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Library Research Scholars Program 2023

**‘In someone’s hands who lived it’:
The Interpersonal Power
of Autobiographical Comics**

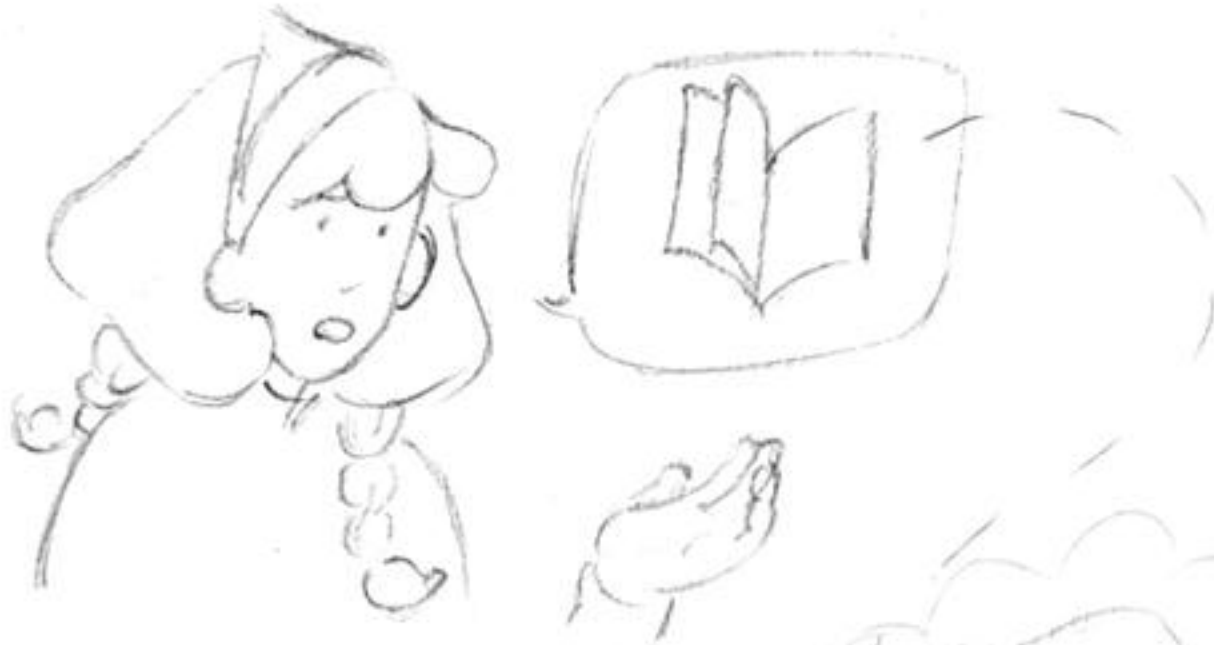


By Eleanor Rideout
Under the guidance of Andrew Chae,
Michael Aguilar,
and the SJSU Library Research
Scholars Program



Background

Throughout history, life narratives have fueled and supported social movements through ...



testimony and counter-narrative¹ on the part of the author, (Schaffer & Smith, 2004),

and narrative empathy² on the part of the reader (Keen, 2006).



Narrative empathy invests individuals in a cause, and can serve as the basis for readers' later involvement in social movements. (Keen, 2006)

¹ In this context, counter-narrative refers to works from underrepresented authors that subvert overarching social or political narratives which misrepresent, essentialize, or silence their experiences.

² Narrative empathy is the empathy a reader feels for characters in a work of writing. In this case it is extended to life narratives, where the author is often represented as a 'character'. For further discussion on the nuanced implications of narrative empathy, refer to *A Theory of Narrative Empathy* by Suzanne Keen, 2006.

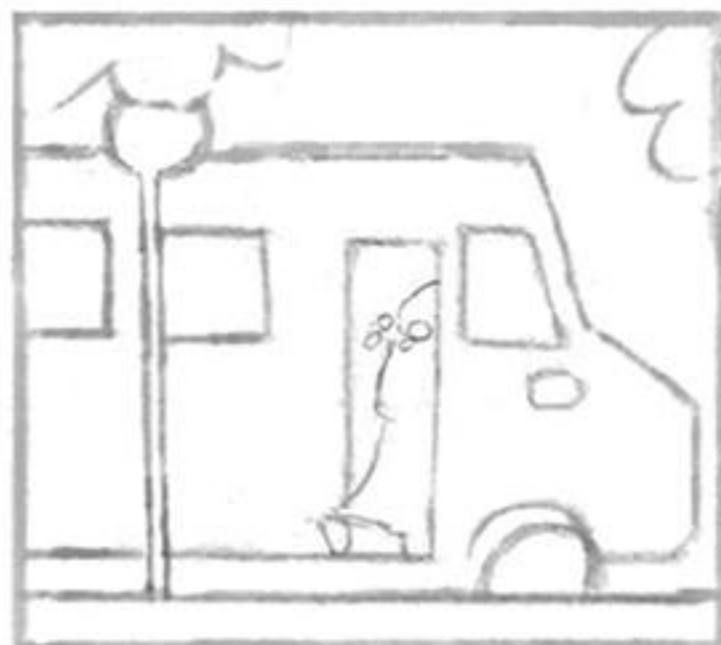
These concepts of *life narrative* form an interesting connection with *comics theory*, which suggests that the form engages readers in unique ways through character identification, subjective reading, and closure.





According to Scott McCloud's seminal research in *Understanding Comics*, the simplified *cartoon imagery* prevalent in comics can encourage readers to more readily *identify with a character*.

(McCloud, 1993)

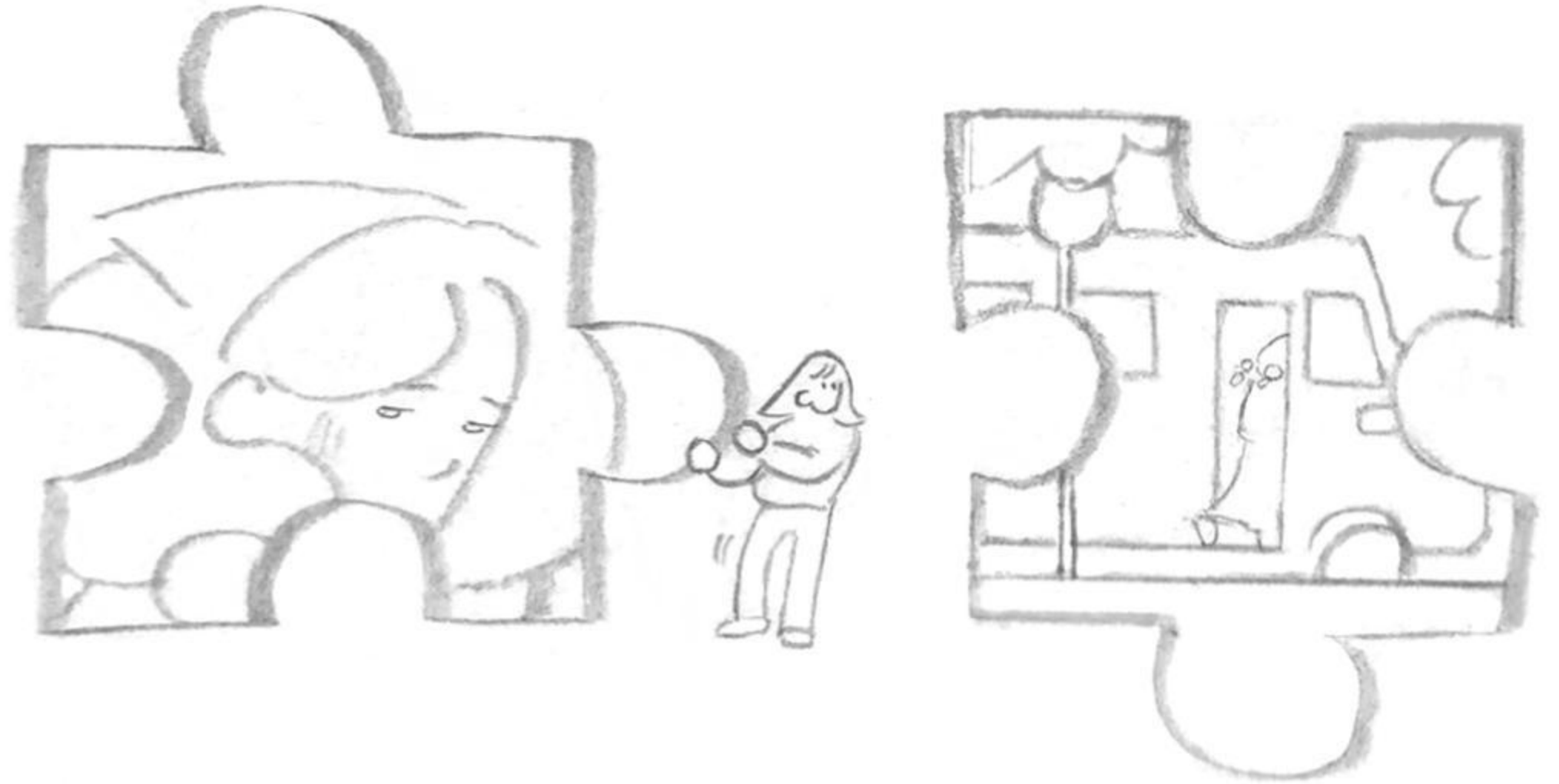


McCloud also asserts that readers are involved in the development of meaning in comics through the process of 'closure' between panels.

(McCloud, 1993)

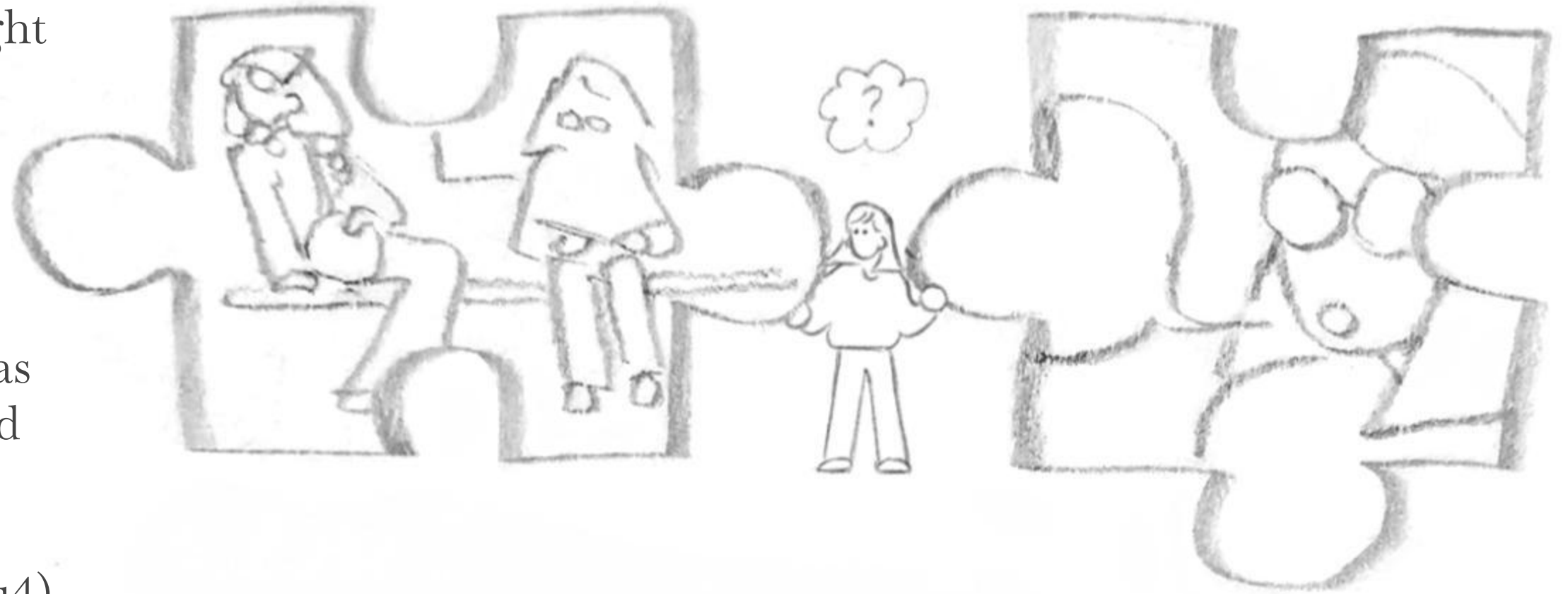
The nature of sequential imagery means that some information is left out, and the reader must use their existing understanding to assume the connection between images or elements of a comic.

(McCloud, 1993)



Because these assumptions are brought up in the process of reading, comics can become a space for readers to think critically about their preconceived notions as they may be challenged or subverted by the author.

(Carleton, 2014)





The reader of a comic may also control the pace at which they read and the level attention they give to each drawing, which further makes the reading experience subjective and personal.

(Carleton, 2014)

These aspects of comics theory have strong implications for the ability of comics to produce the narrative empathy, intimacy, and critical awareness which are central to the study of life narrative.

In connecting these ideas, *this* study explores...



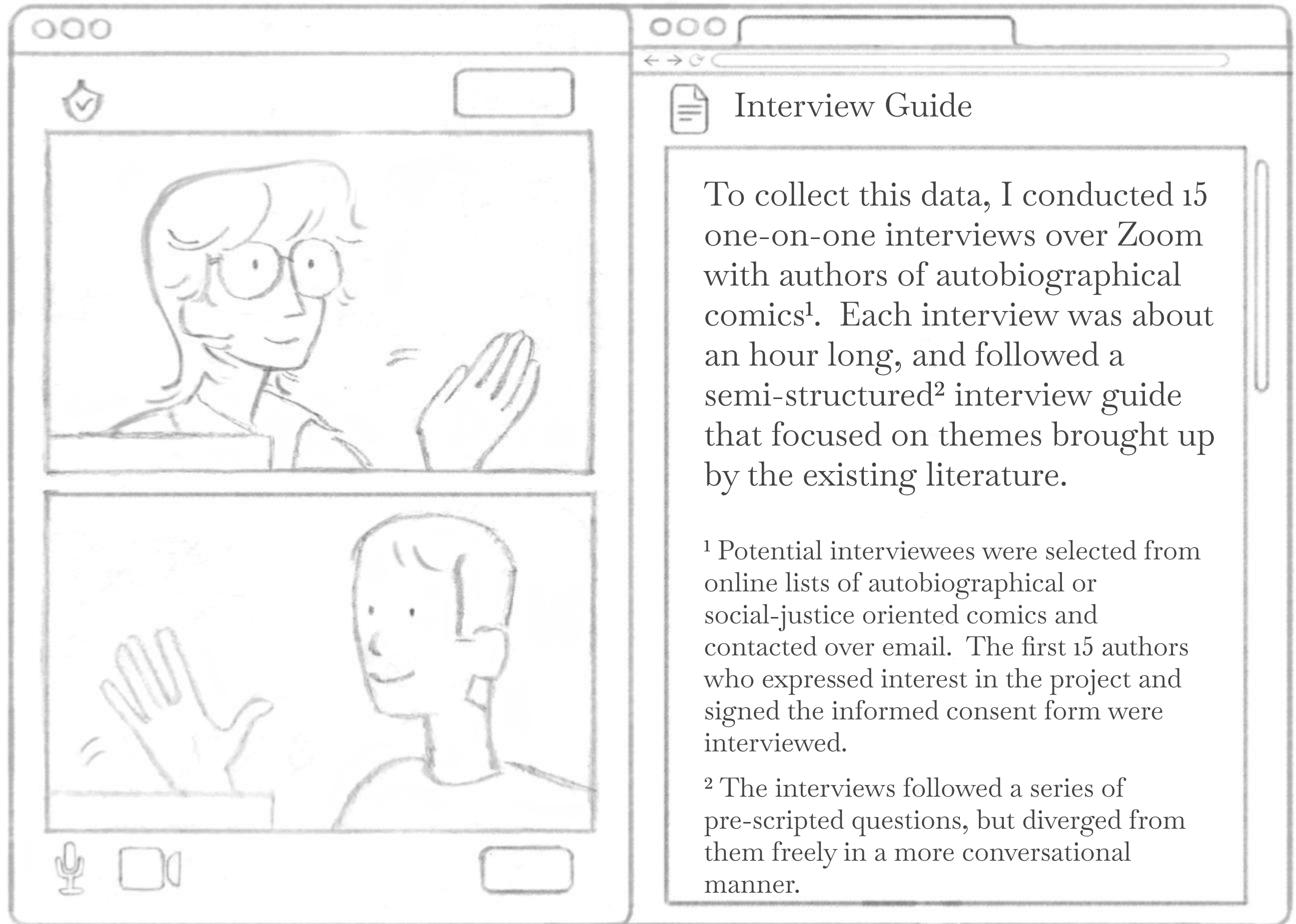
how the *medium of comics* can be uniquely utilized by *creators from underrepresented groups* in order to express their lived experiences,

and the role of autobiographical comics in social movements.



Methodology

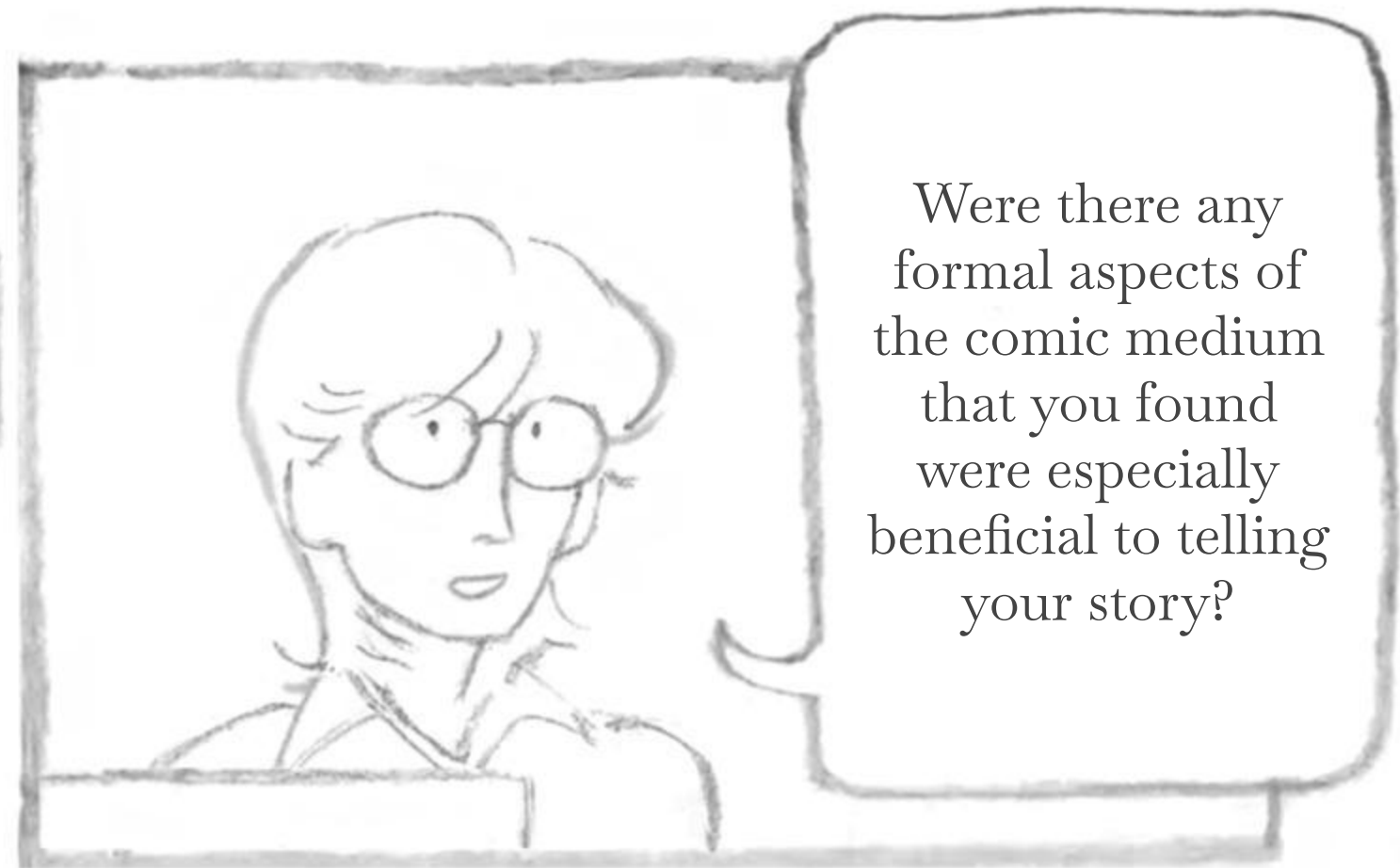
Most of the literature that exists surrounding life narrative and autobiographical comics focus on analysis of the works themselves. In order to contribute to a more rounded understanding of these subjects, this study focuses on *author perspectives*.



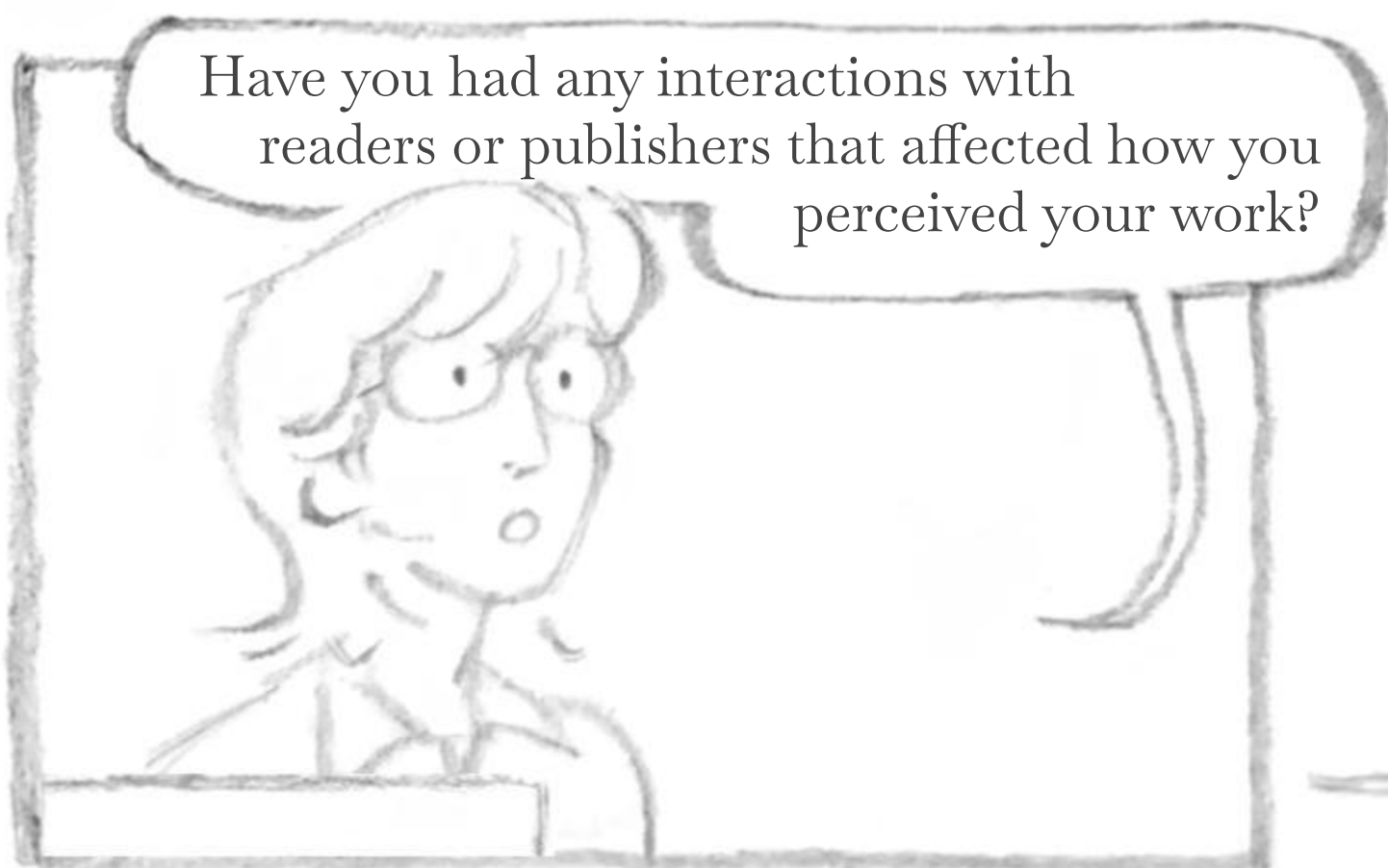
★ No drawings in this comic are intentionally representative of the actual authors interviewed.

The interviews focused on each author's experience with their published autobiographical comic(s), following the topics of motivation, process, formal construction, and reception of the work.

Do you view your comic as a work of activism?



And one overarching question:

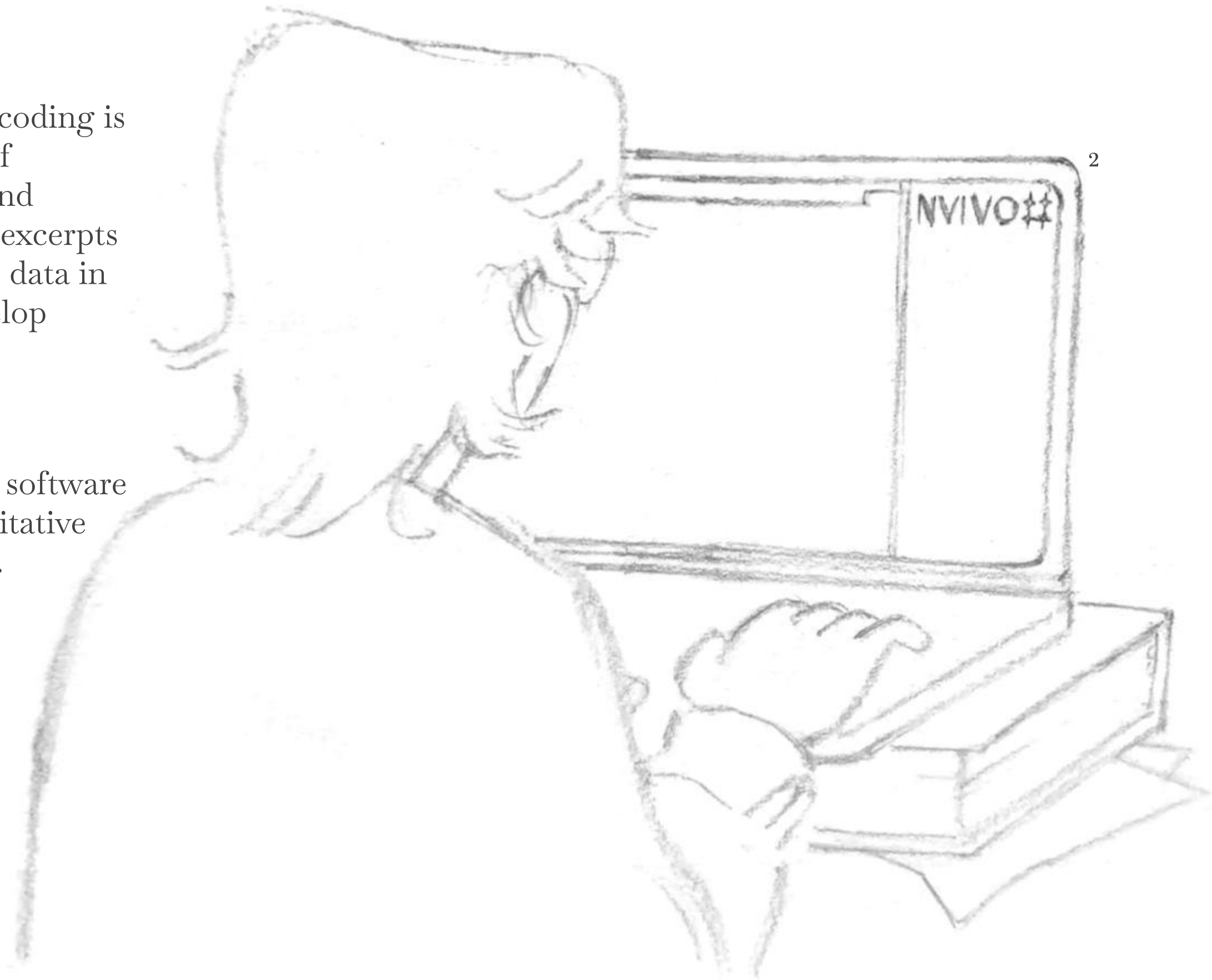


As someone who has contributed to this body of work, what do you feel is the role of autobiography, and furthermore autobiographical comics, in social movements?

The transcribed interviews were then analyzed with qualitative coding¹, using a structure developed during the analysis itself.

¹ Qualitative coding is the process of identifying and categorizing excerpts of qualitative data in order to develop themes to be analyzed.

² NVivo is an organization software used for qualitative data analysis.



Here's what I found!



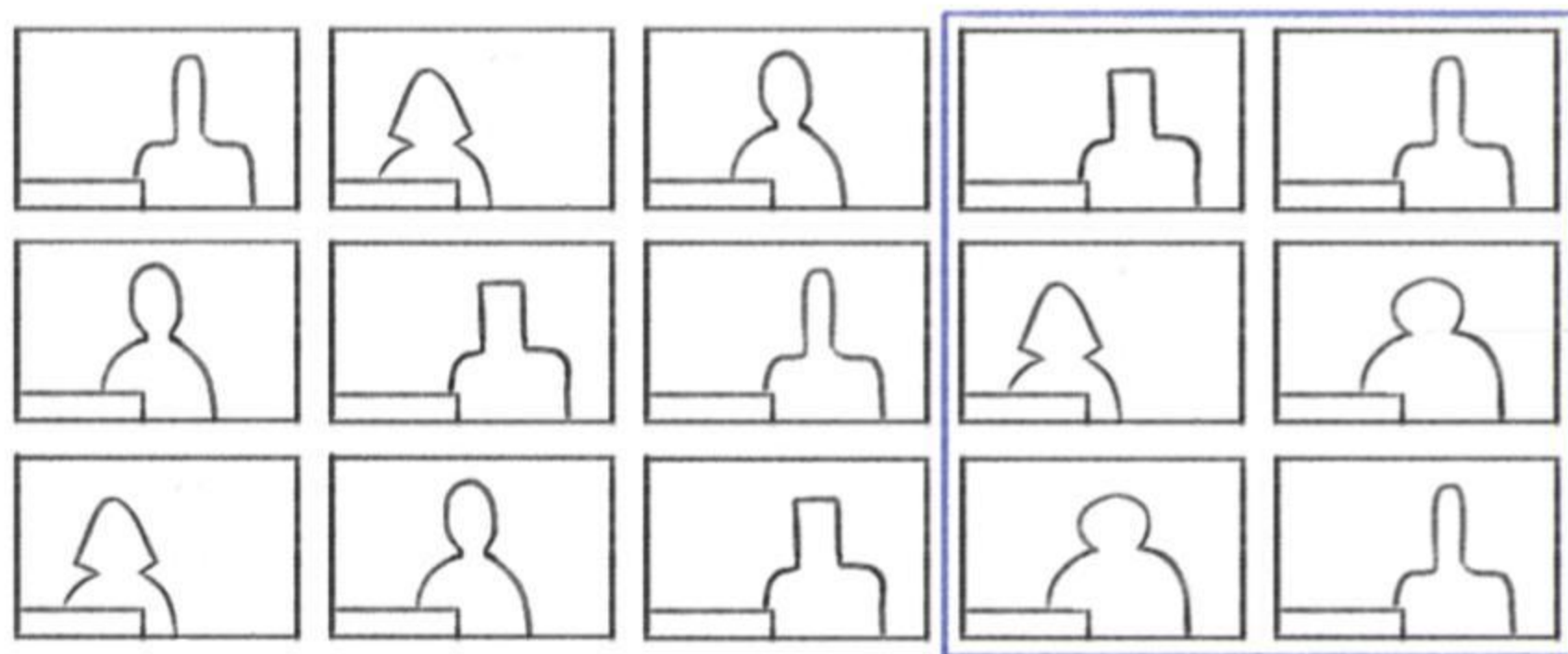
Underrepresented voices in autobiography:
Why do authors make autobiographical comics?



Motivations

In studying the work of underrepresented authors, there is a common danger of assuming a narrative of social justice whether or not that was the author's true intent.

In fact, only 6 out of 15 authors identified their comics as activism*, and only four of them stated an activist-leaning initial motivation.



Of the rest, four mentioned it could be considered activism, but that this was not their intent.

* These responses do depend on each author's conception of what is considered 'activism', but this was not directly asked about in the interviews. Consequently, some of the 'external' motivations covered below were shared by those who did not identify their comics as 'activism'.

“So I didn't think of my book as a work of activism at all. I thought of it as a memoir; a story about me and my family. And I was actually not necessarily even coming at it from the perspective of being marginalized, it was more about just trying to understand something very personal, and believing that all of us have our personal, particular family stories, and this was mine.”

Amy Kurzweil

★ All direct quotes came from the interviews and were confirmed by the authors before use.

Of the personal motivations expressed by authors, the most common were...

To ‘get the story out’,

Many authors expressed a strong internal drive to share something important to them,

and found that comics were the right vehicle to do so!



“And so I see it more as an act of defiance, in a way, where it's like this is me telling a story that I feel extremely compelled to tell about myself, knowing that it can be viewed through a number of lenses.

But ultimately, my own goal by telling it is just to put it out into the world.”

Carta Monir

And to explore something in their life, such as...

personal identity,

family history,

or the relationship between
personal experiences



and their wider context.



Of the external motivations expressed by authors, the most common was to fill an absence of stories.

To many authors this meant creating the informative representation that was not available to them,



not to act as a singular representative voice,
but to encourage and contribute to a diverse understanding
of subjects often effaced or essentialized by mainstream
narratives.

In doing this, authors expressed a desire to:

Destabilize
dehumanizing
rhetoric by telling
their own stories
with subjectivity
and nuance,

Break down barriers
to informed
conversation around
politicized topics by
drawing on this
expression of
humanity,

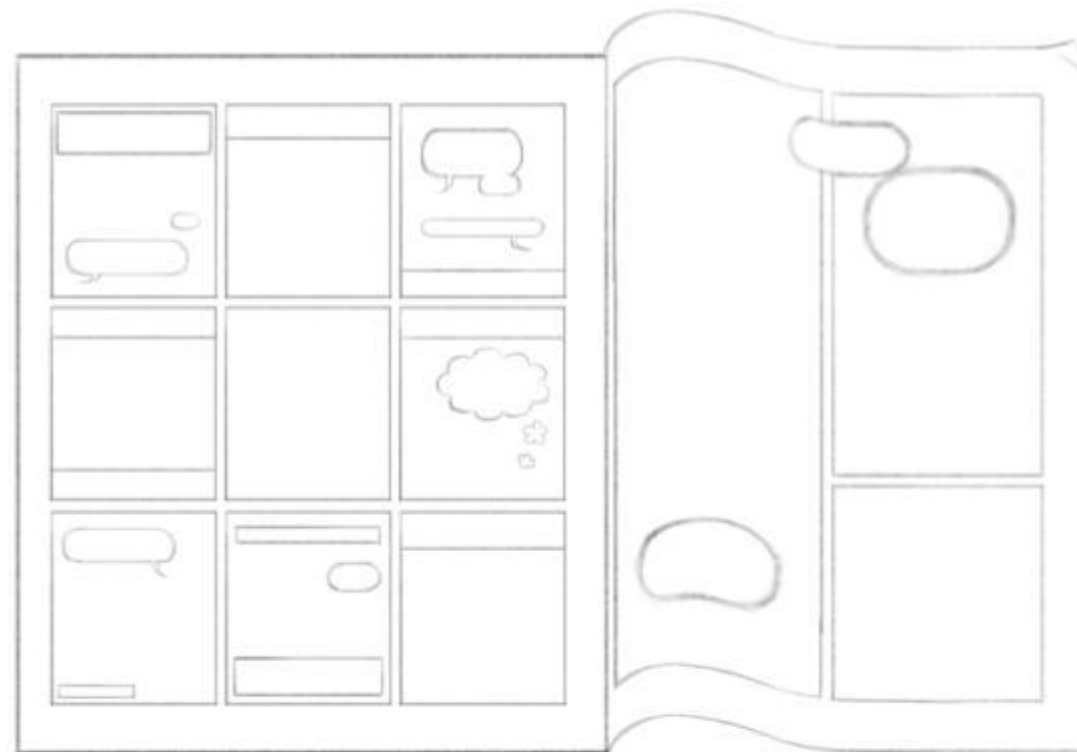
Give readers a
deeper
understanding so
that they may
defend themselves
or others in
politically
vulnerable positions,

and to encourage critical thought from a reader throughout these processes.

“It was pedagogically young people who needed to know critically about the undocumented, who needed to know about undocumented epistemology. And what I mean by that is they needed to know the history, they needed to know the critical perspectives, they needed to know the way to destabilize the narratives that were being used against them- all of that. They needed to have tools for survival around this debate. That's what I did.”

Alberto Ledesma

How does the *medium of comics* uniquely serve these goals of autobiographical storytelling?



Comics can reach a lot of people and tell a lot of people's stories in a highly individualized way, making them a powerful tool for the personal expression, exploration, and assertion which drives authors to create them.

This is made possible primarily by the **approachability** and **formal capabilities** of the medium brought up by the authors interviewed.

Approachability

The relative approachability of the medium to both readers and creators can broaden the range of voices in autobiography and widen their audience.

(Refaie, 2012; Pratt, 2009)



Approachable to authors:

- Cheap supplies
- Few technical barriers (most authors interviewed were self-taught!)
- Easy online publishing

Approachable to readers:

- Visual appeal
- Digestible complexity
- Less time investment than prose



Because of this approachability, comics provide a space of expression for anyone who feels compelled to do so, making them an accessible tool for filling the gap in storytelling felt by so many of the authors.

Form

Comics are built out of many visual, written, and formal elements which all interact with each other fluidly and together form meaning, almost like an extended vocabulary for expression (Mutard, 2019; Hatfield & Beaty, 2020). Cartoonists have control over every element of the page, and therefore can express themselves and their story in a very personal way.

I think the role of autobiography is to document what it's really like to be a person.

Amy Kurzweil

“I think that, just because of the amount of *control afforded to a creator*, it's easier for comics to more fully embody the way that a person is, or wishes they could be.”

Carta Monir

This strong subjective voice makes it an especially effective platform for self assertion.

One key piece of comics vocabulary is *style*.

Style may be influenced by message, theme, cultural influences, cultural references, story moment, emotional state, author personality, etc.



For example, the variations in style between these five drawings of me each convey a slightly different impression of my character, and set the stage for a different type of story.

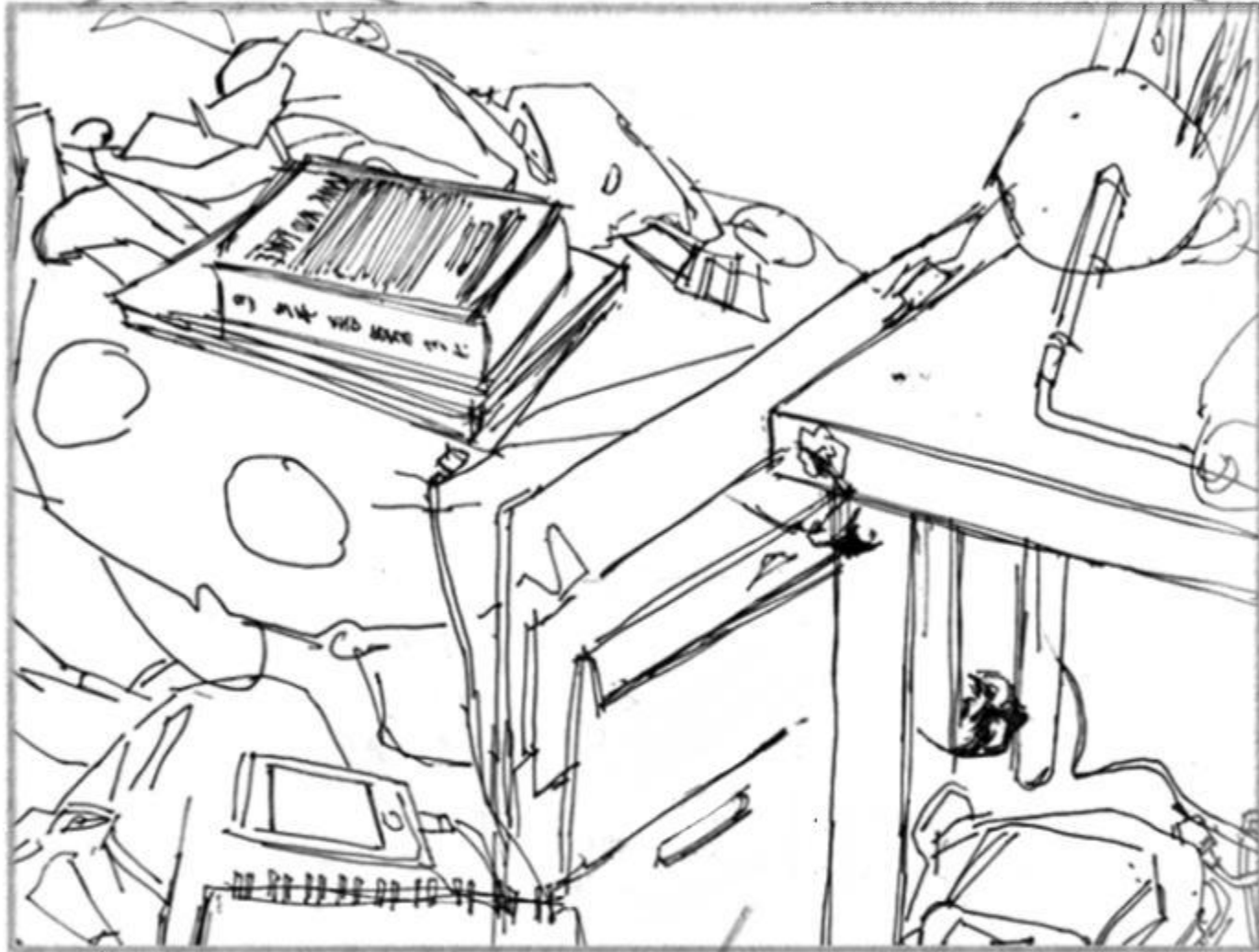


I chose *this* style because it comes most naturally to me, and is flexible enough for the type of story I am telling. The authors I interviewed described choosing their style for different reasons, as mentioned above!

Similarly, these drawings of my room each convey an immediate sense of emotion that is distinct from the other, despite the fact that they both depict the same room with the same level of finish.

scattered detail

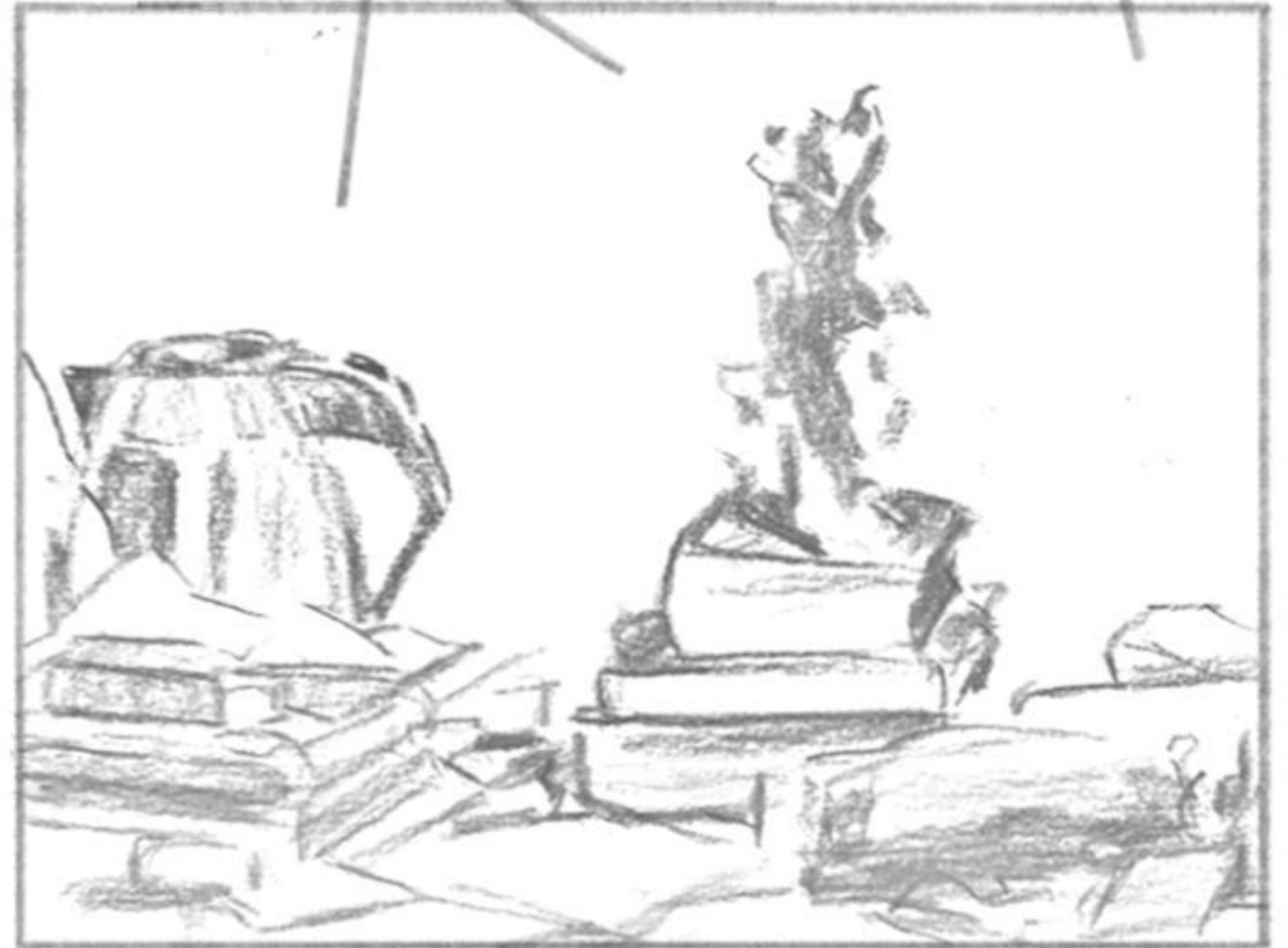
messy lines are sharp, vertical, and overlap without a sense of clarity, making them appear tense



lack of visual space in the composition makes it difficult to discern a focus, and conveys a sense of discomfort

clarity of focal points gives a sense of visual order and unity

balanced division between positive and negative space



messy lines are horizontal, softer, and have a uniform gradation that makes them unobtrusive to the eye

This visual dimension enables authors to externalize their inner world in a very immediate and subjective way.

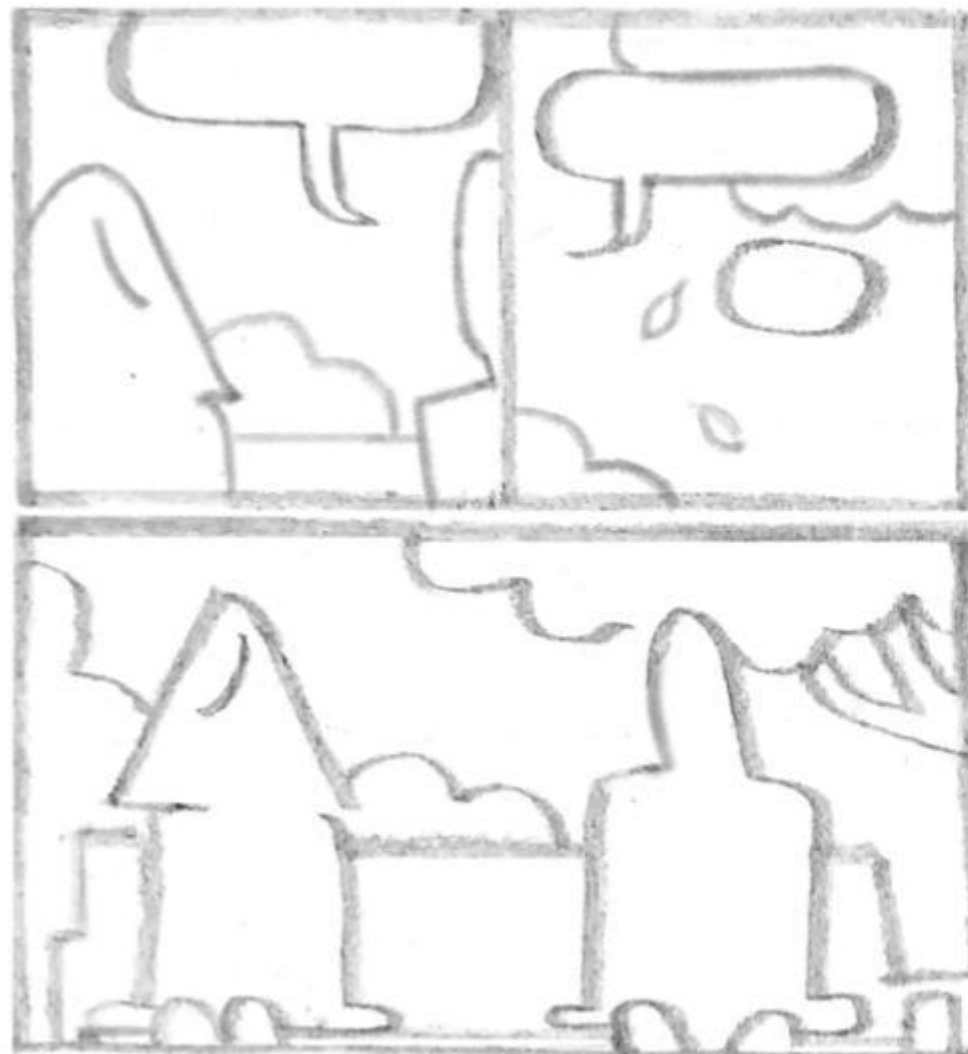
Drawings in comics also contribute to the expression of lived experience through...

closeness to life,



-visual cues are navigated and represented in a similar way to real interactions-
(Mutard, 2019)

visual pause,



-wordless images create 'space' in a story for readers to sit with and process it-

and the visualization of



metaphors or multisensory experiences.

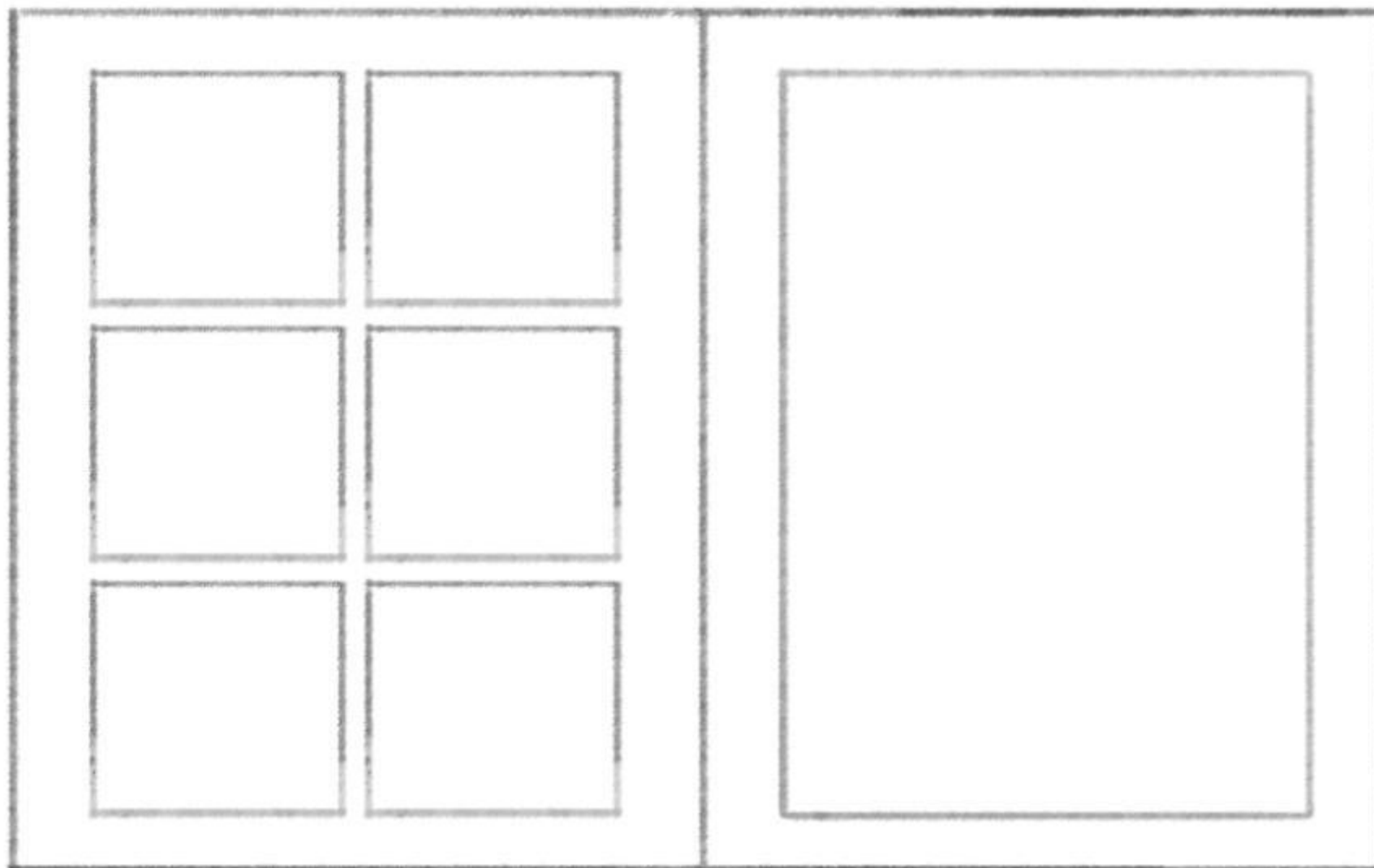
The way that drawn and written elements come together in the form of **page layout** is another important piece of vocabulary available to a cartoonist.

“When you're reading comics, you're not just reading the art and the bubbles, but you're reading the format as well.”

Meags Fitzgerald

There are two main styles which categorize page layouts: **conventional** and **rhetorical**. These can be standardized within one comic or shift from page to page.

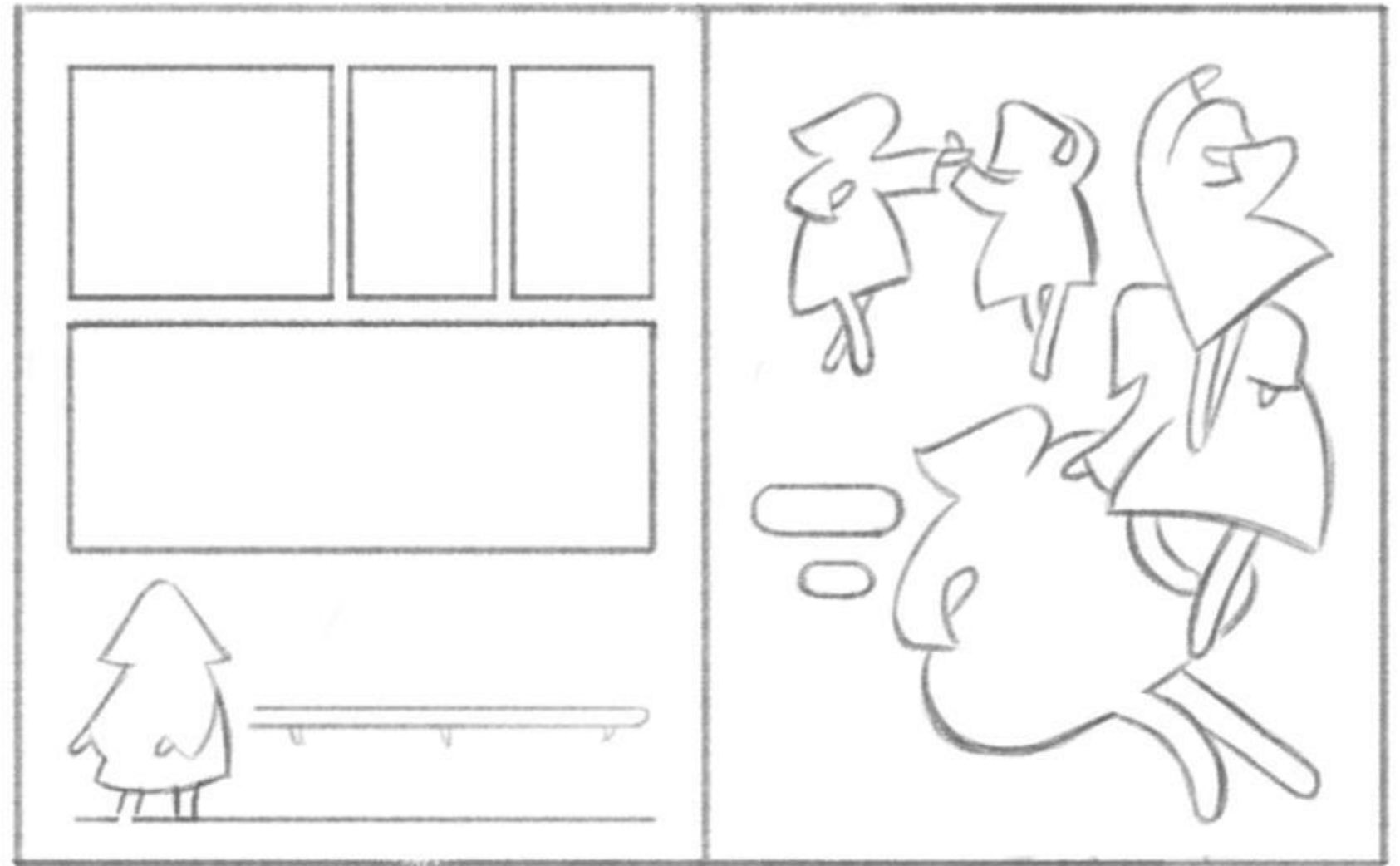
Conventional



A conventional layout is one where the panels remain consistent on the page in a grid format (Kuhlman, 2020). This can be used to highlight other elements of the story or to emphasize moments of contrast.

Rhetorical

In a rhetorical layout, the panels may adjust dynamically with the story. In this form the layout can be designed to reflect an experience, and to give the reader a similar experience by manipulating the way it is read. (Kuhlman, 2020)



For example, if an author wants to depict a moment of freedom and fluidity, they can do away with panels and allow the drawings to flow into each other. If they want to depict an anxious or chaotic moment, they can make the page itself visually chaotic and difficult to follow.

“Maybe it has something to do with the nonlinear quality of memory, that I'm not going to use the page in a linear way because my memory is swirling and it's not necessarily linear, and I want things to connect in more interesting ways so I often am using the page in a way that mirrors that quality of my brain.”

Amy Kurzweil

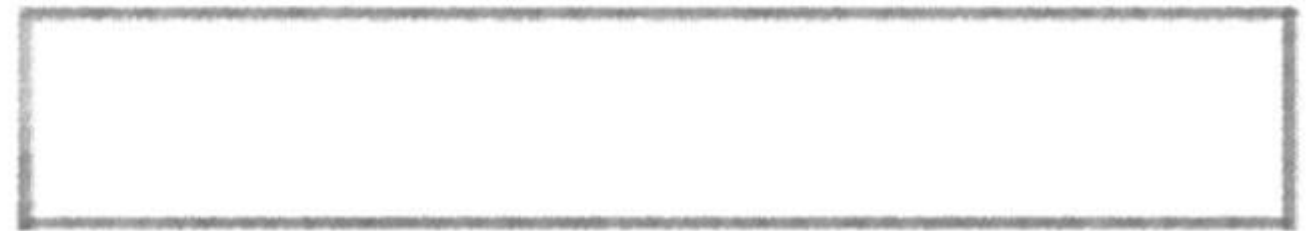
The added vocabulary of comics can also make them especially apt at communicating **nuance**.

“It's almost like having multiple voices that you can take on a page that can tell multiple stories about the same event or the same aspect of a person.”

Bishakh Som



For example, within one single panel an author can share information using narration boxes,



speech bubbles,

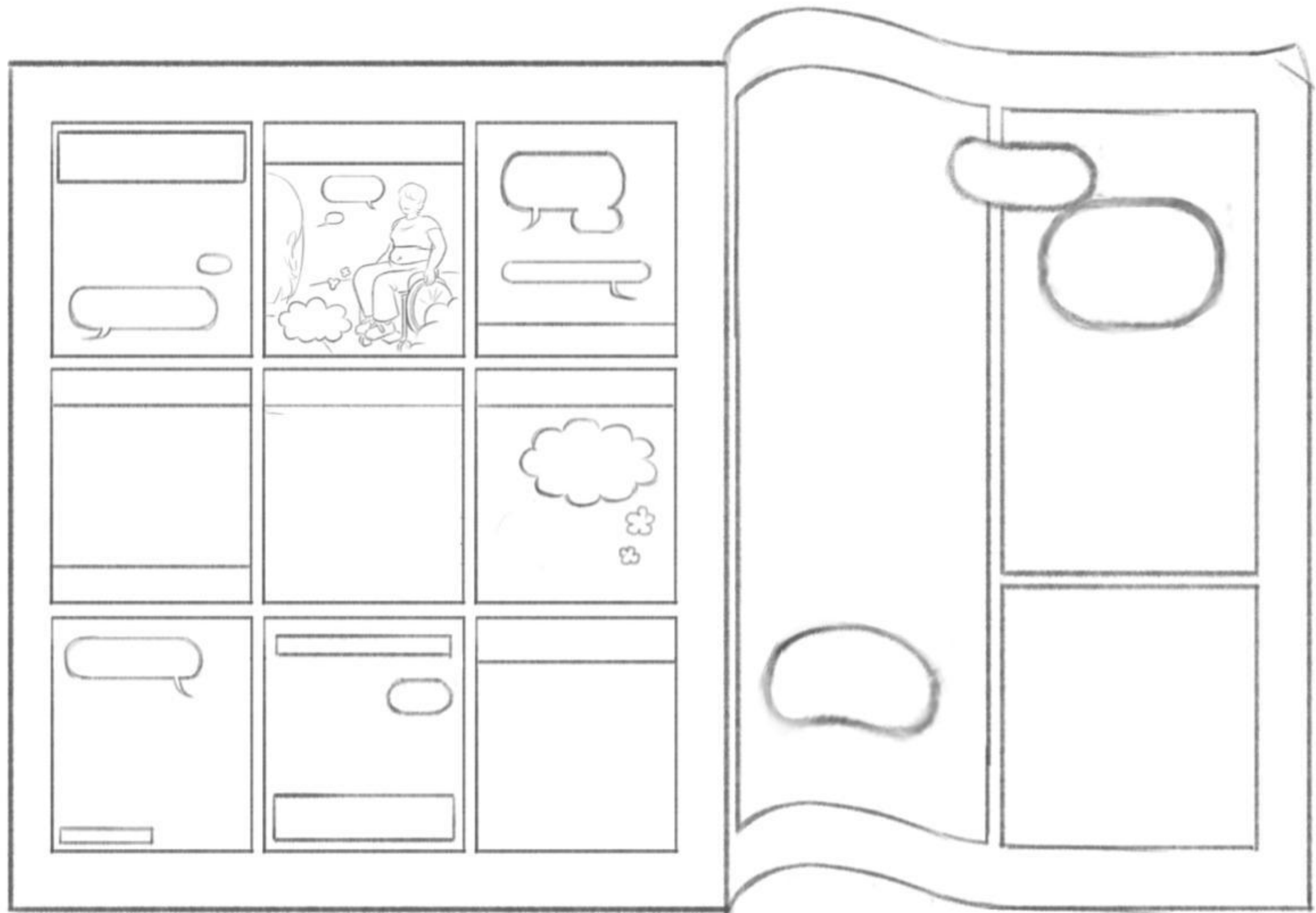


thought bubbles,



and the drawing itself.

On a comic page it can then be juxtaposed with other panels- each with a similar capacity for information- then arranged into the total composition of the page itself, juxtaposed with the surrounding pages, and placed into the total construction of the narrative- both visually and thematically!



The tension between all of these elements generates nuance and complexity to be interpreted by the reader, and can aid in expressing the multiplicity within a person or a single story to come closer to reflecting 'what it's really like to be a person' (Bodell, 2019).

The culmination of these elements in comics additionally enables and encourages distinct types of autobiography, such as:

Diary-like autobiographies which highlight everyday experiences;

focused autobiographies that explore a specific theme or experience;

and autobiographies that incorporate genre-bending elements.

These can include interviews, reporting, allegory, history, fictional elements, etc.

A very common example are informational interjections drawn into the style and context of a story. This can be a very powerful way to reflect on social issues or impersonal events as they are experienced in a personal capacity, to ground a story in reality, or to provide context for those who are not familiar with a subject.

These specializations are important because they allow authors to explore and express their own lives in the specific way that they imagine, and enables them to draw new connections in the field of life writing. In this way the comic autobiography can become an active tool for critical reflection and processing rather than a passive documentation of facts.

“In someone's hands who lived it, this is going to be a powerful graphic novel. It just seems that it has everything to me. It's like a documentary that you can hold in your hands, a deeply personal documentary”

Lila Quintero Weaver

Autobiographical comics in social movements:

Given these tools, what can autobiographical comics really do for people?



In order to answer this question in a tangible way, we can look to the interactions authors have had with their readership.

When asked about the reception of their work, authors shared stories about readers seeing themselves represented for the first time, making realizations about themselves, and coming to understand their friends, partners, or family members better through the comic.



“There were a lot of students who hadn't had voice who told me, you know, after reading this book that they were able to talk to their parents or to talk to teachers or to talk to their community because of language that came from this book.”

Alberto Ledesma

One author shared how their work was used in a classroom setting to successfully connect students who had personal experience with the subject of the comic and those who were unfamiliar with it.



“It was a very warm feeling, because I realized maybe that my story was more universal than I realized and than I had anticipated; that there was more value to it in telling a story that was very particular to me; that it might have the possibility of reaching people whose lives were not similar to my own, but maybe somehow they felt a connection, in some kind of way.”

Lila Quintero Weaver

The common humanity expressed in the comic allowed students to bridge their differences, and opened the door for more fruitful conversations built on shared understanding.

Authors' stories also showed how autobiographical comics have the ability to build a sense of community- for both authors and readers- through a mutual feeling of being understood or seen.

This is especially visible in online comics, where authors and readers can interact with each other more directly.



“You have this nice connection when someone else really understands it in a way that no one you know in real life understands something, something you're going through.”

Bex Burgess

These stories of author-reader experiences support the power of autobiographical comics to act as a framework for readers to understand and express themselves, to bridge differences, and to build community among authors, readers, and the people around them.

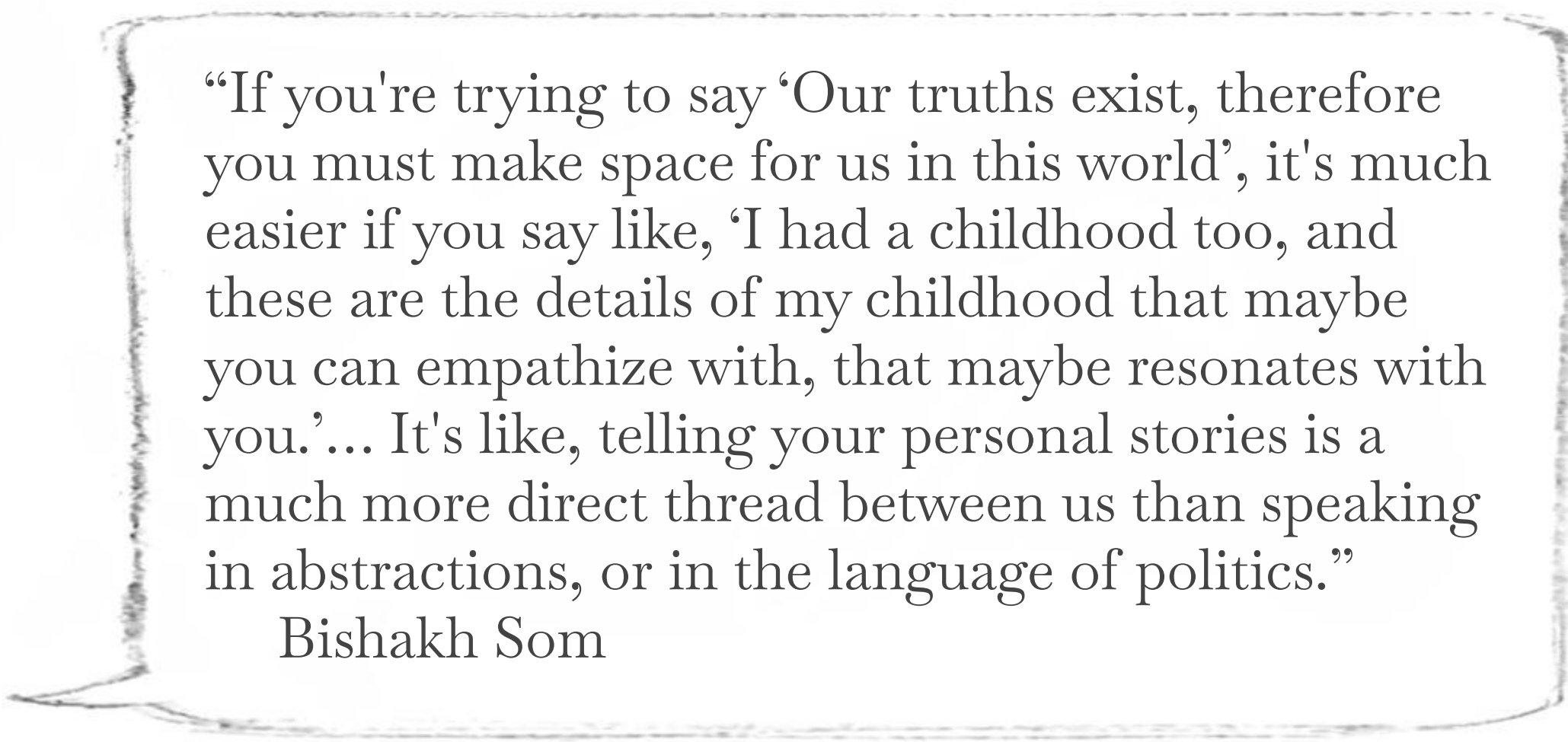


Conclusion

“I just thought, I can’t do everyone's experience so I can’t treat it like that; I can't treat it as activism, I have to treat it as autobiographical. *But that's what activism is; it's personal to people, otherwise it wouldn't exist.*”

Bex Burgess

All in all, the work that autobiographical comics do for social movements is largely at an interpersonal scale. The formal qualities of comics allow authors to express themselves with a high level of subjectivity, making their work a powerful platform for exploration, self-assertion, and intimate connection with an audience. This personal connection humanizes abstract truths, which can bring understanding from a reader and validate the significance of a movement.



“If you're trying to say ‘Our truths exist, therefore you must make space for us in this world’, it's much easier if you say like, ‘I had a childhood too, and these are the details of my childhood that maybe you can empathize with, that maybe resonates with you.’... It's like, telling your personal stories is a much more direct thread between us than speaking in abstractions, or in the language of politics.”

Bishakh Som

Autobiographical comics have the powerful potential of connecting broad ranges of people through mutuality and understanding. This effect is limited, however, by their readership, which can be fairly small, niche, and self contained. This doesn't diminish the value of these comics, but it does mean that they may not reach all the people that would benefit from reading them.

So, what can you do?



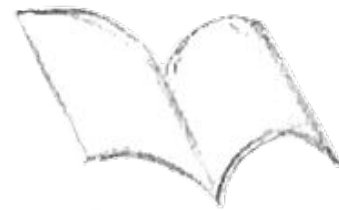
Consider reading
more comics!



And if you have
something to say, consider
writing some too!

Suggestions for Future Research

This study covers a broad topic, and there is much more to be learned about it!
Here are some suggestions that came up during my own research:



Explore comics readership.
Who is reading autobiographical comics?
What do they think?

Delve more deeply into distinct genres within autobiographical comics, to understand how the medium affects these different types of stories in unique ways.

Explore author perspectives about the effects of publishing on this topic, with a particular focus on online comics.

Authors Interviewed

Alberto Ledesma - *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer: Undocumented Vignettes from a Pre-American Life*, 2017

Amy Kurzweil - *Flying Couch*, 2016

Belle Yang - *Forget Sorrow*, 2010

Bex Burgess - *How to be Ace: A Memoir of Growing Up Asexual*, 2020

Bishakh Som - *Spellbound: A Graphic Memoir*, 2020

Carta Monir - Assorted short comics, 2016-2019

Erin Nations - *Gumballs*, 2018

GB Tran - *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*, 2010

Julie Dachez - *Invisible Differences: A Story of Aspergers, Adulting, and Living a Life in Full Color*, 2016

KC Councilor - *Between You and Me: Transitional Comics*, 2019

Kiku Hughes - *Displacement*, 2019

Lila Quintero Weaver - *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White*, 2012

Meags Fitzgerald - *Long Red Hair*, 2015

Rhea Ewing - *Fine: A Comic About Gender*, 2022

Vanessa Davis - *Make Me a Woman*, 2010

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