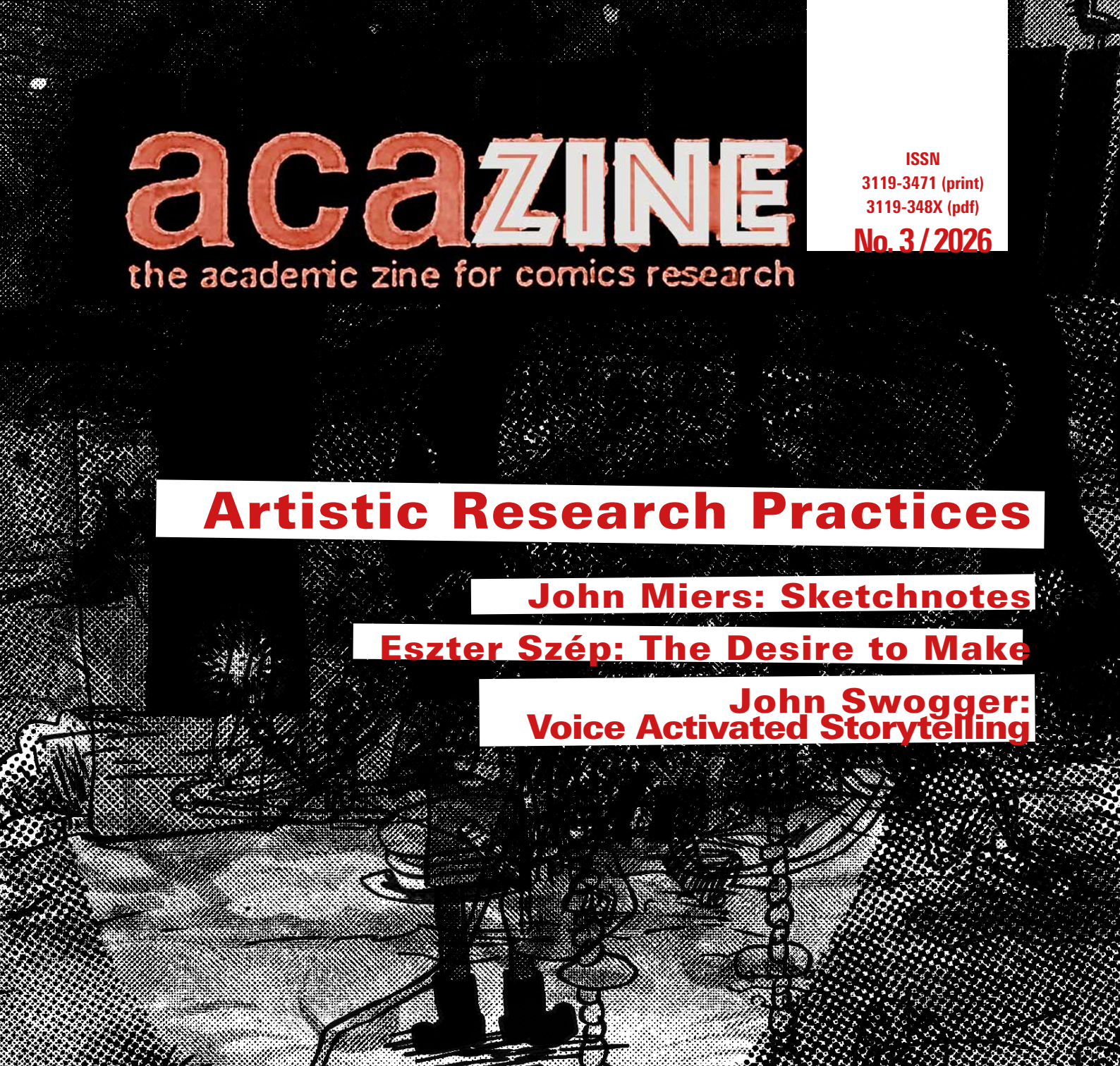
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the academic zine for comics research

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Artistic Research Practices

John Miers: Sketchnotes

Eszter Szép: The Desire to Make

John Swogger: Voice Activated Storytelling

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Artistic Research Practices

Things take up speed for acazine – this third issue continues on the topic of artistic research that we started in the very first issue!
We are happy to present in this volume three different examples that introduce us to distinctly different aspects and approaches to artistic comics research. They focus on seemingly different aspects of visual expression in comics, from visual conceptualising ideas to communicating research results to specific audiences.

John Miers' contribution focuses on **sketchnotes as artistic practice** that expands on note-taking at conferences and how these visual notes can be used also to illustrate comics research. The documentary method of sketchnoting is known for its effective function for remembering the events, that is where it started from. Like all drawings, the quality of these sketches is of the moment and depends on many factors, and due to their individual qualities and contexts, they expand beyond visual note-taking and transport additional aspects that invite for their further use. This contribution focuses on the use of sktechnotes as narrative elements within research reflections.

continued on next page –>

Eszter Szép takes us *into* her sketchbook, inviting the accidental into academic practice and asking *what comics studies might gain from the embodied knowledge of the maker.* Her drawing process interweaves with the development of her reflections on drawing, combining textual and pictorial aspects, utilising for her own reflections the hands drawing each other as established in M.C. Escher's *Drawing* (Tekenen. January 1948) as reference and concept. As the notes included in or framing the individual images indicate, the research-process partly happened during, partly within the drawing process, it got clearer in and because of the resulting visual material. The resulting images can be shared, like the sketchnotes in the previous article, and invite us readers to reconstruct the artist's own thought process. In this, Eszter Szép's article reminds us explicitly about subjectivity in encoding and decoding, forcing us to reconsider our own readings carefully.

John Swogger describes and reflects on examples of *voice activated storytelling* that are realisations of the concept of *community engaged comics* (CEC). In this, the focus is not put on artistic self-expression but on carefully reflected experiment in the construction of the narrative, Voice activated storytelling for comics asks for the careful curating of the sources that the comic being told is following the storyteller and letting the narrators speak using their own voice. And it demands to construct the narrative so that it connects and continues from and into other contributions on its theme and topics. While the visual artist is always searching for expression, in Swogger's case that expression cannot be an experimental search as described and executed in the previous contribution; here, the experimentation lies in meeting the communicative requirements while keeping the readers' interest activated.

Enjoy and continue the debate!

If you want to contribute to acazine's open and uncomplicated approach to comics research, take a look at acazine's call for papers at the end of this volume an on our homepage
www.acazine.org

Oskar Jakob

the new academic journal dedicated to international comics research



Artistic Research in Comics.
Experimental visual storytelling by humans who draw comics for humans.
No.1/2026

This issue looks into artistic research as a method to better understand how storytelling in comics is working on the pictorial plane. The focus of artistic research is partly driven by experimentation on visual qualities, while clearness of expression or conveyance of narratives are not always most central to experiments.

Zine, 32 pages, format A5,
images in colour, 50 skr + postage.



Flexible Pages.
Reading Comics on Screen Media.
No.2/2026

This issue looks at a few selected examples of digital comics storytelling that are distinct in the way they construct their narration, e.g., how they provide for variations in formats, or allow for the construction of distinctly different points of view.

Scroll-zine in 26 columns, 14x390 cm (approx.),
images in colour, 300 skr + postage.
Produced in 24 copies only:
Scroll rolled around wooden core, closed with ribbon/ band attached to (removable) wood-supported front-edge.

previous issues of acazine

Don't waste the garbage! Reflections on making and showing sketchnotes

Text and illustrations by: **John Miers**

Introduction

Sketchnoting, a term initially defined by Mike Rohde (2013) as "rich visual notes created from a mix of handwriting, drawings, hand-drawn typography, shapes, and visual elements like arrows, boxes and lines" is one type of what Penelope Mendonça (2016) calls "live visual recording". She distinguishes it from the more methodologically explicit "graphic facilitation", a related practice carried out professionally, usually on large format paper, with the explicit intention of providing a public record of interactions (Mendonça, 2016, pp. 134–136): sketchnoting is often conducted on an amateur basis, and for the purpose of facilitating the sketchnoter's own comprehension and recall of a presentation.

Mendonça observes that sketchnotes typically make use of many of the formal resources considered characteristic of comics (p.130), and that sketchnoting has become a common practice at comics studies conferences (p.128). Advocates for sketchnoting often make claims about the cognitive benefits of

producing multimodal texts by hand, as in Nichole Carter's assertion that "when touch is combined with vision, learning jumps by 30%" (2022, p. 19). In this piece my claims about the value of sketchnoting, my own use of it at least, will be comparatively deflationary. Leaving aside the question of what a jump in learning of 30% might mean or how such a thing could be measured, I don't want to claim that the visuals in my sketchnotes offer any particularly insightful translations of the arguments made in the conference papers they record. I'm open to the idea that their incorporation of some visual record of an event means that they might aid recall more than purely written records, and I certainly find the exercises of quickly attempting a likeness of the speaker and visualisations of some of what they say to be productive and enjoyable ways of maintaining skills I value. But on reviewing the piles of drawings I've accrued over years of comics scholarship, the key value of sketchnoting highlighted by Mendonça that seems most clearly applicable is its role in community building, which is highlighted by Rohde as a cornerstone of the philosophy of *The Sketchnote Handbook*. Alongside this observation she also notes Rohde's endorsement of the individualised nature of approaches to sketchnoting, but cautions that this casts the activity as a mode of self-expression in which "It may not matter to [sketchnoters] whether they are accurate or reflect a shared view" (Mendonça, 2016, p. 131). The production of self-adjudicated records of public conversations may, she notes, create ethical concerns when "sensitive information [is] shared within group discussions" (ibid). This is arguably less of a concern with public presentations of academic research, but I should nonetheless confirm that none of the drawings presented here are intended as authoritative records, and offer my customary apology for misrepresented arguments and poor portraiture.

The circulation of sketchnotes, Mendonça suggests, operates in a manner "not dissimilar to the 'small press' [comics] […] scene […], where sharing ideas and visuals promotes the feeling of belonging to a group or subculture" (ibid). With that idea in mind, I'll also mention that Mendonça, or Pen as I know her, is a dear friend who I studied alongside as a doctoral student in the 2010s, and that, not coincidentally, the examples she offers of sketchnoting in comics scholarship come from events I attended, convened by organisations to which I feel strongly attached. One is a collection of drawings compiled as a record of the 2015 conference jointly hosted by the International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference, about which more later, and the International Bande Dessinée Society society in Paris. The other is a one-day symposium at Sussex University organised by the British Consortium of Comics Scholars, a grandiose name me and a few fellow comics studies PhD students gave to the reading group we had formed. One of those students was Paul Fisher Davies, also a keen sketchnoter. We drew on our experience with this type of drawing when collaborating on a research comic for formal publication (Miers, Chessum and Davies, 2021 [1]).

Sketchnoting, then, has for me been primarily an enjoyable way of engaging with comic scholarship and friends within the field, which has occasionally influenced or been directly used in more formal research outputs. I suppose reflecting on this in a research zine straddles those modes of engagement appropriately!

[1] Doctors John, Thierry and Paul planned to record a conversation about the comics theories they had explored in the course of pursuing their respective PhDs, to see whether these were consistent– with plans to co-created a 'verbatim comic' based on the recordings. To keep things manageable each composed five questions, from which two were chosen to answer, for a strict one minute each –with a little chance for comments, questions and responses after. This was still a lot of text to fit into a comic! Each transcribed the questions asked, and the comic that follows is a result of the subsequent editing and drawing. Thierry passed away in the months following the recording but his self-drawings are re-used here, and his partner Sharon provided a splash image. (Miers, Chessum and Davies, 2021)

The examples that follow show sketchnotes produced and used at the two most recent comics scholarship events I attended: *Mental Health: New Perspectives in Graphic Medicine and Life Writing*, KU Leuven, Belgium, 12-13 May 2026, and *Truth, post truth and damn lies in Comics and Graphic Novels*, The International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference (IGNCC), De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, 17-19 June 2026.

Mental Health: New Perspectives in Graphic Medicine and Life Writing

All the drawings were produced on cheap A4 printer paper, resting on a clipboard if no table was available. The reason for this choice of surface was my adoption a few years ago of a Noodler's Ahab Flex fountain pen for writing, as a complement to my already-established preference for a Kuretake Fountain Brush Pen no. 15 for portraits and other drawings. Noodler's ink dries slowly on good quality paper, making it impractical for use in my usual sketchbook. However, it bonds very quickly to cheaper, less densely woven paper, hence the move to cheaper materials. An unanticipated side effect of this material shift was that when a speaker noticed me drawing them and expressed interest in the results, I felt able to offer them the drawing, something I would not have been willing to do if it had meant tearing a page from a sketchbook.
It was this circumstance that first alerted me to the ability of sketchnoting to initiate or reinforce collegial relationships and as such I have continued to draw in this format, even when, as in the following examples, the writing is done with a generic fineliner rather than my fancy fountain pen with its pernickety ink.

Figures 1-3 record the first morning's presentations. There's a decent amount of content in these, and that to some extent reflects my intense interest in the topics - graphic medicine is a key focus of my research and practice, and Lynda Barry and Gabby Schultz, the subjects of Maaheen and Frederik's papers, are both discussed in my aforementioned book. But what they also reflect is simply the fact that these talks happened in the morning.



Figure 1



Figure 2

After lunch was a panel I spoke on, and figures 4 and 5 show the rest of the afternoon's content. The relative reduction in graphic density of these drawings is not at all reflective of a proportional reduction in interest! Johanna and Fleur presented outlines of participatory graphic medicine projects rather than analyses of comics, meaning that there was less cool stuff for me to copy, but more importantly I was getting tired. I have multiple sclerosis,

meaning that my stamina for even the relatively gentle physical activity of drawing diminishes over the course of a day. For the closing roundtable discussion I wasn't really up for more than just sketching the speakers, but I'm pleased to have reminders of Erik's delightful story about receiving a three-page letter from Hergé as a child, and of Geert's moving account of helping individuals with psychosis to understand their experiences.



Figure 3

Embodiment had already emerged during the day's discussions as a key theme for the symposium, and in that light the changes in the drawings produced over the day might be seen as an embodied record of the fact that spending a day engaged in the ostensibly abstract and wholly intellectual activity of listening and responding to academic papers remains a physical and demanding experience.

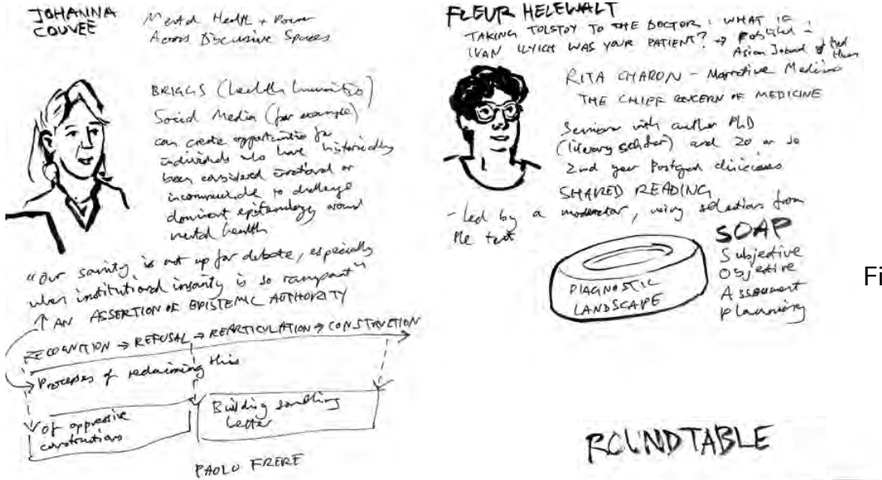


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7a

The same pattern is repeated the following day, from a dense page of text and images reproduced from Hel Spandler's keynote lecture, to Erwin Dejasse and Simon Grennan just getting half a page each in Figure 8. But that page probably contains the clearest example of drawing being used to facilitate my engagement with the symposium: the forms at the top right are taken from drawings by Gustave Sievers held in the Prinzhorn collection[2], produced while he was an inmate in a psychiatric institution. They depict elements of the landscape seen from his window, and the page on which these forms appear

[2] https://www.sammlung-prinzhorn.de/en/

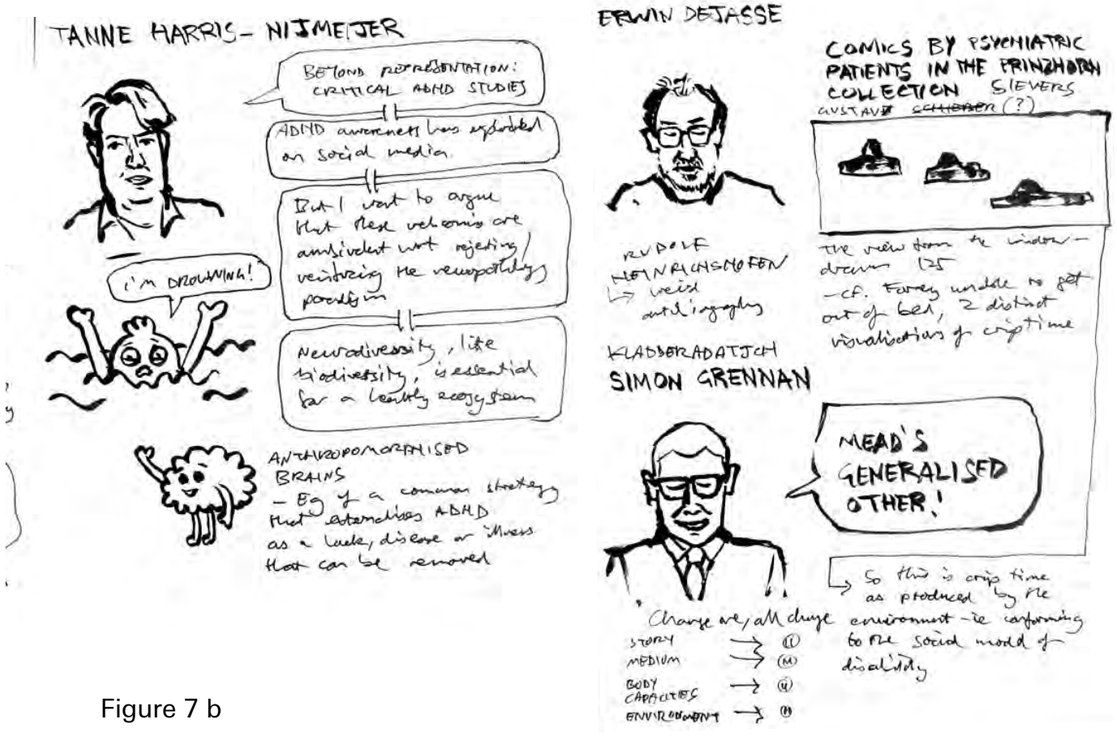


Figure 7 b

Figure 8

Is divided into a comics-like grid of interrelated images. As noted below the sketch, they reminded me of Ellen Forney's depictions of herself unable to get out of bed and enshrouded in a duvet (Forney, 2013)[3], which Stella had discussed in the previous panel. At the end of that note I suggest that the two drawings could be considered "distinct visualisations of crip time"

[3] https://offbeathome.com/how-to-get-out-of-bed/

(see Gardner, 2022), and reflecting on that idea during Simon's presentation of a model for the analysis of artistic research outputs led to a question about how different models of disability might produce different experiences of crip time, the basis of which is written at the bottom right.

Finally for this event, my apologies to Simon de Backer and Iana Nikitenko who both gave excellent talks comprising the last panel, but at that point I'd stopped drawing for the day.

Truth, post truth and damn lies in Comics and Graphic Novels

Does it matter to me whether the drawings presented so far are accurate or reflect a shared view? At a basic level they do contain externally verifiable information regarding who spoke when and about what, and the accuracy of the images can be judged by visual comparison with the speakers or the material they presented, and it would be embarrassing if any of that were found to be wildly inaccurate ("Frederik" is misspelt in figure 3). But some of the comments they contain, such as the fragmentary quotes from Barry in the bottom half of figure 2, or Simon's decontextualized statement "Mead's generalised other!" in figure 8, are notes-to-self that recall previous engagements with the work of the speaker or the artist they are discussing, thus not even produced with the intention of reflecting a shared view.

The above discussion highlighted ways in which the drawings prompt recall of my embodied experience of the event and specific interactions prompted in various ways by the drawings (Simon wasn't really convinced that the Sievers and Forney drawings manifested versions of crip time constituted by different models of disability! Fred was wryly amused by how much I'd made him look like an egg!), thereby emphasising that they are notes, primarily intended for private recall. If any of the people depicted in them are reading this, they may well be seeing them for the first time. The next set of drawings made a more explicit appeal to community formation by being incorporated into a public display.

At the IGNCC 2026 I was invited to give a keynote lecture, end given

my years of regular attendance at that conference I wanted to incorporate sketchnotes made in previous years into my slide deck where appropriate. As it turned out the content of my lecture on visual metaphor and truth didn't afford that many opportunities for callbacks to papers from previous years, and when I did cite colleagues who I thought were likely to be present the accompanying drawings didn't necessarily have anything to do with the points I was using their work to support.

Early in the lecture I prefaced a summary of Ernst Gombrich's lecture "The Cartoonist's Armoury" (1963) with some remarks from Ian Horton and Maggie Gray (2022) about the influence of his work on contemporary comics studies. Neither drawing in figure 9, both taken from the previous year's conference, has anything to do with those observations. Ian's is another example of material circumstances influencing what makes it onto the page: that panel took place at the end of a long week, in a sweltering room without air conditioning, so the only element of the actual content of his paper that made it into the drawing is the fact that it was about James Bond comics.

Figure 9



The other two examples I prepared before the event had more substantial connections between the talks they recorded and the points I made while showing them. Figure 10 accompanied my introduction of Dominic Davies's arguments about the effects of focalising images through military targeting equipment in Hamad Sulaiman's *Freedom Hospital* (2017; Davies and Rifkind, 2025) in support of my own arguments about how metaphors are embedded in graphic styles. Figure 11 accompanied a mention of metaphor therapy (see Kopp, 2013) in the lecture's conclusion.

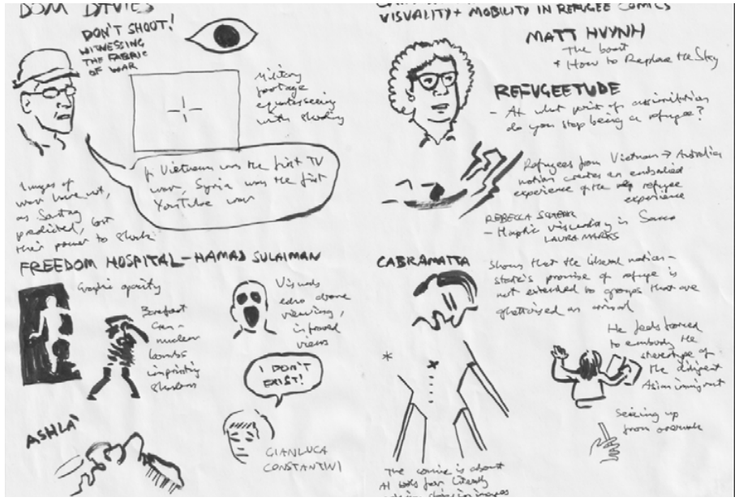


Figure 10

Figure 11



All these drawings function as direct gestures of appreciation for the work of the colleagues they depict, and as celebrations and demonstrations of the exchange of ideas at this long-running conference. That endorsement is arguably made most strongly in Figure 12:

This slide shows, on the left, my sketchnote from Kate Evans's[4] keynote lecture given the previous day at IGNCC 2026, and on the right Kate standing at the same lectern from which I would show figures 9-12. The slide she is displaying in the photograph presents an excerpt of a sequence from *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* in which she depicts herself drawing a portrait of a young Afghan man she has met in the Calais "jungle" (see Evans, 2017, p. 106). Lace, which we see forming the border of the projected panel, has a variety of specific metaphorical resonances within *Threads*, which as Harriet Earle (2020) discusses are often used to evoke the exclusion of refugees from systems of access and validation constructed by white European culture. In such cases the qualities of fragility and value evoked by lace are ironically contrasted with the treatment and circumstances of refugees living in Calais. In this sequence, however, Evans's narration documents detailed observations of the young man's appearance, and images show her careful attention to capturing the features she describes, including precisely delineating an eyelash with a watercolour brush. Through this attention to the live visual recording of a social event the lace decorations become an appropriate adornment for something valuable rather than a bitter reminder of an inaccessible world of leisure and luxury.

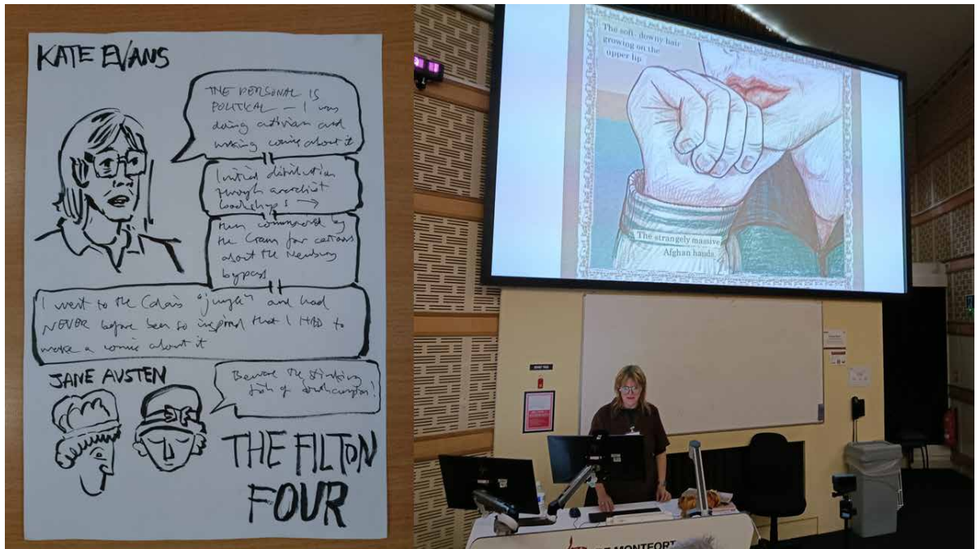
In my lecture I used this example to clarify a distinction I proposed between denotative and expressive visual metaphors (see Miers, 2025). In the former type, commonly encountered in advertisements and political cartoons, a new, objectively incorrect, label is applied to a depicted subject that has already been identified by its correct label, as when we recognise a politician in a cartoon and also recognise that they have been depicted as a pig. Evans's use of lace belongs to the latter type. Expressive pictorial metaphors are part of our recognition of the subjects of depictions rather than subsequent acts of relabelling, and they occur when affective qualities are invoked by material features of images and attributed to diegetic worlds or entities, as when the delicacy of lace is attributed to Evans's sitter.

This example and argument bring together many of the threads discussed above. Early in her article Hattie quotes from an interview Dom did with Kate (Davies, 2017) in which Kate explains that her use of collage in *Threads* took inspiration from *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) by Lynda Barry, who was the subject of Maaheen's paper (fig. 02). My sketchnotes from the 2015 conference discussed by Pen record that Simon discussed Lynda Barry in his paper at that event, and commented that the decorative marks adorning many of her pages still signify despite being non-representational, but they do so through affect rather than reference, just as the fragments of lace in figure 12 do.

Reviewing these drawings, at least insofar as I have focused on them as records of social events, affect likewise seems to be strongly emphasised as a source of signification, at least moreso than one might expect from drawings ostensibly produced as informative

[4] https://www.cartoonkate.co.uk/

Figure 12



documents. My dominant impression of figure 2 is that it records the experience of spending 20 minutes thinking about Lynda Barry thinking about making comics. Reference does play its part, of course. The speaker portraits might in some regards be considered the most straightforwardly decorative element of any of these drawings, but under the present focus they anchor the drawing by invoking the presence of the person who prompted the reflections being recorded. Nor is my focus on the interpersonal and affective meant to disregard the benefits of sketchnoting in more traditional terms of information recall. I doubt I would have remembered Simon's comment so readily if I hadn't incorporated it into a drawing 11 years ago!

In a forthcoming research comic, Paul (Davies, 2027) identifies correspondences between academic cartooning and academic writing, and he introduces this discussion with commentary on his own sketchnoting practice. As I have done here, he emphasises sketchnotes' status as elements of social events, including sharing the drawings with the speakers they depict. He develops his comparison of stylistic features of scholarship in prose and comics with reference to Helen Sword's (2012) work on "stylish academic writing". Among textual features she identifies as enhancing the readability and accessibility of academic work are first person anecdotes and narrative framings, concrete nouns, visual illustrations, and humour; as Paul observes, these are also characteristic of comics. He depicts himself gesturing towards a reproduced page from Helen's book and exclaiming "look at that list! Anecdote and story – the concrete versus the abstract, and material verbs… It's what comics were made for!".

Earlier I described sketchnoting as a practice in the sense of rehearsal, in that the rapid production of drawings functions as a "productive and enjoyable way […] of maintaining skills I value". Paul's framing suggests that sketchnoting has value in the maintenance of more traditional academic skills too. Visualist scholars such as Rudolf Arnheim (1969) would of course be quick to insist that the demanding cognitive activities of selecting representative details and summarising arguments belong to the visual realm no less than the verbal. As somebody who produces academic work in both comics and prose form, the idea that there is a continuity or even isomorphism between the intention to produce marks signifying features of a speaker's appearance and the intention to produce marks recording words that speaker has spoken or displayed appears both natural and explanatory. Multimodal notetaking is in this sense not that different from any other form of notetaking, in that the goal "this is useful or important and I want to be able to recall it" is realised by making ad hoc applications of the same communicative resources the notetaker employs in their more public-facing work.

The contexts of rehearsal and personal recall again return our attention to the value such work has for the notetaker, but the various audiences examined in this essay and indicated by its presence in this publication also point to wider applications. I have noted above how my display of sketchnotes in the IGNCC lecture operated as a statement of belonging to, and gratitude towards, that particular community, and recalled instances of the Leuven sketchnotes prompting both scholarly and informal conversations. Notes and other types of intellectual ephemera are, in general, considered valuable because of the insights they provide into texts and textual-production activities that have already been identified as objects of interest. We care about Art Spiegelman's minute revisions of the placement of words in a speech balloon recounted in *Metamaus* (2011) because we already care about *Maus* (2003). As comics scholars invested in the use of comics as not just objects of study but vehicles of scholarly insight, we already care intensely about how comics' multimodal resources can be used in academic discourse. Thus for the present audience there is potentially a twofold interest in drawings like these. As notes they record events and arguments relevant to our field of work. As sketches they are improvised experiments with the same set of material and semiotic components used in comics that more explicitly identify themselves as research outputs, and as such, they document exploratory combinations of those components.

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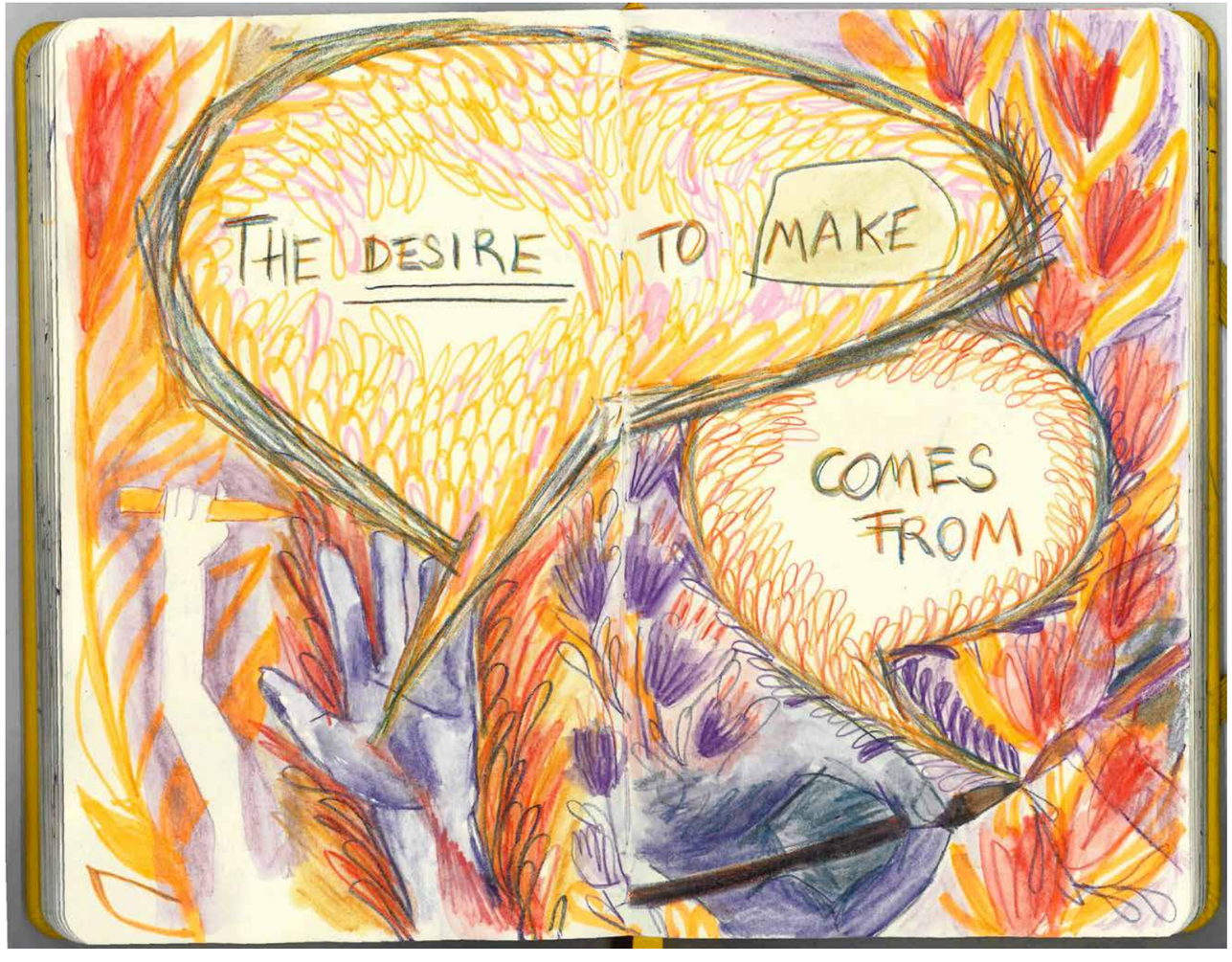
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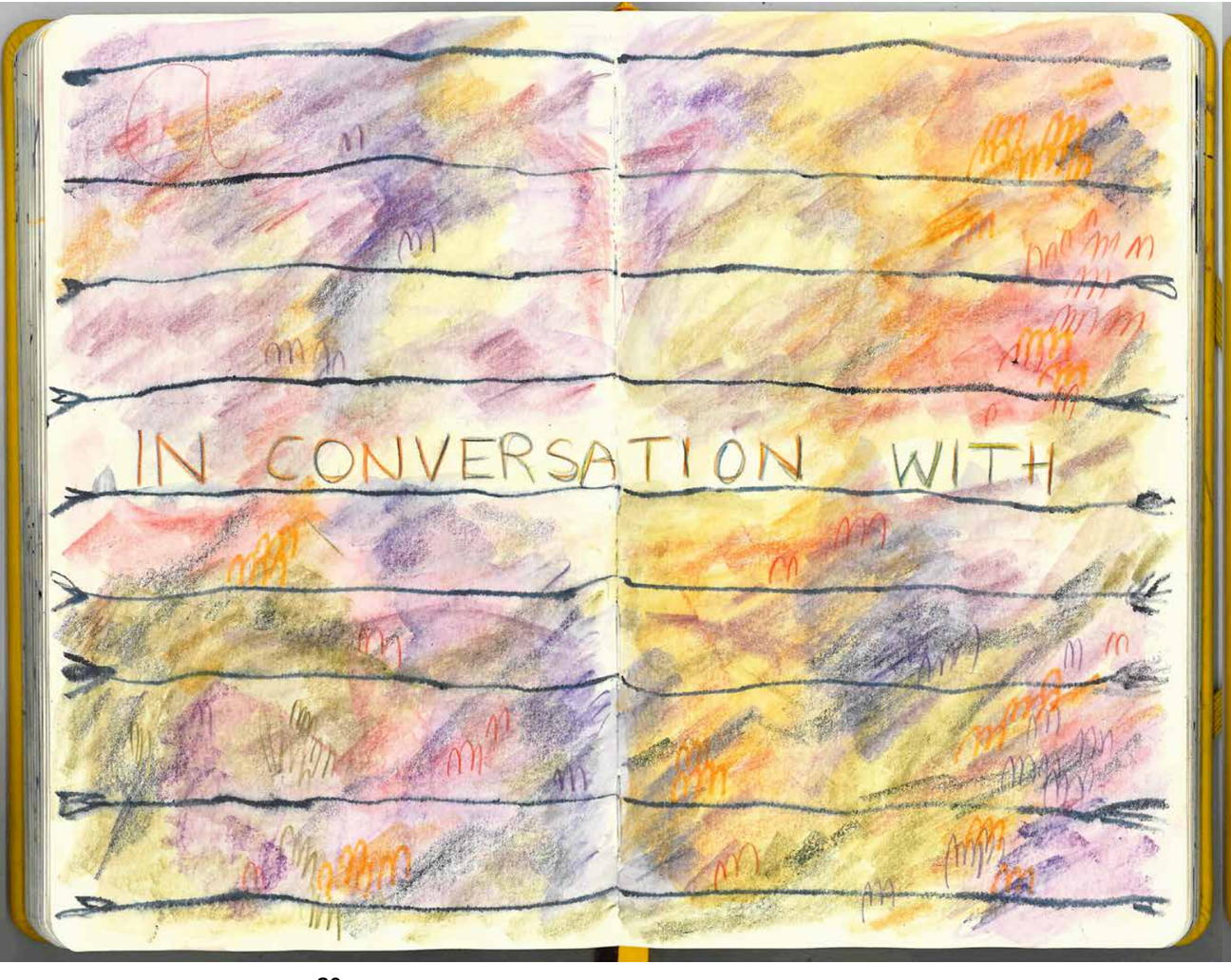
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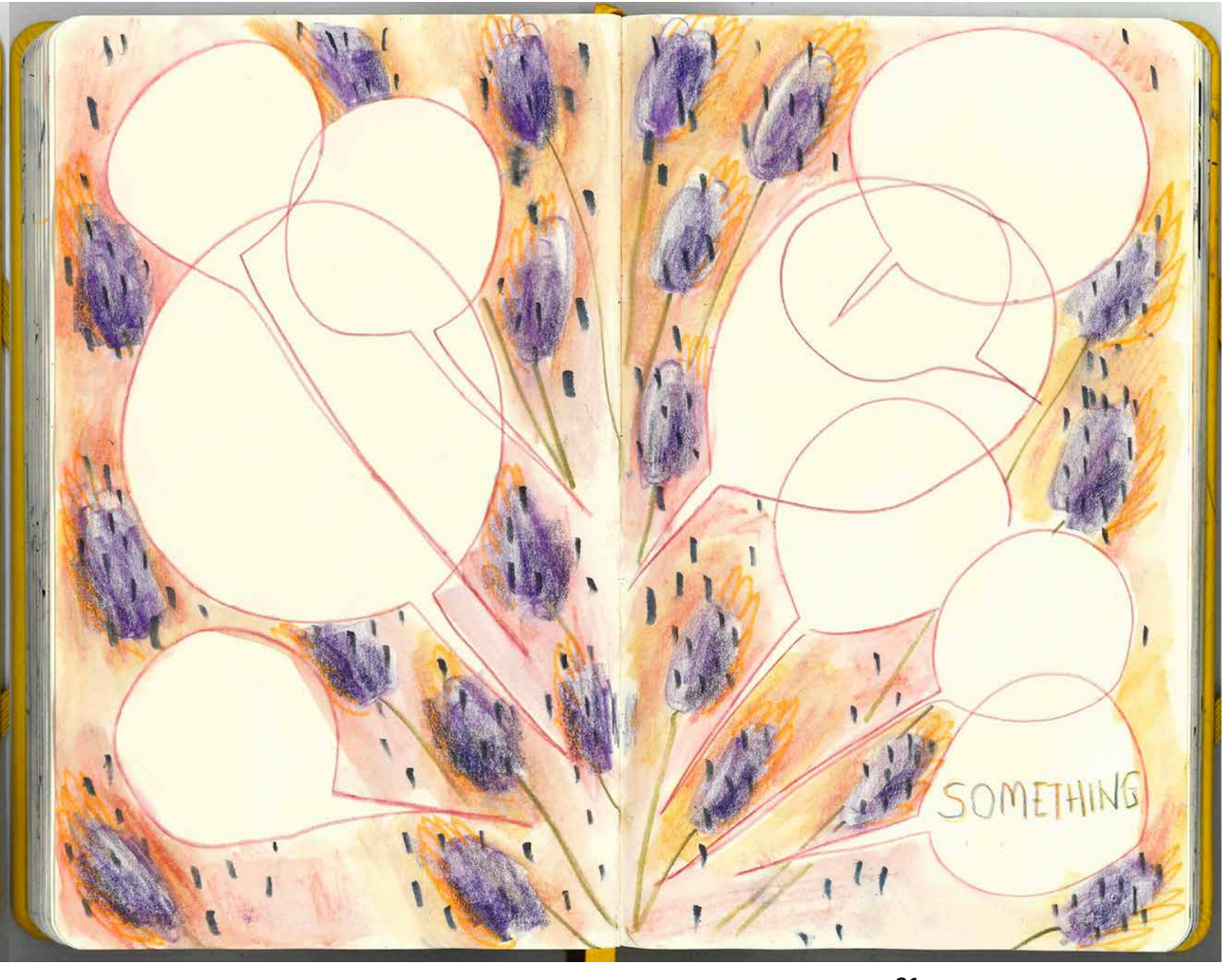
Text and illustrations by: **Eszter Szép**




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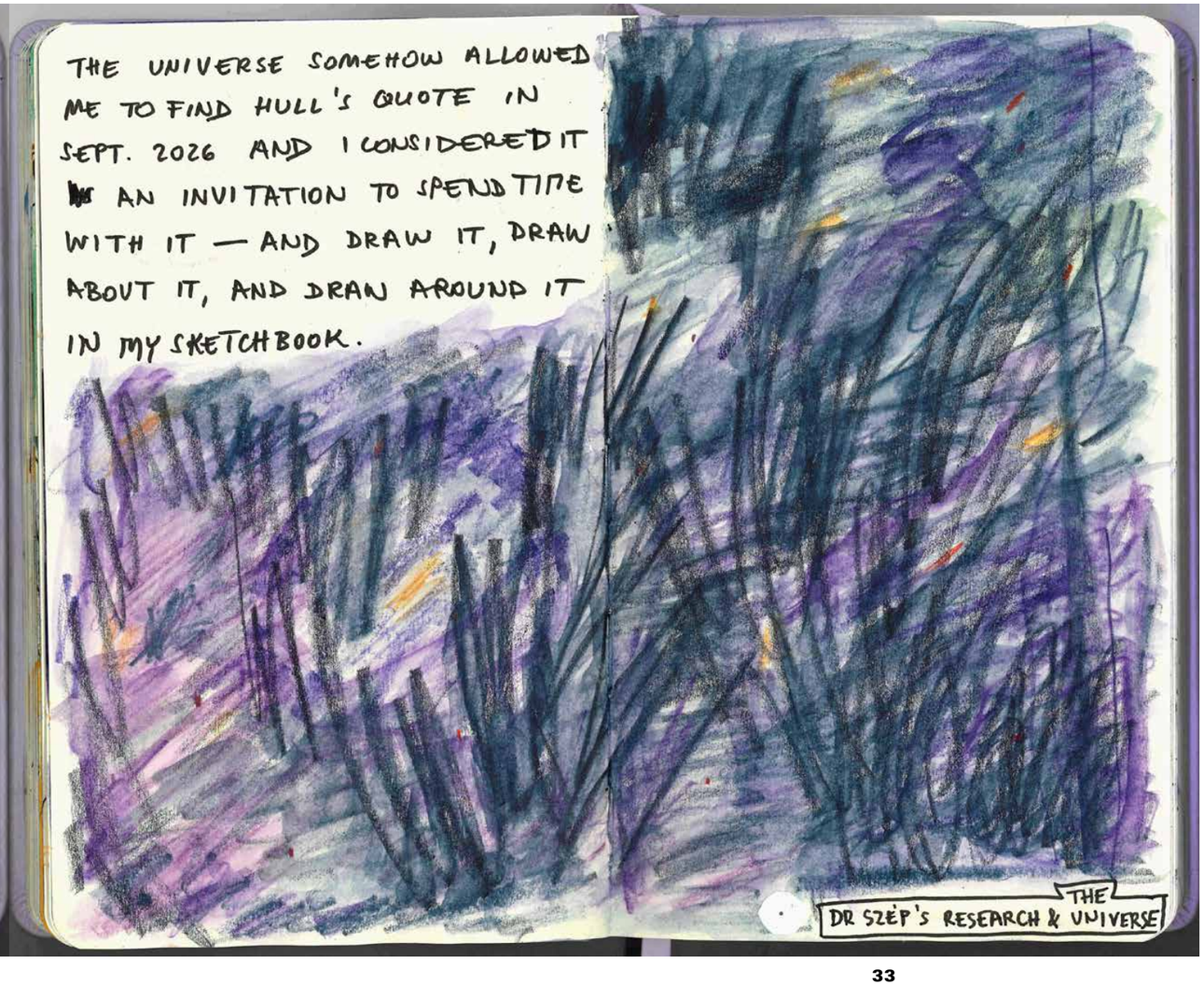
"THE DESIRE TO MAKE COMES FROM WANTING TO BE IN CONVERSATION WITH SOMETHING" — SAYS TESSA HULLS*, AUTHOR AND MAKER OF FEEDING GHOSTS: A GRAPHIC MEMOIR (2024) IN AN INTERVIEW. I COPIED THIS QUOTE IN MY RESEARCH NOTEBOOK/CALENDAR AND FORGOT ABOUT IT IN DUE COURSE. BY ADDING THIS ABSOLUTELY AVERAGE ANECDOTE THAT DOES NOT CONTAIN ANY PUNCHLINE TO THE INTRODUCTION OF MY ARTICLE(?)/ESSAY(?)/EXPERIMENT(?)*, I WANT TO INVITE ANYONE READING THIS TO CONSIDER THE ROLE OF THE ACCIDENTAL, RANDOM IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH. NOT ONLY CONSIDER IT: INVITE IT. I

AT LEAST TRY TO MAKE SPACE FOR THE UNIVERSE IN MY RESEARCH PRACTICE, WHICH IS OCCASIONALLY ALSO MY ARTISTIC PRACTICE.

*we will see.

DR SZÉP & THE UNIVERSE.

THE UNIVERSE SOMEHOW ALLOWED ME TO FIND HULL'S QUOTE IN SEPT. 2026 AND I CONSIDERED IT AN INVITATION TO SPEND TIME WITH IT — AND DRAW IT, DRAW ABOUT IT, AND DRAW AROUND IT IN MY SKETCHBOOK.



THE DR SZÉP'S RESEARCH & UNIVERSE

A CONVERSATION BY MARKMAKING IS MANY THINGS: TEMPORAL, SLOW, IN A STATE OF FLOW

SLOW (again) because there is a lot of stopping, touching, contemplation

both when I'm waiting for the material and when I AM WAITING FOR MYSELF.

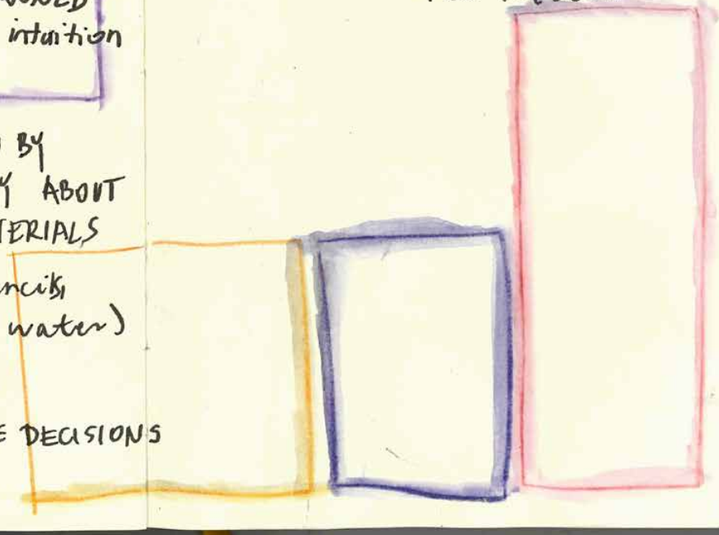
PHYSICAL EMBODIED COMES WITH A PAIN IN THE BACK ↑ which fights with the flow experience.

IMPROVISATORY HALF-PLANNED but by intuition

IS DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY ABOUT THE MATERIALS (here: pencils, paper, water)

SKILLED
UNSKILLED

INTUITIVE DECISIONS



IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH (2018) JUHA VARTO WRITES:

"ARTISTIC RESEARCH INVOLVES STOPS; THEY ARE THE ONLY WAY TO DISCERN QUALITIES AND MEANINGS THAT REVEAL METHODS AND CONTENTS." (56)

AND

"ONLY WHEN WE STOP DOES EPISTEME BECOME VISIBLE BEFORE OUR EYES TO LET US SEE —EUREKA!— WHAT IS IMPORTANT." (56)

ARTISTIC RESEARCH MAKES THE ARTISTIC EPISTEME VISIBLE.

"IT IS THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PRACTITIONER" (46.)

"IT IS BODILY, SENSORY, RICH, COMPLEX, SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE AND THE DIVERSE [...] HUMAN MANNER OF BEING IN THE WORLD." (58.)

"IT IS "VISIBLE BODILY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD." (59)

"ALL EPISTEME IS ABOUT THE WORLD AND HUMAN KNOWLEDGE" (59) _____ IN COMICS STUDIES DO WE CONSIDER, not only consider, INVITE

THE COMICS ARTIST EPISTEME?

I FEEL TESIA HULLS IS TALKING ABOUT THE COMICS ARTIST EPISTEME IN THE QUOTE THAT I SPENT SOME TIME WITH IN MY SKETCHBOOK, IT IS A GOOD ENTRY POINT TO THINK ABOUT ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN COMICS.

WHICH IS NOT THE SAME AS

WHICH IS NOT THE SAME AS COMICS based RESEARCH, A DIRECTION OF PRACTITIONER-LED ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN WHICH AUTHORS, ARTISTS, AND RESEARCHERS ARE CONCERNED WITH "SOCIAL, SOCIETAL, CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, OR PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES, WHICH ARE EXPLORED THROUGH ART PRACTICE." (KALLIO-TAVIN 2)

ART PRACTICE." (KALLIO-TAVIN 2)

(here: comics practice

ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN/BY/THROUGH COMICS IS DIFFERENT, THOUGH BOTH ALLOW NEW KNOWLEDGE TO EMERGE AND BOTH "ASK QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT BE MISSING FROM MORE TRADITIONAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH MODES." (KALLIO-TAVIN 2.)

I WOULD LIKE TO APPLY KALLIO-TAVIN'S DEFINITION OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE RESEARCH IN/BY/THROUGH COMICS:

"ARTISTIC RESEARCH AIMS TO LEARN ABOUT THE ARTISTIC PROCESSES AND THE ARTIST'S ART-MAKING TO ENHANCE THE RESEARCHER'S ARTISTIC VIEWS AND TO PRODUCE HIGH QUALITY ART.

KALLIO-TAVIN 2.

Artistic research in/by/through comics aims to learn about the artistic processes and the artist's art-making to enhance the researcher's artistic views and to produce high quality art.

following Kallio-Tavin 2.

I AM FASCINATED BY THE SPEED AND CURIOSITY BY WHICH MORE TRADITIONAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS, EVOKED BY KALLIO-TAVIN ON THE PREVIOS PAGE, HAVE OPENED THEMSELVES TO THE VERY QUALITIES THAT I VALUE IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN/BY/THROUGH COMICS / AND IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN GENERAL.)

I AM REFERRING TO THE VARIOUS PRACTICES OF POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH.

THESE SCHOOLS OF QUALITATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCES ARE VERY OPEN TO USING COMICS (SEE ALSO PETERLE 2021.)

NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH IMPRESSIONISTIC AND CREATIVE, CANCES OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND "IN 320). BOTH VANNINI, WHO TALKS RESEARCH, AND VARTO, WHO DISCUSS-

POSITS THAT RESEARCH CAN BE GET ENTANGLED IN THE PRACTI-RELATIONS AND OBJECTS" (VANNINI ABOUT NON-REPRESENTATIONAL ES ARTISTIC RESEARCH, EMPHASIZE

the need for the researcher to take risks. RISKS. risks. RISKS. risks.

(VANNINI 319, VARTO ACTUALLY TALKS ABOUT SKILL AND COURAGE (40) AND THEN LATER ABOUT TRANSGRESSI-ON (42). I MISREMEMBERED IT SEEMS.)

BOTH VANNINI AND TESSA HULLS TALK ABOUT PASSION. (VANNINI 319.) HULLS ACTUALLY TALKS ABOUT A DESIRE. I MISREMEMBERED IT SEEMS.

RISKS.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN/BY/ THROUGH COMICS CAN HELP THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF COMICS,

which started with self-reflective and pedagogical works written and drawn by practitioners,

TO EMBRACE SOME OFTHE QUALITIES OF EMBODIED VITALITY AND CONVERSATIONS THAT ARE SO IMPORTANT IN THE MAKINGOF COMICS.

WHY SHOULD COMICS STUDIES EMBRACE THESE QUALITIES?

THEY COULD HELP TO NARROW THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE, WHICH CAN RESULT IN MORE INFORMED ANALYSES (PARTICULARLY ABOUT THE MATERIAL ASPECTS OF MEANING IN COMICS). See Brooke s' re-readings of influential schools & highly accepted theories in comics studies from the practical, embodied, and materially engaged point ofview of a comics artist.

ANY KIND OF MOVING AWAY FROM METHODOLOGIES OR SCHOOLS CAN BE A MEANINGFUL WAY TO INVITE COMICS STUDIES TO BECOME MORE IMPRESSIONISTIC AND CREATIVE AND TO RE-ATTACH ITSELF TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MAKER.

VANNINI'S LIST OF QUALITIES THAT CAN BE FOUND IN MOST PRACTICES OF NONREPRESENTATIONAL (PRIMARILY ANTHROPOLOGICAL) INQUIRY OFFERS AN INVITING WAY TO "ANIMATE" (HIS PHRASE) THE STUDY OFCOMICS (andto invite the universe, the more-than-human, the material, the accidental, the lived):

risked RISKS

WAYS TO ANIMATE COMICS STUDIES, FOR EXAMPLE BY ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN COMICS, BASED ON VANNINI 2015.

VITALITY
PERFORMATIVITY
CORPOREALITY
SENSUALITY
MOBILITY

okay I admit that this list can look commonplace to some... but why not take some risks and try appr aching comics to see if/how they carry these qualities or let the m enter in conversation with the study of comics?

BY ESZTER SZÉP 2026

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Voice Activated Storytelling: Collaboration, agency and responsibility in Community Engaged Comics.

Text and illustrations by: **John Swogger**

A foundational storytelling mechanic in comics is the speech balloon. This device, visually transforming written text into spoken words, is found both within contemporary comics and their historical antecedents. The speech balloon has many formal variants, but with the exception of intentionally wordless and experimental pieces, they are common to most, if not all, comic works. The consequence of the speech balloon is to turn characters within a work into narrators. They "speak" directly to the reader; in some cases, the reader may even be witness to their thoughts and inner monologue (Reed 2015). In this way, comics can be understood as first-person narratives: speech is not reported, it is "heard" by the reader directly. Reactions by characters to events and to the speech of other characters can be conveyed without reliance on another narrator. There is an immediacy and intimacy created by this kind of dialogue that may well contribute significantly to the appeal of comic narratives (Gross 2002, Royal 2012).

This kind of first-person narration has particular significance when used in informational and other forms of "applied" comics. A comics-based explanation acquires a particular quality when it is narrated in the first person. How to repair a jeep, the history of the Persian

Wars, the experience of living with Parkinson's disease, the way in which capitalism works - such narratives feel very different to a reader when explained in the first person than when explained in the third. Creators such as Will Eisner, Joe Sacco, Scott McCloud and Darryl Cunningham have utilised this qualitative difference to build explanatory and informational narratives that also have a personal dimension. The presence of a first-person narrator gives the reader someone to identify with on the journey through unfamiliar intellectual territory. Eisner's Joe Dope and Connie Rodd acted as guides through the complexity of spring tune-ups, tightening a bolt just right and how and why not to overload your jeep (Eisner 2011). In the same way, McCloud's cartoon self has become an instantly-recognisable guide to generations of would-be comics creators as they navigate their way through the complexities of comics-making (McCloud 1993).

But this storytelling mechanic can do more than simply create an intimate connection between reader and character. It has the power to vastly expand notions of agency and responsibility, creating a completely different set of dynamics between narrator and subject, between narrator and story, between narrator and creator.

To illustrate how this works in practice, I am drawing here on the experience of creating two "Community Engaged Comics" which I made in collaboration with various Native and non-Native partners between 2016 and 2025. My work in comics draws primarily from my background as an archaeologist and archaeological illustrator, in which fields I have worked since the early 1990s. Beginning in 2003, and more seriously since publication in 2005 of the archaeological comic *Catal Nedir?* (Atalay, Swogger & Tung 2005), I have created dozens of explanatory and informational comics about archaeological, historical and cultural heritage subjects. Sometimes these are full-length comic books, at other times these are short one-pagers or strips.

In 2016 I was invited by Sonya Atalay (U.Mass., Amherst) and Jen Shannon (U.Colorado, Boulder) to work on a collaborative comic book about a "repatriation" case brought under NAGPRA. NAGPRA is an acronym for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a piece of US legislation from 1990 which provides for the return from federally-funded museums of native ancestors (human remains), funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated Native American tribes and Native Hawaiian organisations (National Park Service 2026). The bringing of a repatriation case under NAGPRA can be complex, time-consuming, politically divisive, culturally impactful and emotionally traumatic for both tribes and museums. Stories about such repatriations are likewise complex and multi-faceted, touching on aspects not only of archaeology, museology and law, but family and tribal history as well as notions of responsibility and agency, and issues surrounding colonial legacies and post-colonial politics (Shannon 2025). Such a narrative (in any medium) must be both legally and technically correct, politically sensitive and emotionally empathic. The comic was written and drawn in close collaboration with tribal members, and drew on published statements by museum leaders and archaeologists, all of whom had direct personal involvement in the repatriation case featured in the comic. The resulting comic, *NAGPRA Comics 1: Journeys to Complete the Work*, has become an important key text for teaching NAGPRA in the classroom and in the community (Shannon 2025).

In 2023 Jen Shannon and I worked on another collaborative project, this time a history of the Kumeyaay tribe of Southern California as told by four Kumeyaay historians: Ethan Banegas, Lorraine Orosco, Michael Connolly Miskwish and Stanley Rodriguez. The collaboration had been encouraged by Mike Towry, one of the founders of San Diego Comic Con, and the project enjoyed the support of that organisation, as well as the La Jolla Historical Society, the San Diego Museum of Us and the San Diego County Office of Education. The comic, based on a textbook written by Michael Connolly Miskwish and oral history conversations between all four historians, directly contradicted many of the assumptions, positionalities and details as related by "official" histories of California and San Diego. The support of museums and the County Office of Education meant that the comic, *Beyond*

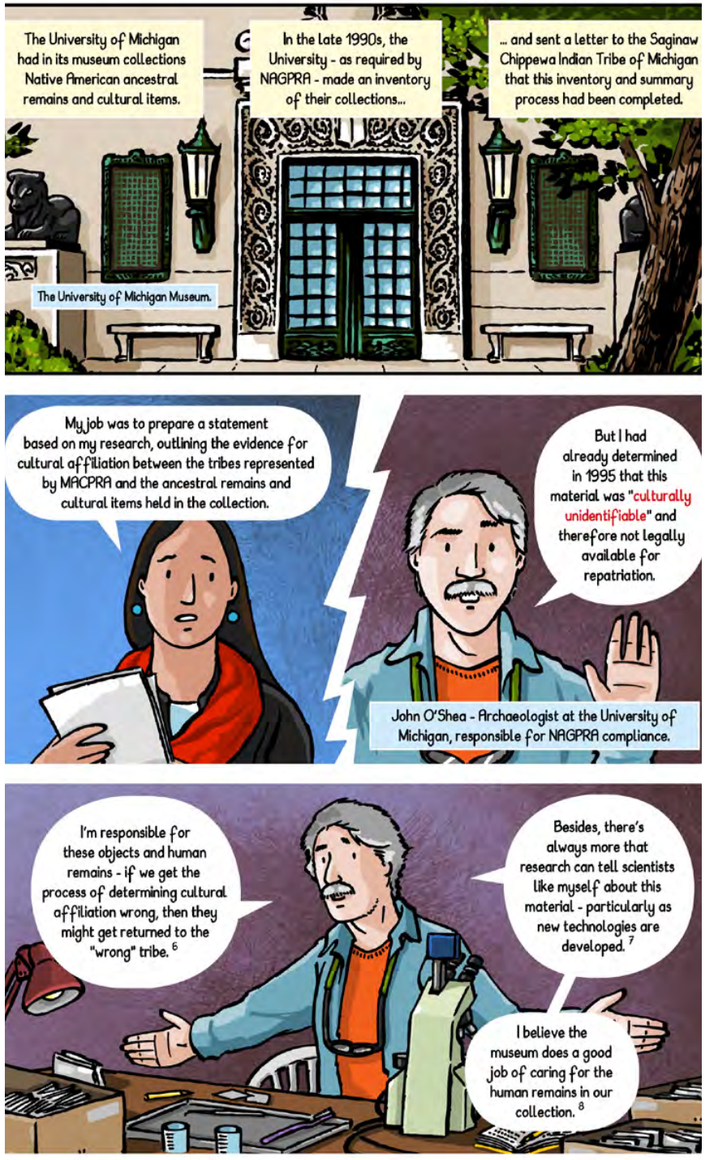


Figure 1

Gaming/Our Past, Present, and Future, evolved a role as a form of community healing (cf. Borkent 2020), historical redress (cf. Giddens 2016), and dissent (cf. Fawaz 2015).

In both cases, the use of first-person narration as a means of expressing notions of agency and responsibility were key to building new relationships between narrator, subject, story and creator during the creative process - and shaping the role and use of the product upon publication. Even in applied narratives, story often defines voice: the requirements of legal explanation, political sensibility or emotional context structure a particular mode or quality of storytelling. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, speaks in a particular way in order to communicate particular kinds of information in a particular way; so do Joe Dope and Connie Rodd. But the reverse can also be true: that speaking in a particular way shapes the legal explanation, political sensibility or emotional context of a narrative. I would argue that in the former, the character is a mouthpiece - while in the latter, the character has voice. The distinction is important, for the latter implies agency, while the former does not. This notion of agency is also important, for in storytelling where the character/narrator does *not* have it, that agency is reserved to the creator.

In both the NAGPRA comic and the Kumeyaay history, the voice not only defined the story, but also defined the very shape and composition of the panels and page layouts. An example from each project illustrates this process. Within the legal framework for deciding whether a repatriation claim under NAGPRA has merit, depositions of evidence supporting the claim are made on behalf of the requesting tribe, tribal organisation, etc.. Some museums have challenged such claims, either arguing that the objects that are the subject of a repatriation claim lie outside the parameters of the law, or that the requesting tribe or organisation has not sufficiently demonstrated cultural affiliation between themselves and the objects being claimed. This process is legally contentious, politically sensitive, administratively complex and emotionally challenging. As I worked on the comic, finding a way to explain this process

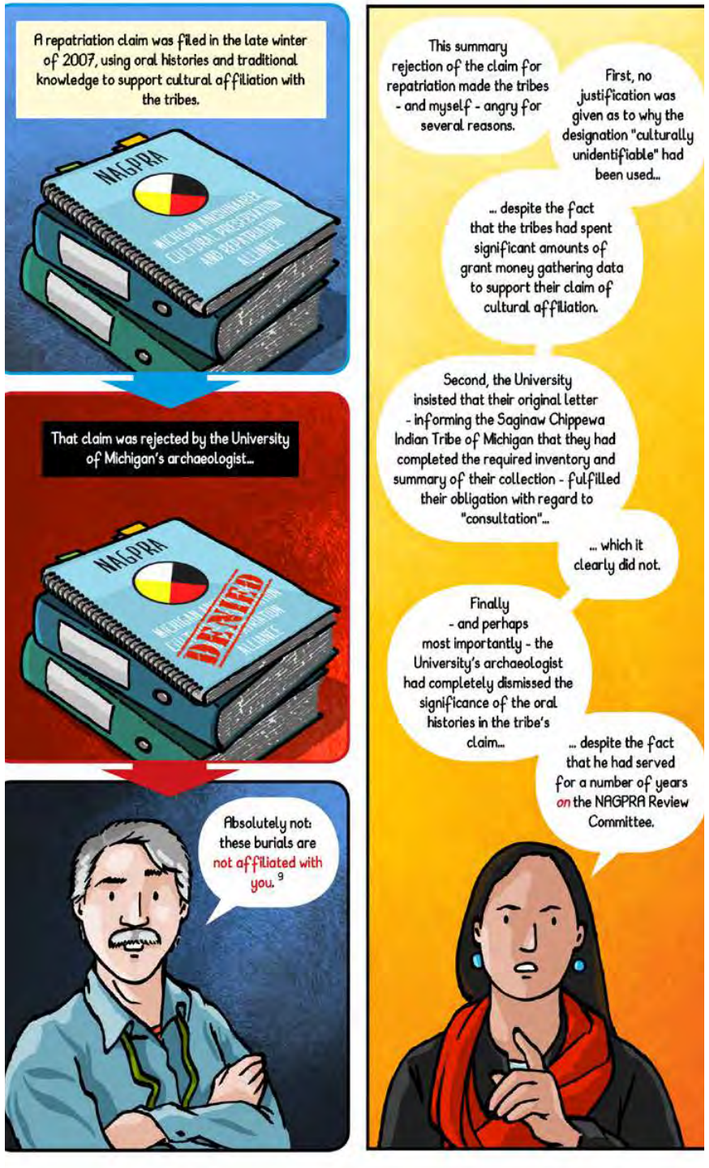


Figure 2

in as simple and straightforward a way as possible was also potentially sensitive and challenging.

The comic followed the events of a repatriation request made by the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan to the University of Michigan. Archaeologist and tribal member Sonya Atalay detailed the role she played in that request in her own words:

"My job was to prepare a statement based on my research, outlining the evidence for cultural affiliation between the tribes represented by MACPRA [the Michigan Anishinaabek Cultural Preservation and Repatriation Alliance] and the ancestral remains and cultural items held in the collection [of the University of Michigan]."

But John O'Shea, archaeologist at the University of Michigan, responsible for NAGPRA compliance, claimed he had: "... already determined in 1995 that this material was "culturally unidentifiable" and therefore not legally available for repatriation."

Originally, I had envisaged that the explanation of this portion of the story would focus on the objects under request and on the evidence/counter-evidence supporting each side of the argument. But Sonya's narration went in a different direction, placing herself in direct opposition to John O'Shea. And so, "following the storyteller", I placed Sonya and John O'Shea in direct visual opposition to each other, first in twinned panels separated by a jagged gutter (Figure 1), then by page-height vertical arrangements of panels and images (Figure 2). The University of Michigan's challenge to the evidence presented by MACPRA was now not an abstract thing of words and data and dates, nor was it a story about objects. Instead, it was visualised as Sonya (and, I suspect, John) experienced it: as a story about people. There is a distinct shift in the feel of the storytelling in the comic at this point, with panels becoming gradually more populated by people until the images in the panels are nothing but a progression of faces (Figure 3). Because of the way in which the narrators chose to tell the story, it became a story not about objects but about people.

In the Kumeyaay history comic, the story split even in its earliest iterations



Figure 3

into two distinct threads. There was a didactic thread, based on Michael Connolly Miskwish's textbook, which was concerned with historic events, grouped around various themes - and there was a discursive thread, based on the conversations between the four historians, which as scripted by Ethan Banegas, was concerned with the way in which Kumeyaay identity and mores were reflected in the traditional game of *Peon*. As the group discussed the threads, it became clear that the historians could not tell the full story of their own history without reference to both, and that both threads were equally important - one was not an appendix to the other: the discussion was not just an explanation of the events, the events not just background information to the discussion. But the two threads were very different in feel, structure and content. We all knew we didn't want to create two separate comic books - so the question was how to include both stories in the same publication *and* weight each one the same. The solution came from the way I already produced dual-language comics, in 'flip-book' format, where the book read one way, from one cover, in one language - and the other way, from the other cover, in another language. There is no "front" or "back" to these comics, neither language is "first". In the same way, the two threads - the didactic one titled *Our Past, Present, and Future*, the discursive one titled *Beyond Gaming* - could be part of the same comic book, neither thread at the "front", neither thread intended "first". This non-hierarchical approach meant that both threads of the story would be encountered by the reader without intrinsic priority, entirely reflecting the narrators' approach to their telling of that story. The very layout and design of the book itself was shaped by following the storytellers. But what to do in the middle - where the two threads met?

In visits to San Diego, in discussions with the historians, in visits to cultural centres and Kumeyaay land, we would often meet and talk in a circle. Everyone is equal, everyone is visible; there is a sense of connection between each individual, and between each individual and the group. In the middle of the comic, the two threads would meet, then, in a circle: equal and connected. Once again, the layout and design of the cen-

tral double-page spread was determined by the way in which the two threads of the story were told: equally and connected. Here, indigenous perspective informs artistic 'perspective' (perhaps contrasting with discussions of 'chronotopic' prose/performance circularity in the works of Alan Moore, for example (Di Liddo 2009).

In both these examples, the agency usually reserved for the creator, in resting instead with the narrators, radically transformed not just the nature of the story, but technical considerations such as layout of panels, pages and even the entire comic book. The decision to create in this fashion depended on a very particular stance taken by the entire team with regards the practicalities and pragmatics of collaboration. Collaborative processes are often hard to define, as they incorporate a range of shifting indicators, responsibilities and outcomes (Whitehurst 2015). "Consultation", a key part of the methodology underpinning collaborative approaches in creative work, is also a key methodological and legal component to NAGPRA. In best practice, transparency, honesty and having an open mind are all integral to consultation (Shannon 2025:130). Collaboration relies on negotiating a successful path towards a shared goal. The degree and form of consultation and collaboration can shape narrative in important ways, particularly when a narrator is exercising visual and vocal agency. Arthur W. Frank describes this approach as "following the storyteller" (Frank 2010). I have found that there can be two levels to this following. The first is when an author/creator, having found a subject, consults those with expertise and/or experience in order to gain a better understanding of the subject and create a more convincing/real/true story. The deeper level is when an author/creator passes creative authority over to those with expertise and/or experience and in doing so, gives them independent agency within the story itself.

This difference may seem subtle in theory, but it is powerful in practice. When such agency is relinquished by the creator, "following the storyteller" can mean that the role of creator is changed. Instead of having a voice, the creator becomes a mouth-piece; instead of telling their own story, they end up telling another's. This can be awkward. There is a strong impulse towards auteurism in comics, and comics-makers are encouraged to claim, elevate and celebrate their agency in their works. "You are the Captain of your ship," Jason Lutes, the Faculty Chair at the Center for Cartoon Studies, is famous for saying. Jason teaches "Cartooning Studio I" for the MFA at CCS. To be the Captain of your ship, he explains, is to take ultimate responsibility for all narrative decisions within your work. But to follow the storyteller in the kind of applied comics I am describing requires that, as Captain, you sail against this tide and devolve that responsibility elsewhere. In doing so, the creator may no longer have the decision-making freedom to lay out their panels this way or that way, to use these colours or those colours, to show this scene or that scene. For better or worse, they are no longer the Captain of their ship.

In some respects, this devolving of agency and responsibility mirrors the fracturing of the comics-making process that characterises the "Marvel Method", where scripting, pencilling, inking, colouring, lettering, editing and production are all undertaken by different members of a large team. What is different in both the NAGPRA comic and the Kumeyaay comic is that there was no team. As is most often the case with such projects, there was one creator: me. I was the writer, the penciller, the inker, the colourist, etc.. However, in order to "follow the storyteller", it was necessary for me to give up much of the decision-making authority while giving up none of the production labour. In some respects this mirrors the comics-making practice of a freelance creator when working with a client who is an author. As an example, Eddie Campbell or Kevin O'Neil's relationship with the highly detailed scripts and notes of Alan Moore springs to mind (DeLiddo 2009:. And while this may be perhaps a truer parallel, there is a key difference.

All these narrators in the NAGPRA comic had such independent agency. Shannon Martin, Sidney Martin, Sonya Atalay, even John O'Shea did not just supply me with their own words, but in doing so, shaping the arrangement and design of panels which made up the comic story. The Atalay/O'Shea juxtaposition would not have been a design choice if the narration had not prompted

it. But more: the decisions that they made included representations of themselves; they and their decisions were equally visible. When represented as the speaker of their own words, such visibility acquires a new dimension, both confirming the agency behind those decisions and assigning responsibility for it. In exercising agency, the narrators take responsibility for their words and their deeds through the visibility of their voice: "exercising responsibility requires a voice" (Frank 2013:109); voice, visibility, agency and responsibility all shaping factors in the telling of the story. Put simply, the voice created the story; the story did not exist without the voice. The voice shaped and defined the story, and in doing so, altered the anticipated/expected relationship between creator, narrator and story. As much as this is true for the process - where creator and narrator could be said to have switched authorities and roles, it is also true for the product. The 'output' of both these projects, the comic books themselves, have become used in ways which seem to reflect this switched dynamic. As such, they have fulfilled the aspirations for both projects as "Community Engaged Comics" (CECs).

This term was coined by myself and Jen Shannon in the wake of the completion of the first NAGPRA comic. It is worth quoting her definition of the term in full:

"... a form of collaboration in which the result is a comic and so much more. The comics are a means for community engagement, for community members to discuss and build together what they want to communicate and how. Community partners direct the project from conception to implementation to evaluation, and they are in control of content and distribution. We conduct community-based workshops and presentations and public events as part of our work together. [...] Each comic ... is developed differently, according to the community we are working with." (Shannon 2025:204).

A CEC project, therefore, is more than just about creating a comic book. The comic book both activates and is activated by a network of other elements through which the community engages with the production, realisation and distribution of the story at its heart. A CEC is less a product than an *event* - or, perhaps, a series of events: a 'happening'. This can stretch out through time, starting long before and extending long beyond the publication date of the comic book. In the case of the Kumeyaay project, there were two publication dates: November 2024 for the community - held at cultural centres on Kumeyaay reservation land, and June 2025 for everyone else - held at San Diego ComicCon. But the project itself began three years earlier, in 2020/2021, with conversations both in-person and via Zoom (thanks, covid!) - and continues to the present, with exhibitions about the project, the comic and continued efforts by the Kumeyaay to tell their own history as part of ongoing cultural renaissance, at the La Jolla Historical Society museum and San Diego's Museum of Us. The transfer of agency, the visualisation of responsibility, the shifted dynamics within the comic conception, design and production all contribute to this expansion of the 'comic' project beyond the comic into multiple communities. In the case of the NAGPRA comic, the publication - both in print and online - has resulted in its adoption by educational communities far beyond those we might have originally intended: in universities, in museums and within government departments. Engagement with these communities of learning and practice goes beyond the expected comic-reader relationship and instead moves towards something else entirely. In California, for example, teenage readers have approached the tribal historians who narrated the Kumeyaay comic and told them: reading this comic has made me want to be a tribal historian too (Shannon 2025:211). Now it is not just the creator or the story that is following the storyteller, it is the reader.

In drawing on my own work, my analysis of the idea of 'voice activation' is naturally limited. I can only speak from my own experience as a creator, and from my own participatory perspective in these two comics projects. But I can see how this idea can extend beyond such examples. I can see echoes of the way in which voice shaped story in the NAGPRA comic and the Kumeyaay history not just in my own work - *Oswestry Heritage Comics* (Swogger 2019) and *Preserving Palau's Future* (Swogger 2022), for example, but also in works such as *The Ancient People of Our Village: Archaeology at Prasat Baset* (Lida 2024). More than just instances of interesting visual se-

miosis, 'voice activation' of storytelling can usefully upset traditional narrative power dynamics in favour of subaltern narrators.

The impulse towards auteurism in comics can sometimes reduce collaborators to the status of informants, and narrators to the role of mouth-pieces. There are, however, other ways to activate and elevate voices within informational and applied comics, ways that visualise responsibility, confirm agency and ultimately re-shape stories.

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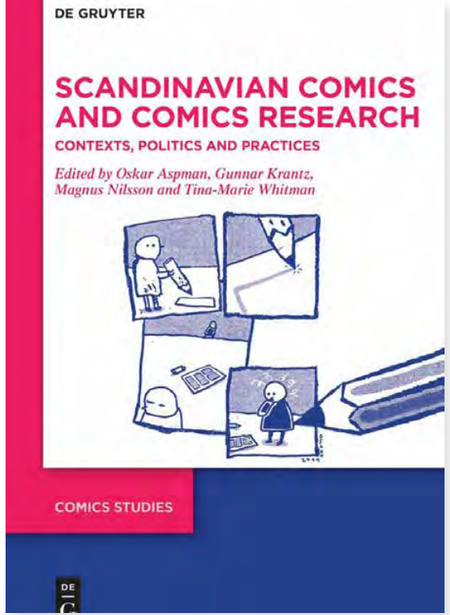
Malmö University Comics Hub (MUCH) is a platform for research, artistic development and cooperation within the field of comics, hosted by the School of Arts and Communication (K3) at Malmö University.
MUCH was initiated in 2017 and is based on the strong infrastructure around comics that exists in Malmö (also called "The City of Comics").
MUCH gathers, presents and discusses current research on comics and creates resources for such research. It organises conferences, publishes research, participates in academic networks on comics and creates collaborative projects within and outside academia. An important part of *MUCH* is the freestanding comics courses, which contribute to the development of our research.

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We invite scholars, artists and other professionals working with comics to start using the hub as a node for dissemination of research, of information about conferences, calls, publications, exhibitions etc.

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Scandinavian Comics and Comics Research
– Contexts, Politics and Practices

Though Scandinavian comics evolved through exchange with international networks and communities, they have a rich tradition in their own right: they have their own distinctive themes, styles and societal functions, which are in turn shaped by the social, political, economic and aesthetic realities in which they emerged. This collection spotlights not only Scandinavian comics production, but also Scandinavian comics research. It sheds light on different areas of the Scandinavian comics landscape: the relationship between Scandinavian comics and comics from other parts of the world; the formation of comics research as a discipline in Scandinavia and its relation to more traditional academic disciplines; the political significance and potential of comics in the Scandinavian context, and finally, the comics practices that are unique to Scandinavia. By presenting research on Scandinavian comics in English, this collection aims to bring the genre to the attention of an international research community, and to showcase some of the most exciting comics practitioners and researchers Europe's North has to offer.

Edited by: *Oskar Aspman, Gunnar Krantz , Magnus Nilsson, and Tina-Marie Whitman*

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