

***Where image and text meet identity:  
Gifted students' poetry comics and the crafting of "nerd identities"***

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**Peer-reviewed article**

**Citation:** Kersulov, M. L., & Henze, A. (2021). Where image and text meet identity: Gifted students' poetry comics and the crafting of "nerd identities". *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 13(1), 92-105.  
<https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2021-13-1-8>

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**Received:** February 17, 2020

**Accepted:** June 15, 2020

**Published:** May 24, 2021

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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**ABSTRACT**

This article reports on a study of how a class of fifteen- and sixteen-year-old gifted high school students "mixed" the media of poetry and comics to unveil and interrogate (what they called) their "nerd identities." Both co-authors constructed and co-taught a class within a literature-based comics course that led students through various writing processes that focused on the visual and textual properties of poetry and comics. Researchers asked: How may gifted students use poetry and comics to write about identity? How can the mixing of poetry and comics contribute to media literacy education? Using their poetry comics to connect their "nerd identities" to superheroes, students reported seeing parallels between the trials and tribulations of superhero origin stories and their own "gifted" identity.

**Keywords:** *comics, multimodal literary, poetry, pop culture, visual literacy.*



**Journal of Media Literacy Education**

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION (NAMLE)

Online at [www.jmle.org](http://www.jmle.org)

## INTRODUCTION

While teaching a literature-based comics course to gifted high school students during the summer of 2016, Michael (one of the authors) asked his class of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds to draw themselves. One student, Jesse (all student names are pseudonyms), drew herself wearing a shirt that combined the logos of comic book superheroes: The Flash and The Green Lantern. After asking her to discuss her drawing, she explained with a melancholic laugh that the picture highlighted her “nerd image.” Initially shocked at the student’s candid response that seemed to acknowledge both a social stigma and a celebration of the student’s “nerd identity,” Michael soon discovered that many of the students in the classroom harbored deeply seeded emotions regarding the social and cultural backlash they received by “being a nerd” while also recognizing various benefits of the label.

In an effort to lead students to explore such identities, Michael asked Adam – an educational researcher, professional poet, and one of the authors – to co-teach a class and lead the students through multiple exercises that would help them combine poetry and comics. The results provided students with a means to use images to express words (via comics) and to use words to express images (via poetry). This is a complicated process that proved to be both valuable for the students and an in-depth understanding of literacy practices and related use of media, such as poetry and comics, associated with students’ perception of identity.

The data draws from a larger five-year study that focused on literacy practices of gifted high school students using comics in the classroom (Kersulov, 2019). Using a sociocultural qualitative approach, our guiding questions for the current study were: How may gifted students use poetry and comics to write about identity? How can the mixing of poetry and comics contribute to media literacy education?

Our aim was to explore how poetry comics can afford opportunities for students’ self-expression; to unpack literacy practices tied to “mixing” or “mashing” multiple media; and to investigate the “nerd identities” of the students in the study, the social and cultural consequences, and the related emotional impact that led Jesse to explain: “I have definitely been called a nerd to my face multiple times. I don’t see it as a negative word. I take pride in it [...] To me it’s more of a term of empowerment. I am a nerd.”

In this article we first outline the foundations of media literacy and its significance in education. We then explain our data gathering methods and analysis of students’ poetry comics, including the unique characteristics of the research site. While showcasing two students’ poetry comics, we discuss how the students make sense of identities (i.e. superheroes, giftedness, and being a “nerd”) by using popular media to construct their own understandings. After presenting student’s poetry comics and analysis, we then connect our work to media literacy education and suggest recommendations for educators, their students, and ways to further explore media in the classroom.

### Influences of media literacy in this study

Media literacy, in general, focuses attention on the means to critically engage messages produced by media. This could take form in terms of access, analysis/evaluation, and creation of texts within and across contexts (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993) as well as understanding how and why meaning is created and displayed in media (Hobbs & Jensens, 2009). The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (2019, para. 1). Lankshear and Knobel (2003) and Liu (2005) discuss how educators must address new and emerging literacies to meet students’ needs in a world of changing media, information, and technologies. The importance of media literacy-focused lessons in education thus “requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create” (NAMLE, 2007, p. 3).

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) argue that “[l]iteracy is in its nature multimodal” (p. 234). A multiliteracies approach recognizes the role of multiple modes in composing, decoding, and reading media that includes linguistic, gestural, audio, visual, tactile, and spatial elements of texts (New London Group, 1996).

In terms of educational research, the New London Group advocates that a multiliteracies approach leads to a democratic view of social and cultural meaning-making as students are able to take up multiple modes, discourses, and social contexts when creating private and public texts. Students come into the classroom with a wide breadth of exposure to media, making them knowledge-holders who can critically and productively contribute to knowledge construction.

## Youth participation within affinity spaces

During this study, we were guided by a sociocultural approach (Dunsmore & Fischer, 2010), in which we drew on the social and cultural agents that cultivate and inform students' understanding of literacy and the world. Additionally, we turned to youth participation within affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Media literacy, as a communal experience (Mihailidis, 2014), and the role of youth participation in media literacy has shown to increase levels of curiosity when comparing fact and opinion in media (Hobbs, 2016). Bulger and Davison (2018) argue that "[m]edia literacy education makes visible what are often invisible structures, with a goal of creating watchful buyers, skeptical observers, and well-informed citizens," (p. 7) that it is "a method of linking critical thinking and behavior change for youth" (p. 8). Gee and Hayes (2011) refer to affinity spaces as informal learning communities or cultures in which experts or novices can exchange shared experiences and information. In these cultural and social spaces, individuals engage one another and the media that they mutually enjoy (Gee, 2018). Affinity groups are spaces where youth participants are encouraged to bring experience and knowledge to the table while also using one another to challenge popular media. We saw deep affinity develop in the comics classroom, which served as an interest-driven learning community (Ito et al., 2013). We also saw how students engaging learning communities with peers can provide opportunities to garner relationships, develop literacy skills, and construct burgeoning identities (Barron et al., 2014). As shown in this article, when adolescents analyze and create multimodal media within collaborative groups (such as fan art, comics, or poetry), such activities can lead to reflective inquiry that is both analytic and playful (Kupiainen, 2013; Song, 2017).

## Media literacy, comics, and the comics course

The NAMLE (2007) explains that "[m]edia Literacy Education expands the concepts of literacy to include all forms of media (i.e., reading and writing)" (p. 3) and that students in the classroom "use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (p. 3). Media literacy can thus be an orchestration of individual and social creativity, one that includes a playfulness in the acquisition and creation of meaning with multimodal media (Hobbs, 2010). Media from popular culture is prevalent in the lives of young adults (American Society of Pediatrics,

2013). We turn to comics in the classroom because comics and "the graphic novel [invite] media literacy education which includes information and visual literacy. The unique combination of print and pictures opens up possibilities for looking at new content and for examining how diverse kinds of texts make meaning to readers" (Schwarz, 2007, p. 2).

The role of comics in education has had a tumultuous journey. Comics have been typically rendered as replacement reading for struggling readers (Frey & Fischer, 2008), novelty stories for small children, and material suitable only for delinquents (Wertham, 1954). While some have advocated for comics in the classroom, it has been within the last twenty years that there has been a rise in educators, researchers, and theorists investigating the use of comics and other multimodal compositions in classrooms. Many researchers point to how comics promote student engagement and motivation – that is, getting students to read more by engendering a sense that they can read successfully (McGeown et al., 2016). Images and text combined in comics support and reinforce each other and can relieve the reader of feelings of mis-reading or the apprehension some students face with failing to read (Duncan, 2010). Comics in the classroom can also provide robust support for teaching reading and writing (Frey & Fischer, 2008). While some have shown comics to promote the value of reading skills in young readers (Jacobs, 2007), they can also encourage students who are hesitant to do their own writing. Some students may see comics as simple doodles that any individual, regardless of sophisticated artistic or writing skills, can create (Kersulov, 2016). Thus, creating comics can be freeing, democratic, accessible – even when topics are serious or even traumatic to discuss – as if a weight of expectation has been lifted (Kersulov, 2014).

It is comics' *power* to engage students in their writing about themselves within social and cultural situations that draws our attention in this study. Stein (2004) claims that through image and text combination, students writing with comics have access to a fuller range of emotions. Cary (2004) states that diverse classrooms can use comics for multilingual instructional needs. And Williams (2008) outlines how a comics' approach to art education can assist students in building empathetic perspectives regarding other cultures, peoples, and histories. Moreover, Carter (2007) claims that the visual elements of comics can help young writers depict social inequities and injustices. While these studies used superhero and fantasy based comics with their students, they also comment on how they

introduced various other genres to students, including memoir, historical fiction, and journalism, promoting critical thinking, analysis, and conversation in the classroom (Christensen, 2006). Others have pointed to the value of students creating their own autobiographical and memoir texts within a media literacies framework (Begoray & Brown, 2018; Nixon, 2013), noting how they can work as “counternarratives that interrupt and dismantle traditional conceptions of marginalized groups” (Song, 2017, p. 68). Furthermore, these studies point to the value of comics and media literacy in the classroom as a multicultural approach to literacy skills while reading, evaluating, synthesizing, and writing about social and cultural phenomena.

### Poetry in arts-based education

Incorporating lessons that blend poetry and comics can be an engaging and fruitful strategy for educators, since both media constitute what Moje (2002) refers to as “youth literacies,” or a set of texts that children and teens typically “read” outside of school, which range anywhere from memes on digital media to the liner notes of hip hop albums. Sales reports from 2018 indicate that the readership for both comics and poetry has increased worldwide (Jones, 2018; Middaugh, 2019), largely driven by the development of youth-led educational programs (Hijazi, 2018; Maughan, 2016) and the growing number of artists and consumers who share and discuss literary works on digital platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Ferguson, 2019; Salkowitz, 2017).

Like comics, McHale (2010) argues that contemporary narrative poetry is inherently a “mixed text.” While comics are often characterized by the mixing of visual art and written text (Kuskin, 2010), the stories of poetry are told through “the interaction between narrative organization and the poetic organization of texts” (McHale, 2010, p. 27). Calo (2011) claims that mixing poetry with images such as “art, photographs, font variations, and other visuals” can be an engaging classroom practice, because “the visuals provide additional clues as to the intent of the poet and help the reader navigate the rich layers of a poem” (p. 351). Loizeaux (2008) contends that poets turn to visual art out of more than just “inspiration” or “collaboration”: such works showcase the yearning for connection that artists have felt since the beginning of time.

## METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Focusing on two students (Jesse and Anna) from the comics course, we use a case study design (Merriam, 1998) as a means to “interpret [students’] experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). The two focal students were selected based on the narratives they expressed in their poetry comics and interviews, which were relevant to the study’s research questions. Researchers received IRB approval from the corresponding institutional ethics board, and the students presented in this article provided informed consent. Data collected during this study was triangulated. Data consisted of students’ products/compositions (comics and poetry), students’ drafts, students’ written reflections on their compositions, fourteen class discussions, two semi-structured one hour interviews with students, teacher and researcher field notes, and teaching materials. Audio recorded interviews and video recorded class discussions were transcribed. Researchers analyzed each focal students’ material separately and then analyzed across cases. Analysis followed multiple steps, initiated with an inductive process of open coding (Merriam, 2009) in order to generate preliminary categories. We used the constant comparative method (Creswell 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and as patterns emerged, axial coding was used to see the intersections within the data, commonalities, and patterns.

The poetry comics were analyzed holistically, guided by Albers’s (2007) visual discourse analysis, which leads researchers to consider how each panel’s information interacted with each individual panel and the composition on the page as a whole. Additionally, we noted how the images and texts invoked social and cultural phenomenon (ie. superheroes, nerd culture, school), looking at how the students replicated socially and culturally situated images to influence their composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). From a media literacy standpoint, we also examined how the students’ mashing of media - comics (a highly visual medium) and poetry (a highly verbal/textual medium) - provide interesting findings in regard to popular culture, student ownership and role in affinity spaces, and compositions that interrogate and reshape identity. We approached analysis of the poetry comics as a consideration of the social and cultural resources available to the students: including the physical materials used to create their comics, the model texts

read, and the class discussions about experiences the students brought to their work.

### Research site: A summer academy

The literature-based comics course was taught at a three-week summer academy for fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students who had been classified as gifted and talented. Students were from a variety of towns and cities from one Midwestern state within the United States. During the time that the students discussed in this article attended, Michael had been teaching the course for seven summers. The comics course had undergone multiple permutations, starting with a focus on superhero comics, moving to a focus on understanding the “system of comics” (Groensteen, 2007), then non-fiction comics, and resulting in a course that encouraged students to explore various composition possibilities with comics to promote reading and writing skills (Bakis, 2011; Bitz, 2010). Guided by these permutations, the 2016 comics course aimed to challenge students’ perception of writing that employed visual modes of composing. This included mashing together other modes of writing, including film, children’s books, and poetry.

### The comics course: Procedure and class texts

The comics course was intended to be both an introduction to the comics medium and an opportunity for students to investigate various forms of comics and its genres. Students read superhero comics, memoirs, comic essays, histories, journalism, political cartoons, digital comics, comic strips, and poetry comics in order to have access to the wide landscape of the medium. The aim of the course was for students to see the potential of comics as a form of composition, ultimately to write various comics about their own experiences. Meeting for 21 days over a summer, there were 54 hours of one-to-one contact with 19 students in the 2016 comics course. With no homework, graded assignments, or awarded credit, the course was for enrichment purposes only.

The course started with discussions about the grammar of comics, using selections from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993). After students familiarized themselves with the language and unique elements of the medium, they read and discussed exemplar texts from various genres. Superhero and fantasy comics included Wilson and Alphonso’s *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No More* (2014), Bendis’ *Ultimate*

*Spider-Man Volume 1* (2001), Kelly and Niimura’s *I Kill Giants* (2009), and selections from Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchman* (1987). Memoir and non-fiction comics included Spiegelman’s *Maus Volume 1* (1992), Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), Lewis’s *March, Book One* (2014), and selections from Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) and Prince’s *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir* (2014). Students also read Yang’s semi-autobiographical text *American Born Chinese* (2006).

Exemplar texts were accompanied by lectures and discussions regarding historical roots of comics; influential authors and theorists; and social, cultural, and political uses of comics. Class discussions also breached the changing nature of comics with regard to digital media, which is discussed further below. Such lectures supplemented students’ readings and acted as a means to model how to discuss and engage comics critically. Multiple guest speakers visited the classroom to discuss their expertise and experiences with comics, including a local comic book artist, a professor of comics from a local university, and a video chat interview with Liz Prince, author of *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir* (2014). Toward the end of the three week course, students met with Adam as he facilitated classroom activities regarding reading, analyzing, and writing poetry comics.

### Constructing poetry comics

While constructing poetry comics in the comics course, there were three student-created texts in the lesson. First, students generated an inventory of their “nerd identities.” Second, students selected one or more “items” from their inventory and were invited to use an image as a vehicle in a poem that narrates the student’s “origin story” related to their “nerd identity.” This second text essentially served as a rough draft for the third text: students parsed out lines and phrases from their poems and placed them into original poetry comics.

To help students generate an inventory to use in the lesson plan, students used two model texts. The first model text was Rob Sturma’s poem “Comic Book Me” (2014). Sturma is one of many writers from the poetry community who self-identifies as a “nerd” and his evident promotion of youth culture led to our decision to share his work with the class. In “Comic Book Me,” Sturma imagines how he would be represented if he were drawn by a comic book artist: “If you were to draw me in a comic book, / I would have a collar around my neck / and the leash attached would be held by my heart” (p. 122). Sturma’s poem is an ideal model text for the lesson because he constructs his identity playfully,

which has the potential to show students how writing in an imaginative space can shape identity construction. In the spirit of Rob Sturma's superhero references, we asked students to make an inventory, or list, of the "nerdy" parts of their identities that they professed in the class days beforehand. This task demonstrates that poetry topics do not have to be serious or cryptic, and that a classroom assignment can welcome the fan properties enjoyed by academic and non-academic communities within and outside classrooms.

After students spent approximately ten minutes writing their inventories and sharing them with peers in the class, we passed out copies of the second model text: the poem "Joker: Year One" by New York-based poet Geoff Kagan Trenchard (2014). "Joker: Year One" tells the origin story of DC comics villain The Joker. As a popular character in youth culture, showing different artistic approaches to popular characters like The Joker demonstrates that these characters are templates for anyone to pick up and wield. Trenchard's poem was also fruitful in the class because it was adapted into a digital comic by artists Ryan Hanson and Marc Scheff (2014). Since the text exists in two iterations - as a traditional poem and as a digital comic - Trenchard's narrative is useful in showing the steps in turning a poem into a visual composition.

We first presented students with the poem without images and read the poem aloud several times, discussing its content. We focused on imagistic lines that construct the main character, like "He's been up for days. Eyes sunk / back like eight balls, teeth rotting yellow / with plaque, hands rattling in happy jitters." Using this poem as a model text, we asked students to write their own "origin story," inviting them to use their inventories as reference points as they planned, edited, and composed their poems. Next, we read the digital comic adaptation of Trenchard's "Joker: Year One" (2014), paying particular attention to how the introduction of visual images enhances our understanding of the poem. As a culminating activity, we invited students to make a comic adaptation of their origin story poems. In the next section we provide an analysis of two students' works in the comics course.

### Anna's poetry comic: "One a story. It is mine"

Anna's inventory of her "nerd identity" includes television shows like *Firefly* and *Sherlock*, films such as *Star Wars*, Shakespeare, and superhero comics. Her inventory points to her membership into comics culture before she entered the course, a membership that she

intertwines with her "nerd identity." One observation of Anna's inventory is that she writes "costuming" and "cosplay" twice, adding a doodle captioned "needle + thread," and another of a period costume on a mannequin with pins, captioned "garb in progress / done dress" (Figure 1). Anna's "nerd identity" thus includes roleplaying, becoming someone else with costumes - a "trying on" of various roles as a means to explore fantasy, sci-fi, and fiction. While it is common for adolescents to explore identity by "trying on roles" (Patrick et al., 2006, p. 169), Anna does so with various fictional characters established within different media (comics, film, and drama). Through this mixing and mashing of these characters, whether it is Anna creating and wearing a costume or re-creating them in her poetry comic, she replaces herself with a fictional role, perhaps giving her access to these characters' traits and experiences. This practice became more evident in her poetry comic, and we took particular note that the role she adopted to portray her "nerd identity" was enveloped in aggressive, dangerous, and deadly situations.

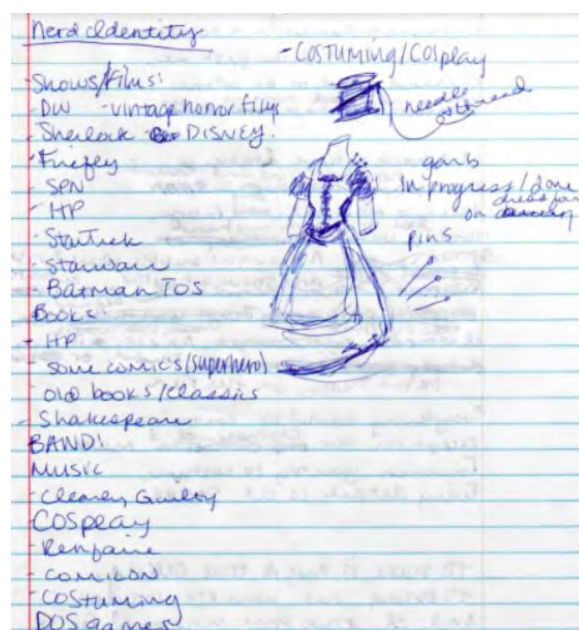


Figure 1. Anna, Brainstorming activity, 2016

When asked how her "nerd identity" relates to herself as a creative writer, Anna said, "I read more than I write when it comes to poetry." Anna's statement is significant because it demonstrates how there are various relationships that someone can have with poetry: some like writing poems, some prefer reading them out loud, while some primarily interact with poems by reading them silently. As her classroom teachers, we

also sensed some anxiety from Anna in regard to writing poetry, which became clearer as she began writing in class. One interesting aspect of Anna's process of drafting her poem is that she makes significant revisions during her writing process. As evident in Figure 2, several of her lines have been scratched out, and she altered the syntax of several of her lines during her short writing time. Anna's draft demonstrates that she approached the craft of writing in different ways: while other students in the class wrote long, flowing lines, Anna chiseled the shape of her poem almost like a sculptor. The effort Anna makes to shift her lines into what she called "the right space" in a stanza suggests that she likely is attuned to its spatial placement on the page as well as to the pacing and rhythm of the sounds produced. The poem also suggests Anna's desire to create a perfect composition - a work without errors. Schuler (2000) speaks to gifted students' struggling with perfectionism, and talking with Anna in class, we believe she struggled with this as well while writing.

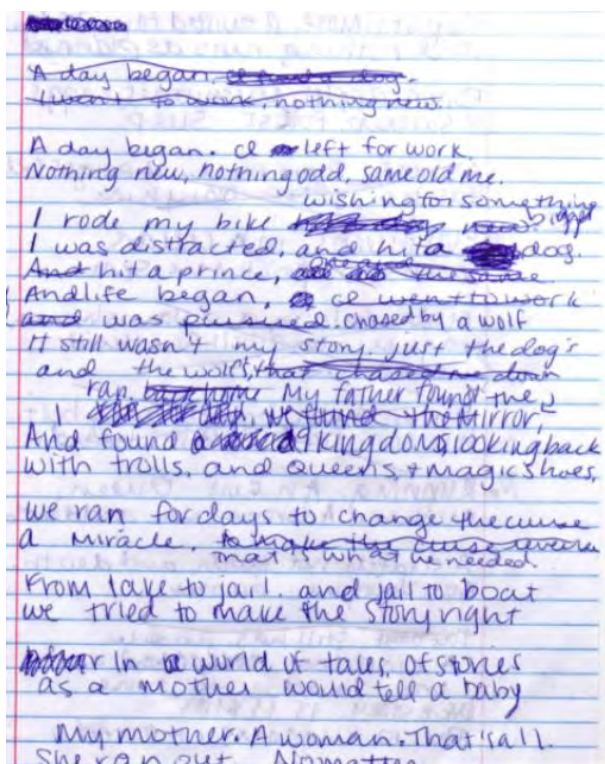


Figure 2. Anna, Draft of poem, 2016

The vehicle Anna chose to include from her inventory into her poetry comic was a fantasy miniseries from 2000 called *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom*. She explained in an interview, "I'm a miniseries nerd, so *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom* was like 100% of my childhood." Originally broadcasted as a five-part miniseries on NBC, a synopsis

provided by Sonar Entertainment reads: "A father and daughter are caught in a parallel universe where the great queens Snow White, Cinderella, and Little Red Riding Hood have had their kingdoms fragmented by warring trolls, giants, and goblins." The illustrations in Anna's comic mirror the opening shots of the series and showcase two interesting ways she uses fan fiction to construct her "nerd identity." Davis (2106) notes that fan fiction can play a productive role during media literacy education when students mix and mash various texts for their own creative means. In the same vein, Anna first drops her childhood self into the world of *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom*, a fantastical place that she claims in the fifth panel "it still wasn't my story" (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Anna, Poetry comic, page 1, 2016

Here, mythical creatures like trolls and werewolves are treacherous things to escape, and the theme of running carries her character through the story. Second, she positions herself as the protagonist in the story, which leaves the reader to wonder if her actual family members are represented as characters in the comic: the antagonist of the story is "An Evil Queen Mother." She then portrays a conflict that results in "death" (a word she repeats three times on one page), and in the thirteenth panel she depicts bodies splayed at the base of a candle-lit staircase in a grand hall. The other characters in Anna's comic (either present as images or referred to with only words) are all presented as aggressive and

antagonistic toward Anna. They hunt her. They lead her to death. While the characters may or may not represent real individuals in her life, it is significant to note that these are the characters she chose to represent her experiences with her “nerd identity.”

When asked how she felt about the assignment, Anna paused for a moment, then said: “You know, I think it was kind of cool doing both the poems and the comics because I feel like with comics a lot of people in our room are more literature-oriented than a lot more art-oriented so that actually connected where the dots sort of fell.” The mixing of poetry and comics gave Anna an opportunity to embody a beloved fictional character from her childhood, and use a familiar, pre-established fantasy world as a playground to construct an origin story related to her “nerd identity.” This mashing of film, poetry, and comics drew from various sources and media and forms a comprehensive narrative of the struggles within her “nerd identity.” Though her comic begins with the discovery of nine kingdoms - from a story she claims is not her own - her comic concludes with triumph. She proclaims that her narrative has become the 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom, to be included with the 9 others that preceded her. She writes: “A kingdom / won, / one add / to / nine... / One a story. It is mine / The 10 Kingdoms restored” (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Anna, Poetry comic, page 2, 2016

This declaration of triumph at the end of her poetry comic is accompanied by an image of the kingdom and its reflection in the water, evoking the parallel theme of a fantasy world mirroring the real world. The reader, thus, receives a message that despite Anna’s conflicts within her “nerd identity,” there is a silver lining, a day when she overcomes the monsters chasing her and the success in the fantasy world becomes a reality.

### Jesse’s poetry comic: “To say I am a superhero”

Another student in the comics course, Jesse, included activities in her inventory that were a part of her “nerd identity,” such as reading comic books and manga, watching cartoons and anime, studying foreign languages, playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), writing fan fiction, and drawing her favorite superheroes (Figure 5).

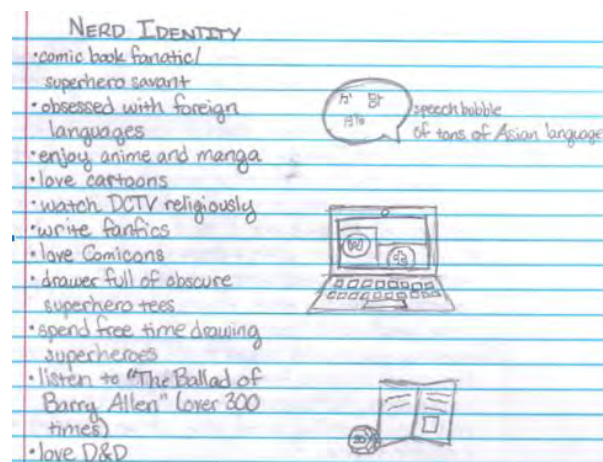


Figure 5. Jesse, Brainstorming activity, 2016

Jesse also included three doodles on her inventory: a sketch of a laptop, a twenty-sided die and D&D handbook, and a “speech bubble of tons of Asian languages.” One noticeable item on Jesse’s inventory is the statement “listen to ‘The Ballad of Barry Allen’ (over 300 times).” “The Ballad of Barry Allen” is a song by Massachusetts-based band Jim’s Big Ego, led by singer-songwriter Jim Infantino. The song is written from the perspective of the Silver Age superhero The Flash from DC comics, co-created by Infantino’s uncle, Carmine Infantino. The Flash is known as “the fastest man alive,” and “The Ballad of Barry Allen” tells the story of a superhero whose “time keeps dragging on” (Infantino, 2017). Essentially, Jesse used a song based on a comic book superhero as inspiration for her poetry comic about her “nerd identity.”

In an interview, Jesse discussed her approach to her poetry comic, explaining, “I took the perspective of Barry Allen [...] He walks the very fine line of being a superhero all the time and leading just an average, good life.” While Infantino’s version of Barry Allen grapples with his perspective of the passage of time, Jesse’s version of Barry Allen shares her struggles with her “nerd identity.” Outside her poetry comics, Jesse also created memoir comics in the class, in which she related how her label as “gifted” led to teachers and peer alienating her, to facing dismissive attitudes toward obstacles she faced related to her gifted status, and to experiencing the pressures and social expectations that resulted in feeling powerless (Kersulov, 2019). Reviewing both her poetry comic and memoir comics, we saw connections between Jesse’s depiction of Barry Allen’s conflicts with her own negative experiences with being labeled as “gifted.” Her poem begins, “To say I am a superhero... / would be to call me a god... / And that’s not a standard ANYONE should be held to” (Figure 6).

To say I am a superhero would be to call me a god, and that's not a standard anyone should be held to.  
Being a "cut above the rest," it's bull.  
We're not above one another.  
That's a philosophy of hubris, of avarice, of greed.  
It's the thinking that ends lives, decimates relationships, stalls humanity.  
There cannot be gods among men, fooling the people of this world into the insecure belief that we control who lives or dies, that saving is a conscious choice and not an opportunity to embrace mere human nature.  
But here we are, people like me, gifted with abilities beyond reality, and it does feel like a choice.  
Maybe it must be, with people like Zoom choosing wrong.  
But does that mean I'm responsible for always being right? Am I responsible for all those that chose an evil path?  
Because I'm just a man. Gifted, but a man among men nonetheless.  
They don't tell you with this connection to this greater congregation, to this Speed Force, that you become grounded and removed all at once.  
Forever isolated by those who enabled me to protect and those I endeavor to.  
But there is no choice to turn from either side.  
So I walk the line, trying to

Figure 6. Jesse, Draft of poem, 2016

Jesse posits Barry Allen (instead of herself) as the protagonist in a poetry comic that is specifically about her “nerd identity.” This is striking to us because Barry Allen is commonly depicted as a white male, and this contrasts to Jesse self-identifying as an African American female. Jesse has completely replaced herself with a superhero character, one that struggles with the guilt and pressures of having super abilities. In her final panel, she states that the assumption that oneself is better

than others is “the thinking that ends lives, decimates relationships, and stalls humanity.” An illustration of The Flash can be seen speeding past a bystander toward the edge of the frame (Figure 7). The juxtaposition of the images and words is interesting because while her poem dismisses the idea that she is a “cut above the rest,” the image depicts her as Barry Allen speeding effortlessly past a closed-eyes bystander whose hair is blowing in the wind. Just as Barry Allen has powers (as The Flash) that surpass the average person’s, we cannot help reading into Jesse depicting her own “giftedness” at the same time. In her poetry comic about her “nerd identity,” Jesse combines her godlike descriptions with images of human marvels, like airplanes and tall buildings, and the tensions between these objects leave us to consider the gravity of the “gifted” label. In a follow-up interview, Jesse continued to discuss her experiences with “giftedness,” saying “And there was always a pressure to keep doing well.”

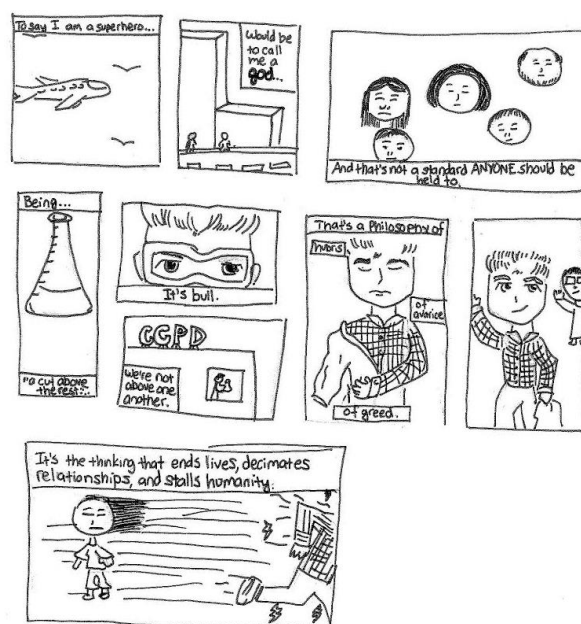


Figure 7. Jesse, Poetry comic, 2016

In an interview, we asked Jesse to discuss how she had depicted her gifted identity in the comics she drew about herself throughout the comics course. Jesse replied:

I think my gifted identity is one of the things I have struggled with the most because I think there is a societal expectation of giftedness. People seek to define giftedness so they can identify other gifted kids, but really giftedness is such an individual thing [...]. And so I think in [a comic drawn in class], my representation of myself is like that, yes, I fit in most people’s definition of gifted, but my own perception doesn’t fit what everyone else thinks, and that creates a really stressful dichotomy for myself

because I want to live up to other people's definitions of giftedness because I'm a people pleaser.

Looking at both Jesse's poetry comic about her "nerd identity" and her comments about her experiences with "giftedness," we see the parallels Jesse makes between Barry Allen's struggles and her own. In her poetry comic, Jesse expresses "a societal expectation" for superheroes to be perfect and to use their abilities for good, just as she does in her interview in regard to giftedness. Reading her poetry comic with this perspective, we wonder if Jesse harbors some sense of guilt for being labeled "gifted," for having academic abilities beyond her peers, one that leads her to write that being a "cut above the rest" is "bull."

We asked Jesse about her experience of turning a poem into a comic. She replied, "thinking of each line as a standalone [...] was actually really helpful in thinking of dialogue." The rhythm of speech is showcased in Jesse's comic, evident in her placement of lines in the panels that oscillate between elaborate phrases and short utterances. In a follow-up interview, Jesse explained that the process of writing poetry comics gave her an opportunity for self-reflection not commonly afforded to students in traditional school curricula. She explained after writing her poetry comic: "Poetry is usually seen as something that is very private, and introspective, and not a lot of people are willing to share that." Jesse's comment echoes a common notion that poems often reveal the hidden parts of the lived experiences (Tannenbaum, 2000), which can be a powerful tool for students who wish to make their identities visible to others.

## DISCUSSION AND STUDENTS' FINAL THOUGHTS

The focus of this article was to answer our questions regarding students' poetry comics, identity, and what insights can we draw regarding media literacy education. Students drew from social and cultural elements of giftedness, comic book culture, and various popular media to create their own multimodal compositions. As students shared drafts, gave comments to one another, and revised their work, the classroom developed into a burgeoning affinity space that began with discussions of superheroes, comics, and poetry and ended with open discussions about the conflicts and struggles of "being a nerd." As a result, they harnessed a core tenant in media literacy education by mashing two very different media (poetry and comics), creating new

ways to compose and new avenues to display their rich experiences.

As the students portrayed themselves in poetry comics, they rendered the elements of their "nerd identity" as a power or gift, much like those of superheroes. Both focal students discussed the expectations, responsibility, and social pressures that come with their gifted and talented label, their academic success, and their "nerd identity." These struggles manifested on the page as carrying a burden or a weight. These struggles were also depicted as a series of trials to overcome in order to satisfy the social and cultural expectations that come with giftedness. Similar to the superheroes the students drew upon, neither student asked for her gifts. Both were asked for something in return for receiving them - an expectation to perform, achieve, and produce for others.

In both the students' poetry comics, the characters (the fictional representations of themselves) were depicted in scenes of conflict. Both the text (poetry) and images (comics) in their work used metaphors of tension: from depictions of being chased and events leading to a death, to battling with social expectations of godliness and power. It is evident that the students' compositions portray their views of "nerd identity" as being outsiders, different, ridden with anxiety, and at times painful. Thus, the students' work begs the question: Do gifted students view an inherent conflict in "nerd identities"? Does being a "nerd" come with a cost or burden? If so, why do they choose to continue to explore, engage, and display such characteristics? In contrast, their work could suggest that the pain that might come with being a "nerd" is what brings satisfaction. A common motif in comic books is the hero understanding his or her plight is a tradeoff for helping society. Anna and Jesse might view the social and cultural struggles tied to their giftedness and "nerd identity" as necessary evils in order to wield such "power."

Finally, we saw the two focal students praise the process of mixing both the poetry and comics. Another student in the course explained that "I really don't like writing about myself, but I really enjoyed thinking about how I would describe myself in poem form [...] I've never been a fictional character before, so that's cool." Even with a series of complicated processes (ie. the inventory activity, poetry drafting, sketching and drawing, and tying multiple media and modes together) the students created exceptional works that housed complicated and thoughtful ideas. Such compositions led the students to not only critical self-reflection

through words and images, but they also poignantly conveyed to their readership the emotional turmoil they experienced.

We would like to end with a student's comment made during an interview. We find that her comment not only carries our sentiments regarding students using poetry and comics toward self-discovery and expression, but her words also speak directly to scholars, researchers, and educators interested in similar classroom activities. In our final interview, we asked students: what would they say to teachers who were interested in using comics in the classroom. One student replied:

Let your kids be as creative as possible with it. Because comics and poetry, those are some of the most expressive media we have. With poetry, it's about self-expression a lot of times, telling stories in a different way, imagery and all of that. In comics you have the entire image, and you have no limits with that. And so when you put the two together, you can really create this whole new world, this new medium that is really good, especially for students, creative students, because you are not just doing it out of a textbook for three hours. It's actively thinking, and drawing, and using creative abilities.

This comment highlights an eagerness these students have for educators to encourage creativity and to pursue self-expression with mixed media.

We believe comics were useful to Michael as a classroom teacher due to his long history of using comics in literature-based classrooms and Adam's experiences as both a poet and educator. They both brought their experiences and enthusiasm for the media to the students. We recognize that not all teachers have a rich background in comics and poetry, and we do not claim that it was simply because of the combination of poetry and comics that students were able to express themselves or these ideas. Instead, we urge teachers to include popular media from their professional and personal lives (ie. comics, poetry, memes, film, social media) into the classroom. Exposure to new media in the classroom leads to students seeing new opportunities and new challenges, and it opens channels to see connections between interest groups that involve students and teachers. We asked students to gain a better understanding of comics, poetry, and media, and we also asked them to use their lived experiences as tools to do so.

The results showed us what students can do with mixed media, but also about the tensions and struggles in their lives, tensions we might have not heard without such an activity. Above all else, this study speaks to the value of media literacy education as a fount that can

bring new life, new venues, and at times new worlds for students to create, explore, and find themselves.

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