

SILENT INTERRUPTIONS: DEMOCRATIZING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE THROUGH WORDLESS NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Jeff Horwat

Abstract

Emerging in the early twentieth century, wordless novels portrayed stories of working-class laborers, immigrants, and other marginalized groups overlooked and silenced by industrialization. Wordless novels visually operationalize their silence by presenting their narratives without words to call attention to hidden struggles of different social groups exploited under capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic violence. This paper explores how the generative power of visual silence forces a pause in hegemonic discourses to create space for reflection and social change. Drawing from the collectivist ethos of wordless novels, wordless narrative research is introduced as a method of creative inquiry to study, investigate, and communicate personal narratives, cultural phenomenon, and emotional experiences outside normative academic discourses. An excerpt of the author's current project is presented to exemplify how wordless narrative research uses silence as a productive fissure that disrupts the status-quo and creates space for other ways of knowing.

Bio

Jeff Horwat is an artist and teacher from eastern Pennsylvania. His art and research practices explore the intersections of wordless narratives, psychoanalytic theory, and arts-based research. He has taught art in both K-12 and higher education for more than 10 years, has published visual scholarship in journals such as *Visual Art Research*, and is the author of 'Nothing is a Cure'—a wordless allegory about anxiety and desire. He currently resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his wife Stephanie and two children Maya and Simone. Contact: jhorwat@unm.edu | www.jeffhorwat.com



Silent Stories for Silenced Voices

For early twentieth century Flemish artist Frans Masereel, modernity did not fulfill its promises of technological, political, social progress. Amid the spectacle of crowding cities with expansive skylines, bustling trolley cars, and billowing smokestacks, Masereel observed growing populations of exploited working-class citizens overlooked and silenced by the roar of industrialization (Beronä, 2003). An accomplished political cartoonist, printmaker, and social activist, Masereel empathized with the struggles of these blue-collar laborers.

In 1918, he published his first novel entitled *25 Images de la Passion d'un Homme* as an act of class solidarity. The book consisted of twenty-five black and white illustrations that chronicled a fictional working-class protagonist who leads a labor revolt to fight for better wages; he is later arrested for inciting a riot, tried, and executed (1918/2019). While aesthetically expressive and thematically relevant, one of the narrative's most unique characteristics was that it was wordless. While visual storytelling had been around for hundreds of years in various artistic forms, including children's picture books, a wordless novel for adults was a unique contribution to literature. This early version of the modern graphic novel represented "a way to sidestep our language barriers and create complex, political, emotional and humorous stories that [can] be universally understood" (Kuper, 2008, p. 17). Masereel would later publish forty-four more wordless novels before his death in 1972—most of which explored sociopolitical themes similar to those in his first book.

Inspired by his work, Masereel's contemporaries used the wordless novel form to explore the disenfranchisement of protagonists from the dehumanization of laborers in the deep American south (Ward, 1932 /2008), poor women struggling to economically survive during the Weimar Republic (Nückel (1930 /2007), exploitation of white-collar workers in the Great Depression (Patri, 1940/2016), to the plight of Pacific Islanders inhabiting ancestral lands commandeered for nuclear testing (Hyde, 1951/2007). While wordless novels maintained a strong readership throughout the great depression and World War II, by mid-century the genre became obscured by the growing popularity of conventional science fiction and fantasy comics. A small niche of contemporary artists and illustrators like Eric Drooker (2007, 2002), Nick Bousefield (2010), and Shaun Tan (2007) have continued to publish wordless novels that often share stories about marginalized people in the face of current social struggles, expanding the genre to incorporate more perspectives of indigenous and immigrant protagonists. In one example, Tan's (2007) *The Arrival* is auto-biographical tale with interwoven surreal vignettes about a father emigrating to a foreign land—the silence of the narrative alluding to the inability to speak the language of a new culture. The artists' decisions to share stories of the voiceless without the use of text offers a sobering reality of how hegemonic social forces silence marginalized populations.

In social and political discourse, being silenced denotes a position of exclusion, disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and dehumanization (Ferguson, 2002; Fivish, 2010). Members of the working class are silenced for speaking out against exploitation; indigenous communities are silenced for defending their ancestral lands against colonial occupation; immigrants are silenced from participating in new opportunities within foreign lands. Lamothe (2019) suggests that "silence is in the location of the mysterious, colonized Other, bereft of language and therefore of humanity" (p. 75). However, while the tragic subjects of wordless novels are silenced through various forms of systemic violence, the stories themselves have their own form of silence, a generative form of silence—one created through the active engagement with the stories. Quietly reading wordless novels, readers are drawn into the silent worlds of the forgotten, engendering empathy with protagonists while reflecting on their own lived experiences to construct new meanings. The interpretive process rehumanizes the characters, reanimates the circumstances of their struggle, and gives their muted life experiences a voice. Wordless novels engineer a pause in discourse that creates space for personal reflection and invites the possibility for social change.

As an artist, art teacher, and researcher, I have been interested in wordless novels since I first encountered David Beron's (2008) monograph on the history of wordless novels several years ago. Initially, the formal and aesthetic qualities of the stories resonated with my interest in graphic novels. Freed from textual com-

petition of written language, wordless novels seemed like the most authentic means of visual storytelling (Postema, 2017). However, as I read more wordless novels, I was notably affected by each story's overwhelming sense of quietness. The silence of the wordless books presented a profound way to express feelings and thoughts too subtle for words, sometimes illuminating hidden emotional struggles and traumas experienced by the protagonists. Inspired by the possibilities of the silence, I created my own wordless novel, *Nothing is a Cure* (2023), a surreal autoethnographic allegory about my personal journey to heal from trauma, anxiety, and depression. The silence of the form captured the quiet isolation of suffering with mental illness while commenting on the stigma of anxiety and depression in contemporary society.

The process of creating the narrative helped me realize the potential of wordless novels, not just as genre of graphic literature, but as a method for doing creative research. Wordless narratives are a valuable way to explore preverbal constructions of lived experiences, including trauma, repressed memories, and other forms of emotional knowledge often made accessible only through affective or embodied modalities (Horwat, 2018). Wordless narratives constitute a viable method to understand the invisible tensions that often elude conventional academic discourses. Furthermore, by undermining the hegemonic power of language, these image driven stories elicit engagement through a different modality—an affective dimension that seeks to level the playing field—making participation more equitable and democratic. Focusing on experiences that exist outside of conventional academic discourse, wordless narratives create space for the voiceless to speak their truths without compromising the integrity of their positions. Thus, wordless narrative research is a radical method of creative inquiry that utilizes silence as an invitation to study, investigate, and communicate personal narratives, cultural phenomenon, and emotional experiences (Horwat, 2018).

Another Possibility

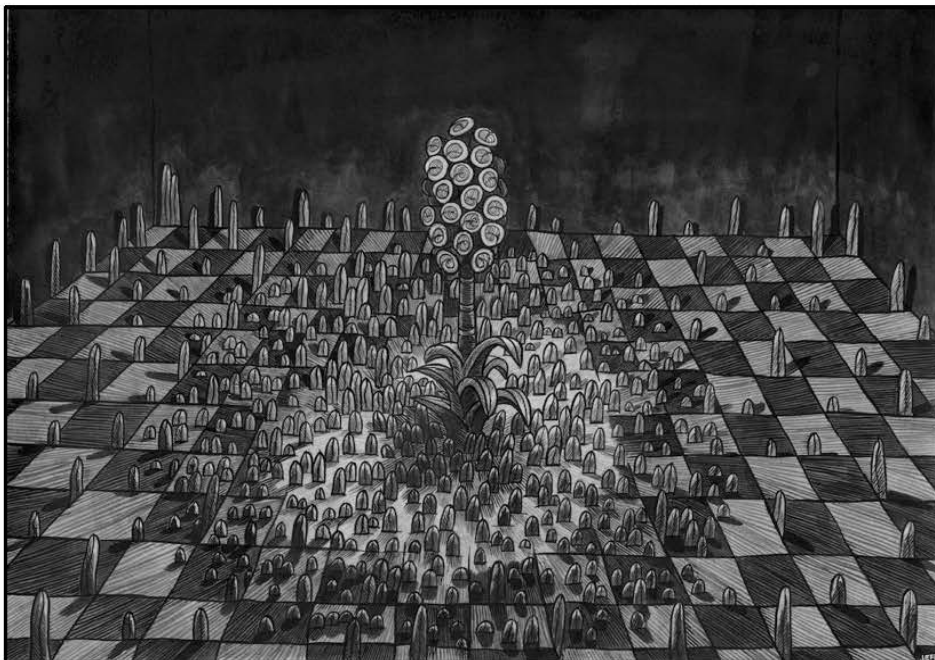
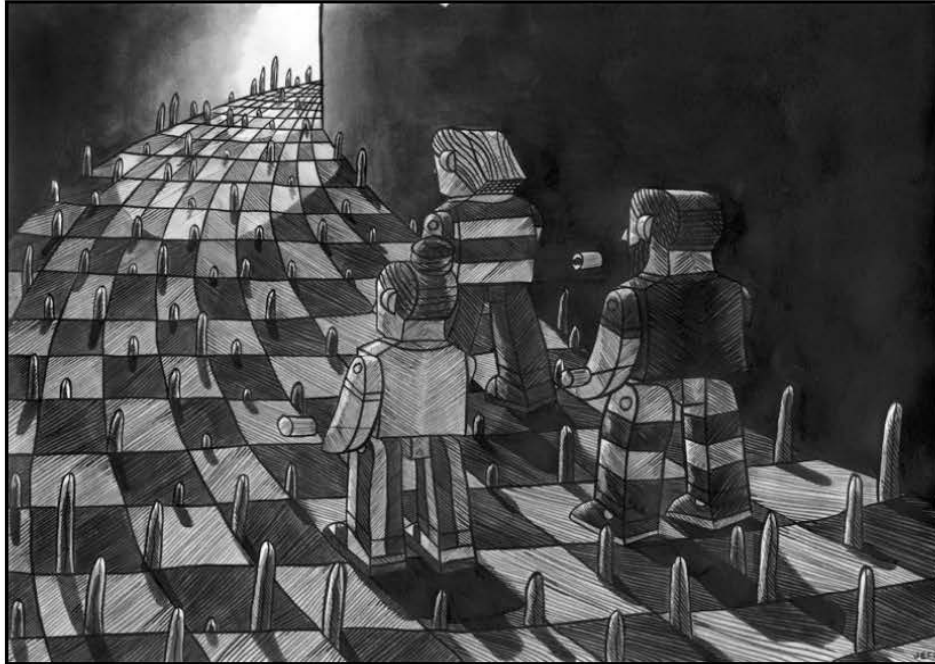
As a literary genre, wordless novels give voice to those silenced by oppressive social forces. As an extension of the form, I view wordless narrative research as a method to create space for ideas, perspectives, positions, and lived experiences often silenced within normative academic discourses. My forthcoming wordless narrative research project, *Living with the Living* (Horwat, n.d.) explores how creative research constitutes a productive fissure that disrupts the status-quo and creates spaces for other ways of knowing. Based on my autoethnographic experiences as an artist, teacher, and scholar within the academy, the narrative draws from the psychanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and contemporary theorists Mari Ruti and Slavjo Žižek to better understand the hidden tensions existing between conventional academic discourses and emerging forms of creative scholarship. Ruti (2009) posits that psychoanalysis can help to illuminate hidden conflicts, understanding the connection between the socially constructed nature of subjectivity and psychic life while also “recognizing that we are always obliged to work within the cultural materials at our disposal, that our attempts at self-constitution inevitably take place within a social context that places limits on what we can envision and attain” (p. 6). Psychoanalysis provides a theoretical bridge between the hidden affect of our subjectivities and the complex, multilayer machine of social institutions. Using psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework, this project draws from the ethics of psychoanalysis to explore how to be creative within normative academic discourses that govern scholarly subjectivities.

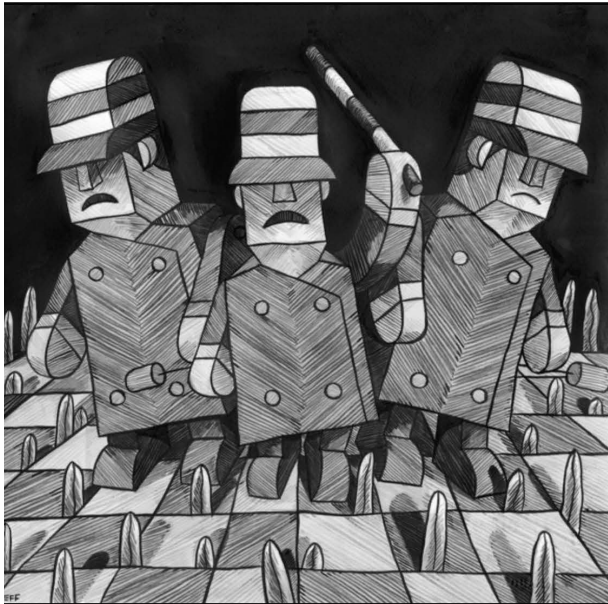
Living with the Living is set within a surreal psychological realm structured by an expansive checker-board floor with imagery on the walls suggesting a collective social ideology. The imagined world is inhabited by mechanical humanoid toys with a social order presumably maintained by two large feet, a seemingly omnipresent authoritarian structure, whose rule is reinforced by anonymous police-like figures. Underneath the

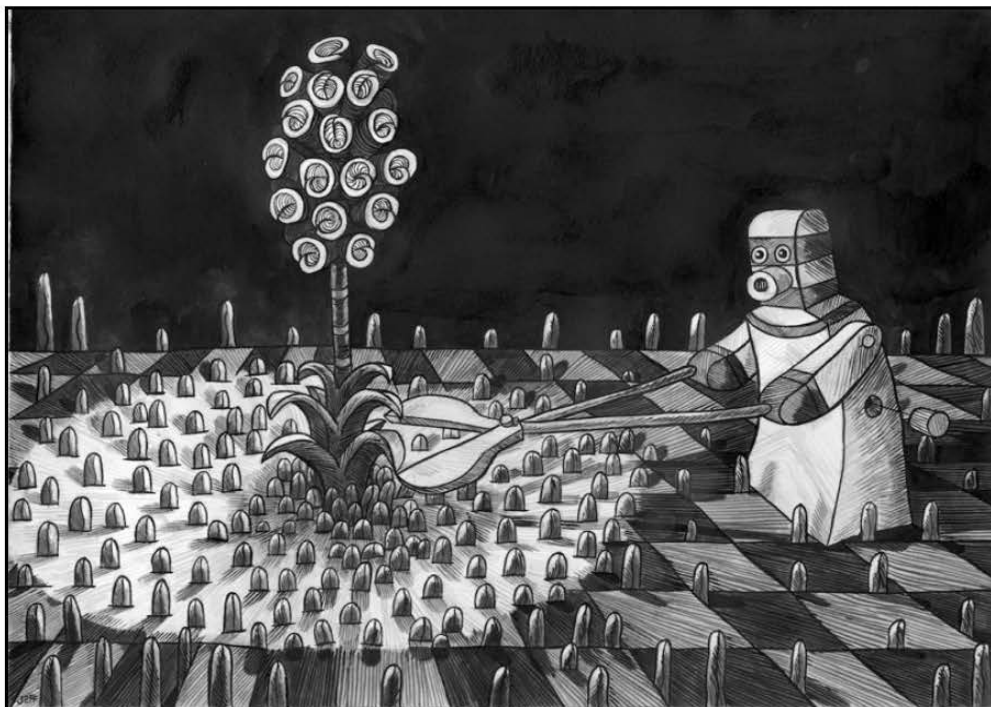
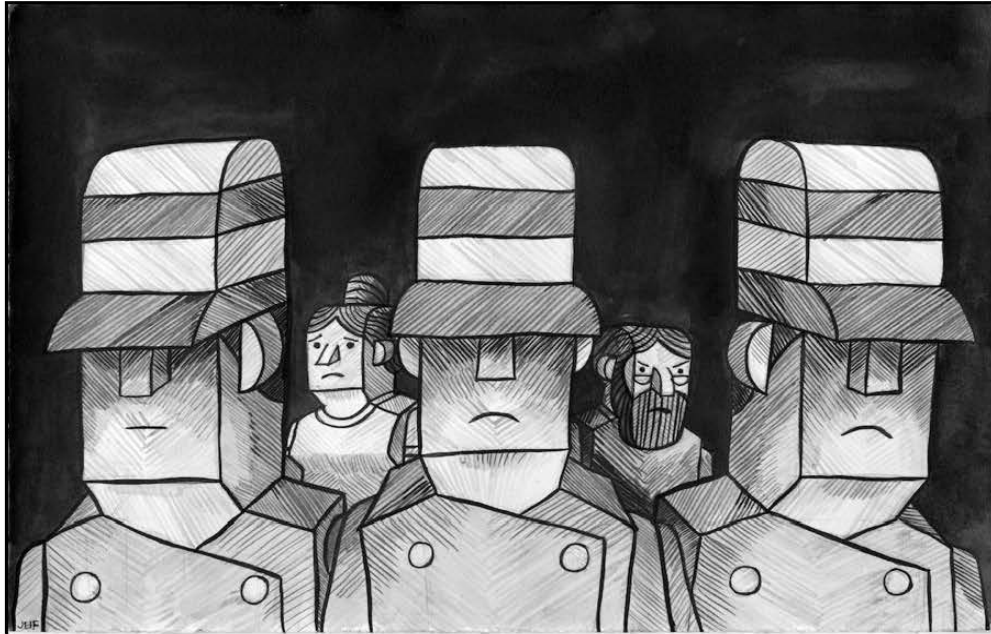
surface of the floor is a mysterious, chaotic energy that materializes as living vegetation when it breaks through the tiles. Believing an ideology that suggests the organic material is a threat to the safety of the realm, the citizens compulsively weed the intrusive grasses as they emerge—snuffing them out before their true potential can be realized. Within this dystopian setting, the narrative follows two central protagonists, Jane and Bruno, as they embark upon a quest to understand the liberating potential of the forbidden vegetative forces.

The following excerpt follows Jane (women with striped pants) and Bruno (man with beard and black shirt) as Bob (man with striped shirt) leads them to a neglected part of the realm where they encounter a large flowering plant that radiates a mysterious energy which appears to disrupt the physical environment and prompts Jane, Bruno, and Bob to question the nature of their realities. A brief written disclosure follows the excerpt.

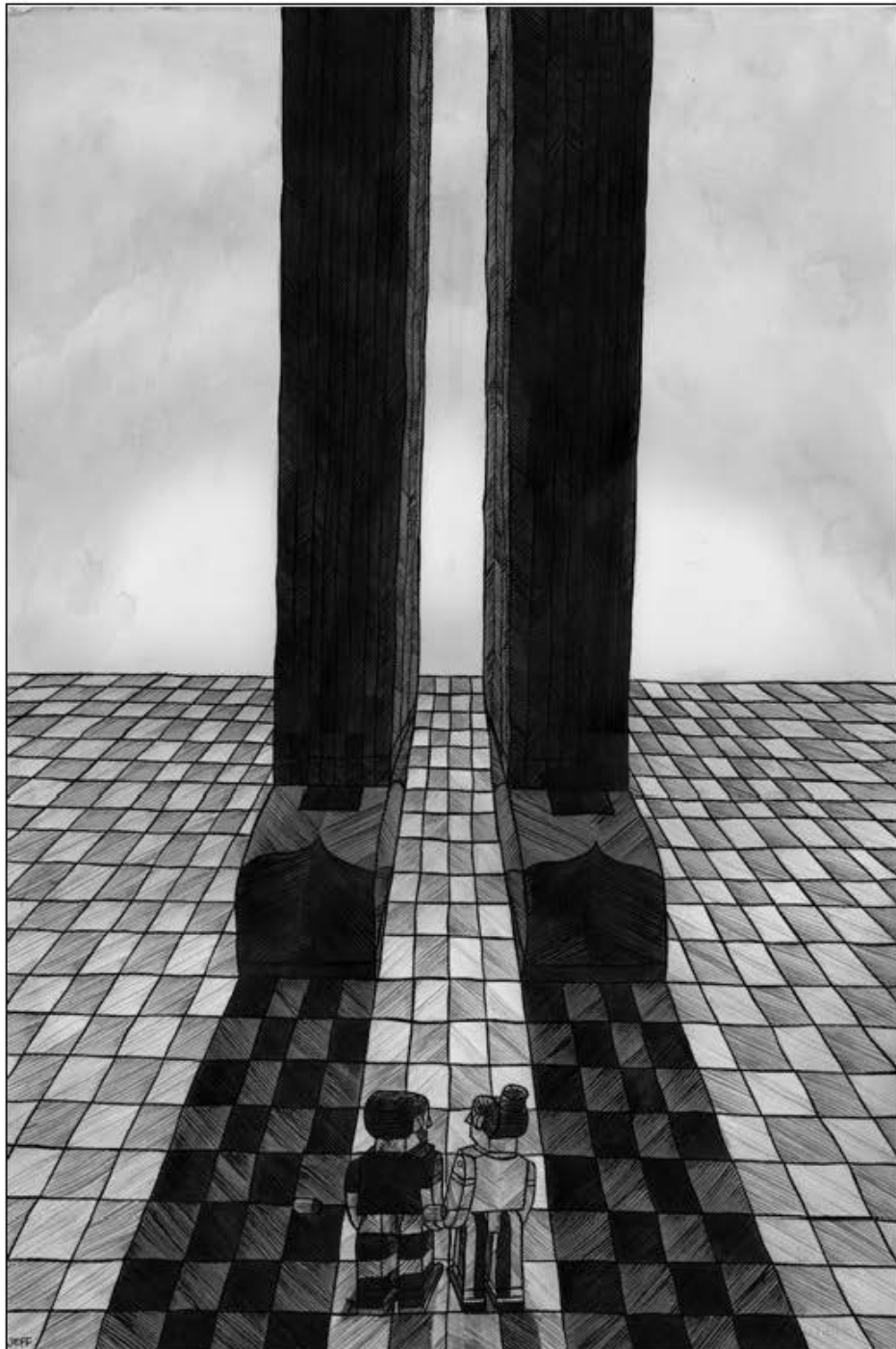


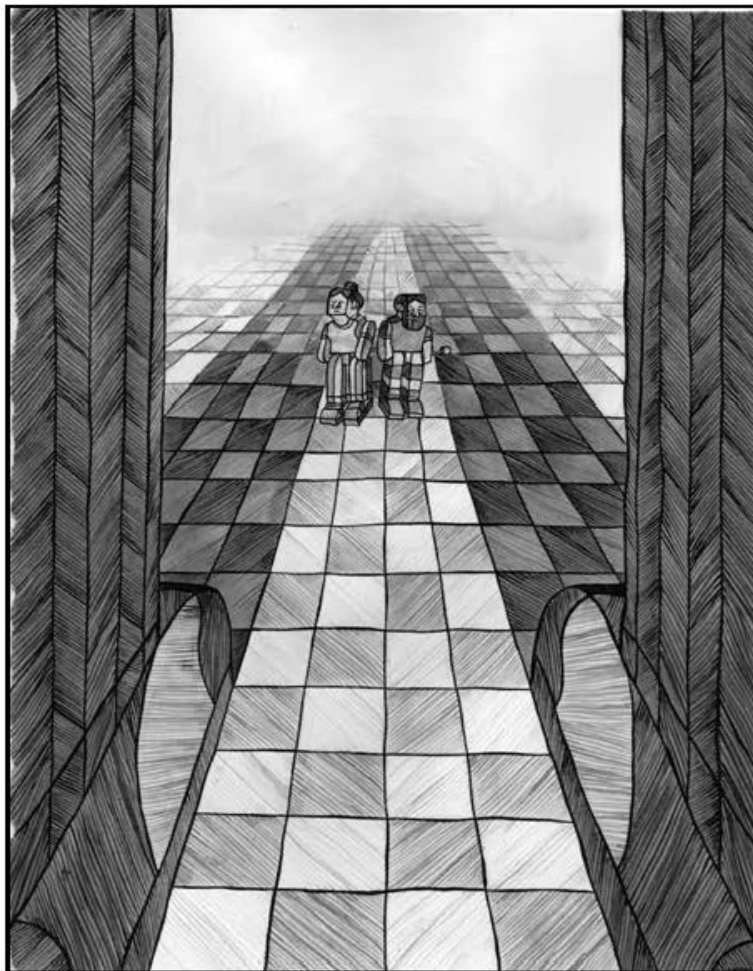


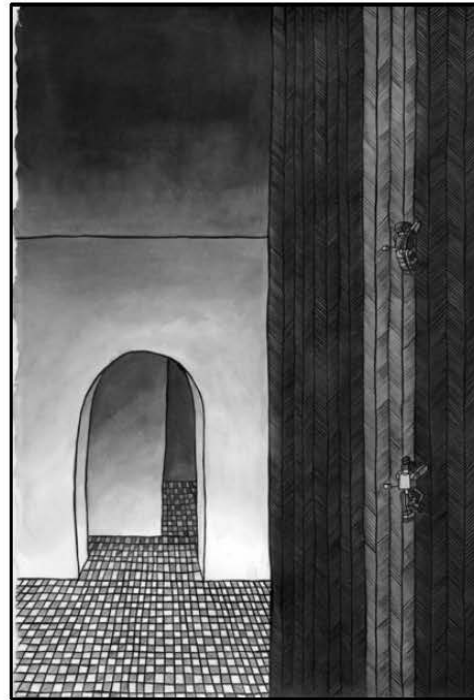




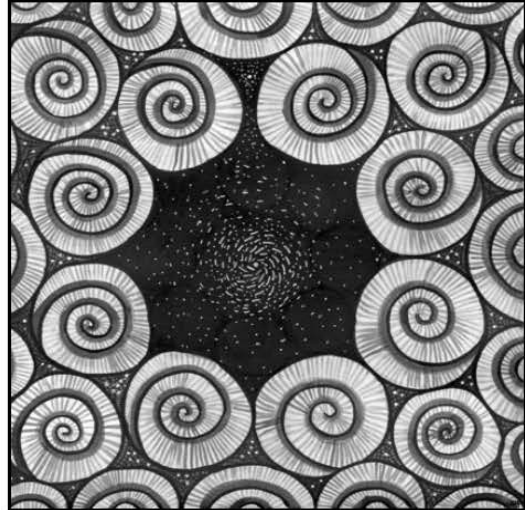
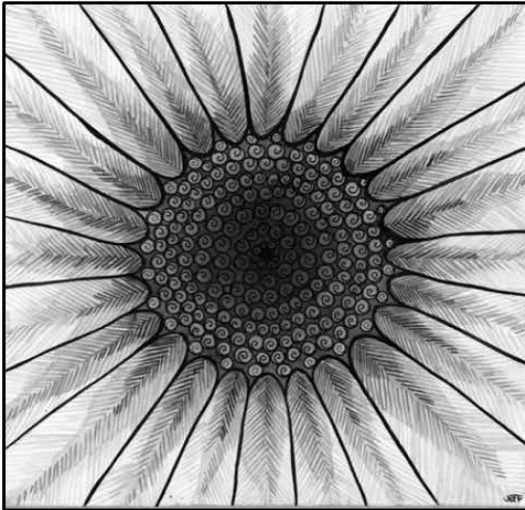


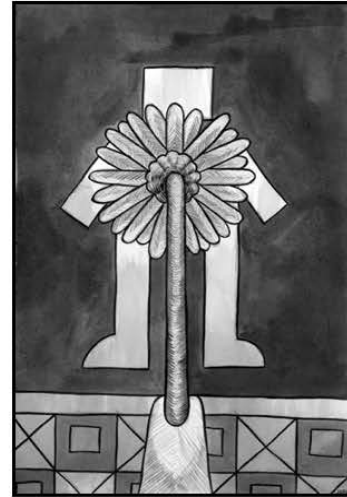
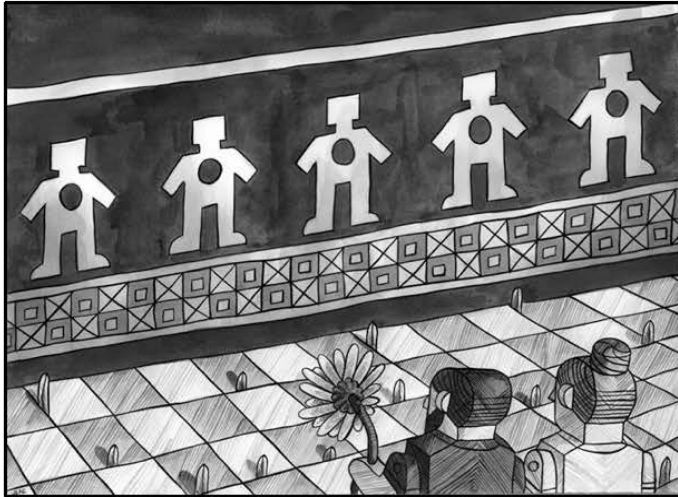


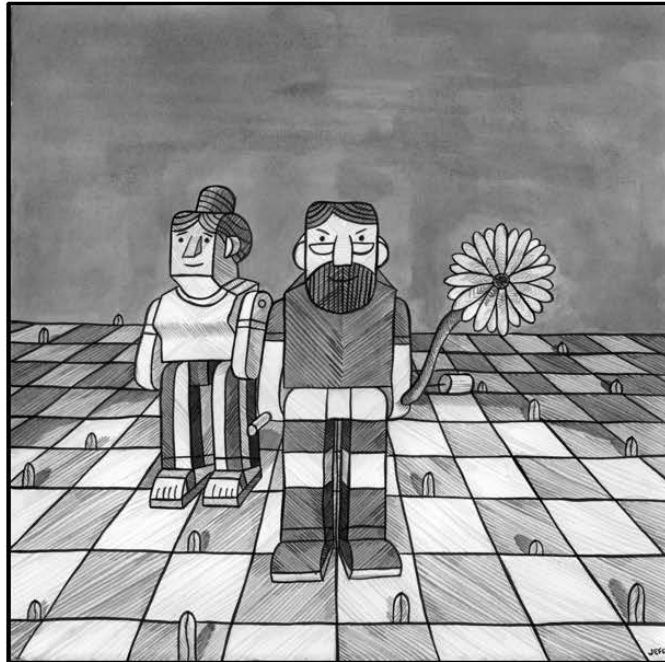


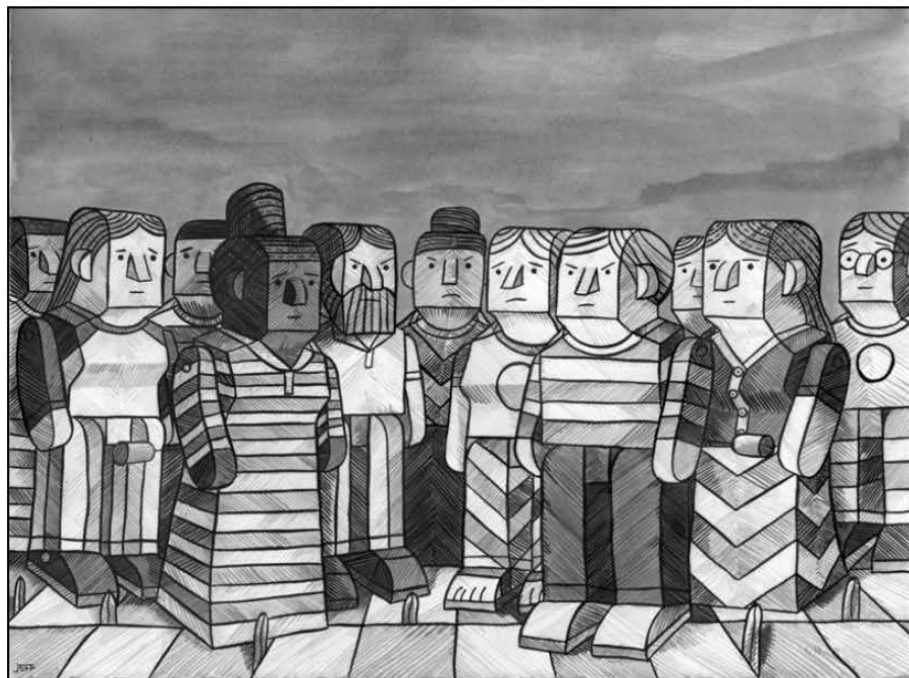
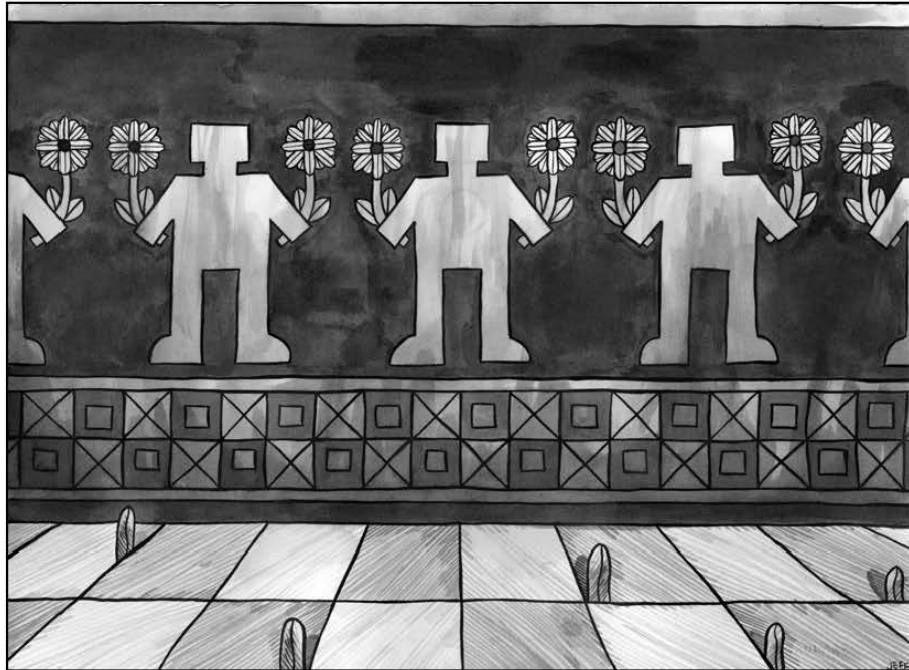












Following a rumor of the existence of a magical plant somewhere in the realm, Bob leads Jane and Bruno to a remote corner where they see a large flowering plant emitting white light that appears to dissolve the black and white tiling on the floor and erase the striped bars on their outfits. The seemingly aesthetic experience with the anomaly forever changes the three characters. Unaware of being followed, the three are confronted by police who raid the encounter. They subdue Bob, destroy the plant, and order Jane and Bruno to weed the remaining grasses as punishment. Heart-broken but defiant, Bruno and Jane finish weeding before approaching the big feet to voice their grievances. When the big feet are unresponsive, Jane follows Bruno as he brazenly climbs the legs to see who the big feet belong to. However, after scaling to the top of the legs, Bruno and Jane surprisingly find a small garden growing out of the tops of the legs. The two are both awestruck and relieved after realizing the seemingly all-powerful symbol of authority is an illusion and the laws that structure their lives are merely deceptive mechanism of control. Wonderment turns rebellious when Bruno pulls a flower from the top as evidence of their discovery before he and Jane climb down the legs. Upon their return, Bruno hastily decides to act upon their discovery by altering the iconography on the walls to include drawings of the forbidden flower—undermining its ideological message by questioning the accepted discourse. Bruno's act draws attention from other members of the community who observe the modified drawings and appear speechless by what they see.

The Generative Potential of Silent Narratives

The plot of *Living with the Living* explores how to transform restrictive social structures by harnessing the potential of creative modes of thinking. A pivotal aspect of the plot draws from the ethics of psychoanalysis to discuss what the transformation actually looks like in practice with characters from the allegory performing different ethical positions. One of the central characters, Bruno, references philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who suggests that the only way to protect ourselves from the oppressive grip of hegemonic institutional norms is to dismantle them through an act, a revolutionary and sometimes violent method whereby “the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn” (Žižek, 2001, p. 44). The act is a radical measure whereby the person destroys their symbolic identity and, ideally, reinvents themselves as a way to retain a sense of lost agency (Meyer, 2003; Žižek, 1989). Channeling Žižek, the excerpt above shows Bruno speaking truth to power and risking punishment in order to expose the oppressive veil that shields others from experiencing a more truthful reality.

The main protagonist, Jane, reflects critical theorist Mari Ruti, whose (2012) strategy of resistance suggests circumnavigating hegemonic institutional norms by harnessing the resistant, sometimes chaotic forces of the Real to weaken the integrity of the social structure—thereby making them more pliable and subject to transformation. She argues that the chaotic energies of the Real can be channeled through creative and playful practices that push against restrictive collective social realities, opening up space and engendering growth without completely destroying the Symbolic structure itself. Unlike Žižek, Ruti is not advocating for outwardly defiant acts but rather a gradual transformation from within institutional forces to reveal new possibilities by experimenting and testing the pliability of Symbolic structure's boundaries. Ruti's position is operationalized later in the narrative when Jane focuses on how to use the forbidden creative materials to create fissures that produce the conditions for more anomalous sublime growth to occur.

The plot of the wordless allegory alludes to a broader meta-narrative embodied through the form of the story itself. Like the aesthetic objects Jane creates, the wordless allegory about the generative power of cre-

ative acts is of itself a creative act—a silent pause in scholarly discourse that opens space for other possibilities. Ruti (2012) argues that experimental narratives actively defy the Symbolic discursive structure while activating the existential energies of the Real. She suggests that any mode of communication that “makes us question our assumptions, allows us to think in original ways, disrupts the monotony of the status quo, moves us emotionally, makes us sit up and pay attention, or exhibits the kind of creative suppleness that allows us to reinvent a slice of the world, is singularizing” (p. 126). By playing with modes of expression within discourse, creative modes of story-telling not only resist the normalizing forces of the Symbolic, but they push boundaries and invite new ways of understanding. As experimental texts, wordless narratives are particularly productive in that their use of silence does more than undermine hegemonic discourses. They also act to cultivate space for creative acts and create collective networks for underrepresented voices, perspectives, ideas, and epistemologies. Fergusson suggests that “[silence] can create identities and enable communities—once understood as freed from interpretive structures that necessarily condemn (or celebrate) it, the unlimited aspects of its multiplicitous functionality are freed for their creative and productive capacity” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 11). Thus, wordless narratives as creative research extends Masereel’s original democratic vision by operationalizing the powerful silence of wordless novels as a means to create community for the voiceless within academic discourses so that their stories, perspectives, and truths can be seen.

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