Dear Student,

We look forward to your arrival at Cowell College in the fall of 2018. As you know, you will participate in Cowell’s Core Course, also called Cowell One, Imagining Justice, Past and Present. The course begins with a summer reading assignment introducing many issues and areas related to justice. We write to you today to make sure that you can get a jump-start on this summer reading, which you should have completed before you arrive for Fall Quarter. We ask you to write a response to the summer reading, which you will turn in at the outset of the course in September.

**Summer Reading Assignment**

We have selected two works that explore justice from different perspectives and genres. The first is a novel, the other a graphic text which considers intellectual theory and philosophy using a visual format. In our course, along with considering content—different ways to categorize and examine justice—we will also be considering how form and rhetoric play a role, looking at the impacts and effects of genre (fiction, autobiography, argument; visual texts and verbal ones).

Here are your summer reading texts. Please have them available to bring to class your first two weeks. Most instructors prefer you have paper copies.

1. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, a novel by Nayomi Munaweera, follows two families in Sri Lanka as their lives are changed forever by war. A San Francisco Chronicle review writes of it: “Nayomi Munaweera uses the child’s point of view to devastating effect in describing life during the seemingly endless civil war in her native Sri Lanka.” This narrative has challenging moments depicting the tremendous violence, including sexual violence, common to war, yet, the review notes, “the devastation in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* gets delivered in a captivating story tempered with sensuality and moments of grace.” It calls on us to consider what justice, if any, is achieved through war, and it considers an immigrant’s experiences moving to the US.

   Note: This book includes some violent and disturbing passages, including the depiction of a rape from the survivor’s perspective. If you have concerns about reading these passages, contact Core Coordinator Catherine Carlstroem (mastodon@ucsc.edu) to discuss possibilities for navigating these scenes.

2. *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis This book, a philosophical treatise using comics, asks us to reconsider perspective as a central aspect of how we know what we know, how we construct our understanding of reality, ourselves, and our social relations. It speaks to how we may initially view things from a two-dimensional, flattened, or superficial perspective, and considers how vision, and visual media present us with models of seeking more complex, multidimensional views.

   Note: To help us all grasp some of the conventions and strategies for reading serious graphic/comic texts, we have appended a short synopsis of key ideas from a worthy book that may interest you: Understanding Comics, by Scott McCloud.

Books will be available at the UCSC Bookstore and can be purchased at a 20% discount during summer orientation. A course overview and reading list, as well as e-copies of this assignment, are available at: [http://cowell.ucsc.edu/academics/courses/corecourse.html](http://cowell.ucsc.edu/academics/courses/corecourse.html)
Summer Writing Assignment

Cowell’s motto, “The Pursuit of Truth in the Company of Friends,” applies particularly well to your Core Course sections. We’d like to start this pursuit off from day one, getting to know each other as a community of readers and thinkers, so we ask that after you have finished the assigned summer reading, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, and *Unflattening*, we ask that you write (and draw, in some cases), a response. This assignment is due at the first section meeting of your class (either Thursday, Sept. 27 or Friday, Sept. 28). These responses need not form a formal essay but should have enough focus to help you to explore and then refine some of your reactions and thoughts about the texts; in other words, they should go beyond mere impressions, into more coherent ideas you are exploring. Note: You do not need to respond to all aspects—every question—of a prompt. The questions are meant to allow you to choose a direction to build on in your answer.

We hope these responses will allow you to start meaningful conversations with one another right away, prepared with ideas—pursuing truth, not necessarily having it in hand. They’re also a chance for you to introduce yourselves as writers to your instructor.

Please respond to both 1. and 2.

1. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* Your response should be one to two pages, double-spaced. **Choose one (either A or B,) of these two possible directions** for your response to this novel:

   A) Many of the characters in Munaweera’s book are paired or paralleled, sometimes across space (as with Saraswathi and Yasodhara), sometimes across time, as different generations deal with similar concerns. Choose a pair of characters and explore how these parallels affect and enrich our larger understanding of themes, issues, or ideas they represent or convey. What did you come to understand by thinking about the similarities and differences highlighted?

   B) This novel traces the life of someone who eventually becomes a suicide bomber. Many of us have never considered how or why someone might commit such a violent and desperate act. What, in your reading of the story, were the key things—both personal experiences and larger sociopolitical dynamics—that drove this character’s transformation, and how might this story help us better understand some of the context that underlies such acts more generally? Did it change the way you thought about terrorism? Was there anything it helped you understand about violence, warfare, and ethnic/gender conflict? If so, how; which specific aspects/passages altered your thinking and feeling? (If you have personal experiences that also shape your response, you are welcome to include them.)

2. *Unflattening* suggests how carefully considering perspective and examining ideas from multiple angles can help us see beyond the obvious. It also offers examples of how visual conceptions may convey information to us in unexpected, new, or additional ways. How do its lessons about perspective help us understand aspects of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors? Choose one (either A or B) of these two possible directions** for your response to this question.
A) After selecting a particular scene from *Island*, draw a graphic adaptation (it may also include words) that highlights some particular aspect that interests you. Before you begin drawing think about: How might pictures and visual data convey information or foster implications beyond what you might have gathered from a purely verbal format? Be sure you aren’t just illustrating the scene, but instead using drawing to interpret it (that is, showing how drawing can focus on a particular perspective or set of ideas). After your short comic (1-3 pages) write a paragraph answering: What is enhanced, altered, or differently represented by the pictures you chose, and how might reading *Unflattening* have helped you discover some of this depth?

B) Using an insight or two that you gleaned from *Unflattening* and its discussion of conformity, dimensionality, and perspective, write a page or two (double-spaced) exploring how concepts you’ve identified in specific pages of *Unflattening* have illuminated your understanding of specific parts, characters, or scenes in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*.

If you have any questions about your summer reading or writing assignments which are not resolved during orientation, please email Cowell’s Core Course Coordinator, Catherine Carlstroem, at: mastodon@ucsc.edu

If you have questions about enrollment, transcripts, or other concerns not related to the Cowell Core Course content, email: cowell@ucsc.edu

Best Wishes,

Alan Christy
Provost of Cowell College
University of California, Santa Cruz
Some Key Conceptual Points for reading Graphic Works
Drawn from *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud (1994)

• Cartooning can be a form of Amplification through Simplification: “When we abstract an image through cartooning we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details.”

• **Comics can intensify a scene by stripping away all but the most significant parts,** which allow them to focus on representing an idea rather than reality. This is part of the power of icons. That which has little distracting realistic detail can more easily be experienced as a concept.

• **Cartoon faces facilitate identification** in the broadest manner: “When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself. … The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled…an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it.”

• In emphasizing the concepts of objects over their physical appearance much has to be omitted. **Often artists mix more realistic art, which involves the readers’ senses, with simpler drawings which emphasize ideas.**

• **Comics bring the worlds of picture and word closer together:** “Pictures are received information…The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. When pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality,’ they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures.”

• **Comics rely on our ability, our propensity to extrapolate a whole from parts.** Our imaginations fill in between and around frames, drawing conclusions about relations of causality, time, etc. between frames. **The phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It’s called closure.**” The audience becomes a participant in creating the scene by necessity. Its imagination is called into play by the very incomplete and fragmented nature of comics—the sequences of frames or panels with blank spaces—the gutters—between them.

• **The space between panels is “the gutter.” It can and does divide not only space, but time, and perspective.** As a pause between statements it relies on the reader to draw conclusions as to the relations between frames. Elongating it may imply a longer time span. Changing its shape or eliminating it comments on the relation between the parts of the panel.

• **The gutter facilitates closure by engaging the reader as a co-creator of the scene.** Comics “is an exclusively visual presentation. Within these panels we can only convey information visually. But between panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why all our senses are engaged.”

• **“Backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas … particularly the world of emotion.”** Impressionism, expressionism and realism influence our interpretation of a scene and create parallels, contrasts and connections between different parts of a comic. “Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our ‘reading’ of characters’ inner states.”

C. Carlstroem