Minding the Gap: Comics as Scaffolding for Critical Literacy Skills in the Classroom

Stephanie Vie and Brandy Dieterle

Abstract: Comics—both digital and print—increasingly make their way to the classroom. Scholars in the field have illustrated the pedagogical value of comics, but there remains little discussion as of yet about how comics can inform critical literacy, a necessary skill for twenty-first-century communication. Here the authors discuss an approach to first-year composition that argues for using comics, like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, as an avenue for grappling with critical literacy. This classroom activity was a part of a larger assignment sequence where students were asked to compose web-based literature reviews that incorporated multimodality. These literature reviews challenged students to incorporate multiple viewpoints into their essays, and critically discussing comics proved to be an effective method for fostering this critical literacy.

Introduction

Comics, as Dale Jacobs argues, have "come out of hiding and into the mainstream" (*Graphic Encounters* 3). The past few decades have seen comics move into the digital environment of the Internet in the form of successful webcomics like *xkcd*, *The Oatmeal*, and *Penny Arcade* (see also McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*; and Fenty, Houp, and Taylor). And as a result of this broad circulation, comics are increasingly filtering into the classroom. Indeed, books such as Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, Lan Dong's edited collection *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*, and Michael Bitz's *When Commas Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project* showcase this growing interest in incorporating comics into pedagogy at a variety of levels and in a variety of subject areas.

Within writing studies broadly and rhetoric and composition specifically, comics have begun to find a place. Both pedagogical applications of comics in the classroom and academic analyses and critiques of comics have increased. For example, Elizabeth Losh, Jonathan Alexander, and Big Team Attic's Kevin Cannon and Zander Cannon's *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing* offers a refreshing graphic-novel-style take on introductory rhetoric for classroom use. Increasing numbers of panels at conferences such as Computers & Writing and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) have detailed innovative ways faculty choose to incorporate comics into their classroom (see Assad; Cahill; Finley; Fraiberg; Howard; Johnson, Scribbly). Authors such as Robert Watkins have described in academic venues like *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* how they have incorporated comics and comics theorists (here, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*) to provide students "an accessible entry for those foreign to the concepts of visual rhetoric and multimodality … spark[ing] interest in otherwise dormant writers." In another *Kairos* article, Fred Johnson offers a vocabulary for instructors to talk with students about the basic constituent components of comics—what we see when we look closely at these visual media.

These scholars and others (see Dickinson and Werner; Howes; Jacobs, Marveling; Wysocki and Lynch) offer convincing arguments for incorporating comics into the writing classroom and feature pedagogically sound approaches for doing so. Jeraldine Kraver, for example, describes an activity she calls "1000 Words" where students must translate the panels of a comic into prose, then revise these narratives and eliminate twenty percent of the words (41). By choosing the stylistic impact of their words carefully, students discover that this kind of visualizing "is a significant component of the learning-to-read process" (42). That is, students must first determine

the best words to capture the visual narrative of their comic panels, then re-visualize their written text through sentence variety, word choice and length, and other elements of narrative "visualization." Similarly, Alex Romagnoli offers a qualitative study of the pedagogical use of comics by following several instructors, one of whom asked students to do a "McCloudian analysis" of the panels from a graphic novel: "Write in detail about how your panel, or panels, exemplify at least one technique or idea from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and how exactly that technique plays an important role in creating meaning within the text" (164). Such an assignment is in many ways familiar to instructors who ask students to deeply examine the rhetorical choices that help make meaning in a given text and also how visual rhetoric and multimodal affordances of texts make meaning.

Our article continues these rich discussions of the pedagogical value of comics in the writing classroom by incorporating an important aspect that has not yet been adequately treated in the literature: critical literacy. We find that comics are an expressive means of addressing critical literacy in the classroom, easily showing, for example, the invisible and naturalized elements of the technologies (including writing) that surround us. Critical literacy asks us to question the language used in our world, our positionality in that world, and the often-invisible power structures in that world: "Critical literacy begins [by] questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane … [it asks] students to take critical postures towards their own language uses as well as towards the discourses dominating school and society" (Shor). Our article brings together extant conversations about comics and multimodality with those about critical literacy to illustrate how this convergence offers students opportunities to grapple with the often-difficult task of critical literacy through an appealing and familiar format, the visual and textual language of comics.

Why Comics?

Within the scope of this article, we draw on Scott McCloud's expansive definition of comics: "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). His definition allows for a variety of genres such as graphic novels, Japanese manga, Internet webcomics, and others to be considered under the overarching umbrella of comics. However, as scholars like Aaron Meskin and John Holbo note, the task of defining comics is one that is fraught, with Meskin challenging scholars to "get on with the business of thinking seriously about comics as art" and to "get beyond the definitional project" (376) and with Holbo questioning, "What is the point of defining 'comics'?" (4). While it is beyond the scope of this article to comment on continued debates surrounding definitions of comics, we gesture to these debates to illustrate a point: These debates are heated, and the definitions are difficult to pin down because comics are complex, meaningful "sociological, literary, and cultural artifacts" that have "constitute[d] an industry" and defined "a community surrounding and accepting the varied works emerging from within that industry" (Cohn 246-7).

No matter whose definition of comics with which we might align ourselves, because of the interplay of visual and textual elements at play in comics, they are frequently considered multimodal texts, "characterized by the mixed logics brought together through the combination of modes (such as images, text, color, etc.)" (Lauer 227). Multiple elements come together in a comic to transmit the intended message; these include the gutter, the pages, the panels, the frames, the images, and the text; Jacobs adds the "use of line and white space, shading, perspective, distance, depth of field, and composition" (More than Words, 22). Each of these operates as a distinct mode that depends on the other elements to make meaning; like a gestalt, the comic is made up of the sum of its parts. Will Eisner even describes how the parts themselves, such as the text, can be read in a variety of ways; they evoke mood, emotion, and the implication of sound as these elements modify the image (4). Embedded within it all are the values, power relations, discourses, and identities that critical literacy can help us reveal. *Fun Home*, for instance—one of the comics we address in this article—uses "the hybrid form of autographics to explore complex formations of gender and sexuality in the modern family" (Watson 28). *Y: The Last Man*—the second comic we include here—uses depictions of gender inequalities to force the reader "to confront the issue of how gender has been typically represented" within comics themselves (Arner 146).

Thus, in this article we offer an analysis of the possibilities of comics in the composition classroom vis-a-vis critical literacy: How do comics and multimodal literacy, particularly in the first-year composition classroom, work together as pedagogical tools that allow for more effective scaffolding of critical literacy and the research process?{1} We begin by outlining how critical literacy can be fostered through the pedagogical application of comics in the writing classroom, showcasing the potential for students to better see the ideological underpinnings of the texts that surround them through exposure to comics like *Fun Home* and *Y: The Last Man*. Next, we describe the assignment sequence, used in a large public university in the Midwest whose first-year writing program incorporates rhetorical principles for the writing and research process. We end by describing how comics in the classroom help meet several national standards for first-year composition such as the WPA Outcomes Statement

and the NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies. Ultimately, we argue that comics have a great deal to offer our field and that first-year composition, with its frequent emphasis on building students' research and critical literacy skills, is an effective place to start.

Critical Literacy Pedagogy Revealed in Comics

Critical literacy pedagogy, Donna LeCourt argues, "seeks to help students critique the ideologies they are asked to accept as reality to imagine possibilities wherein they might resist these dictates and discover forms of agency to enact social change" (276). In rhetoric and composition, the field of computers and writing has urged faculty to incorporate critically reflexive information literacies that account for social and ideological contexts that are embedded—sometimes overtly, sometimes tacitly—into the technologies that shape all written communication (Shepherd and Goggin 67). What we here call "critical literacy pedagogy" or simply "critical literacy" is a framework that, drawing from critical pedagogy itself, asks us to work toward illuminating the ideologies that underpin the texts and technologies that surround us in our daily lives. In illuminating these ideologies, we are better able to assess, critique, and, if desired, resist these ideologies (Gurak; McCorkle).

The visual and textual elements of comics make them well poised to illuminate such ideologies: Quite often, the ideological underpinnings are literally drawn into the pages we behold, while other times what is *not* seen is as starkly revealing as what is seen. A reader approaching a comic through the lens of critical literacy will search for "hidden messages, ideologies, and power interests behind the information conveyed in texts and locates these messages as part of larger social, historical, and political contexts" (Schieble 49). Those elements that are prominently visible can serve to normalize previously subversive societal elements, such as Morris E. Franklin III's historical account of gay and lesbian characters "coming out" in comic books; those elements that are less visible can remain marginalized or subsumed, such as Edward H. Sewell, Jr.'s analysis of queer characters in mainstream comics—he notes that they look and act straight before coming out, but then look and act in ways that are deemed acceptable by the dominant heterosexual culture even after coming out (253), rendering them essentially invisible as queer.

Along with issues of gender and sexuality explored in the comics mentioned previously, many comics tackle head-on other complicated issues in society: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* tells one family's story of surviving the Holocaust and describes what was lost along the way; Jonathan Ames' *The Alcoholic* depicts the author's descent into alcoholism; and Will Eisner's *Last Day in Vietnam: A Memoir* offers various wartime memories, including an entirely wordless section describing how a soldier lost his left hand. These are but a few of the comics that address serious social issues through the graphic form, and the choice of the graphic form is a deliberate one. Eisner explains that story-bearing art from the twentieth century was intended "to create a gestalt, some cohesive language, as the vehicle for the expression of a complexity of thoughts, sounds, actions, and ideas" (7). While traditional texts, too, are capable of expressing "thoughts, sounds, actions, and ideas," comics rely on the visual experience for engaging readers where traditional print texts generally do not. As such, they are effective texts to bring into the classroom to highlight both the composition's form (what composing choices were made and why) and content (how the comic furthers particular ideologies, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly).

It is the visual experience of these texts that provides another entry point into these ideologies than what traditional print texts are able to convey through words alone. As Scott McCloud says, "the whole world of visual iconography is at the disposal of comics creators," the visible (pictorial styles) and the invisible (symbols and language) (*Understanding Comics* 202). Comics, and the visual experience that accompanies them, can challenge or perpetuate power differences in society; they can critique the status quo or legitimize dominant values and institutions (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 2). It is our attention to these issues that makes the difference. That is, the multimodal elements that govern most comics literally help make visible networks of power and power structures, aspects of our world that can often be difficult to discern through alphabetic text alone. Much like Hannah Dickinson and Maggie M. Werner argue in their analysis of the pedagogical power of what they call "sourced comics," where they note that such comics help make visible power relations surrounding students' use of academic sources in the composition classroom, we assert in a similar vein that the juxtaposition of multimodality and ideology in comics like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* assists with the acquisition of critical literacy in the writing classroom.

The following section details a classroom assignment sequence that can be successfully used to incorporate critical literacy pedagogy into the classroom. While here we describe its use for the first-year composition classroom, the assignment sequence could easily be modified for other writing courses that include a research component (which, along with analysis, is one of the more commonly assigned elements in composition classes—see Jackson). We describe two particular comics that lend themselves well to this assignment sequence:

Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Brian K. Vaughn's *Y: The Last Man*. For readers unfamiliar with the texts, we provide a brief gloss to introduce them; however, this assignment sequence is adaptable to other comics of one's choice. Given the numerous texts available that tackle complex social issues in the comic form, finding other comics that suit one's needs should not be difficult.

Comics in the First-Year Composition Classroom: A Sample Assignment Sequence

One of the overall goals of this assignment sequence was to incorporate critical literacy into the first-year composition classroom through the inclusion of comics; further, students were also asked to consider multimodality, both in terms of analysis (analyzing multimodal texts such as comics) and production (creating portions of the assignment sequence in an online website creation tool, Google Sites). This second-semester composition course (Composition II) featured multiple course outcomes that asked students to gain further experience with the research process within a rhetorically focused curriculum, one that asks students to critique how technologies, research methods, and writing itself construct knowledge. Rather than a "one-shot" deal where research is seen as a discrete unit, disconnected from rhetorical concerns (Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Monge 96), such an approach embeds research throughout the course within a rhetorical foundation. This foundation is one reason why the focus on critical literacy pedagogy that this assignment sequence relies upon works effectively.

The first major writing assignment of the semester tasked students with composing a literature review (as a webtext using Google Sites) that looked at a single issue from a variety of perspectives. This literature review would later be a part of a larger research essay that, by the end of the semester, would culminate in a webtext that also included a podcast and video created by students. This first step in the larger research process asked students to consider research rhetorically by finding differing perspectives on one topic and rethinking the typical print-based literature review as a multimodal composition. Along the way, students both analyzed and produced multimodal texts. This balance of production and analysis, along with classroom activities and discussion on comics (discussed more fully in the next paragraph), facilitated students' comprehension of multimodality.

As a way to help students consider how visual aspects can communicate meaning, and also to think about alternative perspectives on an issue, a week of class time was devoted to looking at and discussing segments of two comics, *Y: The Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughn and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. *Y: The Last Man* is a science fiction comic book series about a single man, Yorick, and his pet monkey, who have survived the simultaneous death of every male mammal across the globe. This catastrophic event caused chaos across the globe; the surviving women, with differing agendas and political affiliations, faced challenges in maintaining structure and order in their society. The series follows Yorick as he travels to reunite with his mother and, along the way, encounters various groups of women either rejoicing or mourning the loss of men in very different ways. *Fun Home* is a non-linear and recursive graphic memoir of Alison Bechdel's family life during her childhood and adolescence. Itself a multimodal text, the comic incorporates diaries, maps, books, and other archival excerpts (Cvetkovich). The memoir focuses on Bechdel, a lesbian, and her relationship with her father, a gay man married to her mother, particularly in light of her struggles with sexual identity and gender roles. Throughout the memoir, Bechdel closely examines the link between her father's closeted sexuality and her openness with her own.

Because these comics portray themes related to feminism, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and gender roles, they are prime examples of texts that can easily connect to current events and the media, and they are also ones that have a variety of perspectives, lending them well to critical analysis. Aside from the themes of these comics, their ability to provide a visual experience in a nontraditional way illustrates a multimodal approach to discussing serious subject matter. In his own use of *Fun Home* with his students, Aaron Kashtan points them to choices about materiality in the text, such as the fact that every typewritten text in this comic is "painstakingly redrawn in Bechdel's handwriting," making it "difficult to ignore the material properties of the text in the same way that we typically ignore the typography or publication design of a novel" (112-3). Similarly, when using *Y: The Last Man* in his own classes, Timothy D. Arner asks students to question "is the text's ostensibly pro-feminist message of female empowerment belied by the ways in which women are pictured? And should the fact that the series is drawn by a female artist, Pia Guerra, affect how one evaluates these images?" (148). By examining the potential tensions between sometimes stereotypical images of women in comics featured alongside narratives supporting female emancipation, all written by a man and illustrated by a woman, students are able to critique the subtle and interrelated networks of power that surround gender, identity, and sexuality in such a comic. In other words, comics are more than the stereotypical fun and easy reading found in the Sunday comics, and they provide opportunities for students to develop a critical awareness of materials they are exposed to through popular culture.

After reading through these two excerpts, students were placed into small groups for discussion. In these small groups, students were asked to consider which perspective or perspectives were presented in the excerpts provided to the class, then they were asked to determine alternative perspectives using current events or the media as support. Students were also encouraged to do preliminary research on their own to help situate them with aspects of the themes they might not be as familiar with, such as different subgroups within feminism that feminists might identify with.

The excerpt from *Fun Home* visually depicts both Bechdel's and her father's struggles with gender roles. Bechdel describes herself as being "a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age" (95) as she admired the "masculine charms" of the hired yard work assistant, the rifleman on television, and the deer hunters at the gas station. She rejects feminine gender roles growing up as her father tries to make her keep a barrette in her hair, makes her wear dresses and pearls, and accuses her of being afraid of being beautiful. Meanwhile, in these same panels, her father is shown rejecting masculine gender roles as he decorates the home with flowers in a vase, hangs a flower painting on the wall, dresses himself in velvet for a wedding—to which his wife (Bechdel's mother) exclaims he is going to upstage the bride. *Fun Home*'s use of what Valerie Rohy describes as a queer archive—one that includes family photographs, passports, poems, police reports, a course catalog, and other visual elements—"engages some of queer theory's most timely issues: teleology, historicism, fantasy, and the retroactivity of identity" (357). These images, the archival elements, don't simply exist because they look interesting; each is carefully chosen as a form of graphic realism that represents Bechdel's history and places it within larger cultural narratives that can be addressed through the lens of critical literacy.

One viewpoint of sexual identity and gender roles presented in this excerpt that students might explore is that the opposition of gender roles can be attributed to the character's sexual identity, with Bechdel being a lesbian who desires masculinity and her father being a gay man who desires femininity. While Bechdel and her father might support this position as they are depicted in this excerpt, sexual identity and gender roles are, of course, far more complex. Many individuals play with the construction of femme or butch appearance or situate themselves somewhere in a constantly shifting "genderqueer" positionality rather than ascribing to binary categorizations. Looking to Hollywood, Portia de Rossi is a prime example of a lesbian who embraces femininity rather than dismissing it. Steven Tyler, lead singer of Aerosmith, could also be described as embracing femininity—despite being a straight man—when considering his brightly colored and tight fitting clothing, long hair, and scarf-adorned microphone. What is visible or not visible in *Fun Home* opens up broader opportunities to consider gender roles: Students can be prompted to consider additional gender roles visible in society (but not necessarily visible in *Fun Home*) such as bisexuality, transgenderism, and transsexuality. Unconventional gender expression is frequently made invisible in our society or is viewed as transgressive; comics such as *Fun Home*, however, can provide a space where counter-cultural and subjective activity that challenges hetero-norms is made visible (Rerick).

Just as *Fun Home* does not portray sexual identity and gender roles in their entirety, allowing students to contemplate ideologies that appear within the text as well as those that are not as apparent, *Y: The Last Man* doesn't demonstrate feminism in its entirety. Like with traditional print texts, in comics authors and/or illustrators carefully craft visual iconography to communicate particular ideas and experiences to their readers. The excerpt from *Y: The Last Man* used in this assignment sequence shows Yorick observing a large group of women gathered around the Lincoln Memorial mourning the loss of men. Unsure of how women would respond to his maleness, he disguises himself by wearing a gas mask and strikes up a conversation with a woman about all the great rock musicians who have been lost due to this catastrophe. Receptive to Yorick's conversation, she even discusses trying to get a band together to keep rock music alive. However, their conversation is interrupted by a gang of female bikers sporting short haircuts and bows and arrows that Yorick refers to as "Amazons … roving packs of pissed-off lesbians" (Vaughn 94). The woman he's been talking to simultaneously corrects him and reinforces the image: "Nah, they're not gay. They're insane. Someone told me that they all burn one of their own boobs off" (Vaughn 94). These "Amazons" believe men were exterminated for a reason and all that was lost were rapists, dictators, and serial killers.
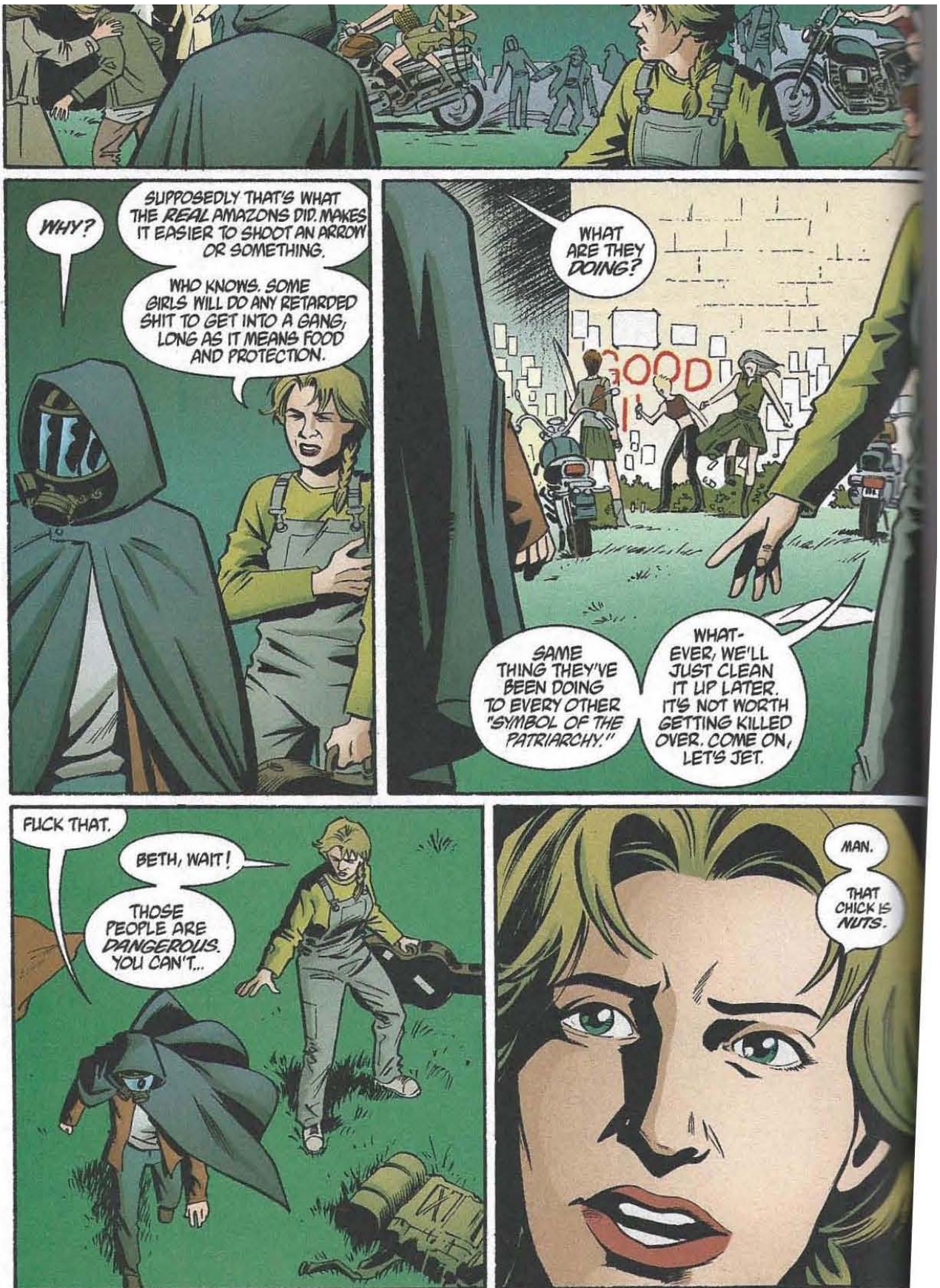
Figure 1. Excerpt depicting the "Amazons" from *Y: The Last Man* (Vaughn 94).

Within just these seven pages, students encountered two opposing viewpoints with regard to feminist issues. The

mourning women saw man's value to society, or more particularly to rock music, without any apparent qualms or concerns about patriarchy. Even so, the woman Yorick chats with expresses her desire to keep rock music alive by channeling Janis Joplin, an influential female rock artist from the late '60s. The mourning women could collectively fall under less forthright forms of feminism, such as pop feminism, liberal feminism, and moderate feminism where the movements seek out empowering idols and inspire change without completely overthrowing patriarchal systems in place. Mourning the loss of men is contrasted with the "Amazons," or the more radical forms of feminism like separatist feminism, such as scholars like Mary Daly espoused, and Amazon feminism, where women are depicted as strong and extreme rather than weak and submissive. Presenting these contrasting forms of feminism in comic form provides both an informative and aesthetic response, as McCloud understands comics (*Understanding Comics* 9), and anchors students with a visual experience. They not only read and learn about these forms of feminism through language, but they see them embodied and enacted visually. From this students are better able to critique and engage with the material due to having more than one entry point (the visual and the verbal). However, the facets of feminism apparent in the excerpt still fail to include some of the other significant movements within feminism, such as transfeminism, which focuses on the application of feminism to transgender and transsexual people, as well as antifeminists who outright oppose feminism's work towards equality and women's rights. Here students could easily point to stories of young girls fighting to earn their education in the Middle East that populate the media and fail to be accounted for in this excerpt.

Prior to the start of the activity, the teacher polled the class to identify how many students had experience reading comics. Because only a few students out of the whole class had read comics previously, the class read *Fun Home* together and participated in a large group discussion on the representations of sexual orientation. This larger group discussion was directed at orienting students to reading comics and to begin introducing them to thinking critically about the material. As a large group, students went panel by panel and were asked to explain what they read into both the verbal and visual aspects of the scene. Together they pieced together a narrative of what they interpreted from the excerpt. This enabled students who were not as comfortable reading images to see and hear how their peers were reading images, thus allowing them to draw conclusions based on the events of the comic. Following the large group discussion, students critically read the visual rhetoric and print text of an excerpt of *Y: The Last Man* and worked in small groups to discuss the representations of feminism they perceived in the text. Students were specifically asked to answer the following questions, first by focusing on the visual rhetoric of the excerpt, then synthesizing their responses into a single paragraph:

- How would you characterize the women in this excerpt? What "type" of feminists are they?
- What are some stereotypes of feminists you are aware of? Do you believe they apply to all women or all feminists? Why or why not?
- What are some other perspectives or angles of feminism that you are aware of? That you can find using your research skills in the media or library resources?

A summary of their responses follows:

Types of feminists identified:	• radical feminists • liberal feminists • conservative feminists
Stereotypes identified:	• tomboys • reckless • lesbians • all hate men • vicious • belief that women can do everything better than men • have short hair • have a tough appearance • power hungry • take the stance of "their way or no way" • strong-willed
Alternate perspectives/angles of feminism:	• feminists have different groups and views on different controversial issues • not all feminists hate men • some believe men and women are equal instead of thinking women should be dominant

- recognize everyone is different and you cannot stereotype individuals
- some women aren't that vocal about their opinions

This activity led to discussions on identifying alternative perspectives and the importance of considering a topic from a variety of angles. Students were not only able to identify the stereotypes that were apparent in the text due to the visual experience of the comic excerpt, but they were also able to identify ways in which those stereotypes were inaccurate. Thus, using critical literacy as a framework, students were guided to consider the ideologies (whether overt or subtle) at work in the comics they read and to research how these ideologies might be translated, represented differently, or repudiated in media coverage. In other words, students had the opportunity to explore feminism critically by looking at multiple perspectives of feminism. Through revealing stereotypical views of feminism in *Fun Home* and *Y: The Last Man*, for example, these students discovered that their initial readings relied on stereotypes of feminist women as they read into the meaning of the text—based on appearance (short hair, tough), behavior (reckless, vicious), or even alignment with other categories (all feminists are lesbians, all feminists hate men, etc.). Their search for alternate perspectives over the next few weeks forced them to confront such stereotypes, asking them to consider whether those ideas were in some way influenced by the texts they'd read (i.e., what textual features contributed to the promotion of those ideologies) or instead *prompted* by something in the text (e.g., an image, a word or phrase, etc.).

Readers of comics scan comics as they read, completing the story as they go and "filling in whatever action is interpreted as *being there*" (Hilst 157, emphasis in original). In a similar fashion, students in this course filled in various elements of the text as "being there": that feminists are lesbians, that strong women hate men, etc. Confronting those beliefs and asking viewers to assess where interpretation ends and ideology begins is challenging yet instructive, a metacritical activity that "has less to do with what texts say and more with what they *do*" (Jackson 19). Narratives like *Fun Home* or *Y: The Last Man* offer students a chance to discuss feminism from multiple perspectives, "beyond the preconceived notions students enter the class with" and help reshape "feminist" as a term within the classroom (Jonet 127).

These comics offer opportunities to not only think about events but how we frame them, bringing to the forefront political, ethical, and aesthetic elements of narrative (Chute 2-4). As Kate Polak MacDonald asserts, "The exploration of what is lost during a narrow type of reading is an excellent lesson, particularly when considering the assumptions that many students make upon entering a text. Pointing out the problems in their strategies of consumption of the text can help students recognize assumptions they make in the process of reading or viewing" (224). Particularly for a complex concept like feminism—one that can be divisive for some younger female students especially, who often wish to distance themselves from what they perceive as a negative label—comics can help reveal students' assumptions and the stereotypes they bring to their readings of the text.{2} The careful scaffolding provided by the instructor to break down these various elements (the comics' framing of events; the students' stereotypical responses or assumptions; their interests in claiming, or not claiming, labels such as *feminist*; etc.) helps break the complex task of critical literacy down into more manageable, discrete tasks.

The interactive experience of reading a comic—which relies on the reader's ability to navigate gutters, frames, panels, text, images, pages, and much more—provides a challenging space for students to think through how ideologies are embedded within such texts. Joshua Hilst described the process of reading comics as one where "we walk through the gutters, juxtaposing panel with panel, and yet what we do not see is just as important as what we do see" (163). While Hilst was describing the experience of reading for relationships between panels, we find his description also quite accurate for the process of reading comics for ideological framing: Indeed, what we do not see, or what we do not see at a first glance (particular perspectives espoused, certain kinds of characters represented, subtle and hidden ideologies, and so on) is just as important as what we do see when we first peruse a particular comic. This is evidenced in students' initial insights into feminism portrayed in *Y: The Last Man* as students articulated stereotypes of feminists such as all feminists being lesbian, hating men, or having short hair. Yet, with more careful and critical attention to the comic, they further explored how those stereotypes are not representative of all women—being a feminist does not necessarily mean she hates men, is a lesbian, and is tough. Instead, students understood that we all come from different places and different perspectives, and a stereotype cannot accurately describe an entire group of people. It is this kind of critical pedagogy that we believe comics are effectively able to support in the first-year composition classroom.

However, care needs to be taken when working to link critical literacy pedagogy, comics, and multimodal texts. When using comics in the classroom, it is critical that students are able to engage with the text. A comic like *Fun Home* is actually quite difficult to read because there are essentially two story lines. Bechdel uses dialogue and text to explain what is happening in each panel, but she also includes additional text that serves as a running commentary and reflection of the events as an adult. This made it more difficult for students to read, and since this

week was the only use of comics in the class, it may have been more productive to choose an easier text to work with. Alternatively, a lengthier amount of time reading and discussing these texts would give students more opportunities to work through not only the challenging works being incorporated into the class, but through the process of reading comics themselves as well.

However, convoluted texts like *Fun Home* or a similarly difficult mixed-media reading experience, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, challenge students to attend more carefully to the rhetorical choices in composing the author has made. While *House of Leaves* is not a comic per se, its challenging structure, which includes footnotes, blank pages, pages with upside-down text, etc., is akin to something like *Fun Home*. That is, by disrupting the typical reading experience, "frustrating" the reader by including multiple textual lines, footnotes, flashbacks, or atypical spatial arrangements (among other choices), the reader must work even harder to discern how the various modes—visual, spatial, textual—align to convey meaning. Ergodic texts like these, which Espen Aarseth describes as texts where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1), can thus be satisfactory choices for this type of assignment sequence, but sufficient opportunities for students to work together in small groups to work through discussions of their reading experience should allow for stronger responses overall.

Additionally, while students were able to identify alternative perspectives and recognized that the texts they looked at failed to give a complete picture of the themes involved, it is also important to ensure the work students are doing is linked to the writing they are doing. Relating the activity to their literature review was focused entirely on identifying alternative perspectives of an issue and didn't take into account the multimodality of comics and how that may carry over to the webtexts they were creating. We would suggest that faculty members make explicit connections between the multimodal features of comics and the multimodal affordances available to students as they compose their web-based literature reviews. For example, by bringing awareness to the meanings conveyed through visual forms (e.g., pictures, text, and color), teachers could then discuss how to rhetorically incorporate visual and alternative forms of media in students' web-based literature reviews. Without such bridging, students may see the discussion of the comics as an interesting element related to the research portion of the assignment sequence but may fail to make the connections between the multimodal elements at play in the comics and the multimodal choices they can take advantage of as composers.

Comics, Multimodality, and National Standards

In the previous sections, we have described some reasons why, at an individual pedagogical level, comics can effectively allow for critical literacy pedagogy in the first-year writing classroom. In this section, we cast our gaze from the individual to considerations of what Cynthia Selfe termed the collective professional level (147). Comics—as multimodal texts that can be incorporated into courses that rely upon writing, research, and even multimodal composing—seamlessly fit into the position statements of many of rhetoric and composition's national organizations, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA).{3} Because comics can be digital or analog, can be analyzed or composed, they offer a variety of ways to fit into the first-year composition class (depending on technological access, instructor goals, departmental outcomes, and so on).

Indeed, NCTE's position statement on multimodal literacies specifically warns against focusing solely on understanding multimodality in terms of digital literacy and the creation of digital projects. Instead, the position statement encourages teachers to embrace multimodality as it is encountered in everyday life with words, images, colors, sounds, and styles as they work together to convey information. The position statement further argues that "in personal, civic, and professional discourse, alphabetic, visual, and aural works are not luxuries but essential components of knowing." Similarly, the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition states that students should be "reading a diverse range of texts, attending especially […] to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements." In comics, each different mode of expression is codependent on one another. Consequently, they each have an impact on the communicative act as a whole.

NCTE's position statement also makes mention of integrating these various modes of expression into the curriculum, allowing for the appropriate amount of time and resources to be devoted to the material. Taking these considerations into account, and reflecting upon the experiences described earlier using *Fun Home* and *Y: The Last Man* in a Composition II course, we end this article by asserting that the incorporation of comics into courses relying on multimodal composition should be more comprehensively integrated. What we mean by this is that faculty members who wish to incorporate comics into their class should consider multiple approaches and methods for using comics so as to most fully draw on their pedagogical potential. That is, along with bringing comics in as a text for class discussion and analysis, a variety of other options are available—from having students create their

own comics, to experimenting with different comic forms and genres, to debating various terminologies (such as the preference for the term *comics*, *graphic novels*, *graphic memoirs*, or another)—and each offers rich pedagogical possibilities.

More fully introducing and integrating comics into first-year composition works at ensuring students are not only learning necessary critical literacy skills, but also works at legitimizing comics as more than a curricular luxury. The activity we describe here begins to scratch at the surface of what it might look like to include comics in a writing course, but it has its shortcomings. Comics are inherently multimodal, but using them to discuss critical thinking and alternative perspectives is only getting at a single part of the medium, albeit a part that makes use of various modes of expression. While students might not necessarily have composed comics in the course we described, this is certainly an activity that can be incorporated easily into the assignment sequence to further engage students—for example, working through potential invention strategies for their web-based literature review by considering how other forms of visual media, such as images, color, and videos, could complement the text. Alternately, students could draw themselves thinking through their rhetorical choices, which would ask them to not only think through their possible options but also potentially apply some of them as they composed the comic itself.

Ultimately, comics offer excellent examples of how multimodal texts communicate meaning, and they provide the "multiple ways of knowing" deemed so critical by the *NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies*. Given that these outcomes and position statements represent "what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, theory and research" (Thomas 165), they allow us to incorporate effective pedagogical ideals from the collective professional level of our field's work into the departmental and even individual pedagogical choices we make that can help support critical literacy.

Conclusion

While academic venues have seen increasing attention to comics, discussions in composition and rhetoric of multimodality and 21st century literacies often only mention comics in passing, if they are mentioned at all. Recent special issues such as *Composition Studies'* special issue on comics, multimodality, and composition are a welcome start. Here we call for the field's continued and broadened interest in the potentials for comics in the writing classroom—at the first-year level and beyond. Comics are positioned particularly well for tackling complex societal issues and ideologies, thus making their use in writing courses all the more critical as students grapple with their own ways of understanding and communicating complex ideas. Students' familiarity with comics (even if they are not frequent readers) can also lead to their excitement at analyzing comics even within a challenging framework such as critical literacy; M. Catherine Jonet recounts how students in her courses responded positively to reading, analysis, and cultural criticism "in ways I do not see when analyzing other narratives including film" (121).

One possible method for using comics to incorporate critical literacy has been outlined here. The second-semester first-year composition assignment sequence we describe can easily be modified by using different comic excerpts or for other classes with a research component. The assignment sequence we describe challenges students to see comics and the perspectives presented as more than merely what is on the page or what can be inferred from reading. As a result, students become more critical of the ideologies apparent in the comics, as well as how these ideologies are translated or altered in media coverage. Incorporating comics in this way seamlessly aligns with positions statements of many rhetoric and composition's national organizations, such as CCCC, NCTE, and WPA, which call for the integration of multimodality and critical literacy beyond just the use of technological tools. Even so, we have only just begun to bring comics into rhetoric and composition, leaving exciting possibilities for future work in this area.

Notes

1. By scaffolding, we draw here on the now-famous concept (later picked up by social constructionist Lev Vygotsky in his theory of the zone of proximal development) from David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross that scaffolding breaks down a complex task including "elements … that are initially beyond the learner's capacity" into smaller, more manageable chunks, allowing the learner "to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" and eventually developing a more sophisticated ability to complete challenging tasks (90). (Return to text.)

2. For a more in-depth discussion of some young women's rejection of the label *feminist*, see Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter's *The Illusions of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths* and Christina

Scharff's *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World.* (Return to text.)

3. For further analysis of how comics in the writing classroom dovetail with the NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies and the WPA Outcomes Statement, see Gabriel Sealey-Morris's The Rhetoric of the Paneled Page: Comics and Composition Pedagogy. (Return to text.)

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.

Arner, Timothy D. Teaching Theory Through *Y: The Last Man. Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art.* Ed. Carrye K. Syma and Robert G. Weiner. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013. 145-53. Print.

Artman, Margaret, Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Robert Monge. Not Just One Shot: Extending the Dialogue about Information Literacy in Composition Classes. *Composition Studies* 38.2 (2010): 93-109. Print.

Assad, Mary. Comics and Rhetoric in the First-Year Composition Classroom. J. W. Marriott Downtown. Indianapolis, IN. 19-22 March 2014. Conference on College Composition and Communication Presentation.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. Print.

Bitz, Michael. *When Commas Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2010. Print.

Cahill, Erin. Adding One More 'C': An Illustrative Argument for Comics as a Scholarly Medium. J. W. Marriott Downtown. Indianapolis, IN. 19-22 March 2014. Conference on College Composition and Communication Presentation.

Cary, Stephen. *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004. Print.

CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments. Conference on College Composition and Communication, February 2004. Web. 29 July 2014.

Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women: Life Narratives and Contemporary Comics.* New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

Cohn, Neil. Un-Defining 'Comics': Separating the Cultural from the Structural in Comics. *International Journal of Comic Art* 7.2 (2005): 236-48. Print.

Coppock, Vicki, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter. *The Illusions of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths.* Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 1995. Print.

Cvetkovich, Ann. Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home. Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1-2 (2008): 111-28. Print.

Dickinson, Hannah, and Maggie M. Werner. Beyond Talking Heads: Sourced Comics and the Affordances of Multimodality. *Composition Studies* 43.1 (2015): 51-74. Print.

Dong, Lan, ed. *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Print.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. Print.

Fenty, Sean, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor. Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution. *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 1.2 (2004). Web.

Finley, Meghan. Blogs, Webcomics, and Convergence: Science Popularizations and Evolving Forms of Scientific Discourse. J. W. Marriott Downtown. Indianapolis, IN. 19-22 March 2014. Conference on College Composition and Communication Presentation.

Fraiberg, Steven. Reweaving Multilingual Practices: Tracing Chinese International Students' Construction of Comics in the Composition Classroom. J. W. Marriott Downtown. Indianapolis, IN. 19-22 March 2014. Conference on College Composition and Communication Presentation.

Franklin III, Morris E. Coming Out in Comic Books: Letter Columns, Readers, and Gay and Lesbian Characters. *Comics and Ideology.* Ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 221-50. Print.

Gurak, Laura. *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003. Print.

Hilst, Joshua. Gutter Talk: An(Other) Idiom of Rhetoric. *JAC: a journal of composition theory* 31.1-2 (2011): 153-76. Print.

Holbo, John. Redefining Comics. *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach.* Ed. Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012. 3-30. Print.

Howard, Mick. Teaching Multimodal Rhetoric with Webcomics in First-Year Composition. J. W. Marriott Downtown. Indianapolis, IN. 19-22 March 2014. Conference on College Composition and Communication Presentation.

Howes, Franny. Imagining a Multiplicity of Visual Rhetorical Traditions: Comics Lessons from Rhetoric Histories. *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 5.3 (2010). Web. 29 July 2014.

Jackson, Brian. Teaching the Analytical Life. *Composition Studies* 38.2 (2010): 9-27. Print.

Jacobs, Dale. *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Print.

----. Marveling at 'The Man Called Nova': Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal Literacy. *College Composition and Communication* 59.2 (2007): 180-205. Print.

----. More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies. *The English Journal* 96.3 (2007): 19-25. Print.

Johnson, Fred. Perspicuous Objects: Reading Comics and Writing Instruction. *Kairos* 19.1 (2014). Web.

----. Scribbly Lines and Peripheral Foreshadowing: What a Comics Page Can Teach Us About Composing Interfaces. North Carolina State University. Raleigh, NC. 17-20 May 2012. Computers and Writing Conference Presentation.

Jonet, M. Catherine. Our Graphics, Ourselves: Graphic Narratives and the Gender Studies Classroom. *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice.* Ed. Lan Dong. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 119-29. Print.

Kashtan, Aaron. Talismans: Using Comics to Teach Multimodal Writing. *Class, Please Open Your Comics: Essays on Teaching with Graphic Narratives.* Ed. Matthew L. Miller. Jefferson, NC: McFarland. 103-116. Print.

Kraver, Jeraldine. Reinventing the Composition Classroom, or How Comics Can Clarify the Writing Process. *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education* 1.3 (2013): 30-46. Print.

Lauer, Claire. Contending with Terms: 'Multimodal' and 'Multimedia' in the Academic and Public Spheres. *Computers and Composition* 26 (2009): 225-39. Print.

LeCourt, Donna. Critical Literacy in the Computer Classroom: Politicizing the Writing Space. *Computers and Composition* 15.3 (1998): 275-95. Print.

Losh, Elizabeth, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, and Zander Cannon. *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing.* Boston: Bedford, 2014. Print.

MacDonald, Kate Polak. Batman Returns (to Class): Graphic Novels and the Syncretic Classroom. *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice.* Ed. Lan Dong. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 221-31. Print.

McAllister, Matthew P., Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon. Introducing Comics and Ideology. *Comics and*

Ideology. Ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 1-13. Print.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form.* New York: HarperPerennial, 2000. Print.

---. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* New York: HarperPerennial, 1993. Print.

McCorkle, Ben. *Rhetorical Delivery as Technological Discourse: A Cross-historical Study.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. Print.

Meskin, Aaron. Defining Comics? *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65.4 (2007): 369-79. Print.

Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies. *National Council of Teachers of English.* National Council of Teachers of English, Nov. 2005. Web. 19 June 2014.

Rerick, Michael. Queering the Museum: Challenging Heteronormative Space in Bechdel's *Fun Home. Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 3.2 (2012): 223-230. Print.

Rohy, Valerie. In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home. GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.3 (2010): 341-61. Print.

Romagnoli, Alex Scott. Comics in the Classroom: A Pedagogical Exploration of College English Teachers Using Graphic Novels. Diss. Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2013. Print.

Scharff, Christina. *Repudiating Feminism: Young Women in a Neoliberal World.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Schieble, Melissa. Reading Images in *American Born Chinese* through Critical Visual Literacy. *English Journal* 103.5 (2014): 47-52. Print.

Sealey-Morris, Gabriel. The Rhetoric of the Paneled Page: Comics and Composition Pedagogy. *Composition Studies* 43.1 (2015): 31-50. Print.

Selfe, Cynthia L. *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. Print.

Sewell Jr., Edward H. Queer Characters in Comic Strips. *Comics and Ideology.* Ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 251-74. Print.

Shepherd, Ryan, and Peter Goggin. Reclaiming 'Old' Literacies in the New Literacy Information Age: The Functional Literacies of the Mediated Workstation. *Composition Studies* 40.2 (2012): 66-91. Print.

Shor, Ira. What is Critical Literacy? *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice* 1.4 (1999). Web.

Thomas, Susan. The WPA Outcomes Statement: The View from Australia. *The WPA Outcomes Statement - A Decade Later.* Ed. Nicholas Behm, Gregory Glau, Deborah Holdstein, Duane Roen, and Edward White. 165-78. Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor Press, 2013. Print.

Vaughan, Brian K. *Y: The Last Man.* Illus. Pia Guerra and José Marzán, Jr. New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 2003. Print.

Watkins, Robert. Words are the Ultimate Abstraction: Towards Using Scott McCloud for Teaching Visual Rhetoric. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 12.3 (2008). Web. 23 July 2014.

Watson, Julia. Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home. Biography* 31.1 (2008): 27-58. Print.

Wood, David, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross. The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17 (1976): 89-100. Print.

WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. Council of Writing Program Administrators, April 2000. Web. 29 July 2014.

Wysocki, Anne Frances, and Dennis A. Lynch. *Compose, Design, Advocate: A Rhetoric for Integrating Written, Visual, and Oral Communication.* New York: Longman, 2007. Print.

Minding the Gap from *Composition Forum* 33 (Spring 2016)
© Copyright 2016 Stephanie Vie and Brandy Dieterle.
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License.

SHARE