Greetings and welcome to the Comics Studies Society Summer Newsletter!

We have lots of exciting news to share, as well as great interviews, articles, and announcements. We hope you have a great summer and we'll be back in the Fall with another exclusive newsletter!
In Memorium: Consuela Francis

The Comics Studies Society remembers Conseula Francis, Professor of English and Associate Provost for Curriculum at College of Charleston, who passed away on May 9, 2016 at the age of 43 from complications due to Leukemia. Her resonant contributions to the field of comics studies over the past decade often explored the complexities of race and memory in contemporary comics. Outside the academy, she never hesitated to share her love for Marvel superheroes (or anything by Matt Fraction) by bringing her expertise in comics to blogs, symposia, and venues ranging from HeroesCon in Charlotte to a HuffPost Live conversation about minority actors playing “white” superheroes.

Much of Conseula’s published scholarship reflected her primary specialization in African American literary studies, including her recent monograph, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer."* As her research and teaching began to incorporate comics more frequently, Conseula applied her extensive background in reader response theory, narratology, and cultural studies to an analysis of visual narratives.

Her insightful chapter on “Drawing the Unspeakable: Kyle Baker’s Slave Narrative” from the 2012 collection, *Comics and the U.S. South*, juxtaposes the rhetorical strategies from antebellum slave narratives with Baker’s artistic choices in his graphic novel, *Nat Turner*. Another essay, “American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero,” focuses on how the Marvel series, *Truth: Red, White & Black*, raises larger questions about race and audience reception, particularly when decades of narrative continuity are at stake. Published in the Eisner-nominated 2015 collection, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics & Sequential Art*, this piece evaluates the efforts of Kyle Baker and Robert Morales to reimagine Captain America’s origin through an African American soldier in the 1940s. As she explains, “when a superhero story such as *Truth* employs race cognizance, that is, a black point of view, it is hard for fans to maintain the raceless fantasy that the genre depends on.”

Conseula also spoke frankly on the web about the challenges of teaching comics, particularly when it came to addressing race or justifying her qualifications to lead these classes at all. For eight years she even maintained the blog, *Afrogeek Mom and Dad*, where she and her husband shared their family’s love for popular culture. She used this online space to reflect further on the intersections between fandom and academia, while always being attentive to the lessons she modeled for her two daughters. Truly her passing
touches a number of scholarly communities, ranging from African American literature to popular romance fiction studies. We, too, mourn the loss of Conseula’s vital perspective in comics studies, a voice and a smile gone much too soon, and we offer our deepest condolences to her family.

CSS Election Results

Congratulations to Carol Tilley, Matthew J. Smith, and Christina Blanch! The CSS held elections for the Second Vice President and Members at Large positions and the results of the recent CSS election were announced at the culminations of festivities at ICAF on April 16th, 2016. Over 65% of registered members voted in the election, and we are delighted that Carol Tilley was elected to serve as our new Second Vice President while Matt Smith and Christina Blanch will join the Executive Board as Members at Large. Thanks to everyone who voted, all of the candidates, and our new officers!

ICAF 2016: A Personal Report

The 18th International Comic Arts Forum, or ICAF 2016, was held at the University of South Carolina in Columbia on April 14-16. Organized by the ICAF Executive Committee under the leadership of Chair José Alaniz, this year's conference offered a diverse slate of distinguished guests—very diverse, even by ICAF's high standard—and one of the richest academic programs in ICAF's 21-year history. Conference site liaison Qiana Whitted (who also serves CSS as a Member at Large) and her Columbia team pulled out all the stops to arrange what I can only call an amazing program, robust, international in scope, and yet also tied to South Carolina and to the US South more generally.

At the heart of the program, of course, were the academic paper presentations, thirty-seven in all, presented by scholars from a lively mix of institutions and disciplines. Some were veteran ICAF presenters, but many were new to ICAF (including a great many up-and-coming scholars). The papers were divided into fourteen panels, spread over eight time slots. The papers covered a tremendous range of genres, traditions, and issues, including race, gender, immigration, global superheroes, Southern culture, autobiography, webcomics, queer comics, style, transmedia adaptation, fandom as participatory culture, and many others. Sharply presented, deeply thought-out, and provocative, these papers, from my point of view, made up a terrific array, and an encouraging dispatch from the future of comics studies.
In addition, ICAF 2016 boasted a world-class roster of guest artists, including Howard Cruse, pioneering LGBT cartoonist, *Gay Comix* editor, and graphic novelist (*Stuck Rubber Baby*); Cece Bell, prolific children's book author and creator of the phenomenally successful graphic memoir *El Deafo*; Dominique Goblet, Belgian graphic memoirist (*Pretending Is Lying*) and avant-garde comix and multimedia artist; Keith Knight, cutting-edge African-American editorial and strip cartoonist (*The Knight Life*, *The K Chronicles*); poet Gary Jackson, author of *Missing You, Metropolis* and Professor at the College of Charleston; and Sanford Greene, popular comic book artist known for his work on *Power Man and Iron Fist, Runaways, Wonder Girl*, and *Rotten Apple*. (Celebrated *Alter Ego* editor and comic book writer and historian Roy Thomas was scheduled to appear with Greene, but could not due to a family bereavement.)


From Chaney onward, the conference was a string of highlights. Here are a few:

The Columbia Museum of Art hosted a satellite event on the first night of the conference, co-sponsored by the CMA's Friends of African American Art & Culture. Keith Knight's timely and powerful multimedia lecture, "They Shoot Black People Don't They?", satirically examined police brutality and racism in the U.S., reflecting recent headline news with cutting humor but also deep humanity. Threading his talk through twenty years' worth of his cartoons about police misconduct and violence, and about the scourge of racial profiling, Knight revealed himself to be a cartoon ambassador and educator of the highest order. Poet Gary Jackson opened this evening by reading a series of poems in dialogue with popular culture, comic books in particular, as viewed through the lenses of race, racist misrepresentation, and underrepresented identities. Piercing irony, complex social critique, and a deep knowledge of
comics culture shone through in these elegant, stunning, at times heartrending, poems, delivered by Jackson with non-nonsense eloquence and fire.

On the second night, Howard Cruse's career-spanning talk showed his development as an artist, his gradual engagement of gay rights and other LGBT issues in his work, the political, spiritual, psychedelic, and theatrical influences percolating in his comics, and the origins and creative process behind his seminal semi-autobiographical graphic novel Stuck Rubber Baby (1995). A superbly well-crafted, beautifully illustrated artist's talk, movingly introduced by scholar Frank Bramlett, this event had Cruse and his audience daubing their eyes by the end, as they reflected both on an amazing life in comics and on the social changes that have happened along the way.

On the third day, John Lent Award winner Eike Exner (University of Southern California) gave a lecture drawn from his research, "The Influence of Pre-War Translations of American Comic Strips on the Development of Comics in Japan." Exner's groundbreaking scholarship revealed the degree of transcultural influence in early 20th century manga, and specifically the way both licensed and unlicensed translations and adaptations of American comics shaped the format and even the reading direction of manga at a crucial moment in the forms's development. Arguing that manga and American strips are essentially part of the same medium, and share a history of intertwined development, Exner showed myriad examples of seminal Japanese comic strip art culled from rare periodical sources. The result was a stimulating and extraordinarily promising example of cross-cultural comics historiography.

The sheer diversity of art analyzed and celebrated throughout the conference—from Cece Bell’s accessible and sophisticated use of funny animal conventions to convey the experience of disability, to Dominique Goblet’s experimental, often autobiographical projects in comics, artists’ books, and gallery exhibitions, to Sanford Greene’s reflections on character design and anime influence in superhero comics—testified to the range and sheer uncategorizable splendor of comic art seen globally. The academic papers addressed an equally breathtaking diversity of creators and work, from Honoré Daumier to Otto Binder to Kyle Baker to Jess Fink. From comics and cartooning pre-1900, to current works like Southern Bastards, Ms. Marvel, and Kill Shakespeare, this ICAF covered as wide a range as any comics conference I’ve witnessed.

Speaking for CSS, I can say that we were proud to take part in ICAF 2016. The Society co-sponsored and –hosted a luncheon on the first day, and an evening reception on the second. We were glad to help offer these important opportunities for social interaction. In addition, ICAF graciously spotlighted CSS
at the opening and close of the conference; I had the honor of delivering opening and closing remarks, and, at the very end, of announcing the results of our first-ever election by paying members. Perhaps most importantly, CSS’s Graduate Student Caucus organized a roundtable for the second day on the theme “Getting a Job When You Work on Comics,” featuring (then GSC President) Ben Novotny Owen, Andréa Gilroy, Frederik Byrn Køhlert, and Susan Kirtley. We of CSS take pride in supporting the Caucus and the work of mentoring up-and-coming scholars in the field, and we hope that this GSC event will become the first of an unending series!

If this all sounds like an unrestrained gushfest, that’s because, from this writer’s point of view, ICAF 2016 was eminently gush-worthy. Having attended comics-themed conferences for over twenty years, and every ICAF since 1996, I can attest that what the ICAF Executive Committee—and in particular Qiana Whitted and her team of students, colleagues, and volunteers—put on this time was one of the greats. (I’m wondering whether Qiana has caught up on her rest since then!) The Comics Studies Society is honored to be allied to this most cosmopolitan of conferences in our field.

(And, on a personal note, I got served a birthday cake at the end of everything. This may not have added an ounce of intellectual rigor to the proceedings, but it did get me a bit misted up!)

Stay tuned for news regarding ICAF 2017 (Seattle), and CSS’s role in it! Also, check out the ICAF website for a complete review of the Columbia conference, including a video playlist, a photo slideshow, tweets, doodles, and the full conference program: http://www.internationalcomicartsforum.org/icaf-2016-review.html

Graduate Student Caucus Report

I’m grateful to have had the chance to serve as President of the CSS’s Graduate Student Caucus, particularly during the first year and a bit of the society’s life. It’s been fascinating to be part of a scholarly society as it begins to define itself. As part of the CSS Executive Board, I’ve watched the board members in action as they took on the considerable labor of turning an idea into an incorporated non-profit with dues-paying members and a journal. And within the Grad Caucus it’s been heartening to work with the dedicated people who comprise comics studies' next generation. That’s been particularly important personally; as a graduate student working on a dissertation that seems, at times, super abstruse, it’s wonderful to have the sense that I do actually have a crew. And during hours of Skype meetings, emails, and
Facebook messages over the last year and a half, the Grad Caucus’s Executive Committee has brainstormed and plotted what the CSS can do to extend that sense of community to other grad students working on comics.

Certainly the idea behind the Caucus’s blog has been to create greater sense of shared endeavor. I’m particularly grateful to Josh Kopin, our Webmaster and incoming Vice President, who both made the blog a thing and advocated for it as a space for more personal accounts of grad students’ work and life, as opposed to simply a public noticeboard. I hope that as membership of the CSS expands the blog and its attached social media will become a go-to for those interested in telling and hearing about the graduate experience.

That experience is, of course, defined partly by anxiety about getting a job. The first of what will be many conference events organized by the Grad Caucus, the “Getting a Job When You Work on Comics” roundtable at this year’s ICAF, addressed that anxiety squarely. The participants (Andréa Gilroy, Susan Kirtley, and Frederik Byrn Køhlert) offered practical advice and began a serious conversation among the grad students and faculty in the room, and the panel itself signaled that the CSS generally, while excited about this moment of consolidation within the comics studies field, recognizes that graduate students need to think carefully about how we can make comics studies work for us.

In a material sense the way that the Grad Caucus can make comic studies work for grad students is by making sure that they get recognized and paid for their work. To that end, Colin Beineke (first Vice President and now President) and Biz Nijdam (Member-at-Large) designed the Caswell Award for Best Graduate Student Conference Presentation. Theresa Rojas, outgoing Member-at-Large was one of three judges for the award (along with me and Charles Hatfield), and very little of the Grad Caucus’s work this year would have been possible without her work, or that of Alison Sagara, who served as Secretary-Treasurer.

Now that CSS has a membership, including more than a hundred graduate students, the Grad Caucus is already at work on new projects, including establishing travel funds for grad students who want to do research and present at conferences, as well as developing new ways to spread the word about opportunities in the field to CSS’s grad student membership. And the Executive Committee has new blood—Rachel Miller is taking over as Secretary-Treasurer, and Francesca Lyn as Member-at-Large. It’s an exciting moment for comics studies, and I’m looking forward to seeing where the Grad Caucus takes things.

First Caswell Award Winner Announced
We are pleased to announce that **Benoît Crucifix** is the inaugural winner of the Lucy Shelton Caswell Award for Best Graduate Student Conference Presentation. The Caswell Award committee wrote, “Crucifix’s paper, which focuses on Charles Burns's recent trilogy of graphic novels that started with *X’ed Out* and concluded with *Sugar Skull*, balances historical and theoretical considerations with elegance and rigor. It offers insights into swiping as a drawing practice and a tradition, into the indexical nature of drawing itself, and into the contested relationship between comic books and ‘graphic novels.’ In addition, it draws on theories of William Burroughs's cut-up technique and of intermediality, and examines questions of cultural prestige. In sum, the paper reveals a great deal about swiping, both historically and within the culture of contemporary comics, and pays particular attention to swiping as a form of imitation that doesn't merely imitate but introduces important new differences to the works copied.”

The Caswell Award is named in honor of Lucy Shelton Caswell, the founding curator of the Billy Ireland Comics and Cartoon Library at The Ohio State University, and is awarded annually to a graduate student conference paper which demonstrates finely-crafted and innovative scholarship. The Comics Studies Society Grad Caucus would like to thank the Caswell Award committee for their deliberations, as well as all of those who put forth their work for consideration. Congratulations, Benoit!

**Note from the Treasurer**

The Comics Studies Society (CSS) launched its inaugural membership drive on February 14, 2016 to great success. With over 450 members from all walks of life (i.e. full-time and contingent faculty, students, cartoonists, independent
scholars, comics professionals, administrators, librarians, curators, and institutional memberships), and from more than 10 countries, CSS is still welcoming members and pleased to offer one-year subscriptions rates:

- $45 for students, independent scholars, cartoonists/comics professionals, emeritus faculty
- $80 for tenure-line faculty, administrators, librarians, or curators
- $200 for institutions

These annual subscriber rates run till the end of 2017, during which members will receive the CSS journal, Inks, and all newsletters.

All members are entitled to:

- All 2017 issues of Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society
- Quarterly electronic Newsletters, and
- Vote for members of its Executive Committee.

Membership is still available now, at [http://www.comicssociety.org/members/](http://www.comicssociety.org/members/).

The Comics Universe "continues to expand in magnificent and beautiful ways":
An Interview with CSS Board Member Carol Tilley

Carol Tilley, an associate professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is our newly elected second vice president. And, we cannot be more thrilled! Not only does Carol teach courses in comics reader’s advisory, media literacy, and youth services librarianship, but most recently she served on the 2016 Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards judging panel. Of special note to CSS members, Carol’s research on anti-comics advocate Fredric Wertham was featured in The New York Times and other media outlets. Recently, I had an opportunity to have a lovely chat with Carol:

**Nhora Lucia Serrano:** Carol, Welcome, welcome! If I may please, let’s begin with why do you think students should read comics today? Why should comics be read and drawn in college and at the university?

**Carol Tilley:** For me, comics in their multitude of formats are simply texts and
as such they convey information and tell stories. That alone makes comics worthy enough to be collected in libraries, read in classrooms, pored over by flashlight, recommended to friends and family, and celebrated in popular and literary cultures. Not everyone has to read comics or even like comics, but it should be ok for anyone who wants to read them or use them as classroom texts or collect them in libraries to do just those things.

But where comics really excel is when they make the most of their medium, where image and text become inseparable and create something much more than the sum of their parts. The two pages –“Images You’ll Get Used to While Grieving Your Lost Child” – in Tom Hart’s *Rosalie Lightning* that encapsulate the mundane flatness of grief? The spiraling two-page spread by Warren King in 1941’s *Blue Ribbon Comics #13* documenting and humanizing Hitler’s rise to power? Lynda Barry’s perfect and awkwardly nostalgic depiction of childhood wonder and pain throughout *One Hundred Demons*? These are some of the instances where comics are especially emotionally evocative and cognitively efficient. These are the comics where I want everyone to take a look.

**NLS:** Now, given your recent work on Fredric Wertham, what lessons can be gleaned about cultural panic? And are these lessons applicable to today’s landscape and tech-savvy culture?

**CT:** Humans seem prone to moral and cultural panics centered on media and technologies. It’s essential that we all read and think critically about research and its contexts. We must examine the rhetoric, acknowledge our biases and presuppositions, and ask questions.

The need for this type of critical assessment is especially acute any time children are subjects in or beneficiaries of social science research. Especially in the US, we have too much cultural and social baggage when it comes to kids, which often results in us vacillating between demonizing them and protecting them.

Any medium—comics, video games, film, whatever—can be used to tell important stories. When the stories trouble us for whatever reasons, we should allow those moments to serve as springboards for conversation with one another rather than for condemnation of the media through which those stories come to us.

**NLS:** And, what about the need for and acknowledgement of diversity in comics? For example, given the popularity of G. Willow Wilson’s *Ms. Marvel*, Noelle Stevenson and Shannon Watters’ *Lumberjanes*, and Kelly Sue DeConnick’s *Bitch Planet*, to name a few, what do you make of the role of
women (from female characters to female artists) in comics today?

CT: For a little over a year, I’ve run a Facebook page called “We Need Diverse Comics” in order to help celebrate and promote diversity among comics creators and readers. It was also a way for me to teach myself more how comics engage the world so that I in turn can share those insights with my students. In selecting news to share on the page, I’ve been struck by how beautifully complex and rich comics as a medium is.

The growing prominence of women and queer creators as well as creators of color is wonderful. It’s also heartening to see comics increasingly embraced as tools for education, political expression, and social justice, often on grassroots levels, around the globe. That we can have a medium that thrives in so many formats from experimental comics like Jens Harder’s Alpha...directions, children’s trade books like publishing phenom Raina Telgemeier’s new Ghosts (which has a 500,000 initial print run!), digital hypercomics like Daniel Goodbrey’s The Archivist, or the multivolume manga masterpiece Showa (A History of Japan) by Shigeru Mizuki is, well, really cool.

Yes, comics is ‘still’ Peanuts and Superman and Tintin and Astro Boy and Sandman too, but its universe continues to expand in magnificent and beautiful ways.

NLS: As the part of the recent judging panel of the 2016 Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards that selected the best from 2015, what should we look forward to in the future? Any particular cartoonists, writers, or inkists on whom we should keep an eye?

CT: Serving as an Eisner judge this year was a fabulous experience because I got to immerse myself even more in everything comics! My biggest takeaway from judging is that the future of comics (and comics scholarship) is even brighter, more inclusive, and more innovative that I had imagined. To my mind, some of the most exciting work is coming from smaller publishers like Retrofit / Big Planet, Avery Hill, Frontier / Youth in Decline, Czap Books, and Nobrow Press as well as through self-published webcomics and minicomics. Cartoonists like Tillie Walden, Laura Knetzger, Kristyna Baczynski, and Yumi Sakagawa put out some of my favorite comics of the year.

NLS: And lastly, as the first person elected to second vice president of the Comics Studies Society, and CSS’s future first vice president (2017-18) and president (2018-19), how do you see CSS “engaging in open and ongoing conversations about the comics world”? 
To my mind, there’s a comic for every reader: it’s an inclusive and dynamic medium. That’s how I view comics studies too and what I want the Comics Studies Society (CSS) to be: inclusive and dynamic. There is no single approach or method for studying comics, no single profile for a comics scholar or creator.

I want CSS to find ways to demonstrate the value of this scholarly discipline and the medium at its center. In that regard, it’s essential for CSS to mentor graduate students and untenured faculty, help contingent faculty find one another and find meaningful work, and support and expand opportunities for sharing and conducting research at all stages. The CSS Graduate Student Caucus, our current partnership with ICAF, and our forthcoming journal INKS help move us in those directions, and I’m confident that the Executive Board will undertake other ventures that will make CSS the keystone organization for comics studies.

Whenever I attend a comics convention, I end up having drinks or a meal with a group of folks. It’s always an eclectic mix of people that typically includes creators, reviewers, scholars, journalists, and librarians, and I always come away from these engagements having learned so many new things about the world of comics and feeling energized to go back to my own work. For that reason, I also want CSS to nurture relationships among creators and editors, independent scholars, librarians, professors, graduate students, publishers, and institutions. Let’s make CSS a locus for the kinds of joyous, insightful, and intersectional conversations I’ve been so fortunate to experience at conventions.
Members-at-Large:
A Brief Interview Between Matthew J. Smith and Christina Blanch

**Matthew J. Smith:** Christy, why join the Executive Board and why now?

**Christina Blanch:** Well, I wasn’t even thinking about running because I sometimes feel unsure about where my place is as a comics scholar in this field. When I found out that someone nominated me, I was excited. I really did not think I had a chance at winning, but then Carol told me I won. I was so thrilled! There are many reasons that I want to be a part of the CSS. One is how cool it is being a part of the foundation of this society! Another is that I want to connect comic scholars with both more creators and also with comic book shops. As I write a comic series (*The Damnation of Charlie Wormwood*) and co-own a comic book shop (Aw Yeah Comics in Muncie, Indiana) I feel that I can help to facilitate this. Also, this fits in perfectly with my dissertation research, “Searching for the Comic Scholar.” These are exciting times in Comics Studies, and I am honored to be a part of this. I plan to contribute whatever I can to help this field gain recognition.

So, Matt. We met because of our interest in comic books and Comics Studies and now we were elected to the board of CSS at the same time. What does this new society mean to you?

**MJS:** To me the CSS represents another great step forward in validating the academic presence of Comics Studies. For all of us who have been toiling in the field, I believe it comes as welcomed affirmation that the work itself has value and that we are, indeed, not alone. I’m particularly taken by the approach of the CSS to be a truly interdisciplinary association, welcoming academics across disciplines. Here we are, you from anthropology and me from communication studies, side-by-side with colleagues from English, religion, etc., ready to dig in and get to the mutually beneficial work of the Society.

Tell me, Christy, what do you hope to see the CSS Executive Board achieve during your tenure as a Member-at-Large?
CB: It’s such a new organization that whatever we accomplish will be excellent. One of my main ideas is to get more creators involved with our organization. We have the opportunity to communicate with many of the people who have made what we study and I think that is amazing. Shakespeare scholars can only dream of interviewing the Bard, while we have the opportunity to talk to people like Morrison, Brown, Moore, Waid, Ellis, and so many more. I would love to help to facilitate those relationships. And I would love to find ways to get what we study out to more people. While we are immersed in Comic Studies, there are still so many educators out there that don’t know where to start. I want the CSS to be the place for them to come to for help.

Matt, what do you think your contributions to the CSS will entail?

MJS: I think that we have to demonstrate the value of the association to its members in these formative years. We’ve enjoyed a tremendous response from colleagues across the globe in our initial membership drive but I think to retain—and grow—the membership base, we are going to have to prove to be relevant to those members. The leadership’s initial efforts to build structures for communication, including the very newsletter we are writing for, as well as the launching of the journal and the partnership with ICAF, are essential to demonstrating that merit. My hope is that in coming at these efforts from the discipline of Communication Studies I might be a voice on the executive body that calls out for strategies to make the value of the association plain for members we’ve already recruited and those we will seek to recruit.

So, what cool thing(s) are you working on in the area of Comics Studies right now?

CB: My main priority right now is completing my dissertation. As I mentioned earlier, it’s all about comic scholars which fits right in with CSS! I am interviewing comic scholars about their identity as such. It’s been absolutely fascinating and I have got to meet some amazing people and catch up with some long time friends. Once my dissertation is complete I plan to offer another SuperMOOC (Massive, Open, Online Course) in the same vein as my Gender through Comic Books and Social Issues through Comic Book courses. Also after the dissertation is complete, it is time to do more presentations at conferences. Besides that I am writing some comics, not quite comic studies but still in the area. In addition, I plan to give as much time to CSS as possible. I am so excited to be able to contribute to this amazing organization!

Matt, besides starting a new job this fall, what are you working on in the area
MJS: Right now Randy Duncan and I are editing *The Routledge Handbook to the Secret Origins of Comics Studies*, a collection of essays that examine the roots of this field of study and one that showcases the contributions of some very talented scholars. I am so pleased that you are one of those contributors. Look for the book in 2017. In the meantime, I'll be taking my tenth group of students out to Comic-Con International to examine the dynamic interactions between fan cultures and the marketing strategies employed by the cultural industries. It’s been a blast getting to meet the next generation of Comics Studies scholars through this program, and I look forward to all the new acquaintances that our work in the Comics Studies Society is likely to introduce us to.

The CSS, "Pinball Wizard," and *Shazam!*: An Interview with CSS Board Member Emeritus Brian Cremins

It's no overstatement to say that Brian Cremins has been a pivotal part of CSS launch and subsequent success. So, as his term on CSS's first Executive Board comes to an end, we wanted to give him the kindest, most gentle 'exit interview,' both in terms of the Society but also in regards to his own work in comics studies.

A. David Lewis: What did you get from the experience of being a Board member? Was your experience exclusive to being a Board member at its inception or do you think you would have benefited from the experience at any point in CSS's growing history?

Brian Cremins: I would encourage anyone thinking about working for the CSS, or perhaps running for a seat in the next election cycle, to sign up. This will sound strange, but being part of the transitional Executive Board—the one voted in at the 2014 ICAF in Columbus—reminded me a lot of my first band in college. I mean, I've served on plenty of departmental committees at school in the last several years, but the energy and excitement of the CSS had me thinking of the first time I stepped into a rehearsal room in the basement of the Hopkins Center in Hanover, New Hampshire in the fall of 1992. “How long have you been playing bass?” the singer asked. “About twelve hours,” I said (I’d been playing guitar for a couple of years, but, since we didn’t know anyone that played bass, I went out and rented one at Hanover Strings).
Anyway, at the first CSS dinner in Columbus, I remember being eager but nervous. How was I going to advise anyone about anything, least of all a start-up academic society? But it was like being in a band. We all figured out how to work together, how to share ideas, how to improvise.

Did I just compare being on the CSS Board to learning how to play bass on “Pinball Wizard”? Yes I did.

**ADL:** What unexpected challenges did you encounter during your time as a Board member? Was there any friction between your full-time work and whatever demands you had in your CSS role?

**BC:** I was lucky in that Harper College, where I teach, granted me a sabbatical leave last summer and fall, so that eased some of the demands on my time while I served my term. Having those monthly Board meetings also helped pull me out of the world of the book as I was finishing my revisions for the University Press of Mississippi. After I got back from sabbatical in January, I had to draw on all the time-management skills I learned as a Catholic school kid. This winter, Qiana Whitted and Ben Owen and I served as the Election Committee during the lead-up to ICAF, so balancing that work with teaching four classes, copyediting, and feeding the cats was a little challenging. But, to go back to what I said in the last question, I got to work with Qiana and Ben, so that was also a lot of fun. If the CSS Board is a band, then maybe the Election Committee was kind of our solo project. I’ll stop already with the music metaphors.

**ADL:** Where do you expect or hope CSS to be in the next 5 years? In the next 10 years?

A couple of days ago I was hanging out at my neighborhood shop, Third Coast Comics, and talking with owner Terry Gant, who introduced me to a Loyola undergrad named Joe, who’s interested, Terry said, in writing about comics. So we made a list for him of the folks he should read, and I also mentioned the
CSS, which got me thinking: this is the kind of work the Society has set out to do, to nurture a new generation of talented and curious writers and scholars. When I was at UConn in the ’90s, I realized that maybe I could write about comics after being inspired by Charles Hatfield and Gene Kannenberg, Jr., both of whom I met in my second year of grad school. Having benefited so much from the care and concern of the scholars who’ve come before me, I know how vital that tradition is. I’ll quote Edie Fake, one of my comic art heroes: “Cross-pollinating is how ideas spread and get expanded upon. Sharing what we can is how we help each other thrive on this messed up planet.” So I guess I’m saying that in ten years I hope I see Joe’s name, and those of kids like him, on the Exec Board list, or in the pages of Inks.

**ADL:** Is there any particular anecdote or amusing story that came out of your time on the CSS Executive Board?

**BC:** I got to be one of the merch people at the CSS table at ICAF at the University of South Carolina in April! Which also meant I got to meet the awesome [Keith Knight](#), who was chasing one of his kids down the hallway while the CSS roundtable was in session. And what did we talk about? How sad we both were that T. T. the Bear’s in Cambridge closed last summer. That was a great club to play. Then suddenly my dad called to see how I did on my panel. I don’t know how amusing any of this is for anyone but me, but I felt like I was in a Jim Jarmusch movie or something, with all these cool characters walking in and out of frame (for the record, Keith was wearing a great hat like the ones John Lurie and Richard Edson have on in Stranger Than Paradise).

**ADL:** How does a former Board member "reintegrate" into the membership of the CSS? What do you see your role as being now?

**BC:** I’m currently serving on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Inks*, which will make its debut from the Ohio State University Press next year. So that’s been a good (and exciting) way for me to continue to play a role in the CSS as it grows and develops. And, as I mentioned, I’ve been doing my best to spread the word about the Society to friends and scholars who might be interested in joining up.

**ADL:** Executive Board or not, you remain a comics scholar in good standing, regardless. What do you hope your colleagues get from your new [Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia](#) book?

**BC:** I first got the idea for it about 15 years ago, when I discovered those DC *Shazam!* comics from the 1970s with all the great C. C. Beck art in them. I was never much of a Captain Marvel fan as a kid. In fact, I really disliked the ’70s
TV show. I’ve told this story before, but, when it would come on, I’d get sad, because the Saturday morning cartoons were over and I’d have to sit through this weird live-action thing. My only solace was the grilled-cheese sandwich my dad would make me for lunch. But as I studied the lives of Beck and writer Otto Binder, and as I discovered the original Fawcett comics of the 1940s, the more fascinated I became.

Taking a cue from writers like Marianne Hirsch (who, as far as I’m concerned, doesn’t get the credit she deserves for the tremendous impact her work on *Maus* has had on comics studies as a discipline) and W. G. Sebald, I found myself writing not only about comics or visual narratives as a form—especially in relation to Beck’s theories of comic art, which he published in *The Comics Journal* in the 1980s and shared with his Critical Circle—but also about memory and time and family. Along the way, I got lucky again, and talked with folks like Trina Robbins and Harlan Ellison about their memories of the character and about Beck and Binder. It’s very grounded in archival research, but it’s also very personal, which I guess is inevitable given that it touches on so many psychological and philosophical theories of nostalgia. I wanted to mix that historicism with the rigorous theoretical training I received while studying African American Lit. and Film during my Ph.D. program at UConn years ago. In terms of style, I was also trying for the intimacy I admire in my favorite writers, people like Sebald and Susan Sontag or poets like Robert Lowell and David Trinidad.

So I hope readers enjoy it, learn a little about comics they might otherwise have ignored, and sense the love, gratitude, and support I felt while writing it. I’ll be honest: I didn’t think I’d ever manage to write a full book. A friend of mine told me how excited I’d be when I got my page proofs, and she was right: when my amazing project editor Kristi Ezernack sent them to me a couple of weeks ago, I realized: oh, this is *happening*. How cool is that? The lovely cover *Keiler Roberts* drew for it, I think, sums it all up better than I can. As long as I don’t mess up the index I’m working on right now, it will be
“I think it has come at exactly the right time”: An Interview with CSS Board Member Emeritus Corey Creekmur

I first met Dr. Corey Creekmur in 2003 at the University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, where he gave a provocative paper on race and racism in underground comix that has stayed in my mind ever since. Over the ensuing years, I’ve come to know him as an eclectic scholar-teacher, thoughtful proponent of comics studies, and esteemed colleague. An Associate Professor of English and of Cinematic Arts at the University of Iowa, Corey has also taught within UI’s programs in South Asian Studies and Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies, and is Director of UI’s Institute for Cinema and Culture. He has been an active member of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies, and is known as an expert in world cinema. Corey is a prolific scholar, author of numerous articles and the forthcoming book *Cattle Queens and Lonesome Cowboys: Gender and Sexuality in the Western*, and now is working on a book about *Love & Rockets* and another on Indian historical film. What’s more, he is co-editor of the anthologies *The International Film Musical* (2012), *Cinema, Law, and the State in Asia* (2007), and *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (1995), and is now editor of the *Comics Culture* book series at Rutgers UP. Corey served on the CSS Executive Board as a Member at Large during our first term, from November 2014 to April 2016, and we of CSS thank him for his service during this crucial formative period, for his scholarship, and for his warmth and collegiality.

When Corey wrapped up his term of service for CSS, I invited him to share his perspective on comics studies in the form of an interview:

**Charles Hatfield:** At UI you not only have a joint appointment in English and in Cinematic Arts, but also are affiliated with several other programs. In every case, you bring to your teaching an expertise in cultural studies, particularly in discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. Also, you’ve been very involved in the Society for Cinema & Media Studies (SCMS), and recently served as its Secretary. All that sounds like a heady recipe for interdisciplinary work! How do you think your multidisciplinary (and interdepartmental) background shapes your approach to comics studies?
Corey Creekmur: My interdisciplinarity has never been a very calculated storming of the gates of my relevant disciplines. It’s always just seemed the appropriately multidirectional way to deal with the already hybrid kinds of texts – especially films and comics – that attract me. Most comics are narratives that employ language (in various ways), and of course they are visual, so it seems obvious to me that some training in the analysis of all of these elements is virtually required to approach comics responsibly. And most comics are broadly representational, which brings in cultural or social markers that signify race, gender, and sexuality, whether these are foregrounded or not. So I think my interest in comics, somewhat like my investment in cinema, simply forces a consideration of intersecting, overlapping elements, whereas analyzing other objects (like, say, a poem) might benefit from a more focused toolkit. I wrote a dissertation on film within an English department, so my work has never been especially “disciplined”!

CH: What do you think comics studies, and CSS more specifically, might learn from SCMS and the history of cinema and media studies?

CC: I’m actually wary of the easy conflation of film and comics as media, which the current consolidation of these media industries otherwise encourages: I remain fascinated by a degree of “media specificity” that remembers that comics don’t actually move or make sounds, whereas movies are in motion and often noisy. Those formal differences remain more vital to me than the overlap between content many films and comics now share. But I do think the history of the legitimation of movies as cultural artifacts and works of art, and the related institutionalization of film studies, can direct comics scholars in ways to follow or perhaps avoid a similar trajectory. There’s no good reason why comics followed movies in this regard (whereas the sequence leading to television or gaming studies just makes chronological sense), but it now often seems to me that comics studies is doing in a few years what film studies did in a decade or more. There are now some fascinating histories of film studies itself, which pay attention to things like how cinema courses and programs were established, the role of film journals and book series, the contributions of professional organizations, the function of major archives and libraries, and other material conditions for the construction of a professional field. Those insights could be very instructive for comics studies, which has already replicated some of those developments.

CH: Would you say your film studies background has shaped your research and teaching in comics studies, and vice versa? Concretely, are there things you do differently in the classroom and/or as a researcher because of your commitment to these overlapping fields?
As I’ve noted, I in fact work somewhat diligently to keep these two isolated: I tend to teach film in the Department of Cinematic Arts and comics in the Department of English, and have resisted teaching a department-bridging “cinema and comics” course, even though it might be popular. And I even think the use of film terms (like “close-up”) to describe images in comics is often misleading, even if this is common among creators. But I hope my training in film studies developed some parts of the visual literacy I think I bring to comics—though since I read comics long before I studied film, who knows? By graduate school, I was deeply informed by British cultural studies, and thus models like Hebdige’s appropriation of Levi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage: if I find a concept from my limited knowledge of musical counterpoint, or theoretical physics, or Hindu religious practices useful to help myself and students understand how a comic strip functions, I’ll use it! Still, I’m aware that when my students veer toward a claim that something in a comic is “just like a movie,” I’m prone to make them slow down and clarify how that both is and isn’t the case.

While in nuts-and-bolts ways my classes focused on literature, cinema, or comics engage with those objects in quite different ways (I often focus student attention on the sound of films, for instance), at some shared, basic level I’m always seeking to demonstrate and develop the skills of close formal analysis, contextualized by cultural, social, and historical factors. Whether moving line by line, shot by shot, or panel by panel, my goal is to get students to better understand how these objects work at the first level(s), an understanding that I think has to form the basis for more sophisticated approaches to how they work as artifacts that engage larger issues and contexts. So, for instance, I’m eager to talk about how race and ethnicity, or gender and sexuality, are central to texts like *Maus* or *Fun Home*, but I first want to get a sense of how these markers of identity are signaled and rendered in the quite specific (if diverse) techniques of comics, and then to ponder what is going on when, say, ethnic stereotypes blend with the comics tradition of anthropomorphic animals, or the rooms in the home of a dysfunctional family look a lot like the panels stacked on a page of comics. The overall goal is to ground larger claims in the specific details present on the page or screen.

Lastly, what do you hope CSS will contribute to the growing field of comics studies? And do you have any thoughts about how comics studies might interact with film studies or other fields, going forward?

As with cinema, and popular culture more generally, there’s always the perceived risk that the professionalization or legitimation of the study of comics will be pretentious or simply unnecessary, or will replace a fan’s enthusiasm with a scholar’s dryness or even cynicism. But my sense is that the focused
study of almost all forms of popular culture in fact enriches the consumption of its objects: does anyone who can read music and analyze a score thus reduce their enjoyment of music, or does following a team’s statistics diminish the pleasure of a baseball fan? To the contrary, I think good criticism enriches the art it engages: I’ll even insist that critical theory (for me Barthes is the best example) enhances rather than enervates the work it addresses. I learned long ago that deflecting critical attention from something by insisting that it’s “just” a comic (or movie, or pop song…) is in fact defensive, a way to say “don’t think about it,” or at least don’t think about it too much, or too hard. But great critical work is simply great work, and arguably creative work as well. Of course comics criticism has been and can be snarky and petty and insular, but my sense is that we are now seeing the steady production of exciting, stimulating, and suggestive work on comics with the scholarly rigor and intellectual sophistication that professional context expects and requires. That doesn’t happen in a cultural vacuum, or just because of bursts of individual genius: it takes a context of support, via journals, publishers, editors, peer reviewers, conferences, archives, museum exhibitions – and supportive professional organizations. These are crucial components of the necessary environment for this work.

In many ways, since some of these elements have been in place for a while, the CSS is long overdue, but in other ways, I think it has come at exactly the right time, and I’m thrilled to be part of its emergence. I frankly think the work of defending comics studies – despite pockets of resistance – is pretty much over: that battle has largely been won, as the presence of comics studies at the annual MLA and SCMS meetings, and in the catalogs of major academic presses, etc., demonstrates. So I hope the CSS won’t need any longer to make that case (unlike the pioneers who built ICAF and other important institutional precursors). Rather, I hope it can move directly to performing the crucial future-directed work of organization-building (rather than field-defending), networking (internationally, as the CSS membership affirms), and information gathering and dissemination that has been important for other professional organizations. At this stage, many comics scholars are the only such animal at their institutions, and my perhaps utopian view is that the CSS will function as their professional home and support system.

The **CSS Executive Board** is responsible for the content of this newsletter:

**Charles Hatfield**, President (interim)
Carol Tilley, Second Vice President