WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT PEDAGOGY

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND COMICS

EDITED BY
SUSAN E. KIRTLEY,
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Introduction: A Once and Future Pedagogy

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The field of comics studies has exploded in recent years, bringing a wide range of participants into this ever-growing scholarly space. In looking across the *kinds* of disciplinary scholars engaged in this work, teaching and learning have been centered in the efforts of those who are writing about and studying comics. As such, this edited collection sets out the stakes, definitions, and exemplars of contemporary *comics pedagogy*. From K-12 contexts to higher-ed instruction to ongoing communities of scholars working outside of the academy, comics pedagogy is at the heart of the work in which today's "aca-fans" engage; most of us are educators, and the role of comics in our teaching is often substantial. Building off the interdisciplinary interests and approaches to teaching comics and teaching *with* comics, this volume brings together diverse voices to share key theories and scholarship on comics pedagogy. By bringing scholars, creators, and educators across various fields and settings into conversation, this volume significantly expands scholarship on comics pedagogy.

Minds in the Gutter: A Brief Introduction to Comics Studies

Comics studies is a relatively new field with, according to Gregory Steirer, "a general start-date of the early 2000s" (265), and given its neophyte status, it is still formulating its foundational narratives. In 2011, contributor Bart Beaty argued that "the current state of the scholarly study of comics is strikingly akin to that of film in the 1960s. . . . Despite the fact that comics are significantly older than cinema, consecration as a legitimate art form has not come easily, and the academic study of the form is still marginal" (106–7). Comics studies has indeed struggled for legitimacy within the academy, and as many

scholars and educators have witnessed first-hand, it is often maligned for the popular nature of its subject matter. Philip Troutman noted that the field "sits somewhat uneasily within the academy, both because of the medium's image/text composition, which sets it outside traditional disciplinary purviews, and because of its popular nature, which has engendered both an ivory-tower skepticism on the one hand and an 'anti-academic' response by some popular culture scholars on the other" (120). Troutman continues, arguing that comics studies "is always coming but never quite arriving" (120). However, despite resistance from academe and on occasion from comics fans and practitioners, tangible evidence demonstrates that comics studies, may, in fact, be arriving imminently. Scholarly books on comics are regularly published by university presses. Peer-reviewed academic journals devoted to comics studies are flourishing. Courses on comics are now being offered on numerous college campuses, and some universities boast comics studies programs and courses of study. The Modern Language Association established a Forum for Comics and Graphic Narratives, and the Comics Studies Society and International Comic Arts Forum represent two of the growing number of scholarly societies devoted to the study of comics. Despite any challenges, the field is growing, and growing rapidly.

One of the hallmarks of comics studies is its interdisciplinary nature, which makes the field extremely exciting, innovative, and difficult to locate within institutions. This interdisciplinary focus has, at times, caused consternation amongst scholars. Gregory Steirer posits, "Though scholars from different disciplines make up the field's participants, the failure of these scholars to establish for their work a collective goal (even if the goal remains essentially in question or dispute) beyond that of researching comics means that the field is interdisciplinary only in the shallowest descriptive sense" (278). Charles Hatfield echoed this sentiment in his article on "Indiscipline, or, the Condition of Comics Studies," suggesting,

> in other words, comics studies might become the very opposite of a critical backwater; it might take part in the ongoing and essential reexamination of how, by whom, and under what auspices knowledge is produced in academe. In any case, comics studies, to thrive, must find a stable conceptual basis that is in no way interchangeable with conventional disciplinarity. In order to address seriously the lack of institutional footing for comics studies, and in order to raise standards in the field (which need not mean imposing one rigid set of standards on scholars from multiple disciplines), comics scholars need to develop and make explicit their commitment not simply to multi- but to interdisciplinarity. We need to articulate a rigorous pluralism—self-aware, synthetic, and questioning—if the field is to flourish.

Comics studies must, then, embrace more than a surface or fleeting interest in interdisciplinary scholarship, a crossing of disciplines in name only, and challenge ourselves to truly engage with other fields of knowledge to create compelling and worthy scholarship that does justice to the form.

Thus far the conversation around comics generally falls into three discourse communities or "modes of address," as outlined by Craig Fischer, who states, "I'd identify at least three different modes of address—fan appreciation, essayistic criticism and academic criticism—and at least two of these modes use jargon to create a sense of connection between writer and audience." Academic criticism has, as suggested by Fischer, a tendency to be dense and sometimes difficult to parse. Furthermore, this criticism has become codified around a particular canon of texts, leaving much of the landscape of comic art unexamined. Thus, even though comics scholarship is on the rise, it currently stands as a narrowly circumscribed domain, with academic studies of comics focusing, according to scholars such as Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo, almost completely on a selection of highly lauded creators, such as "Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and, to a lesser extent, Chris Ware" (6). In fact, the majority of what Hillary Chute has called "today's contemporary canon" (14) is composed of auteurs creating "literary" or "art house" comics, largely ignoring the more mainstream publications, a myopic vision we hope to see expanded in the future.

While the sphere of comics scholarship is slowly expanding to include more titles and creators, criticism generally relies on one of several strategies, as Gregory Steirer articulates, citing the "factual," "reiterative," "sociocultural," "ideological," "auteur," "industrial," and "formalist" approaches. Steirer argues for a wider perspective and an opening of the field beyond these few methodologies, suggesting, "What comics studies requires from its practitioners if it is to achieve a coherent (or even productively incoherent) disciplinarity is that we spend slightly less time focusing on comics as our research object and slightly more time focusing on comics research itself—its history, its methods, and the intellectual and institutional goals that will determine its future" (278). And while Steirer's criticism is certainly still valid, since his critique was published in 2011 the field truly has blossomed, exploring additional approaches, with sub-specialties developing even within comics studies itself, such as comics pedagogy.

Comics pedagogy examines ways in which comics can be used in various learning contexts, and the area is thriving as educators, scholars, and creators work together to understand how comics can encourage visual literacy and multimodal thinking for students. Comics are worthy of study in classrooms in and of themselves, for, as Michael Uslan argues, "Comic books are

a manifestation of popular culture, and as such deserve study in their own terms. But comics can also be studied as a reflection of our society, and their study can be part of our attempts to understand ourselves and our society" (191). In addition to studying comics as the subject matter, graphic narratives can also teach students about various disciplines, including history, political science, anthropology, environmental studies, philosophy, and so on. Furthermore, comics can be used in classrooms as tools for communication and a way of thinking through ideas in any discipline and at any age range.

Why would one want to bring comic art into a classroom? For one thing, in order to fully participate in society, our students must be able to name and speak to that society. As Paulo Freire articulates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

> human existence cannot be Silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (76)

In order to fully participate and, ultimately, to transform the world, our students must be able to name it, and today, to name our culture is to acknowledge the importance of the image. When outlining dual coding theory, Mark Sadoski and Allan Paivo explain,

> Through our sensorimotor experiences in the world, we develop a remarkable ability to understand and use language, based on a specialized linguistic code, as well as a remarkable ability to retain, manipulate, and transform the world around us mentally using a nonverbal code of mental images. (28)

It is clear that our students are increasingly immersed in an image-based culture, and visual literacy is key to communicating in contemporary society. In fact, in *The Image and the Eye*, Ernst Gombrich asserts that "we are entering a historical epoch in which the image will take over from the written word" (37), echoing numerous scholars who lament the demise of literacy, literature, and the book itself. In fact, the 2001 census shows that literary reading has fallen 10 percent from the 1982 census, which equates to the loss of twenty million potential readers. Even more striking are the numbers reported for young adults. In 1982, 60 percent of young adults engaged in literary reading, while in 2002, only 43 percent do so.

While it seems doubtful that we will ever abandon text entirely, it certainly seems naïve to neglect the importance of the interaction of text and image

in communication. David Byrne, the Talking Heads frontman turned media scholar, explained in an interview with D. K. Row:

> I think we communicate graphically, through icons and imagery much more than we realize. And I think, for the most part, we are communicated to graphically. . . . And because it's not primarily text, and we don't have a grammar and understanding of it, we've never learned to talk about images and icons. . . . So it becomes one-way communication: We're being talked at but we can't talk back. We can talk back verbally but that's in a different language and it pushes different buttons. That's part of what draws me to this and the other things I do: I want to learn the language that is being spoken to me.

In order to prepare our students for writing beyond the classroom (and increasingly within it), we must begin to discuss not just alphabetic based literacy, but also address the importance of images.

Moreover, studying comics promotes multimodal literacy. As contributor Dale Jacobs points out in *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*, "Reading comics involves a complex, multimodal literacy and . . . that by thinking about the complex ways comics are used to sponsor multimodal literacy, we can engage more deeply with the ways people encounter, process, and use these and other multimodal texts" (3). Comics can encourage a more deliberate reading and writing process and might also invite new kinds of expression. Sean Howe contends that in comics, the "juxtaposed words and images invite readers to dwell, to reflect, and to meditate inside a compositional space where the pace and tone of reading as well as the interaction with the medium are pliant and controlled by the reader/interactor" (ix–x). This flexibility encourages a different sort of interaction with the text and asks students to slow down and ruminate on the process of making meaning. Furthermore, well-established educational research describes how students make meaning drawing upon multiple intelligences and strengths. Marek Bennett notes in his comic on "Multiple Intelligences," that comics "provide ample opportunities to exercise all the intelligences." Including comics in classrooms allows students to exercise various intelligences and to integrate them through text and image. In her article "Multigenre, Multiple Intelligences, and Transcendentalism," Colleen Ruggieri argues, "By reading the comic books, my students were able to use this different genre to interpret social commentaries, make connections with works they'd studied in class, and develop their own views on the subjects of individualism, nature, and passive resistance" (61).

Clearly, scholars have begun to answer the call for research and writing on comics pedagogy, and there are some wonderful, practical guides for bringing

comics into K-12 classrooms. Books like *The Graphic Novel Classroom: POWerful Teaching and Learning with Images* by Maureen Bakis (Corwin: Thousand Oaks, 2014), *Teaching Graphic Novels: Building Literacy and Comprehension* (Waco: Prufrock Press, 2014) by Ryan J. Novak, *Using Graphic Novels in the Classroom Grade 4–8* (2010) by Melissa Hart, and *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* by Katie Moninall (Gainesville: Maupin House, 2010) all provide detailed lesson plans and units that K-12 teachers can be easily adopted and replicated in classrooms. The anthology *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen E. Tabachnick (New York: MLA, 2009), gives a more critical perspective, focusing on university instructors, and providing introductory chapters on understanding the form before delving into social issues, individual creators, and different courses. This very useful text offers a number of short, useful essays for college teachers using comics for the first time. *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2009), however, works as a textbook for introductory comics studies courses at the university level, collecting landmark essays from important authors such as Charles Hatfield, Thierry Groensteen, Bart Beaty, and Hillary Chute. *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, edited by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), also works as a textbook and would be particularly useful for a comics history course at the university level. And of course, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) is a classic introduction to theory and form. While building on and recognizing previous scholarship, this anthology works differently, reaching out to educators at all levels as well as fans, bringing the voices of creators, scholars, and educators into conversation, exploring theory in practice in dialogue with industry professionals.

The Big Tent of Comics Pedagogy

Comics pedagogy continues the tradition of interdisciplinarity within comics studies, bridging various fields and discourse communities, both within academic spaces and beyond. Below we demonstrate the primary roles that comprise the burgeoning field of comics pedagogy (see figure 1.) While we see substantial benefit in the overlapping fields and identities of our community, we want to highlight the ways these different groups accentuate different aspects of student-driven, comics-centered pedagogy today. However, while we see these differences as important, we also recognize that, for the most part, those studying, writing, and proselytizing the power of graphic narratives in classrooms share a common passion for comics. Of course it isn't necessary

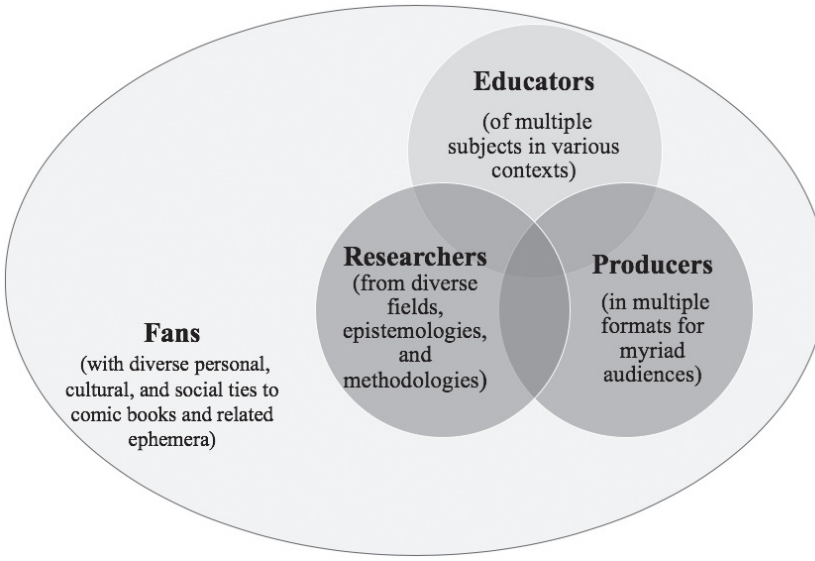

Figure 1: The converging participants of a field of comics pedagogy

for an instructor using comics in the classroom to self-identify as a comics fan any more than an instructor incorporating Chaucer would have to name themselves a "Chaucer fan." However, for educators who are serious about mindfully integrating comics into their curriculum, it certainly helps to have an appreciation or, hopefully, an enthusiasm for the medium, an excitement often associated with fandom in the case of comics. This comics fandom underscores nearly every aspect of how and why comics are leveraged for and designed into pedagogical approaches. This affiliation as a comics *fan* or enthusiast is one that bleeds into other aspects of the careers we take up, the topics we teach, the ways we treat our work. Fandom—as both a separate topic of rich study and as a broader point that links otherwise disparate audiences—functions as a key lynchpin for connecting the members of a comics pedagogy field both literally and figuratively. In cities across the globe, comic conventions continue to grow in popularity.

In addition to identifying as comics fans, a majority of those engaged in the field of comics pedagogy are, understandably, educators. Perhaps obvious is the fact that those interested in teaching with and through comics are often educators who actively read and participate in the culture surrounding the comics as a medium. Overlooked in this recognition is the fact that comics fans teach in myriad academic settings and for learners of various ages, identities, and linguistic practices. The interdisciplinarity of educators means that

comics pedagogy addresses early childhood educators that may use sequential art for early cognitive development just as it may mean developing complex graphic narratives for explaining graduate-level engineering concepts. Such diversity may feel like only tenuous links could be drawn across the field. However, we've organized this volume to put such diverse interests in conversation with one another. Centering the fact that a pedagogy emphasizes the theoretical tenets behind an instructional approach, an emerging comics pedagogy provides a rationale behind the use of comics and comic production principles within classrooms of diverse contexts.

Similar to the wide range of educators that are a part of this community, we also recognize that the comics studies field of researchers come from many disciplinary backgrounds. As comics studies scholars have come to recognize, these cross-field conversations mean that researchers are often approaching comics instruction from different ontological perspectives, with different methodologies, and with abundant theoretical backgrounds. This can mean shedding new light on texts and our understanding of how comics function within learning environments, but it can also mean that seeking to translate and communicate comics research effectively can be a challenge. Further, simply by the nature of academic labor, we recognize that the vast majority of comics studies researchers often spend a large portion of their career as educators—from large setting lectures to intimate doctoral seminars. The intersection of research with, about, and through comics and the teaching of such is a fundamental component of how a large portion of our academic community engages in their work.

Finally, we recognize that producers within and about the comics industry are also an important foundation within the comics pedagogy community. This includes writers, artists, editors, and other individuals involved in the day-to-day creation of comics that are consumed by audiences globally. It also recognizes that—within today's participatory culture—production is much more fluid than in the past; bloggers, cosplayers, convention organizers, and a bevy of other creators also emphasize that comics-related production is not tied solely to the pages that are read by an audience. Not surprisingly, there is a substantial diversity within this space as well—from genres to audiences to formats, comics producers speak to and develop work for various audiences and for various purposes. Likewise, this volume highlights that comics producers are often purposefully involved in critically teaching and supporting comics pedagogy, as evidenced by our numerous contributors involved in the industry as producers of comics, including Lynda Barry, Jenny Blenk, Brian Michael Bendis, Kelly Sue DeConnick, Ebony Flowers, Nick Sousanis, and David Walker. Though the figure above suggests discrete kinds of audiences participating within this growing field, we want to emphasize that there is substantial and productive

overlap. Every contributor to this volume falls across multiple categories in their professional and personal commitments to comics and to instruction. From creators that occasionally teach such as Brian Bendis, David Walker, and Kelly Sue DeConnick, to educators that also produce or study comics like Nick Sousanis and Ben Bolling, to researchers that often spend much of their professional time engaged in teaching about and through comic books. Understandably, these categories bleed across and inform one another.

These overlapping categories mark the field as an emerging discipline. Comics studies is still formulating its foundational narratives, and, for that matter, its vocabulary, borrowing liberally from film studies, literary theory, communications, art, art history, and the publishing industry, just to name a few of the many fields from which scholars draw inspiration and language. For example, while a comics publishing professional might refer to the point of view or perspective of a comics page, a scholar trained in literary theory (and in particular narrative theory) might reference internal and external "focalization" and "ocularization." An academic trained in film studies might prefer to discuss the "camera angle." Clearly, while interdisciplinarity strengthens the field, the varying traditions and discourse communities can make discussion complicated and, at time, confusing.

In this volume we seek to communicate as lucidly as possible, identifying any insular language and developing connections across traditions. However, this does mean that the style, writing conventions, and epistemological grounding of research shifts from chapter to chapter. Our various fields use a lot of different vocabulary and adheres to genre-specific demands; intentionality toward sharing knowledge about comics pedagogy requires interpreting and listening across these divides. Likewise, the kinds of intellectual questions, teaching approaches, and interpretations of comics will vary throughout this volume based on how authors are situated within different configurations across figure 1. We see this diversity as a strength of this volume that moves away from a field mired in theory taken for granted. For instance, contributor Johnathan Flowers presents a critical examination of the Scott McCloud's pervasively influential *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* in order to expand the field of Comic Studies towards "an understanding of comics from multiple perspectives" beyond "McCloud's 'blank slate' as *the* prototypical reader."

What Do We Mean By Pedagogy and Comics?

By definition, a pedagogy centers both the theories that shape one's approach to teaching and the methods of instruction and facilitation. This mixture of theory and practice—*praxis*—is an ever-evolving dialectic. Similarly, the

relationship between pedagogy and comics is one that remains in flux, and this volume captures preliminary thought from a wide variety of scholars in order to seed the field for a pedagogy-driven conversation across academic disciplines. Making clear the diverging pathways for classroom instruction, we want to ground a few approaches to comics-related instruction and several key commitments that underlie a growing interpretation of comics pedagogy.

Along with Samuel Delany, we believe that "you could do things in comics that could be done in no other medium; that as an aesthetic form, comics were irreplaceable," and comics can be studied as texts worthy of scholarly examination in and of themselves, as Ben Bolling does in his chapter. Like Delany and Bolling, we believe that graphic narratives merit attention in educational settings alongside more traditional texts. Comics can also provide a window into other disciplines, a way of approaching a variety of subjects—from literature classes to history, art, math, graphic medicine (see Squier), and so on. Furthermore, comics can be used as ways of communicating and thinking, utilizing text and image to study and render the world, relying on visual and verbal modalities of expression. Going into more detail below, we see the four types of comics pedagogy most frequently enacted in classrooms today as:

- Teaching *with* comics;
- Teaching *about* comics;
- Teaching *through producing* comics; and
- Teaching comics *production* as a means of processing thinking and learning.

The first two types of teaching on this list are likely the most common upon which comics scholars focus. Whether teaching a concept through connecting to a parallel comic book or analyzing key ideas as represented within comic books, teaching *with* comics is one of the most frequent ways that educators can pull comics into other fields for learning and scaffolding. Likewise, a deeper analysis of particular titles, genres, eras, writers, and artists as specific topics to teaching *about* comics is an approach that can often align with English courses, art, and the growing comic studies field.

The second two types of teaching listed involve the production of comics for specific purposes. Teaching through producing comics introduces the form and mechanics of the medium in order to offer a communicative outlet for students alternative to text structures more traditionally used in classroom settings. Student narratives, be they fiction or nonfiction, are the most common examples, although using comics to sequentially display instructions are also representative of this project-based learning intent on production.

While the essential focus of teaching through producing comics is the culminating product, this approach focuses on empowering students with the elements of comics construction as problem-solving tools for carrying the cognitive load while learning any topic or approaching any task. For instance, in *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, authors Mazano, Pickering, and Pollock assert that "drawing pictures to represent knowledge is a powerful way to generate nonlinguistic representations in the mind" (82). The authors of *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms* expect teachers "to help students become self-directed, strategic readers"; therefore, "Teachers must find a way for them to feel safe voicing confusion about what they are reading" (67). Comics production as a cognitive processing tool meets this expectation. In *Text Mapping Plus: Improving Comprehension through Supported Retellings,* Lapp, Fisher, and Johnson document that "students who create their own graphics improve their understanding of what they read, remember the salient features of texts, and are more confident in their retellings" (424).

Alongside the rise of classes on making comics, there is also a classroom-focused movement to incorporate comic art as a way of thinking. This approach, too, struggles with vocabulary. Mike Rohde argues for using what he calls "sketchnotes," notes that incorporate text and image in *The Sketchnote Handbook*, while Sunni Brown prefers the term "doodle," a process of "making spontaneous marks (with your mind and body) to help yourself think" (*The Doodle Revolution* 11). Ivan Brunetti sticks to "cartooning" in his book *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*, while Lynda Barry focuses on "finding the image" in *Picture This* and *What It Is*. And though these practitioners vary in their vocabulary, they share a belief that combining the visual and verbal engages multiple intelligences and provides another way of thinking through ideas, resulting in a powerful and useful skill. This flexibility encourages a different sort of interaction with the text and asks students to slow down and ruminate on the process of making meaning. Ivan Brunetti argues that "cartooning . . . is a translation of how we experience, structure, and remember the world" (8), and we have a great opportunity to harness that visual literacy in classrooms and encourage multimodal thinking.

Pedagogical Comics Knowledge

Foundational to how classroom teachers are trained today is Schulman's description of *pedagogical content knowledge*. Recognizing that simply knowing

the content one may be teaching (e.g., science, literature, algebra) is not enough, Shulman notes that this kind of knowledge "goes beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge for teaching" (9). Pedagogical content knowledge includes knowing the best approaches for conveying a particular topic, the best ways to tailor such information for a particular class or set of students, and "an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons" (9).

Though Shulman's work has expanded since it was first articulated, it continues to function as a key means for understanding a relationship between content and effective means for classroom instruction. In this way, comics can be seen on the one hand as a means of delivery for some other content areas' pedagogical domain. Several of the chapters in this book allude to scaffolding comics-based instruction for conveying complex ideas and intellectual histories within other fields. At the same time, the teaching *of* comics requires centering the content knowledge of (at least a portion of) the vast, growing fields of comics history and comics studies for pedagogical planning. Likewise, the introduction of comics—regardless of whether they are at the center of a course's topic or not—requires considering the kinds of literacy-driven and culturally bounded challenges that may be faced in classrooms. For example, the use of speech balloons, the order of reading panels, and sound effects are all conveyed within comics in ways that typically adhere to conventions that are understood and historically developed over time; new readers of these conventions may not interpret them the same, and we recognize that such conventions shift over time and within different cultural contexts. A comics pedagogical content knowledge is both a foundational component of developing a comics pedagogy and an important area for future research.

Book Overview

The histories and initial tenets of comics pedagogy outlined here are a single snapshot of a field only now stepping into its adolescence. The approaches, practices, and tensions that will likely arise in coming years will be revealed across myriad "lines of practice" (Azevedo). That is, as Azevedo writes in describing the learning practices of model rocket enthusiasts, teaching instruction falters when based on single theories and interests. In contrast—and as prevalent in our organization of this volume—intertwined interests

and practices allow for a robust set of learning principles to emerge over time. Likewise, the role of comics as a source of interest and passion is also intrinsically a part of the motivation in moving forward this pedagogical enterprise. As Azevedo notes, "Tapping into people's long-term interests holds the promise to keep them engaged and productive" (179).

In considering that our relationships to comics are evolving and often come from sources of personal identity, nostalgia, and history, each of us finds ourselves immersed within a comics-driven classroom with different interpretations of what comics *mean* and different assumptions about the promises that they hold. Acknowledging these pathways, one of the strengths of this particular project is the diversity of voices represented within; the collection boasts a particularly wide range of outstanding comics scholars and creators, and includes both critical pieces and interviews with notable comics professionals. We have organized this volume around three key areas: "Foundations of Comics Pedagogy," "Comics Pedagogy in Practice," and "New Directions for Comics Pedagogy." In doing so, we acknowledge that these categories overlap substantially, yet we feel these permeable boundaries accurately reflect the field and our approach to it.

We open the book with "Foundations of Comics Pedagogy," a section devoted to offering key theoretical and methodological approaches that have driven comics pedagogy thus far. In the opening piece, "Text, Object, Transaction: Reconciling Approaches to the Teaching of Comics," Dale Jacobs examines the vexed relationships educators have had with comics, with some suggesting that comics are distractions antithetical to both literacy and morality, while others posit graphic narratives as a site on which alphabetic literacy might be scaffolded. These parallel developments of comics pedagogy have left us with two distinct ways of thinking about teaching with comics that seldom overlap, and this chapter reconciles these approaches within a larger framework that advocates for a diverse set of methodologies in the teaching of comics. In the section following, Aimee Valentine provides an introduction to the patriarchal history of comics, while highlighting female creators who have found a new role in classrooms and in public consciousness, in "Wonder Women and the Web: How Female Comics Creators Leap from Private to Public in a Single Bound." In "Teaching Typical Comics: Overcoming the Biases of Comics Pedagogy with Online Tools," Bart Beaty surveys the state of current comics scholarship, focusing on what is lost when the field focuses on teaching and studying "typical" comics at the expense of the larger comics world, and speculating about how scholars can overcome this bias by embracing online tools. The section concludes with an interview by high school English teacher and comics author Johnny Parker II with acclaimed

comics writers David Walker and Brian Michael Bendis in a rousing conversation discussing their intentions and goals as writers and educators.

The second section, "Comics Pedagogy in Practice," details comics pedagogy in action, offering specific, practical approaches to teaching using various texts, multiple themes, and differing subject matter. The first piece in the section highlights the possibilities of the comics form in scholarship, exploring Ebony Flowers Kalir's approach to teaching comics, which examines the importance of duplication in creative practice, and graphically illustrating how copying incites a physical response that is related to working with images and necessary for making comics in the essay "On Copying." In the following chapter, "Thinking in Comics: All Hands-On in the Classroom," Nick Sousanis provides an introduction to his own comics course, providing specific strategies and examples of his pedagogy, creating a window into his classroom. In "Transmedia Superheroes, Multimodal Composition, and Digital Literacy," Ben Bolling describes his approach to "Networked and Multimodal Communication: The Transmedia Batman," a class in which students engage the Batman mythos in print, radio, television, film, music, and other media, and invites students to build proficiency in multimedia composition. Benjamin J. Villarreal takes a different approach in "Truth, Justice, and the Victorian Way: How Comics and Superheroes Might Subvert Student Reading of Classic Literature," exploring his attempts at using comics and their themes to help freshman-composition students make sense of Victorian literature's influence on contemporary popular culture and the challenges it offers. Next, James Kelley champions comics in STEAM classrooms, reporting on his study that examines the extent to which a contemporary superhero comic-book curriculum can be used as a cultural tool to help middle-school students master science literacies. Finally, Leah Misemer interviews infamous comics creator Lynda Barry in a dialogue that speaks to a pedagogy marked by innovation and inclusion.

The final section, "New Directions for Comics Pedagogy," looks to where the fields of comics studies and comics pedagogy are headed, turning our focus to new areas and questions for scholarship. We open with John A. Lent's proposal for "Comic Art Research: Achievements, Shortcomings, and Remedies," in which Lent, one of the originators of the field, argues that the future study of comics and cartoons must examine the political economy of comics and the legal studies of copyright, censorship, and intellectual property. Johnathan Flowers then offers a critique of McCloud's foundational text, *Understanding Comics*, in "Misunderstanding Comics," and argues that a critical reading of the text will encourage students to engage in a dialogue that invites transformative action. "In the Cards: Collaboration and Comics-Making in the Traditional

English Classroom," a piece by Frederik Byrn Køhlert and Nick Sousanis, posits a more collaborative approach to comics pedagogy. This essay invites collaboration, and we see this as the cornerstone of our approach, working together, for and with our students, to promote comics as subjects worthy of study, to engage in explorations of various disciplines and subject matter, and to produce graphic narratives as a way of thinking, innovating new ways of seeing and thinking, and taking seriously the great responsibilities of a contemporary comics pedagogy. Finally, the section closes with Jenny Blenk's interview with trailblazing comics writer Kelly Sue Deconnick.

Similar to an initial issue of a comic series, we intend that this volume grows a community and propels its conversations further. Particularly considering the diverse discursive practices found in this volume—from casual conversations with some of the biggest names in the comics industry to academic analyses of comics epistemology to empirical scholarship within classrooms—we embrace the variety of how comics pedagogy is forged.

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Text, Object, Transaction: Reconciling Approaches to the Teaching of Comics

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At the beginning of "The Practice of Book and Print Culture: Sources, Methods, Readings," Leslie Howsam poses several important questions related to practice. She asks, "How do scholars actually 'do' studies in the history and culture of the book when it comes down to working with sources, adopting methodologies and constructing arguments? How do our chosen source materials and methods shape our (mostly unspoken) definitions of 'book culture' or 'print culture?'" (17). Substitute comics studies for book/print culture here, and the questions, as well as the necessity of asking them, still function in ways that emphasize the similarities of concerns between the two fields. As Blair Davis and Benjamin Woo note in their introduction to "Roundtable: Comics and Methodology" in the inaugural issue of *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, "Comics scholars come from departments of literary studies, film and media studies, history, and so on, bringing with them different research traditions and assumptions" (57). Questions of methodology are, consequently, central to our pedagogical approaches and to the ways we, as comics scholars, teach comics studies in our home departments.

Over the long history of comics, educators have had a vexed relationship with the medium. In the terms of literacy education, comics have moved from distractions seen as antithetical to both literacy and morality, to a site on which alphabetic literacy might be scaffolded, to a set of multimodal texts that use a combination of sequential art and text in order to create narrative meaning for the audience. Currently, judging from the number of journal articles and conference presentations on comics and composition in the past few years, it is clear that comics have become an accepted part of and tool for teaching multimodal composition. In a quotation that sums up much current thinking about comics within the field of composition studies,

Gabriel Sealey-Morris writes in "The Rhetoric of the Paneled Page: Comics and Composition Pedagogy" that "comics complicate notions of authorship, make sophisticated demands on readers, and create a grammar and rhetoric as sophisticated as written prose, while also opening up new methods of communication" (31). The attitudes towards comics among literacy educators have changed drastically over the years.

Similarly, when viewed through the lens of literature pedagogy, comics have moved from disposable, dangerous entertainment, unwelcome in schools in any form, to pop culture supplements to the alphabetic literature it was assumed students needed to study, to "graphic novels"—literary works worthy of study in their own right. Now comics such as *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and *Persepolis* are regularly included in literature classes, whether the main focus is on comics or not. These parallel developments of comics pedagogy within English departments, in both high schools and universities, present us with two distinct ways of thinking about teaching with comics that seldom overlap or take into account ways of teaching comics that predominate in other disciplines.

As an interdisciplinary field, however, those of us who teach in comics studies in universities need to not only acknowledge these disparate disciplinary approaches, but attempt to capitalize on their various strengths as we engage with students in the classroom. Rather than focus on the multiple ways that comics can be used for specific pedagogical purposes (as in the recent collections *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom* and *Teaching Comics Through Multiple Lenses*) or on using comics as a means of teaching specific subjects (as seen in another recent collection, *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives*), we need to "move beyond instances of comics integration as a means of teaching other ideas—of teaching *through* or *with* comics—and make space for studying comic *as* comics," as James B. Carter asserts in his short "Pioneer's Perspective" contribution to *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies* (30). Further, as Charles Hatfield argues in "Comics Studies, the Anti-Discipline," the foreword to that same volume, "Comics Studies forcefully reminds us that the disciplines cannot be discrete and self-contained; in effect, our field defies or at least seriously questions the compartmentalization of knowledge that occurs within academia" (xix). This vision for the field can, however, only come to fruition if we make a concerted effort to bring it about. This chapter focuses on what it would mean to teach comics *as* comics and comics studies *as* a fully interdisciplinary endeavor. As I pursue this notion of interdisciplinarity, I want to begin by examining the ways in which questions of definition influence our teaching and research methodologies before turning to the field of book history, not only for the kinds of practical questions

seen above, but also for the utility of its own hybrid methodologies to the current state of comics studies.

Within interdisciplinary fields such as comics studies and book history, terminology is often the locus of anxieties that carry over into discussions of how we teach and research. In discussing the very term "book history," Howsam notes how "'book' itself is beset with multiple meanings and shifting form—even while casual use of the word appears to refer to something that was fixed by the technology of printing with movable type" ("Practice" 18). Defining comics is, if anything, an even thornier proposition; as Charles Hatfield has written, "Definitions [of comics] are not merely analytic but also tactical" ("Defining" 19). That is, the very act of defining is a way to make an argument about the field, a way to stake out one's methodological position. Consider Scott McCloud's famous definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (*Understanding Comics* 9). The emphasis here and in *Understanding Comics* as a whole is on the way that this definition emphasizes that comics is a medium with its own particular set of affordances. Henry Jenkins, in his response during the aforementioned roundtable to a question about how he teaches comics, is typical of many teachers of comics studies: "My approach in the classroom was inspired by Scott McCloud's insistence that comics are a medium and not a genre" (59). Even if one disagrees with elements of McCloud's definition, his overall approach is accessible to students and works well as a starting point from which to discuss how comics work. So ubiquitous is *Understanding Comics* in undergraduate comics-studies classes that it is impossible to overestimate its pedagogical influence.

This emphasis on form can also be seen in the Comics and Methodology roundtable when Scott Bukatman states that "being in an art department has freed me from emphasizing narrative in the way that comics scholars in English departments would be encouraged to do" (59). Within Bukatman's disciplinary context, form and art are more important than narrative in the study and teaching of comics. Such an emphasis opens up a productive theoretical and pedagogical conversation about how comics operate as a medium and how they convey information through their unique affordances. However, if we look again at McCloud's definition and Bukatman's statement, and the way they privilege image, we can see how this emphasis reveals their methodological biases as artist and art historian, and constricts how we might view even the workings of the medium itself.

Consider another definition: Robert C. Harvey's argument that comics are "a blending of visual and verbal content" (76). It is a statement on which I

tried to build in *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*, writing,

> comics—comic books, comic strips, and graphic novels—are media that use a combination of sequential art and text in order to create narrative meaning for the audience. This combination of words and images—multimodality—works to create meaning in very particular and distinctive ways; in a multimodal text, meaning is created through words, visuals, and the combination of the two in order to achieve effects and meanings that would not be possible in either a strictly alphabetic or strictly visual text. . . . As cultural artifacts, sites of literacy, means of communication, discursive events and practices, sites of imaginative interplay, and tools for literacy sponsorship, comics are far more than simply "sequential art." (5)

While I also focus on form and on comics as a medium (or, to be more exact, multiple media), you can certainly see my disciplinary biases as someone trained in composition and rhetoric and housed in a department dominated by literature scholars. Unlike Bukatman, I cannot divorce myself from narrative, both because it figures too prominently in my departmental context and because it is a productive avenue of inquiry. Moreover, the filter of multimodality is one that for me comes from developments in the last fifteen years within composition and literacy studies, which in turn came from Gunther Kress's work on visual literacy and social semiotics and the subsequent multidisciplinary work of the New London Group in the area of multimodal literacies. In developing this definition, I saw that McCloud's emphasis on comics as a medium focuses our attention on form in very useful, but at the same time potentially limiting, ways. Though I do mention comics as "cultural artifacts" and "discursive events," my research and pedagogical practices were then mainly limited to formal considerations and the ways in which comics could be seen as a medium of communication and individual comics as sites of literacy. The multiple locations that informed how I thought about comics and comics pedagogy at the time both opened up and occluded possibilities for teaching and research methodologies.

In this definitional exploration in *Graphic Encounters*, I also cited Dylan Horrocks and his long response to McCloud's work, in which he proposes that comics can be seen as a cultural idiom; a publishing genre; a set of narrative conventions; a kind of writing that uses words and pictures; a literary genre; and texts (34). As I have continued to teach and research in comics studies, I realize that while I incorporated some of these ideas, simply acknowledging the existence of the others is not enough. What would it mean to take

these definitions, and the disciplinary methodologies they imply, seriously? Teaching students, for example, to view comics as a common cultural or subcultural experience—that is, adopting some methodologies from sociologists or cultural historians—broadens the possibilities of the classroom. Similarly, approaching comics from the standpoint of narrative conventions or genre can give a much fuller picture than simply looking at considerations of form, just as looking at comics form adds immensely to literary discussions of comics. My colleagues in literature sometimes do not have the formal vocabulary to discuss comics, just as those of us in composition or art history or communication are sometimes without the means to adequately address narrative or genre concerns. Further, in thinking through the variety of approaches that Horrocks briefly lists, what happens when we consider comics as a publishing genre? What could the field of book history add to comics studies and to the ways in which we teach our students to think about comics? In order to explore this question further, let me begin by returning to Howsam's initial question: "How do scholars actually 'do' studies in the history and culture of the book, when it comes down to working with sources, adopting methodologies and constructing arguments?" ("Practice" 17). The answers to this question will, I think, help us to be more productively self-reflective about what it is that we "do" in comics studies, while at the same time providing us with another set of pedagogical and research lenses that can inform those practices.

In addressing scholarly practices in book history, Howsam focuses on scholars' home disciplines, much as I have been doing to this point (and to which members of the Comics and Methodology roundtable allude). She writes,

> literary scholars look at a book primarily in terms of text, while bibliographers are focused mostly upon the material object. Those two sides of the biblio-coin cannot, of course, be separated; but one can face up while the other remains down. Historians, while conscious of text and object, tend to see the book more in terms of a transaction: the biblio-coin is used for exchange. The transaction occurs in a communicative relationship between and among individuals, groups and generations of human beings—readers, writers, editors, printers and so forth. The transaction is both commercial and cultural. ("Practice" 18–19)

While one of these ways of knowing and its attendant methodologies may come to the fore while the others momentarily recede, book history, like other truly interdisciplinary endeavors, succeeds when all of these strands inform the work of practitioners. That is, text, object, and process all need to be taken into account as one researches and teaches. Attending only to one's own disciplinary notions of what is central and ignoring the questions and

concerns of the other constituent disciplines results in something that may be akin to book history, but is, in the final analysis, not book history.

However, as Howsam points out in *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Cultures*, such an interdisciplinary approach can also lead to a kind of disorientation, "Because all these disciplines assert their own theoretical assumptions and methodological practices, and each one changes as new generations of scholars challenge their predecessors" (4). Such is clearly the case within comics studies as well, though with one sub-discipline clearly predominant. Of the constituent fields that comprise comics studies—including (at a start) art history, cartooning, librarianship, cultural studies, political science, linguistics, literacy studies, rhetoric, communications, composition, and English education—it is clear that the majority of practitioners were trained or are housed in literature departments. That is, despite the reliance on McCloud's work in so many undergraduate comics-studies classes, the predominant methodologies in the field, both in terms of research and teaching, derive from the study of literature. As Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo argue in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*, literature scholars (mainly in English, but also from other departments of language and literature) "have contributed immensely to the development of comics studies, but the pull toward the problematics and methods of a single discipline has had significant repercussions on the development of this putatively interdisciplinary research area," and their influence "has profoundly shaped the way that comics are understood" (28, 29). The predominance of the methodologies of literary study and teaching has led not only to an emphasis on the narrative in the text (to which both Bukatman and Howsam allude), but also to questions of which texts are worthy of attention. That is, with literature in the ascendant position within the interdiscipline of comics studies, questions of canonicity remain at the forefront in terms of both research and teaching.

In *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, a fascinating study of the process of peer review across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, Michèle Lamont addresses how the canon has remained at the core of what English literature scholars value. She writes that since the late 1970s, English has "[broadened] its mission—to the tasks of producing, teaching, and celebrating literary canons, the profession has added the job of reflecting on the canonization process itself" (70). Even through the so-called theory wars of the 1990s and even to today, literature has still concerned itself with texts and with debates about which texts deserve attention, including within the classroom. Woo and Beaty recognize the way in which these imperatives of canon formation have been imported into the

burgeoning field of comics studies, writing, "Despite the form's dubious and marginal origins, notions of quality, greatness and exemplarity have become so entrenched in the standard operating procedure of comics scholarship that they—and the biases they introduce—disappear into the background" (15–16). What follows in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time* is a kind of What-If narrative in scholarly form, a speculation about what comics might be studied and taught if different paradigms were emphasized rather than the literary one that has promoted texts such as *Maus* and *Fun Home*. While I find such questioning of the premises, biases, and methodologies of the field invigorating and see them as wholly necessary, it should be pointed out that such discussions of "the canonization process itself" fit squarely within what has been happening in English departments for the past forty years. That is, if we move beyond an assumption that English departments are only concerned with a specific kind of aesthetic sensibility, we can instead productively draw on literature's concern with texts, canon, and narrative *in conjunction with* methodologies of the home disciplines of other scholars within comics studies. The question then becomes how can we move beyond such critique of the methodological assumptions that inform research and teaching in comics studies and towards an interdisciplinary stance that productively draws on the multiple constituents of the field?

Let me here return to book history as it is instructive both as a model of interdisciplinarity and as a recombinant methodology that can be usefully incorporated within comics studies. As we have seen, book history that is truly interdisciplinary treats books—as well as periodicals—as texts, objects, and transactions (both commercial and cultural). A practitioner of book history needs to keep all of these ways of knowing in mind rather than defaulting to his or her home discipline and its attendant biases. While there have been a number of models of what this triple vision might entail, I find Sydney Shep's model of production, distribution, and consumption to be the most useful, focusing as it does on "the complex dynamic intercrossings between people (prosopography), places (placeography) and objects (bibliography)" (66). Here Shep provides an exemplar of interdisciplinary method, a way of thinking that goes beyond what is possible in any of the separate disciplines that make up book history. While she acknowledges that one's research (or, I might add, teaching) activity might tend towards one part of this model at a given time, she maintains that "the pull of the other elements balances the possibility of the researcher [or teacher] being captured by the potential black hole of a single domain" (67). However, if we consider such a tripartite approach in terms of comics studies, it also offers scaffolding on which a truly interdisciplinary model might be constructed. That is, what if we begin by

thinking about comics as texts we might interpret (as literature scholars, art historians, linguists, or theorists of the comics form might), material objects that we hold in our hands (as librarians, archivists, or scholars of material culture might), and as cultural transactions (as literacy scholars, communication scholars, political scientists, rhetoricians, sociologists, or historians might). Borrowing an approach that emphasizes text, object, and transaction allows us to utilize interlocking methodologies that, especially when expanded in ways that are directed specifically towards comics, can provide us with a working interdisciplinary method to guide both our research and teaching.

When we approach a comic as a text, it is necessary to think not only about narrative and themes (as one might in a literature class), but also about how meaning is created through the comics form, how artistic tools such as line, color, and shading operate (in terms of aesthetics, narrative, theme, and so on), and the relationship between all of these considerations at the textual level. In much of my previous work on multimodality, my focus was on how meaning is created at the level of the text and in my teaching, the idea of how comics work as a form has been of paramount importance. Even at this basic level of the text, though, it very quickly became apparent that I needed to teach notions of multimodal literacy (as derived from my own discipline of composition and rhetoric) in conjunction with insights from art history about line, color, and shading, and formal comics theory (starting with McCloud and Eisner, but branching out to thinkers such as Groensteen, Kannenberg, Postema, Hatfield, and Kukkonen). This combination of methodologies for examining comics as texts seems to parallel what Carter calls "PIM pedagogy": "panel and page analysis, imagetext, and multimodal notions of image study." Carter sees such attention to the comics text as the necessary scaffold on which further study can be built. I concur. Since I teach English majors, narrative and thematic questions are never far from their minds, and the links I make to those ideas are mainly reminders of what they are learning in their other classes. However, when students understand how the comics form works and the affordances of the medium, they can complicate their thinking about how narrative and theme play out in individual comics texts. At the basic level of comics as texts—without even moving on to material object or cultural transaction—a fully interdisciplinary model necessarily complicates the approaches we use to teach comics studies.

When we add to our teaching the idea that comics are also material objects, we incorporate ways of thinking from librarians, archivists, and scholars of material culture that turn our attention to comics as physical objects. We begin to ask questions such as how does the material form of the comic affect the way in which we read? How is our reading different if we

encounter a comics narrative as single issues, in collected print form, or as a digital version? How, as Ian Hague asks in *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*, are all of our senses engaged as we read comics? As Hague insists, "Comics are not simply static objects that can be considered from an atemporal perspective. They change and are changed over time, modifying the space they occupy as they are being read" (5). How, for example, does touch affect the way we engage with a comic and the way we ultimately make meaning from it? What happens if we consider with our students "the materials of its composition, their textures, hardness, flexibility, weight, and temperature" (6)? How do these aspects of the comic affect our reading? What about our other senses as we interact with the material object of the comic? Moreover, what happens if we consider the various kinds of paratexts that accompany different forms of comics? How would Gerard Genette's work help us and our students to consider how paratexts like advertisements and covers in single-issue comics provide a very different frame for the narrative than paratexts like back-cover blurbs and bonus material (such as scripts and thumbnails) in collected editions? And what if we consider the difference in these formats in the context of comics publishing? By treating comics as material objects in our teaching, we add a productive series of questions and set of avenues for exploration that are not available when we examine comics only in a textual sense.

Finally, we need to consider the ways in which we can think about comics as sites of commercial and cultural transaction. How do commercial considerations affect artistic choices? How do various players in the production of comics (publishers, editors, distributors, artists, colorists, letterers) interact with each other to produce and distribute comics? What kind of cultural transactions occur with the reader at the locus of the comic? If we address these specific questions, we might for example examine the ways in which one company, such as Archie Comics, has responded to changing demographics of comics readers, especially within the last twenty years. We might explore with students the founding of Image Comics and the ways in which commerce and art are entwined in that specific example. We might consider fanzines and letters columns in the history of comics and the ways in which readers interacted with both creators and publishers through these outlets. Asking such questions about commercial and cultural transactions through these kinds of specific examples helps students to understand comics more fully, in ways that move beyond form or narrative alone.

As someone trained in composition and rhetoric, I have often thought about the study of comics through the lens of literacy studies and about comics as a site of literacy sponsorship, a concept introduced by Deborah Brandt.

She writes, "Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain some advantage by it in some way" (166). What happens, then, when we ask students to consider publishing companies, artists, writers, censors, teachers, and other people or groups associated with the production and distribution of comics as sponsors of literacy? Or what happens if we engage students about questions of comics and symbolic capital, following the example of Beaty and Woo in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time*? That is, how might we examine what is valued by different groups of readers in the cultural transactions around different types of comics? How might we think about the ways in which comics are imbricated in contemporary political or social cultures, as does Matthew J. Costello in his book *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and The Unmasking of Cold War America*; about comics and youth culture, as does Bradford W. Wright in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*; or about comics history, as does Amy Kiste Nyberg in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*? These examples serve to provide a very small sample of the possible approaches to comics within the umbrella of commercial and cultural transactions. When we bring such ways of thinking about comics into the classroom, in conjunction with an emphasis on comics as both texts and material objects, we are introducing students to comics studies *in toto*. Teaching at this intersection means sometimes moving beyond our comfort zones, beyond the methodological approaches of our subdisciplines, and embracing a more fully interdisciplinary approach.

When I first had the opportunity to teach comics, my courses were rooted in my training in rhetoric and composition and my position in a department of English. The first class I developed in 2007 was a class for third- and fourth-year students called "The Rhetoric of Comics" and focused on the form and how it had been and could be used rhetorically. On the syllabus for that course, I created a framework and posed a number of questions that would form the bases of inquiry for the semester.

> In this course we will examine the rhetorical uses of comics and the rhetoric surrounding comics in order to think through important questions of multimodality, rhetorical genre theory, intertextuality, and rhetorical theory. In particular, we will explore the following questions: To what rhetorical purposes are comics used? In what rhetorical situations? With what audiences? How are roles for both writer and reader created/negotiated in multimodal texts? How do writers create multimodal meaning—through the interaction of words and images—within specific rhetorical environments? How is "truth" represented/constructed through

> visual, textual, and multimodal rhetorics? What is the relationship in these texts between the writer and his or her social context, and how is that represented by the visual codes and multimodal rhetorics of these texts? In what ways do multimodal texts participate in multiple genres? In what ways does the multimodal form change the genres and vice versa? How do multimodality and the material form of comic books and graphic novels intersect? How does the production and consumption of these texts represent a distinct form of multimodal literacy? How can thinking about these literate practices complicate our ideas of literacy? How can thinking about these texts complicate our ideas of rhetoric?

Though there is a nod to comics as material objects and cultural transactions at the end of this list of questions, it is clear that this class was designed from a particular disciplinary standpoint. This disciplinary approach can also be seen in the second comics class I taught, a fourth-year seminar entitled "Comics and Literacy," an outgrowth of the research I was doing at the time for *Graphic Encounters*. Finally, I taught another fourth-year seminar simply titled "The Contemporary Graphic Novel," which I framed through many of the same questions about form and multimodal literacies as the previous iterations of my comics classes. However, I also asked, "Why should we take comics seriously?"—a question that reflected both my departmental home and the implicit argument I was making to my colleagues about the value of comics.

Throughout these classes, my focus was mainly on comics as texts, with occasional forays into comics as cultural transactions, filtered mainly through the particular subdisciplinary lens of literacy. Questions of comics as material objects were acknowledged but seldom given much room for discussion, while questions of comics as texts or cultural transactions were confined for the most part to those that would arise from the methodologies for composition and rhetoric or literature. Certainly teaching through such disciplinary biases was helping students to think about the disciplinary concerns of rhetoric, literacy, and literature; to some extent, comics were being used in the service of the particular disciplines in which I was enmeshed. In teaching this way, my focus was still on the development of students as English majors and the attendant benefits of those ways of thinking. However, I was missing the opportunity to introduce students to notions of interdisciplinarity and to approaches that might expand their ways of knowing. These courses did not allow me to help students see what it might mean to approach a subject from multiple positions and through multiple lenses. I was teaching students about particular aspects of comics in what I still consider to be productive ways, but I was not teaching *comics studies*.

It was not until a couple of years ago, when I was asked to teach a class geared towards second-year students, that I began to try to address some of my methodological biases. In retrospect, I had been teaching the kinds of upper-year classes about comics that should presuppose a grounding in the interdisciplinary nature of the field, but the introductory course that could provide that grounding was simply not there. In many ways, I had the opposite problem that Beaty describes as common in the Comics and Methodology roundtable: universities with "Introduction to Comics" classes with no upper-year classes to follow (59). As I began to conceive the new second-year course, I realized that I needed to move beyond teaching mainly about form and about the limited cultural transactions involved in examining comics and literacy. That is, the course needed to be an introduction to comics studies that could serve as a scaffold for the upper-year courses that students might take in subsequent years. It was a conscious effort to create a methodologically diverse course not because everything needed to be crammed into one semester (as Beaty laments in the roundtable discussion), but because I could do so with the expectation that students would have the opportunity to go on to more specialized courses (such as the course I often now teach in "Comics Theory") that would draw on this interdisciplinary introduction (59).

What I decided to teach was a class called "The History of the Comic Book in North America" as an attempt to introduce students to the field of comics studies in all its diverse methodologies and ways of thinking about comics. The important component here is not the scope of material covered in the class—the focus could have been productively altered in any number of useful ways—but the questions asked and the methodologies invoked. To illustrate this point, let me quote at length from the course description section of the syllabus for "The History of the Comic Book in North America."

> Over the last several years, comics and graphic novels have been an ever more visible and well-regarded part of mainstream culture, reviewed in major newspapers and featured on the shelves of both independent and chain bookstores. Major publishing houses now publish work in the comics medium, while both school and public libraries are building graphic novels collections in order to try to get adolescents into the library. How did we get here? How can the present state of the comics medium be traced through the history of the comic book in North America? How do word and image work together to create narrative within the comics medium? How does the sequential nature of comics work to create meaning and structure narrative? Have the answers to these questions changed over the history of the comic book in North America? How do stories function within comics and how have they functioned over the history of the

> comic book? To what purposes have comic books been used? In what situations? With what audiences? What is the place of genre in the history of the comic book? In what ways does the multimodal form change the genres and vice versa? How do multimodality and the material form of comic books intersect? Why should we take comic books seriously? In looking at the practical, theoretical, and commercial aspects of history of comic book publishing in North America, we will examine issues such as remediation, genre, seriality, artistic influences, materiality, distribution, political activism, literacy sponsorship, and censorship, as well as theories about how to read comics. By looking at this history, not only will we be able to see how the medium got to where it is now, but also be able to use these concepts to think about publishing in general.

While it is clear that I teach this class from a particular standpoint and that my bias towards comics as a medium is still in effect, what I think is important here is the focus on questions, issues, and methodologies that bring together approaches from the constituent disciplines of comics studies.

In order to illustrate this idea, let me return very briefly to book history and Shep's framework of production, distribution, and consumption, and specifically her focus on "the complex dynamic intercrossings between people (prosopography), places (placeography) and objects (bibliography)" within that model. In examining the history of the comics book in North America, we study not only creative teams—writers, artists, and letterers—but also editors, publishers, distributors, and retailers, as well as readers, all of whom interacted with comics in a variety of ways throughout the process of production, distribution, and consumption. Place is built into the course by virtue of the geographical limitation of North American comics, allowing us, for example, to think about particular instances of comics censorship in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, we discuss New York as the commercial center of the comics publishing industry and home of many creators, but also as the site of many of the stories within the comics texts. Finally, we consider comics as objects, discussing issues such as what it means to switch between reading different formats (floppy, collected, digital), the process of collecting, and the ways in which the material object fits as part of both the artistic and commercial sides of comics.

The approaches used in addressing these and other questions and issues in the course are certainly not exhaustive of the subdisciplines that comprise the field (after all, how could they be?). What the class does, however, is attempt to examine comics as texts, material objects, and commercial and cultural transactions in a multiplicity of ways that begin to offer a complex picture of the field of comics studies and to introduce students to questions of

interdisciplinarity. As Hatfield writes in "Comics Studies, the Anti-Discipline," as members of the field, we must be able "to step back far enough to see where our individual disciplines can work together, and what they can contribute to a truly interdisciplinary project of knowledge-making" (xix). In suggesting these general ways of approaching interdisciplinary teaching in comics studies, I seek to push the field towards the future that Hatfield envisions.

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Thinking in Comics: All Hands-On in the Classroom

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Comics let us say things we can't in other forms. This principle is at the core of my approach to teaching comics, which focuses on the form's potential for multimodal communication and on how the combination of textual and visual elements has the ability to unlock both new ideas and creative responses to old problems. Therefore, even in the more traditional theory or education-based courses I have taught, in which my students tend to describe themselves as nondrawers, I always put hands-on comics-making front and center. By taking these novice drawers through various comics-making exercises, I want to give students a first-hand understanding of what the form is able to express while also showing them how much more capable they are at visual communication than they realized before entering the classroom. These lessons, I hope, are carried with my students into their other classes and beyond—as future teachers, scholars, and even sometimes practicing cartoonists.

Before delving into the specifics of these courses, I want to note how my prior noncomics teaching influenced what I would do in my comics classrooms. First, as a teenager right up until my final year of doctoral school, I taught tennis to players of all levels and ages. It is, to say the least, imperative that practice be a significant part of learning on a tennis court—you can't talk about how to hit a forehand—you have to move your arm, your feet, watch how someone else's body does the motion. Theory isn't unimportant—I introduce analogies such as likening the way air flows over an airplane wing that provides lift in relationship to how topspin makes a ball dive—but ultimately this is something you have to feel to understand. My other primary teaching experience was an undergraduate public speaking course at Wayne State University that I taught for several years. I saw my role as not unlike what I did on the tennis courts: I provided structure, prompts, feedback, coaching, and lots of encouragement, but so much of the time I sat in the back of the classroom as each student performed, and I watched them grow on their own over the term. (I might

add, on a theoretical note, as a doctoral student, I was quite taken by Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which drew lessons from the story of an eighteenth-century schoolteacher who couldn't speak the language of his students and how this acknowledged ignorance on the part of the authority figure led to an emancipatory learning experience for the students.)

Despite these earlier experiences and a strong belief in the importance of making as essential to understanding, it still took me a little longer to fully institute this practice into my comics courses. Initially I think I treated hands-on practice as more of an add-on than a central focus. And perhaps with comics, where they are perceived as less than "academic," I felt a certain defensiveness, a need to come to their rescue with heaps of theory. In my first comics and education class at Teachers College, I conceived of a number of exercises (which remain part of my repertoire and will be discussed later)—activities to get students comfortable drawing and making their own explorations to connect back to theory. They were a lot of fun, but in looking back, I clearly framed them as supplement. The third time teaching the course, some of the texts we were planning to use were backordered and late in arriving, so I flipped the course and started with the comics-making activities. A few weeks into the course, when the texts still hadn't arrived, I started to apologize to the students, "sorry that we hadn't learned anyth—" And I caught myself. Here I was in the midst of drawing a doctoral dissertation as comics to make an argument that this form could offer as much intellectual rigor as its textual equivalent, and in my own class, while I had them making, I was undervaluing it—seeing the process of making as support and not as core.

And that was a profound realization.

Through these simple comics-making exercises we'd been doing together, they had been teaching themselves and gained a tremendous wealth of understanding that, I believe, far exceeded what they would've attained at this point from readings. One example prompt: tell the story of how you got here (interpreting this as the student wished—the literal commute to the university or how their life path landed them there), and do so in two ways: a three-panel comic strip and also as a two-page comic. What sorts of decisions do you make when working in the three-panel format that you did differently in two pages? What were the challenges of moving one from another? What kind of affordances did you have with two pages in contrast with three panels? Not only could they compare their two distinct versions, but there was a whole classroom of students who'd all tackled the project from their unique vantage point, and now we could look at all of these together, for inspiration, to get ideas, learn new strategies, discover things that weren't working, and see clearly how much they already knew about making comics unfettered by any

expectation of a proper way to go about it. Those experiences were revelatory and set the stage for them to engage with scholarship and read professional works with new eyes. They were hungry for new material to inspire their own works and filled with a desire to transfer this understanding to their students.

From this crucial realization, I would make practice the first thing—and in all the different settings I've taught comics, we start with practice and continually circle back to it as the foundation for deeper understanding. In my experience, all of my students are able to make comics and frequently really interesting ones—no matter what their drawing skills—and that practice aids them greatly in getting a handle on the medium. They hit on sophisticated concepts in their making that they later are attuned to observe in the comics we study. And they have so much fun—something we shouldn't undervalue. Play matters and is too infrequently present in our classrooms. These activities reawakened something every student did as a child. In regards to assessment, for all the quick activities I have them do in class or at home in their sketchbooks, I evaluate entirely on completion, not skill. They are encouraged to try everything. Inventiveness, curiosity, and willingness to vigorously immerse themselves matter most. By making the class a space for them to play—I watch them take risks, work harder than I asked them to do because it's theirs and there's a deep sense of satisfaction in seeing it done well. And I suspect they make discoveries many of them might not if it was about their grade.

To accompany some of the practical exercises in this chapter, I want to share two students' personal perspectives, one here and the other at the close. This is from a student in my introductory comics course at San Francisco State University. Kyleigh, a first time comics maker, reflects on the experience of making her final project, a personal narrative:

> I had never made a comic before, and I was surprised by the sense of accomplishment I felt after using this medium. As an English major, I love to use language to tell stories. . . . Drawing pictures that represented my story actually forced me to manipulate my language. It created a cycle of positive feedback that surprisingly strengthened my skills as both a writer and illustrator. In the beginning, I was really nervous about my comic because I am a perfectionist and I do not feel like I am a particularly good artist; I feared that I would get so hung up on how imperfect my drawings were that I would lose sight of the story. The opposite actually happened. The meaning of my comic became much more significant to me than my sketching, and I finally realized that that's one of the benefits of comics—it does not have to be hyper-realistic to be a successful story.

> Drawing comics allows you to really sprawl your thoughts out on paper. Writing allows me to translate my experiences into feelings and words, but drawing my experiences forces me to reflect on how the physical images of my memories influences the way I think and act. In the case of my particular narrative, I think comics' ability to generalize a story was very effective because this is a relevant, commonplace occurrence.

Kyleigh's experience rings true of what I've seen throughout all of my classes—no matter their skill level or prior experience drawing, the act of making affords deep insights. (See figure 1.)

And with that in mind, let's take a tour through some of the specifics.

Because comics accommodate such disparate kinds of drawing styles and skills (consider as a pairing of extremes, the lush, dense hyper-realism of J. H. Williams III to the spare poetry comics of John Porcellino), I've shied away from focusing much on drawing technique. This extends even to my more recent courses within the comics studies program at San Francisco State that are designated "Making Comics." Instead, I'm always looking for ways for students to engage and play with form, to give them a range of ways of using comics to express what they want to say. To this end, I find that constraint-based exercises, as with the three-panel and two-page example above, help them explore and hone in on what works best for them. The constraint limits the focus to one particular aspect of working in comics, but the prompts are open enough to allow all sorts of material from the individual student to make its way onto the page. And it does.

While I prefer to come up with my own assignments, I definitely borrow and adapt from others whenever I can. Cartoonist-teachers Jessica Abel and Matt Madden have come up with tons of great exercises (available in their book *Drawing Words-Writing Pictures* and website of the same name, as well as Matt's "OuBaPo" constraint-based comics-generating rules). I'm a big fan of their brilliant, massive collaborative activity "Panel Lottery," where Abel and Madden provide three characters that anyone can easily draw on model, and prompt participants to draw on three different index cards, one, two, or all three of the characters doing or saying something on each card. The group (or separate groups within a class) then works together to create a coherent narrative from these randomly generated "panels." It's a fascinating activity that offers terrific insight into how to construct a sequential narrative from otherwise disconnected scenes. In all the times I've run it, it's been a wonderful way to get students drawing with no barrier to entry, and working and laughing together as they learn about comics! It's also the sort of thing future

Figure 1a: Kyleigh's final

Figure 1b: Kyleigh

teachers latch onto to see how they can use it with their own students and invent variations for their particular purposes.

The first time I taught my comics class, I wanted an exercise that got students quickly thinking about the entire space of the comics page as a maker does without them being stymied by a lack of drawing skills and confidence. I came up with "Grids and Gestures," which has taken on a larger life beyond my classrooms (I've done it in numerous workshops and as a Twitter challenge (#gridsgestures, for detailed instructions www.spinweaveandcut.com/grids-gestures, Sousanis, 2015) and it has become the touchstone for how I set the tone in my classes. To summarize in brief, I set it up by having everyone look at the ceiling tiles and other features in the room, and imagine putting them to music. Long notes, staccato beats, all of those time signatures represented by the organization of space. We then bring this back down to the comics page and how in comics, time happens in space. I share examples where page layout is integral to the narrative. Then I instruct them: on a single sheet of paper of any size, organize the space into some sort of grid-esque composition that represents the shape of your day (that day, your average day, a particular day), and rather than drawing *things* in it, inhabit those spaces you've drawn with lines, marks, or gestures that represent what you were up to or how you felt in those moments. I give them about seven minutes to complete it, and then we share and discuss. As with many of my prompts, I try to explain the exercise so that it's deliberately somewhat ambiguous to allow everyone to bring their own take to it but also providing enough structure so that they aren't lost at the same time. Students not only start thinking about the compositional structure of a page, but more importantly they realize how much they all already know about drawing. It's a starting point to begin to get them past the fear of "I can't draw" and to remain open and imaginative in finding their own ways to explore comics creation not limited by a particular conception of what they think drawing should be. I've expanded on this by making it into a diary exercise for them to do over the course of a week. Grids and Gestures sets up other basic conceptual exercises—one where I work with how much expressional content can be in a single line, and more involved exercises using construction paper cutouts to portray relationships with abstract shapes, color, and composition, and moving onward to more general concepts.

Before outlining the other exercises, I want to highlight some key activities I do that aren't specifically comics-making but still focus on getting students comfortable communicating visually. This includes "sketchnotes" (as coined by Mike Rohde), which consists of taking notes using a mix of words, simple drawings, and diagramming. (See figure 2.) It is, as Rohde insists, not about

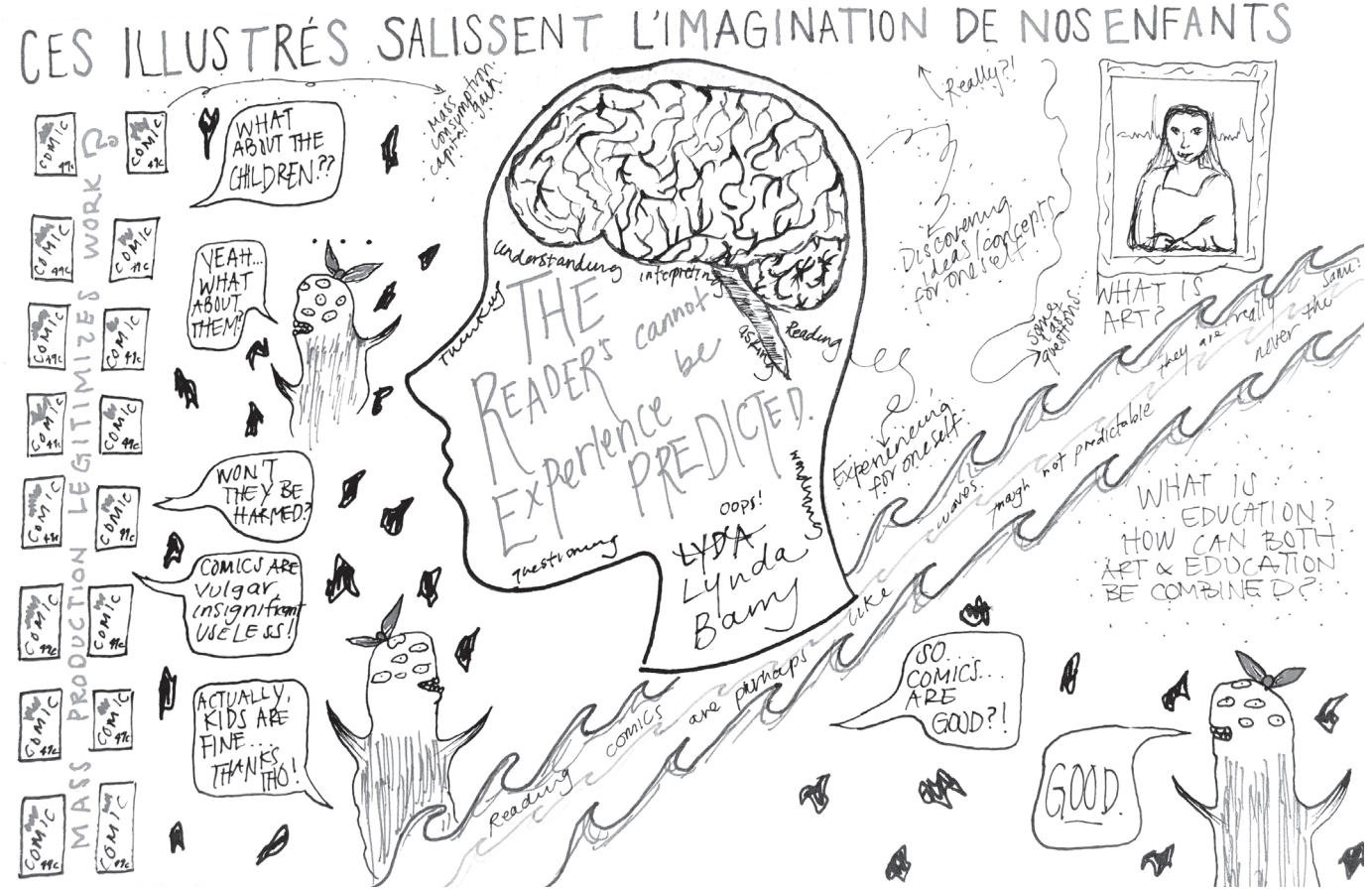


Figure 2: Sketchnotes example

making good art but getting ideas down. I have students make sketchnotes in all my classes and have them do it in at least one of their other classes. The mix of words and pictures is comics-like, visual notetaking as a means of retention is well-demonstrated, and many students continue using this method for taking notes in their classes going forward. Additionally, at the start of semester, I frequently have students make a sketchnote to map out what brought them to the course and what they want to take from the experience. Sketchnoting gets them mingling words and pictures off the bat with no pressure and has been a great way for everyone to get to know one another.

As a means of prompting group discussion and keeping the focus on comics as a visual medium, another key activity involves having students visually analyze and annotate comics pages. I have them do this with every reading, as well as for a few more involved projects over the term. I keep the format wide open—I suggest they trace, redraw, or photocopy the page, perhaps layering over it with tracing paper or acetate, anything that lets them engage with the art in an intimate way. Drawing directly on the composition is the key! This active interaction with the comics page invites them to start noticing everything the authors employ to construct meaning. When I do this for a larger standalone project, I provide a set of pages for them to choose from that I've selected, all of which are particularly interesting in a formal way such that I'm certain they can't help but find things to notice. I tell them that if they spend at least half an hour moving their hand and eyes over a page, they will absolutely start to discover all sorts of things about the maker's choices and the creative decisions within that were not immediately apparent. After they cross this threshold, some switch seems to flip and all sorts of things start to spill out—they find every square inch invested in meaning. The results are frequently this beautiful and insightful explosion of thinking. Students develop their own coding strategies, work in multiple layers, diagram, redraw key elements—find ways to draw out and bring to light elements of the page we'd otherwise be unaware of. As I've been collecting them over the years, I now briefly share some past examples with new students, which has often led to attempts by students to outdo earlier classes, by being more inventive in their formats and more exhaustive in all they bring to light.

As I said, I provide them with particularly complex pages, which pretty much guarantees they will come up with something interesting; but as they get better at this, they are able to do the same with even the most straightforward composition in rather run-of-the-mill comics. Sometimes we turn this analytical spotlight on their own, relatively novice works. And while initially, they may think their pages will be of little interest, here too it turns out that the student can bring to light a treasure trove of inspired decisions. It's

important to distinguish this from doing analysis solely based in writing. It's not that this can't be extremely insightful (of course it can), but in my experience, I strongly believe that the act of drawing on drawings—this direct physical response with the hand and guiding of the eyes through the page—opens students to seeing in ways they couldn't otherwise. The resulting annotated page could, of course, be subsequently turned into an essay if so desired, but the thinking is in that direct spatial engagement.

I'm reluctant to require specific textbooks on process—not that I don't have several and share from them to develop the course—I want to have students see a wide range of approaches in order to develop their own. I certainly draw heavily on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*: it was a huge influence on me, it's brilliant and accessible, and it's exciting in opening up what comics can be. But as McCloud says, it's the start of a conversation, and I want them to keep adding to it. In my making courses, where we don't have regular readings, I frequently pair Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story,* in which he makes a one-page comic of a completely mundane event and then proceeds to revisit it ninety-eight times in different variations and styles, alongside Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*, which offers a glimpse into her course on teaching comics for nondrawers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Madden's book, in its relentless exploration of form, page after page offers tremendous insight into how comics do their thing. We do a few activities inspired by it, including to imagine we are adding to his book by making a variation of his base story in a way that he didn't. For another, they tell a mundane story of their own in a one-page comic, and then make three different versions of it, where they play with style, storytelling, and distort form (including things that we may no longer even consider comics), challenging themselves to be inventive and question the very structure of conveying a narrative. We tackle a few of Barry's exercises in class; her "let's draw Batman" in successively shorter intervals from three minutes down to five seconds, is always extremely helpful, particularly with nondrawers in seeing how much they can draw, and I find it aids all of them in developing their own styles. Much of it I have them explore on their own—and I see it really help students in getting past their fears and finding inspiration for their own creative process.

Because of this reluctance to have a specific textbook, in my making courses I've been having them make their own "Recipe Book" of sorts, where each student contributes a short, single chapter highlighting some element of comics creation that they feel is particularly important, unique to their own way of working, and was helpful to them in learning to make comics that they want others to benefit from the experience of. Students have focused on elements of technique, ways to organize their work space, inspirational

activities, and other tips in a variety of illustrated and other forms. It lets them take charge of what's important to their own learning in a real way and they get really into it.

Much like the three-panels/two-pages activity, I do an exercise where students partner up and share a brief story about themselves (either in conversation or sometimes via email). Then, without further collaboration or sharing anything visually about their stories, each person makes a comic representing their partner's story and a comic telling their own story. So each person will have created two comics, and there will be two versions of each person's story. We end up with this great look at their distinct approaches to the same story—what took prominence, what was left out—all the different solutions they came up with, which in turn highlights the myriad sorts of approaches one can bring to telling any story.

Some exercises are fairly straightforward, at least in prompt. We create short wordless comics, with careful consideration for the different ways we can do something wordless, but not necessarily silent—so substitutes for dialogue, sound effects, and such. (I highly recommend David Berona's article analyzing Peter Kuper's wordless *The System*, in which Berona breaks down several different approaches to wordless comics: http://ireadpictures.com/david-a-berona-on-the-system-by-peter-kuper/.) We explore comics-poetry and the links between comics and poetry, and students make works either adapting an existing poem (found or their own) or something entirely new, with the emphasis on form and the interdependency of text and image—as opposed to illustrating text. (The comics-poetry anthology *Ink Brick* offers a wealth of inspiration: http://inkbrick.com/.)

After hearing Scott McCloud talk on airline safety instruction manuals, I've become quite fascinated to see how they might be reimagined in a comics class. It's an exercise that can be helpful in working on clarity of narrative and could potentially be quite useful as future explanatory materials. Essentially, after looking at existing manuals (and things like IKEA instructions), we discuss what's working and what we feel could be improved, and then they try their hand at it at anything from shoe-tying to recipes.

Many of the exercises I come up with spring from thinking about a particular page design or storytelling choice, and some from things in my own work. One such is an exercise playing with metaphor and visual-verbal resonance, a central feature of my approach, which was sparked after reading Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's short essay comic "This Is Information." I've done a number of pages where I use a single visual metaphor to talk about something else altogether—well-known fictional rabbits to talk about games, roses to talk about the name "comics," a "show of hands" to talk about the

process of voting, and so on. I want them to explore both the metaphorical potential of comics and the process of allowing words and images to co-generate one another. As I've described the assignment (which is best understood after sharing a few specific examples), make a one-page multipanel comic in which you select a single thematic element to use metaphorically or literally throughout as a way of linking the piece together. A short way to think about it is to talk about one thing in terms of another. Keep the metaphor running in some way for each beat of the narrative. A favorite example came from a student using horses (and a zebra) to brilliantly work through her thoughts on her racial identity.

I have students do something with their storytelling that could only be done in comics. This can include taking advantage of the spatial nature of comics, it might mean exploring time in a particular way, playing with the concept of simultaneity across panels, using panel-breaking, or the role the very structure of the composition can play on storytelling. Sometimes the prompts have an additional constraint—as with one that was to be rooted in the place they lived that highlighted time in some way (as in things like Chris Ware's *Building Stories* or Richard McGuire's *Here*).

In my first several years teaching, I hadn't done a lot with minicomics, besides showing students templates for making them. That changed when we Skyped with legendary former Dark Horse editor Diana Schutz, who shared stories about how she greatly appreciated the minicomics she was given by creators at conventions. She could easily take these home with her, and thus they were a great way to get someone to remember you. That idea of something easily shareable, cheap to produce, and finished appeals to students, and I've since made it a staple of class, with students producing both straightforward and wildly experimental minicomics.

I'm a strong believer that we learn a lot by studying and copying other creators. I frequently mimic other artists in my own work to play with styles and approaches (see "A Life in Comics" and "Bi(bli)ography") and am a big fan of R. Sikoryak's perfect adoption of another artist's look to tell his own stories (see his "iTunes Terms & Conditions" or *Masterpiece Comics* for great examples). With these examples in mind, I have them make a short comic about themselves using at least three instances where they directly reference the style from three different artists they admire or were influenced by as a way of telling their own narrative. The results for this have been amazing—their work often makes a significant leap with this project from what they glean from their "muses," and they tell insightful stories about themselves along the way.

"22 Panels That Always Work" is a fabled thing in the comics industry—an illustrated "cheat sheet" by cartoonist Wally Wood, as he put it "or some

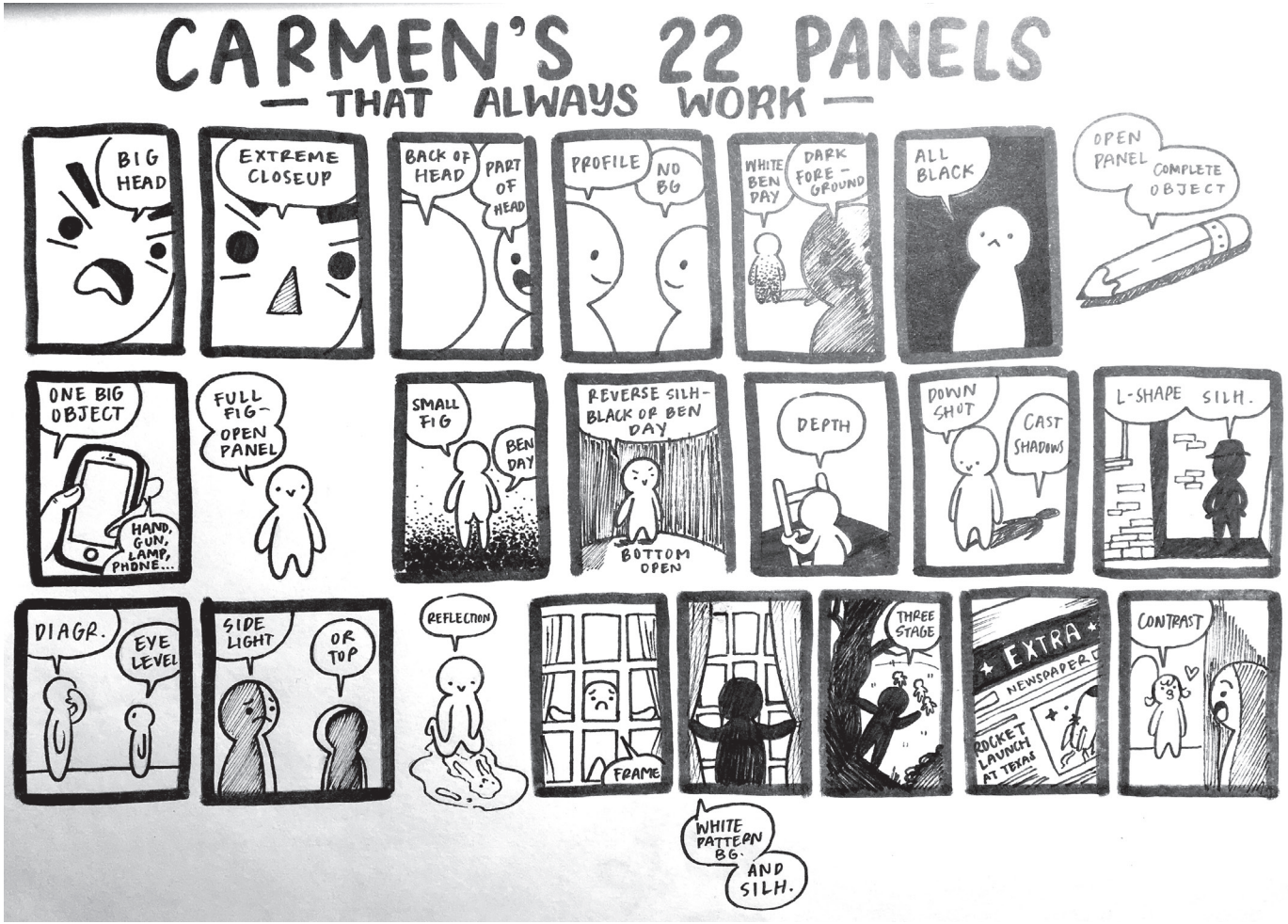


Figure 3: Carmen's twenty-two panels

interesting ways to get some variety into those boring panels where some dumb writer has a bunch of lame characters sitting around and talking for page after page!" These include such things as "extreme closeup," "down-shot—cast shadows," "back of head—part of head," and so on. After sharing his original twenty-two drawn panels along with numerous adaptations of it by various artists over the years, I have students create their own set, so that they now have this handy reference guide done in their unique styles. We then turned it into a game where I drew numbers one through twenty-through out of a hat (usually around seven in total), and they made a one-page comic based on the sequence I'd selected. (See figure 3.) As with the example above, I witnessed their comics grow in significant ways as following Wood, they were invested deeply in thinking about the particular composition of each panel in a way many of them had not done prior.

I do a few variations on script-to-page translations. For one, we start with a script to a single page (for which I also have the finished comic), and they break it down and thumbnail the page. To give them a good sense of how this works, I share a range of different scripting styles (often the extreme density and descriptiveness of an Alan Moore script alongside the closer to more spare theater directions of Neil Gaiman). When they've made their pages, we can compare the solutions they came up with to one another and against the page from the original comic. We've expanded on this where they pick an existing comic, write a script from a page of it, then give that script to someone else to produce a page, and again compare the results. They learn about what's necessary to put into a script and provide enough instructions to get what you're hoping for—or let it be wide open and surprised by the result. (Often to humorous effect—one student wrote a script for a page from *Pride of Baghdad*, which features lions as main characters, a fact he forgot to mention in his notes for the second student!) These sorts of telephone games are great interactive learning experiences and students delight in them. I've continued to introduce variations in my making courses—chopping up the whole process of producing a page—as in, person one shares a story, the second does thumbnails, the third person makes the actual page, and still further breakdowns. Each variation gives students insights into the process without having to be bogged down with telling just the right story—the collaboration and time constraint facilitate quick growth. (See figure 4.)

One of my favorite things to do, which works really well both in class and in workshops with large groups, is an independent-collaborative three-person exercise. The instructions are super simple. The first person takes a sheet of paper and proceeds to quickly (in maybe two minutes) compose a blank panel structure. The paper is then handed off to a second person (without

Figure 4: Making comics together

further comment from the first) who adds words to the page—in the form of dialogue in word balloons, thought bubbles, captions, or sound effects (in five or so minutes). It is then passed to the final person who draws everything. (My first time testing it out, I had them do the drawing second and words last, but it proved less generative.) There's something almost magical about how the disparate elements come together with these, and I think it speaks to the importance of constraints and collaboration to accelerate the creative process. I find in my own work, the more rules I build around the work, the more free I become to explore and arrive at unexpected places. I've increasingly made in-class collaboration a part of my courses. These fast switches, dividing up the labor, frees them from having to think of something perfect that they've invested too much in. They can get their hands moving and thus their minds working, and the results are frequently thrilling. And the energy in the classroom while they're doing this is such a treat to behold.

At the Angoulême Comics Festival in France, I watched a live drawing performance where two teams of cartoonists take turns making a comics

page—one team draws a panel all at once and then they pass the page to the "opposing" team to continue the story in the next panel and back again. I immediately wanted to try with my students, though I was slightly concerned it might not work as these were all seasoned professional cartoonists and my students were almost all novices. But to the contrary, students dove in and tackled their panels with abandon! To make it simple, we divide a piece of paper into four equal quadrants, make teams with two to three students each, and pair them off. Unlike what I'd seen in France, I didn't give students a rest while the other team was drawing. We have two pages being worked on at the same time. Both teams start in the first quadrant on their respective pages. After five minutes, the teams exchange pages and work on the next panel, and then pass again until they've filled all four. I've added different wrinkles—sometimes we do it silently, other times with a specific theme to incorporate throughout, and always it's produced terrific energy in the room. (See figure 5.)

Watching students grow leaps and bounds in their comfort level working together in these quick-paced activities has kept me experimenting. I pull out some feature from a comic we've looked at, and then try to reverse-engineer it to make an exercise that constrains for whatever unusual thing the comic did. One might expect for the comics produced under these conditions to be more or less throwaway formal exercises. To the contrary, I'm constantly surprised by how often these formal rules generate unexpectedly meaningful stories. I'm not asking them to discuss their emotions or personal stories, but I think a space opens and the stories flood out almost by accident. A few examples: "Zoom"—an exercise where someone draws whatever they want in the first panel, and then the next person draws their panel by zooming in or out directly from the prior panel, and so on. Sometimes panel layout is arranged at the start, and I've also tried it where that too is developed as each panel is drawn, which adds another layer of complexity, especially for the person at the end. We do an exercise where I ask them to sketch out a three-page fight scene and also, separately, a conversation. I prompt them to have an arc of ups and downs and moments of resolution (without any further specifics) and have them focus on page turns and the lower right corner of each page (to build anticipation for the next page). Story material pops out in comics crafted in minutes! One final exercise, something I'm calling "Zithers," which is intended to get students thinking about the way a comics maker can control the reader's movement through the page diverging from strictly left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading patterns. I set it up by drawing a curving, possibly looping directional arrow for everyone. Students are to then try and "solve" this pathway, by coming up with a page composition that follows the reading order that the arrow suggests. They

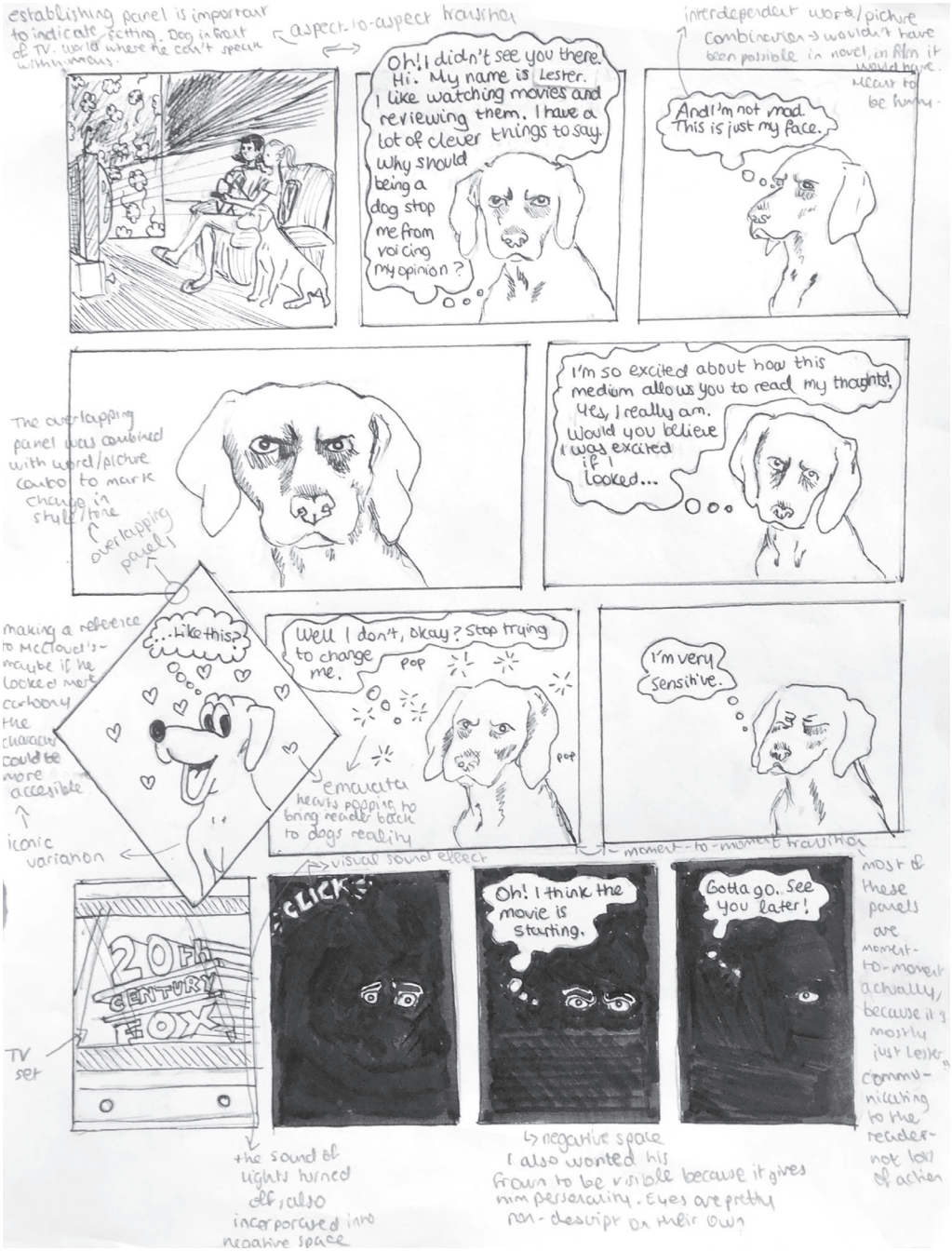


Figure 5: Reverse engineering

can use panel arrangement, overlapping panels, introduce a character leaping across a border, use the placement of text boxes or sound effects, anything they can come up with to get the reader to go in the desired direction. Solving these is hard enough (I don't have anything in mind when I draw them), but they not only figure out solutions but come up with genuinely interesting pieces all from me drawing a looping arrow! I keep trying new things to push them, expecting that some exercises will likely be a bust—but that's rarely been the case as students are always up for these odd challenges and rise to the occasion.

Everything I've been doing in my classroom is shaped by and influences my work, where I argue that comics should be taken seriously in academic settings. When I give public talks, I frequently get a response along the lines of, "I buy your argument, I see that it works for you, but I can't draw." To make the case in a way that I find is more succinct and powerful than all my intensely involved drawings, I have for the last few years taken to sharing an excerpt from one student's work. Let me introduce Odessa—a shy student who spoke very little in our "Comics as a Way of Thinking" course at the University of Calgary. The sketchnote she made about herself at the start of the semester revealed a lack of confidence in her drawing skills but an openness to explore. Throughout the semester she did a number of intriguing comics that did fascinating things with panel breaking, which in turn sent me to gather up additional examples to share with the class. I've thought about her work a great deal over the years since I've begun sharing it, but it was only the occasion of writing this chapter that prompted me to ask her about it directly.

As with her smaller pieces over the semester, this comic she created for her final project is highly involved in exploring form. She plays with the comics panel as window, as support, as tangible presence, and she manipulates the very way we read, reinforcing her point in the narrative by beautifully winding her words around and asking the reader to rotate the page to follow her thinking. It demonstrates an extremely sophisticated understanding of the comics form and it powerfully speaks to how working in visual ways allows us to make discoveries and understand things about our subject and ourselves that we couldn't without it. (See figures 6a–6e.)

I think in looking at her work, we would still agree, this is not the work of a trained drawer in the ways we conceive of that. However, I think it is impossible to miss that what she created is a profound piece of thinking. It shows that visual thinking isn't about technical training, but about understanding the properties of the form and drawing on our natural ability to understand space. It means an enormous amount to me each time I share it,

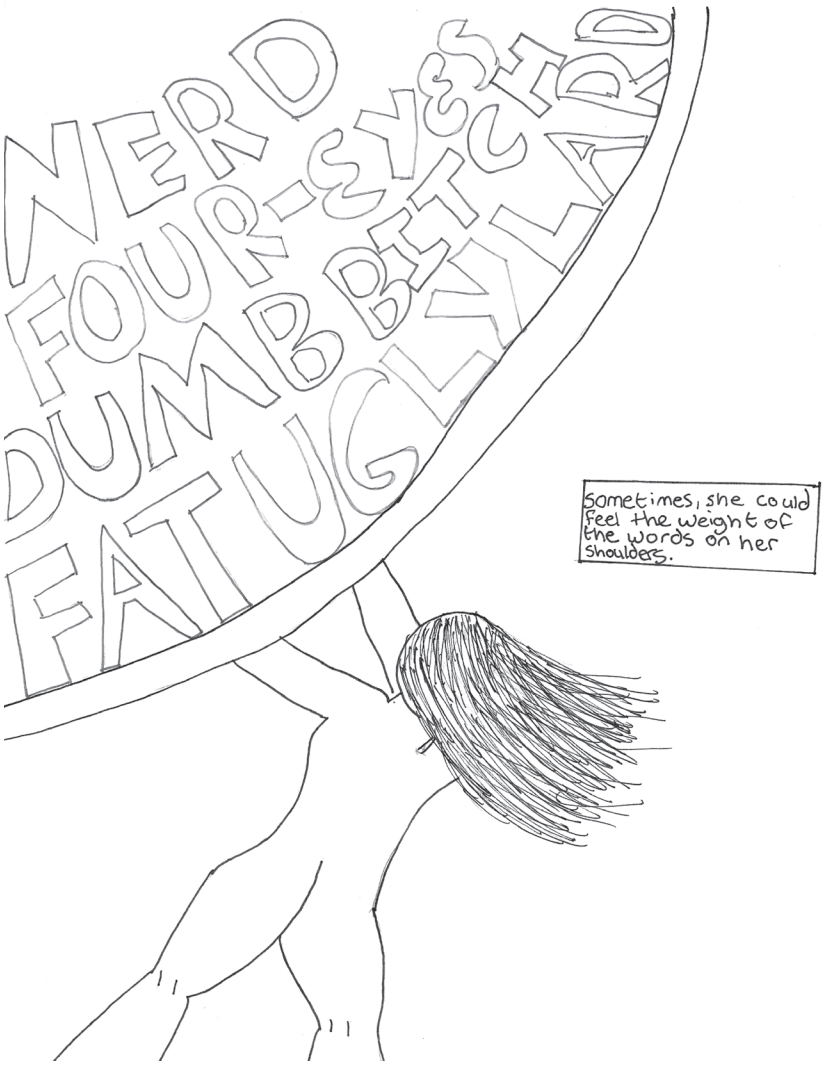
and I see its impact with others whenever I share it. All of them are deeply moved by what she created. (A fact Odessa found to be wild!) I asked her what she was able to express in comics in ways perhaps not available in other forms.

> I've never been very good at talking about myself. The anxiety in me makes me think that, when someone wants to know about me, they only ask so they can make fun of me later. Anyway, I never felt like that in comics class. I ended up writing about myself without really realizing what I wrote was about me until about halfway into the semester. It is a lot easier to draw a silly comic about pink elephants then it is to go up to someone and say, "Hey, I'm pretty sure I have social anxiety, sorry if that's weird and sorry if it's not." Being able to draw and visualize something like that let me look at it and say, "You know what? That pink elephant is kinda silly." I'm forever going to deal with the elephant but it's oddly comforting to have something to point at and tell it to shut up. I have come pretty far on that issue in the last couple years. It's nice.

Of its genesis, she describes having the phrase "this is a story" stuck in her head and working with it to see where it went:

> Then I got part way through and went "oh whoops" because apparently I'd dug a little deeper than intended and ended up finding the memories of being bullied. I didn't know that it was bullying at the time but now I look back and go, "No, that was not okay." So, there is that. Also, I was coming to terms with the fact I have zero interest in stereotypical "life" stuff like kids or marriage. While I didn't know it at the time I made the comic, though I suspect it helped me figure it out, I am bisexual. Which would explain whenever I tried to convince myself I was straight or someone tried to make fun of me for being gay I felt like I was being stuffed into an ill-fitting box. I spent a lot of time that year wondering who I am and who I should be and it turned out the answer was "who cares?" *I'm me and I'm pretty cool. That's what matters.*

Comics let you say things you couldn't in another form and learn things about yourself along the way. I connect Odessa's experience of discovering her own creative potential to an observation I made in response to someone in a workshop I ran. One initially reluctant participant made this incredibly elaborate three-dimensional metaphorical cutout construction, and then she said, "I'm not usually into artsy-craftsy things." I responded that it wasn't a piece of art, "that's a piece of thinking." Working in this way is available to everyone, and I think the flexibility of comics to allow a broad range of approaches in how we use images, words, and space makes them particularly inviting for anyone.



Figures 6a–6e: Examples from Odessa

And while I certainly want my students to leave class knowledgeable about comics—theory, history, and craft—I mostly want them to be better be able to understand and express their own thinking. By incorporating making, I think we can achieve both.

To those who are onboard but worried you don't know that much about comics and definitely don't have the skills to draw them or (therefore) to teach them, I say it's ok to acknowledge your ignorance and to trust your students. Start trying things and let them lead the way. You'll figure it out together.

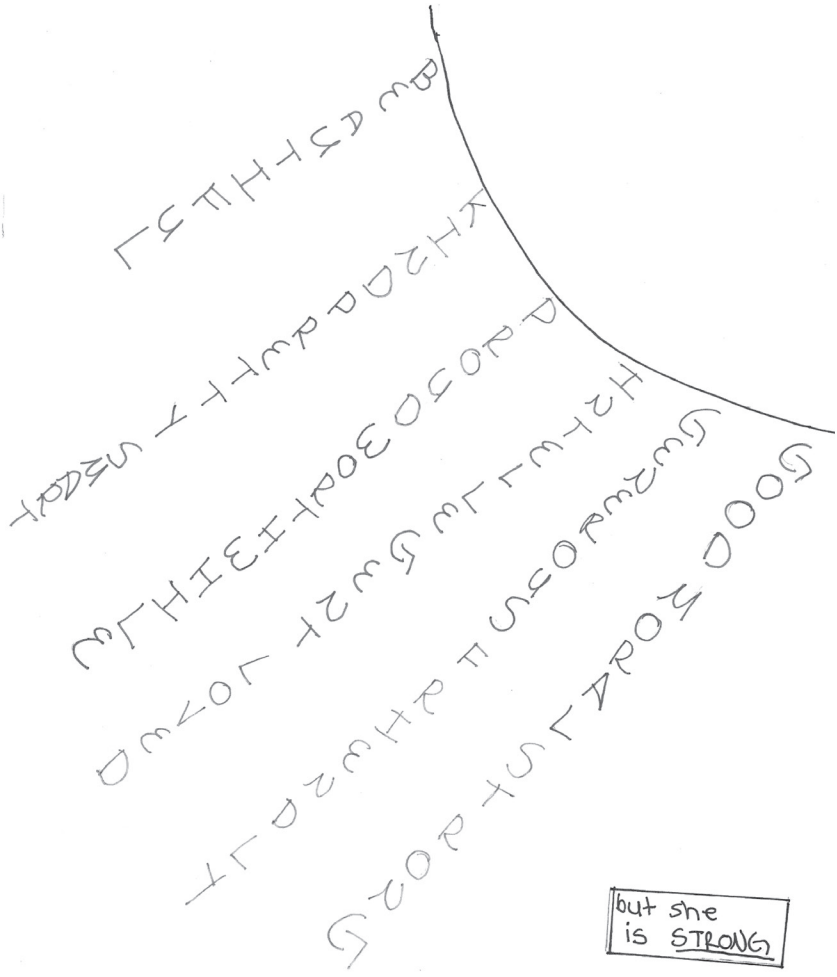


Figure 6b

Figure 6c

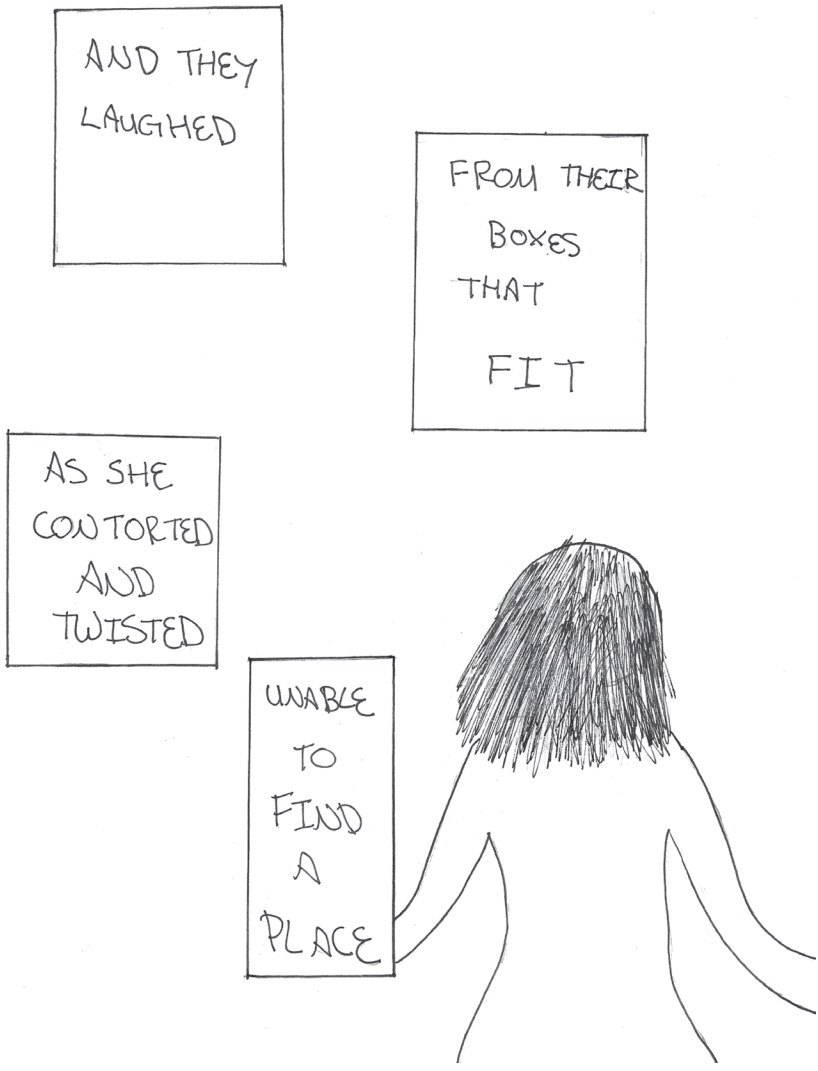

AND THEY LAUGHED
FROM THEIR BOXES THAT FIT
AS SHE CONTORTED AND TWISTED
UNABLE TO FIND A PLACE

Figure 6d

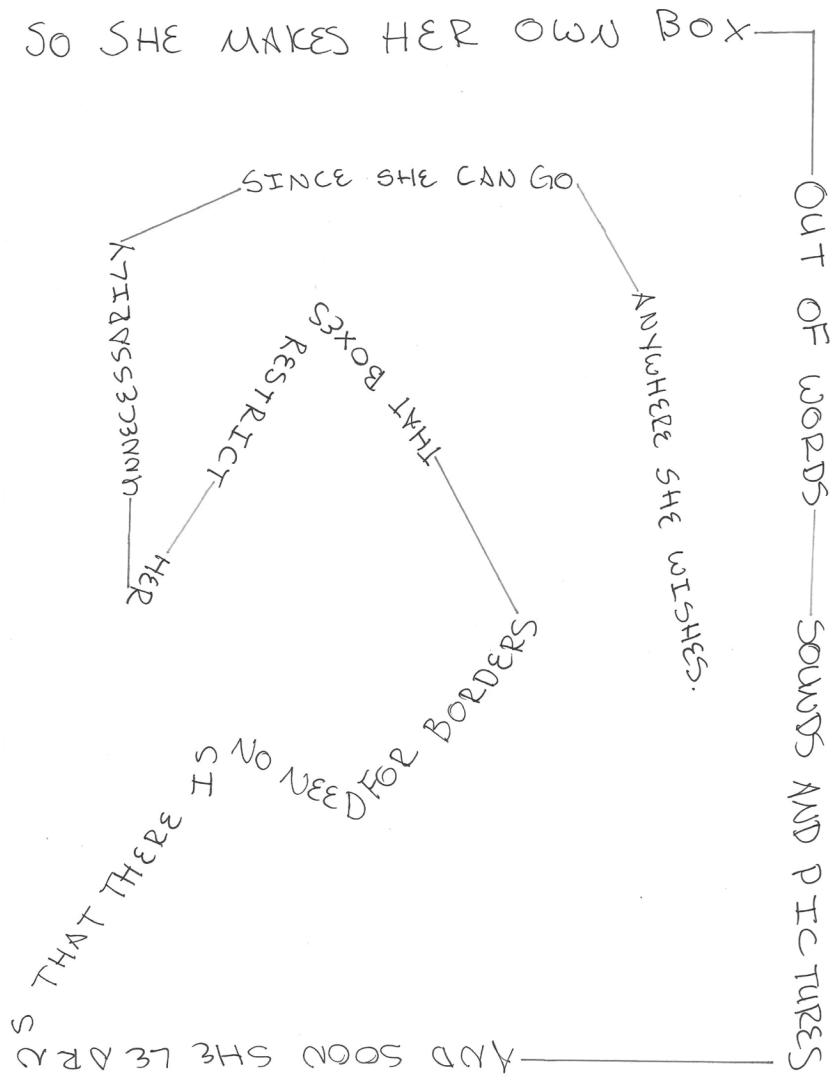

SO SHE MAKES HER OWN BOX
OUT OF WORDS
SOUNDS AND PICTURES
AND SOON SHE LEARNS
THAT THERE IS NO NEED FOR BORDERS
THAT BOXES RESTRICT
HER UNNECESSARILY
SINCE SHE CAN GO
ANYWHERE SHE WISHES.

Figure 6e

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OTHER RESOURCES

To see examples of the student activities detailed above, along with his syllabi, readings, more exercises, and other resources for using comics in the classroom, please visit Sousanis's Comics Education website http://spinweaveandcut.com/education-home/ or www.thinkingincomics.com.

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's website *Drawing Words/Writing Pictures*: http://dw-wp.com

Panel Lottery—a great collaborative comics-making exercise by Abel and Madden: http://dw-wp.com/2010/05/panel-lottery-an-exercise-in-narrative-juxtaposition-and-editing/. PDF (with instructions): http://dw-wp.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/lib-workshop-panel-lottery.pdf.

Teaching the Unthinkable Image: An Interview with Lynda Barry

—LEAH MISEMER

On a cold, rainy February day in Madison, Wisconsin, I was delighted to interview Lynda Barry, a cartoonist who made her name in the days of alternative comics with *Ernie Pook's Comeek* and has since gained a following based on her genre-bending works *What It Is*, *Picture This*, and most recently *Syllabus*. While taking the "What It Is" class with Barry when she was a visiting artist at UW-Madison in 2012, I was struck by how much I learned about studying comics by making comics and by the often counterintuitive but always effective nature of Barry's pedagogical choices. After seeing what I—a self-described terrible artist—was able to produce given the right tools and armed with some simple techniques, I became, like so many others around the world who have heard her speak or taken her "Drawing the Unthinkable" workshop, a Lynda Barry disciple, spreading her message that everyone can and should draw. We met in her Image Lab in the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery, where she is now an associate professor of interdisciplinary creativity, surrounded by her students' work taped to windows and walls on all sides.

Misemer: You've talked a lot in the past about your experience as a student of Marilyn Frasca at Evergreen State. For example, you talk about being in her class in *What It Is*. Can you tell me a bit about how Marilyn's approach to teaching influenced your own approach to teaching comics?

Barry: Probably the most important thing was the way she did critique. In Marilyn's class, the artwork was never separated from the experience of viewing it or reading it. That is to say, it was never separated out as an object that we looked at critically and dispassionately. You know how people do, when they're doing criticism. Instead, she used people's work to help the rest

of us see. So a critique would mainly consist of putting up five images, and then the class would just stare at them, sometimes for up to an hour. Afterwards, we'd do drawings from them or we'd respond to them in some way. But Marilyn made it clear that when you're looking at a piece of art, there is no way to take yourself out of that experience, to talk about it objectively. You're always, in a funny way, talking about yourself. When I began to teach workshops in my early twenties, that's what I would do. I would emphasize the experience of the work and looking at other people's work and copying other people's work, but not speaking about it directly. And certainly not speaking about it in a critical way where you would give suggestions about what would improve a piece. Marilyn would just say, "See what's there." That's something I do in my classes. That's how I look at work, too. That's how I move through the world. And I was nineteen when I started that practice. I'm sixty-one now.

Misemer: What about that uncritical eye helped you learn? How have you seen it help your students learn?

Barry: I think there are multiple parts of us, and that one part has speech, but another part doesn't have speech. It has language, but it doesn't have speech. So I think this approach gets my students to start to use, understand, and communicate in this other language. The only way to become versed in this other language is through total immersion. You have to stop the chatting or talking part of speech and pay attention to the thing I always call the "top of the mind" for this other thing to come forward. It was difficult enough to learn to do this when I was in school. Now we have all these devices that are always calling us back to this other state of mind. I call it the hamster wheel sometimes, you know, with the same fifteen problems that you just keep running through. Because we have so many things bringing us out of the top of the mind, it's harder to show people how to do this. People also don't have as long of a history with their hands, particularly writing by hand. Sometimes that can be hard. But I always say that it's a very difficult thing to explain and very easy to demonstrate.

Misemer: Moving on from Marilyn to some of your other learning experiences, how have your past experiences with school shaped how and why you teach? I'm thinking about teachers in your early life. For example, you talk about some of your early teachers in *One! Hundred! Demons!* How did their pedagogy influence you, or how did your experience as a student in their classroom influence you?

Barry: Elementary school, from the very first day, had a profound influence on me. I came from an immigrant family. My dad left early on, but I grew up in a Filipino family without a lot of money and no books. Nothing that would be at school. So for me, when I got to school, it was this remarkable place that was stable, that had materials, that had a desk that was just mine, a coat hook that was just mine, all these things that kids in stable homes may take for granted. And they should take them for granted. Everybody should feel like they have something that belongs to them. I also happened to have the same teacher for first and second grade, who understood that I had emotional problems, that I had a lot of trouble. You know, I flipped out. And she took an approach to helping me manage my issues that meant everything to me. She had an easel set up in the back of the room, and when I started to flip out, I could go to the easel. And it was without shame; it was without punishment. There was some part of her that understood that another part of me was trying to get out and couldn't do it with words, and so she thought that I could do it with pictures and stories. Those things would come together for me.

Right now, I go every Tuesday to a pre-K classroom here on campus at Eagle's Wing, and I know my time there is directly related to what happened to me in first and second grade. I'm really interested in seeing when kids become hesitant about drawing and storytelling. I used to believe, before I started working directly with little kids, that that hesitation, when it shows up, becomes more and more intractable until, by about the age of eight or nine, kids will decide they can draw or they can't draw. But what I'm finding is that it's more like a spiral, and there are opportunities over and over again for this kind of language to be learned and spoken. The most important thing is having somebody around who's doing it. Not teaching it necessarily. I don't go to my pre-K classroom to teach those kids anything. But I'm there drawing, and I have materials, and they know that I'm going to come there on Tuesday and lay on the floor, and they can come and draw with me and tell me stories. And I'm starting to see that practice moving away from where I am in the room to other parts of the room.

I do believe that drawing is our earliest language, in a certain way. It's attached to the movement of the hands. No matter what it is you're studying, it's invaluable moving into the future to have facility in this other language, which is drawing. And I don't mean representational drawing. I'm speaking specifically about comics. Today, there was a four-year-old who wanted me to draw a rock-and-roll baby in a diaper. They come over and tell me to draw stuff. And we have a tradition in that classroom where they'll be drawing, and I'll draw with them in real time, moving their hands like a

Ouija board. So I copy them in real time. They also copy me. So I start drawing this rock-and-roll baby and the kid put his hands on mine to copy in real time. This rock-and-roll baby had his eyes closed and squinted down because he was rocking out really hard, so instead of just being circles with dots in them, I made a different shape for the eyes. And the kid really liked learning the traditional anime way of using a V with a line in it. Then, I gave the rock-and-roll baby a turned up nose, and the kid said, "It looks like a pig nose," and I said, "Yeah, it does." But we drew it together.

Their brains and bodies are developing so rapidly, along with their ability to learn language. With the language of drawing specifically, the only limitation is whether their teachers are afraid of drawing or not. Most teachers are afraid of drawing. Most people are. So that really inhibits. If adults are scared of that language, the kids will pick up on that. There's also this really weird idea that you're not supposed to draw for kids. You can show them how to make an A, you can show them how to make a 5, but you're not supposed to draw a giraffe. I asked about the theory of that, and someone said that it's because kids will get so intimidated by what you're doing that they won't try themselves. But that's a wish! That's not what's going to happen. Kids aren't going to go, "Oh, you just drew a perfect giraffe, so I'm just never going to do it." I mean, they're really not that interested. That comes way later. So the other thing I'm working on is trying to get teachers to start drawing, too.

Misemer: You've taught all kinds of populations since you started teaching at twenty-five. From the pre-K kids that you're talking about to prisoners, business people, elderly people, everybody. I have met so many people who have taken workshops with you all over the world. How does your teaching approach change based on who you're working with? How do you adapt what you're teaching?

Barry: That's one of the most wonderful things about this job. Somehow, in the course of forty-eight hours I work with everyone, from people who are four years old to people who are getting their doctorates. And I do adapt what I'm teaching. Mainly I teach to where I think the person is kind of scared, to an ability the person or group doesn't realize they have. I always try to create surprise. That's what I was doing when I brought in that little tin box for you that you made *Made in Atlanta* [the project I made for her class] out of. The way you looked when you put everything in that box . . . I'm getting teary eyed thinking about it, because you were so surprised that you had done this. And that's the thing I always try to teach. Where can I add this element of surprise?

For adults who are completely sure they can't draw, one of the most important things is to have other people drawing at the same time, so they can show each other their drawings. I like to have people draw with their eyes closed. In fact, a giraffe drawn with your eyes closed almost always looks fantastic. It looks like a cave painting, you know, because people will lift their hands and they don't know quite where the dots are supposed to be, so the giraffe will be on one side of the page and the dots will be over about four inches away from it. But they always look good. [Laughter] And the way you're laughing right now, that happiness? That's what happens in the classroom. If they're just looking at their own giraffe, they look all concerned, but if you say, "Now hold up your drawing and show your neighbors," this joy happens in the classroom. This kind of drawing can bring this immense and immediate joy.

I was giving a university roundtable talk, and I wanted people to draw, but I didn't understand they would be eating lunch while I talked. All of a sudden, I realized there was no way that I was going to be able to get them to draw. Then I realized they were eating. So I said, "Whatever you're doing with your meal right now, I want you to make a face on your plate." Nobody moved. They were all looking at me like I was crazy. I said, "Just arrange stuff on your plate so that you're making a face that's showing some kind of emotion." What was so funny is that it was quiet for a moment, and then you heard this mad clinking, as they started making the faces. And then people started to laugh. Then I said, "Show your neighbor." Everybody turned their plate around and showed their neighbor, and the place erupted in laughter. They were having such a good time laughing at each other's food faces that it was hard for me to get them back. That kind of big physical change is possible just by moving your lettuce around or by drawing with your eyes closed. What the hell is that?! The cool thing about comics is they can just leap right over all the problems representational drawing caused. It jumps right over all that fear immediately. Especially if you give people just the most basic tools: that Ivan Brunetti means of drawing. You start there and you'll always end up somewhere.

Misemer: I drew an Ivan Brunetti drawing in a job interview recently, and I taught the method to my students. It's such a good way of helping people create simple, expressive figures interacting with their environments. And it takes seconds to teach. The formula helps scaffold the experience, so people can get beyond thinking about their lack of technique and focus on drawing to communicate or to think.

Barry: I do Ivan Brunetti drawings all the time. That style has such a long human tradition. I found a drawing that was made I think in the thirteenth century in Russia by a little kid, and it looked just like an Ivan Brunetti drawing. It was scraped onto a piece of birch bark, but it was definitely the same style. So I think it's a common language that all people have, this use of images. And following the basic idea of evolution, the characteristics that contribute to our survival tend to persist. Drawing persists. And not only does it persist. Even when people quit drawing, they wish they could draw. One of the things I love to say to people is, "If I was a genie, and I could give you the power to draw to your satisfaction, but the rule was you could never make a dime off of it, would you accept that power?" Most people say yes. And I say, "Wish granted."

Misemer: You're making this distinction between representational drawing and comics, and I just want to clarify that distinction. I'm familiar with the distinction McCloud makes in *Understanding Comics* about how reader interaction is related to the level of detail in the drawing. How do you see the two as different from one another?

Barry: It's easy to explain. Most people quit drawing, or they become sure that they can't draw, at about the age of eight or nine. Around that age there will come a time when they'll draw everything else on the page, but suddenly they'll realize the nose doesn't look right. Or hands. Those are the two things that trip people up, noses and hands. And unless they develop a symbol for that nose or hand, they'll quit drawing. Most people who think they can't draw are living with a decision they made about themselves when they were eight. Then I'll say to them, "Okay, so imagine Charlie Brown. Now imagine Charlie Brown with a hyperrealistic nose and realistic hands." It'd be horrible, right? In fact, a cartoon really needs to have just symbols, little symbolic marks, for the hands and the face. Part of that is because we're born being able to recognize faces. Also, anything in the hand position is going to read as a hand. Anything in the nose position is going to read as a nose.

I love to prove this to my students when we do drawing jams. I'll tell students to draw an object in the nose area. I had one student draw a can of beer. Then I'll tell them to draw a letter of the alphabet where the nose would be. Then an exclamation mark. Then a scribble. And once we get all the other features in, you can see that, yes, it's the letter Q somebody wrote for a nose, but it totally reads as a nose. Again, that's the surprise element I love to show people. You can also see this ability to recognize faces from

symbols when you do a drawing jam, where you draw and then pass me the paper, and then I draw and pass it back and so on. Say we each drew a head shape, then we passed it, then we each drew eyes and passed it. Maybe we'd do four of these heads. And we lay them out, and I ask you, "Which one's drunk?" and you'll know. No one intended to make a drunk person, but it's really easy to tell which one is drunk. So where's the comic? The comic is somewhere between the person who made it and the person who's looking at it.

It's a relationship. And it's one that stutters through time, because somebody might have made that comic in 1954, and then here in 2017, I may activate something from it. Or it may activate some part of me. And that's the thing that's so great about comics. Once you realize that sweating over the tiny details isn't going to get you close to what you're trying to do, it's freeing. There are cartoonists who leave you more and more to find, and that's heavenly. But comics can also be very, very simple, because the tiny details aren't visible.

Misemer: For me as a comics reader, the digital has changed that a little bit. I don't know if you read comics digitally, but with guided view your whole iPad screen can become one panel. I'm currently super fascinated with the cartoonist who's doing *The Fade Out*. Ed Brubaker's writing it. Sean Phillips is drawing it. He uses a different brushstroke style depending on the character he's writing. [Gesturing] The noir detective guy, his brushstrokes are all scratchy. And then, the femme fatale, hers are all sinuous. But even being able to see those details, I can see what you're saying in terms of that relationship created by the drawing. That it can be detail oriented, but sometimes it's elements of the image that we don't even think about.

Barry: You just demonstrated the universal language of drawing to me. [Gestures] You did this to show the noir guy and this to show the femme fatale. So you were drawing. When people are gesturing, one of the things they're doing is drawing. It's just that they're drawing in the air without leaving any kind of evidence. Another thing I've been trying to study is the tendency of people who haven't drawn something in a while to want to cover up their drawings. They have this look of distress, and the only thing I can compare it to is if you had suddenly lost control of a bodily fluid. It's the same kind of shame you'd have if you just started drooling while you were talking to somebody. It's intense shame and embarrassment.

Misemer: I'm interested in the role of shame and the forbidden and the idea of permission in your work and teaching. In your own history, you talk about

how drawing was forbidden, how you had to scrounge scraps of paper and things like that. And then you talk about giving your students permission to draw in your classes in a way that is not representational or giving them permission to draw even though they haven't drawn in twenty years. Do you feel like one informs the other? Do you feel like your idea of giving students permission comes from your own history of drawing being forbidden or difficult?

Barry: It wasn't just drawing that was forbidden. It was pretty much engaging with anything. Drawing, a book, anything. But I do think that for me, the permission is more about permission to speak in this other language, to try to use this other language that's there. To be able to make pictures in real time in class. You know from working with me that we move rapidly. Often, you make a drawing and it's out of your hands before you even have a chance to look at it. Like when we're doing drawing jams. It's more like total immersion in learning a language versus studying verbs and conjugation. Conjugation and sentence structure, all that stuff can come later, but you have to have the language first.

Also, I just love drawings made by people who quit drawing at about the age of eight or nine, because there's so much that's intact from that time. Like your drawings just drove me wild, as you know. I was a huge fan. Because I'd just see these drawings that I'm not capable of doing anymore. A lot of people who are trained artists can't draw like that anymore unless they're around people who draw in a very natural way, who are mostly untrained. That's the big advantage of having a really mixed class. I feel like when people are taught to draw well, they basically just learn how not to draw badly, which means there's so much they can't say. It's like they're trying to write everything with one vowel. And it's not bad drawing, but the untrained students have a very fresh approach. I think everybody benefits from the class when I can get the people who feel like they can't draw to not be scared.

Misemer: It's interesting that you describe this as a language immersion program, because that's what I felt like when I was in your class. I was sort of swept up in the flow, and I never really knew what was happening, and you wouldn't really tell us what we were going to do. I didn't even have time to think about the fact that, before coming to your class, I was a self-classified "bad drawer." I just kept doing what I was told. As someone who has students in my writing classroom reflect on their writing all the time, which is a research-supported method for helping someone become a better writer, it was really strange for me. But it worked. What other techniques do you have for getting people over the idea that they are bad writers or bad drawers?

Barry: Exhaustion is one of my main techniques. So that you get to the point where you just can't care anymore. That's where the timer comes in. I work really hard to get people to understand what three minutes feels like without having to keep a timer. If you have to do a drawing in three minutes, you can't really think about it. I also frontload the class. Now the most difficult part of the class is the first six weeks. I just make them draw nonstop. Make comics. Observe people. I lessen that frantic pace as we go toward the end of the semester, so that in the last four weeks, they just have one comic strip due, which is way more than most teachers ask people to do. My "Comics I" class had to do ten comic strips last semester. And each strip had to have a silent moment, so that they'd start to understand what that silent beat is. There's this point where you just can't freak out because there's just too much due. You're not going to stress over how to draw that eye, because you have too much to do. You're just going to go, "Okay, that's how I'm going to draw an eye."

Also, we copy each other's work a lot. And we copy work from books. I think copying is probably the best way to learn how to draw. Boy do I see that in the pre-K classes. They do not have this concept of intellectual property. One draws a princess, and the princess happens to have this long blue nose. Suddenly, you'll see that blue nose appearing all over the classroom. Or an element will be in a story, and then it appears in all these other stories. They borrow each other's stuff constantly. And that's how they're growing. They're picking up stuff from all over. I often go to those kids to help me figure out what's going on in my classroom with my grown students. One of the things I always say is that the class is open source. When you see someone try something, you have the absolute right to copy it and try it. So far, everybody's been cool about it. That's the kind of thing in fine art that you're not allowed to do at all. And I'm like, "Why?" I don't get it.

Misemer: If you think about how art, or really any skill, was taught in the guild system, people learned by copying their masters, by imitating what they did with whatever tools that they were learning to work with. So learning from copying makes sense. And having interviewed a number of women cartoonists because of my interest in *Wimmen's Comix,* so many people learn to make comics by copying comics.

Barry: How else would you do it? How else do you learn to speak any language? You copy what people are saying. You don't have to invent an entirely new language to be able to speak. The only kind of comics instruction you used to get was in the backs of magazines, you know, where you could take

a comics course. There are people who taught caricature. But this idea that comics are being taught now is really interesting to me. And the idea that they're being taught without drawing is fascinating to me. How do people study comics, but not draw them? It's sort of like studying the Portuguese language without ever speaking it. I think that, if you're studying comics, even if you feel like you can't draw, just trying to copy one panel will teach you way more than anything that can be spoken.

Misemer: There's a small, but growing, movement within scholarship that emphasizes the importance of comics creation. Nick Sousanis's work springs to mind, and Aaron Kashtan had a piece in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* entitled "Materiality Comics" published a few years ago that argued for a similar practice-based approach to scholarship. He was talking about the importance of materiality in comics and used BitStrips and Comic Life to create his own comic, basically theorizing the comic as he was creating it.

Barry: That's so much nicer than writing out the script and then finding pictures that go with it.

Misemer: This actually brings me to another question about the relationship between art and literature and drawing and writing in your class. So often, in school, we separate the two. We have separate classes in literature and art. And in college, at least here at UW-Madison, they're on opposite ends of the campus. I imagine that your students bring this artificial distinction with them sometimes. What kinds of challenges have you faced in trying to get students to both create art and write?

Barry: If they have to do it with the intention of creating art or creating a piece of writing, they are already not going to be very happy. So again, what I try to do is walk them into it in a surprising way. For example, somebody might read in our class, and then everybody in our class has three minutes to draw a picture based on that reading. What we've done is take a piece of text that somebody's read, and then suddenly, there are twenty visual images of that text. We can do the same thing with a visual image, which your class often did, where we write from a photo. And then there'd be twenty text versions. What I try to show is that everything that we call "the arts" is image-based.

Whether it's an image that's in a sound form, like in music, or whether it's in some other form, the image is there, but the formula for that experience differs whether it's a painting or a comic strip or an opera or a novel. It's the

language of that experience. But what I'm able to show in a classroom is that you can have the same image—so it can be like a picnic somewhere—and you can put the formula for that experience in the alphabet or written language. Or the formula for that experience can be a drawing. But either way, the person has to experience it while they are using that formula. I don't think images transfer very well if you're just thinking logically about what it should look like and then handing it to somebody. That's really different than having an experience while you're making something. Then, I think the image transfers a lot better.

One of the problems I have about comics that are trying to teach is that rather than doing the amazing thing comics can do, they are infomercials. It's mainly a head looking directly out of the frame and talking to me with text that oftentimes feels that it was written before this little head and was just popped into the panel. Those things don't do what comics do. I look at them and I think they're not comics. They look like comics, but they're not in this other world that I'm sort of looking into. In comics, there aren't imperatives for me like, "Hey you, now make comics!" Nobody's talking out at me. I think it would be really weird to try to read a novel where the person was trying to talk to me the whole time I was reading it.

The thing I feel like hasn't been done in comics yet, and I think it will be, is that when people are trying to do scholarly comics, they have not yet found a good solution for giving information to people. And I think the solution is pretty damn simple, but nobody believes it. If you're giving a citation or some scholarly observation, to just have a person telling you that, that doesn't do anything. If you had instead a picture of a plate of spaghetti or a mountain range or a dog pissed off at another dog or a cigarette smoking or anything, suddenly, whatever text I'm reading and the image are going to try to communicate with each other in the back of my mind. That's where all the associative thoughts happen. That's also where comprehension happens. So the thing that comics can do is put text together with an image that is not quite exactly right and suddenly open up a way of thinking through that juxtaposition. And that's the thing I hope people will start to realize when they're doing educational and scholarly comics.

Because I know that comics and scholarship are intertwined now. Ebony [Flowers's] dissertation is almost done and it is gorgeous. It's this beautiful, drawn piece of art. But even she had to use some of these talking faces. She had to figure out how to write a whole dissertation in comics. Can you actually write a whole dissertation in comics? She couldn't do the whole thing, but she did part of it. And she also talks a little bit out, but mainly, she has conversations with people in her comics. So in a funny way, I still get to be

the reader, instead of someone who's being directly addressed and bored, by the way, by that direct address. They might just as well say, "Eat sausage. Eat sausage, eat sausage." That's what it seems like to me. It's like an infomercial for sausage.

Misemer: I think Nick's [Sousanis] work takes advantage of this juxtaposition you're discussing. And *Unflattening* came from his dissertation, so it is possible to write a dissertation in comics. Having a willing committee is the tricky part. It's interesting that you bring up these comics that teach you how to make comics, because I was recently reading *Everything Volume 1,* and I found one of those that you did from 1979.

Barry: I was already critical about the whole thing then. How old was I? Like twenty-three, and I was already critical about the idea that this is how you do it.

Misemer: When I was reading through your oeuvre, I noticed that elements of teaching start to emerge at a certain point. It seems to start happening at the end of *One! Hundred! Demons!* but maybe it happened before that. *What It Is, Picture This,* and *Syllabus* are all very much about teaching. Was writing about teaching something you always wanted to do? Or did it happen organically? What was that process like?

Barry: For a lot of people, what's published has to do with what a publisher is willing to publish. The publisher Sasquatch didn't care for *One! Hundred! Demons!* and really didn't care for that instruction stuff at the back. The next book that I had planned was *What It Is*, and they didn't want any part of it. I met with my publisher to talk about my next book and he said, "Is it going to have comics in it?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm a cartoonist." And he said, "We're not interested." So that was in 2002, I believe. Then all the way to 2008 or 9 I couldn't find a publisher who would touch anything. I had this career that was going really well, and then it just crashed, and at the same time, these alternative newspapers started to fold up. Interestingly enough, I got to the point where I really had nothing to lose. Nobody wanted to publish *What It Is*. There was something wonderful about that, because I thought, "I'm not going to try to make these comics in a way that people think of comics."

I've been interested in the nature of images since I worked with Marilyn, and teaching is one of the ways that I get to know more about the image. It's really weird. If you think about that little watercolor set that you had with all those colors that you could mix and make all this stuff with. That's what

students are like for me. You're like this palette with these amazing colors. Things I cannot figure out on my own, in my own practice, I can for some reason figure out when students are working. I was just going through my computer. I have to find some images that I have to send to New York for this event that I'm going to. And I was just laughing because I have hardly any pictures of my own stuff. It's like baby pictures of you all. Just every little thing that you did. The main memory of my computer is just pictures of your stuff. When I look at it, I'm just like wrecked and wowed, you know. It'd be so much better if I wasn't. Because then I could just go home and make comics. But I feel this strong need to show people what my students are making.

Misemer: So is that where *Syllabus* comes from, then? The idea that the work you are doing right now is made up of what your students are making?

Barry: Being in love? Yeah. Actually, when I was hanging some stuff up in the hallway of the sixth floor in the art building, one of my colleagues walked by and he looked at me and he went, "Show off." I said, "I totally am. I'm showing off their work." One time, when I was hanging something up, somebody said, "How do you get them to make so much work? What do you do with them?" Because my students make more work than anybody. But I believe in it, and I believe it has a biological function. And I believe comics are the oldest form of art. If you watch the little kids I work with, they'll say, "I'm going to write a story and read it to you." So they'll write the story by drawing it, and then they hold it like a book and they read it to you. Today, a girl came up to me who has been telling me the same story about this snake every time I visit. She'll tell it to me and I'll write it down. So she drew the same snake today and she says, "This time, I'm going to write it." So I said, "Alright." She took an index card and imitated handwriting and said, "Now I'll read it to you." And she went, "Blah blahblah blahblah blahblah blahblah." And then we started laughing really hard. And then other people would pick up this card with her scribbles and they'd read it and they'd go, "Blahblah blahblah blahblah blahblah blah." They're really funny.

Misemer: I see this idea of using student work as your materials in *Syllabus*. But in *What It Is* and *Picture This*, it's the teaching without the student work. Where does that impulse come from?

Barry: I think it's teaching myself. That's the way that I sort stuff out. I sit down and I try to write about it. And always try to include some visual element, whether it's collage or just any kind of drawing. Ebony [Flowers]

came up with something that blew my mind. She figured out to take a double-paged spread in a comp book and actually draw the places where the pictures are going to go, even though you don't know what in the hell it is that you're going to write about. She's also a person that really started to play with frame shapes and sizes. It's as if I was able to show her something that made her able to teach me. That's happened over and over again, where from working with students, particularly students who are teachers themselves, I end up learning so many things and getting so many ideas. Things that become an integral part of my practice. For example, one of my students, Chef Boyardee, he teaches, and he started doing the attendance thing where you draw a self-portrait, but he started directing the students. He'd say, "I'd like you guys to draw yourselves getting shot out of a cannon." So that's what I do now. Everyday as I drive into school, I think about what I'm going to have them draw. I had them draw themselves leaving their bodies yesterday. And I gave them these little tiny red rhinestones that are adhesive on the back. I said, "Start by putting two of those on your index cards. Those are your eyes." They were just fantastic.

[We are interrupted by one of Lynda's students] Joe's an ag student. That's the part that's wild. Comics allow me to talk to anybody. Everyone wants to do them.

Misemer: They allow you to go to NASA.

Barry: They wanted me there. I got to do the monster exercise with them at NASA. And some other things. I got them to draw self-portraits. It was really cool. I just got back from the medical school at Penn State Hershey. It's one of the only medical schools in the country that has a medical humanities program, so the fourth-year medical students are required to take humanities classes. I was there teaching comics to fourth-year med students. Just teaching them how to do all this stuff. And then afterwards we sat around and had a drink, and I talked to them about the crazy shit they did, like having to take apart cadavers. Or having to solve the problem of how are you going to get twelve legs from one place to another place, because you're going to have to go through the hospital? The way they do it is they line them all up on a bed and cover that up so no one knows there are twelve human legs just rolling down the hallway. So it's really wild knowing that I'm showing somebody how to draw a nose, but that person also knows how to take a leg off. That's the part that's really humbling. They're freaked to draw a nose; they're not freaked to take a leg off.

Misemer: I want to go back to the flow of the class, the surprise of the class, which in *What It Is* you describe as being between knowing and not knowing. Or you might call it "the unthinkable," after your "Drawing the Unthinkable" class. The educational environment, right now in particular, is very objective driven. You have standards and testing and all that drives instructional practice. I think that leads students to form expectations based on stated learning goals. Have you seen this attitude reflected in your classroom? How do you respond?

Barry: I see it in the initial three weeks' terror of the students if they get one thing wrong. I do ask people to work to capacity and beyond, so they'll often be missing a couple drawings or something, and they just flip. Then I get to tell them it's not that kind of class. But it is a very serious class, and we're going to work until we fall over. But when they fall over, I believe them. When they say they just couldn't get those other three drawings done, I'll believe them. Especially because I'll look at how they did the first six, and they were supposed to spend three minutes, and on that first one they probably spent an hour. It's all about learning how they work. I think the critical thing is for people to not know what they are about to do. Also, taking a different name is important. You guys went by cards.

Misemer: Seven of spades forever.

Barry: Yeah. Right? And when you see the seven of spades, it's you, right? It's like an avatar. For instance, I had a student named Frida $flow and the "cash" was spelled with a dollar sign. Her real name is Gretchen, and Gretchen will say, "I can't do this. I'm not good at drawing. I don't like to do this," and I'd say, "Yeah, you can't, but Frida $flow loves doing this." And then she'd start laughing. When people start to identify themselves with their avatar, they get over some of the fear. I'll say, "Lynda Barry can't keep a class like this together, but Professor Mandrake is all about it." It's about identifying this different part of yourself as a different name. Also in the classroom, it keeps people so that they stay classmates rather than saying, "That's a PhD student." Or, "That person's just a sophomore." That's one thing I do.

I also control where my students sit. They have nametags that they leave with me, and I arrange them so when they come in, they're always sitting in a different part of the room and next to someone else. Everybody seems to really like that, because whatever hierarchy is usually created by space in the classroom just can't happen. That's also why I don't have them put their names on the front of their drawings. Ever. We start to recognize the

drawings. They'll start to recognize someone's style, but they don't know who it is. And then, after a while you connect who it is. Yesterday in "Comics I," I was able to hold up stuff and people were able to tell who did it. And how that happens, I will never know. It's a very mysterious thing. What is it? How are we able to recognize someone's style of handwriting? It's interesting. It's a very complex thing, and yet we can do it. And what's weird is I can recognize who did what when I find just pieces of drawings from our class.

Misemer: It seems like such a counterintuitive way of creating a classroom community. Usually, the way you're taught to do that as a teacher is to do endless icebreakers and group work and things like that. And it's very important that everybody know everyone else's name. That's been my approach to teaching. But I was part of a community when I was in that class, despite the fact that I knew nobody's real name. I knew their card number. How does that work? Is it just because you're sharing such an intimate part of yourself?

Barry: Without ever taking the work and putting it somewhere that we would talk about it as if it could exist outside of that living space. That relationship is so strong. I'm spending Spring Break with Marilyn. That's the thing that's wild. These are lifelong relationships. I'll always feel that way about my students. It's a kind of love that I didn't expect, and I didn't see coming. When I think about all the things comics have brought me, it's amazing that they brought me an entire life. A very rich, good life.

Misemer: In *What It Is* you say that your experiences working as a painter, cartoonist, writer, illustrator, playwright, editor, commentator, and teacher are very much alike. Can you explain that comment? How is teaching like cartooning, for instance?

Barry: Because it has to be responsive, and it has to have an element of being alive. The logical way that people might think you do a cartoon is to think of a story first, then figure out the text, then figure out how to get an illustrator . . . [Laughs]. But that's not how a good conversation goes. There has to be an element of being prepared for all of those things at the same time. You have to be prepared to respond to what's going on, alive, right in front of you. Say I'm making a comic, and I'm thinking, "Okay this is going to be a comic about Marlys telling a story about going to buy a goldfish," and I call it "Goldfish." And I draw her holding something in her hand that's supposed to be a bag with a goldfish in it, but somehow I've drawn it so

that it looks like cotton candy. I've really learned that when I'm trying to draw a goldfish in a bag and it looks like cotton candy, the story is about cotton candy. So I respond to what the drawing's doing, and I try always to see where the drawing takes me. My characters very rarely talk out to the reader. They have a few times, and I never like it when I do it. I think Marlys is the only one that's ever talked outside of the panel. Sometimes she's having a show, so she can talk out at you. I always just try to watch and listen. All of those things that I mentioned. You watch and listen and it's all image based. You've got to be prepared, but you have to be completely willing to improvise, to see what's there. Otherwise, it's like trying to have a relationship with someone where they're not even there, you're just kind of planning the whole thing.

Misemer: Do you have any last advice for people who want to teach courses where students create comics?

Barry: They have to draw. The teacher also has to draw comics. And copying is a really good way to do it. I think one of the best books to get started is that Ivan Brunetti book. It's just brilliant. I keep going back to it and finding more stuff.

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Comic Art Research: Achievements, Shortcomings, and Remedies

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Signifying a new field of study's "arrival" are factors such as the dwindling justifications and defenses for its right to be part of academia and the generation of historical and critical overviews of its research portfolio. Comic art studies satisfy both of these criteria. Until recently, it was not uncommon for articles and conference presentations to find it necessary to start off with reasons that comics/cartoons must be taken seriously (e.g., political cartoons help form public opinion, or comics and animation are significant cultural and economic parts of the entertainment world) and why they were not (academic snobbery, lack of funding, or links to popular culture and "low culture").

As comics scholarship blossomed, especially since the early 2000s, enough research was completed to merit analytical overviews of these bodies of work. Among these were articles by Steirer and Lent ("Winding"; "Comics Scholarship"). In Steirer's critical appraisal, he calls for disciplinarity, claiming that comics scholarship remains in an "academic no-place," having "ghettoized" itself within the academy (Steirer 263), and he calls for "greater theoretical sophistication and a more coherent disciplinary reflection" (Steirer 264). Reviewing comics studies publications, Steirer identified six major approaches regularly used by researchers: factual (often leaning towards reiterative), sociocultural, ideological, auteur, industrial, and formalist. He was surprised by how minimally the industrial approach figures into comics scholarship, blaming this deficiency on the "anticommercial prejudice" of most humanities departments and the "stubbornness" of mature scholars who stick with "familiar methodologies" of literary studies (Steirer 274). As editor of *International Journal of Comic Art* (which in forty huge issues has included more than a thousand articles), I can attest to this lack of scholarship on the comics' industrial sector. Despite numerous calls for more research using an industrial-commercial approach, very little has been forthcoming.

Two of my own articles attempted to survey the status of comics studies. In the initial issue of *Studies in Comics*, I characterized the initial route of comics research as "pot-holed" and "winding," consisting of isolated individual and short-term efforts, carried out by fans, collectors, aficionados, and cartoonists, often using their own collections as resources (Lent, "Winding"). The road began to take the shape of a paved highway in the mid- to late 1990s, with an attitude change towards comics scholarship in the academy, the reinvention of comics more suitable for an adult readership, the cross-fertilization of research partly because of globalization, the emergence of theoretical frameworks as young researchers from the full spectrum of academia entered comics studies, and the acceptance of comics scholarship by many graduate students who felt safe approaching professors with ideas about comics for their dissertations (Lent, "Winding").

The second article (Lent, "Comics Scholarship") identified the issues of definition and disciplinarity as devourers of considerable chunks of academic comics discourse, with no consensus reached on either. With definition, the difficulty results because different labels are used, and their meanings vary country to country; the terms "comic art" and "narrative art" are not always applicable because comics are not exclusively humorous or sequential. Characterizing comics through the lexicons of cinema, literature, or graphics also does not solve the problem, as forms and formats differ. My contention has been that both definition and disciplinarity, seen by some as earmarks of legitimatization, should not evoke so much concern. Ever-changing forms of comics demand different definitions and categorizations, and the delimiting function of definition can be accomplished by keeping readers' interest in mind when organizing and presenting research (Lent, "Defining"). Retaining an interdisciplinary approach makes sense; it allows for borrowing from, linking with, and reaching across other disciplines (Lent, "Comics Scholarship" 19).

From my vantage point as the author or editor of books, articles, and a journal, and organizer of many academic panels, I have observed trends, problems, and gaps in comics scholarship, many of which are elaborated on in the following pages. Perhaps as a means to summarize these tendencies, the communication paradigm (communicator, message, channel, and audience) is useful. It is fairly safe to say that comics studies falls short at every stage of the continuum except for the message (text), which dominates much of the literature. Though biographies, profiles, and interviews of comics creators have proliferated since the 1990s, very little is known about publishers and owners and their ideologies and the extent of the control they exercise over content and labor. Channels (the comics distributors and comics retailers)

and audiences continue to receive sparse research attention, resulting in insufficient information on how comics are distributed, the controllers of these channels, or the impact of digitalization on comics delivery. The scant research on comics readers is based on very narrow samples (a handful of fans interviewed online or at a comic-book store or convention or through letters to comic-book editors), which are not systematically constructed nor representative of more meaningful universes.

Encouraging, and pleasing at the same time, among my observations of trends are the hugely augmented community of comics researchers worldwide, hailing from a plethora of disciplines in addition to literature (e.g., medicine, disability, many of the social sciences and humanities); the expansion of links and collaborations of comics researchers through the availability of more conferences and the internet; and personally most satisfying, the move away (especially in the United States) from the insular, myopic, and occasionally arrogant notion that only American comics were worthy of studying. There have been gigantic strides made to study comics from international, transnational, intercultural, and multicultural perspectives in this century.

These successes aside, deep gaps remain in comic art studies, most prominent being the lack of the following.

1. A political-economy approach to answering: Who owns the industry? What are their vested interests? Who benefits/who pays in the current financial arrangement? What are the implications of conglomerate ownership of comics industries?
2. Legal studies on censorship, other restrictions on the "right to cartoon," copyright, and intellectual property; morality and ethics.
3. Labor studies: how comics companies, print media, and feature and comics syndicates treat cartoonists in terms of wages, benefits, gender equality, job security, and work load.
4. Historical method and archival usage, digging into the increasingly plentiful comics and media archives (not only online) to rediscover the evolution of comic art, perhaps pushing its beginnings further back; to make connections between early cartooning and that of today.

Political Economy

Comics studies need to be grounded more deeply in political economy theory. With roots in the Frankfurt School and the criticism of capitalism, political economy encompasses patterns of ownership, production and distribution,

labor-management arrangements, the commodification of comics hardware and software, the remaining impacts of colonialism, modernity, westernization, and other dependency relationships, and other topics. Because of its connection to Marxist thought and some disciplines' strong allegiance to the market (e.g., mass communication), political economy scholarship for decades was not welcomed in academia. Such exclusion is not as prevalent today; yet, topics such as the ownership of comics enterprises has received scant attention.

Today, transnational conglomerates own a substantial portion of the comics and animation industries. Two of the world's top ten media conglomerates own the largest US comics firms—Time Warner owns DC Comics, and the Walt Disney Company owns Marvel Comics Group. In mid-2018, the way was cleared for the big to become bigger as AT&T's bid to acquire Time Warner was court approved, clearing the way for a proposed Comcast acquisition of Fox. Already, children's cartoons and much of the overall US animation industry are dominated by Disney with Pixar in its fold, Time Warner through its Cartoon Network, and Viacom owning Nickelodeon (Westcott 254). Some of these are giants tied to other comics-related companies. For example, Marvel Comics is affiliated with the French-originated book publishing giant Hachette through a distribution arrangement. Hachette's parent company Hachette Livre is the sixth largest trade and educational publisher in the world. With the prospect of digitalization drastically changing comics, Amazon in 2014 purchased ComiXology, the dominant digital comics marketplace, and by 2018 ComiXology Originals added the creative dimension when launching four new titles. Other large comics publishers such as France's Delcourt have also seriously entered the digital comics fold.

Others of the world's biggest mass media conglomerates are or have been major comics owners. Bertelsmann has comics through its Random House subsidiary; the once-powerful Robert Maxwell media conglomerate owned Fleetway Editions, representing 60 to 70 percent of the UK's comics market, before the Danish Gutenberghus Group took it over, and Mexico's Televisa Group has in its fold at least one-half of the small companies responsible for the hundreds of comic book titles on the Mexican market.

In Europe, the centuries-old Casterman, a publisher later of Franco-Belgian comics (including *The Adventures of Tintin*), recently became part of Groupe Flammarion, which in turn was bought by RCS Media Group of Italy; DC Thomson of Scotland, owner of television, book publishing, newspaper, and website interests, brings out important comic books such as *The Dandy, The Beano, Jackie, The Broons, Commando,* and *Oor Wullie*; and in India, Virgin

Comics LLC, which later became Liquid Comics, was founded in 2006 by Sir Richard Branson and his Virgin Group of transnational companies.

A 2017 *Publishers Weekly* list of the largest revenue-producing book publishers worldwide found at least nine of the first twenty-five heavily involved with comics production. Four of them were located in Japan—Shueisha (sixteenth), Kodansha (seventeenth), Kadokawa Publishing (nineteenth), and Shogakukan (twenty-second). Shueisha and Shogakukan are affiliated with the mammoth Hitotsubashi Group. Each of these conglomerates has many holdings in other media and entertainment properties, such as broadcasting, newspapers, records, a theme park, software (websites and mobile sites), video games, and film. As an indicator of their size, Kadokawa Group Holdings owns forty-three companies; Shogakukan publishes sixty-four magazines (eighteen of which are comics) and about 760 new book titles yearly; and Shueisha, the largest manga publisher in the world, also owns Hakusensha Publishers and (jointly with Shogakukan) Viz Media to produce manga in the United States and ShoPro to distribute, license, and merchandise popular magazines and comic books in Japan.

Other transnational publishers with significant comics holdings listed by *Publishers Weekly* are Holtzbrinck (fifteenth) of Germany, Bonnier (twenty-first) of Sweden, and Egmont Group (twenty-fifth) of Denmark and Norway. Bonnier is composed of 175 decentralized companies in five divisions (books, magazine group, business press, newspapers, and broadcasting and entertainment) operating in more than twenty countries. Bonnier, which owned comics publisher Carlsen in Germany before its sale to Egmont, consists of book publishers and book clubs throughout Scandinavia and is the major publisher of fiction in Finland, Norway, and Sweden; the leading publisher of children's books in Germany; and the owner of the online book retailer Adlibris. The Egmont Group includes magazines, books, films, cineplexes, television, comic books, textbooks, online communities, games, and game consoles. Egmont's one hundred plus companies are active in more than thirty countries (see Milliot). The synergistic holdings of these companies lend themselves well to spin-offs of comics on multiple platforms.

Other large US book publishers produce comic books and graphic novels, such as Scholastic Corporation, Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, IDW Publishing, Harper Collins Publishers, Macmillan Publishers, Boom! Studios, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Hyperion Books, Little Brown & Co., St. Martin's Press, and more (Woo 33–36).

The concentration of comics industries in fewer conglomerates is a justifiable concern worthy of research attention. A number of possible research questions come to mind:

- How much of the world's comics industry is controlled by these behemoths?
- How real are trends towards monopolization of the industry?
- How are the companies interlocked, and how do these interlocking directorships play out in terms of influence?
- What are the vested interests of these conglomerates with comics appendages?
- Are the interests a threat to artists' freedom and autonomy and to the quality and diversity of comics titles and content, and do they relate to considerations other than those of marketing?
- To what extent are the conglomerates enclosing culture and intellectual property, making sure, in media critic Herbert Schiller's words, that these rights are "strengthened and extended [for the sole benefit of the conglomerates], and new means devised to ensure that these rights cannot be breached"? (see Schiller).
- Finally, would comics publishing survive without these large-scale companies?

Close public document analyses and, in the rare cases where they are open, corporate records can reveal the breadth of conglomerate ownership of comic art. Yet data and analyses about the concentration of comic-art ownership are rare everywhere. Using Asia as an example, the Philippines *komiks* industry, for most of its ninety-year existence, was nearly totally in the hands of media magnate Ramon Roces; a large proportion of Indonesian-produced comic books come off Kompas Gramedia Group presses; in Hong Kong, Jademan controlled the industry for years, its books garnering 70 to 90 percent of the market; in South Korea, Dai Won Publishing and Seoul Cultural Publishers brought out fifteen of the country's twenty comics magazines for years; and Art Square Group controls much of the comics and graphic novels titles in Malaysia (see Lent *Asian Comics* 162–63).

Remembering that comic art also encompasses political cartoons and comic strips, the possible ramifications of conglomerate ownership and control become even more serious. Corporations of the magnitude of those that operate newspaper chains in North America, Europe, and Australia especially wield enormous control over their appendages and their journalists and artists. These corporate giants have many vested interests that are tied to government and big business with the potential to interfere with truthful reporting by writers and cartoonists. It is vital to know the operational mode of these corporations, the entities they own and control, and their links to potential influence peddlers.

Once this information is determined (a published study of its own), research by content or textual analyses, supplemented with interviewing, can yield findings on threats by corporate interests to the "right to cartoon"

(author's term). It is difficult research, for corporations are extremely protective of their ledger books, and cartoonists and other editorial staff are sometimes reluctant to address such issues for fear of losing their jobs. Examples of corporate vested interests figuring in cartoonists' autonomy abound. In the US in 2018, a veteran cartoonist for a family-owned newspaper was fired because his anti-Trump drawings were disliked by the publisher, a Trump supporter. In the Philippines a few years back, the publisher of the country's largest daily *Bulletin*, shipping mogul Emilio Yap, often humiliated his veteran cartoonist, showing him with rudimentary stick figures how he wanted a cartoon drawn.

Commodification of comics has also been given short shrift in studies. The notion of "creative industries," at one time probably thought of as an oxymoron, has led to high levels of commercialization and the treatment of comic art as a commodity. This is not a new trend; the "Yellow Kid" strip of the nineteenth century spun off all sorts of products, including tobacco, as did "Buster Brown" and others. Different now is that in many cases, merchandising has become the end-all of cartooning, cranking out thousands of toys, games, posters, cards, and what I have called "cartoonized junk." Seemingly, in some instances, this has made the by-product more important than the work of art, resulting in what American cartoonist Bill Watterson said was a "cheapening" of the comics (23, 26). Research into the commodification of comics is called for in an attempt to find out the extent of this phenomenon, its largest benefactors, and the positive and negative effects on comics business and artistry.

Legal Studies

It is indeed puzzling that legal studies associated with comic art are just now emerging from an embryonic state. There has been more than enough evidence that cartoonists' freedom to work has been increasingly thwarted by legal and nonlegal governmental moves and terroristic actions by fundamentalist religious groups, and that cartoonists' rights to use and own their cartoons are still in doubt in many countries, and that they are hampered by nonexistent or poorly enforced copyright legislation and by piracy. Add to that the dilemma of political cartoonists who, employing satire, must determine the boundaries of the red line not to be crossed, or whether there is a red line in satire, and you have a full plate of research topics.

In an interview with British comics researcher Paul Gravett, law lecturer Thomas Giddens termed the field of study "graphic justice," placing a range of topics under this rubric. Giddens granted that comics have much

potential for legal studies and emphasized that the field relates "mostly to criminal law and justice, with a large helping of moral philosophy" (Gravett, "Graphic Justice").

In such a borderless field, some possible research projects are the rights of comic art workers, relative to contracts, trademarks, and copyright; the "right to cartoon," to be free to graphically express opinions; the legal regulations that shaped the comic art industry; the ethical and moral considerations of using humor to mock institutions and individuals; sexual harassment or other gender issues in comic art; the moral/immoral dimensions of vigilantism in superhero and some crime comics; the libel and obscenity legislation pertinent to comics and cartoons, and criminal justice portrayals in comics featuring legal professionals (e.g., "Judge Parker," Matt Murdock [Daredevil]). A possible base for legal studies and comic art is law and humor studies (see the journal *Humor*; Little 1235–92).

The concentration here is on the currently seriously challenged "right to cartoon," which I have assigned to categories of the perpetrators of infringements on this right, their means of victimization, and the mechanisms cartoonists use to offset or cope with the infringements. Each sub-category of this three-pronged structure merits the attention of comics researchers worldwide, using a myriad of research techniques—historical method, archival searches, interviewing, content or textual analysis, and interpretation of law cases.

Perpetration of infringements is more likely to be committed by government suppression through legislative means, such as the use and misuse of libel and sedition laws, copyright and intellectual property violations and piracy, vague and nonuniform obscenity and child pornography laws, and unwritten restrictions and national guidance policies (respect for royalty, sensitive topics, national ideologies, such as Rukunegara in Malaysia and Pancasila in Indonesia, and policies during war, martial law, or states of emergency).

In recent years, incidences of religious intolerance of cartooning have risen in number and world attention—the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, the *Charlie Hebdo* humor magazine massacre in Paris, and the murders of bloggers in Bangladesh, among them. Intolerance by hate groups (such as fascist, neo-Nazi, racist, or anti-LGBTQ) has also attempted to negatively affect cartooning.

A third means to infringe on the "right to cartoon" is through the already-discussed corporate/conglomerate control, with possible implications of the homogenization of content, the drying up of the watchdog function of political cartoons, and the downsizing of cartoon staffs.

There are also infringements brought about by organized publics, such as Parent Teacher Associations, schools, ethnic groups, and churches, sometimes

because of political correctness going afar and turning into censorship, and by the most dangerous form of censorship, that by editors and cartoonists themselves.

As for the means of victimization, cartoonists have been killed or "disappeared," arrested, imprisoned, fined, fired, terroristically threatened, pressured economically, and exiled; their publications have been suspended or boycotted by printers and distributors, and their premises burned or otherwise ransacked. For centuries, cartoonists have used a whole array of means to cope with infringements, including subtlety, stealth, insinuation, double meanings, and innuendo. Hidden meanings have appeared in the titles of cartoons (e.g., a very popular South Korean political strip is called "Kobau," meaning high, firm rock), symbols used (a South African cartoonist during apartheid included splattered ink in his cartoons, symbolizing blood), by plots and language (proverbs, rhymed sentences, and bon mots), and by characters (an Iranian cartoonist's use of a crocodile, representing treachery, to depict a hardline cleric). In other cases, cartoonists have coped by going underground, working in exile, or participating in campaigns (see Lent, "Global Infringements" 4–70).

Closely tied to legal studies and comics and cartoons are issues of ethics and morality. Globally, there have been numerous occasions when the ethics of using certain cartoons took (or should have taken) precedence over all else, most notably, the Danish newspaper and *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad. On the heels of these monumental events, systematic surveys of the opinions of the public, and of the cartoonists, would have gone a long way in determining where the red line is drawn, or even if there should be a red line.

A number of questions concerning the publishing of the Prophet Muhammad cartoons might be suitable for inclusion on a comics/legal studies research agenda: as a magazine, should *Charlie Hebdo* be held to the same values and ethics of other print media? Should there be an ethical code for satire? If there were, would it still be satire? Discussed in terms of freedom of expression, should satire be expected to work within the norm of freedom of expression? Further, should there be a freedom of expression norm? Is freedom of expression an absolute right, or is it relative to where it is exercised and by whom? If provocation is the goal of a cartoon, what purpose does it serve and is the provoked person a public figure meriting attack? Should provocation cartoons be published, knowing a result is likely to be death and injury to others? Answering these questions through surveys of newspaper or magazine editors or juridical scholars and scrutinous readings of relevant legal decisions would benefit both the academic and practicing journalism communities.

Labor Studies

Common worldwide are the travails of comic art laborers, often ill-treated and marginalized by media managements who focus merely on their bottom lines and treat cartoonists as expendable subjects, unworthy of reasonable payment, job security, and manageable workloads.

The history of United States comic art is full of sad stories concerning labor and management—the payment of a mere US $125 to the creators of the Superman character by National Publications (now DC Comics), which later battled them in court as they sought a small pension; the denial until the 1980s of US newspaper comic strip creators' rights of ownership to their characters; more recently, the stranding of political cartoonists, left jobless as conglomerates close newspapers or abandon posts to cut costs or avoid possible litigation; the maintaining of very stressful and demanding workplaces by major comics publishers such as Marvel Comics, whose editors, artists, and writers called it a place of stressful and broken lives, premature deaths, legal entanglements, firings, rude and disrespectful behavior, sabotage, betrayal, and shady deals (Howe); and the movement of about 90 percent of American animation production offshore as companies seek low wages and strike-free environments (see Lent, "Animation" 239–54).

Since at least the 1970s, American comics publishers also "farmed out" work to less-expensive artists in Asia, Latin America, and Australia. To the question of whether such labor treatment is exploitation, solely a means of survival, or a transfer of skills, the answer is probably all three. Non-American artists working for US comics and animation companies are paid at a lower scale for sure, but they still make more money than they can from their home countries' comic art industries. Offshore comic art employment has provided some training and career opportunities for non-American artists and writers, but it also has damaged some cartoonists' and animators' styles. New Zealand cartoonist and graphic novelist Dylan Horrocks told how writing for DC Comics became a nightmare he had to escape: "It almost killed me as a cartoonist. I was writing in a voice that wasn't mine and felt trapped in other people's wish-fulfillment fantasies. Eventually, I lost my cartooning voice entirely, and my lifelong faith in stories and art" (Gravett, "Dylan Horrocks").

Conglomeratization of comic art has also led to brain drains as Asian, European, and Central and South American artists and writers left their homelands for the glitter and money offered by DC, Marvel, or Disney. One cannot in true conscience blame them for leaving; cartoonists throughout the world face precarious existences. Among the hundreds of cartoonists I

have interviewed on every continent, a majority had to keep "day jobs"—as an architect, farmer, clerk, tattoo artist, psychiatrist, ferry-boat operator, graphic artist, betel-leaf merchant, military colonel, teacher, long-distance truck driver, hair stylist, French-horn musician, engineer, electrician, medical doctor, boxer, and orchestral soprano. In Asia and Africa particularly, to survive, cartoonists must draw for multiple outlets and regularly produce many drawings, a number of which are not used, thus wasting the cartoonists' time. That (the economic factor) and political reasons are why we see in the US and Western Europe considerable pockets of West African, Philippine, Cuban, Mexican, Brazilian, and other nations' cartoonists. Unfortunately, a number of them do not realize their dreams in their new countries and end up doing freelance cartooning and working non–comic art jobs. In Paris and Brussels, there exist organizations of West and Central African cartoonists-in-exile (for political and economic reasons), providing a variety of services, such as finding accommodations for newly arrived artists and publication and exhibition venues (Lent, "Out of Africa")

Other transnational comics-labor problems hound cartoonists. In much of Africa, Asia, and the world generally, newspaper and magazine editors continue to use less-expensive American and sometimes British syndicated gag and political cartoons and comic strips rather than indigenous ones, thus depriving local cartoonists of employment opportunities and readers of content more in tune with their own culture, traditions, and issues. For example in Asia, local newspaper comic strips are almost nonexistent in important English-language dailies in India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Because international intellectual property regulations are either vaguely interpreted or not enforced, cartoonists' rights are not normally respected. Widespread piracy endemic to these regions has added to cartoonists' woes. (see Lent, "Unfunny": 180–89).

Many unanswered or partially answered questions concerning transnational comics labor need researchers' attention.

- What is the operational mode of US and Western Europe comics and features syndicates relative to their newspaper clients abroad?
- How have non-Western comics syndicates succeeded or failed?
- How have immigrant cartoonists fared in their new countries of residence?
- How do cartoonists doing offshore comics work feel about their creative integrity and their situations more generally?
- What are the policies of conglomerate-affiliated comics corporations relative to their offshore artists and writers?
- Is (or has) any part of transnational or national comics industries unionized?

- In any given country, are cartoonists' rights spelled out and effectively enforced?
- If they are, how—by established law, medium protocol, codes of ethics?
- What are the implications of comics that are collaboratively created by artists of different national origins—their experiences, problems?
- How do comics that are joint labor productions handle different cultural, religious, and political norms? The example that comes to mind is a comics firm in an Arab Muslim country that sent stories to Brazil to be drawn by artists accustomed to explicitly depicting women's bodies.

Though animation labor history has merited some academic attention, studies about cartoons and comics labor are rare. Needed at a beginning stage are, first, to determine the meanings of terms such as "union," "movement," and "collective" in each case (are the groups' goals to help cartoon labor or to simply offer a socializing place?), and second, to find out how many organizations really function as bargaining and arbitration units protecting and advancing cartoonists' rights to their creative work, payments and other benefits, and job security. Specific studies stimulated by the above and other questions would at a preliminary stage demand historical and descriptive research. Identifying archives rich in labor materials, especially newspapers and magazines, is a first step, for too little research has been completed on the history of comic art labor (see Sito). Other sorts of studies can follow—on specific labor cartoonists and their works, such as Fred Wright, Mike Konopacki, and Gary Huck (Borrelli) in the United States; cartoon content during major labor strikes; strikes affecting cartoonists and animators, or nonmedia, labor- or union-related comic art (advertisements, posters, leaflets, and so on).

The subject of digitalization and comic art labor and creativity also needs more study. How much do cartoonists and animators depend on computers and the internet? And for what purposes? Has the internet attracted (and, if yes, to what extent) women creators to cartooning, especially those who are homebound caring for families or restricted in their social movement by religious and social norms? In many parts of the world, digitalization has been lauded as a savior of comic art traditions as print comics dwindled in sales. In China, for a while, the internet allowed *xinmanhua* (new comics) to survive through *oekaki* bulletin board systems that helped anyone desiring to draw comics use computer graphics and post their works (Chew and Chen 186). The internet rebirthed Korean *manhwa* as well, opening new avenues for established cartoonists and for amateur ones who would have found it nearly impossible to have their work printed conventionally. Korea's leading role in adoption of high-speed broadband internet in the early 2000s spearheaded the surge in online comics, also called essay comics (see Kwon 320–50).

Though not as supercharged as the cases of South Korea or Japan, digitalization has opened up creative avenues in many parts of the globe and allowed previously isolated cartoonists to network through online groups and forums, websites, and blogs; and enabled cartoonists (especially political ones) to dispense alternative views and stories in highly restricted countries or to divulge the circumstances when governmental, religious, or other public entities threaten their "right to cartoon." Research topics can be siphoned out of any of these and other related subjects. Overall, systematic research is called for in determining the strengths and weaknesses of digitalized comics labor, similar to work done by Liu Chang De in Taiwan. Using survey methods, Liu found that the "introduction of ICTS (information and communication technologies) has negatively influenced the artists' works, as well as their labor process" (459–62).

Historical Method and Archival Research

Much of the comics history has been written from an antiquarian approach, taking a very small part of what will become the history and writing about it in a descriptive, nonanalytical manner. Some purists among historians would scoff at this as nonhistorical method. However, contrary to their notions, antiquarianism plays an important role leading up to historical method, filling small holes in the larger story and, in the case of a new field of studies such as comic art, helping to create a chronology. Sometimes this type of researching and recording of past events has been snidely referred to as "journalistic," but again, this is shortsighted thinking. Good (and I emphasize *good*) journalism is based on thorough research, using interviewing, public documents, and observation, backed up with corroborative sources, and written in an accessible style. The significant difference between historical method/historiography and journalism practice is that the latter is written with a shorter deadline.

Journalism's traditional home (newspapers) offers historians a vital source in tracking down information, providing important leads, and setting a chronology, but newspaper content should always be corroborated with other sources. In comics studies, newspapers and magazines can also be the research item itself. Undoubtedly, much more research is needed about comic strips, gag cartoons, editorial and political cartoons, and advertising graphic humor, all of which are in abundance in newspapers of the past. Searching for newspapers and magazines has been made much easier in the past quarter century with the establishment of repositories in many libraries. The best places to start in the United States are the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum

at the Ohio State University, the Library of Congress, and the Michigan State University comics collection. The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library houses the huge collection of newspaper comic strips donated by Bill Blackbeard. Comics researchers owe a huge debt to Blackbeard, who, upon learning that libraries were dumping old newspapers in favor of microfilmed copies, hired five trucks and drivers to bring them to his California home (Blackbeard 205–15). Many libraries worldwide have, over the years, made spaces for historical newspapers, most of them containing comic art; more recently, libraries have increasingly sought out private collections of individual creators' papers, correspondence, and drawings.

Though more entrenched in Europe and North America, the practice of preserving comic art–related material for public use is just catching on in much of Asia and Latin America, and to a lesser degree in Africa. As in the past nearly everywhere, comics materials in these regions often are taken out of the reach of the public and researchers as they are thrown away upon cartoonists' retirement or death, shredded for packing purposes, or bought up by collectors and, as in the case of China, by the new upper class to decorate their homes as a sign of "arrival." Other impediments to the comics researcher's hunt for materials are their destruction during wartime, restrictive government campaigns (such as China's Cultural Revolution), and natural disasters, and sometimes by the very nature of a culture. For example, Mongolia has not maintained many files on comics (and most other things) because of the society's nomadic nature that requires traveling lightly with only necessities.

In recent years, many parts of the Global South have stridently engaged in projects to preserve and publicly display original comic art, with the establishment of museums, libraries, centers, and other facilities beneficial to researchers. Some are online, such a Gerry Alanguilan's Komikero museum of Philippine komiks and a loosely structured group of family members of deceased, mainland Chinese cartoonists, who regularly post among themselves materials related to their cartoonist relatives' life, work, and career.

Proper usage of the increasingly available archival materials will enrich comic art history immensely, supplementing or contradicting information passed down from one historian to another, offsetting the "over familiar pantheon of 'greats'" (Gravett,"Rewriting"), bringing up from footnotes important cartoonists slighted by the subjectivity that is intrinsically endemic to historical research and "backplacing" the history of comic art.

The concentration of much of the comics history on twentieth-century United States comic books and strips has valorized certain American creators and works and tended to all but ignore or obscure other significant pioneers, such as *kibyoshi* artists of eighteenth-century Japan, the comics magazine *The*

Glasgow Looking Glass of 1825, a nineteenth-century Wilhelm Busch strip in Germany, work by Apeles Mestres in Spain, Mary Darly in eighteenth-century and Marie Duval in nineteenth-century England, an Angelo Agostini strip in Brazil in 1869, and prints by Gustave Doré and Nadar in France. Others requiring elevation from footnotes or needing first-time discovery in comics scholarship are the numerous women artists who undoubtedly satirized society or told narratives often in image-text combinations.

Other Research Gaps

Other areas of comics scholarship needing a jumpstart are:

1. Theoretical studies using creative models or approaches poached from other disciplines besides literature (such as mass communications, aesthetics, social sciences). Additionally, fitting or fashioning theory and methodology for regions of the world that operate on noncapitalist economies, non-Judeo-Christian religions, nonalphabet languages, and non-Euro-American cultures, in the process recognizing comic scholarship of the Global South as equal in importance as that of the North and rethinking North scholarship, which is the norm for the South, because of its dominance in books and journals and its impacts on students who study in the North and then impart those ideas and theories in their home countries (see Lent, "Imperialism":14–17; Lent, "Western": 33, 35–38).

2. Analyses of alternative (to mainstream) models of creating, producing, distributing, and exhibiting comic art, such as comics collectives, underground and alternative comics, and nonprint comics.

3. Broadening of comics scholarship through more translations, especially of the whole trove of research written in Japanese (such as articles in the twenty-four volumes of *Manga Studies*), Chinese, Korean (such as articles in *Cartoon and Animation Studies*), and European languages.

4. More emphasis on slighted forms of comic art, such as the already-mentioned newspaper and magazine comic strips and one-panel gag cartoons; printed, animated, and televised editorial cartoons; humor/cartoon magazines; advertising graphic humor and narrative; and various comics images on posters, leaflets, record covers, postcards, and other paraphernalia. Similarly, other genres (Western, horror, sports, romance, adventure, religion, education) need to be studied.

5. Studies, set in a socio-cultural context, of publishers, distributors, and comic shops that played important roles in the development of comic books. This suggestion aligns well with Sydney Kobre's 1940s notion of a sociological

perspective to journalism history and Casey Brienza's recent call for a "sociological methodology" for comics study, bringing in "the larger social and organizational context of [comics] production and dissemination" (106, 115).

Conclusion

Much of this chapter discusses shortcomings in the field, but this is not to imply that comics scholarship is in poor shape. Far from that, advances made in the setting up of an infrastructure (journals, publishers, organizations, conferences), the attracting of researchers from many branches of the humanities and social sciences, the establishing of theoretical bases, and the spreading of the field internationally have been phenomenal.

It must be remembered that relatively, comics and cartoons are a new study area, and as such, will require settling-in time, during which ideas and notions will be tossed about, some accepted, some rejected, and others adapted, but all done in an open-minded atmosphere. It is in this spirit that I make these suggestions as to how comics studies are likely to develop (or as I wish them to develop).

Already it is apparent that social scientists are increasingly entering and enriching comic studies and are likely to introduce more research based on political economy and cultural studies. As a result, important information will be yielded about the industrial and commercial aspects of comics, the socio-cultural contexts in which they are created, produced, and consumed, and possibly their effects and uses and gratifications derived from them.

Though the optimal goal for a new field of study is to develop its own theory (or more accurately, its own "educated guesses," "notions," "hunches," and even hypotheses), for the most part, the conceptualization takes its strengths from other disciplines. The condition should be that the "poaching" not be confined solely to one discipline. The comics study field should be both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary.

As an example, recently a comics study or two used David Manning White's late-1940s "gatekeeper theory," a mainstay of mass communications study that attempts to locate the "gates" that, for example, a comic book or political cartoon must pass to reach the consumer. Sticking with the mass communication discipline as an example, other of its theories can be applied, with modifications of course, to comics and cartoons: media-cultural imperialism, active audience (readers and viewers do not passively consume others' cultures or media), uses and gratifications (how comics are used by readers and what satisfactions they derive from them), agenda setting (such as political

cartoons setting the agenda for discourse), or even the very old "cloze procedure" test, where readability is determined by gauging the number of omitted words a reader can fill in because of familiarity, a bit akin to the notion of the comic-book gutter. Other disciplines have lent concepts to comics studies, going back to psychology and psychiatry with the Wertham-inspired comics effects on children in the 1940s and 1950s, and the application of language and semiotics to comics studies by Western European researchers in the 1960s and 1970s.

As the borrowing continues in the future, the hope is that it be a process of adaptation and not total adoption, and that it be applied with the knowledge that most of these concepts were fashioned in the West, and the feasibility of their use in some cultures and languages may be problematic. On the horizon also is a proliferation of original historical research that will be dug out of troves of newspapers, magazines, and journals, much of which has not found its way into comics scholarship previously, the greatly augmented collections of drawings, correspondence, and other materials made available by cartoonists and others closely affiliated with the profession, and the preserved audio and video recordings of interviews with comics and cartoons personnel. From this research, the history of comic art will be pushed back, factual holes will be plugged, myths will be obliterated or corrected, and trends will be made discernible, thus satisfying the principles of historical method and historiography.

The recent spate of transnational and multicountry anthologies and surveys will spawn even more collaborative research, produced by scholars highly knowledgeable of their subjects and the languages in which they originated, in the process pushing to the sidelines very short-time "safari" researchers.

Granted that this essay has concentrated on the accomplishments and shortcomings of comics studies, a number of the approaches used to find answers to the many questions raised have major implications for comics pedagogy. Because comics studies is an inexact and flexible discipline (compared to physical sciences), it opens up a wide range of ways in which knowledge and skills can be exchanged while teaching comics and teaching with comics.

Teaching comics effectively requires abandoning or downplaying some of the methods and practices traditionally used. First of all, comics need to be taught by drawing from multidisciplinary and international perspectives—such as by showing how comics and cartoons generally or individual titles specifically enhance, blend in, or defy social norms; acknowledging that a world of comics exists besides those of American or Japanese origins; taking into consideration the wealth of genres open for study besides superheroes; and paying more attention to the industrial components of comic-art production, distribution, and consumption.

Second, comics pedagogy needs to include more critical approaches and contents—to look at comic art through other lenses (political economy, cultural studies, etc.), and to discuss more often topics such as comics and their relevance to censorship and control, ownership, transnationalism, and labor. The imparting of knowledge about these subjects can still be accomplished somewhat objectively (if that is a concern) through analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the discussed theories, practices, and systems related to comic art.

Perhaps too much energy is spent in the pursuit of objectivity, considering that teaching itself is not neutral, but rather political, and never completely balanced, favoring some perspectives and marginalizing others (such as through types of assignments, exercises, and textbooks). Students, if prepared properly through a variety of readings and assignments, can be expected to add to the discourse, challenging some notions and sharing their experiences, observations, and readings of and about comics, oftentimes as avid fans. This teaching method aligns with the Freirean pedagogy, where the passing of knowledge functions as a two-way street, with teachers and students learning from each other.

In upper-division undergraduate and graduate courses in comic art that I taught from the late 1980s onwards, I used a quasi-Freirean approach that worked well, intersplicing my lectures and discussions with student-occupied panel discussions on assigned comic art topics and, later in the semester, with student reports on their primary-research term projects.

Hopefully, the study and teaching of comics and cartoons will remain flexible, employing a wide swath of topics, theories, approaches, and contents endemic to multidisciplinarity, at the same time moving into new dimensions through experimentation with new concepts, forms, and perspectives and reinterpretations of those that came before.

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Misunderstanding Comics

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Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* has been essential in developing the vocabulary in use by the field of comics studies while providing students with a fundamental understanding of comics not only as an art form, but also as a medium of communication. As noted by Henry Jenkins, *Understanding Comics*, together with Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, served as the basis for a formalist approach to the field of comics studies, wherein comics are studied critically through the lens of the "visual language" (Cohn, "Visual Language Manifesto" 5) of comics structured around a "vocabulary" connected to other historical forms of sequential art ranging from Egyptian hieroglyphs, to medieval tapestries, to the culturally specific uses of space and transition in Japanese manga. Consequently, McCloud's approach, like Eisner's that precedes him, has been a driving force in the development of linguistic understandings of comics (Cohn, "Comics, Linguistics, and Visual Language" 4), which has subsequently served to organize the pedagogy of teaching readers not only to read comics but understand them.

Although McCloud attempts to connect his work to a global history of sequential art, and therefore the diversity of approaches to developing a visual language of comics, this connection is surface level: the "language" developed in McCloud's work is grounded on an assumption of cultural neutrality. That is, the language, and the reader constructed by McCloud's work, seems to presume an uninterrupted capacity to be embodied in the work absent cultural or social barriers. Thus a central problem of McCloud's work is the assumption of a "default" or "unmarked" reader as the subject taught to "understand" comics, as well as an "unmarked" or "default" object that is created through the mastery of the language of comics. Put another way, by assuming the comic itself is a "vacuum into which our identity and awareness is pulled . . . an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel to another realm" (McCloud 36), McCloud presumes that each reader has an unmediated experience of embodiment in the reading of the comic.

Thus, through *Understanding Comics*, McCloud seeks to offer a perceptual framework, a phenomenology, of how a comic coheres to enable a reader to be fully embodied in a comic through the experience of reading. In this experience, for McCloud, the embodiment of the reader is not an impediment to their embodiment in the narrative constructed by the comic. To this end, while McCloud's *Understanding Comics* starts, as all works of phenomenology do, with the body in the world, it only attends to what is before the reader, the comic, and not what is *behind* the reader, the embodied experience of the reader. Put simply, the reader brings with them the totality of their lived experience in the act of reading, an experience that informs not only *what* is being read, but *how* it is read. Thus, in this chapter I suggest that for some readers, their embodied experiences deny them the capacity to be fully embodied through the language of comics. Because McCloud's proposed reader proceeds from an extension of his own experiences as a white male, his hypothetical reader shares in this orientation towards the world. As a result, a nonwhite or nonmale reader would not have the same orientation towards the comic: because of the way that McCloud has organized "understanding" in line with the dominant organization of culture around the experience of whiteness, their bodies fail to trail behind the action of "understanding" comics, and their experiences are not fully accounted for in the act of "understanding" comics as described by McCloud.

This chapter will explore the way in which the language of comics developed by McCloud, and taken up by the field of comics studies, participates in what George Yancy calls a "social ontology of whiteness," or the social organization that produces whiteness as a privileged identity (Yancy 24). For Yancy, the "social ontology of whiteness" is what allows for the cultural and social products of white individuals to maintain their cultural and social dominance through the ways in which whiteness is treated as an invisible and universal standpoint to approach the world (Yancy 24). DiAngelo refers to this as "the discourse of universalism," which makes it possible to view the "white" experience as the "human" and "universal" experience (DiAngelo 59). As a result, McCloud, like many other white people, does not view himself as white or positioned as a result of his whiteness: he is simply human. As a consequence of McCloud's failure to recognize his experience as a "white" experience, the way of understanding comics outlined in *Understanding Comics* is one that seeks to understand comics through the frame of *whiteness*. McCloud's vocabulary of comics is not a neutral or an "unmediated" language that, despite the historical trajectory he traces, is accessible to all potential speakers: it is a language structured, organized, and grounded in a social organization that constructs the "neutral" standpoint as equivalent

to the white standpoint. This neutral standpoint allows McCloud's project to assume the function of reinscribing the colonial project of the West through its assimilation of the historical "languages" of the other.

Further, this chapter takes up the argument that an experience of unmediated embodiment in comics is only possible for bodies who feel "at home" in the space created from McCloud's language of comics. This concept of being "at home" is described by Sara Ahmed as a consequence of the way that spaces are organized by the repeated actions of some bodies and not others. The language of comics, because of its predication on an experience of whiteness, is familiar to white bodies because it participates in the repeated actions of white bodies. As white comics fans, scholars, and educators who bring with them the histories and cultural practices that give rise to whiteness as a mode of organizing the world, white bodies are better able to "understand" the language developed in *Understanding Comics*. In contrast, nonwhite bodies who seek to learn the "language" set forth by McCloud must be "disciplined" or "straightened" into an "understanding" that does not align with their lived experience of the world, rather than allowing their experience to inform their way of understanding.

Thus, to conclude, this chapter will suggest a "misunderstanding" of comics through the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and its emphasis on collaborative, dialogic understanding to address the way that queer comic fans, nonwhite comic fans, female-identified or genderqueer comics fans, and all other fans whose identities do not align with McCloud's own identity "understand" comics in the context of comics pedagogy, and how "understanding comics" through whiteness serves to reproduce inequalities in comics scholarship and pedagogy.

The Hidden Orientation behind McCloud's *Understanding Comics*

McCloud's universal or neutral standpoint for understanding comics begins in the second chapter of *Understanding Comics*. In describing his choice in stylistic representation of his narrative avatar, McCloud states:

> Apart from what little I told you in chapter one, I'm practically a blank slate. It would never occur to you to wonder what my politics are, or what I had for lunch, or where I got this silly outfit. . . . You give me life by reading this book and "filling up" this very iconic (cartoony) form. Who I am is irrelevant. I'm just a little piece of you. But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more. (McCloud 37)

Here is where we must look "behind" the neutral orientation presumed by McCloud, which allows him to presume that the reader who engages with his text through his comic avatar will not question his politics, his eating habits, his outfit, or those social relations that constitute the meaning of his avatar. In doing so, McCloud privileges the interiority of the reader while simultaneously treating the interiority of the creator as irrelevant through what he terms the "amplification through simplification" of the comic character. For McCloud, "by stripping down an image to its essential "meaning," an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (McCloud 30). However, McCloud warns us that this "stripping down" is, paradoxically, a means to focus on specific details of the comic image. The "stripped down" image serves to focus our attention on the details that remain: in this context, "cartooning isn't a way of drawing, it is a way of seeing" (McCloud 31). As a "way of seeing," amplification through simplification in comic art serves to orient our perception of the image, the action, on the page in such a way as to make present those elements the author has selected as our focus.

Using his own avatar as an example, McCloud argues that a consequence of the "amplification through simplification" of his avatar is our ability to treat the avatar as a "blank slate." Amplification through simplification is what removes any preexisting social meaning of the avatar by distancing it from the "sensory world" through the simplification of its features, which, McCloud argues, also distances it from cultural presuppositions about the avatar. As a result, the reader is able to "fill" his avatar with their own inner thoughts and experiences without being distracted by the form of the avatar. In describing his own comic avatar as a "blank slate," McCloud puts forth the argument that his avatar is not raced, it is not gendered, it does not call attention to its representation in the comic medium because of its simplification of the form, which fails to arouse our socially organized perceptions. McCloud, however, fails to recognize that it is his own whiteness that is amplified through simplification of his avatar. It is only because whiteness goes unnoticed as a consequence of what George Yancy calls "the social ontology of whiteness" that McCloud can present his avatar as a blank slate.

To understand the "social ontology of whiteness," we must understand what "whiteness" is. For Yancy, "Whiteness constitutes an ensemble of power relations that places whites in positions of advantage and power (that is, puts them in potential and actual positions of power in virtue of their whiteness) vis-à-vis nonwhites" (*What White Looks Like* 4), which includes the power to define the ways that we engage with the world. As an "ontology," or a structure that provides the conditions for existence, individuals who are identified as white emerge from within power structures that constitute the social

ontology and are participants in maintenance of white supremacy regardless of their intentions: their power to organize the world around themselves is a consequence of a colonial structure of the world. Further, the *social* ontology of whiteness is "the intersubjective and interpersonal matrix in terms of which whites perform a shared mode of being-raced-in-the-world, a form of being-in-the-world that is marked as 'benign' and 'natural,' but is nefariously oppressive and cunningly deceptive" (*White Self-Criticality* xii). As both "benign" and "natural," the white self that emerges through the social ontology is naturalized into the world as unremarkable, unnoticed, and unseen. Whiteness, therefore, is not known or understood *as* a social project that grants specific social, economic, and cultural privileges to those identified as white. Moreover, the above actively prevents whiteness from being viewed as constructed, nor are those identified as white being *raced* in any meaningful way. So thoroughly does the social ontology of whiteness perform this function that it conceals itself from the very white people it privileges. It is in this way that the social ontology of whiteness renders whiteness and the white body as unremarkable, unnoticed: it is what enables McCloud's comic avatar to be represented as a "blank slate" onto which a reader may project their understandings.

Here we can turn back to *Understanding Comics* as a phenomenology of experiencing comics. On this view, McCloud's "blank slate" concept, his assertion that his avatar goes unmarked save for what we bring to it, and his argument that we would not think to consider his politics both position those who *do* stop to consider the social ramifications of his white avatar as bringing something (problematic) to the avatar rather than addressing what is present. Put another way, when we question the whiteness of McCloud's avatar, its universality, we begin to question the fundamental nature of a world that is organized by whiteness and treats whiteness as universal. Because the white form of McCloud's avatar is both simplified and abstracted, it becomes more universal through its distancing from any visual markers of race: the whiteness of the avatar does not invite us to bring in assumptions about it because of its "default" organization. Thus, while we give McCloud life, this life is not raced, its politics are not questioned, its social relations are "natural": were McCloud's avatar that of a black man, the life we brought to it would be different by virtue of the social ontology of whiteness.

Moreover, within the social ontology of whiteness, it does not occur to us to view McCloud's avatar *as* white: McCloud's avatar is simply a blank slate onto which we may project everything *except* whiteness. If we turn back to the "missing syllable" in McCloud's phenomenological approach to understanding comics, the orientation of the body towards the comic character, it becomes clear that McCloud is taking his own body as the starting point

for *all other bodies* that encounter the visual language of comics. Because of his emergence as white from the social ontology of whiteness that, again, renders whiteness natural and benign, or a "default" position from which to approach the world, it would not occur to McCloud, or any other reader positioned by the social ontology of whiteness, to question the extension of his starting point across all bodies who seek to understand comics. Moreover, it would not occur to a reader who occupies the "default" position to view McCloud's assumptions as cementing the position of the white body as the default body. This, in turn, is connected to the function of the ontology of whiteness as enabling white bodies *not* to recognize themselves as invested in white supremacy, or whiteness itself, as a consequence of the generation of knowledge that fails to render whiteness visible in any meaningful way.

Following the above, the identity of McCloud's avatar is only made "irrelevant" insofar as it participates in an ongoing social structure that renders whiteness invisible in comparison to the social construction of nonwhite bodies, which enables us to fill McCloud's avatar with ourselves. Put another way, the implied whiteness of McCloud's avatar is what enables him to put forth his avatar as a "blank slate," the "thesis" through which all other bodies can interact with a world that unfolds from an "invisible" white subjectivity, which would be an impossibility were McCloud's avatar black. According to Yancy, "The black body . . . is ontologically mapped; its coordinates lead to that which is immediately visible: the black surface. There is only the visible, the concrete, the seen, all there all at once" (*Black Bodies, White Gazes* 38), which is to say that the social ontology of whiteness is that which simultaneously enables McCloud's avatar to be a "blank slate," yet the ontology of whiteness is also that which denies a similarly positioned black avatar the capacity to be a "blank slate," for it is always perceived as *being black*. Put simply, the capacity for McCloud's avatar to remain invisible in the action of narrating the "language" of comics, and therefore to make his words "matter" more than the representation of his avatar, is itself a function of the social ontology of whiteness, without which his avatar would call attention to itself in the execution of its narration.

To fully understand the above point, specifically the argument that a black avatar could not function in the same way, we must turn to the ways in which a black body moves through a space organized by whiteness. Sara Ahmed, drawing upon Frantz Fanon, argues that bodies are never neutral: they are shaped by the activities of colonialism, which serve to make the world "white" (Ahmed 153). A world made white is a world that is "prepared" for some bodies and not others prior to their arrival in it. In so doing, the world made white serves to place some "objects," by which she means the objects within

McCloud's conceptual and sensory worlds, in reach. A white body is therefore "at home" in a world already prepared for it in a way that a black body is not: bodies that are at home are those bodies that do not stand out in the execution of their actions, that do not call attention to themselves through the ways in which they move through space. These bodies are "habitual."

Ahmed, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, describes the "habitual" body in the following:

> The body is 'habitual' not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but in the sense that when it performs such actions, it does not command attention, apart from at the "surface" where it "encounters" an external object (such as the hands that lean on the desk or table, which feel the "stress" of the action). In other words, the body is habitual insofar as it "trails behind" in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose "a problem" or an obstacle to the action, or is not 'stressed' by 'what' the action encounters. (Ahmed 156)

For Ahmed, white bodies are habitual bodies: because of their whiteness, they do not impede the actions taken in the world; they "trail behind" the action in such a way as to enable the action executed to stand at the forefront, rather than the body that acts. Here, we may see similarities with the white bodies defined through Yancy's social ontology of whiteness that enable white bodies to be "natural" and "benign" through a shared mode of being predicated on asymmetrical power structures: the habits of this shared mode of being in the world are such that white bodies never have to confront their whiteness in the execution of their actions. For Ahmed, this means that "white bodies do not have to face their whiteness, they are not oriented 'towards' it" (Ahmed 156), which is what allows whiteness as a shared mode of being to come together *as* whiteness, or the background against which all other modes of being in the world are projected.

The inverse, however, is true for nonwhite bodies. Because nonwhite bodies never trail behind their actions, because they are always present in their action, a nonwhite body is not "at home" in the world as made white by colonialism. That is, because they are not at home in a world made white, they are unable to "extend" themselves through the world: they are stopped in the extension of their bodies towards "objects" in the world by virtue of their lack of whiteness, which is that which draws attention to the action in the world. Thus, for Ahmed, "To be black in 'the white world' is to turn back towards itself, to become an object, which means not only not being extended by the contours of the world, but being diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others" (Ahmed 161), which is to say that as whiteness extends through the

world, other bodies are diminished as a consequence of that extension. More specifically, Ahmed treats this failure to be extended by a world made white as manifested in being "stopped."

Stopping, for Ahmed, is embodied in questions asked. For example: "Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of stopping device: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped" (Ahmed 161). Not being stopped, on this argument, is manifested in the way in which some bodies are not questioned upon their arrival in the world. To turn back to McCloud and his avatar, that we would not stop to think to ask about his politics, his clothes, or his food indicates the way in which the simplified version of his white body can amplify the narrative by not calling attention to itself. On the other hand, because the black body is immediately visible in its historical and social construction, it would be unable to extend fully into the space of a narrative that was predicated on articulating *how* to understand comics. The black avatar would, consequently, be "stopped" by questions about the political objectives of a black avatar teaching an understanding of comics, of the legitimacy of the understanding presented, of the sources used. Not only would the black avatar be unable to be a "blank space" into which identities are poured, the very structure that denies the black avatar this capacity would also serve to stop the avatar from communicating its message *despite* any simplification. Put simply, no amount of simplification can enable a black avatar to amplify anything but the politicization of the narrative.

To be stopped by whiteness, for Ahmed, is to be oriented by whiteness in the action of moving through the world. Insofar as white bodies do not encounter whiteness in their movement through the world, in the execution of their actions, by being "at home" in the world, white bodies are not oriented by whiteness: whiteness orients other bodies. Moreover, whiteness, through colonialism, serves to organize and orient spaces. Spaces, phenomenologically, emerge because of the repeated actions of the bodies that dwell within them. Put another way, spaces become "white" as they take on the contours of the repeated actions of the bodies within them. To draw upon Yancy, the coherence of a space around the shared whiteness of the participants in the space is what makes this space white. Insofar as this space forms around whiteness, within a social structure that naturalizes whiteness, the space itself will appear *naturally* white, and this whiteness will not be taken as a problem for white bodies that seek to move through it. As a consequence, white bodies are not oriented by spaces made white, whereas nonwhite bodies are *disoriented* by those spaces, made uncomfortable by their inability to fit in.

For Ahmed, "Whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in" (Ahmed 158). Insofar as nonwhite bodies do not fit in by virtue of not participating in the shared being-in-the-world that gives rise to whiteness, nonwhite bodies are not comfortable. Here we may critique McCloud's identification thesis: as McCloud's imagined reader is a projection of himself, a white projection, it assumes an innate capacity to fit in. "Fitting in" in this context is the ability for the reader to "fill" the abstracted and simplified comic character with what they bring to the work. In contrast, a nonwhite reader would have difficulty "fitting in," or filling McCloud's avatar with their lived experience, given the way in which the world, and *Understanding Comics*'s vocabulary as an extension of that world, is not "comfortable" for them. To this end, McCloud's identity thesis, as it draws upon a "conceptual world" for the source of the power of identification, draws upon a conceptual world already made white wherein the reader need not face their whiteness: because McCloud's white body as simplified trails behind the action of narrating *Understanding Comics*, he may claim an objective position from which to articulate a language of comics without "distracting" from the message. The invisibility of his white body, therefore, allows the narrative to take center-stage. A black body, which is always visible in its actions, would be unable to "trail behind." This, then, places into question the universality of McCloud's thesis.

If whiteness is comfortable because the space of the world has already taken the shape of whiteness, identification with McCloud's avatar is easy depending on one's proximity to whiteness. However, the inverse is possible as well: a black avatar created through simplification is not a space that takes the shape of whiteness. Because blackness cannot be simplified away from its social history, the black avatar stands out in its actions: it is "stopped" in the action of narrating. Further, because the black avatar is not a space that has taken on the shape of whiteness, a white body, and its experience, would consequently be "uncomfortable" filling it. This discomfort, drawing upon both Yancy and Ahmed, would be experienced as an inability to "fit in" within the narrative, resulting in a narrative that is an "uncomfortable" fit. The attempt to "fill" the simplified black body with white experience would consequently interrupt the construction of whiteness by displacing the white body from a site of privilege and power: it would, in essence, deny the white self the capacity for mastery of its definition as a consequence of the history of blackness. To this end, the white body would be "stopped" by the black avatar because the world it seeks to inhabit is not one that is perceived as made for it, and therefore not one that the white reader could sink comfortably into.

The preceding description of McCloud's understanding of comics, and the vocabulary of comics that proceeds from it, as grounded in a social ontology of whiteness, is not to attribute a nefarious intent to McCloud's work. Rather, the above serves to indicate the ways in which the social context from which McCloud's work proceeds results in its adoption of implicit assumptions about the nature of comics creators, readers, and how to read comics. Moreover, as *Understanding Comics* represents an early attempt at articulating a language of comics and defining the form of comics in a comprehensive way, it is unsurprising that McCloud's initial entry into the field would reproduce social inequalities common to other attempts at creating an objective definition of a form. Specifically as *Understanding Comics* was developed in the absence of the conceptual language provided by recent entries into the field of comics studies, the above demonstration of the implicit assumptions within the text becomes more necessary given the prominence of the work within the field.

Put another way, McCloud's articulation of how to "understand" comics does not proceed from a neutral ground as implied by his articulation of the conceptual world or the sensory world, nor is it free of the social ontology that conditions McCloud's understanding of comics through the experience of whiteness as neutral. Moreover, the widespread adoption of McCloud's text as an introduction to a phenomenology, a method of reading, serves to institutionalize the implicit assumptions made within the work. As such, *Understanding Comics* serves as an "orienting device," in the words of Sara Ahmed, that directs the appropriate engagement with the language of comics and, given its dominance in the discourse of comics studies, the field of comics studies itself.

Understanding Comics as an Orienting Device

To understand *Understanding Comics* as an "orienting device," we need to understand *Understanding Comics* as providing a way to organize our perceptions of comics through providing a language to *understand* comics. In doing so, *Understanding Comics* serves to structure our perception of the way comics unfold, or to provide instruction for how they *should* unfold before a reader. This unfolding is established through a history of sequential art, albeit one that serves to draw the traditions of other cultures under the ambit of McCloud's own definition and thereby legitimate diverse comics traditions as something worth understanding. However, insofar as McCloud is attempting to provide an orientation towards comics through the "straightening" of our perceptions of comics, he does so from within the sedimented power

structures of the social ontology of whiteness, which informs the ways of understanding comics presented within *Understanding Comics*. Put another way, *Understanding Comics* seeks to place "ready to hand" the appropriate "tools" for understanding comics: it predicts a line along which the "world" of a comic unfolds, a line that has been taken up within comics studies without reference to the way in which *Understanding Comics* is itself an extension of McCloud's orientation towards the world itself.

For Ahmed, "orienting devices" provide our initial orientation towards or away from an object: in her description of whiteness as orienting nonwhite bodies, Ahmed treats whiteness as directing nonwhite bodies towards or away from things in the world. As an orienting device, *Understanding Comics* functions similarly: the text shapes the understanding of the reader through its provision of a language that gives meaning to comics beyond bare perception. Further, *Understanding Comics* serves to shape comics by the ways in which the text directs the perception of the reader towards comics to enable the "world" of comics to unfold along the "lines" inscribed by McCloud throughout the text in the form of a "vocabulary" of comics. The orientations produced by McCloud's specific language of comics, as indicated through the structure of his amplification through simplification, are shaped by a history that is hidden from McCloud by the social ontology of whiteness. *Understanding Comics* participates in this history through the totalizing effect of its "vocabulary," which subsumes the uniqueness of non-Western traditions of sequential art into a Western vocabulary of comics, which thereby serves to orient the presumed reader towards non-Western comics in ways that serve as an extension of an understanding of comics grounded in whiteness.

Here we can turn to McCloud's historical exegesis and repeated references to Japanese manga throughout *Understanding Comics*, and limitedly within the rest of his corpus, as an example of the way in which McCloud's vocabulary serves to render the nonwhite other, and their cultural traditions, as an instantiation of the "sameness" of whiteness. Put another way, McCloud, like Eisner before him, redefines comics through the language of the "white understanding," which proceeds from the "sameness that issues from whiteness's proclivity towards totalization" (Yancy, *What White Looks Like* 14). Insofar as the objectivity of McCloud's definition relies implicitly on "white understanding" as a default position from which comics unfold, it is necessary to interrogate the ways that *Understanding Comics* structures our perceptions of what it is to be a comic within the world defined by McCloud's text. That is, we must consider that the very definition of comics derived from McCloud's encounter is rearticulated through the "white understanding," which renders the nonwhite experience "civilized" or intelligible to whiteness.

Briefly, McCloud presents comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9) as the definition necessary for "most cases" where we seek to understand comics. Consequently, McCloud moves to impose this definition on a pre-Columbian picture manuscript by reorganizing the work so that it becomes intelligible in his understanding and definition of comics. McCloud describes this process in the following: "First, we separate words from pictures, then reverse it and straighten it (the original read right-to-left and zigzagged) and begin" (McCloud 11), where "begin" indicates the initiation of reading the reordered picture manuscript. Here McCloud's process of dismembering and reordering the pre-Columbian scroll serves to maintain, rather than deny, "the imperial epistemological and ontological base from which it sees what it wants (or has been shaped historically) to see" (Yancy, *What White Looks Like* 13). In so doing, McCloud enables the assimilation of the nonwhite experience, embodied in the work of art, into the totalizing form of whiteness by dismembering the work and rearticulating it through the "white understanding," thereby enabling its inclusion within the development of a history of sequential art as a colonial project.

This colonial project is limited in its scope within *Understanding Comics*, as McCloud subsequently presents the totality of an Egyptian work with the appropriate reading order as an example of the historical construction of comic art; however, the preservation of the appropriate order of reading is not, as we might be quick to assume, an attempt at what Yancy might call "genuine inclusion," or the "opportunity for the development of a porous horizon, one that responds positively to the other in his or her difference, learns from the other, and changes based upon an encounter with the other" (*What White Looks Like* 14); rather, the work serves as a means whereby the culture of the Other can serve to establish and confirm a preexisting colonial narrative of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," a mode it shares with McCloud's representation of Japanese manga later in the text. That is, while McCloud does not disparage the two traditions and their distinctions from the established Western canon, and indeed recognizes them as "comics," it is their difference that McCloud is concerned with: they serve to establish the dominance of the language already developed rather than expand on it. James Banks speaks to this project by reminding us that our failure to "recognize the ways in which social location produces subjectivity and influences the construction of knowledge" allows us to continue to maintain the marginalization of underrepresented groups through our reproduction and failure to interrogate established ways of knowing that are grounded in the subjugation of marginalized individuals (Banks 65).

The case of Japanese manga is particularly interesting, as McCloud notes with regard to aspect-to-aspect transitions in manga that "through these and other storytelling techniques, the Japanese offer a vision of comics very different from our own" (McCloud 83), a vision that on the following page is presented as valuable for the way in which the elements from Japanese culture have been taken up in the Western milieu. That is, while McCloud emphasizes the difference between manga and the Western tradition, he does so only to make clear existing elements within the Western tradition, as well as the way in which the West has *benefitted* from the assimilation of the Japanese elements of culture. Here it might be argued that the "vocabulary" developed draws upon nonwhite and non-Western works in order to make clear the ways in which the Western, white imagination has anticipated the works generated by nonwhite cultures within its own totalizing vocabulary, and not to emphasize the cultural and social distinctiveness of those works. Put simply, while McCloud makes overtures to the development of a language of comics that is "porous" and as such open to expansion, the way in which these overtures are framed as an invitation for the Other to confirm a language present within "white understanding" precludes a genuine contact with the Other in the development of McCloud's language. This function of *Understanding Comics* is crucial given the prestige that it has enjoyed within the field of comic studies. As presented by Cohn:

> McCloud's approach has permeated nearly all linguistically driven studies since its publication. Both Saraceni (2000) and Stainbrook (2003) focused their dissertations on adapting McCloud's panel transitions to theories of verbal discourse, while Narayan (2001) compared them to cognitive theories about event structure. Similarly, Saraceni (2001), Bridgeman (2005), and Lim (2006) all invoke McCloud's ideas in their discussions of multimodal texts integrating images and words. (Cohn 95)

Taking the field of linguistics as our example, *Understanding Comics* has served to orient the ways in which we produce knowledge where comics is concerned. Through the repeated citation of *Understanding Comics* as crucial to developing an understanding of comics within the field of comics studies, the underlying assumptions of McCloud's works and the vocabulary generated within the text become sedimented into the field. To this end, the orientations adopted as a consequence of the repeated use of *Understanding Comics* as an authority within the field of comics studies, unless critically interrogated, will reproduce the "blind spots" of the ways of knowing that develop McCloud's orientation towards comics. Thus, for comics studies

to become truly expansive, it may become necessary that we *misunderstand* comics through a critical reading of *Understanding Comics*.

Conclusion: Misunderstanding Comics as a Critical Reading of *Understanding Comics*

Even if *Understanding Comics* is implicated in the ways of knowing that have maintained the marginalization of underrepresented groups, it does not stand to reason that *Understanding Comics* should be discarded as a tool for understanding comics. Instead, we should seek to critically engage *Understanding Comics* because of its place of prestige within the field of comics studies and comics pedagogy as a guide to how we should understand comics. Doing so can enable the "democratization" of McCloud's "comic vocabulary" by validating the ways of knowing and experiences of comics brought to comics by marginalized comics fans, scholars, and educators. Critical, in this context, is grounded in the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who presented education as the means whereby the oppressed can develop the consciousness of their oppression and the social relations that maintain it.

To be critical, therefore, involves challenging the assumption of a text as an absolute authority on a subject from which "pure" knowledge is received. Instead, the text and the reader are collaborators in developing an understanding of the material within the text. This dialogic or collaborative engagement with the text subsequently empowers and validates the experiences that the reader brings to the text in order to transform the text into a site of resistance. In the case of *Understanding Comics*, it would be to challenge the authority of McCloud's treatment of the comics vocabulary and the process of reading comics as absolute, rather than an initial starting point for a dialogue between McCloud and the reader: it would open the possibility of using the concepts within *Understanding Comics* to generate a unique and situated way of understanding comics. It would be to use the concepts within *Understanding Comics* to ask readers how they understand comics *through* the vocabulary provided rather than assuming universal understanding through mastery of the vocabulary.

A critical reading of *Understanding Comics*, therefore, would seek to develop an *understanding of comics* through McCloud's that seeks to orient a reader in a direction taken towards comics that makes comics available to readers in new and unique ways through validating a reader's experience of a comic. For example, if we take McCloud's blank slate in *Understanding Comics* as a starting point to ask how different readers understand comics from within their social and cultural positions, McCloud's blank slate in *Understanding*

Comics takes on new meaning as an entry point into the experiences and ways of knowing of marginalized peoples. It is this power of *Understanding Comics* that opens up the possibility for understanding comics as a liberatory practice by incorporating critical or dialogic pedagogy. A dialogic, or critical, approach to *Understanding Comics* would not rest on McCloud's "blank slate" as the prototypical reader: instead, it would engage in a conversation among multiple readers to collaboratively develop an understanding of comics from multiple perspectives that serves to decenter the assumed "default" body.

As an example, insofar as McCloud assumes that all readers possess the same "starting point" when interacting with both the sensory world and the conceptual world, *Understanding Comics* seeks to institutionalize this universal starting point without attending to its social position. It is on this presumption that McCloud argues that readers are better able to identify with simpler comic characters by filling up their forms with material from the conceptual world when those characters are juxtaposed against realistic backgrounds. In so doing, McCloud presumes that the primary barrier to identifying with characters in comics is the degree to which they approximate objects in the "sensory world," which denies readers the capacity to identify with the character represented. Thus, a simplified form provides a means whereby readers can extend themselves into the comic character *because* they are abstracted from the sensory world and thus do not have a ground in it: the abstracted form of the comic character does not "orient" the reader in the same way that a photorealistic character would, and it thereby allows a reader to bring their own orientation to the comic character.

However, what McCloud misses is the ways in which readers possess an initial orientation, an initial starting point that places the simplified character "in reach" so that they may fill it with their identity. As indicated in the discussion of the black avatar, a simplification of the black avatar does not evacuate it of its social meaning: it functions to pull in the social meanings of the black body in the narrative. Here, the black avatar becomes not a "vacuum into which our identity and awareness is pulled . . . an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel to another realm" (McCloud 36), but a vacuum into which social meanings are pulled and a site where those meanings can be interrogated. *Understanding Comics*, both as a text and an action, thereby can serve as an aid to understanding our specific orientation to the work such that we can be pulled into the work. A critical pedagogy could approach *Understanding Comics* as providing the language for readers to articulate their own orientation to comics by rephrasing its initial assumptions concerning the "work" that comics do.

For example, while Superman's origin is treated as a universal story, an "all-American" story that describes how the character comes to embody

American cultural ideals in a white body, a body which all readers are expected to "see themselves" in, a black reader would decode Superman's origin in light of the way that white bodies are able to become the embodiment of American virtues by virtue of their whiteness, while nonwhite or black bodies are denied this privilege. Conversely, a white reader would struggle to view the narrative of *Black AF: America's Sweetheart* as a universal narrative because of the racialized perception of the black female body as subjective, as only being able to represent the experience of black womanhood, and not as being able to represent a universal narrative. Thus different orientations of the body produce different unfoldings of the world, as some objects in the world are placed in and out of "reach" of our bodies, just as different orientations of readers produce different ways that the text unfolds.

Here we can turn back to the "missing piece" of McCloud's work elaborated through critical theory: as amplification through simplification creates a universal image only insofar as our perceptions are oriented to view the image as universal, *Understanding Comics*'s language of amplification through simplification can articulate the ways that some images are *not* universal because of the social meanings of the images, thereby opening a critical space for readers to explore what it is that they bring to the experience of reading, and how the critical space of comics makes present their orientation not only to the comic but to the world. Experiences of disidentification as a consequence of an avatar's social history can be explored by *misunderstanding* comics through McCloud's language, particularly in the mode of the reader's engagement with the comic as *subjective* rather than *objective*. Put simply, the ways in which McCloud's thesis fail are as informative as the ways in which it succeeds, specifically insofar as who the language fails for can open a space for critical engagement with the text.

Additionally, a critical pedagogy of *Understanding Comics* is not simply limited to exposing tensions within and between groups: it can be used to unpack the ways in which marginalized subjects have deployed comics within their own communities. As an example, applying the concepts of amplification through simplification to the cultural history of comics in the African American community can provide crucial insights to the ways that comics do "work" in a social sense. Using *Understanding Comics* to articulate how Orrin C. Evans used "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9) to "give American Negros a reflection of their natural spirit of adventure and a finer appreciation of their African heritage" (Evans 1947) allows for an expanded use, and historical reinterpretation of the ways in which comics were used by the African American community, through McCloud's assertion of the universality of comics' ability to draw in

the reader, to connect contemporary African Americans with a past that they had lost. Moreover, critical use in this way can indicate significant differences in the ways that languages are used across cultures.

Further, readers may critically reflect on how the simplification of some avatars serves to amplify some narratives and not others through the ways in which those narratives are "attached" to the social histories of the simplified bodies. Or, taking up Robin DiAngelo's assertion that the universality of whiteness is grounded in the assumption that "whites can represent humanity, while people of color, who are never just people but always most particularly black people, Asian people, etc., can only represent their own racialized experiences," *Understanding Comics*, interpreted through a recognition of the positionality of the reader *prior* to being provided with the language to "understand" comics, can allow readers to critically interrogate the habits of perception developed through the language provided by *Understanding Comics* (DiAngelo 59). It would be to interrogate how the "language" of the comics changes, or *what* narratives are amplified through *which* simplified bodies.

Drawing on Margaret Noori, this critical approach can be useful for understanding the nuances within the respective traditions of the visual narratives of indigenous Americans, specifically insofar as these narratives do not conform neatly to McCloud's comics language. For Noori, drawing upon McCloud's language of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images" serves as an expedient method of exploring the connections between early Anishinaabe visual culture and its modern representation. Specifically, Noori argues,

> if centuries of Anishinaabe were able to develop and deploy a complex agglutinative structure made mostly of verbs to communicate images, ideas, and relationships across time, there must then be a way of interpreting them based on more than printed and published texts. Furthermore, the layered construction of the sound and meaning is perfectly suited to the comic format, where text, line, and color combine to communicate action and relationships. (Noori 58)

In Noori's view, the visual form enables the preservation and articulation of multiple indigenous narratives because of its connection with indigenous visual culture. Comics, in her view, are the natural progression of indigenous oral and visual culture. Thus, it is this alignment of Anishinaabe cultural works with the modern form of comics, and the recognition that "not only are comics rich with potential in their own right, they are historically one of the original formats of native narrative" (Noori 59), that makes the language provided by *Understanding Comics* well suited to bridge the gap between the historical visual culture of the Anishinaabe people and its modern equivalent.

For Noori, the language of *Understanding Comics,* as a means whereby the visual image and the written word come together to make manifest a narrative, may be used by "the 1,681 sovereign nations in the United States, Canada, and Central and South America, so that they may understand themselves as connected in new ways to one another and to the nations that surround them" (Noori 71), and thereby recover a connection to a history nearly lost through colonialism.

Given *Understanding Comics*'s position of privilege where orienting understandings of comics is concerned, it is necessary to take seriously the critical use of *Understanding Comics* within a pedagogical space. Insofar as *Understanding Comics* not only orients the fields of comics studies and comics pedagogy through its repeated citation in publications, syllabi, and informal criticism of comics and its role in establishing the critical study of comics as an academic enterprise, *Understanding Comics* serves as a privileged orienting device, albeit one that suffers from the limitations of the time and space of its publication. While McCloud's subsequent works *Making Comics* and *Reinventing Comics* make great strides in developing and expanding the initial thesis advanced within *Understanding Comics*, McCloud's formalistic, objective approach does not lend itself to an engagement across subject positions.

It is for this reason that we must "queer" our understanding of comics through *Understanding Comics* by reappropriating and redeploying its language to make explicit the implicit assumptions about the organization of comics and our orientations towards comics. What has been sketched above is but one way of reorienting *Understanding Comics* to accomplish the aim of using its language to open up a critical space for the interrogation of our implicit assumptions about the ways in which we are oriented towards comics, how we should read comics, and the "uses" of comics. By engaging with *Understanding Comics* through the lens of critical pedagogy, we may decenter the "default" assumptions within the text and redeploy its language to make clear other ways of understanding, or misunderstanding comics. Put simply, as the field shows little sign of abandoning the language and orientation of *Understanding Comics*, it becomes our task to reorient *ourselves* towards *Understanding Comics.*

In this way, adjusting our own orientation towards *Understanding Comics* allows us to treat the development of comic literacy presented in *Understanding Comics* as a means to attain a critical understanding of a reader's social relation to a text and the society that produced it. *Understanding Comics*, therefore, would become a site for readers to engage in dialogue, ideological critique, and transformative action (Luke) to change the conditions that give rise to those relations rather than an authority on the *right* way to understand comics. Critically engaging *Understanding Comics* in this way would "democratize"

Understanding Comics by encouraging students, comics fans, and comics scholars alike to bring their own experiential knowledge into the process outlined in *Understanding Comics*, thereby limiting the privileging of one dominant "voice" (Cahan and Kocur) as the authority on understanding comics.

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