

**Beyond Traditional Writing: Insights and Reflections
For Teaching/Creating Latinx Comics
Using Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath***

**By Ezikio López, Evelyn Cohn, Guillermo Rubio Beltran, Victor Gomez, Adriana Uribe,
and Nirvana Rodriguez**

As a queer and trans neurodivergent professor of color, I recognize the importance of showing up as my full self in my classrooms as well as encouraging my students to do the same. I have always looked for opportunities to create prompts that encourage creativity and that center the identities and experiences of my students. When I was a college student, I looked forward to completing projects that allowed me to divert from traditional essays because it was challenging for me to break down traditional essays in ways that were manageable. I often found it difficult to concentrate and to stay engaged in the readings that were required for me to complete the assigned essays. When I started teaching, I began to reflect on why my experiences as a student were so challenging for me and I realized that I was trying to mask my neurodivergence rather than embrace it. In efforts to embrace my own neurodivergence, I began creating prompts that might be more mindful of students' identities, capabilities, and experiences. One of the ways I have done this is by creating prompts that go beyond traditional academic writing genres.

This article presents an overview of how I taught my Latinx/Chicanx students how to create their own thematic and analytic comics, along with insight from my students on their creation process. The course where this topic was introduced is at Mt. San Jacinto College, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), and the students in my Latinx/Chicanx Literature class are predominantly Latinx students in the Puente Program. Puente is a two-semester program designed to help underserved students adjust to college life and prepare for transfer to four-year universities. So, most of my students in the class have shared classroom space before, which creates a welcoming space for tackling conversations around Latinx comics and Latinx identities. Many former students have been instrumental in developing my practice of creating nontraditional writing prompts. In this article, I invite five of my students, Evelyn Cohn, Guillermo Rubio Beltran, Victor Gomez, Adriana Uribe, and Nirvana Rodriguez, to share their comic projects, reflect on their creative processes, and discuss their interpretations of in-class preparation to examine approaches to teach Latinx comics.

The Project

Nontraditional writing projects offer an exciting and innovative approach to the world of teaching, pushing the boundaries of traditional forms and exploring new ways to express ideas and stories. For my Latinx/Chicanx Literature course, one of the texts that we read was Gabby Rivera's graphic novel, *Juliet Takes a Breath*, a captivating story about a lesbian Puerto Rican protagonist, Juliet, and her experiences in "coming out" and learning about the LGBTQIA+ community and where she fits in it. Because Rivera's text presents a complex and powerful story through visual storytelling, it felt fitting to ask students to analyze the comic's themes via a nontraditional project that contributes to the expansion of the literary landscape. Nontraditional writing projects deviate from conventional novels, essays, and poems, offering unique experiences for both the writer and the reader.

My prompt asks students to create a 5-page analytic comic that examines a theme from Rivera's text, a script for their comic, and a 1-page critical reflection about their creative process. While I felt confident that students would be receptive to creating a comic instead of writing a traditional essay, I quickly learned that not all students would feel ready to create something that they have not been asked to create in a writing course before. In fact, when I asked them how many had created comics before, less than a handful raised their hands. Based on feedback from my students and their reactions to the in-class comic preparation, I added a second option to the prompt in efforts to meet students where they are at. The second prompt asks students to create a single panel about one of the text's themes, write a 3-to-4-page analytic essay, and a 1-page critical reflection on their process. Students felt more at ease when they were presented with the second option even though less than a handful chose that route. While the second option includes a traditional essay format, I found it important to ask students to create a single panel to encourage them to create something that is different from previous essays they have worked on. The comic format requires a different approach to structuring and presenting a story compared to traditional prose writing, emphasizing the importance of visual storytelling.

Creative writing projects continue to evolve and challenge the boundaries of traditional storytelling as they offer exciting opportunities for writers to experiment with new forms of expression and engage readers in innovative ways. The prompt asks students to choose at least one theme to incorporate and/or depict in their comic and they were presented with the following list of themes (they were also encouraged to choose themes that may not be listed): familial relationships, allyship, racism, decoloniality, intersectionality, queerness and "coming out," agency/independence, queer knowledge production, and community. Among the list of questions that I asked students to help them prepare for their comics, three of them serve as guides in their creative imagining and reimagining:

1. How does Rivera depict the characters, plot, and other literary elements in her text and how do we get an understanding for the significance of it all?
2. If you were a character in *Juliet Takes a Breath*, who would you be and why? If you could create a character to add in the text, what character would that be and why?
3. Imagine yourself as a character in *Juliet Takes a Breath*, how would you respond to Juliet in terms of the themes listed above?

By starting off with questions, my prompt centers my students' responses and reactions to Rivera's text in order to help them visualize the kind of comics that they can create. Using Rivera's text as a model for the composition of their comics allows them to see how the series of illustrations and text are arranged in a specific order to create a narrative flow.

The Lectures

Latinx comics have emerged as a rich and dynamic medium for storytelling, cultural expression, and class assignments. This section examines the approaches that I took to prepare students to create their own analytic comics in response to Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath*. Throughout the semester, we worked to comprehend identity-based terms in relation to texts and have analyzed important literary themes and devices and how authors use them in their texts. Two course outcomes that shaped the module and project prompt are "Apply theory and knowledge produced by Latinx communities to describe the critical events, histories, cultures, intellectual

traditions, contributions, lived-experiences and social struggles of those groups with a particular emphasis on agency and group-affirmation” and “Critically review how struggle, resistance, racial and social justice, solidarity, and liberation, as experienced and enacted by Latinx people are relevant to current and structural issues such as communal, national, international, and transnational politics as, for example, in immigration, reparations, settler-colonialism, multiculturalism, language policies.” Before considering the theoretical portion, I started with historical and cultural knowledge production. For instance, we started by examining visual texts such as the Aztec Calendar, the architecture of Chichén Itzá, and Popul Vuh. The Aztec Calendar, Chichén Itzá, and the Popol Vuh are interconnected through the ancient Mesoamerican stories that they depict. We examined these cultural texts to draw inspiration from them and to identify the influence that these have in Latinx comics. More specifically, we examined the symbolism and stories that each cultural example depicts. For instance, the Popol Vuh is an ancient Mayan mythological text that recounts the creation of the world, the exploits of gods and heroes, and the struggles of humankind.

Given the time limitations of my Latinx/Chicanx class, we met twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes. I prioritized providing lectures on the history of comics, Puerto Rican culture and identity, LGBTQIA+ communities, a variety of theoretical approaches, and Latinx comics once a week. On the other days, we focused on applying the basics of comics into practice. We started with discussing some comic terminology such as “panels,” “script,” and terms that describe the dialogue approaches as seen through “balloon bubbles” and more. I also provided my students with examples that I created despite not being experienced in creating comics. Because students shared that not all of them have art experience, we also discussed free platforms that can be useful in creating art for their comics such as storyboard websites and Canva. For their comic script, we used the “Comic Script Experience Template,” that is available on The Comic Book Script Archive’s website that was founded by Tim Simmons, an actor known for *Galaxy Lords* (2018). Simmons “couldn’t find an online resource for comic book scripts, [so he] decided to make one” that serves “as an educational resource for those interested in comic book scripting” (Simmons, *Comicsexperience.com*). The script template is perfect for beginners because it presented the general template and explained how they had to fill in each part from “character notes” to information about the setting and scenes. While comics are oftentimes collaborative in terms of the story and the illustrations, students had to provide the script, story structure, and the illustrations for their comic, which is a lot of work. To provide them with extra support and time, I scheduled optional “Comic Lounge Hours,” which was a space for students to meet once a week for about an hour to work on their illustrations, story and/or script.

The Students’ Processes

Evelyn Cohn’s “Please Hold Me Just a Minute”

Evelyn Cohn’s comic “Please Hold Me Just a Minute” is about “Sylvia, a Latinx 19-year-old girl, who is going through the motions of self-care (see Fig. 1). In each step, Sylvia has to face her monsters by accepting them... She is a bit bitter and fearful of herself because her sexuality [might] destroy her relationship with her mother.” The next two characters are the Monster (Mother), an indicator of the mother in Sylvia’s life. Following her around, the creature invokes a sense of “dread and discomfort” and the Faceless Girl (Ex-Girlfriend) who was “once Sylvia’s

girlfriend, in the scenes you see her in. She loves her too much and is deranged.” Cohn created the illustrations for her comic using *ibis Paint X*, a popular and versatile drawing app, and she has been creating art as a hobby for about three years. Cohn focused on the themes of self-love and self-discovery and also was inspired by Audie Cornish’s author interview, “Life, Love, Coming Out And Culture Shock In *Juliet Takes A Breath*.” Cohn’s themes highlight a focus on mental health as she adds:

I concluded that, like every queer person, Juliet’s coming-out path is vastly different from the small-short story I have written about my character, Sylvia’s coming-out experience. Even though Juliet and Sylvia’s stories are different, they both share the same underlying message of self-acceptance and self-love. Yet, I made Sylvia’s journey differ in contrast to Juliet’s, to demonstrate that coming out is an individual journey that is deeply personal and must be taken at one’s own pace, which I revealed through subtle hints through each panel, not by words, as I thought it would hold more significance to do so. I decided to go beyond and choose my prompt carefully to have a different turnout than Gabby Rivera’s comic, and go in-depth with mental health struggles and the shame of loving the same gender, and how most could not accept who they are and live in shame as their closest family members do not accept them. And in every scene of the comic, I encourage the audience to decide what is going on and make it their story through the eyes of the characters in my comic. However, not every story is always happy through their experiences, and I wanted to show that even if a character accepts themselves, sometimes, it is not always their time to really cope with their mental health in the end.

Guillermo Rubio Beltran’s “What is a Garden”

Guillermo Rubio Beltran’s comic “What is a Garden” focuses on the themes of community and identity formation for his comic and he used a free online drawing editor program called *Pixilart* for his illustrations (see Fig. 2). Unlike most of his peers, Beltran’s main characters are plants with the two main characters being Sasha and the other Jesse. The majority of the comic is in black and white, and the third character is Juno, who is a new plant, and the only source of color throughout the comic. Beltran writes that “black and white color palette made it easier for Juno to stand out due to their color being so vibrant. It also fits the story thematically, as I wanted to mirror a message present in *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera, which was one that talked about identity and how often it can be complicated.” Beltran adds:

One of the inspirations for the comic was *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera. The theme of community being present throughout the graphic novel was pivotal in deciding what the dialogue between Jesse and Sasha was going to focus on. Throughout the book Juliet both temporarily loses and gains communities she bonds with. The communities she loses are in part due to differences between them in regard to their race and sexuality primarily. After talking about what it means to be able to identify oneself with a culture or sexuality, i.e. some of our talks in class that explored what it meant to be Latine, I wanted to do a comedic and simple exploration of what it meant to be a part of something larger than the self. And to be as general as possible I chose flowers as the main characters, since community and relationships form throughout all parts of our life, whether that be within a religion, in school, or even at a Starbucks you go to study with. So in a nutshell, *Juliet*

Takes a Breath was the main inspiration as its theme of community was the one concept I wanted to focus on for a short comic. The message was supposed to be that humans or I guess in this case plants, don't always come with the same traits or even the same humor, but that does not make them any less human.

Victor Gomez's "Online Encounters"

Victor Gomez's "Online Encounters" comic centers two trans characters, Emile (Transgender Female -> male) and Kendra: (Transgender male -> female). The comic depicts their gaming screens and their chat exchanges. Gomez focused on the themes of allyship and queer community and "integrated it into [his] own story creation process" (see Fig. 3) He shared that the in-class lectures and discussions with his peers helped refine the themes presented in the comic. His main inspiration is "own online hobby of video games, [he] wanted to relate a narrative that captured the development of community that would occur in an online space." Gomez writes:

This is the first time I have ever done something like this but, I would have to admit that the hardest part of the creation process is attempting to integrate the script into a visual format... The artwork was my biggest concern; however, with efforts in rewriting the script to follow the sequence of the panels aided in the process.

Although some of the content that I made might have mature concepts, I made sure to make it appropriate to children so all readers can enjoy the story. Although there are some terms that are used that might confuse the audience, the dialogue is easy to follow and is meant to be a high stakes quick adventure...

Although some online communities are not always receptive to all people, providing a positive experience that features trans people as the protagonist helps to normalize queer people into the community with less resistance. Although some criticize online space for their lack of physical interaction, being able to socialize and befriend people in online space deconstructs judgment based on physical appearance.

Adriana Uribe's "A Young Girls Broken American Dream"

Adriana Uribe's "A Young Girls Broken American Dream" focuses on the theme of "coming out." Oftentimes the concept of "coming out" is referred to when a person discloses their sexuality and/or gender identities (see Fig. 4). In Uribe's comic, she demonstrates how two friends are both experiencing the fear that is associated with "coming out" as undocumented and as queer. Her protagonist Maria "is a caring young girl who was born in Mexico and had a happy childhood" and when she immigrated to the United States, we see her experience hard times and a "dark tunnel [that made] her life unstable but she finds something that made her achieve her parent's American dream." Maria's closest friend is Rivera's Juliet, a Puerto Rican lesbian from the Bronx. In writing about the theme, Uribe states that both characters "came forward, revealed the information about their dirty little secret, and supported one another in doing so." The juxtaposition that Uribe presents through Maria and Juliet is a powerful depiction of support and of friendship. Uribe shares:

Being Latinx means adhering to a number of different traditions, but our more recent generation is still working to find its place. I have the deepest appreciation for those parents, and I applaud the support they have shown. I think about my own personal Maria story and all of the Juliet friends that I've made as a result of my experience. I was always the friend that they could count on for anything, and during those moments that changed the course of time, I needed more of Maria's story, but it's difficult to resume on five pages. When the word finally came out, it was a relief not only to my friends but also to my feelings. Maria and Juliet are the perfect examples of coming out. These two women are demonstrated to be proud of who they are and no one can stop their feeling and dreams.

....

Both girls came out in different ways, which forged a strong friendship between them. They become so powerful that they both graduate from college and enroll in a four-year university. Their stories continue with great success in their own ways, while supporting and respecting one another within the Latinx and Undocu community. I want the audience to sense a connection to either narrative because these are several topics about which our Latino community has limited knowledge. Mental health, being undocumented in school, belonging to the LGBT+ community, and having Latinx parents are still not taught in the Latinx community.

Nirvana Rodriguez's "Misunderstood"

Nirvana Rodriguez's "Misunderstood" comic focuses on a protagonist named Astra who was recommended by her friends to read Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* (see Fig. 5). A lot of Astra's friends identify as LGBTQIA+, so they enjoyed the book, but Astra is a straight person who is still learning about allyship and the LGBTQIA+ community. Astra tries to ask her friends for help, but "one of them judges and shames her for not understanding the representation of LGBTQ[IA+] characters. However, her other friend actually helped her and gave her advice and taught her why LGBTQ[IA+ community] is important to talk about in comics, and that she shouldn't feel ashamed for not knowing or understanding these topics." Rodriguez discusses her creation process:

During the early process of the comic, the first thing I did was design the characters for the comic. For me, working on the characters first before the script helps me get a better idea of how I want the story to go since story ideas come to me easily when I'm drawing while also listening to music. At first I only wanted three, characters for the comic. Astra, the main character, Ravyn, the antagonist, and Eartha, the support character. But after working on the comic, I felt that it was very dull and lacking in character. So, I made more background characters with different ethnicity and sexualities, since I wanted the comic to feel more diverse. I changed the script to add the background character and gave them dialogues so that everyone is getting some kind of attention.

Rodriguez focuses on various themes, but one captures the central idea of her comic. She writes that respect is an important theme because "every character in the comic wants the same thing. Acceptance and Respect."

Conclusion

The comic projects that my Puente students, Evelyn Cohn, Guillermo Rubio Beltran, Victor Gomez, Adriana Uribe, and Nirvana Rodriguez, shared and worked on represent the creative possibilities of Latinx comics. Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* is an empowering and uplifting book that not only inspired students, but also encouraged them to visualize the power that their own stories can have in our course as well as outside of it. Witnessing my students' efforts in creating their comics during class and in optional "Comic Lounge Hours" after class has confirmed the potential of nontraditional writing projects. In addition to the art that they created, their scripts and stories can reach audiences beyond our college classroom. Comics have a wide and diverse readership, appealing to both children and adults across different cultures and backgrounds. The visual nature of comics makes them accessible to readers with varying literacy levels, language barriers, or different learning abilities. This inclusivity expands the reach and impact of the storytelling, reaching audiences who might not typically engage with traditional forms of writing. Latinx comics provide a platform for subverting dominant narratives and creating innovative legacies. We hope that our approach to discussing and creating Latinx comics empowers educators with reflexivity practices and insights for teaching Latinx comics in college classrooms.

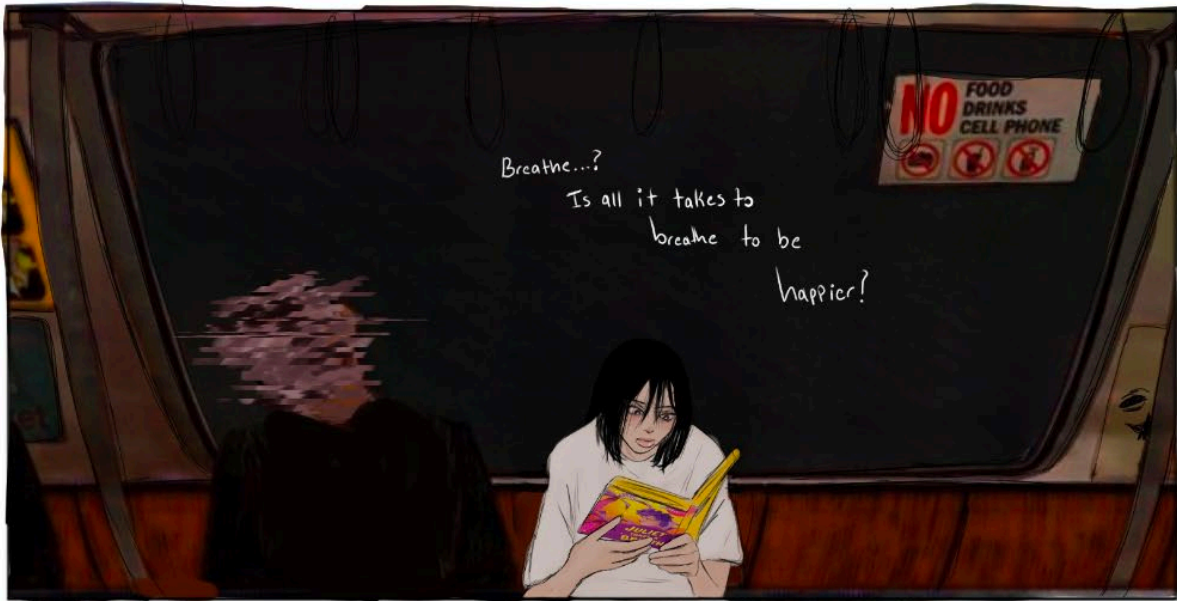
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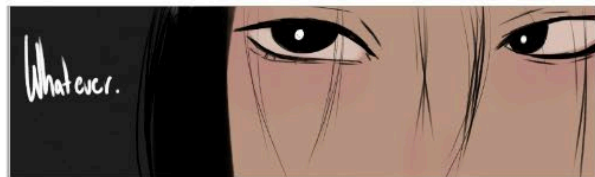
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Students' Comics

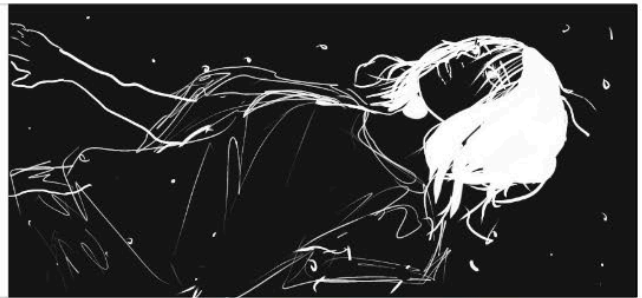
Fig. 1 Evelyn Cohn's "Please Hold Me Just a Minute"







WHERE AM I?
My body feels RAW.



Even if a Memory is full of
LOVE...
- All it
DOES
IS
HAUNT
ME



SHES NOT HERE

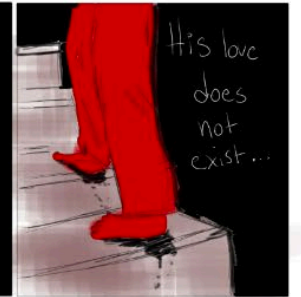
What are you
doing?
Your skin is
peeling



Wait! Wait!
Have you
Slynn
We'll
Get
Caught!

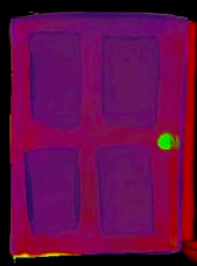


When
God
Comes

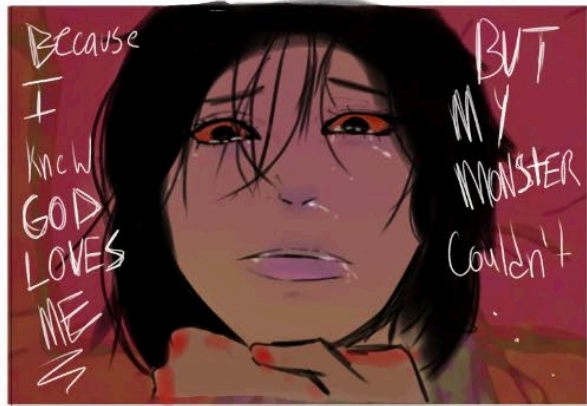
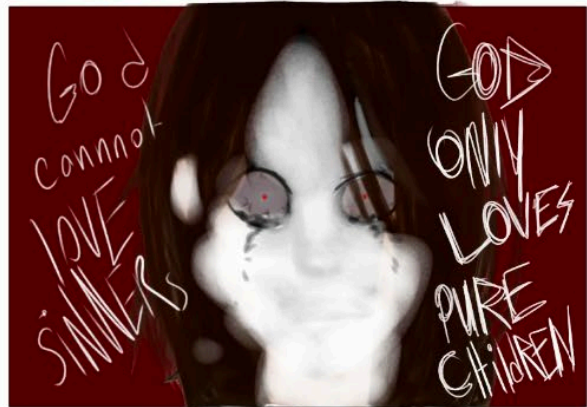


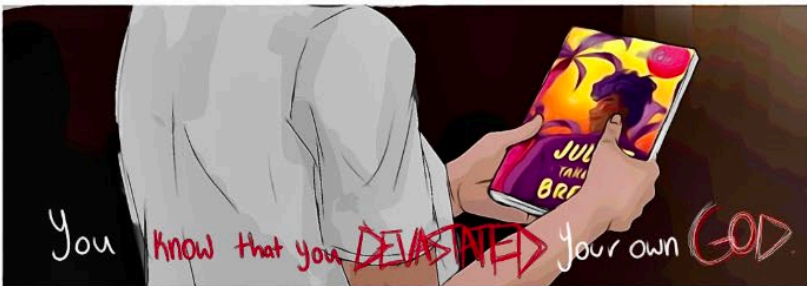
His love
does
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IN THE
EYES
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Parent...
His LOVE
IS
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HOW
Could
you do
this
to ME

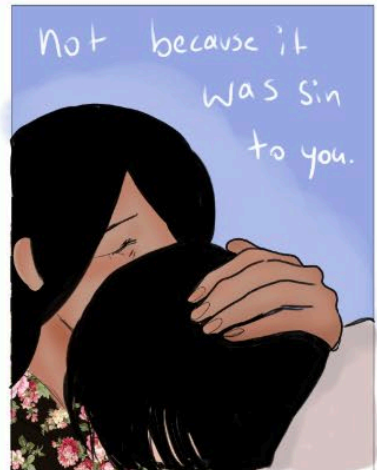
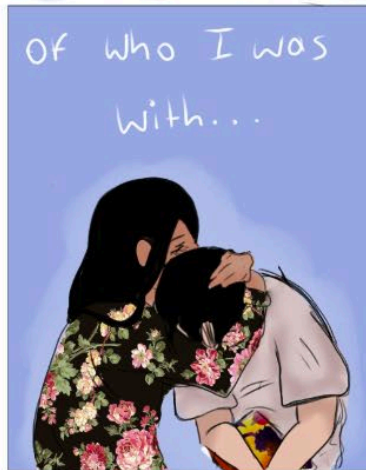
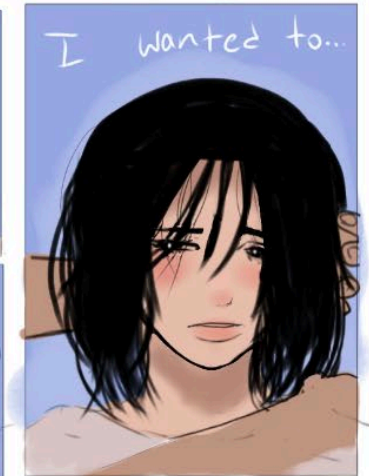






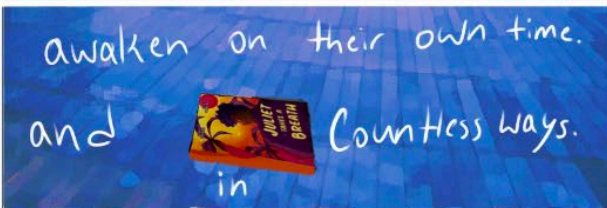
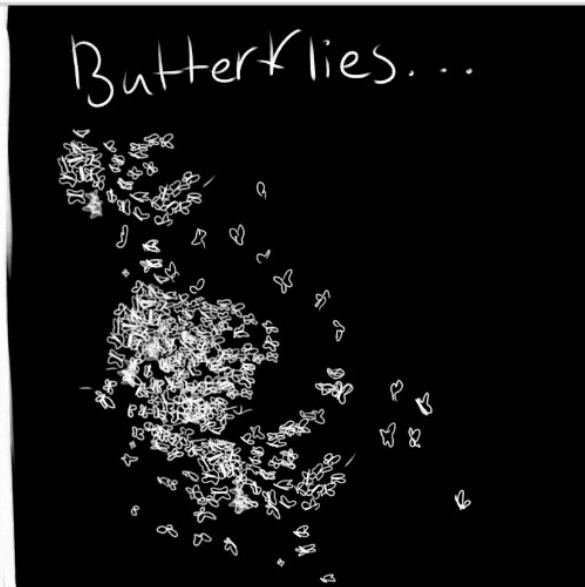
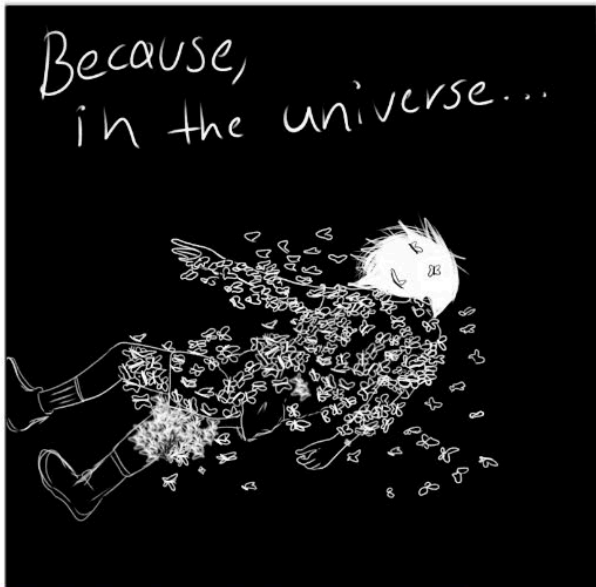
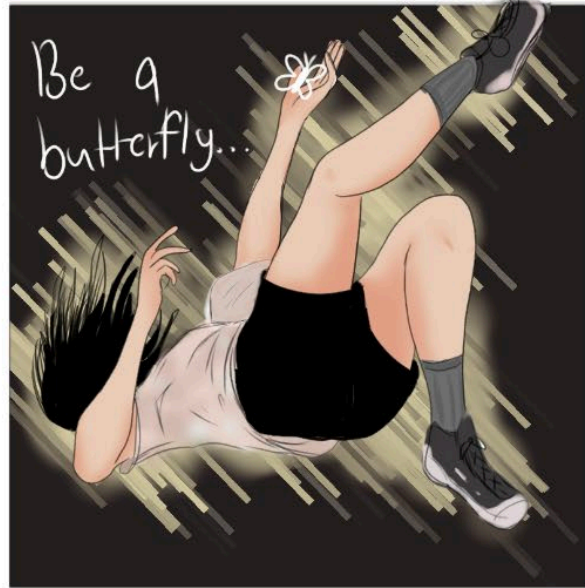






lets forget everything for now and...

Let the universe Guide you



The end.



Thank you for reading.

I dedicate this to my best friend
Grace. ♡ Who has helped me through this
project & being my main motivator.

I love you!

— Evelyn Cohn

Fig 2. Guillermo Rubio Beltran's "What is a Garden"











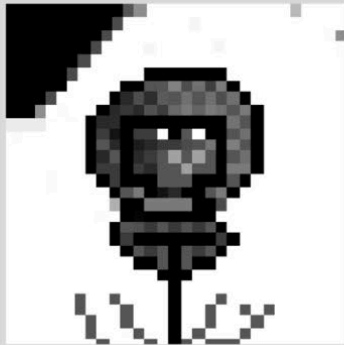










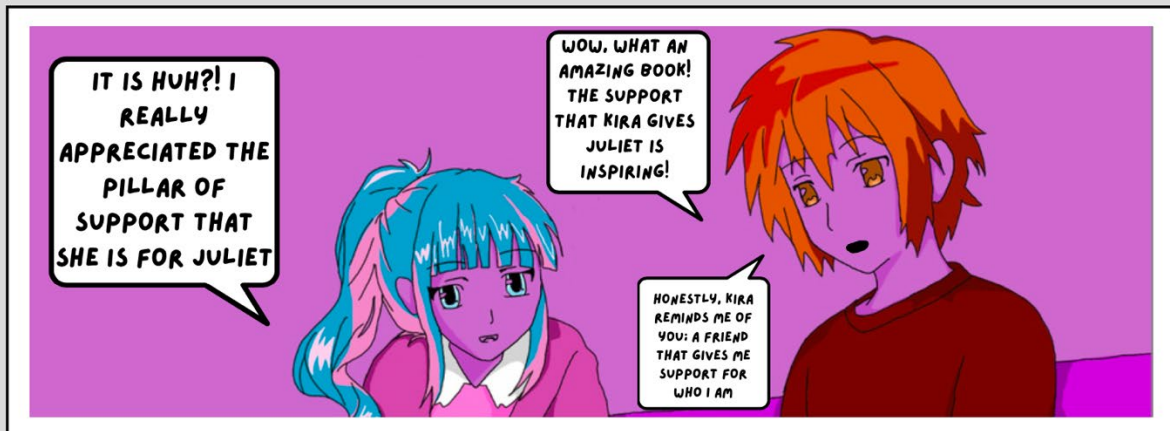
Fig 3. Victor Gomez's "Online Encounters"

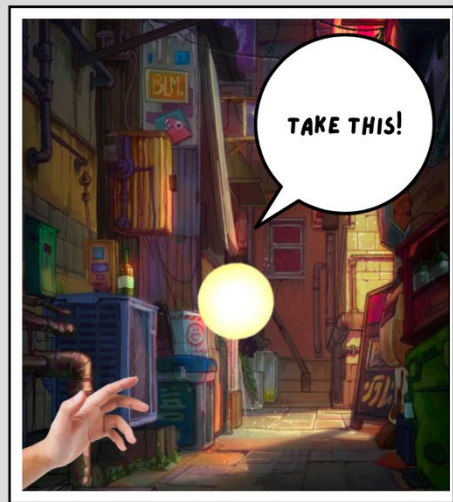


INTO THE GAME!









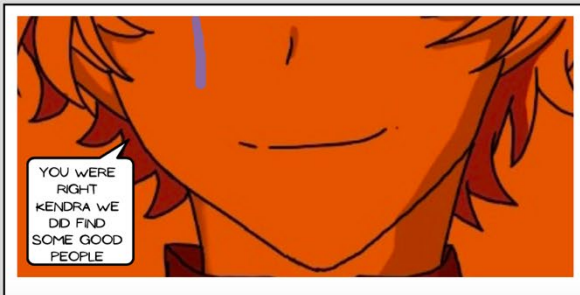
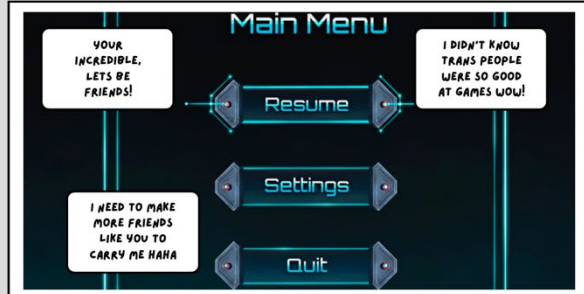
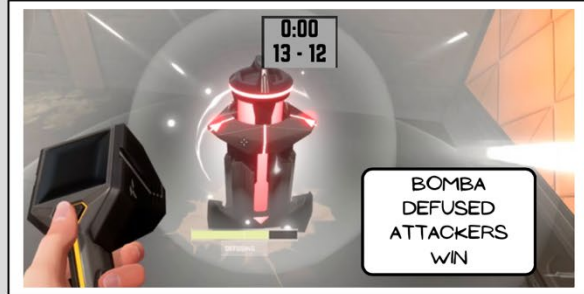
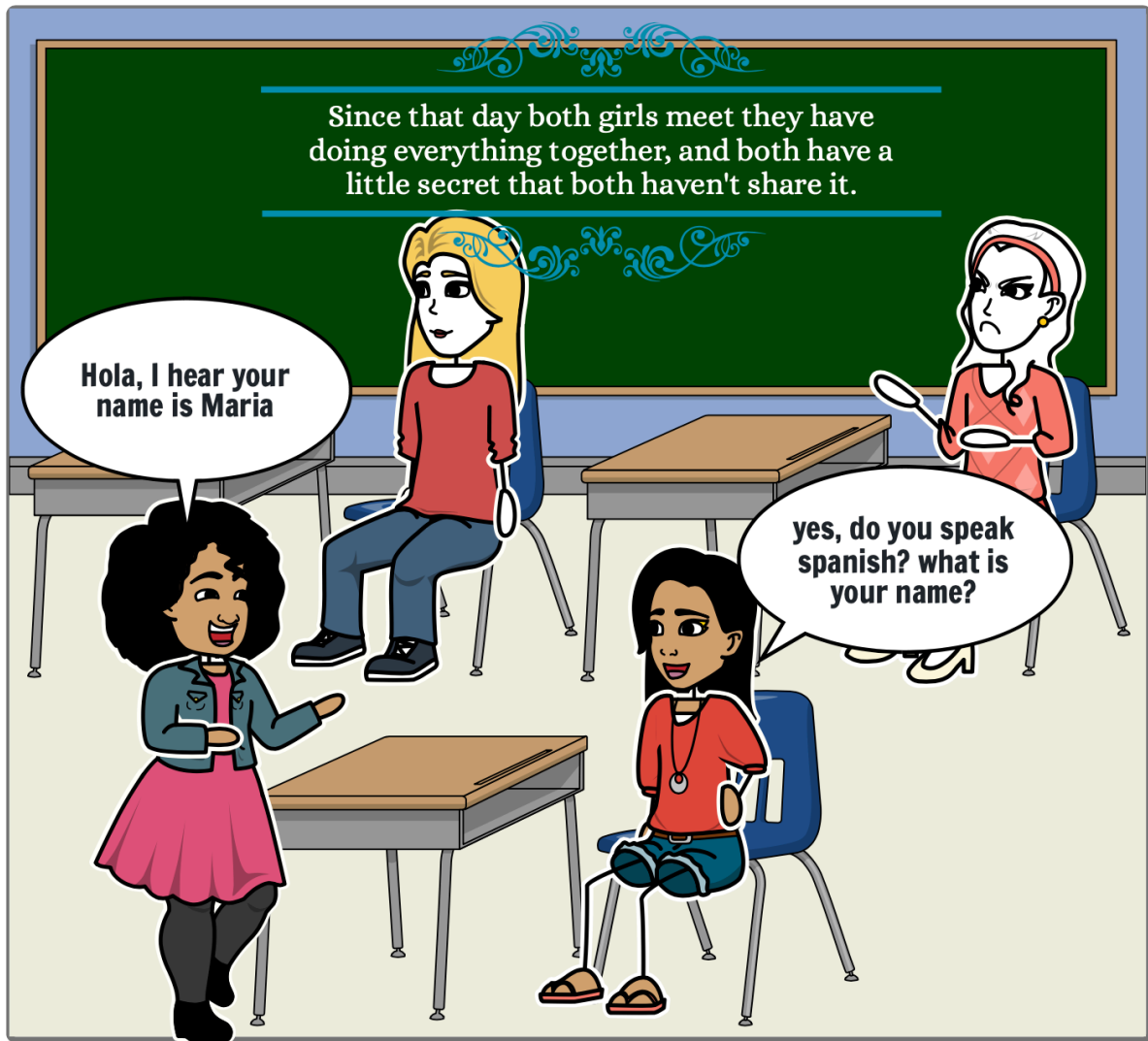
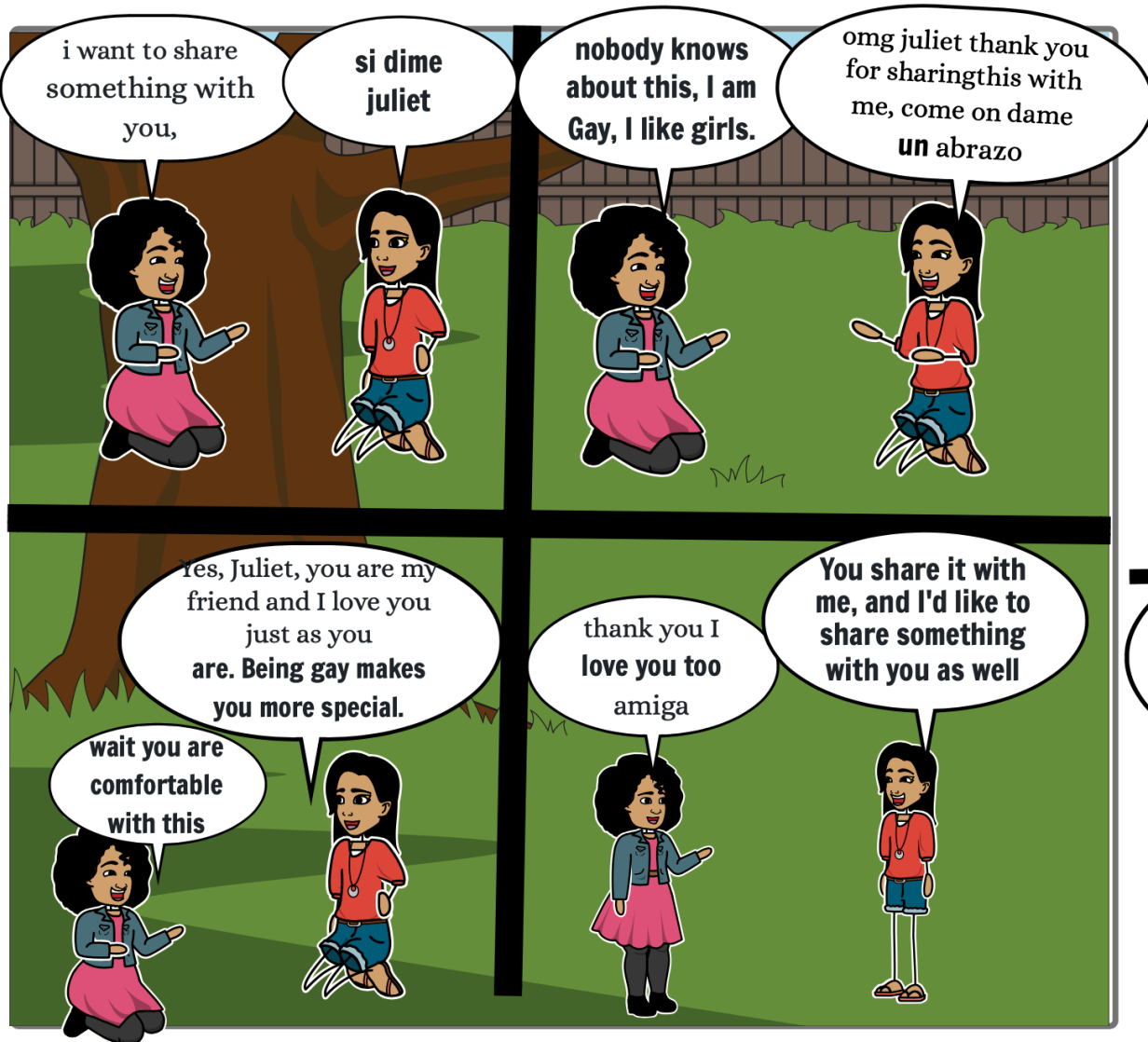


Fig 4. Adriana Uribe's "A Young Girls Broken American Dream"





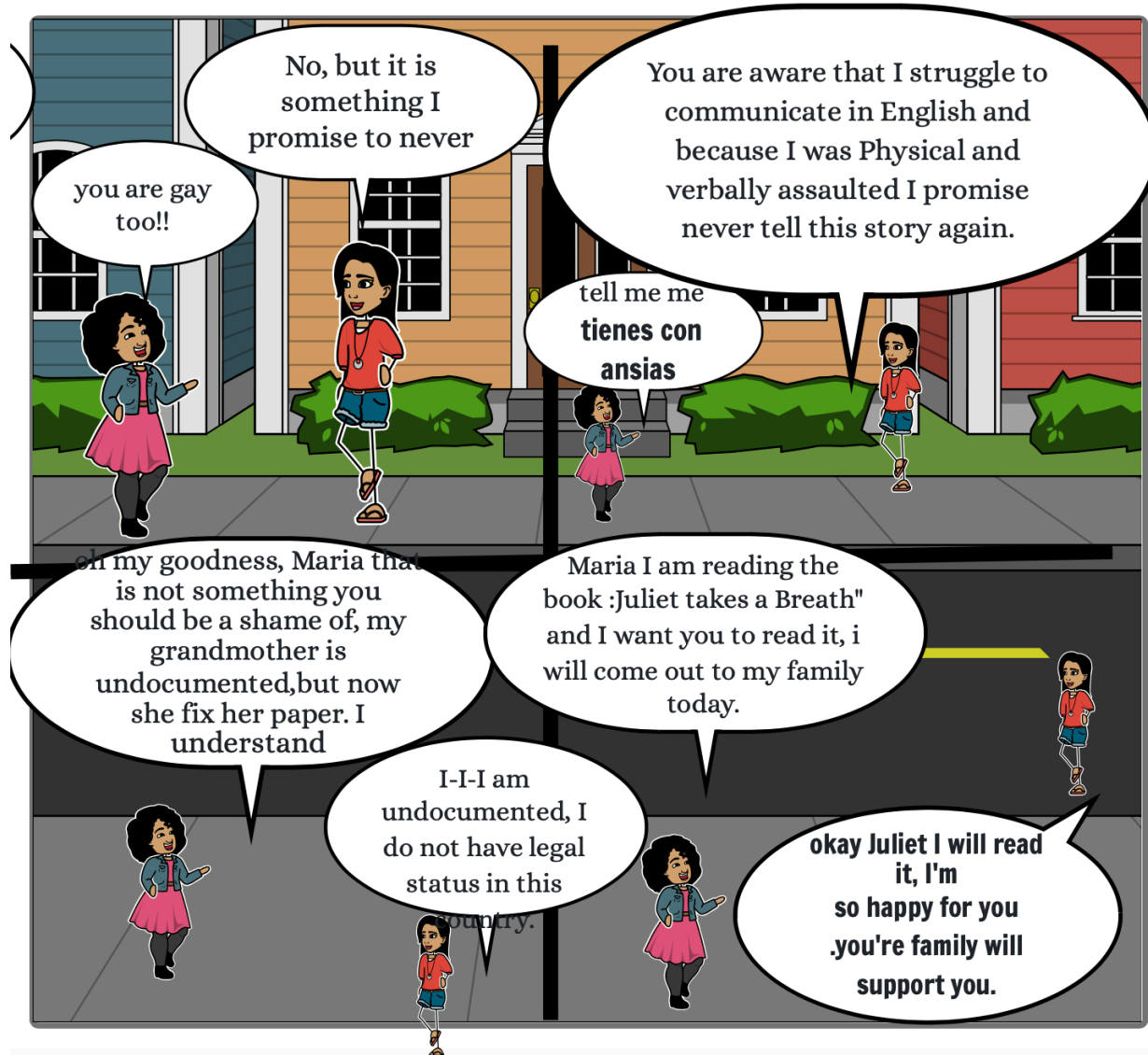


Fig 5. Nirvana Rodriguez's "Misunderstood"

