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What Kind of Studies Is Comics Studies?

Benjamin Woo

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Abstract and Keywords

Dramatic recent growth in comics research suggests that comics studies has matured as a field, perhaps even constituting an emergent discipline. Yet important questions about the nature of this field and how it relates to established academic disciplines remain unresolved. This introductory chapter examines the genealogy of comics studies and explores the relationship between theory and method as a proxy for the field's "paradigmatic" status. Four theories of page layout are analyzed as examples of theorization in comics studies. Drawing on Robert T. Craig's "constitutive metamodel" of communications theory, the chapter ultimately rejects both attempts to retread the path of established humanities disciplines such as English literature and film studies and arguments against disciplinarity as such, calling instead for a dialogic conception of academic disciplines that continually reflects on the differences through which they are constituted.

Keywords: comics studies, disciplinarity, genealogy, page layout, theorization

A paper presented at the 2013 International Comic Arts Forum argued that the time had come for comics studies to take its place as an independent humanities discipline, rather than an area of research within more established fields. The paper presented an intellectual rationale but ultimately pointed to an institutional solution, envisioning (at least as a thought experiment) comic studies as a *discipline*—and, therefore, a *degree program* housed in a *department* with its own faculty lines. It was hardly the first such call, though it came at what seemed like a moment of possibility. Yet this case for capital-C-and-S Comics Studies begged an important question: Where on the ancient and gnarled Tree of Knowledge shall we graft this new branch?

The sheltering wings of language and literature departments (particularly departments of English) made much of comics studies' recent growth and development possible, but the argument that comics are a kind of literature also rendered comics studies a kind of literary studies (Beaty and Woo 29). There are obvious advantages to more holistic

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approaches that integrate comics' visual dimension and avoid the pressures toward arguments over quality exerted by more traditional versions of the curriculum or canon. But can we be so sure that comics studies would be a *humanities* discipline? Perhaps comics' expressive use of language and images could be better explained by the cognitive and language sciences than by literary studies or art history (Cohn), or perhaps understanding comics requires going beyond the page to research their social contexts and uses (Brienza). Our colleagues who study comics as part of multimodal literacy practices, who use research creation methods, or who support student practitioners in studio art or library science contexts may have yet other models in mind. And of course, there are some creators and fans of the art form who would prefer that academics and theoreticians left well enough alone. All of this is to say that it is not quite clear what kind of studies a new discipline of comics studies would be.

"Ever since prehistoric antiquity," writes Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, "one field of study after another has crossed the divide between what the historian might call its prehistory as a science and its history proper" (21). While Kuhn's book is most famous for its definition of the "paradigm shift," I am more interested in his account of how new fields of study develop paradigms and thereby become "sciences" or "disciplines" in the first place. This is a crucial moment in our field, a moment of consolidation, institution building, and canon formation—a moment when an *Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies* is not only thinkable but actually publishable. As the apparatus of a scholarly discipline begins to cohere but before the closure of disciplinarity has been fully achieved, we have a golden opportunity to reflect on the project of academic comics studies.

Thus, this chapter does not present a case for formalizing the discipline of comics studies but rather attempts to raise some questions about what disciplinarity could mean for the study of comics. Our field is lively and diverse—surely, one of its strengths—but ensuring that this diversity remains productive and generative requires careful reflection and continual effort. I begin with a short overview of the Kuhnian "prehistory" of comics studies. Then, taking theory as a paradigm's distinctive product, I examine some theories of page layout. My goal here is not to adjudicate among them but to ascertain how they theorize and what that says about comics studies as a form of inquiry. Finally, I conclude with some considerations about disciplinarity as such. Some comics scholars have pushed back against the very idea of disciplines, arguing that comics studies' diversity marks it as an inherently antidisciplinary project (Hatfield, "Anti-Discipline," "Indiscipline"; Jenkins, "Should We Discipline?"), but there is much to be gained from a dialogic conception of discipline that brings these submerged tensions and differences to the fore as the subject of explicit argumentation and debate.

Let's begin this consideration of what comics studies *is* with a brief examination of what comics studies *has been*. As Ian Gordon suggests, much of the pathbreaking work on comics has been made obsolete by more recent developments or may simply seem unfashionable to contemporary eyes, yet "a field that does not know and read its own history is impoverished" (129). For my purposes here, a genealogy—in the critical,

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Foucauldian sense—of academic comics studies is a productive point of departure for imagining its possible futures precisely because the study of comics could have taken a very different shape if the field had come together at a different time, under different circumstances, or with different influences (Jenkins, “Should We Discipline?”).

The earliest academic research on comics in the English language was conducted not by humanists but by psychologists, educationalists, and mass communication scholars. Comics were not yet seen as “plausible texts” for literary study (Bordwell; Beaty and Woo). Rather, scholars were largely working within a “social problem” framework, in keeping with much research on emerging media in the early to mid-twentieth century. For instance, although it’s impossible ever to conclusively point to the “first” or “earliest” example of something, the oldest dissertations listed in the ComicsResearch.org bibliography include Florence Heisler’s study of the impact of comic books, radio serials, and movies on children’s educational achievement, IQ, personality, and reading ability, submitted to New York University’s School of Education in 1944; Etta Karp’s dissertation on the “role preferences” of boys who read crime comics, also completed at NYU a decade later; and W. Paul Blakely’s analysis of comic-book readers following the industry “cleanup” of the early 1950s, submitted to the College of Education at the University of Iowa in 1957. The 1950s are, of course, remembered for the anticomics moral panic—perhaps tainting psychological and mass communication approaches for many whose introduction to comics came through the generations of fandom that followed it—but there was, in fact, a lively debate throughout the period among scholars and public intellectuals about comic books’ impact on young people, with figures such as sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh and psychiatrist Lauretta Bender on one side and psychiatrist Fredric Wertham famously heading up the other. As Wertham noted at the time, many of the procomics experts sat on publishers’ advisory boards (Beaty 141), not only representing at least a perceived conflict of interest but also suggesting an “industrial” or “administrative” version of comics studies that never fully materialized. What if comics studies had been nurtured by the interests of the comic-book publishing industry? What if it found a place as a research area in the social sciences, broadly conceived? Or what if it remained focused on young readers and their interests, rather than seeking to shuck off the medium’s “bam-pow” associations with children? It is not difficult to imagine that the field could have evolved very differently; rather, the challenge is understanding why this early research had so little impact on the development of comics studies as we know it. Instead, the roots of contemporary comics studies lie in two other traditions of thinking about comics.

First, cartoonists themselves have been a rich source of historical information and more or less explicit examples of what John Thornton Caldwell calls “self-theorizing discourse.” Indeed, one of the earliest known master’s theses on comics was written by a former *Superman* artist (Ricca). Creators such as Jules Feiffer and Jim Steranko did much to consolidate the broad historical narratives that inform common-sense understandings of American comic-book publishing, while Mort Walker, Will Eisner, and, perhaps most notably, Scott McCloud developed more or less theoretically informed vocabularies for describing the formal elements that make up comics and how they work together to

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produce the aesthetic experience of reading. More recently, accomplished cartoonists such as Jessica Abel, Lynda Barry, Ivan Brunetti, Matt Madden, and Nick Sousanis have enriched understandings of the practice of making comics and its relationship with visual literacy and cognition through their respective teaching practices and pedagogical reflections (Jenkins, “Formalist Theory”).

A second major tradition of research and writing originates in organized comics fandom and the fan-scholars who used fanzines, amateur press associations, fan conventions, and eventually email listservs and discussion boards as forums for sustained critical discourse on comics.¹ At certain moments, the fan press constituted the only venue interested in printing—and, thus, preserving—the knowledge gleaned by readers and creators in essays, bibliographies, and interviews. Similarly, early scholarly conferences such as the Comic Arts Conference and the International Comic Arts Forum piggybacked on conventions and festivals such as the San Diego Comic-Con and the Small Press Expo, respectively. Not to put too fine a point on it, fan-scholars and fan-archivists laid the foundations of comics studies, although they sometimes also introduced biases to our received accounts of comics history that we are still trying to rectify, notably by centering US superhero comics and the “Big Two” publishers and marginalizing other comics and the institutions that produced them.

That comics scholarship originally came together around creators and fans is consistent with Kuhn’s accounts of preparadigmatic inquiry. Kuhn notes that existing craft knowledge and the work of amateur investigators are frequently sources of information in the early stages of a field’s development:

In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar. Furthermore, in the absence of a reason for seeking some particular form of more recondite information, early fact-gathering is usually restricted to the wealth of data that lie ready to hand. (15)

Of course, academic comics scholarship was eventually professionalized—though not without some bumps along the way. In *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud calls the comics-friendly people working in the press, libraries, museums, and universities the art form’s “moles” (83, 93–94). That seems like an apt description for the first generations of comics scholars in the anglophone academy, who were rarely hired for their expertise in comics but found ways to sneak it into the curriculum nonetheless, thereby breaking paths for the rest of us to follow. And we should also note the continuing contributions of impassioned amateurs and those in what we might now call “alt-ac” positions; for example, Bill Blackbeard incorporated himself as a not-for-profit in order to preserve newspaper comic strips that were bound for the scrapheap (Robb 76), while pioneering works on Canadian comic books were written by John Bell, a government archivist. However, the rise of comics studies is attributable not only to the blood, sweat, and tears

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of generations of comics scholars but also to changing conditions in the academy and society at large.

As Richard A. Peterson has argued, the sophisticate of today is a “cultural omnivore,” who demonstrates their superior taste by consuming objects eclectically drawn from across a range of high and low arts. Comics’ rehabilitation as both “literary” graphic novels and transmedia entertainment franchises has translated into a new confidence in their “plausibility” as objects of scholarly attention. With the increasing acceptance of comics as a legitimate field of research, we have also seen concomitant growth in the institutions that support it. Faculty and students can now attend comics studies conferences, join comics studies associations, subscribe to comics studies journals, and publish comics studies monographs in any of the several comics studies book series from major academic presses. In Canada, where I live and work, comics scholars have been reasonably successful in funding competitions from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC); as of July 2018, SSHRC had given out nearly \$3 million (Canadian) in funding to fifty-two different scholars for sixty-five projects listing “comics,” “comic strips,” “comic books,” or “graphic novels” as keywords.² Throughout the anglophone world, at least, many universities and colleges now regularly offer courses on comics, and a small but growing number of institutions have launched degree programs (typically, interdisciplinary minors, for now). It is hard not to see this as “coming of age” for comics studies. Today’s dynamic field seems almost unspeakably distant from the sense of isolation or condescension reported by those who marked out this territory in a much more hostile institutional environment (see, e.g., the “pioneer’s perspectives” collected in Smith and Duncan’s *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies*). Challenges still remain, yet, just as literary studies emerged from its own predisciplinary ooze in the late nineteenth century (Graff), comics scholarship is now sufficiently developed and institutionalized to contemplate its own disciplinary status.

While the establishment of specialized journals, learned societies, and courses once signaled the emergence of a new paradigm, Kuhn notes that “the paraphernalia of specialization [have] acquired a prestige of their own” (19). There are powerful incentives (not least from commercial academic publishers; Buranyi) to put the cart before the horse and develop the paraphernalia before the paradigm. The new journals, book series, and conferences may signal an emergent discipline, but do they mask unresolved fractures in the field? One way to explore this question is by looking at how some comics scholars work with theory.

Let me set the scene for you. “What Were Comics?” is a SSHRC-funded project to investigate the historical transformation of comic books and comic-book publishing in the United States through a content analysis of a random sample, stratified by year, of American comic books published between 1935 and 2014. It’s 2015, and Bart Beaty, Nick Sousanis, and I are holding our first planning meeting at the University of Calgary. Our task for the day is to write a draft coding protocol, which we’ll test on an arbitrarily chosen comic (*Tippy Teen #21*) with a group of graduate students in order to troubleshoot the instructions, gauge intercoder reliability, and get a sense of how long it

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takes to complete. At this stage in the project, we are focusing on material and formal variables that we expect will be relatively easy to train research assistants to code, saving more complex issues such as genre, drawing style, or gender and racial representation for a second stage. As a result, much of our first protocol involves grunt tabulation: How many stories in this comic? How many pages in this story? How many panels on this page? And so on. The work of defining variables and writing instructions is going well until we reach the section of the protocol where we want our research assistants to be able to record something about the layout of the pages in our corpus. Our progress comes to a screeching halt.

We know from Eisner, McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, and other theorists of the comics form that the spatial arrangement of panels on the page is crucial to how artists convey narrative information to their readers, as well as contributing to the work's aesthetic qualities more broadly. We have some sense that grids and tiers are important and that we will need to account for overlapping and inset panels. But beyond that, we have difficulty coming up with a satisfactory set of categories for the coders to use. We talk for hours, debating the difference between a layout composed on an underlying grid system and one featuring identically sized panels, whether it's panels or the space between them that actually defines the layout, and how things change when we approach the problem from a readerly or a writerly perspective. But we simply cannot settle on what to count or how to define different kinds of page layouts. Soon we find ourselves pulling books off the shelves in Bart's office, looking for anything in the literature that can help us figure out how to categorize the layout of a page of comic art. There is no shortage of theories of the comics form, both in English and increasingly available in translation, yet we are unable to glean insights from this extensive body of work that could help us describe how panels are arranged on pages.

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In light of our inability to derive principles for categorizing comics layouts from some leading theories of formal structure in comics, I want to consider some questions about the role theory plays in comics scholarship. At times, “theory” has been seen as a vexed object (Thompson), at others as the height of intellectual sophistication. Following a paper by Elisabeth Kotzakidou Pace on the epistemic status of music theory, I will conceptualize theorizing as the practice of creating a rational structure from our experiences of the world, and theories are simply the output of this practice. Thus, theorizing is integral to all forms of knowing, from the “lay theories” that make up our store of tacit knowledge to formal theories articulated by professional scientists, but that doesn’t mean all ways of knowing are the same. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, Ernst Cassirer asserts that every branch of science has its own particular way of “achieving the subsumption of the particular under the universal” (69). In other words, all the sciences—including the “human” or “cultural” sciences, that is, humanistic inquiry—attempt to relate particular observations, cases, and examples to broader, if not necessarily “universal,” processes, dynamics, and phenomena. In comics studies, then, what makes for a good theory? Consider how four of our colleagues have written about page layout:

- In *Case, planche, récit*, Benoît Peeters defines four “conceptions of the page” based on the relationship between composition and narrative, which may be autonomous or interdependent with either element “dominant.” These four categories do not describe different arrangements of panels but supposedly represent different uses of layout by artists. Like the conventions of so-called realist film editing, *conventional* layouts “become transparent” (par. 7) through the regular, gridlike character of the panels. Conversely, *decorative* layouts elevate the composition of the page as an aesthetic totality over the breakdown of narrative into sequence. In *rhetorical* layouts, “the dimensions of the panel conform to the action being described” (par. 22) so that narrative drives choices of composition, while the reverse is true of *productive* layouts, in which artists exploit a range of compositional tricks to play with the reader’s expectations of how a graphic narrative usually unfolds.
- Thierry Groensteen attempts to refine Peeters’s approach but using a different logic. Rather than trying to determine whether composition and narrative are interdependent or autonomous and then which one is “dominant,” whatever that means, Groensteen poses two questions of a given page: Is the layout “regular or irregular”? Is it “discrete or ostentatious”? (97). This again produces four possible combinations, and Groensteen is able to redescribe Peeters’s four conceptions of the page in these terms: conventional layouts are regular and discrete, decorative layouts are regular and ostentatious, rhetorical layouts are irregular and discrete, and productive layouts are irregular and ostentatious. Notably, the classificatory questions remove any consideration of artistic intent or reader reception that may have been implicit in Peeters’s scheme, boiling down the analysis to two questions within which a large number of actual layouts are possible.
- For his part, Joseph Witek provides three broad categories. The “highly regular grid” approaches the ordinary sense of the word *grid*, with the page being divided into equal

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segments by evenly spaced gutters that run in parallels and perpendiculars. The “offset grid” retains an overall impression of regularity but with some staggering of the gutters. Finally, the “baroque style” adds interest (and sometimes confusion) to an underlying irregular grid through “a variety of flamboyant technical gestures”; at the extreme, the “high baroque style,” which he suspects is more common among comics published in the so-called Golden Age of American comic books may employ “wavy or jagged lines for panel borders, circular, triangular, or other unusually shaped panels, blackout panels, extreme close-ups ... and extensive use of figures which appear to emerge from within the panels onto the physical page itself so the panel becomes only a notional ‘container’ for the action” (“The Arrow and the Grid” 153-154).

- Barbara Postema offers a “taxonomy of layouts” in the second chapter of *Narrative Structure in Comics*, though she means something slightly different by “layout” from the others. While noting that the number of panels on a page has an impact in terms of the complexity of the formal composition, she in fact describes different ways of connecting images to one another on a page, rather than the totality of their arrangement: panels surrounded by other panels and separated by a gutter; single images on a page; clusters of panels surrounded by “a significant amount of empty page” (35); compositions of relatively few unframed images; panels touching, separated by a line rather than a gutter; and “insets or inserts” (42).

Here we have four different ways of theorizing the page from four significant scholars in our field. Each has a degree of *prima facie* validity and seems quite persuasive on its own merits. They all deserve to be taken seriously. So it is all the more remarkable that we could not operationalize any of them for the “What Were Comics?” coding protocol.³ They didn’t translate into a set of categories that research assistants could be trained to use reliably and that would enable us to track changes in how artists compose comic pages both through time and across types of comics. On reflection, the problem had less to do with the content of the theories we consulted and more with how they were constructed. We were apparently asking them to do something different from what they were intended for. Reviewing these examples again, it strikes me that there are two significant things they do.

The first thing they do is describe. Some theories explain or predict; others construct their rational structure by telling us what kinds of things we can expect to find in the world. There are a few gestures toward identifying causes here: Peeters relates the “conventional” use of the page to production workflows that emphasized the modularity of comic art, Witek implies cartoonists must balance visual interest and narrative interest when composing a page, and all the theorists occasionally assert that a certain kind of layout will have such-and-such an effect on the reading experience as they go about enumerating the differences between categories. But notwithstanding these casual causal references, the theories we examined are basically descriptive theories.

Having named and described a number of objects, the second thing these theories do is typologize. They organize things into a relatively small number of categories—fewer than the variety of layout choices we typically see in published comics and many fewer than

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the potential compositions available to an artist. The resulting typologies invite us to classify the pages we encounter in our reading, or parts of them, in line with the categories provided.

So far, so good—we were looking for a descriptive typology of layouts. Nonetheless, we encountered some problems when we tried to use them to organize our observations. While they provided some vocabulary for talking about certain kinds of pages, the categories they furnished were neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. That is to say, there are many possible pages that arguably belong under more than one heading or fall entirely outside the proposed systems. The theorists are not unaware of this, of course. Peeters says that the four uses of the page “do not have any absolute value” but “are merely analytical tools that must be modified in light of each new example” (par. 10n5), while Postema points out that her six layouts can be mixed and matched in actual practice. The typologies seem to be conceptualized as mere heuristics, and a classificatory schema that doesn’t actually classify the phenomena in question was of limited use to us. But there are also two important things these theories generally *don’t* do.

First, they don’t engage with other theories. With the notable exception of Groensteen, who is explicitly responding to Peeters, the theories are presented as if they have been constructed entirely from first principles. In the works I consulted, at any rate, none of the others justifies the categories they constructed by appealing to a more general theory of composition or reception. This is perhaps only a consequence of a broader tendency for comics scholars not to relate their arguments to prior work in the field, which has been identified by Phillip Troutman, Witek (“Dual Address”), and others, but it is particularly notable here, especially as the field has begun to be more self-conscious about its relationship with canons of academic legitimacy. If quite different theories of comics can be inferred directly from observation of more or less arbitrarily selected examples, then there is no reason to prefer one of these over another—or over one’s own intuitive understandings.

Second, these theories don’t establish criteria by which they could be proven wrong. Since Karl Popper, falsifiability has been one key criterion used to distinguish scientific hypotheses and theories from myth and ideology. That is to say, while we may not yet know for sure if some claim is true, we should be able to imagine circumstances under which it could be demonstrated false. Another way to think of this might be, what difference would it make if a “representation of our world of experience” (17) were right or wrong? Is there any way to judge it more or less accurate? If it is impossible to marshal evidence that would refute a statement, if it makes no difference, then that statement is epistemologically empty. None of the theories we looked at is falsifiable, even in this broad sense. The decision about which category a page layout belongs in is largely a matter of assertion. If someone disagrees with you about whether a particular layout is rhetorical or productive, whether deviations from an underlying grid are “flamboyant” enough to be considered baroque, or where to draw the line between

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“several panels on a page” and “panels surrounded by other panels,” there is no clear way to arbitrate it.

Theories of this sort did not provide the kind of link between the particular and the general that we needed for our coding protocol: one that was clear, unambiguous, and, above all, reproducible but also subtle enough that changes in how artists break down a page could be detected in a corpus of more than three thousand comics. But do these theories tell us anything more about the state of comics studies as a body of knowledge or a practice of inquiry? As individuals and as a scholarly community, the question we need to consider is whether accounts of this kind—not, I repeat, these specific explanations but this way of explaining—are sufficient. What, in other words, is comics theory for? We all want to know more about comics and graphic novels, but what counts as knowing? These questions cut to the heart of how we define comics studies.

Some of us conceptualize our work as interpretation or criticism, while others seek to discover facts in archives or explain processes by appeal to data. Some of us expect a theory to apply widely, perhaps even universally, while others plumb the depths of a small corpus or a single text. What constitutes a satisfactory theory runs along a rough continuum, from theorization that aspires to formulate universal, causal accounts that can be tested by experimentation and used to predict future outcomes, at one end, to theorization that responds in some irreducible way to an object that is not something to be explained but only an occasion for theoretical discourse, at the other. While some formalist theories of comics rhetorically aspire to universality, Neil Cohn is probably one of the few in our field to seriously pursue nomothetic theorizing on the model of the natural sciences. The other extreme of idiographic theory is more common when comic art serves as a proving ground to “apply” or “demonstrate” some other body of theory, often drawn from the domains of so-called critical or cultural theory. Most of us probably sit somewhere between these two extremes, and perhaps all that means is that it’s not entirely clear exactly what we’re doing.

The talk of comics studies as discipline seems to assume, or at least give the impression, that all comics scholarship is broadly the same, that it all has similar goals and working methods. After all, isn’t that what it means to be a discipline? But there is, in fact, a range of backgrounds, traditions, and research interests that comics scholars bring to the field. If comics studies is to become something like a discipline, then we need to make our engagements with method, methodology, and the relationship between theory and observation much more explicit. We must not only model our conceptions of comics research but also reflect on the affordances and constraints these models (or paradigms?) necessarily bring with them.

There are, broadly speaking, two ways to approach academic disciplines. One—let’s call it a “theory of knowledge” perspective—takes it on faith that disciplines correspond with real divisions in the world or the mind. It would include the numerous attempts to revise the branches of knowledge in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment (Darnton), as well as more recent attempts to sort university departments in the

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scholarship of teaching and learning (Jones; Cresswell and Roskens; Smart et al.). From this perspective, a discipline is identified by a sufficiently distinctive object of study (e.g., “geology is the study of rocks”), philosophical anthropology (e.g., “economists view human beings as maximizing utility through exchange”), or perhaps research practice (e.g., “anthropologists write ethnographies” or “data scientists use algorithms”). By contrast, what we might call a “sociology of knowledge” perspective focuses on the institutional realpolitik taking place behind the back of intellectual history. If a language is a dialect with an army and a navy, then a discipline is a field of inquiry with a calendar code and office space. Critical scholars of disciplinarity remind us that disciplines (noun) discipline (verb). They have a benign face; the regulatory force of disciplinary norms and institutions is one reason academic departments enjoy as much autonomy as they do, and the evaluative contexts that disciplines furnish make academic careers as we know them possible (Shumway and Messer-Davidow 208, 207). But they also necessarily rule certain ideas outside the bounds of normal science, and this “boundary work” isn’t innocent, particularly where disciplinary gatekeeping intersects with axes of systemic marginalization or oppression (209–211). These two perspectives on disciplinarity aren’t always distinct. As Robert Darnton argues, the “figurative system of human knowledge” that famously opens Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* attempted not only to organize the arts and sciences into a coherent structure but also to render certain knowledges and certain knowers illegitimate (209). The challenge is how to reconcile the wholly understandable desire for the trappings of disciplinarity—for institutions that support an ongoing intellectual community, for control over curricula, and for more and less-precarious academic jobs—with the reasonable suspicion that taking on those trappings will constrain the field, limiting the directions it takes and the questions it entertains. Or, as Henry Jenkins provocatively asks, “Should the reading of comics be disciplined? What is the price we will have to pay in order to become a coherent academic field and are we willing to pay it?” (“Should We Discipline?” 6).

My doctorate and my appointment are both in communication studies, which looks quite a lot like a discipline—certainly in comparison to comics studies at the moment. There are departments and even faculties of communication or media studies at many universities and colleges, attracting large numbers of undergraduate and graduate students; multiple learned societies operating to greater and lesser degrees internationally (Pooley), in addition to national and subfield-specific associations; and too many journals, monographs, edited collections, and textbooks to enumerate. Nonetheless, surveying communication theory as a field, Robert T. Craig found an incoherent grab bag of ideas raided from other disciplines: “Communication scholars seized upon every idea about communication, whatever its provenance, but accomplished little with most of them—entombed them, you might say, after removing them from the disciplinary environments in which they had thrived and were capable of propagating” (“Communication Theory” 122). But, rather than attempting to overcome this “sterile eclecticism” (122) by imposing “some chimerical, unified theory” (123) or following “the red herring of antidisciplinarity” (124), Craig’s remedy was a shift in perspective. From a different point

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of view, these are not incommensurable paradigms talking past one another but a set of traditions and practices in dialogue, and dialogue requires a common language:

Productive theoretical arguments most readily occur within an interpretive community sustained by a disciplinary matrix, a background of assumptions shared in common. Disciplinarity, however, does not require that diversity and interdisciplinarity be suppressed. To be a discipline means only, at a minimum, that many of us agree that we disagree about certain matters that are consequential in certain ways and therefore worth discussing. (124)

Craig's communicative conception of communication theory provides a model (a "constitutive metamodel") for a version of disciplinarity that remains porous and open to diversity while still providing a framework within which the study of comics can continue to develop.

When we say that comics studies is a field, we are pointing to an intellectual community of people who have something to say about comics. To be a discipline, comics studies requires a metadiscourse, a backchannel where we can talk about how we talk about comics (Craig "How We Talk"). The point is not to suppress or explain away difference but to focus in on the differences that are consequential and the debates that are worth having. Heretofore, our conversations about disciplinarity have largely been focused on the institutional appurtenances thereof—the "paraphernalia" of journals, learned societies, conferences, and, yes, faculty jobs. These are certainly important conversations to have if the achievements of comics scholars over the decades are to be sustained and carried forward by future generations. But we can't neglect other, perhaps more difficult conversations about what comics studies has been, is, and could be.⁴

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Notes:

(1.) By "fan-scholars," I mean fans who make use of academic knowledges, theories, and modes of discourse as part of their fan practices, rather than "scholar-fans," who mobilize their fannish experiences as capital within the academy (Hills).

(2.) These figures come from SSHRC's public database of awards payments from fiscal year 1998-1999 to 2017-2018, which can be accessed at sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/award_search-recherche_attributions/index-eng.aspx.

(3.) Since these conversations, we have also explored Bateman et al.'s and Neil Cohn's (Pederson and Cohn) approaches to annotating and/or indexing page layouts.

(4.) As part of the "What Were Comics?" project (Bart Beaty, principal investigator), this work was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. An earlier version was presented at International Comic Arts Forum 2017 in Seattle.

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Benjamin Woo

School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University

