

Special Issue

# **IMAGE AND TEXT: CRITICAL AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE USE OF COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

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## **COMICS: YES, AND**

From the age of seven, I knew there was something special about the comics medium. As a literacy scholar and educator, questions of what makes this medium so attractive for both reading and composing continue to persist. While I did not encounter any comics at school, I would occasionally happen upon a chapter book about a character that I loved in the school book fair (Spiderman and Batman come to mind). Comics never seemed like part of the classroom routine or like a valid and welcome form of literacy – in fact, my attempts to craft comics at school were often taken up by teachers and deemed a troublesome distraction. As Smith (2011) noted, comics are not a focus of “easy” study (p. 110) for a number of reasons, including the drive to pair them up with more acceptable forms of reading and writing. Scholars point to the complexity of these texts through visual models of cognitive processing (Cohn, 2020), as well as their depth as literary materials (Kukkonen, 2013). Yet, limiting approaches to these texts has a long social and political history (Wertham, 1954) that still (mis)informs resistance in classroom spaces.

As a young reader growing up, I knew little of this debate. As a teacher, I saw both the appeal of comics for my students, as well as the lack of comics in classroom libraries at the time. Fortunately,

a resident comics shop would pass through my small town every now and then, popping up and then disappearing like a promise of an open world of reading materials. Otherwise, I found what I was looking for at the local pharmacy and grocery store magazine shelf.

Decades later, I would become a middle school teacher. Armed with a graduate-level knowledge of canonical texts, I began my teaching career with the unspoken and unconscious agenda of continuing this school-based focus on particular authors and particular texts – namely, White male names I had learned to earn my degree. Soon, I realized that, much like me as a young person, there were groups of children in my classroom who would steal away for a few moments and make comics (namely, Manga and Anime-inspired creations). Then comics began to enter popular media more and more, thanks largely to the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

I soon found myself at a decision point of pedagogically embracing the materials that I continued to enjoy in my home reading life as part of sanctioned and “worthy” reading for classroom use. Like Mjolnir bestowing itself to a capable character of Marvel lore, I embraced comics and continue to do so. When I began my career as a university instructor, I found myself further inspired by authors like Raina Telgemeir and Jerry Craft, authors and artists who envision comics as places where relevant questions can be asked and where realistic and fantasy elements can collide, and where literacy can be seen as an imaginative, inclusive, and invigorating set of practices that are not nearly so bounded as I once thought.

Invited to take on a special issue for *Study & Scrutiny*, I, along with co-editors Crag Hill and Shelly Unsicker-Durham, searched for scholars to center comics texts in both empirical and critical work. We are so pleased to offer a robust issue, complete with two interviews, eight articles, and academic and trade book reviews by Terri Suico and others. For us, comics are valid and valuable texts that can be enjoyed by young readers and older readers alike. What is more, comics take on a range of topics and stories. As author/artist George O’Connor wrote in the introduction to *Using Graphic Novels in the English Arts Classroom* (Boerman-Cornell & Kim, 2020), “Nowadays, comics do not have to be funny,” though these books have been often regarded as “silly kids’ stuff.” Comics are spaces for stories to be told through both words and images – indeed, all kinds of stories from authors and artists who arrive at the medium from a range of experiences and backgrounds. Sometimes comics are the product of a single artist and author, and sometimes they are the textual site of collaboration. Embracing the term “comics,” I tend to use this word as a catch-all for the

medium, although “comics” tends to refer to shorter serial works, and “graphic novel” is often used by publishers to denote a longer, stand-alone, or collected work in comics form.

## IN THIS ISSUE

Contributors in this issue have taken up a number of questions, and there is still room for further conversation and classroom storytelling about comics. Scholars and teachers considered questions of how educators align themselves with the counter-narrative of comics as texts worthy of analysis and exploration, and how they send this message to critics of the medium; considerations of the ways that comics/graphic novels sit within the context of antiracist and social justice-oriented pedagogy; and close examination of the wide range of graphic novels and comic books that are being published, including attention to titles and authors that might not be as well known to teachers and researchers.

At the outset, we present interviews with comics scholar and creator Nick Sousanis, whose graphic novel in dissertation form, *Unflattening* (2015), continues to serve as an example of how the comics medium can be employed in a theoretically complex and aesthetically pleasing approach to textual and instructional questions. Sousanis speaks, in particular, to finding one’s style in comics, as well as approaching classroom instruction with a focus on making. We then feature an interview with comics scholar Stergios Botzakis, in which the educator’s history with comics is explored, along with notable works, including popular titles, and a discussion of the current nature of the research world relative to literacy and comics studies. Both interviewees share resources with readers, including their own websites which can be mined further for resources and comics/graphic novel titles.

Ashley Dallacqua leads an empirical focus on comics in the classroom with an article entitled, “Reading When the World is on Fire: Teaching with Comics and Other Multimodal Text Sets.” In this piece, Dallacqua draws on personal experience as an educator who uses comics in literacy to work with a classroom teacher to examine the types of texts that are valued as part of classroom instruction in an action research project located at a public school located in the Southwest of the United States. Dallacqua and co-author/co-researcher, Amanda, documented engagement from six students with two multimodal text sets. Amanda also spoke to the beliefs and practices that guided decisions about texts and approaches to include.

Next, contributors Danielle Kachorsky and Stephanie Reid take up a look at comics with, “Teaching with Comics for the First Time: Traditional Literacy and Non-Traditional Texts in Content Area Classrooms.” These contributors begin with a look at the history of comics in the

classroom, including pushback on the medium, before taking a close look at the ways that secondary teachers include comics and graphic novels in instruction. Through a qualitative case study approach, Kachorsky and Reid co-construct a portrait of practice at a science and technology-focused public charter school in the Southwestern United States in both a Science and English classroom context, providing a helpful interdisciplinary perspective.

In “Experiencing Historical Fiction Graphic Novels to Teach Social Studies: Preservice Teachers Learn Why and How,” Barbara McClanahan expands on the interdisciplinary/genre-crossing affordances of comics and graphic novels, and considers the experiences of preservice teachers in engaging with historical fiction graphic novels through the implementation of a literature circles approach. The information McClanahan provides includes an examination of comics and graphic novels in social studies education, as well as the ways that preservice teachers made their way through graphic novels both in terms of reading materials and when thinking about historical accuracy.

Rounding out the empirical studies, Jo Ann Higginbotham, Laura Anderson, and Shane Brown take up the task of gathering and analyzing the opinions of school librarians who use comics and graphic novels in their article, “Perspectives from Local Media Specialists and ELA Instructors on Graphic Novels in the Middle Grades Curriculum: Yay or Nay?” These researchers employed a survey to pose the questions: In what ways do local media specialists and English Language Arts (ELA) instructors use them in their classrooms or other educational settings? If instructors use graphic novels, how do their students respond to them? Have they experienced criticisms concerning the use of graphic novels as texts worthy of analysis and exploration in the classroom? Finally, what is the connection between research and the use of graphic novels in the classroom? Taking a qualitative approach, Higginbotham, Anderson, and Brown present themes from fourteen responses along with a review of the literature related to each of these questions.

Beginning the critical examinations, David Low and Francisco Torres engage in an analysis of both published texts and comics created by schoolchildren in their article, “Comics as Literary Compasses and Kaleidoscopes: A Pedagogical Essay in Fragments.” The authors build upon Rudine Sims Bishop’s literary metaphors of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors by considering the ways that comics serve as compasses and kaleidoscopes that allow readers/composers/educators to center justice in the storying process. Low and Torres note the particular affordances that comics

bring for readers and composers and expand on the possibilities of what teachers can do when carefully and critically reading comics.

Then, in “Through the Space and Time of Educational Experiences: Examining the Chronotopic Landscape in *New Kid*” Holly Riesco and Megan Grizzle employ the Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope to closely consider the ways that time and action occurs in Jerry Craft’s award-winning 2019 graphic novel. These authors note the commentary that Craft provides in the text in terms of counternarrative and representation of Black characters, and dive into particular moments in the narrative. This critical approach links with the multimodal nature of comics and graphic novels, as well as the multimodal literacy practices that youth engage in as part of their literacy lives.

In “Theory-of-Mind Thinking as a Tool for Professional Learning: A Sociocognitive Complexity Reading of the Graphic Novel *Queen of the Sea*,” Julianna Kershen draws attention to Dylan Meconis’s work, beginning with a look at the text itself, as well as an overview of the position comics and graphic novels occupy in classroom instruction. Kershen calls for a “slow reading” (Smith & Pole, 2018, p. 175) of multimodal texts, and draws upon theory-of-mind thinking to consider the question of how a reading *Queen of the Sea* with a sociocognitive complexity perspective (i.e., theory-of-mind thinking) shapes the author/researcher’s reading experience.

Concluding this section, Sara Villaneuva considers how teachers can use comics like Marvel’s *Ms. Marvel* to reframe stereotypes and limiting constructions of adolescence in “Kapow! Bam! Wham! Shattering Adolescent Stereotypes and Promoting Social Change Making in Comic Books.” Villaneuva draws up a modified version of Petrone et al.’s (2015) youth lens analysis to approach *Ms. Marvel*, volumes 1 and 2, critically, and identifies four themes: (a) adults serving as guides, (b) adults and authority, (c) the *careless* and *reckless* teen, and (d) adolescents as social changemakers. Villaneuva provides relevant and text-driven commentary on critical consideration of characters, as well as a call to social action for adolescents.

## A FINAL CALL

As these contributors indicate, comics are a “yes” answer for curricular focus, critical study, and analytical reading and pedagogy – “and” an invitation for more attention to a wide range of texts and voices in the literacy and literature-focused classroom in grades K-12 and beyond. The popularity that comics and graphic novels are presently enjoying is a matter of warm welcome for me, but my

hunch is that, within the scope of deficit framing and increasingly aggressive attention on intervention-based approaches, the debate about comics in the classroom is far from over.

Thankfully, a number of scholar/teacher voices in cognitive science, literacy studies, literature fields, interdisciplinary studies, arts education, and comics studies have spoken and are continuing to speak to the sheer power and variety found in this unique medium. While advocating for comics as a replacement to all texts is hardly a goal, or even a healthy concept of reading and composing, the place of comics has become more solidified over the past 10-15 years (Dunst, 2021).

It is my hope that this special attention inspires further conversation and engagement around the texts and theories that are treated here. I further hope that this medium continues to grow with many more texts to come as authors and creators, including those from historically minoritized communities, find voice and creativity in comics as inspiration textual sites for future stories to be shared.

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