Seymour: In My Shoes

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Synopsis

Seymour: In My Shoes is a globe-trotting, mixed animation and live action series that magically transports young viewers into the lives of real children around the world. Watch cultural barriers dissolve as the charismatic and inquiring main character gets hooked on learning about the lives of others - by quite literally walking in their shoes.

Seymour, age 10, is a curious kid living in a regular town who dreams of going on great adventures someday. Their favorite aunt is an anthropologist and she sends them the best photos and books from all over the world. You can usually find Seymour with their nose stuck in one of them! One day their aunt comes to visit, and she has brought a very special present: a pair of sneakers. The worn shoes have come from a boy named Tariq she worked with in Baltimore, and she explains to Seymour that to know someone you have to walk a few miles in their shoes. So, Seymour puts on the shoes and all of a sudden Seymour is *there* in real life with Tariq. Tariq then gives Seymour a tour of his neighborhood, what he does for fun, and the unique things he appreciates about his community, even introducing Seymour to his big sister who is organizing a political rally. After a good long day learning about Tariq's world, Seymour takes off the shoes. They return them and are magically transported - back with their aunt in their own house.

Each week Seymour receives a pair of shoes from a child around the world. Through the mysterious power of imagination, they are magically transported to whomever the shoes belong to and that child gets to tell Seymour about

their community and how they live. On some of their adventures, when Seymour is learning about more difficult or sensitive topics, Seymour's aunt will be with them to act as a trusted adult for Seymour and by extension the audience to make sure they feel safe even if challenged. When Seymour returns the shoes to their owner, they always wind up safe and sound and home again.

Treatment

"**Seymour: In My Shoes**" is a social justice-oriented, cultural education program aimed at children between ages 7-12 that encourages them to start a dialogue with the cultural "other," helps them better understand the world they inhabit, and adds a plurality of voice to representation in the media.

Seymour's world is animated - a liminal universe in which all children can imagine themselves. When they put on the shoes, they are transported to the real, tangible world of a child storyteller, giving full narrative authority to the real experience. The program is "shot" from the point of view of Seymour, maintaining a child's perspective to keep the viewer at the center of the action.

One of the hardest parts about growing up is learning that the world is far bigger than the narrow view presented by our limited social circles. These transitions can be painful and scary, but with a proper guide that can open these dialogues not only with the child viewers but among their families as well this show offers a safe space to grow together. As a cultural learning show "Seymour" seeks to build bridges in a divided world. Racism, xenophobia, and ideological entrenchment are products of social isolation and cultural homogeneity. When traditional power

structures are the only producers of mass media, programming becomes indoctrination and only portrays dominant values. Seymour recognizes the varied lives and cultural knowledges of others and seeks to portray communities based on their assets rather than their deficits. Seymour is not here to discredit one way of life over another, but to learn from all communities and find common ground.

Cultural exploration programming often features generalized overviews of particular communities talked about by “experts” or community representatives. What is problematic is that a single voice is given to speak on behalf of an entire group, often an outsider's voice, which implies a normative experience of being part of that culture. What “Seymour” seeks to do is challenge the normal structures of narrative control by acknowledging the inherent expertise within communities, handing the tools of production over to the storyteller to represent themselves. Not only will the reins of representation be trusted to the communities Seymour visits, but this show will prioritize hearing from the voices of the typically marginalized.

This is not meant to be another travelogue or nostalgic look at “traditional cultures” for western audiences; this is an exploration of individual narratives within the context of their cultural environments and the modern world. For example, this show does not want to know the objective history of the Chinese lion dance; it wants to understand how little Li experiences this tradition, how it makes her feel and what meaning she draws from it in her own life.

This is an important shift in the perspective of cultural programming in two ways. First, it acknowledges

that a person's experience is not defined by his or her culture and environment, but is rather colored by them. Second, by focusing on the less powerful subjective voices in a particular community, the audience is able to gain new perspectives on inherited beliefs and institutionalized power structures. Inspired by feminist standpoint theory, this program promotes the idea of social justice by challenging the viewer to experience the often disorienting and unsettling view of themselves that comes with fully engaging with another world view.[1] Seymour seeks to challenge the viewer's perspective, but in fun and exciting ways that spark their curiosity, engaging deeply with them to keep coming back again and again.

Each week, Seymour is gifted a pair of shoes from a child somewhere in the world and in bringing the old idiom to life is literally transported to walk a mile in their shoes. Seymour is meant to represent childhood curiosity and therefore be above any particular gender or racial heritage. We don't need to know Seymour's background because Seymour is any audience member who is watching from anywhere. The focus of the show is on the storytellers, Seymour acts as a stand-in for the audience and the animated scenes of them at home anchor the viewer to a clear point of safety from which to carry on a dialogue at the beginning and end of each episode.

The animated "Seymour" motif is a conduit that gives the stage to the storytellers from around the world. The philosophy of this show is that all voices have value and that representing a plurality of voices from a similar cultural or community background creates a more realistic

[1] S. Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* (Springer, 2016).

and humanistic understanding of those groups. This plurality is achieved by having the child storytellers introduce Seymour to others within their communities, people that don't necessarily share the same views as the child hosts. By viewing these new communities from a child's perspective the show maintains subjectivity and is able to see that not all people from a particular group think or act all the same.

The production for the real-world storyteller segments of this show will be community-led, assisted by professionals as teachers and consultants. We will identify the assets that already exist and ask what access is there to filming equipment? How can we best enhance the tools that are already here to make the story that we want to tell? The goal is to break away from mainstream, white-dominant approaches to filmmaking and encourage creativity within the communities of the storytellers. Each episode will be unique as a different set of hands will take over the process of storytelling. The difference between this show and others is that communities will not only have control over the content of their stories but every aspect in the storytelling process from lighting to camera work and participants will walk away from this project with concrete knowledge and tools to continue making their voices heard. Seymour is not here to be a voice for the voiceless, but it is here to help pass the mic.[2]

In the tradition of Fred Rogers, this show will take a dialectic approach to storytelling, opening more doors than it shuts and not looking for mastery but expansion. Human

[2] D Watkins, *We Speak for Ourselves: How Woke Culture Prohibits Progress* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2019).

beings have a deep history of oral storytelling and many cultures still practice these traditions today. For the Navajo, stories are often circular and have no distinct endings. This is to facilitate continuous growth, as the listener gains more perspective with each telling and the accumulation of life experience.[3] Life exists in dialogue, no one is ever fully defined, as we are continuously in a process of becoming. All we can ever know of someone else is who they were within a particular moment.[4]

"Seymour" taps into this tradition of oral storytelling by creating a dialogue with its audience- not only breaking the fourth wall but smashing it down all together. Like when Mr. Rogers would introduce his audience to his guests as his "tv neighbors," the viewer actually steps into the perspective of Seymour and at the end of every episode Seymour speaks directly with the viewer offering questions and a space for them to share their experience. With this dialogue created by the series itself there will be accompanying interactive pieces that expand the ways in which children can participate through a companion website and social media discussed below.

Seymour: In My Shoes is about finding the best in communities and ourselves - the "the good stuff of our very being"[5] as Mr. Rogers put it. This program wants to dismantle the extractive nature of dominant cultural media production and instead create a reciprocity of knowledge and expertise that seeks to create investment in and

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[3] Donna Eder, *Life Lessons through Storytelling: Children's Exploration of Ethics* (Indiana University Press, 2010).
[4] Arthur Frank, "What Is Dialogical Research and Why Should We Do It?," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 7 (2005): 964–74.
[5] Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel, *Mister Rogers Neighborhood: Children Television And Fred Rogers* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

sustainable representation of the storytellers while being both entertaining and transformative for the audience.

Seymour is all of us, the embodiment of childhood innocence and curiosity, encouraging viewers to think outside of the worlds they know and learn from voices different from their own. By creating a program that offers a safe and fun way to learn from others while challenging us to critically look at our own beliefs and systems, Seymour eases this transition and hopes to create a more sensitive and socially conscious viewership. With this show, we can all learn to see more.

Episodic Descriptions

Episode 1 of **Seymour: In My Shoes** will focus on introducing the main characters, Seymour and their aunt, and seeing Seymour take their first adventure. First the audience is introduced to Seymour, a curious kid growing up in a small town. We learn a bit about them being a curious and creative child who is fascinated by the things their aunt sends them from her travels all over the world. We learn that Seymour's aunt is an anthropologist who studies different cultures and works with communities to share their stories. On this day Seymour is very excited because his aunt is coming to visit. She always brings the best gifts. This time she has a very special present for Seymour. When she arrives she tells him about her latest adventure and gives them a pair of shoes that belong to a boy named Tariq in Baltimore. They look on the map at where Baltimore is and Seymour asks some questions about who this boy is and how he lives. Their aunt tells them that the only way to truly understand someone is to walk a few miles in their shoes and explains that anthropologists live with

the people they work with and talk to a lot of people and try to participate as much as possible with them in their daily lives so they can better appreciate and learn what makes each community special. Seymour thinks on this for a minute and then says that they will wear Tariq's shoes so they can understand him better. Their aunt replies that this is a pretty good idea and they will use the power of their imaginations to magic themselves to Baltimore.

So Seymour slips on the shoes and opens their eyes to meet Tariq who owns them. Tariq is a little surprised at first but then agrees to show Seymour around. They spend the day together and he tells Seymour all about his life even introducing him to some of his family. At the end of the day, Seymour returns the shoes to Tariq and all of a sudden they're sitting back at home with their aunt. They tell her all about their adventure and then Seymour and their aunt create a dialogue directly with the audience asking them to talk about what they have learned and share it with a friend or family member. A storyboard for the proposed pilot and character art for Seymour, inspired by the work of student community partners, and created by a friend of the show, Christine Merola-Wenzel,are attached below.

Each episode adheres to the same format. Seymour receives a pair of shoes from a child somewhere in the world and, putting them on, is magically transported to where the owner lives and gets to learn about their community and how they live. At the end of each episode, Seymour has a dialogue with the audience, asking pointed questions about their experience and encouraging the viewer to carry on the conversation with their friends and family at home and online with other Seymour fans. When the

episode deals with more difficult topics, Seymour's aunt appears, as a safe adult to act as facilitator and mediator, explaining more difficult concepts and allowing Seymour and the viewer to feel safe.

Interactive Elements

Because this show seeks to actively engage its audience in a dialogue with other cultures, the goal is to develop an accompanying website,as well as an active social media presence, where viewers can interact virtually with the conversations on the show and Seymour themself. The features of the website will include a discussion board based on conversations raised within each episode where viewers can chat with each other about the experience and a space where children can email their stories to Seymour to be featured in sections at the end of episodes. Other resources will also be available that directly relate to the communities of our storytellers like biographies to learn more and links to projects or topics of interest that our community members would like to add. I envision this website allowing viewers to continually grow their learning experience and to feel as if they too have the power to see the world the way Seymour does. (Use this link to visit a template of what this website may look like www.seymourinmyshoes.weebly.com)

Finally, there will also be Seymour on social media where fans can follow the adventures as the show is made, interact through online challenges or videos with Seymour directly and post content from their own lives to share with the rest of their Seymour community. It is my belief that building out Seymour's online presence in collaboration with the show a powerful online community can

be cultivated that encourages children to think critically, dialogue with their peers in a healthy manner, and continue to engage with the communities that they learn about. These online supplements add to the sustainable power of the show that not only secures a fanbase but also creates a more culturally aware and sensitive community.

References

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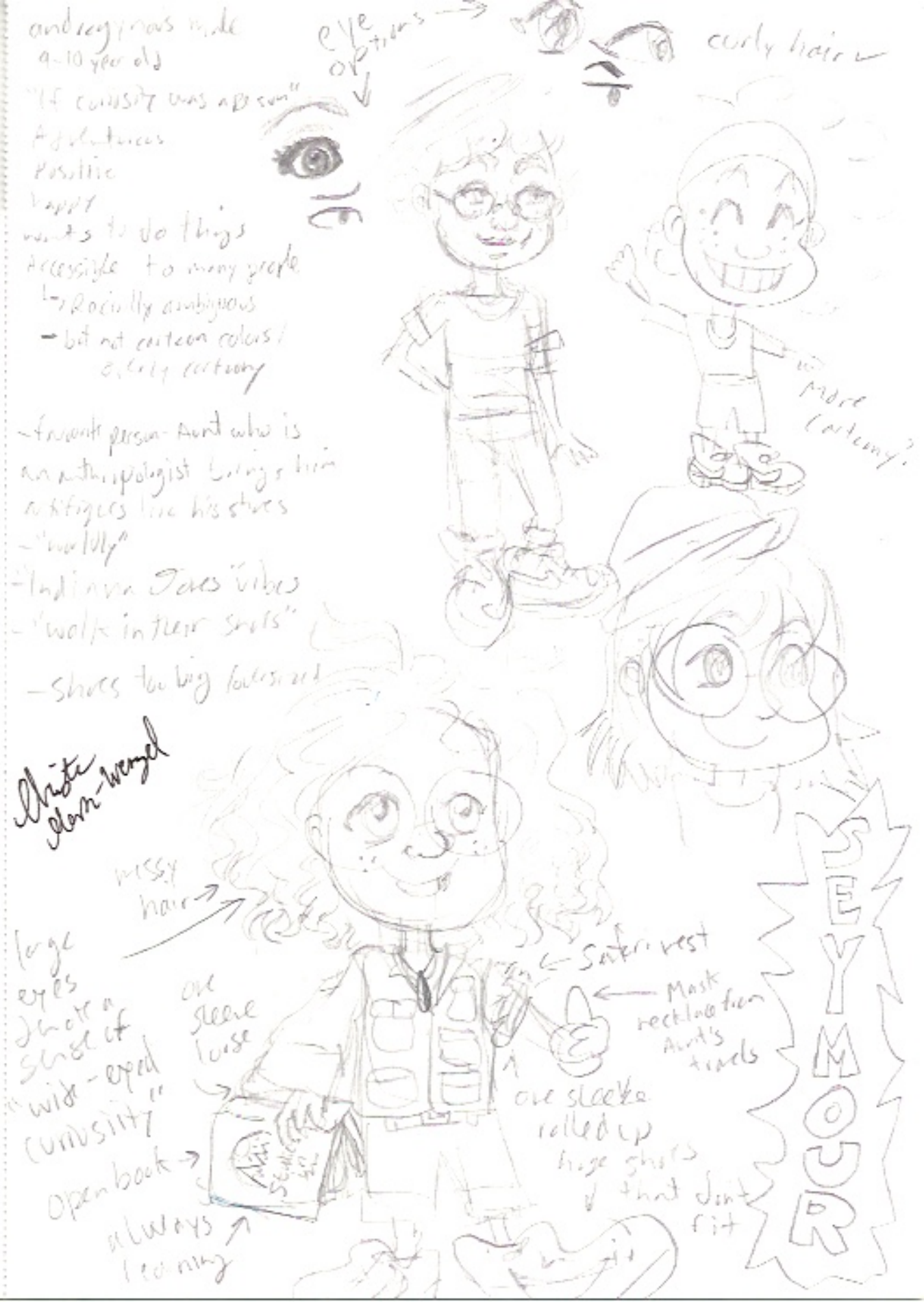
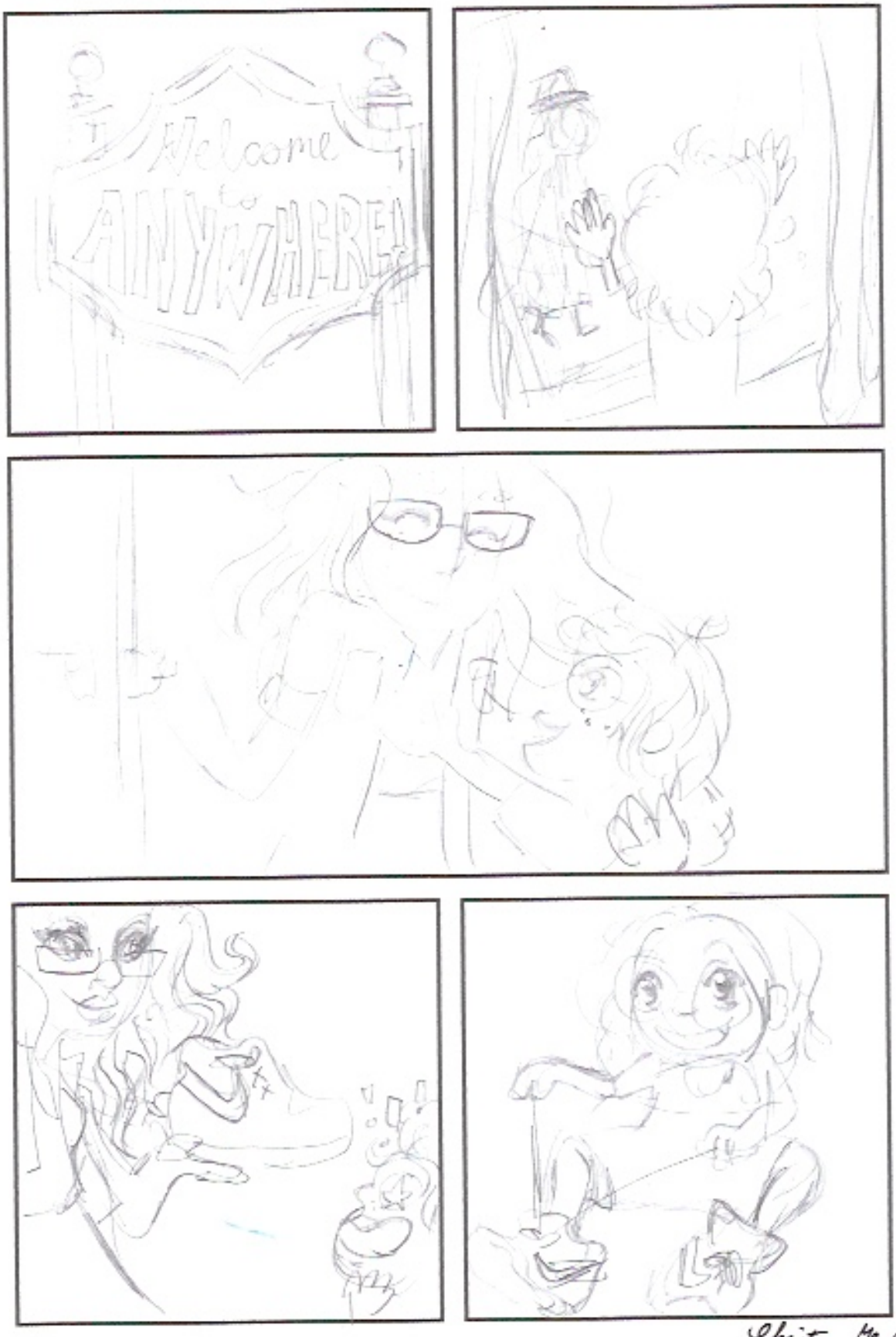
androgynous male
9-10 year old
"If curiosity was a person"
Adventurous
Positive
happy
wants to do things
Accessible to many people
→ Racially ambiguous
- but not cartoon colors/
exactly cartoony

- favorite person - Aunt who is
an anthropologist brings him
artifacts like his shoes
- "worldly"
- Indiana Jones vibes
- "walk in their shoes"
- shoes too big / oversized

Christa
Alam-Wengel



Christine Mendoza-Wenzel
10/29/20



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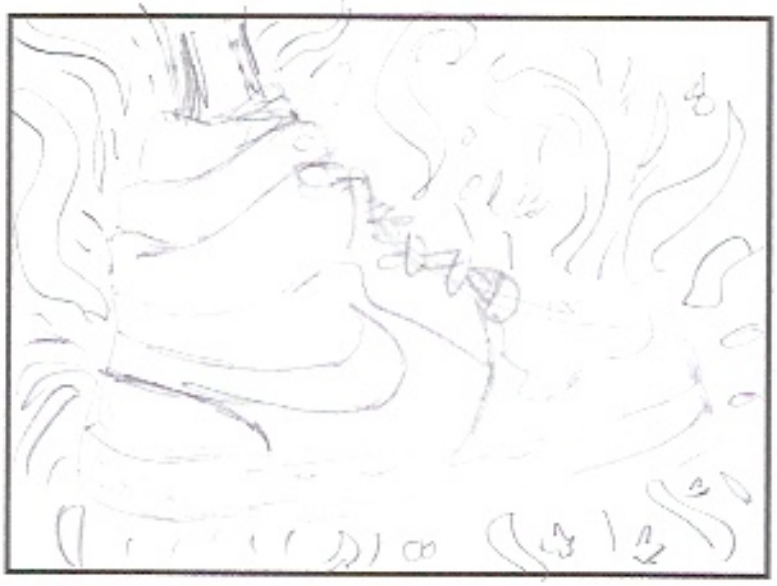

ZOOM

WE CANT BREATH

Christa Nesh-Wage