

DTS 199 Fall 2023

*Superman and Other Migrants:  
Drawing Diaspora*



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Tuesdays, 10-12 p.m. OI 4420

Office hours: Tuesday 3-5:30 and by appointment (in person—my office or a café—or by Zoom), please sign up. Please plan on coming by to chat at least twice during the semester, once toward the beginning to tell me how things are going in your first year, and once toward to the end to brainstorm ideas about your final paper.

My office is in Jackman Humanities Building, Room 302; 170 St. George. But I also love cafes, so email me and we'll find a time to sit over a coffee.



**Course description:** From the 1938 debut of Superman until the spate of recent autobiographical graphic novels by immigrants and children of immigrants, the development of the comic and graphic novel form has been intricately bound up with the diaspora experience. In this course, we will explore the emergence of the superhero from the immigrant experience; trace the depiction of migrants, immigrants and refugees in recent graphic novels; and study visual strategies for

representing migration and displacement.

**Required Texts** can be acquired at the various comic book stores around Toronto, but all readings will also be available on Quercus; some of the comics might be in a format called cbr. Here's a free cbr reader for you to download: <https://www.cdisplayer.com/>

We will read the following graphic novels in the class:

Will Eisner (1978), *A Contract with God* (stories 1 and 4, “A Contract with God” and “Cookalein”)

Art Spiegelman (1986), *Maus* 1

Marjane Satrapi (2003), *Persepolis* 1

Gene Luen Yang (2006), *American Born Chinese*

Alison Bechdel (2006) *Fun Home*

Thi Bui (2017), *The Best We Could Do* (Chapters 1, 2, 9, and 10)

Joe Sacco (2020), *Paying the Land* (1-46, 121-60)

### **Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will become acquainted with the basic terms and history of the comic book and graphic novel, and learn to use comic-book terminology to perform close readings of these texts.
2. Students will acquire an understanding of the role of immigrants in developing the superhero comic, and consider how these origins might shape later graphic novels about migration.
3. Students will reflect on the visual methods by which comic artists figure migration and displacement.
4. Students will consider the thematic relationships between migration and the graphic novel: Themes explored in graphic novels are the relationship between migration and both power and powerlessness; and the role of language and masquerade in immigration.
5. Students will learn techniques in combining drawing and writing

As a 199, the course is also designed to introduce you to more basic skills that you will be using during your undergraduate career. These include:

- 1) **reading** for comprehension and critical analysis across many genres, including comic books, secondary sources about comics.
- 2) **writing** to convey both analytical and creative insight
- 3) **speaking** based on your own reading and research

This course will help you to develop your ability to write well-structured, well-argued, and *interesting* essays. **We** will help you to develop these skills as a writer by giving you regular feedback on your assignments, each of which builds on the other, helping you to work towards the final assignment. **You** will help yourself to develop as a writer by reading carefully with an eye to how the authors in our syllabus construct their arguments and choose their words, and by editing your own writing with care.

## Course requirements (details below)

1	Readings and participation	Weekly	10 %
2	Critical reflections & comments	One of the following three dates: October 3, October 10, or October 17	10%
3	Midterm exam	October 24	15 %
4	Classroom presentation	Once during the semester, as part of a small group; presentations will be held on October 31, November 14, and November 28.	15%
5	Paper proposal	November 10	10%
6	Presentation of a page of your own graphic novel	November 21	20%
7	Research paper	December 14	20%

1. **Readings and participation:** Careful preparation for and thoughtful participation in each class; please read absence policy below (10%).
2. **Critical reflections and comments.** Students are required to present a brief reflection (300-500 words) on a panel or page in one of the three following graphic novels (*Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *American Born Chinese*, *Maus*). You should include a discussion of diasporic themes in the graphic novel you are discussing, and refer to both thematic and visual elements of these panels or pages. Please also reproduce the panel or page you are discussing in whatever format is convenient. Students should submit their work on Quercus on the Monday **before** the class session (before 7 p.m.) during which the graphic novel is read (10%).
3. **Midterm:** We will take half of the class for a midterm exam, where you will annotate a page of a graphic novel, using correct terms for the images and discussing diaspora themes (20%)
4. **Classroom presentation:** Students, in small groups of two or three, will orally present a page or panel from one of the readings at the beginning of one of the following class sessions: October 31 and November 14 and 28. I will hand out a sign-up sheet during the fourth or fifth class session. Please collaborate with the other members of your group to choose a panel or page, and decide who will present which aspect of the panel or page. Please send me the page number of the panel or

page you'll be discussing no later than Sunday at midnight before the class during which you will be presenting (10%).

5. **Paper Proposal:** Students are required to submit a brief proposal of 300 words, and a basic bibliography of three works (primary and/or secondary), detailing their plans for the final paper, due November 10 (10%).
6. **Graphic novel page:** Students will sketch a page of their own graphic novel on a poster board, present their work during the session of **November 21**. Students are encouraged to work collaboratively; for collaborations, please append a jointly written brief note on how your collaboration worked. (20%)
7. Students are required to write an 800-word **term paper** on one of the works we read together or any other comic book or graphic novel that deals in some way with migration. You may build on your short reflection, presentation, or midterm. Due December 14 (20%).

## Academic ethics and policies

### Plagiarism

For the purposes of what I expect is mere formality, I remind you that plagiarism—representing someone else's words as your own or submitting work that you have previously submitted for marks in another class or program—is a serious offence that can result in sanctions. Trust your own ability to think and write, and make use of the various resources available at U of T that can help you do so (e.g. professors, writing centres). Also, see the U of T writing support website at [www.utoronto.ca/writing](http://www.utoronto.ca/writing). For citations, please use one of the Chicago Manual of Style's methods. Here's a link if you're unsure. [https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html) For the final paper, please be sure to provide a bibliography of all works cited and consulted in your assignments, including print and web sources.

### Our classroom

Our class meetings are meant to build a community of reading, questioning, writing, and conversation. Everyone is welcome: you might be someone who has never read a comic book or you might be someone who has a big collection, goes to Comic Con, or yourself is drawing a graphic novel. You might love to draw or think you draw horribly or not have drawn since you were nine. You may be an immigrant, or the child of immigrants, or not. My goal in the class is to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible—which means sometimes making mistakes, admitting we don't know something or are confused, upset, etc. With this basic support system in place, we can enjoy ourselves while also being introduced to the university, and acquiring skills to succeed. More narrowly, I hope to persuade you that comic books aren't just dumb, cheap products for kids but also really interesting and unique cultural artifacts that can teach us a lot about ourselves and others. And also that diaspora studies is a fascinating field.

Challenging conversations are part of what I appreciate about teaching at the undergraduate level, and I hope that people will contribute to the discussion and listen generously as well as critically. Over the course of our semester together, we will be encountering topics that can be emotionally difficult. Course readings include the Holocaust, sexual violence, racial prejudice, and more. I believe that a university education should be challenging (it certainly was for me), with space for discussion of different worldviews. I aim for this seminar to be a safe space for conversation. If

course material makes you feel uncomfortable (which is perfectly normal), please talk with someone about that—me, as the course instructor, but also friends or family, or resources on campus, which your College Registrar can help you to find.

### Art in the classroom

This is not an art class, but we will also participate in art creation as part of our experience of reading comics. Every class will begin with a brief drawing exercise on an “attendance card,” an index card where you will draw for a few minutes following a prompt. We will copy the art of the artists we are reading in a more embodied attempt to understand and appreciate their style. All of this will lead to the page of a graphic novel that you will present on November 21. Your grade will not be based on your natural talent as an artist (though of course we will appreciate the artists among us), but rather your thoughts, creativity, originality, and storytelling. The page you present may include photographs and even incorporate computer-generated images (programs for comics are widely available, but they tend not to be very good), but those images must be hand-edited in some way to make it the product of your own hand and creativity.



### Religious Holidays and Observances and Privacy

According to U of T regulations: “It is important that no University member be seriously disadvantaged because of her or his religious observation. Students have an obligation to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely fashion to upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences. Every effort will be made avoid scheduling tests, examinations or other compulsory activities at these times.” Personal information is collected pursuant to section 2(14) of the University of Toronto Act, 1971 and at all times it will be protected in accordance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. **Please note** that this course requires presentations of one’s work to the group. If you have questions, please refer to [www.utoronto.ca/privacy](http://www.utoronto.ca/privacy).

### Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me as soon as possible, and contact accessibility serves at <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/departments/accessibility-services/>

### Late work

If you have legitimate and documented reasons for not being able to complete an assignment on time please ask for an extension as early as possible. Unexcused late assignments will be marked down 10% for each day of lateness. That said, please see what counts as an acceptable reason for absences and how to register on Acorn <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/academics/student-absences> and <https://registrar.utoronto.ca/policies-and-guidelines/absence-declaration/>.

## Grading

Percentage	Letter	Definition
90-100	A+	<b>Exceptional Performance</b> - Strong evidence of original thinking; good organization; capacity to analyze and synthesize; superior grasp of subject matter with sound critical evaluations; evidence of extensive knowledge base.
85-89.5	A	
80-84.5	A-	
77-79.5	B+	<b>Good Performance</b> - Evidence of a grasp of the subject matter; some evidence of capacity and analytic ability; reasonable understanding of relevant issues; evidence of familiarity with literature
73-76.5	B	
70-72.5	B-	
67-69.5	C+	<b>Intellectually adequate performance</b> - Student who is profiting from the university experience; understanding of the subject matter and ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material
63-66.5	C	
60-62.5	C-	
57-59.5	D+	<b>Minimally acceptable performance</b> - Some evidence of familiarity with the subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have developed
53-56.5	D	
50-52.5	D-	
0-49.5	F	<b>Inadequate</b>

## Schedule of Readings

### September 12: Week One (Introductions and brief review of the syllabus)

In our first class meeting, we will dig right in by reading a few lines about Superman and juxtapose that story with the biblical story of Moses and a short comic that reads Superman as an immigrant.

We will also discuss the notion of *intertextuality* and review a few basic terms for reading comic books.

Reading *Superman* alongside the Moses story  
Gene Luen Yang, “Supersquare”  
Terms for Reading Comic Books and Graphic Novels

### **September 19: Week Two**

This week, we will race through a lot of material in an effort to lay the groundwork for the rest of the class, reading McCloud’s discussion of comics, looking at the first two issues of *Superman* and two issues from a much later version of the story, a section on Nietzsche explaining the term “superman,” and an introduction to the concept of diaspora. Please come with any questions you have on the readings.

Scott McCloud, “Understanding Comics Revisited,” and “The Twelve Revolutions,” in *Reinventing Comics* (pp. 1-24)  
Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, *Superman: Issues 1 and 2 of Action Comics in 80 Years of Superman*  
Grant Morrison, Introductory material, and issues 1 and 10 of *All-Star Superman*  
Fred Van Lanta and Ryna Dunlavey, *Action Philosophers! Volume 1*, 25-31  
Safran, William. 1991. “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return.” *Diaspora* (1991) 1: 83–99.

### **September 26: Week Three**

Using McCloud again as our guide, we will read about half of Eisner’s *Contract with God*, the first “graphic novel” (Eisner’s coinage). The novel takes place in a single tenement building and involves the immigrant experience.

McCloud, “Setting Course: A ‘Low’ Art Takes the High Road,” in *Reinventing Comics* (pp. 26-55)  
Will Eisner, *A Contract with God* (Chapters 1 and 4 only)

### **October 3: Week Four**

This week we will focus on Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, a critically acclaimed graphic novel describing Spiegelman’s relationship with his father, a Holocaust survivor. Among the themes we will discuss are Spiegelman’s use of animals to depict human characters and his representations of different time frames on the same page.

Art Spiegelman, *Maus, Part 1*

### **October 10: Week Five**

This week we will read Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, a widely-taught graphic novel credited with bringing discussions of Asian-American identity to the field, and with opening up the question of visual stereotypes in American culture. It’s a little complicated, with three different story lines intersecting in complicated ways. I hope you can figure it out, but we’ll work on that together.

McCloud, "Big World: The Battle for Diversity," in *Reinventing Comics* (pp. 96-125)

Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese*

### **October 17: Week Six**

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, an autobiographical novel set in revolutionary Iran, has a distinctive style and brilliant approach to visually representing cultural and psychological conflict.

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis 1*

### **October 24: Week Seven**

Midterm exam and pages 1-55 in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. I'm not entirely sure that *Fun Home* counts as a graphic novel about diaspora, but I love it so much I wanted to teach it anyway. It's a queer classic, with interesting things to say about family, sexual orientation, and reading.

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

### **October 31: Week Eight**

Please read the rest of Bechdel's *Fun Home*

### **November 7: READING WEEK, NO CLASS!**

**Paper proposals due: November 10**

### **November 14: Week Nine** Thy Bui, *The Best We Could Do*

Thy Bui's *The Best We Could Do* powerfully describes and depicts intergenerational trauma, in this case among a Vietnamese immigrant family. A page of the novel, which has a "watery" style, shows a Berkeley corner about three blocks from my house, so there's also that. It's very long, though, so please focus on Chapters 1, 2, 9, and 10 (while skimming the rest).





**November 21: Week Ten: Presentation of a page (or more) of your own graphic novel.**

We'll set the room up as if it were an art gallery, hire a jazz band, and drink champagne while admiring each other's work. Well, not the jazz or the champagne.

**November 28: Week Eleven:**

Joe Sacco is an interesting figure, who combines deep journalistic writing and comic art. He's worked in different parts of the world, but *Paying the Land* is about Canada, and in particular the First Nations experience. I'm very glad he took this on, and curious to know what you think of his work.

Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land*, 3-46, 121-160

**December 5: Week Twelve Student Presentations of paper topics**

This week we'll go around the room and hear what everyone is working on for their final paper. Please come prepared with a very short presentation, since we won't have time for more than a 2-3 summary and a question.

**Paper Due by noon on December 14. Good luck!**



*"I'd like to extend a special welcome to those of you who are joining us for the first time, as part of a nightmare you're having."*

#### READINGS FOR OUR FIRST CLASS SESSION

Superman was born on the fictional planet Krypton and was named Kal-El. As a baby, his parents sent him to Earth in a small spaceship moments before Krypton was destroyed in a natural cataclysm. His ship landed in the American countryside, near the fictional town of Smallville. He was found and adopted by farmers Jonathan and Martha Kent, who named him Clark Kent.

Exodus 2: 1 A man of the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi as his wife. 2 The woman conceived, and bore a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. 3 When she could no longer hide him, she took a papyrus basket for him, and coated it with tar and with pitch. She put the child in it, and laid it in the reeds by the river's bank. 4 His sister stood far off, to see what would be done to him.

5 Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe at the river. Her maidens walked along by the riverside. She saw the basket among the reeds, and sent her handmaid to get it. 6 She opened it, and saw the child, and behold, the baby cried. She had compassion on him, and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Should I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." The maiden went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." The woman took the child, and nursed it. 10 The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water."