

IT'S A BIRD! IT'S A PLANE! It's...CRITICAL LIBRARIANSHIP!:
Comics and Exhibits for Critical Library Pedagogy

OBJECTIVES

- The role libraries play in questioning what goes into the creation of information
- Talk about the use of exhibits as critical pedagogy
- Demonstrate how comics and graphic novels can create an environment that offers various viewpoints on identity, diversity, social change and historical context

Critical librarianship definition

“Critical librarianship—and by extension Critical information literacy--differs from standard definitions of information literacy (ex: the ability to find, use, and analyze information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.

TIMELINE:

- In the 1930s American Libraries started talking about intellectual freedom
- 1939 Progressive Librarians’ Guild (PLG), U.S.
- 1969 Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association (ALA) advocates for intellectual freedom
- 2007 recommendation for Critical Librarianship as a subject heading

The ACRL framework recommends:

- Students develop a healthy skepticism and an awareness of their own biases;
- Recognize the value of a diversity of viewpoints
- Engage in self evaluation

ACRL Visual Literacy

As a part of being information literate, the competency standards for visual literacy address critical elements. They address looking at an image:

- In its cultural, social, and historical contexts
- Look at social and cultural identifiers like gender and ethnicity
- Think about how interpretation of an image may change over time
- The importance of discussion to gain perspective for interpretation

Why Comics? Distinctive features of comics:

- Pervasive objects of popular culture (like other elements of popular culture studies, such as hip hop music and lyrics used in library instruction)

- Specialized forms of language
- A portal for discussions on “otherness”
- Unique properties as teaching objects

Why Comics? Comics as Popular Culture...

- Comics have long provided platforms for viewpoints on identity, diversity, social change, and reexamination of historical context, which at times has led to attempts at normalization and censorship (mention comics code, Fredric Wertham, Seduction of the innocent, and EC Comics)
- Popular culture studies are vaguely defined and therefore lacking a “specific object of inquiry,” making them “wide-open to theorized thematic inquiries.”
- As a distinct approach to social change, the reading and writing of comics have had an effect on established power structures, sometimes with great success (The comic book *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* inspired a non-violent sit-in at a segregated restaurant in 1960 which had a lasting effect on the civil rights movement.
- Accommodating of any belief system on an infinite number of topics
- Comics are “public pedagogy” that require contextualization and interpretation, capable of shaping identity and historical perspective
- Comics used to compare societal attitudes in transition across eras—the lengthy history of Lois Lane in the Superman family of comics makes her a perfect subject for analysis of attitudes about women in the workforce.

Why Comics? Comics as Specialized Language

- Within comics there exists a space for critical dialog and direct engagement with the viewer that requires interpretation on several levels. The interaction between the sequence of received images, perceived text, and the gutter space between panels can bring about new meaning.
- Educator and philosopher Freire spoke of the “narrative” relationship between teacher and student, in which students are mere receptacles without opportunities for critical assessment of their own realities
- Overcomes the intellectual oppression that takes place in Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire’s “banking model.”

Why Comics? The “Other” in Comics

- The concept of a “space” where behaviors and thinking are capable of change (Foucault)
- Comics deconstruct and recombine elements into a “Thirdspace”
- Allows for multiple viewpoints on wide range of topics
- Otherness exists in depicting the lives and struggles of women, Minorities, LGBTQ+, lower socioeconomic classes, and other historically socially marginalized individuals

Wonder Woman

As one example, the iconic character Wonder Woman (a major target of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*) has been the focus of discussions regarding stereotypes as they apply to women and sexuality, misogyny, and feminist and queer principles.

Why Comics? Continued

- Comics also lend themselves to historical examination across cultures and movements, such as the gay rights and civil rights movements as depicted in the graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby*, or the unrestricted underground comix of the 1960s.
- At times, comics can draw attention to misrepresentation—using revisionism to draw attention to historical inaccuracies, “political fictions,” or erroneous depictions through works such as *Comanche Moon* and *Los Tejanos* by Jack Jackson and others.
- Complex non-binary narratives began to emerge with superheroes during comics’ Silver Age in the 1960s, with characters such as the blind Daredevil and Thor’s physically disabled alter ego, Dr. Blake.
- *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green, published in 1972, was the first graphic novel to depict the “otherness” within mental health, that of obsessive compulsive disorder.
- *Binky Brown* was also revolutionary for its use of a solo underground comic as an unadulterated confessional.
- Readers of such comics who see themselves mirrored in these hybrid narratives may be transformed (“self-othering”) through the development of new meaning and understanding.

Stuck Rubber Baby

A panel from the graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* which focused on the gay rights and civil rights movements.

Jaxon

Panels from *Comanche Moon* by Jaxon (Jack Jackson)

Why Comics? Comics as Teaching Instrument

- Critical pedagogy [and critical librarianship] “value dialog, shift traditional conceptions of classroom authority, and maintain a commitment to social justice.
- The “openness” of comics creates the necessary space for students to engage in meaningful dialog through use of metaphor, allusion, self-reflection, and the manner in which words, images and transitions are handled.
- The myriad ways in which comics deliver visual and textual content, and the variety across the medium (different art styles, different storytelling conventions, different media)

- Analyzing feedback from fans in comic books, fanzines, and blogs can be a unique approach to using comics and a means of surveying contemporary social trends (1991 outing of the superhero the Pied Piper in the *Flash* no. 53)

Why Exhibits?

- Exhibits are a “space” that transcends the traditional lecture format towards active learning (recall the earlier discussion of Freire’s “banking” model of information)
- Classroom provides a limited time available for activities and discussion, while in contrast, a display or exhibit allows for a more open experience by permitting more time for engagement
- Opportunity for empowerment exists when viewers are invited to engage beyond viewing—through commenting on writing pads, whiteboards, social media or participating in a corresponding panel discussion.
- Exhibits and displays have an additional benefit as passive programming, since there is little need for viewers to interact with library staff, thereby minimizing the viewer’s possible discomfort or hesitancy to share a political viewpoint or reveal one’s sexual orientation
- Learning may be unanticipated
- Demonstrates that the library supports free expression

Themes from the Utoledo Exhibit:

- The William S. Carlson Library at the University of Toledo hosted an exhibition titled “Perceptions of Latinx Characters in Mainstream Comics and Graphic Novels” to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month during September and October 2018.
- Focused on the construction of Latinx identity and experience.
- Contained four posters, comic books, graphic novels, white boards and easel pads (for viewers to “self-other” by envisioning themselves as superheroes).
- Main themes: Stereotypes, power and authority, Marginalization and objectification of women of color, differently-abled characters

Roberto da Costa as Afro-Brazilian Sunspot (1982). He has dark skin, curly black hair, is an excellent soccer player, and is college-educated. This scene depicts da Costa as a victim of racism. During his transformations, Sunspot’s solar energy is depicted as black to symbolize his Afrolatino identity. When he is not treated as an equal in Professor X’s academy for mutants, he chooses to join Magneto’s “antiheroic” team, which is more accepting of racial “Otherness.”

Vibe: Into the 1980s, the trend was to urbanize and complicate Latino superheroes, and ground them in time and place (generally a community). Yet creators who chose not to follow the example set by White Tiger constructed characters whose bodies were emphasized over their brains, and accents were stereotypical. Paco Ramon as Vibe typified the stereotype as a break-dancing, former gang leader, involved in a Latinos vs. African-American storyline.

Blood Syndicate:

- One of the first comics to significantly feature Latinx characters was the series Blood Syndicate (1993-1996).
- As is typical of Latino superheroes, the Blood Syndicate straddles the law to tackle drugs and capitalist exploitation.
- Atypically, these superheroes were confronted with complex challenges such as crack addiction, religious fundamentalism, sexism, and internalized racism.
- Brother/sister team members Flashback and Fade struggle with Blatino identities, while Fade has his own issues with closeted gay sexuality.
- The Puerto Rican superhero Brickhouse was formerly a slave in sugar cane fields, and Aquamarina feels like an outcast due to her mutant status and for being monolingual.

Antonio Stark:

The reinvention of the Marvel Comics universe in 2006 paved the way for ethnic avatars of established Marvel superheroes, including Ant^oñio Stark as the Latinx Iron Man, son of Howard Stark and Latina biogenetics genius Dr. Maria Cerrera. Stark's entire body is comprised of brain tissue, thus symbolically overturning the stereotype of Latinx superheroes' long tradition of hot-headed brawn over brains.

San Diego State University Special Collections and University Archives, *DemoGRAPHICS: Voices and Visionaries from the SDSU Comic Arts Collection*

Michigan State University's (MSU) annual Comics Forum (multi-day event of panel discussions, several keynote speakers, an artist's alley, an exhibition and book discussion)

RodCon at the University of Northern Iowa (The Holocaust and other Jewish themes, genocide and human rights, depictions of Muslim women in comics, controversial Christian worldview, Racism in Disney, disabilities in comics)