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Spring 2024 Sabbatical Report: Building the Comics Class

Planned Project, Scope, and Intent

This sabbatical project grew from an English elective course outline I co-created called English V27: Comic Books and Graphic Novels. The idea behind the course was to give students at Ventura College an opportunity to explore stories told visually through sequential static images and text in the same manner they approach prose, poetry, and film in other English classes. Of course there's a long-standing precedent for this course at other colleges and universities across the country, so it felt like a good time for VC to join in the conversation and expand our offerings of English elective courses.

In making the pitch for taking the sabbatical, there were some distinct goals I wanted to pursue. Other than reading and familiarizing myself with comics and graphic novels from a diverse range of authors covering a vast range of potential subject matter, I also wanted to prioritize prose texts about comics and visual literacy; this meant reading non-fiction books I had on my shelf but had not had time to read. I also wanted to emphasize the body of work from brothers Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, cartoonists from Oxnard who made it big in the indie comics scene in the early 1980s and whose series *Love and Rockets* is still going strong. Having read very little of the Hernandez Brothers' (or as they're often known, Los Bros) body of work, I wanted to read and study

as much as I could, with the goal of incorporating their work into the curriculum of the course; seldom do students read authors local to our community, so engaging with work by artists who made it big, and who have told stories reflecting the people and communities they grew up with, felt important. I also wanted to actually build curriculum for the class: lessons for class and content for Canvas, online. And perhaps the most important thing I wanted to tackle and understand was how to teach comics to students. As a lifelong comics fan, I've rarely paused to consider how the brain works while reading stories told visually on the page; it just works, so why question it? But I wanted to be able to attempt to explain to students why comics are unique from other storytelling mediums and pinpoint particular ways in which we process what we read. I wanted to be able to unpack structure and content the same way I've explored prose and poetry in writing and literature classes. That meant taking time to pause, to really think, and to consider how others have tried to explain what happens when we read a comic book.

What I Read: The Comics and Graphic Novels

I tried to create a few loose guidelines or goals when it came to the comics and graphic novels I selected to read. I grew up in and have always lived in America, and in this country, comics are synonymous with superheroes. For most people not familiar with comics, I think there's an assumption that stories about crimefighters in tights leaping across buildings make up most of the medium. It doesn't take much imagination to wonder why. Given the popularity of superhero movies since approximately 2008 when the first *Iron Man* film was released, superhero movies have been the hot ticket,

and there's little sign of that slowing down. But when it comes the actual comic books that are adapted into films, TV shows, and video games, superheroes are only part of what's on a very broad and comprehensive menu. So, it felt appropriate and important to me to not read as many superhero comics, and instead to look to graphic novel memoirs, anthologies, and fiction stories from genres not superhero-related. If I did read a superhero comic, it would be a very intentional choice.

Given the Hernandez brothers' large body of work, it felt daunting knowing what to read; I opted to simply start at the beginning. This meant purchasing and reading their paperback volumes of *Love and Rockets*, and I attempted to read as many as I could to see which collection(s) I might assign to a class. I was able to read and enjoy several volumes, and as of this writing I believe I've settled on one volume from each brother I would love to teach in class.

What I Read: The Non-Fiction Prose

Over time I've amassed a small collection of non-fiction, prose texts dedicated to the history of comics and the men and women who created them; however, until this sabbatical, I hadn't read a one. That changed quickly. Without question, the most insightful book was Jeremy Dauber's *American Comics: A History*. This thick, impressive volume is exactly what it claims to be; Dauber unpacks several aspects of the medium and industry that created it, moving from one period to the next in clear chronological order. He details everything from trends of the day to the oftentimes problematic business practices that contributed to the success or failure of publishers, artists, and even particular genres of comics. The average student would find this much information

and insight overwhelming, but for me, it was deeply compelling, and I know I plan to incorporate his work into what I teach. I'll be lifting from his book liberally in my PowerPoints, I'm sure.

Douglas Wolk's flat-out romp *All the Marvels* and his less entertaining but still deeply insightful *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* were important, too. If *Reading Comics* is a pseudo-academic exploration into the significance of certain comics, *All the Marvels* is simply a joy-inspired celebration of the best things about comics. In fact, *All the Marvels* was the very first thing I read when my sabbatical started, and if I needed any additional enthusiasm and passion to begin my work, this book gave me an extra boost. In short, Wolk literally read over 26,000 Marvel comics (yes, you read that correctly), from the early 1960s through about 2018. In his book he spotlights particular issues, runs and arcs made by authors and artists alike, and examines what's to be loved about the stories. There's nothing remotely academic about the book, and that's part of what makes it so wonderful. It's a celebration of stories, of passion for art, an all-things-nerd fist pump in the air, and highly accessible to anyone. For students, I can envision it as a model for how to write about comics, and in a larger sense, just how to write about something you love with depth, detail, insight, and context for outsiders who don't know. It's easy to imagine sharing an excerpt or two with a class, maybe even pairing up the comic he's written about, and letting students experience the art and the reflection about what makes it great.

Because I wanted to prioritize the Hernandez Brothers' work (Los Bros, remember), I picked up a short text called *The Hernandez Brothers: Love, Rockets and*

Alternative Comics, by Enrique Garcia. This book serves as a very thoughtful exploration of the significance of the Hernandez Brother's work in the context of independent publishing, but also with respect to depictions of Latinx characters, and characters from the LGBTQ community, something that unfortunately mainstream superhero comics have not done in sustained, meaningful ways. I suspect excerpts of the book will indeed be part of the curriculum in class, but I'll confess, I had to hit pause on my reading before the first chapter was even done. The reason was, the book began detailing issues I hadn't, and still haven't, read yet. This meant not only did I not have full context for the conversations on the page, I was also having storylines spoiled! *Not good!* So the book is here, waiting, until I can revisit it with a more informed perspective.

In conjunction with Mr. Garcia's book, I also watched a very good documentary about the cultural impact of *Love and Rockets*, produced by PBS, that I absolutely plan to show in the future. In only 56 minutes, the doc unpacks what makes the long-running series great, subversive, radical, and culturally significant. Plenty of space is dedicated to hearing directly from Jaime and Gilbert themselves, and early on they speak about growing up in Oxnard, reading comics, drawing, and not feeling like they belonged at school. I have to believe the sentiments expressed would resonate with many students, and again, what an opportunity for them to hear from such important contemporary artists. To me, this doc is clearly a must-view, and I'll plan to make space for it in class in my Canvas shell once it's up and running.

Field Trips: Visiting Los Bros Not Once, But Twice!

Given my newfound time to dedicate to this project, I didn't just sit around the house or coffee shop reading; I also wanted to get out a bit and find resources I could bring into the classroom. By sheer dumb luck, Spring 2024 was a goldmine of opportunity. First, the LA Times Festival of Books, which hosts hundred of panels, discussions, and signings over a weekend in April each year, held an interview with Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, in conjunction with two recent releases of some of their work. I bought two tickets, piled in my car with a good friend, and made the drive to USC. While the interview on campus was less-than-stellar, during the chat I learned a very interesting bit of information: Gilbert's daughter attends Ventura College! After the interview, during which Los Bros signed copies of their work, I mentioned that I in fact taught in the English department at VC, was getting ready to teach an intro to comics elective course, and was interested in trying to host the Brothers at our campus at some point in the future. To my total shock, Gilbert grabbed a sticky note, wrote down his personal email address, and invited me to reach out again. I was gobsmacked! And I'm happy to report as of this writing, Gilbert has agreed to visit our campus in April, in-person, during our Diversity In Culture Festival. What a treat!

Cal State University, Northridge, one of the most popular destinations for Ventura College students looking to transfer to a four-year institution, happens to have a pretty robust English department, complete with comics electives, thanks to the work, energy, and passion of Dr. Charles Hatfield. Dr. Hatfield happens to be an admirer of Los Bros' *Love and Rockets*, so I was again thrilled when I learned that CSUN would be hosting Gilbert and Jaime less than two weeks from the LA Times Festival of Books. This CSUN

chat promised to be a more intimate affair, as Dr. Hatfield has taught seminars completely dedicated to *Love and Rockets*, so there's a relationship there. It would be a quiet conversation among friends and students studying Los Bros' work; I of course made the short drive (exploring a few comic shops in Northridge along the way and spending money I didn't really have).

The conversation that evening between Dr. Hatfield, his students, and Jaime and Gilbert indeed proved to be much more engaging and insightful than the larger LA Times Festival event, and I even got one of my own questions asked. I was able to touch base again with Gilbert and Jaime (they remembered me), with the promise to follow-up later. It was interesting to see Los Bros in this academic environment, answering questions from students who were actively studying their work, and I gained some pointers as to how I might incorporate their work, or even how to ask questions of them should they make it to VC one day. I also got to meet Dr. Hatfield, who invited me to reach out any time to talk all things comics in the classroom.

Another somewhat minor, but still consequential encounter happened during a conversation with local comic book store owner, operator, and comic writer Timmy Heague. Timmy has co-owned, or owned, Arsenal Comics & Games for ten years now, and its Ventura location is literally down the street from the college, on Telegraph. Timmy's always collaborated with local schools in an attempt to, as he puts it, "get more comics into the hands of kids." While these visits are usually taking place at elementary and high schools, I spoke with Timmy about collaborating with VC; in fact, he brought it up before I could. To my mind, this could be a two-fold endeavor: first, Arsenal may be

able to serve as the spot where some students purchase the required reading for our class; second, this could be an opportunity for a local business owner and comic book writer just at the early stages of his career to talk with students about what it means to be a small business owner (a bookstore, no less) and an artist. Most of my students will not want to go into comics professionally, but plenty will want to start up and maintain their own small businesses, and Timmy can speak to that experience with authority and insight. Plus, he started very, very young, a detail that will be of interest to students, I think. I see a strong collaboration between Arsenal and VC in the very near future.

Can't Do It All, I Guess: What I'm Still Figuring Out

So, the best set plans don't always work out, and that cliched mantra certainly applies here. When I began, I imagined I'd take the information I cobbled together and start to actually build some curriculum: Canvas pages, PowerPoints, stuff like that. Turned out, this is where I spent the least amount of time. The balance of taking in information and stories, then translating them to curriculum-based content, didn't pan out. While I did start building a few Canvas activities, and I think I've sorted out what "major" assignments I may ask of my students, most of the weekly content has yet to be built.

Part of this is because, well, I'm still (even as of this writing) thinking things through, figuring out how to best unpack this content, how students might best learn about this stuff. The other part is—and this gets complicated—I'm also still sorting out what I'll ask my students to read, and how they'll be able to purchase the required readings without going broke.

Comics, and their collected trade paperbacks, are expensive. What's more, unlike the prose book publishing industry, comic collections often go out of print quickly, then go for sometimes-obscene sums of money on secondary markets (looking at you, Ebay). This makes things tricky. With an eighteen-week semester, it seems reasonable to me to say students in our class might be asked to read seven or eight graphic novels/comics collections, and that adds up quickly. If the class is prohibitively-expensive, no one will be able to participate...then what's the point?

Part of my sabbatical plan was to work out the specific books I'd like to assign and sorting out the best mechanisms to creatively to get them into the hands of students (at a price that won't break the bank). I'm still working this out, but there are some clear takeaways I've learned:

- a) I can't assume all the books I want will be in print, even six months from now
- b) Major publishers (DC, Marvel) don't necessarily guarantee longer print runs
- c) Online subscriptions are also pricey, and the more reasonably-priced options of yesteryear (Comixology, for instance) have changed; digital does not necessarily mean more accessible anymore
- d) Whatever I select, students need to be able to read the books and have them in class for discussion and panel-by-panel examinations; library holds alone won't cut it

While these factors mean I've got challenges to think through, they also create some opportunities to be creative. Going back to a collaboration with Arsenal, it could be that students pick up some books there (and maybe with a student discount?); it could be I

rely a bit more on anthologies than initially planned; maybe I start building my own lending library of copies of particular books I find on secondhand markets when I suspect a book may be going out of print for some time; it may mean I explore free webcomics (an avenue I'm not well-versed in at all) in an effort to keep costs down; and it likely means I'll need to look to particular lines of books to use (such as DC's Compact Comics line, in which all titles are \$9.99, or Marvel's Premier Collection, where books are \$14.99). Whatever I do, it'll have to be deliberate and creative, and I suspect I won't be able to assume the same books I use in a given semester will be as readily available again down the line.

Final Takeaways: What I Learned, What I'm Thinking Through

To unpack everything I learned during my sabbatical would result in a dissertation, not a report, so I'll refrain from an all-out geek-fest in this space. But what I can say is, I learned that we'll have plenty to talk about in this intro-level course because there's so much content to cover. And in spite of what I may have initially planned, a contextual history of the medium and publishing industry can and will impact how students think about and engage with the books. I also learned more about the rich diversity of stories and creators available today; if I do this right, we'll read few superhero titles and instead focus elsewhere. It isn't just Spider-Man or Wonder Woman. Focusing on the stories of historically marginalized creators, and the characters they conjured, will allow students to find more meaning in this medium of literature. It's a chance for them to see these aren't just silly stories that give inspiration to multi-million dollar superhero popcorn flicks. It's a chance for them to see these stories matter in broader contexts, too.

One of my biggest takeaways was the affirmation that comics aren't some childish stepping stone to real literature; **comics are literature**. If folks think otherwise, it's plain ignorance; they don't know what they don't know. What I'd like is for students to have moments of discovery and appreciation, to get lost in the pageantry of what's on the page, and to find a love for reading they may not have experienced previously. Lofty goals, for sure, but worthwhile ones. I'm looking forward to giving it my best, and I'm grateful for the time I was afforded to prepare.

Bibliography: What I Read

1. All of the Marvels by Douglas Wolk
2. Marvel Comics: The Untold Story by Sean Howe
3. Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean by Douglas Wolk
4. Maggie the Mechanic: A Love and Rockets Book by Jaime Hernandez
5. Earthdivers, Volume 1: Kill Columbus by Stephen Graham Jones & Davide Gianfelice
6. The Good Asian by Pornsak Pichetshote & Alexander Tefenkgi
7. Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud
8. Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner
9. American Comics: A History by Jeremy Dauber

10. The Girl from H.O.P.P.E.R.S.: A Love and Rockets Book by Jaime Hernandez
11. Julio's Day by Gilbert Hernandez
12. Goodbye, Eri by Tatsuki Fujimoto
13. Marble Season by Gilbert Hernandez
14. Lone Wolf and Cub, Omnibus 2 by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima
15. Perla La Loca: A Love and Rockets Book by Jaime Hernandez
16. Beyond Palomar by Gilbert Hernandez
17. Frizzy by Claribel A. Ortega and Rose Bousamra
18. Unflattening by Nick Sousanis
19. Class Act by Jerry Craft
20. Fuzz & Pluck by Ted Stearn
21. Doomboy by Tony Sandoval
22. Johnny Caronte: Zombie Detective & The Revolver by Jaime Roman Collado & Tony Sandoval
23. Breath of Bones: A Tale of the Golem by Steve Niles & Dave Wachter
24. I Killed Adolf Hitler by Jason
25. The Last Mechanical Monster by Brian Fies
26. Houdini: The Handcuff King by Jason Lutes and Nick Bertozzi

27. Delphine by Richard Sala
28. Ghosts by Raina Telgemeier
29. Superman: Brainiac by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank
30. Daze of the Dead by Javier Hernandez
31. Days of Sand by Aimee De Jongh
32. The Rocketeer: Cargo of Doom by Mark Waid and Chris Samnee
33. Anya's Ghost by Vera Brosgol
34. The Black Beetle by Francesco Francavilla
35. Josephine! by Jason
36. American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang
37. Strange Academy: First Class by Scottie Young and Humberto Ramos
38. Adora and The Distance by Marc Bernardin and Ariela Kristantina
39. The Shadow Hero by Gene Luen Yang and Stanley Liew
40. Batman and The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Omnibus by James Tynion IV and
Freddie Williams III
41. Richard Stark's Parker, Book One: The Hunter by Darwyn Cooke
42. Richard Stark's Parker, Book Two: The Outfit by Darwyn Cooke
43. Richard Stark's Parker, Book Three: The Score by Darwyn Cooke

44. Superman, Rebirth Deluxe Edition, Book 3 by Peter J. Tomasi and Patrick Gleason

45. Joe the Barbarian by Grant Morrison and Sean Murphy