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# The Graphic Memoir *Crude* and the C3 Framework: Disciplinary Thinking in the Social Studies

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## Abstract

This article examines one way that graphic memoirs can be utilized to engage K-12 students in the type of social studies instruction advocated for in the C3 Framework. First, we define graphic memoirs and describe potential benefits with using this type of text. The article shifts to an overview of one graphic memoir *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) and then gives three activities that can be implemented to develop students' disciplinary thinking skills in the manner argued for within the C3 Framework. The steps and resources needed to implement the three activities are provided.

**Keywords:** Graphic memoirs; *Crude*; C3 Framework; environmental social injustices

Social studies education is changing. Teacher-centered lecturing is slowly being replaced by a focus on student-centered learning that actively engages students in the learning process. This is a positive step. School should not be a place where younger people come to watch older people work. This movement to student-centered learning has been in large part driven by the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The C3 Framework focuses on building students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills in the four core social studies disciplines: civics, geography, history, and economics (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013; Swan & Griffin, 2013). Many states, including Kentucky, have directly adopted the C3 Framework or use social studies standards that closely mirror the disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills found within its indicators. For some social studies teachers, this means that they will have to restructure their classroom instruction. One of the outcomes from implementing the type of social studies instruction advocated for by the C3 Framework is that teachers need to utilize texts to develop their students' disciplinary thinking skills (Swan & Griffin, 2013; VanSledright, 2013). One type of text that can be used is graphic memoirs.

This article explores how graphic memoirs can be used to engage K-12 students in the type of social studies instruction argued for in the C3 Framework. First, we define graphic memoirs and discuss potential benefits associated with using this type of text. The article shifts to an overview of one graphic memoir *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) and then provides three activities that can be used to develop students' social studies disciplinary thinking skills in the manner advocated for within the C3 Framework. The steps and resources needed to implement the three activities are provided.

## Graphic Memoirs as a Teaching Tool

Graphic novels are book-length comics, or sequential art, either an original work or a reprint of previously published comics within a single-story arc (Eisner, 2008; Weiner, 2003).

Comics are multimodal texts. They utilize an interplay of the visuals and texts to convey meaning through panels, text, and gutters (McCloud, 1993; Serafini, 2013). Contrary to the idea that comics are simplistic texts for young audiences, graphic novels can be highly complex texts that address significant issues, weaving multiple narratives with an intentional use of symbolic imagery.

The most famous, and arguably most iconic, graphic novel to demonstrate the narrative complexity possible in a comic is Art Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*. The graphic novel is a three-pronged narrative encompassing Vladek Spiegelman's (Art's father) experiences in the Holocaust, Art's experiences as a child of Holocaust survivors, and the story of the creation of *Maus*. The images used in the graphic novel appear deceptively simplistic, as Spiegelman uses black and white drawings of animals to tell his story. However, his choice to represent different groups with specific animals, such as Jews represented as mice, Germans as cats, and the Poles as pigs, is not random. In the book *Meta Maus*, Spiegelman (2011) explains his rationale for choosing the animals representing the different groups, such as mice and pigs being used by Nazi propagandists to reference Jews and Poles, respectively. One could argue that by using the animal iconography, Spiegelman was able to demonstrate in a visual shorthand what would take multiple sentences to explain in a traditional text. Specifically, when Vladek Spiegelman and his wife Anja attempt to pass as non-Jewish Poles, they are depicted as mice wearing pig masks.

Beyond the omnipresent superheroes, there are graphic novels in every genre of fiction, including romance, action, and even horror (Sheffield et al., 2015). One of the most frequently published genres of graphic novels is the graphic memoir. A sub-set of autobiographical literature, memoirs tell the story of a specific moment in an author's life that had a significant emotional impact (Chaney, 2011).

Memoirs, while they contain factual information, convey the author's emotional truth more so than a wholly faithful account of an event (Duncan et al., 2015). The author's emotional connection to that event can be leveraged to engage students in historical inquiry through the process of emotive empathy (Chisholm et al., 2017). Since graphic memoirs are created by the person living through an event, and told through what is true through their lens, graphic memoirs offer a first-person account that can be analyzed for perspective, bias, and purpose.

Many, if not most, graphic memoirs address topics that are not necessarily aligned with social studies curriculum, such as Alison Bechdel's (2006) *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* or David B.'s (2005) *Epileptic*. Both are powerful memoirs, but neither is aligned with what is typically conceived as being social studies content. That said, there are a great number of graphic memoirs that directly address content typically taught in social studies classrooms. Example social studies content-related graphic memoirs include *Run: Book One* (Lewis, et al., 2021) and *Dark Room: A Memoir in Black and White* (Weaver, 2012). Both explore perspectives of the civil rights movement in the 1960s; one from the perspective of a civil rights leader (*Run*), and the other from a Latinx girl living in Alabama (*Darkroom*). *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei et al, 2019) and *Citizen 13660* (Okubo, 1946) are memoirs about Japanese imprisonment during World

War II. However, they are told from different perspectives. Takei's memoir is from the perspective of a child written more than 60 years after the event, while Miné Okubo's memoir is the story of an imprisoned adult published a year after World War II. These four books are but a handful of graphic memoirs available for social studies teachers to use in their classrooms.

Graphic memoirs have the potential to be impactful texts to use in the social studies classroom. Events that are distanced from students, either by time or location, can be difficult for them to conceptualize. Because of the visual, yet not overly realistic, nature of most graphic memoirs, these texts offer an accessible entry into the event in question. The graphic memoir makes the presented content both palpable and palatable. As previously discussed, graphic memoirs are presented through the lens of an author's emotions. The emotions depicted on the page help to connect students to the content; they can relate to the events through an emotive empathetic response (Chisholm et al., 2017). The palatability of graphic memoirs references a student's ability to grapple with potentially highly disturbing content through images that are less realistic than a photograph or a video. For example, Kenji Nakazawa's (2004) *Barefoot Gen* depicts the destruction of Hiroshima when the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city. The images of horses on fire, children with glass embedded throughout their body, and people with skin dripping off their face while unpleasant in a cartoon would be nightmarish in photographs. By using a comic, in this case a graphic memoir, a teacher can approach a potentially disturbing topic in such a way that students can process the information, yet not experience a significantly negative emotional reaction.

Similar to movies and traditional texts, teachers may choose to use excerpts of a graphic memoir to highlight a specific idea or theme. Using excerpts from a graphic novel (whether a graphic memoir or a different genre) is also beneficial to the teacher due to time constraints associated with the traditional structure of class periods. While reading a graphic novel will take considerably less time than reading a traditional novel or information text, it would still take more time than a teacher may have to dedicate to this one resource.

Listed below are three lesson activities designed to accompany three two-page spreads of *Crude: A Memoir* by Fajardo, Tardy-Joubert, Chute, and Roudeau (2021). The three activities are designed to be used at three different grade levels, elementary (Activity 1), middle grades (Activity 2), and high school (Activity 3). That said, all three of the activities can be successfully modified for use in a high school social studies class.

### **Teaching with *Crude: A Memoir***

*Crude* (Fajardo, et al, 2021) is a graphic memoir written by Ecuadorian lawyer, Pablo Fajardo. Through richly colored illustrations and succinct text, the memoir chronicles his efforts to hold Texaco accountable for the damage it did during the twenty years (1972-1992) of drilling for oil in Ecuador's Amazonian Rainforest. During that 20-year period, the region's environment was drastically impacted by the waste and by-products of oil drilling in what was previously a pristine ecosystem (Barrett, 2014). Whether through negligence or neglect, Texaco allowed oil to seep into local water sources, impacting both the wildlife and human populations. Residents of the Ecuadorian rainforest, which are largely indigenous populations, were severely impacted by

the carcinogens associated with oil production (Vargas et al., 2020). Disproportionately high levels of stomach and uterine cancer, miscarriages, and leukemia are seen in the areas closest to Texaco's drilling locations. When Texaco left in 1992, the company's actions continued to adversely affect both the environment and the local populations. Despite the Ecuadorian government certifying that Texaco had cleaned the areas where it drilled, the reality was that the company merely buried the evidence of its pollution.

Pablo's story does not have a happy ending. The resources of a multinational energy company, when combined with the questionable decisions of a government more concerned with profit than environmental impacts, made Pablo's legal fight against Texaco an uphill battle. Thirty years later, Pablo Fajardo and his colleagues are still fighting for the Ecuadorian rainforest and the health of its indigenous people (Barrett, 2014; Fajardo et al, 2021; Vargas et al., 2020) .

*Crude: A Memoir* (Fajardo, et al, 2021) is a text that addresses several interdisciplinary topics within social studies content. The activities listed below use *Crude* (Fajardo et al, 2021) to examine human impacts on the environment (a geography-focused construct), the idea of civic agency and identity, and the realities of the rise of multinational corporations in this Second Gilded Age (which is an economic as well as historic topic).

### Activity 1

Although students may have extensive experience with animation and some experience reading comic strips, it is necessary to spend time teaching them how to read and make meaning from the panels, text, and gutters of a graphic novel (Clabough & Sheffield, 2022). The first part of Activity 1 will require students to examine the structure of the comic, analyzing the use of panels, gutters, and text boxes. The second part of the activity focuses on the geography-focused content embedded on pages 46 and 47 of the graphic memoir.

#### *Part 1: Reading a Comic*

Ask students to look at the two types of text boxes used on pages 46 and 47. Have the students describe the text boxes and the type of text depicted in the two different box formats. The students should notice that the boxes with the straight lines are narrative text, where the author is speaking directly to the reader. The text boxes that have a more fluid shape are conversational. They depict the spoken interaction between the characters on the page. Within this two page spread, these fluid text boxes reflect the conversation between Pablo and Doña Maria, a woman living in a rural settlement.

Now task students with examining the panels on the two pages. Students should read the panels on page 46 first. Ask them to identify what is happening in these four panels. Who is depicted in the scenes and what action is taking place? Then, have students read the six panels on page 47. While looking at these panels, ask the students to explain how the cartoonist used the different panels to focus their attention to a particular topic or event.

Finally, ask students to identify what is happening in the gutters between the panels. These gutters are not just blank spaces. Rather, there is action implied within that space. What is the action inferred in the gutters on pages 46 and 47?

Through the analysis of the comic components prior to asking students to do a close reading of the pages, students are well-situated to make evidence-based inferences about the content depicted in the comic.

*Part 2: Human Impact on the Environment*

The events depicted on pages 46 and 47 are both highly memorable and accessible to students of all grade levels. In this spread, Pablo visits a rural community where he meets a woman who shares with him that her pig died suddenly. When the animal's stomach was opened, it was full of oil. The waste from Texaco's drilling seeped into the water and soil, polluting the food sources available to animals and humans, alike. Students can use the graphic organizer found in Appendix A to analyze the information presented on these two pages. The graphic organizer tasks students with asking the who, what, where, why, and so what of the depicted event. Students will be expected to support their answers to the graphic organizer's questions using evidence from the memoir excerpt.

The negative impact of Texaco's oil drilling on the environment and people of Ecuador cannot be overstated. The two pages selected for this activity capture in a particularly visceral way how the actions of an oil company can have a direct negative impact on a local community. In this case, the family lost its livestock because oil polluted the water and soil where the family lived and the animal ate.

**Activity 2**

Social studies teachers need to help middle school students construct their civic identities (Clabough, 2017). Democratic citizenship is not a passive process as citizens elect politicians and support or oppose public policies that may or may not become law (Parker, 2015). This means that middle school students need learning opportunities to grasp how people's values, biases, and beliefs are shaped by public issues and events in their lives and how these experiences shape their involvement in society (Evans, 2021; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Middle school students can examine pages 42 and 43 from *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) to see how working with the Franciscan fathers shaped Pablo's worldview. Specifically, Pablo was outraged by the extreme health conditions that people in Ecuador endured due to Texaco's actions.

Students start by reading pages 42 and 43 from *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) in pairs. Then, they complete Pablo Fajardo's Civic Character Graphic Organizer, which is provided in Appendix B. The pairs draw Pablo Fajardo in the right column and include items that they feel reflect his civic character. The items added might be a picture of a lion next to Pablo to signify his courage or an epithet like Social Justice Warrior or Environmental Champion of Ecuador. The pairs will explain their artistic decisions in the last question. The left-hand column includes several questions that connect to Pablo's civic identity that can be discerned from reading pages 42 and 43.

The teacher should walk around and help students as they complete this graphic organizer. After pairs complete this graphic organizer, there is a gallery walk where they share their responses. This activity sets up a reflection writing piece for students to consider factors in their lives that impact their civic identity. Students can answer similar questions as those that



appear in Pablo Fajardo's Civic Character Graphic Organizer. Some questions that the teacher might use include what issue impacts your civic identity the most and explain your reasoning, and how would you take civic action like Pablo to help address a public issue in your local community? This learning opportunity gives students experience grappling with the contours of public issues and helps see the root causes of issues (Blevins et al., 2018; Journell, 2016). Students also get opportunities to reflect on and do research on issues that they are passionate about and consider ways that they can be involved in their local communities. These considerations can plant a seed for activism in our students that can flourish as they get older (Clabough, 2017; Martell & Stevens, 2021).

### Activity 3

*Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) captures aspects of the Second Gilded Age that has emerged over the last 40 years. Large corporations have gained increased power and political influence inside the United States and around the world (Bartels, 2016; Perlstein, 2020). High school students in pairs read pages 60 and 61 to see the Second Gilded Age that has emerged as large corporations exerted their influence on a global scale in the 1980s. Then, they complete the chart found in Appendix C. The chart is designed to help students grasp the differences between the methods employed by Pablo and those opposed Texaco's actions in Ecuador as discussed on page 60 and the corporate lawyer for Texaco, Ricardo Reis Veiga, as discussed on page 61.

By reading pages 60 and 61 from *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) and completing the chart in Appendix C, high school students grasp the economic, social, cultural, geographical, and political differences of those supporting and opposing Texaco. Pairs share their responses to the chart in a class discussion. Students add onto their charts based on peers' responses. This class discussion helps students focus on page 61 with how Texaco tried to use its wealth and political influence in Ecuador to manipulate the levers of power in order to win its court case. The teacher asks some follow-up questions to explore the subtle threats that Chevron used to attempt to coerce Alberto Dahik, Ecuador's Vice President, to support Texaco's case. One question asked might be the following. How does Ricardo Reis Vega subtly hint that Ecuador's economy would be negatively impacted if Texaco does not win the lawsuit? Use evidence from page 61 to support your arguments. The completion of this activity allows high school students to grasp how Texaco tried to use its staggering wealth to influence Ecuador's government. Students are able to hone in on the extremely different ways that Texaco and its opponents try to take civic action. Additionally, students discuss how the artist drew contrasts of these two pages to show the vast wealth inequalities. All of these steps help students grasp the ways that Texaco tried to leverage its political influence through its financial might to not be held accountable to the damage the company caused in Ecuador.

### Afterthoughts

In this article, we defined graphic memoirs, discussed benefits of using this type of graphic novel, and modeled three classroom activities for using *Crude* (Fajardo et al., 2021) in K-12 social studies classrooms. This was done to give social studies teachers a better understanding for the potential of using graphic memoirs in their classrooms. Social studies

teachers also gain another type of text that can be utilized to strengthen their students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills as argued for in the C3 Framework. Due to the arguments for best teaching practices advocated for in the C3 Framework, social studies teachers need to search out and integrate social studies texts in their classrooms to develop their students' geographic, civic, economic, and historical thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills. The three activities in this article demonstrate the potential for graphic memoirs to do just that.

Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is changing. The various technology mediums through social media platforms are changing how we communicate with each other. Our students are constantly encountering messages that use texts and visuals on diverse social media platforms from politicians and special interest groups to support or oppose public policies. These public policies will not only impact our students' daily lives but also the members within their local communities, state, and nation (Clabough, 2020; Journell, 2020). K-12 social studies teachers must meet the challenge of adapting their classroom instruction in order to address their students' learning needs. Graphic memoirs are valuable tools that K-12 social studies teachers can use to meet their social studies standards but more importantly prepare students to be literate and contributing members of a democratic society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Appendix A

## Human Impact on the Environment

**Directions:**

Read pages 46 and 47 of *Crude*. Answer the questions below about the scene depicted in these two pages. **Be sure to provide support for your answers by using information from this excerpt.**

**Who** are the people shown in these two pages?

**Where** do the events in these two pages take place?

**What** happened to the people and/or animals in these two pages?

**Why** did it happen to the people and/or animals in these two pages?

**So What?** What is the message of the story being told in these two pages?

## Appendix B

**Pablo Fajardo's Civic Identity**

<p><b>What health issues did citizens in Ecuador face? Use evidence from these two pages to support your arguments.</b></p>	<p><b>Image of Pablo's civic identity.</b></p>
<p><b>How would the health concerns of Ecuador's citizens impact Pablo's civic identity? Use evidence from these two pages to support your arguments.</b></p>	
<p><b>How does your drawing show Pablo's civic identity? Why did you include certain items in your drawing to capture Pablo's civic identity? Use evidence from these two pages to support your arguments.</b></p>	

## Appendix C

**The Second Gilded Age: Grassroots Activism vs. Corporate Action**

<b>Pablo Fajardo's Actions</b>	<b>Ricardo Reis Veiga's Actions</b>
<p><b>How is Pablo Fajardo and opponents of Texaco depicted on page 60? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>	<p><b>How is Ricardo Reis Veiga depicted on page 61? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>
<p><b>How are Pablo Fajardo and opponents of Texaco taking civic action on page 60? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>	<p><b>How is Ricardo Reis Veiga taking civic action on page 61? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>
<p><b>Why did the artist depict Pablo Fajardo and opponents of Texaco the way that he did on page 60? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>	<p><b>Why did the artist depict Ricardo Reis Veiga the way that he did on page 61? Use evidence to support your arguments.</b></p>
<p><b>Why did the authors and artist create this two-page spread to highlight the differences between how Pablo Fajardo and Ricardo Reis Veiga tried to impact the court case with Texaco in Ecuador? Use evidence from pages 60 and 61 to support your arguments.</b></p>	