

Grappling With Representation in the Age of the Comments Section

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The field of illustration has a long history of establishing and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about marginalized communities. With an emergent critical discourse developing online to challenge the continued usage of problematic historical tropes, it is important for educators to challenge themselves, their peers and their students to critically engage with this legacy as consumers and creators of influential imagery.

This paper focuses on a variety of approaches to this objective in studio-based, undergraduate illustration curriculum at Queens College, City University of New York. It describes a range of lectures, discussions, writing assignments, and studio projects teachers can use to engage and empower students.

Introduction

Let's start by looking at two recent controversies to illuminate what I mean by "emerging critical discourse developing online." I picked these particular examples because:

- a) They represent different genres within the field of illustration.
- b) The role(s) illustrators play in the debate is different.

The first controversy we will look at involves three children's book author/illustrators consciously responding to an institution's contemporary reproduction, prominent display, and unwillingness to contextualize a racist caricature by Dr. Seuss.

On October 5, 2017 Mike Curato, Mo Willems, and Lisa Yee release a letter to the public on social media to explain why they were pulling out of a scheduled appearance at the inaugural Springfield Children's Literature Festival at the newly

opened “The Amazing World of Dr. Seuss Museum” in Springfield, MA. Below is an excerpt of their letter, which explains their reasoning:

“...we recently learned that a key component of this institution honoring Dr. Seuss features a mural depicting a scene from his first book, 'And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street,' and within the selected arts is a jarring racial stereotype of a Chinese man, who is depicted with chopsticks, a pointed hat, and slanted slit eyes. We find this caricature of 'the Chinaman' deeply hurtful, and have concerns about children's exposure to it.

While this image may have been considered amusing to some when it was published 80 years ago, it is obviously offensive in 2017 (the year the mural was painted). For some children who visit the museum, their only interaction with Asian representation might be that painting. For others, seeing themselves represented in such a stereotypical way may feed into internalized, even subconscious shame and humiliation. It is incumbent on our public institutions to present all races in a fair manner. Displaying imagery this offensive damages not only Asian American children, but also non-Asian kids who absorb this caricature and could associate it with all Asians or their Asian neighbors and classmates.

The career of Ted Geisel, writing as Dr. Seuss, is a story of growth, from accepting the baser racial stereotypes of the times in his early career, to challenging those divisive impulses with work that delighted his readers and changed the times. It was our hope that the administration of the new Seussian institution would be able to take inspiration from Mr. Geisel's journey and find creative ways to allow children of all backgrounds to feel welcomed (or, at the very least, provide context for this hurtful painting). "

Curato, Willem, and Yee go on to explain that the museum was unwilling to respond to their concerns, claiming that the museum insisted that it was the responsibility of

visitors to contextualize their recently commissioned, oversized reproduction of the “Chinaman.”



Figure 1: Mural in Springfield, MA Dr. Seuss Museum (Boston Globe, 2017)

When the open letter is published on twitter and begins generating discussion, a series of events take place on two tracks:

The first track is that the museum reconsiders their initial position and promises to remove the caricature in a response letter. Then, the author/illustrators release a second letter thanking the museum and indicating that they will happily attend an event there in the future.

The second track is within the broader Springfield community: Two prominent business owners offer to buy the mural and install it in a more prominent, public location in the town. One, Andy Yee, is Chinese American and states:

"That's my ancestors coming to this country in the 1930s. We did not come wearing Louis Vuitton and Gucci. Why do you want to change history?"

In support of the businessmen's proposal, the Democratic mayor of the Springfield says:

"This is political correctness at its worst, and this is what is wrong with our country. We have extreme fringe groups on both the right and the left dictating an agenda to divide instead of working together towards the betterment of our country. We feel it should stay as is. If not, we have the cavalry with the Picknelly and Yee families saving another Springfield institution."

As of this writing, the fate of the mural remains unclear, but one can clearly see how the illustrators' actions are being connected to more prominent national debates by their opponents.

Now let's jump over to the genre of editorial illustration. This controversy stems from an editorial illustrator being accused of creating a sexist magazine cover for a prominent publication, and the debate and organizing that occurred as a response.

On February 5th 2015, Newsweek publishes the cover story "What Silicon Valley Thinks of Women" by Nina Burleigh. The cover is illustrated by Edel Rodriguez and art directed by Grace Lee. The article is well-received and is in many ways a precursor to reporting done in the last year about sexism in the entertainment industry. The cover illustration, however, generates controversy. The controversy stems over whether the illustration uses conceptual symbolism and representation to critique the sexism documented in the article, or to further perpetrate it.



Figure 2: Edel Rodriguez "What Silicon Valley Thinks of Women" (Newsweek, 2015)

From this central question, ripples of related questions and debate expand in various forums and with various depths of inquiry- from the Today Show to the Huffington Post to the PBS News Hour to Illustrator/Educator's Steve Brodner's Facebook wall. There are opinion pieces, interviews with Edel Rodriguez, interviews with contemporary female illustrators, 657 comments responding to Steve Brodner's Facebook post, and the formation of a Facebook advocacy group for female and non-binary illustrators named Humorless

Mutts (the name is a reappropriation of what illustrator Tom Dougherty referred to critics of the cover illustration) that currently has 988 members. Below are excerpts from two published interviews that reflect some of the discourse:

Excerpt from Huffington Post article "6 Female Illustrators Weigh in on Sexism, Feminism and the Newsweek Fiasco"

Author Katie Tandy: Do you believe Edel Rodriguez's illustration depicting Silicon Valley sexism was itself sexist? Did everyone just miss the entire damn point and publish an illustration that was as sexist as the attitudes it was attempting to criticize? Or was this his (perhaps failed) attempt to illustrate that, yes, sexualizing, infantilizing and humiliating women is Silicon Valley's current mode of operation in regards to women? Nina Burleigh (the author of the article) has gone on record insisting that it was supposed to be ugly, because that world is ugly.

Illustrator Celine Loup: I can only speak for myself, both as an illustrator and also as someone who has devoted years of her life to understanding

intersectional feminist theory. The most I can say about the illustration *by itself* is that it is a mediocre concept delivered in a mediocre package. It succeeds in portraying “what dudes think of women in tech” without actually subverting the narrative — the result is frustratingly superficial, places men’s point of view at the center of this issue, and tells me nothing about what it’s like to actually be on the receiving end of that male gaze.

In the aftermath, two things happened: one, it became painfully obvious that Edel, Steve Brodner, and many many other men (and some women) have an incredibly limited, simplistic understanding of what sexism *actually is* and worse, that they use that ignorance to derail and harass and gas-light their female colleagues who dare speak up.

Two, I watched a class full of sophomore illustration students (most of whom were women) come up with tons of better, far more subversive ideas. Context is everything, and all this tells me is that Edel and many of his male colleagues lack the empathy required to handle a subject as painful as sexism in tech.

Excerpt from PBS Newshour Interview “Artist behind Newsweek cover: it’s not sexist, it depicts the ugliness of sexism”

Author Ruth Tam: Did you anticipate the backlash?

Illustrator Edel Rodriguez: I thought there might be a few letters or something. I didn’t realize there would be that much commenting on it. Many women think this cover is right on the money. There might be 30 to 40 percent who have a problem, and 70 to 60 who think it shows it perfectly. That’s the sign that it’s getting people’s attention. And that’s what a magazine cover should do. To get people to try to figure out what the image is. The article could possibly eliminate what they were first outraged about, but you have to read it. The cover is supposed to get them to read.

To survey the range of content written in response to this controversy is to find a wealth of intentional and unintentional commentary about traditional depictions of women in illustration, in addition to sexist business practices and power dynamics within the field. One can also find dialog on the relationship an illustrator has to the content of an article they are assigned, and how that should or should not be assessed when considering the value and ethics of an editorial illustration.

Approaches to Curriculum

How should studio-based educators interrogate/ incorporate the historical, contemporary, ethical and professional conundrums present in these examples in our curriculum? What is necessary to prepare students to thoughtfully account for and respond to this growing dialog in their developing, creative output and professional conduct?

From the outset, it's important to keep in mind that the creative choices and control illustrators have when making imagery varies greatly based on the divergent structures of the genre we are working in.

Part I: Desired Learning Outcomes

As mentioned earlier, this paper will discuss pedagogical techniques to help students develop the tools they need to navigate these current conversations in illustration. These techniques seek to achieve the following three goals:

- Students understand the role illustrators play in establishing and reinforcing harmful stereotypes
- Students develop a vocabulary and are empowered to critically engage with this ongoing legacy, regardless of their personal relationship.
- Through the development of a personal code of conduct, students have tools to better evaluate the potential cultural weight of their work during the creative process, and be able to thoughtfully respond to potential criticism after their work is published.

Part II: Setting up a Framework, Lectures and Class Discussion

Syllabus

Similar to articulating grading criteria, including language about respect for diversity in a syllabus sets clear expectations for which student/teacher conduct can be evaluated and navigated in an ethical manner throughout the semester. This is helpful for having potentially difficult conversations and assignments about problematic representation. I include the following in my syllabus:

Diversity Statement

It is my intent to present materials and activities in this classroom that are respectful of the diversity that makes Queens College a strong intellectual community: this includes race, gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and culture. This is consistent with the Mission Statement of Queens College, which emphasizes a commitment to fostering an atmosphere of collegiality and mutual respect. Throughout the semester, your suggestions on how to better achieve this goal are encouraged and appreciated. This includes suggestions on ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups.

I have based this off of language and policy my college describes in our Mission Statement, existing diversity statements from other institutions, and input from my college's Center for Teaching and Learning. If you teach at a public institution, you likely have a similar research office that could offer suggestions. If not, many prominent universities have similar centers that digitally publish suggestions on how to craft effective diversity statements- either as standalone sections like mine, or additions to sections on student conduct or participation.

These institutions, in particular the University of Ohio, the University of Michigan, Yale University, and Brown University, also publish research and teacher guides on accounting for implicit and explicit bias in your teaching practice. Some have

interactive tests that you can take to assess areas where you might be biased, and suggestions for how to address them in your teaching practice.

Planned Discussion & Presentation of Controversial Images

When I devote class time for an assignment or reading to focus explicitly on the legacy of stereotyping in illustration, I review the class Diversity Statement with students. I also work with students to create a code of conduct for discussion, based on this guide from the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching:

Guidelines for class participation can be designed by you or negotiated with your students. By asking for their input, you give students the sense of ownership that can help them take the guidelines more seriously. The following guidelines can be used to develop an atmosphere of mutual respect and collective inquiry.

- Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own. Challenge or criticize the idea, not the person.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said. Comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker's comments.
- Be courteous. Don't interrupt or engage in private conversations while others are speaking.
- Support your statements. Use evidence and provide a rationale for your points.
- Allow everyone the chance to talk. If you have much to say, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.
- If you are offended by something or think someone else might be, speak up and don't leave it for someone else to have to respond to it.

I find that my desired learning outcomes are best achieved when group discussion is based on previously assigned readings, done in break-out groups (4-6 students) determined by random selection.

Below are questions that I ask my students to respond to with assigned readings:

RESPONSE TO READINGS ON CONTROVERSIAL IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

- What is the title of your article?
- Where was this article published? Describe the form of the publication and any relevant info (like its focus or mission, target audience, etc...)
- Who is the author of your article and what is their professional background? Do some online research and provide a two-four sentence summary.
- What is the subject of the article?
- What is the thesis of the article?
- What examples does the author use to argue their thesis?
- Does the author suggest an alternative working process for artists/creatives that will have more ethical results? If so, what is it?
- If not, can you describe a working process that might be more ethical, based on the author's thesis?
- Are there any terms, words, or sentences in the article that you don't understand?
- Come up with a list of 5 questions you would like to ask the author about their thesis?

When students meet in groups, they have already responded to these questions. I then have them draft a group response, which I read, and then come up with follow-up questions. I then meet with the group to have a conversation about their individual and group responses. My role, as I tell them, is primarily to ask questions to help clarify their perspectives, and if they request, I'm happy to describe experiences in my professional career that might be relevant.

Lectures with Offensive Imagery

Deciding whether or not to show controversial imagery to a class is often a complicated question. There is certainly a well-established line of belief in the field that it is antithetical or bizarre to the principles of free speech that many consider a central democratic principle to not show a controversial image as part of a discussion around it.

An example of this would be:

“Should we have a discussion about the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Cartoon Controversy without showing the cartoon?”

Regardless of where you land on this question, I conjecture that there is a general consensus that a professor has a responsibility to contextualize whatever imagery they present to a class. One tactic I use when putting together lectures that feature potentially offensive illustrations is to also include imagery created in opposition or in critique of offensive imagery and the legacy it represents. If it is a historical illustration that would no longer be acceptable in the publication in which it was originally printed, I also describe how society and publishing standards changed to make this type of image no longer socially acceptable.

For example, if I'm doing a lecture on early 20th century newspaper cartoons and animation, I will certainly want to include the work of Winsor McKay- particularly Little Nemo in Slumberland. I want to include these strips for their popularity at the time, the incredible visual inventiveness, and the influence they had on his

contemporaries- particularly Maurice Sendak. Yet to do this I will be gathering and presenting images that likely contain “the Jungle Imp,” or “Impie,” Nemo’s sidekick who, despite all appearances to the contrary, happens to be one of the least overtly racist depictions of black people Winsor McKay published throughout his career.

There are a number of ways I could handle this:

- I could remove the panels containing the problematic imagery, and just show work by Winsor McKay that does not include overtly racist stereotypes.
- If I find that in taking the images out I’m not able to communicate what makes his body of work relevant (let’s say the most compositionally notable work contains Impie), or if I feel that removing the imagery whitewashes a painful legacy that is worth talking about, I could say something like:
 - “This character looks shocking and offensive to us today, but it was socially acceptable at the time.”
 - “Winsor McKay was a product of his time.”

If I go with the latter option, (which is usually my course of action), I will go beyond the general statements above to better contextualize what I mean by “socially acceptable at the time” and/or “product of his time.” I will describe larger social and political structures that created, protected, and promoted this product. I will also describe some of the forces (activists, advocacy groups, other artists, etc...) that made such work socially unacceptable. For Winsor McKay, I would explain the segregation of newspapers at the time. I would show examples by African American cartoonists working in black newspapers from the same era: the cartoons of Chester Commodore, and the early work of Romare Bearden- who, like Winsor McCay, started as an editorial cartoonist, before becoming a renowned collage artist later in life.

I will also show the work of artists who have re-appropriated these stereotyped forms of illustration as a form of social critique. I do this particularly when I am not able to speak from personal experience about how a particular legacy affects me. So, if I'm planning on showing images with Impie, I will also be showing the work of Kara Walker. I will screen the recent Jay-Z animated music video for "The Story of OJ" which reappropriates racist cartoon imagery from the early 20th century (I will also mention that this song generated controversy because Jay-Z included Jewish stereotypes in the lyrics). We will read an interview with the animation team of this video who describe, among other ethical and stylistic considerations, how they wanted to make sure they were critiquing the symbolism they were invoking, rather than just recreating it. They describe achieving this by creating intentional contrast between the historically reproduced style, movement and expressions of the environments and secondary characters and the more contemporary movement and expression structures of the main character (voiced by Jay-Z).

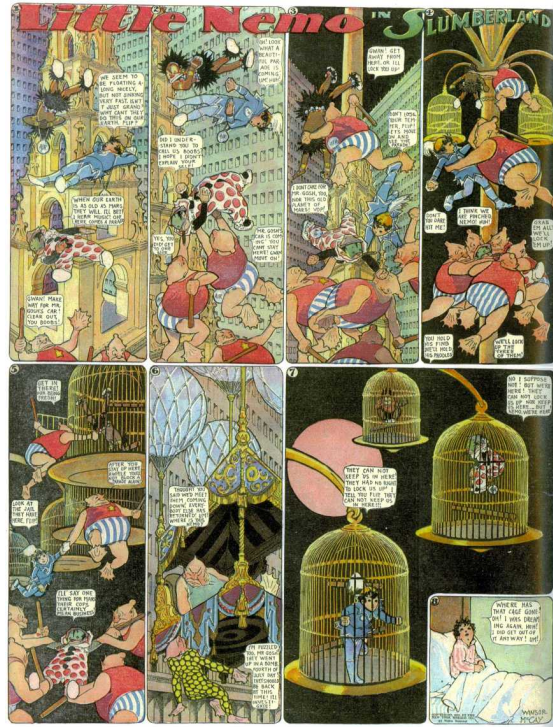


Figure 3: Winsor McCay "Little Nemo" (New York Herald, 1910)

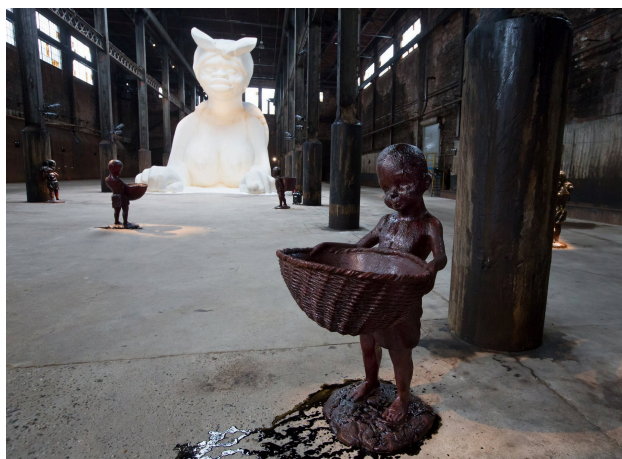


Figure 4: Kara Walker "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugarbaby" (New York Times, 2014)

Separate from controversial images, but related to having students think critically about the roles illustrators play in relation to their social influence, when I put together lectures I provide conflicting narratives and

perspectives of the traditions that I am presenting. For example, when I have a class create political cartoons I will create a lecture that covers the traditional bases: examples of prominent cartoonists working from across the ideological and political spectrums, the difference between Horatian and Juvenalian forms of satire, compositional structures for setting up an effective visual joke, and high-profile instances of censorship and persecution.

In addition to this, I also present broader theory about the role political and social satire plays in different societies and at different points in history. I do this because, in the instance of political

cartoons, the dominant narrative I have encountered (in artist talks, panel discussions at events such as ICON), is a somewhat fuzzy web of David vs. Goliath metaphors, being on the front lines defending free speech, being equal opportunity offenders, pillar of healthy democracy, etc... without a lot of how and why.

As an educator, I feel we have a responsibility to challenge students to interrogate such beliefs and claims with questions like “What does an equal opportunity offender mean?” and “Does the David vs. Goliath metaphor hold in the current media and political landscape?”

To interrogate questions like this, I talk about divergent roles satirists have played in societies around the world throughout history. This ranges from public, satirical shaming of ordinary citizens as a form of justice and social control, to the public, satirical shaming of public officials and powerful institutions as a form of dissent



Figure 5: Romare Bearden "The Watch Dog" (Baltimore Afro-American, 1936)

and advocacy for social change. As an example of the full range of this spectrum, I present the work and legacies of Cuban political cartoonist René de la Nuez, whose work prior to, during, and following the Cuban Revolution encompasses the progressive, conservative, reactionary, and propagandist roles a satirist can play in a society.

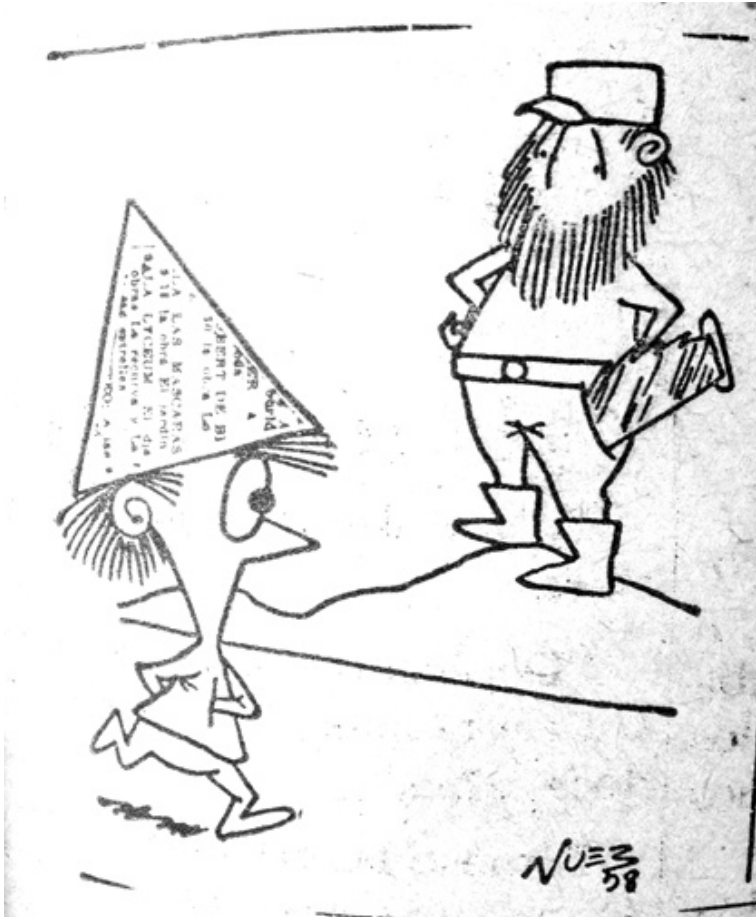


Figure 6: René de la Nuez "Loquito- Subiendo La Sierra" (1958)

I'm not necessarily trying to disprove narratives or critique tradition with this approach to lecturing and line of questioning, but rather to communicate the multitude of ways an illustrator can impact and be impacted by the evolving social contracts of their society.

Organic Discussion

However, even with the approaches to curriculum I've described so far, when you discuss something

that touches on both painful history and principles of free speech, there's always the risk of altercations between individual students or groups of students, altercation between faculty and individual/group of student(s), presentation of problematic assumptions and false stereotypes, the expression of offensive speech, and silence from students who feel intimidated or fear conflict. I've found these unintentional outcomes to be rare, but when they have happened in my classroom they have

arisen in critiques of student work (unrelated to planned conversations about stereotypes).

In critiques, I've found the most frequent spark for dialog that leads to problematic assumptions and false stereotypes is when I, or a fellow classmate, interrogates whether or not a student has intentionally or unintentionally created an image with dated or contemporary false stereotypes or other contentious forms of representation.

A common student response to this accusation is:

“So, are you're saying I can't say that?”

Or...

“You're saying I can't draw that?”

Here is the type of response I try to offer when presented with this line of inquiry:

“I'm speaking from the perspective of what I understand, based on my own experience as a professional illustrator, to be socially acceptable in the professional field that I work in and that you're preparing to enter. I'm saying this with the assumption that your educational goals are linked to the professional goal of establishing and ultimately supporting yourself in this field. I acknowledge that this a subjective judgment- but it's a subjective judgment made in a field of many forms of subjective judgments, and learning to absorb, navigate and react to contemporary trends, technology, and dialog is necessary in this field. One of the things we've talked about (or will talk about) this semester is how these lines of acceptability and taste form and change over time- with the input of critics, creative, and usually in conversation with larger social movements. If you feel strongly that my perspective on this image is too limited, hopefully these talks will give you, as a creator of influential media, some ideas for how you can advocate for new standards of taste that would accommodate such an image in mainstream

media in the future. Or, like many
illustrator before you, you can
locate or create alternative
publishing platforms for this type
of image.”

In my experience, students have been
receptive to this line of reasoning, or it
moves the conversation away from the
specifics of their image and into a more
nuanced discussion. If, in the course of
this discussion, a student intentionally
or unintentionally articulates a
stereotype to the class (usually to
defend an image in question), I make a point of calling it out as a stereotype.



Figure 7: Keith Negley "To Stop Violence, Start at Home" (New York Times, 2015)

Part III: Studio Assignments

The projects I will describe are from intermediate or upper-level studio courses. For the most part, I weave the lectures, readings and discussions described in Part I with traditional studio curriculum.

Composition Assignment

For example, if we are working on an assignment where students are required to create compositions from a variety of viewpoints- or perspectives taken from cinema, the standard discussion (at least based on my education), usually focuses on the relationship between the viewer of an illustration and the subject of an illustration. A classic example of this would be the power dynamics of an audience looking at a subject from a bird's eye view, versus looking at a subject from a worm's eye view. While the class explores this concept, I am presented with an opportunity to introduce some related concepts to consider:

- Can there be a uniform audience understanding of a power dynamic between themselves and the image they are viewing, why or why not?

- In the world of fine art, an artist's intention and relationship to their subject is considered fair game for criticism. Why might this be?
- Should the relationship between an illustrator and their subject matter be taken into account by the audience or critics?

Editorial Assignment

As another example, I challenge students to create an editorial illustration for either a previously published article in Newsweek ("What Silicon Valley Thinks of Women") or the New York Times ("To Stop Violence, Start at Home"). Both of the illustrations published alongside these articles generated controversy, and both illustrators responded with public statements to address the backlash. Students are not shown the original illustrations, or told that the published images generated controversy. While they are working on this studio project, they are also doing the group reading/response activity that I described in the group discussion section of this paper.

When they turn in their finished illustration, I also show them the originally published images and critical writing and responses. I then ask them to use their readings to assess the following:

- How could the different thesis of the articles we read, and the examples the authors use, be applied to assessing the Newsweek and New York Times illustration controversies? Break this down in three ways:
 - First, to the image itself
 - Second, to readers' negative reactions
 - Third, to the illustrator's remarks after the reaction

I then ask them to answer the same set of questions about the image they created. I find this approach usually creates dynamic contradictions between students' creative solutions, and their stated opinions about the readings and/or the

originally published illustrations. The goal becomes appreciating the difficulty of creating illustrations for socially or politically charged subject matter, appreciating different lenses with which the work can be received and critiqued, and examining two illustrators' divergent responses to being accused of furthering harmful stereotypes with their work. The goal is not to form consensus one way or another about whether or not originally published illustrations are "offensive," though that is certainly part of the discussion.

Comics Assignment

When I do create assignments for students to explicitly explore potentially difficult historic or symbolic content (like the legacy of harmful stereotypes in illustration), I find that comics are an ideal format. Different genres of illustrations have different legacies of problematic tropes and larger issues of identity politics. The genre of independent/small press comics has a relative wealth of contemporary material and emerging scholarship that interrogates these issues.

Making comics can be used to have students explore themes like contextualizing historical events, imagining an interview with an ancestor or prominent historical figure, or conducting an interview with a family member or friend about a specific social or political issue.

A multi-panel comics format is also useful in that you are not asking students to make a single visual statement- so if I interrogate whether or not something in their work might be problematic in a critique, it's less likely to be a critique of an entire project and more likely a critique of a particular section. This is usually a much easier and more nuanced conversation than when addressing a single image.

Another way comics can be helpful, regardless of what genre(s) a student wants to pursue, is that by forcing students to compose written content and imagery, it deepens a student's understanding of potential relationships between image and text and creates opportunities to discuss text in a critical manner. One thing I feel

embarrassed about in my own education and development as a critical thinker is the late point I came to the realization that I could have a critical opinion about writing- particularly non-fiction writing. Since our work as illustrators often has such a central relationship with written copy, I believe that challenging students to create/consider the challenges and processes of writing and editing can only lead to more thoughtful work.

Establishing a Code of Conduct

For several semesters, following the readings, discussions, and assignments I have described, I asked students to create “ethical codes of conduct.” I would tell students to think of their code of conduct as a series of loosely structured questions to ask themselves and/or their client during various stages of a commission, and ideas of how to respond to negative public feedback.

However, I found it initially difficult to make this assignment relevant, applicable and engaging for students- because I was not making the parameters and prompts specific enough. No matter what genre an illustrator is working in, there is a spectrum of art direction ranging from “Here’s the headline and text, make something” to “Here’s a predetermined concept, please execute it in your style with these three colors.” Similarly, there are a variety of production structures and processes, each with unique opportunities and limitations for incorporating and addressing the ethics of imagery being generated. Because of this, I was hoping students could create general guidelines for themselves that could apply for many frameworks. However, I found that it is easier to do this if you start by having students explore the ethics of a specific commission and then adapt that response to more generalized principles.

I have also found that when I combine contract and payment-related class exercises and lectures with the code of conduct exercise students are more engaged. Illustrators confront a similar range of variables when it comes to contracts, payment schedules, and copyrights from project to project, and students are

I have made the starting point of the code of conduct exercise more specific by challenging students, in groups of four, to respond to an initial email from an imaginary art director. I base the art director's initial and subsequent correspondences on communication I have had with art directors in my career. I combine different commissions, but in many cases include word for word sentences from original correspondences, and I let students know this. I make sure to include some financial and ethical ambiguities that students must get clarity on as they put together a contract and decide whether they want to take the commission or not.

After an initial email response, we do a mock-phone call (between the groups of four students and myself) and then students are required to craft a contract with a series of clauses that seem most relevant based on the back and forth they have had with me and the nature of the project. When the student groups present their contracts, this becomes an opportunity to talk through both financial and ethical concerns and questions that came up through the process. I have found that this leads to nuanced conversations and focused student engagement that was missing from when I asked students to craft a generalized ethical code of conduct.

Will this exercise help reduce the creation of problematic representation in our field once students graduate? Will a significant number of art directors be willing to engage in ethical questions alongside production and legal questions? Unclear. To an illustrator entering the field, getting your first commissions are thrilling and terrifying opportunities with many potential risks. The outcomes can greatly help or hurt one's career, giving it momentum or stalling it- which is a distinct possibility if you become known as "difficult to work with." I imagine some lines of inquiry in the mock correspondence with me playing an art director and certain sections of students' codes of conduct run the risk of art directors applying the "difficult to work with" label.

With this in mind, for additional context I tell students about professional projects I've worked on where I've brought up ethical dilemmas up with art directors, and describe the various responses, project outcomes, and anecdotal takeaways I've made. I also speculate about how these interactions might have affected my career- and how my gender, race and other aspects of my identity could have blunted or heightened the affects.

However, I also bring up the fact that art directors are increasingly being brought into the public discussion- as illustrators called out for problematic imagery explain their process, or in some cases defend their process by implicating an art director. Or, like in many industries today, some are being publically called out online for sexual misconduct and other unethical behavior. I believe that ultimately this will make more art directors more receptive to conversations about representation and stereotypes in the creative process.

Conclusion

Ethical questions about illustrators' roles in establishing and reinforcing harmful stereotypes can no longer be ignored within our field thanks to the work of online activists and critics- as well as illustrators like Mo Willems, Mike Curato and Lisa Yee. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to bring this dialog into our classrooms and expand the conversation in ways that better prepare students to create, reflect, and situate themselves and their work within a larger historical context.

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