

WRITING THROUGH MEDIA: SUPERHEROES**Mitch R. Murray • m.murray@ufl.edu**

TUR 4343 • Hours TBA

Summer A 2016 • MTWRF / 3 • TR / 6-7 • WEIL 408E

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Though comics have been a staple of popular culture in the U.S. since the early 20th century, they have only become a respectable object of critical study in recent years. This is true of graphic memoirs and other “serious” works, to be sure; but lately it’s true even of once-pulpy superhero comics. It would be difficult today to name a medium untouched by this genre. Uninhibited by any one medium, we see superhero narratives in most media: for example, DJ duo Madvillain’s 2004 collaboration *Madvillainy*; Junot Díaz’s 2008 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; Pixar’s 2016 animated short, *Sanjay’s Super Team*; and, of course, the immense cross-media productions of the major peddlers of superhero narratives, DC and Marvel. One of this course’s presumptions is that genres (because they are *cultural* institutions) exist in time and space and are therefore rethought and retooled through history and as new technology and media become available for generic experimentation. The superhero narrative’s overwhelming presence today demands a revisiting of its early historical and ideological situation and a consideration of its uses in the present moment.

Though the superhero genre is defined by wide international and cosmopolitan horizons, this course focuses on its manifestations in American culture from 1938 (beginning with the creation of Superman and the era of what comic book historians call the Golden Age) to the present day. We will begin our exploration of the genre with the first appearances of Superman in *Action Comics* and the first issues of *Superman*, and move on to superhero comics of the 60s and 70s (*Wonder Woman*, *Fantastic Four*, *Black Panther*) in order to discuss some of the genre’s sociological and political representations and fantasies during wartime, in the postwar era, and in the following decades. We will spend some time with comics from the 1980–90s, a moment that, as Andrew Hoberek argues, marks the superhero’s shift from unrealistic stories of fantasy to a more psychologically complex exploration of character reminiscent of more ‘artistic’ text-only literature. We will also investigate superhero films (in both blockbusters and more independent cinema) and how, in particular, the comics medium is being adapted for film and newer digital media. We will also investigate the genre’s overlap and dialogic relationships with other literary genres like science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history. We will take a look, toward the end of the semester, at alternative and transnational comics publishing by looking at creator-owned titles that offer new developments in the intersections of creativity, labor, and intellectual property. And we will, finally, look at some 2016 superhero titles as a way to make connections with previous discussions and to identify some emergent directions in which the genre might be heading.

This course also provides 6,000 words toward the university Writing Requirement. You will learn to organize your thoughts, make clear arguments, and use evidence drawn from multiple

media in argumentative prose and designs. We will spend a significant portion of class investigating and practicing the narrative and rhetorical strategies—to follow the comics medium—with which image-texts are created by engaging both print and visual literacies. To this end, we will read a comics theory text, either Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* or Nick Sousanis’s *Unflattening*, and try our hand at producing our own comics projects. The bulk of writing assignments will take the form of creating and maintaining a blog and writing for that genre’s particular challenges in clarity, cohesion, concision, and, yes, entertainment.

REQUIRED (IMAGE)TEXTS

PRINT: Though a large portion of our class will be spent examining non-print or digital media, we will spend a good portion of time referring to comic books as lynchpins for our historical understandings—from the genre’s inception to the present day—of the superhero genre.

This list of print texts might appear long; however, the comics medium’s popularity and transmissibility also means these texts are commonly short. The reading load of this course, while significant, is not especially heavy. We will devote much of our energy to active, critical discussion.

Trade paperbacks will be available in the UF bookstore. These titles are also easy to find online from vendors such as amazon.com or bookfinder.com (ISBNs included below). Additionally, most, if not all, titles on this part of the list are available for download from their publishers as PDF, EPUB, or CBR files, or available to read in your web browser (with an Amazon/ComiXology account).

- Bendis/Gaydos, *Jessica Jones Vol. 4* (TP: 978-0785198581)
- Higgins/Siegel/McCarthy/Reis, *C.O.W.L.* Vol. 1 (TP: 978-1632151117)
- —, *C.O.W.L.* Vol. 2 (TP: 978-1632153265)
- McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (TP: 978-0060976255/library reserve)
- Sousanis, *Unflattening*, optional (TP: 978-0674744431)
- Moore/Gibbons, *Watchmen* (TP: 978-1401245252)
- Moore/O’Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* Vol. 1 (978-1563898587)
- —, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* Vol. 2 (TP: 978-1401201180)
- Siegel/Shuster, *Superman Chronicles* Vol. 1 (TP: 978-1401207649)
- Wilson/Alphona, *Ms. Marvel* Vol. 1 (TP: 978-0785190219)
- —, *Ms. Marvel* Vol. 2 (TP: 978-0785190226)

DIGITAL: Certain texts, single issues especially, are either out of print, available only in more expensive collections, or not yet released in trade format. Print copies of such texts can be

easily found in digital format and are inexpensively available via comixology.com or on their publisher's websites. ComiXology is accessible with a ComiXology *or* an Amazon.com account. You can also buy comics via iTunes with an Apple.com account. I have no preference, so long as you have one means of procuring these issues listed below.

- Andrews, *Renato Jones: The 1%* #1, #2 (imagecomics.com)
- Coates/Stelfreeze, *Black Panther* #1, #2 (ComiXology)
- Delany/Giordano, *Wonder Woman* #202, #203 (ComiXology)
- Kane, *Detective Comics* #27 (ComiXology)
- Lee/Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #49, #50, #51, #52, #53 (ComiXology)
- Marz, *Green Lantern* #54 (ComiXology)

FILM AND DIGITAL STREAMING: Films will be provided for screening during lab meetings. We will screen a number of episodes of Netflix's *Jessica Jones*, but I encourage you to complete the series outside of class if you have access to a Netflix account.

- *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014)
- *Deadpool* (2016)
- *Jessica Jones* (2015-)

SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS: will be easily accessible online or made available on Canvas or in the Smathers library reserves.

ASSIGNMENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ANNOTATION (500 words):

Though the superhero genre has become exceedingly popular across most media, it is still an emergent academic concentration. Thus, as we work toward a more rigorous understanding of how the genre was and is deployed, I want us to compile a collection of secondary sources for the purposes of critical, scholarly writing.

This assignment is also designed to give you practice in navigating UF's library system and other research venues. Your sources should come from peer reviewed journals or from books by reputable authors and presses. Online sources are ok too; it's the peer review that matters. Or, barring peer review, we will also consider what, otherwise, makes for a good source.

Each of you will be responsible for finding one secondary source and writing an annotation that clearly and concisely explains the source's arguments, methodologies, and implications for further study of the superhero genre (that is, based on your interpretation of the source, what is its significance, and how can we use it to think new things?). By the end of this assignment, you will have experience in researching, vetting, and annotating reputable sources. We will also have a bibliography from which the whole group can pull for final research projects.

BLOG (4 x 500 words = 2,000 words):

We will have ample time in our lab meeting times to create and maintain blogs. Since some of the main interests of this class are popular genres and media in the study of culture, we will also hone our literacy and composition skills in the popular blog medium. Throughout the semester, you will be required to compose a number of blog entries that add some kind of critical discussion to the class's interests and to the major problems and discussions that emerge from our class meetings.

ABSTRACT (700 words) + FINAL PROJECT (2,800 words):

Your final should be your most polished production of the semester. There are a number of options, and you may choose whichever you prefer. All, however, require an abstract proposing the project and its expected arguments and sources (or, for option 3, its supposed design). You don't have to conform to your abstract in the end. The point is to get you thinking early about your project.

1. Research paper

For our purposes, this paper can take the form as an extended blog entry. I do require, however, that you submit a hard copy as well. Building on the themes and problems of the class and its discussions, write a research paper of about 2,700 words that makes an original argument based on your interpretations of two or more image-texts from the semester.

2. Edited collection

This project will be ideal for anyone seeking to continue their readings and investigations beyond the texts we discuss in class. For this project you will curate a collection of superhero comics. Think of this project as the front matter to an anthology: you will include a table of contents indicating which texts you've included.

The bulk of the project will be to write a critical introduction to your collection, which introduces a key problem or theme developed from the class discussions (e.g. afrofuturism in superhero comics; LGBTIQ superheroes; nationalism, imperialism, and globalization). The introduction must also provide:

1. both an introduction to and historical context/evolution of the topic
2. a justification for including each of the image-texts you include

In short, you will explore in class, and beyond, a key issue that the superhero genre has been or is specially suited to explore, and you will become a minor authority on that issue. Your collection will then act as an introduction to this issue and make the critical interventions that demonstrate the importance of the texts you choose to a study of the superhero genre.

As with all our assignments, your collection must include both text and image in some manner that helps to explain your positions.

3. Comic Book

I am also open to a final project in the form of a short comic book or graphic novel, one that is both argumentative and critical, while also employing both the key storytelling or narrative elements of the superhero genre itself and engaging the dialogic exchange between text and image (à la McCloud or Sousanis). I will not grade on artistic merit, or lack thereof; the key is to explore the rhetorical strategies unique to the comics medium. If you are interested in this option, I require that you discuss it with me well in advance so that we can plan.

GENERAL RUBRIC AND GRADING SCALE

- A An A assignment gives a strong and original argument. It is logical, well argued, supported, and organized. It demonstrates a thorough and complex engagement with the text(s) and builds on the themes and concepts discussed in class. Papers at this level also contain strong prose and are mostly free of typos, as well as mechanical and stylistic errors.
- B B assignments fall noticeably short in one of the criterion for a strong argument listed above, but still demonstrate a thorough and complex engagement with the text(s) and the themes and concepts discussed in class. Work at this level needs minor revision, but is otherwise stylistically and mechanically sound, with few errors.
- C If you just complete your assignment, you're probably doing C work. C designates an average level of engagement, which often simply echoes or restates class lectures, and which falls noticeably short of the criteria for B and A range papers. C work needs significant revision in terms of its content and organization. C assignments also often appear as summaries rather than arguments. But they still show effort and kernels of a potential B or A range paper.
- D A D assignment is disorganized, poorly argued, or too obvious in terms of its argument. It may also lack textual support for the arguments being made. Work in this range is in need of almost complete revision and contains numerous spelling and/or mechanical errors that affect the clarity of the writing.
- E An E assignment is short of (almost) all the criteria listed above. It is incomplete or so poorly argued that it does not satisfy the basic requirements of the assignment. E work

is also full of spelling/mechanical errors, which make the writing unclear and/or unreadable.

A	4.0	93–100 (100)	B	3.0	83–86 (85)	C	2.0	73–76 (75)	D	1.0	63–66 (65)
A-	3.67	90–92 (91)	B-	2.67	80–82 (81)	C-	1.67	70–72 (71)	D-	0.67	60–62 (61)
B+	3.33	87–89 (88)	C+	2.33	77–79 (78)	D+	1.33	67–69 (68)	E	0.00	0–59 (0)

*Final grade appeals may be made by filling out a form available from Carla Blount, Program Assistant.

ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSIONS AND GUIDELINES

1. I will not accept late work. If you have some kind of conflict (appointment, emergency, etc.) and are unable to meet deadlines, you must inform me in advance
2. Once you create your blogs, your entries will be updated there. You will supply me with the URL so I can find and follow your blogs and, of course, read and grade your entries.
3. Your annotation/bibliography entry should be submitted as a hard copy. I will return it with comments, and you must then revise and update your entry on a Google doc, to which the whole class will have access to assist with your final projects.
4. I require hard copies of all final projects. (But print your papers double sided. Save some trees, ok? It also makes a smaller pile for me to carry around.) You will also upload a single file on Canvas.
5. All assignments must be formatted according to the MLA Handbook, 7th Ed. For a helpful guide, see <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/> for help with MLA guidelines. At the end of a blog entry, you must include any primary and secondary sources you cite in a works cited list. Your final projects will likewise follow MLA format (whether you choose option 1, 2, or 3).
6. Assignments for this class will be graded rigorously for complexity of thought and the quality of their arguments. Therefore, I will not grade any paper that makes sexist or misogynist, racist, homo- or xenophobic ‘arguments.’ The scare quotes are there because such stances do not subscribe to anything remotely resembling critical thinking or logical or academic rigor.

COURSE POLICIES

1. Attendance and Lateness

Attendance is mandatory in all physical and intellectual senses. Absences *will* affect your grade: not only because you will lose participation credit, but you will also lose track of our discussions and be in a weak position to complete your assignments.

Students travelling for university-sponsored events or observing religious holidays are excused from class. However, you must tell me about these absences in advance so that we can make arrangements to have you make up missed work within an appropriate timeframe.

If you enter the classroom unreasonably late, which disrupts the entire class, you are absent.

Exemption from these policies *may* be considered for students in exceptional circumstances and who discuss these absences with me *well in advance*.

2. Readings

All readings are to be completed *before* the class meetings in which they are to be discussed. If you've not done the reading, then you have nothing to say. Accordingly, then, you are unable to participate and therefore absent. Because of the accelerated timeframe of the summer semesters, we will have a lot of reading to keep up on, so do begin early, and try to keep reading ahead whenever possible.

3. Office Hours and Assignments

Assignments are to be discussed during office hours, not via email or Canvas. That is, I do not host office hours so that I can take more time *later* to discuss assignments or answer questions. I will of course respond to routine queries by email, but I insist that any substantial discussion about the class, especially your assignments, be done in person (brief follow-ups can be done by email).

4. Devices

As many of our readings are more cheaply available in electronic format, devices are of course permitted *for the purposes of reading and class discussion*. Use of devices for anything other than the work of the class is not permitted. Texting is an especially unwelcome interruption.

Caveat: Life happens to us all, so if you need your phone on a particular day for reasons like family emergencies, your job, etc., just let me know prior to class. For whatever reason, if you absolutely need your phone, feel free to quietly step out of class for a reasonable amount of time.

5. Classroom Behavior

This is a small class that involves lots of discussion and participation. It should go without saying that your courtesy for the rest of the class is expected at all times. I insist that you treat our classroom as intellectual arena in which to discuss complex ideas. Any disrespectful behavior will result in dismissal, and accordingly absence, from the class.

6. Course Evaluations

You are encouraged to do a course evaluation at the end of the semester at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/>.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Statement on Academic Honesty:

All students must abide by the Student Honor Code. For more information about academic honesty, including definitions of plagiarism and unauthorized collaboration, see <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>

Statement of Humanities and Composition Credit:

This course can satisfy the General Education requirement for Composition or Humanities. For more information see <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/1314/advising/info/general-education-requirement.aspx>

Statement of Writing Requirement:

This course can provide 6,000 words toward the UF requirement for writing. For more information see <http://gened.aa.ufl.edu/writing-requirement.aspx>

Statement on Sexual Harassment:

UF provides an educational and working environment that is free from sex discrimination and sexual discrimination for its students, staff, and faculty. For more about UF policies regarding harassment see <http://hr.ufl.edu/manager-resources/policies-2/sexual-harassment/>

Statement of Student Disability Services:

The University of Florida complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. To request accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center in Peabody 202, which will provide

documentation. Accommodations cannot be made until I have received documentation. For more about the DRC see <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

These texts may be of use for your bibliographies and final projects. Our class will involve some secondary readings as generative entry points into our discussions, but, as there are so many superhero image-texts to read, we will focus on primary sources to come establish a kind of common canon for our work. Use these as a starting point, and feel free to look beyond these as well.

Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*

Rami Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*

Charles Hatfield, Ed., *The Superhero Reader*

Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby*

Andrew Hoberek, *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics*

Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*

Alan Moore, *Alan Moore's Writing for Comics*

Adilifu Nama, *Super Black*

Sara J. Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*

OTHER RESOURCES

ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies

<http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/>

Graphic Novels and Comics: Journals and online resources from NYU Libraries

<http://guides.nyu.edu/c.php?g=276896&p=1846435>