

BLOOD (AND OTHER THINGS) IN THE GUTTER: DECONSTRUCTING MCCLLOUDS
“PLEASURE IN CLOSURE” FOR INTERSECTIONAL EXPLORATION

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Darren DeFrain, Committee Chair

Jean Griffith, Committee Member

Chinyere Okafor, Committee Member

DEDICATION

To the coven

When we are old men, we want to see new, young comic artist whose work is taken as seriously as any novel... On the other hand, the comic books are in their own neat, kitschy, junky world that is unique to comics. We like that too. We like that it's outlaw. You can't repair comics, you can't hang them in a museum and say, "This belongs next to the Mona Lisa." It's the whole squirrelly factor, like early punk: There is the scene that this is bad, and we want it to be bad.

-Gilbert Hernandez

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אני מודה לך

ABSTRACT

This research explores gutter theory in comics and graphic novels. While many regard Scott McCloud's theoretical work as the gold standard, others such as Thierry Groenstein, Theresa Tensuan, and Hannah Miodrag believe that his "pleasure in closure" is too easy of an explanation into how we read and analyze these multimodal works.

My research concludes that the gutter is a space where the reader's active imagination takes form and dismantles the captivation of motion pictures and traditional text novels. Utilizing the works of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*, and several Latinx comics including los bros Hernandez' *Love and Rockets*, Jessica Abel's *La Perdida*, and *Virus Tropical* by web comic, Power Paola, we see that the gutter is a place lacking closure; rather an offering of possibilities.

PREFACE

I chose to study comics and graphic novels in greater depth after taking Dr. Darren Defrain's intro course. It was one of the few courses offered by the English department at Wichita State University that featured works published in this century. It also featured works written by people who were not white men.

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Blood (and Other Things) in the Gutter: Deconstructing McCloud’s “Pleasure in Closure” for Intersectional Exploration

There is Always a There There

The gutter space in comics and graphic novels is one of the most under-researched yet fruitful components of this complex literary genre. With so much of our attention focused on addressing text and assessing illustrations, it can be easy for the thin strips of usually empty space between frames to go unnoticed. Book reviewers rarely waste their time on praise for the limited areas between the words and pictures, and readers don’t often gush about the unremarkable void of the gutter. Yet its necessity, its ever-present framing and contextualizing function, affects any work in a profound way, making the liminal space one of the most critically important components of the graphic novel genre.

The “nothingness” of the gutter is where structuralist systems crumble, intersectional possibilities are theoretically endless, and the active component of reader response is ignited in a manner unique to the form of comics. The literal act of moving our eyes across a page past a white lane of paper makes the graphic novel experience unlike that of film, television, video games, or other narrative media. This phenomenological power allows the gutter to exist both as a visual element and a means of inviting interpretation. The word “space” has many definitions in visual art, and its denotative fluidity gives it a particular power in theory and criticism. This array of meanings hints at the richness in a comic or graphic novel’s gutters, and in this case the word means both the visually blank areas of a design and the practice of mentally extrapolating meaning from a work of graphic art. Graphic novel researcher and theorist Thierry Groensteen speaks candidly about making a big deal about “nothing” in his prominent *Système de la bande*

dessinée, or *The System of Comics*, a text that is widely considered to be the foremost primer on comics and graphic novels outside of the United States.

Maybe you will say to me the term ‘gutter’ (blanc) lends itself metaphorically. We use it to designate “that-which-is-not-represented-but-which-the-reader-cannot-help-but-infer”.

It is therefore a virtual, and take note that virtual is not abandoned to the fantasy of each reader. It is a forced virtual, an identifiable absence. The gutter is simply the symbolic site of this absence. (112)

Groensteen argues that the gutter--or *blanc* in French--enforces a mandatory imagination for the reader. In comparison, films are captivating (in a pejorative sense) and permit the viewer to remain passive as an observer. In the case of the traditional novel, the reader is similarly rendered an inanimate participant and as Groensteen puts it unable to “abandon” the medium for imaginative purposes. Some exceptions to this notion have arisen, of course, in the instance of concrete poetry or literature with a penchant for visual experimentation. These examples operate somewhat outside of the expected traditions of the novel form, however, which places them nonetheless in a different category than the graphic novel, with its inherent collusion of imagery and text. Frank Miller, prolific comic and graphic novel author of such titles as *300*, *Sin City*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* once explained, “The illustrations are not really illustrations of what’s going on. The narration isn’t really describing what’s going on, either. There’s a gap there, and somewhere in that gap, is reality” (37). Another tradition in visual art pedagogy is the concept of “negative space,” or areas of a composition that are left untouched, but that do not exactly function as “blank” by virtue of their role in contributing to the look of a completed piece. The gutter in a graphic novel is a perfect example of this undrawn but meaningful aspect of a work, which here is as important visually as it is critically.

The narratology of comics and graphic novels requires us to examine the entire form: illustrations, sequential art, text, and gutter space. Graphic novel criticism often focuses on limited reads, either prioritizing the visual art or essentially ignoring it in favor of a traditional literary examination. Wolf Werner addresses this conundrum in his essay *Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and Its Applicability to the Visual Arts*,

“...narrativity” in discussion of pictures is still either reference by means of a visual representation to some literary narrative or the representation of any kind of action in a picture as opposed to a static, descriptive images, but hardly ever the representation of a story proper. (180)

Multiple narratological elements are compounded to create the lexical and grammatical structure of comics and graphic novels. When we receive them as one form, with all of the complexity and density that this requires, a deeper read can emerge from the relationships that are created. Like the “reality” in the gap that Frank Miller described, the confluence of media in comics can create a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Throughout *The System of Comics*, Groensteen boldly opposes the deconstruction of comics into separate forms (art, words, other), opting for the reader to employ an arthrological approach. “The neologism ‘arthrology,’ from the Greek for ‘articulation,’ is specific to two kinds of panel interrelations” (Evans 158). Groensteen argues for us employ a breakdown of parts from spatial and sequential logic. With this practice the reader can draw from multiple parts to comprehend the entirety of what the comic and graphic novel form has to offer.



Figure 2

Hey Wait! by Jason-- this selection of panel is an example in which we see the vitality of employing Groensteen's arthrology. To read panel to panel, or text to illustration, we get a segmented or incomplete version of the event. Arthrology gives us a translinear view of sequential art.

Groensteen further explicates the role of the gutter along with word balloons in the category of restricted arthrology, or breakdowns of parts within a breakdown of parts. In the essay *Invisible Art, Invisible Planes, Invisible People* Evan Thomas talks about the magic of the void: "--so easily dismissed in the French as a *blanc*--in the generation meaning in comics. The gutter, in fact, contributes an entire plane of meaning to comics that employ it" (157). The aforementioned absence that Groensteen described as being an essential component of comics and graphic novels, exclusive to the form, is a part of the arthrology and just as essential to the page as the words and pictures that we expect to see when we flip through the pages. This expectation

reveals a certain oddity in focusing on the gutter: it's often ignored or unnoticed, yet without it an entire book would function in a dramatically different manner.

Understanding the science and phenomena behind how we read or interpret comics and graphic novels continues to lag. As *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman puts it “comics fly below the radar” (Sable 1). Unfortunately graphic novel criticism isn't always accepted as legitimate. Because this is a relatively new medium in comparison to other genres in literary study, very few foundational texts exist providing the theoretical framework necessary for criticism and analysis of comics and graphic novels. Certainly Groensteen's *System of Comics*, and several other works that will be mentioned later have had influence, but they are relatively new publications circulated within the last 10 years, while this medium is still initially asserting itself as an accepted genre of 21st century academia.

One theoretical text appears well before the trend and is cognizant of Groensteen's arthrology even before Groensteen published *The System of Comics* in English. Scott McCloud, born in 1960, is an American cartoonist and comic theorist and the author of *Understanding Comics*, published in 1994 (McCloud 1). Crafted as a comic book about comic books, it provides a history of the genre, a cultural examination, and most significantly, it provides comics and graphic novels their first theoretical analysis. “The significance of McCloud's book is primarily rooted in the excellent presentation and communication of the subject matter, but also in that *Understanding Comics* has evolved into a common point of reference in comics research” (Christiansen and Magnussen 13). The canonical weight of McCloud in comics and graphic novel criticism is prodigious; even when scholars outright disagree with McCloud--myself included--he serves as some base for their argument.

Despite the growing pool of scholarship on comics and graphic novels, McCloud's notoriety remains relatively unblemished. In her text *Comics and Language. Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*, Hannah Miodrag is outright declarative on the problem with elevating McCloud's work: "McCloud is widely cited as the founding father of the field though it is something acknowledged that he is a distinctly second-rate theoretician" (Baetens 2003: np), "reverent allegiance to his seminal primer has more consistently seen it elevate[d] [...] holy writ" (6). Miodrag, with the assistance of theorist Jan Baeten's acerbic observation make an important point that we need to question the credibility and value of McCloud's work if comics and graphic novels are to organically progress into a foundational academic genre.

Despite Miodrag, Baeten, and others' criticisms of McCloud's credentials, the bulk of *Understanding Comics* is not at fault. If the text remained as a primer of sorts for scholars and stuck to just the definitions, history, and explanations of the visual iconography and its the effects within comics, McCloud would most likely be impervious to critique. However when the concept of the gutter space comes up in "Chapter 3: Blood in the Gutter" we see the strongest reaction from scholars and critics. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud uses the term "closure," similar to the Gestalt psychological theory of the mind's desire for a unified whole, as he discusses the gutter space.

The phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called closure. In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience. (63)

Without too much interpretation, this theoretical approach leaves minimal reader participation between panels; the mind's ability to automatically fill in the gaps without effort describes the reader as a passive participant. Yet McCloud points out that the pleasure we derive from reading

comics comes from actively closing the gap between frame to frame, as he states “Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them in a single idea” (66). It’s confusing to pinpoint exactly what role “human imagination” plays in McCloud’s gutter theory with his concept of closure. If the mind is automatically doing all the heavy lifting, what role does human imagination play at all? McCloud concedes that “Nothing is seen between the two panels but [...] something must be there” (67) and acknowledges that comics offer the reader infinite opportunity to explore the gutter when he states in his conclusion, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” (67). But he then retracts this statement completely by reaffirming the reader passivity of closure: “closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). McCloud wants us to think of comics and graphic novels as a simple algebraic equation, $a + b = c$, an Occam’s razor of genre. However, despite what we know about the mind’s desire and willingness to connect the dots and create closure, it creates a much too simplistic view of comics and graphic novels.

McCloud too quickly broaches the concept of closure and leaves it behind, failing to fully explore the complexity of how the gutter functions. Jared Gardner, author of *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty First Century Storytelling*--and self-professed “Gutter Geek”--goes into a greater detail hypothesizing on McCloud’s speculations that have so prominently shaped how we look at comics and graphic novels. As Gardner describes, “Comics bring together different semantic systems (figural, textual, symbolic) into a crowded field where meaning is both collaborative and competitive--between images, between frames, and between reader and writer” (xi). Up and down panels, in and out of frames, throughout the gutter: there is a deluge of semiotic information for the reader to process. Gardner concludes in an assessment of

closure, “Even in the most simplistic narratives, the reader imaginatively fills in this space with the ‘missing’ action” (xi). How active the reader is in reading comics remains under debate; it is an “uneasy negotiation” rationalizing the role of human imagination (3). If the mind is *not* seamlessly fusing images together in motion pictures, it aggravates McCloud’s theory that readers are so easily blending panels together to create closure.

If we are to theoretically examine the concept of closure in regards to all sequential art--comics and graphic novels existing under this umbrella term--McCloud’s foundation becomes less solid. American cartoonist Will Eisner states that in “In sequential art the artist must from the outset secure control of the reader’s attention and dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative.” The mass market and traditionally low printing cost of comics has, as Eisner describes, been both an “obstacle and an asset.” The form of comics and graphic novels have created a new genre to “which the most important obstacle to surmount is the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander” (*Comics and Sequential Art*, 40). This wandering (as both obstacle and asset) is a licence for readers to pick up at will and explore at their own devices--the gutter giving the reader the perfect opportunity. McCloud claims that we gain “pleasure” from creating closure but this defies Eisner’s ideas about wandering.

Returning to Groensteen’s arthrology, when we analyze comics, the gutter cannot be regarded as a secondary space or a mere byproduct of technique. It is essential to recall that this medium is a sum of its parts and it’s counterproductive to divide components in analysis. Comics scholar Hillary L. Chute emphasizes the particular value of the gutter space to this medium, “While all media forms are, to an extent, framing, as in its narrative movements across printed pages, comics claim and use the space surrounding its material, marked frames in a way that, say, paintings cannot” (*Graphic Women* 8). While it’s easy to misread the gutter as a simply a

practical means of arranging images, its role as a critical facet of the art itself opens the door to a rich mode of criticality, one which understands the liminal to be not only beneficial to artistic vision, but inseparable from the elements that remain the most visible. McCloud's closure has the potential to hasten or erase any possible exploration of the gutter, eliminating any chance for subjectivity to positively influence the reader experience and denigrates the medium to a plot-driven, surface-value experience.

Not surprisingly, a number of feminist and postcolonial scholars have responded favorably to the rejection of McCloud's gutter theory. In her article *Comic Visions and Revisions in the Works of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi*, Theresa M. Tensuan postulates that the gutter is a place in which narrative exists and does not exist; the reader is encouraged to explore themes outside the literal contextual frames.

[A] reader has to insert herself in order to transform the separate frames into a coherent narrative framework; the multiplicity of aesthetic strategies that a comic artist can employ creates narrative trajectories and tensions that move beyond the parameters of conventional narratives or scripts in which a plot is mapped out along a one-directional arc of conflict and resolution. (949)

Tensuan furthers her argument by accusing McCloud of "retreat[ing] from the radical possibilities he opens up in his analysis" (950). The passage of time, words unspoken, the nuances of translation, or the intangible experiential aspects of trauma are all just some examples of "radical possibilities" the gutter space contains.

Michael A. Chaney takes a more visceral direction with his interpretive view of the gutter and compares it to wounds. Chaney likens the panels to flesh torn open, exposing the true messy

guts of the work, which paradoxically consists of sterile nothingness. In this sense, Chaney equates the reader to a diagnostician:

As a result of this approbation and assessment, a critical consensus has emerged emphasizing the unique subtle procedures the comic form makes possible for the representation of multiple yet simultaneous timescapes and competing yet coincident ways of knowing, seeing, and being (*Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* 5).

As a doctor would make a mental tally of a patient's conditions before exploratory surgery, the reader is constantly aware of the total mein of a work as they explore a comic's gutter space "wound." Thus, Eisner's fear (admittedly, one he also regarded as an asset) that the reader's eye and imagination was bound to wander when reading comics is perhaps one of the most engaging components of reading comics and graphic novels. What Tensuan, Chaney, and growing school of comic scholars (myself included) argue is that McCloud's concept of closure is too quick, too simple, and too easy. It relies heavily on the myth of the persistence of vision, which is just that, a myth. Readers of comics and graphic novels are actively engaged with the text and utilize the gutter to transmute meaning, which is especially relevant in poststructural critiques. States Richard Harrison, comic and graphic novel readers have a unique "authority" of active interpretation that comes from maneuvering through a text as opposed to being led.

It is the energy of the leaper that animates the comic--the reader is the one with the greater power and the great responsibility to make the story come to life. The reader exercises that power by jumping from something over something again, thus, the argument goes, giving motion to the something. And the very nothingness the reader has

leapt is the precondition of the miracle that connects the somethings on either side of it into a story (60).

The jumping Harrison describes is crucial for a poststructural read of comics because it allows us to focus on where the reader chooses to jump. The nothingness is not actually nothing, but what the reader has actively chosen to make of the work in response.

A prime and early example of the gutter space working as space for intersectional exploration occurs in George Herriman's prolific newspaper comic strip *Krazy Kat*, which ran in various publications from 1913 to 1944. Every student getting their feet wet in the history of comics and graphic novels learns about Herriman, partly because it's so iconic (it's clearly the foundation for the power dynamics of *Tom and Jerry*, *Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner*, and "Itchy and Scratchy" of *The Simpson's* fame) but also because of its remarkable socio-political commentary. "The structure of the strip was built on reversals: a cat loves a mouse, a dog protects a feline, and, at a time when anti-miscegenation laws held sway in most of the United States, a black animal yearns for a white one" (Bellot). To further complicate matters, *Krazy's* gender varies throughout the strip, and Herriman never confirmed or denied *Krazy's* sexuality or gender. The genius of the work exists in the subversiveness; does *Krazy* love Ignatz because he yearns to be accepted by white society? Does Ignatz throw bricks (a symbol of violent love) because he loves *Krazy* but cannot act upon these feelings due to the south's anti-miscegenation laws? Or was the queering of the characters eschewed from any contemporary analysis due to an era when homosexuality and gender nonconformity would almost certainly lead to charges of obscenity?



Figure 3

Krazy Kat by George Herriman pushed the boundaries of readers' agencies and the role of imagination in text.

Before diving into Herriman's gutter, there are a few more elements to consider. Despite working in New York City, Herriman was enamoured with the American west and based *Krazy Kat* in the real life Coconino County, Arizona. Coupled with anthropomorphic creatures weighing in on race, sexuality, and gender, placing his characters in a Dali-esque surrealist fantasy environment locates human values in the objective world rather than in the relative world of culture (Amiran 62). The language of *Krazy Kat* also has a surrealist, puzzling, DADA-like quality to it; Hannah Miodrag posits that Herriman crafts his own personal lexicon as a distraction to the reader.

The quirkiness of Herriman's language, the humor of its proliferations, is effectively bestowed by the very rules violated. Though language's structural rules prove easy to breach, the sustained sense that they are being breached points to the existence of an organizing system that enables this sort of disruptive communication. (25)

Language for Miodrag in *Krazy Kat* would be a deterrent from the brutal issues that Herriman could not feasibly discuss in print. And thus we have the gutter. Herriman left so much subversive ambiguity up to the reader because there was no other option. All of the components were left for the reader to put together in the gutter. *Krazy Kat*'s "system" is therefore easy to see, and many critics agree on a limited set of elements and techniques that compose Herriman's work.

First is an extremely efficient and tense drawing style, with nervous etchings that may seem clumsy but which perfectly fit the tone and the spirit of the characters as well as of the story. Second, an experimental language that blends English, Spanish, French and sometimes Latin words with a permanent curiosity for all kinds of plays, ranging from puns to phonetic English over numerous typographical pseudo-errors. Third, a properly Surrealist treatment of setting and props, both distortable and changeable at will. Fourth, a sense of psychological profundity that no other comic had ever achieved; a completely new and paradoxical mixture of the very trivial and the utmost sophisticated. And finally a systematic play of page lay-out that managed to keep the series fresh during more than thirty years. (Baeten 120)

If eyebrows were ever raised and questions ever asked, Herriman could easily respond that one was reading too into it, that it was merely a silly comic strip about a cat in love with a mouse, and a mouse who inconsequentially is in love with throwing bricks back at the cat. However, as Jared Gardner points out, "The gaps between the panels that the brick both represents and transcends are made meaningful, both sides fulfilled by miscommunication that is also a perfect correspondence" (26). What happens in those gaps, or what happens when we "read too into" anything is the power of the gutter.

Another fault with McCloud's theoretical approach is his generalization of the gutter space as a literal blank space. This assumption devalues the defining factor of sequential art. Perhaps I'm airing the side of theatrics here, but McCloud's pleasure in closure crumbles the rock upholding the Lascaux paintings and unthreads the fibers of *The Bayeux Tapestry*. Comics and graphic novelists are cognizant that their readers are utilizing the gutter for imaginative purposes. While traditionally, or typically, the gutter is blank or rather, a negative feature for the panels to lay center stage, some comics and graphic novels are actively drawing our attention to this space with illustration, collage, or text. While there is a multitude of reasons for this aesthetic choice, think of this clouding of the gutter space as a large blinking road sign, signifying to you, the reader, "mind yourself."

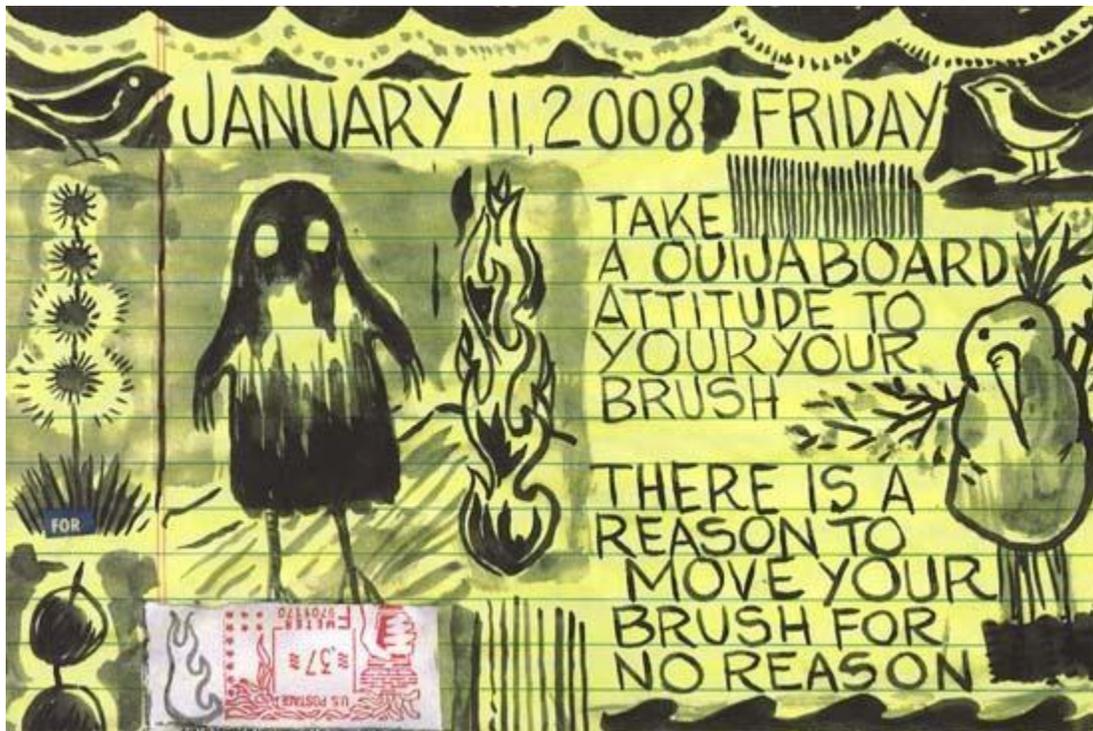


Figure 4

One Hundred Demons Lynda Barry's gutter space defies the traditional conception of the gutter as a blank space.

Several comic and graphic novelists employ the gutter as a space for translation. At first glance, it might be easy to assume that this is done for convenience sake. Characters will converse or think in restricted orthology and the foreign text will thusly be translated into the narrative text typically in the gutter. Consequently, with panels, illustration, dialogue, and narration, there is hardly any remaining territory to place translated text. What any polyglot-- or anyone possessing basic foreign language skills-- can easily identify with these translations is that often characters' dialogues and the gutter text are not align with one another. Languages will never match identically, but comics and graphic novels have the ability to widen the gap to create a new chaotic space for linguistic dissonance and language possibilities.

The Dominican-American author, Junot Diaz-- who has often attributed los bros Hernandez' *Love and Rockets* as one of his major influences-- has described learning English as a "miserable experience" and a "brutal slog" (Asymptote). This brutal slog, (the clashing of his native Spanish with the enforced English of a compulsory Reagan-era New Jersey education) is perhaps better conceptualized as Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of linguistic terrorism featured prominently in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa work explored the uncomfortableness and rigidity of forcing two opposing languages upon one another and examines two texts that employ the gutter as a space for translation.

Both *La Perdida* by Jessica Abel and the *Love and Rockets* series by los Bros Hernandez feature latinx characters interacting with speakers of varying levels of English and Spanish-- the result is often restricted orthology with translation in either speech balloons or featured as subtitles below in the gutter. *Virus Tropical* by Power Paola, originally published in Spanish, has been translated in English due to its popularity. The graphic novel features examples of varying dialects of Spanish for English reader when the titular Paola relocates to different hispanophone

nations. In summation, all of the novel featuring translation in the gutter space is leaves us, the reader, to wonder for whom is the linguistic rigidity posed toward?

Though various comics and graphic novels employ the gutter space as a means to suss out the complexity of translation, Latin American and Latinx comics are especially significant to this genre. In his article, “Virus tropical: presencia y relevancia del personaje autobiográfico femenino en la novela gráfica colombiana,” Felipe Gómez Gutiérrez argues that Latin American societies have relied heavily on pictorial writing, dating back to pre-Columbian civilizations and the implementation or insertion of “letter writing” was for European conquerors to the continent (93). Modern comics, though, are inherently written in their own hybridized language that relies heavily on multimodal (arthrological elements). Thusly, the act of translation is not necessarily transmuting the text, but rather a component of the text itself.

Abel’s *La Perdida* (which translates to “loss” in English), is a semi-autobiographical account of a young woman’s experiences living and traveling in Mexico as a means to connect with her paternal Mexican heritage. The narrative presents perhaps the shakiest hold on the Spanish language as Carla, the protagonist, does not speak fluent Spanish at the text’s beginning; comparatively though, to other American tourist characters, her grasp on the language is stronger and more developed. In time, as Carla immerses herself in the culture and the language develops, all the while simultaneously realizing that her Mexican identity is unattainable, the translation becomes more accurate and precise. Abel creates a space for Carla to explore her her mestiza identity and the deeply personal, ever evolving non-static liminal qualities of the characters relationship with language in the gutter.

The same exploration with language occurs routinely throughout los bros Hernandez *Love and Rockets* series, which ran heavily throughout the 1980s and is still an ongoing

publication. Many comics and graphic novelists, Abel included, attribute influence to Jamie and Gilbert's work. Gilbert Hernandez' 2010 *High Soft Lisp* features the character of Fritz, covering her high school days, relationships, forays into adulthood, sexual exploration, and careers in psychology and a B-movie star. Los Bros Hernandez, cognizant that they were writing comics for a predominantly white readership, conveyed the unspeakable, and equally unillustratable chaos of language breaking down.

Returning to Groensteen's "that which is unseen," the illustration and depiction of psychological trauma for instance is not an easy task. Done well, readers can effectively empathize with the invisible wounds that linger. When poorly attempted or mishandled, mental illness can come off as a smoke and mirrors affliction that justifies ableist attitudes. The task of representing pain becomes still more difficult when exploring temporal settings of the past. Mental illness and afflictions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and the gutter space in comics and graphic novels share a number of similar qualities. One cannot measure the depth of the gutter; the area between panels is a space for both the comic and reader to explore that which cannot be expressed in words and pictures. Similarly, the breadth of psychological also cannot be quantified: the "expanse" of pain between illness and wellness is a space for the victim to work through, and one with which observers can only passively empathize.

In Susan Sontag's *Regarding The Pain of Others*, a collection of essays that examines the American aesthetic relationship with trauma and its depiction in art, Sontag posits how medium affects perception. "Narratives can make us understand [...] photographs do something else: they haunt us" she writes (71). Comics and graphic novels offer a chaotic blend of the two. The comfort of the verisimilitude associated with a traditional linguistic text is extinguished with the accompaniment of artistic representation in comics and graphic novels. The author is showing

exactly what something is in addition to telling. Yet mimesis is paradoxically impossible with this genre. Art is not truth and thusly there is an element of sublime anxiety present with these texts. How is trauma, specifically afflictions such as PTSD, depicted in comic and graphic novel form effectively?

Lynda Barry's 2002 graphic novel *One Hundred Demons* explores the complexities of childhood trauma and searches for a means to recovery as a grown-up. First published in 2002, by *Drawn and Quarterly*, *One Hundred Demons* is a graphic novel that seeps into the territories of memoir, creative how-to manual, and even functions as a self-help book. Initially inspired by a 16th century Japanese Zen monk's meditative practice of painting demons chasing each other across a long scroll, Barry took it upon herself to create her first self-reflective work: a graphic novel consisting of 19 chapters featuring seventeen full color vignettes, each segmented by intricate two panel collages that parallel the chapters' narratives (Barry 13).

Before delving into the critical analysis of Barry and her demons, the comic's prestige and notoriety in the genre's community should be recognized. Barry was recognized by The Comics Alliance in 2013 for her contributions to the comics art form and the organization listed her as one of twelve women cartoonists deserving lifetime achievement recognition . In 2016 she was inducted into the Eisner Hall of Fame, an honor that has previously been awarded to comics such as Neil Gaiman, Daniel Clowes, and Alison Bechdel (comic-con.org). Barry's body of work, which began in 1977 by publishing a strip titled *Ernie Pook's Comeek* at Evergreen State College's student newspaper, ranges from comics, graphic novels, traditional novels, plays, and visual art. She continues to publish new work and is currently tenured as Chair of Interdisciplinary Creativity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Exploring trauma is, of course, not pioneer territory for comics and graphic novelists. Grappling with the unseen is a longstanding tradition that we've seen in as mentioned in Spiegelman to Pekar to Bechdel to Satrapi. Jared Gardner, in his essay, "Autography's Biography," theorizes that comics and graphic novels, specifically memoirs such as *One Hundred Demons*, are ways in which the graphic memoir provides a space to theorize and practice new ethical and effective management of one's personal history with pain and trauma and the means in which to share or convey this pain. The graphic novel memoir, states Gardner, "points toward how we might in fact fight back, using the multimodal and multi-mediated form of graphic narrative [...] entwine the globe many times over in a vast canvas of human suffering. Only by allowing the past to bleed into history, fact to bleed into fiction, image into text, might we begin to allow our own pain to bleed into the other, and more urgently, the pain of the other to bleed into ourselves" (23). What makes this text such a compelling work for critical analysis, however, is Barry's artwork as critique on the nature of truth. In the introduction of *One Hundred Demons*, Barry asks the reader directly, "is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (Barry 11). When asked how to quantify her work, Barry categorizes it as an "autobifictionalography." Barry's portmanteau is eerily suggestive. Autobifictionalography could imply the enjambment of truth and fiction; however the use of "auto" could imply the precarious nature of selfhood and memory. Returning to Gardner, "Indeed, the hybrid term could be said to apply to all autobiography, but it the graphic memoir that foregrounds in its very form the ways in which the power of memory must always share the act of self-representation with devices of fiction" (6). The pain, the truth, Barry's memory is all subjective, and Barry is keenly aware of it. This is a work where she suggests us to explore the undefined, unknowable spaces of memory.

And *One Hundred Demons*' gutter is remarkable in comparison with common traditions in comics and graphic novels. Barry's gutter spaces are richly decorated, fully colored, and function as narrative structures on their own. The traditional breaks in sequential art are often literal gaps in the narrative, blank spaces allowing the reader to process the story, or negative space, are lacking with this text. Feminist comic scholar, Hillary Chute notes Barry's distinction in *Graphic Women*, stating, "There is literally no white (or black) space as there is in Kominsky-Crumb, Gloeckner, Satrapi, and Bechdel, anywhere in Barry's book, which might either gesture at the space of reader projection or mark where one might anchor oneself in any differentiated shifting 'before' or 'after' space of the story" (112). The lack of negative space in the gutter does put it into a weird, quasi-territory of sequential art; like the traditional gutter, there is always something there. However, in the case of Barry's gutter, there is literally something there, a catalogue of semiotic images to guide our interpretation of the text. Though *One Hundred Demons* is primarily about childhood pain, as evident by Barry's gutter demons, it would be simplistic though to reduce the text's gutter to just the painful memories of childhood. Joy, nostalgia, regret, and a complicated mosaic of emotions are dispersed throughout. Building off of Chute, in "Photography and the Layering of Perspective in Graphic Memoir" Nancy Pedri states, "Multimodality is particularly important for the study of comics narration since comics are complex multimodal narratives that tell stories by combining not only words and cartoon images, but also different semiotic modes—maps, paintings, charts, and photographs" (1). Elements of Barry's gutter in the Sontag manner are meant to make us understand, while other aspects are present to haunt us.

While it's easy to focus heavily on the past with *One Hundred Demons*, and past pain is a central theme for this work, the gutter also serves as a space for potential healing. Throughout

the graphic novel, Barry encourages the reader to bravely face their demons, name their demons, draw their demons, even if their presence isn't representative of one's entire pain, just portions of it. The resurgence of fragments of Barry's past don't give us a clearer picture of the narrative, but they allow us to explore what is left unspoken. In this, yes, we experience some truly heartbreaking moments of neglect, abuse, sexual assault, generational trauma, etc; however we also explore the possibility of healing and recovery. I would like to note for the sake of clarity, I will refer to Young Lynda and Adult Lynda as separate characters, with Adult Lynda narrating in reflective panels, and Barry as the comic creator.

The American affinity for stories of survival and triumph over adversity has polished the word "resilience" into a term of positivity, a desired state of strength and admiration. Barry's definition differs drastically as addressed in "Resilience," a chapter that delves into both the pain of her own experiences of sexual assault and the additional trauma of having no resources to cope or heal due to her parental neglect and abuse. "I cringe when people talk about the resilience of children. It's a hope adults have about the nature of a child's inner life that it's simple, that what can be forgotten can no longer affect us. But what is forgetting?" (70). Conversely, the narrative of telling one's truth is not always restorative, or as Barry demonstrates feasible. Leigh Gilmore, in her essay, "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity," comments on this balance: "Telling the story of one's life suggests a conversion of trauma's morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma's hold on the subject. Yet, autobiography's impediments to such working through consist of its almost legalistic definition of truth-telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those

criteria (129). In what is arguably the hardest chapter for consumption, Barry asks us to reconsider the role of of resilience.

The chapter's narrative revolves around the act of remembrance as a critical component to selfhood. The "Resilience" opening collage has the phrase, "Can't remember/Can't forget" written in the panes of glass that a 3 year-old Lynda stares out of; this phrase is repeated throughout the chapter in illustrations, as well as in Barry's narration. The mantra--a paradoxical coping/avoidance mechanism--illustrates 13 year-old Lynda's hesitancy and evasion of sex, explaining that she'd already "knew too much about sex, found out about it in harsh ways" (69). As 13 year-old Lynda struggles throughout the chapter with boys, with friends, with substances, with her mother, we realize that her issues are not existing solely at this temporal age; Lynda's trauma has placed her in a state of paralysis.

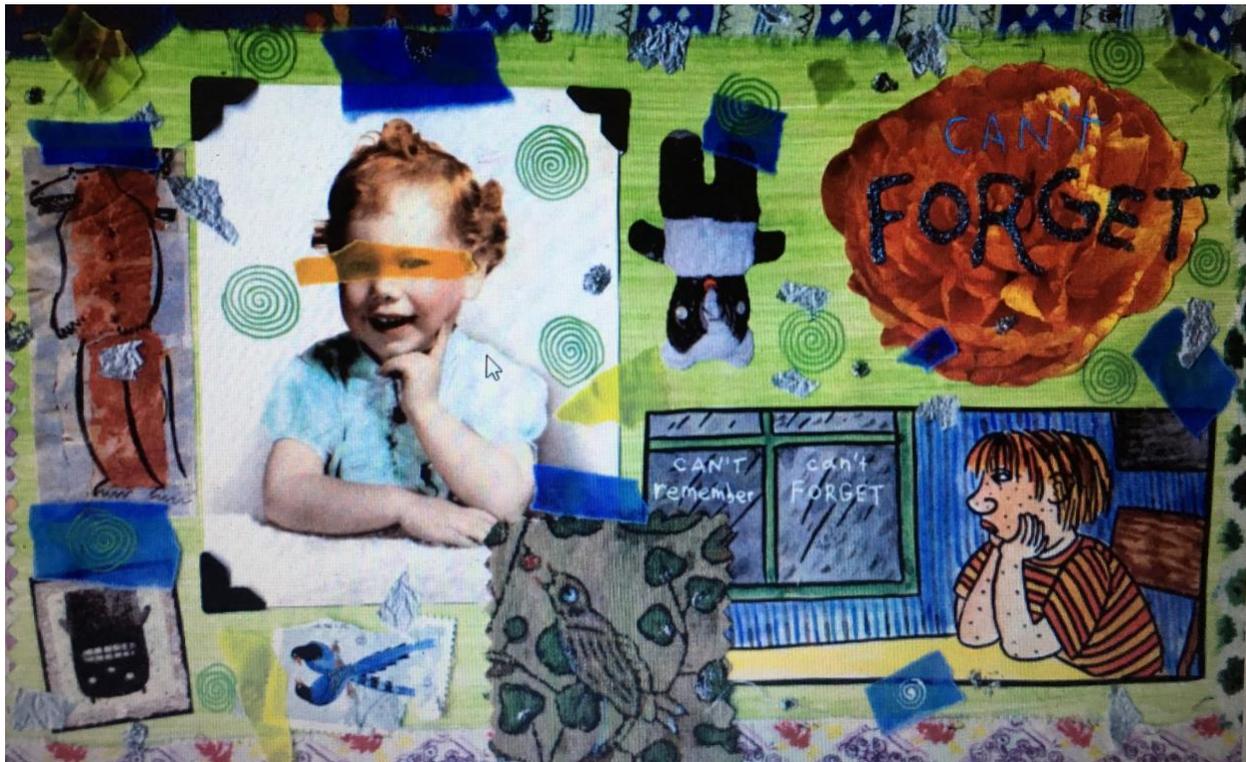


Figure 5

One Hundred Demons' panel collage for "Resilience." Juxtaposed against the overall narrative, the reader is given fragments in between vignettes. Here we see an altered photograph of Young Lynda with her gaze averted featured prominently next to her teenage self gazing at the chapter's mantra "Can't remember/Can't forget." The fragments act as markers for the reader to be mindful of what Barry is intentionally leaving out of the narrative.

Unlike Barry's contemporaries in womens/wimmins comics, such as Julie Doucet and Phoebe Gloeckner, who illustrate and narrate traumatic events quite graphically and explicitly, "Barry continually works with the absences the form of comics provides; she does not display trauma so much as work in the edges of events, unsettling readers by leaving us to imagine the incidents whose aftereffects she plumbs" (Chute 282). Adult Lynda refrains from directly stating that she was sexually assaulted, which further exemplifies her point that "resilience" causes children to purposefully fragment themselves as a means of survival. Reflects Adult Lynda, "The ability to exist in pieces is what some adults call resilience. And I suppose in some way that is a kind of resilience, a horrible resilience that makes adults believe children forget trauma" (75). The fragmented memory, the temporal laps, the linear gaps in the chapter's narrative, all mimic *One Hundred Demons*' gutter, and to a greater extent comic and graphic novel's genre arthrological structure. The reader is called to make connections by accessing their own imaginations and through their own associations piecing a resolution (or in the case of "Resilience," the lack of a resolution).

Instead of outwardly professing her own experiences, Barry circumvents the act of open rumination through a number of systems. Young Lynda's sexual assault is treated as more of a public health endemic: "I wasn't alone [...] Nearly every kid in my neighborhood knew too much too soon. Some people call it growing up too fast but it actually made some of us unable to grow up at all" (70). Barry discredits the severity of her own abuse by placing it in the midst of a larger societal problem.

Aesthetically, Barry also cryptically uses the chapter's collage to inadvertently tell her truth. "Resilience" begins with a photograph of Young--almost infantile--Lynda smiling brightly at the camera. The image is altered most notably by a thin strip of orange transparent tape covering her eyes, subverting her gaze. In her biography of Barry, S.E. Kirtley postulates on this symbolic gesture, stating "The masking of the eyes suggest blindness, a veiling or suppression of vision. The orange bar remains somewhat transparent, implying that some of the truth and horror seep through"(165). Conversely, we the reader are also not entirely cognizant of Barry's experiences, we can only speculate on the fragmentary information supplied. On the collage's second page, Barry illustrates a doll lying supine, eyes gazing blankly upward, underneath the chapter title.

Both the doll and Young Lynda--depicted now through illustration, but identified with the same curly hair and puffy-sleeved blouse as the photograph--return at the conclusion of the chapter. True to Barry's form, the reader is excused from viewing anything nefarious. However, this exclusion also prevents the reader from actively witnessing Young Lynda's trauma. Rather, the reader is presented with just image of man from the waist down asking Young Lynda, "Hey there, sweetheart. Do you and your dolly want to go for a ride?" (Barry 76) The final collage at the conclusion of "Resilience" is remarkably bare, especially in comparison with the chapter's opening, but features a small depiction of a bird in flight, and a reiteration of "Can't remember/Can't forget." In a figurative cycle of the *One Hundred Demons* narrative, Young Lynda's act of consciously attempting not to remember her psychological torment resonates with the reader's awareness that more has happened than has been explained.

Lynda's mother, though a blip feature in "Resilience," manages to magnify Young Lynda's suffering. Parental neglect has positioned her like the reader: aware that something is

going on, yet not wholly aware of the situation. She pieces together assumptions that her daughter is fooling around with neighborhood boys, chastising Young Lynda that “[...]God watches you! N’ako, he knows what you are. He saw you!” and “you prostitute,” grossly miscalculating her daughter’s agency in the ordeal, and disregarding her distress (Barry 69, 76). The combined hardships that Young Lynda experiences throughout *One Hundred Demons*--her mestiza identity, the anxiety of passing, the pain of sexual assault--all become amplified by the lack of a maternal figure. Returning to “Head Lice and My Worst Boyfriend,” the fragmentary elements of Lynda’s forced-forgetfulness resurface to manifest that the issues and trauma never really went away.

As Chute assesses, “it is significant that the accusation familiar to Lynda--you talk about assignine memories”” materializes in her autobiography first chapter. Right away, the book establishes memory as its focus, and “writes against the verdict of Lynda’s mother and Lynda’s worst boyfriend (who gives himself the authority to gloss--and to denigrate and romanticize a narrative of her life. Barry explores her difficult and constitutive relationships with relatives, friends, and community, as well as with trauma, re-creation, and the very notion of creativity, visualizing and materializing memory as counter not only to those who would fix her identity (and believe identity fixable), but also those would diminish the political importance of the everyday” (298). If memory is critical to selfhood, than even the incomplete or “ugly” aspects of memory are an essential process.

The fragmented narratology mirrors the illustration and collages featured throughout *One Hundred Demons*, Barry ammasses an immense collection of found materials--pieces of printed textiles, pressed flowers, Asian postage stamps, ticket stubs, paper doilies, cut up shapes and patterns, glitter, scraps of torn and printed paper, and perhaps most jarring, aged and stained

photographs. It appears that the only unifying trait present is that there is no connected uniformity or wholeness to any of the featured media. The crumpled notes fail to tell us the whole story, nor do the pasted photographs give us insight; but much like Barry's splintered narration, the reader becomes aware of the significance of the events in both Young and Adult Lynda's storytelling. And although the stories featured in *One Hundred Demons*'s are deeply personal and belong solely to Lynda, feelings of confusion, hurt, loss, and pain are all universal emotions that are fettered to universal experiences. Readers identify with these personal stories that resonate with the touching and mundane aspects of life.

Chute comments on the gendered importance of Barry's collage by stating, "Relevant as feminist praxis, *One Hundred Demons* is a vital feminist work, resignifying the detritus of girlhood as productive collage by aesthetically revisioning it. The contextualization of cheap, common, or utilitarian paper (which also harkens to the historical avant-garde), as one understood as transvaluation of the idea of working waste--a knowing ironic acknowledgement on Barry's part that her life narrative, itself perhaps consider insignificant, is visualized in an accessible, popular medium, comics, that is still largely viewed as 'garbage'" (125) Too often works that defy formalist conventions drawn from a male-skewed cannon are critically dismissed. Barry's work is unabashedly connected to an aesthetic tradition rooted in the punk genre, the "riot grrrrl" scene tied to the late 20th century Pacific Northwest community.

Beyond collage, Barry's illustration also speaks to a radical feminine aesthetic by focusing on the formal considerations of color, texture, and density rather than the clear depiction of naturalistic scenes. In the article "Lynda Barry's Humor: At the Juncture of Private and Public, Invitation and Dissemination, Childish and Professional," Özge Samancı observes Barry's artistry and its connection to women comic arts.

Barry's denial of rigid anatomy and proper linear perspective, her choice of equipment for her collages, her non-uniform contour lines caused by her preference for drawing with a brush, and, overall, her apparently clumsy and childish aesthetic, together constitute a complete opposition to the professional aesthetic of mainstream comics established by male artists for the male-centered industry. Consequently, Barry not only blurs the definition and significance of the professional aesthetic, but also offers a set of new possible formal approaches and narration devices for comics. Jolting the traditional conventions of comics and renewing them is a must in order to liberate the comics from being a male property. (182)

Furthermore, Barry's "sloppy" collage aesthetic is not evidence of laziness or a lack of technical skill, but rather a different approach to illustrative form. It defies the "masculine" idea that things have to be told exactly as they happened. Barry tells things as she feels them, as she remembers them, as she has processed them so that she can move on from them.

The class implication of Barry's collage, coupled with her use of low quality paper and "trash" materials as medium connotes an acceptance and celebration of "low art" status. Barry has famously commented on the nature of her work, "Nobody feels the need to provide deep critical insight to something written by hand" (Kirtley 216). It is easy to go along with Barry's self-denigration; Barry's art as well as her career as graphic novelist can be as commercial or basic, as both disciplines exist still on the critical fringe. The fact that Barry deflates her work publicly by dismissing its handwritten qualities puts it in a unique category that deserves a more critical eye. Elaine Claire Villacorte, in her essay, "High Fives and Neil Young for the Road: Lynda Barry's Writing the Unthinkable as an Aesthetic Experience" critiques the artistic significance of handwritten typography. "As an artist, Barry is an active proponent of

handwriting, which requires movement; the physical act itself is reflective of a body in motion that can go beyond thinking, states Villacorte. “The body in motion invested in writing, it seems, is framed as art because it is a process of doing or making” (86). While handwritten text does not separate Barry from other comic artists and graphic novelists, Barry’s highly stylized and personified hybrid script text adds to the overall arthrology of *One Hundred Demons* and interpretation of the text.

First, the low art quality of Barry’s collage, gutter illustration, and typography explore and celebrate childlike aesthetic conventions. As comic theorist Emma Tinker writes, “In all these strips Barry’s drawings retain elements of a childlike style that reflects their content. Although the popular view of comics as kids’ lit is invariably grounded in erroneous assumptions based on the cultural association of comics with childhood, the argument that Barry’s comics are deliberately childish is rather easier to substantiate (123). There is of course an element of narratological dissonance--the reader Barry is memorializing tales of Young Lynda and Adult Lynda--however *One Hundred Demon’s* movement through separate temporal spaces licences Barry to employ a low-art/outsider or a purposefully naïve aesthetic.

Secondly, if we are to assign value the material scraps (junk) of Barry’s collage or her choice medium (cheap legal paper), it would be rendered mostly worthless. Likewise, many of the traumatic events and experiences that Lynda has stuck inside of her, are worthless in that they only offer pain and suffering years after the fact. “One Hundred Demons is disturbing not just because of the incidents themselves (“Hey there sweetheart. Do you and your dolly want to go for a ride?”) but because it demonstrates the extraordinary longevity of such events in the author’s memory” (Tinker, 127). However, in compiling and composing these fragments of trash, Barry is able to make new work and thus new meaning from her demons compiled from Young

Lynda's journey to adulthood. Similarly, by assembling these fragmented stories and memories, Barry offers us the opportunity to make something new out the old, worthless experiences. In this, we see the opportunity for healing and growth.

Comics and graphic novels provide readers the chance to be multimodal witnesses. The ability for one voice to accurately represent the reality of those who share a social experience shouldn't be assumed, but the individualized images that graphic novels give us hold a striking power to demonstrate life in its complexity. The process of canonization has favored a limited lens on western art and literature: people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and other minorities have been canonized much more slowly, if at all, since at least as long as there has been a discourse surrounding canonization. This is not an anomaly, unfortunately, that sets the process apart from the rest of Western culture. Instead, the canon remains a mostly accurate index of broadly-held values through history. And while it is now outdated, discussing the prejudices that are present in the canon reveals more about the disparity of opportunities than objective quality. Half a century ago Simone de Beauvoir described the patriarchal tendency for men to find aesthetic meaning in work that "has to do with with other men" (74). The negative space of the gutter allows us to re-imagine the presented intersectional realities on the page, a more realistic path to just thinking than dismantling the entire world's existing systems of oppression. While there is a type of punk element of comics and graphic novels that allows underrepresented and marginalized people to express themselves, the textual and illustrative components are often reactionary elements of living in an inequitable world.

Although the gutter is the negative space, the bardo, the contrapasso of the narrative, it offers a great deal of liberties to those who need it most: there is no gaze, no barriers, no limitations, and no assumptions. Here the kyriarchal and intersectional arguments rooted in text and illustration are fully explored, uninhibited by any lens, and buoyed by the active human imagination. Shena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson in their introduction of *Black Comics:*

Politics of Race and Representation write about this critical component in comics and graphic novels.

Every political campaign is based on it. Every adolescent's life begins with it. Every motivational speaker tries to convince us of its power and potential. Your reflex might be to guess that the answer is hope; and you would be half-right. The answer is imagination, or imagining what is possible. From an early age we are socialized to consider life through the lenses of others. As we come to learn more about social ways of seeing, we begin to develop our own lenses for seeing the world. This is when we start to explore the possibilities of our imaginations. (25)

And certainly imagination arises from the narrative element, especially as Howard and Jackson mention, "the adolescent." For instance, the young reader might see themselves as the protagonist of their favorite comic series or imagine themselves existing within the world constructed by the author or artist. Much of the imagination that Howard and Jackson speak of arises in what is not seen--escapism to imagined realities. This freedom to experience and see the world without inhibitions is not only a healthy germination for the narrative, but for the development of intersectional theoretical advancement.

The escapism offered by the gutter followed by the pull and return to reality presents the combatting dualism of comics and graphic novels. The gutter is, in a sense, the only way this imagined reality could exist. In this case I'm speaking of the gutter as a psychic "space," the moments of analysis we insert into the experience of a work. We need the gutter to re-imagine space, to allow us to subvert reality as we know it. Many poststructuralists called for this radical upheaval, as is the case with Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of Medusa."

[Women] take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking the up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down...., A feminine text cannot fall to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings more about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments there's no other way (16).

As triumphant as Cixous and her school can be, it is important to recognize a postmodern awareness of the way things could and should be versus the way things are. In response to Mulvey's concept of the gaze, feminist scholar bell hooks composed the theory of the oppositional gaze, positing that there is power in looking, or "courageously looking." Writes hooks, "I want my look to change reality" (116). What reality exists in the gutter, whether it is Bitch Planet-- a prison on the brink of a feminist revolution, Wakanda-- a totally isolated African nation untouched by colonialism, or Palomar-- a Latinx community where youth are seen as fully flushed out multidimensional characters, true intersectional exploration into concepts and arguments, a child's imagination of the self, or just a blank space existing between two frames is ultimately up to the reader.

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