

September 2015

Students as Critics: Exploring Readerly Alignments and Theoretical Tensions in Satrapi's Persepolis

Ashley K. Dallacqua

Ohio State University - Main Campus, dallacqua.1@osu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Educational Methods Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dallacqua, Ashley K. (2015) "Students as Critics: Exploring Readerly Alignments and Theoretical Tensions in Satrapi's Persepolis," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Students as Critics: Exploring Readerly Alignments and Theoretical Tensions in Satrapi's Persepolis

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dorothy Sutton, the amazing classroom teacher in this study.

Students as Critics:
Exploring Readerly Alignments and Theoretical Tensions in Satrapi's *Persepolis*

"I cannot take the idea of a man cut into pieces and just write it. It would not be anything but cynical. That's why I drew it" (Marjane Satrapi on the visual-verbal methodology of *Persepolis* qtd. in Chute, p. 151)

"I think that when you have themes of a certain extent, when they involve violence or difficult subjects so much, you often get to a point when you're writing about them with words, that you just can't keep writing." (an adolescent reader on the visual-verbal methodology of *Persepolis*)

Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel, *Persepolis* (2004, 2005), has been the subject of both theoretical, textual analysis and debates of readership. In her book, Satrapi draws from visual and verbal modes in order to depict her childhood journey of living through the Iranian Revolution. As a text dense with historical facts told through black and white images, *Persepolis* invokes the starkness, contrasts, and complexities of growing up in a time of war. The complex composition and story-telling quality, which shows, tells, and ultimately remembers tragedy has been praised by both literary critics and readers. Since its publication in English in 2004-2005 literary critics have examined the structure of *Persepolis* from a narratological stand point. At the same time, American young adults have acted as an actual audience (rather than the one imagined by the author) and interpretive community to this graphic novel in their classrooms. Although it is both a recommended (Carter, 2007) and contested (Berlatsky, 2013) text for an adolescent audience, few have examined the reactions and interpretations of 'flesh and blood' readers to it. In this essay I will draw on the voices of both critics examining the structure of *Persepolis* from a narratological standpoint and young adults as a 'flesh and blood' audience (Phelan, 2007, p. 296) and interpretive community (Fish, 2010). As part of a larger, qualitative research study I had the opportunity to observe discussions and interview ten high school

students about their experiences with *Persepolis* in their language arts class. Here, analysis of that empirical data results in a contextualization of critical theory through readers' voices. The empirical data I collected was analyzed along with textual, literary data. In many ways, interpretations of both critics and actual student readers support one another. Further, by reading critic and adolescent interpretation side-by-side, the adolescent voice is elevated and empowered; the adolescent "chaperones the words" rather than receiving another's interpretation (Sanders, 2013, p. 62). Within interpretive communities students *become* critics.

The audience and study

In this study, the audience to Satrapi's *Persepolis* was a group of high school students assigned to read and discuss the novel as an assignment for English class. I had the opportunity to observe discussions within what became an interpretive community. This work took place in a Midwestern public STEM school that is filled by a lottery each year. The students who attend come from urban, suburban, and rural districts as well as varying socioeconomic statuses, so the resulting student body is very diverse. All adolescent readers observed for this study were enrolled in English 11 during the spring quarter of 2013 and participated in a series of discussions around *Persepolis* as part of their English curriculum. Both *Persepolis I* and *II* were assigned as required reading over a two week period. Students were also assigned to generate questions to draw from in Socratic Seminar discussions in class.

The initial goals of this work were to explore issues of gender and culture in literature through a critical lens. In particular, *Persepolis* has been recommended as a classroom resource to engage readers in critical, student-focused discussions (Connors, 2007). Connors, while teaching *Persepolis*, utilized cultural criticism to create ways for students to deal with tension around cultural differences and make strong connections in similarities that seemed buried. And

White (2010) has asserted that *Persepolis* provides opportunities for students to experience and even take on different perspectives, such as students “expected to mourn the soldiers killed” through reading and discussion (par. 4). Critical exploration also occurred with these participants, extending from our focus on gender and culture. (For more information about this unit see Dallacqua and Sutton, 2014) This work also connected to other texts read during that school year; however, this was the first and only graphic novel used in this class. Further, this was the first graphic novel for several of the readers, making for varying levels of experience with this medium among the ten participants.

I was able to document the many perceptions a high school audience brings to a reading of *Persepolis* over that two week unit. During that time reader/participants were encouraged to ask their own questions and connect their own stories with Satrapi’s. Their discussions were student led, with no adult interjections. The quotations from adolescent readers used here are pulled directly from those recorded discussions, as well as from follow-up interviews.

My analysis examines issues of audience, narration, color and style, and form, exploring and questioning popular, common, readings of *Persepolis*. Placing the voices of adolescent readers alongside critics’ illustrates that aesthetic reading can result in nuanced and analytical work. This work positions young readers as critics. For educators, this serves as evidence for time and space for young readers to transact with complex texts such as *Persepolis*. By making room for an aesthetic reading experience, stemming from reader response theory, educators create opportunities for critical reading and deep engagement.

Audiences to Memories

As an acclaimed and best-selling book, *Persepolis* has attracted a wide audience, first in France, and now translated and read all over the world (although not in Satrapi’s home country of Iran). This popularity, especially in the United States, encourages an examination of the

authorial audience, “the author’s ideal reader” and actual, flesh and blood reader: “each of us with our glorious (or not so glorious) individuality and common human endowments” (Phelan, 2007, p. 296). The authorial audience, I argue, includes Satrapi herself, those like her, and further extends to an audience willing to participate in remembering. Throughout this text, the theme of remembering is returned to again and again, through promises and departures. By the end of the first book, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Marji is forced to flee a war-torn Iran. At the airport, Marjane’s father’s parting words to her are “You’ve got to go now. Don’t forget who you are and where you come from” (Satrapi, p.152). The narrative that proceeds and succeeds from this moment takes the form of memories of a younger Satrapi, retelling a childhood and a history of her country.

There are moments when Satrapi draws herself as audience, complicating the layers of authorial audience literary critics have explored. For example, at one point, upon meeting and spending time with her Uncle Anoosh, a young Marji serves as an audience to his life stories, promising, “Don’t worry, I’ll never forget” (p. 60). In this way, *Persepolis* acts as a kept promise, a way of remembering for herself. Yet, Chute (2010) points out that her story also “pushed outward to consistently visualize publics – collectivities of people – aside from herself and thus shifts the narrative attention to a broad public sphere” (p. 139). Satrapi does not only tell her story, but the stories of others. In a vignette titled “Heroes,” readers meet Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba, family friends imprisoned as revolutionaries who have recently been released. Marji sits in and listens to their stories of torture, again an audience herself. We share her perspective and her imagined images of others’ stories as they are told. Satrapi is not remembering just for herself but for her family, who directly asks it of her, and for the people of Iran, whose stories Satrapi witnessed. As Chute (2010) notes, she “places the self in dialogue

with a collectivity: Satrapi frames her text to address those, like herself, who are exiles from Iran” (p. 141).

The authorial audience goes beyond this narrow description. In fact, Satrapi has noted that *Persepolis* “is an attempt to explain Iran to the West, hopefully bringing the two together using humor” (Tempesta, 2014, para 11). Satrapi spends a great deal of time and space retracing her country’s history in the opening of her novel. She does not assume a shared experience and sense of history with her readers, instead educating her readers about her country’s past. Told in comic form, *Persepolis*’s dense and difficult story becomes more approachable, inviting a larger audience (Constantino, 2008).

Further, by choosing to tell the story through the eyes of her child self and the voice of her adult self, Satrapi extends her memories to a wider authorial and implied audience, beyond herself and beyond Iranian exiles. Younger audiences can connect with an adolescent Satrapi, who is also concerned with maintaining friendships, finding clothing she enjoys wearing, breaking rules, and other adolescent struggles. When Satrapi learned that her book, which focused so thoroughly on the trials of adolescents, was being removed from Chicago classrooms because of torturous images she commented, “seventh graders have brains and they see all kinds of things on cinema and the internet” (Soupporis, 2014, par. 3). Satrapi’s ideal, authorial, reader seems to take her invitations to remember with her, regardless of age or experience. She educates us on her valued history in a form that invites readership, assuming that readers will participate in continuing her tradition of remembering.

Young audiences have actively taken up this task of reading and remembering. *Persepolis* has become a popular text in classrooms (Carter 2007; Connors, 2007), providing an actual, real-life audience perspective. Exploring readings of classroom audiences invites a

reader-response theoretical approach, “bring[ing] with it a whole new set of facts to which its practitioners can now refer” (Fish, 2010, p. 344). Reader-response theory argues for the importance of the reader and what they bring to the reading of a text. Rosenblatt (1978) concludes that a text is “an event in time” occurring when the reader brings her “past experience and present personality” to it (p.12). As readers engage in interpretive strategies as a social experience, the text becomes, “not a spatial object but the occasion for temporal experience” (Fish, 1980, p. 345). Different readers at different times will, based on their own histories, interpret texts differently. The text, which forms in the moment of interpretation, what Rosenblatt(1978) calls the ‘poem,’ is based on agreements an interpretive community has come to (p. 12). This interpretive community relies on “presently recognized interpretive strategies for producing the text” (Fish, 2010, p. 347). Their community is based on in the moment discussion, but also common goals and “a core agreement...concerning the ways of *producing* the text” (Fish, 2010, p. 342). In short, an interpretive community is a group of readers who work together with common tools and aims for reading a shared text.

As noted earlier, student participants in this study represented a diversity of backgrounds and experiences with reading graphic novels, all of which were drawn on during reading and discussion. They acknowledged being part of a wide audience for this text. Even more, the students agreed that the comic form also invited them to be audience to this story. One particular reader, who identified as both American and Palestinian, connected deeply with this graphic novel and Satrapi as a Muslim female, working against the grand narrative of being identified only as oppressed and as a victim (Dallacqua and Sutton, 2014). This reader aligned closely with the authorial audience, feeling empowered and called to remember her own stories of her family living in poverty, some choosing to leave Palestine, some choosing to stay. Other readers

connected to the theme of growing up and the difficulties of maneuvering school, friends, and parents. Readers worked to draw parallels between being a teenager in the U.S. and in Iran, “like...when people break dress code” one reader pointed out. While they didn’t identify as closely with Marjane’s life, these readers still noted that they engaged with the text because the central character was an adolescent too. One reader, noting the graphic novel form, explained, “It allowed the author to get her opinions out there into a wider range of people. I thought it worked well.” Collectively, this group of adolescent readers believed that the form of the text made it more “approachable” and even enjoyable. Here, they too align with critics like Constantino, and join the continuously growing audience of *Persepolis*.

Narrating memories

Satrapi invokes multiple narrating forms to explore her memories, which is commonly explored through literary criticism. Using the narratological concept of focalization, critics have explored these multiple narrators. “Narratorial focalization in particular is neither necessarily nor exclusively concerned with consciousness presentation, but with the filtering of *all* events and extents in the storyworld” (Horstkotte and Pedri, 2011, p.335). Satrapi establishes multiple lenses through which to filter events. For example, an adult Satrapi is the primary narrating perspective throughout the printed text of her novel. This printed text appears alongside images of herself as a child, which includes her memories and imaginings through her younger narrator lens. Satrapi established these narrators on her first page writing: “This is me,” and drawing a ten year old cartoon version of herself, speaking both in present tense and in retrospect (Satrapi, 2004, p.3). Chaney acknowledges that

such a paraphrase asserts that the author function...is an unequivocally seamless identity that coheres over time. In this way, the author function that spans

decades assumes visibility in the Iconic shape of the little girl, who in later panels speaks to us (in speech balloons) from the enunciating space of the present.

Implicitly, adolescence is the iconic language of timeless authorial identity, the young girl in *Persepolis* is Satrapi's archetypical storyteller (p. 27).

The combination of past and present on the page contributes to the complexity of the story and interpretations of it.

Images from the young narrator often suggests "a child's too-tidy conceptualization of 'mass' death" (Chute, 2010, p. 149). This conceptualization is evident in her drawing of 'Black Friday' on page thirty-nine, where "there were so many killed in one of the neighborhoods that a rumor spread that Israeli soldiers were responsible for the slaughter. But in fact it was really our own who had attacked us" (p. 39). Chute describes Satrapi's structural drawing, with lines and layers of bodies blending together in the thick, black ink on the page: "the bodies are stylize against a black background, filling up the frame... mass death in Satrapi's work looks architectural" (p. 149). The words on the page are narrated by a voice of one who already knows who is responsible for these deaths, told in retrospect. But the image is the imagination of a child, trying to comprehend death at such a level.

Perhaps one of the most well-known pieces on focalization and *Persepolis*, Horstkotte and Pedri's (2011) *Focalization in Graphic Narrative*, points to page forty-three and the interpretation of the snake framing the panel in the first volume of the graphic novel. According to Horstkotte and Pedri, this "shift in visual vocabulary indicates a subject inflection of the narrative and thus focalization" (p. 337). Here, readers must question the aspectuality of the panel: Is the snake a representation of young Marji's confusion and frustration of the many changes in her world? Or does it symbolize what the older narrating Marjane knows, that war is

coming? While Horstkotte and Pedri argue that the panel is focalized through the experiencing - I, they also stress that focalization “almost always invites the reader’s inferential activities” (p. 339), therefore calling attention to images and multiple narrators and leaving it for the readers to interpret and decide. Therein, exploring narratorial voice lends itself to reader response transactions.

While the adolescent readers did not take up the vocabulary used by critics above, they took note of the various perspectives that the multiple narrators provided in their own interpretations. One reader called attention to the illustration on page forty-five of young Marji imagining what it would be like if her mother “nailed [her] ears to the wall” (p. 45). The image, in a thought bubble above Marji’s young head, shows a second Marji in full, her ears stretched out, each pinned to the wall with a nail. Her imagined self wears a troubled frown and her arms lay defeated at her sides. The imagining Marji thinks to herself, “Wow! It would hurt a lot.” In this panel, students saw two Marjis drawn, and also note that they are both drawn by a third, narrating, retrospective Marjane. The high school readers discussed the various facial expressions on the faces and what the images, focalized through a young Marji’s imagination and drawn retrospectively, contribute. As one student reflected: “You can get more detail in the way that she’s thinking. Because if you’re in a ten year old... if you’re in their mind, you’re gonna be different. You’re gonna see different things.” Drawing from what they know of a ten year old’s imagination, these readers noted the diverse perspectives, based on the lens through which it is provided. They, too, realized that through the lens of an adult, the imagined image would have been ‘different.’

As the story continues, this lens shifts as Marji ages. The readers in this study also noted the shifting and maturing of themes and language. Beyond the theme of war, Marji, as she ages,

experiments with drugs and sex, cusses, and questions authority with more force. “You can see just how her thoughts change and how she’s getting older, besides just seeing her thoughts change *once* she gets older,” one reader pointed out. The shift in Marji is gradual. As these students read, they noticed seeing her grow up, mature, and change. And as her character ages, the narratorial voice also shifts.

Moreover, readers called attention to the layers of narration. As an autobiography told through words and images “you’re actually seeing how the author wants you to see it,” one reader explained. Here this reader was noticing the multiple narrators and the ways in which Satrapi controls the images we read. The reader continued: “If it’s real life situation, like, thing, I think it’s better to have it like this.” As an interpreter, this reader acknowledged the freedom she has to make meaning with the text, taking ownership by forming personal opinions about the text structure. In fact, all readers focused on details, questions, and opinions in the book that were important to them. At the same time, they appreciated the choices made by the author, providing multiple levels of narration for us to “see how [she] wants [us] to see it.” Reading this way becomes a transaction, “a two-way process involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). The readers negotiated meaning between the text, the author, and their own personal experiences and opinions. Through those transactions they arrived at complex conclusions regarding the text’s narration.

Memories in Black and White

Along with the overall structure and composition of *Persepolis*, the use of flat, black and white images and understated artistic style also adds to the rich meaning of the text. Some scholars argue that this artistic style communicates ideas more clearly (McCloud, 1993). The style is another aspect of the book that has been explored by critics and readers. Chute argues

that Satrapi drew on her cultural background, influenced by Persian art and its flat, shadowless, images. Satrapi's artistic choices of thick black ink in stark contrast with the white surface do not include shades of grey. Images are therefore bold and complex, at time abstract, but also straightforward.

Writing about comics structure, McCloud (1993) notes that there is an amplification that can happen through the simplification of images in a comic (p. 30). Characters drawn in this iconic style invite readers to see themselves in characters and stories rather than make readers "too aware of the messenger than the message" (p. 36). Further, drawn "in black and white, the ideas *behind* the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language" (p. 192). McCloud argues that, structurally, simplified images and the lack of vibrant colors invite the reader to focus on the meaning of the story, not just the art. Groensteen extends this argument further, asserting that the "plasticity of comics, which allows them to put in place messages of every order and narrations other than the fictional, demonstrates that before being an art, comics are well and truly a language" (p. 19). Drawing from a more narratological perspective to examine the artistic structure, we are able to see the style and color are operating as communicative tools, as a language.

This language is evident throughout *Persepolis*; it creates an undeniable tension throughout the text that is reflective of the story content. Lefèvre (2011) explains that readers arrive to readings of graphic novels with prior knowledge. "An average reader has seen thousands of images and has learned to associate a cartoon style with humorous content" (p. 16-17). This assumption, in the case of Satrapi's graphic novel, further contributes to the tension, as it utilizes a more minimal, cartoon-like style to remember a story full of pain, not humor. Davis (2005) describes the text's art and style as "eloquently convey[ing] both childhood innocence

and indescribable pain” (p.271). This palpable tension exists through the entire text. Gardner (2011), drawing from narratological theories to examine line, argues that the line in comics also contributes to the style and meaning of the story, “roughly analogous to diction and syntax” (p. 57). The thick lines of black and white on the pages of *Persepolis*, then, are part of a language that is communicating such tension and emotion.

Chute further argues that this style and contrast is the act of representing memory on the page. She writes:

Satrapi’s stark style is monochromatic – there is no evident shading technique; she offers flat black and white.... The visual emptiness of the simple, ungraded blackness in the frames show not the scarcity of memory but rather its thickness, its depth; the ‘vacancy’ represents the practice of memory for the author and possibility for the reader (p. 144).

Chute acknowledges the process of remembering for the author, as well as what that might be like to participate in those memories as readers. Satrapi’s stylistic choices purposefully hold and release memories, while elevating them to a level that goes beyond being realistic. Satrapi, herself, has commented on her style and lack of color:

Violence today has become something so normal, so banal – that is to say everybody thinks it’s normal. But it’s not normal. To draw it and put it in color – the color of flesh and the red of the blood, and so forth – reduces it by making it realistic (Satrapi qtd in Chute p. 146).

For Satrapi, using color and drawing realistically was not an option. Examining assumptions about the use of color in comics and graphic novels, Baetens (2011) notes that “colorization can be experienced as trauma” (p. 113). In Satrapi’s case, “black and white is chosen for other

reasons” (Baetens, p. 112). A realistic, traumatic display of violence could not honor her memories and the memories of others. This was a story to be told in black and white. Gardner (2011) also notes that the “graphic narrative...does not offer the possibility of ever forgetting the medium, losing sight of the material text or the physical labor of its production” (p. 65). In its style, form, and black and white lines, *Persepolis* is also forcing us, as readers, to remember the existence of the author and the truth in her story. Her story, then, invites the readers to engage in “literary transactions” with the author and the text (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268).

Adolescent readers take up the style and black and whiteness of the pages in similar and diverging ways, compared to literary critics. One student added to the argument that the black and white images contribute to the tension of the themes in the book, reflecting on major events in Marji’s life, such as her conversations with God: “I feel like that’s not a very black and white thing.” Readers noted the complexity of Marji’s life in contrast with the black and white that often symbolizes clear cut paths and answers. Still, this reader also acknowledged that the “black and white [is] just kind of symbolizing, I guess, what she’s going through, cause she has a lot, she has a lot of ups and downs.” Along with creating tensions, the black and white, for this reader, further supported the content of the text and the jarring changes from highs to lows that Marji experiences.

Readers also interrogated the use of this specific color palette. While Satrapi noted realistic images would not do her story justice, readers wondered if the understated images without color minimized the trauma. Readers generally noted that the black and white format made the depictions of war easier to read, understand, and digest. While this format invites a wider audience, these readers took time to also question the choice. One reader discussed page fifty two, which depicts a man who has been executed and cut into pieces. The image shows

clean lines between severed body parts, no blood, the body surrounded only by black ink. “It, like, shows in a way what they did. They cut him to pieces, and it shows what they did to him, almost in a way that children can see it and, like not be freaked out by it.” As this graphic has been removed from schools because of its violent themes (among other mature topics through the book) the idea that it could be given to children seems extreme. Yet, this reader, drawing on his own discomfort with violence and gore, appreciated the lack of detail and “how it was in black and white.” Another reader was troubled by this, commenting that

...her story is pretty horrific, I mean the things that she went through. And the fact that she put it in comic book format made it easier for me to deal with...It made us see it better, clearer...But, um, at the same time, I think it led us, like, to believe, to be too casual with it...It doesn't really, like, portray such horrific scenes as detailed as we would in our minds.

Literary analysis of *Persepolis* marks Satrapi's images and lack of color as drawing attention to trauma and war, acting as a language to communicate tension and tragedy. However, this student questioned it, wondering if it contributes to a callused attitude towards violence.

This style of artwork added to the tensions of horrific content and understated imagery, yet still provided opportunities for the readers to approach more tragic or complicated events. Deadly bombings or drug abuse did not destabilize readers so much that they were unable to engage with or analyze the text in a critical way (Dallacqua and Sutton, 2014, p. 44). Instead, these readers engaged in deeper aesthetic reading associated with reader-response theory, taking time to notice, “not simply the abstract concepts that the words point to, but also what those objects or referents stir up of personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes” ((Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269).

Through critical analysis and discussion, these students posed engaging questions and made connections as they transacted with this text.

Memories in Comic Form

The comic form was arguably a necessary choice to tell Satrapi's autobiography, especially to achieve the goal of remembering. Chute (2010) describes this process of 'never forgetting' existing in the book "through its layers of verbal and visual narration: it presents the procedure, in addition to the object, of memory" (p. 143). Further, the autobiographical graphic novel has been described as inherently communal, connecting authors with readers deeply (Gardner, 2012, p. 131-132). In choosing this form to remember, Satrapi is sharing personal experiences and linking herself to her audience through her images, words, and form, therein inviting that "two-way process" between a reader and a text (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268).

What's more, the comics form calls for a particular kind of reading. Readers must work and participate in the telling to make connections between image and text, and between panels. McCloud (1993) focuses on the reader throughout his explorations of the pieces and parts of comics, underscoring the importance of the interaction that takes place between comic and reader. He argues that comics "command audience involvement" (p. 59) and that audience must actively contribute to the reading process: which includes filling the gutters and finding links (or disconnects) between image and text. All stylistic choices, according to McCloud, should be about propelling the story forward with the readers in mind (p. 68-69). Groensteen (2007) also argues that comics are a system that "offer[s] the reader a story that is full of holes" that lends itself to a collaborative interaction between text and reader (p. 10). Although Groensteen is primarily concerned with the structure of the comic, he acknowledges that there is a reader that must participate in the story-telling, hence the purposefully structured format. This type of

reading requires detailed looking and reading, making it an aesthetic experience. Readers “must slow down enough to make the connections between image and text and from panel to panel” (DeKoven qtd in Chute, 2010, p.9).

Readers (and participants from this study in particular) when engaging in aesthetic reading, are not “blank tape[s]” ready to receive information, but actively involved in making meaning from the images and text of *Persepolis* (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 10). Through this process, they became part of the remembering. Kiefer (1995) describes this aesthetic reading process in relation to young readers with picturebooks, arguing that analyzing a picturebook should involve “explaining how the art conveys meaning, rather than just categorizing the pictures according to periods of art history or identifying their relationship to the text” (p. 117). In comics, this process can be much the same. Meaning comes from images, not just from their relationship to the printed text. As was noted above, comics often act as a language (Groensteen 19). That language encourages active exchanges between reader and text.

In observing adolescents’ discussion of *Persepolis* I found that both the images and the text provide valuable and necessary information for the complete telling of this story. For example, one adolescent reader noted the small detail of characters’ hair showing and how that influenced his interpretation of them, and further, his interpretation of cultural expectations placed on women. In this case, it was acknowledging Iran’s questioning of women as sexual beings, with a need to prevent pregnancy, as well as the cultural expectation of woman to cover themselves and their hair, as not to distract men with their bodies. He discussed his surprise that certain minor characters would be so against Marjane using a contraceptive, drawing on images to support his thoughts: “It’s surprising, ’cause like, even some of them now, in this picture, like almost all of them are showing their hair. So it’s even more surprising then, ’cause they’re

being, they're going against the rules there, too." These details were only available in the images of the text and were not obvious. Instead, the female clothing in this image seems to blend into the background, while the bolded text and facial expressions draw readers' attention. This reader's close reading attests to the meaning making potential with graphic novels read aesthetically, as it encouraged him to take note of complex cultural differences and varying degrees of gender expectation.

The content of the story also relies on a comic form to accurately and clearly tell the story. As I pointed to in the epigraph, Satrapi discusses the need to draw her stories, describing page fifty-two specifically. "I cannot take the idea of a man cut into pieces and just write it. It would not be anything but cynical. That's why I drew it" (Chute, 2010, p.151). For her, comics were the form needed to tell the story. The adolescent readers' discussion of the format of *Persepolis* carried a similar sentiment: "I think that it's necessary. I think that when you have themes of a certain extent when they involve violence or difficult subjects so much, you often get to a point when you're writing about them with words, that you just can't keep writing." This young reader echoes Satrapi's hesitation about writing violence, acknowledging the limitations of text. And this understanding surfaces from a deep, collaborative, and aesthetic reading of the text that contributed to adolescent readers' meaning-making. Fish (1980) notes: "If you begin by assuming that readers do something and the something they do has meaning, you will never fail to discover a pattern of reader activities that appears obviously to be meaningful" (p. 345). These students were given time and space to read and discuss slowly and aesthetically. As one adult in the room, I assumed that students would have meaningful thoughts, ideas and connections with this text without my own interjections. As Fish suggested, I discovered impressive work being done with this text, work that stands alongside critical literary analysis.

Conclusion

Literary critics have taken up readings of *Persepolis* in many capacities, elevating the comic form. The intersection of narrative theory and comic studies “draw[s] attention to the great variety and imaginative power of graphic narrative practices” (Gardner and Herman (2011) p. 12). Critical conceptions of *Persepolis* encourage nuanced readings and provide a clear appreciation for comics as a work of art and storytelling. Here, critic’s words worked as a tool for me to examine and acknowledge adolescent discussion in a new light. Viewing literary critics’ words alongside an adolescent audience reminds us of the power of literature, how it might be interpreted, and the potential that layers of storytelling brings for meaning-making.

Young readers took the opportunity to read *Persepolis* slowly, acknowledging the complexities of a visual autobiography, noting details of the images and text, making valuable connections with the text and each other. Rosenblatt (1982) reminds us that “precisely because every aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader, the literary work of art can be a rich source of insight and truth” (p. 276-277). While their observations spoke to theory that they were not privy to, adolescent voices both validated and complicated common theories of this text and the story it tells. Their voices show that these kinds of complex graphic novels, when read slowly and aesthetically, result in critical analysis. In this way, young readers became critics, gaining interpretive authority and agency over their reading experience. Ultimately, these adolescent voices brought theories to life, providing evidence for the deep reading and insightful responses that aesthetic reading in interpretive communities cultivates.

References

- Baetens, J. (2011). "From Black & White to Color and Back: What does it Mean (not) to Use Color?" *College Literature*. 38(3). 111-128.
- Berlatsky, N. "Sex, violence, and radical Islam: Why 'Persepolis' belongs in public schools." *The Atlantic*. 19 March 2013.
- Carter, J. B. (2007). ed. *Building literacy connections with graphic novels*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Chaney, M. (2011). "A. Terrors of the Mirror and the Mise en Abyme of Graphic Novel Autobiography." *College Literature* 38(3). 21-44.
- Chute, H. (2010) *Graphic Women*. New York: Columbia.
- Connors, S. (2007); "Graphic Young Adult Novels: Deconstructing and Reinterpreting *Persepolis* From a Cultural Critical Perspective." *Interpretive Play: Using Critical Perspectives To Teach Young Adult Literature*. Eds A. Soter & M. Faust. Norwood Ma: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 179-190.
- Constantino, M. (2008); "Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38(3). 429-447.
- Dallacqua, A.K. and Sutton, D. (2014). "Critical Discussions: Using Satrapi's *Persepolis* with High School Language Arts Students." *ALAN Review*. 41(3), 33-49.
- Davis, R. G. (2005)l "A Graphic Self: Comics as autobiography in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 27(3). 264-279.
- Fish, S. (2010). "Interpretive Communities." *Literary Theory: An Anthology 2nd ed*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 217-221.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is There a Text in this Class?*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gardner, J. (2011) "Storylines." *Substance* 40(1). 53-69.
- Gardner, J. (2012). *Projections: Comics and the history of twenty-first-century storytelling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gardner, J. and Herman, D. (2011) "Introduction." *Substance* 40(1). 53-69.
- Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.
- Horstkotte, S. and Pedri, N. (2011). "Focalization in Graphic Narrative." *Narrative* 19(3). 330-357.

- Lefèvre, P. (2011). "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences." *SubStance*. 41(1). 14-33.
- Kiefer, B. Z. (1995) *The Potential of Picturebooks: From Visual Literacy to Aesthetic Understanding*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- McCloud, S. (1993) *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Phelan, J. (2007) "Rhetoric/Ethics" *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanders, J. S. (2013). "Chaperoning Words: Meaning-Making in Comics and Picture Books." *Children's Literature*. 40. 57-90.
- Satrapı, M. (2005) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon.
- Satrapı, M. (2005) *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. New York: Pantheon.
- Soupporis, A. "Chicago bans 'Persepolis' Graphic Novel from Seventh-grade Classrooms." *The Verge*. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.
- Tempesta, E. "Convocation continues with Persepolis author: Satrapı Discusses Graphic Bio." *Oberlin Review*. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The Reader the Text and the Poem*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1982): "The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response." *Theory in Practice*, 21.4, 268-277.
- White, A. M. (2010). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*, Rational in J. B. Carter (Ed.), *Rationales for teaching graphic novels* [CD-ROM]. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House.