TOO SUBTLE FOR WORDS: DOING WORDLESS NARRATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract: Inspired by the wordless novels of early twentieth century Belgian artist Frans Masereel, this paper introduces wordless narrative research, a dynamic method of inquiry that uses visual storytelling to study, explore, and communicate personal narratives, cultural experiences, and emotional content too nuanced for language. While wordless narrative research can be useful for exploring a range of social phenomenon, it can be particularly valuable for exploring preverbal constructions of lived experiences, including trauma, repressed memories, and other forms of emotional knowledge often times only made accessible through affective or embodied modalities. This paper explores the epistemological claims of the method while describing five considerations for doing wordless narrative research. The paper concludes with a presentation of an excerpt of *There is No (W)hole* (Horwat, 2015), a surreal wordless autoethnographic allegory, as an example of wordless narrative research.

Keywords: arts-based research; autoethnography; narrative inquiry; practice-based research; wordless novels

The United States in the 1970s was a decade rife with cultural revolution, transformation, and evolution – a period where countercultural movements and iconoclasts would challenge established cultural norms and encourage pluralistic ways of being in the world. This desire was very much felt by social scientists in scholarly communities, who were shifting attention away from previously unchallenged empirical research methods and looking to the humanities to explore new possibilities by "combining scientific research with artistic design elements that are more evocative, enabling readers to vicariously experience the lives of people through their stories" (Kim, 2016, p. 137). Through this daring and brave paradigmatic shift, many believed social science research was not about discovering generalizable truths but rather served to construct new knowledge that increased understandings of our own humanity and our place in the world through guidance from the visual, literary, and performing arts – the very practices that distinguish us as humans (Kim, 2016; Leavy, 2015a; Sullivan, 2005). Identified as a period of genre blurring, methodological developments in social science research in the 1970s and early 1980s prompted a significant transformation that radically influenced the current paradigm of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kim, 2016; Leavy, 2015a).

Indebted to the work of Cole and Knowles (2001), Barone and Eisner (2011), Lincoln and Denzin (2000), McNiff (1998), Sullivan (2005), and other scholars, the current manifestation of arts-based research melds the systematic and rigorous qualities of empirical research with the aesthetic and imaginative qualities of the arts, allowing "the process of researching [to become] creative and responsive and the representational form for communication [that] embodies elements and various art forms – poetry fiction, drama, [and] visual art" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10-11). Because of this expansive geography of arts-based research practices, there has been a proliferation of creative research possibilities currently being explored by artists, writers, poets, playwrights, musicians, dancers, and other performers – all experimenting with diverse ways to create research through their respective creative practices. Recently some of these projects have even received acclaim outside of the academy and are introducing mainstream audiences to theory. Notably, Patricia Leavy's (2015b) social fiction novel *Blue* draws from Cooley's looking-glass self-theory, Goffman's Dramaturgy theory, critical theory, and her own social science research to tell a narrative about identity construction and personal transformation. Nick Sousanis's (2015) thesis turned philosophical graphic novel, *Unflattening*, draws from sequential art practices of comics to explore how perception and knowledge creation constitute active processes of combining and assessing different vantages points. Most recently, A. D. Carson's (2017) hip-hop dissertation, *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes &*

Revolutions pushed the boundaries of traditional forms of scholarship by using hip-hop as a medium to promote an authentic black voice and subvert anglo-normativity inherit in traditional forms of research.

Unquestionably, the work of Leavy (2015b), Sousanis (2015), Carson (2017), and others has expanded the terrain of arts-based research and encouraged creative practitioners, such as me, to push methodological boundaries further – testing the potential and pliability of different artistic forms as research generating practices. In the continued spirit of experimentation, this paper introduces wordless narrative research, an arts-based research method that draws from different narrative/storytelling and visual design strategies to create an entirely visual approach to presenting research. Wordless narrative research serves as a viable arts-based research method that allows creative practitioners to use diverse visual languages and design approaches to share narratives that are accessible to broader audiences, communicate complex theories through metaphor and symbolism, and foster imaginative engagement that encourages an empathic connection. To further develop wordless narrative research, I will provide a brief history of wordless novels – identifying some of the significant conventions of the genre that influenced the form of this method. Next, I will contextualize wordless narrative research as a form of visual-based narrative inquiry and present some methodological considerations for doing wordless narrative research. Lastly, I will present an excerpt of *There is No (W)hole* (Horwat, 2015), a surreal wordless allegory that exemplifies many of the considerations of wordless narrative research addressed in this paper.

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Wordless and Radical

In 1919, a relatively unknown Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889-1972) published *Passionate Journey,*[1] the first woodcut novel to be published without the use of text to support the narrative. The story portrays an archetypal modern man who

struggles with living in a typical western European city undergoing cultural, economic, and ecological transformation caused by increasing industrialization and class inequality. The narrative honored lifestyles of commoners, paying "respect for the working class; bourgeois conventionality [was] satirized or scorned" (Cohen, 1977, p. 180). This theme mirrored the sentiments of many of Masereel's contemporaries like George Grosz, Max Beckman, and Otto Dix – artists known for creating artwork critical of post-World War I German society (Cohen, 1977). As an accomplished printmaker, Masereel used the woodblock printing process to produce 167 black and white images to create the narrative. The woodblock printing process was significant in that the images were affordable to create, allowed the artist to mass produce his images, and afforded him the ability to develop simple, bold, high contrast imagery that could easily be understood by viewers. While regarded as the precursor to the contemporary graphic novel, wordless woodcut books differed from comics in not only their omission of text, but also in that each page contained only one image. The use of multiple panels was rejected by Masereel, who thought that isolating each image to a single page gave each illustration more emphasis and encouraged the reader to carefully read the picture (Beronä, 2008; Cohen, 1977).

Masereel designed the wordless woodcut novel to support his socialist agenda and allow people across diverse socio-economic and intellectual strata access to a meaningful art object. He worked with his publisher to make the book affordable; he wanted it to be something people from all social classes could own. The book referenced tiny prayer books, known commonly as the *Book of Hours*, a publication designed usually for the wealthy, made to be small enough to fit into a person's pocket and allow it to be taken out quickly to glance at it (Cohen, 1977). In this sense, *Passionate Journey* (Masereel, 1919) served as an empathetic tome for the working class, an affordable and portable affirmation of solidarity.

Masereel would continue to produce over 20 other wordless woodcut novels during his lifetime – all exploring different themes of lone heroes attempting to understand the ailments of the modern world. His work inspired other mid-century artists like Lynd Ward (2004, 2009) and Otto Nünkle (2007), who developed their own unique styles of woodcut imagery while maintaining a similar leftist thematic ethos of their predecessor. In the latter half the 20th century, both mainstream and underground comics overshadowed the genre. However, a contemporary class of artists such as Eric Drooker (2015), Marnie Galloway (2016), Shaun Tan (2006), and others began working within the wordless narrative tradition again. While these artists have deviated from the traditional form of the wordless woodcut book by using pen and ink to create their images and utilizing the multi-image page layout found in comics and graphic novels, they continue to develop complex storytelling through their own respective wordless visual languages.

The short history of wordless books is one of visionary artists seeking to explore the narrative potential of images as a solitary means to communicate lived experiences, provocations about the human condition, and empathic tales of solidarity across socio-cultural strata. These narratives provide imaginative stories, social critiques, and vivid imagery that are, at baseline, important cultural contributions to both art and literature. However, methodologically, wordless books are also significant in that they find "a way to sidestep our language barriers and create complex, political, emotional and humorous stories that [can] be universally understood" (Kuper, 2008, p. 17). The wordless book's ability to communicate complicated thoughts, emotions, and experiences through carefully sequenced and strategically arranged images is important for several reasons. First, wordless narratives demonstrate how images can communicate complex ideas, theories, and concepts without reliance upon any kind of text. Second, wordless narratives can make complex ideas accessible to diverse audiences – serving as a form of public scholarship. Lastly, wordless narratives can encourage readers to actively introject their own feelings, thoughts, and lived experiences into plotlines – crafting their personal meanings from the texts as they read the images in the book. These three points form the impetus for adopting the wordless narrative as a dynamic arts-based research method. In the next section, I will define wordless narrative research, contextualize it as a form of narrative inquiry, and present methodological considerations for doing wordless narrative research before providing an example with an excerpt of *There is No (W)hole*, my surreal wordless autoethnographic allegory.

Doing Wordless Narrative Research

Wordless narrative research is a dynamic method of inquiry that uses visual storytelling to study, explore, and communicate personal narratives, cultural experiences, and emotional content too nuanced for language. While wordless narrative research can be useful for exploring a range of social phenomena, it can be particularly valuable for exploring preverbal constructions of lived experiences, including trauma, repressed memories, and other forms of emotional knowledge often times only made accessible through affective or embodied modalities. By (re)constructing these experiences as stories, practitioners configure different narrative elements of episodes to make connections and generate new meanings (Kim, 2016; Leavy, 2015a). The method then draws from the aesthetic power of visual images to present narratives that empathically connect with readers, prompt active engagement with content by melding narratives with lived experiences, and generate new forms of understanding that inform readers' life experiences.

Wordless narrative research is similar to another arts-based research method, image-based narrative inquiry, which is used in the creative arts therapies as a tool to translate the stories of patients to help clinicians process and understand traumatic experiences and gain access to concealed emotional knowledge (Fish, 2017). While these two methods share a common view that images possess the ability to engender forms of preverbal knowledge, wordless narrative research is different in that it uses visual narratives to investigate broader social contexts and cultural phenomena, and thus can be used to conduct research outside of clinical settings.

Because the aim is to better understand larger wholes, I frame wordless narrative research as a sub-genre of narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016), a form of visual-based narrative inquiry, that draws from ethnographic, autoethnographic, and fiction-based research methods to tell image-centered stories. Like narrative inquiry, wordless narrative research uses data derived from qualitative research methods (interviews, surveys, journaling), or more imaginative constructions that pull from a combination of lived experiences, theory, and other modes of research (Leavy, 2017). Furthermore, it employs narrative configuration whereby the "researcher extracts an emerging theme from the fullness of lived experiences presented in the data themselves and configures stories making a range of disconnected research elements coherent, so that the story can appeal to the reader's understanding and imagination" (Kim, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, doing wordless narrative research requires attention to how data can be transformed into compelling narratives, considers the characterization of different actors (protagonists and antagonists), the flow and sequence of events, and the trajectories of narrative arcs and development of plots and sub-plots. Furthermore, the processes of collecting qualitative data and transforming it into an engaging story must consider the visual language used to communicate the narrative.

Like other forms of visual research methods, wordless narrative research requires projects involving participants to develop and adhere to a research protocol that ensures research is conducted and presented in a way that is respectful and fair to participants, minimalizes harm, and benefits all who are involved. Cox and colleagues (2014) created a guide for conducting ethical visual research that identifies six categories researchers should consider when developing a research protocol – a guide that is appropriate for wordless narrative research. The first three overlap with common qualitative research protocols: confidentiality, minimizing harm, and informed consent. The following categories are unique to visual research and thus require some explanation. The first is fuzzy boundaries, which addresses the blurring of roles that may occur between researcher and participant when doing visual research. Next is authorship and ownership, a guideline that calls attention to issues of ownership pertaining to contributions made by participants such as artifacts, stories, or ideas. Lastly, the guideline of representation and audiences asks researchers to be attentive to

how participants and their life stories are represented visually. Aside from developing a thorough research protocol, researchers should member check their work with participants throughout the process, being transparent with both analysis of data and representation of data while also being receptive to suggestions and concerns addressed by participants.

Arguably what makes wordless narrative research unique – and doing it so challenging, is its primary use of visual strategies to communicate narrative elements in ways that are both clear enough to suggest some particular significance and ambiguous enough to invite readers' own life experiences. Intentional use of visual styles (expressive, realistic, surreal, illustrative, etc.), uses of visual metaphors and symbol systems, as well as attention to how elements and principles are arranged and composed all become essential components in how well the visual imagery will communicate the story. In addition to being cognizant of how each image portrays content, attention must also be paid to what happens between each image and how each image relates to the whole. Moreover, all aesthetic decisions made must take into account both the qualitative data and narrative's plot.

Thus, practitioners using wordless narrative research must have an understanding of how the literary, qualitative, and visual aspects all correlate to one another in a way that is cohesive, logical, meaningful, and trustworthy. Successful wordless narratives that accomplish this achieve verisimilitude, which refers to the "creation of realistic, authentic, and lifelike portrayals, [which] is a goal of both fiction and established social science practices like ethnography" (Leavy, 2015a, p. 57). Therefore, the goal of wordless narrative research is to create a suggestive, believable, and engaging visual reality where the literary, visual, and qualitative aspects function dialogically together to form a convincing sense of truthfulness.

To achieve verisimilitude, I created five different considerations for doing wordless narrative research: aesthetics, design, flow, narration, and visualization. Each of these considerations addresses the literary, qualitative, and visual aspects working together. I developed these considerations while creating *There Is No (W)hole* – a surreal wordless autoethnographic allegory, and reviewing relevant scholarship that addressed appropriate criteria for evaluating arts-based research and narrative inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015a, 2017; Kim, 2016). These considerations are not firm rules, criteria, or tenets, but conceptual guides of essential elements to help organize the different aspects of the process of doing wordless narrative research. In the following subsections, I will discuss each consideration and describe its significance for doing wordless narrative research.

Aesthetics. Aesthetics is a broad term used to describe a range of ideas pertaining to understanding art, theories of experience, the philosophies of beauty, as well as something's visual appearance and stylization (Barrett, 2011; Koren, 2010). For this paper, aesthetics refers to a cohesive organization of visual qualities that have a kind of distinction and form a particular style (Koren, 2010). When doing wordless narrative research, practitioners must consider the particular style of imagery they will use. Aesthetic choices inform the particular kind of visual elements (line, shape, color, pattern, space, form, value) that will be used to portray the content. They also frame how the viewer should perceive the mood, tone, and feeling of the narrative, communicate how they should approach the story, and allude to the narrative's possible meaning. Imagery can be designed to be realistic, expressive, illustrative or cartoon-like, surreal and imaginary, abstract, or a combination of different styles. For example, a narrative created using a degree of realism suggests that observational data is being emphasized and that the story is recounting an actual event that may have occurred, while a narrative created with an expressive, surreal style may be stressing emotional content and communicating a metaphorical reality. The style of the images also provides information about the characters and alludes to their personalities, and describes settings, time periods, and contexts where the narrative takes place. Thus, essential information that adjectives would otherwise be used to describe in more literary-based research forms is communicated in the visual aesthetics used to tell the narrative.

Design. If aesthetics is being used loosely to serve as the adjectives that describe the subject matter and contexts of the narrative, design serves to portray the action, illustrating what is happening in the image. In this regard, design functions as a kind of grammar that forms the visual structure of the picture and provides information for how the image should be read. This is largely done through careful attention to each image's composition, or the arrangement of visual elements in the picture (Arnheim, 1974; Bond, 2016; Lauer & Pendak, 1994). Many of the compositional decisions artists make pertain to visual necessity – creating an image that is balanced, unified, and presents the content in a way that is dynamic, clear, and pleasing to look at. Artists use strategies like the rule of thirds, the golden ratio, and triangular composition to structure the visual elements in images. The use of psychic lines, or directives, is commonly used to lead the reader's eye around the image, influencing the order of what should be looked at.

Another approach that Bond (2016) introduces when discussing composition is the idea of *artificial control*. Artificial control describes how compositions can be used to communicate power dynamics, portraying what subject is in control or the focus of the particular image or scene and what subjects lack power or agency. This is done through scale, placement, and framing of the subject matter. Artificial control is useful when attempting to communicate relationships between two or more subjects in a scene.

When visual images constitute the primary means of communicating action, attention to composition as a means to influence how the image should be read, what content is being emphasized, and what subject matter has control in the scene are important to consider when crafting each image.

Flow. Functioning in tandem with design, flow pertains to how each image relates to the other and how they are sequenced in a way that coalesces with the narrative's plot. Flow addresses both the order of images and the pace of action. Flow is largely determined by the changes that occur between each image. In sequential storytelling, these changes are referred to as closures, or images that complete that which is incomplete based on previous knowledge (McCloud, 1993). For example, if the only major change in a series of three images is the subtle movement of a lead character from one corner of the page to the next, the series of closures suggests a short passage of time has passed. However, if a lead character's location changes dramatically between images, the final closure suggests that the character may have traveled major distances during that series of events. Thus, the space between images is also an important aspect of flow that dictates much of the action of the narrative. In traditional comics, the space between panels is called *the gutter*, the mysterious liminal space where "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (McCloud, 1993, p. 66). McCloud describes six different transitional strategies that use both closure and gutters that are helpful in narrative storytelling: moment-to-moment, where little change occurs between panels; action-to-action, where a before and after action is portrayed; subject-to-subject, where two or more subjects are addressed in a single scene; scene-to-scene, where narratives can change locations or settings; aspect-to-aspect, where different ideas relevant to the whole can be portrayed; and non-sequitur, "which offers no logical relationship between panels whatsoever" (p. 72). Understanding each image as a visual closure that employs different transitional strategies to manipulate gutters and communicate the flow of the story is useful and relevant for traditional comics and wordless narratives alike in that it helps to communicate action, suggest the passage of time, and/or establish setting changes.

Narration. Narration is the process of crafting a story into a coherent logical flow of events that includes the elements of storytelling such as plot, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion (Kim, 2016; Leavy 2013, 2015a). To develop these stories involves narrative thinking, which "is a method of making a story by organizing experiences around our perception, thoughts, memories, and imagination" (Kim, 2016, p. 156). One of the most important aspects of narrative thinking, and developing a story, is determining the plot, or the narrative's aboutness (Kim, 2016). The plot forms the architecture around which the rest of the story is structured (Leavy, 2013). The plot can develop from pre-established goals or objectives of the project, questions that guide the

research, or emergent themes from collected qualitative data. Once a plot is established, main actors are chosen, and settings are determined, then the narrative can start to take form.

Working with interviews, ethnographic, and autoethnographic data to develop the story may require some modification of the plot to ensure an overall continuity. Narrative smoothing is a method used by narrative researchers to make qualitative data more coherent and interesting when drafting their stories. "It is like brushing off the rough edges of disconnected raw data" to make pieces fit (Kim, 2016, p. 192). While necessary to create a unified story, narrative smoothing is potentially problematic in that it may omit certain details or decontextualize aspects of the data that could affect the truthfulness of the research. As with many forms of qualitative research, reflexivity is an essential practice to guide narrative researchers to reflect critically and ethically upon the choices they make when working with the lived experiences of other people or themselves; reflexivity helps to ensure that researchers are respecting the integrity of data when crafting their stories (Kim, 2016). Because wordless narrative research draws from the epistemological underpinnings of narrative inquiry, it is important that practitioners are cognizant of a potentially tenuous relationship between developing plot and working with qualitative data.

Visualization. As stated earlier, one of the unique challenges of doing wordless narrative research is using an entirely visual system to communicate knowledge through narratives constructed through images alone. It tasks a skilled practitioner to employ a complex process of (re)constructing, translating, and, more importantly, making visual their interpretations of qualitative data, theories, and other studied cultural materials and phenomena. In addition to generating insights, practitioners must present their visual constructions in ways that are suggestive enough to be understood by readers, yet ambiguous enough to invite readers' own lived experiences to illicit interpretations. I use visualization as an umbrella term to describe the gamut of processes used to transform the social, theoretical, and emotional materials into illustrations that compose narrative research. However, the idea of making studied phenomena visual originates from practice-led research, a dialogic arts-based research method whereby practitioners use their art-making practices to work through studied phenomena as a way to gain new insights and understandings (Smith & Dean, 2011; Sullivan, 2011).

Similar to practice-led research, practitioners doing wordless narrative research use their known image-making practices to identify unknowns – gaps, holes, problems, that prompt experimentation and reflection. Working within these unknown spaces, practitioners return to the known "whereby imaginative leaps are made into what [they] don't know as this can lead to critical insights that can change what [they] do know" (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48). Through the process of making studied phenomena

visual, practitioners engage in a dialogic back-and-forth process between image-creating and the interpreting, synthesizing, and translating qualitative data, personal experiences, theories, and feelings into visual manifestations of their understandings.

While not entirely essential towards achieving verisimilitude, some practitioners may find it appropriate to provide disclosures, or notes, at the end of the project as an appendix, that explain the process and provide more transparency in the research. Disclosures can provide contextual information, link imagery to referenced scholarship, document particular aspects of the research process, and/or be used to reinforce important themes or concepts the wordless narrative researcher wishes to stress (Kim, 2016; Leavy, 2015). The use of disclosures may become helpful with projects where the imagery is more abstract, and when subject matter references specific theories and concepts that might be difficult to discern without context. Furthermore, disclosures can make projects more accessible to broader audiences unfamiliar with the content or the process of reading visual imagery.

Some caution should be exercised when drafting disclosures. Researchers should be explicit about what the disclosures provide, giving readers the option to not read them if they wish to form their own interpretations without contextual information. Careful attention should be paid to the level of detail that is being provided.

In review, wordless narrative research is a dynamic arts-based research method that employs image dependent storytelling to better understand different social phenomena. Drawing from ethnographic, autoethnographic, and fictionalized amalgamations of lived experiences, these narratives rely upon the careful design and sequencing of images to create approachable scholarship that is coherent, engaging, and believable. Five considerations have been identified to help researchers conduct their wordless narrative research. Depending on the project, disclosures may be included with projects to increase transparency and accessibility. In the next section I will further discuss the five considerations for doing wordless narrative research through a presentation of a selection of *There is No (W)hole* (Horwat, 2015).

Unpacking *There is No (W)hole*

There is No (W)hole (Horwat, 2015) is a surreal wordless autoethnographic allegory that chronicles my personal journey to overcome anxiety and other traumas I experienced as an adolescent. The narrative follows the protagonist, Charlie, an underwear clad everyman, who – after falsely misrecognizing an existential feeling of emptiness as a personal ailment needing to be cured, embarks on a quest to find a lost object to fill the perceived hole inside himself, calm his personal anxieties, and feel

whole (again). Along this personal journey, Charlie is intimidated by the relentless aggression of a pack of angry geese, misled by a vindictive owl, and coached by a seemingly benevolent crane, all while pursuing different physical objects – a pin cushion and a cracked tea-cup, each ultimately failing to cure his existential ailment. Fortunately, these different challenges and obstacles only seem to strengthen Charlie's conviction to understand the very nature of his anxiety and suffering. The allegory climaxes when Charlie comes to the profound realization that to be happy – to feel whole – he must accept his incompleteness as a condition of being, one that connects him with all things in the universe.

As suggested earlier, wordless narrative research and the five considerations designed as guides for conducting it, was developed through creation of *There is No (W)hole*. I will briefly explain the process I used to create the allegory by referencing the five considerations to further contextualize how they support the goals of the method. Starting with visualization, I used my art practice to literally draw through and visualize the personal feelings, memories, experiences, as well as concepts derived from Buddhist philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory that constituted the data I was interpreting (Horwat, 2017). This was a lengthy process that took place over several months of drawing, reading, and reflecting. Through this process of working from the known to the unknown and the unknown to the known, a visual language slowly emerged that reflected my life experiences while also being suggestive. To portray the data, I further developed a surreal aesthetic style I had been working with since I was a student in art school – an illustrative and playful visual system composed of wind-up toy figurines and other objects existing in a shaky, ambiguous labyrinth-like checkerboard universe. The imaginative aesthetic consisting of unattended animate kids' toys in a big, lonely, empty world seemed highly representative of the existential themes I was exploring.

As the data and aesthetic developed the visual language, I thought about the narrative I wanted to tell. I began crafting the allegory by configuring how different episodes that emerged through my data could be arranged in a logical narrative structure. I story-boarded thumbnail sketches of different episodes – actions, interactions between characters, revelations, discoveries, reflections, to determine an engaging and dramatic progression of events toward a conclusion. With the structure of the plot established, next I considered the design of each image. I thought carefully about how a skewed perspective, tiling in the floor, and other visual elements present in my shaky, nervous aesthetic could serve as directives to guide the viewer's eye around the page. I was also conscious of how I could use artificial control to show the protagonist's complex relationship with other characters and objects he encounters, while also suggesting his inner thoughts and feelings. As the design of major illustrations started to develop, I thought about how each image would flow together and

what images would be needed to bridge gaps and smooth transitions between different episodes. I looked to the repetitive structure of one of my favorite children's books, Maurice Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are* for inspiration. I thought that the repetition of similar compositions – specifically triptychs, would help create a sense of continuity and coherence across the six chapters of *There is No (W)hole.*

The following excerpt is from the end of the third chapter of *There is No (W)hole*. It portrays the protagonist, Charlie, holding a recently discovered virtuous object – a cracked tea-cup, while surrounded by a gaggle of angry geese. Seeking to upset Charlie's newfound, albeit temporary, sense of happiness, the geese try to steal the vessel causing a melee to ensue between Charlie and his relentless aggressors. The cracked tea-cup is destroyed in the scuffle, which in turn ignites a monstrous rage in Charlie that drives him to dispatch the geese. In the final image, Charlie is standing remorsefully amid the broken remains of his aggressors, seemingly ashamed of the destruction he created. An autoethnographic disclosure follows the excerpt. I included the disclosure to further exemplify the process of doing wordless narrative research by making visible the thought behind the imagery and its relationship to autoenthnography.

Disclosure. This excerpt addresses a unique period when I had begun studying at a Kadampa Buddhist[2] center and practiced meditation. Prior to joining this community, for a project I was teaching while working as a high school art teacher, I revisited an old book I had to read for an art class as an undergraduate student, Leonard Koren's (1994) *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets, and Philosophers*. Rereading the book, certain themes resonated with me deeply: the idea that there was profound beauty in the impermanent and imperfect was particularly comforting to me as I struggled with my own attachments and anxious thoughts. The Buddhist undertones of wabi-sabi prompted a further study of Buddhist thought. I read several introductory books, mostly autobiographical stories that I found approachable such as Alan Watt's (1999) *Way of Zen*, Brad Warner's (1994) *Hardcore Zen: Punk Rock, Monster Movies and the Truth About Reality*, and Stephen Bachelor's (2010) *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* – many of these books were stories of how Buddhist thought shaped the authors' lives. As I read these books and drew through many of the ideas I encountered, I began to visualize Buddha's teachings through the wabi-sabi aesthetic as a tea-cup with a crack in one side – an austere, flawed, but virtuous object that represented the nature of reality.

When I first began to meditate, I was instructed by the resident monk to select something to concentrate on, like my breath, a prayer, mantra, or another conceptual object of focus. Referring back to my drawings, I chose the cracked tea-cup as my object of meditation. As I sat each week under the guidance of the resident monk, calming my mind, and learning Buddha's wisdom, I focused on the symbol I had created to temporarily quell the anxious thoughts that had been hijacking my personal happiness for many years. A month later I began experiencing panic attacks while sitting quietly in the Buddhist center during the guided mediations. At first, I thought it was a fluke, a rare anomaly that meant I needed to focus more on my object of meditation. However, the more I meditated the more the anxiety grew stronger and increasingly disrupted the inner peace I tried so hard to cultivate. I soon dreaded meditation and felt ashamed that I was able to experience panic surrounded by the community of fellow practitioners, the supportive guidance of the resident monk, and the glimmering gold-plated statues of the smiling Buddhas placed throughout the space. My critical inner voice – my inner gaggle of angry geese, seemed to be successfully obstructing my strategy to find inner peace. I felt like I was either failing as a Buddhist or my anxiety was so pervasive that Buddhism was inadequate to help me. As a result of all these discouraging thoughts, I became increasingly hopeless and angry, uncertain that I could find any form of relief. After two months, I stopped attending the Buddhist center and fell out of a meditation practice. Much later, after talking with a counselor about my experiences meditating, I learned that negative thoughts that are used to being heard as the dominant voice in one's head, often become stronger when challenged by other, more positive inner discourses. Gyatso (2003) suggests that experiencing a restless

mind or even feelings of anxiety when beginning a regular meditation practice is actually quite normal. His recommendation is to continue to practice but exercise self-compassion when such feelings arise.[3] This short excerpt of *There is No (W)hole* chronicles my initial attempts to find inner peace while addressing the resistance that sometimes occurs when confronting toxic mental behaviors with healthier ways of being.

Wordless and Relevant

Frans Masereel's twentieth century project to publish wordless novels that were accessible to populations across a range of economic and intellectual strata, not only inspired a genre of graphic novels and comics, but also revealed the potential of how visual narratives can communicate knowledge, ideas, and experiences. The inspiring work of Drooker (2015), Ernst (1976), Masereel (2007, 2009), Tan (2006), Ward (2004, 2009), and others gave me permission to meld my interests in arts-based research and autoenthnography with wordless novels to create *There is No (W)hole.* By reflecting upon the creation of my surreal autoethnographic allegory and further studying visual-based narrative inquiry, I developed wordless narrative research.

Throughout this paper I have defined wordless narrative research as a dynamic arts-based research method that uses an entirely visual approach toward storytelling to study, explore, and communicate personal narratives, cultural experiences, and emotional content too nuanced for language. I note that in doing wordless narrative research, practitioners will use their own visual languages and design approaches to share narratives that are accessible to broader audiences, and communicate theories, philosophies, feelings, and other embodied ways of knowing through metaphor and symbolism as a method for constructing narratives that foster an empathic connection with readers who can construct their own interpretations from the texts. To help others to do this form of research, I present five considerations, originating from my own wordless narrative research practice, designed as guides for negotiating the aesthetic, literary, and qualitative aspects of the method, all of which need to function dialogically together to form a convincing sense of truthfulness.

While the five considerations serve as guides for practitioners to do their own wordless narrative research, they also serve as starting points for further development of the method through future projects. Because wordless narrative research was very much developed through actual practice, my hope is that it will continue to evolve and grow with the creative works of fellow practitioners interested in exploring the potential of visual images to communicate knowledge too subtle for words.

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ENDNOTES

[1] When the book was first published in 1919 it went by the title *Mon Livre d'Heures* (*My book of Hours*), but in 1922 was renamed *Passionate Journey* for an American edition (Antonsen, 2004).

[2] Kadampa Buddhism is a Mayana Buddhist school.

[3] I eventually followed Gyatso's (2003) advice and returned to the center and regular meditation practice.