From Analysis to (Re)Composition: A Prismatic Pedagogy

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Introduction

The use of comic books as educational tools in the U.S. has a long, complex history. Between the 1940s and today, approaches to alphabetic literacy, English language acquisition, literary analysis, critical literacy, cultural literacy, visual rhetorical analysis, visual rhetorical composition, and multimodal literacy have at times characterized comics as having pedagogical value. Unfortunately, much of this scholarship approaches comics from the compartmentalizing assumptions that words and images can be easily distinguished from one another and that non-alphabetic images can be more easily apprehended than alphabetic text (e.g., Burmark; George; Hoeness-Krupsaw; Leibold; McCloud, *Understanding*; and Schraffenberger). Similarly, there is a relatively clear-cut division between the analysis and critique of comics as, on the one hand, ideologically imbued cultural artifacts and, on the other, sites of formal design and production. The scholarship employing comics as sites for teaching cultural critique can be further subdivided into those analyzing representations of gender (e.g., Chute, Jonet, and Thalheimer), race/ethnicity (e.g., Chaney, Cong-Huyen and Hong, King, Nama, Rifas, Strömberg, and Wanzo), and sexuality (e.g., Van Dyne), respectively. For composition studies, a field invested in understanding and developing our students' and our own abilities to communicate in complex, multiple, and intersecting historical, cultural, and social contexts, it is counterproductive to take a "separate but equal" approach to visual and verbal texts and their analysis, production, and ideology.

I am not the first to make this claim. Work done by feminist, digital, and rhetorical theorists such as Mary E. Hocks, Anne Francis Wysocki, and Cheryl E. Ball, particularly in relation to new media and multimodal and digital composition, emphasizes the interrelationship of analysis and composition. Hocks, Wysocki, and Ball, drawing in part on the work of the New London Group, use the framework of "design" to discuss both formal construction and the sets of assumptions or ideologies—such as those that dichotomize images and text, analysis and composition, and even rhetoric and ideology—that shape a composer's decisions and contextualize an

audience's reception. They argue that the extent to which we can facilitate our students' awareness and understanding of these assumptions is the extent to which we enable them to be more conscious consumers and, even more importantly, rhetorically savvy composers of culture. Their work, therefore, parallels and extends a critical pedagogical approach to composition that requires acknowledging the rhetorical construction of ideology.

Further, as critical theorist Roland Barthes points out, ideologies function in culture at the meta-narrative level, persuading us through repetition to accept the values they indirectly imply, often through stories. Feminist scholar AnaLouise Keating labels these "status quo stories," stories told and retold to "normalize and naturalize the existing social systems, values, and norms so entirely that [we] deny the possibility of change" (23). As such, teaching students how to analyze narratives has become a common practice at all levels of visual rhetorical education. And, as visual narratives, comics have increasingly been used to identify and critique representations of oppressive ideologies of gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and (to a lesser extent) class (e.g., Chaney, Dong, King, and Thalheimer).

Despite this analytical investment, and like multimodal composing more generally (Palmeri), much of the advocacy for and engagement in composing comics occurs in elementary and high school contexts (e.g., Bitz; Carter; Lamb and Johnson), and most of the work written about composing comics in undergraduate writing classrooms does not address the intersection of rhetorical construction and ideological meaning, nor the opportunities that comics provide for challenging oppressive ideological perspectives (e.g., Carter, Frey and Fisher, and Haendiges). An exception is Wysocki and Dennis A. Lynch's *Compose, Design, Advocate: A Rhetoric for Integrating Written, Visual, and Oral Communication* (2013), which advocates an embodied approach to the rhetorical analysis and composition of comics (510). In one chapter, "Analyzing Comics," Wysocki and Lynch argue that students can enact an embodied understanding of comics' rhetorical construction by drawing on their individually as well as historically and culturally situated experiences. Employing two well-known texts, the "Common Scents" chapter in Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Wysocki and Lynch lead students through the rhetorical analytical work of exploring the relationships among authorial purpose, genre, alphabetic texts, visual styles, authors' self-representations, representations of family, representations of experience, and students' experiences. Wysocki and Lynch then invite students to begin composing their own comic narratives using the rhetorical structures students identify.

Building on[i] Wysocki and Lynch's work, I argue in this essay that comic books and graphic novels are generative locations for a feminist, critical, and visual rhetorical—or prismatic—composition pedagogy. More specifically, comics offer (1) contexts in which differences and conflicts can be identified and engaged, (2) explicable sites of intersection between ideological perspectives and rhetorical construction, and (3) models for the transition from ideological critique to (re)composition. As alluded to above, very little work ad-

dresses this rhetorical triangulation of discourse, ideology, and composition in the context of comics, and my hope is that this essay engenders more interest in such work.

(1) A context in which difference and conflict can be identified and addressed

The Gateway (Drug)

Diana George, in her review of visual literacy education in the U.S., describes how "visual studies [were] perceived as a threat to language and literature instruction" based on the long-held presumption that alphabetic literacy and proficiency far outweigh the difficulty and therefore value of non-alphabetic literacy and proficiency (15). Comic's initial reception as pedagogical tools exemplifies this perspective. Their "obvious" simplicity lead educators in the 1940s and 1950s to question "how faithfully [comic adaptations of literary classics] communicated the heart and soul of books they adapted . . . and about whether children were using them as a gateway to reading, or as a substitute for reading (Rifas, "Educational" 165). Comics' assumed simplicity also underlies the moral furor Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* incited in 1950s America, forcing the mainstream comics industry not by legal sanction but by public opinion to self-regulate via the Comics Code Authority. Wertham based his objections not on comics' inability to teach readers anything, but their power to teach the wrong thing. Violence and, to a lesser extent, homosexuality pervaded mainstream comics, and provided, according to Wertham, examples of moral reprehensibility comics could persuade readers to replicate. This line of reasoning is based on two problematic assumptions. The first is that the meaning of comics, as simplistic images, is predefined, interpretable in only one way. The second is that a one-directional relationship exists between comics and their audiences, the latter passively receiving and accepting comics' predefined meaning at face value.

Same Difference

Ironically, while the political sway of Wertham's objections to comics has long since diminished, the text most commonly used to introduce undergraduate students to comics—Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*—works from a set of assumptions similar to Wertham's. McCloud argues that words and images exist along multiple continua of abstraction. The first is a rather lopsided continuum that defines words at one end as complete, iconic abstraction and images, at the other end, as more or less abstract (and, therefore, realistic) depending on the amount of "iconic content" (27). The second continuum, which intersects with the first, is bookended by simplicity and complexity. The more complex an image is, the less abstract and more realistic it is. Building from this, McCloud characterizes comics' meaning-making power as that of amplification via simplification, or the ability of a form's basic outline—such as a circle, two dots, and a line for a face J—to increase

an audience's ability to identify (with) this representation of a universal human perception of humanity:

> When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail. Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement, a sense of shape…a sense of general placement. Something as simple and as basic as – a cartoon….When you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself. (36)

The essentialist assumption underlying this definition is that some universal human experience exists to which we can all relate and that, in fact, relation/identification requires that the representations of our experiences be simplified. While acknowledging similarities among experiences is important, stopping audience interaction here assumes that we can only be familiar with what we see as similar to ourselves and our experiences of the world. Limiting familiarity to similarity neutralizes potentially productive conflicts that might arise from differences between our complex experiences and a complex representation of our own and others' experiences. The meaning-making power with which McCloud imbues comics, therefore, ends up closely resembling that of unchallenged stereotypes. Familiarity, however, is not the same as similarity. It is possible to be familiar with individuals and experiences we do not share. Feminist and critical pedagogies both highlight this distinction in order to emphasize the importance of consciousness-raising and dialogue across differences as essential elements of social change.

Positively Conflicted

For practitioners of both feminist and critical pedagogies, the conflict that arises from identifying differences between and among our own and others' experiences and their (mis)representation (or lack thereof) in contemporary culture is itself a powerful learning tool, one that can be used to challenge the naturalized knowledge, or set of oppressive ideologies that structure our interactions. In her commentary on the historically synchronic emergence of feminism and visual culture, art historian, critic, and curator Amelia Jones posits that feminism has "long acknowledged that visuality (the conditions of how we see and make meaning of what we see) is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture" (2).

In the words of postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her foundational *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), overcoming

> years of notions of what is normative…is not merely a question of whether or not we have learned to analyze in particular kinds of ways or whether people are able to intellectualize about a variety of experiences. It is also about coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without im-

> posing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm. (201)

An emphasis on what independent filmmaker, feminist, and post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha calls "the primacy of experience" challenges the always-already existence of particular ideological structures, then, by offering experience as an analytic framework:

> We need…[to] ask students to explore the analytic possibilities of experience by locating the experience that surrounds their habitual approach to differences; by sketching the complex discursive terrain out of and in which the self habitually speaks; by investigating how that terrain delimits our understanding of differences along lines of race, class, sex, and gender, and by exploring personal and social motivations for transforming one's existing self-location in the process of rereading and rewriting. (244, 243-44)

Paolo Freire also engaged his students in using their experiences as interpretive frameworks and relied heavily on images of everyday life as jumping-off points for discussions regarding students' perceptions of themselves and their environment (105). This is not to say that our experiences are completely unmediated and can, therefore, be used as litmus tests to judge a representation's veracity for all time. Rather, the goal is to explore the extent to which our understandings of our experiences have been influenced by their representations. In Susan C. Jarratt's words:

> My hopes are pinned on composition courses whose instructors help their students to locate personal experience in historical and social contexts – courses that lead students to see how differences emerging from their texts and discussions have more to do with those contexts than they do with an essential and unarguable individuality. ("Feminism" 277)

As this survey of feminist theorists demonstrates, analyzing and critiquing conflict between images and what they represent is a foundational characteristic of feminist theory, feminist pedagogy, and critical pedagogy. Because this critical analytical work is also the starting point for a prismatic approach to composition pedagogy, identifying and analyzing the rhetorical form and function of oppressive ideologies in a composition classroom can help students become more aware of how they define themselves and others and teach them rhetorical strategies to ethically enact these definitions.

(2) Explicable sites of intersection between rhetorical construction and ideological perspectives

In Stereo(type): Rhetorical Repetition

Repeated visual presence and absence are both tools of rhetorical emphasis, and stereotypes, as recurring, oversimplified misrepresentations, are rhetorically constructed to naturalize the oppressive ideologies they represent. Stereotypes, or what Black feminist theorist

Patricia Hill Collins terms "controlling images," have and continue to receive much analytical attention from feminist (and) visual culture scholars (4). There is also a growing body of work addressing comics' potential to educate students in stereotypical representation. Independent scholar, artist, and educator Anne N. Thalheimer uses the scene from Diane DiMassa's comic book *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* in which the main character castrates a man for harassing her on the street, to challenge her students to consider the differential reception of violence against women and men in alphabetic and non-alphabetic images. Assistant professor of English Michael A. Chaney uses Lance Took's *Narcissa* to engage his students in discussions about constructions of black masculinity in comics. Independent scholar, as well as middle and high school teacher, Marla Harris uses *Persepolis* as an entre into a discussion of stereotypes fueling religious and cultural persecution. Former high school English teacher and a current Professor of English, English Education and Postcolonial studies Allen Web and high school English teacher Brandon Guisgand engage students in a comparative analysis of stereotypical representations of Jewish identity in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew.* In each of these examples, students are asked to identify the ways in which characters are represented (alphabetically and non-alphabetically), and to what extent they repeat stereotypical assumptions regarding gendered, raced, classed, religious, and/or cultural stereotypes. In order to engage students' experiences as interpretive frameworks, these representations can also be used as points of comparison with and among students' experiences.

Antistasis: Rhetorical Repetition and Recontextualization

C. Richard King takes his pedagogical investigation of stereotypical representation one step further by asking his students to consider when, how, and to what effect stereotypes are used as "racial metaphors" to "differentially racialize…human communities, social problems, identities, possibilities, pleasure, and privileges" and to contextualize multiple forms of victimization (101). More specifically, King asks his students to consider the effect of visual "parallels between slavery and the treatment of animals or between imagery of Jews in Nazi Germany and imagery of Indigenous peoples in contemporary American popular culture" intentionally constructed to identify and end the problematic use of Native American mascots and cruel industrial farming practices (88). By placing images associated with one racialized context into a differently racialized context, racial metaphors function via the rhetorical trope of antistasis, in which an alphabetic or non-alphabetic image is repeated in a different or contrary sense. In much the same way that a virus spreads via mutation, rhetorical repetition and recontextualization can reinforce an ideological perspective's impact. However, new contexts also provide new opportunities to challenge what is being repeated, for placing an old meaning in a new contexts requires additional work on the part of the audience to make new connections.

An Exploration Divided

The above-mentioned examples of comic-based stereotypical analysis evidence a compartmentalized approach to ideological representation—gender OR race OR religion—that belies the complexities of our experiences and identities. We are defined in part by gender *and* race *and* religion *and* class *and* sexuality *and* age *and* ability *and* nationality *and* ad infinitum. Prismatic pedagogy, then, is interested in addressing the conflicts between and among these intersecting[ii] ideologies, conflicts that may help us better understand the complexities of our experiences.

Additionally, while Jarratt's perspective on the significance of recognizing and engaging experiential differences and the ways in which these experiences are historically and socially contextual echoes that of Mohanty and Minh-ha, we can also identify a presumption that the instructor has already done this work and the like-mindedness towards which students work is a predetermined goal. This presumption also turns up in "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing," in which Jarratt describes Gayatri Spivak's and Minh-ha's disruptive tactics as ones that can be used to "open up distance between the writer and audience rather than close it" ("Beside" 170). Instead of discussing the ways in which both instructors and students can collaborate on this work, however, Jarratt proposes that teachers use these tactics to diagnose students' lack of critical distance from institutional power:

> I am not suggesting that students will consciously employ the complex tactics I've outlined…but rather that we [scholars, academics, teachers] might use Spivak's and Trinh's rhetorical gestures as a guide for reading traces or symptoms of texts from students writing their own relations to institutional power. ("Beside" 170)

Practitioners of critical pedagogy have also frequently been critiqued for unwittingly employing the long-standing hierarchical power of instructor over student when framing the teacher as enlightened leader tasked with raising her students' consciousness to her level. For Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, the pedagogical goal and focus is students' emerging critical consciousness and social action, with the implication that educators have already reached some higher level of awareness that enables them to facilitate that same growth in students. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), feminist theorist and teacher bell hooks, addresses this unwitting hypocrisy with her goal of reorienting critical pedagogues toward the importance of their own continued self-actualization, a commitment without which they could not ask their students to follow a similar path. For hooks then, critical pedagogy is an "engaged" pedagogy in which everyone is equally committed to their own learning (*Transgress*, 11). Following hooks, prismatic pedagogy is also an engaged pedagogy.

Analysis, Intersected

Wysocki and Lynch's "embodied" approach to rhetorical analysis provides prismatic pedagogy with a generative with which to identify the rhetorical construction of ideologies in comics. Not only do Wysocki and Lynch ask students to identify the ways in which individual characters are alphabetically and non-alphabetically represented in relation to one particular ideological perspective, students are tasked with understanding what a comic book might be communicating about issues that involve multiple, intersecting ideological perspectives such as the meaning of family. This work requires moving beyond identifying the ways in which a character is (repeatedly) represented. For example, in addition to questioning the ethos of Lynda Barry's "less-than-flattering" self-representation in "Common Scents," Wysocki and Lynch ask students to explore possible relationships among the captions, drawings, and what the characters say in the drawings; extrapolate from what they see/read any strategies Barry might be employing to characterize her family in certain ways/ask her audience to view her family in certain ways; consider Barry's possible motivation for visual but not verbal thematic repetition; consider the possible (dis)connections between the words and the color scheme Barry uses and what might be significant about them; identify drawing conventions they've learned (to identify) and how they learned these conventions; consider Barry's motivation for including phonetic spellings of Tagalog words rather than translating them into English; consider any strategies Barry might be using to evoke emotion to characterize her relationship to her past and to others; consider Barry's motivation for her use of time; and consider Barry's motivation for ending on a "note of nostalgia" and the relationship among smell, memory, and "those closest to us" (Wysocki and Lynch 522). For Wysocki and Lynch, then, as well as from a prismatic pedagogical perspective, the possible ideological import of a comic book arises from the multiple and intersecting relationships among a comic's many rhetorical elements—including visual themes, verbal themes, narrative structure, genre conventions, and historical and cultural contexts—with the potential to reflect the complexities of our experiences. As such, a prismatic approach to analyzing comics enables us to identify ways in which we can more effectively represent these experiences and the ideological perspectives that both shape and arise from them.

(3) Models for the transition from ideological critique to (re)composition

Unfortunately, scholarship on the educational value of comics tends to separate the investigation of comics as sites of cultural critique from their potential as models for compositions. This leaves individuals with an awareness and understanding of intersecting ideological perspectives and their complex rhetorical construction but no sense of whether or how to compose an intervention. However, if oppressive ideologies can be constructed and (via analysis) deconstructed, they can also be reconstructed into non-oppressive

perspectives. Narratives lend ideological perspectives their rhetorical influence via their invitations to retell and, therefore, re-affirm these perspectives. This structured opportunity to retell also leaves ideological perspectives open to challenge to the extent that narrative elements can be antistatically re-contextualized in new (narrative) contexts. In Wysocki's words, "We can create aesthetic experiences…for each other where we use the expected social constructions of form just enough to hold onto what audiences expect, but where we can then also make visible the particularities of our own lives and experiences and hence make visible the limitations of the forms we have been asked to grow into" ("Sticky" 172).

As antistatic recontextualizations define comics, they are excellent examples of this type of "provocative revision" (Fulwiler 190). According to Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, who dub comic book production in the mid-1980s onward the "Era of Reiteration," characters from earlier comics are revived to contradict their earlier iterations' significance. Bill Willingham's *Fables* series places fable and fairy tale characters in a contemporary Western urban context in ways that both challenge and reinforce the gendered, raced, and classed ideologies that informed earlier character iterations. Additionally, Willingham's plot structures draw from literary, historical, religious, and mythical narrative traditions, calling into question the distinctions among them. There are also numerous comic book retellings of literary classics, filmic remakes of comic book narratives, and apps for reading digital reproductions of print comics and born-digital comics that provide audiences with the opportunity to more closely consider the rhetorical impact of different media on a narrative's ideological import.

Digital tools are also increasingly being used to compose and produce both print and digital comics, but these tools are seldom discussed in the scholarship on comics in undergraduate literature and composition courses. In the few pieces that do, including Jason Haendiges' dissertation, *Mobility and the Digital Page*, Comic Life predominates as the digital composing tool of choice and for good reason. It offers a wide variety of genre and period-based layout options, customizable word art and word balloons, image filters, and most significantly, the opportunity to import images into the layout rather than selecting from preset options or hand-drawing each frame. All of this flexibility also comes with a price tag. *Comic Life* is not free beyond a 30-day trial period. While this time frame is workable within a semester course, it limits students' opportunities to learn, experiment with, and revise any work composed with this software. And while requiring students to pay the approximately $30 for unlimited access is not unreasonable, the institutional mechanism by which students access their financial aid prior to and during the first three weeks of a given semester at my university precludes them from using their aid to purchase *Comic Life*. They must pay out of pocket. Fortunately, there are several free options for digital comic composition, including Bitstrips, ToonDoo, and Pixton that give students a good introduction to the relationship between rhetorical construction and ideological meaning, which they can then test out in their own comic compositions and apply to multimodal composition

more generally. More specifically, preset and character design options such as backgrounds, characters, and props function as sets of naturalized assumptions regarding where and who we should be against which students can compare their own experiences. This comparative analysis can then be used to identify the existing and potential realities students want to represent and how they might compose these realities.

On Background

Bitstrips and Pixton each offer over 200 choices of backgrounds, almost all of which I would describe, based on an initial review, as industrial or non-industrial, inside or outside, work or leisure, commercial, and/or holiday. As definitions of "industrial" differ, I use the term to refer to scenes where there is demonstrable human intervention/alteration. So Bitstrips' "Huts" scene is "industrial" despite the former's association with non-industrialized societies; its "Forest" scene is non-industrial despite the possibility that a groundskeeper has maintained it. At 190 and 22 options, respectively, the industrialized scenes outnumber the non-industrialized ones almost 8 to 1. Given the preponderance of industrial spaces, it is not surprising that Bitstrips' scenes inside an enclosure outnumber those outside an enclosure, though by a smaller margin of almost 2 to 1.

Less prominent but still significant themes emerged when considering that 43, or 21%, of the scenes reference a commercial/retail context such as a corner store or a fast food restaurant, and that scenes of leisure activities (35/16%) such as a hot tub, outweighed those referencing employment, such as a cubicle, 2 to 1. Additionally, of the small number of holiday-themed scenes (12/6%), all but one are references to Christmas. According to Bitstrips, then, individuals worthy of attention (should) participate in leisure activities in industrialized, commercial, and indoor locations.

ToonDoo's own preset background categories, including Scenery, Space, Abstract, Fantasy, Indoors, Outdoors, Landmarks, and Sports, align with those I used to describe Bitstrips' backgrounds, though in ToonDoo, there are only slightly more Indoor scenes (65) than Outdoor ones (51), and the 156 abstract backgrounds far outnumber the rest. For ToonDoo, then, no place identifiable is better than any familiar place.

What Pixton's twenty scenes lack in quantity, they make up for in cultural cues regarding appropriate social roles and interactions. The classroom scene, for example, places the outline of an individual in front of a chalkboard and gesturing at it with a wooden pointer, suggesting a relationship among formal education, lecturing, and technological simplicity. In a bathroom scene, we see the outline of one individual gesturing at another, both of whom are standing in front of a toilet with its seat up—a scene regularly employed to reference a naturalized gender binary.

Propped Up

ToonDoo also offers a large number of preset prop options, which are divided into nine categories, including: Celebration, Eatables,

Trees Plants, Indoors, Outdoors, Sports, Our World, Shapes, and Logo. Here, too, there is only a small difference in the number of Indoor (245) and Outdoor (227) props, but the second largest number of prop options are in the "Our World" category, which includes images of every U.S. state and every country's flag. This suggests that the United States of America is equivalent to all the countries in the world, and that the U.S. can (or should) represent the world.

In Character

Gendered, as well as raced and classed assumptions also pervade Bitstrips', ToonDoo's, and Pixton's preset character options. In all cases, there are more identifiably male characters than female ones,

Fig. 1: ToonDoo's Characters

more identifiably white characters than characters of color, and more of the male characters have identifiable professions, both white and blue collar. The images ToonDoo uses to represent their character categories are illustrative examples:

The head of a white man with a very pronounced jawline represents Men, the head of a white woman with a heart-shaped face, large eyes, and pouty mouth represents Women, a U.S. football player represents Sports, and the heads of George W. Bush and Salman Rushdie represent Famous characters.

Bitstrips and ToonDoo also give users the opportunity to create their own characters, and asking students to do so moves them from analyses of how others construct reality to compositions in which they narrate their own versions of reality. Compared to the preset character options, the character design tools appear unconstrained, but when compared to the variety of identities we embody, cultural assumptions regarding how we should embody which identities reappear.

Bitstrips' character design options are structured as an ordered series of choices, the first of which is gender—male or female, suggesting that individuals are identified first and foremost by their gender. This assumption is reinforced by differences between the options for male and female characters. Male characters have 13 facial hairstyle options, while female characters have 9 blushes, 18 eye shadows, 9 lipsticks, and 4 chest sizes to choose from. After gender, users select from 18 skin tones. These selections do not overtly ref-

erence racialized identities, but the "default" skin tone for both males and females is one stereotypically associated with those raced as White. Next, users choose from nine face shapes, 18 hair colors, 5 hair lengths, three hair types, 9 jaws, 25 eyebrows, 4 eyelashes, 18 eye shapes, 9 pupil shapes, 18 eye colors, 18 noses, 9 mouths, 9 face details, 19 glasses, 5 heights, and 7 builds. Because a Bitstrips character cannot be Slender and Buff or Heavy and Buff, these options do not appear to account for all possible body types. The choice of outfits, including casual, sporty, work, dressy, outdoor, and costume styles comes last, and only 342 hairstyle choices outweigh the 253 outfit options. This suggests that individuality is defined more by what you wear than what you look like in those clothes.

Like Bitstrips, ToonDoo's default character is a young, ostensibly White individual, but unlike Bitstrips, ToonDoo's TraitR options for facial and body characteristics are not labeled with alphabetic text. They also do not have to be made in a particular order or in relation to a male/female gender binary. Further, users can upload an image for points of reference in constructing a character.

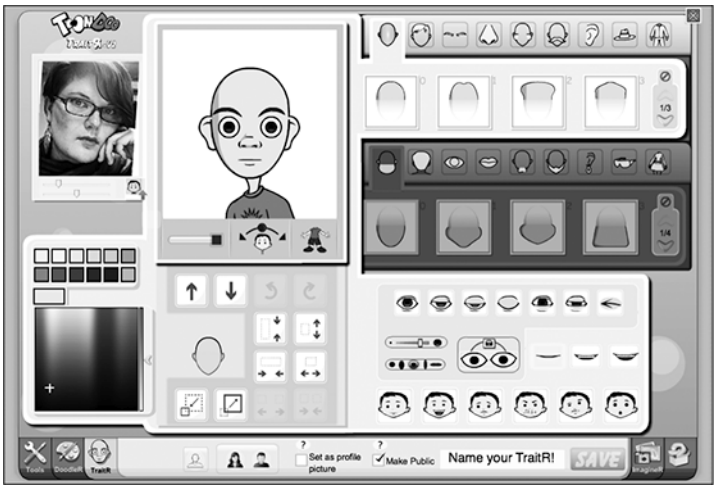

Fig. 2: ToonDoo's TraitR

As such, asking students to enact a comparison of these to character creation tools *by* creating characters with these tools provides opportunities to discuss both the characteristics often assumed to be the most significant to identity construction and those students think should be valued.

Practicing Prismatic Pedagogy

I will conclude with two examples of my own in which I taught composition pedagogy from a prismatic perspective. The first is Eng-

lish 1101, the first of two freshman composition courses required by the university at which I teach. The second is English 3135 Visual Rhetoric, an upper-level undergraduate elective offered by my university's English department.

Once Upon a Composition: Fairy Tales, Myths, and Legends in English 1101.

Working from the understanding that 1) myths, legends, and fairy tales communicate ideological perspectives and that 2) references to and revised versions of fairy tales, myths, and legends in popular culture are examples of antistasis, Students in the English 1101 class I taught in the fall of 2009, as their final projects, composed their own comic book versions of a myth, legend, or fairy tale meant to comment on and/or challenge what the student identified as the ideological perspective of a myth's, legend's, or fairy tale's earlier iteration. Building towards this goal, we read and responded to three retellings of fairy tales, myths, and legends: *Legends in Exile* (volume one of Willingham's *Fables* comic book series), Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*, and Junko Mizuno's graphic novel *Cinderalla*. I chose these texts as they exemplified the kind of critical analytical and (re)composition work I hoped they would accomplish in their final projects.

Legends in Exile includes a cast of characters from many fairy tales that students familiar with Western culture and the literature it has produced would find easy to identify: Snow White, The Big Bad Wolf, Prince Charming, Beauty and the Beast, Jack and the Beanstalk, the witch in Hansel and Gretel, and Pinocchio. There are also a few characters that may be less recognizable to students but are still very much part of the fairy tale tradition, notably Blue Beard and Rose Red. On the surface, or rather, the obvious plotline of the story is the disappearance of Snow White's twin sister, Rose Red, and the process of finding out what actually happened to her. As the story unfolds, we find out that the fables currently residing in New York in a small, cloistered neighborhood protected from sight by powerful spells have actually been forced out of their "homelands" by an as yet nameless "adversary." We also learn that the violent acts committed by fables in the community while they were still living in the homelands have been forgiven in order for the community to live together peacefully. Beyond that, the text seems to offer some pretty straightforward invitations to compare the ideological perspectives represented by the *Fables* characters and those characters and narratives to which they refer.

The clearest examples of this center around the relationships of fairy tale characters whose unions were supposed to end happily ever after. Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella, for example, are all the ex-wives of Prince Charming. This not only invites us to consider the extent to which the heroes in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella* share characteristics, but also the possibility that the man they were supposed to trust implicitly was actually a philandering Casanova. The marital relationship between Beauty and

Fig. 3: *Fables'* Garden of Eden © Bill Willingham, Courtesy of DC Comics.

the Beast is not idyllic either. The curse Belle supposedly lifted by falling in love with the Beast lifts temporarily and changes him back into his beast-like form whenever she becomes angry with him, inviting us to consider the ways in which gendered and sexual identities are assumed to be mutually constitutive.

When looking at the visual representation of these stories, a deeper connection can also be made between the fairy tales and the culture(s) that created them. Before the beginning of each chapter, there is a full-page illustration using a different style than the frame-by-frame images within each of the chapters. They employ a more real-

istic style and do not seem to correspond directly with the plot of the particular chapter that follows each of these illustrations. They therefore give the impression of offering a story behind the story, or possibly foreshadowing of events to come. The former is clearly the case in the first of these illustrations. Snow White is holding an apple in front of a very large tree while also sitting on part of the wolf costume that has been unzipped to allow the human male manifestation of The Big Bad Wolf, Bigby, to emerge bare-chested. The illustration clearly alludes to Judeo-Christian mythological figures: Adam, Eve, and the Tree of Knowledge. The tree is, in fact, placed firmly in the center of the illustration. At the very top, along the edge of the tree line, is a faint outline of a metropolitan city, which we may assume to be New York, the setting for the story enclosed in the chapters that follow. The city almost seems to be an outgrowth of the tree, as if the ensuing story is a new outgrowth of an older tale. The arrangement of this visual juxtaposition invites us to consider the extent to which the biblical story is the foundation of the reinterpreted fairy tale and whether the biblical story could itself be a fairy tale. As such, when looking at the plotlines and the visual representations used to reinforce those plotlines and suggest others, we can see how the verbal and visual reinterpretation of fairy tales presents us with persuasive invitations to consider the relationship between the cultural contexts of the representations and their allusions. And, because of students' expected familiarity with many of the stories that get reinterpreted in *Legends in Exile*, I began the course by asking students to read it and write comparative analyses of the characterization of one of the fairy tale characters in the text and an older version of a story in which that character appears.

Some of the students wrote about how Willingham used the contemporary setting to suggest that the values present in the older tales no longer apply to modern Western culture. However, many students argued that despite the very different situations in which the characters found themselves, some of the same cultural assumptions could still be pinpointed in both versions of the tales. In an essay on Jack and the Beanstalk, one student pointed out how both characters represented immaturity and foolish greed, though in *Legends in Exile*, these characteristics are not rewarded.

Moving on from *Legends in Exile*, we read *American Gods*, an alphabetic novel by writer and comic book artist Neil Gaiman that incorporates mostly mythic and legendary characters. It also raises more direct questions about the origins of myths and legends, the power belief has to physically manifest itself, and the effect relocation has on belief. The plot centers around the understanding that, as people move, they bring their beliefs with them and that people have been coming to America with their gods for thousands of years. The relocation, however, does not leave the people or their gods unchanged. Many of the gods are forgotten, and by the end of the twentieth century, are forced to work as taxi drivers, store clerks, hookers, and con men. They have been forgotten in part as a result of the differences in location, but also the 'advancement' of civilization to a point at which mythical explanations for the beginning of the world or natural phenomena are no longer accepted as valid. In America,

new gods of technology have slowly risen to power and now want complete control. In order to do so, they believe they must exterminate any old gods still hanging around. These older gods have come from Norse mythology, Native American mythology, Indian mythology, African mythology, West Indian mythology, and Japanese mythology. There are also quite a few older American legends such as Johnny Appleseed who have fallen out of favor and who rally to the side of the older gods at the urging of Odin, the Norse All-Father, or "Wednesday," as he's referred to throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, (spoiler alert!) the gods go to war with one another, and, as it turns out, Odin and Loki, another god in the Norse pantheon, worked together to orchestrate this war so that there would be blood sacrifices in their names. This suggests that if belief creates the gods, and gods represent belief, then belief is also powerful enough to create beliefs that sacrifice each other for power. Three different groups of students led class discussions on different sections of this text, and the beliefs we discussed related to the nature of love and relationships, sin, forgiveness, friendship, and death.

To follow these discussions up and apply the connections we made between the characters and story line to larger cultural beliefs, I asked the students to select a pop culture text predominated by references to a fairy tale, myth, or legend and based on a rhetorical analysis of that text, argue for which particular belief(s) these references represent. Many students chose to analyze contemporary recastings of fairy tales such as Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast, though some chose more obscure, filmic representations of Christian mythology.

I chose Mizuno's *Cinderalla* to give students the opportunity to look at how a very familiar story has been transformed by its relocation to another geographical and cultural location and intentionally used to challenge some of the core values represented by earlier ver-

Fig. 4: *Cinderalla* Centerfold [© Junko Mizuno]

sions of the story. Originally written in Japanese, it was translated in English and republished in the U.S. two years after its publication in Japan. Judging from the inside cover alone, it is clear that Mizuno is playing with the standards of femininity and sexuality reinforced by earlier versions of Cinderella with the outrageous infantalization and hypersexualization of her Cinderalla character.

The style in which the characters are drawn and the alterations to the plotline suggest that this text is playing with the childlike quality of the fairy tales that have an explicitly moralizing intent, as well as the very sexualized and darker imagery used in older folk versions intended for adults. Because of the ways in which Mizuno visually and verbally challenges gender constructions present in other versions of the Cinderella story by outrageous, and hilarious, exaggeration, I thought her text would offer students a good example of the kind of work I asked them to complete for their final assignment, a visual narrative, in which students create their own reinterpreted fairy tale, myth, or legend.

At the beginning of the tale, Cinderalla works with her father at his yakitori (barbequed chicken kebab) restaurant that he's made famous with his secret barbeque sauce. He dies suddenly from overeating, and after a short period of mourning, Cinderalla discovers that her father is a zombie who is perfectly happy to come back to the restaurant and continue his work. He brings back with him a new wife and two stepdaughters (also zombies) who cause quite a few problems. Cinderalla's stepmother must be fed constantly or she will pass out, one stepsister is constantly requesting new bras be made for her larger than average breasts, and the other stepsister is constantly harassing the patrons with sexual advances in her quest to get married. Cinderalla herself falls in love with a young male zombie and gets her fairy-in-training friend to turn her into a zombie for one night so that she can attend the concert at which "the Prince" is performing. While escaping so that he will not see her transformation back into a live young woman, Cinderalla, still in zombie form, loses an eye. The Prince finds the eye, and vows to make the woman whose eye it is his wife. Upon hearing this, several of the Prince's adoring zombie fans pluck out their eyes in the hope that Cinderella's eye will fit their sockets. Cinderalla successfully reunites with her zombie love interest when her fairy godmother casts a spell to send all of the eyes of these young women back to them, leaving only Cinderalla without the eye that Prince then returns to her. Cinderalla and her extended family live happily ever after in a restaurant remodeled as a castle where the Prince is the nightly entertainment.

I hoped that the effect of visual choices on the arrangement and presentation of a story would strike students more clearly as a result of their unfamiliarity with the style Mizuno uses or the specific genres of manga her style represents and challenges. I also hoped the text would allow us to talk at greater length about how its visual construction does just as much to convey meaning as the verbal construction and what kinds of visual choices students can make in constructing their own projects. In reality, students were more challenged by this text than I anticipated, possibly because more than the other two texts, it called some of their gendered and raced as-

sumptions into question. Some of them, however, were able to apply Mizuno's formula to their own final projects. The more successful ones used a variety of rhetorical recontextualization strategies, including changing a character's gender, changing a character's narrative role, representing a character's symbolic significance with a visual metaphor, and using first-person narration to personalize previously impersonal narratives.

(Re)Visions: A Critically Comic Approach to Visual Rhetoric

Using Ball and Kristin L. Arola's *visualizing composition 2.0* as a jumping-off point, English 3135 began by identifying formal features of visual culture. I chose Ball and Arola's text as it offered definitional-to-analytical explorations of several visual rhetorical elements (e.g. color, contrast, alignment, organization, etc.) exemplified by both student-produced and professional work. We catalogued these elements as the first set of criteria for the visual rhetorical analyses to be completed (both formally and informally) in and for the course. We also read and discussed the second chapter of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994) concurrently with completing the *visualizing composition 2.0* exercises to begin considering how visual rhetoric functions within the medium of comics. Additionally, I chose *Understanding Comics* as an example of the kind of work I was looking for in students' final projects, i.e., a sequential narrative exploration of how the topic of interest has been (visually) represented and understood and what we should (not) think/do about that representation and understanding. In other words, I hoped it would provide an example of a non-fictional approach to sequential narrative.

To complicate our understanding of the visual rhetorical elements thus far identified and to provide examples of possible research topics for the final project, we read Wysocki's (2004) "The Sticky Embrace of Beauty: On Some Formal Relations in Teaching about the Visual Aspects of Texts," the first three chapters of John Berger's (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, and Stephen Greenblatt's (1989) "Culture" essay. During class discussions of each of these readings, we added to our list of analytical criteria "bodies/embodiment," "gender," "race," "class," "age," "sexuality," "strangeness," "absence," "genre," "medium," "foreground/middle ground/background," "values," and "symbolism," discussing ways in which all can be visually represented.

While we consistently drew parallels between contemporary digital culture, the media, and genres of visual print culture addressed in the readings thus far addressed, I paired our discussion of the introductory chapter of Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) with volume one of Mike Carey and Peter Gross' *The Unwritten* to engage the class in considering the increasingly blurry distinction between producers and consumers of digital culture, the opportunities digital media provide to both support and challenge a given status quo, the rhetorical function of intertexuality in contemporary digital culture, i.e., the contextual meaning created by references to specific texts and/or genre con-

ventions, and how each of these subjects might be addressed in a fictional sequential narrative form. Several students identified their research topics based on their critical engagement with *Convergence Culture* and *The Unwritten*, topics such as the ways digital media can be used to expand comic artists' creative opportunities and the definition of comics itself, the use of social media in human rights campaigns, the romanticization of suicide in contemporary music and movies, shifts in sitcom representations of "awkwardness," the misrepresentation of Zen in self-help books, and possible parallels between contemporary celebrity worship and human sacrifice. After submitting project proposals identifying their research topics, students completed digital collages of topic-based images and rhetorical analyses of these images in order to begin researching their topic and considering which textual and genre references they could/should make in constructing their sequential narratives.

Before beginning work on their final projects, students completed annotated bibliographies to engage them in more deeply considering the complexities of their topics and read the first chapter of McCloud's *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* (2006), which provides a useful overview of many of the rhetorical choices it is necessary to contemplate in constructing a sequential narrative, be it a strip, book, or another variation. We also used class time to explore several of the options for digital composition I had given them, including *Comic Life*, *ToonDoo*, *BitStrips*, and *Pixton*, and most students chose to use *Bitstrips* or some combination of hand-drawing and design software. For the remainder of the course, students workshopped drafts, presented finished narratives, and composed written rhetorical analyses of these narratives. The narratives and analyses both evidenced the progress students' made in understanding and composing visual rhetorical texts. Certainly, the level of artistic skill varied, but students' rhetorical uses of available means were apparent in their intentional adaptations of genre conventions employed in the media they chose to research. The student exploring webcomics made a webcomic; the student exploring (mis)representations of Zen used basic forms, a watercolor technique, and a black and white color scheme in reference to superficial perceptions of Zen; and the student comparing celebrity worship to human sacrifice employed several visual references to classic horror films.

To conclude, I hoped this course's focus on comics as examples of antistatic recontextualization would give students a more complex sense of how their realities are constructed and what rhetorical tools they have at their disposal to envision, represent, and potentially enact the realities in which they want to exist. And, based on the coursework students completed, this hope has been realized. Accordingly, this course provides one solid approach to challenging the continued primacy of textual analysis in undergraduate composition courses that also addresses the rhetorical construction of ideology so central to a prismatic composition pedagogy.

Notes

[i] Though textbooks are not traditionally recognized as scholarship, I do so here.

[ii] I use the term "intersecting" as a conscious reference to Patricia Hill Collins' definition of intersectionality as "mutually constructing features of social organization."

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