Matthew Cheung

Sabbatical Report

Fall 2019

In the spring of 2018, I taught my first graphic novel. I used Congressman John Lewis' memoir, *March: Volume 3.* I was excited. I thought students would be captivated by the life story of one of the prominent figures in the Civil Rights Era and hoped that the graphic novel genre would present such heavy topics like segregation and voter suppression in a way that students would find accessible. Along the way, I would incorporate hefty readings like "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and other primary sources from that time. It was my sneaky way of getting students to read historical documents before they could complain about how history was boring or unrelatable. I was hoping that the graphic novel genre would be the cherry flavor to the cough syrup of heavy reading.

While I had been a lifelong fan of comic books and graphic narratives, I had never used a graphic narrative before in the classroom. I soon realized there was much I didn't know. How would I teach students about the grammar and mechanics of comics? This language was second nature to me, and I wondered just how I would articulate it for an audience who've never read comics before. How would I explain to students how to "read" the page? How do I tell them what a panel is or a gutter? Did I even know what those really were? I had to find help. I found Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, which became my crash course in comics theory. From there, I found other resources like the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund whose wide array of teaching supplements showed me there was an entire community of people integrating comics into their curricula.

The purpose of my sabbatical project was to create and help gather resources for instructors like me, first time graphic novel adopters. I wanted to create a starting point for people like me who loved the genre and for others who may not have much experience with comics but are interested in adopting them for their own classrooms. My sabbatical proposal contained two parts. The first part was to construct a reading list of graphic novels that would be appropriate for college level use. I geared my reading list toward the English department, but since comics are such an interdisciplinary genre, I hope my list also applies to other classes across the campus. Included in the reading list would be descriptions of each text, which English classes it might be appropriate for, and a list of questions instructors could use for discussion or to adapt into paper prompts. The second part of the project was a list of resources. I originally wanted to create an annotated bibliography of resources that instructors could use to help teach comics terminology and language. I wanted also to collect a range of scholarly and non-scholarly articles on comics, but I soon realized that was too ambitious. It would be like creating an annotated bibliography for articles on Shakespeare's works. It's simply too much. Instead I focused on websites, organizations, and publishers that would help instructors teach comics but also integrate them into the wider world of Comic Studies.

After spring semester ended, I quickly began creating my list of graphic novels to review. I began collecting titles based on feedback from other instructors and looking at "Best of" lists from various years. Originally, I thought I would finalize a list of around 30-40 books before deciding on 20-30 books to read and write about. Eventually I gathered 50 titles, but this process took more time than I anticipated, and I realized it would not be very efficient to read all of the books first and then go back and write about each of them. I began reading and reviewing one title at a time and then writing about each one if I decided to keep it.

There were a few elements I considered as I created the reading list. The most prominent question on my mind was, "Is this appropriate for college?" I wanted to make sure that the subject matter would be both interesting and rigorous for instructors and students. I could already anticipate objections about graphic novels as being too childish or not academic enough. This caused me to lean heavily toward graphic novels that were memoirs or grounded in historical or current events. "Is this appropriate for college?" also led me to linking each title with a few English classes. For instance, many of the graphic novels that were memoirs or based in current events, I paired with English 1A or 1C classes because their subject matter would lend easily to research assignments. I also looked for diversity and representation in both the characters and the authors. When appropriate, this rationale led me to pair a text with our literature classes. For instance, I paired works by Thi Bui and Gilbert Hernandez with our Literature of American Ethnic Groups class. Texts like the adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* fit into multiple classes such as English 1C, Literature of Science Fiction, and Sexualities, Identities and Literature. Lastly, there was one informal rule I adhered to for all but one of the texts: no capes. I didn't want any superhero stories. The reading list contains no Supermen, no Spidermen, and no Batmen. There are, however, *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* is a deconstruction of conventional superhero tropes and is a highly influential text in the genre, so I kept it.

Ultimately, the list emphasizes breadth. There are a variety of authors, genres, ethnicities, and subject matters represented here. The selections are both non-fiction and fiction. Stories range from the magical realism of *Heartbreak Soup*, which chronicles the vibrant lives of the residents in a small Central American town to the somber musings of one author wondering how his classmate became a serial killer in *My Friend Dahmer*. I've also included memoirs from

authors fighting for civil rights like John Lewis and George Takei, to everyday people trying to make sense of their families like Thi Bui and Alison Bechdel. These titles are not meant to be a comprehensive list of what's appropriate for college level. My hope is that people use it as a starting point to explore the genre and can even add to it in the future.

The final part of the project was to compile a list of resources to help instructors use comics in their classroom. As I began to gather sources, I realized that finding help also meant entering into a community of Comics Arts scholars. As a result, I searched for resources that could act as teaching aids as well as resources that could introduce instructors into other areas of comics scholarship. I included two books that would help exclusively with teaching comics. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is a seminal text in the world of comics studies. McCloud's work discusses the history of visual art as well as the mechanics of comics. I also included Lynda Barry's *Making Comics* which features exercises from her own classes on teaching comics. Barry's text is a primer on how to create comics. Her text is so practical that it even includes the syllabi for her class. Other resources I included will help instructors join into the Comics Arts community. I've listed schools with Comics Arts programs and publishers that provide teaching resources and free copies of texts for instructors to preview.

It is my hope that my sabbatical project will be one step that El Camino College takes to enter into this area of scholarship. El Camino College has excellent faculty who are currently teaching comics but we have yet to create a formal Comics Studies course. Other colleges in the area such as Harbor College, UCLA, and CSULB have courses like this, and I hope this project takes us one step closer into that direction. I am grateful to my colleagues in the English department who use graphic novels in their courses. I took great encouragement from their work as I constructed this project. I am especially grateful to my advisor Kevin Degnan who guided

me throughout this process. Lastly, I am grateful to the sabbatical committee and to the college

for allowing me to devote time and energy into this endeavor.