

Comics as Literary Compasses and Kaleidoscopes: A Pedagogical Essay in Fragments

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Through an analysis of published graphic novels and comics created by schoolchildren, and building upon Rudine Sims Bishop's literary metaphors, we discuss how comics serve as compasses and kaleidoscopes that allow readers/composers/educators to center justice in the storying process. We argue that the comics medium provides readers and authors specific affordances (interiority, multiperspectivity, fragmentation, ambiguity, juxtaposition, and focalization) for bending reality and framing stories of the unseen, unheard, and hidden in the margins. We address teachers directly in exploring what's possible when texts are read kaleidoscopically to engage the multiperspectival/multiversal/liminal nature of a robustly multimodal medium.

In the September 2021 issue of NCTE's *Council Chronicle*, our colleague Stephanie Toliver offered an extension of Rudine Sims Bishop's enduring 1990 metaphor of children's books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Where Dr. Bishop's work described literary mirrors that reflect readers' realities back at them, windows that show readers the realities of others, and sliding glass doors that allow readers entry into storyworlds, Dr. Toliver's extension was concerned with speculative fiction and socio-racial imaginaries, introducing the metaphor of the literary telescope. To wit:

Mirrors transform the human experience and reflect it back to the reader, and telescopes use multiple mirrors to gather light from hazy futures and clouded otherworlds to make faraway, liberatory ideas clearer and brighter. Windows offer views of real, imagined, strange, or familiar worlds, and telescopes provide views of liberating futures and otherwise worlds.

Through telescopes, children—especially those whose access to futures and fantasies has been distorted by violence and oppression—will be able to see that those futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be. (p. 30)

It is in this generative spirit that we too add to the collection of metaphors provided by Dr. Bishop, which in recent years have been expanded, clarified, and recontextualized by a number of critical scholars. Several notable examples include Dr. Debbie Reese (who in 2018 added “curtain” as a metaphor to describe private moments Indigenous authors are unwilling to share with audiences outside their communities), Dr. Ebony E. Thomas (who in 2019 wrote about literary misrepresentations that become “distorted funhouse mirrors of the self”), Gene Luen Yang (whose 2016 autobiographical comic, “Glare of Disdain,” applied Bishop’s metaphors to his own childhood experiences), Dr. Grace Enriquez (who in 2021 introduced “foggy mirrors, tiny windows, and heavy doors” to explain how Bishop’s metaphors are insufficiently applied in practice), and Dr. Maria José Botelho (who in 2021 performed a critical analysis of Bishop’s literary metaphors, probing their possibilities and limitations for selecting and analyzing multicultural children’s texts). Inspired by this work, we turn specifically to the medium of comics to offer readers our own additions to the cabinet of metaphors stocked by Dr. Bishop¹.

Our contribution to the discourse is in conceptualizing comics as compasses and kaleidoscopes. In looking at graphica, specifically, our aim is to illustrate how the comics medium’s “inherently multiperspectival” nature makes it “structurally equipped to challenge dominant forms of storytelling” (Chute, 2008, p. 456). Nowhere are multiple perspectives and subversive forms of storytelling more needed than in representing, complicating, and engaging with the lives and experiences of those whose realities are marginalized in differing ways. In this essay, we will share examples of published graphica as well as children’s work creating graphic literature. In both cases our goal is to highlight how the comics medium can be used to not only guide readers and composers toward new realities, but also to lay bare possibilities for change if reality is perceived as unfixed and malleable. To that end, this paper is written kaleidoscopically, allowing for differing entry points into the piece and different destinations based on readers’ interest and the roads they follow. Our paper

¹ At a 2021 ALSC event honoring Bishop’s work, panelists were asked what they thought about scholars expanding on Bishop’s metaphors. Dr. Violet Harris responded that the ultimate question should be “What more can I learn from the addition of another component?” (Association for Library Services to Children, 2021). We attempt to honor that challenge in this essay.

is both a work of qualitative research and a practitioner piece intended to support classroom instruction. That is by design. Kaleidoscopic thinking emboldens us to shed traditional academic genre expectations and to seek out the generative tensions of fragmentation. We take inspiration from the comics medium, itself a marriage of tensions and seeming cross-purposes.

COMPASSES AND KALEIDOSCOPIES IN THE LITERARY CONTEXT

In her discussion of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, Bishop (1990) reminds us that children deserve to see themselves and the experiences, lives, and cultures of others reflected in the texts they read. Our use of compasses in this essay expands that argument by highlighting the potential of texts to guide readers to what they could become in our shared world. For example, a reader who sees representations of themselves, their language, culture, race, etc., might be able to more deeply connect with a text, but if that text also acts as a compass leading them to what they could become, then the power of the text is magnified. Because of comics' fragmentary nature - an affordance we unpack in the following section - the medium invites readers to do a lot of roaming, exploring, and mapping. We adopt the compass metaphor from the work of artist-scholar Dr. Nick Sousanis (2015), who wrote that comics "help us find our way beyond the confines of how it is, and seek out new ways of being in directions not only northwards and upwards, but outwards, inwards, and in dimensions not yet within our imagination" (p. 46). This is a powerful metaphor for the medium's ability to let readers blaze new trails of meaning in the imperfect marriage of images and words, and in the spaces between and around them. Compass texts invite readers to look beyond what is represented on the page, to consider what was left out, and to speculate on what lies beyond.

In our own work, we do not only use superhero of color texts as a way for children and youth from minoritized backgrounds to see themselves in what they are reading (mirrors), or to walk into an author and artist's immersive storyworld (doors), but rather, we use those texts as guides to encourage students to explore what's possible when they are afforded (or afford themselves) the power to envision systemic change in their own worlds (e.g., Low, 2017a; Maldonado & Dehart, 2021; Torres & Tayne, 2017). We see the compass as integral to the work of compassion.

As it relates to the metaphor of kaleidoscopes, we draw from Dr. Jacquelyn Jones Royster's 2000 book *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. Royster argues that "[T]he kaleidoscopic view is designed to make the hidden and unrecognized visible. This view...encourages us, above all else, to complicate our thinking, rather than simplify it,

in search of greater clarity and also greater interpretive power” (p. 73). In this way, applying kaleidoscopes to texts is a way of reconfiguring what is being read to foment and create differing readings and interpretations of a text, as well as what's possible. For example, in the 2015-2017 comic book series *Sam Wilson: Captain America* (written by Nick Spencer with various artists), the reader is guided to what is possible with heroes of color, and the kaleidoscopic view pushes readers to not only embody the roles of Captain America (Sam Wilson) and Falcon (Joaquín Torres), but also to (re)consider what it even means to be a Black and Chicax hero in the context of the United States. Each issue of Sam Wilson's series is “a direct engagement between the dominant culture's ideals (whiteness) and its ideas of blackness—in both terrible and transcendent ways” (Oyola, 2017, n.p.). Readers are dropped into a swirling kaleidoscope of identity- and positionality-informed hybrid readings. To that end:

Engaging with the medium (comics) and the genre (superheroes) means to understand that Sam Wilson is the Captain America White America needs because they need their conception of America radically shifted, and that he is the Captain America Black America needs to see their struggle represented not merely as victims, but as actors with agency in a form of media where White America is idealized and has rarely questioned its dominance—in order to be seen and have him say, *I see you.*’ (Oyola, 2016, n.p., emphasis added)

What do kaleidoscopic texts afford the acts of seeing and being seen? How is our seeing dependent on where we position ourselves, and what lenses we peer through?

KALEIDOSCOPIIC AFFORDANCES OF THE COMICS MEDIUM

How do readers make meaning in/with/from comics? How (why) do we see what (who) we see?² Some background. Comics is a robustly multimodal medium that expresses concepts using images in sequence arranged in space, often paired with words. Certain verbal and visual devices are commonplace, and are used by comics creators to generate moments of gestalt, layering semiotic modes to guide readers toward hybrid readings. These conventions include panel arrangements, page design, gutters (the spaces between panels), speech and thought balloons (the latter of which visually represent interiority), and caption boxes. While not unique to the medium, comics also emphasize size, perspective, line density, shading, color, and typography (Low & Jacobs, 2018).

² We ask this rhetorically, but there are a number of researchers who examine this very question. Check out the work of cognitive scientist Neil Cohn if you're interested in cognition and the visual language of comics.

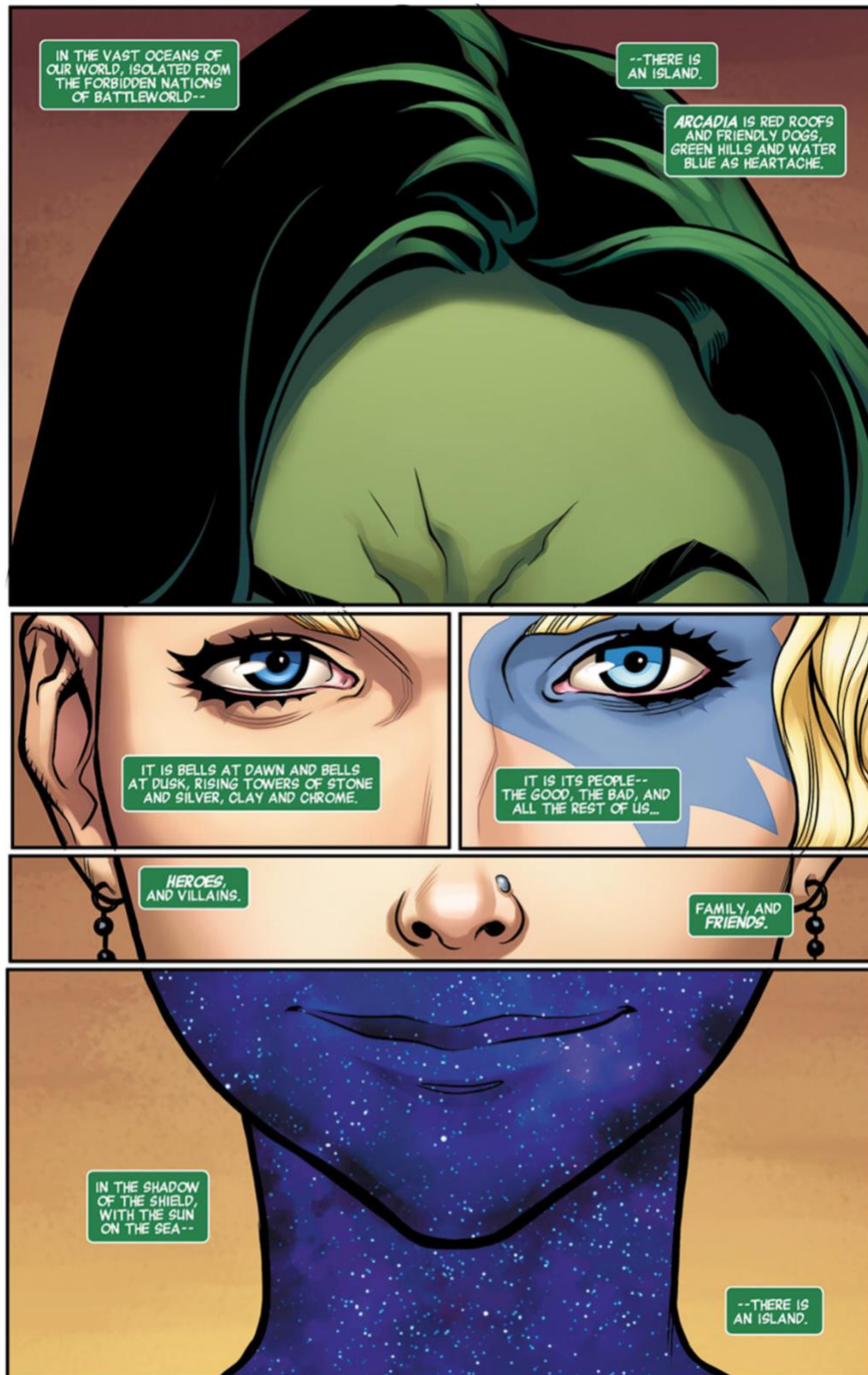
When considering affordances of comics as a hybrid storytelling medium, we must acknowledge its inherent multiperspectivity (Chute, 2008). Because numerous perspectives can be visibly rendered on a single page, overlaid or in juxtaposition, comics invite readers to step into and out of points of view, to sense what characters sense (*in a sense*). In some cases, illustrators use comics to show how radically multiperspectival storytelling can be, such as the opening page of 2015's *A-Force #5* (Bennett, Wilson, & Molina, see Fig. 1), in which pieces of five characters' faces come together to form one visage, broken apart by gutters and united by overlaid narration from a single speaker.

Some creators, such as Nadia Shamma and Nabi H. Ali in their 2021 graphic novel *Ms. Marvel: Stretched Thin*, use axonometric panels that skew perspective by making multiple viewpoints visible at once and allowing none to dominate (Kejara, 2021). These examples, and their fracturing of perspective, evoke looking into a kaleidoscope and the visible possibility that is contained there. We as readers are tasked with reconciling the fragments and stringing them meaningfully together.

On the topic of fragments, gutters are a key affordance of the comics medium, undergirding its ability to represent (and withhold) meaning through multiple synchronous sign systems (Postema, 2013). When one panel transitions to the next, readers infer what happened in the space between (McCloud, 1993). Creators decide what to show in panels and what to conceal in the middle spaces, “constantly call[ing] readers’ attention to what they see and don’t see, and why” (Chute, 2017, p. 34). Gutters highlight the juxtapositions and image-text tensions that ultimately make the medium’s hybrid readings possible, and they provide liminal spaces for narratives (and readers) to transition from one moment, subject, body, or scene to another. David has written previously about transnational children and youth who used comics gutters to safeguard aspects of their narratives from outside readers (Ghiso & Low, 2013; Low, Monea, Stornaiuolo, Campano, & Thomas, 2020; Low & Pandya, 2019), not entirely unlike Reese’s discussion of literary curtains (2018).

FIGURE 1

A-Force #1 (2015, p. 1). Script by Bennett and Wilson / Art by Molina



Gutters have been used by a range of comics authors to excavate buried histories (personal and community) and to process personal and collective traumas. While some of this speaks to the fragmentary nature of memory in general, ultimately, gutters are a structural invitation for authors and readers to co-create meaning interstitially. Both sides communicate via “gutterances” (Ghiso & Low, 2013; Low, 2012), requiring readers to actively interpret the pregnant silences between panels. The gutterance is a phenomenon in which the gutter

figuratively speaks to the reader, demanding to be filled in, and that the reader, in filling it in, speaks right back to... Together, author and reader co-construct a meaning that cannot be said to definitively exist on the page itself. (Low, 2012, pp. 372-373)

Readers fill in the gaps (making connections and inventing their own meanings) while authors maintain the power to withhold—in effect, to represent via omission. Dr. Osvaldo Oyola (2014) argues that the “reader-provided closure that occurs in [gutters]...isn’t just happening in comics. It is all over the place, especially in navigating the identity politics of transnational America, where disparate images are sewn together to make a narrative of self and/or community” (Oyola, 2014, n.p.). Numerous comics creators have demonstrated creative (and discomfiting) possibilities for personal stories of transition(ing) when image and text are out of alignment, when the gaps to fill are relatively ambiguous, and when hybrid readings about hybrid lives fracture as if through a kaleidoscope. From coming out stories to immigration narratives, comics are a medium built for transition.

Comics’ multiperspectivity can also enable readers to transition through (and break free from) time and space as readers take stock of people, places, and relationships—and how spatiotemporal perspective shapes our understanding of such matters. Richard McGuire’s 2014 graphic novel *Here* tells a largely wordless “story” by showing the same physical vantage point over and over across hundreds of thousands of years, as the world around that fixed perspective changes. It is as if someone left a camcorder rolling in one spot, undisturbed, forever, and at some point, the film became looped over itself. As readers, we get a fragmentary history of one small dot on the map and no capital-T truths about what that place is like to any or all who inhabit it. Another example of comics’ ability to warp time comes from Walter Simonson’s run on *The Fantastic Four* (1989-1991). The writer-artist brilliantly juxtaposes two timelines on the same page, sometimes allowing them to mingle. Elsewhere in Simonson’s run, he fractures and replicates panels to show countless possible directions, perspectives, and realities. “It’s a narrative best told in comics, as Simonson bends time

and plays with the rules of static imagery” (Fiffe, 2018, n.p.; see examples of Simonson’s work there). As Dr. Anna Peppard argues (in Peppard & Burt, 2022), “Serialized superhero comics bend time, and so do comics in general, as a form where past, present and future exist simultaneously on any given page” (n.p.).

FIGURE 2
The Best We Could Do (Bui, 2017, p. 92)



In her 2017 graphic narrative *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui creates a page composed of four panels in which she considers her relationship with her father (p. 92, see Fig. 2). In the first panel she is a child and her father is an adult; in the 2nd panel they are both children; in the 3rd panel she is a child and her father is an adolescent; and in the 4th panel, Thi and her father are both adults. Bui uses caption boxes, cigarette smoke, clothing, and an unchanging background to weave the panels together. Another example of comics' time-space tensions comes from Art Spiegelman's *Maus II* (1991), where past events discussed in the story's present are visually juxtaposed within a single panel (p. 79, panel 7, see Fig. 3). It is as if telling stories physically conjures the traumatic images that populate them, and multiple temporalities become visible at once. The panel-to-panel narrative of *Maus* conveys through visual components "the underlying thoughts that need to be communicated - because you can go from the past to the present to the future and back and forth, as your eye flits across the page" (Spiegelman, quoted in Cavna, 2022, n.p.).

FIGURE 3
Maus II (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 79, panel 7)



As Royster (2000) portends, readers "benefit from an intentional shifting of perspectives" (p. 282). Bui's and Spiegelman's graphic novels are discomfiting instantiations of that kaleidoscopic affordance. The ability of comics to creatively shuttle through time and place creates radical opportunities to untether our readings from spatiotemporal constraints. As the journalist Joe Sacco (2012) reminds us, "A cartoonist assembles elements deliberately and places them with intent on a page...The cartoonist draws with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth" (p. xii.). There is nothing literal about the passage of time in Bui's or Spiegelman's pages, but we feel its weight regardless. As readers, we experience these characters' memories in different and significant ways.

In addition to juxtaposition, focalization is another key element of comics storytelling and analysis. Focalization invites readers to consider which perspectives dominate by examining how much space figures occupy, who appears in the foreground and who in the background, and how much presence/absence is allotted to each character. The comics theorist Dr. Kai Mikkonen (2012) describes focalization as the set of visual and verbal elements that collide on a comics page and that “interpenetrate each other and thus allow a multiplication of perspectives” while also “suggest[ing] a particular perspective to the story” (p. 71). When characters are superimposed over other characters, or transgress the borders of the panels that mostly contain them, sometimes entering other panels, readers must work to reconcile those transgressions (Low, 2017c). Often, readers come away with the idea that foregrounded characters’ perspectives are more central than backgrounded characters’ perspectives. To that end, when words interpenetrate and overlap other words, or one character’s speech or thoughts appear in a caption box over another character’s body, powerful critical meanings can be made. As an example, we look at two pages from Melanie Gillman’s YA webcomic *As the Crow Flies* (later published as a 2017 graphic novel).

FIGURE 4
As the Crow Flies (Gillman, 2017, p. 28)



FIGURE 5
As the Crow Flies (Gillman, 2017, p. 29)



The comic's protagonist, Charlie, is a queer 13-year-old attending a Christian sleepaway camp for girls, where they are the only Black camper. Throughout the graphic novel, Charlie is misunderstood and mistreated by staff and by other campers. In these two pages, Charlie reacts to the following words from the white camp counselor: "Our lives are uphill battles, and all throughout, our souls are constantly gathering dirt—sin, doubt, temptation... But if we strive for goodness, then God sees our efforts and rewards us – by washing away the dirt and whitening our souls" (p. 27). Charlie is visibly taken aback, and immediately retreats from the moment, into their own mind. On page 28 (see Fig. 4), Gillman brilliantly uses caption boxes (representing Charlie's interior monologue) superimposed over word balloons and images (representing the harmful conversation Charlie has retreated from and no longer hears). Gillman is employing deliberate focalization techniques to show readers whose perspective matters, why it matters, and how Charlie has been traumatized by the camp counselor's casual microaggression.

On page 29 (see Fig. 5), Gillman continues to employ focalization, using comics devices to render a clear visual representation of double-consciousness. Not only is Charlie running through an inner monologue, but it becomes an interior dialogue in which they imagine how they would be perceived if they were to confront the white camp counselor over her racist language. These thoughts are so encompassing, so (re)traumatizing, that Charlie ultimately realizes that they have been forced into silent quiescence. The moment has passed, the conversation has left Charlie behind, the dominance of whiteness has gone unchallenged. Gillman's layering and fragmentation of semiotic modes illustrates another facet of the kaleidoscope, that "some things become visible while others are cast in shadow" (Royster, 2000, p. 282). Charlie's experience will certainly function as a mirror for some readers and as a window for others. In both cases, it is the medium's kaleidoscopic affordances that make it so resonant as a form of textual identification.

Earlier this year, Dr. Keith Friedlander wrote that:

The past few years have seen a host of comics, both fantastical and factual, examining history through varied racialized lenses, challenging traditional colonial narratives. These comics not only educate readers about historical events and experiences that are typically erased and elided in schools, they broaden our ability to envision the past and understand how it shapes our present moment. At the same time, artists creating speculative fiction comics are dispensing with white, heteronormative tropes to create queer and Indigenous visions of the

future. Envisioning a possible future that threatens or displaces present structures of power is an inherently radical and utopian act. (2022, n.p.)

We share this quote in its entirety to highlight the comics medium's ability to shift lenses, challenge dominant narratives, surface buried histories, and impact how we understand the relationship of past, present, and future. In terms of interiority, multiperspectivity, fragmentation, ambiguity, juxtaposition, and focalization, comics answer Royster's (1996) call for readers to engage in "other ways of reading...for a shift in paradigms...for other ways of analyzing and composing" (p. 12). Comics manifest the possibilities of the kaleidoscope to fracture prevailing perceptions of reality, and to create from those fragments new and powerful perspectives.

What might the medium afford young authors who are in the process of constructing and navigating hybrid identities within spaces of liminality? And how might children participate in the "inherently radical and utopian act" (Friedlander, 2022, n.p.), invited by comics' penchant for rupture? We explore these questions in the following sections.

THE RESEARCH: WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DID

Both Authors recognize practitioner knowledge as "central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 119). As practitioner researchers, we actively co-construct (with youth and other educators) sites of learning, creating pedagogic conditions and curricular invitations for students to engage in critical identity work. We approach our research with certain ideas and framings; for example, that comics is a valuable medium for literacy education, and that racio-linguistically marginalized students should have spaces within which to practice critical multimodal literacy with agency and joy. We are teachers and facilitators, employing Simon's (2012) concept of connoisseurship as a framework for inquiring about students' lives and literacies, and then implementing what we learn into our evolving pedagogies and methodologies. As Campano (2009) writes, practitioner research strives to be "procreative, rather than merely analytical" (p. 332), and to "respond to students in their full humanity and dignity" (p. 327).

As scholars whose work centers the voices and activism of children and youth through critical multimodal literacy, we understand the potential of critical inquiries with, for, and led by children and youth to be liberatory experiences. David is a Jewish American scholar (and sometimes cartoonist) who is a devoted fan of the X-Men and the manifold possibilities and tensions offered up

by its mutant metaphor. Francisco is a Puerto Rican scholar who entered the world of *graphica* through the cinematic universes created by Marvel and DC and through his love of superhero manga. As scholars, we read a lot of *graphica*, including superhero texts, manga, graphic novels, graphic memoirs, and graphic medicine. While both of us actively critique problematic “funhouse mirror” representations of race, gender, sexuality, and ability that have always been a part of the medium (Dallacqua & Low, 2021; Low, 2017c; Torres, 2019), we also see the potential of comics, not just as powerful, multivoiced, literary, and multimodal storytelling forms, but as ways of engaging children and youth in actively imagining resistance, telling their personal stories, and deeply grappling with systemic issues present in their local and global communities.

The student work presented in this essay comes from two separate practitioner studies, both of which focused on comics and critical engagements with visual texts/storytelling. Francisco’s study took place at Dreamers Elementary with 5th grade students; David conducted his with 4th-8th graders who formed an afterschool Comics Inquiry Community (CIC). While regionally and temporally isolated, the resonances across our work have allowed us to identify connections that highlight the metaphors of compass and kaleidoscope.

Dreamers Elementary (pseudonym) is a school located in an affluent district in Colorado and is one of the few bilingual programs in the district. It is a late-exit program³ and serves predominantly Latinx students. The study conducted by Francisco was designed to highlight the political knowledge of children through superhero narratives. Students were asked to engage with issues of social justice that mattered to them by creating a villain who embodied a form of injustice that they could combat and ultimately win against (Torres & Tayne, 2017). Students grappled with issues of language, race, and war, among others. The intent of the work was to be the first step in students seeing themselves as capable of making systemic change and of understanding that change can only be done through actions taken on their part and the part of those around them (Torres, 2020).

The CIC, located in a K-8 parochial school library in South Philadelphia, was the site of David’s practitioner research study for parts of three school years (Low, 2015). During that time, students met weekly to read, write, design, and discuss comics. As a practitioner researcher, David

³ In the case of Dreamers Elementary, late-exit referred to how students began their elementary program learning English and Spanish in equal amounts (from grades K-3) and then began transitioning to only one Spanish class and the rest in English by 5th grade. The goal of these programs tend to be English language learning rather than maintenance and development of home language.

extended pedagogic invitations for students to engage with the comics medium, and used qualitative tools to study their literacy enactments. David's study examined how a tight-knit group of Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian students co-constructed the space of an afterschool inquiry community and mobilized the comics medium to (per)form identities and engage in critical inquiries. Whether students chose to compose autobiographical stories or create new characters, findings of this line of research indicate that comics authorship provided young authors – all of whom experienced social marginality and precarity of some form – a space to represent the complexity of their transnational experiences, to convey cultural hybridity, and to resist single stories of racial identity. Some students' comics rendered non-assimilationist transnational migration narratives (Low, 2017b), and critical excoriations of the criminalization of Black men (Low & Campano, 2016).

In the next section, we share examples of student-created comics that exemplify the compass and kaleidoscope metaphors in various ways.

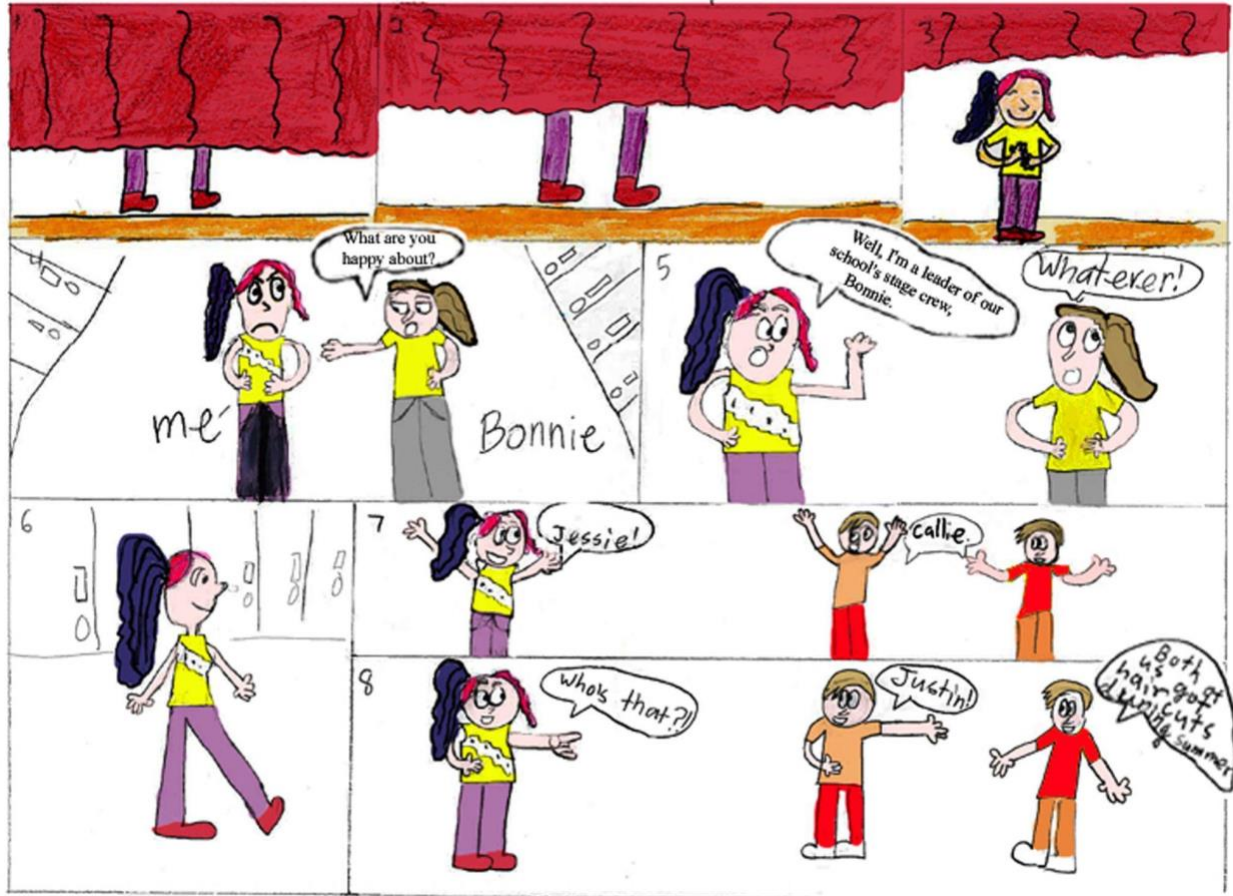
GALLERY WALK OF STUDENTS' COMICS

Rather than sharing data and analysis in a traditional format for empirical reporting, we've opted to organize this section in the form of a gallery walk. To us, this reflects some of the possibility of kaleidoscopic thinking. Rather than forcing the reader to read linearly, each section opens up new and different possibilities, and much like a gallery walk, can be begun and finished at any artifact. For four of the students' work featured below, we lead with their comics and then provide intermittent context and analysis. We leave the final comic in this section with context but no analysis to invite readers to interpret the piece through their own lenses and views of the world. All student names are pseudonyms.

NELLIE

FIGURE 6

Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 1

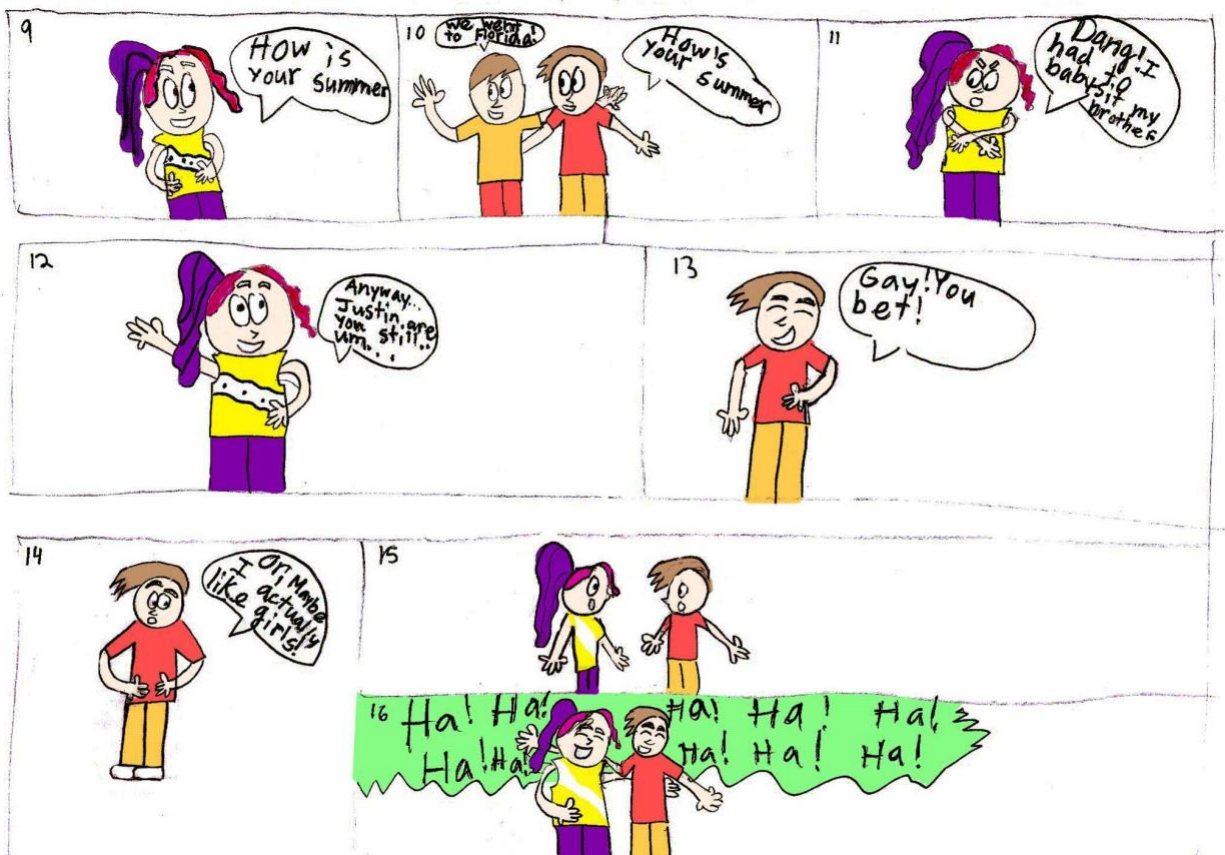


Nearly all the comics Nellie produced during the two years she belonged to the CIC as a 4th and 5th grader were part of her long-form sequel to Raina Telgemeier's best-selling YA graphic novel *Drama* (2012)⁴. In "Drama Pt. 2," Nellie continued the middle school misadventures of Callie Marin and twin brothers Jessie and Justin Mendocino. Like her source material, Nellie did not shy away from depicting difficult issues of early adolescence, such as dealing with bullies and nagging parents, and awkwardly exploring romantic relationships. In creating fanfiction sequels, Nellie adopted

⁴ In addition to being a massive bestseller, *Drama* won a 2013 Stonewall Book Award. Due to its LGBTQ content, it is often challenged and banned from schools and libraries. (The ALA lists *Drama* as the seventh-most banned book from 2010 to 2019.) Then, there are progressive critiques of the graphic novel's content. Dr. Michelle Ann Abate (2017) argues that *Drama* ignores intersectionality and highlights "forms of multiculturalism that omit critical discussions about race," thus weakening its LGBTQ youth advocacy.

Telgemeier's school setting, character designs (including attention to body language and expressiveness) and color palette, as well as the quippy and theatrical tone of *Drama*, but she took the characters to new places by examining them through the prism of her own childhood inquiries.

FIGURE 7
Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 2



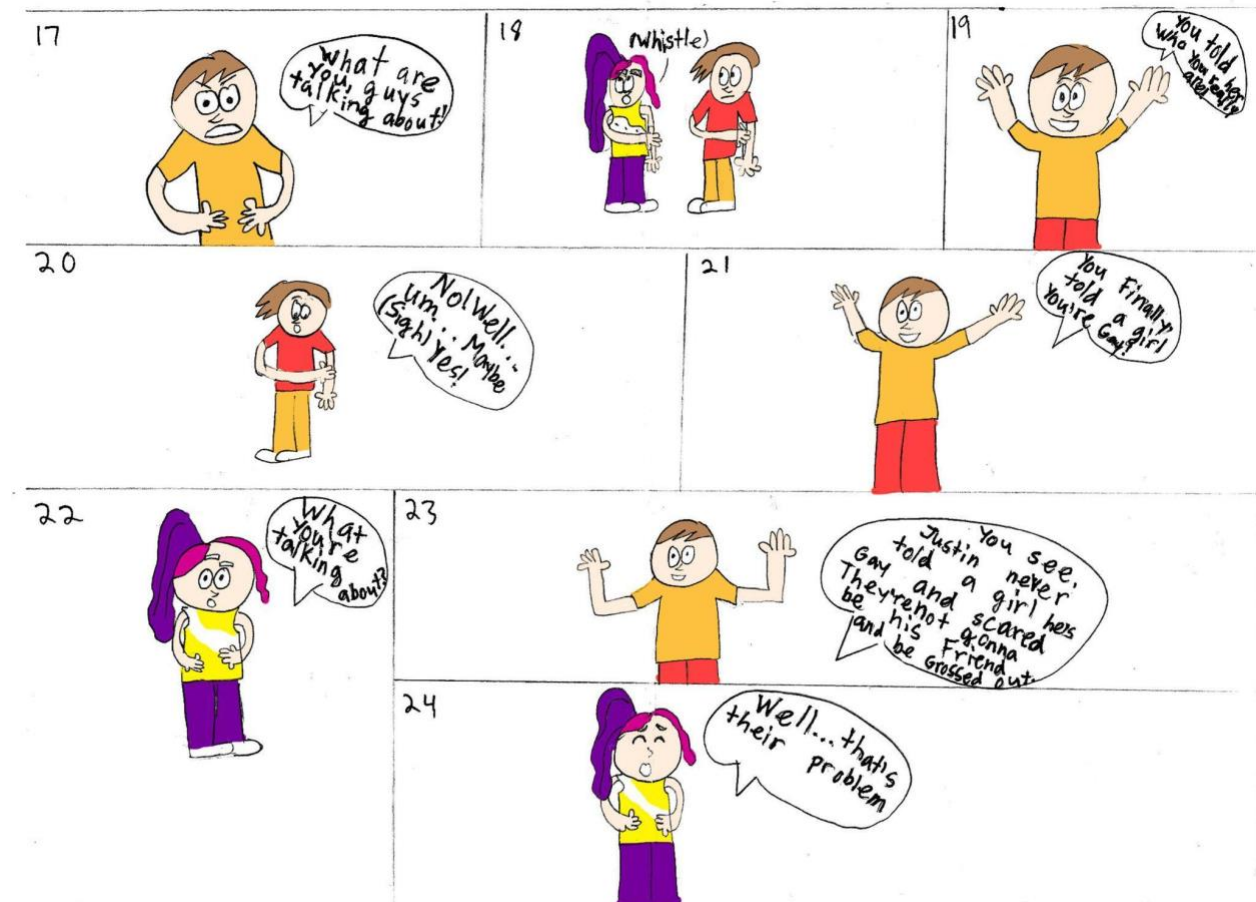
At the end of Nellie's 4th grade year, David asked why she had decided to create "Drama Pt. 2." Nellie responded:

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...and that's how I'm like. Sometimes I make big deals of some things that some people don't see as important. And so [Callie] kind of represents me, and that's why I keep writing... I try to resemble my experiences with the

comic that I'm trying to make. And I'll try to put the experiences in my comic to make sure that people know how it's like to be insulted.

Following Bishop's (1990) metaphor, Nellie was able to use Telgemeier's graphic novel as a mirror text. Despite being younger than Callie, and a Vietnamese-American raised by immigrant parents and grandparents (Callie is portrayed as a white teenager in *Drama*, who lives with a parent), Nellie saw herself represented in Callie. But crucially, Nellie also extended the characters of Callie and her friends, using them as an invitation to do her own critical identity work. While maintaining the graphic novel's humorous tone, Nellie delved deeper into the nature of emerging identity. This being fanfiction, Nellie took some license with Telgemeier's characterization, and even took interpretive agency, discarding how characters had been developed in the graphic novel. By "shipping" Callie and Jessie, Nellie created slash fiction, expanding the parameters of the source material.

FIGURE 8
Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 3



When Nellie created “Drama Pt. 2” she was nine years old and attending a parochial school that explicitly prohibited talking about sexuality. In the afterschool space of the CIC, Nellie saw an opportunity to subvert the discursive norms that marginalized queer identities in her school. While Telgemeier’s *Drama* began as a mirror text, Nellie operationalized the graphic novel as a compass text, letting it lead her to do some thinking and writing about desire and identity (with warmth and humor). When David asked her about it, Nellie explained: “Justin, when he says ‘I’m gay,’ I put that because I think it’s right if you’re gay or not. Because gay means being yourself in another way. So that’s why I put it there [see Figs. 7 and 8] because I wanted to show that people can be gay... *Drama* is about being yourself and going through problems, like everyday problems.” The affordances of comics storytelling invited Nellie to highlight the divergent perspectives of Callie and characters in Callie’s orbit. Nellie’s use of visual symbols, nested thought and speech balloons, creative gutter transitions, and focalization enabled her to emphasize interiority and multiperspectivity.

FIGURE 9
 Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 8

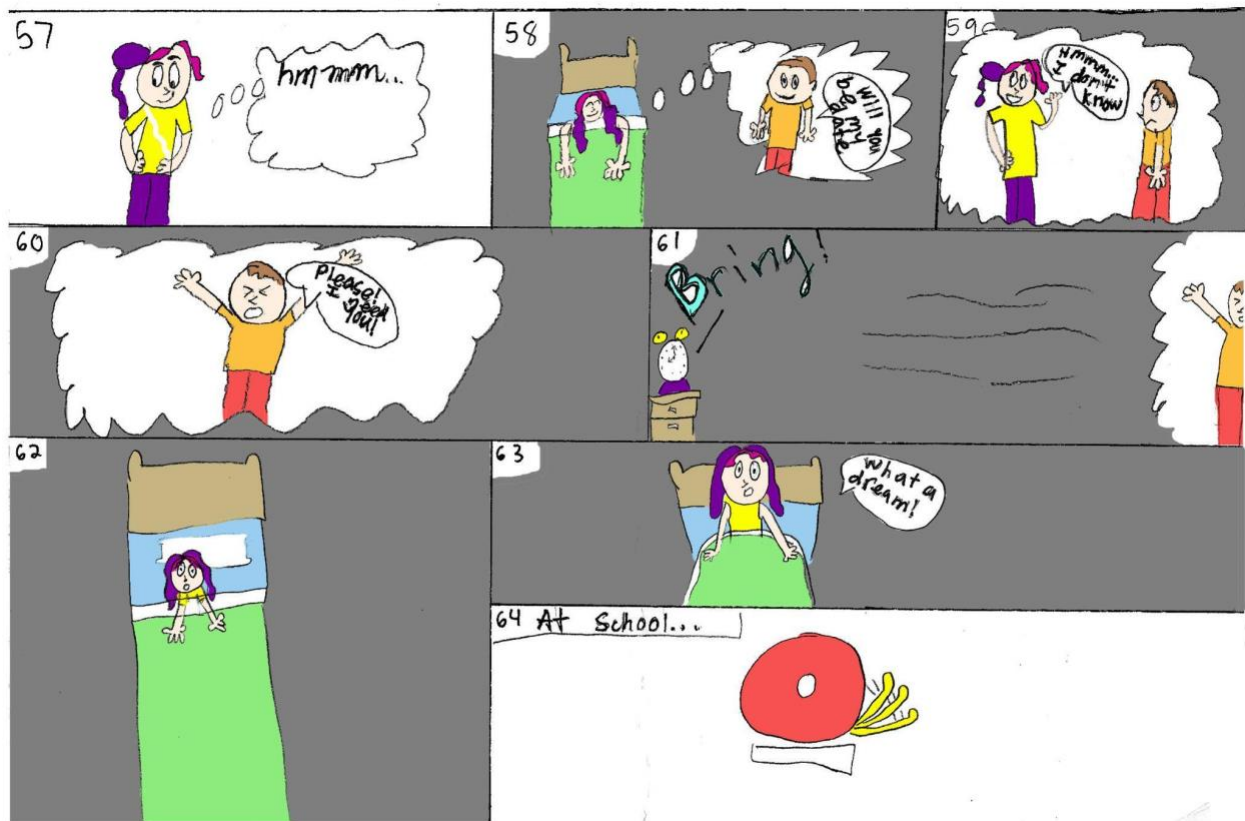


FIGURE 10
Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 9

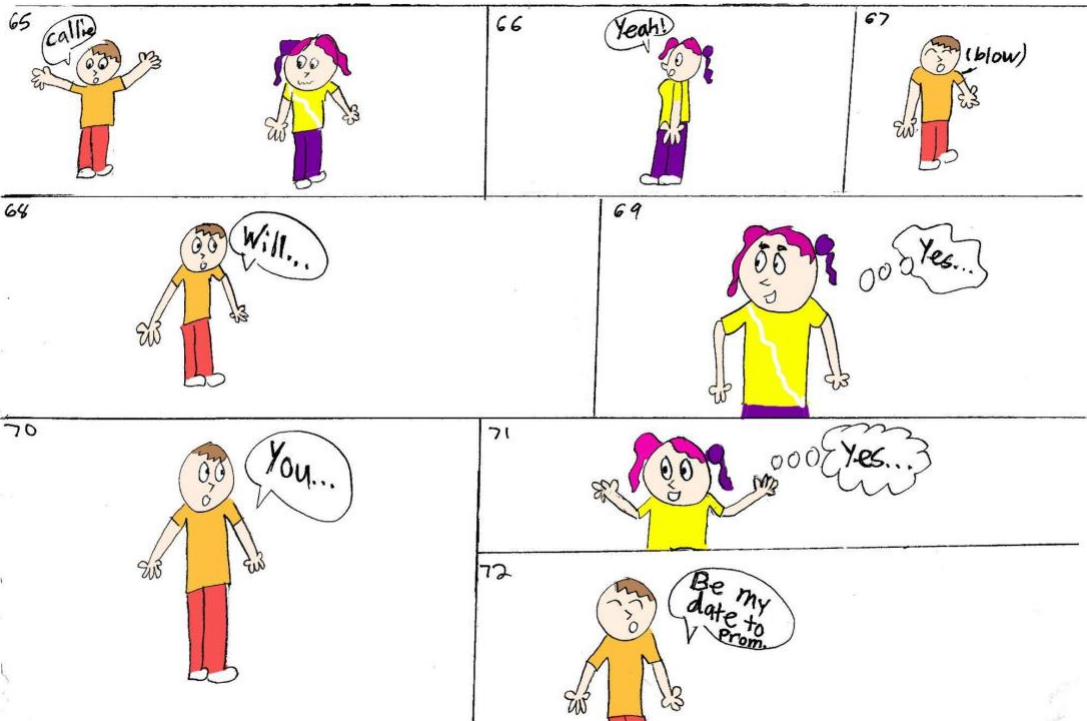
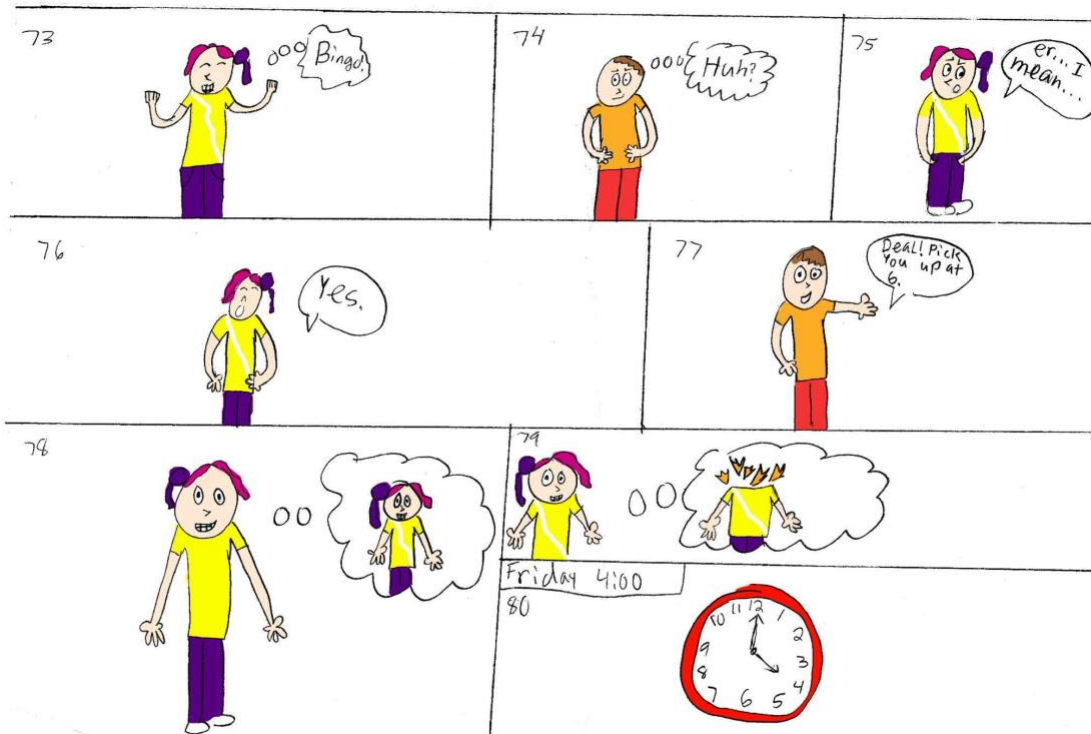


FIGURE 11
Drama Pt. 2 by Nellie (grade 4), p. 10



LITA

FIGURE 12

Superhero origin story by Lita (grade 5), p. 1



pg1

Lita was a quiet 5th grader who tended to keep to herself, but in her storytelling, especially her visual storytelling, Lita expressed herself fully. She was quick to enter the worlds of video games and movies, and would include them in her drawings. The image above (Fig. 12) is part of a comic Lita created in response to one of Francisco's lessons. Students were invited to compose about issues of justice and equity that mattered to them and that they could take on as heroes. What stands out initially in this piece is the differing creative sources Lita drew from to create her story. These sources, manga and anime (e.g., big playful eyes) and superhero movies/comics (e.g., origin story of Lita as Spider-Girl) combined to act as a compass guiding the reader to the world Lita inhabited, with its varying fragments, yet borderless as she weaved her story. Lita, using her knowledge of differing mediascapes -- movies, anime, manga, comics, and the like -- created a storyworld of fragmentation and possibility. In this world, as its main character/author, she guided the reader to a reality that was at once familiar, yet decidedly her own mishmash, brimming with possibilities for (re)storying. Creating stories within this space guided Lita to issues that mattered (i.e., Bishop's sliding glass doors), and in turn, revealed what's possible when students are allowed and encouraged to bring in their full imagined and real-world knowledge to the forefront of their storytelling.

On the second page of Lita's comic (Fig. 13), we begin to see the villain of the story and the issue of injustice Lita wanted to grapple with. As a multilingual Mexican 5th grader, Lita understood well the racial tensions present under a Trump presidency in 2019, including the killing of unarmed Black men by police. It was with those thoughts in the background that Lita chose to engage with race as her systemic issue. She understood that American society needed/needs to change and she argued that all people deserve a place in this country. It is worth noting that in her attempts to fight for change, Lita's villain is dehumanized by his lack of pupils. No other character in her story fails to have pupils, but this figure, this man who wishes to have whites "rain supreme," is missing them. This artistic move could highlight how Lita views those who spout white supremacy as inhuman.

FIGURE 13
Superhero origin story by Lita (grade 5), p. 2



pg 2

FIGURE 14
Superhero origin story by Lita (grade 5), p. 3



In the above pages, and also holding true in her last page (Fig. 14), the differing fragments of Lita’s life, her worries, her desire for justice or some form of systemic change is present in the “imagined” story she is telling. She renders these fragments by connecting her joys (animation, drawing, and video games) with her fears of white supremacists, as well as her need to rectify problems with the powers she has as a person/superhero. These multiperspectival realities swirl together on the page to tell a story about an

agentive young girl who too often feels silenced by adults, instead of an active participant in the society she is growing up in. Lita’s piece also injects this reality with humor, seeking to find joy within herself as she struggles against issues of inequity. Through her reiterating to her villain that “I told you you would regret it” and “the end” at the end of her piece, Lita attempts to find humor in the fight for change. This very much mirrors the quippy tone of Spider-Man, one of Lita’s source texts. The power of joy is sustaining and the reader leaves hopeful about what’s possible when children are allowed to dream about change, even against sizable odds.

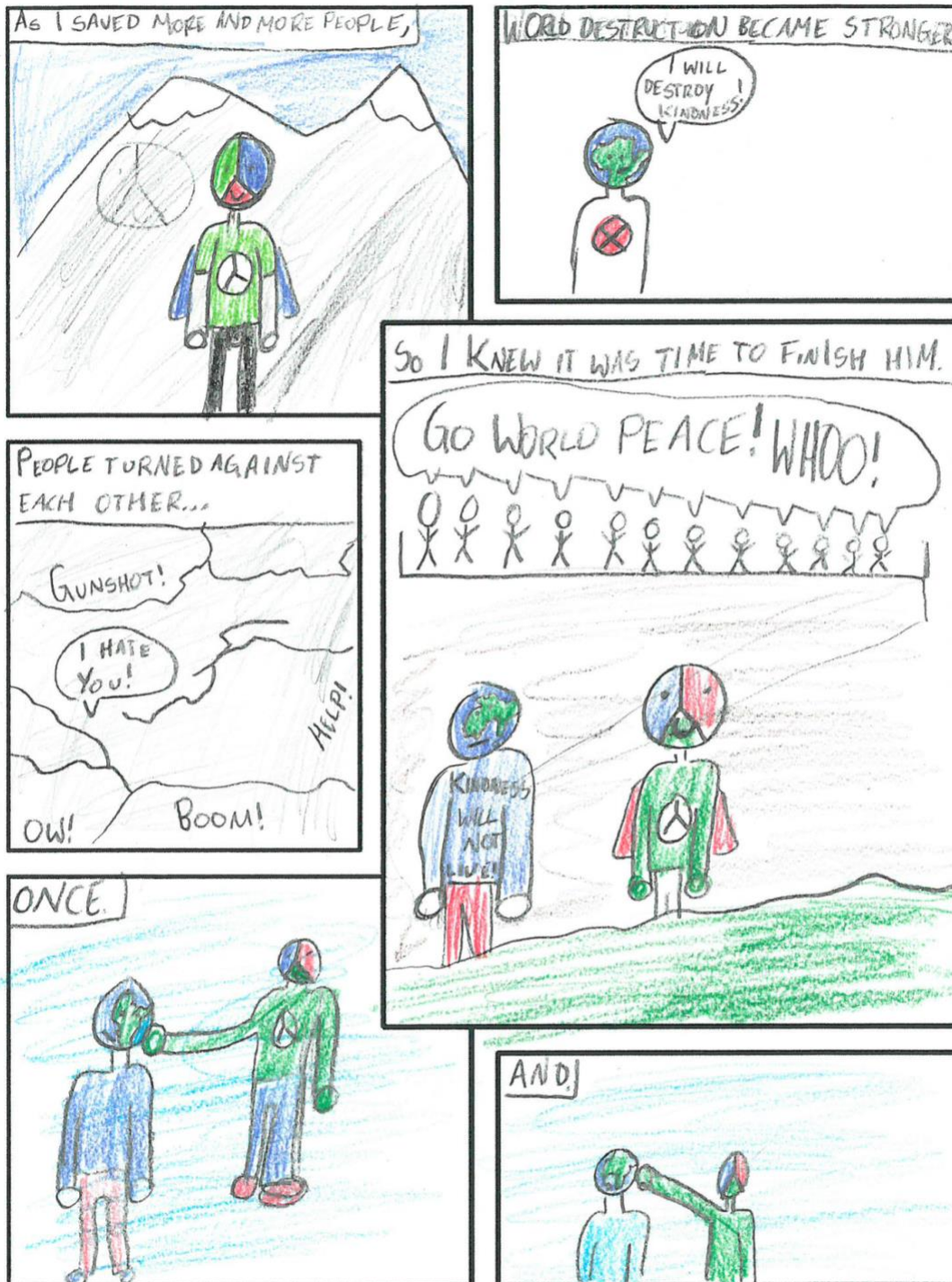
JOSHUA

FIGURE 15

Superhero origin story by Joshua (grade 5), p. 1



FIGURE 16
Superhero origin story by Joshua (grade 5), p. 2



“So many countries in the world are arguing and fighting over land. This can cause destruction and leave many people homeless.” This quote from Joshua’s planning document, and the comic he created, reflect issues that affected Joshua personally and the communities he identifies with. Joshua is a young Jewish child who rarely talked about Judaism in our classroom discussions of race, class, and injustice. But in Joshua’s comic, his religious and cultural identification took the forefront. (Indeed, he introduced himself in panel #2 [see Fig. 15] standing beside the Israeli flag.) Through his work, he led his instructors to become aware of some of the complexities he was grappling with—the ongoing hostilities between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Because of these conflicts, as Joshua highlighted, families have been displaced by the thousands and land ravaged by wars that have been occurring for decades. Joshua looked upon these incidents with bewilderment, emphasizing that these wars were brought on by the same people being hurt “protecting people from... well, themselves” (Fig. 15, panel 6).

It is also important to note that as Joshua, through his superhero guise, was doing the work of creating peace and saving us from ourselves, he stated: “As I saved more and more people, world destruction became stronger.” Joshua recognized that individual heroic actions were not enough, because he needed to decisively stop the instigator of the destruction, his nameless but pervasive villain. The sense of futility Joshua expressed neatly parallels one of the features of long-running superhero comics, the weight of continuity. How many times has Batman squared off against the Joker since they first clashed in April 1940? There can be no real resolution in serial storytelling which, like the real world, just keeps on going. The revolving door nature of the hero/villain dialectic can be resolutely felt in Joshua/World Peace’s sense of despair that saving people won’t stave off the world’s continuing decline. Ultimately, Joshua’s villain serves as a compass for the reader to recognize the limits of individual heroism and identify what could solve our worldwide issues—communal kindness.

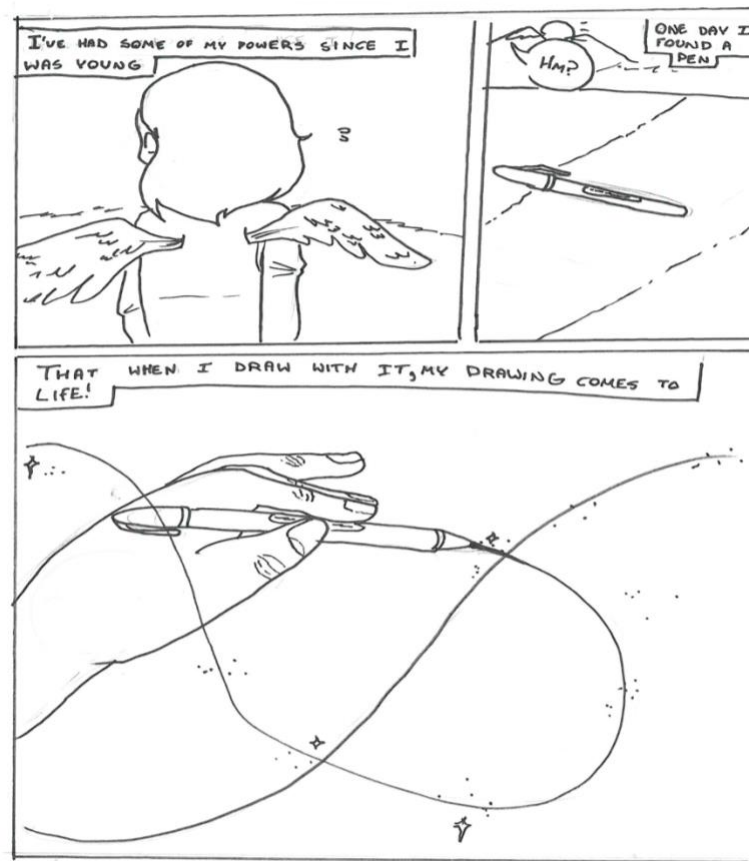
As we further explore Joshua’s text, splintering its reading, searching for what’s hidden within the gutters, we see the powerful premise that Joshua, a Jewish child, did not choose a side in this war. He sought peace for all. He chose to stop all people from destruction and, as stated in his planning document, to keep families and people together, rather than homeless or lost. The key to Joshua’s work is kindness and he uses his powers and advocacy for all, no matter their religious or cultural backgrounds. The colors of his hero’s mask come together like a literal kaleidoscope to reflect the countries he tasks with working to augur peace. Also kaleidoscopically, Joshua fractures

the importance people place on culture, religion, and nationality to divide, and instead forces us to focus on the suffering people are enduring, regardless of creed. Joshua wants world peace and, in that sense, his hero is attempting to represent all people because only people can heal the harm imparted by people. Crucially, his hero worked for peace even before gaining superpowers, showing Joshua's belief in the power of protest to elicit change.

ALICIA

Alicia, a 5th grade Mexican child, was often reserved but also a staunch advocate for combating injustice when that was the topic of classroom discussions. When asked if injustice existed in our world on her pre-study questionnaire, she stated “there is injustice in today’s world” and when asked how to combat it, she argued “being kind, standing up for the right thing and including others.” Unfortunately, Alicia was not interviewed at the end of the project because she was not a part of the focal classroom, but we share her comic below so that readers can practice reading kaleidoscopically. We invite readers to ask themselves

FIGURE 17
Superhero origin story by Alicia (grade 5), p. 1



questions (as researchers/practitioners) such as: What can be learned from this child's work about the child's interests and what matters to them? Where is Alicia trying to lead the reader? What is her goal? What is she showing us, telling us, and concealing? Which features of the comics medium is Alicia employing and to what effect? What differing realities (and sign systems) intersect to create meaning within her text? And how can the experience reflected in this comic inform our teaching and engagement with students like Alicia?

FIGURE 18
Superhero origin story by Alicia (grade 5), p. 2



FIGURE 19
Superhero origin story by Alicia (grade 5), p. 3



FIGURE 20
Superhero origin story by Alicia (grade 5), p. 4



FIGURE 21
Superhero origin story by Alicia (grade 5), p. 4



The comics created by Nellie, Lita, Joshua, and Alicia raise important questions about identity, epistemology, semiotics, aesthetics, representation, and critical literacy. In the following section, we attempt to synthesize our readings of the students' work with what we have written about the comics medium and its kaleidoscopic affordances. We do so with an eye towards a pedagogical practice centered in the lives of readers/writers, justice, and critical thinking/creation.

TAKEAWAYS: TEACHING COMICS KALEIDOSCOPICALLY

We return to the question: What do kaleidoscopic texts afford the acts of seeing and being seen? Our examples of student work illustrate how the comics medium is used by young authors to guide them and others toward new discoveries (compasses), and how the medium splinters reality into multifaceted arrays of refraction (kaleidoscopes). The comics medium invites creators to visually render counter-realities and overlay multiple perspectives. It lets creators put bodies (sometimes their own bodies) on the page. Comics creators re-story established lines of flight and do so with great attention to power, movement, and hybridity. Comics are used by their creators to challenge preconceived ideas, bring words to life, pose new questions, see through different lenses, demand more just realities, and expand in dimensions not yet within their imaginations. Comics transgress boundaries.

As we wrote in our introduction, comics often serve as compasses. They encourage readers to read between the panels and examine what is said/shown and what is left out. Comics also possess the textual potential to guide readers toward what they can become in a shared world, and also what our shared world can become. Characters like Spider-Girl, World Peace, Ms. Marvel, Sam Wilson, Charlie from *As the Crow Flies*, and Callie from *Drama* guide us to new readings of the self, and inspire questions like “Where do *I* fit in?” and “Who gets to be a hero? What makes a villain? Who requires saving? By whom?” Comics are everyday texts that let us move past the everyday limitations on who we are and can be. As Dr. Carol Tilley (2021) writes, comics are “springboards for having hard conversations and exploring new ideas and identities...Comics can be companions and confidants, guides to other worlds and ways of thinking. And with their visual content, comics can make those alternative worlds and new ideas more tangible and alive” (n.p.). This is the power of visually rich textual compasses. How might teachers harness that great power? *With great responsibility?*

Although beyond the purview of this essay, it is necessary to highlight the need for kaleidoscopic views of teaching before engaging with texts with students to arrive at a certain destination. For example, it is through a kaleidoscopic view of teaching, and in our case, students’ multimodal production in the classroom, that we may begin to unearth, complicate, and engage with the ideas and realities students, no matter their age, are grappling with. As Torres (2022) posits, student voices are often silenced because of age, perceived innocence, and their “lack of agency” as seen through adult eyes. But a kaleidoscopic view pushes us to “to make the hidden and unrecognized visible” (Royster, 2000). This can refer to the voices, actions, and lived realities of students and the ways those realities are manifested in our teaching/learning spaces.

As it relates to the selection of graphic texts and the introduction of kaleidoscopic reading and composing processes, we offer the following table as a way to think about engaging with comics as compasses and kaleidoscopes in practice. It is important to note that kaleidoscopic reading is a critical endeavor (attentive to power) that asks students to read within the gutters to engage with issues of justice. When planning or creating readings or activities rooted in this practice, educators need to focus attention on why we choose texts or create assignments for students and the intended destination(s) we wish for them to arrive at through multimodal justice-oriented work.

TABLE 1
Teaching Comics Kaleidoscopically: Possible Steps in a Flexible Process

STEPS IN THE INTERPRETIVE PROCESS	QUESTIONS ASKED / CONCEPTS INTRODUCED
TEXT SELECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In what ways does/might this text act as a compass for my students? ▪ What is the destination I want students to arrive at or work towards? What other destinations might they arrive at?
INTRODUCE KALEIDOSCOPIC READING (CRITICAL THINKING TOOL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What does it mean to read within the gutter? ▪ In what ways could the text relate to systemic issues, our society, or our lives? ▪ What differing realities (and sign systems) intersect to create meaning within the text?

<p>GUIDED READINGS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Where is the text leading us? What perspectives are we invited to see as the focus? Where is the meaning ambiguous? ▪ What is possible in the or from the text if applied from a different perspective? Are hybrid readings permissible? ▪ How do our world experiences shape our reading? ▪ How are words, images, and silences at play? How is timespace rendered?
<p>CREATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is my intention in creating x-y-z? ▪ How can I use all of my linguistic, cultural, and social resources to tell the story I wish to tell with differing entry points for differing readers? ▪ In what ways does the story I wish to tell highlight and complicate our shared humanity in complex ways? ▪ What information do I wish to depict with images? What information do I wish to depict with words? Which information do I wish to leave to the reader to infer? Will I leave room for hybrid readings? ▪ How do I want to represent time and space? ▪ How do I wish to give weight to (i.e., focalize) some perspectives over others?

Although the above table is articulated as linear steps, a kaleidoscopic reading or creative process need not be linear. These steps could be easily recombined and reconfigured, much like the panels on a comics page or the shards of a kaleidoscope. We hope they are.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING MULTIPLICITY

As practitioners, we find that comics, especially those rooted in justice and critique, allow us to “spend more time considering context than text” (Royster, 2000, p. 257) because of the work authors (including very young ones) do to center their critical knowledge in the stories they tell. As students multimodally layer their ways of knowing, being, and dissenting in their comics, they give their readers multiple entry points into their lives as young people, grappling with issues they are at times seen as too young to understand, yet not too young to feel the ramifications of. Taking hold of a compass by creating comics allows youth – especially systematically marginalized youth – to claim identities as knowers, authors, and artists, which in many cases are counter-identities to the ones ascribed to them by schools (e.g., Low, 2017b; Reid & Moses, 2021).

The need, especially in times of great social unrest, for kaleidoscopic readings and creations, for the centering of “hidden and unrecognized” readings (Royster, 2000, p. 73), is more important than ever. Comics – rooted in fragmentation and hybridity, image and text, presence and absence – invite justice-centered readings to flourish. Beyond mirrors, windows, and doors, comics allow authors to fashion telescopes, curtains, and compasses. These metaphors may be used flexibly; in fact, we encourage it. Doing so allows us to consider the comics medium’s capacity to refract time/space relations, to render double-consciousness on the page, to proclaim queer allyship while dispelling either/or dualities, and to re-story the sociopolitical worlds we move within, imagining resistance as counter-reality. As a metaphor, the kaleidoscope is durable and flexible enough to do all at once, addressing the complexities of lived experience in the margins. It is, as we have said, the powerful possibility of the kaleidoscope to fracture dominant perceptions of reality, and to locate in those fragments new and powerful perspectives that foment critical thinking and actioning.

Isn’t it time for a more kaleidoscopic view of teaching that makes room for multiversal realities (including those concealed in the proverbial margins and gutters)? Isn’t it time to prioritize (con)texts that, like comics, emphasize hybridity, liminality, and multiperspectivity? Failure to do so only reifies the single reality, the single reading, the single image, the single way of being—to the detriment of systemic change. Let us rather embrace the multiplicity and beautiful ambiguity of the kaleidoscope.

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