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Editorial

The super politics of comic book fandom

Matthew J. Costello

Saint Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Editorial for "Appropriating, Interpreting, and Transforming Comic Books," edited by Matthew Costello, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 13 (2013).

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1. Comic book fandom evolves and transforms

[1.1] Transformation is a political act. Whether it is slash fiction's challenge to heteronormativity, cosplay at political rallies, or editorials that question the white male privilege of fandom, whenever fans appropriate cultural artifacts they transform them for rhetorical purposes. Fandom thus becomes the battleground through which cultural meaning is constructed and as such is always contested terrain.

[1.2] The political element to fannish transformation is particularly apparent in the world of comic book fandom. For 75 years comic books have been major art form in popular culture, and since 1938 the superhero has been the major genre of comic books. Superheroes have had such longevity and such mass appeal that they have appeared in nearly every medium of popular culture and become embedded in the cultural psyche. American superheroes have always had a distinctly political element to them—consider Captain America's famous first appearance punching Hitler, or the *Adventures of Superman* radio show, which transformed him into a defender of "truth, justice, and the American way." The late former Alaskan senator Ted Stevens would gear up for contentious battles on the Senate floor by donning an *Incredible Hulk* tie, a not-so-veiled threat of the consequences of making him angry. "The Inquiry," a 2011 Superman story in the *Action Comics* 900th anniversary issue, in which the hero renounces his US citizenship in favor of serving all humanity rather than one nation, generated over 600 commentaries on the conservative message boards of *The Blaze* and over 3,000 at the site of the more centrist *Huffington Post*. For both dedicated

fans and casual consumers, comic books and their characters provide one battlefield in the fight to define cultural meanings.

[1.3] This issue of TWC explores 21st-century comic book fandom and the way it is transforming not only the characters, but also the industry and the art form. The essays that comprise this issue reveal a moment of change, with new voices meeting carriers of tradition and advocates of democratization meeting industrial inertia. Fans still engage in traditional fan practices of indexing, collecting, and forming reading communities, but as they do so, they appropriate and transform the characters, the encounter between the comics art form and diverse genres, and the very comics industry itself. These transformations continue in the traditional form of fans becoming creators, but they take on a specifically political hue. Fans and professionals vie to define the meaning of characters by placing them in new situations; newly visible groups within fandom assert their presence and interests against an industry that continues to define its audience as exclusively white and male. Fans of comic art are also pushing the boundaries between comics and other narrative forms, transforming narrative itself.

2. The politics of Captain America

[2.1] Captain America is a symbol of nationalism, one that has been frequently deployed to construct a rhetoric of national power (Dittmer 2013). In the 1940s he defended America against Nazis, and in the 1950s was reformulated as a "commie smasher." Since the 1970s, though, the character has consciously been written to be less a symbol of specific policy or party than a bearer of more general putatively American ideals. This led the character of Steve Rogers to quit being Captain America on two occasions in the 1970s and 1980s. As Forrest Phillips notes in this issue, this characterization of Captain America has created an icon available for appropriation by both sides of the political spectrum. Examining the use of Captain America iconography particularly through cosplay by the Tea Party and Occupy movements, Phillips explores how and why this character in particular is used by both ends of the political spectrum. He notes, however, the danger posed to meaningful political discourse by adopting an icon of Americanness as representative of one political position. Defining one's political position as identical with American ideals "turns Americans who disagree with them into an Other" (§4.3), intensifying a language of polarization and exclusion.

[2.2] From a different perspective, Babak Zarin explores how fan fiction deploying Captain America can be used to recast issues and develop political advocacy. In the 1960s and 1970s and in recent filmic incarnations, Captain America was frequently presented as a man out of time, possessing 1930s values in a late 20th-century world.

The value conflict within the character is used by slash writer hetrez to develop a critical encounter with contemporary social policy. Zarin reads hetrez's piece of fan fiction "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York" as a how-to manual for developing issue advocacy movements, focusing specifically on unions and gay rights.

3. From fan to professional: Defending and deconstructing the superhero

[3.1] Fan movement into the professional ranks has often altered the politics of the characters. Roy Thomas used his love of the 1940s heroes to challenge the politics of the 1970s as writer of *The Invaders* and *The Justice Society of America*. Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison, among others, used their fannish knowledge to deconstruct superheroes, problematizing the notion of superheroes as inner-directed champions of justice. Others, such as James Robinson and Kurt Busiek, have tried to reinvigorate the superhero tradition that they loved as fans. The interview with comics artist Lee Weeks that appears in this issue reveals a common path from fan to professional. From childhood fan, he moved into the reading community that developed around his local comic shop, attended conventions and cartooning school, and entered the professional ranks as an artist in the late 1980s, making a name for himself through his work on Daredevil, Batman, and Hawkman, among other iconic superhero characters. Today he defines interactions with fans via Facebook and at conventions as his major connections to the industry. Weeks sees himself as carrying on the tradition of the comics he read as a child, following in the footsteps of artists such as John Buscema and Gene Colan. Disturbed by the moral ambiguity that has characterized much of the superhero genre for the past two decades, he sees defending the tradition in his interactions with fans as a moral calling.

[3.2] While Lee sees his role as being faithful to a tradition that he seeks to maintain, Garth Ennis is revealed to be more subversive, deconstructing and transforming the superheroes he grew up admiring. As Amanda Odom discusses in her essay on *The Pro*, Ennis as both fan and creator brings to his work a critical style that foregrounds relations of gender and power, a consistent element of his work from *Preacher* and *The Pro* to more recent work such as *The Boys* and *Fury*. This is not, as Odom argues, a rejection of superheroes, but an attempt to engage them critically: the fan's "high degree of acceptance [of the superhero] necessitates a stark provocation to move us to treat both superheroes and our relation to them critically" (¶9). By carrying on the tradition or problematizing it, both Weeks and Ennis take a critical stance on that tradition and transform it.

4. Industrial transformation

[4.1] New opportunities for fans to express and reveal themselves have also begun a major change in the industry, but one that has required a fight. Long considered an almost exclusively white male domain, superhero comics had developed in blissful oblivion concerning gender issues. Occasional attempts to address a female market by largely middle-aged white male creators were generally condescending (the ladies only like the romance stuff) and often embarrassing (see, for instance, the Femme Force, created in *Captain America and the Falcon* 144–47, or the earliest incarnations of Valkyrie and the Savage She Hulk). Attempts to relate to an African American audience resulted in the creation of heroes of color, all of whom had to be identified by their color—Black Panther, Black Goliath, Black Lightning.

[4.2] In the 1990s, some things began to change. Milestone Comics became the first African American-owned and operated comic book company, and it created several African American heroes that became solid commercial properties (Icon and Static Shock). Still, this was a short-lived success that collapsed along with the rest of the comic book market in the 1990s (for a history of Milestone, see Brown 2000). Heroes of color who do not have to identify themselves by skin color have gained some ground, but not much. DC Comics has a teenage Hispanic from El Paso wielding the scarab of the Blue Beetle, and Marvel has created a new multicultural Spider-Man. Ora C. McWilliams recounts the role of fandom in bringing about this change but also notes some disturbing elements of backlash within the fan community.

[4.3] Women still had little representation, even though they were becoming increasingly visible as fans. Gail Simone's 1999 posting "Women in Refrigerators" raised awareness of the misogyny of superhero comics and the increasingly visible female fan base. This fan base has grown extensively as comics have migrated to film and television over the last 15 years. Whether this greater visibility has generated significant change remains a matter of debate. As Suzanne Scott argues, women are becoming more visible within comic book fandom, despite the major producers' attempts to ignore them. This visibility is an important step toward increasing gender equality, a condition where women will be equally visible to men, and thus gender will be invisible. Rebecca Lucy Busker seeks the same goal, where gender is not an issue, but she sees little change in the male privilege that dominates comic book fandom.

[4.4] The growing visibility of female fans seems generated in part by the migration of comics out of the specialty shop and into the theaters and mainstream bookstores. At FanFiction.net (<http://www.fanfiction.net>), for instance, movie-based fiction outnumbers comics-based fiction almost three to one, and while women are more likely to write fan fiction than men, they seem even more likely to do so for film. This does not mean that women are not fans of comics but that their presence in specifically comic book fandom has been largely invisible (as Scott argues), but it is

increasingly less so. The greater visibility of women has generated several battle fronts, from Simone's posting to the Batgirl of San Francisco's protest against the decline of female creators in DC Comics' "New 52." *My So-Called Secret Identity*, a project instigated by Will Brooker to create a better Batgirl, discussed in an interview in this issue with Kate Roddy, Carlen Lavigne, and Suzanne Scott, is another battleground for gender awareness in comics, as is the publication of the Kickstarter-funded *Womanthology*. All of these battles not only transform characters, but push toward a transformation of the industry.

[4.5] Fourteen years after "Women in Refrigerators," these battles do seem to be having some effect on the industry. Gender parity is a long way away, but there have been new inroads for female creators at the mainstream houses (although DC Comics seems to be doing a bit better than Marvel in numbers and visibility). The number of female title characters has grown—although again, parity is far off. While I would like to think we have come farther than we have, the current issue of *Supergirl* comics (#20) features a cover that loosely echoes the Pieta, with Powergirl as the Madonna, her "boob window" centered on the page. In the latest issue of *Batman: The Dark Knight* (#20), the hero's current love interest finds herself tossed out of a helicopter, crashing (somehow) into the Batsignal atop police headquarters. And although more women are creating comics, frequently they are still, to use Scott's metaphor, getting "fridged."

5. Transformational opportunities of the comics art form

[5.1] Melding image and text, comics engage readers on both a textual and visual level; the ways text and image interact open up new possibilities of meaning and create unique opportunities for fan engagement and transformations. The construction of the comics page, separated into panels that capture and freeze a discrete moment of time, fractures time and space. By the very act of engaging the comics page, the reader creates the action that occurs in the gutter—the space between the panels. The presentation of the medium—fracturing time and space and combining image and text—forces the reader to become a transformative participant through the very act of engaging with it at all.

[5.2] Several of the essays in this issue explore the unique opportunities for fans to become transformative participants in creating meaning from (and transforming the meaning of) comics. Catherine Coker's essay on slash fiction treating Captain America and Iron Man sets this fan fiction community in a unique position because the source material are comics. She examines how fan fiction is an attempt to create continuity between comic panels "by piecing together those elements visually present in the text with those that are clearly not" (§1.6). She goes further, exploring the manifold

transformative opportunities generated by the multiple alternative universes that have arisen over decades of Avengers continuity and transitions across media. This opportunity to create meaning, rendered possible by the spaces between panels and the multiple contexts of the AUs, allows fan fiction writers to give new meaning to the Steve/Tony relationship and to subvert the heteronormative narrative world of superhero comics, rendering the fans "subaltern and subversive practitioners" (§1.2).

[5.3] Lyndsay Brown similarly identifies the fractioning of time and space through the comics panel as a central element creating unique opportunities for transformation, particularly as fans suture the panels together. She goes further, exploring how text and image can work together to develop new forms of narrative. Her examination of both professional and fan pornographic comics explores how those elements peculiar to the comics art form can be used not only to create new meanings, but also to create new functions for the narrative.

[5.4] The interaction of image and text is also central to transformational reading communities. Kayley Thomas examines fan reactions to the filmic Loki, the villain of *The Avengers* movie. She explores how fans use GIFs from the film amended by images from comic books, bringing two different fandoms together, to develop a sophisticated encounter with a character who is clearly a villain in the film—charming and attractive, certainly, but a villain nonetheless—and a character cast as part villain and part victim in the comics. Bringing together these two media enables an intertextual and transformative encounter with Loki. Such intertextuality, Thomas argues, can create new meanings and "can break down...hierarchies [in the fan community] by exhibiting engagement with multiple sources and providing coherent meaning for other viewers" (§2.3).

[5.5] Democratization of fandom is also a central element of Tim Bavluka's analysis of the Hypercrisis thread on 4chan (<http://4chan.org>). This thread, essentially a reading community for the works of comics writer Grant Morrison, attempts to place all of Morrison's writings into a coherent single narrative, deploying images drawn from a variety of his texts, his own personal writings and interviews, and the texts he has produced. Because of the anonymity of 4chan postings, Bavluka argues, the hierarchies in comics fandom disappear, rendering the /co/mrades of the Hypercrisis a democratic fan community engaged in "participative thinking" (§1.8).

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Comic book fandom is one of the oldest groups of organized fans, with a history that goes back at least to the early 1960s (Pustz 1999; Schelly 2010). Twenty-first-century fandom is more diverse by gender and color than has been previously

considered, but we still engage the iconic characters and stories of comics as bearers of moral meaning, exciting narratives, and deep emotional commitment. We still form reading communities and aspire to become writers and creators. The Internet provides easier access, greater visibility, and new venues and more opportunities to participate in fandom without getting our fingers stained with mimeograph fluid. Films generate a new body of fans. These changes create opportunities and challenges to fandom, the industry, and the narratives. This issue of TWC reflects this moment of change and reveals that at its core, transformation is a political act.

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Theory

Fangirls in refrigerators: The politics of (in)visibility in comic book culture

Suzanne Scott

Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—In 1999, Gail Simone circulated a list of female comic book characters who had been "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator," sparking a dialogue about gender and comic book culture that continues today. In particular, 2011 and 2012 have been marked by an exponential growth in conversations and criticisms surrounding the state of women in comics, both as producers and consumers. Through a survey of how scholars have gendered comic book readership, an overview of recent incidents that have renewed concern about women in comics, and an analysis of one transformative intervention in the wake of these conversations, this essay broadly discusses the relative invisibility of female comic book fans as a market segment and how fangirls are actively striving to become a visible and vocal force within comic book culture. This essay suggests that we are currently witnessing a transformative moment within comic book industry, comic book fandom, and comic book scholarship, in which gender is one of the primary axes of change.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fandom; Gender; Representation; Subculture; Transformative works

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1. Introduction: Fangirls in refrigerators

[1.1] In 1999, Gail Simone created a list of the disproportionate number of "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (1999a). As for the wives and girlfriends of superheroes who suffered similar tortures in their decades as damsels in distress, Simone dismissed that as "a whole 'nother problem" (1999b). The title of the list, and the Web site it inspired, refer to *Green Lantern* #54 (1994) (figure 1), in which the hero's girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, is left dismembered in his refrigerator by villain Major Force (note 1). While the implied violence of the image is unsettling enough, its domestic context and paternalistic tone ("Least she left a note") collectively send a clear message about both the role of women in comics and in comic book culture. The panel is wholly focused on Kyle

Rayner's reaction to the discovery of his girlfriend's body, visually composed to emphasize his trauma while obscuring hers. One could argue that this panel is simply a textbook example of comics' expressionistic effects and subjective use of color to convey Rayner's horror, but it also aesthetically symbolizes the concerns that underpin Simone's list (McCloud, 1993). Female comic book readers, like Alex Dewitt or many of the other heroines they identify with, often fade into the background or are obscured from view.



Figure 1. The inspiration for Simone's "Women in Refrigerators" list, *Green Lantern* #54 (1994). [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.2] In the years since the Women in Refrigerators list was published, Simone has become one of the most visible female creators of mainstream superhero comic books, perhaps best known for her work on superheroine-centric DC Comics titles *Birds of Prey* and *Wonder Woman*. Since coming to comic book fandom's attention with the Women in Refrigerators list, Simone has also been a vocal advocate for women in comics, reiterating the list's initial goal: "My simple point has always been: if you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't read comics. That's it!" (1999c). The primary issue for Simone, one that is echoed by many female comic fans, is not just that there are fewer female superheroes (and thus, when they are brutally dispatched or disregarded, their absence leaves a greater demographic hole in the roster of mainstream superhero comics), or that they are often treated as spin-off

franchise "baggage" (*Batgirl*, *Supergirl*), but what their treatment implicitly suggests about the comic industry's valuation of female readers. Simone ruminates on the impact of comics' implied or intended audience in the site's "Possible Motives" section, acknowledging that statistically, women are understandably "of marginal import" in a medium dominated by male creators and consumers. Simone concludes that, beyond the potential hostility these representations might breed for women venturing into their LCS (local comic shop or store), what is more disheartening is that "there's a feeling of inconsequence, of afterthought, to these stories" (1999b). This essay examines this nagging feeling of inconsequence, and how female comic book creators and fans have visibly and vocally begun to challenge the representations and industrial inequities that perpetuate these feelings.

[1.3] The years 2011 and 2012 were marked by increased attention to the place and perception of women within comic book culture, from the pointed questions of the "Batgirl of San Diego" at Comic-Con in July 2011 to the publication of *Womanthology* in March 2012. The increased visibility of these issues can be credited in part to social media platforms like Twitter, a growing network of feminist blogs devoted to geek culture, and the emergence of crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter. However, this groundswell of criticism must also be viewed as a part of broader contemporary debates around misogyny within male-dominated media subcultures. Running parallel to this interrogation of gender and comic book culture, female gamers have begun to document the exclusionary practices and harassment they face within video game subcultures (see the blogs *Not in the Kitchen Anymore*; *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty*; *Go Make Me A Sandwich*). In particular, the vitriolic response to feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian's Kickstarter campaign to produce a series of critical videos documenting representational tropes of women in video games made national news. Responding only to the project's Kickstarter description, male gamers launched a comprehensive campaign of harassment, including the creation of a Flash-based "game" in which players could physically abuse Sarkeesian (Sarkeesian 2012). This is an extreme case, but it speaks to long-percolating tensions within these communities and increased efforts to maintain "authenticity" and to socially police subcultural boundaries, frequently along gender lines. Comic books and video games, arguably the two media forms most associated with an overwhelmingly male consumer base, also appear to be most concerned about retaining their subcultural capital as geek culture moves from the margins to the mainstream. As the analysis below suggests, events like DC's massive "New 52" rebranding and reboot have provoked criticism from female fans precisely because they presented an explicit (and ultimately missed) opportunity to acknowledge minority readerships and expand comics' fan base.

[1.4] I don't mean to suggest that the comic book industry treats female fans as brutally as it occasionally treats its female heroes, but rather that female fans of comic

books have long felt "fridged," an audience segment kept on ice and out of view. Through a brief survey of existing scholarship on comics' readership, a closer examination of several of the controversies that have reignited debates around the latent sexism of comics, and examples of transformative and critical interventions currently being made by female comic book fans, this essay aims to interrogate the politics of (in)visibility for women within comic book culture.

2. Gendering comic book fandom: A survey of scholarship

[2.1] In many cases, we need look no further than the titles of scholarly work on US comic book culture to see how this body of literature reinforces the cultural presumption that comic book fans are overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, male (see Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*; Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*; Matthew J. Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*). There are two primary issues with the current body of literature on comic book culture. First, historical data on comic book audiences are both limited and inconsistent, often relying on "imperfect indicators" such as market studies and reader surveys (Gabilliet 2010, 191). If, as Gabilliet suggests, a fuller understanding of the volume and composition of comic book readership is essential, in part because a medium's "visibility is closely correlated with legitimation" (191), then female comic book fans' recent efforts to make themselves visible as a market segment suggests a similar desire to legitimate their identities as comic book fans. Second, comics scholarship often essentializes women's taste in comics along gendered genre lines, at the expense of engaging with the (admittedly small, but robust) female audience for mainstream superhero comics. The brief survey of scholarship on comic book fandom and readership below suggests a desperate need for more extensive ethnographic and demographic work that addresses how gendered presumptions impact our cultural conception of the audience for comic books.

[2.2] In his history of the creators and publishers of early superhero comics, Jones succinctly characterizes comic book fans as "overwhelmingly male, mostly middle class, mostly Anglo or Germanic or Jewish, and mostly isolated" until they discovered comic book fan clubs (2004, 33). More specifically, Jones pejoratively depicts comic book fanboys as a collective of Jerry Siegel: small, anxious, withdrawn, and terrified of the opposite sex (26–28). Jones also notes that, like Siegel's writing, the stories that comic fanboys "loved and wrote were locked in boyish latency, often lacking females entirely; even the occasional damsel in distress tended to be...fairly sexless and unthreatening" (34). Keeping these descriptions of comic book readers' "boyish latency" in mind, comics scholars typically frame age, rather than gender (or race, or sexuality, or class) as the structuring demographic rift within comic book fandom

(Pustz 1999, 164–65). As a result, gender is often invoked and quickly dismissed as an analytical axis, citing surveys that estimate that men constitute 90 to 95 percent of the fan base for comic books (Brown 1997; Parsons 1991; Lopes 2009). Invoking these data without any further interrogation allows these studies to focus on society's historically "paternalistic attitude" (Brown 1997, 18) toward comic book fanboys while neatly sidestepping conversations about the patriarchal attitude of comic book culture.

[2.3] For example, Jonathan David Tankel and Keith Murphy's ethnographic study of comic book collectors states that "the most striking and expected demographic characteristic of the comic book collectors surveyed is that 100 percent are male" (1998, 60). Modeled on the questionnaire used in Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Tankel and Murphy's survey group was small (only 38 out of 50 questionnaires were returned, some of them incomplete), making their certainty regarding these extrapolated, "expected demographic" results especially problematic. Tankel and Murphy reinforce their own expectations with industrial and anecdotal evidence to argue that the "overwhelming male dominance" of comic book fandom "remains true despite the efforts that all the major publishers put into winning the readership of females" (1998, 60–61). In this and many other studies, comic book fandom and culture is coded as always completely male, and the comic book industry's failure to acknowledge the female audience is justified through economic rationalization. In comic books' Golden Age, at the height of its popularity as a mass media form in the 1940s, comics were equally popular with adolescent and preadolescent boys and girls (Gabilliet 2010). Though we must also be skeptical of data estimating that 80 to 90 percent of girls ages 6–17 were reading comics around 1944 (Parsons 1991, 69–70), the current discursive construction of women as a surplus audience obscures the fact that they were a preexisting segment of comic books' audience at a time when comics consumption wasn't as stringently gendered. Scholarly accounts of comic book publishers' attempts to reach out to female readers and expand their current fan base tend to stress that these attempts invariably fail (Pustz 1999), with minimal examination of why.

[2.4] The issue is not simply that popular and academic literature generally renders female comic book readers invisible; it is also that the moments in which they are visible, they are too frequently compartmentalized and contained. Whether addressing the boom of romance comic books in the postwar period (Lopes 2009), or contemporary transmedia extensions designed to expand a comic book's preexisting male fan base (Jenkins 2007), the gendered genre discourses used to frame past and present industrial efforts to reach out to female readers are problematic on two fronts. First, postwar romance comics, written predominantly by men, featured female protagonists but continued to frame them exclusively through their relationships to men, championing domestic servitude and illustrating the "perils of female

independence" (Wright 2001, 128). Likewise, transmedia comics like *Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane* may have the capacity to nuance female characters that have previously functioned as love interests and/or plot devices and to tell stories from their point of view, but the series' essentialist emphasis on romance (reflected in both form and content) keeps it firmly located in the "pink ghetto" (Radway 1984, 18). Second, and even more troublesome, is the fact that *Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane* is clearly marked as existing outside of Marvel continuity. Thus, while it might offer new readers a low-stakes access point into the Spider-Man canon, it also cordons off these new presumed female readers from the broader continuity traditions, serial pleasures, and community of comic book readership.

[2.5] When not addressed through "feminine" genres, female comics audiences are most frequently aligned with independent comics (Pustz 1999). As Trina Robbins (2002) and others have noted, female readers frequently gravitate toward indie titles in part because this is where the vast majority of female comic book writers and artists are working. Courtney Lee Weida notes that the tendency to feminize indie comics, "if feminizing means the inclusion of women's agency as producers of cultural narratives in male dominated narrative artforms" (2011, 103), aligns indie comics with zine culture and other spaces in which activist self-publishing is valued. Many scholars have acknowledged that underground comix culture, despite its typically progressive political leanings, was equally laced with misogyny (Lopes 2009; Pustz 1999). Still, we can see the traces of the DIY ethos behind the underground comix movement and its mobilization as a feminist strategy in publications like *Wimmin's Comix* in the 1970s (Noomin 2004), within the contemporary transformative projects discussed below.

[2.6] Research on female audiences for mainstream superhero comics is limited, in part because of a lack of transparency from publishers who, when they do conduct surveys, do so to "maximize profits within the existing system, rather than seeking to extend the readership of comics across barriers of sex, age, and race" (Gabilliet 2010, 207). Most recently, DC hired the Nielsen Company to gauge the demographic response to the New 52, finding that the relaunch ultimately "galvanized the traditional fan base for superhero comic books: male readers, who were already—or have at one time been—comic book fans" (DCE Editorial 2012). The data culled from over 6,000 surveys conducted in comic stores, via e-mail and online, between September 26 and October 7, 2011, found that 70 percent of the respondents were already avid comic book fans, and 93 percent were male. The fact that only 5 percent of those surveyed indicated that they were new to comics should have been a point of concern for DC; instead, it was widely read as an affirmation "that [DC's] best bet for solvency in the market is to focus exclusively on keeping the 18–34 year old male reader to the exclusion of other demographics, over the protests of many female fans and readers" (Polo 2011). Comic blogger Jill Pantozzi echoed Gabilliet in her response

to DC's explicit efforts to target men of ages 18–34 with the relaunch, noting with some frustration that the "survey wasn't meant to tell DC what they were doing wrong or what they could do to get more women to read their books (even though many respondents absolutely told them in the space provided). All the survey proves is that [DC's] lack of trying to do anything to gain a female audience did exactly what was expected—nothing" (2012b).

[2.7] Contrary to the results of the Nielsen DC survey, anecdotal evidence suggests that the female readership for comics has been growing over the past decade, in part because of comics' integration into transmedia storytelling models. Reflecting on the noticeable shift in comic book convention attendance over the past several years, Gail Simone recounted an exchange between her husband and a male attendee at a recent convention. While signing books for female fans, noticing female attendees lined up to meet male creators and flocking to booths featuring creators like Amanda Connor, Simone marveled that despite being in "the very epicenter of that, the young man turned to my husband and said, 'I don't care what anyone says, women are never going to read comics'" (2012, 17). What female comic book readers must fight for now, Simone suggests, is acknowledgment, in large part because those in power "don't see what's directly in front of them" (2012, 17). The next section frames this visibility problem through the allegorical capacity of "Invisible Girl" Sue Storm and the gendered politics of studying subcultures.

3. The politics of invisibility (from Sue Storm to subcultural theory)

[3.1] Marvel's *The Fantastic Four* debuted in 1961 as a superhero narrative focused on the often dysfunctional familial bond among its characters. Given this historical context and the comic's emphasis on how the "problems of human existence interfered with their crimefighting abilities" (Genter 2007, 954), it is difficult to read symbolic matriarch Susan "Sue" Storm (Invisible Girl, later Invisible Woman) outside of the context of second-wave feminism. Wife to Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic), sister to Johnny Storm (the Human Torch), and colleague/caretaker to Ben Grimm (the Thing), Sue's power, her ability to turn herself invisible, could be read as a commentary on the shifting cultural visibility of women's rights in the 1960s. Laura Mattoon D'Amore (2008) has suggested that Sue Storm symbolically represented the 1950s suburban housewife, "undercompensated and unrecognized for her successes," invisible and "unappreciated in a world of and for men." Tracing these tropes within *The Fantastic Four* comics through the 1960s, D'Amore argues that Sue's invisibility is both literal and figurative, initially mirroring and ultimately deflecting the period's gender norms.

[3.2] D'Amore locates this shift from reflection to deflection in 1964's *The Fantastic Four* #22, in which Sue learns to craft powerful force fields, remaining visible as she projects invisibility onto others. As D'Amore (2008) notes, this "appears to be a limitation—yet another weakness—but in actuality it is critical to her newer, stronger identity. This power privileges her visibility, rendering others (men included) invisible." Thus, though not intentionally constructed as a feminist character, Sue Storm's visibility might be read as a "classic feminist victory," finally positioning her as an equal member of the team. Just as fans advocated for a more empowered Sue Storm in the letter columns of *The Fantastic Four* in the early 1960s, contemporary comic book fans are becoming increasingly unwilling to accept comic book culture as a world of and for men. We cannot neatly equate visibility with equality; nor should we fail to interrogate the problems and paradoxes surrounding notions of "visibility politics." It is important to acknowledge the enduring centrality of the concept not just to feminist media criticism but to a range of scholarly work on marginalized communities.

[3.3] In their seminal 1977 essay "Girls and Subcultures," Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber interrogated the absence of female subjects from the literature emerging from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. McRobbie and Garber's ultimate concern, that "girls sub-cultures may have become invisible because the very term 'sub-culture' has acquired such strong masculine overtones" (1993, 211), could easily be applied to contemporary concerns about the masculine overtones of "comic book culture." This gendered invisibility is cultivated and sustained through a variety of journalistic, industrial, and academic discourses. Though media fandom in general has moved out of the subcultural shadows within convergence culture, McRobbie and Garber's claim that the "popular image of a subculture as encoded and defined by the media is likely to be one which emphasizes the male membership, male 'focal concerns,' and masculine values" (1993, 212) remains firmly entrenched within comic book fandom.

[3.4] In an effort to explain why girls were rarely the subject of subcultural studies, McRobbie and Garber observed that girls are likely to retreat or, alternately, become collectively aggressive in situations that are "male-defined" (1993, 210). Many female comic book fans have adopted a similar response to the male-defined realm of comic book culture, in which "both the defensive and aggressive responses are structured in reaction against a situation where masculine definitions (and thus sexual labeling, etc.) are in dominance" (210). Joanne Hollows has made a similar argument about cult movie fandom, a subculture that is not only "based on a refusal of competencies and dispositions that are culturally coded as feminine; it may also work structurally to exclude women from participation" (2003, 37–38). Comic book fandom, like cult movie fandom or other male-dominated subcultures, may welcome women if they "opt to be 'one of the boys,'" but this fails to "challenge the power relations which sustain a

position in which there are few opportunities to capitalize on femininity" (40) as either a producer or consumer. Thus, it is not enough to be visible; it is the terms and conditions of that visibility that are central.

[3.5] My own concerns regarding comic book fangirls' relative invisibility, as a demographic and as a subject of study, echo McRobbie and Garber's anxieties that this might create a "self-fulfilling prophecy, a vicious circle" (1993, 212) in which women view comic book culture as inaccessible or inhospitable. For example, scholars tend to characterize the LCS, the primary site in which comic book fandom is made visible, as a space reminiscent of a secret clubhouse with policed social barriers of entry for new readers, and in particular female readers. Benjamin Woo's recent work productively describes the social setting of the LCS, and the tensions they exhibit "as both 'sanctuaries' from mainstream hierarchies of taste and status, and arenas of competition for social and subcultural capital" (2011, 125). Building on Erving Goffman's distinction between "front" and "back" regions of theatrical performance, Woo allegorically links the inside of an LCS to a backstage area of a theater, a safe and supportive space free of the cultural scrutiny of an audience. Though he characterizes the LCS as a backstage area in which comic book readers aren't forced to manage impressions or perform mainstream taste hierarchies or social norms (131–32), Woo acknowledges that "a region's 'frontness' or 'backness' is relative to the performers and audiences in question" (2011, 132).

[3.6] When women are mentioned as inhabitants of the subcultural space of the LCS (either in scholarly or conversational accounts), they tend to be framed as highly visible precisely *because* of their pervasive framing as subcultural interlopers. In this panoptic model, visibility is not desirable but rather a trap that induces a "state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995, 201). This has not been my personal experience as a patron of comic book shops, and gender rarely enters Woo's ethnographic account of the two social regions that LCS patrons occupy. Still, the notion that women might be simultaneously subjected to the front region's pressure to performatively manage impressions and be scrutinized by the audience (in this case, male patrons, as well as, frequently, shop owners and staff), and denied the invisibility afforded by the back region as a space for performers/fans to let down their guard and collectively engage in conversation and social rituals, is often reinforced in the characterization of comic book shops (Pustz 1999). Female comic book fans, like Sue Storm, must consider the different and often paradoxical, forms of power that visibility and invisibility afford. If the goal is for female comic creators and fans to become more than an industrial niche or surplus audience, to become invisible (read: accepted) members of that culture, increased visibility will be necessary to encourage that shift.

[3.7] Because comic book culture is male defined, and because this perception has permeated both the collective consumer consciousness and the spaces in which those exchanges take place, it is understandable that many female comic book fans have taken it upon themselves to construct alternative, fangirl-friendly spaces. Henry Jenkins has argued that a "politics of participation starts from the assumption that we may have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities" (2006, 249). The fact that Jenkins's example of such a community is Sequential Tart, a Web zine and community that was formed in 1997 as "as an advocacy group for female consumers frustrated by their historic neglect or patronizing treatment by the comics industry" (249), is evidence that the medium of comics is perhaps most in need of such a politics of participation. In addition to other organizations with similar advocacy goals, such as Friends of Lulu, the boom in recent years of blogs that resonate with Sequential Tart's mission, such as DC Women Kicking Ass, The Mary Sue, Girls Read Comics Too, and Has Boobs, Reads Comics, among many others, is heartening. Even more encouraging is the politics of visibility that has recently emerged around and through these consumption communities, which have been wielded as weapons of intervention in the gender and comics debate.

4. Form and feminism (or, why we care how Mary Jane drinks her coffee)

[4.1] The increased visibility of female comic book fans in 2011 and 2012 was due in large part to a string of compounding controversies that prompted an outpouring of criticism and commentary online. As Simone's initial Women in Refrigerators list makes clear, debates surrounding the links between comics' representation and readership are not new but have been revived with renewed interest amid broader conversations about women in comic book culture and comics' industrial survival. This section briefly discusses three notable firestorms of 2011: the Batgirl of San Diego, the response to hypersexualized female characters in the New 52, and the Mary Jane Drinks Coffee meme. Importantly, these three controversies suggest that comic book fans are increasingly producing transformative commentary, turning the male gaze of comic book culture back on itself, and holding the industry accountable for the paltry number of women being hired to work on mainstream superhero titles.

[4.2] At San Diego Comic-Con 2011, a woman dressed as the Stephanie Brown iteration of Batgirl attended a range of DC Comics panels and waited patiently in line to ask a question of the overwhelmingly male panelists. Considering that the majority of these panels were expressly designed to promote the launch of the New 52, the questions themselves were not particularly controversial. They were questions about creators, which heroes would be featured, and comments on leaked covers and promotional images online. What was controversial was that each of these questions

cordially, but pointedly, asked DC creators and publishers to explain the lack of female characters and creators being featured in DC's reboot. It is important to acknowledge that this fangirl, quickly dubbed the "Batgirl of San Diego" and now known by her handle, Kyrax2, wasn't the only attendee to interrogate the noticeable shift in the demographics of DC's creative teams surrounding the new line, with female creators dropping from approximately 12 percent to making up only 1 percent of DC's talent roster. One sound bite that circulated widely featured a male fan posing a similar question, only to be testily challenged and ultimately silenced by DC copublisher Dan DiDio.

[4.3] Ironically, the originator of the Women in Refrigerators list now frequently serves as a tokenist example of publishers' efforts to support female creators. As arguably the most prominent female writer for DC Comics, publishers and fans' frequent reliance on the "Gail Simone defense" when confronted with the aforementioned statistics makes tactical sense (in other words, if Simone, a vocal critic of gender and comics, chooses to align herself with DC and is known to craft narratives centered around compelling female characters, then the industry clearly doesn't have a gender bias) but ultimately only highlights industrial inequities. In particular, Simone's attachment to the New 52's *Batgirl* reboot suggests that her visibility as a female comic creator and critic is a double-edged sword. Though female fans were certainly pleased that Batgirl was getting her own title, many were disappointed to learn that Simone would be relaunching the character of Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, effectively erasing Gordon's tenure as Oracle after being paralyzed by the Joker in Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). In the New 52's *Batgirl*, Barbara regains the use of her legs three years after being shot by the Joker, and quickly slips back into the cape and cowl. While rebooting characters has been a common strategy of the New 52, many fans felt that the decision smacked of ableism and were especially critical of Simone, who as a feminist creator was expected to be more sensitive to these representational shifts and their impact on minority readerships.

[4.4] If Simone's industrial presence has become somewhat symbolic, invoked to quickly dispel criticism of industrial inequities ([note 2](#)), what made the Batgirl of San Diego such a powerful symbol was her consistent, visible presence at DC's panels, the persistence of her questions, and other fans' response. In response to the Batgirl of San Diego, Laura Sneddon (2011) of comicbookgrrrl.com observed:

[4.5] Typically, questions about women in comics from women in the audience were prefaced with the usual disclaimers—"I mean absolutely no malice," "I don't want this question to come across as confrontational"—in full knowledge of the likely reaction. That the rest of the audience booed and

heckled these women is, sadly, no big surprise. You only need turn to any large online comics forum to see a slew of (mostly male but not all) comic fans condescendingly dismissing women's concerns about female diversity in comics. In a society where pop culture is very much dominated still by men, and the male gaze, it is very easy for our concerns to be brushed aside.

[4.6] Unquestionably, the Batgirl of San Diego's unwillingness to be treated as a surplus reader challenged widespread presumptions about superhero comic book readership, but she also exposed the gendered nature of Comic-Con as a space. Doreen Massey has argued that spaces and places are not only gendered but also "reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood," noting that attempts at spatial control can extend to a social control of identity (1994, 179). Fan conventions have historically been characterized as safe, even utopian spaces in which differences are embraced. My work on the Twilight protests at San Diego Comic-Con 2009 (Scott 2011), the recent sexual harassment debacle at Readercon 23 (Colby et al. 2012), and comic book artist Tony Harris's November 2012 Facebook screed against "COSPLAY-Chiks [*sic*]" who "DONT [*sic*] KNOW SHIT ABOUT COMICS" (Dickens 2012), all indicate that these utopian characterizations of comic book conventions belie how gendered subcultural tensions manifest in these spaces. Specifically, the hostility directed at the Batgirl of San Diego from fans and publishers alike suggests a sort of panopti(comic)con, in which fan expression is increasingly policed. Like the aforementioned panoptic qualities of the LCS, conventions transpose the implied male gaze of comics into physical spaces, realizing John Berger's claim that "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (1973, 47). If female comic fans are simultaneously prisoner and guard, it is in large part because comic book form itself encourages women to "consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (Berger 1973, 46).

[4.7] The New 52, which presented a prime opportunity to attract new readers and reboot both comic book franchises and the comic book industry at large, instead kept its focus firmly on 18-to-34-year-old men and accordingly kept its superheroines in "outfits that catch the eye and erect the crotch" (Sneddon 2011). Many female comic bloggers argued that it was not simply an issue of costuming, though a wave of cross-dressing and genderswap memes accompanying the New 52's release made these disparities abundantly, and comically, clear (note 3). To the male comic book fans who frequently rationalized or openly dismissed complaints about the representation of women in comics by noting that the male superhero body is hypermasculinized, these female bloggers argued that "the 'ideal' nature of male superhero bodies will always focus on strength and fitness while the 'ideal' nature of female superhero bodies will always focus on sexiness and vulnerability" (Sneddon 2011). In particular, Guillem

March's cover image for *Catwoman* #0, one of the only female-centric titles in the relaunch, was criticized and endlessly parodied (RoboPanda 2012) for exhibiting the "broken back" syndrome that many superheroines aesthetically suffer from (figure 2).

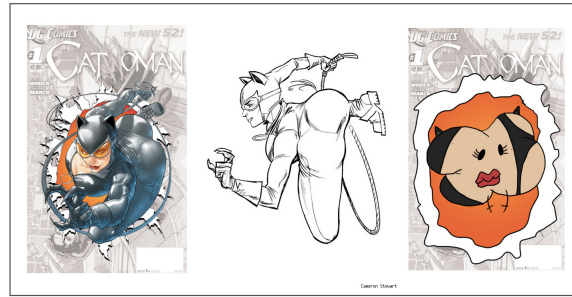


Figure 2. The controversial cover of the New 52's *Catwoman* #0, and two examples of the many parodies of Catwoman's "broken back" pose by Cameron Stewart and Josh Rodgers. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.8] Starfire's appearance in *Red Hood and the Outlaws* also drew attention and genderswap criticism (figure 3), in that her presence in the comic was little more than a pornographic tableau. Reflecting on the aspirational nature of superhero comics and what precisely Catwoman and Starfire were asking female readers to aspire to, Laura Hudson (2011) asked a common question and arrived at a common answer: "Why is she contorting her body in that weird way? Who is she posing for, because it doesn't even seem to be Roy Harper? The answer, dear reader, is that she is posing for you. News flash: Starfire isn't being promiscuous because this comic wants to support progressive notions of gender roles. Starfire is being promiscuous so that you can look at [her]." It is difficult not to hear John Berger in Hudson's remarks, particularly the notion that, under these conditions, a woman's "own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another" (1973, 46).



Figure 3. Ashley R. Guillory's "Manfire," a prime example of how artists have used genderswapping to transformatively critique comic book representation. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.9] In the midst of growing complaints about the objectification of female superheroes in the fall of 2011, a meme emerged mocking the cover of *The Amazing*

Spider-Man #601 (2009). J. Scott Campbell's cover image, depicting Mary Jane Watson fretting about Spidey's safety over her morning coffee, provoked a string of parodic images in which fans attempted to contort themselves into Mary Jane's pose (Sicha 2011). The backlash also prompted artists to rework the image, sometimes in radically different styles, but more often than not hewing closely to the original cover, arguing that minor alterations were enough to make the image more relatable without sacrificing Mary Jane's sex appeal (figure 4). One commenter summarized these frustrations: "Look, I get it. Mary Jane is hot, but for Christ's sake, this is why girls feel alienated from comics. This is not how a human lounges. [...] This is what we're talking about when we say 'male gaze'" (werockthisshit in kitfoxxhawaii 2011). Because Mary Jane is presumably alone in her apartment, the performative pose assumes "the determining male gaze" of a heterosexual comic book reader projecting his fantasies on the female form. Mary Jane, like the Hollywood actresses in Mulvey's initial study, is thus "styled accordingly...simultaneously looked at and displayed, with [her] appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that [she] can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1999, 837).

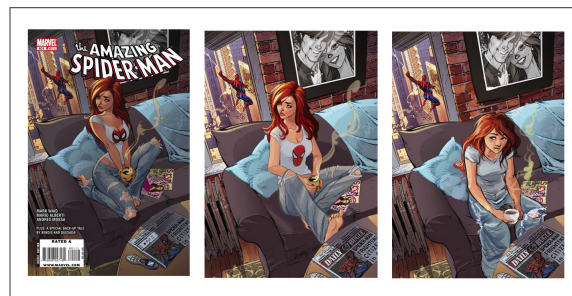


Figure 4. J. Scott Campbell's original cover of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #601, and two covers that attempt a more realistic depiction of Mary Jane (artists unknown).
[\[View larger image.\]](#)

[4.10] Though it is clearly popular to channel Laura Mulvey in these critiques of the male gaze of mainstream comic book art (and perhaps comic book culture by extension), a 1979 interview with science fiction author Samuel R. Delany in *Comics Journal* is quick to differentiate between the respective gazes of film, television, and comics. Privileging the gaze of comics over other media forms, Delany cited the unprecedented control the medium offers: "Viewers can control the speed their gazes travel through the medium, they can control how far away or close they hold the page, whether they go backwards and regaze—and going back in a comic book is a very different process from going back in a novel to reread a previous paragraph or chapter" (1979, 40). Arguing that the nature of the medium renders the reader a "coproducer" of the text, Delany's notion of the "regaze," while compelling, doesn't address the issue that women are rarely considered in these terms. Thus, despite comics' great potential, they still fall prey to many of the same issues Mulvey identified

with respect to film, and perhaps exacerbate the male gaze via this gendered control of the regazing and the bodies of female superheroes. This unprecedented control of the gaze also evokes the panoptic power of the prison guard, with superheroines arranged in their panels/cells, performing this state of constant visibility for an invisible male spectator.

[4.11] In the letters column of *Saga* #4, writer Brian K. Vaughn shared the results of a tongue-in-cheek reader survey he had placed in the prior issue. Having requested readers to list their age, Vaughn noted that 35 percent of the respondents made a point of identifying themselves as women, despite the fact that he hadn't directly solicited gender demographics. While this is not entirely surprising, given Vaughn's reputation for producing work with compelling female characters and feminist undertones (*Y: The Last Man*, *Runaways*, *Ex Machina*) and the large female fan base that artist Fiona Staples brings to the project, the fact that these respondents felt compelled to specify their gender is telling. The growing desire for women to be counted, or rendered a visible part of the comics fan base, and the industry's reticence to listen have resulted in crowdfunded endeavors. These projects strive to rectify some of the aforementioned representational inequities and prove there is a paying audience for more progressive female superheroes; but centrally, they are concerned with making female comics creators and fans visible on their own terms.

5. A transformative intervention: The case of *Womanthology*

[5.1] In May 2011, in the wake of controversies surrounding DC's New 52 and various other calls from female comic fans to be acknowledged as both producers and consumers, artist Renae De Liz tweeted and pitched the notion of a charitable comic anthology created entirely by women. A little over one month and one hundred contributors later, a Kickstarter page was created to raise \$25,000 for printing costs, with IDW Publishing supporting the release. After surpassing the initial fund-raising goal in less than 24 hours, *Womanthology: Heroic* went on to raise over \$109,000, becoming one of the most successful crowdfunding endeavors in the history of Kickstarter. Though there has been some debate surrounding the project's charitable giving and distribution of funds (Khoury 2011), the anthology was successful enough to prompt IDW to commit to a five-issue *Womanthology: Space* miniseries, which launched in September 2012. This miniseries furthers the project's initial goal of carving out a space for female comic book creators to share their work, but it also demonstrates the potential of projects like *Womanthology* as a transformative industrial intervention.

[5.2] I don't use the word *transformative* here as we might when discussing fan works (that is, fan fiction or other texts created by fans and inspired by a media

property)), in part because *Womanthology* features wholly original works. So rather than framing *Womanthology* as a textually transformative work that, in the Supreme Court's terms, "adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning or message" (*Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music Inc.* 1994), I would categorize it as an industrially transformative work, one that strives to effect the same change on the comic book industry that a fan might on a media property, bending it to align with textually unacknowledged identities and desires and wielding it as a mode of critical commentary. *Womanthology: Heroic* is thus pointedly the antithesis of a monthly comic book, weighty in both size and mission, distancing itself from the pejorative implications of the "floppy" and its historic treatment, often mistreatment, of female creators, character, and consumers. Though diverse in genre, style, and tone, the comics thematically coalesce around and interrogate our culture's narrow, often rigidly gendered, definitions of heroism. As the cover image indicates (figure 5), many of the comics feature preadolescent and adolescent girls as protagonists, visualizing an untapped market key to the industry's future survival and articulating textual and aesthetic frustrations with mainstream comics.



Figure 5. The cover of *Womanthology* visualizes the range of stories and styles that remain underrepresented in mainstream comics. [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.3] Gail Simone and artist Jean Kang's contribution to the collection, "In Every Heart a Masterwork," exemplifies these tropes and celebrates the transformative drive of female fans. Focused on a precocious young girl who pilfers and "fixes" her big brother's violent, hypersexualized comic books, "In Every Heart a Masterwork" models how fannish frustration can prompt creative intervention. Following a triptych in which the young female protagonist rifles through her brother's comics (notably, the center panel pictures the girl holding up a comic book featuring a busty dragon slayer, "Beastia," as one might a *Playboy* centerfold), she sets to work with her art kit. The comic closes with the girl's mother offering to buy her daughter "some comics a girl might like," to which the girl replies, "It's okay Momma—I made my own" (figure 6). The image of the transformed comics that concludes the story highlights a range of fannish (and potentially feminist) rewriting strategies, from the reconfiguration of

Beastia as a fully clothed cowgirl, to the generic subversion of the zombie comic, to the Mary Sue-ish self-insertion, to the potential slash relationship connoted by the heart placed between two male characters. The celebration of transformative textual play in this particular comic is reinforced by the "Pro Tips" peppered throughout the anthology, expressly designed to encourage readers to create their own comics. These Pro Tips range from practical advice to general words of encouragement, supplemented with in-depth walk-throughs on how to write, draw, ink, color, and letter comics, and interviews with notable female creators on their creative process.



Figure 6. *Transformative intervention is foregrounded in Gail Simone and Jean Kang's contribution to Womanthology, "In Every Heart a Masterwork" (2011). [View larger image.]*

[5.4] Other comics in the collection, such as this single-page untitled comic by Miss Lasko-Gross (figure 7), openly play on gendered notions of visibility, suggesting that even heroics of the highest order might become a form of women's work within our current cultural frame. Across seven dialogue-free panels, Miss Lasko-Gross's heroine slays ghouls, gladiators, dragons, and killer robots, only to return home to a hungry male partner lazing in bed requesting a sandwich. The physicality of the female protagonist clearly plays off of long-standing debates within comic book culture regarding representation. The punch line of the sandwich, and the heroine's response, speaks directly to the weariness of female fans of purportedly masculine properties and media forms being consistently told to "get back in the kitchen." This Internet forum refrain has grown alongside female fans' (particular female gamers and comic book readers) increased efforts to expose and denounce sexism in their respective

communities over the past several years ([note 4](#)). What Miss Lasko-Gross's comic does so effectively, and so economically, is capture the moment of grudging disappointment that accompanies these regressive dismissals. Many of the comics in *Womanthology* similarly grapple with gender norms and their social enforcement.

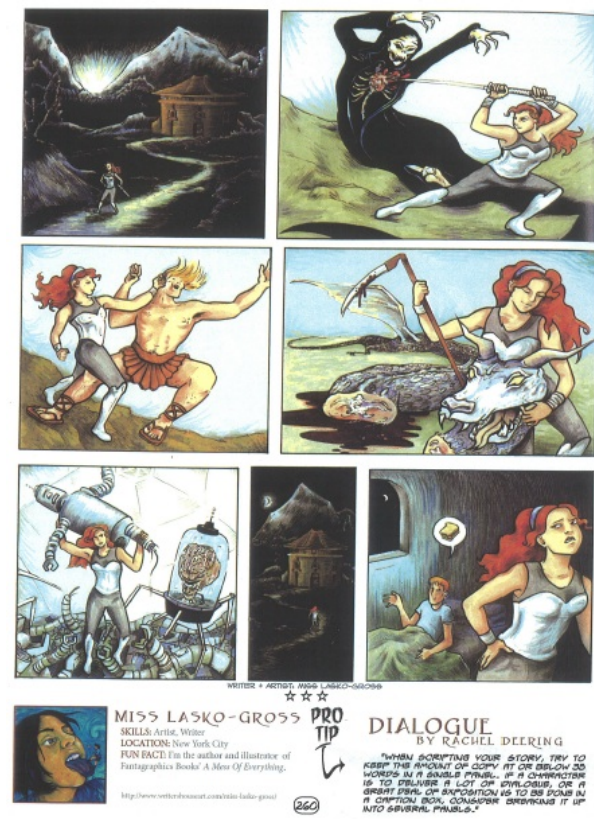


Figure 7. This untitled comic by Miss Lasko-Gross in *Womanthology* (2011) reframes and reflects on the notion of "women's work" and the common digital dismissal, "Go make me a sandwich." [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.5] In some senses, a project like *Womanthology* can be viewed as an attempt to work through the tensions that invariably accompany discussions of gender, visibility, and fan culture. First, though it primarily focuses on the inequitable gender politics of mainstream comics, it points toward other marginalized or minority voices in comics, including works that consider heroism through the lenses of race, age, and mental and physical ability. As fan culture and fan studies broadly begin to look beyond gender as its primary critical axis to consider other marginalized audiences, the collection's attention to diversity, not just in content and style but in contributor demographics, suggests an attempt to raise the visibility of more than just female comic creators and readers. Second, while the collection shares many of the qualities and core traits of feminine fannish gift economies, *Womanthology* explicitly pitched itself as a professional launching pad for its contributors. The majority of fan creators show limited interest in industrial exposure, choosing instead to circulate their works for free as a mode of building and maintaining communal bonds. If this mode of feminine

textual production remains relatively invisible to those outside these communities of practice, *Womanthology*'s overt effort to exchange free labor for industrial visibility suggests a tentative step toward a reconciliation between commercial and gift economies that retains the appeal of both. Debates around the commercialization of fan labor are ongoing, and the collection's capacity to inject the comic industry with emerging female creators remains to be seen, but *Womanthology* makes a compelling case for how gendered means of amateur production as an entrée to professionalization (modding, fan filmmaking), might be used to feminist ends.

6. Conclusion: Why the "what" matters

[6.1] A recent In Focus section of *Cinema Journal* devoted to comics studies culminated in a conversation among scholars Greg M. Smith, Thomas Andrae, Scott Bukatman, and Thomas LaMarre. The aim of this dialogue was to survey the state of the field and contemplate its future as a burgeoning object of study. Discussing the lack of "exemplary" comics scholarship and how the difficulties of navigating a hybrid scholarly identity might contribute to such a lack, Bukatman noted:

[6.2] Younger scholars, many of whom are comic fans, feel that they have to overburden their objects of study with a lot of ideological analysis. So there is a wave of "representations of" studies—African Americans in comics, queer characters in comics, and so on. It becomes a very predictable parade of concerns that played through in other fields decades ago. It also, often, serves to rob these objects of whatever pleasures they may have contained for the very scholars producing the work. But it serves the purpose of separating the scholar from the fan and demonstrating to the home department that the scholar is, indeed, doing "serious" work. (Smith et al. 2011, 138)

[6.3] LaMarre concurred that "rather than grapple with the 'how' of comics, scholars tend to dwell on the 'what' of comics" (Smith et al. 2011, 138), a concern that reflects broader anxieties surrounding the "comics and..." logic that has dominated much of comics scholarship in the age of transmedia storytelling and superhero movie franchises. I am in no way advocating that comic book studies rehash (or worse, be subsumed by) media studies methods and discourses designed to address wholly different media forms. Nonetheless, this essay suggests that comic book culture is currently witnessing a potentially transformative feminist intervention in which the "how" and the "what" of comics are being placed in meaningful conversation. Like Simone's Women in Refrigerators list, which situated a discussion of superhero comics' narrative tropes and representations within broader concerns about the comic book industry and its conception of the audience, what I am calling for is an integrated

approach to comic book studies in which discussions of the distinct pleasures of comic form and ideological analyses are not mutually exclusive. At the risk of overburdening LaMarre's comment, I am interested in a future for comic book studies that creates critical intersections between the "how" and the "what" of comics, in addition to considering the "who" (audience) and the "why" (economics/industry demographics).

[6.4] Fan scholars, whether they embrace the acafan portmanteau or not, have been grappling with questions around affect and academia for decades. If, as Bukatman argues, affect is not the enemy of objective, robust scholarship, and that "the fan's stance is the perfect starting point for beginning an analysis: 'This fascinates me—why?'" (Smith et al. 2011, 139), then the expressions of frustration currently emerging from comic book fandom provide an ideal starting point to consider the transformative potential of these conversations and a productive direction (among many) for the growing field of comics studies. Andrae and Bukatman both acknowledge that fans were the first to seriously study comics and that some of the best contemporary comics scholarship is being produced outside of the academy by fan bloggers (Smith et al. 2011). While the analysis above reflects on only a small portion of feminist criticisms currently being levied at the comic book industry by fans, it collectively exposes a need for more scholarship on comic book audiences.

[6.5] Meanwhile, projects are emerging that suggest compelling, transformative possibilities for comic book creators, fans, and scholars to collaboratively speak back to comic book culture. A project like *My So-Called Secret Identity*, initiated by media scholar Will Brooker out of a desire to "build a better Batgirl," models a collaborative approach to transformative criticism that foregrounds the work of female artists and collaborators to comment on, and creatively correct, some of the more problematic tropes that tend to weigh down superheroine comics. Brooker's 2001 book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, opened with an admission and embrace of his long-standing affective ties to the property and reflected on his own fannish textual production. Likewise, the article that inspired *My So-Called Secret Identity*, a history of the Barbara Gordon iteration of Batgirl, models precisely the sort of scholarly impulse Bukatman suggests might be most fruitful for emerging comics studies. As Brooker's project and the growing array of female-driven comics criticism makes clear, fannish frustration can be also be a perfect starting point to begin an analysis. Fascination will unquestionably drive the future waves of comics scholarship, but frustration might facilitate more praxis-oriented, transformative approaches to this work.

[6.6] The stakes are ultimately higher than building a better Batgirl; they're about building a better comic book culture, one that acknowledges and holds itself accountable to its diverse and passionate readership. Fittingly, the cover image that accompanied *Cinema Journal's* first major foray into comic studies was taken from R.

Sikoryak's "Masterpiece Comics" series, which fannishly mashes up iconic comic characters with canonical literary works and authors (figure 8). Sikoryak's "Action Camus" offers an absurdist spin on Action Comics' Superman, but it also neatly (and perhaps unwittingly) encapsulates the gendered tensions currently underpinning comic book culture. One of the dangers of visibility politics, a by-product of its either/or logic, is that it has the potential to reproduce the very structures of dominance and exclusion that it seeks to dismantle. I am not advocating for comic book scholars or the comics industry to exclusively focus their energies on female readers at the expense of misrepresenting or alienating comics' core demographic. Reading "Action Camus" as a satire of the comic book industry's historically genre-essentialist efforts to appeal to female readers and a commentary on superhero comics' estranged relationship with female fans, 2011 and 2012 have witnessed female comic fans grappling with their containment as Miss Maries within comic book fandom. We don't need to be told that we're loved, but we would like to be assured that we aren't meaningless.

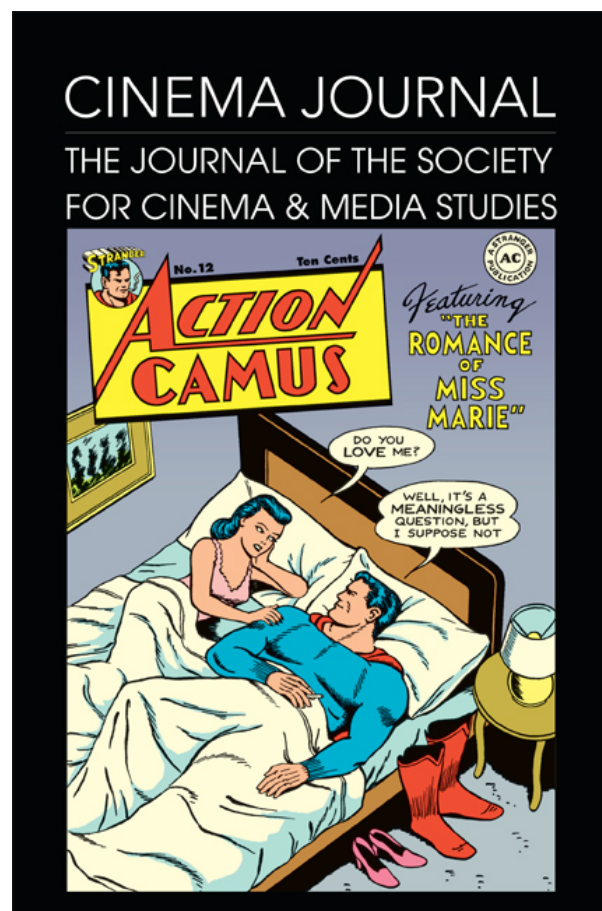


Figure 8. The cover of Cinema Journal 50 (3), featuring a piece from R. Sikoryak's Masterpiece Comics, unwittingly reflects on comic book culture's rejection of female fans. [[View larger image.](#)]

7. Notes

1. As Simone notes on the Women in Refrigerators Web site, Katma Tui, a former Green Lantern, was also butchered in her kitchen after being depowered in DC's *Action Comics* #601 (1988).
2. DC Comics' firing and subsequent rehiring of Simone in December 2012 affords a prime example of her symbolic significance to readers and the industry alike. After being fired via e-mail by new *Batgirl* editor Brian Cunningham, without explanation and despite robust sales figures, Simone's diplomatic announcement of her dismissal provoked a firestorm across social media platforms. While the motivation for DC's change of heart remains unclear, fan and creator outcry over the treatment of Simone could not be easily dismissed.
3. Memes addressing the impossible physicality, contortionist posing, and impractical costuming of female superheroes include: Superheroes posed as Wonder Woman (Turnbull 2011), Male Superheroes in Female Superheroes' Costumes (Cronin 2012), Batman Fighting in Heels (Pantozzi 2012a), and Boob Gate (Hudson 2009), addressing the infamous "boob window" in Power Girl's costume. All of these memes/parodies deployed transformative artwork created by both men and women, amateurs and professionals, as their primary mode of critique. For an example of this trend, see figure 3. These efforts have coalesced around the Hawkeye Initiative (<http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com>), a blog that crowdsources images of Marvel hero Clint "Hawkeye" Barton styled in the same hypersexualized poses as female superheroines.
4. One site that exposes, mocks, and ultimately reclaims this refrain is "Not in the Kitchen Anymore" (<http://www.notinthekitchenanymore.com/>). Created by gamer Jenny Hanniver, the site archives audio files of Hanniver being denigrated by male gamers while playing *Call of Duty* on Xbox Live.

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Praxis

Earth 616, Earth 1610, Earth 3490—Wait, what universe is this again? The creation and evolution of the Avengers and Captain America/Iron Man fandom

Catherine Coker

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—This essay surveys the creation and evolution of the Captain America/Iron Man or Steve/Tony ship in Avengers fandom, from its origin in comics to its reinterpretation by fandom through the recent movies, and discusses how the alternate universe trope in both canon and fanon is used to make a case for the pairing.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Comic book; Fan fiction; Slash

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1. Problematizing comics fandom: A multitude of textual universes

[1.1] The relationship between slash fan fiction and comics fandom is problematic not only because of the shift of medium from source text to fan text but also because of the shift of fan community. Comics fandom is often viewed as consisting of heterosexual white men and comics are often explicitly marketed to them, excluding and othering the rest of the audience. Comics fandom online subverts this expectation of audience because the majority of fan authors and creators are women. While canon plots privilege action and conflict, and the problematic depiction of women characters in them is so obvious it hardly need be discussed, comics fan fiction reverses these trends: stories privilege emotional arcs, and female characters are depicted as more recognizably human even when they are secondary to the male characters.

[1.2] Comics fan works thus become completely transformative because of the shift in both fan space and fan audience: texts that are homophobic become homophilic, authors and readers who are male become female, and that which had previously been

other becomes the new norm. For these reasons, the fans are not just aware but indeed hyperaware of their own identity as subaltern and subversive practitioners.

[1.3] When the overwhelming presentations appear homophobic, where are the positive queer identities to be found in these works? That homophobia is used throughout these texts (and others within the comics genre) by the authors to establish queer identities has been made readily apparent. All too often these identities are crafted as a reaction to the homosexual's interruption of society's heteronormative homosocial. As a result, these homophobic identities regularly appear as threats to heterosexual society: gays as murderers, villains, rapists, and pedophiles. And yet we have also seen where the positive identities can exist. It is due to the very nature of comics' physical attributes (their visual aspects, panel structures, and blank gutters) that we are allowed an alternative space where queer identities that are not saddled with homophobia can be formed. (Buso 2010, 79–80)

[1.4] Through this lens, *all* of comics slash fandom becomes a resistant and even a queer reading, an insistence on enacting and creating a virtual safe space for fans. Further, this self-awareness of identity (as feminine, as queer) becomes explicitly politicized through its declaration of *being*, which is then often rewritten from within the fan texts themselves. Comics fandom and fan fiction in particular face an especially unusual challenge because of the difference of medium. While many comics fan works are themselves comics—some of which are of professional quality in both artwork and writing—many more are in the traditional fan fiction format of short stories or novels. In some ways, this format is at odds with the original medium, in which the interplay of illustration, textual narrative, and dialogue is as crucial to the form as the story itself. For instance, Scott McCloud explains what he calls *closure* by describing how the comics format invites the reader to acknowledge that comics (and thus, all texts) are artificial creations that our brains then rationalize to fill in the blanks:

[1.5] See that space between the panels? That's what comics aficionados have named "the gutter." And despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics. Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there. Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (1993, 67)

[1.6] Fan fiction and other fan works are efforts to join these disconnected moments and make sense of them in another fashion, by piecing together those elements visually present in the text with those that are clearly not. Reconstructing these pieces to create new works is not only a part of reading comics textually but also a part of reading fan works.

[1.7] Marvel's Avengers multiverse is a troublesome text because of its historical grounding and constant revision. The emergence of movieverse fandom creates a tabula rasa for some fans, a blank slate on which they can write a new text by creating new origins and points of reference that do not require previous knowledge. Rather than only supplying missing scenes or explications and expansions of canonical material, they can select and connect elements as they please from the comics, films, and cartoons, making choices about characterization, time line, history, and so on, and create their own unique universe in which to tell the story they want to tell. Such a story might be an alternate universe (AU) story in more traditional fandoms. However, thanks to the complexity of Marvel's own multiverse, Avengers canon already contains AUs from which fans can, again, select or rewrite elements. Thus Avengers fandom creates not only a separate space for fans but also infinite possibilities for fandom. Movieverse fandom can itself be viewed as a kind of AU or reboot, because the feature films provide origin stories for the heroes that sometimes differ significantly from the various versions offered in the comics. In the film *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011), the eponymous character is an alien (Asgardian) deity throughout the story, with no second identity as mortal doctor Donald Blake (aside from a brief comedic reference). Likewise, in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston, 2011), Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes are shown as men of the same age with a long-standing friendship, rather than an older hero with a teenage sidekick. The films are self-contained and do not require knowledge of previous canon, which makes them accessible to new fans.

[1.8] That said, Avengers movieverse fandom predated the release of the actual film *The Avengers* (dir. Joss Whedon) in 2012. Many stories appeared in 2011, looking forward to the anticipated events of the film, and writing them thus required some knowledge of canon comics. Additionally, Avengers movieverse fandom relies not only on this textual knowledge but also on extratextual materials, such as promotional images and the other iterations of the franchise, to contextualize its stories. This is where the self-awareness of fandom—identified through fans' conscious decisions to preserve their texts as historical documents—again comes into play, because shared knowledge is key to maintaining fandom and documenting fannish history. Numerous shared documents online, such as elspethdixon's Steve Rogers/Tony Stark Ship Manifesto (2008) and muccamukk's Captain America/Iron Man Slashy Moments List (2010–12), provide fans with the knowledge needed to maintain the ship's visibility. In

other words, the presence of the ship in numerous branches of preexisting fandom makes a case for its adoption into movieverse fandom as well. This adoption sets up a series of expectations within movieverse fandom: How do the characters meet; how do they fall in love; how do they function together? Even before the 2012 release of *The Avengers*, the movieverse already played on viewer expectations by subverting the traditional heroes' origin stories: Iron Man is more antihero than hero, particularly in *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010) when he mocks Congress as a witness during congressional hearings, uses his armor for (self-)destructive purposes during a drunken binge, and in general is treated as more of a problem celeb than an icon. *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) wears all the tropes of a conventional war story on its sleeve far more than it does those of the superhero genre.

[1.9] In the slash genre, however, this playing on expectations can present new problems for the reader. Traditional slash narratives have often posed an issue for readers in that they essentially reproduce aspects of the traditional romance with the notable difference that the protagonists are, of course, two men. It has only been in the last decade that fan writers have become more willing to label the characters of these stories gay, or at least bisexual; especially in the 1970s and 1980s, fans wanted to distance beloved characters from the stereotypes and even the identity of gayness (note 1). Instead, they depicted the men as sharing a great, transcendent love that eliminated the boundaries of gender. Indeed, it was an article of faith that neither man would have had same-sex sex prior to their romantic involvement with each other—unless, of course, one of them had previously been prostituted or raped, in which case the sexual consummation became a sexual healing. This specific genre of hurt/comfort fiction earned the notable appellation "magic cock stories," of which much more could be said, perhaps, but not in this essay.

[1.10] Many scholars have attempted to explain why women read and write slash stories. For the purposes of this study, I'm not interested in recapitulating this research, since it has been so heavily documented elsewhere, but I would like to note the work of Joanna Russ on the topic. "If you ask 'Why two males?'" she said, "I think the answer is that of eighteenth-century grammarians to questions about the masculine-preferred pronoun: 'Because it is more noble.'...No one [can] imagine a man and woman having the same multiplex, worthy, androgynous relationship, or the same completely intimate commitment" (1985, 84).

[1.11] As frustrating as it seems some 30 years later, this attitude definitely persists. Further, the most specific element—(gender) equality—actually grounds the Captain America/Iron Man or the Steve/Tony ship. As written by fans of that ship, their relationship is the only possible true partnership (figure 1).

[1.12] Steve is an idealist with a practical streak, while Tony is an "ends justify the means" pragmatist with an idealistic streak. This leads to frequent clashes between the two of them over methods and tactics, but at [*sic*] also means that the two of them balance one another remarkably well. Tony challenges Steve, forces him to rethink his assumptions and defend his ethical position—and Steve needs that. Without someone to question him, to treat him as a friend and comrade instead of "Captain America: Living Legend," he'd still be stuck in 1945. For Tony, Steve's friendship and faith in him provides both a sanity check that keeps him from straying too far into supervillain territory, and the support that allows Tony to keep on fighting the good fight, to keep on trying to live up to and be worthy of that faith. Tony has declared on multiple occasions that he thinks Steve is a better man than he is (he even goes so far as to tell Steve that he's perfect), and that Steve's faith in him is the one thing that allows him to still have faith in himself. (elspethdixon 2008)

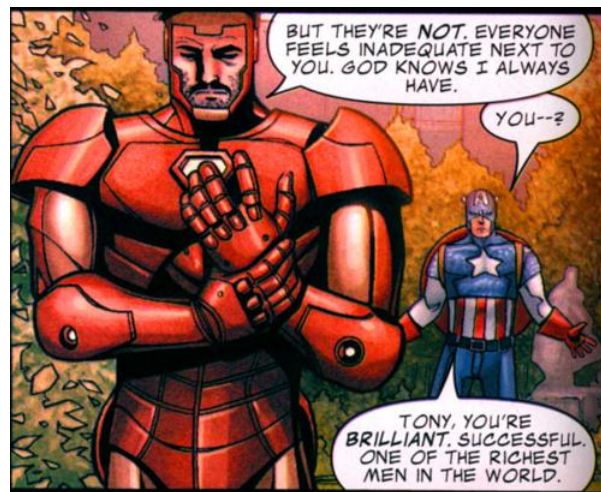


Figure 1. Subtext? What subtext? Steve and Tony discuss their feelings (and emotional vulnerability) in a panel from *Captain America/Iron Man: Casualties of War* (2006). [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.13] The self-awareness of fandom transforms within the Steve/Tony ship into fiction that verges on nonfictional commentary, or meta, rather than story. The romance as realized by the fans translates into Steve and Tony becoming aware of and analyzing their own feelings at length. A popular trope within the fandom is that of identification and explication; the goal of the story is for the characters to come to terms not only with being in a same-sex relationship but also with why the specific relationship works for them.

[1.14] Rogers didn't look surprised or curious at all. Just frustrated. "Let me guess," he said sharply. **"What on Earth could a nice guy like me see in—Tony."** Lindsay could actually hear the adjectives Rogers had cut

out of the sentence. "Do you know how many people just walk up to me on the street *every day* and ask me that?" Rogers demanded. "And now it's apparently such a tantalizing *mystery*," he said the word like an insult, "that you're willing to risk your life over it? What is wrong with you?"

"Steve—" Tony began, his tone apologetic.

Rogers spun to face Stark instead of Lindsay. "No!" he snapped. "This is not your fault. And it's not a 'reasonable level of media interest' either." The quote in the words was clear. "When did reporters lose all respect for privacy and decorum? **And why is it so unbelievable that I'd fall in love with a dedicated and brilliant man with whom I've shared some of the most significant moments of my life?**" (Nix 2012; emphasis added)

[1.15] This trope not only allows for character studies but also offers fans a route to conversion to the ship. A reader who is curious about the pairing may be more convinced by, and become more invested in, the ship by a fictionalized account of how the romance works than by a detailed nonfiction analysis like the Ship Manifesto.

[1.16] Anne Kustritz reiterates this idea in her essay "Slashing the Romance Narrative," in which she says,

[1.17] Slashers often exaggerate the extent to which slash characters seem drawn to talk about the power dynamics within their relationship, demonstrated in a series of stories that parodied the characters' tendency to begin philosophical discussions about their relationship during sex...Authors meticulously create an equality relationship dynamic in which characters are completely equal in everything from decision making to love making, and from patterns of dress to household chores to levels of attractiveness and financial security. (2003, 377)

[1.18] However, this dynamic is rewritten by Steve/Tony fandom in that, in Steve's and Tony's private lives at least, there *is* a fundamental difference in wealth. Steve came of age in the New York of the 1930s, with its soup kitchens and breadlines. In some comic and film time lines, he has also spent time in an orphanage or boys' home after his mother died of TB, and has been an art student struggling with tuition bills. He has always had to work to make ends meet, and often meager ends at that. In contrast, Tony Stark has always been a wealthy, privileged profligate. Essentially, despite their equality as male superheroes, their material disparity returns their relationship to something closer to the traditional romance, with Tony as the wealthy, experienced suitor and Steve the innocent ingenue.

[1.19] In some ways, fandom anticipated this element of class and economic tension prior to the 2012 film. In that film, Steve and Tony have multiple verbal confrontations stemming from their different backgrounds:

[1.20] **Tony Stark:** Following is not really my style.

Steve Rogers: And you're all about style, aren't you?

Tony Stark: Of the people in this room, which one is (a) wearing a spangly outfit, and (b) not of use?

...

Steve Rogers: Yeah, big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?

Tony Stark: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

Steve Rogers: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.

Tony Stark: I think I would just cut the wire.

Steve Rogers: Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.

Tony Stark: A hero, like you? You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle. (Whedon 2012)

[1.21] These scenes echo many that had already appeared in fan stories, in which Steve and Tony are unable to get along because of their clashing personalities. In "Ready, Fire, Aim" by gyzym, they aren't even able to apologize to one another without getting into another fight:

[1.22] "You came all the way out here to *apologize*?" Tony says. "Have they not taught you to use the phone, like normal people?"

"I'm not apologizing!" Steve snaps, and then visibly reigns [*sic*] himself in. "No, you know what, I am apologizing. I'm sorry. I'm just...not adjusting all that well, I guess, and then there's you, and you look a lot like—"

"Get out of my house," Tony says, instinctive, automatic, before he can finish that comparison.

Steve jerks back, stunned, and then narrows his eyes. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Tony says. "Look, Rogers, you want teammates or whatever, fine, great, you've got a whole gaggle of S.H.I.E.L.D. cronies waiting to bust out their guitars and sing Kumbaya with you, *have fun*, but I told you, I don't play well with others, okay? So you and your...apology or whatever, you can just go, I don't need you to do me any fucking favors."

Steve stares at him with his mouth open for a long minute. Then he says, "What're you—no, you know what, I don't care. *Fine*. If that's the way you want this to be, that's just fine with me. Have a lovely evening, Mr. Stark."

"Fine!" says Tony. "Good! Great! I *will*!" (gyzym 2011)

[1.23] In fan fiction, their tension is interpreted as having undercurrents of sexual attraction, of which the characters may or may not be aware. Onscreen in the 2012 movie, Steve and Tony's interactions were read by many as having this same motivation, especially in the climax of the film, in which Tony is feared dead. Surrounded by his teammates, he jerks back to consciousness after the Hulk roars loudly. He gives a short cry and looks around in panic, saying, "Please tell me no one kissed me?" Steve looks away, relieved and blushing. It is up to the invested viewer to guess at the source of Steve's embarrassment.

[1.24] As can be seen, elements in both fiction and film are open to multiple readings. Steve/Tony fandom is remarkably aware of the many ways in which texts can be read and interpreted, and it actively documents its history through numerous archives. In larger, more well-known fandoms, it is not unusual for Web resources to be abandoned or orphaned (or even deleted altogether) once the fan who maintains them has left the fandom. In Steve/Tony fandom, these resources are often adopted by other fans so that they are continually maintained for new fans or those who want access to older materials. Many of the fandom's works have been duplicated on LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, and the Archive of Our Own to prevent textual loss through technical failures, people dropping out of fandoms, or other means. Resources such as the Captain America/Iron Man Slashy Moments List have had a series of moderators or curators who have kept the page up to date over a period of years.

[1.25] Further, the variety of fandoms within both the ship and the official franchise is astonishing. As mentioned above, Marvel has a multitude of iterations of the Avengers, Captain America, and Iron Man available, including not just the comics (which themselves have a dizzying array of versions) but also the cartoons and films. Fan authors and communities normally specify the universe referenced in a fan work, both to alert readers to version-dependent elements of characterization and history

and to allow them to avoid spoilers. For instance, comics fans will recognize the significance of Agent 13 and the Winter Soldier, while movie fans may not. With the announcement that the forthcoming film *Captain America 2* would be subtitled *The Winter Soldier*, several debates were struck up online. What, if anything, do comics fans owe to movie fans to ensure that the latter remain unspoiled if they so desire? Do plot points that are years—and sometimes decades—old really count as spoilers? It remains to be seen how these questions may be resolved. As the following discussion will show, characterization and plot can diverge significantly enough that their interpretation by and through fan works should prove problematic—and yet it doesn't, because of fans' commitment to unifying universes.

2. The use of the alternate universe

[2.1] Marvel Comics canon is essentially already a shared universe, particularly when it comes to massive story lines that cross over multiple comics titles and have far-reaching consequences, such as *House of M* and *Marvel: Civil War*. (This latter story, which involved more than a hundred issues of fifteen monthly titles, pitted Captain America and Iron Man against each other in a conflict over a law requiring superheroes to register with, and essentially become weapons of, the US government. In an epilogue titled *Civil War: The Confession*, a distraught Iron Man admitted that nothing he did during the conflict was worth the loss of everything that mattered to him, namely Steve.) Characters stepping in and out of each others' monthly titles or sharing adventures in special miniseries are all but *de rigueur*. Moreover, stories are told in a multitude of time lines or universes (a multiverse), in which events are freely rewritten or replayed. Marvel maintains an online list of these universes (<http://marvel.wikia.com/Multiverse>), and tsukinofaerii (2012) has compiled a useful fannish aide-mémoire as well. Four are of particular interest to Steve/Tony fandom.

[2.2] The 616 universe is the standard, mainline continuity, beginning with the 1941 Captain America comics and continuing through subsequent titles from the 1960s through to the present. Because of its longevity, the time line of events has been blurred, so that while nearly five decades' worth of stories have occurred since the 1960s iteration, they are compressed into the lifetimes of characters who remain in their physical prime and virtually ageless.

[2.3] The 1610 or *Ultimates* universe reboots the events of 616 while simultaneously displaying darker themes in story and representation. For several reasons, it's widely suspected among fans that Marvel created this universe to enable the production of feature films; among other things, the character of Nick Fury was redesigned as a near double of Samuel L. Jackson.

[2.4] The movieverse or MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe), also called 199999, encompasses all the major film interpretations from 2008 onward, including projected sequels to *Thor* and *Captain America* and rumored stand-alone films for other characters.

[2.5] The 80920 universe, depicted in the animated series *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* (2010–2012), shares details with both 616 and the movieverse that other universes do not, such as physical appearance (Tony's brown eyes, always depicted as blue before Robert Downey Jr.'s appearance in the films) and JARVIS the AI rather than Jarvis the butler.

[2.6] Some details of canon are shared from universe to universe. Tsukinofaerii notes that *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* combines the basic plotlines of 616 with elements of 199999, such as JARVIS being an artificial intelligence and Tony having brown eyes (like actor Robert Downey Jr.), rather than blue as in the original comics. The 1610 *Ultimates* line, initially published in 2002, also set the stage for the series of films by retconning many events and characterizations, emphasizing streamlined story arcs that require no knowledge of previous history and focus on an ensemble rather than a single point of view.

[2.7] In addition to these universes, many more appear as one-shots or are referenced only briefly. For example, universe 3490 is seen only in a single panel in an issue of *Fantastic Four: Dark Reign #2* (figure 2). In this universe, Iron Man is Iron Woman while Captain America remains male; the single image we have of them together is their wedding kiss. The narrative tells us that their romance acts as a "deterrent to each other's more aggressive behavior" and thus circumvents the Marvel Civil War ([http://marvel.wikia.com/Natasha_Stark_\(Earth-3490\)](http://marvel.wikia.com/Natasha_Stark_(Earth-3490))). The whole tragedy of the Marvel Civil War is that, although Steve and Tony talk to each another, they are unable to come to a compromise and instead continually rage at each another as the country falls to pieces around them. Their relationships are virtual analogs of the bodies politic: one couple can function peacefully by (presumably) discussing their feelings, thus leading to peaceful unification, while the other cannot.



Figure 2. *The marriage of Captain America and Iron Woman. From Fantastic Four: Dark Reign #2.*

[2.8] Sheenagh Pugh notes that "the one aspect of canon that is not usually up for alteration is the nature of the characters" (2005, 65). Both tsukinofaerii and elspethdixon demonstrate through their extensive notes and analyses that the combination of character traits and histories that make up Tony Stark/Iron Man and Steve Rogers/Captain America are often those same elements that promote the pairing, such as their repeated statements that each means the world to the other and their flowery interior monologues ("Captain America, Steve, I look at your handsome face...into your clear azure eyes...") (note 2). Within the 1610 universe, however, the darker themes and character traits emphasize their heterosexuality. These comics emphasize the sexuality and violence of superheroics, including scenes of Tony in bed with Natasha (typically his sexual encounters are alluded to but never seen) before she murders Jarvis, and Steve viciously beating Hank Pym after Janet is hospitalized. Hence canonical 1610 Steve/Tony fan stories are rather short on the ground, though there are some 1610 AUs of note.

[2.9] As is often the case in new and quickly growing fandoms, the AU modern-day trope (in which science fiction characters are rewritten as normal, workaday people) has seen burgeoning use. This trope is popular because it is accessible to new fans. Most AUs presuppose new backgrounds for the characters that may be based on

decades of preexisting history or commentary. A specifically modern-day AU, on the other hand, has no presuppositions to build upon: instead, the featured characters exist in a world of the fan author's own creation, generally with the same emotional relationships as their originals (friends, lovers, colleagues) but in a different environment. Steve/Tony modern-day AUs frequently keep elements such as Stark's wealth and Rogers's transformation but reconfigure them to be more realistic: Tony is a programming genius who makes software and apps rather than AIs or flying armor; Steve's evolution from skinny asthmatic to buff Adonis is due to an intense health and workout regimen.

[2.10] Modern-day AUs give the characters a tremendous variety of new professions, but certain tropes recur over and over again across multiple fandoms. In almost every fandom, for instance, there is the coffee shop AU, in which one character is a barista and the love interest is a repeat patron. Fan author sol-nox puts this genre to use for Steve/Tony in a story called "Caffeine, Otherwise Known as the Key to Tony Stark's Heart":

[2.11] Tony returns the following morning and Steve looks astonished. Tony can't imagine why. He'd said he was going to come back, hadn't he?

When Tony first heard that a coffee shop was going to be opening across the street from Stark Tower he had been interested in a detached sort of way. A potential supplier for his caffeine-fueled nights in the workshop? Sure, he was all over that. And then Tony had caught a glimpse of its owner.

Tony can't pinpoint the exact reason why he's taken an interest in the young art-student-gone-barista. Actually, no, that's a lie. He can. Steve is fucking *hot*. Tall, built like a comic book superhero. He had those amazing blue eyes and that pouty mouth. Plus he had an air of sweetness and innocence that Tony, being Tony, had a base urge to corrupt.

Tony steps up to the counter and presents his best smile. Steve's eyes dance shyly away. That was much cuter than it had a right to be. (sol-nox 2012)

[2.12] Businessman Tony as a patron ordering coffee from barista Steve is the story's "meet cute." Other characters from the comics and movies appear in small roles: Nick Fury is Steve's assistant, and Bucky is mentioned as Steve's childhood friend recently fallen in Afghanistan. The story largely plays out as a series of encounters in the coffee shop, detailing the making and serving of beverages as a kind of language of romance.

[2.13] Readers and writers like coffee shop AUs partly because coffee shops are a comforting environment (and also, probably, where many authors actually write their

fics). As in fairy tales, the elements common to such stories—the flirty barista who offers special concoctions, the recurrent visits to a place that offers something like sanctuary, the happy ending—instill expectations that are then pleasantly met. Indeed, the popularity of this trope has prompted some complaint.

[2.14] Another near-universal trope is the high school AU, in which the main characters are all high school students. (There are also college AUs, though high school AUs are more numerous.) Part of the reason for this is likely that high school stories are themselves a recurring trope within popular mass culture, and since many fan writers are in their 20s or 30s, high school is a recent experience for them, one that can be referred to knowledgably and without research. In high school AUs, the focus becomes the traditional dialectic of the nerd and the jock—and in Steve/Tony fics, either may play either role. Tony is often portrayed as being superficially popular but still socially ostracized for his youthful genius; Steve can be portrayed as a skinny art nerd or as a bulky football player. Fan author settiai chose to interweave these possibilities in "High School Is Not a Musical." In her story, Tony is a young inventor with a propensity for pyrotechnics and Steve straddles expectations as both a would-be illustrator and an athlete. As in many other stories, the boys awkwardly miscommunicate:

[2.15] Steve folded his arms over his chest uncomfortably. "Uh, don't take this the wrong way, but why are you even talking to me?"

Tony blinked, apparently in surprise. A slightly hurt look appeared on his face, and he opened his mouth. Whatever he was going to say, however, was cut short by a firm hand coming down to rest on his shoulder. (settiai 2010)

[2.16] As in other stories, their developing friendship eventually leads to deeper feelings. College AUs are often longer, with slowly building, better-developed narratives. In these, the characters are most often college students, though sometimes they are professors instead. This genre is less common, most likely because college studies are more specialized; it's harder for characters to be rewritten within a specific discipline than it is for them to represent well-known high school archetypes. For instance, in Steve/Tony college AUs, Steve is usually an art student while Tony is usually in computer science or engineering. Like high school AUs, they reiterate certain stereotypical elements of American school experience, such as the partying student (Tony) and the conscientious student (Steve):

[2.17] "So, how did I end up with you?" Tony asks, because he honestly has no idea. He remembers vaguely meeting his anti-Pepper and then there

was more drinking and a sudden urge to go to the library. He's not really sure what was so pressing.

Steve was looking amused but his face freezes, goes carefully blank and he says, "You were drunk I guess."

Tony wants to ask Steve if he did anything. He feels like he should apologize but then again, with Pepper around, he constantly feels that way. "Sorry if I said anything...weird?"

"S'fine," Steve dismisses, not elaborating. "You want me to walk you back to your room so it doesn't look like you're doing a walk of shame?" Steve asks, back to amused and Tony just grins at him, enjoying this soft, morning version of Steve more than he'd like to admit. (kellifer_fic 2011)

[2.18] This story, "If at First" by kellifer_fic, goes on to describe the characters spending late nights in diners drinking cheap coffee, falling asleep in the library, and struggling to get to class on time after oversleeping. In short, these interpretations of AUs privilege a form of normalcy over the superheroics displayed elsewhere. Other stories, however, return to the heroic form for a different purpose: social justice.

3. "Some time-displaced war heroes marry genius billionaire playboy philanthropists, get over it"

[3.1] An AU, whether in canon or fanon, can acknowledge the nonstereotypical comics audience—that is, women and LGBT readers. Fandom traditionally creates a safe space for many people who, for whatever reasons, lack it in their nonfannish lives. In comics canon proper, the multiplicity of AUs allows the characters to step outside their own safe spaces, offering stories in which Tony Stark hasn't always been a wealthy multimillionaire or Steve Rogers hasn't always been a hero. These "what ifs" open a world of possibilities for character exploration that nonetheless return them both to the people we know, as well as carving out a new space they can inhabit.

[3.2] The lengthy history of the Avengers, and particularly of Captain America, allows both the corporate authors and the fan authors to infuse political meaning into the characters, as is demonstrated through the entirety of *Marvel: Civil War*. All the narrative tension and meaning of this story comes from the struggle and failure of Iron Man and Captain America to find a common ground. Steve/Tony fandom largely developed after the publication of *Marvel: Civil War* in 2006–7, at the same time that same-sex relationships were being more often discussed in popular culture. Safe spaces for LGBT people are increasingly seen as desirable both within and outside fandom. The It Gets Better movement, for instance, is aimed at preventing LGBT teen

suicide. Steve/Tony stories, by necessity, involve Steve coming to grips with his sexual identity as he comes to terms with 21st-century morals and mores. Numerous stories do this by showing Steve trying to balance his duty as Captain America and advocating for the civil rights of others. In hetrez's story "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York City," all of the Avengers, and especially Captain America, inspire a grassroots campaign of public service and social change that reaches its emotional climax and plot apotheosis when Steve comes out during an interview on *The Colbert Report*:

[3.3] "Yesterday, a boy killed himself. He loved other boys, and he was bullied for it, and he took his own life. When I learned about him, I thought, this is something I can do. I can tell people who I am, that I'm a hero and I love men and it's not wrong. I can make them listen, and maybe I can make it easier for somebody else. So Mr. Colbert, I want you to do something for me. If you know somebody who's gay, you tell them about me, and maybe it will make their lives easier. You'll be helping me a lot." He puts his hands in his lap, and looks straight at the camera. "That's really all I wanted to say. Thank you for having me on your show." (hetrez 2012)

[3.4] Similarly, autoschediastic's story "For America" (2010) combines social justice and romance plots when Steve proposes to Tony because he wants not only to marry the man he loves but also to make a public stand for what he believes in. Many other stories play out similar plots by describing political protests and, often, political fallout as Steve or Tony receives negative press because of their relationship. These plots not only depict current social reality but provide a series of "what ifs" for the reader—a different sort of AU or continuity that can be conjoined with our own as a new aspect of shared reality.

[3.5] Some fans add text to clips from the films or interviews with the actors to reinforce this shared reality. If the viewer doesn't know the original context of the visuals, it is astonishingly easy to believe that the combination of image and text is a real quotation rather than a constructed fan work. One fan, for instance, added a subtitle to footage of Chris Evans appearing on an episode of *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Evans actually said, "Aquaman and I are moving to New York to get married," but the subtitle changed "Aquaman" to "Iron Man" (figure 3). In the new context, the actor Chris Evans can be viewed as his character Steve Rogers; as in the fictional exchange on *The Colbert Report* in hetrez's story, the mix of fictional characters with real people creates an element of cognitive control—or closure—for the viewer or reader, allowing her within the newly shared universe of fandom. The characters have stepped out of the comic book panels into a blank space that can be filled by the fans. Similarly, canonical texts in the comics, such as the picture of Iron

Woman's marriage to Captain America, demonstrate what happens outside the characters' own books: this scene appeared in a *Fantastic Four* comic rather than in *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, or *The Avengers*, allowing readers to view the story from outside the characters' own space—much as fan fiction does.



Figure 3. GIF of Chris Evans on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, July 14, 2011, edited by fan lawyerupasshole (2011).

[3.6] The world depicted in fan stories is not a utopia of acceptance but rather includes fraught experiences that most readers will have observed (if not actually lived) themselves. In many slash fandoms, the romances are viewed as if from a distance, but within Captain America/Iron Man fandom they gain a new meaning because of the historical baggage inherent in the characters. It is all but unprecedented for fandom to have a political message so inextricably bound up with a mainstream text like the Avengers. (In contrast, K/S fans in the well-documented Star Trek fandom were always only a tiny percentage of fans within a small, intense fandom.) Online dissemination of texts through social media platforms such as LiveJournal and Tumblr makes even people outside of fandom aware of the pairing. The hash tags of blog entries and other shared media sites can quickly lead readers from general fandom to slash fandom, providing another sense of sharing and another way to experience fan texts.

[3.7] Queering texts through fan fiction is the traditional method of fan revision, whether through slash or the use of AUs. AUs as a subgenre place the characters in a new setting or time line; they give fan writers a new avenue to explore not only what makes the characters or the pairing work but also what the pairing represents as a function of contemporary commentary on issues like the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." If the *Marvel: Civil War* and *Ultimates* lines are a conscious critique of the current antiwar movement, then similarly fan fiction is a critique of the predominant comics culture. If canonical AUs provide one sort of social commentary, fan-created AUs create another. AUs within the slash subculture thus provide a space for fans to air their concerns about feminist and LGBT issues, much as the original comics provided a haven for war protestors during a period when popular culture was silent on the topic or forthrightly hawkish. They demonstrate how slash fans present and articulate their

political concerns through the mode of fandom itself, and examining them gives us a more comprehensive view of how we can read past the constraints of both text and panel.

[3.8] The emblem of Steve/Tony fandom is a split circle, with one half formed by Cap's shield and the other half by Iron Man's arc reactor. It is perhaps notable that the shield prototype seen in *Iron Man 2* has a more than passing resemblance to this emblem (figure 4). Readings of the prop as a deliberate shout-out by the film's creators to Steve/Tony fandom demonstrate an awareness of creators' own co-option of fans/fan service that appears to a growing element in popular culture as a whole.



Figure 4. *Prototype of Captain American's shield in Iron Man 2.*

[3.9] The rapid growth and transition of the fandom—from comics to movies, from hidden to open through the use of new social media—provides a fascinating record for media scholars. The exact nature of the fandom's impact, if any, has yet to be demonstrated, but for this brief moment at least, a traditionally obscure part of fandom, slash, is mainstream. Fans avoid Scott McCloud's "limbo of the gutter" to allow the various forms and aspects of the Avengers to transform into a more meaningful narrative—one that encompasses both the real world we experience and the dozens of other universes possible in comics, film, and fandom.

4. Notes

1. In Henry Jenkins's words, "A focus on how slash constructs a continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire may explain why the protagonists of slash stories are male lovers and yet often have had no previous history of gay relationships: the barriers between men must be intensified to increase the drama of their shattering; the introduction of sexual taboos requires greater trust and intimacy between the men before they can be overcome" (1992, 205).

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Praxis

Pornographic space-time and the potential of fantasy in comics and fan art

Lyndsay Brown

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—By putting pornographic comics and fan art into conversation, this article contends that works intended to depict and fuel sexual fantasy structure time and space differently with the goal of directly engaging the reader and extending the duration of her pleasure. Further, the comics and pieces of fan art examined herein are produced by, for, and about women and suggest an alternative vision of female desire that challenges contemporary understandings of pornography's utility and functioning as it intersects with fantasy in the private sexual economy.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Desire; Narrative; Structure

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Recent work in the field of porn studies has examined the ways in which film, video, and online technologies have reshaped our engagement with erotic and pornographic content, but less attention has been paid to still mimetic visual art, that is to say, comics. Comics by, for, and about women, whether published by the comics industry or produced by fans online, have received even less consideration. While lesbian erotic comics offer a variety of scenarios using a nonnarrative sequential structure, pornographic fan art explores the erotic potential of a single panel that relies on a common canonical source as well as a collective archive of other works. Pornographic comics and fan art can be drawn into conversation to determine how graphic media depict and fuel fantasy, as well as whether texts that evoke female desire more fully figure an alternative reading of not just pornography's nature and effects on the consumer, but of desire itself. Additionally, the works considered herein challenge fundamental beliefs about the nature and utility of fantasy, particularly in its relationship to masturbation and the private sexual economy.

[1.2] When drawing a rough distinction between categories of sequential and/or multipanel fan art and nonsequential/single-image works, an interesting division appears: the vast majority of the former is nonpornographic, while the opposite is true of the latter. Sequential fan art may depict commentary on a source or offer its own narrative, but explicit sex, unlike romance, is rarely a central theme. Likewise, single-image works are most commonly devoted either to a sexual scene or to a figure or figures in the style of pinup art, as in the case of wallpapers or title images for fan fiction, making single image fan art a more productive form of fan work to consider alongside pornographic comics. As a result of generic influences and constraints provided by the content, pornographic comics and fan art express a context- and content-specific understanding of space and time, embracing scenario over narrative and surface experience over deep identification without necessarily requiring narrative resolution in a climactic end (pun intended). Further, pornographic comics and fan art produce a more involved and complex relationship between consumer and text by directly addressing and engaging the consumer; the result is a multivalent and polymorphous experience of identification, objectification, and destabilization of subjectivity. The visual pleasures offered by pornographic comics and fan art are inextricable from their formal and material conditions, and an encounter with those pleasures signals not an isolated or solipsistic descent into escapism, but a window into a different manner of perceiving the self in the world.

2. Space and time in comics

[2.1] In their books detailing the nature of the comics form, Will Eisner (1985) and Scott McCloud (1993) describe how time and space function in a manner unlike either written narrative or film, largely as a result of the difficulty of representing three-dimensional events in two dimensions. Eisner (1985) observes that "paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event. Indeed, it 'tells' time," as the image within the panel becomes a frozen segment of "what is in reality an uninterrupted flow of action," now broken up into representative images (28). Similarly, for McCloud (1993), "comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" (67). Both Eisner and McCloud assert that the reader is an active contributor to an experience of the medium, unlike that of film or literature, as she participates in the creation of time and motion via—as McCloud notes—the experience of closure, which "allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). By suturing separate panels together, the reader perceives a fluid and consistent progression made necessary because time and space are the same thing in comics: the lack of sound and motion within drawn panels extends their duration and blurs the perception of time, and

McCloud (1993) observes that no clear "conversion chart," such as one panel equaling one minute of time, exists as a metric (100). The solution is closure, the method by which the reader "assemble[s] a single moment using scattered fragments" and thereby perceives the panel as a single action or event and the text itself as a narrative whole (79).

[2.2] Yet, as McCloud (1993) observes, time works in much more complicated ways in comics, and although closure is essential in the depiction of certain types of action or narrative, single panels can extend the reader's experience of time within them. While Eisner (1985) and McCloud (1993) use primarily mainstream American action and/or superhero comics as their examples of the form—Eisner his own work, which is based in a tradition of newspaper comics devoted to action-based narratives, and McCloud panels from a variety of sources, but overwhelmingly samples of 1950s and 1960s superhero comics from such artists as Jack Kirby—and thereby depict a period and type of American comics that emphasizes action/reaction panel transitions, along with specific moments of action that propel the reader onward, neither author supports a singular form of narrative progression. Instead, McCloud articulates how panel and page layouts in comics serve as temporal cheats, imperfect analogues of the real world in which "a silent panel...could indeed be said to depict a single moment" (98). That same single moment "can actually be held" through a caption or an alteration of the panel's size and shape, or it can "produce a sense of timelessness" and invite the reader to linger rather than moving on to the next image (102). Both context and content influence the reader's perception of time and space: a fight scene has distinct beats that lend themselves well to what McCloud identifies as "moment-to-moment" and "action-to-action" transitions, yet a sex scene, while similarly intimate and narrowly focused, is less linear and less narrative (74). As the works examined in this essay demonstrate, comics with pornographic content involve a contemplative and elaborative presentation of the image and a lack of direct, narratively propulsive transitions.

[2.3] Deborah Shamoon (2004) cites Natsume Fusanosuke's (1996) analysis of narrative in Japanese comics to demonstrate that both *shojo* manga (comics targeted at girls 10–18) and their successor, *josei* or ladies' comics (targeted at adult women), are concerned less with depicting action than with "illustrat[ing] the emotions of the characters; for this reason," according to Fusanosuke, "montage is preferable to an orderly progression of panels" (quoted in Shamoon 2004, 83). McCloud observes that the generalized and iconic qualities of the face draw the reader in, and Shamoon surveys various design innovations found in both *shojo* and ladies' comics that "draw the reader's attention to the image of the female protagonist for the purpose of sympathizing and identifying with her," producing numerous panels of her face and body so as to allow the reader to vicariously experience her emotions as opposed to

her actions (84). While action does occur in ladies' comics, the genre is more concerned with exploring the character's subjectivity than with her struggles against a supervillain, for example.

[2.4] Narrative comics (or more precisely, superhero comics) are understood to progress to a point of closure from panel to panel and from left to right, developing identification through a deep engagement with characters and a satisfaction through linear progression via a traditional novelistic structure. This understanding of comics demonstrates a privileging of teleological concerns: fundamentally, so the argument goes, the form works as it does to produce a satisfactory end for the reader as she progresses from panel to panel to reach a conclusion. Yet this element of comics is not constant or even wholly consistent across genres, cultural traditions, or international forms. While an extended formal survey is beyond the scope of this article, the work of Chris Ware demonstrates the type of formal, structural, and narrative experimentation present in American indie comics, and McCloud (1993) discusses Osamu Tezuka as an example of Japanese mainstream comics. Additionally, given the influence of content on form, the purpose of pornographic comics—to arouse the reader—suggests that such works must mobilize numerous formal elements to heighten and sustain pleasure for as long as possible, and engage the reader in a manner distinct from, though informed by, filmed pornography.

3. The problem with pornographic fantasy

[3.1] Modern-day comics and fan art rely on some filmic conventions, such as presenting the body in ways that are more pleasing to the viewer than pleasurable or even possible for the characters involved, as well as overdetermining signifiers of pleasure (the sounds of orgasm, the money shot) to amplify their affective power over the consumer. Both McCloud (1993) and Eisner (1985) describe comics' use of space and time through reference to the moving image and its realistic representation of moving bodies, suggesting first that film serves as a useful model for audiences more familiar with film than comics, and second, that both forms aspire to an ideal of visual authenticity. In the comics and fan art discussed below, however, the ideal instead appears to be one of authenticity of feeling, conveying characters' emotions and experiences in an authentic manner without relying on a simulation of realistic time and space. Linda Williams (1999) defines pornography as "the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers," which privileges an objective ideal of physical "truth" (30). Thus, unlike fiction, still photography, or comics, film has a privileged position to offer truth claims about bodies and their responses, as male arousal and ejaculation in filmed pornography are clearly real.

[3.2] Yet if, as Williams (1999) contends, the goal of hard core pornography is "making visible the involuntary confession of bodily pleasure," a quest similar enough to the documentary genre that narrative or characterization are set aside in favor of discrete scenarios, a problem arises when it comes to representing the female body's confession (50). Williams argues that the invisibility of the female orgasm, given its location inside the body, means that any actress may be giving a voluntary performance or otherwise faking it. Thus, these films continually attempt and fail to depict the "visible 'truth' of sexual pleasure itself" via the female body and instead must turn to the male body's obvious signs (50). Williams acknowledges that her study only examines heterosexual films made by and presumably largely for men, and that this issue may be absent or differently figured in lesbian pornography, for example, but concludes that the male-centered economy of hard core's "obsessive focus on the female body proves to be a narcissistic evasion of the feminine 'other' deflected back to the masculine self" (267). The result is a failure to figure female desire from a female perspective.

[3.3] One other significant element of Williams's (1999) definition is that pornography is produced with the intent of arousing its consumers, which guides how bodies and actions are depicted, but which also raises various issues of exploitation of and violence towards women. As Williams observes, antipornography feminists criticize the genre primarily with the claim that its consumption, presumably meant to satisfy male sexual fantasies, inevitably leads to various harmful effects on real women ([note 1](#)). This underlying belief, that consuming fiction perceived to be harmful leads to enacting in the real world the ideas and fantasies inspired by the fiction, has spurred widespread controversy, censorship, and social policy in a repetitive cycle with each new form of that fiction, from novels and film to television, comics, and video games ([note 2](#)). There is something suspect and dangerous about fantasy, and about art that allows us to access and express what Williams (1999) calls a "desire for self-abandon" in an unreal world filled with unreal objects (273). Since pornography exists to facilitate masturbation, examining arguments against it and the fictional vehicles that fuel it will shed light on what is so dangerous about desire and its spur to fantasy.

[3.4] In *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, Thomas W. Laqueur (2003) charts how a constellation of anxieties, both medical and moral, came to center on masturbation as a discreet kind of sexual act in the early 18th century. Writers such as Wittgenstein, Kant, and Rousseau were not concerned with Catholic ideas about the sinfulness of the flesh but still remained convinced that masturbation was an act that should—and did—cause shame, guilt, and a host of other physical, psychological, and ethical issues. Masturbation was found to be essentially unnatural for three reasons: first, it is "motivated...by a phantasm" rather than by the real world; second, it is an act of private rather than social sexuality; and third, "it could be neither sated nor

moderated" because it is inspired by "the mind's creations" alone (210). While desire for a person or act is checked and ended either by satiation or rejection, desire created by the mind for no real object was potentially without end, without limit, and without a way for the masturbator to reenter the sexual economy of the world. While Laqueur frames his inquiry within the context of the Enlightenment—in which industry, a public/private divide, the advent of rational rather than religious ideology, and print culture combined to generate precisely the autonomous, imaginative, and self-controlled subjects that were so easily seduced by the excesses produced by the rise of modernity—many of these ideas remain in contemporary fears about the fundamental excessiveness of desire.

[3.5] What appears to be at stake in the three-century outcry over masturbation is not just the danger of forsaking the real for the illusory, but that the self requires protection from imagined threats even more than from real ones. As Laqueur observes, medical scholars in the Enlightenment considered "nerves and nervous fluids" at the center of human development—consider the empiricist vision of the child's mind as a blank slate—and believed that experiences penetrated through the senses to affect the body directly via those elements (2003, 204). Traces of this idea that "we are creatures open to endless stimulation, material and psychological" are apparent in Williams and other scholars of film and video pornography, along with the belief that "wrong or inappropriately modulated...stimuli" can lead to mental and physical deformation, in the view of 18th-century doctors, or to rape and sexual violence, in the view of antipornography advocates (Laqueur 2003, 204–5).

[3.6] Masturbation with the aid of a text was not considered any less harmful; like Williams (1999), Laqueur observes that pornography—written or filmed—has the most concentrated power to affect the body of the consumer, and both authors document a fear of "hordes of autonomous but somehow complicit individuals who do not cooperate because they know they do not need each other" for sexual or any other satisfaction (2003, 357). What, then, makes fantasy, specifically sexual fantasy, so threatening? Claims that fantasies are produced by the mind alone ignore the influence of culture, particularly how desires are shaped by experiences with other people as well as with fiction. And when the self does turn inward to contemplate idiosyncratic scenarios for the purpose of achieving orgasm, what is to prevent it from returning to the external world? Desire writ large may be inexhaustible, but the body and mind certainly are not. If the belief articulated in the Enlightenment that fantasy is inherently solipsistic, inferior to reality, and generates nothing is set aside, the discourse of pornography gives way to alternatives, including a renewed interest in what happens when the consumer engages with her dirty book, film, or comic. For Laqueur's self-obsessed and isolated reader, solitary sex not only offered a safer and perhaps easier option, but also a different *type* of pleasure:

[3.7] the pleasures of the novel—"nobody's story"—were the pleasures of fictionality itself: the frisson of absorption in a reality that was known to be artifice...If "fictionalizing" in general is a way of being present to ourselves, a way of self-grasping and a way of escaping, of overstepping and of creating boundaries, then the stakes in reading a particular form of fictionalizing—the novel—are great: reading novels could create new ways of being morally present to oneself for good or ill. (Laqueur 2003, 320)

[3.8] Laqueur's (2003) observations about the potential value of artifice are suggestive, as they reveal a fluid and unstable subjectivity constantly negotiating the utility of what is taken in along with the possibilities for being present to oneself in the world. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the coincidence or noncoincidence of fantasy and action, much less the exact influence of the former on the latter, Laqueur's description of fantasy as both useful and generative may be specifically relevant to pornographic comics and fan art by, for, and about women, particularly given the role women usually play in mainstream pornography.

[3.9] As Williams (1999) observes, the answer that hard core provides to the question of what women want is the penis, preferably that of the watching male. Yet Shamoon (2004) suggests that pornographic comics by and for women express a desire to abandon the self to pleasure. In comparing the female audience for pornographic comics and for comics as a whole in Japan and the United States, Shamoon identifies access as a primary issue. In the United States, the comics audience as a whole is small, with few comics targeting women, much less produced by them; technical, financial, and time constraints inhibit the potential for audience growth (77–79). Japan's tradition of producing specific genres for women and girls stretches back to the mid-1960s, and Shamoon surveys the genre of ladies' comics, which are drawn by women and take a relatively realistic view of contemporary women and their desires, to determine what vision of "female spectatorship and visual pleasure" they offer (80).

[3.10] Similar to traditional pornography, ladies' comics rely on displaying the nude and aroused female body more often and more consistently than the male body but for a very different reason. According to Shamoon (2004), this display serves not only to affect identification, as noted in section 2, but also to "arouse[] the sexual desire of the female reader through the endless play of difference and similarity between her and the characters" (83). Pleasure arises not from possessing the image but from engaging with the text's protagonist as both self and other, as ladies' comics display female pleasure in order to arouse it via "an exploration, not of the other...but of the self, or what may potentially become the self" (95). Male bodies are barely present during sex acts in Shamoon's examples, cut entirely or represented via action lines so

that the panel can better frame the woman experiencing a transformative pleasure that can temporarily dissolve the character's subjectivity, and through identification generate a similar dissolution in the reader. The ultimate fantasy that Shamoon documents in ladies' comics is not to understand the desire of the other, to be wanted by the other, or even to experience a real moment of intimacy that removes the separation between self and other, but rather to achieve a satisfaction that is nearly sublime in its resulting loss of coherence and awareness of the self as self. While this radical dissolution is less on display in the comics discussed below, similar breakdowns in narrative, formal conventions, and structured experience offer another potential window into the intersection of female fantasy and desire.

4. Erotic structures of space-time in comics

[4.1] The protagonists of Molly Kiely's graphic novels *That Kind of Girl* (1999) and *Tecopa Jane* (2000), and Colleen Coover's two-volume *Small Favors* (2002–3), seem to exist in a sexual space detached from the outside world, unaware of political, social, or even ethical concerns. Similarly, while fan art can offer critique or commentary on canon and/or a variety of sociopolitical topics, pornographic fan art is largely unconcerned with such topics at the level of content (note 3). In terms of production, reception, and circulation, of course, a variety of political, social, and ethical issues arise, including kink (that is, raising awareness of correct practices and promoting interest in them), consent, and representation. Media fandom and female underground/alternative comics artists also share a history of negotiating issues of identity, including resisting the male gaze and articulating women's right to their own pleasure and to control how that pleasure is depicted. Kiely's and Coover's texts, however, imagine a world without such narrative struggles; instead they are formed according to a structure of desire, with its concomitant peaks and valleys. Linearity of panel-to-panel reading aside, a narrative drive is largely absent in these texts in favor of a determinedly unrealistic space-time of imaginative play. Some panels and pages unfold like snapshots, gesturing at a larger whole that is unrepresented and perhaps unrepresentable. Others call attention to the constructed nature of the form through reader addresses or playing with the image's simultaneous representative and physical presence.



Figure 1. Speech balloons containing sex noises come alive and transform into tentacles/restraints in *Small Favors* (2002–3). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.2] Rather than producing a linear movement as in narrative comics or filmed pornography, pornographic comics, as a result of the nature of the form, allow the eye to linger and the reader to remain in an extended state of pleasure far longer than realistically possible—bodies tire, orgasms end. Instead, the representation of action in comics panels or fan art's single images produces a simultaneous distillation and elaboration of time and space within a sexual encounter, both in the work and the audience.

[4.3] What occurs in Kiely's (1999) *That Kind of Girl* is primarily sex, but that description trivializes how intertwined intimacy, art, travel, fantasy, and experience are in this loosely structured work. *That Kind of Girl* follows frustrated writer Dez Diva as she travels across the desert for a yearly meeting with a long-distance boyfriend—whose existence doesn't at all inhibit taking pleasure in other "beautiful boys." A flat tire leads to a brief erotic encounter with a man in need of jumper cables, and then Diva meets a trick rider named Ruby Justice, whose erotic calls to action inspire Diva to begin writing again. Yet the two women part just as this comic begins to feel like a romance, and Diva is suddenly back home in New York, hooking up with another beautiful boy after a pretentious art party. Clearly, neither monogamy nor the threat of disease exist in Kiely's universe ([note 4](#)), and without the constraints of such

interpersonal complications, Kiely is free to depict sex outside of a narrative context. Instead, sex is an occurrence, a momentary pleasure that affects an individual's life without either defining that life or being subsumed into a larger framework of romance.



Figure 2. One of numerous momentary sexual encounters with a "beautiful boy" in Kiely's *That Kind of Girl* (1999). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.4] The motivating theme of travel in *That Kind of Girl* reflects the content, resulting in a nomadic movement from scene to scene rather than a forward progression, and Kiely (1999) resists even the regular structure of a pornographic narrative, moving fluidly from landscape shots to individual sex scenes along the cross-country trip. *Tecopa Jane* (2000) has a similarly loose structure and contemplative pace, though the plot is a bit more complex: the protagonist, Jane, is heartbroken over her ex, Dixie, while Jane's roommate, Violet, Dixie's fraternal twin who transitioned to male beginning at age 9, longs for Jane from afar as she goes from one girl to another. Eventually Jane meets a girl named Jubilee, and the two begin a relationship, while Violet leaves town to join the rodeo. Not only does *Tecopa Jane* play with chronology, but it also breaks up narrative progression via flashbacks, voice-over, and breaking the fourth wall—one page features a future Jane narrating present events, who claims that "Other people may talk at you, too...But...I'm the real narrator. My name is the title." Unlike *That Kind of Girl*, *Tecopa Jane* presents a protagonist with multiple selves and perspectives, and grants significant time to

Violet's longing, which culminates in a frustrated masturbation session interspersed with pieces of fantasy, making her a secondary protagonist.



Figure 3. Kiely breaks the fourth wall to have Jane address the reader in *Tecopa Jane* (2000). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.5] Both texts reveal the influence of Kiely's work in photography and pinup art, as each grant as much focus to poses and brief but expansive images of silence as it does to moments of climax. Having eschewed a plot-based framework, Kiely's comics linger on oddly angled panels of bodies writhing together, accidental encounters, and other ephemeral moments chained together by an almost filmic focus on experiencing the image in depth, privileging visual over textual engagement. There's a remarkable lack of extraneous words in Kiely's work, which helps to shape her protagonists as icons or figures rather than characters with complex internal lives. Readers have some ideas as to what Diva wants, even her profession as an artist, but little idea of who she is—and other characters possess even more symbolic status. This emphasis on scenario over story, encounter rather than romance, and figure rather than character forms a kind of pornographic quest structure, and each part is given equal weight, whether a fuck or a dream. Diva's world is suggestive of what Williams (1999, 269) terms a pornotopia, "in which sexual utopia is divorced from the real world of its narrative," at least as relates to sex: Diva is never not in the mood, never experiences rejection, never regrets a sexual encounter, and ultimately seems to find sex, sexuality, and desire itself wholly unproblematic. This is even more the case for Colleen Coover, whose work depicts an ultimate sexual utopia without even the concerns of profession or nonsexual interests.



Figure 4. Kiely depicts a scene of activity in representative snapshots almost without text in *That Kind of Girl* (1999). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.6] Coover calls *Small Favors* (2002–3) "girly porno," and this subtitle accurately describes her playful approach to representing pleasure. *Small Favors'* protagonist, Annie, is a girl so highly sexual that she's taken to an alternate world in order to be judged and punished by the queen of her conscience, who condemns Annie for using up her entire lifetime allotment of masturbation by age 21. The punishment is an eternal sexual monitor in the form of 4-inch-tall Nibbil, who herself is quickly seduced by the photographic proof of Annie's debauchery, and their first interaction is a play on the titty fuck. Interestingly, the event that begins Coover's series reflects the Enlightenment anxiety about how to monitor, regulate, and control the private sin of masturbation (Laqueur 2003), which is of course Annie's crime, and her punishment is not only a monitor but another person—making solitary sex unnecessary, as upon their first meeting, Annie and Nibbil recognize in each other what Eklund (2007, 15) calls a mutual "want to": a shared belief that the only requirement for sex is mutual consent. Though the two do express a specific, pair-bonded form of love for each other in these two volumes, that fact doesn't enforce a trajectory of romance.



Figure 5. Coover's protagonists in *Small Favors* (2002–3) have a "meet-fuck" rather than a "meet-cute." [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.7] *Small Favors* details the sexual adventures of Annie and Nibbil as they move from one scenario to another; rather than engaging issues of identity or politics, everyone in this universe is not just sex-positive, but wholly concerned with having as much sex as possible. The outside world of jobs, families, and obligations simply does not exist, and in that sense Coover's work is far more traditionally pornographic. The two girls exist to have sex, and sex that is pornographically perfect: without awkwardness, pain, or lack of desire. Shamoon (2004) observes that a common element of ladies' comics is the overdetermination of signifiers of female sexuality, and in that case wetness serves as both "proof of the woman's arousal and a demand for satisfaction" (91). Coover and Kiely both depict wetness as a similar proof, but less often and less overwhelmingly than a sheer desire for more, whether more numerous and varied partners in Kiely, or more sex in as many ways as possible in Coover. Each artist produces a pornotopia designed to engage readers' fantasies, in which anything unrelated to satisfying sex ceases to exist and female desire is voracious and always satisfied.

[4.8] Coover relies heavily on the discrete scenario, bracketing off and titling each segment according to its content, revealing the two volumes' origin as several single issues. As in the case of filmed porn, this allows the reader to select scenes for their

erotic effectiveness, which grants the pornographic form, as Williams (1999) has noted, a surprising capacity for catering to individual desires, no matter how rare or specific. *Small Favors* encourages that type of reading, making it convenient to use the comics as stroke books that can be put down and picked up at will. For, if the only thing inhibiting sex is rejection from other people, since it is both a constant desire and constantly satisfying, all boundaries disappear: thus, Annie and Nibbil engage in numerous kinks, including BDSM, gender play, exhibitionism, and insertion, which is what happens when Nibbil masturbates herself from inside Annie's vagina, penetrating Annie as Annie masturbates. The rule in Coover's work appears to be that of function: everything, even the conventions of the form itself, is sexual.



Figure 6. *Spaghetti and a wooden spoon are only two objects Coover repurposes as sex toys in Small Favors (2002–3).* [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.9] *Small Favors* may be said to out-porn porn by the simple rule that if it exists in the world of the comic, it exists to be used as a means to achieve sexual satisfaction. This highly creative use of the natural environment also provides Coover's work with a level of variation necessary to pornography, as satiation usually leads to boredom. Given that Annie and Nibbil aren't real people, they can never get bored with sex. Each scene merely inspires further scenes, and the fluidity of their desire allows for endless new scenarios. If written porn offers fantasies from inside the protagonists but without

visual stimulation, and if filmed porn offers verisimilitude with the caveat that the images may not accurately represent the reader's desires, then Coover's work demonstrates that comics can provide an excellent compromise. Kiely engages variation by extending the moment, eroticizing everything so as to sustain pleasure, while Coover eroticizes everything to literally fuck with it.

[4.10] Additionally, both artists' work directly engages the reader, in part to make the explicit content more accessible and acceptable, especially given the dearth of explicit lesbian American comics. *Tecopa Jane* acknowledges how readers are commonly engaged by pornography and by foregrounding its fictionality, grants the reader permission to appreciate what she might otherwise find demeaning or silly. In *Small Favors*, the playful and utopian mood of wholly uncomplicated pleasure is only enhanced by inviting the reader to play along with the genre's conventions, so that she may enjoy the series without self-consciousness or discomfort.



Figure 7. Thoughts become sex aids in *Small Favors* (2002–3). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.11] Coover often uses the rule of function to break the fourth wall, as Nibbil turns the idea, in the traditional shorthand of a light bulb, into a dildo: here, thoughts literally get you off. As porn necessarily addresses the reader/viewer in order to implicate her in the fantasy, and that implication arises because of the genre's

pragmatic goal of getting her off, these works' lack of narrative makes it easier for the reader to engage in and experience a surface intimacy, rather than one concerned with internal workings. Porn is utilitarian, which makes it, to a certain extent, disposable: without the complex though predictable structure of romance, the aim is to show us just enough (or perhaps just too much) to get us off. The vision of female desire and fantasy present in these works is one of limitless play, extended sensation, and shifting subjectivity. Readers are invited to identify with Diva's free spirit and greed for experience, Jane and Violet's struggles to find a deeper connection in the midst of enjoyable but insufficient sex, and Annie and Nibbil's boundless joy in a world full of sex, but none offers the kind of deep identification described by Shamoon (2004). Instead, this is a fantasy of a world in which such easily and consistently pleased women (and such pleasures) are possible.

5. Addressing the reader in comics and fan art

[5.1] The reader is implicated in the surface intimacy of given representations whether she is directly addressed or not and thus also in how the form is constructed. The comic must be opened up, spread flat, and made accessible, so that the reader can see the events occur. But direct addresses, as in Nibbil's acknowledgment of herself as a character on a page, break a traditional structural element of fiction that is presumed to allow for the suspension of disbelief. Awareness of the audience is innate to pornography, however, even if only in paratextual or contextual ways. Fan art contains within its ethos a similar drive, for while it may seem obvious that both the artist and viewer desire the creation of such work, the lack of distance between producer and consumer in fandom's gift economy reveals a shared emotional identification that sharply diverges from that of comics.

[5.2] Further, the audience for such fan art is likely to be largely female, given the demographics of American media fandom, and is thus free of the access problems that women commonly encounter with comics. The pieces considered in this article display the female body in order to heighten identification and engagement, but what they share with Kiely's and Coover's comics is a distinctly lesbian gaze, unlike Shamoon's (2004) ladies' comics; for this reason, the play of difference and similarity is more akin to desiring to have and to be both parties in a scenario, doubling the dual engagement that Shamoon describes. What is distinct about this femslash art is that its lesbian gaze may not be anchored to a discrete and lived sexuality on the part of the artist or the viewer, as fandom's "particular online spaces, cultures, and practices can queer women (and other gendered subjects) in ways not accounted for by most identity narratives," regardless of whether, as is the case in individual fantasies, those fantasies are directly related to one's lived experience (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007, 103).

[5.3] Shamoon (2004) is oddly dismissive of other Japanese comics genres targeted at women, particularly *yaoi* or boys' love (which she conflates with *shotacon*), largely for its unrealistic elements. While she briefly acknowledges that identification with the male protagonists may offer a temporary experience of empowerment due to feeling free of gender constraints, Shamoon rejects the "escapist fantasy" of boys' love and slash fiction for its "self indulgence" when compared to ladies' comics' more realistic genre conventions, as the latter can increase the reader's sexual freedom and autonomy (86). More complicated structures of identification, such as with a male body, or engagement, such as with a comic that, like traditional (men's) pornography, lacks character development and a complex narrative in favor of endless sexual acts, are apparently innately inferior because they lack the clear tie between artifice and the real that Laqueur (2003) describes. In applying traditional feminist theory to ladies' comics, Shamoon favors fantasies whose consumption may improve female readers' lives and thereby outright dismisses the possibility that alternative understandings of pleasure, sex, sexuality, gender, and even identity may be generated by escapist fantasies. As Williams (1999) observes:

[5.4] As long as sexual pleasure is viewed as having a proper function and an end...it tends to reside within the relatively parsimonious masculine economy of production. But when sexual pleasure begins to cultivate (already inherent) qualities of perversion; when it dispenses with strictly biological and social functions and becomes an end in itself;...when a desiring subject can take up one object and then another without investing absolute value in that object; and finally, when this subject sees its object more as an exchange value in an endless play of substitution than as use value for possession—then we are in the realm of what must now be described as a more feminine economy of consumption. (273)

[5.5] Fan art serves as an excellent example of such a "feminine economy of consumption," as the viewer contemplates the image and lingers in pleasure for its own sake before moving on to the next one of many potential objects for satisfaction.



Figure 8. Lizardspots's "Bit of Skirt" (2005). [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.6] Consider Lizardspots's (2005) "Bit of Skirt," a piece of Harry Potter pornographic fan art featuring the characters Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley. The piece depicts a frozen moment of action: each girl caressing the other with eyes closed and mouths open in midkiss. Whether by accident or design, Lizardspots cropped and framed the sketch—initially penciled on paper and then colored using Open Canvas—into a narrow vertical panel that cuts off the ends of Hermione's hair. This fact, along with the messy cross-hatching and roughly defined fingers, suggests urgency and illicit passion, a moment captured by accident. The two figures are posed against a blank backdrop, and this lack of location reveals the work's emphasis on a moment devoid of narrative progression. While pornography in general may largely be motivated by the desire to see what cannot commonly be seen, two components intensify this factor in fan art: first, the reliance on a preexisting canon that offers built-in emotional identification with the figures depicted; and second, the awareness that the fan will

likely never see her beloved characters performing the desired acts. Depicting two characters overwhelmed with passion, frozen in time and thus unaware of the viewer's gaze, grants "Bit of Skirt" an illicit power, as the eye is drawn to subtle details rather than quickly progressing to the next image.

[5.7] Pornographic fan art can also take as its subject other fan works, just as art can inspire fan fiction, be produced to accompany a story (often for a larger challenge or fandom-wide event), or be commissioned as part of a festival. Twilightsorcery's (2008) "Just Us" was requested as part of the InsaneJournal community hp_summersmut's 2008 fan fiction and fan art exchange: participants filled out a survey listing characters they were willing to write or draw along with requests of their own, were matched according to the survey, and then posted their products anonymously. Unlike the freestanding comics, fan art is either anchored to its canonical frameworks, possibilities, and established scenarios, doubly anchored to both canonical and "fanonical" impressions, or further, is anchored yet again to an interpersonal context. Twilightsorcery acknowledges in the comments of the post that her depiction of Gabrielle was influenced by how Sweetcarolanne, for whom the work was produced, sees the character, demonstrating how this additional layer of interpretive context affects what the artist produces. This direct influence, in which the desire motivating the art isn't simply the artist's but also the recipient's, illustrates what Lothian, Busse, and Reid (2007) call a queer economy of exchange, in which "shared sexual fantasies bring people together from a wide array of identities and locations" (103).

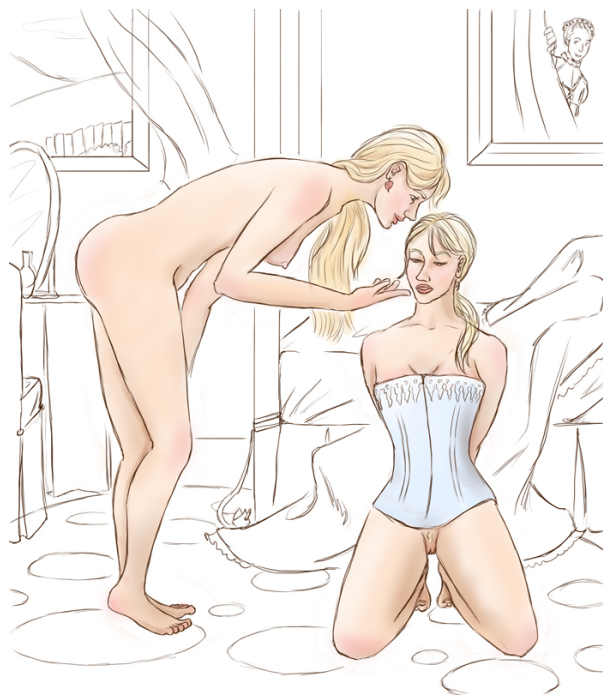


Figure 9. Twilightsorcery's "Just Us" 2008. [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.8] As in the previous piece, the figures here are drawn in midaction, entirely focused on the experience of pleasure: though their positioning in the frame is clearly for the viewer's benefit, none of the characters is looking out from the image. While a nude Luna Lovegood is drawn in profile, bending down to caress Gabrielle Delacour's cheek, Gabrielle is posed facing the viewer, kneeling and dressed only in a white corset, hands behind her back. The two women's bodies are colored in, while the surrounding room is penciled and thus vague; this lack of specific environment leaves room for the audience's imagination. The piece presents canonical elements—Luna's radish earrings in particular, though the watching portrait serves both as a nod to the Harry Potter universe and as a doubling effect, as the viewer is in a similar voyeuristic position—and thus anchors the image in a specific context, despite the lack of source material devoted to the two characters. Further, the specificity of characterization present in Luna's mischievous expression and in Gabrielle's almost haughty response to being dominated reveals how "Just Us" evokes a desire in the viewer based more on characterization and emotional investment than on the flat, nearly anonymous fantasy of Coover's comics. Neither of these two pieces overdetermines signifiers of female sexual pleasure or focuses primarily on genital sex acts—"Bit of Skirt" doesn't even feature nudity—and while this is not universal in pornographic fan art, much of it disperses the locus of pornography's visible truth in the genitals (Williams 1999) for multiple sites of pleasure, suggesting that this female structure of desire is polymorphous; the viewer takes as much pleasure from shading or facial expressions as from the particular act on display.

[5.9] While "Just Us" may provoke fantasies of the events that led to this moment or those following, the artist does not provide definite answers. Further, the lack of direct acknowledgment of the viewer—unlike pinup art and its contemporary equivalent, the desktop background or wallpaper—offers a touch of realism, as the fan can credibly imagine that the events depicted either really occurred or could occur, rather than merely existing for her pleasure. The narrow focus of nonsequential pornographic fan art invites the viewer to linger in an unending moment and therefore to achieve the satisfaction of seeing a fantasy realized. Thus do such works convey in a single panel the effect of entire pornographic comics, relying on preexisting narratives and emotional investment to heighten the viewer's pleasure further, such that a single moment can evoke an entire scenario. Additionally, just as Coover's works offer numerous scenarios so as to engage multiple desires, the larger community of fan art generates a similar proliferation of options: all potential scenarios are on offer via collective production and circulation, thereby producing a decentered, diverse, and ever-evolving erotic archive that caters to all. Just as these comics depict undeveloped figures to offer the reader easy access to pleasure, these pieces of fan art refuse to interrupt the viewer's gaze with any particular narrative or characterization that could rupture the surface flatness of the open image.

[5.10] Along with her own definition, Williams (1999) also cites Beverly Brown's definition of pornography, which emphasizes how fan art's depictions of individual fantasy are entangled with extant cultural discourses and, moreover, a community of like-minded subjects. If pornography can be understood as "a coincidence of sexual phantasy, genre, and culture in an erotic organization of visibility" (Brown 1981, quoted in Williams 1999, 269), it is clear to see how fan art calls on the viewer's situation within a fandom full of other, similarly pornographic responses to canon, all connected in a web of networked desires. Fan art does not need to address the viewer in the same blatant manner as do comics because the form itself is an address more intimately and directly tied to the potential audience than commercial works. Just as a consumer may purchase pornography because it contains familiar and presumed elements, from an actress to a kink, the fan consumer engages a piece already primed not only by attachment to canon and fanon depictions of characters, but also by an expectation that some element will be left out. Unlike the visual and sequential fullness of Coover's or Kiely's work, fan art offers a blank or unoccupied space because of the lack of information that can be conveyed in a single panel for the viewer to fill in. While the masturbatory aid offers both a spark and potential limit by providing an encounter with an external object, fan art further engages the viewer as part of a collective, connecting her desires to a larger whole and figuring fantasy itself as inextricable from her chosen community and thus to a lesser degree from the world itself. Rather than springing fully formed from a solipsistic mind, fan art envisions fantasy and the desire that engenders it as simultaneously individual and shared, internal and external, artificial and real.

[5.11] Because pornography is fundamentally invested in affecting its consumer's body, Franklin Melendez (2004) claims its address to viewers is necessarily an invitation to engage rather than passively look. As has been suggested earlier, the reader's interaction with pornography is "a negotiation between different pleasures and different modes of viewing not necessarily locked into a static subject/object relationship," but instead offering simultaneous pleasures of possessing the image and being moved by it, both having and experiencing (413). By framing what happens when people consume pornography as "an encounter with the voluptuousness of the image" (404), Melendez suggests that instead of placid self-absorption or an imperialistic devouring, the reader experiences both active and passive pleasures, alternating between consuming and becoming an object moved by the pornographic image, [resulting in] a visual experience neither constant nor unilateral, but fractured and polymorphous" (414). The result is a kind of sublime experience, a specific and particularized moment of encounter in which the instability of the viewer's position produces pleasure, to which can be added the fractured progression from image to image and the flat, multiplied spatial arrangement specific to comics.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Climax in these comics does not necessarily evoke closure, and the acts leading to climax form no consistent progression from beginning to end as the next scenario interrupts, or starts anew from the same setup of "before sex," applying a playful attitude to format and structure at the very basis of representation. Fan art most often offers a single moment, suggesting both the transience and fecundity of fantasy. Both forms represent time as a fragmented experience of lingering in a moment or moving between discrete though not necessarily chronological moments, with the reader encountering an instantaneous charge that can never be exactly repeated despite the ability to return to it again and again, thus making a suggestive claim about how desire itself works. If pleasure in filmed and written pornography derives from its movement from scenario to finish, the pleasure of these works lingers across bodies in various states of being, frozen in time, taking a hedonistic joy not just in depicting the intimate, but also in expanding that category past any limits imposed by the panel. Such a situating of the readerly experience asserts a rethinking of how desire is structured, and these works' evocation of a specifically lesbian gaze offers an alternative vision of desire itself. Rather than moving through a linear trajectory toward a desired end, interrogating the other's pleasure in order to possess it, these works both depict and transmit a desire that circulates and oscillates between subject positions as well as between pleasure and pain, never entirely exhausted or satisfied, and thus continually a site of generative possibility.

7. Notes

1. The effects on men have been less of a concern; see Jensen (2007) for more on that issue.
2. See Beaty (2005) and Nyberg (1998) for depictions of the midcentury controversy over comics and comparisons to similar situations involving television and film.
3. For example, see vito_excalibur's "Alter's 6: Supernatural" for a Latino version of the Winchesters that challenges perceptions of the series.
4. Though the title does imply a woman who, as the back cover blurb makes clear, is "thoroughly a creature of her own desires," and thus Kiely's (1999) book offers the reader—whose world punishes *that* kind of girl—a fantasy of freedom to "tak[e] whatever and whomever she wants as it cums—to the speed limit and beyond!"

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Praxis

/Co/operation and /co/mmunity in /co/mics: 4chan's Hypercrisis

Tim Bavluka

Chicago, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—The Hypercrisis—an online attempt by fans of DC Comics to create an overarching story across the entirety of the history of the comic company's line—provides insight into online comic book fandom. Comic fans on 4chan (<http://4chan.org>) began noticing connections between this overarching story and the canon of comics writer Grant Morrison's work. However, the Hypercrisis is entirely fan made; it is not a part of DC Comics's continuity and not necessarily a part of the possible published futures of the comics; nor is it officially part of Morrison's work. However, the fans continue to create and discuss the developing Hypercrisis, providing deep analysis and intricate images. Part of what makes this process interesting is that it is developed and maintained entirely by an anonymous Internet group. Further, it focuses on the work of one particular creator, Grant Morrison. Because of the brief display time, no one on 4chan knows or is able to maintain any consistent relationship to any other user. Yet the Hypercrisis has remained a prominent and powerful part of this particular Web culture. The group has maintained this theoretical event, exhibiting remarkable consistency and a nuanced understanding of the texts. The group's analyses explore important aspects relating to Morrison's work and to DC Comics.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Anonymous; Comic books; Comics; DC Comics; Fan communities; Fandom; *Final Crisis*; Grant Morrison

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In November 2009, comic book fans on the popular Web site 4chan (<http://4chan.org>) began questioning certain aspects of recent issues published by DC Comics. The discussions held on these message boards, which originated as forums for comic book fan speculation, quickly developed into something more than the typical musings heard in one's local comic book shop or the theories of a fan awaiting next month's issue. The online posts of these fans focused on the many works of comic book writer Grant Morrison, which led to analytical discussions that developed into a narrative event now known to the participants as the Hypercrisis. Minor details over the breadth of Morrison's creations were brought to the surface, and fans created

elaborate collages to help explain their theories to other community members, all while maintaining a consistent focus on and development of the Hypercrisis. The fans at 4chan have thus created a unique practice, one that breaks the established confines of comic fandom as occurring in bookstores and at fan conventions. Although fandom can grant social agency to those who are culturally disenfranchised through the rejection of mainstream culture, subcultures privilege individuals and practices through the development of subcultural capital, limiting the expressive possibilities of those who may not identify with the more socially visible aspects of a fan of comics and privileging individuals deemed authorities. The lack of persistent identities on the anonymous Web site rejects the development of subcultural capital, and the online space negates the formalized actions necessary for establishing a true fan identity. The Hypercrisis represents a space of developing Internet-based fandom that focuses less on the dependency of fandom rituals and hierarchies and more on the participative engagement of texts and cultures.

[1.2] 4chan is one of the largest and most notorious Internet communities. Hundreds of thousands of users from around the world access the site every day, where they engage in a variety of postings, discussions, and group events, all while developing a close-knit community. As of February 1, 2013, 4chan has accumulated 1,149,144,201 total posts and over 100 gigabytes of content. Unlike more conventionally popular social networks like Facebook, 4chan users are almost entirely anonymous. One of 4chan's subgroups occupies the Comics & Cartoons board, where members share favorite images, create fan art, develop their own style of collective humor, and discuss various texts. This specific board is known as "/co/," in reference to how the board's digital location appears in the site's URL: <http://boards.4chan.org/co/>. Playing off the board name, the users of /co/ often refer to themselves as /co/mrades, thus establishing them as a close-knit Internet community and allowing participatory culture to flourish. Users can engage in the creation of the Hypercrisis in the intimacy of a community that allows for individuals to speak in an open environment about their favorite texts. The power of the Hypercrisis is built on the affective texts of Grant Morrison, but the participative audience and the content of discussion (in all its forms) have created something more.

[1.3] Grant Morrison has been working in the comic book industry for decades and is one of the medium's most prolific writers. Throughout his career, he has worked for a number of different publishing companies. He has written stories involving some of the medium's most iconographic heroes, reinvigorated barely remembered characters, and created complex worlds and individuals in his original titles. Besides his work in the comics industry, Morrison also practices various forms of ritual magic (Morrison 2006, 9). Morrison, who in the 2010 film *Grant Morrison: Talking with Gods* often refers to his creative process as "shamanic," infuses the fictional universes of his comics with

his particular form of magic practice, giving his work a particular uniqueness. Fan knowledge of his esoteric lifestyle allows for easier interpretation of the abstract magical elements Morrison often includes in his narratives. Because of their knowledge of his beliefs and the minutiae of superhero comics, fans may forge more personal connections through participation with Morrison's work.

[1.4] United by an interest in superhero comics, /co/ users take pleasure in consuming popular texts. Henry Jenkins elaborates on the individual's connection to fandom participation as an "increased significance as [texts] are fragmented and reworked to accommodate the particular interests of the individual" (1992, 50). The Hypercrisis serves not only as a form of textual engagement, but also as a way for fans to participate in a community. Jenkins describes this as the "pleasure in discovering that they are not 'alone'" (23). As a community, /co/ members construct their elaborate paratext, the Hypercrisis, which intertextualizes Morrison's work and DC Comics's textual history as a way to interpret Morrison's often dense and esoteric narratives. Through this creative process, the users of the site have developed a complex understanding of their texts, institutionalized a collective knowledge of fictional stories, developed a future mythology outside of a formal published record, and constructed elaborate images demonstrating complex analysis. The anonymous nature of the group leads to a hierarchy-free fandom, giving fans an open forum for thoughts, ideas, statements, and interactions. This fan practice supports the complexity of the Hypercrisis: the user-constructed analysis is noticeably intricate, demonstrating the closeness and consistency of the community, the richness of content, and the users' relationship to their texts and to the Internet environment.

[1.5] While Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) discusses the affordance of cultural capital to high culture, John Fiske argues that subcultures such as fandoms also establish hierarchical limitations on those who participate: "Cultural tastes and practices are produced by social rather than by individual differences, and so textual discrimination and social distinction are part of the same cultural process within and between fans just as much as between fans and other popular audiences" (1992, 37). The socially constructed privileges of cultural distinction are equally present within fandom communities, but they are based on unique parameters. The hierarchies of distinction in fandom can be a way to establish and develop personal identity, but they can also control the extent to which others may acquire the distinction, and to what extent social mobility is granted individuals within the fandom. Jeffrey A. Brown, in his general framework for understanding traditional comic book fandom, notes that the level of fandom of comics readers can be determined by the level of participation with their texts and the associated culture. Although these "seemingly uncommitted readers" have less visibility within the subculture, their fandom can be equally as devoted as that of a hard-core fan (2001, 61). This affirms Fiske's theory: while

someone may identify with being a comic book fan, certain cultural practices and figureheads can limit his or her involvement in a particular group and the agency granted through fandom.

[1.6] The perceptions of hierarchy in the subculture are determined more by the fan's presumptive visibility and participation in the culture than by the individual's sense of identity. Comic fandom identity is established through cultural construction as "the subculture of fandom operates for readers well beyond the purview of the producers" (Brown 2001, 67). A fan's ability to engage narratives, interact with other fans, establish an identity at a local comic shop, or be known within a subculture can increase his or her status as an authoritative subcultural figure. The presence of this possibility creates an intercultural fragmentation and a legitimacy to particular fandom identities not granted to others. Inclusion is enforced through the subculturally defined parameters of those with greater authority within the fandom. As Brown points out, many of these subjugated fans do not consider themselves any less devoted to the medium, but they are perceived as less valuable within the fandom community by those who are perceived as more ardent.

[1.7] Because 4chan is an expressive Web space without persistent user identities, it is more difficult to ascribe individual claim to the content on the site, thus allowing fandom practices to occur without the limitations of subcultural capital. This dismantles the hierarchical identity privileges granted by capricious rules of belonging. Without the restrictions of this type of privilege, fans can create and participate with texts in a way that grants more personal agency and creative expression. The Hypercrisis as a fandom event focuses on the act of participation with texts, moving beyond traditional comic book store discussions and casual conversations about favorite texts. 4chan's anonymous message board becomes a place for fandom to exist and flourish without needing to legitimize identity in order to have a sense of belonging.

[1.8] The Hypercrisis represents an important communal activity for /co/, highlighting Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of participative thinking—that is, "committed, involved, concerned, or *interested* thinking" (1993, 86). The /co/mrades are intensely participating with their text; they are not engaging in random discussion. As they do so, they encourage participation with their fandom. This happens at an individual level, thus allowing users to think about the various comics and the Hypercrisis as it develops. However, it also demonstrates a form of group participative thinking where an entire community engages with these texts. When applying participative thinking to the Hypercrisis, the community's in-depth activity affirms a development of communal and individual knowledge and experience, as well as a complex fan practice.

2. The Hypercrisis

[2.1] What exactly is the Hypercrisis ([note 1](#))? In terms of an institutional definition from DC Comics, it does not exist. Grant Morrison proposed an idea for a new event to DC Comics, but it was ultimately rejected (Brady 2009). His plan was to create a very large-scale event occurring over DC's universe of comics. This would have been much like Morrison's *Final Crisis* (2009), but with a plot spanning the entirety of DC's titles, rather than just a limited series. The idea was never approved, as it would have required Morrison to take over the company's entire lineup of publications, rather than simply getting his own special story to write. Original plot ideas related to this universe-spanning story line exist only in rumor, vague interview segments, and recycled ideas used throughout Morrison's other stories. Morrison has explained that his original Hypercrisis has lived on in other work, but he has never mentioned where, to what extent, or to what end.



Figure 1. Fan-made cover to the theoretical book version of the Hypercrisis. From 4chan (<http://4chan.org>). [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.2] Members of /co/ began noticing specific events from various Grant Morrison comics, mainly from his DC Comics event series *Final Crisis* (2008), his story arc *Batman: R.I.P.* (*Batman* issues 676 to 681, 2008), and his then-current *Batman and Robin* (2009) series and how they were beginning to coincide with each other and with other comics in the DC line. Ironically, *Final Crisis* was originally frowned upon by the

/co/ collective for being meaningless in the grand scheme of the DC universe. This helped fuel the discussion, as it added an element of discovering significance in something previously ignored. Morrison has also commented on the poor reception of fans and how it found acceptance a few years later, after more of his comics developed from the event (*Grant Morrison* 2010). Months after the completion of *Final Crisis*, it has remained one of the main sources of research by the /co/mrades for their theory discussion.

[2.3] This constructed continuity of seemingly unrelated comics appears to be a primary goal of Morrison's work. In an interview in the fall 2010 issue of *Comic Heroes* magazine, Morrison states,

[2.4] The way it works is that everything I've done since I came back to DC is all tied together. The end of the *Batman* run ties directly into some stuff that I did when I took over writing the book in 2006. I've tried to connect it all together, so hopefully it will all tie up as one big story which says everything I have to say about the character. (Jewell 2010, 37)

[2.5] Although this remark seemingly refers only to his work with *Batman*, there is the implication that Morrison is trying to incorporate the entire run of *Batman* comics into one continuous story, covering over 700 issues since 1940. Morrison admitted this nearly a year after the members of /co/ began to notice this trend on their own.

[2.6] The /co/ group's creation of the Hypercrisis is not just a narrative analysis; it is also a participatory event—a group-based dialogic relationship. Mikhail Bakhtin defines this relationship with texts as reading in which one "interrogates [the text], eavesdrops on it, but also ridicules it, parodically exaggerates it" (1981, 46). The visual and textual narrative of comics means that this is happening with the printed words and the comic's art—the combined language of comics. Bakhtin describes the narrative of novels as being "inseparable from images of various world views and from the living beings who are their agents—people who think, talk and act in a setting that is social and historically concrete" (1981, 49). Unlike novels, where the diegesis is represented only by the text and the heteroglossic dialogism among author, text, and reader, comics allow the reader to see the world of the text, and strengthen their participation with it. One can see the actions of a scene or emotions of a character rather than gleaning information from descriptive text. Comics provide another level of discourse open to interpretive actions. The reader is having a conversation not only with the language (the text), but also with the art, thus allowing for a stronger connection to the overall narrative. The users of /co/ are connecting vague passages, panels, quotations, and ideas across various texts, trying to discover a hidden meaning and to learn the possible future of the comics they love. By establishing an

in-group continuity and understanding of DC's comics, the Hypercrisis becomes not a simple act of media consumption but rather a mode of media participation.

[2.7] The /co/mrades are creating a theoretical mythology for the DC universe that is both unrelated to the actual narratives of DC and based entirely on its published history. This theoretical mythology is a way for fans to "raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions" (Jenkins 1992, 18). In terms of predictions, the Hypercrisis may or may not represent what will actually happen in the future of these comics. The participants do not care if they are right; rightness has no place in the discussion. They are having fun sharing ideas and developing their own concept of knowledge, with discussion constantly in flux and analysis presenting infinite possibilities. They are putting together a huge puzzle that may or may not have any specific solution. Whether or not this supposed grand idea is diegetically real in the comic world (that is, formally planned for publication by DC creators and editors) is irrelevant to the actual process of community participation.

[2.8] The range of ideas pondered within the early 4chan threads highlights the complexity of material that is being discussed: /co/mrades discuss characters as common as Batman and as obscure as Qwewq, a sentient universe. The texts they mine for meaning come from many different sources, including *Final Crisis* (2008), *Blackest Night* (2009), *Blackest Night: Batman #1–3* (2009), *Batman and Robin* (2009), *Batman: R.I.P.* (2008), *Batman: Last Rites* (2008), *52* (2006, 2007), *Death of the New Gods* (2009), and *DC Universe #0* (2008). These texts remain some of the core materials for analysis, although fans focus heavily on *Final Crisis* and how it interacts with the larger continuity of the DC universe. Over the first several months of the creation of this community, the reading list increased in size and complexity. However, the titles listed above have become the core reading for the Hypercrisis and serve as the base for the group-constructed continuity of the DC Comics universe.

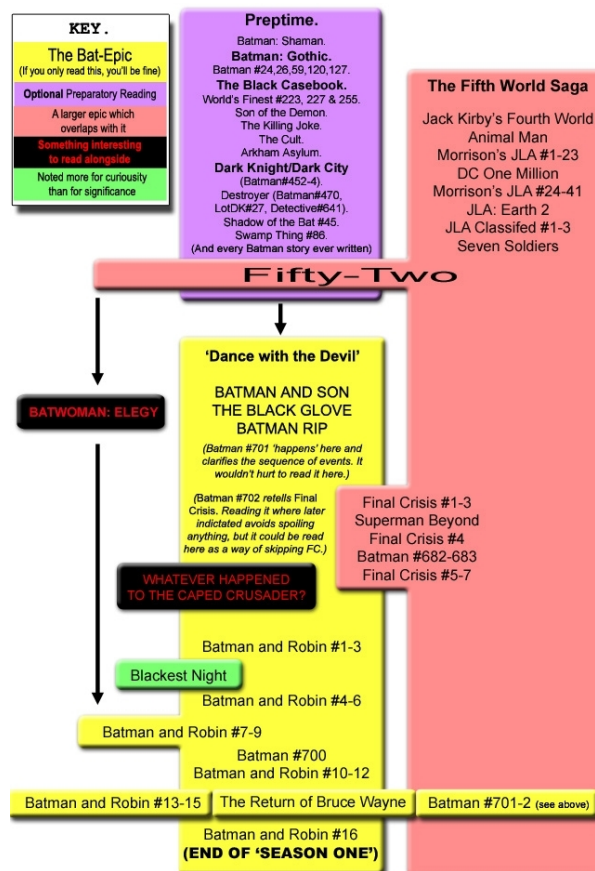


Figure 2. Fan-made reading list for the Hypercrisis. From 4chan (<http://4chan.org>).
[View larger image.]

[2.9] The growing textual complexity demonstrates several things about the /co/ group. The first set of comics explored by fans was published from 2006 to 2009, emphasizing an importance of contemporary work. Second, as hinted at by post 13000226, "I...I think I need to re-read Final Crisis," communal competency with the texts in question is implied. Users assume others will have more than just casually read a comic. The members encourage others to critically engage with the content and play with continuity ideas. Not living up to the standard of critical analysis on /co/ can be dangerous: "Good god. You guys have an amazing ability to invent stuff from nothing. To totally invent story lines that aren't there. To create connections in order to save Morrison's shit from being irrelevant trash" (post 13000844). This particular user may be a troll, but he or she is implying that some people read for simple enjoyment. This post is in response to post 13000862: "When this all turns out to be true, your face is going to be so red" (Hypercrisis 1). This user is stating that not only is he or she having fun with the texts, but he or she is also representing a collective belief that the group is onto something big, and participation is required.

[2.10] Whereas the first thread represents a deep textual analysis of contemporary comics, drawing basic connections between works and developing ideas, the second official thread starts something far more complex. The first post involves a compiled

image of 10 panels from two different comic series and compares symbols and dialogue in *Batman* and *Green Lantern* comics to create connections between two seemingly unrelated characters and stories into one larger narrative. This use of user-constructed images becomes a recurring trend throughout the Hypercrisis discussions. This process of image creation continues throughout all the newer threads, and the images become increasingly elaborate. Later on, an image focuses on the diary entries of a therapist in Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989), which describe a specific patient. The user applies Freudian psychoanalysis to help establish a greater understanding of the history of events in Morrison's work and its intertextuality with other Morrison comics. In a later thread, a user connects the appearances of a minor character in Batman comics, General Slaycroft, who has appeared only in three minor stories: *Robin Dies at Dawn* (1963), *Batman: Venom* (1991), and *Batman #673* (2008). The image opens up 45 years of comic history to be considered for interpretation, collects the appearances and pertinent information surrounding this seemingly forgettable army general, and establishes his relationship to the purpose of the greater narrative. This interpretation suggests that Morrison is indeed attempting to establish the entirety of DC's comics as a single story, not just those related to Batman, as he states above.

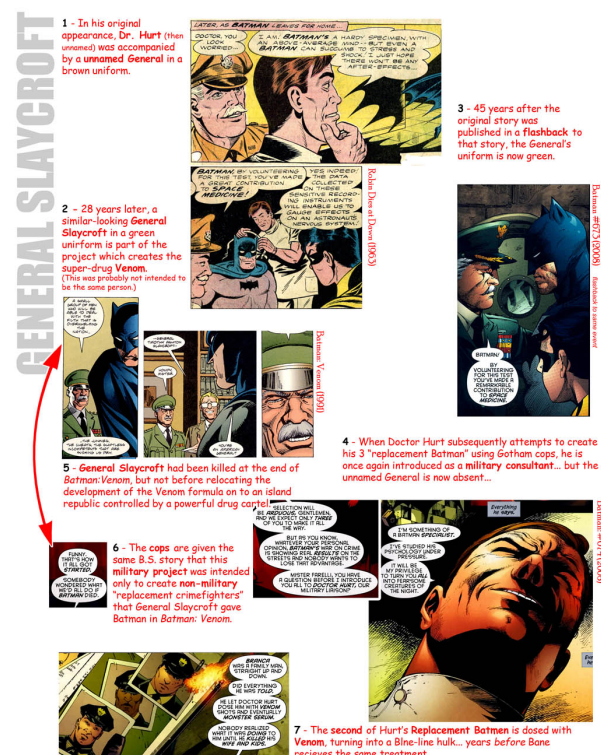


Figure 3. Fan-made image displaying the appearances of General Slaycroft (post 15229143, Hypercrisis—Oberon Sexton 3). [View larger image.]

[2.11] Another trend in the second Hypercrisis thread is a connection to other literary works. A user points out the cryptic slogan of a character, "Vengeance Arms Against His Red Right Hand," connecting this idea between the different comics the character,

Red Hood, has appeared in and the overall message of vengeance that is prevalent with so many DC characters. Other users expand on this, and connections to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the source of slogan, enter the discussion. These literary allusions lead to a greater understanding of the overall tone of specific characters. As one user remarks, connecting the tone and allegories in Milton's work not just to a single character, but to a greater sense of characterization throughout DC's comics:

[2.12] This allusion gives us some insights into the mindset of the Red Hood. In addition to the reference to the Penitente Brotherhood, it suggests that the character may have a god-complex—or, at the very least, a belief in divine justification for his violent acts in a manner that's not dissimilar to the crusades of the middle ages. (post 13021733, Hypercrisis 2)

[2.13] This trend continues into later threads, as other users expand this process of literary connections as the identity of a new masked character, Oberon Sexton, is discussed by references to Shakespeare. To quote a user-created image, "Oberon—King of the Faries [sic]. sexton [sic]—a church groundskeeper. A **Clown** who is also a **sexton** and a **gravedigger** appears in the play *Hamlet*" (post 15229143, Hypercrisis—Oberon Sexton 3). This leads to the idea that Joker (the Clown Prince of Crime) is Oberon Sexton. This was revealed as true in Morrison's *Batman and Robin* series, which demonstrates that these details are significant and thoughtfully planned out, as opposed to simple coincidence.

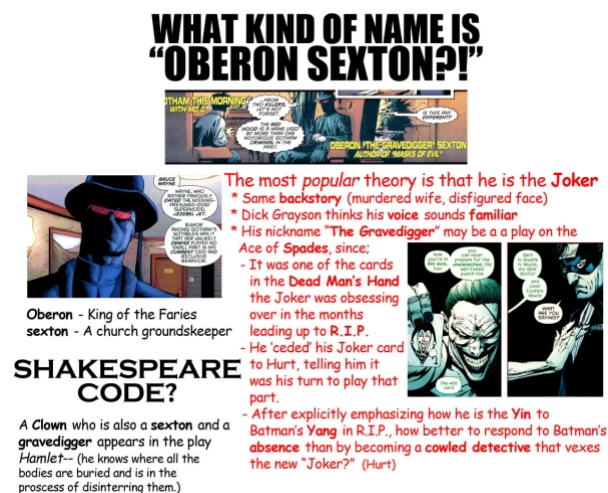


Figure 4. Fan-made image displaying various Shakespearian allusions pertaining to Oberon Sexton (post 15229143, Hypercrisis—Oberon Sexton 3). [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.14] In Hypercrisis 3, something new develops. Included in this thread is a completely original image detailing the levels of power and control over the entirety of DC's comic universe. This connects Neil Gaiman's Endless characters (characters based on abstract universal ideas), the spectrum of Lantern groups (groups powered by a different core emotion), and the Seven Soldiers of Victory (an obscure 1940s super

team that was revamped by Grant Morrison for an event in 2005). Users develop a greater collective understanding of the structures of abstract power within the fictional universe based on three entirely unrelated comic histories while also creating original media to help explain events. The shift to the conceptual also includes more artistic elements within the comics. Users are analyzing symbols, icons, scars, cave paintings, tattoos, and other diegetic markers relevant to the characters and narratives, even going so far as to connect the importance of historical shamanistic imagery to the iconography of DC's superheroes.

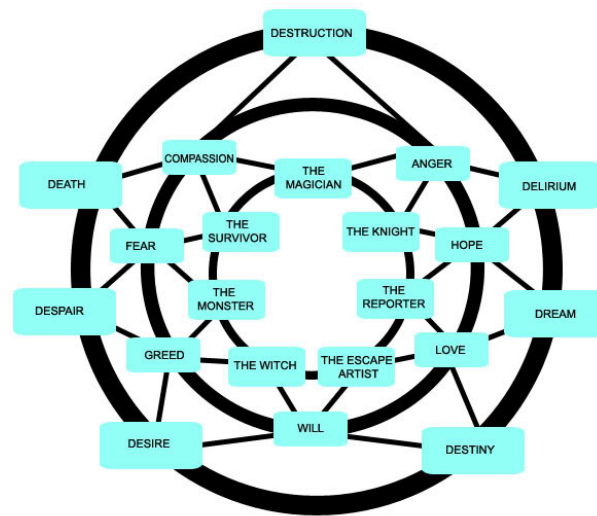


Figure 5. Fan-made chart by user Madman connecting several superhero groups by their power levels (post 13064208, Hypercrisis 3). [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.15] Where participative thinking helps a reader engage a text in a more fulfilling way, as a group, the members are able to collect their engagements into a communal dialogic process. Users help others in order to gain increased participation. When a user states, "I just realized I understood 40 percent of [Final Crisis]" (post 13000371), another replies with, "It's amazing—Final Crisis was the most picked-apart thing EVER in the history of /co/ but we are still discovering new [stuff] that was set up in it" (post 13000472; Hypercrisis 1). Besides coming up with new theories, /co/mrades help each other with readings. Scans of comic pages are common and are often used to remind others of past events or allusions to other texts, or to illuminate missed details. Bakhtin describes the dialogic process with texts as "a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language" (1981, 47). Narratives have multiple levels, given the realities of the characters and settings. The construction and interpretation of a text cannot be a singular process. The /co/ members help each other with this process. Users can bring in information from other canonical texts, but they also collect it for future discussions and to show to new users.

[2.16] The strength of this process is in part due to the group's ability to be wrong and to adapt discussions according to findings they decide are incorrect. The lack of importance of subcultural capital in the anonymous community allows for experimentation in thought and a lack of repercussions for incorrect ideas. While discussing the death of Bruce Wayne and the possibility of his being the mysterious Phantom Stranger, a user reminds everyone that "Phantom Stranger is an angel who refused to take sides during Satan's rebellion" (post 13029333, Hypercrisis 2). But in reply to the limitations of a character in DC's canon, a user states, "Like I said I don't like this theory but in one of Aesop's fables one animal didn't fight in the battle of Beasts and Birds. That animal was The Bat" (post 13029407, Hypercrisis 2). Nor does the group neglect possibly fruitless ideas. Rather, members search for better justifications for their theories. Although this theory was ultimately disregarded by /co/, it did help the community by developing analysis, strengthening the group's bond, and furthering the community's efforts.

[2.17] In addition to discussing the theory and origins of plot points, the /co/mrades also focus on deconstructing the complex nature of power and identity in the DC Comics universe. The users analyze the nature of good and evil DC's fictional universe over more than 75 years' worth of published texts, discuss how it has developed through events created by Grant Morrison, and speculate on what it means to the future development of DC's comics. This has less to do with analyzing texts and more to do critically thinking about intertextual and universal realities and the belief systems of various characters. The user-created ideas are growing collectively more abstract, yet the group manages to explain these concepts to each other succinctly and continues to connect them to the texts in discussion; the community encourages interaction. Users help explain and elaborate on concepts and point to particular texts and characters to help construct a particular idea. If somebody doesn't get it, it is up to the community to justify the idea or express it more clearly.

[2.18] Fandom gives individuals permission and power to identify with texts, and it grants creative expression for their passions. The establishment of authority and cultural power within fan groups isolates the less involved fan from the subculture. Those who do not follow the fandom's rules may be deemed inauthentic fans, which may cause disillusionment through cultural fragmentation. However, because 4chan is an anonymous community, the authority of identity is removed, thus permitting more individuals to feel included in their participation. The Hypercrisis allows comic book fans to break away from the potential limitations of cultural spaces, where they may not feel welcome as a result of their lack of culturally constructed associations. The fan event does not permit subcultural elitism because it provides a welcoming space for textual engagement and fan expression. The visibility of traditional fandom in itself discourages participation from those who are not dedicated in the same ways as die-

hard fans. 4chan users can be more open about their passions, and thus meaningful participation and community development can occur congruently, without fear of risking individual fan identity.

3. Note

1. 4chan deletes threads regularly, often within minutes of posting. However, there is an online archive of several Hypercrisis discussion threads. When I quote, I cite the archive post number (<http://www.mediafire.com/?9mugfs0jg8uumih>).

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Symposium

Captain America and fans' political activity

Forrest Phillips

University of California, Santa Cruz, California, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—A brief overview is provided of how American fans have used Captain America in their political activity, and the implications of their political appropriation are explored.

[0.2] *Keywords*—American; Comic book; Marvel Comics; Politics

Phillips, Forrest. 2013. "Captain America and Fandom's Political Activity." In "Appropriating, Interpreting, and Transforming Comic Books," edited by Matthew J. Costello, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0441>.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, serves as the embodiment of traditional American ideals such as liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness (Dittmer 2005; McDermott 2009; DuBose 2007). Considering this, it is hardly surprising that American fans often use the character to engage with political topics (Johnson 2010; Ostrander 2011). More specifically, Marvel Comics fans of varying political perspectives have used the Star-Spangled Avenger to further their political arguments. This wide range of political engagement is possible in part because Steve Rogers's brand of Americanness is broad enough that it encompasses all but the fringes of the American political spectrum. This essay will look at the ways in which the Tea Party and the Occupy movement have used the Sentinel of Liberty to further their respective ideological goals, and will briefly touch on two groups that have not.

2. Transcendent Americanness

[2.1] Captain America was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby as an argument against isolationism, and after his revival in the 1960s Marvel has painstakingly ensured that the Star-Spangled Avenger is identified with the highest American ideals rather than any administration, policy, or political party (Calhoun 2011; Dittmer 2005; Johnson 2010; White 2011a; Wright 2001). *Captain America* writer Richard Stern even went so far as to issue an official statement in the June 1980 issue saying that the Sentinel of Liberty is "about as dead-center in the political spectrum as one can get" (quoted in DuBose 2007, 930). Former *Captain America* writer Steve Englehart has argued that this transcendent quality is an essential part of the character (Walton 2009). As Cap himself declared in *Captain America* #332 (August 1987):

[2.2] Those men are not my country. They are only paid bureaucrats of the country's current administration. They represent the political system—while I represent those intangibles upon which our nation was founded...liberty, justice, dignity, the pursuit of happiness...that, really is my major stumbling block with their plan for me. By going back to my wartime role as a glorified agent of America's official policies, I'd be compromising my effectiveness as a symbol that transcends mere politics. (quoted in DuBose 2007, 930–31)

[2.3] He was disillusioned by Richard Nixon, fought Ronald Reagan, and refused an offer from the New Populist Party to run against Jimmy Carter (*Captain America and the Falcon* #175; Walton 2009; DuBose 2009; Booker 2010). Fans have embraced the character's higher standing and use his iconography as a way to semiotically encode a claim that their dissent is based on core American ideals rather than a more radical perspective (cjohnson 2011; White 2011a).

3. Captain Red America and Captain Blue America...

Video 1. "The Best Tea Party Movie" by billhenn1.

[3.1] When the Tea Party rose to national prominence in 2010, the movement's cosplay of American icons, including the Founding Fathers, immediately made news (Walsh 2010). One of the most remarkable costumes worn by Tea Party demonstrators was that of the Star-Spangled Avenger. As Nicolle Lamerichs (2011) argues, when fans cosplay they are expressing their fondness for, identifying with, and making statements about the narrative associated with the character whom they are playing. The statement made by political Captain America cosplayers is that Cap would agree with their point of view. For instance, at a 2011 Tea Party rally, a man dressed as Captain America personalized his shield with a bumper sticker that read "*Please* don't tell Obama what comes after a trillion" as a way to assert that his support of limited government is the sole authentic American perspective (White 2011b). Similarly, the Star-Spangled Avenger waved the star-spangled banner at a March 24, 2011, rally in opposition to the Affordable Care Act (Shelly 2012).

[3.2] While in both these cases Captain America's iconography was used to support right-wing causes, his use in political action transcends partisan boundaries just as the character does in the comics. In October 2010, the Sentinel of Liberty showed his support for "reasonableness" at Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear (Calhoun 2011). A year later he defended labor unions at a protest in Madison, Wisconsin (Mills 2011). Furthermore, Cap's iconography has been used at multiple Occupy rallies: one protestor wore a makeshift Cap costume and flashed the peace sign while another attached a figurine of the Star-Spangled Avenger to the top of a sign bearing a handwritten anticorporate slogan (Moscamaurer 2012; jamie nyc 2011). Additionally, an activist advocating for homeless veterans addressed Occupy Oakland clad in the costume of the Sentinel of Liberty (addio33 2012).

Video 2. "#F29 Allen Mullins (Captain America) Addresses Occupy Oakland" by addio33.

[3.3] While most appropriations of the Captain's iconography are anchored in a broader political movement such as Occupy or the Tea Party, not all political uses of it occur on behalf of such groups. For example, in a riot following an Occupy Oakland march, Roy Sorvari, a "real-life superhero" called "The Ray," attacked riot police at an Occupy Oakland encampment with a borrowed orange aluminum reproduction of Captain America's mighty shield (Smiley 2011). An *SF Weekly* article made clear that Sorvari lacked a coherent political motivation and was motivated by a general fear of African Americans. Sorvari's use of a superhero identity to act on this fear is an inherently political statement, as it distorts his prejudice into four-color heroism. However, it is distinct from other fan appropriations of Captain America in two ways. First, Sorvari doesn't belong to a political movement. Second, he made practical use of the shield as a defensive weapon rather than using it to connect his viewpoint to American tradition.

[3.4] Fans' politicized use of Captain America's iconography goes beyond wearing costumes and wielding props at rallies. A post on the Occupy-affiliated Web site Occupyr was titled "Captain America Stand with 99%" and included a panel from *Amazing*

Spider-Man #537 (January 2007) in which Captain America declares,

[3.5] This nation was founded on one principle above all else: the requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or the consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world — "No, you move." (precipice 2011)

[3.6] However, this passage was also quoted on a conservative Tumblr blog that has declared the 99% movement useless ("Doesn't Matter" 2012; "So Let's Have a Chat" 2012). At first glance, the fact that an Occupier and a Tea Partier both present this quotation as perfectly summarizing their viewpoint seems to support the popular notion that these movements are starting to converge. This is mistaken. Nothing that Captain America says in that passage is specific to Tea Party or Occupy ideology, and it would be wrong to conclude from their joint adoption of it that their ideologies are similar. All that this use of the quotation demonstrates is that members of both movements frame themselves as outsiders who adhere to their vision of true American values, and that Captain America is a broad enough figure to encompass such outsiders regardless of their differences. This shared outsider status is hardly evidence of a convergence. Instead, it is merely evidence of their shared origin as grassroots movements.

[3.7] Steve Rogers's brand of transcendent Americanism has even been embraced by the establishment the character is written as being separate from. This was demonstrated when the Obama reelection campaign's Tumblr reblogged a poster of the president dressed as the Star-Spangled Avenger (*Daily Mail* 2012). The Obama campaign hasn't reblogged a picture of the president dressed as one of the Founding Fathers, and few if any Occupy protestors have styled themselves so as to evoke them. This difference suggests that Captain America is a more potent symbol of nearly universal, nonpartisan Americanness than any historical figure who has been elevated to the American pantheon.

4. ...or Captain America?

[4.1] The use of the Star-Spangled Avenger's image by the Obama campaign and by protest movements across the nation's political spectrum demonstrates Marvel's success in writing the character as a defender of broader American ideals rather than of the American government. That is to say, Captain America's owners have crafted an icon of Americanness whose bipartisan popularity rivals or surpasses that of our nation's founders. The good captain is even treated as though he were a historical figure. Every other member of the American pantheon was a complicated human being who held a wide range of opinions, yet Americans across the political spectrum frequently claim that one or another of them would agree with their policy positions. The same claims are made about Captain America. He was rabidly pro-war in the 1940s and yet has been heralded as an icon of everything that is great about the United States by the generally antiwar Occupy movement (Canfield 2012; Carapezza 2012). He exchanged blows with Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office, and yet Captain America and the Gipper are both held to be paragons of American virtue by the Tea Party (Gonyea 2011; White 2011b). Marvel has created an icon of Americanness so potent that Americans can't help but turn to political poaching (à la Michel de Certeau), writing their own meaning onto him rather than passively accepting Marvel's assertions of his neutrality (Jenkins 1992; Rimjob 2008; DuBose 2007). Each poacher considers the elements of Cap's character that conform to his or her own perspective to be essential, while casting aside those that conflict.

[4.2] The reason Captain America is so easily poached is simple. Marvel's desire to ground the character in overarching American principles rather than policy or party means that Steve Rogers will never outline whether or not he supports Medicare. He'll never issue an opinion on illegal immigration. Instead, all he will talk about are broad ideals like freedom and justice. When fans read Captain America saying that the United States is built on "the requirement that we stand up for what we believe," they assume those beliefs are their own. His vagueness combines with readers' confirmation biases (Eysenck 2004, 328) to make him a broadly admired American patriotic icon.

[4.3] Such broadly admired icons are rare. This means that fans' decision to use one as a mouthpiece for their political position is inherently divisive. It creates a dichotomy that turns Americans who disagree with them into an Other (Dittmer 2005). If Captain America is a conservative, then liberals oppose not only a specific set of policies, but the very core of America itself. The reverse is true when those on the left use Captain America to support their policies. When a character whose narrative is that he represents all Americans is used to criticize some of them, the de-Americanization of those being criticized is inevitable. This is the reason Marvel faced outrage when it published stories that conservative fans, including film critic Michael Medved, felt were critical of the United States or the Tea Party (Medved 2003; McGuirk 2010). If Captain America stands against certain people, they're not simply Americans with a reasonable policy proposal that he disagrees with. They are against life, liberty, and the other ideals that form the foundation of America's self-image (DuBose 2007).

[4.4] This last point is critical. Groups that fall outside of the American mainstream tend not to embrace Captain America (Docsamson 2010). A likely explanation is that these groups are not primarily focused on arguing that their views are part of the American tradition. As an example, the American Communist Party contextualizes itself as an international movement and prioritizes the hammer and sickle over the stars and stripes. Fittingly, Captain America is nowhere to be found on its Web site (<http://cpusa.org>). The same is true of fringe groups on the right, like Stormfront, that identify as part of a broader white-supremacist movement and prioritize German- and Teutonic-inspired iconography (Kampfgruppe88 2011; Lady Celtic 2007). Given such groups' international self-image, it isn't surprising that they would abstain from appropriating the Star-Spangled

Avenger. It's worth mentioning that while some groups that walk the line between the mainstream and the fringe, such as the John Birch Society, fully embrace American iconography, they find their membership conflicted about whether they can embrace Captain America (Eddlem 2011; Walker 2011). Only the mainstream, including the Occupy and Tea Party movements, has generally embraced Captain America. This is likely because the members of such movements have (at least largely) embraced their Americanness and thus want to draw on the tradition that Captain America so effectively represents.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] While Captain America was first created as a fervent nationalist who wanted American children to "free our country of our traitors" (Yanes 2009, 58), he has developed into a very different character. Fans have embraced the modern incarnation of the Star-Spangled Avenger because he is one of the few embodiments of an Americanness that encompasses a wide swath of the nation's political spectrum, from the most conservative Tea Party member to the most liberal Occupier (Johnson 2010; Mroczkowski 2011). This near-universal American appeal renders any political use of his image inherently divisive and questionable, yet makes his political appropriation irresistible.

6. Acknowledgment

[6.1] Thanks to Suzanne Scott for introducing me to the world of fan studies.

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Symposium

The advocacy of Steve Rogers (aka Captain America), as seen in hetrez's "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York"

Babak Zarin

Fredericksburg, Virginia, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—This analysis of "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York," by hetrez (2012) assesses gay advocacy.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Case study; Fan fiction; Literary criticism; Slash

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1. Introduction: Why "average Avengers"?

[1.1] In "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York," a slash story by fan writer hetrez (2012), Steve Rogers (aka Captain America) appears as an advocate for labor unions and gay youth in modern-day New York. The course of his advocacy is described through the eyes of Tony Stark (aka Iron Man), who serves as Steve's partner in his advocacy and eventually becomes Steve's boyfriend. The piece, originally posted in January 2012, is part of an Avengers movieverse fandom that remains active while awaiting further film releases. It is also timely, as both labor unions and gay rights face challenges in the United States, such as efforts to remove the collective-bargaining rights of Wisconsin public employees, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Knox v. Service Employees International Union* that unions may not impose special fees on members, the 2012 North Carolina constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman, and the ongoing harassment of gay youth that prompted the founding of the It Gets Better campaign.

[1.2] There is, perhaps, little doubt that fan fiction, including slash, can portray or discuss these issues. Slash by definition portrays same-sex couple relationships and so naturally shows the challenges faced by them. That fiction can advocate or discuss issues is inherent in the nature of writing. Still, is Captain America the right choice for an advocate? As well as merely being patriotic, Captain America has been used for

social advocacy before. The character's creator, Joe Simon, has stated that he made Captain America fight Nazis in a conscious response to those against the United States' involvement in World War II (Wright 201). In 1974, Steve gave up his role as Captain America to become Nomad in response to Marvel Comics' version of Watergate, reassuming his original identity after deciding that Captain America better symbolized American ideals (*Captain America*, #176♦83). There was a plotline regarding homophobia in June 1982 (#270). Most recently, Steve opposed federal registration of superpowered beings in the 2006–7 *Civil War* story line, and this struggle (which culminated in his temporary death) was reported by ABC News as paralleling the events of a post–September 11 world (<http://abcnews.go.com/US/Story?id=2934283&page=1>). There is no reason why this advocacy should suddenly stop.

[1.3] What makes Steve a compelling advocate, and how can others become one? To answer these questions, it is useful to analyze hetrez's story, as the work depicts one way such advocacy can develop. So how does Steve begin?

2. The two factors driving Steve's advocacy, and his first attempts at it

[2.1] As Steve and Tony are en route to eat at Petrossian, which has "been around since Steve was younger" (hetrez 2012), Steve sees something. Stopping, he asks Tony, "What in the world is that?" Tony tells him that he is looking at "Scabby the Union Rat," a "twenty-foot-tall, inflatable rat" (Maraldo 2011) (figure 1). This opening establishes the two things prompting Steve's advocacy. The first is the contrast between Steve's memories of New York in the 1930s and 1940s, a home he lost by being frozen for decades and that places like Petrossian help him remember, and modern New York, where he and Tony now live and of which Scabby is a part. Steve's shock at learning that labor unions set Scabby up to shame businesses into hiring them is understandable: fueled by the signing of the Norris–La Guardia Act in 1932 and the Wagner Act in 1935, which limited the ability of employers to prevent workers from joining or forming unions, labor unions were a powerful force in the New York he knew. It was only after Steve was encased in ice that the Taft–Hartley Act was passed to restrict them, beginning their 70-year decline that resulted in their being nearly forgotten and apparently powerless in today's world. This contrast between Steve's memories and the modern world creates conflict. The second factor is the relationship between Steve and Tony, which is in its infancy early in the story. The narrative uses this relationship to resolve the conflict, so that Steve can learn from Tony how to maintain his values in the modern day.



Figure 1. A picture of Scabby the Union Rat, taken in New York City (Maraldo 2011) (photo by Jacqueline Bessey). [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.2] Steve's initial attempts at advocacy are unsuccessful. He initially returns with Tony to the apartment building where Scabby was set up and, snubbed by the front desk staffer, calls the building's manager; but she hangs up on him after he asks if she realizes "the Journeyman Plumbers of New York City are the men who kept your grandparents from dying of cholera." They next see Scabby outside a pizzeria, and the business's owner only agrees to negotiate with the union when Tony questions how much business he'll have if Captain America says he hates his pizza. Later Tony admits he felt as though he had "set up a protection racket," and Steve is shaken. Weeks of silence between them follow, only ending when Tony drags the Avengers to a "speakeasy." There Steve confesses that his view of gangsters was formed by Clutch Hand Morello burning down Bucky's apartment and by his mother, a nurse, treating Frank Scalise, and so the comment had made him doubt the rightness of his behavior. Tony tells Steve that it wouldn't "be extortion if there was, say, a partnership program." They eventually set one up, and ultimately Steve and Tony successfully both fight crime and advocate for union labor.

[2.3] They also start watching movies together at Avengers Mansion. The increasing strength of Tony's feelings for Steve is hinted at when Tony receives an e-mail about a blog featuring pictures of the Avengers in everyday life, titled "Average Avengers." One picture grabs Tony's attention: it's a picture of him looking at Steve, and he appears "so happy, and relaxed, and affectionate, and oh fuck. That was weeks ago, before the union stuff." Tony decides to ignore the attraction he has now realized he feels.

[2.4] All of this demonstrates the interplay of the two factors. Conflict arises as Steve attempts to bring the New York of his memories, where labor unions were highly respected, into modern New York, where they are not. This conflict is exacerbated by Steve's failure to find an effective method of advocacy: his first attempt, appealing to

the building manager's gratitude to union plumbers, would have worked in the past but does not now, and the second, when Tony warns the pizzeria owner that he may lose business, is too much like the act of a 1920s gangster for either his or Tony's comfort. Ultimately, Tony's knowledge of the present helps him frame Steve's actions so that Steve's advocacy becomes successful, and in doing so, he creates a new home where Steve's values do not conflict with the mores of modern New York. Modern would-be advocates can find several lessons in their efforts. First, advocates must be passionate about their cause, as early failures are likely. Second, advocates should have a partner whom they can discuss issues with, who can help them learn and try a variety of approaches. Finally, a passionate appeal in an appropriate medium is often very successful.

[2.5] Steve applies this last lesson at a press conference, where he tells a reporter that he "support[s] [his] local union" because "it's the right thing to do." When someone says that doing the right thing all the time is boring, Steve responds, "The right thing is always the scariest, and the weirdest, and the saddest thing you'll ever have to do. If you're bored, it's because you've stopped doing it and you didn't even notice.'"

[2.6] This causes Tony to fall completely in love with him, and gets Steve forbidden by S.H.I.E.L.D. to talk to reporters for a while. When Tony rechecks the Average Avengers blog after seeing volunteers wearing "Average Avenger Local Chapter" T-shirts, he finds that it has been redesigned and now contains accounts of people helping other people. Reading them, he realizes that he is "watch[ing] a full-on movement blossom."

[2.7] What made Steve's statement so powerful? Partly the large and receptive audience, but also the fact that he spoke as the patriotic and ethically sound Captain America. People cannot resist a manifestation of America, surrounded by superheroes, declaring that using union labor is right, as easily as they could a stranger. Steve's appeal at the press conference rouses people to act, each mimicking Steve's own development as they first post about helping others and then use the blog to find ways of helping people beyond their local reach. Eventually they organize into groups, bringing Steve's advocacy full circle. Tony tells Steve, "Look how you're changing the world."

3. Further advocacy: Captain America on *The Colbert Report*

[3.1] Steve now takes up a new cause: gay youth ([note 1](#)). Telling Tony of a boy in Iowa who committed suicide because of bullying, and wondering if a role model would have helped, Steve asks Tony why he hasn't "told anyone [he] likes men." Tony

refuses to answer, finally telling Steve that "no matter how many people you help, they're never coming back." Furious at the curt reference to all the friends who died during his years in the ice, Steve leaves after nearly punching Tony in the face.

[3.2] This beginning to Steve's advocacy of gay rights is different from that of his union advocacy. Steve was ignorant of Scabby's meaning, but he is not ignorant of bullying; the experience of being bullied was critical in his becoming Captain America. Moreover, where Steve could talk with Tony before, he cannot now. Tony could have faced similar harassment if he had come out when he was young, and doing so now could damage both him and his relationship with Steve. And it wouldn't bring anyone back, rendering the move pointless. This challenge is strengthened in Tony's attack on Steve's motives: Steve's New York is gone, and even if it could return, gay youth in Steve's time faced worse harassment. Once more, clashes result from Steve's values being out of place in the modern world, and his memories offer no useful way of resolving these clashes.

[3.3] That night, Tony discovers that Steve has snuck onto *The Colbert Report*. While on the air, Steve admits he loves men to a stunned audience, going on to say,

[3.4] People watched our press conference and they listened to us. The work I did helped these people realize how brave and capable and amazing they are. That's something that I need, I think. I need to know that I'm alive for a reason.

Yesterday, a boy killed himself. He loved other boys, and he was bullied for it, and he took his own life. When I learned about him, I thought, this is something I can do. I can tell people who I am, that I'm a hero and I love men and it's not wrong. I can make them listen, and maybe I can make it easier for somebody else.

[3.5] Tony rushes to find Steve and ends up kissing him "in front of half the neighborhood."

[3.6] Steve's coming out is a complete response to Tony's challenge. Yes, the past is gone and his lost friends are irreplaceable, but the aid he and Tony can give is so great that it is self-justifying. As at the press conference, Steve seizes an opportunity and uses his credibility to tell viewers they aren't alone ([note 2](#)). All of this allows Steve to advocate change and create a new home where he and Tony can grow closer.

4. Conclusion: Becoming an advocate

[4.1] Hetrez ends here, noting that the Average Avengers movement ultimately grows into a successful political party and leaving to the imagination what actions were undertaken by those inspired by Steve's public coming out. Given this somewhat bare ending, what are readers to leave with?

[4.2] One takeaway is the course of Steve's advocacy, which suggests to readers a course to becoming advocates themselves. First, a developing advocate needs to find a cause to be passionate about and someone to work with. Steve chooses his causes as a result of having grown up with labor unions and having been a victim of bullying (and possibly of harassment related to his sexual orientation, although this latter goes unmentioned in the piece), and he had Tony to discuss his actions with. Similarly, a person who has faced harassment, bullying, profiling, or other mistreatment will likely be able to find reasons to advocate lessening such social harm and having a partner gives them someone to share their successes and setbacks with. Again, advocates' actions must be ethically sound or doubt regarding how helpful the actions really are will arise among both the advocates themselves and those they are attempting to help.

[4.3] Having found a cause and a partner, advocates should start at home. Steve's efforts to change New York both benefited New Yorkers and inspired him. Other advocates would similarly benefit from the results of their labor. Then, as Steve did, they should combine the credibility their successes give them with their message, use modern methods (such as mass media) to inspire others, and take up new causes when they feel they have succeeded in their first. While they might not feel the benefits of their advocacy as personally as Steve does (for example, directly improving the conditions of people in his hometown of New York, gaining Tony Stark as a boyfriend, and receiving public acclaim for his efforts, a reception that simultaneously demonstrates to Steve and to others that there is a role and a place for Steve in the present world), the aid they can offer is so great that refusing to give it would be unethical.

[4.4] Have readers taken this course? On this topic, the reception of this piece speaks volumes. Since its publication on January 4, 2012, "Average Avengers Local Chapter 7 of New York City" has received over 40,000 hits and 150 positive comments. The comments note a strong desire for such groups to exist, and many commenters describe feeling comforted and inspired to act by the piece while lamenting that such groups are not more common and that they can find few ways of taking action. In January 2012, an Average Avenger Tumblr was created (<http://averageavenger.tumblr.com>), with a T-shirt design and a call for ideas. In June, however, its owner admitted having difficulty maintaining it (there had been only two posts since the end of January) and asked to hear from anyone willing to help.

These suggest that most fans remain at the first stage and are having difficulty finding partners to join with. They also point to a limitation of "Average Avengers": while inspirational and suggestive, the story is unable to help readers along the course it proposes. Of course, developments may continue, and thus this lack of movement may turn out to have only been temporary.

5. Notes

1. The primary romantic relationship in this work is between Steve and Tony. (For those questioning the appropriateness of such a relationship, I recommend elspethdixon 2008.) As slash naturally involves a discussion of the difficulties faced by same-sex couples, the Steve/Tony relationship allows the topic of gay youth to be raised and depicted with ease.
2. It is worth noting that Steve's statement is similar to those in the It Gets Better campaign, in which people post recordings of themselves to offer emotional support and reassurance to GLBT youth who might not have such support available otherwise.

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Symposium

Professionalism: Hyperrealism and play

Amanda Odom

Westminster, Colorado, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Marvel has entertained the dichotomy between serving as creator of and commenter on the text quite explicitly in "Ascension" (2009).

[0.2] *Keywords*—Alternate universe; Comic books; Fan fiction; Fans; Graphic novels; Superheroes

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0459>.

[1] Comic book stories exist and coexist as texts, constructs of texts, reconstructions and reimaginings and responses to themselves. They do not move in a linear path. They are not plot consistent (at least, there are multiple universes in which simultaneous stories play out), and they reinvent, reuse, and add on as needed to communicate the social impetus of any current moment. To these ends, they have been explored across official and unofficial communities. Fan fiction communities, for example, have allowed a broader interpretation of characters, further humanizing these figures by giving them a satisfying mundanity that pulls them into the colloquial experience while skyrocketing them out of context by reexamining their prescribed roles via subtext or in alternate universe (AU) spaces to give them sexualities, problems, and so on that never explicitly existed or which were not exhibited in canon. In addition, every writer who, as a child, read his or her favorite comic, then grew up to write for a major distributor, is also creating fan fiction, redefining beloved characters on a very personal level. When writers inhabit the dual spaces of professionals and fans, they become creators and critics, identifying the tropes that make readers feel the love and frustration of fandom and perpetuating those same tropes within canon-bound stories.

[2] Marvel, one of the major distributors, has entertained the dichotomy between serving as creator of and commenter on the text quite explicitly; a recent Ms. Marvel collection entitled "Ascension" includes a heated diatribe on the part of Ms. Marvel and a snarky rejoinder by Spider-Man. He calls her and the Avengers crazy for seeking

legitimacy for their work and says he wants to get away from her to "go back to my life of fighting maniacs dressed up in frog costumes" (Reed 2009). She argues that because he is an unregistered hero, he should face charges for vigilantism, whereas she is "with the Avengers. I'm one of the good guys" (Reed 2009). He in turn calls her a "corporate mascot" (Reed 2009). The discussion between the two echoes the discussion in the greater comic communities as they relate to realism, idealism, and canon.

[3] However, examples of this occurred years before Spider-Man left Ms. Marvel frustrated and the issue unresolved. Image Comics is a publishing company that grew from the desire of several comic illustrators, working with larger publishers like Marvel, to maintain copyrights to their characters. It has grown in success since the early 1990s (one comic line is *The Walking Dead*), but it remains known as a publisher that allows independence among its writers and, as a result, a greater independence in the content of the texts it publishes. *The Pro*, written by Garth Ennis, published as a short comic book series in 2001 and collected into a graphic novel in 2002, is a work that inhabits the landscape of the mainstream superhero while problematizing that space. It is a prime example of conflicting issues: Do we as fans, as the audience, want realism in our comics or idealism? Who are our heroes? What do we want them to be? Concurrently, what does it mean when the writer inhabits the space of the fan? Via this text, Ennis is fan, writer, and commenter on the state of being both.

[4] In a back cover endorsement for the graphic novel, Mark Waid (2002) noted, "The Pro is laughing with me, not at me. Well, okay, it's doing both. But it's still great." The subject matter *is* controversial. The main character, known to the reader by her superhero moniker The Pro but never directly named in the text, is a prostitute—an uncomfortably realistic one. She looks old before her time, has a child that a neighbor begrudgingly watches until all hours of the night, and has a disturbing skin condition. A voyeuristic sojourner from an alien race from on high (The Viewer) gifts her with super powers to demonstrate that, "any human can be a hero...These strange creatures hold within them the potential for endless evil and ultimate greatness". Accordingly, members of the League of Honor (a potshot at the Justice League) come to usher her into her new life as a superhero. These figures are unmistakably character studies of favorite heroes: The Saint (Superman), The Knight (Batman), The Squire (Robin), The Lady (Wonder Woman), The Lime (Green Lantern), and Speedo (Flash). Everything they say is the expected pabulum of the superhero (such as "Greetings, comrade. Welcome to the fight"). Each also shows a problematic stereotype inherent to the particular character: misplaced patriotism, repressed sexuality, lip-service feminism, and token racial diversity. Over the course of the text, the main character shows the characters, directly or indirectly, as the facilitators of the

stereotypes, not the patrons of diversity and acceptance they promote themselves as being.

[5] Thus, the text is not providing a fairy-tale change for the main character. In an interview in the UK magazine *Clint*, Ennis (2012) notes many of his characters "have really just been dealt a shit hand, and are endeavouring to do the best with what they've got." Accordingly, this is no *Pretty Woman* or Cinderella-meets-superpowers tale. As a superhero, she is juxtaposed with her fellows not as a fallen woman, but as a sane, if bitter and jaded, human who recognizes that life is not a game or an adventure. She shows up her comrades as the hypocrites they are: token figures or stereotypes that promote rather than heal the tensions of divisions brought about by race, sexuality, and so on. She mocks their methods, their outfits, and their rationalizations. As she bluntly asserts:

[6] I don't know why you retards think I'd want to come play in your rubber room with you, but you have got the wrong woman. I've got the kid, a nine-hour shift at Denny's—which I have to be at in about twenty minutes—and a fun night of hand-jobs to look forward to. So fuck off and carry on smearing shit up the walls. And leave me the fuck alone.

[7] Upon learning that she will receive remuneration for her service in The League, she reluctantly tags along to battle a motley crew of thugs, including The Noun, The Verb, The Adverb, and The Adjective (all the good names having been taken). Thereafter, she uses her powers to subdue a nasty individual who had been hurting prostitutes. She allows those he'd wronged to take vengeance. Both of these scenes show her to be a duck out of water. They are depicted as slapstick, until they go too far and become uncomfortable, which is the point. As she tells The League members when they accuse her of being too vulgar and brutal, "Please. You dress up like that and run around fighting perverts into the same shit—what kind of sick fucking game do you call that?...Nothing you do makes any real difference, nothing you do puts you in any real danger..." (2002). As her anger builds to a crescendo, she exclaims:

[8] We don't need you. What we need are guys with the balls to drop bombs on schools and hospitals, because that's where these assholes like to hide...or some poor slob who'll run into a falling building knowing he's going to die but willing to throw it all away anyway. We need people who don't know shit about hope. (2002)

[9] Ennis creates a story in which the constraints of the superheroes and the impact of their stories on the reader can be discussed. This has prompted criticism, such as from an outraged Will Eisner Hall of Fame comic artist/writer, Jim Steranko (who wrote, among other things, *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). In the light of 9/11, he

lambasted Ennis, Amanda Conner, and Jimmy Palmiotti, the writers and artists of the comic, saying, "They obviously think of themselves as cultural terrorists and want the world to know they've allied themselves with evil" (2001). Steranko misses the point; Ennis's work is a reflection on the very concept of the superhero and his or her audience, creating a space for discussion that is neither easy nor comfortable because he does not believe it should be. We the fans grow up with superheroes, and their stereotypes and ideals are part of our cultural dynamic. We love them. We laugh at them. We want them to be better than they are. This high degree of acceptance necessitates a stark provocation to move us to treat both superheroes and our relation to them critically.

[10] In large part, these are the reasons we have fan fiction in the first place. These are certainly reasons why Ennis ends his story with an attack and hostage situation at the Empire State Building. The League of Honor is unequipped to deal with a bomber with no demands. The newest addition to the group is left holding a depressed nuke. Recognizing that she is dead anyway, she flies into space to allow it to detonate. As she enters the inky blackness, her cigarette fizzles out; she huffs it as her life fizzles out as well.

[11] Throughout this graphic novel, Ennis as fan explores the tropes of the stories he grew up with, able to satirize them precisely because he loved them. Ennis as writer engages the tropes in his own space. Ennis as commenter shows the problems inherent in hero comic texts and offers a harsh criticism both of the material and those who subscribe to it. That he chose to do so in the light of 9/11 is no mistake. The last two sentences of the story are compelling. They are, as Waid noted, laughing with and at the reader: "Her kid grew up. Not a bad idea, when you think about it.". With this comic, with this comment, Ennis is simultaneously the professional writer telling the fans to grow up and the fanboy telling the professional comics industry to do the same. A harsh statement playfully delivered is, for all that, no less pointed in its analysis of the subject.

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Symposium

Fandom and male privilege: Seven years later

Rebecca Lucy Busker

Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—In 2005, clashes by male comics fans entering spaces created by (predominantly female) slash fans led to an essay exploring the role of male privilege in media fandom. Despite many changes both in fandom and media texts, the essay continues to be relevant today.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; Gender

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1. Introduction: It was 7 years ago today (more or less)

[1.1] Like many fans, I have written long stories, carefully crafted drabbles, thoughtful journal posts, funny polls, and academic essays. It's both ironic yet somehow telling, though, that I seem to get the most attention when I lose my shit.

[1.2] Arguably the most enduring of these moments has been an essay I wrote in November 2005 called "Fandom and Male Privilege." The essay was a quick, somewhat irritated look at what happens when male fans wander into spaces created by and predominantly inhabited by female fans, particularly those spaces centered on or at least friendly to slash activities. The essay argued that many times, these male fans not only expected the women who had built these spaces to invite them in and make them welcome, but to do so by suppressing the slash discussions they had built the spaces for, as those discussions made the men uncomfortable.

[1.3] Posted on both the Fanfic Symposium and my LiveJournal, it garnered approximately 1,250 comments, and continues to get the odd comment even today, so to say that it struck a nerve is an understatement.

[1.4] I sometimes joke that the essay was dashed off in the hour between two classes, but the truth is that parts of the essay had been brewing in my head for months. My primary fandom at the time was DC comics, specifically the Batfamily, and

like any good comics fan at the time, I was following a LiveJournal community called scans_daily, a place for posting comics panels and pages fans found interesting.

[1.5] In its LiveJournal incarnation, scans_daily had been founded by women fans to be friendly, but not exclusive, to slashy interpretations and discussions of these comics panels and pages. Many of the fans who initially came to post and discuss comics there approached comics as part of their larger media fandom, and also as a part of their larger *slash* fandom. However, for reasons that I suspect had something to do with the cross-pollination I discussed in 2008 in "On Symposia: LiveJournal and the Shape of Fannish Discourse" ([doi:10.3983/twc.2008.0049](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.0049)), the community began attracting more mainstream comics fans, whose background was in the broader realms of geekdom, and for whom slash was either unknown or at least a very strange thing (slash being at least slightly less mainstream at the time). Not surprisingly, most of these fans were men. Also perhaps not surprisingly, many of them missed the community information that said "slash-friendly" on the way in. This led to a number of clashes, which ultimately led to "Fandom and Male Privilege."

[1.6] That was 7 years ago. In both comics and fandom, much has changed, and much has not. In comics, there are now openly gay characters making headlines. On the other hand, the tremendously popular character Oracle, an icon for disability rights and a character refreshingly valued for her smarts and computer skills, has been taken out of her wheelchair and squeezed back into her skin-tight Batgirl costume, and artists continue to thrill us with material like Catwoman's debut cover (figure 1).

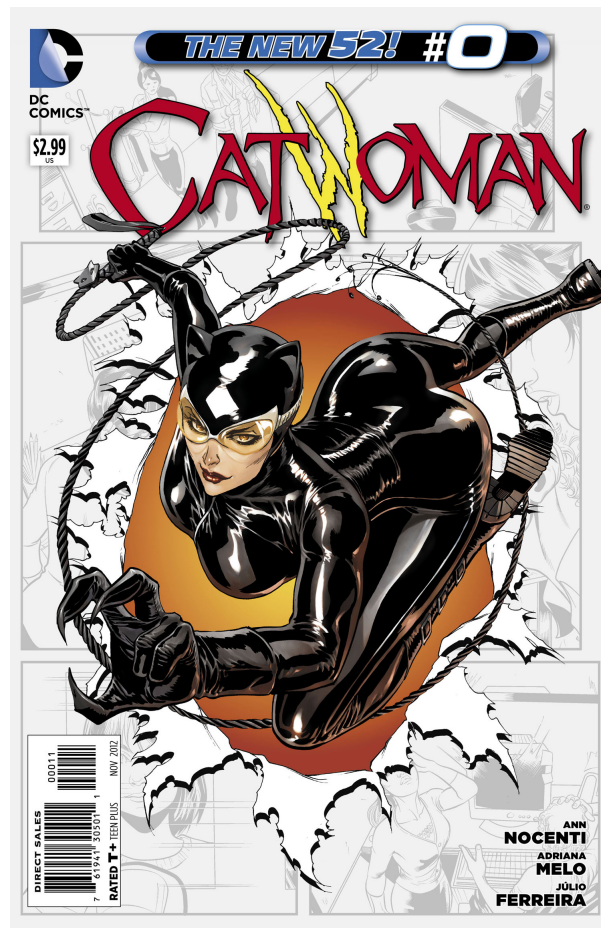


Figure 1. Catwoman's debut cover. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.7] What has changed in fandom since then? A great number of things, and not all of them expected. In particular, the notion of fannish spaces as predominantly women's spaces has become complicated. Women of color have spoken up and repeatedly said that fandom has ignored and undervalued their presence, thus prompting the question of which women we mean when we say "women's spaces." Likewise, challenges to gender binaries have necessarily challenged the very notion of predominantly women's spaces. At the same time, some communities have struggled with the question of male privilege and even sometimes misogyny versus exploitation and appropriation when it comes to gay male members.

[1.8] At the same time, judging by the occasional affirming comments the essay still receives, the issue of male privilege is obviously one that fandom still struggles with. Of course, it seems almost painfully naive to say this in a year when, in the United States at least, the issue of male privilege is foremost in real-world politics. Certainly fandom continues to have its clashes. Women are still excluded from the definition of "geek" and "fan" in the mainstream press

(<http://geekout.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/24/booth-babes-need-not-apply/>), despite our contributions to the culture, once again leading to the very issue I discussed in

"Fandom and Male Privilege": mainstream geekdom attempts to exclude us, and then when we make our own spaces, accuses us of being exclusionary.

[1.9] That said, certainly other voices, like John Scalzi's (<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/07/26/who-gets-to-be-a-geek-anyone-who-wants-to-be/>), have spoken in welcome. However, the valorization that men like Scalzi and Jim Hines receive for speaking positively on women's issues does point to the way fandom still struggles with male privilege: men's voices are valorized at the same time that frustration builds over the usual expectation by men (and women) that they will be.

[1.10] "Fandom and Male Privilege" is a glimpse into a specific historical fannish moment, yet its underlying issues remain relevant. All told, while I would certainly write a very different essay today, it has done me very proud. You know, for something I dashed off in the 50 minutes between classes.

2. When worlds collide: Fandom and male privilege

[2.1] *[This essay originally appeared in November 2005, posted at the Fanfic Symposium (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp181.htm>) and my own LiveJournal blog. It has been revised for publication in Transformative Works and Cultures.]*

[2.2] I'm going to start here with the kind of metastatement I usually avoid like the plague, but I think in this case it's necessary. Here goes.

[2.3] I know not all men are like this. I know not all men in fandom are like this. I know there are exceptions to everything I am talking about here. Having said that, I am going to try to avoid tripping all over myself to hedge everything I discuss. I am talking about larger patterns, and I think it's possible to do so without hedging every word.

[2.4] There. Metastatement done.

[2.5] A number of years ago, in my early BBS days, I got into an argument with a (much older) man about whether the US medical establishment was gender biased. His argument was that US medicine was not only not gender biased in favor of men, but it was gender biased in favor of women. His support for this was that as many men get prostate cancer as women get breast cancer, and yet breast cancer receives much more funding and research than prostate cancer.

[2.6] Without being able to verify either of these facts easily (this was before such information was available with a couple of mouse clicks), I responded thusly: the

reason breast cancer has the research and funding it has is because women (and a few men, most of whom had lost women to breast cancer) had gotten off their asses and gotten it. They had raised money and lobbied and dragged what was once a vaguely shameful disease into the public eye.

[2.7] I don't actually remember how the debate ended, but the gist of it was this: the idea that men as a group might actually have to do something to get their interests represented was totally and completely foreign to him. The "fact" that they weren't represented already was just proof of bias and oppression.

[2.8] Flash forward a few years to my active gaming days, when the majority of my social life was either gaming or hanging out with my gaming-geek friends. As should be no surprise, the majority of those friends were men. In a group of, oh, about 30 or so people in various concentric circles, there were about four women who regularly showed up at parties and other functions.

[2.9] After a while, we began organizing chick nights—gatherings of just the four of us, and maybe some other women we knew from outside the group. Some of the men in the group took exception to this. They never organized nights at which we were excluded. When we pointed out that by the law of averages, a good half of the various social outings ended up being guy only, they replied that it was not the same thing.

[2.10] "Look," I finally said to one of them, "when we get together Saturday night, we're going to paint our nails and put goop on our faces and play with each others' hair and watch movies with really hot guys and talk about how hot the guys are and probably talk about sex and periods and all that fun stuff. Do you really have any interest in that?"

[2.11] "No," he replied, "but we could do other stuff instead."

[2.12] At which point I walked away, because otherwise things would have ended either with a rant on how it was not only more socially accepted but socially expected for women to be interested in stereotypically guy things than for guys to get into stereotypically female things (which I didn't want to do, because really, we all did love gaming and horror movies and science fiction all that fun stuff), or else with me banging my head on the table.

[2.13] We live in a culture of male privilege.

[2.14] I mean, you all do know that, right? I'm not breaking anything to you? Cool.

[2.15] Male privilege may be more obvious in other cultures, but in so-called Western culture, it's still ubiquitous. In fact, it's so ubiquitous that it's invisible. It is so

pervasive as to be normalized, and so normalized as to be visible only in its absence. As John Scalzi points out in his attempt to find a new terminology for the default status that is straight, white, able-bodied male

(<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/>), the vast, vast, vast majority of institutions, spaces, and subcultures privilege male interests, but because male is the default in this culture, such interests are often considered ungendered. As a result, we only really notice when something privileges female interests.

[2.16] This results in, well, lots of things, but two that I want to talk about here. The first is that true gender equality is actually perceived as inequality. A group that is made up of 50% women is perceived as being mostly women. A situation that is perfectly equal between men and women is perceived as being biased in favor of women.

[2.17] If you don't believe me, then you've never been a married woman who kept her family name. I have had students hold that up as proof of my sexism. My own brother told me that he could never marry a woman who kept her name because then everyone would know who ruled that relationship. Perfect equality—my husband keeps his name and I keep mine—is held as a statement of superiority on my part.

[2.18] Back to the first point there. Think for a minute about any show that isn't a sitcom (for some reason, they're the exception) or a Lifetime series. I'll bet you anything the opening credits have more male names than female. If there are more female names, odds are the series is about women, as opposed to being about lawyers or doctors or people living in another galaxy, like *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004–9). And as much as I love the show, the main cast was a tad lopsided. For that matter, I remember noticing and being pleased by how many women there seemed to be on the *Atlantis* starship *Daedalus*. How many is how many? Two. If it's realistic that there would be fewer women on an air force ship, the more telling point is that the presence of two visible female background characters caused me to take notice.

[2.19] The second result of the invisibility of male privilege is that a lack of male privilege is taken as active oppression, as male bashing or bias toward women. It is not enough that the mere presence of something that actively aims at women and women's interests is taken as oppressing men; simply not catering to men's interests is perceived as oppression—honestly perceived that way.

[2.20] Let's talk about Spike TV (<http://www.spike.com/>) for a moment—television for men. Leaving aside for the moment that their idea of what television for men is kind of interesting, there was no question that the network label was in part a response to Lifetime. Leaving aside what Lifetime thinks television for women is or

should be (we live to rant another day), it sounds fair enough, right? One network that's television for women and one that's television for men.

[2.21] Except is there anyone out there who doesn't know that pretty much every other network on television is courting the male viewer? The W-fricking-B is trying to attract more male viewers. I'm not saying they're actively excluding female viewers, unless they're the sort of network that cancels their second-highest rated show because the only people watching it are women, and no, I am never letting that one go, but is it any secret that male viewers are the holy grail of television?

[2.22] This is, in essence, the television corollary of the men who point to women's studies programs/classes and ask where the men's studies are, at which point I flail in the direction of the history, literature, art, and social studies classes. Does anyone actually think men are underrepresented there? Again, something that is not predominantly about men is perceived as oppression even though it is actually an attempt to rectify the gender imbalance in the mainstream.

[2.23] What does this have to do with fandom?

[2.24] Media fandom as most of us know it is often largely a female space, by which I mean that many of the circles we run in are made up mostly of women. Women write stories for other women, make vids for other women, talk with other women, and go to cons with other women. Although few of us actively want to exclude men, we're not really invested in drawing them in either. Fandom is one of the few places where you'll actually hear, "Wait, so-and-so's a guy?" We're kind of used to that.

[2.25] Except lately, these fairly small spaces have been expanding, and intersecting with spaces where there are more men. Often, everything is fine and dandy. It's just that sometimes, it's not.

[2.26] Let's take a post at LiveJournal community fanficrants as an example (figure 2). Allowing for the moment that the guy was being obnoxious as all shit in his phrasing, there was still a rather disturbing amount of agreement to what was, in essence, a classic example of male privilege.

Males

I'm male. I love being male.

And I'm annoyed at parts of the female fan fiction population, especially the quasi-academic, use-big-word female crowd. I'm annoyed at females who put down men in discussions regarding fan fiction. I'm annoyed at the portrayal of men in fan fiction.

If you're going to discuss men, INVITE THEM TO THE TABLE. If you look through some of the conversations on the big meta and fic journals that discuss gender, slash, & reading habits of the fan fiction writing community, you frequently see a lot of women, females, girls. Rarely do you see any men. These women, you know who I mean, will talk and talk about men. And they'll subtly bash my wonderful gender. They'll say that isn't it wonderful that women can identify with characters regardless of gender and men can't do that. Shove it female fans with your elitist feminine attitudes! Men can relate to female characters just as well as women can relate to male characters. Some men can. Some women can't. And your brother, husband, lover, gay male friend, father do not represent all males. Get a larger pool. Men can do romance. Straight men can watch two gay guys screwing on screen with out going all homophobic on people's asses. There are some wonderful anime shows with two guys in a relationship that have male audiences. Your female bashing of men as being uninterested in romance is hurtful to men because it reinforces negative stereotypes.

So stop your discriminating. Stop your talking about our gender without actually asking our opinions or getting us involved in those discussions. Stop putting down our gender in order to put yours up.

You'd think fan fiction writers and slash writers, would know better than to do this but it just isn't so. Learn and stop the playful hating male bashing that exists in too many fan fiction communities. We see you even if we're not saying it!

ETA: Seriously, though, gender stereotyping is wrong. Very true, [@revelininsanity](#) I think I just needed to rant/vent for a while.

[Post a new comment](#)

306 comments

Figure 2. Screen cap of October 11, 2005, post to LiveJournal community fanficrants.
[[View larger image.](#)]

[2.27] It is not enough, you see, not to exclude men. We have to actively get them involved. I'm not sure what's more insidious: the notion that we must find it not only desirable that men get involved in fandom, but also some kind of imperative, or the notion that it is our, women's, responsibility to get them involved in fandom—in other words, that we are the ones who must act. Even though we carved these spaces out for ourselves (didn't nobody create those lists and cons and archives and communities for us, darlin'), we must take the further step to get men involved in them. If you are going to argue that these couple of guys are in no way representative of male privilege at work in fandom, you might want to talk to the vidders who've been told that vidding can't be an art because no men are involved. Instead, it can only be a hobby.

[2.28] Further, as implied in a response to the fanficrants post cited above (figure 3), we must do so by actively suppressing our own interests. It is not enough to make things more appealing to men; we must stop doing the things that appeal to us. That is where things can get ugly. Men can stand longingly at the window waiting for us to coax them in all they want, and ultimately it doesn't affect us. What does affect us is the attempt to reshape the spaces we have set up for ourselves to better reflect their interests.



Figure 3. Screen cap of comments in response to a post at LiveJournal community *fanscrants*, October–November 2005. [*View larger image.*]

[2.29] Let's talk about the LiveJournal community *scans_daily*. This was a community set up to be friendly to, if not exclusively about, slash, which is, let's face it, mostly a female activity. There was in essence a situation of perfect equality. No one was stopping men from posting things that interested them—and indeed, they did so (how many scans of Power Girl have been posted?) Perfect equality: everyone gets to post what interests them.

[2.30] Except that wasn't enough. Instead, some men (not all, of course) felt it necessary to actively try to stop the posts that were of interest to women, the slash and "ooh, pretty man" posts. Instead, we get "I don't understand this kind of fandom" in response to slashy commentary on DC comics scans. We get long essays on why we should not post slashy commentary on a particular set of scans. And no matter how many times we point out that the male fans have the whole rest of comics fandom on the Internet, this one space that does not actively cater to their interests by preventing us from asserting ours has become the object of contention.

[2.31] Tempers have frayed as a result. It's all well and good to try to be understanding, to try to remember that larger comics fandom is a male space, and thus that guys see us as the intruder, and so on. But in a culture of male privilege, when even the spaces we create for ourselves become sites of struggle, it can get frustrating.

[2.32] I feel the need to reiterate: I've met some great guys in fandom, guys who've joined fannish spaces and embraced fannish ways and just been, well, great. I always think of them with a bit of a squirm when I say that I'm mostly writing for women like

myself. I'm happy when men like my stories or other work because I'm happy when anyone likes my work, but I'm not actively seeking them as an audience.

[2.33] But you know, that should not be a problem. It should not be seen as antimale to admit that I'm mostly writing for other women. We shouldn't have to keep fighting for the spaces that we made for ourselves. We shouldn't feel any need to apologize for having made those spaces for our interests, and having made them to reflect our interests. Seriously, can we stop that? This is not oppression. It is not male bashing. It is simply a lack of male privilege, and that is not a bad thing.

Symposium

Revisioning the smiling villain: Imagetexts and intertextual expression in representations of the filmic Loki on Tumblr

Kayley Thomas

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Loki fandom actively negotiates this potential conflict between character as text (interpretations of Loki by those with textual authority, such as film writers, directors, and actors, and comic artists and authors) and as primarily image (in the form of visual representations repeated across Tumblr).

[0.2] *Keywords*—The Avengers; Comics; Visual culture

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0474>.

[0.3] O most pernicious woman!!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables—meet it is I set it down!
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain—!
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.

—*Hamlet* 1.5.105–109

1. Introduction

[1.1] As it is in Denmark, so may it be in fandom. Marvel's Loki has gathered quite a following in his journey from comic to film in *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011) and *The Avengers* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012). But how does one love a villain? It's indeed the how, and not the why, that's key. Where one might expect to find lengthy textual analyses rationalizing an attraction to Loki, the microblogging platform Tumblr brims with image posts, many without substantial text to contextualize or expand upon the visual (figure 1).

[1.2] Has Loki fandom fallen prey to the trickster's physical manifestation?
Concluding a post about how one can "like and empathize with a villain and still

disapprove of his actions," majesticgingerbear (2012) reflects. "Or, maybe, we're all just suckers for a pretty face." This demonstrates awareness of the implications of being a fan of a character portrayed by a handsome actor like Tom Hiddleston. Visual appreciation doesn't delimit overall character comprehension, yet some have used it to suggest that, as one Tumblr post asserts, Loki fans' "cognitive skills...are being hindered by Tom's beauty" and that "maybe they should just walk away from this engrossing franchise" ([note 1](#)).



Figure 1. A photo set posted on Tumblr by *angelfish69*. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.3] Many Loki fans exhibit critical consciousness of their precarious position. *angelfish69*'s photo set situates her gaze within an intertextual framework by including the quotation "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" Further, she expresses desire for Loki in her addendum, "Although he can smile at me anytime" (2012). The "although" registers her awareness of that disjuncture—Loki is the god of lies, a villain wrapped in a smile. Are the Loki fangirls, then, those most pernicious women, duped by the visual presentation? Is the elevation of Loki's character to a Shakespearean complexity undercut by attention to the image?

[1.4] I posit that Loki fandom actively negotiates this potential conflict between character as Text (interpretations of Loki by those with textual authority, such as film writers, directors, and actors, and comic artists and authors) and as primarily image (in the form of visual representations repeated across Tumblr). Although we function

in a culture saturated with the visual, in what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "an age of 'spectacle' (Guy Debord), 'surveillance' (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making," Mitchell also maintains that "we still do not know what exactly pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and the world...and what is to be done with or about them" (1995, 13). This anxiety surrounding the ubiquity of the image affects our discourse about the visual, and in considering fan activity on Tumblr, I believe that it's critical that we examine the visual as discourse.

2. Loki fandom as Tumblr case study

[2.1] Loki fandom on Tumblr, with its pervasive image making, serves as a particularly potent case study as the fans work to enter into an already complex discourse community. Hiddleston's Loki is a filmic character that may be (or alternatively may not be) approached from multiple knowledge bases. His latest appearance, in *The Avengers*, can be placed in dialogue with *Thor*, numerous comics of different runs and universes, animated series, Norse mythology, and the additional paratext of Hiddleston's own interpretation of the character. There is, then, a plethora of material from which to construct a view of Loki that allots him depth, motivations, sympathy, empathy, and even redemption, whether as developed in fan works or anticipated in future films.

[2.2] The resistance to such expression seems to stem in part from a belief that many Loki fans on Tumblr are emotionally or superficially invested in the filmic Loki as opposed to being intellectually invested in any of the other properties, and from a suspicion of the image of Hiddleston as Loki—and of Tumblr's repetition of it. This critique of the (primarily) female gaze in a medium already largely dependent upon visual representation is problematic. Further, the idea that Loki fans misunderstand the concept of the villain, and thus fundamentally misunderstand Loki, divides fannish expression into an intellectual and purist hierarchy. It's important to note that movieverse Loki fans are not the only ones to see Loki as inviting empathy or sympathy. If Loki was once of the mustache-twirling villain variety, recent comics *Loki* and *Thor: Blood Brothers* (2010) and *Thor: The Trials of Loki* (2011) endeavor to offer the trickster the chance to tell his story.

[2.3] Visual posts on Tumblr can break down these hierarchies by exhibiting engagement with multiple sources and providing coherent meaning for other viewers, even when those viewers might not immediately understand the intertextual nature of the posts. Photos, GIFs, and art that appropriate the filmic Loki's image work to negotiate the tension between privileged Loki texts (official comics and film) and the image posts, which are suspected of having no significant verbal meaning. I propose

that emotional and intellectual expression is subtly converging in Loki fandom's employment of the image as text, specifically as intertextual imagetexts.

3. Theoretical framework

[3.1] In referring to the text, I adopt Roland Barthes's idea of the work versus the text: the work is what we consume (the films and comics), and the text is what happens when we "decant" the text from the work and "recuperate" it as "play, task, production, practice" (1977, 161–62). Barthes maintains that the text "exists only when caught up in a discourse" (157). Many would agree that a fan drawing constitutes play and production, but does it follow that screencaps and GIFs actively engage with the work from which they derive? Or are they copies, and further, simply copies upon copies, as they and more traditional forms of fan art are reblogged? Or can they be considered part of a discourse?

[3.2] Images have a language, and in evaluating the discourse that visuals on Tumblr engage in, Mitchell's (1995) notion of imagetext provides a useful concept. In the simplest sense, imagetexts are works that combine image and text or other verbal expression: a picture with a caption, a comic, or a film. But images without text can also be considered imagetexts, because "in the act of interpreting or describing pictures, even in the fundamental process of recognizing what they represent, language enters into the visual field" (52). Whether or not I talk about an image post on Tumblr, and whether or not it even contains words, in order to make sense of the image, I enfold it into my own mental discourse, drawing upon memories and knowledge that might contextualize or interpret it for me.

[3.3] Barthes also offers tools to examine the function of the imagetext in his definitions of *anchorage* (text that supports the image), *illustration* (image that supports the text), and *relay* (image and text that work in tandem) (1977, 38). I position fan-created images on Tumblr as engaging primarily in anchorage or relay, depending upon the knowledge base with which the viewer approaches them. Here Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality proves pertinent. Kristeva (1980) positions any text along two axes: one that connects the creator and audience of a work, and one that connects the work to other works. Where these two axes converge is where intertextuality most strongly occurs. Many of the imagetexts function differently for each viewer, according to the viewer's ability to experience those moments of convergence; Tumblr offers a space where intertextuality develops wider coherency through its pervasive dispersion.

4. Intertextual imagetexts



Figure 2. An example of a reaction GIF, by lokism. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.1] Reaction GIFs are popular in many fandoms; although the GIF in figure 2 was created by lokism, other Tumblr users embed it into their own posts freely. The GIF could express meaning without the text if a viewer aligned the visual with familiar emotional cues: the flailing arms could indicate excitement or even panic. With the text "fangirling" added, the image comes to function more specifically, symbolizing fan emotion or behavior. It could be employed to indicate an excitement about any fandom-related scenario, or specifically for a post relating to *The Avengers*, Loki, or Hiddleston. A Tumblr user could decide to employ the GIF because it represents the feeling she's trying to express, or she might choose it over other GIFs because of her knowledge of its origin: an interview with Hiddleston in which he discusses Loki with fanlike enthusiasm. In this context, the use of the "fangirling" GIF in Loki fandom creates a connection to Hiddleston and positions him as an authoritative figure in interpreting Loki.

[4.2] When lokism inserts text into her GIF, she anchors the visual with verbal meaning. Most image captions, as in newspapers, translate or mimic the image, offering textual certainty of its context. A documentary voice-over might serve a similar function, though it can provide a tone or argument that demands the images be read through a particular ideological lens. Both assert the power of the verbal over the image. The imagetext GIF at once functions within this system and within Barthes's "relay" mode, in which "text...and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same ways as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level" (1977, 41). In a GIF with text, the question of whether image or text is to be privileged invites a critical gaze. If the use of lokism's GIF creates a feeling of connection with and validation by Hiddleston, it's ultimately the fan who controls the meaning of the imagetext in how she employs it, putting the visual into play in an ongoing discourse.



Figure 3. *Loki with his lips sewn shut, from Thor: The Trials of Loki. [View larger image.]*

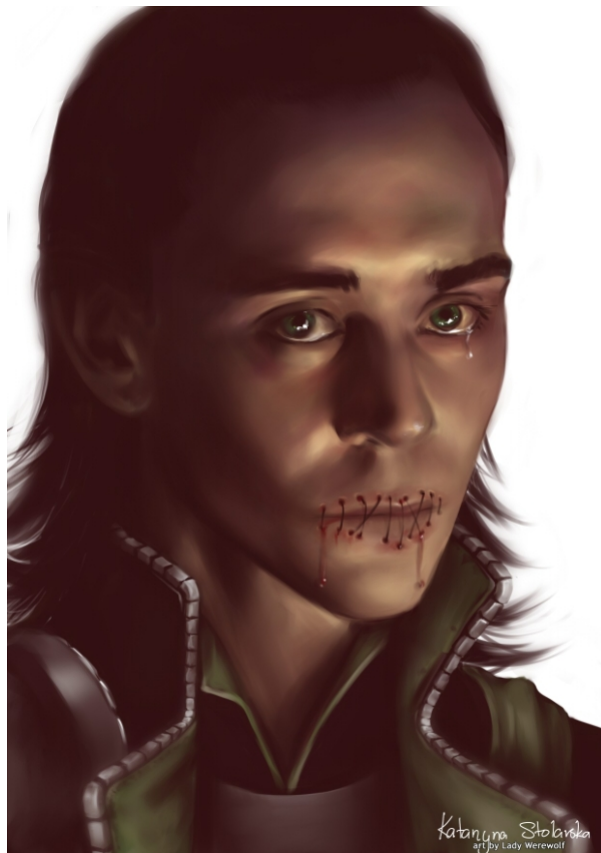


Figure 4. *"Loki: Mouth Shut" by Lady Werewolf. [View larger image.]*

[4.3] Fan art adapting images from the comics to incorporate the movieverse's visualization of Loki is also posted regularly on Tumblr, and revisions of a scene from *Thor: The Trials of Loki* (adapted from Norse myth) in which Loki's mouth is sewn shut are particularly prevalent. What does refiguring the scene with Hiddleston's likeness accomplish? Rather than being only repetition with superficial variation, such a refiguring further challenges the notion that the Loki fan is susceptible to the lure of the empty visual text.

[4.4] *Thor: The Trials of Loki* explores how Loki nearly begins Ragnarok through a series of events drawn from myth, but in this version of the story, Loki is allowed to

contextualize his misdeeds in his own narrative. Loki lies to the dwarves Brokk and Eitri in order to trick them into creating a collection of treasures for him, which he intends to give to the other gods so that they will love him. When his trickery is discovered, however, Brokk appeals to Thor for recompense, and Thor helps to hold Loki down while the dwarf sews his lips shut to prevent him from telling more lies. When Loki recounts this story, Thor says that he doesn't remember doing so, and a distraught Loki insists, "But you did! You helped, and you laughed...I heard the laughter as I pulled the thread from my mouth and thought: 'I do not belong...I am alone'" (Aguirre-Sacasa and Fiumara 2011, 25–26). The brothers continue to challenge each other's memories, and whatever the truth, Loki sees the incident as particularly formative. It defines him, and he narrates it in a fashion that invites sympathy.

[4.5] By adapting the scene from the comic (figure 3) in her own art (figure 4), Lady Werewolf places the movieverse Loki in dialogue with the Loki of myth and comics canon. Whereas Aguirre-Sacasa and Fiumara are able through multiple panels to show the painful process that Loki undergoes, as well as Thor's questioning of the narrative's truth, Lady Werewolf's image can only speak to one moment, with no assurance that her viewer has other textual knowledge. In presenting Loki alone, with no context to indicate who has sewn his lips shut or why, she draws attention to his still features and single tear, inviting the viewer to linger on his sadness and potentially create a narrative to explain what has brought him to this condition and what it means to the viewer to observe him.

[4.6] The initial experience of Lady Werewolf's art depends in part upon the viewer's knowledge base; reblogs of her post indicate varying levels of familiarity with the original mythology, the comic itself, and other fan art adaptations. The pervasiveness of the image across Tumblr, with each reblog potentially providing new context and a new interpretation of what the image accomplishes, creates an intertextual discourse for Loki fans regardless of their knowledge base, however. Other adaptations of this scene position Thor as the one who either sews or pulls out the thread, painting Loki as victim and opening the image of his suffering up to the viewer as a way to, through empathy or sympathy, actively engage with the text.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Tumblr is rife with other examples of intertextuality and command of imagery in Loki fandom. But does the application of images of Hiddleston as Loki serve as a suitable language for a discourse about whether Loki is a villain or deserving of the emotional investment fans have in him? To express emotional investment requires a language with which to speak about it, and the continual employment of these images across Tumblr, a platform for communication, should invite serious consideration.

Barthes posits that once the text is engaged as activity, "it follows that the Text cannot stop...the constitutive movement of the Text is a *traversal*" (1977, 157). The mobility of the image on Tumblr and the mobility of Barthes's text both suggest to me Barthes's space of a "transparency of language relations...the space in which no language prevails over any other, where the languages circulate" (1977, 164). As fans increasingly migrate to Tumblr from sites like LiveJournal, understanding the language of its denizens is crucial for engaging with any fannish discourse.

6. Note

1. I've refrained from identifying Tumblr users by name whose stances my essay in some manner seeks to challenge, so as not to make them feel targeted or draw what may be unwanted attention to them. The blog post I refer to can, however, likely be found by searching for the tag "Loki fangirls" on Tumblr; that tag is used primarily to direct criticism toward those who express sympathy and empathy for Loki. Tumblr users mentioned by name have given their permission for their words or works to be shared in this article. Note that the availability of posts and consistency of user names are particularly unreliable on Tumblr and any sources may disappear or become difficult to trace.

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Symposium

Who is afraid of a black Spider(-Man)?

Ora C. McWilliams

University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—An Internet post asking about Spider-Man's race in a film turned into an Internet campaign about an actor that led fans to interact with each other as well as with the actor, which in turn led to the attention of media producers, which resulted in a change in Spider-Man's race in a print comic book.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Comics; Fandom; Marvel Comics; Miles Morales; Race; Ultimate Universe

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0455>.

1. Amazing beginnings, ultimate innovation

[1.1] After 60 years of ongoing publication, Marvel Comics thought its superhero line was aging and wasn't attractive to new readers. In 2001, they created a line of comics, Ultimate Universe, so that new fans could begin reading the line without the pressure of knowing the backstory. Ten years into the Ultimate line, in August 2011, this universe also became prohibitively difficult for new readers to enter. In a bold choice, Marvel Comics killed Peter Parker, the secret identity of Spider-Man, and introduced a new character to carry his mantle: Miles Morales, a half-Latino, half-African American teen. This new representation of an established character represented a victory for some fans, who thought that superheroes, who were mainly white, did not truly represent all people. But the very mention of such a change upset other fans, who thought that Spider-Man was already representative of a particular population. As Dave Itzkoff wrote in a 2011 *New York Times* article, "Though both Marvel and DC Comics, its chief rival, have featured black and minority superheroes over the years, [series writer] Mr. Bendis said that changing the identity of Spider-Man, a central character in the Marvel mythology, if not its single most recognizable property, was a watershed moment."

[1.2] This watershed moment, encompassing both the origin of the new character and the initial fan reaction, links comic book culture and the media to interrogate notions of race and its meaningfulness to the fan community. Although both Spider-Man have origin stories that involve the bite of a radioactive, genetically altered spider, the black Spider-Man has his own origins in a Twitter campaign (<http://www.twitter.com>). In this online conversation, the change of Peter Parker to Miles Morales was precipitated by fans who wanted comedian and television star Donald Glover to play the web slinger in the upcoming reboot of the film franchise. Ultimately, Glover did not win the role, but the campaign caught the attention of the current Spider-Man editors and writers. To them, Spider-Man and the Ultimate Universe needed a boost, and a multiracial characterization was the perfect way to do just that.

2. Morales's origin story

[2.1] Technology and lifestyle Web site io9 (<http://io9.com>) deserves credit for starting the discussion about Spider-Man's race. Marc Bernardin, in a 2010 post, "The Last Thing Spider-Man Should Be Is Another White Guy," argued that Spider-Man is not defined intrinsically by his race but by his identity as a New Yorker and by his understanding of choice, as represented by the often-quoted line, "With great power comes great responsibility." Spider-Man's whiteness is thus not defining but merely accidental. As Bernardin wrote, "Lee and Ditko created a wonderfully strong character, one full of complexity and depth, who *happens to be white*. In no way is Peter Parker defined by his whiteness in the same way that too many black characters are defined by their blackness." Bernardin thus suggests that the same stories can be told irrespective of the race of the man wearing the mask; he advocated a color-blind approach to the character.

[2.2] Two days later, on May 30, 2010, actor Donald Glover posted on his Twitter feed (<https://twitter.com/MrDonaldGlover>, now moved to <https://twitter.com/DonaldGlover>) a retweet: "@io9 wrote a post about casting a non-white #spiderman for the reboot. Some suggested @MrDonaldGlover. I agree with this." Glover posted two tweets directly after, using the #donald4spiderman hashtag: "You guys. Let's make this happen. #Donald4spiderman" and "Sweet. You guys are awesome! Retweet. Someone start a facebook page. I'm going to start doing shit. #donald4spiderman." Glover, best known for his role as nerdy jock Troy on NBC's comedy *Community* (2009–present), a TV show about a group of friends at community college, had a fan base that loved the idea of Glover as Spider-Man. They created and posted dozens of Photoshop mock-ups of the actor in Spider-Man comics and with his face on Spider-Man's body in shots from the previous films. Glover, a couple of days into the campaign, clarified in a tweet, "Some people are mistaken. I don't want to be

given the role. I want to be able to audition. I truly love Spider-Man.
#donald4spiderman."

[2.3] The #donald4spiderman campaign became a top 10 trending Twitter topic that Memorial Day weekend and was reported in the *New York Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, and on several other Web sites such as MTV.com (<http://www.mtv.com/>). Stan Lee, cocreator of Spider-Man, said of Glover's campaign, "Here's the point: We've already had the Kingpin in 'Daredevil' portrayed by a black man, where he was white in the comics, [and] we've had Nick Fury portrayed by a black man where he was white in the comics...But not that many people had seen these characters—not that many moviegoers are familiar with them" (Marshall 2010). Changing the race of these characters mattered less because they were not household names in the same way that Spider-Man was. Lee continued, "Everybody seems to be familiar with Spider-Man, so I say that it isn't that it's a racial issue—it's just that it might be confusing to people...But that's a matter for the people at Marvel to take into consideration" (Marshall 2010). Lee explicitly stated that he was not advocating a particular view, but that Glover should have a chance to audition for the role. Academics weighed in too: Phillip Cunningham (2012), in an essay about "Donald Glover for Spider-Man," pointed to other creators and fans who addressed the universality of Spider-Man and who saw no reason why the character could not be black, Latino, or something other.

[2.4] Ultimately, the campaign failed to secure Glover the role, which went to Andrew Garfield instead. Although the fans may have felt that they lost this battle, it was not the end of Glover's Spider-Man. The second season premiere of *Community*, "Anthropology 101," which aired on September 23, 2010, opened with Glover in Spider-Man pajamas (figure 1). Show creator Dan Harmon explained the presence of the pajamas in the opening sequence by noting that Troy, Glover's character in *Community*, "would definitely be a Spider-Man fan...And it's definitely a cutesy inside wink at the Donald Glover for Spider-Man campaign" (Adalian 2010).



Figure 1. Glover in costume. Screen shot from September 23, 2010, NBC TV program *Community*, season 2 premiere, "Anthropology 101." [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.5] Before the movie announcement, Marvel Comics publicized the killing of the comic book version of Peter Parker as "The Death of Spider-Man" (figure 2). Marvel

intentionally played coy with their plans in this ad, leading to speculation that Marvel might kill the character published since the 1960s. Instead, they killed the Peter Parker in the parallel Ultimate Universe created in 2001.

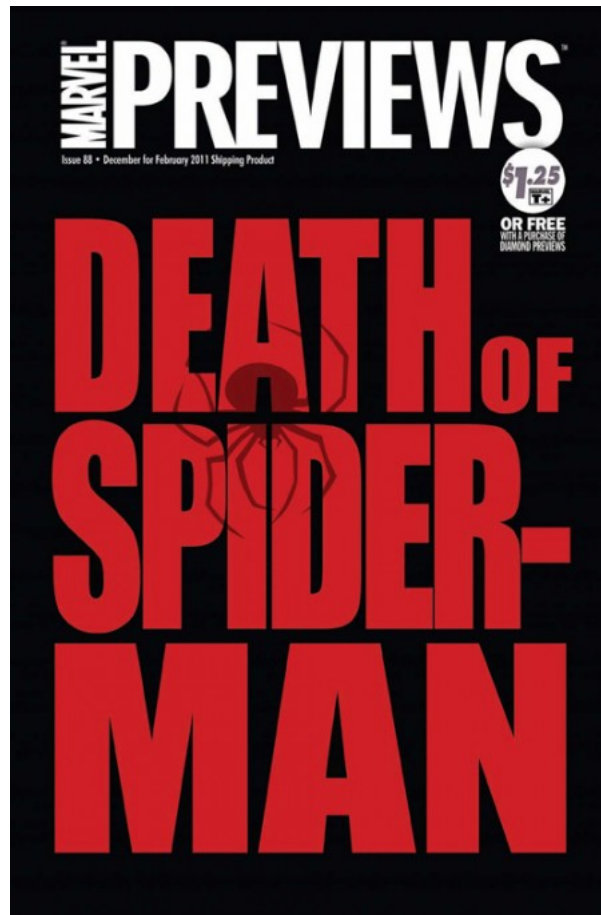


Figure 2. *Death of Spider-Man ad copy.* [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.6] Marvel chose to change Spider-Man's identity to someone other than Peter Parker as a first step in a publicity blitz to call attention to the line of comics. Series writer Brian Michael Bendis stated that Marvel needed to change the secret identity to someone other than Parker because introducing a second Spider-Man alongside the first would only force the two into competition. For Bendis, seeing Glover wearing Spider-Man pajamas in the *Community* episode cinched the deal to change the character: "I would like him to be Spider-Man. Very Much" (Chang 2011). However, Bendis acknowledged that there were differences between Miles Morales and Glover, including age and voice. From the writer's view, altering the character's race made the change all the more provocative. The comic could have a fresh outlook, but without forgetting its roots. The new character uses some of the same jokes as Peter Parker and is often drawn in poses that echo those of the iconic white Spider-Man (figure 3).



Figure 3. Two Spider-Man covers demonstrating parallelism in the representation of Peter Parker and Miles Morales. [[View larger image.](#)]

3. Not everyone is a fan

[3.1] Marvel Comics, by changing Spider-Man's race, roused Internet fans concerned with that topic. After the *Community* episode where Glover wore the Spider-Man pajamas, series creator Dan Harmon noted that he was struck by the "curious eruption of a previously unknown demographic of racist comic-book readers it ended up uncovering" (Adalian 2010), referring to the negative Internet backlash against the possibility of changing Spider-Man's race—a backlash also noted by Glover. Some Spider-Man fans on the Internet ignited a firestorm of racism. For example, on August 1, 2011, two days before the release of the first appearance of the new Ultimate Spider-Man, a comic book retailer tweeted two comments: "Q: Ben dat you? A: How you know? A: Dem lips nigga, no mask gonna hide dem," and "Q: Hey Spidey, why you web slinging so fast? A: KFC closing in a few minutes." These Twitter comments appeared on the comic book industry rumor Web site Bleeding Cool (<http://www.bleedingcool.com/>). By posting these racist comments, the retailer acted against his own interests—selling comic books. The retailer later clarified his comments: "Marvel making Ultimate Spider-Man African American is simply a cheap publicity play to bolster sinking sales. I think it's a desperation move, and I took some *good natured jabs* at it" (Constant 2011, emphasis in original).

4. Conclusion

[4.1] The fans proved their power, and the power of new media, through the Spider-Man campaign. A simple Internet post asking a question about Spider-Man's race in a film turned into an Internet campaign about an actor that led fans to interact with each other as well as with the actor, which in turn led to the attention of media producers, which resulted in a change in Spider-Man's race in a print comic book

(Truitt 2011a, 2011b). White Peter Parker was transformed into multiracial Miles Morales, hero and ambassador of the diversity of 21st-century America.

[4.2] As a character, Morales speaks to a different audience and can say different things than Parker can. Morales, as evidenced by the backlash against the change as well as the voices in favor of it, energized an audience and renewed interest in the Ultimate Universe version of the character. For Marvel, this may have simply been all about publicity; however, the change does make a difference. Spider-Man has universal appeal, but the race of his secret identity changes the dynamic of the character, leading to new modes of representation and fan consumption.

5. Acknowledgments

[5.1] I thank Dr. Germaine Haleboua (University of Kansas), Dr. Nancy Baym (University of Kansas), Phillip Cunningham, Elizabeth Potter, and John Bond.

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Interview

Interview with comics artist Lee Weeks

Matthew J. Costello

St. Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—Lee Weeks discusses how he moved from fan to professional, the influences on his art, and his current perceptions of the comics industry and superheroes across media.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Comics art; Comic book; Superhero

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Lee Weeks (<http://www.facebook.com/pencilsmudge.leeweeks>, <http://www.comicartfans.com/GalleryDetail.asp?GCat=43675>) has been a professional comic book artist for almost three decades. He has worked on some of the most prestigious superhero titles from major comic book publishers DC Comics and Marvel, including *Hawkman*, *Batman*, and *Green Arrow*, and *Daredevil*, *The Hulk*, *Captain America* ♦ and *Spider-Man*. He is the subject of a volume in TwoMorrows Publishing Modern Masters series by Tom Field and Eric Nolen-Weathington. This interview was conducted via e-mail in May 2012 and has been rearranged and edited for clarity.

2. Starting out

[2.1] **Q:** What do you remember about reading comics as a kid? What interested you in the comics medium?

[2.2] **A:** A couple things. One, there was a tremendous variety of comic books available back then—seemingly much more so than today; we had westerns, mystery comics, war comics, even romance and lots of humor/fun stuff like *Richie Rich* and *Sad Sack*. My family had a camp on a lake with a large wraparound, screened-in porch, and my little brother and I would dive into boxes and have them spread all over (we hadn't yet been introduced to backing boards and Mylar bags). It was a great way to

disappear into a variety of imaginary worlds—some scary, some funny, others heroic. In fact, I remember learning a lot of great morals through the comics. Many of my friends say the same thing. They were often great morality tales. A couple years back I had the privilege of working with Stan Lee, and I asked him if something I'd heard for years was actually true—that is, that he, a Jewish man, read the New Testament of the Bible for story ideas. He copped to it.

[2.3] The second thing I remember is that it began as a hand-me-down hobby. Along with my little brother, I had three older ones—one in particular whom I idolized. If he liked something, I liked the same thing. And he liked comics...a lot.

[2.4] Of course, there was a third thing: the art—the strong lines that brought these stories to life. I tried to emulate those drawings from a very early age. Unfortunately for Mom, that emulation on more than one occasion took place on a wall in our house. I wanted to draw comic books from very early on.

[2.5] **Q:** Which writers and artists were you drawn to as a fan?

[2.6] **A:** Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko were probably the two I became aware of the earliest. But there was another who grabbed me at a time when my hobby graduated from the hand-me-down form to something I took ownership of (I was around 9 or 10, I think). This was John Buscema—a phenomenal blend of cartoonist and illustrator who could render the most real figures performing any heroic act, yet the reality never was at the expense of the cartoon. To this day, his work amazes me.

[2.7] I had a Neal Adams period as an 11- or 12-year-old. His realism went beyond Buscema's. Each of these guys I tried to emulate at one time or another. There was Jim Steranko at some point (a *Hulk* cover of his in particular stands out as something I copied); John's brother, Sal Buscema; and I remember being introduced through some reprints of golden age comics to an artist named Mac Raboy, whose graceful figures and unique lighting really grabbed me.

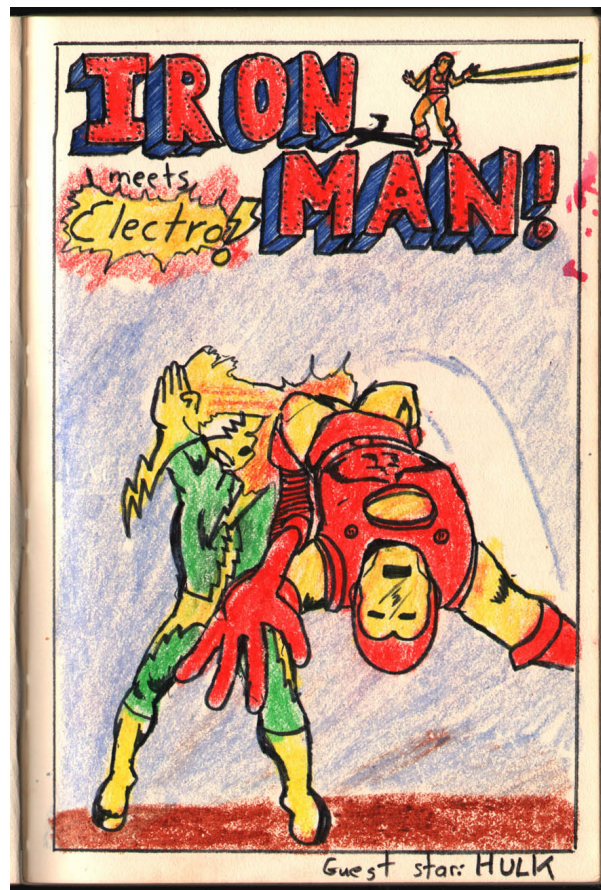


Figure 1. The young artist in 1974: Lee Weeks at 11. [[View larger image.](#)]

[2.8] **Q:** Did you participate in fandom, such as hanging out at comic shops, writing letters to editors, attending conventions, or writing or drawing fan fiction?

[2.9] **A:** In my first incarnation as a fan, I did not. I had about a 4-year break, during junior high and the first half of high school, where I had almost nothing to do with the hobby. Then, in my junior year, a friend invited me to go with him to Duck Soup, a comic shop that had opened on our main street in Hallowell, Maine. I went with not a great deal of enthusiasm, but I brought home *Fantastic Four* #193 and read it that night—and became completely hooked (or rehooked). The issue had a cliffhanger, and I couldn't wait for the break between football two-a-days so I could run down and see if the store had #194.

[2.10] Thankfully, they did!

[2.11] From there, I befriended some guys from around central Maine who were really into collecting. Over the next couple years, and through a myriad of crazy circumstances, my heart returned to its first big dream of drawing comics for a living. There was a Maine Comics Club that met every month or so. And a couple of these friends and I planned and executed a handful of trips to Boston, which seemed so far away that first time. The trips were for the purpose of attending comic book conventions—the first a smallish one called Sunday Funnies (because it was held on

Sunday). The next couple we went to were pretty big deals because some of the professional guys who actually worked on the books were guests at the shows. I'd had no idea this world even existed, and I probably never would have if not for those friends, whom I'm still close with today, 30-plus years later.

[2.12] I can't really say enough about that experience. It was vital in my development. In fact, much of that development consisted of quietly sitting back looking at the pictures of some incredible comics work while these guys talked...and talked...and talked...comics. I learned many things I'd never learned in my first run at the hobby—about characters and plotlines and why certain artists were favored over others.

[2.13] I can't believe it all took place in about a 3- to 4-year period. Then as swiftly as Duck Soup had blown into town, it was gone. I'm grateful and blessed it just happened to be there in that small window of time.

[2.14] **Q:** You were studying at the Kubert School of Art in the mid-1980s, the era of Frank Miller's *Daredevil* and *Dark Knight*, Allen Moore's *Swamp Thing*, *Watchmen*, and *Miracleman*, Todd McFarlane's *Spider-Man* and *Spawn*. John Byrne was doing *Fantastic Four* and *She-Hulk*. Were you a fan of any specific artists or writers from this period who influenced your work?

[2.15] **A:** What I remember during the period of the early to mid-1980s are things like seeing Gene Colan's work being reproduced from pencils in *The Ragamuffins* and again in *Nathaniel Dusk*; certainly Miller's work was a huge influence, from *Daredevil*, to *Ronin*, back to *Daredevil* with Mazzuchelli, then on to *Batman*. I still think *Batman: Year One*—Miller and Mazzuchelli again—is one of the closest things to a perfect comic book in mainstream comics. It's simply exquisite.

[2.16] I first became aware of Moebius (Jean Giraud) about this time, too (who just recently passed away). He made me realize that movement can happen in different ways in comics than what I had been familiar with. The movement in his style was less direct and forceful; there was a floating subtlety to it at times, something more common in a lot of European comics.

[2.17] Of course, there was Will Eisner—loved the *Spirit* reprints—especially a particular story called "Gerhard Shnobble: The Man Who Could Fly," which I later found out was his favorite story. I followed his work some and read his book on sequential art, and I tried to understand the thinking behind storytelling because of him.

[2.18] James Robinson is a writer I discovered and liked early in my career.

3. Going pro

[3.1] **Q:** Which books did you want to work on? I remember you as a Marvel guy. Did that experience affect the way you approached things like *Tarzan* and *Hawkman*?

[3.2] **A:** Well, the first 4 years of my pro career were not what I expected. The first two shorts were fun as all get out—done for one of those independent companies. When I'd worked for them about a year, I headed into Marvel and was hired immediately. (I'd actually been hired before the indie, but stuff happened...another story.)

[3.3] Those first 3 years at Marvel were tough (as was that other year). It wasn't until I sat down one night in early 1990 on my sofa shortly after moving here to Pennsylvania that—for the first time since I'd been a pro—I asked myself, "Who do you want to draw?" Up until then, I'd just taken whatever was offered, and often it just wasn't a good match. I wasn't taking charge, and I knew I needed to or I'd have to leave the business.

[3.4] The answer to that question was, Daredevil. And about three weeks or so later, I was in NYC at the Marvel offices and did something I hadn't done—I asked to be considered for a Daredevil story if they ever were in a jam. Funny thing—they were in a jam!

[3.5] I loved that character and still have a fondness for him today. I drew him for about 2 years and then moved on—it was time for a change. When opportunities to draw things like *Tarzan* came along, I pounced on them. I love variety and I love a good story. When we were able to get Walt Simonson on board for *Tarzan*, I knew it would be lots of fun.

[3.6] **Q:** What drew you to Daredevil that you wanted to work on him above all others? What did you want to do with the character—where did you want to take him?

[3.7] **A:** The Born Again story line (issues 227–233) was a big reason for that. The inward struggle—the great losses, yet his ultimately realizing he'd lost nothing—those things resonated with me in what was going on in my life at the time. Though my theology has taken a more biblical path since then, those dynamics still are powerful to me—this idea that life is an inside job. The apostle Paul writes in the New Testament of the inner man, and although Frank Miller didn't take it to a Pauline degree, I still appreciate the hint at it. And Daredevil's costume is simply a perfect costume—simple, sleek, great opportunities for creative use of blacks.

[3.8] As for what I wanted to do with the character, I wasn't really concerning myself with that. I felt a sense of duty to uphold a great artistic tradition that had been established on that book—Wood, Romita, Colan, Miller, Mazzuchelli, and Romita Jr.—that was pressure, but a welcome pressure. I also believed in my job being to first and foremost serve the story—something emphasized by the greats that I had come to respect, both in and out of the Kubert School.



Figure 2. Nick Fury by Lee Weeks, from an unpublished project. [[View larger image.](#)]

4. Fans and conventions

[4.1] **Q:** Fan interaction used to be primarily through letters columns, but with the rise of conventions and the Internet, fans can voice their opinions more easily. (The message boards at fan sites can be brutal.) Fans can also follow and access their favorite artists and writers, and the conventions have developed a huge market for original artwork. How has this affected the industry, and in particular you?

[4.2] **A:** That's a very interesting question for me, because I actually disappeared from the convention scene and from most of anything to do with the business (apart from the actual work, that is) for several years before slowly making my way back to cons in the middle of the last decade. And I've only in the last year or so become involved with the modern interaction with fandom that happens throughout the Internet. My stepping away was intentional, because as with so much of any entertainment field, I felt things were becoming increasingly dark—in tone and in spirit, and graphically. I had become a committed follower of Jesus Christ, and I simply was uncomfortable with much of what was going on with these characters that used to be so wholesome and heroic. There was too much blurring of the lines. A very little of that goes a long way for me.

[4.3] But I'm finding the way of navigating through those waters. I'm more involved in the creating—doing a little writing—and yes, I've even participated in the original art end of things, having sold more work these past 2 or 3 years than probably at any other time. I'm amazed at the level of interest with the avid collectors. Even though it's worldwide (both the comics collecting and the art collecting), still it's a small community of people.

[4.4] **Q:** How do you deal with your fans? Do you enjoy fan interaction? How do you see your relations with fans compared to the way you as a fan interacted with professionals?

[4.5] **A:** The fans *are* my connection to the comics business these days. I rarely speak with my editors—rarer still are my visits to the office. About 3 months ago, I broke down and started a Facebook page, mostly to announce convention appearances and such. I have begun doing more cons the last few years, and I have even had little chat sessions with some fans who've contacted me through the page. For this season of my life, anyway, I am enjoying the conventions about as much as anything I do. I think at the end of 2012, I'll have done six or seven. It might not sound like a lot, but for me, it is. I believe either of those numbers will be the most I've ever done in a year. As I think we discussed earlier, my first interaction was at a con in Boston—and it seems that this kind of pro/fan contact is pretty much the same as it was (once there).

[4.6] One thing that's super important to me—the most important to me—is remembering that whatever interaction I have with whomever, I am an ambassador for Christ (as the apostle Paul wrote). I stopped doing shows altogether when I came to faith in Yeshua/Jesus about 11 years ago, because of a dark tone that continues to grow darker at the shows and in the industry. But about 4 years later, I felt led in my heart to go back, interact, and share as opportunities arise. I know sharing the Gospel at a comics convention in between sketches of Wolverine and Spidey must sound a bit

odd, but I've had some pretty profound conversations with total strangers, some of whom have since become my friends, or at least regular correspondents.

[4.7] The last show I was at, I hung out with two guys in the business, one of them an indie guy who was previously a stand-up comic. He's one of the funniest people I've ever met, even when he's not trying to be. I laughed until I hurt—something I hadn't done in a *lonnnng* time. I asked why he left the comedy, and he told me there was no community—a lot of backbiting, stealing of jokes, and paranoia over having jokes stolen. He compared it to his comics experience: generosity, community, kindness, and creative people all wanting to see each other do well (with exceptions, of course). And I think he's right.

[4.8] One last thought on the con experience: the hours and years of sitting alone can take a toll on the psyche. I've often wondered—being the social person I think I am—why I chose this profession to begin with. The reality is, I like both; I love working in solitude with my thoughts, my music, and God...and I love being with people, learning about them, sharing a few card tricks (okay, more than a few), and talking about big things...life, eternity, God.

5. The comics industry

[5.1] **Q:** You have nearly 30 years as a professional under your belt, having worked on some of the premiere properties for both major publishers and for minor ones. How has the industry changed since you've been involved? Have fan tastes changed? How does this affect your work?

[5.2] **A:** The delivery and production of the material have changed a lot. Much of the actual production is done via computer. There are some artists who are actually drawing digitally now, but I'm not quite ready to go there yet. I like the tactile experience of paper, pen, and ink.

[5.3] When you and I were growing up, the analog version of comic book colors gave the colorists a palette of exactly 81 colors (and black) to work with. With the advent of computers and Photoshop/Illustrator, the digital guys have literally millions of colors to choose from.

[5.4] The sales numbers are nowhere near where they were 30 years ago per book, but because there are so many more titles being produced, I don't think the overall number of units sold industrywide is much different—or at least the difference isn't as great as the sale of individual titles makes it appear.

[5.5] But for me, the greatest change is the actual material—what I alluded to before—tone, spirit, etc. And it's a reflection of the culture at large, really. In many ways, comics have lost a sense of a strong moral compass because we (the culture) have lost that same sense. It's harder to tell who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. We see in Washington moral convictions of convenience rather than sticking to convictions even when it hurts your guy—your party—your whatever. Same with some of the heroes—they bend and break a little bit too soon for my tastes in many cases... but thankfully not in all cases.

[5.6] Right now, for whatever reason, I feel more a sense of responsibility to bring a little light into what has been dark. I think there are other creators who feel the same way. In a strange way, I feel as excited about doing this work as I have felt in a very long time.

[5.7] **Q:** There seems to be a backlash against this movement in comics—writers like Kurt Busiek and James Robinson offer a more classical vision of the superhero, and artists seem to be moving toward a less graphic portrayal of action and violence. Given the industry needs (and the new presence of Disney in the market), has this loss of moral compass begun to change?

[5.8] **A:** My sense is no—but that's mostly from things I hear. To be frank, I don't get to the comic shops that often, myself. I read very little of the newer material, so I rely on what I hear from friends and colleagues for the latest goings-on in the actual books.

6. Comics and movies

[6.1] **Q:** Has the increased popular awareness of the medium, at least in the form of graphic novels, made any difference?

[6.2] **A:** The comics themselves seem to have (to a significant) degree become R&D for movies and games. The comics don't generate the colossal dollars the movies do, but they are a great way to develop properties without shelling out loads of developmental cash. I'm not sure of the difference to me personally, except that more of the culture at large is aware of the material.

[6.3] **Q:** How do you see the characters being transformed in their translation to big (and game) screen?

[6.4] **A:** For the most part I'm amazed how faithfully the characters have been translated to the big screen. I just saw *Avengers* with my wife and our two college-age daughters. We all loved it (though I did think it was a tad slow in the first half in

parts). And beyond the care and execution of the individual movies, I believe what's most impressive has been to see the execution and coordinating of all the *Avengers*-related movies leading up to this one. It's mind-boggling, really.

[6.5] I'm continually impressed over and over again with the fabulous casting choices, going back to the first *X-Men* movie (can't believe that was a dozen years ago!). I've even enjoyed some of the tweaks and changes that have made their way into the movies; the way Captain America's classic costume is worked into his movie is one of my favorite examples. I've thought for years his costume would be the hardest to pull off on screen in a way that could be taken seriously. The Cap movie did just that.

[6.6] A very clever moment in the *Avengers* movie is how the fan is brought into the plot...even to the point of being the catalyst for the team finally getting together. Phil Coulson was us, so in a sense—even though the book didn't have fans until it existed—they found a way to make a fan ("the fan") be the reason for their being...very M. C. Escher-esque.

[6.7] For years the proportion of adults to kids has continued to move toward the adult—though I think the movies may be creating a little push back. Also, I have found a lot of the art collectors are guys who read my books as kids. One of the most wonderful e-mails I ever got was from a young man in Australia who hadn't had a very good relationship with his dad. One day, at 15, while digging through the attic, he found his dad's comic collection. Well, Dad was a fan of my work, and this young man and his father ended up finding common ground and bonding over their shared enthusiasm for it.

[6.8] Where have all the heroes gone, though? I want to see that come back...or better, I want to find a way through the thicket into an even better version of what it was...but going forward.

7. Looking ahead

[7.1] **Q:** Mark Waid, longtime comic book writer, whose Thrillbent.com (<http://thrillbent.com>) digital comics site premiered May 1, 2012, has stated that print comic books are on their deathbed and that digital production and delivery are the future. While you haven't moved to digital drawing, what impact do you see the presence of digital delivery having on the industry or the art?

[7.2] **A:** I have listened to friends for the last several years make the same proclamation about print's demise, but I'm not sold on it for a couple reasons. We still

like to hold books. The digital world is still so new—I wonder if we know how fragile it might be. There's also a lot of the world that is still unplugged.

[7.3] But certainly digital delivery has had impact in just getting the material into more hands more easily. Since the advent of the direct market in the late 1970s, growth of the readership base has been a more difficult task. The direct distribution system isn't designed to grow more readers as much as to most efficiently pluck fruit from the existing trees.

[7.4] **Q:** What are you working on now, and what can we expect in the future?

[7.5] **A:** What I'm working on is a Daredevil project that I conceived and wrote myself (still am writing, actually). It's a fluid process; even though I've known the basic story for a few years, things move around in the execution of the story.

[7.6] The narrative spine is Matt Murdock waking in a hospital bed suffering from the effects of a concussion and temporary amnesia during what is the biggest blizzard to ever hit NYC. He realizes he is the only hope for a girl in need of a heart transplant. The medic helicopter delivering her new heart went down somewhere in the blinding storm. With nothing moving—no traffic, subways, or people—Matt sets out to cross the city, retrieve the organ carrier, and make it back before the heart becomes unusable, while his powers are being limited/compromised by both the storm and his concussion.

[7.7] The Jack London-esque journey becomes the outward working of an inward journey that helps him to refresh his mission and identity. It will be three issues and should come out by the beginning of 2013. [*Daredevil: Dark Nights* is an eight issue series beginning in June 2013.]

[7.8] After this project, things are up in the air. I'd like very much to do some Messianic/Christian comics. It's been in my heart to do something in this area for several years, but I want it to be the right thing. Wherever God leads, that's where I'd like to find myself.

Interview

Toward a feminist superhero: An interview with Will Brooker, Sarah Zaidan, and Suze Shore

Kate Roddy

Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Carlen Lavigne

Red Deer College, Red Deer, Alberta, Canada

Suzanne Scott

Occidental College, Los Angeles, California, United States

[0.1] *Abstract*—In this interview with the writer and artists of the noncommercial collaborative project, "My So-Called Secret Identity," interviewees answer questions on the origins of the project and their own creative processes as they attempt to "build a better Batgirl."

[0.2] *Keywords*—Batgirl; *My So-Called Secret Identity*

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In a November 2011 blog post titled "From Killer Moth to Killing Joke: Batgirl, A Life in Pictures" (<http://mindlessones.com/2011/11/09/from-killer-moth-to-killing-joke-batgirl-a-life-in-pictures/>), media scholar Will Brooker expressed his frustration with Batgirl: "I wanted to like Barbara [Gordon]. I just wasn't getting much to work with." He went on to detail a series of tropes—self-conscious first-person narration, forgettable fights with D-list villains, the questionable decision to wear high heels to fight crime—that make it easy to understand why a comic book reader might finish a superheroine comic book feeling a bit like Batgirl at the end of a mission, "wondering if she can carry on, and if so, when, and why she does all this after all."

[1.2] Brooker closed his annotated visual history with a promise to readers: "We are building a better Batgirl. Look out for her." The "we" is central, a reflection and

extension of comics' collaborative ethos. The outcome of this pledge is *My So-Called Secret Identity*, written by Brooker and featuring art by Sarah Zaidan and Suze Shore (note 1). Brooker describes the project as "an experiment: a non-commercial project to prompt discussion and maybe suggest a different way of doing things, in terms of approach, aesthetic and practice." Though *My So-Called Secret Identity* remains intertextually indebted to Batgirl, its "different way of doing things" suggests that fans' transformative impulse might move beyond the text itself to comment on industrial inequities and the gendered nature of comic book content and culture.

[1.3] Thus, while the project suggests new possibilities for collaborative transformative works, this difference is also demographic, establishing a network of predominantly female creators and commentators. Three of these commentators, Carlen Lavigne, Kate Roddy, and Suzanne Scott, composed the questions below. All three interviewers had access to scripts for issues 1–5 and early concept and character art (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/drwillbrooker/sets/72157629358191516/>), and all offered feedback on the project.

[1.4] The interview has been edited for clarity, but it is important to note that this exchange is part of an ongoing conversation that began in the comments section of Brooker's initial post, and has continued via e-mail.

2. Meet "Team Cat"

[2.1] **Q:** Briefly introduce yourselves and explain how you became involved in this project. How have your past experiences in comics fandom or other aspects of your background affected your contributions to the work so far?

[2.2] **Sarah Zaidan:** During my first year of PhD study, Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* was an instrumental text in the formation of my thesis. In what I like to think of as a dramatic twist of fate, later that year, I was presented with my second supervisor, Will Brooker, and the rest is history! Over the next 3 years, I completed a prototype of the interactive software that was my thesis, received my doctorate and finally had free time to work on Project Cat.

[2.3] My experiences with comic book fandom have certainly made me familiar with the tropes and conventions of the superhero genre, as has my research. I've also been a gigantic Batman fan for two decades, and given *My So-Called Secret Identity's* start, it's been a wonderful experience for me to see how Cat and her world have evolved beyond their initial incarnations into fully realized characters and places. Through interactions with my fellow sequential art majors, online comics fandom, and a lot of female gamers and role-players, I can see that Cat is a character the genre has a need

for, and that's another reason I really believe in this project and am so excited to be a part of it.

[2.4] **Will Brooker:** I grew up reading comics in the 1970s, and my first experience of Batman was a hybrid one: Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams's contemporary, gritty comic books, and reruns of the Adam West 1960s TV show. Many fans, authors, and producers regard these two Batmen as binary opposites, a camp aberration that was effectively corrected by the tough comic book reboot, but I enjoyed them both as different parts of the same picture, and that attitude has stayed with me. I drifted away from comics during my early teens and was won back by the mid- to late 1980s graphic novel boom. By the mid-1990s I'd enrolled on my PhD, which became the book *Batman Unmasked*.

[2.5] I read very widely in the mid- to late 1980s. So alongside *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*, I read *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Second Sex*, feminist novels by Zoe Fairbairns and Marge Piercy, and particularly feminist science fiction, from *Herland* to Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*. I became interested in gay rights in the context of the UK's homophobic Section 28, and my involvement in comics fan culture during the early to mid-1990s intersected with my increasing participation in feminist and queer communities—most notably in my own (largely forgotten) edited fanzine, *Deviant Glam*, which was basically about superheroes and trans* identity.

[2.6] I think it was because I lost touch with those communities and for various reasons got a little locked into the role expected of me as a professional man (and manager) that I became, in every sense, more of a dick. This dialogue, organized by Henry Jenkins (http://henryjenkins.org/2011/10/aca fandom_and_beyond_will_broo_1.html) helped me realize that in dissing squeeing and other "feminine" fan expression, I was really still trying to distance myself from and disavow an aspect of myself. The Batgirl articles from late 2011 come from a more honest position for me, as does (I hope) the *So-Called Identity* project.

[2.7] **Suze Shore:** Looking back, I think I've always felt the most accurate and efficient way for me to express myself is through a combination of both words and pictures. This mind-set started fleshing itself out during a one-year certificate of illustration at Algonquin College, where it was made clear to me that sequential art was both a valid and effective method of expression and communication. In the past couple of years I've been creating comics, both sporadic autobiographical shorts and working other people's narratives.

[2.8] My work on *MSCSI* began when Will Brooker approached me about drawing up some character designs for his project. What struck me immediately was his refreshing

treatment of female characters; I've been increasingly concerned with the treatment of gender—specifically women—in comics and the general media, and Will's female characters are wonderfully real in their personalities and appearance. Women in comics, specifically the superhero genre, seem to be under constant threat of being presented as accessories rather than people. Cat and the cast of the *So-Called Identity* project are a definite stand against that.

[2.9] **Will Brooker:** When I saw this strip online, I knew Suze was someone I needed to approach about the Batgirl project (as it was then), and our correspondence started off the back of that.



Figure 1. "Arkham Outfitters," by Suze Shore (<http://imgur.com/TdvKZ>). [View larger image.]

3. Building a better Batverse

[3.1] **Q:** This project began as an attempt to build a better Batgirl, and there are notable intertextual and iconic ties to that property, such as Cat's costume and inner monologue, which evoke and subtly comment on Batgirl tropes. How much influence did Batgirl (or the Batman franchise broadly) have on the narrative and aesthetic choices here? How transformative is this text, and why?

[3.2] **Will Brooker:** I had initially just planned to create a scrapbook of script extracts, character sketches, synopses, and covers for a hypothetical reboot project—a sort of alternate history Batgirl, from another (better) version of the 1990s DCU, to prompt discussion and suggest different ways of doing things.

[3.3] Once I started talking to artists, I realized that this could really be done as a complete story, and by the time I actually wrote the script for the first episode, I'd made the fundamental decision to change all the characters' names and key details to move them away from the DC originals. So it became a story about analogues, in the same way as *Watchmen's* Rorschach and Comedian are essentially The Question and Peacemaker, and *The Authority's* Apollo and Midnighter are a version of Superman and Batman. I progressively changed the characters' appearances to distinguish them from the originals too. The name Cat just fell neatly into my lap—it sounds like a chick-lit novel rather than a superhero comic (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Cat-Freya-North/dp/0099278359>), it evokes Catwoman (and Katie) as well as Batgirl, and it enabled a strand through the story about Catherine Abigail Daniels—I had imagined Barbara Gordon must be Irish American—finding a name she's comfortable with. "Cat" is not so much a secret identity as an expression of who she is.

[3.4] I would say that *So-Called Secret Identity* is both its own independent story and a commentary on the Batman mythos. One interesting turning point for me was a conversation I had online with the young adult fiction author Karen Healey. I told her what I envisioned happening to Dahlia and Cat by the end of the story arc, and she was horrified. I suddenly realized I was still trapped by the conventions of mainstream superhero storytelling; I had unconsciously internalized the idea that bad things have to happen to strong women in comics, for no reason except to shock the reader and enable a victim to become the tough survivor archetype. It was liberating to realize that people didn't actually have to be tortured or die—that things could be different—and it really brought it home to me just how powerful the dominant conventions of the genre are, that I had felt bound to follow that route without even realizing it.

[3.5] **Suze Shore:** My unfamiliarity with most of the Batgirl/Batman franchise has resulted in very little influence on my design work for *MSCSI*. My number one influence in drawing/outfitting Cat and others has been a yearning for realism and practicality. I can't remember the first female superhero I saw in the media, but I can more or less guarantee that she was doing her fighting in heels. One of the goals in a lead female like Cat is to introduce someone not only powerful, but also based in reality. So for Cat I started at the practical boots and went from there: what would a regular girl wear to run around in at night? What would she own and be able to move comfortably in?

[3.6] **Sarah Zaidan:** Batman has been a presence in my life in one form or another since I was given a tape of the 1969 *Batman with Robin The Boy Wonder* animated series when I was 5. The episode "From Catwoman with Love" stands out in my mind as the first time I'd ever seen Batgirl, who also put in an appearance as Barbara Gordon. Full of cat-related puns though the episode was, my young imagination was

captured by the first female superhero I'd ever seen, who saved the day when her male counterparts were trapped by one of Catwoman's schemes. When I was older and began building my library of comics and graphic novels and came across *The Killing Joke* (1988), billed as essential Batman reading, I was horrified. I consider that the point where I truly became aware of how horrible things persist in happening to female superheroes and strong female characters in general. So when Will told me he'd made the decision to turn *MSCSI* into an original work with its own setting and characters, I was thrilled that I'd be a part of a project that was breaking away from tropes.

[3.7] My initial images for *MSCSI* are very much in keeping with the *Batman: The Animated Series* style, because at the time it was still a Batgirl story. Since the work has evolved, I'm incorporating a lot more of my own art style while bringing in elements of Suze's.



Figure 2. "Cat," by Sarah Zaidan

(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/drwillbrooker/6892239530/in/set-72157629358191516/lightbox/>). [View larger image.]

[3.8] **Q:** Urbanite (the script's Batman analogue) is derided by the protagonist, Cat, for his authoritarianism and distrust of women. Are these accusations that you think can be leveled at Batman himself (or at least certain versions of him) and/or other mainstream comic heroes?

[3.9] **Will Brooker:** I think these accusations can be leveled at certain interpretations of Batman. Urbanite is in part a critique and parody of the so-called purist fan view of Batman as a badass, cold, and committed one-man army, and the representations of the character that fit that particular reading.

[3.10] There's also an element of social critique as Urbanite is a rich man's fad of crime fighting, rather than a genuine and concerted attempt to deal with crime and its causes; by implication, Batman could be seen as Bruce Wayne's expensive hobby.

[3.11] This is only a mockery and attack on one aspect of the Batman mosaic, though it's been a dominant aspect since the early 1970s. I remain very fond of Batman as a cultural icon—although I don't personally love all his incarnations equally—and I think that actually comes across in the mockery of Urbanite. The more I studied and reread Batgirl's stories, though—especially *Killing Joke* and its aftermath—the more I started to get really annoyed with Batman's treatment of her as a pawn in his bigger game against Joker (and vice versa, but we expect that kind of callous cruelty from a villain).

[3.12] **Sarah Zaidan:** With Urbanite, as with Batman, I tend to read him as not being fully aware of just how damaging a view like that is to himself and others. I think Batman can be cool, ridiculous, and tragic at the same time. This limited view is something I do see in other masculine heroes in mainstream comics, although perhaps not to the obsessive levels Batman takes it to.

4. On gender and comic book conventions

[4.1] **Q:** Were there certain superhero comic styles or conventions you particularly wanted to avoid in your representation of Cat and her world? Did any elements prove inescapable?

[4.2] **Will Brooker:** A very early correspondence invited Suze to draw Cat in "a costume made of stuff a 23-year-old with fashion-student friends could put together—so, a customized ski mask, black boots, big belt, a little rucksack—things she could patch together on her own, not a fully developed costume—and something practical, chunky, loaded with accessories, rather than skintight, sexy and revealing." So we were on the same page from the start.

[4.3] An early character document describes Cat as "attractive, physically fit to a college sports level but above all, incredibly smart." I certainly didn't want her to have the conventional superheroine physique or to adopt conventional superheroine poses. She is slim, but later developments give us a curvier, plus-size Cat, so we move further away from dominant representations.

[4.4] From my point of view, the writing was more about elements I wanted to include or change—fashions you might actually want to wear, rather than silly costumes, and more people of color—than things to avoid. I did explicitly aim to avoid coding Carnivale in the way Joker is often represented, in terms of gay deviance. I think he ultimately operates as a queer figure in the broader sense, but so do Cat, Enrique, Kit, Kay, and Dahlia, in that change, subversion, play, and fluidity are associated with positive values in this story, and it's monolithic, rigid straightness, in the form of Urbanite, that is really held up for critique and ridicule.

[4.5] **Sarah Zaidan:** I think the most effective way of answering this question is visually, with a rough draft of the cover art for *MSCSI* #1.



Figure 3. "Rough Draft, First Issue Cover," by Sarah Zaidan
(<http://ateliermitti.tumblr.com/post/28153296661/a-rough-draft-of-the-first-issue-cover-for-my>). [View larger image.]

[4.6] Foremost in my mind was that this was *not* going to be a cheesecake image, and I wanted to get as far away as possible from presenting Cat as a sexualized object. So she might be getting dressed, but she's not showing off. Her expression may indicate an awareness that she knows the reader is looking at the cover—this work is meta in a lot of ways and I wanted to add an element to the cover that could be read that way—but she also knows the reader has come way too late to the party to engage in voyeurism, a subtle message that if you pick up this comic, you'll be getting a different representation of a female superhero. The placement of her hands holding her skirt shut as she finishes pulling up the zipper deliberately echoes the classic hands-on-hips superhero pose while subverting it: this *is* a superhero text, but with an everyday young woman as its protagonist. If she's got her hand on her hip, she's not doing it to pose; it's part of the everyday act of getting dressed. The papers and books surrounding her are a reference to her intellect and studies, and will include images and objects that subtly foreshadow her story in the final version.

[4.7] **Suze Shore:** Drawing the pages for the *MSCSI* comic has been very much about including a sense of reality in depicting both Cat and her environment. Since I'm working off Will's script, this isn't challenging; we're very much of one mind about giving the characters practical costumes and believable personalities.

[4.8] This approach is immediately avoiding the comic conventions I've never been keen on, namely the one-size-fits-all approach to female characters and the tendency to skimp on personality in favor of treating a character as a scene accessory. Will's script is circumventing these status quos wonderfully—Cat has depth that we're seeing fleshed out even within the first issue, and character images are being based off personality. That is to say, while there will be people sporting less than full coverage, it won't be at odds with those characters and their situations. Cat's larger figure later on in the story will take *MSCSI* another step further from the usual comic approach to female bodies and showcase a heavier girl being no less smart or capable than her previous self.

[4.9] **Q:** Sarah touched on getting "as far away as possible from presenting Cat as a sexualized object." Could you elaborate on specific elements of comics layout that might encourage or avoid such imagery? How does a storyboard for *My So-Called Secret Identity* work to challenge these stereotypes?

[4.10] **Will Brooker:** I played some conscious part in this process through specific directions in the script: the first page, for instance, notes that "the idea here is a sequence of 'girl getting dressed' that immediately subverts and offers an alternative to the more conventional cheesecake/tease scene."

[4.11] There are other moments where I've specified a deliberate angle or perspective that in some way subverts mainstream representations of women in comics—Cat sitting down in a library with a pile of books is described as "the hero shot," and there's a sequence where she explicitly closes the door on the viewer (and on Kat and Kit) when she gets changed.



Figure 4. "Hero Shot," by Suze Shore. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.12] In the second story arc, which I'm working on now, Kyla Flyte—a Supergirl/Britney Spears analogue—is practicing impossibly strained boob-and-butt Eschergirl poses (<http://eschergirls.tumblr.com/>) at one point. And the opening scene, set in a gym changing room, again explicitly tries to work against the mainstream sequences of Poison Ivy/Harley Quinn covered in suds and flicking towels at each other, or Catwoman and Batgirl in a nudist club, which I linked to in an earlier article, "Batgirl's Last Dance: The Brave and the Bold #33" (<http://mindlessones.com/2011/06/08/batgirl-dance/>).

[4.13] I think these directions could easily have been ignored or misinterpreted by artists who wanted to draw a different, more familiar type of comic, though, so really it's mostly been in the hands of Suze and Sarah, and the many artists who have drawn sketches and character designs for the project.

[4.14] That, thanks to Suze, the hero shot isn't just an image of a young woman with a pile of books in a library telling us she's really smart, but also looks down at her from above but without showing any cleavage, really epitomizes what this project is about and distinguishes it from (to pick a particularly relevant example) this cover image of Oracle.



Figure 5. Cover, *Battle for the Cowl* #2 (2009). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.15] **Suze Shore:** The main concept I've been working with for issue #1 is to treat Cat's shots as is appropriate to what's going on in the story. I think a lot of comic artists flip this order of thinking; the first priority becomes "this woman must look sexy," and that sexual pose is then placed within the context of the scene whether it works or not. The best example of this would be fight scenes between women in which the poses have been taken from pornography. The result is a scene carried by the text and the accessories, with the basic posing and expressions of the characters entirely at odds with the situation.

[4.16] I've found that by using a scene's mood and context as my primary inspirations, it's been easy not to fall into the trap of nonsensical sexiness. My favorite sequence so far is the lead-up and reveal of Cat's hero pose in the library. To use this

sequence—in which her superpower is revealed to be her intellect—as an excuse to break out sexually charged camera angles would have been utterly undermining.

[4.17] I wouldn't say I'm aiming so much to subvert stereotypes as I am to keep the characters real. When there is sexiness, it will be genuine to the character's personality.

[4.18] **Sarah Zaidan:** I adore the reveal of Cat's hero pose in the library; the energy she embodies in that scene is fantastic, and it came through in both the script and Suze's art. To me, what makes that image so powerful is that it's true to the character.

[4.19] What frustrates me about overtly sexualized imagery in comics is that it is very seldom in keeping with the personalities of the characters depicted; instead, it's just there. Perhaps a way to avoid this kind of imagery, or utilize it more mindfully, is to take a minute before drawing or writing to ask if it really needs to be there, taking into account the characters' personalities, motivations, and actions. For a femme fatale type like *The Spirit's* P'gell, overt sexiness has a point. For a character like Cat, it's out of place. Being on the same page about this as Will and Suze really adds to the experience of working on *MSCSI*.

5. Collaborative and transformative criticism

[5.1] **Q:** *My So-Called Secret Identity* is a collaborative project: although there is one author (Will), input was sought from a variety of readers and fans, and several artists contributed. Did you have any concerns about the feasibility of working by committee? What have the benefits and challenges been?

[5.2] **Will Brooker:** I think the collaborative approach is valuable for this project for a number of different reasons.

[5.3] Politically, I do think it's important to recognize privilege and try to make positive use of it. I have a decent reputation as a Batman scholar and have a variety of ways of gaining publicity for a Batman-related project (this roundtable discussion is one of them), so I think there is some value in me sharing that platform with a group of others and helping to showcase a range of creative talent. One key aspect I wanted to address was the traditional gender imbalance in mainstream comics, which I deliberately tried to reverse in terms of the people I initially approached.

[5.4] Aesthetically, the idea of a scrapbook was always key to the project. It connects to Barbara's scrapbooking—and while it's Jim Gordon who is sticking things in a memory album when Barbara is shot in *The Killing Joke*, I think scrapbooking,

especially in its digital form of Pinterest, has associations of more feminine creative work, which distinguishes the project helpfully from mainstream superhero comics for teenage boys and young men. A scrapbook aesthetic also works to undermine any sense of a single, restrictive look for the characters—instead, we have various interpretations of Cat and the supporting cast—and gently subverts mainstream ideals of female representation in comics.

[5.5] Institutionally, comics are almost always collaborative, of course. So I would always have planned to work with visual artists, though I hope Sarah and Suze are getting a better deal of it than artists (and indeed writers) often have within the comic book industry.

[5.6] In terms of fan culture, I think (though again, it wasn't conscious) this way of working chimes with the practice of beta reading and collaborative online writing that's been long established within (predominantly female?) fan communities. So there may be something about transformative works that is particularly suited to joint creation.

[5.7] And on a personal, creative level, there were simply some things I didn't know well enough from personal experience. Enrique Garcia's character is hugely informed by lengthy online discussion with Juan Ramos, whom I first reached out to on Twitter. One of Cat's flashbacks about how she is treated within the academy was taken from a conversation with Sarah. L. J. Maher prompted me to think about the relatively uniform body types of all the women in the comic, and sparked the idea of a curvy Cat. The Egyptian stylings of Sekhmet are supported by research from another friend, Paul Harrison, who also provided ideas about Misper's fighting style; when Sekhmet's outfit started looking a little too showgirl, I ran it past feminist scholars—including the authors of this article—for their feedback. I've only just now had an e-mail from TWC editor Kristina Busse (about the idea of a mother yelling "Catherine Abigail Daniels!" at a freckled, tomboyish little girl) that made me realize we haven't seen the young Cat, and that it would be great to explore her childhood in a future issue.

[5.8] I feel the story is still in my voice, rather than written by committee, and overall I've been pleasantly surprised by the way conversations have always led to great new ideas, and haven't, so far at least, encountered any obstacles. Maybe it comes down to all being on the same page about what kind of project it is, and where it's going.

[5.9] **Suze Shore:** The committee-style setup of this project is one of the reasons I find *MSCSI* so rewarding to be involved with. We're doing something still relatively new with this series and, among other aspects, its treatment of sexuality and gender, and with such a range of voices within the comic, I believe it's essential to also have a diverseness in the voices guiding its production and direction.

[5.10] I think that the main challenges in this collaboration result from what is also its largest asset, namely the fact that we're from all over. Since geography requires we communicate via the Internet, there's always the risk that nuances of ideas get lost in transit. That being said, I've thus far been blown away by how in sync everyone has been and believe this similar vision combined with the contributors' individual uniqueness will result in a fantastically rich final product.

[5.11] **Sarah Zaidan:** This is the sort of project I've been waiting for ever since I went to art school and discovered I wasn't the only person out there who created characters and their worlds and visually realized them. What's surprised me about the process is the fantastic interplay of ideas that everyone involved has contributed, and how it really does create a visual and textual mosaic—all of which has served to create a stronger, better-rounded cast and setting. This makes the scrapbooking aspect of the project's imagery meta on another level, as it can be read as being representational of the process behind the project.

[5.12] **Q:** In some respects, *My So-Called Secret Identity* is part of a much longer fannish tradition of transformative textual production. This project has also come together in a year marked by vocal critique of the representation of women in comics, mounting concerns about the paucity of female comic creators, and projects like Womanthology, a Kickstarter-funded, fan-driven response to these concerns. Do you think there have been any signs that comics publishers like DC and Marvel are taking note of transformative works (and the criticisms/alternatives they embody)?

[5.13] **Will Brooker:** I'd love to say that they are, but I can't personally see any signs of it. As far as I know, Gail Simone remains the outstanding example of a female (feminist) fan entering the mainstream and shaping it from the inside, and unfortunately I get the sense she's being used by DC editorial as a kind of token fan service.

[5.14] I haven't personally met or spoken to Gail Simone, and I'm not an expert on her work. But I think it's wrong if one writer is expected to shoulder the responsibility of female representation within DC Comics. It's wrong for a range of obvious reasons, including the fact that one person can't adequately live up to that expectation and is limited in what she can do within the dominant system. I like Simone's work on *Birds of Prey* very much, but her recent run on the New 52 *Batgirl* has disappointed me. It reads like what I expect it is—a compromise and negotiation.

[5.15] So it's great to see the transformative works on offer this last year, and the boundaries between fan and professional seem to be blurring further with Kickstarter-funded projects, but I think the DC mainstream has a long way to go.

[5.16] **Sarah Zaidan:** Researching for my PhD, it became clear to me that while male superheroes are representations of each era's desirable characteristics for masculine figures, female superheroes, more often than not, represent projections of male desire instead (although how this is defined does vary from era to era).

[5.17] As more years pile up between the 1990s and the era of "bad girl" comics, I keep hoping that mainstream publishing leaves behind their legacy, but then things like Starfire and Catwoman in the New 52 happen and my optimism erodes. What's heartening, though, are the emergence of things like the plethora of negative responses the New 52's depictions of Catwoman and Starfire garnered, and projects like this one and Womanthology. To me, this indicates that not everyone reading comics is content to consume what's on offer. Nevertheless, there definitely is, to echo Will, a long way for mainstream publishers to go.

6. Note

1. Will Brooker: "Team Cat" is a flexible group of several artists, critics, scholars and commentators, some of whom contributed feedback and advice on the script, while others added costume design, cover art, or character sketches. Suze and Sarah have been most consistently involved since the project inception, though Jen Vaiano was the first to draw Cat and her supporting cast, and Clay Rodery has recently expanded the art portfolio with his own take on the characters. Others offered early input and have not been involved with the project's later stages, but they still deserve credit and thanks. The roster of current and former contributors is as follows. I've listed all the women together because I think it helps make the point about attempting to reverse industry norms (a male-female ratio of 4:15 at the moment).

- Karin Idering (<http://www.karinidering.com/>)
- Suze Shore (<http://www.smuze.net/>)
- Jennifer Vaiano (<http://noflutter.deviantart.com/>)
- Sarah Zaidan (<http://ateliermitti.tumblr.com/>)
- Sisley White (<http://sewwhite.com/>)
- Hanie Mohd (<http://haniemohd.blogspot.com>)
- Lea Hernandez (<http://divalea.livejournal.com/>)
- Susana Rodrigues (<http://comicsfashiondivas.tumblr.com/>)
- Paige Halsey Warren (<http://paigehalseywarren.carbonmade.com/>)
- Sandra Salsbury (<http://www.sandrasalsbury.com/>)
- Karen Healey
- Carlen Lavigne (Twitter @clavigne)
- Kate Roddy
- L. J. Maher
- Suzanne Scott (<http://www.suzanne-scott.com/>)
- Clay Rodery (<http://www.clayrodery.com/>)
- Paul Harrison
- Juan Ramos

- Will Brooker

Book review

Comic books and American cultural history: An anthology, edited by Matthew Pustz

Daniel Stein

Georg-August-University, Göttingen, Germany

[0.1] *Keywords*—American culture; Comics; Historical analysis

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Matthew Pustz, ed. *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*. London: Continuum, 2012. hardcover \$110 (296p) ISBN 978-1441163196.

[1] Scholars working in fan studies, and specifically on American comic book fandom, will be familiar with Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (1999). This important book appeared years before the current boom in comics studies, and it traced the interactive and participatory dynamics of American comics, and superhero comic books in particular, throughout the second half of the 20th century. Pustz's most recent comics-related work, the edited essay volume *Comic Books and American Cultural History*, is also interested in historical investigation. As Pustz writes in the introduction, its first goal is to "demonstrate how comic books can function as dynamic primary sources that can help scholars, teachers, and students to understand various periods of modern American history" (4); its second goal is to take "another step in the integration of comic books into the field of history" (8). Both of these goals are crucial. They remind us that comic books are popular artifacts whose impact on American culture warrants close critical attention, and they emphasize the power of comic books to teach scholars, students, and fans important lessons about American history.

[2] With close to 300 pages, the volume is of substantial length, subdividing its 16 essays by mostly American scholars into four sections that each contain between three and six essays. More than half of these essays are accompanied by black-and-white illustrations; these illustrations (a total of 19) contribute to the appealing look and

design of the volume, and they allow readers to relate specific arguments to their primary sources. Comics scholars will be familiar with a few of the contributors (Alison Mandaville, Matthew J. Costello, A. David Lewis), while the presence of many unfamiliar names attests to the healthy influx of new voices into the field of comics studies.

[3] The first section, "Doing Cultural History through Comic Books," begins with two essays that focus on teaching methodology. In the first of these essays, Jessamyn Neuhaus discusses her experience as a history professor teaching a methodology course with comic books as primary and secondary sources. Neuhaus shows that comic books can be utilized to foster active engagement with history—for instance, by raising the students' awareness about their own consumption of and involvement with popular culture as historically situated and culturally significant practices. She smartly conceives of comic books as material artifacts that feature not only serial stories but also editorial columns, letters pages, and advertisements, all of which can and should be subjected to critical examination. Bridget M. Marshall's "Comics as Primary Sources: The Case of *Journey into Mohawk Country*" focuses on the transhistorical "collaboration" (37) between the 17th-century Dutch explorer Harmen Meynderts van den Bogaert and the 21st-century comics artist George O'Connor. Indicating critical discrepancies and creative gaps between the verbal narrative of *Journey into Mohawk Country*, which is based on a translation of van den Bogaert's historical diary, and its modern visual adaptation in the comics form, Marshall encourages 21st-century "readers to contemplate the complicated ways in which we make history" (37). The formal makeup of O'Connor's visual narrative, she suggests, foregrounds the constructed nature of historical emplotment, including the conflicted depiction of interracial contact and gender relations among early settlers and the native population. William Grady's "Transcending the Frontier Myth: Dime Novel Narration and (Jesse) Custer's Last Stand in *Preacher*" deals with the myth of the American West as it was popularized in 19th-century dime novels. Grady argues that Garth Ennis's 1990s *Preacher* series revives and mobilizes dime novel myth-making strategies, and he ponders the ideological implications of the frontier myth for late-20th-century readers. Alison Mandaville's "Duel. I'll Give You a DUEL: Intimacy and History in Megan Kelso's Alexander Hamilton Trilogy" illustrates the didactic potentials of Kelso's comic by emphasizing the need for a gender-balanced perspective on comics history. Mandaville's analysis of the female narrator's creative engagement with historical figures and events makes a central connection between comics as a participatory medium that involves heightened reader involvement and the equally participatory making and remaking of the American past.

[4] The second section, "Comic Books as Cultural Artifacts," is organized chronologically, opening with Martin Lund's essay on the impact of the New Deal on

Shuster and Siegel's Superman ("American Golem: Reading America through Super-New Dealers and the 'Melting Pot'") and ending with Matthew J. Costello's reading of *American Flagg!* as a reflection and satire of postmodern American politics ("The Shopping Malls of Empire: Cultural Fragmentation, the New Media, and Consumerism in Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!*"). Sandwiched between these essays are instructive investigations of gender conflicts in romance comics (Jeanne Emerson Gardner, "'Dreams May End, but Love Never Does': Marriage and Materialism in American Romance Comics, 1947–1954"), of parody as a means of propagating anticommunist messages in 1950s war comics (John Donovan, "Parody and Propaganda: Fighting American and the Battle against Crime and Communism in the 1950s"), of 1970s kung fu comics as a response to the rise of a self-conscious Asian American (sub-)culture (Peter Lee, "Grasping for Identity: The Hands of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu"), and of the reflection of the so-called American malaise in the superhero genre (Matthew Pustz, "'Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift': America's Malaise as Demonstrated in Comic Books of the 1970s"). I find these essays most convincing when they provide historically sensitive textual analyses: Lund identifies elements of FDR's social justice rhetoric in the first issue of *Action Comics*, and Pustz suggests that the depiction of powerlessness and lost purpose in the superhero comics of the 1970s helped ready readers for Ronald Reagan's electoral promise of a new morning in America.

[5] Section 3 turns to "Comic Books and Historical Identity," starting with Todd S. Munson's "Transformers and Monkey Kings: Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese* and the Quest for Identity." Munson provides background information on the history of Chinese immigration into the United States and argues that the transformer theme in Yang's graphic novel may be read as a pledge for the cultural hybridity of Asian Americans. Philip G. Payne and Paul J. Spaeth's "Agent of Change: The Evolution and Enculturation of Nick Fury" regards Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's popular character as "part of the process of war commemoration in popular culture" (184). Ben Bolling's "The US HIV/AIDS Crisis and the Negotiation of Queer Identity in Superhero Comics, or Is Northstar Still a Fairy?" is also concerned with a serial character, but it moves from the issue of war commemoration to the narrative emplotment of the HIV/AIDS crisis. This crisis is narrated through the life story of a homosexual character (Northstar) whose experiences resonate with popular narratives about the outbreak and treatment of the virus. Bolling's essay is strongest when it considers the role of readers and fans in the negotiation of a character's serial trajectory, suggesting that we can only fully appreciate the historical significance of the character if we are willing to trace the paratextual debate about the series' treatment of homosexuality and the HIV/AIDS crisis through letter columns and fan protests.

[6] The volume concludes with section 4, "Comic Books and Contemporary History," which turns to the impact of 9/11 on the American comic book. A. David Lewis's "The Militarism of American Superheroes after 9/11" and Jeff Geers's "'The Great Machine Doesn't Wear a Cape!' American Cultural Anxiety and the Post-9/11 Superhero" nicely illustrate how the narrative possibilities of superhero comics shifted after the terrorist attacks and the wars that followed, including new doubts about the superheroes' authority as national figures of identification and their uneasy roles as imperfect fighters in wars in which no clear distinctions between good and evil exist. However, both essays rather uncritically embrace the notion of 9/11 as a collective national trauma and thus miss the chance to reflect critically on one of the most dearly held fictions of recent American history. It is the essay of a French contributor, Yves Davo's "September 11, 2001: Witnessing History, Demythifying the Story in *American Widow*," that deconstructs this national myth in its analysis of Alissa Torres's graphic memoir about her husband's death in the World Trade Center (illustrated by Sungyoon Choi).

[7] But how do these essays fare in comparison with other comics scholarship, and do they fulfill the objectives formulated in Pustz's introduction? I think it is fair to say the essays allow scholars, teachers, students, and fans to get a better sense of specific aspects of American history. Neuhaus and Marshall offer useful suggestions about how to teach which comics and how to achieve specific didactic goals. Moreover, while Mandaville's discussion is not very explicit about the didactic possibilities of Kelso's *Alexander Hamilton Trilogy*, it connects the participatory dynamics of Kelso's comic with the participatory demands of the political process and the interactive making of national history. The other essays in the volume, however, remain mute about the teachability of the primary sources they analyze; instead, they offer case studies that are instructive in and of themselves but add little to our understanding of how comic books can be used to teach American history. Thus, the volume only partially fulfills its didactic aims (note 1).

[8] Whether the volume achieves its second goal, to facilitate the integration of comic books into the field of history, is difficult to gauge. All of the essays deliver pertinent analyses of their source texts, and they do a good job of embedding individual comics and genres in their historical contexts. But this kind of historical contextualization does not seem entirely sufficient. If we really want to take comic books seriously as "dynamic primary sources," we should venture beyond arguments about how comic books "reflect" or "illustrate" (both terms that appear frequently across essays) historical developments or discourses: we should treat them as truly active artifacts that perform specific cultural work by offering material as well as imaginative spaces for the production and negotiation of historical meaning. Not all of the essays in this volume subscribe to a notion of comics as mere reflectors of history,

but it is noteworthy that only a small number consider comic books as actual makers of history.

[9] As a volume that aims to bring American comic books into the realm of historical analysis, *Comic Books and American Cultural History* walks a fine line between the kind of theory-heavy writing that academic readers might expect and the detailed close readings of individual comics that might attract teachers, students, and fans. There certainly is enough theory here to satisfy academic readers interested in learning more about comic books and their historical contexts, but what is sometimes missing is a sustained engagement with the intricacies of historical analysis and the many complexities we confront when we approach comics as primary and secondary historical sources (note 2). Moreover, a more focused treatment of a specific aspect of American cultural history might have created a more cohesive volume with a stronger overarching narrative; upon finishing the final essay, one has a sense of being left hanging in the balance, of confronting unresolved questions that might have been addressed in an afterword.

[10] My final critique of *Comic Books and American Cultural History* addresses more than this single text. It is a critique that pertains to many other books in the field of American comics studies that, like Pustz's volume, conceive of comics as a largely American cultural form and of its history in almost exclusively American terms. Indeed, some of Pustz's contributors speak of "our history," "our allies," and so on. I realize that the very point of *Comic Books and American Cultural History* is to investigate different aspects of the nation's history and the role of comic books within that history, but I do believe that comics studies can benefit much from an infusion of international and transnational perspectives. As John A. Lent's *International Journal of Comic Art* (1999–) and essay collections edited by scholars from outside of the United States underscore, to look at the history of comics through an overwhelmingly American lens always entails the danger of reaffirming dominant national myths and exceptionalist self-images at the expense of marginalized perspectives both from the inside and outside (note 3).

[11] All in all, I can recommend *Comic Books and American Cultural History*, albeit with the reservations expressed above. The book will be most rewarding for those interested in specific comic books and historical issues as they are covered in individual essays. While I do think that the volume as a whole would have benefited from a stronger theoretical frame and more a rigorous understanding of comics as dynamic artifacts and active historical agents, I very much appreciate the fact that it covers a range of intriguing primary sources and presents a series of valuable case studies, all of which will surely encourage further historical investigations of comic books.

Notes

1. For an essay collection that focuses more fully on the didactic and pedagogical potentials of comics and graphic narratives, see Dong (2012).
2. One attempt to provide this kind of engagement within the field of American studies is Stein, Meyer, and Edlich (2011).
3. Two books edited by German scholars foreground such international and transnational perspectives; see Berninger, Ecke, and Haberkorn (2010) and Denson, Meyer, and Stein (2013).

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Book review

Of comics and men: A cultural history of American comic books, by Jean-Paul Gabilliet

Drew Morton

Texas A&M University, Texarkana, Texas, United States

[0.1] *Keywords*—American history; Comic book industry; Comics studies; Industrial history

Morton, Drew. 2013. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, by Jean-Paul Gabilliet, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen [book review]. In "Appropriating, Interpreting, and Transforming Comic Books," edited by Matthew J. Costello, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 13. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0479.

Jean-Paul Gabilliet. *Of comics and men: A cultural history of American comic books*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010, hardcover, \$55.00 (390p), ISBN 978-1604732672.

[1] The field of comics studies has witnessed a massive expansion over the past five years, driven in particular by the efforts of the University Press of Mississippi and its line of titles in the area. The year 2007, which marked a watershed moment, saw the release of Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen's English-language translation of French scholar Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*. Groensteen's study successfully elaborated upon Scott McCloud's seminal text *Understanding Comics* (1994) by infusing formal analysis with semiotics. This expansion has also spread beyond this single publisher to the creation of two new print journals: the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (Routledge) and *Studies in Comics* (Intellect). Given the central role comics have played in the culture and academy of France, Beaty and Nguyen have productively returned to the well to translate another French work: Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, originally published in French in 2005.

[2] With *Of Comics and Men*, Gabilliet—a professor of American studies at the University of Bordeaux, France—attempts to produce "a cultural, not an aesthetic, history: as its title indicates, it does not aim to assess the intrinsic value of any particular comic book or creator. Rather, it means to observe individuals and the

conditions in which they engineer a given cultural production but also respond to it, no matter how inferior it may subjectively appear in relation to consecrated art forms" (xix). Despite this stated objective and the author's desire to draw upon the theoretical models established by Pierre Bourdieu, Gabilliet's book is only tangentially a cultural history. Unlike Bradford Wright, whose *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) extensively intersected analyses of individual comic titles with occurrences and shifts in American culture, Gabilliet never utilizes extensive textual analysis to elaborate on his portrait of the American comic's cultural history. However, the author does succeed in producing one of most definitive historical accounts of the industry behind the American comic book.

[3] Gabilliet divides his book into three sections. The first part serves as an historical survey of the comic, rendered in broad strokes. The second section, covering the producers and consumers, builds on the historical survey by analyzing some of the previously discussed historical moments with more rigor to provide a vividly realized portrait of the industry, its creators, and its readers. Finally, Gabilliet accounts for the significant cultural shifts the medium has witnessed over the past century.

[4] As a result of its short length ("Seventy Years' Worth of Images" is covered in 104 pages), Gabilliet's account of the medium's history hits many familiar notes. The American comic book found its origins in the form of the newspaper comic strip and came into its own by initially offering reprints of those newspaper strips. As the cost of the rights for reprints rose, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson decided it would be more feasible to publish original content; this gave birth to DC Comics. This original content spread across genres from the superhero comic to adult genres like crime, horror, and romance comics by the 1950s. These genres ultimately raised the ire of social progressives, who blamed comics for the post-World War II rise in juvenile delinquency. This outrage, fed by the shoddy psychological scholarship of Dr. Fredric Wertham, climaxed in a series of government hearings that ultimately resulted in the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954 and decades' worth of self-censorship, powered by the Comics Code.

[5] Yet despite its brevity, Gabilliet's historical account is able to leap minor histories with a single bound precisely because the author never allows brevity to result in generalization. For instance, when analyzing the effects of the Comics Code on the industry, the author provides a complicated and nuanced narrative. He notes that the mid-1950s decline of comics actually began one year before the Comics Code crisis. Moreover, the decline had less to do with the code and more to do with an unstable market that had overexpanded beyond actual demand, the rise of television, and the end of tie-in sales distribution practices (comics, like the films of the Golden Age, had to be purchased by distributors on an all-or-nothing basis).

[6] When the author returns to the same crisis in the second section of the book, which is focused more intensely on the industrial forces at work, he further elaborates on the element of television. Gabilliet uses sample studies to inform us that 75 percent of fourth graders read nine comics a month in 1950. By 1960, that number dropped to 41 percent as television expanded its reach into American households (201–2). By the end of the chapter on "The Readers," the author's utilization of data sources ranging from a survey commissioned by Marvel Comics, to the American Library Association, to retailer questionnaires, make his concluding argument clear. He concludes, "At the dawn of the 1980s, comic books were no longer a mass medium, but were a sector of the cultural industry that was increasingly structured around a 'fan' audience, in the strongest sense of that term" (204). In cutting through the prevailing myths and origin stories of the American comic book industry with hard, quantifiable, data, Gabilliet's monograph exhibits its greatest strength in its elaborative role.

[7] For instance, Gabilliet succeeds in providing nuance to the portrait of the contemporary comic book audience, offering up some frightening statistics focused on the gender divide in readership that should prove fruitful to the fan studies scholar. Specifically, his dissection of quantifiable data (approached "with caution" from sources ranging from surveys produced by *Comics Retailer* and marketing firms like Melchoir Thompson) makes it depressingly clear that the demographic data the industry has access to shows an audience that is only six percent to 13 percent female (208). The author goes on to trace this gender divide to the predominance of superhero titles that provided masculine escapism, the industry's abandonment of the romance genre, and the "masculine cultural practices of collecting and speculation" that came to fruition with the direct market system (209). He notes that these demographics have probably experienced a "radical shift" thanks to the link between the general bookstore and the graphic novel but that the specifics "are still unclear" (211).

[8] In the third section, Gabilliet finally circles back to Bourdieu when he argues that "Comics...can be analyzed as a 'field,'...as a social space seen through the prism of relations between the agents who participate in it" (248). He then goes on to chart the different areas of "consecration" the form has witnessed, both internal (prizes, fans, conventions, and specialty magazines) and external (how comics are viewed and written about by cultural critics like Gilbert Seldes and Harold E. Stearns and by academics). The book is structured to climax with this section, but instead it deflates, primarily because of the lack of signposts bringing us back to Bourdieu. By the time the reader finally reaches the discussion of cultural legitimation, they have long forgotten the objective of the monograph stated 244 pages earlier.

[9] The book is not without a handful of minor flaws that should be noted. First, the elliptical structure matches Gabilliet's desired objective, but admittedly the nonlinear approach results in some inevitable duplication. More significantly, Gabilliet undercites some sources. In a paragraph explaining DC and Marvel's jockeying for the top position among the publishers in 1986, the author notes that Marvel had fallen into second place for the first time in 20 years and contrasts DC's Alan Moore and Frank Miller's successes with the "commercial failure" of Marvel's *Elektra: Assassin* (93). Yet Gabilliet never gives us any quantifiable figures or a source for why he has such an impression. In a book that includes an essay on bibliographic sources and is at its best when it avoids generalizations and provides nuance to the grand history of American comics with concrete data, such an omission is all the more glaring.

[10] Thus, while Gabilliet ultimately only half-fulfills his objective of providing a cultural history of American comic books, he does provide a fairly definitive institutional history of the form. Gabilliet's book is also an achievement because his balance of rigorous research and accessible prose is capable of engaging both scholar and comic book fan alike. This should put the author—who laments that the integration of comics on the campus "did not give rise to remarkable scholarly works" and that the field has yet to expand across the pages of the *Journal of Popular Culture* (298–99)—at ease. The field has come a long way since he initially put his pen to paper in the early 2000s. With works like *Of Comics and Men* providing comics studies scholars with a model, the field will continue to evolve faster than Professor X's students.