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# Comics and Composition, Comics as Composition: Navigating Production and Consumption

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## Book Reviews

### Comics and Composition, Comics as Composition: Navigating Production and Consumption

**Contemporary Comics Storytelling**, by Karin Kukkonen. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2013. 248 pp.

**Linguistics and the Study of Comics**, edited by Frank Bramlett. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 328 pp.

**Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments**, by Barbara Postema. Rochester: RIT Press, 2013. 172 pp.

*Reviewed by Tammie M. Kennedy and Jessi Thomsen, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Erica Trabold, Oregon State University*

Composition has a vested interest in exploring how comics studies can inform our teaching of writing, multimodal literacies, and visual rhetoric. Composition and rhetoric has already demonstrated a growing interest in comics (including graphic literatures, graphic novels, graphic narratives, digital storytelling) as complex sites of literacy and as spaces to theorize and practice multimodal composing. Comics also provide opportunities to explore the rhetorical choices and transactions that must be negotiated between composers and readers. However, despite composition scholars' interest in multiliteracies, multimodal composing, and visual rhetoric, the interdependent and fluid connections between images and words remain largely disengaged.



Fig. 1. Consumption versus production of comics.

For example, in *Embodied Literacies*, Kristie Fleckenstein coined the term “image-word” to disrupt the binary that often exists between word and image and to revitalize the use of images in the composing process.

Despite such efforts, this disengagement also prevails in comics studies. More specifically, as we note in Figure 1, there remains a persistent divide between using graphic texts for interpretation, or as a means to understand something else (consuming), and composing graphic texts (producing). While composition instructors and textbooks are developing more multimodal and visual assignments, production-based pedagogical practices are slower to emerge, or they focus too heavily on what Diana George describes as the traditional uses of visuals, such as “image analysis, image-as-prompt, or image as dumbed-down language” (32). Steve Westbrook argues that the problem with the consumer-based paradigm that accompanies the use of visual texts such as comics is that “[t]his approach does not position students as genuine agents of change precisely because it places them outside of the discourses that they are examining” (465). The groundwork has been laid to incorporate comics studies into composition studies; it is now imperative that students compose *with* images instead of just write *about* their analyses of various images found in comics.

Our review of the books by Karin Kukkonen, Frank Bramlett, and Barbara Postema provides an opportunity to address more specifically the impetus for editor Dale Jacobs’ special issue on comics, multimodality, and composition, and to answer a central question that undergirds this impetus: How can comics studies inform writing theories and practices, for both students and instructors? From a pedagogical perspective, the immediate concern that follows this question is *how* to deploy comics to help students read and write more effectively. Our focus on production-based comics pedagogies stems from three different but complementary perspectives (see fig. 2). Tammie is a rhetoric and writing professor who teaches students how to write comics, especially graphic memoir, and draws on comics as a way to teach writing and revision. Erica is an MFA student in creative nonfiction with no formal background in art. Jessi is a rhetoric and composition graduate student who also has a background in art and digital writing. Both Jessi and Erica compose comics in digital and non-digital forms, as well as teach writing using comics. We believe that students in composition classrooms can benefit from the tools required for analyzing and producing comics. In fact, we already ask composition students to make the leap between reception and production all the time: students read essays, articles, and samples, and then produce their own writing. Therefore, the composition classroom is already structured for the type of work comics studies invites.



Fig. 2. The reviewers.

The three texts reviewed here articulate varying arguments for comics to be analyzed and regarded as literature; however, none of these texts explicitly address *instruction* in the creation of comics. In addition, because these texts are heavily reception-oriented, they do not delve into the possibilities of using comics for the purposes of invention, composing, or revision. While these texts do much to advance comics studies, they also expose some of the gaps that remain in terms of how comics studies might be deployed more productively in composition. As we review the texts, we highlight specific chapters that might inform composition theory and provide richer, more production-based pedagogical practices. Although the authors do not make explicit production-based connections, we believe each book provides generative spaces within comics studies that can augment both composition theory and student writers' composing processes. We maintain that composition studies needs to embrace more production-based pedagogies associated with comics to bridge effectively the gaps between consumption and production that have stalled a more expansive approach to literacy and multimodality within composition studies' meaning-making practices.

### **Defining a Genre: Providing Comics Vocabulary for Composing**

Regardless of whether the goal for writing students is the reception or production of comics, it is important to first define the elements unique to the genre. In order to fully capture the complexity of comics as a means of composing, those undertaking its study have used several terms. The Modern Language Association has proposed "graphic narratives" be used in place of "comics" to frame its discussions (qtd. in Postema xi). However, Kukkonen, Bramlett, and Postema all use the term "comics" to focus their studies, as does the title of this special issue of *Composition Studies*. In the introduction to *Narrative Structure in Comics*, Postema provides a rationale for this choice:

There is danger inherent precisely in creating a separation and disassociation between different kinds of comics genres, especially when

the labels are ill-defined or haphazardly applied. . . . The scope of what the comics form can represent or incorporate becomes limited, diminishing the form itself, at least for casual observers, and the graphic novel or narrative becomes a genre without precedent or tradition, as if it originated all of a sudden in a vacuum, thereby misrepresenting the genre. (xi)

Postema goes on to propose that the term “comics” should be used broadly, but it should not be all encompassing. A narrative sequence should only be considered a “comic” if it includes a combination of purposeful gaps, words, and images.

The issues surrounding this broad genre’s terminology, however, remain quite complex (see fig. 3). Kukkonen, Bramlett, and Postema derive their analytical work in relation to comics rooted mostly in fiction. Based on the traditional literary divide between fiction and nonfiction texts, we began to wonder if nonfiction comics, like those composition students may be invited to compose, call for a term of their own. We considered adopting a term like “graphic narratives” or “graphic literatures” to broaden the scope of our inquiry. In the end, we decided that extending the use of the word “comics” in our review seemed best suited to advance the genre. Just as “creative nonfiction” is used as an umbrella term to signify the subgenres of autobiography, memoir, the personal essay, or any combination thereof, “comics” can function as a term that represents a variety of texts and subgenres, including the graphic novel and those based in nonfiction. As the body of work surrounding comics continues to grow, scholars will likely continue to refine these terms. At the moment we find ourselves entering the conversation, however, we feel that introducing a new term may do more harm than good in advancing the academic study of the genre.

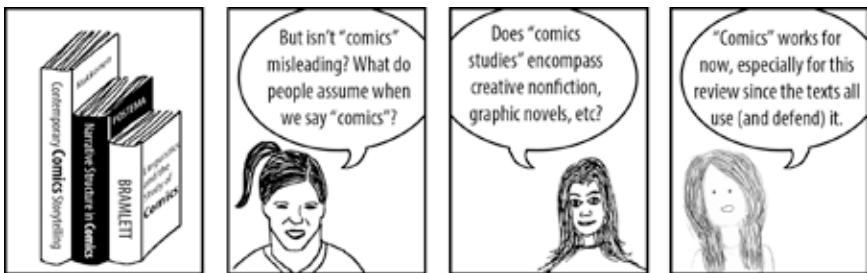


Fig. 3. “Comics” as a term for genre.

Once students understand the genre features of comics, including the contested terminology, and how comics’ attributes mirror and diverge from other kinds of texts, they need a language that helps them articulate what a text

says and how it says it. Postema offers the most straightforward description of *how* comics function to build a narrative sequence, which provides students with not only an understanding of the complex function of panels—the lines separating images from one another in comics—and the gaps and spaces that generate meaning, but also a vocabulary for discussing how students interpret and produce comics. According to Postema, “the framed panels and the page on which they are laid out create their own gaps, namely the spaces that now separate the panels—the gutters” (xiii). Students, as savvy readers, may already recognize gutters as a visual representation of the passage of time between panels, which can then be read as a sequence (see fig. 4). What may be new to them, however, is the understanding that these sequences rely heavily on what is missing, “making the reading of comics an active, productive process” (Postema xiv). Whether composing comics or performing an analysis, students’ attention should be drawn to the act of closure, or filling these gaps, which is an action essential for the reader to perform in order to decode a comics narrative.

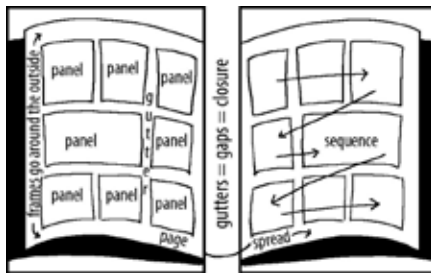


Fig. 4. Comics terminology.

### Consuming Comics: Navigating the Gaps between Writer-Based and Reader-Based Texts

The three books under review demonstrate that comics has established itself as a genre fit for critical inquiry in English studies and that the production and consumption of comics involve complex processes of encoding and decoding. Arguably, the least helpful book for composition scholars interested in teaching students how to produce comics is Karin Kukkonen’s *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*. Kukkonen promotes the analysis of comics, not because of their increasing popularity, but because of their narrative complexity that places them on equal footing with text-based literature. For example, in her chapter, “How to Analyze Comics Cognitively,” Kukkonen provides a literary-based context for analyzing comics by defining a number of terms (inferences, clues, codes, gaps, closure) that connect the two genres. Overall, she proposes that comics must be viewed in terms of “the complex combina-

tions of clues and gaps in the text that interface with the cognitive process our mind runs when reading fiction” (14). Her strategy to equate comics with literature is an important enterprise, but one that many composition scholars already embrace. Although Kukkonen asserts that the postmodern relationship between composer, text, and audience increases the complexity of the comic narrative and places it more solidly in the realm of literature (see fig. 5), this chapter can help composition scholars better articulate the complexities of the rhetorical triangle when reading and composing comics. Furthermore, Kukkonen uses postmodernism to interrogate comics, explaining that “postmodern texts take the identity- and empire-building narratives of modernism and subvert them with retellings from a different perspective” (3). Students are often asked to tackle various perspectives (cultural, ideological, political, etc.) within reading and writing. Comics provide a platform for teaching analyses of these differing viewpoints as well as tools for composing texts that navigate multiple perspectives.



Fig. 5. Kukkonen’s argument for comics as literature.

The rest of the book’s chapters feature case studies that perform literary analyses of comics and specifically address intertextuality, storyworlds, and fictional minds. More specifically, “Fictionality in Comics: *Tom Strong*, Storyworlds, and the Imagination,” might be of interest to composition scholars. Here, Kukkonen focuses on layers within the comic, demonstrating how both image and text contribute to the reader’s understanding of the multiple worlds or “multiverse” within the *Tom Strong* comic, increasing its narrative complexity. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates how the comic enters moments of metanarrative in which the fictional comic shows awareness of the reader and/or writer. This attention to the complexities of the reader/writer relationship illuminates how rhetorical choices shape reader/writer transactions in meaning-making processes. Overall, Kukkonen illustrates the potential for analyzing comics using literary tools and theory, as well as provides a postmodern lens, which helps readers consider the dynamics of closure, audience investment

and participation, and narrative structure, and leaves space for addressing how comics might inform the production of complex narrative texts.

In *Linguistics and the Study of Comics*, editor Frank Bramlett compiles chapters that construct a generative space where the interdisciplinary nature of English studies and comics might better inform each other through linguistics (1). Drawing on the extant works of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, Bramlett's collection advocates studying the language *in* comics versus the language *of* comics by applying linguistics to comics studies to explore both the visual and verbal in varying degrees (2). The first four chapters "peer into the minds of readers and artists, accessing linguistic and visual codes through cognitive linguistics" to better theorize how words and images shape the medium (8). The other seven chapters explore the "sociocultural landscape" of comics and characters in comics, focusing on how comics represent and provide a means to understand language issues, such as accents, dialects, jargon, and group identity (8). Furthermore, Bramlett assembles a wide range of expertise in comic studies, representing different background fields (linguistics, sociology, library science, media artist/designer, communication, English, and education) and home languages (e.g., Swedish, Spanish, and Hebrew).

Elisabeth Potsch and Robert F. Williams open the collection using concepts of image schemas and conceptual metaphors from cognitive linguistics to analyze how speed and direction are conveyed in comics so readers can conceptualize a sequence of events from still images such as in *Spider-Man* and *The Green Lantern*. These concepts are useful for teaching students the rhetorical nature of spatial cues. Neil Cohn's significant contribution draws on cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics as he uses comics to articulate a theory of what he calls "visual language." Cohn argues that "while 'visual language' is the biological and cognitive capacity that humans have for conveying concepts in the visual-graphic modality, 'comics' are a sociocultural context in which this visual language appears (frequently in conjunction with writing)" (113). Cohn's work challenges the notion of the language *of* comics. From Cohn's perspective, "visual languages" have a vocabulary of patterned graphic representations and a specific grammar, just like spoken languages. For example, Cohn focuses on the translation process between visual and verbal and how this translation shapes representations of meaning. In composition courses, we often ask students to use description to support their arguments, embolden their narration, and illustrate results, concepts, and theories in their essays. Description, in essence, is a visual language, which requires the writer to translate mental images into words that create visual images in the minds of the readers.

The remaining seven chapters focus on the sociolinguistic elements in comics from a range of perspectives. These chapters are important for rhetoric



and composition scholars because they demonstrate *how* representations of identity and difference are constructed through linguistic and visual systems and create meaning for the artist/creator and reader. For example, Miriam Ben-Rafael and Eliezer Ben-Rafael examine how French language comics incorporate English and other languages to reflect youth culture and vernacular, which appeals to a broad range of readers. Editor Frank Bramlett contributes to the study of manga in the collection by examining varieties of English in *Afro Samurai* and how linguistic differences mirror the politics of language and social struggles across various identity groups. Carla Breidenbach examines how bilingual code switching and other linguistic tools operate in the U.S. comic strip *La Cucaracha* as a way to create and critique political discussions about English as an official language. Kristy Beers Fägersten examines the effect of code switching from English to Swedish in the Swedish comic *Rocky*, revealing how English represents cultural appropriation and affinity within U.S. popular culture, especially African American culture. Overall, Bramlett's book provides an important treatise to think about comics as a way to understand how language (textual and visual) functions within specific lingual systems, offering tools and conceptual lenses that might be adapted to help students compose their own comics or inform their writing and revising processes.

Lastly, Barbara Postema focuses on the function of gaps and how they relate to meaning-making in comics in *Narrative Structure in Comics*. While the book focuses on defining the formal and material specificities of comics for critical consumption rather than production, the concepts outlined in Postema's book provide the most potential for developing product-based pedagogies for composing comics. Despite Postema's focus on semiotics and comics, much of the information culled from this text could focus on producing comics, especially the role and effect of space when composing with graphic elements. The various elements of comics—including gaps created by gutters and framed panels—work together to create meaning. Through a series of five colorful, heavily illustrated chapters, Postema demonstrates how gaps created by gutters and framed panels work together to create meaning within comics. Postema's carefully chosen excerpts in the chapters provide visual examples of how comics utilize connotative, intertextual, narrative, and temporal codes to achieve meaning, highlighting how these systems of visual representation build on one another to construct a narrative sequence. Readers must use evidence on the page, both coded and mimetic, to understand images and their implications. For example, in "Concerning the In-Between," Postema explains how frames, borders, and spaces create the structural layout of comics on a page, which is useful material for teaching composition students about creating comics. Although gutters are used to separate panels, which are laid out to create the

conditions for reading, they are never devoid of meaning; reading the blank spaces causes readers to reconsider and reevaluate the meaning of earlier images.

Throughout chapters three, four, and five, Postema focuses her discussion on gaps and how they function to propel a narrative. In “All in a Row,” Postema demonstrates how action is implied through the gutters and readers make “unvisualized connections” in order to fill them. Almost automatically, readers are prompted by the gaps to move back and forth in a sequence, making gaps an essential part of the reading process. Readers, and by extension composers, must consider various panels simultaneously in order to fully understand the information they provide. In literature, text propels narrative, but in comics, images must do this work. Postema explores image-text relations in “Combining Signs” and explains how text can help to fill the gaps left by images, layout, and sequence. But by adding text, Postema reminds her readers that a new gap forms—that between verbal and visual representation. A combination of text and image can smooth over gaps in signification, but together they can never quite succeed: “Comics are not inherently a hybrid form that must combine text and image. However, when the two are balanced, and image and text work together, the combination creates the possibility of bridging a gap, allowing for new forms of intricacy and nuance in the comics form” (101). Readers use prior knowledge to temporarily fill these narrative gaps, revising them as new information becomes available. Building on Postema’s analysis of gaps, students can learn to consume and produce texts more critically, identifying how gaps in text and images function rhetorically and shape meaning.

In the book’s final chapter, “Show and Tell,” Postema deploys compelling examples to show how images provide data visually to readers, and readers participate in dialogic and recursive processes in order to understand narrative weaving: “[C]omics signal their own reading processes, creating and instructing new ways of signification as necessary” (116). To bring the controlling idea of gaps full circle, Postema reminds readers that artists choose what is said and unsaid, what is drawn and not drawn, in order to achieve clarity. Comics are engaging and immersive because on every level the reader must fill the gaps and continuously participate in the story created by the writer in order to achieve a desired effect.

## **Conclusion**

As a whole, the three texts discussed in this review continue the work of legitimizing comics as a genre of academic study and augment our understanding of how to analyze, critique, and enjoy a wide range of comics. Furthermore, these texts expose a challenging gap in composition’s use of multimodalities, multiliteracies, and visual rhetoric. Though these books do not extend their inquiries toward the production or creation of comics, composition has much

at stake in creating generative production-based pedagogies. Incorporation of comics into the writing classroom should not hinge upon students' artistic abilities. Instead, emphasis should be placed on combining images and text in ways that allow the author to think differently about writing and explore new ways of composing for richer rhetorical effects. Students should pay particular attention to how text and images interact, create tension, and produce meaning that could not be generated in either by itself. In the end, comics provide a rich avenue for students to deliberate with more sophistication the rhetorical moves they employ in their own writing.

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