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► **To cite this version:**

| Nicolas Labarre. Poetry in comics, poetry comics.. 2021. hal-03367640

HAL Id: hal-03367640

<https://hal.science/hal-03367640>

Preprint submitted on 12 Oct 2021

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Poetry in comics, poetry comics

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This essay seeks to investigate poetry in comics, as a fairly recent medium-specific genre ("comics poetry"). After a brief look at poetry adaptations, I shall examine the formal and discursive characteristics of comics poetry.

Has published poetry comics in *Ink Brick* and *Over the Line*.



The intersection of comics and poetry is both common and persistently uneasy.

As Chrissy Williams and Tom Humberstone note, in the early 20th century:

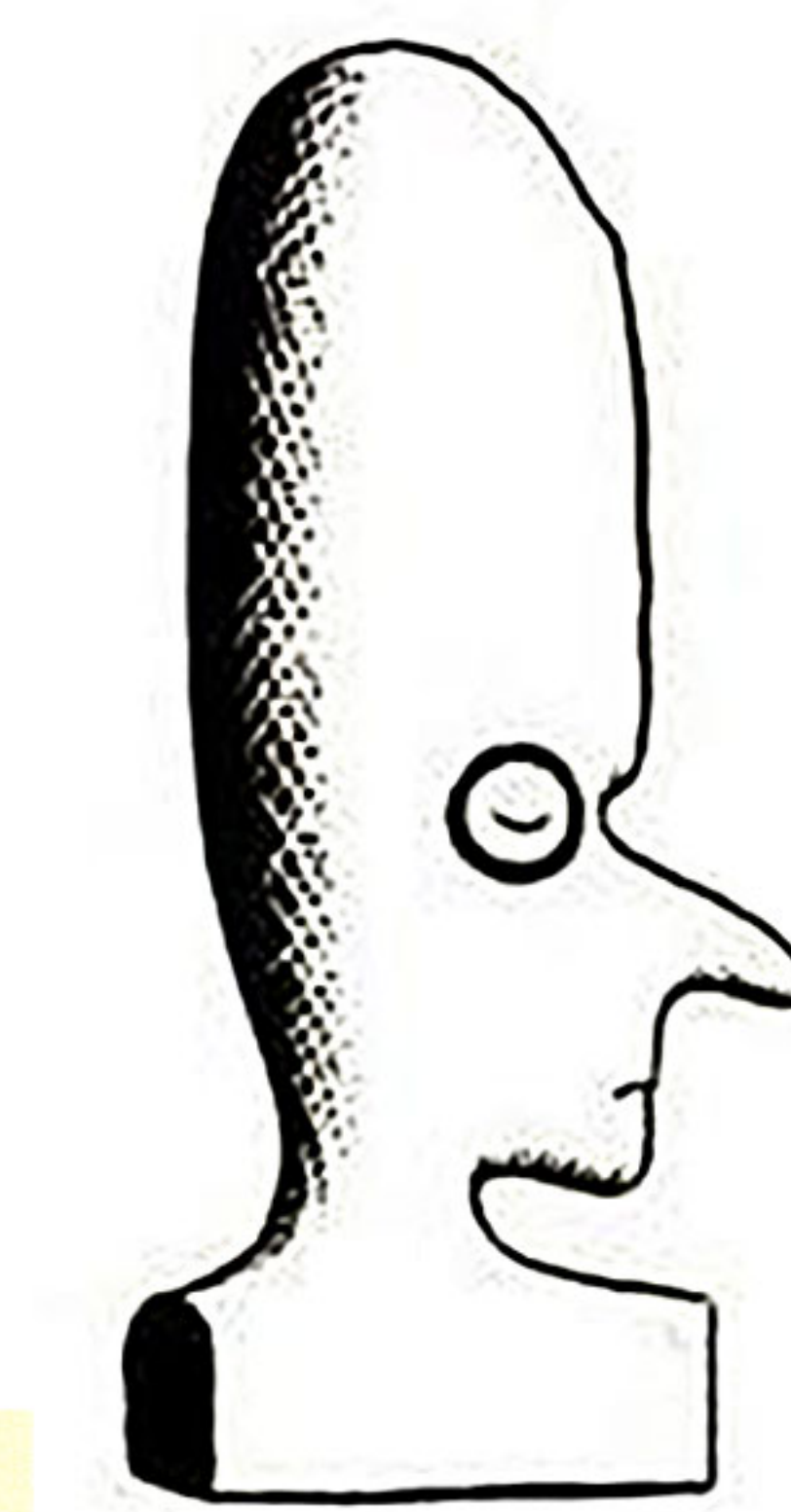
"Poetry got the perceived highbrow of the stick, and comics the low."

(Williams and Humberstone 2015, p.6)

HIGH-BROW

LOW-BROW

VS



Busts and selected examples from *Life's* 1949 chart of "everyday tastes"



"Little magazines," criticism of criticism, avant garde literature

Pulps, comic books

That distinction has become somewhat obsolete.



FEARFUL SYMMETRY



Poetry can certainly be found in many comics, mainstream or otherwise, in the form of quotes, inspiration, nods and jokes, from *Watchmen* (right) to Bilal's work.

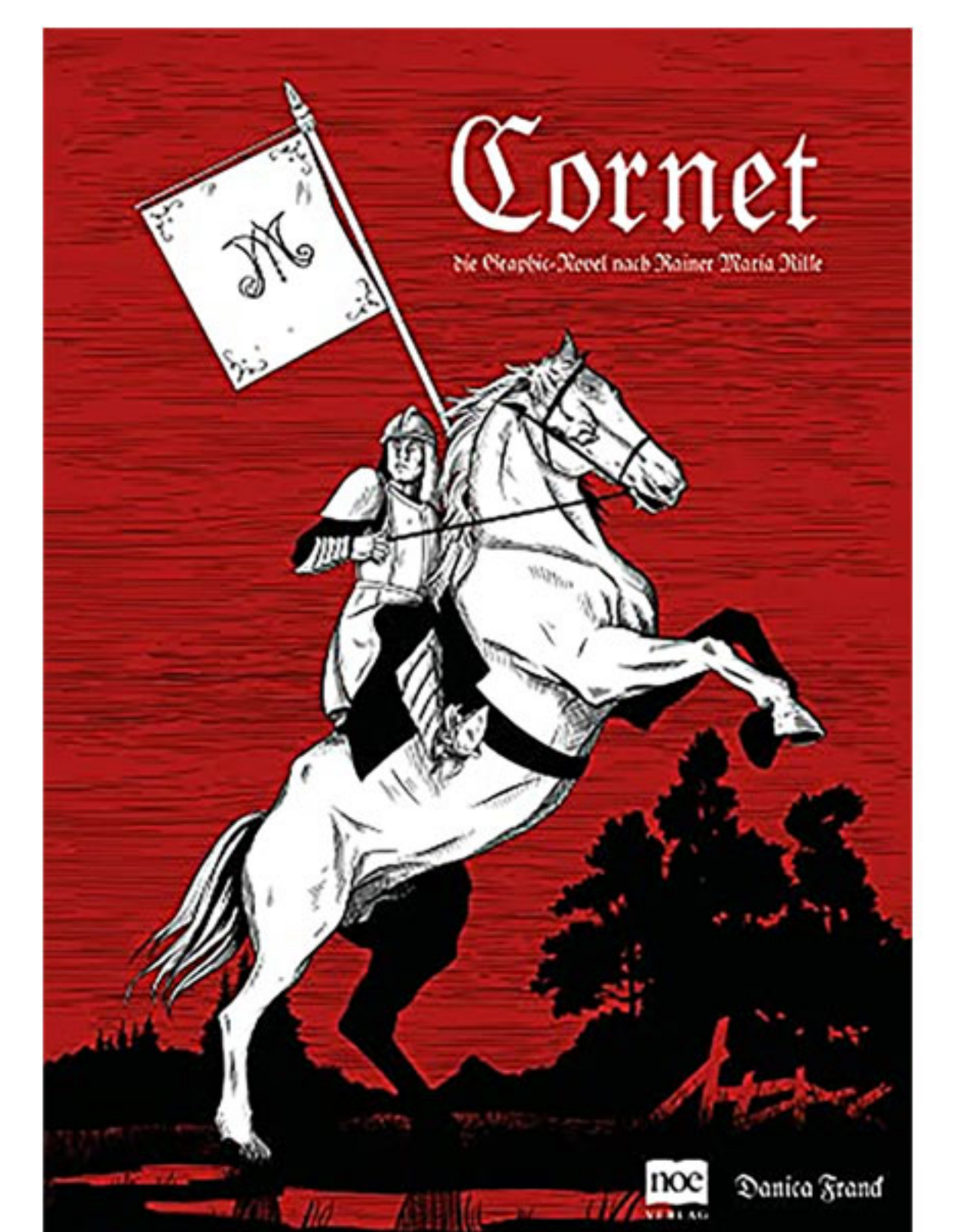
And as noted by Baetens and Frey, among others, the era of the graphic novel has encouraged comics artists to engage with literature more daringly.



+



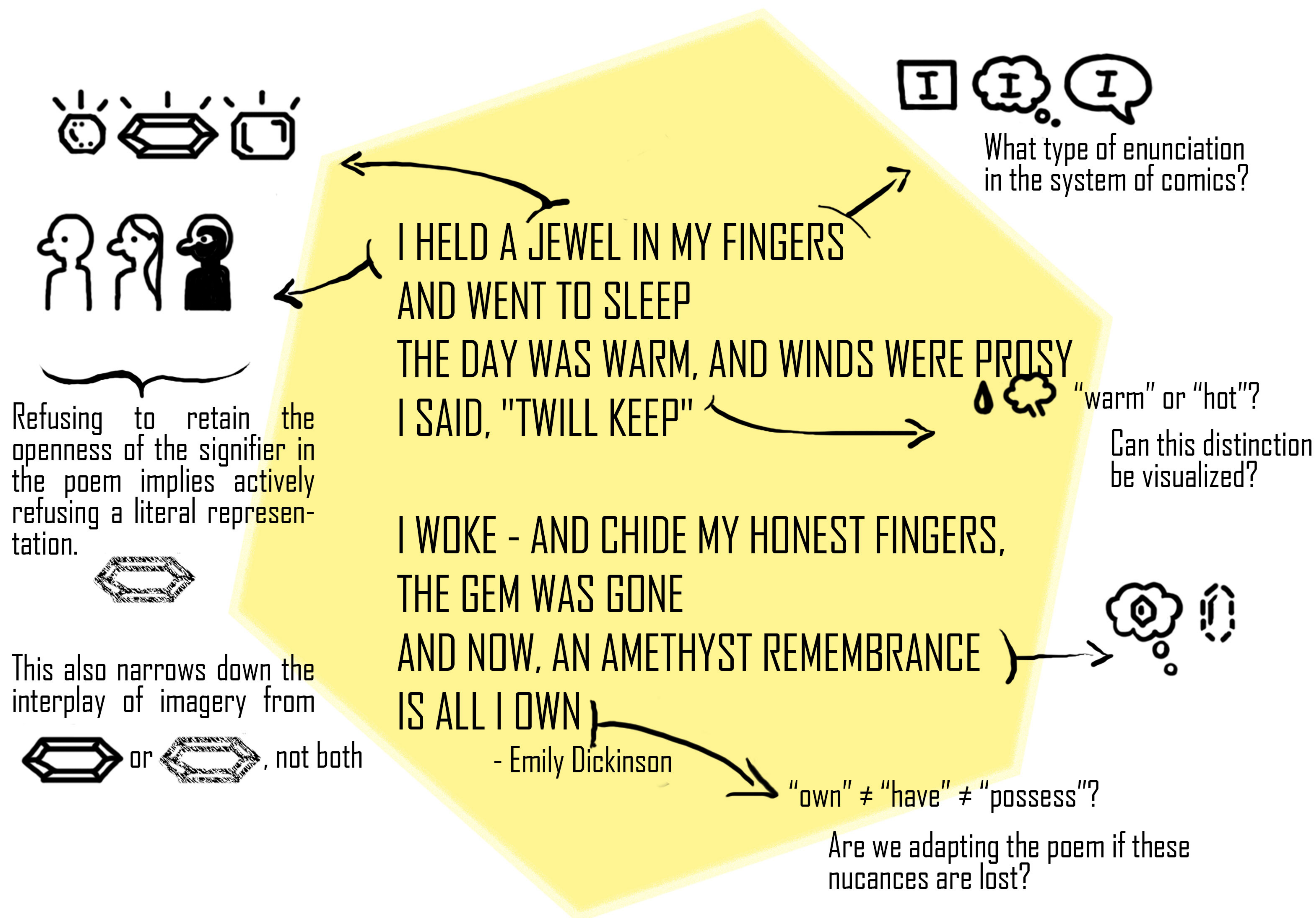
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"The Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke" by Rainer Maria Rilke. Graphic novel by Danica Franck (2021)

Yet, poetry has proved somewhat resistant to a privileged mode of intermedial encounters: adaptation.

This resistance can probably be explained to a large instance by the mismatch between the affordances of comics and the expectations generated by poetic adaptations, as in this example.



Besides these formal considerations, the financial incentive for adaptations within the culture industries rarely apply to poetry.

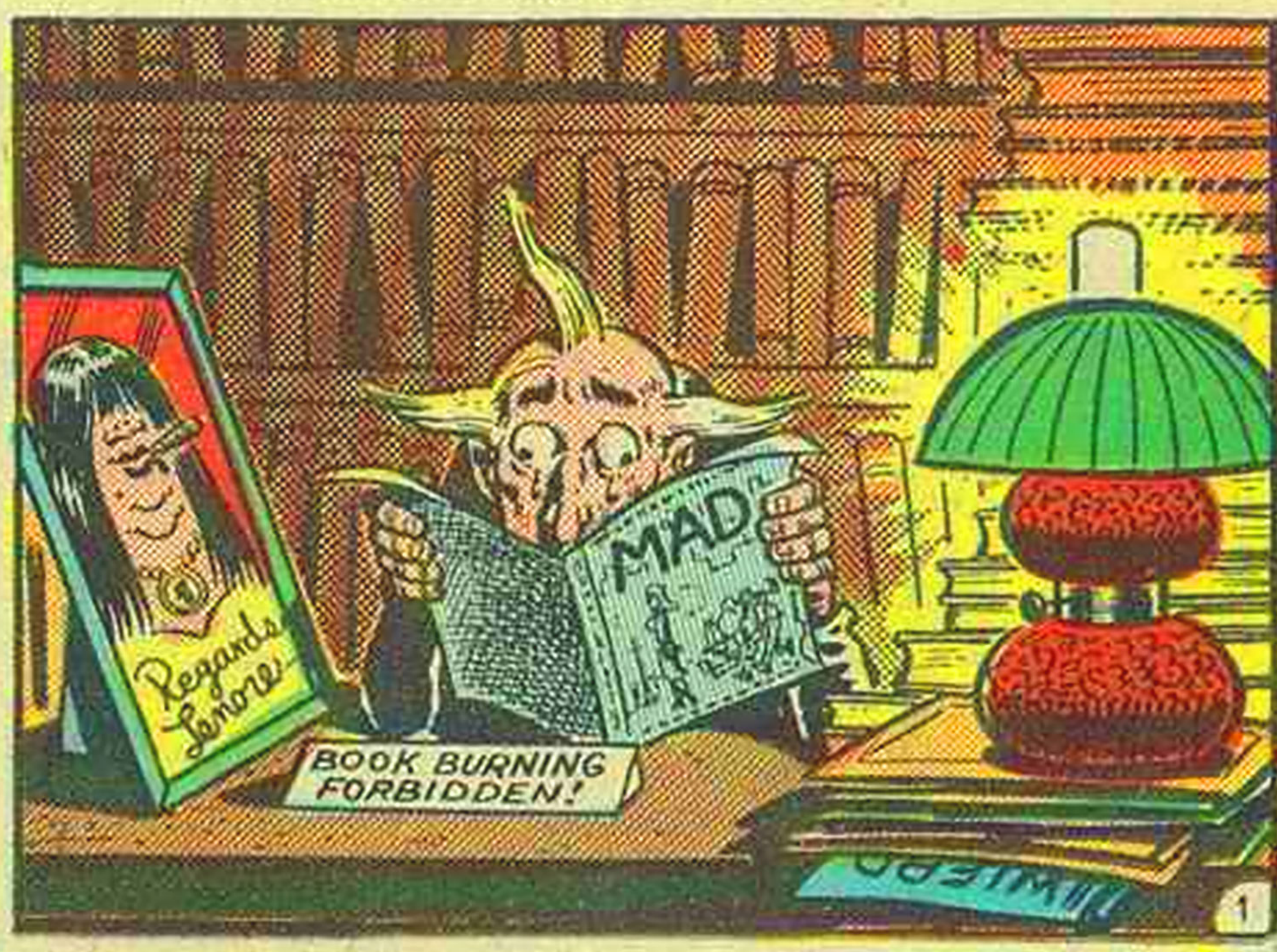
This does not mean that there are no poetry adaptations, but these constraints encourage a focus on canonical texts, with a clear narrative content.

AND

It pushes authors to illustrate texts which they are unwilling to alter in any way (in part, because they are canonical).

From my books surcease of sorrow-sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore -

Nameless **here** for evermore.



Kurtzman, Elder, "The Raven", MAD #9 (1954)

To be clear: illustrating and sequencing IS adaptation. It does offer "repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 2006, 173), as demonstrated by Kurtzman and Elder's version of "The Raven", which retains the entire text.

Elder's graphics deliciously bring out absurdities and inanities lurking beneath the poem's overwrought surface and in doing so help support such readings. (Eddings 2013)

But such adaptations offer a very constrained and often deferent form of engagement between poetry and comics, which often replicates the perceived hierarchy of the two forms. This is not the case with "poetry comics"



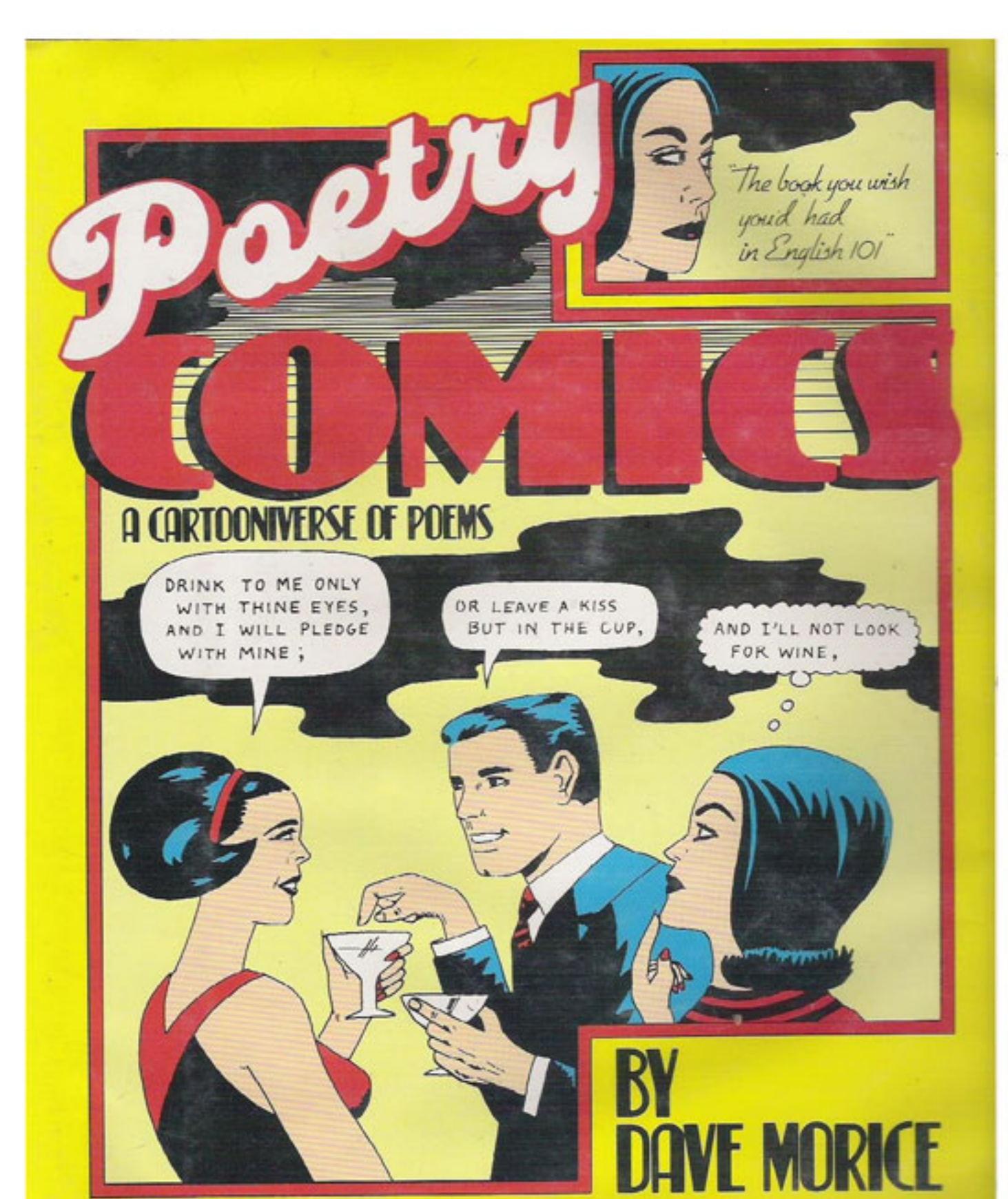
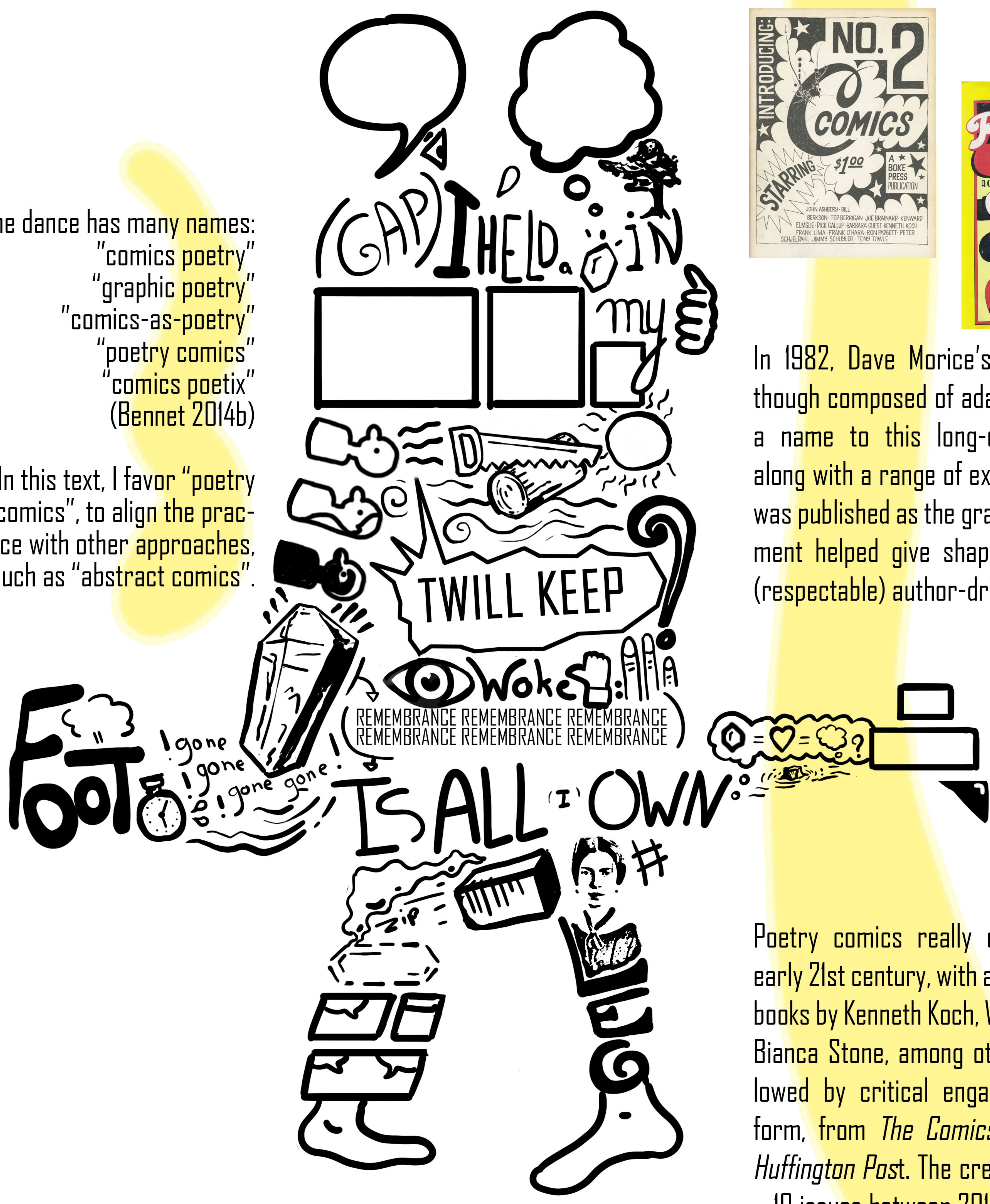
In poetry comics, the tools of comics do not function as supplements - or even counterpoints - to a text, but are equally central to the affective and expressive work of the poem. In the words of the editors of *Ink Brick*: poetry comics is "a sort of dance between words and images" (Crum 2015), while Bianca Stone describes it as "a caged dance" (2021)



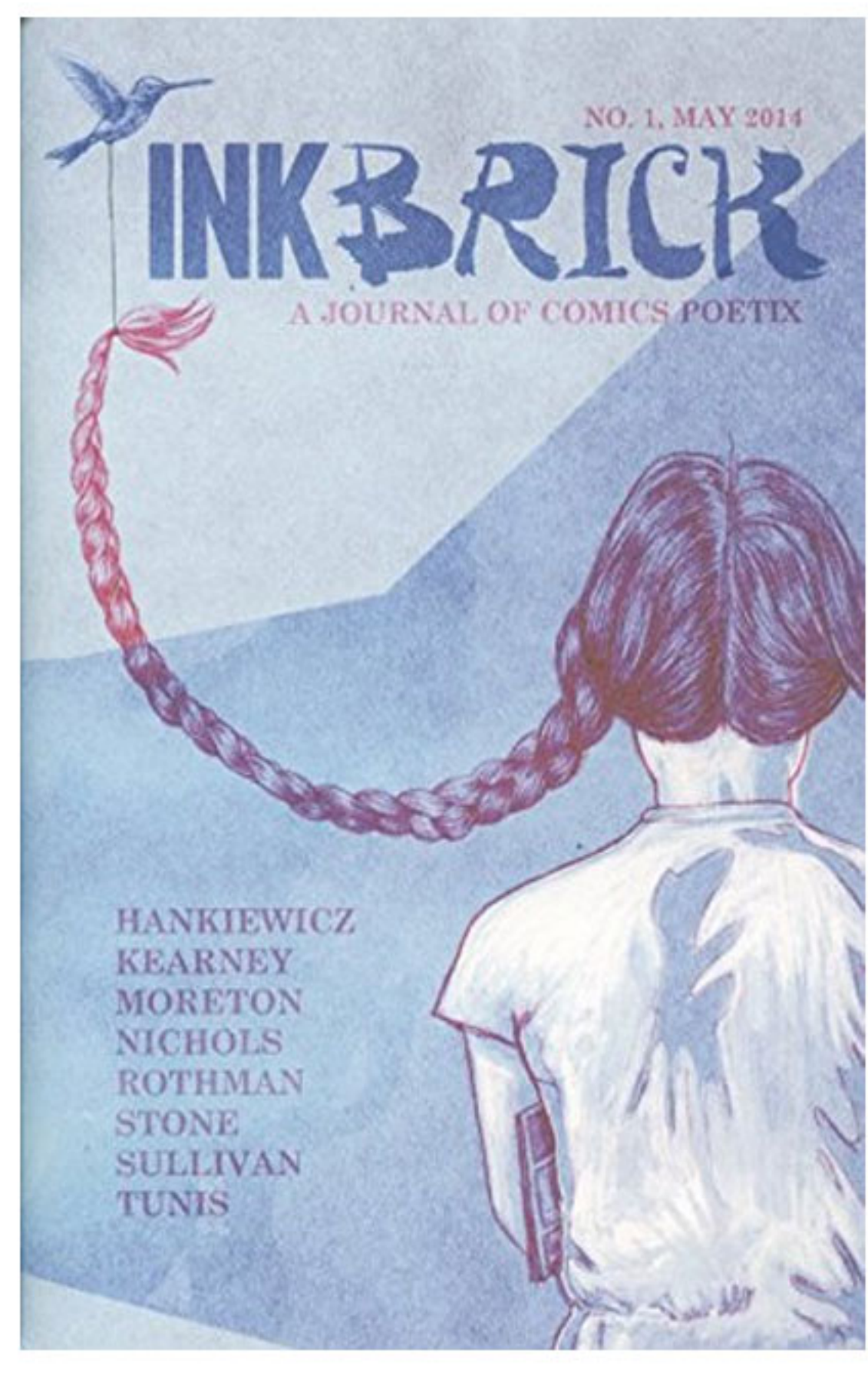
The dance arguably started in the 1960s, in the context of a broader discovery of comics by the art world, with Joe Brainard's *C Comics* in New York in 1964-65, and Dino Buzzati's *Poem Strip*, in Italy in 1969. However, many earlier examples exist in the constellation of content typical of comic strips and early comic books.

The dance has many names:
 "comics poetry"
 "graphic poetry"
 "comics-as-poetry"
 "poetry comics"
 "comics poetix"
 (Bennet 2014b)

In this text, I favor "poetry comics", to align the practice with other approaches, such as "abstract comics".



In 1982, Dave Morice's *Poetry Comics*, though composed of adaptations, offered a name to this long-existing practice along with a range of examples. The book was published as the graphic novel movement helped give shape to the idea of (respectable) author-driven comics.



Poetry comics really coalesced in the early 21st century, with a series of notable books by Kenneth Koch, Warren Craghead, Bianca Stone, among others, quickly followed by critical engagement with the form, from *The Comics Journal* to *The Huffington Post*. The creation of *Ink Brick* - 10 issues between 2013 and 2019 - further demonstrated the existence of poetry comics as a collective and well-identified practice.

It is common to describe poetry comics as having the same relationship to regular, narrative comics that literary poetry has with prose (Mack and Jenkins 2011; Surdiacourt 2012; Bennet 2014b)

“ Poetry exploits language, abstracting beyond its initial meaning for aesthetic and other purposes, while at the same time remaining more condensed and less straightforward than most prose. (Clough 2013) ”

In this description, “prose” comics are those in which the expressivity of the form is minimized, to offer a “transparent” narrative, as in the example below.

conventional, consistent and “invisible” typography, panel borders, etc.

mimetic space

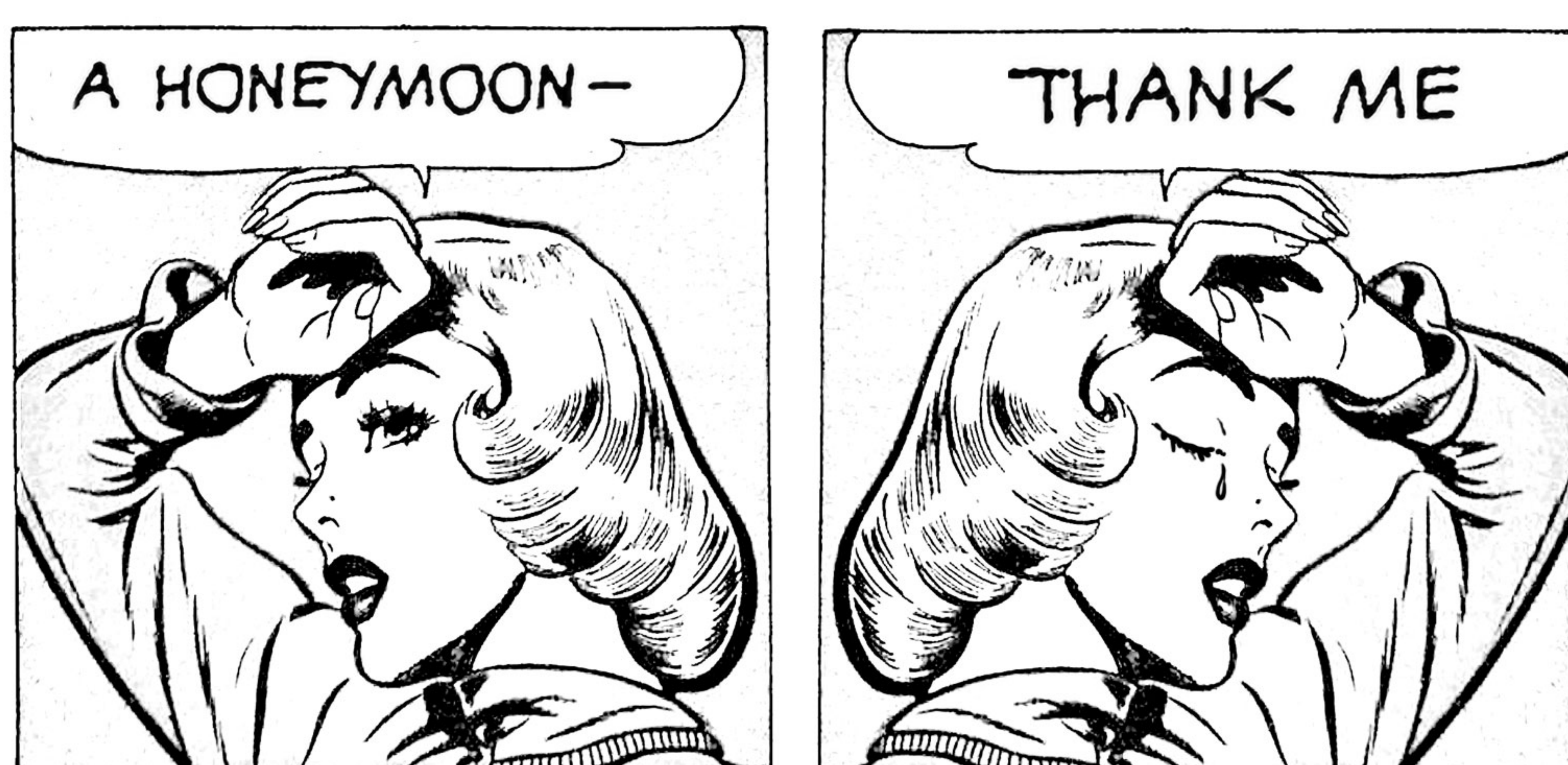
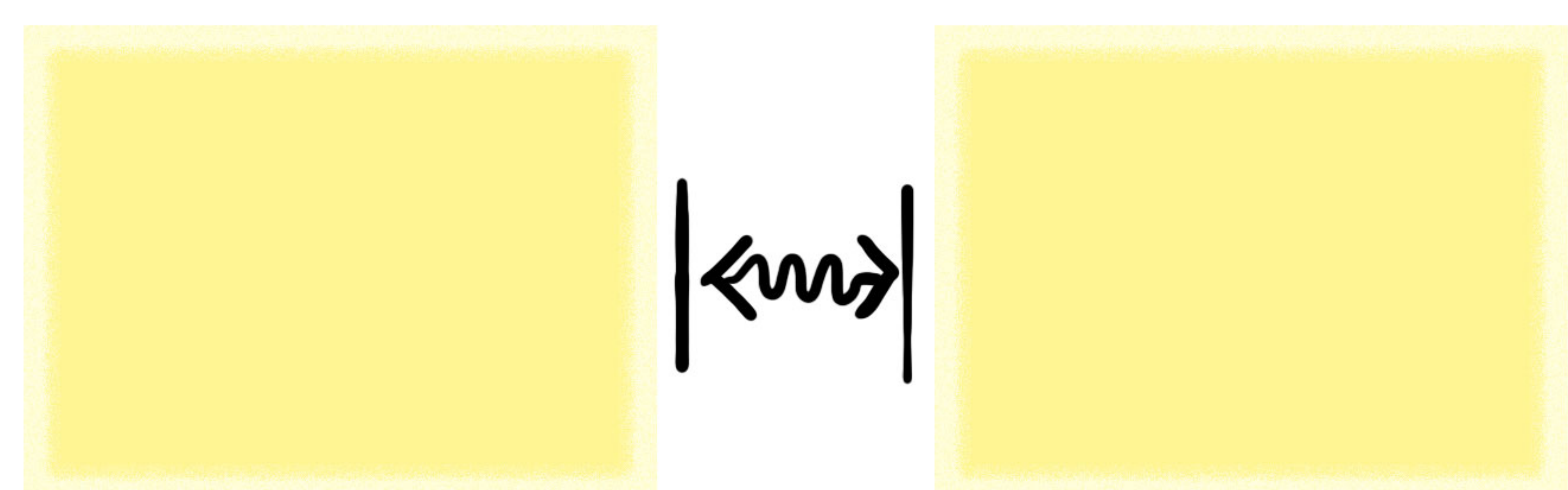
text/image consonance

conventional/collective style

non-problematic inference from panel-to-panel
Facilitating/enabling “closure”

“My Foolish Infatuation”, authors unknown, in *Ten-Story Love*, vol. 29 #3 (1951) [two years after the *Life* article mentioned on p.1]

Poetry comics aims at making some or all of these devices meaningful, to create “denseness” (Clough 2013) as opposed to transparency. It seeks to alter comics reading from an efficient narrative medium to a form demanding that readers “stop and inspect the intricacies of the image” while “embracing uncertainty” (Stone 2015).



Disrupting closure through minimal interventions: series, elisions, non-congruence between text and image...

In particular, poetry comics seeks to deemphasize or complicate “closure”, understood as the inference process from one panel to another, but more broadly as a description of the cohesiveness of comics narratives (Bennet 2014a, 2014b; Stone 2021).

In other words, comics poetry seizes on the “gaps and omissions” which make comics a “most inefficient [narrative] form” (Gardner 2012, xi) and seeks to widen these gaps.

The system is always apparent in comics, but poetry comics simultaneously foregrounds and defamiliarizes it, so as to alter the reading experience.

Critics and practitioners have sought analogies between poetry and poetry comics, suggesting not only a commonality of intent but also of means.

In particular, two fruitful descriptions of poetry applicable to poetry comics have been foregrounded:

"Segmentivity"

"According to DuPlessis, the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre is its 'ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments' [...]. For her, this involves 'bounded units' and 'the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of a gap' such as line breaks, stanzas and page breaks." (Bennett 2011)



BUTTER
SOME TOAST,
GET
OLD.

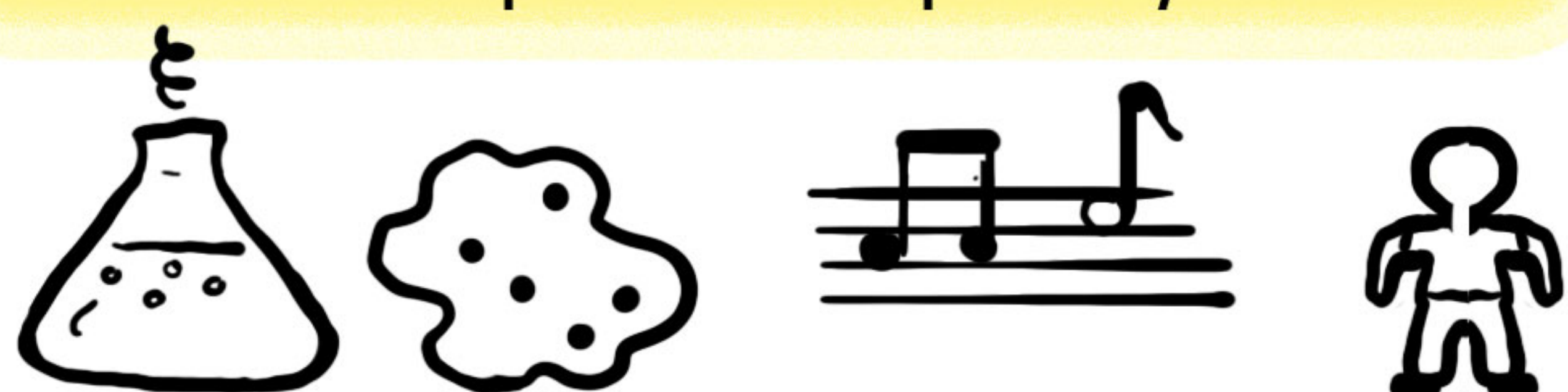
"Negative capability"

"Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." - Keats, letter to his brothers, 22 December 1817

Bianca Stone frequently mentions this as a key to her work in poetry comics (2015; 2021)

Page from "Polis Ample", by Warren Craghead (2013)

Other metaphors for poetry comics:



An alchemy (Mack and Jenkins, 2011), a gestalt (Clough 2013, Crum 2015), a musical piece comprised of various instruments (Robertson 2015) a child of both forms (Stone 2021).

However these analogies and metaphors merely suggest a resemblance between poetry comics and traditional poetry, with little insights on what differentiates poetry comics from other experimental forms.

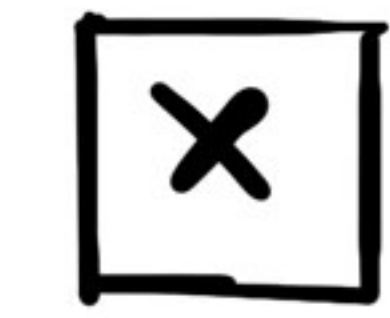
Formally and pragmatically, poetry comics is neither a stable form nor a neatly bounded one. and as such, its stability is ensured by discourses and institutions.

Even more so than older, less medium-specific genres, the notion of poetry comics is fragile, provisional and flickering.

Can YOU spot poetry comics?
(wish it were that straightforward)



Questioning the code
Segmentivity
Negative capability
Opaque, thick, dense
Challenging closure

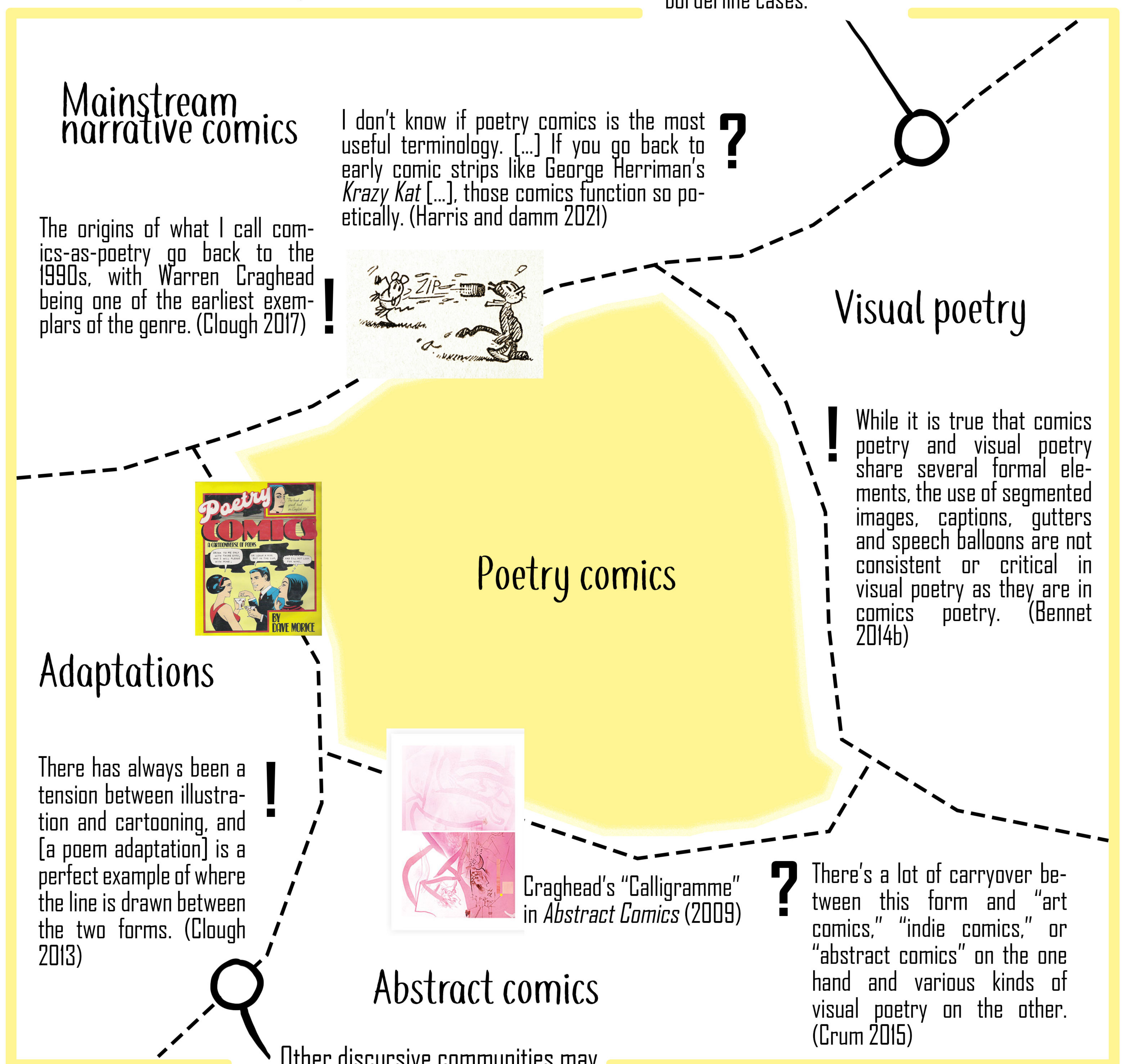


Embracing the code
Cohesiveness
Certainties
Transparent
Closure

Instead of a binary distinctions, genres offer multidimensional clusters. A map offers a useful metaphor here.

A possible map of poetry comics and neighboring practices

These borders are erected, patrolled and challenged by creators, critics and readers. This is especially visible in borderline cases.



Poetry comics thus remains imperfectly defined, still an amorphous category, with porous borders. Yet, the same can be said of most emerging genres, especially in the absence of strong thematic content.

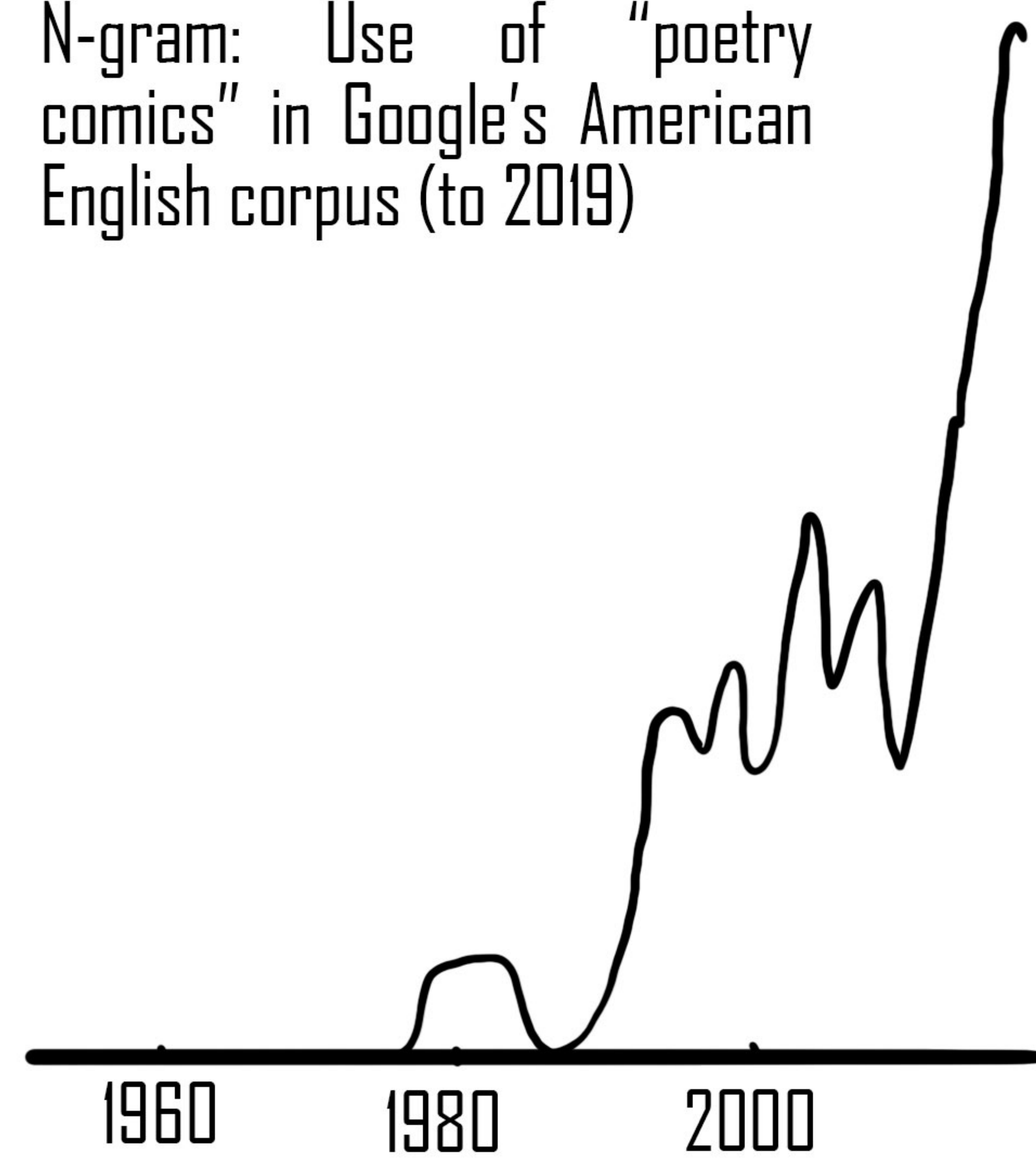
Conclusion

The n-gram on the right suggests both the rising attention paid to the notion in critical discourses and the importance of the name in shaping these discourses. Again, this is surprising. To quote from Raphaëlle Moine's study of genres in cinema:

"A cinematic genre only appears when it is named and designated as such, since its existence is tied to an awareness of it that is agreed upon and shared by a community" (2008, 142)

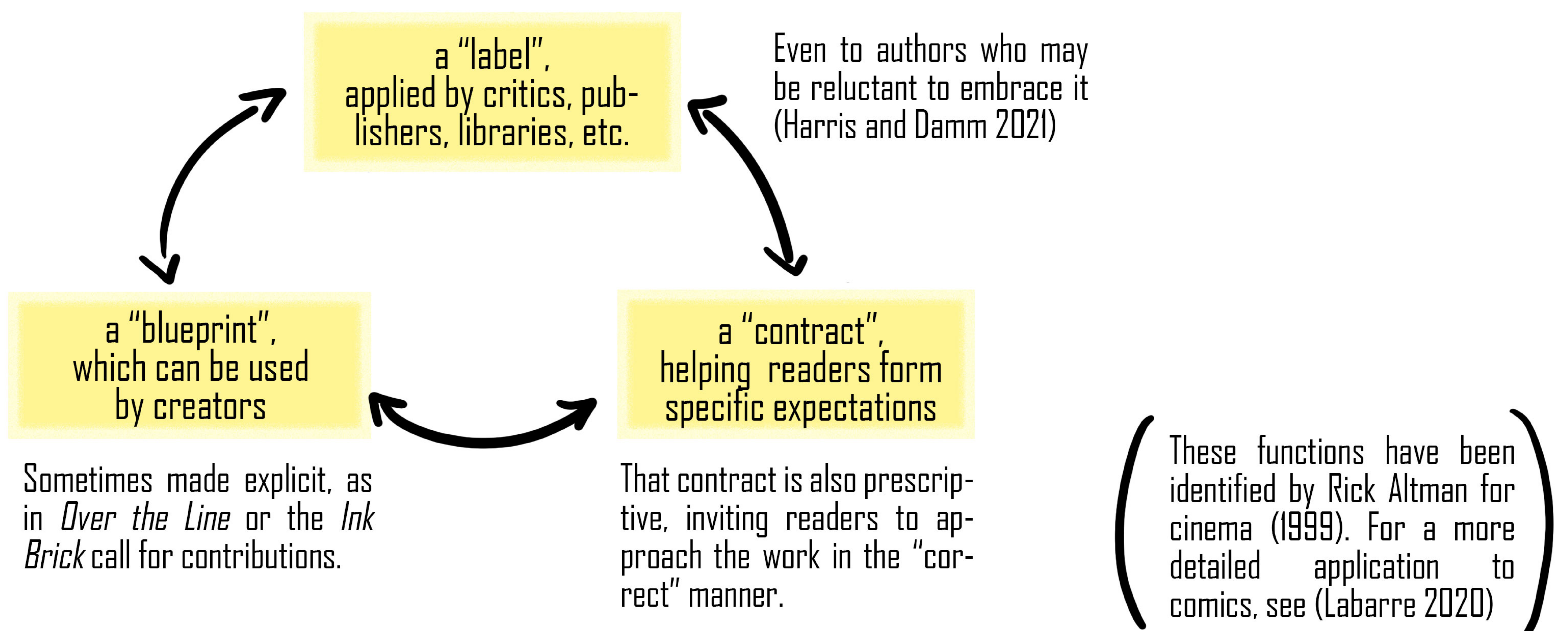
In view of the previous page, it might even be tempting to suggest that poetry comics is *primarily* a name, lumping together widely divergent practices.

N-gram: Use of "poetry comics" in Google's American English corpus (to 2019)



("comics poetry" does not return sufficient data for a similar graph)

Still, after a decade of sustained use, there is little doubt that poetry comics fulfill the various functions of genres:



Many testimonies from creators suggest that this cycle was already in place in various teaching institutions before the current wave of poetry comics. However, the availability of celebrated exemplars and the existence of an internet-enabled generic community should ensure the durability of the genre.



The intersection of comics and poetry is likely to remain somewhat uneasy.

And poetry comics have arguably embraced highbrow culture, in the wake of a general reevaluation of the legitimacy of the form.



But that unlikely intersection is now a productive, well-settled genre, beyond adaptations and beyond what would have appeared as a radical incongruity for mid-20th century cultural consumers.

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