

so you want to be **a superhero?**

How the Art of Making Comics in an Afterschool Setting Can Develop Young People's Creativity, Literacy, and Identity

by **Sarita Khurana**

What do you think of when you imagine comics? Superheroes in colorful costumes who fight dastardly villains? Cuddly bunnies, mice, and cats? McCloud's (1993) classic definition of comics is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9). By that definition, the epic story contained in a pre-Columbian picture manuscript "discovered" by Cortes around 1519 qualifies as a comic. This 36-foot brightly colored screen tells of the great Mixtec military and political hero 8-Deer Tiger's Claw. The Bayeux Tapestry, a 230-foot tapestry detailing the Norman conquest of England in 1066, as well as Egyptian paintings, Trajan's Column, Greek urn paintings, and Japanese scrolls, also qualify as comics (McCloud, 1993).

Another example is Electro Magnetic Man, created by Sal¹, a sixth grader at the Educational Alliance's afterschool program at School of the Future in New York City. "Electro Magnetic Man is, like, 15 years old, and he lives in Manhattan. There was an experiment and he blew up and got supercharged... His powers are electricity that goes out of his hair... and he can fly and stuff.... His enemy is Dr.



A Manga character created by one of the comic art class students

SARITA KHURANA is the director of Community Schools and Youth Services for the Educational Alliance. She received her master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Risk and Prevention Program. She is also a filmmaker; she recently directed *B.E.S. (Bangla East Side)*, a documentary about immigrant Bangladeshi youth growing up in the Lower East Side of New York City. She is currently working on a documentary film about Bollywood background dancers, to be completed in 2005.

Vergon Van Stratameyer who clones evil military geniuses like Hitler and Napoleon to take over the world... His real name is John Strapper and he's like really responsible and serious and but he doesn't want anyone to find out who he is because it would be hard for him" (interview, May 4, 2004).

A few months ago, in a visit to a bookstore, I went past an aisle of graphic novels, how-to-draw books, and comic collections. To my surprise, I saw about ten teenagers sitting on the floor or leaning against the bookshelves, with their backpacks in disarray around them. Mind you, it was 3:30 in the afternoon on a beautiful spring weekday in New York City. What were all these young people doing? They were reading. This assertion may come as a shock to those who perpetuate the myth that young people don't like to read—certainly not outside of required school reading, certainly not on a nice day when they could be playing basketball or video games. Yet comics constitute a whole genre of reading material that fascinates many young people.

I hear the skeptics say, "Well, comics aren't real reading material; those are just cartoons with words like 'Pow!' and 'Wham!' masquerading as dialogue." Such skeptics are missing an educational opportunity. At the Educational Alliance's afterschool programs, Alex Simmons, a teaching artist who specializes in comic production, teaches a group of fifteen middle- and high-school students The Art of Making Comics. In this class, comics are taken seriously both as reading material and as an art medium. Participants learn not only the craft of comic production—including storyline development, character profiles, sequential storytelling, and illustration—but also many of the skills that support literacy development and identity development in adolescents.



Comics and the Development of Multiple Literacies

Comic art is one of the most popular storytelling media around the globe. From classic American comic strips to Japanese Manga, comics cover subjects ranging from humorous teen angst to social commentary. Youth are naturally excited to have a chance to draw their own characters and develop their own stories in comics class. After all, they've been reading comics for a long time, often starting with newspaper comic strips, and they've been familiar with animated characters since they were introduced to Saturday morning cartoons and video games. Comics class in an afterschool program is a natural draw for many young people. Older youth, in particular, vote with their feet when it comes to regular participation in afterschool programs. Many afterschool programs have naturally chosen to align themselves with youth culture, promoting activities to which young people are drawn, such as hip-hop dance, photography, fashion club, and soccer. To that list we can add comics. As Shirley Brice Heath (2001) has stated, "For some children and youth [afterschool programming] fosters a sense of self-worth and a host of talents—particularly linguistic and creative—that classrooms neither have the time nor legal permission to foster" (p. 10).

I believe that teaching reading is best left to school-day teachers; however, an afterschool comics class can give young people the opportunity to enhance, develop, and strengthen the skills they learn in school while engaging them in various kinds of literacy work. Though

much of the vast body of research on literacy instruction has concentrated on young children, Alvermann (2002) has focused on effective literacy instruction for adolescents. She points out that today's society demands fluency not only in reading, but in a multitude of areas including

I hear the skeptics say, "Well, comics aren't real reading material; those are just cartoons with words like 'Pow!' and 'Wham!' masquerading as dialogue." Such skeptics are missing an educational opportunity.

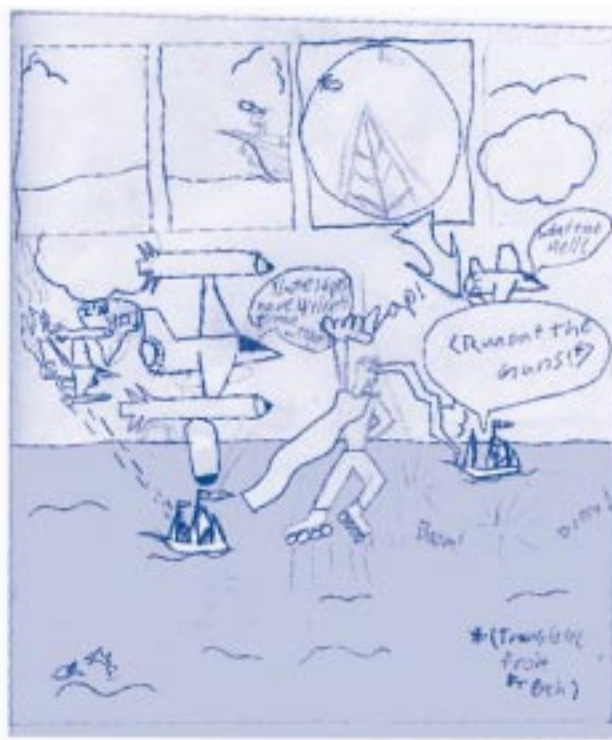
computer, visual, graphic, and scientific literacy.

Effective literacy instruction for adolescents acknowledges that all uses of written language (e.g., studying a biology text, interpreting an online weather map, and reading an Appalachian Trail guide) occur in specific places and times as part of broader societal practices (e.g., formal schooling, searching the Internet, and hiking).... [It] builds on elements of both formal and informal literacies. It does so by taking into account students' interests and needs while at the same time attending to the challenges of living in an information-based economy during a time when the bar has been raised significantly for literacy achievement. (Alvermann, 2002, pp. 190–191)

Alvermann specifies a number of areas that effective adolescent literacy instruction addresses: issues of self-efficacy; student engagement in diverse settings with a variety of texts, including textbooks, hypermedia texts, and digital texts; the literacy demands of subject area classes, particularly for struggling readers; and participatory instructional approaches that actively engage adolescents in their own learning (Alvermann, 2002). The art of making comics is a viable medium for addressing several of these areas.

Scott McCloud's 1993 book *Understanding Comics* is a foundational text in comics theory. On the first page, he summarizes the appeal of comics for adolescents in his own story: "When I was a little kid I knew exactly what comics were. Comics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art. Stupid stories and guys in tights. I read real books, naturally. I was much too old for comics. But when I was in eighth grade, a friend of mine (who was a lot smarter than I was) convinced me to give comics another look and lent me his collection. Soon, I was hooked!" (McCloud, 1993, p. 2).

Being "hooked" is exactly how I would describe most of the students in Alex's comics class. In one of my first visits, I met Sal, the sixth-grade comic artist. Sal could not stop talking about Electro Magnetic Man. "Who?" I asked, in



Sal's Electro Magnetic Man

deep amusement and interest. "Electro Magnetic Man," Sal repeated with serious firmness. "Oh, OK," I said, trying to get it right, "Tell me about Electro Magnetic Man." And that was the beginning of my immersion into the world of youth comic production.

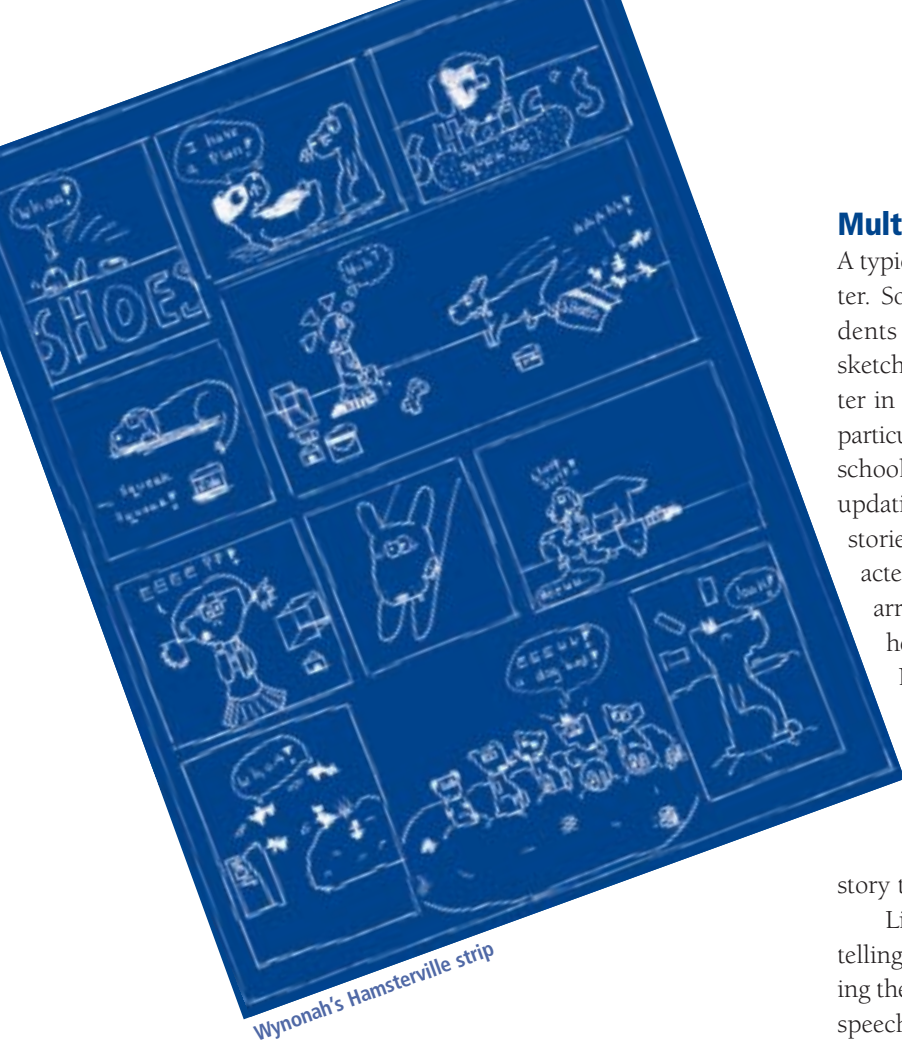
The Background of the Comics Class

The Educational Alliance, an old settlement house in the Lower East Side of New York City, serves children

and families in a number of capacities, including Head Start, afterschool, and mental health programs. My role there is to oversee the development of community schools and youth programs. My research for this article took place at School of the Future, a public middle and high school in Manhattan with which we've partnered for the past five years to provide an afterschool program. Our partnership with School of the Future is like several others we have with schools across New York City, where we support and expand the school day by providing young people with enrichment opportunities they do not usually get in school. I regularly work with the Alliance's afterschool director at School of the Future to oversee the program, but during my research for this article, I participated simply as an observer of the class.

Students at School of the Future are sixth to twelfth graders from all over the city—a diverse mix of African-American, Latino, Asian, and white students. Of the 550 students enrolled in the school, approximately 300 are part of the daily afterschool program. Most attend the program because they like what's offered there: arts, technology, sports, academics, and recreation. Students select their own classes each semester and receive elective school credit for regularly participating in and completing the classes. This credit helps build connections with the school day and provides recognition of the learning students do after school. All our classes use project-based learning; culminating projects include performances and visual art displays.

During the spring 2004 semester, the comics class had 15 students, about two-thirds from the middle school, and the rest from the high school. As many girls were enrolled in the class as boys. About half of the stu-



dents were new to class, while the rest were re-enrolled for at least a second semester.

The instructor, Alex Simmons, has been working in the afterschool setting for the past four years. His background is in the comics industry; he spent many years producing and writing his own work, *BlackJack*, a comic about an African-American soldier of fortune set in Tokyo in the mid-1930s. As an African-American man, he is a veteran of dealing with the difficult race and class dynamics of an industry that has traditionally been managed by white men catering to a white male audience. Of the many afterschool educators/teaching artists that I know, Alex is one of the best. He cares deeply about his students and is extremely knowledgeable and passionate about his medium.

My research took place in spring 2004. I attended the comics class every Wednesday afternoon for three hours during 12 weeks. I not only observed the students and teacher but also participated in several of the exercises during class time; in addition, I spoke with students—individually and in groups—informally as they were working, pulling some of them aside for more formal interviews during class time. Alex and I met several times outside class to speak about the class and various students' work.

Multiple Literacies in the Comics Process

A typical day in the comics class begins with a lot of chatter. Sometimes I arrive before 3 PM to find several students already in the classroom, pulling out their sketchpads and notebooks, as the rest of the students filter in from snack downstairs in the auditorium. On one particular day, I notice Hillary and Wynonah, two middle-school girls, already seated next to each other, busily updating each other on what's happened in their comic stories since last week's class: Wynonah's animal characters in "Hamsterville" have run away from home and arrived in New York City; Hillary is still working on her sketch of her main character, Gladiator Girl.

Most of the students sit in twos and threes, working and talking even before Alex has officially started the three-hour class. Others sit by themselves, usually wearing headphones, working in their own musical space. Someone always brings in a new comic book to show or has a story to tell about his or her character's latest adventure.

Like any other written medium, comic book storytelling has its own conventions. Students begin by learning the basic elements of the page: panel, thought-bubble, speech balloon, caption box. Other basics are visual rather than word-based: drawing the human body, learning perspective. Ultimately, students learn how to use both images and words to construct complex stories.

Since not all students have fluid drawing skills, the first 15 minutes of class is usually an exercise in one-minute sketching. Two students volunteer to be models, while the rest tell them how to pose. For instance, when Wynonah and Hassan volunteered, the rest of the class called out action poses: "You guys have to act like... Hassan is riding a horse, and Wynonah, you're on the floor in pain." "OK, both of you pretend you're doing a *Matrix* pose like jumping between buildings." Then we switched to two new volunteers: "OK, Jake, you're dancing, and Mia, you're sitting in a yoga pose near his feet." "Jake, you lie down, and Mia, you stand up and pretend you're going to kick him in the stomach" (field notes, February 10, 2004). These exercises get students to see the world from different angles and help them with their drawing styles. Students work on basic drawing techniques such as line, shape, color, and perspective. They can have their classmates pose in stances that occur in their storyline, so they can practice drawing something that is relevant to their work. Sometimes Alex asks the students to make a one-minute sketch into a comic strip, so that the drawing practice becomes an exercise in sequential storytelling.

When sketching time is over, students get down to work on their projects. New students begin with three- or four-panel comic strips like those in newspapers. Even a three-panel strip requires a storyline; it has to have a beginning, middle, and end. Students need to think about elements of story structure: What is the genre—science fiction, adventure, fantasy? Who are the characters? What is the mood—humorous, serious, or suspenseful? What is the point of the story? What are the first and last shots the audience will see, and what's in the middle? Sal's first four-panel comic strip about Electro Magnetic Man introduced the character, who is shown being zapped by telephone wires. The last panel shows him with electric yellow zigzag hair and a bolt of lighting coming out of his left hand, announcing, "I'm Electro Magnetic Man!" This may not seem like the kind of writing students have to do in English class, but they are learning to use such basic literary elements as plot, character, and theme.

Once students feel comfortable developing a basic comic strip, they can move on to more elaborate work. One option is to develop their initial strip into a series. Alex asks students to think of themselves as comic artists producing for a daily newspaper, so that they make a new comic strip for every class and complete a whole series within a semester. Malcolm, a sixth grader new to the class, is working on a series called "Fowl Prey," in which a group of birds conspire to conquer the world. The first strip shows a group of seven or eight birds meeting in the basement of a house, establishing their purpose: to rid the city of other gangs. By the end of the spring semester, Malcolm has produced eight "Fowl Prey" comic strips. The birds have come a long way in carrying out their dastardly plot—and Malcolm has come an equally long way in his ability to use the elements of narrative.

Another project option for students is to develop their own comic book. Newer students usually work on producing a four-page comic book, while more seasoned students may produce a complete 22-page comic. The process is the same, and Alex has a way of breaking it down into manageable chunks. Like many good after-school educators, he starts where the students are—with their enthusiasm and ideas. This practice of engaging young people's interests, taking their skill level into account, is central to good youth development.

This may not seem like the kind of writing students have to do in English class, but they are learning to use such basic literary elements as plot, character, and theme.

Character and Story Development

Comic book production begins with developing a profile sheet for the main character: What is her motivation and background? What are the main events in her life? Linta, another sixth grader, shows me the profile sheet for her character, Muoliko, drawn in full Japanese Manga style and personality. It reads: "Muoliko—she is turned into a half-cat for stealing and eating someone's magic red bean cakes. She eats them and is kicked out of her house by her sister because her younger brother is allergic to red bean cakes. She takes care of herself. Muoliko tries to find a way to undo the spell. Tomboyish, Age 11, comes from the planet Copiko" (profile sheet obtained in an interview, April 28, 2004).

Next, students write pitch sheets similar to the ones professional comic artists use to present their work. In this storyline summary, students are not yet working on the exact details, but they have a good idea of the story structure as a whole. Next come script layouts: thumbnails of each page of the comic book. This is the step in which students work out the details of their story. A script layout can take a student an entire semester to produce, because it includes a rough sketch not only of text but also of images.

Together these pieces—character profile sheet, pitch sheet, and script layout—make up a presentation package. Students could go to an industry representative with a professional portfolio of their work. Once the presentation package is complete, students move on to actually writing, drawing, inking, lettering, and coloring the entire comic.

Learning Professional Standards

Alex likes to intertwine the conventions of the comic book industry, which he knows from the inside, into the class. He helps students connect with the larger world and gives them room to envision themselves as professional comic artists. Linta, creator of Muoliko, tells me that she has been interested in Japanese comics and animation since she watched a Hayao Miyazaki film called *My Neighbor Totoro*, and then *Sailor Moon*, when she was six. She tells me that she wants to grow up to be a Manga artist and that the class has allowed her to pursue her vocation.

In comics class, young people explore all sides of the comic book industry. They learn the various roles, such as penciler, writer, inker, editor, colorist, and letterer; sometimes they practice these roles on each other's work, in the way production is typically broken down in the industry.

Students also get a sense of what the world of comics is like with trips to the Museum of Comic Art or to comic book publication houses such as DC Comics or Marvel.

Multiple Points of Entry into Literacy

Comic book reading can serve as one of many possible points of entry into literacy. When I asked Hassan how long he'd been reading comics, he said that he'd been into comics since he was five: "Yeah, I used to play lots of video games and my dad wanted me to learn to read so he gave me comic books to read like the original Batman and Superman.... That helped me be more interested in reading and give it a try" (interview, May 4, 2004).

The varieties of comic books and graphic novels are as diverse as those of any literature, ranging from science fiction, fantasy, and adventure to teen romance and humor. One interesting phenomenon has been the introduction of Japanese Manga. While, in the West, mainstream comics are almost entirely for children and adolescents, in Japan, many different types of Manga are written for people of all ages and both genders. It is not uncommon to see a middle-aged man reading Manga on the subway. Manga comics are taken as a serious form of literature; while American comics are 22 pages long, the average Manga comic has 350 pages and contains as many as 15 chapters. The introduction of Manga in the U.S. has opened up a whole new audience for comics: girls. The comic industry in the U.S. has always been geared for a white male audience; the vast majority of characters are white males in some superhero fantasy quest. However, there is a whole genre of Manga written specifically for girls. Such Manga as *Love Hina* and *Pitaten*, with their strong female leads, appeal to girls like Linta, who said she prefers "stories that have more build-up than American comics" (interview, April 28, 2004). Partly because of the popularity of Manga, at least half of the comics class is usually female, and many of the female students' characters reflect these Japanese comics.

Using Comic Art to Support Learning Standards

Comic storytelling is a rich medium with which after-school practitioners can build on the skills and knowledge students learn during the school day. Alex makes regular reference to what is taught in language arts, English, social studies, science, and history classes. He even has students work up single-panel political cartoons, which give the class an opportunity to discuss current events and politics.

Students develop what they learn in school in new ways, putting Greek mythology or their fifth-period science experiment into their comics. Of course, they also draw on popular culture references and their own experiences. Whether they're working from television, the latest video game, or someone they know, ultimately the class is about telling stories in visual and verbal form.

Engaging young people in comic production is a clever way to help them work on language arts skills. A look at the four New York State English language arts standards reveals how comics can enhance literacy instruction:

Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen and speak for information and understanding.

Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen and speak for literary response and expression.

Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

Standard 4: Students will read, write, listen and speak for social interaction. (New York State English Language Learning Standards, 2004)

Each of these standards is addressed in producing comics. A comic artist must process information by sequencing the plot of a comic before writing it, as demonstrated in students' development of a character profile sheet and script layouts. Comic art is an expressive, interpretive art form with a long history of techniques and aesthetics; students need to work at interpreting how the images and text work together to tell the story. In order to effectively tell a comic story, the artist must analyze and evaluate the underlying meaning

of the story. The artist must also interact socially with other readers; students often discuss their work in small groups in the comics class. The reading aspect of the standards is also addressed, as students further support their investment in comics by reading various publications, exploring different genres, and learning new vocabulary. Students often revise their work with the help of the instructor, going through several drafts to produce the final version.

The process by which Hassan, a seventh grader who has been in the comics class for two years, worked out his story demonstrates how comic production can promote research and inquiry skills as well. Hassan's comic features Hazara, an orphan who was raised in a monastery in 16th-century Japan. Of course the monks have trained him, so that now he is a super-powered Samurai warrior. Hassan came up with his character because he loves Samurai movies. But when put to the challenge of actually figuring

Comic book reading can serve as one of many possible points of entry into literacy.

out his character's life, Hassan had to do some research to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. Where did Samurais come from? How were they raised—in a noble family, as peasants? How were they trained?

Other students might be attracted to a different genre, such as sword and sorcery. Alex asks them what they know about history and mythology, so that they start by building on their own knowledge base. He shows them examples of how other comic artists have developed their settings. Then Alex helps students find appropriate books and encourages them to use the web to look up the relevant historical period and read about the places they want to use as settings.

On a recent visit, Sal showed me his latest Electro Magnetic Man strip, and I asked him to describe what was happening. "In the first panel, that's a U.S. battle ship patrolling the waters. In the second panel, that's Napoleon sailing in an old 48-gunner ship and it's about to attack the U.S. ship." "OK, wait," I say, "How do you know so much about ships?" (I had no idea what a 48-gunner ship might be.) I found out that Sal is a big fan of ships, and not only from watching *Master and Commander* one too many times. He told me about a collection of books about Horatio Hornblower and the British Royal Navy (interview, May 4, 2004). Although these books are too advanced for him to read, his love of ships has gotten him into listening to the books on tape. Reading them himself is certainly in his future.

Adolescent Identity Development through Comic Art

Producing comics not only supports young people's literacy development, but also promotes their identity development. As young people grapple with questions of identity during adolescence, comics production in the after-school program offers them a unique way to enter into an imagined world that allows them to experiment in safety



A panel from Malcolm's Fowl Prey

Comic art is an expressive, interpretive art form with a long history of techniques and aesthetics; students need to work at interpreting how the images and text work together to tell the story.

because it is their own creation. As McCloud (1993) explains, "entering the world of the cartoon, you see yourself... through factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and childlike features of characters" (p. 57). The cartoon "is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it..." (McCloud, 1993, p. 57). Inventing characters and storylines is a way for young people to express feelings, play out likes and dislikes, make choices, and test new ideas.

Eva's comic, *Night Shade*, illustrates how young people can use comic production to work out common adolescent identity issues. Eva, a ninth grader, is in her third year in the comics class. She has developed a complete 22-page comic book about Night Shade, a 16-year-old girl whose father was murdered by a police officer. Because the family is poor, Night Shade's father resorts to burglary in order to care for himself

and his daughter. On one such expedition, an alarm gets tripped and a police officer is called. Somehow, too much force is used, and Night Shade arrives on the scene to see her father beaten to death by the police officer. Night Shade swears to avenge her father's death by tracking down this police officer. As she has no means of survival, she does what she knows best—she steals. Inevitably, she is caught and sent to prison. There she meets a woman scientist who promises to give her superpowers if Night Shade will, on her release, take revenge on the assistant who gave the scientist up to the authorities. With this pact, Night Shade gains powers Eva described in an interview as “speed, strength, agility, and aim. Her secret weapon is the ability to use *night shade*, a poison that she can draw from her veins and inject into others” (interview, April 28, 2004). When Night Shade gets out of prison, she goes on a quest to find first the scientist's enemy and then her father's killer. Eva's first full-length comic ends at the point at which Night Shade has tracked down the scientist's assistant and is face to face with him in a late-night brawl in his laboratory.

Separation and Transformation

Like Night Shade, all of the main characters in these students' works are somehow in the world on their own. Whether they are cute, magical, or villainous animals like Wynonah's hamsters or Malcolm's birds, technoid warriors like Hassan's Hazara, or girls or boys who are physically transformed with new powers like Sal's Electro Magnetic Man or Linta's Muoliko, none of the main characters lives with their biological family. Many have been abandoned or orphaned by a parent's accidental or murderous death; others, with a history of family conflict, are kicked out of their homes or run away. This separation from the family is a prerequisite for the main character to begin his or her adventure in the world. Many adopt new families or friends along the way, usually someone who helps the main character develop his or her new powers and identity. I asked Hassan how Hazara became an orphan. “A demon inhabited his body, and

that body killed his parents. After he leaves the monastery, he becomes friends with other people, but I guess he's looking for his purpose. He's kind of soul-searching and dealing with this demon” (interview, May 4, 2004).

The fact that the characters are in the world on their own parallels the adolescents' own desire to explore their world. Through their characters, these young people try on new identities, playing with different subject positions. When the characters build community with new characters they meet, they are transforming themselves to adopt and occupy new spaces. In this moment, the young people are

figuring themselves out and making meaning of their world. In creating their comic characters—from the kind of personality they have to the clothes they wear, the time periods they occupy, and the adventures they seek—these young artists are defining a world of their own choosing.

Shirley Brice Heath writes that young people's art “layers identities and confuses categories of societal assignment” (Heath, 2001, p. 13). She says that young people's art resists their usual role assignments in the “real” world. Students' characters can be independent in the comic world, making choices that may not be available to their authors in their real lives, at least not until they are adults. For young people, who are usually marginalized in adult society, expressing themselves in artistic possibility, in imagined and futuristic scenarios, is an attempt to defy societal role assignments. Themes of crossing boundaries and of experimentation often appear in young people's art, especially in afterschool settings where youth have the freedom to create works of their own choosing.



Eva's character, Night Shade

Through their characters, these young people try on new identities, playing with different subject positions.

Social Critique

In her work on children's use of media and popular cultural symbols, Anne Dyson (1996) examines how young people's use of cultural symbols in their work reveals their view of the world and their values: “[C]hildren may position themselves within stories that reveal dominant ideological assumptions about categories of individuals and the relations between them—boys and girls, adults and children, rich people and poor, people of varied heritages,

physical demeanors, and societal powers” (p. 472). Eva’s *Night Shade* illustrates how the vehicle of comics provides young people with an opportunity to explore their own social worlds through reading and writing. Eva’s comic clearly takes issue with police brutality; it is a complex look at issues of power, class, and gender—issues Eva confronts in her daily life. Some of Eva’s friends in school are young men of color who typically face harassment by the police; in New York City, we often read about police misconduct in the daily newspapers. Eva uses the experience of her friends and her knowledge of the world in her comic book. Eva explained to me that she invented her storyline because she was “sick of the superhero” who arrives on the scene to save the day—like the police officer in *Night Shade*—and then is glorified for horrifying acts, “like beating someone to death and using excessive force” (interview, May 4, 2004). Eva has subverted the traditional role of the police officer as “good guy” to reveal both her critique of institutional power and her own process of grappling with issues of police brutality and the abuse of power and privilege.

Students’ appropriation of Manga characters or Samurai warriors also challenges the world of the traditional white male superhero. When I asked Hassan to describe Hazara, he said, “Well, he kind of reflects my personality—he can be serious, and he can get into trouble. He’s kind of irresponsible, but a good leader, and likes to fight” (interview, May 4, 2004). Having gotten to know Hassan, I was not surprised to hear that he related personally to the characters he was creating. The previous semester, he had created, for the end-of-year visual arts display, a dreadlocked superhero that he said was based on himself, “but someone with powers.” Students’ characters take on new identities of race, class, gender, and culture, often morphing all of these in ways that extend or parallel their own selves.

Creating Self through Literacy

Adolescents are in the midst of a soul-searching process of identity development. Comics have the potential to serve as a vessel for any number of ideas and images; they offer a temporal and liminal world young people can inhabit. In afterschool settings, a comics production class provides a safe, creative space where young people can test limits, exploring their worlds in outrageous and playful ways while at the same time developing literacy skills that support academic learning.

Comics have the potential to serve as a vessel for any number of ideas and images; they offer a temporal and liminal world young people can inhabit.

The semester ended with the students showing their work in the school’s second floor display cabinets as part of the end-of-year afterschool visual arts show. Alex had also made the students’ comics into an *ashcan*, a magazine of comic art, which he reproduced for students to take home. Many of the students will sign up for the comics class next semester to continue working on their pieces or to start new projects. Some will continue to inhabit their comic worlds over the summer, catching up on their favorite comic books or continuing to work on their original stories. The comics class has been a fun and engaging way for students to spend their Wednesday afternoons in the afterschool program; it has also provided a semester of learning, supporting literacy skills, and exploring new worlds.

References

- Alvermann, D. (2002). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34(2), 189–208.
- Dyson, A. (1996). Cultural constellations and childhood identities: On Greek gods, cartoon heroes, and the social lives of schoolchildren. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(3), 471–495.
- Heath, S. (2001). Three’s not a crowd: Plans, roles and focus in the arts. *Educational Researcher*, 30(7), 10–17.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: Paradox Press.
- New York State English Language Learning Standards. (2004). University of the State of New York: State Education Department.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Alex Simmons and the students in The Art of Making Comics afterschool class during the spring 2004 semester at School of the Future. Thanks also to the Robert Bowne Foundation for supporting this research and writing with their fellowship, and in particular to Sara Hill and my fellow 2003–2004 Bowne research fellows, who provided a community and context for this writing. Thanks to Robin Bernstein, Rosa Agosto, and Mitzi Sinnott of the Educational Alliance for their commitment to young people and the communities we serve.

Notes

- ¹ All participants’ names are pseudonyms.