INTRODUCTION

The term "poetry comics" emerged in the 1960s among New York City's postmodernists, a notoriously collaborative group of artists who experimented with poetry's visual possibilities. While the term "poetry comics" is somewhat unfamiliar outside of academia, visual texts, or works which apply both textual and visual elements and techniques, are as old as written language itself. Artists and writers have been confined to and have wrestled against genre boxes as far back as Ancient Greeks. As a result, many hybrid forms and subgenres, like poetry comics, have been grouped, named, and studied.

Scholar and author of *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry*, Willard Bohn, defines visual poetry simply as "poetry as meant to be seen," and he suggests that it is "neither a compromise nor an evasion but a synthesis of the principles underlying each medium" (2). In this sense, poetry comics fall under the umbrella of visual poetry and hold similarities to other forms in the category, such as ekphrasis or erasure poems. Like concrete poetry or a calligrams, poetry comics pay careful attention to white space, the poem's performance on the page, and intentionally draw connections between a poem's physical shape and the text. As a "hybrid" form, however, poetry comics apply specific techniques and genre conventions traditional to both poetry and comics. An effective poetry comic employs poetic elements and techniques such as metaphor, juxtaposition, personification, lyricism, and alliteration. Poetry comics appropriate particular visual and spatial tools traditional to comics such as panels, speech and thought bubbles, and narration boxes.

Visual poems— poetry comics especially— possess powerful opportunities for reader engagement and interpretation by inviting active participation. To demonstrate the form's capacity for rich and subjective interpretation, in my analysis of Bianca Stone's exemplary poetry comic "7th Floor," I include many personal connections and associations. This tonal shift is intentional, as I aim to offer an associative and intimate interpretation of a poetry comic as a model to benefit students and teachers.

Additionally, I complement my personal understandings by incorporating concepts which scholar and essayist Sarah Minor discusses in her article "Looking While Reading I, II, III." Though Minor's scholarship focuses nonfiction, I draw connections between her approach to reading visual texts such as the lyric essay to reading poetry comics. I also aim to explicate the pedagogical potential of poetry comics by linking the hybrid subgenre to scholarship by writer and professor Jen Soriano. Soriano's concept of "intersectional form" provides a framework which highlights the multimodal form's capability to develop student identity, creative expression, and to justify its alignment to culturally responsive teaching.

I also delineate how the form can be used as a tool for other common pedagogical goals such as genre knowledge, critical thought, and student engagement. I supplement these ideas with a practical lesson sequence and pedagogical suggestions that teachers and writers can appropriate to best fit their needs.

An imaginative and often surreal form that tends to mirror the nonlinear nature of memory and experience, poetry comics live in the crosshairs between text and image. Writers are faced with the challenge of creating resonant work which balances the artist's singular, lived experience with collective understandings and truth. Poetry comics construct a visual landscape, together temporal and spatial, to speak into the unsaid. In an article titled "Why I Make Poetry Comics," Stone asks, "Why does poetry comics feel like yearning?" She eventually responds, "It is an obsession with the impossible."

What follows is an exploration into the space between words and image, an examination of visual texts' attractiveness, and an overview of the pedagogical benefits that come with exposure to poetry comics.

VISUAL TEXTS: A SHORT OVERVIEW OF A LONG HISTORY

Visual texts, or artwork which merges text and image, originate at the birthplace of written language: the mouth of a painted cave, Ancient Egyptian tombs, Chinese pictographs, illuminated manuscripts, Japanese poetry printed in calligraphy, Aesop's fables carved into woodcuts, or Edward Lear's limericks coupled by cartoons (Morice 7). From humanity's primal beginnings to the technology-saturated twenty-first century, people have searched for ways to communicate thoughts and understandings to one another through words and images. Centuries of recorded history showcase humanity's fondness for visual texts. It seems contradictory then, that today's work which combines text and image is often considered "experimental."

Writer and interdisciplinary artist, Sarah Minor, acknowledges the somewhat buried past of what she calls "visual writing," because of our inherited "value and storage systems" which separate reading from seeing. Because visual texts do not fit neatly into any genre recognized today as traditional, the oldest method of written communication is inaptly considered new.

This renaissance of image-text fusion is prominent, especially in K-12 classrooms. Graphic novels, video games, visual/textual social media applications like Instagram and Tik-Tok are just the beginning of the conversation regarding our increasingly multimodal world. It's evident that no pre-destined container exists for this type of medium; therefore, interdisciplinary artists have few strict conventions.. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen, a New York Times* best-selling book of American Lyrics, and Matthea Harvey's *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?* a

collection of poems set to visual art, are just two of the many examples. However, for some readers and teachers, experimental or hybrid texts, those that do not fit into Plato's "poetry, drama and prose," appear daunting. For this reason, it's critical to remember that visual texts are not new; rather, few things are as inherent to humans as creating and making meaning from language and image. Visual texts are becoming increasingly popular, and although the human brain is wired to comprehend these texts, creating space in the classroom to teach students how to thoughtfully consume these texts is critical.

Not only are visual texts like poetry comics appealing to the human brain, but the form also has the capacity to shape identity and allows for original thought and personal reflection. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard examines the poetic image in his book *The Poetics of Space* and suggests that artwork which incorporates both text and image produces a "multiplicity of resonances." He writes, "the resonances are dispersed on the different planes of our life in the world, while the repercussions invite us to give greater depth into our own existence," and that when we engage with the poetic image "the poem now becomes really our own…It is as though the poet's being is our being" (xix). Thus, Bachelard's multiple resonances rationalizes the feelings of intimacy and self-discovery that often arise when engaging with multiplicitous art forms. Thus, engaging with visual texts is an intrinsic opportunity for readers and writers to explore the layers of their internal and external worlds.

Poetry Comics: What exactly are they?

To situate poetry comics within the contemporary literary landscape requires a delineation of the form's most consequential developments. Referenced frequently as an artist instrumental to those who utilize visual art and written text in their work, eighteenth century poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake's work is not necessarily classified as poetry comics, yet his work remains highly relevant for its permeating roots. His collection of poems and paintings, *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* depict biblical stories which employ both text and paintings in an illustrative manner. Some discussions surrounding Blake's legacy entertain questions regarding Blake's standing as either a writer or a visual artist. Blake scholar and professor of art history and literature, W.T. Mitchell writes:

> One can and must, however, avoid the trap of comparison. The most important lesson one learns from composite works like Blake's (or from mixed vernacular arts like comic strips, illustrated newspapers, and illuminated manuscripts) is that *comparison itself is not a necessary procedure in the study of image-text relations*. The necessary subject matter is, rather, the whole ensemble of relations between media, and the relations

> can be many other things besides similarity, resemblance, and analogy. Difference is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor and interesting as harmony and blending of function. (89-90)

Mitchell's assertions apply not only to Blake's hybrid work, but any other multimodal artwork which relies on the relationship between more than one medium. It is natural to examine how a hybrid or experimental form contrasts with more traditional work; however, as Mitchell points out, it is best to consider the relationships and similarities that exist between genres. Instead of determining distinctions, a reader of poetry comics is better off considering the commonalities that exist between the hybrid form and its related art forms. But what separates poetry comics from the Sunday comics or other modes of visual poetry? These are valid questions, and distinctions certainly exist. But, to answer these questions with a list of qualifiers or delineations would be drawing a line that does not actually exist. Hybrid forms like poetry comics snake in and out of each other. They are not quite lawless, but the standards are fluid. Plus, answers to these questions would likely vary from one reader of poetry comics to another, thus it is futile to set strict boundaries or qualifications.

To define or situate this widely encompassing form, it is more pertinent to first examine the ways poetry comics effectively make meaning in ways akin to traditional poems or comics. Consider what the form appropriates from its mother genres, or how poetry comics parallel visual poetry and graphic novels, and notice any shifts, or places where poetry comics begin to break away from its more traditional influences. This is where the construction of a new subgenre occurs. From there, one can discern how these shifts or departures affect meaning-making and reader experience.

The New York School coined the term "poetry comics." A group of artists characterized by "cross-pollination between writing and visual art" (Poetry Foundation), The New York School consisted of poets such as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery and visual artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Second-generation New York poet, Joe Brainard, was central in establishing poetry comics as a recognized sub-genre through his subversive and grungy visual art that frequently incorporated everyday objects and poetic language. Working closely with friends and other artists of his generation, he published collaborative, anticapitalistic comics in a short-lived magazine, *C Comics*, which "exhibit something of the irreverence and energy of an underground 'zine' put together by a bunch of high-school students—the arty, misfit ones—to counter the assumptions and pieties passed down by teachers and adults" (Shamma 55). Yasmine Shamma, a scholar particularly interested in the New York School, writes of Brainard:

> With one foot playfully outside, he refuses to settle for any one particular style or form. It is this tangential relation that gives his work freedom to move on its own terms between genres, disciplines, and traditions—creating work that is insistently juxtapositional and which, in this constant desire for such relation, draws closely to its object, to its subject, and to us. So that Brainard's work is, in part, defined by the kinds of in-between movement and minimalism that characterizes the minor traditions in which he works and which allows us to see, as Gertrude Stein writes, that "If anything is natural enough it is not surprising." (82)

Often uncanny and intentionally absurd, Brainard's work does not possess singular meaning, rather it's experiential and mirrors his unique world onto the page, which is a world uneasily broken up or categorized into strict genres or traditions. Instead, he creates through "a constant unsettling of boundaries," (Shamma 88) generating nuanced, layered art that encourages viewers to bring much of themselves to the work to make meaning. Simultaneously familiar and strange, Brainard's work speaks to the Pop Art scene which acknowledges the absurdity of everyday life. Even now, Brainard's image-text work is considered "experimental," yet it highlights the attraction to and reverence for artwork that defies the textual-visual art binary.

Among many other reasons, artists create as a means of self-expression, young artists especially. Perhaps poetry comics merit appeal because of their multifaceted, indefinite tendencies, which historically align them to underground, counterculture movements. Surprising, mutable, personal, and widely interpreted, the form's experimental origins demonstrate the way poetry comics allow for expansive expression of the self.

The Specifics: Elements and techniques utilized by poetry comics

Although the New York School may have given poetry comics a name, the genre has since developed its own loosely standardized set of expectations. A genre that combines the poetic line with a visual landscape, poetry comics are interested in simultaneous speaking and showing.

Poetry and comics, in their traditional forms, share many of the same elements and techniques, so it is no surprise that the combination of these two "mother genres" make such a compelling hybrid form. Poet and visual artist Tamryn Bennett writes, "Aesthetically, comparisons can be drawn between the visual arrangement of comics and stanzas, line breaks, special structures, symbols and the experimental typography of some poetry" (61). While visual poetry often deals with the way a poem performs on the page, incorporating caesuras, intentional typography, or secondary image-sources like photographs, poetry comics depart

from visual poetry by adopting techniques central to comics such as panels, speech or thought bubbles, and narrative text boxes.

Like visual poetic forms such as ekphrastic, erasure, calligrams, and concrete poetry, poetry comics utilize a shared visual and verbal language. As Bohn suggests, in visual poetry, "the visual dimension is an integral part of the poem, developing and expanding the verbal text," and in the most successful examples, "there is a constant dialogue between these two levels that increases the depth and breadth of our experience" (2). In a successful visual poem, meaning is made in the space between text and image, thus, the words and images cannot be separated and retain full meaning.

Additionally, both visual poems and poetry comics rely on white space to effectively communicate time and space. Poetry comics do not rely on words to execute a linear narrative or plotline, nor do they use images simply as an illustrative tool. This complexity primes them for rich discussion and analysis— a tool useful in building critical thinking skills.

Effective poetry comics braid together elements and techniques from both poetry and comics, exemplified in Bianca Stone's piece titled "7th Floor" [Figure 1]. My first encounter with poetry comics was Stone's book, *Poetry Comics from the Book of Hours,* when it was featured in a special collections exhibit at Middlebury College's library, which was curated for a graduate course that I took with poet Gwyneth Lewis titled Poetry and the Visual Arts.

A short and engaging piece, “7th Floor” comes from this collection and exemplifies many elements central to poetry comics, making it an effective model to use with those new to the form. In it, readers are first presented with a vibrant image of three figures, which I will refer to as characters, propped up against a dreamy, periwinkle background. Three characters gather around each other while a cartoonish cat sits at their feet. A fourth character stands in the background, separated from the group, with their back turned to the viewer. While the character dressed in green braids or brushes another’s hair, a third holds a mirror up to them both.

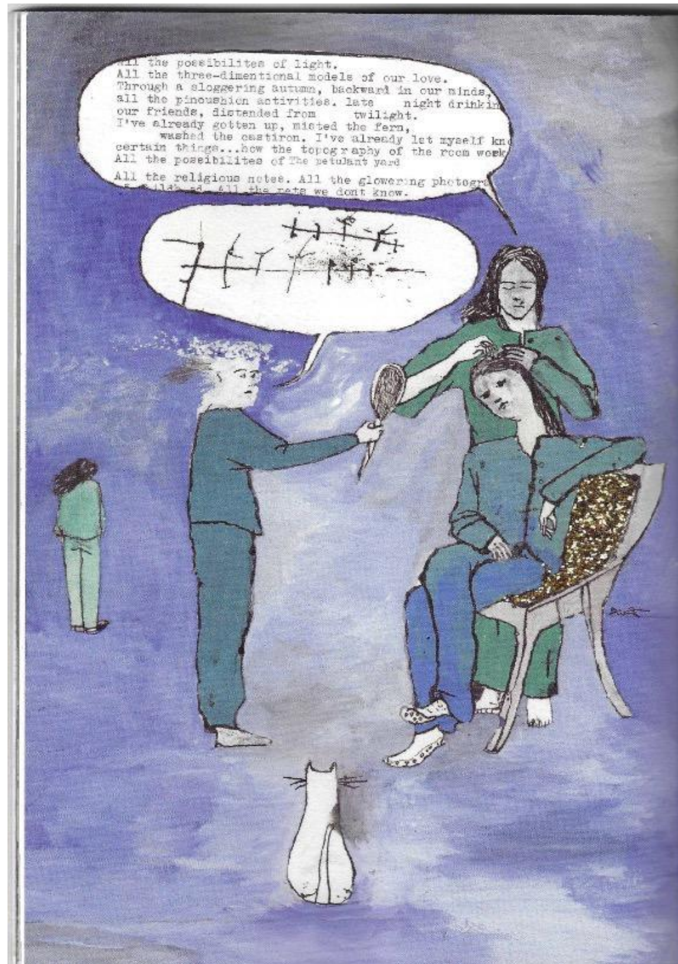

Figure 1

As indicated by a speech bubble, the hair-braiding character says, “Through a slogging autumn, backward in our minds, all the pincushion activities” and “I’ve already let myself know certain things… how the topography of the room works. All the possibilities of the petulant yard.” These lines, so rich with music and surprise, do not function as typical dialogue, often used as a plot development tool in prose and traditional comics. Instead, this dialogue utilizes metaphor and imagery that emphasizes wonder over explanation.

While some poetry comics may incorporate plot the way narrative poems often do, this example deals with time in a liminal way, effectively placing the reader in a suspended, emotionally charged moment. The effect is reflective, contemplative, and invites wide audience interpretation and participation, similar to that of a lyric poem.

Stone complicates the image by including a reply from the mirror-holding character— an assortment of indecipherable scribbles. There is no one way to comprehend this image and conversation, but readers are likely to wonder what the connection is between these characters, perhaps what feelings they have for one another and why one character is separated. Maybe the handheld mirror is of intrigue, or maybe the cat. Readers like myself might sense the feeling of intimacy that comes with the act of braiding hair.

To read poetry comics is to wonder, witness, and to trust one's ability to understand without being told. In her study of the lyric essay's visual effects, Sarah Minor examines the possibilities of hybrid image-texts, and her findings are relevant not only to nonfiction, but to poetry comics as well. She writes, "in visual texts, what is visual extends not to reiterate what has been written, but instead contributes to and extends qualities (tonal conceptual, setting, voice or character) that aren't explicitly present in the text, or that the reader expecting to read words-only might not notice in the text otherwise" (9). Apply this same concept to poetry comics, and the form's lack of redundancy between words and text becomes clear. A poetry comic's image-scape provides the text with layered context and opportunity for expansive interpretation; the images do not tell the same story as the words. This implies poetry comics have more in common with graphic novels, such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, than they do most illustrated picture books, especially those aiming to teach early literacy. As Stone's work exemplifies, an effective poetry comic simultaneously communicates two distinct yet intertwined narratives, ideas, or notions: that of the text and that of the image.

Reading text is one skill, seeing images is another and, in comprehending the two together, a third is born. Minor claims, "Text is image. Space is time. So the reading of concrete texts is about reading in two modes, and at two different scales, and also simultaneously. Looking while reading prompts re-reading, pausing, questioning, and refocusing, and the temporal shifts and reorientations of power that those gestures can invite" (10). She highlights the idea that, even when we read text-only work, we do not read one letter at a time, we read the whole word, the words around that word, and the sentences above and below. Readers of visual texts are not reading and viewing separately, rather they practice a consumption of material, a complex seeing, that is unique to image-texts and multimodal forms like poetry comics.

"7th Floor" continues onto the next page [Figure 2] and presents readers with a black and white image of a horse with the caption "Today I woke up baffled." The second page of this poetry comic functions as a breath and a moment of absurd, perhaps comedic, relief. It also serves as an example of a poetry comic that uses not only illustrations, but a photograph. There are numerous artists who demonstrate the breadth and variety of the hybrid form by incorporating components such as diagrams, erasure, and collages in their poetry comics. Some examples include

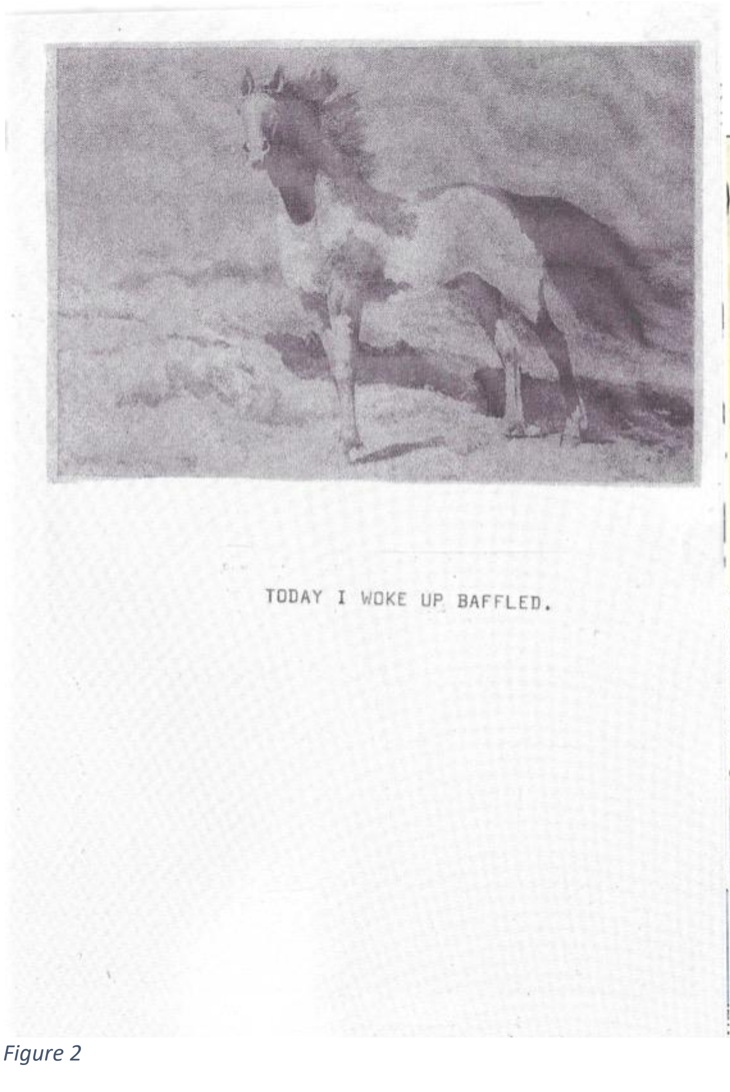

Figure 2

Catherine Bresner's pieces "January 2nd" and "Bon Voyage" or Mita Mahato's collection of poetry comics, *In Between*, which is composed entirely of collage.

There are many reasons I'm drawn to Stone's "7th Floor." These individual associations are worth acknowledgment because, as Bachelard suggests, engaging with the poetic image provides an opportunity for readers to see themselves inside the work itself. To recall memories or prior knowledge and apply these earlier understandings to make sense of new information is a valuable skill to practice because this is how we learn. We take what we know, or thought we knew, and adjust accordingly.

In my girlhood, my mother and sister and I would sit on the floor of my bedroom playing with each other's hair. These are fond memories. I don't remember what we talked about, but I felt safe and cared for. As an adult, the only time someone touches my hair, I'm inside a chemically perfumed hair salon and I'm paying them to do so. The act is often coupled by awkward, forced conversation, which this piece might also symbolize for me. I'm reminded of Brainard's ability to absurd the normal, causing us to look at a thing we thought was familiar with new eyes. The small, cast-off character in the background intrigues me, as it does my students whenever I present this comic to them. It's worth speculating at the causes behind this character's physical isolation, even if no answer is found and agreed upon. Though our circumstances are certainly

different, this character serves as a representation of loneliness that I can empathize with, and therefor provides me with some level of comfort.

Maybe I'm drawn to this comic because periwinkle is my favorite color. Maybe I like the glittery chair. This example, like most poetry comics, leaves much up for interpretation. There is mystery and uncertainty. Bachelard writes, "In poetry, non-knowing is a primal condition; if there exists a skill in the writing of poetry, it is in the minor task of associating images. But the entire life of the image is in its dazzling splendor, in the fact that an image is a transcending of all the premises of sensibility" (xxix). Although ambiguity and subjectivity are rarely navigated with ease, in a classroom especially, ignoring the uncertainties that exist within poetry comics limits reader experience. To successfully engage with poetry comics, non-knowing is a required experience. In the creative writing classroom, navigating subjectiveness and widely interpreted texts challenges students to slow down, to think critically, pushes them to explore less familiar thought patterns, and encourages them to think in ways they have not previously. Widely interpreted poetry comics such as Stone's can do all of these things and, in doing so, bring students to better understand themselves.

Similar to Bachelard's thoughts on the poetic image, Minor argues the lyric essay, a hybrid form that combines elements of prose, poetry, and memoir, gestures at a "participatory invitation" and "resists explaining itself." She claims that the lyric essay resists "holding the audience's hand" because "after all, participation does not mean simply gazing" (15). This is also true of poetry comics. The in-between nature of this form leaves many gaps for the reader to fill in themselves. To fill the gap between text and image, from panel to panel, or line break to line break, a reader of poetry comics must bring their own stories, identities, and understandings to the page.

The form facilitates this kind of intimate relationship between writer and reader by utilizing specific aspects of poetry and comics. Bennett argues "In comics, the white space where narrative is absent is what mobilizes readers to make-meaning, much the same way as line breaks and stanzas do in poetry. Negotiations of gaps between panels allows individual interpretation, similar to the effect of line breaks or gaps between stanzas" (62). Because poetry and comics both encourage the reader's individual interpretation, poetry comics allow for double "independent creation of meaning" (Bennett 61). Thus, much of the form's impact comes from the requirement for readers to approach poetry comics as themselves, and to participate by integrating their unique position in the world with the work to make meaning.

Multimodality & Culturally Responsive Teaching: The pedagogical benefits of poetry comics

Multimodal, hybrid forms like poetry comics provide opportunities for students to tackle common, standardized literacy objectives like literary device expertise in fresh, imaginative ways. More than an opportunity for students to develop nuanced understandings of literary elements, artistic techniques, and genre standards, I assert that making poetry comics aligns with multimodal and culturally responsive pedagogies, as the form moves away from strict traditions and binaries to increase student engagement, inspire creativity, encourage abstract thought, and aid in identity development and expression.

Between words and image lives what Bennett calls a "visual-verbal juxtaposition" that "matches the written with visual content, further revealing possibilities for the creation of a hybrid visual language" (64). Effective poetry comics employ traditional literary devices such as metaphor and juxtaposition visually, making them a useful tool for teachers looking for ways to deliver content using multiple modes. Poet and visual artist Gabrielle Bates understands poetry comics to possess a "dynamic mutuality" where, "meaning is found in integration by dwelling in the between." Like Bennett, Bates suggests that in poetry comics, juxtapositions "form the whole, and to be read truthfully, these contrasts must be considered in relation." By avoiding simple illustration, the images in poetry comics often become naturally oppositional or misaligned with the text, providing a visual representation for connected-disjointedness, which is the machine behind both juxtaposition and metaphor. By studying these two elements of poetry from a visual angle, students are likely to develop a more nuanced or sophisticated understanding of established literary devices.

Poetry comics mirror the nonlinear, associative nature of memory and often reach towards the ineffable. Rich understanding and layered implications are available to the reader, so long as they are willing to embrace complexity and mutability. To engage with poetry comics is to dwell in the in-between, to accept the illogical, and to allow for many possible interpretations. Poetry comics allow for students to think critically, beyond fast consumption, and to access multiple levels of understanding: visually, spatially, and verbally.

In today's increasingly technology-reliant world, engaging with multimodal texts such as poetry comics is a vital skill worthy of practice. Compared to their grandparents, middle school students today are more familiar with the elements of anime or manga. They approach videography and graphic design with ease and excitement. Yet, young readers' abilities to quickly grasp and comprehend multimodal, visual texts is often considered a steppingstone into "real reading," or language-dominant reading. Current standardized, high-stakes language assessments only further perpetuate the notion that multimodal texts are inconsequential or frivolous, as these tests remain largely language dependent. At its core, however, to read is to translate what exists on the page (or screen, canvas, billboard, etc.) from the unknown to the understood.

It makes sense then, that multimodal texts can increase student engagement. Students' lives outside of school, often referred to as their lifeworlds, are inherently multimodal. A primary concern of culturally responsive classrooms is to bridge the gap between students' educational experiences in the classroom and their experiences at home or in their communities. Pioneer of culturally responsive pedagogies, Geneva Gay, states the fundamental aim of this framework is to "empower ethnically diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy." Gay claims that for students to learn effectively in a classroom setting, the course material "must be accessible to students and connected to their lives and experiences outside of school." Students today are inundated with multimodal texts outside of the classroom, and so to incorporate visual texts like poetry comics in school grants immediate interest, as they bring together students' lifeworld with their formal educational experiences.

More than increased student engagement, additional links have been discovered between multimodal pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching. In qualitative thematic analysis conducted for *Linguistics and Education, s*everal international researchers gathered information from 98 articles which center multimodal pedagogies in the classroom. In this systematic review, they determined that studies which centered multimodal texts in the classroom recognized the "inclusion of the students' cultural identities and lifeworld encourage them to build on funds of knowledge through culturally responsive pedagogies" (Lim, et al). More than that, these studies which focus on multimodal classrooms revealed a common focus in "developing criticality and creativity in students" (Lim, et al). These findings suggest that when students are introduced to multimodal texts like poetry comics, they develop more critical original thoughts and are more likely to be inspired creatively, especially when encouraged to bring the funds of knowledge they've gained outside of school into the classroom.

As previously discussed, engaging with poetry comics invites readers to make personal associations and consider their identity and lived experience to make meaning. Another critical finding from the systematic review of multimodal studies revealed a connection between multimodal literacy and students' "communicative competence," "critical literacy development" and "exploration and performance of identities" (Lim, et al).

Not only do poetry comics fall under the category of multimodal texts, but they also fall under the category of "intersectional form," a term coined by writer Jen Soriano. In "Multiplicity from the Margins: The Expansive Truth of Intersectional Form," Soriano defines "intersectional form," as "writing in which authors write their intersectional identities, experiences, and perspectives onto the page." Intersectional forms might take the shapes of fragments, micro memoirs, or any other hybrid form that allows the writer to express meaning outside of traditionally lineated text. Soriano suggests that intersectional form results in

"writing that breaks away from the confines of traditional narrative arc and instead moves through fragments and strands and strips, conveying multiple viewpoints to reject homogeneous truth in favor of a more complex reality" (4). Intersectional form allows for the blending of genres and "resists convention not just for the sake of experimentation." Most importantly, intersectional form models new ways of being with the world.

Soriano references W.E.B.'s concept of "second sight," to show how "people from communities that are marginalized by race, class, gender, and/or sexual orientation often live in co-existence with many parts of ourselves, including a consciousness of how those work with more decision-making power sees us. These multiple identities yield conflicting perspectives of ourselves, but also yield a sort of gift of 'double-consciousness' or 'second sight… that allows for multiple expansive perspectives on the world' (5). In her discussion of hybridity and intersectional forms, Soriano examines the many identities she holds and how they shape her lived experiences and thus her creative work and practices.

By incorporating poetry comics in their classroom, teachers introduce their students to a multimodal, intersectional form, which has the potential to reach students who might have been otherwise uninterested or disengaged. As Soriano suggests, marginalized artists especially can more acutely represent their experiences through intersectional forms, as they allow "for a strategic engagement with power not by directly locking horns in an arena of authoritative truth and false binaries, but by writing from a third space where there is room for the intersections of contradictory truths, spectrums of identities, clashing and reinforcing values, and interdependent subjects and genres" (5). By moving away from strict forms typical to "master narratives," artists and writers who are less likely to see themselves represented in canonical texts have more room to create work that is authentic to the multiplicitous world in which we exist.

Additionally, the illustrative and hyper imagistic nature of poetry comics allows for heightened engagement, identity expression, and abstract thought. Sarah Minor describes the act of drawing as "thinking and seeing outside of language." Writers of all levels are familiar with the struggle to find language to accurately represent emotions and experiences. This is particularly common to artists whose lived experiences exist partly or entirely in the margins and therefore are less represented; thus, the task becomes even more difficult to articulate because the language does not yet exist. Poetry comics offer an opportunity for marginalized writers to create outside of language.

When engaging with poetry comics with my students, I've witnessed them articulate personal aesthetic preferences, interpret multifaceted, abstract ideas, and generate work that authentically depicts their many-layered identities. Revered for its ability to articulate emotions through image and musical language, to read and write poetry is a deeply personal and political act. Fuse the poetic line with more

than just images, but with elements and techniques traditional to comics (panels, speech and thought bubbles, narrative boxes), and the results offer simultaneous freedom and constraint. Through controlled and intentional image-text creation, by combining the rules and structure of both poetry and comics, writers who struggle with language or identity may find it possible to translate their internal world onto the page.

Poetry Comics in the Classroom: Pedagogical suggestions for student engagement

Poetry comics benefit students at various levels and ages. Teachers might consider teaching poetry comics if their students love graphic novels. Maybe the classroom walls are empty. Maybe there's a group of students who need to say something that they don't have words for. Teachers can even use poetry comics with younger students who are just beginning to interact with poetry, as they might benefit from accompanying visuals, as poetry comic artist David Morris suggests in his short book, *How to Make Poetry Comics*. Although the result might be better described as an illustrative poem rather than a poetry comic, it's a starting place. When students are asked to visually represent their interpretation of the poem, they're encourage them to make individual meaning from the words through images. They are, as Bachelard suggests, becoming part of the poem itself. Moreover, for students who struggle to articulate with verbal or written language, making representational drawings becomes a successful scaffold in promoting literary analysis and discussion.

Currently, I teach entry-level creative writing courses as a graduate student at The University of South Florida. Even at the undergraduate level, most of my students start the semester poetry-hesitant and so I teach poetry comics towards the end of the course when they have some exposure to poetic vocabulary and forms. The suggested prompts and lesson sequences I describe below could work for a high school or even middle school writing classes, so long as teachers are willing to modify and tweak any of the following practices to best meet their students' needs.

Students benefit from naming and identification when encountering unfamiliar content, so it is useful to begin by simply providing vocabulary. When designing my lessons, I utilize frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy, or Fink's more recent taxonomy of significant knowledge, to craft clear learning objectives. The goal here is to bring students from the concrete to the abstract. Sample objectives to set for students when initially reading/seeing poetry comics include: 1. Identify elements and techniques of poetry, 2. Identify elements and techniques of comics, 3. Identify the elements and techniques of both poetry and comics in a poetry comic.

Once students are comfortable identifying and perhaps discussing the aspects of a model poetry comic, they are ready to begin creating their own original work. The objectives shift from identification towards meaning-making and creation. When writing or creating poetry comics, some sample objectives include: 1. Recall elements and techniques of poetry and comics, 2. Identify elements and techniques of poetry and comics in original work, and finally, 3. Author an original poetry comic that employ elements and techniques from both poetry and comics.

Even if students are already familiar with them, it's useful to revisit concrete definitions of poetic techniques and elements. Review is helpful in ensuring comfort and confidence, along with incorporation of model poems that contain the major elements of poetry but are not so complex that students will struggle to grasp basic themes. I've used Naomi Shihab Nye's "So Much Happiness" in both middle school and undergraduate classrooms, as it incorporates rich figurative language, personification, title, stanzas, line breaks, imagery, form— all things students will need to identify, without overly complicated language. Students will have various interpretations of the poem to discuss, but in doing so, teachers should first ask students to identify the poetic techniques employed by the author and then work towards a discussion which questions the impact of each poetic technique. For example, students might identify a metaphor in the poem and then consider how the author's use of metaphor shapes their own understanding and reaction to this poem.

When students seem comfortable with our review of poetic elements, I shift towards comics. Even if comics have not been explicitly discussed in class, today's students are already familiar with most vocabulary associated with comics. Still, it is beneficial to name the techniques and elements like panels, speech/thought bubbles, text boxes, titles, metaphor, imagery, personification, repetition, characters, and dialogue. It's advantageous to repeat the familiar process of providing a model text, identifying vocabulary, and then move towards more abstract conversations about reader impact. Jaron Roselló's "Robot Camp," is an example of a short, engaging comic includes the most basic elements of comics that students should be familiar with. Emma Hunsinger's "How to Draw a Horse" is another suggestion, although this wonderful, queer comic does not have traditional panels. However, the ending provides a brilliant example of effective juxtaposition between text and image to which students frequently have powerful responses.

Once students can identify elements of poetry and comics with ease, it is time to draw. Teachers should expect discomfort and hesitation from those who haven't drawn since elementary school. The class doodlers, however, will suddenly come alive. I begin by having students scribble, making nonsense shapes. I ask them to notice the way their hand moves on the page. Teachers might ask: What kinds of shapes does your body like to make? What kind of lines does your hand avoid making? I emphasize to students the idea that drawing connects the mind to

the body. I also stress the idea that to make great comics, you do not need to be a naturally talented artist. Rather, the some of the best comics are made by those who haven't drawn in years, yet they have something they want to say.

I've discovered drawing in the classroom to be an incredibly effective way to build community. Even when writing in the vicinity of others, it is a distinctly solitary act. Drawing together, however, encourages students to notice and engage their body and provides a chance to organically interreact with one another. In my classroom, I have noticed the way collaborative drawing produces a childlike energy among undergraduate students. I suggest showing YouTube videos by creativity scholar and celebrated comic artist, Lynda Barry. "Drawing Faces with Lynda Barry" has proven to be a favorite among my students because it requires them to work closely in pairs. Drawing and making comics is not only an opportunity to move physically and build community, but it also provides a low-stakes space for experimentation.

Once students are comfortable and excited, introduce them to a poetry comic. As discussed previously, Bianca Stone's "7th Floor" is a suitable choice for beginners, as it's short and incorporates the form's basic elements. I've also used Coleen Louise Barry's "Bye" for similar reasons. Again, ask students to practice identification of techniques. Ask them to recall what aspects of poetry and comics they can identify. As with the aforementioned projects, I avoid more complex questions about major themes or interpretation upon initial encounter. I let students share what they like about the piece, what they don't like, then ask the class to identify any feelings or emotions they might experience by examining the work. What about this work might encourage those emotions? What specifically about the piece do you think inspires that feeling? From there, encourage students to examine the details less obvious in earlier readings. I'm always surprised by what my students are drawn to. The cat in "7th Floor," for example, often sparks a discussion around nonhuman language and whether the cat understands the character who speaks in indecipherable scribbles. By starting small and concrete, I notice the discussion naturally develops complexity, eventually arriving at critical thought and analysis.

Be sure to emphasize the subjective nature of reading and responding to poetry comics. Encourage a range of interpretations and impressions. No understanding is right, and no understanding is wrong, so long as students can point to something in the piece to explicate their reading. Remind students that poetry comics ask us to bring our own experiences and beliefs to the art. We are meant to fill in the gaps between image and text or panel and panel with our individual brains. Together, teachers and students can then interrogate possible reasons behind our preferences and interpretations, a conversation that serves as a diving board into identity and self-exploration.

Once they're familiar with reading and comprehending the form, I shift students towards generating original poetry comics. To begin, I display Matt Madden's "20 lines project" and invite students to make their own collection of 20 lines drawings modeled off his. I first did this exercise as a graduate student in a course titled "Creating Comics" taught by comic artist and graphic novelist, Jarod Roselló. Like Dr. Roselló, I ask students to avoid depicting objects, people, animals, etc. Rather, their 20 drawings should be abstract, and each drawing should have no more and no less than 20 lines. They can do this on index cards or several pieces of paper.

After they've made their images, I ask students to add a word or phrase to each of their 20 drawings. I encourage my students to pull words and phrases from what I call their "notebook junk drawer," which is a page in their notebook or computer where, throughout the semester, they've saved any original lines or phrases that they are drawn to but have not yet found a way to incorporate in their work. Every time I ask my students to participate in this activity, I make my own version alongside them, often projecting my progress to the class. I allow the room to fall into comfortable silence as we scribble and shuffle. I allow students time outside of class to complete their projects. Once we all have a polished collection of 20 drawings, with text on every panel, we conduct a gallery walk to notice the variations and similarities between all our finished products. It is not at all uncommon for those who previously seemed disengaged become the students most enthusiastic about showing off their work.

This is only one of the numerous ways to introduce students to poetry comics. Some students might have sketchbooks full of old drawings collecting dust; other might be interested in collage and store cuttings from magazines and newspapers in a folder. Another way to make poetry comics, as Bianca Stone often does, is to start with developed images, old sketchbook drawings for example, and combine them with lines of poetry which were authored independent of the visual art.

Teachers might also return to previous lessons on poetic forms or techniques and use poetry comics to further develop students' content knowledge. For example, is it possible to employ anaphora not with words, but with image? Lynda Barry does it in her comics through a reoccurring octopus, ghosts, and her four-eyed money, all of which become representational characters. Teachers should encourage play, experimentation, and student interest above all else. While creating poetry comics alongside my students, allowing space for wild, uncharted connections, my classroom has become a home for intersectional identities, creative and critical thought, and metaphorical possibility.

Conclusion

In her essay “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag deems “transparence” to be the highest, “most liberating value” in art. She defines transparence as “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are” (19). When words fail us, when there is much left unsaid, we are often quick to move on from the emotions and ideas we cannot clearly articulate. By asking us to slow down, to remain suspended in a moment the way a lyrical poem does, poetry comics disrupt hegemonic interpretation, fast consumption, simplistic meaning-making. In a time where instant gratification is fed by social media, to practice the kind of wondering and unknowing that poetry comics require is essential. In the rippling aftermath of a global pandemic, isolation lingers still. This makes any opportunity for connection vital.

To engage with poetry comics is to be reminded of our humanity, to explore creativity’s depth, and to marvel at the mind’s unending capacity to make connections between dislike things. To engage with poetry comics is not to glean a correct or incorrect answer. To engage with poetry comics is an experience, an encounter, a place to feel. As Minor points out, we’re accustomed to limited ways of seeing and to push on those limitations allows for richer understandings. The intersectional form asks us to bring our layered selves to the page and grants us permission to explore new ways to articulate our story.

“What is between our inside and outside?” Lynda Barry asks in her book *What It Is*, a collection of comic essays, memoirs, and teaching practices. Writers are tasked with the impossible: authentically representing our innermost thoughts, ideas, and feelings— the things that make us human— on a page. Poetry comics offer us a way to do so, by pushing our internal landscapes up against external experiences. To engage with poetry comics can be a deeply personal act of self-discovery. Poetry comics offer us space in between what is said and what is seen. In a culture that relies so heavily on words and images, my students and I have learned about ourselves and one another by attempting to truthfully tell the world inside our heads. An obsession with the impossible. I encourage engagement with poetry comics for teachers, students, and artists who’ve ever dwelled in the impossible: the unsaid, inexplicable, yet deeply felt.

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APPENDIX

More Poetry Comics:
"The Last Love Letter" by Alyssa Berg
"Noon" by Bianca Stone
"January 2nd" by Catherine Bresner
"The Real Thing" by Alexander Rothman
From "In the Circus" by Gabrielle Bates
"Alligator Gut: A Representation of Survival with Papers, Polyethylene, and Residual Ink" by Mita Mahato

Detailed Lesson Sequence:
Lesson 1: What are the elements of poetry comics?

Materials:	Model texts: ● "The Last Love Letter" by Alyssa Berg ● "So Much Happiness" by Naomi Shihab Nye ● "Noon" by Bianca Stone
Objectives:	● Students will state three elements of a comic. ● Students will state three elements of a poem. ● Students will state three elements of a poetry comic.
Warm up:	Free write for 3 minutes: ● What do you know about comics? ● What do you know about poetry? Share with a partner.
Mini Lesson:	Read aloud & project "So Much Happiness" ● What elements of poetry do we see here? (label for students figurative language, personification, title, stanzas, line breaks, imagery, etc) Read aloud & project "The Last Love Letter" ● What elements of comics to we see here? (label for students images, panels, speech/though bubbles) Direct instruction: "The Last Love Letter" is a poetry comic. Poetry comics are a hybrid genre that include elements from both poems and comics. **The three we will focus on are: panels, speech/though bubbles, poetic language.**
Active Engagement:	Distribute copies of "Noon" to partners or small groups. Have students work together to address the following:

	● What elements of comics do you see? Label them. ● What elements of poetry do you see? Label them. ● What elements are missing? Are there elements that this author could have incorporated?
Share:	Small group go-round: ● Have each group share one element they identified of either comics or poetry.
Formative assessment:	Exit ticket: What are three elements of a comic? What are three elements of a poem? What are three craft elements an author might use in a poetry comic?

Lesson 2: Guided practice: Making a poetry comic using 20-lines and model poem

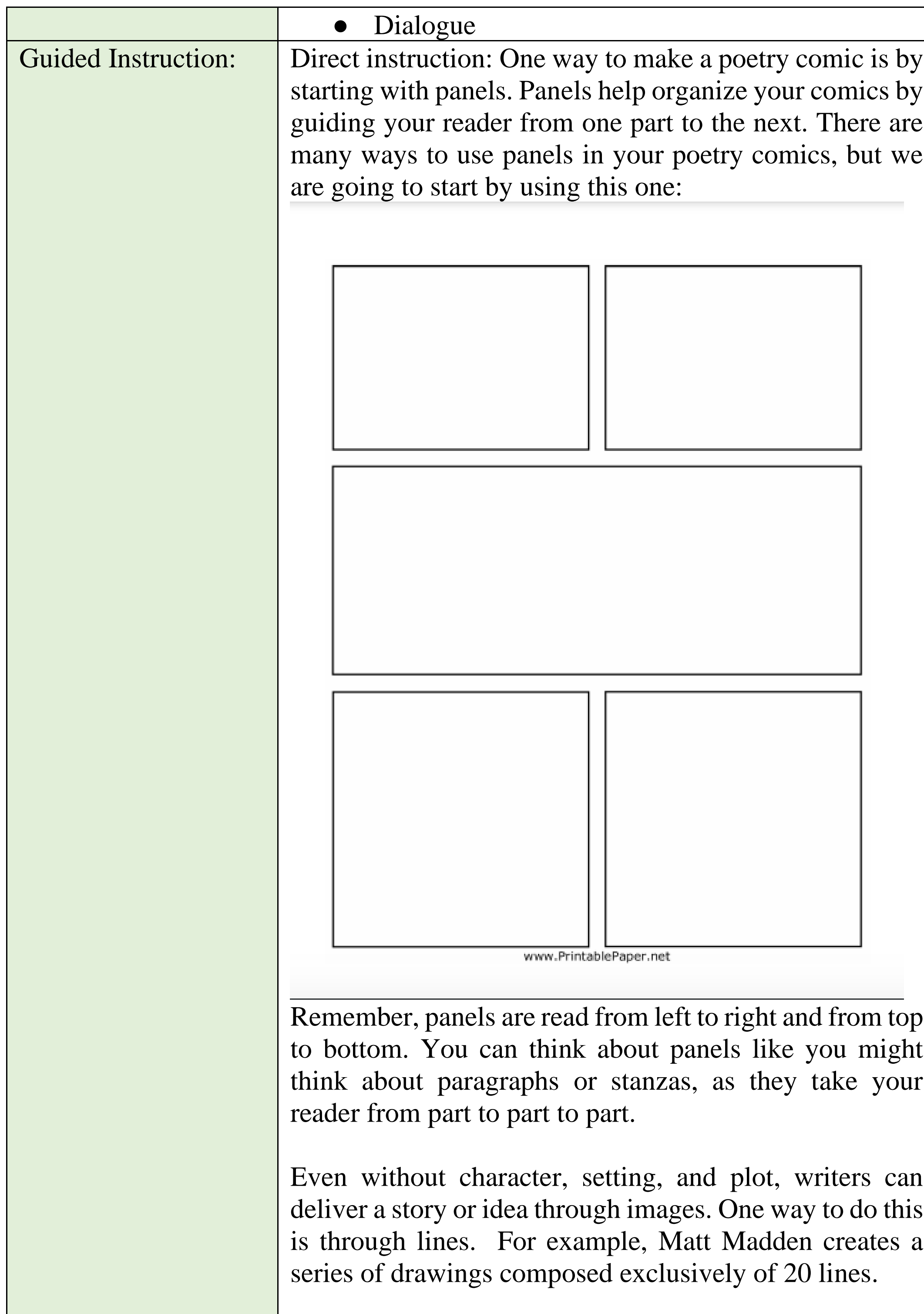
Materials:	Pencils/erasers for each student Pre-drawn page of panels Mentor texts: ● Matt Madden 20 lines ● "So Much Happiness"
Objectives:	● Students will recall elements of poetry comics. ● Students will be able to identify elements of poetry comics. ● Students will practice scaffolded experimentation, using blank panel pages and model texts, to practice merging words and images.
Warm up:	Free write for 3 minutes: ● What were some elements of poetry comics we discussed last class? Share with partner. Curate list from student responses: "Elements of Poetry Comics" ● Panels ● Speech/Thought Bubbles ● Text Boxes ● Titles ● Metaphor ● Imagery ● Personification ● Repetition ● Characters

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>

- Dialogue

</td></tr>
<tr><td>Guided Instruction:</td><td>

Direct instruction: One way to make a poetry comic is by starting with panels. Panels help organize your comics by guiding your reader from one part to the next. There are many ways to use panels in your poetry comics, but we are going to start by using this one:



Remember, panels are read from left to right and from top to bottom. You can think about panels like you might think about paragraphs or stanzas, as they take your reader from part to part to part.

Even without character, setting, and plot, writers can deliver a story or idea through images. One way to do this is through lines. For example, Matt Madden creates a series of drawings composed exclusively of 20 lines.

</td></tr>
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	Activity instructions: Fill out each panel with a total of 20 lines. Use pencil! Model your panels after Matt Madden's and avoid drawing concrete objects or people with your lines. Let your hand guide you. In other words, notice what kind of lines your hand prefers and notice what kind of lines your hand avoids. Model: ● Project blank panel sheet to student and fill out one panel with 20 lines. ● Model thinking aloud, let your hand guide you.
Active Engagement:	Panel practice: ● Distribute blank panel sheets to students ● Individually or in partnerships, send students off to practice filling out panels with 20 lines each ● Make sure your piece has a title ● Set time limit to 10 minutes Discuss: ● What was that like? ● What kind of lines did your hand like making? ● What might you need to do to turn this into a poetry comic? Display "So Much Happiness" to students Direct instruction: ● To turn what you have now into a poetry comic, you might add poetic language. You can do this by adding original text, or you can incorporate text from an outside source. We are going to practice by using lines from "So Much Happiness." To do this, you must give credit to the original author by including the subheading "after Naomi Shihab Nye" underneath your title. Do this now. ● Model for students Choose your words: ● Take 3 minutes to choose 5 lines from "So Much Happiness" you'd like to incorporate. Circle them on your copy or write them down.

	• Model for students, encouraging them not to think too much, just choose lines they like Plan placements of your words: • Take 3 minutes to plan where you will place your 5 lines. Use text boxes, speech bubbles, thought bubbles. • Model this for students, let them know they can erase lines to fit in bubbles or boxes Place your words: • Take 5 minutes to insert your chosen lines from "So Much Happiness" into your planned
Share:	Gallery walk! • Spend 10 minutes allowing students to move about the room, viewing each other's work. Wrap up discussion: • What did you notice? How did our poetry comics differ? What was similar?
Formative assessment:	Exit ticket: • Reflect in three sentences: What elements of poetry comics did you include in your work today? What did you learn about poetry comics?

Lesson 3:

Materials:	Model text: • Colleen Louise Barry's "Bye" Blank paper Pencils/erasers for each student Student work: • Students will need to refer to their 20-line poetry comic
Objectives:	• Students will recall elements of poetry comics. • Students will create a one-page poetry comic that uses at least three elements of poetry comics.
Warm up:	Recall: Display "Bye" • What elements of poetry comics do you see here? "Elements of Poetry Comics" • Panels • Speech/Thought Bubbles • Text Boxes • Titles

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>Metaphor
Imagery
Personification
Repetition
Characters
Dialogue
Free write for 3 minutes:
What is your favorite food or color? Be specific. What is it like? Why is it your favorite?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Mini Lesson:</td><td>Direct instruction:
Now that we’ve practice making a poetry comic together using blank panel pages and a model poem, today we will work to generate original writing in combination with original images.
Take out your 20-line poetry comic.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Active Engagement/Guided Instruction:</td><td>Imagery practice: Describe your favorite color using the following prompts: (5 minutes). Encourage poetic language/thought.
Sounds like:
Looks like:
Smells like:
Tastes like:
Feels like:
Panel Practice: On a blank sheet of paper, design your own panel page. Include 5 panels (5 minutes)
Use your 20-line poetry comic as a reference
If you’re stuck, you can use the same design as your 20-line poetry comic
Drawing practice: Fill up each panel with visual representation of your favorite color. Here’s the trick: You are only allowed to use pencil. No color! (10 minutes)
Students will want to draw concrete images of things that are their color. Encourage abstract images.
Plan placement of your words (5 minutes):</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>Plan where you will place your 5 lines. Use text boxes, speech bubbles, thought bubbles.
Place your words:
Take 5 minutes to insert your 5 imagery lines (sounds like.. tastes like... feels like...) into your planned placements.
Give your poetry comic a title
Include name of color in the title</td></tr>
<tr><td>Share:</td><td>Gallery walk!
Spend 10 minutes allowing students to move about the room, viewing each other’s work.
Wrap up discussion:
What did you notice? How did these poetry comics differ from our last poetry comics? How did they differ from one another?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Formative assessment:</td><td>Exit ticket: Turn in your original, one-page poetry comic. On the back, identify 3 elements of poetry comics you applied to your piece.</td></tr>
</table>