CCIC, and might lead to meaningful dialogues<sup>62</sup>. As Wilson described her process of co-creating Kamala with artist Adrian Alphona and editor Sana Amanat:

We wanted her to be quirky and real and flawed and relatable. None of us were interested in doing some kind of model minority series in which all the world’s problems are swept under the rug. But neither did we want to do a solemn retrospective on racism and intolerance that would make people feel like they were being punished every time they picked up the book. We wanted to tell the kind of story we wanted to read. We wanted all the humor and tenderness and awkwardness of real life (Sava et al., 2014).

The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* sold out from coast to coast in spite of what Wilson describes as the ‘trifecta of death’: “New character (doesn’t sell!), female (doesn’t sell!)

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<sup>62</sup> I am not the only educator who feels this way about *Ms. Marvel*. In a letter to the editor published in issue #11 (Feb. 2015), a high school English teacher wrote that “I have shared and given away multiple copies of the first three issues and my students adore her – my students of ALL races... Through Kamala I have been able to draw out some of my shy, displaced, and culturally isolated students through a character who they relate to.”

and Muslim (hire an intern to open all the hate mail!)” (Sava et al., 2014). As a reader, I was pleased with the issue, particularly because I *hadn't* read anything like it before. From the first page, where Kamala contemplates the enticing aroma of a BLT sandwich (“delicious, delicious infidel meat”), to the final page, where a confused Kamala wears a new, White-skinned body and colorful superhero costume, the issue is about the competing claims made on her identity. I ran color copies of *Ms. Marvel* #1 and brought them in to the CMS library, anticipating a lively discussion of the text with members of the CCIC. This discussion did not happen quite as I had imagined it might. Rather than excitedly reading their photocopies in the space of the CCIC, several students quickly flipped through its pages and then moved on to other things. Others seemed uninterested altogether. I include a brief section of transcript from my introduction of the series to members of the CCIC:

- David: I was watching the news a couple weeks ago and they talked about this new comic that Marvel put out, and that it sold out across the country. [Tyler puts up his hand.] Tyler, what do you know about it?
- Tyler: Well, one thing, I know that Ms. Marvel is one of the superheroes. She, in the series and in some of the games, she's blonde, she flies, she's super strong.
- David: Yeah. So Ms. Marvel is this character that Marvel has had for a long time. And then she turns into this character called Captain Marvel. And she has all of these superpowers. And she's this blonde woman, right? Now, Marvel puts out this new comic book, and it sells out, like, thousands and thousands of copies in one day, and it's the first female Muslim main character that Marvel has ever had. [Tyler has his hand in the air again.] Tyler, what's the next thing you're thinking?
- Tyler: One more thing. I noticed she's not blonde because it's a different person playing Ms. Marvel.
- David: You're right. She's not blonde because it's a totally different person. This character is a new character called Kamala, and she lives in New Jersey. [*Héctor holds up the last page of the comic book, which portrays Kamala as a blonde Carol Danvers.*] Well, you'll have to read the whole story to find out what's happening. Because at the end of it, if you look right at the end, it looks

like she's blonde. Right, Héctor? (Transcripts, Mar. 10, 2014).

While Tyler and Héctor were seemingly engaged in my rollout of a common text, and wanted to demonstrate their prior knowledge of the character, most of their CCIC peers were less interested. I recorded in my fieldnotes from that day that I was both surprised and frustrated by my difficulty in getting the majority of students to care about *Ms. Marvel* #1. I ended my introduction of the series with a whimper, and allowed the CCIC members to go about their day, wondering if and how Kamala Khan would be brought up again in our shared space (each student took home a photocopy of the issue). Despite my strong feelings about the quality and relatability of *Ms. Marvel*, it was not an issue I was willing to force in the 'free' space of our inquiry community.

Several weeks later, I sat down with three 5<sup>th</sup> grade classmates, Tyler, Desiree, and Nellie, to see if they had read *Ms. Marvel* #1, and if so, to hear what they thought about it. I was pleased to find that Tyler and Desiree had read the issue, and also interested to see what stood out to them:

David: Did you read *Ms. Marvel*, that one that I gave everybody?

Tyler: Yes.

David: Did you like it?

Tyler: Yes.

David: I would love to hear what you guys thought about it, because most of your friends didn't read it, I think.

Desiree: Yeah.

David: So what did you think? What stood out for you?

Desiree: Somebody said that the girl, because she was Muslim, they said she smelled like curry a lot.

Tyler: That's racist. You should never say that about people because... Say if somebody thinks that about you. You'll get mad if somebody makes fun of you. If someone makes fun of you – wait, wait, wait, I'm gonna try and say this right. If you make fun of somebody you'll think it's funny, but when somebody makes fun of you, it's like, it will hurt your feelings and then you wouldn't like it at all. But that's when you're just gonna be sad.

David: So when you say something like that about a person, what you're almost saying is that the only thing they can be in this world is...

Desiree: Curry.

David: Right. Like, all of their hopes and dreams?

Desiree: Curry.

Tyler: Yeah, the things that you like, if you're nice or not nice, it doesn't matter because you just...

Desiree: Smell like curry.

David: So tell me...

Tyler: That's kind of rude, because say if somebody says "You smell like trash..."

Desiree: Tyler, you smell like fried chicken. Your hopes and dreams are fried chicken.

Tyler: Wait a minute!

Desiree: You all find a perfect place, you smell like curry, and your hopes and dreams are curry [laughs] (Transcripts, Apr. 7, 2014).

Several relevant themes emerge within this short section of dialogue. Significantly, the first comments Desiree and Tyler make about *Ms. Marvel* pertain to issues of racism. The topic clearly has salience to them, regardless of whether they are encouraged to discuss literature vis-à-vis race in school or not (i.e. Thomas, under review). It is likewise significant that Desiree and Tyler equate religious and cultural stereotyping with racial stereotyping, in terms of their referring to Islamophobic insults hurled at Kamala as “racist.” It is likely that Desiree and Tyler co-articulate various forms of identity oppression under the umbrella of race in order to “specify a coalition based on a similarity of treatment within the U.S.” (Bow, 1995, p. 32), and thus, they use the word “racist” to surface shared histories of marginalization (Reyes, 2011). Theirs is an overlapping narration of race and racism, and positions experiences of oppression and privilege across indices of ethnicity (Connolly, 1998). Taking an emic stance toward data construction (Erickson, 1986), it is highly relevant to my understanding of the children’s race talk to similarly co-articulate issues of racial and cultural identity. Further, I am



continually in the process of trying to better understand and negotiate issues of race, culture, and identity myself, and am committed to learning with and from the children with whom I work (e.g., Campano, 2007).

The discursive moves that lead off Desiree's and Tyler's discussion of *Ms. Marvel* share several similarities with earlier examples of CCIC members responding to what they perceived as racist dialogue in graphic novels. For example, as with her previous responses to *American Born Chinese* and *The Boondocks*, Desiree incorporates humor into her critical talk about race, and through her irreverent reframing, "makes social issues visible" (Janks, 2010, p. 217). In reacting to Zoe's insult of Kamala [see Figure 1], for instance, Desiree once again demonstrates an understanding of how humor productively exposes racial conflicts (Carpio, 2008) and allows speakers to irreverently "attack powerful institutions or views of life" (Freud, 1916, p. 153) while simultaneously working within and contesting existing discourses (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 133). In a nice bit of identity play, Desiree expresses her interpretation of Zoe's orientalist slur (Said, 1978) by repurposing the insult so that it applies to a derogatory dietary stereotype of her own and Tyler's ethnic backgrounds (Demby, 2013). When Desiree facetiously tells Tyler that he "smells like fried chicken" and that his "hopes and dreams are fried chicken," she demonstrates a lived knowledge of the dangers of racial stereotyping, echoing Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) insight that stereotypes "make one story become the only story," and that stereotypes flatten one's hopes, dreams, experiences, and possibilities (Perry, 2014). Certainly, Desiree is also having a bit of fun at the expense of Tyler, whom she believes too earnest in his assessment of racialized joke-telling. Beneath the surface

of her words, though, Desiree displays meta-awareness of race talk, using a graphic ‘pulp’ text as an entry point for constructing a critique of ethnic stereotyping in her own (and Tyler’s) life. Here, comics serve as a “vacuum into which [Desiree’s] identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud, 1993, p. 36), and the medium provides her with multiple points of access for individual and communal meaning-making (Jenkins, 2006; Mackey, 2004). Further, Desiree engages in what has been, during her school experience, a form of unsanctioned talk. As before, Desiree operationalizes the inherent interplay of gravity and levity in the comics medium to negotiate discursive terrains, moving beyond the “silence and evasion” which often characterize literary discussions of race at her school (Thomas, under review).



**Figure 1.** *Ms. Marvel* #1, pg. 11 panel 4

At this point in the transcript, Nellie, who was sitting beside Tyler and Desiree while reading her photocopy of *Ms. Marvel* #1, joins the conversation, having caught up to the dialogue featuring Kamala and Zoe.

Nellie: Is this what you meant? This? “Smell like curry”?

Desiree: Yeah.

Tyler: That's racist.

Desiree: Yeah.

David: What do you all think? Do you think the author of the book who wrote that line is being racist or do you think she's...?

Tyler: It's just trying to show how people say it.

Desiree: Or like, if she's Islam, it's probably the stuff that people said about her.

David: Mmm, that's a good thought. The author of *Ms. Marvel* is a Muslim.

Tyler: I got an idea, because the story of Daredevil and Ms. Marvel, it's almost the same. Because, like, the stuff that's happening. They get bullied but they end up helping people. Daredevil got bullied when he was little, like when he was young. 'Cause he's different from everybody. Since he was blind they all made fun of him 'cause he doesn't know what he's doing.

Nellie: Such a phony.

David: [to Tyler] Hold that thought. Nellie, what'd you see?

Nellie: After reading this, Zoe is starting to remind me of this wrestler Summer Rae.

David: The way she looks or the way she talks or both?

Desiree: She's kind of like a phony. The way she talks.

David: I want you guys to really pay attention to that character, Zoe. I wanna know what you guys think about her (Transcripts, Apr. 7, 2014).

Continuing the practice of identity co-articulation, both Nellie and Tyler reach to other pop culture figures in order to draw thematic connections from across their literate lives to the bigotry Kamala is exposed to in *Ms. Marvel* #1. First, Tyler compares Kamala's experiences to those of Daredevil, another prominent Marvel comic book character. Without going into too much detail, Daredevil – alias Matt Murdock – is a White superhero and attorney who, as a child, was blinded by chemicals that enhanced his other senses; Matt was often taunted by other children in his neighborhood due to his (dis)ability. In co-articulating blindness and ethnicity, Tyler expresses an organic

understanding of intersectionality, in terms of identity-based othering. Tyler's theorizing of the experiential interconnections among superheroes is a fairly clear example of how pop culture texts afford avenues for children to assert their social and cultural knowledge and perform a range of identities (e.g., Hagood, 2009; Hagood et al., 2010; Hall, 2011; Morrell, 2002; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).

At the opposite end of the *Ms. Marvel* character spectrum, Nellie makes a pop culture connection in order to clarify her understanding *not* of the othered, but of the otherer. Focusing on Zoe Zimmerman, the White, blonde-haired foil to Kamala (and, I'd argue, the Janus face of Carol Danvers as well), Nellie calls Zoe out as a "phony," comparing her to another blonde White female, the professional wrestler Summer Rae. In the world of wrestling fandom that Nellie, Tyler, and Desiree are deeply immersed in (e.g., Collier, 2013), Summer Rae is known as a "diva" and agent provocateur. By comparing Summer Rae to Zoe, a character she is only just 'meeting' for the first time, Nellie provides several shades of intertextual character analysis. First is that Zoe and Summer Rae bear an obvious physical resemblance to one another. Additionally, Nellie connects Zoe's "phony" manner of speaking to Summer Rae, and uses that comparison to make predictions about Zoe. In weaving pop culture into her trans-modal reading and literary analysis, Nellie behaves as a "thinker armed with knowledge of the dynamics and transformations of contemporary culture" (Callahan & Low, 2004, p. 57), and uses that knowledge to navigate the terrain of an unfamiliar text. Beyond that, Nellie employs a tertiary comic book character to initiate and sustain a conversation about Whiteness, gender, and hegemony. I am reminded of Gretchen Schwarz's (2007) claim that graphic

novels and comics “promote discussion in more lively and immediate ways than most [school texts], and they offer points of view often unexpressed in the usual curriculum resources” (p. 2).

Similar to ways in which the character of Miles Morales (the Ultimate Spider-Man) became an instrument for CCIC members to talk about Black masculinities, Zoe served as an analogue for White femininities. If race talk in general was unsanctioned within the halls of Cabrini Mission School, talk about Whiteness, in particular, was the most silenced talk of all. In the span of three school years at CMS, I did not hear teachers or administrators ever refer explicitly to their ethnic identities as White people, nor did I hear students talk about Whiteness. In the next, longer section of transcript data, I discuss the significance of Zoe as a comic book character who provided a means for CCIC members to safely discuss and contest elements of White hegemony and racial silencing. Not coincidentally, this is also the section in which students’ critiques begin to transition from deconstruction (reaction) to critical multimodal redesign (action).

- 1 David: I have a question. There's this line where Zoe says to Kamala and
- 2 Nakia, “Cultures are so interesting” [See Figure 2]. Do you think Zoe has a
- 3 culture?
- 4 Desiree: Probably.
- 5 David: Yeah?
- 6 Desiree: American. Well, no...
- 7 Nellie: White.
- 8 Desiree: *American*. There is no White, Nellie! Caucasian!
- 9 David: You can say White, you can say Caucasian. You can say whatever you
- 10 want here.
- 11 Nellie: This is a sad story.
- 12 David: Is there such a thing as Caucasian culture?
- 13 Desiree: No... I don't really know.
- 14 David: Yeah, what do you think? Is there such a thing as Caucasian culture?
- 15 Nellie: What's Caucasian?
- 16 Desiree: White.

17 Tyler: I have something to say. People, they're kind of, they're kind of... It's not,  
18 like, racist, but it's rude how they say it. Like, "*White*." I think they're trying to  
19 say like the color of their skin. And like how they say Black like the color of  
20 the skin. But some people, they don't understand it. Like, they say they're  
21 "Brown."  
22 Desiree: Yeah, but we're not Black. Black is like... [points at a piece of black  
23 metal.]  
24 Tyler: I'm a darker shade of tan.  
25 David: Do you think there's a history of White people treating other people's  
26 cultures like something they pretend to be interested in?  
27 Desiree: Oh, yeah.  
28 Nellie: Making other people slaves?  
29 Desiree: Or just feeling like what they're saying is "White is normal," right?  
30 Nellie: Yeah.  
31 Desiree: But different people are starting to take over America. Like, there's  
32 actually more people that immigrated here or Africans or Native Americans.  
33 There's more of them than White or Caucasian people. The thing is, like,  
34 African American and Native American people, that's the people they have to  
35 worry about the most. And because they treated us so bad. Like right now, they  
36 have Native Americans on reservations. And I don't know, some of my cousins  
37 could be on reservations for all I know.  
38 Nellie: Zoe is so ignorant and mean! [to Desiree]: You gotta show Mr. Dave that.  
39 Would this be racist again?  
40 Desiree: "Brown people."  
41 Nellie: "Kick Brown people and their roots to the curb."  
42 David: Let's read the whole thing. Kamala's saying, "Zoe thought that because I  
43 snuck out it was okay for her to make fun of my family. Like, 'Kamala's finally  
44 seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior Brown people and their roots to the  
45 curb.'" [See Figure 3].  
46 Desiree: Ewww!  
47 Tyler: Ewww!  
48 Nellie: What?!  
49 David: So what do you think?  
50 Desiree: She's being racist. She's just being rude and...  
51 Nellie: That was Kamala!  
52 Tyler: Ewww, this is disgusting!  
53 Desiree: She's saying what Zoe said. She's showing her what Zoe said.  
54 David: Because you don't think Kamala thinks of herself as inferior, right?  
55 Desiree: Or Brown people.  
56 David: Do you think Zoe, when she imagines a superhero... that she imagines a  
57 superhero could be a Brown Muslim girl?"  
58 Desiree: No. Because most of the superheroes are Caucasian and there isn't...  
59 Tyler: Or African American.  
60 Desiree: Or African American. A lot of them aren't, like... You have Asian

61 people, Islam people... There isn't a lot of them.  
62 David: So what would help people to be able to imagine that superheroes could  
63 look like anybody?  
64 Desiree: Make more different race kinds of people. Or just have a mix of  
65 superheroes from all over the world.  
66 David: Desiree, I love that idea.  
67 Desiree: We should create a comic book with Islam people.  
68 David: Should you?  
69 Desiree: Yeah.  
70 David: All together?  
71 Desiree: Yeah. I think we should make our own comic book about a different  
72 race, or a group of them.  
73 David: Now, Nellie. You just finished *Ms. Marvel* #1. What'd you think? Did it  
74 make you think about superheroes differently at all?  
75 Nellie: Girl superheroes, yeah.  
76 David: How so?  
77 Nellie: Girl superheroes...Kamala's the only one.  
78 Tyler: I'm just gonna say one thing. You guys don't really pay attention to other  
79 comics. Like Kitty from X-Men, she's a girl.  
80 Desiree: But what race is she?  
81 Tyler: She's...Caucasian.  
82 Desiree: Okay!  
83 Tyler: But you were talking about GIRL superheroes. It's different about girl  
84 superheroes. But like Kitty, Storm, Rogue... there's a lot of woman  
85 superheroes.  
86 Desiree: But is there a lot of different ethnicities? You gotta imagine that, Tyler.  
87 There's no Islam.  
88 Tyler: Storm. Storm.  
89 Desiree: What is she?  
90 Tyler: She's probably Muslim because...  
91 Desiree: She's Muslim?  
92 Tyler: Probably.  
93 Desiree: Let's make an Asian character too.  
94 Tyler: She's not Asian. There's no Asian.  
95 Desiree: You should make one.  
96 Tyler: That's weird that there's no Asian superheroes. It's always just Caucasian  
97 and African American.  
98 Desiree: Oh, there's a lot of African Americans. But rarely that you see that in  
99 a *comic* book!  
100 Tyler: There's a lot, though.  
101 Desiree: Like right there! [Desiree points at Alma.]  
102 Nellie: She's not even...  
103 Desiree: No, she's Mexican. Well Mexican, you should make more Mexicans.  
104 Tyler: Wait. We should sign a petition that we should...

105 Desiree: Make a comic!  
106 David: Desiree, you're saying that if you don't see the kind of representation in  
107 comic books that you want to see, you make your own?  
108 Desiree: I'm gonna make different race comic book characters.  
109 Nellie: Yeah!  
110 Tyler: I just noticed that I never draw comics but I can name stuff. And I can  
111 think about the stories and everything but I just can't draw.  
112 David: Well, it takes all kinds. You know, some people who make comics are  
113 writers and some are illustrators.  
114 Desiree: I'll text you my Facebook space so we can talk about new characters.  
115 Nellie: We'll do a group chat.  
116 Desiree: Yeah, group chat.  
117 David: Can you share next week what you talk about in your group chat about  
118 these new characters?  
119 Desiree: What race do you think we should...?  
120 Nellie: It should be your race, Mexican, and Asian. And what else? Whatever  
121 you...  
122 Desiree: Mr. Dave, do you think we should make multiple, well like, three comic  
123 book characters each? From our own race and ethnicity?  
124 Tyler: I think there's a Create-a-Superhero, there's like a website.  
125 David: You can make any kind of hero that you want. You can make an Indian  
126 character or you could make a White character. You could make a Vietnamese  
127 character. You could make a Black or White character from New Zealand.  
128 You could make a character from anywhere.  
129 Nellie: Australia!  
130 David: Right!  
131 Tyler: Austria.  
132 David: And you can have a character from Australia who's Asian.  
133 Desiree: And we're gonna make a comic, well, like these three characters to  
134 represent the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community.  
135 David: Yeah, I think that's very important.  
136 Tyler: I can always name a couple characters who are Asian or African American,  
137 but the world's not like that.  
138 Desiree: No, it's diverse.  
139 David: Yeah, we live in a very diverse world and we want to see our comic books  
140 represent that, right?  
141 Desiree: Yeah.  
142 David: You've inspired me today (Transcripts, Apr. 7, 2014).





Figure 2. *Ms. Marvel* #1, pg. 3 panel 5, and pg. 4 panel 1



**Figure 3.** *Ms. Marvel* #1, pg. 17 panels 3 and 4

In terms of co-constructing, regulating, and contesting race talk norms in the space of the CCIC, there are a number of significant speech events which occur throughout the preceding section of transcript. In lines 6-16, Desiree, Nellie, and I become involved in an awkward negotiation of race labels, evoking Pollock's (2004) findings on label omission and suppression. In patrolling Nellie's use of the label "White" (and suggesting the phenotypic euphemism "Caucasian" in its stead), Desiree appeals to the unspoken but nevertheless enforced rule of 'polite' color-muteness: that it is inappropriate to name race plainly and openly. Desiree likely does this on my behalf, treating me as she has been conditioned to treat her White teachers—as if we are unracial

beings. In effect, by telling Nellie that she shouldn't say "White," Desiree reproduces the sort of talk sanitization already prevalent in their school. In line 17, Tyler enters the conversation and agrees with Desiree, expressing his viewpoint that it is indeed rude when speakers use the term "White," since White skin isn't technically without hue. As in Bettina's and Cherice's earlier green skins/purple skins conversation, Tyler takes the position that race is roughly equivalent to skin pigmentation. While I appreciated at the time that Tyler complicated racial categories by expanding the color spectrum (i.e. saying that he is "a darker shade of tan" rather than Brown or Black or even biracial), I was concerned that he took up the colorblind (i.e. acritical multicultural) stance of his teachers. As I have argued, this stance stems from the post-racial tenet that those who discuss race are racists (Pollock, 2004, p. 9), and it frequently has the effect of eliding shared histories of racial experience by dissociating race from issues of power, knowledge, and cultural identity. My prevailing concern was that by taking Whiteness off the table as an ethnic referent – i.e. refusing the Whiteness label – we are complicit in reinforcing White hegemony, making it less visible and thus less open to critique (Aceves, 2008; Bouie, 2014; Moya & Markus, 2010). In my capacity as facilitator of an inquiry community, I did not want to reproduce the discursive norms and regulations of CMS, and I certainly did not want CCIC members to feel unable to engage in critical race talk. I was aware that at CMS, as in other school settings, the rules governing race talk are established through continual interactions within hierarchies of power and discipline (Thomas, under review). I thus made a decision to mobilize my own power-laden identities – as the adult/educator/authority figure in the space, and as a White man as well

– and gave explicit encouragement for Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler to use any race labels they wished. I hoped that our conversation would be more productive if the students knew they could use race labels in my presence without fear of censure.

In line 25 of the transcript, we return to the text of *Ms. Marvel* #1. Using Zoe’s dialogue about ‘cultures being so interesting’ [see Figure 2], I ask Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler to share their thoughts about cultural appropriation. Desiree takes up my invitation by launching into a critique of White normativity and imperialism in the United States. She explains that America’s rapidly changing demographics, coupled with cross-cultural shared histories of oppression, will lead to coalition-building and revolution. As Desiree explains, a union of the historically marginalized is what White people “have to worry about the most...because they treated us so bad.” Desiree invokes a rhetoric of unity – or of MLK’s “inescapable network of mutuality” – against a common oppressor, and she uses pertinent demographic data to make her case (see Tavernise, 2011). It is significant that in responding to a White character’s insult of a Middle Eastern-American character, Desiree co-articulates the experiences of other historically subjugated groups – Native Americans and African Americans – for the purpose of identifying productive intersections. As Henry Giroux (1994) writes,

It is important for students to affirm their histories and voices while simultaneously [learning how] to critically appropriate the codes and vocabularies of different cultural experiences so as to provide them with the skills they will need in order to define and shape...the modern world. Students need to understand the richness and strengths of other cultural traditions, other voices, particularly as these are constructed with a politics of difference in which the relationship between the self and other is mediated by the principles of equality, justice, compassion, and freedom (p. 316).

I recognize Desiree's naming of social interconnectivity as part of a coalitional activist stance, one that is strongly emphasized in both her home and her robustly multicultural community (e.g., Campano, Ghiso, Yee, & Pantoja, 2013; Montero et al., 2013). In cross-referencing the principles of equality and justice, Desiree works within her intergenerational legacy of dissent, as well as invoking firsthand knowledge of inequality and coalition-building in South Philadelphia (Gadsden, 1992; Low & Campano, 2013). All this in response to a comic book.

By line 38, Nellie redirects Desiree from her monologue and back to *Ms. Marvel*. As they question Kamala's ventriloquation of Zoe's racist barb "kick Brown people and their roots to the curb," it seems to me an optimal time to bring our conversation back to race and comic books writ large. Using Zoe as a proxy for the assumed White consumer of comic books (e.g., Sava et al., 2014), I ask, in line 56, "Do you think Zoe...imagines a superhero could be a Brown Muslim girl?" (The question is essentially a paraphrasing of Zetta Elliott's 2010 essay.) Following my prompt is a large section of transcript in which Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler alternately discuss and argue about the histories of race representations in the comics medium, as well as ultimately deciding to remake it to suit their desires. One point over which Tyler and Desiree disagree is the historic representation of Black characters in comic books. Tyler maintains that there *are* Black superheroes – referencing his earlier inquiry into that very topic – while Desiree contests his opinion, arguing that comics aren't very diverse, and certainly not as diverse as the community in which they live. At times their argument is the result of miscommunications, as when Tyler believes they are talking about gender and Desiree

thinks they are talking about an aggregation of race *and* gender<sup>63</sup>. Ultimately, it is the theme of co-articulation that allows them to collectively forge ahead. While Tyler holds strong to his belief that Black characters are not necessarily underrepresented in comic books, Desiree convinces Tyler, who is part Filipino, to admit that it's "weird that there's no Asian superheroes." Tyler later says, in line 136, that even though he can "name a couple of characters who are Asian or African American, the world's not like that."

There is not one precise moment when the children's conversation pivots from deconstruction toward reconstruction, but rather several turns that embody the valence of critical redesign. Throughout her disagreement with Tyler about underrepresentation, Desiree expresses a desire to actively contest "entrenched patterns of exclusion" in comics (Kennedy, 2011) by creating their own corrective texts to represent the ethnic diversity of their community. Examples of this impulse appear in line 67 ("We should create a comic book about Islam people"), line 101 (We "should make more Mexican [characters]"), and line 71 ("We should make our own comic book about a different race, or a group of them"). In effect, Desiree disaggregates and then re-aggregates race, ethnicity, and nationality in arguing for the importance of creating comic books that represent "different kinds of people... A mix superheroes from all over the world." In line 119, Desiree passes the baton to her friends, wondering which ethnic backgrounds they should include in the graphica they plan to create. Desiree seems to share Juliet Kahn's (2014b) belief that "comic[s] writers ought to be capable of delivering both

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<sup>63</sup> I am reminded of Audre Lorde's proclamation that "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

visible diversity and more profound representations of identity,” and that the ultimate point of creating such characters is “disruption...making change that cannot be ignored by those who wish they could.”<sup>64</sup>

Korina Jocson (2005) writes that what frequently begins as one child’s personal project can quickly morph into “a highly social activity where language, race, class, gender, and experience merge, a place for imaging selves, constructing texts, acquiring new literacies, and evoking possibilities for social change” (p. 171). The remainder of the transcript shows Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler working together to imagine more inclusive multimodal story-worlds that represent the diversity of their own lived experiences. This is no small task, as historically, mainstream “comics characters [have been] a White man’s land” (Pierce, 1966) and very much continue to be so (e.g., Foster III, 2005; Sava et al., 2014). Luckily, Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler do not lack for conviction. In their efforts to take seriously the topic of race in comics, Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler locate themselves in conversations which have been impacting the adult worlds of publishing

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<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that ‘minority’ creators must create new ‘minority’ characters if they wish to see a greater diversity of representations in comics (e.g., Bella Vida Letty, 2015; Wheeler, 2014). Existing franchises can be ‘racebent’ and ‘genderbent,’ as we have seen in popular series such as *Thor*, *Captain America*, and *Green Lantern*, and White characters, from Archie to Superman, can certainly be written and illustrated by non-White creators. But as the comics artist and critic Joseph Phillip Illidge (2015) argues, there is an “ease with which a significant number of creators of color adopt and embrace the racebending of White characters, the superimposition of culture onto archetypes defined through originally non-inclusive iconography... It's easier to make Black characters in the form of popular White characters than it is to not do so. It's easier for the comic book companies, and it's easier for us. The more difficult road, the one with more peril, the one you may think is less likely to lead to success, is to research and dig deep into the well of your cultural mythologies to create a new generation of heroes. More distinctive heroes. Heroes with stories that start in your history and culture, yet have meaning for history in general, and for people of any culture. We have the capacity to create heroes that dig from sources unfamiliar to many people, and by doing so create stories and mythologies and new archetypes of the superhero team” (n.p.).

and media for years. Earlier in 2014, the cultural critic Gene Demby posed the critique-laden question, “Who gets to be a superhero?” and explored issues of race and identity as they pertain to comics. Now, three fifth graders take up that same question. Whereas Demby detailed his concerns in an essay for *NPR*, Desiree, Nellie, and Tyler decide to become more actively involved in designing solutions. When, in line 104, Tyler suggests creating a petition to advocate for a greater diversity of representation, Desiree reiterates that they should actually make their own comic book (VanDerPloeg & Steffen, 2002). From here on, the three fifth graders<sup>65</sup> negotiate roles of collaborative authorship, assign themselves tasks, and excitedly plan out their next moves. Desiree suggests creating three characters apiece, representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and echoing Jeffrey Brown’s (2001) plea that “It’s about time we got some new heroes around here” (p. xv). In line 133, Desiree names what I believe to be a spot-on distillation of her creative mission. In cooperation with her friends, Desiree wants to “represent the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community,” and by extension, her school and community in South Philadelphia, in its complexity, particularity, and diversity. It is an endeavor which demands not just critique, but critical redesign.

## **Conclusion**

Talking openly about race in 21<sup>st</sup> century American schools may or may not lead to productive change (e.g., Robin, 2015), but silencing race behind sound-proof walls of

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<sup>65</sup> While I have featured Desiree, Tyler, and Nellie in this section, their creative and critical impulses were shared by others in the CCIC. For instance, when I asked Héctor to imagine the perfect comic book, he described it as one that would feature “One of each people, like African Americans and Vietnamese and Mexican and American just team up. And battle, like, superheroes” (Interview transcript, Feb. 24, 2014). Héctor went on to tell me that he plans on creating this comic book at some point in the future.



post-racial ‘politeness’ will be devastating for change (e.g., Kinloch, 2012; Michael, 2015; Moya & Markus, 2010). Earlier in this chapter, I wrote that I was interested in understanding how members of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community practiced something akin to a ‘cypha,’ by using comics for the purpose of collaboratively contesting the silencing of race and racism in their school. Through my review of transcript data, I have established that CCIC members employed comics in a number of ways to critically engage in ‘unsanctioned’ race talk. In some cases, race in comics served as the subject of conversations, while in others, comics functioned largely as a platform for initiating conversations *about* race and racial phenomena. Still, in other cases, race became a prompt for the necessity of critical redesign work. Across these cases, I identify eight interrelated subsets of race talk that emerged from students’ literate engagements with graphica:

1. Students critiquing authors for racial stereotyping in graphic texts (i.e. Nellie’s critique of *American Born Chinese*; Raman’s critique of a *Batman* comic book)
2. Students critiquing the racist actions of characters in graphic texts (i.e. various critiques of Zoe in *Ms. Marvel*; Isaiah’s and Noah’s critique of *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow*)
3. Students critiquing racial exclusion (absence and underrepresentation) in graphic texts (i.e. Kyrie’s read of *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*; Lena’s response to comics in general; various students’ responses to *Ms. Marvel*)
4. Students responding humorously to the content (and medium) of graphic texts in order to engage in race dialogues (i.e. Desiree’s responses to *American Born Chinese*, *The Boondocks*, and *Ms. Marvel*)
5. Students using graphic texts to initiate conversations of social phenomena (i.e. Bettina, Cherice and Lena moving from comics to discussing violence in their community)
6. Students identifying interconnections and co-articulating identities in their responses to comics (i.e. Desiree’s and Tyler’s responses to *Ms. Marvel*)
7. Students expressing their understandings of race in comics by invoking other pop culture texts (i.e. Tyler’s intertextual comparison of *Ms. Marvel* to *Daredevil*; Nellie’s comparison of *Ms. Marvel* to *Summer Rae*)

8. Students contesting the idea that racism is an action committed by individuals, not institutions (i.e. Desiree's expansive response to *Ms. Marvel*)

Within and across these discursive phenomena, CCIC members demonstrated a variety of ways of mobilizing their knowledge and lived experiences of race, racism, and identity. Despite attending a school in which race talk is typically suppressed or sanitized, students employed comics – via their discursive transactions around the medium and its history – to actively contest the silencing of race talk at CMS. In so doing, CCIC members developed heightened metalinguistic awareness of race talk and the post-race discourse infringing upon it. Informed by the data I have shared and analyzed in this chapter, I argue that it is the combination of the comics medium (a multimodal medium that balances upon a dialectic of levity and gravity, and which forms the backbone of an enormously popular media culture) and participation in an inquiry community (in which children co-constructed a space to engage in race talk and critique) that cultivated a fertile intersection for students to work through injurious ‘post-race’ discourses of silence, and toward more productive (at at times difficult) discourses. Largely because comics have not traditionally been ‘taken seriously’ in academic spaces, the medium affords students a ripe terrain for critically surveying – and ultimately subverting – the “conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown” regarding race in an urban school (Chute, 2008, p. 456-457).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Cultural Engagements and Autobiographical Inquiries with and through the Medium of Comics: Two Case Studies of Multimodal Authorship

*“There is probably no more powerful force for change in this uncertain and crisis-ridden world than young people and their art. It is the consciousness of the world breaking away from the strangle grip of an archaic social order.”*

-Luis J. Rodriguez

#### Chapter Framing

In classrooms and out-of-school spaces, multimodal composing has become an increasingly relevant concern for literacy scholars and practitioners (e.g., Bitz, 2010; Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Hull & Katz, 2006; Maliszewski, 2013; Stornaiuolo et al., 2009; Whitin & Whitin, 2012). Suzanne Miller and Mary McVee (2012), for instance, write of the “urgent need” to incorporate multimodal composition into and across learning spaces, claiming that such opportunities provide students a “design-based means of both communicating and coming-to-know” (p. 3). Indeed, numerous scholars have identified the element of design as pivotal in locating the critical affordances of multimodal literacy (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005; Siegel, 2012). As Hilary Janks (2000) notes,

Design encompasses the idea of productive power—the ability to harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing Discourses. It recognizes the importance of human creativity and students’ ability to generate an infinite number of new meanings (p. 177).

It is significant that Janks identifies the “productive power” of multimodality rather than elaborating ways by which multimodal information is *consumed*. This is an important distinction to make, particularly when students, literacy, power, and change are the topics of consideration.

In today's educational climate, and especially in America's underresourced urban schools, literacy education has become typified by standardization and remediation (e.g., Allington, 2010; Edelsky, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). One result is that students' cultural, linguistic, and epistemic resources are often afforded lower capital than 'measurable' or 'quantifiable' indicators of achievement which align with White, middle class, and monolingual standards of knowing (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Willis, 2007). It is in these multicultural and multilingual environments – i.e., learning spaces where students are frequently framed through discourses of deficit and risk, and are subjected to rigid forms of literacy instruction and assessment – that opportunities for multimodal composing are most urgent (e.g., Albers & Sanders, 2010; Berry et al., 2014; Fairbanks & Price-Dennis, 2011). As Marjorie Siegel (2012) writes, a pedagogic emphasis on multimodal design can have the effect of “recast[ing] students who are labeled 'at risk' students—whether English-language learners, low-achieving or reluctant readers...or learning disabled—as students 'of promise'” (p. 674).

In this chapter, I present case studies of Héctor and Alexi – two members of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community – and describe how, through their multimodal composing practices, both students endeavor to think beyond the places, spaces, and ascriptive identities assigned to them by others (e.g., Zapata, 2014). Héctor and Alexi are both Mexican-born students who attend the Cabrini Mission School and who have been involved in the CCIC since 2012. On account of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, both boys have at times been narrated by their teachers through a diagnostic language of deficit. In presenting and analyzing Héctor's and Alexi's experiences, their multimodal

compositions, and their descriptions of the time they spend in the CCIC as linked case studies (Creswell, 2007), I highlight ways in which both students employ multimodal authorship to resist narratives that would otherwise situate them as *lesser* in terms of their capacities as readers, writers, speakers, activists, and intellectuals.

### **Not to Be “Destoried”: How Héctor Employs Comics to Engage in Autobiographical Performance and Self-(Re)Narration**

*“The form of comics lends itself to the autobiographical genre in which we see so many authors materializing their lives and histories. It is a way to put the body on the page.”*

-Hillary Chute

*“Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger.”*

-Ben Okri

With his younger brother Marco in tow, Héctor joined the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC) in the summer of 2012, several months prior to entering the sixth grade at Cabrini Mission School. Héctor’s family was new to the Marian Anderson neighborhood of South Philadelphia, although they had lived in the United States for seven years following their migration from Mexico when Héctor was four and Marco one. After a nun working with the St. Cabrini parish’s Hispanic ministry<sup>66</sup> recommended our comics-oriented group to Héctor and Marco’s mother as a way for her sons to make friends and strengthen their reading, writing, and speaking skills, the boys began attending twice weekly throughout the summer. Upon joining the group, Héctor and Marco were initially hesitant to interact with its other members, several of whom – Henry, Jamir, Larry, and Raman – had formed the CCIC during the previous school year,

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<sup>66</sup> Sister Mary Margaret was familiar with my project because Moxie, CMS’s librarian in 2011-12, roomed with a group of nuns during her time in Philadelphia and discussed our mutual work.

and who had insisted that we continue to meet over summer break. During the first several weeks of Héctor and Marco's attending, I noted how rarely they spoke, and figured that they were shy in the company of unfamiliar children, as many children are. The boys spent their time thumbing through graphic novels and speaking when spoken to, and only then in short sentences (Fieldnotes, Jul. 12, 2012).

I learned later that Marco's initial reluctance to talk to other children in the CCIC was due to feeling self-conscious about his age, and Héctor's was a function of his speech (Fieldnotes, Oct. 19, 2012). While both Héctor and Marco spoke English in addition to Spanish at home, Héctor was hesitant to use either language publicly, owing to a pronounced stutter that frequently caused him to be misunderstood by adults and other children. As I would observe in the years to follow – years in which Héctor attended CMS and became a devoted member of the CCIC – Héctor's soft and economical manner of speaking proved relatively easy for his peers to accommodate, but led to his being treated as academically incapable by teachers and administrators<sup>67</sup>. In spite of his being an active reader, writer, and artist, a story I repeatedly heard from three of Héctor's teachers during 2012-2014 was that he was an unmotivated and unexceptional student who “won't read” and who “disappears into the background of the class” (e.g., Fieldnotes, March 13, 2013; May 30, 2014). On account of Héctor's stutter and his linguistic background, I thought there was a real possibility that his teachers were not

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<sup>67</sup> See Blood et al., 2003; Lew, 2013; and Williams & Diaz, 1999 on the topic of stuttering and the subsequent perceptions/expectations of co-occurring non-speech pathologies. There is also a wealth of scholarship on the history/ies of immigrant students being positioned through deficit lenses in schools (e.g., Campano, 2007; Klingner et al., 2005; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Snell, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999; Zacher Pandya, 2011).

‘hearing’ him clearly, and that they were slotting him into a predictable narrative of deficit (e.g., Brock et al., 2007; DaSilva Iddings et al., 2014; Flores & Schissel, 2014; Heath, 1983; Rodriguez et al., 2010; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Their narratives of Héctor and of his literate activity certainly differed from his own.

The sociologist Hugh Mehan (2000/1993) writes of ways in which various educational brokers – parents, teachers, and school psychologists – can come to narrate the same student quite differently, and how institutional authority, rather than familiarity with the student, typically elevates one narrative over competing accounts<sup>68</sup>. The view which generally carries the *least* institutional weight is the student’s own narratives of her or himself as a learner, and yet young people’s self-perceptions are vitally significant in understanding how they think, learn, and practice literacy (e.g., Henk & Melnick, 1995; Owocki & Goodman, 2002). At the very least, a student’s self-narratives must be taken into account in order to co-construct a holistic understanding of what she or he knows, cares about, and can do (e.g., Campano, 2007a & b; Carini, 2011; Carini & Himley, 2010). To exclude a student’s views of her or himself from the ‘official narrative’ poses the danger of committing an act of “epistemic injustice,” whereby she or he is characterized in ways which discredit her or his capacities as a knower (Fricker, 2009). This danger is only magnified when the student in question comes from a minoritized language group, as does Héctor (e.g., Menken & Klein, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Snell, 2013; Steele, 2010). During the years I have known Héctor, I have been interested in how he

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<sup>68</sup> R.D. Freeman (1998) writes that the ways in which students are officially positioned (i.e. as “failing” or “gifted”) tend to be accepted by everyone, including students themselves, which hinders equitable educational outcomes.

narrates and represents himself, and how, through his self-storying, he embraces, rejects, or ignores characteristics that have been attributed to him by others. In order to come to an understanding about Héctor's narratives of himself, it has been integral for me to consider not only how he narrates himself through the verbal mode, but how he represents himself multimodally, and in particular, through the hybrid medium of comics.

What I did not yet realize when Héctor began attending the CCIC in July 2012 is that he had been transacting with the comics medium for much of his life, and that comic books were already his preferred literary format. Nearly two years later, when I asked him to recount how he had come to join our group, Héctor explained:

My mom signed me up to a book club. And then I didn't really want to go, but then I have to. So I went to my first day, and then I thought – And then, when I first met you, I can pick comic and, like, regular book, and then I chose this because... I, like, used to read comic books in the past, since I was three or four (Interview Transcript, Feb. 24, 2014).

For Héctor, reading comic books – as opposed to “regular” prose books – is an important part of his literate life, marking his family's arrival in the U.S., and influencing his language, storytelling, and identity. It is not uncommon for language learners to be drawn to comic books (e.g. Cary, 2004; Lam, 2004; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Stenglin & Iedema, 2001), as visual texts “promote learning that recognizes students' own language resources, which in turn affirms students' identities as learners and thinkers” (Chun, 2009, p. 2). Unlike purely prose texts, which have caused Héctor to feel like (and to be labeled) a struggling reader, *graphica* has enabled him to recast himself as an empowered maker of meaning. When I asked him what he enjoys about the comics format, Héctor told me that:



I like how the drawings look like... And then, like, it's never, like – it's not like a regular chapter book, but it's like much funnier... I like how comics, they do, like, adventures and comedy and stuff... Sometimes [comics] have hard words. Like sometimes, they have, like, so many words, like a chapterbook page. But, like, graphic novels? The thing is, I get to pick which ones. And I like reading *fast* (Interview Transcript, Feb. 24, 2014).

The element of choice is substantial here. By agentively selecting the texts he reads, Héctor is able to position himself through an additive lens, as opposed to at a deficit in relation to some external benchmark of literacy achievement. Héctor's is a stance which innately pulls from a lived theory of multiliteracies. He values a range of meaning-making practices – the reading of images, specifically – and avoids the sort of hierarchical thinking that frequently elevates words over pictures (e.g., Low, 2012; Sousanis, 2015). Because of his freedom to direct his own reading practices, Héctor told me that, rather than feeling like school, to him, the CCIC “feels like home” (Interview Transcript, Feb. 24, 2014). It is a space in which Héctor reads what and how he wants to read, and in so doing, “declares himself a connoisseur of reading...claim[ing] an identity counter to the one ascribed to him” (Simon, 2012, p. 516).

From his earliest involvement in the CCIC in July 2012, and throughout the following two school years, Héctor immersed himself in the graphic novels I kept on hand in the CMS library, reading nearly ninety standalone books. This practice did not necessarily differentiate him from other students, but his checkout preferences were distinctly his own. While other members of the CCIC tended to gravitate toward certain genres and titles, Héctor checked out and read a wide assortment of books stretching across the gamut of sequential art, from action/adventure and superhero fare (Miles

Morales as the Ultimate Spider-Man was a favorite) to romance, folklore, and biography. Héctor seemed to revel in the comics medium for the medium's sake, and he often selected texts that other students had rejected as "girly,"<sup>69</sup> such as *The Babysitter's Club* graphic novel (Martin & Telgemeier, 2006), "too baby," such as *The Flying Beaver Brothers* series (Eaton III, 2012-2013), or "really hard," such as *Meanwhile* (Shiga, 2010). As opposed to doggedly following any particular author or character, it was the combination of words and pictures, put into the service of narrative, to which Héctor was drawn, and it all became grist for his imaginative mill. Whether Héctor liked or disliked a book, he was eager to discuss his selections with me each week. As I recorded in my fieldnotes, Héctor and I had many conversations in which he discussed visual composition and broke down plot points and character motivations. I was impressed by his desire to analyze comic books and graphic novels for what was *not* within their pages as well. Héctor commonly drew connections between what he was reading and world events, and made frequent text-to-text connections, exercising a critical sensibility that he brought into his own multimodal authorship. On at least one occasion, I wrote in my field journal that I wondered if "Héctor's classroom teachers know the sorts of deep and detailed readings he performs with graphic novels, even if he doesn't speak much about his reading practices with them. Are they able to listen beyond the stutter?" (Memo, Jan. 13, 2014). It seemed probable to me that Héctor's stutter, his immigration status, and the

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<sup>69</sup> See chapter five for a thorough examination of CCIC members' gendered transactions with graphica.

fact that he preferred reading and writing graphica to alphabetic prose<sup>70</sup>, had led his teachers to make false assumptions about his relationship to literacy.

For his part, Héctor endeavored to mobilize the medium of comics as a corrective to the ways in which he was perceived. In July 2012, one of the first books Héctor borrowed from my graphica collection was *Adventures in Cartooning* (Sturm, Arnold, & Frederick-Frost, 2009), an interactive guide to creating comics. Throughout the text, which itself functions as a graphic novel, the characters possess a postmodern awareness of themselves as illustrated characters in a book. They explain to readers how comics work – naming panels and gutters, for instance – and encourage children to try their own hand at comics creation [see Figure 1]. While perusing *Adventures in Cartooning* in the CMS library, Héctor took up the text’s invitation and created what would be his first of many pages of sequential art in the CCIC [Figure 2].

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<sup>70</sup> As is the case in the majority of academic spaces, prose texts are afforded more capital than illustrated texts within the classrooms of CMS. This hierarchical phenomenon, and some of the reasons for it, is explained in more detail in the Context section of chapter two.

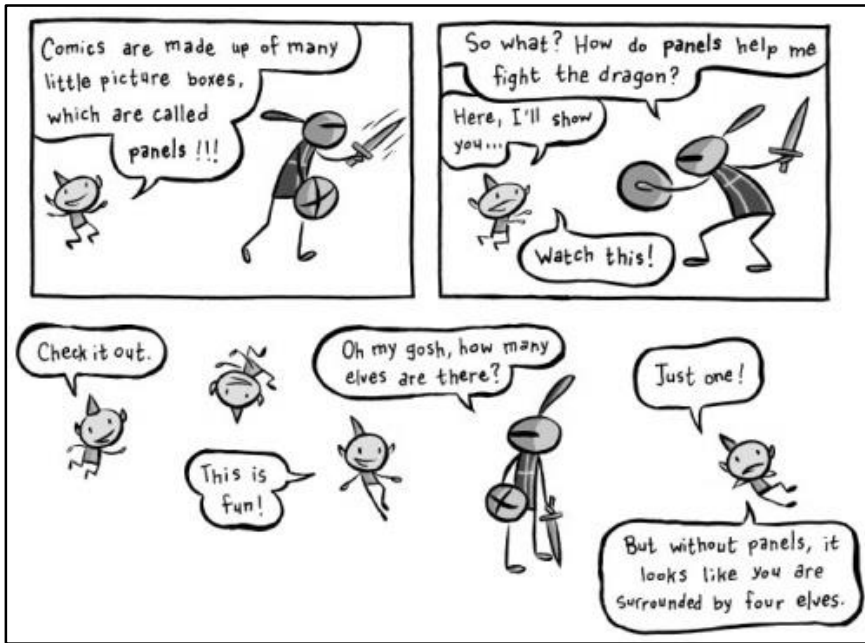


Figure 1. A page from *Adventures in Cartooning* (2009)

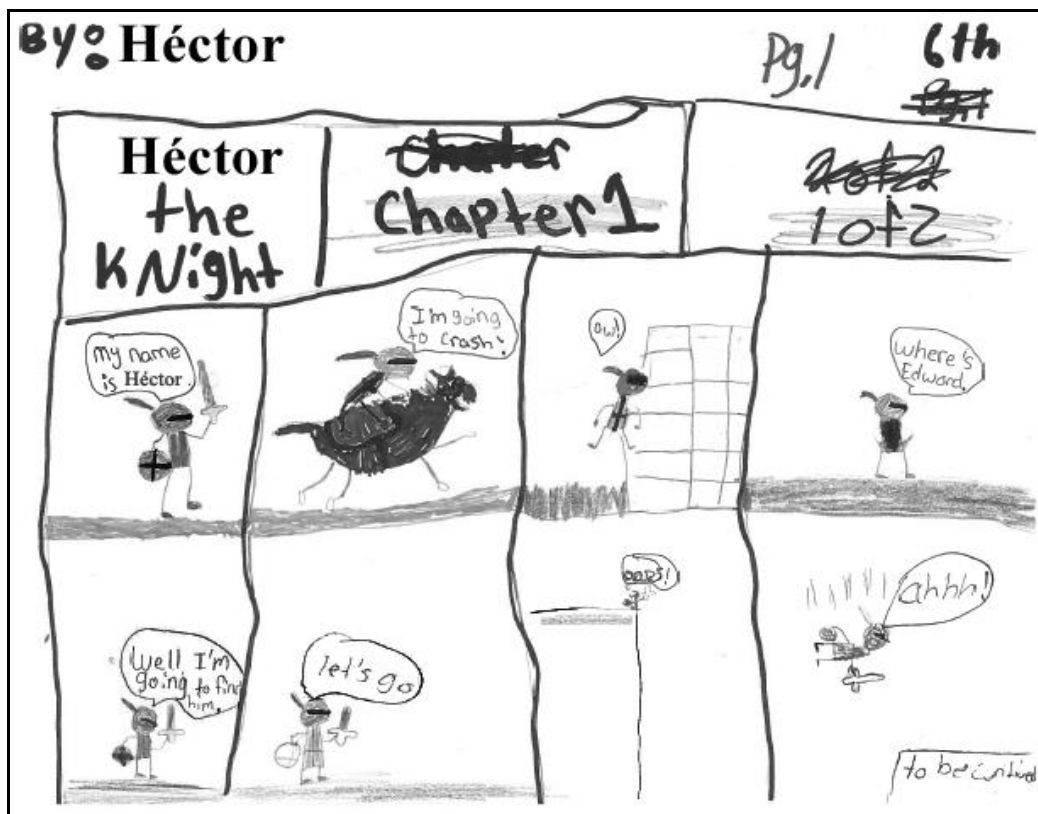


Figure 2. Héctor's first comics page in the CCIC, after *Adventures in Cartooning* (Jul. 24, 2012)

With his composition, Héctor attempts to evoke the layout, visuals, and tone of *Adventures in Cartooning*, but he makes one notable modification. In Sturm, Arnold, and Frederick-Frost's original text, the knight character has no given name, but in Héctor's version, he has named the knight after himself<sup>71</sup>. While this may not seem especially significant on first review, I regard Héctor's rechristening of the knight through the context of his initial anxiety about speaking within the CCIC. At the time that he drew this page, Héctor had not yet opened up to his peers, and was still ensconced in a veil of silence. His introduction to them thus came multimodally, in a manner with which he was comfortable and in control. Héctor took his time crafting his images and words, and arranged them precisely as he wanted them – something he was not always able to do through speech.

Writing on the subject of comics and autobiography, the literary scholar Hillary Chute (2010) poses the question, “What does it mean for an author to *literally* reappear – in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page – at the site of [his] effacement?” (p. 3). In the case of Héctor's knight, it indicates that Héctor was able to proactively introduce himself to his new classmates with agency, and to represent himself as a simultaneously heroic and humorous figure, the person he believes himself to be, but not always the person people see (or hear). Héctor, having attended American schools for five years prior to CMS, was highly aware of his own histories of effacement on account of his stutter and his language learner status, and told me on several occasions about being bullied as a young child. Through visuo-textual remixing, however, Héctor made an

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<sup>71</sup> Edward the Horse keeps the name assigned to him in the original text.

effort to seize the reins over how he would be perceived and narrated by students in his new school. Indeed, after completing his drawing, Héctor passed it around to other children, including his future classmates Jamir, Raman, Henry, and Larry, and used his composition to spark their first conversation with one another. The four boys told Héctor that they enjoyed his work, and laughed at the page's humorous ending. Henry, a self-styled manga artist, encouraged Héctor to continue the knight's story, and invited Héctor and Marco to sit at their table in the library (Fieldnotes, Jul. 24, 2012). With the benefit of hindsight, I recognize this moment as an important transition for Héctor at CMS. Through his autobiographical multimodal narration, Héctor moved from simply sharing a physical space with members of an affinity community to becoming an initiate of that community. Perhaps better articulated by Anne Haas Dyson (1997), Héctor "used popular cultural symbols to achieve a sense of personhood and social belonging, of control and agency in a shared world" (p. 2).

As the 2012-13 school year began, I continued to facilitate and document the CCIC as an ongoing pilot research project. Héctor, now a sixth grader at CMS, attended the CCIC's weekly meetings, although Marco was no longer permitted to accompany him, after Principal Caputo imposed a new age limit for attending afterschool activities. Héctor, it seemed to me, began his time at CMS in stride, having made friends with several classmates over the summer. While he still spoke predominantly in short sentences and remained quiet much of the time – so as not to emphasize his stutter – Héctor did appear more confident than he had several months prior. Riding the creative momentum he had built with his *Héctor the Knight* story (which ultimately stretched to

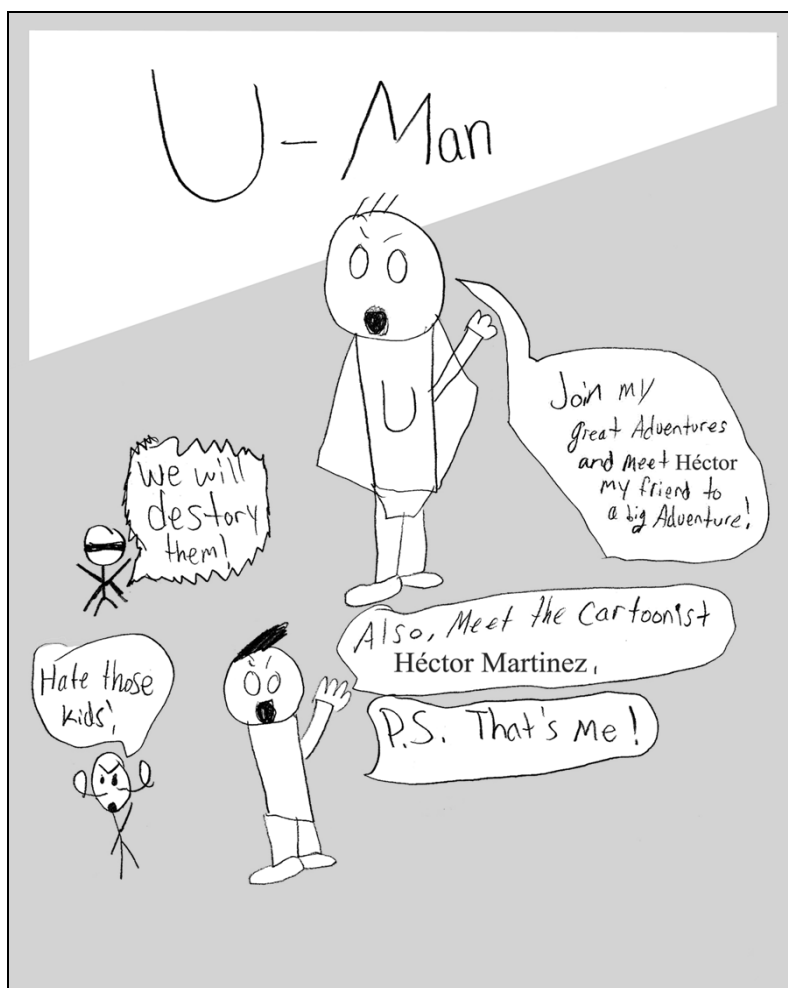
six pages in length)<sup>72</sup>, Héctor returned to the CCIC with a definite sense of purpose: he told me that he wanted to publish a book in 2013. During the previous school year, when the CCIC was inaugurated, its members had collaborated on releasing an anthology of their work, with each contributing between two and fifteen pages. Héctor had read their book and was impressed with it, but it was not what he had in mind for himself. His goal was to produce enough original material to release his *own* book. To do so, Héctor began creating various series, each with a subtly different style. By the end of the 2012-13 school year, Héctor had produced 37 pages of finished material and dozens of additional sketches—more than any other student, and easily enough to warrant his own book, which I had professionally printed and bound<sup>73</sup>.

The fact of his being the published author of a book bearing his name was deeply meaningful to Héctor, and he asked me to order additional copies to share with family and friends. While Héctor had already seen himself as an author, he now had tangible proof – proof that challenged stories of his lack of motivation or insufficient literacy aptitude. Published in June 2013, Héctor’s collection included graphic adaptations of several *Stick Figures* videos he had found online and a short parody of the *Halo* video game series. The majority of his book, however, featured the adventures of U-Man, a superhero of Héctor’s own creation.

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<sup>72</sup> The remainder of *Héctor the Knight* is included in the Appendices, as well as other examples of Héctor’s work.

<sup>73</sup> I printed Héctor’s book through an online publisher, Lulu Press, which assembles professional-grade books and charges a reasonable price per copy.



**Figure 3.** The cover of Héctor's book (May 3, 2013)

As with his *Héctor the Knight* story, the production of Héctor's *U-Man* comics was less about creating artistic masterpieces, and more about telling rapidly paced stories through a combination of pictures and words, all saturated with pop culture references. Through an idiosyncratic blending of humor, adventure, and elements from his day-to-day life, Héctor used his comics storytelling to cultivate a distinctive authorial identity. As opposed to other students in the CCIC who might spend weeks illustrating a single page, Héctor was more concerned with prolificacy and making sure that his jokes landed. This is not to say that Héctor was sloppy or unintentional in his work; rather, he afforded



himself the freedom to create the work that he wanted to. As a creator, Héctor made his compositional choices quite deliberately, and his drawings are deceptively simple. He agonized over his characters' body language and facial expressions, making countless alterations to his drawings in order to convey exactly the nuance he wanted. Héctor also looked to develop more sophisticated coloring techniques to heighten the moods of his compositions. On many occasions, he asked to use a computer or smart phone to search for model images in order to make his own characters as expressive as possible.

In addition to constructing a strong authorial identity, Héctor created *U-Man* as a means of representing aspects of his history and identity as well (e.g., Dyson, 1997). For instance, in his first *U-Man* story from January 2013 [Figure 4], Héctor features the theme of bullying. All superheroes have origin stories, and U-Man is certainly no exception. As *his* story goes, five years prior to acquiring superpowers (by making a wish on his twelfth birthday), a seven-year-old child is harassed by a bully. U-Man's transformation into a full-fledged superhero, then, is part of a narrative that mirrors Héctor's accounts of his own childhood<sup>74</sup>. As Pahl & Rowsell (2007) note, looking at a multimodal text means acknowledging the "sedimented identities, or traces of past experiences" that lie behind its meaning (p. 388). This concept is made quite clear through Héctor's composition. In creating U-Man as a quasi-surrogate for himself, Héctor composes a cross-temporal story through the comics format to "foster a deeper awareness of [himself] in relation to the world around [him]," and engages in a

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<sup>74</sup> Héctor also writes himself into the familiar literary trope of the hero who emerges from a childhood of difficulty, as seen in characters from King Arthur and Harry Potter to comic book mainstays Spider-Man and Daredevil.

“sustained inquiry into [his] experiences as a means of understanding who [he is]” (Yagelski, 2012, p. 193). Furthermore, Héctor enacts a manner of storytelling that derives much of its effect from “the hybrid, visual-verbal form of graphic narrative where the work of (self-)interpretation is literally visualized” (Chute, 2010, p. 4).

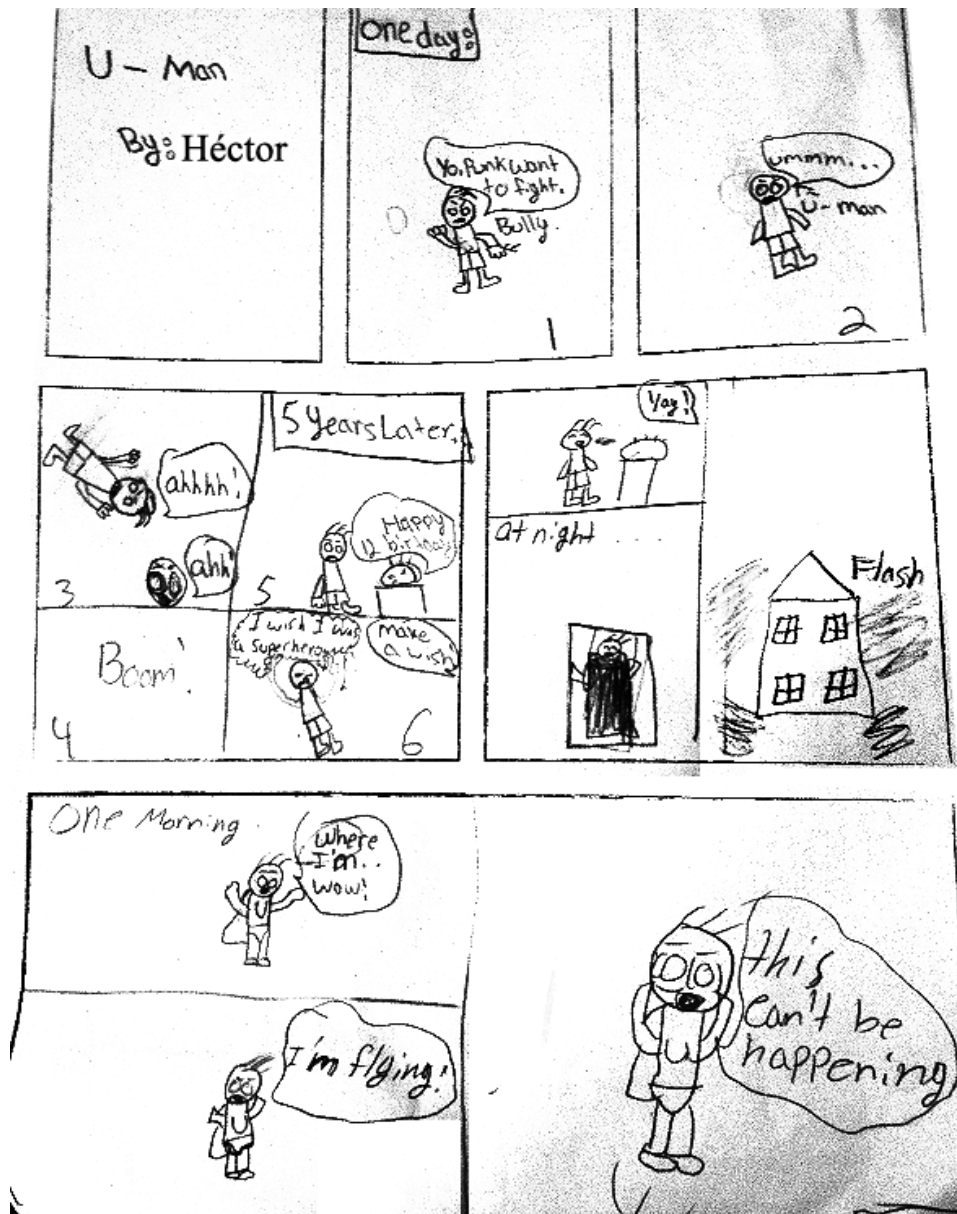


Figure 4. The first page of Héctor’s *U-Man* story (Jan. 29, 2013)

Héctor initially draws U-Man in distress, as indicated both through his spoken dialogue and his body's minor position within the upper-right panel, subsumed by a sea of negative space that is "laden with anxiety, or hints of the uncanny" (Telotte, 2007, p. 467). On the topic of negative (or blank white) space, the Caldecott-winning picturebook illustrator David Macaulay explains that "it is essential to read both the positive and the negative spaces together to fully understand the image" (1991, p. 342). Open blank spaces can speak to a character like U-Man's sense of fear or isolation, for example. These feelings are made manifest in Héctor's panel #3, in which U-Man has literally been upended by his tormentor, and faces the reader from a tense diagonal angle (e.g., Martens et al., 2013).

On the bottom third of Héctor's page, through a series of three zoomed-in panels, U-Man literally gains power – both physical and representational – with each passing moment; his body increasingly fills the negative spaces that had earlier overwhelmed him. While in the first half of the page, seven-year-old U-Man was uncomfortable speaking to his tormenter (represented by the short utterances "ummm" and "ahhhh" in small font), by the end of the page, twelve-year-old U-Man – and it is surely no coincidence that he is the same age as Héctor – has found a voice, speaking directly to the reader in a noticeably larger font. As Chute explains, handwriting in comics carries "a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker . . . , underscor[ing] the subjective positionality of its author" (p. 10-11). U-Man's voice – representing both aural sounds and physical marks on a page – parallels Héctor's own development at CMS. While Héctor has at times been reluctant to speak aloud, his comics cypher U-Man provides him

a means of finding security in self-expression. As Zimmerman (2008) notes, “through making comics and becoming makers of media, we can all find our voices and feel empowered to communicate our stories” (quoted in Kamiya, 2009, p. 59). U-Man, then, serves as Héctor’s instrument for writing and voicing himself both into being and becoming.

Throughout his 2012-13 output, Héctor produced over twenty *U-Man* comics pages, developing his hero into a funny, good-natured crusader for justice. Within these stories, Héctor often played with the conventions of superhero comics, merging them with film, for instance, or allowing his characters to interact directly with readers. In addition to the usual superhero business of fighting supervillains, Héctor created a blooper reel and even riffed on *Adventures in Cartooning* by creating his own playful guide to drawing U-Man (see Appendices). It was not too far of a leap into postmodernity, then, when Héctor introduced *himself* into the *U-Man* cosmology, as an ally of his titular hero. To be sure, Héctor’s appearance on the page complicated the narrative a bit, as now there were *two* surrogates for him, but Héctor the author was able to maintain distinct personas for both of his creations [Figure 5].



Figure 5. Héctor meets U-Man (Apr. 23, 2013)

In Figure 5, when “Héctor” first meets U-Man, the author Héctor makes some of his most sophisticated artistic and authorial moves to date. From a strictly visual

standpoint, Héctor leans heavily on his characters' body and facial language to propel the story forward. The final panel of the page, representing his characters' zoomed-in handshake – the beginning of a formal partnership that builds a bridge across the center of the panel – is preceded by various feints and follies. Within the middle third of the page, U-Man attempts to endow “Héctor” with superpowers by providing him with a beverage that immediately detonates, leading to the latter character's humorous reaction. In the page's central panel, Héctor illustrates an impeccably nuanced caricature of U-Man, arching the hero's eyebrows and mouth in just such a way as to highlight the character's compassion and concern (e.g., Darda, 2013). Héctor's multilayered coloring in the central panel drags the reader's eye almost immediately to it, making it the focal point of the page, both tonally and spatially. As Cheri Anderson (1995) explains, color “may be used in full spectrum or limited palette to create an intended mood or change in mood to help clarify meanings of the story” (p. 307). Héctor's selective use of color is intended to mark the central moment in the narrative in which the character “Héctor” gains superpowers, and also to reveal to his readers a little something about U-Man's sympathetic nature.

The character “Héctor” represents a similar, yet somewhat idealized version of his creator (i.e. a sarcastic preteen with superpowers), while U-Man remains a stand-in for Héctor's wish fulfillment. When I formally interviewed Héctor in February 2014, and asked him how he invented his characters, we ended up having a conversation that informs much of my thinking around Héctor's authorship and his multimodal autobiographical identity performances. I include a section of transcript here:

David: Do comics ever make you think about your own life in different ways?  
Héctor: When I make comics, yeah.  
David: Tell me about that.  
Héctor: Like how I put myself in it?  
David: Yeah.  
Héctor: When I take that, like, I just think of it, like, when I go to some places, I pretended, like, that's the settings.  
David: When did you decide to make yourself a character in your comics?  
Héctor: I think that was last year, yeah.  
David: Yeah? Do you remember why you decided to do that?  
Héctor: To, like, make... like, I got bored, so I try to make myself, like, fun.  
David: How is comic book character Héctor different than real-life Héctor?  
Héctor: Power.  
David: He's more powerful?  
Héctor: Yeah.  
David: Do you feel like you make your comic book Héctor a fantasy of yourself?  
Héctor: Yeah.  
David: So you write him kind of like you wish you were?  
Héctor: I guess, yeah.  
David: Do you ever bring pieces from your real life into your comics?  
Héctor: Um, yeah, sometimes.  
David: Like what? How do you do that?  
Héctor: Can you, like, explain it?  
David: Yeah. So, like, stuff that you do in your lifetime, or your experiences, or your family members, or your culture. Do you ever bring that into your stories that you make up?  
Héctor: Yeah. Like the characters, like U-Man. And, like, I can just overcome my fear and just take it, like me.  
David: Oh, okay. So it's about overcoming fear. Do you feel fear sometimes?  
Héctor: Yeah.  
David: What do you feel fear about?  
Héctor: Like on the river by Mexico, I like, one time, I like jumped and then I forgot. It was like a long time ago, when I was four.  
David: ...And that is something you've brought into making comics? Like overcoming fear?  
Héctor: Yeah. (Interview Transcript, Feb. 24, 2014).

With a single word – “*power*” – Héctor encapsulates what comics authorship has meant to him. Through comics, the literary format with which he is (and has long been) most comfortable, Héctor is able to depict himself as a more powerful being, and with that power, to converse with his fears. Specifically, Héctor references his family's passage to

the United States, when he leapt into the Rio Grande at the age of four—a time he rarely wishes to discuss. Creating comics gives Héctor a multimodal means of surveying and (re)presenting his own personal histories, while working through traumas that have been with him for much of his life (e.g., Jacobs & Dolmage, 2012). As Cathy Caruth (1995) writes, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (p. 4). Building on Caruth’s work, Chute (2010) argues that the medium of comics is especially apt “for expressing that difficult register,” and claims that “the force and value of graphic narrative is how it pushes on the conceptions of the unrepresentable” (p. 2). This dialectic is plainly evident in Héctor’s work<sup>75</sup>.

Angie Zapata (2014) writes that by blending a diverse array of compositional resources – i.e., languages and modes – children are able to think beyond the places, spaces, and identities assigned to them. Héctor’s comics compositions enable him to (re)narrate himself as a heroic figure, rather than as someone who is positioned as a victim of his identity (e.g., Bathina, 2014; Flores-González, 2002). As I have argued, the stories Héctor tells about himself through his comics are drastically different from the ones that are told about him by others. This echoes Shirley Brice Heath’s (1994) contention that “the role of story as a way of explaining and of prompting others to new perceptions makes special sense for those who see their experiences as somehow marginal, as lying outside the mainstream of their associates” (p. 215).

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<sup>75</sup> Proponents of personal narrative (as a tool for identity formation) note that victims of trauma and oppression may become more self-assertive and self-empowering when they position themselves within their pasts (e.g., Bathina, 2014). Wortham (2000) argues that it is not only the act of self-representation, but also the ways in which narrators position themselves, and how they interact with their readers, that allows them to construct and reconstruct identities with agency.





In September 2013, Héctor returned to CMS as a seventh grader, and picked up where he had left off the previous school year. For his second round of *U-Man* comics (which he referred to as “Season 2”), Héctor planned to release another full-length book. He decided to organize his storytelling around a succession of American holidays, and created the multipart storylines “Turkey Disaster,” “Christmas Special,” and “April Fools Day: King of the Jokers.” I considered Héctor’s creative impulses emblematic of his wanting to playfully write himself into American holiday traditions, as he had frequently done with other forms of ritual and pop culture to enact various identities (L. Hall, 2011). Héctor explained to me the genesis of his Thanksgiving-themed story [Figure 6]:

Héctor: Like, I know that some YouTube videos, they make videos of the holidays. So I got an idea to make U-Man come with me and new superheroes that I made. And then the scientist comes back with them. And this turkey comes in. Like, too many turkeys. And then they form into one, and they can't defeat him. So in part four they show him how to defeat him by fire and stuff.

David: So you got this idea from YouTube?

Héctor: No, from Thanksgiving... Like, at the end, they all come together. The four heroes. U-Man, Boy Changer, Stickboy, and Me come together for Thanksgiving.

David: I think Héctor is my favorite hero of those four.

Héctor: That's me.

David: Yeah, I know! I love that! (Fieldnotes, Nov. 25, 2013).



Figure 6. A page from Héctor's *U-Man* story "Turkey Disaster" (Nov. 25, 2013)

In addition to keeping himself as a recurring character in *U-Man*, Héctor added others to his lineup, including Tom, a superhero he named for his new baby brother. Each week, Héctor handed me several new pages of comics, and I found myself responding to them in a number of different ways. On the surface, *U-Man* remained an adventure story, but I also read it as a multimodal commentary on Héctor's life, from his fears to his unassailable sense of humor. It is important to note that even when he was writing about a somber topic, such as the death of a character, Héctor almost always inserted humor into his work. Through Héctor's multimodal storytelling, I was often reminded of the "simultaneity of experience" embodied by many immigrant narratives, wherein "one can experience humor and tragedy, loss and hope, and other – often multiple – ostensibly contradictory emotions at the same time (Campano & Low, 2011, p. 381). As Janks (2010) notes, critical literacy need not always privilege rationality at the expense of joyful transactions with texts and with the world. Héctor's work is an ideal personification of this idea.

In addition to his *U-Man* series, Héctor put much of his creative energy in 2013-14 toward writing and illustrating stories that were explicitly about his family<sup>76</sup>. In these comics, Héctor deliberately uses the visuo-textual medium to enact a manner of storytelling that embodies "individual and collective experience [and puts] contingent selves and histories into form" (Chute, 2010, p. 3). The ongoing story Héctor created in 2014 (which is too long to include here in its entirety) is simply called *Héctor*, and it

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<sup>76</sup> Donald Murray (1991) may have famously argued that "all writing is autobiography," but certainly, some writing is more or less explicitly personal.

centers on a fictionalized version of him (though he is distinct from the “Héctor” character in *U-Man*) battling a monster while searching the desert for his lost brothers. Before formally beginning his story, Héctor included three pages in which he introduced the cast of characters: himself and his brothers Marco and Tomás [Figures 8, 9, and 10].



**Figure 8.** Héctor’s depiction of himself in the prologue to *Héctor*. (Apr. 7, 2014)



**Figure 9.** Héctor's depiction of his brother Marco in the prologue to *Héctor*. (Apr. 7, 2014)

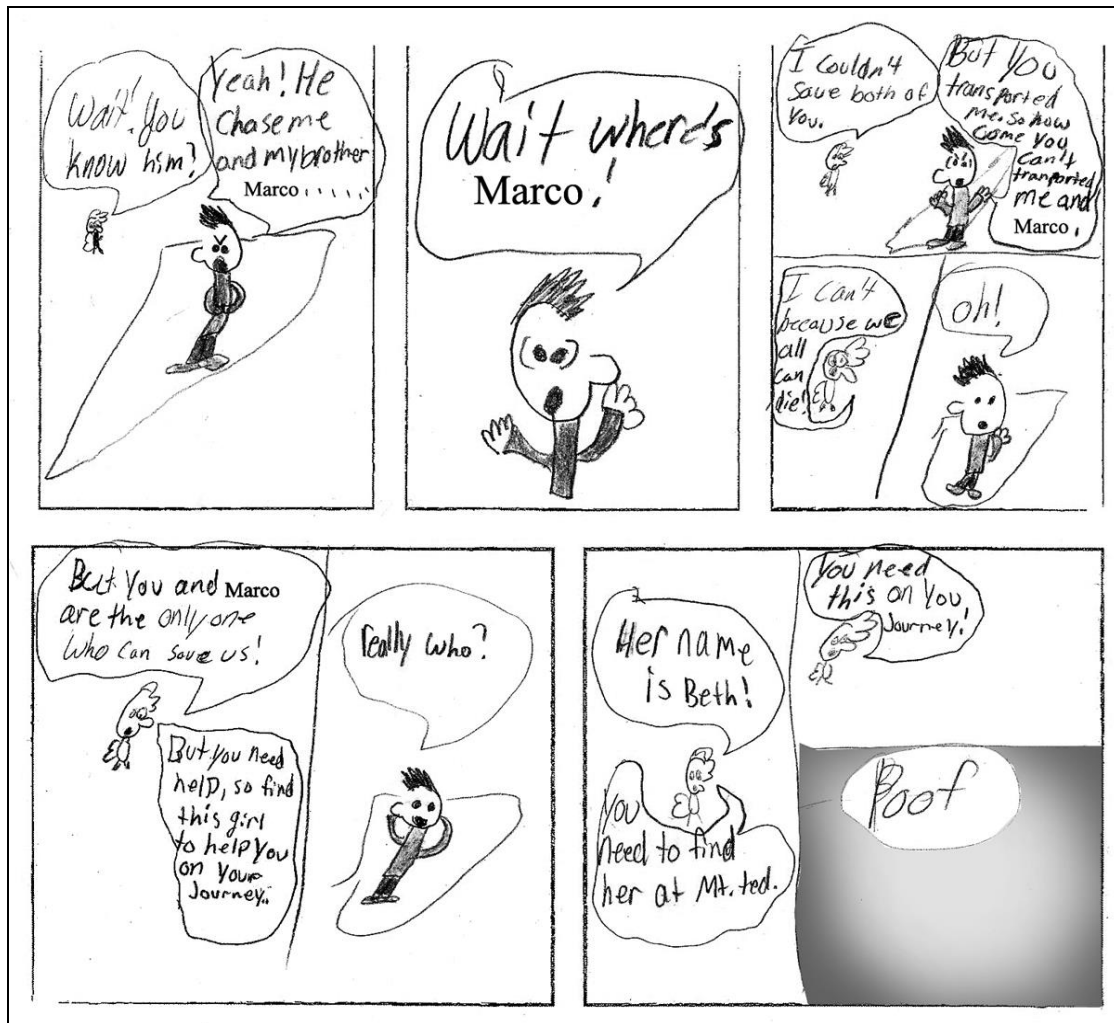


**Figure 10.** Héctor's depiction of his brother Tomás in the prologue to *Héctor*. (Apr. 7, 2014)

The three-page preamble to his eponymous story is significant in establishing Héctor's narrative through a multimodal assemblage of words, facial expressions, body language, color, and visual symbolism. As Chute (2010) writes, the comics medium "brings certain key constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography...and textuality that takes the body seriously" (p. 3). This multipronged concept is made clear through both the similarities and stark differences in Héctor's three drawings. In Figure 8, Héctor represents himself as "always happy" and "nice except for my brother Marco and Tomás who always sleeps." Indeed, his avatar is laughing and is colored in with cheerful hues (yellow, purple, and green). As Martens et al. (2013) explain, "Color helps to create different moods or emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, calm, peace, excitement, embarrassment)" (p. 288). Anderson (1995) continues in this vein, explaining that "the intensity and combinations of color can evoke emotional meaning." (p. 307). Marco, for his part, is harshly colored, with a bright red complexion and a serpent for an arm. His face is contorted into a rictus of anger, with his eyes narrowed and accusatory (e.g., Darda, 2013). Marco claims to be "always mad all the time," and Héctor renders him in diagonal lines, which indicate tension (Martens et al., 2013). From a visual design standpoint, it seems that Héctor construes himself as the hero of the story, and Marco as the villain, until Tomás's page calls the arrangement into question. The baby Tomás, bathed in a soothing grey tone (as opposed to his two brothers, who are each surrounded by negative white space), and literally facing in the opposite direction as his brothers (toward the westward future, rather than the eastern past), poses a question directly to the reader: "Which one do you think is you? Me, Héctor, or Marco?" Our author, Héctor, has

deliberately emphasized the inherent intersubjectivity of the comics medium to allow readers to forge dynamic bonds of identification with his characters (e.g., Mikkonen, 2012). By allowing each brother to comment on the character of his other two brothers, Héctor demonstrates an understanding of partiality and of the value of multiperspectival narration—as readers, we do not know who to position at the center. It is a move that speaks to Héctor’s wealth of authorial experience and confidence.

*Héctor* begins with a title page that playfully claims the story is “FROM THE CREATORS OF *BONE*,” Jeff Smith’s popular comic book series from the 1990s of which Héctor had read all fourteen anthologized volumes. It is not difficult to see the influence of *Bone* and other serialized adventure stories, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Oz* books, on Héctor’s writing. In his story, the action begins on a “dry dry dry day,” when Marco finds a map while he and Héctor are wandering the desert. Soon, the brothers are attacked by a floating head, and chased into a mystical portal. Upon arriving in a strange new land, Marco realizes that he and Héctor are the only objects that are in color; the rest of the world is black and white (see Anderson, 1995). At this point, Marco disappears into another dimension and Héctor is visited by a tiny creature who explains that the floating head is to blame for the world’s lack of color. The creature informs Héctor that he and Marco are “the only one who can save us” [Figure 11] and later refers to Héctor as “the chosen one.” Chapter 1 ends with Héctor naming his task: to “save this world and get back to Philadelphia!”



**Figure 11.** A page from *Héctor* (Apr. 14, 2014)

As with many of Héctor's graphic narratives from his two years in the CCIC, *Héctor* has several recurring motifs: the struggle between good and evil, the need for companionship in order to overcome obstacles, an occupation with death and dying, the inclusion of desert imagery, and, not insignificantly, prolonged journeys. Maliszewski (2013) writes that "creating comics is purposeful, authentic, and honors the writer's life experiences" (p. 235). Indeed, as in his other imaginative work, *Héctor* can be read as an allusion to events from his own life, and in this case, his family's migration through the



Sonoran desert and into the United States. The comics medium, which is well equipped to show time and movement, has a rich history of being mobilized in the service of immigration narratives (e.g., Boatright, 2010; Ghiso & Low, 2013). *Héctor*, while not an obvious example of an immigrant narrative, is about “movement, transformation, and rebirth in a new place, which [are] very much in tune with immigrant experiences” (Campano & Low, 2011, p. 383). Through his comics storytelling, Héctor once again faces his fears – i.e. the loss of family members – and positions himself in the role of the epic hero. As I have discussed throughout this case study, this positioning is part of a larger impulse for Héctor to represent his knowledge, his creativity, his cleverness, and his emotional depth through the construction of an identity anchored in individual and communal strength.

I conclude this first case study by returning to a detail from the cover of Héctor’s 2013 book [the full image appears in Figure 3]. In this inset panel, a *U-Man* villain shouts, “We will destory them!” While it is likely that Héctor meant to write ‘destroy’ – indeed, his writing contains many similar miscues – I find the malapropism (or neologism, perhaps) profound. To destroy or to ‘destory’ a person... In the end, what difference does transposing a single letter make? As Ray Gwyn Smith is quoted as asking in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), “Who is to say that robbing a people of its [stories] is less violent than war?” (p. 75). It is a theft which amounts to the “silencing of a people; the erasure of an identity...an erasure at times subtle, silent, but never sudden” (Z, 2011). Through his



multiliterate transactions via the comics medium, and especially through his multimodal composing, Héctor refuses to be destoried, silenced, or erased. He pushes back against the narratives that, whether due to his stutter<sup>77</sup> or his linguistic heritage, have situated him as lesser in terms of his capacities as a reader, writer, communicator, and intellectual.

In an interview with William Alexander for the National Book Foundation, the graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang stated that, “You learn something about yourself every time you write. I think that’s what storytelling is. You’re trying to figure out what it means to be human. Identity, culture, and belief crop up again and again in comics” (Alexander, 2013). Through comics, Héctor continually reimagines who and how he wants to be, depicting himself as a knight, a superhero, a family member, an ally, and even as “the chosen one.”<sup>78</sup> Héctor is also able, through comics, to (re)position himself as an accomplished reader and writer, a counter-story to ones that have been told about him by his teachers. Through his work, I am reminded how “the making of stories is a political matter with consequences for our perceptions of those represented” (Flores-González, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2006).

The comics medium is crucial to understanding how Héctor enacts various identities and casts aside the narrative of deficit that has so often been cast upon him in school (e.g., Dyson, 1997). Lisa Delpit (1988) writes that, as educators, we must “realize

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<sup>77</sup> Is Héctor’s stutter a metaphor for the unintelligibility of the minoritized voice within official academic discourses? I hesitate to draw this connection, but it is nevertheless there.

<sup>78</sup> Significantly, Héctor affords himself the power to depict himself not only how, but also *when* he wants to, so that he may be proactive in his (re)presentations of himself, rather than simply reactive.

that people are experts on their own lives” and “learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our own world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 297). How might viewing Héctor through an additive lens, and learning about his knowledge and interests through his multimodal authorship practices, impact the education he receives? Quoting Simon (2012) again, I wonder what it would mean “for teachers to become connoisseurs of their students’ talents and interests” (p. 517), as opposed to viewing their minoritized students predominantly as those most in need of remediation. In the case of Héctor, it might mean seeing and storying him as he sees and stories himself.

**“They’re not Supposed to Ever Open it”: How Alexi Employs Visual Modalities to Interweave Critical Literacy and Cultural Identity**

*“Images communicate in a way that can be secret, that can be mysterious, that can be unappreciated.”*

-Scott McCloud

*“Our thoughts should soar upward with the butterfly—not linger with the exuviae that confined him.”*

-Nathaniel Hawthorne

Alexi López joined the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community as a fourth grader during the 2012-13 school year, and quickly became one of its most committed members. From the time he joined, few of our weekly afterschool sessions began without Alexi bursting through the door to the library to breathlessly proclaim that, once again, he was the first student to arrive. Indeed, during his two years of membership (2012-13 and 2013-14), Alexi took pride in being the first member of the CCIC to do a great many things. He enjoyed being first to check out and read new graphic novels so that he could recommend them to his peers, and the first to finish a long series such as *Bone*, *Amulet*, or

*Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*. Alexi also took pride in the sheer number of graphic novels he read, frequently asking me if he was the first CCIC member to require a second, third, or fourth book sign-out sheet. Each week, Alexi checked out as many books as I would allow him to, and he returned the next week having read them multiple times, ready to discuss them in connection to other texts and to his lived experiences.

Alexi has been referred to by his schoolmates as the “librarian” of the CCIC for his knowledge of the space and the texts within it. Indeed, Alexi knows the library far better than I do. If a book is out of place on the shelf, he will be the student to notice and rectify it. If one of his peers is seeking a book recommendation, Alexi is often there to provide it, asking about her or his reading interests in order to make a qualified endorsement. Week after week, Alexi infused the space of our inquiry community with palpable energy and an abiding love for reading and discussing comics. During our final session before a two-week break, Alexi told the group, “I’m gonna die without comic books!” (Fieldnotes, Nov. 25, 2013) — I made sure to give him a larger-than-usual checkout allowance. Alexi is truly a connoisseur of graphica, and the medium matters deeply to how he positions himself as a reader, writer, artist, and intellectual (e.g., Simon, 2012). I have often marveled at the deep levels of concentration and engagement Alexi brings to his reading of graphica. For example, one week, upon arriving in the library for CCIC, Alexi excitedly said, “I’m gonna show you something!” He removed the graphic novel *Amulet vol. 4* (Kibuishi, 2011) from the bookshelf – a book he had read the previous school year – and began flipping through it, telling me he had noticed a similarity between it and the graphic novel *Bad Island* (Tennapel, 2011), which he had

read over the weekend. Navigating both books side by side, Alexi located the common feature: two symbols comprised of concentric circles [Figure 12]. “It’s a sign on a rock. That sign looks like from *Amulet*, look!” Alexi shouted (Transcripts, Nov. 4, 2013). As I recorded in my fieldnotes that day, I was “blown away by the close attention to detail that Alexi pays in his reading of these graphic novels. I never would have noticed such a similarity, and I like to think I’m a fairly observant reader.” In terms of enacting visual literacy, i.e., a “heightened awareness of images and their presentation and representation” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 57), Alexi deftly integrates multiple, synchronous literacies that deal in visuality and spatiality as much as they do in textuality (Low, 2012, p. 370). As many communication scholars have written in recent years, it is these types of visual literacy practices that will serve students like Alexi well in the future (e.g., Burmark, 2002; Hobbs, 1998, Kress, 2003; Monnin, 2011; Versaci, 2008), even as they continue to be undervalued in official school curricula.



**Figure 12.** A side-by-side comparison of the pages from *Bad Island* and *Amulet vol. 4*

Throughout the two academic years that Alexi belonged to the CCIC, I was often inspired by his intellectual curiosity and seemingly endless supply of bonhomie. Week after week, Alexi would amass his pile of graphic novels to check out, and then gambol about the library, talking to anybody he could – in English or in Spanish – about comic books, the daily exigencies of attending CMS, or life in general. What confused me was how poorly my understanding of Alexi aligned with the statements made about him by his teachers. Like Héctor, I heard multiple disparaging comments made about Alexi in conversations spanning two years: that he is “slow to learn and lazy” (Mar. 10, 2014), that “he doesn’t read or write” (Nov. 18, 2013), and that “things just don’t click for him” (May 19, 2014).<sup>79</sup> Once, when I visited his fifth grade classroom, Alexi proudly showed me a project for which he had received a 90% grade. Overhearing this exchange, Alexi’s teacher Mr. Hannigan interjected, “I have to kick him to get him to do anything.” Alexi seemed surprised to hear his teacher talk about him in such a way (Fieldnotes, Jun. 6, 2014), and I too was taken aback. Mr. Hannigan’s story was inconsistent with the deeply engaged student that I saw week after week in the CCIC; moreover, the statement was loaded with overtures to power and violence. In situating Alexi as an apathetic learner who requires outside prodding to be productive, I interpreted Mr. Hannigan’s words as an institutionally rooted attempt to minimize Alexi’s talents, and in effect, to ‘destory’ him<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991) have written that children identified as “slow learners and culturally deprived” are “largely the children of minority groups, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, children who are bilingual, or children who speak English as a second language” (p. 369).

<sup>80</sup> It is not my intention to denounce Mr. Hannigan for how he talked about Alexi, but to describe one example of a larger institutional phenomenon. Mr. Hannigan does not teach in a vacuum, and although I

Several months prior, Mr. Hannigan had told me that he needs to work on correcting Alexi's "bad speaking habits" because "there is no grammar in the Spanish language" (Jan. 13, 2014). I wrote in a research memo that:

I believe Mr. Hannigan is being dismissive of Alexi's linguistic and epistemic resources. What is this bit about Spanish not having a grammar? Of course Spanish has a grammar. All languages do. Does Alexi make oral and written 'miscues' with English language prefixes and suffixes? Sure. Does he sometimes take a few seconds to process his thinking before making a comment? He does, and I believe this is referred to as inhibitory control (?). Does this get in the way of Alexi getting his meaning across to English speakers? I don't think so. The Alexi that I've known for nearly two years is adept at telling wildly inventive stories and communicating all sorts of complicated ideas in both English and Spanish (Analytic Memo, Jan. 14, 2014).

During the interaction in question, I responded to Mr. Hannigan that I think Alexi is quite brilliant, and I mentioned that he reads voraciously, which is excellent for building his vocabulary and literary comprehension. But, as I expressed in my memo, I feared that Alexi was being harmed by a persistent discourse which favors a monolingual paradigm (e.g., García, 2009; Macedo & Bartolomé, 2014) and which positions multilingual students of color from a deficit perspective (e.g., Athanases et al., 2013; Ball, 1998; Brock et al., 2007; Flores et al., 1991; Flores & Schissel, 2014; Laman & Sluys, 2008; López & López, 2010; Rolstad, 2014). As multiple scholars of language and equity have written in recent years, pathologizing multilingual students both relies on and reproduces "dangerous stereotypes, given the extent to which students' identities are associated with their languages" (Gorski, 2013). One such stereotype, of course, is that of the failing

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feel that teachers should take a certain amount of responsibility for the consequences of their words, Mr. Hannigan is not responsible for the existence, ubiquity, or proliferation of the deficit discourses he invokes. Indeed, these discourses are often affirmed within the larger climate of urban education policy.

multilingual student (e.g., Morrison et al, 2003; Reyes, 2012). Such stereotypes often lead to a “policy of erasure” (Rodriguez et al, 2010) by omitting disconfirming evidence – such as a student’s deep engagements with certain forms and practices of literacy – from the official narrative of the student. The student is instead marked as insufficient, pathetic, and not “all” that she or he can be (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 36).

In addition to the comic books and graphic novels that Alexi reads with such vigor in the CCIC, he is also deeply engaged in South Philadelphia’s Mexican-American community, and he often invokes his own and family members’ cultural experiences during our time together. Outside of school, much of Alexi’s day-do-day life is filled by his involvement in a Mexican-American cultural center called Casa Mariposa, at which he learns about history, art, and politics, and where his mother is a volunteer teacher. Alexi speaks often about Casa Mariposa, and I once asked him if the classes he takes there remind him at all of the time he spends in the CCIC:

David: Is there anything similar or different about the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community and the art classes you take at Casa Mariposa?

Alexi: Yes, there is. I have fun at both places. I enjoy hearing about my history. And I enjoy reading comic books (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).

For Alexi, there is not necessarily a firm boundary between his activities in Casa Mariposa and the CCIC. He is able to co-articulate them as key components of his literate identity, which swirl in a variety of ways to inform his reading of the world. In the following section of transcript data, I share part of a conversation in which Alexi introduces me to Casa Mariposa by describing a connection between contemporary comics and a figure from the Mexican Revolution. Specifically, Alexi associates *Squish*, a series of humorous graphic novels about a talking amoeba (Holm & Holm, 2011-2014),



with José Guadalupe Posada, a Mexican political cartoonist from the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries [Figure 13]. The transcript begins when Alexi, who had been reading a volume of *Squish* in the CMS library, brought to my attention the book's use of word balloons:

Alexi: Mr. Dave, you know who started to make these little bubbles? [points to word balloons in *Squish*.]

David: Who?

Alexi: In Spanish?

David: Who?

Alexi: José Guadalupe Posada.

David: José Guadalupe... *who*?

Alexi: José Guadalupe Posada.

David: Who is that?

Alexi: It's a Mexican guy, like the Day of the Dead, that made the skeletons, and made fun of the rich.

David: He's making comics like *Squish* now?

Alexi: He already... He already died. But he's the one that made those bubbles in Mexico.

David: Interesting. So how did you find out about that?

Alexi: I have Mexican... I've got, like, a culture class. At my home. We live in an apartment downstairs of my mom's job, and my mom is the teacher. So I go down, I participate. It's my third year participating. And Monday – today – is Casa Mariposa's 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary, late night university time that it has there. Like, four years that it was there.

David: Oh my goodness. So, you've been going for three years?

Alexi: I was there since the beginning. I was taking other classes.

David: So tell me the name of the class you're taking now.

Alexi: Se Mismo.

David: Se Mismo? And does that mean...?

Alexi: It means, like, Mexico, like you're learning about it.

David: Do you feel any kind of special connection to Posada?

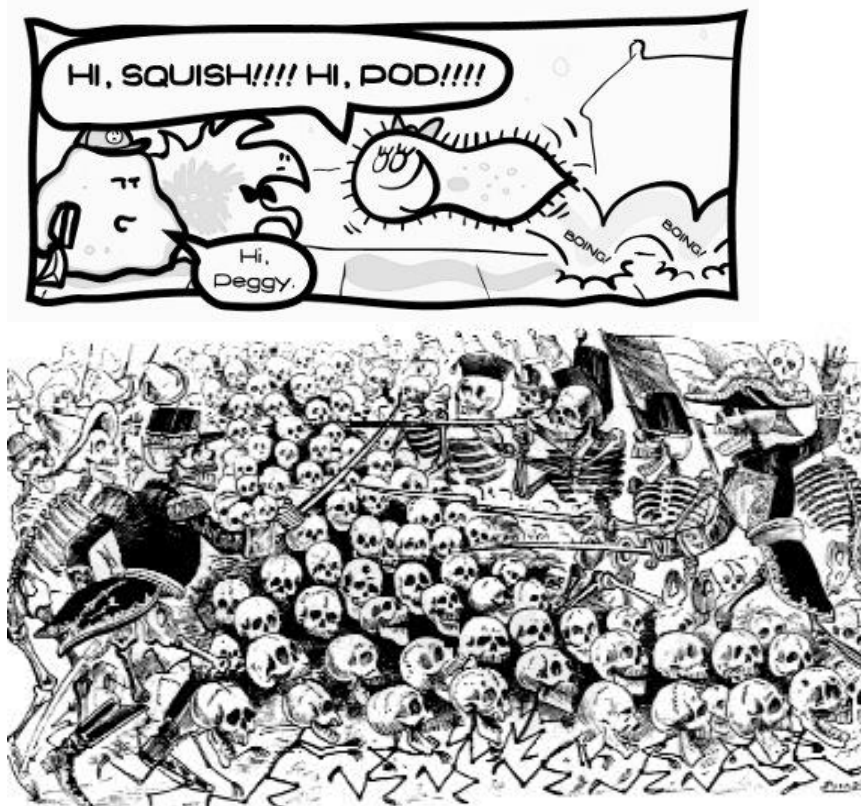
Alexi: Yeah.

David: What is it about him that you think is interesting?

Alexi: When I pointed out that he made those little bubbles, that was interesting. I only knew that he made the skeletons, the skeleton drawings. And made fun of the rich. José Guadalupe Posada, he didn't sell his art, or get rich or anything. He died very poor, as he was born (Transcripts, Nov.

4, 2013).

It is compelling that Alexi uses *Squish*'s word balloons – a regular feature of comics – as an entry point for discussing culture, history, class, and politics, and for positioning himself as the teacher (e.g., Fecho & Botzakis, 2007, p. 554). In spite of my having taken several classes on Mexican literature and history as an undergraduate in Arizona, as well as spending much of my lifetime studying the work of cartoonists, I had been unfamiliar with José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), and I ‘googled’ him later that evening. As I learned, Posada was a political cartoonist who found some success in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but who died in poverty, falling into obscurity until being reclaimed as a folk artist. I was fascinated by how purposefully Alexi had used *Squish*, a relatively ‘light’ graphic novel, as a point of access for talking about his cultural heritage and understandings of complex topics, such as the class struggles that fomented the Mexican Revolution. It is a fairly clear example of Alexi inventing a technique for bringing his knowledge into school in a way that is not part of the official curriculum (Campano, 2007b). I have often read about how comics (and more generally, popular culture) may be used in schools to “close gaps in students' background knowledge” (Brozo, 2013), but rarely do I encounter scholarship that discusses students using comics as a vehicle for sharing their knowledge, experiences, cultural identities, and literate legacies (Dyson, 1997; Hall, 2011; Low & Campano, 2013). This is not a minor semantic squabble, either; the latter framework situates students as epistemic resources in a classroom (who employ pop culture purposefully), and the former as lacking in resources and necessitating remediation (for which pop culture is a delivery system).



**Figure 13.** A page from *Squish* and a political cartoon by José Guadalupe Posada

Further in the transcript, Alexi told me that:

Alexi: When I got to Mr. H's class, I started liking to write.

David: Yeah? I'm so glad. Did you not like to write last year?

Alexi: Not that much.

David: I think it's so important, because you have this entire universe of things in your head, and in your family, and in your culture. And when you write about it, it's like you're saying to the world that you interpret life differently. And you do it with drawing, and you do it with writing. And those murals that you were showing me...that's a kind of writing, isn't it?

Alexi: Yeah, I think it is. And I also make robots out of Sharpie too!

David: [Laughs.] I want to take a picture of those murals that you were making before I forget. Because I thought they were really neat. The ones that were in your notebook. The map of the United States.

Alexi: I'm drawing a little bit much better. I feel like it.

David: I think you're getting better all the time. And I'm so happy to hear that you're writing. Because to me, that's one of the most important things anyone

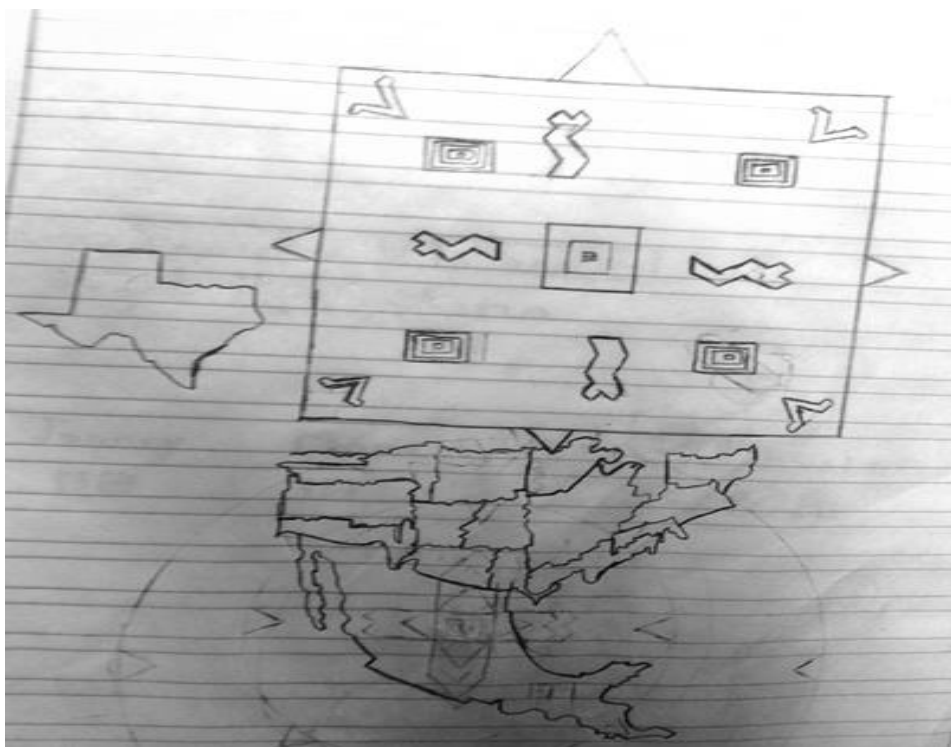
can do (Transcripts, Nov. 4, 2013).

A prominent example of Alexi's enjoyment of writing, in the form of multimodal composition, is a map that he created in his notebook [Figure 14a]. Over the course of two years, I spoke regularly with Alexi about his artwork<sup>81</sup>, which he referred to interchangeably as murals and as comics<sup>82</sup>. (For Alexi, these artistic media informed one another.) Through his participation in Casa Mariposa, and along with older cousins, Alexi was affiliated with several Mexican-American muralists in Philadelphia. He often sketched out ideas he had for murals and comic books, pulling on a wide variety of influences, from Frida Kahlo to *Amulet* graphic novels. In the following pages, I will examine Alexi's map through several lenses of multimodal and pictorial analysis (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Sonesson, 1988) and Chican@ visual studies (e.g., Cowan, 1999; Fedorova, 2009), as well as interspersing pieces of Alexi's personal history that he has shared with me.

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<sup>81</sup> Additional examples of Alexi's work are included in the Appendices.

<sup>82</sup> In the interest of taking an emic perspective on my data (Erickson, 1986), I opt to use Alexi's own terminology for his compositions, even if his map does conform to technical definitions of the comics medium (i.e. the imagery is non-sequential). It is more significant to this study that Alexi refers to his work at times as comics.



**Figure 14a.** Alexi’s map of the United States (Nov. 4, 2013)

Alexi was born in Mexico, and with his mother and sister, passed through Texas as a small child on their way north. While they reside in South Philadelphia now, the American northeast is clearly not the epicenter of Alexi’s composition, nor is cartographic exactitude his objective. In his composition, Alexi is uninterested in producing a replica of the state-sanctioned map of North America as it looked in 2013. He composes, rather, “with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth” (Sacco, 2012, p. xii.)<sup>83</sup>. Employing multimodal and pictorial analysis with a focus on socio-historical contexts, I began identifying visual features in Alexi’s drawing that I felt indicated

<sup>83</sup>As Janks (2014) notes, maps are texts that “shape our knowledge of the landscape” (p. 39). Although maps are often considered neutral, Janks argues that they are subjective, revealing the interests of the map’s producers.

potential buried meanings (Ghiso & Low, 2013). For instance, it is significant that Alexi marks the border between the U.S. and Mexico with a line the same width as those which separate individual U.S. states (Johannessen, 2010, p. 39). “Lines have great expressive potential,” writes Anderson (1995, p. 307), and it seems that to Alexi, the international border is one that should not stand out as distinct, and certainly not as impermeable. In learning more from Alexi about the time he spends at Casa Mariposa, he explained that the organization is named for the monarch butterfly, a creature that continually migrates back and forth across the border with freedom and impunity (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014). To the monarch, as to Alexi, such borders are immaterial<sup>84</sup>.

Upon further viewing of Alexi’s map, and after having conversations with colleagues as part of a descriptive review session<sup>85</sup> (Himley & Carini, 2000), I was left wondering about the symbols above it. What did they mean? Were they some sort of key? Several of the symbols suggested to me Mesoamerican codices or the *Calendar of the Sun* (e.g., Boone & Mignolo, 1994; Fedorova, 2009; Jiménez & Smith, 2008), but I wasn’t sure. Certainly, the use of Aztec imagery “suggests the blending of two distinct traditions” (Savin, 1995, p. 124) and mestizaje or borderland themes (Anzaldúa, 2007/1987; Baca, 2008; Payant, 1999), but I wanted to know more about the images

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<sup>84</sup> Alexi’s older sister Alma (also a member of the CCIC), explained that “the monarch butterfly, for us, it’s like an immigrant, ‘cause it starts from Canada and travels to United States and to Mexico. So, we’re like immigrants, so we think it kind of symbolizes us, how we go for a better life in the United States or Canada for their children, like *us*, to have like a better life, but then they have to travel back. We like how they have wings. It symbolizes you can fly anywhere. It’s like freedom. That’s why they actually chose a butterfly, for the mariposa” (Interview Transcript, Feb. 10, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> The descriptive review is a method of collaborative inquiry that seeks to investigate (and honor) how children actively make sense of the world and of their experiences through drawing and/or writing. By design, descriptive review is oriented around children’s resources, not their supposed deficits.

themselves. What did they mean to Alexi? And why had the state of Texas been isolated from the continent like a free-floating island at the map's left margin? I knew that Alexi's family had passed through Texas during their eventual migration to Philadelphia, but I wondered if there was special significance to its artistic repositioning in a border-crossing composition (Skerrett & Bomer, 2013). Were the reconfigured borders of Alexi's map a tribute to Aztlán, the ancestral, spiritual, and cultural homeland of the Aztecs? (Carrillo, 2013; Leibsohn, 1994). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that all design choices are ideological as well as aesthetic; I wanted to better understand how Alexi employed ideology in his aesthetics.

There is much happening in Alexi's composition in terms of critical visual literacy (Newfield, 2011), and also much that I could not have hoped to understand without asking Alexi to guide me through his multimodal text. As with all forms of interpretive analysis, there are limitations to multimodal and pictorial analysis; one cannot simply deconstruct an image to arrive at its absolute meaning. Fortunately, as a practitioner researcher, I have deliberately positioned myself as a co-inquirer with the members of the CCIC. Alexi and I have known each other for years and we have built a relationship on mutual trust which enables us to collaboratively make meaning of our meaning-making. Beyond basic member checking, all participants in the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community – myself included – are engaged in co-constructing knowledge of our experiences via the reading and composing of multimodal texts. It was not unusual, for instance, for students to hold spirited discussions in the CMS library about their intentions as artists and writers. I thus sought Alexi's input into the ways that, through his

map, he was employing visual modalities to critically represent issues of nationality and identity.

When I asked Alexi to elaborate on the symbols in his map, he guided me to meanings that I could not have otherwise ascertained:

David: Is this from Casa Mariposa that you saw [these symbols]?

Alexi: It was from in art there. You see that circle?

David: Yeah, the circle that's kind of faint in the background? Yeah, tell me about it.

Alexi: I was making it, just that, I knew what it meant. Just that it didn't look so good. It looks more like... You see like the lockers? 'Cause you see the line?

David: Yeah, it's like the twisty combination part of a locker.

Alexi: Yeah but, it didn't go in the front. I did it on purpose. 'Cause they're not supposed to ever open it.

David: You mean they're not supposed to open the mural?

Alexi: No (Interview Transcript, Mar. 10, 2014).



**Figure 14b.** Alexi's map of the United States, with his semi-erasures restored and emphasized (Nov. 4, 2013)



Within his comics map (Moore, 2009), Alexi fuses together Aztec imagery with school locker combinations, then erases his symbol mostly into the background, for the purpose of keeping his knowledge safe and secure [Figure 14b, with Alexi's erasures amplified<sup>86</sup>]. In the process of obscuring and adding layers to his map, Alexi has created a palimpsest, which, as Kimberly Powell (2008) writes, often serves "as a metaphor for the re-inscription and legibility of discourses situated within institutional power structures" (p. 7). It is perhaps not surprising that Alexi feels the need to symbolically 'lock away' his cultural and experiential knowledge, considering both the power structures that exist within his school – structures that have at times positioned him through a lens of deficit – and larger discourses around immigration in the United States. Alexi is keenly aware of the social and economic precarities facing undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Latin America, including members of his family and community in South Philadelphia (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997; López & López, 2010). In his neighborhood, as throughout much of the U.S., numerous immigrants regularly encounter "poverty, lack of adequate healthcare, deportations, [and] linguistic stigma" (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015, p. 39). Alexi possesses intimate knowledge of these precarious circumstances, and he

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<sup>86</sup> ● It is important to note that, even though Alexi erased the image of the lock/pictograph, it still remained visible. As Chute (2010) writes, "Against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (p. 2). It is this complicated balance of presence and absence that Alexi's composition embodies.

● It is likewise significant that Mexico appears at the center of Alexi's lock/pictograph (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 203-211), as his national heritage is the aspect of his identity that Alexi feels he must keep secure.

● Finally, I would be remiss in my role as a multimodal analyst if I did not bring up the visual similarity between Alexi's image of the lock/pictograph and the concentric circles from *Amulet* and *Bad Island* that he compared [Fig. 12].

powerfully employs multimodal composition to simultaneously invoke and camouflage his knowledge of injustice.

Before beginning my analysis of Alexi's map, I asked him to describe his artistic processes. As we discussed:

David: What kinds of murals do you make?

Alexi: It all started when we were in a garage. In Magic Garden<sup>87</sup>. They have a garage in the back, right?

David: Yeah?

Alexi: How do you say, um, they were making these shirts with these little – like, puff paint on it – like stamps. And then I saw a stamp that looked like a mural. And then I got it stuck in my head. I just grabbed a notebook and a pencil and start drawing.

David: So that was the beginning of your mural? Alexi, that is really cool. It shows how art inspires different art, and how *that* inspires different art.

Alexi: At art class, I got ideas from others, and then combined it with my ideas, and got something good that I liked.

David: I love that you take inspiration from different things and kind of mix it together. 'Cause it's like you're taking things from Posada, and you're taking things from graphic novels like *Amulet*, and taking things from the Magic Gardens, but you're making it all your own, right? Like, at the end, it becomes Alexi. It's your point of view. It's your creativity.

Alexi: Can I ask you a question?

David: Of course.

Alexi: Were you at U. Penn at the Day of the Deads?

David: I wasn't there. Tell me what I missed.

Alexi: It was this skeleton that was big. And there was a lot of murals. There was two big ones, the main ones. And at the hall, you could see the main door, there's this hall, but they put all the murals of companies that work with the Mexicans and fight for the immigrants, and all of that. And they were making a competition, which one was better. And the first one won \$200. And the second place my cousins won. His dad won second place.

David: What did they win for?

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<sup>87</sup> Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, on South Street, is "a mosaicked visionary art environment, gallery, and community arts center that preserves, interprets, and provides access to Isaiah Zagar's unique mosaic art environment and his public murals" ([www.phillymagicgardens.org/](http://www.phillymagicgardens.org/)).

Alexi: Like, which one did they like more and which one fought more for people. And, at third place, my mom, where she works, won third. \$100. Casa Mariposa (Transcript, Nov. 11, 2013).

In contributing to artistic movements that mobilize around immigration issues (e.g., Bathina, 2014; Delgado & Barton, 1998; Peña, 2003), Alexi has been encouraged to cultivate an activist stance (Campano, Ghiso, Yee, & Pantoja, 2013; Montero et al., 2013). He composes for social action (Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Christensen, 2000; VanDerPloeg & Steffen, 2002) and uses multiple modalities to represent his experiences in ways which connect to “historical, political, economic, and social processes” (Warriner, 2009, p. 163). Through his involvement in Casa Mariposa and the CCIC, Alexi has been able to (inter)act within various community networks, and to enact a wide array of literacy practices that are critical and multimodal in nature (e.g., Harste, 2014; Whitin & Whitin, 2012). Alexi’s re-appropriation and blending of diverse semiotic, symbolic, and cultural materials serves as a powerful example of how children, and marginalized children in particular, can imaginatively mobilize and represent their experiences for the purpose of critique (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Honeyford, 2014). Using both ends of his pencil, Alexi responds to a ‘politics of erasure’ with *literal* erasure, and demonstrates how the semiotic qualities of stasis and silence afford multimodal composers such powerful symbols (Dadey, 2009, p. 2). Unfortunately, if a school environment values neither its students’ multimodal forms of meaning-making nor their cultural and experiential funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), then critical compositions such as Alexi’s will do little to shift the still-dominant narrative that low-income multilingual learners are at an intellectual deficit compared to

their monolingual middle class peers (e.g., Cowan, 1999; Falchi et al., 2014; Zapata, 2014).



Toward the end of the 2013-14 school year, Mr. Hannigan, while discussing several of his students that belonged to the CCIC, informed me that Alexi has “no parental involvement at home” (Fieldnotes, May 30, 2014). This is something I know to be patently false. Alexi’s mother and stepfather are deeply committed to their children, working several jobs – including in the St. Cabrini parish rectory – to support their family. Alexi’s mother is also a volunteer teacher at Casa Mariposa, where she makes sure that her children continue to learn about their Mexican heritage<sup>88</sup> and participate in advocacy for immigrants’ rights. I recognize Mr. Hannigan’s statement about Alexi’s home life – not an uncommon narrative to be wrongly applied to Chican@ families (e.g., Fuller et al., in press; Watanabe, 2015; debunked by Valencia, 2002) – as an invocation of the “culture of poverty” discourse (Lewis, 1959) that is frequently predicated on stereotypes of people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and which also breathes new life into those stereotypes (see the work of Ruby Payne (1996) for a rather invidious example of this). As Bomer et al. (2008) write, the “culture of poverty” discourse draws “from a longstanding U.S. tradition of viewing the poor from a deficit perspective,” leading to rampant teacher misconceptions about their students (p. 2500). Aside from Mr.

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<sup>88</sup> Alma once told me that prior to attending Casa Mariposa, she and Alexi were sent to a preschool where they learned “how to speak Aztec again. Like, Nahuatl and all those” (Transcripts, Apr. 21, 2014).

Hannigan's statement being inaccurate, it represents a prevalent narrative which positions children of color as "vulnerable, susceptible, and in need of particular forms of adult intervention" (Petrone & Lewis, 2012, p. 256).

As Laman and Sluys (2008) write, students' "linguistic diversity is often seen as problematic," rather than as advantageous in academic settings (p. 265). Such subtractive thinking has led to the metanarrative of the 'problem student' who brings cultural, linguistic, and cognitive deficiencies with her/him to school that must be consciously unlearned (e.g., Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). From this perspective, academic 'problems' are located within students' cultures and families, rather than in racist and classist systems that both reproduce oppressive conditions and ignore the wide ranges of ways in which students enact intellectual identities. An example of this subtractive mentality can be seen in Mr. Hannigan searching for reasons to label Alexi an under-motivated student with poor grammar and no parental involvement, rather than recognizing evidence to the contrary.

Listening to the stories children tell through a variety of modalities can enable educators to better honor minoritized students' critical knowledge of the world, and to (re)position them as intellectuals, artists, and activists (Campano, 2007a; Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Himley & Carini, 2000; Low & Campano, 2013; Schultz, 2003; Vasudevan, 2006). During Alexi's two years as a member of the CCIC, I have come to see him as a highly engaged reader, author, and artist, with a deeply critical sensibility and the desire to represent, through a complex assembly of words and symbols, his knowledge. From drawing connections between a talking amoeba and José Guadalupe

Posada, to energetically reading and discussing the minutiae of graphic novels, to reimag(in)ing the map of North America, Alexi manifests critical visual literacy with joy and a commitment to hybridity (both in terms of culture and media). Regrettably, Alexi's sophisticated literacy practices have been undervalued in the classroom.

There is an enduring need for educators to continually 'cross borders' in order to better know our students and ourselves, and to subsequently transform our teaching practices (Faltis, 2013; Hall, 2014)<sup>89</sup>. Taking an inquiry stance on one's own teaching practice, in which an educator seeks to identify and disrupt problematic patterns by constructing conditions which allow for status quos to be unsettled (e.g., Campano, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon & Campano, 2013), provides a powerful means for 'crossing borders' through the 'radical' act of listening to and learning from students' interests (Simon, 2012). Krista Ratcliffe (2005) describes the need to "listen pedagogically," stressing the value of hearing the oft-overlooked stories of community members and students in the cultivation of a critical inquiry stance (p. 154). To be sure, critical teacher inquiry is a vital component in challenging the hegemony of Whiteness and monocultural, monolingual, middle class standards of achievement in American classrooms (Aceves, 2008; Athanases et al., 2012; Delpit, 1988; Fecho, 2004; Michael, 2015). Interweaving the stories and artwork produced by students, as part of a larger

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<sup>89</sup> Such borders might include the rift between traditionally school-sanctioned (verbocentric/alphabetic) literacy practices and students' multimodal literacy practices (e.g., Low, 2012), or sociocultural divisions (cultural, linguistic, economic, etc.) between conceptions of how a 'good student' and 'poor student' look, speak, act, and learn.

commitment to critical praxis, is concomitant with challenging the widespread impact of borders in schools and in society (e.g., Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

Goodwin and Macdonald (1997) write that “when the culture of the classroom...rejects the cultural heritage of students, then students are silenced, and shared meaning making is impeded” (p. 215). To close this case study, I would like to return to the words Alexi used to explain the combination lock that he buried below his map: *“It didn't go in the front. I did it on purpose. ‘Cause they're not supposed to ever open it.”* The word “they” is significant here. *Who* is not supposed to ‘open’ his map? From *whom* does Alexi feel the need to conceal his knowledge of the world? Alexi’s instructions serve as a strong reminder that one may endeavor to be the type of educator that recognizes and honors students as artists, activists, and intellectuals, rather than being the “they” from whom students feel they must keep their precious knowledge locked away.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Through their blending of art and writing, Héctor and Alexi refuse to be “destoried.” Each young author employs a range of symbol systems – though in the case of Alexi’s map, written language is not one of them – to share their knowledge, to participate in their own educations, to engage in critique through de- and reconstruction, and to intervene on their own behalf (Campano, 2007b). As Berry et al. (2014) write, the use of multimodality allows “for new ways of replaying histories across space and time” (p. 281), and Héctor’s and Alexi’s work bears out this concept admirably. What both student’s compositions represent is the need to view all children and youth as

cosmopolitan intellectuals (Campano & Ghiso, 2011; DeJaynes & Curmi, 2015) who have the capacities to think transculturally, across genres and modes, transforming any texts they encounter into the materials of compositional innovation and (re-)design (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010; Janks, 2000; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Low & Campano, 2013). It is the need to view all students – and especially students who have been historically marginalized – through a resource orientation rather than a deficit orientation, and to recognize them as theorists, activists, epistemologists, and artists (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995).

It is essential to think about literacy and identity broadly, as a constellation of multimodal meaning-making practices that are inextricably linked to cultural identity and issues of power and equity. Jerome Bruner (1991) writes that “identity links the construction of a self with the construction of a world, and that like all other aspects of world-making, self-making depends upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted, its opportunities and constraints” (p. 77). Through multiple symbol systems, and by bridging popular culture, personal history, and cultural heritage, Héctor and Alexi have found many opportunities and few constraints. They take the symbolic materials around him and import them into their semiotic toolkits (Siegel, 2012, p. 674), mashing them together and bringing them to bear on their world-making and self-making, whether it is talking about figures from Mexican history, critiquing U.S. border policies, or (re)narrating themselves as readers and authors. As acts of counter-storytelling (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 1998), Héctor’s and Alexi’s compositions

illustrate the power of nonverbal modes of expression to attract attention, convey critique, and stimulate action. Images and actions can broaden, complement,



enrich, and complicate what can be communicated by words alone. The creative use of provocative symbols [and] familiar associations...provides a different kind of engagement that often expands the audience, and thus the range, of potential activists (Hodgson & Brooks, 2007, p. 17).

“A pedagogy of possibility,” write Berry et al., depends on “a critical hope that would allow space for the coexistence of stories of literacy and schooling that might otherwise compete with one another” (2014, p. 281). Thinking pedagogically, I am enthusiastic about students utilizing popular multimodal texts and formats – such as comics – as platforms for inquiring into issues of culture, power, and identity, especially when they are invited to bring their lived experiences and cultural legacies into those inquiries (Moya, 2009, p. 45). As data from this chapter indicate, such inquiries can lead to powerful work. Héctor’s and Alexi’s compositions are but a few examples of how pedagogies which utilize popular culture (Alvermann et al., 2001; Hall, 2011; Simon, 2012; Vasudevan, 2006) may enable educators to better honor their students’ stories, their rich literary and activist legacies, and their cultural identities. The intersections of culture, history, and art are deeply complex. Who could have made a connection between José Guadalupe Posada and a talking amoeba? Alexi could and did. We are, after all, a storied and a storying people, and we possess many modes for telling stories, for drawing connections, and for representing our histories.

I think back to Alexi’s assertion that he didn’t like to write previously, but that he started to enjoy writing as a fifth grader, and I recall Gloria Anzaldúa’s rhetorical question-and-answer:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By creating a new mythos

– that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave – I create a new consciousness.

It is, as the Luis Rodriguez quote leading off this chapter portends, the consciousness of the world breaking away from the strangle grip of an archaic social order.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Students Discussing, Performing, and Regulating Gender through Inquiries into the Multimodal Medium of Comics

#### Introduction: The Problematic ‘Herstory’ of Mainstream Comics

*“The graphic novel is a man’s world, by and large.”*

-Charles McGrath, 2004

I begin this chapter with a short data ‘teaser’:

David: What makes a great comic book creator, in your mind?

Desiree: It would have to be a girl, ‘cause there are a lot of guy comic book creators. She would have to be strong. She’ll make multicultural characters, not only Caucasian people. Like, they’ll all be different personalities. One can even be disabled, if she wanted to. She’d make them like real people because they’re not only, like, *White kinds of book people*, but multicultural people. That would be the best comic book creator to me.

David: Do you think that there are a lot of women who work in the comic book industry professionally?

Desiree: Well, they made a comic book about Ms. Marvel. She’s a woman. So I think yeah, there are.

David: So you think there are good role models for women in comics?

Desiree: Yeah. Maybe I’ll be one (Interview transcript, May 30, 2014).

Fifth grader Desiree’s responses to my interview questions get to the heart of several basic contradictions within loosely-defined ‘comics culture.’<sup>90</sup> For a popular medium that has appealed to a wide variety of readers since its origins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its midcentury and early 21<sup>st</sup> century resurgences, the “Big Two” publishers<sup>91</sup> – DC and

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<sup>90</sup> Building on the work of comics scholars, I refer to ‘comics culture’ as one in which “avid participants of popular culture construct a meaningful sense of self” (Brown, 1997, p. 13) by engaging with others in a specific form of pop fandom. Duncan & Smith (2009) write that “to identify oneself as a fanboy [or fangirl]... may be to express one’s status as someone who is deeply immersed in comics culture” (p. 174).

<sup>91</sup> There are many graphica publishers other than DC and Marvel, and indeed, CCIC members enjoyed hundreds of texts from ‘midstream’ publishers like First Second, Boom, Image, Oni, Graphix, and many

Marvel Comics – have for decades proceeded as if they were unconcerned with courting a range of readers wider than boys and young men (e.g., Berlatsky, 2014; Sanghani, 2014)<sup>92</sup>. There is a pervasive and largely still-accurate belief that in the world of mainstream comics<sup>93</sup>, women are poorly represented both on the page and in the profession. Until recent years there had been precious few notable female creators at the “Big Two,” to the degree that writers such as Ann Nocenti, Gail Simone, and Louise Simonson were remarkable for having succeeded at all in the male-dominated comics industry of the 1980s and 90s. Today, there are more women working in mainstream comics, but the shift has been far from drastic. Perhaps there are greater changes awaiting the next generation of comics creators. As Desiree mentions in the opening transcript snippet, the writer of *Ms. Marvel* – G. Willow Wilson – is a woman, and indeed, she is frequently recognized as a role model for both women and minorities in comics. As Wilson herself explains (in Sava et al., 2014):

I think we are at a point in comic book history where there is unprecedented openness to diversity... When I do speaking gigs and chat with young adult readers, their outlook is far more globalist and pragmatic than that of my peers

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more. Still, when most people think of comic books, they think of DC’s and Marvel’s flagship characters. These are the characters that launch billion-dollar movie franchises, appear on lunchboxes, and impact pop culture to the greatest degree. DC’s and Marvel’s titles are also those most frequently read and discussed by CCIC members. As a literacy (and identity) researcher, I must attend to the pop supremacy of the “Big Two.”

<sup>92</sup> In 2015, 11-year-old girl named Rowan Hansen wrote an open letter to DC Comics, saying: “I love your comics, but I would love them a lot more if there were more girls. Please do something about this. Girls read comics too and they care.” After Hansen’s letter went viral on Twitter, DC responded that the company is “working hard to create more superhero fun for girls” (Molloy, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> I use the term “mainstream” to denote comics which are not explicitly alt-comix. Thus, I include midstream publishers (i.e. companies that are not the “Big Two”) within my mainstream distinction, and exclude self-published and ‘underground’ work, even though this is where the most daring gender explorations occur within the comics medium. Unfortunately, this work – by artists such as Phoebe Gloeckner and Alison Bechdel – is rarely kid-appropriate.

when we were that age. They are willing to see themselves in unexpected characters, unexpected scenarios. They have that innate flexibility... I hope the success of *Ms. Marvel* will open doors for other characters and other creators. Readers are clearly ready. There are new stories waiting to be told. We are really at a tipping point (n.p.).

Tipping point or no, the dominant culture of the mainstream comics industry today is still one in which “straight White men... write and illustrate the majority of titles, and those books tend to star straight White male protagonists” (Sava et al., 2014, n.p.). In July 2014, the month following the endpoint of my dissertation study, there were four female writers and two female artists working on DC’s titles, and three female writers and one female artist working on Marvel’s titles<sup>94</sup>. While creative teams change frequently, this proportion of women to the dozens (if not hundreds) of men working on DC and Marvel titles at any given moment feels consistent month-in and month-out. Independent and midstream comics publishers *do* publish more work from female creators than DC and Marvel, but the portion is still far from balanced. And with two companies taking nearly 73% of the comic book industry’s combined market share by unit (source: Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc.), as the “Big Two” go, so goes the industry. This is why Desiree’s proclamation that maybe she’ll *be* a good role model for women in comics is so promising.

*On* the page, the portrayal of female characters has been aggressively regressive. In mainstream comics, women have often been limited to roles as “sexy superheroines in sexy costumes being put in sexy situations” (Kahn, 2014a), or to be “killed, raped,

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<sup>94</sup> For DC: Gail Simone, Amanda Conner, Ann Nocenti, and Christy Marx (writers) and Nicola Scott and Emanuela Lupacchino (artists). For Marvel: Kelly Sue DeConnick, G. Willow Wilson, and Jen Van Meter (writers) and Joanna Estep (artist).

depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured...or [have] other life-derailing tragedies befall her” in order to motivate male characters by her suffering (Simone, 1999). Male characters have faced a different sort of gender distortion, through their representation as hyper-masculine individuals who employ violence almost indiscriminately. These muscular supermen and brusque antiheroes typically possess as much machismo and bloodlust as they do actual personality. In neither case does it feel as if male or female characters are permitted to transcend the constrictive definitions of gender<sup>95</sup> allotted them; masculine, feminine and heterosexual thus become the “only logical options” (Blaise, 2014, p. 119). Beyond the manly men and womanly women of mainstream comics, there have been precious few agender, pangender, transgender, or genderfluid characters – and even fewer who are human<sup>96</sup> – to complicate the traditional male/female binary construct (McDonough, 2013). As with DC and Marvel, in mainstream comics, male and female remain the “Big Two.”

The single-note absurdity of gender depictions in graphica, as well as the large followings that strongly gendered characters such as Wonder Woman and Superman have maintained for decades, have led to numerous surveys, inquiries, and critiques of mainstream comics (e.g., Darowski, 2014; Hanley, 2014; Lepore, 2014; Madrid, 2009; Robbins, 1996; Stuller, 2010). Non-academic criticism exists as well, in the form of blogs

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<sup>95</sup> I employ the term “gender” to refer to psychological and social (as opposed to biological) aspects of sexual identity, which are constructive, performative, and culturally situated. While I do not endorse a simple male/female binary, binary constructs are inescapable in contemporary Western society and must be attended to in empirical studies (e.g., Blaise, 2014; Butler, 1990; Heggie, 2015).

<sup>96</sup> I find myself deeply moved by a subterranean “Moloid” creature coming out as transgendered to her siblings in Marvel’s *FF* #6 by Matt Fraction and Mike Allred (see Jono, 2013). I wonder why there aren’t more human characters having such experiences in all-ages comics.

such as *Escher Girls*, which “archives and showcases the prevalence of certain ways women are depicted in illustrated pop media, . . . often in ridiculous, impossible or disturbing ways that sacrifice storytelling” (Angelwings, 2012), and *The Hawkeye Initiative*, in which contributors post their own drawings of Marvel’s Clint Barton (and other prominent male characters) arranged in the supple poses of female characters to illustrate “how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics” (Skjaldmeyja, 2012). Academic explorations of gender in comics have focused primarily on the lives and oeuvres of professional cartoonists (e.g., Chute, 2014; Robbins, 1999), and gender representations within professionally manufactured comics (e.g., Brown, 1999; Madrid, 2009). Relatively few studies have attempted to empirically examine how children and youth engage with issues of “gender/sex/uality” (Blaise, 2014) *through* their literate transactions with the comics medium (for several exceptions, see Dallacqua & Sutton, 2014; Danziger-Russell, 2013; Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000; Moeller, 2011). And yet, if literacy and identity are co-extensive (Simon, 2012), and if many readers develop literate identities through their transactions with comics (Botzakis, 2009), then it stands to reason that comics, and the ways in which gender is represented by the popular medium (and other entertainments spun from it) must impact the ways in which comics readers and creators come to understand, perform, reproduce, and contest gender categories, processes, roles, and norms.

Gender was a salient topic throughout the 2.5-year lifespan of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community. As I explained in the (Hi)story of the Questions section of chapter

one, the group was comprised exclusively of boys during its first iteration in the spring of 2012. When three 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls began attending the next fall, there was an uneasy renegotiation of norms, and several of the group's original members expressed their displeasure at having girls in "their" space. One boy wondered aloud if he'd still be able to take his shoes off (Fieldnotes, Jan. 11, 2013). As a practitioner researcher, I have remained attentive to ways in which gender is talked about, performed, and embodied in the space of CCIC sessions, by (self-identifying) female and male members alike<sup>97</sup>. By examining students' gendered interactions with one another and their vocalized responses to gender in the comics texts they read or choose not to read (in terms of both creators and characters), I have endeavored to develop a fuller and more nuanced understanding of *how* gender matters in the CCIC. Pursuant to this inquiry, I have also been interested in understanding how students collaboratively make sense of gender features, roles, and identities through their literate engagements with graphica.

Research in multimodalities indicates that reading popular texts across semiotic modes can provide additional spaces for reflection, critique, and identity performance (e.g., Fairbanks & Price-Dennis, 2011; Honeyford, 2014; Vasudevan, 2006; Whitin & Whitin, 2012). The purpose of this data chapter is to examine how members of the CCIC employed the multimodal medium of comics as a platform for collaboratively engaging

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<sup>97</sup> I should mention that I am not necessarily an 'expert' on gender, and I certainly do not float above the contexts about which I write, like some critical and all-knowing eye in the sky. Yes, I make time to read critical scholarship on gender, which contests binary thinking, and which positions gender not as a noun but as a verb (i.e. gender as process and performance). But I must admit that I find myself falling back into binary thinking all too frequently, and I often conflate terms such as gender and sex (Blaise, 2014). This is one reason that I am so drawn to collaborative inquiries into issues of gender with young people. When I qualitatively examine ways in which children and youth come to make sense of gender, I also engage in reflexive self-inquiry. Through the process of collecting data in the CCIC and writing this chapter, I too am learning about how gender identities operate and fluctuate in various sociocultural contexts.



in inquiries around issues of gender specifically (e.g., Dyson, 1997; Moeller, 2011). In the sections to follow, I explore CCIC members' responses to visual depictions (and omissions) of gender in comics, discuss how students' understandings and performances of gender impact the graphic texts they select and reject, and examine how students – through the enforcement of borders – reproduce and/or challenge stereotypes about gender identities. Much of my analysis will be undertaken through lenses drawn from gender studies in/and education, which I employ to examine how gender roles are constructed, maintained, negotiated, and resisted in social learning contexts (e.g., Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

### **“Some People Got Different Ways of Drawing Different Genders”**

One of the defining characteristics of the comics medium is its visuo-textuality (Groensteen, 2007). As I described in my chapter one review of literature, through its “hybrid and spatial form,” *graphica* lends itself to depicting multiple interwoven subjectivities (Chute, 2010, p. 5). The subjectivity of comics imagery is the result of, among other conventions of the medium, its deliberate abstraction. Very few cartoonists strive for photorealism in their work, and this is by design (Sacco, 2012)<sup>98</sup>. As Scott McCloud writes in his groundbreaking text *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), due in large part to their refusal of realism, cartoonists can strive for universality. “The more cartoony a face is,” writes McCloud, “the more people it could be said to

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<sup>98</sup> The graphic journalist Joe Sacco writes that “there is nothing *literal* about a drawing... There is none of the photographer’s luck of snapping a picture at precisely the right moment. A cartoonist “snaps” his [or her] drawing at any moment he [or she] chooses. It is this choosing that makes cartooning an inherently subjective medium” (2012, p. xii).

describe” and the more iconographic it can be (p. 31). The implication is that a greater number of readers relate to a character whose features are abstract than to a character whose features are specific – an effect McCloud refers to as “amplification through simplification” (p. 30).

In several of the comic books and graphic novels that CCIC members read (both “Big Two” and midstream), the illustration styles were so abstract or ‘cartoony’ that artists signified a character’s gender with shorthand visual signifiers – such as clothing, hair, and other accoutrements – or not at all. As Dallacqua and Sutton (2014) write, reading visual texts impacts students’ understandings of gender, and graphic novels provide openings for students to use the visible features of characters’ gender performances to talk about issues of identity. For members of the CCIC, visual signifiers did indeed lead to spirited discussions and collaborative inquiries into gender and identity. Within these exchanges, comics did not always remain the central focus; students weaved in and out of topics and drew connections to their own lives, but graphic texts were always the anchor of the discussion.

### **1. *Broxo***

One afternoon, Nellie sat at a table in the CMS library, flipping through the graphic novel *Broxo* (Giallongo, 2012). Alexi, who had been walking behind Nellie at the time, glanced down and saw that an earring-clad character was not wearing a shirt [Figure 1]. Alexi quickly commented on his observation, which in turn led to a short discussion of the character’s gender identity among several students sitting near Nellie:

Alexi: Ewww, she's a woman!  
Nellie: No, that's a man.

Alexi: Oh, that looks like a woman.  
 Tyler: It's a guy!  
 David: What makes you think it's a woman?  
 Nellie: Earrings.  
 David: You think the earrings?  
 Raman: Is that that book *Broxo*? No no no no no. It is a woman, because it's a princess. It says in the back.  
 Tyler: But the one they were looking at, they think it might be a male.  
 David: Sometimes you can't tell, right?  
 Tyler: Yes.  
 Nellie: I think *this* one is the princess [points at a different character], the one with the kind of lighter colored hair.  
 Tyler: Yep.  
 Nellie: Ehhhh...*that* doesn't look right. [points to a character's silhouette, which shows a sharp bulge near the crotch.]  
 David: Well, it's because the person's against the sun, right? So that's why they look like a dark silhouette?  
 Nellie: It still doesn't look right... (Transcripts, Nov. 25, 2013).



**Figure 1.** Images from *Broxo* (Giallongo, 2012)

The group's short discussion of the images from *Broxo* is significant for several reasons. Alexi, Nellie, and Tyler take up Zack Giallongo's visual "signifiers" (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) in order to make claims about one character's supposed gender identity. Taking as a given that images and icons represent objects and entities, but are not *actually* those objects and entities (see Rene Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of*

*Images*), viewers must use the signifiers provided them by an image's composer to understand *what* is being represented. Much of visual literacy, then, is analogous to Wolfgang Iser's (1978) theory of textual literacy: gaps are filled and semiotic information is assembled by the reader/viewer so that meaning is continuously and sensibly constructed (Low, 2012).

In the image to the left, Giallongo's illustration clearly represents the upper half of a humanoid figure whose arms and face are uplifted. In the image to the right, the silhouette of one character appears to pierce the silhouette of another character with a sharp object. Taken out of context, a reader would have no way of knowing who these characters are or why they are doing what they are doing, but the majority of readers could supply background information so that the images make some amount of sense. Few readers, for instance, would assume that the character in the left panel has no legs; rather, the character's legs would be assumed to exist outside of the frame (i.e. object permanence). Likewise, few readers possessing knowledge of comics conventions would assume that the characters actually stand one inch tall, or that alphabetic text floats in midair. Most readers automatically decode these conventions and move along. The rest of a story's visual content, however – such as why a character is motivated to lift her or his arms to the sky, and what her/his body language means – is up to the interpretation of the viewer. Image-text interpretation is very much a function of a reader's social position and background knowledge, her or his values, and of course, the position of the image in relation to the surrounding text.

In their study of young readers' assignments of gender to characters in award-winning picturebooks, Crisp and Hiller (2011) write that "there is no singular way of being (or appearing) 'male' or 'female'" (p. 204). However, readers of images frequently use the information an image provides them with, and supplement it with their own gender understandings in order to arrive at sites of logical comprehension. As Crisp and Hiller argue, "Despite any reliance on culturally constructed norms, images are intended to be interpreted by the reader, who may or may not share the same conceptions about gender as the illustrator [and author]" (p. 205). In Giallongo's image to the left, for instance, visual signifiers such as the character's earrings or her/his relatively flat chest may have different gendered connotations to various interpreters. In the image to the right, Nellie interpreted (what I construe as) a piece of dangling fabric to be a character's crotch, and claimed that it "doesn't look right." Based on the limited number of visual signifiers in these two decontextualized panels, there was room for a range of responses to *Broxo's* gender depictions. This range was manifested in the differing responses that several CCIC members had (although it should be mentioned that every student operated from the standpoint that gender is a male/female binary). After ascribing gender to *Broxo's* characters, it next fell upon Alexi and Nellie to make decisions about the appropriateness of *Broxo's* gender depictions, whether concerning a perceived female character going shirtless (inappropriate) or a perceived male character with an unfortunately placed protuberance (also inappropriate). These value judgments pull from Alexi's and Nellie's sociocultural locations as well as their individual preferences.

## ***2. Boxers & Saints***

On another day in the CCIC, Nellie took an interest in Gene Luen Yang's newly released graphic novel duo, *Boxers and Saints* (2013). Nellie had earlier enjoyed Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2008a), and I thought there was a good chance she would be drawn to his new work as well. The two books, which were released as a single slipcover edition, offer contrasting points of view on 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese culture – and the Boxer Rebellion in particular – from the perspectives of two protagonists, Little Bao and Four-Girl/Vibiana. In Nellie's case, Yang's vague representations of gender on the covers of *Boxers and Saints* [Figure 2] were viewable through the lenses of her own Asian American identity, and her knowledge of culturally and historically specific gendered customs.

Nellie: These books look cool!

David: They just came out, so it's two parts, right? It's called *Boxers and Saints*. There's the *Boxers* half and the *Saints* half. The story is told in two parts.

Nellie: It looks so cool! It looks like they're in two different dimensions.

David: Well, they're two different people.

Nellie: That's a female. Oh, I didn't see the hair at first.

David: Mmmm. So it's the long hair that makes you think that? It's the long hair that makes her...

Nellie: A girl. Yeah. I know some Asians' culture about the hair...

David: Tell me.

Nellie: I keep seeing movies with my grandparents about learning Asian culture. And I've determined that some boys had a braid.

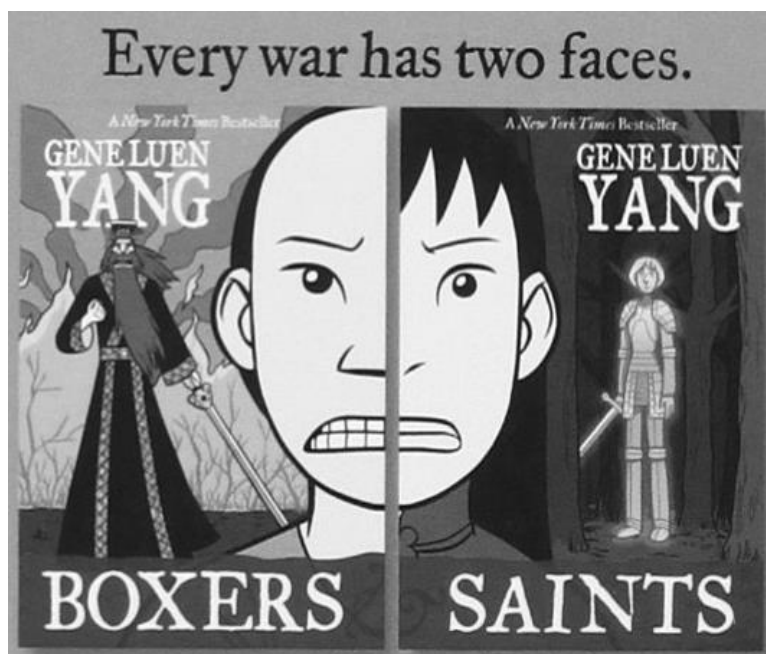
David: Okay. Look, I bet you can see that.

[Nellie flips through *Boxers and Saints* on a page.]

Nellie: His hair is in a braid! 'Cause it was part of a law in Asia. In China.

David: That's right. Wow, you know a lot about that, Nellie

Nellie: My grandparents wanted me to learn about our culture (Transcripts, Jan. 13, 2014).



**Figure 2.** Promotional materials for *Boxers & Saints* (Yang, 2013)

As with the *Broxo* example, Nellie’s impressions of *Boxers & Saints* were likely due to her initial unfamiliarity with the texts. Because she had not read the graphic novels yet, Nellie’s perceptions of gender on the books’ covers were limited to the visual and textual information on their covers alone. For each character on the books’ covers, and especially the two foregrounded half-faces, Yang employs McCloud’s concept of “amplification through simplification” (1993, p. 30). By keeping his character designs simple, Yang ensures that readers will supply their own personal, intertextual, and culturally inflected identifications (e.g., Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 228). As I wrote earlier, readers’ visuo-textual connections are formed in concert with their histories, epistemologies, and cultural affiliations (although not in culturally deterministic ways; obviously, not all secular Jewish males read *Maus* in the same way). For Nellie, making sense of the images’ gender signifiers meant bringing her intergenerational ethnic identity

into the mix. While I had not told Nellie that *Boxers & Saints* was about Chinese history, she determined rather quickly – from the cover’s images, title, and author’s name – that the books had something to do with “Asian culture.” Nellie told me that her grandparents want her to “learn about our culture,” and although she is of Vietnamese and not Chinese descent, Nellie has amassed some knowledge of Chinese history – and the role gender plays in that history – from watching movies with her family. Interestingly, Nellie used that knowledge to make logical gender assumptions about graphic novels she had not yet read.

Gender, as a continual process in which people are simultaneously structured and have productive (and potentially subversive) agency, cannot be extricated from other ‘intersectional’ elements of culture and identity (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005)<sup>99</sup>. While I do not argue for cultural determinism by any means, individuals and groups do have various ways of performing gender that are more or less widely accepted than others within a culture<sup>100</sup> and at a particular time, and which also evolve over time (e.g., Butler, 1990). As Pace and Lowery (2001) argue, cultural gender values are often passed along in the form of stories:

Through stories we learn what acts are likely to draw criticism and ire, which acts will be tolerated by our peers or are likely to alienate us from the crowd. Acts and attitudes expressed through story events can reflect the dominant attitudes of a

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<sup>99</sup> Theorists of intersectionality argue that gender (as with all markers of identity) cannot be examined in isolation from other identity markers (such as, but not limited to sexuality, race, class, age, (dis)ability, religion, and immigration status). Examining identity-based oppression (i.e. racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) also requires attending to intersections of identity.

<sup>100</sup> As I stated earlier in this dissertation, I employ Sonia Nieto’s definition of culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (2010, p. 78).



specific culture and can define the boundaries of group acceptability with clarity and force.

Even at a young age, many children are able to articulate and regulate what they think it means to “be” a boy or a girl within their cultural worldviews (Blaise, 2005). The worldview that Nellie took into making sense of gender in Yang’s cover images was beholden to her knowledge of Chinese history. As Crisp & Hiller (2011) write, children “readily differentiate between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles, and have a firm understanding of the types of behavior deemed ‘appropriate’ for males and females” (p. 197). Since images possess a powerful urgency for children and adults alike (e.g., Wolff, 2012), discussing images – and especially the sorts of deliberately abstracted images found in comics – with young people can reveal much about how they make sense of, perform, and reproduce gender norms within and across cultural contexts.

### **"I Thought You Were Supposed to Be This Person"**

I share one piece of longer transcript data to illustrate several ways in which comics’ visual features led to collaborative inquiries into gender and identity within the space of the CCIC. Building on the two previous pieces of data, I continue to examine ethno-cultural elements and category formations of students’ gender discourses (e.g., Gal, 1995; Stokoe, 2008), as well as exploring the phenomenon of gender regulation (i.e. “borderwork” – when gender borders are ‘policed’ by children, e.g., Thorne, 1993) by CCIC members. In the following section of transcript, 5<sup>th</sup> grader Bettina and 6<sup>th</sup> grader Alma engage in an extended conversation of gender roles, employing several graphic novels to anchor their discussion. Due to the length of the transcript, I break it into several smaller sections in order to provide periodic commentary.

- 1 David: Hey Bettina? Alma is interested in maybe reading *Courtney Crumrin*,  
 2 the book you just read and returned. Would you be willing to tell her what  
 3 you thought was good about it or what was bad about it?  
 4 Bettina: Well... I don't know what you wanna know, so...  
 5 Alma: I wanna know the bad parts.  
 6 Bettina: The bad parts... Well, I'm gonna let you see. [Bettina opens up the  
 7 book and begins flipping through it.] The beginning starts off kind of  
 8 weird, so you might just really get mixed up. Like this part, it's kind of  
 9 weird. I don't actually know what she's saying. And once you get farther in,  
 10 you start to understand what they're talking about. I think their eyes look  
 11 weird for some reason. Really big... Well, actually, in this part, they were  
 12 kind of beating her up. It started on here, they were arguing. That's her  
 13 mom. I thought that was the dad at first.  
 14 Alma: [Laughs] That's a... that's a... that's a... that's a *great* picture of a  
 15 woman. No really, what is she?  
 16 David: Hmmm, that's a good question. Like gender?  
 17 Alma: Yeah.  
 18 Bettina: Yeah, like...  
 19 Alma: Actually a woman?  
 20 Bettina: That's the woman. The mom.  
 21 Alma: Some people got different ways of drawing different genders.  
 22 Bettina: And there's also women who look lots of different ways, right?  
 23 Alma: Yeah. I guess so.



Figure 3. Panels from *Courtney Crumrin* vol. 1 (Naifeh, 2012)

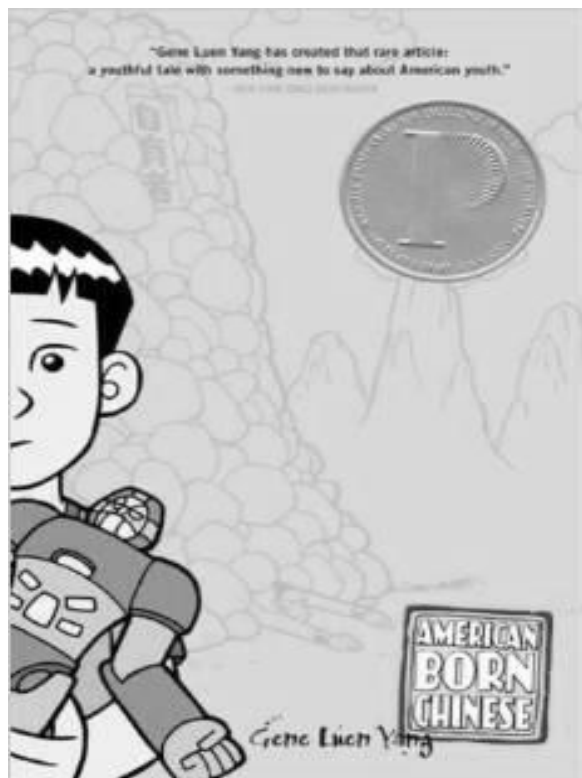
Bettina and Alma begin their discussion with Bettina delivering my requested synopsis of the graphic novel *Courtney Crumrin vol. 1: The Night Things*. Flipping through the book together, each student offers commentary on the style in which the protagonist's mother is visually depicted (i.e. her ear-length hair) [Figure 3]. Like Yang's and Giallongo's artwork in the previous samples of data, Ted Naifeh – the author and illustrator of the *Courtney Crumrin* series – also employs minimalistic designs for his characters, and provides more detail for objects and settings (e.g., McCloud, 1993, p. 44). Perusing the graphic novel's opening pages, Bettina admits that she thought Courtney's mother “was the dad at first,” and Alma shares her skepticism. After realizing that Bettina is not fooling with her, and that the character is in actuality *not* the father, Alma posits that the only way the character could be identified as female is because “some people got different ways of drawing different genders.” Bettina suggests that perhaps it's not just that female characters are *drawn* differently, but that women can look many different ways, but Alma seems unconvinced. Courtney Crumrin's mother simply does not look right to her.

Bettina's and Alma's opinions about one character's short hair do not constitute much of an epiphany, since numerous children and adults associate long hair with femininity and short hair with masculinity. The reason I include this exchange is that it escalated into a further collaborative inquiry between Bettina and Alma, in which the girls discuss how visual and embodied qualities are constitutive of gender and sexual identity, and also to what degree they should be enforced. In the next segment of transcript data, Bettina and Alma use the cover of Gene Luen Yang's *American Born*

*Chinese* (2008a) as a means of weighing in on a number of behaviors that they then co-articulate with gender roles and norms.

- 24 David: That's one of the things that I'm really curious about, is what you –  
 25 what everyone – thinks about the way gender gets drawn in comics.  
 26 Bettina: It's like weird. [She points to the cover of *American Born Chinese*.] Is  
 27 that a boy? Right? That's a boy?  
 28 David: What makes you think it's a boy?  
 29 Alma: He has short hair. And he's carrying a boy toy.  
 30 David: So what makes that a boy toy?  
 31 Alma: 'Cause boy toys are different. Like, boy toys are like more things that  
 32 they play around with, that they're more interested in, like cars, robots...  
 33 Bettina: Why do some girls play with boy toys?  
 34 Alma: 'Cause us girls aren't girly. Like me. I don't play with girl toys at all.  
 35 Bettina: [gasps] You're supposed to be a girl!  
 36 Alma: I am a girl! I am a girl!  
 37 David: So here's a question: If a girl plays with a robot, and a lot of girls play  
 38 with robots...is it still a boy toy?  
 39 Alma: Yeah.  
 40 David: Why doesn't it become a girl toy if it's a toy that girls play with?  
 41 Bettina: Well, I don't actually know if girls can play with boy toys. I don't  
 42 actually find that interesting. Like, I don't play with boy toys except once  
 43 in a while. I'm mostly like a girly girl. I play with baby dolls.  
 44 David: Can a boy play with those toys too?  
 45 Bettina: Uh...  
 46 Alma: Yeah, sure! My brother did. Alexi did. He was smaller. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>  
 47 grade he played with my toys. And now I play with his.  
 48 Bettina: Well, sometimes I play, like with my little cousin's racecars. I like  
 49 racecars. Yeah, I think it's okay for boys to play with girls' toys. But if  
 50 they're too girl, like, say if he's combing my doll's hair, no. That's kind  
 51 of...  
 52 Alma: That's kind of, like, weird. Like, it kind of shows what's gonna happen  
 53 in the future. So, it's kinda, it's kinda...  
 54 David: What do you mean?  
 55 Alma: Like...  
 56 Bettina: So I wouldn't let my little cousin or brother play with my girl stuff, but  
 57 most of my girl stuff is kinda, like, mixed with the boys.  
 58 David: What do you mean by, like, 'That lets you know what'll happen in the  
 59 future?'  
 60 Alma: It starts by childhood, that they, like, start getting to more kind of  
 61 things that girls do. And then they start thinking that they're a girl and...  
 62 Bettina: The term they use is gay. Or bisexual. I wanna let you know my  
 63 family, actually, be kind of mixed. I don't like that because then... I don't

- 64 actually look at him or her weird, it's just I wasn't, you know...
- 65 Alma: It just feels...
- 66 Bettina: It's weird. Because I'm a girl, and you're acting like a girl. And you're
- 67 a girl, and you're acting like a boy. And it's like "I thought you were
- 68 supposed to be this person." On the other hand, it's like our family. But,
- 69 you know, we will always look at it differently because we know this is not
- 70 how you were actually raised. Like, to be this person. Something had to
- 71 happen, or you know... If you just saw other people like it, or something.
- 72 Alma: Like, I don't mind having a brother that plays around with my old toys
- 73 that are kind of girly. I don't mind it. I know who my brother is and I know
- 74 he plays with them 'cause he's usually bored or something. And it's okay
- 75 'cause he's my brother so I get used to him. But when someone else, like
- 76 my brother's friend or something, comes over and plays with my toys, I
- 77 feel kind of, like, weird.
- 78 Bettina: Yeah, 'cause it's not your brother.
- 79 Alma: It's just not the way we're used to. Like, I'm used to my brother playing
- 80 with his toys, me with mine. Or I'm just on the Internet or something. I'm
- 81 not used to other people playing with my old toys that are not their, like,
- 82 how do I say...
- 83 Bettina: Gender.
- 84 Alma: Yeah.



**Figure 4.** Front cover of *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2008a)

As with the covers of *Boxers & Saints*, the cover of Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* reveals only half of its protagonist's face, foreshadowing the character's ongoing identity negotiation throughout the text. Danny is shown holding a generic robot toy, and this is the visual feature that, along with his short hair, Bettina and Alma invoke when identifying Danny as a male character. The conversation that follows, in which Bettina and Alma discuss the gendered qualities of toys (e.g., Cherney & Dempsey, 2010), says much about how each understands and performs gender as a binary and with certain norms. The students' conversation also includes several instances of "borderwork" (Thorne, 1993, p. 64) and "category-maintenance work" (Davies, 1989/2003, p. 29). When Alma claims not to play with girl toys at all, Bettina audibly gasps and tells her that she's "supposed to be a girl!" It feels almost like a challenge. "I am a girl!" Alma responds. It seems that Alma and Bettina, both of whom self-identify as girls, have uncovered an instance in which they think of gender differently. For Bettina, a "girly girl" plays with "baby dolls," but Alma doesn't find such toys interesting or necessary in establishing her girlhood. Still, when I followed up by asking Alma if a "boy toy" becomes a "girl toy" when girls play with it, she tells me no, they are still boy toys; the objects themselves maintain gendered connotations. For her part, Bettina adds that she doesn't even know if it is possible for girls to play with boy toys.

When I ask Bettina and Alma whether boys can play with dolls as well as girls, Bettina seems slightly taken aback, but Alma quickly tells me that her younger brother Alexi does. From this conversational turn on, the topic of gender begins to overlap with

elements of sexual identity<sup>101</sup>. Mindy Blaise (2014) writes that the hybridized term “gender/sex/uality” may be used “to indicate the complex and shifting relationships that exist between gender, sex, and sexuality,” and to keep from conflating them (p. 115). I find Blaise’s term both personally useful, as well as germane to qualitative research. The shifting relationships of gender, sex, and sexuality are invoked in this next portion of Bettina and Alma’s conversation, when Alma suggests that boys playing with girl toys “shows what’s gonna happen in the future,” and that boys doing the things that girls do leads to “thinking that they’re a girl.” Bettina clarifies: “The term they use is gay. Or bisexual.” Bettina, despite saying that she comes from a “mixed family” and doesn’t look at her (presumably gay or bisexual) family members “weird,” explicitly adds that she “wouldn’t let my little cousin or brother play with my girl stuff,” for fear of him becoming gay. Bronwyn Davies (1989/2003) writes that “boys doing ‘girl’ things and girls doing ‘boy’ things” is frequently the subject of children’s emerging inquiries into gender and sexuality, and this phenomenon is borne out through Bettina and Alma’s discussion. In their conversation, the girls indicate their belief that homosexuality is a condition which may be caused by children engaging in non-normative forms of gender play (although Alma makes exemptions for her own brother because *she knows who he is*). I am not particularly surprised by Alma’s and Bettina’s common enough belief about

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<sup>101</sup> I was extremely cautious about facilitating conversations of sexuality in my work at the St. Cabrini Parish and CMS. In fact, I tried to keep these types of conversations to a minimum, even when doing so went against my instincts as a researcher and critical educator (e.g., Thein, 2013). It was absolutely a tension of conducting research within a Catholic organization. Monsignor Wells, who has been so supportive of my (and Dr. Campano’s) work in the parish, previously stated that research on sex and sexuality was the only type of inquiry he categorically prohibited. I made every effort to respect this. From my standpoint as a practitioner researcher, then, I have attempted to disaggregate gender from sexuality, and to focus my attention on invocations of the former. Due to the fluid natures of these terms, however, there are instances of spillover, such as in the discussion among Bettina, Alma, and me.

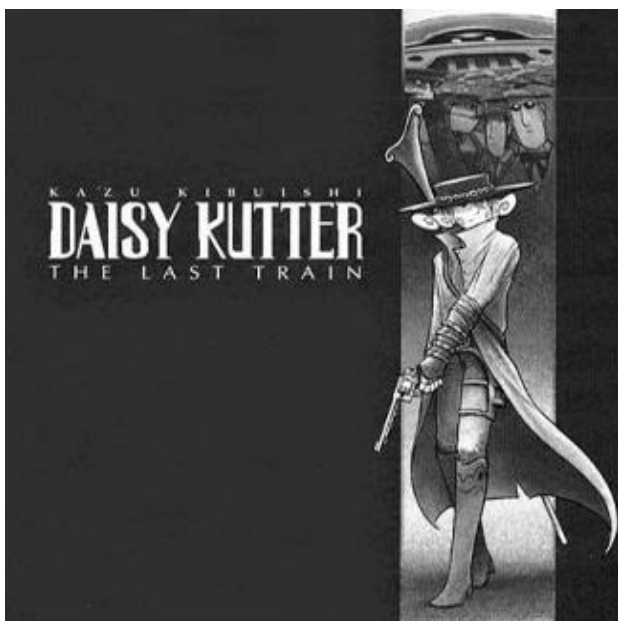
sexual identity (i.e., nurture over nature), as I often hear variations of it when speaking to both young people and adults from many cultural backgrounds. I simply did not expect the disclosure of this stance to be the result of students assigning a gender identity to a drawing of a character holding a toy robot on the cover of a graphic novel. Again, I am struck by the power of the comics medium's 'simple' imagery to inspire children to engage in gender inquiries (e.g., Dallacqua & Sutton, 2014).

In the next section of transcript, I ask Bettina and Alma to redirect their focus from toys to texts, but to continue addressing issues salient to gender identity. The girls were more than willing to continue their conversation, with Alma expressing that “every object has a way that’s similar to another,” thus drawing a line between toys and comics.

- 85 David: This is really interesting, what you're saying about toys. I want to  
 86 extend that and think more about books. Because you could talk about  
 87 books the same way. If there's girl toys or boy toys, are there girl books  
 88 and boy books?  
 89 Alma: Well there is. Like, every object has a way that it's similar to another.  
 90 Like, there's girl toys, boy toys, and there is a mix. Like, lots of books are  
 91 a mix, others are separated. Like, for me, this one [*Daisy Kutter* by Kazu  
 92 Kibuishi] is like a “both book.”  
 93 David: *Daisy Kutter*?  
 94 Alma: Yeah.  
 95 David: How come?  
 96 Alma: Well, the main character's a girl, we know that. But she's, like, into  
 97 things that boys do. So it shows both of their things, like what boys would  
 98 like and what girls are.  
 99 David: What is she into that boys do?  
 100 Alma: She's into, like – I'm not saying that *we* are. I'm not saying that lots of  
 101 girls aren't. But some of them are and some of them aren't – so, she likes  
 102 shooting arrows or playing in casinos and all that.  
 103 David: Okay.  
 104 Alma: She likes doing things that normally girls wouldn't do. But she's still a  
 105 girl herself, so she knows what we, like, think and feel.  
 106 David: Alma, you said that *Daisy Kutter* shoots arrows. And she's got a gun  
 107 on the cover of the book. Are guns and violence a boy thing or a girl thing  
 108 or a both thing?



109 Alma: It's a both thing, but for me, there are criminals that I see on TV...  
110 Sometimes I just see running by... Usually they're men. I'm used to them  
111 being men.  
112 Bettina: Yes.  
113 Alma: There can be womans. I'm not saying they're can't. I'm more used to,  
114 like, criminals being men.  
115 Bettina: I think it's kind of weird to like, actually have a girl shooting a man or  
116 a girl shooting another girl. Isn't that weird? Because people are kind of  
117 crazy. So they'll... Sometimes they use it just for fun and they think it's not  
118 less serious to use it. But it's really serious because mostly all people use  
119 guns for violence. I have a question.  
120 David: Sure.  
121 Bettina: Don't you know in the Army, is that kind of violent too? How they're  
122 fighting?  
123 David: What do you think?  
124 Bettina: I don't think it's violence because they're kind of fighting, actually,  
125 like, over -- I don't know -- whatever they're fighting over. But they're like  
126 fighting, so it's like whoever wins, wins. Sometimes I think that's how it is  
127 when people shoot each other. It's like, you know, whoever wins, like "I'm  
128 the best" or whatever, you know. That's how some people think. And it's  
129 still in everywhere. So it's like, it's actually, nowhere is safe to go. There's  
130 violence all over the world, so you can't actually say, like "This place is  
131 safe." Because you can just be walking to the store and you just, something  
132 happens or something. And it's like, it's not safe, but you try to be a safer  
133 child. But, it's like, this girl, Daisy Kutter, since she's into like shooting and  
134 arrows, I don't think that's actually real, because my cousin -- her name is  
135 Tati -- and she, like, travels. And she likes to play, like, kind of boy stuff.  
136 But she's a really girly girl. But I never, like, actually knew her as, like,  
137 acting like a boy.  
138 Alma: Like the movies. Like superhero movies.  
139 Bettina: Iron Man. I like Iron Man.  
140 Alma: Those are supposed to more... For me? Like, for most of the people,  
141 those are more of a boy thing. But for some people that are girls, we enjoy  
142 that. Like I don't know if you know this -- but most of the stuff my brother  
143 Alexi reads I'm really into. Like all his superhero books, the *Bones*, every  
144 single book he reads. I know he chooses them, like, with a vision of a boy,  
145 but sometimes I like the superhero books. I love -- I really like -- all the  
146 superheroes (Transcripts, Jan. 13, 2014).



**Figure 5.** Front cover (truncated) of *Daisy Kutter: The Last Train* (Kibuishi, 2005)

In the third chapter of this dissertation, I wrote about how three students (Bettina, Cherice, and Lena) employed comics texts to engage in a discussion of race, specifically in terms of violence<sup>102</sup>. As in that section of transcript, Bettina again operationalizes the comics medium to discuss the theme of physical violence, but she and Alma do so here in terms of how violence pertains to gender, rather than race.

When I ask Alma if there are any graphic novels which are appropriate for both male and female readers, she provides me with Kazu Kibuishi's *Daisy Kutter: The Last Train* (2005). Interestingly, Alma identifies the female protagonist's penchant for violence as a potential buy-in for male readers (e.g., Collier, 2013). Because the character shoots arrows, frequents casinos, and carries a revolver on the book's cover, Daisy represents both "what boys would like and what girls are... She likes doing things that

<sup>102</sup> Bettina's words from chapter three – "It's not safe anywhere, you know? It's not safe" – continue to resonate here, when she says that "You can just be walking to the store and you just, something happens or something. And it's like, it's not safe."

normally girls wouldn't do. But she's still a girl herself, so she knows what we, like, think and feel." In this conversational turn, Alma commits to the idea that there is a dichotomy between male and female behaviors, and also that there are certain inborn characteristics attributable to each sex. Further, Alma and Bettina agree that they mostly associate violence with men. Bettina sees violence as gendered to the degree that Daisy Kutter's use of weaponry strikes her as unrealistic.

To close the section of transcript, Alma talks about her perceptions of gender vis-à-vis popular superhero properties like *Iron Man* and adventure series like *Bone*. In noting that "for most of the people, those are more of a boy thing. But for some people that are girls, we enjoy that," Alma leads into the next section of this chapter: how the gender identities that CCIC members perform, combined with the gendered qualities they assign to objects and semiotic markers, impact their selection of graphic texts.

### **"I Want All the Books! ... But Not the Girl Ones."**

Year in and year out, few events are as exciting for the students of the Cabrini Mission School as the week the Scholastic Book Fair takes over the school library. It feels like something akin to a work of alchemy: after a few short hours of setup, the library no longer resembles itself, but rather a multicolored bazaar teeming with books, posters, and assorted branded knickknacks. The excitement of children entering the library to browse Scholastic's inventory is palpable. In each of the three years I volunteered to work the cash register, I was privy to no shortage of shrieking and shouting. I also saw my fair share of tears when students came to the realization that they did not have enough (or any) money to purchase the items they wanted. Scholastic, of

course, designs its annual event to be maximally exciting to children, and the company is largely successful in creating an atmosphere swirling with equal parts magic, desperation, and material desire (e.g., Hade, 2001). And like the toys in a McDonald's Happy Meal, the entire event is structured around assumptions about gender.

While working the cash register at the 2013 book fair, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class came into the library, and the first thing I heard was Alexi shouting from the hallway, "I want all the books! I want all the books! ...*but not the girl ones!*" (Fieldnotes, Apr. 28, 2013). As with his older sister Alma in the previous section of this chapter, I had a number of questions about what Alexi meant by this. From a memo I wrote later that day:

What exactly *are* girl books, and who gets to decide? How does Alexi make this designation, and what semiotic features of the texts enable him to do so? What assumptions does Alexi have about "girl books"? What does he think reading such books would *do* to him? (Apr. 28, 2013).

Throughout the week of the 2013 Scholastic Book Fair, I asked dozens of students why they desired the books and products they did, and found that their responses often involved some reference to gender, in both explicit and implicit ways (e.g., Williams, 2008). Since the Scholastic Book Fair was *not* the formal site of my dissertation study, I brought my questions into the CCIC, wondering to what degree gender (i.e. students' perceptions of gender) impacted the graphica that was checked out. My question: 'When selecting the comic books and graphic novels they wish to read from the CMS library, how do the gendered qualities students assign to texts impact what they choose to read and what they avoid?'

Rather than including eleven narrative segments of framing, transcript data, and analysis, I have compiled a table outlining the range of oral responses in which members of the CCIC elaborated their methods of text selection and evaluation, vis-à-vis gender. In looking at these data in close proximity, and I am intrigued that so many students explicitly identified a text's perceived gendered characteristics as the salient criterion by which to select or avoid a comic book or graphic novel.

Transcript Data	Brief Overview/Analysis
<p>David: Is there anything you don't like about comics and graphic novels compared to other kinds of books?</p> <p>Nellie: There's too many boys' comics.</p> <p>David: What do you mean by that?</p> <p>Nellie: Like superheroes.</p> <p>Desiree: Well, some girls can like superheroes.</p> <p>Nellie: [whispers] Well, I don't like that.</p> <p>Desiree: Well, I do.</p> <p>David: [laughs] What do you think makes a superhero book a boy book?</p> <p>Nellie: More, like, fighting. A lot of fighting.</p> <p>David: Okay, so when there's fighting in a book, that makes you feel like it's probably meant for boys more than girls?</p> <p>Nellie: Yeah.</p> <p>Desiree: Okay, so, Nellie, what about <i>Drama</i>? The book <i>Drama</i>? They may have fighting in it.</p> <p>Nellie: Yeah, but they don't include hands!</p> <p>David: They don't what?</p> <p>Nellie: They don't include hands in it.</p> <p>David: [laughs] Oh, like punching?</p> <p>Nellie: Yes (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).</p>	<p>In this short section of interview transcript, Nellie names her gripe with <i>graphica</i>: it is too often gendered in favor of male readers and the things male readers are perceived to enjoy, such as fighting. Desiree, who enjoys superhero comics, disagrees with Nellie, and describes Nellie's favorite graphic novel, <i>Drama</i>, as violent. Nellie claims that <i>Drama</i>'s fighting is different, since it is not <u>physical</u> violence (male), but emotional bullying. This conversation mirrors Alma's and Bettina's discussion of physical violence being male-gendered.</p>
<p>David: How do you pick the comics and graphic novels that you want to read? It always seems like you two know exactly what you want to read. So how do you know?</p> <p>Nellie: Well, we girls... We like to see some stuff, but not too girly stuff, because we just think it's boring when it's too girly. And we know when we're picking out books because we like the books that match our personality.</p> <p>Desiree: Yeah.</p> <p>David: In the last two or three minutes, you've said you don't like books that are too much like boy books, like with</p>	<p>When Nellie articulates the types of <i>graphica</i> she is interested in reading, she seems to be saying that she looks for depictions of characters representing multiple genders that are not <u>hyper</u>-gendered. By expressing that she is neither interested in hyper-feminine nor hyper-</p>

<p>fighting, because they're for boys, but you also don't like books that are too girly. I'm confused.</p> <p>Desiree: Me too.</p> <p>David: If it can't be too boyish, and it can't be too girly, what is the perfect book for Nellie?</p> <p>Nellie: Perfect book, when it has both girls and boys in it.</p> <p>David: What is it about <i>Drama</i> that has been so powerful for you?</p> <p>Nellie: Yeah. It's because, it's like, a normal girl, but not like a Gossip Girl. It's like a normal girl's problem, only the main character doesn't have like girly problems. It has more like an actor's problem, or a director's problem, which is really cool because you get to know what it's like to be backstage and how it works (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).</p>	<p>masculine characters, Nellie leans toward books that match her "normal girl" personality. Nellie, who read and reread <i>Drama</i> multiple times from 2012 to 2014, describes the graphic novel's protagonist Callie as "a normal girl" as opposed to a "girly girl." In Nellie's estimation, the issues that Callie faces are not typically gendered ones.</p>
<p>David: Tell me what you like about <i>Drama</i>.</p> <p>Héctor: It's about, like, she has a crush on a boy named Greg, when they kiss in the beginning. And then now, when she sees him and talks to him, he gets embarrassed in front of his friends. So like, she meets these two, the twins, and then she likes this one.</p> <p>David: Oh, interesting.</p> <p>Héctor: But then not him, because, like, he's like gay. And then he turns to one like to kiss the other boy in the play (Transcripts, Jan. 13, 2014).</p>	<p>As opposed to Callie's "normal girl" status, Héctor identifies <i>Drama</i>'s relationships, and the characters' navigation of romantic tensions (including adolescents exploring their emerging identities as gay men) as the graphic novel's major appeal. As I mentioned in Chapter four, Héctor, more than any other CCIC member, was willing to check out and read any comics text.</p>
<p>David: What makes a comic book or a graphic novel something that's for boys or for girls? How could you know by looking at it?</p> <p>Tyler: Nothing, really, 'cause it's both for boys and girls. Like the <i>Oz</i> books, they have mostly girls in it. It has Dorothy and then the lions. Then Ozma, it was the little boy, but it turned out that she was actually -- the boy was actually a girl. 'Cause the witch did something.</p> <p>Isaiah: It's like <i>Drama</i> and <i>Smile</i>.</p> <p>Tyler: Yeah.</p> <p>Isaiah: Them books, they both involve girls and boys communicating with each other, so I feel that if they could do that in the book, they'll do it in real life, and it's like... girls and boys will read it because the people who are in the book. And that's what a lot of people judge it on.</p> <p>Tyler: Some people shouldn't judge it by the cover because it's</p>	<p>Tyler and Isaiah stand firm against the idea that graphica should be seen as gendered, even going so far as to say that readers should give stories a chance rather than judging books by their covers.</p>

<p>for both boys and girls. ‘Cause just read the story, and it’s not going to be like that anymore. ‘Cause they don’t read it, and then that’s what they think (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).</p>	
<p>Cherice: I joined the CCIC because I first love to read. I always loved to read. And I do love comic books, and how they show a lot of pictures and stuff. And I just like how the characters are, like how some of the books are, like, you know, they’re really fun and girly and stuff like that. Not only that they’re girly, but they’re all sorts of things. So yeah (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).</p>	<p>For her part, 5<sup>th</sup> grader Cherice is drawn to books that she describes as “fun and girly.”</p>
<p>Alexi: Mr. Dave! I want this! [holds up <i>My Little Pony</i> graphic novel.] ...I'm joking!!!  David: Oh, you're joking? You don't want it? What's wrong with <i>My Little Pony</i>?  Alexi: Ahhhh!!!  David: Not your favorite?  Alexi: No! It's for girls!  David: Tell me, what makes this made for girls? What is it?  Alexi: Desiree! Isn't this book for girls?  Desiree: Yes.  David: Well, how can you tell? What makes it made for girls?  Alexi: It's a book for girls!  Nellie: It's colorful!  David: It's colorful?  Desiree: It's pink.  David: So, you see the color of this pony? What color is that?  Alexi: Purple! Boys don't wear purple!  David: Well, what am I wearing? [a purple shirt]  Alexi: It's a special occasion.  David: [laughs]: So is my shirt for a girl? I guess I'm just curious, 'cause you say it's colors that are for girls.  Alexi: I never wear pink. Not ever (Transcripts, May 19, 2014).</p> <p>Alma: <i>My Little Pony</i>? Really? These are all little girly books (Fieldnotes, Mar. 31, 2014).</p> <p>Desiree: Do you have any comics, like manga comics?  David: Manga... I've got a couple. I've got...  Desiree: ...that's not <i>My Little Pony</i>? (Fieldnotes, Nov. 4, 2013).</p> <p><i>My Little Pony</i>: “Very Girly b/c all girls don’t like ponies, pink and glitter” [anonymous sticky note placed on the cover of the book] (Jan. 13, 2014).</p>	<p>Alexi treats <i>My Little Pony</i> comics like poison, and he is not the only member of the CCIC to do so. Nor is he the only male CCIC member to do so. I found it interesting that Alexi, Nellie, and Desiree all identified the book’s color palette as its identifying “girly” feature. When I mentioned that I was wearing purple, Alexi pardoned me by saying “it’s a special occasion.” (I’m not sure what occasion he was referring to.) I was exempted from Alexi’s “category maintenance work” just as he himself was when his sister Alma said that it’s okay if he plays with her toys.</p>

<p>David: Desiree, one time you told me you didn't like girly books like <i>My Little Pony</i>.</p> <p>Desiree: Uh huh.</p> <p>David: I want you to explain what you think girly books look like and what a boy book looks like, because I'm curious. I'm trying to figure out what everyone thinks a girl book means and a boy book means. Because it might look different to different people.</p> <p>Desiree: A girly girl book means it's too girly.</p> <p>David: But what does "too girly" mean?</p> <p>Nellie: Like... "Tahahahaha!!!" [does a high-pitched, chipper laugh] Like too perky<sup>103</sup>.</p> <p>David: Like too perky? Okay, so some books have too much perkiness and that makes them girly?</p> <p>Nellie and Desiree: Yeah (Transcripts, Jan. 6, 2014).</p>	<p>Desiree and Nellie express an aversion to what they see as a representation of hyper-femininity, which is typified here by perkiness and high-pitched laughter. I am not exactly sure how a printed comic book can be slotted a feminine category based on an aural characteristic, but Nellie's point is nevertheless clear.</p>
<p>David: How can you tell if a comic book is meant for girls?</p> <p>Lena: I think for the picture, the title, or some of the colors.</p> <p>David: Like, what colors are girl colors?</p> <p>Lena: Pink, red, purple. Boy colors: green, blue, black.</p> <p>Bettina: Wait, can I ask you a question? Say if a girl color was like all those colors you said, but not like all of them. Say if it was green, or like, red, but it was a girl, but she was actually kind of into the boy stuff? (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).</p>	<p>Like Alexi and Desiree in the previous example, Lena names the color palette as an indicator of gender in graphica. Bettina wonders if the color wheel is as rigid as Lena makes it sound.</p>
<p>David: How do you pick out the comics and graphic novels that you want to read?</p> <p>Alma: It's hard, 'cause there is all different types of comics that I like. Well, I like the ones that, like... So, sometimes, back then, girls didn't have as much rights, so I like the books about how girls -- womens -- stand out and start doing things that usually they weren't allowed to do back then or just become leaders in life. Now they're my favorite kind of types, like books. Or the ones that have very good illustration.</p> <p>David: So if you're looking for a book that has strong women in it, do you look for the cover, or do you kind of flip through it?</p> <p>Alma: Sometimes I just look at the cover, or some books have like a short summary on the back of them. That's what I usually read (Interview Transcript, Feb. 10, 2014).</p>	<p>Alma specifically identifies female empowerment stories as the literary subgenre to which she is drawn. She does not subdivide the female sex into gendered characters like "girly" or "normal."</p>

<sup>103</sup> On a separate occasion, Nellie once asked me if she could trade in her writing journal (which featured Marvel superheroes on the cover) for "a more girly one." I gave Desiree the same option, and she gladly accepted. In this case, "girly" wasn't defined as a negative characteristic (Fieldnotes, Jan. 6, 2014).



<p>David: What makes a comic book or a graphic novel either something that's intended for boys or intended for girls?</p> <p>Raman: A lot of people think just because the protagonist is either a boy or a girl, that it's either a boy or a girl book. But there was this one book that had to do... it had everything to do with dragons, and the girl was the protagonist, and a lot of my friends who are male, they also read that book.</p> <p>David: Is there any way that you feel like you could know, just by looking at a book, if it was marketed for female readers or male readers?</p> <p>Raman: A lot of the bigger companies out there would try to make a book marketed for boys or for girls, but sometimes, not. I remember, it was one of the boys, I think it was Tyler. He actually checked out <i>Unico</i>, and I think that was supposed to be marketed as a girl book.</p> <p>David: But it sounds like you don't really agree with the idea that there's a boy book or a girl book.</p> <p>Raman: No. Books are just books (Interview Transcript, Feb. 24, 2014).</p>	<p>Of all the CCIC members who commented on their perceptions of <i>graphica</i>'s masculine or feminine characteristics in terms of text selection, only 7<sup>th</sup> grader Raman, and 5<sup>th</sup> graders Tyler and Isaiah, maintained that "books are just books" and can be enjoyed by any reader. Here Raman offers his take on <i>why</i> a reader might be drawn to certain books' gender representations, but determines that this is just marketing, not some inherent feature of the text.</p>
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Upon cross-indexing and analyzing the responses I have included above (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I find it salient that masculinity and femininity are both defined (and performed) largely in opposition to their perceived counterparts (e.g., Dutro, 2002 & 2003). In the transcript snippets, the term "boy comics" connotes *graphica* that *isn't* girl comics or genderless comics. Likewise, "girly" only seems to possess meaning in reference to "boyish" or "normal girl." In reacting disparagingly toward the *My Little Pony* graphic novel, for instance, Alexi, Nellie, and Alma exhibited negative perceptions of a gender performance they collectively refer to as "girly." Based on the ways in which they perform and demarcate their own gender identities, the three want nothing to do with the horses of Equestria, or even Equestria's color palette.

I find it interesting that within the responses included in the table above, the self-identifying male members of the CCIC (Tyler, Isaiah, Héctor, and Raman – Alexi was the major exception) appear less concerned with ascriptive gender characteristics when

selecting texts than CCIC's self-identifying female members. I would not have expected this to be the case, but students like Nellie, Desiree, and Alma were more worried about what their reading choices meant (in terms of restricting their gender identities) than the boys—they did not want to be associated with “girly” *graphica*. Based on my analysis of their discourses, Nellie, Desiree, and Alma seem to feel as strongly about *not* reading “girly books” as Bettina and Alma felt, in the previous section, that girls should play with girl toys and boys should play with boy toys. As opposed to toys, however, no students claimed that girls reading ‘un-girly’ books or boys reading ‘unmasculine’ books had anything to do with their emerging sexual identities or preferences.

As the CCIC's practitioner, I found myself with multiple unresolved questions: Why were books and toys afforded different openings for subverting gender expectations (i.e., how did students see reading and playing as differently gendered activities)? Why did more boys feel comfortable reading so-called ‘girl books’ than girls did reading either ‘boy books’ or ‘girly books’? (Were boys’ gender identities less restricted, less policed, less under attack? Did boys feel less of a need to take a firm stance on gender through their text selections?) In addition, I wondered not just about *how* students assigned gender qualities to a work of *graphica* (and the characters in it), but also what those assignments meant in terms of how students interpreted a character's worth. For instance, Alma told me that she seeks out stories featuring “strong women” who have had to overcome adversity. She also told me that she does not like to read books with “girly” characters in them. I wondered if to Alma (and to other CCIC members), it was impossible to be simultaneously “girly” and a “strong woman.” To what degree were *graphica*'s female

characters allowed to exhibit variety, nuance, and contradiction? Was an outwardly ‘feminine’ character – whether a human with a high-pitched laugh, a superhero like Dazzler, or a pink pony – allowed to be strong? Did female characters need to exhibit masculinized traits (or what readers understood to be non-feminized traits) in order to be considered powerful?

Through the languaging of their book selection procedures, it felt to me that there was a possibility that some CCIC members – and interestingly, the majority of them girls – were reinforcing the comic book industry’s history of restrictive gender archetypes. Although students were not hyper-sexualizing women, by enforcing a dichotomy of ‘not girly’ = has the potential to be powerful; and ‘girly’ = innately weak, they delimited the label of ‘strong female character’ to only certain affects, idioms, and visual aesthetics.

**Conclusion: “It’s How You Use the Power You Have”**

*“I am power incarnate! You are nothing! Less than nothing!”*

-Jean Grey as the X-Men’s “Dark Phoenix”

*“There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali.’ It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”*

-Chimamanda Adichie

My questions about gender borderwork (apropos of *graphica*) came to a head at the beginning of a CCIC session in May 2014. In an attempt to disentangle the ways that strength and gender were correlated for CCIC members, I invited a whole-group discussion on gender and power (e.g., Waff, 1995), through the medium of comics. I share here a snippet from this discussion:

David: When we're looking at a comic book, does it sometimes seem like male characters have more power than female characters?

Lena: Yes.

Kyrie: That's a good thing. Women are weak.

Tyler: But Kyrie, what about The Avengers? They have Black Widow, who's a woman, and she's strong.

David: Kyrie, when you said women are weak, were you joking?

Kyrie: No. Women *are* weak. They can't beat up men. Or maybe Lena could beat up Raman, but...

Desiree: If it's a boy, he's probably gonna be stronger. And most likely he's gonna be the main character. If it's a girl she's probably gonna be a sidekick, not really strong, and probably not be in the story a lot. But boys seem like they're in the story a lot.

David: That is a very good observation of a lot of comic books.

Nellie: It makes me sad because--

Héctor: Everybody's equal.

David: Do you think it presents a limited understanding of what strength is? Aren't there tons of ways to be strong?

Desiree: You don't particularly have to be strong to actually be strong. It's how you use the power you have (Transcripts, May 19, 2014).

In several ways, this short section of transcript data pulls together threads from across the chapter, and from earlier chapters as well. As had other students, Kyrie names violence as an inherently masculine characteristic, and he locates it as the source of power in comic books, and – perhaps facetiously – in the CMS library as well. Desiree seems to agree with Kyrie's definition of power as the ability to perform physical acts of violence, but she does not agree that it is a trait exclusively possessed by the male sex, or that it is the only way to be strong. In fact, Desiree critiques the abundance of comics stories in which female characters are made peripheral to male characters on account of their presumptive weakness. To Desiree, just because male characters are “probably gonna be stronger” in comic books doesn't mean they have to be, or that this is a biological feature of gender. Further, by saying that true strength comes from “how you use the power you have,”

Desiree exhibits a type of wisdom that often eludes people much older – and with more institutional authority – than her.

Desiree shows up often within the chapters of this dissertation, and in many of her appearances, she provides the strongest voice of critique. In chapter three, Desiree challenged her friends (and herself) to correct the mainstream comics industry’s lack of strong multicultural characters by creating their own. In the ‘data teaser’ which opens *this* chapter, Desiree offers a variation on her theme, saying that a strong comic book creator would “have to be a girl,” and that she should create “multicultural characters [with] different personalities.” At the same time, Desiree has routinely voiced her contempt for “girly” and “perky” characters, withholding from them the capacity to be strong. Were Desiree’s stances a contradiction, I wondered, and if so, did it matter? How were Desiree’s fluctuating critical sensibilities, in all their nuance and complexity, evocative of the differing ways that gender was engaged and enacted by other CCIC members through the medium of comics?

My findings from this chapter surprise me. After exploring ways in which the medium of comics was operationalized by youth to ‘subversively’ engage in race inquiries that are often silenced (see chapter three), I had expected to uncover similar phenomena in terms of students’ critical gender inquiries. Instead, I was left with a plethora of questions, and the reminder that intersectional identities present a complicated terrain which can defy empirical expectations. Just because a group of multicultural and multigendered students responded critically to issues of race did not presuppose that members of this same group would respond critically to issues of gender. It is a reminder

that identities cannot be examined uncritically or without complication, and that identity performances should never be disaggregated for the sake of ease (for instance, the ubiquitous quantitative claim that “we controlled for socioeconomic status”). Examining forms of oppression that are the result of identity (i.e. racism, sexism, heteronormativity, agism, etc.) requires attending thoughtfully to intersections of identity, and not assuming they can be conflated (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987).

Within and across the data I analyzed in this chapter, I have found that through their transactions with the multimodal medium of comics, CMS students identifying as girls engaged in more category-maintenance work than CMS students identifying as boys<sup>104</sup>. In terms of text selection and character valuation, gender boundaries were regulated more heavily by the inquiry community’s female members than its male members, although certainly not exclusively (Kyrie and Alexi voiced heavily gendered views toward texts, spaces, and literacy practices). There may be several reasons for this. My speculation is that male students at CMS do not feel as urgent a need to define or defend their reading choices – in terms of what claims a text makes upon their gender identities – as female students. This is likely indicative of larger social phenomena concerning how categories such as female, feminine, girl, and woman are socially constructed and maintained (Blaise, 2005). Girls and young women are sent an astounding number of contradictory messages about the roles they are supposed to take on: be feminine but not *too* feminine; develop a gender identity, but do so from between a

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<sup>104</sup> I remind the reader that the seventeen members of the CCIC do not constitute the material for which to generate a universal theory about category-maintenance work and visual texts.

rock and a hard place. Certainly, boys and young men also receive mixed messages about gender, but there may be less pressure to identify with only one camp. Due to the historical capital afforded males by dint of their biological sex, the boys of the CCIC seemed to encounter fewer tensions and restraints in defining themselves as boys who possess authority and strength, and who also enjoy ‘girl graphica’ such as *Unico*, *Drama*, and *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz*.

A corollary of my findings is that, with regard to graphica and visual storytelling, there are identarian influences that may limit the purview of children’s imaginations, insofar as how they develop and negotiate conceptualizations of gender (both their own and others’; both real people and fictional characters). Interestingly, the discourses I have identified as gender-constrictive are constrictive in ways that are quite different from the mainstream comics industry’s typical gender constrictiveness. As I discussed in the opening pages of this chapter, the most prevalent means of constraining gender in mainstream comic books has been through the hyper-sexualized distortion of characters (e.g., Asselin, 2014; Bricken, 2014). Hyper-sexualization was not a phenomenon I observed within the CCIC. Instead, some of the students’ gender regulations may actually have been a reaction *against* hyper-sexualization. Because “fan-girls” of graphica feel the weight of unfair gender expectations (such as the “girly girl” or “perky girl” identity girls believe they are expected to perform), they might compensate by stripping all “girly” or “perky” girls of their power. Ironically, divesting a female archetype of her power reinscribes the phenomenon being resisted in the first place. It’s still about withholding power on the basis of a perceived gender identity.

The comics medium, for reasons I have articulated elsewhere in this dissertation, offers a range of modal affordances for readers and creators to decenter and subvert dominant viewpoints and representations (e.g., Chute, 2008; Ghiso & Low, 2013; Mikkonen, 2012). However, I resist the impulse to claim that the medium is inherently emancipatory. It is not as simple as arguing that by inviting young people from minoritized communities to read and create graphica, educators will naturally create openings for critical literacy and inquiry around issues of gender (or race, class, culture, etc.). As any dedicated reader of mainstream comics knows, the medium can just as easily be used for regressive purposes as progressive ones. (More easily, perhaps.) In spite of this, I feel hopeful that creators, readers, and characters will transcend the restrictive definitions of gender that continue to be allotted to them in mainstream comics. One reason for this hope lives within a medium which employs abstraction, focalization, absence, and aporia to depict interwoven subjectivities and complicate binary identities (e.g., Chute, 2010; Mikkonen, 2012; Sacco, 2012). The extralinguistic medium of comics offers the potential of disrupting normalized gender discourses, in concert with readers' histories, epistemologies, critical sensibilities, and cultural affiliations. The other reason I feel hopeful is that young people like Desiree inform me, with such utter conviction, that new stories about gender are waiting to be told, in all their contradictory and problematic complexity.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

#### Discussion

The two major bodies of literature I use to frame this study are urban multicultural education (policy and practice) and multimodalities in literacy education. Anchored by this scholarship, I argue for the importance of qualitatively examining intersections among multimodal literacies, youth identities, and popular culture, through a methodological perspective drawn from practitioner research and New Literacy Studies. In conducting a practitioner study within an afterschool space in South Philadelphia, where I have been involved in a long-term ethnographic immersion, I endeavored to closely examine the ways in which a group of urban students engaged with the popular medium of comics. As a practitioner, I created curricular invitations for urban students to draw upon the medium of comics to form and perform multiliterate and multicultural identities, and to enact critical multimodal literacies. I then used ethnographic tools to examine the outcomes.

As I discussed at length in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, students from historically minoritized communities are frequently labeled “underachieving” and “at risk” within America’s schools (e.g., Valencia, 2010). During an era when unfettered testing and “accountability” have run roughshod over the nation’s schools, urban students of color – a robustly multiracial, multilingual, and transnational taxonomy rife with complexity and variation – have often been the recipients of effete and/or demeaning models of literacy instruction exemplified by the mechanical transmission of ‘skills.’

With literacy defined as a set of quantifiable skills that are largely monolingual, monocultural, and monomodal in nature (and supposedly free from cultural context, value, and bias), policymakers claim to measure the literacy aptitudes of students, as if such a venture were unproblematic. Not surprisingly, students who statistically perform the highest on these assessments represent the same middle and upper class White suburban values as the authors of the assessments. The comparatively poorer performances of underprivileged students (often representing under-resourced schools in communities of color) are used to justify labels of pathology, rather than to argue for a more equitable distribution of resources. Once diagnosed deficient, students in urban schools are funneled into remedial literacy programs, where an emphasis on pre-scripted (and prescriptive) skill-and-drill curricula is said to help them “catch up” to their overprivileged suburban peers and to “narrow the achievement gap” (e.g., Nieto, 2010) with communities of pallor.

A number of scholars and practitioners of literacy have spoken back to diagnostic models of assessment, arguing that they distort and conceal the epistemic resources of “non-dominant” students (e.g., Flood & Anders, 2005; Harris, 2011). Such paradigms, it is widely argued, fail to account for the ways in which literacy is *not* a context-neutral, unbiased set of skills, but rather a critical social practice inseparable from the contexts of students’ lived realities and value systems. As David Kirkland (2013) writes,

Literacy is a potential—complex, social, cultural, historical, and even political—that, like energy, is ever stored in the human bond. The practice of literacy is a release of this energy/potential, which always exists in every human’s ability/vocation to make sense of our world (p. xiv).

In locating literacy as a form of sense-making with a range of social, cultural, linguistic, and experiential forces in motion, researchers and practitioners have opened the door for theorizing literacy not as an individual's ability to decode and produce alphabetic text alone, but as a constellation of socially situated, multimodal meaning-making practices. By looking qualitatively at the ways in which students make meaning of texts and contexts, socioculturally-minded literacy theorists endeavor to attend to the variegated contours of literacy in people's lives. Such a shift in thinking pushes beyond deficit ideologies (i.e., the perspective that some students "lack" literacy and must therefore be remediated to become more like other students) to perspectives of profit (i.e., the view that all humans are literate, and educators should strive to better honor all students' multiliterate practices) (e.g., Campano, 2007a, González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999). Additive orientations consider the manifold ways in which students make meaning meaningful and meaningfully, even – and perhaps especially – when these ways differ from those with the highest economic and symbolic capital.

The research questions framing this study derive from the tensions I have outlined above, and others upon which I have elaborated throughout my dissertation. The context of this study, set within an urban K-12 mission school in South Philadelphia, provided a complicated terrain from which to conduct a long-term practitioner inquiry into the intersections of critical multimodal literacy, popular culture, and cultural identity. As I learned in early 2012, when I began a pilot study at Cabrini Parish School, there was a vocal group of students who were deeply invested in the popular and robustly multimodal

medium of comics. As a comics enthusiast myself, both as a child and as an adult, I was interested in understanding what the comics medium meant to all of us, in terms of our readings of multimodal texts, and also the larger contexts within which we operated. Working closely with these students as a literacy practitioner – and a de facto sponsor of multimodal literacy (e.g., Jacobs, 2013) – I discovered quite a bit about the intersections of popular culture, visuality, identity, criticality, and institutional power. At the same time that students at CPS (later CMS) were engaging deeply and critically with *graphica*, the school's leadership did little to promote these particular literate practices. Embodying several of the characteristics of urban education policy and pedagogy I have outlined above, a number of educators in the school held to the position that students' multiliterate behaviors were inconsequential and would not serve them as well as test preparation. These were tensions I was interested in exploring in depth.

The students who comprised the original membership of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community claimed – both through their words and their literate activities – to derive a sizable portion of their identities through their multiliterate transactions with comics. As an emerging literacy researcher, I wanted to understand how and why the medium was valuable to them. In what ways did *graphica* inform the students' identity work? How did students operationalize the comics medium to their own critical ends? How did students' multiliterate practices conflict with the autonomous model of literacy (e.g., Street, 1984) endorsed within so many urban schools in these times? In October 2013, informed by the pilot studies I had conducted during parts of the previous two

school years, I formally posed the following research questions to guide a 9-month practitioner research study:

- How do the cultural identities and experiences of CCIC members inform their literate transactions with graphica? In what ways do they form and perform identities through their reading, composition, and talk about comics and other multimodal texts?
- What happens when I explicitly invite students to respond critically to representations of race, class, and gender in comics texts?

In the next section, I will look across my three data chapters to give an overview of what I “found” during my time as the practitioner and researcher of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community. Lengthier accounts of my findings are discussed at the end of each individual data chapter.

### **Overview of Findings: Comics as a Medium for Critical Inquiry**

The qualitative data I presented and analyzed in chapters three, four, and five speak to a variety of ways in which the members of the CCIC mobilized the medium of comics as readers, critics, and creators. My pedagogic invitations to employ the medium of comics critically, within a co-constructed inquiry space, resulted in the CCIC’s members forming and performing raced, gendered, and cultural identities in their multiliterate transactions, and mobilizing an assortment of modal affordances to invoke community legacies and ways of knowing. I argue that it is a combination of the particular modal and cultural affordances of comics – a globally popular visual medium that is nevertheless undervalued in many sites of formal learning – merging with

students' own ethno-critical sensibilities, that provides a fertile ground for identity performance and critical inquiry.

Because the comics medium is frequently positioned as trivial and uncanonical (by children and adults alike), it may afford students textual “counter-spaces” for subverting traditional school expectations, and for giving voice to subalternated narratives. This is to say that the medium is uniquely situated for engaging in critical work. Indeed, during my data collection period of 2013-14, comics served as a medium that CCIC members used to engage in frequent social critique, going beyond sanctioned (i.e. in-school) spaces to do so<sup>105</sup>. This was certainly the case in chapter three, where students used the comics medium as a platform for engaging in critical discussions of race within a larger school environment that suppressed such dialogues. As the CCIC's facilitator, I endeavored to take students' “social, cultural and community lives into account, and listen for silence and acts of silencing” (Schultz, 2003, p. 2). The students had volumes to speak on these subjects. Within the co-constructed space of the CCIC, race – vis-à-vis *graphica* – became a relatively safe(r) topic of inquiry, rather than one silenced by the post-racial discourses which are the norm of CMS. Within their race inquiries, CCIC members challenged racial status quos – typically by deconstructing mis- and under-representations of ethnic identity in the *graphica* they read – and endeavored to critically redesign the visual medium (and its corresponding pop culture) in ways more to their liking. The visual and verbal representation of race within the ‘not-so-serious’ world

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<sup>105</sup> Some CCIC members read and wrote little besides *graphica*. Other students made comics one aspect of their much larger literate lives. In both cases, the medium served as a meaningful site of critical literacy.

of *graphica* served as an excellent accelerant for igniting students' critical readings.

Whether discussing how they might design alternatives of representation, or actually composing multimodal corrective texts, CCIC members were deeply engaged in acts of (re-)designing critical social worlds.

The operationalization of comics as a medium for inquiry was also evident in chapter four, where two Mexican-American students composed multimodal texts to visually depict their experiences – both personal and sociocultural – and contest deficit labels through the radical act of “re-storying.” Comics is a medium that presents its authors with a range of modal options for figuratively depicting one’s experiences – even, at times, through visual absence and *aporia* (Chute, 2010). By employing the medium to pro-creatively (and reactively, at times) enact cultural identities, Héctor and Alexi engaged in no small amount of critical identity work, negotiating their pasts and presents (i.e., the historicizing of cultural identity), mobilizing their cultural and community knowledge, critiquing ethno-linguistic injustices in their school and in American society at large, and constructing culturally-engaged authorial identities. I argue that when minoritized students are encouraged to bring their lived experiences and family legacies into their multimodal storytelling (e.g., Campano, 2007a), they frequently engage in acts of re-narrativization, using visuo-textual media to write themselves, and their experiences, into rhetorical existence. Comics, as a distillation of multimodality and global popular culture – and also informed by other artistic movements, such as Pre-Columbian Aztec codices (McCloud, 1993) – served as a mechanism for CCIC members to contest being “de-storied” and to cultivate counter-identities as writers and artists, with

power and agency (e.g., Curwood & Gibbons, 2010). I understand Héctor's and Alexi's composing practices, and those of their peers, to be powerful enactments of critical visual literacy with an ethno-cultural basis. How can formal school environments do a better job of recognizing the power behind such enactments of visual literacy?

In effect, the comics medium provided the young readers and authors of the CCIC a multimodal mechanism (or semiotic assemblage) for flipping the scripts of racial silencing and 'culture of poverty' ideologies. As Berry et al. (2014) write, "the stories we tell and our ways of seeing a situation matter; they cannot erase material conditions, but they can help us see the world differently and, sometimes, can lead to social action" (p. 280). Clearly, the medium of comics impacted both the stories that CCIC members told as well as their ways of responding to critical situations pulled from their daily lives. In some cases, as with Desiree's impulse to push comics culture in more inclusive directions, there was a clear element of social action. Social justice was not just a theme of the students' work, but an illustrative example of how the medium is uniquely situated for engaging in extended acts of critical inquiry.

There are tensions and limitations, however, in positioning comics (or any instantiation of multimodality) as an inherently "liberatory" medium. In chapter five, I discuss how the comics form, and its historically regressive representations of gender, did not as frequently result in CCIC members taking critical perspectives, but rather reifying and regulating gender norms. It would be imprudent of me to declare that young peoples' literate interactions with comics necessarily take on a critical valence, irrespective of context. In terms of CCIC members' responses to graphica, I found that race and gender,



while both identity categories that are frequently the subject of critical theories, cannot be empirically conflated. As the data I present in this dissertation indicate, one form of criticality does not presuppose or preclude other forms of criticality, and identity co-articulations are fraught with complexity and contradiction. This “identity fraughtness” is surfaced through CCIC members’ multiliterate transactions with the medium of comics, and its visuo-textual depictions of identity. Thus, while I do remain an advocate of comics, I must mitigate my claims by admitting the medium’s historical shortcomings in terms of representation and critique.

In spite of my finding that criticality was not consistent across the board, when I look across the superset of data I constructed from a 9-month practitioner study (informed by the 1.5 years of pilot studies which preceded it), I feel confident in claiming that reading and composing across semiotic modes (i.e. the visual, textual, and spatial mode) does provide additional symbol systems for reflection, critique, identity construction, and identity performance. In the case of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community, students’ literate transactions with the multimodal medium of comics – coupled with my curricular invitations – frequently engendered acts of culturally-situated criticality. Stated another way, my methodological/pedagogical design invited the CCIC’s members to surface and highlight a wider swatch of their critical literacy practices. In asking urban students to co-construct a space with me according to their interests as literate and cultural beings, we together complicated notions of ‘expert’ and ‘novice,’ challenged deficit stereotypes, and resisted the dominant narrative of urban student disengagement.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Through this dissertation, I argue for the need to foreground issues of culture and identity in empirical studies of multimodal literacy/ies in education. Far too frequently, students' local contexts and ethno-cultural affiliations are treated as merely tangential to the work of multimodal meaning-making. Through the data I have presented and analyzed in the preceding chapters, I maintain that students' cultural and multimodal enactments are inexorably linked, and must be examined as such. In order to attend to the critical nature of multimodal literacy, students' identities (both as ascribed, as claimed, and as performed) cannot be disaggregated from a literacy event itself. Identities matter, and students' identities are integral if literacy researchers are to make meaningful sense of students' critical sense-making. As Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez (2013) write, "critical literacy practices...are most productively understood through an ideological lens that is attentive to local contexts and issues of history, power, and identity" (p. 101). Why should this be any less true of critical *multimodal* literacy practices? Making meaning across modes never occurs in a vacuum, free from history, power, or identity (e.g., Stein, 2004).

There is a need for further research on how students enact critical literacies and perform ethno-cultural identities through their reading, discussion, and composition of multimodal texts, such as comics. As I have argued, because *graphica* is not a part of the dominant narrative of literacy (i.e., literacy as a cognitive skillset devoid of cultural context), it possesses an air of transgression. The nature of the comics medium – both its inherent multimodality and its pop cultural status – affords a common visual "language"

for enacting critical identities, as evidenced in the CCIC and elsewhere. Topics which do not often find purchase in official spaces (such as race talk or immigration narratives) become broachable largely because the comics medium is positioned as trivial, and overlooked. The medium thus provides a space for mixing modes in the pursuit of critical resistance, offering its fans a form of dangerous irreverence. Comics connoisseurship, like other marginalized literacy practices, may serve as a vehicle for young people to cultivate critical orientations toward the world. Yet, to many educators in the United States, the medium remains associated with musclemen in tights and onomatopoeia, no matter what evidence is provided to the contrary<sup>106</sup>.

The entire world learned how transgressive *graphica* can be in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in January 2015. Regardless of the satirical French magazine's penchant for cultural offensiveness, the point is clear that comics and cartoons can provide a powerful, and highly contested, vehicle for desacralizing the world. Indeed, there is a sort of universality to be found in the visual medium, despite its undervalued status in the United States. The medium is globally read, globally produced, and globally provocative (e.g., Berndt, 2010). In the hands of young people (i.e. nonprofessional cartoonists), the medium is no less powerful, which is why it is essential to explore how children and youth mobilize comics as a vehicle for critically engaging issues of culture and power in ways that are not frequently talked about vis-à-vis literacy education in the

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<sup>106</sup> An ongoing tension I have been unable to reconcile is the idea of domestication. If more educators were to suddenly recognize the transgressive power of comics, would the medium continue to be transgressive? Hip hop educators have written on this topic at length, and it is certainly not a new concern. When the media youth use to critique systems are co-opted by those systems, do they retain their bite? I cannot say for certain, but I do attempt to keep the notion of domestication at the forefront of my mind when working with students and the media they use for critical purposes.

U.S. All literacy events are culturally inflected, though often in invisible ways. I argue that it is crucial to examine how young comics connoisseurs (Simon, 2012) negotiate the dialectic between the universal and the local in their multimodal engagements. In the case of CCIC members, comics surfaced how young people respond to their local conditions multimodally, while also linking them to a universal form of transgressive play through “comics culture” more generally.

Mine was not a large-scale study, and this was by design. I was not interested so much in the affordances of global comics culture for fomenting acts of resistance, as I was in how a group of urban students employed the comics medium to perform identities, to position themselves as multimodal readers and composers within a larger environment of curricular remediation, and to locally enact critical literacy practices. As a practitioner researcher, I created specific pedagogic conditions in order to surface students’ multimodal literacy practices, and I invited them to collaboratively inquire into issues of race, culture, and gender through the medium of comics. Not insignificantly, I also invited students to co-construct the space with me and to pursue their own inquiries in that space. Insofar as practitioner research is intended to unsettle and disrupt status quos (e.g., Campano, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), I believe this study’s findings make a strong case for recognizing a wider range of texts, media, and literacy practices as academically valuable.

There are many contributions that scholarship on comics in education can make to the wider field’s understandings of literacy and classroom practice. Rather than positioning comics-in-school in terms of an either/or relationship (i.e., either a teacher

brings comics into the classroom or a teacher teaches the skillsets that are valorized in a traditional literacy curriculum), it may be instructive to think of ways to “cross the gaps” and build bridges among curricular paradigms. In terms of practice, the work I present in this dissertation begs the question: Why keep comics out of schools, when utilizing them – along with other popular media – enables educators to re-center the location of knowledge around our students? What better way to value our students’ knowledge and stories than by honoring the media with which they enthusiastically engage? My and other scholars’ research finds that children who are often labeled as “disengaged” or “reluctant” are actually *quite* engaged in literate activity when it’s with the media they choose. Further, children and youth often harness popular media to learn about, extend, and cultivate the established literary traditions that are typically valued in school curriculums. There need not be an oppositional relationship between old and new media, or between word-based and image-based texts. Rather, these media may be seen to have a porous and bidirectional relationship when students’ literacy practices are examined empirically.

Moving multimodalities and popular culture from out-of-school settings like the CCIC and into the classroom could provide additional avenues for minoritized students to take on expert roles and to exert agency in their own literacy educations. And just as alphabetic writing is not necessarily stripped of its transgressive potential because formulaic essay-writing is taught in schools, neither would *graphica* inherently sacrifice subversion by appearing in sanctioned school spaces.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In a short story published a quarter-century after his death, the author Isaac Bashevis Singer writes, of a perplexing situation, that “like food stuck in the throat, which can’t be swallowed or coughed up, it fixes a question in [his] mind that can be neither answered nor dismissed” (2015, p. 69). This metaphor is both so visceral and so appropriate to the work of the practitioner researcher, presented as we are with an endless parade of “puzzling moments” and “stuck points” which can be neither satisfactorily answered nor categorically dismissed (Ballenger, 2009). Throughout the process of designing a research study, collecting and analyzing data, and ultimately composing this dissertation, I find myself with questions left unanswered, future directions in which to move, and commitments to which I have rededicated or distanced myself. Starting with the lattermost item, I am as committed as ever to honoring the knowledge of young people – and in particular, people whose knowledge has been marginalized on account of their ethno-cultural identities and socioeconomic conditions – through a steadfastly additive orientation. To view literacy as a potential that is expressed within human bonds, and which may be applied in the service of constructing more equitable worlds, necessarily repositions literacy from a quantifiable academic skillset to an actual intellectual resource. It is the difference between constructing narratives of pathology and narratives of humanity. The students of CMS, and especially the children who employed a visuo-textual medium to renarrate themselves from a position of strength, did much to illuminate the symbolic violence of deficit thinking.

Ernest Morrell (2008) writes that literacy is “fundamentally tied to the realization of our full humanity. For our children, literacy determines their ability to engage in the world as citizens, as intellectuals, as workers, and hopefully as the artists...and writers of the next generation” (p. xi). I included this particular quotation as the epigraph to my dissertation proposal in April 2012, and I believe as strongly in its wise beauty now as I did then. Indeed, Morrell’s is a precept I will carry with me to Fresno, California, where in the fall of 2015 I shall begin work as Assistant Professor of Literacy in Multicultural Contexts. As with the population of Marian Anderson in South Philadelphia, California’s Central Valley is robustly multilingual and multicultural. The region is also economically depressed, and its schoolchildren have frequently been narrated through discourses of deficit. In Fresno, as in South Philadelphia, the work of conceptualizing literacy by honoring the manifold ways in which students respond to their worlds with creativity and promise will be vital to my work.

If the purpose of education is fundamentally progressive, and not simply to replicate status quos from one generation to the next, then the role of a progressive literacy educator should be to purposefully co-construct spaces in which students are invited to deconstruct and reconstruct the social conditions that have been constructed around them. As Campano, Ghiso, and Sánchez (2013) write, there are critical literacy practices which “arise organically in local contexts, especially if students...are afforded the curricular space to mobilize cultural and epistemic resources in their transactions with texts and with their worlds” (p. 119). Through their use of language and the other semiotic tools at their disposal – from digital storytelling to street cyphas, from teatro

campesino to *Squish: Super Amoeba* – all students receiving a literacy education must be recognized as potential theorists, activists, epistemologists, and artists. As the members of the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community taught me, a pedagogy which pulls from students' own interests is fundamental to such an endeavor.

I find myself wondering how literacy educators, and especially those in urban schools, might productively incorporate culturally-relevant multimodal pedagogies into their everyday classroom teaching, with everything they are already expected to do. This work should not be seen as a 1-for-1 replacement for any set of pedagogical practices, but rather as an extension of existing teaching practice. Many teachers, including those at the Cabrini Mission School, recognize that their students bring a wealth of cultural experiences and stories into the classroom, and would like to do a better job of valuing and incorporating them into the curriculum. In these times of high-stakes testing and scripted curricula, the members of the CCIC – and their critical multimodal inquiries – provide a definitive rationale for why multimodal pedagogies are so imperative. Providing invitations for students to share their stories through a variety of modes, and via popular culture, can provide openings for greater critical engagement, and may attenuate the marginalization that students of color often encounter in school. Through culturally-enacted multimodal pedagogies, new counter-stories are waiting to be told – about students, about teachers, about knowledge, and about the fullness of literacy in our lives.



## APPENDICES

### *Supplement: My Histories with Graphica*

As I recall it, my history as a comic book reader – and eventually a cartoonist and educator interested in graphica – began with a sick day in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. My father, on his way home from work, stopped at a grocery store and picked up an issue of whichever superhero magazine was on display near the checkout counter. It was meant to be the sort of soft reading that would allay my boredom while I recovered from the flu; it was *not* meant to be life-altering in any way. Before that, I had never expressed much interest in comic books, preferring “normal” pictureless books such as *Hatchet*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and other chapter books that had been assigned by my teachers or recommended by a neighbor. Looking back, however, I realize that I was well situated to become a comic book fan. In addition to enjoying to draw and reading adventure stories, I was small and often picked on. Many of the comic book characters with whom I’d later come to identify were social outcasts who battled bullies with their wits. To a certain type of kid, this motif cannot be overemphasized. The colorful costumes and superpowers were just the whipped cream on top.

With that first comic book – *The Uncanny X-Men* #284 – I was hooked. While I cannot remember that particular issue’s storyline (though I do recall that the cover posed the haunting question “What lies beyond the void?”), it sparked something in me. I read the issue several times, enjoying the artwork and trying to piece together the serialized narrative, until I finally asked my father if he could find a few more issues. The grocery store came up empty, and so, searching the phonebook, we found a nearby store in Mesa,

Arizona called Atomic Comics. The store was large and intimidating, taking up an entire corner of an old strip mall. Every foot of the store's interior wall space was covered in colorful artwork of characters I couldn't identify, though the posters hinted at decades of mythical lore. (Hundreds of long white boxes, stuffed with individual issues arranged alphabetically and chronologically, confirmed this.) The store's personnel and clientele, comprised of teenagers in *Nine Inch Nails* t-shirts, enthralled me with their inscrutability. Even the store's air carried the aroma of old, mildewed paper that can send a child's imagination into overdrive. I remember browsing for a bit, and wandering into an entire world to which I was unaccustomed and overwhelmed, but thoroughly intrigued. I came home with *The Uncanny X-Men* nos. 280-283 and 285, and a burgeoning fixation. Newly equipped with my collection of six comic books (each emblazoned with a sticker reading "Buy Atomic or Die!"), I was now able to construct a larger swath of the X-Men's universe, filling in the gaps around issue #284. Still, there were many characters and plotlines that were unfamiliar to me, and I yearned to know more about them. (It should be mentioned that the year was 1992. By that point the X-Men had a thirty-year history, and I had no Internet with which to unravel that history.) Imagine catching a random week of *All My Children* and trying to figure out how all the relationships and storylines fit together. This is a lot like coming into *The Uncanny X-Men* in 1992, only with considerably more mutants, spandex, and onomatopoeia.

Here and there, I bought a few more comic books, then a few dozen more, and within several years, nearly a thousand more. With money I earned mowing lawns, babysitting, or assisting at a summer camp, I scoured the 25-cent bins, searching for

treasure. From the ages of ten to thirteen, the world of superhero comics became the world I most wanted to inhabit, often at the expense of other worlds. Comic book stores, shows and conventions, interviews with writers and illustrators, nonstop conversations with my friends, and hours upon hours of writing and designing my own characters and stories: these were the seas in which I swam. A small group of friends and I made a weekly bicycle trip to a booth at our local flea market that sold old issues for pennies on the dollar. During these years I continued to follow *The Uncanny X-Men*, buying each new installment and also trying to reach back into the past. I purchased older issues whenever I could find them cheap. In addition to the X-Men family of titles, I hopped aboard the just-launched Image Comics bandwagon, throwing down my money over whatever impossibly large-muscled, gun-wielding antihero the fledgling company could invent. At the height of my comic book buying, in 1994, I spent 100% of my ‘income’ on comic books. Eventually my parents enacted several rules governing my transactions with graphica: I was only permitted to spend half my earnings on comic books, and I was only allowed to read one comic book a day. Both these rules I would break early and often.

In addition to buying and reading comics, I spent a good portion of my time during these years creating my own superheroes and villains, and dreaming up origin stories for them. I very rarely drew *comics*, in the technical sense of the word – comics being defined as narrative sequential art (McCloud, 1993) – but rather pin-ups of my characters posing, their muscles flexed, weapons brandished, teeth bared like angry dogs. Once I was satisfied with the look of a character, I’d venture to my mother’s typewriter

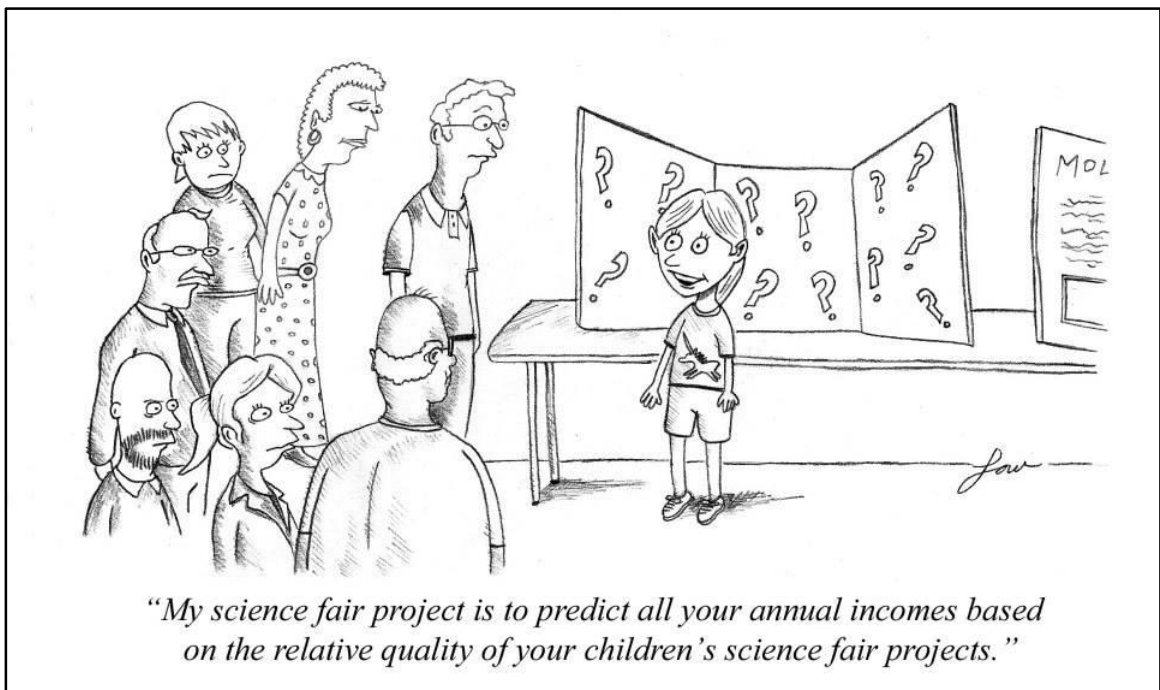
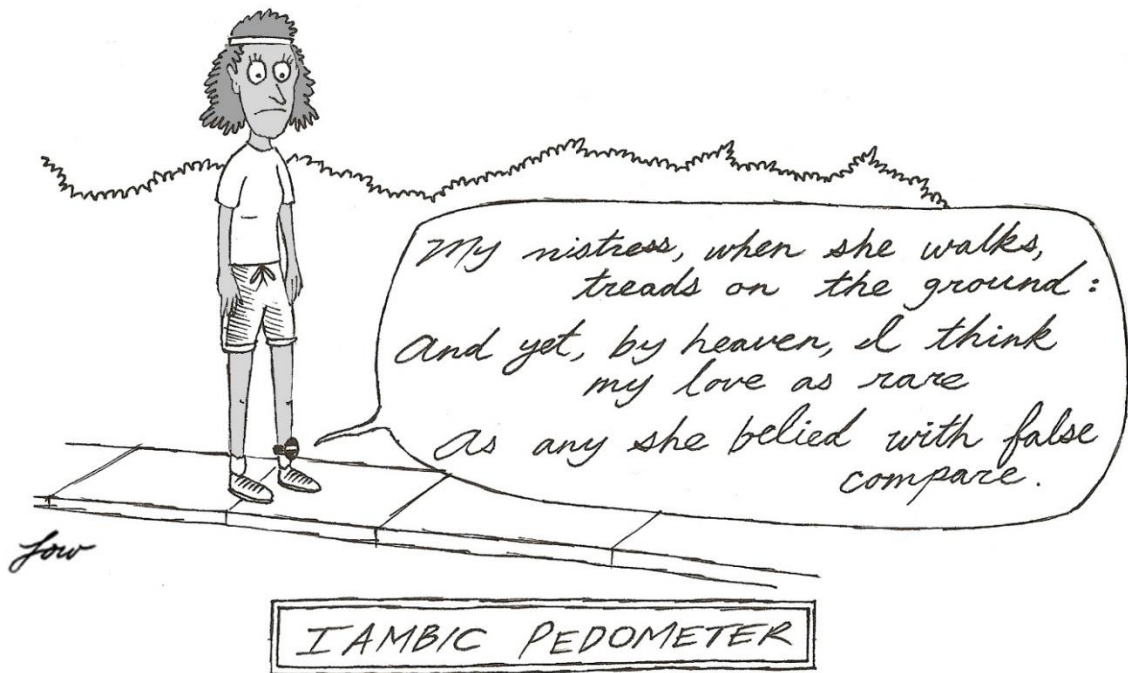
and create an elaborate background story. I often turned to encyclopedias to research my characters.

For three or four years, comic books were the primary mode through which I read, wrote, and navigated my late preadolescent world and endowed it with meaning (Freire, 1987; Carter, 2010). Through comics I thought about issues such as sexuality and death, the purposes and consequences of violence, racially- and sexually-directed bigotry, and other issues of social significance. The adults in my life – my parents and teachers – often denounced comic books (which they did not read) as insipid pabulum, and saw my reading them as an unhealthy fixation. I was forced to either give comic books up or to read them in secret. I chose to do the latter, validating the perception that comics are commonly seen as lowbrow pulp with little social value. There is a long history of people condemning the comics form, one my parents and teachers surely didn't invent themselves. This viewpoint is most prominently exhibited by Frederic Wertham's influential *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which claimed that comics were a serious cause of juvenile delinquency and which led to Congressional hearings on the matter. Wertham's conceit, of course, is still widely mobilized against many forms of popular culture with which young people engage (see Hingston, 2010). I find that most critics' objections to comics (and hip hop and video games, for that matter) have less to do with the form itself, and more to do with the presumed deleterious content of the texts. The adults in my life saw comic books as trivial, unintellectual wastes of time because *The Uncanny X-Men*, with its colorful pictures, could not possibly possess the same gravitas as *Lord of the Flies*. It was a deterministic view, to be sure, but one with which I did not

argue, despite my conviction that *X-Men* was, at its core, about social justice. Instead I became the archetypical reader who hid his comic books inside a math textbook, masking an unacceptable literacy practice with the officially accepted one.

By the time I entered high school in 1995 I had stopped buying comic books in favor of CDs, but I had begun drawing single-panel gag cartoons, more in line with Gary Larson's *The Far Side* than the *X-Men*. Despite the shift in my subject matter, the graphic medium continued to offer me what it always had: an outlet for imaginative meaning-making. As I aged into and out of adolescence, cartooning afforded me a way to interact with my world, to make sense of ideas both new and old, to grapple with my doubts, to recombine seemingly unrelated concepts, to play with language, to critique and satirize whatever I considered asinine, and to read my own developing thinking. As Robert Mankoff, the cartoon editor of *The New Yorker* writes on the process of gag cartooning, "It's only when we take elements from the real world and put them into the unreal world of thought that the rigidity of reality can give way to the malleability of mind" (2002, p. 64). Time after time, I have experienced this to be the case. I published my cartoons from 2002-2004 in my university newspaper *The Daily Wildcat*, and then periodically ever after in venues such as *Z Magazine*, *The Tucson Sentinel*, and *The Funny Times*. [I include several examples of my cartoons on the next page.] To re-appropriate Chico Escuela's famous words about the sport of baseball, comics has been "very, very good to me."

Two examples of my recently published work, from *English Journal* (Sept. 2014) and *The Journal of Language & Literacy Education* (Spring 2014) respectively:



I am not proud to admit that as a classroom ELA teacher from 2004-2008, graphica had little place in my curriculum or pedagogy. Despite the fact that many of my students read and talked about comic books quite frequently, I never assigned a graphic novel and rarely created spaces for my students to create graphica in the classroom. Reflecting some of the very stances that I had found restrictive as a child, as a teacher I preferred that my students focus their attention on the ‘canon’ of American literature. I was the foul embodiment of Rilke’s 1923 poem *Imaginary Career*, the child bent who had become the bender, “inflict[ing] on others what he once went through.” Not until I began reading in the areas of multiliteracies and multimodalities as a Master’s student at NYU did I realize that I had done both my students and myself a disservice by keeping my curriculum closed off to graphica.

Today, I take my legacies (as a reader, writer, artist, and educator) with me into my work with students and comics. I recognize that in 2015, many children and youth engage with graphica in culturally inflected ways, and that countless adults still see comic books as frivolous pap, despite a gradual uptick in the critical acceptance of graphic novels. My work, then, in theorizing literacy alongside the young people who consider themselves connoisseurs of comics, is to learn from and honor them as readers, artists, intellectuals, and literate beings, and in so doing, to theorize and co-construct multiliterate learning spaces of real possibility.

### *List of Graphic Texts Used in the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community*<sup>107</sup>

*This collection began with fewer than ten books in 2012, and grew week-by-week according to students' requests, my research on "high-quality" graphica, and any titles I could find deeply discounted. I solicited no external funding to acquire these texts.*

#### Graphic Novels and Comic Book Anthologies

1. *21: The Story of Roberto Clemente* (Santiago, 2011)
2. *A Chinese Life* (Otie & Kunwu, 2012)
3. *A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel* (L'Engle & Larson, 2012)
4. *Adventure Time vol. 1* (North, Lamb, & Paroline, 2012)
5. *Adventure Time vol. 2* (North, Paroline, & Lamb, 2013)
6. *Adventure Time vol. 3* (North, Paroline, & Lamb, 2013)
7. *Adventure Time vol. 4* (North, Lamb, & Paroline, 2014)
8. *Adventure Time: Fionna and Cake* (Allegri, 2013)
9. *Adventure Time: Marceline and the Scream Queens* (Gran, 2013)
10. *Adventure Time: Playing with Fire* (Corsetto & Sterling, 2013)
11. *Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn your Doodles into Comics* (Sturm, Arnold, & Frederick-Frost, 2009)
12. *Adventures in Cartooning Activity Book* (Sturm, Arnold, & Frederick-Frost, 2010)
13. *Adventures in Cartooning Christmas Special* (Sturm, Arnold, & Frederick-Frost, 2012)
14. *The Adventures of Daniel Boom AKA Loudboy vol. 1: Sound Off* (Steinberg & Smith, 2008)
15. *The Adventures of Superhero Girl* (Hicks, 2013)
16. *African-American Classics* (various authors and artists, 2012)
17. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2008)
18. *Americus* (Reed & Hill, 2011)
19. *Amulet vol. 1: The Stonekeeper* (Kibuishi, 2008)
20. *Amulet vol. 2: The Stonekeeper's Curse* (Kibuishi, 2009)
21. *Amulet vol. 3: The Cloud Searchers* (Kibuishi, 2010)
22. *Amulet vol. 4: The Last Council* (Kibuishi, 2011)

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<sup>107</sup> Note: For this dissertation, I have not analyzed data on students' text selections, but I did keep detailed records about which books were checked out, when, and to whom. I plan to analyze these data in a future publication. One preliminary finding is that nonfictional texts about characters of color (i.e. *King*, *Macolom X*, and *March*) were checked out rather infrequently. I was surprised by this. CCIC members preferred to read fantastical texts, and when they could find these texts starring characters of color (i.e. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*), they were the most checked out books of all.



23. *Amulet vol. 5: Prince of the Elves* (Kibuishi, 2012)
24. *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007)
25. *Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity* (Roman, 2011)
26. *Atomcat* (Tezuka, 2013)
27. *Avatar the Last Airbender: The Search vol. 1* (Yang & Gurihiru, 2013)
28. *Avatar the Last Airbender: The Search vol. 2* (Yang & Gurihiru, 2013)
29. *Avatar the Last Airbender: The Search vol. 3* (Yang & Gurihiru, 2013)
30. *Avatar the Last Airbender: The Promise* (Yang & Gurihiru, 2013)
31. *Babysitters Club: Kristy's Great Idea* (Telgemeier & Martin, 2006)
32. *Bad Island* (Tennapel, 2011)
33. *Babymouse vol. 1: Queen of the World* (Holm & Holm, 2005)
34. *Babymouse vol. 2: Our Hero* (Holm & Holm, 2005)
35. *Babymouse vol. 3: Beach Babe* (Holm & Holm, 2006)
36. *Babymouse vol. 4: Rock Star* (Holm & Holm, 2006)
37. *Batman: Li'l Gotham vol. 1* (Fridolfs & Nguyen, 2014)
38. *Battling Boy* (Pope, 2013)
39. *Ben 10 Omniverse vol. 1: Ghost Ship* (Brown & Levine, 2013)
40. *Big Nate: Game On* (Peirce, 2013)
41. *Big Nate: In the Zone* (Peirce, 2014)
42. *Big Top* (Harrell, 2005)
43. *Binky the Space Cat* (Spires, 2009)
44. *Bird and Squirrel on the Run* (Burks, 2012)
45. *BMX Blitz* (Ciencin & Maese, 2011)
46. *Bone vol. 1: Out from Boneville* (Smith, 2005)
47. *Bone vol. 2: The Great Cow Race* (Smith, 2005)
48. *Bone vol. 3: Eyes of the Storm* (Smith, 2006)
49. *Bone vol. 4: Dragon Slayer* (Smith, 2006)
50. *Bone vol. 5: Rock Jaw* (Smith, 2007)
51. *Bone vol. 6: Old Man's Cave* (Smith, 2007)
52. *Bone vol. 7: Ghost Circles* (Smith, 2008)
53. *Bone vol. 8: Treasure Hunters* (Smith, 2008)
54. *Bone vol. 9: Crown of Horns* (Smith, 2009)
55. *Bone Prequel: Rose* (Smith & Vess, 2009)
56. *Bone: Quest for the Spark vol. 1* (Sniegowski & Smith, 2011)
57. *Bone: Quest for the Spark vol. 2* (Sniegowski & Smith, 2012)
58. *Bone: Quest for the Spark vol. 3* (Sniegowski & Smith, 2013)
59. *Bone: Tall Tales* (Sniegowski & Smith, 2010)
60. *The Boondocks Treasury: A Right to Be Hostile* (McGruder, 2003)

61. *Boxers & Saints* (Yang, 2013)
62. *Brain Camp* (Kim & Klavan, 2010)
63. *Bravest Warriors vol. 1* (Comeau & Holmes, 2013)
64. *Bravest Warriors vol. 2* (Comeau & Holmes, 2014)
65. *Broxo* (Giallongo, 2012)
66. *Captain America: Red, White & Blue* (Dini & Waid, 2007)
67. *Cardboard* (Tennapel, 2012)
68. *Cat Burglar Black* (Sala, 2009)
69. *Chess Rumble* (Neri & Watson, 2007)
70. *Chickenhare* (Grine, 2013)
71. *City of Ember: The Graphic Novel* (DuPrau, Middaugh, & Asker, 2012)
72. *City of Light, City of Dark* (Avi & Floca, 2013)
73. *Clan Apis* (Hosler, 2000)
74. *Cleopatra in Space vol. 1: Target Practice* (Maihack, 2014)
75. *Copper* (Kibuishi, 2010)
76. *Coraline: The Graphic Novel* (Gaiman & Russell, 2009)
77. *Courtney Crumrin vol. 1: The Night Things* (Naifeh, 2012)
78. *Courtney Crumrin vol. 2: The Coven of Mystics* (Naifeh, 2012)
79. *Courtney Crumrin vol. 3: Twilight Kingdom* (Naifeh, 2013)
80. *Courtney Crumrin vol. 4: Monstrous Holiday* (Naifeh, 2013)
81. *Creature Tech* (Tennapel, 2010)
82. *Daisy Cutter: The Last Train* (Kibuishi, 2005)
83. *To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel* (Siegel & Siegel, 2006)
84. *Dogs of War* (Keenan & Fox, 2013)
85. *Doppleganger Chronicles vol. 1: The First Escape* (Taylor, 2008)
86. *Doppleganger Chronicles vol. 2: The Secret of Indigo Moon* (Taylor, 2009)
87. *Doppleganger Chronicles vol. 3: The Great Mogul Diamond* (Taylor, 2011)
88. *Drama* (Telgemeier, 2012)
89. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 1: The Shadow Door* (Nykko and Bannister, 2009)
90. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 2: The Shadow Spies* (Nykko and Bannister, 2009)
91. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 3: Master of Shadows* (Nykko and Bannister, 2009)
92. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 4: The Calling* (Nykko and Bannister, 2010)
93. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 5: The Parting* (Nykko and Bannister, 2011)
94. *Elsewhere Chronicles vol. 6: Tower of Shadows* (Nykko and Bannister, 2013)
95. *The Eternal Smile* (Yang & Kim, 2009)
96. *Explorer vol. 1: The Mystery Boxes* (ed. Kibuishi, 2012)
97. *Explorer vol. 2: The Lost Islands* (ed. Kibuishi, 2012)
98. *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence* (Canada & Nicholas, 2010)

99. *Flight vol. 1* (ed. Kibuishi, 2004)
100. *Flight vol. 2* (ed. Kibuishi, 2005)
101. *Flight vol. 3* (ed. Kibuishi, 2006)
102. *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo & Campbell, 2013)
103. *Flying Beaver Brothers and the Evil Penguin Plan* (Eaton III, 2012)
104. *Flying Beaver Brothers and the Fishy Business* (Eaton III, 2012)
105. *Flying Beaver Brothers and the Mudslinging Moles* (Eaton III, 2013)
106. *Flying Beaver Brothers: Birds vs. Bunnies* (Eaton III, 2013)
107. *Foiled vol. 1* (Yolen & Cavallaro, 2010)
108. *Foiled vol. 2: Curses! Foiled Again!* (Yolen & Cavallaro, 2013)
109. *Futurama: The Time Bender Trilogy* (Groening, 2006)
110. *Gabby and Gator* (Burks, 2010)
111. *Ghostopolis* (Tennapel, 2010)
112. *Giants Beware!* (Aguirre & Rosado, 2012)
113. *Glorkian Warrior Delivers a Pizza* (Kochalka, 2014)
114. *G-Man vol. 1: Learning to Fly* (Giarrusso, 2010)
115. *G-Man vol. 2: Cape Crisis* (Giarrusso, 2010)
116. *G-Man vol. 3: Coming Home* (Giarrusso, 2013)
117. *Gon vol. 1* (Tanaka, 2011)
118. *Gon vol. 2* (Tanaka, 2011)
119. *Gon vol. 3* (Tanaka, 2011)
120. *Gon vol. 4* (Tanaka, 2012)
121. *Gon vol. 5* (Tanaka, 2012)
122. *The Great American Dust Bowl* (Brown, 2013)
123. *Hamakua Hero: A True Plantation Story* (Iwasaki & Berido, 2010)
124. *Hereville: How Mirka got her Sword* (Deutsch, 2010)
125. *Herobear and the Kid vol. 1: The Inheritance* (Kunkel, 2003)
126. *Hidden: A Child's Story of the Holocaust* (Dauvillier, Lizano, & Salsedo, 2014)
127. *Hilda Folk* (Pearson, 2010)
128. *The Indispensable Calvin & Hobbes* (Watterson, 1992)
129. *Into the Volcano* (Wood, 2012)
130. *Iron West* (Tennapel, 2006)
131. *Jax Epoch and the Quicken Forbidden: Borrowed Magic* (Roman & Green, 2003)
132. *Jellaby vol. 1: The Lost Monster* (Soo, 2014)
133. *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Anderson, 2005)
134. *Knights of the Lunch Table vol. 1: The Dodgeball Chronicles* (Cammuso, 2008)
135. *Knights of the Lunch Table vol. 2: The Dragon Players* (Cammuso, 2009)
136. *Laddertop vol. 1* (Card, Card, & Ibardolaza, 2011)

137. *Laika* (Abadzis, 2007)
138. *The Legend of Hong Kil Dong: The Robin Hood of Korea* (O'Brien, 2008)
139. *Level Up* (Yang & Pham, 2011)
140. *The Lightning Thief: The Graphic Novel* (Riordan & Venditti, 2010)
141. *Little Adventures in Oz vol. 1* (Shanower, 2010)
142. *Little Adventures in Oz vol. 2* (Shanower, 2010)
143. *Little Vampire vol. 1* (Sfar, 2008)
144. *Lockjaw and the Pet Avengers Unleashed* (Elipoulis, Guara, & Sotomayor, 2011)
145. *Lunch Lady and the League of Librarians* (Krosoczka, 2009)
146. *Luz Sees the Light* (Davila, 2011)
147. *Magic Pickle Vs. the Egg Poacher* (Morse, 2008)
148. *Magic Pickle and the Garden of Evil* (Morse, 2009)
149. *Magic Pickle: The Full Color Graphic Novel* (Morse, 2008)
150. *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* (Helfer & DuBurke, 2006)
151. *Malice vol. 1* (Wooding, 2009)
152. *Malice vol. 2: Havoc* (Wooding, 2010)
153. *Manga Shakespeare: Macbeth* (Appignanesi & Deas, 2008)
154. *Marble Season* (Hernandez, 2013)
155. *March: Book 1* (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2013)
156. *Marvel Adventures Avengers: United* (various authors and artists, 2012)
157. *Marvel Adventures Captain America* (various authors and artists, 2011)
158. *Marvel Adventures Fantastic Four vol. 1: All For One* (various authors and artists, 2004)
159. *Marvel Adventures Hulk vol. 1: Misunderstood Monster* (various authors and artists, 2007)
160. *Marvel Adventures Hulk vol. 2* (various authors and artists, 2008)
161. *Marvel Adventures Iron Man vol. 1: Heart of Steel* (various authors and artists, 2007)
162. *Marvel Adventures Iron Man vol. 2: Iron Armory* (various authors and artists, 2008)
163. *Marvel Adventures Peter Parker Vs. The X-Men* (various authors and artists, 2010)
164. *Marvel Adventures Spider-Man vol. 1: The Sinister Six* (various authors and artists, 2009)
165. *Marvel Adventures Spider-Man vol. 2* (various authors and artists, 2010)
166. *Marvel Adventures Thor* (various authors and artists, 2011)
167. *Marvel Universe* (Sanderson, 1998)
168. *Marvel 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection* (various authors and artists, 2009)
169. *Marvels* (Busiek & Ross, 1994)
170. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 1* (Patterson & Lee, 2009)

171. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 2* (Patterson & Lee, 2009)
172. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 3* (Patterson & Lee, 2010)
173. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 4* (Patterson & Lee, 2011)
174. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 5* (Patterson & Lee, 2011)
175. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 6* (Patterson & Lee, 2012)
176. *Maximum Ride: The Manga vol. 7* (Patterson & Lee, 2013)
177. *Meanwhile* (Shiga, 2010)
178. *Mermin vol. 1: Out of Water* (Weiser, 2013)
179. *Mighty Avengers vol. 1: No Single Hero* (Ewing & Land, 2014)
180. *Miki Falls: Spring* (Crilley, 2007)
181. *Miki Falls: Summer* (Crilley, 2007)
182. *Miki Falls: Autumn* (Crilley, 2007)
183. *Missile Mouse vol. 1: Star Crusher* (Parker, 2010)
184. *Missile Mouse vol. 2: Rescue on Tankium3* (Parker, 2011)
185. *Mo and Jo: Fighting Together Forever* (Lynch & Haspiel, 2013)
186. *Mouse Guard: Fall 1152* (Petersen, 2009)
187. *Mr. Big: A Tale of Pond Life* (Dembicki & Dembicki, 2012)
188. *Muppet Peter Pan* (Randolph & Mebberson, 2009)
189. *My Life as a Cartoonist* (Tashjian & Tashjian, 2013)
190. *My Life as a Stuntboy* (Tashjian & Tashjian, 2011)
191. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic vol. 1* (Cook, 2013)
192. *No Girls Allowed: Tales of Daring Women Dressed as Men for Love, Freedom, and Adventure* (Hughes & Dawson, 2008)
193. *Nufonia Must Fall* (Kid Koala, 2003)
194. *The Odyssey: The Graphic Novel* (Hinds, 2010)
195. *The Olympians vol. 1: Zeus* (O'Connor, 2010)
196. *The Olympians vol. 2: Athena* (O'Connor, 2010)
197. *The Olympians vol. 5: Poseidon* (O'Connor, 2013)
198. *Ororo: Before the Storm* (Sumerak & Barberi, 2005)
199. *Oz vol. 1: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2010)
200. *Oz vol. 2: The Marvelous Land of Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2010)
201. *Oz vol. 3: Ozma of Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2011)
202. *Oz vol. 4: Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2012)
203. *Oz vol. 5: Road to Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2013)
204. *Oz vol. 6: The Emerald City of Oz* (Shanower, Baum, & Young, 2014)
205. *Pandemonium* (Wooding, 2012)
206. *Peanut* (Halliday & Hoppe, 2012)
207. *Peanuts: Every Sunday* (Schulz)

208. *Princess vol. 1: Save Yourself* (Whitley & Goodwin, 2012)
209. *The Prison-Ship Adventure of James Forten, Revolutionary War Captive*
210. *Rapunzel's Revenge* (Hale, Hale, & Hale, 2008)
211. *Reading with Pictures* (various authors and artists, 2010)
212. *The Red Pyramid: The Graphic Novel* (Riordan & Collar, 2012)
213. *Redwall: The Graphic Novel* (Jacques & Blevins, 2007)
214. *Re-Gifters* (Carey, Liew, & Hempel, 2007)
215. *Resistance vol. 1* (Jablonski & Purvis, 2010)
216. *Resistance vol. 2: Defiance* (Jablonski & Purvis, 2011)
217. *Resistance vol. 3: Victory* (Jablonski & Purvis, 2012)
218. *Robot Dreams* (Varon, 2007)
219. *Salem Hyde vol. 1: Spelling Trouble* (Cammuso, 2013)
220. *Satchel Paige: Striking out Jim Crow* (Sturm & Tommaso, 2007)
221. *The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook* (Davis, 2009)
222. *The Shadow Hero* (Yang, 2014)
223. *Sidekicks* (Santat, 2011)
224. *The Silence of our Friends* (Long, Demonakos, & Powell, 2012)
225. *Sketch Monsters vol. 1: Escape of the Scribbles* (Williamson & Navarrete, 2011)
226. *Sketch Monsters vol. 2: The New Kid* (Williamson & Navarrete, 2013)
227. *Smile* (Telgemeier, 2010)
228. *Sonic the Hedgehog Archives vol. 0* (various authors and artists, 2008)
229. *Sonic Super-Sized Comics Digest #6* (various authors and artists, 2014)
230. *Sons of Liberty vol. 1* (Lagos, Lagos, & Walker, 2010)
231. *Sons of Liberty vol. 2: Death and Taxes* (Lagos, Lagos, & Walker, 2011)
232. *Spider-Man: The Cosmic Adventures* (various authors and artists, 1993)
233. *Spring-Heeled Jack* (Pullman & Mostyn, 2004)
234. *Squish vol. 1: Super Amoeba* (Holm & Holm, 2011)
235. *Squish vol. 2: Brave New Pond* (Holm & Holm, 2011)
236. *Squish vol. 3: Power of the Parasite* (Holm & Holm, 2012)
237. *Squish vol. 4: Captain Disaster* (Holm & Holm, 2012)
238. *Squish vol. 5: Game On!* (Holm & Holm, 2013)
239. *Super Dinosaur vol. 1* (Kirkman & Howard, 2011)
240. *Super Dinosaur vol. 2* (Kirkman & Howard, 2012)
241. *Super Dinosaur vol. 3* (Kirkman & Howard, 2013)
242. *Three Thieves vol. 1: Tower of Treasure* (Chantler, 2010)
243. *Three Thieves vol. 2: Sign of the Black Rock* (Chantler, 2011)
244. *Three Thieves vol. 3: The Captive Prince* (Chantler, 2012)
245. *Three Thieves vol. 4: The King's Dragon* (Chantler, 2014)

246. *Tommysaurus Rex* (Tennapel, 2013)
247. *Trickster* (various authors and artists, 2010)
248. *Triton of the Sea vol. 1* (Tezuka, 2013)
249. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man vol. 1* (Bendis & Pichelli, 2012)
250. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man vol. 2* (Bendis, Samnee, Pichelli, & Marquez, 2012)
251. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man vol. 3* (Bendis, Marquez, & Larraz, 2013)
252. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man vol. 4* (Bendis, Marquez, & Pichelli, 2013)
253. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man vol. 5* (Bendis & Marquez, 2014)
254. *Unico* (Tezuka, 2009)
255. *The Unsinkable Walker Bean* (Renier, 2010)
256. *Wolverine and the X-Men vol. 1* (Aaron & Bachalo, 2012)
257. *World War Hulk* (Pak & Romita Jr., 2008)
258. *X-Men Forever vol. 1: Picking Up Where We Left Off* (Claremont & Grummett, 2009)
259. *X-Men: God Loves Man Kills* (Claremont & Anderson, 1982)
260. *X-Men Misfits* (Telgemeier, Roman, & Anzu, 2009)
261. *Xoc: The Journey of a Great White* (Dembicki, 2012)
262. *Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's Vol. 1* (Hikokubo & Sato, 2011)
263. *Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's Vol. 2* (Hikokubo & Sato, 2012)
264. *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri & DuBurke, 2010)
265. *Zebrafish* (Emerson & Kurilla, 2010)
266. *Zita the Spacegirl vol. 1* (Hatke, 2011)
267. *Zita the Spacegirl vol. 2: Legends of Zita the Spacegirl* (Hatke, 2012)
268. *Zita the Spacegirl vol. 3: Return of Zita the Spacegirl* (Hatke, 2014)

Loose (un-anthologized) comic book runs in the CMS library

- *Fantastic Four* (2012) #1-15
- *FF* (2012) #1-15
- *Here Comes Daredevil* (2011) #1-34
- *Ms. Marvel* (2014) #1-4
- *Superior Spider-Man* (2013) #1-31

**I include here the [pseudonymized] handouts I provided to Principal Caputo in September 2013 to rationalize and attempt to win her support for my dissertation study.**

Proposed Dissertation Study at Cabrini Mission School Comics Inquiry Community (2013-2014)

Working Title: “Urban Students and Graphica: Exploring the Multiliterate Lives of an Afterschool Comics Club”

Chair: Dr. Gerald Campano, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

**Contexts of my study:**

- \* Approximately 10-20 participants; boys and girls (grades 4-8) who choose to attend the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC) after school.
- \* Follows on the heels of my pilot study with the CCIC from February 2012 through May 2013. I have been involved in other collaborative projects with the Cabrini school, aftercare, and parish since 2011.

**Why is this a Topic that is Worth Studying?**

- \* In the years following 2002’s *No Child Left Behind*, a celebration of the **diverse literacy practices** of urban youth has continued to elude many of our educational institutions (Ball & Lee, 2011; Kinloch, 2011).
- \* Urban education policy is typically characterized by curricular standardization, high-stakes tests, and skills-based approaches to literacy (Edelsky, 2006). Too rarely is space provided within this model for urban students to exercise their **vast literacy practices and knowledge** with agency and joy, and to form literate identities through a range of **modalities** (Morrell, 2002).
- \* “How might we position **multimodality** so teachers and students can tap its possibilities in the accountability culture?” (Siegel, 2012)
  - A 5<sup>th</sup> grader at CMS once said that “Comics express me. When I was younger, people thought I didn’t like books. [One person] told me that comics aren’t real books. She undermined my knowledge.”
- \* My project may allow teachers and researchers to better acknowledge historical, social, cultural, and political considerations when talking about **multimodal literacies**. This may enable us to better honor our students as cosmopolitan intellectuals with huge resources of knowledge (Low & Campano, 2013).



- \* “A failure to adopt a pedagogy of **multiliteracies** will only create a further gap between what kinds of literacies students interact with at home or at work and those they interact with at school” (Monnin, 2011, p. xii).
- \* “It is sound practice” to include comics in school and “integrating them is a step toward a realization of more democratic notions of text, literacy, and curriculum” (Carter, 2008, p. 47).
- \* “If we find ourselves refusing to accept comics in our classrooms, or intentionally ignoring their potential, we are in reality making powerful political statements. These statements might suggest that we do not care much for others who think, read, and decode differently from the narrowest notion of reading and literacy (Carter, 2008, p. 53).

### **My Research Questions:**

- \* How do the experiences and raced, gendered, and classed identities of CCIC members inform their transactions with and creations of illustrated (multimodal) texts? How are they forming and performing identities, in their talk and in their multimodal composing, that pertain to their social experiences? What do CCIC members talk about when they talk about CCIC, and how do they talk about it?
- \* In what ways might the medium of comics (i.e. ‘graphica’ or ‘illustrated texts’ enable CCIC members to form and perform identities, to invoke community legacies and ways of knowing, and to construct diverse narratives?

### **Urban schools have routinely been characterized in two very contradictory ways:**

1. As underachieving and in need of curricular remediation and test-taking skills and strategies – as “joyless epicenters of apathy”
2. As storehouses of cultural, linguistic, and knowledge resources

The first characterization appears totally unsatisfactory when viewed with respect to the range, context, nuance, and human agency of urban children, families, communities, and schools. This is especially clear in the vibrant, rigorous, multicultural context of the Cabrini Mission School.

One scholar of urban literacy education, Valerie Kinloch (2011), asks: “How can critical educational research in urban settings account for dynamic interactions, practices, and literate engagements of children, youth, and adults in ways that critique popular and often unfounded notions that they are disengaged from learning?”

***In looking at the various ways that the CMS students interact with (and create) multimodal texts, this is what my work attempts to do.***

*“We encounter daily a system that reinforces an idea of deprivation: of community decay, teacher incompetence, parental neglect, and ultimately student failure. At the same time, daily, we encounter children, young adults, and families who are responding to their circumstances,*

*including this pervasive discourse of deprivation, with creativity and promise”* (Gerald Campano, 2007).

### **Additional Background**

I am proposing to continue researching in the site of my pilot study, at the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC), located within the Cabrini Mission School. My pilot study began in February 2012 and by the time my dissertation study comes to a close in June 2014, I will have been involved in this site as a practitioner-researcher for roughly 28 months.

In the fall of 2010, Gerald Campano and María Paula Ghiso (both professors of literacy education, at Penn GSE and Columbia University Teachers College, respectively) became involved in a research relationship with the St. Cabrini Parish. In the first year of their involvement, Gerald invited members of his doctoral research team, including myself, to build relationships within the parish’s communities and to envision pilot projects we might be interested in pursuing. The idea was that by attending to literacy practices within smaller parish communities, we could hope to cultivate more complex understandings of the overall site and develop more sensitive, nuanced, and participatory approaches to the educational experiences and resources of the parish’s children and families.

I began participating at St. Cabrini in early 2011, and soon met Moxie, who was the librarian at the parish school at the time. Less than a semester after opening up the library, dozens of the parish school’s students had begun to hang out in the library after school, and so Moxie and I established loosely organized book clubs with another of our colleagues, Robert LeBlanc. Moxie shared with us some of her concerns about 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys who weren’t using the library to read or check out books. I asked Moxie if she ever considered stocking graphic novels or comics in the library, and she told me that she didn’t know much about them, but that several students had been asking her to procure some for the library.

Over the next several weeks, I brought into the library a box of my graphic novels from home, and several of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys had various reactions. One child began to tear up when reading a story about bullying. Another child told me that he hates to read, but that he loves comics. I wondered how he was defining reading and why. *What made him think that comics don’t count as reading?*

One message I kept hearing from the boys was that they didn’t think there were other people in Philly who like comics, and especially not people of color, like them. They thought that comics were mostly for White people, even though they claimed to be big fans themselves. They saw themselves existing outside this narrative tradition, rather than within it, and I worked to convince them that many, many artists and writers of color have had great impacts on graphic storytelling (i.e. comics), some even based out of Philadelphia.

One thing that surprised me at first was that some of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys began collaborating on their own stories, making up new characters, deciding who would write and who would draw, and thinking about who their audience would be. They were treating comics as an authentic opportunity for authorship (rather than a mandated classroom assignment), which was very moving for me. Due to popular demand, “Comics Club” became a weekly thing, and at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, the students put out an anthology of their own work. That a group of students chose to stay after school on Friday afternoons to attend an optional club, for such a long

period of time, says something about this space and what it might mean to them. I came back during the next school year (2012-2013), and even more students became involved this time around, and for the first time, female students joined the group. We continued to read, write, and draw comics together throughout the year, and by the end of it, several of the students had produced their own comic books. The stories varied widely, as some are funny, some are full of action, and some are intense pieces of social critique. The students in comics club use the medium to tell any sort of story they want. They are powerful literants with narrative agency!

My aim in this dissertation research is to explore what the space might mean to its members, and how the multimodal medium of comics might allow them to construct and question various issues relating to autobiography, race, gender, and community.

### **Additional Rationale**

Like many education researchers working in cities like Philadelphia, the context of my research lies somewhere in between the climate of standardization that has become so prevalent in the past generation, and the brilliant students I work with on a daily basis. I am highly interested in the ways that students at Cabrini assert their social and cultural knowledge in creative ways that push back against the dominant narrative that urban students require remediation in schools.

The reason that comics are important to my research at CMS is because comics are so important to these kids for making meaning and (per)forming identities. The importance of multimodality is that it increases the “ways by which people can make meaning in the world” which is “important if schooling is to be relevant and meaningful”. Marjorie Siegel writes that “multimodal transformations of school literacy are really a matter of social justice.”

In recent years, a growing number of literacy scholars have argued that comic books and graphic novels may provide students of all ages with an ideal medium for navigating wide ranges of literacies and modalities (e.g., Frey & Fisher, 2004; Griffith, 2010; Schwarz, 2006; Simon, 2012; Weiner, 2004). The medium of comics, which uses both images and words to tell stories, does much to disrupt the traditional definition of literacy – being able to read and write alphabetic texts – that is overwhelmingly endorsed by the testing regime.

A particularly hopeful way to honor the knowledge of young people is by operating from the standpoint that youths’ interests are valid and innately intellectual. We can thus celebrate “the literate lives, academic achievements, and social networking systems of students in urban environments” and open up “worlds for meaning makers that are frequently, if not always, silent in formal, institutional settings like schooling”.

It is with these appeals in mind that I propose to investigate my questions around urban youths’ engagements with comics and graphic novels in the Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community.

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**I include here the [pseudonymized] document I disseminated to students who expressed interest in joining the CCIC in September 2013.**

Dear Guardian or Parent,

Your child has been selected to participate in a new year of the **Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community!** In this exciting afterschool club, your child (or children) will get to read, create, and discuss a variety of illustrated texts. In today's world, each of us is constantly being exposed to countless images, whether on billboards, on TV, in magazines, or on the Internet. In this afterschool "inquiry group," children will practice critically interpreting images, as well as developing new ways to tell stories using combinations of words and pictures. Over the past several years, students have created characters, published their own comic books, and written autobiographies as a part of the club.

The club is scheduled to meet on **Monday afternoons from 2:30** (when school ends) **to 3:30 pm, beginning on October 21<sup>st</sup>.** Every student must either be picked up at 3:30 or be able to take himself or herself home. For this reason, the club is only being offered to older students in grades 4-8. The school and office will close at 3:30, and no return access to the building will be permitted.

With support from Principal Caputo and Liberty Mission Schools, the club will be run by Mr. David Low, an educator from the University of Pennsylvania who has been partnering with the Cabrini Mission School for over three years. He is excited to be back and once again working with the teachers, students, and community of St. Cabrini.

There is no cost for your child to participate in the club, to use materials, or to borrow books.

Thank you. We look forward to another great year of afterschool activities.

David Low  
University of Pennsylvania  
Doctoral candidate in Reading/Writing/Literacy

Janet Caputo  
Cabrini Mission School  
Principal

**I include here the semi-structured interview protocol I used with CCIC members from January – April 2014 <sup>108</sup>**

1. Why did you decide to join the CCIC?
2. Does the CCIC feel like school to you?
  - a. Does it feel more like work or more like play?
3. Do you like school?
  - a. What are your favorite subjects?
4. What do you think of the experience of being in the CCIC?
5. Do you like seeing the other people who are in the CCIC?
6. Are there things you don't like about the CCIC? Things that you would change?
  - a. What are they?
7. How has the CCIC changed since you first joined?
8. Do you feel like you can be yourself in the CCIC?
  - a. Explain what you mean...
9. What do you like about comics and graphic novels?
10. Is there anything you don't you like about comics and graphic novels, compared to other types of books or magazines?
11. Do comics feel more or less 'real' to you than other types of books?
12. Why do you think some people don't respect comics, or think they are less important than books which only have words in them?
  - a. What would you say to these people?
13. Do you think reading comics will be good for you throughout your life?
  - a. Why or why not?
14. When did you first start reading comics?
15. Do you think reading comics makes you a better reader of other kinds of books?
  - a. In what ways?
16. How do you pick the comics and graphic novels you want to read?
  - a. Do you prefer fantasy comics or realistic comics? Why?
17. Tell me about some of the comic books and graphic novels you've read so far this year. Which ones have stuck with you, and make you keep thinking about them?
  - What did you enjoy or not enjoy about them?
  - Do these books relate to your life in any important ways?
  - Do these books make you think about the world – or your own life – differently?

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<sup>108</sup> The purpose of my interviews with CCIC members was to consider how the space of the inquiry community functioned as a site of multiliterate engagement outside of a traditional literacy curriculum. The questions I asked arose from themes generated by CCIC members and the words & work they produced.

18. Do you think that some comics should be read by girls or boys only?
  - a. What makes a comic book something intended “for girls” or “for boys?”
19. Do you ever talk to your friends or family members about comic books?
20. Do comic books ever make you think about your own life differently?
21. Do you see yourself as someone who enjoys reading?
22. Do you ever see your culture/race/history/language/community represented in comic books and graphic novels?
  - Should these things be represented in comic books? Why do/don't you think so?
23. Why did (or didn't) you decide to make your own comics this year?
24. Do you like making comics more or less than other types of writing? Why?
  - a. What is different about it for you?
  - b. What kinds of stories would you rather tell in one form or the other?
  - c. Are there ever stories you think you couldn't tell with comics? Or could only tell with comics?
25. Do you think reading and making comics makes you more creative? How so?
26. Does making comics help you think about your life and experiences in any ways?
27. What interests you about the \_\_\_\_\_ genre? Are there other types of stories you're interested in creating?
28. Tell me about some of the comics you've created so far. What made you decide to tell these stories with these characters? Where did you get your ideas? (I've got examples, so you can point out things to me.)<sup>109</sup>
  - Do you ever try to put any parts of yourself, your life, and your own experiences into the comics you make?
  - Do you think your culture, community, and experiences shape the kinds of stories you tell?
29. Do your characters have a race, ethnicity, or culture?
  - a. How do you try to make that a part of your work?
30. Do you see yourself as a good writer?
31. Do you see yourself as a good reader?
32. Do you see yourself as a good student?
33. Tell me about a piece of art or writing that you've made that you're proud of, from any time in your life.
34. What have you learned about yourself by being in the CCIC?

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<sup>109</sup> This question often took on the function of a ‘think-aloud’ in which a CCIC member would describe one or more pieces of her or his work.

*Further Examples of Students' Multimodal Compositions*

Because there was insufficient space to include all the student-produced artwork I referenced within data chapters, I include additional examples here in the Appendix.

1. Héctor

BY Héctor Martinez 6th Pg. 2





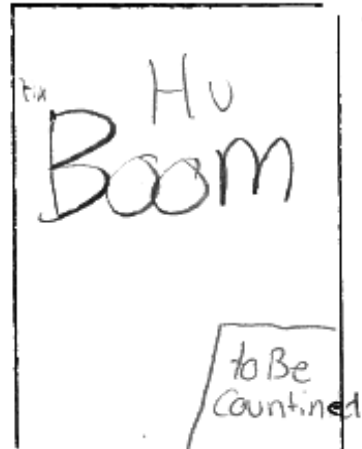
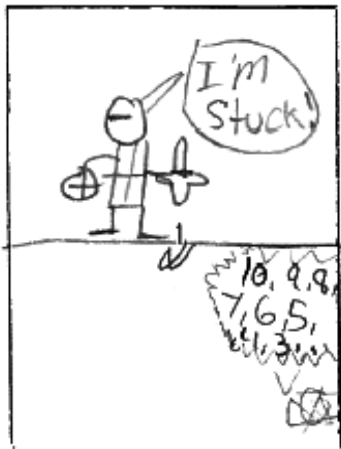
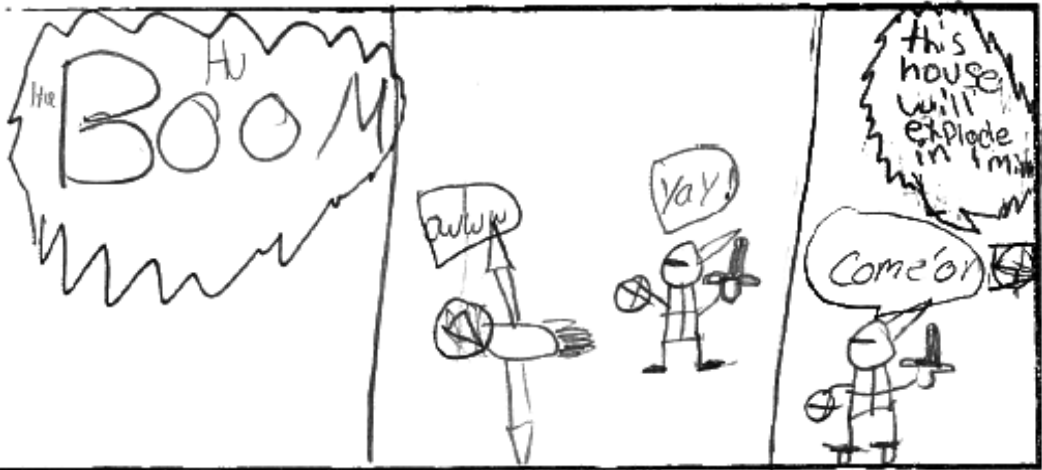


Héctor the  
knight 6th  
Pg. 4



# Héctor

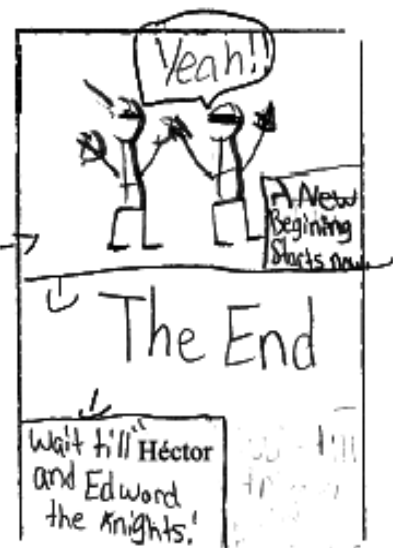
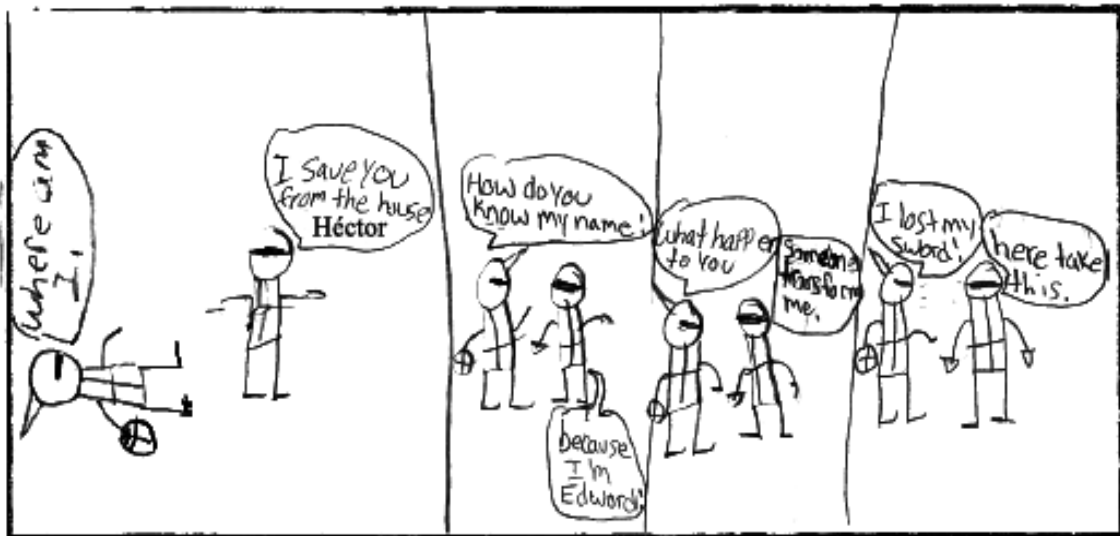
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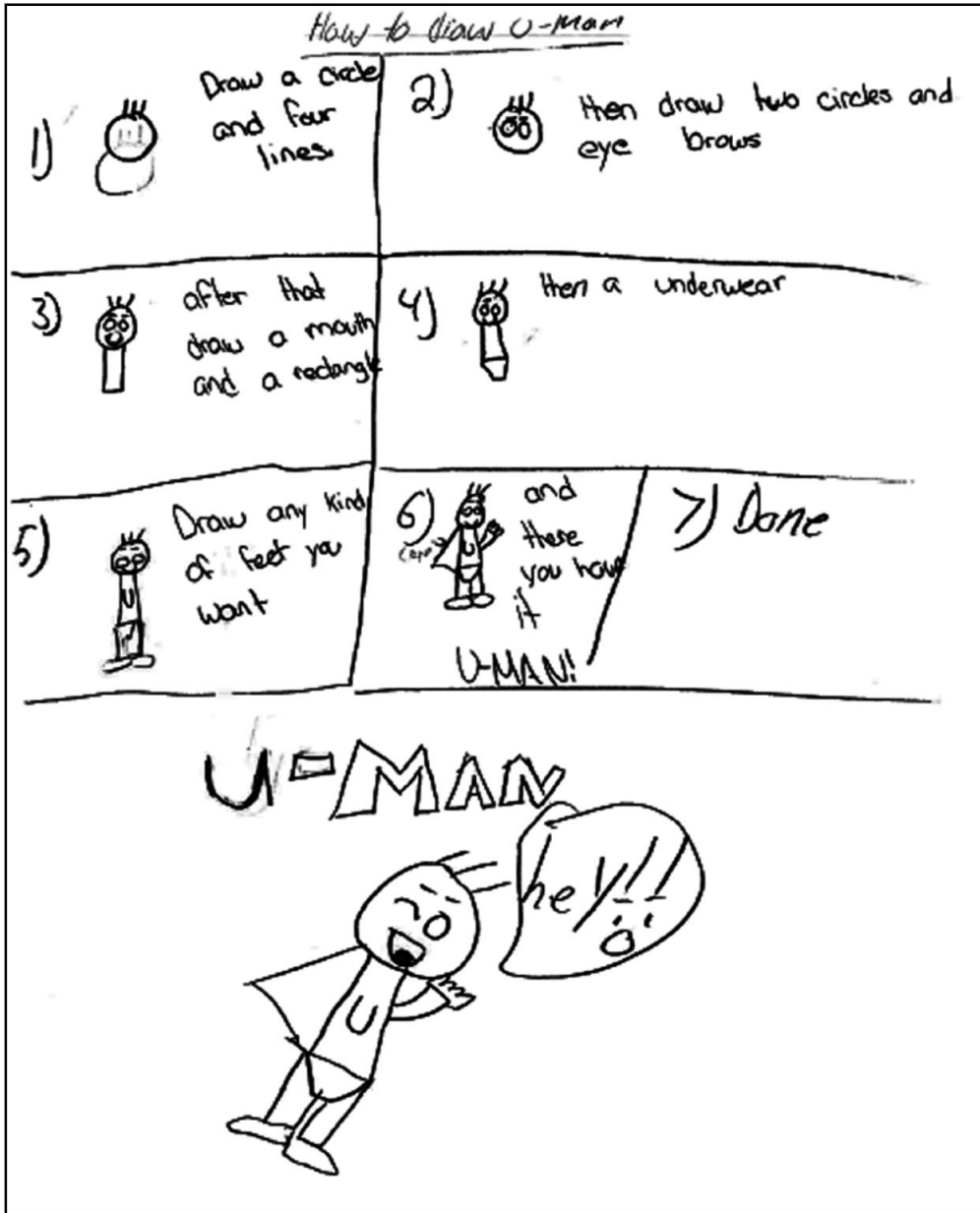


Pg 6

# Héctor

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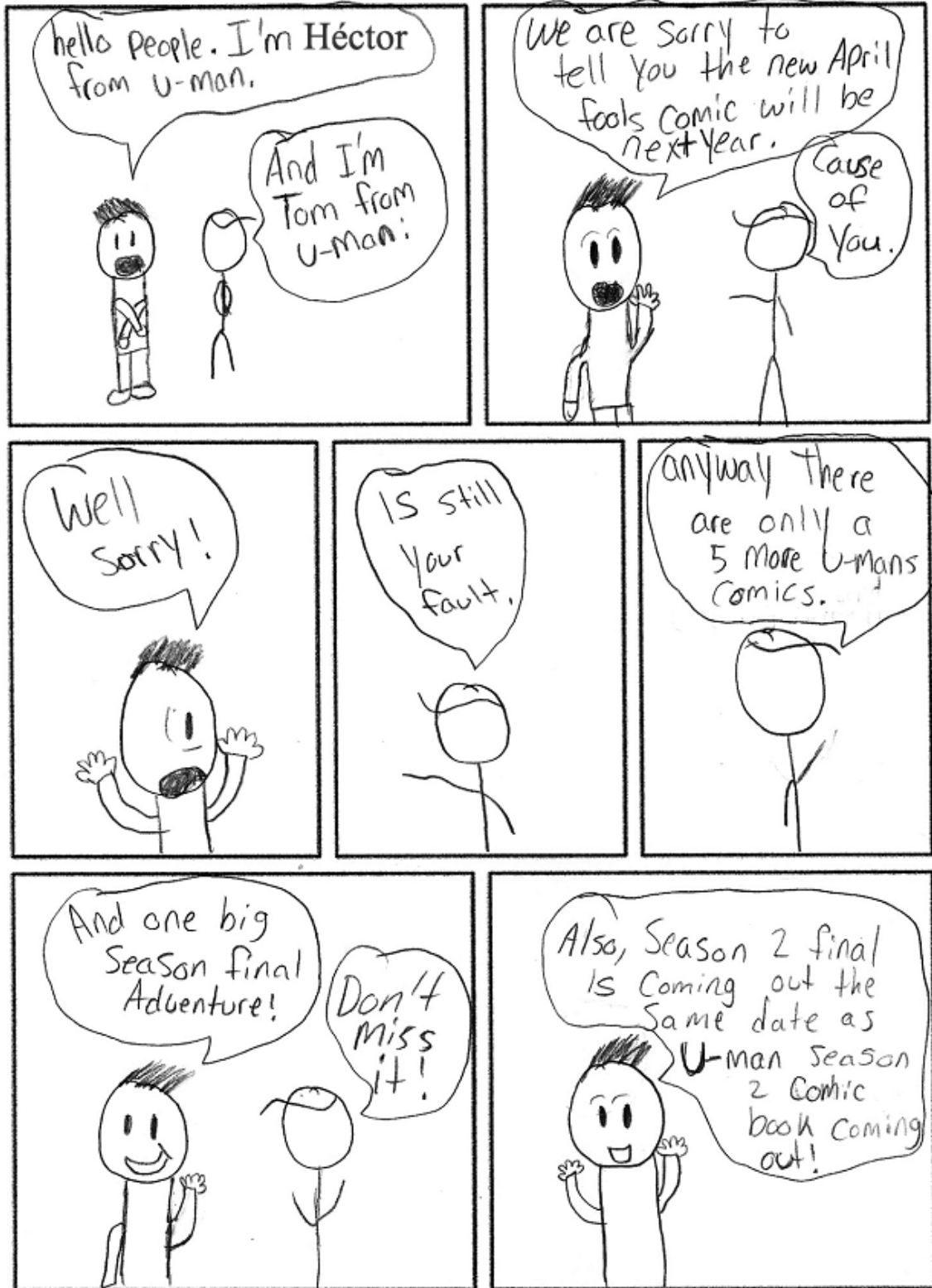




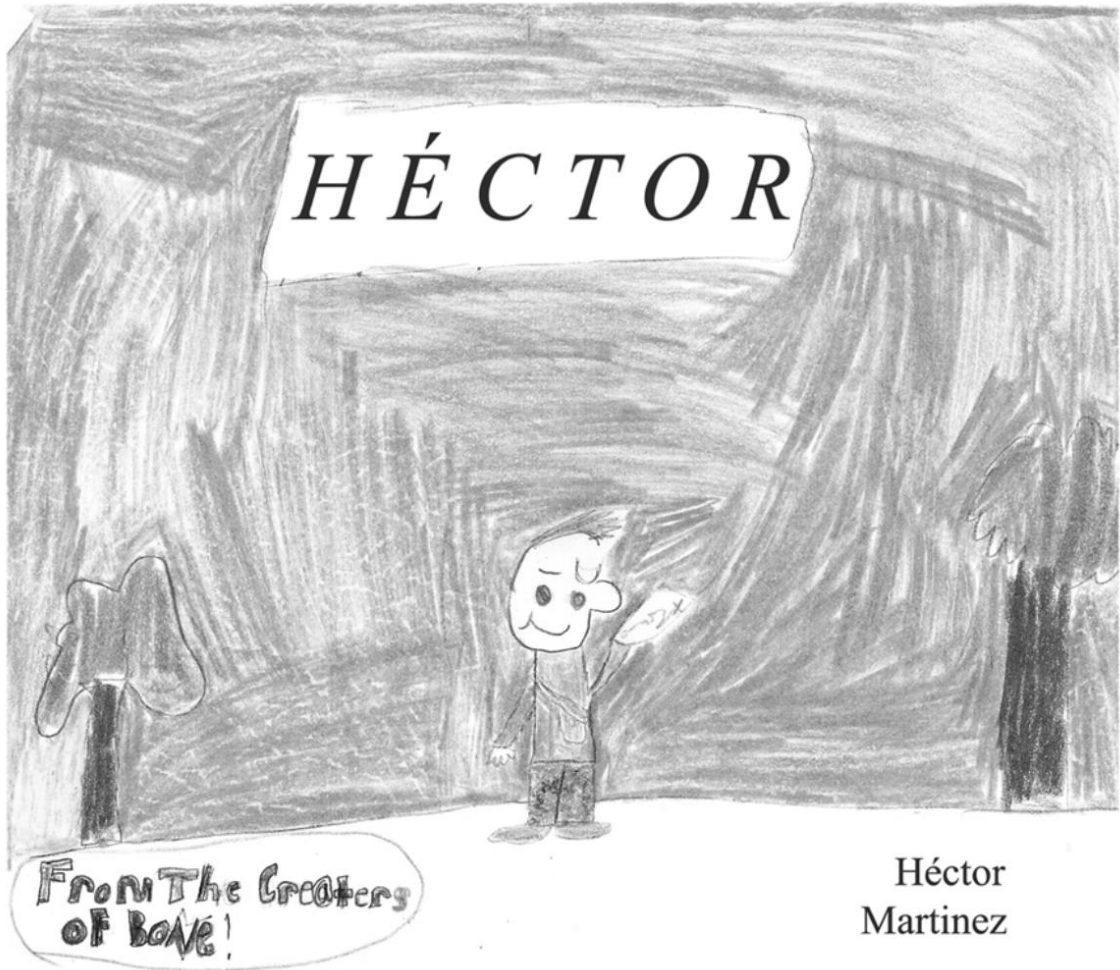
Héctor's whimsical guide to drawing his character U-Man

U-Man In →  
Turkey disaster pt 1 of 4  
Plus Héctor and 2 new Super heroes!





A prototypical example of both Héctor's postmodern dismissal of the 4<sup>th</sup> wall and his proclivity for including himself as an inhabitant of his story-world.

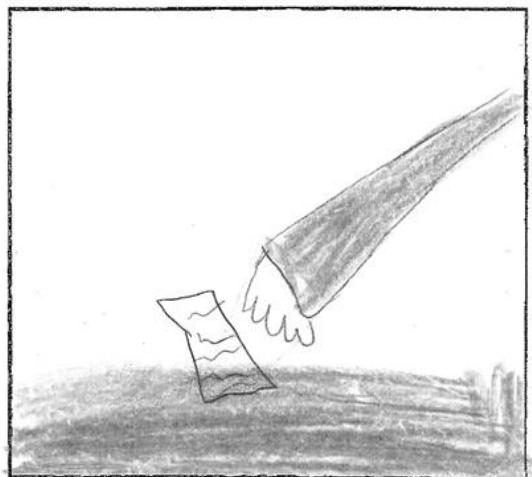


Book 1  
Out of Philidelphia.

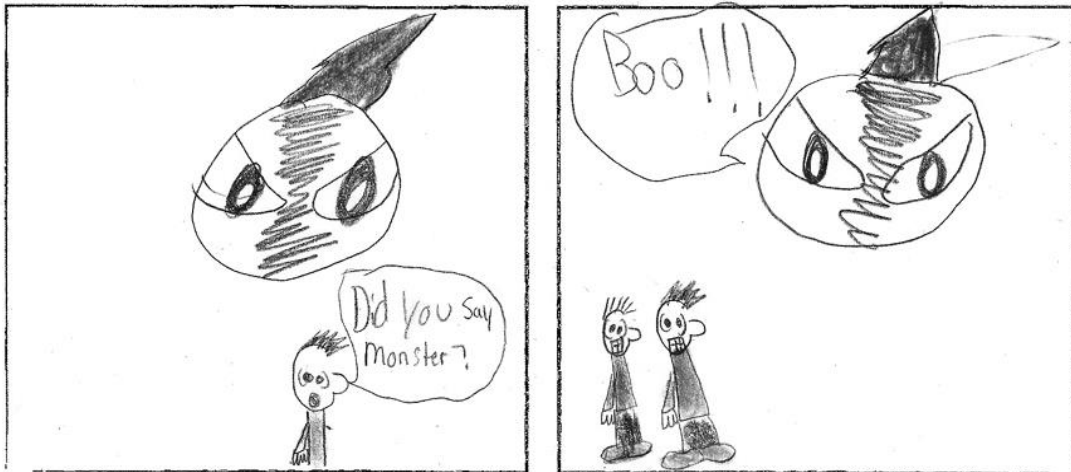
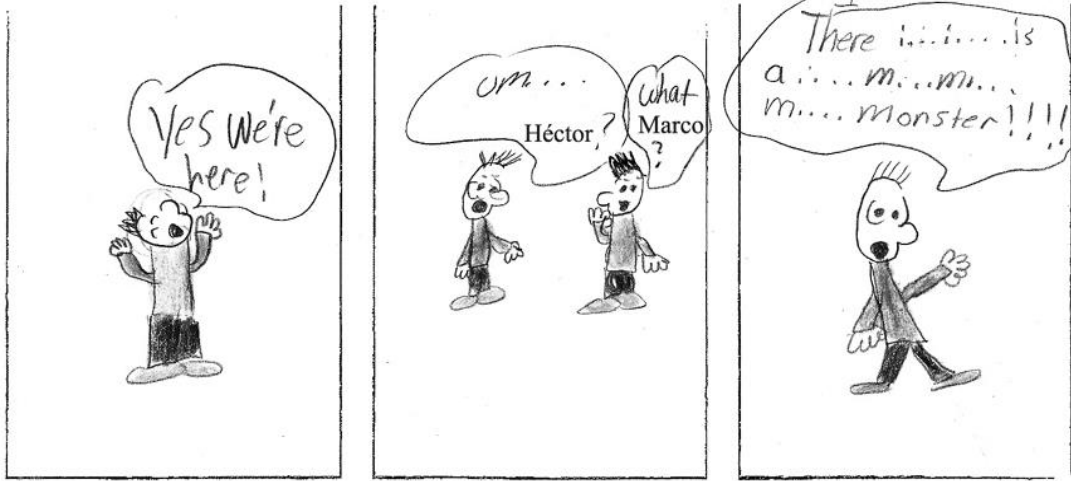




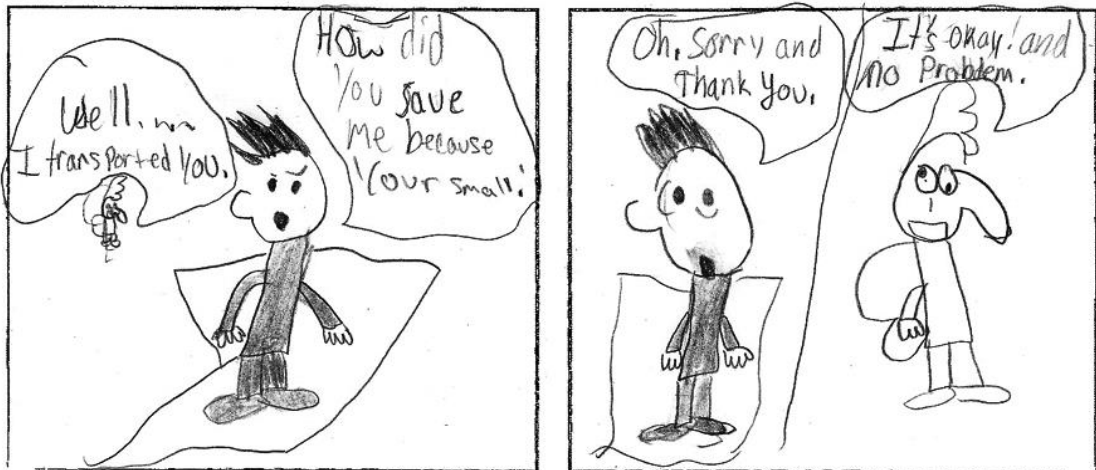
Héctor  
Chapter 18  
~~Not Home~~  
one dry dry dry  
day. . . .

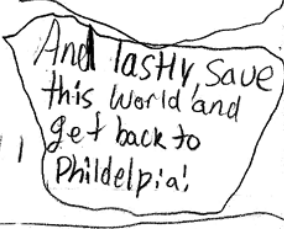
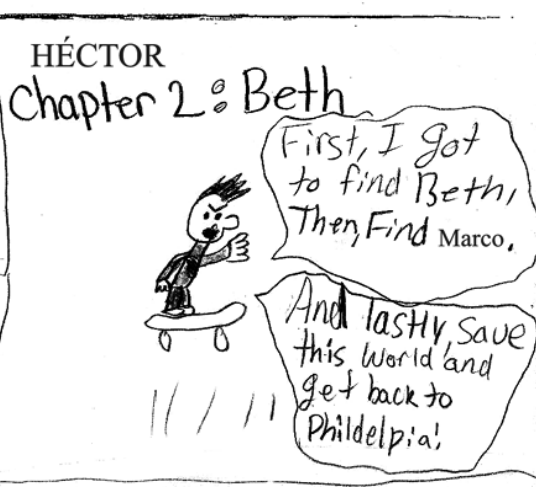
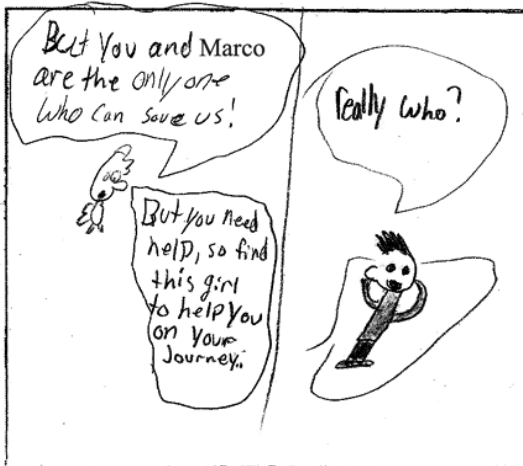


Five  
hours  
Later



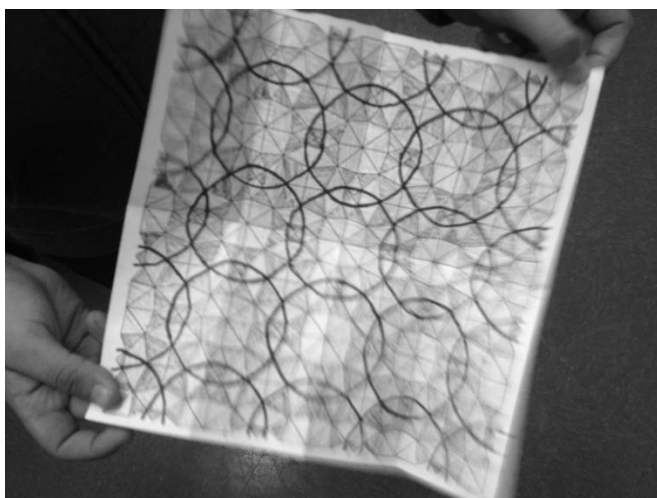
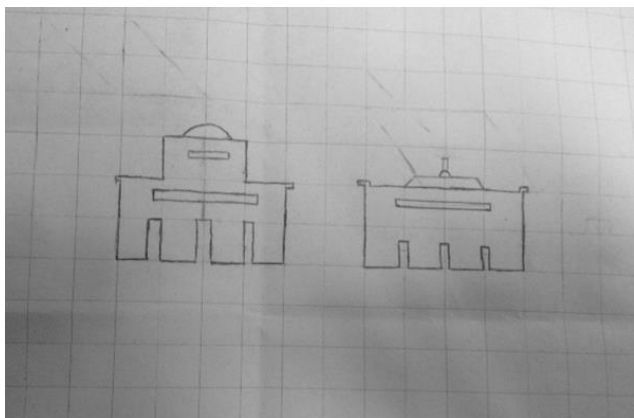




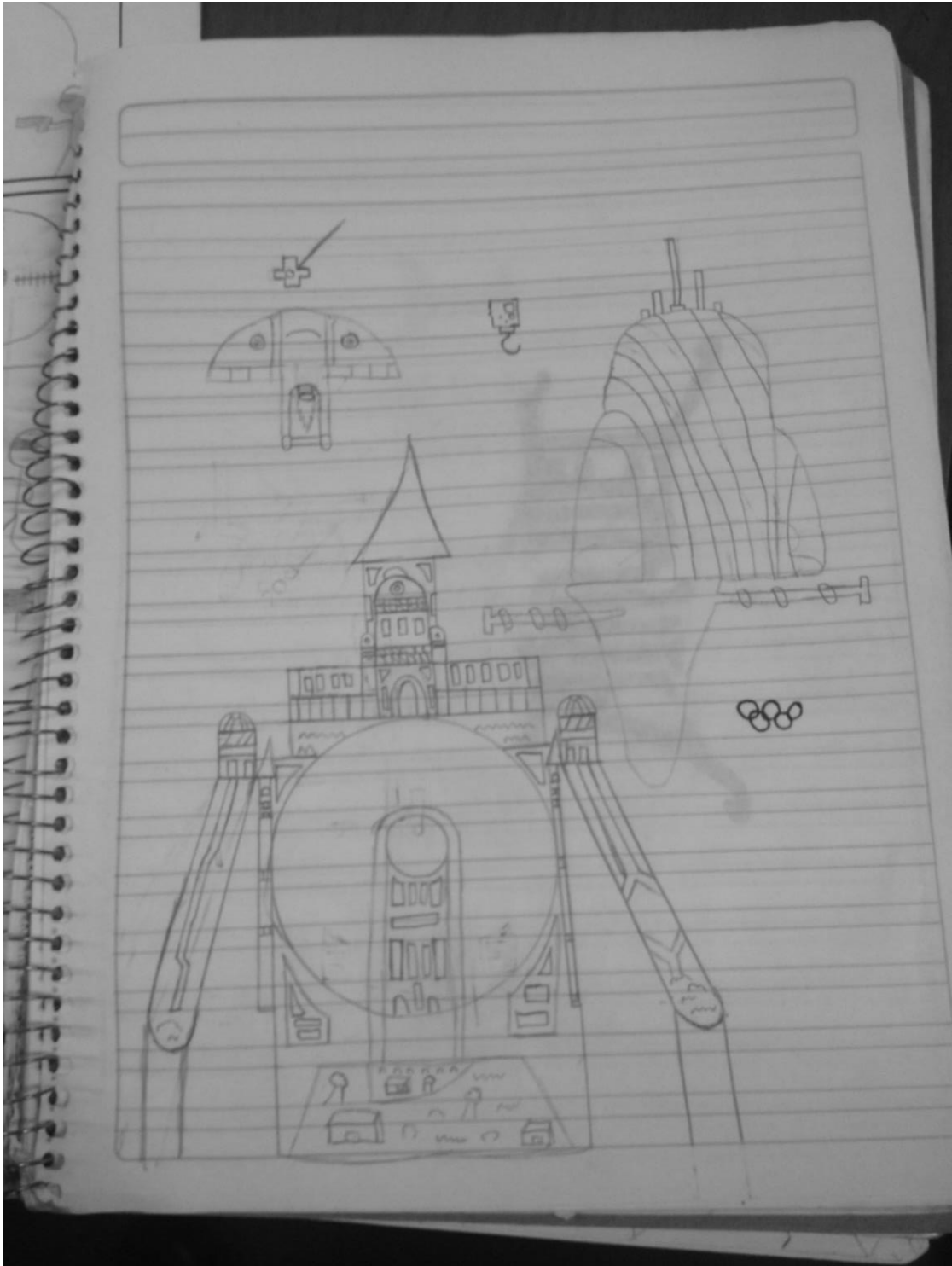




## 2. Alexi

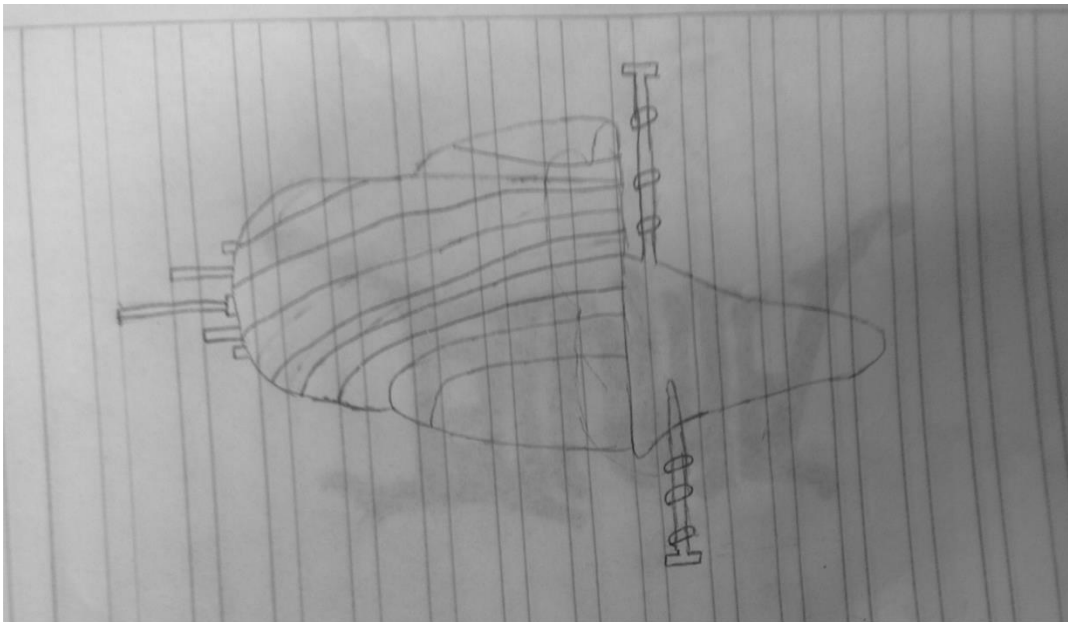


Alexi's drawings represent a variety of styles. He was often inspired by the graphic novel series *Amulet* (Kibuishi), whose logo he recreated.

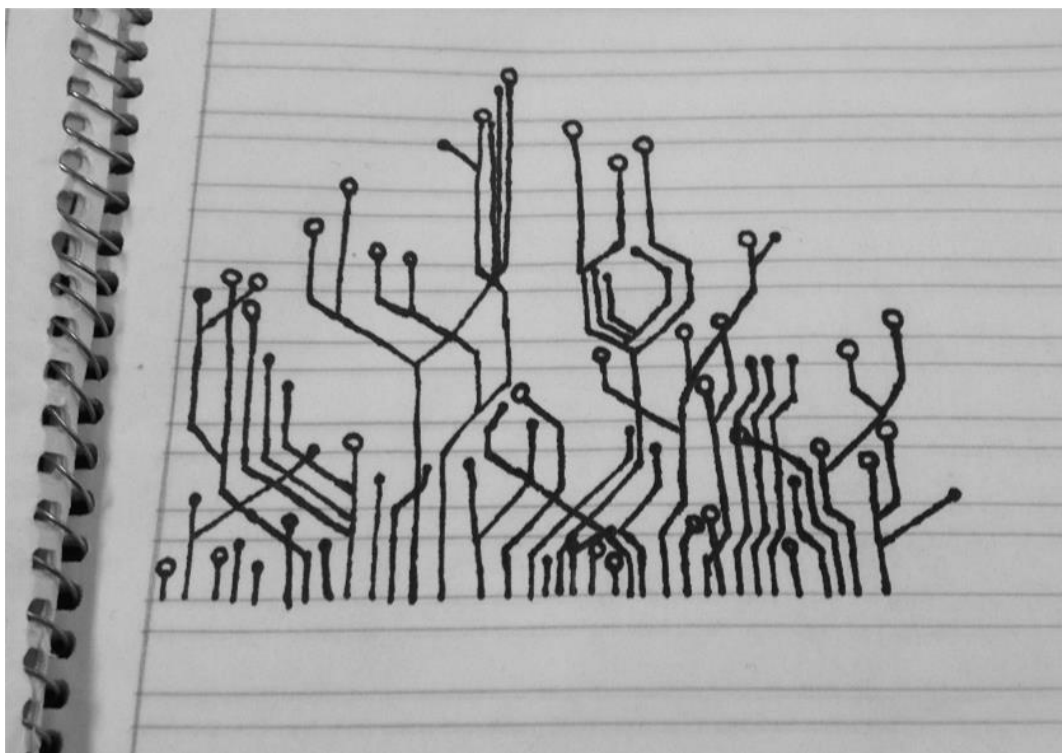


Alexi's drawing of a walking city, inspired by *Amulet* (Kibuishi)





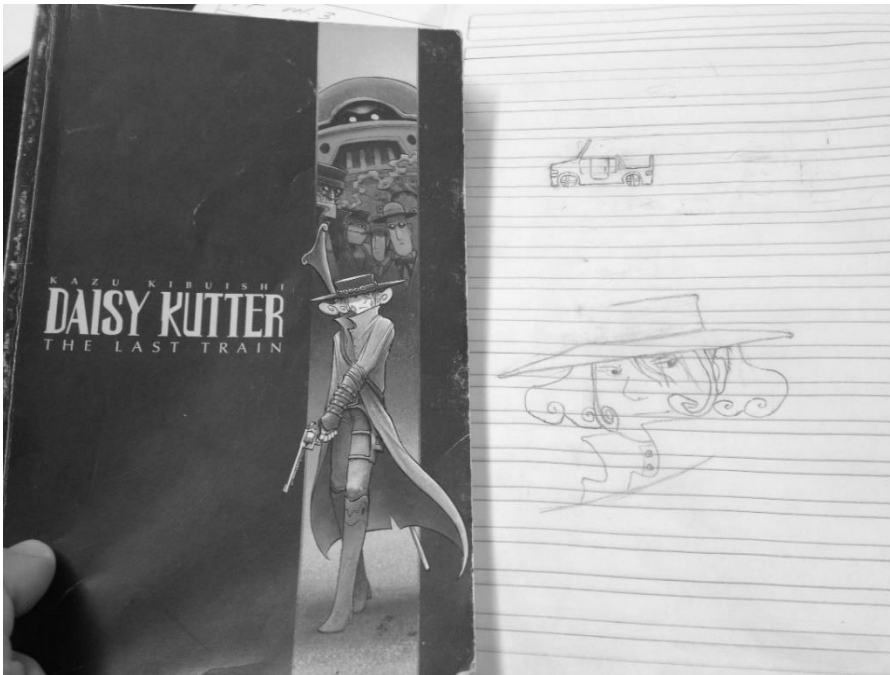
Alexi's drawing of a spaceship from *Amulet* (Kibuishi)



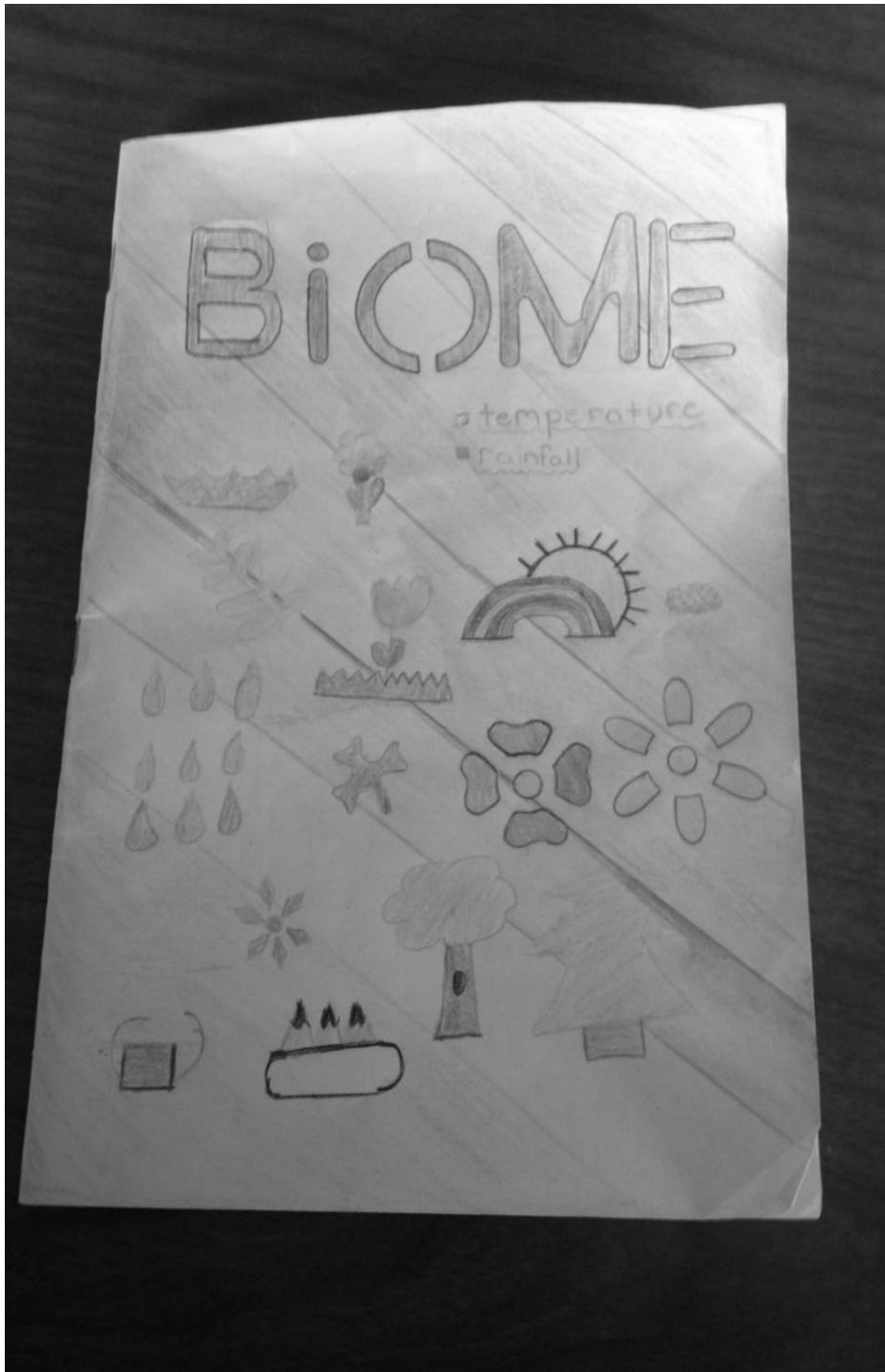
Alexi's drawing of the inside of a computer



Alexi's drawing of a bird, in the style of Mexican folk art



Alexi's drawing of Daisy Kutter, adjacent to the graphic novel (Kibuishi)



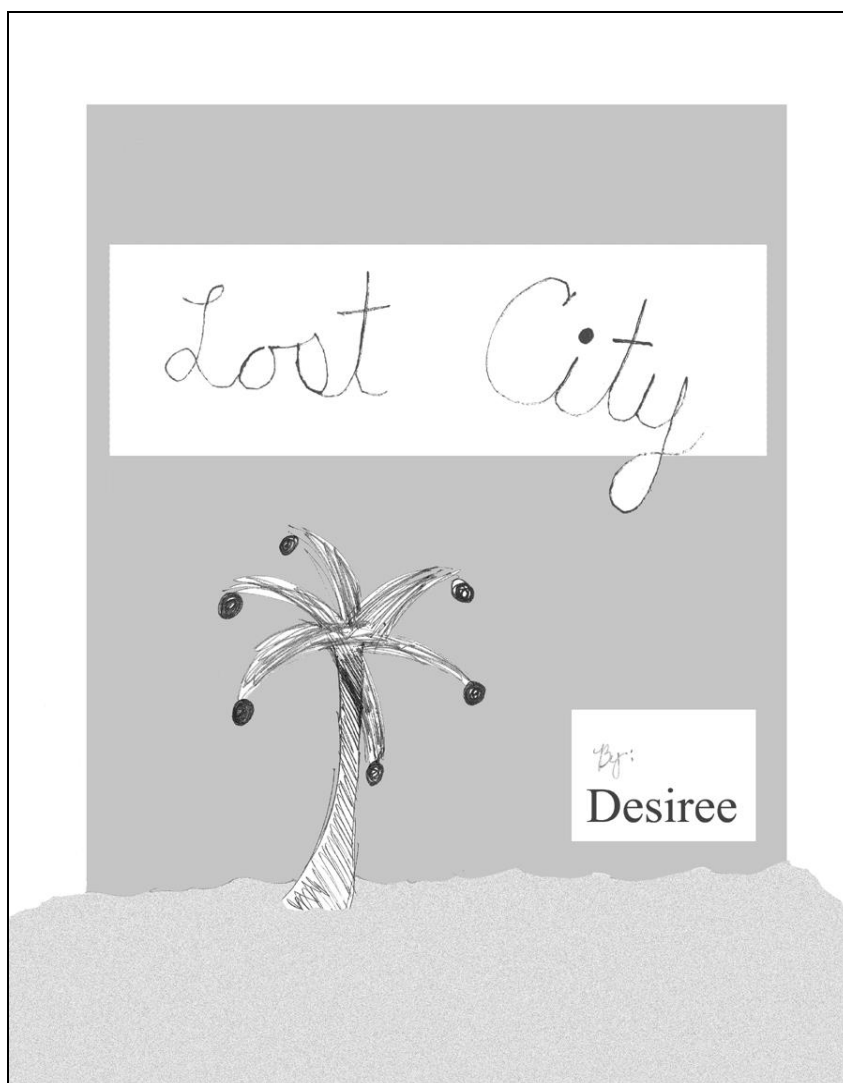
The school project on which Alexi received a 90% from Mr. Hannigan

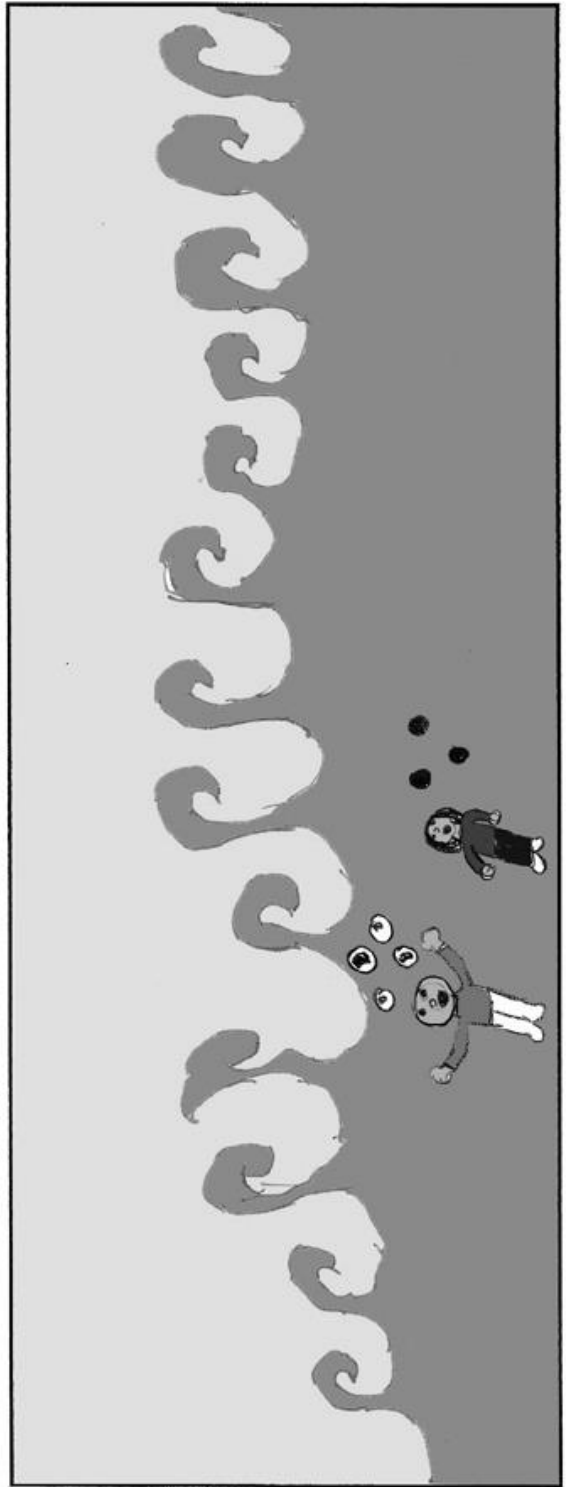


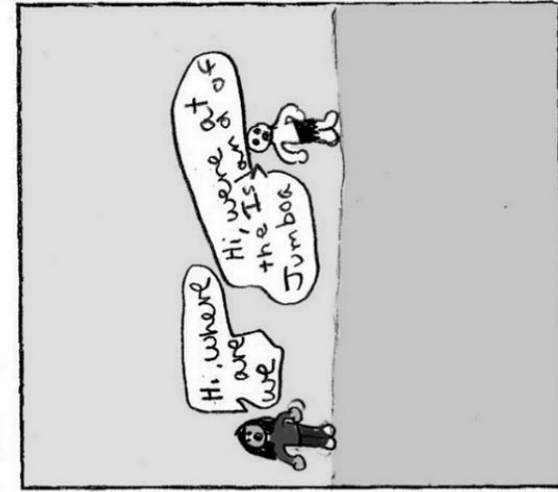
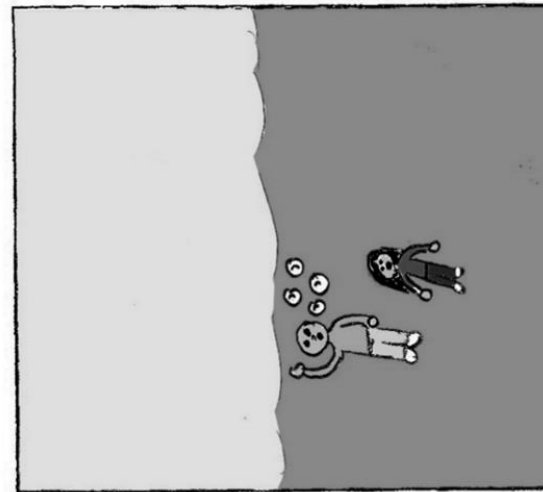
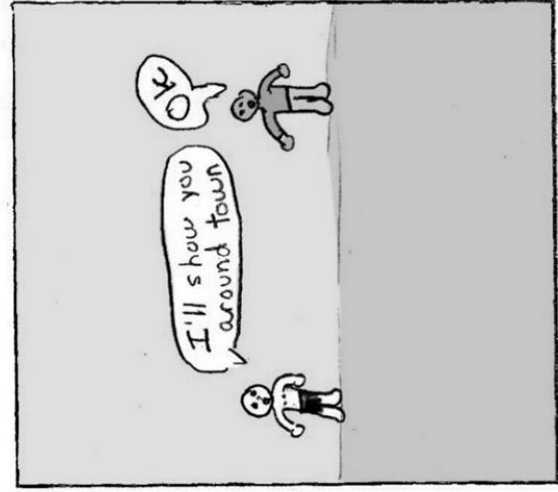
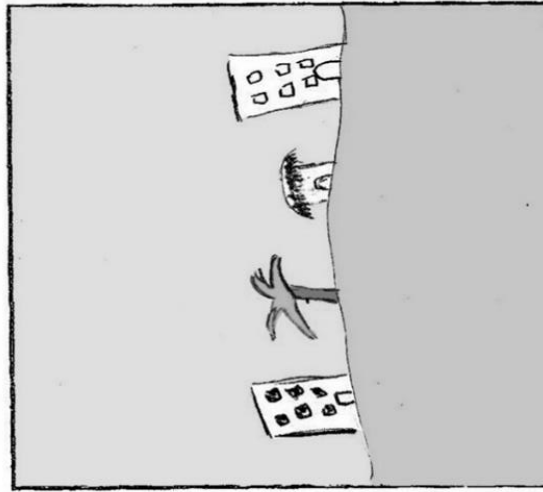
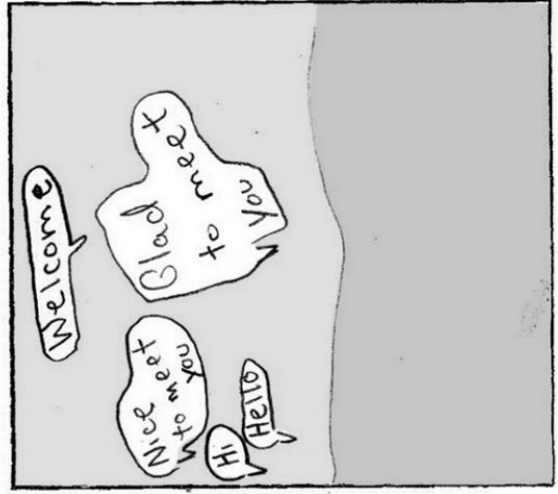
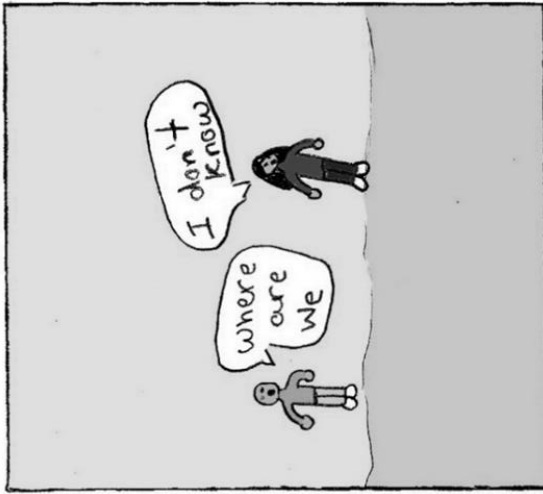
A four-panel graphic narrative about dragons that Alexi created using index cards

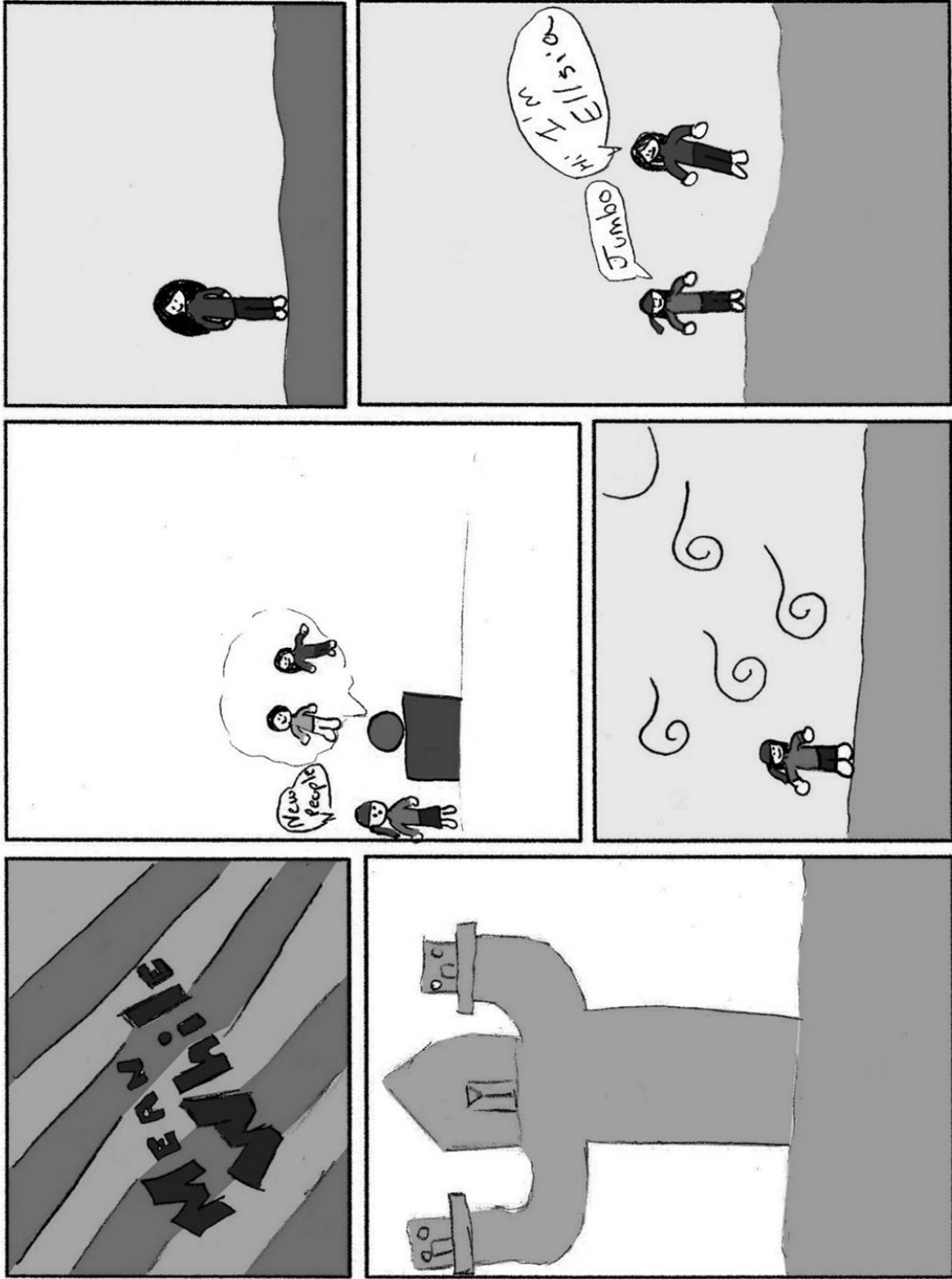
### 3. Desiree

In 2013-14, Desiree's largest project, which she published in June 2014, was the story *Lost City*. The story involves characters who are shipwrecked on a perilous island. In many ways, Desiree's story mirrors the traditional 'castaway' stories of Melville and Defoe, but with the notable difference that Desiree's 'civilized' travelers have Brown skin and the island's superstitious grass skirt-wearing inhabitants are White. Desiree explained to me that she got the idea for the "Island of Jumboa" from looking at a map – "I think it's near Trinidad and some other place near it, but I can't say it" – and that she is familiar with shipwreck stories from her mother (Fieldnotes, Nov. 11, 2013).

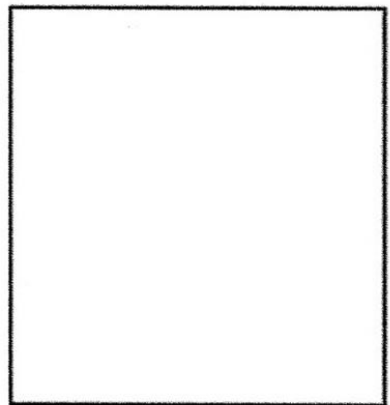
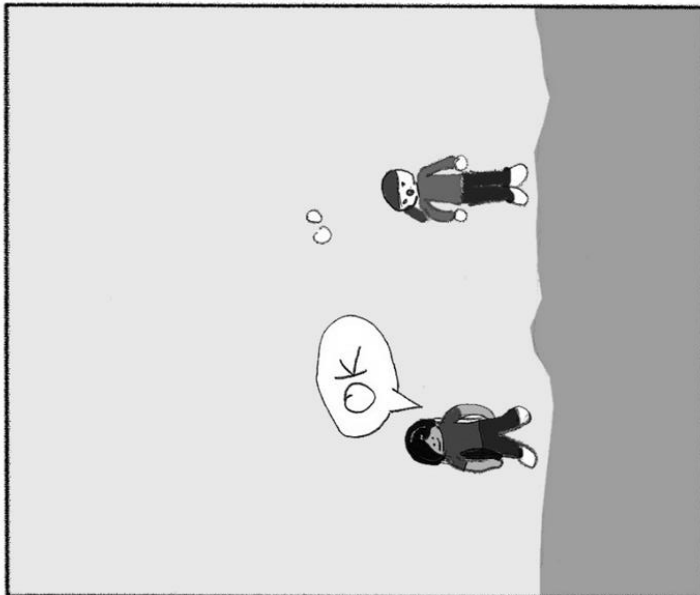
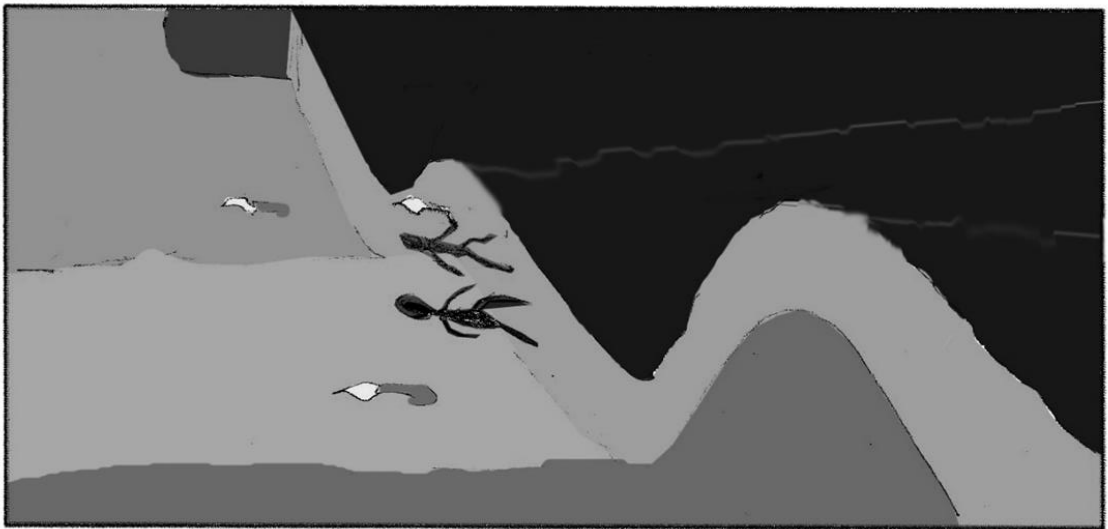
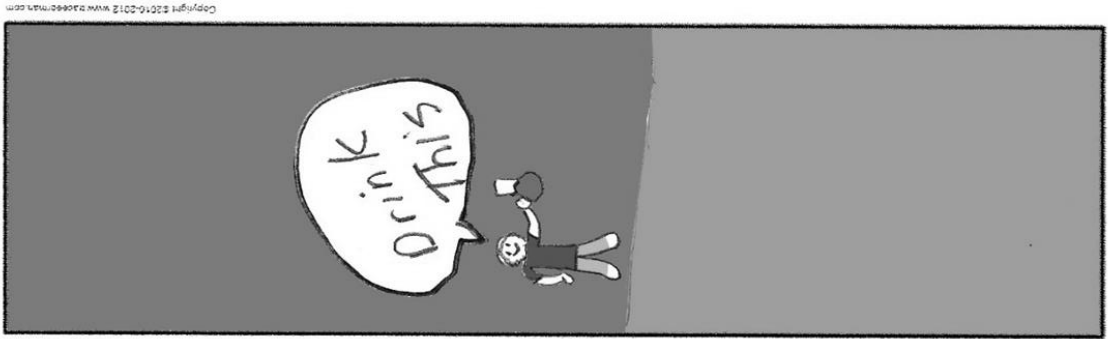


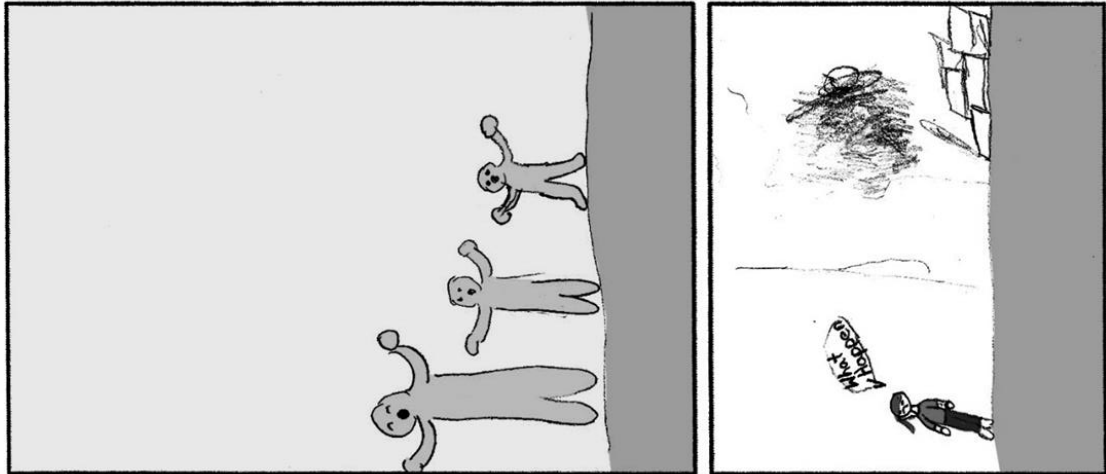
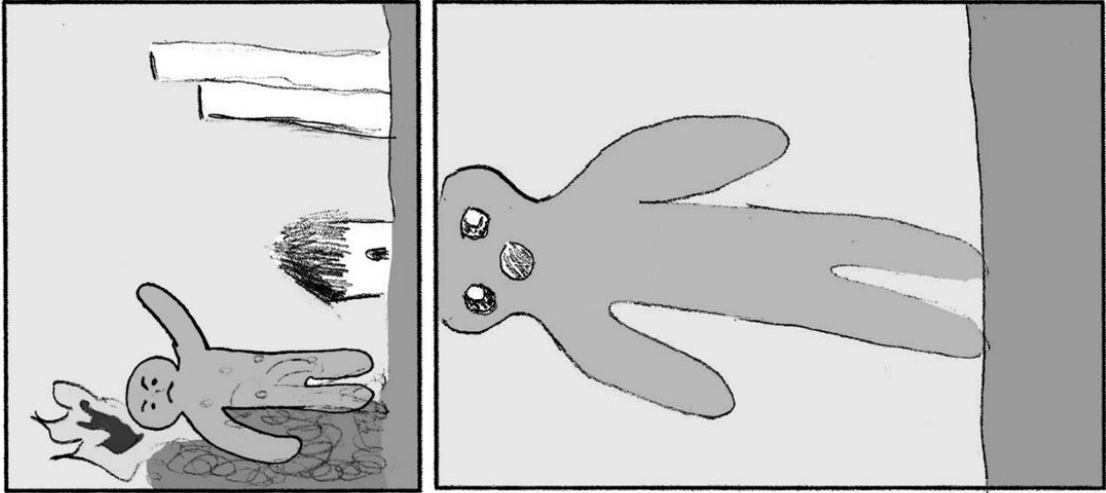




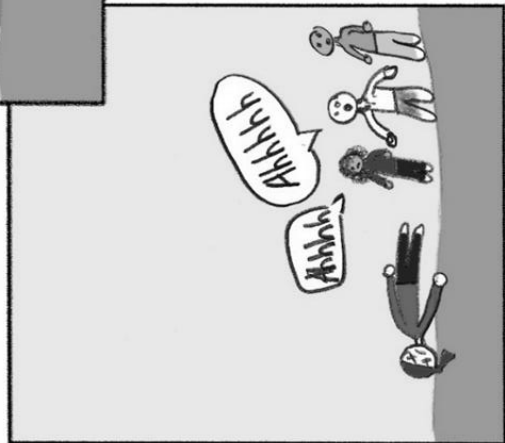
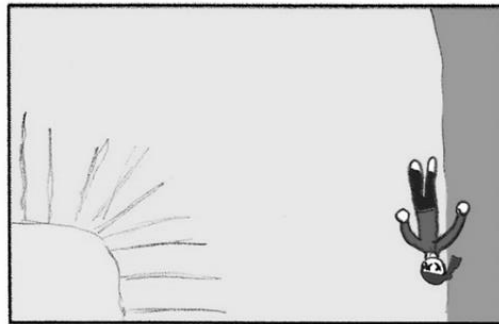
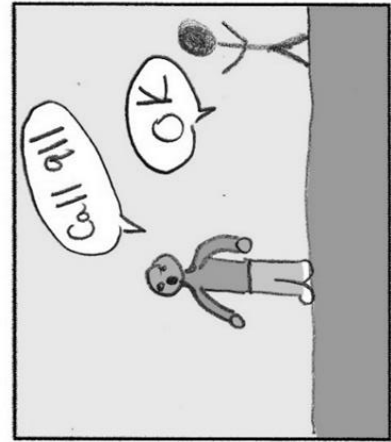
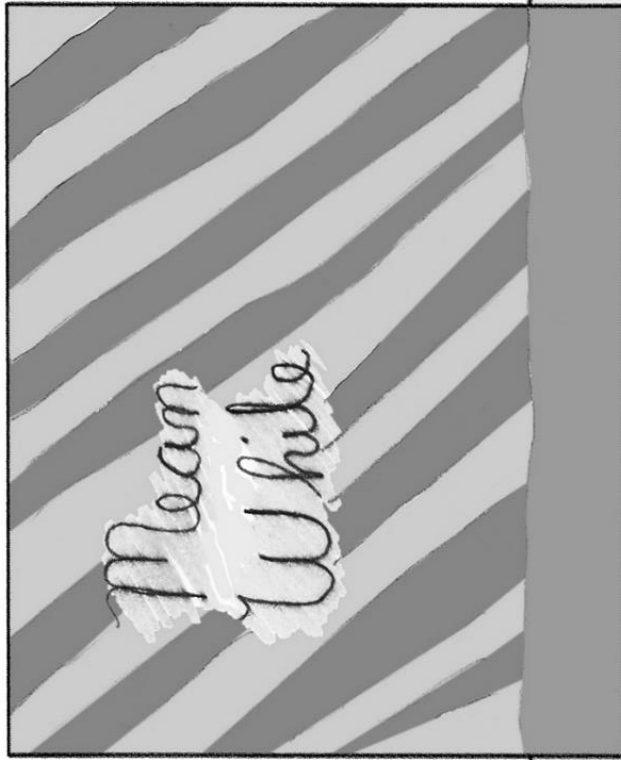
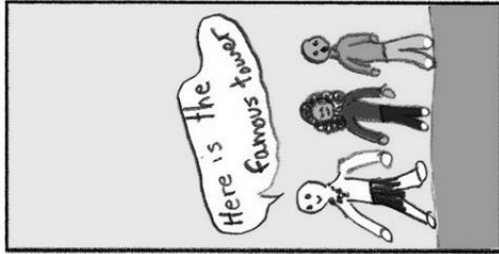








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Desiree's drawing of Kamala Khan thinking about Zoe, who fell in brackish water in *Ms. Marvel #2*, and was subsequently rescued by Kamala. It is significant that in Desiree's composition, Kamala is represented as large and central, while Desiree relegates Zoe to a small character on the margins, with 'stink lines' emanating from her. As she made her composition, Desiree gave me her impressions of *Ms. Marvel #2*:

Desiree: Zoe, the girl that was making fun of Kamala – that was making fun of her and being mean to her... Kamala actually helped her. 'Cause Zoe and her boyfriend were dancing on the pier and they fell off. Then Kamala, she was around, and she saved Zoe. She saved her from drowning.

David: Do you agree with what Kamala did? [Desiree shakes her head no.] What would you have done differently?

Desiree: Let her go. 'Cause she was being mean to her. I wouldn't save her.

David: What do you think a superhero would do?

Desiree: Save people.

David: Even when they're bad?

Desiree: Yeah. A superhero would try to help someone. Or if someone is mean, or if they

got in trouble, she would try to find a way to help somebody. But I wouldn't save her. I mean, in the first issue Zoe was racist, right? And then she's gonna be mean?! I wouldn't have saved her. But...it's a superhero's job. You would have to. But I wouldn't. See, right here? [points to *Ms. Marvel* #2]. This is the part where they're dancing or whatever. Zoe falls, then Kamala goes to get her, and see? She extends her hand to get her. And look at all that trash she gets with it [Laughs]. What does she get? An old bottle. A barber shop pole. She deserves those things! (Transcripts, Apr. 28, 2014).

A month later, after completing and coloring her composition, Desiree provided me with another explanation during an elicitation interview:

David: We're going to look at your drawing of Ms. Marvel. Can you tell me what's happening in it?

Desiree: Kamala's thinking about what Zoe said, but then she's just laughing at her 'cause she winds up falling in trashy water. Like all the mean things that she said about her, now it's the other way. Now she's in trash, and Ms. Marvel's laughing at her.

David: Okay, so Ms. Marvel's laughing about Zoe--

Desiree: --After Zoe laughed at Kamala. 'Cause she was Muslim, and people like Zoe, because she was Muslim, they said stuff about her. But she didn't let that make her think, "Oh, well, I'm not a superhero anymore." Even though people being mean to her she still saved them. And that was actually very nice of her (Transcripts, May 30, 2014).



Desiree's mural for the CCIC, in which she includes characters from various graphic novels that she and her friends read, including *Squish* (Holm & Holm), *G-Man* (Giarrusso), *Atomcat* (Tezuka), *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson & Alphona), *My Life as a Stuntboy* (Tashjian & Tashjian), and *Boxers & Saints* (Yang).

In one of our final CCIC sessions, I sat down with Desiree to assist her in designing a new superhero. Desiree had expressed some frustration that she was unable to get her character to look how she wanted her to, and I offered to help. As I retrieved a fresh sheet of paper, I asked Desiree to dictate the type of character she was interested in creating. I drew soft pencil outlines for Desiree to erase or trace over as she wished, and ultimately, Desiree erased them all. (This collaborative process – which we engaged in frequently over several years – was more about brainstorming than creating a finished product.) I include a portion of the transcript here, in which Desiree introduces her new character – an homage to her grandmother. Like Desiree herself, her creation is a strong multiracial female and the product of an intergenerational critical legacy.

David: If you could create any kind of character, which of course you *can*, what's the character you would create?

Desiree: A girl, of course. She has to be a girl because there's not a lot of girls. She'd have to be multicultural 'cause you never see them a lot. She has to be smart. Like, she has a love for animals. But then she finds this rock, and she touches this rock, and it makes her have the power to turn into any animal she wants -- she can communicate with them, and she has the power to fly, also.

David: Hmm. Do you know anything about her as a person, her backstory?

Desiree: What do you mean?

David: Like, is she a girl from America?

Desiree: Yeah. Wait... Can she be, like, a character with...mixed ethnicity?

David: Mixed ethnicity? Of course she can. Your characters can be just as real as real people.

Desiree: African American and Native American. And she grew up in a poor family from North Carolina. Then they migrated to Philadelphia to start a new life.

David: Interesting. When did they do that?

Desiree: When she was young.

David: Okay. Interesting. Where did you decide on North Carolina from?

Desiree: I'm going to live there in the summer.

David: So you're pulling in pieces from your own life?

Desiree: Yeah.

David: To bring into the story? That's really neat.

Desiree: That's how my grandmother was.

David: Did your grandmother come to Philadelphia from North Carolina?

Desiree: Yeah. She said, like, we visited there. We used to live in a, well, a shed. It's like a one-story house. Like, we don't have doors. You just have to slide them open. We had – it's like a tiny living room, only two bedrooms, and it was like five people staying in there, and the children had to sleep on the floor.

David: Is it very different from your house here in Philadelphia?

Desiree: Yeah. I got my own room, but I have to share a bathroom with Raman. But what could my character look like?

David: Let's think about that. What do you think?

Desiree: She's gonna be feminine. I mean not feminine.

David: Should she be tall or short?

Desiree: Kind of tall.

David: How about her hair? Should she have any hair at all?

Desiree: Wavy and medium.

David: Wavy, medium length hair... I want to know what your character's gonna look like. Let's do this kind of sketch together so we can know where stuff is gonna go. [I draw a basic body frame and hand it to Desiree.]

Desiree: I do that a lot when I draw manga.

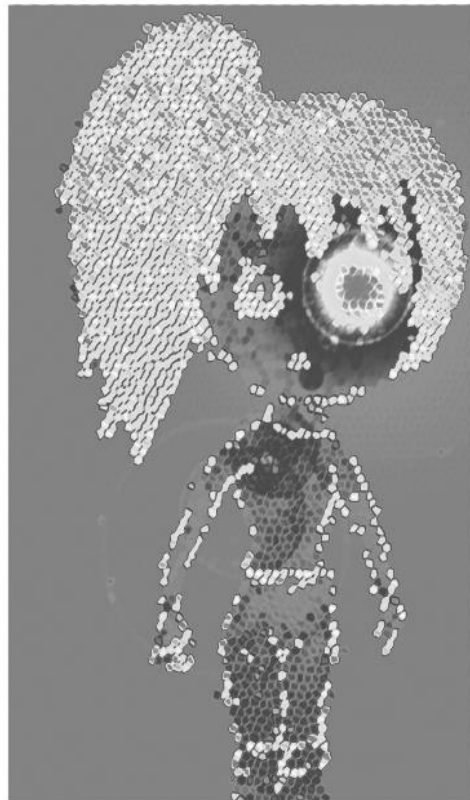
Nellie: Do a chiseled jaw!

Desiree: A girl with a chiseled jaw?

Nellie: Yeah, it looks pretty! Be sure she's slim and has muscles.

Desiree: Yeah, she's gotta have muscles if she's a...

Nellie: Superhero (Transcripts, May 30, 2014).

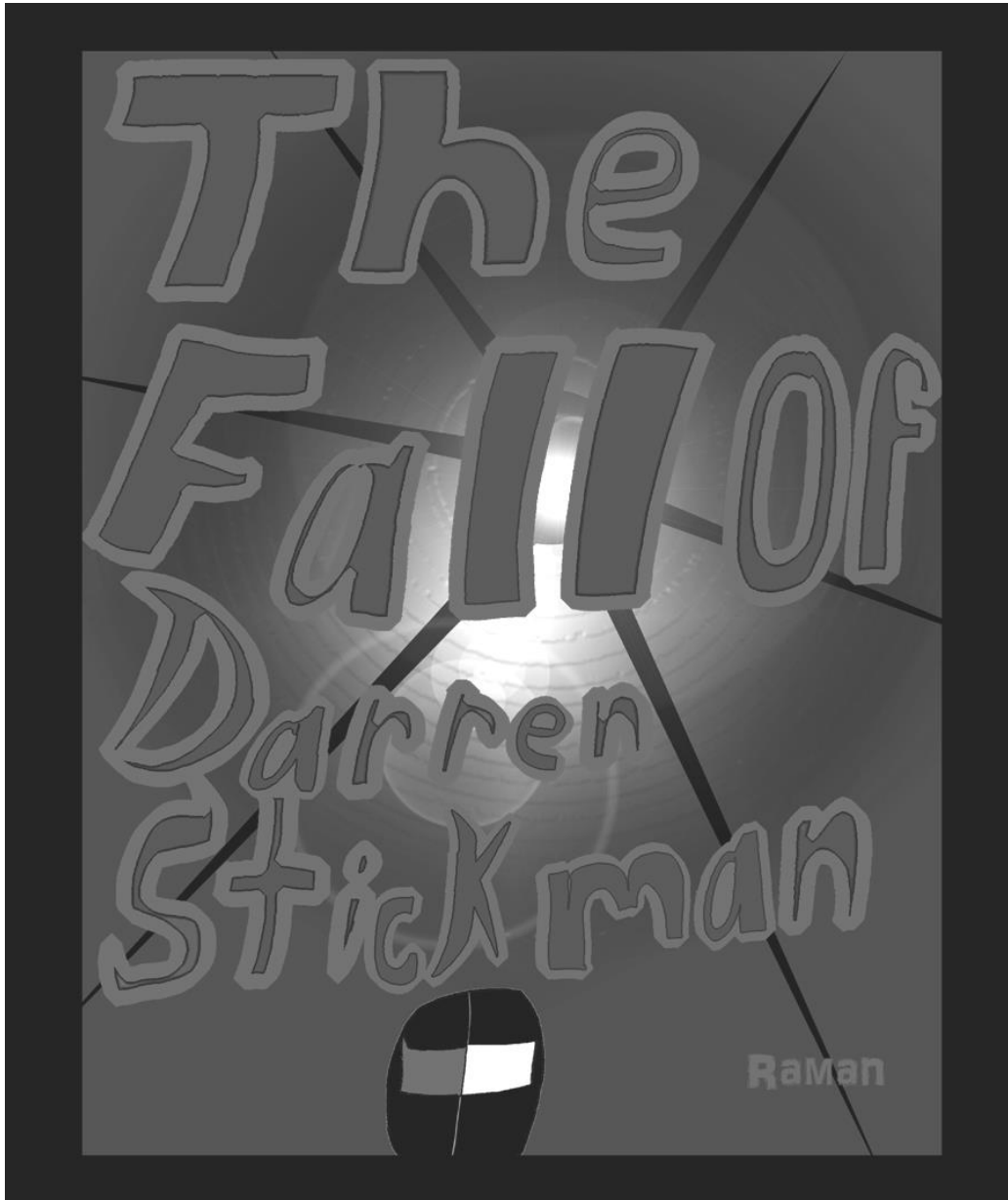


Desiree's drawing of her new superhero, before and after she used Photoshop to alter the character's appearance. (In the left image, the character is wearing a green shirt and blue jeans. In the right image, the character's body is broken into small mosaic tiles of neon pink, green, and blue. Her hair is lime green and her eyes are the same bright red as the background.)

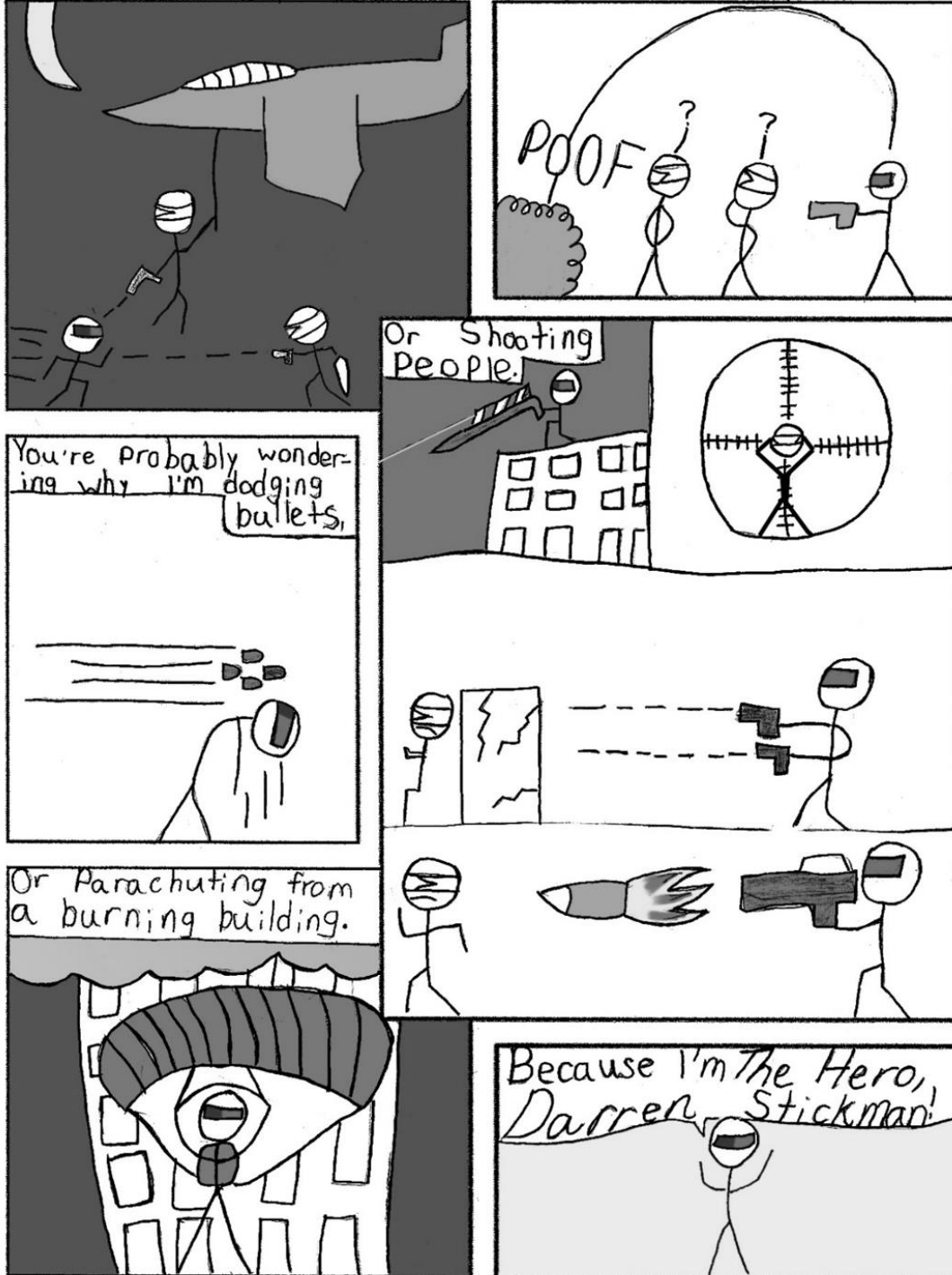


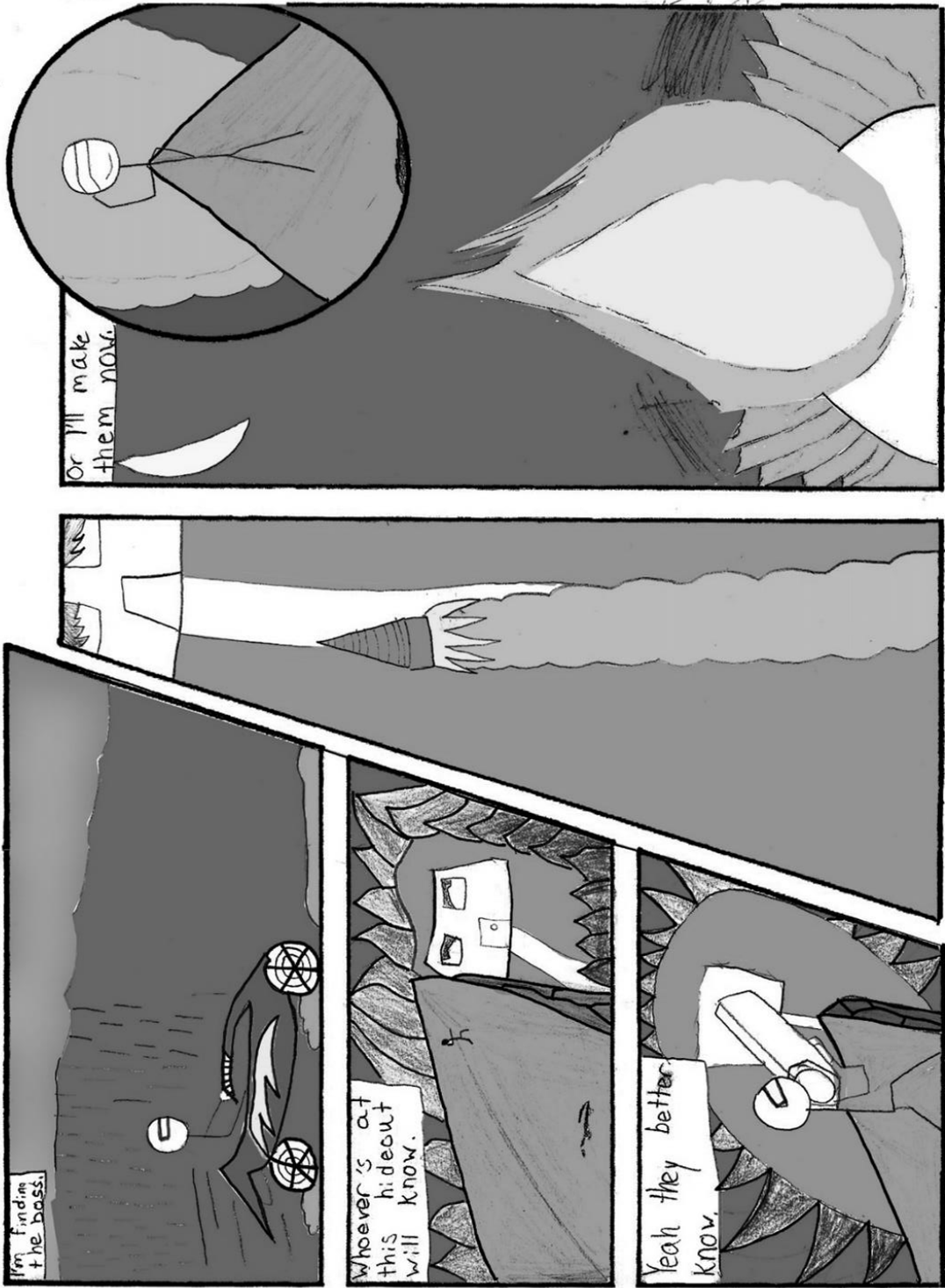
#### 4. Raman

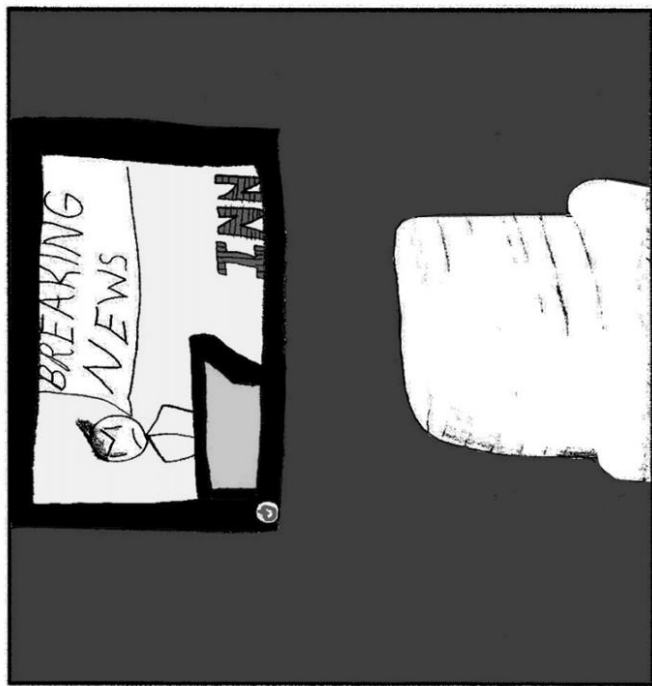
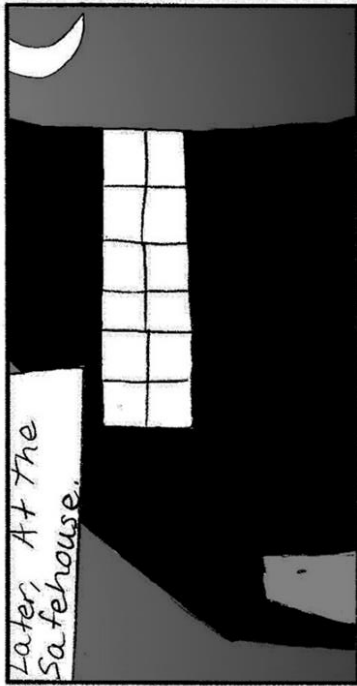
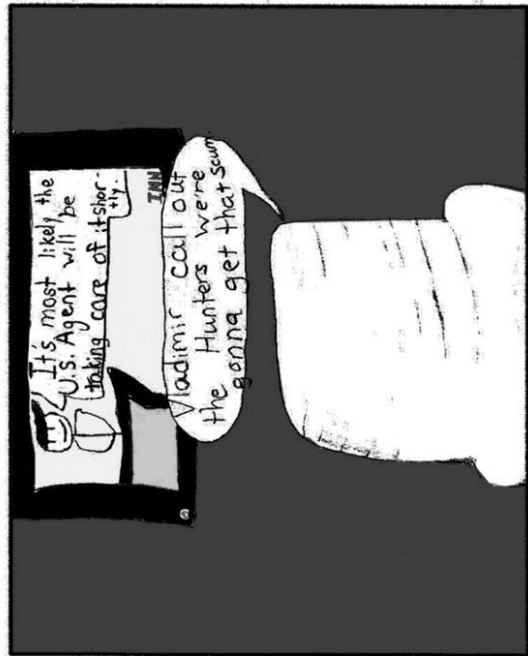
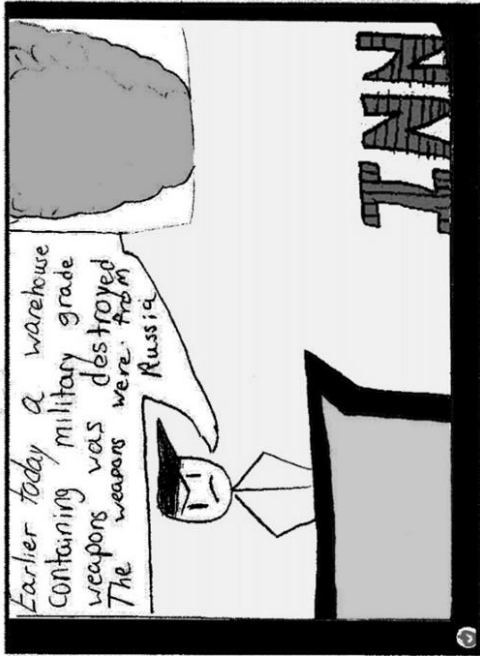
Raman was one of the founding members of CCIC in 2011-12, and he attended continuously for the next two years. As a 7<sup>th</sup> grader in 2013-14, Raman spent much of his time working on *The Fall of Darren Stickman*, an action/adventure spy thriller with humorous elements. The title character was adapted from Raman's friend Esteban's work several years prior.

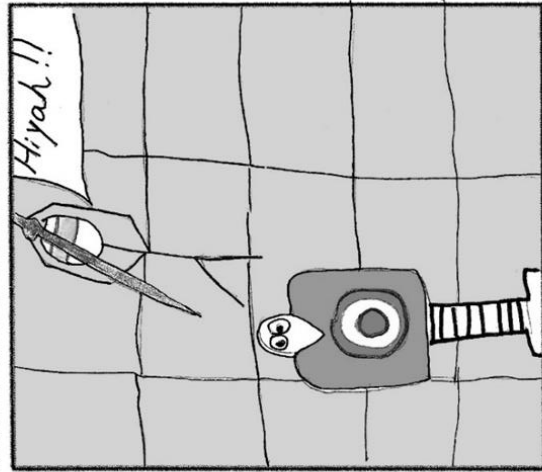
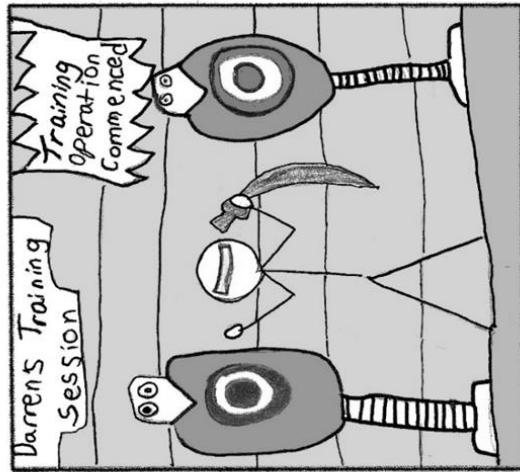
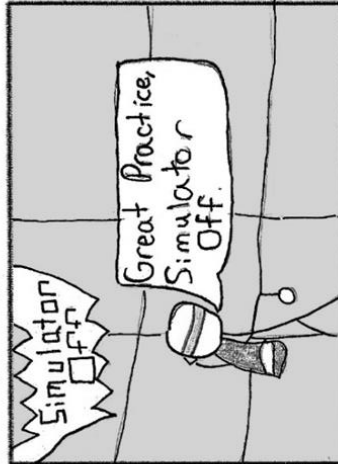
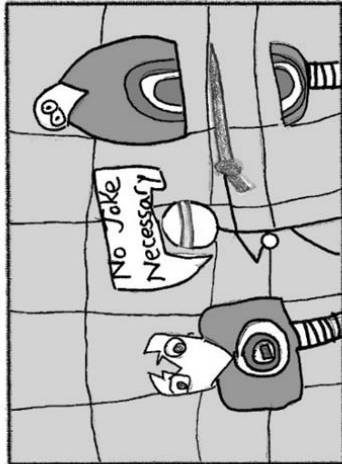
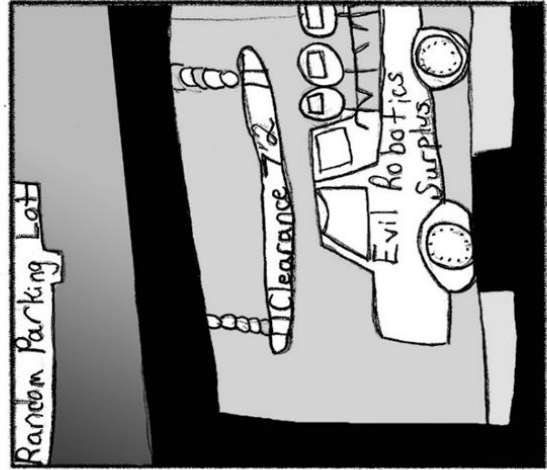
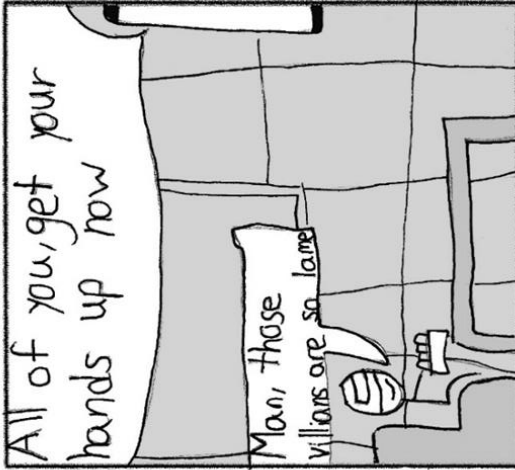


# The Fall Of Darren Stickman Pt 1





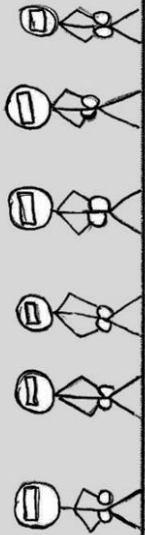




Part I

Find out what happens  
next in *The*  
Fall Of  
Darren Stickman<sup>of</sup>

Finally, The Hunters are here.  
Now, we'll have revenge on that  
American trouble maker

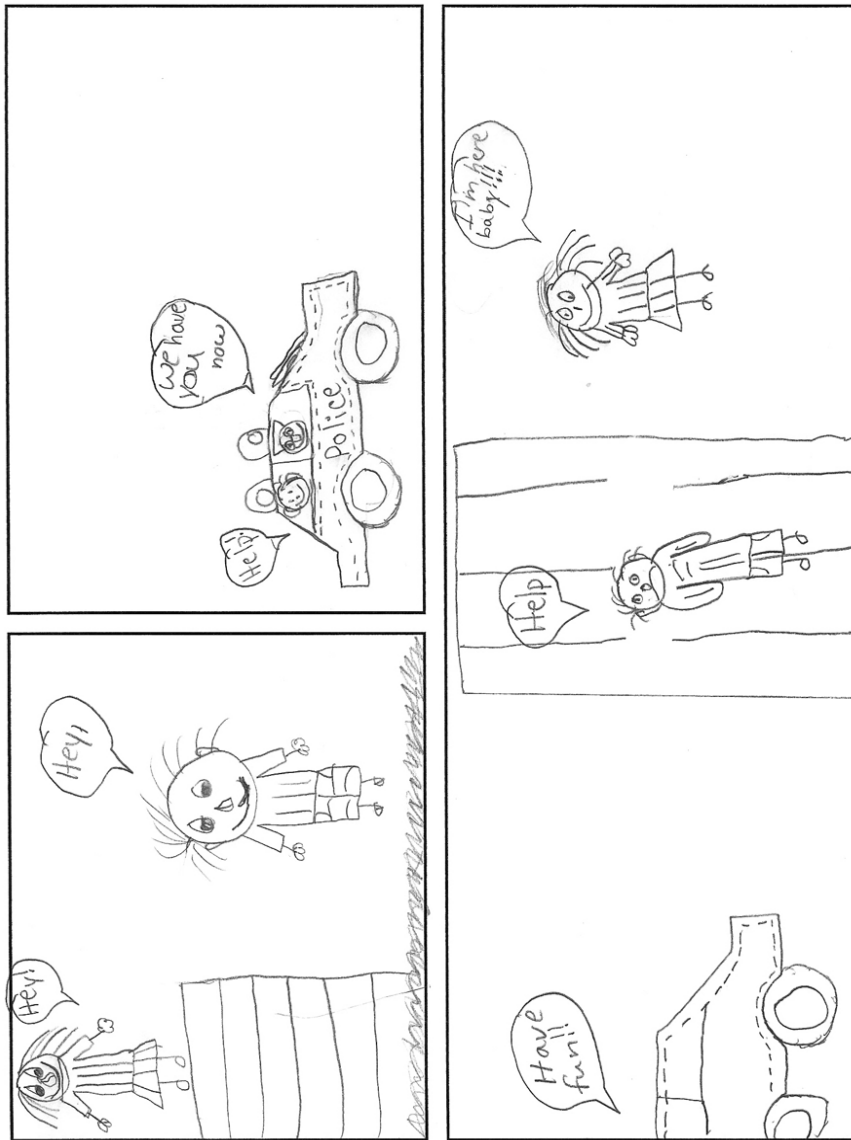


end of

## 5. Isaiah

Isaiah preferred reading comics to creating his own, although he did write and illustrate a two-page story around Halloween 2013. I find it interesting that in this short work, Isaiah includes a reference to police activity, harkening back to Larry's composition, which Gerald Campano and I wrote about in an article for *Voices from the Middle* (Low & Campano, 2012).





Isaiah described his story by saying “I want to make a guy, like, he keeps meeting different things. Like, he meets a pumpkin then he leaves the pumpkin. He meets the dog, he leaves the dog. So now, I want in this scene, I want him to be in, like walk on a deserted island. ‘Cause I think that's where he's gonna find romance. Like, he's gonna be walking on the deserted island. Then he gets arrested here. The police were looking for him, so they took him to jail, and he told his girlfriend to have fun, so here, he’s in prison, and she says, “I’m here baby.” And it’s over. Then he's in jail. And, like, the girl, she sees him. I'm gonna make her looking out of the balcony watching him walk away and get arrested. And when he goes to jail she's gonna come bail him out, 'cause she sees him go to jail. She's gonna bail him out and then they just walk, like, here's where she's gonna bail him out. And he's gonna be in a prison cell, and she's gonna be standing here, and then in this scene I want him and her to just walk back along the beach happily ever after” (Transcripts, Nov. 18, 2013).



## 6. Nellie

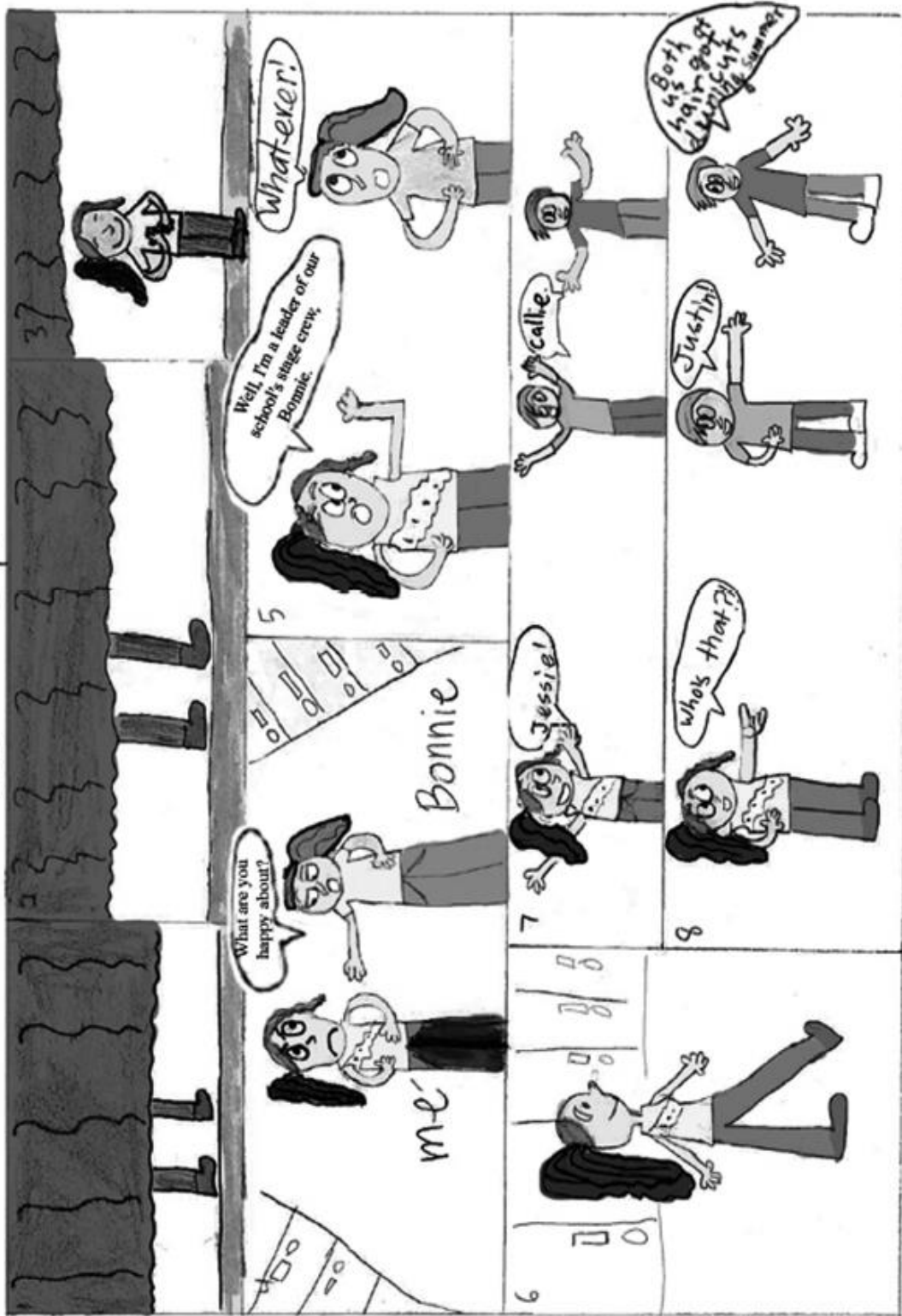
Nearly all of the graphica Nellie produced during the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years (as a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grader) was part of her long-form sequel to Raina Telgemeier's award-winning graphic novel *Drama* (2012). In "Drama Pt. 2," Nellie continues the romantic misadventures of Callie, Jessie, and Justin, and like her source material, Nellie does not shy away from depicting difficult issues of adolescence (such as dealing with bullies and parents, and awkwardly coming to terms with gender and sexuality). Nellie adopts Telgemeier's theatrical settings, character designs, and color palette, as well as the humorous tone of *Drama*, but she takes the characters to new places by placing them in kid-centric situations. In Nellie's own words:

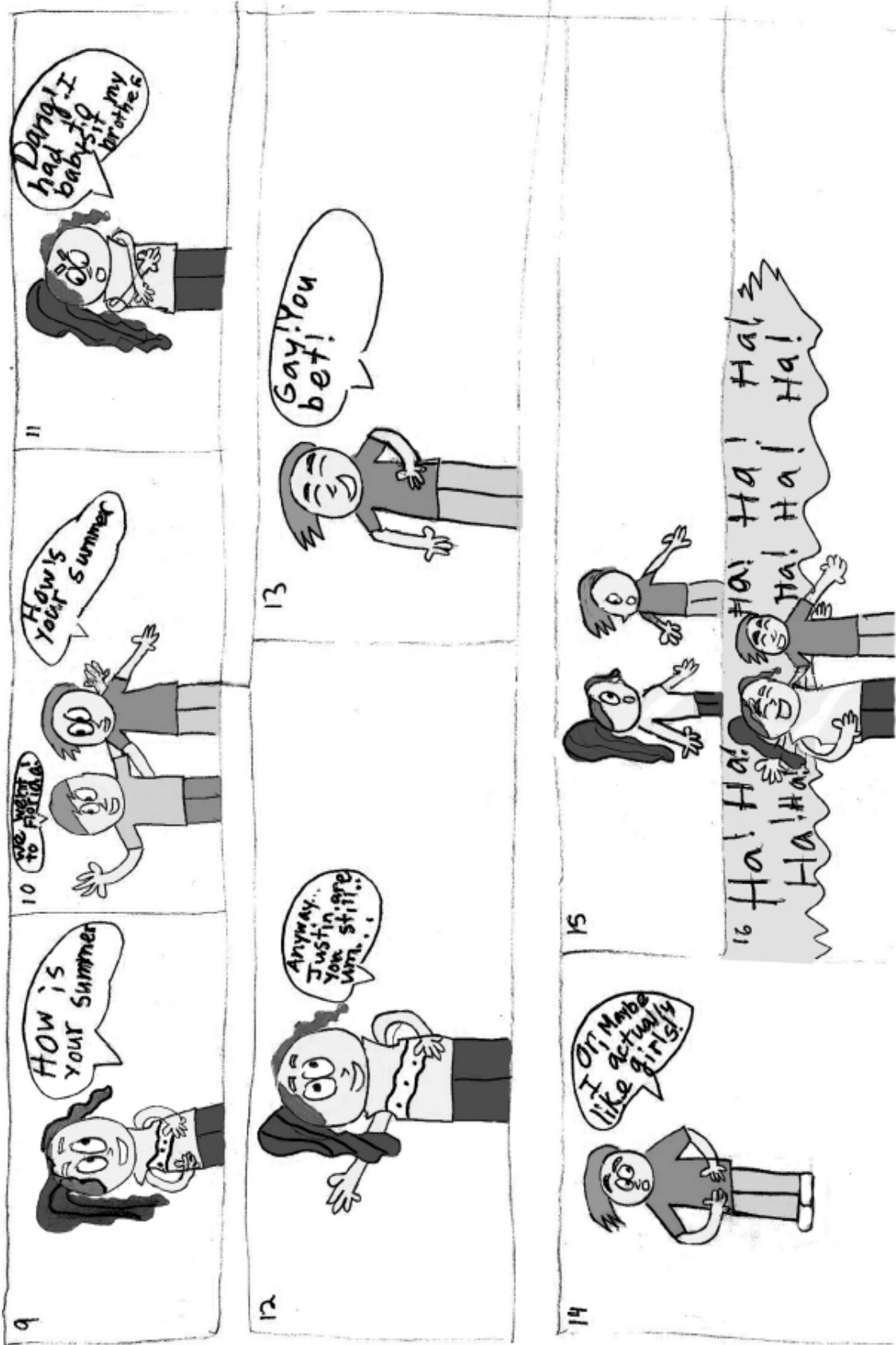
David: What made you decide to make *Drama Part 2*?

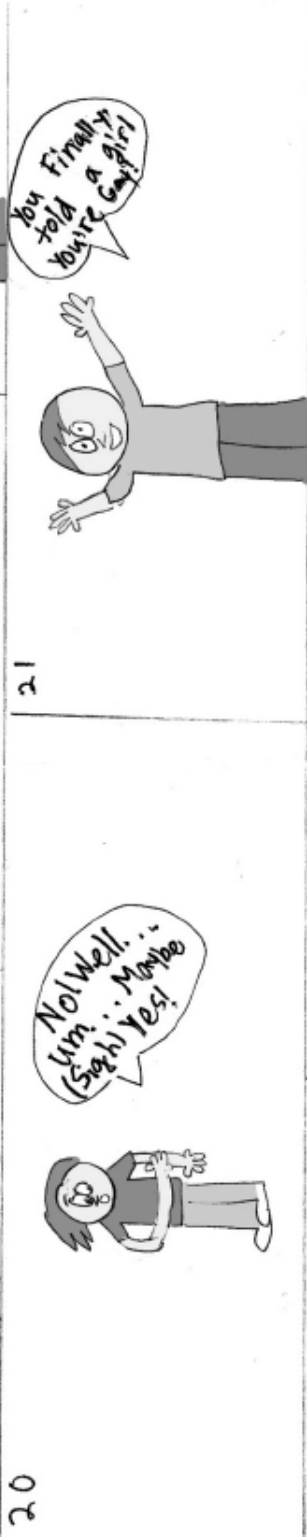
Nellie: It was because *Drama* really inspired me, because it has girl power in it, and it has boys and girls included in it, and it really makes me want to write it because Callie, the main person in the comic book, does all these sorts of things just for a movie scene, a play, and then it kind of makes it a big deal for her, and that's how I'm like. Sometimes I make big deals of some things that some people don't see as important, and then Callie does it on for a play scene. And so she's kind of represents me, and then that's why I keep writing (Interview Transcript, Jan. 27, 2014).

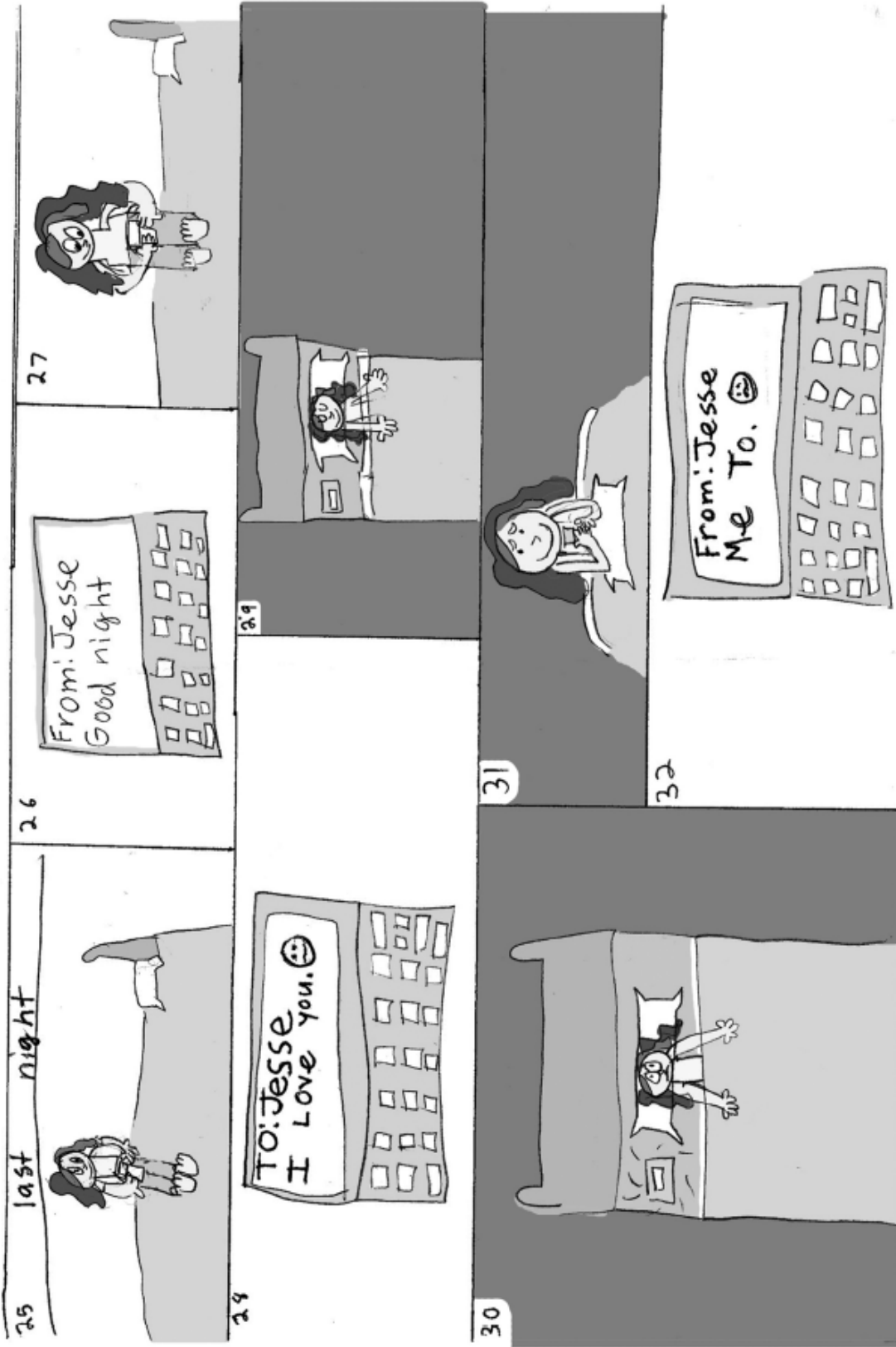


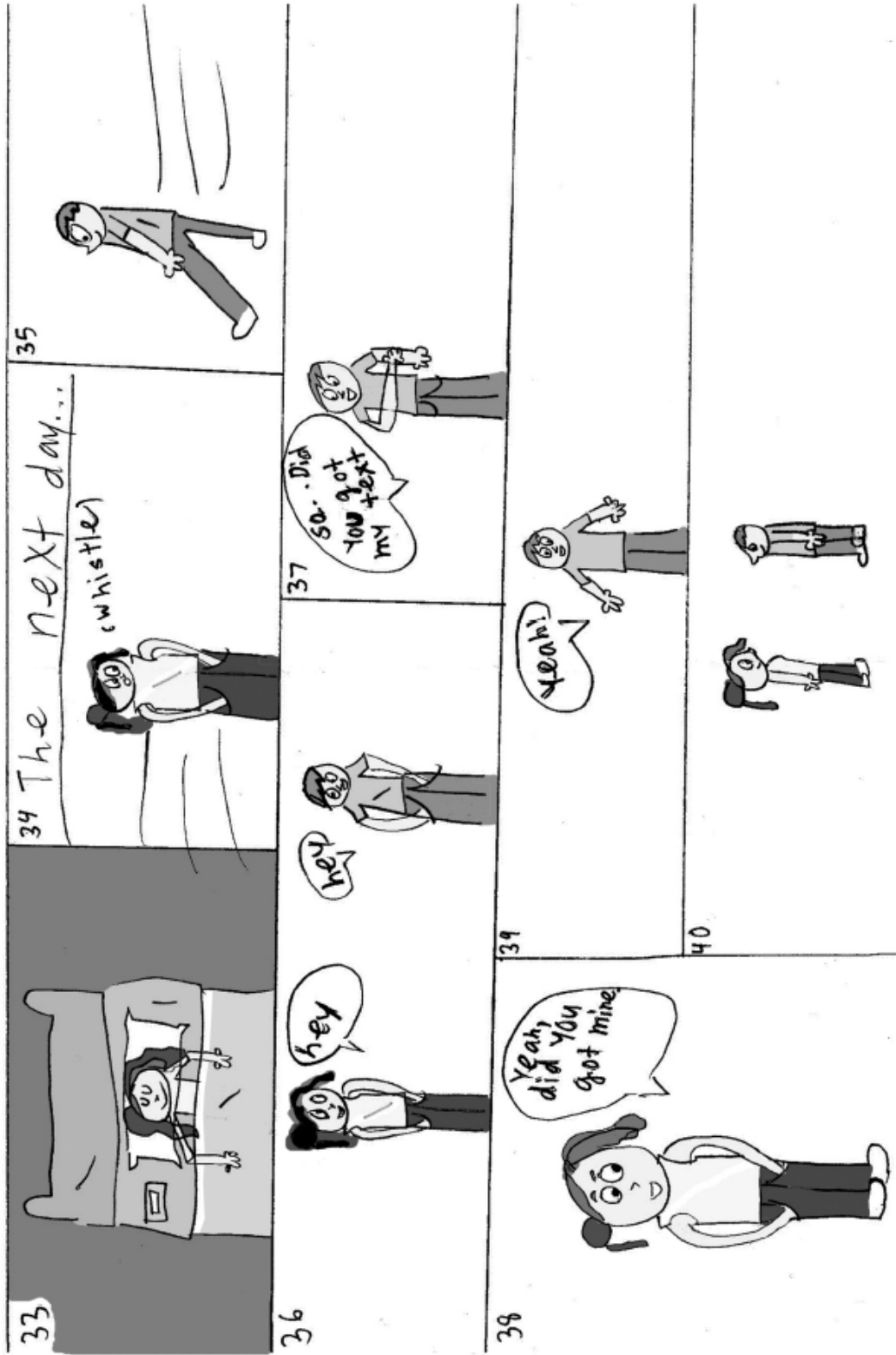
Drama: Book 2 By: NELLIE

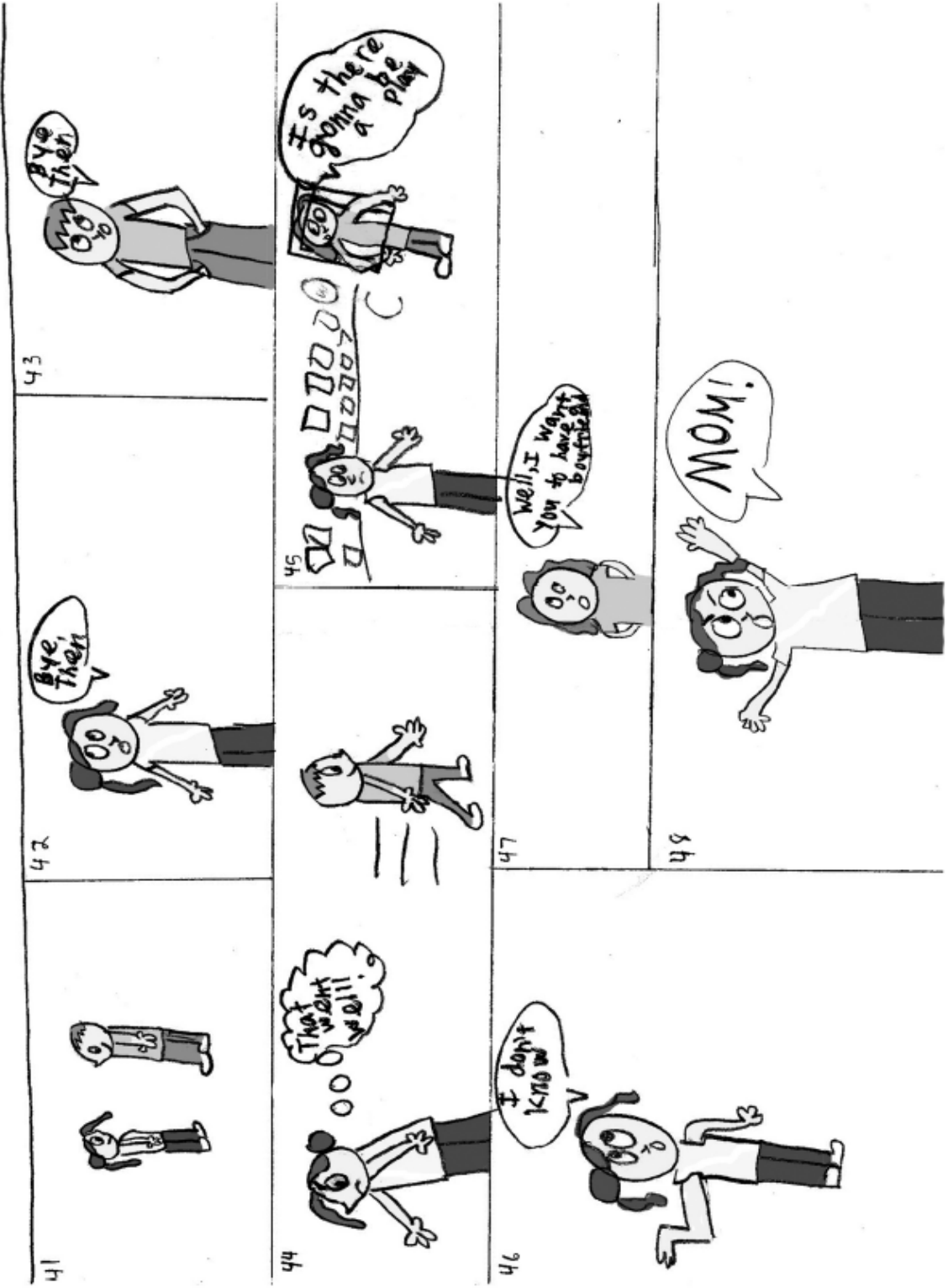


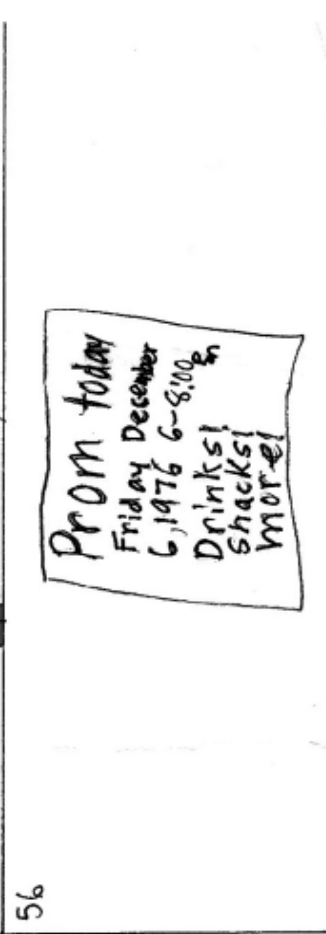
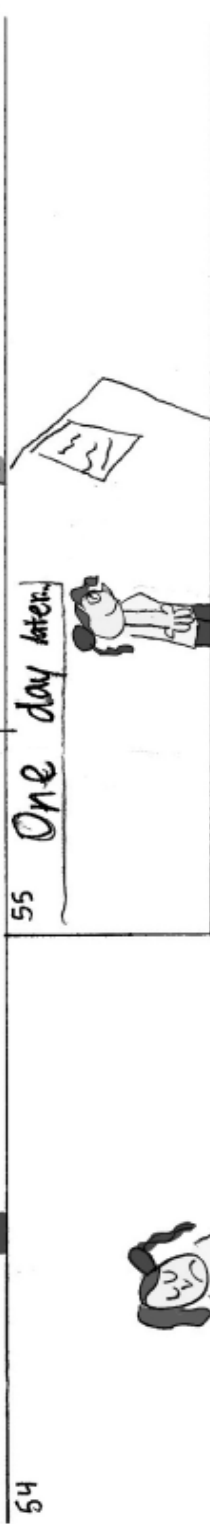
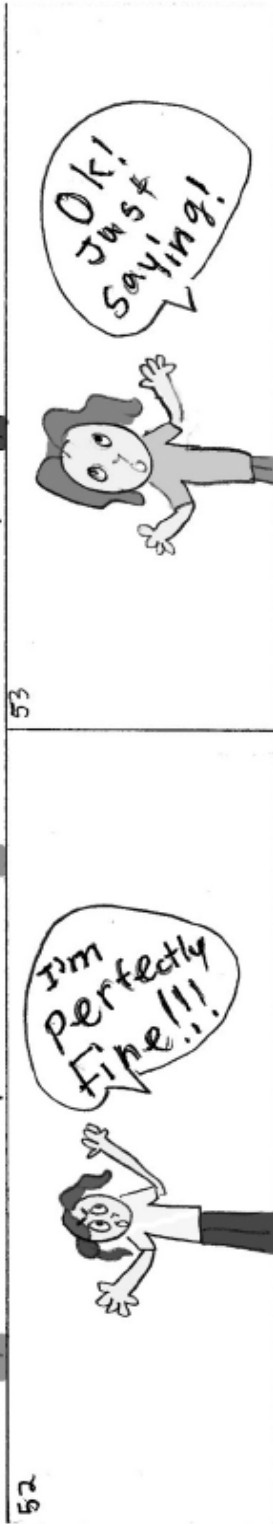




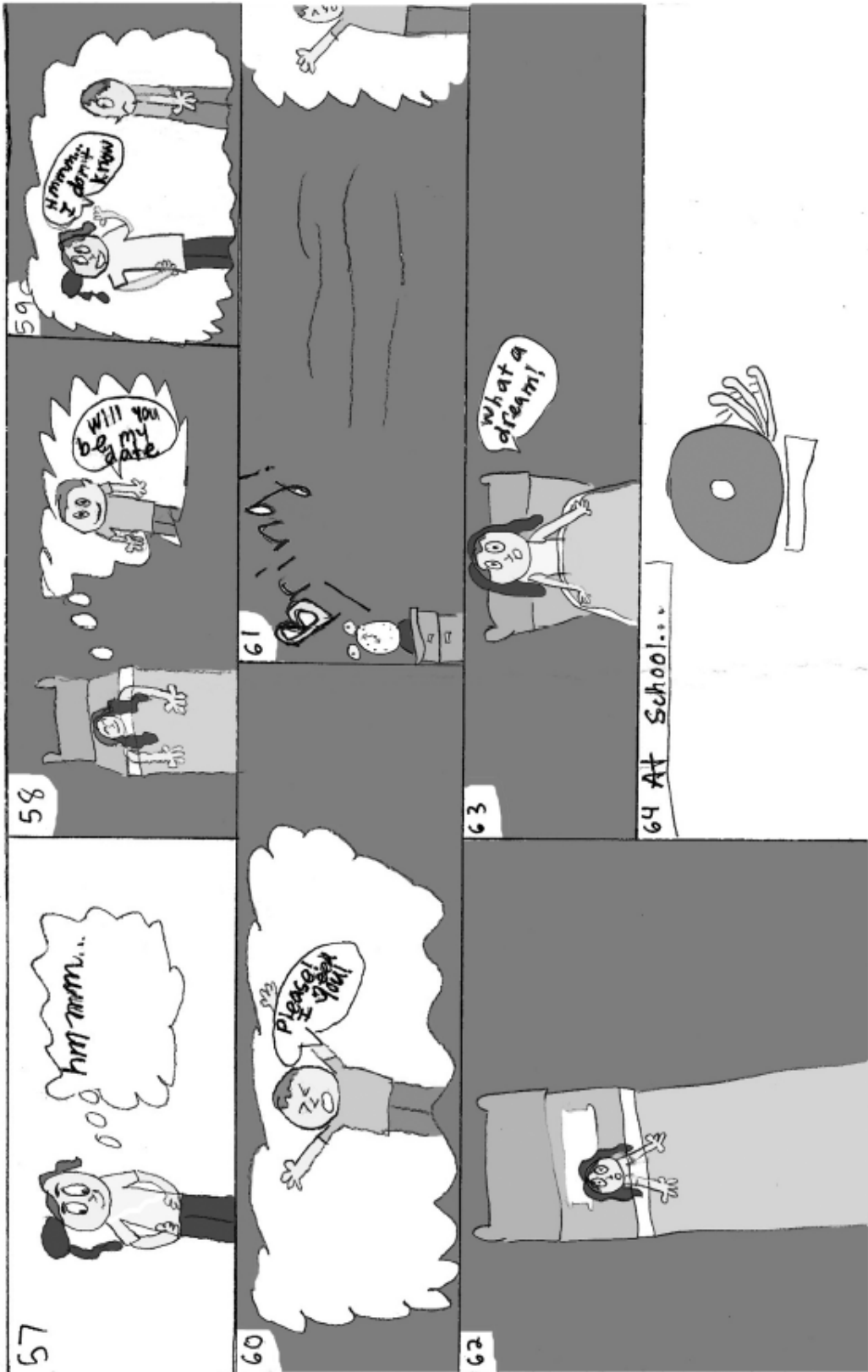


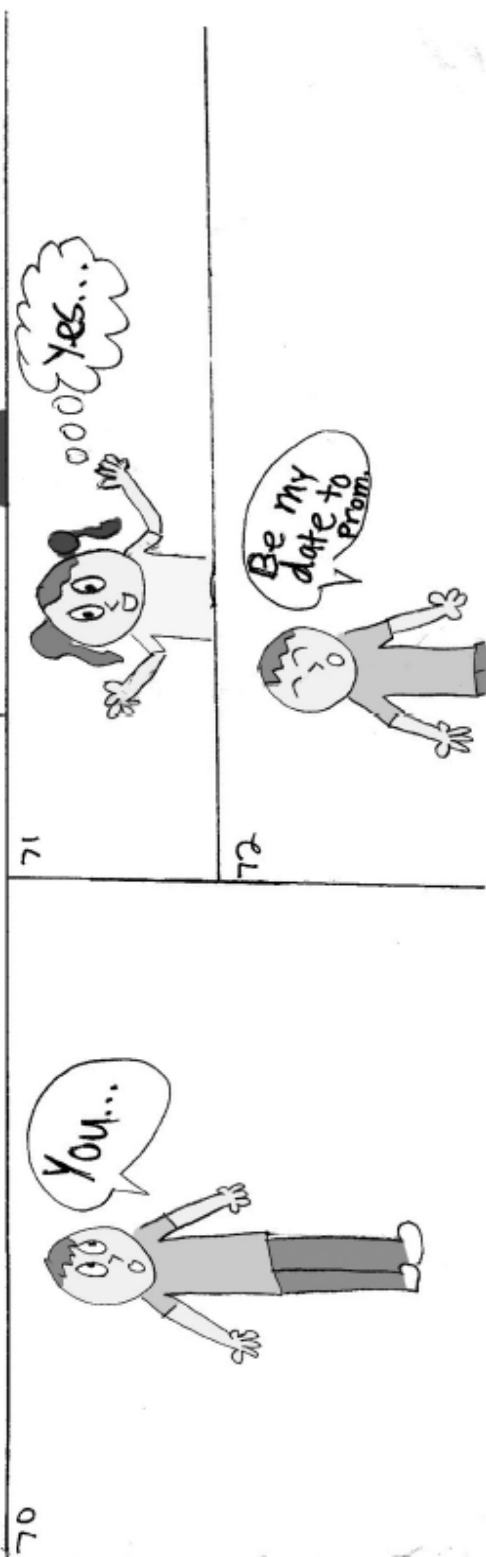
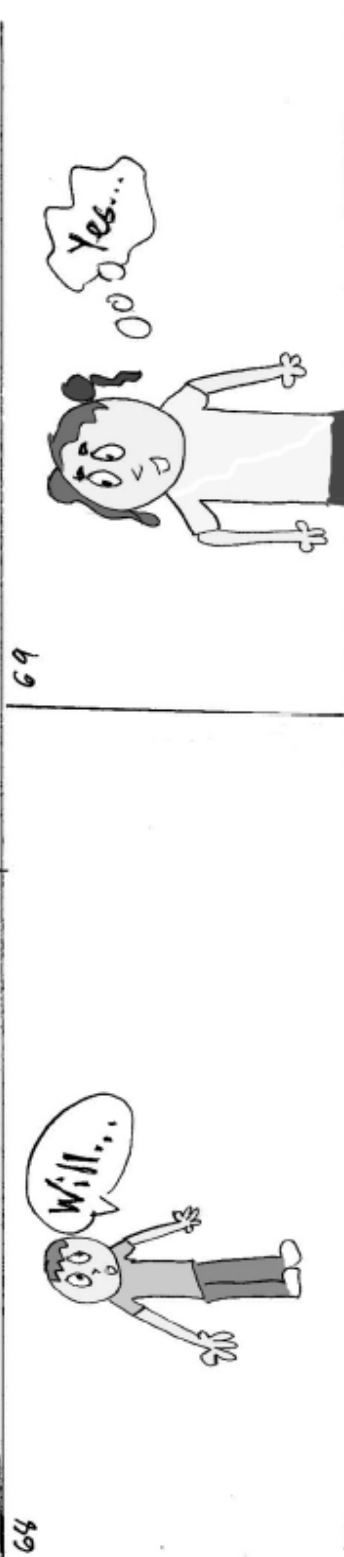
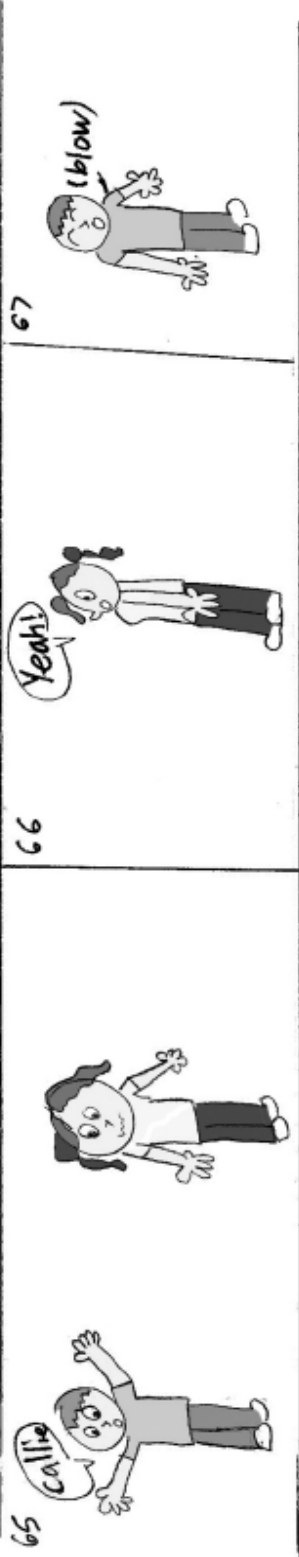


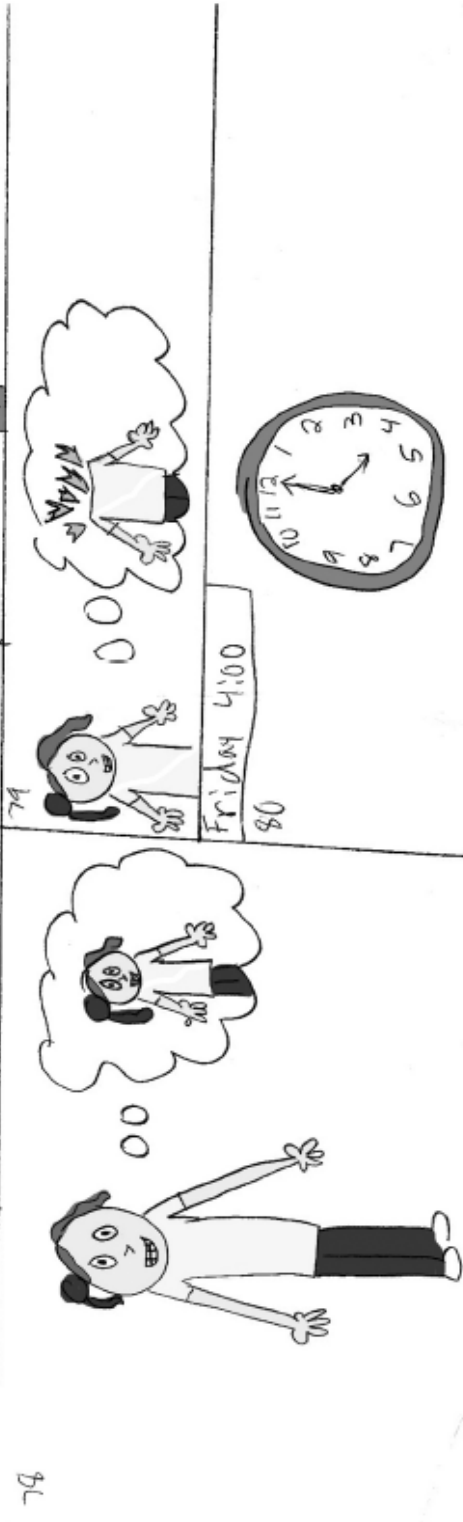
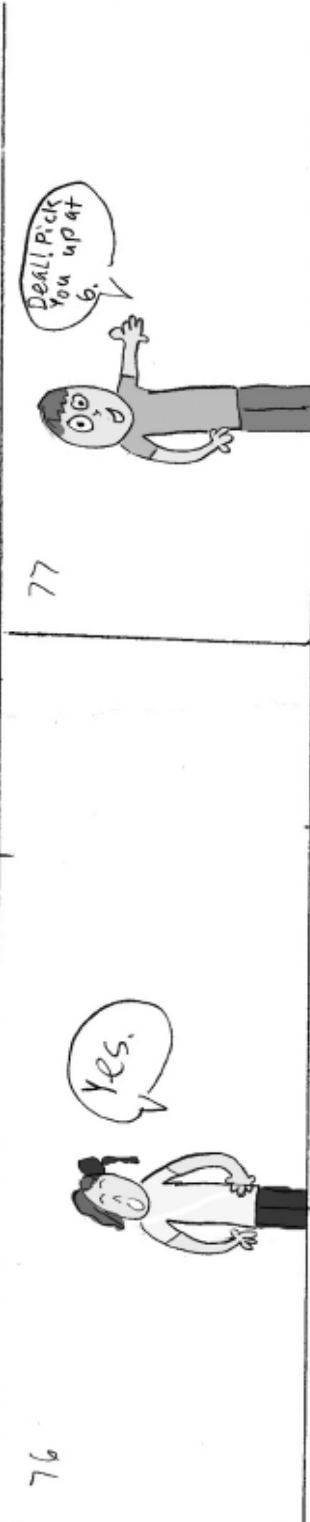
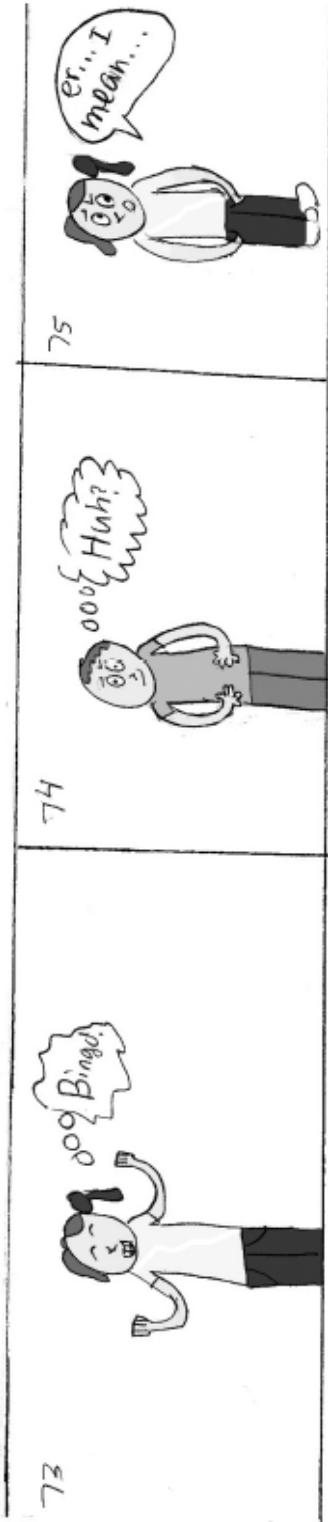


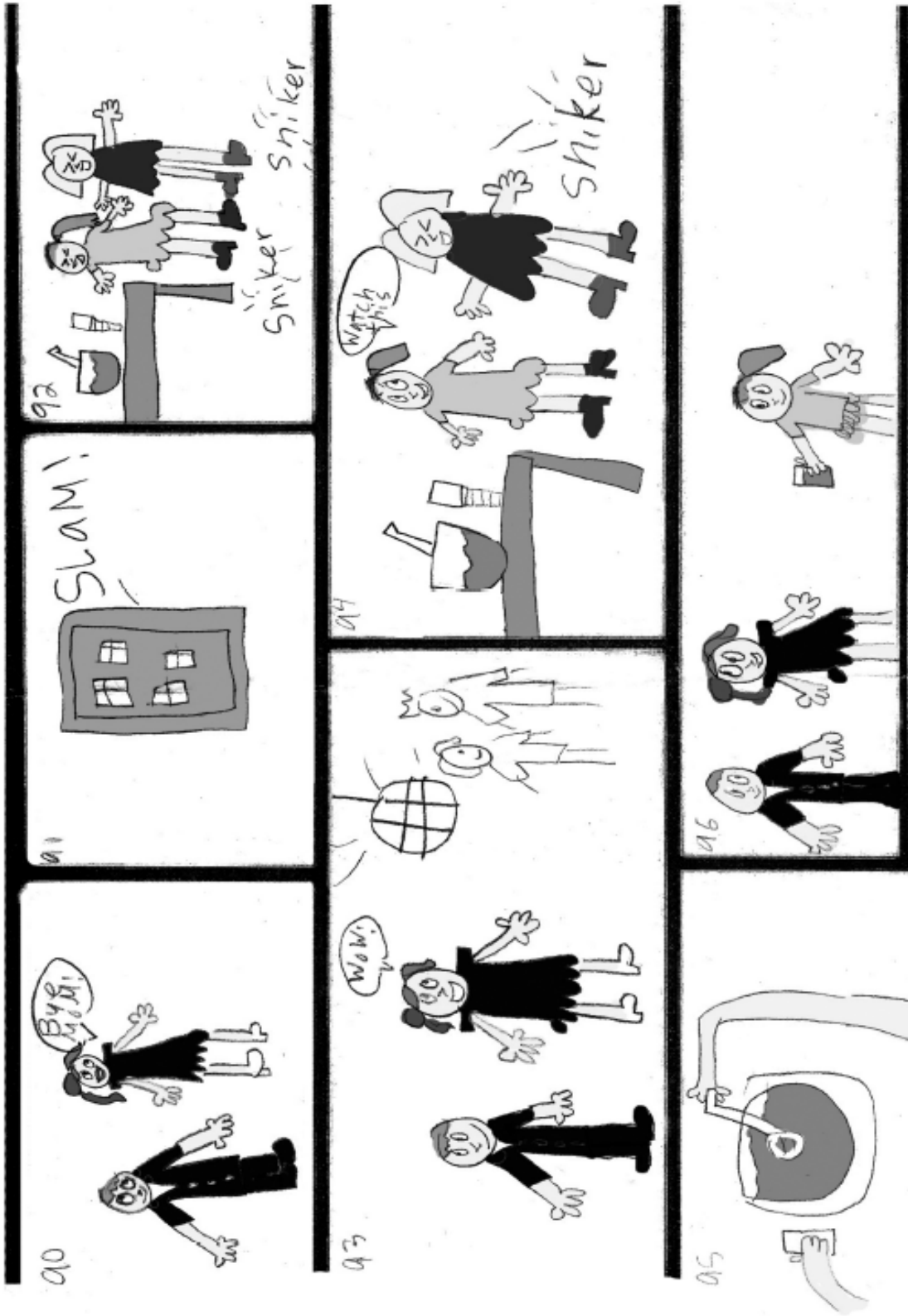


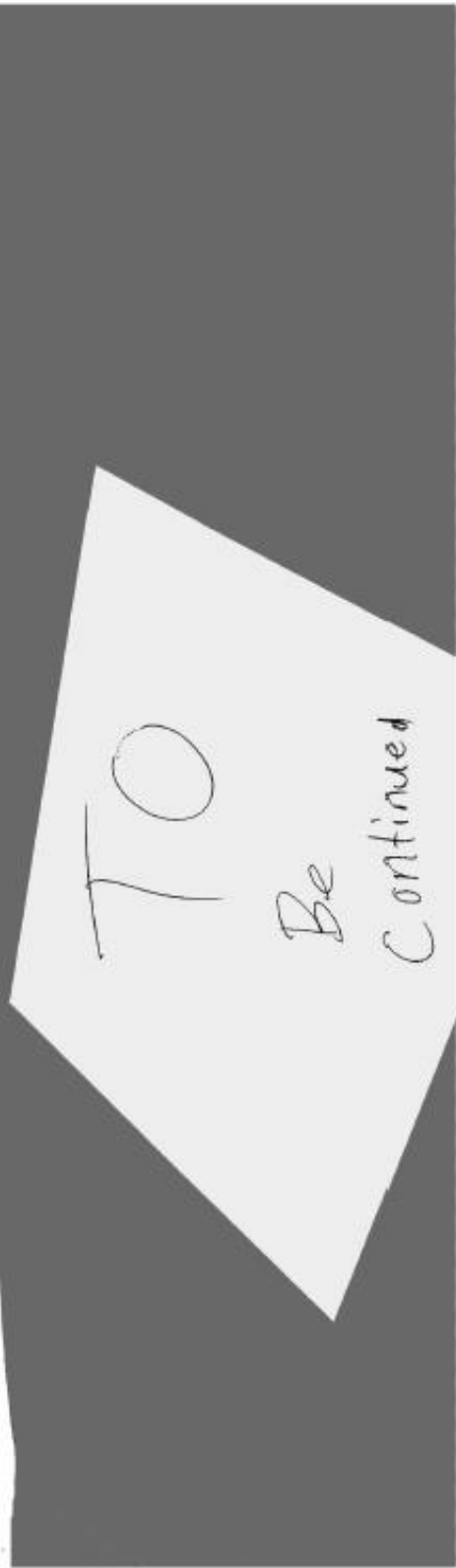
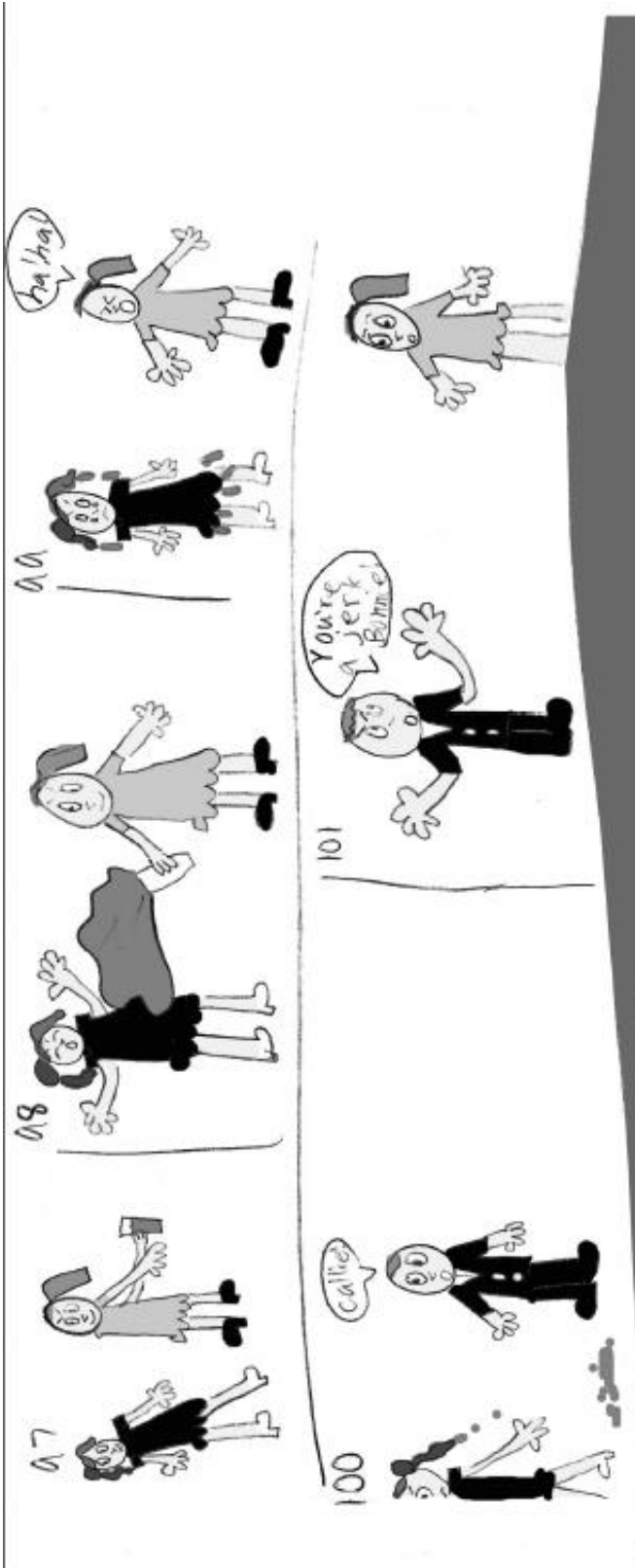




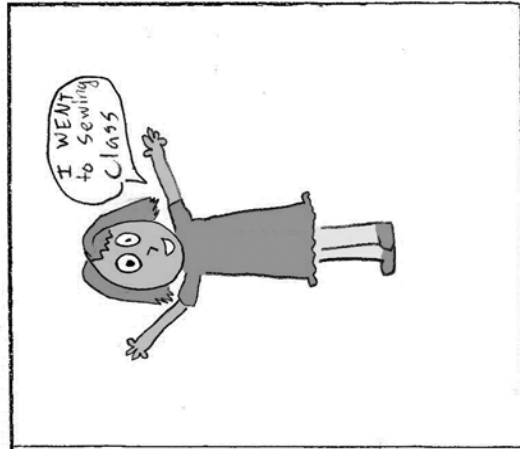
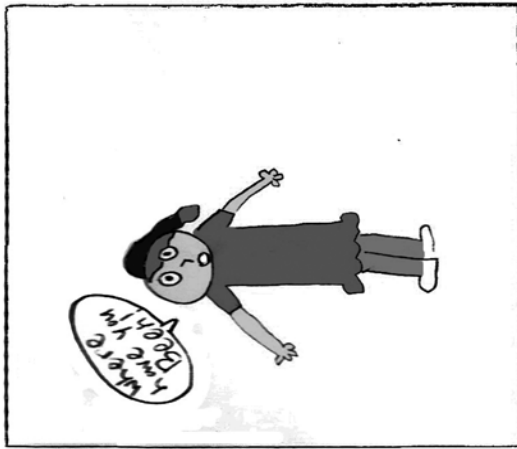
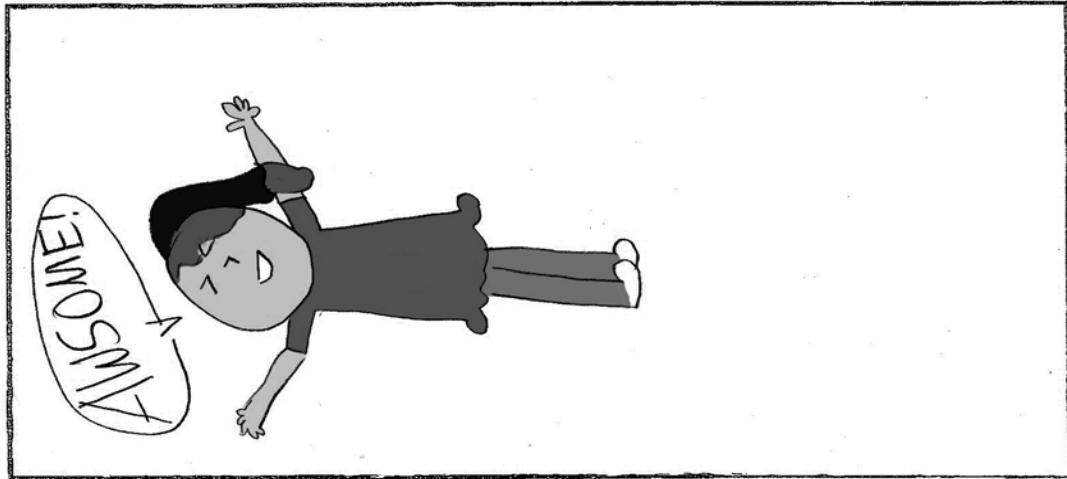
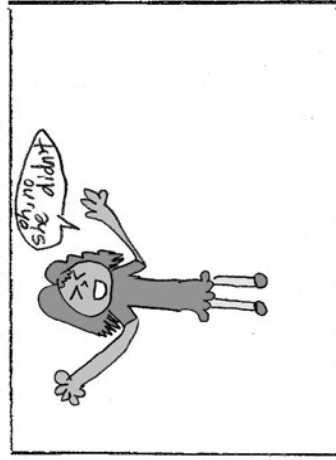
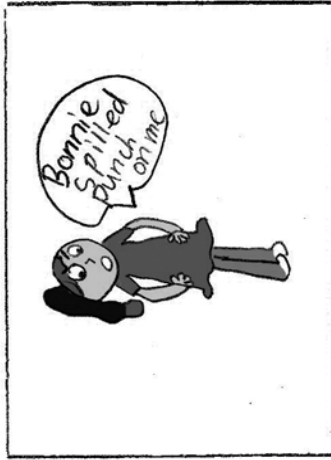


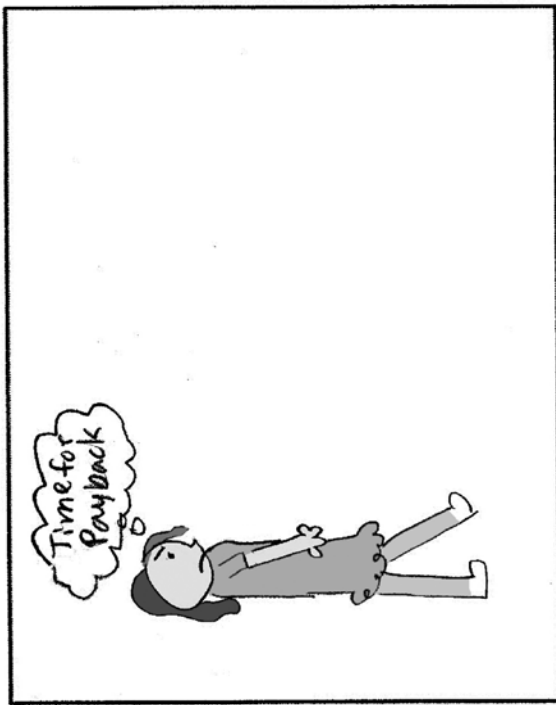
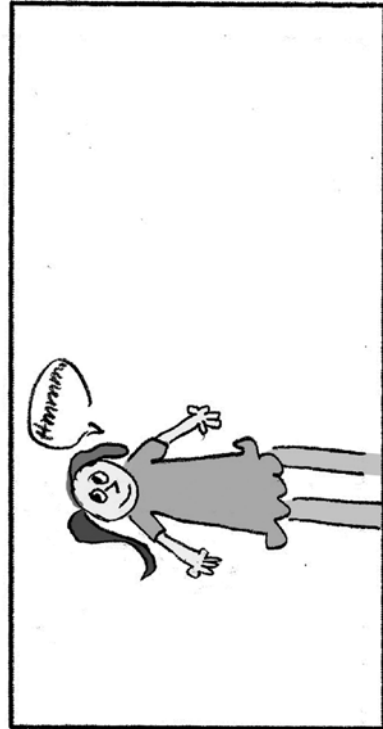
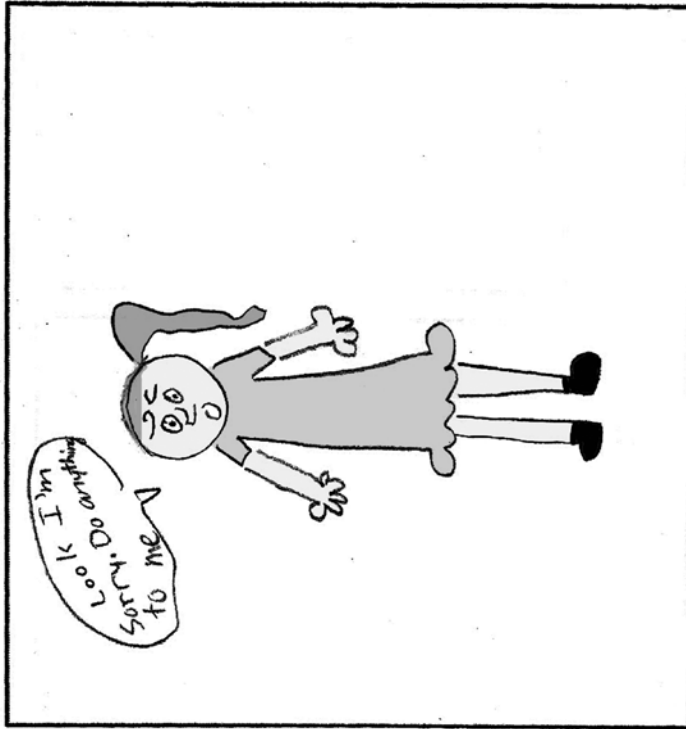








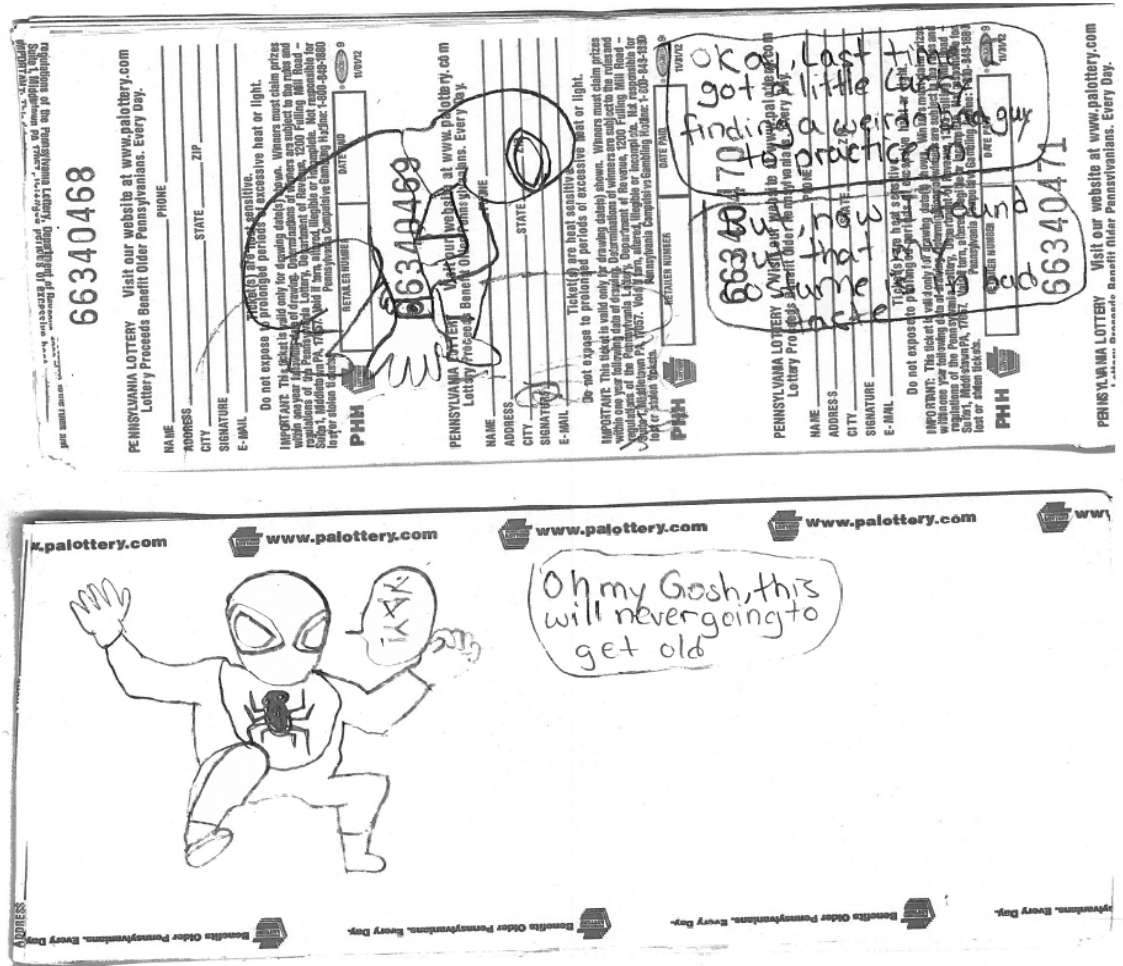






### 7. Teresa

Teresa only attended the first five minutes of each CCIC session, and then went to help her father at his convenience store job. In spite of her limited time spent in the CCIC, Teresa checked out many books (usually starring Marvel superheroes) and produced dozens of pages of original *Spider-Man* stories. She created all of her work on the fronts and backs of lottery ticket receipts from her father's store. I include a small sample here.



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