

# Exile, Autobiography, and Immigration in Comics and Graphic Novels

Spring Semester 2024  
GSEM 120G  
T/Th 11-12:20  
GFS 220

Dr. Robert Decker  
[deckerr@usc.edu](mailto:deckerr@usc.edu)

Office/Hours: THH 155E 2-3pm



Nnedi Okorafor, *LaGuardia*

Comics and the graphic novel have in recent decades become an important medium for artists and writers to pose and address questions concerning identity, the legacy of colonialism, language, personal exile and ethnic migration, and politics. As a powerful medium of self-expression, comics offers them a means of representing themselves and their family histories in the context of world history: the works we will study in this course represent events such colonialism, genocide, revolution, war, death, life and survival in both image and text. But how does one *read* a sequence of images? How do visual pictures, drawings, and symbols convey meaning with or without the assistance of language? What can a multimedia form like comics do that texts alone cannot? This course offers an introduction to comics as a unique medium with its own internal forms, functions, and means of communication. We will survey a group of canonical and emerging comics authors who represent, reject, and come to terms with their cultural, ethnic, or national heritage in image and text. Throughout the course, our discussions, informed by selected theoretical readings, will address the formal, aesthetic, ethical, and political questions raised by these works.

Our learning outcomes for this course include:

- Reflecting on what it means to be human by studying how migrant artists and writers situate themselves in their societies and represent themselves in word and image.
- Cultivating an understanding of the diverse cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts that drive migration and exile and consider how artists and writers respond to the geopolitical events that shaped the contemporary world.
- Engaging with lasting ideas, values, and political practices such as independence, self-determination, altruism, equity, and inclusion that have animated both social and political movements as well as inspiring artists to imagine a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life.

- Learning to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively through structured and unstructured writing assignments, informal presentations, and group projects.
- Evaluating ideas from multiple historical perspectives to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world, including colonialism, war, ethnic discrimination and tolerance, diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Collaborating effectively by using both traditional and contemporary forms of communication and knowledge production such as images, books, journals, digital archives, films, and more.

### **Course format, attendance, and workload**

This course is designed as a seminar: a small group that meets regularly and that is focused on fostering discussion. As such, **all sessions will be in person and attendance is required.** You should communicate in advance with me if you are unable to attend class due to illness, religious observance, or any other reason. **All absences, excused or unexcused, must be made up** by completing that day's readings and submitting the make-up assignment that I will give to you. You are responsible for making sure that you request and submit make-up work in a timely fashion (2-week maximum) Your participation grade will be reduced by one letter grade (e.g. A to B), for each absence that you do not make up in excess of two (2).

Students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively in class. Before each class session, students should complete all readings (see course schedule) and prepare written responses to post on our blackboard site that consist of one citation from the reading and a 150-word analysis. Occasional, unannounced reading quizzes will be administered during the semester. There will be two papers will provide you the opportunity to reflect in greater depth on the works you have enjoyed. A written midterm exam will be conducted in class.

### **Primary Texts**

Primary texts are available for purchase at the bookstore and are widely available used on the internet. If you choose to buy your books on the internet, make sure to buy an edition with a matching ISBN number: this will ensure that you have the correct page numbers.

Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (0679406417)

Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (0375714839)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (0618871713)

Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (1419718789)

Nnedi Okorafor, *LaGuardia* (9781506728599)