



My Cartoonish Cancellation

How I became the subject of an equity investigation at the University of Michigan.

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In late August of 2020, I began teaching my introductory comics course at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in the same way and with the same material that I had used many times before. It's a studio course with a smattering of history. In the first week, I assigned a technical exercise involving a comics page drawn by Robert Crumb, one of the first and most important cartoonists of the underground-comix movement. The point was to study and imitate the way Crumb created the illusion of space and three-dimensional form.



A page from A Gurl, by R. Crumb.

Some might call the images grotesque. In the past, though, the exercise has always been a success.

But in 2020, we were all “sheltering in place” because of the pandemic, and I was teaching on Zoom. The students Googled Robert Crumb before I could say much to contextualize his work. They immediately raised their voices in protest. Quoting from what they read, they insisted that Crumb was a “racist” and a “misogynist.” One student cried out that he had been accused of rape. Several insisted that showing any of his work was “hurtful.” They said I was “harming” the class.

I was taken aback. Comics are fundamentally a provocative medium, and Crumb is a provocative artist, but I didn’t think I had shown an especially offensive image. Crumb and his work have been the target of both high praise and bitter criticism for years, but before that moment, most of the students knew nothing about him — and seemed unwilling to question what they had read about him on the internet. Moreover, Crumb is a central figure in the history of comics. He can’t be written out of the books.

It was only the second class of the fall semester. I fumbled to regain equilibrium. Time running out, I shuffled through a folder on my computer, thinking I’d explain how underground comix had originated partly in response to the restrictive Comics Code Authority of the 1950s and ‘60s.

As I searched for particular comics covers, I forgot that I was sharing my screen. The students watched as multiple images flashed by, images I planned to share later in the semester. One of them was the cover of *Young Lust* #5 (1977), featuring a Red Guard couple in a suggestive embrace.

The *Young Lust* series satirized romance comics of the 1940s–60s. This particular cover is a teaser for Jay Kinney’s *Red Guard Romance*, a love story set in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. The story, dedicated to Zhou Yang, an early supporter of Mao’s who was later imprisoned, is a humorous critique of the Communist government’s oppressive methods of controlling behavior. Kinney satirizes the representations of cheering Mao supporters omnipresent in Cultural Revolution propaganda.

When the Young Lust cover came into view, one student raised the alarm: “Why are you showing us even more racist images?” The cover, the student said, “sexualized Asian women.”



Students complained about this cover illustration by Jay Kinney.

Panicked, discombobulated, I attempted an apology and a rapid explanation: I had been looking for something else to show them; the Young Lust cover was intended for a later lecture; in context it might not seem offensive. Class was about to end.

In a desperate attempt to salvage the day, I suggested, but did not require, that they watch Terry Zwigoff's 1994 film *Crumb*. The film, I cautioned them, includes imagery they might find offensive, but it would offer some context for Crumb's work and present both laudatory and critical points of view on it.

The film was a last-ditch effort, and it failed miserably.

After that class, the students began a private group chat called the R. Crumb Hate Corner, with a customized banner featuring Crumb's face with "Punk bitch" written across it in red letters.

R. Crumb Hate Corner



A group of students who disagreed with the “haters” wrote to tell me about the chat in confidence, fearful that they would be branded sexist or racist should their dissent become known.

One of these students sent me screenshots from the Hate Corner throughout the semester. It soon became clear that the chat was not about Robert Crumb. It was about me. The “haters” were watching me carefully, waiting for me to slip up so they could add ammo to a document they were preparing, “Complaints Against Phoebe.” One day after class, two of my confidential informants shared their screen over Zoom and scrolled through the document, which described a plan to report me to the art-school administration. There was one statement that stood out to me, which I paraphrase here because I don't have the document, something along the lines of: Let's get this one right. We failed with the other professor — let's do this one by the book. I inferred that they had attempted to bring charges against another teacher, without the desired outcome. Now they would try to get me, and make it stick.

This past May, a year and a half later, I received an email from an investigative reporter for The Michigan Daily, a student-run paper. She invited me to respond to a list of allegations against me, including: failure to use trigger warnings, exposing students to racist material, misgendering students, and demonstrating that I was a racist by confounding two names. Also included was an inflammatory accusation from someone outside

the university who claimed I had kissed them on the forehead and whispered in their ear, “You are a dog.”

Where did such charges come from? Some were rooted in truth, however ungenerously construed. Early in the semester, after showing the Crumb image and before learning everyone’s name, I had apparently mixed up two students with Hispanic surnames. A screenshot from the R. Crumb Hate Corner claimed that this faux pas was inexcusable and proved that I was a racist. I’ve been working on a project in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, for 15 years. This allegation was so far from the truth that I could barely make sense of it.

Another day, I inadvertently misgendered a trans student, whom I had known the previous semester when they used a different pronoun. I immediately apologized. Screenshots followed.

I felt under siege. Would I have felt this way if the screenshots had not been shared with me? Maybe not, but the students who sent them thought they were doing me a favor, and at the time, I thought they were, too. In retrospect, the screenshots put me into something of a panic. Words I wasn’t meant to read were seared into my consciousness.

I dreaded logging into Zoom on the days I taught. Most students would not turn their cameras on, leaving me feeling like a fish in a lighted tank in the middle of a dark room. Because of Covid, I was stuck in my house nearly 24 hours a day, leaving only to buy groceries or take my mother to chemotherapy appointments. Enforced isolation compounded my misery, but my experience was far from unique. The students were in a similar situation.

In early October 2020, I met over Zoom with the (now former) dean of the Stamps School of Art & Design to ask for advice about the situation in my classroom, about which we had corresponded via email several times. His tone was sympathetic. He seemed supportive. By the time we Zoomed, he had also been contacted by students. We chatted idly for a few minutes,

after which I tried to shift the conversation to my class.

“No, we can’t talk about that yet,” he said, explaining that we must wait for an associate dean who was to act as a “neutral witness” to our discussion. The dean said that after our meeting, he and the associate dean would decide together how to proceed. Because he had a role in decision making, I did not understand how this witness could be considered impartial. I asked the dean what was at stake, but he offered no explanation. I had hoped for a friendly, frank conversation, but the dean had immediately shifted into protective mode, as if he saw the situation as a legal threat to the school. I decided I’d be better off with a witness of my own, so I asked to reschedule.

I took the administration’s refusal to speak freely with me as a cue to shut my mouth. I thus had no support from my colleagues. I was in limbo, with a problem I had to deal with alone. I felt an untenable combination of fear, shame, and anger. I imagined that I was the only one struggling with students in this way. There were other faculty members who I thought might be sympathetic to my plight, but I feared that they’d believe the mounting allegations that I was racist or transphobic, or that, at least, a seed of doubt would be planted.

Eventually, I took an unusual step for a tenured professor. I requested a faculty mentor. I needed advice. My mentor had had success in presenting challenging material, but she had also been attacked for doing so and still suffered unresolved angst from the experience. I wondered why I hadn’t been previously aware of her struggles. Or the struggles of other professors she told me about. Were such things too shameful to mention?

In an attempt to restore peace to my classroom, I invited the historian Bill Kartalopoulos to deliver two lectures on comics history, thinking that students would be more receptive to an outside expert. During the second lecture, Bill spoke of Robert Crumb and the American underground-comix movement, couching the topic in historical context. When I tried to engage my students in conversation about Bill’s presentations, they had nothing to say. They were silent.

I also invited several comics artists to class. One of them, Casanova (Nobody) Frankenstein, an acclaimed artist and author of *In the Wilderness*, ignited the students' ire. He gave trigger warnings before his presentation because he uses racial caricature in some of his work. He is Black. He was "owning" white-racist caricature, subverting it. Students challenged him about this and also about his depictions of women. He explained his thinking and his process in great detail. The students remained incensed — and let him know it. Frankenstein was stunned. I apologized to him.

His visit generated another complaint to the administration. The students were offended by Frankenstein's work. They were also offended that he had been vaping nicotine (while Zooming from his own home, 2,000 miles away!). One woman wrote, "Never in my 4 years at studying in the University of Michigan have I been more displeased."

I would like to address some actions that were taken in today's Graphic Narrative 336 course. Phoebe brought in a guest artist to talk about his work, usually this involves a q&a session, a screenshare of work that is published, etc. This has worked quite successfully in past lectures as we've been able to talk to Keith Knight and cartoonist Alex Graham. However, today an artist by the name of Casanova Frankenstein, formerly known as Ibert Melvin Frank III was introduced. I understand that there is encouragement to talk about work that has cultural significance and provides a clearer understanding of discussions pertaining to race. However, I can comfortably say that various students of color were offended, including myself, about the outright depictions of sexualization of women, including objectification of their bodies, and various racial caricatures alongside them.

In certain contexts, like in various Anthropology and Sociology courses I've taken at 300-level in the University of Michigan have shown similar images with cultural context in relation to history. This is done so with 1. A warning at the beginning of the class, 2. An option to opt out, and 3. An opportunity to learn. I preface this, because what was witnessed today was an artist smoking on Zoom, and defending these outwardly racist and sexist drawings to the rest of the class, even after being questioned by students and Phoebe herself.

I would like to talk about this with you in more detail, because never in my 4 years at studying in the University of Michigan have I been more displeased.

Please let me know when it's a good time for you to speak or what the next course of action is.

That's how I became the subject of an inquiry led by the Office of Institutional Equity. The process, which straddled the fall-2020 and winter-2021 semesters, was grueling. What was happening seemed out of proportion with any wrong I had actually done. I considered hiring a lawyer, but the cost was prohibitive.

I had presented the piece by Crumb on the second day of class, September 2, 2020. Several days later, the students contacted my dean with a list of complaints. By the second week of September, the students had written to OIE, and met with that office on September 25. By the time I met with the dean via Zoom

on October 8, their complaints were on their way to becoming formalized by OIE. A scheduled follow-up meeting with the dean, to which I planned to bring an ombudsman, was canceled in the third week of October because OIE had begun a formal inquiry. From then on, OIE would be directing the process.

The inquiry included a long discussion with the Office of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion followed by a “hearing” with OIE in which I was presented with a list of allegations and asked to respond. I was warned that any of my responses could be held against me should the inquiry advance to a formal investigation. I responded anyway.

When I tried to explain the classroom dynamics (the R. Crumb Hate Corner and the stress felt by students who were afraid to publicly disagree with the complainers), there was little acknowledgment and no discussion, as if the behavior of the students was not pertinent.

After several months, the equity office closed my case, with no further action requested.

Over the following year, some of the complaining students continued to enroll in my courses. Perhaps they needed the credits — or perhaps they were intent on gathering more information to use against me. I preferred to believe the more benign possibility, because I was tired of being worried, and relieved that OIE had closed my case.

These students, however, along with a few others, kept complaining. Once, for instance, when a majority of my students had missed an assignment deadline, I asked the class: “What’s going on? Do you need more time?” I was met with silence. Attempting to elicit some response, I asked again: “Student X? Student Y? Student Z?” (using their names). I was accused of “singling students out in order to embarrass them.”

The associate dean contacted me and explained that these complaints would be added to my personnel file. He warned me that should he receive more, the case could be reopened by

OIE.

I couldn't anticipate which actions or words would trigger another complaint. I tried to figure out when I could retire. If I sold my house, where would I go? I wouldn't stay in Ann Arbor feeling like a pariah. I've always wanted to return to San Francisco, the city that raised me, but I was priced out of that town decades ago. It felt unfair. Everything felt unfair. I felt trapped.

I couldn't work out an escape route, so I just kept teaching.

The winter semester of 2022 seemed better. I had a grant to research cartoonists of color. I had guests who represented broad points of view about comics from a critical standpoint. I felt things were going well until May, when I received the email from the student investigative reporter at The Michigan Daily asking me to respond to a list of allegations. My administration, as well as lawyers at the [Comic Book Legal Defense Fund](#) and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, whom I contacted as soon as I read the email, advised me to make my answers brief. To say I was not racist or sexist or transphobic would be in vain.

I spent the first two months of summer waiting for the article to appear, depressed by the realization that I was caught up in an ever-expanding pool of muck from which I might never extricate myself. I worried about what the article might say, and whether my job and reputation were at stake. It was difficult to focus on my creative work. Instead, I worked in my yard, sawing dead branches and rolling boulders across the lawn, waiting for the hammer to fall.

THE article, "[Daily Investigation Finds Allegations of Micro-aggressions Against Comics Professor](#)," was published on June 25, 2022. It is a hit piece, and I won't dwell on it here, except to address one of its more sensational charges: that I had kissed someone and whispered "You are a dog," which was especially unfortunate, and entirely untrue. "Asa," as they're called in the article, was not a student at the University of Michigan, but

an established cartoonist with no ties to my university. I had chosen them as a participant in a summer-2021 residency in Florida. But they were expelled by the director after allegedly making disturbing statements to several people, including that someone there was “going to die.”

The reporter refused to contact two professors, both cartoonists, able to refute the “You are a dog” allegation, asserting that I might have groomed them to speak for me. I hadn’t. These two professors had attended the residency, witnessed Asa’s behavior, and suffered Asa’s abuse. They were willing to speak and had plenty to say.

I didn’t kiss “Asa.” I didn’t call them a dog. I like their work, and I hope they’re OK.

What’s relevant here is that as soon as the article appeared, this sad and bizarre lie seemed to my detractors to confirm the most sordid notion of my character. One example: On Twitter, a student who had taken a class with me every semester since the fall of 2020 criticized a colleague who had defended me: “You unintentionally prove a point in the article that this problem is institutional; as a Umich prof you are choosing to close rank and knit-pick [sic] an article calling out a coworker. She sexually assaulted a student and this is the hill you choose to die on?”

At the beginning of the current semester, a student wrote inviting me to be a speaker at [TEDxUofM](#). I happily accepted, thinking that this was a sign that I might again feel welcomed in the academic community, in spite of the article.

As the date of the talks approached, I had a conversation with two students over Zoom to discuss event details. They said they’d looked me up and read interviews I’d given. If they’d done that, then surely, I thought, they’d seen the Michigan Daily article.

But they hadn’t, apparently. Several days later, I received the following email:

“Dear Professor Gloeckner, First and foremost, thank you for taking the time to meet with us last week. Unfortunately, in light of the Michigan Daily article, we have decided not to move forward with you as a speaker at this time. I am sincerely sorry for the time you have spent for TEDx.

Being a part of the bigger TED organization, we have to follow their guidelines. One of the pillars of this organization is that talks cannot be divisive and we worry that having you as a speaker would bring controversy and resulting [sic] in us acting contrary to this pillar.”

The tweets continued.

Is it possible any longer to be an artist in the increasingly restrictive climate of the university? Is it even possible to teach the history of art? I am no longer sure. The past two years have me rethinking my role as an educator.

After the Michigan Daily article appeared, professors contacted me describing similar experiences in their classrooms: allegations of racism, sexism, even of “being mean.” Some, even though they hadn’t experienced these things, reported feeling like they’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. There is a sense that there is no room for misstep.

“The university,” one faculty member told me, “doesn’t care about protecting or defending the reputation of individual professors. They care about tuition revenue and creating and maintaining relationships with significant donors. All elements of the grievance process are put in place to protect the university. They won’t stand up for you.”

I don’t think the university did the students any favors, either. No one is happy. Neither students nor teachers can thrive in such an atmosphere of fear.

Comics have only recently found their way into the academy, and their place there remains tentative. Meanwhile, off campus, right-wingers are trying to get books like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Jerry Craft’s *New Kid* removed from school libraries.

Although I wouldn't say that I have faced a concerted effort to curtail free speech, I have heard one message unambiguously: Education is a safer occupation for those willing to limit their speech by excluding certain material. That would make it impossible to teach the history of comics.

The illustrated novel I'm working on now can't be described as traditional "comics." Based upon fact, experience, and research, it is about several families and a neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez, directly across the U.S. border.

I've drawn the images in my previous books with pen and ink. For my current project, I constructed miniature scenes and photographed them. Frustrated by my physical distance from the place and the people I'm writing about, I began building parts of Ciudad Juárez in my studio. I built replicas of houses I had visited, trying faithfully to reproduce interior and exterior details. The floor of my studio was covered in sand. I constructed dolls to populate the streets and buildings. The process of making all these things made me feel closer to the story. It was something of a spiritual ritual; I was recreating a particular place as it appeared at a particular time, and I no longer felt so distant. I could walk the streets of Anapra day or night, because they lived with me.



The author's miniature construction depicts a Ciudad Juárez home.

In 2018, the University of Michigan International Institute had invited me to exhibit a work in progress in its gallery. Several weeks before the exhibit was to open, I received an email from the International Institute describing some “strong concerns” about my project expressed by a group of professors in the Latina/o-studies program, who wished to remain anonymous to me. The program had been asked to co-sponsor the exhibit, a request which it declined.



Author's miniature construction of a family in Mexico

The professors had been sent a brief description of the work along with two or three images. Based on this material, they voiced concern that “the miniaturization or infantilization of the Mexican body through the use of dolls could be trivializing and upsetting to some people”; they “worry that the scenes depicted might reinscribe negative racial stereotypes.”

Other remarks in the letter focused on the “demonization of Mexicans in national rhetoric” and the potential for “retraumatization” that the work, about a violent era in Juárez, might present. These concerns led this group of anonymous faculty members to conclude that the work should not be exhibited.

Although the identity of the writers was concealed from me, I responded to the director of the Latina/o-studies program, extending an invitation to those interested to visit my studio for a discussion of the project. I never got a response.

It's clear what was going on: This was an attempt to limit my voice as an artist. Rapid, erroneous presumptions made about my work and a superficial reading of the project had elicited a knee-jerk attempt to quash my message, which was, I assumed, interpreted as out of alignment with the reigning academic political agenda.

I decided to withdraw from the exhibition in order to protect myself and the project. Any benefit or pleasure I'd derive from exhibiting the work seemed unworthy of the price likely to be exacted. Writing, making art, can tear out the heart, and I don't wish to place mine on a platter and present it to the academy for approval. I'm not making work for them. Let them talk about it when it's out in the world, if they wish.

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What does it mean when institutions voluntarily pre-empt the dissemination of certain ideas or types of expression? What does it mean when shallow readings of an artist's work (mine, Crumb's, Casanova Frankenstein's, Art Spiegelman's, or anyone else's) serve as the basis for encouraging the exclusion of artwork from the curriculum or from exhibition? What does it mean when students themselves seem eager to support such exclusion? Are professors expected to participate in this quietly

ensorious shift in the academic climate? Is it assumed that we will discourage the exploration of certain ideas in student work? I hope not.

I was hired because of the creative work I've done, and there was a time when I was happy to share my work and the work of artists I admire with my students. The art that interests me, as well as my own art, is messy. As in life, ugliness and beauty co-exist. Some might feel the need for a trigger warning on nearly every page.

I now avoid talking about my work unless students ask me about it. I'm not proud of this.

Phoebe Gloeckner is a graphic novelist.

A version of this article appeared in the December 9, 2022, issue. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/my-cartoonish-cancellation>