

English 822: Topics in Theory

Queer About Comics: The Cultural Politics of Sequential Visual Narrative

Professor Ramzi Fawaz

E-mail: fawaz@wisc.edu

Class Meetings: T 5:30-8 PM, 7105 HCW

Office Hours: W 2:30-4:30 PM, or by appointment 7161 HCW

Course Description: This course will explore the intersection of queer theory and comics studies. We will consider how the medium of sequential visual narrative has functioned, in its many forms and genres, as a rich archive for articulating a vast range of alternative sexualities and erotic desires as they take shape alongside diverse expressions of gender, ethno-racial, and class identity in twentieth century U.S. visual culture. Simultaneously, we will ask how the central concerns of queer theory—understood broadly as the study of the public and political dimensions of sexuality and erotic desire—might illuminate the formal mechanisms of comics art in new and unexpected ways. This includes exploring how visual sequential art, serial storytelling, the combination of words and images, and dramatic shifts in the visual size and scale of bound comic books and graphic novels offer distinct formal avenues for telling stories about the heterogeneity of sexual identity and erotic fantasy. Rather than simply a medium or object then, we will treat sequential visual narrative as a *distinct mode of thinking about difference* as well as a formally inventive site for producing a wide variety of cultural fantasies about embodiment, identity, and collective belonging.

Toward this end, rather than a traditional survey of LGBTQ comics history or primer in queer theory, this class will combine a wide range of queerly inflected comics productions across a variety of genres (including superhero comics, biography and memoir, pornography, speculative fiction and fantasy—some written by and about self-identified queer and trans* people, others putatively “straight” but generating very queer views of the body and the social world we share) with very recent interventions in the study of comics by scholars working in queer and trans* studies, critical race and ethnic studies, and feminist media studies. This class then will be as much a training in (queerly) reading comics narrative and form as it will be an exploration into the development of new interdisciplinary methods for analyzing this prodigious and exceptionally heterogenous media.

Goals:

* Students of literature and culture working in any sub-field will gain:

- 1) an expansive reading knowledge of the breadth and depth of queer comics production in twentieth century US culture.
- 2) a grasp of the various ways that gender, sexuality, desire, erotic attachment, and intimacy have functioned as central themes, concepts, and motivations for comics production.
- 3) a sustained engagement with contemporary interventions in comics studies that deploy queer, feminist, and critical race approaches to the study of sequential visual art.

- 4) a wide-ranging set of interdisciplinary theoretical tools for analyzing the narrative and formal operation of comics art, as well as a greater understanding of the intellectual and political investments that animate feminist, queer, and critical race approaches to visual media.

This course meets the criteria for a 3-credit seminar with weekly 2.5 hour meeting and at least 8-10 hours of class preparation expected weekly. Reading comics is more challenging than you might think, as it demands a high level of cognitive processing of multiple registers of verbal and visual information, which is being presented to you on a number of scales (the level of the panel, the sequence, the page, and the bound text itself). You will be asked to read a large volume of comics work alongside 2-3 scholarly essays or chapters each week. With this in mind, give yourself ample time to sit with these readings and develop your visual acuity. The reading process will become easier as you practice.

What are we reading?

The texts listed below are required. They are available at the University Bookstore or online through a variety of sellers. I highly encourage you to purchase texts used, but in very good condition, to save on costs. Comics are, after all, intended to be re-circulated among readers. I prefer that you have physical copies of the listed texts.

The Complete Kake Comics by Tom of Finland is a classic work of gay male comics pornography; it is extremely sexually explicit, and hence I have chosen not to have it sold at the University Bookstore. A link to purchase the title on amazon.com can be found [here](#). This should stand as a signpost that some of the texts we will read in this class will depict a variety of forms of sexual activity, much of it queer, some (though not much) of it depicting or discussing experiences of sexual trauma and violence. I expect you as informed adults to prepare yourselves to encounter such material and the range of affects it might invoke in you—from pleasure, to disgust, to fascination and curiosity—and engage in collective dialogue about it in class.

The Golden Age Wonder Woman Omnibus Volume 1 normally retails at 75 dollars but is currently available at an extremely discounted price of 35 dollars [here](#) on amazon.com; I recommend you purchase a copy at the discounted price. Some of our texts such as James Sturm's *Unstable Molecules* and individual issues of particular comics, such as the classic *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men* series, can be accessed digitally through the online comics archive ComiXology or Kindle. When possible, I will provide pdfs of individual comics issues; otherwise I will indicate when you should purchase them online. All readings in the syllabus marked with * will be available on the course website as a pdf. You must bring print copies of all purchased texts to class with you on the indicated dates; you may bring e-copies of texts available in pdf format either on a laptop computer or, ideally, a tablet.

Required texts:

Danny Abnett and Andy Lanning, *The Legion by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning Volume 2* (2018)

Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008)

Chris Claremont, *X-Men: Dark Phoenix Saga* (2012)

Kelly Sue DeConnick, *Bitch Planet Volume 1: Extraordinary Machine* (2015)
Kelly Sue DeConnick, *Bitch Planet Volume 2: President Bitch* (2017)
Kelly Sue DeConnick et. al. *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature Volume 1* (2017)
Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016)
Jaime Hernandez, *Angels and Magpies: The Love and Rocket Library Vol. 13* (2017)
Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four Volume 1* (2009)
Tom King, *Vision* (2018)
Greg Pak, *Storm: Make it Rain* (2015)
Greg Pak, *Storm: Bring the Thunder* (2015)
Cristy C. Road, *Spit and Passion* (2012)
James Sturm, *Fantastic Four Legends Volume 1: Unstable Molecules* (2003)
Tom of Finland, *The Complete Kake Comics* (2014)
Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (2015)
David Wojnarowicz, James Romberger, and Marguarrette Van Cook, *7 Miles a Second* (2013)

A selected reading list of queer comics and graphic works, as well as interdisciplinary queer studies scholarship on sequential visual narrative can be found [here](#).

What do we have to write?

Writing assignments include: 1) distributed weekly posts and responses to an online forum. Each week, 2-3 members of the class will be responsible for developing a mini-essay of 500-600 words that you will post online the evening before our scheduled meeting. You will upload one image from a comics text we are reading—this can be a panel, a sequence, or a page—and provide a sustained analysis of that image using ideas from the course scholarship to support your interpretive work. These short essays should be well written and organized in thought and execution; you should have an original argument or stake a distinct position and incorporate at least 1-2 direct citations from the week's scholarly readings in shaping your claims. These posts must be online by 8 PM on Monday evenings. The rest of the class is required to post short replies that take up and complicate particular ideas, questions, or concepts brought up in the primary posts. These responses are due no later than 10 AM on Tuesday mornings. Each member of the class will cycle through posting a primary response two times across the semester.

2) a fifteen-minute conference presentation on one of three graphic works. In each of the last two weeks of our course, we will respectively read Tom Frank's *Vision* and Kelly Sue DeConnick's *Bitch Planet*. During these weeks, we will not read any additional scholarship. Instead, in each class session, 5 or 6 students will present short conference papers offering original analyses of one of these assigned works. The remaining members of the class will be respondents to the presenters, offering questions, insights, or feedback on the presentations and facilitating our collective dialogue.

WEEK 1: What's Queer About Comics?

Tuesday, January 22

Hillary Chute, "Comics for Grown-ups?" and "Why Queer?" (2017)*

Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz, "Introduction: Queer About Comics,"
American Literature 90.2 (June 2018)*

Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016). Read Introduction.

Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (2015). Read Introduction.

W.J.T. Mitchell, *Comics as Media: Afterward*, *Critical Inquiry* 40.3 (Spring 2014)*

WEEK 2: Unstable Molecules: Or the Queer History of the Fantastic Four

Tuesday, January 29

Stan Lee (writer) and Jack Kirby (artist), *Marvel Masterworks: Fantastic Four Vol 1*. + *Fantastic Four* #11, 22, and 52-53.

James Sturm, *Fantastic Four Legends Vol. 1: Unstable Molecules* (2003)
[download individual issues on amazon.com through Kindle or ComiXology]

Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants*. Read chapters 2-3.

Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ* 12.4 (2006)

WEEK 3: Dykes to Watch Out For: Unpacking the Lesbian Comics Archive

Tuesday, February 5

Alison Bechdel, selections from *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008)

Dianne DiMassa, *Hothead Paisan: Homocidal Lesbian Terrorist* (1993)* + selections from Jennifer Camper, *Rude Girls, and Dangerous Women* (1994)*

Yetta Howard, "Politically Incorrect, Visually Incorrect: Bitchy Butch's Unapologetic Discrepancies in Lesbian Identity and Comics Art," *Journal of Popular Culture* 45.1 (2012)*

Margaret Galvan, "'The Lesbian Norman Rockwell': Alison Bechdel and Queer Grassroots Networks," *American Literature* 90.2 (June 2018)*

Cynthia Barounis, "Survival Angst: Reading *Hothead Paisan* in the Trump Era," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22.4 (2018)*

WEEK 4: On Loving Amazon Warrior Princesses: The Queer Fantasy-scapes of *Wonder Woman*

Tuesday, February 12

William Moulton Marston (writer) and Harry G. Peter (artist), selections from *Wonder Woman: The Golden Age Omnibus Vol. 1* (1941-1943; 2016)

Noah Berlatsky, *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics 1941-1948* (2015). Read introduction and chapters 1 and 3.*

Carole Tilley, "A regressive formula of perversity: Werthem and the women of comics," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22.4 (2018)*

WEEK 5: Making Gay Sex Public: Queer Comics Pornography

Tuesday, February 19

Tom of Finland, *The Complete Kake Comics* (1968-1986)

Selections from Belasco, *The Brothers of New Essex: Afro Erotic Adventures* (2000) + Colleen Coover, *Small Favors* (2000-2003)*

Justin Hall, "Erotic Comics" (2016)*

Darieck Scott, "Big Black Beauty: Drawing and Naming the Black Male Figure in Superhero and Gay Porn Comics" (2014)*

Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34.1/2 (Spring–Summer 2006)*

WEEK 6: Uncomfortable Images: Visualizing Childhood Sexuality and Trauma

Tuesday, February 26

David Wojnarowicz (writer), James Romberger, and Marguerite Van Cook (artists), *7 Miles a Second* (1996; 2018)

Ramzi Fawaz, "Stripped to the Bone: Sequencing Queerness in the Comic Strip Work of Joe Brainard and David Wojnarowicz," *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (May 2017)*

Yetta Howard, "Unsuitable for Children? Adult-erated Age in Underground Graphic Narratives," *American Literature* 90.2 (June 2018)*

Michael Moon, *Darger's Resources*. Read introduction, Chapters 1 and 4.*

WEEK 7: Becoming X-Men, or Queer Mutant Disco Divas in Space

Tuesday, March 5

Chris Claremont (writer), Dave Cockrum (artist), and John Byrne (artist), *X-Men* #100-105 + *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (1979)

Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants*. Read chapters 4 and 6.

Anthony Michael D'Agostino, "Flesh-to-Flesh Contact": Marvel Comics' Rogue and the Queer Feminist Imagination," *American Literature* 90.2 (June 2018)*

WEEK 8: Bring the Thunder: Theorizing Black Feminist (Super) Power

Tuesday, March 12

Greg Pak, *Storm: Make it Rain* (2014) + *Storm: Bring the Thunder* (2015)

Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence*. Read chapters 1-3.

andré carrington, "Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's *Black Panther*, 1998-2016," *American Literature* 90.2 (June 2018)*

WEEK 9: SPRING BREAK

WEEK 10: Inventing a Queer Latino Comics Imaginary: On the Hernandez Bros.

Tuesday, March 26

Jaime Hernandez, *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls* (2012) [included in *Angels and Magpies: The Love and Rocket Library Vol. 13*] and Gilbert Hernandez, "Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz" (1989)*, "Love and Rockets X" (1989-1992)*, and "Julio's Day" (2013)*

Darieck Scott, "Love, Rockets, Race, and Sex," *Americas Review* 23.1-2 (Spring-Summer 1995)*

Matt Yockey, "Ti-Girl Power: American Utopianism in the Queer Superhero Text," *European Journal of American Studies* 10.2 (Summer 2015)*

Jessica Jones, "Spatializing Sexuality in Jaime Hernandez's *Locas*," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34.1 (Spring 2009)*

WEEK 11: Border-lands: On the Literal and Figurative Intersectionality of Comics
Tuesday, April 2

Cristy C. Road, *Spit and Passion* (2012)

José Esteban Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag” (1997)*

Angela Laflen, “Punking the 1990s: Cristy C. Road’s Historical Salvage Project in *Spit and Passion*” (2018)*

Mimi Ngyuen, “Queer Cyborgs and New Mutants: Race, Sexuality, and Prosthetic Sociality in Digital Space,” (2009)*

WEEK 12: Any Body That Can Be Drawn Can Be: On the Trans-ness of Sequence.
Tuesday, April 9

Jaimes Cortez, *Sexile* (2004)*

Selections from Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010)*

Michael Harrison, “The Queer Spaces and Fluid Bodies of Nazario’s *Anarcoma*,” *Postmodern Culture* 19.3 (2009)*

Brian Cremins. “Bodies, Transfigurations, and Bloodlust in Edie Fake’s Graphic Novel *Gaylord Phoenix*,” *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 34.2 (June 2013)*

Hillary Chute, “The Space of Graphic Narrative: Mapping Bodies, Feminism, and Form” (2015)*

WEEK 13: Accounting for New Mutants: On the Problem of Diversity in Superhero Comics
Tuesday, April 16

Chris Claremont and Bill Sienkiewicz, *The New Mutants* #18-21 (1984)

Dan Abnett, Andy Lanning (writers), Olivier Coipel and Pascal Alixe (artists), *The Legion by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning Volume 2* (2018)

Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants*. Read chapter 7.

Ellen Kirkpatrick, “TransFormers: ‘Identity’ Compromised,” *Cinema Journal* 55.1, (Fall 2015)*

Ramzi Fawaz, “Legions of Superheroes: Diversity, Multiplicity, and Collective Action Against Genocide in the American Superhero Comic Book,” *Social Text* 36.4 (December 2018)*

WEEK 14: Cyborgs Can Be Queer Too

Tuesday, April 23

Tom Frank, *Vision* (2018)

WEEK 15: Bitches Can Be Queer Too

Tuesday, April 30

Kelly Sue DeConnick et. al., *Bitch Planet Volume 1: Extraordinary Machine* (2015) +
Bitch Planet Volume 2: President Bitch (2017) + *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature Volume 1*
(2017)