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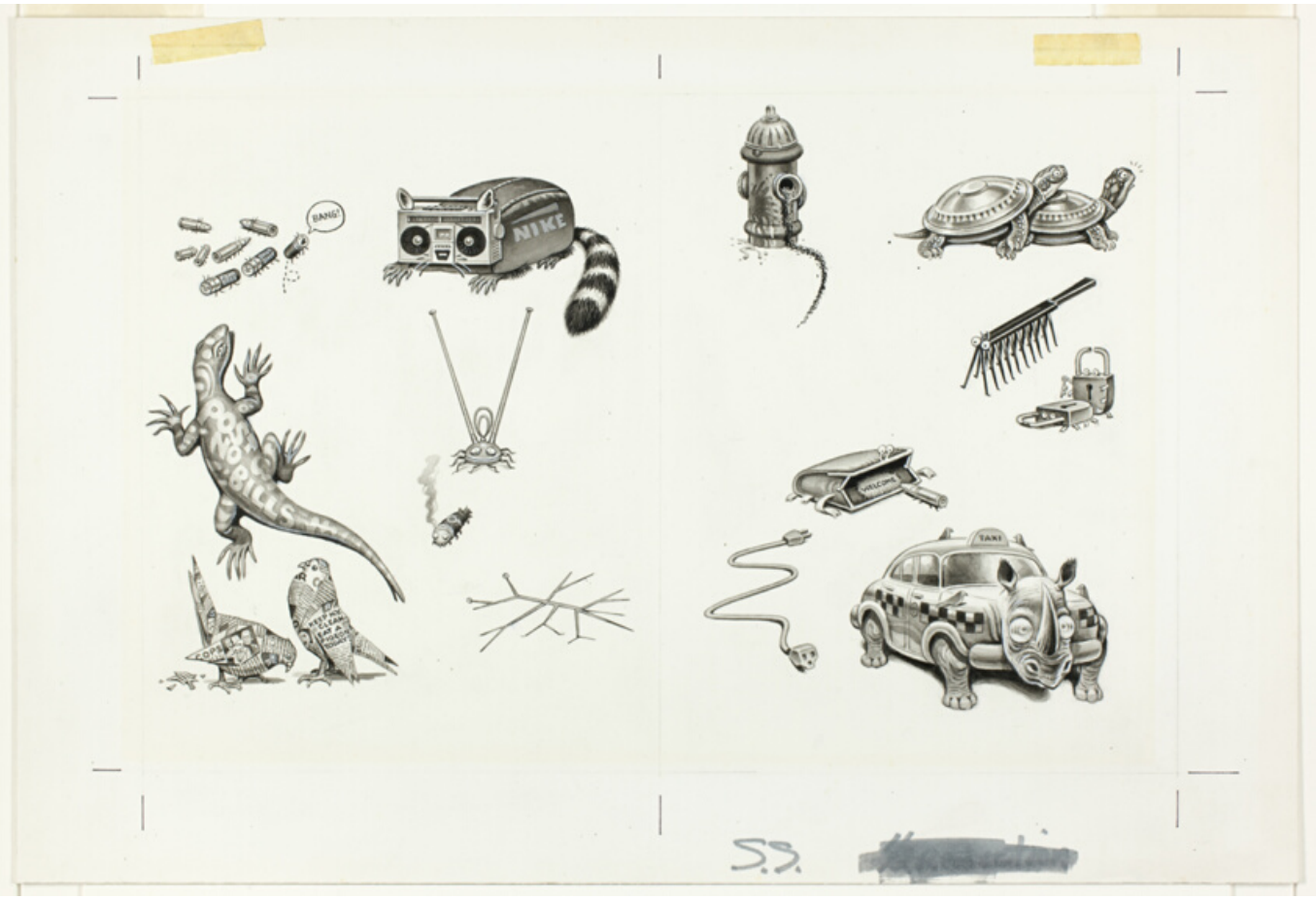
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Friday Night Comics in Dark Times

by Jake Mattox



ANIMAL HABITAT IN NEW YORK. 1986. BY WILL ELDER. GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. LEWIS H. KAMINESTER. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

I began writing this essay in the fall of 2023 as a review of *Friday Night Comics* (FNC), a free workshop series in which a different comics artist each week describes their work and leads Zoom attendees through real-time prompts to create their own. I had some modest goals of explaining the value of having university or K-12 students attend FNC, how it might help them with the freedom to experiment and create, and, hopefully, reflect on themselves as students in a learning environment outside of our formal educational institutions.

However, during the period of researching and writing, plus working with the journal editors, a dark context has gotten darker. The disastrous 2023 elections promised and brought newly emboldened attacks on education: more-extreme rhetoric and policies pertaining to academic freedom, student access, and the very role of public education. Locally, the regional campus of the major public university system where I teach, like so many, has embraced a dangerous narrative: *There's a crisis in higher education, caused by a looming enrollment cliff. Parents and students no longer want to pay for a broad-based liberal arts education. They seek narrow job training. Students want to be online. Our institution can no longer afford "the public good."* Administrators on many campuses, including mine, have used versions of these narratives to justify radical restructuring—cutting programs, altering the campus mission, and downsizing faculty while continuing with new levels of administrative bloat. Our state legislature, under the guise of ensuring "intellectual diversity" on public campuses, passed a law attacking DEIJ, threatening tenure, and creating a new system of ideological surveillance, arguing that *We want to make sure all students feel welcome and safe on campus. We're only giving universities the tools to strengthen open discussion and debate.*

More: one night in April 2024, top leaders within our state system quietly formed an ad-hoc committee to change longstanding university policy regarding demonstrations on the flagship campus. The committee had no faculty or student representation. The very next day, state police in riot gear (including a rooftop sniper) arrived to suppress the free speech of peaceful student and faculty demonstrators, who, when arrested, faced immediate one-to-five-year bans from even stepping foot on campus. They told us: *We had knowledge of potential threats to campus safety*. *We firmly believe in the right of free speech but need to balance those interests*. *There are outside agitators.*

The attacks have accelerated. Most recently, several last-minute additions were snuck into the state's budget bill with no time for public discussion. These included giving the governor control over the seats on the IU Board of Trustees that had long been reserved for (and chosen by) alumni, setting new minimums threatening the existence of hundreds of smaller majors and programs, and functionally ending tenure protections via mandatory post-tenure reviews.

Developments such as these demand that we organize politically and strengthen alliances between faculty, students, staff, and community members. We need, that is, to fight for our institutional spaces of learning, to define who has the right to be there and under what conditions. Further, if we believe in the potential of radical pedagogy, we need to prioritize, protect, and re-invent those and other spaces, ones where students feel safe to try out ideas without risk of failure, where community is central to what is meant by "learning," where the relation between student and teacher moves away from the authoritative model too often instilled beginning in kindergarten, and where students can explicitly reflect on key questions, such as how "learning" and being a student is situated in wider social contexts; how our institutions can foster certain kinds of "achievement" even as they reproduce existing unjust relations; and how students' own experiences, goals, and motivations—as students and as people—shape and are shaped by established spaces of learning.

In this essay, which is a review, a call to action, a self-reflection, and an offer of suggested approaches and activities, I will first briefly introduce *Friday Night Comics*—its history and current form. I will then focus on the kind of *making* its participants do—comics—as a genre that can combine spontaneity, creativity, and openness to create new knowledges with the possibility for individual and collective awareness and change. I will consider its location (a non-university space) and its online delivery as important to its possibility in establishing learning communities whose strengths lie at least in part in the fact that they need to be rebuilt each week. Finally, I will discuss a few ways for teachers to incorporate comics and/or these workshops and the advantages of doing so.

Even if you teach in disciplines that traditionally have not intersected with the arts, have little interest in comics, and/or think primarily of superheroes when you hear the word, these workshops matter. They might suggest either a reminder, or a reimagining, of what learning can look like. In place of competition, one finds a supportive community. Instead of high-stakes testing, standards, mastery, and reified learning outcomes, one finds joy, creativity, and spontaneity. Instead of for-profit, private, and reputation-focused schools, one finds free workshops with the only barriers being the need for a computer or smart phone and internet access. Instead of an instructor imparting supposedly value-free and universal knowledge, what gets created is, ultimately, generated by the participants as they take the prompts and techniques and use their own lives, experiences, and situated knowledges to create. And if the sharing at the end could be seen as implying some emphasis on *product*, the 60+ minutes of each workshop feel more valuable as a collective *process*.

It would be a mistake to reduce the specifics of what's happening in my state and elsewhere to one cause, and it's surely too much to suggest that a weekly online creativity workshop can decisively counteract beliefs and practices rooted in authoritarian and neoliberal assumptions about higher education and the public good. And yet that's precisely what this essay explores. I will argue that alternatives like *Friday Night Comics* can, at the very least, offer alternative spaces of learning free of coercion, ones that contribute to a sense of community often lacking in institutional spaces, insist on the centrality

of the arts in creating knowledges, and focus on a medium itself that has strong potential for recognizing and countering dangerous narratives—that is, for reflection and resistance. The workshops, like comics as a form, are not immediately or inherently transformational or radical. But when used deliberately and combined with other resistant practices and approaches, they can play literal and symbolic roles, reminding us—indeed, even insisting upon—what other forms "education" might look like.

An idea born of the pandemic

At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, the then-Art Director of the arts/culture quarterly journal *The Believer*, Kristen Radtke, launched *Friday Night Comics* (*FNC)* and hundreds joined on Zoom each week from 7 to 8 pm Eastern to make and share comics. The early workshops explicitly sought to counteract the isolation of the pandemic. Beginning with making a "quaranzine" (Malaka Gharib, April 10, 2020), other early *FNC* topics included "Draw Your Lockdown Life" (Teresa Wong, May 22, 2020) and "Self-Care Comics" (Nicole Georges, May 29, 2020). The final *Believer*-hosted workshop was led in June 2021 by Radtke, author of the graphic non-fiction work, *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness*. Looking back that night, she said that more than 10,000 people had joined live over the 15+ months of the workshops, with twice that number having watched recordings on YouTube. In October 2021, the nonprofit Sequential Artists Workshop (SAW) took over hosting the workshops. SAW offers in-person classes in Gainesville, Florida, plus online instruction, resources, and community. Over more than three years, SAW has offered more than 150 *FNC* workshops hosted by more than 100 different artists, with its founder Tom Hart usually there to greet Zoom attendees, introduce the guest, and moderate the sharing of comics. The *FNC* series fits with SAW's mission of fostering an inclusive comics community that "celebrates creative investigation, exploration and excellence in cartooning and comic art."[1]

The list of past *FNC* workshop leaders includes cartoonists, activists, illustrators, writers, poets, graphic novelists, zine creators, educators, multidisciplinary artists, editors, and more. Many identify with groups traditionally marginalized due to race, ethnicity, first language, nationality, gender, sexuality, and/or disability. Topics and content range impressively. Some are more directly focused on issues of power and social relations, such as "Comics as Resistance" (Bianca Xunise, June 29, 2020), the ironically named "Making Comics for the Politically Indifferent" (Ben Passmore, Aug. 14, 2020), and "Making Comics for a New World" (Leila Abdelrazaq, Oct. 23, 2020). Others, just as selected examples, have included "Movies as Memoir" (Jett Allen, July 1, 2022), "Experimental Comics" (Lawrence Lindell, Nov. 4, 2022), "Experiments in Climate Drawing" (Aidan Koch, Jan. 6, 2023), "Filipino Form Poetry" (Trinidad Escobar, June 9, 2023), "No Panels Allowed" (Laura Gao, Aug. 4, 2023), "Comics Battle the AI" (Tom Hart, Aug. 25, 2023), "Drawing Sound" (Mara Ramirez, March 22, 2024), and "Family Migration Stories" (Carly Shooster, Aug. 30, 2024). A quick search of the web presence of roughly 10 workshop leaders suggests that they come from across the country (and one from Australia).

Each of the *FNC* workshops starts with a short lesson or presentation from a comics artist followed by participants making their own comics, spending 20-30 minutes following prompts that pertain to content, style, materials, and/or structure. During the final 15-20 minutes, volunteers share what they created. Many people appear to join the Friday workshops regularly, from different parts of the U.S. and often other countries, and it's not difficult to begin to recognize faces, styles, and Zoom backgrounds as people share the work they do that night. Many attendees make use of Zoom's chat function to support one another; as of this writing, average attendance seems to range around 80-120 participants.

Comics and "signifying monolithically"

Critical discussions of comics have included a question that could not have higher stakes, having everything to do with ideology and power: how do the formal/genre elements of a specific medium enable and limit claims about the way the world is and the way it should be? For instance, in his seminal study, *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud suggested that "cartooning isn't just a way of *drawing*, it's a way of *seeing*" (31) and more recently, Nick Sousanis (2015) argued that through the variety of possibilities of arranging text and image, through different ideas of visual thinking, we enable new ways of understanding the world. For Sousanis, these "are offered not as steps to follow, but as an attitude—a means of orientation—a multidimensional compass, to help us find our way beyond the confines of 'how it is" (46). Such a compass would surely be invaluable for recognizing specific narratives that reinforce unjust social relations and imagining alternatives.

McCloud and others also focused directly on specific formal attributes of comics as related to the interaction between comic and reader. He explored "closure," the human "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." For McCloud, comics are unique in that the audience (reader) is a "willing and conscious collaborator," and the "gutter," the space between the panels of a sequential comic, is central to that. He wrote, "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (62-69). McCloud did not understate the importance of what comics artists have placed on the page and how that can guide and manipulate the reader, but even so, he argued that in comics the reader has a unique participatory role.[2]

That assertion about the unique openness of comics and relationship between reader and text might be overstated, but I think there is a central point about what is possible with comics, assuming we frame the questions productively. That is, we might emphasize the openness of a particular comic, or panel, even as we recognize that it very well can be used to instill/enforce a specific

meaning—but even as it does so, with the tools to read it, we can see y its self-referentiality, its awareness, its insistence on a given meaning's transience, improvisation, artificiality.

In a 2018 special issue of the journal *American Literature*, titled "Queer About Comics," Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz add to the discussion by asserting the semiotic openness of comics. They quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's explorations of the meanings of "queer," and especially the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (202). Scott and Fawaz build upon this to suggest that the proliferation of images, their ordered and re-ordered sequences, and the "presentation of mutant, monstrous, or altogether fantastical characters that have no 'original' form in everyday life" (203) leave comics a medium resisting the imposition of a single, "original" source of meaning or interpretation. They continue:

> Perhaps more than any other literary or cultural mode, then, comics self-consciously multiply and underscore differences at every site of their production so that no single comics panel can ever be made 'to signify monolithically.' Each iteration of an image, an issue, a storyline, or a world has the potential to disrupt, comment on, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before… (203).

Each reader, each reading, uses the specific text and image combination to co-create a specific meaning. But that very openness and opportunity can be a lesson in the provisionality, situatedness, and improvised nature of asserted knowledge—which is essential everywhere but especially in our university spaces.[3]

To be sure, regardless of the specific content of a given comic or the background or intentions of the artist, comics as a medium does not *necessarily* force us to question existing social relations and forms of power and domination. Indeed, some have argued that many branches and traditions in comics, broadly speaking, have served reactionary ends. For instance, one review of *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016) praises its argument that while many "comics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s engaged in radical worldmaking," more recently, "diversity is championed but has no worldmaking potential" and can serve instead as a "neoliberal marketing scheme" (Cuffman 228). Similarly, on a roundtable blog in 2023 discussing Sam Cowling and Wesley Cray's *Philosophy of Comics: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) Sam Langsdale noted its suggestion that "superhero stories … [perpetuate] social injustice insofar as superheroes essentially function to keep society at, or restore it to, its present status quo" (*Nine Scholars*).

Essential to a full discussion of the potential of any genre or medium are the contexts of production and reception. Cultural forms and genres never exist in isolation; the meanings that are created through process and product depend just as much on the communities of practice that arise. Here, comics and *FNC* offer key possibilities. In this context of free online comics workshops, how should we think about the relation between art, activism, and community?

Comics, communities, and maker cultures

In their introductory essay to the 2010 *Radical Teacher* issue "Jamming the Works: Art, Politics and Activism," Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin consider some crucial questions about art and its relation to activism, most notably how one knows for sure whether a given work of art or performance, etc. is indeed *activist*? They argue that while "most ideologically driven art" has served the interests of those in power, "it is heartening to remember that the arts of the powerful have always been countered by the arts of the powerless and their allies. The lavish church pageant met its counterpart in the village square; the overpriced canvas is challenged by the cheaply produced poster and graffiti; the canonic book is de-sanctified by the zine" (5). A collection of 100+ people from around the country and beyond, learning from practitioners passionate about comics (some of whom—such as Mira Jacob, Matt Madden, Malaka Gharib, Tom Hart, Kristen Radtke, and Teresa Wong—have reached degrees of mainstream success with major publishers and/or prominent reviews), supporting and learning from the work each other do, coming together at the same time each week in this imagined community, I suggest, cannot help but offer alternative spaces of relating and creating. Dittmar and Entin also suggest that such either/or formulations are not productive, writing that "the dividing line between direct action, which is incontrovertibly activist (e.g taking over a building) and activities that educate and agitate for such action (e.g. making a poster that critiques what that building represents) is not so clear. That is, the lines separating awareness, advocacy, and action are fuzzy" (7). They note that at the heart of the essays on teaching and art-making is a "sense of community—of dialogue in a common 'language'" (8); perhaps we can understand online, non-profit, weekly comics workshops as developing their own common language.

Scott and Fawaz addressed this as well, writing about the strengths found in the very fact that comics are often dismissed:

> The status of comics as marginal literature and art, as well as the assumed immaturity of its audiences (associated with childhood or arrested adolescent fantasy), situates comics as an outsider medium that elicits attachments from perceived social delinquents, outcasts, and minorities. … Comics is a medium that thus hails counterpublics. …[which are] shaped in large part by the development of a variety of alternative and often egalitarian and grassroots forms of sociality among readers, creators, and textual content including fan clubs, letter-writing campaigns, zines, and comic art conventions. (200)

Scott and Fawaz are careful to emphasize the *potential* of comics in its communities and its form—not any predetermined ideological vantage point or meaning. The *FNC* series embodies this potential as well. Its open-ended prompts, open access, and sustained community of enthusiastic and supportive participants—all contribute to a democratic ethos lacking many spaces of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the sense of "learning" and "knowledge" valued by these workshops is one deeply central to critical pedagogy: the knowledges produced, the meanings created, the stories told, the methods of telling, and the images and words offered come, ultimately, from the artist/creator/participant. There is no standards-based lesson or outcome driving the workshops. One might say that if there were, it would be an *anti*-standard, one entirely seeking and valuing the lived and varied experiences of participants.

Furthermore, as a Zoom workshop repeating every week, *FNC* can be understood as a form of grassroots sociality that draws from and sustains a community of people who become, at once, fans and makers, outsiders and artists.[4] Many of the weekly instructors have themselves taken classes or participated in other SAW programs. As distinct from, say, a university class or degree program, these workshops are free from the forms of coercion endemic to higher education today, including high tuition and resulting student debt; classroom power dynamics expressed through grading, testing, sorting; and the pressures to quickly narrow one's course of study and skip "useless" non-required courses that a student might hope to take.

In a basic sense, the *FNC* workshops might be seen as responding to what Neil Meyer and Jocelyn Wills, writing in *Radical Teacher*'s "Teaching in a Time of Covid" issue, suggest that students are calling for, even as the public sense of pandemic urgency has abated: "more meaningful learning opportunities, active listening on the part of the institutions they engage, more work-life balance and self-care time, a greater emphasis on passion over dead-end make-work, more resources for mental and physical health, and programs that allow them safely to express their emotions and identities" (2). The *FNC* workshops generate meaningful experiences, appeal to the passions of participants, and are safe spaces for different kinds of expression. The word compassion also comes to mind.[5]

No spaces can be entirely outside of current systems resting on logics of competition, individualism, and privatization. But the *FNC* series suggests at least one compelling alternative whose community rests on shared interests but does not assume shared (universal) experiences or resources. Because the workshops almost always feature a different comics artist and never draw the exact same participants/audience, structurally the series lacks some advantages and disadvantages of ongoing, regular meetings with a semester-long syllabus and goals. Workshop leaders bring widely varying backgrounds and experiences as people and as artists. As teachers, they have in common the modeling of possible (not prescribed) techniques and approaches. There is a sense of "Try this one. Or this one. And come back next week for another." And they seem to share the assumption that the entire point of teaching and learning is to support individuals and the improvised community in creating based on their own visions, styles, aesthetics, and experiences—that the art the student will make that day is necessarily the right art, the best art. This calls to mind Lynda Barry's wonderful graphic compendia, *Making Comics* and *Syllabus*. In the former, she asks (and illustrates) "How old do you have to be to make a bad drawing?" (3) In the latter, accompanying a drawing/thinking exercise, she writes "The only way to understand this is by *making* things. Thinking about it, theorizing about it, chatting about it will not get you there." (72)

The potential within and debates around Do-It-Yourself (DIY) communities, cultures, and media also help contextualize the *FNC* workshops—which, while not entirely self-directed or rooted in peer-to-peer pedagogy, contribute to a vibrant "maker culture." As Red Chidgey notes in her chapter on feminism and zines in the recent collection *DIY Citizenship*, on one level, "Maker cultures are seen as strategic processes through which people reclaim power in their everyday lives" (104). Chidgey goes on to outline, though, how some scholars challenge the very concept of "DIY democracy" and argue that "zines are mere flirtations with resistance, leaving mainstream codes, values, and systems intact" (106). Along those lines, for Chidgey, "self-described DIY projects, wherever they take root, cannot necessarily guarantee liberating possibilities or outcomes by intention or declaration alone" (102). These seem like fair observations to apply to the *FNC* series. I would like to suggest, though, given its status outside of the formal institutions of learning, of the for-profit complex, of the necessities imposed through state funding, accreditation, and neoliberal accountability, and despite the fact that the workshops and participants do not form and gather under any particularly overt political/ideological purpose or banner, the collectivity, the process, and the making together form this important site of potential. And Chidgey's review of the debate about DIY cultures, zines, and feminism, especially with her when engaging with feminist-scholar Alison Piepmeier, seems apt: "In the end, it does not matter if bigger systems remain untouched because other transformations in individuals and communities are taking place" (qtd. in Chidgey 106-107).

Conclusion: Incorporating FNC and Comics

There are no wrong ways to try incorporating *FNC* into our teaching. Different levels, different institutional settings, different disciplines: all could find some kind of value in this more informal teaching experiment. Requiring one's students to attend *FNC* workshops in real-time or accessing a recording can, as with the above example, not only push students in new directions that blur the line between different kinds of thinking and meaning making but push the instructors as well. In other words, what will you experiment with? Are you willing to give up some of the certainty or control of the more traditional lesson plan, outside the boundaries of your own classroom? Moreover, if you're an instructor who thinks it's crucial—as I do—to

cover not just content and skills but make our methods, lessons, and assumptions transparent to students, then incorporating an *FNC* workshop could also allow you to ask students: What do you notice about the instruction and learning here? How is this setting and structure different from what you usually experience? What are some takeaways for you as a learner?

One possibility is to consider how "creativity" itself can support learning across the disciplines. At a September 2023 workshop focused on "Non-human Characters" (Robert James Russell), for instance, one participant with a University of Florida (UF) background screen-shared how they had taken the prompt and drawn themselves as "hijabi cat." I found out later that they and other students were part of Professor Elif Akçali's "Divergent Thinking" course for later undergraduates and graduate students in the UF Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering. Akçali told me that she required all 29 of her students either to attend that *FNC* workshop in real time or to watch it on YouTube later. She explained that she insists on the need for engineering students to experiment—and struggle—with the methods, approaches, thinking, and skills of what is too often separated as the "arts." She requires students to try to adopt these processes and utilize alternative ways of knowing in their engineering design projects: "For instance, I may have them attend a dance performance and watch it through the eyes of an engineer, and then try to solve a particular engineering problem by drawing on that dance performance." According to Akçali, "All engineering students have qualities as artists, but they think they cannot afford to bring that part of themselves to their engineering practice and make it part of their engineering identity. Hopefully, through experiences like *Friday Night Comics*, they learn to see art as not outside themselves."[6]

At my university, I am afraid that we have reached the point where even the question about where "art" resides and matters would simply be smiled at, acknowledged—and then dismissed. The arts, artistic thinking, and creativity are too often assumed to be extras, enjoyable diversions from the "real work" at hand. Incorporating different modes of thinking and creating, of course, does not automatically challenge existing relations, does not necessarily even raise consciousness—but as curricula shift away from arts and liberal arts, programs are combined, majors disappear, and faculty are cut, alternative ways of accessing creativity, spontaneity, and joy matter in whatever form they take. In this final section, I will offer not developed lesson plans but descriptions of two additional possibilities for incorporating *FNC* and/or comics into a class—and the principles or objectives attained. Though I teach in an English department, I believe that, as with the example above, there are possibilities for just about any subject, set of goals, or discipline.

Possibility 1: Comics and *FNC* to encourage self-awareness: How could students benefit from reflecting upon institutional learning contexts and their reified and naturalized approaches?

Background and my context: My campus now requires all first-year students to take a "First-Year Seminar," as many universities do. Faculty have latitude to create these courses with widely varying topics if they cover the primary goals of helping first-year students feel more connection to campus and each other, learn about successful habits and support resources available, and reflect upon their own experiences, goals, and motives for university studies. To that end, I have designed a course called "Why School? The Problems and Potential of Public Education in the U.S."

Relation to current approach: One way I hope to use *FNC* in this course: connect it to our examination of how traditional grading affects learning—and how the "ungrading" approach we discuss and use relates as well. In my class, following teacher/scholars such as Asao Inoue and Susan Blum, we use a "contract-based" grading approach in which students decide from the start what semester grade they are working toward, a grade that will be based on *labor*. For instance, an "A" student attends more than a "B" student, completes more of the regular assignments, takes advantage of revision opportunities, even meets with me outside of class, etc. Key to this system, though, is that along the way, I offer no letter or number grades on any assignment. I only indicate whether the assignment is "complete" or not, and I offer specific feedback. I also ask students to reflect on nearly every assignment: How long it took them, what the conditions of their labor were, what they feel good about, what they struggled with, and/or how something from a previous assignment helped them think about this one. Drawing upon Alfie Kohn and others, this approach assumes that traditional grading is poisonous to the learning environment for many reasons, including the following:

- When an *extrinsic* motivator—carrot and/or stick—is attached to anything, the *intrinsic* motivation lessens or even disappears;
- Students are less likely to read comments if you also attach a grade;
- Students avoid taking risks out of fear of failure, instead following incentives to take the easiest path to the "A," and this also destroys the joys of learning and risk-taking;
- Students have been hurt—and in some cases traumatized—by the stressors of only working toward a grade and the related constant surveillance and real-time anxiety as points are gained or lost; and
- Students can become alienated from each other (as competitors) and from teachers (who are the gatekeepers to be impressed, convinced, or fooled).

New assignment and goals:

Step One: First require students to attend one of the *FNC* workshops (or watch an archived one on YouTube) and then, either writing individually or discussing/sharing as small groups, reflect upon and contrast their traditional classroom experiences. One goal is to help them think

critically not just about the elements of the Zoom workshop context but how it departs from so much of what has become naturalized as a space of learning, from the blackboard and rows of desks to the separated spaces of the campus to the tools of assessment and coercion, and more.

Step Two: Then require students to use the internet informally to research a variety of non-institutional learning environments, events, and settings and then share what they have found. What other alternatives beside *FNC* exist, and given their own individual expectations, experiences, motivations, and goals, what benefits—or drawbacks—would they entail?[7]

Step Three, if time: Have students attend/explore at least one such alternative and share a critical analysis with the class.

Note: While the class I teach, a First-year Seminar, is ideal for this sort of assignment, I would argue that time taken in many classes to help students critically reflect on themselves as students in relation to the contexts of institutional learning—and possible alternatives—could be valuable, especially if it's in a class taken in the first or second year of university studies. For many students, seeing college as not just several more years of compulsory K-12 education could offer an opportunity for a different perspective and, in the case of many of my students, a chance to reset.

Possibility 2: Comics, *FNC*, and constructing the world: How can students learn about, and participate in, the tools of representation and meaning-making?

Background: This past spring, I taught the gateway course to our English major/minor (also required for future teachers). It surveys college-level approaches to literary interpretation and we read poetry, short fiction, drama, and either a novel or, as I chose this time around, a graphic narrative. The primary course goal is to help students develop the skills of close reading: Identifying and analyzing the importance of the textual elements, formal devices, and strategies particular to a text and to a genre—and consider how these enable a text to make meaning, to represent the world a certain way. Along the way, we survey the history of some approaches, from the New Critics to Political Criticism and New Historicism.

Relation to current approach: For the first time, I chose a graphic narrative for the longest text of the course (replacing novels I have chosen in the past such as *Ragtime* and *The Jungle*). This time around, I chose Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), though I could have instead assigned *Palestine* (originally a nine-issue series from 1993-1995, collected in 2015, and re-released in 2024): both are full-length and self-contained collections of his "comics journalism." *Footnotes* is based upon a reporting trip to Khan Younis and Rafah that Sacco took in 2001 with Chris Hedges. Sacco's purpose was to find and interview eyewitnesses to large-scale killings of civilians by the Israeli military nearly 50 years before, in 1956, events he characterizes early on as "footnotes to a sideshow of a forgotten war." After helping students with the key terms for graphic narratives via excellent videos created by faculty at Oregon State University, we regularly practiced those terms in analyzing specific panels, pages, and chapters in Sacco's text, discussing how the specific arrangement of image and text suggested—with varying degrees of insistence—ways of understanding conditions and debates about Palestine in relation to historical events.

New assignment and goals: In the future, I will ask students to attend an *FNC* workshop as we study such a text, with the following goals/considerations:

- What do they notice as they become creators of comics? What are the representational challenges and stakes in the interrelation among image and text?
- What do they notice, as we studied with Sacco's text, about the importance of such genre elements as gutters, panels, thought and speech bubbles, and more?
- Is meaning-making, as Scott and Fawaz and others have argued, more semiotically open in comics? Does creating and/or reading comics help us think critically about the way narratives are shaped and improvised?

There are surely many other possibilities for fostering critical awareness and enhancing course skills and knowledge through comics and sending students to alternative contexts like *FNC*. I hope that, as with the first example above, students themselves will discover and share other alternatives and contexts that I have no idea exist, ones similarly rooted in or enabling reflection, trust, and the freedom to experiment.

As we face these new realities justified by troubling narratives, we need to increase our own awareness of how institutional spaces have become diseased, how conditions of and motivations for learning have been hijacked. We need to keep control of curriculum even while trying out new forms, activities, and tools to best educate our students and ourselves. We need to rethink what's possible and what's needed in our spaces of teaching and learning.

I want students to reflect on themselves as part of institutional spaces of learning that have, too often, naturalized practices and purposes that work against meaningful learning and community. I want them to consider their past and current relations to each other and to the instructor. I want them to scrutinize the usual practices of assessment and surveillance, the prevalence of carrots and sticks, as they also comb through their own motivations and experiences. And I want them to explore the stakes of interpretation and meaning-making—so central to a broad liberal arts-based education, and so anathema to the goals and priorities of those who seek to alter the fundamental mission and spaces of public education.

Notes

I am grateful to Kelcey Ervick, Tom Hart, and Elif Akçali for their conversations with me about comics and *Friday Night Comics* workshops. And I thank Jesse Schwartz and Jocelyn Wills for their enthusiasm and extremely helpful ideas about this piece.

[1] SAW was founded in 2011 by Tom Hart, author of the breakthrough graphic memoir *Rosalie Lightning* (2016) and *The Art of the Graphic Memoir* (2018) and co-editor (with Kelcey Ervick) of Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Graphic Literature* (2023). One of SAW's priorities is accessibility, with sliding-scale and scholarship possibilities for paid classes, plus free online resources including books, videos, tutorials, and member-run regular events such as the Thursday Virtual Draw Jam and weekly "skills swaps" via, for instance, the "Underdrawing Club" and "Procreate Wednesdays" (for the digital illustration app of that name). All or nearly all the *Friday Night Comics* workshops, whether hosted by *The Believer* or SAW, are available on YouTube.

[2] The question of audience in comics is too rich to delve deeply into here. As one example: Joshua Kopin tells of a Marvel Comics vice president's lamentation in 2017 about the poor sales for the brand's recently developed "diverse" characters—and the troubling assumption that readers of comics are straight, white males who simply want versions of their childhood comics heroes (439-440).

[3] Precisely for that openness, some writing teachers have been drawn to using comics. For instance, Gabriel Sealey-Morris uses them in teaching first-year composition, arguing that that comics, as a multi-modal text (one with any combination of text, image, audio, visual), "complicate notions of authorship, make sophisticated demands on readers, and create a grammar and rhetoric as sophisticated as written prose, while also opening new methods of communication often disregarded by conventional composition instruction" (31). Comics bring tools to encourage different ways of making meaning, thus encouraging critical reading and thinking, plus a potential for collaborative authorship. And, echoing the importance of the semiotic openness of comics, Sealey-Morris writes that with comics, "[E]ven in sequence, there can be no prescribed order, as a comics reader may start with words, with images, or with various combinations" (37).

[4] I identify these benefits but am aware that notions of "community" can be overstated and potentially serve anti-democratic ends. In their essay exploring alternative, non-individualist, and anti-hierarchical modes of study and learning, Dyke et al draw from Miranda Joseph's *Debt Society* to warn that "A romanticized imaginary of 'community' as a fetishized container can serve to reify the borders surrounding 'education' or mask relations of power, oppression, and difference" (176). In addition, there is nothing intrinsically progressive or radical about a creative workshop. Recent work by scholars such as Chavez and Salesses, for instance, show how traditional writing workshop models (most notably the longstanding Iowa model) and static ideas of "craft" assume false and destructive ideas of neutrality and universality that don't just foreclose creativity and community but also suppress and deny marginalized communities. Salesses notes, for instance, that "Since craft is always about expectations, two questions to ask are: Whose expectations? and Who is free to break them?" (22). Chavez writes of her experiences as a student in a workshop in which her "professor and peers … schooled me in how to write like them. 'Use our words,' they seemed to say, and 'with time and hard work, you, too, can have voice'" (7).

[5] See Inoue, who briefly explores "compassion" in different religious traditions and applies the concept to his composition classrooms, especially in terms of its importance in antiracist writing pedagogies and assessment.

[6] Akçali also told me that her emphasis on arts as part of engineering education was recognized by an endowment from a UF alum for a new Professor in Creativity position in the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering, which Akçali now occupies. She has also written and received NSF grants to train future engineering educators on including this kind of interdisciplinary approach in their teaching.

[7] Another community connecting through and with comics, although students could find resources and workshops focused on other media, is "Graphic Medicine," which describes itself as "academics, health carers, authors, artists, and fans of comics" who "explore[] and support[]the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare." The group features an International Collective, supports an online journal, and has held annual conferences (according to its website) since 2010.

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