

## Chapter 10

# Intersectional Identity Representation and Approaches in Comics

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The co-authors present this work as a graduate student/preservice teacher and university professor pair who have a common interest in equity, literacy, and fostering inclusive environments. While the professor-author has provided a space for the graduate student/lead author to share their experiences, they note that the planning and thinking of this lead author, as well as their experiences, are central to this chapter. The authors explore comics as a space for literacy development with elementary and middle school students and highlight texts that have a focus on LGBTQ+ intersections of identity and experience.*

Some critics decry the comics as overly simplistic, while historically comics have been seen as a textual site of corruption and darkness. Part of the elegance of the books I mention in this paper is the ways in which the comics narrative is used to probe depths of experience that travel well beyond the tropes of the superhero genre.

It is a rarity to find a textual resource that has been critiqued as both overly inviting and simplistic, and yet scintillating to the point of moral deterioration at the same time. What neither of these views consider is the rich variety of materials that the comics medium encompasses, and the array of educational possibilities with comics seems to increase as more and more publishers embrace this medium. Comics are not simply one set of purposes or story types, and this singularity of focus does not apply to comics readership, either. Indeed, comics have the potential for leading to conversations centered around much more than superheroes – these texts can stimulate conversations about interpretation and

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lived experience (Farrell, Arizpe, & McAdam, 2010), and contain the potential for critical and analytical discourse (Botzakis, 2010).

While it has been argued that comics are simplistic materials, researchers have shown that the affordances of this medium are actually quite complex (Bateman et al., 2017; Cohn, 2019). Moreover, comics cannot simply be dropped into the educational program for expected results – they entail a specific set of reading practices, and maximizing their utility for classroom engagement takes thoughtful work (Jiménez et al., 2017). Historical opinion surrounding comics has ranged from viewing these materials as overly simplistic to, in the case of the 1954 text *Seduction of the Innocent*, socially-destructive materials with a sinister agenda. It seems that comics hold the potential for engaging younger audiences, as well as early adolescents (Edwards, 2009), and that there is further potential for moving from reader to creator as a writing practice.

Comics, like film, have the unique dual reputation of being both too simple and too edgy. These books are often decried as low culture, although they have more recently been accepted into mainstream canon in some classroom spaces. Continued critique suggests that teachers are dumbing down curriculum and not actually teaching reading. As a teacher of reading, I would never downplay the power of the written word or suggest that meaning-making in a comic should discount the presence of words.

However, I do note that the addition of images in juxtaposition, and sometimes contrast, to text actually opens up more opportunities for inferences and discussion than some prose pages do. Furthermore, I would suggest that comics provide opportunities for both engagement and success with texts, which can then be thoughtfully used to link to other texts that rely more on words to do their work. Or, comics can simply be read and enjoyed for the ways they work in and of themselves, and contribute to a strand of reading and study that would otherwise be neglected, ideally situated in a classroom that values and examines all texts.

On the other hand, comics have been deemed too edgy by some. Frederic Wertham suggested in his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, that comic books were to blame for mental illness and violence in society. Wertham's critique has since been reevaluated and his methods have been called into question, but this duality of thought speaks to an issue with understanding the comic medium.

That is, comics are not simply one kind of book. Just as one might read a series of books by one author and deem the novel stifling, oversexualized, overtly negative, glibly positive, or too concerned with pastoral scenes to ever be useful for the study of a character or thematic issue, so too can one read of a limited set of texts lead to a false conclusion about the comic, or any medium for that matter.

In response to the critique that comics are either too simple or too complex, I ask: How many have you actually read, and have you read widely? I also note, as William Boerman-Cornell and Jung Kim pointed out, comics are not a panacea. There are readers who will prefer other types of books.

## **STORIES THAT PUSH BACK**

In the following sections, I will explore a wide range of texts and provide commentary on the potential for the comics as a source of literacy motivation for an equally wide readership. Comics have the potential to do more than tell about an experience or identity, but to actually show elements of lived experience in the shades, lines, and panels that adorn their pages.

As Hughes et al. (2011) have noted, readers of “all ages and abilities read comic books and comics” (p. 625). Indeed, it is difficult to constrain readership in comics to one particular demographic, espe-

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