THE REVOLUTION WILL BE FOUR-COLORED: AMERICAN COMICS AND THE
CRITIQUE OF POWER

By

Sean Guynes

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation, *The Revolution Will Be Four-Colored: American Comics and the Critique of Power*, is about how mainstream American comics speak (back) to power, particularly where questions of the comics industry and its representation of capitalist crisis; whiteness, white supremacy, and racism; and homophobia and queerness are concerned. The chapters are organized around the three thematics of capital, race, and queerness, though each recognizes the intersections of these forms of power. The comics I discuss open themselves to both symptomatic readings of structures of power, and also reparative and critical ones, emphasizing how comics not only represent the forms of oppression present in American society in the postwar period, but also how they critique and, in the best cases, offer powerful responses to and solutions for the social and political crises of the last several decades.

The Revolution Will Be Four-Colored demonstrates how comics enter the discourse of power struggles in the larger field of American popular culture production—demonstrating that a lowbrow medium is indeed capable of revolutionary critique, of complex and sensitive engagement with the politics of liberation. Unsurprisingly, this dissertation is fundamentally concerned with the politics of comics production, circulation, and narratives. Each chapter addresses how these layers of political storytelling and comics worldmaking interact and are indeed inextricable from one another, rendering mainstream comics of the last several decades a field for comics creators to respond to the political pressures of contemporary life.

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INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN COMICS AND THE CRITIQUE OF POWER

This dissertation, *The Revolution Will Be Four-Colored: American Comics and the Critique of Power*, is about how mainstream American comics speak (back) to power, particularly where questions of the comics industry and its representation of capitalist crisis; whiteness, white supremacy, and racism; and homophobia and queerness are concerned. The essays that follow are organized around the three thematics of capital, race, and queerness, though each recognizes the intersections of these forms of power. The comics I discuss open themselves to both symptomatic readings of structures of power, and also reparative and critical ones, emphasizing how comics not only represent the forms of oppression present in American society in the postwar period, but also how they critique and, in the best cases, offer powerful responses to and solutions for the social and political crises of the last several decades.

The chapters of this dissertation have, for the most part, been published elsewhere—in journals of comics studies and in edited collections ranging from a chapter in *Keywords for Comics Studies*, the most recent entry in New York University Press's prestigious Keywords series, to another in *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*. Put together, these chapters represent a collective focus across my scholarship on how comics enter the discourse of power struggles in the larger field of American popular culture production—demonstrating that a lowbrow medium is indeed capable of revolutionary critique, of complex and sensitive engagement with the politics of liberation, whether Marxist symptomizations of capitalism's crises, AIDS-era gay liberation struggles, detailed conversations of the politics of blackness in a moment of black nationalism's clash with multiculturalism and anti-Semitism, or to the politics of "indie" comics' aesthetics and their use by male creators of feminist narratives that respond to calls for strong female heroes who

buck stereotypes. Unsurprisingly, this dissertation is thus fundamentally concerned with the politics of comics production, circulation, and narratives. Each chapter addresses how these layers of political storytelling and comics worldmaking interact and are indeed inextricable from one another. My overarching goal in writing these disparate pieces, and why they fit together well here, has been to articulate a sense of comics as a medium pulled between (1) the economic and political forces of popular culture and (2) the narrative, cultural, and artistic forces of genre, and in doing so to understand how mainstream comics of the last several decades have emerged as a fertile field for comics creators to respond to the political pressures of contemporary life.

My interest in comics studies arises from a general interest in the ways that popular culture, particularly in the United States, makes meaning—and more specifically how creators and audiences make *political* meaning through, with, and against popular texts that are often considered entertainment and which fully permeate the daily experience of modern American life. This is a question basic to some of twentieth-century literary studies, as exemplified in the work of Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, or Pierre Bourdieu; in fact, it is surprising given their attention to popular culture and their widespread influence, that the study of popular culture has only recently shed its stigma in hiring committees' eyes. Despite popular culture having developed as an integral part of the experience of modernity, arising in the industrial revolution alongside an emergent working and middle class living in urban centers (often as a means of dealing with the new complexities of modern, urban life), only in the past several decades has it become a non-taboo topic of scholarly concern thanks to the rise of cultural studies in two separate traditions that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, that later bore fruit in the 1990s and 2000s and allowed the blossoming of a body of scholars, like me, whose key focus is the cultural history and theorization

of popular culture—that is, the subject of how popular culture illuminates the complexities and contradictions of, in my case, American culture.

These two traditions that inform my development as a scholar of American popular culture studies are the Marxist tradition of the Birmingham School, with key influences in the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, and the Bowling Green School that branched off from, but has largely been reunited with, American Studies by way of more recent work in the nascent and broadly defined discipline of media studies. For those in and influenced by the Birmingham School of cultural studies, popular culture was an object of inquiry that allowed for deeper understandings of society at large, particularly within a Marxist framework. Raymond Williams, for example, bridged traditional Marxist literary studies with the study of popular culture, and wrote regularly about science fiction, authoring useful structural studies of the genre throughout the 1950s and 1960s that predate most academic interest in science fiction. That Williams and Hall are not only regularly cited but taught in the most basic cultural studies courses testifies to the significance of this tradition. On the other side of the Atlantic, at roughly the same time, popular culture was becoming the explicit target of a group of scholars who felt outcast from English departments and American studies. Organized by Ray B. Browne and based out of Bowling Green State University's Center for the Study of Popular Culture, Browne and a bastion of midwestern scholars set aside methodological and theoretical differences to pursue popular culture interdisciplinarily, with a heavy emphasis on American cultural history despite the overwhelming sense by many in the Bowling Green School that American Studies as a discipline thought poorly of their work. The Bowling Green School's productively anarchic embrace of scholarly objects allowed constituents to explore just about any topic, from low-rider car culture to McDonald's Happy Meals to Disney fans and more, creating a massive archive of scholarship that exposed the possibilities inherent in

a more democratic way of doing cultural studies. Yes, much of this scholarship lacked intellectual nuance, but was nonetheless driven by excitement and characterized by joy in the topic of study—aspects of scholarship that much of the rest of the humanities could learn from.

In the 1990s, Marxist-driven approaches informed by the Birmingham School and the popular culture enthusiasm of the Bowling Green School began to merge in the work of scholars interested in film and music, and, through the alchemy of academic disciplinarity, the transdisciplinary field of media studies was born. It coalesced around conversations of media industries, media fandom, and media politics. Work on media industries is a clear methodological influence on my interest in comics studies, and draws on Marxist cultural studies paradigms to understand the implications of media industries and their politics, while being married to the Bowling Green approach to an open-ended consideration of subject. It has been my goal in the chapters that follow to bring greater attention to the modes and politics of production at work in the American comics industry. As a result, my training as an Americanist builds on the work of popular culture studies as developed in the twin traditions of Brimingham and Bowling Green, and, together with key concepts developed largely in literary studies (such as in aesthetics, transgender studies, or genre studies), brings comics to center stage to ask questions that have until now remained in the background of a field in its infancy.

All of this is to say that this dissertation draws on a range of theoretical paradigms and methodologies common to both literary and cultural studies, with the emphasis on a particular set of methodological influences from American studies that allow me to zoom in on popular culture as a cultural field that opens itself fruitfully to questions of production and reception. The chapters in this dissertation contribute to a tradition of work both in comics studies (as described below) and in American cultural studies (as evidenced by the theoretical groundings chosen for each

chapter) that emerged to answer questions posed scholars invested in understanding what happens between the meaning-making of creators and the meaning-making of audiences when that meaning-making is mediated by particular media, industrial models of production and distribution, and political circumstances of creator and audience subjectivity. It's this nexus where questions of political power and medium/generic/artistic/political possibility converge in the work of scholars as broadly cast as Richard Slotkin, Sianne Ngai, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael Denning, that has driven the most exciting work in American studies and which I seek to contribute by focusing here on comics.

Unsurprisingly, to anyone familiar with comics studies, this emphasis on questions of power and belonging are increasingly becoming "old news"—though much work clearly stands to be done. In part, this is because comics studies has grown exponentially since I entered my PhD program in 2015; then, only a handful of studies were devoted to the topics addressed in my dissertation, and it was in response to the lack of scholarship on race and sexuality in comics that many of these chapters were initially written. Indeed, the chapters in this book, published between 2015 and 2021, reflect a concurrent and hyper-contemporary engagement with the field of comics studies *as it has developed* to address the need for good critical work on race, gender, disability, and comics more broadly beyond the major graphic novels—like *Watchmen*, *Maus*, *Persepolis*, or *Fun Home*—that have become the darlings of literary studies classrooms but that do not represent the vast majority of comics production over the past fifty years. Because comics studies is still something of a nascent discipline lodged awkwardly between literary, cultural, and film studies, there still remains much work to be done, despite the recent growth in scholarship. Now, yes, I can point to two or three (rarely more) worthwhile monographs on race (Nama; Aldama, *Latinx Superheroes*; Austin and Hamilton; Whitted), on gender (De Dauw; Cocca; Whaley; Chute,

Graphic Women), on sexuality (Fawaz; Berlatsky), on disability (Alaniz), on trauma and war (Earle; Chute, *Disaster Drawn*), etc. in comics, but the conversations remain very much focused on a small body of texts and follow the method of growth familiar to many young fields: read a theory, apply the theory, and conclude that comics can be read theoretically, too! (There are a significant number of edited collections in the field, but with few exceptions—e.g., Pustz's *Comic Books and American Cultural History*, Gateward and Jennings's *Blacker the Ink*, and Peppard's *Supersex*—these have had little impact.) As a result of my interest in expanding the textual archive of comics studies, all of the chapters herein address comics that have little or no scholarship about them; this is both a weakness—insofar as there's little to talk back to and thus little to situate my critical work for readers unfamiliar with my source texts—and a boon—since it has allowed me a critical freedom not often granted in literary studies (where some scholars will spend a lifetime thinking about a handful of authors; although, comics scholarship is beginning to replicate this trend, as Hillary Chute's oeuvre attests). To be sure, I am counting on the chapters herein *not* being the last word in any discussion of these texts, and I hope to see my interpretations challenged and built on in coming years.

The remainder of the introduction below offers a brief glimpse at the perennial question "why this source material?" in order to frame a larger set of concerns within literary, cultural, and American studies. Then, I outline the recent developments in scholarship that frame the work being done in this dissertation. And finally, I outline the organization of the dissertation and the central arguments of the chapters. Although admittedly a collection of (mostly) previously published pieces, there is a clear unity of vision and purpose behind my scholarship that demonstrates the need for a sustained, careful consideration of the way in which comics creators—and popular culture producers generally—utilize their mass-market media to shape, respond to, take seriously,

and critique the structures of power that discipline American society. The work here is but a beginning.

Why Comics? A (Very) Brief History of Comics Studies

"Why comics?" is probably, today, to many called comics scholars a rather annoying question. Unfortunately, "because I like them" is a less than useful (if entirely honest) answer that misses the opportunity proffered by the question. It is a simple question with an answer made all the more complicated by the recent explosion of scholarship about comics, resulting in academic disagreement about everything from how to periodize comics history (we're still at the stage of pointing out that American periodizations don't generalize to other traditions, and despite this being obvious we have yet to see anyone forward more useful periodizations) to whether comics is a medium, genre, form, or mode.

A great deal of earlier comics scholarship, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, was focused on defending the very notion of viewing comics as a worthwhile subject of scholarly analysis. Work like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* referred to comics as an "invisible art," and, through the medium, demonstrated the narrative, artistic, and storytelling complexities afforded by comics. This work has more recently been continued by Nick Sousanis in his book *Unflattening*, which also utilized the comics medium to take McCloud's analysis further, to demonstrate the comics could be theoretical tools as well. Early work also sought to demonstrate comics' importance to growing discourses about subcultures, as evidenced in Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture* and Jeffrey Brown's *Black Superheroes*, which both combined ethnography and history to understand the ways in which comic-book readers created meaningful communities around and in conversation with comic books and the stores that sold them. Others sought to bring

comics into conversation with fields outside of literature, as Joseph Witek did in *Comic Books as History*, which looked to the creation of narratives from historical memory in comics of the 1980s.

What McCloud, Pustz, Brown, Witek, and many other comics scholars working in the 1990s and 2000s noticed, was that comic books were a major cultural force—and had been since they first emerged in the 1920s, first in the form of mostly humorous comics and later, in the 1930s, in the generic guise of the superhero, crime, Western, and science fiction. (All of this is to say nothing of the comic strip from newspapers or the political cartoon, which helps date comics as a broadly conceived form of art to the early 1800s; see Kunzle.) As a result, a great deal of comics scholarship has sought to understand what exactly comics meant to their readers, who consumed comics in the millions each month and sustained an industry that, by the 2000s, grew to be among the most lucrative in the culture industry. In short, comics scholars argued that, if film and literature could be studied critically and proved to have value, whether in their most refined, highbrow, artistic forms, or in the mass-market forms of genre fiction and blockbusters, then so too could (and should) comics. In the early 2000s, pioneering scholars like Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Paul Lopes, Bradford W. Wright, Amy Kiste Nyberg, and Bart Beaty brought a comprehensive historical approach to comics studies, with a particular focus on the American national traditional, and in doing so provided a framework within which future comics studies could situate new scholarship, refine the historical paradigms they established, and provide more detailed analyses. These scholars demonstrated the historical force of comics, not just as consumer products, but as shapers of cultural periods and moments in tandem with literature, film, geopolitics, and, well, everything else that makes the domains of culture and history what they are.

Out of this scholarship, then, grew a great body of work on American superheroes, with particular attention to the cultural history of superheroes that began to emerge roughly coeval to

the rise of the superhero film to billion-dollar box offices from mid-2000s onward. As a result, much of the work on superheroes has tended to be transmedial in approach, looking at comics and film alike, with the expectation that scholars are conversant with both sets of texts. Scholars like Dan Hassler-Forest, Jeffrey K. Johnson, Marc DiPaolo, Charles Hatfield, Matthew J. Costello, Martin Lund, and others established the superhero (across comics, television, and film) as part of a representative political economy of American power in the twentieth century, a cultural figure whose manifestations could be used to help trace not only the history of American empire, especially in the postwar years, but also the ways in which artists and readers responded to the changing meanings of what it meant to be American. Because of the abundance of superhero comics narratives, even with regard to just a single superhero like Batman or Superman, edited collections became a driving force of comics scholarship on American superheroes. Unsurprisingly, then, comics scholars also began to turn to the work of particular "auteurs," as film studies had labelled particularly influential or "singular" comics creators, both because of their influence but also in an effort to locate—as with the superhero—a particular figure to focus their analysis on. Charles Hatfield and, more recently, Zack Kruse, have written compelling studies of comics auteurs (Kirby and Ditko, respectively) whose work was not only beloved by millions and shaped the comics field for decades, but which also expressed political and artistic ideologies that later creators (and comics scholars) have had to reckon with.

These and other works of comics scholarship laid the groundwork for an entire field, much of which moves along two, occasionally overlapping tracks that (1) emphasize studies of representations of identity, subjectivity, and history in comics, and (2) offer cultural-historical approaches that have framed comics as an artistic agent in conversation with historical and cultural forces. My own work seeks to marry these major approaches to comics by analyzing the ways in

which marginalized subjectivities have been represented in comics, while also viewing those moments of representation as historically defined and emphasizing the role of creators (and the comics industry) in engaging such representations as active co-creators of cultural meaning. In the following section, I outline some of the major works that inform my dissertation, paying particular attention to work that has sought to address the discourses of power that animate the questions of capital, race, and sexuality at the heart of my work.

Comics Studies vs. the Discourses of Power

As many of the above examples suggest, representation and its political valences have never been far from comics scholars' minds. Even beyond mere studies of representation—which are, at base, studies of how people without power (across a variety of social and economic categories) become present in and/or creators of a popular artistic form consumed by millions, including others without power—comics scholars have always attended to the ways comics have been bound up with questions of power, whether in the studies of the anti-comics "crusade" of the 1950s instigated by Fredric Wertham (Beaty; Nyberg; Wright; Hajdu; Lent; Barker) that highlighted concerns about boys and girls getting queered by comics or youth generally being turned into sexual and criminal "deviants," or in the studies of superheroes' imbrication with or revolt against "American values," e.g. the consensus culture of the early Cold War (Costello) or the neoliberal, neocolonial Americanisms of the George W. Bush years (Hassler-Forest). But it is work on race and, to a lesser extent, the rarer scholarship on queerness in comics that has been particularly influential in demonstrating the circulation of power in, through, and out of the discourses that (superhero) comics have facilitated. Looking at the specific case of race and ethnicity, then, I want to outline how comics studies has tended to read discourses of power, where pitfalls have opened in the literature, and where my work has largely intervened.

As noted earlier in this chapter, there are few truly great studies of race and ethnicity in comics, and while there are none that cover "race" generally (outside of edited collections), there are representative masterworks of comics studies devoted to Blackness, Latinidad, indigeneity, and other articulations of racial and ethnic identity, particularly with regard to American comics and, even more specifically, American superhero comics. One of the earliest serious studies of comics—a game-changer for the field—was Jeffrey Brown's 2001 monograph on the indie superhero publisher Milestone Media, a company which partnered with DC Comics for distribution, and which offered a slate of Black, Afro-Latino, Asian, and multiracial superhero comics in the mid-1990s. Though the publisher was short-lived, its radical agenda to unmake the white default in comics (both at the levels of creation, since most of the writers and artists were people of color, and representation) influenced a generation of creators and let readers, especially non-white readers, know what it would be like to read diverse comics. Brown's book not only traced the politics of Milestone's comics, which intervened quite transparently in the "multicultural" ethos of the 1990s, but also studied the industry's reaction, interviewing publishers, readers, and comic-bookstore owners to better contextualize Milestone Media's project, its reception, and its legacy. Brown provided an auspicious beginning to comics studies's engagement with race by demonstrating the centrality of representation to the creative, distribution, and consumption aspects of the comic-book industry, asserting that representation is not just about what identity characters have, but is rather an overlapping set of discourses about identity and meaning that unfold at every level of the comics industry.

Much of what has followed in the past twenty years since Brown inaugurated the academic conversation on race and representation in superhero comics—to say nothing of the fans and creators who had long discussed the issue in letter columns, message boards, and at comicons—

has revolved around documenting the history of racial representations. Scholarship has tended to focus on one racial or ethnic group. In this way, comics studies has often emphasized demographic studies that narratively historicize the representation of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, Jewish, and other racial-ethnic identities. More often than not, this scholarship has revolved around superhero comics, since the genre has been the most popular and widely distributed of the comics genres since the 1960s and the rise of Marvel Comics (though one company, their historiography has tended to determine how scholars write the history of superhero comics generally, a problem still unsolved in the field).

Comics scholars have thus produced an incredible amount of information about the representation of African Americans (carrington; Nama; Whaley); Arabs, Muslims, and Arab and Muslim Americans (Lewis and Lund); Jews (Lund); biracial folks (Bertlasky and Dagbovie-Mullins); Indigenous people (Sheyahshe); and Latinx folks (Aldama, *Latinx Superheroes* and *Your Brain on Latino Comics*), to name the more prominent examples in the scholarship. Studies of representation have had their limits, especially since they tend to (1) overemphasize particular hot-spots in comics history, e.g. the introduction of Black Panther is central to many discussion of Blackness in superhero comics, but rarely are the politics of his representation as an *African* leader in Cold War America discussed, and most discussions focus only on the first appearance of Black Panther, not on later storylines written by Black creators; and (2) simply problematize racial history as a trajectory from underrepresented to better represented, acknowledging that we now live in a world where diverse comics are an industry priority, but with little concern about how such industry priorities become rearranged within the larger political economy of neoliberalism. Only recently has anyone attempted to produce something like a general history of race in American superhero comics—Allan W. Austin and Patrick L. Hamilton's *All New, All Different?*

which tells the story of racial representation but tends to elide decades-long periods into categorical periodizations that leave little room for complexity—or started to historicize the role of whiteness in superhero comics, a project that I contributed to in my co-edited collection *Unstable Masks* (Guynes and Lund), and which Josef Benson and Doug Singsen further in their forthcoming book *The Invisible Costume: Whiteness and the Construction of Race in American Comics and Graphic Novels*.

In sum, comics scholars have engaged for twenty years in a major project of recovery: finding and telling the stories of racial and ethnic representation in (superhero) comics, building a foundation for further work that can theorize meanings of, for example, Blackness and Indigeneity *through* comics, especially in the work done by Black and Indigenous creators who utilize the affordances of comics to say things about identity, belonging, and ethno-racial power in the US. This is the work now being carried out by scholars like andré m. carrington, Qiana Whitted, Jeremy M. Carnes, and Adrienne Resha, the latter two of whom are early-career scholars , but whose work has begun to push comics studies away from studies of what we might call "mere" representation (that is, lists and plot summaries of stories with characters of color) toward scholarship about how creators (and readers) *do things* with race and ethnicity in and through comics. carrington, for example, reads the networks of Black creators to demonstrate a politics of liberation through comics production work in his book *Speculative Blackness*, and Resha, though a graduate student, has significantly altered the way comics scholars are talking about the intersection of medium and distribution (especially digital distribution) with multi-faceted identities, such as that of a disabled queer Muslim American woman.

Comics studies now stands on a precipice with regard to the historiography of American comics and the superhero genre more specifically, in large part because past scholars have so

heavily historicized representation, that much of the work which remains is to (1) contest the narratives written by pointing to the complexities elided by the periodization process inherent in the narratives produced thus far, (2) diversify the focuses of those narratives by deemphasizing the usual characters and creators and writing alternate histories of representation among less-well-known comics scenes, publishers, creators, and characters, and (3) integrate histories of representation in a broader cultural historical framework that sees comics as both attendant to sociohistorical concerns and active in shaping them. Some of this work has been done, and much of it is currently in the process of being written by comics scholars already mentioned above.

Already the shift from writing histories of representation to asking what comics can and did do within the larger discourse of power in the US is evident in the work of comics scholars like Frederick Luis Aldama, who has written several "representation histories" but whose recent book, *Latinx Superheroes*, ostensibly a history of representation, goes beyond the representation question to consider how comics operate at the level of composition to "geometricize" race—a process he describes as the creative effort put into make character "real" through historical, cultural, visual, and linguistic signifiers. By emphasizing not just representation, but the geometricization of identity in comics, Aldama has offered a way to think about *how* racial meaning is made, what work race (or any identity) is doing in comics, the role of creative processes therein, and the ways that such work impact the mind, ideas, and world of the readers. It is this sort of emphasis on comics as not just representative of culture and history, but also as agents of social change, that has driven my work throughout this dissertation—Aldama has offered a strong paradigm for a more just comics studies that, although not published until partway through my writing of the chapters herein, has nonetheless influenced how I approach the popular medium and its blockbuster genres. Though some of the chapters stray toward representation, they do so in the

name of laying a groundwork that did not already exist, while the remainder of the chapters offer reparative and geometricized readings of how creators struggled with the meanings of racial, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist power coursing through American life.

A Dissertative Agenda

The chapters in *Four-Color Revolution* are divided into three sections, each organized around a thematic of power in American cultural life, the urgency of responses to which have motivated my scholarly and political growth since 2015. These are capitalism (the economic hierarchy of power that structure everyday life, identity, and subjectivity, especially with regard to neoliberalism in the 1970s and beyond), racism (racialized hierarchy of power), and heteropatriarchy (gendered and sexual hierarchies of power). The chapters in each section, for the most part, offer readings of individual comics, comics storylines, or creator "runs" on a comic (i.e. a lengthy period of a serial comic book during which a creator or set of creators created a uniform sense of the comic as a narrative and artistic whole). Published between 2015 and 2021, these chapters demonstrate my attunement to the turn in comics studies away from studies of "mere" representation and toward more holistic work on the political intervention comics have made into American public life by virtue of their mass cultural status and consumption by thousands to millions of readers. Some of the chapters drill deeply into the specifics of a single comic and its moment in time; others survey a much broader range of texts; all of them grapple with the big question of why comics mattered, to whom they mattered, and why we should care now, especially in a period when the comics industry is reconfiguring its relationship to those it has long marginalized.

I begin the dissertation with a short piece, "Lowbrow—A Stigma or an Analytic?," that was commissioned for *Keywords for Comics Studies* edited by Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Whaley for NYU Press. This piece sits apart from the thematically focused sections that

follow since it deals with a question foundational to the analysis of comics, and all the more so important in the American context where, both in academia and in the public consciousness, the cultural capital and presumed "brow" value of a text has strongly governed the ways scholars, consumers, creators, and cultural tastemakers think about entire fields of cultural production! This chapter frames the concept of "lowbrow" within the history of both popular culture and comics studies and, rather than trying to argue whether comics are or aren't (definitively) of one brow or another (as too many comics scholars attempt!), asserts that the tension around comics' "brow" is a useful category of analysis in and of itself, one that can be used to inform just about any work of comics criticism. The chapters that follow do this implicitly in the way they deal with comics' attention to capitalism, race, and sexuality. To provide a solid frame for the originality of each chapter within the landscape of comics studies at the time, I begin each with a short paragraph on the intervention posed by each chapter and comment, where possible, on how scholarship has changed since.

"Part I: Comics and Capital" offers chapters that engage with two very different comics in an effort to demonstrate what I call "industry reading," or reading comics for what they tell us about the operation of the comics industry that produced them within the context of the larger structures of media culture, law, policy, and economics. The first chapter in this section, "'Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die': *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the Anxieties and Calamities of the Comic-Book Event," originally published in the Society for Comics Studies's flagship journal *Inks*, offers a symptomatic reading of the 1985 DC Comics series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that brings together mid-1980s concerns about corporate mergers, the growth of franchising as a staple for (trans)media production, and intellectual property to demonstrate how the comic itself offers commentary on these concerns and at the same time set up a new system for organizing comics'

IP franchising that has since taken over the industry: the comic-book "event." In the second chapter

of this section, "Candy and Drugs for Dinner: *Rat Queens*, Genre, and Our Aesthetic Category,"

published in *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*, I similarly read a comic—the indie-

produced *Rat Queens*—for the ways its creators utilize neoliberal aesthetics (informed by Sianne

Ngai) in the service of creating a rowdy, "bad ass," feminist comic that plays with genre (fantasy)

conventions and at the same time exemplifies the major problems in an industry that capitalizes

on image over (political, narrative) substance. These two chapters, together, demonstrate the

viability and necessity of reading comics for the way they engage media industries and what they

tell us about the comics industry under neoliberalism in particular.

"Part II: Comics, Race, and Whiteness" turns an eye toward race in American superhero

comics to demonstrate how the genre and medium can be powerful tools for articulating cultural

and historical concerns about whiteness, racial oppression, and multicultural justice in the US. The

first chapter of this section, "Green Martians, White Supermen, and Black Folk Heroes: White

Plasticity and Black Possibility in Darwyn Cooke's *DC: The New Frontier*," originally published

in my co-edited essay collection *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics*

(Guynes and Lund), looks at how a white creator retold the in-universe history of DC Comics's

superheroes from the late 1950s through the early 1960s, and did so with a particular attention to

race, racial belonging, and the (im)possibility of the Black superhero in a time of Jim Crow. In

doing so, Cooke acknowledged the history of racial violence and injustice while also gesturing

toward the future emergence of Black superheroes, and at the same time demonstrated the

complexities of (passing) whiteness and the dangers of metaphorical racial representations through

the character Martian Manhunter. The second chapter in this section, "'Am I Doing the Right

Thing?': Milestone Comics, Black Nationalism, and the Cosmopolitics of *Static*," published in

Frederick Luis Aldama's state-of-the-field collection *Comics Studies Here and Now*, captures a salient moment in Black political thinking done through comics by offering a reading of the Milestone series *Static*, specifically it's "Louder than Bomb" storyline about an anti-Semitic villain who is a clear reference to the Nation of Islam. In this chapter, I show how Black writer Robert L. Washington grappled with the possible meanings of "Black politics" in this storyline, demonstrating how conversations about race and multiculturalism *can* unfold (in families, among friends, and in public discourse), how certain forms of Black nationalism threaten a liberal vision of multiculturalism, and how forms of inter-ethnic and interracial solidarity might form the basis of one version of Black political meaning-making. These chapter together articulate a sense of comics as actively engaged in the process of making, debating, and challenging racial meaning and injustice in the US.

The final part of the dissertation, "Part III: Comics and Queerness," offers three chapters that contend with how queerness—specifically with regard to gay men and transgender folks—has been represented in comics, and how those comics have shaped the political discourses about queerness during pivotal touchpoints in the history of queer identity in the postwar US. The first chapter, "Coming Out: A Brief History of Queer Visibility in Mainstream American Comics," is an unpublished conference presentation from a conference on women, gender, and sexuality held at MIT in spring 2015. The paper offers a narrative history of queer representation, looking at the emergence of "visibility" for LGBTQ folks in the vein of Susana Danuta Walters's work on "gay visibility," and in so doing historicizes how changing attitudes allowed for the emergence of new queer representations across popular media. This work is foundational to the chapters that follow and has yet to be produced in larger scale by other comics scholars. The second chapter, "The Once and Future Queer: Trans Narratives and DC Comics's *Camelot 3000*," also an unpublished

conference paper (from the 2015 annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies meeting), looks at recent theorizations of transgender, transsexual, or trans* identity and takes the Arthurian space opera comic *Camelot 3000* (1982-1985) as a case study for how one (cisgender, heterosexual) creative team problematically imagined and grappled with the trans* experience—the first clear instance of trans* representation in mainstream American comics. The final chapter of this section, "Fatal Attractions: The AIDS Crisis and American Superhero Comics, 1988-1994," originally published in the oldest journal of comics studies, *International Journal of Comic Art*, in 2015 provides a detailed history of how comics creators responded to the AIDS crisis, the politics of their narratives of gay and straight people with AIDS, and the impact these stories had on the comics industry by essentially forcing a revocation on the ban of queer representation in comics imposed in the 1950s by the Comics Code Authority. These chapters, geared more toward the representation approach to comics studies, demonstrate a clear and urgent need for work on queerness in comics and offer a foundation for further scholarship to build on.

My sense of the usefulness and power of comics—the thought that ties together these chapters into a whole—is their potential, in the right hands, to signal more than just a "reflection" or trite commentary on the news of the day, but to instead rally around the ideas of injustice that are at the heart of the most popular, populous genre—the superhero—and to galvanize critical discourse of introspection and, indeed, of social change. This is evident through the texts I take up, whether in the difficult conversations between the Black teenage superhero Static and his parents about race and anti-Semitism or in the ways that comics artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s drove conversations about the AIDS crisis and gay visibility. Were these moments in comics history ultimately decisive in changing, say, how Black Americans felt about Jewish neighbors or

how non-gay people unaffected by HIV/AIDS thought of the humanity of gay and AIDS-affected person?

In some small sense, yes; as I demonstrate in my readings, the letter columns in comics often demonstrate a clear engagement on the part of the tiny handful of readers who wrote into and then had their letters published in a comic. What's more, I point to numerous interviews with creators who talk about the influence of earlier or contemporary creators on their depiction and address of the politics of capitalism, race, and sexuality. And I always situate the comics in a larger discourses of power circulating in American culture at the time of a comic's production, such that while it's impossible to gauge the "effectiveness" of any comic in, say, revolutionizing the way America though about Jews or gays, it's clear that the comics discussed here were part of discrete and impactful moments in the various movements for equality that have shaped American life for more than half a century.

In another sense, I'm also not interested in whether *Camelot 3000* instituted a trans* revolution or *DC: The New Frontier* radically altered how creators at DC Comics thought about the racial history of the superhero. The measure of a text—or a person's life—should not be in the change they wrought, but in the very fact that they sought to bring about change, to "raise hell," as Barbara Ehrenreich puts it. As my dissertation makes clear, comics may not have been the driving force behind Black or queer movements, nor do comics mount any particular challenge to capitalism—in fact, comics can often work counter to these movements and exploit the machineries of capitalism, as an artifact of popular culture, to keep on being comics—, but they nonetheless shaped the conversation, gave new tools for reckoning with inequality and exploitation, and lit fires under the asses of more than a few people to think (even just a little!) differently. As utopian as this vision of popular culture may be, I prefer it to the grim vision of a

world mindlessly enthralled to mind-numbing effects of cookie-cutter culture. Even in the banal, there is the opportunity for something more. It gives me hope that, despite more than 200 pages of discussion and analysis, I survey herein only a small handful of comics written between the 1950s and the 2010s, and read fewer than a dozen with the detailed eye of a literary and cultural studies scholar. Hundreds of comics are published each month; imagine the possibilities.

The title of this dissertation, *The Revolution Will Be Four-Colored*, riffs on poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron's best-known piece, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." The key idea from Scott-Heron's song—despite so many revolutions having been televised, digitized, and even social-mediatized since the advent of these new media—is that social change comes about only through political *action*. As so many media and cultural studies scholars have noted, popular culture and media are political, just as much as Scott-Heron's song was part of a revolutionary discourse; not the revolution itself, but a part of it, revolutionary, a call to action. I riff on Scott-Heron's piece to say that, no, comics aren't the revolution, but they sure are part of it. The chapters that follow show how.

CHAPTER ONE

LOWBROW: A STIGMA OR AN ANALYTIC?

This chapter is a convenient entry to the project I undertake in this dissertation. "Lowbrow: A Stigma or an Analytic?" offer a strong sense of why I find comics so cultural and historically appealing as objects of study—namely, because millions of people read them and thousands continue to read them today, and because, as a result, lots of folks worry (still!) about whether comics are worthy of study, can be called art, are good for our children, etc. The purpose of this chapter, originally commissioned for NYU Press's *Keywords for Comics Studies* (2021), was to offer to student's and newcomers to the field a sense of how "lowbrow," as a concept, is useful to comics studies. My approach was not the typical one: to defend comics from the claim that they are lowbrow, a rhetorical which often has about it the air of someone deeply upset that you insulted their favorite t-shirt. Frankly, my only interest in comics as "lowbrow" or not has only ever been at a meta-level, i.e. in how the terminology is deployed by would-be detractors and protectors. That more people read graphic novels today than in the 1980s is, to me, less a sign of comics's "rise" to cultural legitimacy, but rather a sign of changing cultural tastes and a breakdown in the classist hierarchies that have historically haunted art and entertainment (the bifurcation of the terms there says it all). This chapter was written in 2019 and serves as something of a literature review for anyone interested in the question of cultural hierarchies as they apply to the study of popular culture, and takes particular aim at just how use such art-world terms are for a new comics studies less interested in whether its objects matter and more concerned about what we can learn from them.

In November 2018, centrist comedian Bill Maher sparked a furor among comics fans after penning a short piece claiming "I don't think it's a huge stretch to suggest that Donald Trump could only get elected in a country that thinks comic books are important." Even if sarcastic, the tone of the piece and its title, "Adulting," showcased Maher's frustration with the idea of taking comic books—a children's medium—seriously. He lamented that "some dumb people got to be professors" by writing theses about comics, a cultural shift that took place "some twenty years or so ago" when "adults decided they didn't have to give up kid stuff." Unsurprisingly, this outrage piece ignored both the substance of scholarship produced on comics and the historical shifts occurring in comics creation that, ironically, made them anything but a children's medium in the eyes of most public commentators. In fact, every few months since the mid-1980s a new opinion piece has claimed that comics are finally for grown-ups. They reference a growing awareness of "serious" graphic novels among literati, academics, and book reviewers, and suggest like Maher that before the advent of (largely autobiographical) graphic novels, comics—whether the newspaper funnies, romance or superhero comic books, webcomics, or evangelical religious tracts—were simple entertainment for simple people: the usual suspects of popular culture consumption.

At stake in discussions of whether or not comics are for kids or adults—or whether there are some comics that are decidedly "adult" on account of their narrative or artistic "seriousness"— is a question about comics' cultural status. As Maher's claim demonstrates, comics have long been considered *lowbrow*, belonging to a cultural status denoting intellectual or aesthetic inferiority in comparison to the supposedly more accomplished "art" of *highbrow* culture. As Lawrence W. Levine has noted, the concept of lowbrow originated in the United States in the early 1900s roughly twenty years after "highbrow" came into popular usage. These terms labelled "types of culture"

and pointed to quintessentially American concerns about producing American art that continued the supposedly superior artistic traditions of white European civilization (Levine 221). The lowbrow was distinguished from highbrow art, literature, and music by its mass popularity, its industrial production, its affordability to the lower classes, and (often) its production by poor and working-class whites. In addition to being classist ways of taxonomizing culture, the concept of "brow" was also racist, since the level of brow referenced by the concept referred to racist beliefs that the shape of the skull (notably the height, thickness, and prominence of the brow) determined traits associated in the eugenic and phrenological "sciences" with intellectual capacity and criminality (Levine 221-225).

In the United States, the highbrow/lowbrow divide determines much of the political landscape of culture. Although the high-/lowbrow hierarchy has constantly shifted across the past century, marking a series of ideological investments in the meaning and status of cultural works and practices, the categories themselves are significant for how they demarcate and contest beliefs about cultural value, our concerns about who makes and owns culture, and our constant preoccupation with who consumes it, why, and how. Unsurprisingly, much scholarship on popular culture, especially among cultural historians, has focused on it as the domain of uneducated and working-class people (Denning; Rabinowitz), women (Enstad; Radway), people of color (Acham; Lhamon), and/or children (Kline)—in other words, everyone *not* an educated, middle-to-upper-class white man. In doing so, much popular culture scholarship has had to take on the widespread public (and academic) juxtaposition of popular culture's artistic quality and intellectual depth with that of art or literature proper; in many cases, scholars of popular culture have pointed to the shaky ground on which the high-/lowbrow distinction stands.

Like dime novels, pulps, and mass-market paperbacks, comics have long been understood as lowbrow. This cultural-artistic status has proved a significant barrier both to the average adult's ability to discuss comics in public without invoking the stereotype of the Simpson's hyperbolically unattractive, sexless, and misogynist Comic Book Guy, and to the development and acceptance of comics studies as a legitimate field of inquiry. Though comics scholarship emerged out of comics fandom and journalism in the 1980s at precisely the moment that the general public began to "take comics seriously," the study of comics has been plagued by the medium's lowbrow association and was built on the (often strikingly defensive) premise that comics are in fact quite smart. Any account of lowbrow as a keyword for comics studies must necessarily deal with it as both a problem in comics history, a social factor that must be understood in its specificity for each study of a given comics, but beyond that as a problem for the field itself. Lowbrow is dealt with—usually only in passing and almost never with direct reference to the word itself—in nearly every study of the subject, and follows the seemingly necessary defense modelled in nearly all studies of popular culture (Fiske; Freccero; Gans; Strinati). In the past few years, comics scholars have become increasingly skeptical of the need to "defend" comics as worthwhile subject and have turned their attention to how conceptions of comics' status manifest in comics scholars (Pizzino; Singer, *Breaking the Frames*).

As this overview suggests, and as the essays in Smith and Duncan attest, for decades the key barrier to studying comics was their historical imbrication in and emergence from the popular culture scene. Although the genealogy of comics *can* be drawn to a range of art historical accomplishments such as the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Bayeux Tapestry, and the early-nineteenth-century cartoons and caricatures of Rodolphe Töpffer (Kunzle)—most of which, at present accounting, can hardly be considered lowbrow—comics' history over the past 100 years was

closely aligned with mass publishing and the media industries. Because of preferences within the academy for singular works of art, intellect, and cultural brilliance—for example, in the tradition of the Great American Novel (Buell)—comics were denigrated for decades in the public and academic eye. Some of this preference was zeitgeist-driven reactionism to moral panics in nations such as the United States, Britain, Australia, and Sweden, where comics were associated with childhood delinquency and sexual deviancy (Beaty, *Fredric Wertham*; Hajdu; Nyberg). And while the success of creators like Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel have brought comics to a wider audience and into the classroom, the past two decades have also seen comics dragged in popular (and scholarly) writing as a result of the medium's increasing synonymy with the superhero genre, thanks to a massive transmedia adaptation industry driven by Marvel and DC Comics.

Early work in comics studies was in much the same position of early film studies or science fiction studies, having to justify the artistic quality and intellectual depth of the medium and defend comics' worth as objects of study. Often, this was accomplished by pointing to the artistic genius of individual comics creators and to specific works of comics art, particularly those collected in or originally conceived of as "graphic novels." The term "graphic novel" (Baetens and Frey) is typically applied in order to add the artistic weight of "graphic" and literary seriousness of "novel" to the otherwise undignified "comic" (too synonymous with humorous newspaper strips), "comic book" (closely linked with superheroes), or "comix" (with links to countercultural vulgarity and underground indie-chic alike). Take for example Witek's book on comics as historical narratives, in which his chapters focus on a single great work by a single comics luminary produced outside of the mainstream comics industry and the superhero/science fiction/horror genres (e.g. Spiegelman's *Maus*, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*). As Beaty and Woo (5) have noted,

comics studies established a canon of "plausible texts" around which the field developed; these texts, particularly Spiegelman's *Maus*, Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a handful of work by cult-status alternative comics creators like Chris Ware and Charles Burns, and two narratively contained, genre-deconstructing superhero comics (Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* and Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*), became the center of a growing field of study by the mid-2000s.

Although the growth of comics studies confronted the problem of comics' lowbrow cultural status, particularly in the US and British contexts (the Franco-Belgian and Japanese traditions are considerably different), and ensured that comics were now widely taught, the lowbrow problem remained in the form of the separation of those comics worthy of scholarship from those that failed to make easily plausible texts—for the most part, serialized mainstream genre comics. For example, despite the historical significance and artistic and narrative complexity of DC Comics's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* limited series (written by Marv Wolfman with art by George Pérez), it has remained out of the scope of most comics research because the intelligibility of the comic relies on decades of prior storylines involving hundreds of characters; as a result, it is also virtually unteachable. Other comics that have been historically influential, such as Frank Miller and Klaus Janson's run on *Daredevil* in the late 1970s and early 1980s (a mainstream superhero comic) or Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* (an indie samurai/funny animal comic), to take two examples, occupy such complex production histories with regard to the interrelation of the series to a larger comic-book universe, distribution across multiple publishers and likely dozens of individual comics, or are otherwise difficult to access (either because of the cost of collected editions or the difficulty of access to original copies).

In contrast to serialized genre comics, texts like *Maus* and *Persepolis* could arguably be saved from the biases of popular culture and its mass appeal by referring to them instead as singular works of artistic greatness. Moreover, the need for plausible texts gives primacy to comics that can be taken as singular texts (either standalone graphic novels or complete storylines no longer than a few issues of a comic-book series) in regularly available editions that can be cited by a groundswell of scholars. It is unsurprising, then, that much of the transformation with regard to the cultural status of comics has come in the form of our terms of reference for the medium. What comics are called has become an especially important signifier for brow level and the medium's acceptance in literary criticism. The deployment of the terms "graphic novel" and "graphic narrative," and their use as legitimizing technologies in the fight against the medium's lowbrow associations, are symptomatic of what Beaty and Woo (5) describe as comics' "poorly developed critical infrastructure," a situation that has led to comics scholars developing a vocabulary drawn from film, literary, and art theory that "ennoble[s] the comic book by stealing fire from the better-established art form." Despite all the good that this new vocabulary and growing institutional acceptance of comics has wrought, the old ties between the medium and its cultural status, as well as an increasing awareness of comics' narrative complexities, have posted comics at the boundaries of literary, film, media, and cultural studies (Pizzino)—not yet fully accepted, but enticing scholars who have typically immersed themselves in the discourses of highbrow art to dabble with the lowbrow.

Recent years have seen a tentative shift away from disciplinary constraints that once made the study of comics either impossible or that required scholars to perform contortions in defense of their texts. The number of academic journals and university presses devoting space to comics has exploded as our cultural moment militantly erodes highbrow/lowbrow distinctions and as

popular culture becomes an increasingly fruitful area of inquiry. The defenses of comics in the introduction to monographs have become shorter or disappeared altogether in the past five years alone. Meanwhile, the longtime distinction between comics and art (Beaty, *Comics versus Art*), though still a productive space for historical and aesthetic concern, has slowly withered. It's worth noting, of course, that this situation is context specific. The cultural status of comics has been a more significant concern in US and British scholarship as a result of the heavy influence in those countries of the Marxist tradition of cultural studies through the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools and their protégés in the US In Francophone scholarship, however, the cultural status of comics has played little role in comics studies, which has tended to focus on the formal functions of comics art, in part because comics have are higher cultural regard in France and Belgium than they do in the US and UK Comics are not considered of equal artistic/cultural value everywhere, and as such the various linguistic and national traditions have their own stories to tell about comics' relation to art.

This discussion of the keyword lowbrow and its relevance to comics studies also invokes the growing description of *middlebrow* (Radway; Rubin) as a concept that mitigates the binary historical tension between high and low. Middlebrow arose to describe the culture of a growing middle class at the turn of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, when new levels of consumption created a shared sense of cultural and class values in the form of up-market paperback fiction, quality television shows, and intelligent (but not "art") cinema. A term like middlebrow— or Peter Swirksi's *nobrow*, which denotes the seemingly dissolution of brow categories in some spaces of cultural production and reception—better describe the changing historical dynamics of culture, industry, and consumption in the wake of the emergence of more complex economic strata, especially the upper-middle class in postwar America. Alternatives to high-/lowbrow are of

increasing importance to comics studies since, following the growing recognition of comics as (sometimes, provisionally) "adult," the medium has become a more significant touchpoint for broader studies of culture, such that comics are now easily found alongside literature and film in studies, for example, of periods or issues in cultural history (e.g. Barzilai 145-185; Chute and Dekoven; Strub 15-21). Not to mention the growth of newspaper and upmarket magazine sections devoted to comics reviews and criticism, the inclusion of scenes from *Maus* in the Norton Anthology, or the longlisting of a comic for the Man Booker Prize in 2018—cultural shifts in the status of comics that nearly all utilize the term "graphic novel" and which mark out that form of comics as intended reading material for the fantasy of the college-educated middle-class American.

We might consider lowbrow the field-defining problematic for comics studies, especially in the U.S and British contexts. At stake in the status of comics as a lowbrow (or not) form is whether or not comics can be studied. In other words, whether or not comics studies can exist within the present institutional terrain of the humanities, since it seems not to be a question worrying those using comics in many other fields, like communications, education, and medicine. And, if so, how it should persist in its interstitial relationship to more well-established areas of inquiry. Volume like Fawaz, et al.'s *Keywords for Comics Studies* and Aldama's *Comics Studies Here and Now* suggest that comics studies is alive and well, though some still turn their noses up at anything but the middlebrow-sanctioned graphic novel. Lowbrow status remains a significant issue for us in comics studies, but it is also an opportunity. If the field turns its attention to how the discursive terrain of brow levels and especially to scholars' fear of being connected with the lowest of lowbrow cultural forms—that is, with the basest of mainstream comics, with the romance boom of the 1950s, with the franchise comics that have kept companies like Dark Horse and IDW afloat, with the mega-best-selling superhero melodramas of the 1990s, with the outrageously

ostentatious "event" comics that enforce crossover reading of Marvel and DC series, with the evangelical tracts of Jack Chick—if then, our field stands to gain a lot. Recognition of lowbrow status at the level of methodology, that is, taking account of the ways in which the cultural status of our objects of study impact our selection of and approach to texts, will create a comics studies open to the generic vastness, artistic inventiveness, industrial depths, awesome capacity, and more holistic history of our subject.

PART I: COMICS AND CAPITAL

CHAPTER TWO

WORLDS WILL LIVE, WORLDS WILL DIE: *CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS* AND THE
ANXIETIES AND CALAMITIES OF THE COMIC-BOOK EVENT

This chapter grew out of my obsession with the DC comic miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

On a more critical level, this chapter sought to address the growing consensus—which I criticize

below—that the year 1986 changed everything for modern comics on account of that year seeing

the release of *Maus*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, three books that supposedly and

forever altered the "tone" and "maturity" of comics, bringing the medium and, in the case of the

latter two, the superhero genre, out of their adolescence and into the realm of high art. Books like

Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics* (which sought to prove how "serious" comics could be as an art

form) were, when I began writing this chapter in 2014, taken at relatively face value or at least

were not openly criticized in the scholarship. Even scholars, like Charles Hatfield, who has come

to significantly revise their takes on the growing "maturity" of comics in the 1980s and 1990s,

have now begun to recant, recontextualize, and complexify the way we view the period—

vaguely stated, sometime between the late 1970s and 1990s—when comics as a medium seemed

to being doing things with a little more intensity, a little more seriousness, and a little more, dare

I say it, postmodernism. If any comic exemplifies the mainstreaming of postmodernism in the

1980s, it's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

Aside from recovering this comic as an important text from a major, watershed period in

the history of comics, and putting it back at the center (just temporarily!) of the narrative of

comics history, this chapter also sought to address a larger lacuna I saw in comics studies, one

that still exists in large part today: the lack of attention to how the comics industry—as a

(sometimes fluid) set of corporate, artistic, and material practices—could be understood not just

through archival research and interviews (as some have tried to write in the form of histories of publishers like Marvel Comics or Image Comics), but through the comics themselves, in everything from narrative decisions, the assignment of artists, the way books were tied to non-comics products, how advertising was placed, the decision to print some comics on higher-quality paper or with glossy covers, and so. My goal, then, with this chapter—published in *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* in 2019 after nearly half-a-decade of refinement, workshopping, and presentation at conferences—was to both recover a unique comic from its critical obscurity, read it alongside the "giants" of the field, and pilot a method of thinking about the comics industrial through a comic and its influence. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* proved an exceptional model in large part because it established a trend now annoyingly common in the comics marketplace and one which scholars of comics, transmedia, and media industries in general are only just beginning to pay critical attention to: the event comic.

Introduction: Comics and/in Crisis

It is by now a cliché, though by no means any less apparent for being one, that postmodernity and the contemporary are defined in part by crisis, catastrophe, and calamity. As Kevin Rozario observed in the opening of *The Culture of Calamity*, "If the content of movies, video games, and network news reports is any indication, we live in a culture of calamity" (1). Indeed, today the highest grossing films in the United States, many of them entries in transmedial superhero franchises spawned from the intellectual properties (IP) owned by Marvel and DC Comics, pay homage to the culture of calamity. Such films respond to the disaster capitalism of neoliberalism, an observation forcefully made by Dan Hassler-Forest in his aptly titled study of superhero films in the Bush era, *Capitalist Superheroes*. The city-crushing, body-smashing, world-rending

climaxes of superhero films literalize the destructive tendencies of global capitalism and make blatantly obvious its deleterious effects on economies, ecologies, and bodies.

In the past three decades the comics showcasing the masked figures who inspire such films have met the film industry's penchant for catastrophe with equal fervor. While the cinema has its blockbusters, the comic-book shop has its "events": limited series, typically six to twelve issues, that narrate fictional-universe-spanning conflicts between superpowered beings, the effects of which often crossover into ongoing comic-book series as title characters deal with the fallout from the event. Events are often used by mainstream comic-book companies, notably Marvel and DC, to boost sales and to act as catalysts for rebooting, reorganizing, and renumbering a company's publishing slate. Events such as Marvel's *Civil War II* (2016) or DC's *Rebirth* (2016) represent, on the one hand, crises within the industry as comic-book companies scramble to make themselves relevant to readers in an age of diminishing sales and growing reader diversity, and on the other, crises within the storyworld, where it is not uncommon for beloved characters or entire planets (or universes) to suffer tragic, calamitous fates—even if those fates prove easily reversible. While an exceptional amount of attention in comics studies has been given to the culture of calamity propounded by superhero films, as well as their reflection on the state of industrial filmmaking practices, little has been said about event comics.

In this article I offer a reading of DC's groundbreaking 1985 series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (hereafter, *Crisis*)—ostensibly, an attempt by two fan-favorite creators to simplify a confusing bevy of duplicate characters and parallel universes into one shared storyworld—in order to think about the history of event comics and their importance to the comic-book industry. While I briefly discuss Marvel's *Secret Wars* (1984–1985), I focus my reading on *Crisis* because the comic and its publishing history highlight the ways in which creators and the industry interacted with comics

history, continuity, fandom, and the structures of the media entertainment market in the mid-1980s to produce the sort of intracompany franchising that has become a staple of contemporary event comics and the episteme of the superheroic catastrophe they define. Working from a position that favors a media studies approach to understanding the history and development of franchises and media industries, I argue that *Crisis* responded to a cultural sense of crisis and calamity in the US through a narrative that featured the destruction of dozens of universes and that killed off multiple prominent characters. Crisis marked an escalation of the scale of the superhero narrative, moving beyond three-to-four-issue storylines involving half-a-dozen or so characters, to weave a story involving hundreds of characters, making the comic into a metaphorical catalogue of mid-Eighties IP owned by DC.

Highlighting current concerns in comics and media studies, I argue that in addition to voicing late-Cold War anxieties about global capitalism and the generalized, easily marketable woes of postmodernity through the trope of a calamitous event of unprecedented proportions, *Crisis* also exhibited anxieties about franchising in the comic-book and media industries in the 1980s. It is no coincidence that the so-called Dark Age of comics (c. 1985–2001)[1] overlapped with unprecedented media deregulation and conglomeration in the US. At the same time, the production of saleable, media-portable IP became the driving force behind comic-book companies' financial success. *Crisis* gave voice to both the cultural and economic anxieties of the comic-book industry in the 1980s, while inaugurating the event comic as a publishing tool for rebooting and revitalizing fictional universes. In the years since *Crisis* attempted to collapse the complexity of DC's storyworlds, comic-book companies have employed event comics in increasingly frantic measure, hoping in each case to restore some narrative order to their IP and to boost sales, while also striving to produce stories and art that set them apart from competitors.

Decade of Disaster and the Calamity of *Crisis*

The story of 1985's *Crisis* began three decades earlier, when DC's superhero universe became a multiverse. In 1956, two years after the infamous "comics crusade" that culminated with a Congressional hearing accusing comics of causing juvenile delinquency, and thus in the creation of the industry's self-regulating standard, the Comics Code Authority (Nyberg), DC published *Showcase* #4, debuting The Flash in a sleek red superhero costume to a new generation of readers. The Flash originally appeared in 1940, the star of his own series, *Flash Comics*. *Showcase* #4 marked the beginning of a trend that characterized the 1950s and 1960s: remaking older characters, and changing the origin stories and often names of characters beneath their superheroic masks (the Forties Flash, Jay Garrick, was replaced by the late-Fifties Flash, Barry Allen; likewise, Green Lantern was revamped, renamed, and the source of his powers revised). For longtime readers the multiplicity of conflicting characters and stories threw into question the narrative continuity of the fictional universe maintained by DC and signaled an expansion at the industry level of IP. In 1961, just as Marvel was making headway with its melodramatic, complex superhero universe, DC decided to explain away conflicting characters by having the Flash of the forties meet the current one, creating in the process two parallel earths: Earth-1 and Earth-2. *The Flash* #123 (Sep. 1961) introduced the concept of the DC Multiverse, with the contemporary Flash offering an explanation for the existence of two nearly identical worlds: "My theory is, both Earths were created at the same time in two quite similar universes! They vibrate differently—which keeps them apart! Life, customs—even languages—evolved on your Earth almost exactly as they did on my Earth" (qtd. in Wolfman, "Crisis Mail"). This new multiverse was explained as a set of parallel universes, often referred to in DC's lingo as earths, separated in the language of pulpy science fiction by universal vibrations.

Taking the implication of The Flash's explanation of the multiverse to its extreme, by 1981 DC's creators had invented more than thirty different earths to host the exploits of its multiplied superheroes. The confusion wrought by the unchecked expansion of the multiverse was brought to the attention of one of DC's top writers when Marv Wolfman received a letter from a perplexed reader, which he published in the letter column of *Green Lantern* #143 (Aug. 1981), responding, "One day we [. . .] will probably straighten out what is in the DC universe [. . .] and what is outside" (qtd. in Wolfman, "Crisis Mail"). *Crisis* was written to straighten out DC's multiverse. With this twelve-issue maxi-series Wolfman sought to feature "all the DC super-heroes from the past, present and future" in a story that would collapse DC's multiversal complexity into one streamlined universe where all of the superheroes who survived the apocalyptic incident could continue to thrive. With the help of artist George Pérez, Wolfman created a story in which the Anti-Monitor of Qward, god of the anti-matter universe that exists beyond the multiverse, destroys all but one of the universes and its earth. Earth-1 and select heroes from the other earths are left in the wake of this catastrophe, prevented by the sacrifice of more than a dozen characters, including Supergirl and Barry Allen, the Flash whose 1956 debut began the multiverse. Thus, *Crisis* was the symbolic end to an era of continuity confusion and a signal that the previous period—the Bronze Age to aficionados7—had transitioned to something different, something new.

Crisis is famously a pastiche of DC's then fifty-year history, reintroducing characters long forgotten, mixing and molding plotlines, and emerging on the other side of calamity as the supposed impetus for a new era in the history of DC—one that was taken quite literally as creators like Frank Miller reenvisioned a darker frame for a classic superhero, or as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons published their swansong to the superhero genre. *Crisis* is a valorization of the superhero genre. The pages are overcrowded with, at times, dozens of simultaneous narratives competing for

dominance, only to be subsumed into the larger threat of an anti-matter apocalypse. Moments of needed respite are found in the dramatic deaths of beloved characters and in the mourning of friends. One character, an immortal scientist named Pariah, who is forced to watch the death of every universe, is driven slowly insane, witnessing as he does the deaths of billions. Other characters, like the Supermans (Kal-El and Kal-L) of different universes, must contend with their duality. Amid this chaos, readers are confronted with some of the most artistically complex pages drawn for mainstream comics in the 1980s. Pérez, whose mastery and experimental use of space on the comics page had won him fame with readers of *The New Teen Titans* in the early 1980s, manipulates panels and borders in *Crisis* to match the frantic, urgent nature of Wolfman's occasionally incomprehensible narrative. Pérez's depiction of the climax of *Crisis* #4, for example, exemplifies the boldness of his art, defying conventional panel, narrative, chronological, and spatial organization as he thematically synchronizes the destruction of an unnamed universe by an anti-matter wave with images of the tormented reaction of Pariah (currently on an extradimensional space station), who weeps over the dead body of the Monitor (a primordial superhero, the only person who could have stopped the anti-matter waves, and the twin of the Anti-Monitor), and with the stunned responses of six teams of superheroes operating on six different earths, as they inexplicably witness the destruction of the unnamed universe—a direct result of the Monitor's death (Wolfman and Pérez 118). It is a powerful moment that unites dozens of Wolfman's narrative eccentricities and prefigures the many character and universe deaths to come.

Of course, words such as crisis, anxiety, and calamity, which supply the tonal makeup of *Crisis*, evoke multiple, shifting, powerful referents. What crisis meant at a barebones semantic level even in the very title of the comic-book series *Crisis* is not exactly clear. At the very least, the title signified to potential readers in 1985 some imminent moment fraught with destructive

potential for DC's characters and worlds. The possibility for destruction was confirmed even before *Crisis* hit the stands, on account of readers' knowledge of the generic expectations of superhero comics and also because the advertisements for the series hyperbolized that "The DC universe will never by the SAME!!" and "Worlds will live . . . Worlds will die . . . And that's only the beginning!!"[2] *Crisis*, then, was utilized as a categorical signifier of the potential for a system—the DC universe, superheroes' (story)worlds—to be disrupted and forever changed. As the title for a comic, the term crisis, with its vague allusions to inalterable changes to DC's storyworld, was particularly suggestive; it played up reader anticipation and provoked anxiety about beloved characters, at the same time that it played on anxieties about world-ending calamities both real and imagined in the 1980s.

Where other scholars have read *Crisis* primarily along narratological lines—as evidencing, for example, the ways in which American superhero comics require their readers to juggle "set[s] of mutually incompatible storyworlds" (Kukkonen 167) and therefore to challenge classical notions of mental processing and even of cosmology itself; or as a case study in how a comic-book company handles the difficulties of continuity that developed across decades of superhero narratives crafted by hundreds of creators (Friedenthal)—I want to instead consider DC's first event comic as a cultural artifact. *Crisis* is a product of the "decade of disaster," as Ann Larabee has described the 1980s, and therefore is part of a disaster archive of sorts, but it is also an artifact of the changing landscape of the comics industry and the media industries at large, a material and narrative response to the demands of franchising that exhibited in the process the anxious tensions between corporate profit, franchised IP, and individual artistic production. Crisis and disaster, as well as anxiety, are thus crucial keywords for thinking about the interstitial relationship between

event comics, the comic-book industry, the media marketplace, and neoliberal capitalism—a relationship, following Rozario, that might itself be dubbed "the culture of calamity."

Rozario's culture of calamity refers to the constitutive relationship between disaster, government, capitalism, and the individual, a relationship that he also defines as the "catastrophic logic of modernity," or, "one of the abiding, and defining, contradictions of our time: that we live in a society infatuated with, and entertained by, spectacles of calamity that is nevertheless willing to sacrifice all sorts of civil liberties in exchange for government and corporate protection against those same calamities" (10). Modernity, in other words, is produced through "a quest to make the world more secure . . . through development patterns that move through cycles of ruin and renewal, bust and boom, destruction and construction, producing as their collateral damage myriad social conflicts as well as technological and environmental hazards" (11). Modernity is thus a dialectic of disaster and anti-disaster, and our cultural fascination with calamities—whether they appear on the evening news or are the topic of the next blockbuster film—is one way in which we mediate our understanding of this dialectic. "Catastrophes," Rozario argues, "generate an extraordinary amount of cultural production" (14). Not coincidentally, catastrophes are also central to capitalism.[3] For Karl Marx, the business cycle of capitalism was precisely "the alteration of prosperity and crisis," an observation that Marx codified as "the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall," which he considered "in every respect the most important law of modern political economy" (qtd. in Rosdolsky 22, 381). Like modernity, characterized by the tension between disasters and the efforts to keep safe from them, capitalism is descriptive of cycles of movement between profit and fall, boom and bust. Crisis and calamity (or disaster or catastrophe) thus have much in common, and Rozario suggests that the two (or three or four) are interchangeable in the history of American modernity, its fascination with disaster, and the cycles of capitalism that both

structure and are structured by modernity's culture of calamity (84-85). The destructive creation

afforded by capitalism and the culture of calamity alike have equally constituted the catastrophic

logic of modernity in America since the eighteenth century.

While Rozario supplies a matrix of concepts within which it is possible to think about a

destruction-loving comic like *Crisis*, event comics, and the comic-book industry, Larabee offers

an account of the 1980s as a decade that reframed disaster in technological terms. Larabee shows

how a series of technological-industrial catastrophes including the failed responses to HIV/AIDS

beginning in 1981, the Bhopal gas leak (1984), the Challenger space shuttle explosion (1986), the

Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown (1986), and the Exxon Valdez oil spill (1989)

"stimulated debate over the rise of powerful multinationals exporting dangerous systems, the role

of modern political institutions in gaining loyalty for massive technological investments, the

dangers of an increasingly mechanized lifeworld, the eroding cultural distinctions between humans

and machines, and social obligations to disaster victims" (ix). So while Rozario presents disaster

as a way of life for Americans, Larabee argues for its specific implications in creating a cultural

shift during the 1980s in our relationship to—and representation of—technology, government, and

corporations. At the same time, this shift took place against the backdrop of both the threat of

nuclear war during one of the most intense moments of the Cold War and the rise from 1977

onward of what Naomi Klein has dubbed "disaster capitalism," or "the radical privatization of war

and disaster," which she argues is a specific articulation of what has elsewhere been referred to as

either neoliberalism or globalization, attuned to the spectacles of war, violence, and torture as they

were capitalized on by private corporation, became integral to governance, and became common

in the popular media (17).

The technological-industrial disasters of the 1980s and conservative policies of Reagan's late-Cold War America that fostered the growth of capitalism attendant to disaster—not to mention the backlash against radical social movements of previous decades and resultant reinscription of straight white masculinity to hegemonic status[4]—provide the frame in which a comic like Crisis was dreamed up by Marv Wolfman, approved by editors, written and drawn, marketed and sold, and ultimately read.[5] *Crisis* certainly imbibes and regurgitates the general sense of being embedded in a "decade of disaster," as well as the particular fears of 1980s techno-scientific disasters. In the pivotal seventh issue of the series, the superheroine Harbinger (the protégé of the now-dead Monitor) explains to a group of superheroes about to spearhead an attack on the Anti-Monitor's fortress that the crisis destroying universes was begun ten billion years prior by a scientist of an alien species, the Oans, with ambitions beyond his society's ethical scope. Harbinger describes the antediluvian Oans as living in a "paradise. Their minds and bodies were things of perfection. In such a world one would expect a winding down . . . a lessening of continued advancement . . . / But such was not the case. They strove always for improvement of the mind and the spirit . . . / Their science has never been equaled." But this utopian society of scientists was disrupted by the ambitious Krona, who performed an experiment that would allow him "to learn the origin of the universe!" (Wolfman and Pérez 182). But the experiment went awry: "At that moment was born both the anti-matter universe and the multiverse" (183). Krona was punished and exiled, and his techno-scientific disaster caused the dissolution of Oan society. Also as a result of the creation of the multiverse, the Monitor and Anti-Monitor were born, began a war with one another, and eventually rendered one another unconscious for nine billion years. Pariah then reveals that his own "false pride led to the fall of everything" when he conducted a similar experiment that breached the anti-matter universe and awoke the Anti-Monitor, whereupon he began to devour

positive matter universes, beginning with Pariah's (186). As a result of his connection to the Anti-Monitor, Pariah is mysteriously dragged to the site of each universe's death, a phenomenon that the Monitor, also awoken by the experiment, uses to track his evil twin in order to rally superheroes to save the multiverse.

The eponymous crisis on infinite earths, then, is a direct result of two technological disasters representative of the postwar ambition to utilize industrial science to better society, all claims that could have been made of the technological developments that produced the great disasters of the 1980s. Indeed, like Krona's Oa, Pariah's world was a utopia produced through magnificent scientific advancements that allowed for social harmony and control: Pariah himself "conquered all disease" and "freed [the world] from toil" (Wolfman and Pérez 187). While *Crisis* exemplifies the cultural anxieties about disaster and techno-science in 1980s America through figures like Pariah, I find it productive to think of *Crisis* as equally a material and narrative response to the comics industry of the 1980s. Following Larabee's insistence (2) that we turn our attention to disaster archives, we might consider *Crisis* as a text in just such an archive—to put it cynically, the disaster of the comic-book event.

Industry, Franchise, Event

To write about event comics is to write about the history of the comic-book industry, its production practices, and its imbrication in the mass media entertainment industry. Event comics such as Crisis have been largely ignored by comics scholars as a result of the field's overwhelming preoccupation, as Andrew Hoberek has remarked, with "individually produced, independently published, nonsuperhero" comics (9). Indeed, event comics are ridiculed for their unself-conscious glorification of the superhero genre and their seemingly solely commercial purpose. And while event comics, like any comic book, provide opportunities for individual creators and artists to work

within the framework of the comics industry by telling the stories about characters owned as IP by comic-book companies that are in turn owned by multinational corporations, their place at the center of a company's publishing schedule and their reliance on the crossover popularity of the major characters featured in each event to draw in readers and drive up sales require that comics scholars consider seriously the economic position of comics series and trends that embody the most commercial aspects of the industry. A focus on event comics like *Crisis* is doubly important to the study of comics history because their creation was contingent upon a number of industrial and cultural forces that only coalesced in the 1980s, as comic-book companies responded to shifts in creator, reader, and market demands concurrent with the conglomeration of media industries and the rise of cross-media franchising.

In the annals of comic-book history, the 1980s are perhaps best known for three major publications from 1986: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Together, these three comics are said to have transformed mainstream superhero comics, to have made them—and the industry and genre that *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* belong to—more mature, "adult." All three are immediately foregrounded in the introduction to Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, and despite there being a rather long history of the aesthetic form that the term "graphic novel" indicates, Baetens and Frey point out that it was not until the publication of these three graphic novels—all of which are in fact bound collections of previously serialized comic books or strips—that mass media and academia recognized the graphic novel as a legitimate art form (74). Indeed, Roger Sabin argues that on account of "The Big 3," comics in the US were undergoing an "adult comics revolution" characterized by "a move away from fandom and into the mainstream," with comics like *Watchmen* featuring themes, narratives, and images that catered

to a larger adult audience brought about, in part, by the shift from niche to mainstream marketing (176). According to Sabin,

> The Big 3 . . . received coverage in all the major periodicals, including Time, Newsweek, and even the Wall Street Journal. Dark Knight featured on the New York Times best-seller list for thirty-two weeks, while Maus won the American National Book Award for biography. All the major press publications reported the "Comics Grow Up" story, and there was also significant radio and TV coverage. . . . PR and advertising played a major role: a DC advertisement featured in many magazines proclaimed "You outgrew comics— now they've caught up with you!" (176)

Although comics have now become an object of a burgeoning field of study thanks in large part to the public reception of 1986's Big 3, the field retains a bias for what Douglas Wolk calls "art comics" in opposition to "mainstream comics"—for the most part of the superhero genre (11).[6]

Crisis, which debuted the year before *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*, cannot be understood except in relation to the shifting terrain of comics in the 1980s, which comics scholars have largely studied as a shift away from puerile superheroic fantasies and toward more serious fare: Wolk's "art comics" or Charles Hatfield's "alternative comics." But the independent, auteur comics of the 1980s—even those that were published by mainstream companies like DC Comics, which led the way in bringing indie British creators like Brian Bolland, Neil Gaiman, Gibbons, Dave McKean, Peter Milligan, Moore, and Grant Morrison to American comics—only tell a fraction of the story, one that focuses overmuch on comics that eschewed the aesthetics and narratives of what was most popular and most common in comic-book shops. Indeed, when Hoberek comments that "the transformation of the comic book industry in the early eighties made possible a book like *Watchmen*" (13), he means that the development of the direct market—that is, the localization of

comics fandom in comic-book shops and major lay publications like *The Comics Journal* (1977–
), and the development of a speculative collectors market—all made possible the sale of limited-
issue series like *Watchmen* and, before it, *Crisis*.[7] The growth of the direct market in the 1980s set
the conditions of possibility for new ways of telling comics stories and for marketing them.

The development of the direct market in the late 1970s and its solidification in the 1980s
was perhaps the single most significant change in the American comic-book industry since the
anti-comics campaign of the 1940s and 1950s. Principally, the direct market represented a new era
in comic-book distribution. Since the 1930s comic books had been sold by publishers to
newsstands, grocery and drugstores, and the occasional bookstore via national magazine and
newspaper distribution networks that cared very little about the low-cost, youth-audience comics,
and that often committed fraud by filing affidavit returns for comics that had never even been
placed on shelves (e.g., only one-fourth of the comics printed in 1974 were placed for sale;
Gabilliet 141). Beginning with young comic-book collectors in the early 1970s, the direct market
system consolidated comic-book distribution with a few small, comic-book-only distributors who
sold directly to specialty stores. These specialty stores, or comic-book shops, were often opened
by collectors who sold new material from the direct market alongside comics from their own
collections. The direct market produced a nearly instantaneous rise in comic-book sales, rescuing
the precarious state of the late-1970s comic-book market from bankruptcy, and accounting for an
overwhelming proportion of mainstream comic-book publishers' sales revenues by 1980.
Moreover, the direct market and the comic-book shops it helped to create—as many as 3,000
nationwide by the mid-1980s (Lopes 100)—provided a locus for fans to buy, sell, trade, discuss,
and critique comics of all varieties, ranging from the mainstream products of Marvel and DC to
alternative, independent, and self-published comics.[8]

The direct market's crystallization as the primary distribution system for comics, and the subsequent creation of the comic-book shop as the geographic center of comics fandom (and their purchases) mirrored the higher-scale shifts in the entertainment media industry that centralized the profits and assets of entertainment platforms and distribution models under fewer and fewer multinational conglomerates. Jennifer Holt describes the development of such conglomerates in *Empires of Entertainment*, where she traces the ways in which media companies and governmental and legal bodies (e.g., the Federal Communications Commission, Federal Trade Commission, and Department of Justice) worked side by side for the laxening of antitrust policy and corporate regulations from the beginning of the Reagan era and the ushering in of widespread neoliberal policies to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which among other things relaxed cross-media ownership policies, thereby allowing the massive mergers that consolidated most media companies under the umbrellas of conglomerates like The Walt Disney Company and Time Warner. What Henry Jenkins has referred to as "economic convergence" or the "horizontal integration of the entertainment industry" in the late 1990s and 2000s, Holt refers to instead as "structural convergence" in order to describe the "mixture of horizontal and vertical integration and conglomeration" that co-occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the government deregulation that allowed such conglomerates to arise (3).[9] Structural convergence in the media industries resulted in comic-book companies being joined to conglomerates as just one entertainment arm of the media Hecatoncheires. DC Comics, for example, which was purchased by Kinney National in 1967, became a subsidiary of Warner Communications through a merger in 1972, and throughout the 1980s was joined with various film, cable, broadcast, gaming, publishing, and other media or media-related production and distribution companies, becoming Time Warner after a two-year merger in 1989.

One significant result of structural convergence was the growth of media franchising—a cooperative business strategy whereby one company licenses its IP to another in order to maximize profit through licensing fees and minimize the risk of poor sales. In the realm of media, franchising is the basis for the transmedia extension of stories, occurring both inter-industry ("transmedia extension across the social and industrial context of multiple media industries") and intra-industry ("multiplication across productions in a single medium") (Johnson 45). Though originally meant to describe the relationship between a franchisor (e.g., McDonald's) and a franchisee (e.g., a local entrepreneur who wants to start a McDonald's, believing that the brand will boost sales better and faster than a new, unknown restaurant would), Derek Johnson has shown how the business strategy became integral to the media industries at precisely the same time that Holt's "empires of entertainment" were emerging. Johnson argues that "in the film, television, video game, comic, and toy industries of the 1980s, the franchised production of content emerged in strategic response to new distributional structures within each market" (73) and by 1988 was a "$54.3 billion-dollar-a-year business" (Kline 137). The ultimate desire, aside from and for the sake of maximizing profit, was to create greater levels of familiarity between entertainment and audience by offering "not just cultural products, but systems of cultural products" (Johnson 74).

The growth of such systems of products—for example, tie-in video games, comics, and action figures accompanying the release of a film, all of which taken together create a deeper transmedial relationship between the audience and the film's storyworld—was partly a result of convergence that placed the various industries under the same corporate roofs. There was across all media in the 1980s a shift away from generating mass-consumable popular culture and toward marketing to and distribution in "smaller, more valuable, localized markets" (Johnson 75). The cultivation of systems of products, as Johnson suggests, was also the result of changes specific to

the various media, for example the development of the comic-book direct market that took advantage of industrial investments in smaller markets and franchising. Johnson provides the example of Marvel's X-Men comics in the 1980s and 1990s as evidence of corporate investment in localized markets and the possibilities for intra-industrial franchising, since the characters of the original X-Men comic, *Uncanny X-Men*, crossed over and expanded into several X-Men comics series, reader interest in which was driven by readers' previous familiarity with the characters from *Uncanny X-Men* (79-85). Johnson's reading of Marvel's X-Men franchise suggests that, since the rise of the direct market, Marvel and DC have relied increasingly on intra-industrial franchising in order to both encourage and meet demand for "the intensification of seriality and continuity between titles" (79). Johnson's foundational study of media franchising, paired with Holt's history of media conglomeration, demonstrate that the understudied direct market and the development of event comics were embedded in social, economic, and industrial structures of significance to media studies beyond the insular focus on comics. Event comics like *Crisis* and Marvel's less-successful, earlier event, *Secret Wars*, are therefore symptoms of this confluence of structural changes occurring in the 1980s mediascape and represent the collaborative efforts of creators, editors, and IP-owners to navigate the complexities of intra-industrial franchising at a moment in that strategy's accretion across media.

Event comics, in other words, only emerged as a result of the development of multinational media conglomerates and the new emphasis on franchising in the 1980s. This was quite literally the case with the first event comic, *Secret Wars*, a twelve-issue maxi-series released throughout 1984 and 1985 that was created as a marketing tool for a toy line and that merged together dozens of Marvel superheroes into one title. The story was, like that of *Crisis*, rather convoluted: a cosmic entity capable of manipulating reality, called the Beyonder, places heroes and villains into a fight-

to-the-death scenario on a planet called Battleworld, where the heroes and villains work through internecine conflicts to defeat the Beyonder, then Dr. Doom (after he assumes the former's powers), and escape. *Secret Wars* was ultimately an inter-industrial franchising opportunity, a reaction by the toy company Mattel—creators of the He-Man toys, which became the basis for a franchised television show, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*—to a franchising agreement struck between toy company Kenner, of Star Wars toy fame, and DC. Mattel feared a monopoly on superhero action figures, and approached Shooter with the deal to make a comic that would excite buyer interest (Howe 263-264). But the event also utilized intra-industrial franchising to boost interest in the comic itself: *Amazing Spider-Man* #251, *Uncanny X-Men* #180, *Iron Man* #181, *Incredible Hulk* #294, *The Thing* #10, *Thor* #341, and *Avengers* #242 all included scenes that led directly into the beginning of *Secret Wars* #1, and to date the eighth issue of the event is regarded as a comics collector's treasure, since it featured the first appearance of Spider-Man's black symbiote suit. Despite being for the most part formally uninspired and artistically uninteresting,[10] *Secret Wars* was nonetheless an economic success for Marvel, and though they beat DC to the printer, the latter already had its major, company-wide crossover event well underway.[11]

Marvel's *Secret Wars* exemplified the significance of comic-book companies to the franchising schemes of the 1980s, and especially of the importance of superhero IP to building inter-industrial franchises. *Crisis*, on the other hand, showcased the extremes of intra-industrial franchising and in the process simulated creator and reader anxieties about franchising and the primacy of IP in the new era of media conglomeration. The origin story of *Crisis*, like that of any comic-book character who has been around for a few decades, is multiple—and this multiplicity of explanations for the creation of the comic, for the instantiation of event comics as major moves

in marketing and IP continuity control within the comics industry, belies some of what makes *Crisis* so important. Wolfman described *Crisis* as a "repair job" in the editorial that accompanied issue #1, claiming it would fix "the morass of continuity" that DC's "writers and artists have often mentioned . . . they wished . . . could be repaired." "By series end," he promised, "DC will have a consistent and more easily understandable universe to play with" (Wolfman, "Crisis Mail"). It was also a project, Wolfman explains, that DC President and Publisher Jenette Kahn was wholly behind. The narrative Wolfman provides in the editorial in *Crisis* #1 is a simplistic one, offering a letter published in a comic he edited as evidence of a sincere and widespread problem for DC readers, who might be said to have lamented the fact that DC lacked the attempted shared worldbuilding of Marvel's comics. Moreover, Wolfman's narrative suggests that reader confusion may have signaled a financial liability to DC's higher-ups.

Kahn's swift approval of the project in 1981, shortly after Wolfman published and responded to the reader letter in Green Lantern #143, and her decision to have the event coincide with the company's fiftieth anniversary, confirms the notion that a simplified continuity might be considered a more marketable asset.[12] As Sean Howe notes in his history of Marvel, Warner executives understood their subsidiary DC's principal financial strength to be as an IP farm for franchising deals, so much so that in 1984, Warner Publishing's Jim Sarnoff offered to license the comics-publishing rights for seven DC titles, including Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and DC's new hit, Wolfman and Pérez's *The New Teen Titans*. Marvel, however, backed out of negotiations after being hit by a lawsuit from the independent comics publisher First Comics for "anti-trust and anti-competitive activities" (Howe 272). Although Sarnoff was working above Kahn's head, it is clear that the franchising potential of a simplified, streamlined, and easily accessible set of stories and characters set in one universe consistent across all DC titles was an

appealing draw of *Crisis*. Not only might it lead to greater crossover sales between the comics and newly franchised television shows or toys, but *Crisis* might also become a launching point for greater levels of intra-industrial franchising, since a newly streamlined comic-book world would in theory make it easier for readers to jump into comics they had never read before and increase creators' opportunities to utilize characters from beyond their comic's traditional cast. Whatever new franchising potential it was thought *Crisis* might offer, Wolfman's discussion of the origin of *Crisis* over a decade later, in the introduction to the 1998 trade paperback, points to other key ways in which the event comic refracts the 1980s mediascape, particularly as concerned the role of the individual creator working with corporate-owned IP.

Wolfman had begun the 1985 origin story with the *Green Lantern* fan letter, but he started the 1998 account with his adolescence in the 1960s, when he read early intra-industrial crossovers in which the Justice League of America encountered the Justice Society of America. The breadth of DC's fictional worlds excited Wolfman, who, "being the greedy fan [he] was . . . wanted to see a single story featuring all the DC super-heroes from the past, present, and future" ("Introduction" 5). He even invented a villain to make it happen: the Librarian, who, "living in a satellite orbiting the Earth, observed all the heroes, and sold the information he obtained about the heroes to other villains." Wolfman also described loving the British television series *The Prisoner* (1967–1968), "the first intentional limited series with a beginning, middle and a definite end. . . . I loved the idea of a short-run series and wondered why it had never been done in comics." Together, these two ideas formed the initial seed for an event comic that ultimately became *Crisis*. When Wolfman broke into comics in the late 1960s, he took the idea for a limited series to editors at Marvel and DC, but was told a limited series would not sell, since comics publishers believed "readers were suspicious of comics with low numbers" ("Introduction" 5). While the latter part of this narrative

points to the importance of the direct market to the development of limited series, Wolfman's 1998 tale of his fannish desire some two decades before *Crisis* to see all of DC's IP joined in one story highlights one of the central tensions of media franchising: collaboration.

This discussion of the origin of *Crisis* suggests precisely what Johnson has described as the primary relationship implicated in the industrial process of franchising, namely the collaboration between individual producers, who see themselves as separate artists responsible to their own work and to readers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the stakeholders, including editors, who stand in for the interests of the corporation that owns the IP with which individual artists or artistic teams produce new media products. To put it another way, Marv Wolfman may very well have desired from adolescence to produce something like *Crisis*, and his successful (read: profitable) work at DC and the "proof" of reader confusion over DC continuity and its multiverse provided by the reader letter to *Green Lantern* allowed him to approach Kahn, who in her role as insurer of DC's profits within the Warner media conglomerate thought that Wolfman's comic would provide useful impetus for rearranging DC's IP in such a way as to make the comics more approachable to new readers. The publicity that a major comics event like *Crisis* could bring, following the year after Marvel's monetarily (but not critically) successful *Secret Wars*, no doubt also motivated DC and Warner executives.[13] At the same time, *Crisis* offered DC a reason to celebrate, loudly and destructively, the company's fiftieth anniversary by defining that celebration through the event: readers quite literally got to see fifty years' worth of DC characters, storylines, and timelines championed in *Crisis*. The success of *Crisis* thus paved the way for future events to be dreamed up, approved, and marketed, though few since have been as expansive in narrative scope as *Crisis* was until the deteriorating quality of DC's event comics was revived in the early 2000s by a series of events that directly addressed Wolfman and Pérez's *Crisis*.

Crisis exemplified the very process of collaboration between creators and corporate stakeholders that enlivened and fueled franchising in the era of media conglomeration, reflecting the cultural crises of the 1980s as a decade of disaster at the same time that it refracted through its narrative the literal collapse of corporate power, metaphorized by the multiverse's collapse into singularity and the death of all that was either extraneous or simply did not fit the new model of the DC universe. *Crisis* is perhaps the most extreme example of intra-industrial franchising in the midst of the 1980s mediascape, since the story captured all of DC's IP into one series that narrated the internal relations of as many properties to one another as possible.[14] As Wolfman described it in an editorial, "Four years in the making, over seven hundred characters will be affected" (Woflman "Crisis Mail"). But just as the comic's production demonstrated the crisis of media conglomeration in the 1980s, so too did its narrative.

The character Wolfman invented for *Crisis*, Pariah, is more than just a warning against the dangers of techno-science in an age of industrial- and state-level techno-scientific disasters. Pariah is also a figure of readerly identification, "forced to observe the death-rattle of the multiverse" just as those who picked up Crisis in 1985 were (Wolfman and Pérez 13). In fact, Pariah seems to exist purely to reflect back to the reader a sense of fear, loss, dread, and anxiety about everything happening—both in the comic and in the world. Pariah is a spectator of death and destruction through the comic, and close-ups of his face offer contortions of worry, fear, apprehension, terror, and dread. For the first four issues, Pariah repeatedly appears out of nowhere at the death of each consecutive universe, his face always already distorted and prepared for the destruction to come as he laments again and again the trauma of the repetitive calamities. For example, in his first appearance in the fourth issue, Pariah is introduced in a canted close-up of his face; his mouth is open in a protesting yell, his eyes shot wide open, and the background a symbolic splash of bright

yellow with thick emphasis lines projecting Pariah's distress outward. This panel takes up the bottom third of the page, where Pariah once again reminds the reader, "It happens again and again— and I—I can do nothing to stem its destructive tide" and asks, to no one but the reader and himself, "But why must I witness such horror? Why?"—a dogged question that readers, four months into *Crisis*, were no doubt curious about themselves (Wolfman and Pérez 99). That Pariah stands in for the reader's horror at witnessing this collapsing of IP into one streamlined universe is further emphasized by his initial presentation on the wraparound cover of the first issue. This cover features a string of earths from the parallel universe torn apart by an anti-matter energy beam, thirteen heroes of those earths floating in the void of space. Pariah, however, stands in the lower right corner of the cover, his body squared to the edge of the page; his hands grasp his head, which is thrown back in a despairing yell, while his eyes stare out at the reader. Pariah is absolutely apart from the scene unfolding on the cover: he is an extradiegetic overlay, a melodramatic witness to *Crisis* not unlike the comic-book reader watching the structural convergence of the media industry metaphorized by Wolfman's multiverse-collapsing narrative and brought to life by Pérez's postmodern comics art.

Coda: Crisis after *Crisis*

Looking back on three decades of comic-book events, economic cycles of boom and bust in the comics industry, and companies' struggles to meet ever-changing audience interests and demands, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is something of an Ursprung—though not actually causative of this history, nonetheless an early symptom of the infinite crises in comic-book economics and narratives to come. *Crisis* is foremost a material and textual remainder of the 1980s comic-book scene and a testament to the shifts in media economies during that same period, but also the instigator for the popularity and narrative, as well as economic, significance of event comics as a

publishing tactic. Today, events, like blockbuster films, dominate the publishing schedules of Marvel and DC, punctuating their regular schedule of serial comics at least once a year, though now both companies utilize the tactic of event comics at smaller levels, to tie related characters and series together in localized, rather than company-wide, comic-book catastrophes.

Take as an example DC's "Death of the Family" storyline, which occurred across all Batman-related titles across late 2012 and early 2013, a year into DC's company-wide reboot, The New 52 (itself the product of a multiverse-reordering event, *Flashpoint*), and concurrent with similar events among the Green Lantern ("Rise of the Third Army") and Superman ("H'El on Earth") titles, and a four-month, event-styled crossover between *Justice League* and *Aquaman* ("Throne of Atlantis"). "Death of the Family" told the story of the Joker's final attempt to destroy the Batman and his comrades, and had ramifications across nine different comics series (*Batgirl*, *Batman*, *Batman and Robin*, *Catwoman*, *Detective Comics*, *Nightwing*, *Red Hood and the Outlaws*, *Suicide Squad*, and *Teen Titans*), each of which was branded with the "Death of the Family" logo and lettering. The bulk of the story took place in Batman with crossover into the rest of the series; while "Death of the Family" might thus be read as a complex crossover story arc, it was packaged as an event through advertisements that offered a full list of related comics, branded with a shared logo (like *Crisis*), and had story-altering significance to several titles, notably *Batgirl*, *Batman and Robin*, and *Detective Comics*. Months after the conclusion of the event, all related issues were collected in a special trade paperback, *The Joker: Death of the Family*, and those issues were remitted from the regular paperback collections of their respective series. Excepting "Throne of Atlantis," the same is true of the above events-in-miniature that coincided with "Death of the Family." As the example of "Death of the Family" demonstrates, comic-book companies have extended the spread of crossover storylines across more than a few issues and titles, branded them

self-consciously as something other than a story arc, and packaged them in trade paperbacks outside of the usual reprints. Marvel, too, has employed the event model at smaller scales, especially among the many titles featuring the X-Men, at the same time that it has matched DC event for annual event, reboot for reboot (often with events as catalysts).

Although *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was born from the mind of a single creator who then worked in collaboration with others, and although that singular creator had the backing of DC's stakeholders and the various editors to work with the entire catalogue of DC's IP, the event comic nonetheless exuded a sense of self-referential worry about itself, about the state of affairs it might set up for DC comics to come (if the advertisements delivered as promised), and by extension about the contemporary state of the comics industry and its relationship to the larger economic structures of the media industries. *Crisis* exhibited the anxieties of the new moment in media history, which itself was a product of higher-scale shifts in economic and legal policies that (de)regulated how the media industry could operate and that were ultimately symptoms of Larabee's decade of disaster, Rozario's culture of calamity, Klein's disaster capitalism, Harvey's neoliberalism, and, through it all, Marx's notion that capitalism produces crisis universally. *Crisis*, then, was both a narrative about and a narrative forged by the crises and calamities of capital and culture in 1980s America, a sometimes self-conscious archive of the media industry and comic-book industry shifts that caused event comics to emerge in the first place.

Notes

1. See Voger for a popular history of this period from the perspective of the fan press. Voger also includes a lengthy discussion of *Crisis* (14–19).

2. *Crisis* was originally advertised in *DC Sampler*, a free previews catalog, as a ten-issue miniseries titled *Universe: Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The logo, title, and number of issues were later emended.

3. Thus far I have used words like catastrophe, disaster, calamity, and crisis interchangeably. While I recognize, as Rozario puts it when confronting the same problem, that "each possesses a slightly different shade of meaning" (11), for the purposes of this essay the near synonymity of the terms is a useful tool for pointing to the interchange between such concept as "culture of calamity," "catastrophic logic of modernity," "disaster capitalism," and Marxist crisis theory, as well as the comic in question, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

4. Susan Jeffords argues that "Reagan's policies were geared not so much to the individual human body as it might be the material location of suffering, pain, or deprivation, as they were to the control of the idea of the body," producing as a result two fundamental categories: the abnormal "soft body" and the normative "hard body," defined by "strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage" (24) and that was also, "like Reagan's own, male and white" (25). In light of Reagan's mistreatment (and, early on, complete ignorance of) the AIDS crisis, it is safe to assume that the hard body is also a heterosexual one.

5. Of course, the political, economic, and social complexity of the 1980s have been reduced to nostalgia in recent years, as the anaesthetized memories of the decade have been packaged in television sitcoms like ABC's *The Goldbergs* or dramas like Netflix's *Stranger Things*. Marvel Comics has participated in this nostalgia as well, with the 2015 megahit event *Secret Wars* (named after the Secret Wars event comic of 1984) and Mark Millar's 2008 miniseries *Marvel 1985*. For a thorough study of the relationship between nostalgia, capitalism, and popular culture, see Gary Cross's *Consumed Nostalgia*.

6. While Sabin and Wolk both use the term "mainstream," their meanings differ in scale. By mainstream, Wolk implies the difference within the comics industry between those comics published by major, corporate-owned comic-book companies, e.g., Marvel and DC. Mainstream comics are thus of a different economic category than comics labeled alternative, independent, or "art." For Sabin, the meaning of mainstream has the meaning of being well known to the public: popular beyond the small number of people who enter comic-book shops, i.e., those whom Matthew Pustz has defined as "fanboys." Except in reference to Sabin, my meaning of "mainstream" is equivalent to Wolk's.

7. Even before *Crisis*, DC tried their hand at a limited series, with the campy Arthurian space fantasy *Camelot 3000*, a twelve-issue comic sold exclusively on the direct market beginning in 1982 but that, because of artist Brian Bolland's desire to provide art up to his standards, and better than the typical monthly work he was doing, was published intermittently until 1985. *Camelot 3000* was also the first mainstream comic to be printed on the more expensive, and thus more durable, Baxter paper. Marvel tried out a direct-market-only series in 1982 as well: Dazzler, which appeared monthly for forty-two issues.

8. There is as yet no comprehensive history of the direct market's evolution, though insightful accounts may be found in Gabilliet 138–48; Lopes 91–119; and in a three-part essay by Dean; Groth; and Deppey.

9. As Jenkins describes it, "horizontal integration" refers to "an economic structure in which companies own interests across a range of different but related industries as opposed to controlling production, distribution, and retail within the same industry" (286). Vertical integration, then, refers to companies controlling multiple points in the chain from production and distribution to marketing and retail.

10. See Sean Howe's discussion of *Secret Wars* (264-272), which he frames within a larger problem Marvel was facing in the early to mid-1980s: "Marvel simply wasn't turning out superstars anymore" (265).

11. As the prologue to the 2011 trade paperback collection put it, "It broke sales records across the board, becoming the best-selling comic book series in 25 years!" (Shooter, et al. 6); Shooter himself even declared that the comic sold "something like a million copies [a] month" (Hartnett).

12. As Wolfman describes it, he and Len Wein (who co-plotted *Crisis* #1) pitched *Crisis* under the title *The History of the DC Universe* to Kahn, who "loved the idea and gave us an instant go-ahead" and who also approved a "Death List" of characters to be killed off, reportedly responding that "we be even more daring in our thinking" (Wolfman "Crisis Mail").

13. There are apocryphal accounts of Marvel "scooping" the idea for an event comic, which became *Secret Wars*, when Shooter discovered what DC was planning with *Crisis* (Friedenthal).

14. The resulting singular universe could then be codified, as Wolfman and Pérez did in their follow-up, two-issue *History of the DC Universe* (1986), which provided the official history from beginning to the present of DC's fictional characters and which was simultaneously catalogued in *Who's Who: The Definitive Directory of the DC Universe*, an encyclopedia published in comics form for twenty-six issues between March 1985 and April 1987.

CHAPTER THREE

CANDY AND DRUGS FOR DINNER: *RAT QUEENS*, GENRE, AND OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

This chapter was commissioned for the *Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies* (2020) in 2018, initially as a case-study chapter on genre in comics. As this dissertation evidences, most of what I write about is superhero comics and I was, frankly, bored of writing about them. I chose instead to take a look at another popular genre within comics and one that also had traction across literary and cultural studies because of its immense appeal in popular fiction—that is, fantasy. In looking at fantasy in comics, I wanted to find a text that exemplified some of the obvious elements of the genre but that also wasn't, like a *Conan* comic, too self-serious in its presentation. *Rat Queens* seemed an obvious choice both for its heavy-handed embrace of *D&D*-inspired epic fantasy and its utter mockery of the genre; whereas *Conan* comics might take seriously that a beefy man in a loin cloth fighting lizard-men and skeletons for the love of buxom women is a completely heterosexual thing, *Rat Queens* questions the gender and sexual politics that lay at the very surface of epic fantasy. What's more, the comic won accolades for its representation of women in the early 2010s when calls for "diversity" in comics (which meant, for many fans, including women and people of color as characters) were just getting loud thanks to social media-fueled campaigns that exposed the gendered and racialized dynamics of comics, video games, and other traditionally "nerd" entertainment to a broader public. This chapter, then, takes questions of genre and gender to bear on a popular, but also controversial, comic and reads it through the lens of an aesthetic theory that, like the previous chapter, helps to further the goal of reading and historicizing trends within the comic industry. In this case, I used *Rat Queens* to argue that genre and gender played a key roles in mediating a particular aesthetic approach that typifies what we call "indie" comics.

Work like this has continued to be taken up by recent scholars like Madeline Gangnes and Kevin Cooley, who look at the intersection of aesthetics, genre, and industry in comics.

Introduction: Aesthetics and Fantasy Comics Pastiche

The comic-book series *Rat Queens*, published by Image Comics on a semi-regular schedule since 2013 and, as of early 2019, comprising over thirty issues and one-shot specials, opens like a typical, *Dungeons & Dragons*-style (*D&D*) fantasy adventure. A town seemingly set in the Middle Ages, populated by humans, elves, dwarves, and other fantasy beings, has a problem. It's an idyllic town with a bland name, Palisade, where everything runs smoothly, the citizens are happy, but all of this has been disrupted by some intervening, malevolent force. In the average *D&D* game or fantasy novel, this is the problem the adventurers work together to solve. *Rat Queens* writer Kurtis J. Wiebe bucks this fantasy trope immediately and in doing so sets the tone for the whole series. In Wiebe's take on the *D&D* fantasy adventure, the titular Rat Queens—comprised of the elf necromancer Hannah, the dwarf warrior (and princess) Violet, the smidgen (a hobbit or halfling-like people) Betty, and the atheist human cleric Dee (the only person of color in the series, dressed as a cliche voodoo practitioner), with the transgender orc warrior Braga joining in later issues— are the town's problem. They are introduced with a splash page that sets the narrative and aesthetic tone for whole series, a two-page spread of a Palisade street with people sprawled bloodied everywhere, buildings damaged, poles knocked over, windows broken, signs and banners ripped down. To the left, at a canted angle, stand the triumphant queens, with Violet tired from the fight, Dee aloof, Hannah raring for more, and Betty uninterested in anything but her beer. On display here are the aesthetic principles that guide the series, what Sianne Ngai calls "the commodity aesthetic of cuteness, the discursive aesthetic of the interesting, and the performative aesthetic of

zaniness" in her groundbreaking book *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Together, the zany, cute, and interesting "help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in late capitalist societies today" (1)—and their presentation in *Rat Queens* is no exception.

Rat Queens is a collage of references and narrative tropes drawing on a century of fantasy. Though not a *D&D* franchise comic, *Rat Queens* is nonetheless saturated with the tabletop roleplaying game's recognizable brand of quest-based fantasy adventure narrative that pits a party of diverse characters, with complementary backgrounds and skill sets, against the odds, typically embroiling the otherwise completely normal adventurers in immense plots to save the local town, city, world, or universe. Created in 1974, *D&D* has largely been (or has at least been understood in popular culture to be) played by adolescent boys and men. In Wiebe's comic, the main characters are all women, some queer, and all unabashedly sexual, funny, violent, and debaucherous. This led many to hail the comic as a feminist spin on *D&D*, despite the fact that the series was initially created by two men, one of whom later left the series after he was arrested for domestic violence. The narrative and production situation of *Rat Queens* is symptomatic of the comics industry's simultaneous attempts to tell diverse, socially just stories without courting diverse artistic talent, relying instead on a rotating door of white men (and occasionally women) to tell the stories of much more heterogeneous comic-book storyworlds.

In this chapter, I link the seemingly disparate but deeply interconnected discourses and practices of contemporary media production, genre, aesthetics, and comics. For the purposes of this "handbook" to comic studies, I offer these arguments through a case study of a popular, if certainly problematic, comic book and in the process demonstrate the critical utility to comics studies of reading genre, aesthetics, and industry together. I read *Rat Queens* through Ngai's conception of zany, cute, and interesting, showing how each of these categories is part of the

aesthetic logics of the series, while also showing how each performs or critiques the series's (superficial) investment in gender politics and the fantasy genre. Like Henry Jenkins's contribution to this volume, I offer a case study that gives insight into the broader political and industrial scope of comics, and in doing so emphasize the importance of aesthetics in understanding the relationship between the comics industry, comics themselves, as art objects, and their narrative and representational strategies. I suggest ultimately that *Rat Queens*'s aesthetic repertoire of the contemporary is symptomatic of the larger aesthetic cache of its publisher, Image Comics, and no doubt a major impetus for its success as a pseudo-indie, pseudo-mainstream comic-book company that courts a wacky range of creative talents, takes chances on short-lived series with strange premises, and is (supposedly) not beholden to comics publishing and narrative traditions but conforms nonetheless to broader artistic expectations—cultural demands, even—to be zany, cute, and interesting.

Genre and Aesthetics in Comics Criticism

Genre is a definitive category in comics studies. Though few comics scholars engage with genre theory as such, genre nonetheless weighs heavily on the field, where the categories of "mainstream" and "indie," "art," or "alternative" comics have been maintained with the same levels of distinction as have the terms "genre fiction" (that is, popular genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and romance) and "literary fiction" (for the most part a descriptor of supposed literary quality, as well as a product of what Mark McGurl calls the "program era" of university-based writing training) in postwar literature studies. In this way, "indie" and "alternative" comics, especially (auto)biographical comics about real people, places, and events— such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*—

have come to be seen as simultaneously non-genre and a genre of their own. On the other hand, mainstream comics published by companies such as DC and Marvel Comics, as well as a host of smaller, "indie" publishers who are nonetheless part of the same comics market and distribution model—e.g. BOOM! Studios, Dark Horse, Dynamite, IDW, and Image—are more clearly defined by the generic categories of popular fiction and film. Without doubt the most significant genre in comics studies is the superhero, in no small part because caped crusaders and their offshoots have dominated the mainstream comics market since the 1950s, even though other genres, notably the Western, romance, horror, and to a more limited extent science fiction and fantasy, have waxed and waned in popularity across the decades. Superheroes have their origins in comics, unlike the other genres, and so are a locus of some pride for comics scholars, and have also, on account of their adaptation into blockbuster hits beginning in the late 1990s, inspired film scholars to put the genre in perspective. Thus, where genre has found critical purchase in comics studies, it has been in explicit attempts to define the transmedial genre of the superhero, as evidenced in the work of Peter Coogan, Scott Bukatman, and Ramzi Fawaz—the latter two of whom have also considered the superhero genre's intersection with other genres, as well as the political and aesthetic dimensions of such genre crossings.

Because comics is a hybrid visual medium, aesthetics plays a significant role in comics studies, even if references to aesthetics tend to only use it as a shorthand for the overall look of a comic. Like genre, aesthetics clearly plays a significant role in the history of comics, and is often linked with shifts in the political and artistic terrain of comics genres that mark tentative boundaries of periodization, so that it is possible, for example in superhero comics, to notice an aesthetic shift alongside a turn toward more explicitly violent, nihilistic, and adult-themed storylines circa 1985 to 1996, which are also symptomatic of interconnected changes in culture (neoliberalism, the

Reagan era, the AIDS crisis, heating and thaw of the Cold War), artists (the British invasion, Art Spiegelman, Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld), and industry organization (rise of the direct market, emergence of "alternative" and "indie" comics scenes, growing popularity of adult-targeted imprints). Charles Hatfield makes a similar argument about the emergence of alternative comics in the 1970s and 1980s, which developed in part out of the "aesthetic and economic example" of underground comix in the decade before (ix). If underground and alternative comics (and to some extent the more recent development of indie comics) valued self-expression and originality, and were for the most part not published serially (as most mainstream comics are), then mainstream comics valued something more like company identity or character visual integrity, so that Marvel and DC, the two most prominent mainstream publishers since the 1960s, developed their own "house" styles and aesthetic languages for certain characters that, although they did not remain static over the years, changed only slowly.

Among those interested in "how comics work," that is, in structural and formal questions about how text and image create meaning, aesthetics has been influential, particularly among the art historians in comics studies. Among these are David Kunzle, who recovered the work of Rodolphe Töpffer, likely the first modern practitioner of comics art and also a significant early aesthetic theorist. David Carrier deals with aesthetics in his aptly named *The Aesthetics of Comics*, though he is much more concerned with the analytic philosophical tradition of aesthetics that means, after Ernst Gombrich, "finding out what role the image may play in the household of our mind" (qtd. in Carrier 2), than he is with answering questions about the political economy of aesthetics in comics art. Thierry Groensteen, perhaps the most significant structural theorist of comics, however, makes little use of aesthetics theory in his books on comics narrative and

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structure, though he makes common reference to aesthetic as that which describes comics' literary and artistic qualities beyond the narrative and structural dimensions of the art.

Aesthetics in comics studies, simply put, is about the look of comics art, and is thus defined by local, discursive, and history-specific concerns. It is in part the look of comics, especially the look of children's and mainstream comics, that has entangled aesthetics with the question of comics' cultural status, making aesthetics, if not a common explicit topic for comics scholars, then at least an important and potentially field-legitimizing one. As Christopher Pizzino argues, aesthetics is fundamentally linked with the question of comics' status as a medium and especially with the status of the genre of comics that creators choose to produce (12). In part by reference to aesthetic traditions within and without comics, and a self-awareness of the aesthetic status of comics as simultaneously mass cultural and art objects, "a comic can express, respond to, or make visible the problem of illegitimacy, as if the text were sentient, and self-reflexively aware of its status" (13). As a medium, Pizzino continues, "comics responds to its status with energetically paradoxical thematic and aesthetic strategies, both acknowledging and exploiting its status to powerful effect" (13). For earlier comics scholars, aesthetic complexity—as recognized by a traditional artistic, and usually modernist or postmodernist, understanding of quality[1]—was a way to mark comics as "mature" or "adult," therefore worthy of interpretation; the quintessential example of this scholarship is Roger Sabin's book on "adult comics," a category Pizzino parses to mean "possessing aesthetic, moral or political value" (41).

Unsurprisingly, in their seminal work on the role of symbolic capital in the comics field, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo argue that "the pursuit of pure, disinterested aesthetic goals" in a given comic is often synonymous with its lack of success in the comics market and its inverse popularity among scholars, such that foundational works of comics scholarship relied on comics

that only specialists had read (66-72). In this way, comics scholarship has tended to reproduce what Bourdieu called the field of restricted production, and while comics scholarship in recent years has placed less emphasis on selecting comics with "pure, disinterested aesthetic goals," arguments in favor of bringing this or that author, these or those comics, under the purview of criticism often nonetheless turn on the exceptionality of the art and storytelling (to be sure, not without reason). This is especially the case with single-author studies or studies of an influential series, for example Hatfield's biocritical study of Jack Kirby or Paul Young's study of Frank Miller's *Daredevil*. Frederick Luis Aldama, on the other hand, has used aesthetics not to build a new canon of "plausible texts" (Beaty and Woo 5), but to describe the lengths (or not) to which creators go in their attempts to write and draw difference in comics, with specific reference to the production of Latinx superheroes. Aldama's conception of will to style is an aesthetic and narrative call to integrate readers' socio-historical realities with the (re)presentation of those realities in comics, and is thus particularly timely in relation to discussing a comic like *Rat Queens* that was hailed as a feminist intervention in the usually all-male dynamics of comics generally and *D&D* fantasy adventure specifically.

Following in this vein and building on a tradition of studying the sociology and political economy of aesthetics, this chapter focuses on a single series, drawn and inked and colored by multiple artists, and written by one writer. But my intent is not to single out *Rat Queens*'s aesthetic exceptionality. In fact, the series is quite uneven across artists and even within individual issues; moreover, the series suffered from shoddy, uninventive writing in volume four, after Wiebe trashed a previously published issue (#16 of the original print run, which was left out of TPBs) because he felt unable to wrap up its storyline. But, as I hope to show by pointing to the comic's use of genre, particularly with reference to fantasy comics and *D&D*, and its expression of certain

contemporary aesthetic priorities, especially zaniness and the interesting, the series offers an

important symptomatic study of the contemporary comics industry and the political economy of

what Beaty and Woo call the "quality popular comic book" (63).

Fantasy and Comics: Contextualizing *Rat Queens*

It would not be a stretch to say that, in the United States, fantasy media since the 1960s has been

sculpted to the contours of three source texts: Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, Tolkien's Middle

Earth (including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*), and the tabletop roleplaying game *D&D*.

Each of these has had numerous instantiations; the Tolkien's original novels, for example, have

been adapted to comics multiple times, were made into animated features by Rankin/Bass

Productions between 1977 and 1980, and later became two trilogies of live action films directed

by Peter Jackson. Conan stories, originally published in pulps in the 1930s and repopularized in

the 1960s through heavily edited mass-market paperback reprints (Jerng 129-157), and *D&D*, a

game system for generating fantasy stories of all sorts (heavily influenced by Conan and Tolkien),

have circulated in comics since the 1970s, though the genre of fantasy comics dates to before the

comic book, and is at least as old as Winsor McCay's Little Nemo newspaper strip (1905).

McCay's comic read more like Victorian fantastica than the mainstream genre fantasy of today, in

part because the fiction/film marketing category of fantasy emerged only in the wake of Tolkien's

success in the US in the 1960s, when his books were reissued in mass-market paperback by

Ballantine. Hal Foster's pseudo-Arthurian fantasy strip *Prince Valiant* (1937) is a more clearly

generic predecessor of the fantasy comics that blossomed in the 1970s in titles like *Amethyst,*

Princess of Gemworld, *Cerebus*, *Elfquest*, *Heavy Metal*, *Savage Tales*, *Sword of Sorcery*, and

Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian*. Many of these comics, Conan included, drew on the amorphous

horror-fantasy hybrid genre "the weird," which took its name from the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, where Conan stories were originally published, and which is most clearly represented in contemporary media by the resurgence of interest in the writing of H.P. Lovecraft.

As this short account shows, transmedia and adaptation have played a significant role in fantasy comics' history. Indeed, outside of the tabletop roleplaying game itself and the 1980s animated television show, *D&D* is also known from its comic-book adaptations in the form of the *Dragonlance*, *Forgotten Realms*, and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* series that DC produced through a license from TSR, then owners of *D&D*, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Conan's comics are perhaps the biggest success in fantasy comics adaptation, having been published regularly since the early 1970s by Marvel and later Dark Horse. The character proved so popular in his pulp afterlife in the comics, that he was franchised into a blockbuster 1982 film, which was named after the comic (none of the original Howard story titles bore either Conan's name or the word barbarian) and the original draft of the film was even co-scripted by longtime *Conan the Barbarian* comics writer Roy Thomas. It is from this multi-mediated, transmedia field of fantasy comics that *Rat Queens* emerged—not only to satirize (or, at the very least, to make shallow jokes about) but also to break genre tropes.

Wiebe's *Rat Queens* makes heavy use of the breadth of transmedia fantasy, drawing especially on the *D&D* concept of an adventuring party taking quests to gain gold and fame. In addition, much of the humor in the series draws on readers' knowledge of the fantasy genre broadly. For example, the first TPB is titled *Sass and Sorcery*, a play on the "sword and sorcery" fantasy subgenre that indexes the gendered attitudes of the main characters, and the fourth TPB is called *High Fantasies*, a dual play on the subgenre of morally righteous high fantasy and the characters' drug use. Moreover, fantasy mainstays, like Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins and Conan

himself, are referenced throughout the series, the former via repeated references to a smidgen (Wiebe's hobbits) mob boss named Bilford Bogin, whose name is also a curse, and the latter in the form of a painting (after Frank Frazetta's style) displayed on the office wall of the merchant Gerrig (*RQV1*).

The series as a whole is an intertextual circus of loosely deployed fantasy, weird, and other generic (including cyberpunk) signifiers all fit to the form of the *D&D* adventure and the raucous all-female buddy comedy. Not for nothing, Wiebe describes his comic as "Lord of the Rings meets Bridesmaids," referencing the trend-setting 2011 female-led comedy (Esposito), and the back cover of *RQV1* describes it as "a violent, monster killing epic that is like Buffy meets Tank Girl in a Lord of the Rings world on crack!" The first volume establishes the series's bawdy tone and insensitivity to genre tropes, but nonetheless turns on the basic fantasy roleplaying game plot in which adventurers take quests for gold. The first issues of *Rat Queens* questions this premise, ask why adventurers adventure, and considers what a world of adventurers, each vying for glory and gold, would really look like. Palisade is overrun with adventurers who spend their off-quest time causing trouble. To solve the town's adventurer problem, the mayor sends all of the local adventuring parties on quests. But Wiebe's series departs the regular formula from here: rather than goblins to kill at the end of a trek through treacherous mountains, the queens find an assassin, as do the other parties—the Peaches, the Four Daves, Brother Ponies, and Obsidian Darkness. This twist in genre expectations touches off a series of events that lead, by the second volume, to a confrontation with the man behind the assassins, the bereaved merchant Gerrig, who seeks revenge on Captain Sawyer (a former assassin himself) for killing his wife, and who exacts revenge by summoning servants of the Lovecraft-inspired god N'Rygoth to destroy the queens (because Sawyer is in love with Hannah). This invocation of the the weird turns *Rat Queens* into a save-the-

world epic fantasy story, and Wiebe develops characters through flashbacks that, for example, flesh out the world of the dwarves, where Violet was a bearded princess, and give background on Hannah that sets up the conflicts of the third volume, which sees another transformation in the series's intertextual use of fantasy.

Volume three, *Demons*, marks an artistic shift in the series, as Tess Fowler takes over art duties (the last few issues of two were done by Croatian artist Stjepan Šejić after the original artist, Roc Upchurch, was arrested for domestic violence). Tess Fowler's tenure is by far the best-suited, of the four main artists, to the series's characters, as she does more than the other artists to bring alive the striking range of emotions felt by the queens; in doing so, her art deepens the narrative from an emotional standpoint at a time in the series when Wiebe was attempting to move away from writing a merely "fun" or humorous comic, and trying to tell difficult stories about friendship and family (glimpsed, but neither narratively nor artistically fulfilled, in *RQV2*). Aptly named, *RQV3* explores Hannah's past and her former possession by a demon—while at a magic university *à la* Harry Potter's Hogwarts (or Ursula K. Le Guin's earlier wizard school in the Earthsea books). The volume centers around the queens' journey to the university to save Hannah's father, who was imprisoned by the university's Council of Nine for leading an insurrection to bring back academic freedom (e.g. studying necromancy). Following conflicts with the other queens, brought on by their fear of her increasingly impulsive behavior and discovery of her demonic past, Hannah once again embraces her inner-demon and the volume ends with her radical transformation into a head-shaved, demon-horned, cigarette smoking punk who murders university guards, is imprisoned by the Council, and abandoned by her friends.

At this point in its publishing history, *Rat Queens* went on sabbatical. *Rat Queens* was briefly published as a webcomic before returning with *RQV4*, which saw all of the queens, Hannah

included, together again doing their usual adventuring. This led to some confusion among fans, but most assumed a story reboot. The fourth volume focused on a single adventure to recover some treasure, but which turned out to be an evil frog-man wizard's attempt to trap and defeat the queens. The volume also adds family drama in the form of an adventuring party led by Violet's brother to mock and mimic each of the queens (including a senile Elvis-impersonator wizard, another wizard who grows fungus on his body, and a possibly-sentient mushroom-person). *RQV4* is by far the zaniest of the volumes, combing over its awkward ignoring of the *RQV3* conclusion with jokes on jokes. *RQV5*, though also filled with humorous plot points common to the series (e.g. hipster club owners who kidnap the fungus wizard to create locally sourced craft recipes), brings emotional seriousness back to the series by revealing that the events of *RQV4* played out in an alternate reality that separated from the conclusion of *RQV3*. Thus, when *RQV4* starts with Hannah and the gang going on adventures, with no comment about her traumatic abandonment, it is because in this world, the queens never abandoned Hannah. The evil, reality bending wizard the queens face off against in *RQV5* is the Hannah who was abandoned at the end of *RQV3*, who punishes and kills the queens one-by-by throughout the fifth volume in order to teach the queens a lesson: not to abandon friends. By the volume's end, she restores them all to life (or, rather, erases the events of *RQV5* from history) and leaves only Betty with the knowledge of the alternate realities so that Betty, the kindest among them, can "tell you about the Hannah we left behind" (*RQV5*).

As this brief summary of *Rat Queens* shows, genre plays a key role throughout the series, not only as the main frame of the narrative, which is unapologetically a fantasy comic, but also as a tool for meta-textually engaging the history of the fantasy genre across media, an aspect of the comic's overall aesthetic that I ascribe to Ngai's category of the interesting. Moreover, this summary suggests that while *Rat Queens* often plays genre tropes for jokes, and relies heavily on

zany and cute to make meaning and curry appeal, beneath it all Wiebe builds on an emotionally powerful story about friendship and found-family that is often at the heart of the best fantasy. The affective depths of *Rat Queens* are a hallmark of the Image brand of comics, which I will explore more in the coda to this chapter; they are also, in part, a result of the aesthetic sensibilities the series rallies to engage its audience and tell its story. *Rat Queens* frames its self-presentation as a fantasy comic, performs gendered and sexual politics, and critiques its role as commodity object through an appeal to the aesthetic categories of the zany, cute, and interesting.

Rat Queens and Our Aesthetic Categories

Ngai's work on the aesthetic categories of postmodernism argues that aesthetic sensibilities are carefully imbricated with our political economy; as a result, the aesthetic and affective registers of culture are both symptoms and important tools for the critical understanding of how we relate to the capitalist system. Ngai finds in zaniness, cuteness, and the interesting that "[n]o other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to . . . everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way" (1). Indeed, these aesthetics describe the multiple meanings of a series like *Rat Queens*, and beyond that point to the constitutive relationship between aesthetics and genre both in this series but also in other projects published by Image comics. Zaniness, cuteness, and the interesting can be seen at every level of the comic: in the art, the narrative, and the dialogue. They act in both discrete moments and as overarching logics of the series.

Wiebe tries for edgy, sexual, shocking, and crude dialogue as often as possible, indexing both the performative qualities of zaniness and the discursive, genre-reflective qualities of the interesting. Take, for example, one of the earliest lines from the comic, when Sawyer chastises the

adventurers for their partying and brawling: "actually, I'm not annoyed, I'm really hotter than a dragon getting his dick tickled" (*RQV1*). The line makes little practical sense, since it mixes meanings—anger beyond annoyance; sexual arousal—but it plays off its own incoherence with reference to a worldbuilding cornerstone of fantasy, dragons, which are occasionally written as temperamental (cf. Tolkien's Smaug in *The Hobbit*). In the end, Sawyer's meaning is less important than that Wiebe got the reader to imagine a dragon getting a handjob, something that both undermines dragons' usual veneration as ancient, powerful beings in fantasy, and also sends the message that the genre tends to take itself too seriously, to pretend that people don't talk about handjobs or do drugs or make crude jokes like in real life. To be fair to Wiebe, Betty mocks Sawyer's phrasing a few panels later, asking whether he meant to say he was sexually aroused by the adventurers' drunkenness or if dragons get angry when they are given handjobs. Invoking cuteness in the form of a small person's seeming innocence, and with a sincerity seemingly incongruous to joke and situation alike, Betty is serious; she is both confused about Sawyer's meaning and curious if dragon's enjoy manual stimulation—so much so, that when she meets a dragon in *RQV3*, she asks him about it in full sincerity.

This early scene establishes something a pattern for the deployment of these aesthetics throughout *Rat Queens*. Cuteness, which Ngai describes as referring to the "basic human and social competences" of "intimacy and care" (13), is almost always invoked by the smidgen Betty—cute not only by virtue of her size (this aesthetic evinces a fetishization of the small and petite), but by the incongruousness of her overly sincere and loving regard for the world and others. But cuteness is not only sensuousness, sweetness, and happy smidgens. As Ngai notes, "cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things,' but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (3). Indeed, the plot of *RQV5* might

be described as (the evil version of) Hannah's attempt to drive Betty slowly crazy, to break her down emotionally, to make her feel the same abandonment evil-Hannah felt when she was abandoned at the end of *RQV3*. So while Betty is the site of cuteness and its innocence throughout, she is at the same time an object, a plaything, as a result of the same helplessness that cuteness is meant to render. Wiebe, however, does not have Betty reject the aesthetic register of cute in order to orchestrate some grand defeat of evil-Hannah; instead, the character traits that are symptomatic of Betty's cuteness become her and the queens' salvation when her sincere love for her friends stops evil-Hannah from destroying them. A marginal aesthetic of the small and hyper-commodified, and one largely understood to be at odds with the masculine heroism of fantasy, cuteness more than once saves the day in *Rat Queens*. As the example of Betty shows, aesthetics in the series are occasionally—and rather significantly—mapped onto individual characters, but for the most part, they do not map neatly and are instead dispersed across the series. They operate as moving signifiers that bounce from character to character, scene to scene, and infuse the series's logic. This is especially true of the zany and the interesting, which seem to have the greatest hold on Wiebe's aesthetic vision of the series, and which attest to the larger aesthetic relation of Image to the comics industry.

Zaniness, as Ngai describes it, is unusual among aesthetic categories because it is typically experienced in the form of a singular character, who can be pointed to and described as "the zany" (e.g. Lucy of *I Love Lucy*). In *Rat Queens*, no singular figure is always zany, but Hannah perhaps comes closest, since as Ngai explains, the zany figure is one to be enjoyed at a distance—a truism of Hannah's relationship to her friends (and on-again-off-again lover Sawyer) in the first three volumes, and confirmed in her evil-self's return in *RQV5*. Moreover, Ngai notes of the zany that it is always in motion, typically from activity to activity, job to job, so that the zany's labor status

is that of "the perpetual temp, extra, or odd-jobber—itinerant and malleable" (10). This perfectly describes the queens, who take on quest after quest in a seemingly endless attempt to make ends meet. More than once the queens remark on their need to pay rent in Palisade, invoking conversations about the tenuousness of property ownership and financial stability in a supposedly pre-modern fantasy world that nonetheless operates within decidedly capitalist paradigms. Indeed, the orc Braga joins the team in *RQV4* to make ends meet after her previous adventuring party splits up, and notes that the best way to survive a tough economy is to own property that can be rented out. All of this suggests the basic criticism that fantasy is, well, a fantasy of the petit bourgeois, but beyond that, the series's conception of a party of adventurers going on quest after quest to make the rent, barely leaving any money for leisure (and which is quickly spent on drinking), points to the underlying meritocratic capitalist fantasy of the *D&D* story model: characters go out, gain experience, and slowly move up in the world, gaining riches, glory, and, at some point, the status of property owner and rentier. Only, in *Rat Queens*, the characters never move up in the world; after five years, thirty-plus comics, and having saved Palisade multiple times, the queens face the same money problems each issue. The zaniness of *Rat Queens* manifests as a critique of the political-economic make-believe of pseudo-medieval fantasy worlds like those popular in *D&D*, *World of Warcraft*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. *Rat Queens*'s zaniness underscores that the life of a fantasy adventurer is a rarely a quest for power or glory, but instead a hustle.

Zaniness also marks and undercuts the gender politics of *Rat Queens*. To be clear, gender haunts the series at the level of labor. The series's main selling point was its genderflipping of the *D&D* fantasy adventure, making all the characters women and emphasizing their gender as a basis for humor. It was originally created by an all-male team, writer Wiebe and artist Roc Upchurch. Early reviews of the series did not comment on the all-male creative team behind *Rat Queens*, but

the situation highlights the gender disparity in the comics industry, not only at the level of representation, which has been thoroughly discussed in scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality in comics, but also at the level of creators. When *Rat Queens* debuted in 2013, female creators made up between 11% and 14.1% of the comics industry (Hanley). In 2014, artist Upchurch was arrested for "battery-family violence," a major problem for a series about strong women (Johnston). Upchurch was replaced by Croatian Stjepan Šejić, well-known for his highly sexualized female-led comics published by Top Crow and his own erotic webcomic *Sunstone*. Šejić's art brought the first nude scene to the comic and also emphasized the dramatic horror of N'rygoth's demonic monsters (which look like giant vaginas with teeth) in *RQV2*. Tess Fowler followed Šejić (with colors by Tamra Bonvillain), but Fowler's time was overshadowed by rumors that Upchurch would be welcomed back to the book, regular posts on *Rat Queens* social media about Upchurch's original art, and Wiebe's continued public friendship with and support for Upchurch (Jusino). Fowler was fired from the series over "creative differences" (Jusino) and replaced by Paul Gieni, who oversaw *Rat Queens*'s return to regular publication with *RQV4*— beginning what is the comic's zaniest period in storytelling, with Gieni's art varying wildly in quality and style, and the queens facing wacky bad guys like a giant magical goose and a reality-bending frog-man. This publication history attests to an industry-wide problem with gender parity in comics production and also reflects, not incidentally, on the presentation of gender in the comic as not a political statement, so much as an aesthetic one.

Zaniness is fundamentally an aesthetic of performance. For Ngai, it is also heavily gendered. Moreover, if the interesting is an aesthetic that indexes the economic mode of capitalist circulation, and cuteness indexes consumption, then zaniness is an aesthetic that symptomatizes production and offers reflections on, even critiques of, labor. Indeed, as noted above, *Rat Queens*

does not shy away from critically unravelling the "odd job" labor practices at work in the *D&D* fantasy adventure (and perhaps, by analogy, the largely for-hire comics industry). The zany's critique of labor is also affective, pointing to the ways in which the post-Fordist world of neoliberalism places laborers into "zany" situations whereby they serve as the performer/creator of affective ties between people and communities—the tensions this creates, between laborer and those for whom s/he labors, are part of the comedy of the text. The comedy of the zany (for example, Richard Pryor in *The Toy*, Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*) reflects a new status of labor that has become, in Ngai's reading, decidedly ungendered, and precisely because of this, "the *question* of gender becomes internal to post-Fordist zaniness," so that the aesthetics of the zany turn the text into a performative playground of gender and (re)productive anxieties (210). Unsurprisingly, these anxieties about production show up in the comic's actual production history and in some reviewers' frustration with the continued existence of the comic (Collins), where the writer's unwillingness to fully split from an artist whose violence against his wife was well documented has become a clear and uncomfortable indication of the state of gender equality and social justice in the comics industry, even among those who write and publish books, like *Rat Queens*, that are all about strong female characters.

The question of gender is obviously central to *Rat Queens*: it is the series's sole impetus for production, to turn the largely male fantasy adventure on its head, to populate it with gendered stereotypes (the Marie Laveau knock-off, the rockabilly babe, the hipster, the hippie), and to breathe "life" into those stereotypes through the characters' wacky encounters and raucously uncouth behavior. The queens say "fuck" (and "fucktart," "dickcheese," "cunt," etc.) often, not because real women say "fuck" often, but because Wiebe wants readers to know he "gets" it, he knows patriarchy exists, but on the whole the series does little to critique patriarchy and its

structural violences. That all these aspects are part of the jist of *Rat Queens*, rather than a contextualized aspect of its worldbuilding, reveals as artifice the queens' supposedly non-traditional performance of gender; they are non-traditional only insofar as their difference from the norm is highlight as (performatively) excessive, wacky, strange—in a word, zany. Gender is the final joke of *Rat Queens*, the zany zing that winds through the series and animates it, so that even as the narrative addresses economic woes through the "stressed-out, even desperate quality" of its characters' attempt to fit the precarious economic position of the fantasy adventurer (Ngai 185), it does so always through the emphatic presentation of the difference of women—in a *D&D* fantasy setting, who say "dickcheese" (*RQV1*) and eat psychedelic mushrooms for lunch and get in crazy bar fights, who are boisterous and voluptuous and smart and funny, all the things "woke" men, perhaps like Wiebe imagines himself to be, are meant to find attractive in contemporary feminist women—as the final performative end of the comic's humor. In *Rat Queens*, gender in conversation with genre is performed as the zany object of the series.

The interesting, too, registers as another key aesthetic of the series, operating in similarly synoptic ways throughout *Rat Queens* to link the series's aesthetic preferences with genre. If *Rat Queens*'s gimmick is that it genderflips the *D&D* fantasy adventure, it can only succeed by virtue of the audience's awareness of this project as intertextual with *D&D* and fantasy more broadly. Violet occasionally sports a beard and Betty is an unabashedly sexual drug user; the humor of these things relies on understanding the source material they are departing from, in the case of Violet, the concept that dwarf women have beards, and in the case of Betty, that hobbits (which smidgens are based on) are conservative countryfolk—in both cases the source text is *The Lord of the Rings*, filtered through the film adaptations and decades of similar jokes made by fantasy fans and *D&D* players. Much of the zaniness of *Rat Queens* is also only zany through similarly

intertextual contexts. For example, in *RQV5*, multiple flashbacks and alternate reality sequences are drawn in artistic styles that diverge heavily from Gieni's usual art, the purpose being to emphasize the distance between the present of the text and the past/alternity of the imposing scene. The imposition of these artistic styles is indeed zany, performative of the series' overall sense of wackiness and excessive need to make new meanings, but it is also only possible because each of the styles refers to another text. When the queens confront a mind-altering toad to save Betty's friend, they enter a world drawn in the style of Fleischer Studios animations from the 1930s, and when evil-Hannah, disguised as a powerful wizard, tells an "allegoric story . . . a tad on the fucking nose" about her abandonment by the queens, the story is rendered in the style of the 1980s animated series *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (*RQV5*). All of this is a hallmark of the aesthetic of the interesting, which Ngai describes as "Always registering a tension between the particular and the generic" (6).

Rat Queens defines itself through its intertextual relationship with other texts, making its own identity from their elements, but in doing so, as with its failure to critique gender while relying heavily on gender for self-definition, the series is less a critique *à la* the postmodern pastiche, than it is about pointing to things the audiences knows in order to generate audience recognition and the semblance of depth; it is generically deconstructive without revealing anything about the problems or interworkings of fantasy as a market genre. *Rat Queens*'s aesthetic of the interesting draws attention to its own circulation practices, to its branding as a un-self-conscious homage of all the fantasy things that people in Wiebe's demographic loved about fantasy (including the women, who are here less a feminist statement, perhaps, than as the fulfillment of another kind of fantasy). And once again this aesthetic activity is bound up with the series's generic situation: *Rat*

Queens is interesting precisely because it knows about—and excessively, zanily perform knowledge of—the genre it belongs to.

Coda: Image, Industry, and Aesthetics

In *Rat Queens*, aesthetics and genre are inseparable. To speak of the aspects of Wiebe's artistically troubled series that made it hot in the first place, namely its zaniness with regard to gender and its evocation of the interesting in responding to and making us of the history of fantasy (not to mention cuteness, which is humorous in the series largely because the aesthetic is so anathema to the usual self-seriousness of fantasy adventure), is to speak always of *Rat Queens*'s status as contemporary fantasy comic. This reading of *Rat Queens* through Ngai's conceptualization of our contemporary aesthetics only scratches the surface of the ways in which aesthetics and genre are interwoven throughout the series. But it shows that a focus on aesthetics and genre have much to offer comics studies, which by and large emphasizes structural, political, and historical readings of comics. Of course, aesthetics and genre are integral to structure, politics, and history of/in comics. The position of gender in *Rat Queens*—which is tied to the broader cultural status of women and feminism in American society and the comics industry, as well as the production history of the series, and which is coded into its aesthetics and genre—evidences this.

I referred above to *Rat Queens* as what Beaty and Woo call a "quality popular comic book," which they define as "writer-driven, ground-level comics . . . that garner critical acclaim and substantial, lasting sales by innovating on popular genres" (63). Their primary examples are *The Walking Dead*, written by Robert Kirkman and drawn by Charlie Adlard (after #6), and *Saga*, written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by Fiona Staples. While it is unfair to call either series writer-driven, insofar as their distinctive artistic style contributed in large part to their success, this

is certainly true of *Rat Queens*, where the multiple changes in artists have, if anything, distracted from the continuity of Wiebe's otherwise complex plotting. But it is also worth noting that Beaty and Woo's quintessential examples are bastions of Image's success in the twenty-first century. Image and other indie publishers, who all remain entirely mainstream in their publication, circulation, and distribution strategies, even as they offer perks such as creative ownership to the writers and artists who work for them (compared, for example, to DC and Marvel, where nearly all work is for-hire), specialize in these "quality popular comic books," which might otherwise simply be called boutique comics. Like *Rat Queens*, these comics are perfectly fit to a postmodern audience niche, are gleefully representative of diversity but rarely critical of the structures that make diversity so difficult to achieve and so necessary, and only superficially mold-breaking where genre is concerned (though they market themselves as significant interventions in genre-as-usual). They are, for the most part—like *Rat Queens*, *Saga*, *Descender*, *Paper Girls*, *I Hate Fairyland*, and so many others—but with a few exceptions—like *Bitch Planet* or *We Stand on Guard*—written and drawn to perfectly please and excite comics reviewers by appealing almost solely to the superficial, the faux-avant garde, and as I have emphasized in this chapter, to the cute, the zany, and the interesting.

Comics studies needs aesthetic and genre criticism in part because they help identify, describe, historicize, and critique the artistic, labor, and production practices of the comic-book industry. *Rat Queens* is symptomatic of a set of aesthetics that themselves reflect on the political economy, but which also operate in much more superficial ways, as the treatment of gender and genre in *Rat Queens* shows. Image and other indie publishers survive on a mixture of boutique comics and franchise projects (e.g. Dark Horse and *Aliens*, IDW and *Star Trek*, most of Dynamite's catalogue). To put aesthetics and genre, but aesthetics especially, at the center of comics criticism

is to better understand the artistic, narrative, and economic practices of the comic-book industry. This case study of *Rat Queens* details just one way in which a single comic utilizes aesthetics of the zany, cute, and interesting to speak to a niche audience of *D&D* and fantasy lovers, as well as to appeal through superficial attempts at diversity to a new, growing audience of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual readers. *Rat Queens* by and large succeeds, when not plagued by production issues that directly undercut its feminist message, but aesthetic critique helps us to see not only larger industry practices at work in this supposedly unique comic, but also the ways in which art, genre, narrative, and politics are co-constitutive aspects of comic-book meaning making.

Notes

1. See, for example, Katherine Roeder on Winsor McCay and modernism, or Hillary Chute on comics and postmodernism.

PART II: COMICS, RACE, AND WHITENESS

CHAPTER FOUR

GREEN MARTIANS, WHITE SUPERMEN, AND BLACK FOLK HEROES: WHITE PLASTICITY AND BLACK POSSIBILITY IN DARWYN COOKE'S *DC: THE NEW FRONTIER*

This chapter grew out of a larger editorial project that encapsulated my concern about the ways in which comics studies was fundamentally ignoring the constitutive role of whiteness in crafting racial hierarchies within comics narratives and around them, i.e. in who gets to write/draw comics and what they get to write/draw (about). That project, a co-edited collection called *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics*, exemplified my approach to comics studies seen in this dissertation: a focus on a popular medium at the intersection of its generic and political articulations. The groundbreaking collection started conversations that comics studies is really only just able to have, thanks to a significant amount of groundwork laid by scholars of race and ethnicity who wrote monographs and similar collections on representation in comics (the most significant of these are discussed in the "Introduction" above). In addition to co-writing the introduction to *Unstable Masks*, which historicized both whiteness studies and the whiteness of superhero as a genre within the mass popular medium of comics, I wrote the present chapter, which went beyond questions of representation to explore how a (white) comics creators utilized a historical-fiction narrative about the history of comics superheroes to think about the history of race and whiteness in American, but also, importantly, in the comics industry and the superhero genre itself. Cooke's incredible *DC: The New Frontier* emerges, in my reading, as a visionary treatment of race in American comics that questions, negotiates, and historicizes who gets to be represented as a superhero, who doesn't—and why. This relatively recent piece, published in the collection in early 2020, laid the ground for more complex reckonings with race, whiteness, and

the fantastical imagining of the superhero genre that are beginning to spread across comics studies. As a result of this chapter and my work co-editing the collection, I was asked to peer review a manuscript on the history of whiteness in American comics for University Press of Mississippi (the book will be out in 2022). With so much work on superhero comics up until recently being either devoted to fannish histories of childhood favorites or, more rarely, to highly specific studies of representation (e.g. of Latinx, Black, or women superheroes), the work of this chapter has been to emphasize reading comics for how they themselves comment on (and even narratively replicate) the structures of power that drive inequality and that so many fans and critics are trying to undo through movements to diversify comics themselves, but also comics studies.

Introduction: Comics, Race, and Critical Nostalgia

Darwyn Cooke's *DC: The New Frontier*, a six-issue miniseries published by DC Comics in 2004, is an unabashed, nostalgic paean to the vast history of DC's intellectual properties and narrative and artistic legacies. It is not, however, uncritical or unaware of the problems of representative inequality, bound up with real-world systemic oppression, that plague that history and those legacies. Cooke's *New Frontier* retells the origin story of DC's superhero team the Justice League of America (JLA), strategically bridging the historical gap between the WWII-era Golden Age heroes Superman, Batman, the Justice Society of America, and Wonder Woman, and the Cold War's Silver Age versions of Green Lantern, the Flash, and others, while weaving a new story of how the JLA was founded and how it fits with lesser-known contemporaneous DC properties, such as Adam Strange, the Challengers of the Unknown, and the Losers. Cooke sets the bulk of his narrative of the JLA's founding between 1955 and 1960, ending with the historical JLA's first appearance in a battle against an alien starfish in *The Brave and the Bold* #28 (March 1960).

Though populated by dozens of recognizable characters, *New Frontier* focuses on Hal Jordan, a white test pilot who becomes the Green Lantern, and Martian Manhunter, an alien accidentally brought to earth by a deep-space communications experiment and forced to keep himself secret lest humans' "fear of the unknown" and "hatred of things they can't control or understand" prove his demise (Cooke, *DC* 191).

Cooke tells this story in the energetic, cartoony style he pioneered as a storyboard artist for DC's animated television shows in the 1990s and that brought him acclaim for freelance work at DC and Marvel in the early 2000s. *New Frontier* melds Cooke's signature style with the aesthetics of 1950s Populuxe design to render a nostalgic glimpse of early Cold War America and its superheroes. Cooke offers a reconsideration of our nostalgia-mediated collective memory of the early postwar era, unsettling sanitized memories of America's history and of the racial politics of DC's publication record, which excluded superheroes of color until the 1970s, when a series of black superheroes appeared in various titles, including John Stewart as the first black Green Lantern in 1971, and culminating with *Black Lightning* in 1977, the first solo title about a non-white superhero. Key to *New Frontier*'s racial politics, Cooke retroactively inserts, or "retcons," the 1990s black superhero Steel into the JLA origin story, transforming him into the black folk hero John Henry, who originally inspired Steel's creation, and making the character a KKK-fighting vigilante in 1950s Tennessee.

In this chapter, I argue that Cooke's *New Frontier* responds to DC's racially unjust history and to the overwhelming whiteness of its superheroes through two narratives, one of Martian Manhunter, who represents a liberal-progressive fantasy of integration and the erasure of racial difference, and the other of John Henry. In the context of the midcentury American racial formation as understood in the pioneering work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, John Henry

signifies what was understood then to be the historical impossibility of the black superhero, unable to be written into the comics of the 1950s, let alone to be thought of as possible by the white-dominated comics industry. But his presence in Cooke's revisionist comic also gestures to the possibility of the black superhero's emergence—its ability to be imagined, then created, sold, and consumed—within the racial formation of the "post-"Civil Rights decades.[1] In telling his history of the JLA, Cooke does not retroactively include black superheroes; he does not sanitize DC's legacy, but reinscribes the company's decision (and, indeed, the genre's tendency) to exclude black superheroes until the chorus of Civil Rights had grown so loud as to demand greater social realism in comic-book representation. Martian Manhunter and John Henry's narratives point to the plasticity of whiteness when it is posited as the sole racial category to which superheroes may belong, making the critique of superhero comics' racial history integral to Cooke's otherwise nostalgic vision of the JLA story.

While Leo Spitzer refers to nostalgia as "the selective emphasis on what was positive in the past," the 1950s were only "positive" in any real sense for the white middle-class heterosexuals most often designated "average Americans" (153). Despite its seeming embrace of the past, Cooke's comic is hardly wedded to notions that the 1950s were a better time. Instead, Cooke places his nostalgic renderings of the past in tension with narratives about race, difference, and belonging. Nostalgia, he knows, acts as a powerful form for thinking about the history and present of racial and gender formations, deployable in ways both reifying and probing. Thus, *New Frontier* exemplifies what Sinead McDermott calls "critical nostalgia" and "uses the past to unsettle the present," thus rejecting notions that the text seeks to restore a better history (401). As a work of critical nostalgia, Cooke's comic plays form, narrative, and history off one another to re-envision the past and think through questions of racial justice in the history of superhero comics.

Through Manhunter and John Henry alike, the metaphors of alienness and superheroism Cooke deploys, and the real histories of blackness that he builds from, he reimagines DC Comics's racial legacy in *New Frontier*. In doing so, he points to the possibility of a more just racial history for the superhero, one that acknowledges the key role of whiteness while also foregrounding the possibilities for the emergence of the black superhero in later decades. At the same time, Cooke underscores the fundamental whiteness of the superhero and its continual erasure of racial difference from the superhero figure.

Martian Manhunter and the Plasticity of Whiteness on the New Frontier

The historical New Frontier from which Cooke's comic takes its name was an administrative policy as well as a cultural attitude. Articulated in John F. Kennedy's speech accepting the 1960 democratic presidential nomination, it was the New Deal for a "new generation of [American] leadership." The New Frontier was defined by significant advances in technology, especially the development of the atomic bomb, but Kennedy assured that despite the threat of nuclear annihilation "the changing face of the future is equally revolutionary." His political vision, furthermore, linked the techno-scientific with the social, stressing that, "Beyond [the New Frontier] are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." Cooke's *New Frontier* lives in Kennedy's rhetoric. His reimagining of DC's superheroes corroborates liberalism's hope for a more equal, more just America driven by techno-scientific advancement and outraged at racist violence, while also demonstrating the fundamental failure of liberalism to achieve lasting justice through structural changes to systems like race. The shape-

shifting alien superhero Martian Manhunter operates as the crux of this historical critique of who does and does not belong, who is and is not white, in mid-century America and in the superhero comic more generally.

Martian Manhunter was created by science fiction (sf) and comics writer Joseph Samachson, son of Russian Jewish emigres to the US, and comics artist Joe Certa. The green-skinned alien first appeared in a back-up story published in *Detective Comics* #225 in 1955. He was conceived as something of a cross between Batman and Superman, mixing the former's detective skills with the latter's alien origins, nigh invulnerability, and outlandish list of superpowers. Manhunter's original story saw him using his shapeshifting powers to spend life on earth as the white police detective John Jones. Outside of this disguise, he looks strikingly like Superman in form, the only real difference being his sharp, heavy brows and green skin. A relatively popular back-up character throughout the late 1950s, Manhunter became a founding member of the JLA when Gardner Fox dreamed the team up in 1960. After that, Manhunter appeared regularly in JLA comics and less often as his alter-ego John Jones. *New Frontier* changes little of Samachson's story, but instead imagines how Manhunter is discovered by other superheroes, joins their cause, and becomes a central member of the JLA. In doing so, the comic stresses the tension between the human (white male) life he leads and the alien he is, turning the latter into a metaphor for race that is typical of sf and that undermines the real damage wrought by race and a lack of representation in people of color's lives.[2]

In the narrative world of *New Frontier*, superheroes have been outlawed as un-American vigilantes by House Un-American Activities Committee. The only legally sanctioned superheroes are Wonder Woman and Superman, the two superheroes with the greatest powers and thus the most to offer in helping assert US policy abroad in the fight against communism; Cooke presents

the former as an adamant feminist disenchanted with US foreign policy, and the latter as a naive, consensus-bound patriot. Other superheroes, all white, keep their former identities hidden or are hunted down by law enforcement. A mock-up newspaper article inserted into the comic details one superhero's death during a police chase as "the latest and most tragic chapter in the Eisenhower Administration's efforts to register and reveal the identities of the nation's" superheroes (*DC* 52). But as the story unfolds, a massive, chthonic enemy predating all life on earth, known as the Centre, enters US territory and attacks. With the military unable to defend against the threat, superheroes become a national defense necessity after the Centre seemingly kills Superman (he is later discovered alive); once they band together to defeat the enemy, they are deemed integral to the nation-state and incorporated via the JLA into the military-industrial complex. This narrative metaphorizes the superhero as a minority political group, like the alien-as-race metaphor, and plays out a key liberal fantasy that imagines this group, formerly the target of discriminatory legislation, integrated into American political culture and now working for rather than (supposedly) against the state.

In this context, Martian Manhunter serves as the only image of color in a landscape of white superbodies: his is a hypervisible green body on display, barely covered by the blue underwear and boots, yellow belt, and thin, chest-crossing red straps that comprise his costume. Manhunter's story follows the same trajectory from exclusion to integration into the white, liberal body of American democracy that the comic's plot traces for the superhero figure, but at the same time his narrative generates anxieties about what it means to belong in America when one is (as a metaphor) racially marked. Cooke signals these anxieties about belonging and, ultimately, about the adaptability of whiteness as a racial category, both visually and through Manhunter's dialogue. When Manhunter first appears on earth, the victim of a telecommunications experiment conducted

by the scientist Dr. Erdel, he is a monstrous figure, a tall, lanky, vegetal green humanoid with a conical head and demonic red eyes. His visage gives Dr. Erdel a heart attack, though the scientist does not blame Manhunter. He warns Manhunter before dying: "You *must* be *very careful*. This world isn't ready for… you. Mankind is a suspicious, violent creature. You *must not* reveal yourself" (*DC* 78, emphases in original). Heeding this warning, and discovering that he cannot return to Mars, Manhunter hides himself away to study humanity so that he can assimilate and live among them—so that he can "pass" as human.

Manhunter spends weeks "studying life on earth with the help of this charming device they call the television. It is giving me all the information I need to act like a typical citizen of this nation called America" (*DC* 89). Cooke demonstrates the plasticity of the Martian's identity and physical form alike, as Manhunter utilizes his shapeshifting ability to emulate realistic and animated images from television: first Groucho Marx, then Bugs Bunny and the Indian-head test pattern that followed television station sign-offs at the end of the broadcasting day, and finally the identity he settles on—the key image of the "typical citizen of this nation called America": "Police detective John Jones. [...] one of the good guys" (*DC* 90). Manhunter effortlessly assumes the visual identity of a white man and proves a formidable detective as John Jones, but not until after demonstrating the limitless extent of his body's plasticity to mimic form, shape, and aesthetic. And yet, though his ability to perform identity is seemingly boundless, whiteness—like the plastic so evocative of the period—cannot exceed certain tolerances. Although passing easily for white as Jones, Manhunter is nonetheless estranged from his human colleagues, who think that Jones talks strangely, as though a character in a film noir, and that he violates the behavioral norms of mid-century white folks on account of his dual obsession with Civil Rights and aliens.

In a pivotal scene, Jones stands in his office staring at his wall covered in newspaper

articles. On the one side, articles about the recent lynching of John Henry (a *Time* cover article titled "Black America Today"), about Rosa Parks, KKK attacks and black retaliations, and even an anachronistic article about Malcolm X; and on the other wall, clippings about life on Mars, alien abductions, UFO sighting, and Area 51. As Manhunter narrates it: "My interest in subjects like racism and UFO sightings has made me something of an eccentric to my fellow officers" (*DC* 221). But as a result of his expertise, he is asked to take a statement from Harry, a "nutty" "fruitcake," as Jones's colleagues mockingly describe him, who sees "little green men." Harry turns out to be a technician on the space flight project led by federal agent King Faraday, with Hal Jordan (Green Lantern) as test pilot (*DC* 222). He tells Jones of a government conspiracy to hide knowledge of alien life from the public and that "the last five years have been spent developing a rocket to reach Mars" in order to eradicate Martian life before it attacks earth (*DC* 224).

When Faraday steps in to remove Harry, Manhunter reads Faraday's mind and discovers that the seeming ravings are true and, moreover, that Dr. Erdel's experiment that brought Manhunter to earth tipped off the US military to the existence of alien life on Mars and to Manhunter's terrestrial presence. To Faraday, who leads the space flight project and seeks to drop nuclear bombs on Mars, and by extension to the military-industrial complex that Faraday stands in for, the alien Other represents the antithesis of the human and a grave threat to national security. But framed against Manhunter's insistence that racial and alien difference are alike in kind, the white G-Man Faraday's insistence on American dominance over and destruction of an entire alien species takes on overtones of a war for racial supremacy—a war in which Manhunter sees both himself and the black folk-hero vigilante John Henry fighting on the same side.

Manhunter's realization that he is being hunted by Faraday leads him to try to escape earth, which he does by sneaking into the interstellar test flight base, but he misses his chance to escape

in order to save Faraday's life after the G-Man attempted to kill Manhunter. But this wins him no favors; Faraday instead imprisons Manhunter at the rocket test site on Nellis Air Force Base, a privately owned enterprise contracted to the US Air Force. Through a series of interrogations, however, Manhunter and Faraday become friends, they play chess, and Manhunter gives Faraday insight into the growing threat posed by the Centre, to which Manhunter is unwillingly connected via telepathy. With Faraday, Manhunter sits revealed in his true Martian form, not as Jones or as the sleek Superman-esque visage he later adopts, suggesting a level of trust and camaraderie that bridges (metaphorically) racial and specific differences.

In the end, the alien whose species Faraday had intended to eradicate as a measure of interplanetary Cold War containment works for the G-Man, at first as a G-Man himself and then as a superhero fighting the Centre with other future JLA heroes. Manhunter's ability to shapeshift once again signals his plasticity of identity and his ability to pass, racially and otherwise. As he and Faraday leave for the battle against the Centre, Manhunter presents himself to Faraday as the bright green, bald-headed superhero familiar to DC readers in the late 1950s. Manhunter calls this a "*friendlier* appearance," "more like the hero Superman." But Faraday disagrees, suggesting a more normative, all-American appearance: "real men wear pants" (*DC* 327, emphasis in original). Manhunter immediately morphs his attire into a blue suit with a tie and dons black glasses, the clichéd image of the G-Man, now the assimilated alien standing side-by-side with his former enemy.

Manhunter's story of anxiously passing, of keeping tabs on the race (and the alien) question, of being hunted and persecuted by the government, and of eventually becoming the G-Man himself is not a novel narrative trajectory for stories about race in the US. Indeed, as countless works of American ethnic literature have demonstrated and as scholarship about the Irish or Jews

or Italians becoming white have strived to chart,[3] whiteness, like Manhunter's fantastical Martian body, is plastic. Although a formidable structure in American social, cultural, political, and economic life, race and its attendant meanings are contingent. Whiteness in particular can be fashioned anew in order to consolidate greater amounts of power over those excluded from the category, a process of racial alchemy that has been called the "racial bribe."[4]

As cultural historian Colin Salter argues of the Australian and Canadian contexts of whiteness, though equally germane to the US,

> The malleability of whiteness, its variability and changing contours, is located in its ability to adapt. The normativity of whiteness, the apparent universality, is rooted in an ability to absorb (co-opt) difference, in adapting to changes and societal variations [over time and space]. These abilities expose the hegemonic nature of whiteness, what we might describe as a dynamic equilibrium. An ability to absorb any potentially destabilising challenges. (47-48)

Manhunter's physical form shifts in step with the social form of whiteness, and in so doing he becomes an assimilated American, a G-Man, a superman. By the end of *New Frontier*, gone is the Manhunter who, in a moment of fear after having his life threatened in his Jones persona by Batman, anxiously reverts to his original Martian form while still in his work clothes. This scene occurs roughly in the middle of the miniseries, after Manhunter has just seen a sensational sf film *Invasion from Mars*. Watching the film, he laughs at what he deems its ridiculous imagination of human–alien encounter while the all-white audience screams. Manhunter takes this experience as evidence that Americans fear the unknown and hate "things they can't control or understand," proof that he will never be accepted (*DC* 194). He repeats this line to himself in his half-alien, half-white man state after Batman's threat, revealing his ultimate fear that the difference between

alien Others and humans, like that between the KKK and John Henry, are irreconcilable. But with time, Kennedy's vision of an America able to put difference aside for the cause of global good proves the fulfillment of Manhunter's wish for acceptance.

Martian Manhunter gets to become, like the Superman he sees perform in animated shorts before the sf film, a superhero admired by and serving the nation. Yet, even so, in the end he takes a form designed to be friendly to that "typical citizen of this nation called America" that he worked so long to pass among. Manhunter's is a story of liberalism's efforts to integrate in the Kennedy era and its mild successes, but at the same time, to borrow historian David Roediger's phrasing, race survives integration, its meanings migrate and its signs proliferate in new ways. This is the result of liberalism's failure in the New Frontier era to fundamentally alter the systemic bases that make race so oppressive for people of color in the US, in the process maintaining what Toni Morrison calls the "habit of ignoring race" throughout American history, which she notes as "a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" premised on the idea that race is, especially in the postwar and "post-"Civil Rights era, "an already discredited difference" (9-10). While Manhunter demonstrates the possibilities for passing and the hope for integration and inclusion, Cooke is not as short-sighted as Manhunter, and offers his character John Henry as a reminder that the superhero figure is enmeshed with a racial politics that champions whiteness and that marks out and excises blackness.

John Henry and the Possibility of the Black Superhero

Martian Manhunter's narrative arc destabilizes whiteness, if only briefly before seeing him incorporated into the power structure of whiteness as one of its central beneficiaries via the JLA.

At the same time, his demonstration of the plasticity of whiteness, insofar as it is the primary racial identity of the superhero, opens up space for the non-hegemonic superhero to emerge. And while, as Cooke knows, DC's history does not see a non-white superhero appear for nearly two decades after the JLA's initial publication, his reimagining of the company's history brings to life Cold War America's domestic struggles with race, carving out room for thinking the possibility of the black superhero while at the same time making clear the black superhero's latent presence in the narratives of so many comic-book superheroes like Manhunter, Superman, and others written as alien outsiders passing in a normative world of whiteness in the comics of the 1950s and 1960s.

New Frontier trades in two metaphors that have been central to narratives of race in American popular culture. The more recent of these sees the superhero as a surrogate for racial differences, a cliched tokenism that, as comics scholar Marc Singer has pointed out, can be used to powerful, socially critical effect, but often instead offers "deceptively soothing stereotypes" that "obscure minority groups even as the writers pay lip service to diversity" ("'Black Skins'" 107, 118). Such are the superheroes in *New Frontier*, who are shunned by US society and hunted by the government, though each lead otherwise successful lives as white Americans. Much older, and occasionally overlapping with the superhero-as-race metaphor—as evidenced by Superman and Manhunter; in Singer's reading, by the Legion of Superheroes; and in numerous, often muddled analyses of the X-Men[5]—is the use of the alien as an allegorical figuration of racial (and, at the turn of the century, colonial) Otherness. These metaphorical renderings of race, both of which are present in Cooke's comic, efface more nuanced considerations of the very formation of power they purport to represent, and thus do damage to the painful histories of race while obscuring or downplaying the dangers of whiteness.

Cooke is aware of the implications of these metaphors, as Manhunter's fascination with the relationship between alienness and blackness, and his ultimate rejection of that relationship in order to become white and a member of the superhero elite, underscores. Cooke's assertion of John Henry's story of real racial struggles in the midst of these metaphors also challenges any reading that would dismiss Cooke's understanding of their ability to erase history in superheroic and sf narratives. Rarely do superhero comics both assert the alien- or superhero-as-race metaphor and also undermine it through the actual presentation of race. Even rarer are uses of that presentation to critique the failures of the metaphors. Cooke allows histories of political uses of the superhero to collide and chafe at the generic figure's constitutive whiteness. Indeed, Cooke's critique comes through clearly in the comparison of Manhunter and John Henry's narratives: where Manhunter insists on the links between blackness and alienness as two comparable things Americans fear, as a shape-shifting alien superhero he is able to assimilate, but as a black man in 1950s Tennessee, John Henry meets with fatal violence.

As a result of editorial and creator prejudices or fears that black superheroes would hurt comics sales in the early decades of superhero comics, black superheroes didn't exist, so they certainly were not eligible for membership when the JLA debuted in 1960 with all its metaphorical diversity, featuring a white Amazon princess, a white scientist-athlete, a white space ranger, a white Atlantean king, and a green Martian. As Cooke put it in his annotations of *New Frontier*: "The problem [with retroactively writing about a black superhero in the 1950s] was DC catered to white culture" ("Annotations" n.p.). Given the racial legacy of the genre at midcentury, then, Cooke's John Henry appears briefly, albeit in key moments, throughout the comic—and when he does appear, it is not as a superhero, but rather as a manifestation of the black folk hero of the same name.

John Henry is perhaps the most famous black folk hero, and certainly the one about whom the most has been said; he was also, as historian Scott Reynolds Nelson discovered, a real railroad worker in Reconstructionist West Virginia. The legend is easily told, but signifies powerfully onto the history of blackness: John Henry, a masterful steeldriver, challenged his foreman that he could drive more steel in one day than the foreman's new steam-powered engine; he did, but the effort cost him his life. These exploits were immortalized in dozens of songs about John Henry, reflecting a complex relationship in America between blackness and labor; the songs were "fantasies of escape" from a labor situation haunted by "the almost constant specter of death" (Nelson 32, 36). The subject of "the most researched folk song in the United States, and perhaps the world," John Henry was "appropriated to tell the story about the position of black men during Jim Crow, [...] about the coming of the machine age, about nostalgia for the past, [...] about capitalism, and about the Black Power movement" (Nelson 2, 40). Foremost, the song was a warning against overwork and the dangers of racial capitalism to the black body. The folk hero became the inspiration for DC superhero Steel (John Henry Irons), a black construction worker-become-superhero, co-created by white writer Louise Simonson and white artist Jon Bogdanove in 1993 as one of four replacements for Superman after his "death"; the character proved mildly popular, landing his own series (1994–1998) and a film starring Shaquille O'Neal (1997).

Cooke's John Henry recasts Steel for an era when he could not have existed. In 1950s America, he is a vigilante driven by a classically generic origin story magnified by the horrors of Jim Crow: John Wilson and his family are hung by the KKK, but Wilson's rope breaks and he survives; Wilson dons an executioner's hood, cinched with the broken noose from his hanging, forges two massive hammers, and attacks KKK members to protect Southern blacks. Media brand him the "Modern Day John Henry" (*DC* 221). His story numbers a mere eleven of the comic's

four hundred pages, making him one of *New Frontier*'s minor characters; he appears in three short vignettes in issue three and dies in issue four. As Cooke put it, "I wanted the reader to know that there was no hope for him, and America was still years away from a time when there would be that hope" ("Annotations" n.p.).

Bringing a more sincere connection to the source material, Cooke uses lyrics from several John Henry songs, plus his own lyrics, to tell Wilson's story. The lyrics overlay and lend a mythic significance to Wilson's few scenes, and Cooke wields the lyrics' meaning to fine effect, as for example during Wilson's first confrontation with the KKK as John Henry, which Cooke narrates using portions of the John Henry songs about his pledge to defeat the machine. In the final image of the scene, a single-page splash, Wilson/John Henry is shown from low-angle perspective, his massive size spread out before a blazing black church set alight by the KKK, his hammers at rest after the confrontation: "*John Henry told the captain that a man is just a man, and I swear by all that's right and wrong I'll kill you where you stand*." (*DC* 184, lyrics italicized in original). This threat is likely Cooke's own lyric, since it promises a violent confrontation with the foreman rather than just the contest with the steam-engine steeldriver. Cooke juxtaposes the machine and its ties with racial capitalism, acknowledging their survival of Reconstruction, *de jure* through Jim Crow and *de facto* through racist violence perpetrated by the KKK and unchecked by local, state, or federal officials.

While *New Frontier* is a love letter to DC superheroes on the cusp of the Silver Age, John Henry's narrative is the crux of Cooke's critical nostalgia. John Henry exists in a period when the superhero has been outlawed, and though isolated from other characters except through news reports read and overheard by Manhunter, he has all the trappings of the superhero: a (tragic) original story, a secret identity, an iconic costume, and a pro-social mission (Coogan 30). But

whereas the superheroes of *New Frontier* prevail through their HUAC-led persecution to become integral members of the US nation-state and the Cold War military-industrial complex, the black superhero goes unrecognized as a superheroic figure, remaining instead a "Modern Day" folk hero (Cooke, *DC* 221). The denial of *New Frontier*'s black superhero is triple: it occurs within the storyworld, in the history that Cooke draws on, and in part in Cooke's own rhetoric for including a proto version of Steel. For Cooke, "Any effort to insinuate the DCU[niverse] into the real world of the 1950s wouldn't have been complete without looking at the civil rights issues of the day" ("Annotations" n.p.). While John Henry is a serious vector for telling the story of blackness and race in America, his presence is mandated by a more just telling of history, one inclusive of race, rather than any inclination toward giving a black superhero his own story alongside the JLA greats. This is not to say that Cooke's motivation is wrongheaded, but rather to point out that the black superhero emerges only in the context of race issues, is always a means to talk about race or to satisfy a need for diversity. After all, the superhero, unmarked, is white, even when metaphorizing Otherness. The black superhero is only possible, John Henry suggests, through a narrative process of marking that makes him something other than the superhero.

John Henry's death is therefore necessary, since he will remain forever marked, first as black in a world where race matters, then—and only then—like the others, as a superhero in a world where superheroism is briefly outlawed. While John Henry's role is thematically and politically significant to *New Frontier*, Cooke uses John Henry, his story, and his death to emphasize Manhunter's identity quest. When, for example, John Henry is killed—betrayed by a white girl[6] whom he asks for help, then burned to death by KKK—and news of his death is broadcast nationwide, it deals a devastating blow to Manhunter's faith in humanity (and by proxy, Americans) to deal with difference. Learning the news while in John Jones disguise at a bar with

his detective partner, Manhunter remarks "That man was a hero… A *freedom fighter!* A symbol of hope and resistance," or all that is definitive of a patriotic American. His partner explains, "This is America, not some sugar-coated utopia," prompting Manhunter to ask: "What do you think they'd do if they ever found one of those aliens they always talk about?" (Cooke, *DC* 239).[7] Manhunter conflates alienness and race, and draws the conclusion that he, too, could be lynched. But not unsurprisingly, the metaphorical connections between alienness and blackness break down. It is not John Henry's death, in the end, that prompts Manhunter's attempt to leave earth; no, he makes this decision later when the Flash takes over a news broadcast to announce he is giving up being a superhero because of government persecution (*DC* 247). Manhunter chooses the meaning of his alienness, between race and the superhero, between blackness and whiteness, and aligns himself ultimately with the group more easily integrated into DC's postwar America. As one able to be and become white, he does what John Henry cannot; he chooses his identity, he lives, and he becomes a superhero.

Coda

One of the final images Cooke gives us of Manhunter appears in the epilogue, after Manhunter and the future JLA have defeated the Centre. The epilogue includes scenes from the lives of the various characters featured throughout *New Frontier*, each paired with a consecutive portion of Kennedy's "New Frontier" speech, the pairing often highlighting the relationship between the comic's narrative and the historical circumstances of the dawning Kennedy era. Cooke gives us, for example, an image of a young black boy with the name "Irons" on his jersey (and thus, ostensibly, the future 1990s Steel) reading next to the mossy gravestone of "John Wilson AKA John Henry," paired with the text of Kennedy's speech that stresses "a peaceful revolution for

human rights--demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life" (*DC* 399). And a panel showing a black boy passing a "WHITE ONLY" water fountain tops a later page, paired with Kennedy claiming that, "Today some would say that those struggles are all over--that all the horizons have been explored--that all the battles have been won--that there is no longer an American frontier" (*DC* 401). The suggestion from Cooke's inventive juxtaposition, is that, just as W.E.B. Du Bois called "the problem of the Twentieth Century [...] the color-line" (20), that problem remained as Kennedy's very own American frontier, even as Kennedy meant something wholly different: the frontier of America's techno-scientific, social, economic, and geopolitical global dominance.

Sandwiched between the pages bearing these two images of the new American frontier that Cooke articulates as race, is a full page splash that features Superman and Manhunter, side by side as friends, turning away from the reader, glimpsing out across a rich field of wheat, both heroes bathed in the golden light of a storm breaking and casting sunlight onto the field. Paired to this image is a lengthy selection from Kennedy's speech about the pioneering spirit of those who first set out across the old American frontier, "determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within" (Cooke, *DC* 400). Martian Manhunter, now a JLA superhero alongside his equal and idol Superman, an icon of assimilated difference, has become not just a G-Man but a triumphal pioneer of the new American frontier. Yet the images of the black boys circling Manhunter's triumph of belonging throw their shade, casting doubt on the possibility of integration, signaling the limits of whiteness's plasticity in an age of heightened racial tensions. Though a wide-ranging and nostalgic love letter to DC Comics's history, *New Frontier* is at the same time a racial critique of the superhero comic. Cooke utilizes the destabilized, plastic, and racially ambiguous body of Martian

Manhunter—who by all rights, as an alien, should sit beyond the discourses of race in America—to complicate and point to the power of racial structures, and in particular whiteness, to incorporate differences, while at the same time demonstrating the ultimate contingency of whiteness in the field of racial formation.

Notes

1. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's eponymous conceptualization in *Racial Formation* outlines race as a both a fundamentally ideological formation—that is, a symbolic and historically situated discourse—as well as the set of real-world social, economic, and other effects of that discourse on black life. I refer to the period after the "'classical' phase" of Civil Rights struggle (1954–1965) as untenably "post-" in order to recognize, after Jacqyelyn Dowd Hall, that the struggle for racial justice and inequality is not over and done.

2. On this generic trope, see the pieces by Isiah Lavender III; Edward James; and De Witt Douglas Kilgore.

3. See, for example, Brodkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks*; Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

4. Michelle Alexander uses the term "racial bribe" to describe attempts to expand the social-control powers of whiteness over blackness (and other non-white racial formations) by granting whiteness to formerly non- or not-entirely-white groups, promising ultimately that the former status quo of what she terms the "racial caste system" will "reemerge in a new form" (234).

5. On the problematic, multiple, shifting interpretations of the X-Men's Otherness, see Shyminsky, "Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants"; Lund, "The Mutant Problem."

6. Cooke, on the blond white girl: "the most innocent creature I could imagine" ("Annotations" n.p.).

7. In an expert formal juxtaposition, following the partner's comment that America is not a utopia, Cooke's next page offers a sensuous glimpse at utopian life on Wonder Woman's Paradise Island, beginning a scene in which Wonder Woman rejects American political self-righteousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

"AM I DOING THE RIGHT THING?": MILESTONE COMICS, BLACK NATIONALISM, AND THE COSMOPOLITICS OF *STATIC*

Like the previous chapter, the present chapter on Milestone Comics and particularly *Static* (1993-1997), sought to unsettle claims within comics studies that simplified the way comics scholars and critics think about comics' past. In this case, my chapter began with an uncomfortable sense that *published* critics and scholars felt that Milestone's Black-centric comics and storylines were liberal fantasies meant to appease white readers into thinking they knew the Black experience, and tricking (in the worst takes) Black readers into thinking they were finally accepted in the "multicultural" America of Bill Clinton. In short, this chapter was a revisionist reading of Milestone's project, and of *Static*'s storytelling, that sought to bring nuance and depth to what they achieve. The chapter briefly historicizes some of the skepticism by earlier comics scholars about how politically useful these comics were for Black audiences, but my main focus is less on "defending" *Static* (which has, as all texts, its issues) and more on reading what it does. To that end, I focused on a storyline that struck me as particularly sensitive to the very conversations about Black politics that many of the critics and scholars I was responding to were having, without recognizing that *Static* and other Milestone comics were having those conversations!

This chapter, then, provides a compelling reading of how *Static* helped readers (Black or white) think through the meaning of Blackness in a multicultural (I use Fawaz's application of the term "cosmopolitan") society, with particular attention to how Black liberation can move forward in a world where other types of oppression exist. This chapter is, as a result, a pretty straightforward reading that emphasizes how even the most mass-market comics can be closely

read to tell us much more interesting things than we might have imagined, especially when so much comics scholarship is done at a more macro level, collapsing entire years-long series into blanket statements and thus offering short-sighted arguments about what comics were and how they *did* politics. This chapter thus sits in nice tension with other chapters in the dissertation, suggesting the need to move between telescopic readings of comics storylines and more synthetic approaches. Comics studies is still trying to figure out how to make the two work together—and, if all the recent discussions in literary studies about the "forgotten archive" and "distance reading" are any indication, literary studies itself still has some work to do here.

Introduction: Stories Louder than a Bomb

Milestone Media's *Static* (1993–1997) was an unprecedented dramatization of the complexity of black youth subjectivity in comics. *Static* addressed major youth concerns, such as drugs, sex, sexuality, violence, and physical and mental health. Attaching itself to Milestone's multicultural sensibility and reflecting the company's goal to bring black experiences to mainstream comics, *Static* made black youth central to confronting issues facing American youth and black communities in the 1990s. In the pages of *Static*, black youth didn't generate the problems but rather, in the form of the black superteen Static and through his friendships with black and white men and women, black youth and their cross-racial relationships became the locus for confronting social problems. Despite being a comic steeped in the multicultural ethos of the 1990s and of Milestone's particular multicultural mission, the specific role of blackness and of Static's relationship to black politics was never far from the comic's narrative. In fact, although Eric Griffin, the founder of the Afrocentric comics publisher Ania, declaimed that, "Basically what Milestone does is create white characters painted Black. They're not culturally aware" (qtd.

in Brown 49), it would not be hyperbolic to say that *Static* was all about grappling with what it meant to be black in urban America.

Following the example of several recent works of comics scholarship by Jose Alaniz, André M. Carrington, and Ramzi Fawaz that have quite usefully problematized the representation and political potential of "difference," or what Fawaz (quoting intellectual historian David Hollinger) dubs "negotiating the experience of otherness" in superhero comics (16), I argue that the series *Static* unfolded a cosmopolitan project that staged transformative encounters between characters of different colors, creeds, genders, and sexualities. Far from being a cosmopolitan project that sought to narratively erase political tensions by merely suggesting that knowledge of, say, racism faced by blacks was enough to end that racism without implementing systemic change, *Static* made social tensions the focus of the series. Throughout its 45 issues, the creators emphasized the role of Static as a figure around whom discourses of racial, gender, class, religious, and sexual difference coalesced—not always neatly and never without personal struggle.

In order to mitigate the burden of summarizing four years' worth of complex plots and to demonstrate and engage with the complexity of individual story arcs created by Milestone's skilled stable of writers, thereby claiming the comic within the larger scope of black or African American literature, I focus this essay on Robert L. Washington's "Louder than a Bomb" (LtaB) storyline, which appeared in *Static* #5–7 (October–December 1993).[1] LtaB is concerned foremost with the question of black politics and its place in multicultural America. In particular, LtaB pits Static against a black nationalist supervillain named Commando X, whose agenda is driven by anti-Semitic beliefs that Jews are the enemies and oppressors of blacks. On the surface, LtaB appears to condemn black nationalism as a ridiculous, even terroristic, political

orientation—a joke to be caricatured for a mainstream comics-reading audience. But considered in the context of Fawaz's conception of a "comic book cosmopolitics" that values differences working together, rather than separating people irrevocably (and violently), as Commando's black nationalism would have, LtaB becomes a more politically complex artifact of Milestone's multicultural project and indeed of the racial landscape of mainstream American comics.

I pay close attention to the connections writer Robert L. Washington and artist John Paul Leon draw between the characters and events in *Static* #5–7, on the one hand, and the history of black nationalism, in particular of the Nation of Islam (NOI) under Louis Farrakhan, anti-Semitic controversies sparked by NOI sympathizers, and the broader racial tensions among blacks, whites, and Jews in the early 1990s, on the other. By focusing closely on LtaB and its political work, I demonstrate that *Static* argued for a black politics based on a cosmopolitical worldview that saw black youth as central to confronting racial—and, in other storylines, gender, sexual, and class—tensions. This was in part because the black superteen operated as a space of identification for potential readers, who could learn with Static as he confronted a black nationalist supervillain just what such a political ideology meant in the moment the comic was being published. With its emphasis on Static working through the question of black politics and the meaning of black oppression in a world where white-passing Jews can also be oppressed, and by black people no less, LtaB suggests that politics is a continual search for an answer, as Static's mother puts it, to the question "Am I doing the right thing?" Attending carefully to LtaB and reading it as synecdoche of the rest of the series and of Milestone's wider oeuvre, I point to a political richness in *Static* that beckons a reconsideration of Milestone's place in the history of comics.

Milestone Media and *Static*

In the field of superhero comics, Milestone Media was a revolution, even if short-lived. An independent comics company founded in 1992 and owned by black comics professionals Derek T. Dingle, Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, and Michael Davis, it was known for its groundbreaking line of comics that placed characters of color at the center of superhero stories that dealt unabashedly with intersectional issues of race and class inequality, urban violence, (hyper)masculinity, sexualization of women, teen pregnancy, and gay youth, among others. Beyond the pages of its monthlies—of which there were six ongoing series between 1993 and 1997 ranging in length from 6 to 50 issues, and several miniseries—Milestone employed a record number of creators of color, and by 2000 it had launched a popular animated television series that lasted four seasons and featured the black teenage superhero Static. Milestone offered an alternative to the largely white male casts of DC and Marvel superhero titles, populating its fictional Dakotaverse with superheroes like Icon and Hardware, and teams like Blood Syndicate. Although independently founded, Milestone allied itself with the mainstream of the comics industry early on by signing a distribution, advertising, and merchandising deal with DC that ensured its books reached a wider audience than independent black publishers such as Alonzo Washington's Omega 7 Comics, Jason Sims's Big City Comics, and the Afrocentric publisher Ania.[2]

It is somewhat surprising, then, that scholarship on race in American comics[3] often fails to give due attention to Milestone. It is possible that earlier claims by black comics creators, who accused Milestone of, among other things, simply doing "Superman in blackface" (Brown 49), have resonated with scholars looking for comics that take up the politics of black liberation with seemingly more conviction. In his monograph on black superheroes, Adilifu Nama glosses over

Milestone's comics, giving less than three pages to discussion of the character Icon. For Nama, Icon "appeared and felt like a plagiarized figure" (96). Nama argues that Icon ultimately

> symbolizes how racial justice is an ambivalent and ambiguous topic best used as a point
> of departure in superhero comics rather than a real-time battleground to make definitive
> declarations concerning black liberation as an integral aspect of American democracy,
> freedom, and societal improvement. (98)

Nama's reading of Icon extends to the Milestone project more generally and is contraposed to interpretations of Milestone and its comics by Jeffrey A. Brown and Carrington, who both view Milestone as having offered unparalleled access to images of, and stories about, people of color in comics. For Carrington, Milestone "augment[ed] the allegorical quality of superhero comics by bringing the critical insights of Black readers who grew up with varying degrees of alienation from [comics] to bear on the conventions that have shaped the medium over the years" (121). Carrington suggests, much as Brown does in his early monograph on Milestone, that although the company worked within the mainstream and did not often court Afrocentric politics in its comics, it was nonetheless a revolution in the sense that it published multicultural comics (by a diverse creative staff of black, Latinx, Asian American, white, gay, and heterosexual men and women) and offered a range of representations of blackness—including those that challenged stereotypical expressions of black masculinity characterizing other companies' black superheroes—to a broad readership.

At the same time, the small body of work on Milestone either overlooks or downplays the significance of *Static*, the company's second-longest-running series. This lacuna is significant, considering that the black superteen with electrostatic superpowers, battling villains and the hardships of a cash-strapped family in the gang-infested Dakota City at the center of Milestone's

storyworld, has proved the company's most popular (and lucrative) creation. Where other Milestone creations faded into relative obscurity after the company ceased publishing its original comics line in April 1997, Static persisted, appearing in his own animated show (2000–2004), in two comics reboots—*Static Shock: Rebirth of the Cool* (4 issues, 2001) and *Static Shock* (8 issues, 2011–2012)—and as an occasional member of the Teen Titans and other DC superhero teams (both in comics and animated features).

Static told the story of Virgil Ovid Hawkins, a die-hard nerd, who gained electrostatic superpowers during the Big Bang, a gang war in the notoriously rough Paris Island district of Dakota that ended when police deployed mutagenic gas to quell the gangs, resulting in widespread casualties and more than a few superpowered beings. Like Marvel's Spider-Man, Virgil uses his mutation to become a teenage superhero. Throughout the course of the comic Virgil has to balance his newfound superhero status with home and family life, high school, friends, romances, work, and, of course, leisure time at the arcade. And, like Spider-Man, he does it all with a fast-talking sense of humor and occasional teen angst. Static's obvious homage of Spider-Man (his first crush, for example, is a redhead), while superficial, is crucial to understanding Static's resonance with potential black audiences, young and old. As a quick-with-a-joke superpowered teenage nerd from a cash-strapped family, albeit white, Spider-Man offered more than just a convenient figure of identification, cemented in comic-book culture as the character is, for hooking Milestone readers' attention early on. Walter Mosley claims that black readers in the early 1960s identified with Spider-Man and read him partly as a black superhero. As he puts it,

> The first black superhero is Spider-Man. He lives in a one-parent house [...] He has all of
> this power, but every time he uses it, it turns against him. People are afraid of him; the

police are after him. [...] That's a black hero right there. Of course, he's actually a white

guy. But black people reading Spider-Man are like, *Yeah, I get that. I identify with this*

character here. (Riesman, emphasis in original)

Not for nothing, *Static* outlasted the Superman-inspired *Icon*. That Static was identifiable yet

refreshingly new allowed the character to gain popularity and to develop a series identity more

fully its own, opening up the possibility for sustained, and occasionally overt, discussion of

politics in the lives of the series's protagonist and his friends.

Static and Cosmopolitics

Fawaz argues that in the postwar era superheroes enacted a version of cosmopolitanism, as

creators of superhero comics turned away from crime-busting stories in favor of penning

"unpredictable encounters between an expanding cohort of superhumans, aliens, cosmic beings,

and an array of fantastical objects and technologies" (17). Fawaz demonstrates a trend of "cross-

cultural *encounter* rather than assimilation" (17, emphasis in original) across postwar superhero

comics through readings of major series like the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby era of *Fantastic Four*

and Chris Claremont's *X-Men*. Superhero comics, Fawaz argues, were invested "in the liberal

values of antiracism and antifascism alongside its absorption of the more radical politics of New

Left social movements" (19). Such investments resulted in what Alaniz describes as the

"'relevance' movement" (138) in comics of the 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in nominal

pushes to create diverse characters.

At the same time, mainstream comics creators disrupted what Alaniz describes as the

superhero genre's prewar and wartime idealization of the "fantastic, quasi-eugenicist apotheosis

of the perfected [male] body" (35), and in doing so demonstrated that the visuality of the

(super)body was inseparable from its political dimensions. As a visual medium and as a genre concerned with the body and its relation to (super)normalcy, difference was and remains a key analytic in the study of superhero comics. Difference and its significance in discourses of cosmopolitanism are all the more important, then, when dealing with comics explicitly about boundaries of identity and belonging. Considering the influence of various social justice movements in the second half of the twentieth century, Fawaz claims that for comics creators and readers,

> *differences* [...] were not only sites of political oppression but potent cultural resources for articulating new forms of social and political affiliation, questioning the limits of democratic inclusion, and developing new knowledge about the world from the position of the outcast and the marginalized. (21, emphasis in original)

Fawaz's argument that "the introduction of previously unrepresented differences […] demanded a substantive recalibration of the social relations between characters, the visual depiction of new distinctions, and a language with which to discuss such differences" (21) is a powerful critical intervention. This notion of a "comic book cosmopolitics" recognizes the possibilities for the production of a cosmopolitan ethic in superhero comics that values encounters with diverse peoples and that embraces the tension and uncertainty of encounters with difference, abandoning individualism "in exchange for diverse group affiliations" (16).

Emerging out of feminist and queer theory as well as revising older models of cosmopolitanism,[4] and therefore deeply interested in preserving difference across identity boundaries through the production of new modes of community, Fawaz's vision of comic-book cosmopolitics is a particularly apt lens through which to read the Milestone project. *Static* valued not diversity (the mere presence of difference) so much as the creation of a multicultural

epistemology. As my reading of LtaB shows, *Static* negotiated the meaning of individual and group differences in order to produce friendship, camaraderie, love, and understanding. This cosmopolitics also served a didactic purpose, to educate the reader about such differences and confront prejudice in ways that balanced Static's superheroics with his tribulations as a black teenager trying to understand his place in the world. Readers attentive to a story grappling with questions of black politics, the black community, and anti-Semitism became witnesses to—and through letter columns and other fan forums could participate in—a dynamic conversation, rather than a one-sided lecture about right and wrong. *Static* dealt with questions of political and cultural significance to black communities as they related to the increasingly recognized multicultural ethnoscape of the US. Perhaps the most pressing question was what forms black politics and resistance could (and should) take.

Cosmopolitical Superteen vs. Black Nationalist Militant

What black politics might be(come), especially in the face of heightened racial tension, and how discussion of black politics relates to personal, familial, and community relations, occupies the central premise of LtaB. The three-part story was scripted by Robert L. Washington and penciled by John Paul Leon. Evidencing the tension between black radicalism and a multiculturalist vision of black politics as cosmopolitics, the story is a useful case study for understanding the series's and Milestone's political vision for black America in the 1990s. Like every decade prior, America in the 1990s was a difficult place to be black. Major race-related events such as the police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the subsequent 1992 Los Angeles riots, the 1995 O.J. Simpson murder trial, and the emergence of gangsta rap and its lyrical and media-exaggerated relation to street crime fueled white fears of black Americans. At the same time, Americans

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witnessed high-profile public controversies such as the discovery of Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment of Anita Hill upon his nomination to the US Supreme Court in 1991 and the legal battles over the firing of Leonard Jeffries, professor of Black Studies at City College of New York, for his statements regarding Jewish financial backing of the slave trade and Jewish control over negative stereotypes of blacks in the media. But also, on account of rap and hip hop, growing Internet culture, and expanded televisual and filmic opportunities, black Americans were more present in American popular culture than ever before.

As Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse describe this "paradoxical situation": "Blacks have a disproportionate impact on the nation's culture—both popular and elite—yet continue to struggle in the educational system and are severely underrepresented in its boom of scientific and high-end technology" (1). Not surprisingly, Milestone created a world in which peoples of color acted as superheroes while in costume but still had to confront racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice whenever civilian life resumed. The struggle against which Patterson and Fosse juxtapose black youth's visibility and cultural impact extended in the 1990s, just as today, to fights against racial profiling, police brutality, criminalization, poor working conditions and opportunities, and ultimately entrapment in a cycle of poverty. LtaB dramatizes multiple responses to these problems and gestures to their importance to the series as a whole by telling a story about a black nationalist terrorist who bombs public institutions—a Civil War monument, a Jewish synagogue, a school, a police precinct, a peace rally—that he argues represent oppression by "race traitors" ("War at 30 Frames") and the "Amerikkkan government" ("You're Gonna Get Yours").[5] The storyline pits Static, in his superhero identity, against Commando, and in his daily life as Virgil, against Commando's political ideology as it causes conflict among friends and pushes him to reflect on his own conception of racial justice.

LtaB starts in the middle of a race riot, as black, brown, and white folks clash on the street before a synagogue. An immediate flashback shows Virgil at a local comics shop, where they overhear a radio announcement about a "Sabbath bombing attack at this hour on historic Beth Adonai temple" with "Reports of racial clashes" (*Static* #5, "Megablast," October 1993). Hearing this, and remembering that his friend Frieda attends Beth Adonai, Virgil dons his costume and rushes off. But his attempts to end the riot fall flat and the fighting is instead quelled when a rabbi and a black minister join hands in the street to call for peace, order, and tolerance.

Static's abilities as a superteen are outpaced by the peacework of local religious leaders, a narrative move that demonstrates Static's lack of social capital as a new, relatively unknown superhero in Dakota, and also gestures to a possible incompatibility of superheroics and direct social action. After dispersing the crowd of rioters and stopping a group of Jews from accosting a black man whom they allege has information about the synagogue bomber, the rabbi and minister confront Static, telling him that racial unrest "can't be fought with your powers" but that he might use the symbolic power of his being a local black superhero by making an appearance at an upcoming peace rally. Static agrees, but also decides that he needs to find out more about this bomber, Commando X, who has orchestrated multiple violent attacks across the city, each prefaced by media announcements "about the 'black man's struggle'."

Commando's rhetoric is expounded later when he attacks Virgil's high school: "Attention! Attention! This white man's propaganda hall-- / --will be destroyed in five minutes. [...] Rejoice in the freedom to educate yourselves, my Nubian siblings" ("Megablast").[5] The bombing destroys Virgil's school, transforming a children's educational institution at once into a war zone. Like the synagogue, the school is a political target made to stand in for the racist

system of oppression that Commando wishes to tear down. By the end of the arc's first issue, Commando has even made the peace rally organized by the rabbi and the minister into another bombing target.

As his message from the high school attack indicates, Commando is in many ways a caricature of the most radical corner of black politics in America. As the story-arc makes clear, Commando elides the distinctions between groups as varied as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam (NOI), figures as disparate as Louis Farrakhan and Thomas Sankara, and joins them in a clash of symbols and references bound together under the banner of a flattened black nationalism. Commando's language is infused with a dated black radical's lexicon, with phrases such as "Nubian siblings" and "Amerikkkan"[6] calling to mind a politics of difference that sought to demonize whites as wholly as many black Americans felt demonized by white society. Perhaps most obviously, Commando styles his name with an "X" after Malcolm X and Louis X (Farrakhan's early NOI name). Static also discovers that Commando runs a public-access television show called *Malcolm's 10: Blackman's Greatest Threats*, and in the arc's final issue Virgil's father reveals that Commando is indeed a black Muslim. Additionally, he dons military fatigues and a red beret, not unlike the Burkinabe Marxist revolutionary Sankara. The outfit signifies in other ways, too. The excess of medals on Commando's beret, for example, suggests the self-aggrandizement of a dictator like Idi Amin. The beret, when paired with Commando's dark sunglasses, black turtleneck, and his toting of a large semiautomatic rifle, also points to the stereotypical uniform of the Black Panthers. From this multiplicity of cues, a general signification: Commando is a beleaguered stereotype of an uncompromising black revolutionary with a will to violence no matter the casualties.

Viewed from the perspective of *Static*'s cosmopolitan vision, which values coalitions across diverse groups working together to end oppression and violence—a position modeled by the rabbi and minister—the comic's treatment of Commando appears as a figural condemnation of militant black radicalism *tout court* and the NOI specifically. Commando's religious affiliation is crucial to parsing the comic's (or at least writer Washington's) understanding of black radical politics in the first half of the 1990s, since the character's symbolic affiliation with the NOI ties him to the tenuous relationship in black radical politics between blacks and Jews. This relationship animates the LtaB story arc; it is a tension signaled in the opening scene of the race riot, sparked by Commando's anti-Semitic attack on the synagogue and recapitulated throughout the story as Virgil and his black friends spar with Frieda Goren, their white Jewish friend, over the relative oppressions faced by each group. This tension takes on heightened significance in the context of black-Jewish relations in the early 1990s, which brought media attention to Farrakhan's NOI and several prominent black radicals for their anti-Semitic views.

The first issue of LtaB deals with the question of anti-Semitism in largely veiled terms. One conversation is particularly telling. Virgil and his friends, including Frieda, are hanging out after the school bombing when Felix tells the group, "I don't agree with [Commando's] methods, but he's just calling attention to white society's everyday assault on the blackman" ("Megablast"). Since Commando's "methods" began the story arc with an attack on a synagogue and sparked the need for a peace rally to quell the racial unrest between blacks and Jews, Frieda asks what the Jews ever did to black people, to which Felix retorts, "If you have a problem with media portrayals of blacks, you go to the ones who control the media." Virgil suggests that Jews have, "Well--connections. Power. In media, banking, law, um…" before Frieda storms off. This scene addresses a widespread anti-Semitic belief in a Jewish world conspiracy, which dates back

at least to the early twentieth century and the Russian forgery of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.[7] While Virgil is distraught about hurting Frieda's feelings, he nevertheless is drawn to Commando's rhetoric of black subjugation—though, like Felix, he does not agree with his methods and is uncomfortable with the implications of his anti-Semitism.

   Static #5 concludes when Static makes his promised appearance at the peace rally, which Commando attacks. In the midst of the battle, Commando reveals the stakes and purpose of his bombings. Interrupting a speech in which the rabbi claims Commando is an enemy to the entire community, the Commando accuses the rabbi: "Your crimes against us *cannot* be forgiven! *We should* dwell apart!" Commando's phrasing identifies black oppression as unforgivable crimes perpetrated by Jews. His is a separatist message: blacks and Jews cannot, should not, gather in peace, let alone live in community together.

   In the context of a peace rally that aims to bring together blacks and Jews to reconcile both the anti-Semitism and the misunderstanding in Dakota City's black community, fostered by Commando, that Jews are responsible for black oppression, the villain's words invoke a set of controversies sparked in 1991 by the NOI's publication of *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews, Volume 1* and by Leonard Jeffries's "Our Sacred Mission" speech in July of that year. *Secret Relationship* argued that the Jews had been heavily involved, if not central to, the early American slave trade and thus had, as Commando argues, committed unforgivable crimes against blacks. The NOI's anti-Semitic pseudo-scholarship codified Farrakhan's long-held belief in a Jewish world conspiracy that implicated Jews as deeply invested in the white oppression of people of color—a position that has led to the NOI under Farrakhan being labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center ("Nation of Islam"). Jeffries's speech recapitulated the major thrust of *Secret Relationship*, leading to his dismissal from his

professorship at City College and a series of legal disputes about academic freedom and freedom of speech.[8]

As if the connection between anti-Semitic black nationalism and Commando were not clear enough by the end of *Static* #5, the attack on the peace rally crosses over into the second issue of the arc, *Static* #6, which begins with Commando crying out for an end to the "Zionist slander!" that he believes the peace rally represents. As he and Static battle it out, Commando volleys off angry claims of his experiences of oppression at the hands of various public and private institution, yelling, among other things, that public access television and the newspapers—both run by "race traitors"—froze out his message (*Static* #6, "War at 30 Frames," November 1993).

Before breaking off his figural attack on black-Jewish relations, literalized in the form of the peace rally, Commando exclaims, "Howell Rice is a slave *no more*! Commando X rides free!" ("War at 30 Frames"). With this, Commando connects the racial slavery system of antebellum America with the psychological/social situation of blacks living under postbellum white supremacy. The proclamation also tightens the symbolic ties between himself and the real-world NOI. In his landmark *Message to the Blackman in America*, Elijah Muhammad—leader of the NOI from 1934 until 1975—argued that "as long as [blacks] are in the white man's name, they are his slaves" (47). The taking of a new name was the inaugural action in the NOI's 12-point platform for black liberation: "Separate ourselves from the slave-master" (180).[9] As Dawn-Marie Gibson notes in her history of the NOI, its founder's "attempt to convince his followers that carrying their former slave masters' surnames symbolized their continued enslavement played to the estrangement and isolation that they had experienced" as blacks in a racially oppressive society (18). We learn throughout *Static* #6 that Commando is motivated by similar

experiences of estrangement and isolation. He thus stands in for victims of the forces of American racism generally speaking, while his being shut out of the media motivates his belief in a specifically Jewish conspiracy against black Americans.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his calls for racial justice for black people in the US, like too many other comic-book (super)villains with radical political agendas, Commando is not a figure for reader sympathy. He is presented as a terrorist, and his deep intertextuality with the signs of black nationalism provokes consideration of the issues of racial injustice that he violently confronts only after it has invoked derision from Static, who, in the final moments of his combat against the Commando at the peace rally, adopts a black vernacular dialect reminiscent of blackface minstrelsy to mock Commando. His mocking serves to distance Commando's political rhetoric from politics as usual, equating radicality with the lack of education that African American vernacular English (AAVE) has long been used to indicate. Static is fittingly punished with a barrage of explosions that put an end to the peace-rally battle and allow Commando the chance to escape. The defeat galvanizes Static into learning more about who Commando really is and what his politics mean.

Static discovers, easily enough, what Commando is all about. He tracks Commando's public presence in the newspapers using the Commando's slave name and then by checking a TV guide for the name and air dates of his public access show, *Malcolm's 10*.[10] Virgil learns that before taking the militaristic moniker "Commando," he went by Howell X and that he often wrote to a local newspaper, *The Northstar*,[11] in order to lambast "Zionist mediamasters" ("War at 30 Frames"). Virgil spends all night studying VHS tapes of Commando's show, taking notes on his major beefs (e.g. with "pigs," "American government," and "race pollution") and searching for potential future targets for the Commando's bombings. After watching the show for hours,

Virgil surmises the next target: the police precinct that houses Dakota City's elite tactical police and anti-gang units. Virgil puts a quick end to the attempted bombing, but still makes no headway in stopping Commando himself, until he tracks the Commando down to the Rockdale Projects, where he meets the Commando and pretends to be a fan of *Malcolm's 10*. Commando takes Virgil into his confidence and gives him "the deep scoop" on the Zionist mediamaster conspiracy:

> Funny how [Jews say] there ain't no "conspiracy," but we on the *bottom*. / And they just "wound up" in all these power-intensive positions. "It just so happened." / And all that mess about how they got beat down in Europe? / If so many of 'em came over with nothing, how'd they get so far so *fast*? ("War at 30 Frames," emphases in original)

Virgil pretends to praise Commando's theory, saying among other things that his "protests" are medal-worthy, and he ultimately gets himself invited, by the issue's end, to help Commando with the next bombing—an invitation that gives Virgil all the information he needs to stop Commando.

In the LtaB conclusion in *Static* #7, Static prevents Commando's City Hall bombing attempt and confronts him before he bombs his final target: a news station with a biracial couple as anchors. Static makes swift work of the bomb-making supervillain by sealing the Commando's hands in cement blocks—in a further nod to Marvel's Spider-Man, Static also sets up a camera before the battle to videotape the confrontation, during which Static gets Commando to confess to multiple bombings. With Commando dispatched, Virgil returns home and the next day finds himself on the news as a local celebrity. But as with the earlier issues in the story arc, sandwiched between the scenes of fast-paced, quip-filled superheroic action are scenes between Virgil, friends, and family that break down Commando's black nationalist message and that

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wrestle with what his NOI-inspired, anti-Semitic black nationalism means in multiracial communities like Dakota City.

Black Politics as Cosmopolitics

That anti-Semitism defines Commando's response to black oppression is central to understanding the *Static*'s investment in cosmopolitics. As I noted, *Static* #5 sparked a conflict between Virgil and his black friend Felix, on the one hand, and Frieda, a Jew, on the other, over whether or not Jews in the US had more power than blacks—or even whether they had power over black America, a particular contention of Farrakhan's NOI. *Static* #6 complicated that conflict in a scene wherein Frieda and Rick (Virgil's gay white friend) point out the absurdity of a Jewish world media conspiracy by pretending to have a frank conversation about a black conspiracy to control entertainment media. "Blacks are monopolizing music and professional sports," Frieda begins, clarifying, "I know you're not *part* of it, but you *know* it exists. You people completely dominate in both." Rick gives evidence, in sentence fragments mirroring Virgil's own explanation of Jewish media control in *Static* #5, that black musicians and sports stars have the "Highest salaries. Biggest advertising deals. Best media exposure" ("War at 30 Frames"). Virgil protests, of course, but quickly realizes that Frieda and Rick are tricking him into making an argument that works equally well to explain how the success of individual Jews does not discount anti-Semitism as a systemic force. As Frieda concludes, "Everything you said about how hard people work and how unfair things have been is just as true for Jews as blacks" ("War at 30 Frames").

This scene laid the groundwork for Virgil to embrace an understanding of anti-Semitism and racism as two unique, but similarly destructive, forms of oppression that disenfranchise

Jewish and black Americans. Moreover, the scene makes clear for Virgil the stakes of Commando's insistence that Jews are partly responsible for the problems facing the "blackman" and that they are necessarily the enemy of black liberation, by establishing Frieda as both a counter to the very idea that Jews are in fact black people's enemies and as a victim of the Commando's ideology (it was her synagogue, after all, that was attacked in *Static* #5). While Virgil is convinced by Frieda that Jews are not all Commando's "Zionist mediamasters," *Static* #7 shows that Virgil's meeting with Commando at the Rockdale Projects was nonetheless confusing for the superteen, since the Commando's demand to end the struggle of the blackman begged the question for Virgil of who, if not Jews, was really responsible for the problems facing black America.

Virgil gets a chance to talk black politics with his family shortly after stopping the City Hall bombing. Returning home, Virgil finds his mother and father waiting for him on the couch, poised to have a serious conversation about the *Malcolm's 10* VHS tapes Virgil watched. When Virgil jokes defensively, "it's not as if it's pornography," his father retorts that "The *lies* in here are *worse* than pornography" (*Static* #7, "You're Gonna Get Yours," December 1993, emphases in original). He then links the illicit nature of pornography with what he assumes might be his son's defensiveness over the Islamic-tinged message of black nationalism contained on the tapes. But he assures his son, "This is *not* about Islam" and he clarifies, further, that "Islam is about 3 dozen religions, each as distinct as the many forms of Christianity." Virgil's father proffers an important clarification for Virgil and the reader: it is the first time Commando's message is labeled Islamic and, since it occurs in the final issue of LtaB, it makes the last symbolic connection between Commando and the NOI. While the allusions are certainly clear early in the comic, this final reveal in the domestic scene of a parent-child heart-to-heart, where a father and

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mother are instructing their son on moral action, allows Virgil to safely confront the complications of Commando's political position in the black community and in the landscape of American multiculturalism.

Here, at home and supported by family, Virgil recognizes the multiplicity of available political positions for black people. Until now, Commando has been treated as an eccentric, perhaps eccentric only because his politically radical views are backed by violent action—recall Felix's claim after the school bombing that Commando is "just calling attention to white society's everyday assault on the blackman" ("Megablast"). Even Virgil's internal monologue during his meeting with Commando in *Static* #6 betrays less sincere political disagreement and more a belief that he is merely simpleminded. But faced with his parents' worry that he might buy into Commando's "racist nonsense," as his father labels Commando's politics, Virgil recognizes his own relative ignorance. Frustrated, he concedes, "I just thought I had it all correct" ("You're Gonna Get Yours").

As a poor black teen in a family that he has to help support with an after-school fast food job, Virgil finds it hard to understand how he has the power to oppress anyone—let alone people who pass as white. Looking for an example of Jewish racism against blacks, Virgil points out that an old Jewish woman who did not seem to like black children left the neighborhood the second she could. But Virgil's mother complicates the situation: "she moved out *fast* the day someone sprayed 'Get out Jew bitch' on her front door" ("You're Gonna Get Yours"). This scene, with its invocation of Commando's "racist nonsense," or anti-Semitism, as the backbone of his politics addresses the tension created by Commando between the black and Jewish communities in the opening scene of LtaB. Rather than separate out racism and anti-Semitism, *Static* #7 argues that they are one in the same. Indeed, this is the point that Virgil's father makes

when he upends Virgil's argument that blacks cannot be racist because they cannot oppress others: "--anybody who chooses to use terror and violence has the 'power to oppress'." He concludes, "'My *hurt* is bigger than somebody else's rights' is what made the Nazis," drawing a provocative through line from Nazism to Commando. Given that LtaB is deeply preoccupied with the place of anti-Semitism in black nationalist politics and given the depth of intertextual references drawing Commando and the NOI together, it would not be a stretch to suggest that *Static* writer Robert L. Washington is also implicating any politics that is simultaneously a black politics and an anti-Semitic one in this metaphorical genealogy of blacks oppressing Jews.

However contentious the claim that anti-Semitism and anti-black racism are the same thing, the family scene in *Static* #7 demonstrates that Commando's black nationalism is, for Virgil's parents and, finally, for Virgil, an untenable position precisely because it allies itself with anti-Semitism and founds its movement for racial uplift on the oppression of another historically disenfranchised group.

The scene, moreover, nicely juxtaposes Virgil's conversation with his parents against Frieda's conversation with her own, which is presented simultaneously as panels take turns showing us the spaces of domestic racial dialogue: Virgil's living room and Frieda's dining room. Frieda and her parents discuss why it might indeed be difficult for some black people to accept that Jews face oppression (or at least discrimination), since as her father points out, Jews benefit from their ability to assimilate visually into the white mainstream of America. But he warns her against thinking that assimilation means acceptance: "Blacks, by virtue of their skin color, are never allowed to forget their culture. They *can't* delude themselves-- / --into believing that they are fully accepted" as Jews can ("You're Gonna Get Yours"). After their parallel conversations, Virgil and Frieda telephone one another and the two reconcile. Unfortunately,

writer Washington glosses over what might otherwise be a touching discussion of mutual understanding across racialized lines and instead moves straight to Virgil and Frieda trying to figure out Commando's final target. Despite the gloss—"one major cultural exchange later"—it is clear from the fact that Washington devotes four and a half pages to the discussion of racial oppression and anti-Semitism in black politics that the two friends have embraced a valuing of one another's difference as foundational to their relationship. Their "cultural exchange" stands in for the larger process of the production of knowledge about difference that undergirds what Fawaz argues is key to the cosmopolitics of superhero comics.

Virgil and Frieda refuse mere diversity, with its combatting notions of the relationship between the systemic structures of race, oppression, and Jewish and black identity unresolved, and instead come to understand the differences structuring the life of the other—an understanding cemented across generational and racial lines. Moreover, because the scene so wholly encapsulates the idea that Commando's anti-Semitic black nationalism is antithetical to a multicultural life lived in community with people who embody a range of differences, the scene operates as the crux of LtaB's political message. While we glimpse Frieda's own maturation in regard to racial politics, the scene emphasizes the damage anti-Semitism does to black politics. It challenges the overwhelming presence of Commando's violent black nationalism throughout the story and in doing so lambasts those very real-world politics that writer Washington so thoroughly connected to Commando. Although LtaB begins with the suggestion that black politics is Commando's politics, since there is no alternative politics interested in combatting black oppression present in earlier issues of *Static*, by the story arc's end Virgil discovers a black way of politics that values difference. Virgil and, by extension, *Static* figure *black politics as comsopolitics*. In the context of the anti-Semitic controversies hounding the NOI and black

nationalists in the 1990s, it is significant that Virgil discovers a way of being resistant to black

oppression while also embracing Judaism, rather than seeing all differences as signaling potential

spaces from which black oppression might emerge.

Coda: "Am I Doing the Right Thing?"

I have dwelt extensively on a single storyline of *Static* and the ways in which it draws clear

connections between the NOI's brand of anti-Semitic black nationalism and Commando X's

political ideology. As Washington and his fellow Milestone comics creators were well aware,

given Ania and other black publishers' frustrations with their company, representations of black

politics in popular art forms matter. Such representations were especially significant in the work

of an independent black comics company that paired itself with a mainstream comics company in

order to distribute multicultural comics to a multicultural audience in an era of heightened racial

tension—those tensions driven in part by national discussion over the politics of black popular

cultural forms such as gangsta rap. But *Static*'s cosmopolitics did not end with LtaB. As one of

Milestone's most popular comics, and one that focused to an almost ethnographic extent on the

lives of black Americans as much as on superheroics, *Static* regularly discusses issues of identity

and oppression. In the story arc "What Are Little Boys Made Of?" (*Static* #16–20), for example,

Virgil confronted his own homophobia when he discovered his best friend Rick is gay and the

victim of a gay bashing, leading to several issues about homophobia among teens and in black

communities. And *Static* #25 took on (safe, consensual) teen sex. Through stories such as these,

Static grappled with the political and personal stakes of what it meant to be black in America in

the 1990s. LtaB, in particular, placed black political issues at the vanguard of the series's search

for solutions to problems that implicate a variety of complex identity relations—both for black

youth, like Virgil himself, and for others, like Frieda and Rick. *Static* resists a singular vision of what black politics is or should be, and instead neatly frames it in the conclusion to LtaB as a constant seeking of right action in relation to others. As Virgil's parents put it in *Static* #7, he will (and should) always ask himself, "Am I Doing the Right Thing?" If, as a young black man, he is oppressing other disenfranchised people in his fight for racial justice, then the answer is no.

Notes

1. For in-text citation of comics I refer to the title of each issue, which can be found alphabetically in the works cited. For reader clarity, the first time I discuss a comic in-depth I include the issue number, title, and cover date.

2. See Jeffrey A. Brown's discussion of these publishers' disagreements with Milestone Media over the latter's mainstream status and purportedly assimilationist approach to telling stories about black characters (46–49).

3. A major thrust of contemporary comics studies research concerns representation; there are now small but growing bodies of literature on race, gender, sexuality, and disability in comics, among other studies of identity position in the medium. Key works in the study of black comics, characters, and creators include the books by Brown, Carrington, and Nama cited earlier, as well as William H. Foster III's *Looking for a Face like Mine* and *Dreaming of a Face like Ours*, Nancy Goldstein's *Jackie Ormes*, Tim Jackson's *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*, Fredrik Stromberg's *Black Images in the Comics*, and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence*, in addition to edited essay collections such as Frances Gateward and John Jennings's *The Blacker the Ink* and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II's *Black Comics*.

4. Fawaz argues for a "revamped cosmopolitanism" that, "rather than seeking the comforts of a utopian category of affiliation somehow free of the violent history of colonial encounters," instead "demands that we remember the precariousness of our engagements, remaining vigilant against the stance of imperial privilege even as we seek out new egalitarian modes of affiliation" (284n21). It is this sort of cosmopolitanism engaged in the uneasiness of, but nonetheless productive capacities of encounters with, difference that I invoke in my reading of *Static*, with the hopes of recuperating this comic for those put off it by critics in academe, like Nama, or in the public sphere, like Noah Berlatsky.

5. I use forward slashes to denote word balloon and panel breaks, following the convention for representing line breaks in quoted poetry. All quotations, including emphases and unusual punctuation, appear as in the original unless otherwise specified. This quote appears in italics in the original text, a typographic choice that denotes that the sound is mediated by a PA system, rather than spoken between persons, a convention typical to mainstream comics.

6. The substitution of the *c* with *kkk* in "American" was common in late 1960s and 1970s radical anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements and was not unknown to Black Panther Party members. When the party newspaper reported the death of Fred Hampton in December 1969, for example, Hampton was described as a leader who had truly experienced "the Amerikkkan way of life" ("Fred Hampton MURDERED").

7. The *Protocols* was a Russian forgery of documents that were purported to provide evidence of "an international Jewish conspiracy to enslave mankind" (Landes and Katz 1) and which was translated into dozens of languages and republished extensively in the early twentieth century.

8. In addition to the Jeffries incident, August 19–21, 1991 saw a riot between the black and Hasidic Jewish communities in Crown Heights after a Hasidic driver struck and killed a black boy. The riots were heavily reported on television and in the New York City dailies and influenced the 1993 mayoral election of Rudy Giuliani.

9. Booker T. Washington, for example, claimed the liberatory power of name choice in *Up from Slavery* (1901), where he recounted that for many manumitted or emancipated slaves, the taking of a self-chosen surname "was one of the first signs of freedom" (11–12).

10. As Devorah Heitner shows, local and national public television programming was utilized by black radicals from 1968 onward to cultivate a black viewing public and in order to offer black critiques of mainstream American culture.

11. Dakota City's *The Northstar* is no doubt a reference to Frederick Douglass's antebellum abolitionist newspaper *The North Star*. This reference is significant, since the comic suggests that Commando's op-eds to the newspaper were eccentric for the publication, thus juxtaposing a historically significant black liberationist artifact of black print culture against the Commando's black nationalist extremism.

PART III: COMICS AND QUEERNESS

CHAPTER SIX

COMING OUT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF QUEER VISIBILITY IN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN COMICS, 1950s-1990s

Unlike previous chapters, this chapter was never published (in any academic sense)—in large part because it's very much unlike the rest of the scholarship I have done, but writing this was absolutely necessary. I explained in my introduction to this dissertation that, until recently, comics studies was at something of a crossroads with regard to how the field talked about marginalized identities, in large part replicating the way in which recognition of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people has tended to play out in the humanities—that is, with a slew of studies about the representation of X group in literature/film/theatre/television/etc. Many of the chapters in this dissertation grew out of a desire to go beyond studies of what I called above "mere" representation to look at what that representation actually tells us about the political possibilities of comics, and the values of its creators, audiences, and the industry. Surprisingly, the work of this chapter still hasn't been done, at least not in any significant capacity outside of popular articles on the Internet. Simply put: there is no major study of queer representation in comics. The present chapter was written initially in 2014 as background to my writing of chapter eight of this dissertation, which was published as a journal article; in order to write clearly about what was unique about queers in comics during the period covered in that the article (1988-1993), I needed to know about the history of queerness in comics. There was no go-to resource outside of curated lists of "major moments" of queer visibility in comics curated by comics fans. So I formalized my 30 pages of notes on queer representation in American (superhero) comics history and wrote this chapter, which was presented as a conference paper at MIT in 2015 and published in a shortened, largely bibliographic format on my personal blog in 2016 (Guynes, "A

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Timeline"), since I couldn't imagine a good venue for the awkward length of this chapter outside of, say, a dissertation or larger book project.

The work here, then, is entirely in the mode of an earlier moment in comics scholarship, but is nonetheless groundbreaking since its like exists nowhere else in the literature (at least as far as studies of *mainstream* comics go; Margaret Galvan has produced an exceptional body of work on independent, alternative, and other anti-mainstream feminist comics with an emphasis on lesbians' contributions to the medium). In writing this history, I made two key decisions. The first was to pay attention to what Suzanna Danuta Walters calls "visibility" over representation, since for much of comics' history the question of "representation" of queerness is one of delicate coding, mockery, and symbolic sleight-of-hand. As a result, I focus on clear instances where straight and queer audiences *think* something queer is afoot in comics, regardless if a character is known to be out and proud. Second, I attempted to periodize the history of queer visibility not according to typical periodizations of comics around changes in the superhero genre, but rather around the changing strictures of the Comics Code Authority, which sought to control what sorts of identities could appear and comics and which were immoral, perverse, etc. To me, the triumph of this chapter is not its hyper-originality, since I don't put forward any particular argument about queerness in comics, but rather the archival and basic recovery work that went into bringing together even a "brief" history of queerness in comics. It is my hope to see more detailed histories of mainstream comics queerness soon.

It is an unstated maxim among comics scholars that the history of comic books is the history of their censorship. Like countless other modes of popular culture with large youth audiences, comic books became the target of a moral panic.[1] What David Hajdu calls "the great comic-book

scare" and others have labeled the "comic book crusade" spread beyond the borders of the

United States in the 1940s and 1950s and affected comics industries in Australia, Britain,

Canada, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, and the Philippines.[2] The anti-comics

agenda in the US began in the late 1940s at the instigation of concerned parent organizations, but

was catalyzed to its height in 1954 when the movement gained its most outspoken advocate,

German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. Wertham was seriously concerned about the

negative influences of comic books on young Americans' healthy psychological development, so

much so that he published a scathing indictment of the comic book industry sensationally titled,

in bold red lettering, *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Though Wertham began presenting the

delinquency-causal analysis of comic books as early as 1948—for which he was scathingly

rebuked in a 1949 special edition of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* by Frederic Thrasher,

NYU professor and member of the Commission on Juvenile Delinquency—*Seduction* was an

(in)famous success. Substantiating his claims with anecdotes from patient interviews,

decontextualized comic book panels, and, as Carol L. Tilley has recently shown, sometimes

falsified evidence, Wertham argued that reading comics caused lesbianism in young girls and

anal fetishes, homosexual proclivities, and sex mania in boys. Wertham also rather famously

touted the Batman and Robin relationship as "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together,"

and in doing so provided the first "queer reading" of a comic book (190).[3]

    Seduction's popularity raised sufficient concern in news media to warrant a Senate

investigation into the link between juvenile delinquency and the so-called funny-books. Though

the Senate subcommittee's report was reluctant to condemn the comics industry, the resulting

public outcry, including comic book burnings, and the mounting panic among comic book

publishers regarding falling sales, led to the creation of the Comics Magazine Association of

America (CMAA), which all the major American comic book publishers joined. In October 1954 the CMAA drafted and adopted a voluntary, self-regulating code, the Comics Code Authority (CCA). In addition to banning certain generic conventions of horror and crime comics, the Code lumped in exhortations against "violent love scenes" and romantic stories that "stimulate the lower and baser emotions" with the stipulation that "sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden" (qtd. in Gabilliet 316). "Perversion," of course, meant homosexuality; it was a term introduced to sexology in the 1890s by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the prominent psychiatrist and author of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, to denote same-sex sexual practices, which Krafft-Ebing viewed as a perversion of the biological purpose of the human sex drive: procreation (Kunzel 53-54). The use of "perversion" in the CCA marks the beginning of an industry-sanctioned ban on comic book characters and stories that disrupt heteropatriarchal ideals of the white-picket-fence family.

The CCA's anti-homosexual censorship measure took on symbolic necessity in the era of "masculinized nationalism" and feminine "containment on the homefront," straightening out representations of gay men, lesbian women, and others—cross-dressers, transsexuals, 'loose' women—whose deviances seemed to threaten the fragile balance of postwar gender roles (Strub 13). To be sure, representations of homosexuality were not common in comics before their official proscription. More often than not gender-play, especially in the form of cross-dressing, and homosexual allusions in pre-Code comics are meant to be parodic or humorous, as is the case with Quality Comics's Madam Fatal character, secretly the famous female impersonator Rick Stanton, who dresses as an elderly woman to avenge the death of his wife and who appears in twenty-two issues of *Crack Comics* (May 1940-Mar. 1942). Though there is little scholarship on homosexuality in pre-Code comics, a growing body of feminist and queer critique of the

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superhero and other popular comics genres reveals the political dimensions of gender and sexuality in postwar American comic books. Among other things, recent feminist and queer critique demonstrates that superhero comics are laden with generic conventions that formalize the superhero's ambiguous relations to dominant discourses of gender and sexuality.[4]

Neil Shyminsky suggests that in the context of the US's Cold War anxieties about masculinity, the subject position of the superhero's sidekick—a generic figure nearly as old as the superhero itself and most famously represented by Batman's teenage protégé Robin and "Superman's pal" Jimmy Olsen—simultaneously demarcates and blurs the boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality.[5] This is because at the most basic level the male superhero upholds dominant discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, race, class, and ability while also subverting them vis-à-vis the otherness that renders him superhuman. In addition, a number of scholars have observed that it is not so much the superpowers but rather the costumed dual identity of the superhero that renders him suspect. Scott Bukatman contends that "[o]ur costumed vigilante is…a dandy, a flamboyant, flamboyantly powered, urban male, who, if not for his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way, would probably be ordered to 'just move it along'" (*Matters of Gravity* 216). The superhero's masculinity is therefore always already suspect.[6] Arguing as Jack Halberstam does that "'heroic masculinities' depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities" (qtd. in Shyminsky 289), the assertion of the superhero's always imperiled status as the embodiment of American masculinity relies in part on the contrasting role of his adolescent sidekick.[7] While the sidekick's most common narrative function (entrapped by the villain, rescued by the hero) allows the superhero to continuously assert and reassert his masculinity, the close, intensely personal relationship between superhero and sidekick also produces a "queer anxiety" about homosociality, which, as

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "is separated [from homosexuality] only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line" (qtd. in Shyminsky 295). The superhero's tensions with a historically constructed hegemonic masculinity are thus structured by some of the genre's most iconic conventions, allowing for "queer readings" whenever a man leaves behind "the visual drabness of his closet" to don four-color tights (Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity* 216).[8]

The superhero's tendentious relationship with the closet may have been instantiated in conventions established during the genre's emergence, but comic book creators of the postwar period recognized and gave narrative primacy to the changing social, cultural, and economic roles of men. Alaniz describes the postwar comics of the Silver Age as grappling with a "crisis of infinite masculinities,"[9] a phrase that signals the dismantling of traditional American male identity into an infinite array of emasculated subject positions (20). That this "crisis" is infinite also acknowledges that the "dominant fiction" of (white American) masculinity was continuously undermined by the "feminizing" effects of, among other factors, the concomitant rise of consumerist culture and the changing landscape of post-industrialism; the humiliations of early US-Soviet cultural, scientific, and military conflicts; and especially the successes of feminist, racial, and gay liberatory struggles (Alaniz 20-22).[10] The effort to police and thus preserve a dominant fiction of masculinity is manifest throughout the comics scene of the early postwar period, from Wertham's homophobic reading of the Batman and Robin relationship to the 1954 CCA ban on the portrayal of non-heteronormative gender and sexual roles. Developing this history of gender/sexuality surveillance in comics further, Christopher York has traced how, throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, DC Comics attempted to distance Batman from accusations of homosexuality by marshalled female and non-human characters to disrupt the homosocial dynamic of their partnership, while Andy Medhurst and Shyminsky have argued that

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DC's history of homo-avoidance extends well into the 1980s.[11] But queer interpretations of the Batman and Robin relationship over the years are different in kind from the emergence of legible queer characters and themes in mainstream comic books—both those that remain unconfirmed in a subtextual closet of metaphors and those that, by the end of the 1980s, are proud and out.

The 1960s and 1970s mark the quintessentially Silver Age years of Marvel Comics, whose new and revamped characters—including Iron Man, Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, Hulk, Thor, the X-Men, and Captain America—were created to challenge and deconstruct dominant perceptions of what constitutes "normal." Marvel's comics were famous for their melodramatic treatment of the superhero genre; their stories emphasized the problems and personal lives of superhero, as well as the burden and abnormality of superhumanity, while the work of Marvel's principal artists, especially of Jack Kirby, John Romita, Sr., and John Buscema, exploded with frenetic, anxious, sublime energies. Although at first glance the overwhelming focus on Marvel in the scholarly literature on mainstream comics might suggest otherwise, DC Comics and other mainstream companies such as Charlton, Archie, or Dell were not without their own stunningly melodramatic narratives that engaged real-world social problems, nor were they devoid of star artists or well-known intellectual properties.[12] Though few comics of this era depict queer characters, when comic books do they are almost always about gay men who, though never named as such, are constructed of the stereotypical effeminacy and flamboyancy that characterize most popular cultural depictions of homosexuals.

A unique early example is Steve Ditko's "The Man Who Stepped out from a Cloud," published in the Charlton Comics science fiction anthology *Out of This World*. In the span of Ditko's five-page comic a telepathic, human-passing alien descends to earth from a cloud, revealing himself to a young man who has run away from his adopted parents. The sharply

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dressed, blonde, mustachioed alien invites the youth to join him for a walk, piquing the young

man's interest: "I'm afraid of everybody else…but your voice is so low…so soft! Everybody else

always yells at me!" Together the alien and boy walk hand-in-hand ("G-gosh -- nobody ever held

my hand this way before!"; unusual punctuation in original) toward a newly formed teleport-

cloud, where, with a crack of lightning, the boy is willingly whisked away to the alien's

homeworld. The alien remains on earth as the cloud dissipates and he is greeted by the youth's

flustered adoptive parents, who show no grief at their son's disappearance, but instead complain

"…that boy's given us nothing but trouble ever since we took him in from the orphanage! […]

An ungrateful misfit who ran away the first change he got! He'll be the same wherever he is!

That kind never changes!" (emphasis mine). But the story concludes on an upbeat, with the

boy—a picture of American masculinity, dressed in brown pants, work boots, and popped-collar

flannel shirt—standing on a table surrounding by a cohort of male aliens, cheerily welcoming

him with arms flung wide.

The loosely crafted narrative of Ditko's little-known story is ambiguously encoded. It

reads on the one hand as the fantasy of a boy who, escaping an unloving household, discovers a

whole world (of men) devoted to his care. Such a reading is corroborated by critics who have

suggested Ditko was a victim of abuse as a child and that he channeled his negative childhood

experiences into his frenetic artwork, especially into his depiction of hands (Fischer; Hultkrans;

Randall). On the other hand, the comic engages the stereotype of a well-dressed, emotionally

sensitive gay man, who here takes considerable emotional and physical, though not necessarily

predatory, interest in a "disturbed" youngster. The comic's conclusion plays perhaps self-

consciously on the artificial boundary between homosociality and homosexuality; in the broadest

reading, Ditko's "disturbed" child is whisked away from unsympathetic parents by a handsome stranger who promises trust and physical comfort on a world full of fashionably dressed men.

Ditko's "The Man Who Stepped Out From A Cloud" is capaciously ambiguous, sending a deeply conflicted and ultimately garbled message that intertwines parental abuse with a story of homosocial world-making, and, as a queer reading would contend, homosexual fantasy.[13] The comic is, like much of Ditko's output, idiosyncratic. More common are those comics which flaunt the flamboyant flare of their ostensibly homosexual characters, as does the Parisian fashion designer and friend of The Flash, Anton Previn, in "Beware the Atomic Grenade!" (*Flash*, vol. 1, #122, Aug. 1961, Broome/Infantino). In his single appearance, Previn is used as a prop to facilitate the developing relationship between Barry Allen (alter-ego, The Flash) and Iris West, who receives a stunning makeover from the fashion mogul. Previn's furtive identity is hinted at when he assures Allen with the flip of his hand that his only interest in women is "their opinions on clothes," invoking in the process the long-popular conflation of the fashion industry with homosexuality—a "safe" homosexual identity that betrays no danger either to the heterosexual male or to his female lover.[14]

The 1960s and 1970s also featured numerous "gender-swap" and female impersonation stories. In the DC series *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, the titular protagonist used a variety of female alter-egos in order to get a job in the feminized American postwar economy, to embarrass his all-boy fan club, to retrieve stolen jewels from a flirtatious mob boss, and to escape the cops.[15] Similarly, in "Claire Kent, Alias Super-Sister" a young Clark Kent (Superboy) is hypnotized by an alien woman (who is offended by his misogyny) into believing he is "Claire Kent." And in "Supergirl's Secret Marriage!" the alien Thal leaves his fiancée, Veena, to court Supergirl (Kara). Veena dresses as a man in a bid to convince Kara that she is Kara's forgotten

husband, "Joaquin," so to dissuade her fiancé from his pursuit of Kara; but Veena is exposed

when "Joaquin" fails to perform a kiss according to heteroromantic gender norms. These

examples, all written by prominent the "Superman family" writers Otto Binder and Leo

Dorfman, denaturalize the rigidly patrolled boundaries of Cold War gender and sexual identity to

show that, in the words of Judith Butler, gender and sexuality are "drags" or "performances" that

regulate, reproduce, and occasionally contest oppressive social structures (313).[16]

    "Gender-swap" comics' disruption of gender and sexual identity categories are in some

ways prototypical of comic books of the late 1960s and 1970s, which after the political and

cultural disillusionments of the 1960s became preoccupied with questions of "often mistaken,

generally confused and ambiguous" identity, "reflecting," as Matthew J. Costello writes, "the

loss of faith in a consensus [American] identity" (94).[17] Governmental failures to respond to civil

rights issues at home and abroad emboldened comic book creators to write more critical, more

socially conscious stories, including those with narratives supporting (in differing and not always

productive ways) feminist, gay liberationist, racial, ecological, and disability politics, as well as a

plethora of storylines that dealt with social crises as varied as prison reform and drug use.[18]

Though the CCA revised its guidelines in 1971 to allow the depiction of drugs for the purpose of

vilifying their use (Phillips and Strobl, esp. 29-33), the Code and editors who were either

homophobic or who feared reprisals from Christian conservatives like Anita Bryant and her Save

Our Children coalition continued to police queer visibility in mainstream comic books.[19] This,

even as lesbian and gay creators carved out their own "restricted field" (per Bourdieu 113) of

fanzines, independent presses, and distribution networks that comprised a vibrant subsection of

the underground comix scene by the early 1980s.[20] Above ground, however, the 1980 publication

of "A Very Personal Hell," written by Marvel's Editor in Chief Jim Shooter, sparked controversy

among readers and critics of mainstream comic books for its salacious presentation of violent homosexual rapists and their innocent, heterosexual victim, Bruce Banner (the Hulk).

Published shortly before the discovery of the epidemic that would come to be known as AIDS, "A Very Personal Hell" and the overwhelmingly negative public reactions to its narrative prefigure the urgency for positive representations of gay men that characterizes the politics of gay visibility in the historical moment of AIDS. The story begins like any other Hulk tale, with a homeless Bruce Banner—the human alter-ego of the gamma-ray-irradiated monstrosity, the Hulk—on the lam from the agents of the military industrial complex that created his viridian *doppelgänger*. When he decides to seek respite at a local Y.M.C.A. he is confronted by two muscled men, one a blonde man with an earring on his right ear and the other a black man sporting an unbuttoned pink tank top, who both beat and taunt Banner. "*Umm!* You're *soft!* And all pearly white -- and you've got the cutest little cheeks! Think he'll *whine*, Dewey?" the coiffed black man threatens (unusual punctuation and emphases in original). Dewey, the white man, remarks that "I *like* it when they whine!" and shoves Banner against the shower wall, imploring him to "Shush, sweetie! […] We just wanna play!" (unusual spelling in original). Just before Banner escapes by convincing the men that "I'm the guy who turns into the Hulk!" the blonde man is shown pulling up his shirt, preparing to unbutton his pants. In this image Banner's back is to the reader, his head placed at the center of the panel, positioned suggestively in front of his aggressor's groin. Banner escapes, but his fear and repressed rage swell up and he once again morphs into the rampaging Hulk, beginning a berserk romp through New York City that is foreshortened pages later by a comforting junkie on acid ("tabs").

"A Very Personal Hell" was published in magazine, rather than comic book, format—a sneaky method that Marvel pioneered and other companies followed suit in order to sell comics

that were not subject to the CCA. A comic book without the staid "Seal of Approval" was

suspect, but magazines filled with comics populated with recognizable comic book characters

somehow drew no such suspicions. Until *Hulk* #23 and its notorious gay-rape story. As gay

comic-book critic and writer Andy Mangels recounts,

> Many news magazines picked up on the controversial story (including *The Comics*
>
> *Journal*), and many gay magazines carried features on the story as well. The directors
>
> of the National Gay Task Force launched complaints with the Comics Code, to no
>
> avail as [*Hulk!*] was not a Coded book. ("Out of the Closet," part one, 40)

In response to letters sent by readers, published two issues later in *Hulk!* #25, scribe of "A Very

Personal Hell," Jim Shooter, denied any homophobic intent to the story and instead offered that

the attempted rape was based on Shooter's own experience. Whatever Shooter's intentions, these

two men are overburdened with gay signifiers: they lisp their sibilants ("Oh, pith!" instead of

"Oh, piss!"), wear tight, revealing clothing and right-ear earrings, and they hang out in the

Y.M.C.A., a locale immortalized in urban gay culture by the Village People's 1978 hit single of

the same name. Under Shooter's pen these walking stereotypes invoke a "queer anxiety,"

manifesting their gayness not only through visual and linguistic markers but through violent,

hypersexualized deviancy. Shooter's Hulk story joins a long history of like-minded Cold War

cultural productions ranging from social guidance shorts (Sid Davis's 1961 *Boys Beware*) to

motion picture features (William Friedkin's 1980 *Cruising*) that cast gay men as (sexual/ized)

criminals. With "A Very Personal Hell" and even more so with his invocation of narrative

realism based on lived experience, Shooter symbolically gestures that no man is safe from the

gay man. Shooter's unsurprising notoriety in gay circles is compounded by the rumors—often

repeated by fans, critics, scholars, and creators alike—that Shooter established a "No Gays in the Marvel Universe" policy while Editor in Chief from 1978 to 1987.[21]

Despite the "abortive beginning" of gay representation in 1980s comics, the remainder of the decade rejoiced in a sustained eruption of queer visibility that challenged the CCA's anti-homosexual strictures, resulting in a revision to the Code in 1989 that called for positive representations of homosexuals (Mangels, "Out of the Closet," part one, 40). Highlights of the decade include the sensitive portrayal of an older gay couple in "Someone Who Cares," in which Arnie Roth, boyhood pal and current neighbor of Steve Rogers (Captain America), discloses his long-term relationship with a man named Michael vis-à-vis subtle textual and verbal cues in a monologue that deftly illustrates the performative methods by which gay men of the pre-Stonewall generation navigated the closet.[22] Another, often overlooked, example is the fleeting use of "gay" in "Into the Negative Zone!," arguably the first use of the word in a mainstream comic book as an indicator of a character's (albeit mistaken) sexual orientation. Elsewhere, the relatively unpopular Marvel series *The Defenders* lost Code approval on several issues as a result of a developing bisexual relationship between the superheroines Moondragon and Cloud, the latter of whom offers to turn herself into a man if that would please Moondragon better ("Manslaughter" and "Bodies and Souls!").[23] Meanwhile Marv Wolfman introduced two partnered gay assassins in "Witnesses," the fifth installment in his new series at DC, *Vigilante*, which ran 50 issues and never once received CCA approval. Perhaps most remarkable is the complex narrative of transgender lesbian identity interwoven into the main plot of Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland's campy, space-operatic reimagining of Arthurian legend, *Camelot 3000* (1982-1985), in which Sir Tristan is reborn in the body of a woman and must contend with the social, political, and personal implications of her identity. Gay characters make subtle and not-

so-subtle appearances in the pages of dozens of comic books throughout the 1980s, though the vast majority of these appearances and also the more sustained and less stereotype-heavy narratives are found in comics published by alternative and independent presses, or in Marvel and DC comics that do not carry the CCA's seal of approval.[24]

By the end of the 1980s readers of mainstream comic books had grown used to queer characters in their comics. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities were at least covertly legible in comic book reading communities, even though they could not be "outed" under the unchanging Code. The emergent visibility of queer and especially of gay identity in comics of the 1980s is of course not surprising, since the discovery of AIDS in 1981 and the growing panic about its alleged epidemiological links to homosexual sex intensified throughout the decade, making the newly formed body politic of the "gay man" and his detractors the subject of daily headlines. The *fin de décennie* marks an important shift in the history of censorship of homosexuality in comics and of the larger cultural history of queer visibility. The number of comics with queer characters and themes reach a peak in 1988, a year one clever critic has dubbed "the gayest year in comic book history" (Queer Comics Historian). Nearly two dozen comics with queer characters and themes were published in 1988, the majority of them about gay men and published by mainstream companies. More importantly, aside from a two-issue storyline in *Jon Sable, Freelance* published in early 1987, many of the "gay" comics published in 1988 concern HIV/AIDS in some narrative capacity. 1988 also saw the incorporation of dramatic "coming out" stories into several comics—exemplified by Metropolis police captain Maggie Sawyer's personal and public revelation of her lesbian identity in "Wings," though "lesbian" is never used and the comic received CCA approval. By 1988 AIDS activism was a cultural force to be reckoned with, as characterized by the rising prominence of outspoken

activist groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, and less radical groups such as the New York

Gay Men's Health Crisis. At the same time, anti-gay violence was on the rise, born aloft by

homophobic fears of gay men and "their disease."[25] No doubt in response to the internal pressure

from creators who wanted to write more, interesting, and relevant gay characters, and motivated

by the dinning public outcry on behalf of gay men and HIV/AIDS affected/infected, the CMAA

substantially revised the Code in 1989 to allow for "references to…sexual preferences" so long

as they were "carefully crafted and show[ed] sensitivity" to the individuals' "orientations" (qtd.

in Gabilliet 321). Equally important, the new CCA required that any derogatory language used

"for dramatic purposes, will be shown to be unacceptable" and creators were warned not to

"assign ultimate responsibility for [disadvantages resulting from one's orientation] to the

character themselves" (qtd. in Gabilliet 321).

The swelling number of covert comic-book queers throughout the 1980s was, at least

metaphorically, an industry-wide response to Shooter's "A Very Personal Hell." Creators strived

to present positive if not still stereotyped gay, lesbian, and occasionally transgender alternatives

to Shooter's gay rapists. The result was the emergence of a visible, legible gay subject in

mainstream comic books, a figure whose salience and tenable acceptance was recognized by the

CCA's 1989 revisions. Even as creators, such as Doug Moench, claimed "verisimilitude of life

and reality" as their prime motivation for writing/drawing queer characters, the social and

political circumstances made gay men central to the project of representing non-heteronormative

sexual identities in mainstream comics (qtd. in Mangels, "Out of the Closet," part one, 40). The

gay comic-book character was unavoidably invested with political capital as the gay male body,

no longer private, became symbolic host to the social, cultural, and political discourses of the

AIDS crisis in the United States. Owing to industry-internal changes and the external cultural

pressures of the public health crisis and the resultant social activism that helped affect those changes, the late 1980s and early 1990s constitute a new, distinct period in the history of queer visibility in mainstream comics. Now that the four-color gay man was legible, he was able to be read as something more than the shadowy, subtextual figure of previous decades, whose covert identification with gayness—always deniable by the creators and editors, watched over carefully by the Code—required the audience's savvy recognition of harmful stereotypes. Building on the insights gained from a sketch of queer visibility's history in mainstream comics, the next section charts the gay comic-book character's legibility in this new era of visibility, showing that although creators rarely infected gay characters with HIV/AIDS, their fates—violent, morbid, tragic—were nonetheless intimately tied to the cultural perception of AIDS as a "gay disease." Like the real world men and women whom they were purported to represent, few gay characters survived the 1990s untouched by the symptoms of AIDS.

Notes

1. For a detailed examination of youth-related moral panics see Springhall's *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*.

2. The literature on the various anti-comics crusades is extensive. See Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*; Lent, *Pulp Demons*; Barker, *A Haunt of Fears*; Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*; Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, especially 86-108; Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, especially 15-21.

3. On Thrasher's reproach of Wertham see Strub 17-18.

4. There are numerous online discussions and blog posts about Madam Fatal, though no peer-reviewed scholarly work yet exists. See for example Hrag Vartanian's essay, which reunites

Madam Fatal's Armenian-American creator Art (Arthur Ashod) Pinajian with his recently "rediscovered" modernist painting legacy.

5. The orphan Dick Grayson, alter ego Robin, was introduced as the ward of Bruce Wayne (billionaire playboy and Batman's civilian identity) in "Robin the Boy Wonder" (Detective Comics, vol. 1, #38, Apr. 1940, Finger/Kane). Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen was the title of a long-running comic book series featuring the titular character, a naïve reporter for the Daily Planet, friend of Clark Kent (Superman's civilian identity, the Daily Planet's star reporter), and sometime sidekick of Superman (Clark Kent's superheroic alter ego, alien from Krypton). Jimmy Olsen ran for 163 issues, published between Sep.-Oct. 1954 and Mar. 1974.

6. Andy Medhurst has noted, for example, that "if one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin" (159).

7. Shyminsky also marshals Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of the "queer child" to establish that, much like the depiction of children in literature and film, the adolescent sidekick is understood as "queer" in both of its popular meanings—that is, strange and homosexual, or "at least 'not-yet-straight.'" (qtd. in Shyminsky 291).

8. Bukatman, in addition to Shyminsky and others cited in this paper, offers methods of "queering" comic books—that is, of reading the construction of gender and sexuality in comic books in such a way as to denaturalize normative assumptions about identity, desire, and relationality that are encoded in the process of a text's production. In the context of comics studies queer readings emphasize the gender and sexual identity performance of the hyper-masculinized male superhero or the hyper-sexualized female superhero, and alter the way superheroes are understood in the discursive worlds of American gender and sexual politics. While queer readings demonstrate the efficacy of and need for such a methodology

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in the study of comics, for the most part scholars such as Bukatman and Shyminsky ignore the hidden histories of comic book creators' attempt to encode queer identities into comics.

9. Note Alaniz's pun on the title of Wolfman and Pérez's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which, as I argue in chapter two, signaled a close of the Silver Age and the dawning of another, hotly contested, "dark" age of comics—hence the need for a more theoretically rigorous periodization of comics history suggested by Benjamin Woo.

10. Alaniz borrows the concept of "dominant fiction" from Kaja Silverman, who uses it to describe the social representations of subjectivity, the "fictions" that interpellate identity into dominant ideologies (15-52). Drawing on Lacan—or, rather, Rancière's reading thereof— Silverman writes: "Not only does a loss of belief in the dominant fiction generally lead to loss of belief in male adequacy, but the spectacle of male castration may very well result in a destructive questioning of the dominant fiction. Male subjectivity is a kind of stress point, the juncture at which social crisis and turmoil frequently find most dramatic expression" (114).

11. York rallies several examples to his aid, including the introduction of numerous "love interests," female superhero friends (Batwoman and Batgirl), and even Bat-Hound, the ambiguous duo's beloved pet. Medhurst argues that the fan-made decision (via a telephone poll) to kill Robin in "A Death in the Family" (Batman, vol. 1, #426-429, Dec. 1988-Jan. 1989) expressed fans' deep-seated anxiety about the Batman/Robin relationship. Shyminsky adds that DC creators sent Robin off to college in 1969, leaving Batman alone to fight crime until a new Robin is found in 1983, in order to distance Batman from the "queer anxiety" that surfaced again in the wake of the campy 1960s Batman television show and film.

12. After all, DC Comics virtually founded the superhero genre, and they maintained both Superman and Batman, while Archie Comics has capitalized on Riverdale's finest for more

than sixty years. The heavy emphasis on Marvel in comics studies is no doubt because the vast majority of comics scholars came of age reading Marvel's comic books. The tension between Marvel and DC in the corporate sphere thus extends—in a rather unfortunate way—into academia, where the comics being discussed are often chosen as a result of fan appreciation, because of the scholar's greater familiarity with Marvel, or because of the long-held fan assertion that Marvel's comics are about the "real" world and DC's about "imagined" worlds.

13. By fantasy I mean the literary mode that privileges enchantment as a means to an end, often in the form of imagining a solution (e.g. universal human rights) to a seemingly impossible real-world problem (e.g. the conflict between billions of humans for equitable freedom of will and agency). See Fawaz for an excellent critique of fantasy as a strategy for literary/artistic and political world-making.

14. The conflation between fashion and homosexuality was used to particular effect in Hollywood films during the era of the Hays Code, which, much like the Comics Code Authority, banned the representation of homosexuality without saying as much. A memorable example of Hays Code-era fashion-designer-as-homosexual can be seen in *The Public Enemy* (1931), in which the tailor is tickled by Tom Powers' (James Cagney) assertion that he'll need extra room to fit his "guns" in his new pair of slacks. The cultural relationship between high fashion and homosexuality extends to the 19th century, to the figure of the dandy, who in his foppish excess was indistinguishable from the Bowery's fairies. See Chauncey's *Gay New York*.

15. Other examples of Olsen's cross-dressing include "Jimmy Olsen's Female Fan!"; "Leslie Lowe, Girl Reporter!"; "Miss Jimmy Olsen"; and "The Day They Unmasked Mr. Action."

Olsen's cross-dressing was so famous that it became the subject of comic book parodies, e.g. "Superman's Favorite Transvestite" and "Stupergal's Slave," and was renewed as a storyline in Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *All-Star Superman*. See Shyminsky (299-302) for a discussion of Jimmy Olsen as the "queer" sidekick.

16. Compare Butler's discussion of "the homophobic charge that queens and butches and femmes are imitations of the heterosexual real"—where "imitation" is synonymous with "derivative," "secondary," and "copy"—in light of the complex and varied fantastical performativities on display in Binder's and Dorfman's gender-swap/female impersonation comics stories (313).

17. A unique counter example is a brief story by Sam Glanzman inserted in the war comic *Our Fighting Forces* in which a very effeminate, blonde-haired, blue-eyed WWII navy man serving on the USS *Stevens*, who receives dirty looks and rough treatment from some of his fellow servicemen, is being sent "stateside for further treatment and perhaps a medical discharge." The comic is unambiguously about a homosexual man, though the message is clear that writer/artist Sam Glanzman, who himself served on the USS *Stevens* during WWII, salutes all men and women who fought during the war regardless of their sexual orientation.

18. Fawaz reads Marvel's 1970s *X-Men* comics as enacting the possibilities of feminist and gay liberationist world-making. Nama reads the origins of the first African American superhero, Power Man, as a "radical signifier" of the black prison reform movement and its intersections with "broader themes associated with black political disenfranchisement" (56). Sheyahshe notes that the 1970s publication of Marvel's *Red Wolf* was "one of the comic book industry's milestones for Native American representation" (30). The DC character Swamp Thing was popularized by Len Wein and Alan Moore during the 1970s as a harbinger of ecological

justice. And Alaniz offers a meditation on the representational politics of disability in superhero comics.

19. Anita Bryant, of course, was not above satirical reproach, even in comic books. *Howard the Duck*, a comic famous for its dark, satirical take on American cultural life, allegorized Save Our Children as the evil censorship organization, Save Our Offspring from Indecency, or SOOFI, in "If You Knew SOOFI…." All SOOFI members had generic yellow smiley faces for heads, signaling that cultural blandness and lack of creativity are products of any attempt to censor art.

20. The underground comix scene was a cultural and economic field of restricted production in which comix were created primarily for other comix creators. Lesbian and gay comix creators thus constituted a restricted field embedded within the larger restricted field of underground comix. By the early 1980s lesbian and gay comics anthologies appear with relative frequency, including *Gay Comix*, *Bizarre Sex*, *Dyke Shorts*, *Gay Heart Throbs*, *Dynamite Damsels*, and *Le Gay Ghetto*.

21. In his 1988 articles Mangels beats around the bush, suggesting the policy but never claiming its existence outright; nearly two decades later, however, he declares it as a known fact when outlining Editor in Chief Joe Quesada's position on gay characters in comics (Mangels "In and Out"). Numerous creators who had major public disagreements with Shooter, especially John Byrne, have confirmed Shooter's policy on their personal websites. Whether or not Shooter had such a policy, official or otherwise, it is well known that Shooter maintained strict control over Marvel artists and their stories, ensuring that nothing he didn't agree with made it to print. The 1980s thus saw an exodus of Marvel talent to other companies,

especially DC. As Marvel's official historian Sean Howe writes, during Jim Shooter's reign "[n]o one would mistake Marvel for one big happy family" (218).

22. "I never got married," Arnie tells Steve. "It just never seemed like…the *right thing* for me. But, for the past ten years, I've been…*rooming* with a guy, my--my best friend. With him along for the ride, I've been able to handle hard times without going nuts" (unusual punctuation and emphases in original, 8). Arnie and Michael reprise their roles several more times throughout the early 1980s.

23. Both issues also features excessive emotional and physical violence, and events in "Manslaughter" suggest a theme common to comics in which a supervillain has psychic powers: "mind rape." It is therefore unclear whether the homosexual and gender-bending content of these issues resulted in their failure to receive the CCA's seal of approval.

24. See the next chapter in this dissertation, which focuses exclusively on the complex representation of trans identity in *Camelot 3000*. None of *Camelot 3000*'s 12 issues received the CCA seal of approval. Thus a trend is noticeable throughout the 1980s: mainstream publishers are willing to entertain the introduction of queer characters in series that either have a history of not receiving Code approval, are unpopular, or are written/drawn by creators whose value to a company is worth the trouble. Moreover, as noted elsewhere, the emergence of the direct market and the ability for publishers to sell to comic book specialty stores—rather than newspaper stands—signaled a change in audience, particular in the age of the consumers, who, now much older than they were in the 1960s and 1970s, cared little for seals of approval.

25. For discussion of the rising case and death statistics, see Berrill, esp. 36-39.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ONCE AND FUTURE QUEER: TRANS NARRATIVES AND DC COMICS'S
CAMELOT 3000 (1982-1985)

If the status of scholarship on queerness in comics is such that the above chapter still remains

somewhat groundbreaking, if even in a fundamental, basic way, this is to say nothing of

transgender scholarship's interaction with comics studies. In fact, transgender studies as an

offshoot of queer theory was really only beginning as I started graduate school. The emergence

of trans theory was made possibility by several key texts in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the

field has practically exploded in the last five years to become one of the most intellectually

exciting and rapidly changing areas in the humanities. But that fervor and excitement hasn't

really come to comics studies. In fact, the fast changing pace of transgender studies and trans

theory is reflected in how this chapter, written in 2015 as a conference paper (one of those ones

that emerges from an itching need to pursue something in a text that just seemed…odd), might

already read as out of touch with the cutting edge of trans theory. This chapter was hyper-

contemporary with ongoing debates about what trans is and could be, both as biological and

social identity, but also as an agent/subject of theory within the space of queer and feminist

theory. As such, this chapter largely responds to the question of transgender being and

transsexuality by asking a basic question asked of any text about an undertheorized subjectivity:

what is a trans narrative and what is it not?

My asking that question was provoked largely by a desire to situate the gaudy 1980s

comic *Camelot 3000*'s presentation of a gender identity "crisis" when a macho-male character is

reborn, thousands of years later, in the body of a woman. To say that character is trans seems

disingenuous to trans peoples' lived experienced, even if on the surface this narrative by a

heterosexual dude in his 30s seems very much to be about that. So this chapter is an attempt to grapple, through some aspects of then-current trans theory, with what the hell is happening in *Camelot 3000*. I'm still not entirely comfortable with this chapter, because I'm not fully comfortable with how exactly to reckon the complexities of a text like this with the theories that have emerged since to deal with this very sort of text. But what I do know is that so few attempts to do the work of reading trans theory in and through comics exist—that doesn't make this chapter groundbreaking, per se, but rather underlines that need for comics studies to engage more wholly with the political discourses calling out to it. This is certainly an original chapter doing work that still, really, is rare in comics studies, but I hope in this particular case to see more nuanced readings of trans theory and comics overtake the work I accomplished here.

What is a "trans narrative"? What does it mean for a narrative to be "trans" at a time when news media and the public are ever more interested in the lives of transgender and transsexual individuals? Because public awareness of transgenderism and transsexuality is integral to the trans struggle for greater rights and equality of economic, political, and social conditions, a hermeneutics of trans narratives is desperately needed to capture, in the words of Alexander Eastwood, "the lived temporality of transsexuality, its literary representations and theoretical implications." Such a recovery goes beyond redressing the historical exclusion of trans people from literary, cultural, and media history and questions the fetishization of trans people's mobility and figural deployment in queer theory. In seeking what a "trans narrative" might look like, this paper reads Mike Barr and Brian Bolland's obscure comic-book series *Camelot 3000* (DC, 1982-1985), focusing on the figure of Sir Tristan, a formerly heterosexual male/socially man character reborn in a female/socially woman's body in the 31st century.

Tristan's personal journey and interactions with other characters decenter the heteronormative narrative that denies the existence of trans people and that insists on the uniformity of sex/gender identities and experiences. Though narratively convoluted and at times problematic, Barr problematizes the social and institutional barriers that confront trans people by focusing Tristan's narrative on questions of marriage, romance, transphobia, homophobia, gender and sexual identity (their intersections and departures), and the possibility of physically transitioning from one sex-gender to another. Critically, Tristan's story appears during what transgender historian Susan Stryker describes as one of the most dismal decades in the history of the trans social justice movement, the 1980s. Far from simply introducing one of the first queer stories in mainstream comics, *Camelot 3000* utilizes the generic versatility of SF to create a complex character psychology that challenges concepts of sex, gender, sexuality, romance, marriage, and access to healthcare. Tristan is more than an object of transgression, but a subject of historical and medium-specific circumstances who offers insight into the interstitial problematics of trans portrayal, fetishization, and narrativizing.

In his groundbreaking article "Notes toward a Trans Literary History," Alexander Eastwood complicates the recent challenges to the reign of historicism since Jameson's edict to "always historicize," and suggests that history and temporality (i.e. the experience of time) are equally important to queer individuals and to queer theory. Responding to Baudrillard's cooptation of trans subjectivity when he suggests that "we are all transsexuals *symbolically*" (23, emphasis in original), and thus that transsexuality is merely an ahistorical embodiment of postmodernism, Eastwood argues that "the dismissal of history is a privilege held by those who are able to locate themselves within it" (590). Indeed, few subject positions have been as marginalized from either the historical record or from conceptions of normality that the

transgender individual, a figure pathologized by Western social, medical, and political discourses alike, and that has more often than not remained at the outskirts of feminist and queer liberationist movements. The field of transgender studies, then, is very much directed at projects that recover trans presences in history, and that at the same time go beyond recovery to develop deeper knowledges of trans identity, subjectivity, historicity, temporality, and personhood. Building on Eastman, I argue that understanding what is, and what might be, a trans narrative is key the "emotional, political, pedagogical, and scholarly reasons for pursuing a trans literary history" (592).

To begin theorizing what a trans narrative is, or could be, we might consider recent discussions about terms for addressing the category that denotes trans individuals. Terms like trans- and trans*, back-formations of the currently most widely accepted word associated with trans social activism—that is, "transgender"—and the earlier term, "transsexual" (itself a replacement of, or alternative to, "transvestite"), utilize hyphens and asterisks to punctuate the relationship between the various "categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts, around and through" the subject position of "trans" to which they are appended (Stryker et al. 11). Hyphens and asterisks bring into sharp relief the relationships among trans individuals' transgressions against social, political, biological, economic, and other kinds of ordering to which the human might be subject. Moreover, standing alone and separated from any anchor to a single category of transgression, trans- and trans* resist ontological fixity. Trans- and trans* are decidedly not transgressors of -gender over -sex(uality), or vice versa, for example. (Or for that matter, over subjectivities bestowed via one's vestments, as a word like "transvestite" denotes) As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore assert in their introduction to the 2008 "Trans-" special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, trans- resists the specific application of

"trans" as "a gender category that is necessarily distinct from more established categories such as 'woman' or 'man'" (i.e., as a "third" gender) but that is also not necessarily constitutive of a category founded solely in the distinction between men and women, the bepenised and the bevaginaed (12). Trans*, too, introduced by Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein—and which builds on Hayward's earlier metaphorical reading of the transsexual as a starfish, a being that reconstitutes itself through a painful process of regeneration ("Lessons from a Starfish," "More Lessons")—builds on the hyphenated power of trans- to resist easy classification, and through the asterisk's "sticky tentacularity" (196) trans* understands that which is "trans" as ontological, or in the words of Hayward and Weinstein, as "the movement that produces beingness...trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted" (196).

All of this is to say that the search for a theoretically versatile means by which to denote the trans subject position, and of bringing it into explicit relation with those modes of being (race, class, gender, sex, etc.) that are interstitial to trans lives, has been profoundly motivated by an interest in how trans individuals narrate their being and/or becoming. The latter, becoming, has not surprisingly been central to the concerns of trans narrative from a non-trans individual's viewpoint, since in a transphobic society the trans individual is marked as such only by virtue of having either had a sex change or by regularly presenting as of the opposite gender than the one assigned at birth. For those who gaze at the trans experience from without, the sex-change marks the ontological barrier between someone previously non-transgender (and therefore, of *a* gender), say, a "confused" lesbian or gay man, and some*thing* fully transgender (i.e. not of a gender). But as Jay Prosser argues in his influential 1998 study, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, "It is the life-plot rather than actual somatic sex change that

symptomizes the transsexual" (158). The life-plot, or the course of an individual's life which can

be narrated and through that process shared with others to encourage solidarity among trans folks

or greater knowledge of a trans experience among allies, becomes a critical way to rethink the

ways in which history, temporality, and trans lives intersect. Prosser's life-plot resists

classification, since all individuals might be said to have a life-plot, and since the life-plot

refuses to yield to the rhetoric of cataclysmic breaks between transitional periods. Much as

Jameson reconsidered the separation between modernism and postmodernism not as a shocking

break from one to the other, but as an historicize-able, continuous transformation of the older

into the newer, so too does the life-plot reformulate our understanding of trans lived experiences

to resist the emphasis on the very things that would seem, to outsiders, to define what it means to

be trans.

I think we can begin to understand trans narratives, then, as being individually driven, as

resisting the transition or the sex-change as a point of climactic action—indeed, as the focal point

of any given story. Trans narratives instead shift focus to the interstitial meaning of trans, to all

the things that "stick" to the asterisk's tentacles or append to the hyphen. A trans narrative takes

as its object the "capillary space" (Stryker et al. 14) that connects trans individuals to the various

structures of their biopolitical hierarchization: to race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, religion,

ability, species, and so on. And as *Camelot 3000* demonstrates, the limits of a trans narrative are

essentially boundless, able to interrogate the interrelations among power structures, and their

imbrication in trans lives, through a variety of narrative and formal means.

On, then, to *Camelot 3000*. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the mainstream comics

industry underwent a series of changes that restructured the distribution of comic books through

a newly formulate "direct market," allowed the emergence of specialty comic-book shops, and

offered comic-book companies greater economic security by placing the burden of sales on the shop and eliminating the returns system that had dominated comics' short shelf-life on the newspaper stands where they had been sold for most of the 20th century. As companies like DC Comics bounced back from the devastating implosion of the mid-to-late 1970s, which saw the cancellation of all but six titles by 1978 (Black), and as mainstream comics audiences were recognizably more adult that before, companies embraced the *auteur* spirit of new creators and gave greater creative freedom to their projects. Mike Barr and Brian Bolland's *Camelot 3000* was a product of this new comic-book *auteurism*, a 12-issue maxi-series published intermittently between December 1982 and April 1985 (cover dates). The series represents several firsts in DC's history: one their first titles to be sold exclusively through the direct market, the first maxi-series they published, the first comic book published on high-quality Baxter paper, and the first issue-length (let alone, series-length) work by British artist Brian Bolland, whose work with *Camelot 3000* spearheaded the "British Invasion" of American comics by a number of illustrators working in the British independent comics scene, prominent among them Alan Moore and Grant Morrison. It is also the first comic explicitly about a queer character of any sort, though it emerges (out of the closet, so to speak) from a long history of queer characters cloaked in subtextual metaphor, hiding just below the narrative surface that was subject from 1954 until the late-1980s (when companies began to care very little for it) to the Comics Code Authority's homophobic regulations regulations.

The series itself is a deployment of the Arthurian formula wholly suited to the postmodern sense of crisis—a fantasy-meets-science-fiction saga gleefully at home in the global drama of the early 1980s, suited equally to politically frustrated and liberal-leaning audiences both in Reagan's America (Barr) and Thatcher's England (Bolland). Whereas earlier 20th-

century adaptations of the Matter of Britain looked back on King Arthur, his adventures, the camaraderie of the Round Table, and the peacefulness of Camelot with almost utopian desire in an effort to displace the worries of (post)modernity, *Camelot 3000* catapults Arthur into a hotly contested far-future Cold War, where the earth, already in dire political straits on account of overpopulation and insoluble discord between the world's 912 nations, is besieged by a reptilian alien species. It is into this world, in the year 3000, that King Arthur's knights, who have lain dormant across the ages as they were passed in subconsciousness from generation to generation, are reawakened and reunited.

In *Camelot 3000* the world's leaders and citizens rally around Arthur, his reformed Round Table, and the reestablished Camelot, and turn to them for salvation from the aliens, who are led in their crusade against earth by Arthur's ancient enemy, Morgan LeFay. In his adaptation of the Arthurian romance, American comics writer Mike Barr relies heavily on an otherwise minor character, Sir Tristan, to drive forward the plot through the character's personal, social, moral, and romantic dilemmas, all of which revolve around the rejection of the female body into which he was reborn. *Camelot 3000* is therefore not just concerned with contemporaneous socio- and even geopolitical issues, but is for whatever reason, and it's not exactly clear from the secondary evidence why, also a narrative of transgender becoming, of personal and social acceptance of trans beingness, and a shockingly detailed window into the many challenges to transgender individuals trying to survive a transphobic heteropatriarchy (what we might call a cisheteropatriarchy).

For the purpose of this paper I'm going to put much of *Camelot 3000* collective 320 pages to the side and focus on Tristan's narrative. We are talking here about the Tristan of the medieval romance Tristan and Iseult, and more famously of Wagner's 1865 opera. Tristan makes

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his appearance in the third issue ("Knight Quest," Feb. 1983), when his soul is awakened in the body of a gorgeous woman named Amber March at the moment just before her marriage to a famous war hero, who symbolizes the militarized masculinity that female-bodied characters throughout the series rebel against, and that Tristan believes his own female body fails to represent. Waking to his new embodied being, Tristan calls off the wedding, dismisses his would-be husband, and shears his long hair. Then, in a roll-call sequence that introduces the reborn Knight of the Round Table, Tristan presents himself to King Arthur, dressed in a skin-tight jumpsuit, donning multiple weapons, and with hair butched, as "Sir Tristan." Arthur, however, calls him "Lady Tristan" in response, prompting an immediate reclamation of the masculine title by Tristan: "Sir Tristan, sire...if you please" ("Assault on New Camelot" 7). Tristan, however, faces challenges on account of the discord between his bodily appearance and his gender presentation. He is marginalized by his ancient compatriots, unlike the other knights he is warned to "be careful" in battle, and he is continually referred to as "Lady" or by his body's former name, Amber. He is voraciously pursued by Tom Prentice, Arthur's squire, who regularly tells Tristan to accept his womanhood. Sir Kay even goads Tristan to fisticuffs by suggesting mockingly before the whole cohort that Tristan drink feminine drinks and wear "something more *suitable* for one of your sex!" ("The Tale of Morgan LeFay" 3). All of this leads Tristan to Merlin's lair, where Tristan confronts the wizard to beg for a male body, and is denied.

After Tristan fails to convince Merlin to transform his into a "man's" body, Arthur sends Queen Guinevere to convince Tristan to act womanly. Furious, Tristan confronts Guinevere:

> Tristan: They sent you to talk to me, didn't they? "Tristan doesn't know her *place*, she isn't being a good girl!" / "She'll listen to *you*," they said, "you're both *women*!"

Guinevere:	Tristan, I--
Tristan:	When will you learn I'm not like *any* of you? Now please--*get out*!
Guinevere:	Very well, Tristan! *sigh*

This event culminates in Tristan's total marginalization from his community, and allows

Arthur's enemy Morgan LeFay the opportunity to offer Tristan better. Showing Tristan in a

mirror what a masculine body he might have, and giving him the chance to inhabit that body for

seconds, so as to tease the embodiment of his desired self, Morgan convinces Tristan to betray

Arthur and the knights. Tristan driven by the hope of returning to a male body, in part because he

views the masculine as physically and socially superior to the feminine, but also he believes it is

a great evil to consummate the love shared he and Isolde, who is also reborn in the 31st century.

Ultimately, however, Morgan's offer is a trick, and Tristan neither receives a new body nor is

found out; for Morgan, this tricking of Tristan, her playing with his desires for trans becoming, is

punishment for Tristan's actions in days of Arthur's original court. And it is revealed in

flashback that when Arthur tried to murder the baby Morgan to prevent his later destruction,

Tristan raped her mother, Queen Margawse.

Reminded of the gendered violence he once performed in the name of chivalry, and

knowing the shame of his betrayal of Arthur, Tristan not only resolves to defeat Morgan

alongside the other knights, but also begins to accepts his embodied being. All of this time I have

been suggesting that Tristan's is a trans narrative, concerned as it is with some fundamental

transgression of gender and sexual subjectivities, and literally fulfilling that cliche phrase used to

describe transmen: Tristan is a man trapped in a woman's body. His narrative pulls to it the many

discourses that revolve around trans*life in a society that actively resists such life; the narrative

goes beyond questions of social acceptance among former friends, whose relationship to Tristan

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is foregrounded by his newly embodied trans being, and the narrative progresses to questions

that bring into focus the personal struggles with questions of transition, the emotional burdens

shared by partners involved in such decisions, and the biological and medical discourses

surrounding actual physical sex-change (though here, I might add, they are rendered magical

discourses, and it is never discussed why the 31st century would have failed to improve on sex-

change procedures then over a thousand years old). It is this final point that truly distinguishes

Camelot 3000 in regards to something what might call a "trans narrative." Tristan's story, as

convoluted and occasionally problematic as it is, does indeed deal with the question of somatic

reassignment, of the cutting and folding of flesh to fulfill a desired gender-sex matching;

however, writer Mike Barr decentralizes the search for reassignment by focusing primarily on

the process of trans becoming, on the challenges Tristan faces in coming to terms with trans

being and embodiment, and on the triumph of social and more importantly *self* acceptance in

spite of Tristan's many encounters with transphobia, his own internalized misogyny and

homophobia, and his feelings of self-loss and gender inadequacy. What obtains, in the end, is a

decision not to transition, but to live life socially as a transmen, bodily as a woman, or what the

transgender community refers to as a non-op transman.

Trans is rightfully, in the words of Sara Ahmed, a "sticky" category; appealing to that

stickiness, trans narratives reveal the limits of power and the bounds of transgression by adhering

to them the socio-political challenges, triumphs, complications, and experiences of trans lives in

a transphobic times. Though a short paper hardly skims its surface, *Camelot 3000* deals with a

broad range of issues that arise for trans*lives as they are subject to the changing historical

valences of biopower. Tristan's story is surprisingly *aware* of the social, personal, and even

medical challenges to trans individuals, and though it instrumentalizes Tristan's trans identity in

part as pawn to the conflict between Arthur and Morgan, *Camelot 3000* is very much concerned with the stakes of Tristan's life plot. Barr and Bolland work through the series' twelve issues to bring Tristan to a point of some becoming, and ultimately to an acceptance that is beautifully rendered in an erotic embrace that emphasize the pleasure of the body. Rather than emphasize the biomedical discourse of transition as the ultimate climax of Tristan's narrative, Barr and Bolland reframe Tristan's story as Prosser's life-plot, and in doing so point to the vast signifying capabilities of that "capillary space" Tristan comes to know as trans*life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FATAL ATTRACTIONS: THE AIDS CRISIS AND AMERICAN SUPERHERO COMICS, 1988-1994

This chapter was my earliest academic publication, published in *International Journal of Comic Art*, the first journal of comics studies, and sought to replicate what is now a pretty standard model of American studies scholarship: situate a trend in a handful of texts within its historical contexts to tell us (1) what the texts say about the history and (2) what the history says about the texts. Classic American studies of the sort practiced for the past 30 years, a successful and, to me, compelling method of thinking history and text together—and yet a formula of scholarship that is not incredibly common, or at least not well done, in comics scholarship. As I noted in the introduction, comics studies is still figuring itself out, and is split today between folks theorizing what comics are and folks providing the archive background of what comics were. Rarely do the latter engage historical context in interesting ways and rarely too do the folks doing comics theory think about historical context. It's a classic conundrum familiar to anyone in genre studies, too. A few truly pathbreaking studies have emerged recently to do, essentially, cultural studies for comics, including Kruse's cultural history of artist Steve Ditko (no one has yet written a history of an artist quite like Kruse's) and Austin and Hamilton's cultural history of race in superhero comics, which goes beyond a list of representations to think about the ways in which racial history in the U.S. has contoured comics history.

The present chapter was an attempt to do the sort of cultural studies I find compelling, and which offers a simultaneous historical and critical intervention that goes beyond just comics studies. I focused on the AIDS crisis because in my collecting comics from the late-1980s I had noticed significant and repeated references to AIDS at the exact same time I was reading

Deborah Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, which historicized emotion as a political strategy for liberation. Digging deeper, I found dozens of comics in just a small period that mentioned AIDS—and usually in more than passing ways, e.g. incorporating into a storyline across several comics. AIDS wasn't a "gay disease" in superhero comics, I found, nor was it ever a joke. It was serious—comics creators and their superheroes treated it with the same intensity they treated supervillain plots to destroy Gotham City. Moreover, this was happening at a period—between 1988 and 1994—when AIDS was *becoming* mainstream conversation as more and more non-gay folks got AIDS (a classic case of empathy beginning when the problem started to effect "average" Americans). What's more, comics creators didn't just want to write about AIDS because it was part of "real life," they did so because it affected friends and family and because, to many living in New York City (as most comics creators then did), the crisis seemed apocalyptic.

The AIDS crisis also corresponded in both American media history and comics history, as I argue, with the growing visibility of "gay" as an accepted (or at least tolerated) social identity. For better and worse, gay and AIDS went hand in hand, and this chapter grapples with what that meant for comics. In doing so, it set a bar within comics studies for how good, historically contextual research that went beyond comics (since this scholarship has implications beyond comics themselves) could be written. And in some sense, the lessons I learned from writing this chapter, about how comics could be rallied by creators to *do* politics, influenced all of my writing that followed—that is, this dissertation. Though much of the queerness is latent in the texts I write about here, since most of the characters who "got" AIDS were heterosexual, this chapter also demonstrates the ways in which queerness is entangled with the stories people tell about queerness, even to the detriment of queer belonging and liberation. It is through stories like

those explored in this chapter, and through the entanglement of emotion and narrative and action harnessed by groups like ACT UP, that queer liberation began to take center stage in American culture in the 1990s.

Introduction: Comics in Epidemic Time

In January 1992, a respected Canadian army veteran broke into the intensive care ward of Toronto General Hospital. The veteran, Major Louis Saddler, attempted the murder of Joanne Beaubier, an infant whose recent AIDS diagnosis had become the subject of national headlines, the impetus of a groundswell campaign to increase AIDS awareness and prevention in the Canadian public school system. Joanne's murder was forestalled when her adoptive father, prominent public figure Jean-Paul Beaubier, discovered Saddler. In the course of the ensuing fistfight Saddler's motives were made clear: his own son had recently died from AIDS-related complications and, unlike Beaubier's adopted daughter, Saddler's son Michael "was *gay*--so people didn't afford him the *luxury* of being 'innocent.'" Motivated by Saddler's grief, and ashamed of the lack of public empathy for gay men's experience of the AIDS crisis, Beaubier declined to press charges. Joanne died shortly after the incident, from AIDS-related complications, leading a despondent Beaubier to hold a press conference in which he "outed" himself as gay and publicly affirmed, in the voice of ACT UP, his devotion to fight the silence that equaled death. The superheroic feats, *noms de guerre*, and colorful spandex extracted, the story above abridges the plot of a comic book, *Alpha Flight* #106, published in early 1992 and feted by newspapers in the United States and Canada as a harbinger of progressive social change for gay men.

AF #106 is paradigmatic of the comic-book discourse on AIDS, and reflects the growing concern on the part of gay men and their allies about gay men's visibility in the cultural momenfof the AIDS crisis. During a moment of intense public interest in AIDS what otherwise might have been a forgettable comic, one of dozens published that month, became a media sensation, reviewed in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Seattle Times*, and Canada's *The Globe and Mail*, as well as the *Associated Press* and its subscribers—a newsprint chorus eagerly harmonizing the tune of gay acceptance.[1] The instantaneous and positive media response to Northstar's coming out was in part galvanized by concomitant media coverage of HIV/AIDS, gay community and AIDS activist efforts, and government responses (or lack thereof) to the epidemic in the late 1980s and the 1990s, as well as by the growing public awareness of the staggering toll AIDS had reaped within just a decade.[2] But the success of *AF* #106 also suggests a larger discoruse about the intertwined issues of AIDS and gay visibility, one already well underway in comic books and among the creators and consumer by 1992.[3]

In this chapter, I theorize the interconnections among the popular fantasies of superhero comic books, the social and political formations of the AIDS crisis, and representations of gay men and PWAs (people with AIDS). I trace the dominant trends comic-book creators used to address the AIDS crisis through their medium. Comic-book creators plotted-the virus and the HIV/AIDS affected into tales of fantastic possibility and melodramatic superheroism, wherein the conventions of comic-book fantasy allowed cures to be found, villains could render homophobia villainous, and superheroic dialogue could offer health education. I also suggest that the rise of gay visibility in American comic books was in part the result of creators' desire to

respond to the AIDS epidemic and its disproportionately negative—and, at the time, institutionally ignored—effects on gay men.

With the exception of a brief moment in the 1950s when comics came under fire for their purported "sex perversion" (qtd. in Gabilliet 316), comic books' lower standing in the postwar US cultural hierarchy and their increasingly specialized audience meant greater freedom from the moralizing scrutiny that befell televisual and filmic attempts to narrate the lives of gay men. In fact, the explosion onto the comics scene of gay male characters in the late 1980s made for very little controversy, so little that news media, fans, and scholars alike have given scant attention (excepting *AF #106*) to the comics about AIDS produced between 1988 and 1994—a period whose otherwise unremarkable brevity is conversely matched by its significance as a "substantive moment" in what sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters terms the "gaying of American culture" (26).

Though not every comic with a gay character dealt explicitly with the AIDS crisis, the association between gay men and AIDS was nonetheless a symbolically powerful one in American popular culture. As literary scholar James W. Jones observes, "it is impossible to read a piece of fiction about gay men in the present and not assume AIDS is going to make its presence felt one way or another" (229). The impossibility of decontextualizing AIDS from its gay referents in not just literature but also American popular culture meant that the presence of gay characters raised questions about the position of gay men, and therefore of AIDS, on and beyond comic books' pages.

Comic books were unique among the discursive practices of the AIDS epidemic; standalone issues such as *AF #106* were more than topical showpieces responding to current events. They were the culmination of a decades-long struggle by comics artists to incorporate

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gay characters into their narratives following the establishment of the industry-regulating Comics

Code Authority (CCA) in 1954, which among other things, stipulated that "sex perversion [i.e.

homosexuality] or any inference to same is strictly forbidden" (qtd. in Gabilliet, 316). The

CCA's anti-homosexual censorship took on symbolic necessity during the Cold War (see chapter

six above for a contextualized discussion) and straightened out representations of gay men,

lesbian women, and others—crossdressers, transsexuals, women sexually active outside of

marriage—whose deviances seemed to threaten the fragile balance of postwar gender roles.

But the Code's policing of heteronorrnativity was nearly immediately subverted, in part

due to the inborn queerness of the super-subject himself and of the superhero's (often teenage,

same-sex) sidekick, but also because of creators' efforts to play with normative social roles

through the fantastical comics genres. Creators like Steve Ditko could thus get away with a story

like "The Man Who Stepped Out From A Cloud" (Sept. 1957), about a dashing alien stranger

whisking a lonely boy off to a welcoming planet populated with happy, snappily dressed men.

Over the next three decades, creators grew bolder in their presentation of gay characters, who

became more prevalent and more realistic from the mid-1980s onward, ultimately allowing the

emergence of an AIDS discourse concurrent with major changes internal to the comic-book

industry that encouraged creators to take more risks, and produce more "mature" works of

comics art (see chapter two above for the context of "mature" comics within the mainstream

comics market).[4]

To frame the history of comic books' contribution to the broader public discourses of

AIDS and gay men's visibility in "epidemic time" (Gill-Peterson 279),[5] I build on Ramzi

Fawaz's description of the superhero genre as "the paradigmatic example of American popular

fantasy" (359). Popular fantasy describes "expressions of literary and cultural enchantment that

suture together current social and political realities and impossible happenings, producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist" (359). Popular fantasy offers a way to understand the superhero genre as always purposively political, and emphasizes comic books' ability to represent the sometimes conflicted, occasionally ambiguous, but nonetheless radical political yearnings of creators as they turned their craft to the AIDS crisis and its effects in gay men's lives. I focus my readings on comics as diversely positioned as DC's *The New Guardians* and Marvel's X-Men franchise, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Nomad*. Through progressive if sometimes flawed narratives, comic-book creators deployed popular fantasy as a means of representing the personal, social, moral, and ethical dilemmas that confronted heterosexuals and gay men alike as thousands of PWAs continued to die, as the government failed to respond to the epidemic, and as the unaffected turned a blind eye.

"Going through the Motions": AIDS and the Superhero

The popular fantasy of the superhero allowed creators to distill their political beliefs through the genre's eponymous figure, to point to the superhero's actions as a framework for a moral and just response to AIDS. Comic-book series such as DC's *The New Guardians* and Marvel's X-Men comics contextualized for readers the stakes of the AIDS epidemic, which by the tum of the 1980s was increasingly understood as a "crisis." From the late 1980s into the 1990s comic-book narratives and AIDS activism alike poured their energies into the late-postmodern rhetorics of apocalypse. While activist organizations such as ACT UP and outspoken intellectuals like Larry Kramer deployed apocalypticism as a "resistive discourse" in art, literature, protest,

performance, and journalism (Long 13; see also essays in Murphy and Poirier), at the same apocalyptic crisis also characterized the dominant impulses in US culture of the "long nineties."

As Marxist cultural critic Phillip Wegner has argued, culture workers in the period between 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and 2001 (the fall of the WTC towers) were fascinated with cataclysm, dystopia, and the apocalypse, in part because, for some, the end of the Cold War controversially signaled "the end of history" and the abeyance of alternatives to capitalism (Wegner; Fukuyama). Not surprisingly, from the mid-1980s publication of the aptly named *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series (see chapter two), which narrated the destruction of thousands of universes at the hands of the matter-devouring Anti-Monitor, and well into the 1990s, apocalyptic scenarios typified comic-book storylines, leading fans, critics, and creators to label the era the "Dark Age." Working through the crisis-prone superhero comics of the late 1980s— exemplified by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*—creators were free to turn their attention to controversial social issues, not the least of which was the AIDS epidemic.

At its height in the late 1980s and until it was understood as a global epidemic circa 1994, AIDS was met with an unprecedented interest on the part of comics creators, many of whom were young, socially conscious, politically engaged men (very rarely women in 1994) living and working in New York City, one of the social and cultural epicenters of the epidemic and comics industry alike. For those who wrote/drew gay characters, the decision was made out of a sense of urgency to represent gay men as part of comic-book universes, occasionally as superheroes but more often as "normal" people, people who lived in the world, with whom readers interacted on a daily basis, and whose lives were disproportionately negatively impacted by the virus. After decades existing in a subtextual closet of metaphors, tropes, and stereotypes, in 1988 openly gay

characters exploded into the pages of superhero comics, leading one clever critic to dub it "the gayest year in comic book history" (Queer Comics Historian). Nearly two dozen comics with explicitly LGBT characters were published that year; unsurprisingly, the majority featured gay men and addressed HIV/AIDS in some narrative capacity. Many were passing representations, as in DC's *The Spectre* #1 (Moench, February 1988), on a single page of which the superhero Dr. Fate saves gay rights protesters—toting signs with the slogan "Act now!"—from a falling building. Other comics, however, took more sustained liberties in their depiction of the politics of AIDS.

Perhaps the most significant comic book of the 1988 "gay" explosion was DC's "mature" (i.e. non-CCA approved) series *The New Guardians*, which promised heroes whose diversity would springboard its fictional world's—and, by extension, its readers' own—cultural, political, and biological evolution into the next millennium. *The New Guardians*'s origin lies in the late 1987 comic-book "event" *Millennium*, published in eight weekly installments that detailed the emergence of a billions-of-years-old cult that attempts to prevent the universe's immortal Old Guardians from bringing forth their replacements, the New Guardians. Caped in all the conventions of the superhero genre, *Millennium* introduces the unlikely cast of Guardians: Jet, a Jamaican woman and immigrant to Britain; Gloss, a communist Chinese woman; Ram, a former Japanese businessman; Floronic Man, an extradimensional plant-man and former supervillain; Betty Clawman, an Australian aboriginal woman; Harbinger, a white woman raised by the immortal Monitor; and Extraño, an openly gay man from Peru. Throughout its brief, 12-issue run *Guardians* bespoke a consistently political tone, addressing issues as varied and controversial as South African apartheid, US intervention in Latin America, late-Cold War US-Soviet relations, and, most significantly, the domestic and global contexts of the AIDS epidemic.

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Not only did *Guardians* include a flamboyant gay character, the Peruvian superhero-magician Extraño, whose sexuality was discussed often and with candor, and who elicited positive responses from readers in the comic's letter columns, but AIDS was a dominant plot p9int throughout the series. The decision to make AIDS a locus of narrative conflict for the New Guardians was a conscious effort by the series's initial writer, Steve Englehart, to bring awareness to the epidemic, but also to denote its overwhelming impact on gay men. In an interview with gay comics critic Andy Mangels, Englehart offered the opinion that to ignore AIDS would be irresponsible: "If I were writing a story about a homosexual in 1988 and didn't do a story on AIDS, [I'm] not really doing 1988" ("Out of the Closet," part two, 51). Englehart's insistence on showcasing the virus's damage in gay communities is significant because it countered the contemporary emphasis on heterosexuals' victimization by AIDS, ignoring and even demonizing the ''fringe" populations through which AIDS originally spread.[6] As early as 1987, communications scholar Simon Watney reasoned that "AIDS is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to 'justify' calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable" (3). In a now-classic essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Leo Bersani similarly claimed that AIDS was "treated like an unprecedented sexual threat" by mainstream media, political profiteers, and opportunistic evangelists (198). Moreover, this media discourse, both on account of its magnitude and tone, "made the oppression of gay men seem like a moral imperative" (204).

The *Guardians* AIDS storyline challenged the moral imperative Bersani identifies by familiarizing readers with a sympathetic gay character, and through that lens transformed the comic into a platform for HIV/AIDS education. The storyline began in *Guardians* #1 (Englehart, September 1988), when the Hemo-Goblin, a vampire genetically manufactured to infect its

victims with AIDS, is sent by the fictional South African apartheid dictator Janwillem Kroef to infect/murder the Guardians. In the battle with Hemo-Goblin, three characters are infected with HIV: Extraño, Jet, and Harbinger. Later, in *Guardians* #3 (Bates, November 1988), the three PWAs visit an HIV clinic, outside of which a homophobic protest is underway. There, they learn how HIV is contracted and how it progresses to AIDS. They also visit an HIV support group and listen to personal stories about living with the virus. One woman tells her story of contracting HIV through drug use. A gay man describes telling his family, to whom the diagnosis revealed his closeted identity, and another gay man recounts the love and support given him by his partner and friends in the gay community. Through these voices writer Cary Bates emphasizes that HIV is not a death sentence, but that people "live with AIDS"—a phrase popularized in the rhetoric of AIDS activism. One of the men even reminds readers that "life-styles don't cause diseases-- / -germs do" (Bates, November 1988, emphasis and unusual punctuation in original). In this issue, it is also revealed that Jet's condition has progressed from HIV to "full-blown" AIDS.

Jet becomes the central focus of the series's AIDS narrative. Her carefully positioned identity allows her to take on multiple signifiers of the AIDS crisis, markers of social positions that make her character all the more significant since it is Jet—and not the gay character, Extraño—whose diagnosis develops into AIDS and causes her death. Jet is both a woman and more specifically a black Caribbean expatriate. While her Jamaican origin is denoted in the second issue of Millennium (Englehart, January 1988), it is also connoted by Englehart's and Bates's attempts to write Jet's script in patois—"Sitting aroun' ain't my style-- / --bot I not in de mood ta socialize!"—which evokes a borderline racist stereotype, at the very least is a caricature (Englehart, September 1988).

Jet's identity points to US hysteria about the alleged Caribbean origins of AIDS and as a woman (of color) with AIDS, Jet's struggle prefigures wider public acknowledgment of women's varied experiences of the epidemic. Organized responses to women's erasure from the dominant AIDS narratives came to the fore of AIDS activism in 1988 following the publication of *Cosmopolitan*'s "Reassuring about AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be at Risk." The article, by psychiatrist Robert E. Gould, "assured'' readers that American women with healthy vaginas would not be infected with HIV so long as they practiced "ordinary sexual intercourse" and not the "brutal way" in which in which "many men in Africa take their women."[7] ACT UP responded immediately by protesting *Cosmopolitan*'s offices in January 1988, and through their campaign brought attention to the fact that women, especially women of color, were indeed at risk.[8]

By the sixth issue of the series (Bates, Holiday 1988), believing that a prolonged death from AIDS-related complications is forthcoming, Jet sacrifices herself in a last-ditch effort to save Earth from an alien invasion. At Jet's funeral, Extraño gives a compelling, symbol-laden eulogy for his friend:

> She was not the first gallant soul to give up her *life* in the war against these *alien invaders*… / …nor will she be the *last*. / Yet our courageous [Jet] was already in the throes of a life-and-death struggle on *another* battlefront. / A struggle her ravaged immune system would not permit her to win. / And yet, despite the agony she had to endure over the past few months… / throughout it all, her beautiful *spirit* remained indomitable (emphases and ellipses in original).

Jet's death came quite literally at the instigation of space invaders, which Extranño likens to the immunological ravages of HIV. As Susan Sontag has argued, "in the era of Star Wars and Space

Invaders, AIDS has proved an ideally comprehensible illness," one that is fashioned as a violent invader in "the language of political paranoia" (106). At a formal level, Jet's passing is, in the grand scheme of the superhero genre's flippant treatment of death, all the more meaningful because unlike the vast majority of superheroes, sidekicks, and villains who "die," Jet remains irrevocably dead.[9]

But Jet's death has even deeper resonances, simultaneously and problematically distancing gay men (here, Extraño) from a fatalistic AIDS discourse as it points to the heavy toll the virus was taking among women and people of color in the late 1980s.[10] In the democratizing hyperbole of superhero comics, Jet is a stand-in for all persons with AIDS—a purposefully broad, open-ended interpretation of who can and does become affected by HIV/AIDS. A chronotope presenting the scorched earth marred by Jet's fatal explosion, the image of what remains in the wake of her death inscribes the story of an individual and a social category into the fictional landscape of the comic. This physical marking of AIDS-related death is reminiscent of the contemporary black-and-white, photographs forming *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, taken in 1987 by David Wojnarowicz minutes after Peter Hujar's death from AIDS-related complications. The images convey Wojnarowicz's personal, emotional response to his partner's death, but at the same time index what art critic Jennifer Doyle reads as "rage at the indifference of the public to the suffering of a generation" of gay men (127). *Guardians* #6 is conspicuously absent an image of Jet's body, probably in an effort to avoid the suggestion—already bandied about in the letter columns—that Guardians was "pushing" the AIDs agenda too vociferously.[11] Extraño's eulogy nonetheless emphatically reminds readers of the erasure of the human element from public conversations of death tolls, caseloads, Senate proceedings, and curative drug testing.

Following Jet's death, in *Guardians* #7 (Bates, February 1989), Extraño returns to his

hometown of Trujillo, Peru to mourn Jet and reflect upon the role AIDS has played in his life.

There, he has an emotional reunion with an old friend, to whom he reveals in untranslated

Spanish that his diagnosis has progressed to AIDS ("Lo tengo" / "I've got it.") While home,

Extraño visits the graves of friends and former lovers, all of whom died from AIDS-related

causes. Trujillo, or rather its "gay district," has been rendered a ghost town by the epidemic.

Extraño's fictionalized gay community metonymizes the experiences of gay communities

everywhere in the late 1988s: with thousands already dead and many more thousands diagnosed

every year, AIDS was, as many activists articulated it, an apocalypse. This brief glimpse at the

global context of the AIDS crisis was the series's final nod to the AIDS storyline begun by Steve

Englehart in the first issue and continued by Cary Bates. Thereafter, the series tamed Extraño's

flamboyancy, opting instead for an ironically queer macho aesthetic, and ceased all discussion of

AIDS.

Though *The New Guardians* only lasted 12 issues, its creators provided a highly unique

account of PWAs in comics form, consistently challenging stereotypes, misinformation, and

prejudice about who gets HIV/AIDS, how they get it, what their lives are like, and how the

reactions of persons without AIDS shape the experiences of those most affected. In the wake of

the "gay explosion" of 1988 that *Guardians* helped define, the 45-year ban on gay representation

was officially struck from the Comics Code Authority in 1989 (reproduced in Gabilliet 320-322),

opening the way for comics of the early 1990s to more broadly, openly, and productively engage

gay characters and the AIDS crisis.

The early 1990s institutionalized AIDS in a mass discourse constituted of near-constant

news media coverage (roughly 3,000 stories a year; Brodie, et al., 2004) joined by films and

made-for-TV movies as diversely positioned in their relations to the gay community as *Our Sons* (1991) and *Philadelphia* (1993). AIDS was also mythologized in widely circulated stories of heterosexual AIDS "victims," the most prominent of whom was hemophiliac teenager Ryan White, who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion in the mid-l 980s and was ostracized by his small-town Indiana community. After several years in the media spotlight as the poster child of heterosexual narratives about the epidemic, White died in April 1990. HIV/AI DS was also central to the third season of the immensely popular reality television show *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994), which included the handsome 22-year-old gay PWA and AIDS educator Pedro Zamora. So great was Zamora's role in early 1990s American popular culture that President Bill Clinton spoke at a benefit for Pedro Zamora a month before his death in November 1994, stating, "Over the past few years, Pedro became a member of all of our families. Now no one in America can say they've never known someone who's living with AIDS" (*The Real World: A Tribute to Pedro Zamora*).[12] In comics, too, the AIDS discourse intensified in the early 1990s. Taken up by Marvel Comics in 1992 in the pages of *AF* #106 and with less fanfare through passing mention in other titles, AIDS also emerged as a major theme in the X-Men comics.

From the mid-1970s and into the late 1990s, the X-Men was one of Marvel's most lucrative comic-book franchise. Led by the ongoing original series *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1), the franchise was attuned to the major artistic impulses of the "Dark Age" and was an especially high seller in its multiple incarnations. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, the X-Men were "mutants" whose genetic mutations bestowed superhuman capabilities, some of which manifested physically (e.g. as wings or blue fur), others of which remained hidden (e.g. telepathy, laser vision), allowing them to "pass" as non-mutant. The comics' positioning of

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mutantcy in relation to "normal" humans allowed the X-Men to metaphorically embody social, cultural, and political "others." Throughout its history, the "mutant metaphor" was purposively articulated by comics creators to minority group contexts, for example, to the racial tensions of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and of women's liberation in the 1970s. At other times, mutantcy was broadly constructed so as to make the X-Men a fluid signifier of any sort of prejudice. The mutability of the mutant metaphor has opened the way for queer readings of the X-Men as well, which Fawaz deftly illustrates in his reading of X-Men comics in the 1970s and 1980s.[13] But while earlier X-Men comics covertly encoded queerness, two early 1990s storylines, "X-Cutioner's Song" (1992- 1993) and "Fatal Attractions" (1993-1994), represent the first creator-intended usage of the X-Men's mutantcy as a metaphor for homosexuality (Darowski 105-117).

"X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions" rallied the fantastic affordances of the superhero genre and the metaphorical versatility of the X-Men's mutantcy to allegorize homosexuality, HIV, and the AIDS crisis. At the surface, however, "X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions" are an interwoven epic of the X-Men's perpetual struggle against their various and multiplicitous enemies—among them anti-mutant hate groups (Purifiers, Church of Humanity), anti-human mutant groups (Mutant Liberation Front, Acolytes), and archetypal supervillains whose vocation is mayhem (Apocalypse, Onslaught). The 12-issue "X-Cutioner's Song" introduces a deranged mutant from the future, Stryfe, who travels back in time to the X-Men's present to assassinate the X-Men's leader, Professor Charles Xavier. Defeated by the X-Men at the end of the story arc, Stryfe releases the Legacy Virus, a bioweapon manufactured to kill mutants. Legacy begins to infect mutants all over the world beginning in the following 31-issue crossover "Fatal Attractions," a major event marking the thirtieth anniversary of Marvel's

X-Men franchise. The virus claims multiple lives throughout "Fatal Attractions" and remains an ongoing subplot to the Xavier-Magneto conflict.[14]

Legacy is a fantastical allegory for the AIDS virus and its effects on the gay community.[15] By allegorizing AIDS and withholding the virus's name—a tactic that comics creators in years prior had not used in their critique of AIDS politics—X-Men writers unintentionally mirrored the dominant trend of early 1990s gay writers who normalized the presence of the virus in gay life by "refusing" its name (cf. Jones, 1 993). The many deaths that occur as a result of Legacy throughout "Fatal Attractions" demonstrate its purposive resemblance to HIV and that virus's etiology. It is noted in the epilogue to *Uncanny X-Men* #300 (Lobdell, May 1993) that the virus affects each mutant differently, owing to the fact that the "X-Gene," the source of mutants' superpowers, manifests differently in each mutant. In much the same way, HIV and AIDS open up PWAs to an array of opportunistic infections, such that the effects of the virus on each PWA are unique. Moreover, both AIDS and Legacy are (at present) incurable, a point of significance that underscores the ethical concerns creators felt toward the representation of AIDS. That Legacy denotes AIDS is confirmed in an interview with Fabian Nicieza, one of the primary X-Men writers in the early 1990s, which is worth quoting at length:

> We [the creative teams behind "X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions"] specifically discussed ways to alienate mutants even further from mainstream superheroes, since by then the thematic tone of prejudice was cemented into the book's structure. One thing the "new wave" of writers discussed was "why are mutants railed against but people are okay with the Fantastic Four or Thor?" . . . H IV/AIDS was a very prevalent topic at the time and absolutely as creators, having gone through our 20's in the 80's, we were well

informed by the thematic underpinnings of prejudice against gays as a result of the virus

outbreak. (interview qtd. in Darowski 116)

AIDS, in the form of the Legacy Virus, was therefore a narratologically convenient but

nonetheless heavily and explicitly politicized means for the X-Men's creators to explain why

mutants were different from, and feared by, non-mutant humans.[16]

Nicieza and the other writers' deployment of the Legacy Virus's as a metaphor for AIDS

is at times conflicted. To begin, Nicieza et al. intensified the discourse of AIDS that creates, in

the words of Leo Bersani, "the peculiar exclusion of the principal sufferers," focusing instead on

"the heterosexual groups now [in 1987] minimally at risk, as if the high-risk groups were not part

of the audience" (203) This is evident in the story of the adolescent mutant Illyana Rasputin's

sickness and death in *Uncanny X-Men* #303 (Lobdell, August 1993), which bore on the cover, in

bold descending letters adjacent to the image of two crying female characters, the hortative "If

you read only *one* X-title this month--this issue *must* be it!" (emphases and unusual punctuation

in original). Illyana, being a young female child, and more so a mutant whose powers have yet to

manifest, and who therefore cannot be said to have chosen to be a mutant (or to have joined the

X-Men), her "innocent" death refracts the fears of mainstream heterosexual America and doubly

points to Ryan White's death three years prior. Illyana's death is what Bersani describes as

"displacement" (passim): it centers the discourse on those least affected and pushes the

disproportionately affected PWA groups to the discursive, and thus social, margins.

Moreover, the Legacy Virus raises unique questions about the ethics of the superhero in

relation to AIDS, especially because the X-Men and its allied and enemy organizations can be

read as representing the social formations of the AIDS crisis. The Acolytes, for example, are a

militant group of mutants who fight alongside organizations such as the Mutant Liberation Front

for the supremacy of mutants over humans.[17] Not an exact (or very positive) mimesis of the

militant factions of AIDS activists (e.g. ACT UP) whose confrontational methods brought

immediate attention to the plight of gay communities, the Acolytes stand in contradiction to X-

Factor, a group of mutants employed by the US government to handle mutant affairs. X-Factor

metaphorizes AIDS activists, such as Treatment Action Group (TAG) and GMHC, who sought

to effect change through bureaucratic means, rather than protest. The X-Men and X-Force (a

band of 20-something mutants), attempt to uphold the status quo by protecting mutants and non-

mutants alike.

The comics themselves produce the critique that the X-Men arc "a group of mutants-- / --

risking their lives to create a world where *everyone* is *treated equally*," a moral stance described

by a disaffected former X-Man as "the *stuff* of dreams" (Lobdell, May 1993, emphases and

unusual punctuation in original).The popular fantasy of mutant superheroes fighting over

mutantcy's place in society enacts the political fantasies of competing approaches to AIDS

activism and demonstrates the superhero genre's unique ability—compared to, say, television or

film of the same era—to map the ethic complexities of the AIDS crisis. In the brilliantly crisis-

prone, melodramatic world of comics where imagination runs beyond logic, superheroes can

answer or at least address difficult questions about who controls the narrative of the affected and

how that narrative is told, about who gets treatment and government attention, and about how the

public reacts to the affected. Superheroes can fight back; they never die (for long) and they

always win.

The superhero's relationship to the AIDS epidemic is dramatized throughout mainstream

comics of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. *The New Guardians* and the X-Men's Legacy

Virus demonstrate that the superhero's relationship to AIDS extends beyond the virus itself, implicating the superhero in the fight against the virus itself but also in the fight for the rights of those affected. Northstar's 1992 coming out in the pages of *Alpha Flight*, for example, directly addressed whether superheroes have an ethical obligation to use their positions of power to effect positive change. Other comics throughout this period challenged the virus and the virus's social effects alike. Superheroes even wrestled the epidemiological and social arms of the metaphorical AIDS supervillain in public service announcements published by DC Comics in association with the National AIDS Hotline, the GMHC, and the AIDS Project Los Angeles. DC's PSAs featured the Green Lanterns, the Flash, the Teen Titans, members of the Justice League, and even Batman's sidekick Robin, each of whom confronted damaging misconceptions about HIV/AIDS transmission.[18] It seemed to comics publishers, comics creators, and activist organizations alike that the superhero was the ideal figure to challenge the AIDS epidemic—as a role model for social action through education and as a friend and defender of PWAs.

"We're Not Interested in Copping Out": PWAs and the Superhero

Since the superhero's early days on the bright, four-colored pages of cheap newspaper print, critics have derogated tights-and-spandex-clad superhumans as mere power fantasy, one that is both fascist and eugenicist in its origins. But like any heroic figure, the super-subject has moral and ethical obligations to the communities it serves and protects, a generic distinction that comics historian Peter Coogan identifies as "a selfless, pro-social mission" (30). The extent of that mission speaks to prevailing social concerns about criminality, morality, and (social) justice; at a practical level, to the personal ethical obligations and political beliefs of creators, who extend the work of social justice in the real world onto the pages of their comics.

Comic-book creators recognized that their fantastic medium could configure the superhero's mission to fight (literally and metaphorically) the virus itself, but also to extend that mission to protecting and fighting on behalf of PWAs.

At the same time that Alpha Flight was fading from the market—unaffected by Northstar's coming out, which was quickly subsumed into the dying series's plot—Marvel writer Peter David brought to culmination an HIV/AIDS storyline three years in the making. Critically, *The Incredible Hulk* #420 (August 1994) takes as its point of conflict the question of the superhero's ethical duty to PWAs. This issue of Hulk was bound in an all-black cover, the darkness of which is disrupted by the image of a dying man, Jim Wilson, holding the Hulk's hand for comfort as he lies in a hospital bed. A lamp provides a cone of light that pierces the cover's stygian gloom, allowing viewers to glimpse the Hulk's intimate moment. The cover also bore a red ribbon—symbol of The Red Ribbon Project by artist-activists Visual AIDS, founded in 1991—in the corner below the publication information. Just below the series' title are the barely visible words "In the Shadow of AIDS," hidden in an off-black grey. David plays self-consciously on a problem facing comics writers, one that *The New Guardians* letter column editor, Mark Waid, recognized in 1988 (more below). That is, whether or not superheroes, who often have access to science-fictional technologies or magical items with unbelievable capabilities, should be able to "cure" AIDS in their fictional worlds.

Hulk #420 details the last moments of two PWAs' lives. The issue begins with Jim Wilson, the Hulk/B1uce Banner's African American sidekick and close friend, being severely beaten by protesters picketing a PWA's attendance at a local high school.[19] Jim, who revealed his HIV diagnosis three years prior in *The Incredible Hulk* #388 (David, December 1991), is a heterosexual African-American AIDS activist who runs an AIDS clinic in Los Angeles. Hulk

intervenes in the protest-turned-riot to save Jim, whom he whisks away to his high-tech base of operations. On his death bed, Jim asks Hulk for a transfusion of the gamma-irradiated blood that gives Hulk his superpowers and which Jim hopes might cure HIV. The Hulk agrees to the transfusion, but instead uses non-gamma-irradiated blood because he fears turning Jim into a Hulk-like "monster." But Jim uncovers Hulk's subterfuge, and, understanding Hulk's fears about using his own blood, Jim pretends that he is feeling stronger, that he is "gonna leap *out* of this bed in just a couple minutes. / Just gotta rest up a bit. . . ." (David, August 1994, emphases, ellipses, and unusual spelling in original). His last breath a performance, Jim dies. Meanwhile, Hulk's wife, Betty, an emergency hotline attendant, is about to leave work when a suicidal, HIV-positive man named Chet calls. On the last page of the issue, as Betty fitfully tries to encourage him to live, the reader watches Chet drive his car onto a train track, as the light of a train approaches and the panels fade to the black anonymity of his death. These two intertwining stories are ultimately conflicted in their presentation of AIDS.

Jim's desire for a miracle cure and his hope that the superpowered Hulk could deliver one signifies the utopian fantasy of a quick end to the AIDS epidemic, a hope heightened and flattened in the wake of various experimental drugs' failure to provide successful long-term treatment. Jim's and Chet's passings are described by death and disability sh1dies and comics studies scholar Jose Alaniz as "existential death," a unique brand of comic-book expiry that is meaningless in the schema of the superhero genre (2014:194). Like all comic-book deaths, such deaths burden the psyche of the hero but differ from "heroic deaths" (180-190) that save people or accomplish an end—deaths that "mean" something. Jim's death burdens Hulk's psyche, even though it was the Hulk who made the ethical choice not to cure his friend.[20] Hulk's quiet, despairing flight from Jim's deathbed resounds with Betty's presumed response to Chet's

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suicide. Together, the deaths of Jim and Chet—one from AIDS-related complications, the other because he is afraid of the social consequences of living with HIV—are, like other existential deaths examined by Alaniz, "an emotionally powerful and authentic means to relate the high-risk stakes of superhero experience in a more realistic fashion" (196).[21] By emphasizing the negative impact of AIDS-related deaths on the superhero, or in the case of Betty Banner, on the superhero's wife, *Hulk* #420 reinscribes the discourse of displacement witnessed in part in *The New Guardians*.

But it might be possible to rescue the superhero from the dubious position it seems to hold in relation to its ethical responsibility to AIDS. For while Hulk's refusal to provide a cure for Jim, and the inability of the New Guardians to muster their magical and technological prowess to treat HIV, are surely ethically problematic, the characters' failures to "solve" AIDS in their fictional worlds are acts of comic-book activism. As popular fantasies, these comics "suture together" the social and political realities of AIDS activism by holding out the possibility of a "cure" for AIDS (Fawaz, "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before'" 359). Superheroes, especially ones with alien technologies and magical powers, should be able to cure diseases—that, after all, is one of the functions of fantasy: to project the impossible into the real. But as a "popular" fantasy that builds on social realities, the superhero genre cannot solve problems that will, for its audience, persist beyond the pages of the comic and into the quotidian.

The Hulk's choice not to provide a cure to Jim is as much an ethical decision as Peter David's choice to write that decision into the comic. It is a decision recognized and faced by creators since 1988. In response to a letter querying whether Extraño could cure his teammates of AIDS, for example, the editor of The New Guardians letter column Mark Waid responded,

no, Extrano [sic.] could not magically cure his teammates . . . What a crummy insult that would be to all the real-life AIDS victims out there -- waving a magic wand and curing one of the greatest tragedies of current times. How comic-hooky. AIDS is a touchy issue; we're not interested in copping out, and we think you realize that. (qtd. in Bates, Winter 1988)

That Waid identifies a magical AIDS cure as the stuff of comics points not to the actual content of The New Guardians or any other comic engaged in the AIDS discourse, but rather to the prevailing public opinion that superhero comics arc fantasy, fun, and gimmicks—the very opinion that Fawaz's politicizing conceptualization of comics as popular fantasy counters (*New Mutants*; "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before'"). It may be that preventing a cure provides the practical benefit of drawing out the drama of a story, of using AIDS as a tragically cliche character-building device, and of allowing a more extensive critique of real-world events. But comic books' failure to cure AIDS reflected their creators' genuine concern for the social effect of their stories. They took seriously the ability of comics to enter into the discursive realm of the AIDS crisis, to be mimetic rather than farcical. By dwelling on the emotion provoked by Jet's or Illyana's or Jim's deaths, comic-book creators painfully demonstrated that a cure did not exist. Cures are fantasies, and unadulterated fantasy in this instance was for the creators as much as the superheroes, unethical.

Dedication to the emotional content of the AIDS crisis is further demonstrated in the letter column of *Hulk* #420, which featured a unique collection of letters written by comics-industry insiders about HIV/AIDS in their lives. The letter writers included Marvel editors (Kelly Corvese), writers (Don DeBrandt, Gary Guzzo, Michael Kraiger, Jeph Loeb, Mindy Newell, Barbara Slate), and artists (Chris Cooper, Joe Rubinstein, Tom Tenney), a number of whom told

stories of gay PWAs—themselves, friends, family, neighbors, lovers. The letters ranged from brief personal stories to elegies, many of them stating their hope that, through comics about HIV/AIDS, they might save a life or change homophobic attitudes ("a *human* problem, not a *homo* problem"; quoted in David, August 1994, emphases in original). The letter column pooled the emotional energies of creators to show readers that even if AIDS finds its way into comics only occasionally, the industry's culture workers cope with it daily. Not surprisingly, the *Hulk* column was a onetime affair; nothing like it appeared before or again in mainstream superhero comics. But it was the first place in superhero comic books where readers could come to know the effect AIDS was having in the lives of creators. The column reflected earlier, frank discussion of the epidemic in independent comics anthologies such as *A.A.R.G.H. (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* (Moore) and *Strip AIDS USA* (Robbins, et al.). It also crystalized the discourse about AIDS and homosexuality that was present in a small body of mainstream comics, their letter columns, and occasionally in comic-book advertisements, such as DC's PSAs.

Whereas *Hulk* #420 addressed the relationship of the superhero to individuals in his life who suffered from AIDS, and in so doing raised ethical dilemmas about the superhero's ability to protect PWAs from the ravages of the epidemic as well as questioned creators' life experiences and reasons for writing about AIDS, other comics broadened the superhero's horizon to explore the societal ramifications of AIDS, with special emphasis on its impact in gay men's lives. "Hidden in View," for example, was a four-issue story arc in the somewhat obscure Marvel series *Nomad* (vol. 2), a comic about the eponymous vigilante Jack Monroe, former sidekick to Captain America turned disgruntled "bleeding heart liberal," who travels the US with his toddler daughter. Together they fight for the rights of the economically and politically

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disadvantaged. Writer Nicieza (of *X-Men* fame) utilized Nomad as a bullhorn for sensitive

political issues, among them American Indian land rights, racial tension in Los Angeles, drug use

and poverty, and the military-industrial complex. Although its underlying premise was the

conflict between Nomad and the metamorphic supervillain Hate-Monger, "Hidden in View" also

explores different aspects of gay life in the "epidemic time" of AIDS.

In the first issue of the storyline, *Nomad* #12 (Nicieza, April 1993), Nomad takes to the

defense of an AIDS clinic that is beseeched by the Clean Comnunity Commandos (CCC), a

group of homophobes who seek to rid Ft. Worth, TX, of "queers." The CCC are galvanized to

action in nightly attack against the clinic and its patients by a radio shock jock, the "Roar," who

believes that gay men are responsible for the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, he believes that because

gay men sometimes keep their sexuality private ("closeted") they are trying to subvert the United

States and its moral integrity, "to bring this country down." The Roar stands here as an example

of a trope common in the comic-book discourse about AIDS: the use of homophobia to galvanize

the hero—and, by consequence, the reader—to the defense of gay men, and by association,

PWAs.

To be sure, homophobia is glimpsed wherever AIDS appears in comics of the era I am

charting. Anti-gay protestors are seen at the AIDS clinic protests in *The New Guardians* #3 and

are the cause of the riot at the beginning of *The Incredible Hulk* #420. Homophobia is also a

predominant theme in other narratives, such as the two-part story arc "Gauntlet," which appeared

in *Green Arrow*, vol. 2, #5-6 (Grell, June-July 1988), in which the Green Arrow intervenes in a

"gay bash wave" (Grell, June 1988) that hits Seattle at the behest of a gang leader who

contracted AIDS in prison, and who murders gay men in a campaign of existential revenge.

Whereas Green Arrow is interested in immediate, individual justice—finding and beating the

gay-bashers, threatening them with retaliation from a generic "gay activist alliance" (Grell, July 1988)—Nomad explores the social depth of homophobia in the United States.

Nomad goes undercover as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* to interview the Roar, whom he later discovers is the leader of the CCC. The connection to *Rolling Stone* is crucial, since it identifies that magazine's prominence in the popular discourse about AIDS, which it entered into very early in the history of the epidemic, in 1985, with David Black's two-part feature "The Plague Years," expanded and released in a book of the same name the following year. Black's writing emphasized the damage wrought by AIDS on gay men's political successes from decades prior. That Nomad poses as a *Rolling Stone* journalist also positions the series as one of Marvel's "coolest" series, and simultaneously demonstrates that very little had changed in the eight years since Black's "The Plague Years." To frame his approach to the Roar, Nomad interviews people all across Ft. Worth. The city-roaming interviews arc illustrated panel by panel, each of which is overlaid across two pages with a portion of a monologue by Nomad:

> I listen to people talk. / --To those who think you can get it from kissing your girlfriend-- whether she has HIV or not. / I hear their anger, their harebrained reasoning-- / --their rationalizations, their fears, their blindness, their *ignorance*--and I realize-- / it's a *stupidity* thing-- / . . . / There is so much ignorance about the *HIV* virus and the *AIDS* disease-- / --about who gets it, how and why. / From people who think *touching* a gay man will do it-- / --it's not a *Texas* thing. It's a people thing. And in *this* country, more and more every day, if it's a *people* thing-- / . . . / If I'm not part of the *solution*, I must be part of the *problem*. (Nicieza, April 1993, emphases, ellipses, and unusual punctuation in original)

Writer Nicieza parses suspected reasons for homophobia among the general population, using Ft. Worth as a temperature gauge for the rest of the nation.

Nicieza's recognition that contemporary US homophobia is exacerbated by AIDS is an important one. Homophobic hate crimes skyrocketed in the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s, and though statistics vary nationwide depending on the reporting institution, the numbers are telling. The National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce, for example, cited a 244 percent increase in homophobic episodes reported per year between 1985 and 1989 (Berrill 36); the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project noted a 405 percent increase in local anti-gay incidents (37); and the FBI reported a 127 percent national increase in violent homophobic crimes between 1988 and 1993 (Walters 9). As a cultural phenomenon, the AIDS crisis was constituted of competing political claims that simultaneously rendered gay bodies as victim and threat, dying minority and deviant aggressor.

Nicieza turns his attention in the following issue, *Nomad* #13, to government inaction in the face of the AIDS epidemic. After fleeing Ft. Worth for fear that he would be charged with assaulting the Roar, Nomad moves 30 miles east to Dallas, where a serial criminal nicknamed "The Needle" is infecting her sexual partners with HIV using an HIV-laced serum injected via needle. The comic shows concerned citizens protesting in the streets, but rather than protesting violently against gay men, these protesters turn their attention to the cops' lack of success apprehending the criminal. The protesters are led by Nomad's girlfriend, Horseshoe, who rallies the crowd around her calls for justice: "The cops want this woman to keep on killing don't they? / 'Course they do--helps them get rid of the *'social deviants'*! I Makes their jobs *easier*, don't it? Well it's time to tell the fascist system we won't lie back an' take it!" (Nicieza, May 1993).

Horseshoe's call to action is mimetic of the anti-fascist tone that cultural historian Christopher Vials (esp. 194-232) suggests characterized AIDS activists' configurations of Reagan and his administration as perpetuating a genocide of gay men and drug users—the "social deviants" Horseshoe refers to. In a twist that is, unlike most comic-book plot twists, actually shocking, Nomad discovers by issue's end that Horseshoe is The Needle (and, like Saddler/Major Maple Leaf in *AF* #106, she tries to kill a child, Nomad's daughter). Formerly a nurse, she gave up her job when she accidentally infected a "poor little girl" with HIV during a blood transfusion. Since then, she made it her mission to infect people who "deserve it," who "need to live with the guilt of what they do" to other people, to the world. In the end, Horseshoe figuratively takes her own life, injecting herself with the last of her serum (Nicieza, May 1993).

Nicieza takes his sto1yline deeper into critical territory when, in the subsequent issue, *Nomad* #14 (June 1993), he turns to the problematic of "outing" and the implications of being out and gay in the era of AIDS. *Nomad* #14 is a response to the shock jock's fear mongering in *Nomad* #12 (Nicieza, April 1993) when he declares the closet as an inherent threat to the public, a hiding place for the AIDS epidemic to fester before assailing heterosexual America. *Nomad* #14 follows its mulleted super-protagonist's efforts to stop a gay tabloid, *Out and About*, from "outing" a senator's son. The fictional magazine was likely inspired by *Out Week*, a well-known but short-lived gay publication famous for Michelangelo Signorile's "GossipWeek" column, which regularly outed closeted public figures. Nomad is hired to stop the outing by the outee's father, a US senator who stands to lose a military contract on account of his son's identity.[22]

The question of the ethics of outing is directly related to the AIDS crisis both in the *Nomad* storyline and in comics more generally. Consider, for example, that Northstar decides to out himself in *AF* #106 (Lobdell, March 1992) only after he is accused of being complicit with

government and public inaction regarding AIDS's effect in the gay community. While both Scott Lobdell of *Alpha Flight* and *Nomad*'s Nicieza identify the act of outing as a loss of the outee's autonomy over his public identity, and therefore label the act homophobic, both writers contend through their characters the necessity for (gay) public voices to represent the communities most affected by AIDS.[23] The "Hidden in View" storyline concludes in *Nomad* #15 (Nicieza, Jul. 1993), wherein it is revealed that all of the homophobic incidents were manipulated into being by Hate-Monger, a shapeshifting villain with an unexplained grudge against Nomad.

Written by one of the scripters of the X-Men's Legacy Virus, "Hidden in View" is a unique engagement with the politics of the AIDS crisis, since over the course of three very different issues, Nicieza addresses some of the most important ethical questions raised by the epidemic. Nomad is a streetwise vigilante whose stories appear to be more a part of the crime or detective genre than of the superhero, despite the fact that he is, like Captain America, a superpowered former soldier. Nomad is figured as homophobia's enemy on the street, the mouth and muscle of those educated to the knowledge that exonerates gay men from insipid constructions of their moral and sexual depravity. Attuned to the sources of public discourse, Nicieza writes the media and public figures as much more important than the superhero in swaying public opinion. While Nomad takes a side, he is not considered a bastion of moral authority as might be expected—social movements do not rally around Nomad, but are joined by him. In this way Nicieza asserts that massive, nationwide action is required to fight the epidemic proportion of AIDS—that AIDS, like poverty, is a social crisis too big for the superhero to fight alone.

After all, as the X-Men, New Guardians, and the Hulk could attest, superheroes and their sidekicks die from AIDS-related causes, too.

Coda: Comic Books in the Post-AIDS Era

After 1994, AIDS dropped out of creators ' comics art, even though homosexuality continued to be written into comic-book storylines and was perceptibly heightened in :fictional comic-book universes in the 2000s. This shift to silence came at a curious moment, both in the history of comics and that of AIDS. Comic-book companies—and by necessity the creators whose paychecks depended on them—pushed toward more generically normative narratives, the comic-book equivalents of "blockbusters" that might, like *X-Men*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Claremont, October 1991), sell in the millions. This meant making more comics more quickly, comics that hit the broadest common appeal by exposing the superhero to greater heights of hypermasculine excess and cutting down on heavily political content. At the same time, AIDS reached its highest number of deaths and caseloads in the mid-l 990s, peaking in 1995 with just over 49,000 deaths that year in the US alone, more than double the annual toll in 1988 ("Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic"). Death tolls declined significantly in 1997 with the advent of antiretroviral (ARV) treatments, marking what Gill-Peterson describes as "a mutation in the temporality of HIV/AIDS . . . from epidemic to endemic time" (279). All of this is to say that the shift to the post-AIDS era came early for comics and that the AIDS discourse that lasted between 1988 and 1994 had a significant impact on the comics immediately postdating that shift.

The post-AIDS moment of gay visibility began nearly instantaneously. Milestone Comics—a subsidiary of Milestone Media that published as an imprint of DC Comics, and that was devoted to characters and readers of color—for example, published a multi-issue story arc, "What Are Little Boys Made Of?," about homophobia and gay rights in one of its hippest comics, *Static*.[24] Despite gay characters' continued presence, gay visibility perceptively lessened in comics of the mid- and late 1990s, as few sustained storylines dealt with gay characters as

they had in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, gay visibility was reduced to single-issue events, and while gay characters who had outed themselves or been outed previously continued to appear in the comics of the late 1990s, their sexuality remained largely unimportant to the stories being told—with the exception of Apollo and Midnighter, gay, married superheroes in Warren Ellis's *Stormwatch*. But AIDS was no longer a thematic of comic-book discourse.

Its virtual disappearance from superhero comic books after 1994, however, did not mean that AIDS ceased to be important in the lives of comic-book creators. In the letter column of *Tempest* #4 (Jimenez, Feb. 1997), for example, series writer/artist Phil Jimenez came out to readers. In doing so, he disclosed his long-tern relationship with noted DC writer/artist Neal Pozner (who died in 1994 from AIDS-related complications), writing, "[Pozner] was the first man I ever asked out on a date; he was my first boyfriend; he was the first person I'd ever watched live with and die from complications from AIDS." Jimenez's recollection of Pozner is sincere and candid, reminiscent of the stories told in the letter column of *The Incredible Hulk* #420, and of more visceral works, such as the posthumously published graphic autobiography of David Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles A Second*, published by Vertigo in 1996.

After nearly a decade of silence on the topic of AIDS, a breakout new creator at DC, Judd Winick, used his position as writer of *Green Arrow* in the early 2000s to remind readers that HIV/AIDS still affected the lives of millions. Judd Winick's mainstream comics success was prefaced by his tenure on the 1994 MTV reality show *The Real World III: San Francisco*. The show featured Winick alongside Pedro Zamora and a cast of six others. As noted, Zamora brought the experiences of life with AIDS to millions of viewers, who watched as Zamora's castmates became close friends with him, as they advocated for greater awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside him, and as they worried over his deteriorating health. Through the show, Winick

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became intimate friends with Zamora, and when Zamora was too sick to continue an AIDS education tour, Winick took over for him and continued giving HIV/AIDS education lectures for three years after Zamora's death.

In 2000 Winick published an Eisner award-nominated autobiographical graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, which wove together his and Zamora's life stories. Winick's success as a graphic novelist propelled him into DC Comics's spotlight, and by the summer of the same year Winick was writing *Green Lantern*, which opened the door for more than a decade of writing at DC. In 2002, Winick wrote "Hate Crimes" (*Green Lantern*, vol. 3, #155-156), about the homophobic bashing of the intergalactic superhero Green Lantern/Kyle Rayner's friend, Terry, and the Green Lantern's uncharacteristically violent reaction, which leaves the three gay-bashers hospitalized. Much like the *Static* homophobia story arc, "Hate Crimes" is not about HIV/AIDS. But it was an attempt by Winick to start a discussion about the continued existence of homophobia in post-gay liberation America. Moreover, "Hate Crimes" was developed through an unprecedented coalition between a comic-book industry professional and a gay rights organization—its narrative based on personal experiences related to Winick by bisexual comic-book editor Bob Schreck and written in consultation with Cathy Renna of GLAAD[25] (see Palmer-Mehta and Hay).

In response to "Hate Crimes," *Out* magazine hailed Winick as a "superhero to gays and lesbians" (quoted in Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005:390). Two years later, Winick channeled his experiences as an HIV/ AIDS educator into "New Blood" (*Green Arrow*, vol. 3, #40-45). In this five-issue story arc Winick reveals that Oliver Queen/Green Arrow's ward, Mia "Speedy" Dearden, is HIV-positive.[26] "New Blood" is devoted to Mia's coming to terms with her diagnosis, which is the result of her forced prostitution and former drug addiction. The "New Blood" narrative is loosely inspired by Zamora's life, so much so that, in the arc's final issue,

Mia gives a speech to her high school about "living with H.I.V." (Winick, February 2005). While "New Blood" received none of the critical attention that "Hate Crimes" did, Winick's serious engagement with HIV highlighted and challenged the erasure of HIV/AIDS in superhero comic books. Moreover, like earlier attempts to narrate the lives of PWAs or the public life of the AIDS epidemic, driven as they were by personal desires to use comics to advocate for gay men's and PWAs' rights, Winick's comics lay bare his struggle to understand his best friend's AIDS-related death and his desire to recognize the continuing struggle for gay social justice and HIV/AIDS education.

Winick's comics reflected on one of the most crucial moments in the history of gay visibility in American popular culture, a brief six years between 1988 and 1994 that saw an unprecedented rise of gay men's visibility in American comic books. The same period that achieved the repeal of the CCA's half-century-long ban on the representation of homosexuality (1989) also effected a sincere, prolonged, and politically motivated engagement with the AIDS crisis. That comics creators rallied to engage the politics of AIDS and the fact of its disproportionate impact on gay men was not unprecedented. Fawaz, for example, argues that from the 1960s onward, creators shaped the discursive field of comics into "a space for modeling new modes of radical critique that offered alternatives to direct-action politics and the discourse of civil liberties" ("'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before'" 357). In works both obscure and critically acclaimed, mainstream comic-book creators addressed the paucity of government response to the AIDS epidemic and simultaneously advocated awareness of the disproportionate effects of AIDS in the gay community. Creators also recognized the connection between rising homophobia rates and the social construction of AIDS as a "'gay disease" and a threat to the American body politic.

Through the figure of the superhero, comic-book creators fought AIDS. They did so through the fantastical affordances of the superhero genre, wherein their four-color superhumans challenged AIDS at the epidemiological and social levels. In the physical form of the comic book and its popularly consumed narratives creators also provided HIV/AIDS education. They directed reader attention to the social, cultural, and political problematics of the epidemic, but also gave practical information about how the virus spread. Comic books' discursive commitment to the AIDS crisis between 1988 and 1994 provided much-needed awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside serious critiques of public and governmental inaction. Uniting the generic conventions of the superhero with the energies and anger of AIDS activists and the affected, comic-book creators carved out their own discourse within the larger cultural sphere of the AIDS crisis. In the company of superheroes, PWAs gained advocates and visibility largely denied in other popular narratives of the AIDS era.

Notes

1. While Northstar's sexual identity was the first to gamer major public attention—and somewhat strangely so, considering his less-than-marquee status at Marvel—the previous year DC "outed" the Pied Piper, a former supervillain, turned friend of the Flash, in *Flash* #53 (Messner-Loebs, August 1991), and sustained a conversation about his identity over several issues, winning acclaim from GLAAD and garnering its first "Outstanding Comic Book" award.

2. See amFar's thirtieth anniversary report, which places the cumulative death toll in the United States at 194,476 by the end of 1992, with 245,147 cases reported. Their data are drawn from

the most comprehensive, retrospective tabulation of nationwide reports of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and cases, and as such are often much higher than statistics reported *in tempore.*

3. On Northstar's sexuality and its anticipation by fans, see Schott; Bolling; Mangels, "Out of the Closet," part one.

4. It is disconcerting to note that gay men (and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals) were disincluded from radical pushes in the comics industry to include racial, gender, economically disadvantaged, and even differently abled others in superhero comics of the 1 970s—what Jose Alaniz calls the "relevance movement" (138). Bradford Wright similarly describes the relevance movement as "a proliferation of self-consciously leftist comic-book explorations of political and social issues" (233). Though creators seemingly made no effort to engage gay liberation in the 1970s, Fawaz argues elsewise via a queer reading of, among other things, the X-Men, Fantastic Four, and Superman.

5. Gill-Peterson splices the history of AIDS into two temporalities, the earlier being the "epidemic time," the "crisis" years of AIDS, in contradistinction to the present, "post-AIDS age" of "endemic time," when HIV/AIDS has become a manageable medical condition, has passed out of public interest, and has been depoliticized in the U.S. as a result of its becoming a transnational medical issue.

6. Englehart's use of AIDS and a gay character were points of major contention between him and the editorial staff at DC, particularly *Guardians* editor Andy Helfer. As a result, Englehart opted to quit *Guardians*.

7. Gould's article was written in part to explain away why AIDS proliferates in Africa among heterosexual people to greater extents than in the United States; his article is of course heavily racist in tone, going so far as to describe Africans' heterosexual sex practices as

"close to rape by our standards." There were a number of contemporary responses to Gould's article beyond ACT UP, including *AIDS Patient Care*, vol. 2, no. 2 (April 1988), which included three articles responding to Gould, one of which was an interview with Cosmopolitan editor Helen Gurley Brown. The ACT UP protest of *Cosmopolitan* magazine is covered in Crimp and Rolston (38-43). For an incredibly thorough contemporary study of the gendered narrative of AIDS see Treichler.

8. Take for example the Gran Fury poster distributed by ACT UP, titled *AIDS: 1 in 61*, which countered the erasure of women and people of color by exposing that "one in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS." The answer to why the media pretends otherwise, the poster reveals, is "because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic" (Crimp and Rolston 42).

9. For a sustained study of death and dying in superhero comics sec Alaniz (58-281). Moreover, unlike other superheroes who are involved in HIV/AIDS narratives (with the exception of the allegorical Legacy Virus in the *X-Men* comics), Jet is the only superhero who succumbs to AIDS-related causes. Jet is, however, brought back to life in the late 2000s, most notably in the series *Checkmate*, vol. 2, where she appears with other characters from *The New Guardians*—this, after several universe- and company-wide reboots that effectively erased the internal history of her death from HIV/AIDS.

10. Take for example the ACT UP slogan "Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It," which was used at a demonstration at the US Centers for Disease Control in 1988 in order to bring attention to the ways in which medical definitions of AIDS made women sufferers invisible (Shotwell).

11. *The New Guardians* letter column is telling in other ways, since the letters betray a distinct interest among many readers—who run the gamut of identifying as gay, as PWAs, as friends/family of PWAs, and even as health professionals—about the role of HIV, and later AIDS, throughout the series. Nearly every letter is engaged with some critique of either Extraño's homosexuality or his, Jet's, and Harbinger's HIV/AIDS diagnoses. For a discussion of letter column responses to "coming out" narratives in mainstream comics see Franklin.

12. Pedro Zamora's many accomplishments as an AIDS activist, including as a member of ACT UP and as a nationally recognized HIV/AIDS education lecturer, are detailed in Morgenthaler, published three years before Zamora appeared on *The Real World*. Zamora's death was widely reported on; sec, for example, Israel.

13. Discussing Chris Claremont's *X-Men* run in the same period, *New Mutants* artist Bill Sienkiewicz provided a unique reading that is attuned to the mutant metaphor's versatility in the era of AIDS. At length, Sienkiewicz stated that, "A lot of the religious factions scream about the link between AIDS and gays. Now heterosexuals and children can get it as well; it's no longer seen as a gay disease. The paranoia and fear and misunderstanding are there. There are the times that try men's souls. . . . People tend not to want to be informed because that connotes a certain degree of responsibility and maybe a change in thinking. When they read about the mutant paranoia, it's fifty times removed from the world, yet it's still there. I think that's more the link between the mutant stuff than anything else" (Mangels, "Out of the Closet," part one, 46).

14. The Legacy Virus is unveiled on the final page of *X-Force* #18 (January 1993). Illyana Rasputin is first diagnosed in *Uncanny X-Men* #300 (May 1993).

15. For a very different study of the Legacy Virus, see Noonan.

16. The Legacy Virus remained incurable during the period under discussion, but a cure was effected in *Uncanny X-Men* #390 (March 2001). It should also be noted that, as a biological weapon created for the purpose of exterminating a particular population, Legacy looks very much like the conspiracy theories surrounding HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. One of the more pernicious of those theories held that HIV was the product of American military scientists who used the virus to cull the population of Africa; only accidentally, according to this theory, did it spread from Africa to the Caribbean, and to the United States. This rumor circulated in the Soviet bloc in the mid-1980s and found its way to British conservative newspapers; it continued to be repeated in newspapers worldwide throughout the late 1980s, as Sontag attests (140-141).

17. There is, of course, a resemblance between the name of the Mutant Liberation Front and of the Gay Liberation Front, the vanguard of the aptly named 1970s gay liberation movement.

18. DC's superhero AIDS PSAs appeared infrequently in various comics of their superhero line between 1992 and 1995. They also created a more candid PSA, *Death Talks about Life* (Gaiman), a sixteen page comic in which Death, from the *Sandman* comics, speaks openly about HIV infection, the toll of AIDS, and the importance of condoms to stopping the spread of HIV. It was published by DC's "mature" imprint Vertigo. Other companies, such as Archie Comics, published AIDS PSAs as well. Comics were recognized as a useful tool for the disbursement of HIV/AIDS education throughout the U.S. The People of Color Against AIDS Network, for example, hired comics creator and scholar Leonard Rifas to produce *AIDS News* in July 1988. For a study of comic books' use in HIV/AIDS education, see McAllister, which is largely about independent comic books and well-known newspaper

strips (e.g. "Doonesbury"), though he does discuss DC's PSAs. His study also contextualizes the long history of comic books' uses for social-educational purposes, the most famous examples of which are *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96 (Lee, May 1971) and *Green Lantern* #85 (O'Neil, August 1971), both about the dangers of drug use and addiction.

19. This protest is most likely a reference to the widely publicized protests that initially kept HIV-positive teenager Ryan White from attending school in Kokomo, Indiana, and, after a judge ruled that he could return to school, that ultimately led to the White family relocating to a more hospitable town.

20. Hulk's fear about using his blood for Jim's transfusion is not unfounded; in *Savage She-Hulk* # 1 (Lee, February 1980) Bruce Banner (aka the Hulk) gives his dying cousin Jennifer Walters a transfusion, and turns her into the unimaginatively named She-Hulk.

21. Alaniz discusses Jim's death in brief (195-196), though he does not address Hulk's decision to withhold a potential cure and he does not mention Chet's disturbing death—arguably a more "meaningless" and therefore more "existential" one.

22. *OutWeek* played a crucial role in the history of gay serial publications; see "Open Closets, Closed Doors" for a discussion of *OutWeek's* legacy after its closing. *Out and About*, the name of the fictional magazine in *Nomad* #14, is also the name of a gay travel newsletter (Walters 277). For a discussion of Michelangelo Signorile in the context of the gay nineties and his theorizing gay visibility in relation to the closet, see Walters (28-29).

23. Compare the problem of being "outed" as gay, and of trying to protect one's sexual identity, to the generic fret over the public discovering a superhero's secret identity.

24. *Static*, the topic of chapter five in this dissertation, was published between 1993 and 1997 by Milestone Comics, a company originally founded by four black mtists and writers – Dwayne

McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, Derck T. Dingle—for the purpose of telling stories predominantly about superheroes of color. Among their taglines they claimed to be starting "A Revolution in Comics"; they also sampled the title of the 1971 Gil Scott-Heron song, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," in their advertisements, as well as quipping that their comics provide "More than Just the Color." Critically, Jeffrey A. Brown has argued that Milestone and their eight-plus series provided an answer to the lack of visibility of people of color in American superhero comics. Although they began as a separate company, Milestone Media struck an immediate deal with DC Comics to publish as an imprint of DC. Using DC's market position as one of the two leading mainstream companies, Milestone was made a significant impact on the comics industry in the mid-1 990s. See Brown for a history of Milestone Comics; shockingly, Nama discusses Milestone Comics but briefly (93-96). It is prudent to note that Ivan Velez, Jr., writer on several of the "What Are Little Boys Made Of?" issues, is a gay Latino comics creator, and that much of his acclaimed work is independent gay comics. See his website, *Planet Bronx,* www.planetbronx.com, for more information about his works and biography. As a result of Velez's importance to the company's writing projects, Milestone Comics touched on queer themes on several occasions.

25. A letter from Cathy Renna, also then representing GLAAD, appeared in the letter column responses to Northstar's coming out in *AF* #106, published four issues later in *AF* #110 (July 1992).

26. For fans, Mia's nickname, "Speedy," marks her as the contemporary successor to Oliver Queen/GreenArrow's first sidekick and ward, Roy Harper, who also went by "Speedy." That Mia's diagnosis is a result of her former (forced) drug addiction is a nod to *Green Lantern*

(vol. 1) #85 (O'Neil, August 1971), wherein it is discovered that Roy Harper/Speedy is a heroin addict. The iconic Neal Adams cover showed a stunned Oliver Queen exclaiming "My ward is a *junkie!"* as Speedy hunches over before him, gripping his upper arm—needles, vials, and a cooking spoon splayed out on the table next to him.

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