Sousanis Brazilian newspaper interview

- Why did you decide to do the project Unflattening? What motivated you? How long did the project execution?

I had been making educational comics before I returned to graduate school to do my doctorate, and I saw in this work the potential to convey complex ideas while still keeping it accessible for a broad audience. Therefore, I could take what goes on in academia and bring it to the general public. Comics could be a way of bridging those two spheres so often kept separate. I started the doctoral program at Columbia in September of 2008, and began working specifically on Unflattening sometime in 2011, though many of the ideas and research behind it had been brewing much earlier.

- What your doctoral supervisor thought when you said it would make all design in the form of comics?

My committee was open to the idea from the very beginning. When I applied to Columbia, I shared some of these educational comics that I had done prior as part of my application materials and stated upfront my intent to do my work in comics form. I think I hit the right time in history to do this, where there was greater reception to comics than ever before. My advisor Ruth Vinz is in English Education (though my program was Interdisciplinary Studies in Education) and although she was not versed in comics herself, she was definitely onboard with the potential for comics to broaden possibilities for communication in educational settings. (So much so, that early on in the program she invited me to do a chapter in comics form for a book on narrative research in education that she co-authored.) Among other members of my committee, was legendary philosopher of aesthetic education Maxine Greene, whose life's work was about the role that the arts can play in transformative education. I think my working in comics resonated well with her philosophy, and I'm grateful to have had such supportive allies all around.

- What are your Unflattening design speaks? [what is Unflattening all about?]

I almost don't want to answer this question – as I'd prefer that *Unflattening* be what the reader decides it is. But I'll offer a little. It is in large part a metaphorical argument for itself. That is, we make sense of the world in ways beyond text, and I am directly demonstrating the potential of visual modes for learning by doing it rather than talking about it. The middle of the book speaks somewhat more directly about comic books and visual thinking. Overall, it pushes back against what is going on in education (at least in the United States, where I'm from and where I studied) – in terms of increasing standardized testing, as it makes the case for the importance of interdisciplinarity and multimodality in education – though because I convey everything through visual and verbal metaphors, none of those terms actually appear. It is a provocation to challenge our existing viewpoints and the situations we take for granted. I suggest that by introducing multiple vantage points or modes of thinking, we can expand the dimensionality of our understanding.

- Develop Unflattening project had a cost? If yes, how much?

The cost in time is immeasurable. But my materials were relatively cheap. I sketch on notebooks and large newsprint pads, and do my final drawings and lettering on a computer.

- It was you who illustrated the images? How was this process?

Yes, I wrote and drew everything. The work is one piece. I didn't write all the text first and then illustrate it afterwards. I made sketches upon sketches, mixing images and text, playing with them until a clear enough idea emerged to start the final draft on my computer. (I draw on a Wacom tablet.) Sometimes words suggested pictures, sometimes pictures suggested words – the two go hand in hand in the creation of this work. Even the directions I went with my research were shaped by the drawings themselves, just as the drawings were made in response to my research. And that is very significant to my overall point in the work. I'm arguing that we need multiple perspectives, for text alone can be limiting and images are as integral to the meaning as text. While I do like to make complicated drawings that require a lot of time and effort, the majority of my time is spent in this sketch-thinking phase, where I keep reworking and playing with different drawn and written elements trying to find a way to best embody the idea through the overall visual composition.

- What did you feel to see it completed? And to see the job get as much positive impact?

Relief to be finished! It is the longest work I have ever made, so I did not have any prior idea of how it would work out. All I could do was proceed one page at a time – "bird by bird" as Anne Lamont says – learning as I went until finally I hit that final page, reaching an idea represented in a tiny sketch I had made some three years prior.

I am, to say the least, quite pleased to see the response to it. From the very early stages of when I began working on it, I have been kindly embraced by academics and comics makers, and that has grown since the entire piece has been available. I'm thrilled to see how deeply people have engaged with it, and how it is already being used in a variety of different classrooms. When you are sitting alone at your desk working away, you can't really anticipate that anyone will want to spend time with it besides you. But now having it out in the world – it means a lot to know that this thing has had an effect on others. And I feel like it is contributing at least in some small way to a larger shift in higher education as to what scholarship looks like. I think we will see some of that make its way back into earlier levels of schooling as alternative forms are introduced there as well. Perhaps at some point, they won't be "alternative" forms. Comics and other methods will just be one of the many options available.

- What was your final score after submitting Unflattening in your doctoral?

Ha – I don't think we have such a thing! I passed, I got my doctorate! I went with my wife and then three week old daughter for a walk in Central Park right after! A good day all around.

- When the project was published in book form? Why did you decide to publish it?

The book was published by Harvard University Press in March of 2015. I was fortunate to sign with them about a year before I finished making it. Because I blogged about the work as I made it and frequently spoke about it at conferences, the project had garnered significant interest while I was still in the midst of it, which led to my connecting with my wonderful editor Sharmila Sen. I wanted it published because I wanted people to read it! Having a publisher means the work can reach a much larger audience than I would have an ability to do on my own. And of course having a press, especially one like Harvard behind the work, legitimizes it in a way that means more people are likely to pay attention.

- Had you heard other graduate students who decided to do their thesis in the form of comics or you were the first in your university?

It is hard to say for sure that it is the first. I know that there have been dissertations done with part of the content in comics in previous years, including two others who finished this past year as well. There may have been one done in France some time ago. The trend is definitely in the air! Mine has clearly received a lot of attention for its presumed firstness – and likely the combination of coming from Columbia University and being published by Harvard University Press contributes to that. Also, I was very public about sharing the work and making the case for the legitimacy of comics within the academy. Unflattening argues for its own existence and is posed as a direct challenge to the status quo of what scholarly work can look like. So for those reasons, the work has gained the recognition that it has, and I hope that it will have an impact on other people being allowed and encouraged to explore other forms so that such things are less of a novelty in the future.

- How did your relationship with comics began? You like to draw since childhood or it is a recent passion?

My older brother read Batman comics to me when I was a baby, so much so that "Batman" ended up being my first word. I started drawing comics and other things when I was little, as all kids do, and never stopped. While I didn't study art at university, instead opting for mathematics, I always kept working on, thinking about, and of course reading comics even when they were not my primary focus. I came back to comics in full force later, first in making some political comics and then an educational comic about art and games, while I was working in the arts in Detroit. This experience reignited my passion for making comics and demonstrated what I could achieve with them as an educator. And furthermore I realized that this was a way for me to combine my interest in drawing, in writing, and in thinking about big ideas all at the same time in one form. Comics let me bring my whole self to my work.

- What is the importance of using resources like comics in education?

The literacy merits of comics for struggling readers, non-native speakers, and others have been well documented. Comics have also been rightly embraced as literature in their own right. I think we are now seeing them being used for the way they help with visual literacy and how their inherently multimodal nature provides different ways of engaging with students. For me, I think in addition to all these reasons, comics offer a distinct and important means for organizing our thoughts. I see comics as being extremely helpful at making sense of our thinking through the multimodal, nonlinear, and layered ways that we can represent ideas. Related to this, we are seeing a large increase in the use of comics to address medicine and health issues implemented in hospitals and other sites of care. And I think the use of the visual in these contexts resonates deeply and creates more meaningful means for understanding difficult subject matter.

- What is the power of visual literacy? What is the importance of visual thinking in teaching and learning?

I suppose in the simplest sense, visual literacy is being able to read images and understand the effect (particularly in advertising) that they are having on you. But the side of it that is often less emphasized, is that visual literacy is also being able to create images and to use them as a way to express your thinking or make sense of your thinking. The visual allows us access to ways of seeing and thereby thinking that we can't in other modes. So whether one becomes an artist or not, being able to draw, being confident to use visual modes to think through ideas can be extremely useful to us even if the end products we make are something more traditional.

- How can we help students teaching the comics? What tips would you give to teachers who want to work with comics in the classroom? How can he do?

I taught a course at Columbia for teachers to develop ways to use comics in their classrooms. For that class, we explored the history of the form, read comics theory, and looked at significant works – but I think the most important thing we did was *make comics!* My students typically self-describe as non-artists, but I got them making comics the entire term, and I think that that hands-on experience provided them with a deeper understanding from the inside out. And from there, they could use the theories and the classroom stuff we investigated to develop their own approaches to how they would use comics with their students. There are a lot of great resources to be found, I post a ton of things for comics and education on my website here http://spinweaveandcut.com/education-home/. To name just a few good resources to get started on thinking about comics – certainly Scott McCloud's seminal work *Understanding Comics* – a comic about comics is essential, Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's comics making textbook *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*, and the *Comic Book Project* website for an afterschool comics making program, created by another person who came out of Columbia University Michael Bitz. I like the work of the *World Comics Project* that helps people to make their own comics to transcend literacy and deal with issues that affect their communities, as well as the work going on in the area of *Graphic Medicine*, as I mentioned before. A tremendous body of scholarly work has been done on comics, and there are now many books devoted specifically for educators to use comics. There is a lot out there (much of which I list on my site) and once you start looking, so much more emerges.

- What is your expectation for the future of comics in the classroom?

I think it is growing leaps and bounds and that will only increase going forward. We will continue to see comics used for literacy purposes and read as literary forms, and we will also see comics being used more broadly as important communication tools on any subject and in any field. But of course, comics aren't a panacea to solve all our problems by any means. If everything in education was done with comics, we would be in the same situation we are in now! Rather they should be on more equal footing with other ways of working, seen as one of the many diverse options we have to conduct our thinking. And I'd like to think that someday drawing will be considered a vital literacy that doesn't stop at age 7, but continues to nurture us throughout our lives. We need to encourage that kind of visual literacy, and I think comics lend themselves well to making that happen.

- Have in mind what will be your next project that will unite education and comics?

I have several in mind. In all my work, I'm always looking to question how we see and to prompt looking at our situations and ourselves from new perspectives in order to transform how we think. As we have been talking about visual literacy above, I want to do some work in comics that helps people rediscover their own ability to draw and why that is important. At the same time, I plan to keep presenting complex topics in comics from mathematics, science, and environmental issues – and come at them in the way I did through Unflattening – using visual and verbal metaphors to make the concepts accessible, but never by simplifying or dumbing down, rather by finding ways to bring the reader up and realize how capable they already are.

- In my research that you did a comic narrating his own life. How was that experience and why it decided to develop the story? [My version of the question – Why did I integrate personal narratives within Unflattening? How did that work?]

For the most part, educational comics have tended to feature a cartoon avatar of the author standing up front and narrating. I made a conscious decision to go in a different direction early on in my work and so while my voice is certainly present, I stay out of the picture. However, in the midst of the heavy theoretical work, I feel that occasional interjections of more personal moments help ground it in something everyone can more easily relate to. I wasn't trying to fit in specific things – these instances all came up organically as relevant to the concept I was working on. So in *Unflattening*, I used my dog to talk about different ways of knowing, my wife's New York City commute helped me discuss the narrowing effect of routine, even the superhero Lockerman that I created in junior high school found his way back into this work as a way to consider the importance of imagination. Just to name a few of these more personal moments. Whether the author appears directly in the work or not, our fingerprints are necessarily all over it – and I feel like sharing these personal experiences offered yet another way of looking at the subject matter I was exploring.

- A picture is worth a thousand words to you?

Ha! I get that question a lot in regards to the word count requirement of a typical dissertation versus doing one in comics. Pictures can speak to things beyond the reach of language. They work differently – so there is no simple one-to-one correlation. As I wrote in *Unflattening*, pictures are, while words are about. And furthermore, the relationships between multiple images and between pictures and text that occur in comics offer far more than the sum of their separate parts. I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to become a comics maker. But I do believe strongly that as educators we should be encouraging and cultivating the different ways each person sees, these unique ways we all make meaning, and recognize them as vital to our understanding.

- What's the meaning of word Unflattening? Why did you decide to call it that?

I started using the term *unflattening* to refer to the way that I felt comics could represent ideas and stories in ways that were less flat than I could in text. Thinking could expand out in many directions. As I was developing what would be the dissertation, I combined that idea with a broader philosophical concept of a narrowness to our thinking. I was drawn to Herbert Marcuse's description of such a state where people all conform to a single pattern of thought and behavior that he called "One-dimensionality." I also brought in E.A. Abbott's 1880s Victorian novella *Flatland* – about the geometric inhabitants of a two-dimensional flat world – who can't imagine anything off their plane of existence. Most people assume that the title came in response to *Flatland*, but actually using *Flatland* came to me later, though it did end up serving as a prominent thematic element throughout the book. Unflattening means bringing in multiple viewpoints to expand our understanding in the same way that the different views of our two eyes create perspective. As such, it is not intended to have a fixed definition, rather unflattening is more of a process of continually relooking at a situation that readers are meant to define on their own terms.

- When did you finish write and draw the book?
I finished the dissertation in May of 2015, and made edits, corrections, drew a bit of new art – the cover and some of the chapter title pages, and that was finished later that same summer. There were some more small details added and one last minute additional page done in December shortly before it went to print.