

## Superheroes and Identities: An Introduction

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## Superheroes and identities: an introduction

The superhero represents, in many ways, the aspirations, concerns and dreams of contemporary life. Superhero films became the biggest genre in Hollywood after 9/11 and they are the focus of top selling video games. The result is that most people know about superheroes from encountering them through films, television and video games rather than through the medium which conceived them, the comic book.

The first superhero, Superman, was conceived by Cleveland teenagers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, who, after several years work, got a publication deal from Detective Comics Inc (DC). Superman's success inspired a boom in characters employing three key characteristics: a secret identity, superpowers and a costume. The secret identity was, perhaps, the most significant, as Superman was a man of two parts: a glamorous fantasy figure and a mild-mannered reporter. His love interest, fellow reporter Lois Lane, scorned Clark Kent but idolised Superman. As for the costume, it was designed by Shuster in primary colours and inspired by that of a circus strongman. Superman's first stories featured him attacking injustice, protecting battered wives and standing up for the rights of miners. However, like many of the following superheroes, Superman was chameleon-like and his persona shifted to reflect the *zeitgeist* of any era. Consequently, he has been said to reflect the immigrant (Fingeroth 2007), the Messiah figure (Andrae 1980) and the frontiersman (Lawrence and Jewitt 2002).

Where Superman was the paradigm of the man-god, Batman, a subsequent character, did not possess superpowers and became the model for the vigilante hero<sup>1</sup>. The most popular villains he faced, the Joker, Two-Face and Scarecrow, mirrored some aspects of Batman regarding issues of control and fragmentation (Langley 2012). Within two years the first major super-heroine, Wonder Woman, joined Superman and Batman in the DC pantheon. Created by psychologist William Marston Moulton, Wonder Woman was both modelled on the Man of Steel and encoded with Marston's aspirations regarding women's empowerment. Marston saw great potential in comics as an educational medium and believed his super-heroine could be a strong and positive role model for girl readers.

Academically, the diversity of research into superheroes often indicates their chameleon-like qualities. They have been analysed through a number of disciplinary lenses, including psychoanalysis (Fingeroth 2004), semiotics (Eco 1972, Coogan 2006), myth (Reynolds 1992), audience studies (Gibson 2003), feminism (Robbins 1996) national identity

(Dittmer 2012), war and propaganda (Stromberg 2010, Murray 2011, Dipaulo 2012), death and disability (Alvaniz 2014) and religion (Garrett 2008). Kaveney (2008) has also contributed some interesting insights, not framed by theoretical materials, into comics development. Research into superheroes has, then, been fragmented so far (with a few honourable exceptions such as Coogan's work on classifying the genre [2006]).

This collection works to draw together work from a range of disciplines to indicate both the range and potential coherence of this area of study. It is predominantly derived from articles submitted to *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, but also incorporates some newly written pieces. It deliberately focuses on superheroes in comics rather than adaptations, given comics creators willingness to challenge and transgress audiences' (and their own) expectations of the superhero.

The superhero genre has, in the past, been broken down into various ages by the comics industry and collectors for marketing purposes. The traditional view identified the Golden Age as 1938-1956, the Silver Age 1956-1971, the Bronze Age 1971-1980 and the Iron Age 1980-2000 (although others have characterised 1980-present as The Dark Age). Coogan (2006) adds two ages to this definition: the Antediluvian Age before the Golden Age in which proto-superheroes emerged in pulp fiction, horror and science fiction genres and the Renaissance from 2000 to the present which re-establishes the conventions of the genre (193-194).

However, there is disagreement amongst scholars and comics audiences about the dates that constitute the artificial borders for each era. Coogan (2006) using Schatz's model of genre evolution, suggests that superhero ages are fluid. For instance, the end of the Golden Age has been identified by fans and scholars as either the end of WWII or July 1949 or 1956. These three dates represent shifts in the underlying values of the genre. Coogan (2006, 230) also identifies similar problems with the beginning and ending of the silver age concluding, 'Generic evolution is not a closed system, although it can be useful to examine it as if it were'.

Rather than dwell upon the various debates around this topic, in this collection we choose to focus on the industrial, technological, subcultural and cultural influences of the genre's development. This volume aims to contextualise the history and key discourses constructing identities in the genre, allowing exploration of how superhero identities reflect a myriad of contextual constructions. These are discussed in sections focusing on the

development of the genre, issues of race and gender and the pleasures superhero comics offer their audiences.

### **Culture, institutions, audiences and the birth of the superhero**

The cultural backgrounds of early comic book creators, changes in the publishing industry and a growing market for extraordinary heroes led to the emergence of the superhero. Jones (2004) argues that superheroes were developed by creators from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, principally Jewish artists and writers, and that they could be seen as offering outsider mentalities. Jones (2004, xv) asserts that, "[superheroes'] relationships with masculinity, sexuality, power, individuality, violence, authority, and the modern fluidity of the self were so tangled and so heartfelt that their work spoke to the anxieties of modern life more sympathetically, more completely, more acutely than they could have foreseen...." Alongside this, the publishing industry was changing through the growth of pulp and early comic book publishers in search of 'splashy novelty' (Jones 2004), something extraordinary heroes exemplified. Technically, these developments coincided with the extensive use of the four colour printing press, creating both impact and marketing.

The superhero grew out of early pulp novels and characters such as *The Shadow*, *Doc Savage* and *Zorro*. The 'pulp' magazine inspirations of Superman are well documented. For example, Steranko (1970, 19) reproduces a 1934 advert which reads 'SUPERMAN. DOC SAVAGE - man of Master Mind and Body...' He is also described as the 'Man of Bronze' which relates to Superman's 'man of steel' tagline. In addition, Savage has his 'Fortress of Solitude' in the Arctic, an idea directly lifted for Superman. Steranko (1970, 37) also cites Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, about another metahuman, as a key influence on Siegel's development of Superman between 1933 and 1938. Pulp heroes, as Coogan notes, differed from the super hero in two crucial respects: their costumes and their codenames. Pulp heroes such as *Zorro* had secret identities but unlike Batman, "the heroic identities of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or their biography" (2006, 32).

Part of the increasing academic interest in comics has been facilitated by the availability of high quality reprints and online collections of previously obscure and early titles. Some printed collections concentrate on characters as varied as 'The Flame', 'The Shield' and 'Silver Streak' (Sadowski, 2009). Others feature comparatively obscure work by well-known artists, for example, Bill Everett, the creator of *Submariner* and *Daredevil* (Bell,

2012), or rescue almost completely forgotten practitioners, such as Fletcher Hanks (Karasik, 2007).

There were, of course, early superheroes with high profiles and, financially, the most successful was Captain Marvel, created in 1940 by artist C. C. Beck and writer Bill Parker. *Whiz Comics*, of which he was the usual cover character, sold over a million copies of each issue by 1946. The comic went out of business in 1953, partially due to a long-running lawsuit by DC which claimed the character infringed Superman's copyright. This is unlikely, for Captain Marvel was, as Goulart describes him, "...a redclad gent who refused to take his profession too seriously" and whose costume, "...was adapted from that of a typical light opera soldier" (Goulart, 1990: 69). Light-hearted stories and a cartoony drawing style also made Captain Marvel distinct from Superman, as did his family, Mary Marvel and Captain Marvel Junior.

The other major superhero of this period who eschewed macho posturing was Plastic Man. Created by Jack Cole for *Police Comics* in 1942, Plastic Man, accompanied later by his sidekick, Woozy Winks, exploited the comedic possibilities of a hero who could stretch, bend, and transform himself into almost any object in his fight against crime.

The origins of early superheroes varied hugely – Superman was an alien, Captain Marvel was young Billy Batson, transformed at will by the magic word "Shazam", Plastic Man was a former criminal changed by immersion in a vat of chemicals, and Batman, through exercise and developing his skills, became the peak of human perfection. However, it could be argued that the real genesis of many superheroes was the Second World War. Even before America's entry into the conflict, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America debut appearance in 1941 showed him socking Hitler on the jaw.

Another supposedly perfect example of human development (this time chemically induced) Captain America also conformed to an increasing trope – that of the hero having a sidekick. Although many superheroes were created without a sidekick, many acquired them, such as Batman's discovery of Robin in April 1940. The comic book companies presumably hoped that these figures allowed their young audience to identify more closely with their stories, and Captain Marvel even had the advantage of being both a young boy and a mature superhero at the same time.

After the Second World War the great threats to the American way of life were identified as juvenile delinquency and communism (Gilbert 1986). A Senate hearing convened to examine juvenile delinquency in 1953 identified comics as problematic given sexual and violent content and blamed them for the perceived boom in juvenile offences. The attacks on comics from politicians, parents and the clergy were reinforced with the publication of *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) by Dr Fredric Wertham, which condemned horror and crime comics as unsuitable reading matter for children. Vigorous critiques of Wertham's methodology in academic journals (Hadju 2008, 259-260) did not prevent the instigation by the comics industry of a self-regulating system, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) (Nyberg 1998). In addition, Wertham specifically criticised superhero comics: Superman was labelled fascist and sadistic, Batman and Robin were described as covert homosexuals and Wonder Woman was supposedly terrifying as Wertham argued, 'superwoman (Wonder Woman) is always a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel "phallic" woman. Whilst she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be.' (P.34). The CCA forced the superhero genre to become bland and it seemed redundant. One exception to this was the successful parody of Captain Marvel and Superman, 'Superduperman', published in the fourth issue of *Mad* (April-May 1953) which transformed their approach to narrative in having specific targets for lampooning.

In the late 1950s DC successfully revised their superheroes, starting with *The Flash* (Infantino, 1958). Barry Allen, a police scientist in a dynamic red costume, was offered instead of the earlier Jay Garrick, modelled on Mercury the Roman God of speed. As a result, a new publisher, Timely (who became Marvel) were inspired to develop their own heroes. The narratives reflected issues in the real world, and the characters were full of *angst* and anger. For instance, *Spider-Man* was worn down by poverty, an ailing aunt and bullying at school, *The Fantastic Four* were a dysfunctional family and the *X-Men* were teenagers shunned by society. These narratives became metaphors for the alienated outsider. Marvel also introduced serialised storylines and crossovers in several superhero titles to encourage readers to buy into the Marvel universe. In addition, they introduced a fan club, The Merry Marvel Marching Society, thus creating a more coherent sense of community, along with the developing comicon and science fiction communities. Further, they addressed mature issues such as drug abuse in *Spider-Man* (1968) which went so far as to dispense with the CCA

logo. DC responded with more adult themes in the early 1970s with comics such as *Green Arrow/Green Lantern* where the heroes made an *Easy Rider* type journey across America dealing with racial, ethnic, feminist and drug related issues.

Given the shift to adult themes, it should be no surprise that even superhero parodies might take on similarly 'real world' issues. This was particularly the case with *Howard the Duck* from Marvel who first appeared in 1973. Trapped on human-dominated Earth, Howard's adventures were generally social satires, For example, a narrative about the presidential campaign of 1976 resulted in Howard garnering postal votes in the actual election. Even underground comics could not ignore the superhero, producing out-and-out parodies, such as Gilbert Shelton's 'Wonder Wart-hog' (the hog of steel) and Spain's counter-cultural hero 'Trashman' in the 1960s.

In the 1980s the publishers and creators began to deconstruct the concept of the superhero and review the over-complex universes they had developed. DC repackaged their heroes in *The Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1986), a huge story arc in which some characters were killed off and Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were revised.

Another key shift in the 1980s was the way that marketing came to have a significant influence on the distribution, narratives and cross-media promotion of superheroes. Comics were rebranded as graphic novels, a move aimed to raise the cultural credibility of the medium. One of the first of these, *The Death of Captain Marvel* (Starlin 2002) dwelt upon the powerlessness of the hero in the face of cancer. In fact, death became a major tool in selling comics, for instance, in the ground-breaking Dark Phoenix saga in *The X-Men* in which long-standing team member, Jean Grey, became a menace to the galaxy and committed suicide. However, the most successful death-related marketing promotion was in 1992 when DC killed Superman (Jurgens 1993) and the character did not appear in comics for over a year. The story arc was a filler to ensure that the wedding of Lois Lane and Clark Kent would coincide with their nuptials in the television series, *The Lois and Clark Show* (1993-7). However, it turned into one of the highest profile story arcs in comics history.

Yet more influential in the future development of comics were two texts of this era; *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller 1986) and *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986). Both graphic novels were visions of dystopian societies in which the heroes' values, morality and vigilante status were questioned. The growing independent comics companies of the era such as Image and Dark Horse were inspired by these titles. Consequently, their superheroes and

super-heroines were more violent (the latter also became more sexualised in Bad Girl comics) and the tales darker (a reason the era was dubbed The Dark Age by some). Masculinity and femininity in these narratives became hyperbolic. Male musculature and female breasts were exaggerated, bodies became longer and heads smaller.

Alongside these shifts was the merger of global media corporations and the rapid expansion of media technologies. DC and Marvel were taken over by Warner Brothers (DC) and Disney (Marvel) and their superhero titles disseminated across media platforms including films, television, video games and animation to diverse global audiences. For instance, Marvel repackaged *Spider-Man* to market in India and DC repackaged characters such as Wonder Woman as an anim .

However, these changes did not replace the strong independent superhero traditions in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Reflecting this, our collection includes research on *The 99*, a comic featuring Islamic superheroes. In addition, many Indian superheroes are derived from Hindu characters, such as *Nagraj* and *Super Commando Dhruva*. In Japan, manga has spawned several superhero franchises such as *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* and *Kinnikuman*, both adapted for television and anim . There are also strong traditions in Latin America such as *Kaliman* (Mexico) and *Black* (Chile) (<http://comicblack.wix.com/english>). Online comics such as the latter may serve to disseminate these great characters beyond national boundaries.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century other technological elements became significant. CGOI technology propelled more superhero narratives into other media and there was a preponderance of Marvel universe spinoffs, such as recent television show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Further, cinema has produced intriguing superhero concepts that interrogate the genre's tropes, for example, around the role of villains (*Despicable Me*, *The Incredibles*, *Megamind*).

In turn, these and other, yet more challenging themes, have been developed in comics such as Mark Waid's *Irredeemable* and *Incorruptable* which explored the ethics of ultimate power, and titles such as Rick Veitch's *Brat Pack* which focused on child grooming and the sidekick. Other themes include the regulation of heroes and their powers (Marvel *Civil War* [various], *The Boys* [Ennis 2008], and gender (*The Cobweb* [Gebbie in Moore 2002], *Promethea* [Moore 2000], *Glamazonia the Uncanny Super Tranny* [Hall and Thompson



2012]). All this serves to suggest how the various media responding to the superhero genre internationally develop in relation to each other.

### **Superhero identities: fluidity, fantasy and genre**

In a genre of such longevity it is inevitable that the superhero will reflect identities from a cultural and historical point of view. The superhero is defined by fragmented and fluid identities (Jackson 1981), split personalities and blurred lines between good and evil. Such fragmentation of identity was explored at length by Freud, Jung, Lacan and others and their ideas about an ideal identity image that is unattainable to ordinary people is a perfect model to express the split identity of the superhero and their alter egos.

The secret identity is an integral part of the superhero genre, presenting a "structured need" within the genre in which abstinence from the revelation of individual empowerment acts as a taboo that pays for supreme power (Reynolds 1994). Thus, in the Clark Kent/Superman model the alter ego is weak and feminized in comparison with the masculinized, assertive superhero, demonstrating to the reader the dilemma of the man-god/hero in their guise of the ordinary. This has been argued, by Smith (2009, 126), for instance, as indicating how the superhero is aligned with "divided subjectivities in modern society", such as those of stars and celebrities. Further, Bukatman (2003) suggests the musical star's body reflects a similar function to that of the superhero in that it is expressive and performative.

The multiple identities of superheroes have been reinterpreted through temporal, industrial and audience discourses and, significantly, by multiple comics writers and artists. This has resulted a constant revisiting of the origin story in each new era, so reflecting its values and audiences. As a consequence, readers/viewers tend to feel that the hero they grew up with is the core hero (Brooker 2000). As Brooker argues, in this situation there is no Ur text, as the Batman considered the core hero could be Frank Miller's Dark Knight, Bob Kane and Bill Finger's *noir* detective, the camp 1960s Adam West or the revisionist Denny O' Neal and Neal Adams dark detective of the 1970s. He could also be Grant Morrison's multi-faceted hero reincarnated through the ages to fight for justice as a privateer, a knight or a vampire.

As the Batman list, above, suggests, it could be argued that superhero comics are mostly produced by and for mainly masculine audiences. Dick Giordano, the vice president of DC, for instance, admitted that audience profiles were, "...between 17 and 26...over 90% of

the time is male" (McCue 1993: 101). Super-heroines, then, have revealing costumes, similar to their male counterparts, but with the added spice of sex and fetishism.

Research into super-heroines in comics concentrates on two themes: gendered identities and their representation within industrial and subcultural contexts. Issues around representation result, in part, from the conception of the first major female character, Wonder Woman, who became a paradigm for many of the female characters of the 1940s. Her creator, William Moulton Marston's encoding of his own beliefs about dominance, submission and female empowerment and Harry Peters's illustrations inspired by pin up art of the 1930s, in turn influenced Good Girl art with its emphasis on bondage and fetishism.

Robbins' (1996) history of the representation and misrepresentation of strong female characters in comics notes that they are always tempered by masculine creators' preconceptions of how women should behave. Thus, in the 1960s Supergirl, is described as, "at heart...as gentle and sweet and is quick to tears...as any ordinary girl". Similarly, Marvel created female characters who exhibit stereotypical characteristics like vanity, weakness maternal/housewife behaviour, and a love of shopping. The Bad Girl subgenre, a modern response to the Good Girls of the 1940s, changed this in the late 1980s. The subgenre arose from what Robbins describes as "circular logic", "editors at the major comics companies continue to produce sex object-heroines which appeal to a male audience. Their excuse for not adding strong female characters who might appeal to women is that, 'women don't read comics'" (2006, 166).

Strong women existed in comics largely before their representation in film and television even if filtered through masculine creators' misconceptions of female identity. Comics scholarship, however, has often lagged behind film and cultural studies debate on this topic. The debate on gaze theory and spectatorship was instigated by Laura Mulvey's flawed but highly influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey proposed that the patriarchal construction of the film industry objectified women's bodies in two ways: scopophilia and fetishism. The woman's body was constructed to be looked at interdiegetically but also by the male audiences. Mulvey's argument was based upon the cinematic apparatus as central to the disempowerment of women, so, while there is no doubt that women are objectified in superhero comics, the two media forms are experienced in different circumstances and utilise different reading practices.

Good Girl and Bad Girl comics have been incorporated into an ongoing debate about strong female warrior figures in popular culture (Innes 1999; Tasker 2004; Heineken 2003; Brown 2011). Much of this debate surrounds the gender characteristics of female heroes asking if images of strong, aggressive, but fetishized female bodies function as good role models for girls, cheesecake for boys or pseudo-males. The work of Judith Butler (1990; 1991) can be useful to deconstruct notions of gender as she proposes that it is culturally constructed and understood through performance. Another useful argument is that of Brown who uses a model based upon the reconciliation of male and female elements, arguing that the Bad Girl, "personifies a unity of disparate traits in a single figure" (49). Comics scholarship has, in recent times, been able to draw on these approaches. For instance, in this collection, Murray and Brown focus on super-heroines as maternal figures and Beerman analyses the empowerment of the female character.

The debate initiated by feminism, especially third wave feminism, also inspired a rethinking of masculine and queer identities. Both masculinity and femininity have been extensively discussed through queer perspectives. Masculinity has been increasingly examined since the 1990s. Writers such as Berger et al (1995) assert that '...gender is constructed, that is, who we are is shaped by historical circumstances and social discourses, and not primarily by random biology' (3). The complications of a constructed masculinity within a patriarchal society have been examined, but little has been written about the superhero. This is perhaps surprising as superheroes, in the main, display 'idealised', often exaggerated, bodies. One of the few to comment upon this, Reynolds, states that:

'The male superheroes embody a correspondingly exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal, which puts them, in the fetish stakes, on a par with many of the superheroines' (81)

At first glance it might appear that the superhero represents an overt and extreme macho 'masculinity'. However, there are several problems with such an assertion, including the diversity of superhero figures that have appeared since 1938, with vastly different body shapes and ethnic backgrounds. Yet more significant, however, is that many have an alter ego who demonstrates an intellectual, even 'feminine' side to their character. Even if simply highlighting their masculine super deeds it still necessitates the hero behaving in reasoned, even gentle manner, something which could be seen as an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of masculinity. Easthope (1990), however, maintains that:

‘Stories like Superman force a boy to choose between a better self that is masculine and only masculine and another everyday self that seems feminine. Because behaviour is so important at this stage, masculine and feminine are strongly coded as social actions,’ (28)

All the same, whatever the nature of their masculinity, Superman and Batman in particular, with their missing fathers, are rich territory for psychoanalytic theorists.

Another key point regarding masculinity is that for the most part, the main target audience of superhero comics has been a comparatively young one, resulting in superheroes with an unfulfilled, or ambiguous, sex life. Whatever more recent revisions suggest, the essential core of Superman and Batman stories leaves them unmarried and childless. Thus the masculinity of the superhero could be seen as largely channelled into the violence that critics like Wertham (1954) found so troubling. In addition, despite their recruitment into the fight against the Nazis, the superhero also carried undertones to Wertham of the ‘perfect male’ espoused in Nazi Germany, suggesting that Superman’s enemies might be seen as racially inferior to him, and perhaps less masculine. This is, of course, ironic, given that the Superman is an alien invented by Jewish creators. Another spectre such figures raise is that of eugenics. Hack (2009) has pointed out that Captain America (Steve Rogers) in particular with his, ‘...humble background – poor, weak, and pursuing what would have been perceived by some...as a “sissy” ambition – made Rogers an ideal candidate for a eugenic makeover’ (80). This theme was discussed explicitly in Captain America narrative *Truth: Red White and Black* (Morales and Baker 2004) where black soldiers are forced to become guinea pigs for the super-soldier serum that turned Steve Rogers into Captain America.

A further aspect of discussion about masculinity in this genre, is that the meaning of masculinity is, in itself, ambiguous at best. Wertham asserted that there were homo-erotic overtones in the relationship between Batman and Robin, and Medhurst (1991) pointed out that Batman, ‘...was one of the first fictional characters to be attacked on the grounds of presumed homosexuality’ (150). Further, the 1960s Batman television series was concerned enough about the supposed slur on Batman’s sexuality that the Aunt Harriet character was introduced into the Wayne household to mitigate against any resurgence of Wertham’s argument. Nevertheless the series was underpinned by a ‘camp’ sensibility as were the comics contemporary to that television version. Whilst explicitly forbidden to portray ‘sex perversion’ or ‘illicit sex relations’ ... they ‘display such a sense of camp and double-

entendre that it is difficult, certainly after reading the interpretations which Wertham made public, not to see a wryly playful subtext...' (Brooker 2011: 27-28)

In the final analysis, whatever the intentions of writer and artist, in a world of postmodern confusion and after 'the death of the author' the audience for any given superhero can read the meaning of the hero's masculinity in any way they choose, no matter how much 'against the grain' that interpretation might be.



Figure 1 Mark Eden and Shaenon K. Garrity (2010) "One to Glam On..." in *Glamazonia the Uncanny Super Tranny*. San Francisco: Northwest Press:p.88.

Recently, however, creators have worked explicitly with notions of masculinity and queer identities as, for instance, with the X-Men's 'Northstar' in the 1990s, discussed by Schott in this collection. Being gay does not, of course, exclude a hero from being tough, intelligent, and violent when required, as Marvel comics' Rawhide Kid underlined, unlike the 1960s Batman series. There has been little research and writing on gayness and the superhero but there is huge potential in this area, especially in the independent and small press in which characters have no problem in 'coming out'. For instance, *Glamazonia the Uncanny Super-Tranny* (Hall 2010) revels in her image when explaining the complexity of the term "gay", "Gay doesn't really cover me, dahling. It's officially LGBTIQQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, queer]" (88). In addition, and returning to Batman, *Glamazonia* explains the diversity of *gSpandex: Fast and Hard* (Eden 2012) makes playful allusion to the homoerotic debate instigated by Wertham through the comic's relationship between Bearman and Twinkle (figure 2).



Figure 2 *Spandex: Fast and Hard*. Mark Eden (2012: 23). Parodying Batman and Robin even down to the body postures.

As inferred above, culturally, issues of race are often connected with the origins of superheroes and their creators. This is reflected in research as, for instance, Superman and Wonder Woman have been analysed as immigrants; Superman for his Jewish roots

(Fingerroth 2007, Kaplan 2008) and Wonder Woman, reconciling Amazon exotica with American ideals (Gordon and Sewell 2001, Pitkethly 2009). However, as Madison (2013) suggests, American rhetoric welcoming the immigrant to a land of opportunity and equality sits uneasily with the fear of outsiders represented in pulps and comics. In addition, the white Anglo-Saxon body is represented as an ideal aligned with patriotism and American identity. Unsurprisingly, the two types depicted in a derogatory manner especially in World War 2 were Asians, especially the Japanese, and 'brutish Huns'. Where antagonists in earlier superhero comics were mad scientists, corrupt politicians and millionaires, from the beginning of the 1940s racialised imagery was used to unite American audiences in the war effort (Wright 42-3).

From the 1970s a growing number of superheroes reflected the Civil Rights agenda with different ethnicities (Luke Cage, Storm from the X-Men, John Stewart the Green Lantern). More contemporaneous superheroes have been examined in Brown's analysis of Milestone Media which specialised in representing African American superheroes. Depictions of positive black role models, Brown (2001) suggests, enabled fans to negotiate their identities through their reflections on the characters. Clearly, much more research must be done on race and superheroes. However, there remain few black superheroes as Singer (2002) notes, reflecting on the necessity of simplification through amplification and the genre's 'history of excluding, trivializing, or 'tokenizing' minorities' (107) which resulted in the construction of heroes whose main characteristic was regarded as race. Articles in this section demonstrate the potential for more diverse approaches aligning race with debates on history, political correctness and gender. It begins with Gavalier's article connecting superhero origins with the Klu Klux Klan, uniting the themes of eugenics and race discussed above. In addition, Cunningham ponders on why there are so few black super-villains and Shirin examines the representations of Muslim women in the wake of 9/11.

## **Audiences**

Work on audiences around any kind of comic is infrequent compared to studies of texts, creators and publishing practices, as Barker (1989) flagged up. In the past, most research around audiences for all comics tended to be driven by teachers or librarians and positioned readers, particularly younger ones, as at risk from what they were reading. These media effects arguments sometimes emerged from writing in which researchers talked to

readers, such as that by Pumphrey (1954, 1955, 1964) but, typically, depicted readers as victims, dupes or delinquents.

This volume, along with articles from the special issue of the *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* on audiences (2011), and others, offer much needed scrutiny that moves beyond the majority of historical critical writing about audiences. This collection, in focusing on different approaches to audience with regard to a specific genre, indicates a few of the many ways in which one can approach this area of research. The chapters also demonstrate that Comics Studies has developed as a multi and interdisciplinary space in that they emerge from Education, Literature and Media and Cultural Studies.

Few writers have engaged specifically with readers in relation to superhero comics, although there are some notable exceptions. One key example is Pustz's (1999) *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*. It can be argued that given the expansion of comic book culture since the publication of that research, Putstz's exploration of what was then characterised as a largely non-visible world could usefully be revisited. Changing views of reading comics, fandom, and the importance of the filmic representations of the superhero make some of the Putstz's discussions perhaps more significant as historical accounts. However, Pustz remains important in flagging up the notion of the comic book store as cultural space, in indicating shifts in the notion of the 'mainstream' with regard to superhero comics and showing the change in perceptions and usage of the term 'fanboy'. Other writing in this area includes further work by Barker (1993) in analysing fans of *2000AD* (1993) and an individual fascist fan of anti-hero 'Judge Dredd' (1997) so opening up debates about the diverse ways in which readers may approach texts. In addition, Nyberg (1995) and Gibson (2003) analysed the appeal of superhero titles to female readers and empirical studies of British women readers respectively.

Fandom has developed into a large number of national and international networks, often initially generated by the activity of specific fans, through swapping, selling, publishing fanzines, attending conventions and discussing and publicising events. Many of the earlier specialist comic shops were developed by fans as individual commitments. Gabilliet (2010) argues that there are diverse ways of engaging with comics, and in developing this argument Rogers (2012) identifies three groups of comic book fans, 'collectors, who value comics primarily as commodity objects; readers, who use comics as a consumable; and reader-savers who both consume and collect comics '(153).



In what ways, then, may the audience be significant in relation to research about the superhero comic? One element is apparent in the role of the reader in contributing feedback through letters to editors. These letters, whether generated by editors to stimulate discussion, or from readers themselves, offer important routes into understanding how readers understood these texts, their sense of ownership and their relationship with publishers.

Equally, the space of the specialist comic shop and the way it is used by readers is an significant space for enquiry. Such stores, in re-locating purchasing, can be read as isolating comics from a wider audience, and as developing fan audiences further. However, as Woo (2011) suggests, they offer the opportunity to explore cultural practices within a rich and diverse community. In contrast, Swafford (2012) uses critical ethnography to explore a specific comic shop and the way that it acts as a 'cultural clubhouse' (296-297) arguing that the practices within the space exhibit a 'members only' perspective (298).

Further, there is scope to explore the multiple constructions of stereotype, text, the 'real' reader and the implied reader. Whilst it can be argued that actual audiences for most comic genres are more diverse than is typically claimed, as Gibson (2003) stated in relation to gender, the cliché and stereotype of the reader/fan has long been established as a dominant discourse, exemplified, perhaps by 'Comic Book Guy' in *The Simpsons*, who is obsessed with continuity and continuity errors. Whilst there is some truth in this stereotype, given that letters about errors in both images and narrative were sent to editors (generating 'no-prizes', for example, at Marvel) Woo (2011) and Botzakis (2011) show the limitations. One explores the ways in which notions of comic book worlds and continuity link with theoretical and personal narratives, the other shows how comic book stores act as communities of practice, spaces for interaction and as both subcultural and public spaces.

One can contrast the stereotypical 'Comic Book Guy' with the characters of television show *The Big Bang Theory* (TBBT) which also works with cultural practices around comics and notions of the 'geek'. The genre of the superhero comic is significant here, with, for example, the character of Sheldon Cooper frequently wearing superhero tee-shirts (often 'Green Lantern' and 'Aquaman'). Brown (2012) discusses this practice as 'how comic book superheroes function for fans as a crystallization of ideals and beliefs and how these concepts are expressed through subcultural fashions' (282). TBBT juxtaposes the characters and their fears, skills and emotional complexity with those of the superheroes they admire, so giving an indication of the deep relationships discussed by Botzakis (2011) and Brown (2012).

Botzakis notes that sometimes the words or actions of a comic book character are used to voice a personal truth. In that sense, this comedy show articulates practices suggestive of what informs elements of academic research with 'real' readers.

Another significant element of research around audiences could focus on creators as fans, whether of their peers or of earlier creators, given that comics are a very self-reflexive medium. Figures like Superman, Wonder Woman and The X-Men, with their extensive histories, offer writers and artists the opportunity to respond to previous work. Indeed, graphic novel, *It's a Bird...* (Seagle 2004) talks about the challenge of writing Superman and the potential struggle involved in moving from the role of fan to that of creator. In addition, creator-fans may refer back to runs by creators they particularly admire, or reject previous versions. In such cases, they are working within an historical and cultural set of understandings of the figures, their personal reading history and preferences, and their persona as contemporary creators.

In summary, audiences and fandom are an area which this collection addresses through flagging up earlier work in the area in relation to genre, but also opening up some new spaces for critical work. Whilst we artificially divided superhero representations from audiences, the two categories are connected through superheroes' continuing appeal to their audiences and impact of the fan upon comics narratives.

This brief introduction identifies the main areas of research in the area and contextualises them within the development of the genre. This collection provides some unique insights into spaces that have not yet been substantially researched and, in some cases, suggest new areas of interest. There are many topics that need more scrutiny, such as superheroes within national and global contexts; particularly those of Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Other future research areas in need of development are disability, death, race, superheroes in underground and indie comics, and super-heroines.

Superheroes, as we have indicated, are ubiquitous, telling us something about contemporary life in nearly every society on the planet. They enable us to express our identities, our empowerment or disempowerment, our understanding of politics, violence, sexuality, race and national identities. Given this, it is inevitable that we should find them of continuing fascination.

**Acknowledgement: The editors would like to thank Roger Sabin for his advice and support.**

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<sup>1</sup> Images of the superheroes discussed in this introduction are spread throughout the book, so the editors chose to focus on creators in the introduction not flagged up otherwise.