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Studies in Comics

Aims and Scope
Studies in Comics aims to describe the nature of comics, to identify the medium
as a distinct art form, and to address the medium's formal properties. The
emerging field of comics studies is a model for interdisciplinary research and this
journal welcomes all approaches and methodologies. Its specific goal, however, is
to expand the relationship between comics and theory, and to seek to articulate a
'theory of comics'.

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The journal includes a selection of world-class academic articles that explore
the formal properties of comics, advance their own theory of comics or respond
to an established theoretical model. We also welcome reviews of new comics,
scholarship, criticism and exhibitions, as well as unpublished creative work.

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EDITORIAL

CARYN E. NEUMANN

Thematic issue: Comic book women in the *Journal of Fandom Studies*

This special issue responds to the increasing interest in representations of women in comic books and the general explosion of Comic Studies over the last decade. The comic industry has long aimed its publications at boys and men. The best-known comic book heroes have been men, with female characters typically relegated to second banana status before being killed off. Women within the genre have largely been ignored or dismissed as both characters and fans by the industry.

Fandom is not gender neutral. Fangirls have always been present, attracted largely by female comic characters. Wonder Woman of DC Comics drew fans such as Gloria Steinem in her earliest years before staggering through decades of the doldrums. Some of Wonder Woman's peers from the 1940s, such as Miss Fury and Nelvana of the Northern Lights, have recently reemerged in print due to crowdfunding efforts. The Carol Danvers version of Ms. Marvel (now Captain Marvel) is the greatest female star in the Marvel Comics world largely because of female fan interest. This interest in female comic book characters is not purely nostalgic, instead speaking to the ways in which fans have reinterpreted their cultural relevancy. In addition, new fan communities are responsible for the revival of Ms. Marvel, who will now appear as a Muslim teenager. She will be the first comic book character to represent contemporary intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion.

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Henry Jenkins in an earlier issue of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* called for the development of a more complex picture of how gender operates within fandom. This volume is partly a response to Jenkins. Leigh Anne Howard looks at Jane Austen fans, a deeply dedicated group that is largely female, as they enjoy Austen's works in graphic novel form. Elizabeth Settoducato contrasts the reception of cousins Hulk and She-Hulk. Dominique D. Johnson writes black women into this discussion through an examination of *The Walking Dead.* Lori L. Parks and Caryn E. Neumann look at the intersection of female fans and female superheroes.

REFERENCE

Jenkins, Henry (2014), 'Fandom studies as I see it', *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2: 2, pp. 89–109.

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Who's messing with Jane?: Graphic novels and the Jane Austen fan

ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, adaptations of Jane Austen's works as well as numerous works of Austen fan fiction have saturated contemporary culture. In addition to realistic, period-piece dramas that retell the novels in a linear, realistic, representational form, Austen's body of work has inspired spin-offs, spoofs and homages, including in 2009 a graphic novel version of Pride and Prejudice. *By examining how readers of Jane Austen novels respond to Nancy Butler's graphic novel adaptations, I identify key shifts in the development of the Jane Austen fan community and provide an overview of the emergence of classical prose in a graphic novel format. Then I turn to the Butler's adaptations of* Pride and Prejudice, Emma *and* Northanger Abbey *to explore how fans respond to comic versions of Jane Austen's works. In particular, by focusing attention on the use of the narrative voice, panel structure and sequence, and character illustrations in these graphic novel adaptations, one can better understand why these participants in this study found these adaptations less satisfying than Austen's books, subsequent adaptations of her works and other forms of fan fiction.*

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a person in possession of the desire to adapt the novels of Jane Austen must be in want of intense scrutiny by Jane fans everywhere. As Nancy Butler observed, 'You Don't Mess

1. The Regency era refers to a period in Britain between 1811 and 1820. During this time, King George III was considered incapable to govern the country, and his son, later, King George III, was named the Prince Regent and ruled the kingdom by proxy. There are two types of Regency fiction. Classic Regency fiction, such as the works by Austen, was written during the Regency years. Modern Regency fiction, like the works by Nancy Butler, is more recently written but set within the Regency era.

With Jane' without feeling the 'bull's-eye forming' on one's back (Butler, 2009: n.p.). Nevertheless over the last two decades – particularly since Colin Firth emerged from a pond with a white shirt plastered to his chest in the 1995 Andrew Davies BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) – adaptations of Austen, as well as numerous works of Austen fan fiction have saturated contemporary culture. In addition to realistic, period-piece dramas that retell the novels in a linear, realistic, representational form, Austen's body of work has inspired spin-offs, spoofs and homages, including *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1998), *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–2014), *Longbourn* (Baker, 2013) and *Death Comes to Pemberley* (James, 2011), as well as Seth Grahame-Smith's genre mashups, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009a), and *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009b).

In 2009, *Pride and Prejudice* was adapted as a graphic novel. Award-winning Regency novelist[1] Nancy Butler recognized what female comics readers have always known. Despite the significant interest females have in comics – and that they comprise the core of graphic novel readers – the comics industry has done little to enfranchise its female constituents. Few titles are aimed at women, few comics creators are women, and when women appear in comics they reflect problematic stereotypes (Jenkins 1992/2013: xix). When Marvel started its Marvel Illustrated series of graphic novels based on classics, Butler approached Marvel Comic editor Ralph Macchio about creating books that were female friendly. He asked her to suggest titles that might appeal to women and girls, and she proposed the idea of adapting Austen's novels. Since that time four of Austen's novels – *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), *Sense and Sensibility* (2009b), *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b) – have emerged as graphic novels in the Marvel Illustrated series.

In this research I examine how readers of Jane Austen novels respond to Butler's graphic novel adaptations. First, I identify some of the key shifts in the development of the Jane Austen fan community and position that fan community at the intersection of high and low culture. Next, I provide an overview of the emergence of classical prose in a graphic novel format. Then I turn to the Butler's adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b) to explore how fans respond to comics versions of Jane Austen's works. In particular, by focusing attention on the use of the narrative voice, panel structure and sequence, and character illustrations in these graphic novel adaptations, one can better understand why these participants in this study found these adaptations less satisfying than Austen's books, subsequent adaptations of her works and other forms of fan fiction. For the participants in this study, reading Jane Austen was not a passive process, but what Rosenblatt labels an 'intense personal activity' (1983: v). These readers gained an insight and satisfaction from reading the novel that was not echoed in the graphic novel reading experience. These participants as a collective described their reading of the novel in tandem with the graphic novel very similarly. Thus, while they may have brought diverse interests, insights and backgrounds to the reading transaction, they experienced few disagreements about how to interpret Austen's novel or Butler's adaptations. Consequently, these participants formed an informed interpretive community (Fish 1970, 1976), one committed to and responsible for safeguarding the Austen legacy. By analysing the way readers approached and reviewed these graphic novels, we can also identify some important lessons for adapting classical prose to a comics platform.

THE RISE OF THE JANEITES

If adaptations are central to an engaged readership, as Thomas Leitch (2007) suggests, then the fans of Jane Austen's novels are extremely active and invested given the proliferation of Jane Austen fan fiction and their participation in organizations such as the Jane Austen Society and the Jane Austen Society of North America (c. f. Yaffe 2013). Bronwen Thomas has attributed *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) with the 'most prolific of literary fandoms online' (2011: 5–6). Deborah Yaffe explains that prior to 1995, Jane Austen fans, or Janeites as coined by George Saintbury in 1894 (Johnson 2012: 8), would have been hard to find, not because they did not exist but because 'Austen obsession was more likely to remain a solitary pursuit' (2013: xiv). She contends Andrew Davies changed Austen fandom when he 'morphed Austen from a much loved classic into an international phenomenon' (Yaffe 2013: xxii). 'Janeite' came to mean 'hobbyists' both 'overzealous and unsophisticated' (Lynch 2000: 12), instead of the badge of honour from an earlier day. As Yaffe explains:

> Once calling yourself a Jane Austen fan seemed to signify a truly refined taste, the ability to appreciate biting irony and subtle characterization. Today, it's just as likely to signify a healthy lust for handsome Brits in tight breeches.

> (2013: xix)

Contemporary public adoration overshadows the complexity of Jane Austen fandom which often defies contemporary logic. Contrary to popular belief, those reading Austen's works in her time included a population more diverse than young females; her first fans were largely male publishers, professors, novelists, and other members of the literati, including Walter Raleigh, Montague Summer and E. M. Forster (Johnson 2012: 8). During World Wars I and II, British soldiers read Austen in the trenches because they regarded Austen as 'masculine and one of their own' (Johnson 2012: 15). Reading the works of Jane Austen provided comfort because the novel depicted stability, central to the formation of British national identity. *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) was also recommended reading for American soldiers during World War II, as the novel was thought to provide insight about the practices – social and personal – that illustrated British cultural values (Johnson 2012: 133). Richard English asserts Austen was even important to the Irish rebellion because a 'passion for "Jane" was consistent with armed nationalist insurgency against Jane's England, and the attachment to the local, to the dust of one's neighborhood that Austen's novels both exemplify and produce, was transposable to other national contexts' (Johnson 2012: 112). Thomas MacDonagh, an Irish poet and university professor of English literature, used his last lecture before the 1916 Easter Uprising to discuss Austen's works: 'Ah, there's nobody like Jane, lads', he sighed, closing his *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) for the last time' (cf. Johnson 2012: 112). A short time later MacDonagh was executed as a leader of the republican movement.

Claudia Johnson posits the polarization one often sees among Austen fans emerged in the World War II era with readers who failed to see the wit, satire and humour embedded in Austen's works (2012: 150). For some, instead of being a cherished companion, Austen was criticized for writing about neighbours when entire dynasties were at stake (Johnson 2012: 99). In addition, since the novels were restful, comforting and centred on domesticity,

the novels became aligned with the feminine, in contrast to the masculine. Subsequent film adaptations have reinforced the feminine alliance by focusing on romance rather than Austen's mastery of language or her skilled descriptions of human behaviour.

Today, the Jane Austen fan community provides an interesting case for the study of fan cultures. The Austen fan community expands the scope of the field which has typically examined mediated and popular texts. Certainly mediated versions of the Austen works provide a fertile venue for examining participatory culture and forms of expression connected to participation. However, while this focus may encompass recent adaptations and recreations in the case of the Janeites, this focus also excludes the legions of fans who come to Austen via the written word and nineteenth-century novels. For over 200 years Austen fans have approached Austen primarily through the printed word. Since 1833 her books have never been out of print, and in 2010 the *Huffington Post* ranked *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) and *Sense and Sensibility* (2009b) first and third in its poll of the best romance novels. Only in the last twenty years have we seen such widespread public fandom, one prompted by mediated sources and one often exclusive of the novels. By understanding how fans respond to Austen's novels, Austen herself, and the plethora of texts inspired by her work and life, we can better understand the hierarchies that exist in fan culture.

Janeites are a diverse demographic of people who express fandom in multiple ways. Austen fans today are young and old. Some are attracted by the novels, others by film, and yet others by the Regency era (1811–1820) or the English setting. Some discover Austen at a young age, and some start reading her upon retirement. While fans are often 'caricaturized as middle-aged, tea-drinking spinster librarians who knot sweaters and keep cats', a 2008 survey of 4500 Austen fans revealed a fan community of men and women who work as zookeepers, college professors, air traffic controllers, homemakers, teachers, librarians, and even a Dominican friar (Yaffe 2013: xix). Most fans are college educated women of various ages, and they demonstrate Austen fandom by engaging Austen in a scholarly way; by rereading the Austen canon; and/or by adopting the dress, habits and manners of the Regency era. Despite the diversity, Jane Austen fans are intimate in their approach to Austen. They refer to her with the familiar 'Jane'; often don Regency apparel at Austen-oriented events; study the customs and protocol of the period; and engage in activities such as making bonnets and reticules and dancing Regency-era dances. A contemporary fan is often more than an enthusiast but one who approaches fandom with something akin to a 'quasi-religion' (Johnson 2012: 9). Frequently, they seem to have 'the belief that the faithful have a direct, privileged, personally felt, rather than dispassionately reasoned and institutionally mediated relationship to the Almighty, in this particular case … to "the Divine Jane"' (Johnson 2012: 9, original emphasis). Although fans are often dismissed or marginalized as Others (Gray et al. 2007: 3), Austen fans celebrate their Otherness. Their very fandom – regardless of its expression – positions them as an elite cohesive collective who forms authoritative interpretations of the novels and their cultural context, and consequently come to know the 'real' Jane Austen. Consequently, their Otherness provides a collective identity marked by appreciation for and knowledge of her work, as well as the good sense to recognize her genius.

Despite that position of power, tension often exists between Janeites as fans determine 'appropriate' expressions of fandom. For example, one person

in this study indicated, 'You can't be a real Austen fan if you haven't read at least one of her books' (original emphasis). Such tension situates Janeites at the intersection of popular culture and high culture, which is typically not explored in fandom studies, a point Roberta Pearson (2007) makes in her research about fans of J. S. Bach and William Shakespeare. From the cultural production of fan fiction to scholarly treatises, from workshops and conferences to Regency re-enactments, fans chose a variety of ways to illustrate their participation in Jane Austen fan culture. Thus, while they may agree that Austen is worthy of adoration, no agreed-upon actions exist to indicate one's membership in the fan community. For example, for some fandom is a social pursuit, not the solitary interest associated with Austen fandom in the past or the act of reading novels today. Instead, their fandom takes a public form as they create and sustain networks of fans – online and face to face – who share their devotion. Austen has become a public and global commodity, which as Yaffe (2013) notes, contains irony given Austen never travelled more than 100 miles from her birthplace, preserved her privacy by signing her work as written 'By A Lady', and lived an intensely private life. The dichotomy between public and private, community and solitude creates a tension that has a 'sharper edge' because it is connected to Austen's 'unique standing in both high culture and popular culture' (Yaffe 2013: xvii). Austen seems as firmly positioned among the classical, canonical authors of English literature as she does in the commercialized landscape of contemporary culture. As a crossover author she is 'equally welcome at Yale and on YouTube' (Yaffe 2013: xvii; Dow and Hanson 2012: 1). However, such cultural flexibility often means conflict between fans who know Austen by her novels, and those who know her because of popular adaptations. This hierarchical fan structure is particularly interesting when one considers, of course, that Austen's novels were the popular culture of the day. As Peter Gutierrez notes, the classics have a following today – are regarded as 'classic' – because they were good in their time (2011: 227). In addition as contemporary authors allude to Austen, reinvent her stories, and use emerging technologies in support of their readers, Austen herself followed the practices for publication of her day (Benedict 2000: 63). She also referenced popular texts of the time in her works and used a fictional structure that enabled her readers to comply with the lending practices of circulating libraries (Benedict 2000: 62). Moreover, Austen must have considered very few things sacred as she used her keen wit and observational skills to make biting social commentary. In short, as fan understanding fluctuates between high culture and popular culture, her works stands as a site of emancipation and subversion, but also a source for inequality and oppression.

CLASSICAL NOVELS AND THE COMICS

Although comics, cartoons and illustrated narratives have appeared in the United States and Europe for several centuries, the 'more complex and sustained narratives' we refer to as comic books have a 70-year history (Martin 2011: 170). In the late 1970s a new subgenre, the graphic novel, emerged as the creative, provocative, entertaining narrative experience attractive to an increasingly visual-oriented readership (Martin 2011: 170). Since that time, the graphic novel has become the 'fastest growing of all publishing categories' (Fingeroth 2008: vii). Since the early 1990s, graphic novel publishers have turned to classical works of literature, including works by William

Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Mary Shelley, Arthur Conan Doyle, Herman Melville and Jane Austen in their search for inspiration. This strategy is hardly new. The classics first emerged in the comics industry around 1941 with Classics Illustrated, a series of highly abridged comic books based on classical prose and developed and published by Albert Kanter until 1971. Since their reappearance on the comics scene, such adaptations of classic (and contemporary) literature have been used to introduce readers to classic literature, offer social commentary, address traumatic experiences, and engage in critique under the guise of entertainment (Martin 2011: 171). United Kingdom publisher Classical Comics offers different versions of the classics adapted to different levels of reading; some have even been adopted for the school curriculum (Werris 2008: 10). In addition, comics creators have offered parodies of the classics, such as Posy Simmonds' adaptation, *Gemma Bovery* (2005) or *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) by Bryan Talbot (Martin 2011: 172).

Adaptations of classics have received mixed critical reception despite being 'sold by the barrel load' by 'well-intentioned publishers' (Fingeroth 2008: 271). Some see graphic novel adaptations as a way to encourage literacy (Werris 2008: 10; Gorman 2010: 46; Price 2009: 27). Others disagree. Comics creators, in particular, have attacked the classics concept for suggesting the only place the comics have in education is to entice children to read 'real' books (Fingeroth 2008: 271). As Fingeroth explains, they think 'the medium should be thankful for the leg-up to respectability brought by association with such cultural heavyweights' (2008: 271). This view denies the 'sophisticated, rich, visionary storytelling' Stephen Weiner attributes to the graphic novel genre (2004: 38), as well as the mastery embedded in the visualization of those stories.

In the introduction to her graphic novel adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), Nancy Butler explains her version was intended to appeal to women and girls. She hopes young readers unfamiliar with Austen will be 'tempted to investigate the actual books' and '[a]dult readers who knew the book would get to revisit their favorite character in graphic novel form' (2009). Elaine Martin's textual analysis of Butler's version reveals how the book might appeal to young readers. Martin asserts the cover, which spoofed young female teen magazines; its muted, earthy colours reflecting old sepia-toned photographs; and the illustrations of people – neither completely realistic or 'cartoon-style' – are devices to attract young readers to the story while retaining the flavour of Austen's wit and humour (2011: 175). However, her suppositions do not address how adult fans, the other targeted market, might respond.

The goal of this article is to explore how adults, particularly Austen fans, respond to Butler's graphic novel version of *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b). I held six book discussion groups, each with four to six members. Three men participated and the rest of the participants were women. These participants ranged from 21 to 75 years of age. They included college students; working mothers; medical professionals; retired and current educators at the elementary, high school and college levels; professionals in business and industry, as well as self-employed business owners. All had read at least one Austen novel, a requirement for participation, but most had read three or more Austen novels. Many had read all six of her completed novels. A few participated in Austen's online fandom, attended the Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America, or the Jane Austen Festival held each year in Louisville, Kentucky. These participants were collectively aware of film adaptations – realistic period pieces, as well

as spin-offs – based on Austen novels, and some of the younger participants knew about or participated in online fan communities. Only two participants had familiarity with any graphic novel adaptation of Jane Austen's work. Each participant was asked to choose and read one of Austen's novels, and then read the Butler graphic novel adaptation of that novel. Participants primarily read *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) and *Emma* (2012a), although two read *Northanger Abbey* (2012b). After they had read both works, they participated in a one-hour focus group interview about their reading experience. Participants were asked what they liked and/or disliked about the novel and the graphic novel adaptation, and to share with the group their ideas about why they described their reading experiences in those particular ways.

JANE AUSTEN GOES GRAPHIC (NOVEL)

Despite the cultural and demographic differences among the participants in this project, all responded to the graphic novel adaptations in similar ways. Perhaps it was their lack of familiarity with the graphic novel structure or with reading strategies needed when approaching illustrated narrative, but nearly all participants agreed they preferred Austen's book over the graphic novel, even when they preferred other adaptations – film recreations or fan fiction – over her novels. In some instances participants did respond favourably to the colour in the Butler adaptations, and they appreciated its scenic illustrations, just as they admitted Austen's long sentences and difficult vocabulary were often hard to comprehend. In addition, their responses often contradicted each other. For example, they appreciated the brevity of the graphic novel while admitting fewer pages prevented a satisfying read. Participants were fascinated by the illustrations, but also found them a distraction from their reading experience. They noted a similarity between social dynamics and relationships then and now, but thought the illustrations of women, particularly those by Hugo Petrus in the *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), looked too contemporary. By examining the role of the narrative voice, structure and sequence of the story panels, and the illustration style of the characters in the graphic novel, one can better understand the critical responses of this community of readers to Austen in a comics adaptation.

HUSHING THE NARRATIVE VOICE

Of course adaptors face definite challenges when reducing a novel comprised of hundreds of pages to less than 100; therefore, writers and illustrators must be particularly judicious in their selections of what to include and exclude, as Nancy Butler explains in her introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* (Butler, 2009: n.p.). Butler's choices to accommodate the short length of graphic novels involved eliminating most of the language from the narrator who influences interpretation. As one participant said, 'I love the narrating voice in Austen and that got almost totally erased'. This choice was problematic to the Austen fans in this study. They saw language as central to their reading experience of the novel and its graphic novel counterpart. One participant explained, 'With the language in the novel, you can do so much with it, see things on so many levels, whereas once someone has defined it for you it flattens the experience'. They praised the adaptations for retaining Austen's character dialogue, but they missed what they described as rich detail of the narrator: 'Because of the narrator, the character seemed fleshed out' and 'the language of the narrator is what gets me immersed in the story'. One participant said, 'You have to

have her language and follow it and the cadence and the structure and I love being able to visualize the story myself'. These readers were not, then, merely reading for the plot or the drama between the characters; they approached the reading process more critically by looking at aesthetic expression, social commentary and subtle humour – all inherent in a narrating voice. As they read Austen's novel, they explained, they enjoyed reading descriptions about the historical context, the class system and women's lives in the Regency era:

> Think of what you had to go through if you lived back then. If you were a woman back then your whole existence was to find a husband, maybe your success in doing so was what saved the family, if you had a million daughters and had to support them.

Many explained they felt they learned as a result of their reading experience. They expressed much of the appeal of Austen's work was in how she structured sentences and selected words to suggest the satirical, humorous and intelligent tone. 'Her words', one participant expressed, 'are reminders of the reality and of the social interaction so that we see what is really behind what someone says, because there is always a hidden aspect'. Thus, a compelling graphic novel for these readers needed more than an illustration of scenes from the story with dialogue balloons containing key quotes from the novel. For these readers, the graphic novel needed to capture the interior of the narrator, not just the language of those who appear in the tale, because they considered the narrator as characteristic of an Austen novel.

When approaching Butler's adaptations, readers encounter very little narration, although she used more at the beginning of *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b) than she did in *Pride and Prejudice* (2009). But narration in Butler's adaptations serves as transition, not commentary. The narration panels indicate time has passed or introduce new characters. Occasionally they take an omniscient quality by conveying the basic mental states of characters, but they fail to engage in the critique associated with Austen or the Austen narrator. These readers missed the social observations of the Austen narrator and concluded graphic novels were not the *milieu* for Austen as a result. Austen might appreciate the irony of their conclusion, given the tradition of graphic novels to make sophisticated scrutiny of social or cultural structures. The narrator's absence in the graphic novel prevented these participants from fully committing to the reading transaction when approaching the graphic novel because the absence eliminated what they saw as Austen's vision, one these fans fully embraced.

Of course, Butler and the illustrators might have replaced the verbal approach to convey social tensions and related observations with a visual one. The illustrators could have developed images that explicate the nuance missing because of the lack of narration. Another strategy would be to create visual metaphors for the verbal or to capitalize on the '… limits of linguistic expression in ways that are unavailable to the prose original due to constraints of the print medium' (Kuhlman 2009: 120–21). For example, by using ironic juxtaposition of the images just as authors chose precise words or by illustrating the complex emotional state of characters, the illustrator can open narrative panels for Austen's commentary. These strategies create a more symbiotic relationship between the verbal and the visual. They might also connect readers, like the ones in this study who longed for Austen's wit, more effectively to the adaptation. And although Rosenblatt asserts, '… any literary work gains

its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the verbal stimuli offered by the text', such significance can also be attributed to the visual stimuli essential to and characteristic of the graphic novel (1983: 27). As McCloud reminds us, 'in comics at its best, words and practices are like partners in a dance and each takes turns leading' (1994: 156).

COMPRESSING AUSTEN'S STORY

In addition to resolving how to handle the narration, adaptors must also embrace the challenge of how to condense the plot's physical action and convey the characters' mental processes without detracting from the story. For the graphic novelist this means particularly close attention to the structure and sequence of the story panels. The story panels in the Butler adaptation are organized to convey the plot of the novels in a logical, linear way consistent with a western reading style. While some participants in this project were able to read the adaptations quickly, most found the story hard to follow. One participant explained, 'There was too much information to cover; maybe if I was more accustomed to reading graphic novels I would have understood the shortcuts and the graphic novel would not have been so complicated'. Although illustrated by different artists – *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) was illustrated by Hugo Petrus and *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b) were illustrated by Janet Lee – the illustrators approached panel content in similar ways. First, the illustrators chose fairly uniform sizes and shapes for panels, so when one looks at the page one sees little variation or suggestion of movement or sound beyond dialogue. The uniformity in the Petrus illustrations is emphasized by his reliance on muted shades of brown and other earth tones. Thus, panel appearance underscored the static quality of graphic novels. In addition, the illustrators provide scenic or background detail in every panel; bookcases, curtains, and landscape, for example, inform readers of various settings for character dialogue. The uniformity and detail merged to create visually busy scenes, and the participants had trouble perceiving the whole. If as Pascal Lefevre (2011: 15) asserts, comics are intended to be read quickly – even though we know comics fans who pour hours into reading enjoyment to memorize 'textual and visual minutiae' (Fenkl and Dringenberg 2002: 198) – then Petrus's and Lee's uniform style and more literal approach to story settings impeded that progression. Because so many Austen fans are attracted to the Regency era or the English countryside, Petrus and Lee may have chosen the detail in an attempt to appeal. But as Scott McCloud explains

> Realistic images [in comics] have a bumpier ride. Theirs is primarily a visual existence which doesn't pass easily into the realm of ideas .… [of] course making the reader work a little may just be what the artist is trying to do.
>
> (1994: 90–91)

McCloud reminds us that comics are subtractive as well as additive, and the key to success is shifting the balance between too much and too little (1994: 85).

Panel sequencing is also central to these readers' response to the graphic novel adaptations of Austen. Comics panels in general may show one quick action or multiple actions to be read in a sequence, or the illustrator may take several panels to illustrate a moment of time in the story or a shift in

thought for the characters. Fluctuating between these options provides action and varies the pace of the story. Most of the panels in Butler's adaptation show single moments in time with little variation in panel sequence. While this strategy may work for an action-oriented comic, it is less successful when adapting classical prose, particularly those in the comedy of manners genre. Panel sequence in the Butler adaptation do provide the overall plot of the romance and offer detailed scenes and settings for that plot, but they fail to provide the reader with insight into the interior thought of the characters. 'Any page of Jane Austen', one participant said, 'is rich in detail that invites the reader to use his or her imagination, and this [holding up the graphic novel] doesn't really do that'. We see what characters say, and we occasionally glimpse what they obviously think (emphasis added). However, the illustrations (and language) do not convey the cognitive complexity associated with Austen's characters. Lisa Zunshine argues some fiction, like Austen's, is 'more overtly mental' than others, and to enjoy the overall impact of the work readers must move beyond the central events and actions to see the carefully crafted social situations (2011b: 349). These types of works feed the 'theory of the mind' because they depict various levels of character thought, or mental embedment where one 'mental state is embedded within another mental state' (2011a: 119). As the levels of mental embedment increase, so does the work's cognitive complexity. Zunshine explains an Austen work is multi-layered and often achieves five or more levels of mental embedment. In contrast, she notes, Butler's adaptations rarely achieve as many as four. As a result, she contends, the illustrations in the graphic novel actually decrease the complexity of Austen's story. To offer glimpses of the complexity Zunshine mentions, illustrators might use a more extended panel sequencing to amplify the multiple moments of recognition that occur as characters process their experiences.

In addition, to the appearance and structure of specific panels and the sequencing of moments of character thought, the overall structure of the story or order of the panels caused problems for many of these readers. To move the plot forward the illustrator efficiently launched the reader from one set of actions to the next. This strategy, one in service to the plot, usually meant a leap from a scene with character dialogue to another scene with character dialogue. Given the lack of narration, these leaps afforded readers little opportunity to transition from action to action. Because of their familiarity with the novel, these readers shuffled back and forth between panels and pages to determine and confirm what was and was not included in the graphic novel adaptation. One participant explained, 'The way the panels are positioned on the page make it difficult to follow the story, so I had to use my memory from the work to guide me from panel to panel'. Another said, 'I kept thinking when I was reading, "That's not the way it is in the book", though I was recognizing Austen's words, and then I would get sidetracked about how the book structured that part of the story'. The reader unfamiliar with the story may be less concerned about the gaps; however, in this study those with knowledge of the novel felt disoriented by the fragmentation.

Another final structural component to adapting prose to illustrated fiction requires consideration of how to accommodate large number of characters or to involve those with more supporting roles. Novels enable characters and their personalities to unfold over the pages, and so when one reads a novel, one can discern the positions of the players in the overall story and chose who to invest in as we read, as well as who to like or dislike. A graphic

novel does not offer creators opportunity to explicate the roles of the characters in the way a novel with hundreds of pages might. Graphic novelists, then, must determine who to keep and how to include them. The compressed space means that minor characters can be relegated to the margins or eliminated altogether. But when minor characters, for example, permit the plot to unfold, they must appear and that appearance may be present disproportionately from the original story. Consequently, they assume more importance in the adaptation (Neckles 2012: 31). The adaptation process, then, causes minor characters to take on more significance. Furthermore, sympathetic characters can shift into parodies of themselves (Neckles 2012) because the fewer pages prevents the comics creator from crafting a character's evolution; this shift often threatens the superiority of the characters in which readers invest (Neckles 2012: 31–39). Not surprisingly, then, readers in this project were often disappointed at the portrayal of Mr Darcy in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* (2009). They felt Mr Darcy was even more pompous at the beginning of the graphic novel, and more telling, they bemoaned how he retained that pomposity through the end. They were also critical of the way the adaptation handled Emma's mistreatment of Miss Bates. They argued the adaptation ignored the significance of Emma's error, one rooted in the customs of polite society and based on the communicative practices of age and class.

CONTESTING CHARACTER APPEARANCE

Perhaps the most controversial discussions held across the focus groups involved the ways Hugo Petrus and Janet Lee illustrated the characters. They used a more realistic portrayal than often seen in comics illustration, and both were soundly criticized by the readers in this study for their choices. First, participants in this project found differentiating between characters difficult. 'I couldn't discriminate among the visual representations of the characters, except once Frank Churchill [in *Emma*] bought his white beaver hat I could tell it was him when I saw that hat'. The participants in this project felt the characters in each book looked the same – the same hairstyle (perhaps a different colour) and the same facial features and expression – which was further compounded for the female characters by the many costumes. Of course, the Regency women of the class depicted would have worn several outfits in a day's time as they wore clothing appropriate to any given activity. Readers of Butler's *Emma* (2012a) explained they eventually picked up on Jane Fairfax's 'rope-like curls' and Frank Churchill's white beaver hat, but they were less definite about signifiers for other characters. Perhaps the illustrators, again, were attempting to appeal to those fans who would notice such detail. However, in a condensed version of the novel, when readers are introduced to many characters in a short space, a less literal approach might have enhanced the reading experience of participants.

Second, readers in this project were especially critical of Hugo Petrus's *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) illustrations, which they described as 'sexy by today's standards'. Readers saw hairstyles typical of the twenty-first century – modified bobs, flipped pageboys and messy up-do's. They disliked the implied make-up and the 'Botox-injected lips'. 'The graphic novel exaggerated their beauty', one participant explained. One criticized the 'voluminizing mousse' apparent in some hairstyles. They described the women in *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) as 'voluptualized' with the body of a female superhero. In short, these readers felt Petrus relied on the standard and stereotypical depictions used for female comic

book characters. Such stereotypical depictions, combined with a realistic drawing style, only emphasized the Otherness of the characters; such Otherness created a distance particularly uncomfortable to Austen fans in the group.

Character portrayals are problematic for those creating visual images of Austen's characters because Austen refrains from providing a great deal of physical description in her works. On one hand, Austen's reticence permits adaptors the freedom to creatively envision the characters they portray. On the other hand, the lack also invites readers to use their own imaginations and determine for themselves how characters should physically appear. Thus, an interpretation by an illustrator can be seen as a misinterpretation by readers, especially Jane Austen fans who have decided ideas about the appearance of the people and places in Austen's fiction. The readers in this project had very specific thoughts about the look of the characters, particularly those they loved and hated. Readers found the illustrations of characters distracting and dissatisfying because they bore little or no resemblance to the ones they envisioned when reading the novel. Several argued against Petrus's depiction of a plain Mary Bennet and a pretty Charlotte Lucas in the graphic novel of *Pride and Prejudice* (2009). They also decried the suggestion of make-up in the illustrations because 'women at that time in that class would not have worn make-up'. Some readers felt the contemporary depictions were intended to grab the attention of adolescent readers; however, the character illustrations, for the participants in this study, were too closely connected to a contemporary sensibility to reflect Regency-era women, and not closely connected to the look these readers had formed for the characters they had encountered in the novels.

These responses suggest an even less realistic character portrayal, perhaps one more 'cartoonish', might have served the illustrators and readers better. Scott McCloud contends that illustrations of people with less definition have more success in a comics format (1994: 30–36). He argues that such stylized illustrations, in contrast to more realistic ones, permit readers to empathize with the face, stand in as the character, and to join the story: 'We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it' (1994: 36, original emphasis). As an adaptation strategy for Austen, this suggestion has merit. More abstract character depictions would provide flexibility for readers to connect the illustrated character with the one they have visualized. Also, the less definite style would enable them to maintain their previously developed connection to Austen's characters, and by extension, to Austen. These are important considerations given the close identity Austen fans have for characters and Austen herself. Moreover, McCloud contends a less defined approach to characterization focuses the reader's attention on the ideas behind the story, so that the work's meaning is amplified. Character portrayal could have served to support the lack of narrative voice, social commentary and interior processes. Thus, less realistic depictions of people in Butler's *Pride and Prejudice* (2009), *Emma* (2012a) and *Northanger Abbey* (2012b) could have enhanced the reception of readers by connecting them to characters and by providing the social critique they found missing in these graphic novel adaptations.

Because these participants missed Austen's narrator, experienced confusion about the plot in its compressed format, and noted the dissonance between the illustrated characters and the ones they visualized when reading the novel, these participants collectively found Butler's adaptation less than satisfying as an encounter with Austen's novel. For these readers the joy of Austen entailed convening with a certain linguistic style, as well as a glimpse into a Regency-era England as depicted by a skillful writer. They praised

Austen's descriptions of the English settings, social practices and complex relations – not merely those that suggested romance – and while the graphic novel satisfied in terms of giving a synopsis of the romantic plot and providing detail (albeit not always with period accuracy) about setting and scene, they explained the graphic novel eliminated all which they considered important to the novel they had read. Aside from its relationship to Austen's novel, the graphic novel was also deemed less entertaining for some than realistic period-piece adaptations, as well as spoofs and spin-offs typical of fan fiction. They described the act of reading the graphic novel as rereading Austen's plot but not her story. And while they expressed a personal connection to the stories, such expressions served as the foundation for a community experience of Austen. Moreover, while confirming the experiential component of reading, they acknowledged Austen's style and structure as central to their reading satisfaction or dissatisfaction when approaching the graphic novel. Most readers expressed the belief that the graphic novel version of any classic was not their preference; people in nearly every group interview saw the potential of the graphic novel as a study guide for the classics or as a way to introduce young readers to classical prose. They were quick to point out graphic novel adaptations of classics could play an important role to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension. Supporting the contentions of Werris (2008), Gorman (2010) and Price (2009), this assessment squarely situates the graphic novel as a central player in education strategy. It also reaffirms the intentions of Nancy Butler to target young girls who read comics.

When participants conveyed their ideas and evaluations, they clarified that while they did not enjoy reading a graphic novel, they did enjoy the process of reading the graphic novel in conjunction with the novel. Some found pleasure in making comparisons between the faithful and unfaithful adaptations because such comparison enabled them to 'show how much we know about Austen' because 'there was pleasure in saying "this is right" and "this is wrong"', as one participant explained. These responses suggest a proper approach was missing in the Austen adaptation, which interestingly enough confirms the notion of 'intentional fallacy' and the stance that literature has 'correct' meaning (see Iser 1978). But these responses also serve as more personal testimony of their own expertise. That is, the act of publicly discussing their reading experience of the graphic novel meant more than evaluations of adaptations or graphic novels. They could also demonstrate their identity as a Janeite. Their process also solidified participants into a community of readers who could experience reading as a conversation with the other people in their group, among other Austen fans they might encounter, and between multiple Austen-oriented texts. Because they consecutively read both Austen's novel and the illustrated adaptation of that novel, participants read the two works with and against the other to create a multidimensional intertextual experience, an experience that explains their contradictory remarks, such as how some felt the novel enabled them to decode the graphic novel, while others felt the graphic novel helped them comprehend Austen's plot. Many readers oscillated between the two texts in order to interpret the story, characters and meanings.

LESSONS ABOUT ADAPTING (BELOVED) CLASSICAL PROSE

This study excavates some important reminders about adaptations, graphic novels and transforming classical prose to a comics format. First, the project raises the important question about the obligation of adaptation. Should it repeat

or rehash the original? Should it enlighten with a new perspective on that text? Must it please the readers familiar with the inspirational text? Fingeroth argues the best graphic novel adaptations 'don't spoil the original … [but] they do drive you back to it, reawakening your enjoyment by drawing attention to things you may have missed and adding another layer of associations' (2008: 272). One way it might accomplish this challenge is to capitalize on the strength inherent in its visual nature. One must use the technology of the medium to support the reading process and provide clues for how to adapt that process when facing differing technologies and media. Consequently, with a graphic novel adaptation of classic works, creators must develop innovative approaches so that the strengths of the medium compensate readers for their efforts.

This point leads to a second lesson. Fingeroth (2008) firmly positions the graphic novel adaptation as an offering to the reader familiar with the original text and supports a readerly approach to adaptation. A readerly approach requires careful consideration of how people approach the original text as well as the medium of the adaptation. In the case of graphic novel this approach means careful consideration how comics as a medium impact the interpretive process. Certainly the adaptation is a creator's opportunity for aesthetic expression; however, when adapting a work replete with significance for its fan, an adaptation that meets the expectations of those fans will stand a greater chance of connecting to that fan. After all, as Sandvoss reminds us, 'fans seek out texts that give them pleasure of familiarity and that fulfill rather than challenge their expectations' (2007: 14). Of course, Sandvoss goes on to explain that different communities and different types of fans may hold different ideas and values, but in the case of the Janeites there seems to be some consistency: keep the wit, humour and satire, and preserve the interiority of Austen's narrator and characters.

A final lesson for adapting classical prose to a graphic novel platform, then, is to determine if the most effective strategy for readers is to condense a story or to create a spoof or a spin-off. If one chooses a more faithful adaptation, the creator must consider the benefits of focusing on essence of plot or essence of story. They must also consider that the story may not be plot-driven, especially when the authors are admired for their carefully crafted narration and character study. They must take into account the relational dynamics and interior processes that make comedy of manners, in particular, an enjoyable read. So for graphic novels to be most successful for fans, they must do more than provide plot or the character actions from the classical prose. They must consider what central features fans find attractive and use the medium to encourage a similar attraction.

Graphic novel adaptations of classical works are primed to level the hierarchies associated with cultural study. They can be a site to celebrate the virtues of high culture as well as popular culture, and when done well they contain a polyvocality with potential to enfranchise multiple audience and multiple constituencies within fan communities. This task, however, requires blending innovation and invention with appreciation and tradition. The result? A work that keeps classics current while making adaptations classic in their own right.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Misogynoir and antiblack racism: What *The Walking Dead* teaches us about the limits of Speculative Fiction fandom

ABSTRACT

Antiblack racial antagonisms manifest in discourse through audience engagement with characters in Speculative Fiction (SF). This article addresses the ways that a fictional black woman in a popular SF series gets constructed in the public imaginaries of a popular fandom community. The character Michonne from the dystopian comic book series and television drama, The Walking Dead, *provides an excellent occasion to examine audience engagement that distinctly operates within a recognizable cultural frame. The character's reception between has sparked much debate and criticism due to the ways that she is understood and dramatized in relation to other characters in the series. While a majority of fan content regarding the character recognizes her skill and abilities for survival with relative positivity, she is routinely regarded as an outsider, perpetually unfeeling or emotionally inept. The result is a broad lack of empathy mitigated by antiblack misogyny. It is as though her character is regarded as a functional object (a weapon) and less than human, which bears the weight of the question of black non-ontology as a requirement for social order. This is particularly*

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interesting within an imagined world of the undead. This article interrogates the ways in which fandom communities actively cite, circulate and produce discourses that sustain structural antagonisms, as well as how they contribute to, respond, or engage particularly problematic tropes regarding black female subjectivities.

> I don't mean to sound sexist, but as far as women have come over the last 40 years, you don't really see a lot of women hunters. They're still in the minority in the military, and there's not a lot of female construction workers. I hope that's not taken the wrong way. I think women are as smart, resourceful, and capable in most things as any man could be … but they are generally physically weaker. That's science.
>
> (Robert Kirkman, Comics creator and TV Producer of *The Walking Dead*, interview, 2013)[1]

Speculative and fantasy fictions are unique in their capacity to endow visions of humanity and the world with possibilities beyond what is known, or even conceivable, within recognizable boundaries of science, religion, theory and knowledge. These epistemic frames shape our interactions with and within the world, delineating truths and non-truths as if such delineations could be measured or bound at all. A key concern in the writing of this genre of science fiction is the implicit thematic question of, what if? – a question that simultaneously reflects on the contingent now, what could be, what might have been, and what may never have been and all the historical and/or futurist possibilities therein (Heinlein 1947; Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2011). Speculative Fiction (SF) in many ways shares theoretical space with the core of academic disciplines such as philosophy, the natural sciences, languages and literatures, religion, societies and cultures, and many others that seek to understand the defining attributes of what it means to be human subjects. The parallels in lines of enquiry suggest a common interest in the conflicts and tensions inherent in the growth of civilizations, environmental changes, as well as the plight of humanity in relation to other living creatures and forms. One might imagine that under this rubric, theories of social life would proliferate towards the endless inclusion of a variety of perspectives, bodies, social formations and political projects. However, taking Kirkman's quote into account, something has gone awry in this realm of possibility – and it is the imperative of this article to suggest a few ways that this failure has become a common point of contention among social commenters and critics invested in the project of exploring a complex range of social potentialities.

In this article I address the ways that antiblack racial antagonisms manifest in discourse through audience engagement with characters in SF. Afropessimism provides a critical framework that allows me to construct an analysis that centres antiblack misogyny as a primary concern. More specifically, this article focuses on addressing the ways that a fictional black woman in a popular television series gets constructed in the imaginaries of a broad, yet highly engaged viewership. US cable network AMC's *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*) provides an excellent occasion to examine audience engagement as it distinctly operates within a limited western social frame in its rendering of the character Michonne. Such a frame appears to resist common cultural scripts for black female archetypes, however, it continues to rely on an ontological indifference implicit in antiblack misogyny – or as I will refer to it moving forward, *misogynoir* (Bailey 2010). The character's reception between various

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comic book and television audiences has sparked much debate and criticism due to the ways that Michonne is understood and dramatized in relation to other white, male and female characters in the series especially within the first two seasons of her appearance in *TWD* universe. While a majority of fan content regarding the character recognizes her skill and abilities for survival with enthusiastic positivity, she is routinely regarded as an outsider, perpetually unfeeling or emotionally closed off which results in a broad lack of empathy from a largely white, male audience. It is as though her character is regarded as a functional object (a weapon) denied the presumption of humanity, which is especially interesting within an imagined world of the undead. Here, I am invested in interrogating how these opinions and characterizations are structured, as well as how they contribute to, respond, or engage problematic tropes used to reductively script black women and girls.

Regarding methodology, I use rhetorical criticism to understand the characterization of Michonne in *TWD* television series' third and fourth seasons. My interest here is in teasing out the co-constructed image of the character that emerges as a product of the myth created by the writers that is then circulated and reimagined through interactions with fan audiences. Towards this aim, I will provide informed readings of episodes and the relevant scenes that are most often debated or discussed in online *TWD* fan communities. To ground my arguments, I have selected several widely circulated blog articles and critiques written explicitly on the tensions embedded in representations of race and gender in the *TWD* universe. These articles have become central in online deliberations about the popular network series' presumed 'problems' with addressing issues of race, gender and sexuality with the nuance many fans believe the various complicated storylines deserve. In addition to the articles themselves, I will engage the content of reader comments posted to their respective websites in response to the articles' claims. Though I do not necessarily support any individual author's arguments, I suggest that there are specific themes that emerge in both the critiques and the reader comments that deserve critical, scholarly attention. Finally, I supplement material gathered from reader comments to specific articles with informal, unmoderated fan community statements as submitted to online forums and conversational threads from online fan websites.

The ways that black and brown bodies, especially those considered African diasporic, are constructed in this context relies heavily on various cultural myths developed through a history of exclusion. The failure to recognize or redress the long-standing impact of chattel slavery in the modern world is indicative of a failed politic of post-raciality. Instead of imagining worlds that are perhaps more inclusive of non-white subjects, we are expected to desire, participate in the creation, and sustain the fantasy of white heterosexual normativity and cisgender male dominance as the optimal formation of humanity worth saving. This uncritical historicity of many dystopian fantasies encourages its creators and consumers to reassert hegemonic divisions when convenient, and thus reproduce racial subordination while encouraging hostilities under the guise of harmless artistic interpretation. Within these alternative fictional worlds, racial difference is flattened under the guise of an essentialist humanity that somehow manages to only protect, save and reproduce heroic white subjects as an effect of mass human extinction. We are continuously asked to believe in the constancy of a pure white saviour even at the end of civil society as we know it – a request that reflects a social, political and cultural investment in sustaining the fiction of white superiority

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2. In the comic book series, Michonne's storyline includes sexual experiences with other survivors, and this is a source of conflict between her and other female characters. I have omitted a full detailing of this difference between the comic and television series for the sake of brevity. However, it should be noted that the television series completely eschews these moments for Michonne, thereby reducing her capacity to experience a fuller range of affects and interactions.

over all other potential identifications. What, then, is at the core of this issue? Why must the reimagined world remain bound by this particular (presumably failed) hierarchical social structure? What prevents fan audiences from connecting with a more 'radical' repositioning of post-apocalyptic subjects at the end of the world? Finally, does rhetoric provide us any avenues of redress? This article will ultimately argue that antiblack structural racism and misogynoir are so deeply rooted in our cultural understandings of the contemporary world that they become the rubric by which imaginative possibilities remain restrained in the public project of speculative worldmaking.

BLACK×FEMININE: MEDIATIONS OF ANTIBLACK MISOGYNY

In the landmark essay 'Mammies, matriarchs and other controlling images' (2002) Patricia Hill Collins offers an assessment of the controlling images that black and Latina women negotiate. How these images are consumed and how they are read *from* the body by those defined by the images as well as by a broader public differ greatly and have different social functions than images that are self-styled and self-selected. Controlling images are what surface when the bodies affected by their circulation and social reiteration cannot control the gaze that witnesses, consumes, and interprets them. In her book on black women in the public sphere, Gwendolyn Pough (2004) offers the assertion that an image can only be deemed politically useful if it is still very much within the control, or authorship, of its marginalized creator. However, I suggest that it is precisely the lack or loss of authorship and control that becomes politicized within the context I have provided thus far. The relationship between the creators of *TWD* and its fans is one of co-production; yet without a critically nuanced attention to representation of marginalized characters, a rupture occurs within its racialized and gendered fan communities. The mythology of *TWD* universe is largely sustained by the fan communities' active engagement with its fictional characters, and it is within this interaction that a notable antagonism occurs.

The attempts by the series' writers to reduce the impact of the simultaneity of the Michonne's race and gender (her apparently absent sexuality[2] notwithstanding) further accentuate the inescapable dilemma of her humanity. So far as the television series is concerned, her purpose is to propel the story arcs of its white characters while also remaining its most detached, objectified figure. By examining the controlling images that Michonne activates as well as her seeming disruption of them, I will demonstrate how her success as a survivour fails to redeem her humanity. As reflected in fan commentary, her characterization neither disrupts nor challenges the confining archetypal images of black femininity that circulate in a white heteropatriarchal media economy. Instead, the character functionally provides a deeper concretization of the very tropes she appears to rebel against. As I will demonstrate through fans' staunch disavowals of race and gender criticisms regarding the show, misogynoiristic logics are used defend substantial critiques.

I argue that it is within these defenses that *TWD* fans offer a clear example of the types of antagonisms both Hartman and Wilderson posit as indicative of a differential grammar of suffering. Such a grammar refers to a logic that shapes, moves, distorts and orders sociality without ever making itself explicitly present even when we are made aware of its ruptures. The conception of suffering invoked in this article refers to the prediscursive affect produced 'when we are unable to determine our environment or conditions'

(Carpenter 2012: 1). To be clear, this is not necessarily a reflection of the *feeling* or *emotionality* of suffering, which refers to the *doing* of emotion. Instead, suffering in this sense describes the process of *acting upon* that directly relates to the structuralizing effect of the interaction between control and experiences of suffering that allow us to trace relations of power. Therefore, a grammar of suffering refers to the implicit and explicit paradigms of social order that structure and produce suffering as a condition of human experience. In teasing out the complicity of the broad acceptance of recognizable archetypes constructing black femininity embedded in fan readings of Michonne, I suggest that a grammar of suffering reflects the continued non-ontology of black female subjects in *TWD* universe. Here, I take into consideration Calvin Warren's distiled definition of 'non-ontology', which 'suggests a negative axis of being – being not predicated on mere appearance in the phenomenal real (Fanon) – ontology's necessary exclusion' (2014: 6). Non-ontology will be used in this article to refer to the tension that emerges when we attempt to define 'being' beyond what is present, visible, represented or signifiable as related to the ontology of blackness. Instead, non-ontology reflects on the paradigmatic grammars of suffering that render blackness increasingly unintelligible in an effort to delineate a relation of power, rather than to define a particular cultural object or subject-position.

Michonne is often described as a warrior. The now iconic image marking her appearance in the final scenes of the second season of the television show continue to hold promise in the mystery of her person. When she first arrives in *TWD* universe she is cloaked in a large hooded cape that hides her face and much of her body. Interestingly, she wields a katana blade and is dragging behind her two mutilated 'pets' on chain leashes – zombies, or walkers as they are referred to in the series, that have had their jaws and arms removed to eliminate their capacity to attack her. These chained walkers provide a virtual protective shield making Michonne undetectable to other walkers. It is her ingenuity and expertise with the katana that makes it possible for her to survive alone, and this is what ultimately brings her into the protagonist group's periphery. While we have some indication of her capacity to survive the extreme traumas and terrors implicit in a world full of attacking undead, there is no indication of her emotional state in this early image. At the outset of the show's third season, we are formally introduced to the character. However, the initial iconic image we encountered has drastically changed: this Michonne occupies a caretaker role, working diligently in the service of care for the character Andrea whom she saves from a small herd of walkers in the closing scene of Season 2.

Over the course of Season 3, we see a peculiar relationship evolve between Michonne, Rick (the purported 'leader' of the protagonist group), and Rick's son, Carl in relation to larger group dynamics. This relationship is a strongly contested one that is discussed in several important critiques of the series (Kearns 2013; Ball 2013; Berry 2013). Over the course of the third season, we witness a strange antagonism between Michonne and the groups of survivours. Initially, Andrea and Michonne are partnered until the former's sickness drives the duo to take residence in a town that appears to have a remarkable amount of normalcy given the current disorder in *TWD* universe. Through a series of incidents, Michonne and Andrea become separated and are eventually at odds with one another prompting Michonne to leave the town, which instigates her eventual move to join Andrea's former group of survivours led by Rick. Michonne's introduction to this group begins with her offering of

necessary supplies to care for Rick's infant daughter, Judith. The gesture of camaraderie is met with extreme suspicion and some would argue, disgust. Rick's initial distrust of Michonne may have seemed warranted given the various dubious circumstances that have resulted from encounters with strangers. However, over the course of about twelve episodes, Michonne proves time and again that she is willing to participate fully as a group member – countless episodes show her saving each and every survivour's life without fail, and often at her own peril. Yet, it is not until Carl speaks on her behalf that she is granted the slightest dignity of partial acceptance. As one critique perceives the situation, this decision bears little weight given the race and gender dynamics of the television show:

> But if Michonne is briefly accepted as one of them, in the next episode, Michonne's body becomes an object of barter. Rick and the governor are trying to negotiate a peace so that they don't wind up killing each other's group. […] The governor tells Rick that the war can be circumvented if Rick agrees to one condition: *'I want Michonne. Turn her over and this all goes away. Is she worth it? One woman? Worth all those lives in your prison? Is she?'*.
>
> (Berry 2013, original emphasis)

The author pointedly continues:

> They had two white men using an African American woman's body as currency. We did that for 300 years. It was called slavery. Did the writers really want to remind us that, in this world, a black woman's worth stems from her ability to be currency, something that can be bought or exchanged in order to stop a war? And these are two Southern men.
>
> (Berry 2013)

The scenario instantiating Michonne's situatedness in the series is far from lost on a critical audience. While many will claim that it is *TWD*'s fictional universe that is to blame for the extreme measures taken against individual characters, the fact remains that these situations carry the weight of historicity in the real world we inhabit. *TWD* is not far enough removed from western society to even pretend to function within an alternative historical trajectory. The cognitive dissonance required to suspend belief in this situation is indeed too much to require of the series' highly engaged fan audience.

The problem I am drawing attention to here is that the fictional environment *TWD* creates simultaneously reflects a real-world historicity. To further understand why this characterization of Michonne is such a strong point of contention, Saidiya Hartmann's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) provides a useful lens through which I read the occurrences of white supremacist ideologies' impact within the imaginative space of *TWD*'s audience. An antagonistic reading of such scenes requires a re-reading of black characters like Michonne in order to conceive alternative possibilities. In the text, Hartmann describes what she terms 'scenes of subjection' where black slave bodies are recalled in rhetorical practices intended to perform some liberatory function. However, for whom that function is meant to serve is the cause for concern when black subjectivity is in question. The black slave body is consistently an object for display, ridicule and gratuitous violence; it functions as a tool for alleviating white guilt, a cause around which whiteness could organize

politically and establish moral authority, or otherwise vicariously 'experience' the dehumanization characteristic of chattel slavery. Black bodies, and blackness as an ideological construct, can only function as that against which whiteness could be redeemed and further privileged through the retelling of black experience. Gendered racialization further compounds the potential for abjection as systemic, institutional and interpersonal violences bear different costs for black female subjects. For my purposes here, I suggest that there is a marked similarity in audience readings of Michonne's storyline and characterization that insist on her subjection in order to establish the boundaries of worth and value in *TWD* world order. This demands further interrogation to excise the grammars that sustain white heterosexist patriarchal structuralism, especially at the sites of its failure.

I develop the point of antiblack misogyny at length here in order to understand *TWD*'s creators and writers contribution to the interaction between fans, fan-critics and the series. It is worth noting that the descriptions of the series I have provided above regard the liberties taken when translating the comic book series to the small screen. There are significant techniques of story development deployed in order to frame the Michonne in the ways she is represented, and I understand much of the criticisms cited here to be engaging this particular dilemma. Taking these fan-criticisms seriously in light of the responses I will outline in the next section of this article, one has to wonder why these critiques receive the dismissive, and sometimes hostile, responses that they do. I argue that the reason SF fans tend to respond in this way is in part due to the continued circulation and reiteration of white hegemony that deploys controlling images of black women as ideological imperatives required to sustain the comfort of post-chattel slavery's hierarchical social order. In the next section, I address the tactics SF fandoms employ to dismiss and suppress the growing number of dissenting critiques that question *TWD*'s investment – or lack thereof – in race and gender politics.

AMBIVALENCE AND ANIMOSITY: *TWD*'S FANDOM PROBLEM

By combining black feminist thought and rhetorical critique to produce an audience analysis, this article offers a response to the provocations embedded in Afropessimism's concern with 'entertainment' media. Though the explicit narrative dimension of SF is commonly considered the domain of entertainment media, it is the genre's preoccupation with critique and social commentary that allows it to maintain a keen interest for fans and scholars alike. As understood by book reviewer David Wyatt:

> Speculative Fiction in all its forms gives authors the ability to ask relevant questions about our society in a way that would prove provocative in more mainstream forms. The alternate universe or civilization provides an emotional and intellectual distance that permits a more dispassionate thought process … In all its forms, it is a literature of freedom, freedom for the author to lose the chains of conventional thought, and freedom for the reader to lose themselves in discovery.
>
> (Wyatt 2007)

With this definition in mind, this article takes as its premise a deep concern with not only the representational capacity of SF, but also the very ideologies it mobilizes as the structural foundation of alternative worldmaking practices. When

social dystopian fantasies are the object of scholarly analysis, critical attention is often focused on the interventions of technology and the ways it informs, supports or negates human subjectivity (Kerman 1991; Tenner 1996; Dinello 2005; Alkon 2013). However, my focus here is on techniques of power that deploy assumptive logics of human suffering in order to reproduce the non-ontological status of black subjects within the operational politics of SF fandom culture.

While this article addresses some aspects of SF writ large, the focus of this analysis centres dystopian fantasies explicitly and the ways certain bodies become constructed within futures that cannot imagine their existence. Dystopian literature is a genre of SF and art that has garnered an increasing range of influence in alternative 'geek' subcultures. It can be recognized in a wide range of artistic styles and has been explored by artists and enthusiasts of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Those who engage in the fandom subculture often participate by enacting fictional scenes through cosplay (costume fashioning deployed as regular dress) and various entertainment-based activities, including participation in discussion forums and generation of additional story-related content (i.e. fanfiction, episode analyses, character profiles and narrative trajectories, etc.). The scene created by fans is especially intriguing for its interest in character development and recreation outside of the context of the various series. However, this subculture is dominated by a clear historical erasure of people of colour (POC) as active, valued community members; instead, issues of tokenism and exoticism are cited at length in online fan communities that congregate via websites like Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook in what are colloquially referred to as 'blerd [read: black nerd]' and 'nerds of color (NOC)' communities. Representationally, we see POC as stock, archetypal figures whose primary purpose is to either forward the story arcs of white protagonists or as comic relief. This sidelining of POC stories and perspectives can be reflected in SF community practices that emerge as suppressive, oppressive politics. As such, these spaces have routinely been deemed hostile to POC who attempt to participate and engage in the imaginative worldmaking processes that are central to fandom's informal philosophy of communal creation as a key tenet of SF's ethos.

Initially, fans appear to be excited to see one of the key figures from *TWD* comics appear in the television series. However, this excitement is challenged by the creators' translation from the comic books to the screen – while the comic book series initially delves into an introspective telling of Michonne's story, the visual representation of her silence strikes a completely different cord. Confronted with a nonfictional black woman on-screen, fans appear to immediately engage in reductionist rhetoric that qualifies her actions within recognizable gendered, racialized archetypes. Even given her backstory, several themes emerge in fan perspectives on what her silence suggests, and these insights betray the commenters' reliance on scripts attributed black female representational frames. To provide an example of the types of conversations that are fairly frequently duplicated across forums, I now turn to a GameFAQs (2012) forum thread titled 'Michonne is actually pretty cool when she opens her mouth and makes words come out' dedicated to discussing her entrance into the series. Here, the user comments are quite telling. On the surface, it appears that fans understand her silent, brooding nature as the 'strong and silent archetype', and it is the archetype itself that they find wanting:

> bfslick50: […] a lot of the complaints definitely feel like they are in part coming from the fact that she's violating a gender stereotype. This isn't

true for everyone who complains about Michonne, but I can't recall a single time I heard about someone complain about a male character looking too stern. Or that a male character doesn't talk enough. Sure we all complained about T-dog having no lines, but that was the writers neglecting him not his character choosing to remain silent.

(GameFAQs 2012: 1)

However, there is a problem with this rendering of the character: though Michonne is scripted as the survivour of an intense trauma – having lost an infant child as well as her partner and a family friend (who tragically become her pet Walkers), as well as having survived alone for the duration of the initial outbreak – *TWD* fan communities maintain the stance that her silence is an unnatural, and even unnecessary, emotional response. One main commenter, whose statements I review in this article, provides an example of few key arguments that can be seen across a variety of fan responses. Instead of being reimagined as a survivour of trauma, Michonne is regarded as angry, violent, untrustworthy and generally lacking nuance – a characterization that is affirmed by the visualization of her silence:

JolosGhost: /facepalm

LOL, why does every character-based complaint turn into a gender/race argument?

Michonne was being an idiot in the first few episodes. I thought she seemed badass in the S2 finale, then she ended up just being a snarling dog. Somebody else mentioned she was a product of this time … which was quickly squashed with the reality that she's in her 20s or 30s and this zombie apocalypse is only about a year-old at the time we met her. She didn't do much until now, and she's *finally* showing some personality other than, 'I ANGRY. RAWR.'

T-Dogg had personality. His actions spoke loudly and they weren't obnoxious. He was just an all-around well-meaning guy who wanted to do his part. He didn't *need* dialogue.

Same goes for Beth. She's a sweetie who tries to lift everyone's spirits.

There you go. T-Dogg and Beth. I've covered black, white, male and female.

Stop throwing race and sex cards at everything.

(GameFAQs 2012: 2, original emphasis)

This statement by commenter JolosGhost sums up a particular strain of arguments echoed throughout this thread as a response to more formal criticisms of *TWD*. To be sure, a chorus of affirming comments proceeded from this statement indicating general agreement with JolosGhost's perception of the early character interactions with Michonne. Several commenters continue, offering thoughts on what they perceive to be an inadequate reading of race and gender into this conversation:

D_Gryphon: I honestly thought the same way the other guy did in some cases. I don't know why the strong silent type thing Michonne had going on bothered so many people.

I never thought it was a race thing but I couldn't help think that at least some people had an issue with it because she was a female. Of course not many people will admit that.

_Chalky_White: It wasn't so much that Michonne was a woman but that there was no depth behind her character. 'Silent badass' tells you everything there was to her for quite some time, and that gets old, especially when its accompanied by literally one goddamn facial expression.

And she was/is opposing a character I do like, which can't help how I perceive her.

JolosGhost: This, and also how she got up in the Governor's face all confrontational when she knew the guy was dangerous and Andrea was helpless.

Now that Andrea has decided to stick with Phillip after all that's happened, I don't mind Michonne being such a t*** to her. [redaction in original post]

The big problem was that she was illogical and permanently sour-pussing. That has NOTHING to do with her sex or race. Period.

Anybody who's mind travels to that point automatically is either hypersensitive or overcompensating for some of their own racist thoughts.

(GameFAQs 2012: 2, original emphasis)

What emerges over the next three pages of the thread is a back and forth debate between approximately eight unique contributors that attempts to address how and why race/gender are incited as causes for particular readings of the character. While a few marginalized voices try to plant this critique as ultimately important to consider, the majority of respondents side with JolosGhost who goes so far as to sarcastically make the accusation, 'Always assume racism. It doesn't make you look like a moron. No, really' (Berry 2013: 3). This is a common tactic deployed in every conversation thread reviewed for this article. Though this instance is articulated with clarity in this limited access forum, it is absolutely not unique in the perspective it reflects. The claim to neutrality and objective perspective often functions as an effective dismissal of critique and an end to contentious debate. The repetitive examples beg the question, what is it about Michonne's blackness and femaleness that makes it so difficult to acknowledge these particular critiques of the show?

Those who deny the implications of race and gender in the narrative development of SF present a point of enquiry that directly ties this practice to my initial concern with the central thematic purpose of the genre: to ask the pertinent question 'what if?'. If SF is not committed to pursuing this line of thought, then what purpose does it have beyond reproducing the exact same narratives of social order that it seeks to disrupt, distort and reimagine? The refusal to engage questions of race and gender within this fandom community gestures towards the implicit acceptance of the non-ontology of black subjects. Without any grounds to even discuss the nuances inherent in embodied blackness, how can world-making practices ever be reconciled with substantial consideration of the long-standing effects of power, privilege and oppressive social structures?

This article attempts to make clear the pervasiveness of antiblack sentiment within seemingly neutral contexts. Interest in world-making and imaginative

rhetorical response would benefit from the line of enquiry I engage in this analysis. My aim is to demonstrate the ways particular tropes drive and complicate fan engagement with contemporary media. For fans and media critics who have engaged the problematic characterization of Michonne, critical attention must be directed towards not only the prominent debates regarding representation, but also the implicit assumptive logics that govern fan responses to SF texts. This type of analysis will prove to be useful for understanding why certain representational scripts regarding black femininity continue to function and be reproduced even within a context that could completely reimagine the social possibilities for all human subjects post-civil society.

Frank Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black* posits that there is no genuine way to resolve the ontological problem of antiblackness in civil society due to the 'rubric of antagonisms', which is defined as 'an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions' (2010: 5). As such, the legibility of blackness depends on a destruction of the very grounds upon which civil society has defined itself through the structuring of the modern world as a product of chattel slavery. Taking the public project of SF's concern with world-making to task, I argue that rhetorical criticism can and does help us understand more fruitfully how the context of antiblackness functions to limit social interaction and affective engagement with particularly unintelligible bodies. Whereas Wilderson's critique focuses in many ways on the necessary destruction of civil society as we know it, rhetorical criticism begins to move beyond that destruction to challenge antiblack sentiments within the creative, generative narratives that engage SF's thematic imperative. Importantly, Wilderson makes a clear, useful distinction between what he describes as a rubric of antagonism and a rubric of conflict. It is the former that offers an analytic with which we can get at the subversive nature of antiblack structuralism aside from a rumination on the prescient conflicts often presumed to *be* the problem and not merely a symptom or indication of something far more insidious (2010: 5–9). The focus on film and cinematic practices he articulates may appear to constrain opportunities for resistance, however a rhetorical analysis of SF texts and fan communities provide an alternative means of articulating individual and collective subjectivities.

SUPPRESSION AND ERASURE AS A TACTIC OF CONTROL

SF often presents storylines that exclude black, brown and Indigenous people as protagonists or as characters central to the development of complex storylines. In popular series, there are often questions of authenticity or necessity of inclusion when visual representations of SF literature present black characters in particular. For example, regarding Suzanne Collins's young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008), when the characters of Rue, Cinna and Thresh were revealed to the general public via movie adaptation posters, there was an unexpected audience response. The comments regarding their racial identification revealed a broad discomfort of a white audience in seeing the roles played by black people. Regardless of the fact that the texts of the novels indicated skin tone and racialized physical characteristics, the visuality of the characters played an important role in disrupting the public imaginary. Comments regarding the black characters' inclusion ranged from statements that the movies of the series would be 'ruined' to disappointment over casting decisions. There is a general ambivalence that emerges in these moments

as indicated by pronouncements such as that from Twitter user 'mari' who proclaimed: 'why did the producer make all the good characters black smh' (Stewart 2012). Other comments are far more troubling, pointing to something perhaps a bit more concerning than a lack of empathy: 'kk call me racist but when I found out rue [*sic*] was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemy-self'; 'EWW rue [*sic*] is black?? I'm not watching'; 'HOW IN THE WORLD ARE THEY GOING TO MAKE RUE A FREAKIN [*sic*] BLACK BITCH IN THE MOVIE?!?!?!??! Lolol not to be racist buuuuut …. I'm angry now ;o' (Stewart 2012, original emphasis). These are just a few select comments that touch on a range of similar sentiments; for the sake of this article, I have focused on the middle range of sentiments though there are far more extreme statements that employ the use of racial slurs, stereotypes and violent rhetoric to express the disappointments of a largely white fan base. The general sense of the matter, however, is that black characters of this dystopian world were not only unwelcome, but unexpected. Many comments went so far as to suggest that it would be difficult to respond to such characters with empathy, simply because the casting decisions to choose black actors made such sentiments 'difficult' for the largely white audience (Stewart 2012).

Returning attention to the character of Michonne, it is important to recognize the impact of including black bodies in SF – especially those with a visual component, such as in comic books and on television. What does it mean to witness black female survival in response to an apocalyptic future? How does her portrayal reflect current society's engagement on matters of race and gender? In what ways does such a character disrupt our understanding of possible futures? Why is black humanity so difficult to imagine? The reason *TWD* is so interesting to consider for this discussion is because it is one of the few intensive interrogations of the zombie-apocalypse genre that takes a substantial interest in the dilemma of determining what defines an essential humanity. In short, who are we as humans under the extreme circumstances of duress that will either see our extinction or our survival? When all else is stripped away, can we claim to be anything more than monsters? Politics of race, gender, sexuality, ability, age and so on ask us to reconsider possibilities for reimagining civil society within this infinitely generative paradigm.

To help answer address the concerns I have outlined here, I first turn to Barthes' 'Myth today' (1972). In connecting these fictions to our realities, he states, 'myth hides nothing and it flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession' (1972: 240). Barthes' concept of signification regarding the construction of myths is useful here to describe the rhetorical capacity of SF to suggest alternative ethical and moral dimensions of communication, political formations, and social responses to historical events. How these individual stories unfold often suggests alternative readings of historically significant events and figures while simultaneously offering new visions of future (and potentially present) social relations. Barthes' understands myth as a type of speech defined by intention; it is ambiguous in that it appears as fact but instead signifies something other. This construct makes it possible to consider the ways that the very presence of black bodies produces alternative narratives that act as more than entertainment. In this sense, I take Barthes reading of myth as one whole (not the different parts that constitute it): the reader lives the myth as a story that is both true and unreal. This is where myth moves from semiology to ideology; from a general history or fictional narrative to an explanation of relevant interest in current society.

Regarding Michonne's characterization in *TWD* television series, many critiques have emerged responding to the noticeable difference between the TV series and the comic book portrayals. In the comic book series, she is more often seen as contemplative, brooding perhaps, but not without reason; she is a skilled swordsman, wielding a katana expertly due to her previous history training in fencing; and she is generally controlled in action as opposed to a violent wildcard. These characterizations are key to understanding the audience's reception of the character overall. In addressing the ways Michonne is characterized in the comic series, one reviewer summarizes:

> In the comics, Michonne arrived at the prison where the group was staying, dragging two walkers behind her. This indicated that Michonne had found a way to survive on her own, even as Rick, the leader of the group, had been losing people along the way. So much for safety in numbers, eh? Michonne is also an educated woman who worked as a lawyer before the zombie apocalypse. […] What makes Michonne so fascinating is that she is a multi-layered character with a history that is slowly revealed. She is passionate and strong when she needs to be but is not afraid to make herself vulnerable, even though what she has lived through is nothing short of absolute horror.
>
> (Renee and Sparky 2012)

This reading of the character is a sympathetic one written for a website that regularly interrogates issues of race in popular culture. What we see here is a reflection on the complexity of the character and a desire of the author to see this version of Michonne reflected on-screen.

However, through the later development of the series, we are presented a very different interpretation of the character. In short, much of the series' episodes that develop her character construe her as mysterious, violently angry, vengeful, silent to a fault (no one assumes her quietude has reason beyond the notion that she may be plotting against the positions of power held by the white, male protagonists), disloyal, and not to be trusted though she regularly enters dangerous scenes in order to save the same people who refuse to accept her as one of the group. In the article '*The Walking Dead*: The problem with Michonne', one blogger critically reflects:

> In many ways, much of Michonne's humanity has been removed. She doesn't really get to have moments of self-reflection, mourning, or happiness. Humans are very complex beings and if we were to sever Michonne's relationship from the group and solely examine her by herself, her lack of nuance would be evident. Michonne couldn't possibly be conceived of as an individual or even compelling because of the constant one note characterisation. Michonne only really gathers the attention of the readers of the comics because of the way in which she handles zombies, rather than her ability to show the whole range of human experience or emotion.
>
> (Anon. 2013)

This is a common reading of Michonne's character across websites dedicated to interrogating race within this genre of fiction. The author points to specific conflicts that arise in the transition from the page to the screen. Much is lost

in this transition and many concerned fans comment in agreement, wondering often why black characters fair so poorly within the series' TV version. Within this critique and others, there is a discourse that emerges regarding the shows white writers and largely white fan base. In the responses to these critiques, (presumably, based on their own insistence or profile information) white commenters often dismiss claims that race is significant at all, while others suggest that black fans and critics are the only ones that 'see' the problem of race as indicated in this type of critique. In responding to a similar critique of an article posted on DailyKos (Devega, 2012), one commenter 'samfish' argues,

> You're injecting race war shit where it doesn't belong. I have doubts that you've ever actually read the comics, judging by your critique of Michonne, too. She has never been talkative in the comics, and was especially quiet and mistrustful of everyone when first introduced. She's honestly the most true to her comic counterpart in the series so far.
>
> (Devega 2012)

There are, relatedly, a variety of comment threads wherein conversations take a very similar turn: first there is the article of critique, some fans (primarily fans of colour, according to relevant profile information) respond in agreement, and then a majority of fans (presumably white and male, also based on profile information) argue against the inclusion of race and gender as analytics for understanding the character at all.

Drawing attention to tactics of suppression and erasure in SF fan communities regarding race, gender and sexuality politics allows us to trace the nature of antagonisms that shape conflicts emerging in discourse. It is important to critically engage this type of phenomena as an effect of power that seeks to control the imaginative terrain of a disparate public. The argumentative tactic of erasing the validity of critical claims reduces criticism to individual complaints of disempowerment. In this way, SF becomes a site of social and political contestation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I suggest once more that rhetorical criticism offers some generative avenues for scholarly reflection. In Raymie McKerrow's foundational essay 'Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis' (1989), it is emphasized that a critique of domination focuses on discourses of power that critique oppressive ideologies. As I have demonstrated, a substantial critique can be actualized through rhetorical analysis. A critical rhetoric, as defined by McKerrow, can help to explain the 'silent' and 'non-deliberate' ways that rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals. By examining the effects of power that emerge in the process of creative world-making, we can try to understand the paradigms of control that foreclose infinite possibility. As a corrective, I suggest that black SF produces a counter-narrative that seeks to redeem characters such as Michonne through the act of rhetorical critique. Counter-SF movements within fandom communities employ rhetorical practices of creative invention to interrogate constructions of race, gender, class, sexuality and other social formations that form the core of social differentiation in current civil society.

The search for change, according to McKerrow, is also not specifically towards something predetermined. This is a condition 'Critical rhetoric' delineates in addressing how critiques of power must be concerned with power's

presence in everyday circumstances across a broad social spectrum. A healthy scepticism of commonly accepted truths lies at the core of what is recognized as Foucault's challenge to remain always agitated by permanent criticism. I suggest that this is a consistent theme among texts related to this genre of fiction that explicitly seek to disrupt themes of erasure, to disrupt histories of power, dominance, and control over black and brown bodies that is too often reproduced within contexts that centre whiteness as the standard for heroism and positive ethical formations. Here, there is no political aim per se, but there is a social aim that seeks to articulate ideological dissent. Finally, a critical rhetoric's aim is the 'transformation of the conditions of domination or in the possibility of revolt' that can potentially manifest when one engages in a critique of freedom. One potential mission of a truly transformative creative practice makes undoing the binds of antiblackness, misogynoir and repressive politics central to its purpose.

Finally, I offer that black SF – as a genre – and its related subcultural presence, speaks directly to power and dominance in its very existence as a rhetorical response to exclusion. The very need for its creation and the trajectory of its evolution as an art form and rhetorical practice makes it a valuable area of enquiry for scholarship on rhetoric, communication and audience engagement with media. In attempting to do more than insert black and brown bodies into white histories, into white imaginaries, the revisionist project of doing away with the confines of antiblackness should be a core concern of any SF continuing to concern itself with the question, what if? In many ways, this genre could serve as a strong example of rhetoric's potential to respond to Afropessimism's primary concerns with the maintenance of a grammar of suffering. Additional scholarly enquiry may prove beneficial to invigorating rhetorical theory and producing more cutting edge scholarship that reflects on possibilities yet to be realized.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Savage sexism: Examining gendered intelligence in Hulk and She-Hulk comics

ABSTRACT

By using Hulk and She-Hulk comics from the 1980s as subjects for a case study, this article explores the seemingly lost potential of She-Hulk's intelligence and exposes the problematic depictions of female superheroes as seen in her comics. This article pushes back against the practice of citing fans and their preferences as rationale for the troubling depictions of gendered bodies that so often characterize superhero comics (especially in a context of the 1980s cult of fitness), and examines not only these gendered representations, but also the gender differences in comics readership. In looking for alternatives to and subversive moments against these gendered social messages, this article also discusses the extent to which intelligence can be read as a sexually neutralizing element for Bruce Banner (Hulk) and his cousin Jennifer Walters (She-Hulk). Ultimately, it seems that, at least in the 1980s, attempts at smashing the status quo were countered by the stereotypical sexism produced and perpetuated by patriarchy.

KEYWORDS

The official Marvel Universe Wiki and database describes Jennifer Walters as 'the meek and mousy lawyer cousin of Bruce Banner', and her web page is a mere 476 words in comparison with the 3421 words given to her famous Ph.D. holding cousin (Marvel 2011). This difference is striking, for even

prior to reading a comic book one can immediately surmise the ancillary nature of Jennifer Walters and her derivatively named alter ego She-Hulk. Though Walters is physically larger than her cousin in human form, Banner is given far more publicity. Indeed, the 'Incredible' Hulk is a title with more positive connotation than the 'Savage' or 'Sensational' She-Hulk. Where the Hulk has issues upon issues of comics in which he single-handedly endeavors to fight crime and fight his personal, psychological afflictions, She-Hulk is defined primarily by her relationships to others, initially as Banner's cousin, and later as a member of The Avengers and The Fantastic Four (Marvel 2011).

Though the Marvel Universe is comprised of thousands of characters, these big ideas about big heroes stuck with me. Representation in comics is an issue connected to many identities and perspectives, and discussions of female superheroes are often fraught with difficulty. Moreover, the artists, editors and members of the comics industry today were likely exposed to these comics in their youths, one of many implications this case study of 1980s heroes has for today's comics and audiences. Experiences of fandom and exposure to traditions in comic art can be long-lasting and profound, perhaps accounting for some of the reasons why conversations about representation of women and gender in comics will always be ongoing.

When Walters/She-Hulk entered the Marvel Universe in February of 1980, Banner and The Incredible Hulk had been smashing and thrashing for over twenty years. This time gap seems to further the notion of Walters as a secondary player in Banner's/Hulk's life, and though that idea in itself is of interest, I found it most prudent to use as reference comics from only the 1980s, the first decade during which the super cousins coexisted. This effort to facilitate direct comparison should eliminate some of the external variables influencing popular culture and comic art that differed over time. In adapting a scientific mindset not unlike Dr Banner's, it is possible to create an experiment of sorts as a way to analyse the relationship between Banner, Walters and their alter egos.

Due to the absence of pre-existing scholarship, the main goal of this research is to examine the gendered social messages presented in Hulk and She-Hulk comics, and to raise meaningful questions regarding the implications of these differences in representation for fandom and comics communities. In doing so, I hope to explore the seemingly lost potential of She-Hulk's intelligence, and ultimately bring to light the problematic depictions of female superheroes as seen in her comics. Hulk and She-Hulk, though often incorrectly perceived as inarticulate in their transformed states, clearly communicate volumes about views of intelligence in gendered bodies.

Many of She-Hulk's social shortcomings can be traced to corporate trends and marketing strategies. In his article 'Ownership concentration in the U.S. comic book industry', Matthew P. McAllister cites a 1995 survey stating that the target demographic of comic book companies are 6- to 19-year-old males with 'a lot of disposable income, and the willingness to dispose of it' (2001: 22). A 1991 article from the *Journal of Advertising Research* found that '39 percent of kids are comic book readers'. Furthermore, the study conducted found that comic readership is most differentiated by gender in the genre of Marvel superhero comics: 'with Disney it's 50–50; with Archie, boys have a slight edge at 55 percent versus 45 percent … With Marvel Jr., boys represent 68 percent, and with Marvel Sr., the boys jump to a whopping 79 percent' (Baxter 1991).

Thinking along the conceptual framework laid out in McAllister's article, one might postulate that the gender gaps in superhero comic readership are perpetuated because it is more profitable for mainstream corporations to continue publishing popular material than to expand and alter their content. Additionally, it is of interest to question whether the fact that a disproportionately large percentage of males read superhero comics is due to the fact that male characters are those who are most often represented positively. Though many comics are now aimed at a more adult audience, the idea that adolescents in their (at least relatively) formative years are viewing this material provides an impetus for a closer examination of exactly what messages are being presented.

Both Hulk and She-Hulk comics perpetuate the stereotypical hypersexualized superhero bodies that have come to characterize the comics industry, as well as stereotypical views of personified intelligence. Ideas regarding gender and intelligence can be traced back to the United States' intellectual and artistic love of Classical Greece, as evidenced by the views on Greek tragic heroines expressed in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Feminist classicist Sarah Pomeroy noted, 'Aristotle judged it inappropriate for a female character to be portrayed as manly or clever' (Pomeroy 1975: 98). As intelligence and masculinity were equated, such values became mores reinforced by European and American societies alike in the centuries that followed.

Some of the views of intelligence that may currently be considered socially normative are outlined in a study conducted on children in an area between Finland and Russia, which found that

> the prototype of the intelligent male turned out to be a professor type, characterized merely by his exceptional cognitive abilities and lacking typical heterosexual features. Thus our cultural model of the intelligent person, whether male or female, seems to differ from the predominant heterosexual ideals by being somehow less a less masculine or less feminine human being.
>
> (Raty, Komulainen, Skorokhodova, Kolesnikov, Vadim, and Hamalainen 2011: 4)

Because the study operates on the basis of a cross-cultural perspective, and because no comparable American or western study could be found at the time when this article was written, we may cautiously extrapolate its findings to include the cross-national perspective that would permit its application to American children as well.

The idea of intelligence as a sexually neutralizing element applies most certainly to Banner, but only somewhat to Walters. Though the 1980s incarnation of Bruce Banner is considerably more muscular (and thus more masculine) than he appeared in the origin comics of 1962, he is established as an intelligent character because he wears glasses and though his muscles are defined, he is relatively small in comparison with his comic co-stars (David 2005: 8).

While this sort of gender neutrality is consistent with the claims of the Russian study, the same cannot necessarily be said for Walters. Upon a quick glance at the cover of *The Essential Savage She-Hulk* (Lee, Kraft, Buscema, and Vosburg 2006), it is evident that She-Hulk is simply a large, green version of Walters, with longer and darker hair. Though Walters is, as previously mentioned, described as 'meek and mousy', those traits are best (and only)

Figure 1: Cover image from The Savage She-Hulk *volume 1 (Feb. 1980).*

applied to her personality, not her physical appearance (Marvel 2011). Walters addresses Banner as 'Doc' while he (either fondly or condescendingly, most probably the former) calls her 'Little Jen' (2006).

Her body is clearly feminine and curvaceous, and panels that show her face in a close-up view indicate the presence of make-up as well. The cover image depicts Walters in pink and white, colours typically construed to represent femininity and purity, respectively. While this may not have been intended by illustrator John Buscema and the artists behind the comics, Walters' attire certainly emphasizes rather than hides her femininity.

The presentation of Jennifer Walters is contradictory of the Russian study in the sense that her intelligence is depicted by her surroundings, and not by her attire. However, some of the children in the study accessorized their drawings of intelligent girls by having them hold tests with high marks (Raty,

Komulainen, Skorokhodova, Kolesnikov, Vadim, and Hamalainen 2011: 16). The illustrators of *The Savage She-Hulk* employ similar tactics (2006). When Walters is first introduced, she is reading a large book, holding a pencil in her mouth, and is standing over the desk in her office, the door to which indicates her status as an attorney.

Walters' situation is also unique in her simply being an exceptionally intelligent, graduate degree-holding, female superhero. Though the Marvel Wiki database ranks Jennifer Walters' intelligence as five out of seven bars, which outranks Peter Parker's intelligence, she is not featured in *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*'s online article about 'The smartest superheroes' and Parker is (Pisani 2006). What's worse is that of the ten heroes selected, only one, Oracle, was female. The article acknowledges this 'dearth of female superheroes', and quotes Marvel executive editor Tom Brevoort who chalks the problem up to the fact that 'the infrastructure for the Marvel cosmology was largely laid down in the early 1960s, and at that time, the notion of a supersmart woman was still threatening to the readership as a whole' (Pisani 2006).

This statement is problematic for two reasons. The first is that, contrary to Brevoort's claim, there is an abundance of female superheroes. Out of 3301 Marvel characters, 637 are female, and the majority of those 637 are heroes, not villains (Marvel). The deeper issue is that of the many female characters in Marvel's universe, relatively few are as accomplished and educated as Jennifer Walters. The second problem with Brevoort's statement is that, as previously established, the readership of Marvel comics is primarily adolescent and primarily male. I would argue that the 'supersmart woman' is more threatening to the corporate stability of mainstream comics publishers and the maintenance of the societal status quo than to the readers, and that the ever-elusive notion of 'what the readers want' is simply a shield of sorts that misrepresents fandom in order to justify the perpetuation of popular-but-problematic superhero comics. Scholar Aaron Taylor and the sources he employs claim that

> In a profit-driven industry, fans ultimately decide the look of super-bodies, and when one considers that 91.5% of the superhero audience consists of white, middle-class, adolescent males … it is not difficult to deduce why heroines often appear like inflatable dolls in a hormonal playground.
>
> (2007: 344–60)

While the preferences of fans are certainly held responsible for a great deal of comic book content, the industry is actually responsible for publishing what it does. Because it is not profitable to publish material that the fans might reject, comics companies will continue to put cost ahead of content. The potential to generate socially or ideologically subversive material is almost entirely diminished by the desire for economic profit.

I would also hypothesize that Walters and She-Hulk are sexualized and kept traditionally female (in both personality and appearance) so that male readers might more readily accept the evidently threatening notion of an intelligent female protagonist. Hypersexualization and femininity may in this case be interpreted to serve as compensation for the assumedly masculine qualities of intelligence and physical strength.

Though intelligence and physical strength have historically been classified as masculine traits, the superhero universe does not always see those traits paired together. Indeed, Banner and Walters exemplify the dysphoria

and lack of positive, stable identity that result from the challenges posed by inhabiting super bodies. As intelligent as Banner and Walters are, neither of them obtained their powers willingly, and the cousins' relationships with their transformations play a significant role in shaping their gendered identities. Developing an understanding of the influence of transformation on Hulk and She-Hulk requires an understanding of several pre-existing factors.

First, it is important to remember the cultural situation of 1980s America and how popular views about body image are reflected in corporeal representations of superheroes. Taylor states that 'Superheroes are the ultimate paragons for the late twentieth-century cult of fitness. Their ultra-hard bodies, muscled beyond all hope of anatomical verisimilitude, enact wild displays of impossible physical prowess' (2007: 351). The popularity of fitness for men and women and the preference for toned bodies is reflected in the depiction of the incredibly muscular Hulk. His appearance plays on readers' fantasies of transforming from someone small or weak into something stronger than ever seen before, and draws visual parallels to the increasingly popular bodybuilding culture of the late twentieth century.

Though Taylor views both 'comic machismo' and bodybuilding as 'spectacles' that reverse gender roles by objectifying males, Hulk and She-Hulk comics seem to portray mainly the aspects of the fitness mentality which maintain the polarity of gender differentiation (2007: 351). While The Hulk derives his name from his musculature and body mass, She-Hulk's nomenclature stems from her relationship to Hulk more than her appearance. Though Walters' height increases drastically, she still maintains a toned body and hourglass figure, and even wears make-up. The cover image of *Savage She-Hulk #1* is reminiscent of anthropologist Helen Gremillion's description of female bodybuilders who 'accessorize performances with long hair and nails', and 'compensate for heavily muscled bodies with reconstructive breast and facial surgeries' (2005: 22). Though cosmetic or reconstructive surgery is not present in Walters' stories, The Savage She-Hulk's physique is savage only in her shredded clothing, claw-like fingernails and frowning facial expression.

When moving into discourse on Banner's and Walters' views of their fragmented identities, it is of interest to call into question Marvel mastermind Stan Lee's intent in establishing his characters as intelligent. Benjamin Radford of *The Skeptical Inquirer* notes that 'Lee – whose grasp of science is admittedly shaky – used science to ground and lend a sense of validity to characters. Thus, many heroes gained their powers through scientific, naturalistic (if not wholly realistic) processes' (2007: 35–36). Can we as readers and scholars attribute Banner's backstory to a simple search to justify the Hulk's powers?

Though Jennifer Walters is not a scientist herself, she too obtains her powers through a somewhat scientific scenario. After planting a potentially injurious rumor regarding the suspects of a criminal trial, Walters is shot by the convicts she is opposing in court, and is saved from imminent death by a do-it-yourself blood transfusion from her cousin Bruce. Unfortunately, Banner's blood contains the mutagen responsible for his Hulk powers, and that condition is passed to his cousin during the transfusion (not unreflective of the historical context of the 1980s AIDS epidemic, but I digress). What is striking about this aspect of Walters' story is that she must fulfill the stereotypical role of damsel in distress in order to obtain superpowers. The entirety of She-Hulk's origin story is dictated by patriarchy in terms of the gendered power differential between Banner and Walters.

Where Walters is entirely dependent on male intervention, her cousin is depicted as the epitome of practicality, strength and altruism. Before Walters is shot, she ignores Banner's warning that criminals may be following and/ or planning to kill her, reinforcing the notion of men being more logical than women. Banner's own origin story is a substantially more flattering one. Banner is victimized to some extent because he describes feeling 'betrayed' by his colleague who would not stop the launch of a gamma bomb, but the significant part of his story is the way he heroically 'raced to the [launch] site', and recounts his selflessness in saving a teenager who happened to be nonchalantly playing a harmonica on nuclear testing grounds: 'I just had time to toss the boy into a protective trench – but I caught the blast myself!' (2006).

Given that Banner's accident occurred as an act of sacrifice, one might make the assumption that he would be more accepting of his jade giant problem than Walters, who had no control over the life-or-death situation from which she was saved. However, taking into consideration the concept of intelligence as a price being paid for superpowers, it's easy to see how the cousins might come to resent or at the very least have the tumultuous relationships they do with their transformative states.

Initially, Banner's transformation seems almost punitive, with the loss of personality in favor of newly acquired-but-uncontrollable physical prowess. However, the Gray Hulk that came to characterize the 1980s is sentient, speaks coherently, and maintains Banner's personality if not his full intelligence as well. *The Incredible Hulk #339* illustrates this concept: The Hulk displays his characteristic smashing, speaking in full sentences, and then holds a crying boy in his arms, reassuring him that 'It's okay. No one's gonna die' (2005: 211–12).

Where the intelligence of Banner's Hulk changes over time (and with variations in skin color), Walters' She-Hulk is fully capable of thought, feeling and proper speech. Prior to Walters' first transformation into the She-Hulk, she is lying in a hospital bed recovering from the blood transfusion provided by her cousin, awaiting proper medical treatment. However, the doctors who come to treat her are criminals in disguise, and not doctors at all. Indeed, they attempt to administer 'fateful chloroform' gas in an attempt to kill Walters while she was recovering from serious injury, lying helpless in bed (though sporting a full face of make-up and perfectly styled hair). The fear in Walters' eyes quickly becomes rage as she transforms in an act of self-defense (2006).

This contributes to a paradox of sorts in terms of the circumstances leading to the emergence of, and the characteristics of, Walters' She-Hulk form. What we see in both cases is that Walters must occupy normative female gender roles (perhaps even stereotypes) in order to obtain any degree of empowerment. Femininity to Walters and She-Hulk is a restrictive mechanism by which intelligence may be countered or compensated for.

As She-Hulk, Walters expresses disgust at the derogatory and disbelieving comments of the men who tried to kill her. They exclaim (original emphasis), 'It's a *girl*! But look at the size of her!' 'Her skin! It-it's *green*!' 'It's like – she's some kind'a *She-Hulk*!' She-Hulk easily hurls her hospital bed, declaring that 'You called me a She-Hulk! And a She-Hulk I'll be!' This can be interpreted as a direct response to the inequalities and inherent flaws in the constrictions of patriarchy: She-Hulk explicitly blames the men's comments for her angered state, rising to occupy their biased fears but implying that she is aware of exactly why she is behaving so dangerously.

Elizabeth Settoducato

Despite She-Hulk's impressive strength and impressive understanding of her own power, her physical characteristics impede her ability to be taken seriously by her fellow comic characters, and more importantly, by comic readers. It makes little sense for the criminals to refer to She-Hulk as 'it', because her hypersexualized appearance makes it explicitly clear that she is a female. She-Hulk dons a shredded, swimsuit-like garment that reveals a great deal of her breasts and back. Often, large portions of her thighs are exposed as well. Where Banner's Hulk is literally a hulking, muscular creature, She-Hulk has the nipped waist of a Barbie doll, long, flowing hair, eyeliner and lipstick, and long fingernails (2006). The message that her image presents is particularly worrisome to present to adolescent readers: what we learn from She-Hulk is that even if a woman is smart, the only way she can or should be strong is through an accident, and once she has that power, it's acceptable to ridicule her because of the extent to which she presents her femininity.

Indeed, Walters often experiences the negative impacts of such messages. Though Walters knows that she is an assertive and qualified lawyer (she introduces herself as 'Jennifer Walters, legal eagle'), her abilities are brought into question because of her gender. When she quickly flees her father Sherriff Walters' office in order to avoid a public transformation into the She-Hulk, the assistant district attorney is shown thinking 'I knew she wouldn't be able to take my place as prosecutor – not even once – but it's what she wanted! Women just can't cut it in a high-pressure man's world!'

The physical and intellectual limitations of Walters/She-Hulk are products of the 'high-pressure man's world' in which they are drawn, and not reflections on the capabilities and character of Walters/She-Hulk. She is constantly forced to take a backseat to male characters, and is isolated from whatever other women exist in her world. Walters is burdened by keeping her She-Hulk state a secret, and is not given a truly trustworthy person to tell about her condition. Her 'dearest, best friend, Jill' is killed, and aside from an evil, robotic imitation-She-Hulk and a hospital nurse, Walters does not interact with female characters on any kind of regular basis.

Where male characters in Hulk comics can be Banner's friends or colleagues at least as often as they can be villains, the male characters in Walters/She-Hulk's storyline are typically set up to challenge or overshadow her, and fellow superheroes are not an exception.

The 6 July 1980 issue of The Savage She-Hulk promises interactions with Iron Man. In most cases, the covers to such comics would be shared equally by both superheroes, or, similar to television programs, the 'guest-star' would receive less of the spotlight than the recurring character. With *The Savage She-Hulk*, this is not the case. Iron Man consumes more than two thirds of the cover space, and a smaller image of She-Hulk is seen (assumedly reflected) in Iron Man's mask. The fight between Iron Man and She-Hulk is characterized by a series of angry thought bubbles that show She-Hulk always one step ahead of Iron Man's tactics.

This battle scene is important because She-Hulk simultaneously demonstrates her skill in combat and her self-confidence. She tells Iron Man 'I don't like people who try to push me around! I don't like you! No one pushes me with impunity, Iron Man! No one!' When Iron Man asks (emphasis original) 'You mean … you actually … speak English?!' She-Hulk has no patience for his condescending disbelief, replying 'So, what's it sound like to you, little man – *Greek*?!' Still astounded by She-Hulk's composure, Iron Man requests a timeout from their battle (emphasis here is the author's): 'Guess I just thought you'd be … *dumber*, like – well, let's discuss it with our feet on terra firma!'

Figure 2: July 1980 cover with Iron Man.

Here, we see a very important phenomena occurring: readers are drawn away from She-Hulk's power (and distracted from the possibility of Iron Man losing the battle) and put in a position to question and inadvertently attack her intelligence. Though it is possible to argue that this questioning arises from connections drawn to the initially inarticulate transformed state of the Hulk, the intellect and sentience of the 1980s grey Hulk nullifies this argument, leaving She-Hulk's gender as the only remaining reason for Iron Man to be so taken aback.

Even more startling than Iron Man's discovery of She-Hulk's intellect is the number of panels in which She-Hulk is depicted with her legs spread, or in other seemingly sexual, often compromising positions (Figure 3). She-Hulk's depiction is unique in the sense of her dual identity, which Taylor would have us attribute to the 'formal strategies of dismemberment' that occur when 'heroes and villains alike are chopped up by the borders of the panels, their anatomy dissected and spread across the page' (2007: 348). While this concept

Figure 3: Assorted Savage She-Hulk *panels, 1980–1981.*

is certainly applicable to both Hulk and She-Hulk, the heroes' genders play a significant role in the depiction of full body panels.

The fact that as a woman, She-Hulk is given full body panels at all is unique, for Taylor notes that 'The general rule of thumb seems to be that any panel featuring a female character must always depict her from the bust up' (2007: 354).

However, the content of the aforementioned panels is problematic in the sense that it subjects She-Hulk to sexualized and stereotypical female roles. Hulk is often shown lunging, fighting or preparing to fight (Figure 4). While She-Hulk may do those things as well, she nearly always does them with her legs spread or with her costume torn to reveal portions of her back, breasts, buttocks or thighs (Figure 3 again).

Figure 4: Panels from Peter David's Incredible Hulk *volume 1.*

The fact that Jennifer Walters finds liberation in existing as She-Hulk (and actually prefers to remain in that state: 'I couldn't seem to make things work as Jen Walters, so I decided to stay The She-Hulk!') does not fully or necessarily justify the use of sexually suggestive imagery in depicting her. Walters likes being She-Hulk because she obtains extreme physical strength and excessive beauty while maintaining her personality and intelligence. She believes that she gains respect first from the fear with which others regard her, and later from her status as a crime fighter. If sexual liberation was indeed Marvel's sole goal, many of the problematic panels could be forgiven, or more easily understood. However, instead of using this sexual power for good, Marvel uses it for pin-up. More specifically, Marvel markets She-Hulk's sexuality as a means of

Figure 5: Special full-page pin-up section from a January, 1982 issue.

attracting and maintaining readers, reflecting once more the idea of She-Hulk/Walters conforming to gender norms as consequence of having powers.

This is yet another Marvel misstep: what exactly is gained by excessively sexual depictions of She-Hulk? This marketing aimed at a straight, male audience, ignores and underserves fans who want to see heroes represented with more complexity and nuance. It is harmful to dismiss She-Hulk's initial depictions as simply a product of their time, for doing so elides the problematic history of the male gaze's influence in popular media. She-Hulk's appearance has, however, changed over the past several decades, far more noticeably than her cousin and male counterpart's.

Are these changes due to a changing awareness of the importance of visual representation, or are they attempts to keep her relevant to a particular audience? If so, what can be done to fight the double standards and myriad frustrations that accompany such changes? Why are some fans valued more highly than others? And when does homage to well-respected artists of years

past result in the reproduction of problematic depictions? These are some of many questions that may be generative for future scholarship to pursue, especially given that the current series of She-Hulk comics has been cancelled altogether. In October 2014, The A.V. Club published a compelling piece calling on Marvel to save She-Hulk (Sava 2014). She-Hulk's dwindling sales reflect the mainstream comics industry's focus on maximizing profit rather than reaching a broad audience.

Where Banner and the Hulk exhibit a journey of growth and coming to accept one's various personae, Walters as She-Hulk skips that evolutionary process and enters the Marvel Universe intelligent, aware and eager to embrace her inner green giantess. She-Hulk's circumstances provide a plethora of opportunities for Marvel to break the proverbial mould, but sadly, each attempt at smashing the status quo is checked by a heavy dose of the stereotypical sexism produced and perpetuated by patriarchy. Combatting this problem with purchasing power is a step in the right direction for those who can afford to buy comics: retailers (especially local shops) and creators doing good work are always in need of consumer support. However, continued conversation and attempts to hold creators accountable for their content are necessary in order to ensure that all fans have the opportunity to find and stay engaged with the complex heroes they love.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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The fan and the female superhero in comic books

ABSTRACT

Despite an increasing number of fangirls, female superheroes continue to represent the fears and concerns of male readers. These characters are not representative of girls or women despite their possession of a female form. Through the characterization and body shapes of male and female superheroes, the comics have remained focused upon fanboys. The female body in comics is not powerful but, instead, reinforces male dominance. While fangirls have made an effort to become a vocal force within comic book culture, the design of comic book content continues to marginalize girls and women.

INTRODUCTION

Ask any American woman of a certain age about Wonder Woman and you may well get a story about how, as a kid, she did Wonder Woman spins with girlfriends, wore Wonder Woman underoos (underwear), savoured the comic books, and loved the television show with Lynda Carter. It is rare if a woman mentions Wonder Woman's violence or copies her fighting stance. Very few reference today's Wonder Woman comic. It is not news that the genders view violence differently but there has been relatively little scholarly examination of violent women outside of criminology. Women and violence almost always

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1. An exhibition on comics at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University is typical in that only women as subjects of violence is acknowledged (N. A. 2015).

2. Katharine Marzi examines Green Arrow, Superman and Batman as vigilantes (2015: 67–82).

means women as the victims of violence and not the perpetrators of it.[1] This article attempts to break new ground by examining the violence of the Amazon and her comic book peers from the perspective of female fans while also examining the place of superheroines in fan culture.

ALL-AMERICAN HEROINES

The superheroines that we examine are American, with a focus on characters emerging from the United States. They display a particularly American viewpoint. Umberto Eco, in his 'The myth of Superman', argued that the Man of Steel possessed particularly American qualities in that he rejected fighting for truth and justice at the structural level and preferred to fight smaller battles of immediate and clear significance. As Eco noted, Superman essentially fought for capitalism and a bureaucratic legality (2004). Our heroines do so as well. Despite being ostensibly feminist, they attack chauvinists with a punch instead of forming a battle plan against the structures of oppression. Oracle, Black Canary (mother and daughter), Supergirl, and the others do not challenge the system. With the exception of Huntress, a vigilante like the others but one comfortable with killing her prey, these superheroines work within the broad boundaries of the legal system.[2]

Wonder Woman subdued the bad guys with violence, albeit more subdued violence than her male peers. She did so for an audience of females that were generally invisible to comic book creators. Girls have always read comics, as Gloria Steinem famously acknowledged in her introduction to a 1972 collection of Wonder Woman stories. Yet the advertisements for such traditionally male toys as gliders, whoopee cushions and airguns combined with the ridiculously skimpy clothing of female characters indicate that the comics were aimed at males. As two examples of sexualized characters, Power Girl has a cut-out in her uniform that reveals her breasts, which leave her so incredibly top-heavy that it is miracle she can fly, while the similarly endowed Oracle catches a taxicab to the airport donned in a swimsuit with a cape and go-go boots. Males in these stories are fully covered in non-sexualized dress (see Dixon and Gorfinkel 1999; Kelly et al. 2007; Levitz 1978).

A heavily muscled male character is not the equivalent of a busty, barely clad superheroine as these muscles are aimed at male fans. As writer Carolyn Siede points out, women are not attracted to the same qualities that men find appealing. She quotes a fan, Lysandra, as saying, 'Heroes tend to be drawn with tons of bulky muscles and weird proportions that I find unappealing'. Other women concur, with Sarah adding that the focus on muscles 'veers into the grotesque'. Sarah notes that the designs of Hulk and She-Hulk illustrate how both male and female characters are designed for a male reader; 'one is a musclebound power fantasy, whereas the other is a powerlifting pinup girl' (Siede 2015). The focus of comics is still largely on male fans.

The rise of the fangirl has only recently been acknowledged, perhaps most obviously as men at Comic Cons take note of the lines at the women's restrooms and geek spaces get attention for ugly behaviour to geek women (Stuller 2015: 39–43). Batgirl, as one example, had been aimed at boys and men since her creation in 1961. Babs Tarr, who became the first long-term female artist to work on a Bat-comic when she started drawing the rebooted Batgirl, aka Barbara Gordon, in 2014, stated, 'I remember going into a store and asking for a comic I would like and the clerks not really knowing what to give me that would interest me' (Beedle 2014). Despite the increasing number

of female fans, the comic industry largely seems to remain clueless. In 2012, a DC Comics Nielsen Survey looked at the reception of the New 52 collection. As one fangirl noted, 'The words "women" and "female" are not actually used anywhere in their reports. Something which, to me, is extremely telling about the way they look at their business' (Pantozzi 2012).

Fangirls pay attention to clothing and style as well as the treatment of female characters. They are not just fanboys with different genitalia. The DC Comic Fangirl on Tumblr has postings that show superheroes in Elizabethan dress, a woman putting on full-face make-up, and complaints about sexualizing the death of a woman in a comic (DC Comic Fangirl 2014). Tarr changed Batgirl to appeal to women. She made her more stylish, with an outfit that any girl could put together, while continuing to draw a tough, strong violent woman. Fans noticed, with one observing that the character had a life independent from the Batguys and that heroism 'really is for everyone' (Kanagama 2015: 26).

VIOLENCE AND WOMEN

But suffering remains largely for women. Despite the increasing awareness of a female audience, women in comics are still the victims of violence. They pay a penalty for their gender that male characters do not, perhaps in a subtle message by comic book creators, overwhelmingly male, that comic books are a male space. Batgirl and Batman both suffered back injuries, but Batman fully recovered while Batgirl transformed into the wheelchair-bound Oracle. The theme of women as victims is so prevalent that fan Gail Simone coined 'Women in refrigerators' in 1999 to refer to it, with other fans picking up the term (Oat 2008). Simone noticed that most of her favourite female characters eventually met a violent end. As she writes, 'Not every woman in comics has been killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies befall her, but given the following list, it's hard to think up exceptions' (1999). The 1960s Elasti-Girl is the only original DC Comics Doom Patroller to stay dead as all the males in the group revived when the comic rejuvenated in the 1970s. Female characters, such as Batgirl, Aquagirl and Hawkwoman, are ultimately weak enough to be destroyed. Simone created her 'Women in refrigerators' list because she recognized that fewer female superheroes meant fewer female readers as potential fangirls recognize that they have little value to comic book creators.

If femininity in comics means largely being the subject instead of the actor of violence, then the question arises about the femininity of violent women characters. Putting a female form in a skirt, blouse and jacket does not necessarily create a truly female character. French feminist theorist, Monique Wittig, argued that lesbians are not women because they do not share the same life experiences, such as living with a man and bearing children.[3] Superwomen who look like women but do not share the same life experiences are not truly women. Female metahumans actively use violence to solve problems, show little fashion sense, and display little knowledge common to women (Winick and March 2012: 1). Catwoman, in listing the risks of daily life, mentions talking to a stranger, jaywalking and driving a car. As her all-male creators do not realize, women face different daily risks than men and avoidance of sexual assault or harassment is a primary concern. A real woman would place rape above jaywalking on a risk list. These strong female characters generally

3. Wittig lived in an era when few lesbians bore children.

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behave like men, albeit ones in skimpy costumes and with a tendency to become victims. They are not women for female fans but a caricature of women for male fans.

There are more female characters in prominent roles than ever before but not all of these women behave like women traditionally have done. Wonder Woman, as one example, has become more violent to the concern of her female fans (St John 2014: 45–48). The Amazon's abandonment of her magic lasso for a sword may be part of a push to make the character more accept-able to male audiences.[4] Her action may also be part of the turn to positive portrayals of women's aggression in mass culture, as art historian Maud Lavin has argued. Whereas aggressive women were once punished at the end of the story for transgressing gender norms, aggressive women, like Lara Croft, are now rewarded (Lavin 2010: 144). However, Lavin's argument presumes that aggression is used in constructive ways.

Noah Berlatsky, a comic's scholar, argues that superhero narratives, partic-ularly Batman, use violence as a 'cheap route to serious meaningfulness'. As comics have reached for cultural legitimacy, they have become more violent to signal maturity. He writes, 'A crimefighter wearing a mask seems like it's for kids, but if the crimefighter interrogates suspects by breaking their fingers one by one, that's verisimilitude'. As he notes, Ms Marvel, aka Kamala Khan, becomes a superhero when she stumbles into her powers. She is not trau-matized by the death of a loved one, unlike Batman or Spiderman, and she has no interest in violence. Her first super-act is to save a girl from drowning. When Khan is (accidentally) shot, it is a horrifying and wrongful act instead of a normal part of life. When she helps Wolverine dispose of an alligator, Khan says, 'I don't like hurting stuff', she says, 'Even giant sewer alligators. I mean … is it possible to help people without hurting other people. Or, you know … reptiles?' Wolverine replies that if you do not hurt others, then you will be hurt (Berlatsky 2015).

The Comic Book Resources Community that weighs in on the issue of violence is overwhelmingly critical of Berlatsky's attack. A reader from Sudbury, England argues that Ms Marvel is aiming not at an adult audience, but a younger and female one and that graphic violence has long enter-tained western readers. Ilovecomics sees violence as realism with attempts to condemn it as ridiculous as it is not 'negative'. Shamus suggests that the entire debate is merely a straw man as comics are about artifice and genre conven-tions and any attempt to realistically depict the impact of violence would leave superheroes ridden with trauma. FattyTravy concludes that we live in a violent world so the depiction of people doing terrible things is acceptable (Exile001, Ilovecomics, Shamus and FattyTravy 2015). The genders of the commenta-tors are unknown, though a female fan might not argue that the depiction of violence upon female superheroes lacks realism as she counts the women in refrigerators.

THE MYTH OF HEROISM

Superheroes who are female appear to occupy a place that is not fully visible. These characters exist but they are easily forgotten, killed off or otherwise marginalized. It is arguable as to whether such characters qualify as superheroes despite being metahuman do-gooders. They may be properly defined as goddesses.

They do not appear to be the heroes of myth. A myth can be understood as a recurrent cultural narrative, which is revised and repeated over an extended

period of time which works to create collective representations and symbols. One of the central aspects to the myth and its capacity to create cultural narratives is the figure of the hero. Mythologist Joseph Campbell explores representations of the hero in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he argues that 'the hero is the man of self-achieved submission' ([1949] 1972: 218). For Campbell, the hero must move beyond his individuality and instead fight for social and cultural order, in short, the greater cultural good.

> The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rights of passage: separation – initiation – return … A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellowman.
>
> ([1949] 1972: 218)

In the traditional journey, the hero must survive the adventure on his strength and cunning alone. His return is complicated by his obligation to his community and difficulty in reverting back into the community's rituals and routines. Campbell's discussion of the hero's journey does not include a female hero. Woman

> represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending.
>
> (Campbell [1949] 1972: 116)

Such a description makes clear the gender roles continue to reflect a heritage of binary oppositions. Campbell's explanation connects the female as part of the terrain of the heroic journey. She is both the promise of the adventure as it begins and the conquering finish that is more experience and knowledge. It is revealing to look back at a formative moment in the construction of the modern conception of the body as it unfolds during the second half of the nineteenth century. Imagery reflects multiple social contexts in its creation and encounters. Violence is intimately connected with the body. It is enacted by a body on a body and experienced bodily. Violent acts can inform, reflect and reinforce structures of oppression found in sexism and racism. Therefore, it is important to consider how violence is visually constructed and used in comics.

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY REPRESENTATION AND ITS 'ICONOGRAPHY OF MISOGYNY'

While superheroes are a mid-twentieth-century construction, the roots of this type of narrative are in the Victorian Era. Gender expectations in both Europe and North America became more sharply divided where men and women occupied separate spheres of society. While men lived a life connected to the extended community or public sphere, women were expected to live largely housebound or the private sphere through their roles

in home management and child rearing. The notion of separate spheres rests on a specific understanding and definition of what constitutes 'natural' characteristics of women and men. Women's place in the home was justified by focusing on feminine physicality as weaker, although they had the potential to be morally superior to men as long as they kept to the expected domestic space. These gendered expectations extended to notions of correct feminine sexual desire and worries over overt sexual appetites of women. Women who were overly interested in intellectual pursuits were considered unfeminine and perceived as attempting to usurp men's 'natural' intellectual superiority.

In *Idols of Perversity*, cultural theorist Bram Dijkstra creates a catalogue of artistic representation, or as he has described it 'a veritable iconography of misogyny' that seem to reflect the fear and hostility felt by bourgeois men towards women in the second half of the nineteenth century (1986: viii). The danger found expression in the 'New Woman', whose demands seemed to fall in direct challenge to the traditional institutions of marriage, work and family. Thus, the depictions of women in art are equal measure alluring and terrifying. They haunt the collective unconscious of the Victorian *fin de siècle* male and his fears of physical and moral decay. The two major perceptions that have been attached to women trying to move beyond the social constraints imposed upon them by a patriarchal society are the mannish intellectual or the oversexed femme fatale. In his text *Satan in Society/by a Physician*, Nicholas Francis Cooke warned that

> if carried out in actual practice, this matter of 'Woman's Rights' will speedily eventuate in the most prolific source of her wrongs. She will become rapidly unsexed, and degraded from her present exalted position to the level of man, without his advantages; she will cease to be the gentle mother, and become the Amazonian brawler.
>
> (1870: 85)

What the art and attitudes of the *fin de siècle* make clear is that the female body had become a means of projecting male fears and feelings of inadequacy. This is what Susan Bordo refers to as 'an oppressor/oppressed model which theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women – who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless' (1993: 23). There are a number of archetypes that develop out of nineteenth-century imagery and attitudes that are employed in comics as well as films that feature action heroines. In addition to the Amazon archetype, there is the Femme Fatale (Dominatrix), Rape-avenger and Mother. Lane Crothers analysis of gender and representation in American popular culture argues that things like movies, music, television programmes and comics even, 'can bring the ideas, values, norms and social practices embedded in American popular culture into contact – and often tension – with those of other cultures around the world' (2006: 2). The body of the superheroine has become contested terrain by simultaneously reinforcing female archetypes and at times, attempting to subvert them. Crothers identifies approximately four stereotypes that reflect female gender roles within popular culture that are consumed globally: The sex object, the victim, the traditional wife/mother and the 'power woman'. The gender role stereotypes associated with men tend to be fewer than those of women. Men are typically either strong/assertive or wimpy/effeminate (implicitly or explicitly homosexual), thus

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males who are shown to have appropriately male values include those in positions of authority or who enjoy athletic prowess; sexual conquests are their daily stock-in-trade. 'Failed' males, however, hold weak positions at work, are dominated and mocked by colleagues and families, or are incompetent at sexual gamesmanship.

<div align="right">(Crothers 2006: 3–4)</div>

The stereotypes or prevailing archetypes often seem to align in binary oppositions which impacts the narrative development.

The comic is an interesting cultural product. It is an art form that has historical roots in ancient cultures like Egypt with its sequential juxtaposed panels. The term graphic novel implies an elevation of status, where the comic book denotes a periodical that is published on a weekly or monthly basis and often for children. The graphic novel is typically a longer narrative, dealing with more serious themes for a more mature audience. The power of the comic or graphic novel is that it combines both the visual and textual. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) W. J. T. Mitchell explores how written and visual texts have been historically framed as dichotomous and excluding one another in their very acts of expression. Mitchell's overarching argument is that theories of image–text difference are more telling about the historical context and aesthetic and political commitments of their predecessors than they do about any difference between image and text.

Thus the American comic book has a history as an alternative form of entertainment for a diverse population while simultaneously reflecting American culture often in visual and contextual extremes. This is especially evident in the portrayal of women and female superheroes. As illustrated in the opening of this article, Wonder Woman has been the most prominent female comic book heroine since her incarnation in 1941 by Harvard psychologist William Moulton Marston. Celebrated for his feminist leaning conception of her, she is later co-opted by the feminist movement of the 1970s as a symbol of feminine power.

According to Greek Mythology, Amazons are a race of women warriors descended from Ares (literally meaning 'battle') the god of war and the nymph Harmonia. Amazons as a result are fierce and love war. The Amazonian myth reflects a male fantasy that is both a frightening and fascinating antithesis to ancient Athenian society (much like Cooke's later use of the Amazon as a contrast to the nineteenth-century feminine ideal). In the Greek patriarchal society, women were also relegated to the home. For Blake Tyrrell,

What the myth says of Amazon customs and homelands derives neither from inquiry nor from independent creation. It is a product of the Greek view of the human condition as civilized, mortal, Greek, and, most of all, male. When men cease to be men the world ceases to be ordered; and the topsy-turvy world of the Amazon results.

<div align="right">(1984: 63)</div>

One of the goals of the feminist movement was to investigate the cultural construction of 'woman' as a category by focusing on the female body as a powerful and prominent site of struggle. In *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970–2006* (2007), Rikke Schubart addresses the mixed feelings and division that the female hero elicits in critics. 'Post-feminists welcome her as progressive and a sign of equality.

From their point of view, her use of masculine violence and discourse signals the end of an outdated psychoanalytic taxonomy of male versus female (active versus passive, and so forth' (Schubart 2007: 6). In contrast, feminist critics view the depiction of the action heroine with some reservations due to the overly sexualized focus on the female body. For many feminists, this seems to only reinforce a kind of oppression through the body. This raises further issues regarding gender and the hero. How is the viewer/reader meant to navigate the hero narrative when a female is occupying what has traditionally been considered a man's role in a patriarchal world? For Schubart, 'the female hero is recognizable as feminine, yet her cross-dressing and cross-behaviour represent degrees of in-betweeness' (2007: 7). Does this mean that the male genre is feminized? Stereotypical male heroes can exhibit other variations of desire and spectacle including homoeroticism. Yet many have questioned the transformative aspect of the female when she becomes a superheroine.

For Barbara Creed, the female has long been both a stand in for male desire and more to the point, a reflection of male fears. 'Woman as archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, possessed monster, *femme castratrice*, witch, castrating mother' (1993: 151). The archetype of the Amazon has been continually called upon as a justifiable example of women running amuck within the confines of patriarchy. Wonder Woman's Amazonian heritage is an explanation of her prowess as a superwoman, although depictions of her reflect changing attitudes towards women. For example, the result of the anti-comics crusade of 1954 was a focus on gender roles and one way traditional order was maintained was to have her perform more traditional feminine duties. Performance is a key theme here. Wonder Woman must perform better than any other Amazon in order to gain the title and role of Wonder Woman. Femininity has long been considered a performance. Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a masquerade' (1929) argues that a woman behaving as a man (e.g., being noticed for her intelligence), uses feminine behaviour to compensate for these transgressions into male territory and avoid any reprisal. In her book *The Fashioned Body*, Joanne Entwistle calls on the metaphor of masquerade to describe the instabilities between sex and gender:

> Cross-dressing reveals the arbitrariness or masquerade of gender: if femininity can be put on at will by men, and masculinity worn in the style of 'butch', or by 'drag kings', then gender is stripped of its naturalness and shown to be a set of culturally regulated styles.
>
> (2000: 178)

The concept of cross-dressing has been applied to the female hero who is in a man's role but actually not a woman but a man dressed as a woman. What this reveals is the contradictory position of superheroines. In *Dangerous Curves* (2011), Jeffrey A. Brown echoes the cross-dressing theory as he explores the notion of 'drag' with regard to the superheroes and heroines and their violent behaviour. Brown piggybacks on a binary structure with long historical roots that situates men as active while women are passive and men as enacting violence upon the female body. As Brown points out, within this strict binary code the action heroine, who fights and kills at par with men, confuses the boundaries and is seen by some critics as a gender transvestite.

PROMETHEA

In 1999, Alan Moore introduced Promethea. A feminine persona adopted by artists and writers over generations and has been described as a 'living story'. Promethea is introduced in two ways: as a young girl in ancient Alexandria 411 CE whose father is a hermetic scholar murdered by an angry mob, who, before his death ensures the protection of his young daughter Promethea. Thus, Promethea lives on in spirit, protected by the gods. She resides in a place known as 'The Immateria' and 'Sometimes, she'd wander into the imagination of mortals', where the creative mortals would channel Promethea. We are also introduced to a young woman named Sophie Bangs who lives in a futuristic version of a late twentieth-century New York City. She is researching a term paper on the figure of Promethea; a superheroine that has appeared on and off since the eighteenth century. Promethea becomes a superheroine who is ready to fight against the forces of evil and stand up for imagination as an important resource of the mind. This is interesting and potentially subversive in that the heroine is connected to the fictional realm where stories and myths are made. There seems to be an awareness and nod to the use of masquerade and performance for the heroine.

CONCLUSION

In other art forms, a villain who plots to kill a woman generates revulsion. A man in a movie who punches a woman only does so to cement his character as evil. It is only in the comics, where heroic men can brawl with women without losing any bit of their admirable identity. Superman can fight Wonder Woman yet maintain his hero status because the Amazon is not really a woman. She is, essentially, a male in female form created to appeal to a male audience. Fangirls are invisible.

Being dismissive of female fans, whether intentionally or not, will likely hamper the comic book industry's efforts to go mainstream as female readers lured into local comic shops by seeing superhero movies might never return once they read superhero comics. A restructuring of comic content is needed to broaden the appeal of comics to the other half of the potential market. The industry is currently at a high point but latent sexism could prompt sales to wane yet again.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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The Adventures of Ms. Meta: The female superhero and her cultural importance

ABSTRACT

William Moulton Marston, inspired by his wife and beliefs, created a female superhero in 1941, seeking to address how the feminine archetype in western society 'lacks force, strength and power', and that 'women's strong qualities have become despised'. Wonder Woman was the result, and the character has achieved iconic status in popular culture seven decades later. While there is a wealth of research examining the representation of the female superhero and how this speaks to perceptions of femininity across the past 70 years, its focus is the prevalence of stereotypical over authentic depictions, and the harmful effects of this on society. However, the existing cultural impact and importance of female superheroes to readers of all genders cannot be ignored; to do so is to the detriment of both fans and scholars of comics. My research combines the platform of digital media with the artistic styles and narrative themes of comics, culminating in a narrative video game that brings together original comic pages, texts and animated sequences. The game tells the story of Meta Woman, a self-created superhero, from her first appearance in the 'we can do it!' 1940s, her reinventions as Miss Meta in the aftermath of the Comics Code of the 1950s, Ms Meta in the liberated 1970s and beyond, concluding in the present day. By cross-references comic representations of women with fan experience and stories of women from each era, the game showcases the power of female superheroes, and makes them relevant to each user's life and experiences.

KEYWORDS

fan studies
gender
magazines
participatory culture
superheroes
video games

The popularity of superheroes in the contemporary mediascape is undeniable. Not since the 1940s, when 70–150 million comic books were sold monthly (Daniels 1991), have these costumed crimefighters enjoyed such mainstream success. The past seven decades have seen the public perception of superheroes transform from a cultural trend to a niche hobby, then back to a fixture of mass culture, with 28 superhero-themed films confirmed for release between 2015 and 2020 (Wheeler 2014). As this mainstream legitimacy has grown, so too has the validity of superheroes as a subject for academic study. These works leave no super-powered stone unturned in their analyses, resulting in the now-standard correlation between classical mythic heroes and modern superhero figures as in the seminal work of Richard Reynolds (1992), or deep critical explorations of specific characters such as in the writings of Will Brooker (2000). Themes taken for granted at the time of a comic's creation are given fresh life through contemporary research, not least of which are critical explorations of the female superhero figure. Whether the tone is celebratory or interrogative, when reading these texts, the authors' passion for the superhero genre is clear. This is academia by way of participatory fan culture.

Indeed my own path to superhero scholarship was paved with my experiences as a fan and it continues to be enriched with each new contribution to the field. My participation with superhero comics as an artist, scholar and fan has developed into a project that celebrates the importance of female superheroes to audiences regardless of gender, and taking the form of a digital game. I will be realizing this project through the methodology of practice as research (PAR), defined by Robin Nelson as 'work where the evidence submitted for the research is practical artworks or media works, or writing. A substantial part of the evidence [for an original contribution to knowledge] will be the art practice itself' (2010).

In this article, I will demonstrate the process behind my PAR, which combines games with comics and history to tell the story of Ms Meta, an original superhero created in part by each individual player. As she journeys through time to stop her nemesis' plans, she will encounter characters drawn from the stories of everyday people, opportunities to challenge preconceived notions of female superheroes, and the ability to change the course of history. I begin with a survey of literature that places the female superhero figure within relevant sociohistorical context, to establish a necessary frame for her visual and textual evolution. This research, while plentiful, often focuses on the prevalence of stereotypical, sexualized representations, and the problematic ideologies such images and stories enforce. Without dismissing how pervasive this aspect of the superhero genre can be, I argue that ending the conversation there creates gaps in a cultural record and undermines the inspirational power female superheroes have had on their audience at various points in time. I will explore ways that fans have created participatory spaces, emphasizing periods of time before the superhero genre became mainstream. However, these spaces have traditionally prevented inclusion from participants outside a devoted male fan base – particularly before the advent of the Internet. I will discuss how this aspect of fan culture, explored through the lens of my work on the collaborative feminist superhero comic *My So-Called Secret Identity* (*MSCSI*) (W. Brooker et al., 2015), has led me to use women's mazagines as a primary research resource for the game's content and themes. Next, I will illustrate the elements that render a game into the ideal medium for my PAR, using studies in game design, the nature of play, and the numerous similarities between the spaces that make up game and

comic fandoms and industries as my guides. Finally, I will elaborate on the space I am constructing within the *Ms. Meta* game, and how I will achieve this through building a relationship between gameplay, art and narrative.

'OUR FEMININE ARCHETYPE LACKS FORCE, STRENGTH, AND POWER'

It is impossible to initiate a discussion of female superheroes and their cultural importance without mentioning Wonder Woman. When she made her first appearance in 1941 (Marston, Peter, 1941), she was not the first female hero to adopt a costume and secret identity, but her appeal has endured beyond that of all other Golden Age superheroes save for Superman and Batman (Lepore 2014). When William Moulton Marston declared that 'women's strong qualities have become despised' because the feminine archetype in western culture lacked 'force, strength, and power' (Lepore 2014: 187), he could not have predicted his remedy for the situation, Wonder Woman, would go on to become the most influential female superhero of all time.

Wonder Woman has been an Amazon princess, a diplomat, a goddess and a feminist icon but she has also inhabited roles that have been the object of derision. Gloria Steinem's successful campaign to restore Wonder Woman's powers and Amazon origins during her costume-less, powerless 'Diana Prince era' from 1968 to early 1973 is well known, and has been discussed by Jennifer Stuller (2010) and Philip Sandifer (2013) from opposing perspectives. Mike Madrid (2009) and Stuller cite the popularity of the spy genre in the late 1960s, and *The Avengers* (1965) character Emma Peel as the inspiration behind this 'white pantsuit wearing Wonder Woman' (Madrid 2009: 198), but Paul Levitz and Michael Uslan contribute additional layers to the reinvention; flagging sales figures (Levitz 2010: 404), and the negative associations with the American flag during the Vietnam War (Uslan 2008). However, Philip Sandifer acknowledges that while the 'Diana Prince era' was fraught with problems, including fetishized images of women in peril and the racist depictions of Diana's martial arts mentor I Ching (2013: 114), he also addresses why a total dismissal of the period is problematic: *Wonder Woman #203* contains this impassioned speech from a supporting character: 'I never asked to be denied what's denied me because I'm a woman! I'm told to be a whole person, but never fight, build, or envision – only to respond!' (Giordano and Delaney 1972).

Wonder Woman was also not the last female superhero, but her spiritual descendants continue to occupy the dual spaces of empowerment and objectification in an uneasy coexistence. This tug-of-war is prevalent in so much of the literature on female superheroes, as Mike Madrid brings attention to in *The Supergirls* (2009). Madrid, a self-confessed fan of female superheroes since childhood, was surprised at the lack of awareness of 'comic book heroines' he encountered while creating this text, noting that 'the archetype of the powerful and beautiful female is one that has become engrained in the American pop cultural sensibility' (2009, Kindle location 99). Thus he places female superheroes and their stories through a filter that focuses on how perceptions and depictions of women in popular media and politics influenced these characters over 70 years. His analysis does not gloss over the decades often regarded as the most problematic representationally, such as the 1950s and 1990s, and his understanding of the comics industry and its ups and downs provides an objective view. He concludes by affirming the

dedication female superheroes have inspired in their fans, as evidenced by their participation with Internet message boards and 'hundreds of devotional websites' (Madrid 2009: 314). Jennifer Stuller takes a similar approach with *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* (2010), although her definition of 'superwomen' goes beyond the now-familiar trappings of costume, powers and secret identity to explore the female heroes presented in cult favourites like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, along with lesser-known characters like Honey West. However, Stuller provides evidence that fans are not merely dedicated enthusiasts, and their voices can affect lasting change. She recounts how actress Nichelle Nichols intended to resign from her role as Lt. Uhura on *Star Trek* due to 'the double whammy of sexism and racism' she experienced from executives at the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1966 (Stuller 2010: 32). It was an encounter with a fan that changed Nichols's mind; a fan who insisted that she was a role model to viewers regardless of race or gender (1994: 164). The fan in question was Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Stuller goes on to mention the impact Nichols's role continued to have over time, such as bringing greater racial and gender diversity to the American Space Program (1994: 138). This example is notable because it dates back to a time before the Internet transformed the spaces where fans, particularly female comic fans, were active and welcome participants. At the time of writing in 2015, there is clear industry acknowledgement that female superheroes can possess the same power Dr King spoke of in characters of colour like Pakistani American Muslim Kamala Khan as Ms Marvel and scientific genius of colour Tanya Spears as Power Girl.

Stuller examines the role of the Internet in this phenomenon, including the Girl Wonder webring, dedicated to female characters and comic creators, and Karen Healey, in her essay 'When Fangirls perform' (2009), explores preconceptions of gendered fan practices. This participation fills the gaps in the landscape painted by Michael Brown when he noted that during the 1990s 'there are female fans, but they are much less in number and usually much less demonstrative about their passion for comics' (2009, Kindle location 126). Matthew Pustz details how and why this landscape came about, from its beginnings in 1930s, when gender was not a barrier to the enjoyment of newspaper comic strips, to the strict division of gender enforced by mass media during the 1950; delineating which comic books acceptable reading for boys or girls (Pustz 1999). Natasha Ritsma (2012) notes the parallels between superhero and horror film fan culture during this period, and that this male-dominated 'no-girls-allowed' mentality carried over into the 1970s and beyond, particularly in spaces like comic book stores.

The dichotomy of female superheroes and the participatory culture of their fans were the initial inspirations for *The Adventures of Ms. Meta*. The challenge I plan to address with this game is not to communicate the importance of female superheroes, nor is it to demonstrate it, but instead create a means of experiencing it personally.

'A HERO ANYONE CAN EASILY BECOME'

Comic book culture in both its mainstream and alternative forms directly shaped my artistic practice when I was approached by Will Brooker in 2011 to help 'build a better Batgirl' (2011). Brooker, whose interest in the Batman mythos first began in the form of childhood fan fiction, and has since developed the Caped Crusader into a research subject (1999). Brooker believed that

the character of Barbara Gordon had not yet reached her full potential and was eager to challenge this by creating a fan-made comic that represented her in a fresh, relateable light. By early 2013, the project became the original crowd-funded webcomic *MSCSI* (2015) (Searles 2012). This project and its intersection with a variety of spaces came to act as a conceptual precursor to *Ms. Meta*. Brooker believes that superhero figures exist as part of a cultural matrix; 'a complex dialogue between different media, different voices, different interpretations' (2012). This philosophy was a cornerstone of *MSCSI* (2015); a collaborative superhero comic with a female-dominant creative team that would tell the story of Cat, an ordinary young woman of exceptional intelligence, and 'a hero anyone can easily become' (Oliver 2014). Cat is a Ph.D. candidate living in Gloria, a city where superheroes are media celebrities. Thematically, the ongoing conflict between characters Urbanite and his nemesis Carnival echo the cyclical nature of serial superhero narratives, but this constant conflict is also interrogated through its presentation as a kind of theatre that disregards the well-being of Gloria's ordinary citizens. One such citizen is Cat, whose anger at the damage caused to her city and its people, to say nothing of the micro-aggressions she experiences daily on account of her gender and intellect, drives her to don a costume and establish her own brand of heroism.

Working from Brooker's script, illustrator Suze Shore and I developed the comic's visuals in through a process of constant collaboration with additional artists and contributors; a living representation of Brooker's cultural matrix theory. This deliberate approach strengthened the project on a number of levels. Mirroring the practice of beta-reading, an activity often seen in female-centric fan spaces where writers seek feedback on a work from a non-professional reader (Hellekson 2006), characters whose cultures were not represented by the creative team were reviewed by third parties who

Figure 1: My So-Called Secret Identity*'s protagonist Cat presents her thoughts in the form of a mind map across pages 14 and 15 of Issue 1.*

shared their backgrounds and played a significant role in their visual and textual development in order to avoid stereotypical portrayals (Brooker et al. 2012). *MSCSI* (2015) takes place in the 1990s, a time chosen because of its ties to the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) collaborative aesthetic of 'zine culture and the collaged covers Dave McKean produced for Neil Gaiman's seminal work *The Sandman* (1989-1996). Thus collage factors heavily into the comic's visuals; the reader is invited to take part in Cat's thought process, portrayed as complex mind maps that give form to the ideas and connections she makes throughout the series. Representing Cat's mind as a mental scrapbook was a creative choice informed by the collaborative nature of the project itself, but also because the act of scrapbooking is generally coded feminine, and viewed as a hobby portrayals (Brooker et al. 2012). The mind maps provide integral narrative information and clues, in addition to insights into the kind of person Cat is. A note, in shadow but still clearly readable as 'Dad', illustrates her not-entirely-successful attempts to bury her grief over her father's death. Swatches of fabric placed together in particular combinations give her a space to plan what to wear to meetings with her potential landlord and her director of studies, respectively (Figure 1). From the outset, the creative team sought to provide fans with multiple spaces for participation and discussion rather than the exclusionary aspects of comic culture discussed above. The *MSCSI* (2015) Facebook page allows fans to communicate directly with Brooker, Shore and myself, post their theories on the latest mind map's mysteries and provide suggestions for further reading, which I incorporated into an interactive collage of Cat's bedroom (Figure 2) (Facebook 2015). Twitter feeds for Cat
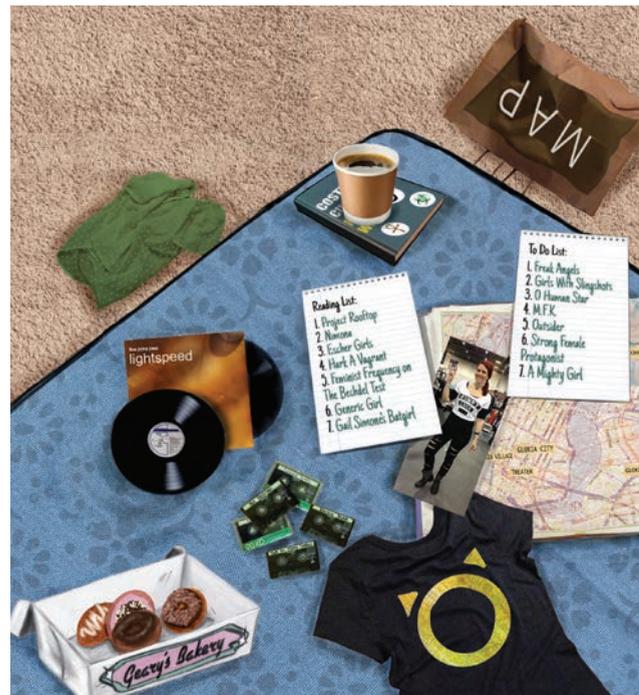
Figure 2: The Community page of the My So-Called Secret Identity *website features links recommended by fans of the comic.*

and Urbanite were created, giving fans an opportunity to interact with the characters as well as watch them expand the world of Gloria through their interactions with one another (@cat_abi_daniels 2013; @UrbaniteRLS 2013). Fan participation continued; Ph.D. student Samantha Langsdale praised Cat's wardrobe for being made up of clothing a graduate student could realistically assemble (2013), a sentiment echoed by David Gregory on the Facebook group Cosplay: Crafting a Secret Identity (2014). Fan Beccatoria created a series of music videos using visuals from the comic and period-appropriate songs (2013). As I watched a fanbase grow around this project that had begun as an act of fan participation, I recognized that in creating a work that models a culture of collaboration and inclusion by its very nature, its fandom has developed in a similarly inclusive fashion. The impact of a female hero for whom intelligence is a superpower is not only limited to the demographics presented above. Brooker has received 'reports from girls aged around 10 and 11 – or their mothers and aunts – who loved the comic and really connect with Cat' (2013).

'ONLY THE MEN WERE SHOCKED!'

Creating a work that exists in conversation with texts that are not exclusively comic books or even superhero narratives allowed *MSCSI* (2015) to reach an unexpected audience: the women's magazine *Stylist*. In an original two-page story that appeared in February 2014, Cat encourages the reader to 'be your own superhero, and find your own style' (Figure 3). This appeared alongside a feature called 'Comics: Not just for the boys' where Laura Sneddon
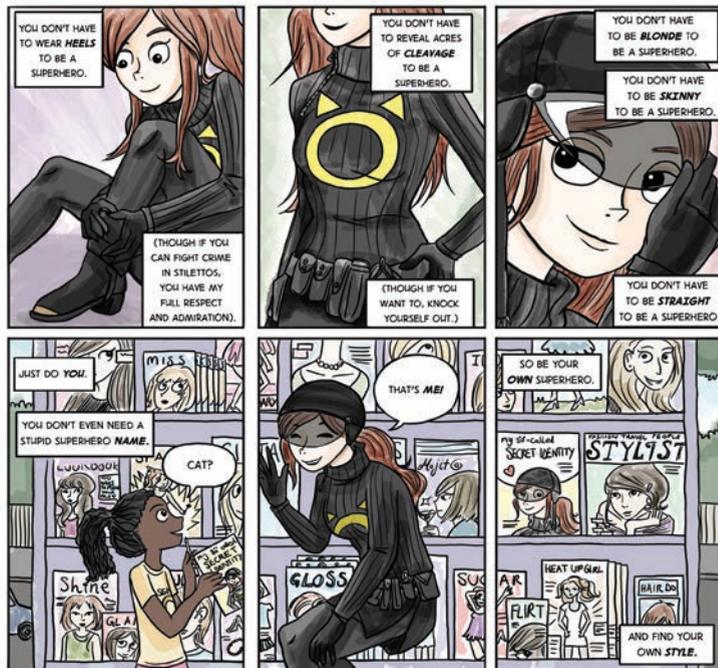
Figure 3: In this Stylist Magazine *special, Cat encourages readers to be their own superhero.*

reiterates that comic books during the Golden Age were read by 'women in large numbers' (Sneddon and Brooker 2014), alongside a list of 'Top Ten Super Heroines'. The list is notable for having been compiled after asking fans to tweet 'the most kick-ass female characters ever drawn', and awards Miss Fury first place (Poole and Ramsden 2014). This overlap between fashion and fandom caused me to consider how magazines have not only acted as spaces for members of a particular subculture, but contribute as a whole to the record of mass culture beyond cult and fandom, and if they might serve as a resource in developing the spaces of Ms Meta's world.

Together with newspaper comic strips, magazines are the ancestors of the comic book format. Dating back to the 1660s, they are the oldest form of communication art featured in this article. However, the place they occupied in mass culture of the seventeenth century was that of a niche product with a rarified audience. This was due to factors such as the time-consuming printing techniques of the period, which kept costs high, and pages and print runs small, to say nothing of the difficulties involved with transporting large quantities of paper (Unwin 2015). Friedreich Koenig's steam-powered printing press of 1810 eliminated these challenges and more, heralding a revolution in printing that only grew as the nineteenth century progressed, with distribution aided by the improvements in transportation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. By the time Otto Morganthaler's Linotype machine was available commercially in 1886, periodicals were widely available and affordable. Now they could be printed faster and cheaper, with more pages than ever before, and with a wealth of illustrations and advertisements (Meggs and Purvis 2011, Kindle location 3654). This cemented the place of magazines in western culture, and they have since acted as spaces for groups of people united by a shared interest. The role they have occupied in practices of fandom and counterculture has been discussed above, but magazines are also a space for groups whose stories have often been excluded from dominant cultural narratives to see their lives and stories represented. Although ordinary women certainly qualify as such a group, there is a tendency to dismiss women's periodicals for reasons stated by David Gauntlett:

> Today there is a well-known, comical stereotype of the ways in which women's magazines and advertisements once addressed women as simpering housewives whose dream was to impress their authoritative, working husbands by using the latest kitchen accessory or washing powder. The advice offered to women was not about how to fulfill their own potential, but was instead focused on bringing happiness to their family. Unlike some stereotypes, this one was based in reality: these magazines and advertisements really did exist.
>
> (2008: 54)

The *Ms. Meta* game will be bookended by two levels set in the present day, with the remaining levels set in different decades beginning with the 1940s, the era of my present research focus. My research into women's magazines is in progress, and will eventually include queer and feminist publications from the 1960s and beyond, leading up to the present day. At the time of writing, I have begun an exploration into the archives of *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1939 to 1941 and while Gauntlett's summary of their content is not incorrect, it is by no means absolute. These mags and ads might have existed, but they defy the modern assumptions about them in several ways. It is

undisputable that the target audience of magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* and its fellows during this period was American mothers (Lepore 2014: 155), but looking the vast array of home-making tips, one finds monthly features like Gladys Taber's *Diary of Domesticity*, in which she chronicles her life on a Connecticut farm. Taber, a poet, playwright and author of over twenty books, had a master's degree and was, by the late 1930s, separated from the husband she would eventually divorce. She might have included her favourite strategies for making gelatin salads, but the frankness with which she shares her inner reflections, pet peeves and imaginative fancies presents her as a three-dimensional person, someone who came down with sinus infections and took pleasure in the silence of winter, someone her readers could relate to and see themselves in. Someone with a fanbase of her own, no differently than contemporary popular bloggers. At the time of writing, The Friends of Gladys Taber, a group with a membership of over 700, recently concluded their 2014 reunion meeting (Turnley 2010).

It is important to acknowledge the progressive manner in which *Ladies' Home Journal* regarded itself and its readership as I draw upon it as a resource for designing the content of the *Ms. Meta* game's levels, particularly those taking place during the 1940s. The February 1939 issue closes with 'Only the men were shocked!', a response to 'masculine readers' who had written letters protesting the magazine's content was inappropriate for a female audience. Gould states that 'barriers of silence and conventional prejudice' have hidden issues affecting American families and communities for far too long and that 'nice women, like children, were supposed to be ignorant of them'. These 'nice women' are now breaking these barriers and seeking out means of educating themselves. The *Journal* here takes on the dual roles of a platform for discussion and a claxon calling attention to the proactive and progressive stance of its female readership. It cheekily 'thanks the men who are shocked' but informs them that 'America's largest feminine audience [does] not wish to be protected from the facts of life to lead to better living!' (Gould and Gould 1939b).

An examination of articles featured in a given issue of the magazine shows that these claims are not merely an advertising gimmick; topics covered education about venereal diseases during wartime (Palmer 1941), the use of scientific facts to assert there are no biological differences between races (Scheinfeld 1941), a remarkably frank column where First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt answered readers' questions (1941), and an approach to divorce that does not stigmatize or trivialize it. The heroines of serial stories were often career women, such as the protagonist of 'The bright face of danger' (Strabel 1939). In 'Daughter of divorce' a job was not portrayed as an impediment to acquiring a romantic partner, but as a source of personal growth for its protagonist (Haviland-Taylor 1939). The January 1939 issue closes by informing the reader: 'You now belong to the largest group of modern women in America united by a single interest'. The readership of *Ladies' Home Journal* leapt from one million to over three million between 1936 and 1939; 'more new readers than have ever been attracted to any single magazine in America'. The language used by the piece to call readers' attention to the community they belong to is that of participation in a shared space:

> The things *you* tell us you like about this magazine … have attracted so many readers that you are now a part of the largest – and one of the most powerful – audiences in America. Already Journal readers have

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made their opinions respected; their convictions heeded. Already states-
men are bringing their problems to you … the future holds opportuni-
ties for you to participate, through the Journal, in many of the most vital
interests and events of your generation.

(Gould and Gould 1939a, original emphasis)

This is the language of belonging to a fanbase; of finding a place where one's
voice can be not only heard, but can impact their community. *Ladies' Home
Journal* is the first of what I hope to be many examples that record the spaces
women and other marginalized groups made use of to assert their relevancy
in the world in the years before social media became the dominant format for
achieving the same. I am especially intrigued to learn more about the future
opportunities for participation promised by Gould, to explore how they devel-
oped in an era that lacked the immediacy the Internet provides, and to incor-
porate their spirit into the game where appropriate.

Popular culture, another element I will bring into the look and feel of
Ms Meta's levels, overlapped as a whole with the content of women's maga-
zines during this decade, such as in 'What the women of America think about
entertainment' (Cookman 1939), and the visual language of comic panels and
speech balloons dominates magazine advertisements of the period (Figure 4).
This demonstrates how established the comic strip was as a form of commu-
nication art in the cultural consciousness of the time, and may seem at odds
with the fears exemplified by Sterling North, literary editor of the *Chicago
Daily News*, when he called comic books 'a national disgrace' in May 1940.
However, Sterling's predictions that comic book readers would grow up to
become 'a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one'
(Lepore 2014: 184) unless the medium was eradicated were entirely in line
with the social anxieties of an America preparing enter a war 'not mainly to
help England or even to defeat Hitler. It is a war to permit our very democ-
racy to endure' (Gould 1941). It is not surprising that Beatrice Gould opens an

Figure 4: A collage of advertisements from Ladies' Home Journal *circa 1939–1941
demonstrates the ubiquity of comic strips in the visual culture of the period.*

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editorial with 'I hear a great deal about the imminent destruction of civilization' (1939). Gould insists that 'civilization' is a concept that will endure regardless of whether or not buildings or even cities are destroyed by bombs but she argues it is society that is in danger, being 'either rent by civil strife, expressing itself in class conflicts, or held together by coercion, usually against an imagined and thereby created enemy' (1939). Gould's further contributions to the magazine continue this argument, which is not merely a criticism of Hitler's ideologies. 'That freedom shall not perish' (Gould 1941) is underpinned by the same concerns about America's future as Sterling's article, although Gould goes beyond blaming a new form of mass media, stating that 'a woman continues to guide her children even after outside influences come in. More than their reading, than the movies, than radio'. She instead declares that democracy will fail unless every man, woman and child in America embodies a culture of racial and religious tolerance.

Marston, meanwhile, was called upon in his capacity as a scholar of comics during a time that indicates how the fear of comic books acting as a corruptive influence on American youth was not merely a concern of the post-war era. An interview titled 'Don't laugh at the comics' appeared in *Family Circle* magazine, where he was employed as a psychologist. Marston reassures the reader that superheroes are far from proponents of 'Hitlerian justice' and positions them as a continuation of the more familiar medium of newspaper comic strips, pointing out how adventure-themed narratives appeared in this form early as 1917, and going on to argue for the educational potential of comics. This strategy situates comic books as part of a great American tradition, in an attempt to eliminate any associations with a foreign 'Other' as represented by Hitler and his regime. It also frames comics as a learning tool, perhaps even a means of imparting to children the necessary democratic ideals (Marston 1940). This article predated Marston's creation of Wonder Woman, but she is the focus of the 1942 article 'Women are our future', which also features the Associate Editor of *Wonder Woman*, Alice Marble. Not only a professional tennis player who 'exemplifies the influence of women in today's scheme of things' (Marston 1942), Marble created the 'Wonder Women of History' monthly feature. She conducted 'a nationwide poll of leading women in business and in public and professional life' (Marble 1942) to determine which heroic women would be showcased in future issues. This feature was not intended to empower female readers alone; the letter accompanying Marble's poll described the *Wonder Woman* comic book as 'the first time daring, strength and ingenuity have been featured as womanly qualities. This cannot help but have its lasting effect upon the minds of those who are now boys and girls' (Marble 1942). Nor was the feature restricted to presenting a particular race or ethnicity as qualification for being a 'wonder woman'; it included Sojourner Truth, Madame Chiang Kai-shek and Sacagawea as heroines (Lepore 2014: 222). The solicitation of women, ordinary women who may not have been book fans but would have certainly been aware of the medium, as contributors to 'Wonder Women of History' might have been framed as a means of nourishing young minds, but it is also a participatory act that helped give voice to these women's ideal heroines.

Despite this historical background, *The Adventures of Ms. Meta* will not be a static recreation of history. A cornerstone of the game is not only creating alternate histories, an established feature of superhero narratives particularly since the Silver Age, but for these histories to emerge from the actions of

individuals participating with the work. This goal lends itself perfectly to the medium of digital games, beyond what a comic book would allow.

THE ACCIDENTAL COMMUNICATION ART

Video games are a newer industry than comics, and as a result, their study continues to be a developing field. Much of the critical study of video games draws upon existing research methodologies being applied to the subject. As is the case with comics studies, sociological and cultural perspectives are applied to representations of history in digital games (Kapell and Elliott 2013), or to interrogate problematic representations of gender (Huntemann 2000). As is also the case with comic studies, these works can provide an illuminating exploration of a medium that has often been critically dismissed as entertainment by way of gratuitous violence and adolescent male power fantasies, yet has achieved mainstream legitimacy in the twenty-first century. The parallels between games and comics fandom continue: the gaming subculture has evolved as a traditionally male-dominated environment. Comic book stores often sell collectible trading card games, board games and role-playing games and accessories, providing community through tournaments and gaming events, and creating further subcultural overlap that reinforces the traditional environment of comic book stores discussed above. As with comics, the Internet has allowed a diverse range of fan and creator experiences to be communicated. Superhero narratives have also proved successful when translated into video games. They are generally part of existing intellectual properties, such as the highly successful *Arkham* series set in the Batman mythos, but the transmedia franchise *City of Heroes* began as a Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMO) that allowed players to design their own superhero avatar, complete with origin story and powers.

However, the decision to present my PAR as a game was ultimately informed by these parallels in a secondary capacity. In developing the *Ms. Meta* game, I discovered how approaching game design as a sequential artist presented its own set of challenges. Narrative and characters drive my artistic practice. Page layouts, colouring and lettering act in their service at all times. I soon realized that I was building an interactive narrative rather than a game, and that this was entirely at odds with what I intended the project to achieve. To clarify why an interactive story would have been an unviable creative path for *Ms. Meta*, it is necessary to examine the meanings of games and the nature of play. 'Play', argues game studies expert Johan Huizinga, is not a singularly defined concept, but a 'culture function' that takes place voluntarily although it is confined by rules (1971, Kindle location 217). It can take as many forms as there are potential activities, for it is an approach, a state of mind (Fullerton 2008: 92). It is seemingly without 'real-world' consequences, yet it can provide meaningful learning opportunities. Similarly, there have been many attempts at defining what is meant by a 'game'; what holds true for one type of game may be entirely absent in another. The definition tentatively suggested by Brenda Brathwaite and Ian Schreiber is notable because it attempts inclusion through a series of disclaimers: an activity with rules. It is a form of play often but not always involving conflict, either with other players, with the game system itself, or with randomness/fate/ luck. Most games have goals, but not all. Most games have defined start and end points, but not all. Most games involve decision-making on the part of the players, but not all … digital or non-digital, the underlying fundamentals

of a game and therefore of game design are all the same (Brathwaite and Schreiber 2009).

Conversely, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and others argue that finding an all-encompassing definition for games is a problematic and limiting exercise. This viewpoint eliminates the wider issue with standardizing a single definition for games: that the conversation about what a game can be is hampered by strict adherence to already-established categories of games. Game designer Anna Anthropy describes this as 'a language of exclusion' and argues that it constrains the experience of game creators and game culture as a whole (Anthropy and Clark 2014: 8).

This 'language of exclusion' can be considered symptomatic of an industry that has, similarly to the superhero genre, traditionally produced works that cater to a particular kind of space. Although the landscape facing contemporary game designers is virtually unrecognizable from a technological perspective when compared to that of the 1970s, this is not the case from a cultural perspective. Fron et al. describe this culture as 'an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of 'minority' players such as 'women' and 'non-gamers' (2007), an echo of Stuller's observations of the comic book and film industries.

I believe that the reasons for this lie within the origins and subsequent evolution of the video game industry. An examination of the medium's history contextualizes the current status quo and provides me with the necessary tools to challenge the 'language of exclusion' through my own game design practice.

The works of Steven L. Kent (2010) and Leonard Herman (2013) have charted the history of video games in exceptional detail. Their chronicling of the field illustrates two different approaches: Kent populated his work with over 500 interviews, providing insights into the people behind the industry, while Herman's text is organized with each chapter representing a year of video game history and focuses predominantly on companies' business decisions and their outcomes. An exploration of both texts reveals the cultural context digital games emerged within and how their inheritance of the arcade culture created by pinball machines and jukeboxes had a significant impact on the evolution of contemporary gaming culture.

The 'first game program for a computer' (Herman 2013: 1), *Spacewar*, was the child of MIT hacker culture in the early 1960s, but it did not launch an industry. Creator Steve Russell was unable to conceive of a way to make money from the two-player rocket ship fight; it had been made on a computer that was not a commercial product. Nor did physicist Willy Higenbotham, who created an interactive tennis game in 1958, regard his creation as anything other than a fun activity for visitors to the US Government's National Laboratory for nuclear research (Herman 2013: 6). It was Ralph Baer who, in 1966, first conceived of the commercial possibilities for games that could be played on a television screen; his creation, the Magnavox Odyssey, was released in 1972 (Kent 2010, Kindle location 671). However, the Odyssey was marketed in such a way that customers believed it would only work with Magnavox brand televisions, and was deemed a commercial failure by 1973 (Herman 2013: 16). Digital games in the 1970s did grow into a flourishing industry, albeit in an entirely different space: the arcade. Before Nolan Bushnell created the mega-hit game *Pong*, he worked at an amusement park while he majored in engineering. His experiences attracting players on the midway and maintaining electromechanical games in the

park's pinball arcade fed into his work in digital game design. By 1971, he had partnered with amusement machine developer Nutting Associates to release a coin-operated adaptation of *Spacewar* called *Computer Space*, believing that the arcade was the ideal home for his creation (Kent 2010, Kindle location 734). This decision was not simply informed by Bushnell's amusement park job; coin-operated amusement machines, also called 'novelty games' had been a mainstay of American culture for over 30 years. Kent's summary of coin-operated games could easily double as a list of common types of video games:

> By the 1940s, companies had already invented mechanical baseball games. Other games simulated horse racing, hunting, and Old West gunfights. Over the years, the field has grown to include hockey, soccer, flying, and even building construction. One of the most popular themes was the shooting arcade. Taverns began carrying mechanical pistol games in which players shot tiny ball bearings on the other side of a small glass-enclosed cabinet. Larger shooting galleries with rifles became staples at arcades.
>
> (2010, Kindle location 422)

Amusement machines routinely made use of current technology, like black lights and projection screens in the 1960s and by this logic, it is no wonder that Bushnell chose this platform to launch *Computer Space*. Digital arcade games may have been a unique innovation technologically, but in terms of content and theme, they were a direct adaptation of novelty games.

Computer Space alienated players with its complex gameplay so Bushnell's next attempt at a coin-operated arcade game was the streamlined, table tennis simulation he developed with engineer Al Alcorn. The game was *Pong*, the first release from Bushnell's new company Atari (Herman 2013: 13). It is unlikely that *Pong* and the games that followed it were played only by men. The now-iconic *Pac-Man*, designed by Toru Iwatani in 1979 'for the female game enthusiast' (Kent 2010, Kindle location 2518) and its 1981 sequel *Ms. Pac-Man*, which featured the first female playable character, indicate an awareness of this demographic and the desire not to completely exclude them, albeit in a limited capacity.

When Atari shipped the final version of *Pong* in late 1972, it launched an industry that saw 25 separate companies produce a disproportionate number of ball-and-paddle games by 1974. The video game industry began in earnest and home consoles, including a revised Magnavox Odyssey, appeared by the end of the decade (Herman 2013: 34). Like the comic book industry of the mid-1990s, the video game industry reached a saturation point by 1983, which also corresponds to the demise of the video arcade business (Kent 2010, Kindle location 3826). Revival came in 1986 when Nintendo released its Famicom console, already a hit in Japan, as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the United States, and this second wave of success for the industry has continued ever since.

Video arcades might have been social spaces for fans to congregate and compete, and certainly created the foundation of gaming culture, however, it was *Electronic Games* magazine that opened the floodgates of fandom. First published in 1981, its premier issue spoke to gamers across America, in language remarkably similar to that of *Ladies' Home Journal* four decades earlier:

Did you know that you're a member of the world's fastest-growing hobby group? It's true. Although the first *Pong* machine made its debut only a decade ago, today more than five million Americans regularly play electronic games … And now the hobby is reaching another milestone. At last there's a high-quality newsstand publication we arcaders can really call our own … Exactly how much space we devote to each aspect of electronic gaming depends on you, the readers.

(Laney and Kunkel 1981)

Regular features included letters from fans, behind-the-scenes information on the latest games, reviews, strategies, and as many advertisements as any periodical from the 1940s. Until the Internet became a ubiquitous part of modern living, these magazines truly were a 'rallying point' (Laney and Kunkel 1981), connecting players both nationally and globally. They evolved in tandem with the industry's marketing trends and crossed over into other fandom spaces, such as when *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (*EGM*) magazine launched a publication called *Hero Illustrated* in 1993. The topics encompassed by *Hero Illustrated* and the way it was advertised in gaming magazines of the time indicate that fans of comic books, cult movies, action figures and the emerging trend of Japanese animation were often one and the same: overwhelmingly male, at least in the eyes of the industry. As Elizabeth Sweet notes in her research on how games and toys are marketed based on gender, the 1970s saw a proliferation in gender-neutral toys but this diminished greatly during the next two decades, and this certainly applies to the marketing of video games (2013). In light of this gendered division, the 1990s saw a spate of 'games for girls' such as *Barbie Fashion Designer* (Mattel, 1996) and the choice-driven *Rockett's World* series by Purple Moon. Purple Moon, founded by Brenda Laurel in 1997, targeted girls aged 8–12 and based their games on information drawn from nearly three years of interviews with young girls and how they played. In 1998, Purple Moon had 40,000 registered users in its online community, a sign of the diversity of spaces the Internet was already providing to different demographics of fans (Laurel 1998b).

Looking beyond the ways that the Internet has served as a space for video game fans to create communities and cultures outside of the status quo, it has enabled the creation and distribution of digital games by small companies and emerging designers. Looking even further beyond how professional-quality game engines such as Unity and Unreal 4 are available to the independent game designer, it is the depth of creativity represented by some of these games that demolishes preconceptions of what games can be. Because of these contributions to the medium, games are currently regarded as art forms, educational tools, methods of journalism and platforms for diverse storytelling and community planning – and this is by no means a complete list. In these spaces, the accidental art form of digital games is being approached with intention.

CHALLENGING THE 'LANGUAGE OF EXCLUSION'

Enriched by this understanding of games and play, my initial plans for *Ms Meta* needed to be revised. I wanted to develop my own language to describe the cultural importance of female superhero figures, and this meant I had to approach the meanings of character and narrative through the lens of game design, rather than that of sequential art. The efficacy of interactive narrative

as a communication medium and platform for critical thought is demon-strated to great effect by Michael Lutz's *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* (2014), created in the free platform Twine. Lutz uses 'a horror framework to think about misogyny and emotional abuse and manipulation, as it is fostered particularly among children in the broader culture of video games' (2014). Player choices including how and where time is spent can lead to one of five possible endings; the difference between an experience that does not go beyond the politics of childhood status symbols, and an experience of eldritch terror. Thematically, this is a very different experience than what I am creating with Ms Meta's adventures, but the seamless way in which serious themes are woven into the narrative of *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* without veering into didacticism is a valuable inspiration for my PAR.

Although Ms Meta's adventures were always going to be strongly based in the visual, with each level steeped in the aesthetic of the corresponding decade of superhero comics, my first designs saw her moving from one situation to another, then being confronted with a series of choices in the manner of interactive fiction. To represent the act of reading a comic book, the player's chosen outcome would appear alongside their present position, transitioning them to the next panel in the story. In the tradition of reading panel to panel, the focal point or camera angle would change as needed, dictated by the era's trends in page layouts. This was a playful approach to interacting with the history of comics, and one clearly inspired by Naomi Clark's 'interactive comic book' *Wonder City* (2013), where players control a high-school-aged female superhero as she navigates her newfound powers. Created to accompany the PBS documentary *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines* (2012), *Wonder City*'s cast and story challenges stereotypical depictions of female game characters and perceptions of heroism. *The Uncle Who Works for Nintendo* and *Wonder City* undoubtedly create meaningful play within the interactive fiction format, but my disciplinary shift occurred early in the developmental process when I stripped away the superhero theme and found myself unable to describe what the game was about. The theme, the 'aspect of games that lies outside side of the mechanics and yet somehow, when chosen well, can make the mechanics feel more natural' (Brathwaite and Schreiber 2009: 32), but I lacked mechanics. I lacked gameplay. Games are experiences. Games are spaces. To revisit Brathwaite and Schreiber's definition, games are also activities with rules. In the act of engaging with these rules, an experience takes shape. A game system begins to communicate with the player. And this is an exceptionally powerful form of storytelling I was not engaging with. Coming to game design through sequential art, it seemed at first that allowing the player to create their own experience within a system I constructed was relinquishing control, as I could not account for every player's behaviour. This underpinned my reasons for the interactive narrative format; I had believed it would ensure a particular set of learning outcomes. In reality, the conversation I would be inviting players to take part in was one-sided and in danger of becoming the 'chocolate-covered broccoli' mentioned by Matthew Farber in his exploration of avoiding didacticism in learning games (2014). Through this act of critical reflection, I realized that my game design practice is driven by characters and narrative after all; it is my comprehension of what these elements signify in the context of this medium that has expanded. Rather than handing the control over to the player, by deliberately crafting a game system that enables players to craft their own unique experience, a game becomes a dialogue based upon mutual trust. Looking beyond the theme, the visuals,

and the content, the core of *The Adventures of Ms. Meta* is problem-solving towards a goal of resource-building. The resources are represented by the connections the player makes by occupying dual roles in the game space, and the problems to be solved are framed by these roles as well as the nature of the game space. As these are mechanics that I have not seen explicitly applied to a superhero-themed digital game before, my primary influences exist outside of the genre.

Of particular inspiration to me is the game *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014). A puzzle adventure game with a comic book aesthetic that integrates panels into its gameplay, *Valiant Hearts* combines historic facts with a game system that enables players to construct their own meaning in conjunction with the very real events of World War I. It redefines what a war game can be with its diverse cast of five playable characters: elderly dairy farmer Emile and his German son-in-law Karl, Freddie, an American of Creole heritage, Belgian student-turned-nurse Anna, and Walt, a German Medic Dog. Their stories interconnect across a narrative spanning the years from 1914 to 1917 and their friendships form the emotional core of a war game where the player never takes a life. Content director Yoan Fanise explains how many members of the game's development team had ancestors in the war, and how their correspondences and experiences defined the game's direction:

> After talking to my grandmother, I found out that her father was drafted in 1914 and had been wounded twice. She brought me all the correspondence between him and his loved ones: hundreds of letters that talked about his experience of the war. Reading those words was really moving since it made the whole thing seem so real. We realized then that we had to talk about this subject from a human perspective, and to show that the most interesting thing was not the kind of weapons they used but the psychological impact of war on regular, everyday people.
>
> (2014)

Most recently, the timing of Mikki Kendall's (@Karnythia 2015) creation of the #DiversifyAgentCarter tag on Twitter in response to ABC's renewal of the Marvel Cinematic Universe-based television series *Agent Carter*. Set in 1946, the series is notable for its fully realized female lead, but has thus far portrayed postwar New York City as overwhelmingly lacking in racial and religious diversity. At the time of writing, fans are populating the tag with research, census data and photographs of women and minorities, who challenge contemporary assumptions about the era, and will doubtless form a valuable resource for my own PAR (#DiversifyAgentCarter 2015).

Through the texts, comic books, magazines and games that have made up my research, it is clear that I cannot assume one particular fan's experience will be like another's, and in my role as game designer, I must act as an advocate for the player, always allowing them to create their own meaningful play. Following on from the practice of beta-testing used in *MSCSI* (2015), I will be doing the same when representing characters and stories outside my realm of experience in *Ms. Meta*. Wonder Woman will doubtless inform the design of Ms Meta during the 1940s, as will her peers and the female superheroes that predated her. I will take inspiration from characters like Fantomah and The Woman in Red, whose costumes were not based in their physical beauty, and from Madame Fatal and Red Tornado, who challenged perceptions of gender.

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My research into women's magazines will support the design of the *Ms. Meta* game's visuals, content and levels. Each of the stages will be divided into ten separate missions that represent each year of a specific decade. Cosmetic details, such as the fashions, architecture and objects featured in each era will be directly informed by the visual and material culture represented in the magazines. Moreover, the spaces created and inferred by the magazines will be represented in the levels and gameplay. Cultural shifts both gradual and sudden will inform the nature of each mission. America's fears regarding World War II in the first two years of the 1940s are revealed to be of an intensity that permeated every strata of society and thus cannot be overlooked. The uncertainty embodied by this perceived war on democracy itself, including its manifestation as an attack on superhero narratives, will be more than simply incorporated into the game, it will manifest with the prominence of a main character in missions before 1945. Women like Gladys Taber and her peers, who balanced professional and personal lives at a time when career women were often criticized (Friedan 1963: 37), will form the basis for a major playable character during the 1940s levels, which I aim to complete by mid-2016.

With this game, I am aiming to open up a new kind of interface between history, game design and players, offering a deeper level of engagement and agency to learn about the history of female superheroes, and facilitating new dialogues between the fan community and the casually interested player, to understand how female superheroes came to occupy the place in society that they do today.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Sarah Zaidan is a game designer, artist and scholar. Her work is interdisciplinary and combines her research and creative practices with video games and superhero comic books; with a focus on how identity is enacted in the spaces they create. She completed her doctorate under the supervision of art and cultural theorist Dr Christopher Horrocks, and media and Batman scholar Dr Will Brooker. Her dissertation took the form of an award-winning interactive media experience, *The Adventures of MetaMan: The Male Superhero as a Representation of Modern Western Masculinity (1940–2010)* that charts the visual and conceptual evolution of the male superhero in western culture over seven decades. Along with Dr Brooker and animation artist Susan Shore, Dr Zaidan is one of the creators and illustrators of the metatextual feminist superhero comic *My So-Called Secret Identity*. Dr Zaidan teaches video game design at Emerson College and is a research fellow with Emerson's Engagement Lab, where she develops playful approaches to civic engagement. Her work is characterized by rapid prototyping, iterative design processes and by discovering game systems in everyday life.

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REVIEWS

**TIME ON TV: TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT AND MASHUP TELEVISION,
PAUL BOOTH (2012)**
New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 255 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1433115691, p/bk, $39.95

Reviewed by Veronica Popp, Elmhurst College

Time on TV by Paul Booth is an ambitious book on the changing representa-
tions of time in recent popular and culturally successful televised program-
ming. The main argument is that television audiences are expecting savvier
shows with broader non-linear narratives due to an overall increased intel-
ligence and expectation of the viewers. Furthermore, television shows such
as CBS' popular *How I Met Your Mother* are doubling their connection with
audiences with the use of social media, a connection that is defined by Booth
as mashup television. The activity the show creates with the audience creates
deeper bonds and connections.

A key strength of this work is Booth's articulate yet relatable voice. He
writes in a conversational, yet academic, tone, easily wading through complex
terms such as temporal displacement, the changing representation of time
on television and transgenic media, and the incorporation of innovative and
old-fashioned media that brings about a new definition of time. Specifically,
recent television programming is engaging audiences in a different way due to
shifting relationships with time and changes in everyday life. With the usage
of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, WordPress and Instagram in every-
day life, television has become a communal platform for online discussion
with fans all across the world. What would *Lost* have been without the online
following and fan theories?

Booth begins with an introductory framework on Charles Yu's 2010
novel, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, essentially stating
that the relationship with narrative time has changed. Overall, he theorizes

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that transgenic media allows audiences to broaden the relationship with the external environment. People are still sharing and communicating, merely in different ways. However, since corporate culture is attached to new media, audiences are consistently replicating 'a combination of individual contributions coupled with professionally produced templates' (Booth 2012: 9). The delivery of the material and where and to whom the material goes is the most important element of this discussion. The subsequent seven chapters illustrate this temporal displacement by examining its critical manifestations in television. Specifically, Booth examines *Doctor Who*, a programme that encapsulates Booth's arguments on the changing face of television, as, over time, the Doctor has undergone multiple regenerations, 'the rewrite ability of history and memory' (Booth 2012: 15). This use of time travel in television narratives fuels a cultural fixation with time, 'to scroll through our entire digital lives, our history recorded seemingly forever' (Booth 2012: 15). Booth contends that audiences' definition of television has shifted too, however, the focus of this work is still steeped within the medium itself.

Returning to *Doctor Who* and including *Boomtown*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Fringe* and *How I Met Your Mother*, the narratives grow in intricacy, from time jumps, different points of view, flashbacks, created memories and unreliable narrators. These devices help create a mediated intimacy, allowing the audience the opportunity to analyse shows and 'fill in the gaps.' This also means that programming is not aimed at the common viewer, but a limited niche audience, allowing writers and creators, 'to give this viewer the "wow" moment of narrative' (Booth 2012: 36).

It is often stated in cliché ridden articles on *Buzzfeed*, that millennials are the most nostalgic and narcissistic generation. Booth's perspective on these characteristics is positive; audiences are not self-obsessed; audiences are time obsessed within the platform of a disjointed socio-cultural location. When a character time travels and interacts with themselves, yes, it is narcissism, but it is also the interaction of self and the self-we-want-to-present. For example, in *Life on Mars*, a man travels back in time to interact with himself and his mother growing up, leading to further clarification on his current life.

Booth concludes that transgenic media is an acknowledgement of this cultural and communicative shift, to 'refocus attention on the non-linear characteristic of time' (Booth 2012: 212). With the success of DVD sales, Netflix, and Hulu, audiences are accustomed to temporal discrepancies in television storylines, including in comedies such as *Arrested Development*. With the rise of 'smart TV' and with the average person watching thirty-four hours of programming a week where is the future? Life, it seems, is non-linear; now, television is non-linear too. Booth writes that this is just the beginning. With *Arrested Development* shifting from a traditional FOX network show to a Netflix show, with each episode focusing on one character with intermingling storylines, the author's predictions seem valid. Booth's work is an excellent addition to the growing body of fan studies and is useful to scholars with varied popular culture interests.

THE ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION TO FAN CULTURES, KINDA DUITS, KOOS ZWAAN, AND STIJN REINDERS (2014)
Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 306 pp.,
ISBN: 9781409455622, h/bk, $149.95

Reviewed by Elliot Hardman, Liverpool Hope University

The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures is a contemporary review of fandom studies and fan cultures posing three key questions. 'What is a fan? What is the current relationship between fans and producers? And where does contemporary fandom manifest itself?' (Duits, Zwaan and Reinder 2014: 2). Editors Linda Duits of Utrect University, Koos Zwaan of Inholland University of Applied Sciences, and Stjin Reijnders of Erasmus University Rotterdam combine a vast array of scholarship on the subject, calling for a 'critical rethinking of the function and significance of fandom, fan practices and fan studies' (Duits, Zwaan and Reinder 2014: 2) as well as exploring many new areas or aspects of fan culture as they are occurring. Expanding on Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, this book features topics as varied as Lady Gaga, Norwegian Black Metal, Football, Keanu Reeves, Hokkien opera, and *Xena Warrior Princess*. With such a wide array of research topics, editors Duits, Zwaan, and Reijnders skilfully assemble this twenty-one chapter collection into a somewhat coherent, though at times uneven, structure.

The *Companion* is divided into three sections. The first consists of contributions that address, amend, and challenge current discourses within fandom studies, updating the field from a reflective viewpoint. The second section features chapters that discuss the various relationships between fans and fans objects, with a particular focus on the collaborative nature between fans and producers. The third section deals with fan spaces and the study of fandoms through transnational perspectives. The wide array of topics featured within these sections makes for an extensive journey through the landscape of fandom studies in the age of Web 2.0. Each section has its triumphs as well as drawbacks. With such a varied approach, every chapter may not appeal to all readers, however, the book does provide enough of a diversity of fan cultures and disciplinary approaches that individual readers can easily overlook one or two chapters that may not necessarily relate to their research interests without devaluing the text as a whole. While this collection sometimes struggles in regards to the brevity of each chapter, it is clear that the editors have constructed a book that provides its readers with a diverse collection of topics, research methods, and authors from around the world that provide external and internal perspectives of, and engagements with, fandom.

The initial section outlines new or previously unexplored research avenues and methods for studying fandoms. It is here that readers will first discover the book's emphasis on the impact of the Internet in the development and current trajectory of fan cultures. This section has two of the strongest contributions, the Janissary Collective's 'Fandom as Survival in Media Life' and Cornel Sandvoss and Laura Kearns' 'From Interpretive Communities to Interpretive Fairs: Ordinary Fandom, Textual Collection and Digital Media'. The Jannissary Collective argues that as lives become more mediatized, in which '[m]edia are

to us what water is to fish' (Duits, Zwaan and Reinder 2014: 83), fandom has become a form of survival in this water. Sandvoss and Kearns' assess fandoms not as social communities but as a method through which most fans filter and curate fan content rather than actively participate in social communities. These two contributions present the most inventive concepts and make great strides in moving fandom studies forward.

However, this section also exhibits the main drawback of the book. With 21 chapters contained within just over 300 pages, each contributor is left with relatively few pages to make concise arguments. Most contributors manage to reach intriguing conclusions while others seem to make their case with little elaboration leaving the reader wanting more. For example, while Shenja Van der Graaf's 'Much Ado About Keanu Reeves: The Drama of Aging in Online Fandom' has many worthwhile qualities, it struggles to fully enter its argument before its conclusion. However, this relative short-coming is not counter to the editors' initial goal of the book as a 'companion for researchers' (Duits, Zwaan and Reinder 2014: 2). Readers can readily follow up on research from the contributors, as well as the recommendations for further study.

The book's second section offers a variety of topics that will either fascinate or alienate readers depending on their own research interests. The standout chapter is Angela Chang's 'Fans of Folklore Performances: Identifying a New Relationship Between Communication and Marketing.' Chang roots her research in debates most readers of fandom studies will be familiar with and applies it to fans who act as patrons of Hokkien opera to enlighten and engage her readers. Chief within this section is Frederick Dhaenens and Sofie Van Bauwel's 'Fans Who Cut Their Soaps Queer,' which examines how fans edit soap operas into webisodes that exclusively feature 'the gay characters and/or scenes that are crucial to the storylines revolving around the gay characters' (Duits, Zwaan and Reinder 2014: 184) as a form of queer resistance to heteronormativity.

The third section presents a mixed bag of topics, with alternate levels of success. Beginning with 'Transnational Cultural Fandom', Hye-Kyung Lee sets the overall tone for the section, demonstrating the transnational aspects of fan communities through the fan distribution and consumption of Japanese, Chinese, and South Korean cultural media across the world. Following on from the previous research from Dhaenens and Van Bauwel, Lee highlights the importance of *Research Companion to Fan Cultures* as a collection of up-to-date research on current and emerging phenomena in fan cultures.

Conversely, section three also includes Deller's 'A Decade in the Life of Online Fan Communities,' which seems to contain flaws in methodology in turning a one-time area of research into a more longitudinal study as she explores how fan communities of Cliff Richard and Belle & Sebastian have evolved over a ten-year period. Further criticism could be levied at Steve Redhead's chapter ''We're Not Racist, We Only Hate Mancs': Post-subculture and Football Fandom', which feels out of place within this section.

Research Companion to Fan Cultures functions as an update of research within fandom studies, producing work that one might return to for reading or reference. The quantity of contributors and breadth of research results in a limitation of depth. This is at once a blessing and a curse; with this number of contributors readers are able to explore varied aspects of fan studies, but

are left without extensive exploration into these topics. However, *Research Companion to Fan Cultures* is exactly that, a research companion, raising more than a few questions, and allowing the reader to explore these issues further. As a result *Research Companion to Fan Cultures* best acts as a first port of call, one that champions new and fresh approaches to the field. It provides a breadth of topics, approaches, and bibliographies per contributor so that readers are left with a number of research avenues to explore.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS 2015

AIMS AND SCOPE OF JOURNAL

The multidisciplinary nature of fan studies makes the development of a community of scholars sometimes difficult to achieve. The *Journal of Fandom Studies* seeks to offer scholars a dedicated publication that promotes current scholarship into the fields of fan and audience studies across a variety of media. We focus on the critical exploration, within a wide range of disciplines and fan cultures, of issues surrounding production and consumption of popular media (including film, music, television, sports and gaming), The journal aims to address key issues in fan studies itself, while also fostering new areas of enquiry that take us beyond the bounds of current scholarship.

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We welcome images illustrating an article. All images need a resolution of at least 300 dpi. All images should be supplied independently of the article, not embedded into the text itself. The files should be clearly labelled and an indication given as to where they should be placed in the text. Reproduction will normally be in black and white. Images sent in as e-mail attachments should accordingly be in greyscale.

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Notes may be used for comments and additional information only. In general, if something is worth saying, it is worth saying in the text itself. A note will divert the reader's attention away from your argument. If you think a note is necessary, make it as brief and to the point as possible. Use Word's note-making facility, and ensure that your notes are endnotes, not footnotes. Place note calls outside the punctuation, so AFTER the comma or the full stop. The note call must be in superscripted Arabic (1, 2, 3).

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The views expressed in essays published here are those of the authors, and do not necessarily coincide with those of the Editors or the Editorial or Advisory Boards.

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All articles should be written in Word. The font should be Times New Roman, 12 point. The title of your article should be in bold at the beginning of the file, but not enclosed in quote marks. Bold is also used for headings and subheadings (which should also be in Times New Roman, 12 point) in the article. Italics may be used (sparingly) to indicate key concepts.

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Intellect's style for quotations embedded into a paragraph is single quote marks, with double quote marks for a second quotation contained within the first. All

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The *Journal of Fandom Studies* is a refereed journal. Strict anonymity is accorded to both authors and referees.

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All references in the text should be according to the Harvard system, e.g. (Bordwell 1989: 9). The default term used for this list is 'References'. Please do *not* group films together under separate a 'Films cited' heading. Instead, incorporate all films into the main body of references and list them alphabetically by director. The same rule applies to television programmes/music/new media: identify the director/composer and list alphabetically alongside books, journals and papers.

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Woolley, E. and Muncey, T. (in press), 'Demons or diamonds: a study to ascertain the range of attitudes present in health professionals to children with conduct disorder', *Journal of Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*. (Accepted for publication December 2002).

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