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“Comic”ally Calling for Cultural Competency:
Using Graphic Narratives to Teach Social Justice
in the Writing Classroom

Travis Moody

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Dedications

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Rachael Ryerson, for her help in completing this project. Without her constant guidance and support, none of this would have been possible. I'm so, so lucky that she agreed to take this project on with me.

I also want to thank Dr. Tim Taylor and Dr. Tim Engles for agreeing to sit as members on my committee. Their suggestions and insight were invaluable in placing the finishing touches on this project.

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Introduction: Social Justice, The First-Year Writing Classroom, and Comics

First-year writing classrooms have long been a site where teachers can enact a social justice pedagogy (Trimbur, George; Hassan Richardson; Corkery). Specifically, cultural and critical pedagogies center the content of the First-Year Writing (FYW) course around various social issues. Instructors who use the principles of cultural pedagogy in their classroom aim to allow students a space to explore cultural differences and write about their own experiences. Those who adhere to critical pedagogy, such as Ann George, hope “to empower students, to engage them in cultural critique, [and] to make a change” (92). Though the outcome of these two pedagogies may differ (with the former aiming for a more exploratory environment and the latter aiming to become more critical, as the name suggests), they both center around common themes of social justice. These pedagogies will inform the classroom theory and approaches discussed in this project, which expands upon current practices both cultural and critical classrooms through the use of graphic narratives.

The goal of this project is to explore how teachers can use graphic narratives in the FYW class to explore themes of social justice. Following the introduction, each chapter will follow one branch of social justice (specifically racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and disability rights) and how a variety of graphic texts can be used in the FYW classroom to address these topics. The goal of this project is not to say that these suggestions are the only way, or even the objectively correct way, to teach these topics or these texts. Rather, the intent is to explore a variety of options for teaching toward social

justice in hopes that readers will draw inspiration from these suggestions and plans in order to implement similar, but personalized, practices in their own classroom.

What is Social Justice?

A quick Google search reveals that social justice is “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society,” though quick Google searches rarely provide satisfactory answers to complex questions (languages.oup.com). While this definition is fairly cut and dry, it centers around achieving equality for groups of people who are disenfranchised and marginalized in society. The classroom provides a safe and somewhat formal space to discuss social justice and recognize certain injustices and privileges through discussion, reading, and writing. To the dismay of progressive instructors, however, social justice is an expansive topic that could never be covered in its entirety in one semester. Instead, most instructors tend to focus on a few key forms of social justice that center around human rights and diversity, such as racial equality, gender equality, disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental justice.

A focus on human rights is often what is meant by “social justice,” though this term can apply to a variety of issues and concerns. Fighting against racial inequality is obviously an act of social justice, but so is fighting against income inequality. Thus a more applicable and driven definition for social justice might be, as Pamela Edwards and Sheilah Vance state, “the process of remedying oppression,” no matter what the oppression in question is (64). While it is unlikely that any major issue is going to be

solved in the FYW course, the classroom can be, and has been, a place for students to become exposed to and learn more about social justice.

Cultural and Critical Pedagogies and Social Justice

The aforementioned composition pedagogies, cultural and critical, will serve as the central focus through which I will examine ways to use graphic narratives as a means to explore topics of social justice in the FYW classroom. Because of the focus of these pedagogies, instructors often dedicate their classroom to examining and/or critiquing cultural norms and practices. The topics that are commonly discussed in these classrooms naturally allow space for culturally diverse texts in the classroom. Though classrooms that practice cultural and critical pedagogies do not necessarily need to focus on social justice topics, the nature of these pedagogies creates a fitting space for such conversations.

Cultural pedagogy has served as a means to discuss privileges and injustices in the classroom since the late 1980s/early 1990s. One key component of cultural pedagogy is to have “culture. . . replace the cultivation of sensibility implied in the high/low binaries of literary studies” (George and Trumbur 73). The cultural classroom looks at texts as artifacts from different cultures and uses these artifacts to guide what happens in the classroom. The hope is to decenter mainstream texts (particularly those written by people who are most often represented in the canon) and include texts from a more culturally diverse set of authors. Further, the goal for students is to have them begin writing about themselves and their experiences (82). For students, they become the subject of the cultural classroom for a while.

It is worth noting that cultural classrooms are not necessarily geared specifically towards topics of social justice. In fact, the real goal in Cultural studies is to look critically at the culture around us, often including a look at texts from popular culture. However, the decentering of canonical texts from the classroom does create space for non-canonical texts. Those instructors who wish to incorporate (and properly utilize) a more multicultural reading list for their class can now draw from diverse pop culture texts to focus their classroom on social justice.

Critical pedagogy has a lot of overlap with other student-centered and social justice-themed pedagogies such as Cultural and Feminist, as Ann George points out (77-78). She also notes that critical pedagogies differ in their “usually explicit commitment to education for citizenship” (78). Often, this approach looks like reworking the student-teacher dynamic that is present in the stereotypical classroom; students who are in a critical classroom participate in a democracy where their voice is amplified beyond that of a standard class. The instructor, in turn, takes a step back, becoming a guide that works alongside students rather than in front of them (both physically and mentally). As Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, stated in an interview with literary magazine *Language Arts*, “Teachers should be conscious every day that they are coming to school to learn and not just to teach. . . It is impossible to teach without learning as well as learning without teaching” (16). Here, Freire advocates for a student-centered classroom where both the teacher and the learners take on both roles of “teacher” and “learner,” an idea that supports cultural and critical pedagogies.

The key element of critical pedagogy that is most pertinent to this project is not this physical and mental shift in the classroom dynamic, though it would be misguided to

say that it holds no importance to the kind of classroom this project hopes to help create. Instead, it is crucial and necessary that the critical classroom works to give students “the ability to define, analyze, and problematize the economic, political, and cultural forces that shape their lives” (George 78). Students are expected to move beyond identifying and defining; critical classrooms push students to “analyze and problematize” the above-mentioned forces that affect their lives.

Social Justice in the FYW Classroom

Now more than ever, it seems incredibly commonplace for FYW classrooms to focus on social justice topics. In fact, the homepage for the website for the Council of Writing Program Administrators features a video of President Mark Blaauw-Hara, known for his scholarship centering around Cultural Studies in the composition classroom, titled “WPAs Share Responsibility to Advocate for Racial Justice.” In the video, Blaauw-Hara speaks about “entrenched racist practices and histories of violence that are far more broad [than the death of George Floyd]” and encourages Writing Program Administrators to “examine how our WPA practices support or challenge entrenched racial biases.” To Blaauw-Hara, this effort extends beyond the classroom to include hiring practices, training for teaching assistants, and every other process involved in a writing program. As president of the WPA Council, he sets a standard for all Writing Program Administrators to examine how instructors in their departments can further combat racial injustice.

Moving beyond just racial justice, FYW classrooms can also be a space to discuss other branches of social justice. For example, Martha Marinara et. al. published a study

that found 25% of FYW readers contained “explicit LGBT content and/or authors” (275). Though their study focuses on the exclusion and inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts in readers, and they argue that 25% is a small number, it does show that FYW classrooms are discussing LGBTQ+ topics to some degree. In some writing classrooms, graduate assistants have assigned students to research an on-campus organization, allowing students the opportunity to explore the campus’s LGBTQ+ Center. In this same article, the graduate assistants also opt to choose readers that feature various social issues (LGBTQ+ topics included), and allow students to write about a topic that is “relevant to the students’ lives” (Jaekel 98-96).

Further, there is also a history of using the FYW classroom to discuss the rights and experiences of people with disabilities. Linda Ware explores disability studies as disability relates to “identity, education, representation, sexuality, personal meanings of disability, access, employment, religion and spirituality, and strategies for empowerment and activism” (110). Ware explores disability studies through the lens of intersectionality and how a person’s disability may interact with other parts of their life. In the classroom, instructors can feature personal narratives, essays, and/or poems written by people with disabilities to not only learn about the disability and challenges that that individual faces, but to also explore the writing itself through a rhetorical lens.

Looping back to Blaauw-Hara’s claims, the WPA has published a list of expected outcomes for FYW classrooms that has reached version 3.0 since 2014. Though the publication of these outcomes predates the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the resulting protests that Blaauw-Hara refers to in his statement, these standards obviously do not predate all instances of injustice. More directly tied to the field of composition,

however, these outcomes arrive decades after cultural and critical pedagogies have been established and legitimized in the classroom. Therefore, instructors are able to read these WPA outcomes through a cultural or critical lens. For example, the expected outcome that FYW students should “learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts” means more than having students read fiction *and* nonfiction or essays *and* short stories (wpacouncil.org). Students should also be analyzing and composing texts that have a variety of ideas, backgrounds, and viewpoints. In other words, students should be reading texts that are both culturally and compositionally diverse.

This same line of reasoning can be applied when considering the WPA outcome that students should “read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between *verbal and nonverbal elements*, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations” (wpacouncil.org; emphasis added). Students shouldn’t just be reading texts that are diverse in style and presentation of evidence; they should be reading texts that are diverse in content from a diverse range of authors. Having students read from authors such as Brent Staples and his essay “Black Men in Public Space,” for example, offers a great opportunity for students to experience an author using anecdotal evidence as opposed to empirical evidence in Angela Davis’s book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* When considering which texts to include in a FYW class, instructors hoping to diversify their selection merely have to reflect on what “diverse” can mean.

Graphic narratives in the FYW Classroom

One way that many instructors are diversifying the texts they feature in their courses is via the incorporation of comics—defined by Scott McCloud as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” in his iconic book *Understanding Comics*—into the classroom (9). Comics were perhaps most popularized by the superhero genre. They were a widely accepted form of literature until 1954, when psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published his book *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth*. In this 397-page argument, Wertham creates an exhaustive attack on comics, claiming that they were a “blight” on the “mental hygiene” of the youth that ultimately turned their readers into juvenile delinquents (2-4). Wertham expressed great concern over the violence depicted in comic books, even noting that there were advertisements for air guns and knives imbedded in these comics. And because he was a well-known psychiatrist, people listened. Although Wertham sparked enough controversy that it inspired many people to try and get the sale of comics banned, the Supreme Court ultimately decided that his argument against comics was “too vague” and comics were included in free-speech protections (wymann.info). Eventually, comics began gaining more and more respectability again, until they have reached their current status as a legitimate form of literature.

Though there are undoubtedly people who still hold Wertham's sentiments, the genre of comics known as graphic narratives by and large have become mainstream texts and found a place within college classrooms. In fact, in 2014, Elizabeth Losh and Jonathan Alexander wrote a textbook titled *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing* illustrated by Zander Cannon and Kevin Cannon (no relation), a textbook that has

been used often in FYW classrooms. Instructors typically use three texts in FYW classrooms: readers (anthologies of various texts for students to explore), handbooks (references to the technical rules of writing) and rhetorics (books meant to teach the principles of writing). *Understanding Rhetoric* is, itself, a rhetoric that takes the form of a comic. The authors describe the book as “a comic anthology, with nine issues dealing with individual rhetorical concepts” (vi). The writers also note that their graphic guide has reached and been used at over 550 colleges, universities, and high schools (v). The reach of *Understanding Rhetoric* both illustrates the growing popularity of graphic texts in the FYW classroom and emphasizes the academic benefits of using a multimodal text.

One of the main (or perhaps just one of the most repeated) praises for *Understanding Rhetoric* is how it utilizes multimodality in its presentation. Reviews scattered throughout the book’s preface call the book “accessible,” give praise for success “in terms of student enthusiasm,” and give praise that the book “practices what we preach about multimodal rhetoric” (v-vii). This last point, the use of multimodality, lies at the heart of what makes a graphic narrative a form of comic. By combining different modes, primarily text (linguistic) and visual, authors and illustrators are able to create new meaning and understanding that may be lost by utilizing only one mode. Comics not only combine image and text, but Scanlon suggests that “comics are especially rich for exploring multimodal composition because they combine image and text interdependently” (106). Of course, many comics utilize more than just two modes; spatial and gestural modalities are key to developing expressive characters. This use of multiple modes appeals to theories of multiliteracy: “the engagement with multiple

literacy methods – linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal – to learn and communicate” (lc2.ca).

As Fred Johnson explains in his article “Perspicuous Objects,” comics are “full of wonderfully complicated sets of relationships between words and images and shapes and lines” (Intro). Further, he says that “Comics bring together image and word and representations of time and space and motion, and comics artists use all of those elements and more to achieve narration, poetry, argumentation, and other ends” (Intro). All of the listed “elements” that Johnson discusses work together, in tandem, to create meaning in a graphic narrative. As he puts it, one of the tools needed to read a graphic narrative as a multimodal piece is to realize that the image of a bird is different than the word “bird,” and the image of the bird contains specific details that the word “bird” lacks (Conclusion). Further, Johnson notes that an image “does not necessarily result in (or need to result in) a translation of the image into words, and no such translation is required either to establish or to convey the cartoon’s significance” (3). There is no need to put the pictures back into words, as the pictures perform their job in and of themselves. It is worth briefly noting that many strategies and practices in graphic narratives have their own terminology; it may be worthwhile for a FYW instructor to take time to teach students what these various terms mean. This explicit instruction will give them the language they need to discuss comics more in-depth.

“Perspicuous Objects” is geared to help provide a common language to those teaching comics in the classroom, and Johnson demonstrates one of the deepest connections between comics and composition in an example of a five-year-old drawing a car. The body of the car may look different or strange, but most, if not all, five-year-olds

who draw a car are guaranteed to include one key aspect: the car's wheels. The wheels serve as an essential part in identifying a car for us – so much so that even if an artist were to completely butcher an attempt to draw the car's body, the wheels would help a viewer to identify what they are looking at. A study by Kress and van Leeuwen calls these elements in comics “critical aspects” (2). The wheel does an adequate job of representing the object in the illustration. This same idea can be applied to all graphic narratives; a panel with no illustrations is too plain, while a panel with too many illustrations is too busy. An artist must decide what critical aspects to include on the page and how much to add after the fact. When students work with comics, they practice compositional skills such as organization, importance of information, and rhetorical understanding.

Johnson ties his idea of critical aspects on the page perfectly into teaching composition by using it as an analogy. Discussing details of a visual piece may be easier than discussing those of a written one. It may be more palatable for students to discuss the details of an image than the details of a paragraph because students can literally see what has been included and perhaps what is missing. Johnson describes this advantage provided by the visual medium as

A bridge to talking about the same in any kind of composition. What details are chosen? How do the included details change the meaning of a text or help it achieve its purpose? Do they ever get in the way? How does the level of detail, or the emphasis given to any one element of the text, contribute to the voice of the text as well as the content? How is the voice of the text, its actual form, inseparable from its content? (4).

Johnson suggests allowing students to use comics as a means to explore their own compositions. By looking at the visual components of a comic, students can then begin to decipher what's necessary, what's extra, and what's missing, then translate that knowledge to their writing. For Johnson, this is only one of several reasons graphic narratives should be brought into the composition classroom.

To further the use of comics in the FYW classroom, Pam McCombs's "A Guide for Incorporating the Multimodal Sequential-Art-Narrative Medium of Comics, Manga, & Graphic narratives into the teaching of First-Year Writing" discusses activities that she has her students do that relate to critical aspects. When she assigns her class to create their own three-panel comic, a student will inevitably say that they can't do it because they aren't an artist. McComb's response is a three-panel narrative of a stick figure walking into a classroom, saying "Good Morning Class" and writing "Comics" on the whiteboard (4). Though the drawing is not remarkably well done (no offense to McCombs, of course), the viewer is still able to understand what is being depicted, the narrative it tells, and the choices made in creating the text.

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Comics also have a history of aiding English Language Learners (ELL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the classroom. As previously discussed, the text and images within a graphic narrative work interdependently to create meaning. Thus, as Kasey Garrison and Karen Gavigan explain, "the collaboration of words and pictures makes graphic narratives more accessible for students learning English" (9). Because the texts and images rely on each other for meaning-making, ELL and ESL students are able to contextualize what the text is saying based on the images before them. Scanlon backs this idea in her work, noting three major benefits to graphic narratives: "they can (1) increase accessibility to complex concepts; (2) engage multiple cognitive meaning-making processes; and (3) aid memory through improved retention of concepts learned" (115). Though Scanlon focuses primarily on technical communicators (specifically Latinx construction workers) in her essay, these benefits can apply to anyone, and particularly ELL and ESL students.

Comics can serve a multitude of purposes in the FYW classroom, ranging from accommodating multiliteracies and learning styles to helping ELL students learn the English language. Comics also engage students in considering which parts of a text are important; though comics allow this consideration to happen visually, students can translate these skills to their text-only projects and assignments.

Comics, Social Justice, and the FYW Classroom

Although graphic narratives can be used as a medium to discuss any and all topics imaginable, Garrison and Gavigan point out that, as of their publication in 2019, there have been a rising number of sales “of graphic narratives that deal with social justice issues” (8). Additionally, according to a study conducted by Moeller and Becnel (2018), there are “higher numbers on racial diversity in their graphic narrative sample than in traditional books, as measured by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center that same year” (9). Together, this means that graphic narrative sales are increasing, and those graphic narratives are also more diverse than their traditional counterparts.

One benefit that many scholars attribute to not only the diversity within the genre but the sales of graphic narratives that center around social justice is the combination of “visuals and text” that “provide a lens for students to explore and understand the challenges and injustices of the world around them” (8). Because of the multimodal nature of the comic, readers are better able to make meaning from complex or challenging issues. Rather than solely reading about it, they also have a visual representation to make sense of the topic. In this way, the comic provides more accessibility to social justice for students due to the visual component, as Scanlon notes.

One thing that all of the graphic texts that this project explores have in common is their nature as graphic memoirs. Each text provides a nonfictional account of the author's life from their own experience. Because of this, students are hearing firsthand (sometimes secondhand, as in the case of *Maus*) stories of events that affected actual people because they belong to an oppressed group. The graphic memoirs considered here explore various and often difficult topics, though this project will explore how the medium of comics allows for a more palatable and digestible experience while shedding light on the experiences of the authors in ways that standard text cannot accomplish.

In the next three chapters, I will focus on a pair of different graphic narratives that could be used in the FYW classroom to explore topics of social justice. Chapter 2 will examine *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei as they relate to racial justice. Chapter 3 looks at *Fun Home* by Allison Bechdel and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe as they relate to LGBTQ+ Rights. Chapter 4 will explore *Stitches* by David Small and *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* by Ellen Forney as they relate to disability studies. Chapter 5 will offer a closing summary of this study's findings and their implications for instructors.

Chapter 2

Racial Justice: *Maus* and *They Called Us Enemy*

One of the more common social justice issues discussed and explored in the FYW classroom is racial justice. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the CWPA has posted a video of President Mark Blaauw-Hara on their home page sharing his views on the responsibility that WPAs have in advocating for racial justice; that is to say, it is not uncommon, to say the least, for FYW instructors to use their classroom as a setting to discuss racial justice. Instructors use many different texts to accomplish this goal: some choose to implement cultural competency readers, some rely on shorter personal narratives, while some turn towards more academic and factual texts as their vehicles of discussion (McAllister, Irvine; Hudley, Mallinson, Bucholtz; Diab, et al.). Racial justice in the classroom can also be practiced outside of the texts and content that students are assigned; Asao Inoue's book *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* discusses anti-racist assessment practices for writing instructors, encouraging instructors to practice the acts of racial justice that they talk about in the classroom (3). This chapter will, unsurprisingly, advocate for the use of graphic narratives as a means to address issues of racial justice in the FYW classroom. For this project specifically, I will be discussing *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, and Steven Scott and illustrated by Harmony Becker due to their race-related discussions about the Holocaust and the Japanese American Incarceration Camps.

What is Racial Justice?

Before examining the use of graphic narratives to discuss topics of racial justice, it is important to establish a groundwork for what “racial justice” entails. The National Education Association, an association composed of 3 million members across the United States, aims to “[champion] justice and excellence in public education,” which includes advocating for family and community engagement, positive school environments, professional growth opportunities, and, most germane to this project, racial justice. They offer “Tools and Tips” to help give educators resources for all of these topics, where they describe “racial justice” as “The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. . . It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures” (nea.org).

Various studies have shown racial bias throughout education, from standardized tests to individual interactions with and perceptions of students in the classroom (Au). On the individual level, instructors have a responsibility to be mindful of not engaging in racial bias in their own testing, grading, and treatment of students. Essentially, instructors have an obligation to create a classroom that is systemically fair for all races – a classroom that is racially just. Even more, and Blaauw-Hara would argue this point as well, instructors have an obligation to advocate for racial justice *outside* of their own classrooms. Blaauw-Hara makes this statement despite the current sociopolitical context of a conservative-driven effort to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) from the classroom. While CRT is actually a theory of law that isn’t truly discussed until law and other forms

of graduate school, those who oppose it have spun the term “CRT” outward to include any sort of conversation about race that may supposedly make white children uncomfortable (edweek.org). Blaauw-Hara’s call for racial justice in the classroom may look like an increased approach to cultural competency when teaching, but it can also include explicit instruction and discussion surrounding racial justice, as this project advocates for.

Graphic narratives, Racial Justice, and the First-Year Writing Classroom

The graphic narratives discussed in this section are not the only ones that could be used to explicitly address topics of racial justice in the FYW classroom. Nor are the ideas, activities, and themes to be discussed the only ones of their kind to implement these topics in the classroom. In fact, many of these ideas can be used across multiple graphic narratives. Rather than focusing on racial justice as the crux of this educational discussion, this project aims to encourage instructors to use graphic narratives as the vehicle to discuss issues of racial justice. While the main goal in FYW classrooms remains to teach more traditional skills such as information literacy and multimodal literacy, these literacy goals can be achieved alongside/with/through a focus on racial justice. Because racial justice is the context to explore these more “standard” FYW course topics, the following discussions and activities will inherently center around racial justice. Furthermore, by incorporating graphic narratives that center on issues pertaining to racial justice, instructors will also be adhering to the WPA’s goal that students should

be able to “read a diverse range of texts” both in content and in format, in this case, “attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence,” which will be discussed alongside each graphic narrative, and “to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements” (wpacouncil.org).

This chapter will focus on how *Maus* and *They Called Us Enemy* can be used to teach rhetorical and compositional skills, primarily focusing on multimodal literacy and information literacy, as well as to create opportunities to focus on racial justice in the FYW classroom. Chapter 1 touched on multimodality—the combining of two or more different modes (such as textual and gestural) to create new meaning. Information literacy, on the other hand, is the ability to “recognize when information is needed” and “locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information,” as defined by the American Library Association (literacy.ala.org). In other words, information literacy refers to a student’s ability to examine information presented to them, assess how trustworthy this information is and whether or not more information is needed, and find new information if more information is deemed necessary. By using the graphic narratives discussed in this section, instructors will be able to have conversations on traditional FYW topics alongside issues of racial justice.

Maus I & Maus II

Maus was originally published serially from 1980 – 1991 in the magazine *Raw*. Each issue contained one of the first five chapters of *Maus* until *Raw* ended in 1991. Pantheon Books then published the first volume, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* with the subtitle *My Father Bleeds History* in 1986, followed by the second volume, subtitled *And Here*

My Troubles began in 1991. Together, *Maus* volumes I and II (collectively called *Maus* unless indicated by the inclusion of the volume number) tell the story of Vladek Spiegelman, Art's father, from the mid-1930s through the end of World War II. *Maus I* follows Vladek as he meets Anja, Art's mother, until they are sent to Auschwitz. *Maus II* follows Vladek from Auschwitz until the end of the war.

Two narratives run parallel to each other as readers see both Art interviewing his father about his experience in the present-day (within the 1970s and 80s) and Vladek's experiences during World War II. *Maus I* chronicles Art's trips to see his father in Florida as he interviews him for *Maus*. *Maus II* mainly focuses on Art and his wife, Françoise, as they take care of Vladek after his new wife, Mala, leaves him and his health begins declining. (Because Art Spiegelman himself is a character within his own memoir, I will use "Art" to refer to the character in *Maus* and "Spiegelman" to refer to the real author.) Within this frame, Art often addresses his own writing of *Maus*. In *Maus I*, he explicitly tells his father that the interviews are being used to produce a graphic text and even occasionally shows Vladek what he is working on. *Maus II* includes a scene where Art talks about the commercial success of *Maus I* and the effect that it has had on him since its publication. Meta moments like these often help drive the narrative of the present-day, as Art grapples with his relationship with his father and his own feelings about the Holocaust.

One feature of *Maus* that makes it stand out against many texts about the Holocaust is the anthropomorphic allegorical depiction of different races and ethnicities. The idea to draw different races and ethnicities as various animals began with an earlier idea Spiegelman had for a comic about race in America; his plan was to show Black

people as mice and the Ku Klux Kats (a parody of the Ku Klux Klan) as cats. In his book *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman expresses worry that his idea may “come off as one more racist ‘parody,’” ultimately deciding that “It just felt problematic” (113). He eventually decided that it made more sense for him to use his animal allegory for something closer to his own experience, and thus created *Maus*. In *Maus*, Jewish people are depicted as mice, while the Germans take the role of the cats. He also chooses to depict Polish people as pigs, claiming that he wanted to find an animal outside of the cat/mouse food chain and eventually drew inspiration from Porky Pig (121). He also creates Swedish reindeer, American dogs, and French frogs. Spiegelman says he reached a point where he “really couldn’t have cared less about [his] metaphor, but [he] was stuck with it,” and he ended up sticking with the metaphor for the entirety of *Maus*, giving every person featured an animal persona (130).

The animal metaphor that Spiegelman uses in *Maus* allows for a few interesting affordances within the graphic memoir. As previously mentioned, Spiegelman chose animals because of factors such as food chains, thereby emphasizing the roles and relationships each group of people had to the Holocaust and the other parties involved. For example, mice (Jewish people) were hunted by cats (German people), and the cats are eventually driven out by dogs (American people). The fact that the memoir depicts animals instead of people also helps to make the content more digestible to readers. Rather than seeing people commit the atrocities depicted to each other, the reader sees animals committing these atrocities while knowing that the animals represent real people. In this way, the metaphor adds a degree of separation from the horrific nature while allowing readers to *see* what occurred rather than just *reading* about it. Further, the visual

representation of people being represented as various animals allows a pathway to incorporate multimodal literacy into the classroom. Using visual literacy, students can also explore the nature of the animal allegory, which ultimately suggests the absurdity of racial stereotypes.

One benefit of using graphic narratives such as *Maus* in the FYW classroom is that discussing traditional topics, such as information literacy, can take a non-traditional appearance; racial justice, multimodality, and information literacy can all be taught in tandem. For example, in *Maus Vol II*, there is a moment when Vladek is recalling his work in Auschwitz after he has been assigned to do construction in a nearby camp, Birkenau, where Anja is being held. He speaks of Mancie, a Hungarian woman being held prisoner in Birkenau who could occasionally make trips to Auschwitz for her duties. She helped Vladek stay in contact with Anja.

Vladek: Each day I marched to work and hoped again I'll see Mancie. She could have more news of Anja.

Art: I just read about the camp orchestra that played as you marched out the gate. . .

Vladek: An orchestra?. . No, I remember only **marching**, not any orchestras. . .

From the gate guards took us over to the workshop. How could it be there an orchestra?

Art: I dunno, but it's very well documented. . .

Vladek: No. At the gate I heard only guards shouting, (II, 54).

Across the panels this interaction takes place throughout, Spiegelman has produced a visual interpretation of this discrepancy. In Panel 1, prisoners are marching from left to

right. The right side of the panel features an orchestra playing. When Art interrupts to tell his father about his readings of the camp orchestra, which happens in Panel 2, the scene cuts to present-day Art and Vladek. Panel 3, when Vladek says “No, I remember only **marching**” the prisoners have mostly obscured the view of the orchestra. Panel 1 illustrates Spiegelman’s understanding of Auschwitz as told through historical records, while Panel 3 illustrates Spiegelman’s understanding through his father’s story.

In such ways, Vladek is shown to be a somewhat unreliable narrator throughout *Maus*’s two volumes, particularly in the second, where the center of his present-day story is his declining health. Focusing on this discrepancy encourages students to practice their information literacy skills; they may choose to examine a moment where Vladek’s memory differs from something they thought they knew, using external sources to create a more complete picture of their topic. There are many moments where Vladek’s narrative is interrupted by present-day distractions, and by the end of the memoir, he lies down in bed, saying, “I’m **tired** from talking, Richieu, and it’s *enough* stories for now. . .” even though his first son, Richieu, died during the war (135). Additionally, in his article “‘Well Intended Liberal Slop’: Allegories of Race in Spiegelman’s ‘Maus,’” Andrew Loman notes how Spiegelman uses the two panels featuring the orchestra to illustrate the importance of perspective within *Maus*, as the narrative is a “transcription of his father’s belated reconstruction of the Holocaust; that is to say, it is the inexact copy of an idiosyncratic experience” (556). The reconstructive element emphasizes that *Maus* is not only a secondhand account, but it’s a secondhand account of a story that happened more than 40 years before it was told.

The fact that *Maus* is a secondhand account brings up the point that Vladek's story, like all the other narratives discussed in this project, does not offer some objective truth about the situations it discusses. Vladek's experience in the Holocaust is not the only experience of the Holocaust in the same way that Takei's experience in the Incarceration Camps is not the only experience of the Incarceration Camps. Still, it would be foolish to dismiss Vladek's narrative entirely because his remembrance of an orchestra fails to align with historical record. This inconsistency does, however, raise the question of how to determine what parts of history are true or untrue.

As with all graphic narratives, students can also look at the composed page to improve their multimodal literacy. One benefit of exploring themes of racial justice alongside practicing multimodal literacy is how the various modes may combine to create a new and tactile understandings of emotionally charged, challenging topics. For example, reading about what happened during the Holocaust is a much different experience than reading *and* seeing Vladek's personal account. As Johnson points out in his web article "Perspicuous Objects," when a text features repeated appearances of a bird in a graphic narrative, "that bird on the page is not the word 'bird' but a drawing of a bird on a page full of carefully arranged images. What can we say about the drawing itself, about the details chosen or left out?" (intro). In other words, the signs that readers see through the illustrations of a graphic narrative differ significantly from their textual counterparts. The multimodal medium of the graphic narrative allows for choices that would not be possible via strictly written texts (and if they were possible, they would be much more difficult to depict well). As Dale Jacobs notes in his article "Marveling at *The Man Called Nova*," multimodality "works to create meaning in very particular and

distinctive ways” and the meaning created by the combination of print and visuals “achieves effects and meanings that would not be possible in either a strictly print or strictly visual text” (182). *Maus* illustrates Jacob’s point as Vladek and Anja are escaping the bunker in the shoe shop. Vladek tells art “Anja and I didn’t have where to go. We walked in the direction of Sosnowiec – but **where to go?!?**” (125). On the panel, Vladek and Anja come across an intersection in the road, only to find that the roads form a swastika in their paths, indicating that the looming Nazi presence is inescapable. No matter which direction they go, the Germans will be there. Another moment that is enhanced by the memoir’s illustrations is the previously discussed orchestra scene, helping to showcase the importance of perception within the narrative. Moments such as this within the memoir can help instructors tie the teaching of racial justice and multimodal literacy together.

They Called Us Enemy

Takei’s graphic memoir, *They Called Us Enemy*, also focuses on events surrounding World War II, though it is from Takei’s own experience in the Japanese American Incarceration Camps as a child following Executive Order 9066 (the Executive Order that allowed for the incarceration of Japanese Americans) after the attack on Pearl Harbor. A few notes before moving forward: I will follow the same pattern as I did with *Maus* by referring to the *author* George Takei as “Takei,” while referring to his representation in his graphic narrative as “George.” Additionally, I chose to refer to these relocation centers as “Incarceration Camps” rather than “Internment Camps” because George refers to the “forced incarceration* of Japanese Americans” with a side note

reading, “*often called **internment**” (45). “Incarceration” seems a much more fitting word than “internment” to describe the actions taken upon Japanese Americans by the American government because it better registers the camps’ resemblance to prisons.

They Called Us Enemy focuses on George’s experience as his family is relocated from Los Angeles, California to live in the Santa Ana Racetrack’s stables, then eventually forced to move to the Rohwer Relocation Center in Arkansas. Takei combines his own experience and perspective from the time with his now more complete knowledge of the events to construct his narrative. The last few pages of the book detail George’s life after the Incarceration Camps as he goes to college and becomes an actor and activist. One of the central themes of his memoir focuses on the importance of American democracy and what activism can look like within a democracy; this is most explicitly discussed through his retrospective commentary on the events of his childhood.

There are several moments where modern-day Takei is presenting and speaking in front of crowds of people. In the beginning of the memoir, Takei stands on the TEDxKyoto stage in 2014 talking about his experience. Later, these framework moments focus on him at Springwood: the home and resting place of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who executed Executive Order 9066, on the 75th anniversary of the order. Here, Takei speaks to a crowd about his experience and his feelings about being in the home of the man who ultimately damaged the lives of 120,000 Japanese Americans. The story of Takei’s childhood is mostly told through this retrospective lens; as an adult, Takei is able to reflect on his understanding of how he faced racial injustice as a kid and how he has come to understand his childhood in the Incarceration Camps.

One privilege granted by reading personal accounts (firsthand in the case of *They Called Us Enemy* and secondhand in the case of *Maus*) is that these personal accounts often include information about the events left out of history textbooks. Personal narratives also help to highlight details that are not “common knowledge.” Both of the graphic memoirs in this section either feature content that contrasts lived experience to historical records (as in *Maus*) or context surrounding an event that escapes written record (as in *They Called Us Enemy*). As instructors consider various methods of teaching graphic narratives in the writing classrooms, eyewitness accounts of historical events grant an opportunity to discuss and practice information literacy by encouraging students to “locate, evaluate, and use” new information to discuss the historical context (literacy.ala.org).

Though *They Called Us Enemy* does not feature any explicit moments where the narrator’s perception does not align with historical records in the way that *Maus* does, it does raise questions about information literacy. Through personal accounts of those who have read *They Called Us Enemy* and an examination of history textbooks, it becomes clear that the Incarceration Camps are often poorly represented in standard public education, if they are mentioned at all. Abby C. Emerson, professor at Columbia University, shares the following reflection from one of her students in her Multicultural Approaches to Teaching Young Children course, in which they read Takei’s graphic memoir:

When I read, *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei, 2019) I was shocked to find out the United States had placed hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans in concentration camps. I had been taught about the Pearl Harbor event, but I never

knew about any of the events that occurred after this. I really questioned why I had never heard about this huge injustice in any history course I took both in high school and in college. Reading these books made me realize how the education I have received growing up was a very whitewashed version of history. (84)

Instances like this one, where students are presented with information that conflicts with their current knowledge, provide excellent opportunities for students to focus on their information literacy by researching more information about this conflict. Further, it appears that Emerson's student is not the only person whose education failed to address the Japanese Incarceration Camps. Noreen Naseem Rodríguez published a study in 2017 where she examined how two teachers taught their second and fifth grade students about the Japanese Incarceration Camps. Rodriguez notes that "Although the removal and relocation of Japanese and Japanese Americans in 1942 is included in *some* U.S. history textbooks, these discussions are typically brief, as they paint the United States in a negative light" (17, emphasis added). By and large, the textbooks that do choose to discuss the Japanese American Incarceration Camps do so minimally. Harry Lah noted that a 1991 edition of *The American Pageant* (a common Social Studies textbook known for its readability) granted only a half-page discussion of the camps in his article "Textbooks and Their Portrayal of Japan in World War II" (9). Though it has been several decades since the publication of this 1991 textbook, the fact remains that those educated using this textbook, or by a textbook that fails to mention the Incarceration Camps at all, likely lack knowledge and awareness of the relocation ever taking place.

In the FYW classroom, instances like the lack of education surrounding the Incarceration Camps can provide a springboard to discuss information literacy itself. It's

not that the information presented in these textbooks is necessarily false; in fact, it's probable that the facts presented are true. However, it is clear that these textbooks are not showing the entire picture; the omission of a discussion about the Japanese Incarceration Camps is not necessarily "false history," it just is not the entire history. By reading Takei's graphic memoir, students may be introduced to new information surrounding the Incarceration Camps. Again, this does not necessarily mean that the information they had was wrong; it was just incomplete. Examining student understanding of the Incarceration Camps also allows racial justice to be at the center of the discussion, since Japanese Americans were the ones targeted by Executive Order 9066, while also promoting and practicing information literacy.

When teaching in order to encourage information literacy, it is important to consider why a text has been written in the way that it has been. Concerning the history textbooks that omit or limit discussion about the Japanese Incarceration Camps, Rodríguez (and I) would argue that the information is omitted to preserve the image of America as a moral nation. Additionally, just as it is important to question why information is left out, it is also critical to question why information is included. For example, Takei chooses to spend quite a bit of time in his graphic memoir focusing on his mother, Fumiko, and her sewing machine that she brought into the camps, even though it was considered contraband. His mother's excuse that her "children [are] going to be needing new clothes" is true, though she also uses the sewing machine to make rugs and curtains in order to "make a home for [her family] out of the rough-hewn single room" they were given (68, 70). Though George was disappointed in the revelation of the

sewing machine as a child, his reflections as an adult indicate why it plays such a big part in his mother's narrative.

Though there was not much that the incarcerated Japanese Americans could do at this point in the war, Takei uses his memoir to explore what resistance can look like. To him, "everything [his mother] did was also an act of defiance" (71). While Fumiko does not adhere to traditional standards and ideas of resistance or defiance, these moments illustrate that defiance does not need to look traditional. By turning their single room in the Incarceration Camp into as much of a home as she could, Fumiko shows her own kind of resistance to the unjust authority. Moments like these can be used to encourage students to consider why these pieces that sometimes seem random or meaningless serve a purpose in the large context of the narrative. Choosing one of these moments to analyze and discuss could serve as a writing assignment focused on close reading and rhetorical strategies. This method would also achieve the WPA Outcome goal of "learn[ing] and us[ing] key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts."

A similar moment to *Maus*'s orchestra scene can also be found in *They Called Us Enemy* when the people still in camp have received news that they were free to leave. George, at this point old enough to begin understanding why they were being incarcerated, though not old enough to have a full grasp on the situation, is reflecting on the camp: "The irony was that the barbed-wire fences that incarcerated us also **protected** us." The next panel cuts to George staring at the barbed wire fences, asking, "Going home. . . ?" In the following panel, the fences have turned to an ominous dark cloud, representing their disappearance as George narrates, "If the fences were no longer there,

we would be in **danger**” (152). The darkness of the cloud also indicates an uncertainty about what awaits the Takei family outside of the camp.

Moments like these, and several others through the two memoirs, offer opportunities for students to do a close reading of a select few panels or pages to practice their multimodal literacy. By having students submit a short proposal discussing which pages/panels they would like to focus their project on, as well as their tentative plans for the focus of their project, instructors can allow students the freedom to choose an area that is of interest to them while avoiding the possibility that a student attempts to focus their project on an area that doesn't necessarily warrant a close reading.

Alongside reading *Maus* or *They Called Us Enemy*, class discussion can center around the inclusion or omission of details within the text, which can in turn lead to a discussion about how the students choose to include or omit details in their own projects. Why did Spiegelman include those panels about the orchestra? Why did Takei give attention to his mother's seemingly small acts of rebellion? As students explore the rhetorical purpose of each of these texts, they can then branch off into a project where they explore a similar theme in a different context. For example, this project could take the form of a rhetorical analysis of a political speech, or they could examine the revision of another historical event. In doing so, students can compare and contrast varying information from different sources to determine the validity of each source, analyze the information they find, and construct a more accurate account of the event they choose to write about. Further, allowing a project like this to move past the content presented in the graphic narrative will allow students to choose a topic that is of interest to them, increasing their investment in their writing.

Another possibility for the use of these graphic narratives in the classroom is an exploration of the written component of a law versus the practice of a law, and how an exploration of this topic can create the basis for a more traditional research paper. This assignment may also take the form of a “They Say/I Say” essay (or perhaps, more fitting, a “They Say/They Do” essay) or a compare/contrast of the law in theory and the law in practice. Takei notes that Executive Order 9066 never explicitly says the words “Japanese” or “camps” – in fact, it is stated that the military was able to declare areas “from which any or all persons may be excluded” (22). Of course, in practice, this turned into an act of singling out Japanese Americans from “any and all persons,” though if one were to look at this strictly from the written word, Executive Order 9066 has nothing to do with race. There are many examples of laws being fair in theory but racist in practice that could be explored. For example, while practices like redlining were banned in the 1960s and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 established the precedent that lenders couldn’t discriminate against borrowers because of their race, studies have shown that, even today, home costs are being “lowered. . . for potential white home buyers. . . while simultaneously increasing buying cost for [Black people]” (Dickerson 1565). Exploring such topics also ties back into information literacy; as students research the law and its surrounding practices, they must piece together information presented to them to uncover the real-world application of the law they are exploring.

Conclusion

Of course, the topics I have discussed and the projects I have suggested are merely a handful among a nearly endless possibilities for incorporating graphic narratives

about racial justice into the FYW classroom. If accompanied by lessons in multimodal literacy (i.e. how to read a comic), these ideas could be broadly expanded and feature any graphic narrative, even a different one for each student if they choose, for a close reading, rhetorical analysis, or basis for a research paper of some sort. Pam McCombs even suggests that rather than a traditional paper, students could take their turn in creating a series of panels, incorporating the creation of a multimodal project and allowing students to “gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers’ and writers’ practices and purposes” as outlined by WPA guidelines (wpacouncil.org).

Maus and *They Called Us Enemy* both tell the story of an individual who endured historical events that were brought about by racism (whether that racism was explicitly stated or not). The use of the comic medium brings these stories to life by visually portraying what the people who were affected went through. The visual elements of these narratives grant students the chance to practice their multimodal literacy, and several points in these narratives warrant a strong rhetorical analysis. While the students are practicing these more traditional composition learning goals, they will also be discussing racial justice and increasing their cultural competency.

Chapter 3

LGBTQ+ Equality: *Fun Home* and *Gender Queer*

Another social justice topic that has gained traction in the FYW classroom is LGBTQ+ equality, and many instructors have chosen to include LGBTQ+ authors and texts in their classrooms to drive discussion (Furrow; Gogats; Sieben and Wallowitz). As with racial justice, LGBTQ+ equality centers around social issues, meaning it naturally has a place in a class focused on critical and/or cultural pedagogy. This chapter will also focus on two graphic memoirs: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. Both of these narratives center around the author's experience as they navigate their own understanding of their gender and/or sexuality. For Bechdel, she begins to understand her own sexuality as the memoir progresses. There are a few moments that touch on gender and gender presentation, but the main focus remains on her sexuality. For Kobabe, on the other hand, eir memoir focuses on eir gender identity, which is often wrapped up in eir understanding of eir sexuality as well. Following the same style as Chapter 2, this chapter will explore ways to use graphic narratives as a vehicle to discuss themes of LGBTQ+ equality in an effort to teach cultural competence and traditional composition topics in tandem.

LGBTQ+ Equality and the FYW Classroom

The fight for LGBTQ+ equality differs drastically from racial justice in the specific goals that its advocates aim to accomplish. However, just as The National

Education Association defines racial justice as “The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all,” advocates for LGBTQ+ equality aim for the systematic fair treatment of all people, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation (nea.org). The ACLU, one of the most well-known advocacy groups, states that their mission concerning LGBTQ+ equality is “to ensure the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people can live openly without discrimination and enjoy equal rights, personal autonomy, and freedom of expression and association” (aclu.org). Both statements have common themes of fair treatment and opportunity, and both hope to prevent discrimination despite the differences in the issues they face.

At the time of this project, a bill that has been dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill is advancing through the Florida legislature. Under this bill, a Florida school district “may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age appropriate.” Those who oppose the bill have raised the concern that “age-appropriate” and “developmentally appropriate” are never defined (npr.org). Under this bill, a parent could decide that discussion about sexual orientation is never appropriate for their child and sue the school if the topic is ever addressed. The ACLU also reports that “Over 100 bills attacking transgender people have been introduced in state legislatures since 2020” (aclu.org).

Additionally, men who have had sex with another man within three months have been barred from donating blood since the AIDS epidemic, mainly due to the virus’s disproportionate effect on the LGBTQ+ community. New research has shown that the proportion at which HIV/AIDS affects the LGBTQ+ community is no longer enough to

justify this ban, and the American Red Cross' website states that due to the national blood crisis, what they call the "worst blood shortage in over a decade," "your donation is desperately needed" (redcrossblood.org). Nevertheless, the bar for men who have had sex with men is still in place, though The American Red Cross does state that they are currently trying to correct this bar, and "believes blood donation eligibility should not be determined by methods that are based upon sexual orientation." The American Red Cross notes that they are unable to unilaterally change this policy due to their status as a regulated organization (redcrossblood.org).

These instances, among many others, provide examples of both recent and longstanding forms of discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community. The goal for LGBTQ+ advocates is to educate people about these issues and encourage students to perceive and resist oppressive policies. In the FYW classroom, anti-homophobic education holds the same goals. However, as Sieben and Wallowitz discuss in their article "Watch What You Teach," queer pedagogy hopes to take these ideas a step further. Rather than simply encouraging acceptance and tolerance of LGBTQ+ people, queer pedagogy looks at "how labels such as homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white, etc., are used to police behavior and affect all people" (45). The idea is to help students understand what parts of their lives are socially constructed (the idea that dresses are for women, for example) so they can begin to problematize these assumptions.

Sieben discusses a freewriting activity she has her students do where students get five minutes to freewrite about each of the following statements: "We value diversity in America"; "We value sexual diversity in America"; "We provide options for sexual

diversity in America” (46). Following the freewrite, the class gathers in a circle to discuss what they have written down. For Sieben’s class, the result is an understanding that LGBTQ+ people are not treated fairly in America.

Jennifer Ansley takes a similar approach in her FYW class titled “Archiving LGBTQ Lives.” Her goal is to “*queer* ethos by asking students to listen to *the past* in ways that centered their accountability to those who’ve been historically marginalized along intersecting lines of gender, sexuality, and race” (18). She has her students access LGBTQ+ Archives in order to understand LGBTQ+ history and begin to understand the ways the authors have been marginalized. This class featured a few projects and assignments that ultimately built up to a personal narrative about each student’s experience and journey through the course, learning about LGBTQ+ Archives and the histories of LGBTQ+ people.

While both of these examples specifically integrate queer pedagogy into the classroom, an instructor doesn’t necessarily need to identify as an instructor who uses queer pedagogy to enact similar lessons and ideas in their own classroom. All of these ideas also work within the ideals and values of cultural and critical pedagogies, but it is worth saying that no instructor needs to (and few probably do) limit themselves to the confines of just one pedagogy.

Fun Home

Alison Bechdel’s 2006 graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, tells the story of Bechdel’s relationship with her father, Bruce, until his death in 1980. The memoir showcases Bechdel’s experience as she comes to understand her own gender and

sexuality, her father's sexuality, and how their sexualities helped to define and alter their relationship with each other. Told mostly non-chronologically, *Fun Home* is organized around themes rather than the time of the events as they take place; Bechdel also frequently uses allusion as a means of introspection. The last chapter, for example, focuses on parallels between her father and James Joyce's *Ulysses* at many points in his life. These allusions provide a seamless transition into a discussion about research practices and information literacy, the two topics this section will focus most closely on. As with the narratives about racial justice, *Fun Home* and *Gender Queer* also provide excellent opportunities for close reading, encouraging the "[learning] and use [of] key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts" and "[reading] a diverse range of texts, attending especially... to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements" as outlined by the CWPA (wpacouncil.org).

When considering how to approach *Fun Home* in the classroom, Bechdel's references to various literary figures (Joyce and Fitzgerald, just to name two) can provide a springboard to discuss research and source material. In her article "Multimodal Literacies and Graphic Memoir: Using Alison Bechdel in the Classroom," Janine Morris notes that "though Bechdel's memoirs are about her family, she frequently uses literary references and additional texts to inform her thoughts and feelings" (195). Bechdel even refers to her own use of references in *Fun Home*, admitting that she uses these allusions "because [her] parents are most real to [her] in fictional terms" (67). Moments like these allow students an opportunity to consider how their work may fit into the current academic conversation surrounding a topic. Students can also explore how the graphic multimodality allows Bechdel to incorporate these allusions in a way that text alone does

not permit. Students can examine not only *why* Bechdel chooses to allude to a certain literary figure, but also *how* she does so.

For example, when discussing her father's ties to Fitzgerald, Bechdel features a panel with her father's war-time letters to her mother messily stacked together. Bechdel notes that her father's letters took on a "Fitzgeraldesque sentiment" after he read Fitzgerald's biography, and the illustration of the letters stacked allows readers to see the influence of both Fitzgerald and his characters in her father's writing (63). She is also able to illustrate the physical similarities she saw between her father and Robert Redford, the actor who played Gatsby in the 1974 release of *The Great Gatsby* (64).

Using Bechdel's use of allusion as a guide, an instructor may have students choose one reference to explore in a close reading (often these allusions only last a few pages). This assignment may also encourage students to bring in additional outside research to further connect the lives of Bechdel's father and the allusions Bechdel makes. Alternatively, students may have the option to create a text that showcases an allusion to a literary figure with their own life. Following McComb's advice, this project could also take the form of a series of comic panels (18). Assignments such as these would help teach students how to "locate and evaluate. . . primary and secondary research materials" and "compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources" as set out by WPA guidelines (wpacouncil.org). The goal in including additional research with this assignment would be to further promote information literacy by bringing in additional information surrounding Bechdel's allusions.

College composition courses aim to teach students a variety of writing skills ranging from the process of writing to rhetorical analysis. Part of this range includes

information literacy and research skills, which entails plagiarism and its prevention. As previously mentioned, *Fun Home*'s use of allusion provides a springboard to discuss research and information literacy; however, this conversation could also be pushed further to discuss plagiarism. Benjamin Harris, in his article "Credit Where Credit is Due: Considering Ethics, *Ethos*, and Process in Library Instruction on Attribution," notes an increase in plagiarism within college courses and ultimately attributes the increase to students not being fully aware of the importance of proper research tactics (4). Moreover, he argues that a possible contributor to this disparity may be that students are being taught *what* to do, but not *how* to do it and *why* they should do it (7). Having students utilize outside resources for any of the above-mentioned projects gives them an opportunity to practice their research skills while the instructor teaches them not only *what* to do to prevent plagiarism, but *how* to do it and *why* they should.

Bechdel doesn't just reference famous literary figures as a means to make sense in her memoir; she also references her and her family's personal archives. For Ansley, Bechdel's personal family archives could also be considered LGBTQ+ archives. Ann Cvetkovich seconds this idea in her article "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." Cvetkovich notes that *Fun Home* has a "particular meaning" to her because it "provides a welcome alternative to public discourses about LGBTQ politics that are increasingly homonormative and dedicated to family values" (111). *Fun Home* features "diaries, maps, and books" that have held significance in Bechdel's life (119). She utilizes these documents to make her story more of a reality to the reader. As she incorporates these archives into her text, she actualizes her experience.

The best example of this “archival documentation” that Ansley refers to comes from the only double splash in the *Fun Home*: a picture of Bechdel’s old babysitter Roy (114). In the photograph, taken by Bruce, Roy lies almost nude in a hotel room that Bruce and Roy stayed in during a vacation (100-101). The children stayed in a hotel room separate from Bruce and Roy. Bechdel features a combination of her interpretation of the photo with her retrospective thoughts as an adult. The image shows Bechdel holding the photograph of Roy in her fingers, showcasing the entire photograph for the double-page spread. In the text alongside the photograph, Bechdel processes her own feelings towards the photograph, initially describing the picture as “beautiful” due to its “ethereal, painterly quality” (100). She soon reflects on how she would feel if the photograph were “of a seventeen-year-old girl,” wondering if she identifies with her father’s “illicit awe” of not only the picture, but of Roy as well (100 – 101). Here, readers see Bechdel both drawing comparisons between herself and her father and acting as a critic of her own father’s life. Her method of drawing these comparisons is the archival documentation she brings into the memoir. In a FYW classroom, students can implement a similar practice in their own writing by examining their own archival documents and providing their own retrospective commentary on the documents that they choose to feature.

Bechdel also features images of diary entries, poems, letters, magazines, and novels at various moments. As with the previously discussed possibility for an assignment, students may select one of these references to an object from Bechdel’s past and do a close reading of its reference and use within the context of *Fun Home*. For a more creative piece, students may select an item from their own past to write about and feature either in a written assignment or a series of comic panels. The goal of this creative

piece would be for students to think about how the item or object they have chosen ties into their story and/or who they are now, imitating Bechdel's practices in their own writing.

Gender Queer

In 2019, Maia Kobabe (who uses e/em/eir pronouns) published eir autobiographical graphic memoir *Gender Queer* after believing eir last autobiographical comic would be about the statistics of the books e had read up until that point (143). *Gender Queer* does not necessarily follow a linear story in the traditional sense. Instead, it features various instances of Kobabe's life when e was trying to understand eir gender and sexuality told chronologically; the common thread that connects these instances and stories is eir self-exploration. The memoir begins when e is three, retelling eir first gender-related memory, and ends as e talks about eir current profession of teaching comics classes to middle schoolers. As with *Fun Home*, this section will be dedicated to the ways *Gender Queer* could be used in the FYW classroom to discuss information literacy and multimodal literacy. One major difference between the two narratives is that *Gender Queer* features explicit in-text citations to outside sources, providing an example for students to mirror in their own work. Additionally, having students create their own comics with in-text citations, and thus following suit with Kobabe, can allow for discussion about information literacy and plagiarism.

One benefit of Kobabe's style of storytelling is that students who are writing about *Gender Queer* in their FYW course have the option to focus on a single one of these stories for a potential writing project. Most of these stories, whose topics include eir

first period, eir experiences at the gynecologist, and eir first time hearing about the pronouns e now uses, are only 10 – 20 pages long in isolation. The way that Kobabe divides the memoir (though these stories are not actually separated in any way) makes it easy to choose a specific passage or arc to focus on for a close reading. Alternatively, the instructor can still choose to have students write about the narrative in its entirety, utilizing multiple stories that Kobabe tells. By asking students to choose a specific story to focus on within Kobabe’s memoir, instructors are encouraging students to “use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources,” the “appropriate sources” in this case referring to Kobabe’s autobiographical text (wpacouncil.org). And, as with all graphic narratives mentioned in this project, students will be actively “[reading] a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations” (wpacouncil.org).

Another feature that the genre of the graphic narrative highlights is Kobabe’s ability to visually represent ideas, thoughts, and concepts that would be more difficult to convey in a text-only medium. Kobabe makes several moments and choices to visually express and highlight eir feelings and thoughts about eir experience. An instructor may opt to choose to have students select one of these moments where Kobabe turns to eir visual metaphors. For example, e illustrates various boxes of typical menstrual products with names such as “Acne and depression,” “Blood Management Week,” and “Bad Sleep for a Week” when discussing the feelings e have about eir period (34). In doing so,

Kobabe is not only stating that the items in this list come with having a period; e also touches on the feeling of having to purchase hygiene products while knowing that these things are the result of eir period. Further, the comparison between eir feelings towards the side effects of eir menstrual cycle and eir feelings towards the products themselves are brought to light; e discusses eir disdain for eir period as it relates to eir gender identity.

Kobabe also features a moment that includes referenced research when e explains the science behind gender identities. E makes reference to neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland and her theory of how the body determines its sex. Throughout this section in the memoir, Kobabe illustrates Churchland giving a university lecture where e is the student. E includes a chunk of text from Churchland's book *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*, presented as though Churchland is saying it during a lecture, followed by an in-text citation in each panel. Here, Kobabe is referencing other real-life figures in eir work much more directly than Bechdel did in her memoir. This moment illustrates how the comic medium can be combined with outside research, opening up the possibility for students to mirror Kobabe's tactics.

One key difference that makes Kobabe's text stand apart from Bechdel's is eir explicit use of in-text citations as they refer to Churchland's theories and publications. Kobabe not only provides an example for students to follow as they compose their own work, but e also exemplifies the ability for students to cite external sources in their own texts. More importantly, and more specifically, Kobabe demonstrates the ability to include in-text citations in a graphic format. McComb's suggestions of having students create their own graphic text, as has been discussed before, do not need to limit students

in their ability to incorporate elements that they typically use in text-only media. In other words, Kobabe demonstrates that the multimodal medium of her graphic memoir is actually more expansive and able to do more than the text-only medium allows.

Of course, having students utilize the databases available to them will satisfy certain WPA outcomes related to research and information literacy. A student who uses outside sources (and does it well) will be able to “locate and evaluate. . . primary and secondary research materials,” though having students do this same task using a graphic medium increases the opportunities to achieve various other outcomes. For example, under the category “Rhetorical Knowledge,” the CWPA states that students should be able to “match the capacities of different environments (e.g., print and electronic) to varying rhetorical situations” (wpacouncil.org). Though they list print and electronic as varying environments, there is no reason this statement could not also apply to text and graphic. Under the same category, students should also “gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers’ and writers’ practices and purposes” (wpacouncil.org). Again, I refer to the distinction between text and graphic mediums as separate genres for students to explore the conventions of, and having them create a graphic text themselves after reading Kobabe’s text fulfils the requirements of both reading and composing in multiple genres.

Conclusion

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer* offer many pathways to discuss LGBTQ+ equality in the context of the FYW classroom. Their inclusion of research within the graphic medium may offer a thread to tie these two

narratives together if they were used in the same class, but each narrative can stand alone and serve the same purpose. Promoting research through the graphic medium will be new to most, if not all, students, thus (hopefully) piquing interest and increasing student buy-in. As with all texts related to social justice, simply featuring these memoirs in the FYW classroom is not enough to thoroughly encompass social justice or advocate for LGBTQ+ equality; instructors must feature relevant conversation and assignments in their classroom to explore the topics at hand in a way that is meaningful and relevant to current issues concerning LGBTQ+ equality, and both *Fun Home* and *Gender Queer* allow opportunities for this discussion and these assignments to take place. Specifically, these two narratives and their use of outside sources give students the opportunity to explore information literacy as they discuss and learn about issues surrounding LGBTQ+ equality.

Chapter 4

Disability Rights and Mental Health:

Stitches and Marbles

The final branch of social justice that this project will examine in the context of the FYW classroom is disability rights and mental health. Many scholars and educators practice Disability Studies in their classroom, citing its importance in both explicating instruction and their daily practices (Stanton; Walters; Callus). In my experience, the topics of disability and mental health discussed in the FYW classroom arise less frequently than this project's previous topics of racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights. However, these topics are just as important to address as the ones this project has previously explored, and thus this chapter will feature a couple of graphic narratives that discuss disability and mental health.

This chapter will discuss *Stitches* by David Small and *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, & Me* by Ellen Forney and some of the ways that these graphic narratives can be used in the FYW classroom to teach WPA standards and disability/mental health studies in tandem. These topics have been placed in the same chapter because society needs to shift the way mental health is addressed and treated in comparison to physical health. In the same way that a person with a physical disability would not be asked to pretend that their disability exists, neither should a person with mental health issues or a mental disability. Classroom consideration of such graphic narratives as these two can encourage students to see that the discussion surrounding

healthcare needs to include both physical and mental health and consider both physical and mental ability.

Disability, Mental Health, and the FYW Classroom

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary area of study closely connected to the disability rights movement. As Anne-Marie Callus explains in her article “The Contribution of Disability Studies to the New Humanities,” “disabled academics” pioneered disability studies, focusing on their experience and the experience of family members with disabilities and “the perspectives of disabled people themselves” (70). Callus notes that “the single most important contribution of these perspectives has been the realization that disability is not equivalent to physical or mental impairment but arises from the difficulties faced by people with impairments in societies that have traditionally given little account to catering for impairment-related needs” (70-1). Essentially, Callus argues that the lens of disability studies helps people pay attention to society’s lack of accommodations rather than the limitations or impairments of the individual. In this way, disability studies is a field that overarchingly looks at the systemic impact of the lack of accommodation rather than thinking about disability in a purely individualistic sense.

While thinking about the classroom through the lens of disability studies encourages students and instructors to think about systemic issues that people with disabilities face, it also encourages them to consider ways they can be more equitable in their own classroom. In her article “Finding Universals Through Difference: Disability Theory’s,” Stanton notes that disabilities are still “real” and would not “cease to exist in any way if such gaps were closed,” the gaps referring to systemic barriers for people with disabilities (7). In other words, if a person is deaf or uses a cane for mobility, their

deafness and their need for a cane do not disappear in the world where society has learned to be more accommodating and accessible. When considering accessibility in the current world, the layout of the classroom may pose challenges for individuals with mobility limitations. Small font on a PowerPoint may make it more difficult for students with poor vision to follow along with the lecture. While there isn't much one instructor can do if their classroom is built around platforms and steps, understanding disability studies may help instructors to make their classrooms more accessible in the ways they are able to do so.

In addition to creating a more inclusive classroom environment for individuals with disabilities, many FYW instructors have begun placing more emphasis on mental health in their classrooms and on college campuses (Bischof, Hamilton, and Hernandez). Cathlena Martin's article "Health and Wellness: An Honor's First-Year Experience Assignment in Response to the Pandemic" explores her implementation of wellness activities and reflections into her FYW classroom. Martin explains that she would assign some activity for her students to complete each week (such as watching the sunrise or interacting with an animal) and writing a reflection about the experience. The goal was to have students practice something that was a form of self-care while disguising that self-care as a fun, low stakes assignment. In short, the inclusion of these activities and writings was a success for both her and her students. While some students were resistant at first, the consensus by the end of the class was that the students were grateful and appreciative, stating that they began to look forward to these self-care assignments (224-25). This prioritization of self-care is one way to allow for discussion of mental health in the classroom.

Many composition instructors have already begun discussing disability rights in their classrooms, and they are using a variety of methods to do so. In “Over There,” their chapter of the article “Multimodality in Motion,” Cynthia L. Selfe and Franny Howes consider the ways that ableism appears in the FYW classroom:

Re-thinking composition from a disability studies perspective reminds us that we too often design writing instruction for individuals who type on a keyboard and too easily forget those who use blow tubes, that we have a habit of creating assignments for those who read text with their eyes and a related habit of forgetting those who read through their fingertips, that we too often privilege students who speak up in class and too often forget those who participate most thoughtfully via email. (“Over There”)

Selfe and Howes encourage instructors to think about their day-to-day practices in the FYW classroom and how something as seemingly universal as a writing assignment may cause challenges for individuals who cannot use a keyboard. In a later chapter, titled “Mode,” Stephanie Kerschbaum argues that the importance of multimodality is two-fold. Not only does using multimodal texts allow students a place to practice multimodal literacy, but they also may make a text “easier to understand than text-only works because they juxtapose text, color, image, movement, and sound,” thus “amplifying the communicative resources of a text” (“Mode”). For example, a text’s use of color or particular images may help a student make sense of what they cannot understand based on text or image alone.

Much of the scholarship dedicated to disability studies in the FYW classroom focuses on creating what the authors of the article “Creating a Culture of Access in

Composition” call a “User-Friendly Social Space” (Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau 153). This social space often extends to academic areas outside of the classroom, but always applies to the classroom setting. Brewer and her co-authors cite closed captions and the use of notecards as a non-verbal way to ask questions and as ways to make conferences more accessible, but these ideas can just as easily apply to the classroom.

Further, in her article “Graphic Disruptions: Comics, Disability, and De-Canonizing Composition,” Shannon Walters proposes ways to use graphic narratives that focus on disability to “productively disrupt normative expectations about the ‘typical’ composition process” (174). Walters argues that comics can be used for both their own multimodal purposes and to de-canonize typical, and often inaccessible, texts that are commonly found in the classroom. These examples demonstrate that the presence of disability studies extends beyond the content of a classroom and into the daily pedagogical practices of the individual instructor.

Because of its effect on classroom theory and its real-world applications, disability studies proves to be a crucial element when constructing a fair and accessible classroom. One way to incorporate it is through the use of graphic narratives for explicit instruction. Rather than calling for changes like accessibility ramps to be placed in every classroom (though all classrooms should be accessible to those who use wheelchairs) and instructors using bigger fonts (though every instructor should make sure that every student can read the material), this project will focus on how graphic narratives can be used to address the topics of disability studies and mental health in the FYW classroom. As with previous chapters, the author’s first name will refer to their character within their memoir while the use of their last name will indicate their role as the author.

This project will focus on incorporating the graphic narratives *Stitches* by David Small to discuss disability and *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* as a means to discuss mental health in the FYW classroom. As with the rest of the texts in this project, these narratives are not the only ones that discuss disability, and the methods explored here are not the only methods that could be incorporated in the FYW classroom. Instructors should feel free to choose texts that are perhaps more meaningful to them, that they feel more comfortable teaching, or that are more accessible for them.

Stitches

To focus specifically on disability in the FYW classroom, an instructor looking to incorporate graphic narratives could turn to *Stitches*, David Small's graphic memoir. *Stitches* recounts Small's childhood and growing up with abusive and neglectful parents. When David was six years old, he developed sinus problems. His father, a radiologist, exposed him to X-rays, a commonplace treatment for sinus issues at the time. As David got older, his parents failed to take him to a doctor to examine a growth in his throat; this growth is later revealed to be cancerous, likely a result of his father's X-rays. Following his surgery to remove the tumor, Small is left with only one vocal cord, rendering him unable to speak aside from a soft whisper. The narrative follows David discovering that he had cancer, a fact that his parents hid from him, and how it affected his relationship with his parents. The way that Small explores disability in his graphic narrative allows students to "gain experience reading. . . in several genres" and "read a diverse range of texts" while also providing a means to challenge assumptions about what disabilities can look like and what disabilities can mean for those who are affected by them through

explicit instruction and discussion and possible writing assignments pertaining to the text (wpacouncil.org).

The ways that Small depicts disability in his memoir could help FYW instructors incorporate aspects of disability study into their classroom in two primary ways: First, Small uses the medium of the graphic narrative to visually represent both the feelings he has towards his disability and the disability itself. This means that, due to the multimodal representation that Small provides, students can both discuss disability and practice multimodal literacy using Small's text. Second, Small's work contains a plethora of moments that warrant a rhetorical analysis, particularly those moments that focus on disability. In this context, largest benefit of the comics medium is that it allows for multimodal literacy and rhetorical analysis to be taught in tandem, as students will be expected to perform their rhetorical analysis on multiple modes that Small uses and how those modes work together.

The reader's introduction to David's family focuses on their dysfunctional communication style: Mama coughs and slams cabinet doors, David's brother plays his drum, and Dad hits his punching bag (15-17). However, no one seems to talk in this family. Even this moment in the memoir suggests that Small relies on multiple modes of communication rather than strictly verbal modes. This multimodality is further expressed throughout the rest of the graphic narrative as Small often relies more on visual portrayals of events, people, and feelings than the words that could describe them. Even David notes that his own language is "getting sick" (19). Small describes his birth, saying that he "was born angry. [His] sinuses and digestive system didn't work as they should have" (20). Readers learn that David was subjected to various medicines, shots, enemas,

chiropractic treatments, and, ultimately, X-rays. The reader's introduction to David highlights how his body deviates from expected norms and the measures taken to try and correct this deviation. In other words, readers meet David as a disabled body and see his father's attempts to "correct" this disability.

Small often plays with the juxtaposition between the external body and its internal happenings, and these juxtapositions provide a great place to start talking about disability in the FYW classroom. This method is exhibited through both the literal body and the metaphorical body; the outward composure of the family is set against how David is treated, for example. The outside is often shown as able. In the case of David, his external body has no issues or ailments. In fact, it takes a family friend to notice the growth on his neck. No one in his family, not even David himself, has been aware of it. However, David's health conditions all lie internally with his sinuses, his digestive system, and ultimately his cancer. This dynamic changes after David's surgery, which gives him a large scar on his neck. The scar is still often hidden, either from David hiding it or the angle that Small provides for the panel. However, As David begins going to therapy, talking about his childhood, and unpacking his trauma, the scar becomes more and more visible on the page. This choice of imagery could represent David's hidden disability and trauma coming to the surface rather than being repressed inside. The memoir ends in a dream sequence in which David decides he will not follow the path of his abusive grandmother and mother, signifying that he has come to terms with his disability and trauma, and he will not allow the cycle of trauma and abuse in his family to continue (324-25). This final moment is represented mostly visually—a choice that obviously could not be made in a text-only medium. The choice to use a graphic narrative to tell his

story gives Small the advantage of portraying nuanced ideas and themes multimodally. In turn, students who work to interpret these elements of the text will be practicing their multimodal literacy in tandem with the work they are doing in disability studies.

Despite this contrast that Small establishes in the world around him between the internal and the external, he often represents the internal as an escape for himself. He notes that he and his brother like looking at X-rays of other kids' stomachs to see what they've swallowed – an act of escapism for Small's younger self (28). Later, there is a moment where David has made it home after being bullied at the playground for “playing Alice,” a game David plays where he puts a yellow towel on his head and pretends to be Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* (55). When David makes it home, he begins to draw as an escape from reality and the homophobic bullying he endured. Small visually literalizes such an escape by drawing his younger self falling into the piece of paper he is drawing on, ultimately finding himself traveling down a tunnel and into a room full of cartoon characters—the entire scene looks like a diagram of the human stomach where the tunnel is an esophagus, and the room is the stomach itself (63). With scenes such as this, Small turns the pattern of good exteriors with bad interiors on its head. The interior is a place of refuge for David, despite the negative connotations associated with it in the other areas of his life. In moments like this, Small highlights his use of the multimodal platform he has chosen while allowing for much more to be expressed about what he has depicted in a writing assignment.

In the FYW classroom, moments of juxtaposition such as the above examples allow students many entry points to discuss and explore disability in conjunction with the multimodal elements of the text. By analyzing moments such as the above example,

students will “learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts” (wpacouncil.org). Another instance could be the contrast between light and shadows throughout the memoir. Small often plays with shading in order to express feelings towards certain characters or objects; typically, the more something is enshrouded in shadows, the more threatening or dangerous it is to David. His mother’s face is often darker than the rest of her and the scene around her, representing the danger that her neglect brings to David. These moments also encourage multimodal literacy, as they are presented multimodally, and provide content for a rhetorical analysis, as they are deliberately chosen to be represented and often contain several layers of meaning within the context of *Stitches*. Through the means of rhetorical analysis, students will “use strategies. . . to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources,” (wpacouncil.org).

Katalin Orbán’s article “A Language of Scratches and Stitches: The Graphic narrative between Hyperreading and Print” points out a moment that highlights this contrast between the internal and external throughout the memoir that could also allow for a rhetorical analysis of a few select panels. On page 22, six-year-old David is getting an X-ray taken, and his face registers worry (and perhaps fright). On page 23, however, David’s X-ray film is smiling. Orbán notes that “unlike the patient, his X-ray portrait [brings] a better, ‘cured’ David to the surface—if not to his own skin, at least to that of film as a sensitive substitute” (175). The juxtaposition of David’s troubled face and his X-ray’s smiling face sets the tone for this comparison throughout the memoir. These panels, along with others like the stomach scene or the moment when David “discovers” he only has one vocal cord by climbing into his own mouth and seeing it, offer moments

for students to perform a rhetorical analysis and foster their multimodal literacy. Because of the incorporation of both visual elements and text, students are engaging in multimodal reading while performing an analysis on their chosen moment; the combination of medium and content that Small has provided allows for the two learning goals to be taught in tandem. In doing so, students will “read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to. . . the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and how these features function for different audiences and situations” (wpcouncil.org).

As with the previous texts in this project, instructors can also use McComb’s suggestion of having students create their own multimodal texts to further expand upon these listed outcomes. To explicitly incorporate disability studies into classroom practice, instructors could elect to assign groups to create a short comic strip about Small’s memoir. While creating the comic strip, each group will be asked to face a different sort of challenge or limitation; one group has to use a digital medium, while another has to use pen and paper, while yet another group has no access to any color, for example. Despite these differences in limitations and ability, students will be expected to create the same project with the same standards. This exercise will help students understand limitations that people with disabilities may face and the lack of accommodation that is often provided. In a process-focused classroom, instructors will also help students “develop a writing project through multiple drafts,” “use composing processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas,” and “adapt composing processes for a variety of technologies and modalities” (wpacouncil.org).

Small’s memoir, when used in the FYW classroom, offers a variety of ways to incorporate discussion and practice of disability studies into daily practice. As with the

other graphic narratives this project discusses, a strong emphasis can still be placed on more traditional content, such as rhetorical analysis. This means that topics like disability can be taught in tandem with topics like rhetorical analysis to achieve both WPA standards and personal goals of cultural competency. The many moments that highlight Small's disability and his feelings surrounding it can provide the springboard to make these conversations and lessons a reality.

Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me

Alternatively, a FYW instructor who elects to focus on mental health may choose to incorporate Ellen Forney's graphic memoir *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* into the curriculum. *Marbles* narrates Forney's journey of being diagnosed with Bipolar I Disorder and how she eventually learned to cope with it with the help of medication. Ellen's visits to her psychiatrist, Karen, play a central role in the memoir; often, Forney will write about changing her medication and recall a story from when she was on that specific combination of medications. Forney's visits and her various treatment plans seem to be the common thread and driving force in the memoir. As she navigates her new diagnosis, Ellen often struggles with side effects from her medication and attempts to tackle the stigma of having Bipolar I, especially as an artist. She often refers to the "crazy artists" that also had mental illnesses (thus giving Michelangelo his place in the memoir's title). By the end, Ellen has found a combination of medications and practices that work for her and ends the memoir by telling her younger self that everything will be okay.

As with all of the other texts this project has discussed, there are several moments in *Marbles* that would allow for a rhetorical analysis centered around mental health; the nature of *Marbles* as a graphic narrative also means that multimodality and multimodal literacy can be a focus of the class at the same time as the topic of mental health. Dale Jacobs notes that “as we function in the world our literacies operate not only in the print realm but in the visual, audio, and spatial realms as well” (183). Humans do not only understand things in the “real world” through the medium of text. The inclusion of multimodal literacy is important because multimodality is not just something students will encounter in the classroom. Rather, it’s something that students encounter all of the time in life.

One set of moments where students may elect to work with multimodality in *Marbles* are Forney’s inclusion of her self-portraits. Throughout the graphic memoir, she occasionally features self-portraits from her sketchbook that take up an entire page of the memoir; some of these self-portraits are accurate portraits of her, while some of them are “depictions of how [she] was **feeling**” (99). The portraits and times they are shown are deliberately chosen to represent Forney’s mental state within the context of the rest of the memoir; an instructor may opt to have students select one of Forney’s self-portraits and provide a rhetorical analysis for it and how it relates to the larger narrative. In doing so, students are practicing multimodal literacy and rhetorical analysis in tandem. At the same time, students are seamlessly discussing mental health through the content of the graphic narrative.

For example, after Ellen goes to her first yoga class, an activity that Karen suggested she try, she includes a page of her scrapbook that she has titled “peace

mission” (111). In this drawing, Ellen sits cross-legged on the floor with her hands resting on her knees, the tips of her thumb and middle fingers touching, and her eyes closed. The woman Ellen has drawn is larger than Forney portrays herself to be at the time in the graphic narrative, though she mentions feeling “heavy” on the page before the sketch (110). The sketch also features sharp, jagged teeth, offering a contrast to the peaceful pose she is doing and the calming connotations that come with yoga. Ellen’s drawing also has noticeable earplugs sticking out from her ears, and her head is drawn disproportionately large in comparison to her body, perhaps indicating the desire to cancel any outside noise. The prior page lets readers know that Ellen is self-conscious about attending the yoga class, so this may also represent her desire to repress her own thoughts as she tries to fall into meditation. The title of “peace mission” is contrasted by her struggle to accomplish this “mission”: the inclusion of her earplugs and the violence of her sharp teeth juxtapose her achievement of inner peace. Further, Bethany Ober Mannon, in her article “Identity, Bipolar Disorder, and the Problem of Self-Narration in Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind* and Ellen Forney’s *Marbles*,” notes that “Forney’s visual style centers on energy (or lack thereof), and the narrative verbally and visually traces the ebb and flow of Ellen’s professional, sexual, emotional, and physical energies” (148). The flow of energy plays a crucial role in yogic practice (Philo, et al. 37). Thus, Forney also ties the energy within yoga to the energy she expresses throughout her memoir. Students can view moments like this in isolation *and* in the context of the rest of the narrative, which will help to improve their rhetorical comprehension, multimodal literacy, and understanding of mental health.

Forney also expresses her energy using what Joddy Murray calls “non-discursive rhetoric.” While rhetoric is typically thought of in terms of discursive (word-based) elements, non-discursive (image-based) elements play an important role in the graphic medium (Safran 1). A character’s eyes turning into stars when looking at someone they admire would be a form of non-discursive rhetoric. Forney implements these elements most frequently during her manic episodes, where she illustrates spirals, squiggles, and other shapes coming out of her body to represent her heightened state (49). If students in a FYW class were to perform an analysis of the Forney’s use of non-discursive rhetoric, it would foster multimodal literacy, allow for practice in rhetorical analysis, and smoothly incorporate a discussion of mental health into the classroom. As a more direct practice, students could attempt to express their own feelings and emotions about a certain subject non-discursively; this project could also be paired with a short, written reflection in which students explain the choices they made. The image will foster multimodal composition and literacy, while the written component will make students consider the choices they are making and encourage them to act deliberately while creating the illustration.

Forney also plays with the idea of the body in her memoir in a similar way to Small’s depictions, which grants readers further exploration into the themes of mental health in the memoir while allowing for compositional standards related to multimodality, literacies, and writing to be met in similar ways. In Forney’s case, she provides students in an FYW a gateway to begin discussing and writing about a variety of topics, such as media portrayals of mental health. Rather than using the body to explore the internal vs. the external, Forney contrasts her manic and depressive states. Readers

are introduced to Ellen's manic episodes in the opening of the memoir as she is getting a tattoo on her back. She sits backwards on the chair with her shirt off (9). During Ellen's manic episodes, this trend of exposing the body continues, and Forney portrays herself wearing more revealing clothing and, in some cases, no clothing at all. She includes several scenes that depict her breasts and/or genitals (9, 18, and 31). These are the moments when Forney feels most like herself—she relates more to the “crazy artist” stereotype and feels excitement to be part of “Club Van Gogh” (22).

Alternatively, the first time readers see Ellen in a depressive episode, she is lying on the couch, completely covered under a blanket. No part of her is showing. Throughout the rest of the memoir, Ellen's depressive episodes often feature her in this cocoon-like state; if not fully covered by a blanket, she often wears less revealing clothing like a tied bathrobe (149) or long-sleeves and pants (159). Her body is much more confined in her depressive states, which reflects her mental state. She often talks about her inability to do anything during her depressive episodes, dedicating an entire page to minimalist drawings of her lying in bed, walking to the couch, and lying down again (77). She hopes that she will be able to balance out her creative ideas during her manic episodes with her lack of creativity during her depressive episodes; this ultimately does not work. In a similar way to the above-mentioned non-discursive rhetoric assignment, students could instead focus on Forney's portrayal of the body to achieve the same end-results. Similar to Small's piece, moments like these allow for the inclusion of multimodal literacy, rhetorical analysis, and discussion about mental health all at the same time. Examples like this also specifically focus on non-discursive elements (by examining the portrayal of

Ellen's body as a signifier), which provide another means for students to learn about that topic.

By using Forney's memoir, students could write and expand upon topics like the examples above, but they could also tackle topics such as the stigma of mental health and medication, generational illnesses (and perhaps generational trauma), or even the problems of the healthcare system (Forney discusses how lucky she was that her mother was able to help her afford the medication she needed to cope with her Bipolar 1, for instance). The variety of topics that Forney makes accessible in her writing enables students the freedom to choose a moment or topic that is meaningful to them. In an excerpt from his book *Building a Community of Self-Motivated Learners*, Larry Ferlazzo emphasizes the importance of allowing students to write about topics that they connect with. He cites a study from the Pew Research Center that notes that "teens say the most important factor for them to feel motivated to write is using it to connect with, and receive feedback from, teachers, family members, and friends." The study also claims that "choice [of what to write about] has an equally important role in teens feeling the desire to write" (kqed.org). The advantage of Forney's memoir is that there is a wide variety of entry points that students could choose to write about, meaning they are more likely to be able to choose a topic that holds some relevance and importance to them.

Marbles focus on Forney's mental health journey grants instructors the ability to incorporate discussions of mental health into their classroom in a variety of ways. Forney discusses the healthcare system, stigma surrounding mental health, and her own feelings about her experience with bipolar disorder, meaning that students will not be limited in their discussion of topics. Her use of non-discursive rhetoric also creates several

moments that warrant deep analysis, enabling students to practice their ability to analyze while also learning and discussing mental health in the classroom.

Conclusion

The examples, texts, and analyses featured in this chapter are not the only means to incorporate disability studies into the FYW classroom. The above discussion is meant to provide a springboard to encourage instructors to think about the various ways they can operate a classroom that teaches both compositional skills and cultural competency, specifically within the realm of disability, in tandem. However, instructors should opt to choose texts and methods of instruction that they feel comfortable using and discussing in their own classroom. That being said, both *Stitches* and *Marbles* offer an opportunity to discuss disability and mental health in a variety of ways. Each memoir opens a pathway to a broader discussion of these topics that may expand beyond what is in the text. However, if an instructor were to choose one of these two texts to feature in their classroom, these approaches and ideas may offer a strong starting point, which should then be modified to fit the needs of their specific classroom environment. Disability studies itself has a long-standing history in the FYW classroom, and it has proven invaluable as a school of thought in helping to create more accessible and inclusive spaces. If instructors are considering how to incorporate disability studies into their composition courses, *Stitches* and *Marbles* can both act as vehicles to foster engagement and understanding of disability and mental health.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Though John Trimbur writes about writing centers as an ideal locale for people to “materialize [invisible networks of literacy] and the differences in cultural orientation towards the literacy students bring with them,” this same idea can be applied to the FYW classroom (178). The goal of incorporating social justice is to create a more equitable world; Trimbur proposes that one way to do that is to consider the ways in which students are literate that don’t necessarily align with traditional western ideas of literacy. This western kind of literacy often centers Anglo-centric language and experience, while also prioritizing the abled body and mind over the disabled.

The texts examined in this project feature stories from various marginalized groups; the authors are either not white, not heterosexual, not cisgender, not able-bodied, not neurotypical, or some combination of these traits. By using the graphic narratives discussed, instructors can feature texts that are not considered canonical and highlight underrepresented voices. Often, the stories these voices tell center around topics of social justice, allowing FYW instructors to teach social justice while also achieving outcomes set forth by the CWPA. While discussing social justice in the classroom is becoming increasingly more popular, achieving CWPA outcomes is mandatory for college and university composition courses. The graphic narratives here allow for instructors to achieve both of these goals. In the FYW classroom, the texts in this project promote Trimbur’s ideas of cultural competency and literacy in two ways.

First, the texts this project considers all focus on some branch of social justice, and they all advocate for underrepresented groups. Trimbur argues that literacy can look like many things, not just what western society has deemed “literacy.” Marginalized groups, such as the groups represented in these texts, may have different ideas of literacy than this western notion that is at the center of so much academic discussion. A student may understand visual representation to the same extent that another student may understand written text; both of these students are literate. Incorporating graphic narratives into the classroom decentralizes a strictly text-based approach to literacy and pushes the idea that “literacy” can mean a lot of different things, which in turn allows more students to be “literate.” Fred Johnson hints at this point as well when he notes that comics often “ran against the limits of [his student’s] vocabularies” (Introduction).

Second, the common medium of the graphic narrative appeals to multiliteracies, or “engaging with multiple literacy methods” (lc2.ca). People are often more literate in one method (listed in Chapter 1) than others. Because graphic narratives ask readers to read text, make sense of facial expressions, look at spatial relation, think about colors, light, and shading, and more all at the same time, the texts naturally engage with multiple forms of literacy. Incorporating multiple forms of literacy in the classroom will reach a wider array of student literacy with the texts.

This project has explored the possibility of using several graphic narratives to teach multimodal literacy and rhetorical analysis—two principles that inherently come from the medium of the comics. Additionally, each set of graphic narratives offers another unique set of writer standards to be practiced. *Maus* and *They Called Us Enemy* focus on racial justice and allow students the chance to practice their rhetorical analysis

and research skills, specifically research skills related to historical events. Moments like Vladek's potentially faulty recollection of the Auschwitz Orchestra encourage students to fact-check their sources, while panels of George Takei looking outside of the Incarceration Camp allow for moments of rhetorical analysis in the classroom.

Concerning LGBTQ+ rights, *Fun Home* and *Gender Queer* both feature explicit in-text references and allusions, opening the door to discuss the importance of attributing information to its proper source and what that attribution looks like. *Fun Home* refers to queer archives, specifically Bechdel's own family archives. *Gender Queer*, on the other hand, utilizes outside resources to help explain the science and physiology of transgender individuals. Because of how Kobabe uses their sources, students can learn about proper citation methods and information literacy while using the text to learn about issues that LGBTQ+ people face.

Finally, *Stitches* and *Marbles* tackle the topics of disability and mental health respectively. Both feature plenty of examples of non-discursive rhetoric, encouraging students to think about the various ways that humans communicate multimodally every day. In the FYW classroom, students can achieve many WPA outcomes related to multimodality and literacy by working with these texts; at the same time, students will be discussing, researching, and exploring topics related to disability and mental health.

As mentioned in all of the previous chapters, this project is obviously not a comprehensive list of ways to include social justice in the FYW classroom. Further, it is important to note that this project does not discuss every branch of social justice that exists. Topics like socio-economic status, prison reform, housing, and education are all encompassed by "social justice" as well. It is also crucial to understand that these

“different” branches are interconnected and do not exist separate from each other.

Intersectionality teaches us that Black liberation, feminism, and queer liberation can exist together and work with each other towards the same goals. The limitations of this project are not meant to suggest that the topics discussed are the most important branches of social justice, either; rather, these were the topics that I felt the most comfortable discussing given my knowledge, experience, and understanding of the chosen texts.

More research and scholarship needs to be done to help create a more equitable world in regards to social justice. This project is an incomplete assessment of the nearly infinite ways that graphic narratives can be used to teach social justice, though it does provide a starting point for instructors to consider a few ways in which it could be done. More scholarship could be devoted to the specific memoirs in my project and possibilities to incorporate them into the FYW classroom. Additional scholarship on other graphic narratives that focus on any of the various issues related to social justice would also be necessary to further this conversation.

Both the scholarship discussed within this project and the scholarship from all of the authors this project features reinforce many of this project’s main claims: social justice has a legitimate place in the FYW classroom; graphic narratives have a legitimate place in the FYW classroom; graphic narratives offer multiple forms of education and literacy practices. Altogether, this project underscores the importance of incorporating graphic narratives in the FYW classroom to not only discuss social justice or college composition objectives, but to complete these goals in tandem with one another.

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