

## **BUILDING A COMICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE CURRICULUM AT SDSU**

**Abstract:** Comics@SDSU seeks \$150,000 for a two-year initiative to 1) develop ten new courses that will deepen and expand our humanistic comics curriculum, 2) use these courses to populate our proposed certificate in Comic Studies, and 3) support workshops that bring other scholars to campus to energize comic studies at SDSU.

**Intellectual Rationale:** Recent blockbuster movies have familiarized huge audiences with how comics and graphic novels are filled with superheroes battling villains and street-level fighters challenging the status quo. Scholars who study the comics medium have long recognized comics' harmful power to perpetuate racist and misogynistic stereotypes; but also, more recently, their incredible capacity to boldly challenge injustice and encourage meaningful social change. Racist characters like Will Eisner's Ebony White, a horribly caricatured African-American sidekick to the 1940s comic-book detective/vigilante *The Spirit*, have been replaced with empowering depictions of the civil rights movement including *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957), a one-shot comic that recounted MLK's life and offered a how-to on methods of nonviolent resistance, and *March* (2013-2016), a three-volume graphic novel telling the powerful story of civil rights icon John Lewis to a new generation. Deleterious depictions of foolish and sexually-objectified women like *Shirl the Jungle Girl* (Harvey Comics, 1957) or Betty, Veronica, and Ginger (1940s-on) of the long-running Archie series have been obliterated by powerful feminist comics, for example the landmark *It Ain't Me Babe* (1970), in which the now-legendary Trina Robbins, Barbara Mendes, and what became the Wimmen's Comix Collective upended those stereotypes with edgy

drawing and unconventional stories, and the more recent *Bitch Planet* (2014-2017) in which Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro boldly depict a dystopia where women who are imprisoned for non-compliance resist their oppression. Put simply, the ever-changing medium of comics and graphic novels is a change-maker. Humanists are well-positioned to trace that change and, through our scholarship and teaching, make meaning of its power.

SDSU's Comics and Social Justice Collaborative (Comics@SDSU) embraces the vibrant comics medium as a way to grapple with timely social issues including racial injustice, misogyny, wealth inequality, immigration, food insecurity, and climate justice, to name just a few. Humanists (from History, English and Comparative Literature, Women's Studies, Africana Studies, and other fields) anchor our team of scholars, educators, librarians, scientists, and artists from across SDSU, a Hispanic-Serving Institution (with 31% Hispanic students in Fall 2019),<sup>1</sup> and the wider San Diego community to form what we are working to make the nation's leading comic studies collaborative and the only such collaborative focused primarily on social justice in and through comics. San Diego is home to a thriving maker community from small studios like Little Fish Comic Book Studio connecting with the local community to national comic book publishing houses like IDW. Fans and professionals alike gather at yearly events from the 2000-attendee Comic Fest to the 200,000-attendee Comic-Con, and a soon-to-reopen Comic-Con Museum is already hosting events drawing large crowds, including events led by SDSU faculty. Our Comics and Social Justice Collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Ristine, "Task Force Reports on SDSU's Future as Hispanic-Serving Institution." *SDSU NewsCenter*, 28 April 2020, [https://newscenter.sdsu.edu/sdsu\\_newscenter/news\\_story.aspx?sid=77974](https://newscenter.sdsu.edu/sdsu_newscenter/news_story.aspx?sid=77974). Accessed 8 April 2021.

cultivates this dynamic community and promotes the creation of, scholarship on, and teaching about, comics. The humanists of Comics@SDSU are poised to develop a full curriculum that draws on the strengths of our community.

**Content and Activities:** We have built the Comics@SDSU collaborative with a strong foundation of innovative coursework and deep scholarship. The goal of this proposal is to expand SDSU's course offerings and curriculum focused on the unique power of comics and graphic novels to engage with social justice issues. Cooperation by our interdisciplinary scholars on these topics --- racial discrimination, gender identities, immigration, wealth inequality, and climate justice, to name just a few --- can bring transformative experiences to our students at SDSU. Specifically, the grant will support three activities: (1) develop ten new courses in addition to our existing classes including large GE courses and in-depth one-on-one mentoring with student scholars; (2) create a formal certificate program in Comic Studies, and (3) host collaborative academic exchange through workshops that brings scholars here to the SDSU comics collection and community. We envision that this work will increase access to the 100,000-title comics and archival collection at SDSU, one of the largest comics collections in the nation. Achieving these three goals will bring transformative opportunities for SDSU students and leverage our expertise with local partners to engage the San Diego community. We believe that when humanistic scholars investigate and artists create and, when together, they collaborate with the community of SDSU students and beyond, measurable and meaningful social change is not far behind.

Activity 1: Develop new courses in addition to our existing classes including large GE courses, library instruction, and in-depth one-on-one mentoring with student scholars.

Already, Comics@SDSU has identified a set of courses we will develop and many of the faculty who will develop them. These include: Graphic Histories (Tarpley, Pollard, and Cline);<sup>2</sup> Chicanx Comix (Nericcio, English); Cold War Comics (Daddis, History), Modern Manga and Japanese History (Dumas, History), Introduction to Visual Thinking/Literacy (Capello, Education); Religion and Comics (Kirkegaard, Religion); Comics and the Ancient World (Pollard and Penrose, History); Comics Librarianship (Jackson, Library); Comics for Teachers (TBD); and Visual Rhetoric (TBD, Rhetoric and Writing Studies).<sup>3</sup> Faculty have brainstormed other ideas including courses on philosophy of comics, comics and diversity, literacy and comics, graphic medicine, and more.

This grant will support the development of ten of the Humanities-focused courses over two years (five per year). Course developers will collaborate closely to ensure that the courses complement one another and build student capacity to recognize the power of comics to grapple with tough social issues over time. Course developers will meet regularly to discuss the common readings described on the reading list (see readings.pdf attachment) and to share ideas about course learning outcomes, teaching strategies, complementary readings, and assignment scaffolding that is appropriate to the course

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 12-16 of other.pdf, for a draft syllabus that demonstrates how the proposed upper-division Humanities GE course, Graphic Histories, will engage social justice issues.

<sup>3</sup> See letters.pdf that illustrates support from the faculty excited about developing the first six courses on this list, as well as pp. 2-3 of other.pdf, which includes course descriptions for most of these proposed offerings.

level. Comics@SDSU has already over the past two years established the pattern of meeting thrice-a-semester to discuss teaching, research, and outreach; these conversations about course development are a natural outgrowth of that community.

So as not to flood the multi-layered course-approval process at SDSU --- from department, to college, to GE (in some cases), to university --- we'll shepherd five classes through the process each year of the grant. We'll choose which five in the 2022-23 cycle versus the 2023-24 cycle based on faculty readiness and department balance. The hard work of developing relationships across the Humanities that has already been done by the Comics@SDSU collaborative will smooth the curriculum process. For more details, see the workplan.pdf.

### *Activity 2: Create a Comic Studies Certificate*

We envision building a certificate program in Comic Studies, consisting of six courses (18 units), that a student could complete in one year. A student following this educational pathway would take two already-existing and successful core courses, HIST/ENG 157 and Art 296, together with four electives drawn from the slate of courses we'll develop with the support from this grant (as outlined in Activity 1, above) and the already-existing "supporting courses" (listed below).

A quick review of the already-existing core and support classes demonstrates that our curriculum-development is underway and that students are interested in learning more. Existing "core" classes include: 1) the already-mentioned English/History 157, Comics and History, a new course that satisfies the C1 category for GE and presents research themes focused on gender, race, politics, rhetoric, stereotypes, and social

justice;<sup>4</sup> and 2) Art 296, Comics and Sequential Media, a historical and theoretical overview of visual storytelling through a cross-section of works in animated films, comics, live-action, and photography taught by faculty member Neil Kendricks. Already-existing “support” courses include: Africana Studies (AFRAS) 120, a GE composition course, taught by Dr. Delores Fisher, which includes a section on comics and African American pop culture graphic representation; AFRAS 466, Afrofuturism, taught by Dr. Ajani Brown on the interdisciplinary study of African and African American contributions to science fiction, comic book art, pop culture, and its origins and influences; Women’s Studies (WMNST) 355, Feminist Approaches to Popular Culture, WMNST 360, Women's Sexuality and the Body, and WMNST 604, Cultural Studies of Gender (official class title "Gender and Representation"), taught by Professor Jarmakani in Women’s Studies, which uses graphic novels like *Persepolis* as crucial source material; and, History 405, Amazons and Wonder Woman, developed by Professor Penrose and completing curriculum approval in AY 2020/21, which includes a deep dive into Wonder Woman comics.

Evolution of the curriculum --- a blending of the existing courses and the new courses developed with the support of this grant --- will rely not only on the leadership of the members of the Comics@SDSU Collaborative, but also on our network of

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<sup>4</sup> See other.pdf, pp. 4-11, for a sample syllabus and major assignments in HIST 157 that demonstrate how the course lays the humanistic groundwork for an exploration of comics in general and, more specifically, their engagement with social issues. See other.pdf, pp. 17-20, for news coverage (on Arts & Letters website and *Daily Aztec* student newspaper) about HIST 157. The Arts & Letters article includes quotes from students about how the course encouraged their critical thinking skills and their thinking about social justice issues. 438 students (distributed across eight sections in the first year of its offering in AY 20/21) have been taught by Professors Pollard, Tarpley, and Stout (in History) and Nericcio, Howard, and Thomas (in English).

collaborative partners including visiting scholars described in Activity 3. Parallel development of a certificate program with new coursework will ultimately lead to a minor in Comic Studies and perhaps a major. SDSU aspires to be the national leader in Comic Studies and Social Justice, building on the San Diego Comics community, the unique history of our SDSU faculty, and our identity as a borderland Hispanic-Serving Institution... this curriculum is a vital component to fulfilling that aspiration.

*Activity 3: Host collaborative workshops that bring scholars here to the SDSU comics collection and community and extend our collaborative network to other CSU.*

Vibrant conversations about the newest scholarship on comics are essential to invigorating our course design (Activity 1) and curriculum development (Activity 2). To that end, we have allocated a portion of the grant to host a selection of scholars and creators to talk with us about their work and help us explore the ways that the 100,000-floppy strong SDSU comics collection can be used to explore social justice themes in comics. A selection of comic scholars and creators that focus on social justice themes will join us for several-day-long stints (Workshops 1-4), working side-by-side with SDSU faculty and students, giving guest lectures in SDSU courses, assessing the utility of the comics collection at SDSU Library for humanistic study in their area of expertise, and interacting with the San Diego community through events at such venues as the Comic-Con Museum. For outward-facing events, we would match an SDSU faculty member with the visiting scholar/creator on a shared topic of interest/expertise. Such events would be moderated by members of the Comics@SDSU community and would be open to the general public.

The final decision on whom we'll invite will stem from the conversations in Spring 2022 about the first batch of five courses developed in activity 1, but possible scholars would include: Sean Guynes and Martin Lund, editors of *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics* (Ohio State University Press, 2020) Pramod K. Naylor, author of *The Human Rights Graphic Novel: Drawing It Just Right* (Routledge, 2020); Neil Cohn, author of *Who Understands Comics: Questioning the Universality of Visual Language Comprehension*, 2020; and Nick Sousanis, author of *Unflattening* (Harvard University Press, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Possible artists we could invite, whose recent work in comics explores social justice issues that matter to the SDSU community include: Christian Cooper (*It's a Bird*), Kelly Sue DeConnick (*Bitch Planet*), G. Willow Wilson (*Ms. Marvel* and *Cairo*), Darcie Little Badger (*Marvel's Indigenous Voices*), Julio Anta (*Home*), and Duncan Tonatiuh (*Undocumented: A Worker's Fight*).<sup>6</sup>

Comics@SDSU has already established the power of these kinds of conversations to spur crucial conversations and invigorate course design. Since 2018, we've hosted artists and scholars for seminars and workshops at SDSU, collaborating with faculty on teaching innovations as well as evolving ideas on how comics have played a pivotal role in communicating the principles of social justice, particularly to youth and others who prefer graphic to text storytelling. Notable past events have included: Zeal Harris (artist in residence) exploring the intersection of her art with the comics medium; Jonathan

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<sup>5</sup> See readings.pdf attachment for a discussion of these and other titles that are already informing our conversations.

<sup>6</sup> See readings.pdf attachment for a listing of comics and graphic novels whose work unflinchingly explores topics such as immigration and refugees, racial justice (specifically African-Americans, policing, and incarceration) and other social justice related issues.

Fahn talking about his work as a voice-over artist; John Jennings talking about Afrofuturism; Frederick Luis Aldama investigating LatinX comics; Lawrence (Billy) Grove and Frank Quitely discussing their collaboration on an exhibit of Quitely's work at Grove's Stirling Maxwell Centre for the Study of Text/Image Cultures at University of Glasgow; Mike Vann sharing his process developing his graphic history entitled *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam*; and Monie Barret and Matt Dunford spotlighting their work with Creators Assemble and San Diego Comic Fest. We have partnered with the San Diego Comic-Con Museum in Balboa Park to co-host events featuring Comics@SDSU faculty and will expand this partnership to leverage our collaborative projects to bring comic creators and scholars to San Diego.

Workshop-related presentations, lectures, and interactions will be recorded and integrated into a digital platform to make these novel materials accessible to others. A long term goal of Comics@SDSU is to cultivate a Comics-in-the-CSUs that is system-wide and brings together scholars from across the system for collaborations each year. To that end, Comics@SDSU recently initiated a CSU system-wide effort to integrate the teaching and scholarship of comics across all 23 campuses. We hosted the inaugural conference on 19 April 2021, with participants from eleven campuses attending. The meeting established immediate connections and envisioned future collaborations (such as conferences, podcasts, publications) to provide greater access for faculty and students to the study of social justice through the comics medium.

**Project Personnel:** The SDSU Project Team leadership (Pollard and Jackson) collaborate with faculty from multiple humanistic disciplines and other colleges across

the SDSU campus. See also the letters.pdf, which includes notes from several faculty who have already committed to developing courses that will contribute to the curriculum. We offer here a description of the team leadership who will coordinate the curriculum-building efforts over the course of the project.

Dr. Elizabeth Pollard (PI) is Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence at San Diego State University, where she has been teaching courses in Roman History, World History, and witchcraft studies since 2002. She co-leads the Comics@SDSU collaborative (2019-present) and is co-Champion of *Comics and Social Justice* for the SDSU President's Big Ideas Initiative (2020-present). Pollard recently debuted the new Comics and History course that explores sequential art from the paleolithic to the present day. Her research investigates women accused of witchcraft in the Roman world and explores the exchange of goods and ideas between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in the early centuries of the Common Era. She is currently working on a graphic history exploring the influence of classical understandings of witchcraft on modern pop-culture representations of witches (from comics to film). Apart from her work on magic and comics, Pollard is co-author of *Worlds Together Worlds Apart Concise*, *WTWA Full* 6th edition, and the *Worlds Together Worlds Apart, Companion Reader* (W.W. Norton). In Summer 2020, she co-facilitated the SDSU Flexible Course Design Institute, which undertook the training of more than 1,000 SDSU faculty as they made the shift to online instruction in the face of COVID-19. She has also published on various pedagogical and digital history topics, including writing about witchcraft on wikipedia, tweeting on the backchannel of the large lecture, and digital humanities approaches to visualizing Roman History.

Pamela Jackson (Comics@SDSU co-leader) has been a library faculty member in the California State University system for 18 years. She is the Popular Culture Librarian and Comic Arts Curator in Special Collections and University Archives at San Diego State University. She manages a comic arts collection of approximately 100K published, archival and ephemeral items. She co-created and co-leads Comics@SDSU, through which she works to include comics in the curriculum and to foster the next generation of comics scholars. She is particularly interested in diverse representation in comics and in using the medium to raise awareness of social justice issues. She has written numerous articles about comics and pop culture for academic publications, and has presented at Comic-Con International, the Comic Arts Conference, San Diego Comic Fest, and the Popular Culture Association. Her works include a grant-funded humanities website, *The Comic-Con Kids: Finding and Defining Fandom*, which explores the emergence of comics, science fiction and fantasy in the youth counterculture movements of the 1970s. An active member of her local comic arts community, Pam serves as the Archivist and on the organizing committee for San Diego Comic Fest, as Secretary for the International Popular and Comics Arts Education League, and as a member of Educators Unite for Creators Assemble!, all San Diego-based nonprofit organizations. She holds master's degrees in English from Sonoma State University and Library Studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

**Institutional Context:** Our Comics@SDSU Comic Studies Collaborative is a cross-college team of faculty from Colleges of Arts and Letters, Professional Studies and Fine Arts, Education, and Engineering (with more faculty joining us as we grow), who engage in a range of research and creative activities including a collection of essays on

Comics and Social Justice that we are currently developing for the Amatl Comix imprint of SDSU Press. Faculty members of Comics@SDSU have long engaged in the scholarship and teaching of social justice through the use of comics. While many faculty had for years taught comics-focused and comics-adjacent classes at SDSU, Dr. Pollard (PI), Distinguished Professor of History developed HIST/ENG 157 (Comics and History) beginning in Fall 2018 with the goal of having a course that laid the groundwork for a study of the comics medium over time. Pollard partnered with Librarian Pam Jackson, Popular Culture Librarian, to develop materials for the course and out of that collaboration the Comic Studies Collaborative (now Comics@SDSU) was conceived. Taught for the first time in Fall 2020, HIST/ENG 157 (Comics and History) emphasized comics and social justice and drew 438 students to eight sections taught by five different faculty across AY 2020/21. Before HIST/ENG 157, the SDSU English Department frequently taught a course on the Graphic Novel that included critical analysis of canonical comics alongside a collaboration with an Illustration course in the SDSU Art Department to facilitate a student-created comic anthology called *Word Balloons*.

With support from the SDSU administration, the Comics@SDSU group has grown to include more than fifteen faculty members across six departments (including Africana Studies, Art, English, History, and Women's Studies) who not only use comics in their classrooms, but also conduct research and regularly publish their work. The program also supports and mentors student researchers from varied disciplines (in Spring 2021, from Biology and History) who are undertaking independent research in comics, blogging about that research for our website, micro-blogging for our social media platforms (e.g. @comicsatsdsu on Twitter and <https://comics.sdsu.edu/> on wordpress), and completing discrete 5-10 hour research explorations for our core

faculty. This strong teacher-scholar model --- which will inform our deployment of a student researcher under this grant proposal --- enables seamless integration, giving students unique insights and opportunities to engage with the humanities.

One of the most unique assets of Comics@SDSU is access to nearly 100,000 floppies in the SDSU Comic Arts Collection. The circulating Comic Arts Collection includes both original comics and scholarship about the comic arts and is located in a browsing collection on the first floor of Love Library. The comics in Special Collections & University Archives (SCUA) do not circulate. Due to the generosity of donors, we hold tens of thousands non-circulating floppy comics and countless graphic novels in SCUA. The collection emphasizes alternative and independent titles, underground comix, drawn books and Modern Age comics, as well as materials that document the history of comic book culture, fandom and the creative process behind comic book production. Noteworthy holdings include a large collection of ephemera and memorabilia from fan conventions, full runs of RAW Magazine and Milestone Comics, comics that focus on all aspects of diversity, self-published and mini-comics, French language comics, the J. Gordon Melton Vampire Comics Collection, and vintage comics and comic strips, including Disney Comics. SDSU has a marvelous collection of Lee Falk's *The Phantom* dating back to the 1930s and numerous collections of late 1800s and early 1900s comic strip collections.

**Impact and Dissemination:** The impact of this grant can be quantified in terms of student enrollment. Given that HIST/ENG 157 drew 438 students across eight sections in AY20/21 (during the pandemic year when we were not even able to actively recruit or hold face-to-face events in the comics collection on campus!), we estimate that

hundreds of students each year will be taking the ten classes we develop with the support of this grant. If we make the safe assumption that each course developed under this program is offered at least once a year and draws 50 students, that makes 250 students the first year the five courses from year one go “live” and then another 250 students each year once the courses developed in year two go “live” (for 500 students taking these courses each year). But again, that’s a low-ball estimate, given that these classes may enroll up to 70-120 students (depending on level, with lower-division GE courses, like the Religion and Comics or the Chicana Comix courses enrolling more students and upper-division disciplinary courses enrolling fewer) and multiple sections of courses that prove to be popular may be offered each year (as with HIST/ENG 157). While it is too soon to estimate how many students will pursue the comics certificate we will create with these classes, the fact that many of the courses will be GE courses makes it likely that we will get not only intentional comics certificate participants, but also “discovery” participants, who find they’ve taken a class or two out of interest or to fulfill GE credits and then are drawn to complete the additional courses of the certificate. We also anticipate that the certificate program, offered in addition through SDSU’s Global Campus, will build interest among degree-pursuing students (working toward their certificate) but could draw enrollment of non-degree students from the wider community (including K-12 teachers who are eager to develop skills for working with comics in the classroom).

We will disseminate the product of this grant in multiple ways: the syllabi developed and the curriculum design (including assessment matrix of certificate learning outcomes) will be shared on the [Comics@SDSU website](#); our course designers and student assistants will share the progress of the course and curriculum development

through blogs about the process via our social media presence on twitter and on our wordpress blog; we'll present our process and results at conferences (both at comics-focused conferences like the MSU Comics Forum and at Humanities-focused disciplinary venues, like the American Historical Association and the MLA); we'll write at least one article for submission (either for a comics journal like *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* and *Inks: The Journal of the Comic Studies Society* or to a more Humanities-focused journal); and finally, as described in activity 3, above, we'll post to our website recordings of lectures and class presentations by our visiting scholars/creators. A long-term goal, once the curriculum is developed and the courses designed, is to offer an Institute for Teachers (K-12 or college-level teachers), concurrent with Comic-Con at which we can share the strategies and resources we've developed.

### **Evaluation:**

Success for this grant will be defined as:

- ten comics courses fully developed (five each year of the grant), and at least eight of those courses successfully ushered through the one-year curriculum-approval cycle;
- a fully-developed certificate proposal submitted for approval at SDSU (populated with the courses developed with the support of this grant);<sup>7</sup>
- and, two guest-speakers hosted per year (one each semester of the grant, for a total of four guest-speaker workshops over the course of the grant).

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<sup>7</sup> Central to the design of the certificate will be the development of learning outcomes for the certificate (both an identification of what they are and an articulation of various levels of attainment from developing to mastery)... ultimately, we'll be able to sample work from the various courses to assess whether students are achieving those learning outcomes.