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**From Picture to Word to the World: A Multimodal, Cultural Studies Approach to Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom**

Shannon Renee Mortimore
*Western Michigan University*

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FROM PICTURE TO WORD TO THE WORLD: A MULTIMODAL, CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO TEACHING GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

Shannon Reneé Mortimor

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Advisor: Gwen A. Tarbox, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2009
Sequential narratives such as comics, graphic novels and Manga (Japanese-style comics) have long been popular in youth culture. Recent attention has shifted to the potential of utilizing these alternative texts in the secondary classroom, yet very little information for English teachers exists regarding how to engage students in close, careful, and culturally informed analysis of these works. While there is a long tradition of thoughtful analytical teaching about literary texts, when it comes to the study of various media with strong image content, language arts teachers often may not know how to proceed. Indeed, preconceptions about the legitimacy of comics and graphic novels as “real” literature, may be a barrier for many language arts teachers who are anxious about the inclusion of these alternative texts in their own classrooms. Recognizing both teacher apprehension regarding these texts, along with the needs of a highly visual and multimodal generation of learners, this dissertation will consider the theory and applications of multimodal learning and critical literacy in the English classroom as they relate to the teaching of three graphic novels: *American Born*
Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi, and Blankets by Craig Thompson. Written using a first-person, autoethnographic approach, this dissertation hopes to offer suggestions for expanding educator's ideas regarding the literary cannon and to situate the use of graphic novels within the framework of respected and established Best Practice teaching principles. This dissertation will also draw upon teacher and student narratives regarding the graphic novel in order to consider the "story" of how these new literacies can become powerful allies in the quest to bring meaning, relevance, and critical awareness into the English classroom.
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At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

—Albert Schweitzer

I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and new.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Shannon Reneé Mortimore
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INTRODUCTION

From Skeptic to Scholar: The Journey Begins

Perhaps it is most appropriate to begin my journey into the graphic novel with a simple confession: I have never been a fan of comic books, nor considered myself to be an aficionado of graphic novels. I never excitedly browsed the colorful, spinning racks in local drugstores, anxious to find the newest edition of Spiderman or The Fantastic Four. I never relished flipping through the tri-colored, ink-smudged pages, and I confess I never really liked superheroes. As a young girl, I pretty much assumed that comic books were for boys. What else would explain the flashy capes and revealing tights, the buxom, half-clad heroines, and kitschy dialogue? These were things, I was certain, that only boys could love. I confess that I was never anything other than annoyed with the SPLAT, BAMS and POWS of the old Batman TV shows, and that I only entertained a fleeting interest in Wonder Woman, whom I was told I should like because I was a girl even though my fascination transfixed around her invisible jet and magic lasso rather than her heroic, Amazonian feats. As a kid, I never really understood comics, and I certainly never thought of them as real reading.
As an adolescent, my imagination wandered contentedly in books like *Little House on the Prairie*, *Little Women*, *Sweet Valley High*, and *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret.* For these reading endeavors, I was greatly complimented by the adults in my life, whose positive acknowledgement of my reading choices encouraged me to continue along this path of “acceptable” learning and literacy. Whether subconsciously or intentionally, I maintained my distance from comics understanding, though never explicitly taught, that these alternatives were for kids who didn’t like reading—for the fanboys, the collectors, the underachievers, and the hopelessly ill-read. I was convinced that comics were a distraction at best, and smut at their worst. They were definitely not literature.

As a budding high school English teacher, many years later, I confess, to some personal shame, that it was a habit of mine to confiscate comic books, magazines, or any other reading I deemed to be “sub-par.” I zealously lectured my students about “real” books and literature. I pushed them to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Odyssey*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, then wondered why, after all of my meticulous lesson-planning, my students sabotaged my best efforts with groans, sighs, and outright revolt. Like Cliff’s Notes, Sparknotes, and other summary resources that profit from condensing, adapting, and simplifying the classics, comic books represented a form of cheating to me—a way of stripping away the original beauty, language, and imagery of the literary classic and replacing it with obscenely colorful pictures, crude narratives, and cheesy dialogue. While these summary resources could be found in my classroom, they were generally relegated to
students with language or learning disabilities. I never considered them to have any merit for my mainstream or "regular-ed" students, and certainly not for my "Honors" students. My own snobbery regarding the superiority of the traditional literary canon compared to the piece-meal "literature" of comics blinded me from validating graphic narratives as a convincing and compelling literary option for my students. In these assertions, however, I found I was not alone.

As a PhD student among academics at the university level, I discovered my attempts at broaching the topic of comics or graphic novels with colleagues typically yielded the same response: "I can see how comics might be helpful for bringing struggling students into real literature," these critics declared, "but it's difficult to see any merit in them beyond that." This "comics-as-a-stepping-stone-to-the-classics" argument had become so pervasive that many scholars and educators, like myself, were willing to accept it as the whole truth—and nothing but the truth. Followed only by "comics-are-great-for-reluctant-readers" and "comics-are-what-you-read-in-the-Sunday-newspaper," these "truths" had diminished our ability as educators to look beyond the clichés and think critically about the stories that unfold between the panels of these unique narratives. Recognizing the marginality of the medium and invested in the work of rethinking common misrepresentations, Rocco Versaci, author of This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature argues:

...comic books have, throughout their history, been seen as a disposable medium that is meant primarily for children. As a result of this view, they have been relegated to the margins of representational
media... comic books are not afforded the same status as other forms such as novels or film... But, the marginality of comics has also allowed comic book creators to take advantage of others’ (dis)regard for them in order to create representations that can be both surprising and subversive. If one characteristic of good literature is that it challenges our way of thinking, then comics cultural position is such that they are able to mount these challenges in unique ways. (12)

Rather than view comic books and graphic novels for what they lack, Versaci asks readers to consider what they are. The question over whether or not comics constitute an inferior or “low” art form when compared to the towering reputation of the literary “classic,” is “irrelevant,” as evidenced by Versaci who writes: “I am less interested in making comparisons between the source materials and their comic book adaptations than I am in discussing how comic books are positioned artistically in relation to that source material” (185).

Compelled though I am by Versaci’s words, my own transformation regarding the medium began not with professional rhetoric, but with a simple conference session several years ago at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Tennessee. Nudging my way into the over-packed session on “Teaching Graphic Novels,” I secured the first open seat I saw and browsed the tri-page hand-out skeptically. I was astounded by the elation of my teaching colleagues—some of whom already clutched at their own copies of the graphic novels illustrated in the hand-out. A fan of popular fantasy role-playing games, chiefly,
Dungeons and Dragons and the Final Fantasy video game series, and a self-proclaimed fangirl of the Star Wars sagas, I had already begun to do some tentative thinking into how alternative literacies like film and video games might be used in the English classroom. However, devoid of any real knowledge on comics and graphic novels, I simply dismissed these texts as aversive without giving them a fair shake. I vowed to listen to the presentation with an open mind, never anticipating that the spark ignited there would lead me, two years later, to this narrative.

The fifty-minute session, which was little more than a graphic novel “show-and-tell,” of several of the most acclaimed graphic novels to date, including Alan Moore’s The Watchmen, Frank Miller’s The Dark Knight, Art Spiegleman’s Maus I and II, and a recent award-winner, Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese, inspired me to purchase a handful of graphic novels for myself and try them out on my own terms. A few nights later, from the comfort of my favorite reading chair, I found myself completely immersed in the story of Jin Yang in American Born Chinese. I was dumb-founded by the complicated, three-part narrative and awestruck by the minefield of cultural and symbolic representations captured in each, compelling, panel. Though I still had a lot to learn about the medium itself, I was certain I had struck gold. These novels had charisma, depth, and character. They had the potential to speak to my students’ lives in profound, significant ways. That week, I gathered together as many graphic novels I could find from the session’s bibliography. I sifted through the stacks at the university library, squatting to read the titles on the shelves until my knees ached. I visited the teen section of the local
public library, and sat in sticky bean-bag chairs, skimming through as many as twenty
titles at a time. Seated in the purple lounge chairs around me were 13-16 year-olds,
flipping through the pages of popular Anime magazines. An entire exhibit, built
around the traditional comic book heroes, Batman, Superman, and Spiderman, stood
proudly in the glass display case. "Come to the Teen Reading Room on Saturday!"
the sign proclaimed, "And get your FREE comic book!" I couldn't help but to
wonder when the world of teen literacy had shifted, and how I had managed to miss
it. When did comic books become popular again? When did they start cropping up
on library shelves in such great numbers? A revival was rustling around me, and this
time I wanted to be a part of it.

Research and Writing Methodology

The sections that follow serve to illuminate the scope of methodologies and
writing strategies employed in my research and in the writing of this dissertation.
Cognizant of a dual audience—both teachers and scholars in the field of English
Education—this dissertation aims to address the needs of both of these readers. In an
effort to connect my research in meaningful ways with real practitioners and students,
I have permitted myself to engage in a form of writing that is both personal and
scholarly, a style of writing that is just as much an invitation into my own life and
work as it is a critical investigation of graphic narratives in the English classroom.
Furthermore, as a researcher immersed in two distinct research sites: a high school
English classroom and my own college literary interpretation courses, I adopted
James P. Spradley's method of Participant Observation to gather data through both “active” and “passive” forms of participation. Each of these methods is described in greater detail below.

**Autoethnography: The Personal Journey as Teacher-Researcher**

In my own experience as a teacher, it was not the meticulous statistical analysis, graphs, or pie charts of student learning that most influenced how I structured my classroom, but rather, the voices of other teachers and students—their *stories*, and their *lives*, that served as my greatest models. As evidenced by teacher-researchers Atwell (1987), Calkins (1983), and Wilhelm (1996), the transition away from “product-based research” in favor of “process-based research” has become a powerful trend in the field of English education. According to Ruth Hubbard and Brenda Power in *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers* (1999):

> While all methodologies are used for teacher inquiry, it is dominated by qualitative inquiry. In contrast to traditional education research studies, written in a distant, third-person voice, teacher research often has an immediate, first-person tone. Findings in teacher research are usually presented as narratives from the classroom with metaphors a common means of highlighting key findings... in teacher research, stories are a critical tool for illuminating the deeper theories or rules governing the way a classroom community works. (2)

Using autoethnography as a method for gathering “descriptive, anecdotal and example-filled documentation” (Hubbard and Power 20) results in a rich and highly
personal style of research that draws the reader into the everyday experiences of both
the teacher and the students and “challenges the notion that research reporting needs
to be dry, distant and filled with jargon” (Hubbard and Power 288).

In "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject"
(2000), authors Carol Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner hope to unravel the myth of
"quantifiable" academic research as the only means of valid academic study by
legitimizing autoethnographic practice as a compelling approach to both researching
and experiencing the cultural lives of those we study. To be an autoethnographer,
according to Ellis, is to “start with [your] personal life” (739). Ellis’ definition of this
type of research follows:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research
that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal
to the cultural. Back and forth, autoethnographers gaze, first through
an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and
cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward,
exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through,
refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (739)

Likening the autoethnography to what he coins "evocative writing," Bochner
argues that the ability of autoethnography to focus on specific, single stories and
interactions, "breaches the traditional concerns of research from generalizations
across cases to generalization within a case" (745). By freeing readers from
inaccessible technical jargon, indecipherable language, and stacks of cold
statistics, autoethnographic approaches invite readers to become "co-participants" in the research process—creating personal meaning through interpretation of the stories provided in the texts. Bochner's passion for this personal, reflective approach to research is evident below:

Evocative narratives...long to be used rather than analyzed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebateable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts...The "Research Text" is the story... [it] asks readers to feel the truth of [these] stories and to become co-participants, engaging the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually. (745, emphasis mine)

With the goal of encouraging compassionate, thought-provoking dialogue among English educators, this dissertation asks readers to become actively engaged in the research process and to "put themselves in the place" of the researcher (Ellis and Bochner, 748). It is within this framework that I invite the readers of my work to become co-participants on the journey toward understanding the powerful potential of using comics and graphic novels in the secondary English classroom.

The Scholarly Personal Narrative

In his book, Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative (2004), author Robert J. Nash defines the scholarly personal narrative (SPN) as "the
unabashed, upfront admission that [one's] 'own life signifies' (24). According to Nash, first-person, experiential research writing has rich meaning for both the researcher and for others. The SPN "tells a story that...can deliver to readers those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research" (24). Mindful of the traditional definitions of what constitutes "scholarship" or "scholarly research,"—specifically, the myth that research worthy of any real merit is measurable, quantifiable, distanced from the researcher, categorically tested, and empirically sound—Nash debunks tradition and challenges his audiences to broaden their "construal of scholarship" by daring them to "rewrite" and rethink the current standards in research narrative and methodology (45).

Rather than equate the term "scholar" with that of "critic," Nash urges researchers to embrace the original, etymological meanings of the word, "scholar" or skola, meaning "leisure" and "play" (42). Scholarship, then, is differentiated from "scholasticism," which Nash references as a "narrow-minded insistence on hewing to traditional theological rubrics and doctrines" (45). Rather, it is Nash’s assertion that a scholar’s duty is to "play" with ideas, language, and knowledge, to illuminate others, not dominate them, and to observe, narrate, and transform the world around them through the centralized lens of personal experience (45). According to Nash,

You are a scholar if you have a passion for language and writing. You are a scholar if you are driven to understand what makes you and others tick. You are a scholar if you can feel and think at the same
time. You are a scholar if you are willing to allow your students, and
your readers, to enter your heart as well as your head. You are a
scholar if you can help your readers and students realize that their lives
signify, that they matter more than they will ever know. (46)

It is this “scholarship” that I hope to inspire in my readers, and it is with the humble
intent to make my life and experiences meaningful for others that I embark down this
path. As Nash argues, knowledge is a playground where observation, imagination,
and innovation “signify” a quest for truth in research and the greater truths within
ourselves. As a teacher and a researcher, my “scholarship” is derived from the stories
that my students breathe into life each day in the laboratory of my English
classrooms. I hope to honor these experiences, ideas, and discoveries by giving them
life and significance in the writing that follows.

Participant Observation

The narrative that comprises my personal journey is based on the research I
conducted in two separate classroom environments: an American literature class for
high school juniors at a southwest urban Michigan high school and an introductory
college English course entitled English 1100: Literary Interpretation at Western
Michigan University where I served as the instructor of record for three consecutive
semesters. In each setting, my methodology was based upon the principles of
participant observation, developed by James P. Spradley in Participant Observation
(1980). Participant observation research involves ethnographic approaches to
gathering data that promote cultural understanding and awareness of the social groups and situations examined. The researcher, according to Spradley, becomes a student of those he/she observes, while the observed serve as teachers (4). Researchers, or ethnographers, study culture in an attempt to learn more about the “three fundamental aspects of human experience: what people do, what people know, and what people make” (Spradley 5). Spradley refers specifically to these three areas as cultural behavior, cultural knowledge, and cultural artifacts (5).

The ethnographic research process moves, according to Spradley, on a continuum, operating cyclically through each stage (See Figure 1.0). Researchers using Spradley’s model begin by selecting an ethnographic project and asking ethnographic questions. They then proceed into data collection, the construction of an ethnographic record, and the analysis of this record. Data analysis might lead to further questions, which may, in turn, propel researchers through the data cycle once more. Viewing the process cyclically, rather than in a step-wise or graduated fashion, allows researchers the freedom to continually revisit their findings, reformulate their questions based on informed analysis, and seek specific outcomes based on their chosen social situations, locations, and overall data.
This cycle may happen on a small-scale, as a "micro-ethnography," meaning data collected in single social situations, or across multiple communities or complex societies in a "macro-ethnography" (30). For the purposes of this study, observations across single social situations provide a micro-ethnographic glimpse at the connections made by two specific groups of students in their work with graphic narratives in order to discover the social and academic significance of these textual encounters.
Participant observation serves as an effective research methodology for this study in a variety of ways. First, maneuvering through Spradley’s developmental research sequence (DRS) affords a great deal of flexibility for the teacher-researcher. Once a social situation has been located, the researcher is encouraged to make descriptive observations. This process asks researchers to record the physical “space” being observed, the “actors,” or people involved in this space, the “acts” and “activities” that the actors carry out, and the “goals” and “feelings” that accompany these acts (Spradley 78). Focusing on these collective situations is what Spradley refers to as “Grand Tour Observations” (77). Data collected through this sequence becomes the foundation for further observation and analysis. As a teacher interested in observing the space, actors, activities, and goals of both my own students and high school English teacher Chris Bullmer’s students, I engaged in participant observation as both an “active” participant—where I, along with my students, became submerged in the texts and the environment studied—and as a “passive” observer—interested in quietly watching and carefully recording the teaching and learning processes of others engaged in the same texts as well. The ability to move flexibly between research sites and situations and to envision myself as both a participant and a researcher allowed me to engage with the students in natural, non-disruptive ways, conducive to understanding how real classrooms work in real situations.

Second, rather than demanding quantitative results that bear the burden of causality and proof in research, Spradley’s method favors descriptive narration, focused observation, and cultural analysis. Once observations have been conducted,
Spradley advocates the development of a “domain analysis,” or data analysis for the purpose of unearthing and examining the cultural patterns that emerge in the field of study (85). Teacher-researchers, in this phase of the research process, have the opportunity to carefully sift through their field-notes or “ethnographic record,” with the purpose of finding meaningful intersections between the essential questions posed by the research and the actual findings made. At this stage, the researcher moves away from mere observations of a “social situation” and begins identifying, classifying, and coding the data to determine how the observed function creates a “cultural scene” unique to the situation observed (Spradley 87). Patterns identified by the researcher are then taken back into the “social situation”—the classroom, and tested further through “focused observation” (Spradley 100). In this way, teacher-researchers move fluidly through the process of observation and analysis, behaving in ways that are familiar both to them as teachers, and to the students they teach.

Furthermore, the participant observation research method allows for the collection of a variety of data. Primarily, the researcher is tasked with the creation of an “ethnographic record” that reports, as clearly and concisely as possible, the specific actions, events, language, and interactions that occur in the research domain. Here, culture is determined by what people say or what people do. In addition to this however, data analysis can also be conducted on the artifacts created, or what people make. Alongside a careful record of observed classroom dialogue, participant observation supports the analysis of reflective student writing or student-created projects and artwork, to name a few. The materials created by students through the
normal course of their participation in the classroom environment become important forms of data for analyzing student connection and engagement with the literature studied.

Finally, engaging in participant observation and conducting classroom research via this method encourages teachers to become vital, active, and involved members in their classroom communities. As true reflective-practitioners—teacher-researchers whose consistent “gaze” is focused on the improvement of both their students and themselves—these teachers acknowledge the power of asking the questions that matter and seeking satisfactory results in their practice. With an eye on both their own lives and experiences and the experiences of the students they teach, teacher-researchers willing to become participant observers in their own classrooms reap the benefit of understanding how their curriculum impacts the lives of others. This knowledge, and its implications for future practitioners and the community at large, is beneficial not only as knowledge for knowledge sake, but as an endorsement that by asking, observing, and acting, we each, as teachers, have the power to transform our students, our classrooms, and our lives.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One, “A Brief History, Definitions, and Theoretical Approaches to Reading and Understanding Graphic Narratives,” considers the rich and controversial history of comics and graphic novels and explores both the notoriety and popularity of the medium, as well. In addition, the predominant theories regarding the unique
infusion of the verbal/visual components that distinguish this medium are investigated through the reputable, scholarly writing and research of Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, David Wolk, Bradford Wright, Hillary Chute and others. Furthermore, this chapter provides basic definitions and classifications of the graphic narrative and other subsequent genres sharing this form (i.e. comic books, comic strips, graphic novels, graphic memoir, etc) and puts forward a working vocabulary of the specific "conventions" of comics including: word balloons, narrative boxes, gutter space, closure, movement, background, line, and color. Working examples of each convention are modeled through a variety of excerpts selected from the graphic narratives themselves. Finally, this chapter investigates both visual and multimodal literacies, primarily through the work of Molly Bang and The New London Group, and promotes multimodal methodologies for engaging readers in meaningful analysis of graphic texts.

Chapter Two, "Critical Approaches to Teaching Graphic Narratives in the English Classroom," introduces readers to the theories of cultural literacy through the work of critical pedagogues, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and others. Viewed through the framework of my own teaching experiences and philosophies, this chapter argues that the graphic narrative provides ample opportunities for students to engage in meaningful critical discourse regarding the complex, interconnected, thematic, and highly visual/verbal language of these texts. Beginning with a discussion of Freire's work with pictorial "codifications" depicting a variety of social situations used as tools for promoting critical literacy among the
participants in his “Culture Circles,” Chapter Two, argues that through the critical investigation of the picture, the word, and the world, students can begin to connect both personally and culturally to the ideas and themes inherent in these texts. In addition to these arguments, this chapter provides a critical close-reading analysis of the three coming-of-age graphic narratives whose thematic “intersections” comprise the direction of this study: Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* (2003), and Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis* (2004). Additionally, a discussion of the preexisting scholarship regarding the teaching of comics and graphic novels in the English classroom, including the work of Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, Gretchen Schwartz, Rocco Versaci, Stephen Cary, James Bucky Carter, and Dale Jacobs lends credence to the argument that graphic narratives, similar to word-based narratives, have a specific literary structure, style, and vocabulary, and furthermore, the ability to create opportunities for students to engage in pedagogically sound and critically meaningful modes of literary analysis and interpretation.

Chapter Three “Critical, Multimodal, and Cross-textual Interpretation of Graphic Narratives in the College English Classroom,” is the first of two chapters that focus on a narrative reflection regarding the experiences of students as they engaged in the reading, analysis, and cultural understanding of graphic narratives. Written primarily from the perspectives of the students themselves, Chapter Three investigates the preexisting attitudes and critical interpretations of forty-four college students enrolled in a freshman-level literary interpretation English class. Working
with three separate groups of students over the course of three consecutive semesters, I served as the primary instructor of record for each course. Alongside these students, I actively engaged in the reading and interpretation of the graphic novels chosen for this study, while challenging my students to consider how the themes of these narratives had the power to speak into their own lives. The data gathered from these classes—primarily via the students' blogs, in-class writings, and term papers—represents a cross-section of common student responses to the graphic narratives appearing in this dissertation. Testimonial and experiential in nature, this chapter, and the one that follows, attempts to catalogue the wide profusion of ideas and perspectives presented by these students. As such, the student narratives chosen to appear in this chapter best represent the attitudes, ideas, and difficulties expressed by the majority of my students in each classroom. The purpose of this chapter is to help interested scholars and educators understand how graphic narratives work in practical, applicable ways in real classrooms with real students. In this regard, the reader is ultimately responsible for interpreting the responses offered by these students and drawing his/her own conclusions regarding the potential impact and usefulness of graphic narratives in the English classroom.

Chapter Four, “In Their Own Words: Graphic Narratives in Action, Stories from the High School English Classroom,” chronicles my experiences with high school English teacher Chris Bullmer as we observed his students' responses to excerpts from popular comics and graphic novels. Working collaboratively over the period of two weeks in the spring of 2008, Chris and I designed three specific lesson
plans, with highly accessible and culturally relevant themes, to present to his junior-level American literature students. As a "passive" participant in this classroom, I observed Chris deliver these lessons to his students, during which time, I carefully notated conversations offered by his students in response to their engagement in these texts. Similar to the chapter that precedes it, this chapter invites readers into a real English classroom, comprised of a widely diverse group of students, and asks them to become "co-participants" in the critical conversations and personal revelations that happened there. The chapter is broken down into three primary sections, divided according to the three lessons presented to the students. Incorporated alongside the student’s writing and dialogue, my own insights as a critical observer in this classroom are expounded upon as well.

The final chapter of this dissertation, "Journey’s End: Outcomes, Conclusions, and Future Recommendations," outlines the major findings supported by my research while at the same time acknowledging the limitations of this work. Furthermore, I return to the original essential questions that initiated this investigation in an attempt to provide answers to these questions within the context of the findings of this study as a whole. Given the recent shift to incorporate graphic narratives within the context of the English classroom, the final chapter also identifies future considerations for teachers interested in experimenting with these narratives in their own classrooms. Overall, the conclusions supported by this chapter serve as an acknowledgement that my work here is a mere "stopping point" in time, and that even
as I conclude my work with the dissertation, there are still many questions and directions to be explored through scholarly research.

**HSIRB Research Approval**

As the teacher-researcher, or the primary "instrument" of data collection, I began my observations for this study through the use of a teacher-journal—a space of quiet personal observation and introspection that later helped me to define the purpose and direction of this study. In addition to this journal, samples of student writing were selected from among the students who signed willing consent to become participants in this dissertation research project. In my own freshman literary interpretation courses at Western Michigan University, students were required, on multiple occasions, to write about what they were learning regarding both the structure and unique conventions of graphic narratives. They were also asked to write about the ways that these narratives intersected with traditional literature alongside their own critical understanding of the world around them. Writing samples were selected from the four formal papers required for the completion of the course, in-class writing assignments, and student blogs. Data collected during my collaborative efforts with English teacher Chris Bullmer include transcriptions of student classroom dialogues and a recorded interview with Chris Bullmer (See Appendix). Three specific lesson plans, incorporating selections from *American Born Chinese* and *Persepolis* were executed during the time of these observations. High school students who signed consent documents, and whose parents signed permission for their child
to participate in the study as well, were invited to volunteer writing samples in the form of journal entries and classroom projects. All students, at both the college and high school levels, were invited to become a part of this dissertation research project. Students whose writing was selected to appear in this dissertation were allowed the opportunity to review and to approve the selected passages. The selected students also indicated if they wished to apply their real names to the text or if they wished to have a pseudonym. All consent forms indicated that students understood research for the dissertation may lead to future publication in articles or books. The data I discovered through my own journal introspection, through transcripts of classroom observations and student writing samples, and through the interview with Chris Bullmer was analyzed for its predominant and reoccurring themes, issues, and concerns—most of which are explored in greater detail in the body of this dissertation. Furthermore, as indicated by the last chapter of this dissertation, data accumulated at the beginning of this study was used to generate additional questions for future field investigations. These findings, in conjunction with the preexisting body of scholarly research regarding this topic, became the final data that influenced the outcomes and conclusions of this dissertation.
CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY, DEFINITIONS, AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO READING AND UNDERSTANDING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Introduction

Prior to reading my first graphic novel, I clung tenaciously to the conviction that working through a graphic narrative was a simple, juvenile process. Similar to the established attitudes of many of the students I encountered as a teacher in both the secondary and post-secondary arenas, I believed the addition of pictures in a reading text meant that very little thought or effort would be required of me as the reader. Naturally, as a teacher of English, I have a great admiration for words. I enjoy the way a cleverly turned sentence lifts off of the page and loiters in my imagination; I find joy in breathing life into the characters I encounter between each doting paragraph, and I marvel at the way a sunset unfurls its glowing rays onto the space of a plain, white page. Most of all, I admire the skill of writers whose craft allows me to escape into the alternate worlds and realities created by my imagination. The pictures I create there belong to me; they are the unique product of my own invention. Because of this perspective, alongside the fear that this special relationship might
somehow be compromised by a visual narrative, I had very few expectations when I cracked open my first graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. Admittedly, to begin, I found it difficult to look at the pictures at all. I found myself focusing on the words, skimming through the dialogue bubbles and narrative boxes, hoping to piece the story together from there. This was not an entirely ineffective method, however at some point, I realized it was a highly unsatisfactory approach. While I hadn’t purposely intended to focus solely on the words, I found it difficult to break my training as a teacher of English—a teacher of words—in order to look beyond them. When I realized that focusing on the visual imagery provided a new type of story, often contradictory to the words themselves, I felt I had made an astounding discovery. This small epiphany forced me to do several things as a reader: First, I had to slow down my reading in order to digest everything on the page. Second, I had to train my eye to move differently across the pages—I had to shatter my belief in left-to-right reading. Third, I had to grant myself permission to look at the pictures and allow myself the luxury of reading as much meaning into these images as I had previously enjoyed in words alone. As a result, once I began to understand the great marriage of the word and the image on the page, my reading experience was immensely altered.

As an educator, I wanted to know as much about the medium as possible. I wanted to understand the history and background of these texts; I wanted to learn more about the specific structural elements that composed each page, and I wanted to discover how my reading process of these texts might be further explored and enhanced.
This chapter outlines my journey as a scholar interested in understanding more about the comics and graphic novel medium itself. While a great deal of debate exists among comics scholars regarding the specific origin, precise format, and the most appropriate definitions of the medium, for the purposes of this study, this chapter is limited to a simple introduction of these arguments. In order to best serve an audience of educators interested in thinking about and teaching comics or graphic novels in their own English classrooms, whether at the secondary or post-secondary levels, this chapter is less concerned with entering in or altering the "great comics debate," and more concerned with providing an outline of the basic chronological history and development of the medium and defining the distinctive structures of the medium. In addition, multimodal approaches addressing the linguistic and visual content in graphic narratives will be explored as well. A discussion of visual literacy and multimodal literacy, particularly through the work of children's illustrator Molly Bang and the work of the New London Group in their article, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" published in the Harvard Educational Review, will provide a theoretical framework for reading, analyzing, and understanding the unique elements of this medium. This chapter attempts to answer the essential question, "What do English teachers need to know about the history, structure, and proposed reading strategies regarding graphic narratives in order to teach them effectively to their students?"—a question I encountered on my personal journey as a teacher first interested in understanding these texts for my own pleasure.
and edification and second as I considered how to introduce these texts to my own students.

A Rich and Controversial History

When considering the origins of human artistic representation, most recognize early cave drawings as a primitive progenitor of the "cartoon." In *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud acknowledges, retrospectively, that comics' history may have begun as far back as the 15th century with the Bayeux Tapestry, a 230-foot long, brightly embroidered cloth, depicting the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of England that began in 1066 (12). Designed to be read from left-to-right, typical of the way most comic books are read, the tapestry unfolds in "deliberate chronological sequence" (13). Though the panel borders that we have come to associate with typical comics are absent in this work, Latin inscriptions accompany each artistic section, providing the language necessary to narrate this highly visual and more importantly, sequential work of art. While McCloud additionally makes reference to early Mexican codices and Egyptian manuscripts as well, paying particular attention to the way pictures are assimilated into actual words (10-12), others pick up the debate with the advent of children's book illustrations during the Victorian era in Britain. In addition, the soaring popularity of the "Penny Dreadfuls" (1830-1850), "sensationalist, illustrated, bit-part novels" (Sabin 13) marketed to working class adults and adolescents for a mere penny a piece, are also credited as a marginal influence in the rise of the medium. Yet most experts of the comic book medium agree that comics began as an outgrowth of the satirical pamphlets, prints,
and broadsheets—or "common prints," later referred to as the "comicals" or "comics" for short—that became the prolific work of eighteenth century satirists such as William Hogarth (1697-1764), author and engraver of *A Harlot's Progress* (1731) and *A Rake's Progress* (1735). In these "vignettes of moral import" (Harvey 26), Hogarth illustrates the decline and fall of protagonists Moll Hackabout and Tom Rakewell through a series of six to eight sequential paintings (later turned into etchings), that warn against the vices of thrift, gambling, and prostitution (See Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 "Moll Arrives in London," from *A Harlot's Progress* (1731) by William Hogarth. 
As each didactic painting or plate progresses, viewers experience the untimely imprisonment, insanity, and death that results as the consequence of Hackabout and Rakewell’s descent into immorality and debauchery. Thomas Rowlandson (1757-1827), James Gillray (1757-1815), and George Cruickshank (1792-1878), largely regarded alongside Hogarth as the first political cartoonists, followed quickly in Hogarth’s lead. Yet while the publications of this era lent both humor and scathing criticism to corrupt government practice, very few of these single-panel “cuts” worked conventionally in the same fashion that modern comics do today.

It was not until what David Kunzle terms, Rodolphe Topffer’s “graphic and aesthetic revolution” (Kunzle “Rodolphe Topffer’s Aesthetic Revolution” 17) that most experts can agree that the modern medium began to take shape. In 1842, the Swiss author, teacher, and caricaturist, Rodolphe Topffer (1766-1847) gained American acclaim for his work, "The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck." This forty-page installation is disputed as the first comic book published in the United States (See Figure 1.2). Similar to Topffer’s earlier works, "The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck" is a collection of illustrations; each contained within a singular frame and narrated with captions (originally) in Topffer’s own handwriting. The panels, unlike those of Topffer’s predecessors, were intended to be read as a whole, and together they create a singular, contained story in the narrative tradition of the picaresque novel (Mainardi).
Figure 1.2 From *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* by Rodolphe Topffer.
<scoop.diamondgalleries.com/.../43536_93041_4.jpg>
According to Patricia Mainardi in her article "The Invention of Comics" (2007):

While the genre was established incrementally over several centuries, with precedents ranging from broadsheets to the print series of William Hogarth, it was Töpffer who truly established the modern genre. Broadsheets often contained multiple images on a single page, but did not recount an original narrative, usually depicting instead well-known legends or events. Hogarth's print series did recount original narratives, but had each image printed on a separate sheet. If we define a comic strip as a single page or series of pages each containing multiple frames of images narrating an original story, then Töpffer undoubtedly created the first such works (Mainardi).

Indeed, Töpffer’s particular attention to “paneling” and “narrating” his work, demonstrates one of the first uses of the common conventions that modern comic-book readers have come to associate with the medium.

In the early nineteenth century, primarily as a way to entice non-literate or non-native English speakers into purchasing newspapers, the “comic-strip” genre was born. These first comics were intended to evoke humor and appeal to the lower to middle working classes. While many comics scholars, among them David Kunzle and Roger Sabin, point to Töpffer as the first comic artist, it is publisher of The New York World (1883), Joseph Pulitzer, (also associated with the Pulitzer Prize), who is largely credited with the development of the four-page, colorfully printed Sunday supplement—what contemporary readers might consider to be the first Sunday
comic-strip section—featuring “exotic and titillating subjects [and] political cartoons” (Hajdu 9). The most famous among them was Hogan’s Alley, a cartoon better known as “The Yellow Kid,” under the creative direction of writer and artist Richard Felton Outcault (Hajdu 9).

Figure 1.3 "The Yellow Kid's New Phonograph Clock" (1897) by Richard Outcault <chnm.gmu.edu/aq/comics/nocss/clock.html>.

“The Yellow Kid” (See Figure 1.3 and 1.4) made his first appearance in February of 1895 in small, black and white, singular panels which later featured the main character in a bright yellow frock (Olson).
Described by David Hajdu, author of *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* (2008), the Yellow Kid "was a crude but strangely endearing caricature of the immigrant poor—barefoot, ugly, inarticulate...and disposed to violence" (10). Parading about the pages alongside the Yellow Kid, were a wide host of "vulgar stereotypes" personified as the Kid’s play pals:

oil-smeared Italians throwing tomatoes; Negroes with gum-bubble lips, snoozing or cowering in fear; scowling Middle Easterners in fezzes, waving scimitars—comrades in Egalitarian minstrelsy...[and] a goat who fit companionably with the kids (Hajdu 11).

![Figure 1.4 “The Yellow Kid” (1895) by Richard Outcault.](http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/yelo-kid.gif).
Given the surprising popularity of the “Yellow Kid,” rival newspaper publishers were eager to follow in Pulitzer’s stead. Within the decade, duplicate “Kids” were featured in William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* (1895-1937) and a series of disputes regarding ownership of the syndicate between Pulitzer and Hearst became known as “the Yellow Wars”—a term that later inspired the more popular use of the phrase “yellow journalism” as a way of inciting “sensationalist newspapering practices” (Hajdu 12, Harvey 37). Commissioned by Hearst to create a new comic serial, based on the German illustrated story *Max and Moritz (A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks)*, written and illustrated by Wilhelm Busch in 1865, Rudolph Dirks, a German immigrant, developed the *Katzenjammer Kids* in December of 1897 (See Figure 1.5). According to Christine Gibson in “A Revolution in the Funnies” (2007), the Katzenjammer boys “perpetrated their slapstick devilry week after week on whatever authority figure bumbled within range.” Together they “personified unbridled anarchy...behind a camouflage of chubby cheeks, skinny legs, and bristly hair” (Gibson). Featuring the playful pranks of main characters Hans and Fritz, the adventures of the Katzenjammer hooligans contended for their own, rightful, acclaim in comic book history. Although fraught with undeniable stereotypes, ethnic clichés, and fractured, unintelligible dialogue, Hajdu argues:

In their earthiness, their skepticism toward authority, and the delight they took in freedom, early newspaper comics spoke to and of the swelling immigrant populations in New York and other cities where comics spread...The funnies were theirs, made for them and about
them...the comics offered their audience a parodic look at itself, rendered in the vernacular of caricature and nonsense language. The mockery in comics was familial—intimate, knowing, affectionate, and merciless. (11)

Figure 1.5 *The Katzenjammer Kids*, Hanz and Fritz, by Rudolph Dirks. <lambiek.net/strips/index.htm>.

It was during the early years of the twentieth century as well that comic books proliferated artist-writers such as Winsor McCay (1871-1934) and George Herriman (1880-1944). Creator of the art nouveau splendor *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, McCay first published in *The New York Herald* in 1911 and later in Hearst’s newspaper syndicate under the new title *In the Land of Wonderful Dreams* in 1914.
(See Figure 1.6). The comic, said to be based on McCay's own son Robert, “advanced the comic strip's potential by experimenting with scale, transformation, perspective, and above all, visionary journeys into the subconscious” (Gravett, "Winsor McCay: The Real McCay").

Figure 1.6  *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1914) by Winsor McCay. <commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Little_Nemo_moon.jpg>
Additionally, George Herriman (1880-1944), a light-skinned Creole African American from New Orleans, also enjoyed fame for his *Krazy Kat* comic strip, featuring the slapstick antics of Ignatz Mouse, Officer Pupp, and Krazy Kat (See Figure 1.7).

![Krazy Kat comic strip](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/073_herriman/).

Figure 1.7 *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944) by George Herriman (1880-1944). <http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/073_herriman/>. 
Set in the sprawling canyons, mesas, and deserts of Coconino County, Arizona, Herriman’s comic chronicles the “kraziness...[of] a cat, a mouse and a dog in an eternal, unresolvable, very human love-triangle” (Gravett “A Krazy Thing Called Love”). Yet while Herriman and McCay’s strips enjoyed artistic acclaim, particularly among the middle to upper classes, according to Roger Sabin, “their strips did not necessary do the best commercially” (Sabin Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels 24). Those that enjoyed the most extensive readership were what Sabin writes, “the dumber kind of ‘kid’ strip” (24), mostly notably strips like Rudolph Dirk’s Katzenjammer Kids (1897), Fred Opper’s Happy Hooligan (1900), or Bud Fisher’s Mutt and Jeff (1907) featuring “domestic comedy...[that] articulated the class tensions of the day” (Sabin Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels 24).

Perhaps because of the popularity of these ‘kid-strips’, it was during this time as well that comics began to draw the attention of scornful critics, bent on discrediting what was considered to be a vulgar and negligent medium. In a 1906 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, Ralph Bergengren railed against the Katzenjammer Kids, accusing the comic of being “extremely dull” (qtd. in Hajdu 11). Furthermore, negligence of property, disregard of the law, and disrespect for parents were listed as the inevitable outcomes of reading these strips (Hajdu 11-12). An article titled, “A Crime Against American Children,” published in the Ladies’ Home Journal in 1909 argued that parents who allow their children to read “vulgar” comics ought to be indicted for “criminal negligence” (Hajdu 12). Other critics voiced concerns that the
Sunday supplements interfered with the Christian day of worship, the Sunday Sabbath (Hajdu 12). Clearly, there was much to dislike about these frivolous cartoons.

However, despite the scathing criticism (or perhaps because of it), the popularity of the medium continued to grow. Inspired by the popular pulp magazines of the era such as *Amazing Stories* (1926) and *Dime Detective Magazine* (1931) whose stories of high adventure, crime-fighting heroism, and bawdy sensationalism resulted in an enthusiastic readership, the adventure strips of the Sunday comics grew to include well-known titles such as Chester Gould’s *Dick Tracy* (1929), Harold Foster’s *Tarzan* (1930), Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* (1934), Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates*, (1934), and Hal Foster’s *Prince Valiant* (1937). These Depression era comics (and those that followed) quickly ushered in what is now recognized as the “Golden Age” of American comics, a period spanning from 1935-1955 and critically regarded as the most prolific and profitable era for the medium (Sabin *Adult Comics* 144). Concerned less with articulating the impish pranks and two-bit laughs of their predecessors, (although these comic-strips were still popular) these serialized comics, and the public’s growing frenzy to read them, resulted in specialized, syndicated “genres,” including detective and science fiction stories and evolving into what some critics have named the “superhero boom.” According to Hajdu, these new “tales of extravagant heroism, physical prowess and wile...conferred upon comics a new kind of legitimacy” (17). Moreover, these comics birthed a new generation of comics creators, among them the “father of the
graphic novel,” Will Eisner, for whom the “Sunday comics were the art class...of the Depression years” (Hajdu 16).

In 1933, *Funnies on Parade*, a reprinted collection of popular comic-strips regarded by historians as the first comic book, was published by Eastern Color and offered free of charge as a radio-show promotion designed to sell popular Proctor & Gamble goods (Hajdu 21). Maxwell Charles Gaines, a commission salesman for the company who credited himself as the first comic book creator, later sold the collection to newsstand distributors as *Famous Funnies* for ten-cents a copy.

Similarly, in 1935, Maxwell Wheeler-Nicholson created *New Fun*, “a thirty-six page, black-and-white, tabloid-size collection of previously unpublished comics...with a hodge-podge of kiddie [stories]...geared for children” (Hajdu 19). When he ran out of comics to reprint, Wheeler-Nicholson solicited kids interested in publishing their original comics in his newspaper, an idea that served several positive functions. Primarily, it allowed Wheeler-Nicholson to continue publications without paying new artists. Secondly, it brought new talent into the industry itself—among Wheeler-Nicholson’s submitters were the young Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, later attributed with the creation of *Superman* (Hajdu 20-21). In 1937, Wheeler-Nicholson sold the company to Harry Donenfeld who renamed the syndicate *Detective Comics*, more commonly known as DC Comics (Hajdu 29). With the establishment of *Action Comics* the following year, “the name of the game” in the industry became “bold, figurative art with strong colours...[that] challenged traditional ‘chessboard’ layouts” and featured high adventure characters in single-title comic books, as opposed to the
previously popular compilation comics (Sabin *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels* 57). In June of 1938 to debut the new *Action Comics* series, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s *Superman* was born. Originally conceived as a “Champion of the Oppressed,” Superman “embodied the Roosevelt-era ideal of power employed for the public good” (Hajdu 30). More a “super-social worker” (Sabin 61) than the commercialized, Kryptonic extra-terrestrial, Superman’s first heroic deeds were battles against incipient social woes: drunkenness, wife-battering, and gambling (Sabin 61). Created as an amalgamation of the mythological Hercules and the biblical Samson, and even referenced to Jesus himself—Superman is sent to Earth from the “heavens” by his loving “father” and charged with using his abilities to better mankind—Superman rapidly became a beloved and cherished American icon (Sabin 61). Selling well over one million copies by 1940, Superman’s enormous success inspired a wide host of imitations, looking to cash-in on the super-human phenomenon. By 1941, comic shops and art houses cropped up in large numbers to pump out titles such as *Wonder Man, Sandman, the Flash, the Whip, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Aquaman,* and *Wonder Woman* (Hajdu 31). With the institution of *Batman* (1939), co-created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger for issue #37 of *Detective Comics,* truth, justice and the Golden Age of superhero comics was well under way (Hajdu 32).

To meet the growing interests of the public, a new style of comic book production became an inevitable imperative. The industry flourished using assembly-line procedures that hastily pumped out issue after issue. In 1936, the first New York
studio, better known as a comic “shop” in the trade, was founded by Harry A. Chesler. Each shop was dedicated to creating and marketing its own distinctive “house style” (Jones 9). According to Roger Sabin in Adult Comics: An Introduction (1993), production was split into “writing, drawing, inking, colouring, and lettering…a cheap and ineffective way to feed the growing market” (145) This quantity above quality mass production model, however, led to “low per-page rates, with no royalties and little or no acknowledgment” for the actual creators (145). Without any set regulations or expectations, and because of the prevailing sentiment that comics were a “disposable medium,” the comics industry suffered from what Hajdu terms, “a kind of aesthetic lawlessness” (34). As a result, the Golden Age of comics, was, according to Hajdu:

...a frenzied era of speculation, experimentation, [and] easy rewards... The people creating and publishing comic books were competing by improvising, trying practically anything, rejecting almost nothing, in a freewheeling spirit of innovation entwined with optimism born, for many, of desperation... low expectations granted comics creators vast liscence (34-35).

While arguably detrimental to the comic writers and artists themselves, this system allowed, conversely, for a great deal of flexibility and creativity within the medium, ultimately leading to the propagation and lionization of the classic comic book heroes enjoyed by millions of Americans today. Furthermore, desirous to meet the fluctuating tastes and demands of the now glutted market, this cost-effective
preparation allowed each shop the luxury of experimentation. If a particular comic was ill-met by the public, it was of little concern to the production houses who simply scrapped the comic and moved on to another concept. Successful concepts grew to include world war crusaders like *Captain America*, created by Joe Kirby and Joe Simon (1941), whose pages perpetuated racist depictions of animalistic German and “yellow-demon” Japanese soldiers pitted against the triumvirate Allies. Clearly propagandistic, these issues rallied support for the war effort against the Axis powers and provided a focal hero—a genetically modified “super-solider”, donned in red, white, and blue—as the symbol of American democracy (or tyranny), justice, and freedom (Sabin, Wright).

It was in 1941 as well that Albert Kanter founded *Classic Comics*, later renamed *Classics Illustrated* as a way to tantalize young readers into engaging in the literary classics by capitalizing on the appeal and marketed success of the comics medium. Unlike other comic compilations sold during this time, Kanter’s *Classics* were “self-contained abridgments” of individual literary works in comic-book format (Jones 9). Offerings such as Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, the first issue published under Kanter in December of 1941, and the myriad titles that followed: *Robin Hood, Jane Eyre, The Last of the Mohicans, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, War of the Worlds*, and hundreds of others, provided young readers with an “educational” alternative to the fast, loose, and slick superhero syndicates (See Figure 1.8).
However, not all comic-book creators were charged, like Simon and Kirby, with upholding or protecting American values or with cultivating young minds, as with Kanter's *Classic Comics*—rather an entire genre of comics profited from exploiting acts of violence, crime, horror, and vice. Offering what Bradford W. Wright in his book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* deems, “vicarious guilty pleasures for readers,” titles such as *Crime Does
Not Pay (1942) and its inevitable imitators, Gangster's Can't Win, Crime Must Pay the Penalty, Justice Traps the Guilty, Crime and Punishment, and Crime SuspenStories flooded the market in 1947, enjoying astounding revenues for each new issue (Wright 78-79). Operating under the flimsy guise of defending social values and punishing those who act beyond the boundaries of the law, the genre was in actuality little more that a cheap gore fest, with "mayhem and murder" reigning supreme—that is, at least, until the final page where "criminals met with an unhappy end in prison" (Wright 77). According to Wright, "beatings, shootings, stabbings, burning bodies, gruesome torture, and sickening varieties of dismemberment were some of the more predictable images found in these comic books" (77). As if to demonstrate that "crime" does indeed "pay" and pay well, the typeface on the front of each issue of Crime Does Not Pay, featured the word CRIME in capital letters easily two inches tall, and the words does not pay floating inconspicuously, as if hidden directly below (See Figure 1.9).

In what Hajdu refers to as "a fever dream of bedlam" (63), he describes the first issue of Crime Does Not Pay below: (See also Figure 1.9)

Two huge, blue-colored hands with bulging veins dominate the picture. One is stabbing a knife full through the other...a .45 pistol, much too small for either hand, is tumbling in front of them. To the right of the hand, some poker chips fly, and behind them...where to start? One gangster is choking a busty vamp while he shoots another man with a machine gun; two others wrestle as they tumble off a
balcony, a fifth lies dead on the floor; and a sixth is splayed across a bar...” (64).

Indeed, the glamorization of “gambling, alcohol, sex, shooting, brawling, and knifing,” (Hajdu 64) would not go unnoticed by the discerning public for long.

In 1948, against the backdrop of the Cold War and the growing hysteria of McCarthyism, the comics industry suffered a public backlash that almost entirely crippled the industry altogether. According to Wright, “as postwar apprehensions about the mass media and juvenile delinquency came together, the comic book industry found itself caught in the crossfire” (88).

“A National Disgrace”: A Bumpy Road on the Ride Toward Legitimacy

The outcry of Sterling North, a columnist for the Chicago Daily News specializing in childhood literature, was not unlike the prior indictments of the Sunday news syndicates nor the national fervor that followed. In an article titled, “A National Disgrace (And a Challenge to American Parents)” (1940), North claimed, “The old dime novels in which an occasional redskin bit the dust were classic literature compared to the sadistic drivel pouring from the presses today” (qtd. in Hajdu 40). Placed suspiciously astride an article also written by North, a companion piece promoting his latest (no doubt, more “appropriate”) new book for children, the article scandalized comics for their “graphic insanity,” calling them the “stupid, dull twaddle” responsible for the “cultural slaughter of the innocents” (qtd. in Hajdu 40-41). To North, and a host of critics in league with these same leanings, comics were insignificant trash, better burned than read, and responsible (like Elvis and Marilyn Manson) for the disintegration of youth culture.

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Burning, it seemed, was not such a bad idea after all. In 1948, demonstrations boycotting the popular crime and horror syndicates resulted in a flurry of bonfires on behalf of a variety of parochial school students. Alongside a crowd of their proud parents and teachers, they gleefully looked on as thousands of comic books vaporized into black ash (Wright 86). Far from an extremist act, the public’s growing worry over rampant juvenile delinquency condoned these acts, blaming comics as an “agent of cultural power operating on the nation’s youth” (Wright 87). Fed up with comics that “glorify criminals,” law enforcement officials and court judges were eager to hitch on to this bustling bandwagon and rid society of the “detriment” of comic books (Wright 88). Other organizations, such as the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL), sponsored by Bishop Noll in 1938, levied against the comic industry as well, pressuring the shops to close down permanently and soliciting officials to take stronger action. Through the *Acolyte*, Noll published a “black list” designed to warn both Catholics and non-Catholics alike against “patronizing evil literature” (qtd. in Hajdu 77). As a way of protecting the shops, reassuring the public, and mollifying critics such as North and Noll, the Editorial Advisory Board (EAB), a group of literary scholars, child psychologists, and children’s literacy specialists were gathered under the direction of M.C. Gaines as early as 1941 to assuage the criticism of public protestors.

However, it was Dr. Frederic Wertham (1895-1981), a psychiatrist from New York City, who became notorious for his zealous determination to crush the comic book industry. Adding fuel to an already smoldering fire, Wertham published
Seduction of the Innocents in 1954, which catapulted the industry into a tailspin of hearings before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and resulted in the development of the Comics Code Authority, a government approved (censorship) seal required to appear on every saleable comic thereafter. Although the introduction claimed the book was the “result of seven years of scientific investigation,” critics of the text debunked Wertham’s credibility, clearly noting that no quantifiable studies were conducted nor were any measurable conclusions obtained from Wertham’s “study”—rather Wertham’s “expert opinion” was based solely on a handful of isolated cases and generalized to an entire adolescent readership (Hajdu 231-235). Indeed, as Hajdu states, “Wertham’s book was a solicitation, not an inquiry—a kind of seduction itself” (Hajdu 239). Wertham’s salacious accusations were based largely on his own selective reading of the comics. Pivoting around the central argument that comics “are contributing factors to many children’s maladjustment” (Wertham qtd. in Wright 158), Wertham warned that impressionable children were likely to emulate their superhero idols by “jumping off of rooftops as if they were Superman,” or “hanging themselves after seeing a hanging in a comic book” (Wright 159). Furthermore, Wertham argued that comics educated children how to behave criminally. Children learned how to fight, steal, conceal weapons, and torture their victims from the popular crime syndicates of the time. It was Wertham as well who first warned of the rampant racism apparent within the pages of comics, noting that a distinction between the white, “Nordic” hero and the dark (or yellow) skinned villain contributed to perverse racial stereotyping. Young girls as well, were not untouched
from the treachery of comic books. Wonder Woman’s strength, assertiveness, and power over men were cited as “an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to be” (qtd. in Wright 160). The sexually inappropriate way the female body was drawn to titillate young male readers resulted, according to Wertham as well, in the degradation of women and the undoing of young boys, whom he writes “confessed that they collected sexy images in comic books for masturbation purposes” (Wright 161). Not only is Wonder Woman accused of being a lesbian and a dominatrix, but Batman and Robin are pinned as homosexuals—evidence gleaned from the lurid way in which Robin stood with “his legs spread,” indiscreetly splaying his “genital region” (Wertham qtd. in Wright 161)—a point that Wright humorously and flippantly debunks when he writes, “all of this evidently proved that the dynamic duo did more than investigate crime in the Bat Cave” (161). Basking in the spotlight of public favor, Wertham savored a landslide of flattering reviews. And while controversy continued to circulate regarding the credibility of Wertham’s study, Seduction had already served its purpose—the public was once again focused on the detriment caused by comic books and prepared to take up the good fight. In April of 1954 the industry was officially under investigation. Proceedings with the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency were promptly called to order.

Led by Robert C. Hendrickson, the Senate hearings on comic book delinquency were scheduled to begin on Wednesday, April 21, 1954 (Hajdu 253). Among the fourteen participants invited to the hearings were prominent child psychiatrists and experts on childhood delinquency, distributors and news dealers,
and a few comic-book publishers. However, according to Hajdu, "no comic book artists or writers were called; nor were the publishers of the most controversial comics: Lev Gleason, Victor Fox, Bill Gaines, and Stanley P. Morse" (254).

Frederic Wertham, not originally selected to participate in the committee, volunteered his "studied" expertise and was later called as a key witness in the hearings. William Gaines, the son of M.C. Gaines and sole inheritor of EC (Entertaining Comics, formerly Educational Comics under his father's direction) likewise volunteered to serve as a witness at the hearings. Incensed by the brutal attack on the writers, artists, and publishers who worked in the industry, William Gaines felt compelled to fight back. Comics had clearly become the scapegoat, and the young Gaines was unwilling to tolerate censorship at the hands of such ignorance. Wertham, whose long-winded testimony was little more than a regurgitation of the "facts" in his book, and according to Gaines, "obvious gush designed solely to increase the sale of his book," (qtd. in Hajdu 277), once again railed against the "sadistic fantasies" created by crime comics, going so far, at one point, to state: "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry...[comics] get the children much younger" (qtd. in Hajdu 264). Given this sobering testimony alongside the gory slideshow presented by the committee's executive director, Richard Clendenen earlier in the day (featuring some of the most damning examples from the EC crime comics themselves), Gaines' position was tenuous at best.

Summoning the spirit of his father's legacy, Gaines expressed great pride in the work of the industry: "I am proud of the comics I publish," he stated. "We use the
best writers, the finest artists, we spare nothing to make each magazine, each story, each page, a work of art” (qtd. in Hajdu 266). His argument validated the rights of the children to select their own reading material and discredited accusations that simple engagement in horror or crime comics would be enough to incite children to emulate such behaviors. Gaines defended the medium as pure entertainment. “Pleasure is what we sell,” he proclaimed. “Entertaining reading has never harmed anyone” (qtd. in Hajdu 266). In his defense of the use of racial epithets in the comics presented by Wertham, Gaines argued that these stories were designed, contrarily, to illustrate the evils of racism, violence, addiction, and other delinquencies—a point that was met with a good deal of scrutiny when a councilman implied that Gaines’ argument was riddled with contradictions. If the contents of a comic could teach against hatred and violence, could it not therefore teach the hatred and violence itself? If the messages in comics were able to affect children positively, then logically it was safe to assume that they could influence children negatively as well. Gaines’ defense deteriorated when he was asked to defend the images appearing on the comics themselves, most famously, the May issue of Crime SuspenStories (1954), featuring an unidentified murderer hoisting the severed head of a blonde-haired woman by the hair in one hand, and a sharpened, bloodied axe in the other. The eyes of the murder victim are rolled back; saliva and blood drip from her open, gaping mouth. Her decapitated body is splayed on the floor, and the gloss reads: “Jolting Tales of Tension in the EC Tradition!” (See Figure 1.10).
Figure 1.10 Crime SuspenStories, Issue No. 22 (1954). Cover art by Johnny Craig.
The proverbial “last nail in the coffin” was pounded in for Gaines (and the industry overall) in the particularly condemning testimony that follows. Below is the actual record of Gaines’ testimony to the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in April of 1954:

"Here is your May 22 issue," Senator Estes Kefauver said, "this seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman’s head up, which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?"

"Yes, sir, I do, for the cover of a horror comic," Gaines said. "A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody."

"You have blood coming out of her mouth," Kefauver noted.

"A little."

"Here is blood on the ax," Kefauver said. "I think most adults are shocked by that." Holding up another issue of Crime SuspenStories, Kefauver continued, "This is the July one. It seems to be a man with a woman in a boat, and he is choking her to death with a crowbar. Is that in good taste?"

"I think so," said Gaines (recorded in Hajdu 270-271).

Gaines was thereafter crucified in the local newspapers for his insistence that horror and crime comics were in “good taste.” To regulate these “horrors” the committee devised a censorial board dedicated to self-regulating the output of the industry, originally inviting Dr. Wertham to serve as its “czar.” When Wertham
declined Charles F. Murphy accepted and in October of 1954, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was established (Hajdu 291). To show solidarity and demonstrate obedience to these new parameters, comics could only be marketed to the public if they carried the official Comics Code Seal of Approval (See figure 1.11).

Among the many “General Standards” listed in the code were decrees against using the words “Crime” or “Horror” in the title of the comic itself. No longer would any “lurid, unsavory, or gruesome” illustrations be tolerated, nor would any “scenes of excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, or masochism” be permitted. Werewolves, vampires, zombies, and cannibals were
barred from comic books. Likewise, in every situation, “good” was charged to “triumph over evil.” No longer would “nudity, partial-nudity, or illicit sex relations” be contained within the newly sanitized pages, and all characters, particularly females, were to be drawn “realistically without any exaggeration of physical qualities,” and dressed in “reasonable attire, acceptable to society” (Comics Code Authority, 1954).

Despite the best efforts of the industry to overturn the confines of the Code, the seal assured parents and government officials alike that the contents of comic books were safe and appropriate for children. This, alongside the advent of television in the 1950’s, drove the industry into a downward spiral. Only the companies with the ability to quickly adapt endured. In terms of future publishing, as Sabin notes, the dismantling of EC opened the market to rival syndicates, Detective Comics (known today as DC Comics) and Atlas Comics (soon to be renamed Marvel). Under these two companies, Batman and Superman, owned by DC Comics, would forever become the arch-nemeses of Marvel favorites, Spiderman, the X-Men, and The Fantastic Four (Sabin *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels* 68). Yet despite the auspicious growth of these two companies, EC, under the direction of Gaines, suffered a devastating blow that nearly folded the company. According to Sabin, it was only the invention of *Mad Magazine*—a satiric publication designed to slanderize the very officials responsible for breaking the industry and published outside of the jurisprudence of the CCA as a *magazine*, rather than a *comic*—that allowed the company to limp into the
next era. The CCA had wreaked a new kind of havoc (and horror) into the industry. To survive, comics went underground.

Underground and Alternative Comics: “New Comixs” for a New Era

It was during the countercultural Vietnam era of the 1960’s that underground comix\(^2\) became seen and enjoyed as an independent, adult commodity (Hatfield *Alternative Comics* 7). One man in particular, Robert Crumb (1943- ) is credited as the founder of the underground comix movement. According to Charles Hatfield in his book, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005), “it was Crumb’s subversive appropriation of the comic book that proved to be the decisive break with the past...Crumb ‘reinvented the comic book. Took it over just as other people of his generation took over music’” (qtd. in Hatfield 8). In an era of political leftism, experimentation, public demonstration, and radical feminism, “the pioneers of comix,” according to Hatfield, were self-styled hipsters and iconoclasts who both rejected and built on poor [comic book] traditions” (16). This restructuring aligned itself with the “political energy of the late sixties counterculture, and reflected [the era’s] demand for peace and political reform” (Hatfield 16). Artistically innovative and oftentimes “graphically” exploitative, these “hippie-inspired” comix (“x” to emphasize the “x-rating” of the comics as well), dealt in subjects such as mind-altering drugs, war protest, rock music, sex and free love (Sabin *Comics, Comix and

\(^2\) The use of the word “Comix” in place of “Comics” was a change made to intentionally differentiate the underground comics of the 1960-70’s from their “comic book” predecessors. The “x” is also used to emphasize the “x-rating” of these comics. Intended for an adult readership, these “comixs” were vastly different from those that came before.
With *Mad* magazine cited as major influence and the kitschy newspaper strips and vintage comic books of past decades as their model, underground artists reified these elements into a “pungent critique of American consumerism...that turned the medium in on itself” (Hatfield 12). Owned, published, and distributed by Crumb entirely, Crumb’s *Zap Comix* (1968) became one of the first mock-comic influences of this genre. Undoubtedly aware of the rigid restraints of the Comic Code Authority—“as children, these were the very people who [had] their comic books torn up by their parents, or thrown onto the playground fires” (Sabin *Comics* 92)—Crumb’s comics, for example, bore a sarcastic reactionary “seal” reading: “Approved by the Ghost Writers in the Sky” (Hatfield 13). Operating in a period lasting from 1968 to 1975, comix creators, unlike their predecessors, were the sole owners and proprietors of their work. Writer, artist, inker, and letterer were the same person—“the underground creator controlled every facet of his or her individual creation” (Sabin *Comics* 94).

Additionally, marketed in shops that appealed to the hippie subculture, comix creators began to earn their own royalties and fame. The first single-issue title of its kind, Crumb’s *Zap* paved the way for a large following of imitators, interested in recreating Crumb’s unique style and zeal. *Young Lust* (1970), *Bizarre Sex* (1972), *Ace* and *Midget Hole* (self-published by Art Spiegelman, 1974) enjoyed mild success, and a bevy of women’s anthologies including *Wimmin’s Comix* (1972), *Tits and Clits* (1972), and *Wet Satin* (1976), illustrated the rise in women cartoonists who
unapologetically broke into the “Boy’s Only” industry with subject matters that dealt with working conditions, equal rights, sex, rape, and abortion (Sabin Comics 105).

A new rise in “taboo-breaking” horror comix dominated the market as well, with prominent titles such as Skull (1970), Deviant Slice (1972), and Two Fisted Zombies (1973). These comix took the black humor of the EC horror comics of the past “to even blacker levels” (Sabin Comics 107). According to Sabin, “nothing was suggested anymore, everything was shown (107). Similar to the Golden Age comics, however, as more comix glutted the market in the 1970’s, this “anybody can do it” approach to making comics meant that a good deal of poor comics filtered into the market as well (Sabin 107). Criticized for their oftentimes highly misogynistic, amateurish, and perverse themes, comix were not without their particular pitfalls in American culture, yet their influence on future generations of comics and graphic novels cannot be denied.

According to Hatfield, the comix movement transformed and re-envised comics in four crucial ways. First, the movement instituted independently owned, private comix establishments that were able to circumvent the industry’s rigid Code by operating “underground” or outside of it. In addition, comix were completely owned by their creators, and no longer subject to previously established industry practices. Second, the comix movement allowed creators to author their own individual titles. Rather than working on the next series of Captain America or Superman, for example, as other comic artists were subject to do, comix creators had the leisure to see their own projects come to fruition. Third, the movement valued the
authority of individual artists and writers above the assembly-line or comic (sweat)shop model that was the norm in previous generations. Finally, the comix movement developed an ironic, satiric style that appropriated (rather than perpetuated) the "once-famous characters, styles, genres, and tropes" from the Golden Age by perverting these established icons to suit their own political and subversive means (Hatfield 17-18).

Notable as well was the way in which underground comix paved the way for the alternative comics or "new comics" that dominated the industry in the 1980's. Creating an atmosphere of "unprecedented aesthetic freedom, diversity, and purpose," previously unknown in the market, this next-gen shift in comics came as the result of graphic novels that were met by the public, and by scholars, with a great deal of debate and critical acclaim (Hatfield 20). In the mid-1980's, three graphic novels in particular, Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight* (1986), Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987), catapulted the industry (and the public's understanding of it) into an entirely new direction. "Heirs to the underground," these "new comics" cemented the way for "a dramatic influx of work that challenged both the formal and cultural boundaries of comic art" (Hatfield 21).

Indeed, as a result of the diverse and controversial history of the medium throughout the decades, comics and graphic novels have gained both new public scrutiny and favor. One need not look further than the local movie theatre offerings to see how the pop-culture icons of comic history have pervaded, quite successfully,
every nook of American society. DC and Marvel's heroes continue to “duke-it-out” on the silver screen, vying to satisfy the public’s thirst for the “sensational” (and line their pockets with gold in the meantime). Most recently, both Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight* swept the box offices, inciting a new generation of comic book readers, eager to satiate their hungry imaginations with bloodlust, revenge, super-human feats, epic battles, bitter rivalries, and heroic triumphs. Where this rich history leads future comics readers and aficionados is as clean and inviting as a freshly inked page, waiting to be read, savored, and enjoyed.

The Problem of Definitions

There is, perhaps, no problem quite so particular in all of comics’ scholarship as that of how to properly define the medium, its functionality for the reader, and the various genres associated with the medium. Indeed, it may even be useful to begin a discussion on definitions with an explanation of the terms “genre” and “medium” themselves. Comics and graphic novels are often referred to off-handedly as “the comic-book genre”—as if their “style” is merely different from that of the gothic novel, the Western, or the romance novel, for example, but representative of a “literary form” all the same. As Douglas Wolk states in *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (2007), “comics are sort of literary, but that’s not all they are” (14). Originally identified as the “ninth art” by French critics, comics (and I use this term in the umbrella sense) are a medium uniquely unto their own in the same way that film, architecture, music, dance, sculpture, painting, poetry,
and photography are listed by the same critics as the first eight "arts" (Wolk 14-15). Clearly, as stated by Wolk and others, comics are neither completely text driven nor image driven. They are, rather, "their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties" (Wolk 14). To refer to comics as a "medium" is to suggest that there are various note-worthy "genres" within this "medium" and that there is a special system of analyzing, discussing, and labeling the unique features that comprise each genre. Popular genres within the comic book medium might include adventure stories, horror and science-fiction tales, memoirs and autobiographies, and of course, the ever-popular superhero tales—each serving as a specific type or variety of story and bound by its own content, conventions, and forms. (Wolk 11).

No doubt in part because of its speckled reputation in the annals of history, the word "comics" has oftentimes been affiliated with what McCloud calls, "crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare"—albeit, not a completely inaccurate stereotype, but a persistent and degrading association overall (Understanding Comics 3). It is for this reason then, that I believe so many critics are apprehensive to define "comics." Those serious about the medium argue for a much more comprehensive definition, one that displaces trite "superhero" or "fanboy" associations with the word—and perhaps for good reason. The stereotypes about the medium continue to be perpetuated by the culture at large regardless of such attempts. For example, one need only look to the Simpson's pretentious, overweight "Comic Book Guy" to see how this stereotype is personified (See Figure 1.12).
Jeff Albertson, the fictional owner of *The Simpson's* Android Dungeon and Baseball Shop, is said by creator Matt Groening to be based on "every comic-bookstore guy in America" (Rhodes). A "45-year-old ponytailed virgin who lives with his parents, has a master's degree in folklore and mythology and a collection of bumper stickers, including MY OTHER CAR IS A MILLENIUM FALCON," Albertson is the pinnacle super-geek (Rhodes). His sarcastic insistence on *The Simpsons* that comics be revered, respected, and above all, preserved is not at all unlike the experience I had several years ago when I wondered curiously into a comic book shop and was met with swift disapproval when a horrified clerk reprimanded me for removing a comic from its protective plastic wrap, abruptly snatched it from my hands, and rudely walked off. And while it is true that comic-reading will always go hand-in-hand with
comic fandom, it is also true that the medium is now enjoying a readership that reaches far beyond the typical “Comic Book Guy.”

According to Wolk, “if there is such a thing as a golden age of comics, it’s happening right now” (10). As library and bookstore shelves continue to grow in size in response to a new public frenzy, and as teachers begin to question the merits of the medium, seeking for ways to legitimize its use within the English classroom, the issue of “naming” has become more important than ever before. How we define the medium as scholars is ultimately how others (parents, teachers, administrators, scholars and fans) will come to receive, respect, and legitimize the medium. For these reasons, and for the purposes of this study, I propose the following definitions, each based on current research and chosen for their ability to best inform future instructors of the language of identification within the medium itself.

Comics

In Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud writes, “if people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly” (3). According to McCloud, “Comics” is a “word worth defining, as it refers to the medium itself, not a specific object as in a ‘comic book’ or ‘comic strip’” (3). What McCloud defines as “comics”—the umbrella term that encompasses all styles, genres, and derivations within the medium—and what Art Speigelman humorously refers to as the “hunch-backed dwarves of the arts,” is similar to Will Eisner’s definition “Sequential Art,” Charles Biro’s “Illustories,” and William Gaines’ “Picto-Fiction.”
Each definition strives to describe the unique way in which word and pictures are fused together to create a story that moves sequentially, respecting the passage of time, from one panel to the next. For McCloud, comics are ultimately defined as "juxtaposed, pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (Understanding Comics 9). Yet, while this definition is generally reputed as satisfactory for understanding the preliminary functionality of comics, critics of the medium have begun to seek new ways of articulating how the medium itself "works." In "An Art of Tensions" Charles Hatfield argues McCloud's understanding of the interplay between words and images defines the image as "open, salacious" and "easily understood" while giving preference to words, which are "coded, abstract, and remote" (134). For Hatfield, comics represent a type of symbiosis of the "word/image dichotomy," where word and image "approach each other" and "words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words" (133). This idea is shared by comics critic Thierry Groensteen who writes, "The reader of comics not only enjoys a story-related pleasure but also an art-related pleasure, an aesthetic emotion founded on the appreciation of the exactness and expressivity" of the various components that compose the medium. The sum of these two pleasures work together in "rhythmic organization in space and time" to create an overall, "medium-related pleasure" that binds the reader to the text in mutual admiration of the words and images that define that text (10). In this way, the overall definition of "comics" is one that considers not
only form and functionality as suggested by McCloud, but also the unique way in
which the fused image and word operate both together and separately to create a
pleasurable (if not derivational, deviant, or "hunch-backed") experience for the
reader.

Graphic Novels

A popular outgrowth of comics is what is referred to as the "graphic novel."
These "comics with bookmarks" (Speigelman), in the most general terms, indicate a
comics-style medium of book or novel length. While it is true that graphic novels
might be seen as a type of "genre" within the medium itself, it is useful, given its
growing presence in both the popular and educational arenas today, to consider the
distinct characteristics that define the graphic novel in particular. The term, most
generally attributed to Will Eisner, who was interested in using it to describe his new
work, A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories (1978), has been applied to a
wide variety of critically acclaimed works, such as Satrapi’s Persepolis, Sacco’s
Palestine, Speigleman’s Maus and In the Shadow of No Towers, Moore’s Watchmen,
and Bechdel’s Fun House, to name a few. While he admits that he was not the first to
coin the term, Eisner tells the story of how he first came to use it to seek the favor of
a potential publisher. An excerpt from his keynote address at the "Will Eisner
Symposium:’ The 2002 University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic
Novels” illustrating this conversation is provided below:
Those of you who've heard me speak before know this now famous story about how it was called a "graphic novel." I completed the book, *A Contract With God*, and I called the president of Bantam Books in New York, who I knew had seen my work with *The Spirit*. Now, this was a very busy guy who didn't have much time to speak to you. So I called him and said, "There's something I want to show you, something I think is very interesting." He said, "Yeah, well, what is it?" A little man in my head popped up and said, "For Christ's sake stupid, don't tell him it's a comic. He'll hang up on you."

So, I said, "It's a graphic novel."

He said, "Wow! That sounds interesting. Come on up."

Well, I did bring it up and he looked at it and looked at me through his reading glasses and said, "This is a comic book, bring it to a smaller publisher," which I did and from then on the term 'graphic novel' began to take on for some reason or another.

The term “graphic novel” has since become a way to market and “legitimize a new, costlier way of selling comics” to an eager fan base (Hatfield *Alternative* 29). This definition was further solidified with the publication and critical acclaim—as noted previously—of *Maus, Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight*, released in the mid-eighties, which were later labeled as “graphic novels.” According to Hatfield, “these three volumes...established a beachhead for ‘graphic novels’ in the book trade”—setting a standard in the industry quite different from the “disposable, monthly, stapled
pamphlets on cheap newsprint” that made up the bulk of American comics for five decades (Gravett *Graphic Novels* 8). This sentiment is shared by Wolk as well who argues that these “convention-rupturing” books became the “standard against which comics that wanted to be important or meaningful were measured” (8). For Eddie Campbell, artist of the graphic novel, *From Hell* (1999), the term graphic novel, “signifies a movement rather than a form.” According to Campbell, the graphic novel should “take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level...foraging a new art which will not be a slave to the arbitrary rules of an old one” (qtd. in Gravett 9). Yet, this idea—that graphic novels are somehow “better” than comics because they are longer, more expensive, or more comprehensive—is a point of great contention in academe. According to Wolk, “there’s a certain nose-in-the-air class consciousness” regarding graphic novels. Citing a review of Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003) that appeared in *The Nation* as an example, Wolk discusses the way in which the reviewer, who “never made it a habit to read comic books,” was astounded by Satrapi’s thoughtful illustrations and language. The implication here, as noted by Wolk, was that a simple “comic” could never be so profound. The reviewer insisted that the work be called a “graphic memoir”—not a comic. Clearly, it was “better” than a “comic” (Wolk 12). Later in his chapter titled, “What’s Good About Bad Comics and What’s Bad About Good Comics,” Wolk takes up this argument once more as noted below:

The class implications of “graphic novel” almost instantly led to the term’s thorough debasement. As a ten-dollar phrase, it implies that the
graphic novel is serious in a way that the lowly comic book isn’t....to this day, people talk about “graphic novels” instead of comics when they’re trying to be deferential or trying to imply that they’re being serious. There’s always a bit of a wince and stammer about the term; it plays into comics culture’s slightly miserable striving for “acknowledgment” and “respect” (Wolk 63-64).

Wolk’s statements about the implications of the term “graphic novel” are not unlike the attitudes I was met with regarding the study of comics at the graduate level. To admit to reading “comics” is to permit others to take you less seriously. Indeed, no matter how hard critics try, the image of the spandex-clad superhero will never truly be able to divorce itself from the word “comic.” “Graphic novels,” on the other hand, inspire a bit more interest and criticism at the academic level, though I would argue they are still taken much less seriously than actual “literature.” One such academic interested in examining the medium is Hillary Chute. In “Introduction: Graphic Narratives,” appearing in a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* (2006), co-authors Chute and DeKoven argue that the term “graphic narrative” should replace “graphic novel.” Unlike the term “graphic novel,” which is, according to the authors, a misnomer, “graphic narrative” implies a “range of types of narrative works in comics”—presumably what is later referred to as “autographics,” or “graphic memoir” (Whitlock), the primary genre with which Chute and DeKoven are concerned. Furthermore, to summon forth this term is to reference a certain philosophy regarding the reading and composition of these texts which Chute and
DeKoven have carefully staked out in their introduction. Among their assertions is that the “graphic narrative” offers an “intricately layered narrative...[comprised] of the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on the page,” that “imagination” and the way the reader melds picture and word together to create a “continuous flow” is integral to the reading experience, and that narrative can bring serious cultural, political, or ethical conversations to the “forefront.”

As a teacher interested in graphic narratives (and by that I mean both “comics” and “graphic novels”), I find Chute and DeKoven’s definition to be similar to what McCloud, Groensteen, and Hatfield (among others) assert regarding “comics.” Yet to distinguish between what Hatfield calls the “short-form” or “comics” and the “long-form” or “graphic novel,” I will invoke each of these terms (and the phrase “graphic narratives” to indicate both mediums) throughout the progress of this study. More importantly, beyond what I call “potato” and someone else calls “potatoe,” it’s crucial to recognize that it’s not only the presence of words and images on the page that define the medium but the way that each fuse together to inspire meaning-making on behalf of the reader. This is the transaction that truly matters.

The Conventions of Comics

Most practiced readers of graphic narratives understand that there is a unique vocabulary associated with the medium, that when understood, lends a great deal of
momentum to the text. To help readers understand what these standards are, I will provide a brief definition and examples of some of the key conventions below:

1. Speech Conventions

There are three basic speech conventions that appear in graphic narratives. Arguably the most recognizable convention, *The Word Balloon*, is used to capture the dialogue of the characters that appear in each panel (See Figure 1.13). Rumored to be "originated from the 'steam clouds' when a person speaks on a cold day (Sabin *Adult Comics* 5), word balloons encircle, or as some critics of graphic narratives suggest, "imprison" spoken language (Renonciat qtd. in Groensteen 6). These words are meant be understood in the "present," unless a flashback technique suggests otherwise. Generally speaking, speech meant to be heard or communicated "out-loud" is typically placed in a solid balloon whereas inner or private thoughts are placed inside thought "bubbles" shaped like clouds. In addition, depending on the shape of the balloon itself, the meaning of the language can be greatly inflected. For example, in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud presents the phrase, "Oh, it's you" encircled by a word balloon drawn with jagged icicles (134). In conference presentations and classrooms where I demonstrate these techniques, I often ask for a volunteer to "inflect" the meaning of the words with their own voice. For the icy balloon, volunteers scowl, drop the tone of their voices, narrow their eyes and repeat the words, "Oh....it's YOU." After a few, similar, repetitions, I ask participants to consider how the voice might be inflected differently if the words were surrounded by a soft, heart-shaped bubble. Those who volunteer to "animate" this balloon rest their
hands on their chins, glaze their eyes over, wink, flirt, and breathily intone, "Ohhhh...it's you...." Without consciously realizing it, readers assimilate not only language but word inflection and meaning simply based on the artistic quality and placement of these characteristic balloons.

![Figure 1.13 Words Balloons used in Manga Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream. Adapted by Richard Appignanesi and illustrated by Kate Brown. p. 67.](image)

_Narrative Boxes_, another necessary convention for incorporating language, carry the task of holding information that is pertinent to directing the story. Captured in rectangular boxes, these words are meant to be read outside of the dialogue. Unlike the dialogue, they may suggest a place or time that is not "present" along with
the dialogue. The most common placement of these boxes is at the top of each panel. This is not always the case, however, as comic artists continue to deconstruct normative conventions. Finally, *Sound Effects* are often employed onomatopoeically—as in “Pow!” “Ker-Splat! “Zooooooom!” or “ZZZZzzzz.” Even the shape of the letters themselves, as any student familiar with texting can share, are important to the meaning of the language. Bolded, capitalized, or otherwise off-set or enlarged text can imply energy, action, yelling, or anger. Contrarily, tiny words or words that taper off might imply shyness, meekness, insecurity, or shame. While it is certain that there are many other conventions that lend to the ways in which language is inflected in comics, these three remain the most notable.

2. Page Conventions

A variety of conventions contribute to the way any particular page works in a graphic narrative. First, each page is generally divided up into a set of or singular panel that represents one exclusive moment in time. Side-by-side (or stacked together) these panels are responsible for propelling the events of the story forward. Clearly, to be able to accurately interpret the story in this way, something unique to this medium alone must happen: a reader must be able to fill in the “gaps” (the space between each panel) with their imagination. These gaps are what are commonly referred to as the *Gutter*. In the panel illustrated below (See Figure 1.14), McCloud demonstrates the concept of gutter space using a simple example:
When I present these two panels at conferences or in classrooms, I ask the participants to describe, in words, what is happening. Predictably, most participants respond: "He killed the guy!" To which I invariably ask, "Who killed who?" Given the visual and verbal information provided in the panels, most readers deduct that the "man with the axe, killed the guy in front of him." When I ask participants how they
know the man screaming in the foreground didn’t overtake his pursuer and kill him instead, most pause and begin to consider the multiple interpretations available from the text. “Maybe he got away,” some speculate. “Maybe the author only wants us to think the guy’s dead.” The act of interpreting the space between each panel is an activity I have come to refer to as Reading Between the Panels. As McCloud suggests, “the mystery and magic at the heart of comics” resides within the “limbo of the gutter [where] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (Understanding Comics 66). This act of condensing the information in each panel (and between each panel) into a singular idea or interpretation of the story is what McCloud calls Closure (67). Unlike film or other electronic media, in order for comics to work, the reader must be a “silent accomplice” in the act of creating meaning. Reader and medium are enjoined in a complicated (yet pleasurable) interplay to unpack the images that unfold before them. As McCloud writes:

I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I’m not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow or who screamed or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style. All of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot. To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousands deaths (Understanding Comics 68-69).
While panels serve as windows, framing the action in easily digested segments, readers must be willing to be the voyeurs who actively peek into them.

*Time* and the *Movement of Time* is an important convention in graphic narratives as well. This is often depicted through the use of *closed panels, borderless panels, bleeds, panel placement and spacing*, and other techniques. An enclosed panel that leads directly into another enclosed panel of the same size suggests, through its size and proximity, an even movement through time. An elongated or open panel, on the other hand, can suggest a lengthened or indeterminate period of time. Further, panels that are placed in the foreground or the background have the potential to suggest flashback, memory, introspection, or other qualities regarding the narrative. The example below, a page from Art Speigelman’s *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, demonstrates each of these unique features (See Figure 1.15). In the top four panels, the elder Vladek narrates (via the information in the narration boxes) the story of his young life. Time moves evenly as readers watch Vladek walk up the stairs, hang up his coat, answer the phone, and listen to the conversation on the other line. Yet the panel that follows rests outside of the traditional border. Furthermore, it depicts the older Vladek—the narrator of this story—in the foreground riding his exercise bicycle while daydreaming back to a time when he was regarded as a handsome Sheik. Time operates differently in this panel. It moves both forward, with the bicycle, in what readers presume to be “present-day” and backward with the poster of the Sheik, an artifact that evokes past nostalgia. The final two panels, followed by the narrative phrase, “Eventually, I took Lucia to
dance..." (notably followed by three lingering dots) implies once more, a lengthening of time—an event that happened perhaps several days or even months after Vladek received his first phone call.

Figure 1.15 from *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman, 1986. p. 13.
Once again as readers, we are aware of these subtle passages of time. Though we are never told in the narrative, "Vladek remembers back to the period when he met his future wife, Lucia," the images, the spacing, the panels and borders have the ability to do the "telling" for us.

3. Graphic (Image-Based) Conventions

*Background, Line, Shading, and Color* have the unique ability to transmit information to readers as well. In this example from publisher Self Made Hero, an excerpt from their popular Manga Shakespeare series, Benvolio and Tybalt prepare to "spar" in the unruly streets of Verona in this Japanese-styled interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* (See Figure 1.16).

![Figure 1.16 Manga Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet. Adapted by Richard Appignanesi and illustrated by Sonia Leong. p. 4-5.](image-url)
In this example, lines move perpendicularly and horizontally behind the characters, suggesting sharp, quick movements. Even the panels themselves are broken into angular diagonal lines, slicing through the page, as one of my students suggested, the way a sword might slice through the air. In one panel, a background of what appears to be flames, ignites behind Tybalt, creating the emotional feeling of smoldering rage and inner turmoil. Dressed in stark black, Tybalt is the most menacing figure on the page, and appears to defy borders—he cannot be contained. While conventionally (American) comics are intended to be read from left-to-right and top-to-bottom, it is nearly impossible not to “read” Tybalt’s presence on the page first. The eye immediately recognizes him as a threat, and then circles around him to the panels on the left and right to accumulate more information. The dialogue balloons, as well, are drawn in contrasting soft circles—to demonstrate those who wish to keep the peace—and sharp, dark, jagged lines. When Tybalt shouts, “As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee! Have at thee coward!” and raises the tip of his sword to the reader, it is clear through both the visuals and his words that he means business.

Panels, borders, gutters, lines, color, shading, time, spacing, and backgrounds play a key role in how and what we are able to “read in” to the comics themselves. But beyond the basic vocabulary of comics are other helpful approaches for maximizing a reader’s response to these texts. As a teacher of graphic narratives, I have found not only McCloud’s “nuts-and-bolts” approach to be helpful for my students, but the theories of visual literacy as outlined by children’s literature scholar
Molly Bang and the work of the New London Group in its promotion of what they have termed, multimodal literacy to be tremendously applicable as well.

Visual Literacy and Multimodal Understanding of Graphic Narratives

In her book, *Picture This, How Pictures Work* (2000), Molly Bang theorizes that the size, shape, color, and position of an image have the ability to create a variety of emotional responses in readers. Among the many principles Bang lists to demonstrate this point follow:

- Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give a sense of stability
- Vertical shapes are more exciting and more active
- Diagonal shapes imply motion or tension
- We feel more scared looking at pointed shapes
- We feel more secure and comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves
- Open space on a page can imply isolation or time
- The larger an object, the stronger it feels
- The center of the page is the most effective “center of attention”
- The bottom half of a picture feels heavier, sadder, or more constrained
- The top half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness, and spirituality (Bang 42-72)
To understand how my literary interpretation students understood these principles and
to better prepare them for the graphic narratives that they would be encountering in
my class, I spent one day of each semester asking them to assess a famous painting
using these interpretive guidelines. The most thought-provoking responses came
from my students' evaluation of Pablo Picasso’s *La Guernica* (1937), illustrated
below (See Figure 1.17). The painting, an 11-foot tall by 25.6-foot wide mural-sized
canvas, painted in shades of navy blue, black and white, was created to turn the
world's attention to the bombing of Guernica, Spain by German and Italian warplanes
during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Since its original appearance, the painting
has come to be regarded as a powerful anti-war symbol, intended to provoke peace.
Yet the painting itself is fraught with tension, derision, violence, and loss.

Figure 1.17 *La Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso (1937).
<aldonorambuenajorquera.wordpress.com/>.
Most students were eager to note the preponderance of jagged, angular shapes within the body of the painting itself. The horse and the eye, the prominent figures at the center of the painting, are composed, primarily, of jagged triangles and rectangles. The inhuman angles with which the head of the mother and child are featured on the left side of the painting were noted by some students in discussion as well. They are bent uncomfortably, unnaturally, painfully. The disembodied limbs, heads and other overlapping body parts that dominate the bottom of the picture, do indeed create a "heavy, constrained" and hopeless portrayal of the loss of human life. The black background led to what many students considered to be a dark, foreboding mood. On the other hand, when I asked about the whiteness of the people and faces depicted, some observed that it was an effort to portray the suffering of the innocent. Many students were keen to note that the upper half of the picture, the place of "happiness, freedom, and spirituality" was dominated by the central "eye"—which many described as a place of "hope." In this figure, they saw the eye of God, watching over these horrible events, and providing light and love to the hopeless.

Another method I ask my students to employ as they read graphic narratives is multimodal analysis. In the Spring of 1996, a group of scholars, among them Courtney Kazden, Bill Cope, James Gee, Gunther Kress, Mary Kalantis, Sarah Michaels, and others—known collectively as the New London Group—formed together to discuss the evolution and rapidly shifting future of literacy education. In their article "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," published in the *Harvard Educational Review*, these scholars agreed that "what students [need] to
learn [is] changing.” Along with this assertion, the New London Group acknowledged that “there is not a singular, canonical English that could or should be taught anymore.” Rather, educators must begin to shift their understanding of literacy and literacy education to recognize both cultural difference and the rise of communication media—forms of literacy that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be “literate” in society today. As such, The New London Group put forward two primary goals for the future of literacy education:

1) To extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies.

2) That literacy pedagogy must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies, including... visual images and their relationship to the written word.

A pedagogy that embraces multiple literacies then is one that considers the multicultural and diverse society that we all live in and broadens our understanding of "literature" to include multimedia and visual forms of literacy, for example, wikis, text messages, blogs, comics and graphic novels, film, video games, or slam poetry. Indeed, the type of classroom that these scholars advocate might look much different from the ones that previous generations experienced. A multiliterate pedagogy asks students and teachers to consider how not only print texts and standard written forms of literature contribute to our understanding of the world around us, but how we "read" visual and technological texts and what these new forms of "literature" speak to us as well. To accomplish these goals, teachers must be willing to think beyond
what the New London Group terms, "mere literacy"—which remains centered on language alone, and begin to develop pedagogies of multiliteracies, which, by contrast, "focus on modes of representation much broader than words and language (New London Group). To accomplish this in practical terms, new literacy design lists six elements that contribute to the process of meaning-making in multimodal texts: "Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other" (New London Group). To demonstrate to my students how each of these elements work together to create a unified "whole" in regard to the meaning and purpose of the narrative overall, I use the following panel from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to model multimodal analysis (See Figure 1.8):

Figure 1.18 "Multimodal Kitchen," by Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*. p. 88.
In the panels depicted above, I ask my students to tell me first what they see (visual meaning). In this step, students are quick to share, "a pot boiling on a stove, a woman in the kitchen, a chopping block, a refrigerator, a mixing bowl," etc. I explain that sometimes I call panels without any narration or word balloons silent panels, yet I promptly add, "but these panels are not silent at all. What do you hear? What auditory meaning is available from these panels? Turning to the panels again, the students reply: "the thunk of the knife on the chopping block, the sound of water boiling, the ‘tik tik’ of the timer." We shift our thinking next to the way that the images are placed spatially (spatial meaning) on the page. "We can all tell that we’re in a kitchen,” I suggest, “but what is the purpose of the artist dividing up the scenes in this way? Some students speculate that it’s not so much the kitchen itself that the artist wishes to put at the center of the reader's attention, but the sound, the activity, the pleasure taken in the act of cooking. The objects on the stove, the knife, and even the egg-timer take on a new identity when presented this way. When we discuss the use of words and language (linguistic meaning), students emulate the onomatopoeic “chop, chop chop!” and “tik tik tik” sounds. We consider the mood of the woman in the third panel by examining her facial expressions and body language (gestural meaning). "She is calm, content, focused on the task at hand”, my students say. I emphasize, during this activity, that in our reading of highly visual or graphic texts, that we must consider how all of our senses work together to create meaning, especially in the absence of words and language. After the activity, my students begin to understand that there are, as the New London Group suggests, multiple ways
of approaching and interpreting a text. To become savvy readers of new literacies, we must learn to become attuned to each of these methods for creating meaning.

Taken together, this knowledge provides readers of graphic narratives with a powerful set of interpretive tools for penetrating and analyzing the distinctive features of the medium. Furthermore, understanding the colorful history of the medium, engaging in the debate of definitions, and applying the techniques of visual and multimodal literacy provides the structural foundation necessary for readers to begin applying added layers of critical interpretation, as discussed in the chapter on cultural literacy that follows.
CHAPTER II

CRITICAL APPROACHES FOR TEACHING GRAPHIC NARRATIVES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Introduction: A Teaching Philosophy

As a teacher of both pre-service English teachers and of high school language arts students, I have come to recognize that my instruction is made most profound for my students when I can connect the literature to my students’ lives. As social justice educator Linda Christensen noted, “teaching students to read is not enough. We must teach [them] how to read not only novels and science texts, but cartoons, politicians, schools, workplaces, welfare offices, and Jenny Craig ads” (Christensen vii). Ultimately, we must teach students how to read and respond to what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire advocates as the “word and the world”—our efforts at building a critical literacy in them are entirely ineffective if removed from their personal lives and experiences. As a result, my classroom is a place in which the curriculum is infused with contrasting texts and ideas that challenge my students to critically and purposefully engage in the “word” and the “world” and begin the difficult work of building communities of personal and cultural awareness. As a constructivist
educator, I design lessons and facilitate classroom discussions that allow my students to take creative initiatives. Through modeling, coaching, and scaffolding, I ask my students to examine a set of essential questions for each text and lesson that we encounter together. The answers to these questions, developed through a critical lens, lead my students to make conclusions regarding literature, language, and society. Cognizant of Best Practice methods for content area learning and for the English language arts, my lessons incorporate hands-on learning opportunities that encourage higher-order, critical thinking skills. In this collaborative learning environment, student choice and response is encouraged and respected (Daniels and Bizar 2-3).

In practice, my teaching philosophy manifests itself in surprising ways. For example, in my high school American literature courses—and often as an introductory lesson for my college literary interpretation courses—I ask students to write on the essential question, “What is an American?” Given an adequate amount of time to create a significant response, my students are invited to share their writing aloud. As a teacher in predominately white, middle-class communities, I find that my students’ answers to this question often mirror who they are politically, economically, and culturally; very few initially demonstrate the ability to think beyond themselves. In one discussion, I asked my students what color they thought of when they pictured an American. A few hesitant responders admitted that they saw Americans as “white,” then quickly conceded that Americans “come in all colors.” The majority of my students write initially patriotic responses, leaning heavily on the slogans and clichés that define the typical public discourse of our
nation. "Americans are all free and proud," some students share. "We live in the land of democracy. Everyone has equal opportunity. We have the freedom to do anything we want."

As a teacher and advocate of social justice, I want my students to challenge this definition of America (along with the other words, codes, images, or ideas that are used in the public realm to define us). I want them to think critically about this question from a variety of perspectives and to encounter the real voices of those whose answers helped to shape our personal, cultural, and national identity. Most of all, apart from any particular essential question, I want to create a space of "constructive confrontation and critical interrogation" (Teaching to Transgress 37). I want to encourage an environment of lively and meaningful discussion—the type of discourse that challenges preconceptions, cultural codes and stereotypes, and ultimately ourselves. Furthermore, I agree with hooks' assertion that "students are eager to break through barriers to knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain" (44). However, I recognize as well, that this path of deliberate "resistance" can also be a difficult one for students who have never been asked to think (or to act) in radical ways.

My experience as a teacher in this type of classroom has taught me, like hooks, that compassion for my students is a necessary practice. hooks writes:

I had to accept that students may not...appreciate the value of a certain standpoint or process straightaway. The exciting aspect
of creating a classroom community where there is respect for individual voices is that there is infinitely more feedback because students do feel free to talk—and talk back...I learned to respect that shifting paradigms or sharing knowledge in new ways challenges; it takes time for students to experience that challenge as positive. (42)

hooks' words not only acknowledge the importance of empathetic practice, but also serve as a poignant personal reminder that I too had to experience these "growing pains." As a white, middle-class woman raised in a fundamentalist Christian home in southwest Michigan, my own journey toward becoming a teacher of social justice was met with many personal challenges. Just like my own students, I questioned and resisted new texts and ideas. I remember one occasion in particular in a senior English methods course where I was asked to debate the merits of bringing GLBT-themed young adult literature into the secondary education classroom. At the time—over ten years ago—I felt deeply conflicted; I was certain that this type of literature did not have a place in the secondary classroom. Never asked to articulate why I held such prejudices, however, I found myself unable to take a solid stance. The debate, conducted via an online threaded discussion board, challenged me to engage in perspectives wholly unlike my own. At first I was disturbed. I felt uncomfortable with the idea of bringing what I considered to be inappropriate texts into the English classroom. As the class progressed, however, I began to question the personal origins of my bias rather than faulting the texts themselves. Through the
opportunity to critically engage in the debate regarding these texts and by remaining open-minded to the perspectives of my peers, I discovered that my previously held convictions were all wrong—a revelation that changed me both personally and professionally. As a result, I began to recognize the power of texts to pose the difficult and “essential” questions necessary to create meaningful connections and transformations in my own life and in the lives of my students. Furthermore, I was forced to confront my own falsely held convictions and learn to understand them through the lens of my own privilege. As I moved forward into the secondary education arena, I continued to carry the implications of this lesson with me.

As an enthusiastic English teacher during the first few years of my career, I prided myself in teaching a multicultural, thematic curriculum that incorporated a variety of texts, time periods, and relevant themes. Working in primarily rural and suburban white schools however, I was often met with resistance from my students and from their parents as well. For example, in a lesson designed to examine racial discord in American Literature through the *Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, and a variety of negro spirituals and even contemporary rap music, I asked my students to examine the “voices” shared in each of these texts, and I encouraged them to identify with these voices through first-person writing. However, when a handful of students chose to repurpose this assignment as a way to express racist sentiments, I became deeply concerned. On one occasion, after asking one of my students to rewrite his essay and eliminate the blatant racist language—this student chose to write from the perspective
of a plantation slave owner and took great pains to detail his pleasure in torturing the slaves—I received an angry phone call from his mother who was irate that I was even addressing these issues in the high school classroom. “This is English class,” she shouted into the phone, “Shouldn’t you be teaching grammar or something! These kids shouldn’t be reading about this stuff until they get to college, and how dare you tell my son what to believe!” Needless to say, I was shocked. Rather than backing down, however, I was determined to provide even more opportunities for students to engage in ideas and texts that would challenge their own systems of belief.

As a white teacher of white students, I found great purpose in exposing my students to a wide variety of perspectives through the literature, the writing, and the discussions we engaged in during our classes. Consequently, it was through the attempt to respond to the prejudices of my students that I originally transformed my teaching. Because of their lack of exposure to others outside of their own races, religions, and backgrounds, I noticed that many of my students espoused racial stereotypes as truths. After one alarming incident in particular, when I discovered that a small group of students were harassing two new black students in the school, my anger turned into resolve. If my students were going to sling racist, sexist, and homophobic epithets in the hallways—I rationalized—then I was going to ask them to address these issues in my classroom in informed, intelligent ways. By structuring lessons and essential questions around these biases, I discovered that many students were eager for a safe, academic outlet to air their misconceptions. In an attempt to ensure that it was my students’ voices rather than my own political views that were
promoted, I designed a series of Socratic seminars that allowed my students to take center stage. Of course, I must also acknowledge that by deliberately constructing activities that fostered critical approaches to teaching I chose questions that would cause my students to think in new directions. While the answers belonged to the students, the questions belonged to me. In this way, I hoped to reject singular or “ultimate” interpretations in favor of multiple perspectives and responses to the literature and the issues put forward. Because of this, the students challenged one another to question representations and rewrite established, hegemonic and cultural narratives through “critical interrogation.” As a result, the voices, ideas, and perspectives of each of these students became an important “text” itself within the classroom—a text that often changed courses in mid-stream (similar to the way my early views changed) as students began to negotiate the origins of their own prejudices and unpack notions of race, gender, class, and privilege.

Clearly, no classroom designed in this way could be apolitical or neutral. However, neutrality was not my goal. I wanted my classroom to be a safe haven for exploring multiple viewpoints and ways of knowing. I began to understand that literature was only effective for my students if it had the ability to ask them the difficult questions and penetrate into their lives in profound ways. While the tension created through the discussion of these sensitive issues felt abrasive and intrusive for some students (and their parents), I discovered that many of my students became willing to face this discomfort in favor of greater knowledge, understanding, and awareness. As a teacher I discovered that I was not only charged with helping my
students to understand literary texts, but that my greatest pursuit was to help them understand the texts (and contexts) of their own lives. To accomplish this I found that the most momentum was created when students were able to construct a critical "conversation" across texts, contexts, time periods, and cultural divides. Discovering the way that Langston Hughes created a conversation with Walt Whitman, Malcolm X, Chris Rock, or P. Diddy, for example, represented a method of communicating with texts and ideas that became both critically engaging and relevant to my students. Ultimately, it was in what I call these "textual intersections" that I experienced the most passion and purpose in my role as a teacher of English and—more importantly—as a teacher of diverse, complicated, and unique individuals.

Confronting and Challenging Visual and Cultural Representations

In *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, (1993) co-authors Knoblauch and Brannon define "representation" as the "practices by which people name and rename the world, negotiate the substance of social reality, and contest prior namings in favor of new or different ones" (3). In my discussion of graphic narratives, I propose that it is not only the "word" that "names" and "renames," but the "image" as well. In a video lecture titled *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, bell hooks argues that representation is a "motivated" activity. Engaged in the study of cultural literacy through popular culture, hooks discusses the great potential of the media to take "control of our imaginations"—to guide our perceptions of "social reality." For hooks as well as Knoblauch and Brannon, questioning these representations and
probing them for their significance, their fallacies and their inconsistencies, is a powerful step toward personal “transformation”—the process whereby we transcend mere representation and embrace an undiluted truth about our cultural identities and ourselves. According to hooks:

The power of Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies has been the political intervention as a force in American society to say there really is a conscious manipulation of representations and it’s not about magical thinking or pure imagination or creativity, it’s about people consciously knowing what kinds of images will produce a certain kind of impact (Cultural Criticism and Transformation).

For critical pedagogues, education is the answer for fashioning an “authentically social and culturally transformative” world (Kanpol 28). Whether it is the “words” or the “images” that bind us, advocating critical literacy “allows the teacher to connect literary texts to student experience—making curriculum knowledge both meaningful and relevant...for both teacher and student” (Kanpol 55).

Furthermore, the texts themselves—whether literary, scholarly, visual, electronic and/or otherwise—allow students to encounter ideas that challenge the quality of their own convictions. Critical literacy applies not only to how students engage in specific texts for classroom study, but also in how the texts themselves are selected. From the Hirschian or “Great Books” framework, literary classics such as Romeo and Juliet, Paradise Lost, The Grapes of Wrath, and The Great Gatsby are favored as aesthetically superior texts that provide the crucial foundations necessary
for understanding society and culture. However, as stated by Feinburg in his article “The Influential E.D. Hirsch” (1999):

Hirsch's philosophy is based on what is sometimes called a transmission view of meaning: teachers hold meaning in their heads and their job is to transmit it in the most efficient way to the heads of students. Whole class instruction, telling, and rote memorization are frequently seen as the most effective means for accomplishing this. And standardized tests are the most effective way to tell if the task has been accomplished.

This philosophy is a direct contradiction to what Freire and other radical pedagogues including Peter McClaren and Henry Giroux advocate as “transactional” learning, where meaning is created through the shared, “horizontal” dialogue and critical interplay between both teachers and their students (as demonstrated by Freire’s model of collaborative education through the use of “cultural codifications,” illustrated below). Hirsch’s views of “cultural literacy,” on the other hand, advocate “vertical,” top-down systems of education, where students obtain “knowledge”—and therefore an understanding of “culture”—through what Freire deems the “banking model” of education. In this model, teachers “deposit” knowledge in their students who represent mere “containers” or “receptacles” to be “filled” by their teachers (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 53). According to Freire,

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals it’s fundamentally narrative
character. This relationship involves a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (Pedagogy 52)

In order to combat this “sickness,” critical pedagogues advocate approaches to education that honor the preexisting cultures and “ways-of-knowing” demonstrated by their students. Curriculum, therefore, becomes the mutually collaborative work of both the students and the teacher where “text-selection” moves beyond the prescriptive “classics” and actively seeks to incorporate the “literature” that narrates the unique lives and experiences of each student.

Clearly, however, “vertical” approaches to public education continue to prevail, as little attention is paid in the traditional school curriculum to what I would call, “student literacies”—a wide variety of print and non-print texts, including film, SLAM poetry, picture books, online forums and social outlets such as Myspace or Facebook, and of course, comics, Manga, and graphic novels. Whether explicitly through the teachers themselves or implicitly through the actual structure of the Language Arts curriculum, students are continually told what “real” literature is. More often than not, this definition alienates student interest and social cultures, serving only to further remove them from the texts chosen for study.

In regard to “student literacies” and popular culture as text, Scholle and Denski argue:
We must consider popular culture as the background of knowledge forms and affective instruments which ground student 'voice.'
Attending to the popular in student experiences involves not simply valorizing that experience, but working with (and on) that experience. Such a pedagogy must allow students to speak from their own experience at the same time that it encourages them to identify and unravel the codes of popular culture that may work to construct subject relations that serve to silence and disempower them (qtd. in Lankshear and McLaren 307).

Culture then, and our engagement in it, is not a prescription—as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. advocates—but rather a shared experience, and I want all of my student's experiences to matter. Providing opportunities for students to unpack notions of knowledge, privilege and access—through the critical examination of a curriculum that intentionally intersects with their own lives—arms them with the tools necessary to question the hegemonic status quo that often dictates their perceptions and experiences. To counter this, educators need to make it their goal to move beyond the practice of “checking-off” disconnected learning objectives by allowing their students to design their own lists. We should ask them, “What makes your personal culture and life’s experiences unique? How does your family history determine who you are and how you view the world? How do the images you see in popular media influence you life? How do you filter these issues through the lens of your own cultural beliefs and convictions? These questions serve to empower students, to help them cross the
intersections created by their own systems of morality, belief and cultural understanding. They open avenues for meaningful discourse that allow for comparison across cultures. They invite a certain amount of cultural clash and discord—yet through the negotiation of these clashes students experience the privilege of envisioning the world through another’s experiences. There is no “list” of cultural prescriptives that can be applied to any particular person. What matters is the lists our students enter our classes with, and how they add to them on our journey toward greater cultural awareness and understanding of one another along the way. This idea is reinforced by Anderson and Irvine who write, “exploring students’ personal experience is the first step in countering the idea that meaning exists only in structures external to the individual. It also brings into the classroom the culture of the community, not just that of the institution” (qtd. in Lankshear and McLaren 92).

Picture, Word, and the World: Cultural Literacy in Graphic Narratives

In large part because of my prior belief that comics were “cheap, disposable, kiddie fare” (McCloud), I never considered them to carry any real “weight” in the classroom. Sure, superheroes might teach us to look out for our fellow man or to help out others in need, but what real significance could they have? The problems and conflicts that existed in the “real” world were those that were examined in “real” literature—that’s why “literature” is worthy of our attention; it has the ability to speak into the heart of human motivations. No superhero could do that for me. Yet curiously (and unexpectedly) it was the ideas of Paulo Freire, an educational
philosopher whose work in the field of critical literacy I greatly admired, that changed my mind. During a graduate course in curriculum theory several years ago, I had the opportunity to read Freire’s *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973). However, it was not until I began structuring a conference presentation for the Michigan Council of Teachers of English on “Graphic Novels for Social Justice” that I began connecting Freire’s concepts with my own interests in both critical literacy and the medium of comics. In a description of his work with a group of illiterate adults from rural Brazil, Freire describes the concept of “the culture circle,” a system of teaching literacy through engaged group dialogue, group participation, and “compact programs that were ‘broken down’ and ‘codified’ into learning units” (Freire 42). According to Freire:

> In the culture circles, we attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification. The topics of these debates were offered us by the groups themselves...These subjects and others were schematized as far as possible and presented to the groups with visual aids, in the form of dialogue (42).

Of particular interest to me was Freire’s use of visual aids. In a series of ten sketches, what Freire called, “cultural codifications,” participants discussed the data present in each picture in relation to the “language” of their own culture. Discussion of the various icons, symbols, and imagery present in each picture would then be translated into a list of vocabulary words intended to move the group toward “a more critical
consciousness at the same time that they [began] to learn to read and write” (Freire 50). Each codification was representative of typical situations experienced by the participants in their daily lives, and they included actions, activities, and tools (or iconography) that were familiar to them. In the third codification, titled, “Unlettered Hunter,” for example, the group began with a discussion of the question, “What belongs to nature and what belongs to culture?” (See Figure 2.1). Participants identified the bow, the arrow, and the feathers the Indian wears as “culture.” They distinguished the feathers on the bird, which are “nature,” from the feathers taken and worn by the Indian—a symbol of the Indian’s culture. Not only an opportunity to learn the words, “bird,” “bow,” “arrow,” “hunter,” etc, this shared dialogue provided an opportunity for participants to consider the implications of being a member of an “unlettered culture” as well. According to Freire, “participants discussed how education occurred in an unlettered culture...they then perceived immediately that to be illiterate is to belong to an unlettered culture and to fail to dominate the techniques of reading and writing.” This revelation, as Freire notes, was often quite “dramatic” for the participants (67).
The codification that follows, “The Lettered Hunter,” (See Figure 2.2) explores man’s use of technology, primarily through the hunter’s use of the rifle in place of the bow and arrow. Viewers of this codification recognized the rifle as a powerful symbol of man’s ability to advance through the use of his “creative spirit” and therefore, “transform the world” (*Education* 69). Not only limited to discussions of man’s “opportunity,” however, participants considered the idea that true “transformation,” is dependant upon man’s ability to use technology “only to the extent that it contributes
to the humanization of man, and is employed toward his liberation,” not to his
detriment (69). Further codifications consider man’s ability to transform nature into
useful tools. In the sixth situation, entitled “Man Transforms the Material of Nature
by His Work,” two men are depicted crafting pots out of clay. The participants
acknowledge that what man makes becomes an object of culture—one that is
oftentimes prized by members of the community as “art” (73). These pictorial
codifications progress until man is met with the written artifacts that depict culture. In situation eight, "Poetry," participants begin to recognize the words themselves as symbols of art and culture. "It is culture, just as the vase is, but it is different from the vase" (77).

As I progressed through these and other images, I began to understand how powerful pictures could be for creating not only functionally literate individuals, but culturally enlightened individuals as well. As demonstrated by their participation in the culture circles, the process of visual meaning-making was a vital step for the participants. Each codification—each sequential "situation"—helped participants to "view" themselves as critically conscious individuals, entitled to all of the benefits of education and democratization. Serving as a type of mirror, the codifications reflected a progression of images that ultimately freed their viewers from lives of silent illiteracy and oppression. As a result, I began to look at comics and graphic novels differently; I began to see them as liberatory texts. I began to read them in the same way that I read To Kill A Mockingbird, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and A Brave New World, and as I read, I began to ask a series of essential questions: Could graphic narratives inspire the same type of critical dialogue regarding gender, race, class, and ethnicity that I advocated in my readings of the typical literary "classics" taught in my classroom? Did engaging in graphic narratives contribute to our ability as readers to "hold up a mirror" to our own perceptions and prejudices? Could these texts pose the pertinent questions that would inspire the "constructive confrontation and critical interrogation" that hooks promoted? And ultimately, did
graphic narratives have the power to “transform” the lives of our students through the use of the picture, the word and the world?

With these and other questions in mind, I turned to three graphic novels in particular, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, *Blankets* by Craig Thompson, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi to seek answers. All critically acclaimed, these graphic novels were identified as exemplary texts for this study for several reasons. First and most importantly, the narratives contained in these pages had the potential to speak to students’ lives in relevant, meaningful ways. Second, authored and illustrated by single creators, these graphic novels represented some of the most beautiful and profound examples of how the picture and the word fuse together in perfect symbiosis—all three narratives were full of images and stories worthy of critical close-examination. Third, centered on issues of personal and cultural identity, these narratives created “conversations” with the traditional texts that were chosen in collaboration for this study; furthermore, each graphic novel had the ability to function as a compelling “stand-alone” for “comics close-reading” activities. Finally, the themes inherent in these narratives worked together in interlocking ways, promoting critical conversations across and between texts. For a better understanding of the themes employed by these narratives, a close-reading analysis of each graphic novel can be read in the passages that follow.
"Now What Would You Like to Become?" Identity and *American Born Chinese*

There is no trope more important within the story of *American Born Chinese* than that of cultural identity and self-acceptance. Told as three interconnected narratives that later converge in the book’s conclusion, *American Born Chinese* begins with the mythological Chinese tale of the Monkey King who lives in the lush jungles and gardens of Flower Fruit Mountain (Yang 8). Tantalized by the lively music and the fragrance of sweet wine that drifts down from the heavens, the Monkey King, secure in his identity as the rightful ruler and deity of his lands, sought entry into the god’s dinner party. The Monkey King, however, is abruptly turned away, when a god, dismissive of the Monkey King’s qualifications as an immortal—the Monkey King is a Kung Fu master, trained in the “four major heavenly disciplines”—denies him entry first because he does not have shoes, and second because he is still “just a monkey” (Yang 15). Outraged and greatly embarrassed by this denial, the Monkey King returns home and is overwhelmed by growing feelings of personal disgust and shame. A smell he’d never noticed before, “the thick smell of monkey fur,” greeted him as he walked into his bedroom chamber. As the final panel in this section closes, the Monkey King sits disconsolately on his throne, enveloped by the blackness of night. Unable to sleep, he “stays awake, thinking of ways to get rid of [the smell]” (Yang 20).

When the Monkey King resurfaces in the novel, his loyal subjects are shown to be the bearers of this slight. A new edict is posted: “All monkeys must wear shoes” (Yang 55). While his followers grapple with how to swing from the branches
of trees without the use of their feet, the Monkey King isolates himself in his
chamber, disciplining his body and his mind—in his solitude, he seeks to transform
his true identity in order to become like the gods who once scorned him. His
meditations teach him the skills necessary to overtake his oppressors—the haughty
deities that dismissed him from heaven—and exact his long-awaited revenge.
Renaming himself “The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven,” the Monkey King denounces
his former title, insisting that he is “NOT a monkey” (Yang 62-63).

In the second narrative thread, readers are introduced to Jin Yang, a young
Chinese-American boy. A newcomer to his elementary school, Jin is ostracized by
his peers, presumably because of his cultural difference. The smallest figure within
the frames of each panel, Jin is immediately identified by his “otherness” and his
“difference” in relation to those around him. Wild speculation that “Chinese people
eat dogs” and suffer from “arranged marriages” further distances Jin from his peers.¹
Yet rather than abating these stereotypes, even the “out-to-lunch” teacher
inadvertently validates them. Jin’s isolation, like that of the Monkey King’s, results
in his being severely bullied by his peers. Later, the profound desire to “fit-in” with
his peers even drives Jin to alter his physical appearance. For example, when Jin
notices that Amelia, the girl he is enamored with, is interested in a boy with curly
blonde hair, he changes the style of his hair to emulate the boy that is the object of
Amelia’s gaze. This shift in physical appearance and denial of the “true” self is
similar to the trials experienced by the Monkey King, who subjects himself and his

¹ The two panels depicting this scenario can be viewed in Chapter IV of the dissertation.
subjects to ridiculous decrees in order to conceal his true identity. For both Jin and the Monkey King, however, this transformation comes at a cost; neither are true to themselves or to their own culture. They have stripped away the truth in favor of a more comfortable lie. This result eventually proves dissatisfactory for both Jin and the Monkey King, who ultimately discover the price of this concealment.

The third interwoven narrative depicts the story of Danny and his Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee. Danny, the all-American, blonde-haired, blue-eyed teenager, is mortified when he learns that his cousin Chin-Kee has come from China to stay with his family. Chin-Kee, (whose name is intentionally pejorative), is the visual personification of all Asian stereotypes: Chin-Kee’s skin is pale yellow, his eyes are slanted shut, his smile reveals two enormous buck teeth, and his traditional attire and long black braid suggest that Chin-Kee is less human than a Chinese caricature. Even the luggage Chin-Kee arrives with is depicted as three large Chinese take-out boxes. Loud and obtrusive, Chin-Kee greets readers with the words, “HARRO AMELLICA!”—an intentional alteration to Chin-Kee’s speech that demonstrates the stereotypical misplacement of “L’s” and “R’s” in Asian dialogue. Furthermore, when Chin-Kee is introduced to Danny’s girlfriend Melanie, his body language is predatory—his long yellow fingers reach out to grasp her, he drools on his own arm, and proclaims, “such pletty Amenlican girl wiff bountiful Amenlican bosom! Must bind feet and bear Chin-Kee’s children!” (Yang 49-50). Later, Chin-Kee attends school with Danny, and unsurprisingly, Chin-Kee is depicted panel after panel as having the “right” answer to each of the teacher’s questions. Danny, extremely
embarrassed by his cousin, sits behind Chin-Kee, smoldering with shame. At lunch, Chin-Kee eats “clispy flied cat gizzards wiff noodles” as Danny’s classmates look on, whispering in disgust to one another (Yang 114). When Danny is approached by the school jock Steve, he downplays Chin-Kee’s presence, yet Chin-Kee never leaves Danny’s side. When Steve rests his cola unattended on the lunch table, Chin-Kee snatches it to pull a prank on Steve. Suppressing a laugh that later erupts into roaring “ha ha ha’s,” Chin-Kee leans over to Danny and whispers: “Me Chinese, me play joke! Me go pee-pee in his coke!” Clearly a connection to the racist sing-song rhymes of playground children, the words once more solidify the stereotype. Chin-Kee’s later reference to eating “dog stew” propels readers back to the story of Jin—who suffers from the cruel words and ignorance of his peers as a result of the Asian stereotypes that Chin-Kee embodies—Chin-Kee is the physical “representation” of all of Jin’s fears and suffering. Danny, on the other hand, epitomizes Jin’s “Anglo-American” classmates—the ones that Jin later attempts to emulate. In the final segment in this narrative, Danny reveals to Steve that he is fearful his association with Chin-Kee will ostracize him from his peers and force him to switch schools: “He comes every year for a week or two and follows me to school,” Danny says. “Talking his stupid talk and eating his stupid food, embarrassing the crap out of me. By the time he leaves, no one thinks of me as Danny anymore. I’m Chin-Kee’s cousin” (Yang 127).

Of particular note as well to this narrative is the appearance of the Herbalist’s Wife, a wise sage, who Jin initially visits as a young boy. In the beginning of the
story, the Herbalist's Wife asks Jin what he would like to become when he grows up.

While Jin's answer is, on the surface, indicative of his childhood interests—Jin wants to become a "Transformer," a toy that alters its appearance between two forms—it is later symbolic of the physical transformation Jin undergoes in order to gain the approval of his peers. Later in the story, an older Jin dreams of the Herbalist's Wife. In his dream she asks him, "Now what would you like to become?" The dream sequence that follows illustrates an astounding physical "transformation."

Figure 2.3 "Now what would you like to become?" from American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang. p. 194.
Jin loses his dark hair and his oval-shaped eyes and shape-shifts into a blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy (See figure 2.3). When Jin wakes in the morning and gazes at himself in the mirror, he finds that his wish to “transform” has been granted—Jin, betraying his cultural heritage and physical identity, “renames” himself, Danny (Yang 195).

Much more complex than it may initially appear to readers, Yang’s graphic novel provides students with multiple opportunities to question the power of naming, renaming, representation, and personal transformation. While the text’s immediacy offers ways for students to engage in the story in highly accessible ways, teachers may find occasion to discuss the underlying mythological tropes and spiritual references that become party to the complicated interplay of this three-in-one tale as well. Of particular importance to teachers as they work through this text in critical ways are the issues of self-denial, personal identity, and (mis)representation. Some teachers, like myself, may initially encounter difficulties addressing the stereotypes raised through Yang’s use of “Chin-Kee,” in particular. In numerous classroom discussions, both with high school and college students, failing to understand the purpose of Chin-Kee in the text led students to question why an Asian author would promote such a disturbing portrayal of himself. In a blog addressing this concern, Yang acknowledges that there is a certain amount of danger in perpetuating stereotypes that may be taken by readers at face value, yet he writes, “I think it's a danger I can live with. In order for us to defeat our enemy,” he continues, “he must
first be made visible. Besides, comic book readers are some of the smartest folks I've ever met. They'll figure it out” (First Second).

“I Wanted to Burn my Memories”: Personal Conviction in Blankets

Making “selves” visible by confronting personal belief is a theme explored by Craig Thompson in his graphic memoir, Blankets, as well. Like Jin in the beginning of American Born Chinese, Craig is also a child bullied by his peers for his difference. Teased for being “too skinny,” and for coming from an overly zealous, religious family, Craig turns to art and eventually to Raina, his first love interest, to alleviate his suffering. In his artistic drawings, Craig crafts a world where he can escape the injustices he encounters in school and at home. An activity that is not only an outlet for working out his aggressions, but an occupation of great personal joy, Craig buries himself in his drawings—his self-proclaimed “get-away car”—far removed from his very “real” and difficult childhood. Working alongside his brother Phil, Craig experiences a feeling of contentment and takes comfort in their collaborative efforts. “I felt connected to Phil.” He writes. “An entire day would be consumed by drawing...These were the only wakeful moments of my childhood that I can recall feeling life was sacred or worthwhile” (Thompson 44).

Art, however, is something that Craig eventually begins to view with feelings of shame. Early in the story, Craig’s desire to “praise God through his drawings” is

2 In discussion of Craig Thompson’s graphic memoir Blankets, the author’s last name “Thompson” will be used to indicate the author’s voice, while his first name, “Craig” will be used to refer to the character that appears in Thompson’s panels.
crushed by a callous Sunday school teacher who tells him that God has already drawn his creation (Thompson 137-138). In later sections, Craig is pressured by his wayward Church leaders to consider going into “the Ministry,” yet unwilling—at this point—to abandon his love of art, Craig continues to seek ways that he can “praise” God through his natural talents. Walking through the quiet “blankets” of Wisconsin snow, Craig berates himself for his “selfish existence” (140)—he gazes up into the ice-covered trees and asks, “So is that it, God? You want me in the ministry? Pastor? Missionary? What if I were to draw—like—Christian cartoons—to win people to the faith?” (Thompson 140). In practice, however, Craig’s efforts to direct his art in this way are half-hearted and eventually lead to more feelings of despair. Further, the congregants at Craig’s evangelical church try to convince him that Art School can only lead to his spiritual and moral demise, as evidenced by one church-goer who testifies that his brother slipped into a life of “pornography,” and worse yet, “homosexuality,” as a result of his time spent in art school reproducing images of the naked human body (Thompson 516-518).

Eventually, Craig begins to question whether he can love both God and his art. While sifting through the words of Solomon in the biblical book of “Ecclesiastes”, Craig realizes that he’s “only been half-committed to [his] faith and that something has been distracting [him] from [his] Bible studies” (Thompson 56). In an attempt to place his worldly passions aside and refocus his energy on his relationship with Christ, Craig decides to remedy his situation by burning everything he had ever created. Frenzied by his decision, Craig rips art off of his walls, pulls it
out of drawers, and crumples it by the handful in his angry fists. Smashing the drawings into a cardboard box, Craig cries: “I’ve wasted my God-given time on ESCAPISM! DREAMING and DRAWING—the most secular and selfish of WORLDLY pursuits!” (Thompson 58). In an act he compares to making a sacrificial offering before God, Craig dumps his art into a burn barrel and ignites a match. As Craig “burns his memories,” purging himself of his “sin,” he kneels before the fire, his hands curled in crippled agony. His mouth, open to the darkened sky, erupts into a scream and spills forth the images from his artwork, now blackened by the fire (See Figure 2.4). This panel is at once powerful, profound, and shocking. While Craig succeeds in burning the physical remnants of his art, he is unable to destroy the art inside of him. It barrels from his mouth like the thick, suffocating smoke of the fire. During this exorcism, Craig’s thoughts flash back to his Sunday school teacher’s lessons on the horrors of Hell:

“Hell is the worst place you could ever imagine—where you are on fire and being BURNED and in constant PAIN…the Bible says you will NEVER STOP SCREAMING…It’s completely DARK…and all around you are the sounds of other people screaming and MOANING (Thompson 61).

In this scene, and those that follow, it is clear that Craig is experiencing a type of hell on Earth. However, Craig’s sin is not that of escapism through art, but rather the folly of believing he can escape who he truly is—an identity that not even flames can consume.
Figure 2.4 "I Wanted to Burn my Memories," from *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. p. 60.
Later in the narrative, Craig meets his first girlfriend Raina at “Church Snow Camp,” an encounter that becomes a pivotal point in Thompson’s “coming-of-age” narrative. Hoping to escape the “Christ-centered recreational activities” planned by the camp leaders and divert the hypocritical scrutiny of their Christian peers, Craig and Raina flee into the unblemished fields of snow. In this wide-open space the two revel in God’s glorious creation as they make snow angels and catch snowflakes with their tongues. Unlike the cramped, sullen spaces where Craig’s peers hovered over him, trapping him into dark panels of violation and despair, Thompson widens the borders, opening the pages and spilling soft, incandescent films of light into each panel where Raina appears. As their relationships begins to develop, Craig drives to northern Michigan to stay with Raina and her family, and it is within the boundaries of these unadulterated spaces that Craig and Raina experience the serenity of first love. While often criticized for its sentimentality, Thompson’s quiet, tender depiction of Craig and Raina’s relationship is at once both arrestingly beautiful and surreal (See Figure 2.5). Raina’s body is drawn in soft alluring curves, which are mirrored by the supple shapes of Craig’s swirling art and the circular movement of the winter wind. Wrapped up in the quilt that Raina made for him—a “blanket” that represents security, warmth, and a sense of belonging—Craig recalls a verse from the biblical “Song of Solomon” as he imagines Raina, glowing like an angel, smiling warmly down upon him: “All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you...you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes” (Thompson 306).
Figure 2.5 “Raina,” in *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. p. 309.
Arguably, Craig’s adoration for Raina is akin to the act of worship itself. In the silent moments when he observes her asleep or from afar, he raises a prayer of thanks, a Psalm:

Thank you God, for your perfect creation. With skin as soft and pale as moonlight, the bones beneath her skin tangling and rearranging, rising along the iliac crest, and dipping into the clavicles. Thank you for the rhythm of her movements—curling—sprawling—her contours lapping like waves around the BLANKETS. She is yours. She is perfect. A TEMPLE with hair spilling over her temples. Pressed against her I can hear ETERNITY—hallow, lonely spaces and currents that churn ceaselessly, and the fallen snow welcomes the falling snow with a whispered, “Hush.” (308-312).

Consequently, these moments of blissful veneration—like first love itself—are destined to come to an end. With Raina, as with his art, Craig struggles to maintain his relationship with God. Unable to indulge in his art as a result of his feelings of betrayal, guilt and shame, Craig finds art in Raina’s words and in Raina’s presence. His feelings for her, however, are also a source of private upheaval. For example, in one panel, Craig masturbates over a perfumed letter that Raina wrote to him—a singular act that proves to Craig that he is unworthy of God’s forgiveness and love. Craig’s desire for Raina, his passion for art, and his feelings of spiritual remorse are further intertwined when Craig recalls a conversation with his mother and father
regarding an inappropriate picture he drew as a young boy. Ushered into his parent’s bedroom to discuss the “sinful” drawing of a naked woman, Craig is overwhelmed with sorrow, guilt, and humiliation. When he asks his parents if they are mad, his mother replies, “No. Sad. Because God gave you a talent and we don’t want you to use it for the Devil” (Thompson 207). When his mother asks him how Jesus would feel about his drawing, Craig begins to sob. He imagines that the picture of Jesus, hanging on his parent’s bedroom wall, is so disgraced by his actions that he turns his back on him. Reaching out to the picture, desperate for forgiveness, Craig is left alone with his feelings of sin and despair (See Figure 2.6). Eventually, Craig imagines that Raina is this naked woman. As he gazes at her, enthralled by her beauty and filled with desire for her, he must also confront the relentless demons of his past. Hanging from Raina’s bedroom wall as well, is the same picture of Christ. Yet in his gentle devotion to Raina, in his innocent reverence and pure love for her, and through his respectful admiration of the “Divine Artist” that created her, Craig at last finds peace. The picture of the Christ-figure that once “turned its back” on Craig, now turned to face him once more. Lying beneath the blankets with Raina, Craig came to the realization that “[he] did not want to be anywhere else” (Thompson 432). Finally comforted by the beaming smile of the Christ-figure, Craig accepts that “For once, [he] was more than content being where [he] was (Thompson 432). There was no more need to fight.
This, however, is not Thompson's "happy ending." Predictably, Craig and Raina lose touch with one another. In his efforts to separate himself from his
memories of her, Craig burns all of Raina’s letters and gifts—everything, that is, except for the “Blanket.” In the years that follow, Craig moves out of his parent’s home, making “a conscious effort to leave [his] Bible behind,” and returns with new perspectives regarding his faith (Thompson 545). What God once “represented” to Craig had radically changed. In the conversations with his brother that conclude Thompson’s graphic memoir, Craig admits:

I still believe in God; the teachings of Jesus even, but the rest of Christianity…its Bible, its churches, its dogma—only sets up boundaries between people and cultures. It denies the beauty of being HUMAN, and it ignores all these GAPS that need to be filled in by the individual. (Thompson 533).

Rummaging through the cubby hole in his old bedroom, Craig finds his bible. Leafing through the tattered pages, Craig encounters a final scripture from the New Testament chapter of “Luke”:

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is WITHIN or AMONG you. (Thompson 564-565).

Removing Raina’s quilt once more, Craig wraps it around him and finds solace in its warmth. Early the next morning, watching his breath form into clouds of vapor around him and enchanted by the untouched fields of white snow, Craig is satisfied to “make his own mark” (Thompson 581).
Beautifully illustrated and narrated, Thompson’s graphic memoir compels readers to question their own spiritual and personal beliefs and convictions. Intertwined with highly complex layers of narrative, Blankets invites readers to become “participants” in Craig’s trials in an effort to help him unravel his true identity and take comfort in his choices. At times (and sometimes all at once) abandoned by his family, his church, his peers, and even his God, Craig must find ways to keep (and to question) his faith. While not all situations in Thompson’s narrative may be appropriate for secondary English students, his memoir offers a brutally honest portrayal of what it means to be both doubters and ultimately, true believers.

An Identity Divided: Culture and Conflict in Persepolis

Sharing similar themes with both Blankets and American Born Chinese—most notably, confronting “representations,” questioning personal convictions, and embracing cultural identity—Persepolis is a graphic memoir that traces the experiences of Marjane Satrapi, a young girl growing up during the Islamic Cultural Revolution in Iran. Satrapi begins her story with an introduction prefacing the historical upheaval endured by her nation and challenging readers—through the statements of her own firmly held convictions—to see beyond the prejudices that have for too long maligned her people:

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{ In discussion of Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir Persepolis, the author’s last name “Satrapi” will be used to indicate the author’s voice, while her first name, “Marjane” or “Marji” will be used to refer to the character that appears in Satrapi’s panels.}\]
“[Iran] has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing Persepolis is so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. I also don’t want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homelands to be forgotten.

Amid these statements, readers begin their journey into the story of the young Marjane, a precocious 10-year old child raised by liberal Marxist parents during a time of great political discord in her nation. Readers are first introduced to Marjane as she experiences the injustices of the Islamic Revolution first hand. Seated in a row with her friends, all wearing down-turned faces and donned in the obligatory veil required by the new regime, Marjane recalls the events that led up to this change: “In 1979 a revolution took place...and then suddenly in 1980 we found ourselves veiled a separated from our friends” (Satrapi 3-4). A panel depicting Marji and her friends playing “jump-rope,” “giddyup!” and “monster” with the veil humorously illustrates the innocent naivety with which these young girls misinterpret these new measures. Indicative of the chapters that follow, “The Veil” unites both Marjane’s inquisitiveness and rebellious nature—qualities that lead her not only to question the purpose of the veil, but ultimately her place and purpose in this society as well. In a
particularly powerful panel that follows, Satrapi illustrates the dual identities that Marjane must negotiate (See Figure 2.7). Split in two distinct halves—one side representing Marji’s desire to be a modern woman, the other her duty to honor the traditions associated with her culture—Marjane’s identity is clearly divided. The narrative box above the panel reads: “I really didn’t know what to think about the veil, deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi 6).

Figure 2.7 “Marjane’s Split Identities,” by Marjane Satrapi in Persepolis. p. 6.
On occasions when I have enjoyed the opportunity to speak about graphic novels as a conference speaker or classroom guest-speaker, this panel is always discussed with great interest. Viewers are eager to give voice to the iconic symbolism inherent in the panel: “The cogs and the hammer represent industry, technology. The hammer could also be a symbol of communism. The ruler suggests education, logic. All of the tools symbolize Westernization and progress.”

In the second half of the panel, Marjane is covered from head to foot in the veil. Beautifully intricate vines weave behind her in the background. Viewers discuss the artistry of these vines, the way these curves suggest the shapes and movement of the written Arabic language. Some viewers are disturbed by Marji’s appearance in this half. “She is trapped behind the veil, we can no longer see her. Her individuality is sacrificed, lost.” Others challenge this point of view. “The veil shows she respects her culture and wants to honor it. She is not lost in the veil if she chooses to wear it.” Altogether these interpretations demonstrate the unique balance that comprises Marjane’s personal and cultural identities. The negotiation between culture and the “self” is a prominent theme that is interwoven—like the artistic vines—throughout the pages of Satrapi’s graphic memoir.

Not only an exploration of “self-identity” but a profound examination of the tragedies of war as well, Persepolis confronts readers with stories of the brutal torture and deaths of the revolutionaries who dared question the status quo. Marji’s Uncle Anoosh is accused of being a Russian spy and is imprisoned and executed—an act which makes the young Marjane question her faith in God. Later, as Iraqi missiles
ravage their homes, Marjane and her family live in constant fear for their lives. At school these Iranian “martyrs” are honored twice a day by Marji and her classmates who are forced to beat their hands on their breasts as a sign of respect and homage for the war dead. “I too tried to think only of life,” Marji says, “However, it wasn’t always easy. At school they put on funeral marches, and we had to beat our breasts” (Satrapi 95). Young men were given gold-painted plastic keys and were told “if they were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven” (Satrapi 99).

Persuaded by false promises of women and houses made of gold and diamonds, these mere children were destined to a far less glorious fate, as indicated by Satrapi who writes: “The key to paradise was for poor people, thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks” (Satrapi 100).

Arguably, however, Marjane, privileged enough to be sheltered from this dark reality, does not fully understand the entire consequences of war until she sees the remnants of it for herself. While out shopping with a friend, Marjane hears a radio report that Iraqi scud missiles exploded in the Tavanir neighborhood—her neighborhood. Devastated by this news, Marjane races home to check on her family. Fortunately, she is greeted by her mother who informs her that her family is okay, but the news that the missile destroyed their neighbor’s home cripples Marjane once more. Walking passed a pile of concrete rubble, Marjane notices the turquoise bracelet that her friend Neda Baba-Levy wore.
When we walked past the Baba-Levy's house, which was completely destroyed, I could feel that she was discreetly pulling me away. Something told me that the Baba-Levys had been at home. Something caught my attention.

I saw a turquoise bracelet. It was Neda's. Her aunt had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday...

The bracelet was still attached to... I don't know what...

No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger.

Figure 2.8 "Marjane's Suffering," by Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis*. p. 142.
Horrified by the realization that Neda and her family are dead, Marjane’s silent agony becomes visible in the last three panels depicting this scene (See Figure 2.8). She covers her mouth as her eyes well into tears; she covers her eyes to block out the light, and in the space that follows—a lingering, empty, black panel—reads: “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (Satrapi 142).

Furthermore, Marjane’s story is one of questions and rebellion. Unable to see the logic in the restrictions enforced by the cultural regime—and perhaps influenced by the rebelliousness of her Marxist parents who engage in war protests, drink wine, and smuggle Western artifacts home to their daughter—Marjane is unafraid to challenge authority. “After the death of Neda Baba-Levy,” she writes, “my life took a new turn. In 1984, I was fourteen and a rebel. Nothing scared me anymore” (Satrapi 143). Expelled from school for hitting her principal during a struggle over a forbidden bracelet she was wearing, Satrapi is moved to yet another school where her confrontational disposition is met with further disdain. Told by one of her instructors that “since the Islamic Republic was founded, we no longer have political prisoners,” Satrapi immediately stands up from her desk and boldly contradicts this statement:

My uncle was imprisoned by the Shah’s regime, but it was the Islamic regime that ordered his execution. You say that we don’t have political prisoners anymore, but we’ve gone from 3,000 prisoners under the Shah to 300,000 under your regime. How dare you lie to us like that? (Satrapi 144)
Outwardly rebellious in her appearance as well, Marjane sports Nike tennis shoes and wears a denim jacket with a Michael Jackson “Thriller” pin. She solicits money from her parents to buy blue jeans and Iron Maiden tapes on the black market. However, efforts at asserting this individuality are met with scorn by the women’s branch of “The Guardians of the Revolution,” a group of loyal regimists selected to arrest improperly veiled women. On one occasion, Marjane is stopped by two such women and subjected to severe questioning (See Figure 2.9). “Why are you wearing those ‘punk shoes’? Is that a Michael Jackson pin on your jacket? Aren’t you ashamed to wear tight jeans like these???” (Satrapi 133). Looming over her like two black towers, the guardians sneer at Marjane, scrutinizing her appearance and threatening to detain her. One of the guardians grabs Marjane’s headscarf and yanks it down over her forehead. “Lower your scarf, you little whore!” she says. To escape punishment, Marjane fabricates a story that her mother is dead and her cruel stepmother will burn her with a clothes iron if she does not return home immediately. “Miraculously,” Marjane is let go (Satrapi 134).

Concerned for their daughter’s safety and interested in securing her education, Marjane’s parents eventually make the decision to send their daughter into a boarding school in Vienna. Exiled from Iran at the age of fourteen, Marjane must learn to make peace with her cultural background while embracing new cultures entirely unlike her own. Marjane’s exodus from Iran begins the odyssey that comprises the sequel to Satrapi’s first book. Together these narratives illustrate a world completely unknown by typical “westerners.”
Their job was to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women.

"These? But these are embroidered slippers!"

"Shut up! They're punk."

It was obvious that she had no idea what punk was.

"And you wear this jacket for basketball too?"

"No, it's Malcolm X, the leader of black Muslims in America."

"What do I see here? Michael Jackson! That symbol of decadence!"

"Don't give me that! It's Michael Jackson!"

"Who? I don't know him."

"Back then, Michael Jackson was still black."

"Cover your scarf, you little whore!"

"Aren't you ashamed to wear tight jeans like these?"

"They creak?!"

"The committee was the HQ of the Guardians of the Revolution."

Figure 2.9 “Marjane Questioned by the Guardians,” by Marjane Satrapi in Persepolis. p. 133.
Through the fusion of both the picture and the word, Satrapi's graphic memoir invites readers to become accomplices to the events that transpire between each of these black and white panels. While the narration is responsible for directing the events that unravel in revolutionary Iran, the visual imagery provides a powerful textual "intersection" that allows readers to understand these external events through the internal response of the character herself.

In all three graphic narratives, *American Born Chinese*, *Blankets*, and *Persepolis I*, the picture, the word, and the world work together in perfect "trimbiosis"—each informing or contradicting the others to provoke critical engagement and thought in the reader. Like Freire's "cultural codifications," these narratives have the potential to begin the type of critical discourse in our students that leads to the essential questions responsible for directing the choices and movement of their lives. Each panel, each frame, each picture, background, line and movement, serves as a type of two-way mirror whereby our choices, experiences, and identities are reflected into each page and back onto ourselves. This type of "reader-response" has powerful implications for teachers interested in provoking the crucial "vocabulary" necessary to raise "critically conscious" and culturally engaged citizens interested in interpreting the world around them.
On my journey as an educator interested in discovering both practical and critical methods for applying graphic narratives in the English classroom, it became important for me to familiarize myself with the preexisting scholarly brick-work invested in providing sensible curricular approaches for incorporating these narratives in the classroom. In the writing that follows, I evaluate recent publications that serve as advocates for the use of graphic narratives in the English classroom. Furthermore, I consider the usefulness of each resource in its ability to meet the needs of future English educators interested in investigating and teaching these narratives in their own classrooms.

Without doubt, comics and graphic novels are undergoing a revival unlike anything prior to the Golden Era of comics in the 1940’s and 50’s. Recognized initially as a librarian’s movement, the rise of the graphic narrative within the educational arena was one met with both excitement and skepticism by interested teachers. In 2006, the same year that Yang’s book *American Born Chinese* was nominated for the National Book Award, the American Library Association (ALA) began listing their own nominations for the “Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens” (Buehler). YALSA, the Young Adult Library Services Association, now dedicates a branch of their work to reviewing graphic novels for interested adolescent readers, and a great number of librarians nationwide have enthusiastically embraced
the medium. In the last year alone, I have witnessed the stacks of graphic novels offered in the young adult section of my local library nearly triple in size.

In 2004, Michelle Gorman, a teen services librarian in North Carolina, published *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens*. An excellent primer on reading and selecting graphic narratives, the book provides a brief history of the comics industry and catalogues hundreds of graphic novels by genre, theme, and appropriateness for readers of all age levels. Similarly, Stephen Weiner, a public librarian in Massachusetts, published early articles on the potential of graphic narratives to meet the literacy needs of adolescent readers. In “Show, Don’t Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom” (2004), Weiner argues that graphic novels are important “transitions” that move students into other literary works. Predominately bibliographic, Weiner’s article—and the series of books he published later, *100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries* (1996) and *101 Best Graphic Novels* (2001), provide curious teachers with comprehensive summaries of the graphic novels available on the market today. Effectively these texts share in the work of Paul Gravett, whose book *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (2005), is an insightful, beautifully rendered page-turner, complete with full-page color renditions of some of the most critically acclaimed graphic novels in publication today. However, while these publications provide a solid foundation for educators interested in learning more about the content of graphic novels, they fall short in their ability to deliver strategies for practical classroom applications of this material.
In 2001, Rocco Versaci, an English professor at Palomar College, published an article in the *English Journal* entitled, “How Comic Books Can Change the Way Our Students See Literature: One Teacher’s Perspective.” In this article, Versaci begins the argument—that he later sustains in his book, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (2007)—that comics have a valid place in the English classroom. Using Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001), Judd Winick’s *Pedro and Me* (2000), and Katherine Arnoldi’s *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (1998) as his examples, Versaci asserts that the “complexity” of the visuals and the “weight of the subject matter” proves the medium’s ability to create “literary” narratives with the potential to probe a variety of complicated social issues (“How Comics” 65). In both this article and in his book, Versaci provides compelling arguments for teachers that support my own philosophies regarding the use of these narratives in English classrooms. Versaci’s book in particular provides careful, close-analysis of a variety of culturally meaningful and socially relevant texts appropriate for classroom study. Furthermore, Versaci’s argument that “comics are able to recreate the world in provocative, and at times, politically charged ways,” (26) maintains my own arguments that comics have the potential to speak to our students lives in significant ways.

Gretchen Schwartz, an English Education professor at Oklahoma University, also advocates critical approaches to teaching graphic novels in her article, “Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies” published in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literature (JAAL)* in 2002. In her article, Schwartz shares that she had “no idea a
‘comic book’ could be so powerful” until a high school student approached her after a German class and introduced her to Spiegelman’s Holocaust tale, *Maus*. Since then, Schwartz has become a notable advocate of the medium, encouraging teachers to consider how graphic novels might be used across the curriculum to teach “complex cognitive skills” and “bring new life into bland textbooks” (*Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies*). However, though the tenor of each of these publications fits positively within my own critical framework for reading and understanding the medium, neither Versaci nor Schwartz consider how these narratives can be used in the English classroom in practical ways.

In addition to Versaci and Schwarz, a wide variety of literacy experts “weighed-in” on graphic narratives in “Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom,” an article published in *The Council Chronicle* (of the NCTE) in 2005, yet despite the very inviting title, the article offers very little practical discussion of how to engage students in the critical study of comics and graphic novels. Rather, John Lowe, chair of the Sequential Art Department at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia and Shelley Hong Xu, professor of Teacher Education at California State University, promote graphic novels as “bridging literacies”—texts with the ability to model important reading conventions and thereby transition students into more literary texts, as testified by Lowe who shares he “literally went from *Batman* to Faulkner.” While I respect the support and enthusiasm Lowe and Xu demonstrate for the medium, I have trouble supporting their “comics-as-a-stepping-stone-to-the-classics” approach which in my view invalidates the medium as a
powerful literary agent, capable of producing both aesthetically pleasing and critically valid responses of its own. In addition, the suggestion that the inclusion of the "image" into a "written" text in some way simplifies the text or titillates reluctant readers greatly distresses me, as it my own firmly held belief that the "image" is just as valuable as the "word" for creating meaning in graphic texts. However, despite my personal misgivings, I can appreciate Xu's caution to teachers "to do some research before rushing to include comics and graphic novels in their teaching plans."

Additionally, Xu's recommendation that teachers "respect students' enjoyment" of these texts and foster conversations regarding the medium with parents and administrators is sound advise as well.

Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* published in 2004, provided "comic relief for busy ESL teachers" and "a superhero-sized selection of research-based practical activities ... [for] second language learners at all levels" (Freeman and Freeman qtd. on Heinemann.com). Directed primarily to an audience of ESL educators, Cary argues that anxiety, (what he refers to as the "affective filter") is lowered when students have opportunities to engage in highly visual texts. By providing "more understandable messages" comics aide in "greater and faster language acquisition" (Cary 12). Furthermore, Cary advocates the use of comics for fostering important social interactions between students. By heterogeneously grouping students according to their language proficiencies, students are given opportunities to discuss the visual information in comics and thereby build higher vocabulary and comprehension skills. Because the
process of acquiring language skills requires attention to not only verbal, but also non-verbal cues (such as body language, voice inflection, facial expressions, etc), the multimodal process of examining comics for each of these layers of meaning provide further ways for ESL students to obtain necessary language skills. Cary’s book provides comprehensive lesson plans for using comics in the ESL classroom, making his text very user-friendly for teachers. Furthermore, for Cary, students are not only readers of comics, but they are the authors and creators of them as well. Engaging in the process of making comics, according to Cary, provides ample opportunities for students to practice higher-order thinking and language acquisition skills. In its ability to meet the needs of ESL students in particular, Cary’s arguments for the use of comics in the classroom are well supported by the prevailing scholarship in his field. However, I am wary of Cary’s suggestion, once again, that the “images” in comics are somehow “easier” for students to interpret and to understand. This goes against my own convictions that comics are a multimodal, and thereby, highly complex medium, that require multiple levels of critical and sensorial interpretation on behalf of the reader.

*Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (2006) edited by comics scholar and enthusiast James Bucky Carter, represented a further shift in English education recognizing the validity of graphic narratives and the importance of including them in the English classroom. Published through the NCTE, the book is comprised of a series of essays by respected scholars in the field of Adolescent Literacy and English education. *Building Literacy*
promotes the alignment of literary classics with a wide variety of graphic narratives that explore similar, intertextual themes. In J.D. Schraffenberger's article, “Visualizing Beowulf: Old English Gets Graphic,” for example, Schraffenberger examines popular comic adaptations of Beowulf, most notably, the work of Gareth Hinds, and argues that the “visual-storytelling” present in these adaptations “combats the major obstacle of the original text for student readers—the language” (Carter 39). Organized around a series of critical questions: “What does [Beowulf] look like in the beginning as opposed to the ending? What is a Hero supposed to look like? And “Which of the monsters is most vividly imagined?” Schraffenberger promotes modes of literary interpretation that validate the inter-connected relationship between words and images. In “A Multimodal Approach to Addressing Anti-Semitism: Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist and Will Eisner’s Fagin the Jew,” contributors Allen Webb and Brandon Guisgand question both the visual representation of Fagin the Jew in Eisner’s graphic novel and other film media alongside the “question of anti-Semitism in Dickens’s day” (Carter 114). According to Webb and Guisgand, “Students can best understand anti-Semitism when they go beyond Dickens’s writing and connect it with popular culture in a more in-depth exploration—one that includes historical context, images, film, Internet research, guest speakers—and graphic novels” (119). Other articles—including the one written by Fisher and Frey described in greater detail below—explore home and family identities in Satrapi’s graphic memoir, Persepolis and invite discussions regarding teenage motherhood through Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter and Arnoldi’s graphic novel The Amazing True Story of a
Teenage Single Mom. As a collection, the essays in Building Literacy demonstrate creative options for incorporating graphic narratives into the traditional English canon—strategies that teachers are undoubtedly eager to learn more about.

Perhaps most influential in guiding the direction of my own study were two articles in particular: “Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School,” (2004) by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey and “More Than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies,” (2007) by Dale Jacobs. Professors of Language and Literacy at San Diego State University, Fisher and Frey were selected as the recipients of the Kate and Paul Farmer Award for Outstanding Writing (NCTE) for this article on new literacies in the English classroom. Clearly unique from the work published by those before them, Fisher and Frey’s primary ambition in the article was to study the effects of using graphic novels with “urban English language learners and native English speakers” in the secondary education English classroom. The article imparts the authors’ experiences “teaching a ninth-grade writing course that emphasized the use of popular culture as a vehicle for developing students’ writing skills.” Careful observers of their students’ reading habits, Fisher and Frey noticed that many of the students were engaged in the reading of Japanese Manga, graphic novels, and zines (independently published “fanzines” or magazines). Using Leslie Oster’s “Think Aloud” technique (2001), the students were guided through the reading of a short excerpt from Will Eisner’s New York: The Big City (2000). During this lesson, students were directed to read the story while the instructors paused at certain moments to “point out techniques the artist...used to
convey meaning." The lesson continued with students brainstorming descriptive vocabulary that might accompany the images in the text and ended with students constructing a written narrative of the story itself. Given the success of the lesson, Fisher and Frey chose further selections from graphic novels to help engage students in discussions of literary conventions such as “mood,” “tone,” and “word choice.” According to the authors, “Using graphic novels to scaffold writing instruction helped students practice the craft of writing and gain necessary skills to become competent readers.” Compelling student writing and testimony is interwoven into the body of the article, strengthening the argument of the authors, who are clearly invested in measuring the effectiveness of these texts in the Language Arts classroom. For Fisher and Frey, graphic novels, Manga, and the Internet represent a type of “visual vocabulary” that aides in student comprehension and provides both visual and multimodal methods for accessing and analyzing written and pictorial information.

Finally, in “More Than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies,” (2007), author Dale Jacobs offers a twofold argument for teaching comics in the English classroom:

1) Reading comics involves a complex, multimodal literacy; and

2) By using comics in our classrooms we can help students develop as critical and engaged readers of multimodal texts. (19)

Jacobs, a professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Windsor University, argues that educators who focus on comics and graphic novels as tools for motivating reluctant readers or for stimulating students into reading more “significant’ literary texts,
"place severe limitations on the possibilities of our uses of the medium as literacy educators" (20). Through a close-reading analysis of the linguistic, audio, visual, and gestural modes of interpretation present in a passage from the comic, *Polly and the Pirates*, Jacobs argues that comics are "complex environments" that provide multiple realms for meaning-making. Referencing the work of the New London Group, Jacobs concludes that "embracing the idea of multimodal literacy in relation to comics" allows teachers to "help students engage critically with the ways of making meaning that exist all around them"—television, the Internet, movies, and more. However, while this close-reading of a graphic narrative provides profound ways for teachers to begin understanding how comics and graphic novels can promote critical analysis and multiple literacies, unlike Fisher and Frey’s work, Jacob’s article does not demonstrate how his theories work with real teachers and students.

Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly the works of Fisher and Frey and Jacobs that have greatly inspired the approaches I have undertaken in my own study of graphic narratives in the English classroom. Like Fisher and Frey, I want readers of my work to enjoy plentiful opportunities to experience the “real voices” of the students I had the pleasure of working with. In my observations, I was interested in reporting their responses, cataloguing their trials, and learning from the ways each student worked to make meaning from the selected texts. Furthermore, I wanted to bring comics and graphic novels into my classroom in a critical way. Like Jacobs, I am interested in looking beyond narrow definitions regarding the use of the medium as a “primer” or “bridge” to somehow “better” or more “worthwhile” reading. The more I learned to
read graphic narratives for their visual, verbal, spatial, gestural, and auditory qualities, the more I began to appreciate the complexity of the medium. Similar to my experiences engaging in Shakespearean plays or the works of Milton, or the poetry of Langston Hughes or Tennyson, or Shelley, I have discovered that each time I approach a graphic novel I encounter something completely new. My understanding of these “new literacies” is constantly challenged by the unique fusion of the verbal/visual, and my appreciation for the texts, because of this experience, only validates the beautiful perplexity of the medium even more.
CHAPTER III

CRITICAL, MULTIMODAL, AND CROSSTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF GRAPHIC NARRATIVES IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter, and the one that follows, is to narrate the experiences of a particular body of students, in this case, first-year literary interpretation students at Western Michigan University, as they engaged in the critical and cross-textual examination of graphic narratives in conjunction with traditional, canonical literature. The testimony and narration that follows represents a cross section of the wide variety of responses and interpretations put forward by students across three separate sections of the course. Beginning in the spring of 2008 and ending a year later, this study included 44 participants whose contributions in the form of in-class writing assignments, discussion, and online blogs directed the focus of this study. As an “active participant” with this group, I sought to emulate what Spradley describes in Participant Observation as “doing what others do” by fully immersing myself in the behaviors, cultural experiences, and knowledge of the participants. To be an “active” or “full” participant means that in order to document accurately the experiences of those studied, the observer (or ethnographer) “must
attempt to learn and master them for himself—to participate in them to the fullest extent possible” (qtd. in Spradley 60). In this sense, therefore, the observer learns from his participants, “but he learns from himself as well” (qtd. in Spradley 61). As the instructor of record, I invited my students to undertake this journey with me—to travel into unchartered territory and to record the discoveries we made there. As a result, I found satisfaction not only in guiding the direction of these interactions, but by participating in them as well. Outside of the benefit of fulfilling my research objectives, this collaborative process of learning—where both the students and I were mutually responsible for developing and defending a variety of interpretations—created a “community of learners,” interested in challenging, validating, and encouraging one another’s connections and experiences in positive, affirming ways.

These three classrooms were places of experimentation, speculation, and cooperation. Challenging formulaic approaches to teaching literature, I jammed my syllabus full of “new literacies”—comics, graphic novels, and Japanese Manga—and I paired these works to a canonical partner with similar, interconnected themes. I was curious to discover the kinds of “conversations” that might be created between and across these texts. Could Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel resonate with Toni Morrison’s work? Would Blankets inspire my students to question their own systems of belief? How would the “classics” converge with the “comics” to provide opportunities for critical meaning-making and interpretation? I was full of questions, and so were my students. What we discovered along the way is the story that comprises this chapter.
Meet the Class

Traditionally, English 1100: Literary Interpretation is an introductory English course designed to expose freshman-level college students to the fundamental principles of literary theory, analysis, and criticism through the study of the three major literary genres: novels, poetry, and drama. Department-wide objectives for the course indicate that students will gain proficiencies in the vocabulary of literary analysis, receive a basic introduction to literary theory, read with close attention to language, form, and meaning, participate actively in the analysis of literature, and develop interpretive perspectives through written literary analysis. To fulfill the objectives of my study, it was important to me as well that students learn to think critically about the historical, cultural, social and political contexts present in their readings and engage in discussions of these features with their own experiences and perspectives in mind. Structured in this way, I put forward a variety of primary essential questions that might guide the direction of our discussions through each individual text, as listed below:

- What is literature?
- What are the elements that make a work “literary”?
- How is literary “quality” defined, determined, and perpetuated?
- How is our reading experience of graphic narratives different or similar to our reading experiences of traditional literature?
• What are the critical and cultural messages supported by each text?

• In what way do these texts speak to our own lives and experiences?

Through a wide variety of responses, including in-class writing, individual student blogs, small and whole group discussions, and formal papers, students explored the merits of each of these questions, sifting through the various stages of frustration, confusion, revelation, and insight. Each of the three semesters, my students—bleary-eyed, pajama-clad, and slogging to class at the bright and early hour of eight a.m.—gathered under the bright fluorescent lights of Brown Hall, hiding behind their elaborate scarves and hoodies, hair thrown back in piggy-tales and sloppy buns, and slumped over from the weight of their backpacks. Those wise enough to plan ahead brought steaming cups of coffee and sipped at them as they scanned through their reading for the day, oftentimes a last-minute occupation. It was easy to tell who had been up all night by the various levels of (un)responsiveness that followed after my (also bleary-eyed, but cheerful) welcome. Unlike the previous classrooms I had the opportunity to teach in, this room was technologically “cutting-edge.” Situated in a wireless laptop lab, each student had immediate access to his/her own Macintosh computer which allowed us to perform in ways, as a class, that was uncommon for typical classrooms. At the beginning of each semester, students were tutored through the process of creating their own blog. This blog became a place where they collected their ideas regarding the texts and “commented,” through interconnected
discussions with their peers, on the perspectives posted there. Multimodal
themselves, the blogs were vibrant places where students posted artwork, pictures,
quotes, links, music, videos, and biographical information for others to engage in.
Each morning, students booted up a laptop, pulled up their blog pages, and prepared
to respond to the writing prompt related to their assigned reading for the day. Ample
whiteboards, a technology cart, a document camera, and an observation room made
this space ideal for classroom instruction. Even the tables and chairs, set on wheels
for easy movement, could be arranged to accommodate a multitude of classroom
activities.

Contrary to what I expected, I was surprised to find that the composition of
my classes extended far beyond the typical first-year college freshman. While a good
deal of students—I’d say the majority—were eighteen to nineteen year-olds, recently
graduated from high school, many of my students were juniors or seniors, enrolled in
the course to fulfill general education requirements. Another significant group
(roughly a quarter of my students) were non-traditional adult students returning to
college, often with children and full-time jobs of their own. Despite my initial beliefs
as well, the majority of my students had declared majors in subjects other than
English—psychology, history, physical education, media studies, music, and even
chemistry. As a result, each student approached the reading material in unique and
unexpected ways. My task was not as simple as “teaching freshman English majors
how to read literature”—a sort of “preaching to the choir” approach, but rather
became a continual process of negotiating both my students’ abilities and interests in
conjunction with their individual goals as students across a wide spectrum of disciplines.

In addition, while I am passionate about applying theories and approaches to literature that emphasize issues of race, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity, the majority of my students identified themselves (like me) as white, middle-class, and Christian. Demographically, roughly sixty percent of my students were white females, twenty-five percent were white males, and only ten percent self-identified as minority students. In the three semesters that I taught the class, I encountered only one African-American student, one Native-American student, one Middle-Eastern student, and two Asian students. Probing texts for evidence of racial intolerance, white privilege, and cultural difference therefore, became a task that many of my students met with a large degree of misunderstanding and resistance. Asking students to confront these issues oftentimes (more than not) led to a classroom “Full of ‘resisting’ students who did not want to learn new pedagogical practice [and] did not want to be in a classroom that differed in any way from the norm” (Teaching to Transgress 9). In my efforts to move students away from their comfort zones, I experienced a reaction—a backlash—similar to what bell hooks describes regarding her own students in Teaching to Transgress:

To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening. And though they were not the majority, their spirit of rigid resistance seemed always to be more powerful than any will to intellectual openness and pleasure in learning. More than any other class I had
taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting, learning community. (9)

However, rather than chastising or berating my students for airing their discursive (and sometimes offensive) beliefs regarding cultural difference, I continually encouraged them to consider the implications of their conclusions. I asked them to read open-mindedly—to consider the multiple voices and perspectives inherent in each text—and challenge their pre-existing notions regarding equity and justice. I asked them to become, as hooks suggests, “enlightened witnesses...critically vigilant about the world around us” (Cultural Criticism). Furthermore, I helped them to confront their assumptions about the process of education by reminding them that the purpose of engaging in critical ideas is not to make us “comfortable” with ourselves but rather “uncomfortable,”—to be willing to put ourselves in a place of tension or uncertainty in order to arrive at the inevitable truths about ourselves and those around us. For students used to reading and assessing texts for their aesthetic qualities and use of traditional literary devices alone, transitioning from (or transgressing) this single-minded approach was admittedly difficult for many students. Yet working through the discord, I continued to not only challenge, but validate and nurture my students’ perspectives. By creatively pairing both graphic narratives with traditional narratives, I encouraged my students to join the “conversation” created by both texts—their voices were a crucial component in the process of creating meaning. I wanted them to confront issues of relationship, belief, identity, and conflict.
Ultimately, I wanted them to experience what Henry Giroux describes as the “merge and shift” of identities...the cultural and social spheres marked by a plurality of languages and cultures” (*Doing Cultural Studies: Youth and the Challenge of Pedagogy*)—and for the most part, I found my students to be receptive to this challenge.

**Fanboys, Skeptics, and Tweeners: Exploring Preconceptions**

Before I could begin measuring my students’ responses to graphic narratives, it was important for me to understand the preexisting attitudes they brought with them into my classroom regarding these alternatives. At the conclusion of my research, I discovered that there were three distinct categories of student that emerged, what I refer to as “The Fanboys/Fangirls”—the avid comics fans, “The Skeptics”—those hesitant to accept graphic narratives as “literature,” and the “Tweeners”—everyone in-between. Not surprisingly, the responses of most of my students at the beginning of the semester typically demonstrated a good deal of skepticism. On those first, tenuous days when I went over the required readings and expectations indicated by the course syllabus, students often offered puzzled, confused looks. More than a few eyebrows raised when they realized we would be reading “comics” and graphic novels. The first semester I taught the class, I was genuinely unprepared for how the students might respond. It was my guess (perhaps assumption) that because these eighteen and nineteen year-olds were part of what I considered to be the “Net-Gen” or “Next-Gen” (Tapscott), that they would be thrilled by the proposition of reading
visual texts in a literature class. Inundated with media from a variety of outlets—the Internet, television, IPods, cell phones, text messages, movies, billboards, advertisements, (and oftentimes, many of these all at once)—these students represented an era of technological sophisticates far removed from previous generations. Evidence proving the adeptness of this generation of multi-taskers was as simple as taking a stroll around campus. It was rare to see students who were not on their cell phones, on their laptops, or plugged-in to their hand-held game devices or mp3 players. Some days I even made a little game of counting the number of students carrying on their one-sided cell phone monologues as I walked from my office to my classroom. Needless to say, I eventually lost track. Other times, after a satisfying reading of Thoreau—“Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!”—I would challenge my students to see how long they could function without the aide of their technological hardware. Days? Weeks? Months? Bewildered at the thought, some students even exclaimed, “I could never do it! I would rather die!”

It didn’t seem unreasonable then, given my assumptions of this particular generation of learners, that there would be some excitement—and if not that, a certain degree of curious interest—in visual narratives. However something about “comics” in a “literary interpretation” class just didn’t seem to jive. “This isn’t going to be your grandmother’s garden-variety English class,” I usually warned them. “While it’s true that we’ll be reading a good deal of literature and poetry, we’ll also be reading alternative literacies as well. If you’re looking for the typical tourist trip through the Norton Anthology, then this is probably not the class for you.” A few
students usually widened their eyes and looked at me nervously at this point. “But, if you’re willing to stay, if you’re willing to experiment and to play with literature, then this class has a lot of interesting texts and ideas waiting for you.” I’m happy to report that most of my students remained in the class, though there were, of course, a few expected casualties.

In the arena of “skepticism,” one student in particular personified (and proudly articulated) the pressing doubts shared by many of his peers. A non-traditional student, an intellectual, and a philosopher, Brian was not afraid to call me out and (politely) demand to know how “comics” could be “literature.” In truth, Brian’s questions—and oftentimes, biting satire—challenged me to solidify my own theories regarding graphic narratives. In this way, engaging in these discussions with Brian (and other students like him) was an activity I met with great interest. Reluctant to waste any time, it was on Brian’s first day that he respectfully demanded some answers:

“Can I talk to you a second in private please?” Hastily shoving my laptop back in its case, I turned and noticed Brian standing patiently next to me.

“Sure,” I responded, gathering up my books, “what’s on your mind?”

“I’m having trouble accepting the direction of this class. I’m thinking of dropping, but I really don’t know what else will fit into my schedule. Can we sit down a minute and talk about this?” Feeling a bit nervous, I gestured to a few seats and invited Brian to sit down.

“So, what are your specific objections, if I may ask?” I inquired.
"Well," he responded hesitantly, "Do you really think comics are literature? I mean, have you read "Get Fuzzy"? It's funny and insightful at times, but I would never consider it to be literature." I had to admit to him that I didn't know what "Get Fuzzy" was, and when I finally gathered that it was a comic strip, a dawning realization that Brian was associating my use of the words "comics" and "graphic novels" with the colorful Sunday comic strips began to take shape.

"I'm more interested in looking at what I call graphic narratives—they're quite a bit longer, and the ones I've chosen for us to study deal with some pretty significant issues."

"But they talk in balloons. How can that be serious? I can't believe that any narrative written in that way could have much substance...are we going to be reading any real literature in here?"

"Well, of course," I responded. "In fact I'm interested in seeing how the class responds to the way each of these texts, the graphic novels and the traditional novels, work together. "American Born Chinese," I said, leaning over to shuffle through my bookbag, "is actually a very complicated, layered narrative. It uses Chinese mythology, and interconnected stories to illustrate important messages about cultural identity." Brian watched, disbelieving, as I flipped through a few pages. "The story works well with Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, which as you probably know, has received a good deal of literary acclaim." Brian seemed un convinced. I paused for a moment and asked, "What is it that you would like to be reading Brian?"
“Well, like you said, I’m interested in looking through the anthologies of literature, reading some of the classics, learning more about philosophy, those kinds of things.”

“So you’re looking for Homer and Milton and Eliot and Shakespeare.”

“Maybe not Shakespeare, but yes, something more like that. Basically I’m here to learn Walt Whitman, not Walt Disney.”

I laughed.

“Well, even though the course incorporates graphic novels, we will also be reading from some of the “greats” as well. We’ll be looking at Emerson and Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Shakespeare and even….Walt Whitman.”

“So you think this is really worthwhile? What is it that you value about it? Why would you say it’s literature?” His tone seemed almost accusatory.

As I sat there thinking about his questions, I realized this was it—this was what my research was supposed to be about. These were the questions I was supposed to know the answers to, but I wasn’t sure if I knew them. I fiddled with my pen, nervously clicking the lid on and off, on and off, until I realized what I was doing and abruptly stopped. What if I couldn’t answer this question? My answer spilled out in a disjointed reply.

“It’s not perhaps literature in the sense that we are used to thinking of the word, but I would argue, and so would many scholars interested in this medium, that comics have great potential, through the combination of word and image, to provide
opportunities for creative and critical interpretation.” I watched Brian’s expression glaze over as I fumbled through this less-than-scholarly explanation. “Honestly,” I admitted, “I never thought I would be thinking of graphic novels in this way either, until I actually read one. Have you read any graphic novels?” Brian shared that he had flipped through the graphic novels assigned in the class after he purchased them at the bookstore.

“Well, yes,” he said. “And some of them had good stories, but I didn’t see how they were any better than any of the literature I’ve read.” I nodded as I listened.

“I want you to know,” I began, “that just because these readings are assigned to you, it doesn’t mean that you have to become a “comics fan” or even enjoy them. What I’m ultimately looking for is that you can think about the reading in a critical way, and that you can share your interpretations, and even skepticism, with others.” Brian frowned a little. “Why don’t you think it over before you drop the class,” I suggested, “with the understanding that if you find no merit whatsoever in these texts you can feel free to share that perspective with your classmates. In fact, I would enjoy hearing that point of view. My interest in graphic novels is not so much because I am a “fan” or that I want to “convert” others to the medium, I’m simply interested in what students do with them when they read them—how they think about them and what they see in them.” Brian sat thoughtfully for a few moments.

“So I can disagree? I can remain skeptical?”
“Yes, I would welcome that point of view. Be the skeptic, challenge the texts, ask tough questions of them, weigh their merits, listen to your classmates and make up your mind about them along the way.”

“I might be able to do that,” he said.

The next class period, Brian came back.

In the days that followed, as I instructed my students on how to develop and personalize their individual class blogs, I noticed that Brian had titled his blog “The Skeptic.” In the autobiographical section of his blog he wrote:

Why “The Skeptic”? Well, I have to admit that I am having a little trouble with the idea of a "graphic novel." It sounds like an oxymoron to me. But I’m willing to be open minded about this and try to have some fun with it. After all, I am here to learn. I doubt that I will ever be completely convinced but if I’ve learned one thing it is that I never know what’s gonna happen next.

In the same way, I never really knew quite what to expect from Brian either, but his skepticism intrigued me. In place of a picture of himself, he posted an image of a monkey, hands propped up under his chin, wearing a thoughtful expression—like “The Thinker.” In an in-class writing assignment addressing the questions, “What are “real” books? and “What knowledge (assumptions, prejudices, ideas, etc) do you have about visual texts such as comics or graphic novels?” Brian wrote:

Comics are books. That’s a fact I’ll have to learn to live with. That however, says nothing of quality. I think the “graphic novel” has its
place and it is certainly a valid art form. But of what art? I read

*Blankets* and *American Born Chinese*, both were entertaining but that

was about it. Is that all a book is about? Entertainment? I don’t

happen to think so. I think that comics still seem to be juvenile.

Furthermore, perhaps to make his point in a more visual and playful way, Brian

posted a clip from a “Get Fuzzy” comic strip on his blog, entitled “A Kitty Litter-ary

Moment with Bucky B. Katt,” a parody of Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping by the

Woods on a Snowy Evening” (See Figure 3.1).

![GET FUZZY](image)

**BY DARBY CONLEY**


Underneath the comic Brian posted the caption, “Would Frost laugh or roll over in his

grave?”—to which many of his classmates responded, “roll over in his grave.”
The real reason I mention Brian is that his perceptions were not unlike many of those expressed by his peers, not only in his class, but in each of the three classes I taught during the course of my research. For example, in response to Brian’s blogs, one student wrote, “I have also been somewhat of a skeptic regarding graphic novels and the like. For some reason I’ve never associated comics with "real" literature. Bias? Yes, but maybe I’ll come around.” Other students were unafraid to articulate related ideas regarding their initial “preconceptions” of the comics medium. Similar to my own reactions prior to reading my first graphic novel, Emily wrote:

I've never really been interested in visual texts, because they have always seemed childish and nerdy to me. I've always thought of little boys with sticky fingers as the main demographic of comic book readers. I've never entertained the idea that they had any sort of adult material or interest in them. However, I do like the movie Sin City and I know that was a graphic novel. I've also always thought visual texts were for people without enough imagination to read a novel without pictures. However, I am willing to have my mind changed.

This idea was shared by Erica as well who wrote, “I personally have never enjoyed comics, I always thought comics...were uninteresting and something boys did.” Both of these statements were of great interest to me, particularly the implications that comics were intended for a specific type of male reader and more intriguing, that visuals somehow implied that the reading was easier or “less imaginative.” Indeed, many of my students’ initial objections to graphic narratives were on the basis that
reading "comics" meant that the experience of creating imaginative pictures from the
written word was somehow compromised or co-opted by the illustrations—the
creative work had already been done for them, resulting in a much less satisfying
reading experience. These ideas were reflected by Ashley Michelle when she wrote:

Since I do not have much experience with comics, (besides skimming
them when I was younger in the paper) I don't have much knowledge
about this type of "reading". I enjoy reading something and creating an
idea or vision in my head after I comprehend it. When it's all already
out there for me, I'm not allowed to imagine anything for myself
really. I believe that's the fun in reading. I really enjoy when authors
describe scenes or characters and you can picture in your mind
whatever you want it to look like. I don't like to feel "forced" to accept
the image in front of me because that's what the author thinks. On the
other hand, I love art and the concept of drawing. It takes talent to
create a story-line and illustrations as well. I just prefer novels.

However, while the majority of my students expressed reserved sentiments
regarding the graphic narrative, the presence of a small handful of "fanboys" and
"fangirls"—who considered themselves avid aficionados of the medium—helped
balance prevailing preconceptions by lending their unique expertise. One such
student was Azwar, a Malaysian media studies major, whose immediate reaction
upon discovering that his "literature" class would be reading graphic narratives was
that of disbelief and elation—not unlike that of discovering that he had just won the
state lottery. A student who we might refer to as Brian’s evil nemesis (tights not included), Azwar was eager to dig in to the assigned texts, and even posted links for downloading bootleg copies of the assigned graphic narratives on his blog.

 Appropriately, Azwar’s blog was illustrated with pictures of robots, parody videos of his favorite video games, and clips from his favorite comics as well. Approaching me after class one day, excited to share some of his comic preferences, Azwar gratefully proclaimed, “It’s about time someone took comics seriously. Comics deserve to be viewed as literature.” These ideas surfaced later in his blog in response to the questions stated previously:

   Graphic novels and comics are as much "real" books as anything else.
   All things being equal, they still present ideas, observations and commentary on the world around us. To dismiss a whole medium as being "unreal" or "less serious" because of biases is idiotic and, sadly, rather expected. I chalk it up to Disney and the Disney-fication of the illustrated art.

 A self-proclaimed, “long time fan of the comic medium” who admitted to having to “defend his hobby countless times,” Azwar acknowledged that he had few if any hang-ups regarding comics. Azwar confessed that his initial interest in the medium was because of the art. Later, however, he shared that his discovery of comics with “solid stories” led him to admire the ingenuity of these texts even more. In defense of comics and graphic novels Azwar wrote:
The stories are generally faster to get through than having to wade through the normal books, but have enough fodder for the imagination to latch onto. Where in watching movies I become a consumer and only a consumer, comics allow a little bit more of self interpretation, giving a nice middle ground. Nowadays, I’m happy to report that comics have reached a point where both art and writing have become important in the storytelling process.

Not wholly unexpected, this statement led to a good-natured debate (via the blog) between Brian and Azwar. In response to Azwar’s assertions, Brian commented:

Given your line of reasoning, Does this make sense.......?

Movies = little to no imagination required, Comics = some imagination required, Books = lots of imagination required.

I don’t think anyone really questions (in this class anyway) if comics are real books or art, the real question that we are leading up to, and I'm looking forward to this is.... "are comics literature?"

To which Azwar responded:

I'm not demeaning the medium of movies. That's not my intention in the slightest. I'm merely pointing out the amount of interaction required of each medium and the amount of personal inflection added to the experience by the viewer/reader. In the case of movies, although there is a lot of imagination involved in the undertaking, the viewer is mostly just a consumer. But that is neither here nor there. Regarding
the question of literature... If the qualifications for literature are solely that it makes a statement about the world around us, then yes, comics can be literature. It just depends on which comic you're addressing or referring to. Just like any book.

While this playful banter ping-ponged about the room, most students found themselves trapped somewhere in the quiet purgatory in between. Open to the ideas of both the “Brians” and the “Azwars,” the blogs of these “tweeners” fluctuated between thoughtful admiration and blunt disregard for the medium.

Working through her initial reactions to Scott McCloud’s book Understanding Comics, the first graphic narrative (or rather handbook on the graphic narrative written in graphic novel form) that the students were assigned to read, Nashon investigated these contradictions in her own “think-aloud” style:

McCloud—what what. I dig--don't make fun of me for saying that. ...BUT. I truly am more interested in this book than I trusted myself to be on impact. And hey, it's not that I don't like comics, because I read 'em now and again, but I'm genuinely likin' it, which is cool. And it's a quick read, too...My initial response was straight-up surprise, and still is. I knew that he would use comics to explain what comics are and why he loves them...he really wants to relate to his readers and get them engaged for real hardcore/fun understanding of this art form. Which it is. And, I, the naive artist, took that for granted a bit. There's a lot more thought going into comics than I have given credit to in the
past--I mean I gave it a little--but this stuff is a science! Basically. The whole thing's enticing, and I really respond well to passion. He's got it.

Uh--What challenged me? I guess, the fact that just when I think I've got it all figured out--McCloud shows me more. Like, when he actually added real detail to his character--and said--"Would you listen to me if I looked like this?" And, I was all: "Prrrobably not." I've enjoyed his insight thus far. I like. I Dig.

Likewise, discussing both her “comics” preconceptions and the impact of McCloud’s text to help her redress her original assumptions, Jeanine added:

[Comics] were nothing I could really relate to, I mean, after all, I can't fly, sling webs, or create laser beams or storms from my eyes. So I guess to be completely honest, I kind of looked down on them and saw them as kind of geeky and childish. Reading McCloud’s book has changed my thoughts on comics... I mean the very fact that an informative book was written/drawn in comic book fashion shows me that complex ideas CAN come from such pages.

As indicated by both Nashon and Janine’s statements, the introduction of McCloud’s book Understanding Comics greatly complicated the initial assertions of many of my students regarding “comics” and graphic novels. Now faced with their first graphic narrative, each student had the responsibility of weighing whether or not their original assumptions were valid. Most, like Nashon, expressed surprise and interest in the text. They recognized the complicated inner-workings of comics in ways they had
not considered previously. Operating at different levels of familiarity, some students, like Becky, a “fangirl” and self-proclaimed “Manga/comic book master of sorts” found the reading to be enticing and palatable. Others—newcomers—struggled to make it through the entire book, feeling enormously bogged down by the profusion of images scattered about the page. They expressed sentiments like, “I don’t know where I’m supposed to begin and where I am supposed to end,” or “I have a headache from doing all of this reading, there’s too much stuff on each page!” In this sense, those who argued that the medium was “kiddie-stuff” had to reevaluate their prior assumptions. If indeed the work required to “read” a graphic narrative was harder than reading a “regular” novel, as some of my students later admitted, then they could no longer dispute the power of the medium to transcend its “cartoonish” reputation. Some students, like Kyle, simply needed a solid understanding of the established conventions of comics before they could begin to appreciate them. For example, Kyle wrote:

McCloud made me realize that the reader and his or her subconscious play much more into the reading of comics than I would have assumed. An example of this that really sticks out in my mind is where in the first panel the reader is shown a man raising an axe to another man, telling him he is going to die. In the next panel the reader is shown a cityscape with a painful scream. It is up to the reader’s imagination to figure out what happened in "the gutter"…This action of putting the pieces together in one’s head is what McCloud calls
"closure." This chapter made me appreciate comics more because I had never really realized the amount of "closure" that is involved in them. It is my opinion now, that comics give the reader much more opportunity to use their imagination than novels or film.

Ashley also shared similar revelations in her blog regarding *Understanding Comics*. While she initially struggled to make sense of all of the images that leapt off of McCloud's pages, her "light bulb" moment occurred when she realized that reading "comics" meant learning how to read/view the pictures and the words simultaneously, and sometimes, even, the spaces *inbetween*.

After reading McCloud's text, I found myself almost confused with his way of thinking...I'm more into reading books and creating a vision for myself...[McCloud's text and opinions] are almost demanding. Since [the reading] was unfamiliar to me, I disagreed on numerous occasions...However, in Chapter Three, [McCloud] says, "The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen," which I strongly agree with. Comics are a form of art and vision. What's in between the panels is left for the reader to create, not the artist.

When students realized that their *participation* in the story was a key element to how the narrative itself operates, they began to take more ownership over the interpretations they discovered there. Contrary to what most students believed, interpretation in comics was not so much about interpreting the information *available* to them as it was about interpreting what was *not* available to them—to be able to see,
as McCloud suggested, the *unseen*. This “reading between the panels” approach became instrumental to my student’s ability to “read” and interpret these texts.

To help my students understand these concepts, I asked them to reflect metacognitively on their experiences as a reader/viewer of these texts. In discussion following their reading of *Understanding Comics*, I asked them to raise their hands if they focused solely on the words, as I did originally. Not surprisingly, more than half of my students generally raised their hands. Together we discussed how adopting new reading approaches might create a more satisfying and critical reading of both the visual and linguistic information on the page. To begin this important conversation, I engaged my students in what I called a “comics close-reading” activity designed to help them isolate the specific multimodal features in each panel in order to derive meaning from the “symbiosis” or fusion of the picture and the word. Recognizing the tendency of most of my students to skim through the written information and sometimes skip over the visuals altogether, the overall purpose of this assignment was to help students *slow down* their reading patterns and help them to identify the iconic and symbolic significance of the visual information available from each panel. Furthermore, by applying the principles of both visual and multimodal literacy, the students began to recognize other avenues of meaning-making that they had not previously considered. I asked them to look carefully at the placement of the characters in the panels and to consider “spatial” ways of knowing. They scrutinized the “gestural” behavior of each character as well, learning to inflect emotion onto the characters based on their facial expressions and body movement.
They learned to examine shapes, backgrounds, lines, and color for their emblematic impact on the passage, and they learned to *listen* to each panel—to understand the "auditory" cues inherent on each new page. Granted, this exercise took a great deal of time and practice to execute well. I asked my students to share their "close-reads" with the students seated next to them, and then later we chose exceptional examples from each group to discuss together as a whole class. In this way, multimodal and critical strategies for reading graphic narratives were constantly modeled to the students. While some students continued to balk at the suggestion that they shouldn't "judge a book by its panels," others seemed to experience a "great awakening" of sorts. Those who previously thought graphic novels were "simple" and "easy," began to report that it was taking a much longer time for them to get through the reading when they dedicated themselves to reading it well. At the same time though, many students began to share a new sense of satisfaction in the reading, even feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. By the time we had finished *American Born Chinese*, I noticed a dramatic shift in the attitudes and approaches exercised by my students. I felt confident that the most difficult barriers had been broken, and I looked forward to seeing each new narrative through my student's eyes.
Critical and Cross-Textual Responses to Graphic Narratives

Apart from teaching my students how to appreciate multimodal approaches to reading graphic novels, my singular, most imperative, task was to help students make connections between the themes inherent in each of these texts with their own lives and experiences. In addition, I wanted to teach my students how to use these texts to question, try, and stay their own convictions. Each semester I separated the course into three literary units centered around the theme of identity. In the first unit, “Culture and Identity: Who We Are,” my students engaged in the reading (and viewing) of a thematic body of work including: Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self Reliance, (1841)” Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and a group of advertisements sponsored by the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty (2004-present). Beginning with Yang’s graphic narrative, students were asked to scaffold their knowledge of this text within the context of the others. In this way, I set up a system of critical “conversations” across a wide spectrum of texts from a variety of cultural and historical time periods. I hoped to deemphasize the “chronological” and emphasize the “critical” in my selection of these texts. I encouraged my students to make connections and ask essential questions as we studied together, and I provided abundant opportunities for the development of both group and individual responses to these literatures. Future units, including “Coming of Age: Perspective, Belief, and Personal Growth,” and “Conflict and Identity” operated in similar ways, by enjoining critically acclaimed
graphic novels—in this case, *Blankets* and *Persepolis*—with similar canonical texts. A discussion of each of these units, investigating student perceptions, interpretations, conflicts, and connections is included in the writing that follows.

**Culture and Identity: Who We Are**

One of the first reactions my students articulated regarding Yang’s text was that of surprise. For many, this first narrative demonstrated that graphic novels *could* in fact be powerful tools for discussing difficult issues such as race, intolerance, and self-acceptance—something that most students are convinced a mere “comic” cannot do. In the multiple “representations” of each character—Jin, the Monkey King, Danny, and “Chin-Kee,” students found ample opportunities to evaluate the visual iconography associated with each character and ultimately begin the work of fusing the intertwined narratives together to create a unified whole. While the story undeniably focuses on rather serious issues, Yang moments of comedic relief—such as when the Monkey King forces his followers to wear shoes, an unnatural practice that leads some puzzled monkeys to wear them on their ears—helped to lighten the burden on readers. Even panels depicting Jin’s humiliation at school combined a hint of humor, allowing readers access to their own school-yard reminiscences: The bully picks his nose and makes Jin play “Let’s be Jews” by placing a cone-shaped bra on his head for a yarmulke. The teenaged Jin perms his hair—an act which even his friends laugh at him for—and rubs powdered soap into his armpits before he enacts the “yawn-and-stretch-your-arm-around-the-girl-at-the-movie-theatre” ritual on his
date with Amelia. In each moment, as readers, we empathized with Jin—we identified with him. Some students even suggested that our laughter was an act of kinship with him, rather than an act of cruelty. Another student suggested that the “humor helped to hide the cultural references that might have made some uncomfortable”—and certainly there were plenty of “uncomfortable” moments as well.

“Chin-Kee” was a source of discomfort for many of my students. In each semester, students were constantly puzzled by the purpose of such a derogatory Asian stereotype in an Asian author’s work. Typically half of the students in my classes thought the use of Chin-Kee was blatantly offensive. When I asked them to think critically about why this “representation” might be useful in Yang’s text, and what it might, in fact, symbolize or represent to Danny (who readers also learn is Jin), they initially struggled for answers. In her blog regarding this, Nashon wrote:

The "Chin-kee" character irritated me…but I can see the reality behind it and why Yang went to such an extreme to convey his embarrassment in relation to his culture. For starters, I caught the name. "Chin-kee" "chinky." I remember growing up and having friends who were harassed about their eyes. Switching "r's" and "l's," I mean dang. Yang is deep…The canned laughter at the bottom of certain panels was mildly offensive to me, but I think Yang took that into account and was inviting most reactions to it. I understand that it was necessary to convey the precise measure of Jin's unfortunate embarrassment.
The undeniable presence of the “hahahahaha’s” under each panel in which Chin-Kee appears was a point of avid debate for the students as well. In each class, our conversations were generally reduced to something like this:

**Student 1:** It’s like sitcom laughter. Even on the back of the novel, it looks like Chin-Kee’s picture is inside of a television set.

**Instructor:** What might the icon of the television represent?

**Student 2:** It’s like the canned laughter you hear in *Friends* or *I Love Lucy* or something.

**Student 3:** Like a bad 1950’s sitcom, it’s forced and fake.

**Instructor:** What purpose does Chin-Kee serve in the text? Why put him in the story?

**Student 4:** He reminds Jin/Danny of all of the stereotypes that are associated with his race, all of the things he wants to change about himself or avoid.

**Student 5:** But still, it doesn’t seem right that an Asian author is creating such a horrible image of his race.

**Student 6:** Yes, but if it makes us, as readers, understand how his race is perceived, and how harmful those “representations” can be then maybe it’s worth it.

**Instructor:** Then what about the “hahahahaha’s”? Why use those words to narrate Chin-Kee’s panels?
Student 7: It’s almost like it’s all a big joke—like Chin-Kee is laughing at Danny.

Student 8: Or maybe it’s Yang, laughing at the stereotype of himself.

Student 9: The laughter seems to punctuate Chin-Kee’s loud personality.

Student 10: He’s all over the page and in the reader’s face; it’s like you can’t escape him.

Instructor: You mean in the same way that Jin/Danny cannot escape him?

Student 10: Yes, he is always there, reminding him of what he really is.

Student 11: Just like Jin can’t escape who he is by perming his hair or the Monkey King can’t escape his true identity by wearing shoes.

Instructor: Yes, exactly. Just like that.

Students continued to reference ideas like these in their papers and their blogs. Kelly wrote about how the Monkey King’s transformation into the “Great Sage of Heaven” made him look “human.” In her paper she remarked: “The other monkeys do not understand this concept because they are comfortable with just being monkeys.” The lesson, according to Kelly in the thesis of her paper, was “to be yourself.” “In the end,” she wrote, “we will always be ‘monkeys’ so trying to live [our] lives covering up this fact will provide zero satisfaction.” Picking up on this idea in his own blog Azwar wrote:
Part of me wanted to revile Jin for wanting to change his appearance, [but] equal part empathized with his reasoning. After all, who hasn’t wanted to become something they’re not at some point in their life? And there’s the rub: on the one hand, we are told to be true to ourselves and trust in what we are. On the other, we are told we can be whatever we choose to be. We are all blasted with contrary messages throughout our lives to some degree or another. So what does it mean to be true to oneself?

Cross-Textual and Personal Connections to *American Born Chinese*

This question was also explored at great length as students were asked to contextualize their reading of *American Born Chinese* within their understanding of Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” (1841), Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and the Dove Campaign advertisements.¹ Using Emerson’s essays to inspire her connections, Nashon contextualized her response this way:

Jin. The Monkey King. Danny. You and I. The major lessons we are pressed to grasp from the Dove ad and from Emerson and Yang deal with security of self. To be esteemed is more an intrinsic quality than we’d have it to be. I thought I was deep when I wrote down the other day, "lying to yourself is quite like murder. Suicide." Lies are binding. If you bind up your identity and try to be something you're not, you

¹ Please refer to Appendix D for a summary of each of these texts.
simply cannot grow. Without growth, there's only death or sure stagnation, and I know we've all heard the saying, "to liberate oneself liberates others." So, with a lie tied to your growth, who knows who else you're killing.

In critical connections to *The Bluest Eye*, another student not only investigated the similarities between the main characters, Jin and Pecola, but she used these texts to ask powerful questions of herself and explore her own cultural convictions as well.

In her blog she wrote:

> The experience of reading Morrison's novel, as well as viewing the video, left me with a knot in my stomach. At times I feel embarrassed to be white. Have I ever, unknowingly, done something to promote our society's view that white skin is somehow superior to black? My response to this literature about culture and identity is to become more aware of the prejudice that people deal with and the impact it has on their lives as well as our culture as a whole. While I've never been knowingly discriminated against because of my skin color, I *can* relate to being treated as inferior based on my gender. This knowledge gives me compassion to others who suffer because of not fitting in based on something that is out of their control.

Likewise, in a personal connection regarding these texts, Casey wrote:

> I think we are so afraid of what others...will think of us acting as our "true self" that we stray away from being who we really are and pose
as someone or something that we are not. We are so comfortable with acting in a way that people are ok with, even if it means not being ourselves.

As evidenced through the ideas shared by each of these students, these textual "intersections" provided numerous opportunities for students to question their personal identities and cultural agencies. By engaging in these texts both critically and multimodally, students learned to question not only the significance of Chin-Kee’s powerful (and disturbing) “representation” of Asian culture, but also the pervasive desire within Jin and Pecola to physically transform themselves to meet unrelenting standards of “white normativity”—an impossible wish as later evidenced by the Dove video, “Evolution.” Furthermore, through the reading of Emerson’s work, students found opportunities to practice becoming, as hooks suggests, “enlightened witnesses” and practitioners of their own beliefs as they sought to understand how literature (and even graphic narratives) were best interpreted through the lens of their own lives and experiences.

Coming of Age: Perspective, Belief, and Personal Transformation

In the second unit of study students were asked to read Craig Thompson’s graphic narrative Blankets in conjunction with Jeanette Winterson’s novel Oranges are Not the Only Fruit (1985). Several poems of Emily Dickinson were included in this unit as well and served as a third layer for fostering critical and cross-textual

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2 Please refer to Appendix D for a summary of Winterson’s novel.
conversations or “intersections” between traditional and non-traditional texts. The two major texts, Blankets and Oranges are Not the Only Fruit represented contemporary examples of the Bildungsroman, a “novel of development” or “novel of education” (Rau). As a literary genre, the Bildungsroman is concerned primarily with the “coming-of-age” journey experienced by the protagonist as he/she moves from youth to maturity. The purpose of this journey is to seek “reconciliation between the desire for individuation and the demands of socialization” (Rau). In this sense, the protagonist is in a perpetual state of negotiation, struggling to discover and fulfill his/her personal needs and desires while constantly compromising these desires in order to conform to (and oftentimes reject) the dogmatism of the established social order. The outcome of this journey is self-actualization, a greater awareness of “self” and “others.”

As discussed in Chapter II, Craig’s “coming-of-age” journey was one that challenged his personal faith and convictions. Raised in a strict, evangelical Christian home, Craig was faced with balancing his desires for art and for Raina with his devotion to God. This negotiation, however, came at a steep price for Craig, who wrestled with inner demons of guilt, shame, and remorse in order to secure his true identity. Eventually Craig abandoned the rigid doctrines of his religious community in exchange for a personal relationship with God—one unblemished by the beliefs of the infallible congregants of his “Church.” Craig’s self-actualization began when he

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3 Full replications of Emily Dickinson’s poems can be viewed in Appendix D.
recognized the God “within and among” him. This revelation dramatically changed the outlook and direction of Craig’s life.

In “comics close-reading” assignments and discussions of Thompson’s *Blankets* in particular, students were interested in debating the way in which images and words were perpetrated to deliberately illustrate Craig’s emotional and spiritual turmoil. For example, in a discussion of Craig’s ostracization from his “church-camp” peers—ironically because he is caught reading his *Bible*—Selby wrote:

> It's all too easy to dismiss Craig's silence as childhood shyness, but [I propose] a different reason: shame... He interprets his social struggles as a disappointment to God. His words in [one] panel read simply, "I'm sorry God." All the while he's also struggling with how to appease his hostile judgmental peers. Craig's dilemma between his peers and his faith shows his conflicted relationship with religion. Regardless of how Craig actually does relate to God, it's clear that how he perceives God is very independent of his peers. It is simultaneously a source of affirmation and isolation.

Conducting a “comics close-reading” analysis of this same group of panels, Becky interpreted Craig’s efforts to hide his *Bible* from his peers as a type of hypocrisy itself. In her blog she wrote:

> Craig is at winter bible camp and he is seen reading the *Bible*. A boy in the bunk below him sees what he is doing and starts to make fun of him for it. In the second panel Craig lies and says he was only
organizing his things and not actually reading the *Bible*. The third panel shows him putting his bible away and asking for God's forgiveness. I find these panels very interesting because in the *Bible* God always said to stand up for what you believe in and Craig doesn't do this, he pretends to hate [being at Bible camp] as much as the rest of the group does [in order] to fit in better or avoid humiliation.

Discussing notions of hypocrisy was a point of great interest for many of my students as well, who were keen to observe the way Thompson used visual and verbal *contradictions* to illustrate the insincerity of Craig's peers. For example, while the visual iconography worn by Craig's peers (WWJD hats, bracelets and t-shirts, and Christian crosses) demonstrated their affiliations with Christ's teachings, the verbal and gestural behavior they demonstrated toward Craig—in scenes where they belittled, teased, and mocked him—were far from Christ-like. As observed by many of the students, while Thompson never "told" his readers that the "church-camp" kids were hypocrites, the contradiction between the verbal/visual was evidence enough to "name" them as such.

Other students generated multimodal and critical interpretations from passages where Craig's brother Phil was sent to sleep in a dark "cubby-hole," a place not unlike the "hell" Thompson illustrates later in *Blankets*. As punishment for behaviors that Craig later felt responsible for, Phil was locked into the confines of the cubby-hole and forced to sleep on an army cot. The ways in which visual, linguistic, and
auditory cues were used to capture the horror of this punishment were discussed in
great detail by Calin below:

The panels on this page are more visual than auditory. The frames are
filled mostly with darkness that represents the dread that Phil felt when
entering the cubby hole. The menacing snap of the cot catches [my]
attention and [I] can almost hear the metallic click and groan [of the
cot] stretching into place. These frames make the father out to be a
merciless character. He ignores the pleading of his youngest son, and
continues to force him onto the cot. Phil's nose is rounded, but his
father's is sharp and pointed. This gives insight to their personalities.
Phil is innocent and childlike, but his father is stern and unforgiving.
The text gradually becomes more chaotic. It [moves] from small and
linear to larger and more frantic, "NO NO NO NO..." The final frame
shows Phil accepting his fate of having to spend the night in the cubby
hole, but not quite ready to give up the fight. He scrapes his nails down
the door.

I was particularly interested in the way that Calin interpreted the personalities of both
father and son through the shapes used to draw them. Harkening back to Molly
Bang's assertions that "we feel scared looking at pointed shapes and more secure
looking at rounded shapes," Calin's interpretation of the conflict between these two
characters was determined by her ability to inflect meaning into this situation based
on the shape of the images used to define it.
Not surprisingly, many students were compelled to write about the panels leading up to Craig's decision to burn his art as well. In the section proceeding the actual burning, students discussed the blurring effect of the lines used to depict Craig's hands and his face. In three small panels in particular, students noticed the way that this blur suggested that Craig wanted to "erase himself." Craig's frenzied movements were even interpreted by some students to be indicative of a type of "demon possession"—as suggested by Craig's deep need to "purge" himself of the "sickness" of art. Reading meaning into the assorted shapes spilling out of Craig's mouth as well, students interpreted these images in a variety of ways. In his blog Brian wrote:

One scene that really struck me was when [Craig] was burning all of his "childhood" drawings and [his] childhood itself in effect. It stirred something in me but that's not a good thing. I immediately thought that [Craig was] making a mistake and going to regret it some day. [The burning] is symbolic of leaving his childhood behind and starting a new chapter. The "flames" coming out of his mouth are very Picassco-esque.

Regarding this same passage Caitlin wrote:

Craig took what he loved most and sacrificed it up to God. This picture portrays such powerful emotions and you can tell because of his eyes, mouth, and hands, which are all in a demented state. It seems
as if he’s almost in a trance. The demons...coming out of his mouth are in the shapes of sharks [and] represent his drawings.

Azwar also noted:

[Craig] burns his drawings and releases everything in him. The childhood memories welling out from his mouth are a great way to show the purging of his youth and there's an almost pagan aspect to it (he's in front of a fire, his eyes waxy and empty in a trance state). The dreams loom large on the page, taking up the entirety of the sky, perhaps suggesting their importance or how much a part of his life they really were. It's possibly one of the most powerful images in the book.

What Brian interpreted as "flames" burning from Craig's mouth, was interpreted by Caitlin as "demons" and Azwar as "dreams." Each student approached this panel with unique perspectives, effectively illustrating the power of the "image" to speak separately and distinctly into the minds of each "reader."

Finally, the contrast between dark and light, and the significant symbolism associated with the application of these features within the context of the story helped to distinguish Craig’s moments of fear and suffering from others of blissful solitude, comfort and peace. This distinction was noted by Derek when he observed:

When Craig is with Raina, the dialogue is coherent, focused, and direct. In the panels that show him with [Raina] and her family, the environment is peaceful, whiter, more pleasant. There isn’t as much
clutter in the speech; the ambient sounds that are depicted through the art are ordered and less abundant. [In contrast to this] other panels are scattered, loud and somewhat chaotic at times. There is a constant flow of intangible thoughts that don't always seem finished or connected.

Cross-Textual and Personal Connections to *Blankets*

In connection with the other texts studied in this unit, the students immediately recognized the mutual suffering of both Craig and Jeanette (*Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*) as they journeyed from childhood to adulthood in an attempt to make peace with both God and themselves. In each situation, either through Craig’s sexual desire for Raina or Jeanette’s desire to love another woman—an act considered an abomination by her evangelical church—both characters were forced to negotiate the religious beliefs dictated by their fundamentalist upbringing in conjunction with their reciprocal desire to free themselves from these confines and “praise” God in their own way. Interconnected to both novels, students engaged in the reading of Emily Dickinson’s poem “Some Keep the Sabbath” (1855) as well. For each of these “protagonists” religion was a type of holy sanctuary. However, these “sanctuaries,” what Azwar refers to as “safe havens” in his blog—were violated when the “world without” passed judgment on the intimate relationships they had established “within.” In his blog, Azwar described his thoughts this way:
This idea of using religion as a safe haven draws parallels with Winterson's book (as Jeanette also found comfort in religion). Both main characters have a special relationship with God, in that they see him as nonjudgmental and a steadfast friend in the face of a confusing world. How they are forced from that place of comfort, however, is quite different and it is here that I become a little disgruntled. Jeanette is literally forced from her haven as a result of her choice, whereas Thompson releases himself from his haven into the outside world. For him, religion is his last blanket.

Similarly Natacha discussed the idea of "letting go" in her blog when she wrote:

In Emily Dickinson's poem, "Some Keep The Sabbath", she explains that she connects with God simply by discovering nature and not being a churchgoer. I think that she does what she wants to in her life, without God being the complete and utter center of it all. And I think this is what Craig and Jeannette do at the end of their stories, when they finally let go of their family's strict religious ways.

Other students shared profound personal reactions to these "stories." For these students the ideas inherent in these texts intersected with their own lives in powerful ways. In her blog regarding belief, Emily wrote:

My beliefs are rooted in the rebellion of the religion I was raised in. I was raised in a fanatical Christian sect, like Jeannette. I had unanswered questions and doubts about the religion at an early age.
There was a time when I was completely devoted, but I started to question my place in the organization (especially my role as a woman). Eventually, I was excommunicated from the religion. Unlike Jeannette, I stopped believing in god. I felt betrayed. I think she had a relatively positive attitude toward god considering what she had just been through. I remained an atheist until something else extraordinary happened in my life. This resulted in the reexamination of my spiritual beliefs. Today those beliefs could technically still be considered atheist. I don't believe in a personified spiritual entity. I do believe that everything in this world is connected, and that when I stop taking that approach I become isolated.

In an in-class writing assignment on *Blankets* and *Oranges* Britt also wrote about the abandonment of her own personal beliefs and her desire to find them once again:

I have spent the last eight years trying to figure out just what I am going to do with this faith that I have set aside, and to tell the truth, I have no ideas what will happen. When reading *Blankets*...I expected Craig to make a choice, either to say “I am going to believe in God” or “I am not,” and on top of that “I am going to do something about it. But this did not happen, and to tell you the truth, I did not find any comfort in that...This book made me question why I set my faith aside in the first place. I don’t think that there could have been a better set of books to read to help me through this time in my life.
I was moved by the honesty of both Emily and Britt’s writing. Undeniably, both of these personal “confessions” deeply demonstrated the ability of Thompson’s narrative to intersect with these students lives in genuine and compelling ways.

Conflict and Identity

By the time we arrived at our third unit of study, “Conflict and Identity,” I discovered that my students had a great deal to say about not only the content of the narratives but the actual form and function of the medium itself. At this point, well seasoned in the art of reading graphic narratives—or at least perceiving themselves to be so—my students proceeded into the Complete Persepolis with few initial reservations or apprehensions. That is, however, until they realized what Persepolis was about. It’s a fair statement to say that many of my students struggled to connect with this graphic novel, at least to begin with.

Far removed from any of the experiences they had ever encountered, the story of Marjane’s coming-of-age in war-torn Iran presented several difficulties for my students. Not having the prior background knowledge necessary to fully understand the historical context of the novel made “getting into” the novel itself a laborious task for some readers. Other students expressed dissatisfaction over the illustrations, complaining that they were not as dynamic as those they had encountered in previous narratives. The stark black and white wood-cut style illustrations—a style I argued was indicative of the story itself—felt confined and claustrophobic to them in comparison with Thompson’s sweeping, illustrative spaces and the dynamic colors of
American Born Chinese. Noteworthy as well was my students' admissions to having preconceived notions about Islamic culture—particularly the women of Iran. Almost all of my students viewed the veil, for example, as a symbol of oppression. Few initially recognized that the veil could also be a sign of reverence or that some women might actually choose to wear the veil. Granted, the opening of Satrapi's *Persepolis* 1 where the girls use the veil as a jump-rope did not exactly challenge these views. Furthermore, for students gratefully unaccustomed to the tragedies of war, Satrapi's graphic narrative was often quite "graphic." Images of dismemberment, torture, and self-mutilation were sometimes quite disturbing to students as illustrated by Sarah whose response to the panel of the girls beating their breast to honor the war dead—and the images of self-flagellation that followed—prompted her to make these connections in her blog:

> In *Persepolis* there is an image of Marjane and her classmates beating their chests as a daily ritual...She said that this was their way of honoring those who had died at war. [On] the next page...some of the men went as far as to beat themselves with chains or even cut themselves with knives...I recently watched a show on the National Geographic Channel about different cultures and how they honored their war dead. [In] one country...once a boy was a certain age, which was not very old, they were allowed to buy razor blades which they held in the palm of their hands and slapped to their chests during a yearly ceremony. They felt that it was honorable to make themselves
suffer like their ancestors in war had. It was a very powerful image after they were finished. There were young boys, around the age of ten maybe younger, that had blood gushing from hundreds of cuts on their chests. I realize this is something they believe is right to do, but it is an act I will never understand. Is it really necessary to injure oneself in order to honor those who have fallen in the name of country?

I was moved by Sarah’s powerful connection and by the questions she was able to ask herself regarding the images depicted by Satrapi. However, not all students connected with Persepolis in this way. Several students perceived Satrapi’s memoirs to be tedious and “whiny,” as demonstrated by Brian when he wrote:

I'm getting tired of strife and struggle and oppression and gender and equality and death and religion and "listening" to people whine about war and their difficulties and life being "unfair". Send me to Vienna and see how much I complain. There is life going on here you know, and that is difficult enough. Why do we enjoy focusing on others people’s strife? Why focus so much on the problem, or worse yet the symptoms.

Likewise, Carissa, a non-traditional student and “Skeptic,” shared similar views. In her blog she criticized Satrapi’s decision to tell her story through the medium of comics and questioned the depiction of Marjane as a “victim”:

With each one of the texts we have used in class I look at these and ask—would this [story] have been better served in print only and why?
With this book, I think that Satrapi did a terrible disservice to the message she wanted to convey. Most of you, my classmates, are at an age where you were too young to even remember what Iran was and I seriously doubt if it was taught in schools, so here is a whole generation that could have benefited from this story of her life [but] instead she hid behind a glorified comic book...yes that is just my opinion but it's my blog......[And] the whole “oh I was a victim” line, I feel, was just a crutch for how she handled her choices in her life...The trick is being able to salvage some sense of who we are, learn from the "oh crap" moments, and not repeat them.

While I disagreed with Brian and Carissa’s assertions, I was intrigued (and a bit disturbed) by their lack of empathy for Marjane. Marjane’s position of economic privilege in the novel (she is the granddaughter of Persian royals) and her precocious “Marx-quoting” tendencies irritated some students, who saw her, as one reviewer suggested, as “an Iranian version of the equally smart and self-righteous Lisa in The Simpsons” (The Independent). However, not all students shared these views. Many admitted that the narrative helped them to confront their preconceptions regarding Middle-Eastern countries and cultures. This change was evidenced by Emily who wrote, “The text Persepolis challenged my view of Iranians. I had stereotyped them as fanatics, and I think getting someone's personal experience open[ed] my eyes a little bit.” In addition, overcoming her initial preconceptions regarding both the text and her own perceptions of Iran Erica wrote:
When I first started reading *Persepolis* I thought that it wouldn't be able to hold my attention. To my surprise, I actually have had a problem putting it down at certain points. It certainly gives me a different perspective on the people of Iran. We here in the United States only get to see a certain image of that area. *Persepolis* gives a glimpse into something we don't see every day and I like that.

**Cross-Textual and Personal Connections in *Persepolis***

With *Persepolis*, and the inter-connected poems that follow, I was primarily interested in helping my students consider the power of conflict to influence and forge personal identity. Using a cross-section of poems from a variety of time periods and perspectives, each exploring issues of conflict and war, I asked my students to find "intersections" between the *verbal* imagery created by the poets and the *visual* imagery of *Persepolis*. Students were allowed to select a poem from a list of five choices including: Stephen Crane's "War is Kind" (1899), e.e. cummings' "next to of course god america i" (1926), Yehuda Amichai's "Memorial Day for the War Dead" (1977), Pablo Neruda's "I Explain a Few Things" (1937) and Hayden Carruth's "On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam" (2003).

In her close-reading of these two texts, Sarah considered the scene where Marjane discovered that her friend, Neda Baba-Levy, had been killed by an Iraqi

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4 Copies of each of these poems can be viewed in Appendix E
missile.\textsuperscript{5} Marjane’s grief and despair in this passage is depicted through a panel that fades to pure black. In comparison to Neruda’s poem “I Explain a Few Things,” Sarah wrote:

In the first panel, where it shows the house in shambles, I think of Neruda’s line in his poem that says "and the blood of the children ran through the streets without fuss, like children's blood.” We do not see any blood in the actual frame, yet we know blood was shed. A child represents a certain level of innocence, and it is this loss of innocence that makes us feel sad when reading through this part of Persepolis. I’m sure there was a struggle on the Baba-Levy’s part to escape, yet there was no great ‘fuss' in the end. The people responsible for the bombing accomplished what they had intended.

Several students, like Sarah, were interested in discussing the meaning behind Neruda’s blunt metaphor. To many students this line meant “war is war”—there was nothing poetic, some argued, about “children’s blood.” Like Satrapi’s use of a solid black panel to illustrate Marjane’s inner despair, the students argued that oftentimes the most simple devices were the most effective for helping readers to emotionally connect to these feelings of loss.

In his close-reading analysis between Stephen Crane’s poem “War is Kind,” and Persepolis, Joe wrote about war and martyrdom in his blog, comparing Marjane’s words to the specific imagery evoked through the words of Crane’s poetry:

\textsuperscript{5} This panel can be viewed in Chapter II of this dissertation.
The idea of martyrdom is present in both texts. Marjane says...“To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society.” Similarly, death in war in the Crane poem is treated as a noble sacrifice, it should not be wept over. "Mother whose heart hung humble as a button/On the bright splendid shroud of your son./Do not weep./War is kind!"

However, what Joe did not note—that both of these quotes were largely satirical in their treatment of war—was a point that his classmates took up in later discussions of both works. War is not “honorable,” and it is not “kind,” his classmates argued. The martyrs in Persepolis died an ignorant death, wearing the “gold keys” of suffering around their necks in the same way that the soldiers in Crane’s poem died inglorious deaths for a nation untouched by their ultimate sacrifice. As the students suggested, the blood of these children “[ran] through the streets, “like children’s blood.” There was no “fuss,” no glory, nor any real “honor” in these wars.

In his consideration of the “intersections” across these texts and in an attempt to address the question related to conflict and identity, Azwar summarized his thoughts this way:

So how does conflict forge identity? The general worldview that the writers have in common (because of war) is that it serves no purpose save to beguile and bewilder the youth, robbing them of a future and changing what is beautiful about a nation into something sordid and vile through the violence of the war. That is what war is. It serves no great purpose. People fight and are forgotten, save for the few that
history turns into heroes. Time, after all, creates heroes and dissolves celebrities. The glory is all that is remembered.

Furthermore, many students noted that Marjane’s “war” was not only an outward conflict, but (as with Jin, Pecola, Jeanette, and Craig) an inner conflict as well. During her exile in Vienna, Marjane must “war” with her personal identity as an Iranian woman as she attempts to assimilate into a modern, westernized culture with a set of values completely unlike her own. Similarly, Azwar, a Malaysian student and non-American citizen attending school in a country much different from the one he calls “home,” identified with Marjane’s experiences as a “foreigner” in both profound and personal ways. In a class response paper, Azwar wrote:

I understand Marjane, as I share a similar perspective. We both have lived in Muslim nations (in my case Kuwait, Oman, and Malaysia) as well as been foreigners in Western nations (in my case Spain, Switzerland, and the US). We both have suffered from the “tyranny” of religion, though admittedly the Iranian syariah law construction is far harsher than in any country I have visited or lived in... both Marjane and I suffered the ignoble slight of never quite belonging anywhere: too different to be wholly accepted in our own countries and too foreign to be accepted in farther shores. This point is echoed in many places. In volume two Marjane laments: “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was
playing a game by someone else’s rules.” She could easily have replaced my voice for hers, our thoughts being so similar in our alienation.

While the majority of my students struggled to make such personal connections with these particular experiences, most understood the importance of “remembering who you are.” Indeed these words of advice offered to Marjane by her father upon her departure for Vienna were words that were echoed in each of the graphic narratives and traditional literatures that the students worked through during their brief stay in my classroom.

Overall, in their reading and critical interpretation of both the graphic narratives and their canonical cohorts, the students clearly demonstrated the ability to apply multimodal reading strategies and cultural literacy theories to each of texts we studied. They also demonstrated the ability to interweave the ideas and themes inherent in each of these narratives into the complicated contexts of their own lives. By the end of the course, students exhibited the ability to speak and write fluently about multiple texts, fully contextualizing them within the interlocking framework of each unit of study. For these students, the overall message of the class was clear: Be yourself. Furthermore, while it was not the express purpose of this class to persuade students into viewing the graphic narrative as a valid form of “literature,” many of my students arrived at these conclusions on their own. In their final self-evaluations in the class, the majority of the students admitted that their prejudices about graphic narratives had been challenged and that they had more respect for the “intelligence
and maturity" of the medium overall. Some even shared that they were interested in reading more graphic novels, as evidenced by one student who wrote that she had “recently ordered Spiegelman’s *Maus*” as a result of her experiences with the graphic narrative in her class. Other students approached me to share how much they connected with the themes and the artistry of *Blankets* and *American Born Chinese*, and one student even shared that he planned to give *Blankets* to his brother as a Christmas present because he appreciated the intimate relationship Thompson created between Craig and his brother Phil. On the other hand, those who arrived in the class as skeptics generally remained skeptics. In the battle of “Brian vs. Comics,” Brian won. Willing to concede that graphic novels were an appealing art form, Brian remained constant in his assertion that comics were not literature as illustrated in his final blog when he wrote: “Is the graphic novel an art form? Absolutely. Is it literature? No way dude.” The majority of the testimony written by the students, however, demonstrated the remarkable *shift* that occurred in these classrooms as students worked to expel their former preconceptions regarding the medium in support of the act of reading and interpreting these narratives in new and enticing ways. The implications of this shift, and the outcomes of this study and the one that follows comprise the conclusions reported in the final chapter of this dissertation.
CHAPTER IV

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: GRAPHIC NARRATIVES IN ACTION, STORIES FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Introduction

In Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel (2007), editor James Bucky Carter writes:

Graphic novels are clearly gaining ground in public middle and high schools. However...if students are to gain the full literacy benefits of the format, we need many more practical articles that describe educational experiments and classroom success stories from middle and high school teachers who have used graphic novels...What is needed is more evidence from researchers that graphic novels improve literacy skills (Carter 13).

In part, this chapter is an answer to this call. While it might be acknowledged that a great deal of work is yet necessary in order to come to any definitive conclusions about the inclusion of graphic novels in the secondary English classroom, (an admission which is explored in depth in the final chapter of this dissertation), this chapter attempts to train a flashlight onto a particular classroom or "social situation"
and a unique group of students or “actors” as they hiked through the unconventional terrain of comics and graphic novels. In this chapter, I describe my collaborative teaching experiences with high school English teacher Chris Bullmer as we introduced graphic narratives to a group of high school students and investigated the multiple uses and responses these students shared during their interactions with these texts. Invested in this project over the course of several weeks, Chris and I worked together to create three specific lesson plans modeled after Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher’s use of comic excerpts in the secondary classroom. Passages for these lessons were selected from the *Captain America* comic books and the graphic novels *American Born Chinese* and *Persepolis*.

Given our shared philosophies regarding teaching for social justice and equity, it was important to both Chris and me that each lesson provided opportunities for students to read and engage in graphic narratives in ways that would respect the students' lives and experiences. In addition, I was interested in discovering if the interactions and connections Chris' students made with these graphic narratives would mirror the responses of my college literary interpretation students as well. As such, this chapter is comprised of documented classroom discussions recorded to accurately represent the perspectives of the high school English students who participated in this study. Furthermore, woven alongside these dialogues is a secondary narrative—the moments of pause, reflection, questioning, and clarity gained as Chris and I moved, as teacher-researchers, through these lessons.
Setting the Stage and Meeting the Actors

Chris Bullmer's English classroom is on the second floor of a large, urban high school boasting nearly 1400 students, grades 9-12, in Kalamazoo, MI. Roughly 50% of the school's population is comprised of African-American students; 45% of the students are Caucasian, and the remaining demographic is comprised of Latino, Asian, and Native-American students. 61.7% of the students in the district are listed as economically disadvantaged ("School Matters"). As evidenced by the student population that filters into Chris' classroom during my morning observations—a racially diverse group of eleventh grade students, the majority of whom have been identified with learning or language deficiencies—one need not look far to see the vibrant, human faces behind the cold numbers. Unlike the students from the well-manicured, wealthy school districts a short, 10-minute drive away—where 86% of the students are listed as Caucasian and only 18% economically disadvantaged—the students at this urban high school represent the "face" of education that all too many educators and politicians would like to forget. Rumors, warranted or not, circulate regarding gang and drug activity among the student population. Security guards patrol the hallways between classes, keeping a wary eye on the behavior of the students, and even though the school is a hub of intellectual and extra-curricular activity, boasting well-staffed departments in Theatre, World languages, Education for Employment, Business, Mathematics, and Music, the school's sordid reputation prevails.
However, my own foray into this school in the Spring of 2008 only further validated the unique strength, sensitivity, and ingenuity of this hardy group of students. On the morning of my first observation, the hallways were a flurry of activity. Students bunched together in front of their lockers, swaying rhythmically to the music on their IPods and MP3 players, waiting for the morning bell to ring. Others flipped open their cell phones, quickly texting last minute messages or chattering loudly with friends. Few of them noticed me. Amid the swarm of animated bodies, I caught a few eyes flit my way then move quickly back down again. The students toted cartons of chocolate milk and 42-ounce cups of blue Slurpees, bags of Cheetos, snack-wrapped breakfast bars, donuts, and bagels slathered with thick cream cheese into the classroom, and carefully picked their way to their desks, where the crinkling noise of cellophane and the pop of paper straw wrappers muddled the cheerful morning conversation. A few students motioned warmly to Chris, who greeted them with friendly hi-fives and reminded them to remove their earphones and tuck their PDA’s back into their pockets and colorful, knock-off Gucci purses. Bookbags and backpacks littered the floor, crumpled against the walls and the cramped spaces beneath their feet. The desks, sticky with soda and covered in pencil graffiti, were arranged in six rows of five. Aside from the few feet of wiggle-room at the front of the classroom, there was little space to move about once seated. Careful to attract as little attention as possible, I slipped into a dilapidated desk in the back row and glanced about the room, consumed by the pre-bell breakfast chatter of the students as I popped open my laptop and prepared to take notes.
Chris' classroom was lively and warm—plants, colorful posters, and family pictures contributed to the comfortable feeling that this classroom was "well lived in." Bookshelves, stuffed with literature, newspapers, and magazines, lined three of the four walls. Peeking into the shelf nearest to me I noticed the *Scarlet Letter* and Homer's *Odyssey* shelved next to *Star Wars: Clone Wars, Dune, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Oliver Twist*. A small stack of superhero-themed comic books were slung precariously on top of the books. In our quiet discussion before the students began to filter in, Chris informed me that every day his students engage in SSR (silent sustained reading) for the first ten to fifteen minutes of each class. As he spoke, he pulled a book from the shelf, fluttered the binding toward me and explained that much of his "library" was the result of flea-market or yard sale finds, where he purchased the books for pennies on the dollar. "Sometimes the books go missing," he confided in me. "But it makes me happy to know that a student was enjoying it enough to take it home. It doesn’t bother me if the book never shows back up again."

Chris Bullmer is a young teacher in his mid-thirties. Standing well over six-feet tall with a slender build, he is a commanding presence in his classroom, yet his casual, friendly manner with the students has clearly earned him their undivided respect. As evidenced by the trickle of pre-bell students stopping by Chris’ room to hang-out or say hello, Chris is popular among the students at the high school. Highly invested in the success of his students, Chris not only teaches tenth and eleventh grade literature courses, but also instructs courses in AP language and composition, film interpretation, creative writing, and SLAM poetry. Off campus, Chris hosts a
youth poetry SLAM, inviting students from a wide variety of local school districts to learn the art of performance poetry and share their original poems in public venues and competitions. Chris is also the director of the high school Forensics team and the editor of the student literary publication, Mosaic. Prior to becoming a full-time teacher in the School of Fine and Performing Arts within the high school, Chris was a spoken word artist in his own right, performing with the Kalamazoo Poetry SLAM team in national competitions. In addition, Chris has presented at both the state and national levels through the Michigan Conference of Teachers of English (MCTE) and the National Conference of Teachers of English (NCTE). A dynamic storyteller, a dramatist, a poet, a scholar, and a teacher, Chris’ strengths in the classroom are self-evident—he continually seeks ways to make his curriculum fresh, relevant, challenging, and contemporary for his students—and it is for these reasons that working with Chris was a natural fit. An avid comic book fan and childhood comics collector, Chris immediately expressed a great deal of interest in bringing graphic narratives into his classroom though he freely admitted that he’d never really considered the possibility of using these texts with his students. However, given the opportunity to review the materials and reflect on how they might be used in compelling ways with his students, Chris’ enthusiasm grew. Both persuaded through our own curiosity and by the power of the texts themselves to reach into the lives of our students, Chris and I were eager to discover what the students would “see” and “read” into these narratives.
Taking a moment to jot down notes on the classroom space itself, I immediately noticed Chris’ indelible personality—and those of his students—bursting from the paste-colored, cinder block walls. A poster of Yoda hovered above a four-drawer file cabinet and proclaimed: “Read, and the force is with you.” Forensics trophies, a chess set, and two Batman action figures lounged above the file cabinet in the front of the room. In “Mr. Bullmer’s Corner”—the bulletin board behind Chris’ desk—sketches of famous poets were tacked up next to smiling senior pictures, athletic calendars, and snippets of old newspaper articles. A poster of Billie Holiday sang near the entrance door—jazz trumpeters silently fingered their notes, cheeks puffed full of air. Poetry flip-books, a project Chris’ creative writing students had recently completed, were proudly displayed on the back bulletin board, their presence only rivaled by a display board titled, “Student Cultural Identity Kits”—a group of meticulous and colorful collages, demonstrating the individual interests of the students in his classroom, including: Xbox 360, Hello Kitty, Guitar Hero, basketball, snowboarding, football, Oprah, Anime, IPods, Motorcycles, and Victoria Secret models. Sidled next to the overhead projector was Chris’ teaching podium. Affixed to the front was a sign proclaiming, “Big Brother is Watching You!”

Shifting my gaze to Chris’ desk, I noticed a student sifting curiously through the pile of ten-cent comic books splayed across the surface. The young man waved a few of his friends over to the desk, and they each grabbed one, eagerly flipping through the glossy pages. One of them looked over to Chris, who was busy writing on the blackboard, and remarked: “You have comic books on your desk and they’re
not *Star Wars*?” Chris smiled, happy they had taken an interest. “Yes!” he replied, glancing over at the boys as he continued to write a few anticipatory questions on the board. “We’re going to be reading those today for SSR.” Chris granted his students permission to browse through the pile of comics and choose any title that captured their attention. In the meantime, he scribbled out three writing prompts on the board in preparation for the class to begin.

Lesson One: From Action Heroes to Social Action: Superhero Comics in the Classroom

**Comics Out Loud: Student Voices on Heroism**

In the first of our three lessons using graphic narratives in the secondary English classroom, Chris and I proceeded with four specific goals in mind: First, we wanted to monitor how students interacted with the unique format of the medium. Because of this, we decided to forgo specific instruction on how to read the comic books as we were primarily interested in observing how the students approached this task themselves. Second, we wanted to use comic books as a way to engage Chris’ students in action writing activities. Specifically, we were concerned with teaching students how to infuse their writing with authoritative action verbs and descriptive concrete nouns. We hoped that the imagery of these visual texts would provide inspiration for this type of descriptive writing. Third, we wanted to use these comics as a way of promoting a discussion on “heroism.” We were interested in discovering who the students admired and how (or if) popular culture had infiltrated these views.
Finally we wanted to observe how students interpreted the social and political messages inherent in many of these comics. To do this we chose three WWII *Captain America* comic book covers to present to the students on a series of overheads. The comics used in this first lesson were ten-cent staple-bound superhero serials that Chris had purchased at a local comic book shop. Fanned out on his desk, the slick, colorful titles invited a great deal of curiosity and speculation.

"We get to read comics today?" one student asked, excitedly.

"Oh, we do?" another jumped in. "You mean we don’t have to do real work?"

I laughed to myself a little, not too surprised by these remarks, and returned to clacking away at my keyboard while Chris performed the more difficult task of focusing his student's attention.

"Okay, okay everyone," he said, waving his hands in the air and speaking loudly enough to cut through the din of student voices, "I have three questions on the board I’d like all of us all to think about. Let’s read them together and share our ideas in discussion.” Chris pointed to the three questions written on the blackboard and read them aloud:

What does a hero look like?
What qualities do you admire in superheroes?
Who are our heroes today?

The responses to these answers are transcribed in greater detail below:
C: Let's talk about the first question. What do you think? What does a hero look like?¹

S1: There ain't no specific look to a hero.

S2: Bubbles, Blossom, and Buttercup. The Powderpuff Girls!

C: What are their superpowers?

S2: Telekinesis, the other one can warp.

C: So heroes can look like anything, and we know they have powers. When I say "hero" what pops into your mind?

S3: My Nanna, the stuff she does is heroic.

C: What kind of stuff does she do?

S3: She just...is always there day to day, there to help out with anybody or anything, money, or talking-wise. She's just a hero.

C: Daniel² says that a hero is someone that we can rely on. So does she have any superpowers?

S3: She can go to the ATM and get money out.

_Students laugh._

C: When I say "hero" what do you think of first?

S4: Somebody made up?

S5: My adoptive parents.

C: So you're thinking of specific qualities in them.

S5: For every adopted kid, their parents saved them from a bad place, and that makes them a hero.

C: What specific superheroes and qualities do you admire?

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¹ For the purposes of the dialogue in this chapter, “C” indicates Chris Bullmer, the classroom teacher. “S” indicates a student speaker. Different students are noted by number, as in S1, S2, S3, etc.

² Some student names have been changed to conceal the identity of these individuals.
S6: The Wolverine

S7: Yeah! Only Magneto can kill him.

S8: Oh! The guy that shoots the needles out of his fingers.

C: Why is it that you admire that about Wolverine?

S7: Because, he can’t die. Only Magneto can kill him.

S9: They have different personalities, some are funny, some have different attitudes.

C: I have a question to go along with that. Stereotypically, when we say superhero, what [gender] are we usually talking about?

S7: I think of She-roses!

S8: They are supposed to take control over situations.

S5: Sometimes there are only three or four females in the comic books.

C: Why is that?

S5: Because the readers are all nerdy guys.

C: Yes, typically most writers of comics are men.

Listening to this conversation unfold, I found it predictable that the majority of the students associated comic books and comic book heroes with males. My own assumptions about the medium as a young girl were once again validated by Chris’ students. I was somewhat surprised, however, that these students were not more familiar with any Manga or graphic novels written and illustrated by women. Surely the diverse and prolific offerings of graphic narratives available to these students on library shelves and in bookstores might have persuaded them otherwise? The faulty

3 Wolverine and Magneto, characters from the popular X-Men comic book series.
logic of my assumptions was shattered, however, by Chris’ reference to the
“superhero trinity”—Superman, Batman, and Spiderman—whose undeniable fame in
the comic book world (and thereby the mainstream media) had lined the pockets of
Hollywood producers with gold. Even if these students never read a comic book, the
existence of this “trinity” in the media was enough to ensure that whenever the words
“comic” or “superhero” were mentioned that one of these three figures would
predominantly come to mind. Admittedly, even I had trouble hearing the word
“comics” without summoning up Superman. Noteworthy as well, was the students’
association of comic books to “nerdy guys,” proving once more that the stigma
associated with being a comic book reader was alive and well—even in the minds of
these fifteen and sixteen year-old students. While a few young women were able to
move beyond these stereotypes in their consideration of the “She-ro,” the overall
consensus of the class regarding both the comic book hero and the comic book reader
remained heavily slanted toward the prevailing “male-centric” standards.

Almost as if to reinforce this association, Chris placed his Batman action
figure on the podium. As the students gazed at the figure, Chris asked them to share
their observations. The students noted that the figure was a white male with rippling
muscles, a square jaw, and the traditional superhero “get-up.” Side-tracked, the
students splintered into several conversations as once. While a few girls in the front
row begin to discuss how much they admired the good looks of actor Christian Bale,
who plays Batman in the movies, others argued whether Batman was a “true”
superhero since he was a “man” without any superhero powers. At this point the
classroom became very animated as the students argued about how to define a
“superhero.” Most students shared the opinion that superheroes needed supernatural
powers. Others stood firmly behind the belief that superheroes could be ordinary
people who behaved in extraordinary ways.

To refocus the students, Chris invited them to consider not only the typical
gender of the superhero, but the hero’s race as well. He asked, “When we think of the
traditional superhero, what race do we think of?” With little delay, the majority of
the students shouted out, “White!” When Chris pressed his students to consider why
Batman, Superman, and Spiderman, the comics that continue to sell the most copies
and retain the largest readership, depicted all white men as heroes, his students simply
replied, “Because they were written during a time when that was most accepted.”
Oddly, there was little discussion on this. Although the class was primarily
composed of African-American students, the majority of these students willingly
conceded to the notion that in the time when these comic books were written, it would
have been natural for only white men to be depicted as heroes. Rather than
questioning the cultural representation of the hero as the “white male,” the students
sheepishly accepted this “representation,” brushing off any further discussion with
sweeping generalizations such as, “that’s the way it is.” While one student pointed
out that the Green Lantern was black, very few students, either from lack of a good
example or from a lackadaisical willingness to accept the iconic image of the hero as
“white,” bothered to consider the implications behind this common representation.
Although Chris did not ask any questions that might have further probed his students
to think critically about the implications of these representations, I was disappointed that the students did not want to challenge these ideas on their own.

Moving forward, Chris asked his students to think beyond the stereotypical image of the superhero and consider the heroes in their daily lives, our "real heroes." The student's ideas emerged in the discussion that follows:

C: Who are our real heroes today?

S1: As in people? I don't know.

S5: Our soldiers.

S11: Bill Clinton.

S7: Our peers are our heroes.

S2: My mom.

S12: The people on TV.

S5: Jesus.

S7: Our allies.

S3: Somebody who can do something that I can't do. Like if you really like to climb mountains, someone who can do that.

C: Well I can juggle, does that make me a hero?

S3: Well, to someone who likes that, yes.

S2: Someone who is inspiring.

S7: Isn't there a difference between a hero and an idol?

C: An idol is someone that you look up to, yes. But, you might believe that you can never be like them, because you can't possibly achieve what they have achieved. You put them on a pedestal. Are we talking about someone who is a protector of our
values and morals, someone who inspires us to be like them or someone we worship or idolize? That’s an important distinction.

Clearly the students’ discussion of these heroes represented a much broader spectrum of people, cultures, and ideas. While many students named their parents as their heroes, others looked to religious figures or to their peer groups or to military soldiers. This list of contemporary heroes demonstrated the students’ desire to see themselves and their own potential in those they admire. It was important to hear as well that Chris’ students were not unaware of the difference between real heroes and celebrity idols. One student’s admission that our heroes today are “the people on TV” illustrated the pervasive power of the media—as hooks, McLaren and Giroux have asserted—to influence personal identity and beliefs. I believed Chris’ students were savvy enough to recognize the impact of these images, though I wondered if they truly understood how insidious these representations could be. In a society dominated by celebrities, sports stars, and rock gods, the confusion between heroic admiration and celebrity adoration is logical. Chris, as demonstrated above, did a particularly good job of contextualizing the difference between these two, making sure that the heart of the student’s discussion focused on the true role models in society, and not on their Hollywood imposters.

As the students continued this discussion, Chris walked about the room and placed a comic book on each of their desk for SSR (Silent-Sustained Reading). He instructed his students to look closely at their comic books to “see what was going on
in there.” He also handed each student a post-it note and asked them to place their
post-it note on a page of their reading that was most exciting or interesting to them.
As I observed this reading time, I noted that while most of the students settled in to
the activity voluntarily, two girls in particular were a bit more reluctant. I watched as
they flipped through the pages of the comic book in the same way they might browse
through a fashion magazine. They chatted with one another about the pictures in their
comics and swapped books to make comparisons. One of the girls, Emily, struggling
to figure out how to read the comic book, flopped it on her desk out of frustration and
said, “I don’t know how to read this stuff.” In response, one of her peers leaned over
and pointed out how the panels work, from left to right: “You go from here to here,”
she said, sliding her finger across the page from top to bottom. Emily, however,
continued to look baffled and uninterested. She even turned the comic on its side and
upside down in her attempt to figure out how to read the visual information. In
previous discussions, Chris and I acknowledged that without proper instruction and
modeling on how to “read” these texts that this response might happen. I found it
noteworthy that Emily’s frustration with the “structure” of the comic was not unlike
many of the initial responses of my college students when first encountered with
graphic texts. The biggest complaint vocalized by these students (as discussed in
previous chapters) was that they did not know where to begin reading or where to
focus their attention on the page. Without modeling this instruction specifically, it
seemed that many of Chris’ students were frustrated or puzzled as well. Whether
unable to connect to the storyline, the visuals, or the basic movement of the text, it
was clear that there was some resistance to the structure and format of the medium itself.

The majority of the students, however, were visibly content in their reading. A few students even appeared to be quite consumed by the story in their comic book. Some of the students occasionally laughed out loud or leaned over to point out a “good spot” to the classmates sitting next to them. Their “silent” reading was contrarily quite “social” and engaged. A small group of students compared, traded, and discussed the unique features of their comic books. “Why are there ads in here?” one student asked. “Because it’s a comic book, that’s how they are!” another responded. Later, a small group of girls, Emily included, vocally expressed their strong dislike of the comics. “We don’t like comics,” one of them complained. “Why do we have to read this?” Again, much of this frustration seemed related to the inexperience these girls had with reading comic books. It may have been safe to assume as well that these young women felt alienated by these male-driven, male-centric texts. Regardless, after flipping through two to three pages, a few sighed dramatically and pushed their comics to the corner of their desks. They waited, annoyed, for the reading period to end. Several students, on the other hand, were only annoyed when Chris asked them to put their reading down. A few students ignored this request and continued reading their comics, too engrossed to realize that the lesson was moving in a new direction.

At the end of their reading time, Chris reminded the students to place a post-it note on a passage they particularly enjoyed. “Choose a page that you really like; it
could be the picture or the words or the action you see there, and put your post-it note on that page.” As the students busied themselves choosing their passages, Chris scribbled a quick-write prompt up on the overhead:

Using your identified “high interest page,” write a one-page creative piece using the themes, characters, and/or action as its basis.

Chris gave examples of the kinds of creative pieces students might write in response to the pages they selected: “Sometimes I look at a painting and write a new poem out of it. I use it as inspiration to write something new. You might look at the pictures in your comic and feel inspired to write a poem or a song or a fictional story.” The students reluctantly shifted out of their desks to collect their daily journals. Emily took her time retrieving her folder from the front of the room, socializing with her peers along the way. When instructed to write, she folded her head in her arms and slumped forward on her desk, rolling her eyes. A handful of her peers followed her lead. She grudgingly scribbled out a few lines before abandoning the assignment altogether.

Alexis, a self-proclaimed “graphic novel freak” with bright red hair, spiked jewelry and candy-striped leggings discussed her thoughts on a //Hack Japanese manga with a friend nearby. “It’s a really good series,” she gushed. “You really should check it out!” Alexis, an avid reader of manga and graphic novels, found several opportunities to express her excitement over the material to both Chris and her classmates. She continued this friendly conversation as she worked her way to the front of the class to retrieve her journal. Similarly, Anthony, a thoughtful
African-American student, looked around to his buddies in class and asked them if they liked their comics. Most of them nodded or shrugged non-committally. Anthony informed them that he really enjoyed his comic. “I wish we had more time to read it; I was just getting into it!” he said.

From Action Heroes to Action Writing

Smoothing out a clean page in their journals and fiddling with their pens, the students gradually dove into their writing. In early planning sessions, Chris and I both expressed an interest in investigating how graphic narratives could provide not only critical but functional literacy skills as well. By designing a lesson that asked his students to translate the pictorial imagery into written narrative, we found multiple opportunities to help students consider the potential of their words to create powerful pictures in the minds of their readers. Chris asked his students to use vibrant verbs and concrete nouns to describe the pictures on their selected (post-it note) pages. After ten-minutes of writing time, Chris focused the class into a large-group brainstorming activity:

C: Let’s talk about how we can spice up [our writing], because comic books add pictures to the words. And are these pictures boring?

S1: No, they are colorful, and vibrant, and full of action, and love!

C: Right! So writing that comes from comics should be the same. [Superhero] comic books are about action. When we write about comic books, we want to use action words. How many of you used the word “fight”?

Many students raise their hands.

C: What other words could you use?
S2: Socked, smashed.
S3: To fire.
S4: To engage!
C: Nice, to engage!
S5: BOOM!
S6: That’s an onomatopoeia.
S2: My characters were flying. To soar!
S7: Hover, glide.
C: What can we say for flying really fast?
S4: ZOOM! Supersonic!
C: How about walking?
S8: Strutted, stumbled.
S9: Waddle!
S10: Skip, shuffle.

Pointing to the words listed on the board, Chris asked his students to consider the common tendency of student writers to avoid using the kind of action words in their writing that comic books create through their visuals. “We see in our minds how the person is walking, but most of us don’t say that in our writing,” Chris shared. “A comic book artist doesn’t have to say that Spiderman, ‘scaled, crepted, or inched’ up a wall. We can see that in a comic book, but in your own writing, we can’t see that unless you show us with your words.” Chris concluded the lesson by challenging his
students to begin creating these same experiences for their readers through the words they chose to use in their writing. In the time that remained, Chris asked his students to look closely at their writing, and he challenged them to replace any dull verbs with lively, descriptive action verbs. Afterward, Chris invited his students to share their writing. Anthony raised his hand and began to read with his peers’ encouragement:

*The Thrasher, chasing down Chord for information. The Thrasher, jumping from building to building in the rainstorm, allowing the falling rain to bounce off of his metallic armor.*

*Chord on the ground, panicking, crying for his life, knows the Thrasher is right on his tail, furiously he tries to open the door. Suddenly the Thrasher crashes into Chord’s back, kicking Chord through the locked door.*

*Thrasher jumps on top of Chord...and yells his question at Chord, “Who did it? What are you trying to get away with?” Chord tries to get up, but he can’t so he pulls out his tazer and shocks Thrasher. Thrasher yells at the pain but knocks the tazer away and picks Chord up with one hand. Thrasher throws Chord against the nearest wall, knocking Chord unconscious.*

*Thrasher darted out of the building and ran to his hideout. Thrasher thought to himself as he fled the scene, “I will get the answers I want, at any cost.” Thrasher’s appearance slowly faded into the dark storm as he got further away.*

The students applauded Anthony’s dramatic reading, and Chris praised his use of action words and phrases. Transitioning the lesson from “action writing” to “social action,” Chris prepared to engage his students in a critical examination of the cultural and political messages inherent in popular *Captain America* comic book covers from the WWII era.
Comics as Social Commentary: *Captain America* Meets the Classroom

In an effort to move students beyond mere functional literacy and into a more critical, political, and socially informed reading of comic books—cultural literacy—Chris and I prepared a mini-lesson designed to help students analyze the propagandistic messages promoted by the visual imagery on the covers of a select group of *Captain America* comic books. Advocates for what Paulo Freire deemed “problem-posing” education, Chris and I were curious to discover whether or not his students could look past the spandex tights and move into more sophisticated discussions of the “motivated representations,” (hooks) that existed there. Chris and I wanted to help his students evaluate the “consciously constructed” set of values and ideals promoted by these comic book covers. To begin, Chris presented his students with a series of three overheads.

Adorned as a bold motif of the American flag, Captain America’s introduction to Marvel fans in the spring of 1941 was with a lightning knock-out punch to Hitler, the leader of the Nazi regime (See Figure 4.1). Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America and his sidekick, Bucky, were purposefully designed to spur the war efforts against the Axis powers of WWII. The Germans, Japanese, and any other perceived wartime threats or factions were often depicted as maniacal beasts—fodder to Captain America’s indestructible strength and moral fortitude. More patriotic symbol than superhero, Captain America unapologetically rallied allies against what Simon and Kirby deemed a “morally repulsive war” (Wright 36).
Figure 4.1 *Captain America*, No. 1, March 1941. “Meet Captain America”
The student dialogue that follows is a record of the ideas presented by Chris’ students as they considered the implications of the visual imagery depicted on the cover of each edition.

To begin the discussion, Chris placed each overhead onto the projection screen. He asked his students to write down three or four words that came to mind as they viewed each comic book cover and invited them to share their ideas in discussion (See Figure 4.1).

C: What time period is this in?
S1: WWII
C: What culture is this coming out of?
S2: U.S.
C: What’s the message being sent?
S3: Showing that the U.S. is winning
S4: Nazis are bad.
C: How do we know the Nazis are bad?
S5: We read about it in history
C: How can we tell just based on the picture?
S6: because the Nazis are mean, they’re being beat up.

Chris placed the next overhead on the screen (See Figure 4.2.)
C: Who are they fighting?
S7: Some monster dude
S8: Captain America is beating them up.
C: Oh that’s interesting, you see a monster. What color is Captain America and [what is] the color of his skin?

S9: He’s red, white, and blue, and white

C: What about the soldier?

S10: Yellow

C: Last time I checked, most people coming out of Europe have the same skin color as Captain America. Why did they paint the enemy’s skin yellow? What does yellow represent?

S2: fever

S10: yellow-bellied

S11: a coward

C: How did the artist make the enemy look?

S12: like a monster, not human

S13: He has a weird Mohawk and eyebrows

Some of the students held side-conversations with one another at this point, considering the racial make-up of the “hero” vs. the “villain.” While no student recognized the connection between the color “yellow” and its reference to Asian cultures, many students were keen to note how barbaric the Japanese and the Germans looked. They are “not human,” one student noted. They are “monsters,” not people.
Figure 4.3 *Captain America*, No. 76. May 1954. “The Betrayers”  
Chris placed the last Captain America cover on the overhead (See Figure 4.3).

C: What about this one?

S1: I think it’s against the Soviet Union. Because it’s industrial, and the anti-capitalism.

C: Yes, and the big clue we get is “Commie Smasher.” What’s the message being sent?

S1: Communism is wrong

S2: Kill the communists!

S3: Captain America has the communists under control, you don’t have to worry about it anymore.

S4: Join the army!

*Chris pointed to a picture of the “I Want You!” Uncle Sam poster.*

C: What does this image represent?

S5: The U.S.

S6: Texas

S7: The Army

C: “I Want You!” When we can connect our ideas of heroism to a political idea, it’s very easy for us to send powerful messages. Even when we don’t have the advantage of using words or action verbs, images can also send powerful messages.

To help make his point, Chris placed a final overhead on the screen. A beautiful, young blonde girl holding a can of white flowers, smiled from this poster. The symbol of the swastika was imprinted on the can (See Figure 4.4). This image was both misleading and disturbing and clearly demonstrated the efforts of the Nazi regime to gain the support of the German people through national propaganda and deception.

C: If we cover up the swastika, what is the message of the picture?

S8: the girl is happy

S9: She is a child

C: She’s smiling, happy, and innocent, and wants you to give her your money for their cause.
The students paused to consider the contradiction between the innocent young girl, with the warm, dimpled smile alongside the pervasive symbol of the swastika. The students discussed the image of the white flowers, a symbol of purity, virginity, and innocence, and they noted how out of place this image seemed to be with the symbol of the Nazi party.

In the time that remained, Chris acknowledged the contradictions his students observed in the German propaganda poster, and asked them to think, as well, about the kind of propaganda presented by the *Captain America* comic book covers. A few students observed that the way America was presented in these covers was similar to the way the Germans presented themselves in their own posters. Each side wanted to rally support, to prove they were "the best." The red, white, and blue image of Captain America overthrowing the Nazis, the Japanese, and the communists symbolized the strength of the nation, support for the American troops, and America's own nationalistic endeavors. America was the "good guy," the students suggested, while our enemies, on the other hand, were less than human, monstrous, and easily defeated. Chris summarized these ideas and reiterated the power of visual imagery to create specific "motivated representations":

> When we mix words with images, we can do a lot of powerful things.

> We used the image of Captain America to talk about war. Together we saw how Captain America was used as a symbol of patriotism against the Nazis and the Japanese. We saw also how the Nazis used their own images to send messages as well. We saw a picture of
Captain America fighting the communist war, and in later comic books, he even fights the war on drugs.

To conclude, Chris informed his students that Captain America, America's iconic hero, was killed in his final battle against the war on terror. He asked his students what the message of his death, and the death of this patriotic symbol might be. Without hesitation, one student replied, “America is not invincible.” With this final resonating statement as food for future thought, Chris praised the perceptiveness of his students and dismissed them at the sound of the bell.

Summary of Lesson One

In debriefing discussions with Chris regarding the performance of his students during this first lesson on comics and graphic novels, Chris shared that he was thrilled to see so much enthusiasm for the topic. When I asked him if the activity and discussion I recorded in his class today was typical, he expressed that he observed more writing, discussion, and interaction than usual. Chris attributed this higher level of engagement in the material to the high-appeal of the comics themselves. “Even one page of reading material is often very difficult for some of my students,” he said. Furthermore, Chris admitted that unlike some of the more traditional literature he had struggled to teach his students earlier in the year, particularly, Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, the comics helped his students to immediately connect with the ideas and messages presented by the texts. He credited this to his student’s prior background knowledge, fluency, and familiarity with the superhero genre, whether through popular movies, cartoons, or the comic book stories themselves. Working from this
common "base" allowed more of his students to interact with the material without the fear of feeling lost, inadequate, or "dumb." In a classroom with a large number of learning disabled students, Chris also acknowledged the usefulness of the comic book medium to contribute to quick transitions in instruction—the visual component to the materials retained his student’s attention and helped to focus them on the activities assigned for the day.

When I asked Chris what his thoughts were as a teacher presenting these materials he responded, “Sometimes that epiphany moment, that connection regarding race or patriotism or other cultural messages, didn’t happen like I wanted it to.” Chris also shared that he hoped to continue creating opportunities for his students to consider the different messages related to heroism, and particularly, heroism in relation to his student’s personal identity: “Since a lot of my students shared they had personal heroes, I wanted to help them find the heroes within, the heroes in our lives, the real people who are our heroes.”

While both Chris and I were pleased with the success of this first lesson, we were quick to acknowledge some of the difficulties presented to the students through their engagement in the medium as well. To help students unfamiliar with basic comic book conventions, we planned to add a quick mini-lesson to our second day on “How to read comics and graphic novels.” It was important to us that every student understood how to engage in the texts without feeling inhibited by what some students demonstrated to be an unfamiliar format. We also resolved to provide continued opportunities for students to explore the idea of heroism as it applied to
both the characters in the chosen excerpts from *American Born Chinese* and *Persepolis*, and to the character of their own lives as well.

Lesson Two: Finding a Place for Self: Personal Identity and *American Born Chinese*

The purpose of our second lesson was to learn how students responded to the social messages and cultural representations inherent in Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. Chris and I chose to model this lesson after Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey’s use of select passages from Will Eisner’s graphic novels with high school students as described in their article “Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills” (2008). In preparation, we copied packets of several panels selected from *American Born Chinese* that would allow students to confront issues of bullying, cultural and personal identity, and the desire to fit in—all appropriate and relevant topics related to this age group. Because lack of funding made it impossible for every student to have his/her own copy of the book—a circumstance many secondary English teachers may need to consider as they entertain the possibility of teaching graphic narratives in the classroom—working with small, contained panels with specific social themes was the natural solution for introducing these texts to Chris’ large group of students. It was our goal as well to foster the dialogical conversation that began to take root in the previous lesson. We hoped that through their interaction with the main character’s struggle to accept himself and take pride in his own cultural and racial identity, that students would begin to understand
the complexities involved in "naming" themselves as well. As the students shuffled in and took their seats, I noticed one young man flipping through the pages of Chris’ copy of *American Born Chinese*. He stood snapping his fingers and humming to the music streaming through his MP3 player as he examined the book jacket and glossed over the summary on the back cover. While his classmates swarmed around him, tossing cartons of milk across the room, swapping notes, and powering down their cellphones, he stood, silent, still, and subdued—glued to the first few pages of the book. Pulling the left earphone out of his ear, he bent over the book and laughed a little to himself. A moment later he looked up, attempting to catch his teacher’s eye. “Hey Mr. Bullmer, that’s a good book,” he said. “And it’s also a true story, right?” Chris acknowledged the question and shared a little of Yang’s background with his student. “Yes, and the author is a high school math teacher.” His student, looking impressed, laid the book back down on the overhead. “And I bet he was Chinese too?” he asked. Chris nodded, “Yes.” A young woman standing within listening range, snatched the book from the overhead and scrutinized the book jacket. She looked up a few moments later, frowning. “That book seems kinda racist,” she said. Chris nodded his head and remarked with a smile, “Hmm. Interesting.”

As the result of our discussion on the previous day, Chris transitioned the class into an activity designed to demonstrate the basic conventions and reading strategies involved in graphic narratives. Chris and I wanted to equip students with some of the basic vocabulary associated with reading a graphic novel before we moved into reading and interpreting selections from *American Born Chinese* and
*Persepolis.* To demonstrate the basic movement of the panels themselves, Chris placed a transparency on the overhead displaying a page from the graphic novel *Maus.* Not only modeling the structure, but his own interest in the medium as well, Chris admitted: “I’ve always been a fan of comic books, and I grew up reading them, so sometimes I forget that other people may not know how to read them.” Sliding his finger along the transparencies, from left to right, Chris showed his students how to progress through the panels of a graphic novel. A handful of students, already familiar with the medium, offered their guidance as well. Together, Chris and his students chatted briefly about how the panels were divided up. Alexis, the “graphic novel freak” was happy to fill her peers in on the difference between narration boxes and dialogue bubbles. In the small space of five minutes, the students seemed to have a better understanding of how they might read a graphic novel on their own, and with a common vocabulary of word balloons, narrative boxes, gutter space, line, background, and color established, Chris introduced the second lesson by reviewing the first. Like a skillful conductor, standing poised at his lectern, he waved his arms in the air and gathered up his student’s attention. Their eyes sat expectantly on their teacher, waiting for the first question, and the lesson began:

C: Okay, everyone. So let’s review. What were we talking about yesterday?

S1: Superheroes. The qualities, the powers, the difference between superheroes and idols, how they can persuade young people.

S2: Action verbs.

S3: Descriptions of covers.
C: What did we see in some of these covers?

S4: Hitler was getting beat up, monsters.

C: Who were the monsters?

S5: The Japanese and Germans.

S6: Captain American was supposed to be the great, almighty savior of America.

C: Who are the superheroes in our comic books?

S7: Batman, Superman... White men.

C: Good! Today we are continuing our discussion of comic books and graphic novels. But how do we make ourselves into the heroes we want to be? How do we put ourselves into a place of personal power, how do we learn to accept ourselves? Some people might argue the most important thing you can do with your life is to figure out who you really are.

As Chris talked to his students, he placed a new transparency on the overhead and instructed his students to complete a quick-write on the questions listed there:

Was there a time in your life when you felt like a hero? If so, explain in detail. If not, what could happen to make you feel that way?

Has there been a time in your life when you felt like you didn’t fit in or belong? Describe in detail.

Before the students began writing, Chris modeled examples of times when he felt like he did not fit in. He discussed how as a teacher at a few conferences he was the only white man, and he felt out of place with his colleagues. One student asked, “Because they were black?” and Chris responded, “Yes.” He talked openly about how he felt out of place when he was in high school because he was taller than
everyone else. Chris was not afraid to poke fun at himself, and he freely admitted to the times when he felt clumsy or "dorky," as a teenager, wishing he could be someone else. The students listened intently to Chris as he told these stories—his honesty was compelling, and I was struck by how each admission seemed to bring his students closer to him. As a group they demonstrated great respect for what Chris had to say, and they were genuinely curious about their teacher's experiences; they wanted to hear more. Chris positioned the questions back onto his students, and challenged them to think of times in their own lives when they felt isolated, awkward, or alone. When Chris stepped out of the room for a moment, several students asked a white girl seated in the front of the room if she felt out of place in their class. She replied very calmly and matter-of-factly, "No, I don't feel out of place with black people." And, indeed, she seemed very comfortable and friendly with her classmates, who treated her with respect as well. After ten minutes of individual writing time, Chris invited his students to share their responses with the class, beginning with the question, "When are some times when you have felt out of place?" The students were eager to participate, oftentimes talking over one another to share their answers as illustrated below:

S1: I feel out of place when I'm with my girlfriend's family. Because I don't know them and I'm usually the only black person there.

S2: When I'm at bowling matches. The things that people say, like, "why are you here?"

S3: When I went to another high school, I was the only white person in all of my classes.
S4: I had to go with my girlfriend while she got her hair done once, and there was a bunch of ladies there, and I had to sit there and listen to them gossip.

C: When Beth, my wife, goes shopping, she wants me to see what she looks like in her outfits. I sit there in that chair outside the dressing room, and feel out of place waiting for her.

S5: When my mom worked for an apartment complex, some people said something bad about black people, and my mom said, “Excuse me, my daughter is mixed” and when she came home and told me that I felt so ashamed. It was horrible.

S6: I changed schools in seventh grade, and all of my friends went to one school and I was the new kid, and everyone stared at me. I just wanted people to accept me for the way I was.

S7: When I go to store with my mom, the boys look at us weird, because she’s white and I’m not.

S8: Race is a big problem for people nowadays.

While many of the student’s responses considered the discomfort experienced while being in a new place, I observed that most of the responses dealt with issues of racial difference. Looking culturally different from others was a significant talking point for many of Chris’ students. Like Jin, the main character in American Born Chinese, these students, both proud of who they are and cognizant of the fact that they are different or “other” than the hegemonic norm, struggled with what it meant to “belong” or to fit in. Respectful of their admissions, Chris transitioned the focus of the lesson onto the assigned reading selections from American Born Chinese. As he passed back the packets to his students, he explained, “Today we are going to be reading a few passages from a graphic novel called American Born Chinese,” he held up a copy of the book and offered a definition of the “graphic novel” to his students,
"It's a longer comic book, that tells a complete story, just like the novels that we usually read in class, but it looks like a comic book." He passed the graphic novel around to his students so that they could see how it was put together. His students flipped through the colorful pages, pausing to read a few panels, then handed the book to the peers seated next to them. Chris began the lesson by asking his students, "What do you think the title of the book means?" One student offered: "He is Chinese, but he was born in America." After acknowledging this answer, Chris invited his students to quietly read the selected panels on their own.

While a few students impatiently counted the number of pages in their packets and complained that it was too much reading, others were excited to dive in. In the fifteen minutes that followed, I observed a few smiles and giggles, but the room was much more quiet than the previous day overall. Several students leaned over to one another, whispering about the panels and pointing out illustrations they enjoyed in the reading. To create a record of their understanding of the events in the text, Chris asked his students to write down a few summary sentences inside and around the panels printed on their hand-outs. We wanted the students to begin narrating the story in their own words—adding the language necessary to tell the story that was presented to them through Yang's visual imagery. Once this step was completed, Chris asked his students to write a one-page letter or diary entry from the perspective of Jin, the main character: "You're pretending you're [Jin], you're putting yourself in his shoes. What would you say about your first day of school, if you were Jin?"
The first panels included in the student's packet told the story of Jin's first tumultuous days in a new elementary school (See Figures 4.5 and 4.6). In close-reading activities with the college students I worked with, and with a variety of audiences at state and national conferences where I presented the same material, the responses to these particular panels were often both perceptive and personal in nature. Visually, readers often noted the fact that Jin's face, particularly his mouth, was cut off by the lines of the panel. In effect, Jin had "no voice" in this passage. Spatially as well, Jin was the smallest figure in the panel, overshadowed by the hulking teacher whose glazed facial expressions and chunky jewelry denoted her distance from the students. Jimmy, whom readers immediately identified as the "bully," first by his iconic appearance—Jimmy wears dog tags around his neck and sports camouflaged pants—and second by his actual words—"My mamma says Chinese people eat dogs,"—also dominated the panels. In close-reading analysis of these pages, most readers concluded that it is the ignorance of Jin's teacher and his classmates that "spoke" the loudest in these panels, though both word and image were required to work together to create this message for readers.
ON THE MORNING AFTER WE ARRIVED, WITH THE SCENT OF OUR OLD HOME STILL LINGERING IN MY CLOTHES, I WAS SENT OFF TO MRS. GREEDER'S THIRD GRADE AT MAYFLOWER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.

CLASS, TD LIKE US ALL TO GIVE A WARM MAYFLOWER ELEMENTARY WELCOME TO YOUR NEW FRIEND AND CLASSMATE JING JANG!

JIN WANG.
JIN WANG!

HE AND HIS FAMILY RECENTLY MOVED TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD ALL THE WAY FROM CHINA!

SAN FRANCISCO.

SAN FRANCISCO!

Figure 4.5 “A Warm Mayflower Elementary Welcome,” from American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, p. 30.
As with the college-level students I studied, Chris and I were interested in discovering how his high school students connected personally and critically with these passages as well. We hoped that his students would identify with Jin and begin
to share their own stories regarding the stigma of stereotypes and the pain of not
"fitting-in" as a result of racial or cultural differences. To measure this, Chris asked
his student to complete two brief writing assignments. First, Chris asked his students
to write a first-person diary entry from the perspective of Jin. Second, Chris asked
the students to write about a time when they were in a situation similar to Jin—a time
when they felt isolated, misunderstood, or shunned because of their difference.
Through these writing activities, we wanted to show students that "self and
community are constructed around empathy—the ability to assume the role of the
other, to feel the other's position in life, including [his/her] pain, oppression, and
subordination (Mead qtd. in Kanpol 95). Illustrated below are samples of the written
responses created by Chris' students demonstrating their critical awareness and
personal connections to the themes presented in the excerpts from *American Born
Chinese*.

**Diary Entries**

*Dear Diary,*

*Today I was introduced to a new school, Mayflower Elementary. The kids weren't at all that nice and the teacher messed up twice. She got my name wrong and she told the students that I was coming from China, when I came from San Francisco. This kid Timmy said the stupidest thing to me, I mean the teacher, but he said his mom told him that Chinese people eat dogs. We don't eat dogs. The teacher didn't even defend me, she just said, "be nice," and said she was sure that "WE" stopped doing that when "WE" came to the United States. She was as mean and rude as the students.*
Dear Diary,

I hate my new school. The other kids treat me like I'm a freak. One kid accused me of eating dogs! That's not true! They made fun of me and hurt my feelings. They should get to know me before they judge. I'm really a nice person. They make fun of me because I am Chinese.... I have no real friends and I just want to fit in.

Dear Diary,

Today was my first day at school and the teacher was pronouncing my name wrong while she was introducing me. I was the only Chinese kid in the class, but there was this other Asian girl that kinda looked lost too. I felt like a stranger. Everybody was looking at me and talking about me... I thought everybody would ask me stuff and that they were going to be friends with me, but that was not the case. I had no friends which made me more homesick. I know this time will pass and that everything will change in a few months....

Personal and Critical Connections

There are times when I feel out of place. I feel out of place when I come to a place I've never been to before and I'm by myself and I don't know anybody... the majority of the time when I feel out of place is when I am the only black person around a bunch of white people I don't know.

There have been many times where I didn't feel like I fit in. All throughout elementary school, I was always picked on. I got into fights every day. I was the fat white kid in a somewhat reverse-racist school. I only had one friend. Everyone would make fun of me and hit me. It wasn't until middle school that I started to get more friends, mainly because I started to get in shape. I lost a lot of fat and gained a lot of muscle. Before that, though, I was always out of place.
In this chapter, we can see how the people have a lot of stereotypes for Asian people and people from all around the world. In America there is still people that use a lot of stereotype and make up those jokes, that kinda sound racist. So we can see how they are all confused with Chinese, and no one wants to be a friend of the “new-from-other-country-kid.”

Summary of Lesson Two

If indeed our goal in this activity was to invite students to engage in a cultural literacy that values “personal evaluation, recognition of bias, and issues of social justice” (Fisher and Frey qtd. in Carter 32) while demonstrating critical interaction with the text, then the writing the students created in these responses is indicative of this growth and awareness. Rather than relying on the language of the panels alone to tell Jin’s story, the students borrowed liberally from the visual information provided in each panel to draw their conclusions about Jin’s experiences. In essence, they gave a voice to the voiceless; the student’s writing allowed Jin to speak, whereas the panels themselves silenced him. Multimodal analysis of the text—the careful examination of the character’s body language, facial expressions, and spatial placement within the panels, and even the icons associated with each character—told a story beyond what the boxes of narration or word balloons alone could tell. Through this activity, Chris’ students enacted both multimodal and critical literacies. They examined both the picture and the word to determine how each worked together to share some greater knowledge about themselves and the world around them. The student’s transition from Jin’s voice to their own voices, as demonstrated in the second group of writings, proved Gretchen Schwartz’s assertions that “an important benefit of graphic novels is
that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general and accessible ways” (3). Chris and I hoped to discover additional ways that students might find these texts both accessible and meaningful. Given the success of this second lesson, we chose further passages from *American Born Chinese* and a few brief panels from Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis I* to share with students the following day. Student discussion and interaction with these passages is explored in further detail in the lesson that follows.

Lesson Three: Recognizing the Heroes Within

The third and final observation day began with a discussion of four panels from *American Born Chinese*. In the previous lesson, Chris’ students had the opportunity to consider cultural identity alongside racial stereotyping. They read a selection of panels from Yang’s text that illustrated Jin’s struggle to fit in, predominantly due to his race. When introduced to his new classmates, for example, Jin’s name was mispronounced. His teacher also mistakenly assumed he was from China, although readers of the text understood that Jin was born in San Francisco. Picking up on these subtle cues, Jin’s classmates perpetuated these stereotypes: surely Jin must eat dogs, as all Asian people do, and he’ll likely have an arranged marriage as well. In later panels Jin is shown eating dumplings with a pair of chopsticks, seated alone at the end of a very long and empty lunch table. Isolated and outcast, readers are left with the impression that things would be better for Jin if only he could “become someone else.”
In the third lesson, Chris and I selected panels from *American Born Chinese* that illustrated Jin’s desire to physically transform into someone other than himself. Attributing his failure to fit in to outward physical appearance, Jin dreamed of becoming the all-American blonde-haired, blue-eyed teenager. If only he looked differently, he rationalized, then he might be treated differently as well. Later pages in Yang’s graphic novel grant this wish. In these panels Jin has a dream where he recalls the words of the old Chinese herbalist who advised him as a young boy. In this new panel, the words of the herbalist linger into Jin’s dream in her Mandarin tongue: “It’s easy to become anything you wish, so long as you’re willing to forfeit your soul!” (194). The figure of the herbalist is depicted hovering at the top of the panel pointing her gnarled finger toward Jin. In his dream she asks, “Now what would you like to become?” At the bottom of the panel, Jin is depicted as gradually shifting through the phases of a complete physical transformation. His hair lightens to a glowing blonde. His eyes become blue and his skin whitens. As if waking from a bad dream, Jin fumbles his way into the dark bathroom where he is met with a strange reflection. Jin has “transformed” into Danny.

To begin the lesson, Chris instructed his students to look carefully at each of these panels and write out a few sentences describing each one. It was important to us that the students had the opportunity to give “voice” to Jin’s transformative experience in this transitional sequence. As they read quietly, I noticed a few students mumble their discontent at this unexpected turn of events. Some students

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4 This panel can be viewed in Chapter II of the dissertation.
clearly believed that Jin had betrayed himself by becoming “Danny.” Another student, engrossed in the reading, noticed that when characters spoke inside of the “carrots” (< >) that they were actually speaking in Chinese. This was a savvy structural observation. One group of boys discussed Jin’s body language in this segment. They physically demonstrated these actions by placing their hands across their chests in the same way that Jin/Danny did in the panel itself. After a few moments of this, Chris gathered his class’ attention by placing the first panel on the overhead. He invited his students to share their ideas aloud in large group discussion:

C: In the first panel, what’s happening?

S1: She’s talking in Chinese, inside the carrots.

C: Someone picked up on if the words are in carrots the language is being spoken in Chinese. The old woman is saying, “Now what would you like to become?”

S2: He’s transforming into an American.

S3: He realizes that he is not the Chinese guy anymore, I don’t think he’s transforming so much as realizing he fits in.

C: When we say American, all of us here are American, in terms of our national identity, but what does Jin want in this picture?

S4: he just wants to fit in

*Chris placed the next panel on the overhead, a panel showing Jin waking from his sleep and seated on his bed in the dark room.*

C: Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night with a problem that you were worried about?

*A few students nodded or raised their hands as Chris put the third panel on the overhead.*

C: In the next panel, he walks into the bathroom.
S5: He looks like Justin Timberlake!

C: Is that what Jin really looks like?

S6: He looks white.

C: This is [Jin] from the first panels we read yesterday. But what has happened to him, psychologically?

S7: He’s changed in his mind, because he’s been in that mindset for so long.

S8: In the mirror, it looks like one thing is happening, but another thing is happening in reality.

S7: His reflection is not himself.

S3: He’s happy about what he sees, and he gets to have a new name. His Chinese name is what made him different.

S9: He wants an average American white name.

S10: He’s happy that he’s average.

C: So Jin/Danny has become what he wants to be?

S5: When I was little I wanted to be white so that I could have nice hair.

C: How does the graphic novel help us to see the changes that Jin is going through?

S: The expression on his face.

S: His body language.

C: All of us have at one point wanted to be someone else, think about a time when you thought “Man, I wish I could... do this or be that.” What would happen if this change could happen? Is this a good change for Jin? Would it be good for him to change into a blonde-haired blue eyed American boy?

S1: If he wants to.

S2: It’s disrespectful!

S3: Not every white person has blue eyes and blonde hair.
S4: You should be proud of who you are.

C: What would be the advantages?

S5: Not being teased anymore.

S6: Fitting in.

S7: No hazing.

At the start of this lesson, Chris and I hoped to build empathy and critical understanding in his students by intentionally focusing on the experiences of the “other,” in selections from Yang’s graphic novel. We both shared a willingness to pose the difficult questions to these students with the hope that they might grow in their awareness and perception of those different from themselves. In effect, we hoped to demonstrate what Kanpol argues when he writes that “change can only start by understanding the make-up of self and other” (96). While Chris’ students recognized the benefit of physically blending in with the socially constructed perception of the “normal” American teenage boy, they were also quick to observe the detriment of these actions to the “self” as well. Though Jin may no longer be “hazed” or “teased” as some students suggested, others noted that this “transformation” was a deception—“his reflection is not himself.” Their reference to Jin’s new identity as “average,” “white,” and “Justin Timerlake-like” demonstrated their understanding of the pervasiveness of the mainstream media to promote the lie of hegemonic “normalcy” (hooks). Jin’s “transformation” in this sequence of panels is not transformative in the sense that it liberates him from his cultural oppression.
Rather, through his betrayal of self, Jin enacts quite the opposite—he embraces “sameness” and forsakes individualism all for the sake acceptance. As a result, it was of little surprise that many of the students expressed deep dissatisfaction with these panels. Some even said, “This isn’t the end of the book is it?” implying that without Jin learning to accept himself for who he truly is, there could be no satisfactory or “happy” ending to his story.

To help his students deconstruct their own notions of identity, Chris introduced a graphic organizer to his students that required them to provide information on the following questions: “Who are you?” and “Who would you like to become?” (See Appendix G). To get them started in this process, Chris asked them to think about their personal beliefs, their passions, and their own unique physical characteristics. To model how this activity should be done, Chris also filled in the organizer, jotting his answers down on the overhead. Under “Who are you?” he wrote: “father, teacher, husband, white man, minivan driver.” Moving to the second box, “Who would you like to be?” Chris reminded his students to “keep it in realm of reality,” and shared:

You know me, I’d probably say Jedi Knight or something, but when I was in high school, I was skinny, and then overweight, I was nerdy, and a little odd. I was bookish. Just like Jin, when I was in high school, I couldn’t see the good things about myself.

To demonstrate these ideas, Chris wrote down, “I wish I could be a CEO of a big company. I’d love to travel the world, etc. When I was in high school though, I just
wanted to be a Jock, I wanted to be cool and fit in.” After modeling his organizer, Chris asked his students to turn to their own organizers and think through these questions for themselves. Later these ideas were offered in class discussion where students responded that they would like to become everything from a 4.0 student to a pro-boxer to the supermodel Tyra Banks. Chris pressed them to consider what some of the benefits of these changes might be, and he used himself as a starting point for this discussion. “For example,” he said, “in high school I wanted to be the sporty Jock, ultimately because that person was popular, and that’s what I thought was important.” He invited his students to consider what good things might have come from his “transformation” into a Jock. One student jokingly replied, “You’d have a better chance of scoring with the ladies!” The most genuine responses, however, were put forward when Chris asked, “What might be bad about me making this change?” The students offered several responses at once:

S1: You wouldn’t be yourself!
S2: You wouldn’t be teaching us English.
S3: You never would have met your wife.
S4: People wouldn’t like you as much.
S5: You’d have fake friends!

At this point, Chris asked his students to turn back to their own charts and consider what some of the good and bad points might be about changing themselves. Furthermore, to bring the discussion back to the idea of personal heroism, Chris asked
his students, “How many of you would be your own hero if you made your changes?” About seven students raised their hands. Many students shared that the changes they wanted to make for themselves were related to positive things—their job success, their ability to become good husbands, wives, and parents, or their ability to do well in school. These changes, unlike those that Jin experienced in *American Born Chinese*, were perceived as productive by the students.

One student shared, “I want to be someone who gets their stuff together, and pursues what they want to do—this was the definition of a “hero” to this particular student. Turning back to the reading, Chris asked, “Do you think Jin became his own hero?” The majority of the students shook their heads, “no.” One student shared, “I think [Jin] became what other people wanted him to be.” Another concluded, “He became what he didn’t like in the first place.” Through these statements students demonstrated the ability to “construct, label, and define themselves” in ways that allowed them to become “active subjects” rather than “passive objects” in the world around them (Gaughan 8). In their value statements regarding Jin’s decisions, Chris’ students practiced asserting their own cultural views. Rather than merely consuming ideas and information, they actively articulated their voices in ways that empowered them to construct positive outlooks on self-identity and self-acceptance.

Finally, to help demonstrate that identity is a difficult construction, one that often requires a great deal of self-exploration and understanding—a balance between who we allow ourselves to be in a variety of social situations—Chris and I selected a few brief panels from Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir *Persepolis I* for the students
to read and analyze. Our goal, in particular, was to have students consider the split identity that the young Marji experiences when she reflects on her religious, Islamic heritage in conjunction with her desires to be a woman of the modern, scientific world. For the purpose of our discussion with Chris’ students we chose the opening panels where Marjane and her female classmates were told they must begin to wear the veil. We further isolated one panel in particular—where Satrapi divides her identity into two distinct halves—for the students to read and analyze.

Perhaps a bit naively in retrospect, we began this lesson without adequately introducing Chris’ students to the historical and cultural context of the graphic novel itself. Wanting primarily to expose students to a few select panels that we felt poignantly addressed issues of identity and self-acceptance—mirroring Yang’s text and thereby creating opportunities for cross-textual dialogue, we failed to consider that the students’ prior knowledge (or in this case, presumptions) about Iranian culture might preempt their ability to respond critically. To initiate this discussion, Chris said, “I want to introduce you to a character who is dealing with some of the same issues [as Jin].” As he passed out new packets to each of his students, he asked, “How many of you know about Iran?” The room burst into a cacophony of answers, and the students competed over one another to respond:

S1: Their women are crazy and they burn themselves!
S2: the women don’t have a lot of stuff, so that’s why they do suicide bombings, they don’t have freedom.

This panel can be viewed in Chapter II of the dissertation.
S3: They wear a burka, and it’s a giant cloth that covers your whole body.

S4: They are one of the three countries in the Axis of Evil.

S5: They make mass destruction weapons!

S6: They are very religious.

While Chris—caught off guard as I was—worked to regain the direction of the conversation and to dispel some of the student’s assumptions, I was reminded of Gaughan’s assertion that in order to help our students become “self-conscious about the political nature of representation,” we must first ask them how they “name or represent the world and how others name and represent it” (69). While Chris’ students understood how it felt to be labeled as outsiders, they failed to see (at this point) the way in which they each participated in the “naming” and “labeling” equation. Though the majority of what was initially shared represented stereotypical or biased viewpoints of Iranian society and culture, the opportunity this unexpected conversation created to critically examine some of these myths become just as important as examining the panels themselves. According to Gaughan, teachers need to “create an environment in which critical reflection is not only possible, but encouraged, in the hope that students will leave our classes and schools more empowered than when they entered them (14).

Rather than admonishing these initial responses, Chris encouraged his students to think critically about the panels they were about to encounter. Providing some context before they read through the excerpt together, Chris shared, “[In Iran] they made some new rules, and these rules affected everybody. One of those rules,
was that all women had to wear a covering.” He asked his students to put themselves in Marjane’s place and try to experience the story from her point of view. In an effort to put these events in a context the students might understand Chris asked, “How would you like it if the regime changed in the US and said you had to wear a covering?” Most of the students scoffed at the idea that someone could make them do something that they did not want to do. “I would say, no!” one student exclaimed. Another yelled from the back, “It’s a free country!”

In a discussion of the opening panels of *Persepolis* I Chris’ students discussed Marjane and her classmate’s perceptions of the veil:

S1: They didn’t really seem to get what it was for.
S2: They’re playing jump-ropes with it!
S3: One of them is wearing it over her head and pretending she’s a ghost.
S4: They are treating it with disrespect by playing around with it.
S5: They don’t want to wear it. Marjane looks sad in the first panel.

Attempting to help his students make personal connections to these panels, Chris asked, “What’s the difference between wearing a veil and wearing your student ID?” Many students were eager to respond. “An ID you can take off if you want to,” replied one student. Another shared, “ID’s show you are *different* while veils show you are the *same*. To encourage his students to further “interrogate” the ways that identity can become fractured or divided, Chris placed a panel of Marjane on the overhead where her identity was rift in two. In order to understand each “side” of
Marjane’s identity, Chris asked them to analyze the iconic images in each “half” of the picture. Similar to the responses made by other groups of students I worked with, Chris’ students recognized the “hammer and ruler” as representative of science, education, and progress. The vine-like images were interpreted by these students as symbols of Marjane’s culture and religion. One student saw the vine as a sign of togetherness and unity.

As a final activity, students were presented with a second graphic organizer, entitled, “Your Two Worlds” (See Appendix H for examples). In the center of this organizer was a large oval “mirror.” Chris asked the students to draw their own image in the mirror. The mirror, similar to the panel, was split in half by a long perpendicular line. The students were asked to draw “two-sides” of themselves.

On each side of these organizers students were encouraged to fill in words or draw iconic images that represented each of “half” of their lives in order to illustrate how their identities performed differently in each distinct place. Furthermore, the students were asked to address three specific categories on their organizers: The people, the objects, and the personality traits associated with each setting. One student used iconic imagery to demonstrate her different school and home lives by drawing symbols to represent each. In the side of the mirror that represented “home,” she drew a dollar sign, a sun, a heart, a music symbol, and the letters LOL. She explained that each symbol represented something unique to her: she liked spending money and listening to music; she loved her family and was always “laughing out loud” (LOL). She drew the sun, “because it represents happiness.” Most of the students used
similar imagery. They drew stick figures of friends and family, referenced books, pencils, lockers and chalkboards as the tools or icons associated with school and assigned feelings of boredom, happiness, loneliness, or freedom to different sides. One student stood out uniquely from the others when he drew both sides exactly the same. He wanted to make sure Chris and his classmates understood that he is "the same person no matter who I'm with or where I go."

Summary of Lesson Three

Overall, the reading and activities assigned in the final lesson provided students with further opportunities to think about how they define and "represent" themselves. Though admittedly difficult to measure the actual "transformative" thinking that occurred in these students over the course of three lessons, Chris and I felt confident that we had provided his students with some practical tools for probing their own identity and personal convictions. Exploring these issues through the medium of the graphic narrative allowed Chris' students the benefit of immediacy—their prior background knowledge and their interests in the "visual," helped Chris' students penetrate these texts in more immediate and accessible ways. For students working toward functional literacy, the creation of written narratives based on the "image" allowed students to practice developing and applying descriptive action verbs and concrete nouns in the body of their writing. In addition, students practiced critical literacy as they evaluated how each of these narratives had the potential to speak into their own lives. Chris' students responded provocatively to the questions
posed by each panel and practiced defending their own values and beliefs in the process. Furthermore, in their analysis of specific cultural images (or codifications), the students worked to develop a "critical consciousness" by proactively seeking to understand "representations" while moving toward the practice of personal "transformation." Like the students before (and after them), these participants demonstrated that they can become "enlightened witnesses" of the picture, the word, and the world—a process that not only enlightened Chris' students but transformed us both, as educators, as well.
CHAPTER V

JOURNEY’S END: OUTCOMES, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Making Returns: A Personal Reflection

To arrive at an outcome is to make many, small returns. If five years ago, at the beginning of my journey as a doctoral student, someone would have told me I would be writing about comics and graphic novels, I would have laughed at them, disbelieving—What? You’re kidding, right? No way. That’s just not me.” However, like so many of the significant steps I have made in my life—without really knowing what I was looking for—I somehow found my way. In this regard, I like to think that the medium found me before I found it. In my third year of doctoral study, with dissertation apprehensions swelling in my gut, I wandered into a conference session on comic books and stumbled out a convert. In retrospect, maybe it wasn’t quite that simple. To be honest, it was never really “love at first sight,” but there was that “spark”—you know the one—the kind that feels like a ball of lightning unraveling in your brain or a field full of July fireflies pulsing in the cornfields at dusk—that kind of spark. And I knew that if I spent some time in the dirt rubbing a few sticks together it would whoosh into a flame.

So, I gave myself permission to build a fire.
Some days it consumed me. Flames leapt from the pyre in feverish rippling waves, burning my eyelashes and stinging my eyes. Other days, I let it go cold—allowing it to dwindle back to that faint whisper—embers glowing orange in the ash.

It is never easy to be a keeper of fires.

But what I’m really trying to say here is, it was not so much the conclusions I arrived at during this journey that mattered as it was the act of taking the journey itself—a cliché, perhaps, yes, but relevant all the same, and we would be kidding ourselves if we believed that the comics themselves were not full of clichés. So I took liberties and burned fires and looked to learn something along the way.

I learned to question my convictions and challenge my own preconceptions. I learned to look Superman in the face and say, “Hey, you’re not so bad after all, especially for a guy who wears tights.” I learned that comics were not always “funny” and that the title “graphic” in novels had nothing to do with sex, and that not everyone who reads comic books meets in clandestine circles in their parents’ basements to sew their next convention outfits while swapping Magic the Gathering trading cards, rolling up their next Dungeons and Dragons characters, and watching Xena the Princess Warrior on bunny-eared television sets. Then again, I learned that some of them did do these things. I learned that even girls read comics—and not just Wonder Woman. Some girls even wrote comics—and they were pretty good too.

And while it’s likely evident that I’m having a little fun here, probably the most important thing I’ve learned, is that at a journey’s end, it’s okay to give oneself permission to laugh.
Of course there were other, more pressing, discoveries to be made. When I began this journey, I was in search of genuine answers. I wanted to know how the themes in graphic narratives could connect with students and teachers in English classrooms in relevant, meaningful ways. I wanted to understand how visual and multimodal reading strategies could be applied to these narratives in ways that would compel readers to slow down, enjoy, and interpret the visual information in the same way they savored the words. I wanted to know, most of all—because this is what I’m passionate about—how these narratives had the ability to speak critically into the cultural lives of my students, to mirror their own experiences and to teach them how to honor, respect, and care for one another, regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or ability. And overall, I think I found some pretty satisfying answers.

Research Questions and Data Analysis

Through my own observations as both an active and passive participant in two primary research sites: 1) a high school English classroom in a local urban high school, and 2) a freshman-level introductory literary interpretation course at Western Michigan University where I served as the instructor of record for three consecutive semesters, the outcomes reported in this dissertation were determined through the examination of a variety of sources. Drawn primarily from the voices of the students themselves, data was collected from student in-class writing assignments, individual student blogs, formal writing assignments, and observations of classroom dialogues
related to the materials chosen for study.¹ My own voice, developed through a private teaching journal and alongside my students in classroom discussion, also contributed to these conclusions, as did the voice of Chris Bullmer, the high school English teacher whom I observed. Data in the form of recorded interview transcripts and transcribed classroom dialogues served as further reference points used to compare findings across classroom contexts in order to arrive at the conclusions discussed in more detail below.

During my journey to unearth specific patterns and trends regarding both student and teacher response to graphic narratives, I was particularly interested in information that would inform the two essential research questions posed by this study as listed below:

1. How do readers of graphic narratives interact with the unique multimodal features in these narratives and construct meaning not only through words and language, but through the visual, spatial, gestural, and auditory cues inherent in these texts

2. In what way do graphic narratives have the power to help students become culturally aware, critically engaged, and socially informed readers of themselves and the world around them?

In an effort to find answers to these questions, I identified data specifically for its ability to address each of these four categories: 1) multimodal, visual, and structural connections; 2) critical and cultural connections; 3) cross-textual or inter-

¹ Samples of data can be viewed in the Appendix of this dissertation.
textual connections, and 4) personal connections. Data was sorted into these categories and appears (as evidenced by previous chapters) as the student (and teacher) testimony that articulates this study. As I sifted through this data I was curious to discover what types of patterns or connections would materialize. I was interested in discovering, as well, what the data might tell me that I had not initially considered when I began my observations. As expected, a variety of outcomes, validated through multiple observations in both the secondary and post-secondary classrooms, emerged. Specific outcomes and contextual examples of these outcomes are described in the information that follows.

Research Outcomes and Conclusions

When I first began this study, I operated under the false presumptions (as do many teachers still) that my students would be thrilled to learn we were reading and interpreting visual texts. Prevailing cultural biases regarding this “Next” or “Net-generation” of learners persuaded me to believe that visual texts would be perceived as somehow more “palatable” or more familiar to students who were labeled as savvy multi-taskers, text-messagers, and Internet sophisticates. These same biases were frequently espoused by other educators I had the opportunity to speak with as well. When the graphic novel first “boomed” into the educational area, I discovered that most teachers believed them to be useful texts for engaging reluctant readers, regardless of the actual quality of the text itself. The visual nature of the text, these educators argued, had great potential to motivate and persuade this new generation of
learners who were, “of course,” more interested in visual texts like movies, television, cartoons, and video games than they were in reading. According to this line of reasoning then, it might be possible to “trick” these students into doing some “real” reading by luring them into comics with “pretty pictures.” Too often, on the occasions when I had the opportunity to speak at both state and national conferences, I discovered that teachers interested in discussing the “accessibility” of these texts—a word that was used synonymously to imply “simplicity”—were more concerned with “quick fixes” to student literacy rather than probing the merits of the medium itself.

Contrary to these beliefs, however, I discovered that students were no more interested in reading visual texts than they were in reading traditional texts if the narrative itself did not have a compelling story. This observation was supported by my own students—whose testimony in previous chapters indicated their initial tendencies toward skepticism, rather than blind acceptance of these texts—and by Chris’ students, whose first interactions with superhero comic-books demonstrated that without proper modeling and without compelling stories, these visual narratives often fell flat. When Chris’ students were asked, for example, if they enjoyed reading their comic books, many indicated that “they did not like superheroes.” These statements led Chris and me to conclude that while the visuals did not dissuade students from reading, they were not enough to engage the students alone. Compelling stories were a key component in the students’ ability to both critically and aesthetically appreciate these narratives.

In conjunction with this outcome, I discovered that many students believed—
in accordance with McCloud’s contentions regarding the prevailing reputation of comics—that comics and graphic novels were “crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable, kiddy fare” (McCloud 3). They did not initially view the medium to be worthy of any literary merit. This assertion was proven on countless occasions when students espoused erroneous or presumptuous beliefs regarding the medium. For example, when students realized that a good deal of my literary interpretation class would be dedicated to reading “comics,” most expressed clear reservations; some students even dropped the class. In blogs where I asked students to discuss their preconceptions regarding the medium, most admitted to viewing comics as “juvenile.” Still others confused “cartoons” and “comic strips” with graphic narratives—like Brian, who feared that we would be reading the Sunday comics section each week as “literature.” Other students initially saw “comics” as “something kids do” or “something that nerdy guys” do. Students generally shared a great number of misconceptions regarding the audience and the purpose of the medium. These ideas were confirmed by Chris’ students as well who believed they were “getting the day off” in English class when they learned that Chris would be teaching them about comics. The ideas underlying these statements being: “comics are easy; we won’t have to think very hard.” While I was familiar with the stereotypes regarding comics held by most adults—just yesterday a good friend asked me if I was still working on my dissertation on “cartoons,” for example—I was surprised to hear these same “hang-ups” from the students as well, whom I presumed would be much more interested in texts of a visual nature. In my interview with Chris as a follow-up
to the observations and lessons conducted in his class, Chris shared that one of the first potential problems he noted with the use of graphic narratives in the classroom was addressing the "student's perceptions of them"—a task that both Chris and I acknowledged as often elephantine in scope.

Furthermore, one of the more crucial findings supported by this study was the assertion that if teachers did not properly model how to read the multimodal, structural, and visual components in graphic narratives, then students would demonstrate resistance, confusion, and an inability to connect with the themes in these texts in meaningful ways. In the first semester when I introduced these narratives into the English classroom—still naïve about the inner-workings of the medium myself—I made the mistake of overlooking the importance of modeling how to read the specific "vocabulary" and structures of comics, by assuming that students would be able to "pick this up" on their own. Unsurprisingly as a result, students offered surface interpretations supported by the words and dialogue alone rather than focusing on how both words and images fuse together in order to speak to the readers/viewers of these narratives.

Curious to see if Chris' students would demonstrate these same behaviors, we purposely chose not to model how to read graphic narratives during the student's first exposure to the medium. As reported in Chapter IV, many students expressed confusion over the basic structures inherent in these texts, oftentimes complaining that they "didn't know where to begin" or how they were supposed to read the visual and verbal information on each page. These same students' responses and
interactions with the texts were greatly altered, however, after Chris modeled "how to read a graphic narrative" to his students. Although this "mini-lesson" was far from comprehensive, students demonstrated a much greater understanding of how to engage in the medium when the structures and vocabulary of the medium itself were both defined and modeled to them.

I discovered the same to be true in my own classrooms as well. Rather than glossing over McCloud’s text, *Understanding Comics*, in future semesters, for example, I scheduled *more time* on my syllabus to discuss this work. I also incorporated lessons using Molly Bang’s principles of interpreting visual information and introduced multimodal approaches to reading these narratives by modeling a “comics close-reading” to my students. When I provided multiple opportunities for my students to conduct “comics close-readings” of their own, I noticed the students began to respond to the material with new levels of complexity and interest. As a result their reading and interpretation of these texts was greatly enhanced, as supported by the students’ in-class discussions and blogs. This outcome challenged my initial presumptions that students would automatically understand how to read and interpret visual information simply because of their interests in and exposure to a variety of visual media. These statements were supported by Chris as well who shared in his interview that he “did not anticipate” that students would have “trouble navigating the pages themselves.” Furthermore, Chris added, “Once we were through the first day of actually showing the students how to read [the visual information], they had a better understanding of how to read comic books.” These ideas were
reiterated (and reinforced) in a follow-up question when I asked Chris what he might do differently in future readings of graphic texts. To this question Chris responded:

I would expand the number of days to spend on the unit so we could do more modeling at the start, really looking at how to read and understand and navigate the graphic novel, and the page of the graphic novel. [I would] spend a little more time with visual literacy, do more with discussion of symbols, icons, and how those translate into comic books, and then from there delve more heavily into character creation and story creation, and how dialogue drives the story in comic books, rather than the narrative, as most novels do. (Bullmer)

Another unexpected outcome I observed through the students’ engagement in “comics-close reading” activities was their ability to apply multimodal strategies to texts other than graphic narratives. In our study of poetry in particular, students benefited from thinking about the imagery created through the language of the poem by considering the spatial placement of the words in various lines and stanzas, the movement created through the punctuation, the visual pictures, icons, and symbols supported by the specific words used in the poem, and the way that rhythm and sound—through the practice of hearing the poem read aloud—suggested even further interpretations. For students who expressed frustration and aversion to the practice of reading and interpreting poetry, multimodal methods employed to create meaning through verbal, visual, spatial, gestural, and auditory cues provided students with a new set of skills for approaching this oftentimes difficult task.
Finally, the outcomes of this study support the assertion that when teachers are willing to model both multimodal and critical interpretations of graphic narratives, students demonstrate the ability to conduct sophisticated readings that connect the themes and ideas inherent in these texts into the context of their own lives and experiences. Indeed, learning how to read visual information critically often became a "liberatory" act for my students. Through their analysis of the visual iconography employed by graphic novelists, students began to understand the symbolic significance of these images in their ability to transmit universal and cultural messages to readers. When trained how to read both the verbal and visual information in graphic narratives, students demonstrated the ability to interpret visual/verbal messages that served to both support and/or contradict one another in order to dictate a variety of responses in the reader/viewer. In their analysis of the hypocrisy of the "church-camp kids" in Blankets, for example, my students noted the way that the visual artifacts worn by the characters contradicted the verbal information and gestural behaviors they demonstrated toward Craig. Without the ability to carefully "read" and analyze both of these systems, students lacked the skills necessary to interpret these passages in critical ways. Furthermore, students who demonstrated the ability to question (rather than merely accept) the visual "representations" offered by these narratives expressed deeper satisfaction in the texts overall as noted in Chapter III of this dissertation. When asked during his interview to comment on his students' ability to make significant cultural and personal connections to the texts chosen for study and interpretation, Chris indicated, as well,
that the use of the image to help students investigate cultural stereotypes and prejudices provided several “teachable moments,” particularly—as discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV—in relation to the students preconceptions regarding Iranian culture. Furthermore, Chris shared, “When we had the students draw themselves...a lot of deep understanding and analysis came out of that.” These statements, supported by the dialogue and written analysis of the students in both Chris’ classroom and in my own, demonstrated that graphic narratives, when taught purposefully and critically, had the powerful ability to both “represent” and “transform” the identities of student readers in multiple and complex ways.

Final Acknowledgments and Future Recommendations

While I maintain that the conclusions supported by this research offer a variety of philosophical and methodological approaches for aiding interested teachers and scholars in the task of incorporating graphic narratives into their own classrooms, I acknowledge the distinct limitations of this study as well. Written through the lens of my own observations and experiences and restricted to two particular “social situations,” the findings supported by this study are confined to the students and to the teachers who experienced them. While some generalizations across wider populations might be inferred, I acknowledge that more longitudinal and comprehensive studies must be conducted in order to arrive at any definitive conclusions regarding the use of these narratives in the English classroom.
Furthermore, while the scope of this study was primarily interested in investigating the multimodal and critical approaches employed by students in their reading and interpretation of these narratives, a wealth of additional issues and concerns are yet to be adequately addressed by scholars and educators, as discussed in greater detail below.

First, investigations addressing the prevailing attitudes of teachers regarding this medium have yet to be conducted. Understanding how teachers view and thereby promote the use of these narratives is essential to how these narratives are incorporated (or exploited) in classroom practice. Rather than viewing the medium as a visual novelty designed to titillate reluctant readers or as a “stepping-stone” to more traditional and therefore “better” literatures, teachers need to begin moving beyond preconceptions and begin thinking critically about the uses and applications of these narratives for engaged classroom study. This recommendation comes with the acknowledgment that very few resources exist for teachers interested in engaging their students in the reading of comics and graphic novels in critical ways, a fact supported by Chris who shared the following:

There needs to be a better understanding by teachers of how to use [graphic narratives]...Until there is more of an acceptance of these texts, there won’t be the type of books and classes and training aids available to help teachers break down how to look at a graphic novel or how to [simply learn] more about them. It’s great when you meet a teacher who has read comic books their entire lives [who] has that
collective knowledge, but it's another thing entirely to understand the *pedagogy* that goes into teaching [graphic narratives]. (Bullmer)

As a solution to this, Chris proposed the development of a database of graphic novel images or even an entire anthology or textbook devoted to the *pedagogical practice* of teaching comics and graphic novels. According to Chris this type of resource would be enormously helpful for incorporating these narratives into the classroom. These materials, however, are yet unavailable to teachers.

Second, along with the acknowledgment that teachers need more practical resources for applying these texts into their classrooms, it is important to note that the cost of these resources is often a great deterrent to their use. In a recent conversation with Chris, for example, he shared that despite his advocacy for the purchase and inclusion of graphic novels in the English curriculum, administrators denied his requests on the basis of cost. For the price of supplying one classroom with a set of graphic novels, the administration argued that they could purchase nearly triple the amount of traditional novels. Until issues of cost are addressed, therefore, the use of graphic novels in secondary education classrooms will continue to be severely impeded. In addition, during conversations at state and national conferences, teachers often argued that there was too little time, given the pressures of preparing students for state standardized tests, to incorporate "extra" materials like comics and graphic novels. Access, cost, and time, therefore, are serious issues in need of further investigation in order for teachers to successfully incorporate graphic narratives into their English classrooms.
In addition to addressing the concerns of teachers, future studies regarding the prevailing preconceptions of students in relation to comics and graphic novels are necessary as well. As demonstrated in previous chapters of this dissertation, students as young as fifteen and sixteen had already internalized the highbrow and lowbrow prejudices typically exhibited by adults regarding this "literature." Students initially undervalued the ability of these texts to speak to them in critical and personal way. Furthermore, when first presented with comics or graphic novels, many students felt personally affronted—as if the act of reading a comic itself somehow implied that the reader was less intelligent than a reader of "literature." Without fully understanding the complicated inner-workings of the medium, students displayed great resistance. An examination of the origins of these attitudes would further benefit teachers interested in the pedagogy of the medium overall.

Finally, as more teachers begin to incorporate these narratives into their classrooms—and as publishers respond in return by glutting the market with more and more graphic narratives—a study evaluating the merits of graphic adaptations of literary texts would greatly benefit interested educators. Since the invention of the Illustrated Classics, publishers have hoped to capitalize on the popularity of the medium by reinventing it for their own gain. Most recently, for example, the plays of Shakespeare have been adapted into graphic novels through the No Fear Shakespeare series. Resulting in little more than hefty speeches punctuated by a few black and white pictures, these texts prove that not all graphic narratives are alike. On the other hand, I would argue that the Manga Shakespeare series stays true the purpose and the
vision of the medium itself, respecting both the picture and the word as they work in conjunction with one another to create meaning. Regardless, teachers interested in these narratives need to be wary of the quality and functionality of these texts. In addition, a careful study of how the images in these narratives co-opt or influence the literary and aesthetic responses of our students in comparison to the responses made to the original texts is an area that would greatly benefit from future investigation.

Journey’s End

In conclusion, as I reflect back on all of the milestones met to reach this final paragraph, as I trace the impressions left by my keystrokes on the wide canvas of each blank, white page, as I watch the steam curl from the rim of a fresh cup of coffee and listen to the wind chimes from beneath my office window, I remember a girl, huddled in her favorite reading chair, eagerly flipping through the last pages of Blankets, restlessly seeking a close, and I am reminded—all at once—of the bittersweet joy of arriving at that last page, the heavy shape of the last word hovering there in the silent, unmarked space that follows. And I know, at last, the bittersweet contentment that comes at a journey’s end.

"How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface, to make a map of my movement—no matter how temporary."^2

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^2 From Craig Thompson’s Blankets, the final “mark” on pages 581-582.
Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: April 4, 2008

To: Allen Webb, Principal Investigator
Shannon Mortimore, Student Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 08-03-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Toward a Multiliterate Pedagogy: Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom” has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 4, 2008
Appendix B

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: April 25, 2008

To: Gwen Tarbox, Principal Investigator
    Shannon Mortimore, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 08-03-06

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Toward a Multiliterate Pedagogy: Teaching with Graphic Novels in the English Classroom” has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 25, 2009
Appendix C

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: April 3, 2009

To: Gwen Tarbox, Principal Investigator
    Shannon Mortimore, Student Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 08-03-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes (total subjects increased to 44; PI changed to Gwen Tarbox) to and renewal of your research project “Toward a Multiliterate Pedagogy: Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom” requested in your memo dated 04/03/2009 (total subjects increased to 44; PI changed to Gwen Tarbox) has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 4, 2010
Appendix D

English 1100: Cross-Textual Literature
“Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is largely regarded as the leader of the American Transcendentalist movement in the early 19th century. American poet, essayist, and philosopher, Emerson is credited as being the mentor of Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden*. “Self-Reliance”(1841) embodies Emerson’s philosophy of avoiding the “foolish inconsistency” of men, conforming to the convictions of the “self” and not that of “society,” and learning to embrace, accept, know, and “trust thyself.” Among the many famous quotes from this essay that my students explored in relation to *American Born Chinese* were: “Know thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” “Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist,” “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,” “Envy is ignorance; and ignorance is suicide,” and perhaps most famous, “To be great is to be misunderstood” (“Ralph Waldo Emerson—Texts”).

*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

*The Bluest Eye* (1970), written by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, is the author’s debut novel. The novel traces the experiences of the young African-American protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, as she struggles to gain acceptance in small town Lorain, Ohio in the years following the Great Depression. Adopted by the African-American McTeer family as a result of the physical and mental abuse she endures at the hands of her drunken father, Cholly (who eventually rapes and impregnates her), Pecola befriends the McTeer sisters, Claudia and Freida. The story pivots around the
varying themes of internal racism—Pecola is seen as a “dirty, nigger child” by the “respected” African-American families, and is completely reviled, as are the McTeer sisters to a lesser degree, by the white community—and issues of “whiteness,” beauty, and self-acceptance. Pecola’s obsession with the picture of Shirley Temple leads her to believe that her life would be much better—that people would treat her with love and compassion—if only she had blue eyes. This unobtainable wish is later made “real” in Pecola’s eyes with the help of the pedophile mystic, Soaphead Church, who claims he can give her what she desires. The idea that “whiteness,” and blue eyes in particular, is symbolic of goodness and purity is a prevailing trope throughout the story. Pecola is constantly called “ugly” and “dirty”—even her mother’s tenderness toward the white girl she cares for proves to Pecola that transforming her physical appearance will result in a better life. This transformation is never fully realized and Pecola, suffering on the brink of insanity, is eventually seen as an outcast.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty

According to the Dove.com website, “The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is a global effort launched in 2004 [that] serves as a starting point for societal change and acts as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty.” Featuring pictures of women of all ages, colors, shapes, and sizes, the campaign advocates questioning current media misconceptions regarding beauty—most notably the image of the 6’ tall, 100 lb, blond-haired, blue-eyed, buxom model as the symbol or icon of
true female perfection. A video entitled “Evolution” and available on their website or through Youtube, visually demonstrates the physical transformation of a young model—quite beautiful to begin with—into a typical billboard ad. This process (sped up to be viewed in less than one minute) reveals not only the modification of the model’s face and hair through make-up, but also the Photoshop editing that occurs after her photo is taken in order to perfect it for the advertisement. The overall message for young women (and men) is that the beauty we see in advertising is a lie. No woman can look like an advertisement because no such woman exists.

*Oranges are not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson

Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, is the semi-autobiographical story of the young Jeanette, adopted by fundamentalist Christians in England. Appropriately, each section of Winterson’s book is titled according to a biblical chapter, and in “Genesis” readers first encounter the fanatical host of religious zealots that dictate Jeanette’s myopic views: Pastor Spratt (a holy-looking Eroll Flynn), the “Halleluiah Giant,” “Testifying Elsie,” and Jeanette’s mother herself, a woman who originally adopts her so she can shield herself from the evils of “carnal knowledge” (Winterson 3). Completely insulated from the secular community, Jeanette knows only her family and the zealous members of her evangelical church. Jeanette’s forced “exodus” into the “breeding grounds” of the public schools at age seven humorously recounts her failed attempts at fitting in with the other children. Convinced that she has been called to the ministry, Jeanette
terrifies her unsuspecting classmates with stories about the horrors of Hell and demon possession. This alongside the creation of a somber needle-point reading: “THE SUMMER IS OVER AND WE ARE NOT YET SAVED,” prompts Jeanette’s teachers to write concerned letters to her mother who is elated upon hearing this news (Winterson 39-43).

As the story progresses, Jeanette meets Melanie and convinces her to come to her church to be “saved.” This conversion is met with great celebration as indicated by Pastor Spratt who hoists up the “salvation flag” to proudly commemorate Melanie’s segue into God’s grace. During Bible studies, the two girls become close, and Jeanette eventually realizes that she is falling in love with Melanie. Raised to live her life in fear of “unnatural passions,” Jeanette must defend her feelings for Melanie, a girl she has come to love “almost as much as [she] loves the Lord” (Winterson 104). Mystified that such feelings could be deemed “sinful,” Jeanette rebels against the efforts of the church elders to convert her back to the “goodness of Christ’s teachings.” In a staunch effort to get her to repent, Jeanette’s mother and the elders lock her in a room for thirty-six hours with no food. Told that she cannot love both Melanie and the Lord, Jeanette’s faith, like Craig’s, is greatly rattled.
Some Keep the Sabbath  
by Emily Dickinson

SOME keep the Sabbath going to church;  
I keep it staying at home,  
With a bobolink for a chorister,  
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;  
I just wear my wings,  
And instead of tolling the bell for church,  
Our little sexton sings.

God preaches,—a noted clergyman,—  
And the sermon is never long;  
So instead of getting to heaven at last,  
I 'm going all along!

Much Madness is Divinest Sense  
by Emily Dickinson

MUCH madness is divinest sense  
To a discerning eye;  
Much sense the starkest madness.  
'T is the majority  
In this, as all, prevails.  
Assent, and you are sane;  
Demur,—you're straightway dangerous,  
And handled with a chain.
Appendix E

War and Conflict Unit Poetry
Memorial Day for the War Dead
by Yehuda Amichai

Memorial day for the war dead. Add now
the grief of all your losses to their grief,
even of a woman that has left you. Mix
sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history,
which stacks holiday and sacrifice and mourning
on one day for easy, convenient memory.

Oh, sweet world soaked, like bread,
in sweet milk for the terrible toothless God.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."
No use to weep inside and to scream outside.
Behind all this perhaps some great happiness is hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt is dressed up
as a little girl with flowers.
The streets are cordoned off with ropes,
for the marching together of the living and the dead.
Children with a grief not their own march slowly,
like stepping over broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay like that for many days.
A dead soldier swims above little heads
with the swimming movements of the dead,
with the ancient error the dead have
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.
A shopwindow is decorated with
dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.
And everything in three languages:
Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

A great and royal animal is dying
all through the night under the jasmine
tree with a constant stare at the world.

A man whose son died in the war walks in the street
like a woman with a dead embryo in her womb.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."
On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam
by Hayden Carruth

Well I have and in fact
more than one and I'll
tell you this too

I wrote one against
Algeria that nightmare
and another against

Korea and another
against the one
I was in

and I don't remember
how many against
the three

when I was a boy
Abyssinia Spain and
Harlan County

and not one
breath was restored
to one

shattered throat
mans womans or childs
not one not

one
but death went on and on
never looking aside

except now and then
with a furtive half-smile
to make sure I was noticing.
War Is Kind
   by Stephen Crane

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind,
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them.
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom--
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbles in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind!
next to of course god america i
 by e.e. cummings

next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut­iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water.

I Explain A Few Things
 by Pablo Neruda

You are going to ask: and where are the lilacs?
and the poppy-petalled metaphysics?
and the rain repeatedly spattering
its words and drilling them full
of apertures and birds?
I'll tell you all the news.

I lived in a suburb,
a suburb of Madrid, with bells,
and clocks, and trees.

From there you could look out
over Castille's dry face:
a leather ocean.
My house was called
the house of flowers, because in every cranny
geraniums burst: it was
a good-looking house
with its dogs and children.
Remember, Raul?
Eh, Rafel? Federico, do you remember
from under the ground
my balconies on which
the light of June drowned flowers in your mouth?
Brother, my brother!
Everything
loud with big voices, the salt of merchandises,
pile-ups of palpitating bread,
the stalls of my suburb of Arguelles with its statue
like a drained inkwell in a swirl of hake:
oil flowed into spoons,
a deep baying
of feet and hands swelled in the streets,
metres, litres, the sharp
measure of life,
stacked-up fish,
the texture of roofs with a cold sun in which
the weather vane falters,
the fine, frenzied ivory of potatoes,
wave on wave of tomatoes rolling down the sea.

And one morning all that was burning,
one morning the bonfires
leapt out of the earth
devouring human beings —
and from then on fire,
gunpowder from then on,
and from then on blood.
Bandits with planes and Moors,
bandits with finger-rings and duchesses,
bandits with black friars spattering blessings
came through the sky to kill children
and the blood of children ran through the streets
without fuss, like children's blood.

Jackals that the jackals would despise,
stones that the dry thistle would bite on and spit out,
vipers that the vipers would abominate!

Face to face with you I have seen the blood
of Spain tower like a tide
to drown you in one wave
of pride and knives!

Treacherous
generals:
see my dead house,
look at broken Spain:
from every house burning metal flows
instead of flowers,
from every socket of Spain
Spain emerges
and from every dead child a rifle with eyes,
and from every crime bullets are born
which will one day find
the bull's eye of your hearts.

And you'll ask: why doesn't his poetry
speak of dreams and leaves
and the great volcanoes of his native land?

Come and see the blood in the streets.
Come and see
The blood in the streets.
Come and see the blood
In the streets!
Appendix F

Observation Transcripts: High School English Classroom
Day 1: From Action Writing to Social Action, Superhero Comics in the Classroom

As the students file in, Chris writes on the board:

“What does a hero look like?”
“What qualities do you admire in superheroes?”
“Who are our heroes today?”

One student says, “Mr. Bullmer, do you want a “real” answer to that question?”

Class begins with Chris asking students to discuss the first question on the board.

S: There ain’t no specific look to a hero

S: Bubbles, Blossom, and Buttercup. The Powderpuff Girls.

Chris: What are their superpowers?

S: Telekinesis, the other one can warp.

S: So heroes can look like anything, and we know they have powers. When I say Hero what pops into your mind?

S: My Nanna, the stuff she does is heroic.

Chris: What kind of stuff does she do?

S: She just like is always there day to day, there to help out with anybody or anything, money, or talking-wise. She’s just a hero.

S: So Dario says that a hero is someone that we can rely on. So does she have any superpowers?

S: She can go to the ATM and get money out.

Students laugh.
Chris: When I say hero what do you think of first?

S: Somebody made up?

S: My adoptive parents

Chris: So you're thinking of specific qualities in them

S: For every adoptive kid, their parents saved them from a bad place, and that makes them a hero.

Chris: What specific superheroes and qualities do you admire?

S: The wolverine.

S: yeah! Only Magneto can kill him

S: oh, the guy that shoots the needles out of his fingers.

Chris: Why is it that you admire that about wolverine

S: Because, he can't die. Only Magneto can kill him

S: Their different personalities, some are funny, some have different attitudes.

S: Question with that. Stereotypically, when we say superhero, what sex are we usually talking about.

S: I think of She-roses!

Most students: Men, because they are strong

S: They are supposed to take control over situations.

S: Sometimes there are only three or four females in the comic books

Chris: Why is that?

S: Because the readers are all nerdy guys

Chris: Yes, because most writers of comics are men. Let's go one step further, when we think of the traditional superhero. What race do we think of?

*The students collectively shout out, "White*
S: The Green Lantern is Black

*Chris puts his Batman action figure on the podium in front of all of the students. They take a look and speculate. All of them have different ideas and begin shouting them out. The classroom is very animated.*

**Chris:** Taylor you have the floor.

S: What about the Punisher, he's not a superhero.

**Chris:** Why is it that Batman, Superman, and Spiderman, the comics that sell the most, show all white men as the heroes?

S: Because they were written during a time when that was most accepted

**Chris:** Who are our real heroes today?

S: As in people? I don't know.

S: Our soldiers

S: Bill Clinton

S: Our peers are our heroes

S: My mom

S: The people on TV

S: Jesus

S: Our allies

S: Somebody who can do something that I can't do. Like if you really like to climb mountains, someone who can do that.

**Chris:** Well I can juggle, does that make me a hero?

S: Well, to someone who likes that, yes.

S: Someone who is inspiring
S: Isn’t there a difference between a hero and an idol?

Chris: An idol is someone that you look up to, yes. But, you might believe that you can never be like them, because you can’t possibly achieve what they have achieved. You put them on a pedestal. Are we talking about someone who is a protector of our values and morals, someone who inspires us to be like them or someone we worship or idolize? That’s an important distinction.

S: There is a group of people who raises money to help disabled kids at the hospital, the Shriners. Those kids love that they can laugh and juggle, and do flips.

S: I think what he meant by idol is that he set standards against what you can do and what someone else can do.

Chris hands out a comic book to each student. They flip through them and compare their comics to the ones their friends have. Some sit quietly and begin reading on their own, without direction. Chris gives directions:

Chris: For SSR today, your job is to read your comic book. Go ahead and check it out, see what’s going on in there. We are going to give you a post-it note. When you find a page that is most exciting or interesting to you, I want you to put a post it note on it.

Most of the students settle in right away, they really didn’t need Chris’ invitation to get going. Two girls are a bit more reluctant. They flip through the pages, but don’t really stop to read anything. They are more interested in chatting with one another about the pictures or trading books. One young woman, who is struggling to figure out how to read the comic book says, “I don’t know how to read this stuff.” A girl next to her leans over and points out how the panels work. “You go from here to here,” she says.

While the majority of the students, 20 or so, are intent on their reading, a small handful, are more interested in comparing, trading, and discussing how the comics “work.” “Why are there ads in here?” “Because it’s a comic book, that’s how they are!”

Chris clarifies how to use the post it note again and gives the students some time to finish up. Chris puts a quickwrite prompt up on the overhead:

1. What did you think of your comic book? What was interesting about it? What didn’t you like?

2. Using your identified “high interest page,” write a one-page creative piece using the themes, characters and/or action as its basis.
Chris clarifies different ways that this might be accomplished. “For example, he says, sometimes I look at a painting and write a new poem out of it. I use it as inspiration to write something new.”

Erin very lively, and outspoken about her lack of interest in the comic books, snaps her fingers, sings, and dances her way up to get her journal for her quickwrite. The other students smile and laugh with her. She has dynamic energy and a sweet personality, but is very unfocused. She wants to spend her time chatting with her friends in class. In this case, her personality is infectious. When she is told to write, she folds her head in her arms and lays down on the desk. She writes a few lines.

Alexis, a girl with bright red hair, and a self-proclaimed anime and graphic novel lover discusses her thoughts on a .Hack Manga with a friend nearby.

Chris focuses the students into a discussion again.

Chris: Let’s talk about how we can spice this up, because comic books add pictures to the words. And are these pictures boring?

S: No, they are colorful, and vibrant, and full of action, and love.

Chris: Right! So writing that comes from comics should be the same. Comic books are about action. When we write about comic books, we want to use action words. How many of you used the word “fight”?

Many students raise their hands.

Chris: What other words did you use?

S: Socked, smashed

S: To fire

S: To engage!

Chris: Nice, to Engage!

S: BOOM!

S: That’s an onomatopoeia

S: My characters were flying. To Soar!
S: Hover, Glide

Chris: What can we say for flying really fast?

S: ZOOM! Supersonic!

Chris: How about walking?

S: Strutted, stumbled

S: Waddle!

S: Skip, shuffle

Chris: Check out these action verbs. *Chris points to the poster paper where the words have been recorded.* What's the difference between fighting and engaging?

S: You're about to get in a fight if you are engaging.

Chris: How many of us have the tendency to not give the kind of action that comic books give? We see in our minds how the person is walking, but most of us don't "say" that in our writing. In the next couple of days, I'm going to ask you to write the way that a comic book artist does. A comic book artist doesn't have to say that Spiderman, "scaled, creeped, or inched" up a wall. We can see that in a comic book, but in your own writing, we can't see that. It's your job as the writer to create that feeling for the reader.
Appendix G

"Who Are You?" Student Graphic Organizer
Who Are You?

I'm a 18 year old teenager. I'm honest, helpful, and fun. I'd like being around. I don't like showing emotions but I can't help it. Never ever. I'm not patient sometimes, student, female.

Who would you like to be?

Own my own business, 23 years old, have a good man, successful, still in touch with my family, own my own car and house, fashionable, maybe pregnant, nice to people, patient.

Why would you like to be that person or like that?

I'm not patient enough to graduate and I don't know if I can do all the things I wish I could do. I just want to get and become everything I want.

What would be good about this change?
- Earn my own money.
- Well known.
- Be happy with my family.
- Successful.

What would be bad about this change?
- I would have grown up so fast.

Would you become your own hero if you were to make this change? Why or why not?

Yes, because I would have everything in my life I wanted and be happy.
Appendix H

"Your Two Worlds" Student Graphic Organizer
Your Two Worlds

The People
Amber, Jerrica, Erin, Dani, A-lafage, Robin, Adrian, Teachers.
More people but traits aren't to write.

The Objects
Pencils, bag, paper, clothes, desk.

The Personality Traits
Loud, hyper, outgoing.

The People
Mom, Dad, Kerri, Chelsey, Shaun, David, Pastor Jeff, India.
I seemed to be more stressed and mad all the time.
Appendix I

Teacher Journal Sample
Teacher Journal Sample

*Blankets*
February 12, 2008

Teacher journal

I started today with an essential question, “What does Craig believe?” I asked my students to consider two relationships that Craig engages in to answer this question. They were allowed to choose from his relationships with: Raina, his family, God, art, the church community, his peers, and his “self.”

I’m hoping that the students can begin to point to some specific areas in the text for discussion. I’m hoping they enjoyed the book and that they will have good, critical feedback. I feel like I’m pulling teeth here sometimes....does that mean that this project isn’t working? I’ll open up with a question about whether or not they enjoyed the reading, just to let them air out their initial feelings regarding the book, but I’m a little worried too that this might set the tone for a “why are we reading comics in a literature class” discussion—actually this might be good. I don’t think they are really asking these kinds of questions yet.

For me, *Blankets* does even more than a traditional literary text can. Through Craig’s subtle movement throughout the novel, through his silence, his quiet pondering, his presence in certain frames where his purpose is to “show” the reader the world around him—he is sensitive, quiet and caring. We feel the pain that Craig endures, not because he tells us about it, but because we witness it—as if it were our own. We see the injustice that Craig must face, and we are wrapped up in a blanket of concern for him. We want to feel warm—the way he wants to feel warm and secure. I think this desire, juxtaposed against the cold of a frigid winter, makes this desire even more significant in the novel. There is poetry in the words that Thompson writes. It is not only the picture that creates this feeling of loss of faith, love, desire, passion. It is the words, the beautiful situational metaphor that Thompson creates. When Craig walks over the ice we are reminded of how skiddish his life is, how fragile his faith, how insecure his love. So many beautiful moments in this story.
Appendix J

Student Blog Sample
Why The Skeptic? Well, I have to admit that I am having a little trouble with the idea of a "graphic novel." It sounds like an oxymoron to me. But I'm willing to be open-minded about this and try to have some fun with it. After all, I am here to learn. I doubt that I will ever be completely convinced but if I've learned one thing it is that I never know what's gonna happen next. I am a sophomore here at WMU and I, for the moment, am majoring in History and English. My goal is to teach post-secondary when I grow up. I got the chance to TA for an English writing class a couple of semesters ago and it was an amazing experience. I loved it. I am originally from NC and traveled a lot before I came to Kzoo. I love to read, I want to travel, and I'm scared of sunflowers.

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

WHAT ARE REAL BOOKS?

Comics are books. That's a fact that I'll have to learn to live with. That however, says nothing of quality. I think the "graphic novel" has its place and it is certainly a valid art form. But of what art? I read BLANKETS and AMERICAN BORN CHINESE both were entertaining but that was about it. Is that all a book is? Entertainment? I don't happen to think so. I think that comics still seem to be juvenile. I'm glad we weren't asked what is a work of literature........

Posted by willieelmono at 5:49 AM 2 comments
Appendix K

Chris Bullmer Interview Transcripts
1. What were your thoughts regarding comics and graphic novels, prior to our collaboration?

I collected graphic novels and comic books before this lesson. Not only when I was a child, but also into my late teens and early twenties. I read them on and off through college and gained a more sophisticated understanding of the themes and motifs in comics books and graphic novels as I got into my literature degree. Also with the use of comic books and graphic novels in Hollywood, I started thinking more about how I could use them in the classroom when I became a teacher. This helped me to gain a better understanding of how I could use them. But I always liked them.

2. So you considered using the materials, but did you ever actually use them prior to our collaboration?

Not a whole lot. I used a few images and a few bits and pieces from comic books, and a couple of select pages from graphic novels but never any long-term lessons. I had some comic books available for students, so it was a very passive activity for students who might not otherwise engage with regular print books.

3. You have expressed a personal interest in these texts, but what made you consider using them in the classroom?

The class that we brought the activity into was a class with several struggling readers, and several students who respond well to literature they can connect their lives with. They were also a class that was really receptive to popular culture and popular media. It was a really good fit, and a good way to see if those types of literatures could be used in a way that would help them understand their own ability to read, help them gain reading skills, and then broaden that to connecting the text to their own lives and the text to the world around them, and to other pieces of literature that we were doing as well.

4. When we brought this lesson to your students, do you feel that they responded to the literature in the way that you originally anticipated they would?

In some ways, I think they responded the way they would. I knew that the imagery of the comic books would be appealing, and I think some of those conversations exceeded my expectations, and were well within the line of my expectations. Some of the things I didn’t anticipate were the trouble navigating the pages themselves, which actually became a lesson in itself—how to look at non-traditional texts and
how to read non-traditional texts. And once we were through the first day of actually showing the students how to read those things, they had a better understanding of how to read comic books. And the corollary of that is that several students told me that they probably would have a better understanding of how to navigate instructional materials that were structured more like a graphic novel.

Not long after this lesson, we did look at some non-fiction pieces from the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and from the automotive industry that were recommended by the State of Michigan as part of the larger curriculum, and interestingly they were set up in tables in graphs that went in a circular page format, which is more like what a graphic novel looks like, and a couple of students actually commented that it reminded them of looking at a graphic novel.

5. Do you feel like the students were able to make any significant connections with the text?

I think the biggest connection that was made was with our discussion of the *Captain America* texts and stereotypes. I think it’s partially because the students deal with these stereotypes and these issues in their own lives and they see them a lot in the media, and in film, and in literature—and so that discussion furthered their understanding of how different people send messages. And when we used both the Nazi propaganda and the American propaganda to expand that out to the ways that advertisers and the government use imagery like those in comic books—that was a really important connection they made.

With our discussion with our exploration of *American Born Chinese* and *Persepolis*, I think some students had a better connection, definitely my exchange students really had a close connection with both of those texts, I think particularly *American Born Chinese*. With *Persepolis* they understood more about the culture being talked about, and it was interesting to watch the learning process with students who didn’t know anything about Iran. We touched on the lack of understanding about the Iranian culture, and that was one of the more interesting teachable moments we had because it brought out more of the stereotypical thinking and a lot of the assumptions students had about Iran and the Middle East.

I think students connected also with the identity shift in *American Born Chinese*—how he wishes and dreams and sort of wills himself to be somebody else. When we had the students draw themselves in both of those roles, a lot of deep understanding and analysis came out of that, which I thought was interesting too.
6. If you were to do these lessons again, how might you modify them?

I would definitely do them again, and I’m thinking a lot about how to add graphic novels into the tenth grade curriculum as linking texts. Our ninth grade is already using *Persepolis* as a linking text and we bought several copies to do just that. I want to continue this work with both the tenth grade and eleventh grade curriculum.

7. Could you define “linking texts”?

Kalamazoo schools develop their units with “anchor” texts and “linking” texts. A linking text can be one of any number of texts that are not required for teachers to teach or students to read but that the teacher thinks is a good link to the unit and the measurement topic which the students are assessed on. There are a couple of sections, one in particular, where we are talking about power and influence in modern culture—which is one of the Michigan standards, being able to understand that, and I’m thinking about using some of the sections from *American Born Chinese* to portray that, and talk about that, and open up that discussion.

The things that I would do differently, I would expand the number of days to spend on the unit so we could do more modeling at the start, really looking at how to read and understand and navigate the graphic novel, and the page of the graphic novel. Spend a little more time with visual literacy, do more with discussion of symbols, icons, and how those translate into comic books, and then from there delve more heavily into character creation and story creation, and how dialogue drives the story in comic books, rather than the narrative, as most novels do.

8. How do you respond to the critic that argues that comics and graphic novels are not “real” literature?

My first answer would be that I just got done doing AP college English training and the college board is putting much more emphasis on visual literacy, and one of the components they teach is political cartoons and graphic novel imagery as one of those portions. It is a literature unto itself, but it also meshes both visual and written texts in a lot of interesting and exciting ways, not even to speak to the fact that some students really benefit from having visual cues when they are reading, and graphic novels provide that. For those reasons I think it’s great.

It’s not a replacement for traditional texts. There’s no question about that. I would never suggest that you have an American Literature course where you don’t read a traditional novel, but I would suggest that in addition to those types of classes there should be classes that can teach primarily graphic novels, and also using graphic novel and comic book lit as linking texts, because a lot of the same skills and
understandings that we’re teaching on a regular basis with novels, short stories, poems, and plays, can be taught with graphic novels.

At this point it has become such an important part of culture that it’s important enough of a genre that students should be exposed to it. Right now it’s going through a popular period with the amount of movies that are being made about it, and the resurgence of the popularity of both the comic book and graphic novel with young people and contemporary culture, but that’s not going to go away. There was an interview with Jack Kirby, one of the original comic book creators, and he predicted at the first comic book convention in San Francisco, which had 70 people that there would be 5,000 people by 1985, and it happened, and I don’t think that this is ever going to go away. It’s embedded enough in the culture.

Traditionalist are always going to find reasons to shut down anything that’s new, it threatens their expertise in the standard canon, but there have always been expansions in the canon.

9. I’m glad you brought the canon up. How are you negotiating your use of some of these new literacies with your use of the traditional canon?

Luckily, a lot of the graphic novel artists and creators, are using pieces of the canon to create graphic novels. Which is spanning the gap between either side. We’re seeing beautiful renditions of Kafka’s work, beautiful renditions of Shakespeare’s work, well-wrought renditions of Beowulf. Texts that have been traditionally hard, or are very inaccessible to some students are becoming much more accessible, my nine year old daughter has read the Metamorphosis, and loved it! Because she could both read the text but also see the imagery, and that gave her enough of a connection where she was willing to go back and read the text, which she wouldn’t have done otherwise.

And now I think there are enough graphic novels out there, and some of the original comic books out there that truly are classic, they have the great archetypes that you see in literature, great themes, they are symbols of culture, symbols of the living experience, those things that make literature what they are. And, people can only hold that truth at bay so long. Yes, comic books did start off as a fringe entertainment, but that’s not what it is anymore. If you put a comic book in front of anyone of a certain age, they are going to know what it is, and they are going to be able to tap into that collective cultural knowledge of what a comic book represents, or a graphic novel. That means that it’s a form of literature.
10. What further potential do you see in comics and graphic novels?

For potential uses, I think that showing models of graphic organizers and comic books and then having students create their own versions of things, for narrative purposes, for study purposes for vocab creation, and there are already well established procedures like window painting and episodic notes that utilize the graphic novel format, but teachers don’t make the connection by showing the actual graphic novel—that’s one place where you’re not even delving into the story you’re just saying, “Look at how this artist portrayed this...how can you correlate that into our study of the water cycle or the periodic table? And illustrating things that way.

Beyond that, the work of Robert Marzano and all of the important things about Strategies that Work, one of the essential skills is the ability to compare and contrast. The graphic novel and comic book are very accessible and not exceptionally time-consuming. A student can consume a large amount of graphic novel material in a short period of time, which they can then compare to a longer novel they’re working with, a short story they’re working with, or a theme that they are discussing in class. And that’s another thing—It’s a great discussion starter, a great seminar starter, there are lots of things you can do with it that way as well. It can be a catalyst to something else. You can use one frame, one page of it, one whole story. I can take a page of a novel and put it context, and there are some that work really well, but I’m more likely to use a poem to do something like that. In many ways I can contextualize the entirety of a graphic novel, but give them one frame and have them pick that apart, because of the visual quality of it matched with the words.

11. What potential problems do you see with using these materials in the classroom?

The first is the students’ perception of them—which we saw when we did it. “Oh, we’re just reading comic books.” It’s very easy for a student who likes to avoid everything to lump their understanding of it into that. Also traditionalists, particularly our department heads or curriculum coordinators who don’t view the graphic novel or comic book as viable literature. That makes it difficult for young teachers who are the most likely to adopt these texts, frankly, to be able to rationalize it, particularly in the year of standards best grading and standards based assessment. We’re probably not going to see these kinds of texts on state testing or the SAT anytime soon.

Beyond that, there needs to be a better understanding by teachers of how to use them. Had I had the time and resources and the ability to go further into the way I was creating the lessons, the lessons would have been much better. Until there is more of an acceptance of these texts, there won’t be the type of books and classes and training aids available to help teachers break down how to look at a graphic novel or just know about them. It’s great when you get that teacher who has read comic books their entire lives and has that collective knowledge and can delve into them that way,
or a graphic artist that understands the ways of the graphic form, and the design, but it’s another thing entirely to understand the pedagogy that goes into teaching these things—and that’s one of the biggest challenges, not having that basis for looking at research on education and applying it to this form.

12. Did the lack of engagement on behalf of some of your students surprise you? What do you attribute that to?

It did and it didn’t. It didn’t because some of the students I had in the class there were many things that didn’t engage them and don’t engage them as students. I don’t think that’s a function of the graphic novel or comic book, because they have trained themselves that anything a teacher sets in front of them is sort of radioactive. However, it did surprise me that there were students who did not traditionally engage in much of the other things, who did, because they were comic books, because they were not novels. Actually another surprise was that more of the young women in class, who traditional don’t like reading and don’t like analyzing texts, were the ones that warmed to it. And I don’t know why that is. I can’t speak to that. Because I think stereotypically, and this is my own assumption, I assumed it would be the young men who would pick up an X-men comic book, or a comic book with traditional masculine superheroes, which is a whole different problem within the milieu of graphic novels and comic books. I figured that would be where the access point was, but it wasn’t.

13. Do you see graphic novels as limited to specific students?

No, I think they are good for all students. I think the depth of understanding can go just as far with any student. You can hit a graphic novel at every level of Bloom’s Taxonomy and really get in to synthesis and evaluation with all students. It’s probably a very effective vehicle with ESL students, students with special needs, and traditionally reluctant readers, but other students can get just as much out of those discussions as anyone else.

14. Will you be using the graphic novels with your AP literature classes?

Oh yes. I will be using them. I’ll be using the 9/11 Report and some other things. There’s a way of exploring text called OPTIC, and I’ll be using this model to explore the texts.

15. How would you approach parents or administrators who are reluctant or resistant to your desire to use these texts in your classes?

I would start with the accessibility of them, and the teaching and learning strategies that can be used. The things that I can do with the text and the things that the students can do with the text and how those things make them better readers, writers, and speakers. Ultimately if you’re gonna hit major resist, you’re gonna hit it. Sometimes
you can ward off the assault and sometimes you can’t. But you’re just as likely to have this kind of problem with a standard traditional text as you are with something like this. I would talk about the merits of it, and explain that the benefits far outweigh the limitations.

16. As a reflective teacher, when you think back on this lesson, what were some of your thoughts as you worked through these lessons with your students? Your personal connections, etc.

With the propaganda portion of the unit, I thought a lot more about how to present those types of message to students and also did a lot of thinking about being careful about the editorializing I was doing. I was choosing the images that we showed to the students, inherently this is going to lend somewhat of bias to what is being shown, no matter what questions we asked, we had a sense of what the answers would be. That lesson and those discussions made me even more aware of that—and made me aware of it in the grander sense of the things that we teach, anytime I choose a book or a curriculum team chooses a book for students, all of the social, emotional, political, cultural ideas that go into the teaching of that book, and went into the writing of it, are brought into the classroom. So I became more aware of those things and aware of the fact that students need to be allowed to access that text as freely as possible, and to be sure not to judge their ideas. When the students started talking about their misunderstandings of Iranian culture, that would have been a place to create a chart of all the misconceptions they could come up with and move on from there, and dispel all of these things.

With *American Born Chinese* and *Persepolis*, it made me reflect on my own adolescence a little bit, in ways that I may not have otherwise because there were images, you could see the face of someone who is struggling with their own identity and think back to your own struggle—which I think was good for me as a teacher. It’s easy when dealing with novels to put faces on characters and just sort of run over it. It’s sort of the Harry Potter effect. When I read a Harry Potter book now, I see Daniel Radcliffe when I read the book and I don’t want to see Daniel Radcliffe. And I didn’t until I saw the movies. With novels you do that too, but with graphic novels, and some people say this is limiting, you get the artists’ rendition of who that person is, however because of that, you sort of get a picture of that time period, you can tap into the emotional message that the artist is trying to send. And I did that with *American Born Chinese*, thinking about being a very awkward 14 year old and wanting to be the captain of the football team, and so that was really important for me, and then to take that into the classroom and let the students have that experience as well.

Beyond that The things we did with graphic novels also involved a lot of graphics, which I *try* to do with written works, and novels and short stories, but the transition
was much easier, the visual/spatial intelligence that students have naturally, and also the logical/math intelligence that makes them want to categorize things into boxes and rows, I tapped into those things much more intuitively, the two lessons that I created, came to me very quickly, and they were inspired by having looked at the graphic novel and asking how do I get students to the same kind of interface between image and text, but do it in a way that is fostering learning and understanding.

17. As you consider moving forward into the next school year, how are you thinking about using the graphic novel?

I think I’d like to use them on a more regular basis. Rather than one stock unit, using bits and pieces to augment more units. I’ll probably use them more often, but not with one continuous chunk, it will be a portion of the larger picture of what I’m doing. And frankly an essential portion, because hopefully I’ll be bringing in the some of the intelligences that I wouldn’t be otherwise, and expanding discussion, and also tapping into the interests of a segment of kids who don’t otherwise have an interest in those things.

18. What resources would you like as a teacher to help you teach these texts?

It would be helpful to have access to a database of graphic novel images organized by theme. Having that database would be amazing. Obviously literature about the techniques of using graphic novels would be amazing.

19. When you consider the issue of cost and how to get these texts into the classroom, what are some of your solutions?

My solution would be to anthologize portions of them. And in fact, I’ve noticed portions of the Understanding Comics book anthologized in some AP texts. It’s cool because the text is broken down thematically. An anthology of those types of texts, either small portions, even four or five of them anthologized, bound and ready for teachers would be great. It might be expensive and an investment for districts, but it would be a nice addition. It would also be good if textbook companies started incorporating them into their textbooks, and I think that is going to happen. We are only a few years away from the demand by teachers and by researchers driving textbooks companies to understand the importance of it. Most American lit textbooks have a few James Thurber images in them—that means that people understand that there is a cultural connection with that, but it has to go further.
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