



GRAPHIC MEDICINE REVIEW

On Tarot, Divination, and Comics

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ABSTRACT

What draws comic artists to magic? Why do so many create tarot decks? How might graphic medicine inform, and be informed by, thinking about comics and tarot together? With a recent proliferation of tarot and comics in queer community and movement spaces, this paper considers how the formal elements and practices of reading both comics and tarot reflect their politico-therapeutic uses. Johanna Hedva theorizes divination as a deviant form of world-making, mapping alchemy to disability justice. I take up this reading of divination in an analysis of the tarot decks and comics of two queer artists of color, Trung Le Nguyen's *Star Spinner Tarot* (2020) and *The Magic Fish* (2020) and Cristy C. Road's *Next World Tarot* (2017) and *Spit and Passion* (2012). Illustrating the queer crip worlding practices at work in each, I suggest that tarot and comics, though distinctly different media, may be leveraged via similar alchemical logics.



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In April of 2023, transgender lesbian comic artist, science fiction writer, tarot creator, scholar, and practitioner Rachel Pollack passed away at the age of 77. Pollack's body of work, from the notable *78 Degrees of Wisdom*, a feminist rethinking of tarot published in 1980, to a proliferation of writing, tarot decks, and teaching, helped translate and activate new community-based take-ups of tarot. Upon Pollack's passing in 2023, NPR noted that sales of tarot decks had doubled in recent years with "artists and activists such as Cristy C. Road, the Slow Holler Collective and adrienne maree brown embracing tarot as a means for building queer community as well as advancing movements" (Gyimah-Brempong 2023). In the comics world, Pollack is known for having created DC Comics' first transgender superhero Kate Godwin, aka Coagula, as part of the Doom Patrol series which ran 1993–1995. Pollack's writing of Coagula challenged transphobic fantasies and representations of trans people in comics. A nod to Pollack's investment in tarot, Coagula's superpower was alchemy: to dissolve solids and coagulate liquids.

Aforementioned comic artist Cristy C. Road's *Next World Tarot* (2017) was the subject of a conference paper I presented at the 2018 (then) Comics and Medicine Conference hosted at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, VT. The paper traced the transversal therapeutics of the *Next World Tarot*, that is, how the deck enacted a kind of therapeutic work that was also political and a kind of political work that was also therapeutic. I examined queer crip femme of color care practices that animate the deck as an "oracle for revolution" (Road, 2017). A conversation bubbled up during the Q&A that has been with me since, now kindled by the event of Pollack's passing: Why are so many comic artists drawn to magic and why do so many create tarot decks? Why are so many creators and practitioners also queer, disabled, mad, or neurodiverse?

Towards that conversation, this paper explores the tarot and comics of two queer artists of color, Cristy C. Road and Trung Le Guyen (Trungles). I begin with a brief orientation to tarot before situating tarot in the field of graphic medicine. I go on to contextualize the recent proliferation of tarot decks among comics artists and queer and disabled people of color. I then turn to Johanna Hedva's theory of divination, mapping alchemy to disability justice models of care. I take up this reading of divination in an analysis of the tarot decks and comics of Road and Le Guyen. With attention to the Lovers card(s) and to themes of sexuality and intergenerational trauma in the comics, I consider queer crip worlding practices in each.

TAROT PRIMER

The Rider-Waite-Smith deck of 1893, illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith is distinguished by its popularity and reach. Tarot is traced to playing cards of northern Italian and southern French origin from the 15th century which people began using for divination purposes in the early 18th century. The Italian cards, however, are believed to have come to Europe via Mamluk cards in the 13th century. There are no references to their investment with "magic" prior to the 18th century. By the 18th century, Gnostic occultist sects that converged in Europe imbued the cards with divinatory functions. In doing so they claimed the cards to be fragments from the *Egyptian Book of Thoth*, believed to be a key to the mysteries of the divine. These mysteries have much to do with astronomy and celestial mapping, or thought a different way, navigation systems and tools.

As with common playing cards, folks use a variety of systems, formulas, processes, and arrangements for their readings from drawing a single card as an oracle to more complex temporal and other map-

pings. A question or a topic is often in mind, although more general readings are also possible. A common spread, for example, is the Celtic cross. Here, ten cards are arranged with the initial card in the middle, a second crossing it on top, cards above, below, left and right of the first two, and the final four in a column to the side. Cards are read based on their position. For example, the first card usually represents the current situation and the second the immediate challenge. Cards are also read in terms of their interactions with other cards and their placements.

Like playing decks, tarot decks consist of four suits of numbered and court cards, the Minor Arcana, and an additional twenty-two trump or major cards, also numbered, the Major Arcana. These start with the Fool numbered zero and end with the World numbered twenty-one. The Major Arcana channel archetypes with mythological, spiritual, or cultural imagery, such as the Moon (eighteen), the High Priestess (two), and the Star (seventeen). The Minor Arcana are organized into suits: cups, pentacles, swords, and wands. Each suit has cards for ace (or one) through ten, plus page, knight, queen, and king. The number cards traditionally include illustrations to match the number of the suit it represents. For example, the three cups might integrate three cups into the illustration, the two of swords, two swords, and the nine of swords, nine. The court cards of the minor arcana indicate the court member with the object of their suit.¹

TAROT AND GRAPHIC MEDICINE

The threads that bridge tarot and graphic medicine are visual, narrative, and methodological. Justin Green employs tarot imagery at key points in his 1972 graphic memoir *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. In addition to being a key graphic medicine text, *Binky Brown* is both the first comics autobiography and the first literary work, fiction or nonfiction, about OCD (Chute 2017). Venkatesan and Saji (2016) suggest that Green reconfigures tarot cards in *Binky Brown* to “enunciate and concretize the paradoxes and psychodrama of an OCD patient” (p. 172). Constraint to enunciate from paradox may explain a thematic frequency of tarot, and magic in general, in mental health comics. OCD comics present an additional level of consideration in that religion or magic can become the focus of obsession. In Ian Williams’ *The Bad Doctor: The Troubled Life and Times of Dr. Iwan James* (2015) the title character performs ritual prayers wherein he bids each of his stuffed animal toys goodnight in a set order, patting them on the head a set number of times. If he messes up, he must start again for fear something terrible will happen. Williams’ employs religious and occultist symbols and archetypes throughout, both integrated into comic panels and as graphic intertitles. In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* Alison Bechdel divines a symbol, a curvy circumflex she would draw over names, after claims, and eventually over full pages of her diary. The symbol served as “a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my subjects” (Bechdel, 2006, p. 142).

Any experience or event of illness, trauma, or disability, however, can complicate our intelligibility to ourselves, our families, and our communities. Like social marginalization on the basis of race, gender, or sexuality, that unintelligibility extends to broader society and specific institutions including (or especially) those such as medicine or law that are charged with our recovery, justice, and care. The unique semiotic capacity of comics to both represent and create anew may also explain the prevalence of tarot, or magic more broadly, at the intersection of comics and medicine.

¹ For feminist readings on tarot, see Pollack’s *78 Degrees of Wisdom: A Book of Tarot, Part One* (1980) and *Part Two* (1983), and Aberth and Arcq’s *The Tarot of Leonara Carrington* (2022). Helen Farley’s *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (2019) offers a general academic history.

As noted earlier, recent years have seen a proliferation of tarot decks. In a 2019 interview with *Masters of the Tarot*, Rachel Pollack was asked about differences between past and more recent decks. She called the new decks more personal, even niche, which she attributed in part to online and social media platforms for connecting, crowdfunding, and distributing. One example is Krista Flute's *#LandBackTarot*. Flute, a Lakota and Cajun tarot practitioner and creator, was drawn to tarot as a "medicine tied to relationships." Frustrated with tarot's colonial practices and its cultural appropriations of Indigenous spiritual technologies and traditions, Flute was "searching for a deck in my dialect. So I made one" (Earthwork, 2021). Card three, traditionally the Empress card, is in *#LandBackTarot* described as "Today's Future." While the Empress card is traditionally illustrated with a woman in a wooded landscape sitting on a throne, Flute's illustration shows two figures traversing a forest lined with plentiful bushes full of berries. The Empress card, generally read as invoking a deep connection to nature and the natural world, is in Flute's deck conceived with a land back sensibility. In response to a question about what makes a tarot practice anti colonial, Flute posits, "We speak reality to the futures we want to build" (Earthwork, 2021).²

The recent proliferation of tarot extends to decks created by comics artists such as Katie Skelly's *Bad Girl Tarot* (2018) and Tillie Walden's *The Cosmic Slumber Tarot Deck* (2020). Coco Fox self-authored a whimsical *Halloween Costume Tarot*, which operates more squarely in the magic of childhood imagination. She has another collection of Wizard of Oz oracle cards. Trungles' *Star Spinner Tarot* (2020) is whimsical and, much like his comics, steeped in myth, magic, and fairy tale. We'll turn to Le Nguyen's graphic novel *The Magic Fish* and more on his *Star Spinner Tarot* below.

Whereas Le Nguyen draws on myth for his archetypes, Cristy C. Road (*Next World Tarot*) draws her archetypes from figures in the various communities and scenes of which she is a part. The five of swords, for example, is recognizable as the notable artist and filmmaker Tourmaline. Tourmaline has and continues to be a community historian and archivist, preserving and transmuting the stories of trans elders of color, primarily in New York City. Road's cards also integrate the astrological mappings of tarot, linking each suit with its element (air, fire, water, earth), and each card of the major arcana with its zodiac sign. Road's cards engender divination as grounded in the material relation of our bodyminds to each other and as well as our relation to the universe as a source of understanding where we are and how to get to where we want to go. In building her deck through personal reference to community and at the same time asserting astrological mappings therein, Road alchemizes community care from gnostic and esoteric trappings of tarot in the design of her deck as well as in its use.

Road (2017) writes, "The next world is a foundation for reconnecting to our ancestry and dismantling magic that's been harmed... its nurturing the decolonized ideologies of health and wellness passed down to us by our abuelas, our elders, our healers" (p. 3). "The Next World Tarot is a tool for magic. Magic is essential for the head to reach the feet and for the feet to truly feel the earth" (p.1). The magic of Road's tarot is thus relational, like Flute's "medicine tied to relationships." It is grounded in people and place and a form of healing and care that is already ours.

DIVINATION AND ALCHEMY: LOVERS

Johanna Hedva, Korean-American artist, disability scholar, and astrologer, turns to disability justice to theorize divination in just these terms. Hedva describes divination as a deviant form of world-making,

² Slow Holler Collective's Tarot Project and Asali Earthwork's reviews at #TarotoftheQTPOC offer further examples and resources.

claiming that queer crip people persist through forms of knowledge that are deviant. This deviance is engendered by queer crip approaches to fate itself as the material to be de- and re-formed. That is, fate is the material we alchemize. In a 2021 interview after their CARE syllabus, Hedva notes “There’s such a strong history of witchcraft being used by queer people throughout time, and especially today. It has to do with this shapeshifting capacity needed for survival, but also the kind of luxury of that capacity to shift and pass and deviate and transform” (Papa et al., 2021). Scott McCloud famously noted that the mixing of word and image in comics is “more alchemy than science” (1994, p. 161). Alchemy is certainly at play in the syncretic approach that characterizes how word and image work together in comics. Are other alchemies at play? In the two-by-two examples that follow, I illustrate how two queer comic artists of color, Cristy C. Road and Trung Le Guyen, leverage the alchemical capacity of comics across media, reflecting the crip models of preservation and care Hedva describes.

The Lovers card, as one might imagine, is a frequent site of queer intervention. The card can invoke a coming together of two cosmic forces, compassion and love, relationality, or even choice. Trun-gles has included four unique versions of the Lovers card in his *Star Spinner Tarot*, see Figure 1. For comparison, the Rider-Waite-Smith deck features a biblical scene of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden blessed by the Angel Rafael above. The first of Trun-gles’ Lovers cards most closely resembles the symbolism of the Rider-Waite-Smith cards with both a quince and a figure of cupid, who often shows up in this scene. While the quince and arrows continue in some of the other cards, this series of lovers cards most notably includes pairings of lovers of the same apparent gender. The implication here is to include the card that best reflects you in your deck, although certainly folks may (and do!) use the cards together in other ways.

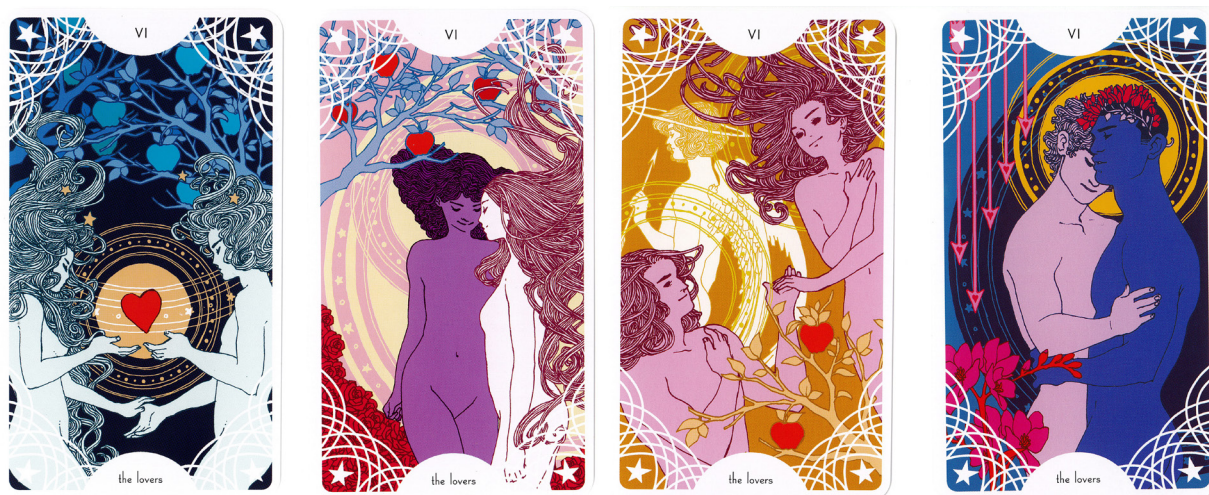


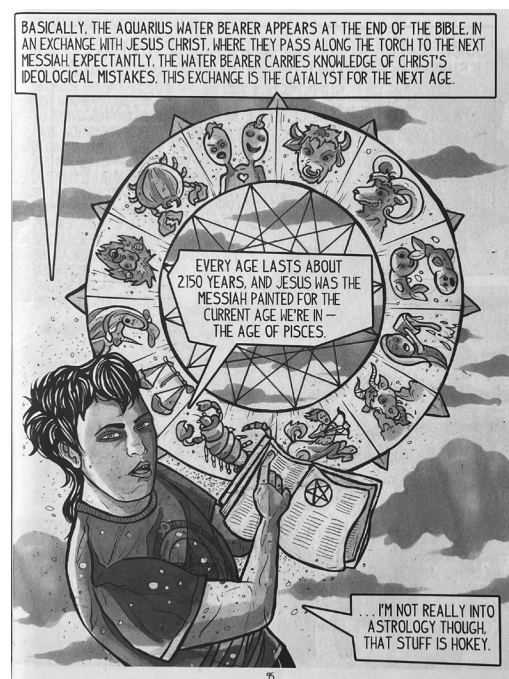
Figure 1: Lovers cards from *Star Spinner Tarot*.
Reproduced with permission.

In contrast, Road’s Lovers card (Figure 2) presents a nude person stepping out of a mirror and handing their avatar, who is clothed in a dress, vest, boots, and holding a cane, a handful of spoons. Road writes that her Lovers card captures the “indestructible bond that honors you for you” (2017, p.13). The card challenges a traditional take-up insofar as it frees the Lovers’ bond both from outside religio-mythical forces and from an understanding of gender itself thematized as binary, or even opposi-

tion. The twin flame of Road's lovers is between oneself and one's reflection, de-centering a traditional understanding of loving relationality as a binary rather than a solitary or multiple endeavor. The illustration also draws on meanings and symbols from disability culture. The caring exchange of spoons, for example, acknowledges disability metaphors for capacity and temporality as well as signifies a visual metaphor of care. Though quite different both formally and narratively, Trungles' and Road's tarot decks invite us to elaborate on shared meanings and encourage us to articulate new worlds. Their comics do a similar sort of worlding.

WORLDING

The Madonna is a token of salvation Road later aligns with the unlikely figure of 90's pop punk outfit Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong, who



serves as a transitional object to her budding queer identity.

Invoking astrology, she imagines a possibility for "The end of the age of the Christian Right" (Road, 2012, p.97) and the beginning of an Aquarian Age. Road illustrates the Aquarian Age as a form queer protest, making specific visual references to ACT-UP. Astrology, in this case, serves as the transit through which Road understands her singular queer becoming alongside and in the same terms as a universal queer becoming. But she reminds us (see Figure 3) that "I'm not really into astrology though. That stuff is hokey" (p. 95).

Figure 3: "I'm not really into astrology though..." from *Spit and Passion* (p. 95).
Reproduced with permission

A memoir about coming into her sexuality and coming into deeper understanding of her bodymind, Road, surprisingly, does not come out in this text. Rather, she ends with a dream of staying in the closet, making it a sanctuary where she could "transform traditional values into radical ideas" (Road, 2012, p. 147). In doing so, she hopes to salvage both her culture and her identity.

Le Guyen's *The Magic Fish* is similar to *Spit in Passion* insofar as it is also a coming out story wherein no one ever comes out. Le Guyen works in a similar style here to his tarot. *The Magic Fish* is organized into three fairy tales that protagonist Tien and his mother Hien recite and adapt together as a way for Tien to help his mother improve her English. Woven through the fairy tales are stories of the many migrations of Hien and her family. Each level of the story is distinguished by a different color: red panels represent the present, yellow the past, and blue the fantastical tale being told. Throughout the text,



Figure 2: Lovers card from *Next World Tarot*.
Reproduced with permission.

Hien struggles to share the trauma of her migration, the events that precipitated it, and the continuing emotional fallout. At the same time, Tien struggles to share with his mother his own challenges and discoveries around his sexuality.

In Figure 4 memories from Hien's passage are drawn in yellow. In blue are scenes from an adaptation of an English fairytale, *Tattercoats*. In the final singular red panel Tien asks his mom, in the present moment, if she is OK. Tien's speech bubble extends backwards from present to past to fantasy: in the gutter between the red panel and the yellow, Tien asks "Are you feeling OK?"; between that panel and the blue: "Hey... Mom?" (p.28). The depth of Tien's concern both extends from and exists between fantasy, the present moment, and his mother's past relived. The backwards movement of the bottom three panels disrupts the reading of the page. As the story progresses, each fairy tale draws out more of Hien's personal story, allowing Hien and her son to together, as Hedva describes, alchemize the traumas of past, present, and fantasy into a fate capable of recognizing and holding Tien and Hien both. In doing so, they divine a more care-full way of being and being together. As in *Spit and Passion*, Tien does not come out. But as the book ends, we are left with a changed possibility of relation, a space pregnant with future affirmation and care.



Figure 4: "Hey... Mom?" from *The Magic Fish* (p. 28). Reproduced with permission.

CONCLUSION

Tarot is not comics and comics are not tarot. Yet, tarot, like comics, is read. Comics, like tarot, invoke unique spatio-temporal logics. Each circulates at the generative edges of meaning-making. While distinct media forms, they share the syncretic qualities which increase their capacity for the type of alchemy Hedva describes. That is, comics and tarot alike offer methods through which we might divine new worlds.

Hedva theorizes divination as a deviant form of world-making: queer crip people persist by taking up fate itself as the object of our alchemy. Comics wield their own alchemy: a unique semiotic capacity to represent and create new meanings and forms. Both forms of alchemy are leveraged in the collaborative worlding practices that characterize comics and tarot of queer, trans, or disabled people of color.

Expanding the frame of medical practice, teaching, and storytelling towards more inclusive perspectives on caregiving and being cared for was an early promise of graphic medicine. Much work is now being done to expand the frame of graphic medicine. The medicine of graphic medicine, for example, is increasingly understood to include broader issues such as climate emergency alongside individual clinical experience. The methods of graphic medicine are increasingly turned towards other visual/verbal storytelling forms such as zines and animation. With the passing of comic artist and tarot

creator Rachel Pollack, a new generation is taking up tarot (and comics!) in their movement work. My hope is that attention to forms such as tarot that share practices, methods, and marginalized communities with comics may strengthen the original promise as well as the movement-building capacity of graphic medicine.

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