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Exploring the Culture and Cognition of Outsider Literacy Practices in Adult Readers of Graphic Novels

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EXPLORING THE CULTURE AND COGNITION OF OUTSIDER LITERACY

PRACTICES IN ADULT READERS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Title: Exploring the Culture and Cognition of Outsider Literacy Practices in Adult
        Readers of Graphic Novels

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Popular bias against comics and graphic novels represents a belief that multi-modal texts likely perpetuate deficit literacy. As such, experienced readers of these texts practice a kind of outsider literacy that heretofore has been primarily examined as a bridge to verbal-only literacy. Therefore this study, which explored how experienced adult graphic novel readers read graphic novels, has become the first to apply think-aloud protocols to graphic novels in an effort to discover what reading these complex texts entails, and what literacy experiences shape that reading.

Nine adult male and female graphic novel readers were recruited through snowball sampling, participated in tape-recorded think-aloud protocols for two graphic novels (superhero and shojo manga texts), and completed follow-up interview and literacy history questionnaires. The protocols, interviews and questionnaires were transcribed, coded, member-checked for accuracy, and reported both quantitatively (reading action frequency tables) and qualitatively (anecdotal case summaries.)

The study's results provided insight into the actual reading actions participants used and the experiences that shape their readings. Participants reported 28 specific reading actions that comprised six overarching reading practices. Of these 28 actions, eight were specific to visual-only aspects of the sampled texts, and another eight represented hybridized actions specific to verbo-visual aspects of the texts. All reading

actions reported were consistent with critical reasoning reading strategies traditionally associated with verbal-only texts. Furthermore, the literacy histories and follow-up interviews indicated how participants' approached (and ultimately appreciated) a text was greatly influenced by genre--and possibly by gender.

Conclusions drawn from these results indicated that participants read actively, critically, and creatively, and reported routinely experiencing a kind of visual and temporal fluidity that lent a cinematic quality to their readings. Genre also informed their literacy experiences as readers reported that their early encounters with superhero comics and graphic novels created the foundation for their expectations for these kinds of texts, a fact born out by their difficulty reading the shojo manga text. Lastly, a strong split between the male and female readers' observations of (and reactions to) perceived sexuality in each graphic novel suggested that readings may be gendered as well as culturally-situated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Endangered Reading

"Comics [are] a gateway drug for literacy." – Art Spiegelman

Reading, particularly the kind of reading that is done for pleasure, is more than just a process that leads to gaining information; it is a means by which life-long learners are created. Yet reading for pleasure among students in American society is becoming an endangered practice, perhaps because much current American education practice and prejudice reduces how literacy is defined to the narrowest of concepts: how well students perform on the high-stakes standardized reading tests required for compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act. Thus the kinds of texts and literacy practices that many adults and students use for pleasure reading, the roots of critical thinking practices and life-long learning, are not well understood because both the texts--comics, graphic novels and other multi-media texts--and the practices used to read these texts are situated "outside" of academic practice and as such are not considered to be academically worthy of consideration. Hence, despite the fact that most education institutions claim to be creating life-long learners, they are inadvertently inhibiting the very literacy and critical thinking practices that life-long learners enjoy, to the extent that current policies discourage the kinds of reading and literacy practices examined in this study. It is to this end, to discover what is the nature of "outsider" literacy, that this dissertation explored the outsider literacy practices of nine adult graphic novel readers.

In his books *Understanding Reading* and *Unspeakable Acts, Unnatural Practices,* Frank Smith (1994, 2003) takes to task the idea that reading is done primarily for information acquisition by focusing instead on the idea that reading, especially pleasure reading, is done for the experience or "satisfaction of the act" (Smith, 1994, p. 61), a kind of "free-range" learning, where "the learning of skills and acquisition of knowledge follows from the development of an interest in a subject" (Smith 2003, p. 66). Smith believes that "through reading we practice critical thinking," (p. 88), a position that is shared by other theorists and educators such as Paolo Freire. Freire (1987) writes that all reading, including reading that is done for pleasure, has larger social implications as literacy represents "the relationship of learners to the world" (p. viii), and therefore becomes a form of cultural politics. For Freire, literacy creates a space in which people practice critical thinking to create a critical consciousness that acts as a mediator between the dominant culture and their own culture (pp. 151-153). Freire discusses how the idea of dominant and subordinate languages within cultures can lead to the notion of superior and inferior culture, a notion that is evident in the selection of literary canons: which texts to include or exclude.

As increasing the emphasis on using standardized test scores as the sole determinant of learning and progress in American public schools forces schools to adopt teaching-to-the-test mentalities, the idea that reading is enjoyable is fast becoming an endangered concept in assessment-driven K-12 public education. In these circumstances, reading for the experience of reading is replaced by the efferent reading posture of mining texts for information to answer test questions correctly, pushing out pleasure for performance. The result of this approach to education is that education institutions are

paying lip-service to their mission statements of creating life-long learners for the more immediate--and most importantly, measurable--goals of creating proficient readers, positioning efferent reading stances as the only kind of literacy that is acceptable. When reading for pleasure is no longer valued, students lose opportunities to learn because, as Smith noted, learning stems from interest in a subject.

Steven Johnson (2005), author of *Everything Bad is Good for You*, shares Smith's concerns. Johnson's book highlights the connection between pop-culture entertainments and John Dewey's notion of "collateral learning" by exploring what Johnson calls the "Sleeper Curve"--the idea that the kind of pleasurable, pop-culture entertainments and narratives such as video games and television which many believe interfere with literacy and intellectual pursuits, may actually enhance critical thinking skills. Johnson's study proposes that the 50-year trend of rising American scores on I.Q. tests is related to the increasing complexity of our entertainment pastimes, primarily video gaming and television. Johnson posits that far from dulling intellectual abilities, the time spent viewing and interacting with these kinds of narrative, entertainment activities actually sharpens critical reasoning skills in the following ways:

- Video games focus attention on developing interactive, problem-solving skills, which include pattern recognition, trial-and-error probing, and persistence
- Television programs require a viewer to: track multiple plotlines, characters, and details across long spans of time; exercise emotional and visual intelligence to "read' characters for personalities, trustworthiness, and relationships; fill in narrative gaps

- Both television and video games are designed to be engagingly complex so that repetition (viewing and playing) is rewarded

- Communities of interest have developed around both games and shows through interactive blogs, where participants/viewers engage in discussion and debate sparked by the entertainment

Such activities suggest that a measure of sophisticated literacy would be required to navigate this pop-culture terrain, as pattern recognition, tracking complex narratives across time, completing narrative gaps, and discussion and debate all require the kinds of close reading and active imagination that the literacy practices of adult, life-long learners are supposed to represent.

Yet, from an educational perspective not all reading or literature, and therefore by extension, not all literacy--particularly the literacy related to popular culture--is valued. In his book *Living the Narrative Life*, Gian Pagnucci explores this academic bias against certain types of texts in the section titled "The Unacknowledged Hierarchy of Genre." According to Pagnucci, even "serious" literature is placed on a lesser footing than theoretical writing and expository texts, as academia "prize[s] abstraction and critical reflection" (Pagnucci, p. 17). Pagnucci explains that this anti-narrative bias comes from a deep-seated cultural belief that somehow narratives are "easier" than other kinds of writing: "People tend to look down on stories, to belittle them, to think they are just for children" (p. 44). He further illustrates this point with a description of the structure of most beginning composition classes where personal essays are usually assigned at the beginning of a writing course, saving the research paper, the more "difficult" or "important" type of writing, for the end (p. 43). Academia has an additional long-

standing cultural prejudice against pop-culture narratives such as comics and graphic novels in addition to the video games and television programs discussed above, as it presumes these kinds of narratives represent some form of sub-literature, a kind of narrative junk food that will to lead to or indicates deficit literacy, when in truth it may be quite the opposite, as Johnson's (2005) study suggests.

I shared this academic bias until a group of seventh grade reading remediation students awakened me to the possibility that I might be wrong about the value of their favorite kinds of narratives. Choosing free-reading material for class became a constant battleground for me in my struggles with these students as they made daily beelines for magazines, teen pulp fictions and--horror of horrors--the comics, despite my best efforts to introduce them to weightier, and in my opinion, worthier reading. Having had no success introducing them to the kinds of stories I believed would help them become better readers, I was completely surprised to discover the following fall that their reading test scores had actually increased; somehow the reading they had done with their comics, magazines, and pulp fictions may have helped improve their scores in some way that I did not understand. Observing my students' preferences for graphic narrative texts sparked an interest in learning more about these kinds of texts, as their persistence in ferreting out all the comics in our school library made me more aware of these texts' general presence. I began to notice adults reading what looked like long-form kinds of comic books--graphic novels. These were adults whom I knew personally to be intelligent and literate, not at all like the reading-resistant students in my test-prep remediation class. In fact, as my research for this dissertation will bear out, graphic

novels are increasingly popular with adults of both genders, even more so than with the teenage boys who remain the larger consumer of comics serial magazines.

This trend toward multi-modal narratives in adult reading material is important to examine because adult reading practice is ultimately what education wants its students to achieve. Furthermore, the kind of literacy these adults, as well as my own students, practice with multi-modal narratives may actually be far more sophisticated than is currently understood, a point explored in this dissertation and one with which Johnson (2005), Freire (1987) and Smith (1994, 2003) might agree. Thus while observing my students' preferences and practices with what I believed at the time to be sub-literate materials provided the impetus for me to explore graphic novels and outsider literacy, I studied the literacy practices of adults, as adult reading practices are what education systems strive to teach students. Given that so many traditionally literate adults are choosing graphic novels for pleasure reading, the assumption that reading visually constructed, pop-culture stories is a sign of deficit literacy must be challenged. Therefore, to better understand the nature of these kinds of outsider literacy practices among adult readers of graphic novels, this dissertation explores the complexity of outsider literacy and how experienced readers of graphic novels read these kinds of texts.

<div align="center">Theoretical Framework</div>

The theories that are central to my examination of the complexity of outsider literacy and the nature of its practices represent scholarship that explores six aspects of literacy study:

- Intertextuality and reading by design: what is the nature of multi-modal texts?--Kress (1999, 2003); George (2002); George and Shoos (1999)

- Genre theory: how may the nature of structure inform meaning, particularly in mixed-genre texts?-- Bazerman (1981, 2005)

- Narrative elements and design: what are the essential narrative and design elements that comprise graphic novels and comics?-- McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006)

- Textuality of comics: how and why do the interdependent narrative and design elements present in comics combine to create a "readable" text?-- Stainbrook (2003)

- Reader Response and transactional reading theories: how do readers make meaning from texts as they read, and what is the nature of that reading?-- Rosenblatt (1994); Smith (1988, 1994, 2003)

- Critical literacy practices: what are the literacy practices at work when readers engage with graphic novels? --Beers (2003); Henry (1995)

Kress's (1999, 2003), George's (2002), and George and Shoos's (1999) focus is the idea that literacy, including academic literacy, has undergone a fundamental shift away from verbal-only to multi-modal texts, a kind of reading-by-design shift away from a "telling" paradigm to a "showing" paradigm. As writing becomes one of many visual elements present on any given page (or screen) of multi-modal text, the reader of such multi-modal narratives must assemble meaning from among these elements. Understanding the nature of multi-modal texts is important because multi-modal texts have become increasingly prevalent in academic as well as pleasure reading. Kress's

(1999, 2003), George's (2002) and George and Shoos's (1999) examinations of intertextuality--how the verbal, visual, aural, temporal, and contextual elements of a text, as well as a reader's own experience, combine to create meaning in multi-modal texts-- help to clarify what are multi-modal texts, and also highlight how the literacy used to understand these texts is not a deficit literacy, but instead involves more complex and critical thinking.

Bazerman's (1981, 2005) work in genre theory is connected to Kress's in that Bazerman clarifies how narrative structures and readers' expectations for narrative structures (be they multi- or single modal) are interactive experiences rather than fixed entities. For Bazerman, genre theory unites a text's author, reader, content and culture wherein the text was produced and read; meaning-making is thus a constructive process, and as such is not fixed, but fluid. Considering genre as a means to understand function rather than form is important to this study as graphic novels and comics may be considered mixed genres. As such, these texts are structurally different from verbal-only narratives, and ones where readers must use their experience with many structures to decide how to navigate and order the different narrative elements present in the visual design of each page.

McCloud's (1993, 2000, 2006) in-depth study of the unique, interdependent narrative elements that comprise comics and graphic story telling provides a basis for understanding the design of graphic novels' narrative structures, including discussion of how readers' individual experiences with comics and personal schemata may impact that understanding. Stainbrook's (2003) dissertation examined how comics' interdependent narrative elements combine to create a unified text, and as such how navigating these

kinds of multi-modal texts may be considered reading. Therefore, verbal-only reading theories may also be used to explore graphic novels and comics, even though the cognitive processes used by readers to understand graphic novels and comics may be different from verbal-only texts.

Stainbrooks' study of the nature of comics' textuality thus allows for reading theories such as Smith's (1988, 1994, 2003) concepts about the transactional nature of reading as process rather than product, and Rosenblatt's reader-response theory (1994) to be applied to comics and graphic novels. Additionally, Smith's and Rosenblatt's concepts of reading as an individualized and contextualized experience allows for the inclusion of readers' personal experiences as important factors influencing outsider literacy practices. Furthermore, Beers's (2003) and Henry's (1995) explorations into the nature of critical reading skills and strategies grounds applying reading theory to graphic novels in current educational practice, providing me with a framework wherein I may examine the outsider literacy practices used by adult readers of graphic novels.

For all of these theorists, the thread common across their ideas is the concept that literacy is more than just a sum of the processes readers use to make sense of texts; it also includes understanding the experiences readers bring to texts and how those experiences help shape literacy. Therefore, the study that is the basis of this dissertation explored two components of outsider literacy practices:

1) What does reading a graphic novel entail: how do individual adult readers work their way through sections of graphic novels?

2) What literacy experiences help shape these individuals' reading: what attracts readers to graphic novels and what experience do they bring to these texts?

In order to explore both of these components of outsider literacy, this study utilized two think-aloud protocols in combination with interview questions and literacy histories. To the best of my knowledge this study has become the first to apply this methodology to graphic novels in an effort to explore the complexity of outsider literacy, and to discover what reading these texts entails and what literacy experiences shape that reading. (An in-depth discussion of this methodology is described in Chapter Three of this dissertation.)

For this study, nine adult male and female graphic novel readers were recruited through snowball sampling to participate in the tape-recorded think-aloud protocols for two genres of graphic novels: a classic superhero story (*Watchmen*) and a popular shojo manga text (*Fruits Basket*). These readers also completed follow-up interview and literacy history questionnaires. The protocols, interviews and questionnaires were transcribed, coded, member-checked for accuracy, and reported both quantitatively, in reading action frequency tables, and qualitatively, through anecdotal case summaries in Chapter Four of this dissertation. The conclusions drawn from this study are reported in Chapter Five.

<div align="center">Outsider Literacy and Academia: Examining a Bias</div>

While my students' preferences for visually constructed texts provided the impetus behind this dissertation exploring outsider literacy practices, my study focuses on adult readers. It was through my students that I first came to recognize the existence of outsider literacy and consider the important place it might hold in the classroom and in literacy scholarship, yet the academic bias I held against visually constructed texts also extends into adult practice. In this way, this dissertation has personal significance in that it is as much about my awakening to an academic bias that I had held without question

against visually constructed texts (such as comics and graphic novels) as it is about exploring the practices of those adult readers who engage in outsider literacy.

My students' attraction to comic books and other image-based materials at first seemed to reinforce the bias against such pop-culture texts; here were students who from my observations in class could be capable of reading better texts but chose not to, and who at first had done so poorly on their state reading tests that each had scored at Basic or Below Basic reading levels and, thus, remediation was mandated by provisions set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act. The fact that I made such an immediate and superficial connection between their preferred reading material and their state test performances also demonstrates how this bias against visually-constructed texts is deeply imbedded within academia and academic thinking. In light of this bias, graphic novels, comic books and other visually constructed texts often represent to teachers and some segments of the general public the very antitheses of what readers' literary experiences ought to be, echoing Freire's ideas about the language of the politically dominant culture associating that culture with the idea of superiority to that of the masses' culture. According to Marsh and Millard (2000) the emphasis on the visual, aural--and in the case of electronically reproduced comics, sometimes the kinesthetic aspects--of these alternative narrative-style texts is often believed to lead to a kind of "deficit" literacy; after all, a popular presumption is that only those who cannot read well need pictures to guide their literacy experiences. Marriott (1998) clarifies this belief by explaining that most people equate literacy with *verbal* literacy, and thus consider pictures to be "…an age-related prop… which support the initially incompetent reader" as a primary form of conveying meaning (cited in Marsh & Millard, 2000, p. 105). Therefore, predominance

of pictures in a text is popularly associated with people who are learning to read (such as emergent, young, or immature readers), or those who have some sort of learning challenge. Once a reader has gained sufficient skill, it is presumed the reader will no longer need--or want--stories to be told through pictures, that the reader will have "graduated" to words-only texts. This represents Marriott's position that "…implicit [in this belief is] the sooner the [reader's] behaviour resembles that of the adult reader, seen as routinely and skillfully absorbing pages of unbroken and un-illustrated text, the better" (p. 105). These descriptions of the stereotype fit my own conception of my reading students, and it was alarming to me. Each of my students was an adolescent under the age of fourteen, which marked them as young or immature readers. Each preferred visually based texts to text-only stories, regardless of the story's content. Furthermore, their literacy had been authoritatively identified as deficient through the labels of Below Basic earned from their performances on the state reading tests. My students' preferred literacy practices seemed to bear out the "truth" of this bias, particularly Rusty, who always gravitated to the comic books; by consistently choosing visually constructed reading materials, their literacy behavior seemed to support the kinds of literacy assumptions that Marriott, Marsh and Mallard identify as prevalent within the education culture and educated society in general. Thus, Rusty's and the other students' preference for comics and magazines over text-only novels was one I easily dismissed as being related to and evidence of their "deficit" literacy, for my assumption was that had they truly been better readers, surely they wouldn't have been so focused on these kinds of materials in the first place.

Rosenblatt (1994) comments on this culturally imbedded idea of a literature (and thus literacy) hierarchy as a:

> …concern [that] the social and intellectual atmosphere … sets up "good literature" as almost by definition works accessible only to the elitist critic or literary historian, and that leads the average reader to assume that he simply is not capable of participating in them. Our whole literary culture tends to produce this defeatist attitude. (p. 142)

While Rosenblatt probably did not have comics and graphic novels in mind, she does illustrate another problem that comics, graphic novels, and other kinds of graphic narratives face, which is a problem of status. That which is accessible to the masses and enjoyed by the masses (such as my students) cannot possibly be "good" literature or worthy of academic study. In this sense, both the visual construct and content of the comics to which these presumed "weaker" or "immature" readers often gravitate make both the readers and the texts suspect. This kind of thinking sets up an academic dichotomy: there are texts which should be read, presumably for your own good, and there are texts which people enjoy, regardless of intellectual benefits. Simply put, especially for students such as Rusty, if learning is "in," then enjoyment must be "out." Academia tends to perpetuate this concept through the idea of teaching a canon: works of literature that have stood the test of time, and are thus approved and worthy of study. These are the *insider* texts. But then there's all the other "stuff": texts that are new, untested, or popular, and hence relegated to non-canon status, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration--the *outsider* texts. This positing of "learning through literacy" against "pleasure from literacy" is a contradiction that Rusty understood implicitly

whenever he repeated his mantra that "English and stuff [was his] most hated class!"

Rusty knew first-hand how I felt about his choice of reading material, and that his

beloved comics were not allowed to be part of his learning, for according to Rusty we

"never [got to] read anything *good*;" all we ever read was "*boring* stuff, like *Treasure

Island."* By taking such a stance at his tender age, Rusty tacitly renounced his

membership in the academic club and stepped outside, often quite literally, the realm of

scholarliness. In this way, reading comic books and magazines during school when I

wanted him to read something else was his act of rebellion, his subversion of the system,

and firmly established his preference for outsider narratives.

Given these perceptions of good and bad texts, graphic novels and comics are

clearly part of the outsider narratives because many educators and the general public see

them as picture-based pulp fictions that do not challenge or broaden a reader's traditional

literacy skills or critical reasoning abilities. In American culture, comics and graphic

novels are presumed to contain at best a watered-down content, which according to

McGrath (2004), "…if the highbrows are right, [are] a form perfectly suited to our

dumbed-down culture and collective attention deficit" (p. 24). Comics' drawings,

language, and story lines come under criticism for being crude, lurid, sensationalized,

overtly sexual, sexist, rebellious, saccharine, and simplistic, pandering to the worst in

adolescent taste and perceptions (Marsh & Millard, 2000, pp. 103-4). Critics of comics

and graphic novels have compared the effects of these narratives on literacy to the effects

of feeding children solely a junk food diet, and in the past have even suggested that

reading these texts correlated to a rise in juvenile delinquency (Wertham, 1954, cited in

Marsh and Millard, 2000, pp.101-102). Seen in this light, picture-based texts are

perceived as a crutch preventing a weak reader from strengthening his literacy muscles

(Marsh and Millard, 2000, pp.101-104). In this way, if a student's preference for these

kinds of texts is considered to be a contributing factor in his "deficit" literacy, then in the

eyes of the general public an adult reader's overt preference for these kinds of texts might

mark him as a member of the illiterati. Thus in America, comics and graphic novels are

culturally and academically situated *outside* the expected course of study for students and

acceptable reading material for educated adults, occupying places of suspicion and scorn,

if not outright disregard, in literacy practices. As such, graphic novels and comics

represent a different kind of literacy--*outsider* literacy--something (until recently) mostly

associated with adolescence and cult followings. In this way, Rusty's outsider-literacy

status was marked academically and socially. Rusty's test scores placed him outside the

reading skills' expectations the state's education department has for students his age, and

his preferences for graphically constructed texts that are not valued (nor encouraged)

socially or in his academic classes marked him as a practitioner of an outsider literacy

associated with his gender and peer group.

Graphic Novels: The Impact of Outsider Literacy

Once when questioned by a fan about comics' place in literature, Art Spiegelman

responded by saying that, "Comics [are] made from neglected pockets of the culture [and

as such in America represent] a Faustian deal between comics and art and literature, high

and low culture" (A.Spiegelman, public lecture, April 9, 2005). If Spiegelman's

observation is correct, then Mephistopheles is winning again; even though the historical,

social, and academic bias against visually constructed texts places them outside the

accepted realm of literary practice and within the "neglected pockets of the culture," the recent rise in readership, sales, movie adaptations, and literary awards given to graphic novels calls further into question the validity of the general prejudice against such visually constructed texts. While serialized comic books remain popular reading and collecting material among middle school-aged children and some adults, readership of graphic novels and comic book compilations, particularly among adults, is increasing in unprecedented numbers. Sales of graphic novels are reaching into the hundreds of thousands, with autobiographical novels such as *Persepolis* selling more than 450,000 copies worldwide (McGrath, 2004, p. 26). According to McGrath, the fastest growing sections in the local Borders bookstores are the graphic novel and manga (Japanese comics) sections. Borders bookstores' Micha Hershman reported to *Time Magazine* in 2003:

> …over the last four years graphic novels have shown the largest percentage of growth in sales over any other book category. …[and] manga are chiefly responsible for this growth…specifically shojo (manga comics aimed at girls)…[in fact] 60% of all Border's graphic novels sales are shojo. (Herschman, cited in Arnold, 2003, pp. 2-3)

Hershman and McGrath's information is echoed by data reported in pop culture retailers' association websites such as *ICv2 – Internal Correspondence Version 2*. According to the June *ICv2* issue reporting first and second quarter sales data for 2005, sales of graphic novels had increased 36% from figures reported in 2004. At that time, the shojo teen fantasy/romance graphic novel series *Fruits Basket* remained firmly entrenched at the top of the sales chart, with Frank Miller's *Sin City* series of novels occupying several of the

top twenty-five slots. Given these kinds of data, readership of these outsider narratives is increasing, and growing beyond what popular conception might deem to be a dismissible cult following.

Furthermore, movie adaptations of graphic novels may be fueling a crossover media fire. Various *ICv2* articles from the first two quarters in 2005 credit some of graphic novels' increased popularity to the success of movies adapted from graphic novels, though they also note that such crossover relationships are difficult to pin down. According to *ICv2* (2005) the renewed popularity of Miller's *Sin City* graphic novels series is most likely linked to the success of the film *Sin City*, which to date has grossed over 74 million dollars since its release on April 1, 2005. In this way, the popular success of the movie may be generating curiosity about the genre among interested adults, and thus gaining a wider audience for the graphic novel format. In fact, according to the website *www.the-numbers.com* (2005), there has been an explosion of movie adaptations from graphic novels in the last five years, and that rise seems to correspond with increasing sales trends for the same time period. For example, from a list of movies adapted from comic book series starting with *Barbarella* in 1968 through films released in 2001, only one film acknowledged its source as a "graphic novel," though the term had been in use since the late 1970's. That film was *The Rocketeer*, released in 1991, and it gained commercial success by grossing over 46.5 million dollars in the United States. In the last four years, however, at least six films have been released that credit "graphic novels" as their sources, and between 2005 and 2006, an additional three movie adaptations of graphic novels are scheduled for release, for a total of nine graphic novel-based films within five years. With the exception of *American Splendor* and *Ghost World*

(which each grossed over six million dollars) the graphic novel movie adaptations *From Hell, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Sin City,* and *The Road to Perdition* were all commercial successes, earning respectively 31.5 million, 66 million, 75.5 million, and 104 million dollars at American box offices.

The most financially successful of these films thus far has been *The Road to Perdition,* and perhaps it is this graphic novel adaptation that best illustrates the kind of media cross-over that may be contributing to a burgeoning popularity of graphic novels among adults like myself --people who may lack the childhood experience with comics reading that one might expect would stimulate interest as an adult (another aspect of outsider literacy that this dissertation will explore in later chapters). Though initially published in the 1990's, this crime and mystery graphic novel did not receive much public attention from comic book readers. This is not surprising since superhero comics and graphic novels remain the top sellers over other comic and graphic novel genres, and are ever-popular subjects for movie adaptations as they command broader generational audiences than stories aimed primarily at adults (especially when combined with all the additional profits made by sales of superhero toys and paraphernalia that accompany such blockbuster releases.) However, *ICv2* reported in July, 2001, that Hollywood was in the process of filming *The Road to Perdition* starring Tom Hanks, and that the novel finally was receiving the attention it deserved. The article further emphasized the importance of this adaptation to the website's customers by noting that:

> Since *The Road to Perdition* is based on a graphic novel, pop culture retailers
> should be able to exploit this connection, and possibly interest civilians in other

cinema-inspiring graphic novels such as the Alan Moore/Eddie Campbell

collaboration, *From Hell…*and Daniel Clowes *Ghost World.*" (*ICv2*, 2001)

The term *civilians* as it is used here refers to non-comic book readers, and as it turns out,

ICv2 was correct in its assumption that the movie would increase readership of the novel,

though it is unclear how many of the novels' sales were made to readers new to the genre.

The Road to Perdition was released in July 2002, and at that time the graphic novel

version of *The Road to Perdition* was listed as number 15 of the top 100 graphic novel

best sellers, just ahead of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* an Alan Moore

graphic novel in the superhero milieu. *ICv2* linked *The Road to Perdition'*s rise in

popularity directly to the commercial success of the movie, but by March 2003, the novel

had again climbed the charts to be listed as one of the top ten, perhaps due to the movie's

two Oscar nominations. In between these articles, *ICv2* also noted that in January, 2003,

Barnes and Noble Booksellers added a graphic novel section to their website, one that

was categorized by genre so that crime novels such as *The Road to Perdition* were not

lumped together with superhero stories such as *Watchmen*. This recognition from one of

the biggest commercial booksellers reinforces the fact that graphic novels had become

popular enough to break away from comic book store venues, and were gaining the

attention of a different audience.

  To add another layer of complexity to this concept of media-crossover, during this

same time period up through the present gangster dramas such as HBO's *Sopranos* and

network televisions hits such as *CSI,* and *Law and Order* (and both programs' spin-off

shows) remain wildly popular among adult television audiences. *The Road to Perdition*'s

cinema success may have been partly due to audience tastes at the time for mobster crime

drama, but the recent creation of a *CSI* comic book series, written by Max Allen Collins (the author of *The Road to Perdition*) can be no small coincidence. Clearly, the efforts of publishers and retailers to reach out to broader markets through cross-over texts are gaining ground, so much so that retailers of graphic novels continue to make concerted efforts to capitalize on future Hollywood productions. As one *ICv2* article from July, 2005, announced the 2006 release of the movie adaptation of *A History of Violence*, the website made certain to remind its patrons that:

> Since *A History of Violence* (like *The Road to Perdition*) is essentially a crime story without superheroes or the need for special effects, retailers will have to alert their customers to the fact that the movie is actually based on a graphic novel." (*ICv2*, 2005)

Thus, the commercial success of these kinds of movies and their sequels, the retailers and publicity vehicles' attention to using cross-over media, and the increasing sales of graphic novels in venues apart from traditional comic book stores support the idea that interest in graphic narrative genre has become so deeply imbedded in modern popular culture as to make graphic novels viable adult alternatives to traditional text-only novels.

Exploring Outsider Literacy Practices: Graphic Novels and Adult Readers

Though McGrath (2004) defines graphic novels simply as "long-form comics,"and others more closely link graphic novels to their serialized brethren by calling them "comic strip novels" (such as Daniel Clowes in his novel *Ice Haven*), there are many different types of graphic novels. The most common versions of graphic novels in

the American canon comprise the superhero genre, and are clearly the progeny of their *Action, EC, DC,* and *Marvel Comics* ancestors. In fact, many of the best-selling graphic novels are actually compilations of entire story lines that were originally sold in serialized form. Two of the most popular and lauded novels from this genre are Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series. Of these two, the Hugo award-winning *Watchmen* is most closely tied to what readers would recognize as traditional superhero genre, yet it has also been described by DC Comics' publicity machine on the cover of the novel as "the book that changed an industry and challenged a medium." Though *Watchmen* used the superhero genre to tell its story, the novel is not intended for a young, teenage audience. Instead, the targeted readers for *Watchmen* come from a mature adult audience steeped not only in comic book tradition and knowledge, but also in American history, politics and cultural knowledge, as I describe in greater detail in Chapter Three. *Watchmen* flaunts comic book superhero conventions and genre expectations, but it also uses these conventions to create a different kind of superhero story, one that is more in tune with the needs of a very sophisticated audience. The book is pictorially and textually packed with literary and comic book allusions, as well as fictionalized historical information. Reading *Watchmen* becomes an exercise in unpacking complicated relationships and close observation to minutia; without this kind of attention to detail, plot, character relationships, and a functional background knowledge of American political history since World War II, even an experienced reader could quickly become lost. (True to industry form, a movie adaptation of *Watchmen* was released in the United States on March, 6, 2009, to 3,611 theaters, which according to *News Daily* reporter Dean Goodman, represented a new

record for an "R" rated movie. Goodman's article stated that according to Reuters news service in Los Angeles, the *Watchmen* film earned 55.7 million dollars in its first three days.)

However, despite the existence and continued popularity of groundbreaking works such as *Watchmen,* some graphic novelists attempt to separate themselves from action/ adventure comics by focusing their work on "serious" subjects that would appeal to an audience of sophisticated adult readers that have presumably moved beyond pulp fiction entertainment. For the most part, these graphic novelists eschew the superhero action and adventure narratives for narratives in alternative genres such as bildungsroman, non-fiction and fiction, gay/lesbian themes, biography and autobiography, history, and social or political commentary. Because these graphic novels move beyond the readers' expectations for comic book content, they meld all the elements of traditional novel story telling with comic illustration, using design as well as image and text to tell complex, serious themed stories, as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Note. From *Road to Perdition* (p. 19), by M.A. Collins, 2002, New York: Pocket Books. Copyright 1998 by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner. Reprinted under the conditions of the Fair Use sections (107-118) of the United States Copyright Act.

Figure 1. Road to Perdition page 19: "The Looneys had the cops in their pockets.*"*

This three-panel page from the graphic novel *Road to Perdition* establishes the novel's setting and characterizes two of the main figures in the story. The black-and-white drawings are composed to be reminiscent of newspaper photographs from the 1930's, though they are clearly meant to be viewed as line drawings and not actual photographs. The level of "realistic" detail present in these subject-to-subject panels - the factory, the bar scene and the reflections in the car body – stand in contrast to other more abstracted, cartoon-like panels present in the story, such as Figure 2.

Figure 2. Road to Perdition page 57: "All sins are forgiven."

 This four-panel page from the same novel illustrates an abstracted, more cartoon- or comic-book-like style of visual narration. Note the absence of background imagery in the top two panels, the stark composition of the page. These moment-to-moment panels reflect a plot-driven style of visual narration.

These novels' illustrations are also more complex in order to suit the content of these novels, and often present a style of drawing that is different from what audiences, particularly those readers schooled in superhero comic conventions, expect. Many of these graphic novels are packaged to look more like "real" books, often available in expensive, color-plated, hardcover volumes, as well as in less-expensive paperbacks. Most of these graphic novelists are also committed to the craft of creating a graphic novel; they choose to illustrate and write their own work, unlike the process used to create graphic novels such as *Watchmen* and *The Sandman,* which follow the tradition of mainstream comic strips and books that have separate illustrators and text writers.

Furthermore, as these kinds of graphic novels have grown in popularity and literary complexity, critics outside the science fiction and comic book industry have begun to take notice. In 1992, Art Spiegelman was awarded a special category Pulitzer Prize for his auto- and biographical novel *Maus.* Not knowing quite how to categorize *Maus,* the Pulitzer committee created a special category to honor Spiegelman's visually constructed narrative about his father's experiences in Auschwitz. This confusion about how to categorize graphic novels is a problem that to this day bleeds over into marketing: is *Maus* literature to be marketed with Elie Weisel's *Night*, or is it a comic book to be shelved with mainstream comics like *The Amazing Spiderman*? However, by 2001 the idea of graphic novels as legitimate literature had advanced somewhat from this first classification quandary: the 2001 Guardian Prize for best first *book* was awarded, albeit by a single vote, to Chris Ware's graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth.* According to Claire Armitstead, the Guardian's literary editor and judges' chair at the time of the award:

Jimmy Corrigan is a fantastic winner, because it so clearly shows what the

Guardian award is about – it is about originality and energy and star quality, both

in imagination and in execution. Chris Ware has produced a book as beautiful as

any published this year, but also one which challenges us to think again about

what literature is and where it is going. (Gibbons, 2001)

Reading and Making Sense of Graphic Novels: Using Outsider Literacy

By their nature and design, graphic novels represent a trend toward multi-modal

narration, a trend that is increasing with commonplace use of electronic media

communication. *The Guardian*'s Claire Armitstead (2001) alluded to this trend when she

explained why *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* had received the prize for

best first book. Armitstead explained that the novel was a challenge to read, a book that

challenged the very notions of what literature looks like, what it could be, and where

narrative, and writing in general, might be headed. According to composition theorists

Gunther Kress, Diana George, Diane Shoos and Geoffrey Sirc, the concept of

"composition" itself is moving into the realm of art as theorists re-examine what

constitutes language, communication, and writing (Kress, 1999; George & Shoos, 1999;

George, 2002; Sirc, 2002). Even traditional academic texts, especially school textbooks

and literature anthologies, are using fewer words and more visual images to make their

points (Kress, 1999). Kress identifies this shift as part of a larger vision of twenty-first

century electronically-oriented composition, "where language is no longer the central

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semiotic mode…[but] part of a multi-modal communication system, a multi-modal semiotic landscape…shifting from narrative to display" (Kress, p. 82).

If composition is changing, then what we consider to be reading must change, too. In his dissertation "Reading Comics: A Theoretical Analysis of Textuality and Discourse in the Comics Medium", Eric Stainbrook (2003) examines how this change might be manifested by exploring how reading comics could be considered *reading*. (A more detailed discussion of Stainbrook's study is included in Chapter Two.) As a result of his investigation, Stainbrook concluded that because comics--multi-modal texts comprised of image and words--exhibit textuality through connexity and "conceptual cohesion," where words and images "hang together "as text, they can be read (p. 46). As such, reading theories used to better understand traditional verbal texts might also be useful when examining multi-modal narratives, though Stainbrook points out through his discussion of textuality that the cognitive processes readers use to understand comics will also be different (p.11; p. 179). This idea that readers of multi-modal texts use different literacies to understand and interpret these kinds of narratives is supported by bell hooks. hooks reinforces this viewpoint by emphasizing, "Rather than seeing literacy and the visual (and our pleasure of the visual) as oppositional to one another, we have to see them as compatible with one another" (hooks, cited in George & Shoos, 1999, p. 115). People who read graphic novels or comics often mention the fact that they're "fun" to read; herein, hooks has clearly identified this aspect of outsider literacy practice as an additional and important factor for consideration, and one with which Rusty would certainly agree.

Rosenblatt (1994) may further illuminate hooks' connections between the marriage of visual and textual elements to the concept of pleasure in and from reading. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading focuses on two kinds of reading: *efferent* (reading for surface comprehension, such as plot,) and *aesthetic* (reading for deeper understanding.) Her question, "How do we distinguish the reading event that yields a poem from other kinds of reading?" leads to an underlying concept of pleasure in reading, which she identifies as a kind of absorption in the experience or enthrallment with the text. In order for a reader to move beneath the surface of a text, he must transact with the text, finding personal connections to the experience by "pay[ing] attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him" (pp. 21, 27, 25).

In multi-modal narratives such as graphic novels, readers are not limited to words, but are also given images and page design to navigate, contemplate and explore. Contrary to popular opinion, graphic novel readers are not limited to efferent reading where the words and pictures provide only superficial content, but may be engaged in a different kind of aesthetic reading. While the plot of an American graphic novel's story is usually delivered quickly through text (and that is a feature of graphic novels that their readers seem to enjoy,) these readers also take great pleasure in the nuances of the images and comic storytelling conventions that also provide fodder for the imagination and enrich the whole experience, which Rosenblatt believes is necessary for a good reading. Furthermore, as non-Western style narratives such as manga become more popular in America, the need for engaging in a type of reading that can interpret and appreciate visually constructed tone and textual nuance becomes more important. Manga typically

do not use action as the driving force behind graphic narratives as American-style comics do. Manga illustrations usually do not mirror or portray the action of the story to the extent that illustrations do in the West, but instead often are drawn to set the emotion of the characters or the mood of the setting, drawing the story and the reader inward to the characters as opposed to the outwardly-directed, action-oriented constructs of Western narratives. This can be disconcerting for American readers whose expectations for narrative are superhero-based, action and plot-oriented. Until the reader learns to read the text and imagery so as to interpret the language, style and rhythm of such narratives, reading manga can be a confusing task.

George and Shoos call this compatibility of text and image "intertextuality" (George & Shoos, 1999; George, 2002). The term "intertextuality" was first coined by Julia Kristeva to describe "…the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position" (Roudiez, 1980, p. 15). George and Shoos use Kristeva's idea of sign system transposition to refer largely to the visual and design elements of composition as they are used in electronic media, where the idea of text has been expanded to include visual imagery and hypertext as an integral means of communication. Extrapolating from George and Shoos' idea of transposition of image and texts means that the concept of intertextuality is also applicable to graphic novels, since the whole "text" of graphic novels transpose such multi-modal systems, including verbal and pictorial, to communicate to their readers. In this way, to privilege the writing in a narrative and ignore the presence of visual components is to misread these kinds of texts. George expands on this idea by exploring how composition is no longer a matter of organizing

words on a page, but must consider the page as a whole. This idea of composition as design reconfigures writing in the context of visual cultures studies, and as such, will treat text as graphic design, incorporating non-writing as an essential element of that design. Graphic narratives are not constrained by Western text-only formatting expectations. For example, in Tokyopop-published manga the page is read from right to left as it would be in Japan, even though the text has been translated into English. Detailed samples of manga-formatted graphic novels can be seen in Figures 3 and 4.

STOP!

This is the back of the book.
You wouldn't want to spoil a great ending!

This book is printed "manga-style," in the authentic Japanese right-to-left format. Since none of the artwork has been flipped or altered, readers get to experience the story just as the creator intended. You've been asking for it, so TOKYOPOP® delivered: authentic, hot-off-the-press, and far more fun!

DIRECTIONS
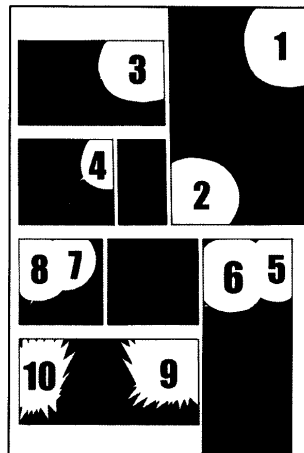
If this is your first time reading manga-style, here's a quick guide to help you understand how it works.

It's easy... just start in the top right panel and follow the numbers. Have fun, and look for more 100% authentic manga from TOKYOPOP®!

FRUITS BASKET © 1998 by Natsuki Takaya / HAKUSENSHA, Inc.

Note. From *Fruits Basket* (p. back cover), by N. Takaya, 2004, Los Angeles: TOKYOPOP, Inc. Copyright 2004 by TOKYOPOP. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3. Fruits Basket back cover: Directions page.

Though published in English, Tokyopop manga retains the format of graphic novels as they are printed in Japan. Figure 2A is actually the last page of the novel, but it is located where Western readers would expect to find the title page of Western-style graphic novels. Note the "stop" sign that alerts readers they are starting at the wrong end of the book, and the reading directions given in both text and mapped out visually in the lower left section of this page.

FRUITS BASKET © 1998 by Natsuki Takaya / HAKUSENSHA, Inc.

Note. From *Fruits Basket* (p.8), by N. Takaya, 2004, Los Angeles: TOKYOPOP, Inc. Copyright 2004 by TOKYOPOP. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 4. Fruits Basket page 8: Tohru's backstory.

In Figure 4, the panel and dialogue composition closely resemble the manga reading map given in Figure 3. If the reader approaches the verbal text from left-to right (as verbal text is written in Western-style graphic novels) the story will not make sense. Instead, the reader must look at the upper right corner dialogue first, then move to the panel immediately to the left, also reading the dialogue in the upper-right position first. Because the images on this page do not represent a moment-to-moment action sequence, a reader must be able to follow the dialogue to understand the story as it is presented on this page.

Thus graphic narratives do not need to be organized in the traditional Western language left-to-right, top-to-bottom page construction, but may actually be designed using a grid concept in addition to the frame, which allows for the possibility of three dimensional "reading" if hypertext is involved, as well as two dimensional flat page or flat screen reading.

In this way, the visual layouts of graphic novels present complex challenges for decoding that may have more in common with reading/ looking at art than reading/looking at text (Marsh & Millard, 2000, p. 112). In graphic novel creation, form must follow function, which is to tell a story or communicate with the reader. When crafting a graphic novel, the novelist must maintain the "story [as] the most critical component…[that] helps the work endure" while considering the effects of "page layout, high-impact effects, startling rendering techniques and mind-blowing color" on the reader. (Eisner,1996, p. 2). Graphic novels require a reader:

> …to be able to read and look at the same time, a trick not easily mastered, especially if you're someone who is used to reading fast. Graphic novels…are virtually unskimmable, and until you get the hang of their particular rhythm and way of storytelling, they may require more, not less, concentration. (McGrath, p. 30.)

Readers of graphic novels must be able to decode these complex, multi-modal communications; doing so requires a different kind of literacy to navigate, comprehend, and in some cases manipulate them. Figure 5 illustrates the kind of visual-verbal complexity that graphic novel readers confront when reading these kinds of text.
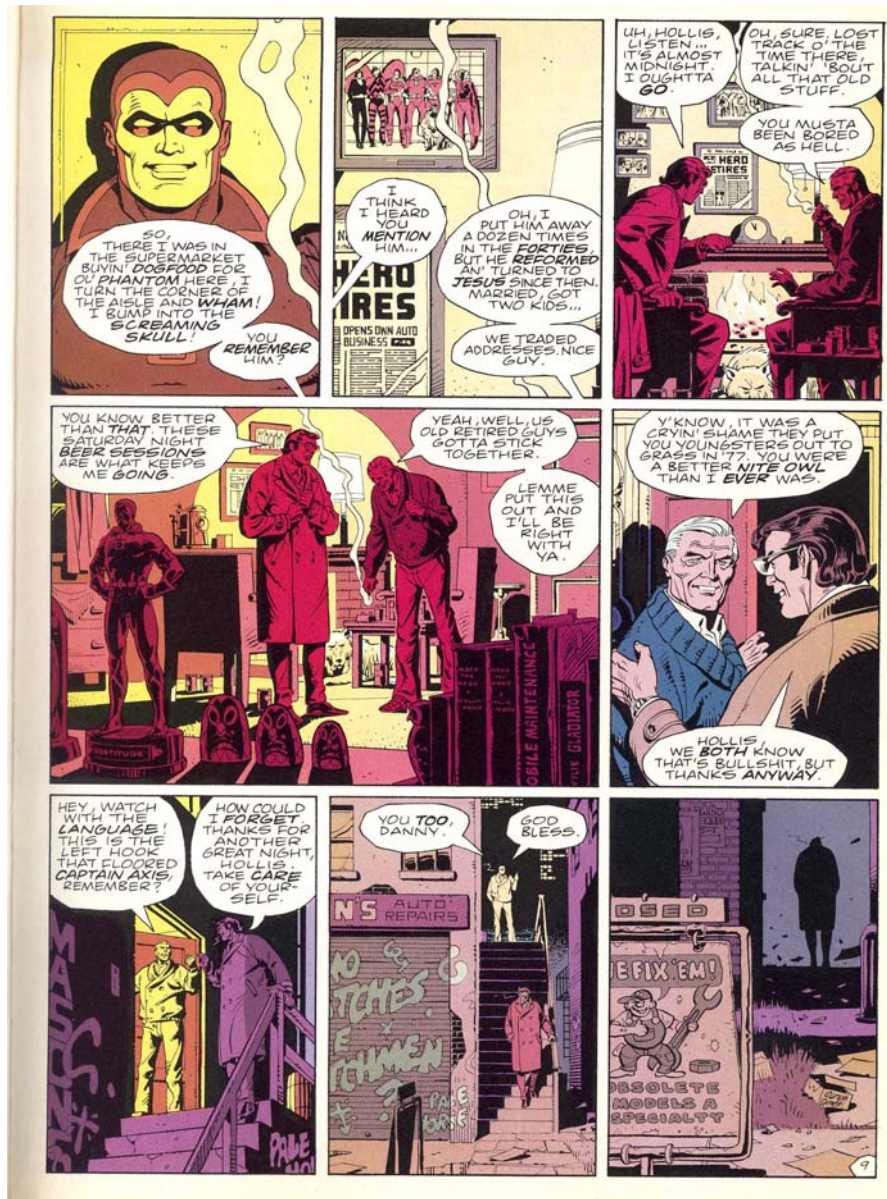
Note. From *Watchmen* (p. 9), by A. Moore, 1986, New York: DC Comics. Copyright 1986 by DC Comics. Reprinted under the conditions of the Fair Use sections (107-118) of the United States Copyright Act.

Figure 5. Watchmen page 9: The Nite Owls.

Figure 5 shows the complexity of visual and verbal images used to construct this portion of the narrative. Incidental text (graffiti, billboards) are bits of text that foreshadow themes present throughout the novel. For example, the graffiti "pale horse" in the bottom panels is a recurring reference to Revelations and the soon-to-come Armageddon. Images also convey themes: the clock above the fireplace stands at five-to-midnight, a reference to a "Doomsday" clock that appears throughout the story. Additionally, the central panel's triangular composition symbolizes three conditions of superheroes in this story: the erect, heroic image of the award statue contrasts sharply with the two men; both are retired, one is middle-aged, and the other is bent with infirmity – in the panel, both men appear as fixed and insignificant as the statue itself.

According to Paul Gravett of the *London Daily Telegraph*,

> …Those [readers] accustomed to scanning regular columns of type often have
>
> difficulty assimilating the haphazard captions in a comics at the same time as
>
> jumping from image to image. But to a young generation brought up with
>
> television, computers and video games, processing verbal and visual information
>
> on several levels at once seems natural, even preferable (cited in Eisner, 1996,
>
> p. 4).

Therefore, regardless of their proficiency in traditional literacy practices, readers of

outsider narratives such as graphic novels are already exercising outsider literacy as they

make sense of these kinds of complex and often ambiguous texts.

Conclusion

Despite this discussion of the prevalence and the significance of visual literacy in

the electronic age, how readers appreciate and make meaning from outsider texts such as

graphic novels remains largely unexplored, probably due to the aforementioned academic

biases against visually constructed texts. Eisner (1996) acknowledged that when reading

comics and graphic novels "[t]here is a different cognitive process between reading

words and pictures," but "…no one really knows for certain whether the words are read

before or after viewing the pictures…" and there "…is no real evidence that they are read

simultaneously" (p. 59). To address the question of how experienced readers of graphic

novels read graphic novels, this dissertation explored two components of outsider literacy

practices:

1) What does reading a graphic novel entail: how do individual adult readers work their way through sections of graphic novels?

2) What literacy experiences help shape these individuals' reading: what attracts readers to graphic novels and what experiences do they bring to the texts?

While other studies have examined how educators perceive graphic texts, and how graphic texts may be useful in teaching deficit readers and emergent English language learners to read (Froriep, 2007), examining how mature readers engage in outsider reading practices as competent (or legitimate) and complex literacy practices in their own right has not been considered. Therefore, my dissertation explored these aspects of outsider literacy, the culture and cognition of outsider literacy practices in adult readers of graphic novels.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction: Looking at Literacy and Reading Art

[Shelly] Anapol had never been a devotee of the funny papers, so it had taken him

a while to simply learn to **read** *a comic book. Now he went through each one*

twice, first when it was in production and then again when it hit the stands,

buying a copy on his way to his train and reading it all the way home to Riverdale

(Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, p. 170).

To a traditionally literate person, the notion that one has to learn to read a comic book seems somewhat ridiculous. Yet Art Spiegleman's concept that comics are the gateway drug to literacy works in other ways, too, as Chabon's fictional character, businessman Shelly Anapol, learned. In Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay*, Anapol built a fortune from the sale and exploitation of *The Escapist* comic series and its various spin-offs, but he never bothered to really understand the medium that became his bread-and-butter until it started to pay. Thus, comics became Anapol's gateway to understanding a new kind of reading and appreciating outsider literacy for more than just the quick money its products brought to him. And therefore by extension, if comics were my student Rusty's gateway to academic literacy--his payoff-- then they were also my gateway to awareness of outsider literacies, for my students' preferences for comic books, graphic novels and other multi-modal print-based entertainments are mirrored by shifting trends in adult literacy practices, too, as is evidenced by the entertainment and publishing industries' practices noted in Chapter One. For the adults in this study (as well as for my students), the world of entertainment

is comprised of visually constructed, multi-modal narratives. Yet graphic novels and comics do not quite fit under the umbrella of visual literacy as the inclusion of verbal text demands that the graphic narrative be read traditionally as well as visually, and in many cases the verbal text also carries a visual message. These instances where each mode works together, not just separately, to convey the narrative, require what Kress (1999, 2003) called a kind of hybridized 'reading across' the modes. In this way outsider literacy engages readers visually and textually, and in order to understand these kinds of narratives, readers must process, interpret and assimilate all kinds of multi-modal information almost instantly. As the character Anapol realized that reading comics would take a different set of literacy skills, my readers' adeptness negotiating these kinds of pop culture texts reinforces the idea that different approaches to what we know as reading may be needed to fully appreciate them. Therefore, this dissertation explores the complexity of outsider literacy and how experienced, adult readers of graphic novels read graphic novels. As reading involves more than just a series of dry strategies applied in a vacuum, the study that was the basis of this dissertation examines two components of outsider literacy practices:

- What does reading graphic novels entail, and how individual adult readers worked their way through sections of graphic novels. (This component was examined through the TA protocols and follow-up questionnaires).

- What literacy experiences helped shape these individuals' reading, what attracted them to these texts, and what the participants brought to these texts as experienced readers. (This component was examined through the literacy history interviews and follow-up questionnaires.)

Outsider literacy and graphic novels as subject matter worthy of academic study are still new concepts, and ones that have much potential for examination because, with a few exceptions relating to comics, cartoons, and comic strips, they not been seriously explored or understood apart from those practicing these literacies. To this end, this chapter explores existing research to situate outsider literacy practices and graphic novels within an academic context by examining the nature of both: are they art, text, or something else, and if they are something else, how can this new kind of text be understood?

Theoretical Framework

The theorists and texts that are central to my examination of the complexity of outsider literacy and the nature of its practices represent scholarship that explores six aspects of literacy study:

- Intertextuality

- Genre theory

- Narrative elements and design (of graphic novels)

- Textuality (of comics)

- Reader Response and transactional reading theories

- Critical literacy practices

These six areas are discussed across the eight core sections of this chapter. The three initial sections, "Visual Culture: Mixing Media," "Visual Literacy: Looking at Literature," and "Intertextuality, Outsider Literacy and Graphic Novels Defined," provide a framework for understanding outsider literacy practices by examining what are multi-

modal texts, discussing how traditional academic constructs of two-dimensional art and text have become hybridized, and considering how this multi-modality is creating new opportunities and challenges for readers as well as for understanding literacy in practice. Central to these sections are the works of Kress (1999, 2003), George (2002), and George and Shoos (1999) on intertextuality and multi-modal texts. The focus of these theorists is the idea that literacy, including academic literacy, has undergone a fundamental shift away from verbal-only to multi-modal texts, where writing is one of many visual elements present on a page. Readers of multi-modal texts must assemble meaning from among these elements, and therefore practice a complex and critical kind of literacy. Kress (1999, 2003), George (2002) and George and Shoos (1999) delve into this idea of reading-as-assembling through their studies of intertextuality. How verbal and visual (as well as aural, temporal, and contextual elements present on the page and present in a reader's own experience) combine to create meaning in multi-modal texts clarifies the nature of multi-modal texts and the literacy practices from which meaning is made.

The fourth and fifth sections, "Genre Theory and Reading: Genre as Design" and "Design Elements and Graphic Narrative Structures," consider how genre may be used as a framework to understand how the multi-modal narrative elements particular to graphic novels and comics convey information such as story. Bazerman's (1981, 2005) work in genre theory clarifies how narrative structures and readers' expectations for narrative structures are interactive experiences rather than fixed entities. Since graphic novels and comics may be considered mixed genres, these texts are structurally different from verbal-only narratives, and readers must use their experience with many structures to decide how to navigate and order the different narrative elements present on each page.

In order to understand the nature of the narrative elements present in graphic novels, McCloud's (1993, 2000, 2006) in-depth study of comics' unique and interdependent narrative elements provides a basis for understanding the design of graphic novels' narrative structures, including discussion of how readers' individual experiences with comics and personal schemata may impact that understanding.

"Reading Art," the sixth section, focuses on the research of Eric Stainbrook (2003). Stainbrook's (2003) dissertation examined how comics' interdependent narrative elements combine to create a unified text, and as such, how navigating these kinds of multi-modal texts may be considered reading. Stainbrook's research was integral to my study because he makes the case for identifying the interpretation of multi-modal texts of comics as "reading. " As such, his research also opened the door for using reading theory frameworks such as reader-response to explore how practitioners of outsider literacies read these kinds of two-dimensional, multi-modal texts, even though the cognitive processes used may be different from verbal-only texts.

The final sections of this chapter, "Reader Response Theory and Outsider Literacy: Frank Smith and Louise Rosenblatt" and "Reader Response Theory in Education Practice: Kylene Beers and Jeanne Henry," explore the context of reading, and how the experiences readers bring to texts help shape their reading. These sections establish the theoretical groundwork for applying Rosenblatt's reader-response theory (1994) and Smith's (1988, 1994, 2003) concepts of reading as transactional process rather than product to graphic novels. Smith's and Rosenblatt's belief that reading is an individual, contextualized experience also allowed for my literacy study to include readers' personal experiences as important factors influencing outsider literacy practices.

Furthermore, Beers's (2003) and Henry's (1995) explorations into the nature of critical reading skills and strategies grounds applying reading theory to graphic novels in current educational practice, providing me with a framework wherein I examined the outsider literacy practices used by adult readers of graphic novels.

For all of these theorists, the common factor across their research is the idea that literacy is more than just a sum of the processes readers use to make sense of texts; it also includes understanding the experiences readers bring to texts and how those experiences help shape literacy. Because I, too, understand reading as a transactional experience, I used Smith's ideas and Rosenblatt's reader response theory reading protocols as my particular approach to study how actual adult readers of these kinds of texts make sense of them, as well as why understanding these practices is important.

Ultimately, though my awareness of outsider literacy was sparked by my students' reading preferences, Rusty and other students like him were the impetus, not the focus, of this study. Rusty and the other students in my Extended Reading class were already labeled developmental or deficit readers by the scores they received on their state reading tests (an issue further discussed in the last sections of this chapter) and for some, this label was legitimate. Students such as these do have developmental reading concerns, which are also discussed in the last section of this chapter. As this study sought to discover what skilled readers of graphic novels do to make sense of them, using for an initial study young readers who have acknowledged and observed difficulty functioning with traditional texts could easily have called into question conclusions about outsider literacy practices in general. Given this concern and the continuing academic prejudices toward comics, graphic novels, and other pop culture texts noted in Chapter One, I

decided that my first foray into exploring outsider literacy would be conducted using experienced, adult readers. Once the results of this initial study have been considered and a basis for understanding these practices as they are used by actual readers has been established, it is my hope that a subsequent study might then be conducted to examine how younger, or developmental readers make their way through multi-modal texts, and compare the results. Therefore, for this first exploration of outsider literacy as it is used with graphic novels, it was my intent to study the outsider literacy practices of adult readers who have demonstrated sufficient traditional literacy skills to complete a high school education. To this end, the next two sections of this dissertation discuss the hybridization of traditional academic constructs as starting points to better understand the nature and practices of outsider literacy.

Visual Culture: Mixing Media

Even though comics and graphic novels have been part of popular American entertainment culture for the better part of a century, the postwar explosion of mass media and mass culture filtering into the fine arts--the notions of fine art and high culture versus pop art and pop culture--prompted art critics such as Lawrence Alloway to rethink the accepted canonical boundaries drawn around art and culture. Alloway noted in the 1950's that a fine arts curriculum needed to expand, to "... think in terms of a 'general field of visual communication'" that would "...include [this] 'long front of culture' that was quickly becoming dominated by mass media and industrial design" (Alloway, cited in Walker, p. 14). This idea of visual culture studies as an amalgamation of different disciplines and what that melding entails is necessarily a broad and changeable concept,

but for Walker (1998) the defining element of these studies is always the emphasis placed on appealing to the visual sense. Walker describes most art forms as "impure," and therefore "...contemporary culture is increasingly hybrid; fusions, interactions, and crossovers between the various arts and media [mean] that boundaries become blurred" (Walker, p. 14). In this way, the hybridization, fusion, interaction and crossovers of image, text, and design that are the stuff of outsider narratives such as graphic novels and comics could place them squarely in the realm of visual culture studies, an expansion of fine and liberal arts curricula.

Walker adds to this concept of expanding curriculum by explaining that visual culture could also be conceived "...as an attribute of a whole society or a social strata" (p. 14). He uses as examples the popular and financial success of Dutch masters' paintings during the painters' own lifetimes to explain that the importance a society places on the visual influences the creative and cognitive skills both the artists develop to communicate their ideas, and the public develops to appreciate and understand those concepts. In short, a new literacy developed. For the Dutch masters, art in general (and painting in particular) was essentially descriptive, and the paintings they produced were celebrated for their emphasis on *tromp l'oeil*--fooling the eye--a representative style of painting that modern viewers might compare to the hyper-realism movements of the 1970's which produced photorealistic renderings of the world the artists observed. The Dutch masters' tromp l'oeil style paintings were products of a society that put great emphasis on careful observation of visual details. These details, in turn, formed the basis of the narratives the paintings were meant to convey to a population that was just beginning to experience widespread book-literacy among the burgeoning middle and

merchant classes. In this way, Walker notes that "...there is clearly a reciprocal relationship between the cultures of those who make and those who appreciate images..."(p. 15). This linkage of specialized skills and aesthetics supports the idea within academia--via visual culture studies--that there are different literacies at work. Though Walker's examples highlight seventeenth century paintings, it is interesting to note that shortly after this period (or perhaps in reaction to it) popular and financially successful European painters shifted away from this kind of exacting visual "realism" to allegorical representation, and as Gunther Kress (1999) notes below, that writing became the preferred means of describing. Image, when paired with text, took an illustrative back seat to the word from that point forward until the mid-twentieth century.

Visual Literacy: Looking at Literature

This hybridization of art and media that Walker explores in the plastic fine arts curricula is also increasingly present in literacy studies. In fact, visual literacy studies and the importance of visual literacy to education have been drawing increased attention, particularly since the advent of home computers and widespread access to the Internet. Yet, the definition of visual literacy is difficult to pin down. According to Robert Maribe Branch (2000) in his article "A Taxonomy of Visual Literacy," visual literacy scholars have yet to reach consensus as to what the field of visual literacy should include or exclude. Focus in visual literacy study runs the gamut of scholars from those interested only in graphics to what Branch calls "verbo-visuals." Branch places scholars like W.D. Winn at the graphics-only end of the spectrum. Winn's focus in visual literacy is to

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explore how people learn from graphics, which Winn defines as the symbol system used to create charts, graphs, and diagrams, and excludes pictures and text of any sort. Other scholars Branch surveys, such L. Rezabek (1999, in Branch, 2000), offer broader definitions of visual literacy by identifying it as an ability to understand and create visual content, which may include word- or number-based texts. This definition includes images and text in the mix of symbol systems to be investigated, but focuses primarily on what the *visuals* import to an interpreter. Branch summarizes this approach to visual literacy as essentially "a language of imagery bound by the explicit juxtaposition of symbols in time and space" (p. 381). Another definition offered by Branch expands visual literacy into film and video media, as well:

> ...[V]isual literacy is the ability to process the elements of and to interpret visual messages, the ability to understand and appreciate the content and purpose of any image, as well as its structural and aesthetic composition. ... Visual literacy involves the interpretation of images, movement, design, color, and pattern in media messages of many kinds, from contemporary symbols and street signs to television commercials and MTV. (Robinson, 1984, cited in Branch, 2000, p. 382)

Perhaps with an eye toward teaching visual literacy, Branch uses these definitions as a means to clarify what is needed to achieve visual literacy. Given the differences among the scholars he cites, Branch's article identifies the need for the field to establish " a visual grammar... based on the communicating perception and the ecology of symbol systems" (p. 383). While the article's focus does not include print media in visual studies, his definitions of what visual literacy involves are very similar to the definition of comics

that Scott McCloud creates. McCloud (1993) argues that comics are "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intending to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, p. 20).

Given this similarity between Branch's concept of visual literacy and McCloud's definition of comics, it would seem that the study of comics' (and thus graphic novels) could come under the umbrella of visual literacy studies. In this way, outsider literacy practices may be a hybridization of visual and traditional literacy practices. While Branch's focus on understanding how to teach visual literacy begins with an admission that there is little research to explain how readers understand and use "pictorial information," he does identify visual literacy as a process more so than a product. His discussion of "communicating perception" and "ecology of symbol systems" can be condensed essentially to a reader-response stance: literacy, visual or otherwise, may come down to what the reader brings to the text and how well that reader understands the symbol system used to create the text, which may include language as well as pictorial symbols.

Branch's article is primarily concerned with visual literacy as a means to explore the messages created by and for the audience of computer-generated, multi-modal messages, and the kind of pop-culture, entertainment-driven multi-modal texts that are most evident in on-line communications, such as magazines, newspapers, video games, graphic novels and films. However, the recent shift away from text-dominated communication has also been noted in traditional expository or informational texts. A current example of this crossover is the impending publication of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation,* as reported in the *Washington Post* (Hassell, 2006, cited in

). This graphic novel, released in August, 2006, from the Hill and Wang division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux publishing company, is a nonfiction adaptation of the federal government's *The 9/11Report*, which was published in 2004 and quickly became a bestseller. The new graphic adaptation of the report is the creation of Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, both veterans of the comic book industry. According to Hassell (2006), Jacobson and Colon decided to create a graphic novel adaptation of *The 9/11 Report* because of the difficulty Colon had trying to read the original. Colon found the report's content presentation confusing, and believed that he and Jacobson, who had previously worked together on Jacobson's *Richie Rich* series for Harvey Comics, could create a more readily accessible and meaningful version. Colon further explained his rationale for adapting the government's report by acknowledging that:

> [t]here are going to be a whole bunch of kids, teenagers, and adults that will not read the report...and comics might offer an alternative. The education system at large has resisted [graphic adaptations,] I think, because of the term 'comic book.' I like to think of them as something that has more purpose. (Hassell, p.2)

At the very least, Colon's rationale for adapting the report can be seen as affirming Spiegelman's assertion about graphic texts as gateways to literacy. However, Hassell's article further explores the adaptation's potential for Colon's vision of a greater purpose beyond simple accessibility of information. Former Governor Thomas Kean and Congressman Lee Hamilton, respectively both Chairman and Vice-chairman of the 9/11 Report Commission, expressed their enthusiasm for the accuracy and respectfulness of the graphic adaptation, and even wrote the forward for the novel. Kean added that he has "hopes the book will lead more audiences to the *original report* (my emphasis)" (Hassell,

p. 2). Furthermore, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux plan to cross-market the adaptation to

comic fans and general readers, and according to Hassell's article, the publishing

company also plans to release several more nonfiction graphic works.

The release of *The 9/11 Report'*s graphic novel adaptation highlights the kind of

crossover marketing previously noted in Chapter One, but with one large difference. In

these cases, the texts noted here are not fiction, nor do they treat their subjects as

entertainment; they are meant to be serious works of nonfiction aimed at broader

audiences than publishing companies clearly feel are traditional consumers of graphic

texts. Especially when one considers the fact that *The 9/11 Report* was already a

bestseller, the idea of increasing readership of the original report by shifting the

information's presentation from verbal-only text to a multi-modal format implies that the

chairmen of the report's commission recognize on some level that the literacy used to

read a graphic novel is not a deficit kind of literacy (as it is often assumed to be), and that

by appealing to this different literacy they will gain more readers for both texts. In short,

for the commissioners this is not just an issue of accessibility to information. Were that

the case, Kean and Hamilton would not have emphasized the fact that they hope readers

of the 150 page graphic novel adaptation will also read the 600 page original report.

The shift that the release of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* represents is

important because it is a microcosmic example of a trend towards multi-modal narratives

outside of entertainment texts. This is the phenomenon that Gunther Kress (1999)

explores in his article *"English at the Crossroads: Rethinking Curricula of*

Communication in the Context of the Turn to the Visual." Kress explains that Western

academic culture has been shaped by an underlying idea that privileges written

communication, and that valuing written communication over all other forms has also been a means of controlling who has access to "social power" (p. 70). In this way, our culture and academic structures (and thus our cultural and academic expectations) have been shaped by the written word and how it appears on the page. While writing is visual in that it has shape, form, structure, and composition, Kress argues that these factors are regulatory in their predominance. The visual aspect of writing thus "...become[s] invisible through its usualness, its 'naturalness,' and at the same time intensifi[es] the meaning of regulation, much as did the stiff collar worn by the military and the white-collar worker alike" (p. 70). Kress is talking about convention, the conventions of writing as well as the conventions of the arrangement and expectations for writing as it appears on the printed page. In this way, the visuality of formal writing is largely unnoticed by readers because it has become the accepted and expected form of communication. Therefore, the kind of literacy that enables a person to comprehend, manipulate, and utilize formal writing and its substantive and visual conventions--what Diana George (2002) referred to as "academic decorum"-- is the privileged or preferred literacy.

From this perspective the long-held academic prejudice against texts that use less writing and more images to communicate their ideas can be understood, for seemingly such texts would only appeal to persons with deficit literacy, readers who need images to comprehend messages. Relegating images to the realm of deficit literacy reveals additional prejudices: namely, images are somehow easier to understand and require less consideration to comprehend than do verbal texts. Thus, the kind of literacy that functions best with verbal-only texts becomes the preferred literacy and the literacy that

educated persons strive to acquire and emulate, the literacy of the insiders in the academic and cultured club.

Kress's point about insider literacy is that the assumption that text dominates image in academia is not necessarily valid in practice, though the prejudice still exists, a point that other composition theorists such as Trimbur (2002), George (1999, 2002), and Sirc (2002) share. Kress believes the current "landscape of communication" to be "multi-semiotic," and that visuals already are central to much of that communication (p. 69). Kress's article supports this belief by examining how the visual presentation, content, and style of two different kinds of texts has shifted across a fifty-year span: Kress compared two editions of a science textbook (one textbook published in 1936 and a 1988 publication of the same science textbook), and two editions of newspapers, also published roughly fifty years apart. Kress's observation from both sets of comparisons is that when visually contrasted, the writing in the older-style newspaper and the older science text dominated the layout of the page, but in both the modern texts, visuals occupied much of the space previously devoted to writing. The significance of Kress's observations becomes even greater when considering that each text he studied represents information designed to be consumed by mass markets--newspapers and public school texts--and that "writing pushed to the margins" has become a "...characteristic of public communication" (p. 72). The validity of this discovery is underscored by the impending release of multi-modal nonfiction texts such as the aforementioned *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation.*

Kress's comparison of texts and text design focuses on how writing and images are used and the assumptions present therein. In Kress's study, the older texts relied on

language to say everything there was to be said, and imagery functioned only as illustration "attendant to the verbal." Two-thirds of the pages analyzed in the 1936 science textbook were devoted to language, and the remaining space was occupied by a diagram illustrating a process that had already been fully described in words. Ironically, book reviewers of the 1936 science text praised the book for its "...enlivening use of imagery [that may lead to] an increased possibility for learning and remembering" (p. 74). This praise, which might be considered a tacit acknowledgment that some information may be better conveyed visually, points to the change Kress notes in the 1988 version of the science book. In this text, Kress explains that fully two-thirds of the page is devoted to imagery and only one-third to writing, a complete reversal from the book published fifty years prior. With verbal text literally "pushed to the margins" of the page in the 1988 book, it becomes evident that in this textbook writing alone was not considered the most effective means of delivering important information.

From his analysis of both books, Kress posits a theory wherein the two modes, visual and linguistic, "take on specialized tasks" that are suited to the unique characteristic of each mode. Kress uses this idea of specialization to address academic bias against visually delivered information as simply "dumbed-down" versions of verbal texts. His analysis of both pages of text revealed that though there was less actual writing present on the page from the 1988 book, the dual-modality text did not represent a dumbed-down version of its 1936 predecessor. In the 1988 version, Kress found that the preponderance of images did not reduce the need for readers to use considerable critical reasoning skills to understand the information, but that each mode presented readers with a different set of comprehension challenges. Kress concludes:

Both writing and image are informative. However, they are not informative in the same way or about the same thing...the functional load of each is different. ...This new representational and communicative situation is not one of lesser complexity, or of lesser cognitive demand; it is one of a different kind of complexity and of different cognitive demand. (p. 76)

With these observations, Kress is opening the door for legitimizing other literacies, those that utilize skills beyond traditional academic, verbal-based literacy. Kress's discussion of both science texts includes a discussion of the page design or layout, and how the page from the 1988 text can be read both as a traditionally written text (where the reader's attention is text-driven and proceeds through the page from left to right, top to bottom), or as a whole visual image (akin to art, as one would look at a painting or a print). Kress's point is that both approaches, text-driven or image-driven, will yield the same information. Kress identifies this shift away from language as one moving toward layout or design an essential factor of visual communication, a concept that is not unlike art historian Alpers' characterization of the Dutch painters' work as the "art of describing." Whereas the canvas was the Dutch masters' vehicle for communication and expression, Kress believes the computer screen is the 21st century's canvas, wherein "...formal writing shifts from written text to blocks of text, a visual element in a visual unit" (p. 89).

Similar to Alloway's 1950's recognition that the boundaries of fine arts curricula needed to expand, Kress's call for change in current traditional English curricula is based on this shift towards the visual in form and presentation that is also occurring in other academic disciplines. Outsider texts and literacy practices are filtering into many areas of academia, narrowing the perceived gulf between the ivory tower and pop-culture. Cross-

curricular trends in secondary and elementary education demonstrate how science texts are further turning their emphasis away from verbal exposition towards visual, narrative and entertainment structures as vehicles for delivering information. In the article "Going Graphic: Educators Tiptoe into the Realm of Comics" Michele Galley (2004) interviewed a Juniata College biology professor, Jay Hosler, who has forgone the usual informational approach to teaching science in favor of creating "science-themed" graphic novels. Hosler chose the graphic novel format because he believes that graphic novels have the "ability to explain complicated ideas. ...By engaging students in the thread of the story...they more easily learn the complex information. ...If you remember the story, you remember the science" (Hosler, cited in Galley, p. 3).

Hosler's statement is significant; not only does it reflect the best thinking present in secondary cross-curricular instruction, but his success using science-themed graphic novels in the classroom also challenges assumptions about delivering information through traditional word-only, exposition-based texts, echoing the findings of Kress and other composition theorists who look at composition as design (George, Shoos, Trimbur, Sirc, Stainbrook). Hosler's ideas about linking visual narrative structure to informational texts reiterate Colon's beliefs about the efficacy of informational texts in delivering that information, and Hosler's reliance on visual media to deliver a significant portion of that information supports Kress's ideas about the importance of understanding how authors and readers use visual media to gain knowledge and insight.

In fact, Kress's notion of verbal text as a visual element--"blocks of text"--melds nicely with the design of graphic novels, where verbal text is often physically confined within speech or thought bubbles, or outlined or highlighted in some way to separate

narrative text from dialogue text. Additionally, Hosler speaks of "engaging students in the thread of the story" which points to an important concept of outsider literacy that is often overlooked in mainstream literacy studies: the notion of engagement or pleasurable experience that gets and keeps people reading in the first place. The book critic whom Kress cited as highlighting the 1936 science text's use of diagrams as "enlivening," links this concept to "an increased possibility for learning." Clearly, theorists understand that literacy on a deeper level is taking place with these kinds of outsider narratives, but what readers are actually doing when engaged with multimedia, multi-modal texts is not well understood.

Intertextuality, Outsider Literacy, and Graphic Novels Defined

The process readers use when confronted with multi-modal texts has been categorized by Diana George and Diane Shoos as intertextuality (George and Shoos, 1999; George, 2002). As defined by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality involves a transposition of sign systems similar to that which occurs in multi-modal texts. George and Shoos expand the idea of text to include multi-modal systems of communication. In many ways, George and Shoos' construct of intertextuality is similar to Kress's notion about the specialized purpose and functions that images and verbal text have within multi-modal texts, but George and Shoos explore how different information vehicles such as words and images work together to create meaning. In George and Shoos' context, intertextuality is:

...a process of reading, of discerning relationship(s) of texts to one another and to

their multiple contexts. It demands that readers pose questions about origins,

voice, and ultimately reception: that they ask not only where texts are generated

from, but also more precisely who is speaking, and for and to whom. (p. 124)

In this critical reasoning aspect of intertextuality, each mode represents its own kind of

text, modes that must be interpreted in relation to other modes as well as individually, a

kind of "countervailing of the sign system" that Kristeva describes as the basis for

signifying practice (Roudiez, p. 18). Where Kress describes the abstract and generalized

nature of images in his science book study as leading to a kind of separate-but-equal

cognitive demand that is as great for the readers of images as that of readers of verbal

language, George and Shoos call the visuals present within multi-modal texts "cultural

artifacts." As cultural artifacts, their meanings are constructed, not necessarily concrete or

obvious to every reader, and open to interpretation. By placing visuals in the context of a

reader's culture, George and Shoos explore how viewers (or readers) need to learn to

navigate what they call the "cultural matrix" of the text: how to read and interpret these

artifacts in relation to the verbal (or other modal) texts. According to George and Shoos,

the immediate cultural matrix present for the reader is imbedded in the design or

composition of the physical text, and the larger cultural matrix is the schema the reader

brings to the text. In this way, the ability to read and understand these texts is an

intertextual process. George and Shoos also note that the same historical prejudice Kress

discussed still informs academic studies today, the concept that "links high culture to

words and low culture to the visual, where words are linked to a reader's active

participation, to production, and images are linked to passive reception or consumption"

(George and Shoos, p. 118; George, p. 31). Using the example of texts that incorporate hypertext, George and Shoos echo Kress in that multi-modal literacy requires different skills, understandings, and levels of active participation and reasoning. Imbedding hypertext into a text implies that the reader will (1) recognize what hypertext is and its purpose, (2) use the link, and (3) know--or figure out--how the link's information is connected to the original text. In this way, including a visual construct (such as hypertext) in the design of a composition creates an active role for a reader that assumes and requires different sets of literacy skills and reader involvement than do traditional verbal, text-only compositions.

Understanding graphic novels and the elements that comprise them--their genre schemes, which vary by culture as well as by content--is key to understanding what confronts readers of these kinds of multi-modal outsider narratives. For the purpose of this study, I confined this discussion of graphic novels to include only printed material and not graphic texts presented on the internet or in another media (such as film or video games), since this study only investigated how readers work their way through printed material; exploring the cognition behind reading virtual material would be a subject for another related but different study.

The term *graphic novel* is very loosely defined: simply put, graphic novels are long forms of comics that focus on either a complete or a self-contained story line. In industry practice, though, the term graphic novel may also be used to give what are essentially comics an air of "respectability" when snob appeal is needed to separate "serious material" from "serial material" (McCloud, p. 28). Neil Gaiman, author of *1602* and *The Sandman* series as well as traditional fiction and nonfiction books, recounted a

story about this kind of labeling for Kurt Anderson's NPR syndicated show "Studio 360."

On the program, Gaiman recalled a conversation he once had at a Christmas party with a

literary editor from the *London Daily Telegraph* :

> The gentleman came up to me, introduced himself, and asked what I did. I
>
> replied I wrote comics, I wrote the *Sandman*. He replied, 'My dear boy, you don't
>
> write comics, you write graphic novels!' And I honestly felt like a hooker who's
>
> just been told she's a lady of the evening. (Gaiman, qtd. in Anderson)

This question of merit and reader-worthiness that the term graphic novel is sometimes

used to quell, is at the heart of the ever-present prejudice against anything associated with

comics as deficient in some way. Interestingly, though, in the 19th century, calling a book

a novel connoted the kind of formula romance--a lurid, gothic story--read only by certain

classes of people incapable of spending their time with "serious" reading. And so,

Gaiman's story illustrates a problem of perception as well as defining and classifying

graphic novels: are these long-form comics pulp fiction or literature, and when do we call

comics graphic novels? Graphic novels seem to run the gamut between these poles, and

the distinction between them is mostly academic; apparently retailers do not fret over

these differences, but use the term graphic novel to refer to all book-length comics and

market them as such. Yet, among comic book creators and graphic novelists the

distinction does carry some weight. Scott McCloud (2000) in his book *Reinventing*

Comics explains this distinction:

> [I]n moving from periodical to book, an implicit claim of permanent worth was
>
> being made - a claim that had to be justified. Periodicals have traditionally carried

with them the connotation of disposability, of temporary worth - while books

[such as graphic novels] brought the promise of something more. (p. 29)

Even given these expectations for graphic novels above their periodical brethren, the most common form of graphic novel is the compilation of a story line that originally appeared in print as serialized comics, which may stem as much from marketing practices as from a creator's intent. In fact, many of these kinds of graphic novels have multiple creators who collaborate to produce the story, just as do most comics: authors (writers), artists (cartoonists), and colorists (inkers). Novels like *Watchmen,* written by Alan Moore, illustrated and lettered by Dave Gibbons, and colored by John Higgins were originally released as a series, and the graphic novel version of *Watchmen* is simply that series collected between two covers. In this kind of graphic novel, even though each chapter was released as a separate issue in a series, the novel itself was designed as a whole, self-contained unit. The second kind of graphic novel is different from the first only in that the artist, colorist, and writer are all the same person, as is the case with *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* by Chris Ware. In some cases, these novels may have been initially released as a series (as was *Jimmy Corrigan*), or they may have been released in book form, as was Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Max Allan Collins's *Road to Perdition.* Ironically, *Road to Perdition* was supposed to have been serialized, but sales of serialized crime graphic novels were not what Andrew Helfer, the editor of DC's Paradox Press, had hoped, so *Road to Perdition* was released as a single volume.

Genre Theory and Reading: Genre as Design

Genre theory offers a way to examine literacy by studying the structure of, and readers' interactions with, texts as socio-cultural constructs (Bazerman & Prior 2005; Simmons 2005; Stamboltzis & Pumfrey 2005; Kress 2003; Bazerman & Russell 1994). At its core, genre theory is based on the concept that all texts, spoken or written, have frameworks that use particular features to communicate. Experienced readers and users of these texts are familiar with their frameworks, and use this familiarity to interact with the text to construct meaning. However, genre theory when applied to literacy instruction, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels, is often applied in a superficial way: if students learn the features of certain types of text, then they should be able to understand and recreate those kinds of text, and in fact many state standards require that students be able to do just that. What this overly simple understanding (or mis-understanding) of genre theory leaves out are the dynamic socio-cultural elements that shape this notion of interaction. Genre does not exist in a vacuum; genres are not fixed constants, no more so than the authors and readers that use and encounter them. Looking only at the surface features of a text ignores the author, the reader, the content, and the circumstances under which the text was produced and read, all the elements that comprise the context of communication.

Bazerman's (1981) examination of the essential role genre plays in writing across the curriculum emphasizes this importance of context, where " writing and other discursive practices [are] closely tied to human development, cognition, interaction, social formation and culture" (p. 164). In short, to understand what language conveys,

one must look at the context wherein it operates and to which it refers. Bazerman identified four essential, interdependent components of genre study for writing across the curriculum that can also be applied to literacy study: lexicon, literature of the field, anticipated audience, and the author's persona. Lexicon is the information conveyed through the symbolism, structural frameworks, etc., that an author chooses; lexicon could be the language an author uses, or in the case of graphic novels, the imagery, color, and iconography of comics as well as the verbal text. The second component, literature of the field, represents experience--the explicit and implicit knowledge--present in the text and that which text makers and readers bring to a text. Anticipated audience asks a reader to consider what the text assumes about its readers; and author's persona refers to the idea that readers recognize an author as an "individual statement [maker,] coming to terms with reality from a distinct perspective"(p. 161). In this way, understanding genre is an interactive process that involves author, text, reader, and culture. In fact, Bazerman's framework for genre theory is similar to the guiding principles of Rosenblatt's reader response theory. In both approaches, literacy is examined as a transactional experience: how a reader understands a text depends not only on the author's intent, structure and content of the text, but also what the reader brings to that content: his literary and personal experience, expectations, and the social framework which encultures the reading. As such, genre is not so much a means to understand form, but rather to understand function, and (by extension) how a text may be understood by its readers (Simmons, 2005).

A further dynamic element of genre theory important to this dissertation's exploration is the concept that genres are often mixed, what Kress (2003) describes as

"ensembles of modes brought together to realise particular meanings"(p. 116). Graphic novels, particularly the two used in the think-aloud protocols for this study, employ essentially two communicative modes: image and verbal. Using multiple modes shifts the organizational structure of these kinds of novels from verbal-based to image-based, so that from the moment readers open a graphic novel they are aware that it is structurally different from traditional verbal-only narratives. Kress's exploration of multi-modal texts posits literacy as moving away from the "world narrated" to the "world depicted," what he calls the genre of display. In this way a page of multi-modal text has more in common with a page from the Internet than a page of traditional verbal text because all the communicative components of a multi-modal text have been assembled so that information is not so much told as it is presented. All components of the text now become visual elements, and the page itself may function as an image--one semiotic entity--emphasizing what Kress calls a "flip in semiotic power" as verbal elements are cast in supporting roles, becoming part of image and functioning as image in addition to maintaining their traditional language functions (p. 7). How the page is designed--its layout--becomes an essential element to multi-modal literacy because "all aspects of form are meaningful, and [as such] all aspects of form must be read with equal care" (p. 44). Thus, viewing a multi-modal text page as semiotics leads to a different interpretation of what that text has to offer.

Reading this kind of text must be studied in terms of process, as the visuality of the text impacts how a reader approaches and works his way through the page's structure. Reading no longer can be considered only in terms of interpretation, but as "imposing salience and order, reading by design" (p. 50). Kress discusses reading not so much in

terms of overall strategies readers use to make sense of text, but in terms of reading paths

that readers create for specific text encounters. How a reader enters a multi-modal page

has to do with how a reader perceives the page, which according to Kress is a culturally

informed decision. In Western society, traditional verbal-only narrative conventions

establish reading paths that assume readers will enter a text from the left, and follow a

top-to-bottom, left-to-right, page-by-page linear trajectory. Multi-modal narratives

present a more ambiguous challenge to readers; because the page can be viewed as a

whole image or through its individual components, readers must also make decisions

about directionality as well as entry points when creating their own reading paths. This is

not to say that multi-modal literacy is a kind of free-for-all, and that multi-modal texts do

not have conventions; the idea of design is the ordering of conventions, the creation of

form from different elements. Graphic novels have their own kind of visual grammar,

structure, and narrative techniques (discussed in detail below) that are the hallmarks of

the genre, and the readers interviewed for this study were chosen to participate based on

their use of, familiarity and expertise with these conventions. Rather, Kress suggests that

the "guiding principle [for reading multi-modal texts] is that of 'following relevance,'

according to the principles of relevance which belong to the reader--and perhaps are

already shared by his community" (p. 162). A graphic novel's potential for this kind of

complexity is what makes understanding outsider literacy important. As reading inside

and outside of academia moves closer to semiosis, understanding the genre of multi-

modal texts (such as graphic novels) and the readers' expectations for these texts, as well

as how readers construct knowledge from these texts, is a critical aspect of studying

outsider literacy.

Design Elements and Graphic Narrative Structures

As multi-modal texts, graphic narrative structures are created using elements that are different from, yet also include, verbal-based elements. In order to better understand how readers confront this mixed genre, it is important to explore what these elements are and how they are used by graphic novelists. To this end, this section will discuss in detail these components of graphic narratives and how each may influence what a reader must do or comprehend to make sense of the text.

Because printed versions of graphic novels are essentially visual media, the format for their design addresses the plane of the page as a two-dimensional entity, much as a painter confronts the surface plane of a canvas. In this way, the page is the basic unit around which the design of graphic novels must center. For Spiegelman, this two-dimensional workplace is the space wherein "mass media and personal expression mix" (Spiegelman lecture). Scott McCloud (1993) calls this mix of media and expression "a language all its own, being at once both and neither writing or art, but an interdependent compilation of both" (p. 17). Reading comics, and therefore graphic novels, means a reader must understand the nature of the media and its special language, and know how to approach it and decode it. Will Eisner defines this composite media as "sequential art," but McCloud clarifies Eisner's concept to focus on that sequential art which is confined to the two dimensional plane of the page:

> Comics [and graphic novels] are juxtaposed, pictorial, and other images in
> deliberate sequence, intending to convey information and produce an aesthetic
> response in the viewer. (p. 9)

McCloud then identifies the essential design elements of comics and graphic novels that readers of these outsider narratives confront: visual iconography, timeframe design, closure, word and image interplay, and color.

The first design element McCloud explores is iconography, or the vocabulary of comics. This vocabulary comprises the subject or content to be delivered to the reader. According to McCloud's definition, icons are "images used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea" (p. 27). He reserves the term "symbol" as a subset category of icon to represent "concepts, ideas, and philosophies" (p. 27). Icons as used in graphic novels are further divided into two basic types: pictorial icons, which are images designed to actually resemble their subjects to varying degrees of realism and abstraction, and non-pictorial icons, symbols wherein the meaning is fixed and absolute, and the physical appearance of the icon doesn't alter its meaning (p. 28). Of these two, it is mainly the pictorial icons, which provide what Spiegelman calls the architectural structure of comics, the intersection of visual and verbal narrative. In other words, how that pictorial icon appears on the page influences how a reader may interpret that image.

McCloud explores how comics and graphic novels use cartooning--a form of pictorial icon creation--and the important role it plays in reader involvement and interpretation. What McCloud calls "amplification [of ideas] through simplification" is the effect achieved by reducing an image to its most basic elements, which is the essence of cartooning. By cartooning, or playing with levels of abstraction in the imagery used to create a visual narrative, graphic novelists can guide a reader's involvement in the story. McCloud believes that cartooning is a way of focusing an audience's perception and emotional investment in the characters and story. By reducing images to just a simple set

of lines, such as a cartoon face, those lines can be said to describe more faces than will a

photorealistic rendering, which serves to describe one very particular face. In this way,

the more abstracted or "cartoony" is an image, the more it can be universal:

> The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...and
>
> empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't
>
> just observe the cartoon, we <u>become</u> the cartoon. (p. 36)

Through juxtapositioning realism and abstraction, as well as manipulating levels of

abstraction in the images, a graphic novelist has almost unlimited potential to involve his

readers with the narrative. For if simplified images encourage readers to see themselves

in the character or story, then realistic images create a sense of otherness or separateness

in readers, as can be seen in Figure 6 (p. 44). McCloud suggests that these kinds of

combinations of iconic images allow readers to "mask themselves in a character and

safely enter a sensually stimulating world--one set of lines to see, and another set of lines

to be" (p. 43). This type of immersion in story, or enthrallment as Rosenblatt would call

it, is an active form of reading. In this way, readers of multi-modal narratives are not

passive recipients of information, but must use their imagination to interact with the

story.

My memories, like some people's dreams, are in black and white

I KNOW WE HAD SUMMER, IN THE TRI-CITIES, BUT WHEN I REMEMBER MY CHILDHOOD, IT'S ALWAYS WINTER...SNOW AND SLUDGE AND SLEET MIXED WITH DIRT AND CINDERS. *THAT* WINTER, OF 1930...

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Note. From *Road to Perdition* (p. 17), by M.A. Collins, 2002, New York: Pocket Books. Copyright 1998 by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner. Reprinted under the conditions of the Fair Use sections (107-118) of the United States Copyright Act.

Figure 6. Road to Perdition page 17: The winter of 1930.

These two panels are an example of juxtapositioning abstraction and realism. The abstraction of the writer's hands penning the narration invites readers to enter into the panel, perhaps as the writer themselves, and the bottom panel, which resembles an overexposed photograph, establishes the "otherness" of a by-gone era, creating the setting and "feel" of the novel.

Pictorial icons are what McCloud calls "received" information; he believes a reader needs no formal education to "get" the message, because the "message is instantaneous" (p. 49). From personal experience with outsider narratives and the participants in this study I disagree in part with McCloud. While a novice reader of outsider narratives may be able to understand some of the message imparted through pictorial icons (or the other design elements to be discussed), so many of the images and icons contain allusions to other graphic texts that without experience or education in this literacy tradition, that understanding will be incomplete at best; the novice reader will not necessarily "get" the joke or the message "instantaneously". As George and Shoos discuss, a reader's schemata--what the reader lacks or brings to the text--shapes comprehension, and even more importantly enhances the pleasure of the reading experience, a key element in the kind of aesthetic reading stance that was explored in this study.

McCloud contrasts pictorial icons with the second kind of icon, non-pictorial, of which words are members. In his opinion, "words are the ultimate abstraction...perceived information which takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language"(p. 49). Once again, a graphic novelist can play with non-pictorial iconography in the same way he can play with pictorial iconography:

When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality,' they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception, and are received faster, more like pictures. (p. 49)

McCloud posits a triangular relationship among the extreme styles of iconography or imagery of which words are a part: icons can be realistic (one vertices of McCloud's

triangle) or can be as abstracted as language yet retain meaning (a second vertices) or they can be completely abstracted shapes, etc., with no attached meaning, which McCloud calls the picture plane (the third vertices). Graphic novelists use all of these styles to varying degrees (or create their own hybrids) to deliver their narratives, and it is this kind of visual vocabulary that provides a design element which readers must also be able to navigate in order to understand the text.

The second and third design elements, timeframe design and closure, McCloud calls the "grammar" of comics and are how an artist or writer actually organizes the content of the narrative on the page. These elements represent the over-arching layout or composition of the page, the panels which contain the icons and the gutters that are the voids between panels. Themselves a kind of comic icon, panels and gutters organize icons and create transitions such as time and motion necessary for concepts of sequencing a story. Panels and gutters provide the reader with a sense of time and space, and how both change as the story unfolds. In comics and graphic novels, panel design--the shape, size, spacing, the aesthetic quality of lines used to delineate them and the number present on a page--are used to play with the notion of time as well as reader expectations for time, and can became iconic themselves. The aesthetic concerns of how an artist/author designs both directly affect how a reader will perceive and follow the narrative. Artists can play with pacing by compressing the past, present and future into one panel, or inflate time by adding panels to visually stretch the moment, as is demonstrated in Figure 7.

Note. From *Watchmen* (p. 3), by A. Moore, 1986, New York: DC Comics. Copyright 1986 by DC Comics. Reprinted under the conditions of the Fair Use sections (107-118) of the United States Copyright Act.

Figure 7. Watchmen page 3: Flashback sequence.

This page uses panel division, gutters, and color (though not visible in this reprint) to layer two different time sequences. Panels one, three, five, and seven are contrasted to the others by a red-wash; these panels represent the murder as it actually took place, the red tones literally bloodying the whole picture. The first six panels are same-sized, which might indicate a certain reading rhythm, but the last is three-times larger than the others. The size and sheer visual weight of this panel effectually freezes time, and the figure in free-fall becomes the dominant narrative element on the page.

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By using uniformly shaped panels, the graphic novelist can establish a visual reading

rhythm familiar to his audience, then interrupt it by changing the perimeters and shape,

size, or orientation of other panels. Bleeds, an industry term for a panel design where the

borders of panels dissolve into the gutters or the edges of a page, can be effectively used

to suggest metaphorical dissolution's of time and space. Using motion or zip-lines can

further indicate time and direction, as well as emotional and aesthetic qualities difficult to

represent visually such as scent or sound. In this sense, the graphic novelist can direct

where a reader looks on a page, within a page or across pages, or how long he will look,

and that direction will not necessarily follow traditional left-to-right, top-to-bottom

literacy expectations. Readers are given direction by the novelist, but are also free to look

wherever they want at any given time or place in the narrative to make sense of the text.

McCloud identifies a reader's ability to navigate both panels and gutters as

representing the idea of closure. In graphic novels and comics, closure is how readers

perceive the icons and complete these gaps:

> Here in the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms
>
> them into a single idea...Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering
>
> ajagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments, but closure allows us to
>
> connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (pp.
>
> 66, 67)

In this way, readers must participate actively to read comics, and McCloud recognizes the

reader's role by calling readers his "equal partners in crime" or his "silent accomplices"

(p. 68). By taking what are essentially pieces provided to the reader by the author and

constructing a unified idea from these pieces, the reader creates a highly personalized

form of closure influenced by the reader's schemata: all the experiences the reader brings with him to the text. McCloud aptly describes this individualized process of reading and interpreting the panels and gutters:

... To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths. ... I may have drawn an ax being raised [in one panel] but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own special style. (pp. 68-69)

In order to explore what readers do when confronted with panel-to-panel gutters, it is important to understand what transitions gutters usually represent in these print-based visual narratives. McCloud identifies six basic transitions: moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect, and non-sequitors. According to McCloud, the first two kinds of transitions require less closure from readers because they are more visually connected in time, space, and concept, usually encompassing the same scene or idea. A moment-to-moment or action-to-action transition describes a sequence that a reader would logically expect to happen next; therefore, less effort at closure on the part of the reader is necessary to piece together the message the author/artist is sending.

Subject-to-subject transitions also take place across same scenes or ideas, but they require more work on the part of the reader as they tend to represent larger gaps in time or space. An example of this kind of transition is the ax murder sequence described above: one panel establishes the would-be killer holding an ax above his victim's head, while the next panel in the sequence shows a nighttime urban skyline with a scream

echoing across the panel. The idea is the same--a murder being committed--but the particulars of the murder are not spelled out for the reader as they would be in an action-to-action or moment-to-moment transition. Instead, the reader must use his imagination to close the gap between the subjects of the actual crime scene and the larger crime scene of the cityscape.

The remaining three kinds of transitions require the most effort on the part of the reader to understand the sequence. Scene-to-scene transitions literally move across large distances of time and or space, often known as the "meanwhile..." panels. The reader must infer what has happened literally in the meanwhile to follow the sequence, often flashbacks or flash forwards, as is also shown in Figure 7. Aspect-to-aspect transitions are what McCloud calls the "wandering eye" effect, and are used to set a mood, or show varied perspectives. The sequencing in these kinds of transitions is not intended to be linear as it is with the first three, but is usually intended to establish psychological relationships or perspectives, as is evident in Figure 8.

FRUITS BASKET © 1998 by Natsuki Takaya / HAKUSENSHA, Inc.

Note. From *Fruits Basket* (p.14), by N. Takaya, 2004, Los Angeles: TOKYOPOP, Inc. Copyright 2004 by TOKYOPOP. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 8. Fruits Basket page 14: Gossip.

Figure 8 is an example of aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitor panel design, where the whole page functions as a kind of panel itself. The dominant image is centrally located; it is Yuki, the boy about whom the main character is teased by her school friends. This teasing sequence is evident in a montage of dialogue boxes and bubbles and smaller panels that are suggested by disconnected vertical and horizontal lines. These surround Yuki's image in a pasted-on, scrap-bookish way. Unusual backgrounds of flowers, a rainbow-like heart shape, and starlight sparkles are used to set the mood of a teenage crush, but these psychological constructs are those of the gossiping school mates that surround the central image, and not the main character's actual feelings.

The last form of transition is that of the non-sequitor, panels that seem to have no real or apparent relationship to each other. This is an unusual kind of transition that seems to deny the idea of sequence, but actually has narrative purpose. As McCloud states, "By creating a sequence of two or more images, we are endowing them with a single overriding identity, and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole" (p. 73). Even with non-sequitors, clearly there is a relationship intended, but it is something the reader has to determine or let develop as he continues to read the text.

Perhaps more than any other element used to create graphic novel narratives, transitions both reinforce and play with reader expectations for story telling, and are culturally constructed. In other words, readers have expectations for design elements based on experience with these kinds of texts. McCloud identifies the American formula for graphic narrative storytelling as stemming from the graphic narrative style of storytelling developed in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comics. Western-style comics, which include European comics, tend to use mostly action-to-action transitions (about 65%, according to McCloud), followed by subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions at 20% and 15% respectively (pp. 74-75). McCloud's analysis of European comics demonstrates that with some slight variations, this formula holds true across the pond as well. From a reader's perspective, this familiarity is important because it should allow for ease of reading and interpretation, based on the idea that in the cultural West, stories (and therefore storytelling) are based on event-driven plots, what McCloud refers to as our "goal-oriented culture"(p. 81). Japanese (Eastern-style) comics, however, use a much broader range of transitions. In his analysis of Japanese comics, McCloud found that the use of action-to-action transitions, while still technically dominant, was almost equaled

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by the subject-to-subject transitions. Furthermore, Japanese comics make substantial use of moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions, which are used so infrequently in most mainstream Western-style comics as to be considered almost nonexistent (pp. 78-80).

McCloud looks to long-established artistic traditions to explain the difference in style and therefore reader/viewer expectation. Much as the aforementioned Dutch masters' style reflected European cultural values and expectations for art and narrative during the late Renaissance and Reformation, so too does comic art narrative reflect or utilize fine art expectations and traditions in the context of its popular culture, part of that cultural matrix that George and Shoos described as necessary to navigate multi-modal texts. McCloud's comparison of Eastern artistic traditions to Western traditions as reflected in pop culture narratives sets up the following dichotomy. Eastern traditions support a labyrinthine style of creative expression, where the emphasis is placed on the journey, the process, the cycle, whereas Western creative expression focuses on the end of the journey, the product, the conclusion, McCloud's notion of "goal-oriented culture." While Eastern art (especially in the 19th and 20th centuries) has greatly influenced Western art (and vice-versa), the emphasis of the two traditions remain different, as is evidenced in the narrative traditions of each. Japanese graphic narratives tend to be much longer than their Western counterparts, using time and space to develop mood and setting. The emphasis is placed on a holistic experience rather than linear progression of plot, and readers must recreate ideas or moments from scattered fragments of and in panels, whereas Western readers learn that what happens in the gutters is meant to bridge moments or gaps between panels. Despite these cultural differences, McCloud

emphasizes that all comic narrative art is essentially a less-is-more proposition, where the reader is expected to contribute to the meaning-making of a story, especially when storytelling "...veers closer to the concerns of the picture plane...[where] it's the unifying properties of design that make [the reader] more aware of the page as a whole, rather than its individual components, the panels" (p. 91).

The fourth and fifth elements of graphic narrative design are the interplay of word, image, and color. McCloud anchors pop-culture graphic narratives in high culture artistic tradition by explaining that the intersections of word, image and color in comics could be considered one kind of realization of the concept of synaesthetics. McCloud traces the shifts from representational imagery to abstracted imagery in art history up through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where artists such as the Russian Constructivist painter Wassily Kandinsky explored how line, shape, and color could work on all the senses to give a viewer a glimpse a the inner world of a painting's creator. According to McCloud, these artists, who were not limited to painters but also included musicians such as Richard Wagner and the poet Baudelaire, "... were searching for an art that might somehow unite the senses...and in doing so, unite the different art forms which appealed to those different senses...[what] we call...synaesthetics"(p. 123). How comics artists use line, word, form, style and color to convey narrative elements such as plot, place, time, characters, physical sensations, psychological states, and thematic concerns therefore, could be viewed as achieving this concept of synaesthetics.

In McCloud's explanation of these elements, all aspects of graphic narrative can be considered iconographic. The physical presentation of comics, which R. Crumb defines simply as "lines on paper," including color or lack thereof, can convey mood and

personality; it can be used to create settings both physical or psychological, and style can situate a comic culturally. The lettering used to incorporate verbal text blurs the distinction between word as text and word as image. As the style of lettering (shape, line quality, width, and intensity) used can convey sound as well as content, words become an important visual element within the story, beyond what verbal textual meaning the words are meant to convey. For example, the use and visual style of word balloons to contain or associate verbal text with certain speakers or narrators also conveys voice and visual direction to a reader: who is speaking and to whom, and when they are saying it, how loudly it's being said, as well as what is being said, thought, imagined or explained. Nonverbal sound effects are also expressed through lines and onomatopoetic letters combined to look like words and to be read as words, but not necessarily representing word-concepts.

When words are meant to be read as words, they also perform different functions within a graphic narrative text. McCloud categorizes seven essential ways in which graphic novelists use words and images to "show and tell": word-specific, picture specific, duo-specific, additive, parallel, montages, and interdependent (p.138). Word-specific combinations most closely represent the phenomena of illustration used in the 1936 text that Gunther Kress identified in his comparison of two science books. In this combination, images are merely illustrations that duplicate the description given by a larger verbal text, but do not enhance the meaning of that verbal text. Picture-specific combinations are almost the opposite of this; in picture-specific combinations, the image gives all the narrative details, and the words function as what McCloud calls a "soundtrack," not really adding any important information to the sequence. Duo-specific

combinations simply send the same message, essentially repeating the message, once verbally and once visually. In the remaining four types of combinations, the reader's interpretive role becomes a bit more interesting as the role of word and image blurs and combines. Additive combinations literally add meaning to each other; the image completes what the text leaves out or leaves to vagueness. Parallel combinations disassociate word from image in that the image narrative seems to be telling a different story than the words suggest, providing another challenge for the reader as he navigates what superficially seems to be disjointed. Montages of word and image, where the physical shape and presentation of words become part of the image, force a reader to consider words as image and image as word. The final category of combinations is the interdependent word-image relationship, where both text and image are necessary to complete the meaning because neither is sufficient on its own. McCloud's analysis of word and image interplay explores Eisner's notion that this kind of word/art fusion is meant to be read as a single, visual entity. Thus, when one aspect of word-image combination dominates an element of the story such as plot, then the other is free to explore different aspects of narrative. In other words, verbal text is not always anchored to plot considerations nor is image married to illustration.

In order to create meaning in graphic narratives, a reader must understand how to make sense of pages that use these graphic narrative elements. Spiegelman has said that each page of comics, particularly in graphic novels, " ... becomes a visual paragraph, holding the page together as a single visual element" (Spiegelman lecture). In this way, the comic artist "functions as a director as the "narrative structure of comics becomes a visual/architectural structure." According to Spiegelman, readers' eyes are meant to

wander around and through a page of comics, but where the reader looks can be somewhat guided by the artist/author's iconographic and compositional choices, and manipulation of readers' expectations for reading graphic narrative texts as discussed above. Neil Gaiman's interview with Kurt Anderson discussed the same concept, that writing a graphic novel feels more "like directing" the novel. When questioned about his genre preferences during this Studio 360 interview, Gaiman compared writing comics to writing poetry in that poetry is an economy of words and poetic rhythms. When he's working in prose (verbal-based texts), Gaiman stated that what he misses about writing comics is the fact that he knows his readers will pay attention to every word in his comics and graphic novels, something he doesn't believe happens in verbal-based texts: "In comics, readers read every word; they read at the pace I want them to read and turn the page when I want them to [turn the page]..." (Gaiman, qtd. in Anderson). Eisner (1996) extends this metaphor to that of play-writing and directing theatrical productions; he believes that while comics are limited in the extent to which they can control the reader's wandering eye (as compared to the control a filmmaker has over how a reader/viewer comprehends that kind of text) the graphic, verbal and compositional choices graphic novelists make partner with the tacit cooperation of the comics reader to get and keep his attention and "control the reader's ear" (Eisner, pp. 40-44; p. 125). These comparisons to theater and film are not unique to comics creators, but are unique to this kind of multi-modal media; in the interviews I've conducted with graphic novel readers for this study, the readers themselves most frequently use film and stage terminology to describe what they've read in graphic novels and comics.

"Reading is a perceptual activity...Reading words is a subset of a much more general human activity, which includes symbol decoding, information integration, and organization. The reading of words is <u>one</u> manifestation of this activity, but there are many others." (Tom Wolf, cited by Eisner, p.8)

In his dissertation "Reading Comics: A Theoretical Analysis of Textuality and Discourse in the Comics Medium", Eric Stainbrook (2003) explores the textuality of comics, essentially looking at whether or not comics and other multi-modal texts can be "read." Stainbrook's study is important to this dissertation because he establishes that comics, using McCloud's definition, can be read, and because the text design and media of comics are different from verbal-only texts, the way a reader makes sense of comics may be different, too. According to his findings, the combinations of image and words that comprise comics--and by extension graphic novels--can be considered cohesive, albeit inherently different, kinds of text and therefore can be read. As such, reading theories used to better understand traditional verbal texts might also be useful when examining multi-modal narratives, though the cognitive processes readers use to understand them may be different as Stainbrook suggests (p.11; p. 179). The results of Stainbrook's investigation were that comics--multi-modal texts comprised of image and words--exhibit textuality through connexity and "conceptual cohesion" - where words and images "hang together" as text (p. 46).

This kind of cohesion is similar to the cohesion that George and Shoos point out as necessary for readers to make sense of these kinds of texts, that all the elements of

multi-modal constructs must have a purpose that is discernible to the reader. Stainbrook identifies this sense of purposeful design as "textuality," as defined by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1983). For Stainbrook, that comics (and therefore graphic novels) have textuality means they exhibit De Beaugrande and Dressler's conditions for textuality: ideation or conceptualization, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. Stainbrook explains informativity as a text's content that readers can comprehend, situationality as the audience's ability to make predictions about the text's "purpose and context," and intertextuality as the audience's ability to utilize the schemata which every reader brings to each new textual encounter to make those predictions (Stainbrook, p. 45; p. 52). This schema, which comprises much of a reader's ability to navigate and understand multi-modal constructs, is defined by Sadoski (1999) as a "mental program with a set of variables (slots) that accept only certain types of data and supply default values where no data are given" (cited in Stainbrook, p. 54). This is similar to George and Shoos' concept of the cultural matrix brought to the text by readers through which they make sense of the information. Thus, Stainbrook's investigation into the theoretical construct of reading comics and his subsequent conclusions support the ideas that "...reading is not governed by signal but by schema; reading must be an event defined on the level of ideation, not the level of surface text" (p. 179). This kind of active participation by readers that Stainbrook describes is essential to the "intertextuality" of outsider literacy, having the experience and understanding necessary to navigate the terrain or design of a multi-modal page, as well as the page's own special language. In this way, the process of reading comics and graphic novels is not bounded by or limited to verbal language and its constructs.

Thus, the idea that readers of multi-modal texts use different literacies to understand and interpret this material is accepted by theorists who see composition (what readers read) as changing. What are the natures of these outsider literacy practices, and what are readers really doing when they confront these texts? Stainbrook posits in his conclusion that "...if conceptual cohesion and conjunctive associations are properly elements of reading and not of language...[then] ...Reading [may be] a series of cognitive schemas that can be taught, practiced, studied, and evaluated apart from words or language" (p. 180). That the nature of literacy could be dependent on how readers make their way through texts (Stainbrook's cognitive schemas), what the readers bring to the text and see in the text (intertextuality), as well as what the texts contain (informativity), is the basis for using genre theory and Rosenblatt's reader response theory as constructs to examine how these readers make sense of outsider narrative texts such as graphic novels.

Frank Smith and Louise Rosenblatt:
Reading, Reader-Response Theory and Outsider Literacy

Gaiman's interview with Kurt Anderson revealed an odd pop-culture kind of currency graphic novels are currently enjoying. Gaiman's amused ruminations on the newfound respectability of graphic novels compare the attitudes of the *London Daily Telegraph* editor, who identified Gaiman as a graphic novelist rather than address him as a comics writer, to the qualitative nuances intimated when people label movies films and

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films movies. For Gaiman, graphic novels and comics are the same, and he rather enjoys the outsider perspective of a comics writer:

> I liked it when I was writing comics...I've always loved the gutter. It's much more fun [to write] when reviewers aren't paying attention. I do [comics] because they're fun, not for respectability. ... [Now] I write all these weird things and then suddenly they become respectable. (Gaiman, qtd. in Anderson.)

Gaiman's interview touches on one of the primary ideas that practitioners of outsider literacy, especially the readers I've interviewed for this study, cite as the draw to these kinds of multi-modal texts: they're fun to read. Tapping into this idea of enjoyment from reading sounds intuitive, but as Rosenblatt (1994) points out in her book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work,* the reader's relationship to a text has been relegated to "...play[ing] the role of the invisible eavesdropper," a position seemingly reinforced by education's emphasis on competency-focused reading (Rosenblatt, p. 2). In *Understanding Reading,* Frank Smith (1994) also argues against the concept of reader as passive recipient, and places the reader squarely in the center of the author-text-audience relationship by stating "One cannot understand reading without understanding readers" (p. 2). Smith takes to task a notion that seems to prevail in the current educational climate of high-stakes testing, namely that "good" readers are essentially decoding machines, passive-but-effective collectors of the facts and information. This information acquisition model of reading places the idea of a stable text with a fixed meaning in charge of the reader. Smith's study of reading examines how readers, not texts, control reading and create meaning. Thus, both Smith and Rosenblatt

emphasize that understanding from a text, as well as enjoyment, is a function of the *reader's* reading of the text.

It was due to this perceived neglect of the reader that Rosenblatt sought to create a theory that would put the reader back into play with the text. Her "concern about the social and intellectual atmosphere that sets up 'good literature' as...works accessible only to the elit[e]" prompted her to look at the act of reading and reconsider the role of the "invisible" recipients of these texts, which to that point had been viewed not as active individuals, but as a faceless, "passive" grouping (p. 142). Rosenblatt's reader response theory is built upon what she describes as a transactional relationship between the reader and text: "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader" (p. xii). In this way, the concept of audience is simplified to its essential component: an individual making sense of a particular text at a particular moment in time. Rosenblatt defines her use of the term transactional as a kind of give-and-take process between the reader and the text, where each individual situation helps to shape and "condition" all parts of that process.

Smith's (1994) study clarifies the nature of Rosenblatt's transacting, shaping and conditioning of the text by readers. His analysis of individuals' reading states that:

> Reading is a creative, constructive activity having four distinct characteristics:
> reading is purposeful, selective, anticipatory, and based on comprehension; all
> matters where the [individual] reader must clearly exercise control. (Smith, p. 3)

For Smith, purposeful reading is a product of the reader's intentions for that reading, selectivity refers to relevance in that readers will pay attention to what is important or what interests them, anticipation relates directly to a reader's schemata and the

expectations readers have for texts based on their experience with other texts, and comprehension is really a matter of learning through predicting: how readers relate what is new in the text to what they already know. All four of these characteristics serve to link author, reader, and text through the idea that meanings readers construct from texts are always related to what the reader already knows and wants to know (p. 157). Predicting forms the backbone of this process: a reader questions the text and the author, and comprehension occurs as a result of the answers a reader derives from the reading. This kind of thinking process is highly personal; what questions a reader asks depends on what interests the reader and what that reader wants to learn, as well as what the reader already knows prior to reading, and what the reader expects from the text.

In this way genre theory and reading by design figure prominently in the notion of transacting with a text. Smith asserts that genre as a part of readers' schemata informs readers' expectations through familiarity with story schemes and discourse structure. Certain genre schemes are so imbedded in readers' experience that encountering them feels natural and universal, and consequently when readers encounter new or different genre schemes, reading feels foreign and disconcerted (Kress, 2003; Bazerman & Prior, 1994; Smith, 1994). Because genre schemes and discourse structures are culturally constructed, a reader's understanding of any text is directly linked to a reader's life and literary experiences. As such, experienced readers most often read for the pleasure of reading, a pleasure that comes from "the experience generated by the act, for the satisfaction of the act, [more] than for the specific information that the reading provides" (Smith, p. 61). In fact, Smith reconfigures the idea of reading competency in terms of experience, where "[t]he advantage of a competent reader over a neophyte lies in

familiarity with a range of different kinds of text, not in the possession of skills that facilitate every kind of reading" (p. 177). Therefore, transactional reading is a process that is by nature is fluid, changeable, and highly individual. A reader that transacts with a text is "...break[ing] down the boundary between the inner and outer world," creating a newly-shaped experience that will add to a reader's total sum of life experience, ready to be used with "future encounters in literature and in life" (p. 21).

In addition to her transactional concept of reading, Rosenblatt's definition of text also leaves room for flexibility:

> 'Text' designates a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols...visual or auditory signs become verbal symbols, become words by virtue of their being potentially recognizable as pointing to something beyond themselves. (p. 12)

McCloud's and Stainbrook's' assessments of comics icons and design elements discussed previously fall within the scope of Rosenblatt's definition of text because they, too, are "recognizable to the reader as pointing to something beyond themselves." Therefore, though comics and graphic novels were not the kind of literature that Rosenblatt was using as the basis for her studies, her broad definition of text allows the possibility for multi-modal outsider narratives to be explored in the context of Rosenblatt's reader response theory. For Rosenblatt, that exploration into the role of a reader was best addressed by studying how actual readers worked their way through new material. This kind of approach, known as a reading protocol study, is what Stainbrook's investigation into whether comics can be read invites when he claimed that comics' reading should be treated individually.

As not all comics are the same nor are their readers identical, so each should be examined individually. In this way, my study takes a next step toward understanding the nature and practices of outsider literacy. Through the use of think-aloud protocols, follow-up interviews and literacy history questionnaires, my study explores how individual, adult readers of graphic novels make sense of two different genres of graphic narrative texts.

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, also called reader-response theory, is based on her investigations using reading protocols. In these protocols, student subjects were given a quatrain of Robert Frost's poem "It Bids Pretty Fair" but neither the author nor the title were revealed to the students. The subjects' read each line and made notes as they read. Rosenblatt's aim was not to discover what each student believed the poem to mean, but rather to see how they developed that meaning. The protocols' results showed that the subjects used several cognitive strategies in various combinations to work their way through the unfamiliar text: prediction, interpretation, connection, rereading and revision. Overall, Rosenblatt's study found that:

> ...each of the readers was active... He had to draw on his past experiences with the
> verbal symbols. He had to select from the various alternative referents that
> occurred to him...[by finding] some context ...within which these referents could
> be related. He sometimes found it necessary to reinterpret earlier parts of the text
> in the light of later parts. ... There was a kind of shuttling back and forth as one or
> another synthesizing element...suggested itself to him. ... [Readers] were also
> paying attention to the images, feelings, attitudes, associations and ideas that the
> words and their referents evoked in them. (p. 10)

Similarly, upon analyzing the protocols she observed that while the text provided the "stimulus" that "help[ed] to regulate what [should] be held in the forefront of the reader's attention," the "shuttling back and forth" that Rosenblatt noted also led her to conclude that her reader's interpretation of the poem was not achieved "in a purely linear fashion" (p. 11). In fact, the readers' level of involvement with the text became an important aspect of her theory, as she delineated two basic spectrums of reading that might occur, only one of which could yield what she called the "poem"-- the work of art--from the quatrain her subjects were given.

The two kinds of reading Rosenblatt posits are efferent, or non-aesthetic, readings and aesthetic readings. These categorizations are not necessarily diametrically opposed, but exist to different degrees along what Rosenblatt describes as a kind of reading continuum. Rosenblatt characterizes the "...distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading [as deriving] ultimately from what the reader does, the stance he adopts, and activities he carries out in relation to the text" (p. 27). In this way, the kind of reading that occurs is not necessarily determined by the text, though some texts are more likely to produce certain kinds of reading events than others; the reader determines what kind of reading he'll engage in, it's all a question of reader's focus. These ideas are similar to Smith's concepts about readers' selectivity and interpretation. Rosenblatt describes efferent reading events as those in which the focus is to acquire information, what she calls "reading residue" (p. 23). Smith characterizes these same types of reading as tests of memory, since information retrieval is the primary goal. Efferent reading events are marked by a certain level of disengagement in the reader and attention to the surface text--decoding--where personal or qualitative issues are not as important or even welcome.

The purpose of such a reading is to gain information, learn concepts or discover guides to action, a focus on the end result or product of the reading, or as in the case of my students, just to get to the end of the reading. Rosenblatt identifies efferent reading as having a purpose that's fulfilled after the reading event has been concluded, a "scientific" or "expository" kind of reading (p. 35).

By comparison, an aesthetic reading may be a form of enthrallment with the text, where the purpose for reading is fulfilled during the reading, similar to Smith's description of experienced readers' motivations for reading as given above. For Rosenblatt, aesthetic reading is the level of engagement with the text where learning through literacy becomes paired with pleasure of literacy, and that signifies a reading event that goes beyond comprehension of surface text. In this stance, a reader's attention is "...both inwardly and outwardly directed..." and the reader pays attention to personal and qualitative concerns such as "...associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that [the] words and referents arouse in him"(p. 25). Aesthetic readings move beyond understanding surface concerns such as plot or general facts and information to create an experience for the reader, a "...sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking, synthesizing state[s] of mind," similar to the concepts of synaesthetics comics aim to achieve as explored by McCloud (p. 26). Rosenblatt also emphasizes that the artistic merit of the text does not determine whether or not an aesthetic reading can occur; literary merit is an idea that is wholly separate from reader response theory. By separating aesthetic reading events from the idea of a text's literary merit, Rosenblatt opens the door to explore what readers do with all kinds of texts, and not just those that have been previously vetted for artistic

worthiness, an important distinction for this study of outsider narratives, which by their nature exist apart from the established academic canon.

Another important distinction Rosenblatt draws is the idea that an aesthetic reading event does not have to come from a so-called perfect reading: "The reader may not respond to or assimilate all the cues. A reader's experience from which he draws may call up preconceptions, tangential preoccupation's, and misconceptions" (p. 38). The notion of getting the reading "right" is more of an efferent reading stance, and Rosenblatt sounds a cautionary note with this idea. Efferent readings, or as my students call them "school" readings, are becoming the standard against which all reading is measured and valued. With the current emphasis on the No Child Left Behind act's high stakes testing, categorizing, and judging of student literacy levels, the purpose of reading in general has been intrinsically linked with that kind of testing, creating an atmosphere where reading is a chore (and one to be avoided at that), unintentionally reinforcing Rusty's notion that "English is my most hated class!" While standardized tests claim to be measuring the kind of skills good readers need to be able to use, they really emphasize the surface contents of texts, and thus place primacy on efferent reading, and in the process endanger the notion that reading can be done for pleasure. Rosenblatt notes that aesthetic reading is pushed to the margins of many students' academic experience, as educators emphasize "reading for comprehension" in order to make the ever-rising quotas for student reading proficiency placed on them by their states' respective departments of education. Smith (1988; 1994; 2003) has also written extensively on the negative impact a basic skills and high-stakes testing approach to "reading as information acquisition" has had on literacy in general:

Experience is responsible for almost all the learning we do in life, both the

desirable and the undesirable. …The learning of skills and acquisition of

knowledge follows <u>from</u> the development of interest in a subject. …Experience

isn't measured by tests. (Smith, 2003, pp. 66-67)

Smith and Rosenblatt have good reason to be concerned about the nature of

reading events valued in secondary academia and the expectations placed on students

when choosing their own reading stance. While reading for comprehension sounds like a

reasonable expectation for good student readers, an aesthetic reading of the kind that

Rosenblatt and Smith describe actually requires a reader to go beyond the surface

interpretation of texts. The most recently released copy of the *Pennsylvania Department*

of Education Reading Assessment Handbook 2006-2007 identifies three of eight literacy

standards that are "at the heart of what students must be able to do to be good readers in

today's society" (p. 10). Those reading standards are learning to read independently,

learning to read critically, and learning to interpret and analyze fiction and nonfiction.

The means by which a student's ability to read is measured are multiple choice (called

selected response questions as the "answers" have already been predetermined and

offered as four choices from which to pick) and open-ended questions. The open-ended

questions are reader-response situations where students actually get to write their own

responses to a given text. However, the handbook describes these open-ended questions

as "..ask[ing] students to organize their thinking and statements in a short, concise

manner, using patterns of development that *focus on the meaning of the texts* e.g.,

(summarize, identify, explain, and analyze)" (p. 11). The responses students are to write

are even further restricted by the test makers:

In an effort to make the expectations for responses to open-ended items clearer to students, the Department will continue to provide more explicit instructions...For example, if a short response requires students to identify the reasons why something has occurred in a passage, the item will clarify how many reasons are needed for a complete answer, or a statement like 'List at least two reasons why...' or 'Use at least two examples/details from the text to support your answer...' will be provided. (p. 11)

Lastly, the report includes a special note to instructors regarding these open-ended questions, namely to say that "...the open-ended items will not require students to make personal connections in their responses" (p. 11). Thus, the kind of reading that will determine for the state the nature and quality of a student's literacy truly reflects an efferent stance, a sort of mining-for-information experience that preferences a disengaged reading stance, to the point where any personal connection (and most likely personal interest) has been expunged.

Another disturbing trend is the emphasis placed on lower-order thinking skills disguised as higher order skills. Test instructions that require students identify, list, use, and summarize comprise 40-60% of the questions students must answer on these tests - the focus is clearly on surface comprehension. Even the parts of the test that supposedly ask students to interpret, analyze and evaluate items are really asking students to identify surface, literal, fact-based information, and require that students ignore the personal connections that can make such higher-order skills possible. Ironically, the first two Pennsylvania state literacy standards, "Learning to read independently" (1.1) and "Reading Critically in all content areas" (1.2) which supposedly comprise two-thirds of

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the focus of the exam, recognize that multimedia texts are an important part of student literacy and call for teachers to include them in student instruction:

> Pennsylvania's public schools shall teach, challenge, and support every student to realize his or her maximum potential to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to:
>
> > 1.2.11B. Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced.
> >
> > 1.1.11A: Locate various texts, media, and traditional resources for assigned and independent projects before reading.
> >
> > 1.1.11D: Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in a text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.
> >
> > 1.1.11H. Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading...a variety of genres and types of text.
>
> (Pennsylvania Department of Education, *Academic Standards for Reading, Writing ,Speaking and Listening,* 2002, pp. 2-5)

Clearly the reading test discussed above does not allow for different kinds of media or media literacies; the test itself focuses on efferent readings of fiction and nonfiction text-only passages and thus privileges text-only literacy, despite the standards' call for broader-based instruction.

Through this kind of emphasis, the meta-message sent to (and received loudly and clearly by) students like my Rusty is that reading is an antiseptic experience, a means to a quantitative end, and only that kind of reading and those kinds of texts which lead to that

end are valued, a completely antithetical experience from the kinds of pleasure reading that adult readers actually practice and schools claim to encourage. In this way, for future generations of students schooled under the aegis of the No Child Left Behind act, the concept of reading for pleasure is at risk for becoming an endangered phenomenon. Students understand that in school, what we test for is what we (and society) value. They also implicitly recognize the irony that this kind of teaching-to-the-test approach to literacy instruction presents, that life-long learning is only for those who have mastered (and are willing to use) a utilitarian form of literacy. In this high-stakes testing atmosphere, what really gets left behind are students' opportunities: to exercise imagination, expand and share critical reasoning, to explore personal interests, or to simply immerse themselves in a favorite story.

In an aesthetic reading stance, though, the reader is able to freely transact with the text, allowing for personal experience, emotions, ideas, prior readings, and situation to help him construct that encounter, what Rosenblatt calls an "integrated sensibility" and which is for Smith the essence of reading. The cues to which Rosenblatt refers earlier in her book help guide readers either deliberately or subconsciously to choose a reading stance, or in other words, help readers shape their own reading experience. This shaping Rosenblatt refers to is a form of active participation in the text, unlike efferent reading where the reader's role is primarily to be the recipient of the text's information:

> Our transactional point of view leads us to see that it is not the words, essential though they are, that ... 'interanimate' one another. The reader, assuming his aesthetic stance, selects out and synthesizes - interanimates - his responses to the

author's pattern of words. This requires the reader to carry on a continuing,

constructive 'shaping' activity. (p. 53)

In graphic novels, the icons and design elements (which include words) provide the

impetus for these kinds of inter-animations, and help the reader develop a framework for

further reading as his expectations (based on the textual cues) are either met or refuted.

Overall, Rosenblatt's studies lead her to conclude that:

...the basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues; the

adoption of an efferent or aesthetic stance; the development of a tentative

framework;...the arousal of expectations that influence the selection and synthesis

of further responses; the fulfillment...of expectations, or their frustration,

sometimes leading to the revision of the framework…[or]...rereading; the arousal

of further expectations; until...the final synthesis or organization is achieved.

 (p. 54)

Rosenblatt's conclusions are inherently similar to Smith's ideas of prediction, purpose,

selectivity, anticipation, and comprehension. Smith's (2003) statement that "Reading,

writing, and basic arithmetic come with experience. Understanding of literature, science,

and civics comes with participation" reinforces Rosenblatt's active view of reading

(p. 67). In this way, good reading entwines the reader's experiences, emotions, and

understandings with those of the text. The process of reading becomes a pleasure that is

at the root of transactional reading, the kind of reading that Rosenblatt says will yield a

poem, art, from text. According to Rosenblatt, whereas an efferent reading may be

satisfied with a paraphrase of the text, an aesthetic reading--a poem--must be experienced

directly by the reader. She uses the analogy of "having someone else eat your dinner for

you and recite the menu" to describe what can be lost in an efferent reading, where the reader does not play such an active role (p. 86). And for both Rosenblatt and Smith, poems are not limited to "good literature"; the reader's involvement with the text--what the reader does--can create the poem as, "...the criterion of personal acceptance or rejection, of personal pleasure or indifference deserves recognition as relevant even when other more sophisticated criteria are applied" (Rosenblatt, p. 158).

Kylene Beers and Jeanne Henry:

Reader Response Theory in Education Practice

Rusty would have been thrilled to be so empowered as a reader. Reader response theory makes room for outsider narratives and invites them to be studied. So what is the kind of reading that adults who read graphic novels do to yield Rosenblatt's concept of a poem? The nature of this question begins to look at the intersection of literacy theory and educational practice. What do we call good reading? What does reader response theory look like in terms of cognitive schema? Kylene Beers' (2003) educational guide *When Kids Can't Read; What Teachers Can Do* offers insight into these questions. In order to explore what graphic novel readers do to make sense of multi-modal narratives, it is important for comparison purposes to examine what independent readers of verbal texts do. As both texts contain words with which a reader must contend, the reading process for graphic novels will by nature include some aspects of traditional verbal reading process.

Beers' book is primarily concerned with helping teachers identify what she calls

dependent reading behaviors in students and providing strategies to help these students

become "independent" readers. She delineates upwards of 47 different kinds of reading

behaviors that students like my Rusty who are classified as "can't read" will exhibit, and

they run the gamut from "cannot quickly recognize single syllable words," to " does not

set a purpose for reading other than to complete the assignment," to "avoids reading at all

costs" (pp. 24-26). While many of the behaviors she identifies are clearly developmental

delays or processing difficulties that emergent or immature readers exhibit (such as

students with particular identified learning disabilities might demonstrate), almost half of

the behaviors on her list are directly related to the higher-order thinking strategies that

Rosenblatt has identified as necessary in developing an aesthetic reading stance. These

problematic behaviors include inability to:

- visualize and *hear* the text

- reread for clarification of meaning or to use text features to help clarify meaning

- sequence events or recall information

- recognize cause and effect or compare and contrast

- predict, infer, conclude or generalize

- connect text to personal experience or relate the text to what they already know

- recognize when they don't understand and work to try to gain meaning

- discern reading for information from reading for pleasure (Beers, 2003, pp. 25-
  26).

In fact, dependent readers' inability to visualize verbal text events and hear the verbal

text in their heads relates directly to the theater-like quality of reading multi-modal texts

that graphic novelists consider so crucial to creating their graphic narratives. Will Eisner's (1996) observation that "writing can control the reader's ear," stems from lettering techniques that give visual clues to readers that can be translated through the reader's imagination to create an aural dimension to silent reading: techniques such as font design and placement, line quality and thickness, the use of bolds and color, as well as the words themselves (Eisner, p. 125). These graphic elements and readers' use of them reinforce Kress's (2003) idea that reading multi-modal texts such as graphic novels is really reading as semiosis. These and other techniques discussed earlier in this chapter help the graphic novelist "direct" the reader as a reader creates a reading path, if the reader knows what to do with those clues, and if the reader chooses to follow the author's guidelines. By missing the textual cues that mature or independent verbal readers comprehend and use to make sense of verbal-based texts, Beers' dependent readers cannot make a verbal text come alive. Reading for them is something they *have* to do, not something they *want* to do, and consequently they resist, often citing the mantra that "...reading is 'boring' and 'dumb' " (p. 26).

Then what are the strategies that adult independent readers use to create meaning from a text? According to Beers, "Comprehension is both a product and a process, something that requires purposeful, strategic effort on the reader's part" (p. 45). This concept of active reading that Rosenblatt stressed so much is essential to making meaning in any kind of text, verbal-based or multi-modal. Active reading is an emphasis on process, which is why Beers also emphasizes the concept of reading strategies over reading skills; the skill is the end result that's achieved when a reader consistently uses different strategies to create meaning, or comprehension. Comprehension, in this sense, is

thus not limited to merely what a text says, but to how deeply a reader internalizes that text and the experience of reading that text. Strategies, on the other hand, are the processes mature, experienced readers employ to achieve these reading skills by which they will gain comprehension and satisfaction (p. 45).

Beers identifies a list of ten general strategies that independent readers use to comprehend verbal texts:

- clarifying

- comparing and contrasting

- connecting to prior experiences

- inference (including generalizing and drawing conclusions)

- predicting

- questioning the text

- recognizing the author's purpose

- seeing causal relationships

- summarizing

- visualizing (Beers, 2003, p. 41)

Absent from this list is the notion of defining a reading stance that Rosenblatt identifies as necessary for an aesthetic stance (understanding that there is more than one purpose for reading). While Beers does emphasize the notion of reading for pleasure and/or information by identifying dependent reading behaviors as devoid of this determination, I am assuming that reading purpose--reading for pleasure or information--is not included in this particular list because Beers' own focus at this point is helping teachers recognize students' dependent reading habits, identify which habits their students exhibit, and tailor

teaching approaches necessary to model the strategies each student needs to learn. In other words, before reading independently for pleasure or information can occur, perhaps students need to understand that reading, and ultimately reading stance, is something they help create; reading doesn't just happen, reading is an active process. Beers explains this further:

> These students don't understand that reading requires activity on their part; they fail to see the transactional nature of reading. ... Readers don't just translate the text, don't merely decode the printed words into spoken words (even if spoken silently in the mind) and then suddenly have meaning. Instead, readers transact with the text, constructing meaning from the information that the author provides in the text and the information they bring to the text. (p. 69)

Unfortunately, reading willingness and reading for pleasure are so entwined that one usually does not occur without the other. How do you help a student who believes that reading is boring and dumb buy into the concept that reading can be done for pleasure, too? Part of the answer for some dependent readers such as Rusty is to consider the nature of the text with which students are being asked to transact. If these dependent readers do not exhibit these reading strategies with verbal based texts, do they exhibit them with multi-modal texts, such as film, video games and comic books? In her book *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom,* Jeanne Henry (1995) explored Spiegelman's idea that the "gateway to literacy" need not come through the traditional academic canon. Henry believes that "...critical reading does not require a critical text, it requires critical thinking" and that "all readers are good readers when they have the right book"(p. 56; p. 73). This concept falls right in line with Smith's (1994)

idea that "Reading cannot be separated from thinking: reading is a thought-full activity" (p. 20). Yet, whereas Beers' and Smith's books focus on reading and children, Henry designed her reading workshops for *adult* dependent readers, using texts that her community college students wanted to read, namely the kinds of pop-culture texts that most educators would wince at seeing in a classroom; self-help books, romance novels, horror, supernatural, and adventure fiction, made-from-TV-movies dramas, and ripped-from-the-headlines true crime and sensational scandal stories comprised the bulk of her classroom library. Henry's students were given the option to read stories that attracted them, and ultimately through their engagement in the texts they had chosen and Henry's direct instruction, they learned how to strategize for reading, enough so that they were able to significantly improve their reading scores on the standardized tests required by her college for placement purposes.

While comic books and graphic novels did not figure in her classroom at the time her book was written, Henry does note that her students responded to the covers on books first, and most often based their decision to read based on what they saw drawn on the cover. To illustrate this point, Henry (1995) describes a book-buying excursion with a fellow teacher who asked Henry what to buy and was given this response:

> Anything with an automatic weapon on the cover. ...When I can see a book rather than just select it from a catalogue, I go for anything with a bloody, clawed hand on the cover. Mutilation by half-human beast provides that winning combination of being both fascinating and repellent. (p. 59)

Thus, the more luridly a cover was drawn, the more likely a student was to be attracted to the book as they believed the images drawn on the cover were representations of the

verbal text inside. In short, they believed a book's cover was--or should be--a form of visual summary of the story, and often referred to the cover as they read, either to mention that their expectations for reading were met based on what they saw in the cover illustrations, or that the cover had mislead them. For instance, in one exchange cited in part below, a student makes direct reference to the book's cover and the role it played in her reading:

> [Henry, aloud, to the class] "Holly's reading a book called *April Fools*. Holly, tell everybody what you told me about your book in your last letter."
>
> "Uh, these three kids was riding around...and they run this other car off the road. They figured nobody could've survived the accident, so they kept going. But then Belinda, this one girl, got this weird doll's head in the mail. She wondered if it had something to do with the accident..."
>
> "So what do you think is going to happen next in the book?"
>
> Holly held up the book to show the cover, which pictured a bloody knife and a severed doll's head sticking out of a mailbox. "I picked it because it looked like a horror." (p. 34)

In this particular exchange, the book cover was a visual representation of plot events, and clearly conveyed to Holly and her classmate's their expectations for its content. Further discussion of the story also revealed that her classmate's predictions about the story, also based on the cover and Holly's verbal summary, were correct. Henry also includes movies in her classroom library as a valuable tool for crossover literacy; in fact, her suggested classroom library encourages teachers to purchase copies of popular films to show interested students first, and their companion books to read after they've seen the

film so that such crossover can occur. Her logic for using the multi-modal text as a hook for the verbal text is this:

> We know that the more prior knowledge you have about a subject the more likely you are to understand what you read about it. Well, if you have seen an easily-understandable film before reading the book, it seems to me that your reading is going to be much easier, virtually a guaranteed success. Success is good. It makes us all feel like a million. (p. 58)

In the case of lurid, brightly designed book covers and popular movies, students used visual, multi-modal information as an access point for verbal information. As for films specifically, Henry's underlying assumption for her students is that viewing movies for understanding is easier for them than reading, and that may not always be the case, as has been explored in Chapter One's discussion of the complexity of some multi-modal texts such as graphic novels. (I would clarify that the literacy her students' used for reading the book covers and possibly the films could qualify as outsider literacy, given their outsider status at her college, were it to be explored individually.) However, as Rosenblatt (and subsequently Henry) points out, literary merit is not an issue--and may even be a detriment--when exploring transactional reading events with multi-modal texts.

Conclusion

While I now share Rosenblatt and Henry's opinion that a text's literary merit ought not be a primary concern when exploring literacy, *perceived* literary merit is very much an issue at the heart of this outsider literacy study. What people choose for pleasure

reading is often dismissed as not worthy of serious consideration because the texts themselves are not viewed as "serious" enough. Yet the theorists explored in this chapter and in Chapter One point out that multi-modal texts such as graphic novels and comics, which are generally dismissed as pop-culture entertainments and as such are not viewed as worthy of academic study, may actually require their readers to use very sophisticated literacy practices, promoting critical reasoning (Kress, 2003; Freire,1987; Smith, 1994, 2003;) and creating different kinds of literacy communities among readers and fans (Freire, 1987; Johnson, 2005; Pustz, 1999). My students in the Extended Reading class, particularly Rusty, became examples of how such preconceptions can hamper developing or emergent literacy. Rusty, who had been labeled as achieving "below basic" literacy by his poor scores on the state-mandated reading tests, turned out to be an enthusiastic critical reader of multi-modal texts. Somehow, comics and graphic novels had enhanced his literacy, yet because the academic prejudice against these texts as representing deficit literacy persists, the kind of critical literacy which Rusty and others who read multi-modal texts use for their pleasure reading is not well understood.

These misperceptions and lack of understanding become magnified when considering the shifting trends in adult pleasure reading toward multi-modal texts, especially the increasing presence of graphic novels in mainstream adult literature and popular entertainment. If educators want students' literacy practices ultimately to achieve those of adults' it is important to understand what are adult literacy practices and how are those practices shaped by experience. Thus, while Rusty and my students in the Extended Reading class provided initial inspiration for paying serious attention to outsider literacy, it was the critical reading practices of adult, independent readers that I examined in this

dissertation. My study explored the cognition and culture--the gestalt--of adult outsider literacy practices as they relate to print-based graphic novels. How do experienced adult readers of graphic novels read these multi-modal texts, and what literacy experiences have shaped their readings? By using Rosenblatt's concept of transactional reading in reader response protocols, and examining outsider practices in terms of recognized good verbal reading practices, it was my intent to begin to describe answers to these kinds of questions.

The theoretical frameworks that form the basis for this chapter and my study are summarized here. While graphic novels and other multi-modal texts are becoming increasingly prominent in mainstream adult reading for entertainment, they are also prevalent in academia, particularly where the notion of text as page is being supplanted by screen. As the idea of text has shifted from the concept of the verbal-only "world as told" to the multi-modal "world as shown," writing becomes one of many visual elements present on a page (Kress, 1999, 2003; George, 2002; George and Shoos, 1999). This hybridization of two-dimensional art and text creates new challenges for readers, as well as for understanding literacy in practice. The concept of intertextuality--how verbal, visual, and contextual elements present on the page and present in a reader's own experience combine to create meaning in multi-modal texts--clarifies the nature of multi-modal texts. Thus, readers of multi-modal texts such as comics and graphic novels must assemble meaning from among many different narrative elements present on a page or screen of text by reading across modes.

Bazerman's (1981, 2005) work in genre theory is also important to this study. Understanding how the multi-modal narrative elements particular to graphic novels and

comics convey information helps clarify how narrative structures and readers'

expectations for narrative structures are interactive experiences rather than fixed entities.

Since graphic novels and comics may be considered mixed genres, these texts are

structurally different from verbal-only narratives, and readers must use their experience

with many text structures to decide how to navigate and order the different narrative

elements present on each page. McCloud's (1993, 2000, 2006) in-depth studies of

comics' unique and interdependent narrative elements build on this genre theory

framework by providing a basis for understanding the design of graphic novels' narrative

structures, including discussion of how readers' individual experiences with comics and

personal schemata may impact that understanding.

Eric Stainbrook's (2003) dissertation presents another concept that is integral to

my own study. His investigation into how comics' interdependent narrative elements

combine to create a unified text, and as such, how navigating these kinds of multi-modal

texts may be considered reading makes the case for identifying the interpretation of

multi-modal texts of comics as "reading. " His research allows for using reading theory

frameworks to explore how *individual* practitioners of outsider literacies read these kinds

of two-dimensional, multi-modal texts, even though the cognitive processes used may be

different from verbal-only texts.

Stainbrook's dissertation made possible my application of Rosenblatt's reader-

response theory (1994) and Smith's (1988, 1994, 2003) concepts of reading as

transactional process rather than product to graphic novels. Furthermore, Smith's and

Rosenblatt's belief that reading is an individual, contextualized experience also allowed

for my study to include readers' personal experiences as important factors influencing

their outsider literacy practices. Lastly, Beers's (2003) and Henry's (1995) explorations into the nature of critical reading skills and strategies that recognized "good" readers use grounded my study in current educational practice, providing me with a reading practices framework wherein I may conceptualize and contextualize the outsider literacy practices of the individual adult graphic novel readers who participated in my study. The idea that all these frameworks reinforce (and that current educational practice too often ignores) is the concept that literacy is more than just a skills-based process; understanding literacy requires an understanding of the experiences that *individual* readers bring to a text and how these experiences shape literacy and literacy practices for these readers.

The individual participants who have graciously taken part in this study are engaging outsider literacy practices, which they use solely for the pleasure of the experience. Consequently these practices are not well explored because they are not yet recognized as worthy by the academic or political world. Ironically, in the few rare instances where graphic novels do make an entrance into the classroom or have been studied, it is usually in the context of teaching students with deficit literacy or emergent English language learners, and almost never for the narratives' own literary merit. If Henry (1995) is correct, and "all reading is good reading," then these kinds of outsider texts and literacies deserve more exploration and serious academic consideration. Since Stainbrook sought to show that comics, and thus graphic novels, can be read, I explored how readers read graphic novels, using established protocols and monitoring the reading strategies used by independent, experienced, adult readers of these kinds of texts.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation sought to better understand the cognition and culture--the gestalt--of adult outsider literacy practices as they relate to print-based graphic novels by examining the question: how do experienced, adult readers of graphic novels read graphic novels? Therefore the study that is the basis of this dissertation explored two components of outsider literacy practices that comprise reading:

1) How did experienced, adult graphic novel readers work their way through sections of graphic novels? (This question was examined through the think-aloud protocols and follow-up questionnaires.)

2) What literacy experiences helped shape the participants' reading? (This question was examined through literacy history interviews and follow-up questionnaires.)

Literacy, as Smith (1994; 2003) and Rosenblatt (1994) interpret it, is an aesthetic experience built on more than just a collection of reading skills or strategies; it thrives or withers within the reader's context, and it is dependent on the reader's ability to experience or transact with whatever text he encounters. How readers make sense of multi-modal narratives such as graphic novels is not well understood, despite the fact that Western culture is rife with multi-modal narrative and expository texts. The advent of personal home computers, the Internet, and other multi-modal entertainment, informational and educational constructs that have exploded onto the pop-culture scene are ever-present reminders that literacy is not just for verbal texts anymore. Yet,

secondary education institutions via their state-created, federal-mandated reading tests still favor verbal text literacy--the insider literacy--despite curricular lip service to the contrary. From an educator's perspective, it is easy to see how students develop negative attitudes toward reading printed verbal texts, which are placed in direct competition with the kinds of multi-modal printed texts like comics and graphic novels that they do enjoy reading. Until we know how readers navigate their way through graphic novels, we will be unable to compare outsider and insider literacy practices. Once we gain insight into the practice of reading graphic novels, however, then the kinds of outsider literacy practices used to read print-based multi-modal entertainment texts will become more important to academia as these skills may also inform screen-based literacy. Therefore, the purpose of this study has been to take a step toward better understanding outsider literacy by interviewing, observing, and studying a sample of nine adult readers as they read print-based graphic novels.

Overview of the Study

A brief outline of the study as it was practiced is given here in this section, followed by an overview of the research methodologies and rationales that guided this study. The study began in the summer of 2005 and concluded in the summer of 2008. Because the participants in this study were not residents of any one particular geographic area, the sessions took place in local coffee houses or in individuals' homes located across Western Pennsylvania and Ohio, according to the participants' personal preferences. The nine participants were recruited by snowball, or referral, sampling. All

participants received and completed informed consent documents (reproduced as

Appendix G). The think-aloud protocols were conducted as follows, where the

participants:

- completed literacy history questionnaires (Appendix C) either in writing

  or on audiotape

- read silently (and listened to my reading of) a written description of

  study's purpose and the think-aloud protocol procedure (Appendix A) as

  well as a list of the follow-up interview questions (Appendix B)

- practiced the think-aloud procedure with a page from Chris Ware's

  graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (reproduced

  as Appendix D)

- read aloud the first chapter of *Watchmen* and half of the first chapter of

  Fruits Basket as they…

- spoke continuously throughout each protocol reading, reporting their

  thoughts and actions

- answered probing questions (when asked) during the readings to clarify

  unclear or ambiguous reports

- completed follow-up interviews.

All data from these sessions were collected, transcribed, analyzed, and coded by

me. Each participant received copies of their raw data transcripts for member checking

purposes. The data were then compiled and the findings reported in Chapter Four as

individual case studies, Tables 8, 9,10, and Appendices E and F. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate

how the study's procedures and methodology align with each of the research questions.

Table 1

Aligning Research Question #1 with Data Collecting Methodologies and Procedures

Research Question	Data Collection Methodology	Data Collection Procedures
How did experienced adult graphic novel readers work their way through sections of graphic novels?	Think-aloud protocols (Appendices A and D) Literacy history questionnaires (Appendix C) Probing for clarification questions Researcher observations Field notes Follow-up interviews (Appendix B)	Snowball or referral sampling for participants Verbal and written instructions for participating in think-aloud protocols Pre-instrumentation for study design (Pre-selected questions and texts.) Audio-taped practice think-aloud protocols Audio tape-recorded think-aloud protocols Written and audio tape-recorded literacy histories Audio tape-recorded follow-up interviews Typed transcriptions of interviews, literacy histories, and think-aloud protocols Inductive open and selective action coding of transcripts for think-aloud protocols, literacy histories, and follow-up interviews Reading-action frequency comparison tables (Appendices E and F) Anecdotal case history memos Memo-writing related to reading actions, including researcher observations from field notes Member-checking

Table 2

Aligning Research Question #2 with Data Collecting Methodologies and Procedures

Research Question	Data Collection Methodology	Data Collection Procedures
What literacy experiences helped shape the participants' reading?	Think-aloud protocols (Appendices A and D)	Snowball or referral sampling for participants
	Literacy history questionnaires (Appendix C)	Pre-instrumentation for interview and literacy history questions (Pre-selected questions and texts.)
	Probing for clarification questions	Audio tape-recorded think-aloud protocols
	Researcher observations	Audio-taped answers to probing clarification questions discussed during the think-aloud protocols
	Field notes	Written and audio tape-recorded literacy histories
	Follow-up interviews (Appendix B)	Audio tape-recorded follow-up interviews
		Typed transcriptions of interviews, literacy histories, and think-aloud protocols
		Inductive open and selective action coding of transcripts for think-aloud protocols, literacy histories, and follow-up interviews
		Anecdotal case history memos
		Memo-writing related to literacy history information and follow-up interviews, including researcher observations from field notes
		Member-checking

According to Patton (2002), exploring the gestalt of a process such as outsider literacy requires this kind of holistic research approach that considers a reader's context as well as a reader's practices, since adult literacy practice involves more than just the strategies or skills a reader might use to comprehend texts. The kind of aesthetic reading experience that Rosenblatt (1994) identifies as "creating a poem" from text requires readers to transact with the text, finding personal connections to the experience by "pay[ing] attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him" (Rosenblatt, p. 25). In order to understand how experienced, adult readers of graphic novels read graphic novels, the study sampled multiple cases of experienced, adult readers. Participants in this study completed literacy history questionnaires in writing and/or as interviews, participated in three think-aloud protocol sessions (one practice reading and two actual protocol readings), and completed follow-up interviews to further explore their readings from both graphic novels used in the protocols. As each method of data collection yielded different types of information, this dissertation utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to study these outsider literacy practices.

Patton (2002), and Miles and Huberman (1994) provide support for melding qualitative and quantitative methodology, particularly with holistic, process-oriented studies such as this one. Miles and Huberman (1994) delineate three levels of linkage between qualitative and quantitative methodology: a "quantizing" level, where "qualitative information can be counted directly," a "linkage between distinct data types," and an "overall study design [of] multi-method approaches" (p. 42). On the quantizing level, the think-aloud protocol portion of this study, which was essentially a free-response

exercise, coded and tracked reading actions the participants used while reading

predetermined segments of graphic novels. The coded categories of reading actions

ultimately came from each case's think-aloud transcript and interview analysis. While

this part of the study yielded quantifiable outcomes, it was also analyzed and compared to

the participants' responses on the open-ended interview questions and my direct

observations of the participants while they engaged in the protocol, linking three distinct

data types. Lastly, including direct observation during the protocols, participant-

completed literacy histories, and open-ended interview questions created a multi-method

approach to studying this form of outsider literacy. By using open-ended questions for the

literacy histories, interviews, and researcher-constructed instruments such as the think-

aloud protocol, my study allowed for the kind of rich description and contextualization

that is the hallmark of qualitative research, and provided a measure of the kind of

structure or standardization needed for cross-case comparisons.

As Eric Stainbrook (2003) suggests in *Reading Comics: A Theoretical Analysis of*

Textuality and Discourse in the Comics Medium, one way to better understand how

outsider narratives are read is to study individual readers of individual texts, which is

what the think-aloud protocol for this study were designed to do. Miles and Huberman

(1994) advocate this kind of multiple case sampling as a way to ground the findings of

any single case by examining the specific "hows," "wheres" and "whys" of each case.

For my study, the pre-instrumentation represented by the reading protocols, interview

questions, and literacy history questions provided an element of standardization while

still allowing for flexibility in design and individual responses that helped re-

contextualize the information learned during the protocol (Miles and Huberman, 1994,

pp. 35, 36). While small sample case studies such as mine are not usually generalized across the larger community of potential participants, they may be generalized "from one case to the next" (p. 29). In this way using the multi-method approach described above helped achieve some measure of generalizability and internal validity, since the cases studied provided "comparably measured responses from different people" (p. 36).

In addition to the literacy history and interview questions, another of the instruments constructed prior to the study's start were the think- or talk-aloud protocols. Adult reading is for the most part a solitary, silent act, and in order to study the practices of outsider literacy, that inaudible, invisible activity needed to become somehow apparent to the researcher. As a means to better understand her students' roles as readers, Rosenblatt (1994) gave her student participants a form of protocol reading that asked them each to respond in writing to the quatrain, *It Bids Pretty Fair* by Robert Frost, as a means for discussing their shifting perspectives and understanding of the poem as a whole as they read and reread each line. Rosenblatt was not so much interested in the actual interpretation of the poem, but investigated instead her students' reading processes, investigations that eventually led to the transactional theory of reader-response that is at the core of my investigation. As my study explored how readers made meaning from longer texts, I chose to use a variation of Rosenblatt's approach to uncovering reading processes: the think-aloud protocol. To the best of my knowledge, this study represents the first time that such protocols have been applied to graphic novels. In these kinds of investigations, participants say aloud everything they think while reading a segment of text. These sessions may be observed, noted, and/or recorded then transcribed.

Think-aloud protocol studies are widely used in education and other social sciences research, despite some limitations (some of which are disputed within research communities) as noted by Young (2005), and Conrad, Blair and Tracy (1999). These limitations are discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, as understanding the nature of these limitations became a part of my think-aloud study's design. Young (2005) believes that the evidence participants are able to give during think-aloud protocols counters concerns about the methodology because think-aloud protocols allow researchers access to "information which would not have emerged had the participant remained silent throughout the entire activity" (p. 24). Recognizing the limitations of this method, using the method to collect data about participants' conscious thought processes (rather than unconscious or automatic activities, or for measuring comprehension), and adjusting data collection methods can help alleviate some of these concerns. Issues of articulation and participants' distractibility can be addressed by having the participants understand exactly what will be expected of them during the protocol and for what purposes the data collected will be used, by ensuring participants' comfort with the observers and data collection sites, and by giving participants' practice with the process, where cuing the participants' behavior is minimized. Concerns about under- or non-reporting of activities caused by participants' abilities to articulate and multi-task may also be addressed through triangulating multiple data collection methods. By combining recorded think-aloud protocols with direct observation and field notes, mid-process probing for clarification, and post-process interviews, a researcher may gain a more complete picture of the participants' thinking processes as they are happening. Furthermore, as recorded protocols yield transcripts (what Young describes as "hard data

for analysis"), the data collected can be coded in a line-by-line fashion, so that the coded activities that emerge from the study reflect what tasks appear to be happening based on the participants' reporting during the sessions and the researcher's observation notes, addressing subjectivity concerns about the coding process (p. 26.)

Overall, the advantage of using this method of data collection for studies such as mine is that think-aloud protocols are an attempt to study the processes that readers use to construct meaning from any given text *as that meaning is being made*. In these kinds of studies the researcher's presence recording field notes during the protocols as participant-observer helps illuminate any behaviors participants exhibit (but may be unaware of) during the process, to address concerns about participants' under- or non- reporting activities. The observer may also prompt participants to explain more about an activity while they are engaged in the process, probing for clarification, thus extracting more information from the participant than they may have reported by themselves. In this way, think-aloud protocols are particularly useful with investigations that examine thought processes that are used to make sense of longer texts, such as short stories, informational pieces, and whole chapters of texts. It is my belief that by asking participants to read larger sections of text the protocols may better simulate actual reading experiences the participants encounter (such as when reading graphic novels for pleasure). The think-aloud protocols I developed were modeled after protocols that had already been used in similar studies of readers engaged with visual text readings, verbal text readings, or on-screen computer-based verbal text readings (Froriep, 2007; Beaton, Nicholson, Halliday, and Thomas, 2004; Smith, 1991; Ericsson and Simon, 1984.) However, as these protocol studies were conducted with either verbal-only text passages or image-only texts, and this

was the first time such protocols had been used to study print-based graphic novels--a combination of verbal and image-based text--I modified the protocols to be more in keeping with the unique nature of these multi-modal texts. These particular modifications are described below in detail.

Methods of Data Collection

Participants

This study examined how mature readers of graphic novels read graphic novels. All nine subjects who participated in this study were male and female adult volunteers in their thirties; all were generally avid readers of verbal as well as multi-modal texts, all had a long history of graphic novel and comic book reading, and all had additional post-secondary education beyond their high school diplomas. Two graphic summaries of the characteristics and literacy histories that describe each participant in this study are given below in Table 3 and Table 4. More in-depth discussions of the participants' personal profiles and literacy histories are reported as case study findings in Chapter Four.

Table 3
Participant Profile Overview

Name	Age at time of interview	Education Level	Current Profession	Marital and Family status
Frank	36	MS Chemical Engineering	Chemical Engineer; Production Supervisor	Married, no children
Diana	33	MA English; PhD candidate English	Professor of English; Writing Center Director	Married, no children
Elvis	38	MS Education	High School Chemistry Teacher	Married, no children
Keely	34	Associate's degree; dental technician certification	Small business owner and dental technician	Married, one child
Louis	38	Associate's degree	Small business owner	Married, one child
Orlando	30	MA Education	Middle School Language Arts and Social Studies teacher	Single, no children
Dave	34	PhD candidate English Literature	Graduate teaching assistant	Single, no children
Vince	38	BA	Banquet waiter/ Hotel food service	Single, no children
Wynton	37	PhD candidate English Literature	Middle School Language Arts teacher; Graduate Assistant	Single, no children

Table 4
Participant Literacy History Overview

Participant Age began comics Person who introduced comics	First comics, graphic novels, or comics authors	Current preferences for comics and graphic novels	Current favorite pastimes
Frank 10; fourth grade Brother	Iron Man; Transformers; X-Men; West Coast Avengers	Iron Man; superhero genre; graphic novels in general	Home improvement; video gaming; movies; reading professional, investment, home-improvement journals; drag racing
Diana 20 Husband (Elvis)	*Watchmen*; stories written by Warren Ellis and Frank Miller	Marvel superhero and detective genres; Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Warren Ellis titles	Reading various genres, role-playing games (online and in-person)
Elvis 5; preschool Father	Sergeant Rock; Sergeant Fury; Thor; Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes	All genres of comics and graphic novels; superhero and detective comics	Reading various genres, GURPS; role-playing games (online and in-person) some fiction writing
Keely 6; first grade Grandmother and mother	The Archies; Betty and Veronica; Jughead; Casper; Richie Rich	X-Men; Spiderman; Buffy the Vampire Slayer; all genres of comics and graphic novels	Reading fiction novels (especially john Irving); Playstation video gaming (especially *Tetrus*); anime cartoons, television
Louis 10-11; fifth grade Father, friend (Vince)	Teen Titans; Captain America; X-Men	Marvel, DC, and independent titles - mostly superhero and detective genres	Collecting comics; reading sci-fi and history; video and role playing gaming (online and in-person)
Orlando 10; fourth grade Cousin	GI Joe; Transformers; Marvel and DC superhero titles	Superhero and detective genres: Alan Moore; Frank Miller; Chuck Dixon titles	Reading comics, graphic novels, history, biographies, sports; Comicons; professional wrestling (writing scripts and performing); movies
Dave 6; first grade Teacher	GI Joe; DC titles	GI Joe, and "everything from the DC universe"; superhero and detective genres	Comics collecting; Dungeons and Dragons role playing gaming
Vince 10-11; fifth grade Self, friend (Louis)	Firestorm; X-Men	All DC and Marvel titles; Marvel online subscription	Reading news, sports, fiction, tech, sci-fi; video and role-play gaming
Wynton 10; fourth grade Self	Daredevil; X-Men	All Marvel titles, but no DC universe titles	Reading all genres; writing fiction; video gaming

I sought adult graphic novel readers because the adult readers who participated in this study have had significant experience with these kinds of texts, and demonstrated a wealth of knowledge about the genre as they have been reading comics and graphic novels since they were very young. Frank Smith's (2003) observation that "Experience is responsible for almost all the learning we do in life, both the desirable and the undesirable" emphasizes the cumulative effect of readers' interest and experience into what he called a kind of "free-range learning," a very apt description of the kind of pleasure reading the participants in this study exhibited, and a good definition of what educators like to call "life-long learning" (pp.66, 67). Additionally, since adult multi-modal reading behaviors--these life-long learning drivers--are essentially what educators try to help student readers achieve, it makes sense to first discover what those behaviors might be. Furthermore, avid readers who have demonstrated sufficient literacy skills to advance beyond their high school diplomas have most likely achieved sufficient critical reading skills to be able to vocalize their thought processes during the think-aloud protocols; all nine participants in this study have continued their schooling beyond their high school education to earn associates, bachelors, and masters degrees; three are currently doctoral candidates. Finally, since many young, immature, or emergent readers do have developmental reading concerns or have demonstrated difficulty or reticence toward reading traditional texts or reading in general, including this population in an initial study could call into question any findings about outsider literacy practices. Given this concern and the continuing academic prejudices toward comics, graphic novels, and other pop culture texts noted in Chapter One, I decided that my first foray into exploring outsider literacy should be conducted using experienced, adult readers.

The use of adult readers for this study was also appropriate because comics have always had an appeal to older readers, including the superhero titles and true crime stories of the post-WWII "Golden Age" of comics. As Bradford Wright (2001) notes in *Comic Book Nation,* postwar publishers such as Warren Kuhn recognized a maturing taste in their target audience and shifted their comics' content and art to appeal to that taste. "... '[T]oday's youth...is a vast jump ahead of the earlier generation'...Because these young people tended to reject anything that seemed to condescend to them as juveniles, Kuhn urged prospective writers to 'write up for them'" (p. 58). Leverett Gleason, whose *Crime Does Not Pay* comics' series epitomized crossover marketing by capitalizing on an MGM documentary series of the same name, "[billed] his titles as 'The Magazine with the Widest Range of Appeal' ...in a deliberate pitch to older teenage and adult readers" (p. 79). Furthermore, advertisements in comic books, especially Gleason's true crime comics, indicated a broader adult audience was reading these than just the youth market. While the intervening decades between the 1950's and current times saw comics sales experience periods of economic success and struggle, Wright concludes that nowadays, "...[t]he average comic book reader is an adult, and there is no evidence that the industry is recovering the mass adolescent readership it once enjoyed" (p. 293), a position reinforced by the mature nature and subject matter of best-selling graphic novels with mass crossover readership and marketing tie-ins such as *Watchmen, Road to Perdition,* and *Sin City*, to name a few.

Additionally, it was important to this study that all participants described themselves as educated, avid readers of many kinds of texts because the pop-culture view of comic books still places these stories in the realm of picture-based pulp fictions, and as

such they still carry the stigma of being easier to read than text-only books; therefore, the adults who read them are sometimes thought to be demonstrating a kind of deficit literacy. This negative stereotype existed as early as 1947, when critics of graphic narratives such as Fredric Wertham and Marya Mannes believed comic book reading was intimately linked to poverty, ignorance, and juvenile crime. Wright noted that Marya Mannes' article in the February 1947 edition of the *New Republic* "...claimed that those residing in poorer households were most likely to be regular readers of comic books while those in wealthier homes read [comic books] the least...suggest[ing]...that comic books appealed to the unsophisticated and poorly educated" (p. 91). Furthermore, Mannes believed that continued reading of comics would lead to a nation of " 'a people incapable of reading a page of ordinary text'" (p. 91). In direct contrast to these ingrained prejudices, the graduate students, teachers, small business owners, and professionals who graciously participated in this study clearly do not represent "unsophisticated and poorly educated" people, and their love of multi-modal narratives has certainly not rendered them "incapable of reading ordinary text."

Yet somehow those beliefs about deficit literacy still persist, and had a direct bearing on how my participant sample was located and the sensitivity with which I needed to treat their willingness to be part of this study. Matthew Pustz's (1999) *Comic Book Culture explores* the nature of comic book fandom and includes many discussions of comic book culture, which he identifies as a closed culture, a "brotherhood, a kind of kinship" with many genre-based substrates. "The act of buying certain comics...serves as a boundary between comic book culture and the outside world, which does not appreciate, enjoy, or understand comics" (p. 156). Pustz writes of fans such as himself

who keep their adult comic book reading a kind of secret. One graduate student fan he interviewed described her reluctance to openly discuss her comic book reading with her classmates as "...the reason I don't bring it up first is that I'm very concerned about how I look as a professional, as a teacher, as an academic, and I don't want to be classified as a geek" (p. 70). Pustz himself reaffirms this perceived stigma in his own undergraduate years:

> Sometimes I would sneak off to a bookstore near campus to check out what was happening in the latest edition of *Avengers* or *Justice League* but I did so only when I knew no one would see me. 'It's time to be an adult,' I must have thought to myself, ashamed of my continuing need to look at the latest issues. 'It's time to get rid of this nasty habit.' (p.199)

Given this perceived stigma and the nature of comic book culture as described by Pustz, potential participants were located from within that culture and in a way that did not make the subjects feel self-conscious about sharing their experiences and practices with an acknowledged outsider.

Another factor in my study that was unique to the participants was exploring what attracts them to these kinds of texts through the inclusion of literacy histories and follow-up questions to the participants' responses in these histories. This portion of the study also needed to be treated with some sensitivity because it directly relates to the perceived stigma that labels comics readers as literacy-deficient. Pustz's book touches on Spiegelman's assertion that comics are the gateway to literacy by observing that well-meaning parents often used comics to encourage children to read, but he also highlights the linkage between perceived deficit literacy and comics by noting that parents were

more inclined to do this for children who had difficulty with text-only books. In the words of Pustz's interviewee Don Hughes:

> Originally what attracted me to comics was that when I was a kid I was a very slow reader. I liked to read books, but it took me a minute or more to get through a page of a paperback. And if I wouldn't lose interest, I'd lose my place and have to go back and reread ... It's not that I wasn't retaining it or had some kind of reading problem, I was just a slow reader. And with comics...I could read through the balloons and the captions and if it seemed like it was taking a while you had the picture to bring me back into it. I guess at my pace it gave me a better feel of what was going on. (p. 102)

Hughes is careful to note that he didn't consider his reading to be deficient in content or comprehension, but his reading pace didn't fit the norm, and nowadays he would most likely be labeled as deficient in the regular classroom, a likelihood that would probably increase if his reading ability were to be tested using a timed reading exam. I found this concern with time spent reading interesting because it was echoed by several of my subjects; when reading verbal-only texts they believe themselves to be slower readers than others, and given multi-modal texts they feel they can read more quickly--not better, just faster. Given the importance our society places on standardized testing as discussed in Chapter Two, this self-perceived problem with time became a significant factor in this study as in several cases it shaped participants' literacy experiences.

In consideration of these still-prevalent beliefs about comic book reading and deficit literacy, and the social stigmas still in place today, it was important to this study to recruit participants who did not necessarily fit the popular stereotype for adult comic

book readers. Therefore, subjects for this study demonstrated sophisticated literacy prowess in an effort to address these kinds of misperceptions about adult readers of graphic narratives. Furthermore, since adult cognitive behaviors are what educators like me are trying to help our students to achieve, it is important to find out what are those behaviors or strategies, and motivations for continuing this kind of critical pleasure reading into adulthood. In this way, participants in this study were adult readers who are experienced in outsider literacy practices, who read comics on a regular basis, and who enjoy reading graphic novels.

Thus, the subjects in this study were nine experienced, adult readers of graphic novels who were solicited for participation in this study via personal referral or snowball sampling. In order to protect their anonymity, these nine participants were given pseudonyms that reflected their genders, but did not reflect their actual names. I decided to use pseudonyms rather than numbering the participants as Reader 1, Reader 2, (and so forth), because I wanted to emphasize the personal nature of these readings; giving the participants names enabled some elements of the readers' personalities enter into the discussion of their literacy practices.

The nine participants consisted of seven males and two females, all between the ages of 30-39. As reported in Table 3, five of the participants were married, four of which were married to other participants, meaning there were two married couples participating in the study. Both sets of couples completed the study individually and at different times than did their spouses. One couple has a toddler; the rest of the participants have no children. Seven of the participants were employed full-time, the remaining two were full-time graduate students. Their professions include: a chemical engineer, a high school

chemistry teacher, a middle school language arts teacher, a college English professor and writing center director, two small business owners, a food service waiter, and two full-time graduate students. Of the nine, three hold masters' degrees, three are enrolled in doctoral programs, one holds a bachelor's degree, and two hold associates' degrees of which one has additional technical training from a commercial art school. As summarized in Table 4, all reported a love of reading comics and graphic novels that continues to this day, as well as other narrative and informational texts. Whereas additional personal and literacy data gathered in this study related to the second research question regarding what individual experiences helped shape their literacy, more detailed descriptions of each participant's reading habits, preferences, and experiences have been reviewed anecdotally as case summaries later in Chapter Four, when exploring the results of their literacy and follow-up interviews.

Sampling

The misperceptions about of outsider literacy described above also influenced how participants were recruited for this study. As a researcher, educator, and graphic novel-reading novice, I cannot claim to be a member of the comic book culture and needed to develop rapport with members of this community. Since I am an acknowledged outsider, brand-new to these kinds of literacy practices, in order to be sensitive to the concerns that my participants may have had as well as establish their trust, I began my study by recruiting participants that were already known to me and with whom I had long-established ties and friendships. These participants were persons who frequently read and purchase graphic novels and comics for enjoyment, and were able to share with

me their past and present experiences with both outsider and traditional text literacy as part of the literacy history questionnaire they completed prior to the think-aloud protocol. These readers were the starting point for my study, as I knew them to have the kind of literacy experience this dissertation explored. Additional participants were recruited through a form of purposeful sampling called snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling refers to a kind of purposeful sampling that is done with populations that are not readily identifiable or reachable (Trochim, 2006, p. 4). In snowball sampling, the researcher asks current participants to recommend other potential candidates for the study. Essentially, snowball sampling is research by referral, searching for candidates that have particular knowledge or experience (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Because adults who read comic books may not always wish to identify themselves as such publicly for the reasons described above, it might have been difficult to find readers who fit my criteria and that were willing to participate in this study. Therefore, by contacting candidates that were recommended to me by others whom I knew, I located the kind of adult reader that Patton (2002) calls "information-rich key informants or critical cases" (Patton, p. 237). Another advantage of snowball sampling to this study was in the area of establishing trust. As a novice graphic novel reader, I had no particular entry into this culture, nor did people who belong to the culture necessarily know me. Gaining entry by means of an intermediary person already familiar with the culture not only helped me remain sensitive to participants needs, but also helped potential future participants feel more at ease about talking with me in the first place. Furthermore, as the type of research I conducted was designed to discover how individual readers read the same graphic narrative texts, the fact that snowball sampling would not

necessarily yield a representative sample of all comic book readers did not detract from the goals of this particular study.

Materials

In addition to a hand-held recording device, the materials used for this study consisted of written copies of interview and literacy history questions and three graphic novels. For the practice think-aloud protocol, participants were given a written set of instructions for the protocol called the prompt, which explained verbally the procedure they used for the protocol. The participants read page eight from Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* as a practice page. For the full-length protocols, participants read the exposition (introduction) segments of two graphic novels: Chapter One from Alan Moore's *Watchmen,* and the first section of Chapter One from Natsuki Takaya's *Fruits Basket Volume One.* Exposition (introduction) chapters were selected because they contain enough information for a reader to get the gist of a story, but were also short enough to provide an appropriate amount of text for the protocol.

Since genre plays such an important role in reading, including a text from the superhero genre--the genre that most of the study's participants read for pleasure-- became important to understanding how participants made sense of these texts. In seven of the nine cases studied, the participants had already read the *Watchmen* at some prior time in their reading history. This book remains a bestseller and is considered one of the best graphic novels written in the superhero genre. This existing familiarity would have been more problematic had the focus of my study been solely on comprehension – what readers remembered after reading. However, as this study sought to discover the process

of reading graphic novels by studying how experienced readers worked their way through multi-modal texts, it was important to include the kind of text from which the participants drew the bulk of their expertise. Furthermore, a second text--the first novel in the *Fruits Basket* series--was used. *Fruits Basket* represents a popular graphic genre known as shojo manga. While the nature of this particular series seems intended to appeal primarily to young adult readers, especially girls, it is also currently the top-selling series in this genre. (A more in-depth discussion of each text will follow towards the end of this chapter.) On a related (but slightly creepy) note, the proprietor of a local comic book store who recommended the series also told me that mostly middle-aged men had purchased this book, hopefully for their daughters. This seemingly unrelated fact called into question the perception of intended and actual audience--who is reading these books and why--an issue that is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five, as many of my participants actively questioned this during their protocols. Yet despite the *Fruits Basket* series' popularity, my participants had minimal exposure to manga, and none to shojo, emphasizing the varied genre preferences different generations have for their pleasure reading, as manga advertisers believe the bulk of their novels' sales are to teenagers and pre-teens, whereas the market for superhero comics, especially graphic novels, in the Unites States is largely an adult audience. Thus, the adult participants' difficulties reading this text further emphasize the importance genre has to reading in general. By incorporating two very different genres of graphic novels, this study helped me better understand not only how the participants read the stories they gravitate toward for pleasure reading, but also how they applied their multi-modal literacy skills to new or unfamiliar texts.

Think-Aloud Protocols

The volunteers for this study each participated in a practice think-aloud protocol and two separate reading protocols of two different styles of graphic novels. The practice think-aloud protocol text was one page of a graphic novel that was not read during the full-length protocols, but the practice session was also recorded and transcribed. The purpose for giving subjects a practice protocol was so that they became comfortable with the think-aloud procedure and reading into the microphone, as well as adjusting the recording equipment. The first graphic novel used during the first full-length protocol was a text, which most experienced readers recognized, and the second protocol used a text with which most had little or no acquaintance. Each of these texts and the challenges they posed to readers are described in detail in the text analysis section.

In think-aloud protocols, the protocol process may be modeled for the participants, or explained verbally. Smith (1991) preferred the written prompt approach to explanation to minimize "cueing particular patterns of response" from his participants (p. 265). Whether the protocol is modeled or explained verbally, the essence of the process remains the same: the participant is instructed to say aloud everything he or she does or thinks while reading the given text to help make sense of that text. In this way, think-aloud protocols "may provide a record of the temporal flow of mental activity that would be impossible for the reader to construct for himself because the self-monitoring would interfere drastically with that normal mental activity"(Kintgen, 1983, cited in Smith, 1991, p. 264). Additionally, think-aloud protocols "map out the temporal flow" for the participant-observer, who otherwise would not necessarily be able to follow the normally silent thought processes of the reader.

I chose to follow Smith's (1991) approach of providing my participants with written directions for the protocols, but for a different reason. As a novice graphic novel reader, the practices I use to construct meaning from these texts may be very different from those of an experienced reader. My literacy is still primarily a traditional, verbal-oriented literacy, and as McCloud explains, so much of understanding comics has to do with experience and familiarity with composition, style, and context, that modeling a process for my participants might have cued them to change their normal practice. Therefore, at the onset of their think-aloud sessions, these volunteer subjects were given a written prompt that clarified my intentions for this study and explained how the protocol process works. This written prompt is reproduced in Appendix A. While the protocol prompt and practice sessions might be viewed as a different kind of cueing, I found that since the majority of the participants had never participated in a think-aloud protocol session, just giving them verbal instructions to tell me what they were thinking or doing while they read, without practicing what thinking aloud could mean, produced confusion.

Once participants were given a chance to review the prompt and practice the process aloud, they were asked to read aloud the first chapter from each novel. The think-aloud sessions, including the practice session, were tape recorded and transcribed, and I observed the participant and took field notes on their behaviors and observations during the reading. Both Froriep (2007) and Smith (1991) recommended that the researcher sit slightly behind the participant as to be out of his line of sight in order to minimize social interactions and to be able to prompt participants to return to the think-aloud mode if they fall silent for too long. This non-interactive posture and part of the protocol procedure proved to be distracting to the participants in my study. When sitting behind readers, I

found that often they would physically turn to look at me when they were reporting, something that became a distraction as it caused them to lose their place in the text. To minimize this I sat next to them or at an angle where they could still see me and I could still observe them and the text at the same time. I also found in the prior exploratory study that participants who read the given text aloud, in addition to saying aloud what they are thinking and doing as they read, were less likely to fall silent and more likely to communicate their thought processes as they were already in the habit of talking during the sessions. As graphic novels do not always have text to read, this modification was particularly useful because it helped the readers remember to talk continuously to me about what, where, and why they were looking, and how they made sense of the pages. Furthermore, having the text read aloud also provided a point of reference for me when I transcribed the audio text into a verbal text document for analysis.

A final modification I made to Froriep's and Smith's processes was to ask probing questions for clarification from the readers while they were in the process of reading. As a participant-observer, I watched the participants read and knew if something they said needed further clarification. I found it was better to ask the reader for more information at the moment when they were engaged in the act than to have them try to recall it post-session. In this way, the protocol at times had elements of the interview questions mixed in where immediately relevant to the practices each reader employed. A sample taken verbatim from one of the participant's transcripts illustrates this kind of probing question-and-answer scenario and why it was valuable to gathering data during the think-aloud protocol:

Vince: It's just him walking, you know, so he starts here, and by the second panel he's made it to this point. You can see that it's meant for this building to carry over from one panel to the next so that indicated right away. And then, it's such a break here, that obviously you have to go down, you know, and also… *(Pauses briefly)*

Marie: What do you mean by "such a break"--what is that?

Vince: Well, it's the color, stark contrast, you know you go from here to here and then the four panels are the same size, same shade, you know, indicating it's night, you know, but then you get to this. It's obviously moved on, the storyline has moved on by the time you get to this point so I would not go this way, I would go down here and go across.

In this report, Vince's term "such a break" for describing how he knew to adjust his reading path was unclear, as it could have referred to a number of factors that Vince did name in his clarification: the color, the contrast, the size and number of the panels. According to his clarification statement, Vince's subsequent observations qualified that for him, the break in the story was primarily noted through a sharp color change. However, asking Vince to clarify what he meant by that term, at the moment when he stated it (rather than waiting until the follow-up interview), elicited a rich description of the visual cues that influenced how Vince created his reading path ("so I would not go this way, I would go down here and across"), and how that affected his interpretation of the narrative ("the storyline has obviously moved on by the time you get to this point"). Had the probing question not been asked, Vince's statement about the break would not have illustrated the separate reading actions he used to make sense of that page.

Interview Questions and Literacy Histories

In addition to the think-aloud sessions, each participant was given a list of interview questions and a literacy history questionnaire just prior to the think-aloud sessions. Warren, in Gubrium and Holstein (2002), describes qualitative interviewing "as a kind of guided conversation in which the researcher carefully listens 'so as to hear the meaning' of what is being conveyed" (Warren, p. 85). Warren also specifies that qualitative interview questions need to be "open-ended, probing for details and depths of experience" (p. 86). She identifies three basic types of questions used in a qualitative interview: "main questions to begin and guide the conversation, probes to clarify answers or request more information, and follow-up questions to pursue implications of answers to main questions" (p. 87). In my study, the main questions (which included the think-aloud protocol questions and the literacy history questions) were given to the participant up front so that he or she had time to look them over prior to the interview session. The probe questions were asked during the interview, but also during the protocol, so as to elicit more information or clarify process as the process was unfolding. Follow-up questions happened immediately after the protocol reading as a way to have the participant reflect on the process and give more in-depth information about his or her practices during and apart from the protocol session. Samples of the kinds of questions asked during the protocols and the interviews have been organized below in Table 5, and are also reproduced as Appendices A, B, and C.

Table 5

A Sampling of Questions for Literacy Histories, Think-aloud Protocols, Probes, and Follow-up Interviews

Literacy History Questions	Think-aloud Protocol Questions	Typical Probe Questions	Follow-up Interview questions
How would you describe your self as a reader? What do you like to read? What other kinds of pastimes do you enjoy on a regular basis? (TV, movies, games, sports, etc.?) What do you like about these kinds of pastimes? Do you remember your first encounter with comics or graphic novels? Tell me about that experience. How/Why/when did you become interested in graphic novels or comics? What sparked this interest? What comics or graphic novels do you enjoy reading? Why? What catches your mind or draws you to these stories?	How do you begin reading this kind of text? What do you do first? Where do you look first? What do you notice as you read? What catches your mind or your eye as you read? What is happening in the story? On the page? What do you do if you become confused? Tell me everything you're thinking or doing, even if it doesn't seem to relate to this task.	I noticed you glanced over the page /section/ panel before you began to read. Why did you do that? (Response to an action taken by the participant) Why did you do that? Is that something you normally do? Why? You fell silent there for a moment. What were you doing/thinking? I noticed you looked back /ahead a few pages. What were you doing? Why? Is that something you normally do? When you say (term used by the participant), what do you mean by that? (Response to comments from a participant) How do you know that? I heard you say "Hmm" just now. What were you thinking /what gave you pause? When you see/ notice/ read something like this, what do you do? Why? What made you laugh just now? I noticed you seem frustrated. What were you thinking /what gave you pause?	What attracts or distracts your attention while reading these kinds of texts? How do you typically work your way through a page/ panel/ section? How do you make sense of or understand the story? (Strategies, habits, patterns?) What do you do when you encounter bleeds? What do you do when you encounter wordless panels? What do you do when you encounter unusual panel layouts? How does color, or lack of color, impact your reading? How do you work your way through confusing sections? What did you like/dislike about this text? What do you like or dislike about graphic novels or comics in general? What attracts you to a graphic novel? What are your selection criteria?

These questions were open-ended in nature so as to elicit more particular knowledge from each participant, especially the literacy history questions which asked the subjects to tell me more about their reading habits and preferences beyond and apart from those I recorded and observed during a think-aloud session. By maintaining the "guided conversation" mindset, the interview and literacy history questions had an element of flexibility, so that I was able to modify them when the situation dictated. Thus, both the interview and the literacy history questions helped reveal the participants' explicit and implicit knowledge about graphic novels and comics, their motivations for reading these kinds of texts, and their experiences relating to reading. Though the participants were given the option to write answers to the interview and literacy history questions, as well as to discuss them orally during the follow-up interview once the think-aloud protocol has been completed, in practice, audio taping the literacy histories proved to be a much better means for eliciting rich data from the readers. Participants gave much more detailed descriptions of their personal experiences when speaking directly to me than they did when writing the answers on the questionnaires. In this way, the follow-up interview and literacy histories became more akin to a conversation with a purpose, and I explored in greater depth the answers a participant gave to particular questions as the reader had just completed the activity and the experience was still be fresh in his or her mind. Interview questions and literacy history questions are reproduced in Appendices B and C.

Analysis of Qualitative and Quantitative Data and Study Materials

Coding Interviews, Literacy Histories and TA Protocols

Once I transcribed the audio protocols, interviews and literacy histories, I analyzed the transcripts by coding their content, creating comparison charts and tables, and writing summary "memos". Charmaz, in Gubrium and Holstein (2002,) describes coding as a two-step process where:

> Initial or open coding forces the researcher to begin making analytic decisions about the data, [followed by] selective or focused coding [wherein] the researcher uses most frequently-appearing initial codes to sort, synthesize and conceptualize large amounts of data. (Charmaz, p. 684)

This kind of coding is inductive, moving the analysis from the specialized content of each case's transcripts to broader concepts or categories that make cross-case analysis in multi-case studies possible. Charmaz focuses on using action codes as these "show what is happening, and what people are doing"(p. 685). Those action codes that appeared most frequently became the selective codes that represented recurrent themes in each case's transcripts, and from these I developed the categories that appeared to be most pertinent to my study. As the interviews, literacy histories and protocols all produced transcripts, coding and summarizing were the mainstay of this study's data analysis. Table 6, showing how these selective action codes revealed over-arching reading actions, is listed below.

Table 6

Selective Coding Scheme for Specific Reading Actions and Their Corresponding General Reading Actions

Specific Reading Actions and Selective Action Codes	General Reading Actions Derived From Specific Reading Action Codes
Scan whole page (SWP) Look for text clues (LTC) Look for image clues (LIC) Adjust reading direction (ARD) Cue from color (CC)	Consciously direct their own attention
Observe image details (OID) Observe text details (OTD) Summarize images or text as plot (SIP/ STP) Predict (P) Infer/ Draw conclusions (I/DC) Follow image thread (FIT) Follow text thread (FTT) Synthesize new connections/ Imagine (S/I)	Construct/create meaning/ understanding
Recognize confusion (RC) Question test/author (QT/QA) Reread text (RRT) Review images (RRI) Revise predictions/inferences/ conclusions (RP/RI/C) Look for comics narrative conventions (LCNC)	Monitor understanding
Use comics narrative conventions (UCNC) Connect to other texts (COT) Connect to other comics/graphic novels (COC/GN) Make personal connections (MPC)	Use prior knowledge
Evaluate images (EI) Evaluate plot (EP) Evaluate technique/ style (ET/S) Comment on comics narrative conventions (CCNC)	Critique aesthetics
Talk back to the text (TBT)	Emotional involvement with story or characters

For coding and analysis, I again referred to Froriep's (2007) dissertation *The Conscious Thought Processes of College English Faculty When Reading Wordless Books: A Verbal Protocol Study* and Smith's (1991) study from his article "Constructing Meaning from Text: An Analysis of Ninth-Grade Reader Responses," published in the *Journal of Educational Research*. Froriep's dissertation examined how college professors read wordless books written for very young children, and Smith's study attempted to discover how ninth-graders constructed meaning from traditional verbal texts. These studies were important starting points for mine; though there are enough surface similarities in the number of participants, the research vehicle, the choice of two separate texts for the protocol, and desire to understand how readers make sense of these texts, we differed in specifics: purpose, participants, audience, and goals. Froriep's protocols studied college professors as expert readers of *verbal* texts, as they made sense of *wordless* children's books, with an eye toward providing literacy information that would support the use of wordless books in reading instruction classes. Froriep's study was similar to mine in that her study employed experienced readers and triangulated three separate data sources for her investigation: think-aloud protocols, follow-up interviews in the form of questionnaires, and field notes from her direct observations. Yet of the five college professors Froriep surveyed in her dissertation, only one had experience reading graphic novels, and another had only an acquaintanceship with picture books as they are used in elementary classrooms. While her study seems to investigate similar practices to mine, Froriep focused mainly on discovering if her subjects used three specific cognitive activities that most educators associate with good reading practice: questioning, predicting, and using prior knowledge, and if the readers noticed any similarities or

differences between their reading processes for the wordless books and for verbal-only texts. In this way, while Froriep's study is grounded in verbal-only reading practice and theory, her study did not seek to identify reading practices that were unique to wordless books or other graphic narrative texts. Therefore, to a certain extent Froriep's study demonstrates a predisposition supporting assumptions that the goal for literacy instruction is really focused on achieving and improving verbal-only literacy. Furthermore, Froriep's use of texts intended for young children in her study might also be considered indicative of the prevailing, though perhaps unintentional, mindset in education that graphic narratives are best used with emergent readers, such as young children, as bridges to "real" literacy, rather than valuing graphic narrative literacy in its own right.

Smith's study is a more traditional, education-oriented use of verbal reporting. Smith also focused on verbal-only literacy; his study investigated how ten ninth grade students of varying backgrounds made sense of two different short stories. Smith, however, chose his participants to represent two different categories of reading ability: less-successful readers and more successful readers. His study's purpose was to discover the processes that each group used to work through the stories in order to compare what processes the successful readers used to those of the less-successful readers. Ultimately, his audience was secondary level teachers, as he couched his findings in terms of what processes students did not use as well as how to strengthen the less-successful readers' abilities by incorporating more of the successful readers' approaches. While my study's purpose was not concerned with either the diagnosis or the correction applications for literacy instruction that Smith studied, I did incorporate his discovery approach to coding. Smith recognized that earlier protocol studies cited in his article tended to identify

reading strategy categories that were too general and did not allow for the different ways that a reader might use these strategies. For example, Smith noted that a previous study had identified one such strategy as "Using Schemata Personalized" (Langer (1986), in Smith, p. 265). Yet Smith's study showed that his students used their personal experiences--schemata--in four distinct ways that the general coding category did not acknowledge. In this way, Smith advised that coding categories should arise from the individual transcripts, and from these individual transcripts a summary of the categories that emerge can be identified. Since I investigated multi-modal literacy, a literacy that had yet to be explored through reading protocols, I also let the coding categories emerge from what my readers actually did, rather than to attempt to describe their processes solely in traditional literacy terms. In this way, the coding system I used followed Smith's advice, and was drawn from my readers' protocol transcripts, interviews, and literacy histories.

The information that emerged from my participants' literacy histories and interviews differed from the protocols, as all three instruments were designed to elicit different kinds of information related to outsider literacy practices. For example, the coding system for the protocols looked for evidence of reading actions reported by the subjects during the protocols, the follow-up interviews asked the participants to discuss the processes they use generally when reading graphic novels, in addition to recounting, describing or clarifying specific parts of the protocol readings, while the literacy histories focused on the readers' attraction to and individual experiences with graphic novels and other texts. During the protocol analysis, six general categories of reading behaviors emerged from the transcripts of the readers, and these categories are similar to the critical

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reading strategies that Rosenblatt (1994,) Smith (1994,) Beers (2003,) and Henry (1995)
describe from studying skilled readers of verbal text:

- <u>Looking/Consciously directing attention</u>: participants indicated what part of the story they would be moving to next, what imagery and/or text features caught their attention, what they were looking or watching for.

- <u>Reading to comprehend/ Construct meaning</u>: Participants observed text and image details, summarized, predicted, inferred, drew conclusions, followed story and image threads, and synthesized new connections.

- <u>Rereading/Monitor understanding:</u> Participants recognized when they became confused, questioned the text or author, looked back at text and/or images, revised a conclusion or an inference based on new information gained while reading and looked for genre conventions to help clarify understanding.

- <u>Commenting/Using prior knowledge</u>: Participants drew on prior knowledge of genre conventions, other narrative texts, or used personal experience to make connections with and understand the story.

- <u>Judging or evaluating/Critique aesthetics:</u> Participants indicated personal preferences for or critiqued narrative elements such as imagery, plot, style and technique, and commented on genre conventions

- <u>Enjoyment or dismissal/ Getting emotionally involved with the story or characters:</u> Participants indicated emotional involvement with the narrative by "talking back to the text."

These six categories represent the kinds of reading behaviors that Rosenblatt (1994) and Beers (2003) describe as necessary for an aesthetic reading experience--in Rosenblatt's terms, yielding "a poem" from the text. From these six general reading behaviors, twenty-eight specific reading actions were further identified from the participants' transcript analyses. These actions were coded, the results of all participants' think-aloud protocols were compared graphically as Table 8 in Chapter Four, Tables 9 and 10 in Chapter Five, and Appendices E and F, and discussed anecdotally in greater detail in the case studies in Chapter Four. Similarly, the follow-up interview questions and the literacy history information were also reported anecdotally, as they provided a deeper understanding of each reader's background, preferences and reading habits and reading actions that could not be gained from the think-aloud protocols.

Member Checking and Peer Debriefing

Once I transcribed all audiotapes of the participants' sessions, copies of the raw data transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. Miles and Huberman (1994) use Guba's (1981) term "member checks" to describe informant feedback in qualitative research. The member checks I used were gathered and submitted after the protocols had been completed and initially analyzed for individual action codes, so as not to unduly influence participants' responses to member checking; if the participants knew what I was looking for in their raw data transcripts, they might have been tempted to tailor their member-checks to what they believed I wanted to see or hear. Once the protocols had been re-analyzed and coded for concept action codes, research memos for the literacy histories and follow-up interviews were created. These research memos that

Charmaz suggests were anecdotal analyses linked to each code, wherein the codes

become more conceptual (rather than individual) categories. Charmaz's suggestions for

research memos are designed to:

> define the properties of each category, specify conditions under which each
> category develops, is maintained, and changes, and note the consequences of each
> category and its relationship with other categories (p. 687)

The traces of this process can be found in the coding chart (Table 8) and frequency charts

(Appendices E and F) developed from the category-coding analysis of each subject's

transcript. The memos created for the participants' literacy histories and follow-up

interviews became the basis for the anecdotal case summaries in Chapter Four and the

study's conclusions in Chapter Five.

Text Analysis - Content and Design

Overview of Text Analysis

Texts for this study were chosen primarily for their genre, content and design, but

they also represent the kinds of graphic novels that are currently popular and therefore,

the kinds of texts that adult readers are most likely to encounter. *Jimmy Corrigan: The*

Smarted Kid on Earth, (the most recently-published text of the three included in this

study,) was selected for the practice text for the unique reading challenges it poses to its

audience. *Jimmy Corrigan* represents a kind of graphic novel that is gaining ground in

sales against its more traditional comics-based brethren – an award-winning graphic

novel that is completely crafted by the writer, and written in a genre other than the

superhero or crime fiction milieu. *Watchmen*, also an award-winning graphic novel, represents the more traditional collaborative concept of superhero narratives, where the writing, illustration, lettering and coloring are done by different artists. This novel was included because the graphic narrative conventions it contains are typical of the Western superhero genre, conventions from which the readers in this study draw their expertise. Whereas *Watchmen* and *Jimmy Corrigan* were written for adult audiences (and therefore reflect a certain amount of literary gravitas), the last novel included in my study was *Fruits Basket,* a shojo manga novel written with a teenage audience in mind. As such, it is not a novel (or genre) with which I expected my adult readers to be familiar, but the upcoming generation of adult readers will be, based on manga's wild popularity among American and Japanese teenagers and ever-expanding sales figures. While *Fruits Basket* lacks the adult appeal of novels such as *Watchmen*, its Japanese graphic narrative conventions posed many reading challenges to the participants who were not familiar with the manga genre or Eastern narrative and reading conventions. Table 7 provides a visual overview and summary of each text, its genre, plot, and graphic narrative features.

Table 7

Text Features of Graphic Novels Used in the Think-aloud Protocols

Text	Genre and Brief Plot Summary	Text Features
Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth Author: Chris Ware Date: 2000 Publisher: Pantheon Books	Genre: Family saga; fictionalized autobiography; fantasy Plot summary: Jimmy Corrigan, middle-aged, isolated and lonely, meets his father for the first time Thanksgiving weekend. Jimmy's stilted existence causes him to escape into superhero fantasies. As the story progresses, the past interacts with the present, showing a pattern of banality, anger, isolation and abuse across four generations of Corrigan family men, but the conclusion leaves open a chance for Jimmy to gain love and acceptance.	Visual Leitmotifs: Redbird, robot, superman, banner-style book title; barren trees; single leaf Graphic text features: Dense, panel-packed pages Deceptively simple drawings Non-linear panel arrangement Multiple panel transitions Symbolic and emotive coloration Multiple lettering styles Multiple layers of text Mixed verbal text genres Multiple narrative perspectives Non-linear text placement Non-linear plot development Western comics iconography
Watchmen Author: Alan Moore Illustrator: Dave Gibbons Colorist: John Higgins Date: 1987 Publisher: DC Comics	Genre: Superhero; alternate history; science fiction; crime fiction Plot summary: As the world comes to the brink of nuclear annihilation, seemingly disconnected events—a murdered colleague, a cancer epidemic, missing artists and intellectuals, public scandal, and personal humiliation—reunite a small band of disgraced, retired superheroes. Through the course of solving these mysteries, these four superheroes discover a horrifying plot to save the world by destroying it, and the mastermind behind this plan turns out to be one of their own.	Visual Leitmotifs: Smiley-face button; Victory Nixon; Gunga Diner blimp; clockface standing at five minutes to midnight; graffiti; fallout shelter and anarchy symbols Graphic text features: Traditional nine-panel pages Dense, image and symbol-laden panels Linear panel arrangement Multiple panel transitions Symbolic and emotive coloration Multiple lettering styles Multiple layers of text Mixed verbal text genres Multiple narrative perspectives Non-linear plot development Western comics iconography
Fruits Basket Volume 1 Author: Natsuki Takaya Date: 1998 Publisher: Tokyopop, Inc.	Genre: Manga; Juvenile fantasy; romance Plot summary: Tohru Honda is an orphaned teenager, working to put herself through high school. A chance encounter, illness, and flood bring her into contact with a mysterious family with a magical secret to protect. Romance blossoms as Tohru becomes an honorary member of their clan.	Visual Leitmotifs: Chinese zodiac; flowers; Japanese lettering; stars/starlight; leaves Graphic text features: Japanese narrative arrangement (right-to-left, back-to-front.) Image-packed, non-linear panels Multiple panel transitions Greyscale coloration Non-traditional text placement Multiple narrative perspectives Non-linear story progression Japanese comics iconography

Practice Think-aloud Protocol Text Analysis

I chose the practice text from page 8 of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* because it contains several reading challenges unique to graphic novels and comics, including (but not limited to) color, varied frame sizes and nonlinear frame and text placement, text-less frames, different kinds of transitions between frames, and nuanced illustrations. The goal of including a practice session was to help the subjects become more comfortable with think-aloud protocol, so having a practice page that anticipated most of the graphic conventions subjects confronted in the full-length think-aloud protocols was important to the success of each session. This practice page is reproduced in Appendix D.

Watchmen *Text Analysis*

The first graphic novel participants read for their protocol was Chapter One of the Hugo Award-winning *Watchmen. Watchmen* was chosen as a text for this study based in part as a representative of the superhero genre, in part on the recommendations of local comic book store proprietors, but mostly on its meritorious status in the comic book community.

According to Bradford Wright, "the future of the comic book industry as a whole continues to rest with the fate of superheroes" (p. 290). Superhero stories remain best sellers in the general comic book reading community, and a glance at any local movie marquee will attest to the popularity of the genre's crossover in the movies. For example, *Spiderman the Movie,* released in 2002, was not only hailed by comic book fans as "the best comic book movie ever," but it also played so well to the general population that it

became "the best opening and second week opening in history, grossing over 400 million dollars" (Wright, p. 292). Since this study focused on how experienced readers of graphic novels read these texts, and given the omnipresence and influence of the superhero genre in graphic novels, comic books and popular culture at large, it was important to include a text that reflects the graphic narrative conventions of this genre, conventions from which the readers in this study draw their expertise.

However, *Watchmen* isn't just any superhero text; it has literary cache beyond comic book readers. In 2006, *Time Magazine* book critics listed *Watchmen* as one of the "100 best English language novels from 1923 to the present," and the only graphic novel included in the ranking. *Time's* list places *Watchmen* in a league with other novels already well established as members of a traditional literary canon, equating it with such works as *The Grapes of Wrath, To Kill a Mockingbird, 1984, On the Road,* and *Catch-22* (Comics Buyer's Guide, 2006.) *Watchmen* has also been called (albeit by its DC publicists) "...the book that changed an industry and challenged a medium." DC's claims are supported by Pustz, who called *Watchmen*:

> ...the final work central to the superhero mythos... Building on the genre
> conventions established decades earlier, this revisionist graphic novel demands
> that its readers know about both the original, primitive elements of the genre, and
> the more mature, classic superheroes of the 1960s. (p. 134)

Watchmen is essentially a superhero tale, so the story utilizes superhero storytelling conventions, but it uses those conventions to question the superhero genre. Pustz's analysis of *Watchmen* further explains that allusions in the graphic novel are to:

...all superheroes - their costumes, their separation from humanity, their motivations, their sexual predilections, their secret identities - making Moore and Gibbon's graphic novel one of the works that demands the most comics literacy from readers. (p. 147)

Pustz's point, that the extent of the novel's revisionism is really only apparent to readers who have a long-term acquaintance with the genre and graphic narrative conventions, is clear because he identifies a reader's need for *comics* literacy in order to fully grasp the story. But comics' literacy is not all that is needed to appreciate *Watchmen*; a familiarity with post WWII United States history, politics, music and popular culture, as well as classic literature is also helpful. The story is rife with layered allusions to Hiroshima, Area 51, Los Alamos and the Manhattan Project, McCarthyism, Vietnam, and the political scandals of the Nixon, Carter, and Reagan administrations. The novel's title is taken from a selection of Juvenal's Satires: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodies," which translates from Latin as "Who watches the watchmen?" and appears as fragments of graffiti (incidental text) all throughout the novel. This translation appears in toto as a brief epilogue at the end of the novel, where Moore cites his source for the quote as the epigraph of the 1987 *Tower Commission Report*, itself a reference to the Iran-Contra scandal that was consuming the media and the public at the time the novel was written. Moore's theme--who can be trusted with power?--is resonant at every level of the novel. Clearly this kind of complexity is not meant for prepubescent audiences, though there are certainly some adolescents who could and do appreciate the novel's depth and breadth; Moore and Gibbons are writing for adults. While the novel can be read superficially as simply a superhero-gone-wrong tale, those experienced, mature readers will understand

the bulk of the allusions, and in essence have a better shot at gaining an aesthetic reading experience from the text.

As a graphic novel, *Watchmen's* comics' conventions fall right in line with McCloud's analysis of the Western- style superhero genre. Panels primarily depict action-to-action transitions, and the story-telling and illustration style is similar--perhaps referential--to the superhero comic narrative style of Stan Lee and visual style of Jack Kirby. The challenges that *Watchmen* provides a reader have to do with the visual complexity of each panel, as each panel is packed with narrative cues for a reader to find, as Figure 9 depicts (below). Incidental fragments of text, present in snatches of graffiti spray-painted on walls in the background of panels, posters, advertisements, and on bits of detritus such as newspapers and garbage, function as characterization, setting, and subplot elements. For example, Richard Nixon is an important, albeit flat, character in a subplot of the main narrative, but his story line only appears in incidental text. Readers only learn that he is (and how he can still be) the president by reading the scraps of incidental text on billboards and newspapers drawn as sets and props in the background and foreground of panels throughout the narrative. Furthermore, these instances of incidental text are not presented in a format that can be easily read; often the bits of text are turned at an angle or lettered upside down, so a reader has to physically reorient himself to the text, mainly by turning the book around, to read what is written. Finally, because these bits of text are almost always fragmented, such as in a newspaper headline partially obscured by the hand of the character holding the paper, a reader has to reconstruct what the whole piece of text might say from the little bits that are actually depicted.
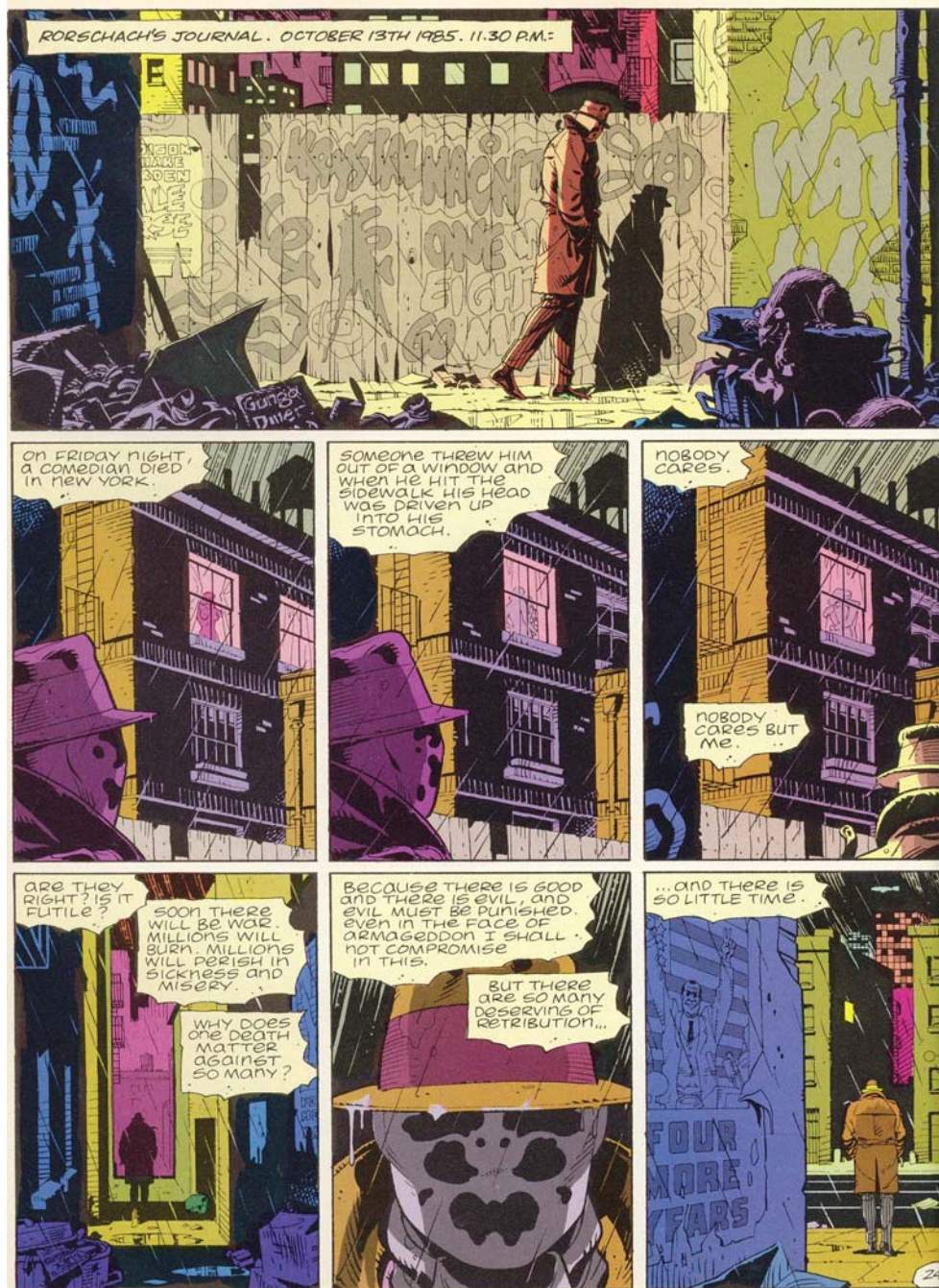
Note. From *Watchmen* (p. 24), by A. Moore, 1986, New York: DC Comics. Copyright 1986 by DC Comics. Reprinted under the conditions of the Fair Use sections (107-118) of the United States Copyright Act.

Figure 9. Watchmen page 24: Graffiti.

Figure 9 illustrates the narrative power of these densely detailed images. The snatches of graffiti such as "Krystalnacht," "Who watches the watchmen," "Pale Horse," the peace and anarchy icons, and the Victory Nixon poster advertising "Four More Years" layer themes of destruction and governments gone amuck. The "Gunga Diner" box in the trash puns the poem Gunga Din, representing another theme of discarded warriors. Lastly, the voyeurism of the main character watching a couple embrace in the central panels serves to further isolate him from his surroundings.

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Another challenge posed by this graphic novel has to do with juxtapositioning panels depicting story line and timeframes. While the narrative layout (i.e. panel shape, size and arrangement) on each page is fairly stable, rhythmic and traditional, panels often alternate between present, past and future times. Frequently, the panel situated next to another panel does not depict the next action in that sequence, as action-to-action transitions suggest, but it represents a parallel story line interspersed with the main narrative. In this way action-to-action transitions are stretched, so that two or more parallel story lines with different characters, settings, and times, are present simultaneously. Moore and Gibbon will often color-code these sequences, using one predominant set of colors for present narrative, and another for the flashback or flash-forward sections. Color, often flat and garish, is used as narrative element, with an emphasis on characterization and emotive quality. Color-as-narrative is even present on the novel's cover, which is largely a bright yellow color-block, with the title printed vertically against a black background. Three icons predominant in the story, a clock face, blood spill, and the smiley-button, are all present on the cover, but their images are abstracted. Within the story, lettering style, narration boxes and dialogue bubbles also vary with character, context and time. Frequently, dialogue or narration belongs to one story line, while the images presented in the panel refer to another, one more example of juxtaposition that is unique to graphic narratives in print media and may provide a challenge to readers. (For a specific illustration of these challenges, refer to Figure 7 in Chapter Two.)

One final observation in this analysis relates to how Moore and Gibbon's design utilizes the presence or absence of text as a visual design--composition--element. Not all

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pages in *Watchmen* contain text. In these sections it is common for a narrative sequence to stretch across a couple pages without dialogue, narration, though bubbles, or incidental text contained inside or connected to the panels. When text does appear in these sequences, it is used architecturally to divide event panels in a banner-like fashion, at once supporting and creating barriers between narrative elements. These pieces of text are similar to the incidental text, but they are physically much larger and read structurally as an element of page design, as well as contextually and thematically. These pieces of text are fragments of quotes from song lyrics that appear at the end of each chapter, something a reader does not discover until reaching that part of the novel.

<div align="center">Fruits Basket Text Analysis</div>

The second text that participants in this study read was the first section of Chapter One of Natsuki Takaya's *Fruits Basket Volume One,* a portion of text roughly equivalent to that of the *Watchmen. Fruits Basket,* known to fans as "Furuba," is an example of Japanese comics known popularly as manga. Like *Watchmen, Fruits Basket* is also an award-winner; in 2001, Takaya received the Kodansha Manga Award for Shojo manga, and also like *Watchmen*, as a result of its wild popularity both in Japan and the United States, *Fruits Basket* has crossed over into other media, namely a popular anime (cartoon) series on television. *Fruits Basket* is a series of twenty-one volumes and represents a category of manga called shojo, which is manga meant to appeal to girls. In content and in popularity *Fruits Basket* has some similarities to the Harry Potter novels: *Volume One* features a plucky orphan, Tohru Honda, who falls in love with a mysterious boy at school who has to protect his family's magic secrets. This juvenile fantasy novel's combination

of budding romance, magic, mythology, and teen-age heroes and heroines in a world where adults are largely absent, hostile or marginalized are hallmarks of most popular young adult fiction.

Manga texts are not all written for young adult readers, but the best-selling manga in bookstores and comic shops are those aimed at the young adult audience, and at young women in particular who are responsible for purchasing upwards of 60% of the manga on the market. In 2003 Stuart Levy, founder of Tokyopop, currently the largest American manga publishing house, reported to *Publisher's Weekly* that he estimated the American manga market would exceed 150 million dollars, largely due to teenage readers of both sexes. "From the numbers I see, it couldn't be any less and it can grow even more. Teenagers will help this market grow and penetrate the culture over the next ten years." (Levy, cited in Reid, 2003.) 2006 sales reports bear out Levy's predictions; according to ICv2, the *Fruits Baskets* series constituted the number two best selling manga property in the United States. Furthermore, ICv2 reported that graphic novel sales grew 48% in the second quarter of 2007, and attributed much of that growth to increasing sales of manga.

The significance of this new market cannot be ignored, as publishers clearly have their sights set on creating, maintaining and expanding readership for these kinds of multi-modal texts. In 2006, Tokyopop announced the release of two more manga lines: Manga Chapters and Manga Readers. Manga Chapters are hybridizations of prose and comics novellas whose target market are children six to nine years' old; Manga Readers are full fledged graphic novellas aimed at a slightly older audience of children, eight to twelve years' old (Reid, 2006). Clearly, a new readership for outsider fiction is being groomed; the teenagers currently reading manga will most likely grow into an audience

of adult readers, eager for manga-style adult graphic novels, and women readers attracted to manga novels because they offer story lines that differ from the superhero genre will comprise a large proportion of that audience.

Given these market trends in pop culture, I included *Fruits Basket* as the text for the second reading protocol. As my participants were adults whose reading experiences fell within the American superhero comic tradition, most of them were unfamiliar with this particular story, or even with manga format, the style of graphic narrative that Tokyopop produces. "Manga format" refers to an English-language version of the original Japanese manga that maintains the composition of the Japanese language text. Prior to Tokyopop's arrival on the publishing scene, Japanese comics translated into English were also reformatted to mimic an English language reading posture; artwork, panels and text were realigned to the left-right reading structure of English. In Tokyopop's publications, the verbal narration is arranged according to the original Japanese text; these manga read from right to left, top-to-bottom, and a reader begins at what Westerners would identify as the back of the text. In fact, Tokyopop graphic novels have a warning page in the place where a Western reader would expect to see a title page. This page (reproduced as Figure 3 in Chapter One) features a stop sign, telling unsuspecting readers that they have inadvertently turned to the end of the novel. Right below the stop sign are printed directions and a brief reading map or "primer" for first-time manga readers, visually demonstrating how to read through a manga text. Additionally, the original Japanese visual and verbal sound effects and honorifics have also been preserved. Another feature of manga format is the five-by-seven inch trade book size, and black-and-white print. The only colors present are the bubble-gum shades

on the cover of the novel, which features the protagonist Tohru Honda in her school uniform.

From a design standpoint, *Fruits Basket*'s graphic narrative conventions follow McCloud's description of Japanese-style comics, and represented many reading challenges to the participants who were not familiar with manga style graphic narratives. Transitions between panels are mainly comprised of scene-to-scene and aspect-to-aspect changes, with some action-to-action transitions, unlike Western-style comics that use mostly action-to-action transitions. Panel divisions or frames on the page are not uniformly shaped or sized, nor do they use right angles as did those in the *Watchmen,* creating a dynamic feel to each page's layout, as if the whole page were moving, unstable, or ready to shift at any time. There are many instances of bleeds--border-less panels--that overlap and drift into other panels. Background imagery is more emotive than scene-setting; these backdrops consist of washes similar to watercolor technique and wallpaper-like patterns of flowers, clouds, and graphic lines, as is seen in Figure 10 (below) and Figure 8 in Chapter Two. In this way, the characters' emotions become the backdrops to whatever action is taking place.

FRUITS BASKET © 1998 by Natsuki Takaya / HAKUSENSHA, Inc.

Note. From *Fruits Basket* (p.23), by N. Takaya, 2004, Los Angeles: TOKYOPOP, Inc. Copyright 2004 by TOKYOPOP. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 10. Fruits Basket page 23: Tohru's crush.

Figure 10 is an example of page design that might present some challenges to a reader. Though it appears at first glance to depict two vertical panels, the page features bleeds--borderless panels that drift into each other. There are actually four or five separate activities happening on this page, and these activities are not separated by gutters, but bleed into one another. Partial drawings of enlarged faces become backdrops, used to express a character's emotions, rather than represent a physical reality. Even the dialogue can be confusing if not read in the correct order that is only indicated by the strong diagonal line that splits the page.

Lastly, verbal text also becomes a visual design element. Verbal text is present in dialogue and narration bubbles, but it also spills across panels and images. There are instances of direct-addresses to the reader, such as prose letters from the author to the reader discussing her creative process and her hopes that the reader will enjoy the story. These instances of direct address are interjected as asides, as actual breaks in the narration, often physically placed to the side of the story, framing the action. Text size varies, too, perhaps implying volume or random thought or speech by a character not necessarily present in the frame. Sound effects are often represented by what looks like untranslated Japanese language characters, barcodes, and punctuation, present as text overlain on the action or props drawn in the panels, almost as if these bits of verbal text were free-floating objects within the character's physical space.

Limitations of Think-aloud Protocols

Though think-aloud protocol studies are widely used in education and other social sciences, researchers have called attention to some potential limitations that the methodology might present. Young (2005) and Conrad, Blair and Tracy (1999) qualify these limitations as falling into three categories: reactivity, participants' verbal abilities, and validity. The concept of reactivity pulls together three concerns about think-aloud studies: that participants may not be reporting all that they are doing, since they may be required to report on more that one activity at a time; that participants may be distracted by the process of reporting aloud during tasks that are normally done in silence (such as reading); and that think-aloud protocols may be drawing the participants' attention to

cognitive activities, essentially changing the thinking the researcher wishes to study. Verbal ability becomes a concern during a think-aloud as some participants may more articulate than others, and thus may appear to be reporting more activities than others and similarly, the less articulate participants may underreport their thinking. Lastly, think-aloud protocols' validity are called into question with two concerns: participants' spoken comments will most likely only reflect the activities they are conscious of performing and not those that are done subconsciously or automatically; and the need for minimizing subjectivity in coding the participants' responses.

While acknowledging these limitations, Young (2005) believes that ultimately the information gained through think-aloud protocols counters the concerns about these limitations, because as stated earlier in this chapter's overview the "information [acquired through thinking-aloud] would not have emerged had the participant remained silent throughout the entire activity" (p. 24). In my study I attempted to compensate for some of these limitations by adjusting some of my data collecting methods. Participants were asked to report on what they did or thought as they read to make sense of the text, as the purpose of the protocol was to discover their conscious thought processes, rather than unconscious or automatic activities, or for measuring comprehension. To counter potential concerns about articulation or distractibility, I explained exactly what was expected of the participants during the protocols and for what purposes the data collected were to be used. Immediately prior to the actual think-aloud sessions, each reader participated in a practice mini think-aloud protocol rather than observing a demonstration of the method to ensure their comfort with the methodology and me and to reduce potential concerns about cueing the participants' behavior during the protocols.

Furthermore, participants chose the places (private homes, coffee shops) where the protocols were conducted, thereby minimizing potential discomfort with the data collection sites.

Concerns about under- or non-reporting of activities were addressed through triangulating multiple data collection methods. For each case study, I combined the recorded think-aloud protocols with direct observation field notes, mid-process probes for clarification and explication, and post-process interviews to gain a more complete picture of the participants' thinking processes as they occurred. To address potential subjectivity in the coding process (Young, 2005, p. 26.), the recorded data were transcribed and coded line-by-line, according to the participants' reports and my observation notes.

Ultimately, I agree with Young's observations, that the advantages gained when using this methodology were worth compensating for its potential limitations when designing the study, as it afforded me the ability to study the processes this study's participants used to understand both *Watchmen* and *Fruits Basket* as they were actually constructing that meaning from those texts. The participants' think-aloud protocols yielded thick and rich descriptions of the conscious reading processes the readers used during their readings because this approach afforded me the opportunity to ask "why' and 'how' questions as the subjects were constructing meaning from the texts, as well as during the follow-up interviews. Furthermore, the tone of this approach to think-aloud methodology was conducive to discussion. The subjects were relaxed and comfortable during the sessions, and were eager to share their ideas and experiences with graphic novels, comics and pleasure reading and narrative-style leisure activities. Lastly, using the think-aloud protocol methodology offered a pleasurable self-reflective quality for the

participants. In post-study conversation with the readers, several of them commented on how much they had enjoyed the experience, which included thinking about how they read graphic novels as well as recalling and retelling their own reading experiences as they completed their literacy histories and follow-up interviews.

<div align="center">Human Subjects Protection</div>

In keeping with the guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects, this study followed all necessary precautions for the protection and privacy of the individual subjects who participated in the interviews, literacy history questionnaires, and TA protocols that comprised this study.

<div align="center">*Potential Risks and Benefits*</div>

There are no known or foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this kind of research.

In a prior exploratory study of adult readers and graphic novels, the two subjects I interviewed after their think-aloud protocols reported that they found the introspective nature of a think-aloud protocol interesting, since it required them to verbalize thought processes and reading strategies that are second nature to adult readers and therefore, not normally examined by the reader. Several participants in this study also reported that the studies made them more aware of their own literacy and they found that kind of awareness to be a pleasant experience. It is my hope, though, that the findings of this dissertation research will be helpful to other researchers and educators that we may better

understand the sophisticated nature of the literacy, cultural skill sets and motivation needed to interpret multi-modal, multimedia visually-constructed texts.

Precautions Taken for Compliance

Because the research was reported in the form of case studies, the participants' names and any specific demographic information that could be used to identify the subjects such as addresses, names of workplaces, etc., were altered post-session to include those research findings in this dissertation. All study data such as audiotapes, transcripts, copies of e-mails, field notes, etc., pertaining to the study will be retained in a locked cabinet for at least three years in compliance with federal regulations.

Subjects who participated in this study received transcripts of their own protocols, interviews and literacy histories. These transcripts were intended for use as member-checking tools; subjects were free to comment on them, add to them, or correct information wrongly reported. Subjects were also given copies of the Informed Consent Form, which they signed, retaining one copy for themselves, and the rest were returned to me. Subjects were reminded that their participation in this study was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. The Informed Consent Form is reproduced in Appendix E.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH QUESTION FINDINGS

Overview of this Chapter

"Through reading we practice critical thinking."

(Frank Smith, p. 88, *Unspeakable Acts, Unnatural Practices*)

In this chapter, I begin again with an overview of the study so that readers of this

dissertation will have the entire context in mind. Then, I present the findings from each of

the mini-case studies in detail. How readers read multi-modal texts such as graphic

novels is largely unexplored. Graphic novels and comic books are generally not present

in the academic canon because of beliefs that these texts are merely pop culture

entertainments, and texts comprised mostly of images are somehow less rigorous, less

"worthy" than texts which rely on verbal-only constructs. This preconception places

graphic novels outside the scope of what is academically worthy of study, and therefore,

readers--especially adult readers--of these kinds of texts are also stigmatized as outsiders,

curiosities practicing a kind of deficit, *outsider* literacy. This notion of outsider-ness is

(perhaps) unintentionally reinforced by the few situations where some picture books,

comics, and graphic novels have been studied for their educational value. In such cases,

these multi-modal texts have been examined to explore their efficacy in helping students

with deficit English verbal literacy, such as English language learners, emergent readers,

and native speakers with reading disabilities, achieve more proficient (read: test-worthy)

literacy, which is culturally synonymous with verbal-only literacy. In this way, multi-

modal texts appear only in the context of a kind of step-up program (using multi-modal

texts as a bridge to verbal literacy,) but not as texts worthy of serious academic study as literature or composition. Yet the irony of this situation is that reading multi-modal texts may actually require a literacy that is far more complex and sophisticated than is currently understood. This habit of linking graphic narratives to deficit literacy is challenged by composition theorists such as Kress, George and Shoos, and inadvertently by literacy theorists such as Rosenblatt, Smith, Beers and Henry, who also question the assumed connection between academic worthiness and literacy by taking to task the notion that there are good and bad texts (and by extension, good and bad literacy.) Therefore, this dissertation seeks to add to the body of literacy research by attempting to better understand the nature of multi-modal texts and outsider literacy as is practiced by experienced, adult readers of graphic novels. To this end, this dissertation has explored how experienced readers of graphic novels read these kinds of texts. Since this kind of pleasure reading involves more than just efferent comprehension that is too-often the sole focus of literacy investigations, this dissertation examined two components of these outsider literacy practices:

- What does reading a graphic novel entail: how do individual readers work their way through sections of graphic novels? (This component was examined through the TA protocols and follow-up questionnaires.)

- What literacy experiences help shape these individuals' reading: what attracts them to these texts and what do they bring to these texts as experienced readers? (This component was examined through the literacy history interviews and follow-up questionnaires.)

Overview of the Participants and Study

This study, which began in the summer of 2005 and concluded in the summer of 2008, was largely a qualitative, descriptive investigation into the outsider literacy practices of nine adult, experienced readers of graphic novels. Only two participants, Frank and Orlando, were known to me prior to the outset of the study; I became acquainted with the remaining seven participants through the snowball sampling process. The seven men and two women who participated in this study included: Frank, a chemical engineer; Elvis, a high school chemistry teacher; Orlando, a middle school language arts teacher; Diana, a college English professor and writing center director; Keely and Louis, two small business owners; Vince, a food service waiter; and Dave and Wynton, both full-time graduate students. (Overviews of participants' profiles and their literacy histories are given in Tables 3 and 4, in Chapter Three.) Since several participants were teachers or full-time graduate students, I conducted most of my interviews when the participants had available time, mainly during the summer months of 2005, 2006, 2007, and concluding in June, 2008. Thus transcription, member checking, memo-writing and data analysis were ongoing throughout those three years, with the final cross-case data analysis occurring in the summer of 2008.

In order to better understand outside literacy practices from the perspective of actual practitioners of this literacy, each of these nine participants completed the audio-taped think-aloud protocols for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth, Watchmen,* and *Fruits Basket*, as well as the literacy history questionnaires and follow-up interviews. During each think-aloud session, the participants spoke continuously, receiving prompts when they fell silent. Unclear or ambiguous reader reports were followed with probing

questions as clarifying these reports at the moment when they were given served to elicit richer descriptions of the participants' individual reading experiences. Upon completion of each session, the data were compared to the field notes and transcribed, then the transcripts were sent to each participant for member checks. Transcripts were then analyzed and action/concept coded, and the literacy history and follow-up interviews were summarized into case memos. Data from the field notes were also used to ask clarifying questions during the follow-up interviews and thus were folded into the case summaries. The results of this data collection and analyses can be reviewed in the reading action categories listed in Table 8, the reading action frequency comparison charts for both texts (Appendices E and F,) and the case summaries presented later in this chapter. As the personal and literacy data gathered in this study related to experiences that helped shape the participants' literacy, in-depth descriptions of each participant's reading habits, preferences, and experiences have been reviewed anecdotally as case summaries later in this chapter, when exploring the results of their literacy and follow-up interviews.

<div align="center">Findings from the Study</div>

Research Question 1: What Reading Graphic Novels Entails: How Do Individual Readers Work Through Sections of Graphic Novels?

Readers of multi-modal texts create what Kress (2003) calls reading paths. A traditional, verbal text reading path is set by how words are organized, the sequence in which written words are read so that they make sense to the reader; in Western verbal texts, the writing sequences moves from left-to-right, starting at the top of a page and moving to the bottom. Kress identifies this verbal sequencing as following the "logic of time" (p. 2). Images, however are organized according to the "logic of space and

display," where placement can create meaning (p. 2). Kress calls reading paths for images "relatively open" as readers can construct their own entry points into an image according to what draws their attention, literally reading an image out of order and still create meaning, unlike the more restricted sequencing of words where reading out of sequence will most likely inhibit meaning-making. Though Kress's discussion of multi-modal texts is primarily intended to explore writing and image as they are presented online, his ideas about the visual quality of writing, that "[t]he affordances and the organizations of the [computer] screen are coming to (re)shape the organization of the page" are also a natural fit for graphic narratives (p. 6). As multi-modal narratives, graphic novels and comics represent a mixing of the logics of these modes, a move away from "reading the world as told--reading as interpretation--[to] reading the world as shown--reading as imposing salience and order, reading as design" (p. 50). This kind of "reading 'across' the two modes" conveys meaning by linking language and image together (p.157). In multi-modal texts, page and panel design become crucial because readers have some choice as to how to construct their own reading paths based on how they perceive the page: as an organic, visual whole, as text-dominated, or as image-dominated. Experience with the genre, personal preferences, cultural habituation, as well as subtle (and not-so-subtle) guidance from artists and writers, may guide readers' constructs, but essentially it is up to them to trace their own paths through the narrative.

The think-aloud protocols from this study look at the actions participants took to create these reading paths and understand the stories while reading two graphic novels from different genres. Reading actions were identified by coding transcripts of think-aloud protocols twice: once for action codes, and then a second time to identify the most

prominent concept codes. The codes that represent the most frequently reoccurring

actions used by all participants are included in this study's results. These codes were

derived directly from what the readers reported in their transcripts during their protocols

and what I observed while they were reading.

*Identifyin*g *Reading Actions Through Codes*

Through observing the readers during their protocols and transcribing the protocol

audiotapes, it became clear that readers exhibited overarching activities that relate to

general reading behaviors identified in Chapter Three: looking, reading to comprehend,

rereading, commenting, and judging or evaluating. These six behaviors were manifested

through twenty-eight specific reading actions (or what Smith, Rosenblatt, Beers and

Henry would identify as reading strategies) the participants used when reading the two

graphic novels in the protocols. A visual summary of the reading behaviors and

subsequent, specific reading actions the participants used to construct their reading paths

is described below in Table 8.

Table 8
Action-Coding Categories for Think-aloud Protocols

Graphic Novel Readers:	General Reading Behaviors	Specific Reading Actions
Look	Consciously direct their own attention	Scan whole page (SWP) Look for text clues (LTC) Look for image clues (LIC) Adjust reading direction (ARD) Cue from color (CC)
Read to comprehend	Construct/create meaning/ understanding	Observe image details (OID) Observe text details (OTD) Summarize images or text as plot (SIP/ STP) Predict (P) Infer/ Draw conclusions (I/DC) Follow image thread (FIT) Follow text thread (FTT) Synthesize new connections/ Imagine (S/I)
Reread	Monitor understanding	Recognize confusion (RC) Question text/author (QT/QA) Reread text (RRT) Review images (RRI) Revise predictions/inferences/ conclusions (RP/RI/C) Look for comics narrative conventions (LCNC)
Comment	Use prior knowledge	Use comics narrative conventions (UCNC) Connect to other texts (COT) Connect to other comics/graphic novels (COC/GN) Make personal connections (MPC)
Judge/ Evaluate	Critique aesthetics	Evaluate images (EI) Evaluate plot (EP) Evaluate technique/ style (ET/S) Comment on comics narrative conventions (CCNC)
Enjoy or dismiss	Emotional involvement with story or characters	Talk back to the text (TBT)

When examining these reading processes it should be noted that separating one activity from another is not a clear-cut process. The participants' reading actions were not for the most part performed in isolation, but were usually a combination of multiple activities. A statement from Diana's reading of Watchmen "I'm trying to take in who the heck he is, and I'm noticing how he's grey in relation to his blue coat and what that indicates" is a good example of how multiple reading actions can be folded into one verbal report during a reading protocol. The phrase "trying to take in who the heck he is" refers to Diana's looking for image clues to establish the character, while the comment that she's "noticing how he's grey in relation to his blue coat" is an instance of observing image detail, and her concluding comment "and what that indicates" refers to color cueing because for Diana, the grey and blue colorations of the character carry narrative significance as well as visual impact. For this reason, while initial coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis, the participants' statements were also considered to contain phrases indicating multiple distinct reading actions. Where it was possible to distinguish clearly among actions in any one statement, I coded accordingly, but where only one activity was clearly intended, though the statement or partial statement might contain small aspects of other activities, it was assigned the dominant activity code.

Looking. The initial reading behavior category is that of looking, activities where readers consciously direct their attention to different aspects of the text. (Reading activities and behaviors related to the looking category are organized as the first row of Table 8.) In graphic novels, this idea of looking first is a crucial part of reading, as it grounds the reader in the text's setting and mood, as well as creating expectations for the story and the art. Kress (2003) called this kind of activity a kind of "modal scanning," for

dominant modal narrative elements and where a reader seeks to assess the function of

those elements (p. 159). At a glance, a reader's visual survey can determine a plausible

reading path based on the apparent overall design of the page, the nature of the artwork,

positioning of text and image, and how much verbal reading will accompany the images.

From the results of the protocols, interviews and direct observation, the general category

of looking is actually comprised of five different actions: scanning the whole page,

looking for text clues and looking for image clues, adjusting reading direction, and color

cueing.

Scanning the whole page refers to a reader's visual survey of the text either prior

to (including anticipatory scanning of forthcoming pages) or following a close reading of

the page's panels. From the study it became clear that readers often viewed a page from a

graphic novel as one visual entity, rather than as separate components. Sometimes

scanning the whole page would also include glancing across at the facing page, in that

case treating the two pages as one entity. How frequently or consistently a reader scanned

the whole page was largely dependent on the reader; some readers, such as Frank and

Elvis reported scanning pages more methodically; others reported using this strategy less

consistently, mostly at the outset of a reading or when the design of the pages seemed to

shift, as in *Watchmen* where one sequence of four pages contained no verbal elements.

Readers reported this strategy through overt comments such as "I'm scanning the whole

page, looking from top-to-bottom" (Frank) or in less obvious reports "It's all visual--I

don't see any dialogue whatsoever" (Dave). What separated scanning the whole page

from other looking strategies was the reader's emphasis on the *whole* page rather than

describing a single panel. On occasion where a reader fell silent during the protocol, it

was easy to see when a reader was scanning by careful observation of their eye and head movements.

The next two actions, looking for text clues and looking for image clues, refer to an aspect of graphic novel reading that I believe to be unique to comics. The participants often discussed their reading in terms of "hunting for clues," even in stories that were not specifically detective narratives. This mindset was common to all the readers and indicated that part of the pleasure of reading graphic novels comes from trying to find clues to the end of the storyline or continuity with future storylines. While this may be a legacy from years of reading serialized graphic narratives, it remained an important part of the participants' expectations for reading graphic novels:

> In comics, it could be the smallest little picture on a panel that two issues down the line they'll refer back to it, and it could be anything from a hand on a window or a reflection in a mirror, or an item left at a scene, or something like that. And it could have a lot to do with the story, so I always make sure I go back through and read it again. (Elvis)

In these cases, looking for text and image clues can also become important for establishing reading paths. The participants reported looking for image and text clues less frequently than other actions, but differentiated this activity from others by using the clues they found to establish setting, mood, character relationships, and in some cases significance of text or image. Looking for text clues in this sense did not refer to following storylines, but referred either to visual style of text or very specific details that would help a reader focus:

If they want you to catch something they'll put it in black. Like they highlight it

for you, like 'pay attention to this'…[so here in the dialogue boxes on this page

they've highlighted] 'wonder' and 'before' and 'happened.' It just makes you

think I should pay attention to that. (Keely)

Looking for image clues functions in much the same way; with this action a

reader notices elements of the imagery that help them understand the story's context:

"At this point I may go back and try to get something from the picture of the guy dying

that makes me, convinces me that this guy who died is *this* guy, the former superhero"

(Vince). By looking for image clues, Vince was able to connect two separate images of

one character--the current image and one from the past--that at first glance seemed to

represent different characters.

Adjusting reading direction includes the activities of skimming sections, turning

back, or looking ahead, and was noted essentially anytime a participant reported (or was

observed) changing their reading path to direct their attention somewhere else. Most

often this occurred while a participant moved from one page to another, but frequently

participants would shift reading paths mid-text or mid-panel, too: "I wouldn't think, now

what would 'Chlop, thlup' mean? That's a fluff thing and I'll just move quickly, not even

really reading it, just getting quickly to where there's real words" (Vince).

The final looking action, cueing from color, was noted whenever a participant

reported color as significant to creating a reading path and understanding the narrative. In

situations such as *Watchmen*'s use of red-and-magenta colored panels interspersed with

traditionally colored panels to visually indicate breaks--flashbacks--in the story's

narrative, color cueing was reported frequently. But some participants also reported color

cueing in the black-and-white *Fruits Basket* text. These reports identified instances where black, white, and grey shadings were used to visually and artistically separate certain panels from the rest of the text, perhaps as color, to draw a reader's attention. Orlando reported that a white word balloon made the text inside look as though it was placed "further up" in the panel, and influenced the order in which he read the verbal text in that particular panel. Keely noted the artistic quality of the shading in the background of the landscape panels was different from most of the other panels and created a romantic mood.

     Reading to comprehend. There were eight separate actions participants used to construct initial meaning: observing image details and observing text details, summarizing images or text as plot, following image and text threads, predicting, inferring or drawing conclusions, and synthesizing new connections or imagining. (The reading activities related to this category are organized as the second row of Table 8.)

     Since graphic narratives are constructed through image as well as verbal text, it was important for participants to note what they saw in the images, what they paid attention to, as well as how those images looked to them because it was from these images and text that readers created meaning. For example, Dave's observation of image detail in *Watchmen* shows how he used those details to clarify plot elements in a series of alternating flashback and present-time panels:

     I see the detective looking at himself and the other detective in the shattered reflection of the mirror, and if you look to the panel to the right you see *how* the mirror was broken based on the person's head being slammed into it.

Observing text details was likewise significant to constructing meaning; since text also functions as a visual image in graphic novels, the shape, size, color, line quality and placement are all used to suggest a theater-like ambiance with sound and sensation as well as image, the concept of synaesthetics that McCloud (1993) discusses as a unique property of comics:

> We have text that sort of free-floats in the air…it's sort of hand-written, so I guess that's thoughts, personal thoughts and whatever head it's next to, that's who's thinking it. (Dave)

In this observation, Dave reported that the appearance of the lettering suggested hand-written quality, and he associated that handwritten look with individual (personal) thoughts--perhaps similar to a voice-over narrative in a movie, where the audience is omniscient, privileged to hear a character's thoughts, but other characters in the same scene are not privy to that information.

Summarizing text or image as plot describes a reader's action that strings observed details together into a narrative sequence. This action was most frequently observed when readers confronted wordless panel sequences, but readers also used summarizing text or image as plot to periodically frame narrative events throughout their reading, particularly as plotlines progressed and became more complex: "All the girls like this Yuki Sohma Kun, and now they're all sort of developing an envy towards the girl" (Vince). Participants also sought to understand progressing plotlines by following particular image or text threads. Following image and/ or text thread actions differ from summarizing and looking for text or image clues in that the readers focused on a particular element and how that element tied into the story at different intervals

throughout the reading. Both actions are more related to clarification than they are to situating, and readers often used these actions to work their way through complex or confusing panels: "There's the blimp again. Blimp equals urbanity, I think, in comic books. We must be in the city; there's a skyscraper and a blimp" (Diana). In this excerpt, Diana followed the image thread of a blimp across several different scenes in *Watchmen*. The blimp's presence in each of these scenes helped her ground the story in a particular setting and gave her a sense of the story's timeline. In the following excerpt, Louis followed a particular text thread from *Fruits Basket* to help him verify and adjust his reading path for verbal text, as the manga novel's Japanese design of reading text from right-to-left created some confusion for the participants: "They're talking about the zodiac things up here and then they're talking about the zodiac things down here. It just didn't seem that the conversation led that way" (Louis).

The remaining three actions participants used for constructing initial meaning were predicting, inferring, and synthesizing. These reading actions are well-documented strategies that mature readers use when making sense of verbal text, and they also figured prominently in my participants' readings of graphic novels, especially in the *Watchmen* protocols. All three of these actions involved a good deal of creative thinking, but what also became apparent during the protocols was that a reader's ability to use these actions seemed to stem from experience with and understanding of the form and context of the text, its genre. This assumption was in part confirmed by the less frequent use of these strategies by the majority of this study's participants when they were confronted with the shojo manga novel, a genre of graphic novel with which most participants were unacquainted. Part of the participants' attraction to superhero graphic novels is their

familiarity with the *generic*--as in genre--narrative conventions, which includes their expectations for the genre's style and design as well as story and character development. Similar to detective fiction, participants' motivation for reading these kinds of stories comes in part from their enjoyment of trying to figure out what's going to happen, and then having their predictions confirmed or challenged. Wynton discussed this link between prediction and reading for pleasure in his follow-up interview:

> I really like trying to guess what's going to happen; I like trying to figure it out in
> advance. I like being right. I also find it productive to be wrong, though. I want to
> be surprised; I don't [always] want to be right. When I'm watching a movie and I
> know everything that's going to happen, it's not a good movie. (Wynton)

Predicting reports were fairly simple to identify as they usually referred to potential, future events in the storyline and were frequently characterized by comments such as "probably" or "I think" or "I'll see."

Another action that occurred with a high degree of regularity across participants was inferring or drawing conclusions. Inferring and drawing conclusion statements were marked by participants' interest in analyzing character development or exploring story complications as they occur in the reading, rather than for a future point in the reading. Comments identified as inferring or drawing conclusion actions, such as the following statement, demonstrated this quality of inferring or concluding reading actions: "A superhero got an ass-whipping and thrown out of a window… that's not a crack-head come off the street, that's not a burglar being surprised; that is a skilled, planned operation" (Wynton). Wynton based his inference characterizing the crime as a calculated murder on combining his personal knowledge of Manhattan skyscraper window glass, his

preconceptions about how strong a superhero should be (based on his extensive experience reading superhero comics), and the story's evidence (clues) presented visually and textually to readers.

Synthesizing and imagining new connections are also a function of the readers' creativity and personal experience. As with predicting, synthesizing and imagining actions occurred most frequently when the participants were reading a familiar and favorite genre (the superhero narrative), and rarely occurred during the manga protocol readings. Synthesizing and imagining actions are different from predictions in that these reports don't necessarily relate to the plot as it is developing, but bring new or tangential ideas to the reading that stem from something present on the page. For example, Wynton's imagination was sparked by the introduction of the character of Dr. Manhattan as America's insurance policy against Soviet nuclear attack: "[I] always wondered why the Russians didn't have superheroes, too, since we did. Where are the mutants from Russia? Everybody needs superheroes, you know…trains run off their tracks, runaway locomotives…" (Wynton). Wynton's experience with the genre is clearly at work here shaping his thoughts and his interpretation of the story; he questions the genre by considering the perspective of whom the genre excludes--the "other"-- in this case the silent, but ever-present political enemy embodied by the Soviet Union during the cold war era.

Rereading. Participants also reported many instances of metacognitive awareness while they read, another trait they share in common with mature, active readers of verbal-only text. Participants monitored their understanding of both graphic novels by commenting on sections where the narratives created some confusion, and taking action

to clear up that confusion. Participants also demonstrated an awareness of the authors' and artists' presence in the texts and how that presence affected their own reading. In these protocols, participants reported six basic types of monitoring actions: recognizing confusion, questioning the text or the author, rereading text, reviewing images, revising predictions, inferences or conclusions, and looking for comics narrative conventions. (Activities related to this category are organized as row three of Table 8.)

Determining when an action was a report of confusion or questioning the text/ author was fairly simple since most participants prefaced these actions with comments such as "I don't know if this is a flashback" (Frank, recognizing confusion) or " [W]hat was Moore thinking when he was writing this stuff?" (Orlando, questioning the author). This level of monitoring usually led directly to an adjustment in the participants' reading paths and narrative construction, either through rereading sections, revising predictions or inferences, or using what they knew about the generic conventions to resolve the confusion. In fact, genre played a large part in monitoring understanding; the most confusion occurred when the participants were reading the shojo manga novel, the genre with which most of them were unfamiliar. *Fruits Basket* presented the participants with several reading challenges: the book is manga, a style of cartooning and storytelling that utilizes narrative conventions that are unique and clearly recognizable, but largely overlooked by adult readers who grew up reading Western-style superhero comics from DC and Marvel, and the book is translated into English, but is printed according to Japanese writing conventions. Participants had to start from what Westerners understand to be the back of the book, and then read from right-to-left, top-to-bottom instead of following the left-to-right writing conventions of Western texts.

When reviewing images or text to clear up confusion, the generic differences between the two novels and readers' experience with genre had a noticeable impact on the readers' protocols. Overall, in *Watchmen*, readers tended to review images more so than text to *enhance* their understanding of the story, but just the opposite held true for *Fruits Basket*. In the shojo manga, readers reported perceived difficulty in just establishing a basic plotline. In order to just follow the storyline, readers tended to review verbal text more than they reviewed images, relying on verbal text continuity to help determine a reading path. Readers commented that the manga images were often ambiguous: to Western eyes, characters seemed to be drawn with a certain androgeneity which made it difficult to determine gender, and thus relationships; backgrounds were not drawn to disclose location, but focused more on establishing mood or emotion; text boxes (or lack thereof) were drawn differently, and the black-and-white print also contributed to the readers' perception that the images lacked "detail." Furthermore, readers noted that manga lacked the kind of "action" they were used to seeing in Western comics; the story tended to focus on the developing character relationships, what film critics might call "talking heads," rather than develop a linear, action-oriented progression of the plot. All these participants' observations confirm McCloud's (1993) comparisons of Western and Eastern graphic narrative conventions discussed in Chapter Two, and reinforce the importance of genre to literacy. As a result of this, instances of re-reading the text in *Fruits Basket* were defined by participants re-reading parts of dialogue and were usually followed by reports that indicated an understanding or clarification of the story or situation had been achieved, such as in this example:

In this panel there's a lot going on. Apparently the girls are in a home-ec class, so all of the 'Kayaahh! You put too much in! The heat's too hot! It's burnt!' is all dialogue that was written for the girls in the background who are obviously trying to cook something or create something, and then the other dialogue is obviously her and her friends--Miss Honda and the other two friends--talking up front. (Orlando)

By re-reading the dialogue discussed in this excerpt, Orlando was able to re-order the complex series of statements present in the panel by determining which dialogue was ambient and which was important to the plot.

However, in the instances where readers attempted to correct confused reading paths by re-viewing images to determine how they related to each other, reviewing image actions in *Fruits Basket* were based on the narrative logic of visual design: "And here, she's leaving the field. She's outside, so she should still be outside, she shouldn't be in the house" (Keely). In this excerpt, Keely adjusted her reading path for this series of panels by re-viewing the panels, looking for images of the protagonist in specific settings. By re-examining the details drawn in each panel, Keely determined where the character was, and where Keely would logically expect her to be next, and thus was able to readjust her reading of the narrative so that it made sense to her.

Watchmen, on the other hand, was familiar turf, especially since seven of my nine participants had already read the novel at one or more times in their lives. Generic conventions are the heart of *Watchmen*, as the narrative not only utilizes superhero narrative conventions to question the genre, but also challenges readers' facility with this kind of comics' literacy. Because the panels are so packed with narrative clues, both

verbal and visual, readers recognized that they were missing some of the clues, even those readers who had read it more than once in the past. Given this mindset, readers reported reviewing images with greater frequency than they did in the *Fruits Basket* protocol. Statements to that effect were similar to the following excerpt: "Oh, he had the smiley-face pin on [when he was thrown from the window]…going back to the page before, that's why it was in the drain" (Keely). The reoccurring image of the smiley-face button to which Keely referred is a thematic icon associated with the Comedian, the character whose death begins the chain of events that comprise *Watchmen*'s plot. Keely's review of the smiley-face button image helped her trace the presence of this icon, the symbolic presence of the Comedian, as it made it's way through several panels and linked different scenes from Chapter One.

In a similar fashion to reviewing images or text, participants occasionally made statements that indicated they had revised previous predictions or inferences about narrative elements. These statements were easy to detect because participants most often included phrases that indicated they had revisited and modified their ideas about the story or characters, such as this comment from Orlando regarding a panel in *Fruits Basket*: "I guess I was right a little bit--I guess she is fantasizing, from what we've said there" (Orlando). Leading up to this example, Orlando had made several different predictions regarding the protagonist situated in a particularly complex panel, one of which was that the panel was actually supposed to be a daydream about the protagonist's crush, Yuki. After reading a few more panels from that series, Orlando revised his predictions to exclude all but the fantasy idea he believed the story to be developing.

A final action participants' used to monitor their reading was represented by looking for comics' narrative conventions. Readers used this action specifically to clarify confusing parts of the text, and therefore they reported looking to comics narrative conventions more frequently when reading *Fruits Basket* than they did during their *Watchmen* protocols. This action also demonstrates the important role genre plays in outsider literacy. In this activity, readers consciously looked for certain types of narrative conventions, what McCloud (1993, 2006), Bazerman (1981) and Kress (1999, 2003) might call the visual grammar of comics, to guide them through the reading. When uncertain about where to look or what to read next, participants looked for visual cues common to their comics reading experience, such as the size, shape, line quality and presence (or absence) of text bubbles and panel divisions, as well as image and text placement. In one instance, Dave reported that reading the manga text was almost "like learning to read comics all over again" because the "visuals [were] foreign to me." Looking for comics narrative conventions comments were most frequently related to looking for text bubbles and boxes as clues to understand the narrative's progression:

> They go from one thing to another without any real progression--or not
> progression, but without any visual cues, like 'now it's later' in a small or square
> dialogue bubble or something, or making it look like a flashback. This is very
> difficult to receive. (Dave)

In this statement, Dave vented frustration trying to follow the story in *Fruits Basket*. Dave's observation that he needed visual cues to understand the story, such as some verbal text set in "square or small boxes," indicated he was actively seeking the kind of visual cues he was used to seeing in Western superhero graphic novels. Without these

familiar icons to help him discern a reading path, Dave had difficulty following the narrative.

      Commenting. Participants made many comments during their protocols that indicated they were actively using prior knowledge while they were reading. Commenting is an observational action, indicating the participants awareness of narrative structure, conventions, author and artists' tendencies or quirks and how these elements help shape the narrative, as well as how their own personal and literary experiences help shape their understanding of the story. These kinds of reports are indicative of a reading stance that is more than just information gathering, that the reader is actively engages with the text, or as Rosenblatt would label the experience, transacting with the text. In this way, commenting statements were contextualizing statements wherein the readers discussed experiences they related to the reading in four separate but interrelated actions: using comics narrative conventions, connecting to other comics or graphic novels, connecting to other texts, and making personal connections. (Activities related to this category are organized as row four of Table 8.)

      Using comics' narrative conventions was an action participants reported when explaining why or how they knew what the text was trying to convey or how they knew where to look next, based on the kinds of comics conventions they expected to be used in the story. In these reading protocols, this action differed from looking for comics narrative conventions actions because the participants were not confused by the text at the time of the utterance, they were describing how conventions were <u>used</u> to create a specific aspect of the narrative. For example, Elvis reported: "[Dan Dreiberg] find[s] his apartment open, and there's slurping and chomping noises…in the Rorschach weird

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dialogue bubbles that they always give him to indicate some kind of raspy or strange voice" (Elvis). Elvis's observation that Rorschach's dialogue bubbles *look* different from other bubbles led Elvis to conclude that Rorschach's voice should *sound* different in the reader's ear. In this way, Elvis has used his knowledge of and experience with comics' conventions to create this synaesthetic or theater-like aspect of characterization during his reading of *Watchmen*. The "using comics narrative conventions" action was also used by readers when choosing reading paths: "That kind of flashback goes into the one color, then it flops into the present, and flops into the past, and it's different colored; it's distinctive even though the narration's going straight through" (Louis). Louis's comment "That kind of flashback" indicates he's seen this type of narration before, and his further observation that the verbal narration refers consistently to the present, even though some of the frames the narration overlays are showing the past (indicated by color,) defined for him a continuous reading path of "straight through" despite the alternating colored panels.

During these readings, the knowledge base from which the participants culled came in part from their extensive experience with Western-style superhero graphic novels. Since this was the genre with which they were most familiar, overall the participants reported more connecting to other comics or graphic novels during their *Watchmen* reading than they did during the *Fruits Basket* protocol. As with using comics narrative conventions, these comments were by-in-large observational, but they also led participants to enrich their understanding of the story and characters by bridging this reading to other graphic narrative experiences: "[Y]ou know, he's reminiscent of Captain America, he's reminiscent of the Joker, he's got Aqua Man's pants, so a lot of these

[characters] are homages" (Diana). Diana's commentary referred to a panel displaying an old group "photograph" of the Minute Men, the group of crime fighters to which the Comedian belonged. Each character from the *Watchmen* is intended to remind an experienced reader of other famous superhero characters, and as such, the connection is an important aspect of understanding the major themes that stretch beyond the immediate plot of the story. Each character is both homage (as Diana observed) and a caricature--a cartoon--of the original. Bits of character traits from the comic book originals appear in *Watchmen*'s characters, but in them these traits become character flaws, suggesting elements of the ridiculous mixed in with the serious consideration of Moore's question: who is watching the watchmen? Because these characters are not long-standing DC characters like Batman, a reader with little graphic novel experience would be able to read the story as a single story, rather than as an episode in a much larger, longer body of work, and therefore would also be able to recognize Moore's uber-theme, but an experienced comics' reader would most likely pick up on these caricatures immediately (as did Diana) to create a richer, farther-reaching comics literary experience. Connecting to other comics or graphic novels was not limited to instances of characterization; readers also used their experience with other graphic narratives to help identify reading paths and narrative techniques, such as Louis who compared the *Watchmen*'s visual design to other approaches he's encountered:

> It's action in the layout. I mean, sometimes things are going to be-- they're laid out pretty systematically here right here. But a Frank Miller or somebody-- characters will be spilling out of the box and flying out. But still, the action is going to flow you through. (Louis)

In this instance Louis's experience with wordless panels demonstrated how he was used to looking for action to indicate reading direction, regardless of how an artist might be creative with the visual design of a page.

Related to the actions of connecting to other comics or graphic novels is the concept of readers connecting to other texts. Connecting to other texts in this case identified reading actions referring to any text other than printed comics or graphic novels. Participants most often made connections to movies and novels, but other "texts" were also present in their commentary: "I'm firstly checking out the graffiti. Graffiti art really, really took off after this, so sometimes you--in later books you'll see some really interesting, somebody will go crazy doing graffiti art in their art" (Louis). Louis's remarks about graffiti art were particularly intriguing and revealing about his own literacy, as Louis himself has formal schooling in graphic commercial art. At the time *Watchmen* was published in the mid 1980's artists such as Keith Haring had elevated the status of street art into the realms of posh New York galleries and quickly gained entrée into established avante garde institutions such as the Whitney. Simultaneously, Haring's graffiti drawings became a pop-culture, performance art phenomena with political overtones, as films were made of his creative process during his guest appearances as a drawing VJ on MTV and as he painted murals on the Berlin Wall. Haring's imagery became iconic cartoons (the "radiant baby" figure) that the general public would recognize immediately, in much the same way that comics icons (such as a dialogue bubble) are immediately recognizable and readable by the general public. The inclusion of graffiti *art* in *Watchmen* as background text speaks to its then new-found pop culture status and narrative significance; the graffiti is not just decorative, but carries

thematic significance, as it is the first place where *Watchmen*'s illustrator, Dave Gibbons, places pieces of the phrase "Who watches the watchmen," the question that is at the heart of the novel's theme. Louis's attention to this detail, which is at once both a verbal cue and a visual image, shows how his literacy is a critical literacy, extending beyond the plot of the story to consider how external references ground a text in a particular moment in time, as well as inform subsequent and future texts.

Perhaps more so than the other previous reading actions in this category, making personal connections reports referred to participants' transacting with a text by connecting an event, image, or technique to something that was unique to their own life or literacy experience. The action of making personal connections indicates a level of familiarity with at least a portion of the reading experience. Frank personalized the entire experience by saying he imagined himself as an invisible character moving through the reading alongside the characters. Most other reports were more selective, where parts of the story spurred personal connections. In all cases, the action of making personal connections was defined by its observation and how these observations enhance readers' understandings of the story, and by in large were reported more frequently during the *Watchmen* protocols than they were reported for the *Fruits Basket* readings. Vince's statement about the zodiac in *Fruits Basket* illustrated one such instance where he made a connection between the zodiac framing device used to characterize the protagonist's budding relationship with her school-girl crush and his own scant knowledge of the symbols and the personality traits they are supposed to characterize:

> I'm thinking, ah, the Chinese zodiac because who hasn't eaten in a Chinese restaurant and seen the zodiac…they always put them on the menus, and I've

talked to people who are interested in the Chinese zodiac. I--I know I'm a … I

think I'm a cock--'69's the year of the cock. These are the thoughts that are

running through my head, mainly about the Chinese zodiac. (Vince)

Other reports from *Watchmen* were more typical of the kinds of observations readers

made: "[The purple] it's solemn…it's like very regretful. I was raised Catholic so purple

always means Advent or Lent to me, so it's like a solemn color" (Keely). Keely's focus

on the purple coloring of several panels reflected the mood she believed Gibbons and

Moore created to characterize that particular scene, where Rorschach, the lone,

unyielding and cynical hero investigates his former colleague's murder. She connected

the solemnity of the panels to the color purple through her own experience with the

religious significance of the color to Catholicism. In the Catholic church, purple

vestments and decor are visual cues to the congregation that are most associated with

solemn vigils, an interesting connection to the idea of a lone (and ultimately martyred)

hero, a watchman, keeping vigil over the other watchmen. In this way, making personal

connections' statements are concerned with enhancing understanding more than just the

plot of a graphic novel; they provide access points to a more critical reading stance by

opening up thematic ideas.

     Judging or evaluating. Aesthetic critique is the focus of the next series of four

reading actions the participants reported: evaluating images, evaluating plot, evaluating

technique and/or style, and commenting on comics' narrative convention. Evaluating

actions were defined by the participants' use of critical language to label what were

essentially observations, such as "I like" or "That's interesting" or "It's odd." These

reports were sometimes used to guide reading paths, but most often they were simply

statements that highlighted the participants aesthetic appreciation for art, story or authors and artists' techniques. Critique reports also offered insight into what gave the readers pleasure and why they were drawn to or rejected certain kinds of texts. As such, critiquing reports happened with much greater frequency during the *Watchmen* protocols than they did in the *Fruits Basket* readings, suggesting that genre also played a strong role in aesthetic appreciation. (Activities related to this category are organized as row five of Table 8.)

In evaluating image reports, participants focused on the artistic quality or visual design of the images present in the story. For example, Diana commented on the impression her survey of the first page of *Watchman* left on her: "I like the way…I notice that the pictures are pulling back; it's very cinematic." This report indicated Diana admired the visual design of the whole page as it shifted the visual perspectives of each panel to literally manipulate the reader's point of view. The difference between an evaluating image statement such as this and the following similar statement from Elvis resided in the reader's recognition as to what narrative purpose the image has, as well as its aesthetic impact on the viewer: "Nice way to end the shot, starting close up just like it began. I find it's really good closure for this, how they continue to pull back until they're out of the city again" (Elvis). Elvis and Diana were both observing the same book-ending pattern of visual design in *Watchmen*, but Diana focused mainly on her aesthetic appraisal of the image ("I like the way…It's very cinematic"). Elvis's personal appreciation of the artwork was also apparent in his evaluation of the imagery ("Nice way to end the shot") but he further considered the narrative purpose this kind of layout might represent: his idea that such design was "good closure" for the story. Elvis's statement

was an example of participants' evaluating technique/style. Evaluating technique/ style reports such as Elvis's indicated readers' familiarity with and expectations for imagery and narrative.

When those expectations were challenged, as in the *Fruits Basket* protocol, the evaluating technique/ style action was also used to help clarify the how plot lines were developed:

> I'm taking in the picture. I like the [visual image] adjustment when you're telling a fable here, the style of picture changes. Look at the little asterisk of explanations--how strange is that! Is that for the benefit of my Western-yokel-ness? (Diana)

Diana's report indicated that her image observations--that the image style had shifted when the protagonist was telling a childhood fable--helped her identify this flashback and understand its relationship to the larger narrative. She also posited that a Western audience's comics' narrative expectations may have been why the author imbedded several very tiny, very detailed explanations of the unusual flashback into the image's background. Readers also judged or evaluated the stories' plots. As with many evaluating images and evaluating technique/ style actions, these evaluating plot reports focused mostly on the readers' appreciation for, or frustration with, developing plots: "That's an interesting intuitive leap, but you gotta be honest--no one's taking a costumed hero and throwing him out his own window. That takes planning, that takes technique, that takes something" (Wynton). Wynton was intrigued by Rorschach's idea that someone was killing masked heroes, an idea that at this early point in the story seemed far-fetched to other characters, as it was based solely on the Comedian's murder. Vince had the

opposite experience with a section of the plot from *Fruits Basket*: "This is silly, just silly. So she feels sympathy for the cat, she's going to be a cat." Vince's frustration with the plot also stemmed from his narrative preferences; *Fruits Basket* is shojo, manga intended for a young female audience, and the protagonist's fantasies and school-girl crushes that comprise this plot held no interest for someone who normally gravitates toward traditional, Western-style, action and adventure tales.

The last category in the critique actions was commenting on comics' narrative conventions. Commenting on comics' narrative conventions actions were distinguished from using or looking for comics' narrative conventions in that the readers' focus was simply on observing the conventions used in each text and judging them according to the reader's own preferences or experiences. As with the other aesthetic observations, readers tended to report commenting on comics' narrative conventions actions more often when reading *Watchmen* than they did with *Fruits Basket,* suggesting that part of the pleasure of reading graphic novels may stem from an appreciation for the design and craft of creating graphic narratives: "There's this great perspective, the guy's all consistent, the colors are there to change depth and lighting, and that's really expensive for the time. You didn't see a lot of this" (Louis). Louis's report stemmed from his appreciation for the quality of the visual storytelling that went into producing *Watchmen.* His experience with serialized comics as usually being done on the cheap side of printing processes informed his observations about the novel's craftsmanship: artistic ability ("great perspective, the guy's all consistent") abundant use of bright and subtle coloring to create mood ("change depth and lighting") and use of sophisticated and expensive printing techniques to publish the story. Even readers who disliked other aspects of either narrative still commented on

narrative conventions, frequently in a positive way, as in this comment about *Fruits Basket*:

> It's interesting that they don't do the thought bubbles; they do them differently. Not only do they do them differently, but I mean some of them aren't still thought bubbles; some of them are just sort of like little--you know--quibs of words written off to the side in small text. (Vince)

Despite his general dislike for and reservations about the subject matter, the above report demonstrated Vince had enough engagement with the story to pique his basic curiosity and critical reading stance toward narrative graphic techniques used in a different culture.

Enjoyment or dismissal. The final reading action category (organized as row six in Table 8) demonstrated the extent to which some readers reported their engagement with the texts. Talking back to the text actions were characterized by outbursts or identified by exclamations from the readers that had no apparent purpose other than to indicate amusement, frustration, disbelief, sarcasm, or outright enjoyment. Comments such as "HAH!" or "Yes!" were difficult to interpret other than that the reader had read something that struck a nerve. Other comments were more direct: "Eating cold beans. Yes!" (Frank) indicated the empathy of a shared experience, or "God, is this man too blonde for his own good?" (Diana) spoke of sarcasm, poking fun of stereotyped images in the text. Readers tended to talk back to texts more frequently in *Watchmen* than they did for *Fruits Basket*, again suggesting that genre had a direct bearing on the readers' level of engagement with a text.

Case Summaries

Research Question Two: What Literacy Experience Shapes This Reading: What Attracts
Readers to Graphic Novels and What Experience Do They Bring to These Texts?

The participants' literacy histories and follow-up interviews were also coded, but

appear here as anecdotal summaries. Within these summaries are the results of the

interviews and literacy histories reported for each participant. The purpose of these

summaries was to present each participant as an individual reader, to give them the

opportunity to tell more about their personal literacy experiences and their own

perception of reading graphic novels than can be understood from the protocols or from

charting their responses to the interview questions. In doing so, these anecdotal

summaries give a better sense of who were the participants for this study and what they

thought about this particular kind of pleasure reading. What becomes clear when reading

these summaries is the extent to which readers' personal experiences have created and

shaped their literacy, how active and critical are these practices, and the central role that

genre plays in outsider literacy practices as readers depend upon familiarity and

experience with graphic narrative conventions and storytelling structures to make sense

of these multi-modal constructs. Reading graphic narratives may be done for pleasure,

but readers do not consider this kind of outsider literacy just entertainment. The

participants are engaged in their reading, but their reading is also way of engaging with

others, as the participants emphasized repeatedly they seek stories that challenge them to

rethink their ideas about the world in which they live. In this way, Wynton's observation,

that graphic narratives are really forums for engaged debate, is an accurate assessment of readers' attitudes toward outsider literacy practice.

Furthermore, to facilitate cross-case comparisons I have grouped the presentation of the participants' case summaries into three categories of graphic novel readers that emerged from analyzing the literacy histories of these nine participants. The three overarching categories refer to different age-related stages of literacy development:

- Emergent readers, represented by those participants who began reading graphic novels and comics as they were also learning to read verbal-only books. This stage occurred for these participants sometime between the ages of five to eight, or kindergarten to second grade.

- Independent student readers, represented by those participants who became avid comics and graphic novel readers around fourth or fifth grade, when the student would be between the ages of nine and eleven. This stage of literacy development is achieved when student literacy generally shifts from developmental learning-to-read to independent reading-to-learn literacy.

- Adult readers, represented by the sole participant who began reading comics and graphic novels in college as an adult reader over the age of 18, with mature, independent literacy skills already in place.

The three participants who began reading comics and graphic novels as emergent readers were Elvis, Keely and Dave, listed here as Readers 1, 2, and 3. The five participants who discovered comics as independent student readers were Louis, Vince, Orlando, Frank and Wynton, listed as Readers 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. The remaining reader, Diana—Reader 9, began reading comics and graphic novels as an adult.

Reader 1: Elvis

Literacy history. Elvis is 38, holds a master's degree in education, and teaches chemistry at a public high school. Elvis is married to Diana (a fellow participant in this study) and the couple does not have children.

Elvis described himself as an avid reader of a wide variety of books and comics, so much so that he usually reads several texts at once; at the time of his interview he reported that he was reading four books concurrently: a history of warfare and technology, the latest Harry Potter novel, an Italian dictionary and a graphic novel. This habit of reading more than one book at a time stems from his desire to not become frustrated with what he calls "heavy" reading, like the warfare book, so he reads a chapter from that, then moves on to something a bit lighter, or differently oriented, then back to the first book. With Diana, Elvis has massed a large collection of books, comics, and graphic novels. The couple has Wednesdays earmarked for visiting the comic book store to pick up the week's supply of comics and graphic novels, some of which are read with friends on the weekends. In addition to reading, Elvis enjoys paper-and-dice role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and GURPS, as well as some computer-based gaming. Elvis likes to research extensively (especially online) for the characters he creates for the role-playing games, and he referred to this research as an excuse to do more reading. For example, one character he created had a magical ability to grow plants, and used this power to operate a winery, so Elvis read three books on wine-making while writing this role. While he didn't consider this kind of character creation to be "writing" he did confide that he has written a few short stories unrelated to gaming, tucked away in

a drawer. Another pastime Elvis discussed was his love for movies, particularly comic book movies that were "true" to the characters.

Elvis was reading comics independently by the age of five. He reported that his father read WWII comics like *Sergeant Rock* and *Sergeant Fury*, so he would sit on his father's lap and "read" along with him--initially by looking at the pictures, but eventually understanding the verbal text, too. His father would take him once a week to buy comics and while Elvis was looking at the pictures, would check to see if he was actually reading the comic by asking Elvis, "Well, what was that one about? I might want to read it." The first series Elvis remembers reading on his own were *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* and *Thor*. Elvis commented that he learned a lot of vocabulary from reading comics, and attributes his habit of reading each comic at least twice--once by scanning the images followed by a second careful reading of verbal and image texts--to this early exposure to graphic storytelling.

Elvis reads mostly superhero and detective fiction comics and graphic novels, but he reads widely within these genres, including DC, Marvel and independent titles, too, as well as some manga. He reported that the artwork of a graphic narrative is his initial entry point--bad art will turn him away from a story before bad writing. For him, a story must have a combination of good art and good storytelling; when buying graphic novels and comics he often looks for certain writers and artists, but also wants depth of characterization and detail. He enjoys stories that have lots of "clues" for him to find, clues that often signal continuity with other stories, little details that show up again in future episodes. That kind of attention to visual and verbal detail, combined with deep character development is his pleasure in reading these kinds of stories.

Self-reported reading practices. Elvis reported that he usually follows a three-step

reading pattern when reading graphic novels. His first move is to understand the gist

through visually surveying the whole book as he flips through its pages quickly; from this

survey, he sets his expectations for the story by noting the style of the images, glancing at

some dialogue, looking at titles, characters, and so forth. Once his expectations are in

place, he reads the story's verbal and visual text, and lastly he reads the story one final

time, looking for details--or "clues" as he calls them--that he may have missed in the

previous readings. Elvis named a graphic novel's visual imagery as driving his readings.

He reported that he pays special attention to graphic conventions and iconography, such

as borders, dialogue and narration bubbles, and coloration patterns. As he reads he creates

different mental voices for each character, and some of that is signaled by the

conventions he observes, such as in this instance where he described Rorschach's voice

based on the rough and uneven line quality of his dialogue bubbles:

> Going to the door, finding his apartment open, and there's slurping and chomping
>
> noises as he--uh--walks into his kitchen, and in the Rorschach weird dialogue
>
> bubbles that they always give him to indicate some kind of raspy or strange voice.

The kind of careful attention to detail that Elvis used to read each panel involves a kind

of shuttling back and forth between verbal and image text, because he reported that so

much of a graphic narrative is *not* said in the dialogue, it's told through highly detailed

images--in this case through the ambient text-as-image he observed during his *Watchmen*

protocol (reproduced as Figure 5 in this dissertation):

> Basically [the old Nite Owl's] got an auto repair shop out in the front, and there's-
>
> -I really like the half of the "Who watches the watchmen" [spray painted] on his

garage. Even in the next panel would be a "Closed" sign for the--thing--it says

"Obsolete models a specialty." Really, really nice little shots that he puts into the

background, which again you can describe that in a regular novel, but it doesn't

give you as much of a chuckle or an impact as it would in a comic book. …If you

want to explain that, it kind of takes you away from the moment. (Elvis)

When confronted with unusual layouts or page design Elvis stated that he alters

his approach to reading the story, switching from a focus on individual panels to one that

treats the entire page as if it were one unified or complete image. Again, he lets his eyes

dictate a reading path by searching for images or conventions that will help him

determine what the calls the "flow" of the narrative. Elvis reported that a page's flow is

usually easy to discern; sometimes an artist will indicate direction with arrows, but if not,

he looks for connections between images or panel-like scenes from such visual clues as

overlapping images of a similar background images: buildings, scenery, or coloration

patterns. Color is something Elvis enjoys in graphic narratives; he reported that black and

white imagery can be effective, but all-in-all he prefers good coloration. He then

discussed an issue of printing quality, how poor quality coloration can interfere with

reading a story because it is different from the reader's expectations. For example, if the

printing is off and Superman's leggings appear purple rather than the anticipated blue,

that can interfere with his enjoyment of the story. This issue of quality printing

techniques and reading pleasure is one that has come up with other participants such as

Louis. With a few exceptions, graphic novels are usually printed with more sophisticated

and expensive processes and paper, and occasionally they are produced as hardback,

library-quality "special edition" books. This transformation of the medium from

serialized pulp magazine to novel places graphic novels in an interesting position of becoming considered objet d'art; clearly the intent is to set the product apart from the disposable context to a preservable one, trading longboxes for the cache of private libraries, another clue that graphic novels are being marketed to an adult audience with disposable incomes.

Unlike other participants, Elvis reported some prior experience reading manga, but not shojo manga. He also discussed a real appreciation for Japanese comics, mentioning that manga and anime are being used for all sorts of written communication such as teaching (edu-manga) and technical guides, and that the sheer number of pages sold far outnumbers those of American comics. From his experience with manga Elvis knew to expect certain narrative and character conventions that are unique to that genre: manga stories printed in English may still retain the Japanese reading path of right-to-left, starting at what Western readers understand to be the back of a book; manga stories usually contain some sort of fantasy plot element, what Elvis called "weirdness;" manga uses a lot of flashback sequences, possibly from anime conventions because using flashbacks may cut down on the need for new animation or drawing; and characters' personalities may be conveyed through their eye shape, rounder eyes indicating an evil or mischievous nature. Yet even with this knowledge base, Elvis's expectations for narrative were challenged during his reading of *Fruits Basket*, demonstrating how reading can be grounded within and shaped by genre. He reported that as a general rule, he resolves any confusion by rereading portions of a story, but if he has to go back more than two pages in a story to follow a narrative thread, he skips it and moves forward:

'Cause it's not, you know, going to be the end of the world if I don't figure out who this guy is that's on page two that's getting kicked in the face like that. (Laughs.) He's probably not that important.

Elvis's reading of *Fruits Basket* began with a quick visual survey of the chapter to be read, and from that survey Elvis correctly predicted that the story, "looks like a typical teenage high-school manga-slash-anime kind of thing going on…you know, the typical teenage angst thing, but we'll see if it's actually there when I read it." Yet even with prior exposure to manga, he quickly encountered some difficulty when trying to establish a reading path, difficulty produced by the different approach this style of graphic narrative uses to communicate thoughts and dialogue, characterization and setting. Elvis reported that he initially tried to reread the imagery and iconographic conventions to resolve confusion, flipping back and forth to try to figure out which character was which (as he would normally do,) but a lack of detail made it difficult for him to discern between characters:

[T]here's a whole androgynous thing, 'cause…apparently it looks like a girl (laughs) but it's definitely a guy, and, um, I don't know if that's an adolescent thing, where adolescent girls are a little less intimidated by, ah, um, guys that look more feminine? I don't know.

Settings and backgrounds also proved difficult, "I like the little flowers in the air, there, but I don't know exactly what they're doing. I don't know if it's supposed to be a pattern on the wall, but I haven't really seen that." As a result of this difficulty discerning imagery and iconography, Elvis switched his usual approach to refocus on following the dialogue and narration, and summarizing what he thought was happening in different

portions of each page. Yet even the verbal text created some difficulties as he reported its

positioning and visual presentation were different from the Western constructs he is used

to reading:

> Now there's all sorts of little notations here. I guess it's her mother saying that.
>
> And there's another one here…and continues on. I like the way that the, ah, the
>
> little comments are indicated by a lot smaller print--they look different. …I don't
>
> know if it's the equivalent of an asterisk, or [if they're there] to help explain the
>
> story a little more from the narrator's point of view. But the smaller writing that is
>
> just positioned above the characters looks like something, a whispering they're
>
> saying under their breath, and then going on with the rest of their dialogue. (Elvis)

While he was able to pick up on most of the iconography as he became more familiar

with the style as he read through the protocol, Elvis reported that his confusion about

character and setting remained throughout the reading. Despite these difficulties, he was

still able to summarize the gist of the story, as enough of the manga genre was similar to

Western-style narrative for him to derive a basic understanding of the plot.

Reader 2: Keely

Literacy history. Keely is 34, holds an associates degree and is a small business

owner, who since participating in the study has gone back to school to train to be a dental

technician. She is married to another participant in this study (Louis), and the couple has

a toddler.

Keely described herself as an enthusiastic reader of graphic novels and comics,

fiction, especially the stories of John Irving, and entertainment media such as the *TV*

Guide. Since the birth of her son a few years ago, finding time to read has become a

challenge further complicated by her recent return to school. She and her husband visit the local comic book store monthly to purchase their comics, and she's even written an essay about the Marvel Universe for a communications class. Other pastimes she enjoys are television, PlayStation video games, anime video games and cartoons such as *Sailor Moon*.

Keely reported that she began reading comics in first grade. Keely's parents were divorced, and as an only child, she spent a lot of time on buses traveling between multiple households and needed a way to keep herself entertained en route. As a treat, Keely's mother and grandmother would take her every Friday to the local Italian grocery store or GC Murphy's to buy her two comic books, which she would stuff in her backpack and save to read on the bus. Keely remembered the visual appeal of her first comic books; she described to me how comics were always displayed right at "kid's eye level" in the GC Murphy's toy department. Back then, she mostly read *The Archies, Betty and Veronica, Jughead, Casper*, and *Richie Rich.* As she grew older, her tastes expanded into the Marvel superhero genre, and as an adult she still follows *X-Men* and *Spiderman,* along with many other titles such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and independent and compilation graphic novels.

As Keely's time for leisure reading is limited by family, school and work, she reported that one of the attractions to reading graphic novels and comic books is that they can be read quickly. However, her main attraction to the superhero genre is that she loves to read about characters facing deep emotional struggles. Keely described the empathy she feels with her favorite Marvel superheroes, such as Spiderman, quoting Ben Parker "With great power comes great responsibility." She enjoys that so many of these stories

focus on how difficult it is to be a superhero, that there are downsides to having superhuman powers, and that "the characters do what they do because they have to, not because they want to." Keely identifies with that dilemma, the problem of shunting aside self-interest for the benefit of others, and she also feels she can relate to the fact that these characters' public personas come at the price of personal identity: "No one recognizes in them the *person* that they are." Therefore, the kinds of graphic narratives to which Keely is attracted are stories from the superhero mythos that focus on characters' personal struggles.

Self-reported reading practices. Keely reported that she usually begins her reading by scanning the page's visual elements first, then she goes back and reads the verbal and visual text for each panel, followed by a quick review of the page to check for any visual details she may have missed. She stated that occasionally she will interrupt verbal text reading to do a quick visual survey before resuming reading the verbal text, essentially a shuttling back and forth between verbal and visual elements such as Elvis also described. In another reading practice similar to Elvis, Keely mentioned that she will "animate" characters by giving them different voices that she hears in her mind's ear while reading. She does the same with the onomatopoetic words such as "Cronch" or "Shlupp;" whereas most participants either skipped or ignored those theatrical, aural cues as insignificant, or did not comment on them at all.

Keely also reported that she is drawn to imagery and color in a graphic narrative, so much so that she will look back or skip ahead in a reading if an image catches her eye, either because it is something familiar or something unusual: "And I see the smiley-face button. That's pretty consistent in all the [panels.] It kind of pulls you in 'cause it was the

first image that you saw." Keely read color as an emotional component of the narrative, either highlighting elements the reader should focus on or providing clues to the story's mood:

> You know, we're in red…like [it's] not well lit. What about a fire? Like a fire-lit room? That's what you get, I mean that's what I get from it, kind of a cozy place, like a sanctuary almost.

When confronted by unusual or wordless layouts, Keely reported using the "flow of direction" to help guide her through the panels, based on what she expected should come next from the visual images presented in the panels, deduction based on her extensive experience reading this genre of graphic narratives. She also discussed making predictions, which from her reading I observed were usually phrased as questions. She told me part of her approach for determining a reading path was keyed into looking for stereotypical image details that she expected to be present in the story, a further example how genre impacts reading. In this one instance from *Watchmen* Keely was drawn to a particular image on one page, partly because of its large size and dark coloration, but also partly because it was a familiar kind of image. While reading this panel, she noted how her expectations for the genre not only influenced how she read this particular novel, but how she approaches variations of the same genre in other kinds of graphic novels:

> Now that's intriguing, I don't know what that is. …that thing that's kind of hidden under the--they kind of pull you in 'cause they've got the tarp over it, but you can see just a little bit. It's all dark and you wonder what it is, what he's working on. Maybe it's something to save the day. (Laughs) You never know, it could be something to save the day. It's what they're always working on in there. And it's

funny 'cause sometimes they're somewhat predictable, but they're still enjoyable

'cause these comics got to save the day. Or more often they'll have to write darker

graphic novels and then you know no one's saving the day. (Keely)

Interestingly enough, Keely was the only participant who seemed actually enthusiastic

about reading the shojo manga, as perhaps her early readings of teenage romances and

adventures in *The Archies* and other related series helped this Japanese version of that

genre seem familiar to her. Her reading of *Fruits Basket* emphasizes the importance that

generic conventions played in reading graphic narratives in this study. Keely had some

exposure to shojo manga through her viewings of the cartoon series *Sailor Moon*, so she

was prepared for some of the manga conventions that she had seen used in anime. Her

comment "Things are interjected" referred to a tendency of artists working in this genre

to insert bits of seemingly free-floating dialogue, inner thoughts, or authorial commentary

into the "scenes" or panels, something that confused other participants who had difficulty

determining which words referred to characters and plot, and which may have been

extraneous information or asides. Keely knew to begin at the Western "back" of the book,

but she reported difficulty following the Japanese-style right-to-left reading path. She

reported surveying each page as she did for her *Watchmen* protocol, using visuals to get a

gist of the story and where the storyline might be, and when she lost the thread of the

dialogue, she stopped, reread, and corrected her reading path, sometimes tracing verbal

and visual composition threads with her finger as she read. Keely also reported some

predictions about confusing pages and looked back in the text to clear up confusion; she

did not skip sections or "give up" on any section of that text. One final comment Keely

made that set her apart from other participants was her observations about the male

protagonist's appearance. Throughout her reading, Keely had no trouble discerning boys from girls as she understood clothing, particularly school uniforms, as a convention used to delineated gender; she noted that the boys actually looked sexy, a bit devilish, and that the title page illustration emphasized the protagonist's buttocks through what looked like leather pants. She did not comment on the shortness of the girls' skirts, as did several of the male participants.

Reader 3: Dave

Literacy history. Dave, 34, is currently working as a graduate assistant while he pursues an English doctoral degree. Dave identified himself as generally a slow reader because of his ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder,) a condition that contributed to his learning to read later than other classmates because he was so easily distracted. Dave has literally been reading comics as long as he's been able to read because it was through comics that he first learned how to read. In primary school, his ADD kept him from progressing in first grade until his teacher gave him a comic book--*GI Joe#1*--and worked with him until he was able to read it on his own. Dave reported that at first reading comics was tough because he had difficulty figuring out the reading paths, but he liked it so well that he stuck with it and eventually became a successful reader. Dave's love of comics is so deep that he calls himself a "compulsive" comic book reader, and reads comics every night for his "sanity," a release from the pressures of his academic reading.

Comics were truly Dave's gateway to literacy, because that first *GI Joe* book opened up a whole universe of reading--the DC Universe. In addition to *GI Joe*, Dave began reading *Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Teen Titans*, and the *JLA* series. Dave explained that he was isolated as a child, in school because of bullies and at home

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because they lived on a farm, so the DC Universe and his *GI Joe* comics became a sort of refuge. He described hiding in the school's library during lunch each day to read, and the lunch money he saved he spent on comics when his father took him into town once a month to visit the comic book shop. As an adult, Dave calls himself a "serious comic book collector;" he seals his books, seeks out perfect copies of each one that he reads (even going so far as to rent a car to drive to Canada once for a mint-condition issue,) and usually purchases multiple copies of issues so that he has one to read and one to preserve. Dave still reads *GI Joe*, as well as "everything from the DC universe" which includes graphic novels about DC characters and independent series such as *Watchmen*. He also reads online comics and graphic novels, but the only other pastime Dave discussed at any length was role-playing in *Dungeons and Dragons* games.

The affinity Dave feels for superhero graphic novels and comics comes from the continuity found in these stories. Dave explained that DC storylines stretch back to the 1960's and he loves how the whole mythology is interwoven so that new stories impact existing storylines in other DC series, which he compared to "ripples in a pond." He enjoys reading stories where the characters are most often anti-heroes, exhibiting both good and bad qualities, such as Snake Eyes in the *GI Joe* series. Heroes (or villains) that are one dimensional--too good or too evil--are boring; Dave stated that for him well-rounded, dynamic characters: "romanticize all the things in our society that we deem as taboo, that if we were to actually try or involve ourselves in there would be serious consequences." For Dave, comics represent "all kinds of possibilities because they explore unfamiliar territory."

Self-reported reading practices. When selecting a new graphic novel or comic,

Dave stated that he always looks at the imagery first, then scans the pages to get the gist

before he considers purchasing the book or issue. He does not use this process when

buying texts about characters he's already familiar with because he already knows he

wants to read those stories. Dave explained that certain writers and artists are sought-after

for their style and narrative technique, further emphasizing the role that genre plays in

outsider literacy practices. Dave mentioned one artist, Turner, who draws "scintillating,

scantily-clad figures--representing erotic, suggestive, and beautiful ideals of men and

women." Dave reported that he is drawn to what he calls "this newer" mix of realism,

idealism, and sexuality in graphic novels and comics. As a child, Dave focused on the

verbal aspects of graphic narratives, but as an adult Dave noted that he pays more

attention to the visuals as "images have more to offer than [he] first realized."

Dave also discussed another trend related to marketing that has directly impacted

how he selects and reads his graphic narratives. Dave's habit of initially visually scanning

potential purchases for a quick glimpse at the story is no longer a useful method for

determining what a story may be about. While he stated that this method worked well

with older comics, newer stories have increasingly divergent, even misleading, images

and verbal text. While recognizing the artistic and narrative merits this kind of pairing

creates, Dave believes this is done partly to force readers to actually purchase the book,

since these sorts of stories can't be read at a glance. (In fact, many comic book stores that

I've visited actively discourage shoppers from reading in the store by posting "No

reading" signs, and having nowhere for customers to sit, unlike the library-esque

atmosphere in big-box chain bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble.) With

imagery becoming less specific or tied to the verbal text, readers can't skim a text and come away with a general understanding of the content; they have to really read the whole issue to understand the story.

Dave's approach to reading graphic narratives is rooted in the Western-style superhero genres, as this constitutes the main body of his experience with comics narrative conventions. Having been exposed to these conventions as long as he's been exposed to verbal text conventions, this experience has taught him the importance of paying attention to image details such as facial expressions. As complex, adult-oriented stories demand more attention, Dave reported that he reads slowly, studying the images, looking for details in a methodical panel-by-panel approach. Dave treats each individual panel as if it were its own page, separate from the other panels but connected in some way. He looks for positioning of text and image within each panel, noting that size and placement matter; generally speaking, he'll focus on the larger items or details, then scrutinize the "small stuff." Color for Dave is important for contrast, often used to show "a shift in time" as it did in his reading of *Watchmen*. Dave determines his reading path by looking for progression, stating that he has a tendency to remember best the most detailed and action-oriented panels, as those stand out the most for him. He treats unusual panels or designs no differently than he does traditional panels, noting that even these types of arrangements are still interrelated with the other panels, it's just a matter of identifying how they are connected.

Despite reporting some prior experience with manga, *Fruits Basket* presented Dave with a series of reading challenges for which his extensive experience with the Western superhero genre had not prepared him. He referred to the shojo manga as

"alien," stating that reading *Fruits Basket* was "like learning how to read all over again." Dave reported that unlike his usual reading approach that begins by examining the imagery in each panel, he used the dialogue to figure out that the panels should be read from right-to-left instead of left-to-right, as they are in Western graphic narratives. The collage-like panels (which occur frequently in this text) he compared to a series of "independent, unrelated stills," commenting that without the dialogue he would not have been able to follow the story as he could not find connecting image threads to link panels together:

> If I were to read it and there was no text to tell me, no textual cues or textual clues to tell me which way to read, I would read it just like an American graphic novel, and I would probably be even more like 'what the hell's going on here' and after about five minutes it would be in the trash. (Dave)

Dave also reported frustration with what he knew to be culturally constructed images and iconography that he did not understand, because he also recognized that this lack of knowledge was to an extent preventing him from following the story line:

> When the artist and the writer lay out the panels, they're the ones dictating how you should read the comic. The culture dictates it, too. So you have this piece from a different culture, an alien culture compared to ours, and I'm not privvy to how to read it…my visual literacy is no way adequate to the images here. I mean this is something I've experienced tutoring Chinese students with comic books. They could read the text; they had no problem with that, but what they got stuck on, something that I wouldn't think they'd get stuck on, was the image: they had

no concept of what a house--that square thing with the pointy-top was--it was a

house. They thought it was a fast food restaurant.

Dave was able to follow enough of the story to understand the subject matter, which he

identified as "something that would interest a girl in a way that it's more drama than

action." Yet Dave reported difficulty identifying an audience for *Fruits Basket*, because

of what he viewed as sexuality in the graphic novel:

> The girl is always shown with the skimpiest of skirts. In fact, it's something you
>
> would see at a club Saturday night. I don't know why that's the definition of
>
> schoolgirl… 'Cause I have some experience with manga and the girls are always
>
> drawn with schoolgirl uniforms…and in real life their dresses aren't that skimpy.
>
> They come down to their knees, not at their butt cheeks. (Dave)

This precipitated a long discussion of sexuality in graphic narratives. Dave noted that

graphic novels and comic books are more "graphic" because he believes that explicitness-

-sex and 'realism'--in comics is what attracts an adult audience. In the case of *Fruits*

Basket, Dave discussed how the drawings of the boys' hairstyles reminded him of the

male Asian students' hairstyles he encountered when teaching undergraduates: both

cartoon and actual students wore their hair so that it covered at least one eye at all times.

Yet the high school boys in the story were drawn without the kind of heavy "masculine"

musculature that a young male would be given in an American comic; instead the boys

had an almost androgynous, if not downright feminine, appearance. By comparison,

American superhero comics exaggerate physical characteristics to ridiculous proportions

for both men and women. Dave called this an attempt to represent ideal beauty, but he

also remarked that the poses in which the characters were drawn often mimicked

centerfold or pin-up poses. While Dave understands this to be part of marketing, he also stated that too much sex and not enough story can backfire with readers, as he claimed it did in the case of the *Dark Chylde* series. Dave continued to discuss the practicality of skimpy costumes and sexuality in comics by considering the character of Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*, who is drawn completely nude, but never fully exposed, throughout most of the novel. He questioned why Dr. Manhattan's genitalia were never actually visible-- was it an artistic, narrative decision to suggest that Dr. Manhattan is no longer even recognizable as a human male, or would including his genitalia have crossed some censor's (or readers') taboo? Lastly, Dave considered public perspective and the genre's expectations for superheroes: if male superheroes were drawn to show virility in the form of sexual prowess, how would perception of these heroes change?

Reader 4: Louis

  Literacy history. Louis is 38, holds an associate's degree and has attended commercial art school, and at the time of his interview had sold his small business and was working as a manager in an Internet bookstore warehouse. Louis is married to Keely, another participant in this study, and the couple has a toddler.

  Louis reported that he reads "a ton" of graphic novels, comics, fiction, history, science fiction, and gaming books, but that finding enough time for all the pleasure reading he would like to do is tough with a toddler running around at home. Other pastimes he enjoys involve video and role-playing games. As with Elvis, Louis enjoys incorporating elements of his pleasure reading into the characters and scenarios he writes for his role-playing games. Additional passions Louis shares with other participants are a love for all things *Star Trek* and comic book movies.

Louis recalled that his dad introduced him to comics sometime between fifth and sixth grade, by taking him and a friend (Vince, another participant) to comic book conventions. Louis remembered that his first comics were a 1960's era *Teen Titans* and a *Captain America,* but it was an *X-Men-Teen Titans* team-up issue that hooked him into becoming an avid collector. Prior to that he had casually collected stamps and baseball cards, just as his father did, but he became passionate about comics' collecting in middle school. Louis recalled earning the money he needed to buy his weekly comics by cleaning out the empty Pepsi bottles his father "left" in the car, and turning them in for the refund. In one week he could earn 60 cents, which at that time was enough to buy one comic at the grocery store. Eventually, his father would drive him downtown once a month to a comic book shop where he could buy his comics in advance of when they would be available in the local grocery store, and they also bought at flea markets and the conventions his father would attend. Louis recalled the best Christmas present he ever got as a kid was a longbox filled with over three hundred *Spiderman* comics that his father had bought for him, and this cache would eventually become the core of his current collection. Louis even worked at a comic book shop, and the discount he (and by default, Vince) received helped him amass his collection that he pooled with Vince's comics, so that Louis currently estimates their combined collection contains 15,000 or more comics.

As a child, Louis read widely in the superhero genre, from both DC and Marvel series, such as the *Teen Titans* and the *New Teen Titans, X-Men, Spiderman, Green Lantern* and so forth. He recalled being amazed by Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen* when he first read them as a teenager. Louis continues to read Marvel series and Marvel character-inspired graphic novels such as *The Civil War* and *Planet Hulk,*

particularly any storyline involving the *X-Men.* Louis loves the continuity he has with the characters in these kinds of series; having spent the better part of thirty years reading about their adventures, he stated that his long-term familiarity with them is like a relationship. Louis is attracted to superhero graphic novels because they "point to something better: better art, a slicker product, and a bigger audience." He appreciates the more adult, sophisticated nature of graphic novels, commenting that the format can afford to be more "graphic" as they do not have to follow the comic book code, yet he also appreciates the concept of graphic novels from a marketing standpoint, remarking that the compilation graphic novels are "killing" the prices on back issues of traditional comics. Louis stressed that he looks for "coolness" when selecting graphic narratives, "coolness" referring primarily to the artistry, action and coloration present in a story. Louis also stressed that for him, stories have to have action, but they also have to have themes or concepts that challenge his perceptions of morality. He enjoys "dissecting" stories to find references to history, pop culture, current events, and literary references to great authors such as Shakespeare and Hemmingway--he likes to "see where it's all coming from."

　　　Self-reported reading practices. Louis reported that he sees a whole page of a graphic novel as one unified image, not as a series of separate panels. He looks at the art first, then he'll go back and read each panel with the verbal text, paying close attention to good dialogue. He likes to spend time, "at least twenty minutes," pouring over the images and story, "absorbing" the whole text by reexamining every line, image and dialogue. Louis reported that for unusual layouts he uses visual patterning to follow a sequence's progression, so that his "eye flows with the art." For Louis, visual patterns include image cues as well as conventions and iconography such as panel lines, and focus on idea (as

well as plot) progression. Louis stated that color has a "tremendous" impact on his reading. From his commercial art training, Louis understands the use of color from a basic advertising perspective: color provokes emotion, and color is symbolism in its most basic form. The more sophisticated printing techniques that are used to produce many graphic novels afford a larger, more varied and nuanced color palate; therefore, color becomes even more important element in graphic narratives.

Louis's long-standing familiarity with superhero comics also demonstrated the influence of genre on his reading. Louis repeatedly emphasized the importance of visual action in a story: he established initial reading paths by following the visual action of sequences (what he referred to as "flow"), and he equated action with the concept of story progression, as well as with what he called "coolness." When confronted with the *Fruits Basket* text, he reported that he had a lot of difficulty following the "flow" of the story, mainly because the panels did not represent visual action sequences:

> I had to reread it to figure out where it was. It was the dialogue that gave it away because there was no progression really in the pictures--it was mostly talking, you know what I mean? So there wasn't really any action to do it, so I just had to piece it together. (Louis)

Without visual action as an entry point for his reading, Louis had to change his usual approach to reading and focus on the dialogue and narration to follow the story. Louis wound up rereading whole pages to resolve the confusion that the Eastern-style right-to-left reading format created, periodically venting his frustration: "Argh--no, I'm reading this all backwards! This is insane!" Reading the manga also proved difficult for another generic reason--Louis's expectations for content. In his job at the Internet book

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warehouse, Louis reported that they have a "ton of Tokyopop things, shelves and shelves of them" but that "it's nothing I'd pick up and read, though." For Louis, *Fruits Basket* shojo manga was just little girls talking, the kind of high school romance that held no interest for him, an opinion shared by most of the men who participated in this study. In an aside, Louis also remarked briefly, without dwelling on it, that seeing little high school girls in manga as sex objects was a kind of "weirdness" not limited to shojo manga, but something he'd heard about even with toys like Furbies: "Oh yeah, there's all kind of weirdness involved with this." As a rule, Louis prefers Western-style storytelling marked by plot-driven action adventures, and he pointed out that he does enjoy anime "like the *Robotech* thing, you know, or the kung-fu fighting or shoot-em-up type things…'cause I'm action-oriented." Without an interest in the story or the art, Louis summed up his reading of *Fruits Basket* in three words: "Didn't like it!"

Reader 5: Vince

 Literacy history. Vince is 38, holds a bachelor of arts degree, and is currently working as a banquet waiter for a large downtown hotel chain. Vince stated he loves to read, that he reads something everyday, and described his reading as a kind of immersion--he "gets swept up" in whatever he reads. Vince also stated that he feels productive when he reads because: "If I have a book in my hand I never really feel like I'm wasting time." He describes himself as an avid comics and graphic novel reader; while he stopped collecting comics several years ago, Vince reported that he has recently purchased an online subscription to Marvel so that he can read almost any Marvel story he wants, especially older, archived issues. Vince also uses the public library as a resource for reading graphic novels, as he has stopped collecting those, too. Vince's

tastes in print media extend beyond graphic narratives into history, mystery science and fiction novels, sci-fi, and fantasy. For light reading, Vince subscribes to news and entertainment magazines such as *US News and World Reports*, *Giant,* and *ESPN*, in addition to computer magazines. Vince reads his newspapers online these days to save paper, as he likes to think of himself as "a green guy."

Vince reported that though he has dabbled in some journal writing, he never really "got in to the discipline of writing." Apart from reading, his current pastimes include role-playing and video games (including *Dungeons and Dragons* when he was younger,) television, especially *Star Trek* reruns and its various spin-offs ("If there was a *Star Trek* channel, I'd watch only that!"), and comic book movies. Vince loves comic book movies so much that he claimed he is never disappointed with them; he's not concerned with what critics might label as bad or good films, he just loves seeing "comics in real, live action."

Vince's introduction to comic books began the summer he turned 10. Coming home from a particularly unpleasant trip to the eye doctor, his mother offered to buy him something, anything he wanted, as a treat, and Vince picked two comics, *Firestorm* and a *Captain Canuck* for his reward. Vince noted that ultimately the *Captain Canuck* story held little interest for him because it wasn't printed in color, but he was intrigued by *Firestorm* enough to buy a few more issues. His real fascination started that Christmas, though, when his aunt gave him two three-packs of comics. The three-packs included *X-Men #167* and *X-Men #169*, and from that moment on, Vince stated "I was in love!" He read those first two *X-Men* issues "hundreds" of times with his best friend Louis (also a participant in this study,) and together the two have read, swapped, and collected issues

to the point where their combined comic book collection exceeds 15,000 volumes. Louis is currently in charge of this collection, as Vince has stopped actively buying comics; he stated the reason for this decision was that he bought his comics to read, not to collect and preserve, and with the online subscription to Marvel and compilation graphic novels readily available through the library or bookstores, he has no real need to actively buy single issues.

As a child, Vince reported that his favorite stories included both DC and Marvel characters: *X-Men, Fantastic Four, Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, Avengers, Teen Titans, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Batman, Hulk, Punisher,* and *Conan,* to name a few. As an adult he still reads these series, as well as all the old back issues of Marvel superhero comics through his online subscription and graphic novel compilations of longer storylines such as *World War Hulk* and *The Civil War*. Vince is especially fond of graphic novel compilations because he can read multiple issues of a series in one novel for less money than purchasing the individual issues would cost, and without the wait that characterizes serialized stories. Vince reported that while his early passion for graphic narratives came from his fascination with the characters' superpowers, it is the concept of heroism that still attracts him to these stories as an adult. He loves the uniqueness of the superhero characters, the idea that even though they were somehow "born special," the "good guys were good guys because of their nature, not because of their superhuman powers." For him, these are characters that deal with their problems and have a chance to make a difference in their fictional worlds, and that is part of the attraction for Vince: in reality, individuals can't make much of a difference, but in comic books one person can make a huge difference.

Tracing this kind of deep characterization throughout a series from its inception to the present is another fascination Vince has with graphic narratives, as certain characters still intrigue him. Vince also noted that he is more critical of these narratives and characters now; as he ages and sees less possibilities for his own future, he reads his favorite stories with more cynicism. In an interesting twist on the idea of Rosenblatt's reader enthrallment, Vince compared the routine of his comic book reading to marriage: after so many years of reading about the same characters, the stories have become a bit played out, but he still reads out of habit, "the habit of marriage, not so much the first flush of romance." As a child these characters were real to him, but as an adult he sees their limitations "there are only so many storylines out there for a 45 year old teenager," so when a story develops a favorite character in an appropriate way, (such as aging Peter Parker enough so that he can use his scientific talents working alongside his new mentor, Tony Stark) the new development fits both characters, in Vince's opinion.

These attempts at realism, along with grounding storylines in current affairs, are elements that Vince seeks in graphic narratives. He enjoys the fact that the characters have faults that make their heroism not a matter of fact, but a matter of choice, and that those choices sometimes have consequences--hollow victories, unintentional deaths-- from which characters can learn. Yet Vince also reported that he doesn't enjoy the more adult-themed graphic novels such as *Watchmen*. These stories with their adult themes and verbiage seem too cynical, too gritty, too realistic, where good doesn't always win in the end. He resolved this seeming contradiction between his adult perspective of the stories and his personal preferences for happy-ish endings (the expectation that good will always

prevail) as stemming from comfortable memories of childhood readings--the familiarity of the genre's formula.

Self-reported reading practices. Vince reported that while depth of writing is an important aspect for choosing graphic narratives, ultimately it is the art--the look of a graphic narrative--that serves as his entry point for reading. Vince likes "flashy, beautiful artwork" such as the images created by Paul Smith, John Burns, and George Perez, images that he feels communicate "feelings, beauty, and realism." Vince stated that he begins his reading by scanning each page first to "absorb" the imagery, reading at what he calls a "normal, straightforward" pace as the texts he reads tend to follow his expectations for the genre. During this kind of reading, he does not study the imagery unless it "grabs" him, in which case he'll pay close attention to ambient details, looking for clues to characterization. Vince noted that he tends to adjust his reading approach based on what he sees as a balance between verbal text and imagery, so that the text "teaches" him how to approach reading: if words dominate the panels or the page, he'll read the words first and then re-examine the images, but if there are few or no words, he'll read the images quickly. While at first this seems to indicate a more casual approach to reading than other readers have reported, Vince also noted that because he enjoys reading comics so much, he usually reads every graphic narrative multiple times. Following Vince's methodology, his first reading acquaints him with the gist of the story, but the second and third readings allow for opportunities to study the nuances and clues that he may have missed in the initial reading.

Vince discussed that his years of experience reading Western-style graphic narratives have made encounters with unusual panel or page design relatively easy to

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follow, especially since Western comics tend to provide reading path clues such as directional arrows. Outsized panels he tends to treat as one unified image, unless a layout includes lots of script; in those cases, he focuses on each individual panel. Color is also an important narrative element, ironically so, as Vince reported he is colorblind. Vince dislikes black-and-white productions to the point where he won't buy "essentials" editions of comics because they are not color productions: "I don't even bother reading those…Without color, it's not truly--graphic. It just doesn't do it for me." Yet the colors that he can see, mostly primary and secondary shades, are crucial to characterization, as his conversation regarding Dr. Manhattan's voice demonstrated:

> This android guy who I thought was an android, they made his speech look more mechanized almost…his was just different colored. …the actual shape of the letters, the shape of the bubble, [and] the color of the bubble always indicates there's a different, it's not a normal voice. In this case I get the impression that he has a kind of like echo-y voice…that's why I thought he was an android. (Vince)

Reading *Fruits Basket*, though, was difficult for Vince as he reported the Japanese right-to-left reading paths felt "weird." But Vince's real difficulty with manga didn't seem to be with reading or following the plot so much as he reacted strongly to what he saw as hyper-sexuality in the novel. From the beginning of the his protocol, Vince focused on the protagonist's short skirt, which he called "not proper." He reported that knew the audience for the story was supposed to be little girls, but he was bothered by what he called "subconscious titillation," and marketing practices aimed at selling sex to children, remarking with resignation, "Why can't they let kids just be kids?" To illustrate his point, he relayed a story about his nine-year-old nephew's fascination with a scantily-

clad, buxom woman featured on the cover of a *Vogue* magazine that was displayed at child's eye level on a grocery store magazine rack. He also mentioned a football video game, marketed to boys his nephew's age, which featured half-dressed, Barbie-style female fans in the stadium. Vince commented that he was worried about the message these stereotypes were sending to younger readers, emphasizing that the image of the "beautiful boy" male protagonist in *Fruits Basket* was also an equally sexist fantasy image sold to little girls.

Yet when asked about sexual stereotypes in Western-style comics, Vince reported that he believed the images were meant to show "ideal beauty," an opinion volunteered by other participants in this study. His perception is that men's and women's physiques in comics are equally idealized as is evident by Robin's micro-tunic and Spiderman's six-pack abdominals. Vince was also the only reader who pointed out that quite often in Western-style superhero comics, the strongest women characters were usually the ones with the fewest clothes. He supported this concept by discussing how changing attitudes towards women in society have been reflected in characters like The Invisible Girl from the *Fantastic Four*, who began her career as a "superhero" as a figure of weakness, fainting frequently after expending any physical effort and in constant need of rescuing, yet her character has evolved over the past 40 years to become one of the most important members of the team.

Reader 6: Orlando

Literacy history. Orlando is 30, a social studies teacher who holds a MA in Education, and at the time of this interview held a language arts position in a Midwest public middle school. Orlando also moonlights as a ring announcer and co-organizer for

professional wrestling troupe, writing the scripts and storylines for the troupe's performances.

Orlando described himself as an avid reader, especially of comics and graphic novels. In addition to graphic narratives Orlando reads news and comic magazines, biographies, history, sports and wrestling books. Orlando's other pastimes are also focused on either comics, wrestling or an amalgamation of both: he makes a pilgrimage with friends and family to the nearest Comicon every year, attends wrestling events, and is a movie enthusiast, especially if the movie is a comic book movie.

Orlando reported that he began reading comics "as a kid," encouraged by a cousin who was an avid comic book fan and collector. However, Orlando's own enthusiasm for comic books was sparked by the Hasbro action figures' tie-in; Orlando was huge fan of GI Joe toys, and quickly became a huge fan of the *GI Joe* comic book series that Marvel created to tie into the popularity of the toys. Orlando's affinity for the series has an interesting narrative note. As a GI Joe toy collector, he watched the *GI Joe* television cartoons but noted they were too "cheesy" to be satisfying. The comic books, on the other hand, were more like the kind of play he created with his toys:

> People died, people got hurt, people got shot--you had, um, people captured and
> tortured, and there was a lot of different elements to it and I liked it more. Stuff
> like that, so to me the comic was more real than the cartoon. (Orlando)

Orlando's comics' enthusiasm expanded into collecting the *Transformers* series, also because of the toy tie-ins, but then lead to other mainstream superhero titles from Marvel and DC, such as *Spiderman, Batman*, and *Daredevil* series, as well as comics spoof series: *Peter Porker: the Amazing Spider Ham, Captain Americat*, and *Hulk Bunny*. As he

grew older and his tastes matured, Orlando reported that he began looking for story substance in his comics reading, seeking out more adult-themed series by certain authors, or storylines that showcased his favorite characters or just sounded interesting. Recent readings include *Supreme Power, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and a rereading of *Watchmen*. Orlando stated that with the exception of *Catwoman,* the writing has always been the main attraction for him:

> Because GI Joe, certainly as a kid growing up, I didn't really pay much attention to the art that much--it was pretty good, but again, it was more the writing--it seemed more real to me than the cartoon. …I don't really think the art's ever really been the focal point for my comics; it's always been the writing.

> The *Catwoman* exception, though, was also another interesting point in his

discussion of comics as it touched on a subject of sexuality in graphic narratives that has also surfaced in other participants' readings. Orlando was captivated by a Jim Balant *Catwoman* cover: "The cover looked so awesome, I was like wow! I gotta get me that. She had awesome 40 double D's, and can shimmy down an elevator shaft; dude, that's amazing!" Orlando clarified that it wasn't only the voluptuousness of *Catwoman*'s body, but Balant's whole style of illustration that drew him in, coupled with the fact that as he put it "it turned out that the writing was very good." Orlando's long-term relationship with the series was cemented when Chuck Dixon began writing for it. Orlando's interest in *Catwoman* shifted, however, when Balant and the writers he admired left the series: "and then it was crappy for the last 15 issues or whatever until the re-launch." With both the illustrator he admired and the writing he enjoyed gone from *Catwoman*, Orlando stopped buying and reading the series.

Self-reported reading practices. In keeping with his focus on graphic narratives'

writing rather than the artwork, Orlando reported that he usually reads through the whole

page first, then he goes back and focuses on the imagery, looking for subtle details he

may have missed during his initial reading of the page. Orlando stated that he generally

reads graphic narratives quickly because he already has a familiarity with most characters

and the kinds of storylines in which they will be involved. He also believes that graphic

narrative writers (at least those writing in the superhero genre) assume their audience will

be familiar with the characters as most have been reading about these people for a long

time.

Orlando also reported paying close attention to verbal dialogue details that

indicated narrative elements such as character voices, for instance the use of the term

"musta" instead of "must have" in one section of *Watchmen*. In fact, he noted that in his

own recent reading of *Watchmen* he had to consciously slow down his reading pace so

that he could "focus on everything" as the *Watchmen'*s information-packed narrative

style is so complex that he needed more time to digest the image and text details, as well

as pour over the backstories included in the chapter breaks. Orlando reported that as far

as complicated design issues were concerned, Western-style panel arrangements made for

better story "flow;" in other words, Orlando's reading is guided generically, by the fact

that he is accustomed to traditional Western panel layouts and he looks for those

arrangements to help determine his reading paths. Color was another area where Orlando

relies on traditional use of color to inform his reading of a comic or a graphic novel as he

prefers to read novels and series with complex colorful imagery. Orlando sees color as

symbolic of certain narrative elements that an artist might use to focus a reader's

attention, such as red for blood or the reddish pink wash that colors *Watchmen*'s

flashback panels, indicating a particularly violent event has occurred. In this way, reading

Watchmen for Orlando posed a challenge not because it offered an unusual design that

was difficult to follow, but because the information-laden panels presented him with so

many complex details he felt he needed to "absorb everything."

Complex page design did become problematic for Orlando during his reading of

Fruits Basket. Before beginning reading, Orlando was not enthusiastic about the manga

text as he told me he generally doesn't like manga. He reported that actually reading

manga had been a new experience, and that for him "deciphering things, it was very, very

difficult." Orlando determined his reading paths for *Fruits Basket* by looking at the visual

aspect of the text, following bolds, looking for size, shape, and positioning of verbal text

to help match dialogue with images. Even though he normally follows a graphic novel's

story threads more so than its art, he reported that imagery drew his attention through the

manga pages, and matching dialogue to images was what helped him clarify the story.

Because his expectations for formatting were formed by his experience with Western-

style superhero narratives, manga page design forced him to stop reading several times

when the verbal text seemed at odds with the imagery. Orlando resolved these difficulties

by frequently rereading sections of pages and summarizing what he thought was the plot

for each section, by predicting what he would expect to happen next, or simply by

moving ahead when he became too frustrated. While his summation of the basic plot was

essentially accurate, Orlando's dislike of the genre was evident and made for a terse post-

reading discussion, unlike the very enthusiastic and detailed discussion we had following

his reading of *Watchmen*.

Reader 7: Frank

   Literacy history. Frank is a 36 year-old chemical engineer, working as a
production supervisor for an international chemical company. Frank earned his BCE and
MS degrees in chemical engineering, and is currently contemplating returning to graduate
school to earn an MBA. Frank also serves as treasurer of a local credit union. Frank is
married, without children. It was Frank who introduced me to my first graphic novel,
Maus I, and in the company of another reader, Orlando, took me to my first Comicon.

   Frank is a bit different from my other readers in that his recent promotion and
career path afford little time to read strictly for pleasure. Frank has also indicated that he
considers himself to be a slow-paced reader and that his reading speed is a contributing
factor to having less time for leisure reading. When he does find time to read, though,
Frank's choice of text is widely varied, with concentrations in periodical publications
such as industry professional journals, financial investment newsletters, computer
technology and home repair magazines, along with graphic novels and a few works of
fiction and non-fiction, as well as an extensive interest in fantasy novels.

   Developing characters through role-playing games and game-based novels, such
as *Dungeons and Dragons*, were also a large part of Frank's literacy experiences as a
teenager and briefly in college, and his interest in these kinds of entertainments, as well
as video games, is still strong. Most recently, Frank's role-playing was extended to
participating in a back-yard-style wrestling event broadcast on local cable access channel
as "Fast Frankie the Referee," a character he created for this event. Currently, Frank's
professional obligations leave him little time for participating in gaming and role-playing,

but this past spring he built a powerful new computer with online gaming applications in mind for the near future.

Frank reported that his first comic book experience came at age 10; while waiting for his mother to return from a shopping trip, his father surprised Frank and his brother with two comics: *Uncanny X-Men #197* and *The Thing #30*. Frank was intrigued with the stories--these characters were something he had never seen before, the books were easy to read quickly, and the combination of story and imagery let his imagination run wild as he became immersed in the narratives. As Frank and his brother began reading comics regularly, they chose to save money by ordering directly from a bulk supplier and developed different tastes. While his brother read more widely, Frank stuck with a few Marvel titles that he enjoyed the most, and by the time both boys left for college, they had each amassed a modest collection that they still own today.

Frank's all-time favorite comic was (and still is) *Iron Man*. Frank loved the fact that the main character, Tony Stark, was an ordinary man who built technology around him so that he could perform extraordinary feats; he wasn't a mutant or a larger-than-life figure, he was a human being that used his resources and his talents to solve problems--in short, he was an engineer. Frank, who loved to tinker and take things apart to see how they worked (and on occasion actually get them to work again), was fairly certain that he wanted to be an inventor, too, with whatever talents he had: "I identified with Iron Man, sans alcoholism, pretty quickly, because I've always been drawn to the idea of craftsmanship in general: what one person can do with what they've got." In a similar vein, Frank collected *Transformers* issues, mostly because he watched the TV show, but also for the robot concept, and *West Coast Avengers*, which would occasionally include

an *Iron Man* episode, and a few issues of *X-Men. X-Men*, however, didn't have the attraction for him that *Iron Man* did.

Graphic novels and comics fascinate Frank because he admires the visual components of these stories. He sees himself as a visual reader in that he can "pick up" a writer's ideas more quickly when he sees images alongside verbal text, and that this pattern holds true regardless if the text read for information (as in a professional journal) or for entertainment. At 36, Frank stated he appreciates the craftsmanship that goes into writing a graphic novel, and has no particular favorite genre; he likes to experiment many different kinds of stories, not just superhero adventures: "At 36, I see the world differently than when I was 11." In keeping with his mature perspective, Frank chooses graphic narratives that depict stories about believable (or "real") characters with real flaws, but who are not consumed by those flaws: "To read a book or see a movie where there are no real life consequences for the characters is boring, but characters who face consequences for their actions, like Batman, that's interesting." Using the *Maus* books as an example, Frank explained that his attraction to *Maus I* and *II* came from the fact that Spiegelman told a very difficult story in such a creative way, using allegorical imagery of mice, cats, pigs, frogs and dogs to express the relationship among Nazis, Jews, Poles, French and Americans. Frank noted he was especially intrigued by how effective the subtle facial expressions of Spiegelman's drawings were in conveying the emotional aspects of the story.

Self-reported reading practices. Frank reported that he usually scans a page of comics before he reads the text, looking at the page as a whole image and then going back for an in-depth reading:

I scan the pages of comics first because I like to get the picture, the visual image

of the story before I read. When I read verbal text, I like to imagine that I'm a

character walking along with the characters in the story.

Though Frank is interested in exploring many different kinds of stories, genre does play a

strong role in Frank's reading. *Watchmen*, which Frank had never encountered before

participating in the study, produced a much more satisfying reading for him that did that

of the manga text because its superhero narrative structure and graphic conventions used

to tell the story were familiar, the kind of comic Frank read most often. Frank noted the

left-to-right, top-to-bottom Western-language style text arrangement in *Watchmen* made

the dialogue easier for him to follow, as did the over-arching traditional arrangement of

six even-sized panels per page. "The boxes were far more discrete than in the other novel.

You knew where the boundaries were at, it was easier to navigate the pages."

Frank also noted that the dense level of interconnected detail found in *Watchmen*'s text

helped convey the story to him in places where the text did not--in his words, every item

present "served a purpose" something that frustrated him when reading *Fruits Basket*.

Color also conveyed narrative; Frank noted that the saturated colors helped him establish

as sense of place and time as well as narrative conventions, such as flashback and

character. Frank discussed the "flashiness' of the color, and how black and white printing

might be able to convey similar ideas, but not as readily. Here, too, genre--or Frank's

expectations for the genre--guided his reading:

[I]t's a superhero type of story, so a little bit of color shows the flashiness of the

costumes even though there haven't been much as of yet. But being that most

superhero stories involve some flashy color to some extent, I think it's a natural

fit. You could probably get away with black-and-white, but it might not have the same effect.

Frank's conscious facility with both conventional verbal and grammar cues used in conjunction with graphic narrative cues helped him create a reading path and construct the narrative for this text. Frank commented on this approach while reading one scene from *Watchmen*, where the narrator confronts another superhero and is forced out of the building. Instead of showing the emotions present through facial expressions, Frank noted that both characters' emotions are conveyed with graphic conventions as well as punctuation. How the narrator is forced out is also unusual, and provides an unspoken clue to the power of the other character:

> …[I]n the last box you see the text trail off with an ellipses, and then the same shot to the middle box just to the right you see [the narrator's] body fizzle away and then reappear on the outside of the complex finishing his statement, which tells me he's been teleported, probably against his will the way the text is reading, 'cause if he would've wanted his line to get across to this character, he would've teleported after the fact on his own, assuming he has that power. But Jon got rid of him. And what was evident … they double-ringed the text to emphasize his sternness, perhaps? And the expression on his face told the story that the text didn't. So basically, he threw him out.

The ellipses in this section indicate speech interruption, but they also convey impending action. However, the action itself isn't shown; it happens in the gutter between the two panels. Punctuation--the ellipses--is used both traditionally and as a graphic construct to indicate a shift not only in the scene's setting, but also a shift in power dynamics between

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these two characters. Other graphic images are the "fizzling" dots that are used to show the narrator's physical dissolution (reminiscent of the visual cue used in the 1960's series *Star Trek* for the transporter scenes). Narrative continuity is re-established by the narrator finishing his statement in a different location. The final graphic-verbal convention that Frank used to construct his idea of the story was the double-ringed dialogue bubble surrounding Jon's sentence. Jon's words are banal, but the presence of the double-ring indicated an intenseness to Frank that the words themselves might not convey, similar to the practice of underlining words so that a reader will consciously understand they carry more weight than the meaning of the words alone suggests.

The importance reader expectation and genre play in literacy became obvious when discussing a reader's experience reading a narrative from a different culture. Frank's use of and facility with Western graphic and verbal conventions to construct meaning from multi-modal narratives became even more evident when reading a text from a genre different from the superhero stories he favors. The shojo manga *Fruits Basket* became a source of frustration for Frank. Overall, Frank reported that he spent more time trying to figure out how to read the novel than he did paying attention to the story. To read *Fruits Basket*, Frank used the same strategies to establish a reading path as he did for *Watchmen*. He began each page by scanning the page to "see where the boxes would take me." In this case, though, he was looking for visual connections among the narrative elements before reading any accompanying text. During this initial scan of each page, Frank found himself largely focused on the characters, especially scenes with "exchanges between characters," to establish a reading path and to determine what narrative elements--such as flashbacks or dream sequences--were present on that page.

From observing and listening to Frank reading the first few pages, I noticed that he had imported the Western left-to-right reading path he uses when reading superhero comics. In doing so, he read the verbal text out of sequence, following the Western left-to-right pattern instead of the Japanese pattern of right-to-left. Interestingly enough, he appeared to be so focused on finding and understanding particular graphic narrative conventions (such as the shape, presence or absence of dialogue bubbles and panel boundaries) that he didn't seem concerned that the verbal text he read aloud wasn't making sense. Once he realized that the book was organized right-to-left, he reread the verbal text and was able to reconstruct a storyline to his satisfaction.

Throughout the story, though, following an image thread became especially important to Frank when he encountered text that confused him. Frank remarked that in this kind of story the characters were "very well articulated," but attending to the scenery (background imagery) became a source of confusion as the back ground imagery didn't seem to relate to the action of the story. Frank thought that his confusion with the backgrounds also stemmed from the fact that *Fruits Basket* is published as a black-and-white text, alluding to how color in Western-style superhero stories is an important narrative construct. Further adding to Frank's frustration with the text were aside comments from the author of *Fruits Basket*, places where the author wrote notes to readers, explaining how she had drawn some of the characters with her left hand, and so forth. Frank called this kind of direct, conversational address from the author "distracting" and remarked that other "comic book writers don't feel the need to do that."

Reader 8: Wynton

 Literacy history. Having taught middle school language arts for several years in a private academy, Wynton, 37, is currently pursuing an English literature doctoral degree while working as a graduate assistant. To label Wynton as an avid reader is an understatement, as Wynton reported he is constantly reading. He identified that his love of all kinds of literacy came from his parents (both educators) who set high expectations for reading ("If you can read it, you will read it") and motivated him by allowing him to read anything he was capable of understanding. Reading was such a focus for Wynton as a child that every Friday night he managed to spend his entire weekly allowance on comics and paperback novels that he would have finished by the following Monday morning, leaving him with only left-over spare change for trips to a hamburger stand or the ice cream store with his friends. All that buying led to a collection of thousands of comics, which Wynton eventually gave his best friend as a wedding present, something that according to Wynton pleased the groom far more than it did the bride. Wynton explained that collecting had never been his goal; he just loved rereading his comics. In fact, the one collector's condition comic he was given drove him crazy because he knew he wasn't supposed to take it out of the seal, but he really wanted to read the story. Wynton gave into temptation, and of course, managed to rip one page while reading. After that, he reported he didn't even bother to place the issue back in the seal, as he had already done the damage.

 Wynton's tastes in reading materials are highly varied: in addition to Marvel comics and graphic novels of all kinds, he reads literary classics, thrillers, history, philosophy, science fiction, fantasy, Black Arts and Harlem Renaissance poetry, and

romance novels. Wynton confided that in the tradition of reading as a family affair, he

managed to hook his whole family on romance novels, which he reads mostly for the

happy endings and character development:

> I like the framework, I like the interpersonal relationships, I like the interior
>
> growth of the characters. You usually end up with a character starting either
>
> emotionally stunted or damaged in some way, or just alone, then they build a
>
> relationship, they build a life. I think I like that. My uncle likes the sex scenes.

In addition to reading stories about character development, Wynton has also written his

own novels that focus on similar themes of interpersonal growth, moral conflict, and

rebuilding lives.

This attraction to theme, framework, and style carry over into Wynton's choice of

graphic narratives. Of all the participants in the study, Wynton is the only reader who

reported that he would only read Marvel--he has no interest in the DC Universe or other

titles published under the umbrella of DC ownership, and as such, Wynton is the other

participant who had not read *Watchmen* prior to this study. Wynton's loyalty to Marvel

began with his first comic book: *Daredevil*. Wynton discovered *Daredevil* in fourth

grade, while on a trip to the convenience store during his family's summer vacation in the

Poconos. He bought the comic initially because he liked the red costume, but he quickly

realized the story was serialized, bought each subsequent issue that summer, and then

actively looked for it once the family returned home. Though the costume caught his

attention, Wynton was drawn to the Daredevil conundrum--that "the man without fear is

actually a man with many fears, with demons haunting him." Through his search for

more *Daredevil* issues, Wynton reported that he also discovered other Marvel characters,

including the *X-Men. X-Men* truly captivated his interest, as he understood his first *X-Men* issue, a Wolverine special, was actually "a conversation about honor." This was a theme he could wrap his thoughts around, a theme he had seen repeated in such diverse stories as Westerns, like *Shane*, and classics such as *Ivanhoe* and the Arthurian legends. Wynton noted that from a ten-year-old's perspective, Wolverine wasn't the strongest character, he didn't have the "coolest" power, but he did the most with what he had, and Wynton recognized this as a lesson about honor and manhood: "that's what honorable men did--they stood up." Wynton reported one more epiphanic moment with *X-Men*. Wynton is African-American, and as an African-American male growing up in the 1970's, his parents reared him with conversations about the diverse views of Malcolm X ("No justice, no peace") and Martin Luther King ("We shall overcome.") Wynton recalled he was in seventh grade when he realized that these conversations about race relations in America were also occurring in the pages of his *X-Men* comics; he saw Professor Xavier as a Martin Luther King figure, working for the successful coexistence of the mutants and humans, and Magneto as a Malcolm X figure, focused on justice at any price, by any means necessary. With this revelation, Wynton reported that he began to read *X-Men* almost as allegorical of the Black experience in America.

This intimate connection between Wynton's personal and literary experiences continues to the present. Wynton recalled how he and his friends actively sought comics that featured black superheroes, such as *Iron Man* and *Power Man and Iron Fist: Heroes for Hire* series. As an adult, though, he has stopped reading many of the comics he once read religiously, such as *Iron Man*, *The Hulk* and *Captain America* because he has a different view of American now than he did as a child, and that has directly affected his

choice of graphic narratives. For example, he won't read any more *Captain America* stories because he views America as a dichotomy, and not just racially divided, but also regionally, generationally, politically, and economically divided. Given this perspective, Wynton's question "Which America is Captain America captain of?" illustrates his belief that graphic narratives such as Western-style superhero comics are not just a "picture-oriented, childish form" but are actually "a space for engaged debate," even within your own convictions. Wynton reported that his most recent reading of Marvel's *The Civil War* series, which reminded him of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, provided him with enough of an outsider's perspective to give him the opportunity to explore both sides of the issues of limiting personal freedoms in times of national crisis, and to his surprise by the time he finished the series, he had completely changed his own point of view.

Wynton reported that he sees graphic novels as literature, "just like Dickens or any other book." Graphic narratives may be shorter, but for Wynton they are no less fulfilling than verbal-only narratives. They are pleasure reading that addresses different topics than other kinds of stories, and he is attracted to the darker-edged stories that authors such as Frank Miller write. While his childhood attraction to graphic narratives resided in the characters' superpowers that reminded him of the Arthurian knights, as an adult Wynton chooses his comics because they focus on favorite characters, such as *X-Men* and *Daredevil*, or for the subject matter, or because the artwork on the cover stimulates his interest. In this way, Wynton compared comics to soap operas: they are comprised of multiple, linear plots where the main characters are always the same characters, and they thrive on consistency and maintaining continuity.

Self-reported reading practices. Wynton reported that he quickly scans each page of a graphic narrative, looking at imagery first, to get a "feel" for the story by anticipating the action and the characters involved--who's doing what--before actually reading the page, panel-by-panel, verbal text included. Wynton noted that his glance is drawn to oversize frames and bright colors or high contrast, tempting him to look ahead of where he has read, which he will do, then return to his place in the story. He also noted that this kind of previewing of future pages or panels isn't problematic for him as he will usually read through a graphic narrative several times, and that multiple readings do not diminish, but in fact enhance, the pleasure of reading a story. At the conclusion of each page, Wynton reported that he likes to stop and predict what might happen next, and to see whether or not he's right. As much as he enjoys predicting the storyline, he also prefers to be surprised; if a story's too predictable, he doesn't enjoy it. Wynton views reading graphic narratives as a process of learning the writer and artist's style of drawing and narration. He reported a tendency to skim wordless panels quickly, not focusing on visual details, but just looking for the plot sequence as told through the pictures. However, he does focus on visual details when he is linking image and text: "The process is different when you're trying to link verbal to image, trying to figure out what they both convey."

Wynton's familiarity with Western-style superhero genre allows this approach to reading as his expectations for story and structure are usually met by the kinds of texts he chooses: only Marvel comics or stories with Marvel characters. Even though he was intrigued by *Watchmen*, he bugged me to tell him how it ended, something I was hesitant to do, not wanting to ruin the ending for him. But Wynton told me he wouldn't read it on

his own because it was a DC publication, and proceeded to guess several different possibilities for the outcome of the story, and I eventually told him the outcome. This loyalty to one publishing house implies expectations for and experience with particular narrative and visual styles that have formed the basis for his outsider literacy practices.

These expectations were called into question when I gave Wynton the copy of *Fruits Basket* to read for his protocol. When he saw that it was a manga novel, he became concerned, and hesitated to open it until I reassured him that the story was not an "adult" novel--by adult, he meant pornographic. Wynton explained that in college, the kind of manga and anime texts circulating through the dorms were literally "adult" stories and cartoons, and that he had always been disturbed by those sorts of publications and shows. Having seen the cover image of the protagonist in her schoolgirl outfit, he assumed the worst. He also discussed that he knew manga and anime offered more mainstream kinds of stories that he might be interested in reading, such as graphic novels about ninjas and vampires, but that he couldn't get past the style, having already associated it with "perversion and weirdness."

Wynton's initial trepidation influenced his reading of *Fruits Basket*. Wynton reported that when confused by a graphic narrative, he alters his reading path to read verbal text first, then the imagery, but when that didn't help, he tried to focus on characters' faces. With that approach, Wynton's lack of experience with culturally constructed, Eastern-style imagery created even more confusion for him. Initially he misread the characters' faces and clothing cues necessary to discriminate between young boys and girls. While he was able to follow the basic plot of the story, he interpreted the crush the protagonist girl, Tohru, develops toward the boy, Yuki, as a crush between two

girls, creating more concern and distrust toward me as the story's little romance progressed. In this way, Wynton's statement that reading the manga had "de-centered him" reflects the extent to which his reading practices are culturally and generically grounded. Furthermore, Wynton's acknowledged difficulty with *Fruits Basket* was not limited to gender confusion, but was also a product of a different approach to storytelling. Wynton's practices of surveying images, focusing on verbal text, and summarizing the "action" of each page were challenged, as the story is not an action-oriented tale. Wynton also had trouble determining which dialogue belonged to which character as the iconography for thought, narration, and speech was different, too. Lastly, Wynton had trouble sensing what parts of the narrative were important to the story and what were secondary, noting that gaining a sense of what is significant in graphic narratives comes with experience. The fact that he was aware he was missing subtle clues reinforced his conclusion that familiarity with a style breeds understanding.

Reader 9: Diana

Literacy history. Diana is 33; she is an English professor and writing center director for a small mid-Atlantic college. Diana is currently pursuing an English doctoral degree. Diana is married to Elvis, another participant in this study, and the couple does not have children.

Diana describes her self as a daily reader, eclectic-but-slow-paced. Her methodical reading pace stems from the fact that she studies everything that she reads. Diana makes a point of reading "something literary" everyday, but in fact enjoys reading all kinds of books, and considers herself to be a big book collector, amassing a substantial library of many kinds of texts. She calls herself "a bit snobby" as she separates her

"literary" kinds of reading from her comic and graphic novel reading which she does usually twice a week with her husband and a group of friends after their "Wednesday is new comic book day" visits to their local comic book store. Her other pastimes include role-playing games, both in person and online.

Diana is unusual in this sample of participants in that she began reading comics and graphic novels at age 20, after she had been dating her husband-to-be for about a year. Prior to that time, Diana shared the general preconception about comics: that they were superficial and sexist, and enjoyed making fun of both the comics Elvis enjoyed and of him for reading them: "I would do nothing but complain about the big-breasted stereotypes and Aqua Man's ridiculous pants!" But eventually Diana decided that since comics were such an important part of Elvis's life she would try to take an interest. As he knew she would most likely mock any traditional superhero comic, Elvis introduced her to the more adult-oriented, non-traditional superhero graphic novels and comics such as *Watchmen* and the stories of Warren Ellis and Frank Miller, who (like Alan Moore, the writer of *Watchmen,*) use the superhero genre as forums for social commentary. These types of stories got her hooked on the media in general, and she has since become a comics enthusiast, reading both traditional and non-traditional superhero stories (in print as well as a few online stories) such as *Planetary, Batman, Sandman, Ruse* and Marvel titles including *X-Men*, as well as other genres of graphic novels such as Frank Miller's *Sin City*.

Diana loves graphic novels and comics for leisure reading partly because she can read them quickly. The compilation-style graphic novels are especially interesting to her because she can read them like she would read a novel--no waiting for the next edition in

the series. Her initial attraction to any comic or graphic novel is through its artwork, then through its story, and to this end she seeks out works by authors and artists whose styles she prefers. But most importantly, for Diana a story must be more than just a plot-driven adventure; she is attracted to stories that step out of the usual stereotype by developing in-depth characters, that use witty banter, and that have a potential for metaphor. To this end, she prefers comics and graphic novels by certain writers (such as Miller and Ellis) who write odder, darker stories that explore or comment on real-world social issues through the fictional narrative.

Self-reported reading practices. Diana reported that she usually surveys each page of a graphic novel to orient herself to the style and action of the story, after which she'll return to the top of each page and read each panel carefully. Size and placement of text and objects or images helps her determine a reading path in that her eyes are drawn to larger items first or anything placed near the top of a pane or page. If verbal text is placed at the top of a panel, she'll read that first, but if verbal text is placed near the bottom of a panel, she'll read the images in that panel first. She is conscious that her reading is driven by the Western-style comics' narrative conventions with which she's become familiar, so when confronted with unusual page or panel designs, she looks for familiar iconography, image clues or color to help determine a reading path. Color in this sense becomes as important as images or dialogue as Diana reported that color drew her attention to certain parts of a page or panel, could be used to establish moods, or give clues to characterization or settings:

> Now the color in the next frame is pink and purple and that makes me look at that rather than the text. … Ok, we have a flashback here. So now I'm, I've just

realized that flashbacks are going to be in pink and purple because I just glanced

down and saw that every other frame now is in that shading. Now I know what's

going to happen, I…I, it won't be hard for me to switch between past and present.

(Diana)

This importance of genre to Diana's reading was evident throughout both

protocols. While reading *Watchmen* Diana made frequent references to the kinds of

Western-style narrative conventions that helped guide her reading path through

potentially confusing sections of the story, such as in this excerpt from her transcripts

where Diana is explaining how she further understood the flashback panels that alternated

with present-time panels that she discussed above: "A thing they do a lot in comics [is]

they carry over the conversation into a picture that has nothing to do with [the

conversation.]" Having prior experience with both these methods of linking alternating

past and present panels together with present-time narration helped her keep the timeline

of the story's events clear. Other instances of Diana looking for or using narrative

conventions to work her way through unusual (or in this case wordless) panels, illustrate

the satisfaction of expectations being met:

I'm trying to figure out what he's doing, where he is. He's back in the apartment,

where the guy was pushed. (Pauses.) Secret panel? No, he's checking for secret

panels. There's always a secret panel! (Laughs.) Yup! Sometimes you know--you

read enough of these, you know what's coming.

How much genre played a role in these readings became evident as Diana and the

other participants tried reading in a genre with which they were unfamiliar. In the case of

her protocol reading of *Fruits Basket,* Diana reported that she felt "out of the loop" of the

story, as her expectations for narrative were not met by the Eastern style genre conventions present in manga. Diana looked for image clues initially, as she had done with *Watchmen*, but when following those provided insufficient information she switched approaches to focus on reading the verbal text. Diana observed that the background images in the panels were different, more connected to the mood of the characters than the setting of the scenes, that the iconography--the lines, borders, dialogue bubbles (or lack thereof) and other expressive icons were meant to convey different ideas, that the text placement was unusual, and the text actually said very little:

> The background tells me--I don't know--it's just--someone's angry? But I don't see anyone being angry. The text- there's no exclamation points, there's--no one looks angry. So a little can--I have no idea what that is, just no clue at all. … [B]ecause the pictures are so foreign they're not helping me get the context. …She's running away? I don't know why the lines look like that. And there's inconsistency, like I said before, in the types of where the text is placed and how it's placed--and the only thing I see that's consistent is when someone yells there's an exclamation point and the bubble will be spikey, but other than that? And my habit is to look for consistency to be able to read.

She also mentioned that there were probably important cultural clues to the narrative that she missed for lack of experience with manga:

> I made a note of the background…See, it's flowers, to me which would signify, I don't know, beauty? Someone being calm? But she's sad, so there's obviously some sort of cultural block in trying to translate it. You know, in the *Watchmen* when I would see a color, or I would, you know, look for foreshadowing or a

symbol it made sense to me because I can't make the same kinds of connections.

So the visual isn't really helping me make sense of the story.

Diana referred to this difficulty reading the story as her "Western-yokelness," a position that was reinforced by the unfamiliar and self-reflective practice of the author periodically directly addressing the reader, as sub-text "asides" in panels, and as a letter to the readers running down the side of one page. Diana remarked that in the Western tradition of graphic narration these kinds of practices may occur in an introduction or conclusion, but they are rarely included as interruptions to the actual story, a position shared by some of the other participants such as Frank.

Conclusion

The analysis of the think-aloud portion of the study identified six general reading behaviors or practices that occurred over the course of each participant's protocols while reading from two different genres of graphic novels. These six behaviors were represented by twenty-eight specific reading actions that all participants used to varying degrees during both think-aloud protocols. All of these reading actions were consistent with recognized verbal-based critical reading practices: eight of these twenty-eight actions were specific to the visual aspect of multi-modal texts, and eight of the twenty-eight actions represented hybridized practices that would apply to both verbal and visual texts, and the remaining actions could apply to both verbal-only and multi-modal texts. Furthermore, these practices demonstrated that for both genres, readers read actively, used critical thinking and problem-solving skills to work their way through the texts by

discussing how they read looking for "clues" to both the current texts and potential

sequels, and drew from their own literacy and personal experiences to make connections

with the text.

The follow-up interviews examined these reading practices in greater detail.

Participants read the texts with an attention to imagining theater or movie-like effects, a

kind of immersion in the world of the text, confirming the synaesthetic aspect of reading

graphic narratives that McCloud and Eisner discussed: readers referred to panels as

"shots" that "zoomed in" or "zoomed out;" Keely and Elvis both reported that they

created voices for different characters and sound effects in their minds' ears, and

sometimes aloud, too; Frank reported that he often imagines himself as an invisible

character walking alongside the characters in any story he reads. Readers also referred to

their self-directed reading pace as "flow," and "absorbed" the story. Other similarities

reside in how all participants also found artwork and use of color an important factor

when selecting graphic novels and comics, in addition to color's importance in

determining reading paths. Several readers stated they would put up with bad writing in a

story if the artwork were good, but poor art work--including poor colorization or printing

techniques--would cause them to reject a story quickly. Another color-related factor

discussed by Keely, Vince, Wynton, and Orlando was how comics are marketed in

supermarkets, that colorful covers displayed low on racks are designed and placed so as

to catch the attention of young eyes. For example, Wynton reported that Daredevil's red

suit was what caught his attention in that convenience store in the Poconos; initially

drawn in by color, he would later come to appreciate the stories that focused on the ironic

complexity of Daredevil's character.

Readers also discussed how genre influenced how they read the graphic novels, as well as how it continues to influence their choice of texts. When confronted with the manga graphic novel (the unfamiliar genre), readers initially approached the story as though it were a superhero tale, but were able to vary their approach as needed to create a reading path that would make sense of the manga text. This revealed that how readers' approached text to create reading paths was highly personal, based primarily on whether imagery, characters, or story was the reader's the initial attraction to graphic narratives. Furthermore, the participants' reactions to reading manga demonstrated that their reading practices are culturally-driven: most readers looked for action-oriented plots and images, familiar iconography, detailed, "realistic" imagery, consistent text placement, and color cues.

Surprisingly, issues of sexualized images seemed to be brought forth by the men, and only when they read the manga text rather than when they read the superhero text, suggesting another set of cultural expectations for representation in graphic narratives. Vince, Dave and Wynton were especially incensed by the short-skirted heroine in *Fruits Basket.* When questioned about this, each discussed this representation as a kind of perversion, yet did not question the Barbie-esque proportions present in the superhero text. In fact, each of these men talked about how the Western superhero portrayals of women were the artists' way of conveying ideals of beauty and strength, ideals not limited to women but also present in the way men were drawn to display perfect--and perhaps equally exaggerated--physiques. Only one man, Orlando, discussed Catwoman in terms of a sex object as well as a superhero. Ironically, the two women readers did not comment on the issues of sexualized images as they related directly to the two readings.

Diana discussed how she used to make fun of the big-breasted stereotypes until she began

reading comics seriously; Keely only noted that the way the manga artist had drawn one

of the *Fruits Basket* character's clothing made it look like the boy "had a sexy butt."

Neither woman commented on the female characters' appearances in either story.

Overall, when readers' expectations for presentation, form and content were not met,

most readers became frustrated, but they did finish the protocol by adjusting their reading

paths, and expectations for conventions and story. While most readers admitted they did

not enjoy the manga for various reasons, a couple participants were less resistant to

exploring unfamiliar territory.

The literacy history interviews explored the personal experiences that readers

brought to the texts and shaped the readings. Cross-case comparisons also revealed

several strong trends among these nine participants' literacy histories. All participants

shared a love of role-playing games, especially Dungeons and Dragons which was a

favorite pastime with five of the male participants, in addition to video gaming which

was popular among all nine participants. Participants overwhelmingly described

themselves as movie and television fanatics, especially partial to all things *Star Trek*. The

participants also emphasized that they were enthusiastic readers of many different kinds

of both verbal-only and multi-modal texts, including graphic novels and comics. With

one exception, participants began reading graphic narratives, specifically superhero tales,

as either beginning readers or as pre-teens. For the three readers who began learning to

read with comics, comics and graphic novels served a dual purpose: in addition to

learning literacy practices, purchasing comics became a way that these readers engaged

with adult family members. Elvis and Keely both reported purchasing comics as a weekly

ritual in their early childhood; Elvis with his father, Keely with her mother and grandmother, and Dave reported monthly trips into town with his father to purchase comics. However, Dave and Keely did not report reading comics with their parents, although both acknowledged their parents had read comics as children. While Dave acknowledged that he learned to read through his GI Joe comics, only Elvis talked specifically about how comics had helped him develop a rich vocabulary, and that his habits of reading his comics twice—one for overall image and story sense, and once for details—stem from those early readings with his father.

This social aspect of outsider literacy practice was not limited to the three participants who began reading comics as young children. The five male readers who came to comics as independent student readers also reported that comics and graphic novels were primary means of engaging with friends and family members of a similar age to the readers, especially since it is at this age—10 to12—when all the male participants began building their collections in earnest. Thus collecting becomes another element of outsider literacy that may be also linked to the age when readers first began this kind of literacy practice. Frank discussed how he and his brother shared their comics and built their collections together, collections they both still own as adults. Orlando's interest in comics was initially piqued by a cousin a couple years older than himself, and together Orlando and his cousin began attending local Comicons yearly-- initially as a means for enhancing their collections, and more recently as a way to spend time together, now that as adults they live far away from one another. As boyhood neighbors, Vince and Louis began reading comics and graphic novels the same summer, and together have amassed a very large collection that Louis has currently stored in his home. Both men continued to

add to this collection until Vince stopped actively purchasing comics a couple years ago in favor of reading the online versions. Wynton also read and discussed comics with his childhood and college friends, and had amassed a large collection, which he recently gave to a close friend as a wedding present. For Louis and Wynton, comics also became a way to bond as teenagers with their parents. Louis recalled that his father (also a comic book enthusiast) took Louis and Vince to Comicons and flea markets, searching for used comics to collect; Wynton recalled how his he and parents would discuss the ideas of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X at home, and how these social discussions mirrored the social struggles he perceived in his favorite comics, creating what Wynton calls "a forum for engaged debate." Diana, the ninth reader, began reading comics and graphic novels as an adult, but her foray into outsider literacy also served a social purpose: romance. Diana began dating Elvis when she was 19, and for a while she resisted reading these kinds of texts, preferring to make fun of them. Yet her growing affection for Elvis led her to take an interest in these texts and she developed a passion of her own for these stories. As a married couple, Elvis and Diana continue Elvis's weekly tradition; they visit their local comic book store every Wednesday, and meet with a group of friends on the weekends to discuss and share their comics and graphic novels.

All nine readers continue to enjoy Western-style superhero stories as adults, but for varied reasons. Many readers still follow their original, childhood favorite characters; in fact, following character development proved to be a common thread among readers, as did a preference for stories that offered depth and some form of (or forum for) social commentary. Seven of the nine readers reported that they still actively read *X-Men* stories, the series that really hooked them on comics. Wynton still reads *Daredevil,* the

comic he first read as a nine-year-old boy; Orlando and Dave both still read *GI Joe*, and Frank maintains his interest in *Ironman.* One aspect of character development that all the readers share is an interest in watching how these favorite childhood characters have developed across the decades; another is an ability to see a bit of themselves mirrored in the characters they love. All readers commented on how they most enjoy reading stories about "real" characters, characters who even though they possess special powers or abilities still have flaws, and thus are forced to face the consequences of their actions.

This thread of attentiveness to characterization spills over into their other pastimes, as most of the participants have a history of developing and 'becoming' characters for various role-playing games. An additional thread common to participants was also related to the practice of collecting graphic narratives, which tended to manifest itself in two different approaches: those who collected comics to read and reread them, and those who view graphic narratives as both entertainment and objet d'art, carefully preserving their purchases and *not* reading those copies they have preserved. Of the first group, a few have begun to divest themselves of their collections, in favor of reading them online or in graphic novel compilations. Both groups (with one exception) also read graphic narratives online, and did not draw much of a distinction between reading graphic novels and comics on screen and in print-form.

This conclusion represents a brief synopsis of the analyzed findings that have been outlined in detail in this chapter. An in-depth discussion of the insights, implications, and conclusions regarding this analysis, as well as recommendations for future research, are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

"All readers are good readers when they have the right book."(Jeanne Henry)

The goal of this dissertation has been to better understand the nature of outsider literacy practices by exploring how experienced readers of graphic novels read graphic novels. As this kind of multi-modal reading is done for pleasure and not simply for comprehension, the study considered two components of outsider literacy:

1. What does reading a graphic novel entail: how do individual readers work their way through sections of graphic novels?

2. What literacy experiences help shape these individuals' reading: what attracts readers to graphic novels and what experience do they bring to these texts?

To address these questions, the findings from the study reported in Chapter Four are further discussed in this chapter by examining the results of the study and looking at the connective threads that became evident among the nine participant readers.

Conclusions for Research Question 1

Question 1: What Does Reading a Graphic Novel Entail: How Do Individual Readers Make Their Way Through Sections of Graphic Novels?

Readers in this study engaged in six general reading behaviors:

- they consciously directed their attention

- they constructed meaning

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- they monitored their own understanding

- they used prior knowledge throughout their reading,

- they critiqued content and aesthetics of the texts they encountered

- they demonstrated emotional involvement with the story and/ or the characters

From these six basic groups of behaviors, twenty-eight specific reading actions emerged (For a complete listing of these actions, see Table 8 on page 171 in Chapter Four.) These twenty-eight specific reading actions can be grouped to represent three categories that are modal-specific: actions that are common to verbal-only texts, actions that are used to examine only the visual aspects of the text, and hybridized actions that are unique to verbo-visual constructs. These three categories and the modal reading actions used for each category are listed below in Table 9:

Table 9
Reading Actions Categorized According to Mode

Common reading actions for verbal texts that are also used in multi-modal texts	Reading actions used specifically for visual aspects of multi-modal texts	Hybridized reading actions used specifically for verbo-visual texts
Summarizing text as plot	Surveying or scanning the whole page	Looking for text clues
Predicting	Looking for image clues	Adjusting reading direction (reading path)
Inferring/ drawing conclusions	Cueing from color	Observing text detail
Following text threads	Observing image details	Looking for comics narrative conventions
Synthesizing or imagining new connections	Summarizing image as plot	Using comics narrative conventions
Recognizing confusion	Following image thread	Connecting to other comics and/ or graphic novels
Questioning the text or the author	Re-reading images	Evaluating technique and/ or style
Re-reading text	Evaluating images	Commenting on comics narrative conventions
Revising predictions; revising inferences and/or conclusions		
Connecting to other texts		
Making personal connections		
Evaluating plot		
Talking back to the text		

Table 9 shows this distribution of specific modal reading actions. In the first column, reading actions labeled as "common reading actions" are those that are expected or associated with traditional, verbal-only texts, but were also used by the participants in multi-modal reading. These actions were not limited to verbal-only constructs but could also be applied to image-text as well. For example, when monitoring their understanding of a text, readers were able to recognize confusion as it applied to imagery as well as when their understanding of a verbal text was not clear. However, the remaining two columns represent the reading actions used by the participants that are specific to multi-modal texts, where imagery and verbal constructs are both intimately linked in communicating the narrative. Reading actions that are related to imagery are reading actions that participants used *only* when reading the visual imagery present in the protocol texts. Actions such as surveying the whole page were used by participants to understand the visuality of a text, what Kress (2003) called a form of "modal scanning," as readers attempt to orient themselves toward their reading, in this case as they attempted to discover reading paths. Other image-specific reading actions referred to a kind of cataloguing of visual details (observing image details, looking for image clues, summarizing image as plot) or to how imagery enhanced understanding of the narrative (cueing from color, following image threads, reviewing images, evaluating images).

The third column, however, is probably the most interesting for multi-modal constructs because it suggests that understanding how readers read graphic novels is really not a question of including comics and graphic narratives under the umbrella of visual literacy, but instead perhaps represents a new kind of reading unique to outsider literacy constructs. The third column represents a list of reading actions of which several

are unique to comics because they address verbo-visual concerns, representing what Kress (2003) believes to be "reading 'across' two or more modes" (p.157). In these hybridized instances, words and images can carry both verbal and visual loads, and this duality conflicts slightly with Kress's ideas that image and text carry 'separate-but-equal' communicative loads when present together in a text construct. In several instances, readers commented about the visual nature of words, such as line thickness (shape), placement of text in or outside of dialogue bubbles, and even its coloration. When using reading actions such as looking for text clues or observing text details, participants referred to the *look and content* of the words as a guidepost for their readings, such as bolded fonts for key phrases or differently shaped words. In all these instances, readers considered text as both an image and as a verbal construct.

Another instance of dual modality is the appearance of word-as-art image in the bits of graffiti, ambient texts that are spray-painted on walls and fences in *Watchmen*. While technically words, the appearance of the graffiti functions both as text and image: as image it sets the physical, gritty, urban New York scene, adding a bit of recognizable realism to the 'futuristic' elements present in the drawings. But the graffiti also functions as ambient text, reiterating the themes and subplots of the story, and giving clues to characterization and backstory, as well as social and emotional settings. This visuality of verbal text emphasizes a need for understanding the conventions that comics use to convey story, such as those described by McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006) and presented in Chapter Two. In this case, hybridized reading actions literally combine elements of visual and verbal literacy; readers that looked for comics narrative conventions or used their knowledge of those conventions to guide their reading, or commented on how a writer

and artist employed those conventions (commenting on comics' narrative conventions, evaluating technique/ style, connecting to other conics or graphic novels) demonstrated this hybridization by recognizing that words as well as comics iconography, such as dialogue bubbles, were art as well as text.

The idea that outsider literacy practices are not another aspect of visual literacy is thus bolstered by the presence of these hybridized, sophisticated reading actions. The fact that these kinds of texts appeal to more than just visual learners is also an important concept for educators because understanding outsider literacy is not just a question of addressing different learning styles such as finding texts that appeal to visual learners, but represents a way for all kinds of learners to appreciate and understand the multi-modal narrative constructs which are increasingly present in the classroom, as well as in pleasure reading and everyday experience. While some of the readers for this study did identify themselves as visual learners, Elvis, Diana, Wynton, and Orlando did *not* identify themselves as drawn to graphic novels and comics solely *for* the art. As writers themselves, (Wynton has written a novel, Orlando teaches eighth-grade language arts and writes storylines and scripts for a traveling wrestling troupe, and Diana runs a college writing center) these three participants all discussed how the writing, the storyline as told through multiple modalities, was the most important factor in their choosing comics to follow story threads and characters as they develop across time. Furthermore, from an educator's perspective, challenging readers through exposure to different genres and narrative modalities also produces opportunities for engaged debate and intellectual growth by providing students with textual experiences that may be outside their cultural expectations and comfort zones.

The frequency with which each reader used these twenty-eight actions depended upon the text the participants were reading, the participants' personal preferences for narratives and artistic styles (as were reported in the case summaries,) as well as the participants' own style of reporting their thoughts during the think-aloud protocols; some participants simply spoke more than did others. According to Kress (2003) when reading multi-modal narratives, the "[g]uiding principle is that of 'following relevance', according to the principles of relevance which belong to the reader and perhaps are shared by his community" (p.162). In this way the readers' job is to create order from what he sees on the page or screen, and that order will be created according to what the reader thinks is important. Thus, some participants reported more total reading actions than did others, and those reading actions were distributed differently among each behavior category. For instance, one participant reported looking for image clues twelve times in one protocol, while another reader given the same text reported looking for image clues six times. (The frequency charts for all participants' protocols appear in Appendices E and F.) However, even given these individual differences, some general reading trends did emerge, as can be seen in Figure 11. Figure 11 compares the average percentage of actions from all nine participants for each category across the two graphic novels used in the think-aloud protocols.
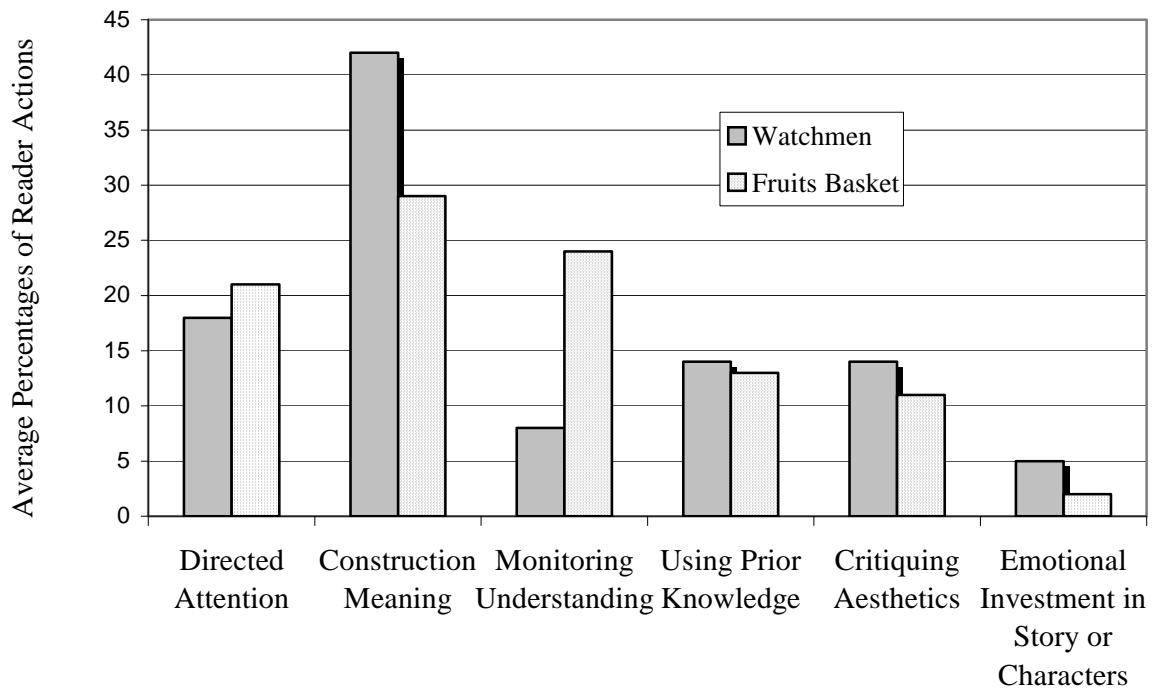
Figure 11. Comparison of average percentages of reader actions per category.

While reading *Watchmen*, on average, participants devoted approximately 18% of

their total actions to directing their attention, and of the actions associated with this

category, adjusting reading paths and surveying the whole page were most frequently and

consistently reported. In contrast, readers devoted an average of 42% of their total actions

to constructing meaning, reporting observing image details the most frequently, followed

in this order by inference and drawing conclusions, summarizing image and text as plot,

and predicting. Monitoring understanding comprised only 8% of the participants' total

actions. This may be due to the fact that all but two of the participants had read

Watchmen and therefore had a sense of the story that would eliminate most confusion,

but when looking at the frequency for individual reports of monitoring understanding, the

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two participants who had not already read the story did not show markedly increased

instances of confusion or a need for re-reading or revising; they were pretty much right in

line with the rest of the participants. Therefore, the relatively low percentage of actions

used for monitoring understanding in this story may be attributed to familiarity with the

superhero genre and Western-style narrative conventions. Interestingly, participants

devoted 14% of their reading actions to both using prior knowledge and critiquing, where

using comics knowledge and making personal connections dominated the one group and

evaluating technique, style and imagery dominated the second. These trends also suggest

that reading graphic novels is genre-based. Lastly, readers' talking back to the text

accounted for an average 5% of the total reading activities reported.

      The frequency comparisons for *Fruits Basket,* however, paint a very different

picture. While reading the manga novel, the participants devoted an average of 21% of

their reading actions to directing their attention, a figure that represents a slight increase

from the percentage used with *Watchmen*. Again, on average participants reported a

greater percentage of adjusting their reading directions and surveying the whole page

than for other actions in this same category, but the average percentage of frequency with

which participants adjusted their reading directions greatly increased from 47% in the

Watchmen protocols to 60% in the *Fruits Basket* protocols. This increase suggests that

participants had some difficulty determining a reading path when confronted with a

different style or genre of graphic novel, which is supported by the participants' own

anecdotal reports of frustration as noted in Chapter Four. Another interesting

development was the decrease in overall percentage of actions participants used to

construct meaning from the manga novel. Participants' total constructing meaning actions

averaged 29% for *Fruits Basket,* compared to the 42 % they averaged for *Watchmen.*

While the most consistently reported actions in this category remained similar to

Watchmen (observing image details, observing text details, inferring/ drawing

conclusions) each of these was used less frequently than they were with the superhero

story, and very little predicting was reported with the manga text, suggesting the

participants' focus was on 'getting through' the narrative, rather than absorption, or a

desire to delve more deeply into the narrative, an efferent posture that was also noted

anecdotally by the majority of participants who admitted they did not enjoy reading this

particular story, or manga in general.

Part of this lack of enjoyment may have been due to (and reflected) in the

dramatic increase of actions participants used to monitor their understanding of *Fruits*

Basket, which was triple that used for *Watchmen.* Participants devoted an average of

24% of their total reading actions for *Fruits Basket* to monitoring understanding, with

recognizing confusion, re-reading the text and looking for comics narrative conventions

dominating this category, suggesting a difficulty following the story that was not evident

in the superhero protocol. As the manga text participants used was designed to reflect

Japanese graphic narrative conventions, the participants noted that they had a lot of

difficulty determining where to look, as well as understanding cultural-specific comics

iconography and overall page design. Participants' actions related to using prior

knowledge was similar to that used in *Watchmen,* averaging 13%, with an emphasis on

using comics narrative conventions, and critiquing aesthetics averaged 11%, slightly less

than the 14% devoted to critiquing the superhero story. Most of the critique for *Fruits*

Basket centered on evaluating technique and style, and most of the comments referred to

the participants' lack of interest in the characters' images and story content, and not understanding the shojo manga narrative structure (which tends toward introspection and interpersonal relationships, rather than displaying action.) Thus, the difficulty participants reported anecdotally following and understanding the story influenced their enjoyment of the text, which is also evident in the readers' lack of talking back to the text, demonstrated by an average of 2%, less than half that noted for the *Watchmen* protocols.

Summation for Research Question 1

The results of this study reveal that reading graphic novels requires an active form of reading in which participants read critically and creatively. In order to read the selected sections of two different genres of graphic novels, the nine adult participants reported consciously directing their attention, constructing (and contextualizing) meaning across visual and verbal modes, monitoring their understanding while constructing this meaning, using prior knowledge and critiquing aesthetics to enhance their understanding and appreciation for the story and the craftsmanship that writing such narratives entails, and talking back to the text as a means of expressing emotional involvement or connection with the story and/ or the story's characters. The twenty-eight specific reading actions that were identified from the participants' think-aloud protocols also serve to emphasize that reading graphic novels requires a critical, thoughtful approach to reading. Searching for and adjusting reading paths by scanning or previewing whole pages or panels to gain a sense of the narrative's direction and context, as well as to establish a point of entry for the narrative, demonstrate a deliberate and systematic approach toward

sense-making. It also suggests aspects of creativity and problem-solving, as readers must decide which narrative elements are relevant to their needs at that moment, and which can be attended to in a different manner or at a different time. This is what Kress (2003) referred to as "following relevance," where the reader's job is to create his or her own reading path according to what is important to the reader at the time of the reading. Additionally, questioning the text or author, predicting, inferring, and drawing conclusions suggest a critical reading stance as readers actively attempt to understand how the story fits together, what the author's intent might be, and what might happen next based on their own expectations for the narrative, creating a context and purpose for continuing reading. Participants were also willing to re-read and re-view images and verbal text when confused, which showed a determination to understand the story, a determination that diminished, though, when frustrated by the shojo manga narrative that held little interest for the participants, suggesting the important role genre plays when reading for pleasure.

Of the six general reading behaviors that participants exhibited, consciously directing attention, constructing meaning, using prior knowledge and critiquing aesthetics are probably the most significant because they are directly related to the hybridized reading actions that are described in Table 9. These hybridized actions I believe are unique to comics and graphic novels because they represent reading "across modes," addressing the combination of verbo-visual narrative aspects of the texts in this study. Directing attention relates directly to Kress's concept that readers of multi-modal texts create their own reading paths, and that in the case of graphic novels, this creation is a conscious activity, intricately tied to the readers' experience with and expectations for the

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genre. When confronted with a different genre and culture represented by the manga text, the readers became even more aware of how they actively created reading paths as they worked to adjust to the challenges presented by a different set of cultural narrative conventions and expectations. Using prior knowledge and critiquing aesthetics actions occurred with similar frequencies during both protocols, but in different ways. In the Western superhero text, the readers' preferences for this genre and their expectations for story structure and character continuity were present in their active search for comics narrative conventions and the critiques they made about those conventions and the text's style of according to their experience with other graphic novels and comics. These are the actions which sparked a lot of critical thinking types of conversation from the readers, linking these actions to the readers' own experiences and to Wynton's concept that graphic novels and comics create a forum for engaged debate. Yet these same reading actions also became useful when the readers were confronted with the manga text, representing a different genre, and different cultural narrative conventions. In the manga readings, the participants applied their knowledge and experience with graphic texts with varying degrees of success. As with the superhero text, these categories of reading actions also produced a lot of conversation from the participants, mostly expressing frustration with their progress, dislike for the genre and manga in general, and analyzing the nature of that dislike. Finally, constructing meaning actions are significant because these represent reading actions where the participants put together all the information gained through all six categories, and created a holistic reading of each text. Thus, the kind of literacy experiences present in these hybridized reading actions demonstrate the active, critical nature of outsider literacy practices employed by the readers in this study.

Generally, participants' critical reading included a form of close reading, a scrutinizing of the narrative within and across both visual and verbal modes to fill in any gaps or address ambiguities needed to understand complex plots, characterization, and relationships among characters and plotlines. During these close readings, participants actively searched for visual and verbal clues and observed text and image details; they looked for and used genre-based comics conventions; they applied their experience with other graphic novels in addition to other kinds of texts; they made personal connections between the text they were reading and their own lives, and they evaluated the quality of the story's imagery, plots, and style. Another factor I believe to be unique to outsider literacy was the participants' reported habit of reading graphic narratives multiple times as a "first" reading: participants reported that reading graphic novels and comics is something they usually do at least twice, once to get a sense of the story followed by an immediate second reading to capture the story's nuances--the clues, details, or connections they may have missed in the initial reading. Some participants reported that for them, this is a kind of three-step process as the first reading may actually be a visual scan of the imagery, immediately followed by two complete verbo-visual readings. These participants reported that this approach had practical merit in that they felt they 'got their money's worth' of entertainment as reading serialized comics and graphic novels can be an expensive pastime if a reader is interested in following a character across titles and tie-in stories.

Participants' active reading also proved to be a kind of creative reading. During their protocols, readers often described their reading actions and observations in cinematic terms: panels were referred to as "shots;" action across and between panels was

referred to as "cuts," "tracking," "panning," or "pulling-back," in the same way that a director or film critic might analyze the action on screen. Participants also referred to reading as "flow", that the story "flows" through the panels, or that the author or artist will "flow" a reader through the narrative. This notion of visual and temporal fluidity, of story unfolding in a sort of expanded cinematic timeframe, is one aspect of synaesthetics that McCloud (1993) and Eisner (1996) discuss as unique to comics and graphic narratives, the idea that art can tap into and unite all the senses at once. Participants' reading the graphic narratives with an eye for scent and sound further supports the theater-like aspect of outsider literacy, as participants noted iconographic odor lines emanating from garbage, or created individual voices for characters based on color and shape of dialogue boxes and the dialogue itself, and filled in the ambient noises as they read onomatopoetic words such as "shlupp" and "cronch."

Another aspect of this kind of creative reading is the enthrallment participants indicated while reading these multi-modal narratives. Participants described their reading process as a kind of "absorption" in the story, and they reported that they often talked back to the text, which was consistent with observations and reports during their think-aloud protocols. One reader, Frank, indicated in his follow-up interview that he imagines himself as another character in the story, walking alongside the actual characters as a kind of silent observer-participant from inside the story. Yet this kind of cinematic reading--where reading becomes a kind of theater in your mind's eyes and ears--is not the kind of willing suspension of disbelief that suggests an uncritical reading; if anything, the participants read both stories with critical eyes as they had specific expectations for what a graphic narrative should be. These expectations, the reader's perception of "following

relevance" or what the reader believes to be important, are partly born of personal taste but also come from a reader's individual experience. It is the nature of this experience that will be addressed by the second part of the research question, discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Conclusions for Research Question 2

Question Two: What Literacy Experiences Help Shape the Participants' Reading: What Attracts These Readers to Graphic Novels and What Experiences Do They Bring to These Texts?

The underlying assumption behind this question is that literacy refers to more than just comprehending: literacy is instead a transactional experience that brings together authors' intentions, textual structures and content, readers' personal and literary experiences and expectations of texts, and social frameworks which culturally-situate texts--all the elements that comprise genre. In this study, the evidence from the think-aloud protocols, literacy histories and follow-up interviews strongly suggests that readers read 'generically'; participants' literacy experiences were shaped by genre in that they overwhelmingly preferred to read Western-style superhero graphic novels, and it is this genre which represents the majority content and context of the participants' graphic narrative experiences. Therefore, the Western-style superhero genre forms the basis for the participants' approaches to and expectations for reading graphic novels.

According to Bazerman (1981), how readers understand text can be examined by looking at four components of text: lexicon, literature of the field, anticipated audience,

and author's persona. Lexicon refers to the structure or framework of a text. In graphic

novels and comics, that framework includes imagery, color, comics iconography and

symbols as well as verbal text (language) and verbal text structures. The sixteen reported

reading actions that comprise the visual and hybridized reading actions from the think-

aloud protocols demonstrate that participants approached reading the graphic novel

sections by actively using this framework. Participants consciously directed their

attention to certain parts of a page or panel, conducting a form of modal scanning and

determining reading paths based on what they believed to be the most relevant or key

features of the text present at that moment. Participants were sensitive to the use of color

in text as a way of determining timeframes, emotion or tone, and characterization. They

also mentally catalogued and studied images as they read and re-read, looking for clues

or details that would set the scene, illuminate backstory, or fill in the gaps or ambiguities

in the verbal or visual text. They were attentive to the design or layout of pages, as

physical placement of verbal text and imagery also indicates importance, and they

focused on iconography that indicated dialogue, narration, or the presence of other

sensations, such as sound and scent.

However, the superhero lexicon on which the participants based their reading is a

culturally constructed framework, based on Western verbal writing and narrative style.

Panels were for the most part arranged in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom pattern simulating

traditional verbal reading paths, and followed what McCloud (1993) calls event-driven or

"goal-oriented" plots, comprised mostly of action-to-action transitions. Thus it was not

surprising that participants looked specifically for action sequences to help guide their

reading. This genre-based focus became evident when readers were confronted with

Fruits Basket, an Eastern-style manga narrative. McCloud characterized the lexicon of these kinds of stories as having a much broader range of panel transitions, shifting narrative focus away from action-oriented sequencing to more introspective or emotive sequencing, what Westerner's might refer to as 'talking heads.' For Western readers looking for action to guide plot-construction, manga presented a frustrating challenge. Not only was the sequence arranged differently, mimicking Japanese lettering conventions (right-to-left,) but the Western concept of action was no longer the driving force behind the plot or the imagery, having been replaced by an examination of interpersonal relationships between high school girls and boys.

Participants' use of Bazerman's (1981) second component, literature of the field, was evident through the readers' expectations for the narratives based on their experience reading this particular genre. Bazerman identified explicit and implicit knowledge as comprising literature of the field; for the readers in this study, explicit knowledge referred to their familiarity with comics narrative conventions (particularly as they are used to tell superhero stories) and Western-style plot structures, and implicit knowledge referred to the personal experience participants brought to the text that created a deeper connections to the narrative. Participants demonstrated their explicit knowledge by recognizing, seeking, and commenting on how conventions informed the narrative, such as using color to indicate flashbacks, or changing the shape of a dialogue bubble to indicate voice and perspective. Other examples of explicit 'generic' knowledge included familiarity with Western-style story-telling structures such as the readers' expectations for action-driven plots, or the more formulaic expectations such as Keely's idea that mysterious contraptions in a superhero's basement workshop were always meant "to save the day."

Implicit knowledge was evident in the participants' ability to connect events that occurred in the text to other narratives or personal experiences, such as the participants' associating 'fictional' superheroes in *Watchmen* with 'real' Marvel or DC characters, or applying historical knowledge about the actual Nixon presidency to the fictional 'endless' Nixon presidency alluded to in the same graphic novel.

The participants, who by their own reports were immersed in Western superhero genre, based their expectations for narrative on this kind of narrative experience, and therefore had difficulty reading *Fruits Basket*, the manga graphic novel that required a slightly different body of knowledge and experience. Though the comics conventions that each genre hold in common were significant enough to make reading the story possible, cultural differences interfered with the participants' reading, indicating the extent to which genre shaped their reading. For example, dialogue bubbles in *Fruits Basket* were often non-existent, creating confusion as to who might be speaking. Thoughts were presented as smaller text, and backgrounds were often more symbolic of characters' emotional states than representative of physical place, causing some confusion about the setting and timeframes. Implicit information, such as the significance of the Chinese zodiac or visual gender and age cues indicated by the characters' clothing and hairstyles were also misunderstood or lost on several of the participants. Thus, the readers reported more frustration than enjoyment while reading the manga than when reading the superhero story.

Bazerman's (1981) third and fourth components, anticipated audience and author's personae, were also evident in participants' expectations. Experienced graphic novel readers understand how a Western-style superhero story 'works,' and that authors

are somewhat obliged to address or at least acknowledge those expectations by including

familiar narrative elements and conventions that their long-time fans expect. In the case

of pleasure reading, the participants reported that they looked for certain elements, such

as art and narrative complexity when selecting stories, and if a novel did not meet these

(mostly visual) expectations, they wouldn't buy it- in essence, readers sought a kind of

graphic narrative formula. One participant even reported he only read Marvel titles

because he knew those stories would meet all his expectations for characters and plot.

This element of expected familiarity extends to certain characters, too, as many of the

participants in the study had been following specific characters (or casts of characters) for

more than a decade. Readers also reported seeking novels and comics series created by

specific artists and writers because of the artists' and authors' style of illustration and

approach to story telling. Again the element of familiarity shaped reading because

participants reported selecting only stories that they believed would meet or challenge

their expectations for characters and plot.

In this way, shifting genres from Western superhero narrative to shojo manga

proved to be another challenge for the participants. The author of *Fruits Basket,* Natsuki

Takaya, included these 'generic' elements of author-audience reading partnership by

using a series of direct addresses to her audience, wherein she alluded to her drawings in

previous series, her writing process, and mentioned that the current novel had similarities

to her other works. (These addresses appeared as a friendly letter and several aside

comments included in different panels throughout the story.) Thus Takaya is conscious of

a specific audience or community of readers, one that seeks out her stories, her art, and

her characters, (an audience that according to ICv2, as of May 2007 had purchased more

than 18 million copies of her novels and elevated *Fruits Basket Vol. 16* to number 15 of 150 on *USA Today's Bestselling Books* list.) The participants in this study were initially confused by these instances of direct address, and mentioned that this kind of commentary by the author was not something they often encountered in their own reading. They called the addresses "disruptive," a comment I find interesting as it speaks to the idea of readers' enthrallment with or immersion in a text, where readers become so involved with (or in their own words "absorbed" by) the fictional narrative they are reading that this kind of conscious reference to the fact that the reading is fictional, an otherness that is separate from the reader is jarring to the whole experience. The participants' negative reaction to this feature of the shojo manga highlighted the fact that they were clearly not members of this particular genre community since they had no prior experience with these stories, nor did they wish to become part of this community as the shojo manga narrative did not meet *their* expectations for story.

A second genre consideration for readers' narrative expectations is the context in which these expectations, or readers' tastes for certain kinds of pleasure reading, were formed. Based on examination of participants' literacy histories and follow-up interviews, several connective contextual threads became apparent among the nine participants. With one exception, readers' expectations for graphic narratives were initially formed by their early encounters with comics.

Participants' initial graphic narrative encounters fall into three categories: those who began reading comics as emergent readers, those who began reading comics as pre-teens, and those who began reading comics as adults. For the purpose of this study and in education, the emergent readers group is loosely identified as children in the K-2 primary

grades who are just learning to read. Three participants from this study began reading

comics independently as they were learning to read verbal-only texts independently:

Dave at age seven, Keely at age six, and Elvis at age five. The second group represents

participants who began reading comics at a time in their schooling when they were

capable of 'reading to learn.' In education, this shift from 'learning to read' to 'reading to

learn' is usually observed in children sometime around fourth grade: Frank, Louis, Vince,

Orlando and Wynton, all began reading comics between the ages of ten and eleven,

which most likely places them in fourth or fifth grade when they began reading comics.

Diana was the only participant in the study who began reading comics and graphic novels

as an adult. In each case, the participants began reading comics as the result of some form

of reward system: acknowledgement for good behavior (Vince, Frank, Wynton;) a treat

or bonding with friends or loved ones (Keely, Orlando, Louis, Diana, Elvis) or as a

success motivator (Dave.) Therefore comics' reading is associated with pleasures apart

from the enjoyment of entertainment for most readers. For most readers, too, these initial

encounters formed long-lasting interest in certain characters. Of the nine participants,

Wynton and Dave made a point to tell me that they still read *Daredevil* and *GI Joe*, the

first characters they ever encountered in comics, in addition to the titles they've come to

appreciate as they've matured. Vince, Louis, Orlando, Wynton, and Keely reported that

they really fell "in love" with comics when they "discovered" the *X-Men,* around the time

they entered sixth and seventh grade, and still actively follow the series; as a sixth-grader,

Frank fell "in love" with *Ironman*, and continues to feel a strong attachment to that

character, though he, too, has branched out into other genres of graphic novels. Having

been exposed to comics at the earliest age, Elvis's love for the medium is all-inclusive,

and he reads anything that attracts his attention; Diana, who began reading as an adult in order to deepen her romantic relationship with Elvis, also shares an affinity for the kinds of stories she first began reading.

Participants' expectations for graphic narratives include expectations for characterization. Having read comics for years, the participants have developed a familiarity with certain characters, especially the characters that piqued their early interest in the medium, and read their stories to 'keep in touch' with their adventures, similar to following a soap opera. One of the reasons the participants have such an affinity for these characters is that they can see a bit of themselves in the comics. Frank openly discussed the connection he felt towards Tony Stark's Ironman; Frank knew from a young age that he wanted to be some sort of inventor or scientist (Frank is a chemical engineer) so reading about a man whose heroics stem from his intellectual and mechanical abilities, not from special superhuman powers, was the spark that inspired Frank's love of comics and graphic narratives. Keely discussed the empathy she has for Spiderman's conundrum, that no one can really get to know the real person behind the mask because of the obligations that stem from his special powers and interfere with his own personal desires, and that she feels the same way at times about her own responsibilities.

This idea of seeing a bit of themselves in the characters became a reoccurring theme across participants' literacy histories and follow-up interviews. Perhaps it is no coincidence that most of the participants who currently read *X-Men* as adults discovered and "fell in love" with the series at an age when most children are driven to seek acceptance from their peers and when they feel their most awkward socially and

physically--the early teens. Wynton, who began reading the *X-Men* in seventh grade,

discussed feeling a kinship with the mutants because he saw them as emblematic of

African Americans in American society--the kind of asymtotoic relationship he felt at

that time, where he was part of, yet separate from, society at large. He recalled the

moment when he connected the discussions he heard at home about Martin Luther King's

and Malcolm X's philosophies to the struggle between Professor Xavier and Magneto;

this became the moment for him where comics truly took on significance beyond

entertainment and became what he calls a "forum for engaged debate."

Wynton's concept about the significance, (or intellectual weightiness) of graphic

novels is reiterated by other participants who reported that they chose specific graphic

narratives because these stories offered something more that simple diversion, they

offered a challenge to their readers. The participants described this challenge in different

terms, but the essence of this idea can be summed up as appealing to the readers' sense of

continuity and creativity. All readers reported that looking for visual clues to the current

(as well as future) plotlines was an aspect of reading these kinds of novels they enjoyed.

For some readers, serialized graphic narratives offered additional challenges in the form

of discerning and establishing continuity as they tracked complex plot and character

threads across multiple titles and years. For other readers (such as Diana and Wynton)

graphic novels added a kind of creative challenge to a reader's own beliefs by offering

relevant themes and social commentary on current issues, or through Wynton's concept

of engaged debate.

This overarching theme of continuity and creativity extends throughout the other

kinds of pastimes the participants held in common. Participants reported that in addition

to graphic narratives, they were active readers of traditional texts and had these categories in common: fantasy novels, science fiction, and history. Participants were all (at one time) active *Dungeons and Dragons* players, and most continue to participate in various role-playing games, either online or as dice-and-paper games with a group of friends. The common thread between these pastimes of graphic novel reading and role-playing is the creative challenge of character development, and character interaction in ever-changing scenarios, maintained over time. Continuity is also a factor in the kinds of television shows the participants reported enjoying, namely *Star Trek* and it's various spin-off programs and movies. The connection among these various entertainments again appears to be the appeal to readers' senses of continuity and creativity, as they view and re-view familiar characters following their adventures as they encounter new scenarios.

Yet when asked what attracted them to comics (and by extension graphic novels) the participants stated the artwork and illustration was the primary attraction, closely followed by the story. However, most readers admitted that if the artwork was good, they would tolerate poor writing, but poor artwork would prevent them from reading a story, no matter how good the writing might be.

Participants' expectations for artwork also surfaced in an unanticipated discussion of sexuality in comics and graphic novels, and suggests that the participants' readings of graphic novels may also be gendered readings. The first inkling of this issue arose when I purchased *Fruits Basket*. The proprietor of my local comic book store suggested it to me because it was one of the best-selling series of graphic novels in the manga genre, but when I asked if young girls were coming into his store to purchase it, he told me that mostly middle-aged men had bought it from him, a fact that I thought to be odd as I

couldn't think why men would be interested in shojo manga. At the time I attributed this tidbit to the perception (reiterated by my participants) that women and girls generally do not frequent comic book shops as much as do men and boys, though this particular store is conveniently located near several high schools and two universities, and has a reputation for being user-friendly toward the general public and older patrons like myself.

Having begun my own foray into reading graphic novels with texts such as *Maus, Persepolis,* and *Road to Perdition,* I had not considered sexuality to be an important aspect of reading graphic novels, and therefore did not include this concept in my interview questions; yet seven of the nine readers spontaneously volunteered their views on this topic. Five of the seven male participants actively discussed the sexuality of comics artwork, and ironically for three of these men and for one of the women, the discussion began during their reading of *Fruits Basket.*

Wynton and Vince reported the most overt reactions to *Fruits Basket*'s cover drawing of Tohru Honda, the high school girl protagonist in the shojo manga novel. Tohru is pictured in her school girl uniform, which is reminiscent of a sailor-suit with a very short skirt that just grazes the tops of her thighs (a uniform-style that is shared by all the girls *her age* in the novel; older girls are drawn with much longer skirts.) Tohru looks very young: she is wide-eyed, and smiles with an open mouth, her cheeks are flushed and her hair flies away from her face, suggesting innocence, excitement, and giddiness. She appears in this manner throughout the first chapter, which the participants read for their think-aloud protocols. Wynton immediately interpreted the cover image to mean the text inside was pornographic, a comment which shocked me until he explained that in college, his primary exposure to manga had been from friends with bizarre tastes and therefore, he

associated manga with pornography, even though he knew that wasn't the case with most of the genre. The image of the sexualized little girl--sexualized because of her extremely short skirt, long-leggedness, and what Westerners interpret as her damsel-in-distress passivity--was something I hadn't considered until it was pointed out to me by the men. Interestingly, Wynton had trouble distinguishing between the male and female characters in the story, as facial features drawn for young characters tend to be somewhat androgynous to Western eyes; gender distinction is achieved primarily through hairstyles (boys' hair is relatively short, and girls have longer hair) and clothing (boys usually wear pants, girls wear skirts) as can be seen in Figures 4 and 8 in this dissertation. Wynton's inability to negotiate these 'generic' and cultural cues present in the text lead him to misread the story; he thought the male protagonist, Yuki, was a girl, and therefore read Tohru's romantic infatuation with Yuki as a depiction of a lesbian love affair, proving the adage that first impressions are hard to correct.

Vince's reaction to the cover (and the chapter) was no less visceral, though he was able to read the story in the spirit it was intended: as a sort of female Harry Potter-like tale of high school romance and adventure. Vince's approach to this issue was along the lines of "why can't they just let kids be kids?" and "what sort of message is being sent to young girls?" To a lesser extent, Louis reiterated the sexual appeal of the image, not to the young female audience that to novel was intended to capture, but discussed the appeal of these kinds of images to older men. Dave echoed Louis's sentiment, but added that he couldn't see older men actually buying the novel just to look at the pictures. Keely, the only woman to comment on sexuality in *Fruits Basket*, did so in regards to the drawing of Yuki and Kyo on the inside front cover, remarking that the drawing of the two boys'

pants gave Yuki a "sexy butt." That, however, was the extent of her remarks about sexuality in either graphic novel. Neither Keely nor Diana commented on the role of women in either story, nor did they report any negative reactions to the *Fruits Basket* characters, the story, or the imagery beyond a general confusion regarding establishing reading paths and interpreting cultural cues in the novel (unlike Vince, Dave, Louis, Orlando, and Wynton, who reported an active dislike for the story and manga in general.) In fact, the only negative comment regarding the portrayal of women in Western comics came from Diana, who reported that she used to make fun of the stereotypes she saw in her husband's choice of comics, especially the big-breasted women, until she actually began to read them. Diana did, however, laughingly remark on the male costumes drawn in *Watchmen*, observing that Nite Owl was wearing "Aquaman's pants," a costume that she had always considered ridiculous.

The fact that Diana and Keely did not report or react to the sexualized imagery in either novel (apart from some sniggering at Nite Owl's pants,) suggests that reading graphic novels may be gendered, as well as 'generic,' a position emphasized even more by the men's radically different opinion of sexuality as it is portrayed in Western-style comics. Orlando's frank, if somewhat blunt, admiration for Catwoman's "awesome 40DD's" inspired him as an adult to read the series on a regular basis, for as long as the artist who created the awesome 40DD's, Jim Balant, continued to illustrate *Catwoman;* the fact that the stories happened to be well-written was an added bonus. Once Balant left the series, taking Catwoman's sex appeal and some of the better writers with him, Orlando ceased to read the comic. Though Dave and Vince both pointed out the similarities of women's poses on the covers of comics to poses found in nudie magazines,

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both insisted that the hyper-sexualized, Barbie-esque proportioned images of women were the realization of the artists' ideals of female beauty. Vince explained that in his experience, physical power and clothing seemed to follow an inverse proportion: that women who were drawn wearing the least amount of clothing usually proved to be the strongest and most independent characters. Dave and Vince explained that this concept of idealized beauty extends to the male characters as well--Robin's leg-revealing tunic, Spiderman's six-pack abs visible through his skin-tight costume were both cited as examples of ideal male beauty.

Dave also emphasized the sexless nature of this ideal-- where men's genitalia is not suggested in the drawings, as though they are asexual beings. Citing Dr. Manhattan from *Watchmen* as an example, Dave pointed out that though the character is naked throughout most of the novel, his genitals are never in full view. Nor does he seem interested in sex; the only male character that does engage in successful amorous relations is drawn to look more like an average middle-aged man. For Dave, the message is clear--the perfect physiques of superheroes are not intended to be sex objects, but as ideal depictions of human beauty. Ironically, in *Watchmen* these physical ideals mask psychological flaws or failures. In this story, the two god-like, physically ideal humans end up the most isolated from the humanity they supposedly represent and protect; Dr. Manhattan leaves Earth to recreate life on another galaxy, and Adrian Veidt remains exiled, alone, and guilt-ridden on his Antarctic research facility.

Summation for Research Question 2

The following factors shaped the experience and expectations that the participants in this study brought to the texts. Genre played a large role in the participants' expectations for form and style during their think-aloud protocol readings. Genre, in the form of Western-style superhero comics, informed the participants' understanding of structural frameworks in the novels. Participants based their readings on their prior experience with other graphic narratives, mostly superhero stories, as well as used their personal experience to connect to the events in the stories. These elements were challenged when the participants read sections of a graphic novel from a different genre-- manga. In these scenarios, participants had enough of a framework to read the story, but the readings were labored and frustrated by cultural differences present in the iconography and imagery, compounded by stylistic differences in storytelling. A second element that shaped the readings was the context in which the participants' experience and expectations (or tastes) for graphic narratives had been formed. All but one of the participants began reading comics either as very young children or as preteens. Their early encounters with Western-style superhero comics shaped their expectations for graphic narratives and for character development as most readers still follow series that feature the characters they admired as younger readers, in addition to the stories they enjoy as mature adults. Participants also reported following storylines to keep abreast of character development over long periods of time, in some cases decades. They reported they actively seek graphic narratives that will present them with challenges that appeal to

the readers' sense of continuity and creativity, something that was also apparent in their choices for other entertainment pastimes (gaming, television, and traditional texts.)

Additionally, participants reported that they enjoy looking for clues to the narrative at hand and future stories while reading, they enjoy following complex plots and characters, and prefer stories that question the social status quo and present opportunities to challenge a reader's own convictions, what one reader called "forum[s] for engaged debate." Despite their emphasis on character development and social commentary, the participants all noted that artwork and illustration were the primary attraction to selecting specific graphic narratives, and most participants cited favorite illustrators and writers whose work they read on a regular basis. Participants noted they would read a poorly written story if the artwork was good, but they would not read a comic or graphic novel if they did not like the illustrations, no matter how well written the story might be. This sparked a spontaneous discussion of sexuality in graphic narratives, and suggested that participants' readings may also be culturally gendered readings.

Implications for Further Study

Gunther Kress (1999, 2003) argues that the omnipresence of multi-modal texts encountered in academia, the workplace, and in casual or personal use signals that texts are shifting away from the world as told--the logic of time and sequence in time, as represented by the organization of conventional verbal-only writing, to the logic of the screen--the world as shown--as represented by the organization of space via imagery

(Kress, 2003 p. 50). As the logic of the screen dominates print media, too, Kress emphasizes that the very nature of what we understand reading to be is changing, becoming more complex. Texts that use multi-modal constructs require "reading the world as shown [wherein reading becomes] reading as imposing salience and order, reading by design" (p. 50). This kind of reading creates a situation where there are no absolute fixed paths for reading such as those determined by the conventions of verbal-only constructs, but instead a reader may encounter multiple entry points. Therefore a reader's job when encountering multi-modal texts moves beyond interpretation to creating order from what he sees on the page or screen, and that order will be imposed according to the reader's own perceptions about what mode of information (display or describe) is important at that time. Because these texts can be read in more than one way, reading becomes more complex, and thus also becomes more challenging. As graphic novels and comics have been melding both the logic of the verbal and the logic of the visual for the better part of a century, Kress's recognition that reading is changing has already been realized by practitioners of outsider literacy. The participants in this study have demonstrated through their think-aloud protocols that the nature of outsider literacy as it is practiced in reading for pleasure is active, critical, complex and challenging, and that genre, culture, and personal expectations combine to shape both those readers' approaches to making sense of multi-modal texts and their reading experiences.

Practitioners of outsider literacy have a lot to teach educators. Perhaps the most significant implications of this study for educators can be summed up using Wynton's words: comics and graphic novels provide a forum for engaged debate, one that questions the status quo. The very nature of the most popular kinds of graphic novels reflects a kind

of literacy that is clearly not tested for by standardized literacy exams, not valued by academia, and consequently runs counter the status quo. However, the kinds of literacy practices that the readers in this study used for their multi-modal pleasure reading reflect the kinds of critical reading stances that educators want to encourage in their students—the habits of life-long learning. In this way, an engaged debate for education may follow the two threads that formed the basis for this investigation into outsider literacy practices:

- What is being read for pleasure and why those texts are chosen by readers
- How these texts are read

Based on their literacy histories and follow-up interviews, the nine participants described themselves as choosing to read comics and graphic novels for the texts' creativity, characterization, and to follow story threads as the characters develop over time. Though their preferences have been shaped by genre, culture, and personal experience, all readers reported that part of the pleasure in reading these texts came from what they perceived to be the challenge of reading and sharing these texts—looking for clues within the texts that will lead them to deeper understanding of the text itself, in addition to future story threads and character development. This philosophical stance--that all texts are somehow interconnected--is at the heart of cross-curricular instruction, and is vital to encouraging the kinds of literacy habits that will lead to life-long learning, but is not often apparent or encouraged in the classroom, especially for literacy teachers working under an edict to focus their instruction on improving student test scores, or following lock-step curricula.

Perhaps even more compelling for educators, though, is the idea of raising consciousness and awareness about *how* we read different kinds of texts, and how we make meaning form them. Using the think-aloud methodology required the participants

to think about *how* they read and made meaning from both graphic novels used in the study, making explicit what has become routine, automatic practices for these adult readers. The participants all reported pleasure, excitement, and curiosity when they were given *Watchmen,* a text both generically and culturally familiar to read, but when I handed them the manga *Fruits Basket,* with only one exception, the tone quickly changed. *Fruits Basket* represented a text outside their comfort zone, a text from a different genre, with different artistic and cultural references, and different narrative conventions. With the basis for the readers' following relevance changed, readers had to find new ways to create their reading paths, and new ways to read the text. The frustration experienced by the participants during these think-aloud sessions and their solutions to this frustration may offer additional ways to explore traditional and multi-modal literacies. Thus, confronting readers with different generic and cultural conventions may be another way to create a "forum for engaged debate"—to create cross-cultural awareness by exploring what are the bases for the perceived differences and how meaning can be constructed from different kinds of texts across various cultures.

Furthermore, as one of my participants pointed out, not all readers are verbal learners, and that multi-modal texts offer visual learners an experience better suited to their individual needs. In fact, four of the nine participants in this study identified themselves as slow readers, not due to any disability to process information, but because they feel they read verbal texts at a slower pace than others' read. Not surprisingly, then, five of the participants also reported that one of the reasons they enjoy graphic novels has to do with the fact that they are able to read these novels more quickly than they can read verbal-only novels--an important consideration for people who love to read but are also

pressed to find time for pleasure reading. Finally, this study's exploration of outsider literacy practices revealed that the reading actions participants used to make their way through sections of graphic novels represented active and critical thought consistent with already recognized good reading practices for verbal texts, in addition to specialized and hybridized reading actions the participants used that applied only to the visual or verbo-visual elements of the graphic novels. Participants consistently used critical reasoning practices such as questioning, inference and drawing conclusions, prediction, revision, synthesis and evaluation during their readings of these pop-culture texts, all hallmarks of sophisticated and mature literacy practices, the kinds of practices educators associate with life-long learners, but do not necessarily associate with pop-culture entertainment.

As first discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, Steven Johnson's (2005) book *Everything Bad is Good for You* offers some additional insight into this potential connection between pop-culture entertainments and sophisticated literacy practices. Johnson, using the research of James Flynn, William Dickens, and Carmi Schooler, posits that pop-culture entertainments, such as television and video games are not dragging the general viewing populace on a slow-but-certain path to idiocy, but are in fact actually enhancing our critical reasoning abilities, a phenomena he has labeled the "Sleeper Curve." Johnson cites Flynn's research in the history of IQ scores to support Johnson's own Sleeper Curve theory. Flynn's research revealed that across several decades, American IQ scores exhibited a wholesale increase that cannot be accounted for by race, education or economic class. This trend, which has been labeled the Flynn Effect, demonstrates that on average, actual IQ scores had risen more than 13.8 points across the five decades that comprised Flynn's study (Johnson, p. 140). Additional studies on the

Flynn Effect reveal that this rise in scores may be accelerating at what Johnson called "an extraordinary clip: … an average of [three] points per decade" (p. 142).

Flynn believed environment was in some way responsible for these increases in what Johnson calls "pure-problem solving ability" as Flynn was able to rule out genetics, familiarity with test-taking, nutrition, and increased access to education as causes for this dramatic rise, a position supported by Carmi Schooler's research into environmental complexity and intellectual capacity (p. 144; p. 146). The environmental conditions that Johnson believes account for "these cognitive upgrades" comes from shifts towards increasingly complex forms of multi-media entertainment (p. 144). Johnson's analysis of video games and television, two of the most popular forms of multi-media entertainment that have dominated American leisure time in the five decades wherein the Flynn Effect has been examined, reveal the factors that Johnson believes may account for the this "cognitive upgrade." Video games require players to focus their attention to problem solve: to probe, test, and decipher for patterns that will help master the game. Television shows have become increasingly complex, offering multiple plotlines for multiple characters that require viewers to keep track of details across long spans of time and exercise emotional intelligence by 'reading' the characters for clues to their personalities, relationships, and trustworthiness. Additionally, some programs (such as popular 'reality' shows like *The Apprentice*) also offer the kinds of interactive challenges to viewers that games do: offering actual participants 'real' challenges and problems to solve, while viewers 'play along,' often by voting online for who they think should be the winner. The multitudes of blogs created by devoted fans of shows extend this kind of involvement and interaction by maintaining a community of interested participants and a forum in which

to voice opinions and ideas about the programs. Johnson cites several common elements among current entertainment media that are the key to enhancing these problem solving skills: active involvement in the entertainments through probing and telescoping for pattern-recognition, exercising emotional intelligence through visual cues, filling in narrative gaps and keeping track of increasingly complex storylines and characterization, across long periods of time.

One additional (and crucial) factor Johnson considers is the widespread availability of technology that enables repetition, such as TiVo, CDs and DVRs. Repetition means shows or games will be viewed more than once, and therefore programs and games that will become the most profitable will need to be designed to facilitate repeated viewings; essentially they must appeal to all the problem solving elements listed above providing the intellectual stimulation that will facilitate multiple encounters. What Johnson calls a "laudable side effect" of this technology is that it encourages "close readings" of the entertainment media (p. 168).

For me, the most striking factor of Johnson's analysis is how similar are the elements at work in pop-culture electronic media to the reading actions and experiences that the nine participants in my study reported and demonstrated. Graphic novel reading as reported and observed in my study was an interactive, problem-solving kind of process that involved a tremendous amount of close reading, most of it gained from repetitive readings of texts. The very nature of comics narrative conventions required the readers to fill in gaps: they mentally completed what happened in the gutters between panels; they pieced together complex visual and verbal information at the same time separating essential information from peripheral information, they created their own reading

sequences (or paths.) Furthermore, the readers returned to the peripheral information because they knew from experience that those details often provide clues to complex narrative networks in other stories, tracking clues across story lines that extend into other series and across decades in some cases. These actions were similar to Johnson's notions of probing and telescoping for pattern recognition, particularly as they used their knowledge of comics conventions and narrative genre to establish reading paths and follow the stories. The participants also actively exercised their emotional intelligence by seeking visual clues to characterization and tone, or moods present in the novels. Participants also filled in gaps in stories by predicting, inferring and drawing conclusions, as well as revised these predictions and inferences as more information became available. Lastly, participants reported multiple readings of the same text, for enjoyment as well as understanding, demonstrating preferences for stories that provided such challenges and opportunities for thought and discussion.

Based on Johnson's arguments and the findings from my study, outsider literacy presents itself as a complex and creative challenge to the readers who practice it, and given this nature, I now have an idea how my student Rusty's verbal literacy might have been enhanced by his preferences for reading multi-modal texts. From this study, I have come to appreciate graphic novels and comics and the rich reading experiences they may offer, as well as to appreciate outsider literacy for the sophisticated critical reading practices used by the nine readers in this study when reading these texts. From an educator's standpoint, the value of understanding these adult practices is important to teaching literacy, as the nature of texts and reading is shifting towards multiple modalities, and these outsider literacy practices are the skills that will be needed to

navigate and engage with multi-modal texts. Student readers, especially those who are

most comfortable reading verbal-only texts or who are resistant readers, may not be

explicitly aware as to how multi-modal texts can be understood. Furthermore, many

students perceive reading to be a passive, receptive fact-related experience, rather than an

interactive, creative and critical process. Yet more research is needed to explore this

connection with younger readers, comprising what I believe is the next step in this

exploration of outsider literacy practices--once adult practices have been identified, a

next study might include young or emergent graphic novel readers to discover how they

read these kinds of texts. Johnson's own close readings of electronic entertainment media

suggests that this study's findings may highlight the kinds of research needed to better

understand outsider literacy practices and pleasure reading, particularly as they relate to

learning and education. Participants read graphic novels for pleasure, yet the nature of

this kind of adult literacy practice is not necessarily valued as an educational construct,

though public school mission statements often tout creating life-long learners as a goal

for their institutions. Exploring what differences (if any) exist between adult and child

outsider literacy practices might be a good starting point. Participants in this study

reported that they selected graphic novels based essentially on the artwork present on the

cover and in the text, but they also 'pre-selected' the kinds of stories they would gravitate

toward by focusing mostly on one particular genre--the superhero narrative. As genre

proved to be such an integral part of the participants' reading and experiences that shaped

this reading, further research in to genre, pleasure reading, and individual literacy

practice is warranted to explore the kinds of genres younger graphic novel readers read,

the approaches they use to read multi-modal narratives, and the experiences that shape

their reading, including expectations they have for narrative and narrative conventions. Lastly, genre and gendered readings might also be an area of interest to explore for both adults and younger readers as the findings of this study suggest women and men interpret imagery--in this case sexuality and imagery--differently.

To illustrate his idea that entertainment, popular culture, and pleasure are not incompatible with education, Johnson cited John Dewey's views on learning and education from Dewey's *Experience and Education*:

> Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only that particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or the lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. (pp.40-41)

Currently, the multi-modal narratives that form the basis of outsider literacy practice are not valued much beyond aiding students with deficit literacy skills because visually-constructed texts are seen as stepping-stones to 'real' or 'adult' literacy due to a prevalent misapprehension that pictures make reading easier. However, educators and theorists such as Kress believe the opposite is true; that mixed mode texts can present readers with more complex kinds of reading challenges that are not well understood. To this end, this dissertation sought explore the gestalt of outsider literacy practices, and the findings from this study's nine participants seem to support Kress's ideas that there is a different kind of literacy at work when reading multi-modal texts such as graphic novels, a literacy that provides its practitioners with complex reading challenges. Western culture and academia

are already rife with multi-modal texts, and as technology becomes increasingly essential in education, workplace, and home settings, the kinds of outsider literacy practices used to read graphic novels and comics will become more important to educators and students as similar practices are needed for screen-based literacy. Thus reading, as educators like myself understand it, is changing; and if we are truly interested in helping our students become life-long learners, it is imperative that we pay attention to the kinds of reading and learning that adults (and students) enjoy. Understanding the appeal and the value of graphic novels, comics, and other pleasure reading may be another step toward aiding the formation of the "enduring attitudes" of which Dewey spoke that are the basis of aesthetic literacy experiences and life-long learning.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Think-aloud Protocol Directions for Graphic Novels

I am trying to discover what readers do to understand graphic novels or comics. So that I can study how you read your way through a graphic novel, please say aloud everything that you think or do to understand and follow the story. Try not to leave anything out while you say how you proceed through the story: tell where you look, what you notice, what catches your eyes or mind, what's happening in the story, what you do if you become confused. Everything that you do when you read, please say it aloud. Say everything you're thinking, even if it doesn't seem to relate to this task.

Please turn to the indicated pages in the graphic novel, and begin.

Appendix B

Follow-up Interview Questionnaire

1. What attracts (or distracts) your attention while reading this kind of text?

2. How do you work your way through the page?

3. How do you make sense of or understand the story? (Strategies, habits, patterns, etc….)

What do you do when you encounter bleeds?

What do you do when you encounter wordless panels?

What do you do when you encounter unusual panel layouts?

How does color use or lack thereof impact your reading of the story?

4. How do you work through confusing sections, if you encounter any?

5. What do you enjoy or dislike about this text or graphic novels in general?

Appendix C
Literacy History Interview Questionnaire

What is your age:

Gender:

Level of education:

Work/employment:

Describe your literacy (reading and writing) habits and preferences:

How would you describe yourself as a reader or writer?

What do you like to read?

What kinds of entertainment do you enjoy on a regular basis, such as television programs, movies, radio programs, games (video or word or board) crossword puzzles, comics or graphic novels, Internet web sites?

What attracts you to these kinds of pastimes?

Tell me about your first comics or graphic novel experience:

How/when/why did you become interested in graphic novels and/or comics?

What sparked this interest?

What kinds of graphic novels/comics do you enjoy reading?

What catches your mind about or draws you to these texts?

Appendix D
Practice Think-aloud Page from Page 8 of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*
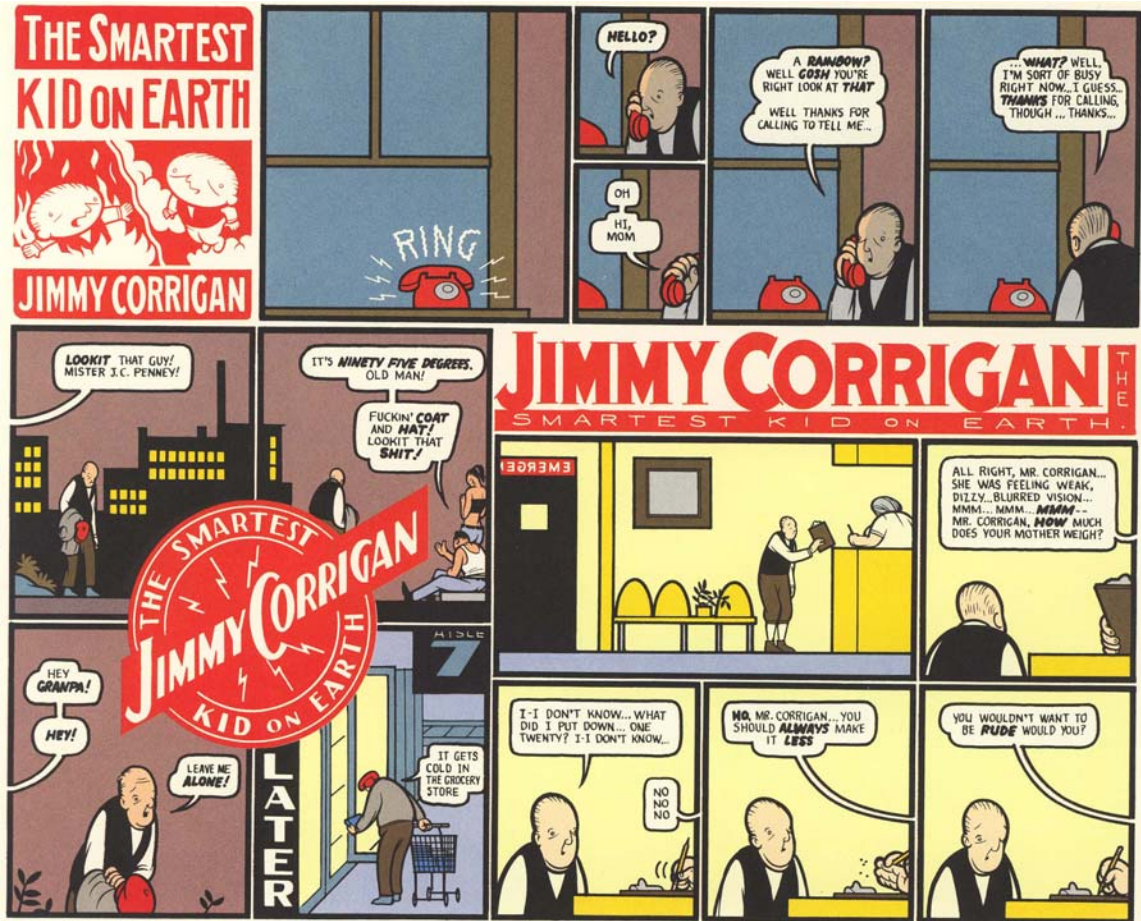
Note. From *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (p. 8), by F.C. Ware, 2000, New York: Pantheon Books. Copyright 2000 by F.C. Ware. Reprinted with permission.

This image was chosen as a practice page for the protocols because it represents several features of many graphic novels that could impact reading: use of color, unusual text placement, non-linear story, and multiple kinds of panel transitions, among other graphic storytelling conventions. Until this point, protocols have been used for text-only readings; in order for my participants to get used to the think-aloud format, this practice page offers several opportunities for the readers to voice what they are thinking, seeing and doing, as well as what confuses them and how they make sense of the page. This can be difficult at first, since most readers read and make meaning in silence, but having this practice page should allow the readers to develop some comfort with the think-aloud protocol process.

Appendix E

Data Chart: Frequency of Specific Reading Actions Used by Individual Participants During Think-aloud Protocols for *Watchmen*

CATEGORY Subcategory	Illustrative excerpts from transcripts	Frank	Diana	Elvis	Keely	Louis	Orlando	Dave	Vince	Wynton
DIRECTED ATTENTION Sum of occurrences		44	111	39	47	36	56	114	58	61
Scan Whole Page (SWP)	"I go to a different scene - I think it's page 5 – and it's all visual, I don't see any dialogue whatsoever, so I look at the first panel." (Dave)	13	15	16	1	7	11	18	7	17
Look for text clues (LTC)	"I'm seeing it's the same dates but the times are different, so I'll go back and see what times…8:30, when this all started." (Vince)	2	5	1	6	3	4	1	7	0
Look for image clues (LIC)	"I'm thinking era, what era is this set in. Pom-pom hat guy, the way they're talking, now we've got a guy in this hat, I'm trying to place it." (Diana)	3	12	4	5	6	5	8	9	2
Adjust reading direction (ARD)	"It bounces back between the exchange of the two guys' speaking…so I'm going to read from left-to-right, and then go down – like a typewriter." (Frank)	20	55	10	11	15	33	67	33	36
Cue from color (CC)	"You put a different voice in your head because it's blue…like a more mechanical, alien voice…" (Keely)	6	24	8	24	5	3	20	2	6

CONSTRUCT MEANING Sum of occurrences		119	163	130	161	75	82	341	120	168
Observe image details (OID)	"I see the detective looking at himself and the other detective in the shattered reflection of the mirror, and if you look to the panel to the right you see how the mirror was broken based on the person's head being slammed into the back of it." (Dave)	51	71	43	59	12	28	161	23	41
Observe text details (OTD)	I see like part of a newspaper ad and it says 'Hero'… something … 'ires', so I assume that it's 'Hero retires'." (Dave)	19	16	9	9	11	8	33	11	3
Summarize image/text as plot (SIP or STP)	"Rorschach's walking into the bar, looks like he's talking to the bartender and it looks like he's going to be talking to some folks here." (Frank)	18	7	30	19	10	7	20	11	25
Predict (P)	"Rorschach – probably the good guy, the superhero." (Vince)	7	14	8	16	2	10	3	14	29
Infer/ Draw conclusions (I/DC)	"A superhero got an ass-whipping and thrown out of a window…that's not a crack-head come off the street, that's not a burglar being surprised; that is a skilled, planned operation." (Wynton)	16	30	30	31	15	19	80	51	44
Follow image thread (FIT)	"There's the blimp again. Blimp equals urbanity, I think, in comic books. We must be in the city; there's a skyscraper and a blimp." (Diana)	3	11	2	8	11	4	22	4	5
Follow text thread (FTT)	"Because of the way [the dialogue]is broken in this word balloon here it seems like in conversation she would say "That's fascinating" and he would cut in with something and she'd [say] "I'm gonna call Dan." (Orlando)	3	6	3	6	4	5	8	5	8

Synthesize new connections/ Imagine (S/I)	"[I]always wondered why the Russians didn't have superheroes, too, since we did. Where are the mutants from Russia? Everybody needs superheroes, you know – trains run off their tracks, runaway locomotives…" (Wynton)	2	8	5	13	10	1	14	4	13
MONITOR UNDER-STANDING Sum of occurrences		28	45	12	34	23	27	31	24	19
Recognize confusion (RC)	"I don't know if this is a flashback or…just scanning the page here. I'm not sure where it's at." (Frank)	10	2	1	9	1	7	4	4	1
Question text/ Question author (QT or QA)	"I mean right now, the biggest hook is who's Rorschach? What's his big beef? Why's this guy dead?" (Louis)	0	18	0	3	4	2	15	1	5
Reread/ Revise text (RRT)	"Sometimes it's weird dialogue…they throw in these big words or whatever and I try to just rattle through, and hmmm, it doesn't roll off the tongue as good as it looks on paper." (Louis)	4	9	1	5	10	3	0	2	0
Review images (RRI)	"Oh, he had the smiley-face pin on…going back to the page before, that's why it's in the drain." (Keely)	3	9	5	6	4	8	10	7	4
Revise predictions/ inferences/ conclusions (RP or RI/C)	"Finds a button, hits it, he's a superhero… Maybe he's one of his superheroes. …so now this changes the narrative of what happened before." (Wynton)	6	3	1	7	0	4	1	6	6
Look for comics narrative conventions (LCNC)	"One seems to be a thought, but I guess it's just the way his bubbles are. The Rorschach character has kind of different bubble text, so I'm just going to assume this is going back and forth." (Frank)	5	4	4	4	4	3	1	4	2

USE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE Sum of occurrences		22	52	36	55	72	27	99	38	37
Use comics narrative conventions (UCNC)	"And in the Rorschach weird [shaped] dialogue bubbles they give him to indicate some kind of raspy or strange voice." (Elvis)	14	23	19	25	13	15	44	13	11
Connect to other texts (COT)	"I'm firstly checking out the graffiti. Graffiti art really, really took off after this, so sometimes you – in later books you'll see some really interesting, somebody will go crazy doing graffiti art in their art." (Louis)	1	9	6	4	12	2	17	4	11
Connect to other comics or graphic novels (COC/GN)	"But you know he's reminiscent of Captain America, he's reminiscent of the Joker, he's got Aqua Man's pants, so a lot of these [characters] are homages." (Diana)	1	5	3	6	29	3	19	11	9
Make personal connections (MPC)	"[The purple] it's solemn… it's like very regretful. I was raised Catholic so purple always means Advent or Lent to me, so it's like a solemn color." (Keely)	6	15	8	20	18	7	19	10	6

CRITIQUE AESTHETICS: Sum of occurrences		14	79	47	57	57	19	64	55	52
Evaluate images (EI)	"I like the way…I notice that the pictures are pulling back; it's very cinematic." (Diana)	8	33	13	29	6	3	6	5	10
Evaluate plot (EP)	"That's an interesting intuitive leap, but you gotta be honest – no one's taking a costumed hero and throwing him out his own window. That takes planning, that takes technique, that takes something." (Wynton)	3	1	4	6	3	1	2	5	9
Evaluate technique/style (ET/S)	"Nice way to end the shot, starting close up just like it began. I find it's really good closure for this, how they continue to pull back until they're out of the city again." (Elvis)	2	27	18	21	13	9	10	20	17
Comment on comics narrative conventions (CCNC)	"There's this great perspective, the guy's all consistent, the colors are there to change depth and lighting, and that's really expensive for the time. You didn't see a lot of this." (Louis)	1	18	12	1	35	6	46	25	16

EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT IN STORY/ CHARACTERS Sum of occurrences		18	37	10	17	5	3	2	6	43
Talking back to the text (TBT)	"God, is this man too blonde for his own good or what?!" (Diana)	18	37	10	17	5	3	2	6	43
Combined Total Number of Occurrences per Reader		245	487	274	371	268	195	651	301	380

Appendix F

Data Chart: Frequency of Specific Reading Actions Used by Individual Participants During Think-aloud Protocols for *Fruits Basket*

CATEGORY Subcategory	Illustrative excerpts from transcripts:	Frank	Diana	Elvis	Keely	Louis	Orlando	Dave	Vince	Wynton
DIRECTED ATTENTION Sum of occurrences		46	32	33	28	24	54	36	28	50
Scan Whole Page (SWP)	"I'm scanning the whole page, looking top-to-bottom…" (Frank)	10	7	13	3	5	7	6	0	6
Look for text clues (LTC)	"…if something jumps out in bold, like on the bottom of page six…" (Elvis)	1	0	3	0	3	9	1	0	6
Look for image clues (LIC)	"She shut her eyes and has that smile on her face that gives you the 'once-upon-a-time' and you're going to have a flashback." (Keely)	1	2	6	6	3	5	4	2	9
Adjust reading direction (ARD)	I'm starting in the left-hand corner…but since this is a Japanese book…I'm going to be reading from the left page, kind of over to the right page…" (Orlando)	34	22	10	16	13	28	24	22	29
Cue from color (CC)	"With that word balloon being white, it makes it appear that it's further up." (Orlando)	0	1	1	3	0	5	1	4	0

CONSTRUCT MEANING Sum of occurrences		78	35	92	65	17	69	46	24	54
Observe image details (OID)	"You have this girl, holding a puppy, standing behind them…" (Dave)	27	16	33	20	3	13	20	6	16
Observe text details (OTD)	"We have text that sort of free-floats in the air…It's sort of hand-written…" (Dave)	30	6	9	1	3	12	6	3	2
Summarize image/text as plot (SIP or STP)	"The girls like this Yuki Sohma Kun, … they're all sort of developing an envy towards this girl" (Vince)	0	0	11	6	1	6	1	3	7
Predict (P)	"You know, the whole teenage angst thing, but we'll see if it's there when I actually read it." (Elvis)	2	2	8	3	0	9	0	0	0
Infer/ Draw conclusions (I/DC)	"I'm starting to get a class-shift here…His family's rich, she's not, but the girls are friends…" (Wynton)	14	7	18	25	2	9	11	5	22
Follow image thread (FIT)	"Yep – there's a jump. They go from eating rice in the kitchen to it looks like they're back in school." (Dave)	2	1	4	4	1	6	6	2	1
Follow text thread (FTT)	"They're talking about the zodiac things up here and then they're talking about the zodiac things down here. It just didn't seem that the conversation lead that way." (Louis)	3	3	7	4	6	13	2	5	4
Synthesize new connections/ Imagine (S/I)	"She's changing her thought process…to match with the older girl…Social hierarchy, social position." (Wynton)	0	0	2	2	1	1	0	0	2

MONITOR UNDER-STANDING Sum of occurrences		40	46	49	43	46	67	34	34	30
Recognize confusion (RC)	"I'm not positive that's the way I was supposed to read it." (Louis)	18	23	20	15	17	23	16	18	14
Question text/ Question author (QT or QA)	"Is this a story about kids, normal kids, or is this a story involving some kind of supernatural stuff?" (Vince)	0	5	4	3	7	6	1	5	5
Reread/ Revise text (RRT)	"Wait a second. I'm going to read it again." (Vince)	2	4	2	11	10	11	1	3	3
Review images (RRI)	"And here, she's leaving the field, she's outside, so she should still be outside, she shouldn't be in the house." (Keely)	1	2	5	4	3	5	2	0	2
Revise predictions/ inferences/ conclusions (RP or RI/C)	"I guess I was right a little bit – I guess she is fantasizing, from what we've said there." (Orlando)	0	3	6	3	3	8	0	1	2
Look for comics narrative conventions (LCNC)	"It's tough to tell what are the thought comments, the implied ones, and the spoken ones are." (Frank)	19	9	12	7	6	14	14	7	4

USE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE Sum of occurrences		14	9	38	11	26	24	33	31	23
Use comics narrative conventions (UCNC)	"And again the little asterisks for someone who is thinking or has nothing to say at the moment." (Elvis)	14	6	15	7	12	17	15	9	6
Connect to other texts (COT)	"And these are obviously like her little clones, like *The Heathers*, almost." (Keely)	0	0	7	3	4	2	9	8	6
Connect to other comics or graphic novels (COC/GN)	"You can always tell in anime and manga about the evil people and the nice people and it has to do with the eyes. The nice people have oval eyes and the evil people have round eyes." (Elvis)	0	1	8	0	5	0	2	2	2
Make personal connections (MPC)	"I'm thinking, ah, the Chinese zodiac because who hasn't eaten in a Chinese restaurant and seen the zodiac… they always put them on the menus…" (Vince)	0	2	8	1	5	5	7	12	9

CRITIQUE AESTHETICS: Sum of occurrences		0	31	39	18	15	15	11	40	10
Evaluate images (EI)	"Again, unique – an unrealistic person wearing more realistic prints – it's funny!" (Diana)	0	8	7	9	0	1	0	1	2
Evaluate plot (EP)	"Interesting description of the flashback, interesting description of the fable." (Wynton)	0	1	4	1	0	0	0	6	2
Evaluate technique/style (ET/S)	"It's interesting how some things are more realistically drawn than others. These are so cartoony and then you'll have the food on the plate realistically done." (Diana)	0	18	12	4	7	8	4	23	1

Comment on comics narrative conventions (CCNC)	"It's odd, because sometimes in a comic…it'll run across…just where the action's going, and the way the story's supposed to go." (Louis)	0	4	16	4	8	6	7	10	5
EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT IN STORY/ CHARACTERS Sum of occurrences		0	11	7	1	4	2	2	1	6
Talking back to the text (TBT)	"I hope he's not hitting on this chick – she's a little too young for him." (Elvis)	0	11	7	1	4	2	2	1	6
Combined Total Number of Occurrences per Reader		178	164	258	166	132	231	162	158	173

Appendix G

<u>Informed Consent Form</u>

Exploring the Culture and Cognition of Outsider Literacy Practices in Adult
Readers of Graphic Novels

You are invited to participate in this research study conducted by Marie H. Romanelli, a doctoral candidate attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher. You are eligible to participate because you are an adult over the age of 18, and have self-reported experience reading graphic novels and comics.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how some adult readers of graphic novels and comics make sense of these visually constructed narrative texts, and to learn more about why these texts are attractive and interesting to these readers. Participation in this study will require approximately 90-120 minutes of your time, during which the session will be tape-recorded. First you will be briefly interviewed to obtain biographical data, such as your age, gender, level of schooling attained, etc. Next, you will participate in two think-aloud verbal reading protocols where you will be asked to read aloud pre-selected sections of graphic novels and report orally on your thinking and reading processes as you progress through each text. Following these protocols, you will be asked some follow-up and clarification questions about the protocols and your reading processes. Finally, the researcher will interview you to obtain a brief understanding of your literacy history, reading preferences, etc. After the data has been transcribed, the researcher may need to contact you at a later date for further data and interview clarification.

There are no known or foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. However, you may find this kind of introspective think-aloud protocol interesting and the information you self-report during the process may add to your general understanding of your own literacy. The information gained from this research may ultimately be useful in that it should help the researcher and educators better understand the sophisticated nature of literacy skill sets and cultural concepts needed to navigate and interpret multi-modal, multi-media visually-constructed texts.

Your participation in this study is <u>voluntary</u>. You are free to decide not to participate in this study, or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship (if any) with the researcher or the researcher's institution (IUP.) Your decision to withdraw will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. Your protocol data and interview responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms so that your personal information will remain protected. Please be advised that the information obtained through the study may be published in scholarly journals or presented at scholarly conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement on the final page of this packet, and return it to the researcher. You will be given an additional unsigned version of these forms to take with you for your records. If you choose not to participate, please notify the researcher of your withdrawal at the address below:

Researcher: Marie H. Romanelli
Graduate Student and Doctoral Candidate
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
English Department: Composition / TESOL
Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Bennett Rafoth

Contact information for Marie Romanelli:
XXXXXXXX

Contact information for Dr. Rafoth:
English Department
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, PA 15701
(724) 357 – 2261
brafoth@iup.edu

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: (724) 357-7730).

Informed Consent Form

Exploring the Culture and Cognition of Outsider Literacy Practices in Adult Readers of Graphic Novels

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed consent form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT):

Signature:

Date:

Phone number, email or location where you can be reached:

Best days and times to reach you:

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date:

Researcher's signature:

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects [Phone: (724) 357-7730).]