Comic Studies and Research in the Cultures of Young People: Cross-Disciplinary Intersections, Tensions, and Challenges

The papers in this forum were first presented as part of a round table entitled "Comic Studies and Research in the Cultures of Young People: Cross-Disciplinary Intersections, Tensions, and Challenges," hosted by the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People (ARCYP) at the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities at Brock University, held in St. Catharines, Ontario, on 27 May 2014.

Comic Studies and Young People's Cultures: The Challenges of Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue
—Naomi Hamer

This round table provided a distinctive opportunity for cross-disciplinary dialogue around the contentious relationship observed by Charles Hatfield, in the introduction to a 2006 issue of *ImageText* on "Comics and Childhood," between comic studies and research related to young people's cultures. In assembling the round table, organizers aimed to include scholars working across the fields of cultural studies, literary criticism, visual and media studies, and media literacy education. Founded in 2008 to include a membership of scholars from various disciplines as well as professionals and practitioners, ARCYP continues to promote the two foundational objectives of the organization: first, "[t]o promote the study of and research in the cultures and texts of young people, in Canada and internationally, across

a range of disciplines, and to build an understanding of such scholarship that defines 'young people,' 'culture,' and 'text' broadly"; and second, "[t]o create interdisciplinary spaces to exchange research on the cultures and texts of young people; to create opportunities for collaboration" ("Constitution"). The executive of ARCYP sought to organize this round table both to create an interdisciplinary space for dialogue and collaboration and to address scholarship that engages broadly with the debates around the definitions of "young people," "culture," and "texts." In addition, the organizers aimed to invite not only participants who present scholarship across disciplines but also scholars who move between the roles of researcher and practitioner.

The historical development of the comic strip as a serialized form is related closely to the development of other visual forms produced for young people, such as the picture book and the animated film. Like many contemporary comic writers, for instance, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean (who are known for the Sandman comic series) work across various graphic formats in their work, including written and illustrated picture books such as *The Wolves in the Walls* as well as illustrated novels such as *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*. Moreover, comic writers such as Gaiman have participated actively in the adaptation of illustrated print texts into animated and live-action feature films. In this forum, Glenn Wilmott's paper illustrates a

historical tradition of cross-writing in which comic and ludic forms, particularly through the visual blurring of human and animal characteristics often associated with narratives in children's literature, are common features in narratives for a general readership. Gaiman is exemplary of artists and writers who incorporate elements that often are associated with young people's texts and cultures in texts for adult audiences, as well as pushing the boundaries of what may be considered narratives intended for young people in format and content.

Hybrid picture books that exemplify a mixture of formalistic and content conventions of both picture books and graphic novels provide the most recent example of this cross-writing tradition, emphasizing the close relationship between these two graphic narrative forms. Nevertheless, in an article entitled "On Comics-Style Picture Books and Picture-Bookish Comics," Nathalie op de Beeck argues that, "while we may find much more than common ground between the two genres [comics and picture books]—indeed, formally one may be said to be a subset of the other—strong philosophical and ideological reasons persist for their separation" (468). Educators, publishers, and booksellers often are reluctant to blur the categories of what constitutes a picture book or a comic, due to assumptions about the cultural value of picture books as literary and artistic educational tools for young readers and about the lack of such value in the case of comic books.

Conversely, many scholars working in Comic Studies define themselves as distinct from work on picture books and young people's texts in order to distinguish themselves from the often-held view of children's texts as simple and idealized representations, as artifacts of mass-market popular culture, and as tools that serve a pedagogic function. Hatfield comments on this phenomenon, observing that "the default position for many recent comics researchers has been to reject entirely the link between comics and childhood, as if to jack the form up to some higher standard of seriousness" ("Comic" 376–77). Despite the popular, cultural, and commercial significance of comic texts outside the academy, Comic Studies, much like the field of Young People's Cultures, has emerged as a scholarly area that inhabits the margins of various historically established areas of study in the humanities and social sciences. Partially due to this marginalization, many scholars working in Comic Studies within a humanities or literary studies framework define themselves explicitly as working outside of the realm of research in young people's texts and cultures. In this *Jeunesse* forum, Bart Beaty's piece on Archie Comics reflects on some of the continued challenges in the literary study of comics (such as Archie) that fall outside the modernist "great books" framework and that may not be defined in terms of the culturally legitimate form of the graphic novel within literary studies.

While literary studies of graphic narratives continue to grapple with challenges around cross-writing and cultural legitimacy, audience studies research rooted in cultural studies approaches and educational studies of digital literacies position the study of comics increasingly in relation to the cultures of young people.

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Ironically, the movement of the graphic novel toward cultural legitimacy within a literary studies framework (a framework in which comics scholars often distinguish themselves intentionally from educational research and pedagogic applications) has secured its more recent role as an educational tool for young people. Both Janette Hughes and Laura Morrison's paper on the use of graphic novels in educational contexts and Andrew Woodrow-Butcher's paper on his work as a bookseller and library consultant illustrate how the acceptance of graphic novels as a legitimate cultural form has led to the production of comic texts that are geared explicitly to young readers by children's book and educational publishers.

This forum presents distinctive theoretical and methodological approaches that have evolved at the same time in different disciplines. These four short papers do not present an exhaustive discussion about the fields of study that examine comic texts and young people's cultures, but rather they highlight and raise points for discussion from diverse disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. The forum consists of two papers that bring critical reflections and theoretical perspectives from the humanities to the study of graphic narratives and two more that highlight recent practical applications and developments in pedagogic contexts for teachers and librarians and in industry shifts and outreach for publishers and booksellers.

Glenn Wilmott's "Comics as a Cross-Writing Tradition" addresses the cross-writing tradition of comics that he argues is both thematic and formal. As Wilmott observes, "[t]his is a cross-writing tradition in two ways: formally, in its roots in what has been called caricature, understood as an iconography or kind of style, and thematically, in what I will call its animalization, understood as an iconology or vehicle for ideas" (98). He reflects critically on the role of comics within the artistic tradition of the grotesque and particularly the function of animalistic and ludic elements that constitute this tradition both within and outside of young people's cultures.

Bart Beaty's paper, "Modernism in Riverdale: Reading the Self-Evident Text Ambiguously," reflects upon some of the issues that have arisen in his work on Archie Comics and the analytical challenges in examining mass-market texts within the confines of the standard terms and methods of literary scholarship, which often values the close analysis of "great works." Even graphic texts that are examined and taught within literary studies often are those that exemplify modernist frames rather than the mass-market texts that are the most popular and profitable. Framed by Andreas Huyssen's work on the rise of mass culture and its relationship to twentieth-century modernism, Beaty explores the challenges of studying Archie Comics texts, which are exemplary of mass culture produced exclusively for the marketplace.

In their contribution, "The Evolution of Teaching with Graphic Novels," Janette Hughes and Laura Morrison discuss recent research on the use of graphic novels in elementary school contexts. The primary focus of their essay is the examination of "pedagogical approaches that combine learning *about* graphic novels with learning *from* graphic novels" (119). Reporting on a case study at two school sites, they explore specifically how graphic novels can be used to engage with social justice and human rights issues, particularly those relevant to historical and contemporary indigenous experiences in Canada. This piece illustrates the use of graphic narratives in practical and pedagogic contexts and begins a dialogue between humanities and educational research that is rooted in distinctive theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Finally, Andrew Woodrow-Butcher's paper—entitled "Little Island Comics Goes to University!"—offers the perspective of a bookseller and library consultant at Little Island Comics, a store in Toronto dedicated solely to comics for young readers. Woodrow-Butcher's unique contribution to this published forum evolves from ARCYP's interest in presenting not only cross-disciplinary perspectives but also critical reflections from practitioners who work at sites outside of formal scholarly discourse. At the same time, Woodrow-Butcher's paper indicates the fluid dynamic between his work as a bookseller and cultural shifts occurring at the levels of publishing, schools, libraries, and post-graduate research and teaching. As I observed in a review essay in *Jeunesse* published in 2013, the establishment and success of the Little Island bookstore reflects changing trends in Canada and internationally in the production and consumption of comic texts geared specifically for young readers:

> The increased cultural legitimacy of the comic as an artistic and literary form, the changing perspective of the comic as a learning tool, as well as the current consideration of print texts in the context of (some) adult fears of digital media are all factors that have influenced the increased production of comic texts geared explicitly to young readers by non-traditional publishers of comics. (166–67)

These four papers respond to shifts in the production and the consumption of comics explicitly as young people's texts and draw attention as well to the continued challenges of grappling with these shifts from within rooted discipline-specific scholarly assumptions and approaches. All four papers illustrate not only the challenges of these category-crossing texts but also a shared interest across disciplines in how graphic narratives encourage boundary crossing and blurring in definitions and approaches. In his paper, Wilmott reflects extensively on the blurring of practices in design and content, describing comics in terms of "a mode of *cross-writing*." In comparison, Beaty addresses

directly the limitations of disciplinary frameworks to deal with graphic narratives that fall outside of long-held definitions of what constitutes "literature." He observes that the "failure of literary studies to find meaningful ways to talk about Archie Comics over the past half century speaks more clearly to disciplinary shortcomings than it does to anything about the eternal present of stories set in Riverdale" (114). As researchers working in the field of education, Hughes and Morrison address the opportunities in these cross-writing traditions in pedagogic contexts. Similarly, Woodrow-Butcher describes the possibilities offered by boundary crossing and blurring: "we maintain a selection of picture books at Little Island, revelling in the blurry lines that separate that form from what some people would consider comics" (131).

During the discussion following the round table in May 2014, a number of key questions were raised.

Who is missing from this round table? Who else needs to contribute to this cross-disciplinary dialogue? What other practitioners and/or scholars should be present for this discussion? While this selection of papers is unique in that it includes the work of practitioners as well as scholars, it does not include contributions from comics authors and illustrators themselves. It would also be valuable to include the voices of collaborations between researchers, authors, and young people. While often there are dynamic and fluid intersections and dialogues around Comic Studies that occur outside the academy, opportunities for dialogue within scholarly contexts between interdisciplinary scholars, practitioners, publishers, booksellers, and artists are still a rarity. Hopefully, this forum will set the stage for future round tables to bring together varied perspectives from within and outside scholarly discourse.

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Naomi Hamer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg, where she is affiliated with the Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures. Her most recent publication, "Re-mixing *The Chronicles of Narnia*: The Reimagining of Lucy Pevensie through Film Franchise Text and Digital Cultures," emerged out of her doctoral research at the Institute of Education at the University of London and appeared in *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture* (2014). Her current research examines media adaptations of picture books in the form of interactive mobile apps and the cross-media literacies associated with children's story museums.