

ELLEN KIRKPATRICK

RECOVERING THE RADICAL PROMISE OF SUPERHEROES

UN/MAKING WORLDS



RECOVERING THE RADICAL PROMISE OF SUPERHEROES

BEFORE YOU START TO READ THIS BOOK, take this moment to think about making a donation to punctum books, an independent non-profit press,

@ <https://punctumbooks.com/support/>

If you're reading the e-book, you can click on the image below to go directly to our donations site. Any amount, no matter the size, is appreciated and will help us to keep our ship of fools afloat. Contributions from dedicated readers will also help us to keep our commons open and to cultivate new work that can't find a welcoming port elsewhere. Our adventure is not possible without your support.

Vive la Open Access.



Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

RECOVERING THE RADICAL PROMISE OF SUPERHEROES: UN/MAKING WORLDS.
Copyright © 2023 by Ellen Kirkpatrick. This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform, and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2023 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
<https://punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-108-5 (print)
ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-109-2 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0353.1.00

LCCN: 2023940799
Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Hatim Eujayl and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei
Cover design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei


spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion



HIC SVNT MONSTRA

ELLEN KIRKPATRICK

**RECOVERING THE
RADICAL PROMISE
OF SUPERHEROES
UN/MAKING WORLDS**



Contents

Prologue

Origins: Tall Tales and Tell Tales

15

Chapter 1

*Medleys of Meaning and Meaning Makers:
Control, Regulation, and Resistance*

53

*Part 1. Making Superhero Texts Mean:
Charting Hostile Waters*

55

*Part 2. Making Superhero Texts Mean:
Surfing Hostile Waters*

103

Chapter 2

Transformation = Representation = Worldmaking

133

Chapter 3

Lost Promise: A Nexus of Possibility

183

Chapter 4
Texcapology: Origins and Territories
235

Chapter 5
“Everyone’s got their own story”:
Materializing Superhero Praxis
273

Chapter 6
“I am a superhero”;
or, A Casting Call (to Arms)
311

Epilogue
Endings: Recovering Radical Promise
349

Bibliography
359

For my beloved, Iain

*You start a question, and it's like starting a stone. You sit
quietly on top of a hill; and away the stone goes...*

— R.L. Stevenson

*But when it comes to getting words on the page, you can
only work breath by breath, line by line.*

— Hilary Mantel

*I don't care about the clothes you wear; it's the size of
your heart, not the length of your hair...*

— Suicidal Tendencies

PROLOGUE

Origins: Tall Tales and Tell Tales

So, what were comic-book superheroes, really?

— Grant Morrison, *Supergods*¹

So, superheroes, male and female ... what is a superhero?

— Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes*²

Un/Making Worlds: A “Just-So” Story

I begin this book with a confession and a question.

American superhero comics are not my go-to comics.³ As with many Irish and British children of the 1970s and 1980s, I was charmed by the spectacle of American superheroes. I have

1 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 217.

2 Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 4.

3 I make this clarification because, while the superhero genre is an expansive global affair, American versions and markets dominate the genre. See *An International Catalogue of Superheroes*, <http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/>, and Rayna Denison and Rachel Mizsei-Ward, eds., *Superheroes on World Screens* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015). I focus on the us because I wish to critique established, mainstream ideas about

blurry memories of watching Richard Donner's *Superman* and being smitten with the idea of superheroes and supervillains, but I never came into enough contact with them to fall properly in love. That would come later. As a child and young teen, I was captivated instead by British and European comics. *The Dandy*, *The Boons*, and *The Adventures of Tintin* were my gateway to *2000AD*, *Warrior*, *Misty*, *Escape*, and *Crisis*, and it wasn't long before I was charging around town trying to pick up old copies of *Action* and *Métal Hurlant*, even though, alongside charity shops and second-hand bookstores, the only comic book shop I had access to at that time — Belfast's intimidating and seedy Impulse Comics — was on the wrong side of everything.

My comics and zines of choice were overtly anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, irreligious, violent, and anarchic. And I loved them. They felt, as did the act of acquiring them, disruptive and subversive, leaving me with dirty hands and a seditious mind. American superhero comics were always there, somewhere in the background, but compared to the titles I was reading, they felt tame and reactionary. Until, that is, the British Invasion of American comics during the mid- to late 1980s. A time that forced all interested parties to reconsider one of the genre's big-ticket questions: What is a superhero? A question that, like all good ones, prompted another, which I'll get to later: What if superheroes were different? It also, in a wider sense, provoked interrogative reinterpretations of comic books and comic book creators. Writing about the British Invasion, Greg Carpenter asserts that

the most radical change in the medium during the '80s didn't come from the independent "art comics" [...]. What changed in the '80s was the mainstream [fantasy, war, horror, crime, superhero] — the genre comics that had largely defined the medium for the better part of a century. And the elevation of some of those mainstream comics from serialized, ado-

superheroes and superhero fans, and the US market is the largest site not just of superheroes but of mainstream superheroes.

lescent soap opera to literary art provides the real demarcation point for the medium. It's easy to dismiss something like *Maus* as the exception to the rule — a comic that's not *really* a comic — but when the genre stories like *Watchmen*, which fully participate in all the tropes of the superhero genre, demonstrate levels of complexity and cultural relevancy that surpass most novels, plays, and films, then the medium of comics has clearly evolved.⁴

The recruitment of some of my favorite writers by DC Comics — at that time, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Peter Milligan — reignited my interest in American superheroes, an interest that soon went beyond the British revisionist superhero work to give me a surprising passion for, and intellectual interest in, all kinds of American superheroes. I finally “got” them. I began to see, appreciate, and assert what I have come to think of as the radical promise of superheroes. And that's how it was for a time — alongside my other comics and zines, I read and enjoyed American superhero comics. Until one languorous fall afternoon, leafing through some well-thumbed back issues, most likely old *Hulk*, *X-Men*, or *Batman* titles, things began to unravel. Feeling the rush of an epiphany that took the form of a question, I wondered: If the American superhero genre is so radical and full of possibilities, as much of the genre's surrounding discourse suggests, then why does it feel so reactionary in practice?⁵ Why, when I am reading, watching, or (cos)playing superhero texts, do the worlds around me not *feel* like progressive or even ideologically disruptive spaces? On that long-ago afternoon, with its low-slung sun, I started to query my bond with the American superhero genre, wondering why I, a fierce, queer feminist, was engaging with, and indirectly supporting,

4 Greg Carpenter, *The British Invasion: Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, and the Invention of the Modern Comic Book Writer* (Edwardsville: Sequart Organization, 2016), 6.

5 “Genre discourse” here and throughout this book functions as an inclusive phrase, one referring to all kinds of fan and intellectual engagement with the genre.

this troublesome genre. Why not, I thought, focus on, support, and intellectually engage with more openly progressive comics and zines like Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* or *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez brothers and ditch the toxic American superhero genre? Even with all its problems, the British comics scene has, in Halo Jones, Tank Girl, Judge Anderson, and Tyranny Rex, strong female characters. As indeed does the American superhero genre, but even in a declaredly modern "feminist" iteration, such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), we see the swift abandonment of the character's, and the genre's, radical potential.⁶ In comics continuity, Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Diana Prince, is widely read as a gay or bisexual character, and, over the years many creators have ably presented queer visions of Diana's sexuality, including Morrison and Greg Rucka. Indeed, both Morrison's and Rucka's acclaimed versions were released just a year before Patty Jenkins's heteronormative reverie, *Wonder Woman*.⁷

Snapshot: *Wonder Woman* (2017)

Released in 2017, *Wonder Woman* gave Jenkins the opportunity to reimagine the Amazonian princess for a new age and a new audience. Yet in this origin story, Diana's heterosexuality is quickly established, as is the heterosexist gaze. Race too is overlooked, as are the intersectional possibilities of the Amazonian world Diana calls home, Themyscira or Paradise Island. There is no mention of Nubia, Diana's Black half-sister. Nor is there sight of any other Black women, or any other women of color, once Diana leaves Themyscira, not to mention the problematic representation of the few Black female Amazonian characters that we do see. A blanket of whiteness covers the film once Diana reaches the "world of men." The film's commitment to patriar-

6 Patty Jenkins, dir., *Wonder Woman* (Warner Bros., 2017).

7 Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette, *Wonder Woman: Earth One* (New York: DC Comics, 2016), and Greg Rucka et al., *Wonder Woman* (New York: DC Comics, 2016).

chal and chauvinistic narrative traditions (e.g., the marginalization of all female characters except the exceptional Diana) and dominant power relations, notably around race, including unobserved whiteness, as well as its broad observance of delimiting stereotypes, as in the Native American character, “Chief,” further dilutes the radicalism of Wonder Woman’s storyworld. Against these kinds of charges—often overlooked within mainstream coverage of the film but very present within fan responses, particularly those of female fans of color—Jenkins’s film is widely hailed as a victory for feminist storytelling and lauded as a legitimate alternative to the glut of traditional, male-dominated superhero films.⁸ More broadly too, Wonder Woman herself is routinely and unproblematically positioned within comics and film traditions as something of a radical reimagining of American superheroes, that is, one that is not male.

Here we glimpse something of the divergent forces and voices shaping the genre’s meaningscape, one shot through with contradictions and oppositions. As the Wonder Woman characterization demonstrates, the genre is full of radical ideas, like a peace-loving female warrior from a queer, multiracial, separatist community of self-sufficient women. Ideas with the potential to challenge or disrupt current hegemony. But, as I illustrate, the potential radicalism of these tales, and their protagonists, is routinely lost in the telling. And yet the genre is still imagined and celebrated as an uncomplicated archive of progressive, liberal, and radical ideas and practices. Superheroes (are thought to) trouble borders and normative ways of seeing and being in the world. Superhero narratives (are thought to) represent, and thereby inspire, alternative visions of the real world. The superhero genre is (thought to be) a repository for radical and progressive ideas. A status conferred and confirmed by an ever-

8 See, for example, Cameron Glover, “Why ‘Wonder Woman’ Is Bittersweet for Black Women,” *Harpers Bazaar*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a9992873/wonderwoman-black-women-erasure/>, and Kadeen Griffiths, “No, ‘Wonder Woman’ Wasn’t a Victory for ALL Women,” *Bustle*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/p/wonder-womans-feminism-is-strong-as-hell-but-its-notintersectional-62798>.

growing and vital body of discourse drawing out connections with minoritarian subjectivities and lived experiences.⁹ Indeed, much is made of the genre's utopian and dystopian landscapes, queer identity-play, and transforming bodies, but to me, it has always felt as though the genre's overblown normative framing, or representation, serves to muzzle rather than express its protagonists' radical promise. The dogmatic representation of stable identity categories — so much stability in the face of so much flux — is a curious paradox. Why, when set against otherwise unbounded and often extreme transformations — human to machine, human to animal, human to god — are certain categories seemingly untouchable? Surprisingly, for all their non-conformity, superhero stories do not match the description of a radical genre in look, feel, or tone. The superhero genre and its surrounding discourse tell and facilitate an astonishingly seamless tale of opposing ideologies. But, how?

Un/Making Worlds serves as an answer to this question — a speculative journaling, or journeying, that details not so much a hunt for genre meaning as a trip through a genre's meaning-scape. Defined by dualistic and oppositional traditions and patterns, genre discourse — the story of a genre — has, I contend, fallen into something of a rut. But one we can escape by looking anew at superhero meaning and meaning-making practices. This book takes just such a look, and in so doing, it presents a distinct way of thinking about and describing the ideological and creative, or formal, condition of the genre and its protagonists, one removed from corralling binaries. (Indeed, one line of my argument holds that the pervasive binary conditioning of the genre works to obscure and contain the genre's radical promise. And further that the protagonists' radicalism is per-

9 These kinds of statements echo popular ideas about the genre's radical and progressive tendencies, ideas critiqued within this book. I do not necessarily dispute these readings (e.g., Bruce Banner does become the monstrous Hulk, and in so doing crosses the human/monster fault line, and so forth). I argue, instead, that such accounts do not always consider the deleterious impact of mainstream representation on these kinds of transformations. As we shall see, much is lost in translating concept into representation.

missible precisely because it is contained within oppositions that ultimately reaffirm cultural hegemony.)

As affirmed in Chapter 2, its distinct approach stems from an, until now, untheorized observation of contradictions between (radical) concept and (orthodox) representation, that is, the possibility of a divergence in meaning (making). This creates an alternative way of perceiving superhero meaning and meaning-making practices, one that foregrounds the idea of an often unseen, uneasy, and even hostile synergy between official and unofficial agents of superhero meaning and one that moves us away from binary relationships and conclusions. Crucially, it allows me to approach familiar questions from a new angle. What kinds of meaning do superhero texts engender? How is this meaning made? By whom and under what conditions? What processes and practices inform, regulate, and extend superhero meaning? And finally, it presents a new question: How might we reimagine its agents, surfaces, and spaces?

As one might imagine, there is no authorial, declarative conclusion on the genre's ideological meaning coming down the track. But there is an arrival: the emergence of an alternative way of seeing and mapping the genre's meaningscape. As I discuss next, superhero fans and scholars habitually acknowledge genre meaning as multivocal and shaped by differently empowered meaning makers, yet many find the lure, the comfort, of binary thinking irresistible. To my mind, however, genre meaning is not anchored in one place or another, not in superhero fans, scholars, or creators, nor in black-and-white conservatism nor in a rainbow of progressive possibilities. Nor is it even located somewhere in the in-between. Rather, it resides in, and simultaneously flows through, all locations.

Notions of oppositions, doubleness, and liminality affect not only characterizations, narratives, and creative traditions but also the genre's formal and ideological condition and critique.¹⁰ Genre meaning can read as both radical and conserva-

10 A central conceit of the superhero figure and the superhero genre is to appear as one thing but be capable of being another. Superheroes have

tive — progressive and reactionary — yet, within superhero culture, it is consistently treated as either one or the other. From many instances in the field of superhero studies, I draw a brief example. Invoking Michel Foucault, Ramzi Fawaz sees meaning, or “interpretative possibilities,” as “emerging within a field of dynamic interactions and antagonisms between competing actors who exercise power in different ways that ultimately shape and proliferate *multiple* meanings and interpretative possibilities around a text.”¹¹ Yet Fawaz ultimately concludes that the superhero figure evolved “from a nationalist champion to a figure of radical difference.”¹² Not an unusual schema for genre discourse. Indeed, my own querying of genre meaning reflects the pull of oppositional thinking, in my case, around the genre as appearing full of radical possibilities but feeling more reactionary in practice, that is, as appearing as one thing or another: a dissonance implying an oppositionality (*either* radical *or* reactionary, *either* possibilities *or* praxis) but also, as I would come to discover, the nebulous possibility of betweenness (*both* radical and reactionary, *both* possibilities and praxis), a dissonance that can be resolved by taking a stance or claiming a position. But as I thought more about my question and about how I might begin to answer it, I began to fear the limitations, the borders, that oppositional thinking would bring to my exploration of the genre’s unruly meaningscape. (Binaristic ordering can, for example, create an unrepresentative and unhelpful air of knowability, surety, and stability.) I began to understand that my work would not attempt to corral genre meaning as one thing or another but would instead occupy an in-between space.¹³ It would inhabit a

their secret identities, shapeshifting bodies, and costumes. By day, they appear as law-abiding, mild-mannered citizens with mundane concerns involving love interests, families, jobs, and hiding their extraordinary abilities, while at night they become zealous, often violent, sentinels or vigilantes.

11 Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 23.

12 *Ibid.*, 3.

13 For example, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

fertile, expansive borderland instead of adopting the safety of a separating line, “/,” no matter how slight and unassuming.

As Gloria Anzaldúa observes, the borderland is a place where meaning is unstable and “in a constant state of transition.”¹⁴ Borderland spaces offer ways to transcend binary thinking and develop a “tolerance for ambiguity,” but not only a tolerance, but a celebration, a valorization.¹⁵ Instead of reinforcing oppositions, my work maps synergies between and incursions upon the oppositions used to define and demark the genre’s meaningscape, such as fan/creator, fanon/canon, good/bad, real/fake, mimetic/transformativ e, authorized/unauthorized, and progressive/reactionary. But these are not standalone oppositions; intersecting networks of identity binaries undergird them, including those of gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, and beyond. While historically these categories have often, and to varying degrees, been decentered and overlooked — gender and sexuality have, for instance, received a great deal more attention than race — they are here prioritized. In one form or another, binaries are at the heart of the genre and its surrounding discourse, and their disruption is at the heart of this book. By illuminating and acknowledging the simultaneous authenticity of the genre’s conflicted and polysemous meaningscape, I aim to interrupt and disturb binary thinking. Simply put, genre meaning is not a case of “either/or” but always a matter of “both/and.”



Methodologically, I employ a combination of theoretical reflection, textual analysis, and a review of praxis to (re)consider the ideological texture of the superhero genre’s meaningscape.¹⁶ As

14 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.

15 *Ibid.*, 101.

16 As per recommendations from the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), all quotations from fans and activists were sourced from publicly accessible archives, such as blog posts, websites, and interviews, and their inclusion was judged against the AoIR’s “Internet Specific Ethical

with most participatory superhero fans, I take the American superhero genre as my starting point. (This is not as tautological a statement as might first appear: superhero fans today have many options when it comes to engaging superhero media.) And, because the genre's popular mode of address is, and has historically been, visual, I focus on visual superhero media and visual and embodied fanwork, such as comics and cosplay.¹⁷

Regarding the superhero figure, *Un/Making Worlds* embraces an a priori idea, sans representation, of a superhero and advances the idea of genre meaning as an antagonistic, in-process nexus of meaning (making) undergirded by systems of power.¹⁸ Working with the root-and-branch idea of superheroes rather than a specific character or epoch allows for consideration of superheroes across a wide range of visual media. Furthermore, I treat superheroes purely as transforming figures, as characters variously enmeshed in processes of un/becoming, and not as colorfully costumed crime fighters and do-gooders. A small but significant distinction that helps to sustain the disconnect between the idea of superheroes and mainstream modes of representation. It also usefully directs attention towards their transformational qualities, thus away from other iconic and distracting charac-

Questions" to mitigate any potential risk in terms of harm or privacy. See Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research 2.0: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee," *Association of Internet Researchers*, 2012, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.

- 17 There are, of course, always exceptions, such as superhero audiobooks, novels, or radio plays. Likewise, superhero fandom similarly sees violative text-based fanwork, such as race- or gender-bending fanfiction.
- 18 The basic idea of a superhero — a transforming being with a penchant for civic participation — was first bent to the will of the "cultural dominant," but efforts are now being made (and resisted) to bend the idea of a superhero to the will of those fans and creators historically erased and marginalized from all spheres of superhero culture, for example, through violative fanwork and varying efforts to improve official inclusivity and diversity. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), and Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1993): 104–14.

teristics, ultimately leading to a more rounded understanding of their radical nature.

To my mind, a nexus of three forces shapes the “meaning” of superhero transformation: concept (how we think about it), representation (how we show and see it), and practice (how we do it). I suggest that the resultant synergy affects radical promise.¹⁹ Indeed, the latter component, practice, proves key to its recovery. For example, violative fan practices see fans radically transform themselves and, to varying degrees, the world around them, including superhero fandom.²⁰ My inclusion of practice, or enactment, is unorthodox, as is theorizing a divergence between superhero concept and superhero representation. Adopting this innovative stance allows for the advancement of a layered and textured understanding of both the expression and suppression of the genre’s radical promise.

Focusing on visual representation and the visualization and practice of transformation leads me to explore visual and embodied forms of “bending” fanwork.²¹ Bending practices enable excluded and marginalized fans to illuminate and fill representational gaps and omissions, allowing them to keep a beloved, but often hostile, genre alive and meaningful. But, as we will see in the closing chapters, they do a little bit more. Yet the need for recuperative practices suggests broader concerns, namely, the issue of remaining emotionally invested and intellectually engaged with a troublesome genre — a quandary I also face.

Reflecting on my ambivalence and responding to my earlier question about why I continue to critically engage the American superhero genre, I realize that I do so precisely because it is a problematic, difficult, and vexing genre, specifically around representational issues both on and off the page and screen.

19 Practice refers to the performance and embodiment of superhero transformation, as enacted by superhero fans and superhero-inspired activists.

20 Violative in the sense of rule-breaking, of failing to maintain or respect dominant laws, traditions, or privileges.

21 “Bending” fan practices rework a source character’s identity markers, most popularly gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and, increasingly, disability.

Indeed, it is its notoriously troublesome low status that has seen it neglected within queer and feminist critical analysis and beyond. Yet it is vital to study inimical genres, especially when members of excluded and marginalized groups remain engaged, involved, and affected by them as fans, as creators, and as scholars. Not only to gain a better understanding of resistive meaning-making strategies, but also of survival tactics. Moreover, while documenting and parsing reformative meaning making is critical work in and of itself, it also usefully casts into sharp relief the totalizing stereotype of cis het white men in superhero culture — all the better to scrutinize it.

Words themselves are powerful meaning-making tools, and linguistic interventions play a valuable, albeit often painful, role in asserting and reclaiming minority identity, agency, and power, as evidenced by the ongoing contentious reclamations of terms like “queer,” “slut,” or “crip.” Acknowledging this, the terminology used within this book reflects that of minoritarian communities and scholarship. For example, instead of the more common but erroneous “able-bodied (or abled)/disabled” pairing, I use the phrase “disabled/nondisabled” which indicates “disability” as the sociocultural effects of impairment rather than a personal condition or status.²² Borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz, I also use the term “minoritarian” throughout my discussion to “index citizen-subjects who, due to antagonisms within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere.”²³ By using this descriptor rather than the more popular “minorities” or “women and minorities” phraseology, I wish to underscore systemic positionality over identity and collectivity over individuality, in order to assert a deep appreciation of the power imbalances that structure and

22 Moreover, at the time of writing, “person-first” language is the predominant and preferred mode of address in written material discussing disability, and so I adopt this mode, while also acknowledging the value of “identity-first” language and the value of asking people their preferences in all matters of identity-based language.

23 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 56.

produce minoritarian and majoritarian subjects and spheres. Minoritarian here

describes a place of (often uncomfortable) gathering, a cover, umbrella, expanse, or refuge under and in which subjects marked by racial, sexual, gender, class, and national minority might choose to come together in tactical struggle, both because of what we share (often domination in some form by the major, or dominant culture) and because of what makes us different.²⁴

I also wish to situate my work within a broader discussion of resistive, radical minoritarian performance. In a comprehensive elucidation of the term, Joshua Chambers-Letson speaks powerfully — through Muñoz, Lauren Berlant, Nina Simone, w.e.b. Du Bois, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Alexandra Vazquez — of the improvisational, transformational, worldmaking possibilities of minoritarian cultural performance. “Affectively charged moments of becoming and belonging that occur at and beyond the edges of anything like a bound event,” qualities and potentialities nestling deep in the heart of this book.²⁵

Moreover, as a white somewhat queer female scholar engaging with a historically default white cisgender male genre and fandom, as well as the practices and experiences of marginalized subjects and communities, working creatively with ideas and language that are already in play proves not only generative, but also critical.²⁶ This approach allies with broader ongoing efforts

24 Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 15–16.

25 Della Pollock, “Performance Trouble,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. Judith A. Hamera (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 5.

26 I say “somewhat” purposely because, and evoking the perennial “queer enough” debate, regarding my queerness, *some* might say *what?* For more on the “queer enough” debate, see, for example, Tiara Deguzman, “You Are Queer Enough,” *Autostraddle*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/pride-2021-you-are-queer-enough/>; Nona Willis Aronowitz, “Am I Gay Enough? What to Know About Queer Identity,” *Teen Vogue*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/am-i-gay-enough>; and Maggie

to challenge and decolonize disciplinary biases by critically engaging and prioritizing theorists at risk of being overlooked, silenced, or “merely adored from a distance.”²⁷ Thus while tactically engaging the “theory canon,” my conceptual framework, and it follows, citational practice, embrace and emerge from less-attended sites and moments of meaning making, especially around notions of promise, disidentification, identity bending, utopianism, futurism(s), repurposing, and escape.²⁸

Afro-, queer, and feminist futurist critique is, for example, a cornerstone of my inquiry into what it means for minoritarian superhero fans to engage with but more profoundly, to enjoy and to love, a predominantly cishet white male genre, a point central to much work on race and speculative fiction. As De Witt Douglas Kilgore wonders: “What does it mean for me to be vulnerable to a genre [science fiction] produced primarily by and for affluent white men?”²⁹ This querying also ties into my later discussion around the labelling of minoritarian superhero fans as *a* or *the* “problem” or “killjoy” within majoritarian spheres of fan culture.³⁰ But speculative and futurist lenses also

Zhou, “Am I Queer Enough to Call Myself Bi?,” *Refinery 29*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/bisexual-impster-syndrome>. Throwing out a lifeline to the “not queer enough world,” bell hooks productively described queerness as not “being about who you’re having sex with — that can be a dimension of it — but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and it has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” The New School, “bell hooks — Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body | Eugene Lang College,” *YouTube*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJkohNROvzs>.

- 27 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
- 28 See Sara Ahmed, “Black Feminism as a Life-Line,” *feministkilljoys*, August 27, 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/27/black-feminism-as-life-line/>.
- 29 De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 12.
- 30 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” in *Three African-American Classics* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007), 159–332; Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects),” *Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 1–8, <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist->

permit me to ask my original question — if the American superhero genre is so radical and full of possibilities then why does it feel so reactionary in practice? — in a new way: How can a genre so mired in Western speculative storytelling traditions be so myopic when it comes to imagining other worlds and ways of being in those worlds? After all, speculative fiction is the art and act of speculation, that is, “of imagining things otherwise than they are, and of creating stories from that impulse.”³¹

The American superhero genre is self-declaredly anchored in *amazing*, *incredible*, *marvelous*, and *uncanny* modes of storytelling. Indeed, speculation about other times, worlds, ontologies, subjectivities, and epistemologies is felt to be one of the genre’s iconic tenets. But while other, frequently intersecting, futurist movements work to decentralize, decolonize, and problematize the homogeneity stifling the world’s stories, the genre’s delimited expression of futurism seems content to replicate the synergistic hierarchies and interlocking oppressions that structure our material world. As illustrated in the closing chapters, when performing violative fanwork, however, marginalized superhero fans literally take the genre’s futuristic failures into their own hands, and through their bending fanwork, it is they who end up doing the futuristic work of the genre.

Snapshot: Speculative Fiction, Fantasy, and Imaginary/Real-World Synergies

Speculative fiction is heavily allegorical, and creators and fans use it extensively to represent, explore, and (dis)incentivize ways of thinking about, being in, and structuring the social world. It is thus a potent tool for challenging, querying, and disrupting the cultural dominant. After encountering alternatives, questioning entrenched and customary value judgements

killjoys-and-other-willful-subjects/; and Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

31 Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), xx.

and beliefs in “truths” can become easier.³² Speculative fiction frequently depicts alternate worlds and reimagines the mundane world through the use of nonrealistic elements. Indeed, creating alternate worlds is something of a core tenet of fantasy; for example, J.R.R. Tolkien describes fantasy as “the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds.”³³ Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz offer an expanded description, where fantasy

must be understandable in terms of its relationship to, or deviance from, our known world. [...] If there is virtually no connection between the real and the fantastic, except distortion, then we arrive at the absurd and nonsense. Consequently we do not escape ourselves or our situation: fantasy has an inevitable role as a commentary on, or counterpart to, reality and realism.³⁴

This description expresses a typically “modernist division of reality and fantasy.”³⁵ It suggests that fantasy operates in a real/unreal opposition. We know what is unreal because we know what is real. In the real/unreal opposition, reality is privileged, the primary term. But this binary is under increasing stress from, for example, postmodern, posthuman, and transhuman discourses, which resist the idea of a firm boundary—indeed,

32 The “creative activism” of the Yes Men’s utopian faux edition of *The New York Times* and their fake “Obama pardons Snowden” event demonstrates the potentiality of using fantasy as a way of opening people’s eyes to the possibility of creating alternative realities or as they describe it, “what could happen if we set our imagination free.” S. Harrebye, *Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and The Yes Men, “The Yes Men: New York Times Special Edition,” *Vimeo*, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/129322969>.

33 J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1971), 40.

34 Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2001), 7–8.

35 George Aichele, “Literary Fantasy and Postmodern Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 325.

the idea of a boundary at all — between the real and the unreal.³⁶ As George Aichele, Jr. writes,

fantasy does not refer to what is excluded from the realm of reality. Rather, it expresses the fragmentation and indeed the impossibility of any self-identical referent; the fantastic is the potential within language (within any signifying system) to speak the incoherence at the heart of every allegation of reality. Fantasy exposes the discontinuity between the signifier and any signified, the gap which we must endlessly seek to fill with “reality.”³⁷

Reality and fantasy, or speculative fiction, share the same conceptual space. From this vantage point, fantasy is not secondary to reality; it is not mere escapism from one world to another. It cannot be: In this logic, where would one escape from and to? If not escapism, speculative fiction then provides a lens through which to better understand and perhaps remedy the unjust condition of our social reality. All of this brings me to my next point, which is the increased politicization of speculative fiction and its hand in disrupting the real/imaginary binary.

Scholarly and popular perceptions of speculative fiction, like its cultural role and reception, are constantly evolving, and today it may be more politically charged than ever.³⁸ Indeed, as

36 For example, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

37 Aichele, “Literary Fantasy,” 325.

38 For example, in a conference presentation, audience studies scholar Martin Barker drew upon his work with international fantasy audience research projects, such as “The World Hobbit Project,” to evidence the capacity of audiences to view speculative, in this case fantasy, texts as political texts. Barker discussed the recurrence of the potent idea that “small people,” or Hobbits, could be agents of progressive change. Barker also cited the adoption of “V” masks by a range of protestors appropriated from Alan Moore’s (writer) and David Lloyd’s (artist) graphic novel *V for Vendetta* and the banning of the three-finger salute in Thailand after its adoption by Thai protestors, a gesture lifted from the young-adult fantasy series *The Hunger Games*. Martin Barker, “Experiencing Powerfully: How Audiences Find

I come to discuss, it is not uncommon for characters and motifs from speculative texts to cross into the real world, appearing, for example, in social justice activism.³⁹ Scholarly interest in these junctures is vibrant and growing. Frederick Luis Aldama's work on Latinx superhero media and Henry Jenkins's exploration of superheroes and the civic imagination, discussed in Chapter 2, are invaluable examples, as is Fawaz's *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*.⁴⁰ Fawaz's concept of "popular fantasy," for example, offers and makes possible a more inclusive, intersectional account of the sociocultural operations of fantasy. His earlier assertion that popular fantasy "acknowledges that what counts as 'reality' at any given moment is subject to manifold interpretations, making it amenable to being punctured by or rerouted toward fantasy" is also significant.⁴¹ More than a repository of reimaginings and otherworldly alternatives, speculative fiction is a commentary on the cultural fictions and norms—the make-believe—that struc-

Meaning in Fantasy Films," paper presented at Fantasies of Contemporary Culture Conference, Cardiff University, May 23, 2016.

- 39 For example, the frequent presence of (fan)activists dressed as Superman and Ms. Marvel at anti-fascist, anti-Trump protests (pre- and post-election), and more recently, as Spider-Man joined a racial justice protest in New York City and Batman in Washington, DC.
- 40 Fawaz's work speaks to aspects of this book but differs in its scope, emphasis, and conclusions. For example, while I work with the idea of superheroes, Fawaz is drawn to an epoch and a kind of comic book "outcast" superhero. And while Fawaz concludes that the superhero transformed into a figure of radical difference during the postwar years, I find that radical promise has been within these characters since their inception. Moreover, Fawaz's assertion that the superhero moved from one position to another—from nationalist champion to figure of radical difference—suggests mutually exclusive positionalities and consequently the "either/or" binary, which runs counter to the logic of this book. Through our differently phrased work, however, Fawaz and I are part of an expansive and vital debate that seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role and utility of American superheroes in both imagological and social realms.
- 41 Ramzi Fawaz, "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!' Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America," *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (2011): 360.

ture the mundane world. As outlined above, however, these are shared, not separate, realms.

Revealing and mapping synergies between imagological, textual, and lived realms disturbs and destabilizes the real/imaginary binary, a dynamic I explore in Chapter 2, which also introduces the concept and practice of world-un/making.⁴² This conceptual thread is key to recovering the genre's radical promise, and it weaves through questions such as: How do genre creators (re)imagine and (re)present alternate realities? How do these (mis)representations speak to, and ignore, real-world conditions? And how do fans respond to the frequently conflicting ideologies at play in these texts focusing on moments of personal and social transformation?

Un/Making Worlds presents a new perspective on the radicalism of the superhero genre, one founded not on a queer or progressive reading but on an analysis of violative fan practice and a reconceptualization of the genre's ideologically incoherent meaningscape, a multivocal environment that has characterized the genre since its founding but that is today growing in tandem with digital technology and social media.⁴³ Resisting hermeneutic research trends, this book examines the dissonant interplay of variously empowered superhero meaning makers, focusing on matters of transformation, representation, and worldmaking. As a result, the genre can be described as failing to harmonize its ideological standpoint—holding significance in both

42 Notions of worldmaking feature in some audience and fan studies projects, especially those such as The World Hobbit Project that explore how audiences and fans relate imaginary worlds to the real world. But, as I discuss in Chapter 2 of this volume, worldmaking also describes the transformative creative and cultural processes and practices adopted by minoritarian subjects to survive hostile and exclusionary treatment within mainstream media and culture. As we shall see, queer worldmaking practices enable minoritarian subjects to reclaim agency.

43 Today, ideological battles and culture wars are fought not just within what some are calling the “superhero–industrial complex,” but across the books, essays, blogs, tweets, vids, podcasts, conventions, conferences, and bodies of superhero meaning makers, be they creators, fans, academics, or those located somewhere in between.

minoritarian and majoritarian spheres—and as struggling to correspond to what a radical, or conservative, genre “ought” to be. This is the radical heart of the genre, exposed. A genre that refuses final definition. And in this distinct, paradoxical way, it is a queer and radical genre. *Un/Making Worlds* offers a much-needed reevaluation of the genre’s ideological condition; it identifies and tests discrepancies between the genre’s radical promise and its more orthodox actualities. The aim is to map the genre’s meaningscape, to limn the loss and recovery of its radical promise, to better understand continuing minoritarian engagement with an exclusionary and often hostile genre, and to fathom how labels like “radical” and “progressive” can be so readily and ordinarily applied to this troublesome, mainstream genre.



But what does it mean to say that a genre or a figure or a fan is progressive, reactionary, or radical? In what ways might a superhero story, character, fan, or fanwork be radical? And what exactly is “radical promise”? Ideological descriptors like radical, progressive, and reactionary are tossed around lightly and vaguely in all kinds of discussions, often beclouding their meaning, and so I take a moment to briefly describe how they work in this book.

The term “radical,” like most designations, is nebulous, but here it refers broadly to a desire for “root and branch” reform. As Angela Davis famously observes: “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’”⁴⁴ Moreover, it connotes not only the politically and socioculturally progressive but also the currently unorthodox, implying ideas and practices that cut against the grain. Here, it also suggests alternatives beyond binaries. I use the terms conservative and reactionary to suggest the “opposite” of progressive and revolutionary. So, while the latter conjures ideas of resisting, dismantling, and reimagining power relations

⁴⁴ Angela Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1990), 14.

and structures, the former suggests practices that confirm and buttress in-situ relations and structures, as well as favoring a return to the status quo ante.

Within my argument, these kinds of terms also have layers of meaning. But, as discussed in Chapter 2, the term layer is not meant to provoke notions of hierarchical organization but rather the idea of intersecting layers, like the structuring of an uncoursed random rubble wall.⁴⁵ Rather than imbrication—overlapping in a regular, consistent fashion—each asymmetrical stone interacts with and is informed by the stones around it at random. These unruly layers, or formative moments, are the genre’s ideological and creative, or formal, conditions, its keystones, if you will. So, when thinking about how a genre or a character might be radical, for example, I consider how they resist and subvert dominant ideology (e.g., by disturbing or collapsing binaries) and remediate dominant ideas concerning superhero embodiment: white, body-normative, youthful, cis het men.

The first layer—the genre’s creative, or formal, condition—concerns the concept, form, and representation of superheroes and their synergies: How radical, or reactionary, is the superhero concept, its mainstream representation, and fannish enactments, particularly those performed by minoritarian fans? It focuses on official and, later, unofficial treatments of traditional superhero ontology, aesthetics, geography, and spatiality. *Watchmen*, for example, is an acclaimed superhero comic noted for radically revising the tenets of the American superhero genre.⁴⁶ But, to me, it has not always felt as disruptive and revolutionary as was, and still is, reported.⁴⁷ *Watchmen* is in

45 A wall-building technique using stones of irregular size and shape to build up nonlinear “courses” or layers.

46 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986).

47 For example, introducing a *Watchmen*-themed “In Focus” in *Cinema Journal*, Blair Davis observed that *Watchmen* “rewrote what was possible in comics,” that it “thoroughly challenged how comic books represented their heroes.” Blair Davis, “Beyond *Watchmen*,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 114–15. And in the same issue, Kathryn M. Frank described

many ways undoubtedly a radical text, but *how* is it, or is it not, radical? And who gets to decide? These are, to a great extent, the kinds of questions driving this book.

Snapshot: *Watchmen* (1986)⁴⁸

Watchmen creators Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons placed superheroes in a real-world setting to see what would happen to them and the world around them.⁴⁹ Speculating on superhero ontology as well as aesthetics and ideology, they asked: What if superheroes were different? What if the border between reality and fantasy were breached? What if superheroes were real? People still wonder what would happen if superheroes actually existed, which was a bold question in the 1980s but is less so now. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 6, a very different group of superhero creators poses a parallel set of “what if” questions, eliciting some surprisingly similar responses.

Watchmen's content as “subverting expectations of superheroes [...] and how [they] ought to be portrayed.” Kathryn M. Frank, “Who Makes the World?: Before ‘Watchmen,’ Nostalgia, and Franchising,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 143. And although dismissing the revolutionary nature of the comic, Grant Morrison describes *Watchmen*'s creators as pitching a “radical new take on a stable of characters” and later noted that he felt alone in his “negative judgement” of the comic. Morrison, *Supergods*, 195, 204.

48 In 2019, a remix TV series titled *Watchmen* launched. Despite the inevitable backlash that comes with being a Black-led media project, the limited series received widespread critical and fan acclaim, particularly for its profound exploration of systemic racism and its centralization of African American voices and experience. In so doing, it confronted many of the representational issues raised in this snapshot. Unlike the original text's creators, its creators found a way to powerfully reanimate the genre's radical promise. The original *Watchmen* comic, however, remains the first superhero text to seriously “revise,” if not satirize, the genre. Its failure to do so in some fundamental and revealing ways as well as its frequently dewy-eyed reception ensures its relevance in this discussion, a failure thrown into even sharper relief today by the TV series, especially in terms of (counter)storytelling and representational strategy.

49 The real world imagined as an alternate 1985 American timeline.

Asking radical or speculative questions does not, however, always provoke radical change, and in the end, Moore and Gibbons failed to fully speculate, *to imagine things otherwise than they are*, be it superheroes or their worlds. Even in the context of drastic revision, the idea of the superhero as an exclusively cishet white male received little substantive attention, as did the world in which they lived. Moore and Gibbons's superheroes became older, fatter, and more complicated, yes, but they remained overwhelmingly represented as white "male saviors," that is, cishet white men living in, and saving, a cishet white world.

Thinking about sexuality for a moment, it is more than a little disappointing that when reimagining an entire genre the creators did not substantively reimagine its protagonists' sexuality. Several of *Watchmen's* characters are open to queer readings, but so are lots of characters in other mainstream superhero comics.⁵⁰ Subtextual queer coding does not a radical comic make. Silhouette, one of the few female heroes, is an out and proud lesbian, and there are other characters who are arguably queer or gay, such as Ozymandias or Hooded Justice, but their representation, like that of female characters in general, is problematic. In the context of a revisionist text, set in an alternate reality and timeline where anything is possible, minoritarian representation is static, stereotypical, and limited, and usually ends in gruesome death. Minoritarian characters serve only as narrative foils for the principal cishet white male characters. Indeed, *Watchmen's* narrative, or world, literally revolves around the fears and desires of straight white men, much like our own. The presence of a vigorous queer subtext is also linked to the

50 For examples of gay and queer readings of *Watchmen*, see Kelly Williams, "'Watchmen' and the Queering of Rorschach," *Shield Maidens*, November 29, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171222083943/https://shield-maidensblog.wordpress.com/2016/11/29/watchmen-and-the-queering-of-rorschach/>, and Rich Johnston, "A Queer Reading of Rorschach and 'Watchmen' at 'Nine Worlds,'" *Bleeding Cool*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2017/08/04/queer-reading-rorschach-watchmen-nine-worlds/>.

creators' desire to (re)imagine superheroes as "grimy and seamy and nasty and real. And part of the way [*Watchmen*] imagines superheroes as being grimy and seamy and nasty and real is by imagining them as sexual—particularly as perversely sexual, which often means queer."⁵¹ So, while *Watchmen* features a range of characters, its handling of minoritarian superheroes as well as superhero identity, embodiment, and transformation is hardly revisionist or radical.

One could argue that the creators had to work, or imagine, so narrowly because they wanted to revise the dominant idea of superheroes and the genre that houses them, undeniably, a delimited realm. But wouldn't challenging the basic assumption that superheroes are cishet white men have allowed them to reimagine the protagonists, root and branch? As I discuss in the epilogue, it appears that the creators did not think to substantively revise their protagonists due to embedded cultural assumptions. As privileged white men, they failed to see the whiteness, maleness, and—though arguably a more complicated vector—the straightness that envelops superheroes and superhero worlds and thus did not consider revising these markers. A similar blindness appears to overwhelm many of the fans and critics who unreservedly praise and continue, rather jejunely, to regard *Watchmen* as a revisionist marvel.⁵²

This comprehensive oversight points to deep-seated biases in the genre and its surrounding culture and beyond, biases so insidious that a text can be lauded as revisionist and revolutionary even though its protagonists are essentially unchanged, and its secondary characters received no revision at all. The point here is not to debate whether *Watchmen* is a radical text or not. Rather, it is to register these kinds of inconsistencies and contra-

51 Noah Berlatsky, "Homosexuality Will Make Your Comic Real," *The Hooded Utilitarian*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/06/homosexuality-will-make-your-comic-real/>.

52 *Watchmen* is the only comic book to appear on *Time's* "Top 100 Novels" list. *Watchmen* has countless books and special issues dedicated to unravelling its epochal impact on the superhero genre and its broader cultural influence.

dictions as a way of demonstrating the difficulties in asserting *Watchmen's* status or meaning as one thing or another. Indeed, it is to start answering my question of how a genre can be simultaneously revolutionary and reactionary and to begin to draw out the idea, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, that radical ideas can only make it into the superhero genre because they are filtered, or tempered, through reactionary modes of representation.

And thinking about identity and embodiment segues neatly to the matter of ideology, the second layer informing my understanding of the genre's meaningscape. This layer comprises the intersecting spheres of political ideology, embodiment, and identity politics, and it prompts me to ask: What kinds of ideologies and sociocultural meanings can be drawn from superhero stories, particularly those relating to personal and social transformation, and how are they layered through genre discourse?

By ideological meaning, I must note that I do not mean the "grand theories" of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, or Max Weber, expounding how a class-based capitalist system can persist without revolution, but rather a more distilled meaning, one connecting with the ideas of Louis Althusser (e.g., ideological and repressive state apparatuses) and Antonio Gramsci (e.g., cultural hegemony).⁵³ Applying these ideas to the superhero genre, we can see that it expresses meaning both literally and figuratively, with the latter describing overlapping ideological and metaphorical meaning, that is, what superheroes and genre stories appear to convey in terms of, say, culture, morality, or nationalism. Do they reinforce, resist, disrupt, or parody dominant ideology? And under what conditions, rules, codes, or dis-

53 Ideology and hegemony are intertwined; hegemony refers to an "organization of consent," to the processes by which "those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses." Michèle Barrett, "Ideology, Politics, Hegemony: From Gramsci to Laclau and Mouffe," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 238, and Bonnie J. Dow, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show,'" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7, no. 3 (1990): 262.

ciplines is meaning (re)produced? Critical too, in the context of this book at least, is that meaning evokes emotional, affective value, which is to ask, what do these texts, stories, characters, and genre *mean* to their audiences, fans, and even anti-fans?

Snapshot: Monstrously Interpretable

Superheroes have accumulated conflicted meanings since their conception...

— Henry Jenkins, “What Else Can You Do with Them?”⁵⁴

Fan and scholarly superhero discourse frequently demonstrate the fascist, imperialist, conservative, liberal, progressive, and activist possibilities of the genre.⁵⁵ Marc DiPaolo, for instance, examines how superhero stories “reflect the dominant values of the time, as well as the extent to which comic book writers and creators are rallying against the dominant spirit of the time and trying to influence public opinion.”⁵⁶ While Henry Jenkins illustrates how superhero symbols work within grassroots activism, writing: “Superheroes are now a vital element in our collective civic imaginations.”⁵⁷ And in *Ms. Marvel*, Mel Gibson detects a progressive feminist ideology at play, asserting that it represents “a vital intervention in terms of young feminist politics. [...] and] foreground[s] agentic, activist, and feminist perspectives.”⁵⁸ Adilifu Nama also presents a progressive inter-

54 Henry Jenkins, “What Else Can You Do with Them? Superheroes and the Civic Imagination,” in *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics*, eds. Liam Burke, Angela Ndalianis, and Ian Gordon (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 27.

55 See Burke, Gordon, Angela Ndalianis, eds., *The Superhero Symbol* for an informative insight into the breadth of work in these areas.

56 Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 1.

57 Henry Jenkins, “What Else Can You Do with Them?” 25.

58 Mel Gibson, “Let’s Hear It for the Girls! Representations of Diverse Girlhoods, Feminism, Intersectionality and Activism in Contemporary Graphic Novels and Comics,” *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, May 2018, <https://maifeminism.com/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls-representations-of->

pretation of the superhero genre, suggesting that Black superheroes can “frequently speak to progressive political expressions of blackness.”⁵⁹ And writing about ‘Black Panther,’ andré carrington puts forward a revolutionary reading of a popular Black superhero diegesis, one grounded in radical practices of “desiring blackness” and “orientation.”⁶⁰

Yet for others, superheroes are “hegemonic and sometimes overly authoritarian.”⁶¹ Indeed, Woody Evans goes so far as to sweepingly assert that superheroes are conservative, or on the “conservative end of a progressive spectrum,” and supervillains are progressive.⁶² Many view superheroes as extensions of the us government and their foreign policies, as protectors of the status quo, or, referencing Superman, as functioning “as a strident representation of American imperialism and racial superiority.”⁶³ Indeed, Marc DiPaolo dedicates an entire book to exploring how superheroes “responded to the war on terrorism, and the extent to which they either supported or vilified former United States President George W. Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.”⁶⁴ He also refers to the embedding of political messages as varying “wildly from the radical liberal

diverse-girlhoods-feminism-intersectionality-and-activism-in-contemporary-graphic-novels-and-comics/. In this essay, Gibson discusses the most recent iteration of *Ms. Marvel* written by G. Willow Wilson (2014–).

- 59 Adilifu Nama, “Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers,” *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009): 142.
- 60 andré m. carrington, “Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel’s ‘Black Panther’, 1998–2016,” *American Literature* 90, no. 2 (2018): 221–50.
- 61 Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 92.
- 62 Woody Evans, “Why They Won’t Save Us: Political Dispositions in the Conflicts of Superheroes,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 17 (2014): §1.3.
- 63 Nama, “Brave Black Worlds,” 134. For the other examples, see Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), and Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer, “The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 3 (2003): 497–517.
- 64 DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, 1.

to the archconservative.”⁶⁵ (Here again we feel the stifling nearness of binary thinking.) Countless comics scholars have also discussed how superhero comics became part of the US government’s propaganda machine during World War II.⁶⁶ Others, however, stress that the “outsider” status of superheroes and their vigilantism places them beyond the law rather than as its protectors.⁶⁷ And a good many other commentators also prefer to argue more individual readings. Batman is, for instance, routinely considered a conservative, Green Arrow a liberal, and so forth.

Ideological critiques tend not to stand alone, however. Superhero scholars frequently embed them in specific discussions of, for instance, geopolitics and nationhood, censorship and regulation, or identity politics and representation. Discussing diverse representation, for example, it is critical to query its impulses and mechanisms. Asking always: Is it meaningful? authentic? a diversity tick-box exercise? Does it challenge or reify the idea of racial hierarchies? Within superhero stories, the appointment of Lemar Hoskins as the fifth iteration of Captain America’s usually white sidekick, Bucky, is just one of many problematic examples. Brannon Costello writes: “Pairing a new, southern Captain America [John Walker] with an African American partner could potentially promote a progressive attitude towards race [...], yet the specific visual and verbal terms

65 Ibid., 4.

66 These sorts of debates rage beyond the worlds of American comics and superheroes too. In a discussion with Afshin Rattansi, Pat Mills, godfather of British comics and author of *Charley’s War* (1979–1986), recalls how difficult it was to secure mainstream media coverage for this anti-war comic during the UK’s nationalistic, often state-sponsored, pro-war celebrations of the “Great War’s” centenary years (2014–2018). In the same interview, Mills also suggests that “a lot of superheroes really are [...] corporate characters who are [...] confirming corporate values and corporate attitudes.” Pat Mills, “Working-Class Superheroes,” *Russia Today*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/shows/going-underground/396516-british-comics-mosul-censorship/>.

67 Mike S. Dubose, “Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 915–35.

in which the relationship is represented paint a more troubling picture.⁶⁸ Pointing to the tempering effect of the genre's formulaic narrative and representational strategies, Costello also productively elaborates on the codename Bucky and its echoes with the dehumanizing, racial slur, "buck," the connected symbolism of the superhero/sidekick pairing to the paternalistic "white patron/black servant relationship," and of "forcing an African American man into the costume and identity of a white teen-aged sidekick."⁶⁹ We see here a clear merging of themes as disembodied political ideologies bleed into the embodied spaces of identity politics. As Leonard Rifas writes: "Ideologies rarely appear in comics as explicitly stated principles, but rather in words and pictures from which readers, consciously and unconsciously, pick up hints for building mental methods of how the world works."⁷⁰ And Jason Dittmer argues that superhero texts should be "recognized as a discourse through which the world becomes understandable."⁷¹ But, and this is something of a rhetorical question: Whose world?

68 Brannon Costello, "Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism," in *Comics and the U.S. South*, eds. Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 76.

69 *Ibid.*, 72–76. Ahmed Best, best-known perhaps for playing Jar Jar Binks in the *Star Wars* prequels, also discusses racial hierarchies in *The Last Jedi* (2017). During a podcast discussion with Henry Jenkins and Colin M. Maclay, Best remarks that Disney "flinches" when it comes to showing an interracial kiss between Rey and Finn to which Jenkins adds that in contrast there is an interracial kiss between Rose and Finn, both of whom are people of color. Best replies, "Disney is okay for someone Black to kiss someone Asian. Disney is not okay with someone Black to kiss someone white. How are we talking about diversity when we're still [...] putting people on pedestals and they are untouchable?" Henry Jenkins and Colin McKay, "Star Wars Cluster-Ahmed Best," *How Do You Like It So Far?*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.howdoyoulikeitsofar.org/star-wars-cluster-episode-1-ahmed-best/>.

70 Leonard Rifas, "Ideology: The Construction of Race and History in 'Tintin in the Congo,'" in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge), 226.

71 Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 2.

As this snapshot shows, it's easy to read things into superheroes and superhero stories. But rather than doing that I wish to theorize the conflicting synergies that constitute the genre's unruly ideological meaningscape, in other words, its radical promise. *Un/Making Worlds* acknowledges and foregrounds the genre's ideologically unstable but authentically plural meaningscape. That is, it affirms genre meaning not as one thing or another — “as championing the oppressed or performing policing functions,” to finish Jenkins's quote at the start of this section — but always as both/and. Hegemony is the privileged message, undoubtedly, but it is a story not simply told. Especially when, as I suggest, the promise of American superheroes is mangled from the outset as official creators struggle to encode dominant ideology into endlessly transforming figures and, sometimes, narratives. But what is radical promise, this quality so tied to unruly meaning (making), and how can it be lost and recovered?

On Radical Promise

The idea of the promise of superheroes, radical or otherwise, alludes to Donna Haraway's essay, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.”⁷² For Haraway, monsters reveal boundaries — between humans, animals, and automatons — as permeable. Moreover, and among other things, Haraway argues that monsters preclude and problematize structuring notions of boundaries. The promise of monsters, the hope of inappropriate/d others, is their ability to disturb, interrupt, and disrupt hegemonic metanarratives. Jeffrey J. Cohen too suggests that monsters allow us to engage in a process of (re)imagination because they “open up more possibility than they foreclose,” and they embody “a relentless hybridity that

72 Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 63–124.

resists assimilation into secure epistemologies.”⁷³ Fawaz, citing Jane Bennett, likewise writes: “For Bennett the enchanted quality of fantasy figures — including any number of hybrid, monstrous, and magical creatures [...] derives from their seemingly unlimited capacity for transformation. Mobile, mutating, and morphing, these figures ‘enact the very possibility of change; their presence carries with it the trace of dangers but also exciting and exhilarating migrations.’”⁷⁴ Even from this bare-bones account, it’s easy to see how the superhero genre, like many of its characters, is more than a little monstrous.

But how does the promise of monsters speak to the radical promise of superheroes?

Transformation is a linchpin of this book and a key site of the genre’s radical promise. As we shall see, however, the subversive force of these characters lies not only in their border-smashing transformations but also in the instability, multiplicity, and mobility of meaning that such movements bring. The “trans-” prefix denotes movements and passages across, through, and beyond all kinds of material and immaterial planes. Movements and passages suggest destinations and landing places — a meaning, a body, an identity. But, as we shall see, these are not always final destinations. As transforming figures — being “both/and” and not necessarily “either/or” — superheroes disrupt the structuring system of binary oppositions. For example, they repeatedly indicate the instabilities, pluralities, spectrums, and intersections that characterize lived reality, notably around bodies and identities. Thus, on a conceptual level, they challenge preferred, dominant narratives of what it means to be human. Furthermore, becoming a superhero has a holistically transformative effect, whether it is private or public, micro or macro, and it can affect bodies, identities, lives, social structures and systems, and surrounding worlds, which may be local, global, or even

73 Jeffrey J. Cohen, “The Promise of Monsters,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 452.

74 Fawaz, *The New Mutants*, 28–29.

planetary. Indeed, superhero stories routinely depict personal transformation as an agentic awakening that leads to increased civic participation and, in most cases, some kind of social transformation. My point here is that, as transforming beings, superheroes don't just express radical ideas; they *are* conceptually radical figures. Their very being challenges, disrupts, and transgresses current hegemony. No matter the era, setting, or storyline, superheroes brim with radical promise, a promise that offers ways of making alternative, disruptive meanings, enabling us to not only imagine other worlds and ways of being in those worlds, but to track the synergies that exist between transforming ourselves and the realms we inhabit, real world and superhero.⁷⁵ But it is only ever a promise — a strong assertion of intention — and not a guarantee.

This does not mean that we can say that superheroes are always radical, however.⁷⁶ Modes of production, particularly representation, frequently impede their conceptual radicalism. Transformation is a fundamentally radical concept, yes, but mainstream representation can undermine and dispel its radicalism. For example, the concept of being able to materially alter one's body and shift subject positions, unseen and at will — as exemplified by the genre's shapeshifting class of superheroes, think *Mystique* or *Martian Manhunter* — is both radical and ontologically disruptive.⁷⁷ As we will see, however, mainstream representations of this phenomenal mode of transformation are rarely radical or subversive.

Polysemy too speaks to the radical promise of superheroes, as to monsters. Indeed, the idea of promise speaks directly to the sense of contingency I want to emphasize around ascribing

75 As I discuss in Chapter 3 of this volume, it is important to acknowledge that transformation does not always dispel borders and that, while transformation can be radical on a personal or local level, it may not affect wider socio-political structures.

76 Remembering my earlier assertion about a nexus of three forces shaping genre meaning (making): concept, representation, and practice.

77 This practice also speaks to certain modes of real-life "passing" practices, touched upon throughout this book.

meaning. Discussing Gothic novels, Jack Halberstam's impression that "multiple interpretations are embedded in the text and part of the experience of horror comes from the realization that meaning itself runs riot" easily applies to superheroes and the superhero genre.⁷⁸ (Although perhaps one of the reasons that the extreme and fantastical transformations that characterize superhero texts are treated as fantastical rather than monstrous is because their riotous meaning is contained by binaries.⁷⁹) Halberstam also uses the phrase "meaning machines" to describe the "infinite interpretability" of monsters, a phrase that rings equally true when considering the meaning-potential of superheroes and their stories.⁸⁰

Thinking back to *Watchmen* for a moment and to the birth of Dr. Manhattan, we can see that Jon Osterman's transformation into Dr. Manhattan is an evolutionary process rather than a "Shazam!" moment. As the story progresses, the character becomes less Osterman (human) and more Dr. Manhattan (god), but, tellingly, even as the character loses his humanity, he retains his culturally loaded human form. In this regard, there is a ray of light because as he leaves Earth to become a god in another part of the galaxy, Dr. Manhattan's human form dispels and transforms into a pale blue vapor. We do not see the character arrive at "his" destination, and so we don't know if "he" rematerializes in human form or if "he" creates life in "his" Earthly image. But there is the possibility that the super-being, or god, we know as Dr. Manhattan finally becomes something Other, and if so, there is the radical potential that the world(s) that he creates become authentically Otherworlds. This single, unassuming panel is a small, perhaps inadvertent, but heartening visual expression of the genre's radical promise, one tied to the infinite interpretability of its protagonists and stories.

78 Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

79 It is also the case that the monstrosity of superhero transformation is routinely elided, sanitized, and civilized, except for the rare sights of monstrous characters, such as the Hulk and the Thing.

80 Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 31.

Celebrated comics writer, Grant Morrison, alludes to the idea of infinite interpretability in the final part of *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne*.⁸¹ In this episode, Bruce Wayne time-jumps to a place called the Vanishing Point, a repository for every story, meaning, and moment in time. It is primed for destruction, but when the timer hits zero, the archive is not annihilated. It becomes instead a perpetually free-floating library of stories, ideas, and meanings, waiting to be awakened by some future reader or meaning maker. Vanishing points evoke ideas of perspective, of unfixed ways of seeing the world. In the story, the Vanishing Point symbolizes the idea that texts and meanings do not have a final resting point or conclusion but instead live on in the possibility or infinite interpretability of future readers. In Morrison's story, meaning is unstable and, literally, hangs in a way of looking. At the end of this tale, Wayne/Batman and their story persist in different ways. Something Morrison knows all too well because even as he was writing the end of this story, he was plotting and planning other future Wayne/Batman stories.

Inspired by Halberstam and Morrison and following Roland Barthes, I do not wish to decipher meaning or declare conclusions. I am more interested in exploring (resistance to) "the rules and constraints of that meaning's elaboration."⁸² Superheroes are bendable. They can be made to represent or to mean ad infinitum: they are polysemous. As we shall see, this air of meaning-possibility has as much to do with historical and canonical developments and expansion into other markets and media as it does with authorial intent and fan practices and re-articulations.

Creators may use normative representational strategies and other techniques to encode preferred meanings into these conceptually liminal characters and narratives, but minoritarian and oppositional fanwork and reading strategies can always

81 Grant Morrison et al., *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).

82 Roland Barthes, "What Is Criticism?," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 259.

resist and subvert this official meaning. Inconsistencies in meaning unsettle and disrupt, leaving gaps and silences that excluded fans are more than capable of filling. Cracks in meaning offer lacunae for minoritarian fans wishing to stay engaged with an exclusionary and frequently hostile genre. Through a variety of practices, fans create and confirm the genre's radical promise (e.g., genderswap cosplay, racebending fan-art, slash fanfiction). And some, as I show in the closing chapters, enact the genre's recurring theme of civic transformation — that one person can make a difference and can transform their local community, and, somewhat contradictorily, that the possibility of change rests with the people and that it is they, rather than some white male savior, who must speak and enact truth to power. Thus, the subversive power of these characters stems not only from their border-smashing transformations but also from the transformative instability of meaning that such movements bring. As part of mapping the genre's meaningscape, *Un/Making Worlds* works to document and raise awareness about how minoritarian fans respond to exclusionary texts and how they contest and escape encoded or preferred meanings, focusing on strategies, processes, and surfaces. After all, through their creative, intertextual, and often violative practices, fans and fan activists are key to recovering the genre's lost radical promise.

Recovering Radical Promise

Un/Making Worlds explores the interconnected layering of the genre's radical promise through three often inconsistent and contradictory sites and expressions: form; narratives and protagonists; and fanwork and enactments. In so doing, it reveals the idea of radical promise itself as mobile and unstable. It too fails to cohere. Thus, the process of recovering radical promise can be outlined as follows: (a node of) radical promise is situated within the genre's transforming protagonists, mainstream representation and production practices curtail the expression of this radicalism, and violative transformative fan engagement,

or meaning- and world-making, reanimates this lost promise.⁸³ Indeed, this outline maps the trajectory and structure of this treatise. Working in two parts, this book moves from a theoretical discussion to an observation and theorization of praxis. The book's first three chapters concentrate on theoretical issues, while the last three chapters re-storify minoritarian engagement with superhero culture, illustrated by a compilation of closing case studies — or, as I prefer, case stories — which begin the process of recovering the genre's radical promise as it plays out on various, frequently overlapping, sites and surfaces.

Chapter 1 grounds my argument in established concepts and perspectives before moving to contemporary and innovative expositions. To draw out the genre's radical promise, I trace the roles that binaries, multiplicities, paratexts, authors, and fans play in creating the genre's idiosyncratic meaningscape. My focus here is on the creation and regulation of genre meaning as well as the relations between official and unofficial meaning makers, gesturing here to the strategies minoritarian fans use to keep this troublesome genre viable. Stories and storytelling are potent meaning- and world-making tools — acts of creation, refuge, escape, remembrance, and resistance — and as such, traditions and practices of (counter)storytelling are a signature theme, not just of this chapter but of this book.

The second chapter details the book's three leading concepts and practices: transformation, representation, and worldmaking. It traces the flow of the genre's promise from (radical) concept through (orthodox) representation and out towards radicalized reception. For example, to fully understand the dynamics between transformation, radical promise, and representation, I point to the role that representation plays in creating the genre's ideologically conflicted meaningscape. Building on this, I close with an account and critique of worldmaking, exploring syner-

83 It is worth underscoring that mainstream practices of representation and production elide but do not eradicate radicalism. As we see, radical promise can be exhumed by creators and commentators and reanimated by violative fan engagement.

gies between fantasy and real worlds, which leads me to retheorize worldmaking as world-un/making. More than just semantics, this is an attempt to better capture the processes involved in making alternative worlds, places, and spaces.

Tapping into futurist traditions and queer notions of failure, un/becoming, disruption, and utopia, Chapter 3 works to reconstitute the genre itself as a site of radical promise. Disruptive protagonists, genre “failings,” multivocal discourse, and violative multimodal fanwork have created a radical genre that is not necessarily seen in its official texts or discourse but felt in its polysemy. Through the example of transmogrification, I show how the genre fails in its speculative duties and, moreover, how this site of failure displays the genre’s broader ideological disconnect (and consequently unstable meaning- and theory-scapes). In refusing to theorize this within a binary, I open a borderland space, one that welcomes illegibility and recognizes it as a source of the genre’s radical promise.

Chapter 4 begins with an account and reconceptualization of the concept and practice of escape, and with the strike of a key “escape” becomes “e-scape.” Extending this, I consider the genre’s connections with escapology and transformation and show how the former enfold the key themes of this book: disruptive meaning making, transformation, escape reimaged, and world-un/making. I describe this synergy as “textual escapology,” or for short, “texcapology” — a spatially dislocated transformative mode of textual engagement that focuses on the border-smashing multimodal interplay between minoritarian fans and the superhero genre, spotlighting how their practice makes it mean, in all senses, so much more.

Chapters 5 and 6 comprise the case story chapters and function like a medieval European town square in times of feast and festival, full of Bakhtinian carnival spirit — a participatory, transformative, utopian, anarchic, transgressive, and unfinished space that turns superhero worlds on their heads. These chapters also give the last word to this book’s real heroes, the fans. The case stories are drawn from official superhero texts, minoritarian superhero fandom, and superhero-infused activ-

ism. Each story presents a detailed analysis illustrating different elements of texcapology. Focusing on bodies and costumes, Chapter 5 presents real-life superheroes, such as Dark Guardian and LightStep, and a superhero-inspired social justice activist, Superbarrio Gómez. I also spotlight violative minoritarian cosplay, or, as I prefer to think of it, “[dis]play” — a transitory embodiment opening an experimental space in which marginalized and excluded cosplaying fans may (re)imagine themselves and their source characters. Comics and film supply the setting for Chapter 6: Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel offers a valuable representation of a minority superhero and superhero fan, while Sanjay Patel, creator of Pixar’s *Sanjay’s Super Team*, embodies a liminal creator/fan position, as does Maya Glick, albeit in a different, more fannishly implicated way.

To conclude, in this book, I step away from binary assertions and toward the idea that meaning is promissory. This allows me to advance the idea that the genre’s meaningscape is a dynamic and contradictory nexus of meaning (making), albeit one informed by systems of power. I seek to better understand how this genre and its protagonists can mean so much to different fans, how minoritarians and majoritarians can both, antithetically, claim the genre as their own. I want, in other words, to know about meaning (making), specifically, why and how marginalized and excluded fans remain engaged with a troublesome genre. Theorizing meaning and meaning making — how we make, see, and change the world — is the nub of this book. I knew of the ever-present possibility of, and value in, oppositional or negotiated readings, but I wanted to develop a deeper, structural understanding of the genre’s and its protagonists’ radicalism, or, as I come to call it, radical promise.

CHAPTER 1

Medleys of Meaning and Meaning Makers: Control, Regulation, and Resistance

Gesturing toward strategies of regulation and resistance, this synergistic two-part chapter maps the roles that binaries, multiplicities, intertextualities, paratexts, and medleys of creators, fans, and scholars play in sculpting genre meaning. If there is to be a stated aim, it is to begin mapping the flux of radical promise throughout the genre. And I use the word “throughout” purposely, because, as we shall see, radical promise literally flows through genre texts and out into the wider world. Thus, part 1, “Charting Hostile Waters,” begins with notes on multiplicities, intertextualities, and authorship before discussing the genre’s other great and iconic structuring devices: binaries and pairings. Here, I show how contradictory meaning-making practices fracture and open fecund spaces within official meaning. Decentering the author fractures and destabilizes official meaning-making processes, creating spaces for resistive and oppositional practices.¹ But I do not stop there, as to do so would be to mark an area of the map, “Here Be Monsters.” Fans, particularly

1 It also helps blur the official/unofficial division that separates authorial positions and knowledge productions, such as canon/non-canon and “amateur” fan/“qualified” professional.

minoritarian fans, occupy a vast, often unsung, often carnivalesque, meaning-making territory. This is the province of part 2, "Surfing Hostile Waters." My intention here is to show how minoritarian fans can transform the "failure" of official genre creators to meaningfully explore and represent radical promise. At the end of part 1, I include a theoretical vignette on binaries and identity to set the stage for my deliberation on resistive meaning making or unmaking. I affirm that resistive, repurposing fan practice can work to recover and animate the genre's lost radical promise, but not always. Part 2 concludes with a word on Elijah Price, aka Mr. Glass, from *Unbreakable* (2000), an invaluable example of a mainstream representation of a minoritarian superhero fan "failing" to repurpose, or disidentify, with official genre meaning, demonstrating that it is not always possible to shirk prescribed meaning. But in thinking about minoritarian resistance, I also want to consider the creation of the minoritarian subject position. Thus, my interlude on binaries and identity at the close of part 1 positions cultural identity as a meaning-making process, which speaks to the concept and formation of identity as a story in and of itself. A Manichean drama with very real socio-political, cultural, and economic consequences for its players, leaving some privileged and a greater many oppressed. Yet, as the superhero genre demonstrates, stories can always be rescripted. Stories and storytelling are potent meaning- and world-making tools: acts of creation, refuge, escape, remembrance, provocation, and resistance, as well as control and regulation. To move beyond binary understandings, we must first consider how the superhero genre and its associated discourse currently handle meaning (making). This is the first step towards seeing genre meaning made differently.

Making Superhero Texts Mean: Charting Hostile Waters

Genre Meaning: Multiplicities & Intertextualities

The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

— Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”¹

The principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity.

— Henry Jenkins, “Just Men in Capes”²

In his opus *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927), Marcel Proust writes: “Words do not change their meanings so drastically in the course of centuries as, in our minds, names do in the course of a year or two.”³ Proust here refers to the women

1 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1968), 148.

2 Henry Jenkins, “Just Men in Capes? (Part One),” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 14, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/just_men_in_capes.html.

3 Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2: *The Guermentes Way and Cities of the Plain*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin

who have held the fictional title, Duchesse de Guermantes, describing it as a “collective” name. The title and all the expectations that come with it remain constant, while those who hold it change over time. And though not writing about superheroes, Proust could have been describing how titles and monikers function in the superhero genre, as well as meaning (making). Series titles, character names and motifs, company names, and even the “superhero genre” label itself, like the Duchesse de Guermantes title, persist but travel and change in meaning over time and cultural epochs. A woman, for example, now officially holds Mjölnir and the Thor title.⁴ In some ways, important ways, the superhero genre still means the same things it did eight decades ago — characters still engage in some form of identity and costume play, as well as socio-political intervention and action — but it doesn’t always, as with character names and titles, *mean* in the same way.

Multiplicities flow from two interconnected spheres: official genre creation (e.g., intertextuality, paratexts) and genre reception (e.g., affirmational and violative fanwork).⁵ The former rests in the hands of genre creators, whereas the latter, while obviously connected to the former, lies in the hearts and minds — interpretations, translations, practices — of superhero fans. Creators and fans author, protect, assert, contest, and debate the superhero canon, with some voices more prized than others. When discussing genre multiplicity, Henry Jenkins observes similarities

(New York: Penguin, 1984), 552.

- 4 At the time of the character’s relaunch, *Thor* writer Jason Aaron underscored Thor’s gender transition — the character’s new meaning — by asserting: “This is not She-Thor. This is not Lady Thor. This is not Thorita. This is THOR. This is the THOR of the Marvel Universe.” “Marvel Proudly Presents Thor,” *Marvel*, July 15, 2014, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/comics/marvel-proudly-presents-thor>. More recently, Natalie Portman’s casting as Jane Foster/Thor in *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) further confirmed that Thor is officially female.
- 5 For a discussion of official and unofficial paratexts, see Lincoln Geraghty, *Popular Media Cultures: Fans, Audiences and Paratexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

between official and unofficial meaning making, noting that the official “rewriting and reimagining of established protagonists”⁶ frequently parallels transformative fan practices. Yet while both sets of creators generate multiplicities and inconsistencies, producers frequently “claim that fans disrupt the coherence of the narrative.”⁷ The use of “disrupt” alludes to power relations and binaries (e.g., official/unofficial, professional/amateur) and suggests a sense of producerial ownership over the genre whereby they make, or establish, official meaning, or canon, which fans later “disrupt” with their unruly, unofficial meaning making. Simply put, producers make meaning, while fans merely disrupt it. I delve into these power dynamics below, starting with an examination of intertextuality and official, or corporate, authorship as mechanisms for creating, securing, and policing official genre meaning, scrutinizing too the prestige that official authorship holds within superhero scholarship. Moreover, as I discuss in Part 2, working creatively with intertextuality illuminates how minoritarian superhero fans can escape dominant, usually troublesome, meanings, thereby helping to produce a fuller map of the genre’s riotous meaningscape.



Many artists, theorists, and writers have considered the role of authors as meaning makers as well as notions of intertextuality, the idea that no text exists in a vacuum. Umberto Eco captures a sense of these ideas in a piece about cult films. He writes:

It is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intentions of their authors.⁸

6 Jenkins, “Just Men in Capes? (Part One).”

7 Ibid.

8 Umberto Eco, “Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage,” in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1986), 198.

And Cornel Sandvoss provides an illuminating snapshot of the “intertextual web” circulating Thomas Mann’s 1947 novel *Doktor Faustus*, from medieval myth to superhero comics and everything in between.⁹ But a feeling for intertextuality, if not the descriptor — the term itself coined by Julia Kristeva and grounded in her doctoral work on Mikhail Bakhtin¹⁰ — existed long before the rise of poststructuralism. It can be found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or in T.S. Eliot’s poetry, and in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where he writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.¹¹

And further, when discussing temporal connections between texts, he observes that it should not be judged preposterous to think that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”¹²

Eliot speaks presciently here about the current demand for prequels, in which new texts are created from the meanings of older texts, such as the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, the *Twin Peaks* prequel film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, or the 2012 superhero comic book series *Before Watchmen*. As the — unusually unimaginative — title indicates, this series predates the ground-breaking *Watchmen* series released in 1986. And, by being produced after *Watchmen* but set in a time pre-

9 Cornel Sandvoss, “The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture,” in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 67.

10 María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro, “Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept,” *Atlantis* 18, nos. 1–2 (1996): 268–85.

11 T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 15.

12 *Ibid.*

ceding it, it plays with and distorts linear ideas of time and textual meaning.¹³ This expression of dislocated textual sequencing provides a useful example of the present being directed by the past and the present altering the past, as reading storylines in the 2012 prequel can affect our understanding of the 1986 text just as much as the 1986 text affects our understanding of the 2012 text. I will come back to time in a moment.

I explore the (effect of the) genre's intertextuality throughout this book but suffice it to say at this point that the superhero genre is fantastically intertextual. Superheroes do not, after all, claim to be original characters, just unabashed reimaginings of undying ones. "SHAZAM," Billy Batson's magic word, which transforms him into Captain Marvel, literally summons the powers of Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury, as well as all their attendant (his)stories. As with Thor (Norse mythology), Superman (Christian mythology), and the Hulk (Gothic tradition), the Flash's intertextual origins similarly evoke global myths and legends. His

winged heels belong to the Greek god Hermes and his Roman counterpart, Mercury. [...] In India, he is [...] Ganesh [...]. In Egypt, he was Thoth [...]. Babylonian cultures portrayed him as Nabu. In the voodoo pantheon, he is Legba; to the Celts, he was Ogma; and Viking mythology knew him as Odin.¹⁴

Yet, while the genre's intertextuality may draw from many sources and take many forms, it is frequently insular, keying into issues of multiplicity, continuity, and canon.¹⁵ For example,

13 Likewise, the recent TV series *Watchmen*, set thirty-four years after the events in the comic book, which would bring the timeline to the present day.

14 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 30.

15 We see intertextuality too in the genre's penchant for reboots and retcons — retroactive continuity — and in the popular practice of hiding "Easter eggs" — insider references or messages — within superhero texts,

many of the principal characters in *Watchmen* allude to other superheroes or were inspired by already-established characters from Charlton Comics.¹⁶ Furthermore, different versions of characters can authentically and concurrently inhabit the genre's multiple worlds and alternate universes too.¹⁷ Jenkins suggests that an appreciation and valuing of continuity emerged sometime in the early 1970s, but that by the mid-1980s, this era of continuity had been hijacked by a widespread embrace, or pleasure, in the possibilities of multiplicity, at least in terms of unofficial meaning making, if not storytelling techniques.¹⁸ Notably, however, while continuity and multiplicities may appear to be contradictory, they are not mutually exclusive, as "fans become both the guarantors of continuity and the generators of multiplicity, but the two modes involve different degrees

as seen in the *Deadpool 2* "No Good Deed" trailer, which includes a *Logan* film poster; a scene in which Deadpool changes costume in a phonebooth to John Williams's iconic *Superman* theme; graffiti that refers to Nathan Summers (a.k.a. Cable) from the *X-Men* series and Rey from the recent *Star Wars* films; a poster for the fan favorite TV series, *Firefly*; and at the end, a Deadpool rewrite of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. All this and more in a swift three minutes and forty seconds. David Leitch, dir., *Deadpool 2 Trailer: No Good Deed* (Marvel Entertainment, 2017).

- 16 Charlton Comics was a small comics publisher that sold the rights to its stable of characters to DC Comics in 1985. Nite Owl is, for instance, a reworking of the Blue Beetle and perhaps Batman, and the rabid vigilante Rorschach references the Question. More broadly, *Watchmen* is a phenomenally intertextual tale that speaks directly to earlier comics characters and traditions, such as the inclusion of a pirate comic, *Tales of the Black Freighter*, but also generally in its plentiful use of quotations and lyrics, and so forth.
- 17 In Marvel Comics and DC Comics, this multiple-worlds model is known as the "multiverse," with worlds designated by numbers. Earth-616 is the main location for Marvel storylines, but DC's continuity is far more complex due to several continuity reboots (e.g., *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *The New 52*) with worlds designated by numbers and as either pre- or post-*Crisis*, so that in Earth-51 (pre-*Crisis*) Superman marries Lois Lane, whereas in Earth-89 (pre-*Crisis*) Lois marries Batman.
- 18 Henry Jenkins, "Just Men in Tights: Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity," in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. Angela Ndaliansi (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21.

of closeness and loyalty to the author.”¹⁹ Let’s take a closer look at the golden-age character, the Flash, a dashing expression of multiplicity and intertextuality.

Snapshot: The Flash²⁰

The Flash is a moniker for several superhero entities. Although there are several alternate versions of the character, such as Bizarro-Flash or the twenty-eighth-century iteration, Blaine Allen, in terms of continuity, the character has been officially remade three times. The Flash first appeared in the 1940s as Jay Garrick, then in 1956 Barry Allen arrived, followed by Wally West in 1986 and Bart Allen in 2006. While Bart Allen’s tenure appears to be coming to an end, Garrick, Barry Allen, and West are still going strong. Revealingly, official reincarnations of the Flash have, for the moment at least, remained stagnant in terms of identity markers (i.e., white, cis het, male, nondisabled). As a side note, this imaginative entropy does not mark all superhero rebirths. Across superhero media, there are now quite a few authentic and diversely raced and gendered versions of the same source character.²¹ Intertextuality is a central conceit of the superhero genre, and while it is typically used to stifle radical change, particularly in its insular form, in these, albeit carefully pitched, reimaginings, we see how, as a component of multiplicity, it can open spaces within official domains for diverse characterization and worldmaking.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ My example refers to comic book history, but the Flash, usually the Barry Allen version, has made many appearances in cartoons, TV series (e.g., the 2014 live-action TV series, *The Flash*), and several recent films in the DCU (DC Extended Universe).

²¹ Alongside other iterations, Spider-Man is both Peter Parker (a white teenage white boy) and Miles Morales (a bi-racial Black and Puerto Rican teenage boy). Kamala Khan (a Muslim Pakistani American girl) is the shape-shifting Ms. Marvel. And Captain Marvel and Thor have both seen a gender change, with Carol Danvers (the former Ms. Marvel) now acting as Marvel’s official Captain Marvel and as noted, Jane Foster as Thor.

The Flash mythos embraces its multiplicity and publicly displays its insular intertextuality. For example, in “Showcase #4,” the issue introducing Barry Allen, we see Allen reading an old *Flash* comic featuring Jay Garrick, the original 1940s version, and imagining what it would be like to be just like him.²² This scene establishes Allen as a superhero fan and creates a direct link between this updated version and his, then, predecessor. It also alludes to some real-life fannish behaviors.²³ But as we see in the ground-breaking 1961 story “Flash of Two Worlds,” encounters can be even closer. In this unconventional time-warp story, Allen accidentally travels to another world — and, for him, another time — Earth-Two, home of the Golden-Age Flash, Jay Garrick. After meeting, both versions of the Flash realize that the events of Garrick’s life are comic book continuity in Allen’s world. (For example, the cancellation of Garrick’s run as the comic-book Flash coincided with the retirement of the Earth-Two Garrick/Flash.)

The effect of this world-colliding story on the superhero genre was enormous. Allen’s adventure alerted readers to the possibility of other storyworlds and indicated to creators the creative and financial potential of multiverses and crossovers, both of which are now key devices in superhero storytelling. However, as criticism of *The Flash* TV series demonstrates, too much intertextuality can be a bad thing: season two of the series was criticized for trying to “include every Flash moment it could think of.”²⁴ Given the deep and joyful intertextuality of the Flash mythos, it is no surprise that time travel is a common element

22 Robert Kanigher et al., *Showcase #4: Presenting The Flash* (New York: DC Comics, 1956).

23 It suggests, for example, fannish wish-fulfillment: that some superhero fans can become part of the official superhero story or even become its creators. Self-proclaimed creator-fans like Frank Miller and Grant Morrison got to carry the torch for the next generation, much like Barry Allen did. But rather than just continuing the tradition, they frequently transform it.

24 Mike Cecchini, “The Flash’ Season 2 Finale: Every DC Comics Reference,” *Den of Geek*, May 25, 2016, <http://www.denofgeek.com/us/books-comics/the-flash/249578/the-flash-season-2-finale-every-dc-comics-reference>.

of Flash narratives, as is traveling to other worlds. Indeed, they frequently intersect.²⁵

As seen, time travel proves a useful and popular device for opening superhero narratives up to new worlds and allowing characters—and fans—to meet other temporally or spatially located versions of themselves. Moreover, the genre constantly undermines the linear model of time, with time-traveling superheroes and alternate versions routinely collapsing ideas of the past, present, and future. But the Flash is not the only superhero to time travel. Of course, there's Booster Gold, Bishop, and Cable, but Deathlok and Green Lantern (the Hal Jordan version) have also spun back and forth through time. In these time-warp stories, creators utilize and celebrate intertextuality and multiplicity while also simultaneously undermining and establishing the idea of authorial control. Intertextuality is undoubtedly an ambivalent force. At once, underpinning the diversification of the genre's exclusionary meaningscape, by fans and progressive creators, but also working for those who wish to imagine authorship, or meaning, as being solely in the hands of a particular set of creators, a band of brothers. For just as intertextuality nurtures spaces for radical change, it also incubates the idea of official (his)stories and thus official meanings. And while not a character one might immediately think of in this context, Batman has been known to take the occasional tumble through time.

Snapshot: *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne* (2010)

Celebrated comics writer, Grant Morrison references various texts, motifs, sources, and epochs in *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne*, ranging from the Paleolithic era to the Pilgrim witch-hunts to pirate and cowboy mythologies and more.²⁶ But

25 Time travel is such a part of the Flash mythos that he has access to a time machine, the cosmic treadmill.

26 Grant Morrison et al., *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).

to (re)stage this Homeric Batman story, he also borrows from the Batman mythos. The result is a phenomenally intertextual comic book and a heartfelt acknowledgement of the “intertextual web” that constitutes this octogenarian character,²⁷ as an unconscious Wayne/Batman observes, perhaps at this insentient moment becoming Morrison’s surrogate: “But something else defined the exact moment Batman was born. The first truth of Batman... The saving grace. I was never alone.”²⁸

“Batman” and “I” here, I suggest, refer to both Wayne as Batman and *Batman* the text. Wayne and Morrison acknowledge in this quote, as well as in some earlier panels, that Batman was created from a variety of motifs, sources, reactions, and experiences — that his birth was not unattended. Batman and *Batman* arose from and exist within an intertemporal meaning network, initiated in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and each *Batman* text is always “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences.”²⁹ It is a “node within a network.”³⁰ The title of the story also nods to this network, with the word “return,” for example, invoking the groundbreaking Batman comic book story *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).³¹

In another scene near the end of the final issue, Morrison and an artistic team including Lee Garbett and Pere Pérez beautifully evoke a sense of intertextuality, destabilized authorship, gaps in meaning, and the polysemous nature of texts. As an alien organism takes possession of Batman, the comic book page collapses. In this fragmented scene, readers come face to face with *a* Batman, but it’s not the one they’re used to seeing. That one is scattered behind the simulacrum in smaller, overlapping panels and captions filled with references to earlier *Batman* texts and defining Batman motifs: the Joker’s purple laughter,

27 Sandvoss, “Death of the Reader,” 67.

28 Morrison et al., *Batman*.

29 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1974), 23.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Frank Miller et al., *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986).

Martha Wayne's broken string of pearls, the murderous bullet, and a repeated upside-down hanged man tarot card. None of these visuals are unique or original, but they all interact to create the idea of Batman.³²

Batman's meaning has been fragmented and displaced, just as Batman himself has been displaced, pushed literally into the background. Wayne/Batman is still there, just represented differently. It is possible to read the fragmented panels in any order and still get an idea of Batman, but it will not be the same as someone else's reading. This panel layout guides rather than leads readers toward Batman's meaning, signaling that there is no "right" way to read *Batman* while also suggesting that this story is just another interpretation of Batman, albeit an official one, another gossamer strand in this character's ever-expanding web of meaning.

Later in the issue, we see a similar panel layout surrounding an unconscious and dying Batman. At this point in the story, Batman has ousted the invading organism but has yet to reclaim his identity. The scattered panels around him are now bare and shaded in pale blues, symbolizing emptiness, coldness, death. There is no Batman, so there are no signs. Batman's life, his textual meaning, hangs in the air, and is portrayed as literally suspended as Wonder Woman gently lifts and carries his broken body to a safer space. By the end of the story, Batman has recovered himself, but only after reconnecting with the moment he first decided, "I shall become a bat." This scene and its phrasing speak directly to Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's influential origin story, *Batman: Year One*, which was published in 1987, twenty-three years earlier.³³

In this text, Batman's meaning is portrayed as a spirited blending and clashing of intertextual and intertemporal writings, as well as being in the hands of variously empowered meaning makers. It speaks directly to earlier Batman stories

32 Befittingly, this tarot card symbolizes things in suspension and martyrdom or self-sacrifice.

33 Frank Miller et al., *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 1987).

and motifs and, through flashbacks, references Morrison's own earlier work with the character.³⁴ In an interview with *i09*, Morrison talks about his desire to include a sense of earlier "embarrassing" moments, which are often overlooked in Batman's currently dominant "Dark Knight" coding:

What part of Batman's life haven't we talked about for a long time? And it was those weird 1950s adventures or the Adam West Batman that everyone thought was really uncool when Chris Nolan's movies came along. Batman used to be brightly coloured! Batman would fight aliens!³⁵

Morrison indicates here not only Batman's multiplicity and oppositionality — camp/gritty, cool/uncool, and so forth — but also the ability of an official author's interpretation to come onto the scene and ringfence a character's meaning. But the supremacy of Miller's and Nolan's interpretations has not entirely shut down other imaginings of Batman. Memories of another kind of Batman linger, ones that do not quite fit the dominant interpretation, and within these spaces it is possible to imagine, talk about, and create alternative meanings and visions of Batman. The character's multiplicity and intertextuality can accommodate them.

Curiously, in these kinds of promotional interviews, while appearing acutely aware that he is rewriting, or translating, this "already-written" text,³⁶ Morrison clearly still imagines himself as *the* author, talking about *his* Batman. And he is certainly not alone among authors in comfortably inhabiting this contradiction. Moreover, witnessing this contradiction — the ero-

34 For instance, see Grant Morrison and J.G. Jones, *Final Crisis* (New York: DC Comics, 2008–2009); Grant Morrison and Tony Daniel, *Batman R.I.P.* (New York: DC Comics, 2008); and Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, *Batman and Robin* (New York: DC Comics, 2009–2011).

35 Cyriaque Lamar, "Grant Morrison's Philosophy of Comics," *Gizmodo*, April 14, 2010, <http://i09.gizmodo.com/5517352/grant-morrisons-philosophy-of-comics>.

36 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1974), 21.

sion and fortification of the idea of authors as the sole source of a text—within long-running superhero stories, fans too often come to similarly occupy the space in-between. But here we begin to feel the presence, the tightening polyvalent grip, of authors on genre meaning making, and likewise, notions of official meaning. Indeed, tracing the topography of multiplicities, intertextualities, and continuity is impossible without mentioning the genre’s penchant for un/making superhero worlds. More than an author’s translation or (re)imagining of a character or series, this predilection is expressed through traditions of rebooting and retconning genre continuity.³⁷ A practice through which the superhero industry flexes its divine authorial might over labyrinthine storyscapes and unruly fans.

Let’s think about un/making superhero worlds for a moment. The purpose of retcon and reboot stories is usually to bring meaning into line, to close gaps, and to assert an official meaning. Sometimes it’s just to “fix” bad or unpopular storylines, like the retconning of Jean Grey’s death or Iron Man’s treason. In reboots and retcons, narrative elements are repurposed, worlds and universes are collapsed and un/made, and characters are transfigured or killed off—often to be later resurrected. Needless to say, continuity revisions are hotly contested within fandom. The introduction of the aforementioned multiverse storytelling created the continuity headache that is both the triumph and bane of the superhero genre. For example, in 1985, DC Comics attempted to simplify its conflicted continuity by collapsing its multiverse into one world. The series was titled *Crisis on*

37 Reboots are attempts to completely erase previous continuity to create a clean slate, whereas retcons—retroactive continuity—only revise elements of established continuity (e.g., Miller’s *Batman: Year One* [New York: DC Comics, 1987] and Byrne et al.’s *Superman: The Man of Steel* [New York: DC Comics, 1986]). Retconning is a popular method of increasing diversity and resolving continuity issues. I describe it as an “attempt” because reboots and retcons are unstable and are often overwritten.

Infinite Earths (henceforth *Crisis*) and was tagged: “Worlds will live. Worlds will die. And the universe will never be the same.”³⁸

Crisis is an extreme example of the industry exerting authorial control to try and shut down multiplicities, contradictions, and “embarrassments.” Pre-*Crisis* material was placed outside continuity, and over the course of twelve months, many official, or canonic, stories became unofficial. Fans had to read the series to “understand the changes being *imposed* on their favorite characters and the universes they inhabited.”³⁹ In this landmark series, the Barry Allen version of the Flash sacrifices himself to save the multiverse, and although he doesn’t succeed, his heroic actions do, temporarily, save five Earths.

With *Crisis*, DC Comics attempted to erase multiplicities and bring stability and order to its narrative and character continuity. It did not succeed. Instead, its storyscape became littered with “retroactive changes, reimaginings, reinterpretations, revising origins, and revisions.”⁴⁰ For example, after Allen’s death, Wally West assumed the Flash mantle, allowing the Flash to live on. And while the Allen/Flash pairing might have been officially dead or “disappeared,” fans could always subvert DC’s plans by reading old Allen/Flash comics or by cosplaying the Allen version of the Flash, thereby breathing life back into the character. Several crossover titles eventually “restored” the official Allen/Flash pairing, as well as a large number of characters who had disappeared or died during *Crisis*.⁴¹

As we are beginning to see, authorship and notions of official meaning are potent yet fragile provisional forces in the construction of genre meaning. Addressing this contradiction early reveals the centralization and hierarchicalization marking

38 Marv Wolfman et al., *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (New York: DC Comics, 1985–1986).

39 Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (London: Continuum, 2002), 21; emphasis added.

40 *Ibid.*

41 For example, see Geoff Johns and Phil Jimenez, *Infinite Crisis* (New York: DC Comics, 2005–2006), and Various, *The New 52* (New York: DC Comics, 2011–2016).

genre meaning (making), not to mention the strategies official creators and producers employ to control and assert superhero canon, thereby taming or diluting radical promise. It also begins to signal the breadth of obstacles that minoritarian fans face when opposing official meanings, that is, how difficult it can be to challenge “the powers that be.” Moreover, given the subduing effect creator privileging can have on fans as meaning makers, it is critical to address issues of authorship, control, and privilege before considering violative meaning-making practices. This will yield a more rounded understanding of the source, power, and value of resistive fanwork. As will be shown, there is much to be gained by delving a little deeper into superhero authorship and notions of official meaning, as well as their role in (controlling) the story of a genre’s meaning.

Genre Meaning: Authorship and “The Powers That Be”⁴²

The superhero genre has been around for over eighty years, and during those long decades, countless creative teams, typically led by writers, have curated long-running characters and titles — an unstable creative arrangement that can stress and test as much as sustain continuity.⁴³ Despite these waxing and waning stewardships, the practice of privileging creators — again, usually writers — as the definitive source of textual meaning persists in superhero discourse and culture.⁴⁴ Creator privilege affects power relations in superhero discourse and fandom and, consequently, meaning-making possibilities. And, like all systems

42 The debates and concepts referenced in this section come from several expansive fields of enquiry. My intention here is not to chronicle these debates but to characterize the tensions around authorship and meaning making within the genre.

43 A practice that applies to superhero comics and, to a lesser extent, superhero films.

44 Although usefully destabilizing the creative hierarchy (i.e., the writer and all other contributors), even the word “creator” evokes strong associations with the deity concept and Barthes’s “Author-God.” Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1968), 142–48.

of privilege, it manifests in different ways, some more obvious or casual than others. Adilifu Nama, for example, points to the valorization of authorial intent within segments of superhero scholarship.⁴⁵ Within such studies, scholars situate authorial intent as a way of *finally* determining the meaning of superhero texts or superheroes themselves, of “teasing out what superheroes symbolize, invoke, reflect, and project.”⁴⁶ Such scholarship proves problematic, not least because of the collaborative and revisionist process of creating superheroes and superhero texts, let alone their multimodality: Whose authorial voice should we listen to or privilege?⁴⁷ Alan Moore, for example, is notoriously dissatisfied with how people read and position *his* text. Moore, in effect, disagrees with many of the meanings readers make and take from *Watchmen*.⁴⁸ In response, he has infamously and long since detached himself from the comic, but its artist and co-creator, Dave Gibbons, remains actively attached to it. Indeed, Gibbons’s name appears in the credits of the 2009 film adaptation of the comic, while Moore’s is noticeably absent.

Nama draws attention to comics scholar Bradford W. Wright, who unabashedly celebrates not analyzing comics “too deeply,” privileging, alongside authorial intent, what Nama describes as “intensely surface perceptions.”⁴⁹ Developing Nama’s point, I contend that it is not that Wright rejects the possibility of layers

45 Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

46 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

47 Jonathan Gray discusses similar issues but in terms of “paratextual privilege.” Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.

48 Moore, for example, is supremely disappointed with how this text, which was intended as a dystopian rendering of superhero mythology and ontology, has become influential and valorized within mainstream comics and superhero culture, particularly with the widespread embrace of the right-wing vigilante, Rorschach. For example, see Steven Surman, “Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and Rorschach: Does the Character Set a Bad Example?” *Steven Surman Writes*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.stevensurman.com/rorschach-from-alan-moores-watchmen-does-he-set-a-bad-example/>.

49 Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), and Nama, *Super Black*, 11.

or multiple meanings, for in his original text he makes direct reference to it: “Ten individuals can read a comic book, watch a movie, or listen to a song and come away with ten completely different impressions, interpretations, and influences.”⁵⁰ Rather, he chooses to set aside alternate ways of knowing and making meaning in favor of pursuing an underlying, fixed, knowable meaning, that is, a final, authorial destination, an either/or position. The myth of an ultimate explanation, a coherent way of knowing superhero texts, still rings true for Wright and for others working like him. Creator privileging practices are so endemic as to appear normal, heavy with the air of taken-for-grantedness.⁵¹

Creator and text-privileging studies can lose sight of alternative sources of meaning, preferring instead to mine “meanings that were easily perceived by audiences, clearly intended by producers, or suggestive of broad historical developments and cultural assumptions.”⁵² And Martin Lund writes rather emphatically:

Ideally, a critical perspective that pays attention to history, context, and biography, and takes authorial self-representation and stated intentions seriously should be developed as scholarship on comics [...]. Nothing should take precedence over direct engagement and quotation of the comics themselves.⁵³

Similarly, in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds demonstrates the casual privileging of official creators

⁵⁰ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, xviii.

⁵¹ For instance, a scholarly review of Wright’s book notes his approach but fails to interrogate it. Jeremiah Massengale, “Review of Bradford W. Wright’s ‘Comic Book Nation,’” *ImageText* 6, no. 3 (2012), <https://imagetextjournal.com/review-of-bradford-w-wrights-comic-book-nation/>.

⁵² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, xviii.

⁵³ Martin Lund, “The Mutant Problem: X-Men, Confirmation Bias, and the Methodology of Comics and Identity,” *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 55, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10890>.

when he writes that continuity is “something malleable, and constantly in the process of being shaped by the collective forces of artists, writers, editors, and even the critical voices of fans.”⁵⁴ Continuity conjures up notions of canon, that is, official texts and meanings, as well as binary oppositions, such as continuity/alternate, inside(r)/outside(r), valued/unvalued, official/unofficial. And while Reynolds acknowledges fans in his list of meaning makers, the use of the adverb “even” and the phrase’s appendage at the end of the list separates fans from the other official creators and rather undermines their inclusion on the list. The adjective “critical” is also worth unpacking, as Reynolds may be suggesting that fan voices are critical, or vital, to meaning making, but given the context of the quote, it appears more likely that Reynolds is referring to the commentative roles fans frequently adopt: critiquing the merits or flaws of official meanings but, crucially, not *making* them, echoing back to the “make/disrupt” distinction observed at the beginning of this chapter.⁵⁵

Moreover, overlapping creative positions go unnoticed in Reynolds’s account. The collaborative nature of the superhero trade, the shared process of making official superhero stories, adds indeterminacy and should call into question the concept of the one “final” creator, as well as notions of official meanings and meaning makers. Despite this creative synergism, however, superhero texts frequently become appended to one creator’s name, usually the writer’s (or, apropos film, the director’s), as touched upon earlier: Morrison’s *Batman*, Nolan’s *Batman*, Claremont’s *X-Men*, and Singer’s *X-Men*. And within cosplay, performers may choose to portray a specific version of a character — thereby affirming creator interpretations — such as *Dark Knight* Joker or *Killing Joke* Joker cosplay.⁵⁶ Fans further reinforce

54 Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992), 47.

55 Reynolds subsequently suggests that if fans want to make meaning, they can, as many have done, cross the line between inside(r)/outside(r) and fan/creator and become official creators and meaning makers themselves.

56 *Dark Knight* Joker cosplay could refer to the comic book version created by Frank Miller, but the overall visuality of this popular cosplay, while echo-

creator privilege by channeling their delight, curiosity, or vitriol directly at writers, directors, or showrunners, even though the creation of superhero comics, films, games, or TV series is, as noted, collaborative.⁵⁷ By publicly celebrating, attacking, or amending authorial meanings or interpretations, fans accede to or resist a text's official meaning. But what of those lucky superhero fans who become official creators?⁵⁸

Creator-fans — or the more loaded “fanboy auteurs”⁵⁹ — blur all kinds of boundaries, exemplifying the point that superhero texts are created and read within a matrix, not an opposition. Notably, creator-fans do not cross the fan/creator boundary but operate within it. Becoming more empowered, they do, however, move from an outside(r) to an inside(r) position. Shifting power relations are of deep concern to many media and fan

ing Miller's version, typically references Christopher Nolan's version of the character played by Heath Ledger. (Miller's version, for example, wears a white suit, whereas Nolan's version wears a purple and green ensemble.)

All Jokers are, of course, ultimately informed by other sources, both within the superhero comics world and beyond.

- 57 Nolan's work with the Batman mythos was, for example, broadly celebrated by fans and critics, while Joel Schumacher's was, at the time, generally denigrated.
- 58 Many official superhero creators are long-time fans, and it is possible that some creator-fans given the opportunity to take authorial control over a beloved character or title could be considered to be producing something akin to authorized, commercialized, or commissioned fan fiction, or fanfic. Frank Miller is a popular example of the creator-fan figure, particularly with regard to his reimagining of Batman in the landmark *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. In the introduction to this text, Miller portrays himself as a long-time Batman fan and writes of how lucky he felt to be given the opportunity to rework the Batman mythos and reimagine his childhood hero. Frank Miller et al., *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986). For an examination of the creator-fan dynamic as it relates to issues of fan representation, see Ellen Kirkpatrick, “Hero-Fans and Fanboy Auteurs: Reflections and Realities,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, eds. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 127–38.
- 59 Suzanne Scott, “Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling,” in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, eds. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.

scholars, including Suzanne Scott, who considers authorial control through a feminist analysis of fanboy auteurs.⁶⁰ Within the context of transmedia narratives,⁶¹ Scott contends that through the intersecting practices of media industries and fanboy auteurs, we are witnessing a resurgence of authorial control over textual meaning, encapsulated in the fan favorite phrase, “the Powers That Be.”⁶²

Transmedia storytelling is expansive and embraces “the notion of an expanded continuity.”⁶³ Storyworlds so imagined become impossibly complex, and continuity becomes subject to multiplicities and contradictions. Fans are “pulled into the pleasure of multiplicity,” even continuity-driven fans, whose dreams of pinning down meaning, often tied to authorial intent, transmediality thwarts.⁶⁴ In such a cryptic, mobile meaningscape, it is possible to imagine creators as guiding rather than controlling textual meaning (making), as Jenkins here proposes and as we saw in the portrayal of our revenant Batman a few pages back. Although differently situated, Scott and Jenkins illustrate the pied nature of creator and fan relations and meaning-making

60 See *ibid.*, and Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

61 Transmedia storytelling is a method of telling a story across multiple media platforms. Each text, or story, is distinct but combines with the other texts to create a larger, richer narrative. For example, see Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

62 Scott is not here suggesting the foreclosure of “alternative” meanings or meaning making but critiquing power relations between media industries and fans. Scott argues that the increased visibility and interference of the fanboy auteur and their privileged position within fandom imperils the potential for resistance to official meanings. Scott’s work asserts that to maximize the undeniably collaborative potential of transmedia storytelling, all meaning makers, fans and creators, must be actively cognizant and critical of the power and control that privileged voices can exert over textual meaning.

63 Henry Jenkins, “The Guiding Spirit and the Powers That Be: A Response to Suzanne Scott,” in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, eds. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (London: Routledge, 2013), 56.

64 *Ibid.*

processes in contemporary pop culture storytelling, and as to the question of creators as guiding or controlling forces, meaning, as always, lies somewhere within.

Creators also try to guide, control, and regulate meaning through paratexts, which are common in the superhero world and its discourse.⁶⁵ Commercial paratexts — official materials that orbit the source text — are critical elements in creating and shaping textual meaning and value. For Scott, authorial paratexts “inevitably privilege the author’s voice, and reaffirm his position of power in that relationship.”⁶⁶ And for Jonathan Gray, “the paratexts of interviews, podcasts, DVD bonus materials, and making-of specials are the preferred means of speaking when creators want to assert authority and to maintain the role of the author.”⁶⁷ Alongside the usual kinds of paratexts, such as interviews with the creators, again mostly writers and producers, anthologized superhero comics frequently include introductions by the writer or an invited guest, which guide readers to engage with the text in a preferred way.⁶⁸ And when they can, scholarly books on superheroes do the same, emblazoning comics industry names and blurbs across their covers. Recommendations and introductions by comics professionals lend additional credibility, or authority, to the scholar’s work and their

65 Scott, “Who’s Steering the Mothership?,” 48. Within this field, debate centers around industry and “amateur” relations: Do transmedia storytelling or paratextual practices blur the lines between official and unofficial meaning makers, or do they reinforce hierarchies?

66 Whereas Jenkins, while not directly referring to paratexts but to authorial voices more generally, believes that many fanboy auteurs “also genuinely want to offer advice, share insights, and empower the next generation of storytellers.” Jenkins, “The Guiding Spirit,” 57.

67 Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 110.

68 Although superhero comics frequently include a “gallery” of preparatory or rough sketches drawn by the artist or another artist’s visual interpretation of a character, similar to a DVD “making of” special. These sketchbooks contribute to the reader’s meaning-making process and may help guide readers to view a character or scene in a preferred way. As with all kinds of paratexts, readers can resist or cast aside these meaning-making interventions.

brand of meaning.⁶⁹ Likewise, press junkets and convention schedules are packed with promotional interviews and panels during which creators tell eager fans what they *meant* by certain things or what to expect from new episodes or issues, spinning official, preferred meanings.

Yet while identifying systems of control and regulation, our brief review points to possibilities for transgressive meaning making through which marginalized superhero fans might navigate, survive, and transform exclusionary spaces, both textual and material. As one of the OGS of superhero comics, let's recap with another quick look at Batman.

May 1939 saw the "World's Greatest Detective" unleashed upon the public imagination, and he has never left us.⁷⁰ Now an octogenarian, there is no single author of Batman or *Batman* and no single text: Batman "has no primary urtext set in a specific period but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts."⁷¹ Official Batman texts and authorized paratexts create, control, and distribute preferred meanings, which are frequently endorsed by fans and enforced through fan policing.

69 Famed comics writer Dennis O'Neil provides an erudite introduction to Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, writing: "Read [Coogan's] book and you will understand what makes *the superhero* unique [...] and understand exactly what superheroes are [...]. Nothing in this book contradicts my long experience." O'Neil here clearly advocates Coogan's message as definitive, and his "insider" introduction encourages readers to do the same. Dennis O'Neil, "Introduction," in Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), vii.

70 Batman is one of the few characters continuously published, even during the genre's lean times, such as the 1950s.

71 Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, eds., *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 185. Despite this polyvocality, and as has been widely observed, Batman's meaning appears always reducible to a good/bad ("dark" Batman/"camp" Batman) opposition. Bob Kane and Bill Finger's original 1930s Batman is unlike the "camp" 1960s TV series version and different again from O'Neil and Adams's "dark" 1970s variant and again from Miller's "even darker" 1980s rendering. Moreover, the grim Miller rendering is widely hailed as the "good" version and the camp, playful Adam West iteration as the "bad" one.

Yet despite regulatory mechanisms, multiplicities and intertextualities play out frequently in the texts themselves, especially, as we have seen, in time-travel and alternate history stories. Evoking Eliot's ideas from earlier in this chapter, each Batman is informed by the past and present and informs past, present, and future iterations and, of course, creators and fans. Batman has indeed "many lives," and in the hands of progressive creators and fans, this "informing" power may yet become a reforming power. Lest we forget, fans produce their own range of paratexts too, from fanfiction and fan films to cosplay. This fanwork forms part of the paratextual landscape described above, albeit a less empowered, less official part, and may align with, subvert, or enhance official meaning. And so, while not exactly a two-way street, superhero meaning (making) is certainly not a fait accompli, especially when it comes to excluded and marginalized fans.

Indeed, despite being first mooted some thirty years ago, Jenkins's foundational notion of "textual poaching" — "an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" — speaks directly to the kind of "push me, pull me" creator/fan relations at the heart of this book.⁷² As does his later conceptualization of "popular appropriation," the practice of "adopting elements from the existing text and adapting them to alternative pleasures and meanings."⁷³ Then as now, Jenkins's work understands textual engagement and participation as a pursuit for meaning that goes beyond simply recovering official textual meaning, one that is set within the context of lived experience, always. Fans are individuals who may or may not be

72 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24–25. Of course, as fandom and fan studies have evolved, so too has the theoryscape. While some fan scholars now dismiss notions of "poaching" texts, a greater many still find value and utility in the concept. See Lucy Bennett, "Tracing Textual Poachers: Reflections on the Development of Fan Studies and Digital Fandom," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 5–20.

73 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxi.

part of larger fan communities, each with their own set of lived experiences and textual agendas. As Jenkins imagines it:

Fans recognize that their relationship to the text is a tentative one, that their pleasures often exist on the margins of the original text, and in the face of the producer's own efforts to regulate its meanings. [...] Sometimes, fans respond to this situation with a worshipful deference to media producers, yet, often they respond with hostility and anger against those who have the power to 'retool' their narratives into something radically different from that which the audience desires.⁷⁴

Snapshot: Bobby Drake Is Gay! Isn't He?

Bobby Drake's coming out as gay offers a potent example of this tussle for official, textual meaning.⁷⁵ In issue #40 of the *All-New X-Men* — a series bringing teenage versions of the original 1963 *X-Men* members into the present time — *X-Men* writer Brian Bendis broke the news that Bobby Drake, a.k.a. Iceman, was gay, the sixteen-year-old version of Bobby, that is. It was not breaking news to everyone, however. To some, it felt more like a rubber stamp. Many Iceman fans have for a long time read and/or repurposed Drake's story as a powerful metaphor for the struggle some people experience when coming out as gay in a straight privileged world.⁷⁶ For decades, creators and producers had asserted Bobby's straightness, diegetically and in genre dis-

74 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (1992), 24.

75 Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, Bobby Drake, a.k.a. Iceman, is a founding member of the X-Men, appearing in *X-Men* #1, published by Marvel Comics in 1963.

76 For example, see Eric Diaz, "For LGBT Fans of 'X-Men,' Iceman Coming Out as Gay Has Been a Long Time Coming," *Nerdist*, April 22, 2015, <https://archive.nerdist.com/for-lgbt-fans-of-x-men-icemancoming-out-as-gay-has-been-a-long-time-coming/>, and James Whitbrook, "Uncanny X-Men Ends with a Bang—And Finally Deals with Iceman's Sexuality," *Gizmodo*, November 4, 2015, <http://io9.gizmodo.com/uncanny-x-men-ends-with-a-bang-and-finally-deals-with-i-1740532667>.

course, while myriad fans had insisted on his gayness. On each opposing side Bobby's sexuality was obvious. Gradually, however, the ice started to thaw. Creators began to officially moot the idea that Bobby was gay, and in 2015, after a few false starts, Bendis finally made the official announcement: Bobby Drake is gay.⁷⁷

A segment of superhero fandom had succeeded in asserting their unofficial interpretation over official authorial intention, melting, for a moment, the boundary separating official and unofficial meaning (making). Some X-Men fans were elated by the official announcement, while others were confused and devastated.⁷⁸ Bobby Drake's retconning was an attempt by creators to shut down polysemous meaning and increase the diversity of superhero representation in a positive, thoughtful way, but a fragment of X-Men fandom once again refused to accept the new, official meaning, preferring instead to stick with the old official-but-now-unofficial story.

Textual meaning here remains contested and fragmented, and although differently focused, the struggle continues. In rebutting unofficial readings of Bobby's sexual identity, fans on both sides resort to the text, to the creators, to the Author: "You can cry 'Iceman isn't gay!!' all you want, but the fact is, it's there on the page."⁷⁹ And in an ultimate appeal to authorial intent and

77 For instance, in the early 2000s, during Chuck Austen's time on *Uncanny X-Men*. For example, see Steve Foxe, "Out Cold: Iceman's Queer Subtext in Chuck Austen's X-Men," *Shelfdust*, February 21, 2020, <https://shelfdust.com/2020/02/27/out-cold-iceman-northstar-and-chuck-austen/>.

78 Much as we see with Marvel's announcement that Superman/Jon Kent, son of Clark Kent and Lois Lane, is bisexual, or that Peter Quill/Star-Lord from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* series is bisexual and polyamorous. See Zoya Raza-Sheikh, "Superman Kent Comes Out as a Bisexual in New DC Comic," *Gay Times*, 2021, <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/superman-jon-kent-comes-out-as-bisexual-in-new-dc-comic/>, and Matilda Davies, "Marvel Tried to Reveal 'Guardians of the Galaxy's' Star-Lord as Bisexual Years Ago with a Mysterious New Love Interest," *Pink News*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/12/17/marvel-comics-star-lord-bisexual-al-ewing-guardians-galaxy-chris-pratt/>.

79 T. Cooper, "Marvel Revealed Iceman Is Gay and It Makes Complete Sense," *Dorkly*, April 21, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328134510/http://>

authority, media outlets invited the late Stan Lee — veteran comics creator and this character’s co-creator — for his comment on the character’s retconning, even though he hadn’t occupied an authorial role in Marvel Comics for decades. Indeed, during press junkets, asking creators what they *meant* by something remains a common enough question. In some contexts, and for some fans, the “Author-God” appears to be alive and well. And while heroic efforts are being made to unseat creators as gatekeepers of textual meaning, they are, as I have illustrated, all too often still revered and held to account for the meaning-potential of the texts they produce. As are another group of meaning makers, profiled next: superhero scholars.

Genre Meaning: Scholars and Making a Theoryscape

As touched upon previously, despite the potential for multiplicities of meaning, superhero scholarship tends to favor the search for single, fixed definitions, meanings, or conclusions. As also touched upon, it is not alone in this pursuit. As a result, oppositional modes of thought dominate the genre’s theoryscape — things are either one thing or another — leaving it binaristically organized and creating an illusory, regulatory sense of superhero meaning (making) as fathomable and stable. As this book shows, this is a perilous approach to making meaning, one that fails to fully account for the permeability and possibility of the space between and beyond binary oppositions. A question arises: How can scholars, and other parties, appreciate the genre’s polyvocality and polysemy but then, advertently or inadvertently, work to foreclose it through the adoption of either/or positions?

Along with creators, superhero scholars are “prized” among the genre’s meaning makers, wielding, as they do, academic authority. Yet, evoking notions of the still much-debated “aca-fan” position, their work also parallels the aforementioned

www.dorkly.com/post/73999/marvel-revealed-iceman-is-gay-and-it-makes-complete-sense.

rewriting practices of creators and fans, shaping, securing, regulating, and sometimes reimagining superhero meaning. Despite there being no “right” way to read superhero texts, superhero scholars help to create and distribute preferred meanings about and within superhero culture. Superhero scholarship guides and regulates meaning (making), prioritizing the mining of particular kinds of meaning and, over time, forging its own canon, which is itself today being rebooted and retconned. We catch a glimpse here of how superhero texts and culture became considered the domain of cishet white men: created by them, centered in them, beloved by them, and later, studied by them. The repetition and totalizing visibility of these profiles served to legitimize and normalize the figure of the cishet white man in superhero texts and culture. All other possibilities were, to use Gail Simone’s parlance, “fridged.”⁸⁰ As in superhero texts, minoritarian — a category including women — fans and scholars were excluded and pushed into the margins, the gutters, of superhero culture. But as is becoming increasingly clear, for as long as there have been superheroes, there have been minoritarian superhero fans and, though often occupying less official spaces, scholars and creators. Where once official authorship and meaning making lay solely in the hands of a “few good men,” it is now being refracted through a diverse range of differently empowered meaning makers. Moreover, superhero texts, meaning, and culture are increasingly shaped by decolonizing and democratizing forces and, of course, by resistance and hostility to the changes these forces effect. Thus, as in industrial and fannish realms, superhero scholarship is just as much a site of struggle for control over textual meaning, remembering that these are not always disparate realms.

Echoing past discussions and, regarding binaries and pairings, those to come, the genre’s penchant for multiplicities and oppositions allows for and encourages divergent, often contra-

80 Gail Simone, “Women in Refrigerators,” *Women in Refrigerators*, 1999, <http://web.archive.org/web/2012011060731/http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/>.

dictory, readings of characters and texts. Evoking Halberstam's notion of "infinite interpretability," Jason Dittmer suggests that creators build ideological mutability or doubleness into stories and characters, allowing superheroes to become "everything to everyone."⁸¹ Writing of Captain America's death, Dittmer asserts: "In leaving it to the audience to affix a meaning to the allegory, [Marvel] hoped for the story to be all things to all people."⁸² Stories and characters blatantly, concurrently, and authentically mean and represent different things to different people, yet each interpretation of the character or storyline is felt to be the "real" or "true" one. Consequently, while the creative and "ideological reading of any given comic is indeterminate,"⁸³ scholars and other parties routinely reveal and hail superhero stories and protagonists as one thing or another: *either* conservative *or* progressive, subversive *or* recuperative, celebratory *or* critical. For example, different publics simultaneously tout Superman as a nationalistic "all-American" hero, an icon for undocumented and migrating people, an irresistible symbol of hegemonic (i.e., cis and het) masculinity, and a gay icon. At a macro level, Superman is clearly "everything to everyone," but not so on a scholarly or community level. As we saw with Bobby Drake, to the involved publics, Superman is exactly who they think he is, no more, no less.

The meaning of Superman is fragmented, segregated, contrary, and thus in suspension, but not in the public or scholarly imagination. Fawaz evokes the unsettling sense of contrariness that can arise when confronted with this kind of polyvocal and polysemous meaningscape, explaining that his experience of

81 Jason Dittmer, "Captain America in the News: Changing Mediascapes and the Appropriation of a Superhero," in *Superheroes and Identities*, eds. Mel Gibson, David Huxley, and Joan Ormrod (New York: Routledge, 2013), 246. Dittmer argues that this status is becoming harder to secure due to the fragmentation of both superheroes and us national identity.

82 *Ibid.*, 243.

83 Aidan A. Lockhart, "Capes, Cowls, and the Fragments of Ideology: Toward a Framework for Revealing Retributive Ideology in Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 1 (2018): 217.

reading American superhero comics did not match the standard perception of them as “nationalist, as white, as patriarchal, as normative, I found that interpretation of comics really odd and kind of unusual because my experience was so dramatically different.”⁸⁴ And Fawaz is clearly not alone. A sharper picture is emerging of the role that conflicting and oppositional synergies, as well as multiplicities, play in constituting the genre’s unruly meaningscape. Scholarship here becomes more about advancing a particular perspective or meaning-potential than noticing or critiquing the whole, which strikes a “can’t see the wood for the trees” kind of note. Consequently, our understanding of the genre’s meaningscape skews towards notions of knowability and stability and away from fecund unruliness.

Meaning (making) exists within power relations, causing the genre’s meaning- and theoryscape to resonate with contradictory dominant or accepted meanings, for example, superheroes as metaphors for Anglo-American culture and ideology and as symbols of minoritarian identities and experiences. Every new superhero text, scholarly article, videographic essay, tweet, Tumblr post, fan discussion, or cosplay exemplifies the multiplicity and intertextuality of genre meaning. Each fragment of meaning does not combine to produce a legible and coherent account of genre meaning. Quite the opposite. Scholars and other parties can and do legitimately adopt a meaning-stance—this text is radical, reactionary, propaganda, consciousness-raising, cultural legitimation, cultural critique, and so on—but such actions fail to shore up a universal meaning. As Barthes suggests, it’s as if literary works, or superhero texts, put “meaning” in the world but not “a meaning.”⁸⁵ Scholars and other parties may hail the genre as meaning creatively or ideologically one thing or another, but their appeal to meaning ultimately collapses because “the work is never entirely non-signifying (i.e.,

84 Ramzi Fawaz, quoted in Sarah Mirk, “Reading ‘The X-Men’ as a Queer Text,” *Bitch Media*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/reading-x-men-queer-text>.

85 Roland Barthes, “What Is Criticism?,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 259.

mysterious or ‘inspired’), and never entirely clear; it is, one may say, a suspended meaning: it offers itself as an avowed signifying system yet withholds itself [...] as a signified object.”⁸⁶ Barthes goes on to describe this as the “disappointment of meaning,” where criticism

has so much power to ask the world questions (undermining the assured meanings which ideologies, beliefs, and common-sense seem to possess), yet without ever answering them [...] and on the other hand why it offers itself to endless decipherment [...] simultaneously an insistent proposition of meaning and a stubbornly fugitive meaning.⁸⁷

Yet perhaps this isn’t so much a disappointment as it is a site of resistance. Discursive instability creates a curious situation in which scholars and other parties can authentically assert a meaning-stance. However, when we step back to observe the whole, we see that genre meaning is illegible and ambiguous. Before delving into illegibility as a site of resistance, I’d like to use the long-running *X-Men* series to expand on the idea that matters of meaning are not solely a case of either/or but always both/and, as well as the implications of this conditioning on genre meaning (making).

Snapshot: X-Meaning: “Mutant = Outsider,” and That’s a Good Thing, Isn’t It?

Mutants are absolutely an analogy for oppressed minorities. [...]

This is not an opinion; this is a fact.

— Jay Deitcher, “The M Word”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jay Deitcher, “The ‘M’ Word — Havok’s Ignorance or Rick Remender’s,” *Unleash the Fanboy*, April 5, 2013, <http://www.unleashthefanboy.com/editorial/the-m-word-havoksignorance-or-rick-remenders/49287>.

One subtext dominates X-Men scholarship: “mutant = outsider.” And one interpretation of that subtext: “mutant = outsider = celebratory.” As Neil Shyminsky observes, X-Men reception is

driven by a metaphor and a message [...one] that has been written of with glowing praise by fans and critics [who argue] that its anti-oppressive message can be applied to any person or peoples suffering from one form of oppression within a hegemonic political system.⁸⁹

Despite the breadth of its corpus, the most active area of X-study is around what William Earnest refers to as the “mutant = gay equation,” writing that “the premise of ‘mutation’ is *best* understood as a metaphor for non-mainstream sexualities.”⁹⁰ Scholarly attention here directs toward the secret (i.e., split) identity or coming out analogy. As a side note, the same holds true within fandom and non-scholarly scenes.⁹¹ The mutant = gay trope plays out diegetically too. From conspicuous mutant coming out scenes to more subtle signals, such as a “God Hates Mutants” protest sign — recalling notorious Westboro Baptist Church signs — seen in Grant Morrison’s *New X-Men* series, #117.⁹² Morrison later stated that in this series he fully intended to treat mutants “like any other minority struggling towards

89 Neil Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 387.

90 William Earnest, “Making Gay Sense of the X-Men,” in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, ed. Barry Brummett (London: SAGE Publications, 2008), 217.

91 *Polari Magazine*, for instance, points to two real-life testimonies “that give a taste of how fictional mutants have influenced real gay lives.” See “Testimonies: X-Men,” *Polari Magazine*, <http://www.polarimagazine.com/oralhistory/testimonies-x-men/>, and Flame Con, New York City’s queer comics convention, also directly referenced connections between the *X-Men* series and queer lived experiences, hosting a panel in 2016 titled “Pride and the X-Men,” featuring time-served *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont.

92 For example, the troublesome handling of Bobby Drake’s (a.k.a. Iceman) coming out in *X2: X-Men United* (2003).

recognition.”⁹³ A connection later echoed by actor Ian McKellen, noted for playing Magneto in the *X-Men* films:

I was sold it by Bryan [Singer] who said, “Mutants are like gays. They’re cast out by society for no reason,” he said. “And, as in all civil rights movements, they have to decide: Are they going to take the Xavier line — which is to somehow assimilate and stand up for yourself and be proud of what you are, but get on with everybody — or are you going to take the alternative view — which is, if necessary, use violence to stand up for your own rights.” And that’s true. I’ve come across that division within the gay rights movement.⁹⁴

Scholars, and other parties, clearly and positively identify (with) a queer or minoritarian subtext in *X-Men* texts. A standpoint so comprehensive and familiar as to feel almost commonsensical. Indeed, Michael Loadenthal observes that the “gay/mutant subtext is so apparent that it has not only been noted by critical observers but has also been discussed in mainstream venues.”⁹⁵ Moreover, appealing to authorial credibility, much is made of Marvel Entertainment’s and now Disney’s openness to, and encouragement of, minority readings of *X-Men* texts. *X-Men* creators have, however, sparked controversy by trying to deleteriously reinterpret the celebratory mutant = minority equation.⁹⁶

93 Morrison, *Supergods*, 355.

94 Ian McKellen, quoted in Cavan Sieczkowski, “Ian McKellen Took ‘X-Men’ Role Because of Gay Rights Parallel,” *HuffPost*, February 27, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ian-mckellen-x-men-gay_n_4865739.

95 Michael Loadenthal, “Professor Xavier Is a Gay Traitor! An Antiassimilationist Framework for Interpreting Ideology, Power and Statecraft,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, no. 6 (Spring 2018): 18, <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol6/iss6/3/>.

96 For example, one controversy arose over a post-mutant, pro-assimilationist monologue given by X-Man, Havoc, a speech undermining the basic premise of minority identity politics. Rick Remender et al., *Uncanny Avengers #5* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2013). Series writer, Remender, while desiring to tap into the mutant = minority equation, ultimately failed to recognize that for many *X-Men* fans, mutancy is an empowering metaphor for minoritarian subjectivities.

We can see here the establishment of a dominant way of reading *X-Men* texts and subtexts — a preferred, acceptable, knowable meaning — one that is vigorously defended.⁹⁷ Yet despite scholarly and common consensus, it is not the only standpoint.

Though infrequent, scholars, and other parties, do challenge dominant readings of *X-Men* texts.⁹⁸ For example, while acknowledging the minoritarian metaphor, a small number of scholars point convincingly to problematics around queer and minoritarian *X-Men* readings. These interpretations frequently key into representational matters as well as the historical centrality of cis het white men in superhero culture as publishers, producers, creators, characters, and consumers. Kimberly Frohreich, for example, contends that filmic discourse undermines gay subtext, leaving the *X-Men* films complicit with white heterosexuality.⁹⁹ Reexamining Bobby Drake's widely lauded coming out scene in *X2: X-Men United* (2003), Frohreich concluded, among other things, that while this scene “uses a narrative that is proper to non-heterosexual identities, the spectator is assured of his [Drake's] heterosexuality from the previous scene in which he shares an intimate moment with his girlfriend.”¹⁰⁰ Drawing upon Harry Benshoff, Frohreich drives her point home, writing, “keeping homosexuality within the closet of connotation continues to marginalize and minoritize, even as it allows for

97 Again, this is not necessarily illegitimate. I highlight this case simply to illustrate the corraling of meaning-potential.

98 A conservative blogger, for example, ruefully acknowledges the queerness of the *X-Men* franchise but turns consensus on its head by reading the gay/queer subtext not as inspirational and affirmational but as progressive propaganda: “The *X-Men* comics and movies are an allegory about homosexual culture and a stealth way to introduce homosexual propaganda to the public.” See for example I.M. Kane, “‘X-Men’ Comics and Movies Push Homosexual Agenda,” *The Millstone Diaries*, September 3, 2014, <https://imkane.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/x-men-comics-and-movies-push-homosexual-agenda/>.

99 Kimberly Frohreich, “Making the ‘Monstrous’ Visible? Reading ‘Difference’ in Contemporary Fantastic Film and Television,” *SPELL* 26 (2011): 239–53.

100 *Ibid.*, 247.

other more general notions of queerness to be warmly received by mainstream audiences.”¹⁰¹

The frequent alignment of minoritarian experiences with “geek” identity or with the “trials” of (white male) adolescence — a common enough tack within superhero critique — is troublesome too. Shyminsky describes this as a problem of equivalency, in which everyone, including members of privileged groups, can (mis)identify as Other or cultural outsider: “The allegorical affinity that mutants are *supposed* to share with oppressed peoples allows otherwise privileged white males to appropriate a discourse of marginalization.”¹⁰² *X-Men* writer Grant Morrison, a white man, evidences this kind of casual and accepted equivalency in a passage about renowned *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont, another white man:

The mutant X-Men could be adolescents, or gay, or black or Irish. They could stand for any minority, represent the feelings of every outsider, and Claremont knew it. He knew that there was a tidal wave of disgruntled teenagers out there ready to embrace anti-establishment victimhood and feelings of persecution and disillusionment.¹⁰³

Again, the goal of this snapshot is not to suggest that adopting an either/or meaning-stance is in itself illegitimate, but rather to demonstrate a corralling of meaning-potential. Moreover, to show how one dominant interpretation can foreclose meaning-potential and elide and dissuade nuanced interpretations, such as those highlighted here by Frohreich and Shyminsky. Not to mention prioritizing notions of meaning (making) as stable rather than tentative, coherent rather than unfathomable, singular rather than multiple. Focusing on a particular mode of meaning (making) can cause us to lose sight of the big picture,

101 Harry M. Benshoff, cited in Frohreich, “Making the ‘Monstrous’ Visible?” 247.

102 Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants,” 389.

103 Morrison, *Supergods*, 175.

and we're back to woods and trees again. Seen up close, *X-Men* texts clearly have a mutant = minority subtext, and they should be celebrated as such, because the world badly needs these kinds of stories. But viewed in their wider context — viz., narrative histories, creator curations, genre traditions, representational strategies, fanwork, and so on — meanings become complicated, slipping beyond the simplicity, the comfort, of either/or interpretations.

Against this backdrop, chasing myths of ultimate definitions seems a curious pursuit, especially when, as I contend, a matrix, or indeed a spectrum, appear better suited models for describing the multiplicities of superhero meaning (making). In sum, *X-Men* stories can be confidently said to either disrupt or reinforce hegemony, but in so doing, it is also possible to say that they do both. Yet, regardless of the resistive possibilities offered by multiplicities and illegibility, superhero meaning (making) congregates around the either/or binarism. This not only forecloses meaning-potential — the genre's "infinite interpretability" — but tames and distils its radical promise. As observed in this section's opening comments, the superhero world is made in the image of its creators, historically white cishet men, a world that is deleteriously and corrosively structured and experienced through binary oppositions. The genre is a wolf in sheep's clothing, with its fantastical elements cloaking what lies beneath: a binaristically ordered world, a prison world, a world we must resist replicating — in our imaginations, in our scholarly work, and in our ways of seeing and being in this marvelously manifold world.

Genre Meaning: Binaries & Pairings

Given over eight decades of oppositional storytelling and critique, it's not surprising that the superhero genre is famed for its oppositions, pairings, and contradictions, despite sporadic deviations. Any meaning (making) map must account for these landmarks, especially their corralling function. Moreover, as in geographic mapping, studying surface topography reveals much

about the underground structure. Thus, in offering the following set of comments on binaries and parings, I wish to not only profile their influential pervasiveness but — and recalling the limitations of the genre’s brand of futurism — to portray how the genre echoes and replicates real-world interlocking power hierarchies and systems of oppression and privilege, thereby limning how the genre controls and regulates its radical promise. And finally, to insinuate again just how tricky it is for exiled fans to resist networks of official meanings and meaning makers, networks that help to structure, contain, regulate, and suppress meaning (making), networks that permeate every inch of the genre’s meaningscape, from publishers and creators to characters and storylines to scholarship and fandom. (Remembering the trick to binary thinking: knowing what something is, we know what it is not, and boundaries thus established can be protected.)

Yet just as binaries cannot contain nor encompass the complexity and contrariness of human identity and cultures, neither can they hope to do justice to the formulations and articulations of superhero identity, narratives, and culture. Thinking about smudging the edges of material and immaterial realms at this early stage — moving into and beyond the boundaries between real and imagological realms — underscores the significance of border-blurring movements to my argument and thus to my meaning-map and begins to set the stage for the book’s closing case stories. Indeed, and en passant, superhero fandom, much like the genre, is itself riven with binaristic thinking, from notions of oppositional fandom — “us vs. them” — and the fan/antifan, or non-fan, binary to the troublesome and highly gendered and raced real/fake fan binary.¹⁰⁴ Fans and scholars also index fandom antithetically as “reactionary and indifferent as often as it is progressive.”¹⁰⁵ And there’s also Jenkins’s histori-

104 Though, like the transformative/mimetic boundary that has historically shaped fan studies, these borders are becoming increasingly blurred.

105 Jason Sperb, “Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney’s Notorious ‘Song of the South,’” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 27.

cal ordering of critiques and theories of participatory culture as either *critical pessimism* (i.e., victimization) or *critical utopianism* (i.e., empowerment).¹⁰⁶ As illustrated throughout this book, the pull of binaristic structuring is omnipresent, seemingly irresistible, but ultimately reductive.

Returning our attention to official sites and makers of superhero meaning, alongside Jaime Hernandez and Gilbert Hernandez, the iconic creator pairings of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and Bob Kane and Bill Finger spring easily to mind. And so dominant is the idea of the Big Two in superhero culture that it feels unnecessary to mention the DC Comics and Marvel Comics dyad, a systemic ordering that in turn suggests, or perhaps even establishes, the stifling rivalism of mainstream and independent/alternative comics publishers — as if we can't have and enjoy both. The fugitive story of Milestone Comics (1993–1997), a Black-owned, Black-focused superhero comics publishing house, illustrates how binary thinking can shape and foreclose alternative meanings.

Briefly, in response to poor minority representation in terms of quantity and quality, Milestone founders — Derek T. Dingle, Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, and Michael Davis — developed a new line of Black superheroes. A bold and much-needed intervention, but one that was fatally undermined when their characters became, perhaps inevitably, pitted against established white counterparts — Icon to Superman, Static to Spider-Man, and so forth.¹⁰⁷ Milestone creators were thus criticized for not

106 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

107 As an aside, in an endnote, José Esteban Muñoz references the revisionist practices of Milestone Comics as an example of industrial disidentification. Muñoz's comment appears to be unusually broad-brush because, while his reading applies to specific characters, such as Icon, it does not apply to Milestone's numerous other original characters. Moreover, as noted in the outline above, Milestone's issues with characterization, diversity, and representation extend far beyond their relationships with the two big mainstream publishers, Marvel Comics and DC Comics. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 250.

only creating “white characters painted Black”—with Icon routinely described and derided as “Superman in blackface” or a “chocolate-dip Superman”—but for selling out (the idea, the promise, of Black superheroes, for example).¹⁰⁸ Milestone, however, contributed to this oppositionality too by positioning itself, in an arguably suicidal act of self-definition, against the powerhouse of the white mainstream comics industry and culture, even while retaining close ties to DC Comics.¹⁰⁹ Ties were to get even closer, however. In 2021, Milestone returned to the superhero scene, only this time firmly ensconced—or perhaps better, assimilated—within the DC fold. The mainstream superhero world was not, and evidently still is not, prepared for Black superheroes or their creators to exist outside industry binaries, as many independent and DIY Black-centered superhero comics and zines do. A perfect case of “you are either with us or against us,” but you cannot be separate from us or unaligned—a familiar Manichean logic in the twenty-first century.¹¹⁰

Oppositionality shapes, controls, and forecloses meaning (making) in other ways too. Consider Superman’s rural wholesomeness against Batman’s urban grit or Bruce Banner’s controlled, scientific efforts to suppress the uncontrolled, primal Hulk. Not to mention the genre’s penchant for gendered pairings, such as Batman and Batwoman, Hulk and She-Hulk, and so forth. Moreover, representational modes and discourse frequently underpin meaning (making) oppositions, witness the apportioning of Batman storytelling into good and bad versions. As does the idea, which is explored throughout this book, that despite reading as both radical and reactionary, genre mean-

108 Frank Spotnitz, cited in Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 49.

109 Milestone also existed in opposition to Ania, a small consortium of independent Black comics publishers. In this scenario, where Milestone was commercial and integrationist, Ania was independent and separatist.

110 This is not about advocating a neutral position—a deleterious stance within social justice activism, for example—but rather illustrating how binary thinking closes down the creative and material possibilities offered by inhabiting borderland spaces.

ing is commonly treated as either one thing or the other.¹¹¹ But perhaps the best-known of all the genre's oppositional relations are those of its dueling and duetting protagonists, at their most basic, heroes (good) or villains (bad), super (extraordinary) or civilian (ordinary). We see a portrayal of this systemic relationality during a fight scene between Batman and his nemesis, the Joker, in the 2008 Batman film, *The Dark Knight*.¹¹² In one sequence, an upended Joker — a shot reinforcing their antagonistic worldviews — describes their oppositional bond:

You, you just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, and I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.¹¹³

And the Joker is correct. Superheroes and villains are forever bonded in a spear and shield paradox. While Batman clearly struggles with their infrangible bond, the Joker embraces it and seeks to explore it, as do many superhero storytellers, scholars, and fans, including self-confessed superhero fan and film director M. Night Shyamalan who crystalizes it in his border-blurring homage to the superhero genre, *Unbreakable*.¹¹⁴

111 An ordering system that is itself a familiar real-world structuring force.

In the us, citizens are commonly categorized as Democrat or Republican, and in the north of Ireland, as Nationalist/Republican or Unionist/Loyalist. Indeed, political power around the globe is most often organized, or controlled, within winner-take-all two-party systems.

112 Christopher Nolan, dir., *The Dark Knight* (20th Century Fox, 2008). The film references other oppositions too, for example, positioning Batman as Gotham's Dark Knight and Harvey Dent as its White Knight, who, in becoming the treacherous Two Face, comes to embody, quite literally, the philosophy of diametrical opposition. It similarly pits "good" citizens and cops against "bad" ones.

113 Ibid.

114 M. Night Shyamalan, dir., *Unbreakable* (Buena Vista Pictures, 2000).

Snapshot: *Unbreakable* (2000)

In this acclaimed superhero film, Shyamalan offers a realistic portrayal of the genre and its binary conventions. The film's title is replete with symbolism, but with regard to this book, it alludes not only to the hero's powers and the villain's spirit but also to the indestructible bonds—the opposition—between heroes and villains. *Unbreakable* is an origin story with two players: the hero David Dunn (a.k.a. The Overseer) and the villain Elijah Price (a.k.a. Mr. Glass). As a teenager, David had two conflicting passions: his high school sweetheart, Audrey, and football. Obligated to choose between them, he chose Audrey. But in so doing, he lost his motivation, or lust, for life. Disoriented and downcast, his world was turned upside down when Elijah Price crossed his path and set him on a journey of self-discovery.

Unbeknownst to David, Elijah had been on a decades-long hunt for someone extraordinary, someone superhuman, and had gone to violent extremes to find him—it is, after all, almost always a “him.” As a superhero fan—though the character would undoubtedly reject the term fan, preferring something like *aficionado* instead—and a chronically disabled individual, Elijah had long since concluded that he must have an antithesis. With Elijah as his guide, the uninitiated David slowly discovers his extraordinary powers (i.e., strength, super-senses, invulnerability), his weakness (i.e., water), and his motivation (i.e., protecting the weak). At the end of this journey, David assumes the role of the heroic figure known as The Overseer, but this un/becoming process also allows Elijah to discover, or to confirm, who he is, the villain of the piece, The Overseer's archenemy, Mr. Glass.¹¹⁵

Yet Shyamalan's portrayal of superhero identity is nuanced enough to suggest that these characters have much in common too, a less obvious aspect of superhero characterization. Both are

¹¹⁵ A glass can refer to a mirror, a looking glass, thus, the moniker “Mr. Glass” reinforces the idea that these characters, and heroes and villains in general, are mirror opposites of each other.

marked by a profound emptiness, or sense of meaninglessness, an emotional state that cripples David but motivates Elijah.¹¹⁶ On the surface, both appear to have “made” it — Elijah’s successful career and David’s (hetero)normative family life — but neither has realized the American Dream. Both have secrets: Elijah, his evil plan, and David, his feigned injury. Their names further suggest their relational bond: Elijah is David’s prophet, foreseeing the arrival of someone who will change, if not the world, then certainly their locale.¹¹⁷

Portraying a search for meaning, *Unbreakable* points directly to the critical — shaping, guiding, controlling, inescapable — role oppositions play in constructing superhero identities and worlds. Arguably, the film’s realism further suggests that these kinds of forces structure the material world too. Shyamalan unambiguously positions the protagonists as diametrically opposed: Elijah is a cultured, self-made, physically disabled, unattached, highly motivated Black man, whereas David is a nondisabled, white, working-class, directionless family man. Elijah was a sickly, isolated youth, and David, a heroic college quarterback with all the conferred social status. David’s escape was the physicality of the football field, and Elijah’s was the imagological field of superhero comics. An oppositionality exposed at the film’s denouement — when David realizes that Elijah has

116 David’s surname, Dunn, reinforces the hopelessness of this character. Elijah’s surname, Price, suggests his motivation and commitment to his plan. He is willing to pay the price — kill and maim — to find his opposite.

117 As in the superhero genre, names are important in this film. Both David and Elijah are religiously symbolic names. In all three major Abrahamic religions, Elijah was a prophet, and in the film, Elijah not only prophesizes the coming, or arrival, of David but actively encourages it. David is a symbolically loaded name. It may refer to King David or to the heroic shepherd boy who rose to save his village from the evil giant Goliath. Renaissance polymath Michelangelo immortalized this shepherd boy in a sculpture, *David* (1504), a much-loved piece celebrating “man’s” rebirth and all the attendant possibilities of the Renaissance. Given the film’s context of rebirth and reawakening, it is these latter ideas that perhaps resonate most closely with David Dunn.

orchestrated crashes, bombs, and fires to find him — Elijah tells him:

Do you know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in this world. To not know why you're here. [...] I almost gave up hope. [...] But I found you. [...] Now that we know who you are. I know who I am. I'm not a mistake! [...] In a comic, you know how you can tell who the arch-villain is going to be? He's the exact opposite of the hero.¹¹⁸

Elijah's speech reveals that, even after all his evildoings, he still wasn't certain that he was the tale's villain. Until that pregnant moment, he was just a well-motivated terrorist, but finding his opposite allowed him to find his place in the (superhero) world. This is a revelatory moment not only for David but also for Elijah. Yet not for superhero fans watching the film. Genre conventions would lead fans to anticipate this kind of declaration, as we saw with the Joker previously. Indeed, as an unabashed tribute to the American superhero genre made by a self-declared superhero fan, *Unbreakable* would not have worked without a clear declaration that superhero identity is relational and oppositional, a model common to the genre as well as the real world.

Unbreakable's unflinching portrayal of the genre's binary conditioning — while also echoing its failure to fully exploit speculative possibilities — is one of its notable achievements. Another is its portrayal of a disidentifying superhero fan, discussed at the close of this chapter. Like official genre creators, as well as factions of superhero scholarship and fandom, Elijah endeavors to shape and control meaning and worlds through binary oppositions — anticipating the comfort of a fixed, knowable meaning, a final resting place, an either/or position. As the mastermind of this origin story, he is its creator, its author-god, its midwife, bringing The Overseer into the world. He is a world un/maker, retconning his life story and David's. And reflecting upon the film's suffocating portrayal of binary conditioning, I cannot

¹¹⁸ Shyamalan, *Unbreakable*.

help but recall my suspicion that the genre's overblown binary framing works to tame and distil its radical promise. Yet even here, its glint is discernible. As Elijah — someone inextricably bound to binary thinking — observes: “Real life doesn't fit into little boxes that were drawn for it,” or, as he is surely imagining, comic book panels.¹¹⁹ There are other ways of seeing and being in the world, far removed from boxes and beyond and between binary oppositions, as we'll explore in Chapter 4. We must, as Elijah also says, “keep an open mind.”

Binaries, Identity, and Storytelling: An Interlude

Stories hold our cure.

— Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*¹²⁰

Binaries are recurring motifs within this book, as is their disruption. This vignette on binaries and identity serves as a segue into thinking about meaning making and resistive meaning makers, the focus of the second part of this chapter. I want to underscore how binaries, and their destabilization, underpin not only genre meaning (making) but systems organizing human reality, such as categorical identity and, more specifically, superhero fandom. Moreover, just as in the material world, pitting our understanding of the issues as either/or proves critically replicative and forecloses an opportunity to create and discover other ways of seeing and evaluating the intricate ideological workings of this genre. Reflect for a moment, for example, on the remarkable impact the concept of intersectionality has had on theorizing identity and structural power away from binary conceptualizations and systems.¹²¹

119 Ibid.

120 Hannah Gadsby in John Olb and Madeleine Parry, dirs., *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (Netflix, 2018).

121 For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How*

Binaries help shape more than genres and genre discourse. They are guiding, and troubling, forces in identity construction. As Elijah's and David's un/becoming story shows us, binaries can shape, control, and limit the story of ourselves and our world. But, as we have seen, just as binaries and pairings cannot contain and regulate superhero identity, narratives, and culture, neither can they account for and narrate the story of cultural identity. This book is all about (re)scripting stories: genre stories, fan stories, life stories. It foregrounds the transformative, that is, world-un/making, power of (re)scripting narratives, and as my focus rests on fans excluded and marginalized within society and superhero culture, it seemed only right to start at the beginning. Identity is, after all, one of the world's iconic grand narratives.



Following Stuart Hall, I understand identity as a meaning-making process, an unstable positioning (re)produced through time, language, culture, practice(s) — in both senses, as repetitions and behavior — and grand narratives. As Arturo Escobar summarizes:

Identities are the product of discourses and practices that are profoundly historical and thus always reside within an economy of power. [...] [I]dentity construction operates through an active engagement with the world [...]. Identities are dialogic and relational; they arise from but cannot be reduced to the articulation of difference through encounters with others; they involve the drawing of boundaries, the selective incorporation of some elements and the concomitant exclusion or marginalisation of others.¹²²

We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

122 Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 203.

Identity is a fiction with very real consequences, and “our narrative identities are the stories we live by.”¹²³ Identities are formed through processes taking place within systems of opposing pairs, or binarisms. Binaries are not equal but marked, as Derrida describes, by “violent hierarchy”¹²⁴ and function as an operating system of the privileged and the oppressed, the inside(r) and outside(r), the majoritarian and minoritarian. Diana Fuss too reminds us, via the inside/outside opposition, that binaries are relational, writing:

The binary structure [...] fundamentally a structure of exclusion and exteriorization, nonetheless constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic. The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior inclusion — an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such.¹²⁵

Binaries rely on notions of norms, or, as Judith Butler describes them, “regulatory ideals.”¹²⁶ The naturalizing of the “superior” position as the “normal,” the benchmark, if you will, is of deep concern and has led many theorists to trouble and resist the binary.¹²⁷ Norms and ideals, no matter how regulatory, can be resisted and subverted. As Muñoz asserts: “Queers of color and other minoritarians have been denied a world. Yet these citizen

123 Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, “Introduction,” in *Identity and Story*, eds. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006), 1.

124 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).

125 Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

126 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993).

127 From Derrida’s theory of *différance* to the intersectional stances of Hall’s “positioning” and Anzaldúa’s “borderlands.”

subjects are not without resources — they never have been.”¹²⁸ Fuss also indicates that just because “hierarchical oppositions always *tend toward* reestablishing themselves does not mean that they can never be invaded, interfered with, and critically impaired.”¹²⁹

Storytelling is one such site of control and regulation as well as resistance and holds particular relevance in this book given that I also consider identity a form of storytelling: the stories we tell are “instrumental in constructing our identities.”¹³⁰ Storytelling can be an empowering mode of world- and self-making, particularly for minoritarian subjects. In *Nanette* (2018), comedian Hannah Gadsby is clear about the transformative, connective, and world- and self-making power of stories:

What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. Not for blame. Not for reputation. Not for money. Not for power. But to feel less alone. To feel connected. I want my story heard because [...] I believe we could paint a better world if we learnt how to see it from all perspectives. As many perspectives as we possibly could because diversity is strength, difference is a teacher.¹³¹

And in a letter written to the editor of the *New York Times* in 1993, film director Martin Scorsese also asserts the transformative worldmaking power of culturally diverse stories: “Diversity,” he declares, “guarantees our cultural survival.” Scorsese goes on to critique the privileging of Anglo-American modes of filmmaking and storytelling through a series of provocative, yet insufficient, questions, asking:

128 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 200.

129 Fuss, *Inside/Out*, 6.

130 Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 20.

131 Gadsby in Olb and Parry, dirs., *Hannah Gadsby*.

Why don't they make movies like ours?
 Why don't they tell stories as we do?
 Why don't they dress as we do?
 Why don't they eat as we do?
 Why don't they talk as we do?
 Why don't they think as we do?
 Why don't they worship as we do?
 Why don't they look like us?

Ultimately, who will decide who “we” are?¹³²

Scorsese's closing question recognizes the power structures underlying binary systems, and in so doing, his letter asks its readers to consider another set of questions: Who controls the narrative? Who gets to tell their stories? Whose stories get heard or believed? Silencing mechanisms, such as statutes of limitations, shush and suppress. Colonizing forces — capitalism, patriarchy, racism, misogyny — can provoke self-censorship. Identities are placed on trial: as with Gadsby above, origin stories, identities, may be deemed not queer enough, not lesbian enough. With power comes the privilege to tell your story how you want, unfiltered — no matter how disordered.¹³³ Marginal-

132 Scorsese, cited in Shaun Usher, “Diversity Guarantees Our Cultural Survival: Martin Scorsese on the Importance of Foreign Film,” *Letters of Note*, April 5, 1993, <https://news.lettersofnote.com/p/diversity-guarantees-our-cultural>.

133 Taking the gender binary as an example, consider the emotional control and restraint — or “poise” as it was popularly reported — Dr. Christine Blasey Ford had to sustain during her testimony before the US Senate Judiciary Committee against the grotesque spectacle of Judge Brett Kavanaugh's emotionally unleashed performance in September 2018. Blasey Ford knew she had to be “pleasing,” “unthreatening,” and “likeable” for her story to be believable or credible. Kavanaugh did not have to consider these kinds of optics. He would, at worst, be considered, perhaps, a little too “passionate,” but no matter the tone of his performance, he could, at least in view of the system — before #MeToo and other forms of contemporary feminist, sexual assault activism — be reasonably certain that his account, his messy story, would be believed. Emotional displays such as tears, outrage, belligerence in men are interpreted positively as “passion.” In women, it is

ized people and communities do not often get to tell their, often messy, stories, messily. And this is why, although we can idealistically assert that “We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell,”¹³⁴ not everyone gets to tell their story and to tell it how they want to, and at its most base level, not everyone gets to “be” who they are. To the list of consequent questions suggested at the start of this section, I would add one final question, which provides this book’s pulse: What happens when people start to reclaim and rescript their stories? What happens when

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space
To place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage.
To look up and out and upon me,
The Rock, the River, the Tree, your country
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here, on the pulse of this new day,
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister’s eyes,
And into your brother’s face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope —
Good morning.¹³⁵

“hysteria.” “If [Kavanaugh] were a woman, we’d be questioning if she were unhinged.” Alicia Menendez, quoted in Jessica Bennett, “The ‘Tight-Rope’ of Testifying While Female,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/politics/christine-blasey-ford-testimony-testifying-while-female.html>.

¹³⁴ McAdams et al., *Identity and Story*, 1.

¹³⁵ Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning,” in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1994), 273.

Making Superhero Texts Mean: Surfing Hostile Waters

MS. MARVEL: Explain “BROADCASTING” to me. Quickly before I’m eaten alive.

GAVIN: It’s this thing I can do. If I read a book out loud, anybody nearby can see the stuff I imagine while I’m reading the book.

MS. MARVEL: You’ve got a vivid imagination, Gavin.

— Brian Reed and Giuseppe Camuncoli,
*Ms. Marvel: Storyteller*¹

As revealed in *Ms. Marvel: Storyteller*, Gavin is a boy with the ability to alter reality, initially through reading books and eventually through the power of his imagination. And while it still has heroes and villains, conflict and drama, and imperiled civilians, *Storyteller* is a superhero story about how thoughts, words, stories, and storytellers can change things. It’s about how the power of reading becomes the power of thinking and imagining for oneself—the power to (re)write the story. And fittingly enough, it takes place in a library. Gavin is not the only reader

1 Brian Reed and Giuseppe Camuncoli, *Ms. Marvel Special: Storyteller #1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008). Henceforth, *Storyteller*.

I want to think about, however; I also want to think about Seymour, editorial assistant at the *New Frontiersman*. But that comes later.

As Gavin and Ms. Marvel discover, stories are powerful world- and meaning-making tools with very real consequences. Gavin's abilities are not innate; they were imagined and crafted — authored, if you will — by a dubious think tank called Advanced Idea Mechanics (AIM). Inspired by Wanda Maximoff's reality-bending antics, AIM's storytelling experiment sought to produce a raconteur capable of retelling the story of the world, to their advantage, of course. They were responsible for Gavin's deific transformation; they enabled him to become the Storyteller. And in so doing, AIM demonstrates not only an understanding of the power of stories but also the power of controlling the narrative.

Gavin was AIM's success story until he broke out of their facility. Arriving in New York City, he started to reimagine, rewrite, and reclaim control over his life story, something many migrating and marginalized people have done or dreamt of doing — a fresh start in a new place, a new beginning. He also started visiting public libraries. A fine location for a story about the transformative power of reading, imagining, and stories, but *Storyteller* is not unique in being set in one of New York City's public libraries.

Snapshot: Public Libraries and the Popular Imagination

The idea of libraries burns brightly in the popular imagination, not least because of their pervasiveness within stories, new and old. Borges had Babel, Buffy, Sunnydale High, John, Claire, Andy, Brian, and Allison, Shermer High, and Harry Potter, Hogwarts. Notable too are the fantastical libraries in popular series such as *Sandman*, *Dr Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Discworld*. Libraries, and indeed librarians, are common motifs in superhero stories too. At one time, Barbara Gordon, Gotham's Batgirl, and later information manager extraordinaire, Oracle, was head librarian at Gotham City's public library. Batman once solved

a library whodunnit hinging on the Dewey Decimal System. Lara Lor-Van, Superman's Kryptonian mother, was a librarian on Krypton. And in *The Escapist*, a text I will discuss later, we see another NYC librarian, Judy Dark, become the superheroic Luna Moth.

But librarians and libraries are much more than occupations and backdrops. Libraries — as story repositories — are transformational places. Librarians, as story-guides, can also be transformational; recommending *this* book over *that* book is a small but potent power. For many readers and writers, libraries are both a sanctuary and a homeland. And I wonder what comes to mind when you, as a reader, and perhaps a writer, think of a library.

Do you conjure up places you visited, or longed to visit, as a child? A public space in the heart of town — perhaps, like me, a Carnegie library — safe enough to befriend dragons or pilot rocket ships? Or perhaps you think of the world's glorious ancient and modern libraries, such as Alexandria, the Central Library of Astan Quds Razavi, Rampur Raza, the Bodleian, Trinity College, or the Library of Congress. Much like the creators of *Storyteller*, when I imagine a library, I dream up a many-storied, ornate old building full of rooms full of people reading books full of stories.

But as a former librarian, I really ought to know better.

In the real world, libraries are diminishing. (As the song "Bulls on Parade" by Rage Against the Machine goes, "they don't have to burn tha books, they just remove 'em.") Comics people, such as Mel Gibson, Gene Kannenberg, Jr., Neil Gaiman, and Alan Moore are not alone in noisily defending and valorizing public libraries and librarians, and their role in shaping them into the scholars and writers they are today. But for many people, libraries simply did, and do, not exist, and when they did, access was not always granted.

In the first volume of the acclaimed graphic memoir *March*, we see civil rights campaigner and congressman John Lewis as a teenager denied access to his local public library, then a whites-

only space.² This affecting moment, one of many, exemplifies an attempt by US state power to control citizens — and their ability to imagine other worlds and ways of being in the world — by restricting their access to stories. But it was too late to bar Lewis's imagination; he had already witnessed the transformative power of reading, books, and libraries:

I loved going to the library. It was the first time I ever saw black newspapers and magazines like *Jet*, *Ebony*, *The Baltimore Afro-American* or *The Chicago Defender*. And I'll never forget my librarian, Coreen Harvey [who said:] "My dear children, read. Read everything."³

This hallowed status echoes through *Storyteller*. In one panel, we are shown a typical library scene. Gavin is reading to a friend among the book stacks while a female librarian shelves some books. The words Gavin reads travel and echo along two distinct temporal and spatial paths, localized red speech bubbles leaving Gavin's mouth and freeform blue lettering leaving his imagination. The blue words flow down the page, leading directly to the female librarian: "She was at the center of the galaxy." And the red: "And it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen." The deific framing of this panel — the "God shot" angle — as well as the words show a reverence for libraries and librarians: libraries are the numinous center of our world, and librarians are the keepers of our stories.

Indeed, the panels on the following page underscore these ideas. The images here represent the words that Gavin has been reading, as have I. They're from *Binary*, a sci-fi novel written by Carol Danvers (a.k.a. Ms. Marvel) that is based on her time as the super-being Binary. It's essentially a non-visual superhero story. Gavin narrates Binary's first encounter with one of the galaxy's Keepers, who reside at the center of the universe,

2 John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, *March: Book One* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2013).

3 *Ibid.*, 49.

where only twelve Keepers remain — a heavily symbolic number alluding to the disciples in the Christian faith, star signs, and the stations on an analogue clockface, among other things. The Keeper's first act is to tell Binary a story, a worldmaking, origin story. Or, more accurately, a binaried creation/anti-creation story: the story of the birth of a universe and its likely destruction at the hands of The Swarm. The Keepers appear to be not only the galaxy's guardians but also its libraries and librarians. According to this comic, stories and storytellers are the sacred, empowering heart of the universe. Binary's vision is literally altered by the story the Keeper tells her, opening up a new way of seeing and — after all, this is a superhero comic — saving the world and the universe.⁴

Like *Storyteller's* creators, Brian Reed and Giuseppe Camuncoli, many superhero comics creators are captivated by the transformative power of superhero stories and comic books and their ability to affect the order of the real world. Grant Morrison once said of superhero fiction, "We can acknowledge that these are stories, but stories are also real. Stories have big effects on people, and they can make people feel sad or brave or make them cry or go to war."⁵ *Storyteller* is almost a phenomenological treatise on such concepts. It demonstrates not only the affective, transformative power of stories but also the blurring of dualisms: material/immaterial, real/imaginary, author/reader, and past/present. In the early days, Gavin's worldmaking power was localized and materially tied to books. He had to hold them in his hands and read them aloud, blurring the lines between the real and the imagological. In the library scene, Gavin sits cross-legged, a position suggesting the lotus pose, in a temple of books, and the words he reads flow from the page — and all over

4 In imagining the Keepers as embodied books and libraries, I am reminded of the activist citizens of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* who, by memorizing and reciting outlawed books, also became librarians and transformed themselves into living, breathing books and circulating libraries.

5 Grant Morrison, "Inside the Mind of Grant Morrison," interview by Dan Phillips, *IGN*, June 16, 2009, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/02/03/inside-the-mind-of-grant-morrison?page=1>.

the page of the comic book I am holding — and out into the city, infecting everyone who hears them and transforming the world around them. This is a powerful idea to portray, but it is not new.

Writing about the bookishness of comics, Scott Bukatman observes the recurrent idea of the “comic book held in a reader’s hands, as an object with power in the world.”⁶ Morrison too asserts of comic book superhero fictions: “They’re real in the sense that you can hold them in your hands and interact with them. [...] They’re actually alive *in our hands*.”⁷ Gavin and I — and any other person reading the *Storyteller* comic — are both holding and reading a Binary superhero story, blending stories and realities. Indeed, the two Binary narratives converge at points, so that we are reading the same story, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes inharmoniously. Moreover, in the quote that begins this section, Gavin tells Ms. Marvel that “anybody can see the stuff I imagine while I’m reading.” Note that the people around Gavin do not see what is written in the book — as the official author tells it — but only his interpretation of it. A point underscored when Ms. Marvel responds to his explanatory statement: “You’ve got a vivid imagination, Gavin.” As the book’s author, Ms. Marvel clearly does not entirely recognize the story Gavin is telling nor the meaning he is (re)making. Gavin becomes at once reader and author, as does Ms. Marvel. This metatextual echoing seems to invite the question: Am I, too, an empowered reader, capable of (re)writing stories, transforming meaning, and un/making worlds? To start answering this question, let’s ask another: What exactly do we mean by “meaning making”?

Meaning Making 101

When it comes to talking about making meaning, I am drawn to a little Scots-Gaelic word, “ken.” It means to know or under-

6 Scott Bukatman, *Hellboy’s World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 13.

7 Morrison, “Inside the Mind of Grant Morrison.”

stand, but it also connects with seeing — “do you see, or ken, what I mean?” Ways of knowing and seeing intersect with systems of power and knowledge production; seeing does not exist within a cultural vacuum but rather within a network of power relations and resistances, an idea captured within the concept of “gazes” — for there are many.

A gaze is the look through which we (dis)identify, (mis)recognize, (non)conform, and bring the world around us into view and into line — making it known to us and making it mean for us. As John Berger writes in the now classic *Ways of Seeing*, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or believe.”⁸ When we ken something, we already have an idea, or perception, of what it means; we understand and often agree upon, thereby establishing, its meaning. When asking “dae ye ken?” we are asking not only do you understand, or see what I mean, but do you agree, do you see the world the way I see it?

One can see then that ken evokes a partisan yet consensus-based notion of meaning making. This way of knowing, or making meaning, runs the risk of (re)producing ideological hegemony, where knowledge begins to look like unquestionable “common sense” — another problematic form of meaning that is hard to sometimes see and therefore counter. In the predominantly cishet white male arena of mainstream superhero comics culture, dominant meanings are prejudiced, rooted in agreement, and guide subsequent knowledge production, but this does not mean they cannot be queried and rescripted. This book does not seek to ken, or know, the genre and its protagonists in this replicative way. It works to see things differently and, in so doing, to make things mean differently.

Meaning making then describes a process of cultural exchange. It refers to how we un/make sense of things: of the self and others, of the world and its phenomena, and of the media and its stories. Language in its broadest sense, as all signifying systems, makes all meaning possible. Ferdinand de Saussure’s founding contribution to the linguistic turn — that language

8 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 8.

constitutes rather than reflects reality/meaning—opened the way for subsequent theorists to expand on these ideas, arguing, for example, that language is not ahistorical but rather subject to cultural epochs.⁹

Considering Foucault's focus on historicity—roughly, that certain knowledges can only exist at certain times—encourages us to think about the alignment of the rise of public and published gay-centered readings of the superhero genre (e.g., the secret/dual identity trope as symbolizing in-the-closet gay identity) with the expansion of theorizing on human sexuality and the increasing visibility and audibility of gay culture and gay rights activism, including linguistic work, such as reclaiming words and revising their meanings. Fredric Wertham's notorious reading of early *Batman* and *Wonder Woman* comics, for example, is considered one of the first published queer superhero readings, appearing in 1954, around the time of the founding of the US homophile movement in the 1950s. Would it have been possible for Wertham to write and think his thoughts and to attribute this kind of meaning to superheroes without the language and knowledge to do so? Stuart Hall, too, asserts language as “the privileged medium [...] in which meaning is produced and exchanged. [...] [Language] has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings.”¹⁰ Binaries, power relations, and consensus structure meaning; a nexus determining what is, and therefore what is not, “normal,” acceptable, and “true.” And representation—“the use of language, of signs, and images which stand for or represent things”—is key to the unstable process of making meaning.¹¹ To make sense of the world and communicate meaningfully, there must be some

9 For Saussure, see Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986). See also, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), and Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

10 Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 1.

11 *Ibid.*, 15.

degree of agreement or consensus between people, ideas, and phenomena. It is no coincidence that culture is described as a system of shared language and shared meanings.¹² “Shared” creates the impression of a common understanding, and although underpinned by dominant structures and expressions, culture and meaning are clearly not homogenous constructs. Interruptions in meaning create critical locations, gaps, and openings for dissent and alternative interpretations.

When attempting to map meaning-making relations between superhero texts and their minoritarian fans, it is useful to recall models and ideas that recognize audiences and fans as active and empowered. Following the cultural turn—an analytical shift prioritizing constitutive concepts and processes, such as culture, meaning, language, and affect—many theorists assert that meaning is contingent and produced within history and culture—a position opening meaning to slippage, ultimately leading to Hall’s assertion that “there is thus no single, unchanging, universal ‘true’ meaning.”¹³ Meaning becomes interpretation and negotiation:

There is a constant sliding of meaning in all interpretation, a margin [...] where other associations are awakened to life, giving what we say a different twist. [...] The reader is as important as the writer in the production of meaning.¹⁴

Snapshot: Seymour, *Watchmen* (1986)

In *Watchmen*’s penultimate panel, a lackluster Seymour reaches into a crackpot pile of papers after being told to pick the story that will fill the final two pages of the upcoming edition of the *New Frontiersman*.¹⁵ The editor in chief—for that’s surely his title—tells his protégé, “I leave it entirely in your hands.” This

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986).

directive can be taken as a passive-aggressive intertextual invitation from Moore and Gibbons to future comics creators and publishers, telling them to do what they will with the superhero genre now that they have turned everything on its head.¹⁶ But it can also be read as an affirmation of the reader's primacy in meaning making, an invitation to the reader to produce *Watchmen's* meaning.¹⁷

Consider the image accompanying the invitation: Seymour's ketchup-stained smiley tee-shirt. An image evoking the text itself, recreating the Comedian's blood-stained smiley face button, *Watchmen's* iconic motif. Seymour here symbolizes the reader, the text, and the publisher — a living, breathing, world un/making force. Even his name, Seymour, invites the reader to see or read more into the panel or text — to look beyond the obvious surface meanings or even those intended by the creators. Seymour's hand reaches for the stack of papers, one of which is Rorschach's incendiary journal, a text telling the story of *Watchmen*, a story readers are just finishing reading. But still, despite knowing that the answer must somehow be yes, readers are left tantalized, wondering, will Seymour pick up and read Rorschach's firebrand journal? And if so, what will he make of it? Will he decide to publish it — with potentially cataclysmic world un/making consequences? (Just as DC's decision to pick up and publish *Watchmen* forever changed the superhero world.) The "right" decision, or response, is in his hands, literally within reach of his right hand. There is no official, authorial guidance or answer; the text is sans author. The journal's author is quite literally dead, and the creators of the *Watchmen* text have left the scene, leaving the fate of the story in Seymour's and our hands.

For some readers, this panel marks the end of the text, but for others, it functions as an invitation to read the text in a new way. Forming a loop, the penultimate panel here serves as a prologue

16 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us about Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011).

17 This reading makes Alan Moore's subsequent troubled response to *Watchmen's* reception even more curious.

rather than a conclusion, a segue to the text's opening panel, an entry from Rorschach's journal accompanied by an image of the Comedian's blood-stained smiley button. But wait. Backing up a little to consider the cover image, a clocklike close-up of a bloodied smiley face. Could that be ketchup rather than blood, a tee-shirt rather than a button? Could that image be a close-up of the smiley face decal on Seymour's stained tee-shirt rather than the Comedian's bloodied button? Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, the panel sequencing teases that Seymour has indeed picked up the journal and started to read it, just as we, the readers, have picked up and started to read the *Watchmen* comic. We are reading the text along with Seymour; we perhaps are Seymour, left in the end with only the text as a source of meaning and a choice about whether to broadcast or spread the news about Rorschach's story, or as we call it, *Watchmen*.

But impoverished Rorschach's unauthorized, tattily handwritten, conspiratorial account is not the only version of events and is set to compete with the official, empowered, polished version authored by the moneyed villain of the tale, Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt. This authorial dualism symbolizes the idea that meaning is not entirely free-floating and, like everything else, functions within power systems, where some texts and meanings, due to their producers and context, are valued as official, mainstream, and "true," while others become unofficial, marginal, and "fake." How many stories and voices have we lost, *Watchmen's* creators seem to ask, because they haven't been valued — or picked out of a pile — at a particular moment in time? Who gets to decide what stories we encounter? Moore and Gibbons have positioned Seymour as an active reader — he, like all readers, has decisions, meanings, and worlds to un/make. Meaning, they appear to be saying — echoing aspects of post-structuralism — does not lie solely with the author of the journal or with them as the creators of *Watchmen* but with its many and varied readers.

Moreover, the broad strokes of the encoding-decoding model go some way towards helping explain how superhero texts can

stand so many different, and contradictory, readings.¹⁸ Hall's distinction between "negotiated" and "oppositional" positions has proven useful in kick-starting theorizing on how minoritarian readers may make exclusionary mainstream texts meaningful;¹⁹ as has the concept of interpellation — originating from Louis Althusser's work on ideology but here referring to how media texts hail subjects.²⁰ Interpellation helps explain how readers respond differently to the same texts.²¹ For example, by bringing dominant ideas and mainstream assumptions to their readings, some superhero fans can overlook, or indeed fail to see, any possible ideological contradictions and uncritically enjoy the texts' preferred meanings. Other superhero fans, perhaps picking up on the contradictions, or strangeness, characterizing representations of superhero transformation, may feel encouraged to look beyond encoded messages to reconstruct, via their own background experiences, the genre's subversive potential. As discussed next, through concepts of intertextuality and disidentification, meaning so reconstructed can, and often does, act as a well-spring of empowerment for oppositional or minoritarian superhero fans.

Meaning Making: Intertextuality and Disidentification

Formal ideas on intertextuality offer routes into thinking creatively about meaning-making practices; this is especially use-

18 See Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," in *Essential Essays*, Vol. 1: *Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 257–76. Hall's model asserts that although creators encode a preferred, or dominant, ideological meaning into texts, readers can decode texts, make meaning, in any number of ways, ultimately rooted to their sociocultural location.

19 Whereby "negotiated" refers to a broad, but qualified, acceptance of preferred meaning and "oppositional" to a total rejection of preferred meaning.

20 Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2008).

21 John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 284–326.

ful given the polyvocal and polysemous nature of the genre. As previously indicated, poststructuralist interpretations of intertextuality combined to undermine the centrality of the idea of the author as the sole creator and arbiter of texts and textual meaning. Julia Kristeva, for instance, writes that,

each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. [...] [A]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another [...] [and] the poetic language is read as at least double.²²

This position informs Roland Barthes's perhaps more expansive interpretation which designates a text as

a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash [...]. A text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering mutual relations, dialogue, parody, and contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not [...] the author. [...] [A] text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.²³

Barthes's later assertion that there are two kinds of readers, "consumers" and "readers," speaks directly to my enquiry into how fans can make the same text mean differently.²⁴ Barthes's reading of intertextuality opens a space for readers to negotiate

22 Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 37.

23 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1968), 146–48. The widely acclaimed essay, however, has come under scrutiny by theorists such as Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1990), and Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

24 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1974). Whereby "consumers" refers to those readers looking for stable meaning and "read-

or reject the idea of authorial meaning, and in so doing, to write their own texts. As Barthes might say, an author may create the work, but it is the reader-as-writer who creates the text. Barthes here puts forward a plan to destabilize and decentralize meaning making, yet within the superhero realm, creators are still often held as arbiters of textual meaning; as we shall see, this is not always the case.

Kristeva and Barthes, amongst others, transformed our understanding of language and meaning; meaning became recognized as shifting, multiple, oppositional, and continuous. It was a momentous, liberating maneuver, reminiscent of the sixteenth-century Copernican Revolution, only this time displacing the “Author-God”²⁵ rather than the Christian god from the center of things. In this process, meaning became conceivable as a movement, one that was authentically and paradoxically open and closed, secure and provisional, legible and illegible. Such realizations were crucial steps towards reclaiming language and meaning (making) as sites of ideological resistance. As Christine Gledhill writes:

Language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace, definitions and identities. [...] [They] are not given over one and for all to a particular ideology — unconscious or otherwise. They are cultural signs and therefore sites of struggle.²⁶

This critical awakening evokes practices and strategies of queer meaning making. Indeed, there has been a decidedly queer air throughout this discussion, one heavy with the possibilities of disruptive meaning making and, although only alluded to thus

ers” to those seeking to produce meaning, described by Barthes as “writers.”

25 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142–48.

26 Christine Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), 242.

far, the enjoyment and pleasure that can be derived from making alternative meanings, as occurs frequently within resistive, transgressive, and violative media fandom. Thanks to the work of many theorists, and many queer theorists, including Barthes and Foucault, texts cannot be understood to signify, or mean, monolithically. And although writing about polysemous queer meaning in a different context (i.e., synergies between gender and sexuality), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the plural possibilities of the meaningscape I have been mapping, where “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”²⁷ And earlier in the same text, Sedgwick writes of queer meaning makers that we

are trying, in our work, [to keep childhood] promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled [...], the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects [...], whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.²⁸

For Sedgwick, those texts were novels and poems, but she observes that for others, the texts may be films or comic strips.²⁹ Her description describes the translations and negotiations performed by minoritarian superhero fans as they work to make these exclusionary texts meaningful to them, and as they find spaces within the ranging narratives and multifaceted charac-

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

terizations within which to insert and assert themselves. Sedgwick's passage also speaks to fannish investments in texts, where there is always the possibility of another way of seeing and translating the originating text. The idea of seeing differently suggests outsider, queer, and minoritarian-looking practices, such as disidentification and "seeing queerly."³⁰ I work closely and creatively with the concept and practice of disidentification, especially with Muñoz's conceptualization.

Disidentification, or, as I conceptualize it, *textcapology*, speaks to repurposing and praxis and offers an alternative way to relate to texts and to the concept of identity, one that eschews the restrictions of identification and counter-identification. Judith Butler describes it as an "experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong."³¹ Disidentification accommodates seemingly contradictory nuances in identity and textual engagement, such as minoritarian fans connecting with American superheroes, making it especially useful for this book. Indeed, Muñoz's conceptualization of disidentification and his later articulation of counterpublics guide my efforts to chart the ways minoritarian superhero fans navigate the "hostile cultural waters" of superhero texts.³² Although the following quote is lengthy, I want to create space here for Muñoz to present his ideas in his own voice and words. For Muñoz, disidentification

is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (counteridentification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that

30 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

31 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 219.

32 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 37.

tries to transform a cultural logic from within, [...] like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity.³³

Muñoz's description speaks to Sedgwick's passage above in its evocation of repurposing texts and un/making meaning. And, as we saw in Part 1, this condition aptly describes the process of creating superheroes and infusing them with meaning, as acclaimed superhero artist and creator Steve Ditko has suggested: "A creation is actually a re-creation, a rearrangement of existing materials in a new, different, original, novel way."³⁴

It is easy to become overly optimistic when writing and reading about repurposing compromised texts and recovering lost promise. However, as Muñoz cautions, disidentification, like all survival tactics, is not a catch-all strategy, and we should be ever mindful of privileging its celebratory, liberatory quality. Sometimes "queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere."³⁵ Disidentification has limits — not failures, but

forces that work against the disidentifying subject. [...] The disidentifying subject is not a flier who escapes the atmospheric force field of ideology. Neither is she a trickster who

33 Ibid., 11–12.

34 Ditko, cited in Henry Jenkins, "Just Men in Capes? (Part One)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 14, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/just_men_in_capes.html.

35 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

can effortlessly come out on top every time. Sometimes dis-identification is insufficient.³⁶

My focus is on minoritarian superhero fans, but I am mindful that, despite my best efforts, this book is neither inclusive nor representative of all minority (dis)engagements with the American superhero genre. The genre and its fandom can be a hostile place for minority audiences, fans, and creators, many of whom have understandably lost patience with the genre and its failed attempts to get representation “right.”³⁷ Taking matters into their own hands, some fans and allies push for reform by boycotting desultory companies like Marvel and DC; others are making a more permanent withdrawal, looking elsewhere for their superhero fix. And while some creators from minority groups have carved out a niche for themselves in this belligerent world, the superhero industry as a whole needs to change to make superhero culture an inclusive place where everyone feels welcome.

Yet, despite the exclusions, elisions, and erosions, many minoritarian media fans continue to engage with the American superhero genre. As illustrated in my closing chapters, the genre continues to be a source of inspiration and hope for many minoritarian people, as well as a means of imagining and realizing personal and sociopolitical change. It is a curious dynamic to witness uber-privileged super-powered characters become symbols of disenfranchised publics, such as the DREAMERS’ adoption of Superman.³⁸ Catechizing Fanon, Muñoz, considers this kind of counterintuitive attachment to hostile texts:

³⁶ Ibid., 161–62.

³⁷ Of course, there are exceptions, such as Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, Miles Morales as Spider-Man, and Charles Soule’s run on *She-Hulk*, but as I discuss in Chapter 3 of this volume, exceptions do not effect change in an impactful way.

³⁸ DREAMER refers to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act for undocumented youths raised in America. As an aside, it is an unspoken assumption that the DREAMERS are referencing the Clark Kent version of Superman in their protests, and certainly it is this version that Jenkins refers to when discussing the DREAMER movement. This assumption is understandable. For instance, in DREAMER protest

Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his writing on the colonized woman. What process can keep an identification with Fanon, his politics, his work possible for this woman? [...] Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as still valuable yet mediated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn to good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics.³⁹

Dreaming of this ambivalent Antillean woman allows Muñoz to show the utility of disidentification; it keeps Fanon's work alive for her and perhaps for Muñoz. In making new meanings, she transforms Fanon's texts and her relationship to these texts. Her disidentificatory work speaks to minoritarian engagement, particularly violative expressions, with the superhero genre. In the same way, minoritarian fans, who have most likely been burned by the genre's regressive representation, preserve beloved elements of the genre while negotiating deleterious aspects, repurposing the idea, the meaning, of what superheroes are. It is a transformative act that affects both the individual and, to varying degrees, the genre and its fandom.



Exploring how intertextuality and authorship spread beyond official, corporate settings reveals superhero texts written with different materials upon different surfaces by different kinds of writers. It provides a critical opportunity to witness the transfer-

materials, Superman is portrayed as white, narrative details point to the Kent origin story (e.g., arrival from another planet and raised in America), and Kent is the most popular version of Superman.

39 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 9.

ence of official, encoded meaning into the hands of subjects who are ordinarily marginalized and absented from official texts. This dynamic process stretches and transforms the meaning of superhero texts, while decontextualizing mainstream, normative texts can disturb and transform their ideological meaning.

Images, icons, and narrative motifs from superhero texts are lifted by fans and activists and transferred to other settings. Superhero fans draw liberally from official texts in their often-intersecting fan practices, which range from writing fanfiction, making fan art, vids, and props to getting tattoos, and cosplaying. Ms. Marvel and Wonder Woman, as well as the uber-privileged Clark Kent version of Superman, are activist favorites for protest signs and tee-shirts. Fan and activist textual praxis often includes a twist that disturbs the originating text's meaning. Slash fanfiction, for example, often places heterosexual male characters in homoerotic pairings, such as Kirk/Spock or Holmes/Watson, and fan and activist protest art adapts diegetic images to send out a different message, such as Ms. Marvel ripping up an image of Donald Trump rather than, as in the text, an image of Captain Marvel.⁴⁰ Fans can even insert themselves into a text's meaningscape by becoming a different version of an established character, as in cosplay, altering not only their own meaning and visuality but that of the originating character. But by incorporating layers of superhero ontology and mythology into their performances, the practices of a band of fans and activists known as real-life superheroes speak to a deeper form of intertextuality, as discussed in Chapter 6.

Theorizing authorship, multiplicity, and intertextuality provides a means to undermine the gatekeeping role of creators and thus notions of the sanctity and coherence of meaning (making);⁴¹ it also helps relocate meaning making to the multi-

40 Recalling Proust, "Captain Marvel" is a collective name. This example refers to Carol Danvers, the present Captain Marvel.

41 Note that while this work undermines and disrupts, it does not eradicate these epistemic traditions because, as discussed, many readers and fans still privilege authors and creators as meaning makers and differentiate between official and unofficial meaning (making).

ple and mutable sphere of the reader, or in this case, the superhero fan. “The true locus of writing is reading,”⁴² where each reader is a meaning-exchange, where meaning can “no longer be viewed as a finished product, [but is] now caught in a process of production.”⁴³ Tellingly, Seymour’s gatekeeping representation in *Watchmen*, apropos the publication of Rorschach’s journal, collides with the idea of a stereotypical male comics geek that still haunts genre meaning making — “overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly underachieving.”⁴⁴ For fans of all stripes are gatekeepers of superhero meaning too.

But it is to fans as resistive meaning makers, as gatecrashers, that I come to in the closing part of this chapter. How do minoritarian fans challenge the idea of who can be a superhero, a superhero fan, and a superhero creator? How do they recover radical promise and un/make a genre, a culture, a world? I delve into these questions in the following two chapters, but before doing so, I want to tease out some of the representational issues (mis)shaping the genre, as well as the disidentificatory strategies minoritarian fans employ to reanimate exclusionary superhero storyworlds.

In the penultimate chapter of this book, I discuss racebending cosplay — when a Black cosplayer plays a white character, for example — but here I want to think about similar ideas performed in a textual context. In December 2013, Orion Martin previewed a racebending superhero art project featuring twelve iconic *X-Men* covers and panels that had been re-colored “so that every mutant had a skin color that was some shade of brown.”⁴⁵ Martin’s remixed images distorted and disturbed official canon. It was a project designed to highlight issues and

42 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 5.

43 Adolphe Haberer, “Intertextuality in Theory and Practice,” *Literatūra* 49, no. 5 (2007): 56.

44 Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes* (Shreveport: Prima Publishing, 1997), 233.

45 Orion Martin, “What If the X-Men Were Black?,” *The Hooded Utilitarian*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/12/what-if-the-x-men-were-black/>.

engender debate around representation and the genre's lack of on-page diversity. Moreover, the *X-Men* franchise is a powerful example of white culture appropriating minoritarian history and experiences, and Martin wanted to examine these contradictory meanings, asking: How could a series focusing on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, in which people of color have been replaced by white people, represent minoritarian lived experiences? Indeed, through its deleterious representation, the *X-Men* franchise offers a striking instance of the genre's mishandling of the radical potential of its characters.

Martin's project is visually arresting. One revised series of panels is based on a scene in which a white Piotr Rasputin, a.k.a. Colossus, stands up to an angry white mob. Unsurprisingly, the panel's meaning changes greatly after Colossus is recolored. As Martin notes:

Reading about black teenagers standing up to a largely white mob is different than reading about white teenagers in the same situation. These images show that when the writers of the *X-men* do comment on social issues, the meaning of these comments is hampered and distorted by the translations from reality to fantasy and fantasy back to reality.⁴⁶

Martin's revisions highlight issues and dynamics circulating around representation and stereotypes. How does changing a character's skin color affect their meaning? Discussing these issues, comics blogger Kelly Kanayama astutely points to the connection between prevalence and stereotypes, stating:

With the original coloring, I don't think people would say that crazy-eyes Jean [an *X-Men* character] is a stereotype of white women, or that the aggressive Wolverine is a stereotype

⁴⁶ Ibid. Martin's last sentence suggests that transitions can affect meaning, and although speaking in a different register or context, his comments evoke my assertion that the radical promise of superheroes can be lost, or compromised, in the move from the conceptual to the representational realm.

of white men. That's because we see so many white characters in comics and popular media in general that one problematic portrayal and one grizzled/savage portrayal doesn't contribute to building a stereotype [...] Even if these two characters are somehow seen as carrying negative implications, they're drops in the ocean. But once you visibly portray them as non-white, that ocean shrinks to a puddle, and every drop counts for a lot more.⁴⁷

Martin's project ably shows that it is not enough to simply alter the skin color of characters and expect to make an impactful change. There must be breadth and depth to any revisions to avoid characterizations becoming stereotypes or token gestures. And following this logic, in seeking to improve superhero diversity, it is not productive for all, or predominantly all, white male creative teams to racebend or create new minority characters. This still customary practice exposes the creative process to the possibility of white creators simply recoloring characters, that is, applying a veneer of color over their culturally loaded ideas of what a superhero is and what a minority superhero should be, much like Martin's project.⁴⁸ Creative conditions such as this risk only ever producing surface level minoritarian characters. Inclusivity within creative teams is an essential facet of increasing and improving minority representation within the American superhero genre: ontologically, aesthetically, and ideologically.

Identity-bending projects need breadth and depth to meaningfully interrupt and disrupt metanarratives. For instance, for all the furor surrounding Thor becoming a woman, Thor's

47 Kelly Kanayama, quoted in Gene Demby, "Superhero Super-Fans Talk Race and Identity in Comics," *NPR*, January 11, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/01/11/261056435/superhero-super-fans-talk-race-and-identity-in-comics>.

48 This is not to suggest that people cannot write "outside their range" but rather to argue against the erasure of minoritarian experiences and voices within the official production of the superhero genre, both in characterization and narratives.

meaning has changed little in the intervening years.⁴⁹ Type “Thor” into any search engine, and it is still a white man looking back at you, not a white woman.⁵⁰ Moreover, while working to change meaning in localized spheres, projects such as this fail to fully exploit the genre’s radical promise, partly because there are not enough of them to make a credible, sustainable change.

Violative fan practices can be a way for minoritarian fans to connect to an exclusionary, often belligerent, genre, however. They are a way of making alternative meanings and negotiating deleterious and circumscribed representation. These practices differ from the representational work undertaken in Martin’s project, as well as many other instances of superhero identity bending, because their transformations are not superficial but rooted in lived experience. But, as I discuss in the closing chapters, in terms of recovering radical promise, their transformative work, as with in-genre examples, has had an arguably limited impact upon the genre’s wider meaningscape to date.

When preparing costumes, for example, or performing at conventions and cosplay parties, identity-bending cosplayers disrupt mainstream aesthetics, inspire other minority fans, and raise consciousness around the genre and diversity, but their impact on official, corporate meaning and dominant superhero culture is slight. And when they do garner mainstream media and industry attention, it is often framed as a cultural or fannish spectacle. In fact, violative cosplayers may have a greater effect on dispelling prejudices about superhero fan identities than disrupting official representational strategies. Yet these practices remain a critical site of resistance and survival. As a form of

49 Created by an all-male team with Jason Aaron (writer) and Russell Dauterman (artist). See also “Marvel Proudly Presents Thor,” *Marvel*, July 15, 2014. <https://www.marvel.com/articles/comics/marvel-proudly-presents-thor>.

50 Primarily, images of Chris Hemsworth, the actor noted for portraying Thor in the recent run of Marvel films. This might start to change, however, with Natalie Portman’s portrayal of Thor in the 2022 MCU film, *Thor: Love and Thunder*. The power and promise of this gender-bending move will undoubtedly be tempered as Hemsworth also features alongside Portman in the film.

continuing minoritarian engagement with a mainstream genre, it speaks to Muñoz's conceptualization of disidentification, described as

recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.⁵¹

Snapshot: Elijah Price, *Unbreakable* (2000)

At the close of this chapter, I'd like to return to my discussion of Elijah Price's portrayal in *Unbreakable*, not to condemn it as a negative, pathological representation of a media fan but rather to see it as a portrait of a minoritarian fan who, ultimately, fails to disidentify with the superhero genre.⁵² That's to say, while Elijah's representation throws the genre's "universalizing and exclusionary machinations" into sharp relief, it does not show him recycling and reconstructing the genre's encoded messages.⁵³ And that's perfectly alright because, recalling Muñoz's caution, sometimes "disidentification is insufficient."⁵⁴ Elijah Price, a.k.a. Mr. Glass, true to his name, provides a slick opportunity to reflect upon the nature of minoritarian superhero fandom as well as a reminder of its heterogeneity.

⁵¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

⁵² M. Night Shyamalan, dir., *Unbreakable* (Buena Vista Pictures, 2000). Elijah's portrayal speaks to the genre's radical promise in a limited capacity (e.g., the collapse of the real/fictional binary and the idea that an individual can radically change the world). Indeed, in terms of radical promise, it exemplifies the genre's "failure" to represent alternative worlds and ways of being in those worlds (i.e., Elijah suffered the eliding effects of the same kinds of power relations in both of his worlds, the real and the superhero).

⁵³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161–62.

Elijah uses superhero comics to escape the confinements of his world — physical, sociocultural, and economic.⁵⁵ But, like many minority subjects, the genre's white hegemonic representation and coding exclude him. This did not stop a young Elijah from escaping into the texts or an older one from building his world around them, but it did, like many other real-life minoritarian superhero fans, influence how he made them mean. We know little about Elijah's childhood engagement with superhero comics, except that he loved them enough to risk going outside to get them, a perilous endeavor for a child with type I osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease. But we can infer a lot from his representation as an adult superhero comics collector and art dealer.

For example, for all his talk about superheroes and identity, Elijah never mentions a favorite character or storyline — a telling omission for a superhero fan. But, in true supervillain fashion, he monologues endlessly about genre conventions, particularly paired oppositions such as strong/weak, good/evil, and, of course, hero/villain. His compulsive desire to know himself and to locate himself within the genre's oppositional mode of identity (and worldmaking) suggests that, as a child, he struggled to identify with the white, hyper-masculine, normative bodies that filled the pages of his weekly comic books, heroes or villains. As a result, rather than connecting with the protagonists or antagonists, little Elijah appears to have identified with the genre's binary model of storytelling, to the point where it came to define his life.

Elijah's long-standing meaning (making) struggle sees him postpone genre meaning until he can make it mean something on his own terms; by failing to identify, or counter-identify, with the characters, ethical codes, and so on, he created an alternative way of reading — or, à la Barthes, writing — superhero comics and thus a way to temporarily resist their hegemonic coding. And, while he may have responded to the marginalization, the often-disfigured bodies, and the dogged megalomania of the

55 Escape is used here in the transformative, not utopian, sense.

genre's villains, as reflected in his own later performance as a villain, it appears unlikely that he identified with them.⁵⁶ We know this because, even after committing terrorist acts, Elijah still required confirmation of his villainous status. He knows that he is "bad," of course, but is he a supervillain?

This question is only answered in the film's denouement, when David is confirmed as the hero. Only then does Elijah recognize and acknowledge himself as a villain, and only then does he know who he is.⁵⁷ And only then, in this un/becoming moment, does he subvert the genre's encoded messages (i.e., he fails to identify with the heroes, to desire to become a "good" citizen, or to wait for a higher power to rescue him). But not all genre codes — stereotypes and prejudices continue to color popular beliefs about who can be a hero or a villain in the superhero world, just as they do in the real world. Worlds that while playing out on different surfaces are not so dissimilar, as minoritarian superhero fans like Elijah understand. Indeed, couldn't his identity crisis have been triggered by the awareness that, as a poor Black boy with disabilities, he was marginalized, disempowered, and devalued, if not completely absented from both worlds?

Elijah lives and plays in prejudiced worlds, and the similarly phrased sociocultural ordering, rules, and conventions of these worlds' blur within him. Take his gallery-cum-lair, for example, *Limited Edition*. Elijah establishes his gallery to sell art, of course, but it's also a place to escape, in the transformative sense, the confines of his worlds. An in-between space that serves as both a superhero art gallery and a secret lair, but we don't know this until his villainous status is confirmed. Entry to *Limited Edition* is strictly controlled and "by appointment only." It is his world, a place where he is all-powerful and where

56 This may be due to the visual codes that superhero villains share with heroes, namely, that they are white, cishet, powerful, hypermasculine, and nondisabled, with the exception of the rare disfigurement.

57 Even though other signs are there: his code-name, Mr. Glass; his aesthetic and sharp styling, including a glass-topped cane; and his base of operations, or lair, *Limited Edition*.

social order is upended; in one scene, Elijah berates and ejects a privileged white male customer from the gallery for not appreciating a piece of comics art and thus not honoring the purpose and power of the place. By jumbling imaginary and real worlds, Elijah carves out a way to discover his identity, meaning, and purpose. But the transference of the genre's identity model to the real world provokes him to commit acts of terror, setting him on course to becoming an evil mastermind.

As a routinely hospitalized and confined child, the unrepresentative and belligerent superhero genre and its associated discourse were, for the longest time and throughout his formative years, Elijah's *petit monde*, and, as we see, they had a profound impact on his view of the real world, a world that is systemically oppressive and prejudiced and particularly hazardous for Black American men. Confronting the injustices of the real world, Elijah turns to the superhero genre for solutions, but, having failed to identify as a hero or a villain, he finds no clear answer: his heroic motivation clashes with his villainous actions. Unlike most supervillains, he does not seek vengeance or power. He does not want to rule the world. Rather, he wishes, like all superheroes, only to make it a better, safer place, but unlike them, he doesn't mind killing lots of people in the process. In *Unbreakable*, Elijah seeks "the kind of person these stories are about [superhero comics]. A person put here to protect the rest of us, to guard us."⁵⁸ True, but from whom?

Elijah craves societal change, a revolution, but he does not approach civic action in the usual way—by going to protests, calling Congress, or signing petitions. Like all superhero protagonists and antagonists, he takes matters into his own hands and does the one thing, according to his genre enculturation, that he can do, and that is to use his power, in the form of intelligence and money, to change the world. But, according to genre codes, he can't do it alone. He needs to find an infrangible, or unbreakable, individual with the moral character and power to help him lift the superhero genre off the page and onto the streets, some-

⁵⁸ Shyamalan, *Unbreakable*.

one willing to play hero to his villain — otherwise he's just a bad man, a criminal, a domestic terrorist, and he wants, no, needs, to be so much more.

Up until the moment of his first attack, there was still a chance for Elijah to become a hero rather than a villain. As Elijah would have known, his embodiment did not predestine him to become the villain, because, while superheroes of color or with disabilities are uncommon, they are not unknown. (We might think of Storm or Black Panther and Daredevil or Professor X.)⁵⁹ Again, oppositions help to illustrate the identity dynamics at work. Elijah first appears to us as a new-born baby, broken and in pain, and later as a vulnerable, excluded child afraid to play outside. This vulnerability and innocence contrast with our introduction to David, who is anything but heroic as he slips off his wedding ring and harries a young woman in a clumsy attempt to pick her up. These are the introductions to our hero and villain. At the start of the film, Elijah's and David's positions in the hero/villain binary are not established, but as the narrative drives through its three acts, the structure begins to solidify, until the final handshake sets their positions in stone. Elijah's lack of an opposition gave him his motivation, an essential quality of every superhero and supervillain.

This snapshot shows that it is not always possible to escape official meanings. It portrays a minoritarian superhero fan trying to tap into the genre's radical promise. A promise that is, as I discuss, meant to offer a window into other worlds and ways of being in those worlds, but Elijah discovers, like many minoritarian superhero fans, that it is a promise the genre does not keep. If anything, it is an expression of the genre's reactionary promise. The young Elijah was looking for another way of seeing the world — a world that saw him and that had a place for

59 As with supervillains, superheroes with disabilities follow hegemonic coding patterns (e.g., white, cishet, powerful), and their representation is problematic in other ways; it can be idealistic, unrealistic, and often falls into a "supercrip" mode of representation. For example, see José Alaniz, *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

him. That Otherworld was not shown to him; instead, layered beneath all the fantastical elements, he saw his own real world reflected back at him, complete with all its exclusions, binaries, and restrictions. Elijah tried to find an alternative way to make these texts, his worlds, mean, but ultimately succumbed to their reactionary ideology, and “gazing into the abyss,” he moved inexorably towards becoming a supervillain, or monster.⁶⁰

In this chapter, I have shown how differently empowered agents un/make genre meaning — key elements of the loss and recovery of radical promise. Having mapped out something of the genre’s polysemous and multivocal meaningscape, I close now by underscoring connections between this meaningscape and the genre’s radical promise, which will be the subject of the next chapter. As we have seen, the industry works hard to control its preferred meanings. Meaning is regulated, but the genre’s unstable meaningscape makes it difficult for creators, fans, and scholars to police dominant meanings. As I will show, the genre’s radical promise is compromised and curtailed by modes of production, notably representation. This lost promise is evident, for instance, in the countless borders that are not meaningfully crossed, in the Otherworlds that are not really other, and in the fantastical transformations that promise to change the characters in extraordinary ways but, in the end, only proffer change if it ultimately reconfirms current hegemony. But we can also see how excluded superhero fans can, through the instability and ruptures in meaning, start to transgress borders and make alternate meanings, thereby beginning to recover the genre’s lost promise.

60 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

CHAPTER 2

Transformation ⇌ *Representation* ⇌ *Worldmaking*

Transformation. Representation. Worldmaking. Three concepts and practices through which to scrutinize the form and reanimation of the radical promise of the superhero genre. Although not necessarily radical, each has, in the right hands, the potential to subvert, disrupt, and undermine. Not only do they allow us to distinctively imagine and realize other ways of being in the world, but they also offer routes to reform, speaking directly to notions of creation and alteration, of meaning, seeing, and being. But to depart from the known, the usual, or the norm, one must first imagine and expose oneself to alternatives.

This chapter has two aims: first, to contextualize the leading themes and second to introduce and outline my strategy for recovering the genre's lost radical promise. My discussion of transformation, representation, and radical promise leads to a critical review of worldmaking, or, as I suggest, un/making. As noted, the radical promise of superheroes is located within the concept and practice of transformation, but it is a promise lost and diluted through mainstream representation, a promise that can always be reanimated through resistive minoritarian fanwork. By identifying a divergence between concept (i.e., how we think about it), media representation (i.e., how we show

and see it), and practice (i.e., how we do it), I open a distinct vantage point, one useful for destabilizing easy notions of transformation as radical. This expansive, layered idea of transformation — one cognizant of the divide between stable denotation and unstable connotation — places my work in a definitional borderland in which meaning blurs, is plural, and is at times contradictory. I work throughout with the following questions in mind: as intertwining concepts and practices, how do transformation, representation, and worldmaking work to secure or disrupt the radical promise of superheroes? And what is the superhero genre, through its centralized adoption and representation of the transforming superhero, telling us about representing radical figures, ideas, and transformative processes, and ultimately about power, identities, and bodies?

Transformation Stories and the Superhero Genre

Stories, fabrications of fact and fiction, show us ways of being in the world. They are powerful self- and worldmaking tools. Transformation stories, and their modern variant, makeover stories, have long both comforted and dis comforted us with tales of un/makings, un/becomings, liminal beings, and border crisscrossings. From pre-Hellenic times through classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, accounts of transforming and liminal gods and beings abound. More recently, one only needs to recall Shakespeare's plays or the classic tales of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Metamorphosis*, or *Orlando*, as well as perhaps less well-known stories like *Passing* by Nella Larsen or Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry*, to feel the grip of transforming or liminal figures on our cultural imagination, not to mention the countless appearances of zombies, werewolves, and vampires, as well as superheroes, in contemporary popular culture. As with passing narratives, tales of transformation warn us about how change and difference influence and bring about un/belonging, and in doing so, these stories and characters narrate the ways of power, community, agency, and social change. We treat them lightly at our peril.

The genre of storytelling at the heart of this book, which was established in the late 1930s, is crammed with all kinds of transforming figures and transformative stories, and it continues to slake the public's desire for tales of transformation. Throughout its history, the superhero genre has itself been subject to overlapping revisions and mutations, from the gaudy "beat 'em up capers" of the late 1930s to the misfits and outsiders of the 1960s onwards, and then to the gritty realistic turn of the 1980s, which is still broadly with us now.¹ The genre's mode of address has also transformed. Comics may be the spiritual homeland of superheroes, but the comics medium is no longer their only dwelling place. The genre has long since migrated to other media, notably film, TV, games, and cartoons. As transforming figures, superheroes have a complex personal-political relationship with transformation. Genre protagonists are subject to transformation on a personal level (e.g., transforming from ordinary to extraordinary citizens), but they also become agents of transformation both in the diegetic world, where their presence irrevocably changes the realities and possibilities of their worlds and communities, and in the real world, where activists, not all of whom are superhero fans, may use them to inform their activism.

Superhero characterizations and transformations are, for all their variation, bound by rules and conventions. Rules that "artists and writers could obey and flout — but not ignore."² Grant Morrison too notes this rule adherence, writing of Superman that "[w]e have to adapt to his rules if we enter his world. We can never change him too much, or we lose what he is. There is a persistent set of characteristics that define Superman."³ Not only do rules and conventions apply to specific characters, but they also apply to the broader concept of a superhero. For example, in "The Definition of the Superhero," Peter Coogan refers

1 This nod to the genre's "ages" is intended only to highlight a few of the more notable changes.

2 Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992), 22.

3 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 14.

to costumes, secret identities, missions, and powers, but only in passing mentions transformation — a critical, iconic process of superheroic becoming — writing simply of “origins (transformation from ordinary person to superhero).”⁴ Coogan’s bracketing underscores his sidelining of transformation within superhero ontology. I wish, however, to foreground transformation and critically engage it as one of the rules and conventions that cannot be disregarded. Superheroes must go through some kind of transformative experience, not always somatically, but usually from a position of non-participation to participation, from civic inaction to action. Something happens to alter the character, therefore changing how they see the world and their place within it, whether it’s becoming an orphan, arriving on Earth from another planet, or discovering a genetic mutation. Within the superhero genre, transformation affects not only bodies and identities but also worlds and communities, as well as time and space. Indeed, such spheres prove inseparable.

While the following account of transformation focuses on superheroes as transforming figures and the radical possibilities of superhero metamorphosis, the idea of the genre itself as a repository of transformative stories is never far from my mind.⁵ Stories whose core premise is that change is not only possible but probable. I wish here to draw out the idea that personal transformation, an awakening, can provoke a desire to actively participate in and transform societal and fannish realms. Thus, a node of the genre’s radical promise lies not only in showing its fans, that’s to say, enabling them to imagine, that people, stories, genres, fandoms, and realities can change, but that people, as individuals and as collectives, can change the worlds they inhabit, be that within the spheres of dominant culture or superhero culture. The genre’s transformative impulse, irrepressible and inescapable, perhaps goes some way towards answering our

4 Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: Monkey-Brain Books, 2006), 77.

5 My discussion of the ideological condition of transformation continues in the next chapter, wherein the superhero genre itself is situated as a site of radical promise.

original question of why minoritarian superhero fans remain engaged with such a troubling genre and its attendant culture.

Snapshot: Costume-Changers and Shapeshifters

When referring to transforming superheroes, I am not immediately concerned with analyzing specific character transitions but rather with exploring how these transitions impact and transform diegetic and real-world understandings of bodies, identities, and worlds. The concept of superhero transformation troubles the myth of the structuring border, challenging binary and hierarchical edifices and ruling systems, as well as the subsequent establishment of identity formation and regulation. (I say “troubles” and “challenges” because, as I discuss later, transformation can just as easily reify binary systems.)

Origins are the start of any superhero’s transformative journey. They point to moments of rupture in character, meaning, and grand narratives and, in so doing, denaturalize the idea of the reality of identity. That is to say, they suggest bodies, identity, and reality as something created and creatable through internal responses to external forces. Emerging subjectivities are named, dressed, and, thus, brought to life and made real. Bruce Wayne becomes Batman. Diana Prince becomes Wonder Woman. Alternating-identity superheroes, in being simultaneously and manifoldly real and unreal, particularly trouble the “reality” of identity.

Origins may not be revealed immediately or in full, but all characters, heroes and villains alike, have an origin story, or stories. I speak of stories because character origins, like those of the Joker or Wolverine, are not always entirely fixed but transform through time and the telling. As previously observed, new generations of creators translate the same events in different ways for different times and different fans, adding new details while emphasizing or minimizing others. Origins thus remain essentially the same but different. Some characters are born with extraordinary abilities, while others acquire them, but it takes a

transformational moment for all of them to become *super*.⁶ It is through these unstable transformation stories that we learn how the originating subject, be it Kal-El or Ben Grimm, became one thing and another.

The genre houses many modes of being and becoming, each of which is distinctively marked by body, sartorial, and identity play. As with most practices, becoming a superhero is best imagined as a spectrum. Superhero transformation can be (near)permanent or temporary, controlled or uncontrolled, private and secret or public, welcomed or loathed. And, of course, it always has the potential to be a little bit of everything. The cyclic alternating-identity mode of transformation is common: a characterization comprising an alter/super pairing. The alter is usually the originating figure, the one accommodating, overrun, and transformed by the emergence of the super persona. When one aspect is present, the other is absent, as is the case with Billy Batson and Captain Marvel, a pairing that endlessly and authentically dances between subject positions. But transformation can also be a one-way movement, landing the subject metaphorically elsewhere, as observable in Ben Grimm's troubled transmogrification into the aptly named Thing.⁷ Other transitions, like Clark Kent's, require a swift change of attire and attitude, or even a quick spin, as when the 1970s television version of Diana Prince swirls into her corseted costume to become Wonder Woman. But, for some, such as Grimm, transformation is more about flesh than fabric. Somatic transformations can be painless transitions or painful spectacles. Witness Bruce Banner's exposed, pained transmogrifications into the raging, green-skinned Hulk or the effortless transformations performed by Marvel's much-loved mimetic shapeshifter, Mystique. Bodies

6 Remembering that the term "moment" does not only denote a brief, discrete time period but can also refer to the idea of "a period of time (not necessarily brief) marked by a particular quality of experience or by a memorable event," or "turning point." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "moment," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/120997>.

7 Although the Thing, very occasionally and temporarily, does assume human form.

don't always structurally alter in superhero transformations, but through costumes and body performances, their appearances do.

Superhero bodies can materially transform or be transformed by material. Often reflecting names and origins, costuming is an idiosyncratic practice and a key element of superhero transformations.⁸ DC's Big Three — Clark Kent/Superman, Diana Prince/Wonder Woman, and Bruce Wayne/Batman — exemplify simple mode of dress transformations; their bodies remain the same beneath the costume changes and identity shifts.⁹ Changing surface visualities facilitates border crossings, and taking off a costume is just as telling as putting one on. By undressing and performing in specific ways, Kal-El becomes readable as Clark Kent and Superman. God-like characters, such as Superman and Wonder Woman, do not undergo any kind of somatic transformation. Indeed, in their home environments, their bodies would not be classified as special or extraordinary. Their bodies transform, becoming *super*, when they arrive on Earth, or, in Prince's case, when she encounters American culture. This is their transformative moment. A change of context transforms the perception of their bodies and their lives and kickstarts their civic participation.

Costume changes do more than just disguise. They also work to transform (self)perceptions. Mode of dress transformations can also have structural and genetic elements, as with Peter

8 Even transmogrified characters, such as Beast and the Thing, wear fabric costumes, but their costuming does not alter their identity position. In many ways, their monstrous bodies serve as their costumes, with their fabric uniforms simply signifying ideological allegiances. The Thing is the Thing, whether he's wearing his trademark hat and trench coat or his Fantastic Four uniform.

9 Unlike Kent or Prince, Wayne goes through a period of somatic transformation as he purposely alters his physicality through strength training and body conditioning. It is not an instant transformation but a gradual one. Scenes showing characters transforming their bodies through physical training are not uncommon in superhero stories and even in the paratexts surrounding superhero films.

Parker/Spider-Man and Logan/Wolverine.¹⁰ Parker's body is genetically altered by a radioactive spider bite, but in most versions of his origin story, his physical appearance remains largely unchanged. He may gain some muscle definition, but somatic changes are intentionally subtle. Parker becomes superpowered, but it is costuming and performance that allow him to become the amazing Spider-Man.¹¹ In these cases, costume changes aid identity play: to become readable as another, one must first appear as another. Radical and non-normative ideas of identity as shifting and non-unitary play out here via modes of dress, not by transforming the body but by transforming the appearance of the body. This is not the case in the next mode of superhero transformation that I present, one using the body itself as a costume: mimetic shapeshifting.

Shapeshifting describes a mode of superhero transformation, but it also denotes a class of superheroes. Shapeshifters can alter the visual appearance, or shape, of their material form at will. As with *Metamorpho*, *Mister Fantastic*, and the *Atom*, shapeshifters can transform into the properties and shapes of objects and substances, stretch, or simply change scale, respectively. In their shapeshifting migrations, category boundaries blur and become immaterial. Shapeshifting is more akin to a process of transmogrification for some characters, such as *Beast* or the *Thing*, but it can be utterly seamless for others, as with the mimetic movements of *Mystique* or the *Martian Manhunter*.¹² Mimetic

10 In one *Wolverine* origin story, the character's signature claws are natural, and in another, they are bionic implants. No matter the origin, Logan's claws and skeleton have been transformed with adamantium infusions.

11 For a discussion of Parker's becoming *Spider-Man* through costuming, see Ellen Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons: Cosplay (Re)imagined through the Superhero Genre, Authenticity, and Transformation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/613/502..>

12 Transmogrification describes transformations with monstrous or grotesque outcomes. Nikki Sullivan describes it as a "strange or grotesque transformation: transformation that is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, extravagance, and [...] 'unnatural combinations.'" Nikki Sullivan, "Transmogrification: (Un)becoming Other(s)," in *The Transgender Studies*

shapeshifting, or visually corresponding to another person, nurtures (mis)recognition and allows the occupation of another, or another's, subject position. As with real-life passing practices, mimetic shapeshifting facilitates all kinds of border crossings and can grant access to people, knowledge, and places that are ordinarily restricted. Yet, in the genre, mimetic shapeshifting is a power of degrees: some *appear* other, while some *become* other. Mystique can look, sound, and act like those she mimics, but she cannot assume their powers. As when mimicking the teleporting Nightcrawler, for example, she could not teleport. By contrast, DC's Martian Manhunter and Meggan, another Marvel shapeshifting character, can assume the powers as well as appearances of those they mimic, for example, when Meggan transformed into Nightcrawler, she could teleport.

This snapshot indicates sites of potential radicalism within superhero transformation and brings us to a point where it is useful to start thinking about how the genre represents its transforming protagonists. After all, representing a concept is itself a transformative process. But processes of representation are not impartial, and to fully understand the synergy between transformation and representation, it is necessary to understand the conditions of genre representation.

On Representation

Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.

— bell hooks, *Black Looks*¹³

Reader, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (London: Routledge, 2006), 553.

13 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*¹⁴

As is widely acknowledged, media representation helps shape and manipulate our sense of self and our realities, in other words, the “deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.”¹⁵ Critically engaging modes of representation and their sociocultural and political relations invigorate debates concerning the politics of visibility and the consequences of media invisibility and poor-quality representation.¹⁶ Apropos

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1952), 143.

15 hooks, *Black Looks*, 5.

16 Within media fandom and fan studies, representational critiques are dynamic and frequent. Inclusivity, diversity, and quality of representation provide the main themes. See, for example, Rukmini Pande, ed., *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020); “Dear Comic Fans: We Get it. You’re Racist and Racebending Scares You,” *Stitch Media Mix*, August 7, 2015, <https://stitchmediamix.com/2015/08/07/dear-comic-fans-we-get-it-youre-racist-and-racebending-scars-you/>; Kristen Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017), <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>; and Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2019). See also Ahmed Best, “Star Wars Cluster—Ahmed Best,” interview by Henry Jenkins and Colin Maclay, *How Do You Like It So Far?*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.howdoyoulikeitsofar.org/star-wars-cluster-episode-1-ahmed-best/>, and Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel, “Episode 22A: Race and Fandom Part 1,” *Fansplaining*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/22a-race-and-fandom>. Formal comics and superhero scholarship tackle identity politics and representational matters too. See Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Marc Singer, “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race,” *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 107–19; and Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). Although within the field, there is some resistance to the rise of representation studies. See,

this book, it helps us to think about minoritarian fan engagement and responses to exclusionary worlds, in this case, the American superhero genre, its attendant culture, and, of course, the wider world.

#RepresentationMatters and Meaningful Representation

Despite efforts to unseat it, an unrepresentative image overwhelms our mediascape and its creation: cis het, white, nondisabled men. This predominant agent and image have successfully suppressed diverse media representation. As is increasingly asserted by media, cultural, and fan scholars, notably those of color, it is not enough to simply insert characters and actors from minoritarian communities into mainstream texts to make impactful, meaningful change. There must be breadth and depth to avoid characterizations and representations becoming stereotypes and token gestures.¹⁷ For example, as I have elsewhere observed,¹⁸ for all the furor surrounding Miles Morales becoming Spider-Man — markedly, at the hands of a white creative

for example, Rebecca Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699/538>, and Ellen Kirkpatrick and Suzanne Scott, “Representation and Diversity in Comics Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 120–24.

- 17 See, for example, Kristen Warner’s work on plastic representation and on colorblind casting — a customary industry practice of increasing on-screen diversity by casting actors of color to play secondary roles that could be played by actors of any race — and Mary Beltran’s essay on “meaningful diversity,” “Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows,” *Flow*, August 27, 2010, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/>. See Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” and “ABC’s ‘Scandal’ and Black Women’s Fandom,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 32–50.
- 18 Ellen Kirkpatrick, “On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1483>.

team — Spider-Man’s meaning has changed little in the intervening years. Even with the acclaimed release of a Morales-centered Spider-Man film in 2018, conduct an online image search for “Spider-Man,” and a series of white men will still look back at you.¹⁹ It is very much the case, as Stuart Hall observes, “that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.”²⁰ Moreover, representing difference is “very carefully policed” and lost under layers of repetitious normative representations and expectations, as Neil Shyminsky and Kimberly Frohreich point out in their considerations of *X-Men* representation.²¹

Hall’s observations speak directly to my central conceit vis-à-vis the disconnect between the genre’s radical promise, lodged in layers of transformation, and orthodox representation, where the radical promise of superheroes becomes diluted, “regulated, segregated,” and lost, or bent, in the replication of white, heteronormative hegemony. And homogeneity in creative teams is just one cause of this effect. Not only does it risk producing “plastic representation,” but it subverts an opportunity to mean-

19 *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* from 2018 appears to centralize Morales but at the same time works to decentralize and undermine — “regulate and segregate” — him as *the* Spider-Man (e.g., it places him in a diegesis with several other authentic versions of Spider-Man, and it is also an animated, not live-action, film).

20 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1993): 17.

21 Ibid. Frohreich, for example, explores how spectator positioning within the *X-Men* films undermines a gay reading of a coming-out scene, “ultimately each narrative appears to suggest [...] a way in which difference should be read (or not), while the filmic discourse is sometimes at odds with this message.” Kimberly Frohreich, “Making the ‘Monstrous’ Visible? Reading ‘Difference’ in Contemporary Fantastic Film and Television,” *SPELL* 26 (2011): 242. Neil Shyminsky examines the (mis)appropriation of the *X-Men*’s mutant metaphor in allowing privileged readers to (mis-) identify with oppressed minorities: “While the popularly accepted suggestion [...] is that the *X-Men* espouses a progressive politics of inclusion and tolerance, a deeper textual analysis would seem to reveal the opposite.” Neil Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 388. See also Chapter 1 · Part 1 of this volume.

ingly interrupt and disrupt metanarratives.²² Moreover, as Ijeoma Oluo observes about race, when looking at representations of Black people created by white people, “you are looking at representations crafted by white supremacy. [...] It’s not actually black people you are looking at.”²³ As also discussed in the previous chapter, to authentically enfold superheroes of color into official genre meanings and culture, attention must be directed towards increasing quantity and improving quality, but such diversifying moves must be informed by inclusivity, that is, diverse lived experience.²⁴

When considering minoritarian engagement with an exclusionary, often hostile, genre and culture, it is, I think, worth highlighting again the historical dominance of the genre by a small number of publishers and the detrimental impact this monopolization has had on diverse representation.²⁵ There are, of course, other sources of superheroes, such as independent publishers and DIY comics, but they can be hard to find, and there is always the risk that they will go bust. This precarity can deter fans from investing in and becoming attached to alternative comics and characters. Also, being small and little known, independent and DIY titles tend not to have dynamic fandoms, which can similarly discourage readers from investing in a new

22 Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation.”

23 Ijeoma Oluo, “The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black,” *The Stranger*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black>.

24 This is something American genre producers appear to be sporadically taking on board. Witness, for example, the diverse creative team(s) behind Morales’s current comics iterations, but the largely white creative teams behind *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and Marvel’s *Spider-Man PlayStation 4* video game.

25 Citing James Spooner’s documentary *Afro-Punk* (2003), Rebecca Wanzo takes up the daedal idea of choice and draws our attention to the complexities involved when thinking about minoritarian fan engagement with white-centric genres. Wanzo also usefully observes the fluidity of the categories of otherness and normativity within these kinds of fannish engagements. Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers.”

title or character, as many superhero fans want to be part of active fan communities. Such factors can stymie fannish investment in independent and DIY publishers, though fans, of course, may enjoy both mainstream and alternative superheroes.

Irrespective of this, big-name characters and teams from Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and their imprints dominate the superhero world. Indeed, the whole notion of superheroes, aesthetics and embodiment included, is a direct consequence of Marvel's and DC's mainstreaming of the idea that superheroes are, with rare and delimited exceptions, cis het, white, youthful, body-normative males: "Since its inception [...] the world of comic books has been populated with the same type of characters in magazine after magazine. [...] C]omic books have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity."²⁶ Some may argue that character diversity is increasing, citing a few LGBTQ characters (for example, Batwoman, Lord Fanny, Midnighter, Xavin, Daken, and Star-Lord) or point to the arrival of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel or Miles Morales as Spider-Man, or suggest that established minoritarian characters are gaining more visibility by mentioning Netflix's *Marvel's Luke Cage* and Marvel Studios's *Black Panther*. But, as noted above, while true, it would be misleading to say so. Yes, visibility and diversity are increasing, but not yet on a scale to make any kind of impactful media or social change.²⁷ Given this backdrop, it is not so surprising that to enjoy superheroes, minoritarian superhero fans frequently connect with and often disidentify with the mainstream genre and its big-name characters. But how?

²⁶ Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 2.

²⁷ So dire is the situation that many minoritarian superhero fans and allies continue to boycott Marvel and DC, hoping to pressurize them into addressing their systemic representational failures, both on and off the page and screen. See, for example, J.A. Micheline, "Marvel Superheroes Aren't Just for White Men — True Diversity Could Boost Sales," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/04/marvel-comics-blaming-diversity-bad-sales>, and Marykate Jasper, "Marvel VP Said Sales Slumped Because 'People Didn't Want Any More Diversity,'" *The Mary Sue*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.themarysue.com/marvel-vp-no-more-diversity/>.

Let's start exploring this key question through two brief examples: racebending cosplay and superhero-informed activism. For example, while there are several minoritarian versions of Superman — and, of course, Icon, the Superman-inspired character from Black-centric Milestone Comics — the “whitebread” Clark Kent version proves perennially popular with racebending Superman cosplayers. Because these alternate versions of Superman are less well-known, many cosplayers are reluctant to portray them.²⁸ Racebending cosplay thus not only draws attention to the predominance and centrality of white characters, but it also spotlights the lack of big-name minoritarian characters and, in turn, the marginalized or secondary positioning of characters of color when they do appear diegetically, frequently in “sidekick” or supporting roles. Furthermore, arguing that minoritarian cosplayers should play “within their range,” as many contend, would currently see cosplayers of color adopting a disempowering secondary role within their own performances — role-play echoing real-world inequalities and oppressions — which sounds anything but playful.²⁹ Racebending cosplayers, on the other hand, “make a play” for alternative ways of being and seeing superheroes, minoritarian subjects, and minoritarian fans through their disidentificatory performances.

Priya Rehal, a cosplayer of color, writes that she uses her “disruptive” or activist form of “cosplay to challenge the future and the whiteness of the media I enjoy. [...] I want to make space for people who look like me in my fandoms.”³⁰ By not “sticking to their range,” racebending cosplayers, like Rehal, embody

28 With exceptions, cosplayers seek recognition and regard for the veracity of their cosplay performance, and reaping such rewards is easier if the audience is familiar with the source character. Performing an obscure character may provide self- and niche-pleasure, but it will not secure general plaudits.

29 See also Henry Jenkins, “Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (London: Routledge, 2018), 383–94.

30 Priya Rehal, “I Fight White Supremacy by Cosplaying,” *Guts*, May 18, 2016, <http://gutsmagazine.ca/cosplaying/>.

the frustration they feel with a beloved genre that consistently fails to represent them: “I’m tired of not seeing faces like mine. I’ve had it with people telling me to ‘stick to my range’ when I cosplay my favorite characters, knowing all the while that my ‘range’ is maybe in the double digits on a good day while their [white cosplayers] ‘range’ is almost endless.”³¹ By materially writing themselves into the genre’s exclusionary story- and meaning-scapes, racebending cosplayers generatively transform, contest, and subvert superhero genre canon and simultaneously resist and challenge fan stereotypes, such as the cishet, white fanboy.³² But challenging canon on any front is a perilous strategy, as many non-progressive superhero fans couch their bigotry and prejudice as concerns for “canonical accuracy.”³³ Attempts to recover canon routinely expose racebending cosplayers to vitri-

31 Priya Rehal, quoted in Chaka Cumberbatch, “I’m a Black Female Cosplayer and Some People Hate It,” *xoJane*, February 11, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130206095511/http://www.xojane.com/issues/mad-back-cosplayer-chaka-cumberbatch>. Relatedly, Henry Jenkins has long since positioned fanwork as “born of a balance between fascination and frustration.” Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 247. See also Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).

32 A section of this paragraph appears in Kirkpatrick, “On [Dis]play.”

33 This relates to the “fanon vs. canon” debates that have erupted within superhero fandom and fan studies and thereupon to ideas of power, privilege, entitlement, and consequently, to toxic media fandom. See, for example, Rukmini Pande, “Who Do You Mean by ‘Fan’? Decolonizing Media Fandom Identity,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), and Klink and Minkel, “Episode 22A: Race and Fandom Part 1.” Relatedly, Rebecca Wanzo points to the critical idea that “some fans of speculative work depend on the centrality of whiteness and masculinity to take pleasure in the text.” Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers,” ^\$1.4. See also Gene Demby, “Superhero Super-Fans Talk Race and Identity in Comics,” interview with Kelly Kanayama, *NPR*, January 11, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/01/11/261056435/superhero-super-fans-talk-race-and-identity-in-comics>. 2014, and Albert S. Fu, “Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Racebending and the Colour-Line in Superhero (Re)casting,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 3 (2015): 269–83.

olic backlashes and barrages of in-person and online abuse from privileged sections of superhero fandom.³⁴

Thinking about these issues in another context, the preponderance of big-name superheroes in media coverage of social demonstrations delights but doesn't surprise me. It does, however, make me wonder about the lack of minoritarian superhero characters in protest paraphernalia. I know they're out there, so why aren't they utilized within social protest too? Icon shares a similar backstory to Clark Kent/Superman yet is nowhere to be found, for example.³⁵ And while the genre's current favorite minoritarian character, Ms. Marvel, puts in appearances, it is nothing compared to the adoption of Wonder Woman or Superman as symbols of, often minoritarian, resistance.³⁶ As an "illegal alien," Clark Kent/Superman is a popular symbol of DREAMERS and their struggles to secure American citizenship and education rights. In adopting and reworking mainstream perceptions of the Clark Kent/Superman myth, DREAMERS remake Superman in their own image, or as Henry Jenkins explains: "When DREAMERS reclaimed Superman they were literally going across

34 Witness the "Comicsgate" debacle, echoing "Gamergate" from 2014, both ongoing neo-con pop culture movements rooted in white supremacy and intolerance and working to stifle the rise of inclusion and diversity within the comics and gaming industries, as well as media more broadly. See Micheline, "Why I'm Boycotting Marvel Comics"; Eric Francisco, "Comicsgate is Gamergate's Next Horrible Evolution," *Inverse*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.inverse.com/article/41132-comicsgate-explained-bigots-milkshake-marvel-dc-gamergate>; and Ada Byron, "Bill Sienkiewicz Pens Rebuke of 'Comicsgate,'" *The Mary Sue*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.themarysue.com/bill-sienkiewicz-comicsgate/>.

35 Icon (a.k.a. Arnus and Augustus Freeman), like Superman (a.k.a. Kal-El and Clark Kent), is an alien who arrives on Earth as a child. Arnus's escape pod lands in the Deep South rather than the Midwest, where Miriam, an enslaved woman, finds him and adopts him under the name Augustus Freeman IV. Note that, like Kal-El, Arnus assimilates into American culture and grows up to protect and serve America.

36 At the time of printing, Marvel announced the demise of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel. The decision to kill off this much-loved character is not only controversial but also revealing, as is the way in which it occurred, which has already been described as cynical, dismissive, and commercially driven. As is often observed, comics will break your heart.

seventy years of history to reconnect with earlier generations of immigrant activists.”³⁷ But Clark Kent/Superman isn’t the only superhero with a migration-inflected origin story — we might think of the aforementioned Icon, Starfire, the Green Turtle, and, yes, Hulkling — yet why is he, and other privileged characters more broadly, so enthusiastically embraced by social justice activists, many of whom fight for minority rights?³⁸ The relative obscurity of these characters in comparison to, say, Clark Kent/Superman has clearly contributed to this scenario.

This situation demonstrates the dominance of the “white-bread” superhero as well as the suppression and marginalization of other superhero representations to the detriment of the genre more generally and, more specifically, to minoritarian fans and creators.³⁹ Minoritarian activists, such as the DREAMERS, identify with Clark Kent/Superman and other mainstream superheroes for all kinds of reasons, but given that a duopoly of grandee publishers and their imprints control superhero ideology, ontology, and aesthetics — or who can be a superhero — this connection also speaks to the reality of limited choice. So when Marvel’s Senior Sales VP, David Gabriel, tells us that people were turning their noses up at “[a]ny character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, or anything that was not a core Marvel character,”⁴⁰ he was also telling us about Marvel’s ideas about who superheroes are and who their readers, their “people,” are. That’s to say: “By even making remarks like these, Marvel is seemingly conceding that its target audience, its ‘core’

37 Henry Jenkins, “Important Reminder: Superman Was an Undocumented Immigrant,” *Fusion*, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20150321163028/http://fusion.net/video/103908/superheroes-are-undocumented-immigrants-and-the-other-way-around/>.

38 Clark Kent’s/Superman’s canonically unstable origins and citizenship status perhaps help explain his curious adoption within human rights and migration activism. In some stories, he is a naturalized US citizen, an honorary US citizen, or an honorary citizen of every country in the United Nations, and in the *Man of Steel* (1986) miniseries, he was even “born” in America, making him a natural-born US citizen.

39 Brown, *Black Superheroes*.

40 Micheline, “Marvel Superheroes Aren’t Just for White Men.”

audience — and their ‘core’ characters — are white and male.”⁴¹ Given that this is the standpoint of the arguably more diversity-minded of the Big Two publishers, it is not surprising that issues around representation and diversity swirl constantly around the American superhero genre. Issues likewise bleeding into how minoritarian superhero fans and non-fans use superhero media in their social action or world-un/making activities. As is often said, necessity is the mother of invention.

Representing Transformation: Conflicted Ideologies

Analyzing media content and its relations to the constitution of the real world remains popular, perhaps more so than influence or effects studies. Media theorists working with content do so largely to uncover messages, or norms and value systems, underlying media texts: Whose worldviews are promoted, discredited, or ignored, and with what aim — to preserve, to modify, or to overthrow? They do so not merely to point out the presence of ideology but to limn the power of the media to affect reality, to shape perceptions of what is and is not considered normal. Hall describes images not as reflecting the world but as “re-presenting” it: “Representation [...] implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping [...] of *making things mean*.”⁴² Mainstream media certainly circulate the ideas and worldviews of those in power and, in so doing, participate in worldmaking, but we must always remain mindful of the room within texts and beyond for negotiation, contradiction, and resistance.

Concerns about representing identity, although still often overlooking intersectionality, clearly overlap with ideological issues. Michael Loadenthal describes ideology as “an integral component in the reproduction of state power,” while Edward

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” in *Culture, Society and the Media*, eds. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woollacott (London: Methuen, 1982), 64.

Herman and Noam Chomsky, focusing on the news media, describe popular media as “systematic propaganda” designed to create consent and conformity, arguing that the media’s role is to “amuse, entertain, and inform, and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of larger society.”⁴³ By focusing on modes of production rather than reception, the propaganda model leaves little room for resistance and does not adequately account for audience negotiations and resistances, but it does usefully set out the media’s role in transmuted ideology and marginalizing dissent. Michael Czolacz further observes that “ideology is often transmitted through the media, not on the overt messages of the programs themselves, ideological norms are instead established in the practices repeatedly depicted as ‘normal’ and ‘ordinary.’”⁴⁴

Although referencing a different debate, Czolacz’s assertion suggests the contradictions found within genre representation. Overtly, for example, the genre shouts about fantastical somatic and categorical transformations and suggests a counter-hegemonic message, but the everyday practice of representing transformation, when closely examined, tells a different story. In the genre, transformation is the normal state of affairs. It happens all the time in all kinds of ways, but modes of representation contradict the overt, potentially subversive, message by repeatedly framing transformation within hegemonic norms so that these norms become the message rather than the border-bending and world un/making possibilities of transformation. Through this process, hegemonic norms become not only ubiquitous and

43 Michael Loadenthal, “Professor Xavier Is a Gay Traitor! An Antiassimilationist Framework for Interpreting Ideology, Power and Statecraft,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, no. 6 (Spring 2014): 13, and Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1988), 1.

44 *The Chicago School of Media Theory*, s.v. “Ideology,” <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/ideology/>.

naturalized, but also unseen and by being unseen, they appear, but only appear, unassailable.⁴⁵

In ideological terms, genre representation expresses dominant power relations and body norms.⁴⁶ In this genre, men are men and women are women. Even monstrous, animal-hybrid characters are normatively gender coded, and we need only think of the Earth-616 versions of Hulk/Bruce Banner and She-Hulk/Jennifer Walters to see this conditioning in play.⁴⁷ This pattern characterizes representations of race and sexuality too. Although a green-skinned “monster,” the Earth-616 Hulk remains coded white and heterosexual, a coding offered through his bondedness to Banner’s love interest, Betty Ross, and because in every live-action adaptation, from Lou Ferrigno (and the Demi-Hulk, Rik Drasin) to Mark Ruffalo, Hulk, like Banner, is played by white male actors, exemplifying the idea of a normalizing repetition.⁴⁸ This aside teases how genre representation codes and reinforces white, heteronormative hegemony (e.g., uncontrollable bodies are monstrous and dangerous, and categorical identity is stable), and in so doing undercuts radical promise (e.g., identity and bodies are unstable, and category

45 This is analogous to the operations of Richard Dyer’s “assumption of whiteness” or of heterosexuality. Briefly, the ubiquity of whiteness renders it invisible, and consequently unacknowledged and uninterrogated. This unexamined status is, however, effectively spotlighted and challenged by cross-disciplinary fields of study that foreground race and systemic racism, such as critical race theory and whiteness studies. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

46 Regulating norms are central to processes of constructing and regulating bodies and identities. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

47 Within the superhero genre, there are many worlds and versions of characters, and to differentiate its worlds, Marvel numbers them, and Earth-616 is the primary continuity of Marvel Comics.

48 For further discussion, see Chapter 3 of this volume. As an aside, in 2015, a Korean American named Amadeus Cho replaced Bruce Banner as the new Earth-616 Hulk, and as with Banner, Cho’s Hulk remains statically coded to reflect his originating identity. Hulk’s source identity and representation can change, but only across titles, not diegetically.

borders are permeable and therefore contestable), and is the subject of a more in-depth discussion in the following chapter.

The idea that superhero comics should reflect and perpetuate dominant ideology can be traced back to the 1954 Comics Code enacted by the Comics Code Authority. A cursory glance through the code reveals its creative, sociocultural, and ideological restrictiveness. Good should prevail, every time. Institutions, authority figures, and religion must never be attacked or ridiculed. A heteronormative idea of the family must always be fostered and respected. And there should be absolutely no mention of sex nor queer identities or sexualities. This authoritarian intervention and its aftershocks confirmed the genre as one legitimizing dominant sociocultural norms and values, an ideological alignment that haunts the genre to this day. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the discursive landscape of superhero scholarship is currently binaristically organized around a legitimation/criticism binary, wherein superhero texts are held to either uphold and reify hegemony or to manifest social progressiveness and pluralism. So, while one scholar may read Marvel's *Fantastic Four* as exemplifying patriarchal, heteronormative family ideals, another might read it as suggesting queer familial relations. But ideological critiques observably fail to consider the layers of representation that contribute to the ideological standing of superheroes — not just that a character is transforming, but how that transformation is represented — choosing instead to focus on analyzing narrative content and structure, or characterization, or aspects of creation, and perhaps making assumptions along the way that visual representation follows the preferred ideological script. Identifying and scrutinizing contradictions within the genre's credo and the conflicted representation underpinning it can, however, yield a more useful account of the genre's ideological condition.

The Bruce Banner/Hulk characterization, for example, can transgress the human/monster fault line, but his sex, gender, and sexuality must remain stable and knowable, that's to say, definable within binary systems. Similarly, as we'll see, when the alien shapeshifter Martian Manhunter, who is diegetically sexed male

and gendered masculine, transforms into a woman, his gender identity remains stable. Moreover, “he” changes into a (hu)man’s idea of a woman, literally, since an all-male creative team occasioned his makeover.⁴⁹ A shapeshifting move that transforms his hyper-masculine male body into a hyper-sexualized and feminized female body, matching the Western hegemonic idea of womanhood. Radical somatic transformation can thus occur in the genre, but only if regulated within normative representation — of what a “woman” is, of what a “monster” is — and only if other identity markers remain fixed. So even when we see categories disrupted, we may not see them collapsed. Within the chaos of transformation, there is stability. Not all categories, it seems, are collapsible, and not all boundaries are crossable. As discussed in Chapter 3, the genre tempers and mediates the radical promise of transformation by consistently framing it within hegemonic ideas of normativity. Superheroes may indeed have the potential to express somatic and categorical fluidity, but when filtered through mainstream representational strategies, it becomes a compromised, tempered, and conflicted expression of radicalism.

Representing Transformation: Lost Radical Promise

Transformation evokes notions of change, becomings, and border crossings: material and immaterial, as in personal, cultural, and socio-political change. But superhero transformation, has in many ways, lost sense of that meaning. While gesturing to radical change, in practice it is curtailed, stabilized, and controlled, or, as Hall would say, policed, regulated, and segregated.⁵⁰ As in the real world, transformation is not always a radical act, but even when it is, the genre’s representational strategies undermine, temper, and foreclose any radicalism, reinforcing rather

49 Arguably, there is another layer to this character’s sex and gender identity since “he” is a shapeshifting alien who, for ease and privilege, lives on Earth as a white cisman, shaping his alien, Martian, identity and anatomy accordingly.

50 Hall, “Black Popular Culture,” 17.

than disrupting borders. Thus, dominant ideologies regarding bodies, identities, and realities are, through representational repetition, sustained. As we are starting to see, trademark genre tropes — identity play, costuming, transmogrifications, and origins — blend to create and proliferate the idea of the transforming superhero as a radical figure, but looking under the surface of these bombastic transformations reveals a different story.

The Billy Batson/Captain Marvel characterization, for example, is authentically and distinctly *both* Batson *and* Marvel — expressing the radical idea of “someness,”⁵¹ that within one can be some — but also and always *either* Batson *or* Marvel. It could be said, then, that the concept of the Batson/Marvel characterization is thus quite visionary. Not so. Both in practice and in representational terms, it is conservative. While borders could and should dissolve in these kinds of transformations, they do not.⁵² Thus can we say, superhero transformation suggests plurality and fluidity, but it is, at the same time, defined by Manichean dogma. Thinking back to mimetic shapeshifters, their matchless transformations provide many examples of these kinds of contradictions in operation, Martian Manhunter’s genderswap transformation, for example. But before discussing the problematic representation of this transformation, it is worth taking a moment to remind ourselves about this complex, unsung hero.

Snapshot: J’onn J’onzz, Martian Manhunter

J’onn J’onzz is a shapeshifting alien from Mars with a god-like arsenal of superpowers, a figure once described by Superman as “the most powerful being on the face of the Earth,” and com-

51 Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

52 This mode of fictional identity speaks to the real-life practices of passing subjects and borderland occupants. It also demonstrates the idea that transformation can be radical on a personal level but not in wider socio-cultural contexts.

ing from the Man of Steel, that's saying a lot.⁵³ Upon arriving on Earth, J'onzz quickly recognizes the sociocultural power that bodies and identities hold within human society, and seeking to assimilate and exploit this system, he chooses to mimic, or represent himself as, a cishet white male, Detective John Jones. (J'onzz also clearly recognizes the sociocultural power that state and police authorities wield.) This is J'onzz's transformative moment. His decision to assimilate serves him well, giving him access to all the power and privilege that come with this advantaged position. As an alien shapeshifter from a world and culture organized around shapeshifting beings, we might imagine J'onzz and his fellow Martians to be free of earthly ideas like binary identity and heteronormativity, but that is not so. J'onzz is coded as a cishet male with a female wife and gendered children back on Mars. Sex, gender, and sexuality systems appear to be universally in play. Commentator Jeff Rovin was certainly correct when he described J'onzz as "making the best of the situation" by disguising "himself as an earth man."⁵⁴

Skipping now to a later episode, in *Justice League Task Force* #7–8, "Valley of the Daals," a title riffing on Jacqueline Susann's kitsch classic *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966), we learn that Martian Manhunter must visit an Amazonian society to negotiate the release of a human hostage, a lost male agent in possession of a deadly virus.⁵⁵ Men are barred from this all-female society. So, to lead the all-woman rescue team, Martian Manhunter grudgingly agrees to transform into a woman, Joan J'onzz, even though he could have declined the role to enable one of the other, equally capable, female team members to lead the mission, not least Wonder Woman, who grew up within a gynocentric Amazonian culture. Tellingly, this option was not even mooted. A clear sign of deep-set misogyny and patriarchy, set alongside a troublesome representation, not least in terms of its

53 Joe Kelly et al., *JLA* #86, *Trial by Fire* (New York: DC Comics, 2003).

54 Jeff Rovin, *The Encyclopedia of Superheroes* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 161.

55 Peter David et al., "Valley of the Daals," in *Justice League Task Force* #7–8 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

fetishization, exoticization, and spectacularization of sex and gender transition.⁵⁶ For example, Martian Manhunter initially resists performing the transformation, saying at one point, “considering that I am a male, how do you propose that I... I... you can’t be serious!” This is a particularly revealing response from a character who can become *anything*, and it is one attesting to power relations, indicating, for example, his fear of moving from a more empowered male position to a lesser female one.

Martian Manhunter’s transformation takes place privately in a bathroom, a symbolic room in terms of female grooming and stereotypically often a sanctuary for emotionally upset women, as Martian Manhunter now is. It is a room associated with body and beauty rituals designed to enable women to reproduce normative ideals of what a “real” woman is. When his male boss threatens to “drag” him out of the bathroom, Martian Manhunter admits to feeling “ludicrous” and worries that everyone will laugh and disrespect his authority. Familiar territory perhaps for anyone who has undergone personal makeovers, experiencing something akin to what Umberto Eco has described as “epidermic self-awareness.”⁵⁷ When Martian Manhunter eventually leaves the safety of the bathroom, he faces two predictable responses: the women laugh, and his male boss tells him that he looks “adorable,” reassuring him that he meets the normative, if hyper-sexualized, ideal of womanhood. Here, we see a conservative, reductive representation clash with a radical concept, in this case, the idea of limitless shapeshifting. We also see a clear example of representational strategies undermining the radical promise of shapeshifting characters. A promise residing in their ability to effortlessly shift subject positions and pass wholly as another, as in some real-life passing practices, potentially disrupting dominant ideas about bodies and identity. For many reasons, the notion of a self-defining masculine male

56 It is worth noting, though it is perhaps not surprising, that an all-male team created this storyline.

57 Umberto Eco, cited in Joanne Entwistle, “The Dressed Body,” in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 113.

alien effortlessly transforming into a woman appears quite radical, especially when seen within the context of a conservative, androcentric genre. However, its representation simultaneously confirms sex and gender binaries, essentialism, and authenticity, while also portraying gender transition as easy and fictitious, a trick allowing access to ordinarily restricted spaces.⁵⁸ Borders and binaries appear in play, as they do in the Batson/Marvel characterization, but in reality, they are shored up by regressive representational strategies.

With customary representations like this, it would be easy to dismiss the genre and its radical promise and fall into polarizing conclusions about the genre's credo. Yet that would not help explain continuing minoritarian engagement with the genre nor help us move beyond binary thinking. It is possible to reimagine superhero transformation as both/and rather than either/or, thereby creating an important space and possibility for radicalism. Moreover, by detaching concept from representation and attaching it to practice, it is possible to salvage the genre's radical promise. For example, while the genre often fails to represent the radical qualities of superhero transformation, the concept still retains a radical promise that creators, or, as I discuss in my closing chapters, fans, can recover at any time and place. Adopting a both/and position also generates the possibility of imagining the ideologically unruly genre itself as a site of radical promise, which I discuss in the following chapter. Rescripting the genre's failed radicalism, seeing it elsewhere, adds to the body of work seeking to fathom minoritarian engagement with hegemonically coded texts. Failure here, as Jack Halberstam suggests, opens "alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends."⁵⁹ I return to this theme in later chapters.

58 A charge frequently levied at transgender people and communities regarding public bathrooms and other public paces.

59 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

Worldmaking: Imaginary and Real Worlds

There are many worlds, if any.

—Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*⁶⁰

Before moving to suggest an alternative way of looking at world-making, one that reflects the liminality, participatory qualities, and liberatory possibilities of un/making worlds, I wish to spend a moment outlining its treatment within contemporary storytelling, focusing particularly on concepts and practices relevant to my world-un/making endeavors.

Worldmaking or -building is a defining element of fantasy and describes the creation of imaginary worlds.⁶¹ This can occur within a single text or across media platforms. Jenkins describes “transmedia storytelling” as world-making, writing:

More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger than the franchise — since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of fashions.⁶²

60 Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 127.

61 See, for example, Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978); Mark Bould, “The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory,” *Historical Materialism* 10, no. 4 (2002): 51–88; Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Tom Clark, Emily Finlay, and Phillipa Kelly, *Worldmaking: Literature, Language, Culture* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017); Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham Press, 2018); and Shelly Streeby, “Speculative Writing, Art, and World-Making in the Wake of Octavia E. Butler as Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 510–33.

62 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 116.

Mark J.P. Wolf's comprehensive study of textual worldmaking practices, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, underlines the transmediality of worldmaking.⁶³ Wolf draws extensively upon Jenkins and, later, David Bordwell to describe how worlds are more than just backgrounds for narratives. Starting with Ridley Scott on making Los Angeles 2019, the *Blade Runner* world, and before moving on to George Lucas and *Star Wars*, Bordwell writes:

The minutiae accumulate into a kind of information overload, so that in straining to pick out a protagonist and to hear recognisable English in the Babel of CitySpeak you may notice that the citizens carry illuminated umbrella handles through perpetual acid rain. Scott called his strategy “layering” and remarked that “a film is like a seven-hundred-layer cake.” Layered worlds, complete with brand names and logos, became essential to science fiction, but the tactic found its way into other genres, too. [...] Lucas remarked in 1977 that inventing everything from scratch — clothes, silverware, customs — created a “multi-layered reality.”⁶⁴

And comics artist Dave Gibbons says of illustrating the world of *Watchmen*, “I wanted to draw it as if it was an alternative history, in which case all of the background things, all the buildings, the forms of transport, the fashions, the fads, immediately become what the story's about.”⁶⁵

While worldmaking in such contexts often loosely considers audience participation and engagement, it largely focuses on the production and distribution of these worlds. Known for his close regard for the myriad ways in which fans extend imaginary worlds, Jenkins provides a notable exception. What interests me in these accounts is not so much transmediality as the recurrent idea of extending and layering imaginary and lived

63 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

64 David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 58.

65 Gibbons, cited in Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 120.

worlds, as well as the idea of distorting originating places and stretching outer limits. I will return to this idea later.

Imaginary worlds increasingly occupy space in the real world, described as “the ability of the secondary world to invade and conquer the primary world.”⁶⁶ The blurring effect can be seen geographically, culturally, and even on a culinary level, as with, for example, Disneyland, Platform 9¾ at King’s Cross Station, London, and *Feeding Hannibal: A Connoisseur’s Cookbook*, a book featuring recipes from the cannibalistic TV series *Hannibal*. Derek Johnson discusses brands and logos within world-making but broadens out the field of play in his examination of the reality-fantasy blending TV series *Lost*.⁶⁷ Drawing upon Matt Hills’s concept of “hyperdiegesis,” Johnson analyzes the role that fictional and real institutions and corporations played in building the *Lost* world. Real-world brands do not appear in *Lost*, but fictional brands, like Dharma or Oceanic Air, cross into the real world:

Real people walk down the street wearing Dharma baseball caps, headed to work where they might drink coffee out of a Dharma emblazoned mug and procrastinate by exploring the web space of the fictional Hanso Foundation that supposedly funds Dharma.⁶⁸

This detail-travel usefully demonstrates a bridging of imagological and social realms, a phenomenon on which other scholars have commented, including Dan Hassler-Forest and Martin Barker.⁶⁹ What we are starting to see here, and what emerges

66 George Aichele, “Literary Fantasy and Postmodern Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 324.

67 Derek Johnson, “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*: World Building, Reality, and the Economic Possibilities of Narrative Divergence,” in *Reading “Lost”: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

68 *Ibid.*, 1–2.

69 Barker and Hassler-Forest both highlight instances of textual details “poached” from popular cultural texts reappearing in social activism (e.g., the “Frodo Lives!” slogan, the Anonymous mask lifted from Alan Moore

from many readings on worldmaking, is the way in which real and imaginary worlds inform each other. “There is,” as Paul Éluard observed, “another world, but it is in this one.”⁷⁰ And from Gibbons again:

I wrote a whole list of the way that the world [of *Watchmen*] could be different... things like different fast foods, which became Gunga Diner, the idea of the Asian subcontinent being the origin of a lot of fast foods in the USA, which it kind of is in Britain and has been for a long while. Subtle changes in fashion, you’ll notice that nearly everyone is wearing a double-breasted jacket and they tend to wear what we in England used to call “Chelsea boots.”⁷¹

Worldmaking thus reworks the already present to “invest it with new life.”⁷² Nelson Goodman describes this symbiosis in his foundational treatise on worldmaking:

We start, on any occasion, with some old version or world that we have on hand and that we are stuck with until we have the determination and skill to remake it into a new one. [...] Worldmaking begins with one version and ends with another.⁷³

and David Lloyd’s trade paperback *V for Vendetta*). See Martin Barker, “Experiencing Powerfully: How Audiences Find Meaning in Fantasy Films,” paper presented at Fantasies of Contemporary Culture Conference, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, May 23, 2016; Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics*; and Henry Jenkins, “Science Fiction World Building in a Capitalist Society: An Interview with Dan Hassler-Forest (Part 1),” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 1, 2016, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2016/09/science-fiction-world-building-in-a-capitalist-society-an-interview-with-dan-hassler-forest-part-one.html>.

70 Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 986.

71 Gibbons, cited in Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 121.

72 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

73 Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 97.

Other-worlds, to use J.R.R. Tolkien's term, are not then entirely new and original. Like story-making, the process of making new worlds is dependent upon the infrastructure, or "bones," of pre-existing worlds, whether real, fictional, or somewhere in between. Like making kitchen sink soup, magical things happen when we simmer disparate ingredients or elements together. Indeed, writing memorably of soup and storytelling, Tolkien observes that,

the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty. [...] It seems fairly plain that Arthur [king of Britain], once historical [...] was also put into the Pot. There he was boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices, of mythology and Faerie, and even some other stray bones of history [...], until he emerged as a King of Faerie.⁷⁴

From the marrow of existing worlds, worldmakers cook up other lands, often — forgive me, reader — souping them up, an un/making process fusing detail upon detail, layer upon layer, until the familiar is alchemied into the strange. Made of the "same stuff,"⁷⁵ imaginary worlds mirror and distort real-world social systems, structures, values, and even geographies. The superhero genre notoriously recreates its fantastical worlds according to dominant real-world power relations, and within the genre, we see clearly that "the prejudices of this world easily transfer to other worlds."⁷⁶ This detail transference is not, however, a one-way street. It is a synergistic process. For better or worse, ideas and actions connect and bridge both realms.

It is no secret, for example, that New York City serves as the real-world inspiration for Gotham and Metropolis, the former

⁷⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1971), 29–30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁶ Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2001), 9.

by night, and the latter by day. Each of these cities has criminal elements as well as extraordinary citizens who are willing to stand up against crime and protect their communities. Gotham and Metropolis have Batman and Superman, and NYC, like many real-world cities, has real-life superheroes and cosplaying activists. Each fictional city has its own police force (i.e., Gotham P.D. and Metropolis P.D.), daily newspapers (i.e., *Gotham Gazette* and *Daily Planet*), psychiatric hospitals (i.e., Arkham Asylum and Belle Reve Sanatorium), and corporations (i.e., Wayne Enterprises and LexCorp), all inspired by and echoing the civic structuring of real-world American cities. The real-imaginary connection appears diegetically too. Marvel's illuminatively titled *Fantastic Four* was the first among superhero titles to unashamedly reveal and blend the real identities and mundane lives of the protagonists alongside their more fantastical qualities.⁷⁷ Prior to their transformation into the Fantastic Four, Reed Richards, Sue Storm, Ben Grimm, and Johnny Storm led relatively unremarkable lives, but the introduction of the fantastic, that is, their transformation into civic-minded super-powered humans, turned their world, and ours, upside down.

Worldmaking disrupts the naturalness, the givenness, and dominance of the real world. The bridging of fantasy and reality disrupts the real/fantasy binary, and by illuminating the constructedness of reality and norms, it has the potential to destabilize the primacy of the real world's "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," and in so doing, worldmaking becomes potentially subversive and transformative.⁷⁸

Snapshot: Worldmaking & Comics

Worldmaking has received surprisingly little attention within comics and superhero scholarship, and what does exist

77 A still quite uncommon motif but one explored most recently in *WandaVision*, an acclaimed TV mini-series centered upon the domestic lives of superheroes, here Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch and Vision.

78 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 29.

focuses largely upon reading practices and matters of comics form — how comics work or come to mean. Scott Bukatman, for example, dedicates an entire monograph to the worldmaking practices of Mike Mignola, creator of the hellishly fantastical *Hellboy* series.⁷⁹ Bukatman’s handling of worldmaking has a traditional formal focus, and his goal, while touching upon how Mignola built the real-world *Hellboy* franchise, is to historicize and analyze the aesthetic and stylistic techniques Mignola uses to detail and create *Hellboy*’s world.

Layers are key in all kinds of ways to worldmaking, and in this instance, the layers of a comic page — panels, colors, and layouts — provide the worldmaking details. Bukatman makes no mention of the politics of worldmaking and fantasy and refers in a very limited, textual way to the role audiences play in making meaning and making worlds and to how imaginary and social worlds speak to each other. He curiously even suggests that *Hellboy* exists “in a world that doesn’t resemble our own.”⁸⁰ Towards the end of his account, Bukatman asks but never really answers his own question: “Are there relevant overlaps between *Hellboy*’s world and ours that can tell us something about one or the other?”⁸¹ The creation of *Hellboy*’s world, for Bukatman, rests assuredly with the creator, and readers play a role in bringing that world to life, of course, but not in making it.⁸² That responsibility rests with Mignola, the “Author-God.” But there are other, more expansive ways of looking at the effects of comics form on our understanding and practice of worldmaking.

The act of looking at, or reading, a comic book occurs in two ways: taking in the page and taking in the panel. Both actions speak to worldmaking. Artistic and compositional elements steer the reader’s eye through the story of each panel, page, and

79 Scott Bukatman, *Hellboy’s World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

80 *Ibid.*, 198.

81 *Ibid.*, 197.

82 This echoes the delimited idea of fans’ meaning-making capacities that we observed in Chapter 1 of this volume, namely that they may disrupt and critique official meaning, and here animate it, but they may not *make* it.

comic book. Formal elements — page layout, panel positions and proportions, or “mise-en-page”⁸³ — guide readers through the page and encourage reading direction at a certain pace or rhythm. Comics creators manipulate page layout to control and direct the reader’s gaze through space and time. Structural decisions affect the meanings suggested by and drawn from the text. Panel proportions can, quite literally, shape textual meaning (making), either in isolation or in combination with other panels. Crucially, however, while creators may use form to strongly suggest a reading direction, they cannot control it:

In comics, the gazer can control the speed his or her gaze travels through the medium. The gazer can control how far away or close up to hold the page. The gazer can control whether to go back and regaze.⁸⁴

Alan Moore too observes:

With a comic you can stare at the page for as long as you want and check back to see if this line of dialogue really does echo something four pages earlier, whether this picture is really the same as that one, and wonder if there is some connection there.⁸⁵

And comic book readers do a lot of this kind of wondering. Rereading or re-gazing practices are common in comics culture, as they are in media fandom more broadly. The idea of an autonomous or free-ranging gaze offers a model of an empowered, participatory reader with the ability to reengineer meaning. (Recall our displaced, revenant Batman from Chapter 1.) When an image is removed or suspended from a visual or textual nar-

83 Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).

84 Samuel Delaney, *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction and Some Comics* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 93.

85 Alan Moore, quoted in Mark J.P. Wolf, “World-Building in ‘Watchmen,’” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 121.

rative, it is dislocated from its context and becomes a distinct image with infinite meaning possibilities. Panels, according to comics creator James Kochalka, are not, contrary to popular belief, units of space and time that propel readers through narratives but rather units of meaning that readers use to create worlds.⁸⁶ Discussing Kochalka and comics form, Dylan Horrocks notes:

If you put up swings people will come and swing on them. But equally, some will use them as imaginary rocket ships, others will twist the chains to see them spin and some [might] use them as a climbing frame and not a chair at all.⁸⁷

This not only shows that people read comics for reasons other than narrative pleasure, but also that the free-flow practice of regarding individual panels can liberate readers from the dominance of the narrative drive and authorial control.⁸⁸ Indeed, we can detect here once again the provisionality of authorship and notions of official meaning. Gaps open, creating spaces within which readers may resist and repurpose preferred, official meaning or ways of knowing. Unsurprisingly, some comics creators, such as Moore and Gibbons, appear to appreciate the pleasures and possibilities of this disorderly way of reading comics, frequently layering panels with extraneous details. As a result, reading comics can become as much about (re)imagining worlds as it is about chasing stories.

Wresting meaning making from official domains, worldmaking provides an alternative way to conceptualize meaning making and brings to the forefront fan and activist practices, such

86 James Kochalka, *The Horrible Truth about Comics* (Gainesville: Alternative Comics, 1999).

87 Dylan Horrocks, "The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and World-Building," *The Perfect Planet*, n.d., <http://www.hicksville.co.nz/PerfectPlanet.htm>.

88 American artist Roy Lichtenstein too famously used his comic-book-panel paintings to explore and exploit the relationship between image, context, and meaning within comics.

as racebending cosplay and protest sign-making, which bridge real and imaginary worlds. And despite referring to comic book readers, the model of an empowered, agentic reader helps to answer my original question about how minoritarian superhero fans come to enjoy exclusionary and frequently belligerent texts, or, riffing on Muñoz, to surf hostile waters, shredding heavy waves.⁸⁹

Worldmaking: Queer Worlds Collide

We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

— José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*⁹⁰

Notions of queerness and queer worldmaking underpin this book, as does a desire to challenge a normative body of knowledge, namely superhero discourse, and thus offer an alternative way of thinking about the superhero genre and its marginalized fans.⁹¹ It is grounded in the idea that

the joining of “queer” with “worldmaking” redirects us to the creative capacities of individuals, together and alone, to forge relations that evade the complete capture of compulsory heteronormativities.⁹²

Broadly, I use “queer” to indicate a resistance to the “network of norms” structuring social reality, emphasizing its unfixated and

89 Because this free-flow mode of textual engagement is no longer limited to comic books, but through video cueing and editing techniques, it extends to all forms of media.

90 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

91 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner are credited with popularizing the phrase, “queer worldmaking.” See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547–66.

92 Isaac West, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy, “Queer Worldmaking in the ‘It Gets Better’ Campaign,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* (Fall 2013): 57.

contingent “oppositional relation to the norm” and its broader and cherished indefinability.⁹³ In this sense, queer, as Halberstam crisply puts it, “refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”⁹⁴ As a mobile, anti-normative, resistive way of being in the world and an interpretative, or disidentificatory, mode of seeing the world, queerness and queer worldmaking offer a dialogic way of fathoming minoritarian engagement with an unrepresentative genre, speaking, as they often do, the same language. As we will see, minoritarian superhero fans reanimate the promise of superhero texts by using them as source codes for imagining, articulating, and effecting alternative, perhaps fantastical, moments, times, and worlds. A clear or queer invocation of worldmaking, or, as I prefer, un/making. On the first page of the last book he published during his lifetime, Muñoz writes that queerness

allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. [...] Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. [...] the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. [...] Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the

-
- 93 Janet R. Jakobsen, “The Body Politic vs. Lesbian Bodies: Publics, Counterpublics, and the Uses of Norms in Horizons,” in *Feminist Theology: Identity, Traditions, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 116–36, and David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62. See also Angela Jones, *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1996); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 94 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 6.

social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations.⁹⁵

Queer worldmaking also commonly refers to “practices and relationships that contest the logics of compulsory heteronormativities.”⁹⁶ Moving on from this general description, Fawaz, inspired by Linda Zerilli, emphasizes a more public-facing and politically activated form of worldmaking, one that speaks directly to the aims of this book. For Fawaz, worldmaking occurs

when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture, and in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies. I am drawn to the concept of worldmaking because of its dual reference to the aesthetic production of imaginative worlds and political practices that join creative production with social transformation.⁹⁷

Muñoz brings the concept even closer to home through his assertion that disidentification repurposes mainstream culture to make worlds. He writes:

Worldmaking [has] the ability to establish alternative views of the world. [...] Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to build a new world.⁹⁸

Echoing Muñoz, Chambers-Letson too writes:

95 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

96 West et al., “Queer Worldmaking,” 56. See also Susan Driver, ed., *Queer Youth Cultures* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008).

97 Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 14.

98 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

Through the appropriation of the materials produced by (and productive of) the dominant (or major) culture, minoritarian cultural practitioners improvise and perform into being routes toward freedom and survival that would otherwise be impossible.⁹⁹

And later, while parsing a quote from Oscar Wilde — “[a] map of the world that does not include utopia is not even worth glancing at” — Muñoz reminds us that queer worldmaking hinges on the possibility of mapping “a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia and to include such pictures in any map of the social.”¹⁰⁰ And in so doing, he speaks directly to the synergy between real and imagological realms. Muñoz’s words suggest a feeling of intertextuality, where no world or time exists on its own but is layered upon the other. As previously discussed, intertextuality, replete with gaps and spaces, is a powerful concept for thinking about how minoritarian subjects experience exclusionary texts, often transformatively.

Public practice dominates the discursive field of queer worldmaking, perhaps inspired by the way the “-making” in “worldmaking” describes a “doing” action. And as with this book, fictional texts and worlds frequently serve as a springboard for explorations into queer worldmaking and aesthetic practices, breaking down barriers between social and imaginary realms. Queer worldmaking is a matter of scale. It can be political in a personal and intimate way, but it can also take a more public form, as in cabaret, drag, or cosplay performances or artwork, such as tattooing, graffiti, or protest signs, that is to say, “at the theater, in political activism, in sexual subcultures such as barebacking and BDSM, in schools, in queer communities, and in queer families.”¹⁰¹ Appearing frequently within queer discourse, the concept of worldmaking is often attached to ideas and anal-

99 Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: NYU Press), 18.

100 Oscar Wilde, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 40.

101 Angela Jones, *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 11.

yses of utopianism, futurism, failure, and hope.¹⁰² And while queer culture and its surrounding discourse currently privilege Western expressions of worldmaking, queer worldmaking is an avowedly global affair.¹⁰³ An expansiveness signaled by the choice of “world-” over “community-” or “group-,” a locution designating queer culture as an all-embracing worldmaking project or counterpublic that

includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped out beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learnt rather than experienced as a birthright. [...] Every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture, indexes a virtual social world [...]. Yet, for all their differences, [they] allow for the concretization of a queer counterpublic. We are trying to promote this world-making project, and a first step in doing so is to recognize that queer culture constitutes itself in many ways other than through the official publics of opinion culture and the state, or through the privatized forms normally associated with sexuality. [...] Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation.¹⁰⁴

This is the world of my work. But more, a world, a queer utopia bathed in the “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with

102 For example, Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press 2010); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*; and Hailey N. Otis and Thomas R. Dunn, *Queer Worldmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

103 For example, see Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia, *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

104 Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.

potentiality.”¹⁰⁵ But as we’ll see next, my interest is less about making worlds and rather more about un/making them.

Un/Making Worlds: Queer Utopianism

I’d like to return now to the topic of layers, focusing here on inter-world layering rather than inter- and intra-textual collocations. As I observe in the introduction, the term “layer” is not meant to imply imbrication — overlapping in a regular, consistent manner — nor hierarchical structuring, nor even the idea that each layer is entirely distinct. It is rather to imagine intersecting layers, like the structure of an uncoursed, random rubble wall.¹⁰⁶ For, as we have seen, texts and worlds do not exist in vacuums. Textual details, or their absence, are often bridges between lived and imagological realms (e.g., Superman’s undocumented status or Ms. Marvel’s Muslim heritage). Real-world details find their way into superhero texts just as frequently as fictional details cross over into the real world (e.g., fan practices, civic action practices), and both modes blur the real/fictional divide. The intertextuality, or layering, of social and imagological realms is central to this book, and in the final chapters, I present a reinterpretation of worldmaking designed to bring these connections front and center.

Worldmaking is a complex, multi-agent process. Layering, as described here, offers a useful way of visualizing this process, emphasizing its symbiotic nature and penchant for repurposing ideas and materials. But “layer” refers to more than just multiplicities or strata. It also refers to the act of “laying,” or producing, preparing, and enacting, an expansive meaning that provides yet another opportunity to highlight the pioneering role that fans play in making other worlds. When read in this light, it is possible to see how minoritarian fans and activists themselves

¹⁰⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ A technique for constructing walls using stones of variable size and shape to create non-linear courses or layers. Each asymmetrical stone interacts with and is affected by the surrounding stones at random.

become layers — laying siege to hegemony and unjust practices, laying claim to their right to “be,” or laying out plans to make the world a better place. Conventional worldmaking ideas and applications do not adequately represent the nuances and interplay of these actions, and through my research, I have come to see and understand worldmaking as a process of un/making worlds.

My proposed rephrasing is not simply a matter of semantics but an attempt to capture the interconnected pulses and processes involved in making other worlds, places, and spaces. Furthermore, it suggests a staging post between the real and the imaginary, the present, past, and future, evoking notions of queer utopia and queer futurity, as I come to discuss. As with queerness, world-un/making, “is always being made, remade, being done, being redone, and being undone.”¹⁰⁷ The un/making construction describes the symbiotic relationship between “making” and “unmaking.” It points to worlds and meaning (making) as contingent, in-play, and interlinked, as well as interdependent. An un/made world suggests and acquires a borderland status, a both/and position. It indicates the repurposing, the recycling, of worlds and, in so doing, foregrounds notions of transformation and, as I discuss, its allied concept, escape. Drawing out the transformational quality of worldmaking allows us to perceive minoritarian worldmakers as agents of change whose practices and performances open “pockets or cleavages of queer utopian spaces.”¹⁰⁸ Moreover, while the concept of worldmaking implies a discrete, one-way journey focused towards an end product — the pursuit of a new, better world — the notion of “world-un/making” represents a process, with the “/” indicating the possibility of interruptions in these makings. It is also worth emphasizing the pliability of the term “world” in queer worldmaking, as it can simply imply a vast, interconnected space, but, as we will see, a world can also be

¹⁰⁷ Jones, *Queer Utopias*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

a small, intimate space, a performance, a fleeting moment, an inhalation.¹⁰⁹

Further, and working on a different theoretical register, the un/making construction destabilizes the coherency implied in the generative concept of “making.” The construction “un/making,” for example, interrupts and contests the supremacy of the value-laden idea or fantasy of *making it*, or what Lauren Berlant refers to as aspiring to live the “good life” or “becoming somebody” — un/making interrupts the givenness of the idea of “making it” and queries if we should be seeking to “make it,” in any sense, in the first place.¹¹⁰ Moreover, alongside referring to generative processes, “making” also alludes to potential or promise (e.g., the superhero genre has the *makings* of a radical genre), and the “un/making” construction signifies interruptions, or suspensions, of that utopian promise.

Both worldmaking and un/making echo notions of utopia (e.g., place, body, society) and express desires to imagine the world differently. But rather than aiming for a distant horizon of better possibilities, somewhere else in time and space, un/making describes and advocates the possibility of creating queer utopian spaces in the aching and overarching (hetero)normative landscape of the present, or the “here and now,” as Muñoz refers to it.¹¹¹ This position is informed not only by Muñoz’s advancement of queer utopianism but also by his proposal that a form of “pragmatic presentism” offers a way of escaping the “prison house” of the present. That is to say, understanding queerness as a “temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a

109 Referencing Ahmed’s politicization of breathing and the recognition of breath as a site of state suppression and civic resistance. At times, the act of breathing becomes politically charged, as evidenced by Eric Garner’s death at the hands of Daniel Pantaleo, a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer, in July 2014 and the subsequent adoption of his repeated assertion that he couldn’t breathe within online and real-world protests. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

110 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

111 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, *passim*.

new futurity.”¹¹² Sara Ahmed too concludes that agents of queer futurity (should) seek and aspire to a more equitable future by securing breathing spaces today:

We could remember that the Latin root of the word aspiration means “to breathe.” [...] With breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe.¹¹³

These ideas play out at the end of *Superman: Man of Steel*, a film that explores various meaning-making struggles, both personal and cultural, as well as planetary.¹¹⁴

Snapshot: *Superman: Man of Steel* (2013)

Modern human civilization faces annihilation, thus its past and future iterations too. The few remaining Kryptonians are worldless refugees, and they wish to make Earth their new home planet. The anti-refugee symbolism is clear and ever-present, as are the story’s utopian and dystopian motifs, discussions I will leave for another place and time. In intention, the Kryptonian worldmaking project is a decidedly unqueer expression of worldmaking, in which planet Earth is to be either a human or a Kryptonian home world. The film’s antagonist, General Zod, expresses this binary worldview when he warns Kal-El, better known as Superman, that “There’s only one way this ends, Kal. Either you die, or I do.”¹¹⁵ In practice, however, the Kryptonian arrivance initiates the queer worldmaking or un/making under discussion, and it started long before General Zod’s ship, the Black Zero, entered Earth’s orbit.

Despite their advanced technology, the Kryptonians cannot build a new planet, so they must commandeer and breathe

¹¹² Ibid., 16.

¹¹³ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 120.

¹¹⁴ Zack Snyder, dir., *Superman: Man of Steel* (20th Century Fox, 2013).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

new life into an existing one. As newcomers, they have opted to colonize rather than assimilate, but a combination of breathing and sensory issues makes this difficult, hence the breather masks.¹¹⁶ And so, when General Zod issues the order to “Release the World Engine!” he marks the start of a nefarious plan to terraform, or terror-form, Earth and make a new Krypton. The World Engine works to alter Earth’s underlying structure and its atmosphere. It will be up to the Kryptonians to change Earth’s meaning from a human to a Kryptonian world. Moreover, by seeking to change Earth’s present and future, the Kryptonians create the possibility of rewriting its past, likely erasing the human chapter of Earth’s story completely, or trying to.

Earth’s un/making happens in a series of earth-shattering pulses, and with each thud, the Kryptonians come one beat closer to un/making a world because, as even the binaristically-minded Zod admits, New Krypton will be built upon the foundations, the bones, of the old world. The marrow of those bones will unavoidably flavor the new world, with the story of Zod’s last great battle with Kal-El perhaps even finding its way into the new world’s creation myths, with Zod cast as New Krypton’s god-hero and Kal-El its devil-villain, reversing the human story. Despite Zod’s genocidal wishes, however, Earth will never be entirely and only Krypton: it will always be both Earth and Krypton. Not least because in New Krypton, human insurgencies would undoubtedly rise up against the colonizers, as in the real world. Zod’s wish does not come true, however. Human civilization reclaims Earth’s meaning and restores it to the security of the binary — Earth as human and not Kryptonian — but there is nothing to say that the battle for Earth’s meaning is over, fixed, and finally determined. After all, this is a superhero story. Earth’s meaning here, like superhero meaning (making) and social reality, becomes provisional, always in a process of being done and redone, made and remade. The Kryptonian incursion interrupts and initiates a struggle for Earth’s cultural meaning,

¹¹⁶ Breathing is not the focus of this example, but the use of breath as a source of power and as a metaphor for alienation is notable throughout this film.

a struggle set in motion 33 years prior when Kal-El's escape pod landed in a field in Kansas.

Marked from the start as an agent of change, Kal-El is a disruptive force, someone born to counter and transform hegemony. Someone who, despite his biological parents' reformist actions, is fated to try to "make a better world."¹¹⁷ If Zod symbolizes binary ordering, Kal-El embodies, I hesitate to say queer, but certainly a freer, more pragmatic approach to meaning- and worldmaking. On Krypton, for example, social norms dictated that every citizen be created with a given identity and a predestined purpose, one from which they could not escape nor even imagine doing so. Observe Zod's utter devastation when Kal-El strips him of his role as Krypton's protector: "I exist only to protect Krypton. That is the sole purpose for which I was born. [...] And now... I have no people. My soul, that is what you have taken from me!" As a product of the Kryptonian caste system, Zod has been socialized to conflate his sense of self, his "soul," and his place in the world, his community, his "people," with his purpose, a societal role preordained, unchosen, and inescapable. To know himself, he has been taught to define himself within a binary system, a "violent hierarchy," as Derrida aptly puts it. Without the strictures of that system, Zod is free to breathe and to forge his own destiny, but indoctrinated and alone, he does not, or cannot, see it that way, and by breaking his neck, Kal-El forever chokes off that possibility, of which more later.

As a natural-born Kryptonian, socialized on Earth, Kal-El was, however, made outside that system. A figure representing the possibility of free will and the promise of being purposeless, the freedom to find and be yourself, to author your own story. Something denied to the citizens of Krypton and, as Kal-El discovers, denied to the majority of Earth's inhabitants as well, despite the rhetoric. As an origin story, *Man of Steel* celebrates life as a messy meaning-making odyssey, a journey of self-discovery marked by joys and sorrows, an un/making moment in which our sense of self is always being made and unmade, a

117 Snyder, *Superman*. Lara, Kal-El's biological mother.

momentous process, an accumulation of moments that are not sequential, as they appear, but instantaneous, all life, one single moment, one breath, in and out.

Unsurprisingly, the Kryptonian plan fails. Unsurprisingly, Superman saves the day. But to do so, he must break his golden rule: do not kill. And that is surprising. As is the method of the murder: he kills Zod by snapping his neck with his bare hands.¹¹⁸ In this scene, a merciless hero breaks his code, killing rather than finding a way to save the villain, a figure evoking pity as we come to understand the annihilating degree of Zod's indoctrination. Not only does this moment disrupt the hero/villain binary, it un/makes Superman's meaning. Seeing this normally good and compassionate character succumb to "the primal eldest curse [...], A brother's murder," alters the public's perception of his nature as well as his own.¹¹⁹ Because, while many superhero fans know that Superman kills, a good many more people don't know this grizzly, controversial detail about him.¹²⁰

After killing Zod, his brother by common ancestry and last link to his Kryptonian heritage, Superman and Lois Lane, who also witnessed Zod's execution, share a look, a look that we too share, registering that this emotionally charged moment has changed things, has altered our way of seeing Superman. A god-like, good-guy hero whose profile now terrifyingly includes the words judge, jury, and executioner. As we know by now, as a superhero character, Superman's meaning is never fixed. Despite being an origin story meant to establish meaning and to fix the protagonists' identity and motivation, *Man of Steel* is only one version of the Superman story. As always, audiences may choose to hold with this controversial version or disregard it, losing it to time and memory. Indeed, in the "Warworld Saga," published

118 Revealingly, the scene is set in a train station, Chicago Union Station, a place of arrivals and departures, of eternal toing and froing, an in-between place where people, like meaning (making), are always on the move.

119 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. T.J.B. Spencer (London: Penguin Books, 1980), Act III, Scene iii, 143.

120 Indeed, Superman has previously killed Zod in comics and on film, most notably in *Superman II* (1980).

by DC Comics in 2021–2022, creators wiped Superman’s moral slate clean, his murderous past erased from continuity, another retcon storyworld weaving more layers, more intertextuality, more multiplicity through this character’s mythos. Mirroring the world- and meaning-making systems exemplified by Zod, we may accept official dogma and notions of author-gods as well as fixed meaning or, like Gavin, Seymour, and now Kal-El, approach life, worlds, and meaning (making) as promissory and entirely in our own hands.

CHAPTER 3

Lost Promise: A Nexus of Possibility

The extended meditation following proposes the idea that the American superhero genre is itself a site of radical promise.¹ To do so, it draws upon futurist traditions and queer notions of failure, un/becoming, and utopia. Echoing the promise of monsters, futurist and utopian impulses disrupt thresholds of space = time, real = imaginary, possible = impossible, then = now = future and, in doing so, “open up more possibility than they foreclose.”² Possibility that the genre often forestalls, as told later in the story of two hero-monsters and their disciplined representation. Because, as we’ll see, the genre’s approach to futurist and utopian “promise” is just as conflicted as its (mis)handling of its protagonists’ radical promise. By translating this stance, this “failure,” into a “refusal of legibility, and an art of

-
- 1 Remembering that radical promise is a multimodal concept comprising textual elements and real-world enactments. I retheorize praxis in Chapter 4 of this volume, but my focus here is on textual dimensions, though both realms overlap.
 - 2 Jeffrey J. Cohen, “The Promise of Monsters,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 452.

unbecoming,” we might, however, put these failings to other, more productive uses.³

Enfolding transgressive and queer utopianism into the concept of radical promise presents an opportunity to explore the idea that the genre itself is journeying towards an aleatory radical and queer expression of worlds, bodies, and identities. Yet the form this expression takes is perhaps different than one might imagine. Radical promise is not located in one place at one time; rather, it is a nexus of dislocated, often inconsistent and contradictory meanings, modalities, expressions, horizons, temporalities, and territories—epistemic, ontological, representational, and fannish. The genre’s in-process, thereby unstable and contradictory, meaningscape— one driving the genre’s failure to arrive or ideologically land somewhere— also contributes to expressions of radical promise. And, from a transgressive utopian perspective, the fact that the genre cannot, despite all efforts to the contrary, be ultimately declared radical or conservative is really no cause for concern.

Overlapping Tides: Utopianism and Radical Promise

Utopia, “the desire to desire differently.”

— Tobin Siebers, *Heterotopia*⁴

Encountering the word “utopia,” one might think of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun* (1602), and, perhaps, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). Or other fictional examples of speculative imaginings

3 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88. Of course, genre creators and producers may not view this as a matter of failure but rather the accomplishment of an intent— a refusal to nurture and advance the genre’s radical promise— yet what we can view as a “failure” is the genre’s inability to irrevocably mask the radical power of the transforming superhero.

4 Tobin Siebers, “Introduction: What Does Postmodernism Want? Utopia,” in *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, ed. Tobin Siebers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 3.

of “perfected” places and egalitarian possibilities, sometimes separatist, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) or Marge Piercy’s “Mattapoissett 2137,” from her 1976 novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, as well as Atlantis, Cockaigne, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” or Planet Hope (an emergent planetary colony in Ytasha L. Womack’s *Rayla 2212* series). But these imaginings nest in the real world too, in places such as Rojava, or The Venus Project, a utopic response to a failing socio-economic system founded and nurtured by futurists Jacque Fresco and Roxanne Meadows. The superhero genre too presents a traditional idea of utopia as a reachable place, somewhere to arrive and depart: the “intentional communities” of Wakanda and Paradise Island, or Themyscira, spring easily to mind, the former the homeland of Marvel’s Black Panther and the latter of DC’s Wonder Woman.⁵ But I want to think here about the superhero genre and utopianism in other, more expansive ways. After all, utopia is a

much more immediately useful and powerful concept when it helps us to imagine alternatives and possibilities that may otherwise seem unachievable or impossible. [...] The point is less to create a better world or a better body than to desire the possibility for something different than we have, and to use that desire for difference as a strategy for enacting realizable change.⁶

In the previous chapter, we saw how queer utopianism informs world-un/making, but here I want to focus on utopianism as it manifests within textual dimensions. I wish to enfold the superhero genre’s radical promise and its fannish expressions into contemporary utopian traditions and bodies of thought. In contrast to traditional utopianism, which stresses arriv-

5 Lucy Sargisson and Lyman Tower Sargent, *Living in Utopia: New Zealand’s Intentional Communities* (London: Routledge, 2004).

6 Olivia Anne Burgess, *Utopian Body: Alternative Experiences of Embodiment in 20th Century Utopian Literature*, PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2010, 11–12.

als — reaching a “perfected” state or place — modern utopianism emphasizes open-ended processes and un/becomings, that’s to say, journeys rather than destinations. We could even say that the genre displays, or rather disciplines, transgressive utopian tendencies, a modern mode of utopianism that, according to Lucy Sargisson, is “open-ended, slippery, and glorious,”⁷ one that queerly “celebrates process over product.”⁸ Discussing Sargisson’s idea of “transgressive utopianism,” Olivia Anne Burgess writes that it

gathers energy from the very act of engaging in utopian thought, what Fredric Jameson refers to as a strategy of “disruption” [...]. Transgressive utopianism self-regenerates through constant destruction, negation and transformation. It counters and destroys what confines it, and by doing so creates a utopian space [...]. The desire for [...] an alternative “third space,” is a truly utopian project that focuses not on the end result, or reaching a static state of being, but rather, on the constant process of becoming within a dynamic environment.⁹

And, with its stresses on disruption, becoming, and creating transformative, emancipatory spaces in the “here and now” — as we journey to a new and better “then and there” — transgressive utopianism aligns with queer theory and conceptualizations of queer utopianism and speaks to the logics underlying continuing minoritarian engagement with an exclusionary, and often

7 Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

8 *Ibid.*, 22. See also Dunja M. Mohr, “Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik / A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 55, no. 1 (2007): 5–24, and Vladimir Nabokov, “The End of Utopia,” in Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 62–82.

9 Burgess, *Utopian Body*, 11.

hostile, genre.¹⁰ As Muñoz suggests, “[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on a potentiality for another world.”¹¹

Utopia is a desirous transformative idea, impulse, and strategy. As with futurist fiction, it is undoubtedly a “setting for desire,”¹² as well as a desire for an alternative setting, “the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively.”¹³ Utopian escapades track a repeating, desirous leitmotif of hopeful betterment: the longing or “wish” to un/make or escape to alternative, impossibly, wonderfully ideal places and temporalities, and, often, transformed bodies to occupy those times and places. Disruptive, transforming bodies — those in fictional and real worlds — are intimately connected to the creation and occupation of utopias. Indeed, Burgess pinpoints “the body as one of the most prominent expressions of the desire for difference and change and as a source for renewing the potency of utopian thinking.”¹⁴ And Dorothy Ko writes that when considering bodies in utopia, one must think about “thresholds and journeys across thresholds. [... T]he body-in-motion, always in the process of making and breaking boundaries,” ideas strongly evoking the ontology of the superhero.¹⁵ For Michel Foucault, utopia was a

place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have a body without a body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite

10 See, for example, Angela Jones, *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

11 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

12 Joan Scott, *Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xx.

13 Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xi.

14 Burgess, *Utopian Body*, 12.

15 Dorothy Ko, “Bodies in Utopia and Utopian Bodies in Imperial China,” in *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*, eds. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr, and Thomas Rieger (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 89.

in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected — always transfigured. [...] It is the land where bodies transport themselves at the speed of light; it is the land where wounds are healed with marvellous beauty in the blink of an eye. It is the land where you can fall from a mountain and pick yourself up unscathed. It is the land where you're visible when you want, invisible when you desire.¹⁶

Within this powerful yet conflicted evocation of utopia and the body in utopia, Foucault recalls traditional ideas of utopia as a “perfected” futural place or destination, one arrived at by a transgressively un/becoming, “untethered [...] always transfigured” body and “I.”¹⁷ In his utopic imagining, Foucault could be describing modes of superhero embodiment. His portrayal brings to mind Sue Storm’s ability to make herself and anything else invisible; the Flash, who can run faster than the speed of light; and Wolverine’s regenerative ability. (It is interesting to observe that in Foucault’s utopia, bodies can still be wounded.) Unintentionally perhaps, Foucault’s description captures the feeling of entering a superhero text as well as the epic battles fought by superheroes. In one extended scene in Ang Lee’s *Hulk*, we see the colossal Hulk attempting to escape the US military by bounding over mountains and through canyons, and when the military collapses a section of canyon on top of him, we see him emerge a little dusty but unscathed.¹⁸ Foucault imagines bodies in utopia as adrift and metamorphic, and while we might readily think of Marvel’s shapeshifting Mystique or DC’s Martian Manhunter, the idea of the “always transfigured” un/becoming body speaks directly to the cardinal matter of all superhero embodiments: transformation.

Utopic discourses of change, hope, and wonder frequently frame superhero narratives, as seen in titles and character biog-

16 Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 229.

17 Ibid.

18 Ang Lee, dir., *Hulk* (Universal Pictures, 2003).

raphies such as the *Amazing Spider-Man*, the *Astonishing X-Men*, and the *Astonishing Captain America*, and back in 1941, Steve Rogers's idealized transformation into "America's New Hope" was, for example, described and portrayed as both "amazing" and "full of wonder."¹⁹ Moreover, definitions of transformation refer to change, alterations, becomings, variations, and mutations; a transferring process moving something from one state or position to another. Transformation in turn connects powerfully but not only with hope, possibility, and positivity—beneficially transforming, reforming, one's body, life, community, and world. Indeed, change is often key to securing the desired, hoped-for thing. Hope, too, speaks to desire and to the idea of promise—a person or thing, perhaps a superhero or a genre, that holds promise for the future. Hope is, after all, defined as "desire combined with expectation," where "expectation" refers to both the action of foreseeing or imagining future happenings as well as to notions of expecting things that are rightfully due or appropriate—such as the hopeful expectation, or desire, that the superhero genre will finally and rightfully correct, for example, its overrepresentation of whiteness, cismaleness, and straightness, on- and off-page and -screen.²⁰

Repetitions of ideas like hope, desire, and change weave through utopic dreams. But in utopian visions, we also see repeated incursions through layers of time (then = now = future), of space (real = imaginary), and of domain (personal = political). Separating lines smudge frequently and easily. Change and hope, for example, defined Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, as epitomized in the campaign tagline, "Change We Can Believe In," and the campaign's iconic series of stylized posters, "Hope," "Progress," and "Change." During the campaign, Obama aligned himself with another popular man of hope, Superman. In a campaign speech, for example, Obama

19 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America #1: Meet Captain America* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1941).

20 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "hope," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88370>.

joked that he was born on Krypton and sent to save Earth by his father, Jor-El. The symbol on Superman's chest is not, as is popularly thought, an "S," but rather the Kryptonian symbol for hope. Superman equals hope, as did, during the campaign, Obama.²¹ Alex Ross, renowned Superman artist, celebrated and cemented this association by creating a portrait of Obama heroically ripping open his shirt to reveal an "O" emblazoned costume, a classic Superman pose.²² Such actions helped transform Obama into a symbol of hope in the popular imagination, someone who could, in a perhaps utopian sense, change the system for the better.²³

Echoing tenets of transgressive utopianism, the superhero genre's radical promise is rooted in the idea of the transformative un/making power of disruption: a disruptive form of storytelling (e.g., text and image), disruptive protagonists and ways of being (e.g., bodies and selfhood), disruptive knowings (e.g., unstable meaningscape), and disruptive modes of reception (e.g., violative fans). This all, of course, speaks to the un/becomingness of the genre's inconstant meaningscape, remembering that genre meaning is multimodal and multivocal, made and mapped by official and unofficial meaning makers.²⁴ As observed, these qualities and practices, along with the genre's riotous tradition of rebooting and retconning — repurposing or transforming — create new futures, presents, and pasts for

21 For example, Superman's theme in *Superman: Man of Steel* (2013) is titled "A Symbol of Hope." Fanfic writer chellethewriter has drafted a Superman fanfic called *The Hope Trilogy*, and comics artist Dan Haring has produced a short Superman comic entitled *Hope*. Of course, given the fluidity and multiplicity that characterize superhero storyworlds, this hopeful translation of Superman's chest plate symbol is only one possible reading of its meaning. It is always open to other interpretations.

22 Superhero iconography is not, however, ideologically static. Images of Donald Trump as Superman are also common, for example.

23 Ytasha L. Womack, creator of the Afrofuturist series *Rayla 2212*, also asserted this association in her novels when she named Planet Hope's capital city "Obama City."

24 Although as the meaningscape shifts to accommodate inconsistencies and contradictions, perhaps we should call them "meaning un/makers."

the genre's characters and fans. In this sense, the genre, like its protagonists, never rests but exists in a constant state of un/becoming: it fails to meaningfully arrive. And despite mainstream representational strategies, superhero transformations often feel queer and utopian; a quality suggesting "the anticipatory illumination of art, which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices as helping the not-yet-conscious. This not yet conscious is knowable, to some extent, as a utopian feeling."²⁵ Matt Yockey also talks about the "utopian impulse that resides at the heart of the genre" and the genre's "latent subversive appeal."²⁶ We may thus find it hard to pin down queerness and utopianism, but, as Halberstam posits about masculinity, we "have little trouble in recognizing it."²⁷

Failure and Un/Becoming

But I am not so sure I believe in beginnings and endings.

— Louise Banks, *Arrival*²⁸

What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from.

— T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"²⁹

In wishing to suspend and upend usual patterns of genre critique, I draw upon Jack Halberstam's work on failure.³⁰ More than simply echoing the critical, urgent, and frequent work

25 Muñoz precising Ernst Bloch, in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3. See also Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

26 Matt Yockey, "Ti-Girl Power: American Utopianism in the Queer Superhero Text," *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015): §1.

27 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 1.

28 Denis Villeneuve, dir., *Arrival* (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

29 T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 195.

30 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.

spotlighting, for example, the genre's problematic "overrepresentation" of whiteness, cismaleness, and straightness,³¹ I want to imaginatively translate and push beyond the speculative failures of the genre's official texts and creators; that is, to take "a stroll out of the confines of conventional knowledge and into the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming."³² I am curious about how the idea of "lost promise" can transform the popular idea of the superhero genre as a repository for radical and subversive ideas. And given the observance of all this speculative and representational neglect, negotiation, tempering, and mishandling, how might we use these so-called failures as starting rather than endpoints, as opportunities to reimagine the genre's standing and relationship with radicalism and subversion?

Before theorizing the genre's failure to authentically represent the dynamic, radical nature of superhero transformation and the effect of this failure upon its meaningscape, it is useful to remind ourselves of one of the genre's most far-reaching failures, which is to say, its failure to speculate. As a genre of speculative fiction steeped in futurism, speculation about the future is, well, a tenet of the American superhero genre. Yet the genre customarily neglects, fails, or refuses its duty to expansively imagine not only other worlds and ways of being in those worlds but other ways of creating those worlds. Absenting minoritarian people and communities from superhero realms, diegetic and creative, is just one expression of this failure—there are others. A purpose of escapist fiction too, as I come to discuss, is to allow readers and audiences to "avoid or retreat from what is

31 I draw "overrepresentation" from andré carrington's work on race and speculative fiction. For example, carrington usefully deploys the "overrepresentation of whiteness" phrasing to strategically critique the more usual "minoritarian underrepresentation" description. See andré m. carrington, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Science Fiction," *Open Democracy*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/andr-carrington/whiteness-of-science-fiction>.

32 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 7.

considered an unpleasant or unacceptable reality.”³³ But what if creators and producers replicate and repeat that unacceptable reality in alternate worlds and imagological realms: Where is the escape, the (ad)venture in that?

Like a great deal of speculative, escapist fiction, the alternate worlds and imagological realms constructed by mainstream creators hold fast to the synergistic hierarchies and interlocking oppressions that structure our material world: “To identify with Blackness in and through one’s relationship to science fiction entails seeing one’s racial background represented only rarely; typically at the margins, seldom in the person of an author, and awkwardly positioned as a consumer.”³⁴ Yet while official creators may fail to recognize, represent, or exploit the genre’s radical promise, other kinds of creators are finding other kinds of ways of realizing its radicalism and thus reanimating, re-siting, and resisting the genre’s speculative failures. In a wider sense, disruptive protagonists, genre failings, multivocal discourse, and violative fanwork have created a radical genre — not always seen in its official texts but felt in its polysemy.



The concept of superhero transformation, but not its mainstream representation, is similarly marked by the failure to land or arrive as a stable subjectivity or, frequently, materiality. This conceptual liminality speaks directly to queer becoming and unbecoming, or, as I prefer, un/becoming, and to what Rosi

33 Lars Konzack, “Escapism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (London: Routledge, 2018), 246.

34 andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 17. Note that Marvel’s widely acclaimed Afrofuturistic superhero film *Black Panther* (2018) offers a rare and potent, though arguably problematic, glimpse of the genre flexing its futuristic imagination. As indicated in Chapter 2 of this volume, the dominance and repetition of the idea of the cishet white male subject within superhero culture (i.e., protagonist, creator, and fan) serves to alienate minoritarian subjects not only from this culture’s past and present, but also from its future.

Braidotti calls “nomadic subjectivity.”³⁵ It also invokes ideas and practices of identity passing. Sara Ahmed, for example, observes a connection between passing “as the literal act of moving through a space (in which there is no moment of departure or arrival)” and passing “as a set of cultural and embodied practices (passing for the other).”³⁶ And Judith Butler’s work on becoming, felt notably in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, as with that of theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Elizabeth Grosz, encourages an appreciation of “existence not in terms of being, of what exists, but of becoming, or the being of becoming — that we consider ‘the fundamental mobility of life,’ life ‘as fundamental becoming.’”³⁷ Through its emphasis on the performative force of repetitions, Butler’s work speaks directly to the “super” subjects of this book.

Superheroes — and ideas of superheroes — are notoriously and interminably caught in passages, in repetitions, of legible and authentic becoming: becoming one, then another, and in the process becoming some, becoming something other, becoming something otherly different. Becoming and belonging in the superhero genre is often a never-ending two-way process of un/doing: ordinary civilians become superheroes, and superheroes become ordinary civilians. As with Derrida’s “arrivants,” superhero protagonists and superhero meaning are always on their way. They are always in *l’avenir*, in the unpredictable what is to come.³⁸ Indeed, we could say that, as with the theoretical uptake of the term queer itself, superhero identity

35 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

36 Sara Ahmed, “‘She’ll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She’s Turned into a N****r’: Passing through Hybridity,” in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 94.

37 Elizabeth Grosz, E.L. McCallum, and Mikko Tuhkanen, “Becoming Unbecoming: Untimely Meditations,” in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, eds. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 2–3.

38 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

is a formation that, despite official renderings, “has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself [...], [it is] an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming: ‘utopic’ in its negativity, queer theory [superhero identity] curves endlessly towards a realisation that its realisation remains impossible.”³⁹ Indeed, what future would the genre have if its protagonists lost their secret identities, resolved their cyclical subjectivities, or ceased their often-dramatic epistemic transformations? What future indeed when, as Gloria Anzaldúa asserts, “[r]igidity means death.”⁴⁰ Moreover, while commonly associated with processes of “turning into” or “coming to be,” becoming also suggests ideas of “properness,” appropriateness, or being “fit for purpose”; it can also indicate aesthetic appearances as pleasing, attractive, appealing, and even desirable. And, as Butler theorizes, its antithesis, “unbecoming,” speaks to its converse qualities: unattractive, unseemly, unsuitable, inappropriate, or improper. Epithets one might find just as easily repeating within descriptions of the superhero genre as queer theory.

And yet, as we are seeing, the mainstream representation of superhero transformation undoes its queer un/becomingness by forcing the perception of a categorical arrival and, indeed, paradoxically, of a never having departed. That is to say, it repetitiously frames and contains pluralities and mobilities within dualities and binaristic ordering.⁴¹ Looking closely at the genre’s representation of dramatic and radical un/becomings, such as Ben Grimm’s transformation into the curmudgeonly Thing, reveals that in these life- and system-shattering happenings, very little changes. The radicalism of Grimm’s transmutifica-

39 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 131.

40 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 101.

41 As indicated, this strategy fails to ultimately suppress the idea of “some-ness.” Gaps, breaks, and elisions create space for ambiguity. Spaces that fans may, or may not, choose to enter; that is to say, meanings they may or may not choose to make, remembering that choice is never entirely free but is shaped by and through social structures and lived experience.

tion is firmly storified and represented, thus seemingly contained, within an oppositional mode of a departure (i.e., from being Grimm) to an arrival (i.e., being the Thing, coded as Grimm), a representational and narrative strategy undermining notions of un/becoming superheroes in favor of an idea of categorical discreteness.

This is true even in characterizations modeled around cyclical transformation, such as Spider-Man/Peter Parker or Wonder Woman/Diana Prince. Despite toying with the idea of identity as plural and mobile, the genre's ubiquitous naming and costuming practices, alongside the "secret identity" trope, reinforce the idea of identity departures and arrivals. Other devices work to secure character separation too, such as differences in social standing or civic engagement, and so forth. Compare Peter Parker's status and impact in the social realm with that of Spider-Man, for example. Thus, while each character or persona clearly bleeds through the other, genre representation and storytelling traditions, as repetitions, foreclose any idea of "someness"⁴² by fixing plural characters within a binary, either Parker or Spider-Man, either commoner or hero. As noted, contributing to this "parity of personas" is that within their world, their "someness" is broadly unknown because it is kept secret. For example, diegetically, all that is publicly known about Batman's identity is that he, a white male vigilante, exists and that he is Batman. That is to say, the public does not know about the un/becoming Wayne/Batman symbiosis. Moreover, apart from a few somatic and aesthetic flourishes, some more overblown than others, emergent characters do not really deviate, or depart, from their original, or established, categorization.

42 Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). The genre's customary mode of titling superhero texts further orders and reinforces a hierarchical separation of personas. Superhero texts are predominantly named after only one of the characters. Captain Marvel comics, for example, reference Captain Marvel and not Billy Batson in their titles, such as *Captain Marvel Adventures*. A titling tradition suggesting that this comic book tells the story of Captain Marvel, of which Billy Batson is a secondary, supporting player.

Although transmogrified, the anthropomorphized Beast is still, as with Hank McCoy, coded and received as a cishet white male, and in other non-shapeshifting modes of somatic transformation, such as Parker or Morales becoming Spider-Man, the effect of their bodily transformation is largely unseen and advantageous.⁴³ Indeed, it is something of an in-genre joke that, despite the recognizable facial optics, no one in Metropolis recognizes that Clark Kent is Superman. Genre creators clearly play with the idea of identity as plural and mobile, but their representational and storytelling traditions tell a different story.

All this stability and containment leads me to suggest, extending my discussion in Chapter 2, that superhero transformation, in the hands of official creators at least, is rather more a case of re-formation than transformation.⁴⁴ As we saw in the case of Martian Manhunter's genderswap transformation — and underscored in this chapter's closing discussion of representing monstrous transformation — official genre creators contain, sanitize, and stabilize the radicalism of superhero transformation through their re-formative work. They do so in two senses: first, they represent superhero transformation as a limited, restorative process, one that brings back and secures the emergent character within the bounds of its original or "normal" condition of being (as a humanoid or anthropomorphized cishet white male, for example), and second, by delimiting the un/becoming idea of superhero transformation, they reinstate the binaried idea of identity as something stable and fathomable, and in so doing bring or restore order to the unruly, radical disorder, or promise, of superhero transformation.

Indeed, it is worth pausing to note "weakling to warrior" modes of transformation, epitomized by Steve Rogers/Captain

43 Compare Seth Brundle's body horror transformation into a "fly-man" in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) to Peter Parker's sanitized, barely perceptible bodily transformation into (a) Spider-Man.

44 While transformation suggests "change in form, shape, or appearance," re-formation describes processes of "forming again" with the prefix "re-" giving a sense of "back," acting back, or restoring something to its previous state. Thus, while there is movement, there is little change, little progress.

America, because alongside exemplifying notions of re-forming, they also speak to the idea of reform, where to reform suggests a process of making remediative changes that redress, literally on this occasion, past failures of properness, especially regarding agency, behavior, and materiality.⁴⁵ We might also note the repetition of the “white man failing” motif playing out in the “weakling to warrior” mode.⁴⁶ My attention, however, rests with a more extreme, arguably richer, mode of re-formative representation, one exemplifying the genre’s profound failure to realize the radical promise of its transforming protagonists or storytelling traditions, namely the genre’s representation of monstrous transformation, or, as it is perhaps better described, transmogrification.⁴⁷ For while transformation suggests traversal between or dissolution of subject positions, transmogrification speaks more fully to the process of un/becoming a dislocated, disorientated, and subsequently monstrous — failing, unproductive — “other.”⁴⁸ Transmogrifications deleteriously affect or deform characters, but not only somatically. They also tend to negatively affect the character’s sense of self and belong-

45 For example, as a “weakling,” Rogers “failed” to match normative male body standards and consequently “failed” in many other areas of his life. Rogers’s instantaneous, utopian, and medically engineered transformation, however, effortlessly upended all his failings. Indeed, Rogers’s idealized somatic transformation proves holistically reformative. While idiosyncratic, this reformative tendency touches all modes of superhero transformation, however. At the end of the *Fantastic Four’s* origin story, for example, post-transformation, the curmudgeonly misanthrope Ben Grimm (a.k.a. the Thing) agrees to use his power collectively to help humanity.

46 See Mel Stanfill, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2018), 305–17.

47 A mode often also tying into notions of “weakling to warrior” transformation, although with a dystopian rather than utopian emphasis.

48 The genre’s predilection toward single naming descriptors for these kinds of characters, such as Beast or Hulk, all notably lacking the suffix “man,” further emphasizes qualities of monstrosity, grotesqueness, and alterity. Furthermore, unlike Blade or Hellboy, these characters are rarely born but become monstrous through a brutal rebirthing process of transmogrification.

ing, as we see in the troubled un/becomings of Bruce Banner. Deform works in the obvious sense: to mar, to make unsightly, and to “put out of proper or ‘normal’ form.”⁴⁹ It also serves as an antithesis to notions of reform or re-formation. In what follows, I illustrate not only how mainstream representational strategies disrupt and dissonate the meaning-potential of these characterizations but also how the genre tempers and mediates radical promise by framing, re-forming, and reforming transmogrifications within hegemonic ideas of normativity.

Disciplining Transmogrification: “Whistling Up Monsters”

I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could be rightly said to be either, it was only because I was radically both.

— Robert Louis Stevenson,
*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*⁵⁰

It is evening in Winzeldorf, Germany, and a crowd of angry torch-wielding locals are chasing retired carnival “freak” Kurt Wagner through the village. The cry of “monster” rises from the mob, and Wagner thinks, “Monster, is it? The fools! It is they who are the monsters — with their mindless prejudices.”⁵¹ The mob has murder on its mind, and Wagner escape on his. But this is neither a scene from a nineteenth-century gothic novel nor the start of a Hammer horror film. It is a snapshot from the iconic *X-Men* story, “Second Genesis” (May 1975), and it is our introduction to the monstrous, blue-furred, teleporting mutant who would soon become Nightcrawler, member of the X-Men superhero team.

49 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “deform,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/48971>.

50 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (London: Heron Books, 1978), 62.

51 Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, *Giant-Size X-Men #1: Second Genesis* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975).

I open with this scene because I wish to ground my examination of monstrous superheroes — or, as I refer to them, “hero-monsters” — within broader gothic fiction traditions and monster culture.⁵² Our introduction to Nightcrawler displays a neo-Victorian “monster mashup” — a popular cultural practice marrying predominantly nineteenth-century texts, characters, and themes to contemporary media genres and broader monster culture.⁵³ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby co-created the Hulk characterization and both have said that the monstrous figures found in the gothic classics *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) provided much inspiration.⁵⁴ And the cover of the first issue of *The Incredible Hulk* series, drawn by Kirby, makes that connection perfectly clear.⁵⁵ The Hulk looming over Bruce Banner, with his bowl haircut and heavy brow ridge, strongly resembles Boris Karloff’s iconic screen depiction of Dr. Frankenstein’s creation in the 1931 black-and-white film, *Frankenstein*. The first Hulk was also colored grey, adding to the mimetic effect.⁵⁶ But alongside traces of Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, and Frankenstein’s creature, we can see other influences in Lee and Kirby’s monstrous creation.⁵⁷ Yet hero-monsters fall within

52 For example, see Finola Farrant, “Ghosts, Monsters, and Hulk,” in *Crime, Prisons and Viscous Culture: Adventures in Criminalized Identities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 125–45, and Matthew J.A. Green, ed., *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

53 For example, see Megen de Bruin-Molé, *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), and Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014).

54 M. Keith Booker, *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014).

55 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *The Incredible Hulk: The Hulk* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1962–1963).

56 Notably, the “Grey Hulk” persona surfaced at sunset and disappeared at sunrise, timings calling to mind the monstrous transformations of werewolves and vampires. It was only later that these fixed-timing transformations were replaced by more erratic, spontaneous eruptions, brought on at any time by fear, anger, or stress.

57 For example, King Kong, “Beast” from modern adaptations of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, the mythical Golem figure, and the Colossal Man

the realm of monster mashups not only in terms of origins, storylines, aesthetics, or diegetic motifs, but because within their characterization, oppositional identity categories are literally mashed up. Indeed, themes of identity and bodies in transition lie at the heart of these mashup characterizations, as they do with more traditional notions of the monstrous.

Conceptually, monsters of all kinds rankle and unsettle systemic order; they disrupt but do not dispel binaries and thus instill border anxiety. Moreover, their very being challenges discourses of categorical and somatic stability and normativity. Traditional monsters betoken “the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries.”⁵⁸ They

represent the in-between, the mixed, the ambivalent as implied by the ancient Greek root of the word for “monsters”: *teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration, placed between the sacred and the profane. The peculiarity of the organic monster is that she is both Same and Other. The monster is neither a total stranger nor completely familiar: he exists in an in-between zone. I would express it as a paradox: the monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity.⁵⁹

from the B-movie Colossal Man films. *The Amazing Colossal Man* from 1957 and its 1958 sequel, *War of the Colossal Beast*, tell the tragic tale of Colonel Glenn Manning. Foreshadowing Bruce Banner’s story, Manning risked his life to save a pilot from a nuclear blast, but in so doing, he started a process that would see him transform into the monstrous Colossal Man. Manning was also romantically involved with a woman who, like Betty, had a calming influence over him. The titling style of some 1950s B-movie films, such as *The Astounding She-Monster* (1958) or *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), also seems to have influenced early Silver Age comics creators such as Stan Lee.

58 Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 27.

59 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 216.

Hero-monsters too are conceptually and popularly readable as “harbingers of category crisis” and as beings with the ability to “overtturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject.”⁶⁰ But the promise of hero-monsters is conflicted: within the disruption of transmutation — undesirable moves within subjectivity — there is stability, and within discrete transformations, not all categories are collapsible. As I assert, in the American superhero genre, there is a disconnect between the conceptual radical power of the monstrous and its representation. A divergence connected to their mode of production: Who is creating and producing these texts and for what purpose? As Finola Farrant notes: “Every monster is a double narrative. One narrative describes how the monster came to be, while the other details what cultural uses the monster serves. [...] Monsters often serve the purposes of their creators.”⁶¹

Let’s take a quick look at the disciplining of Hank McCoy’s transmutation into the blue-furred Beast. McCoy went through a dehumanizing, rebirthing process of transmutation to un/become Beast. Starting off human, he morphed into something other than human, something abhuman. As with monstrous bodies and subjectivities more generally, McCoy/Beast appears abnormal in the fullest sense of the word, deviating from the norm, from the ordinary, in an undesirable way.⁶² For Braidotti, the monster is an “a-no(r)maly.”⁶³ But aside from his dramatic somatic shift and his representation as a “civilized

60 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture: (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6; Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 1; and Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 2.

61 Farrant, “Ghosts, Monsters, and Hulk,” 134–37.

62 Note that monstrous embodiment is contextual. What seems monstrous within one time or culture may not be the case within another. Moreover, transmuted bodies only appear monstrous because of hegemonic body and beauty myths designed to organize, regulate, and normalize bodies.

63 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 216.

monster,” how is McCoy/Beast an a-no(r)maly?⁶⁴ For example, creators temper the radical possibility of this monstrous character by doggedly representing “him” as determined to assimilate into mainstream American society. Being dislodged or disorientated from his place of privilege as a cishet nondisabled white male, McCoy/Beast wishes to be (re)orientated, to reclaim his familiarity with the world, to once again feel at home.⁶⁵ Moreover, and like many people from minoritarian communities, to successfully assimilate or (re)orientate, McCoy/Beast must, at all times, be better than average, a model citizen. Indeed, McCoy/Beast assimilates so well that he becomes an example of what Matt Yockey describes as “American exceptionalism.”⁶⁶ And while this representation works hard to recuperate the (hu)man/monster binary, meaning here is conflicted (e.g., radical and reactionary). While clearly playing with the idea of an un/becoming (hu)man/monster border crossing or collapse, genre creators ameliorate any sense of disruption through their reformative work (e.g., repetitive reassurances of the character’s humanity and stable identity). *He may look like a monster, they seem to say, but don’t worry, nothing has changed; underneath it all, he’s still a cishet white man.* But as discussed at the close of this chapter, despite disciplining measures, there is space for fans, especially perhaps excluded and marginalized fans, to see, or recognize, other kinds of meaning, around bodies and identi-

64 A mode of monstrosity springing from the disruption of sociocultural norms (e.g., that “monsters” have, as with Dr. Frankenstein’s creation, the potential to be good, loving, and intelligent). Moreover, as the McCoy/Beast characterization shows, transmogrification is as much about longing and belonging as it is about un/becoming. The loss of a stable connection with their original material form disrupts their sense of self, and as we’ll see later in the un/becoming of Ben Grimm, many hero-monsters long to become human again.

65 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

66 Matt Yockey, “Mutopia: American Utopianism and the Mutant Superhero,” in *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis*, ed. Claudia Bucciferro (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 5.

ties, for example, and as vibrant traditions of resistive fanwork demonstrate, they do.

Disconnects between radical concept and reactionary representation also work more generally to leave texts open to contradictory readings, an itinerant quality that amplifies their ability to unsettle. Thinking about sex and gender identity, for example: on one hand, hero-monsters are readable as presenting an idea of sex and gender identity as connected, stable, inherent, and authentic and that gender identity is resolutely linked to the body as it was originally sexed at birth (e.g., Banner as Hulk's originating locus is male, therefore Hulk is male); on the other hand, hero-monsters seem to suggest that gender identity is not tethered to the body or the visual appearance of the body and that sex does not necessarily define gender expression or identity. That there are, for example, many kinds of men and male bodies. A seemingly progressive stance for a mainstream genre, until we realize that such a reading applied to hero-monsters problematically positions the emergent expressions of maleness as monstrous and troublesome.

Notions of "disordered" and "ordered" bodies also underpin the disruptive force of the monstrous. And as an aside, it is possible to read hero-monsters as symbolizing a move from a "normal" ordered male body to an "abnormal" disordered female body: one raging, unpredictable, and dangerous.⁶⁷ As signifiers of difference, from the earliest times, women's bodies have inspired both wonder and terror. They are the archetypal disordered body. Women's bodies are sited as monstrous because they are "uncontrollable" and because they represent a danger to dominant hegemony and the established social order. They are "sites of chaos that pose threats to political, cultural, and economic orders" and positioned "in a larger matrix of 'ordered'

67 Illustrating the genre's meaning (making) polysemy, Ramzi Fawaz, as with others, suggests that in the Banner/Hulk characterization, "the Hulk's physical appearance as a muscled green giant and his outbursts of violent rage identified him as hypermasculine." Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 12.

social institutions, which posit their bodies as disordered.⁶⁸ These descriptions also fit our ideas of hero-monsters very well. Bruce Banner, Ben Grimm, and Hank McCoy are, in their transmogrified states, feared because of their visual difference, or their powerful, unexplainable, uncontrollable, unnatural bodies. As textbook examples of abject figures, they do not respect borders, positions, or rules, and they disturb categorical identity and hegemonic systems of domination.⁶⁹ Transmogrification thus renders these characters conceptually radical not just because it passes them through borderlines but because it forces them to occupy different positions within systems of power. Understanding the monstrous aspects of these characters as standing for female bodies allows me to suggest en passant that what adds to their monstrosity and fearsomeness is their feminization, which is to say that constituted within ideological systems and discourse, transmogrification transitions characters from ordered male embodiment into a form of monstrous female embodiment.

What is becoming clear here is that there is no one way to read hero-monsters. Meaning is multiple and mobile. Inconsistencies discomfit and disrupt. The subversive force of these characters lies not only in their monstrous visualities or their border transgressions, but in the instability of meaning that such movements and visualities bring. Shifting subjectivities induce fear

68 M. Chinchillo, "(Post)Colonial (Dis)orders: Female Embodiment as Chaos in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'Nervous Conditions' and Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine,'" in *Exclusions in Feminist Thought: Challenging the Boundaries of Womanhood*, ed. Mary Brewer (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 95–96. See also Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, for further discussion on the historical connection between women and monsters.

69 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4. Barbara Creed draws perceptively on Kristeva's influential work on abjection to better understand female monstrosity, concluding that while "femininity itself can be construed as monstrous, the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within patriarchal discourse." Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 70.

and loathing because there is no certainty or *truth* to conjure or hold onto. Indeed, they can be read as demonstrating that there is no inherent truth to the human subject. These themes echo through the concept and sociocultural practice of identity “passing.”⁷⁰

Passing subjects are not monstrous in a traditional sense, but by disrupting categories and hierarchies, they become susceptible to charges of being “unnatural,” “miscreated,” or “freakish.” As with the monstrous, and indeed violative fan practices, passing is “about the creation and establishment of an alternative set of narratives. It becomes a way of creating new stories out of unusable ones.”⁷¹ Monstrosity is, after all, not just about the tangible fright or scare, but about disturbing and unsettling, and as Ken Gelder asserts, monstrosity “most often resides at (or is relegated to) the edge of culture, where categories blur and classificatory structures begin to break down.”⁷² A place where one might just as easily find fictional monsters as real-life passing subjects. And yet, as examining genre representation shows, categorical disruptiveness is not always guaranteed; identity categories are intersectional, not additive, and disrupting one boundary may enforce others.⁷³ For example, when Bruce Banner transforms into the Hulk, he disrupts the (hu)man/non-human, ordered/disordered, and civilized/savage binaries, but reinforces those concerning race, gender, and sexuality. Heromonsters may indeed emblemize somatic and categorical fluidity, but it is a problematic incarnation.

70 Passing describes a set of practices that allow subjects to move undetected through category positions, as when a Black subject passes as a white subject. See, for example, Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

71 Linda Schlossberg, “Rites of Passing,” in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, eds. María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 4.

72 Ken Gelder, *The Horror Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 81.

73 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

I move now to consider these ideas through two extended character snapshots: Bruce Banner, a.k.a. the Hulk, and Ben Grimm, a.k.a. the Thing. I am particularly interested in exploring the representation of their ontological instability: they begin as one normative being — a “normate” — then become another non-normative or monstrous being, and sometimes vice versa.⁷⁴ This will illustrate the genre’s failure to fully realize the disruptive promise of these kinds of characters. I consider both cyclical and non-cyclical modes in order to engage a range of representational and storytelling strategies, with the Banner/Hulk characterization representing the former and the Grimm/Thing characterization representing the latter. By pointing to moments of inconsistency and sites of potential radicalism and suppression, I seek to show that it is possible to interpret these characters as radical and/or reactionary, authentically and synchronously. This part of my discussion contributes to this chapter’s other theme, which is that the genre’s unstable meaningscape is a site of radical promise in and of itself. As we shall see, representations of hero-monsters sometimes work with and sometimes against the radicalism enfolded within the concept of transforming superheroes. Much depends upon how we see them, or rather, upon how they are shown to us and by whom; how well, that is, “they serve the purposes of their creators.”⁷⁵

Snapshot: The Hulk

I wanna be Dr. Banner, not Dr. Jekyll.

— Bruce Banner, *The Incredible Hulk*⁷⁶

I start this account by tracing, from comics continuity, Bruce Banner’s un/becoming journey towards transmogrification and the emergence of the Hulk persona. In this, we can see how

⁷⁴ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 8.

⁷⁵ Farrant, “Ghosts, Monsters, and Hulk,” 137.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Johnson, creator, *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1977–88).

broader ideas of the monstrous and the gothic weave through his origin story. Robert Bruce Banner, a cis het white non-disabled man, grew up in a household dominated by an abusive, alcoholic father, Brian. Bruce survived, but his mother, Rebecca, did not. Brian murdered her when Bruce was around 6 years old. The specter of generational trauma — the “monster gene” — haunts the Banner family. Brian, too, was a survivor of childhood abuse and described his father as a monster. Bruce fears following in his father’s and grandfather’s monstrous footsteps, coming to “detest men who think with their fists,” but, as an acclaimed research scientist working in the same field as his father and with similar issues around stress, anger, and control, as well as emotional intimacy, he came to do so in so many ways.⁷⁷ The monstrous motif is, however, taken to another level when Bruce transmogrifies into, or releases, the swingeing Hulk, an event triggered by an incident during a bomb trial. During testing, Bruce notices that a teenager, Rick Jones, has entered the test area. He doesn’t hesitate to save Rick, but in so doing, he exposes himself to a gamma blast, an act of heroism that has a lasting effect on his life.

This selfless deed marks the (be)coming of the Hulk. A phrase echoing the title of the first issue of the debut Hulk comics series, “The Coming of the Hulk,” published in May 1962. A grim origin story that director Ang Lee brought to the big screen in 2003, but in this version, Banner’s un/becoming takes on a utopian tinge.⁷⁸ In a scene just after the fateful accident, Betty tells Bruce that his survival is impossible, stressing the fact that he should be dead.⁷⁹ Echoing the ill-fated David Kessler in

77 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *The Incredible Hulk #1: The Coming of the Hulk* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1962), 3.

78 Lee, *Hulk*. In this adaptation, the life-changing accident takes place in a “testing area” housed in a lab rather than in an outdoor area.

79 Bruce’s survival is likewise treated as a death-defying miracle in comics continuity. For example, in Lee and Kirby’s debut *Hulk* comics series, Bruce comments — echoing Betty in Lee’s *Hulk*: “It isn’t possible to take in so much gamma radiation and not have something happen!” Lee and Kirby, *The Incredible Hulk #1*, 5.

An American Werewolf in London (1981), a euphoric Bruce reassures her that he feels great: “I’m one hundred percent, more. [...] Remember my bad knee? Well, now it’s my good knee. [...] I’ve never felt better.”⁸⁰ And later, after his second transmogrification, he tells her that the experience was dreamlike, imbued with feelings of power, freedom, and rage. He also confesses to liking the feeling of losing control, saying “it was like being free.”⁸¹

Transmogrification releases Bruce into a utopian state and a new hulking embodiment to occupy that state. In these oneiric moments, Bruce escapes his prison house of fear, control, guilt, and insecurity. He is untethered, a disruptor of thresholds—life/death, possible/impossible, reality/dream, good/bad—and, catching sight of another world and way of being in the world, he is enamored of the power of those processual movements. But this utopic feeling is not confined by time and circumstance. It leaks through the dreamlike realm into Bruce’s mundane world. Recalling Foucault, in this utopic state, wounds are healed, physical but also perhaps emotional. It is *Bruce’s* bad knee that is healed; it is *Bruce* who has never felt better.

But in the Banner/Hulk characterization, Bruce does not just transform into the Hulk, the Hulk transforms into Bruce. Banner/Hulk is in a constant state of un/becoming.⁸² This processualism suggests a hybrid, unstable subjectivity, and transitions in an uncommon direction, from deviant to normate, from disempowered (e.g., Hulk as a monstrous Other) to empowered subject (e.g., Banner as a cishet white male), from the margins to the center. Bruce and Hulk oscillate endlessly through somatic and sociocultural normativity and monstrosity. In a scene from a *Fantastic Four* comic, the Hulk is on a rampage through New

80 Lee, *Hulk*.

81 Ibid.

82 Indeed, rather than the more usual “Banner/Hulk” formulation, this characterization would perhaps be better represented by “Banner = Hulk,” an expression symbolizing its un/becomingness—though the separating “/” formulation does accurately represent the genre’s separative treatment of its protagonists.

York City, and upon catching sight of him, a subway driver wondrously asks himself:

Are my eyes playing tricks on me?? What's that up ahead — a man on the tracks?? It — It is a man!... Why does he just stand there?? Why doesn't he — Wait! It isn't just a man!! It — It's — the Hulk!⁸³

The driver articulates the Hulk's disruptive influence on the (hu)man/monster binary. His statement that the Hulk "isn't just a man" is key. It expresses the idea that the Hulk has not stopped being a man. The Hulk occupies a new position, one straddling the (hu)man/monster divide. In this example, the Hulk represents a synchronous moment of both/and, rather than either/or. (Moreover, in this scene, the Hulk is trying to protect, not scare or "smash," the citizens — not very monstrous behavior.) This fear-"someness" is suggested and undermined in a number of ways, especially through representing changing visuality and transitions as cyclical, as processional, as departures and arrivals — (hu)man/monster, good/bad, friend/enemy, civilized/uncivilized, science/nature, control/instinct, rational/irrational, and perhaps also, as Fawaz suggests, masculine/feminine, where the Hulk's body reads as hypermasculine and Bruce's "fragility and emotionality" as feminine.⁸⁴

Focusing here on (hu)man/monster transitions, mainstream creators have made many insistent references to the separateness, the duality, of the Banner/Hulk characterization, over its more radical liminality. In *Hulk*, director Ang Lee repeatedly suggests that the Hulk is incarcerated inside Bruce, waiting to escape, waiting to be born. Being born is, of course, an evolutionary separating process — that there cannot be two within one. As Bruce describes it: "The gamma just unleashed what was already

83 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four #26: The Avengers Take Over* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1964). As indicated, the Hulk is consistently gendered male and referred to as "he" or "him" and rarely as "it," a designation upholding the sex/gender binary.

84 Fawaz, *The New Mutants*, 12.

there. [...] Me. It.”⁸⁵. And the morning after his first transmogrification, he tells Betty that he “had the most vivid dream. It was like being born — coming up for air — light hitting my face — the screaming — my heartbeat — boom — boom — boom.”⁸⁶

Each puff-and-grunt filled transmogrification scene features birthing tropes; in the second, an expectant Bruce adopts an all-fours pose, a popular birthing position; and in the third “induced” transmogrification, Bruce is placed in a womblike water tank while his nemesis, Glenn Talbot, takes on midwifery duties, with motifs of gas and air throughout. Returning to the first transmogrification scene, we see the expectant Bruce-becoming-Hulk figure as he stumbles through the lab’s corridors, evoking the idea of a birth canal. There’s even water breaking as Bruce knocks over a mop bucket. It is a painful, difficult, and anomalous feet-first birth. The first extended sight we get of the Hulk is of him ripping through Bruce’s shoes as Bruce’s wallet and ID card — his identity — lie discarded on the floor. The Hulk will not walk in his father’s shoes. He will go barefoot. The Hulk’s first (re)action is to smash up the lab, the center of Bruce’s world and identity. It also underscores the Hulk’s hostility towards science and technology and his alignment with nature. On his way out of the lab, the Hulk picks up a globe-shaped machine — the gamma sphere — and strikes an Atlas pose before, with herculean effort, throwing it through a wall. Although wonderful, this scene serves no narrative purpose, but it does tell us important things about the characterization. The mythical pose tells us that the sublime Hulk is monster-god to Bruce’s puny human.⁸⁷ Upon impact, the globe crushes a police car — representing state authority — and separates into two halves, two hemispheres, two selves.⁸⁸

85 Lee, *Hulk*.

86 Ibid.

87 A recurrent theme in god-making is an “unnatural” birth. See Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*.

88 A motif Lee also includes in the film’s opening credits. The screen is split into horizontal panels, dividing a sphere: the cosmos and half a raging planet occupy the top panel, while half a pulsing green cell fills the bottom.

Hulk's birth, or escape, is an earth-shattering event for Bruce, Betty, and the social order. And, as in any heteronormative, patriarchal fantasy, the father is there to welcome, to recognize, and to claim the newborn: "My Bruce" croons a beatific David Banner, Bruce's father and the monster's co-creator. Cast as a mad scientist, à la Dr. Frankenstein, David's paternal claim lies not upon human Bruce but upon the Hulk, the newly released, reborn, son, the one he always knew was inside human Bruce. David here uses the name he originally gave his son, which asserts naming power, a mechanism of ownership and control, but the sentiment is clear, as he states later when confronting human Bruce:

I didn't come here to see you, I came here to see my son, my real son. The one inside of you. You're nothing but a superficial shell, a husk of flimsy consciousness, ready to be torn off at a moment's notice.⁸⁹

But unlike Dr. Frankenstein, who flees at the sight of his creation, it is the Hulk who literally takes flight at the nightmarish memory of his monstrous, murderous creator — "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."⁹⁰

Catching sight or spying — discovering what is partly hidden — is another way Lee indicates the separateness of these figures. Characters are repeatedly shown looking through windows or into mirrors or other reflective surfaces. In one scene, we see the Hulk plummeting back to Earth and falling in and out of consciousness while his mind's eye recalls or imagines an encounter with Bruce. Bruce is shaving — a civilizing behavior indicating Banner's humanity over the Hulk's monstrosity — but stops to clear and peer into an overly fogged mirror. The Hulk too has been clearing his side of the mirror, which has now

89 Lee, *Hulk*.

90 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 56.

turned into a window, and through watery streaks they catch sight of each other for the first time. Lee here capitalizes on the magic-mirror motif, popular within fantasy and fairy tales.⁹¹ In a rare moment, or slip, of (pro)creative connection, both characters appear to touch, Banner using his hand and the Hulk one finger, an image evoking Michelangelo's fresco painting, "The Creation of Adam" (ca. 1512), a scene further suggesting the monster-god/puny-human binary.

Although contained within one sequence—Hulk falling—the scene's staging encourages us to view this moment as an interaction between two distinct subjects and worlds, separated only by a fragile glass line, which the Hulk inevitably smashes through, dragging Bruce into his world. We know it is the Hulk's world, or time, because when he calls Bruce a "puny human," we understand him. The sound accompanying this scene also reinforces a sense of separateness and the science/nature binary. As the Hulk falls into his reverie of Bruce, we hear a rising leitmotif from Danny Elfman's main theme, "The Hulk." This musical phrase connects to the film's science-laden opening credits which tell the story of David Banner and his demented adventures in the lab. But this phrase fades when our attention switches to the Hulk. We hear a different leitmotif from the film's main theme, one full of pipes, birdsong, and chanting monks, a sound and method suggesting a oneness with nature. Thus, in this scene, we do not only see but hear binaristic ordering (i.e., Hulk, nature/Banner, science). Both leitmotifs feature and combine to create the film's main theme, but here they are separated.

The sense of separateness, duality, and disciplined liminality in Lee's *Hulk* is traceable back through the intervening decades to the Banner/Hulk origin story in 1962. One need only glance at the cover of the first issue of this series to see the radical power and promise of transmogrification, of un/becoming,

91 As in this scene, enchanted mirrors not only allow moments of self-reflection, but they can also be used as windows or doorways into other worlds or times.

chastened.⁹² The top third of the cover features the title, "The Incredible Hulk," in yellow and red all-caps, and in the bottom two thirds, against a midnight blue background, we see, cast in a cowardly yellow light, a soldier, a police officer, Betty, and her father, General "Thunderbolt" Ross. Their attention rests upon the figures dominating the cover: Bruce Banner and the Hulk. Both characters are set slightly off-center, suggesting their marginality, skewness, and nonconformity while also establishing each as an "a-no(r)maly." A shocked and fearful Banner is stationed at the front of the cover, and looming behind him is the great grey Hulk. His greyness suggests a deathly, emotionless detachment, and his facial expression is more repose than menacing. His hen-toed stance, a pose favored by some children, creates a sense of haplessness. Indeed, representationally, his whole bearing works to undermine or tame his monstrosity, raising another question: Just how monstrous is this monster?"

But the Hulk is not just the Hulk; he is, as the cover shouts, the "incredible" Hulk. A characterization beyond belief, beyond understanding, and beyond classification as either (hu)man or monster. Yet the first thing Lee and Kirby ask readers to do is classify the characterization; the question, "Is he man or monster or... is he both?" is set in a giant question mark. But while teasing the possibility that the characterization may be radically both, the guiding hand of the creators tells us, through visual representation and the positioning of the title's tagline — "The strangest man of all time!!" — that being synchronously "both" is not a real option. Indeed, on the issue's first page, readers are categorically told that the Hulk is "Half-Man, Half-Monster." This assertion tempers the more radical idea of a synchronous, un/becoming "both" with the idea of a successive "both," an altogether more orderly conceptualization in which two sepa-

92 This cover was redrawn for the Hulk's thirtieth anniversary, with a green and much more aggressive-looking Hulk. It also inspired the cover for the first issue of *The Savage She-Hulk* (1980) and a film poster for *The Incredible Hulk* (2008). It is also interesting to note the cover's other heading, "Fantasy As You Like It," and the subtle reference to Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* which centers its narrative around genderswap transformation.

rate and, in this case, opposing halves combine to make the whole.⁹³ (Which is, as we have seen, a repeating motif in Lee's *Hulk*.) Even Kirby's sketchy contour lines pulsing out equidistantly behind Banner and towards the Hulk reinforce the idea of sequential, disciplined connectedness, of a departure and an arrival.⁹⁴

On the cover, different modes of dress work to further reinforce the characters' separateness and the human/monster binary, but not as neatly as the creators might have thought. Banner wears glasses, a suit and tie, and a lab coat, emphasizing science, rationalism, and civilization. Hulk, on the other hand, wears a raggedy grey vest and trousers combination. Modes of dress add meaning and value to bodies.⁹⁵ Dressing, like shaving, is a civilizing behavior and suggests a separation between human and animal. The Hulk's mode of dress displays his monstrous body and emphasizes his rippling alterity: "Bodies which do not conform, bodies which flout the conventions of culture and go without appropriate clothes are subversive of the most basic social codes and risk exclusion, scorn, or ridicule."⁹⁶ The Hulk's attire expresses his relationship with humanity perfectly: colorless and shredded. But in being dressed in some fashion, the Hulk appears not quite monster, yet not quite man: the strangest man. On a related note, if the Hulk is known for one thing, besides being a raging green monster, it is his inexplicable purple shorts.⁹⁷ The Hulk's iconic shorts are not only a curiosity but a site of contradiction. For while underscoring his monstrosity and separateness from civilized humankind, they also leave a trace of human culture behind. (*Again, just how mon-*

93 Halves, of course, suggest distinct sides or parts and a portion or division of a whole, not the whole as a blend.

94 Similarly, a heartbeat connected Banner and the Hulk in Lee's *Hulk*.

95 Joanne Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001).

96 *Ibid.*, 33.

97 In the 1962 Banner/Hulk origin story, we discover that Hulk's clothes are not grey as the cover shows but the remnants of the clothes Banner wore before he transformed into the Hulk: an orange shirt and blue pants. Notably, when blended, this color combination can produce the color purple.

strous is this monster?) And so, despite their great efforts to foster a steadying sense of oppositional duality and separateness, a departure and arrival — in this instance, through diametrically opposed clothing styles — genre creators have come up short. In choosing to clothe the Hulk, they have failed to entirely uphold the (hu)man/monster binary and to fully exploit and represent this character's monstrosity and radical un/becomingness. But in re-imagining this creative failure, we can see that in wanting to further secure an opposition, the Hulk's creators created a gap, a breach, a site of monstrous intelligibility. The Hulk's purple shorts interrupt, disrupt, the insistently desired dualistic reading of this characterization. It is just as our subway driver suggests, the Hulk is something more than just a (hu)man or a monster. He is, despite of and because of, his creators' hands, something in-between. He truly is the incredible Hulk.

Snapshot: The Thing

Born into poverty in Manhattan's Lower East Side, a series of personal tragedies, including the deaths of his parents and his beloved older brother, brought Ben Grimm into the transformative care of his aunt Alyce and uncle Jake. Renewed familial stability enabled him to turn his life around, from hoodlum to patriot. While at university, Ben met STEM scholar Reed Richards and formed a friendship that would turn his life around, again.⁹⁸ Ben entered the military after graduating and trained as a pilot and astronaut, and he didn't have to wait long to put his ace aviation skills to the test. As we learn in the first issue of the inaugural *Fantastic Four* comics series, debuting in November 1961, the now Dr. Richards needs Ben to pilot his newly built but untested rocket ship.⁹⁹ Ben first declined his old friend's request, but Reed and his fiancée Sue Storm, Ben's secret unrequited love,

98 STEM is a useful acronym grouping science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines.

99 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four #1: The Fantastic Four* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1961).

appealed to his machismo and persuaded him to join the venturesome crew now comprising Ben, Reed, Sue, and her brother, Johnny.¹⁰⁰ During the flight, “terrible cosmic rays” knock Ben unconscious, and the ship’s autopilot brings the rocket safely back to Earth in a “rough, but non-fatal landing.”¹⁰¹ The fateful flight irrevocably transformed the bodies and lives of each crew member and led to the formation of the Fantastic Four superhero team: Reed became Mr. Fantastic; Sue, the Invisible Girl (later the Invisible Woman); Johnny, the Human Torch; and Ben, the orange boulder-like Thing. After the rough landing and mid-transformation, Ben and Reed brawl, partly due to the stressful situation and partly because Sue loves Reed and not Ben. Closing this un/becoming scene, the teammates share a thought, one echoing that of the NYC subway driver above: “We’ve changed! All of us! We’re more than just human!”¹⁰²

The failed test flight irrevocably disrupts the life plans of the four friends, creating previously unimaginable possibilities and futures. Indeed, by inducing the quartet to enact other ways of being in the world — ontologies and embodiments prompting them, in this case, to make a new, “better” world — the disruptive failure of the flight is translated into an affirmative, reformative experience, one shot through with utopianism. Taking again the (hu)man/monster binary as our center point, I next explore how genre creators translate and discipline this quite radical un/becoming, asking, just how far removed is the Thing from Ben Grimm’s originating embodiment?¹⁰³ Or rather, echoing our previous question, just how monstrous is the Thing?

100 Reed and Sue want to help America win the Space Race and usher in an age of American dominance in space exploration and consequently the future — a utopian dream of creating and conquering a New American Frontier.

101 Lee and Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #1, 11.

102 *Ibid.*, 13. A declaration echoing the subway driver’s description of the Hulk as more than “just a man” from a few pages earlier.

103 Embodiment is understood as “the sociocultural relations that act on individual bodies.” Chris Bobel and Samantha Kwan, eds., *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 2.

In *The Fantastic Four* #1, Grimm's transmogrification begins, as does Johnny's, aboard the rocket ship. Upon encountering the terrible cosmic rays, Grimm starts to lose control over his body and, with that, control over the ship, and arguably his sense of self. His body feels heavy, deadened, a feeling that persists even after the ship has landed back on Earth and is well beyond the range of the cosmic rays. In the post-crash panel, the crew scrambles from the wreckage; Sue and Reed are colored normally, but Johnny and Ben are tinted orange and red, respectively, possibly indicating the advanced stage of their transformation. In this panel, Grimm is positioned crouching in the corner, his crimson hue symbolizing, of course, pain, anger, and danger. The rest of his transmogrification is captured a few panels later in a standard three-panel transformation sequence.

In the first panel, Grimm stands facing Richards, ready for a fight. The background is primary red, and the characters are colored lurid yellow. It is an unsettling color combination and alerts readers that something catastrophic is about to happen. (The colors also combine to create Grimm's inhuman orange coloration.) The second panel comprises a high-angle close-up shot of Grimm's face as it starts to slide into a new arrangement. He is positioned at a slanted angle, off-center. His features, accented by a gaudy yellow helix, are less defined, and his hair has thinned. He is still set against a red background, but one now giving way to blackness. The overall effect is one of slippage, a downward spiral. The final panel repeats the pose, only this time we are face to face with the Thing: a shouting, aggressive orange rock-being set against an oppressive jet-black background. (We do not see the calamity of his full body until the next panel.) Yet, the high angle used in these panels disrupts the idea of Grimm as a fearsome, mindless monster. Even as Grimm threatens to "mop the place up" with Richards, the scene's composition suggests a vulnerability in these life-altering moments.¹⁰⁴ Grimm's transmogrification may have hardened him physically, but emotionally, as the staging tells us, this hard man is soft-shelled.

104 Lee and Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #1, 12.

Throughout it all, however, Grimm is blissfully unaware of his grotesque metamorphosis. Apart from an initial and temporary sense of heaviness, Grimm's transmogrification, unlike Banner's, is quick and painless. In fact, Grimm appears to feel no different from his pre-transmogrified self and shows no curiosity regarding his changed state. He does not look down at his hands nor his body to see what they look like. Indeed, as there are no mirrors or reflective surfaces around, the readers and his teammates get to see his monstrous new body before he does. It is an uncharacteristically subdued representation of transmogrification for any genre, but its reservedness is telling, speaking deeply of the superhero genre's ambivalence towards the radical possibilities of its most un/becoming protagonists. As we'll see, it all becomes rather more a case of reform and re-formation than un/becoming transmogrification.

Just like his transformation sequence, the Grimm-Thing's cultural identity is repeated, rigid, and fixed. Synchronously, the possibility of both/and becomes the certainty of either/or, undercutting the disruptive power and promise of heromonsters. Grimm appears to blur the divide between (hu)man/monster, normate/non-normative, inside(r)/outside(r) but for all the grotesque spectacle, very little changes. This quotidian representation of transmogrification does not dispel binaries; it secures them. As Grimm himself states, "I ain't Ben anymore — [...] I'm — [...] the Thing!!"¹⁰⁵ He is, in other words, either/or — *either* Ben *or* the Thing. Indeed, the Thing's potentially radical status is only tolerable within the mainstream superhero genre because the system instantly absorbs any disruptive potential. The repetition of the transformation pose underscores the sense of inertia: the Thing now occupies Grimm's space, literally. And as noted, Grimm bizarrely fails to notice his transmogrification; he sounds no different and feels no different, and if it feels to Grimm that nothing has changed,

105 Ibid., 13.

it is because, fundamentally, nothing has changed.¹⁰⁶ Much like the readers, Grimm must be told that he has transformed into *something* else. We need the (over)dramatic visualization of the Thing's body to "read" that a change has taken place. Without the monstrous body, it's just Grimm, but with the body, it's the Thing. As we are seeing, Grimm's transformation is all surface and no depth. A representational strategy that disciplines the promise of hero-monsters, framing the un/becomingness of transmogrification as an orderly departure and arrival, or, as we shall see, something akin to a departure-less arrival.

Despite all the possibilities this transformative moment offers, Grimm sets out as a cishet white male, and the Thing lands coded as a cishet white male, a return trip that re-forms his originating waspish embodiment.¹⁰⁷ Several representational strategies enact this coding; the Thing is, for example, referred to with male pronouns, dressed in a conventionally male fashion, and situated in a normatively male position within heterosexual relationships or desires. In our epochal comics example, Grimm's normatively expressed cismale gender identity and heterosexuality are reasserted immediately after the transformative accident. "He's turned into a... a... some sort of a thing!" Sue cries after witnessing his transformation, "He's as strong as an ox!"¹⁰⁸ And in the aftermath of the crash, the Grimm-Thing is less worried about the potential ramifications of their misadventure than he is about convincing Sue that she should be with him instead of Reed, telling her, "I'll prove to you that you love the wrong man."¹⁰⁹ He even gets into a brawl with Reed about it, a stereotypically male response to stress and unrequited love. And later, the story's omniscient narrator subtly confirms the Thing's continuing occupation of Grimm's cismaleness by speci-

¹⁰⁶ Note that Grimm retains the civilizing power of speech and talks or shouts the whole way through his transmogrification.

¹⁰⁷ All hero-monster transmogrifications follow this pattern, so that when Jennifer Walters transmogrifies into the She-Hulk, she remains coded as a cishet white woman.

¹⁰⁸ Lee and Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #1, 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

fying that the clothes store the Thing visits is, lest there be any confusion, a men's clothes store. Regardless of the possibilities, the superhero genre is devoted to representing rigidly gendered characterizations and transformations. As Edward Avery-Natale writes, "the super-body has thus far been able to do anything except transcend the norms of the male/female binary and its exaggerated hegemonic representation."¹¹⁰

The genre's representation of race and ethnicity, in this instance regarding whiteness, is equally parochial.¹¹¹ And, as is so typical when dealing with whiteness, wholly un(re)marked and invisible. From a Western standpoint, whiteness is historically constructed and considered the racial norm, the neutral, the invisible, and the unmarked. Intensive work over the last decades has, however, seen this previously unnamed racial identity named, marked, and irradiated.¹¹² Within hegemony, those categorized as white experience race privilege, which is, of course, affected by other intersecting categories, such as class and gen-

110 Edward Avery-Natale, "An Analysis of Embodiment among Six Superheroes in DC Comics," *Social Thought & Research* 32 (2013): 95.

111 More broadly, rather than being fluid and relational, race is treated and represented as a fixed identity category. Indeed, instances of superheroes changing their racial identity as part of their transformations are rare. Christopher Priest and ChrisCross, *Xero* (New York: DC Comics, 1997) supplies a notable exception. In this series, the protagonist, Coltrane Walker, cycles from being a Black professional basketball player to a white secret government agent known as "Xero."

112 For example, see James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993); Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Catherine Rottenberg, "Passing?: Race, Identification, and Desire," *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 435–52. With specific reference to this discussion, see also Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018); carrington, *Speculative Blackness*; and Benjamin Woo, "The Invisible Bag of Holding: Whiteness and Media Fandom," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (London: Routledge, 2017), 245–52.

der.¹¹³ Whiteness, then, does not simply refer to skin color but represents a learned, habitual position within power relations: a worldly orientation.¹¹⁴ As the representation of Grimm's transmogrification ably illustrates, race is best considered a politics of optics rather than a politics of substance.¹¹⁵

As I'll get into, Grimm is identifiable as a white subject, and as an orange boulder-like creature, the Thing's race should be indeterminate, but it is not. As in the matter of gender and sexuality, the notion of the Thing's race can be traced back to the static representation of Grimm's transmogrification. A monotonous representation that encourages and keys into an "assumption of whiteness," a percept felt not only by the Thing, his teammates, and the citizenry of his world, but also likely by us, his audience, and ultimately his co-creators.¹¹⁶ One line of con-

113 Peggy McIntosh memorably describes white privilege as an "invisible weightless knapsack." Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence through Work in Women's Studies," Working Paper 189 (Wellesley: Wellesley Center for Research on Women, 1988), 1.

114 For example, see Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68.

115 Amy Robinson, "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 715–36. Stori-fying his lived experience of becoming Black, Frantz Fanon powerfully observed it as the crumbling of the corporeal schema to be replaced by a "racial epidermal schema." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 84.

116 An uncritical assumption of whiteness also haunts much superhero scholarship. Scott Bukatman provides a ready example of this in his description of the 1970s launch of a more "diverse" *X-Men* team, writing: "Replacing the all-white antics of the Beast, Iceman, Angel, Marvel Girl, and Cyclops was a more ethnically and visually diverse bunch. Beast became more bestial, Cyclops more tormented; Marvel Girl was reborn as Phoenix, and an African woman known as Storm took over the leadership." Bukatman here uncritically continues to read the blue-furred Beast as white, likely due to Beast's originating embodiment and a recuperative assumption of whiteness. Troublingly, he also appears to suggest that Beast's increased bestiality, or dehumanization, somehow helped to dilute the whiteness of the team (i.e., equating an increase in animalism with a reduction in whiteness). Moreover, apart from Storm, the other diversifying examples listed instantiate white characters as less stable, controlled, and "civilized,"

ture holds that because Grimm was white, the Thing must also be white. Another line goes that “in a society in which white is the ideal norm, one is assumed to be white unless one looks black.”¹¹⁷ The Thing’s visual racial indeterminacy does not allow him to “look Black,” nor indeed white, but racial assumptions and norms foster an assumption of whiteness, illustrating that “race construction is about much more than visibility.”¹¹⁸ This all helps explain how, although now epidermically Other, the Grimm-Thing—and many other variously colored and furred hero-monsters—remains readable as a white subject. It is possible to think of the Thing as an “honorary white” or as passing as white, but I think there is a much subtler conference of whiteness taking place within the representation of Grimm’s transfiguration.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work on whiteness, the Thing inherits and inhabits—that’s to say, is born into—Grimm’s whiteness, where whiteness is “described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions and how they ‘take up’ space.”¹¹⁹ Grimm’s transfiguration is extrinsic, while the “racial and historical dimensions are,” as Ahmed notes via Fanon, “beneath the surface of the body.”¹²⁰ Just as Grimm’s body and clothes are unwoven through his metamorphosis, the Thing’s white racial identity is woven out of the millions of moments of Grimm’s past orientation in whiteness: “What is reachable is determined by orientations we have

but do these kinds of changes really make a superhero team appear more “ethnically and visually” diverse? To *Bukatman* and others, perhaps, yes. See Scott *Bukatman*, “X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero,” in *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 50.

117 Rottenberg, “Passing,” 438.

118 *Ibid.*, 439. Familial resemblances, proximities, and continuities also support worldly orientations and assumptive identity-making practices. For example, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

119 Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 150.

120 *Ibid.*, 153.

already taken.”¹²¹ Familial resemblances, proximities, and continuities feed into these worldly orientations and, in our example, serve to secure the Thing’s orientation in whiteness.

As Marvel’s “First Family,” the Fantastic Four is routinely showcased as more of a family than a regular superhero team.¹²² The transformation of Sue, Reed, Johnny, and Ben into the Fantastic Four takes place in a secluded glade just outside Ithaca, New York. They are the only witnesses, or midwives, to their various rebirths. Much like any birth, it is an intense, intimate happening, one that bonds the crew into a mighty *us*; as Reed puts it, “Together, we have more power than any humans have ever possessed!”¹²³ This joint transformative experience and resultant “shared attributes” cements the idea that their unit is more of a blended family than a team.¹²⁴ But the Thing is not only part of a fantastic family; he belongs to a larger fantastical clan, the white-centric superhero dynasty. As Peter Coogan observes, superheroes are not all the same, but they do share similarities, what Ludwig Wittgenstein described as “family resemblances.”¹²⁵ Many of which repeat through superhero creators and fans. Ahmed too references family resemblances and proximities when discussing whiteness as a worldly orientation, noting that if “whiteness is inherited, it is also reproduced.”¹²⁶ The Thing does not, of course, epidermically resemble his family members, but his bloodline, his ancestral connection to Grimm, elicits repetitive resemblances in personality, emplacement, habitats (cultural and concrete), desires, or “styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits.”¹²⁷ These resemblances serve

121 *Ibid.*, 152.

122 It is also broadly appreciated as such within superhero fandom and scholarship.

123 Lee and Kirby, *The Fantastic Four* #1, 13.

124 *Ibid.* They all become more than “just human” with a shared civic motivation, or wish, to “help mankind.”

125 Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Peter Coogan, “The Definition of the Superhero,” in *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 82.

126 Ahmed, “Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 154.

127 *Ibid.*

as a “familial tie” and help orient the Grimm-Thing favorably within dominant culture.¹²⁸ Further, the continuous, unbroken representation of Grimm’s descent into somatic nonnormativity and subsequent un(re)marked drift into white culture illustrates Ahmed’s assertion that whiteness is treated as if it were “a property of persons, culture, and places.”¹²⁹ As I observe, the Thing is represented as literally taking up the same space and orientation as Grimm. The Thing’s world unfurls from Grimm’s in a continuous, ongoing movement. They share an ancestry, a lineage, a line of sight. Grimm’s eyes remain open throughout his transmogrification. There is continuity in his way of seeing and being in the world. Even during the transmogrification scene, Reed and the Grimm-Thing’s dialogue doesn’t skip a beat. But, as the ongoing troubled trials of this character show, this is, given the Thing’s epidermic monstrosity, a tricky inheritance to claim.

A large part of the Thing’s shtick, for example, is his desire to unproblematically navigate the spaces of his past, both cultural and concrete. Milieus that are now, as he puts it, “too small for me!”¹³⁰ And, as we see in another scene in the debut issue, sartorial misadventures are a perfect foil for cultural dissonance. Midway through an unsuccessful trip to a men’s clothing store, the clothed Thing suddenly ditches his disguise, but keeps on his trunks for decorum, and crashes out through a too-narrow doorway. (A mode of dress recalling the Hulk’s imperial shorts from a few pages back.) Not out of frustration with the lack of plus-size clothing on sale but to answer a call to return to his family. The Thing is only in the store because he feels the need to clothe himself, to somehow mask his somatic monstrosity and thereby allow his cracked exterior to match his infrangible interior; it also helps encourage recuperative identity-making assumptions. And, to some extent, it works. After all, a clothed Thing managed to enter the store without causing any damage to the doorway or drawing unwanted attention. But when he

128 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2.

129 *Ibid.*

130 Lee and Kirby, *The Fantastic Four* #1, 3.

casts off his humanizing clothes and explodes out through the doorway, mayhem ensues.

The doorway symbolism is rich, and bursting through it allows the Thing to make room for himself in a world that is otherwise too small, much like the clothes on sale. It is a joyous, destructive, liberating moment, suggesting, on some level, that his “tight rags” aren’t his only means of matching his monstrous exterior to his interior sense of self (as a privileged subject); his family resemblance can also help ameliorate the (hu)man/monster, or normate/nonnormative, disconnect traumatizing him.¹³¹ Indeed, before he comes into the normalizing, protective proximity of his fantastic family, he runs a gauntlet of physical and verbal assaults from New York’s terrified citizenry. They think he’s a *monster*, a *walking nightmare*, a *Martian*, but the Thing knows better, emphasizing his normate sense of self by escaping into a *manhole*. And later, when a car collides with him, he complains to the driver, “Fool! Did you not see me in time?” Even though the driver clearly sees something, crying out, “What is that... right in front of me?? Oh, no... It’s alive!!”¹³² It’s just that what he sees is not the thing, the “me,” that the Thing thinks, remembers, and assumes himself to be — a cishet white male. Both perceive the Thing differently, one as an “it” and the other as a “me.” Alone and undisguised, the Thing is a monster, but costumed or with his superhero family, he is free to inhabit whiteness, straightness, and cismasculinity.¹³³

Hero-Monsters: Monstrously Interpretable

There can be little doubt that hero-monster representation plays with radical ideas concerning bodies and identities, but this does not guarantee or site them as radical figures. Over time, monstrosity has migrated from the inner to the outer, from the

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Either in his trademark trilby and trench coat or his Fantastic Four uniform.

interior to the surface, from the soul to the body — a movement, Halberstam argues, that sees monsters characterized today by somatic visibility rather than deviant interiority.¹³⁴ As Halberstam writes, postmodern monstrosity plays out on surfaces “in what Baudrillard has called the obscenity of ‘immediate visibility’ and what Linda Williams has dubbed the ‘frenzy of the visible.’”¹³⁵ Halberstam concludes that both gothic and contemporary monstrosity, no matter their differences, destabilize borders and boundaries.

My account of hero-monsters certainly echoes these kinds of standpoints, but I am not certain that Halberstam’s conclusion entirely applies to mainstream representations of superhero monstrosity. Within hero-monster characterizations, monstrosity has undoubtedly moved from the interior to the exterior, from conceptual to representational realms, but their representation, or surface, tames their deviant interiority, or radical promise. Representation is a stabilizing force in their unruly, binary-collapsing transformations. Banner may transmogrify into a monstrous Hulk, but for all his monstrosity, the Hulk remains indubitably represented as male and masculine and coded as a white heterosexual, and moreover, as a discrete subject. Hero-monsters are not as unstable, as fluid in meaning, as their surfaces, monstrosity, narratives, creators, and criticism would have us believe. Yes, they transform, but they do so always within normative, hegemonic bounds. This reading destabilizes the idea of the monstrous superhero as a radical figure, but, usefully, it does not fully dispel it. It also points to a potential reactionary interpretation of these figures, adding another meaning (making) layer, and thus further complicating the ideological condition or status of these figures. Meaning here is unstable and in flux and speaks to the idea of “infinite interpretability.”¹³⁶ As Halberstam later writes, “monsters are always in motion, and they resist the interpretative strategies that attempt to put

¹³⁴ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

them in place.”¹³⁷ And that, as Donna Haraway puts it, is their “promise.”¹³⁸ And as with monsters, so to with superheroes and genre meaning, always in process, always interpretable.

Superhero Transformation: Bridging Binaries

In seeking to interpret the ideological disconnect marking superhero transformation, and the genre itself, away from binaries, it is useful to remember the kinds of ideological meaning that the genre is traditionally thought to articulate.¹³⁹ I detail this in the opening chapters of this book, but what I do not discuss is how the subversive/recuperative opposition affects and regulates superhero discourse and, thus, superhero and genre meaning (making).¹⁴⁰ That’s to say, how it disciplines superhero discourse as cultural legitimation/cultural criticism, progressive/conservative, positive/negative, and worthy/unworthy.

Knowledge produced from well-established and opposing standpoints can be valuable and insightful, but it runs the risk of becoming routine, “safe,” or stale. The danger of “disciplinary correctness,” according to Halberstam, is that it “confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing,” and there is undoubtedly an air of “correctness” in superhero discourse.¹⁴¹ The subversive/recuperative binary, for example, appears to be a given, with the genre and its protagonists staged as either representing progressive ideas and radical ways of being (e.g., posthumanism, queerness) or as reflecting and bol-

¹³⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹³⁸ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge), 85.

¹³⁹ Note that the genre’s suppression of radical promise is also an ideologically transformative action, just to different, conservative, ends (i.e., the conceptually radical Martian Manhunter is transformed into a more conservative figure).

¹⁴⁰ Briefly, that the genre either subverts (criticizes) or reifies (legitimizes) hegemony. Superhero discourse refers to knowledge and meaning produced by fans, scholars, and the superhero industry, as well as inbetweeners, such as aca-fans and creator-fans.

¹⁴¹ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 6.

stering statist ideologies and power relations (e.g., heteronormativity, exceptionalism).¹⁴² But as alluring as “black and white” thinking can be, it cannot simply be the case that ideological meaning is always either subversive or recuperative.

As we have seen, while superhero transformation is often showcased as unruly and destabilizing, its normalized enactment tames its radical promise. Remember Martian Manhunter? A character capable of limitless transformation, but you’d never guess it from his disciplined and delimited representation. Instead, we see transformative power, radical promise, and creators’ imaginations constrained and disciplined by categorical and somatic conventions as well as social norms. Moreover, because these characters are so delimited, their subversive natures invariably become co-opted into confirming hegemony. But this cannot be, as much as genre discourse suggests, the end of the matter. While functioning to control ideological meaning, the recuperative aspect of Martian Manhunter’s or Banner’s or Grimm’s transformation simultaneously fails to fully regulate the subversive elements, the un/becomingness. Mainstream narrative strategies and representational codes cannot wholly suppress the utopic queerness of superhero transformation. Despite his regulation, Martian Manhunter “disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo.”¹⁴³ Fans, especially perhaps minoritarian fans, still see and respond to a plural and progressive, if disciplined, idea of bodies and identities, and we see their responses in their transformative fanwork and civic engagement. They must, of course, first know what to look for.

¹⁴² A brief example: idealized superhero transformations are simultaneously open to dual readings, both radical and reactionary. Radical because they unsettle hegemonic ideas of the stability and knowability of bodies and identity, and because of the broad sociocultural acceptance shown to liminal or transitional subjects in superhero worlds. Reactionary because the somatic transformations presented are re-formative, for example, moving privileged subjects from normate positions to idealized ones.

¹⁴³ Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 5.

Making a case for slash as queer utopia, Ika Willis observes a similar imagological disorderliness, whereby intentionality and inconsistency allow queer readers to “make up the framework of possibility.”¹⁴⁴ The reader here “has to decide not only what readings [...] are possible, but what is possible in a (fictional) universe — and this decision must necessarily engage what she believes is possible in her own universe.”¹⁴⁵ And reading the phrase, the “framework of possibility” takes me back to the park full of swings in the last chapter and thus to agentic meaning makers and utopic meaning making.¹⁴⁶ To the “piratability of texts which affirms the possibility of change, not only in reading, but in the social institutions according to which we read.”¹⁴⁷

Given this meaningscape, it cannot be enough to simply say that the genre and its protagonists are either radical or reactionary; a more satisfactory and sophisticated reading reveals how radicalism is known, expressed, and readable. And it is in understanding that failure to cohere, to know, to be one thing or another is not always a loss, as Halberstam advises.¹⁴⁸ That, as with Reed Richards’s failed rocket-dream, it can bring forth new ways of seeing and being in the world, not necessarily easy occupations but made easier through bonds and solidarities — ways of seeing, being, and knowing amongst and beyond binary formulations.

Disciplined, traditional ways of thinking regard incoherence and contrariness, particularly when it comes to meaning (making), as negative, unproductive, and something to be avoided at all costs — a thought pattern that falls into another set of binary judgements (e.g., positive/negative, useful/useless). Convention dictates that it is preferable to retreat into the knowability, surety, and stability offered up by the binary. Without recourse

144 Ika Willis, “Slash as Queer Utopia,” paper presented at Queer Space: Centers and Peripheries conference, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, 2007, 4.

145 Ibid.

146 See “Worldmaking and Comics” in Chapter 2 of this volume.

147 Willis, “Queer Utopia,” 4.

148 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.

to the binary, the superhero genre and its attendant discourse fail to function as a coherent, reliable site of ideological meaning, but what happens when we introduce the notion of regulatory control into the subversive/recuperative binary? How might we determine the ideological standing of superhero texts and protagonists, and account for any instability of meaning without resorting to binary formulations? Or, as Halberstam might ask: “What’s the alternative?”¹⁴⁹

This chapter’s snapshot discussions are indicative of how the genre (mis)handles its protagonists’ radical promise. But alongside exposing the mechanics of the subversive/recuperative binary, they reveal another layer of my argument: radical ideas and practices are only permissible within dominant systems and media if they ultimately and fundamentally reconfirm hegemony. That is to say, the recuperative aspect occupies the privileged position, controlling and tempering the subversive element. This structural dynamic reveals the hierarchical and partisan nature of the subversive/recuperative binary and, crucially, introduces the idea of its regulatory quality. The American superhero genre can suggest all kinds of radical and progressive ideas, but only because they are contained within a hyper-conservative context, that is, a binary. Harry Benshoff and Alexander Doty are among several theorists who point to similar dynamics within different contexts, as does Kimberly Frohreich, when she writes of Marvel’s mutant X-Men and *True Blood*’s vampires that “[t]he spectator is thus asked to read difference positively as long as it coincides with, rather than confronts, white heteronormative hegemony.”¹⁵⁰

Introducing ideas of disciplinary and regulatory control is useful to my account because it suggests that the opposing sides of the subversive/restorative binary do not sit in isolation but rather in conversation; that is, they come together in a shifting,

149 Ibid.

150 Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*; Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Kimberly Frohreich, “Making the ‘Monstrous’ Visible? Reading ‘Difference’ in Contemporary Fantastic Film and Television,” *SPELL* 26 (2011): 247.

unbalanced alliance to articulate and regulate genre meaning. Thus, the ideological standing of the superhero genre, and its protagonists, is not staged in oppositions but rather in the contradictory, synchronous position of both/and. As a result, it is both subversive and recuperative. Recognizing this dialogic quality provides the first glimpse of a bridge that links opposing standpoints. This bridge transforms the boundary into a gateway that allows passage both across and into the separating space.

Bridges configure space differently. We may not only cross them, but also leap from them into the space between. Bridge jumping disrupts expectation and turns a linear crossing into a horizontal falling or failing. Like Felix Baumgartner's supersonic space jump in 2012, freefalling offers another way of seeing the world.¹⁵¹ Repurposing manmade structures, from bridges to binaries, can help us move away from reductive, oppositional conclusions and reveal other ways of seeing the radical promise of the genre and its protagonists.

A great deal of time and effort is expended in trying to pin definitions and meanings to illegible and indefinable forms. But working with both sides of the opposition — reanimating the radical and repurposing the reactionary — allows access to the anarchic in-between space. Superhero fans may plunge into the great divide rather than crossing or being marooned on exclusionary shores. Falling into the “/,” the opposition, we enter an ideological borderland. A place where meaning is mobile, unstable, and ambiguous, and where it is welcomed as such.¹⁵² Because, rather than bolstering standpoints, ideological meaning, generated in oppositional settings, is ultimately illegible and contestable and thus takes on a radical and queer air. At the macro level, genre meaning is incoherent, deferred, and suspended. Conclusions are never-ending. Nonetheless, rather

¹⁵¹ Working with a team of scientists as part of the Red Bull “Stratos” mission, Austrian parachutist Felix Baumgartner fell to Earth from the stratosphere in one of the longest recorded human free falls, 4 minutes and 19 seconds.

¹⁵² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

than embracing inconsistencies, contradictions, provisionality, and illegibility, superhero meaning makers of all stripes routinely find themselves arguing either/or positions, which, while rewarding on a micro level, leaves superhero discourse grounded in binary formulations. Moreover, treading “well-travelled byways” stymies other ways of engaging the genre and its protagonists.¹⁵³ Meaning (making) is thus not only corralled but entombed in the hands of vested agents—a disciplining convergence.

Jumping headlong into the subversive/recuperative binary, this book takes a little tumble into an untraveled borderland. By looking anew at this influential binary and embracing its associated tensions, instability, and contradictions, it is possible to un/make our understanding of the genre’s ideological condition. Recognizing meaning as influx, unstable, and infinitely interpretable reveals a genre failing to cohere in its ideological standpoint and to match ideas about what a radical genre *should* be. Possessing deep cultural significance for both minoritarian and majoritarian subjects, it is a genre refusing final definition, and in this sense and despite appearances, it is an incalculably queer genre. As the following chapters reveal, while the radical promise of the genre and its protagonists may appear compromised, all is not lost.

153 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.

CHAPTER 4

Texcapology: Origins and Territories

You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.

— Angela Davis, lecture at Southern Illinois University¹

You don't create new worlds to give them all the same limits of the old ones.

— Jane Espenson, *The Advocate*²

While the previous chapter explored the textual expression of the superhero genre's radical promise, this chapter reconceptualizes and recontextualizes its real-world enactment. Working in tandem with the closing case story chapters, it theoretically addresses questions circulating minoritarian engagement with the mainstream superhero genre: How do maligned and excluded fans keep a beloved genre alive and meaningful, given

1 James Anderson, "Angela Davis talk at SIUC on Feb. 13, 2014," *YouTube*, February 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s8QCucFADc>

2 Quoted in Neal Broverman, "TV Mastermind Jane Espenson: From Ellen to Buffy to Evil Queens," *The Advocate*, October 27, 2011, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2011/10/27/tv-mastermind-jane-espenson-ellen-buffy-evil-queens>.

its many erosions and misrepresentations? How do violative fan practices function as sites of empowerment and activism? And how can resistive modes of fanwork speak to and recover the genre's radical promise? Remembering always that minoritarian engagement with the genre is about more than just consciousness-raising or securing inclusion and diversity, it is also about fun, love, and community. To tackle these questions, I build upon previously discussed themes while also introducing a new way of thinking about "escape," a recurrent yet under-theorized motif within queer, minoritarian, and superhero worlds.

The notion that minoritarian superhero fans are, for example, simply escaping from one majoritarian world or future to another, and still another if we include superhero fan culture, is, as I have previously noted, deeply unsatisfying and problematic. It causes concern not only around the idea that minoritarian subjects are in some way seeking to escape into a world of extraordinary white men but also that minoritarian superhero fanwork may be working to buttress real-world racial hierarchies. As Adilifu Nama observes: "White superheroes pose a problematic incongruity for blacks who as victims of white racism are further victimised by reading and identifying with white heroic figures in comic books."³ But rather than follow the binary logic that minoritarian fan engagement with the American superhero genre *is* or *is not* problematic, Nama advocates adopting, as do I, a more nuanced, even strategic, stance. Indeed, within superhero and fan scholarship, several scholars have noted how superhero fans of color regularly negotiate and feel an affinity with the qualified outsidership of superheroes, yet they do not feel compelled to compromise their racial identity or lived experience.⁴ As an example, a minoritarian Kent/Super-

3 Adilifu Nama, "Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers," *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009): 134.

4 For example, Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), and Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001). See also Alanna Bennett's sophisticated discussion of similar issues in relation to identifying as a woman

man cosplayer clearly wants to be read and perform as Superman but not as a cishet white man: “Some people think that Black cosplayers are just trying to be [w]hite. No, we don’t wish we were [w]hite. We can be geeks and still love our melanin.”⁵

As I will show, escape can, and does, operate far beyond its customary meaning of “breaking free,” and as such, it can help to account for the complexities layered through the popular idea that minoritarian fans find “escape” in the American superhero genre, which is itself frequently derided as escapist. Moreover, reflecting upon the concept and practice of escapology, a maverick performance art and popular superhero trope, can lead us beyond flatly abstracting minoritarian fan engagement toward an understanding that appreciates, reflects, and fully accounts for the meaning-making promise of violative fan practices and the dynamic nodular concept of radical promise, one that captures their inter-spatial quality.

Escapology exhibits many of this book’s key themes—disruptive meaning making, transformation, repurposing, and world un/making—and, like minoritarian fan practices, it crosses the symbolic/lived divide.⁶ (In transferring the symbolic into the lived realm, escapology can, for example, be viewed as an embodied performance of the concept of liberatory escape.) But as I will discuss, escapology also possesses radical promise. Escapology performances reveal, disrupt, and disturb boundaries, and in moving from confinement to freedom, escapologists, alongside monsters, superheroes, and other fantastical beings, “enact the very possibility of change; their presence car-

of color with Hermione Granger from the white-centric Harry Potter mythos. Alanna Bennett, “What a ‘Racebent’ Hermione Granger Really Represents,” *Buzzfeed*, February 1, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alanna-bennett/what-a-racebent-hermione-granger-really-represen-d2yp>.

5 Tai Gooden, “Unmasking the Cosplay Community’s Sexism and Racism Problem,” *The Establishment*, May 12, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170518133102/https://theestablishment.co/unmasking-the-cosplay-communitys-sexism-and-racism-problem-3ca9431f58co?gi=250bd276b4a8>.

6 As we’ll see, the recovery of the genre’s radical promise also crosses this borderline.

ries with it the trace of dangers but also exciting and exhilarating migrations.”⁷ Similar to the concept of escape, escapology performances can, however, transcend the limitations of liberatory interpretations. As transformative, resistive, and empowered lacunae, they provide performers and onlookers with other ways of seeing the world. I conceptualize this synergy as textual escapology, or, as I prefer, “textapology.” As I detail below, textapology is a spatially dislocated, active, disruptive, transformative form of minoritarian textual engagement, here performed by superhero fans.

Motifs of Escape: E-Scape

Common-sense understandings of escape do not capture its dimensions and possibilities. It is chiefly understood as liberation, the act of getting away, the art of breaking free. And while fairly describing the concept and practice, there is another sense of escape sheltering within minoritarian discourse and superhero narratives, and I wish to draw it out. As a baggy, protean concept, escape, as we’ll see, is insufficient to the task of describing social evolution, but I wish to keep it in play because of its power and established place in queer and minoritarian discourse, as well as superhero narratives. There is power in speaking the same language, and repurposing escape can help us do that while also illuminating its motley meaningscape.

Notions of sociocultural escape concern how we resist and survive current hegemony and reach beyond the personal into the social domain. Indeed, the language of escape is common in both realms. Liberatory escape, as a leaving/arriving practice, is an effective and all-too-common strategy in personal domains, useful for liberating oneself from an oppressive environment. But it is not always clear how emancipatory language translates to the social sphere. One can certainly find and create safe spaces, or lacunae, within the system, but one cannot ultimately

7 Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 17.

escape the deleterious effects of current hegemony, or “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” as bell hooks crisply puts it.⁸ My reconceptualization is thus less concerned with escape in personal domains but rather seeks to show how it speaks, or operates, in social spheres, though there are obvious overlaps. As I’ll show, liberation is only one facet of escape. Indeed, it might be preferable to consider escape as a nexus, with liberation as one node and survival as another. That is, escape provides a resistive way of remaining and surviving within oppressive and deleterious worlds, experiences, and moments. Not forgetting that it may also be about disrupting, evading, and un/becoming too.

Escape is a common descriptor and metaphor within work and performances treating queer and minoritarian subjects, experiences, and communities, whether implicitly or explicitly.⁹ So too, immurement. A frequent motif that may involve physical as well as emotional imprisonment.¹⁰ There’s a good reason why the idea of escaping a small-town rural setting and mindset in favor of cosmopolitan urban centers reverberates through-

-
- 8 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Liberatory escape can, for example, free an individual, but in so doing it can also release them into another kind of confinement or the confines of another identity.
- 9 Antebellum liberation and enslaved peoples’ narratives, such as William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) and the self-written *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (1851), offer powerful examples. As does Emma Parker’s queer reading of Judith Katz’s novel *The Escape Artist*, Hannah Kosstrin’s queering of the “Escape” solo (part of the *Rooms* suite) choreographed by Anna Sokolow in 1954, or Todd Hayne’s 1991 film *Poison*, featuring as part of its triptych a gay love story set in a prison entitled “Homo.” See Emma Parker, “Magic, Diaspora, and Klezbian Desire in Judith Katz’s ‘The Escape Artist,’” *Textual Practice* 25, no. 4 (2011): 689–710, and Hannah Kosstrin, “Queer Spaces in Anna Sokolow’s ‘Rooms,’” in *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 10 Prison settings are, for example, popular locations for exploring queer sexualities, with the “women-in-prison” genre experiencing a revival across various media, for example, the TV shows *Orange Is the New Black* (2016–2019) and *Wentworth* (2013–2021), or the dystopian comic book *Bitch Planet* (2014–2017).

out international queer narratives.¹¹ The widespread adoption of the language of escape within queer and minoritarian discourses — “evading capture,” “to escape the punishing norms,” “to escape the song’s interpellating call,” or “to escape from the busyness of a world” — also speaks strongly to its liberatory meaning.¹² But for all its primacy and potency, as a concept and practice, escape is underworked and under-theorized.

Escape tropes and motifs similarly mark superhero narratives and characterization, often as a precursor to transformation. Escaping the dangers of Krypton transforms Kal-El into the all-American Clark Kent and subsequently into the god-like Superman.¹³ Echoing tropes of queer migration, Clark Kent escapes small-town, rural America for Metropolis. In the cramped space of a phone booth, Superman iconically escapes from under Clark Kent’s workday attire. Bruce Wayne creates and escapes into the myth and costume of the Batman. When Steve Rogers joins the “Super-Soldier” project, he transforms his body and his life, escaping a non-normative materiality, poverty,

11 For example, Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 253–77; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); and Bryony White, “Queering the Rural,” *Hazlitt*, July 26, 2017, <http://hazlitt.net/feature/queering-rural>. Escape also characterizes narratives and discourse around broader, but still largely binary, concerns around queer migration and mobility. See Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004).

12 Isaac West, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy, “Queer Worldmaking in the ‘It Gets Better’ Campaign,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* (Fall 2013): 57; Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 93; and Sara Ahmed, “Black Feminism as a Life-Line,” *feministkilljoys*, August 27, 2013, <https://feminist-killjoys.com/2013/08/27/black-feminism-as-life-line/>.

13 Alternatively, in *Superman: Red Son* (2003), Kal-L arrives in the Ukraine, part of Soviet-era Russia, and becomes Red Son, savior and defender of the Russian people.

and even linear time and death. Tony Stark escapes death by becoming Iron Man.¹⁴ And on it goes.

As we shall see, escape so conceived becomes about more than just breaking free and begins to embrace notions and possibilities of transformation of the self and of the world, whether it be moving to a new city to avoid small-town suspicions and prejudices, like Clark Kent and many queer people, or performing racebending superhero cosplay, which sees cosplayers transform and escape from the idea of superhero realms as always and only the domain of cishet white men. (Re)imagining escape as a way of looking and as a means of resisting and surviving hegemony deepens its resonance and invites us to reconsider this quotidian concept and practice, asking, how can escape fully convey and capture the subtleties and complexities of surviving as well as resisting oppressive systems?

My first step in answering this question is to temporarily dismantle the word “escape” and to create a new way of looking at it, quite literally. And so, with the dash of a pen, escape becomes e-scape. The “e-” prefix refers to being “out,” “outside,” or “without,” and the “-scape” suffix refers to a kind of space or view of something. By rending escape as e-scape, I mean to interrupt, disrupt, and transform its everyday definition and meaning. Escape here ceases to always and only mean breaking free, a traversal meaning that evokes departures and arrivals, and opens up to other meaning-possibilities: perhaps the sense of an outside(r) view or of being viewed or thought of as an outsider. Such meanings speak directly to minoritarian experiences of living within a majoritarian world, whether surviving, resisting, or survival as resistance.

¹⁴ Conversely, when we think of Wayne/Batman or Stark/Iron Man, it is possible to imagine that their transformations not only free them but imprison them in new identities, and in Stark’s case, a new body. Steve Rogers also, in becoming part of a military project, “imprisons” himself in government structures and bureaucracy. When ordinary citizens become superheroes, they confine themselves to a way of being and behaving that is not always liberatory.

We can see then how e-scape begins to describe an awareness of being, or becoming aware of being, viewed or positioned as on the outside (i.e., those “without”), and how such transformative awakenings may give rise to emancipatory actions like activism and solidarity. Perhaps e-scape too describes the condition of (re)viewing the world and its structuring systems from outside(r) standpoints.¹⁵ For many outsiders, these arousals mark the beginning of not just thinking outside the box but of thinking that there is no box at all: as Elijah puts it in Chapter 1, “Real life doesn’t fit into little boxes,” or binaries. A transformative discovery that can leave people resolved to think and perhaps act willfully, seditiously, and without limits. I will come back to the subject of boxes, specifically the transformative power of escaping them, later in this chapter.¹⁶

Rupturing escape into e-scape registers the promise of looking out somewhere over the curving horizon, or rainbow, to imagine new presents, pasts, and futures. The concept of “looking out” also conjures a careful, watchful eye, suggesting the metamorphic idea of looking out for one another in love, community, and solidarity. It also serves as a protective, cautionary warning to “look out!” and, of course, refers to the idea of a “lookout,” someone who keeps others safe by alerting them to danger.

Rescripting e-scape repurposes an already present and potent concept. Its rearticulation frees it from its liberatory, often utopian, origins and repurposes it as a strategy for recognizing and e-escaping, that is, living within, an oppressive world. It creates a new way of seeing escape, one that captures and foregrounds the subtleties and complexities characterizing its broad use within outsider discourse. As a great deal of queer and minoritarian discourse and (counter)storytelling suggests, escape cannot

15 Drawing ways of seeing, being, and knowing together — all interacting within systems of power, epitomized here by the inside/outside binary — reminds me of the idea of “kenning” discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume. The little Scots-Gaelic word *ken*, we might recall, colloquially and powerfully expresses similar connections.

16 M. Night Shyamalan, dir., *Unbreakable* (Buena Vista Pictures, 2000).

always be about simply getting free, and e-scape indicates this. Looking anew and askance are critical survival strategies for queer and minoritarian subjects, and reading escape as e-scape brings these strategies to the fore.

Yet we cannot overlook the socio-political and cultural significance of the inside/outside binary evoked by the outsideness of the “e-.” (If there is an outside, so it goes, there must be an inside.) In this context, e-scape appears to reaffirm notions of binaries and “outsiderness” and to reflect the systemic positioning of queer and minoritarian subjects “relegated to the right of the virgule — to the outside of systems of power, authority, and cultural legitimacy.”¹⁷ But it is always possible to contest and subvert the inside/outside logic, for example, by remembering that to be “outside” also refers to the idea of being beyond the limits, scope, or grasp. To be outside can then mean to be beyond the reach of the system, a reading that, in a satisfying way, takes us back to our starting point.

Reconceptualizing escape provides a way to make it more meaningfully reflect its role in outsider discourse. In sum, dismantling escape reveals how it speaks not only to liberatory meanings but also captures something of the practices and lived experiences of queer and minoritarian subjects, that is, those who cannot in a conventional sense escape the “inescapable sphere.”¹⁸ In highlighting tactics useful to illuminating and disrupting systemic control, escape as e-scape becomes about more than trying to escape the confines of this world. It becomes about recognizing the power of disrupting and surviving today in order to open up possibilities for better tomorrows.

17 Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.

18 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

The Intertextuality of Escape: Motifs of Liberation and Transformation

“Holy Escape-Hatch, Batman!”

—Robin, *The Boy Wonder, Batman*¹⁹

Escape as liberation and transformation are recurrent themes in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).²⁰ But we also see something else, something that helps further release the concept of escape from liberatory exegesis.

Snapshot: “The Pit”

The Dark Knight Rises features an iconic battle between Batman and the villainous Bane. During the duel, Bane breaks not only Batman’s back but also his spirit. In failing to defeat Bane, Batman becomes Bruce Wayne again, and it is Wayne who is confined in the fearsome well-like prison known as the Pit.²¹ Before leaving him to die there, Bane tells him: “There’s a reason why this prison is the worst hell on Earth... Hope. Every man who has rotted here over the centuries has looked up to the light and imagined climbing to freedom.”²² Unlike the other prisoners, however, Wayne regains enough physical and mental strength to escape the Pit and rise up against Bane to become Batman once again.

This snapshot is useful because it elucidates instabilities within the concept of escape. As an example, Wayne’s escape evokes what Halberstam describes as a “utopian concept of escape as exodus.”²³ Wayne, quite simply, breaks free. This is a powerful

19 William Dozier, creator, *Batman* (ABC, 1966–68).

20 Christopher Nolan, dir., *The Dark Knight Rises* (20th Century Fox, 2012).

21 The Mamertine, a seventh-century real-world prison, may have inspired Nolan’s vision for the Pit. The only way in or out of the Mamertine was, like the Pit, through a well-like entry point, and prisoners were frequently left to starve with little hope of ever being released.

22 Nolan, *The Dark Knight Rises*.

23 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 32.

moment for Wayne, but also for his fellow prisoners, as his liberation also releases them.²⁴ But, in sociocultural terms, escape as liberation becomes utopian because, while one can escape one's circumstances, the idea of escaping the system appears idealistic or impossible. As yet, it is an unrealizable dream, hope, or wish. Bane points to this idea when he describes the source of the Pit's unbearableness as "hope." We may carve out resistive and liberatory spaces, but the system remains broadly intact, where "there is no getting outside the matrix of power."²⁵ The emancipatory idea of escape appears theoretically constrained, yet it characterizes swathes of queer and minoritarian discourse. So, how are these discrepancies accommodated within the concept of escape? Must escape always be liberatory, utopian?

This question brings out another quality of the portrayal of Wayne's escape and our recalibration of e-scape. It is not just about liberation but also transformation: personal, sociocultural, textual. Christopher Nolan, the film's director, could have glossed over Wayne's incarceration, but he chose to dwell on it, emphasizing the links between transformation and escape: to break free, Wayne must once again become Batman. In the prolonged prison scenes, we watch as he painstakingly rebuilds himself mentally and physically before making his bids for freedom. He begins by standing, then walks, and finally climbs and rises. At the start of his rehabilitation, Wayne claims to have no fear of death, and thus no love of life, but as part of his recovery, he learns to recognize and embrace fear, just as he did as a youth cruelly orphaned by gun violence. Along with his physical transformation, Wayne's chiropteran awakening enables him to climb, or leap, to freedom without the use of a safety line, signaling his reawakened regard for life. This may be the last time

24 Before leaving, Wayne lowers a rope into the well to allow the other prisoners a means of escape.

25 Angela Jones, "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness," *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 4 (2009): 7. While I evoke utopianism and futurity, it is not my intention, at this point, to enter debates around utopianism or futurity. I discuss these ideas later in this chapter and in a different context in Chapter 4 of this volume.

that Wayne makes the climb, but it is not the first. Indeed, he only survived his maiden ascent because he was wearing a safety line, which broke his fall and snapped him back to a childhood memory of his bat-shaped father rescuing him after he tumbled into an abandoned well. “Why do we fall, Bruce?” his father later asked, turning the traumatic experience into a didactic lesson. A question that recurs throughout Nolan’s films and which now jolts Wayne awake, reminding him that the purpose of falling, or failing, is to learn to pick oneself up, to rise, and so he does.

The framing, lighting, and intent of the “falling” scenes mirror each other. The flashback scene is a pivotal memory for Nolan’s version of Wayne/Batman, and it reaches back to the origin story told in *Batman Begins* (2005), a film portraying Wayne’s transformation into Batman.²⁶ Nolan’s use of flashback tells us that Wayne learns from his failures, but it also emphasizes that he is on his way to becoming Gotham’s defender once more. Wayne emerges from the Pit a different person than when he arrived, which includes a new way of seeing both himself and the world. An empowered Wayne/Batman later tells a diminished Bane: “You think you’re the only one with the strength to learn how to escape.” As Bane is well aware, Wayne is not the only one who has been changed by his time in, and escape from, the Pit. Among those who have escaped, the rise of Talia al Ghul, a female child, is particularly notable.²⁷

Talia was born in the Pit. And while her mother did not survive long, Talia lived there for about ten years. She only lasted that long because she disguised herself as a boy and because her devoted guardian, Bane, looked out for her. But she had to leave the all-male prison before she hit puberty and could no longer hide the fact that she was a girl. The Pit transformed Talia into a boy, and her escape transformed her back into a girl. Upon securing her freedom, Talia changed her gender expression to

²⁶ Christopher Nolan, dir., *Batman Begins* (Warner Bros., 2005).

²⁷ Talia is the daughter of the villainous Ra’s al Ghul, and she grew up to be one of Batman’s archenemies. Indeed, she is supported by Bane and is the archvillain of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

match her assigned sex, a shift suggested at the end of her escape scene. After climbing out of the Pit, Talia lifts her scarf over her short, boyish hair, an action that transforms the scarf into a hijab, a headscarf worn by many Muslim women.

The recurrent and intertwining themes of transformation and escape demand general attention, but they take on an intense significance within my discussion. We see them play out in Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning homage to superhero culture, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.²⁸ Layering his world with fantastical and mundane details and blurring fact and fiction, Chabon explores notions of escape through the figure of the superhero (focusing on the Golden Age in the late 1930s through 1950s), or maybe, given the degrees of intimacy these themes share, it is the other way around. Nevertheless, escape of all kinds is a recurring motif and changes lives irrevocably. Jewish characters escape, and tragically don't escape, nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. Those who arrive in the land "of the free" go on to escape brutalizing poverty and transform their mundane lives; by changing names and locations, they can break free from sociocultural expectations and time. And in Prague, a young Josef Kavalier learns the secrets of escapology from an elderly master escapologist named Bernard Kornblum, who goes on to help him escape nazi-occupied Prague.

Snapshot: Kavalier & Clay

The novel follows two Jewish cousins, Josef (Joe) Kavalier and Samuel (Sam) Klayman, as they make their way in the world by making superhero comics. Chabon indicates the novel's central themes on the first page, and their intersections resonate deeply within my discussion. Sam observes:

To me, Clark Kent in a phone booth and Houdini in a packing crate, they were one in the same thing [...]. You weren't

²⁸ Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000).

the same person when you came out as when you went in. Houdini's first magic act [...] was called "Metamorphosis." It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation.²⁹

And throughout the novel, Chabon weaves together themes of escape, escapology, and transformation. Speaking to the practices of many real-life superhero fans, Sam and Joe use superhero comics as a form of escapism and a way to (re)imagine and transform the condition of their lives. Joe escapes into superhero comics to alleviate family guilt and traumatic memories of nazi Germany, while Sam seeks refuge in them to escape heteronormativity and the constant struggle of suppressing his homosexuality and his physical disability, resulting from childhood polio. As they see it, superhero comics provide an escape from the confines of a mundane, ordinary life, akin to being "sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York," as Sam memorably puts it.³⁰ Sam, the artist, and Joe, the writer, are composites of real-life comics artists (such as Jim Steranko, Jack Kirby) and writers (such as Stan Lee, Joe Simon), and like their real-life counterparts, they secure their fortunes by creating superheroes. One title in particular captures the public imagination: an escapology-based anti-fascist superhero comic called *The Escapist*. Joe's experience as a Jewish refugee and an escapologist and Sam's closeted homosexuality and disability inform the *Escapist's* characterization and his motivation to liberate all who "languish in tyranny's chains."³¹

As a text, *Kavalier & Clay* defies rigid definition. It disturbs the meaning of the term "fictional" novel by, for example, including cameo appearances by real-life comics creators such as Stan Lee and Gil Kane. But it disrupts the real/fiction binary in other ways too. For example, the cover of the first issue of *The Escapist* comic book featured the *Escapist* punching Adolf Hitler, echo-

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 121.

ing an iconic Captain America cover from 1941. This Captain America cover is routinely repurposed within superhero culture and social justice activism, and it clearly inspired the unofficial, activist-based images of Wonder Woman and a slew of other superheroes punching former US President Donald Trump. It also perhaps inspired the viral video of an unidentified protester punching neo-Nazi Richard Spencer. The most spectacular instance of border crossing occurred, however, when Chabon's fictional comics title broke free from the confines of the novel to become a bona fide real-world superhero comic book series, written by Chabon and published by Dark Horse Comics.³² *The Escapist* thus not only world-hopped from fiction to reality but, by becoming a superhero comic, medium-hopped too, from novel to comic.

Although Chabon repurposes real-life events and people, he does not fully explore the idea that escape frequently necessitates a repurposing of the materials of confinement, a central theme of this book and a quality I describe as the intertextuality of escape. Bruce Wayne, for example, repurposed his childhood fear of bats into his escapist alter-ego Batman, and Tony Stark repurposed missile parts into an escape suit and became Iron Man. Indeed, Iron Man's origin story offers a rich example of transformation, escape, and repurposing, and their intersections.³³ Let's take a closer look.

In the opening scenes of the 2008 *Iron Man* film, Tony Stark is critically injured during an ambush and held captive by the "Ten Rings" terrorist group somewhere in Afghanistan. The kidnappers tell him that to secure his freedom, he must con-

32 Fannish desire for a real-world *Escapist* title made this crossover thinkable and possible, as did commercial possibilities. To secure the illusion that this was the comic from the *Kavalier & Clay* storyworld, *The Escapist's* artistic and production values reflected the style of Golden Age comics, and Kavalier and Clay were credited as *The Escapist's* creators, with the series tagged as "Michael Chabon presents."

33 Elements of Iron Man's origin story may change or be repurposed depending on the era and the storyteller(s), but the impetus (i.e., imminent death), outcome (i.e., Iron Man is un/made), and Ho Yinsen's role as trusty assistant remain the same.

struct a replica of a Stark Industries missile. They imprison him and another prisoner, Ho Yinsen, in a cave workshop and leave them to build the missile. Repurposing material from the workshop, Yinsen first reengineers and implants an electromagnet into Stark's chest, a lifesaving and life-changing intervention. Stark and Yinsen quickly hatch an escape plan and start building something, but it is not quite the something that their captors have in mind. Repurposing their skills and the material provided by their captors, the hostages manufacture a power source for Stark's electromagnet (i.e., an "arc reactor") and an armored suit that will enable Stark to escape and subsequently free Yinsen. The plan, as with most escape plans, does not go entirely as hoped, and Yinsen sacrifices himself to save Stark. Stark escapes his captors' grasp, and once back in the United States, he uses his experiences and memories to build a new, improved suit. He extricates his company from the bombmaking business and transforms his life, and the world around him, by becoming publicly known as Iron Man.

Halberstam, too, explores a repurposing theme in the escape-centered animated film *Chicken Run* (2000).³⁴ To escape their coop, the chickens must "create the conditions for escape from the materials already available."³⁵ Repurposing also characterizes transformative minoritarian fan practices, where reimagining and reworking mainstream texts is an empowering way to escape the exclusion or negative representation of source texts. Muñoz also evokes a sense of fannish repurposing or salvage when he writes: "Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy."³⁶ And all this talk of reworking and repurposing recalls Audre Lorde's decontextualized, and consequently often misread, declaration that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*"³⁷ Although talking about

34 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.

35 *Ibid.*, 32.

36 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.

37 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Cheryl Clarke (New

the white heterosexual bias within feminist academia, Lorde's metaphor can be, and has been, extended. Reading the statement contextually, it becomes clear that Lorde is not, as some argue, suggesting change is impossible but rather that change is only possible by reimagining, repurposing, the "master's tools" (i.e., difference, systems of oppression). Lorde writes,

*survival is not an academic skill. [...] It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. [...] In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.*³⁸

Writing of queer heterotopias, Angela Jones asserts a similar sentiment when she states: "We must work within the discourses at our disposal; there is no getting outside the matrix of power."³⁹ But Lorde's use of "survival" is telling. She does not talk about escaping the system but surviving it. Muñoz too refers to survival: "Disidentification [...] is a survival strategy,"⁴⁰ and "disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychological survival."⁴¹ Indeed, for Muñoz, disidentification is another way of saying "survival strategy." Survival means more than just existing or elopement. It is about persevering in the face of unending adversity; it is to endure. Lorde is not, I think, invoking survival in the utopian, or liberatory, sense but rather to convey the ongoing nature of the struggle and the strategies required to endure and escape, in the transformative sense, the daily grind of an oppressive system. To dismantle is not to destroy but to

York: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 112.

38 Ibid.

39 Jones, "Queer Heterotopias," 7.

40 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 28.

41 Ibid., 161.

unmake, and in so doing, to un/make or repurpose. To escape the confines of an oppressive system, we must, Lorde asserts, repurpose our differences as strengths, that is, to see difference as a source of empowerment and not, as the system requires, fear and hatred. Taking our differences and transforming them, repurposing them as strengths, enables us to see and be in the world differently and, in so doing, creates the possibility of un/making worlds.

The ideas of escape, transformation, world-un/making, and repurposing that I have been discussing can all be summed up in one potent concept and practice: escapology. A performer of escapology is known as an escape artist or escapologist, and while the approaches may differ, the outcome is the same.⁴² Escapology offers alternative ways of seeing and being in the world, so transforming it.⁴³ In this way, escapology becomes a subversive act, much like a drag cabaret, a urinal in an art gallery, or the displacement of a world from the center of a universe.

Escapology performances create spaces in which established meaning and “rules” are upended and suspended, sometimes quite literally. Adamantine handcuffs, chains, and locks are broken, and death can be defied. Performers create space, or “wiggle room,” within their environs and bodies to hide keys and so forth.⁴⁴ Their bodies become an inextricable part of the performance, symbolizing a deeper struggle for freedom. Bent and bound in chains, or squashed into fish tanks and milk churns, these corpora begin to look unlike bodies. They are visually arresting, and their peculiarity contributes to the spectacle of the escapologist’s performance. Escapologists use this

42 The suffix “-logy” suggests a more scientific approach.

43 Briefly, science reveals contingent “truths,” and the arts represent and (re-)interpret the world. And while a small number of practitioners took escapology into the mainstream (e.g., Houdini, Randi, David Blaine), it always retained elements of its marginalized origins as a “side show spectacle,” of not wanting to look but of not being able to look away. See Rosemary Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

44 See Sara Ahmed, “Wiggle Room,” *feministkilljoys*, September 28, 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/09/28/wiggle-room>.

strangeness to confound audience expectations, just as their performances disturb somatic and sociocultural “certainties.” They escape from prison cells, straightjackets, and coffins, all metaphors for social control, and just like many other artists and “-ologists,” their work says something about the ways of the world. It enlightens, informs, provokes, uplifts, transforms, and entertains. From birth, we are locked into ways of thinking and being in the world, but escapology testifies that escape or change is always a possibility, no matter how remote it may appear. Moreover, in their surreal performances, might we not glimpse a little of our own plight and struggle for freedom or change, so that when we cheer them on, a little bit of us may also be cheering for the possibility of our own liberation? Escapology is not just “escapist” fun and distraction. It can become allegorical.

As Chabon illustrates in *Kavalier & Clay*, the superhero genre and escapology are inextricably linked. A bond perhaps best exemplified by the real-life figure of Jim Steranko, former escapologist and comics creator. Indeed, Steranko provided the inspiration for Chabon’s superhero character, the Escapist.⁴⁵ In certain storyworlds, many superheroes and villains are trained escapologists too, such as Bane, Wayne/Batman, and Munroe/Storm from Marvel’s *X-Men* series. But for a small few, like Mister Miracle and Miss Miracle, escapology *is* their superpower.⁴⁶ John Zatara and his daughter Zatanna are likewise skilled illusionists and escapologists, cast in the Houdini mold. Indeed, John Zatara trained Bruce Wayne in escapology.⁴⁷ And in a subtle nod to this venerable association, an escapologist makes a

45 Describing his creative process, Chabon writes that he was “wrestling with the question of how to get my character of Joe Kavalier out of Nazi-occupied Prague when I read an article about Steranko’s career as an escape artist.” Chabon, cited in Brian Cronin, “Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #2!,” *CBR.com*, June 9, 2005, <http://www.cbr.com/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-2/>.

46 Steranko similarly provided the inspiration for Mister Miracle. Chabon, quoted in *ibid*.

47 Dan Riba et al., “Zatanna,” Episode 50 of *Batman: The Animated Series* (Fox Kids, 1993).

brief appearance in *Wonder Woman* (2017).⁴⁸ Inspired by this rich heritage, I enfold escapology into my work, and in what follows, I demonstrate its value to my project, but first I set the stage with an illustrative real-life example of escape, repurposing, world un/making, and un/becomings.

Snapshot: The Amazing Randi

James Randi, also known as “The Amazing Randi,” was an escapologist and skeptic who spent his whole life escaping things. From self-imposed physical restraints (e.g., chains, straightjackets, and safes) to what he himself might have described as the bonds of “bad” ideas, such as thaumaturgy and alchemy, as well as heteronormativity and other social norms, notably religion. This world un/making project quickly became his life’s work. I say world “un/making” because Randi wanted to change the world by changing how people saw and thought about it. Above all, he wanted to free people from the bonds of myth, superstition, and herd thinking, and using his insider knowledge, he sought to expose the reality, or “truth,” behind the illusions of what he colorfully called “woo-woo,” namely, the paranormal, theism, faith healers, and psychics.⁴⁹

Randi was privileged in many ways as an educated, affluent, cis white man, but in his personal life, he subverted, if not entirely escaped, several sociocultural norms as a gay atheist in an intercultural, intergenerational relationship. Randi, who had lived with his life partner, José Alvarez, for over three decades, came out publicly at the age of 81, and he and José married in 2013. Up until then, Randi operated a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy: “I’ve been out all my life, if anyone asked.”⁵⁰ Randi’s sexuality

48 Patty Jenkins, dir., *Wonder Woman* (Warner Bros., 2017). As they walk through the Port of London, Diana Prince and Steve Trevor pass the escapologist, who is wrapped in chains and entertaining a small crowd.

49 In this and many other regards, Randi’s life was like that of another renowned escapologist, Harry Houdini.

50 James Randi, “Big Think Interview with James Randi,” *Big Think*, April 16, 2010, <https://bigthink.com/videos/why-i-came-out-at-age-81/>.

was not news to a lot of people. What was news, however, was Alvarez's arrest for identity theft in 2011.

Unbeknownst to Randi, a young Deyvi Orangel Peña Arteaga had fled Venezuela twenty-four years earlier to escape homophobic persecution and, upon arrival in the United States, had adopted an alter-ego, much like superheroes do. A voyage of un/becoming that saw him cross more than geographic borders, Arteaga broke out of the prison house of Venezuela only to reemerge in the United States as a different person, José Alvarez.⁵¹ Alvarez remains undocumented but has been assured by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement that he will not be deported from the United States, and thus from the queer world that he and Randi un/made together. Escaping Venezuela, the man who would become Alvarez embarked not just on a journey to a new world but upon a world-un/making (ad)venture.

Randi's coming-out experience was very different from Alvarez's, and as with most coming-out stories, it is layered and full of personal complexities.⁵² As an example, Randi recollects that he did not feel the pressures of heteronormativity: "The point that I came out so late in my life is that I never got around to it."⁵³ But he also movingly recalls how these pressures prevented him from coming out as a young man, a scenario certainly familiar to Alvarez: "When I was a teenager that would have been the last thing I would have done. I would've gotten stoned. I would've been beaten up every day, I'm sure, by the kids at school."⁵⁴ Although Randi said that coming out made no difference to his life, he was aware of the transformative potential of coming out for individuals, and evoking notions of escape, he describes how it "relieves them of a bit of the burden, you feel somewhat freed

51 Arteaga's identity theft was only discovered when the "original" José Alvarez applied for a passport.

52 For a critique of the complexities of "coming out," see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

53 Randi, "Big Think Interview with James Randi."

54 Ibid.

up.”⁵⁵ The pronoun slippage is revealing here as it suggests that although Randi feels untouched by the hand of heteronormativity, he was perhaps not always as free of it as he imagines.

Randi and Alvarez’s story speaks to the heart of this book. It is a tale full of becomings, world and meaning un/making, escapes, and dual and blurred identities and borders. Conjuring and escapology transformed an ordinary James Randi into an “amazing” version of himself. (Similar to how many ordinary people, not least Peter Parker or members of the X-Men, became “amazing” versions of themselves.) Randi’s complicated relationship with heteronormativity suggests an early sociocultural tension, which may have drawn him in some small way to a career escaping and defying physical, sexual, and psychical limitations. Like Parker or any other superhero, life experience saw him become a divided subject: public/private, ordinary/fantastic. It also provided him with a civic motivation: to, as he saw it, protect vulnerable citizens from “bad” people and “bad” ideas and thereby make the world a safer, better place, a *modus operandi* echoing Superman’s mantra of fighting for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.”

Escapology: Textual Escapology

As Randi’s life experience illustrates, escapology “symbolises a desire for freedom.”⁵⁶ It is about defying expectation and querying realities. It is a form of world un/making. We see these ideas at play in the “renegade form of ‘escape artistry’”⁵⁷ performed by Henry “Box” Brown, a formerly enslaved person who escaped the institution of slavery in 1849 by mailing himself in a wooden crate to the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society.⁵⁸ Brown entered

55 Ibid.

56 Parker, “Magic, Diaspora, and Klezbian Desire in Judith Katz’s ‘The Escape Artist,’” 710.

57 Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 11.

58 See Henry “Box” Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2015). As an aside, it is worth noting that

the crate as an enslaved person and emerged a survivor, a free man, and an activist. It was a liberating, transformative experience, not only for him but for the world around him, where “the act of fleeing is an existential act of self-creation.”⁵⁹ After his escape, Brown toured with an innovative and popular anti-slavery exhibition and, through it, performed an early form of consciousness-raising. His show featured a re-enactment of his escape, and in its theatrical staging, Brown “tapped into the evolving art of escapology.”⁶⁰ Brooks asserts the centrality of Brown’s body to his escape performances, writing that he used “the black body as a tool of defiance, as a site of illusion, theatrical mastery, and reinvention.”⁶¹ Brown’s performances blurred the lived/symbolic binary and allowed him to tap into the powerful idea of escape and its associations with personal and socio-cultural transformation, something at the heart of escapology and this book.

Escapology speaks directly to poststructuralist and queer conceptions of minoritarian readers and audiences escaping from the confines of unrepresentative texts and encoded meaning. Through their transformative, repurposing work, some of these readers, spectators, and fans become textual escapologists, or, as I describe it, “textcapologists.” Their textual encounters and counterstories exhibit notions of e-scape, transformation, repurposing, and world un/making. Through their resistive tex-

Harry Houdini, performing after Brown’s consciousness-raising touring, was feted for his “box escapes.” And it is difficult to ignore the parallels between Brown’s and Houdini’s box escapes, as well as their different registers, one for entertainment and one for survival and, later, activism. A distinction speaking to issues around contemporary allyship, such as the idea that people protest for varied reasons. During the 2020 global racial justice uprisings, for example, some Black activists expressed concern about white protestors’ long-term commitment to racial justice, suggesting that for some white people, protest is more about entertainment and performance (as with Houdini), whereas for Black protestors, it is a matter of life and death (as with Brown).

59 Paul Jefferson, cited in Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 69.

60 Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 123.

61 *Ibid.*, 121.

tual engagement, they become subversive meaning makers and world un/makers, and their rescripted texts and performances challenge fan stereotypes and disrupt hierarchical meaning-making relationships while undermining official meaning (making). Escapology has two main expressions that speak to fan practices. The first, “overt,” evokes public acts of repurposing texts seen within media fandom (e.g., convention hall cosplay) and social activism (e.g., creating superhero-inspired protest costumes and signs), while the second, “covert,” suggests a much more private connection and reanimation of a text’s meaning.⁶² The activity is still going on, but we just might not get to see it or know who is doing it.⁶³

Some might rightly say that, unlike minoritarian subjects, escapologists choose to place themselves in perilous situations and hostile environs, and that while they may require assistance to secure their confinement, it is they who decide to enter the cell or the straitjacket. To be clear, I am in no way equating the lived experiences of minoritarian subjects with those of escapologists. I am instead keen to open a dialogue between the disparate yet theoretically connected practices and meanings of minoritarian audiences and escapologists.

Texcapology: A Strategy of Resistance, Subversion, and Survival

The concept and practice of escapology speaks usefully beyond its origins and, as we have seen, to the superhero genre. I wish, now, to extend it a little further and think about it in terms of minoritarian fans and audiences. Texcapology is a portmanteau of “textual escapology,” and it packs, as Humpty Dumpty

62 Superhero images, comics panels, icons, and narratives often initially inspire such activities, indicating again the blurriness of the real/imaginary binary (e.g., Ms. Marvel and Wonder Woman were popularly adopted as symbols of real-world resistance to the Trump presidency).

63 Individuals may participate in fandom and social activism, for example, but they may do so anonymously and/or online.

might say, the meanings of two words into one.⁶⁴ It purposely houses ideas that are already in-play within outsider discourse and the superhero genre, albeit repurposed. This circularity increases the term's resonance, but recontextualizing these ideas also allows them to interact with, and reverberate through and beyond, one another. Ultimately, it creates a space within which to rethink, rearticulate, and unleash their latent power.⁶⁵ Its phrasing also seeks to capture a sense of the symbolism and agency of escapology.

Texcapology focuses attention on the coaction between texts, (counter)stories, worlds, bodies, and e-scape. (Remembering that, alongside notions of breaking free, e-scape embodies ideas of dodging, eluding, disrupting, evading, or becoming, a more powerful, something.) It foregrounds body aesthetics, both symbolic and material, and ways of looking, and because it is concerned with texts in their broadest sense, it speaks directly to (counter)storytelling and representation. As a newly minted theoretical lens, texcapology offers another way of thinking about minoritarian engagement with exclusionary texts and shows how certain textual encounters reanimate the genre's lost radical promise by migrating it from textual to lived realms.⁶⁶

Texcapology speaks to disidentification, especially to Muñoz's conceptualization of it as "a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort

64 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

65 Texcapology speaks to all kinds of minoritarian textual engagement. It is not limited to superhero audiences.

66 Before moving to demonstrate texcapology as a survival or resistance strategy, it should be noted that not all minoritarian engagement with the superhero genre falls within the purview of disidentification or texcapology. For example, when minoritarian fans engage with minoritarian superheroes, such as Miles Morales/Spider-Man or Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, their meaning-making strategies will differ from those used when engaging with majoritarian superheroes. It's also worth remembering that superheroes have long outgrown any sort of textual confinement, and people can be fans of superheroes or the idea of superheroes without necessarily consuming or being fans of the genre.

to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology,” but it is strategically different in its origins, focal points, and some outcomes.⁶⁷ As a concept, for example, texcapology foregrounds and works with a repurposed — expansive, empowered, utilitarian — idea of escape. And rather than focusing on *either* texts *or* somatic performances, texcapology breaks down the *either/or* opposition by, as its phrasing suggests, exploring their overlaps, intersections, and in-between spaces. By collapsing the boundaries separating texts and reality, especially around fictional and material bodies, it reveals the transformative qualities of liminality. Its focus on the liminal, notably on un/making worlds rather than worldmaking, also sets it apart, where the material world provides *a* focus but not *the* focus. The concept of world un/making brings to the fore the intertextuality, or non-hierarchical layering, of worlds. Texcapology adopts an expansive idea of performance and spotlights privateers instead of professional performance artists, although these definitions are porous.⁶⁸ Its emphasis on media fans and fandoms also distinguishes it. As does its focus on mainstream texts and performances rather than subcultural ones. And finally, it is undergirded by debates around diversity and representation in the mainstream media.

67 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

68 The term “privateer” taps into sailing terminology. A privateer is a private person, or an individual, who engages in warfare or acts of hostility for their own benefit but does so, unlike a pirate or a buccaneer, within the system. They straddle boundaries (e.g., official/unofficial, sanctioned/unsanctioned), and while benefiting themselves, their skirmishes also work to disrupt and upset the smooth running of an overriding system, be it commercial trading or mainstream media.

Texcapology: Enfolding Representation, Futurism(s), (Counter)storytelling⁶⁹

Storytelling is a site of control and resistance.⁷⁰ In terms of control and discussing heteronormativity, Sara Ahmed points to how repetitious stories shape, control, and regulate our lives, our ways of living, and our bodies, causing feelings of comfort for some and discomfort for others.⁷¹ But the stories I share in the closing chapters demonstrate a resistance, a counter, to these kinds of oppressive, institutional, and ideological master narratives.⁷² Radicalized, transformative fanwork, such as genderswap superhero cosplay, fanart, or fanfiction, perform powerful genre critiques as minoritarian fans aim to illuminate and fill representational gaps and omissions, but their fanwork also resists and highlights wider institutionalized systems of privilege and oppression that allow the genre to persist and flourish while employing deleterious and exclusionary practices. As discussed, an unrepresentative image overwhelms our mediascape: the cishet nondisabled white Western male. This predominant image, and agent, has successfully suppressed diverse media representation. Fortunately, hegemonic agendas can be checked.

Foucault, for example, suggests that resistance is always a possibility: “There is no power without potential refusal or revolt.”⁷³ And indeed, there are several intersecting routes to

69 A portion of this section appears in Ellen Kirkpatrick, “On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1483>.

70 See Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, eds., *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

71 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

72 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

73 Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Laurence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 83–84.

resistance: first, to realize that “real world image-making is political”;⁷⁴ second, to alter our way of looking at images; and third, to come to control, and thereby change, representational schemas. Many of the world’s intersecting futurist movements work, for example, to centralize minoritarian bodies and identities, lived experiences, and belief systems.⁷⁵ In so doing, they decentralize, decolonize, and problematize the homogeneity stifling the world’s storytellers and stories, typically tales of cis het white nondisabled Western males, often affluent. For marginalized subjects, such movements and strategies create and sustain agency. The feminist reworking of Édouard Manet’s painting *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) evidences these forms of representational resistance, as does the similarly focused genderswap fan-art project *The Hawkeye Initiative* or Orion Martin’s aforementioned racebending superhero art project. Marvel’s recasting of white male characters as white women also speaks to identity-bending practices, as with Thor/Jane Foster and Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers, a broadly pacifying move responding to increasing pressure from sections of superhero fandom to diversify its stable of characters. As we’ll see in the closing chapters, bending practices represent and produce radically altered images and ways of looking that challenge aspects of genre as well as social and fan orthodoxy. Bent superheroes, thus, represent just one more transformation for the always transforming superhero body. In creating alternative images and new ways of looking at both the original image and the new image, these kinds of practices transform not only the look of the present but also how we might view the past and (re)imagine the future.

(Counter)storytelling, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told,”⁷⁶ forms the heart of this book, just as it sits at the heart of many social justice

74 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 5.

75 For example, queer, feminist, ethno-, or Afrofuturistic movements.

76 Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 32.

movements and theoretical frameworks, such as critical race theory and queer theory, as well as intersectional feminism and indigenous and environmental activism. Within these intersecting domains, the transformative, connective power of stories is universally acknowledged and utilized. Ahmed, for example, bases her powerful account of diversity on a series of interviews with diversity practitioners: “My aim has been to retell the many stories you told me. This book is thus the product of our collective labor.”⁷⁷ Ahmed recognizes and enacts the metamorphic, entwining power of surfacing and sharing untold stories, which are all the more powerful for emerging through lived experience. We can also see this force manifested in the hashtag evocation of “me too,” a phrase and movement originating with Tarana Burke in 2006: “It’s about the millions and millions of people who, one year ago, raised their hands to say, ‘Me too.’”⁷⁸

Ahmed, Burke, and anyone who shares their lived experience believe in the transformative, world- and self-making power of (counter)storytelling, which includes stories of exploitation, oppression, suppression, and exclusion but also of resistance, resilience, and survival. Minoritarian fans tap into these traditions by telling their stories, exemplifying and sometimes embodying the idea that there is power in a story shared, a connection made, a tradition broken, and “that we can be connected by what we come up against.”⁷⁹ And minoritarian superhero fans come up against a lot in their play, a lot of hostility, misconceit, and derision. As I come to discuss, this enmity is rooted in the broader recurring tradition of *talking about the problem, becoming the problem*.⁸⁰ To this end, I suggest that

77 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), ix.

78 Tarana Burke, “Me Too is a Movement, Not a Moment,” *TED*, November 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_moment.

79 Ahmed, “Black Feminism as a Life-Line.”

80 For example, see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018); and Rebecca Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of

transformative minoritarian superhero fans not only resist and (re)materialize the dominant narrative shaping the who's who of superhero culture but that by sharing their stories they also become "life-lines" for each other and for those of us also seeking an alternative past = present = future superhero culture.⁸¹

As an action that challenges hegemony with the aim of inciting change, (counter)storytelling is activism, and social media and alternative media are critical spaces for voices, practices, and stories marginalized within the dominant culture.⁸² As we shall see, transformative minoritarian superhero fans resist exclusion and hostility by creating and sharing their stories of other kinds of superheroes. Their aberrant, "willful" superheroic performances resist, (re)shape, and repurpose the dominant narrative of superheroes and superhero culture.⁸³ They rattle the comfortable idea of superheroes and superhero fans as cishet white men, and they upend Ahmed's feelings of "comfort/discomfort."⁸⁴ Those who have historically felt discomfited or disoriented within mainstream superhero culture are comforted by the legibility of superheroes and superhero fans of color, while those who have traditionally felt at ease or oriented within mainstream superhero culture are discomfited. As Kristen J. Warner observes, women of color and other minoritarian fans are present and active within media fandom, despite the stereotypes.⁸⁵ By attending conventions, posting photographs, blog-

Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699/538>.

81 Ahmed, "Black Feminism as a Life-Line."

82 See Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989): 2411–41.

83 See Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)," *Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 1–8, and Sara Ahmed, "Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character," *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 231–53.

84 See Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68.

85 Kristen J. Warner, "ABC's 'Scandal' and Black Women's Fandom," in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 32–50.

ging about their experiences, and broadly sharing their stories, transformative minoritarian fans effect multifaceted activism: the resistive act itself, producing the fanwork, and the (counter) storytelling action — creating and sharing stories that disrupt and undermine dominant narratives, whether genre, fannish, or cultural. Their counterstories make the invisible visible and the impossible possible, not only sustaining and serving their own practice and communities but also inspiring and emboldening others to perform similar resistive fanwork. Remembering, that it's always about having fun and sharing the love too.

Storytelling, consciousness-raising, and community-building are foundational forms of grassroots fan activism. As an example, cosplayer of color Chaka Cumberbatch recalls an interaction with a young female “Blerd” (Black nerd) at a convention. The girl was excited to see Cumberbatch cosplaying Huntress, an established white female superhero, and told her that “she didn’t know black girls were ‘allowed’ to cosplay, that she hardly knew any black female superheroes, and that she had no idea ‘people like us’ could join in on things like comic books, cosplay, and conventions.”⁸⁶ This encounter perfectly illustrates the transformative power, the activism, inherent in creating “imagined moments of identification and representation for an audience that rarely gets to see an actress of color in a leading role.”⁸⁷ Through her disidentificatory cosplay performance, Cumberbatch was able to embody and tell the young girl a different story, one where women of color get to play the hero and be superhero fans. Cumberbatch’s story echoes Warner’s assertion that “one of the main ways that Black female fandom makes Black femininity visible is by consciously moving mediated women of color, who often occupy supporting roles,

86 Chaka Cumberbatch, “I’m Demanding Better Representation for Black Girls Nerds in Geek Culture,” *xoJane*, October 7, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130206095511/http://www.xojane.com/issues/mad-back-cosplayer-chaka-cumberbatch>.

87 Warner, “ABC’s ‘*Scandal*’ and Black Women’s Fandom,” 34.

to the center, transforming them into leads in fan-produced discourse.”⁸⁸

By calling out and resisting the representational homogeneity of the superhero genre and its attendant culture, transformative minoritarian fans perform a powerful form of resistance. Their engagement unmasks the all-too-common misconception of fandom as “a homogenously normative band of Othered outsiders.”⁸⁹ Their fanwork illustrates the difficult, currently uncomfortable kinds of stories. They embody and illuminate the awkward questions. They are akin to feminist killjoys, as Pande suggests, fandom’s killjoys: “The one who gets in the way of other people’s happiness. Or just the one who is in the way — you can be in the way of whatever, if you are already perceived as being in the way. Your very arrival in a room is a reminder of histories that get in the way of the occupation of that room.”⁹⁰ And talking more broadly about race and racism in fandom, alongside Rebecca Wanzo, Pande asserts the quandary of “observing the problem, becoming the problem,” and white entitlement as well as ownership of fan spaces:

It’s that position of the feminist killjoys [...]. You talk about it, you’re the problem. Everybody else is having fun, [...] for a lot of people who perhaps have been sailing along in their particular experiences of fandom are saying, “well, this was never a problem earlier, I don’t see why you guys are coming in — you know and *taking over our spaces* and spoiling our fun.”⁹¹

Transformative minoritarian fans get pushback from all quarters of superhero fandom. But genre critique, the desire to trans-

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 36.

90 Rukmini Pande, quoted in Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel, “Episode 22A: Race and Fandom Part 1,” *Fansplaining*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/22a-race-and-fandom>, and Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys,” 5.

91 Ibid. See also Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers.”

form canon, is only one strand of their resistance. The very act of coming together to form another line — lineage, family, life, and perhaps even battle — is a critical part of their activism. This line reaches at least eighty years into the past, as they reimagine established majoritarian characters, and stretches endlessly into the future, as their resistive practice sparks a renaissance in which the genre and its attendant culture becomes an inclusive, diverse, and thus infinitely better version of itself. Transformative minoritarian superhero fans give pause to the li(n)e that superheroes can only be one thing because they have always only ever been one thing. In this way, they refuse to toe the line. Through their performances, they rewrite the genre's past and thereby rematerialize its present and future. Discussing Black female fandom as resistance, Warner examines three interventions, identified by Jacqueline Bobo, open to Black women engaging exclusionary texts, namely: "imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and Black women's social condition."⁹² Each is clearly in play within transformative minoritarian fan practices, performances, and communities. Such fanwork is meaningful in and of itself, but when witnessed by another Other, its resistive power intensifies. Ahmed's utilization of the lifeline speaks to the power of such solidarity:

A lifeline can be [...] the quiet words of an encouraging friend, an unexpected alliance with a stranger, the sounds of a familiar landscape, or of an unfamiliar one; it can be a revelation that comes to you when you are seated quietly trying to escape from the busyness of a world; or it can be when you are caught up in the buzz of a pressing intense sociality and are caught out by a thought. A lifeline can be the words sent out by a writer, gathered in the form of a book, words that you hang on to, that can pull you out of an existence, which

92 Warner, "ABC's 'Scandal' and Black Women's Fandom," 38. See also Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

can, perhaps later, on another day, pull you into a more livable world.⁹³

It can also be the sight, story, or rumor of a person of color boldly dressing up as a beloved white superhero, despite and perhaps because of the flak, to embody a different reality where minoritarian subjects have moved from the margins to occupy the center ground. Yet, as the stories at the end of this book show, the power of transformative fanwork isn't just that it provides a lifeline, but that it offers the possibility of becoming part of that lifeline, to not only receive but also to give comfort.

Texcapology then describes a transformative, resistive mode of storifying textual engagement: minoritarian fans rewrite exclusionary texts upon different surfaces with different materials, and in so doing, they transform not only their own lived and textual experiences but the form and character of the originating texts and fandom. In short, texcapology is a textured struggle for alternative meaning. Consequently, it cannot speak to all kinds of minoritarian textual engagement, only those located within territories of resistance and survival. Within the idea of texcapology, I place all the concepts and practices discussed thus far: escape reimagined, transformation, repurposing, (counter)storytelling, world un/making. I tie them together in one conceptual thread through which to weave an alternative understanding of how some minoritarian audiences engage exclusionary texts: how they make them mean something more. As the book's climactic case story chapters illustrate, texcapology can be detected within representations of minoritarian superhero fans and within personal as well as fannish responses to superhero texts. And by closing with their voices and experiences, the book's final word belongs to them.

But before presenting the case stories, I wish to take a moment to outline the spatiality of texcapology, emphasizing

93 Ahmed, "Black Feminism as a Life-Line."

the creative spatial processes at play within it.⁹⁴ It is not only about creating new worlds by escaping old ones, but also about discovering how to inhabit all sorts of exclusionary worlds, real and fictional. To contest and e-scape hegemonic pressures, texcapologists often dispel the boundaries between symbolic, imagological, and social spheres. Indeed, they comfortably circulate through these realms. It is safe to say that texcapologists create and operate within oppositional and disruptive lacunae. But how can we usefully conceptualize these spaces?

Un/Making Worlds: Territories of Texcapology

When thinking about territories of texcapology — fluid, liminal, transformative, empowering spaces layered through imagological, symbolic, and material realms — I go back to queer worldmaking and my conceptualization of world un/making. The “un/making” construction suggests a subversive, empowered, borderland space, a queer heterotopia. Gloria Anzaldúa describes borderlands as “in a constant state of transition.”⁹⁵ The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, [...] in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’”⁹⁶ Muñoz’s application of Ernst Bloch’s “concrete utopianism” also speaks to these kinds of disruptive almost premonitory, spaces. Muñoz writes of Bloch’s distinction between concrete and abstract utopias:

In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. [...] Concrete utopias can also be daydreamlike, but

94 This outline offers a conceptual framework for thinking about how texcapologists reconfigure space, which ties back to the idea of world un/making discussed in Chapter 3 of this volume.

95 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.

96 *Ibid.*

they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many.⁹⁷

Like Muñoz's and Bloch's "concrete utopias" or Ahmed's "breathing spaces," for Foucault, heterotopias are "something like counter-sites" that unlike utopias can be real places.⁹⁸ Angela Jones brings Foucault's notion of heterotopia into the queer realm. Although lacking intersectional breadth, Jones usefully describes queer heterotopias as "material spaces where radical practices go unregulated" and as

sites of empowerment. [...] [W]here actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical politics of subversion, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity.⁹⁹

All of these theorists evoke the idea of worlds within worlds, but curiously, each places an emphasis on the "real" world, on identifying and creating "outsider" spaces within the material realm. Drawing from their conceptualizations and emphasizing the

97 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 3. Muñoz also draws upon Bloch's approach to aesthetic theory and Bloch's assertions concerning the "anticipatory illumination of art," where representation speaks to the "not yet conscious" and in so doing creates a "utopian feeling." Bloch's idea speaks to aspects of this book and might perhaps begin to explain the celebratory emphasis found within superhero scholarship. Anzaldúa too invokes this anticipatory, revelatory quality in her concept of *la facultad*, describing it as "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities [...]. It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the consciousness that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols [...]." Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60.

98 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Foucault.info*, <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en/>.

99 Jones, "Queer Heterotopias."

action of laying and layering worlds, I seek to bend their ideas towards a spatially dislocated imagining of minoritarian textual engagement, in this case, with the superhero genre. Instead of prioritizing “real” places, I work with the idea of worlds as sites, spaces, and moments. I do so because texcapology takes place neither entirely in the material world nor in the symbolic or imagological realm. (Texcapology circulates, affects, and transforms texts as much as subjects and their cultural materiality.) In the closing case stories, I demonstrate the liberating idea of layering and layered worlds. World intertextuality is a powerful reframing device. It delimits the hierarchical ordering of worlds and can help describe how minoritarian audiences translate, migrate, and circulate elements originating from within textual and material realms.

The closing case stories illustrate different elements of texcapology, drawn from official superhero texts, minoritarian superhero fandom, and superhero-infused activism. I have organized them into chapters based on their media or surfaces rather than on their status as official or unofficial texts, though there are always overlaps. The line between official creator and fan isn’t often clear, and I wanted the book’s structure to reflect this. Indeed, although separated by titles and headings, the case stories reverberate through each other. In them, we see repetitions of ideas, intentions, and practices, just unfolding on different surfaces. Cosplay, for example, provides a focus in Chapter 5, but it also features in Chapter 6, albeit in surprising forms and realms. These illustrative stories are not meant to be read or perceived as dislocated, rarefied incidents but as a chorus, a refrain, just as the power of bird song, numinous in its own right, becomes more potent and impactful when heard during the dawn chorus, or as I observe in Chapter 2, the irregular strength of a random course rubble wall. Indeed, rather than interspersing the stories throughout the book, I chose to compile them at the end, hoping that when read together, they would ripple randomly through each other and allow readers to feel the power, the suggestion, of a critical mass of different people coming together through different mediums to tell the same

kinds of bending, transformative stories, as at a protest camp or rally, or even, foreshadowing our next chapter, a superhero flash mob. As noted, I wish to give the book's final say, or pages, over to these stories and their creators. This is not to suggest endings or arrivals, but to invoke a call and response modality, one already characterizing the fannish, grassroots creation of this mobile, textured, and in-play counterstory.

CHAPTER 5

“Everyone’s got their own story”: Materializing Superhero Praxis

Within the bounds of these “critically celebratory” closing chapters, I seek to create a space to commemorate the story of violative superhero fanwork, expansively conceived.¹ In other hands, this story might have focused on examining its effect on the echo chamber of official genre production: to what extent do these niche practices and performances *really* encourage a more inclusive, diverse genre? Or *really* make the world a better place? It might have stressed the limited effect this kind of resistive work has on official genre meaning (making) and the world. But that would have been a different story. Instead, I prioritize the story of resistive meaning making, focusing on how it impacts

1 Adilifu Nama, “Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers,” *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009): 133–44. While displaying a range of fannish engagement, the stories presented in this chapter feature people drawing upon the superhero genre and meaningfully engaging with it in their lives and activism. Thus, while some participants are further along the superhero fan spectrum than others, all can be usefully described as superhero fans. Moreover, the descriptor “fanwork” here covers a range of practices and performances, for while some of their work is less fannishly motivated, such as Superbarrio’s superhero-inspired activism, all expressions dialogue with the official superhero genre, even if unintentionally.

participants personally and socially and, of course, how this intersects and informs their engagement with a largely othering, often hostile genre and world. Multimodal, multivocal, participatory engagement with the genre creates a counterstory that challenges superhero culture doxa. For some, like our violative cosplayers, this is in direct response to the genre's exclusionary meaningscape.² For others, it is through the adoption of superhero tropes within their activism. But no matter the catalyst, the transformative effect of resistive fanwork is deeply felt within the realms of marginalized (fan) communities. In the great traditions of grassroots activism and futurisms, these practices and performances are powerful storytelling, consciousness-raising, and community-building actions. Remembering too, that my work aligns with the idea that the contestation of the cultural dominant is "never a zero-sum game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it."³ That is to say, resistive fanwork proves a powerful meaning-making strategy, one that enables excluded superhero fans to remain purposely engaged with a troublesome genre, but as a site of minoritarian resistance and survival, it is so much more.

This chapter's case stories play out on a humble and familiar surface: the human body. All involve dressing the ordinary body as an extraordinary superhero, for pleasure, for transformative purposes, or for a mixture of both. Working with the costumed body as a meaningscape allows me to consider transference and translation, as marginalized citizens transfer and translate an idealized notion of superheroes from a fictional to a material realm, from homogenized or "plastic"⁴ representa-

2 Violative in the sense of rule-breaking, of failing to maintain or respect dominant laws, traditions, or privileges.

3 Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1993): 106–7.

4 Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017), <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>.

tions to diverse materialities, making the invisible visible and the personal political. I wish also to underscore the repetition of overlapping surfaces and blurring borders in these moments of transference as superhero texts become city streets or convention halls, and paper, ink, and pixels become skin, blood, and spandex, but also where invisibility and disconnectedness become solidarity and community, and fanwork becomes activism. Some performances are more fannishly implicated than others, but the rich analytical work produced within fandom and fan studies on mimetic and transformative fanwork, as well as on costume play, or "cosplay," speaks usefully to all aspects of privateer texcapology. To that end, I begin with a scene-setting account of cosplay before focusing on minoritarian superhero cosplay. Building on this discussion, I storify other less fannishly oriented performances enacted by superhero-inspired community and social justice activists, opening with real-life superheroes and closing with Mexico City's illustrious Superbarrio Gómez.

Cosplay is an expansive, fluid term and practice, and the case stories presented here serve only as an illustrative snapshot. Cosplay might just as easily take place two-dimensionally as three-dimensionally, such as when a minoritarian fan-artist draws a portrait of themselves dressed as a favorite majoritarian superhero to be posted later on Twitter or Instagram for fun as well as a consciousness-raising tool. And when Yasmin, whose story features in the next chapter, imagines herself as a superhero, she repurposes Western traditions of costuming female superheroes to reflect her cultural and religious dressing traditions, resulting in an imaginative form of cosplay that migrates from the imagological realm to cinematic animation.⁵

5 Or, within video role-playing games such as *Batman: Arkham City* (2011) and *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* (2006), but the multiplayer game, *Gotham City Imposters* (2012) demonstrates it particularly well. Players within this game choose to join team Batman or Joker, but instead of *becoming* Batman or Joker, they cosplay them, so each game character looks different from the others and from their source character, reflecting real-life embodied modes of cosplay.

We might also think of superhero flash mobs, in which groups of people dressed as superheroes gather, seemingly spontaneously, to perform synchronized dances. These happenings can be purely for fun and mischief, but they can also be rooted in social justice activism, as with the “Superheroes and Villains for Education” flash mob held in Santiago and organized by the social collective Project SEIS of the University of Chile, a riotous, carnivalesque affair that saw fun, mischief, and protest overlap. The flash mob took place in one of Santiago’s most beautiful city squares, the Plaza de Armas. In this protest, civilians seeking to overturn real-world conventions and norms transformed a public square into a comics panel in which superhero conventions were upended, superheroes and villains danced together instead of fighting. Play and protest, as well as the silly and the serious, intermingled disruptively and powerfully in this costume-based action, which, as an aside, also saw participants bend their protest costumes. Their mode of action also spoke directly to the idea of the superhero as a transforming figure. As described in the opening chapter, becoming a superhero, as these protestors were doing symbolically, is holistically transformative.

Cosplay 101⁶

One of the reasons I cosplay is because I can dress up as characters who are more powerful than me and [I] like to feel more powerful.

— A Harley Quinn cosplayer, “Awesome Con”⁷

A neologism of “costume” and “(role)play,” cosplay is an expansive global fan-based performance art that involves dressing up and role-playing as fictional or self-created characters. Although

6 See also Ellen Kirkpatrick, “Cosplay,” in *Keywords for Comics Studies*, eds. Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Whaley (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 63–67.

7 Emma Louise Backe, “Consumption, Performance and Identity in Cosplay,” *The Geek Anthropologist*, June 16, 2016, <https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2016/06/16/consumption-performance-and-identity-in-cosplay/>.

it is a manifold practice, costuming, bodies, identities, transformation, and community are constituent elements. It has many modes of expression, from digital cosplay to real-life superheroes, as well as less costumey, everyday modes of dress, often dubbed "stealth" or "closet" cosplay, such as fan fashion and Disneybounding.⁸ Other modes of cosplay, like intergenerational, or age-bending, cosplay, are also becoming increasingly visible.⁹ As I elsewhere affirm, superhero cosplay is closely allied to the costuming practices and identity-play marking the superhero genre, making its inclusion in this section of the book especially appropriate.¹⁰

The reasons for cosplaying a character are complex. It might be a favorite character, a popular character, or just one that matches the cosplayer's physical appearance. Characters from anime, manga, and live-action tokusatsu dominate the global cosplay scene, but cosplayers draw inspiration from other pop culture media. Media fans today cosplay celebrities, musicians,

8 See Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Ellen Kirkpatrick, "Playing Gods: Identity in the Superhero Genre and Cosplay," MPhil Diss., Bristol University, 2013; and Nicholle Lamerichs, "Fan Fashion: Re-enacting Hunger Games through Clothing and Design," In *Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2018), 150–72. Disneybounding describes people dressing as contemporary versions of Disney characters in daily life. See Nettie A. Brock, "The Everyday Disney Side: Disneybounding and Casual Cosplay," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 301–15. The idea of "bounding" is evolving to include other media texts, such as "Potter bounding" (referencing J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series) and, more generally, "fandom bounding."

9 For example, see Emma Pett, "Cosplay Rey: Intergenerational Fandom and the Importance of Play at the 2016 Star Wars Celebration, London," *Deletion*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-12/cosplay-rey-intergenerational-fandom-and-the-importance-of-play-at-the-2016-star-wars-celebration-london/>.

10 Ellen Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons: Cosplay (Re)imagined through the Superhero Genre, Authenticity, and Transformation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/613/502>.

and film directors.¹¹ Amongst these other sources, the American superhero genre proves incredibly popular. Given its ubiquity in today's mediascape and the fact that American comic book fandom is "one of the most dedicated, active fandoms," the genre's popularity within cosplay culture is perhaps not that surprising.¹² Cosplay motifs also feature routinely in superhero stories, either directly or indirectly.¹³ But connections between the superhero genre and cosplay culture run much deeper than that. Through their preoccupations with *becoming* via experimental identity-play, body transformations, and, of course, masking and costuming, both domains are in deep dialogue.¹⁴

Within fandom and scholarship, considerations of cosplay foreground its transformative qualities.¹⁵ But I advocate a convergent sense of cosplay, one that, given my focus on violative minoritarian superhero cosplay, centers on transformative expressions often underpinned by mimetic impulses.¹⁶ Cosplay

11 Witness Jessi Chartier's "Patty Jenkins" cosplay at Chicago's Comic and Entertainment Expo. Jenkins directed *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020).

12 Alisa Perren and Laura E. Felschow, "The Bigger Picture: Drawing Intersections between Comics, Fan, and Industry Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (London: Routledge, 2017), 309–18.

13 See Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons."

14 As discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume, the origin story for the second rendering of the Flash (i.e., Barry Allen) illustrates several moments of juncture between superhero comics and cosplay performance.

15 See Osmund Rahman, Liu Wing-Sun, and Brittany Hei-man Cheung, "'Cosplay': Imaginative Self and Performing Identity," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2015): 317–42; Emily E. Roach, "Cosplay, Drag, and the Transformative Nature of Living Out Your Fandom," *The Mary Sue*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.themarysue.com/dragging-pop-culture-through-cosplay/>; Jordan Kass Lome, "The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 22 (2016), <https://journal.transformative-works.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>; and Shelby Fawn Mongan, "Finding Truth in Playing Pretend: A Reflection on Cosplay," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/634/481>.

16 Much attention on cosplay focuses on effect, but including considerations of cause generates fresh insight into creator, text, and fan relations

can be transformative in all kinds of ways: seen and unseen, desired and unsolicited, personal and political, textual and material, as well as imagological. Attention centers on personal realms (vis-à-vis bodies and identities), but without suggesting that these themes are separate, I focus here on its imbricated transformative effect within textual, fannish, and social realms. In theorizing violative cosplay as an act of resistance, I wish to join with those other, uncommon voices that speak to and harness minoritarian cosplay as a socially disruptive force, one capable of transforming not only perceptions of superheroes but also sociocultural relations: "cosplay has provided several [transgender] fans with the opportunity to demand the representation we need and crave, but also to make it happen. [...] [S]eeing transgender or gender non-conforming cosplayers helped them [transgender fans] break down their internalized transphobia."¹⁷ Adopting this expansive stance and delving into methods and motivations propels my discussion deep into the liminal space between textual and material realms, as well as real and imagological borderlands.

But before discussing minoritarian superhero cosplay, let me first briefly set it in a broader social context.¹⁸ Because while fan conventions, social media, and geek culture can provide safe

and how absented fans respond to and redress their textual, fannish, and societal exclusions and misrepresentations. I also treat superhero cosplay as an embodied form of reception. See Kirkpatrick, "Playing Gods," and Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons."

- 17 Alenka Figa, "Trans, Genderqueer, and Genderfluid Cosplayers on Finding Their Safe Space in Conventions," *The Mary Sue*, March 12, 2015, <https://www.themarysue.com/trans-genderqueer-and-genderfluid-cosplayers-on-finding-safe-spaces-in-conventions/>. See also Joan Miller, "Race Play: Whiteness and Erasure in Cross-Racial Cosplay," in *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, ed. Rukmini Pande (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 65–78.
- 18 Racebending cosplay is an embodied costuming practice that reworks and bends the source character's race and ethnicity to create "alternative and more viable images." Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 26.

spaces for minoritarian media fans, it is not always so.¹⁹ For minoritarian cosplayers, performing in public spaces carries an increased risk to personal safety, even, as the police killing of cosplayer of color Darrien Hunt demonstrates, a risk to life.²⁰ Sharing minoritarian superhero cosplays on social media can also result in harassment and trolling, which are frequently coordinated as toxic barrages designed to overwhelm and police the behavior, and imagination, of those daring to restorify superhero culture (i.e., disrupting dominant ideas of superheroes and superhero fans). Women of color cosplayers are especially vulnerable to a particularly virulent and brazen strain of abuse.²¹ Robust efforts are, however, afoot to spotlight and confront the rampant and intersecting chauvinism within cosplay culture and broader media fan cultures. Fan-instigated activism, such as the “Cosplay is Not Consent” movement, the Twitter hashtag #28DaysOfBlackCosplay,²² and an increasing number of grassroots conventions, including Flame Con, Indigenous Comic

-
- 19 See, for example, Alenka Figa, “Queersplay Cosplay Creates Safe Spaces at Cons,” *Women Write About Comics*, November 13, 2015, <http://women-writeaboutcomics.com/2015/11/13/queersplay-cosplay-creates-safe-spaces-cons/>; J.A. Micheline “Cosplaying While Trans: Exploring the Intersection Between Cosplay and Gender Identity,” *Vice*, January 3, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/wd4v5z/cosplaying-while-trans-569; and Tai Gooden, “Unmasking the Cosplay Community’s Sexism and Racism Problem,” *The Establishment*, May 12, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170518133102/https://theestablishment.co/unmasking-the-cosplay-communitys-sexism-and-racism-problem-3ca9431f58co?gi=250bd276b4a8>.
- 20 See Jamie Broadnax, “Cosplay or No Cosplay: The Homicide of Darrien Hunt,” *Black Girl Nerds*, September 17, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150703103821/http://blackgirlnerds.com/cosplaying-black-homicide-darrien-hunt/>.
- 21 See Chaka Cumberbatch, “I’m a Black Female Cosplayer and Some People Hate It,” *xoJane*, February 11, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130206095511/http://www.xojane.com/issues/mad-back-cosplayer-chaka-cumberbatch>.
- 22 Founded by “Blerd” (i.e., Black nerd) cosplayer Chaka Cumberbatch. See Jamie Broadnax, “#28DaysOfBlackCosplay: More than Just a Hashtag,” *Black Girl Nerds*, February 5, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150306230820/https://blackgirlnerds.com/28daysofblackcosplay-just-hashtag/>.

Con, and Geek Girl Con, not to mention the budding cosability movement (i.e., cosplay for people with disabilities), are critical to resisting and countering the popular story of cosplay and superhero culture.

Moreover, the experiences and theorizations of real-life violative cosplayers, many of them women of color, count among the many guides to understanding fan practices as acts of resistance. Through citational and sharing practices, I acknowledge their voices, (counter)stories and, often poached, intellectual labor, as well as their critical yet routinely overlooked role in the conversation around identity-bending cosplay as activism. More broadly, I wish my contribution to illuminate, undermine, and problematize the neutrality of whiteness in scholarship and fandom in favor of an intersectional reading with attention to critical race theory. Thus these case stories commit to the expansiveness of cosplay and other forms of violative minoritarian fanwork as a storified, socially disruptive force, one capable of transforming not only perceptions of superheroes but also social relations and hierarchies.

Minoritarian Superhero Cosplay²³

The following account of minoritarian superhero cosplay focuses on moments and spaces of transference as well as the affirmational, or mimetic, and transformative quality of this transference.²⁴ Because, while some performances are mimetic in intent, all are transformative. But if mimesis involves replica-

23 Sections of the following discussion appear in Ellen Kirkpatrick, "On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1483>.

24 The latter point recalls the meaning-making debate discussed earlier in this volume, whereby mimetic/affirmational modes of fanwork align with and value authorial intent, whereas transformative expressions explore textual gaps and create new possibilities. Transference, in this context, refers to migrations from imagological to lived realms, or from the fantastical and textual to the mundane and material, as well as from the invisible (i.e., unseen, absent) to the visible (i.e., seen, present).

tion and simulation, the question arises: How can minoritarian fans perform mimetically? How can they replicate what was not originally there? There is no Black Clark Kent/Superman nor Asian Bruce Wayne/Batman in the mainstream superhero genre, and yet minoritarian cosplayers frequently and, I affirm, mimetically perform these characters. A question prompting another question, which is discussed in Chapter 2: Why choose to cosplay a “white-bread” version of Superman over, say, Calvin Ellis, just one of several other canonical Black Supermen? Textapology is clearly not a simple process.

Minoritarian superhero cosplayers are engaged in a materialistic dialogue with over eight decades of unrepresentative canon. Examining their motivations and methods, as well as the effect of their performances, paints a fuller picture of the strategies used to survive, navigate, and transform exclusionary realms—textual, lived, and fannish. Minoritarian superhero cosplayers not only reveal and query omissions, elisions, and exclusions but also offer rebuking answers to those erosions. The small number of prominent minoritarian superheroes, such as Storm and Falcon, create a narrow window for unambiguous mimetic performances, but what of the other numerous instances of violative costuming and identity play? What is happening within those disruptive, borderland performances?

Embodied Translation

Superhero cosplay is particularly marked by the idea of transferring the fantastical—and, in the case of minoritarian superhero cosplay, the invisible—into the realm of the mundane. In this sense, it is always more about translation than transformation. All superhero cosplayers disrupt and rewrite the ontology and aesthetics of superheroes. Unlike their heroes, they will never become a real superhero by changing their mode of dress. Their bounded performances show that superheroes can only really exist in the genre’s imagological realms. For all its marvellousness, cosplay eliminates the “super” from the superhero.

I have elsewhere theorized this delimited process as "embodied translation."²⁵ I describe translation as a continuous, fluid, and unassured meaning-making process, and cosplayers, as translators, as empowered makers of meaning. Embodied translation speaks to the processes involved in performing the extraordinary within the limits of the ordinary. It is "uniquely enacted within the frame and bounds of the material body of the cosplayer. Thus, in translating an established character, cosplayers are implicated in a process of (re)creation, they produce simultaneously a new character and a revised version of the original."²⁶

However, because there are so few minoritarian source characters to draw from, I suggest that minoritarian cosplayers perform an additional layer of imaginary work by virtue of their cultural identity and lived experience.²⁷ Through their empiric performances, violative cosplayers deliver the extraordinary idea of minoritarian superheroes from their imaginations into the material realm. Superhero cosplay creates the idea of a Superman who cannot fly and a Spider-Man sans Spidey sense, but its violative modes also reveal the possibility of a Black Superman with a physical disability or a female Muslim Captain America. In its own way, each is a radical reimagining, an embodied translation, of the superhero. Embodied translation can help us understand the complexities of such textured performances. But, as I discuss next, unravelling the mimetic/transformational binary can also shed light on how minoritarian cosplayers resist and reform exclusionary meanings without compromising their cultural identity and lived experience.

Often hinging on binaries such as mimetic/transformational, established modes of fan scholarship cannot fully explain the mechanics and radicalism of resistive modes of minoritarian fanwork, such as genderswap and racebending cosplay. Mov-

25 See Kirkpatrick, "Playing Gods," and Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons."

26 Ellen Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons," §4.7.

27 Full-masked characters, such as Deadpool or Spider-Man, arguably create a rare space for minoritarian cosplayers to perform straight mimetic cosplay, as do performing characters "within their range."

ing beyond these paradigms and binaries can shed light on the multidimensional nature of such practices. And as these oppositional impulses also trouble texcapology, I take a moment to unpack this binary before (re)telling the story of violative minority cosplay.

Dispelling Binaries: Affirmational/Transformative

Unhelpfully, fan practices and cultures are still often classified as either mimetic/affirmational or transformative, where “affirmational fandom reproduces the source material [...] while transformational fandom remediates the source material to reflect the fans’ desires and interests.”²⁸ This influential binary is, however, being increasingly problematized within fan studies and fandom.²⁹ Matt Hills works to dispel it through his gendered considerations of the often-veiled transformative qualities of building prop replicas.³⁰ And drawing upon Hills’s work, Suzanne Scott writes that cosplay “typically presents itself as a form of mimetic fan production.”³¹ A practice that seeks to replicate rather than “create radical mash-ups, or ‘read’ in provoca-

28 B. Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles: Handicrafting as Fan Art* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). See also obsession_inc, “Affirmational fandom vs. Transformational fandom,” *Dreamwidth*, June 1, 2009, <http://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html>.

29 See, for example, Bob Rehak, “Materializing Monsters: Aurora Models, Garage Kits and the Object Practices of Horror Fandom,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 27–45, and Victoria Godwin, “Mimetic Fandom and One-Sixth-Scale Action Figures,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/686>.

30 Matt Hills, “As Seen on Screen? Mimetic sf Fandom and the Crafting of Replica(nt)s,” *in media res*, September 10, 2010, <http://mediacommons.org/imr/2010/09/06/seen-screen-mimetic-sf-fandom-crafting-replicants>, and Matt Hills, “From Dalek Half Balls to Daft Punk Helmets: Mimetic Fandom and the Crafting of Replicas,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/531/448>.

31 Suzanne Scott, “‘Cosplay Is Serious Business’: Gendering Material Fan Labor on ‘Heroes of Cosplay,’” *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015): 146.

tive ways, [or] transformatively rework the object of fandom."³² Alongside suggesting the affirmational or mimetic/transformatory binary, this presupposes a nondisruptive fan body = character body equivalency, where cosplayers can unproblematically replicate the source character's visuality. But, as we have seen, many modes of cosplay collapse or undermine this opposition. Cosplayer embodiments can interrupt mimetic cosplay, causing it to become radically transformative, and such cosplay becomes simultaneously affirmational and transformative. This disruptive effect may be intentional or unintentional. Violative superhero cosplayers do not always aim for a radical reworking in their cosplay — they just want to cosplay a beloved character — but given the genre's homogeneity, their embodiment causes mimetic practice to become revisionist. Such cosplay, I hold, is conceivably just as mimetic as majoritarian superhero cosplay. The effect may be different (i.e., transformative), but the motivation and method are the same (i.e., mimetic). Although working with a different focus, Hills also affirms that a mimetic/affirmational emphasis does not necessarily impinge on the transformative possibilities of fanwork: "Perhaps converting textual visions (back) into material artefacts is the greatest transformative work of all."³³

In developing his ideas on mimetic fandom, Hills productively (re)phrases its practices as intermediary and oscillatory as well as capable of deconstructing the "binary of fan productions that either transform or imitate mainstream media content, just as textual/material productivities can also blur together."³⁴ Utilizing Derrida's concept of *economimesis*, Hills usefully restores the productive quality of mimesis: "'True' mimesis is between two producing subjects and not between two produced things."³⁵ This expansive view of mimesis covers not only imitating

32 Hills, quoted in *ibid.*

33 Hills, "As Seen on Screen?"

34 Hills, "Dalek Half Balls," §1.2.

35 Derrida, quoted in *ibid.*, §3.2.

objects but also imitating production processes.³⁶ Mimetic fanwork thus escapes classification as purely affirmational: “Fans who participate in mimetic fandom may ultimately imitate the original media text, [but] certain transformative details that individualize each item surface as well.”³⁷

For Hills, mimetic fandom represents a “kind of ontological bridging” or unity, an “authentic,” “objective” transference of an object across realms, “from textuality to reality,” noting that cosplay may also represent this kind of ontological unity, adding embodiment as a potential site of contradiction.³⁸ Although superhero cosplay clearly transfers visualities from text to reality, I regard violative superhero cosplay as more of a bridge jump into the separating space than a bridging maneuver (crossing from one side to another, text to reality).³⁹ A leap that transforms or repurposes our “text/reality” bridge, or binary, into a swirling convergence that can affect textual, fannish, and social realms by affirming, undermining, or transforming textual meaning.

Violative modes of superhero cosplay query mainstream superhero ideology, ontology, and aesthetics, resulting in new ways of seeing and being superheroes and superhero fans.⁴⁰ Given the genre’s systemic issues with representation and diversity, minoritarian fans wishing to cosplay superheroes, whether

36 Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, cited in *ibid.*, §3.2. This speaks to my concept of embodied translation as a way of theorizing the connections and repetitions surfacing between diegetic superhero costuming practices and superhero cosplay.

37 Booth, *Playing Fans*, 18.

38 Hills, “Dalek Half Balls,” §3.2.

39 More on the disruptive power of bridge jumping can be found in Chapter 3 of this volume.

40 Majoritarian superhero fans can also, problematically, perform transgressive modes of cosplay. See Kayal Swaminathan, “To White Cosplayers Who Cosplay as POC Characters,” *Odyssey*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/to-white-cosplayers-who-cosplay-as-poc-characters>, and Joan Miller, “Race Play: Whiteness and Erasure in Cross-Racial Cosplay,” in *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, ed. Rukmini Pande (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 65–78.

online or at conventions, have little choice but to perform, often intersecting, transgressive *bending* or *swapping* modes of cosplay.⁴¹ Violative superhero cosplayers layer idealistic fictions through their outsider materialities and in the process un/make meanings, worlds, superheroes, and themselves. They breathe new life into run-of-the-mill characterizations and representations and in so doing reanimate the genre's lost radical promise. It is they, and not the Hulk or Martian Manhunter, who are the genre's real shapeshifting trailblazers.

Violative Cosplay: On [Dis]play

Violative cosplay, or as I prefer to think of it, [dis]play — a transitory embodiment opening an experimental space in which marginalized and excluded cosplayers may (re)imagine themselves and their source character — intimately connects with all kinds of futurist discourse. "What if" questions drive speculative and futuristic fiction. In the case of the superhero genre, we can imagine early creators sitting around asking: What if human beings were gods? What if they could flame, fly, stretch, or transmogrify? And even occasionally, what if gods and heroes were women? Questions allowing creators to (re)imagine and represent alternative futures, worlds, and ontologies. But some "what if" questions were, and for many still are, unimaginable and therefore unaskable: What if subjects other than cishet white men were the stuff of our superheroes? What if minoritarian people were among America's, if not the world's, go-to gods and heroes?⁴² What if...? For many superhero genre creators, imagining a diverse and equitable world is more difficult than imagining worlds where cishet white boys and men can be gods. But, as we will see, world-changing questions like these are increasingly being asked and answered by minoritarian creators, fans,

41 For example, on cosplay forums, Pinterest, Tumblr, or Twitter (e.g., #28DaysofBlackCosplay). I would, however, underscore my previous discussion on the dangers of [dis]playing in public spaces.

42 There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as Power Man (a.k.a. Luke Cage), Black Panther, Ms. Marvel, and Storm.

and their allies: What if Superman — or god — were Black, queer, a woman, or indeed a Black queer woman? What if...?

Inspired by Muñoz's work on disidentification, the embracing bracketed "[dis]" in "[dis]play" is meant to evoke notions of displacing, disruptive, discredited, disidentificatory play.⁴³ "Display" itself speaks to ideas of "unfolding to view," or ostentation, and relatedly to "call attention to important parts."⁴⁴ An act of showing then, and a show of something, whether emotion, military prowess, or meteor showers. A temporary arrangement of things for public viewing, often spectacular things, even carnivalesque, like a firework display or a *Body Worlds* exhibition. The bracketing is also intended to symbolize the suspended, precarious, ephemeral, and offset nature of the performance. This is not to undermine the radicalism of these performances. While the act itself may be temporary, its impact in the shape of a digital footprint can be profound and long-lasting.⁴⁵

[Dis]play is a ludic fan practice with a radical heart, one beating through interconnecting domains: genre, fandom, personal, and social. It resists the strangling "network of norms" and speaks to the pragmatic presentism of queer world-making.⁴⁶ [Dis]players trouble superhero canon. Their rebellious practices reimagine and repurpose the ideology, ontology, and aesthetics of mainstream superheroes. Some performers intend to do so, but for others, it is a byproduct of the collision of idealistic representations with outsider materialities. [Dis]play is, however, more than just a response to the overwhelming failure of super-

43 See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

44 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "display," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55050>.

45 See Broadnax, "#28DaysOfBlackCosplay," and Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans Advocacy and Community Building Online," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 5 (2017): 1868–88.

46 Janet R. Jakobsen, "The Body Politic vs. Lesbian Bodies: Publics, Counterpublics, and the Uses of Norms in Horizons," in *Feminist Theology: Identity, Traditions, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 136.

hero culture to imagine, embrace, and represent, diverse, inclusive worlds, and it also illuminates and creatively transforms that dereliction. It casts into sharp relief the neutrality of dominant, privileged identity markers such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness. Through [dis]play, official, dominant meanings are challenged, resisted, recast, and stretched as unrepresented fans create ways of finding themselves in often beloved exclusionary texts and surrounding culture, thereby making it anew. Moreover, aside from illuminating and filling representational gaps and omissions, [dis]players resist and highlight wider institutionalized systems of privilege and oppression that allow the superhero genre to persist, even flourish, while implementing deleterious and exclusionary practices:

For people of color to traverse racial boundaries by cosplaying as white characters is to traverse literature and media that seek to make us invisible. It is a revolutionary act that turns the normative white male or female character on its head because many of these characters represented by white faces easily could have been a person of color.⁴⁷

[Dis]players see beyond the limits of exclusionary mainstream texts to a place and time where they can, unquestionably, be superheroes, superhero fans, and superhero creators, suspending not only the limiting logics of the textual realm but the lived one also. They don't just see or imagine that future world. They recreate it in the present of today. Their texcapology unfolds textual and material realms to create riotous "breathing spaces," empowering lacunae where superhero meaning and traditions are suspended and upended.⁴⁸ By boldly displaying their trans-

47 Swaminathan, "To White Cosplayers Who Cosplay as POC Characters."

48 I draw the idea of breathing spaces from Sara Ahmed. In doing so, I register minoritarian superhero fan embodiment as a "killjoy" source of difference and site of resistance, emphasizing the idea of [dis]play as a survival strategy for superhero fans of color living in a white world, enjoying a largely white genre, and being members of a predominantly, and stereotypically, white fandom. Racebending cosplay creates a breathing

gressive superhero bodies, they materialize a better today and hint at an alternative tomorrow. As we will see, the disruptiveness of [dis]play is not limited to superhero culture but extends beyond it in a butterfly effect.

Racebending cosplayers, or [dis]players, such as Chaka Cumberbatch, Vishavjit Singh, and Briana Lawrence make the invisible visible, the personal political, and the unthinkable doable.⁴⁹ By transcribing and layering idealistic body norms through their outsider bodyscapes, they perform a deep, radical form of embodied translation. Moreover, by rejecting or misrecognizing some superhero characteristics (e.g., whiteness, maleness, wealth) while embracing others (e.g., costume motifs, civic motivations, centrality), they effect a kind of “tactical misrecognition.”⁵⁰ Even when performing mimetically, they are engaged in a bilingual, border-smashing dialogue with their source characters—a palaver that disrupts all kinds of binary formulations, such as extraordinary/ordinary, imagological/lived, textual/material, idealistic/deviant, inside(r)/outside(r), seen/unseen, past/future. By redrawing the superhero aesthetic, [dis]players materialize the idea of minoritarian superheroes and minoritarian superhero fans, thereby beating a parley with the official superhero genre and segments of its fandom, which can turn hostile. By increasing visibility in one realm, they stir revolution in others.

space for cosplayers of color and for observers of the cosplay performance. See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 120.

- 49 See Stephanie Smith-Strickland, “Meet Brichibi Cosplay, the Queer, Plus-Size Diva Taking the Cosplay Scene by Storm,” *Mic*, March 4, 2016, <https://mic.com/articles/137034/meet-brichibi-cosplay-the-queer-plus-size-diva-taking-the-cosplay-scene-by-storm>; Sikh Captain America, “Red, White, and Beard,” *YouTube*, December 4, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2G8L_Aq5E4; and Britni Danielle, “Thanks to ‘28 Days of Black Cosplay,’ Comic Book Characters Are Looking a Lot More Diverse,” *Take Part*, February 13, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/thanks-28-days-black-cosplay-comic-book-characters-204700782.html>.

50 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

Singh, for example, lives in New York City and regularly cosplays as a skinny, bearded Sikh Captain America. Singh's narrow physique and beard play a prominent role in his mash-up cosplay, as does his blue turban emblazoned with a silver capital "A," which stands in for Cap's iconic helmet. Singh's costume clearly remixes Sikh and superhero traditions. Through his activist performances, he aims to dispel preconceptions and stereotypes about Sikhs, superheroes, and superhero fans. Describing his journey from drawing to cosplaying a Sikh Captain America, Singh writes that he "re-created a superhero vision from 1941 penned by Jack Kirby. I illustrated a new Captain America with a turban and beard ready to fight intolerance."⁵¹ Singh's personal story echoes ethnofuturist strategies for recreating alternative universes. (*What if Captain America was a Sikh?*) It collapses space and time to reimagine a more inclusive, diverse reality. In this way, Captain America's and Singh's meanings are here both lost and reimagined in translation.

As Singh discovered, superhero cosplay can be an empowering practice. Many [dis]players want to animate their beloved heroes and thereby bring a little superhero magic into their own lives and worlds. Yet these heroes tend to be cis het nondisabled white (super)privileged men, posing a conundrum for minoritarian cosplayers as they negotiate power structures. Thinking back to the previous chapter, something abstruse is going on in these layered, negotiated, and often killjoy performances. But identifying mimetic = transformative interplay provides a way of fathoming this textured fan practice and, moreover, reveals it as a survival strategy, a way of resisting dominant ideology without compromising cultural identity. That is to say, [dis]play is a form of transformative e-scape, one enabling minoritarian superhero fans to create breathing spaces within exclusionary meaningscape — text, lived, fandom. And further, texcapology offers a useful way of framing the interplay between the

51 Vishavjit Singh, "The Wild Journey of a Sikh Captain America," *On Being*, January 30, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-wild-journey-of-a-sikh-captain-america/>.

mimetic = transformative = transgressive elements of this disruptive fan practice.

[Dis]play is a powerful challenge to the textual, or canonical, supremacy of the cishet white male superhero and superhero fan. But it is always a hazardous undertaking. Many non-progressive fans frame their bigotry and prejudice as concerns for canonical accuracy, for example.⁵² Yet by materially writing themselves into the genre's exclusionary story- and imagological meanings, [dis]players generatively transform and subvert superhero genre canon while simultaneously resisting and challenging the stereotype of the cishet white fanboy. As Tai Gooden notes: "Because of this power structure, it can be particularly difficult to fight for change — but that hasn't stopped the marginalized members of the cosplay community from doing so."⁵³ Sara Ahmed also evokes the fortitude and resilience, or backbone, required to put an already disempowered body on the line in order to spotlight another line, the color line: "The body

52 This speaks to the fanon-versus-canon debates within fandom and fan studies and hence to ideas of power, privilege, and entitlement, as well as toxic fandom. Witness the 2018 "Comicsgate" debacle, echoing 2014's "Gamergate." Both are ongoing neocon pop culture movements rooted in white supremacy and intolerance, with chauvinistic fans working to shut down the rise of inclusion and diversity in comics and gaming industries, and culture more generally. See J.A. Micheline, "Marvel Superheroes Aren't Just for White Men — True Diversity Could Boost Sales," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/04/marvel-comics-blaming-diversity-bad-sales>; Eric Francisco, "Comicsgate is Gamergate's Next Horrible Evolution," *Inverse*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.inverse.com/article/41132-comicsgate-explained-bigots-milkshake-marvel-dc-gamergate>; and Ada Byron, "Bill Sienkiewicz Pens Rebuke of 'Comicsgate,'" *The Mary Sue*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.themarysue.com/bill-sienkiewicz-comicsgate/>. Relatedly and en passant, Rebecca Wanzo points to the critical idea that "some fans of speculative work depend on the centrality of whiteness and masculinity to take pleasure in the text." Rebecca Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015): §1.4, <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twvc/article/view/699/538>.

53 Tia Gooden, "Unmasking the Cosplay Community's Sexism and Racism Problem."

'going the wrong way' is the one that is experienced as 'in the way' of the will that is acquired as momentum. For some bodies, mere persistence, 'to continue steadfastly,' requires great effort, an effort that might appear to others as stubbornness or obstinacy, as insistence on going against the flow.⁵⁴ Gooden's assured assertion speaks to the power of a community coming together to create change and, thinking back to Ahmed, lifelines.⁵⁵ And this brings me to another community of people who similarly wish to bring a little superhero magic into their lives and worlds. And although working on a different cultural register, they too transfer superheroes from fictional to material realms and from extraordinary to ordinary materialities, and in so doing, un/make superhero meanings, worlds, and themselves.

Caped Crusaders and Costumed Do-Gooders: Real-Life Superheroes

The subcultural performances of real-life superheroes, or "real-lifers," present another rich example of superhero-informed grassroots activism.⁵⁶ Similar to [dis]play, their civic-minded work reimagines and repurposes the superhero metaphor and, vicariously, disrupts the canonical idea of superheroes. While marginal, their work raises important questions regarding superhero ontology. *Who can be a "real" superhero? What makes a superhero a superhero? What if I became a superhero? What if we all became superheroes — what then?* Ordinary questions can, however, yield extraordinary answers. Like this one, an answer which begins simply but quickly takes an unexpected turn.

54 Sara Ahmed, "Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character," *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 245.

55 More on the reciprocal nature of lifelines can be found in Chapter 4 of this volume. See Sara Ahmed, "Black Feminism as a Life-Line," *feministkilljoys*, August 27, 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/27/black-feminism-as-life-line/>.

56 The term "real-lifer" is widely accepted within the real-life superhero community, and thus in this discussion.

First the question: *Was there ever a Black Superman?* A standard enough question for an online forum, to which one respondent replied “Yes,” before continuing: “Historically, there have been quite a few Black/African American Supermen. Not comic book characters created by a commercial industry, but actual human beings.” The enterprising informant then went on to note, at length, examples of real-life Black supermen, an expansive list that surprisingly included men and women, such as Harriet Tubman, Harry Belafonte, and John Henry.⁵⁷ This quotidian question about superhero ontology saw respondents provide all kinds of canonical answers, but it also allowed this adducer to creatively reframe the question and put forward an alternative, diverse idea of superheroes. And in similar fashion, so too does the community of real-life superheroes populating this snapshot.

Real-life superhero practice is inextricably linked to other forms of superhero cosplay, and not wishing to cover old ground, I pause only to note its similar disruption of superhero ideology, ontology, and aesthetics, along with its adoption of the superhero as a rallying figure for change in personal, political, and possibly even textual realms. Instead, I wish to use this space to consider superhero-inspired civic action and vigilantism, as well as the transition of the imaginary to the mundane and the fictional to the real. When discussing sentinel practices, however, it is critical to point out the regressive and reactionary possibilities of costumed vigilantism. While my work focuses on celebratory, progressive, and agentic expressions of vigilantism, it must be remembered that these practices (e.g., dressing up at night, adopting peculiar code-names and secret identities, and working outside the law to “protect” communities) apply just as easily to right-wing, reactionary individuals and hate groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Similarly, as some superhero

57 Whether the respondent knew it or not, John Henry was the real-life inspiration for one of DC’s alternate Supermen, John Henry Irons, a.k.a. Steel. Derek Simpson, “Was There Ever a Black Superman?” *Quora*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.quora.com/Was-there-ever-a-black-Superman>.

texts show, superhero practices, and their reenactments, are not without controversy, as they can involve unchecked, improvised vigilante street justice. Real-lifer Phoenix Jones, for example, was arrested for pepper spraying two women he was trying to "save."⁵⁸ The progressive and reactionary possibilities of embodying superheroes lie not in the practice of performing them, but in the performers' motivations.

Real-lifers, like other superhero cosplayers, perform embodied translations, some more textured than others, similar to [dis]play performances. But given that not all superheroes have superpowers, some translations are easier to effect than others. Indeed, costumed heroes, such as Bruce Wayne/Batman or Barbara Gordon/Batgirl, are strikingly similar to many real-lifers, in that they are altruistically motivated, tenacious, non-super citizens. In this way, real-lifers can be much more than simulacra, and it is entirely possible for anyone with the *right* mindset and circumstances to authentically become a real-life costumed hero. Indeed, more than a few have tried. After all, Bruce Wayne is just a highly motivated civilian with a lot of time and money, and thus power. But what is it that makes Wayne the real Batman? (*What if I became Batman?*) Can there be more than one real Batman?

Ontological questions like these, which circulate notions of realness and authenticity, recur frequently in superhero stories. "Pity there's only one [Batman]," says one of Gotham's more cocksure criminals, only to be ambushed by several armed Batmen. This hard-boiled scene is from *The Dark Knight* (2008), a film that delves into Batman's ontology in a variety of ways. The "BatFans" are real-lifers, or copycats: ordinary citizens who are inspired by Batman to rise up against villainy and injustice. (Not in the way he meant, but that's another story.) The Scarecrow, also in this scene, realizes right away that he is not in the presence of the real Batman: the guns, if not the clumsiness,

⁵⁸ See "Superhero' Arrested, Accused of Pepper-Spray Assault," *NBC News*, October 10, 2011, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna44848642>.

likely gave it away.⁵⁹ The appearance of the outrageous, militarized Batmobile, the Tumbler, signals the arrival of the real Batman, as confirmed by the Scarecrow, who proclaims, “Now, that’s more like it.” The real Batman deals with the criminals and the real-lifers efficiently, tying them up and leaving them for Gotham PD to pick up. Before leaving, Batman warns the real-lifers not to imitate him again, provoking one of them to ask, “What gives you the right? What’s the difference between you and me?” Not skipping a beat, Batman growls back, “I’m not wearing hockey pads.”⁶⁰ And later, when questioning another real-life Batman, the Joker asks, “Are you the real Batman? ... No? ... Then why do you dress up like him?” only to be met with the gutsy response, “He’s a symbol that we don’t have to be afraid of scum like you.”⁶¹

Both scenes query superhero ontology, aesthetics, realness, and militant motivations. They also signal the centrality of costume, gadgets, wealth, and altruism to any *real* Batman performance.⁶² Moreover, most of the real-life Batmen fall short of idealized superhero body norms, which, when combined with their haplessness, emphasizes their sham status. Returning to the real world, the notion of somatic and tactical failure, at least in comparison to superhero ideals, as well as misrecognition, similarly contributes to the uncanny quality of real-life superhero performances, as they too frequently exhibit nonnormative superhero embodiment, but not always. Indeed, while strictly adhering to costuming traditions such as masks, military-grade fabrics, and even capes, more than a few real-lifers reject other superhero aesthetics, such as idealized muscular athleticism. Many real-lifers harness this unsettling dissonance by purposely

59 One of Batman’s guiding principles is that he does not use firearms. Another is that he does not kill.

60 Christopher Nolan, dir., *The Dark Knight* (20th Century Fox, 2008).

61 Ibid.

62 The film ultimately underscores the idea of a “real” Batman — DC’s Batman — and shuts down the multiplicity of meaning that real-life Batmen offer. After all, DC Comics must secure its monopoly and commercial interests and protect its copyrights.

portraying themselves as overweight or underweight superheroes, as with the Sikh Captain America and, as we'll see later, Superbarrio Gómez. Through their idiosyncratic performances, real-lifers refract canonical ideas of who can be a superhero and what superheroes look like.

Real-life superheroes can be found in South and North America, Australia, China, Europe, and beyond.⁶³ They come from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds, but they all share a passion for social justice, activism, and, sometimes, superheroes. Curiously, although deeply invested in superhero ontology and aesthetics, their performances and associated discourse are notable for their lack of fannishness.⁶⁴ A few real-lifers, such as Chiba's Chibatman, are inspired by specific superhero characters, but the majority of crusaders, such as Dark Guardian, Purple Reign, and the Vigilante Spider, invent new characters based on superhero tropes. As is customary in the genre, some form into teams, such as the Rain City Superhero Movement or the New York Initiative. And many adhere to genre conventions by concealing their non-superhero identity. For example, DC's Guardian, "doesn't show skin [...] because I want people to imagine anybody behind the costume."⁶⁵ But of those characters whose cultural identity is readable or self-defined, it appears

63 For example, based in the UK, Statesman; in Canada, Thanatos; in the US, Urban Avenger and the Xtreme Justice League (XJL); in Australia, Captain Australia. Real-life superhero culture is well supported and documented, from websites offering networking, tutorials, and forums to documentary films and shorts. For example, HBO's *Superheroes* (dir. Mike Barnett, 2011) and Thrash Lab's *The Subculture of Real Life Superheroes* (dir. Sheldon Candis, 2012). Several fictional films have also explored the idea of real-life superheroes, for example, *Defendor* (dir. Peter Stebbings, 2009), *Kick-Ass* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2010), and *Super* (dir. James Gunn, 2010). Photographer Peter Tangen documents this global culture through his The Real Life Super Hero Project, <https://wiki.rlsh.net/wiki/TheRealLifeSuperHero-Project>.

64 A quality suggested, for example, by their general preference for performing original or composite characters rather than extant characters, as is the case within fan-based cosplay.

65 RLSH Project, "The Real Life Super Heroes Project: DC's Guardian," *You-Tube*, July 21, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch>.

that, despite the preponderance of white males, an encouraging number of minoritarian people are active in the community, such as Seattle's Phoenix Jones and Montreal's LightStep, the latter a white real-lifer who identifies as a queer radical feminist.⁶⁶ Through their unruly performances, real-lifers transform and diversify the meaning and territories of superheroes, taking the idea of a superhero, and sometimes a superhero fan, and making it their own.

Many crusaders have origin stories, that is, a transformative experience that prompts them to work for the betterment of their communities.⁶⁷ This trope is also common among superheroes and citizen activists, though in the genre, transformative moments tend to confer super-powers. An openly gay real-lifer and founding member of the gay protection real-life superhero group the New York Initiative, Zimmer Barnes recounts how he became a real-lifer:

Everyone's got their own story — there were some [real-life] superheroes in the past few decades and I read about them and was inspired. One of the first times I went on patrol was on the anniversary of Kitty Genovese's murder. [In 1964, Genovese was brutally assaulted and killed in Queens, in view of dozens of people who did nothing to intervene.]⁶⁸

66 Julia Jones, "I Spent a Night Patrolling with LightStep, Montreal's Real-Life Superhero," *Vice*, November 11, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpwjx7/i-spent-a-night-patrolling-with-lightstep-montreals-real-life-super-hero.

67 Public response to real-lifers is mixed: to some they are failed and poor imitations of superheroes, but to others they are "real" heroes working for good within their communities and serving as much-needed positive role models.

68 Zimmer Barnes, cited in Dan Avery, "Meet Zimmer Barnes, The Real-Life Gay Superhero," *New Now Next*, October 26, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141031101008/http://www.newnownext.com/meet-zimmer-barnes-the-real-life-gay-superhero/10/2013/>. As an aside and en passant, note the intertextuality in Barnes's origin story: it is other real-lifers, not textual, "real" superheroes, who serve as his inspiration. The New York Initiative (a.k.a. The Initiative Collective) patrols the city and teaches citizens self-defense. In the West Village, for example, they increased patrols in

Zimmer's real-life account echoes the origin story of the costumed hero, Rorschach in *Watchmen* (1986):

Kitty Genovese. [...] Raped. Tortured. Killed. Here. In New York. Outside her own apartment building. Almost forty neighbours heard screams. Nobody did anything. Nobody even called cops. Some of them even watched. Do you understand? [...] Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress... and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror.⁶⁹

The murder of Kitty Genovese marks the transformation of Zimmer and Rorschach into vigilante costumed heroes, motivated by a desire to do something in the face of widespread civic indifference.⁷⁰ DC's *Guardian* is just one of many ordinary citizens who "saw apathy' and decided to get involved."⁷¹ Every crusader is driven by the desire to make a difference in their

response to a wave of attacks on gay men. See CBS New York, "Superheroes Suit Up to Combat Anti-Gay Attacks in NYC," *CBS New York*, June 5, 2013, <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/superheroes-suit-up-to-combat-anti-gay-attacks-in-nyc/>.

69 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986), chap. 6, 10.

70 Rorschach exemplifies the problematic part of real-world vigilantism. For example, he patrols his neighborhood, meting out his own brand of extra-legal social justice. Indeed, Rorschach can be considered as "the most extreme example of pavement pounding vigilantism to demonstrate to [Moore's] readers that no one in their right mind would want someone wandering around exacting his or her own uncompromising (and brutally violent) sense of justice." Also note the omission of co-creator Dave Gibbons in this quotation and the privileging of the author, Alan Moore. Steven Surman, "Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Rorschach: Does the Character Set a Bad Example?," *Steven Surman Writes*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.stevensurman.com/roorschach-from-alan-moores-watchmen-does-he-set-a-bad-example/>.

71 Mark Memmot, "DC's *Guardian* and Phoenix Jones: Real Life Superheroes Open Up — A Bit," *NPR*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/sections/I-way/2011/03/14/134539750/dcs-guardian-and-phoenix-jones-real-life-super-heroes-open-up-a-bit>.

communities. They speak the language of empowerment, community, and transformation:⁷²

I finally had enough of seeing the gangs terrorizing the downtown section of my city. (Amazonia)

Everyone has the power to stand up for themselves, to stand up for other people, but it's the few that decide to embrace that power and be heard, and these people are real-life superheroes. (Black Arrow)

Eventually everyone has the opportunity to awaken and become who they always wanted to be. (Green Scorpion)

I feel it is a civic duty to protect those we love and care for... the communities we live in... it is our duty to see this world a better place. (Dreizehn)

And finally, tying it together, Dark Guardian says:

I am here to show the world that there are people that care to make a difference, inspire others, stand up to the bad guys and change the world for the better. I use the iconic essence of comic book superheroes to make a difference, inspire others... and call attention to issues in my community. [...] There is a hero in everyone and if we would let it shine we would live in a much better place.

The real-life superhero movement is steeped in language typically associated with superheroes, such as civic duty, altruism, possibility, and transformation, but on this occasion, their prosocial credo runs counter to official superhero logics. In the genre, this type of “do-good” rhetoric and agentic positioning belongs to the heroes, not the masses, and translates into excep-

72 For all five quotes, see *World Superhero Registry*, <http://www.worldsuperheroregistry.com/>.

tionalism and saviorism. Superheroes are rare and unparalleled beings. They will save the day and perhaps even change the world, not ordinary citizens. As Batman tells the real-life Batmen in *The Dark Knight*, "I don't need your help."

By providing them with figures of hope and change, the genre removes revolutionary power from the hands of its fictionalized citizens and tells them to take a back seat in local and global affairs, much like Western democracy and traditional forms of social activism do in the real world. But as we are seeing, in the real world, superheroes can inspire citizens to become change agents, upending and decentralizing the genre's disempowering vision and strategy for social action. Real-lifers disrupt the precept that superheroes are rare and uncommon beings, and in so doing, they exemplify the idea of the "superhero who could be you," to borrow Stan Lee's iconic refrain.

Although differently phrased, this kind of superhero-inspired civic action speaks to work undertaken by a team of researchers working out of the University of Southern California.⁷³ Focusing on young people's civic engagement and activism, this group explores,

how superheroes are stepping off the page and becoming resources for the Civic Imagination. Around the world activists are struggling for immigrant rights, battling rape culture, questioning the police state, asking for homes for Syrian refugees, or condemning wealth inequality while deploying iconography and mythology borrowed from the American superhero tradition.⁷⁴

73 Henry Jenkins et al., "Superpowers to the People! How Young Activists Are Tapping the Civic Imagination," in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, eds. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 295–321.

74 Henry Jenkins, "Superheroes and the Civic Imagination," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, February 27, 2017, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2017/02/superheroes-and-the-civic-imagination.html>.

While acting as change agents, real-lifers perform a different, more direct, form of civic action than, say, the DREAMERS, who protest for citizenship and educational rights. Real-lifer activism and engagement does not usually involve agitating for systemic change, but rather works on a community or street level. Indeed real-lifer actions frequently include beat patrols, which are akin to the superhero's penchant for prowling the streets, as well as the tradition of street patrolling undertaken by civic-minded groups such as the Guardian Angels (1979–) or going a little further back to the Lavender Panthers.⁷⁵ Ties between civic participation and social activism and the superhero genre are extensive and pervasive. But whereas some activists deploy the superhero metaphor, real-lifers embody it.

Alongside street patrols, real-life superhero activities include, assisting vulnerable people, raising funds for charity, consciousness-raising, breaking down stereotypes and prejudice, and simply just making people smile. (As an aside, Sikh Captain America exhibits real-lifer tendencies.) Looking to explain the preponderance of the “change agent” motif in superhero characterization, Chris Gavaler connected mainstream superhero ontology to historical radicals, outlaws, and social activists, such as Guy Fawkes and Robin Hood.⁷⁶ By enfolding Gavaler's assertion into real-lifer ontology, we can enrich our understanding of the intertextual, world-un/making nature of these perfor-

75 Between 1973 and 1974, the Lavender Panthers patrolled predominantly gay neighborhoods in San Francisco. One could also mention the patrols conducted by the Black Panther organization (1966–1982) or the Bear Clan Patrol group, a grassroots community patrol group primarily operating within Winnipeg's Aboriginal community (1990–). Of course, the inverse is also true, with many anti-LGBTQ vigilante groups operating globally. For example, in response to the retrograde “gay propaganda law” (2013), Russia has seen an increase in this type of injurious and lethal activity. For example, see “Occupy Pedophilia,” *LGBTQ Nation*, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/occupy-pedophilia/>, and Ben Steele, dir., *Hunted: The War against Gays in Russia* (Home Box Office, 2014.) And there is a clear parallel here with other right-wing hate groups that have used patrol tactics in the past, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

76 Chris Gavaler, *On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

mances, which manifest layering and repurposing tendencies too. Because by materializing characters whose origins can be traced back to the lived experiences of real people, real-lifers can be said to be engaging in a process of translative rematerialization, in which real life is translated into fiction, or mythologized, and then back into real life — heroic men become omnipotent gods become “heroic” men again *ad infinitum*, and leaving the question of causation for another day. Real-life superhero performances are embodied simulacra — material distortions of “real” superheroes, who are themselves distortions of other real-life heroic and activist figures. That is, real superheroes can currently only exist in the fictional realm. Once materialized into the physical world they cease to be, in a sense, real superheroes and become make-believe versions of real, but fictional, superheroes. And given the genre’s homogeneity, some, like minoritarian real-lifer superhero characters, are more made-up than others.

Real-lifers are neither real superheroes nor ordinary citizens. They reside somewhere in the liminal space between textual and material realms, as well as within real and imagological borderlands, in the gap and contradiction produced by bringing superheroes into the real world. The term “real-life superhero” refers to a limited performance. The qualifier “real-life” denotes the emergence of a different kind of superhero, one whose performances are subject to the limitations of life in a real world.⁷⁷ It also suggests their remit as falling within the realm of real-life issues (poverty, oppression, intolerance, for instance) and far removed from the threat of intergalactic overlords and planet eaters, though with the rise of authoritarianism and the devourment of the world’s “resources” by predatory, transnational

⁷⁷ The genre has a name for superheroes who are sans superpowers: costumed or masked heroes. This term more accurately describes real-lifers, but as within the genre itself, heroic characters of all kinds are subsumed under the superhero moniker.

corporations, the distance between these annihilative threats is perhaps not so great.⁷⁸

In disturbing superhero meaning (making) and destabilizing the idea of the real as well as the imaginary, real-life superheroes drive us to ask, as we did at the start of this snapshot, what is a “real” superhero, or indeed a “real-life” superhero?⁷⁹ And, as we discover next, *what if someone became a real-life superhero?*

A Real-Life Superhero? Superbarrio Gómez’s Story

I can’t stop a plane, or a train single handed, but I can keep a family from being evicted.

— Superbarrio, Mexico City⁸⁰

Superbarrio Gómez’s real-lifer status is unstable and complex, but as a superhero-inspired social justice activist, his mode of texcapology is undeniably grounded in real-life superhero traditions. While keeping in mind the substance of the preceding discussion, such as the un/making virtue of migrating superheroes from a fictional to a material realm and from extraordinary to ordinary materialities, this snapshot concentrates upon Superbarrio’s particularly textured, idiosyncratic brand of social activism.

Based in Mexico City, Superbarrio is a Mexican folk hero allied with Mexico City’s Neighborhood Assembly (La Asamblea de Barrios). He is also one of the world’s best-known real-life superheroes, and his origin story offers a rich example of inter-

78 Note that the genre has gone through periods, including recently, of prioritizing realistic, socially driven storylines over its more usual fantastical fare, notably the “social relevance” phase of the 1970s and the “realism” phase defining the 1980s.

79 This suggests the conceptualization of simulacra and the hyperreal, notably the oeuvre of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and the work of Jean Baudrillard.

80 Chris Kline, “Defender of Justice Superbarrio Roams Mexico City,” *CNN World News*, July 19, 1997, <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9707/19/mexico.superhero/>.

textuality and world un/making.⁸¹ Like all superheroes, Superbarrio's origins are marked by trauma, and his identity is complicated and infused with duality and multiplicity. The moniker "Superbarrio" refers to one person, but it is also the code name for a collective entity formed by the La Asamblea de Barrios in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City. This was a watershed moment for Mexico City residents, as well as a transformative moment for Superbarrio's creator(s). Superbarrio is the personification of "a collective political will" and "the defender of the poor tenants and scourge of voracious landlords and corrupt authorities."⁸² His personal identity is kept secret to encourage the idea of collectivity and unanimity, that "we are all Superbarrio." As he remarked once in an interview, there are "thousands of Superbarrios, in fact anyone who raises his/her voice against injustice was Superbarrio."⁸³ Indeed, the moniker itself suggests an empowered community, an uber neighborhood, a super barrio.

Superbarrio was born of two allied traditions: Mexican wrestling, or *lucha libre*, and the American superhero genre.⁸⁴

-
- 81 Superbarrio is not Mexico City's only real-lifer. "Peatónito" (loosely translates as "Pedestrian Man") defends the rights of pedestrians and has been described as a "pedestrian rights activist." See Dulce Ramos, "Unmasked! The Mexico City Superhero Wrestling for Pedestrians' Rights," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/09/unmasked-mexico-city-superhero-wrestling-pedestrian-rights>.
- 82 Mauricio-José Schwarz, cited in Edwin Corbin, "Habitat: The Effectiveness of Justice through an Intervention of the Assembly of Barrios and Superbarrio," *Hemispheric Institute*, https://web.archive.org/web/20090519055652/http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/3.1/eng/en31_pg_corbin.html.
- 83 Berta Jottar, "Superbarrio Gómez for us President: Global Citizenship and the 'Politics of the Possible,'" *e-misférica* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2004), https://web.archive.org/web/20211202005649/http://hemi.nyu.edu/journal/1_1/sb.html. This identity shielding strategy recalls DC's Guardian's reasoning for keeping his identity secret, namely, to keep the cultural identity of his character fluid and open to allow people to imagine that anyone could wear the costume.
- 84 *Lucha libre* wrestlers and superheroes share many similarities, but El Santo's immortalization in *Santo*, a superhero comic book series that ran for thirty-five years, synthesized them. See Chris Sims, "Cinco De Mayo

El Santo, a renowned luchador and former escape artist, serves as his muse, while the superhero metaphor galvanizes his civic action. Like the superhero genre, lucha libre has a penchant for masks and costumes, secret identities, code-names, making it difficult to tell where the superhero starts, and the luchador ends. Indeed, Superbarrio's costume is a striking mash up of both traditions and standing in a crimson skinsuit and gold lamé shorts, he cuts a portly figure. A full-face red and gold wrestling mask, gold boots, and a floor-length gold cape complete the look. It is a perturbing image that undermines and distorts the muscular athleticism associated with superheroes and wrestlers. Indeed, Superbarrio's aureate shorts jarringly recall muscle man Rocky's kitschy hotpants from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a piece of clothing designed to show off the body, in Rocky's case the ideal male body, as played by Peter Hinwood, a professional fitness model at the time. In Superbarrio's case, the hotpants help to display a different kind of body, and they do so purposely.

Superbarrio presents a non-normative idea of a superhero, or indeed a wrestler. As a spectacle, his outward appearance, his masquerade, works in contradictory ways. To make people smile and relax in his presence, for example. Or, as a distraction, akin to escapologist performances. But it can also unsettle onlookers and opponents, throwing them off guard. His embodied translation disrupts the mainstream idea that superheroes are white, somatically "ideal," and English-speaking. Like [dis]players and other real-lifers, Superbarrio tactically misrecognizes some mainstream superhero characteristics (e.g., whiteness, athleticism, individualism) while adopting others (e.g., costumes, secret identities, civic action). But his performances are not fannish. He does not want to *become* a superhero or bring

Luchadore Comics Special: Viva Santo," *Comics Alliance*, May 5, 2010, <http://comicsalliance.com/luchadore-comics-santo/>. Superbarrio also crossed over into comics, appearing in *Crisis*, a socially aware British comic book series published by Fleetway (1988–1991). Superbarrio appears in the *Third World War* storyline created by Pat Mills and Carlos Ezquerro, as well as on the front cover of issue #8.

one to life. Instead, he wants to hijack and repurpose superhero tropes. A decision that illustrates the power of superheroes to speak beyond texts and fandoms. And while he may not intend to rescript or un/make the idea of a superhero, it is nonetheless a consequence of his disruptive performance.

As a performance artist and activist, Superbarrio is well-known for his transnational grassroots activism, which focuses on structural inequality, wealth disparities, affordable housing and gentrification, and immigrant rights. For example, in 1989, he toured a cross-border campaign called "Superbarrio vs Agente Fronterizo" (loose translation, border agent), and ran for US president in 1995, not with the intention of winning, but to use the spectacle of his candidacy to force an opportunity to meaningfully discuss alternative transnational politics and open a critical dialogue around NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement).⁸⁵ A strategic action that also served to highlight the utility of "failing" in today's social justice activism.

Superbarrio's civic performances cross geographic, political, and cultural borders, and in so doing disrupt seemingly opposing positions: fantasy and reality, sport and politics, high and low culture, serious and silly, the "I" and the "we," and the Mexico-US border. In his performances, worlds collide, as he wrestles a political opponent one moment and then speaks eloquently about social justice the next, still in full costume and face mask, or as he stands in full wrestler-cum-superhero regalia beside conventionally dressed, uneasy-looking officials. And, like other superhero-based activists, he repurposes the genre's white savior tendencies. By encouraging people to unite and fight for their rights, he transforms the genre's individualistic *I will fight for you* into an empowered *we can fight for ourselves*.

85 An astute photo essay on Superbarrio Gómez's performance as a wrestler and political activist examines his journey as "an alternative political imaginary constituted via popular culture and the construction of a national and transnational social movement. [He] belongs to both the minoritarian class and to the wrestling ring of popular culture, which makes his politics possible" and his "journey maps an alternative political imaginary." Jotta, "Superbarrio Gómez."

Liminal performances like Superbarrio's are invaluable because they remind us of the constructed nature of borders, rules, conventions, and social organizations. As a destabilizing force, Superbarrio's disruptive, layered performances offer an e-scape from the drives of hegemony and assimilation.

In mainstream and geek media, Superbarrio Gómez is frequently described as a real-life superhero, but in practice, his style of superhero-inspired activism is more difficult to define. He bears all the hallmarks of a real-lifer, including an origin story, a secret identity and code-name, a costume, and a passion for social justice and civic action. Unlike the localism of real-lifer activism, Superbarrio engages in broader, rights-based activism, more akin to the systemic activism of the aforementioned DREAMER movement. He also forgoes street patrols. Moreover, his inspiration is more layered than straight-up real-lifers, extending beyond the superhero genre into the realm of *lucha libre*. And while these are analogous traditions, rooted in masking and masculinity as well as duels and dualisms, it is surely the superhero moral code that puts the "super" in Superbarrio.

Resistive superhero practices such as those snapshotted here transform not only the performers' lives and worlds, but also the lives and worlds of the people they meet. They can even rupture mainstream ideas of superheroes and superhero fans. Texcapologists of all stripes deliver on the genre's fumbled radical promise. It is they who imagine and embody other ways of seeing and being in the world, whether it is the elementary idea of minoritarian superheroes or an empowered citizenry who, realizing that we are all "bound to the same destination," refuse their back-seat role on Spaceship Earth.⁸⁶ Within their disparate performances, we can observe disruptive meaning making, repurposing, transformation, and world-un/making, all of which help recover the genre's lost radical promise.

86 Walt Whitman, "Old-Age Echoes," in *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Oscar Lovell Triggs (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 32.

Moreover, to contest and e-scape the pressures of dominant ideology and genre prejudices, texcapologists dispel the boundaries between symbolic, imagological, and social spheres, and freely circulate these liminal realms. This interspatial, multi-modal quality clearly characterizes the textured performances of [dis]players, real-lifers, and Superbarrio Gómez. As we will see next, it also marks the practices of our final band of texcapologists. Little Sanjay, for example, enters the symbolic realm and his creator, Sanjay Patel, the animated film; Yasmin flows into the imagological realm, and Kamala Khan, the fictional, yet real, world of her heroes; and finally, Maya Glick, who makes her childhood wishes come true by making a live-action superhero film. Embracing ambiguity and eschewing binary formulations creates space to reimagine the genre's relationship with radicalism, ultimately moving superhero texts into the wild, lawless places, a migration that adds to the genre's distinctly queer feeling, as I discuss in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

“I am a superhero”; or, A Casting Call (to Arms)

The case stories presented thus far have focused on embodied and sartorial articulations of texcapology, but in this closing chapter, I look at how it manifests on different surfaces, especially on-page and on-screen. Sanjay Patel, creator of Pixar’s *Sanjay’s Super Team* (2015), embodies the liminal creator/fan position, while in “Yasmin’s Story,” a segment from the 2013 *Girl Rising* documentary, the lines between live action and animation, as well as reality and the imagological realm, are powerfully and poignantly blurred.¹ (*What if I were a superhero?*) *Rain*, a crowd-funded fan film by Maya Glick, is also notable for challenging and remediating Storm’s official representation within the X-Men mythos and serves as her definitive answer to the question: Who is the *real* Storm?² (*What if I were Storm?*) However, I begin with the story of Kamala Khan, today’s Ms. Marvel, a rare and valuable representation of a minoritarian superhero

1 Richard Robbins, dir., *Girl Rising* (GathrFilms, 2013).

2 Zane Rutledge and Jeff Stolhand, dirs., *Rain* (Zane Films and Thunder-Goddess Creations, 2016).

and superhero fan.³ (*What if Ms. Marvel were a Pakistani American teenage girl?*)

Official Textual Representation: *Ms. Marvel*

Textual examples of texcapology are rare because official representations of media fans are rare, and representations of minoritarian superhero fans are even rarer. We might recall Raj from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) but struggle to think of anyone else. From within the genre itself, Kamala Khan/*Ms. Marvel* and Miles Morales/*Spider-Man* are recent examples, but Virgil Hawkins/*Static* came much earlier.⁴ These *rarae aves* provide valuable representations of minority superhero fans. But they do a bit more than that. As superheroes *and* superhero fans, or “hero-fans,” as I refer to them elsewhere, these characterizations provide industry representations of texcapology, which, when done well, can shed light on real-life tactical textual engagement.⁵

Hero-fans find themselves in the peculiar position of being superhero fans while living in worlds populated by actual superheroes.⁶ Their world-un/making stories are full of fannish details and encounters, not just stories where the superhero “could

3 As previously noted, at the time of printing, Marvel announced the demise of Kamala Khan as *Ms. Marvel*. This is a story for another occasion, but suffice it to say that the decision to kill off this much-loved character is not only controversial but also revealing, as is the way it occurred, which has already been condemned as cynical, dismissive, and commercially driven.

4 A character created by Milestone Comics founders Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, Derek T. Dingle, and Christopher Priest who made his first appearance in 1993.

5 Ellen Kirkpatrick, “Hero-Fans and Fanboy Auteurs: Reflections and Realities,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, eds. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (London: Bloomsbury 2016), 127–38.

6 Making these characters superhero fans blurs all kinds of boundaries and raises some interesting questions in terms of the dynamics between creators, producers, and media fans (e.g., professional/amateur, fantasy/real-ity). The hero-fan status also evokes the in-between status of the aca-fan.

be you," but realities in which the superhero *is* you. Morales's bedroom walls are plastered with Spider-Man posters. Khan writes Avengers fanfiction before teaming up with them, and after fighting alongside the X-Men's Wolverine, takes a fannish selfie with him. In their worlds, they have dodged and eluded the genre's negative, or absencing, representations to become superheroes and superhero fans, just as they have resisted the dominant idea that superheroes are cis het white men, as are superhero fans.⁷

Like the performers in the preceding chapter, to become superheroes, hero-fans are portrayed as tactically misrecognizing genre dogma, embracing some elements (e.g., superhero code, costumes) while rejecting others (e.g., whiteness, gender coding).⁸ Each character helps to transform the genre's homogenized landscape, both within their worlds and ours. Their presence alters the nature and meaning of the superhero, just as it does the superhero fan. And in so doing, they rekindle old questions. *Who can be a "real" superhero? What does a "real" superhero look like?* Questions still plaguing superhero culture. Questions stirring other questions. *What if I were a superhero?* An open, universal casting call, which, when answered by minoritarian superhero fans, like Khan, Morales, and Hawkins, sparks an alternative, more diverse idea of superhero ontology, ideology, and aesthetics. As texcapologists, minoritarian hero-fans

7 For example, becoming superpowered did not automatically make them superheroes. Superheroes are more than their powers, but despite its flaws, each of these characters saw enough in the genre to inspire them to become a superhero (e.g., to make a costume, pick a codename, fight crime). Their powers may have come about by chance, but becoming a superhero was entirely their choice.

8 It's worth noting that, despite appearing in titles that seek to counter the genre's homogeneity, the creators have transferred the failures of our world's superhero genre into the fictional worlds of their characters. Khan's beloved heroes, like ours, are shaped by dominant superhero ontology, ideology, and aesthetics. While this choice is understandable in terms of narrative demands and expectations, as well as perhaps seeking to accurately reflect the real-life experiences of minoritarian superhero fans, it also represents yet another example of the genre failing its duty to fully speculate about other worlds.

un/make the genre. That is, by seeing it differently, and allowing us to see it so, they make it mean differently. As we'll see next, Kamala Khan's un/becoming transformation invites superhero fans, including Khan herself, to (re)consider superhero lore as she stretches into the role of one of the most malleable superhero characterizations, Ms. Marvel.



Khan is a typical teenage Pakistani American girl and superhero fan. One evening, a mutagenic vapor cloud engulfs her, causing her to have a vision in which she meets some of her heroes, including her favorite, Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers (former Ms. Marvel). Speaking Urdu, Captain Marvel, a blonde-haired white woman, asks her who she wants to be, and Khan replies, "I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you."⁹ Khan's answer speaks to the genre's homogeneity and its failure to create a diverse imagological realm into which Khan can escape. Simply put, she can't imagine being a superhero, or indeed being beautiful or popular, outside of the genre's mainstream model. Rather than offering an escape, the genre confines Khan's imaginary field within the limits of our "unpleasant or unacceptable reality."¹⁰ Captain Marvel warns her that she is about to be "rebooted" in a way that people "only dream about," and when Khan awakens from her reverie, she discovers that she has transformed into a blonde-haired white girl, and as if that weren't enough, she has also become Ms. Marvel.¹¹ (A transformative moment not only rebooting Khan but the official Ms. Marvel characterization.)

9 G. Willow Wilson et al., *Ms. Marvel #1: Meta Morphosis* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

10 See Chapter 3 of this volume. Lars Konzack, "Escapism," in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 246.

11 Wilson et al., *Ms. Marvel #1*. And people do "dream" about fantastical kinds of transformations, but not necessarily about gaining superpowers,

Her dreamy encounter sees her dearest wish granted, and she becomes what she has always wanted to be, a *real* superhero. Khan's idealized transformation confirms that she cross-identifies with the hegemonic messages encoded in the genre's representations: superheroes are white, and female superheroes are to be beautiful and sexually objectified. For example, prior to transformation, she describes wanting to wear "the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in giant wedge heels."¹² But there's a lot of wisdom in the idiom, "Be careful what you wish for, lest it comes true," as she soon discovers.

Her idle wish changes her body beyond recognition, leaving her physically ill and mentally disoriented, lost in familiar surroundings, literally. Alongside body integrity disorder, the portrayal of Khan's initial transformation confirms a precarious, dislocating process of cross-identification, in which subjects identify across identity markers. Quickly realizing her mistake, she asks, "is it too late to change my mind?"¹³ And, of course, it's not too late — this is the superhero genre after all — but to become a superhero on her own terms, she must curb her customary cross-identification and begin disidentifying, that is repurposing encoded superhero meaning, a scrambling process that "both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications."¹⁴ Khan won't be able to authentically answer her "what if" question until she learns to see superheroes in a new way. Only then will she be able to recreate herself as a real superhero, as the one and only Ms. Marvel.

Over the next few issues, Khan becomes a texcapologist. We watch as she learns how to escape the confines of her genre enculturation and its effect upon her body and mind. Her strug-

but about effortlessly becoming normatively and idealistically beautiful through cosmetic surgery and beauty filters, and so on.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

gle for meaning is underscored when she reveals her “true” identity as Ms. Marvel to a close friend, Bruno, and he asks her: “But why hide [...] why do it all behind someone else’s face?”¹⁵ Khan tells him that she felt obligated to satisfy mainstream expectations of what a real superhero is and looks like: “With perfect hair and big boots. Not Kamala Khan,” and, while she doesn’t explicitly mention race here, given the ubiquity of whiteness in the genre, she perhaps doesn’t need to.¹⁶

The scopic theme continues into the following scene, where Khan — now un/becoming Ms. Marvel on her own terms — asks a police officer who doesn’t believe that she is Ms. Marvel: “What’s Ms. Marvel supposed to look like?” to which he replies: “You know. Tall, blonde, with the big [...] powers.”¹⁷ Khan dodges the police officer’s mainstream, sexualized, and racially coded idea of what a superhero looks like by using her shapeshifting abilities to grow taller, signaling to him that she does, indeed, have “big powers.” Her disidentificatory response demonstrates her newfound mastery of the art of “tactical misrecognition.”¹⁸ With this final stretch, she inexorably breaks free of the totalizing idea of superhero ontology and aesthetics. This is a watershed moment, indicating an awakening and an acceptance of the idea that, despite not conforming to normative superhero body ideals, she is a real superhero: she is Ms. Marvel. It also signals a rejection of the homogeneity, whiteness, and hegemony of mainstream superheroes and the genre that houses them. Perhaps it is no coincidence that at this moment Khan grows in stature and, quite literally, becomes someone to look up to.

15 G. Willow Wilson et al., *Ms. Marvel #4: Past Curfew* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

16 Ibid. For discussions on the ubiquity and invisibility of whiteness, see, for example, Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997); Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); and Emma Dabiri, *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Comradeship* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

17 Wilson et al., *Ms. Marvel #4*.

18 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

As Ms. Marvel, Khan creates a new way of seeing and being a superhero, and by asserting herself as a differently embodied superhero she e-scapes and expands the confines of superhero ontology and aesthetics. Her visible presence helps the genre, and its protagonists begin to mean differently, both in her world and in ours. In the end, even the skeptical police officer — perhaps representing skeptical fans or “fan police” — believes that she is a real superhero.

Mirroring *The Escapist's* world-hopping antics, the Khan/Ms. Marvel characterization similarly un/makes worlds.¹⁹ As a frequent symbol of resistance in social justice protests around the world, her transformative effect extends beyond the boundaries of superhero culture. This is due, in part, to her casting as a female Muslim character against a backdrop of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, which is often state backed. Superhero fans, readers, and perhaps even people who haven't read the comic book or seen the TV series recognize the cultural significance of a female Muslim superhero. They see in this character someone who has carved out a space for herself, on her own terms, within the cultural dominant, a goal to which they too likely aspire.²⁰

19 More on *The Escapist* can be found in Chapter 4 of this volume.

20 While not the only female Muslim superhero, Khan is perhaps the most well-known mainstream Muslim superhero. Sooraya Qadir (a.k.a. Dust) is a member of the X-Men, but Muslim characters can also be found in other media, such as the Qahera from the self-titled webcomic *Qahera* and the award-winning *Burka Avenger*, a Pakistani animated TV series. See Gordon Campbell, “Muslim Female Superhero Fights Misogyny,” *Werewolf*, June 11, 2014, <http://werewolf.co.nz/2014/06/female-muslim-superhero-fights-back-against-misogyny/>, and Fred Patten, “No Import Yet for Pakistan's Hit Animated TV Series ‘Burka Avenger,’” *IndieWire*, January 3, 2016, <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/no-import-yet-for-pakistans-hit-animated-tv-series-burka-avenger-122437>.

(Auto)Biographical Representation I: *Sanjay's Super Team*

Sanjay's Super Team is a seven-minute, dialogue-free, animated short from Pixar Animated Studios.²¹ It explores many of the same themes as *Ms. Marvel*, including the tensions between religion and secularism. Seen through the prism of a child's fan-nish attachment to his favorite superhero, the Blue Flame, it is a story about the struggle for meaning and the collapse of boundaries between father and son, gods and superheroes, modern and traditional, and the West and the East. Its staging suggests the oppositional logic structuring the superhero genre and the world's major religions. The action takes place in a divided living room with each opponent occupying a corner, much like a boxing ring. An old-fashioned TV and VCR set-up dominates one corner and a Hindu shrine the other, with two incense sticks mirroring the TV antenna. Each corner boasts a *map*, one of America and one of India, a *calendar*, one in English and one in Hindi, and a *mat*, one modern and one traditional. And, as we shall see, each combatant worships a separate set of three idols. The stage, or panel, is set for an epic battle.

Wearing Blue Flame pajamas, little Sanjay is first to enter the scene. Clutching a notebook and pencil and a Blue Flame action figure, he runs to the TV and flops down to watch some *Super Team* cartoons. His father follows at a slower pace and, to the sound of cartoons, opens the shrine to begin his devotions. Sanjay is lost in another world, his eyes wide with delight in the reflected glow of the TV screen. Clearly a big *Super Team* fan, he happily begins filling his notebook with drawings of his heroes. His pictures mirror the figures on the screen. He does not deviate from the official images. But his joy is short-lived. His father

21 Sanjay Patel, dir., *Sanjay's Super Team* (Pixar Animation Studios, 2015).

While it doesn't precisely belong to what Jack Halberstam dubs "Pixarvolt," animated movies emphasizing "themes of revolution and transformation," *Sanjay's Super Team* shares many similarities with Pixarvolt films, not least its suggestion that people can find alternative ways of being and belonging outside our stifling social arrangements. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 28.

rings a bell—to summon the gods and ward off evil, signaling too the start of the next round—and Sanjay responds by turning the TV volume up, but he loses the aural skirmish when his father first turns down and then turns off the TV before motioning him over to the shrine.

Slouching to the other side of the room, Sanjay reluctantly joins his father in his devotions. Distracted, he lights the diva lamp, then accidentally blows it out, but like *trataka*, as he gazes into the evanescent wick, he is transported to another place, the liminal world of the shrine, and he isn't alone. Flames are religiously significant, and Sanjay's snuffing out of the flame, no matter how accidental, signifies his distance from Hinduism and, thus, from his father. But ensconced in the shrine world, Sanjay begins to connect, and blur the boundaries between, Hindu and superhero mythologies, much like Khan does with Islam and superhero lore in *Ms. Marvel*. This being a superhero story, however, his awakening involves a Homeric showdown, and it's not long before the other gatecrasher makes itself known, a belligerent shapeshifting monster from the *Super Team* cartoon. A battle ensues, and Sanjay quickly realizes that he needs help. But rather than summoning the Super Team, he uses the sparking feature of his Blue Flame action figure to relight the diva lamp and call forth the Hindu gods. An action denoting a transference of power, literal and symbolic. His plan works, and he watches Vishnu, Durga, and Hanuman fight the monster. The gods, however, need some assistance, so Sanjay, dressed—or cosplaying—in his Blue Flame pajamas, becomes a surrogate god and superhero, not quite the Blue Flame but his unique rendering of this character. He saves the day but shatters his beloved Blue Flame action figure in the process. After the battle, Vishnu, a blue-skinned deity, replicates the action figure and gives it to Sanjay.²² The figure looks the same, but it, like Sanjay's relationship with the superhero genre and Hinduism,

22 Note that in Hinduism, blue-skinned gods are on the side of "good," and this color symbolism clearly informs the color coding of the Blue Flame superhero.

has changed. Sanjay's world-hopping experience saw him merge these two disparate realms to create an alternate, more personal way of connecting with these figures and mythologies.

Wanting to show his father his new way of seeing, or relating to, Hindu gods and superheroes, Sanjay decides to amend one of his old Super Team pictures. A drawing of the Super Team already covers the bottom half of the page, including a facsimile of their official logo, and he now fills the top half with drawings of the three Hindu gods before printing his name above the Super Team logo. "Super Team" becomes "Sanjay's Super Team." Notepad in hand, he makes his way to the middle of the room and waits to show his father his repurposed drawing, but before doing so, he opens the window blinds and floods the room with sunlight. When his father sees the drawing, he realizes that Sanjay has created a way to combine Indian and American culture and rekindle their bond. Lying on his stomach with his feet wiggling in the air, a posture recreating his son's earlier cartoon-watching pose, he is clearly engaged and delighted with his son's epic world-un/making.

Sanjay's repurposed drawing illustrates his changing relationship with official meaning and symbolizes a form of texcapology. Prior to his shrine experience, his drawings reflect official images, suggesting that he wished to identify with official meanings. But after it, his drawings become more personally expressive and exhibit an agentic, disidentificatory spirit. By printing his name over the official logo, for example, he declares that these are now his versions of the characters. The different font styles represent official/unofficial meaning-making positions, and Sanjay here not only asserts himself as a creator and meaning maker, but also signals meaning making as a negotiated process between creators and consumers. Note too that Sanjay did not take a new page, a new leaf, a fresh start, but merged his drawing of the Hindu gods with an existing drawing of his heroes. Rather than dualistic, his experience is holistic, and his fanart reflects his newly expanded imagological realm, both sets of ideas now share the same space—he literally puts them on the same page. Sanjay's repurposing represents an intricate form

of meaning making and world un/making. To invoke Chabon's metaphor, Sanjay emerged from the shrine a different person than when he entered.

But Sanjay's texcapology is not just a work of fiction. It comes from a real source and reflects its creator's real-life engagement with exclusionary superhero texts.²³ Before the film begins, we learn that it is "mostly based on a true story." Sanjay Patel, the film's director, not only portrays texcapology, but his filmmaking itself functions as a mode of texcapology. In promotional interviews for the film, Patel describes how he wanted to create an overlap between his father's Indian culture and his American culture, and that he did so by connecting "the superheroes of the East with the superheroes of the West."²⁴ Patel's love of superheroes stems from cartoons rather than comics, and although he embraces Western pop culture, he consistently explains that the lack of diversity within the mainstream media drove him to make the film. He describes wanting to "reflect a family that was closer to my own and speak to that audience of immigrant kids."²⁵ The repetition of this sentiment indicates Patel's depth of feeling on the subject and his awareness, even as a child, that the genre that he loved did not directly address him. In *Sanjay's Super Team*, Patel reveals how his "outsiderness," as a minoritarian superhero fan and a child of Indian immigrants, drove him to find a way to translate and make this genre and his father's culture into something more meaningful for him.

As a child, Patel did not see himself or anyone like him in his beloved superhero cartoons, but he began to see possibilities within the Hindu pantheon, possibilities made real when he started to connect the two mythologies. Patel's experiences

23 The childhood experiences of its first-generation Indian American director, Sanjay Patel, provide the inspiration for the film.

24 R. Ryan, "Sanjay's Super Team Interview," *Vimeo*, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/140871418>.

25 Tasha Robinson, "Pixar's Sanjay Patel on His Debut Short: 'It was so lovely to have John Lasseter champion it,'" *The Verge*, December 6, 2015, <https://www.theverge.com/2015/12/8/9869646/sanjays-super-team-sanjay-patel-pixar-interview>.

as a minoritarian fan take me back to the opening chapter and Muñoz's allegory of the female revolutionary from Antilles who wanted to find a way to keep Fanon's work relevant. Patel too could have walked away from the hegemonic genre and its normative representations, just as the woman could have walked away from Fanon. He could have escaped its grasp, but by blending Hindu and superhero mythologies, he chose to e-scape instead. In the film's closing credits, we see a child's drawing of Sanjay/Patel as the Blue Flame, just as he appeared during the battle scene in the shrine. The childish style of the drawing suggests that this is one of little Sanjay's drawings. In this image, Sanjay/Patel looks directly at the audience. It is an assertive, confident gaze that contrasts with his earlier drawings and represents his new perspective on superheroes, himself, and the world. In these final images, as well as throughout the film, Patel's texcapology is manifest, a strategy that frees him from the confinement of the genre's totalizing gaze and its stifling imagological realm. *Sanjay's Superhero Team* blurs the line between reality and fantasy, increasing not only diversity and fan representation but enacting and portraying a mode of texcapology that minoritarian fans might well be familiar with but may not be required to utilize on this occasion.

The idiosyncratic examples of Khan and Sanjay/Patel illustrate how minoritarian subjects can disrupt mainstream representations of superheroes. As with disidentification, their texcapology erupts from what Muñoz calls "tactical recognition," a way of seeing and being that enables them to "resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology."²⁶ This tactical strategy also characterizes my next set of case stories, all drawn from the lived realm.

26 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

(Auto)Biographical Representation II: *Yasmin's Story*²⁷

Content Warning: Sexual Assault and Violence

"No, I'm not a street kid!... I'm a superhero." And with these words, a young, disenfranchised girl and sexual assault survivor tries to transform her position in the world. Recalling Billy Batson's method of becoming Captain Marvel, by uttering these seemingly magical words, she seeks to become an empowered version of herself. The words are spoken by an actor on this occasion, but they originate within the lived experiences and imagination of a real girl. As with most superheroes, the girl's identity is a secret, and we know her only by her codename, "Yasmin."²⁸

"Yasmin" is a 12-year-old Egyptian girl whose survivor story forms part of the 2013 *Girl Rising* documentary and project.²⁹ Shifting voices, genres, mediums, and cultures relay her lived experience.³⁰ The tale behind the tale is that to survive the trauma of reliving and reporting a sexual assault, a disempowered Egyptian girl seized upon a power-crazed genre and used

27 I include an extended account of "Yasmin's Story" because it offers a rare and extraordinarily rich manifestation of texcapology. As part of an (auto)biographical documentary film, it straddles the border between reality and representation. In terms of power relations between filmmakers and Yasmin, this is a hazardous position to occupy. Ever mindful of these tensions, I work with the understanding that, although Yasmin's lived experience undergirds this dramatization, what we see and hear on screen are only glimpses and echoes of her experience and empowering mode of texcapology.

28 For clarity, I place quotation marks around the name when referring to the character version of Yasmin.

29 Richard Robbins, dir., *Girl Rising* (GathrFilms, 2013).

30 A project aiming to change the meaning of the signifier, "girl," and thus the lives of girls all over the world. Despite critical acclaim, the 2013 documentary drew legitimate criticism centering on the mediation of the girls' stories, through writers, actors, and narrators as well as producers and directors. For example, see Natalie Baker, "Film 'Girl Rising' Has Good Intentions — But Ends Up as Cinematic Chivalry," *Bitch Media*, March 21, 2013, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/film-girl-rising-cinematic-chivalry-review-feminist>.

it to create a transformative site of superheroic resistance.³¹ A team of Western documentary filmmakers picked up the story and, with their own agenda, collaborated with the young girl to bring her story to the international stage, repackaged as “Egypt Chapter: Yasmin’s Story.” The chapter is a mixed-media short that combines live action and animation, but we see only shadows and hear only whispers of the girl’s story within it: A creative team filters her fantastical account through their privilege and their project goals; a child actor represents her during the live-action dramatization; an animated version is her surrogate during the reenactment of her assault; a female voice speaking English narrates the first-person animated sequences; and the story is a collaboration between Yasmin and the Egyptian American journalist, Mona Eltahawy, herself a sexual assault survivor, to whom the story is credited.³² Yet while the overall storytelling strategy is flawed and problematic, Yasmin’s story rings out movingly and compellingly.³³

Yasmin attempts to escape the confines and oppressions of her world by becoming a superhero and by allowing her story to become part of a global consciousness-raising project. Her survival strategy is made more vivid because she draws her power from the blighted American superhero genre. Given her sociocultural embodiment, Yasmin cannot easily claim sanctuary within the genre, so she draws what she can from it to create an alternate version of a superhero, un/making worlds in the process. Her texcapology, and its representation, actualize the possibility of a different kind of superhero, one who

31 Egypt is a politically and religiously conservative country, and Yasmin’s oppression is intersectional and multifaceted: she is a poor, illiterate girl, whose father was imprisoned.

32 The choice of a white American actress, Chloë Moretz, to perform the voice-over is highly problematic and was just one of many elements of the documentary to receive fierce criticism.

33 As a side note, this narrative strategy resembles the collaborative nature of creating superhero stories. It also suggests some superhero narrative conventions (e.g., a codename and a secret identity) as well as costuming and masking practices.

disturbs normative superhero ontology and aesthetics. As an outsider, Yasmin has no place, voice, or representation within both realms, lived and textual, so to survive, she unleashes her imagination and creates a transformative, liberating, liminal, no-place space. "Yasmin's Story" disrupts all kinds of borders: reality blurs into the imaginary as a young, marginalized girl discovers an unexpected way to (re)claim agency, if only symbolically. (*What if I were a superhero?*)

In this mediated portrayal, we watch as "Yasmin," accompanied by her mother, tells her story to two male police officers: some details are true, some are tactically repurposed, and some are fantastical. For example, when asked why she has come to the police station, "Yasmin" tells the officers that she is a superhero, and as she does so, she lifts her chin slightly, a movement that raises her head and eyes. It is a small gesture, but it transforms and empowers her whole visage. (It also supports the interpretation of her repeated phrase, "I am a superhero," as a performative utterance and code for *I am an empowered citizen*.³⁴) Here, "Yasmin" draws back from the real world and plugs into the superhero genre like a power socket. This survival strategy gives her the fortitude to endure both her assault and the police interview, both of which are male-dominated and disempowering situations. Her narration drifts into an animated sequence as she matter-of-factly recounts the fantastical details of her assault. She states, for example, that she warned her attacker that she was "not an ordinary girl" and that she was "powerful" before revealing herself as a modestly dressed superhero. She tells the officers that she defended herself with a knife, which turns out to be a taped-up shard of glass, and that after defeating her attacker, she showed mercy, as any superhero would do, by not killing him.

Yasmin's account offers an alternative idea of who superheroes are and what they look like, so too their fans. We don't know how she became acquainted with the American superhero

34 See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

genre, but given her geographic, economic, and sociocultural location, it was perhaps through fragments scavenged from other media, including paratexts and cartoons, as with Patel.³⁵ But whatever the source, Yasmin clearly overcame the genre's Western, hegemonic coding to connect with many of its tenets. She knows about the costumes, the honor code, and that superheroes are powerful individuals who are not like ordinary people. She uses genre codes to escape the horror of her ordeal and recasts her assault as a superheroic battle. But she does not fully, nor uncritically, connect with the genre. Her costume, for example, reflects her religious doctrines, and she firmly rejects the genre's dogma regarding saviorism and exceptionalism. It is within this gap, this disjunction, that her texcapology emerges. By imagining saving herself she adopts a much more creative and empowered stance than the genre usually advocates for citizens, spurning its damsel-in-distress trope, for example. Here, *I will protect you* becomes *I will protect myself*. And tellingly, she does not imagine herself as a god-like superhero. By envisioning herself becoming a non-white female Muslim superhero, she not only creates a survival strategy, but she also disrupts and resists, through her embodiment and its subsequent on-screen representation, the genre's exclusionary racial and gender coding. Yasmin, bravely repurposes the encoded messages of superhero texts, thereby answering her own "what if" question.

Yasmin's storyworld is a fluid, contradictory, disruptive space: an un/made world. Blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, agency and impotence, and the material and imagological realms, her revisionist strategy keeps meaning generatively in process and ambiguous. For example, she claims to have defeated the bad man, but her storytelling collapses around this point, suggesting that she was, in fact, sexually assaulted. As I

35 Superhero culture is nascent in Egypt and is grounded in the recent wave of blockbuster superhero films from Hollywood. Heba Fouad, "Batman, Superman, and Deadpool: The Rise of Comic Subculture in Egypt," *The Caravan*, April 11, 2016, <http://www.auccaravan.com/?p=3913>. Home-grown characters, such as the groundbreaking female title *Lamis*, created by Safia Baraka and Hamid Yehia, are beginning to emerge.

discuss below, the layering of details, as well as the subsequent contradictions, allows her to keep the particulars of her assault in play. It enables her to create an empowering version of events, and by controlling the story and keeping its details mobile, she controls the past, present, and future. And in the end, in a different and queer kind of way, she does defeat the bad man.

The film's layered form reflects her world un/making, and it cycles between a realistic, drab live-action portrayal and a fantastic, colorful animation. A shift in language, from Egyptian Arabic (subtitled in English) to English narration, emphasizes these symbolic, visual transitions. The decision to animate Yasmin's interiorized account and to accompany these segments with an incongruous English first-person narration formally denotes it as a constructed, alternate, intangible version of reality.³⁶ (As a reenactment piece, however, the entire chapter is a reconstruction of reality.) "Yasmin's" transformed voice hovers commandingly over the animated scenes, and it is the only voice we hear. The voicelessness of the animated figures suggests that they lack the breath necessary for speech. The quality of being without breath reinforces the alterity and liminality of these scenes, in which the figures silently occupy the living/dead interstice. Speech is a powerful metaphor for agency, and their silence suggests impotence. They are the lifeless puppets, and Yasmin is the omnipotent puppeteer. In the lived realm, Yasmin has no voice or agency, but within her superheroic storyworld, she uses language and her voice to take control of her (life)story. In her lacuna—a breathing space, a pocket of resistance—she is free to become everything she is not expected or allowed to be in the real, or indeed the superhero, world.

Mirroring Yasmin's world-un/making, the filmmakers have created an alternate, fantastical space within the live-action film,

36 To animate is to create or give life to something. It also means to fill with boldness or courage. Both meanings speak to Yasmin's creation of a fantastical, transformative lacuna. The animation medium also suggests a detachment from, or altered relationship with, the rules of reality. It can offer, as in this case, a realm of possibility unhinged from the limits of the real world.

one pointing to the superhero tradition.³⁷ But neither world nor story feels privileged or more authentic, even though one is, literally, presented as real and the other as fantastical. Yasmin does not simply exchange one exclusionary world for another. Instead, she sutures details from both realms to un/make an alternate world, where she resides in the “neither here nor there” of the separating “/” (e.g., text/reality, true/false, inside/outside). Inside this lacuna, she shirks the disempowering victim or false accusation narratives swirling around her. Her texcapology enables her to survive the oppressions, the “slings and arrows,” of her world, and, by subverting and repurposing the superhero genre, she, like Khan and Patel, simultaneously disrupts normative ideas about what superheroes are and can be.

The toing and froing between mediums, genres, and languages symbolizes Yasmin’s struggle for meaning and agency. It is itself reminiscent of the action of breathing. On the inhalation, Yasmin steadies herself for the suffocating, oppressiveness of her reality, but on the outward breath she exhales into the freedom of the fantastical space.³⁸ Breathing displays the porousness of the border separating internal and external or imagological and real meanings, and similarly between the realms of the seen and unseen.³⁹ And if we read “life” as symbolizing agency and “death” as oppression, we see the same ideas play out in Wordsworth’s lines: “A being breathing thoughtful breath / A traveller between life and death.”⁴⁰ Yasmin, as phantomic ruler of the land of the living dead, circulates and qua-

37 The animated sequences nod to superhero cartoons, and the use of English locates them within the realm of the superhero: the segments, literally, speak the language of the American superhero genre.

38 The idea of film as breath, or a series of breaths, immediately recalls Aleksandr Sokurov’s ground-breaking 2002 film *Russian Ark*, a ninety-minute film captured in one single, continuous breathtaking shot.

39 For an in-depth examination of these interfaces and the idea of breath as a border-troubling force, see Davina Quinlivan, *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

40 William Wordsworth, “She Was a Phantom of Delight” (1803), *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45550#poem>.

vers between sociocultural — and, on the occasion of her attack, material — “life” and “death.”

The soundscape, particularly around speech and breath, amplifies the generative ambiguity of Yasmin’s account. It also illustrates the capacity of un/made worlds to accommodate unstable and contradictory ways of making meaning and being in the world. The ambiguity arises from a series of tactical misrememberings and inversions that enable her to repurpose the details of her assault as empowering rather than debilitating (e.g., reframing it as a battle rather than an assault). This is neither an easy nor a concluded matter. Rather, it is a painful process full of negotiation and tactical (mis)remembering. For example, at the onset of narrating the battle or assault, “Yasmin’s” voice falters for the first time as, to the sound of clashing blades, she stutteringly describes how she “wanted to teach him [her attacker] a lesson, to show him that girls are... but then we... he jus — this man... he was a bad man.” She cannot verbalize the reality of her assault: to do so would be to relive it and concretize it, and her power, or survival strategy, relies on keeping meaning fluid and unstable. Her broken vocalization paints an aural picture of her being overcome, both during the assault and by the memory of it. This phonic portrayal clashes with the accompanying visuals and Yasmin’s broader account. Her disarticulation indicates a momentary rupture between her illusive version of events and what actually occurred. The on-screen visuals reinforce the connotative precariousness of this moment as they transform from a battle scene into a disorienting inverting image of her contorted body: a suggestive kaleidoscope made more disconcerting by the accompaniment of the sound of a fast-descending object. Meaning ebbs and flows through and between the scene’s sights and sounds, its utterances and silences. Yasmin works hard to remember the assault differently, to change its meaning, but this part of the memory may be too raw, causing her to stumble over her words. Past and present collide as she loses control of her tactically altered memories at the exact same time that she lost control of her body.

The inversion and ambiguity continue into the next scene as “Yasmin” tries to reassert her preferred superheroic narrative, but it is quickly upended as we hear more faltering phrases studied with silence: “he begged for me t — ... to spare... him... so I spared his life.” Phrases and actions that, while attributed to her attacker, most likely emanated from her. When viewed in this light, the battle or assault scene represents more than just the physical fight between Yasmin and her attacker. It symbolizes her existential struggle for meaning and agency.⁴¹ For example, “Yasmin” tells us that her attacker left her “no choice” and that they “fought for a long time.” The sound of a single slicing blade accompanies these statements, and when combined with her utterances, it appears that to survive the horror of her ordeal, Yasmin’s only recourse was to sever her narrative from reality and rewrite an alternate superheroic version. At the end of the battle or assault, “Yasmin” leaves the scene, and her battle-worn costume falls from her as she walks towards a moon-filled horizon, an image that inverts the idea of “riding into the sunset,” symbolizing Yasmin’s return to the disempowering reality of her world.

But Yasmin’s superheroic survival strategy did not entirely leave her on her slow walk home. In the quote opening this snapshot, “Yasmin” tells one of the officers, “no, I’m not a street kid!” In so doing, she refuses and rejects his negative, disempowering interpretation of her sociocultural subordinated status, as well as his authority to tell her who or what she is. Yasmin’s texcapology is a strategy of survival, resistance, and refusal. In the end, it is she who defines herself (and (re)defines genre meaning) — which is itself a heroic act, given the surrounding power dynamics — and she says it plainly, “I am a superhero.”

Ultimately, however, Yasmin’s brave refusal collapses as she is reabsorbed back into the system.⁴² Her texcapology provided respite during a traumatic event, but it was insufficient to save

41 This interpretation is reinforced by the film’s shift from live action to animation. These scenes are, literally, removed from the material realm.

42 One year later, Yasmin is taken out of school and engaged to be married.

her from the machinations of a comprehensively oppressive and exploitative system. The temporariness of the manifestation does not, however, diminish its power but rather reveals the limits of texcapology as a survival and resistance strategy. Drawing from Muñoz, I see limits not as failures but as evidence of the slew of brutal sociocultural forces at work against rebellious minority subjects.⁴³ In this sense, her strategy did not fail, but serves as a powerful reminder that resistance is sometimes not enough and that many minoritarian subjects, including Yasmin, "need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere."⁴⁴ Yasmin had to find another way to survive within the system, but by sharing her story even within this problematic documentary, she demonstrated an inspiring and practical kind of real-world heroism, ensuring that she remains for many a symbol of resistance and hope: a superhero.

Rain (2016)

There's a storm coming...

— Selina Kyle, *The Dark Knight Rises*⁴⁵

Writer and performer Maya Glick loves Storm, a Black female superhero from Marvel's *X-Men* comic book series. More accurately, she loves the promise of the character, which, like many other fans, she glimpsed in *X-Men* comics and paratexts but found hopelessly unrealized in the early *X-Men* films, during the much-maligned Halle Berry era (2000–2014). Indeed, a paratext in the form of an illustrated *X-Men* arcade game machine suggested Storm's promise to a young Black girl in the 1980s looking for some relatable heroes. As Glick tells it:

Up against the glass wall of the theater were arcade games, and one of them caught my eye and set my soul on fire. The

⁴³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 161–64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁵ Christopher Nolan, dir., *The Dark Knight Rises* (20th Century Fox, 2012).

whole side of one of the games was an image of Storm with the mohawk. I wasn't sure what I was looking at[,] but it stopped me dead in my tracks. That's the power of artwork... and of representation. Here was this brown-skinned woman, clearly magical somehow with the unearthly eyes, surrounded by lightning... but wearing this badass black leather get-up with a white mohawk. I fell in love. ... [I]t changed everything. [...] Floaty, regal Storm with the crown and cape shooting lightning bolts is lovely, but down-to-earth leather Storm looked like she could actually win a fight with powers or not. That's the chick I wished would show up at my school and deal with the bullies! Black leather pants and mohawk on a black woman comic book character changed everything I understood about what a superhero could be... what a woman could be... what I could be.⁴⁶

This uncanny encounter marks Glick's transformative moment. (*What if I became Storm?*) But the image on the coin-op machine speaks to another transformative moment, one that disrupts Storm's official meaning: a graceful queen becomes a streetwise punk. The cape, crown, and bombshell hair are gone, replaced by a striking mohawk, black latex pants and vest, and a studded dog collar. But what's the story behind the controlled "Mistress of the Elements" becoming something of a rebellious punk? (*Who is the real Storm?*) And how might pulling this thread help us better understand Glick's texcapology?

Storm: Un/becoming the "Mistress of the Elements"

In a 1983 *Uncanny X-Men* storyline, which bears all the hallmarks of a makeover story, an ordinarily assured Storm struggles with her powers and her sense of self. This character arc powerfully illustrates the kinds of dilemmas and stresses that minoritarian

46 Dennis R. Upkins, "Making It Rain: An Interview with Maya Glick," *Black Sci-Fi*, July 11, 2016, *Black Sci-Fi*, July 11, 2016, <https://blacksci-fi.com/making-it-rain/>.

people face while navigating the majoritarian sphere, in this case a queer woman of color building a new life in a new land. In this epochal arc, Storm realizes that to be a successful X-Men leader, something she thought she wanted to be, she must compromise her core values, even to the point of being prepared to kill.⁴⁷ Storm's beloved mentee, Kitty Pryde, would later face a similar watershed moment, asking herself, "Is this what it means to be an X-Man, that I turn my back on all I was ever taught about right and wrong? My fundamental beliefs about myself?"⁴⁸ And answering herself, she recalls a similarly compromised Storm doing exactly that, stating simply, "Storm did."⁴⁹ Storm's turning point, or "moment of truth," as she describes it, is metamorphic: "Whatever I choose, I will no longer be the woman I was — but what will I become?"⁵⁰

Storm's elemental power is linked to her emotional state. Over the years, she has had to learn to, "hold herself on a tight rein," as Wolverine puts it.⁵¹ But, in this storyline, her ability and desire to control her emotions, and thus her power, wavers. In a mission to rescue Angel, she leads a team of X-Men into a subterranean world inhabited by the Morlocks, a group of outcast

47 Chris Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men #170, Dancin' in the Dark* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1983). Callisto, Storm's target, only survives the attack because a healer saves her.

48 Chris Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men #179: What Happened to Kitty?* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1984).

49 Ibid.

50 Chris Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men #171: Rogue* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1983). It is worth noting that prior to meeting Professor X, Ororo Munroe (a.k.a. Storm) led a peaceful existence as a goddess in Kenya. Indeed, Professor X's unsolicited intervention was her transformative moment. In seeking her out, Professor X assumed the role of an imperialist and colonizing author and father, renaming and thus changing her from a god to a mutant, and replacing her traditional beliefs and sense of self, duty, belonging, and place with those of the Global North. Possibly more than anyone else, he is the cause of her existential crisis, which she can only meaningfully resolve by decolonizing her mind, a path that mainstream creators and publishers and many fans are as yet unlikely to follow.

51 Chris Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men #172: Scarlet in Glory* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1983).

mutants led by a powerful, maniacal queen, Callisto. During the sortie, Callisto unleashes Masque, a villainous body- and face-altering mutant, who promises Storm a “whole new outlook on life.”⁵² By changing her appearance, Masque and Callisto intend to transform Storm’s way of seeing and being in the world, unaware that she has already arrived at her own existential crossroads and will, in time, refashion herself. It is, however, a series of encounters with the Japanese female rōnin Yukio — a queer character exuding female masculinity — that provides Storm with the clearest opportunity to reimagine herself.

Unlike Storm, the impish Yukio is a rebellious daredevil.⁵³ And while Storm supports and functions within a hierarchical sodality, as a rōnin, Yukio is without a master, allowing her to make her own decisions and form and operate within non-hierarchical associations. Indeed, in many ways, Yukio is set up as Storm’s opposite: where Storm is regal, serious, constant, controlled, and feminine, Yukio is streetwise, playful, mobile, mercurial, and masculine. This attitudinal oppositionality is underscored sartorially. At this point, Storm wears her traditional hyper-feminine X-Men uniform, which was designed by comics artist Dave Cockrum in the mid-1970s: jet headdress, flowing cape, latex cutout leotard, thigh-high stiletto boots, and, of course, her trademark bombshell icy-white hair. It is an ensemble designed for engaging enemies from a distance. Yukio, on the other hand, sports an androgynous practical style, right down to her short, spiky hairstyle. Her subcultural styling complements her non-conformist attitude and up-close and personal fighting style. Storm is utterly captivated by Yukio, and following one of their encounters, she thinks (using problematic language and conflating “madness” with freedom): “The woman is mad, and yet I wish I could laugh so,” later confessing:

52 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #170.

53 Yukio’s name itself points to her androgyny, or female masculinity. Yukio is the masculine form of Yukiko, the character’s birth name.

I envy you your madness, Yukio. It is a luxury denied me ever since my powers first appeared. My safety, and that of those around me, requires an inner serenity—an absolute harmony with the world—I have lately lost.⁵⁴

Storm is inspired by the rare sight of a powerful non-white and openly queer “masterless” woman. Just as for Glick and many other fans, Storm’s punkish representation offers another way of being a woman of color. Motifs of rebirth and renewal echo through Storm’s and Glick’s transformative moments. Evoking a phoenix resurrection, Glick describes the sight of Storm reborn as stopping her dead in her tracks and setting her soul on fire. And while trying to rescue Yukio, Storm literally sets herself on fire, a life-threatening blaze that rips through her body, burning off her uniform and much of her hair. Yukio, however, swoops in to save her, and the pair escape an exploding building by crashing out through a window and plunging into a river below. It truly is a baptism by fire and water for Storm, a motif underscored by the spectacle of a flaming phoenix rising from the ashes of the building they have just decamped.⁵⁵ A new Storm is indeed coming.

Storm is greatly changed when we next see her, shortly after the enkindling incident, but she has not yet adopted a punk aesthetic.⁵⁶ Invoking José Esteban Muñoz’s rearticulation of “stages,” her punkish transition is a staged, if not a stage-managed, process.⁵⁷ Her skin is undamaged, but her impossibly long, bombshell hair is gone, replaced by a choppy shoulder-length style, as if the burnt sections have been hastily lopped off. (As an aside, this look is a potent expression of punkish amateur-

54 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #172.

55 While the appearance of the phoenix speaks to Storm’s rebirth, it is, in fact, part of a subplot running alongside the main storyline, namely, the possible resurgence of Dark Phoenix or the Phoenix Force.

56 I say punk “aesthetic” because Storm is clearly not an “authentic” lifestyle punk.

57 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

ism, one later subsumed by her impeccably coiffed mohawk.) An ensuing confrontation with some street thugs allows her to show Yukio and us, the readers, her new and surprising devil-may-care attitude towards life and combat: “We face death [...] and worse [...]. We are trapped in this alley, we are unarmed, wounded — and my control over my elemental powers is marginal at best, oh, well — you only die once.”⁵⁸

This is not the Storm of old speaking here. Her time with Yukio is clearly having an effect: “Whatever it means — this madness of yours has infected me — I welcome it.”⁵⁹ A contemplative malady bringing its own set of “what if” questions. (*What if I do things differently?*) As with the performers peopling the previous chapter, costuming offers Storm a way to play with her identity, to un/become herself, and to un/make her world. (*What if I break free from social and superhero norms? What if I were a different kind of superhero?*) Or, rather, it offers her predominantly white male creators an opportunity to speculate, to realize the character’s radical promise, and to ask the seemingly unaskable questions. (*What if Storm were a different kind of superhero? What if she was more than the “token pretty black girl in the background”?*⁶⁰ *What if we meaningfully reimagine the idea of a superhero?*) Storm welcomes the chance to reimagine herself and her fellow superheroes, but will they?

We do not see Storm again for some time, a pause that holds readers in utopic suspense, a gap within which to imagine the potentialities of a not-yet-here Storm. Storm’s arrival, like Frank-N-Furter’s elevating entrance in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), was, however, worth the wait. (Indeed, one wonders if Yukio helped devise the audacious entrance.) In a provocative reveal scene worthy of any contemporary makeover TV show, Storm flies in fashionably late for Wolverine and Lady Mariko’s ultimately canceled wedding ceremony. Kitty Pryde is first to notice the lone figure in the sky, telling everyone gathered to,

58 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #173.

59 Ibid.

60 Glick, quoted in Upkins, “Making It Rain.”

"Look! Up in the sky. It's —." ⁶¹ A refrain more associated with, and making an obvious connection to, another supremely powerful being, Superman. ⁶² Kitty dubiously finishes her observation — "Storm?!" — just as the revamped and vampish Mistress of the Elements floats down to the ground.

It is quite an entrance, marking both a beginning and an end, but also a suspension and disruption in meaning. Storm, in whatever fashion, will never be the same or mean the same again. The occasion itself, a wedding ceremony, underscores the idea of beginnings and endings, as well as transformed meanings. And while the other guests politely suppress their shock at Storm's makeover, Kitty's reaction is overly dramatic and self-absorbed. Indeed, Pryde's response recalls stories of young children running off distraught when their previously bearded or mustachioed parent appears clean-shaven. Such reactions are often rooted in the fear that some deeper, more structural, immaterial transformation has occurred, a possibility mooted later by Professor Xavier: "Is this some whim [...] or indicative of a deeper, more serious metamorphosis?" ⁶³ And in this case, Kitty and Professor X are right to be concerned that Storm's sartorial transformation portends more profound changes. Or at least that was the hope of many minoritarian fans, as well as the goal of the white male creative team that was tasked with reimagining Storm for a new age and a new audience. ⁶⁴

Storm's makeover symbolized a shift in meaning: a daring new look representing a daring new way of seeing and being in the world. Owing largely to the mohawk and studded dog collar, her restyle is usually described as punk rock, but to my mind it lacks the *DIY* ethos behind punk aesthetics. Her look is clean, polished, stereotypical, and commercial. Damningly,

61 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #173.

62 Recalling too one of our "what if" questions from the previous chapter: "What if Superman — or god — were Black, queer, a woman, or indeed a Black queer woman?"

63 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #173.

64 Namely, writer Chris Claremont, penciller Paul Smith, and inker Bob Wiacek.

it appears thought-out rather than thrown-together. The overall effect is more pop punk than authentic punk rock. A quality underscored when we remember that Paul Smith, the artist behind Storm's celebrated punk look, described his redesign as a "bad joke that got way outta hand."⁶⁵ And sure enough, it wasn't long before Storm's punk styling started unravelling, adding to the sense of affectation. Five issues after the big reveal, her cape started to sporadically reappear, recalling a comfort blanket, though she kept her coiffed mohawk.⁶⁶ This boilerplate portrayal of punk style, the epitome of anti-fashion, lacks depth and in many ways, feels inauthentic.⁶⁷ But many would argue that punk is an attitude before an aesthetic, as crossover thrash band S.O.D. counsel, "it doesn't matter how you wear your hair, it's what's inside your head," and so perhaps Storm's attitudinal transformation would prove more authentic than her sartorial one.⁶⁸

As a descriptor, "punk" is shorthand for rebellious, forthright, non-conformist, anti-authoritarian, anarchist, and, of course, do-it-yourself. Yet Storm remains part of, if not the leader of, a hierarchical heroic order, one enabling a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," not a great example of a punk.⁶⁹ But in the context of the X-Men storyworld, we can perhaps more usefully imagine punkness as disruptive behavior: being willful, noticeable, assertive, and self-assured, as well as agentic. Storm's awakening, from this vantage point, appears more feminist than punk.⁷⁰ Although, to the disappointment of many minoritarian

65 Brian Cronin, "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #338," *CBR.com*, October 28, 2011, <https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-338/>.

66 Chris Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men #178: Hell Hath No Fury* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1984).

67 Despite its flaws, however, it does offer a radically different vision of Storm and female superheroes of the 1980s, to which Glick responds and refers. See Upkins, "Making It Rain."

68 S.O.D., *United Forces* (Megaforce, 1985).

69 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

70 For an extended discussion of becoming a feminist, one that speaks powerfully to the idea of Storm's transformation as a feminist becoming,

fans, this feminist becoming never fully stabilizes either. Storm is no forerunner of a 1990s riot grrrl. Yet while describing her as a punk, or indeed a feminist punk, is a stretch, in this storyline, we do see signs of a more willful, assertive, even aggressive, Storm. For example, when Scott Summers (a.k.a. Cyclops) challenges her over her restyle, she retorts, "I had my reasons, Scott. Am I not allowed?"⁷¹ Or later, when she overrides Wolverine's battle strategy, telling him, "I will place you where you will do the most good, Wolverine, and at the moment I think best."⁷² It is refreshing to see Storm occupying a more central position, befitting her status as leader of the X-Men. Yet, even within this liberating and centralizing character arc, Storm's new-found unruliness is tempered, as when Professor X and former team leader, Cyclops, routinely undermine her decisions. Nonetheless, like Glick, many minoritarian fans responded positively to Storm's surprising and bold revision. Indeed, this story arc is frequently cited as one of the most popular Storm-centered storylines.

But the remediative work of this storyline, and other Storm-centered comics stories was, many would say, undone by her on-screen representation, particularly during the Halle Berry era (2000–2014). Notably, a medium with more power over the public imagination than comics. One fan tells us:

I wanted a comic book accurate Storm. Not only was I not a fan of 20th Century's casting choice, the first X-Men movie, and, subsequently the ones after it, would nerf Storm's abilities and use her as a "filler" type of character. [...] She would not add or detract anything from the story, but add an extra element to the scenery—much like any other background character.⁷³

see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

71 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #173.

72 Claremont et al., *Uncanny X-Men* #178.

73 TheNaimahProject, "Fancasting: Storm in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," *TheNaimahProject*, January 20, 2019, <https://thenaimahproject.wordpress.com>.

Speaking about Storm's representation in the early days of the MCU, Glick similarly observes that,

of course Storm ended up just being the token pretty black girl in the background which wrecked my heart. There's a scene where she sees a guy melt down and turn into water and she is so terrified by it that she has to run and get help from one of the white guys. WATER scared her [...]. WATER SCARED STORM. Ugh.⁷⁴

And in her Kickstarter campaign outline, she also candidly describes her disappointment with Storm's cinematic representation, speaking, I believe, for many minoritarian Storm fans and allies:

Decades later I was thrilled to find out that she would be coming to life on the big screen, but of course the incarnation that Hollywood delivered was hardly the warrior badass who I discovered as a kid. She was... mild... passive... background fluff. It kinda broke my heart. She has been a queen, a goddess, a thief, a street urchin, a warrior, a leader, powerful and powerless, and a knife wielding punk-rocker. Transforming over time as storms do... but always remaining formidable and fierce, as storms are. Hollywood cheated us out of seeing any of that — if you ask me.⁷⁵

And more recently, Alexandra Shipp, the actor who played Storm in the last run of MCU *X-Men* films (2016–2019), also vividly expressed concerns about Storm's sidelining in ensemble *X-Men* movies:

com/2019/01/20/fancasting-the-actresses-that-could-portray-storm-in-the-mcu/.

⁷⁴ Glick, quoted in Upkins, "Making It Rain."

⁷⁵ Maya Glick, "RAIN: A Fan Film About Storm," *Kickstarter*, September 3, 2016, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rainfilm/rain-a-fan-film-about-storm>.

Storm barely has anything to say as it is. I don't know about you all [other actors], but like we never talk. So it would be really nice if we weren't piled into yet another jam-packed cast, in which you only see me in the back of the shot like a fucking sasquatch.⁷⁶

Evoking Kristen Warner, it all feels more than a little plastic, that is, "it offers the feel of progress but actually cedes more ground than it gains for audiences of color."⁷⁷ As Glick affirms:

The main problem with Storm's portrayal obviously is the writing and the fact that her character has never been important to whatever story they're telling. In effect: *her life does not matter*. I know it's hard to do these ensemble stories without somebody ending up just being a glorified extra, but after ten films they can't make a woman who can control the fucking sky an important character somehow?

You can totally remove her and add in absolutely anyone else or no one at all and the main story isn't affected. It's like they're telling the "Xavier/Magneto/Wolverine/featuring Mystique" story again and somebody was like[:] "Go ahead and throw in the black one, too." Hey Hollywood? That doesn't count as diversity!⁷⁸

As can be seen, Storm's representation is broadly conflicted and unsure. A representational failure that attests to the view that

76 Alexandra Shipp, quoted in Zack Sharf, "Alexandra Shipp Shades 'X-Men' Films for Giving Storm 'Barely Anything to Say,'" *IndieWire*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/04/alexandra-shipp-x-men-storm-never-talks-1202054949/>.

77 Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017), <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>. Warner deploys the idea of "plastic representation" to talk about broader matters of representational diversity — positive/negative trope, colorblind casting, dimensionality — and it proves a valuable lens through which to consider Storm's transformation and her broader representation, as well as minoritarian fan responses to it.

78 Glick, quoted in Upkins, "Making It Rain."

predominantly white male creative teams do not know how to craft a supremely powerful queer woman of color. Simply put, they don't know what to do with her.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Storm, one of the few queer Black female superheroes, continues to elicit strong reactions from minoritarian superhero fans, who intuit the promise this character holds. Moreover, while they lament her treatment in the cultural dominant, Glick suggests that they may identify with that treatment, pointing out that, “just like us, she was wildly powerful but always taken for granted and overlooked so that someone could take the lead and the glory. (In films anyway.)”⁸⁰ Glick's throwaway reference to “in films anyway” is telling and takes us back to her transformative moment and her fan film, *Rain*.

Making (It) *Rain*

Minoritarian Storm fans have been holding their breath for decades, hoping for a meaningful representation of their beloved Mistress of the Elements. In 2013, tired of waiting, Glick took matters into her own hands. Not just her hands, but those of the 207 Kickstarter backers who pledged \$10,033 to bring *Rain: A Fan Film About Storm* to life.⁸¹ Upon reaching the goal, one backer excitedly commented: “Finally! Storm gets the representation she deserves!”⁸²

Rain is a twenty-three-minute fan film, created by Glick, directed by Zane Rutledge and Jeff Stolhand, and produced by Matt Joyce.⁸³ The noirish film opens with the famous line, “Once upon a time.” This fairy or wonder tale beginning frames the story as an enchanting act of fancy and imagination. It is a fantasy, in the sense of being a superhero film, but it also speaks

79 TheNaimahProject, “Fancasting.”

80 Glick, quoted in Upkins, “Making It Rain.”

81 Coincidentally perhaps, in Hebrew, Greek, and Spanish naming traditions, *maya* means “water,” and in Arabic, “princess.”

82 Glick, “RAIN.”

83 Zane Rutledge and Jeff Stolhand, dirs., *Rain* (Zane Films and Thunder-Goddess Creations, 2016).

to the fannish fantasy that Storm would one day not only be authentically represented, but would also have her own standalone film, similar to *Wonder Woman* (2017), a dream Glick sought to make a reality.

Rain is not a recuperative retelling of Storm's official story. It is a creative repurposing of that story, a procreative act bringing forth an alternate character and alternate worlds, in which Ororo Munroe as Storm becomes Rain and where Storm's radical promise is realized, even if it means her undoing. (*What if Storm were a different kind of superhero?*) In this counterstory, Glick plays Ororo Munroe/Rain, who has just been released from the Mutant Normalization Institute (MNI) after having her memory torturously erased, all as part of a state-sponsored control and rehabilitation program. To find out who she is, Munroe must put together the flashbacking pieces of her past. Glick uses the lost memory trope to blur the distinction between fiction and reality, as well as to play with the idea of identity itself as a fiction, albeit one that is always undergirded by systems of power. She literally rewrites Munroe's/Storm's life story, a mode of texcapology that sees her bend the quality of Storm's representation, notably around race and gender stereotyping.⁸⁴

The stage is set for an origin story, an un/becoming tale in which Munroe remembers or imagines herself as Rain rather than Storm, yet each holds the makings of the other. Glick's storytelling establishes then dissolves the line between these characterizations: Storm and Rain now reside within Munroe, recalling the radical idea of "someness," that within one can be some.⁸⁵ Indeed, by naming her character Rain instead of Storm, Glick underscores the transformative rather than mimetic nature of her fanwork. In one scene, Munroe is trying to remember who she is when a mutant telepath posing as a Wakandan bartender

84 Official representations of Storm, for example, work hard to avoid the stereotype of the "angry Black woman" by customarily portraying Storm as reserved and conciliatory.

85 Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

asks her to describe what she sees in her mind.⁸⁶ Munroe sees a storm, but she tells him that she sees thunder — an impossibility because thunder cannot be seen but only heard — and rain, and that she thinks her name is Rain. “I don’t know,” the bartender chuckles, “you look a little tougher than rain to me.”⁸⁷

This backstory scene cleverly establishes the possibility that Munroe is actually Storm but is misremembering or reimagining herself as someone called Rain. This misremembrance also serves as a rejection of official portrayals of Munroe as Storm and an assertion of an alternate version, one grounded in canon (as Munroe) but re-formed, and reformed, as Rain. Symbolically, this disjunction provides a fresh start, an origin point for a counterstory, allowing Glick to create and exploit a gap in meaning. This alternate version of Munroe differs greatly from those who have gone before. She has moved from the margins to the center, for example, and her dimensionality is reflected in displays of vulnerability, strength, fear, courage, and so on. It’s also notable for another reason: the character was crafted by a Black woman in collaboration with a creative team chosen by her and crowdfunded by scores of minoritarian fans and their allies. Munroe as Rain is a grassroots representation of Munroe/Storm rooted in lived experience, desire, and community. It is a powerful moment of fannish DIY reclamation.

Unsurprisingly, *Rain* features a portrayal of Storm’s iconic punkish makeover. Unlike the comics version, we get to see the in-between moments, the transitional stages, of this totemic restyle. Glick’s purposeful choice to give us a behind-the-scenes look emphasizes the DIY nature and, thus, authenticity of this

86 Functioning as an Easter egg, this character may in fact be notorious telepath Emma Frost. Several other Easter eggs can be found throughout the film, including graffiti that reads “Magneto was right” and a Dark Phoenix whisky bottle label. Munroe also checks into the Stanley Hotel, which is perhaps a subtle nod to Stephen King’s best-selling horror novel *The Shining*. King is said to have been inspired to write the novel after spending a disturbed night at the Stanley Hotel, which has been dubbed one of the world’s “most haunted.”

87 Rutledge and Stolhand, *Rain*. The storm motif reappears throughout the film, a silent reminder that Storm is never too far away from Glick’s mind.

transformation, something missing from the official version. Keeping with the noirish feel of the film, the transformation scene takes place in a grimy, back-alley hotel. In this (re)telling, Munroe's transformational impulse is not ignited by Yukio's devil-may-care attitude but rather begins as a disguise to avoid recapture by the MNI. Her makeover quickly becomes a means of not only reclaiming herself but also revealing herself as a powerful Black female mutant. Once a mere concealment strategy, a cloak of invisibility, her restyle is now a method of revelation, wherein the invisible became visible, the silent vocal, and the powerless empowered. At the film's denouement, her now-defeated nemesis tells her, "You're already the worst of everything. A woman. A Black woman. A mutant."⁸⁸ And Rain, levitating, vengeful, and exuding confidence and electricity, declares, "I know who I am, and now so do you."⁸⁹

The staging of the transformative ritual suggests (re)birth, from Munroe to Rain, but also, more broadly, Munroe's/Storm's fannish reincarnation as Rain. Echoing the official version, it features water and fire motifs, as Munroe showers and burns her old MNI t-shirt. From above, we see Munroe lying naked and fetal in an empty bath, the tub enveloping her like a protective womb. The composition of the overhead shot underscores the sense of vulnerability, while the tub's emptiness suggests that the waters have broken and emergence is imminent. After a cleansing shower, she gazes into a broken mirror, picks up her switchblade knife, and begins slicing off her long, unkempt white hair. (We can easily imagine a scene like this happening in the official version, perhaps with Yukio using her knife to chop off the charred remains of Storm's hair.) It is a powerful and empowering act that challenges the long-held belief that cutting hair inhibits power and identity, a small counterstorytelling moment in and of itself. When we see her again, she is sporting the iconic

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Recalling Yasmin's empowered assertion, "I am a superhero," which means so much more to these superhero fans, altering not only notions of self but of the genre, of what a *real* superhero is.

white mohawk and is dressed in tribute to Storm's punkish look. However, the motorbike prop and lack of a studded dog collar make the look more biker chic than punk rock. As one fan in a reaction film, eagerly anticipating the restyle and the adoption of the mohawk, puts it:

She's gonna cut her hair now, ain't she? If you go with the mohawk, I'm cool. I love that look [...] Yep, she's gone biker look. [...] Awwww shit!⁹⁰

And as the camera pans slowly up to reveal the mohawk:

Let me see it. C'mon! C'mon! Aowwww! That is NICE!⁹¹

Unlike the official version, Glick's portrayal of Munroe's makeover has a strong DIY aesthetic, underscored by the inclusion of the in-between moments of transformation. These scenes reveal her motivations and give her aesthetic transformation a sub-cultural authenticity. But the scene also represents a moment of fannish transformation as Glick gets to cosplay Storm on the big screen. For her, the performance was the dream of a lifetime. While downplaying them, Glick draws parallels between earlier Storm cosplays and her desire to bring an alternate version of Storm to the screen:

One day my husband Adam took some photos of me in "costume" (really just some of my own clothes with my hair whited out via photo editing) and when I posted one of them online people went nuts. People were like, "You need to do a Kickstarter!"⁹²

90 TheMtVernonKid_Christopher Bennett, "RAIN Storm Fan Film REACTION!!!!," *YouTube*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOVae3H1P4I>.

91 Ibid.

92 Glick, quoted in Upkins, "Making It Rain."

The quotation marks around "costume" and her comment that she was wearing her own clothes suggest that Glick wants us to know that her look is authentically punk- or biker-style, smudging too the distinction between reality and fiction. She is not *just* wearing a costume or pretending to be Storm. Moreover, by telling us that she resembles her "favorite superhero" in daily life, she wants us to appreciate her deeper connection to the character.⁹³ Highlighting this bond, rooted in shared lived experience, deepens her project's authenticity. But Glick's costumed play and performance are not strictly an expression of [dis]play, a disruptive rescripting of the genre's homogeneity. Rather than directly addressing issues around diversity and visibility, her film tackles representational quality and, arguably, behind-the-scenes inclusivity. As her repeated assertions demonstrate, it is Storm's consistently poor-quality representation that prompted her to create *Rain*. Her fan film is a creative, frustrated response to the repeated heartbreak of the character's lost promise. But her fan-work is intended to disrupt. She wishes to upend Storm's traditional "plastic" representation by bringing her from the margins to the center of the story and by portraying her multifaceted, often antagonistic, sensibility as that of a queen and thieving street kid, god and tellurian, strong and vulnerable, peacemaker and street-fighting badass.⁹⁴ She wants to create and propagate a "meaningful resonant representation" of Storm: "Resonant characters that are complex and nuanced may not resemble the respectable characters so often proffered as the social cover for racial integration and as proof that black lives matter."⁹⁵

But Glick is not only concerned with un/making exclusionary and universalizing representational strategies. She is also interested in world-un/making. Not forgetting that these intersecting practices are intricately bound to transformation. Describing her aspirations for *Rain*, Glick writes, "I want to make a heartfelt tribute to a character I adore, but more importantly I

93 Glick, "RAIN."

94 Warner, "Plastic Representation."

95 Ibid.

seek to create a bit of art that just might do for others what that arcade game image did for me so long ago.”⁹⁶ By rematerializing the present, she rewrites the past and future and doing the speculative, futuristic work of the genre. Tracing the line back to her life-changing yet serendipitous encounter with the electrifying image of Storm, Glick wishes to ameliorate the damning sense of chance or precariousness by creating one more opportunity for minoritarian superhero fans to see a meaningful representation of not only a superhero and superhero fan of color, but also a female creator, filmmaker, and actor of color.

Rain is a lacuna, a breathing space, and in creating this one meaningful moment, one droplet against a rising tide, Glick hopes to inspire the next wave of creative, transformative, and resistive minoritarian superhero fans. As Munroe/Rain is told in the film, “Sometimes the smallest thing can break the wall.”⁹⁷ Glick is seeking, à la Ahmed, to create a lifeline. Her texcapology taps directly into the idea of resistive fanwork as (counter) storytelling, that is, the transformative power, the activism, of creating and sharing a (counter)story. But the story of the making of *Rain* is just as important as the film’s story and rescription of Storm. It tells the tale of people who share an idea — alternate dreams of the past, present, and future — coming together to make a difference. A tale about the transformative power of community and solidarity. The fans who financially backed Glick’s project shared her desire to tell an alternative story, a counterstory, and her belief in the transformative power of meaningful representation. And by backing her project, they too became part of the story, a link in the lifeline, illustrating that changing a character’s story, or even a genre’s, is not so much a tale of “doing it yourself” but of “doing it ourselves.”

⁹⁶ Glick, “RAIN.”

⁹⁷ Rutledge and Stolhand, *Rain*.

EPILOGUE

Endings: Recovering Radical Promise

*Within each line, each sentence, you succeed and fail, succeed
and fail.*

— Hilary Mantel, “The Reith Lectures”¹

Be water, my friend.

— Bruce Lee, *The Pierre Berton Show*²

In this book, I sought to reimagine how we see and talk about the ideological condition of the American superhero genre and its protagonists. Binaries and pairings dominate this meaningscape and corral the genre’s polysemy, cultivating a sense of knowability, stability, and surety. I stepped away from ineffectual and limited binary assertions and introduced different surfaces, sites, and agents of meaning, and adopting the idea of “promise” from Donna Haraway and Jeffrey J. Cohen was

1 Hilary Mantel, “Silence Grips the Town,” *BBC*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/bo8vyoy6>.

2 Be water, “Bruce Lee: The Lost Interview | Full Version,” *YouTube*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLXYFEaoq58>.

critical to this side-stepping move.³ As discussed in the opening chapters, my assertion that genre meaning is promissory rather than binary allowed me to advance the idea of the genre's meaningscape as a dynamic and contradictory nexus of meaning, albeit one informed by systems of power.⁴ The idea of promise was also fitting because it spoke to the sense of contingency that I wanted to emphasize around ascribing meaning. A promise is, after all, not a guarantee. I also sought to understand how this genre and its protagonists can mean so much to different fans: how minoritarian and majoritarian superhero fans can both, antithetically, claim the genre as their own. I wanted, in other words, to know about meaning. I was specifically driven to understand why and how maligned and excluded fans continue to engage with a genre that frequently does not see or appear to value them. Theorizing meaning and meaning making—how we make, see, and change the world—is the nub of this book. I knew of the ever-present possibility of, and value in, oppositional or negotiated readings, but I wanted to develop a deeper, structural understanding of the genre's and its protagonists' radicalism, or, as I came to call it, radical promise, and I spend the last few pages of this book summarizing such a promise, beginning with an example.

Snapshot: *Watchmen* (1986)

It is August 1959, and research scientist Jon Osterman enters an intrinsic field test chamber, and two minutes later, his world is forever changed. The safety door locks behind him, and outside, through a small rectangular window in the door, his col-

-
- 3 Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 63–124, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Promise of Monsters," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 449–64.
- 4 A nexus comprising three nodes: narratives and protagonists, fanwork and enactments, and form.

leagues look on as particle cannons vaporize him. Osterman repurposes, or better yet, resurrects himself over the next three months, eventually rematerializing as the blue-skinned super-being, or god, later known as Dr. Manhattan.

This character arc occurs in *Watchmen*, the troublesome superhero comic critiqued in the prologue.⁵ Osterman rebuilds himself, and yet, despite the creative and revisionist possibilities presented by this root-and-branch transformation, the white male creators chose to represent god as a cishet white man. (A common enough occurrence.) Perhaps it wasn't a choice at all but rather the fruiting body of a set of embedded cultural assumption, a knee-jerk reaction. A failure to fully speculate because famously Moore and Gibbons did indeed ask a clutch of "what if" questions (*What if superheroes were different? What if they were real?*) but they did not wholeheartedly speculate on the possibilities of those questions. Yet even though this text is now over thirty years old, the depiction of Osterman's transformation tells us all we need to know about mainstream superhero representation and patterns of transformation, past and present but not necessarily future: privileged citizens tend to come to occupy even more privileged positions. As we have seen, however, new perspectives on superhero ontology, as well as ideology and aesthetics can always be fashioned. And fans, especially excluded minoritarian fans, know this only too well. The restrained depiction of Osterman's messianic transformation does not, for example, deter gender- or race-bent Dr. Manhattan cosplay, and in these daring performances we can glimpse the possibility of a Black lesbian female research scientist becoming a god, a radical reimagining of the superhero on multiple levels.

This snapshot illustrates the themes and trajectory of this book. In it, a divergence between conservative representation and radical concept can be observed. The radicalism of the superhero concept is evident — permeable boundaries, alternative ontologies, disruption of metanarratives, and the possibility of personal and social transformation, for example — but con-

5 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986).

tradictorily, the converse also holds true. That is to say, emerging from mechanical imaginations and mainstream publishing, the parochial representation of the concept muzzles its radical potential. Throughout this book, we have seen that in order to cross some borderlines, like life/death and human/god, others must remain firmly in place, such as gender, race, and sexuality. Radical transformation appears only permissible if it, ultimately, reifies the cultural dominant.

Identifying a disconnect between superhero concept and superhero representation is significant in several ways. It helps crystallize why the genre often feels, and is treated, as radical. As laid out in the opening chapters, fans, scholars, and aca-fans who produce progressive readings pick up on, or are hailed by, this conceptual radicalism, embracing a way, or art, of seeing things queerly. This work is key to the broader project of reanimating the genre's radical promise. The concept/representation disconnect also suggests that while superheroes, as currently experienced, are not always radical, their concept is. The concept of a superhero is, and always has been, a site of radical promise. In terms of ascribing meaning, the disconnect reveals that genre meaning (making) is more complex than the popular either/or paradigm suggests, wherein things are either radical or reactionary, for example. Labyrinthine in nature, genre meaning (making) is more precisely described and more usefully understood as a dynamic both/and process. A conceptualization that speaks to and embraces the synergistic, oppositional, contradictory, and hostile meaning-making process that is discussed in the early parts of this book: superhero meaning is the product of differently empowered meaning makers.

While that could have been the end of the book, I felt there was a lot more story still to tell. The account, or meaning map, was missing an important territory: media fandom. Only by including this chapter could it claim to speak fully to the nature and recovery of radical promise. Moreover, concluding without engaging superhero fandom would have silenced an integral, and already often occluded, site of meaning making. Given the nature of my project, however, I did not see value in working

with mainstream or majoritarian superhero fandom, which is already well-served. I wanted to work with superhero fans who were already, out of love and necessity, mining the genre's radical promise, namely, violative minoritarian fans. I wanted to give voice and space to these often-assailed fans and their reanimating, resistive fan practices.

As illustrated, minoritarian superhero fans are frequently engaged and disruptive meaning makers, even if sometimes they don't mean to be. Together with progressive readings and increasingly inclusive industrial conditions, they play a critical yet broadly untheorized role in recovering the genre's radical promise. As we've seen, they strategically embrace the genre and its protagonists, connecting with the genre's radical impulse or concept (e.g., permeable borders, alternative ontologies and aesthetics, empowered transformation, transformative storytelling), while tactically misrecognizing elements of mainstream superhero storytelling and representation (e.g., white heteronormativity, saviorism).⁶ Their engagement and fanwork is mediated and produced through a combination of recognitional and repurposing strategies. As with discursive modes of radical recovery, something in the genre's overwhelmingly chauvinistic texts hails them, but their recovery work takes different, often embodied, forms. Thus, while the genre talks about fantastic transformations, violative minoritarian superhero fans perform them. Recall our shapeshifting superheroes, Martian Manhunter, Hulk, and the Thing? As they more than ably show, shapeshifting may well be a conceptually radical mode of transformation, but the genre's representational strategies repeatedly temper and undermine its radical promise. Enfolding other kinds of meaning makers into my project, however, reveals that all is not entirely lost. As the closing case story chapters reveal, the dominant idea of a superhero, a superhero creator, and a superhero fan as a cis het white male is itself shapeshifting or

6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.

bending into something more diverse.⁷ Violative minoritarian fanwork boldly and powerfully recovers the genre's radical promise, not least by displaying permeable borders, empowered transformation, and a mode of transformative storytelling that allows onlookers to see other ways of being a superhero and being part of superhero fandom. We can also see the creation of lacunae and the mobilization of strategies to resist and survive the effects of a beloved, but eliding genre, such as the operation of transformative e-scape, occasionally alongside utopian escape, as with our Egyptian superhero, Yasmin. To degrees, their trans-world performances are transformative: text, fandom, personal, and social. I came to describe this synergy as textual escapology, or texcapology.⁸ By remaining engaged with the genre, minoritarian superhero fans are clearly, as Muñoz puts it, "tactically and simultaneously [working] on, with, and against a cultural form," and in this case, a *beloved* cultural form.⁹

But, as I affirm, the genre's radical promise has one final site and expression: its unstable meaningscape. The idea that genre meaning is in process and thus unstable and contradictory runs throughout this book. I detail the consequences of this instability in Chapter 4, asserting that the genre and its discourse are unable to assert a coherent ideological standpoint, despite valiant efforts. This incoherence also contributes to the ideological confusion I described feeling in the prologue. It may

7 As noted, however, the effect of violative transformations can be localized, and celebratory readings benefit from a qualified and contextualized response in recognition of the complexity of these transformations. For example, superhero fandom is not always a supportive, safe, and inclusive space. Violative minoritarian fanwork is frequently subject to hostile and antagonistic responses from majoritarian spheres of superhero fandom, and this potentially dangerous and belligerent environment can cause minoritarian superhero fans to suppress their desire to produce fanwork, transgressive or otherwise.

8 As described in Chapter 4 of this volume, texcapology is a spatially dislocated transformative mode of textual engagement that focuses on the border-smashing multimodal interplay between minoritarian superhero fans and the superhero genre.

9 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

also help explain why the genre constantly reminds its fans and audiences that its characters are “amazing,” “fantastic,” and of course “super,” because, in actuality, they are not as strange and exceptional as the genre and much of its discourse suggest. The superhero genre resists final definition, and it is this instability that allows me to conclude, in an inconsistent and queerly contradictory manner, that the genre is indeed radical, and, in this single sense, it does succeed in keeping its radical promise.

I began this book and this chapter with examples of the genre obscuring its radical promise, but I don’t want this to be its lasting impression. Along with the closing case stories, I wish to conclude with a celebratory “what if” kind of story, demonstrating that it is possible to textually represent the radical promise of the genre and the concept of transformation.¹⁰ Edie Fake’s 2010 award-winning comic *Gaylord Phoenix* is not a traditional superhero narrative, but, as a fantastical adventure story that centers on transforming bodies and identities, it shares much with the genre.¹¹ *Gaylord Phoenix* powerfully manifests the radicalism of transformation and has a transformative origin story too. In this “free-wheeling” trans identity adventure story, we follow Gaylord Phoenix, “a gay bird-man,” as they travel through

¹⁰ The work of Jaime Hernandez, specifically his superhero series based around the Ti-Girls, is also worth noting. This acclaimed series is collected in the graphic novel, *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls*. See Jaime Hernandez, *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012). This female-centered series features a diverse cast of superheroes, and it offers a truly refreshing take on mainstream superhero narratives and representation, in terms of exploiting the radical concept and representing other ways of seeing and being in the world. See Matt Yockey, “Ti-Girl Power: American Utopianism in the Queer Superhero Text,” *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015), <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11014>, for an insightful discussion of the complexities and possibilities of this series, and Derek Parker Royal, “Introduction: The Worlds of the Hernandez Brothers,” *ImageText* 7, no. 1 (2013), <https://image-textjournal.com/introduction-the-worlds-of-the-hernandez-brothers/>, for an extensive introduction to the Hernandez Brothers much celebrated oeuvre.

¹¹ Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (Jackson Heights: Secret Acres, 2010). *Gaylord Phoenix* won the 2011 Ignatz Award for Outstanding Graphic Novel.

various realms and bodies in order to make peace with their traumatic past.¹² Fake has described the semi-autobiographical comic as telling the story of a

[y]oung, wandering Gaylord being reborn as a bird-man. His journey is a magic roller coaster ride through a psychedelic microcosm of homoerotic smut and gender meltdown and, the whole way through, he's recovering and reconciling the violent, painful parts of his past with his powerful present self. Then there's a great orgy scene at the end.¹³

Transformation is at the heart of Fake's comic and utopian project to show that "sex, sexuality, and gender were all messy, surreal, and fluid," and Fake's fluid and borderless representations of transformation more than captures these qualities.¹⁴ *Gaylord Phoenix* is itself a messy, surreal, and fluid text with similar fluxes in its meanings.¹⁵ Brian Cremins concludes his insightful article on *Gaylord Phoenix* by writing:

These images of transmogrification have an unpredictable but telling effect on readers: How might I dream myself into becoming something other than what I am? [...] If the fantasy of most superhero comics is an answer to the question, *What would I be if I could fly like Superman?*, *Gaylord Phoenix* poses a different (if related) question: What would I be if I could see my thoughts and desires projected back to me, if my body could conform to the shape of my dreams?¹⁶

12 Edie Fake, cited in Graham Kolbeins, "Rad Queers: Edie Fake," *The Comics Journal*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.tcj.com/rad-queers-edie-fake/>.

13 Edie Fake, cited in Zach Dodson, "'The Rumpus' Interview with Edie Fake," *The Rumpus*, May 17, 2011, <http://therumpus.net/2011/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-edie-fake/>.

14 Ibid.

15 Fake has almost entirely abandoned traditional comics form. There are, for example, no panels, gutters, or insets. Indeed, it is antithetical to *Watchmen's* regimented nine-panel grid page layout.

16 Brian Cremins, "Bodies, Transfigurations, and Bloodlust in Edie Fake's Graphic Novel 'Gaylord Phoenix,'" *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34, no. 2

Cremins here is not pointing to the radical promise of *Gaylord Phoenix* but to its radical vision, expression, and actualization. Fake's subjective experiences and creative work sutures radical concept, representation, and enactment. The *Gaylord Phoenix* project captures the slippages and border-crossing possibilities of transformation. Fake's and the Phoenix's transformations are intimately connected: paper and skin, ink and blood, imagological and real. And in the pages of *Gaylord Phoenix*, we catch a glimpse of transformation freed from mainstream modes of production, that is, the transformative power of radical concept aligning with radical representation. Fake's work shows that it is possible to representationally suggest the radicalism of transformation, something that, as we have seen, the American superhero genre largely fails to do. And while the fantasy of superheroes is more expansive than Cremins describes, we can see how violative minoritarian fanwork gives some answer to his second what-if question: "What would I be if I could see my thoughts and desires projected back to me?" If minoritarian superhero fans could see themselves, and their desires for the genre projected back at them, it would be to see a diverse and inclusive superhero genre and culture. It would be to routinely see the work of minoritarian creators and producers and to hear minoritarian fans — among them the voices of Kamala, Sanjay, Vishavjit, Yasmin, Maya, Chaka, Priya, DC's Dark Guardian, LightStep, and Superbarrio — announce that they are superheroes, that they are empowered citizens, and that, for many of them, they are superhero fans. For while the system does suppress and reabsorb moments and motifs of opposition and dissent, it is always possible to create, inhabit, and connect spaces of resistance — that is to un/make worlds.

(2013): 301–13.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68. DOI: 10.1177/1464700107078139.
- . 2013. "Black Feminism as a Life-Line." *feministkilljoys*, August 27, 2013. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/27/black-feminism-as-life-line/>.
- . "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)." *Scholar and Feminist Online* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 1–8. https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm.
- . *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- . *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- . *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- . "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a N*****': Passing through Hybridity." In *Performativity and Belonging*, edited by Vikki Bell, 87–106. London: SAGE Publications, 1999.
- . *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

- . “Wiggle Room.” *feministkilljoys*, September 28, 2014. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/09/28/wiggle-room/>.
- . “Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character.” *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 231–53. DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2011.0019.
- Aichele, George. “Literary Fantasy and Postmodern Theology.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 323–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465499>.
- Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014.
- Althusser, Louis. *On Ideology*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2008.
- Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- Anderson, James. “Angela Davis talk at siuc on Feb. 13, 2014.” *YouTube*, February 17, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s8QCucFADc>
- Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Penguin Random House, 1994.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Augustyn, Brian, and Mike Mignola. *Gotham by Gaslight: A Tale of the Batman*. New York: DC Comics, 1989.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Avery, Dan. “Meet Zimmer Barnes, The Real-Life Gay Superhero.” *New Now Next*, October 26, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20141031101008/http://www.newnownext.com/meet-zimmer-barnes-the-real-life-gay-superhero/10/2013/>.
- Avery-Natale, Edward. “An Analysis of Embodiment among Six Superheroes in DC Comics.” *Social Thought & Research* 32 (2013): 71–106. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24642398>.
- Backe, Emma Louise. “Consumption, Performance and Identity in Cosplay.” *The Geek Anthropologist*, June 16,

2016. <https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2016/06/16/consumption-performance-and-identity-in-cosplay/>.
- Baker, Natalie. "Film 'Girl Rising' Has Good Intentions — But Ends Up as Cinematic Chivalry." *Bitch Media*, March 21, 2013. <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/film-girl-rising-cinematic-chivalry-review-feminist>.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- Barker, Martin. *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.
- . "Experiencing Powerfully: How Audiences Find Meaning in Fantasy Films." Paper presented at Fantasies of Contemporary Culture Conference, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, May 23, 2016.
- Barnett, Mike, dir. *Superheroes*. Home Box Office, 2011.
- Baron, Lawrence. "'X-Men' as J Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie." *Shofar* 22, no. 1 (2003): 44–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42944606>.
- Barrett, Michèle. "Ideology, Politics, Hegemony: From Gramsci to Laclau and Mouffe." In *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, 235–64. London: Verso, 1994.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. London: Cape, 1974.
- . "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath, 142–48. London: Fontana Press, 1968.
- . "Theory of the Text." In *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young, 31–47. Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1981.
- . "What Is Criticism?" In *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard, 255–60. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
- Battis, Jes. "The Kryptonite Closet: Silence and Queer Secrecy in Smallville." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 48 (2006). <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/gaySmallville/>.

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981.
- Beatty, Bart. *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005.
- Bell, Vikki. "Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 2 (April 1999): 1–10. DOI: 10.1177/02632769922050511.
- Beltran, Mary. "Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows." *Flow*, August 27, 2010. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/>.
- Bennett, Alanna. "What a 'Racebent' Hermione Granger Really Represents." *Buzzfeed*, February 1, 2015. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alannabennett/what-a-racebent-hermione-granger-really-represen-d2yp>.
- Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Bennett, Jessica. "The 'Tight-Rope' of Testifying While Female." *The New York Times*, September 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/politics/christine-blasey-ford-testimony-testifying-while-female.html>.
- Bennett, Lucy. "Tracing Textual Poachers: Reflections on the Development of Fan Studies and Digital Fandom." *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 5–20. DOI: 10.1386/jfs.2.1.5_1.
- Bennett, Lucy, and Paul Booth, eds. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Benshoff, Harry M. *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Bergerson, Amy Aldous. "Critical Race Theory and White Racism: Is There Room for White Scholars in Fighting Racism in Education?" *International Journal of Qualitative*

- Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 51–63. DOI: 10.1080/0951839032000033527.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547–66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>.
- Berlanti, Greg, Geoff Johns, and Andrew Kreisberg. *The Flash*. The CW Television Network, 2014–2023.
- Berlatsky, Noah. “Homosexuality Will Make Your Comic Real.” *The Hooded Utilitarian*, June 13, 2013. <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/06/homosexuality-will-make-your-comic-real/>.
- . “Superheroes Are about Fascism.” *The Hooded Utilitarian*, December 26, 2013. <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/12/superheroes-are-about-fascism/>.
- Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- . *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Betancourt, Manuel. “The Queer Subtext of X-Men Shines Bright at Flame Con.” *Vulture*, August 30, 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/chris-claremont-on-the-x-men-queer-subtext.html>.
- Be water. “Bruce Lee: The Lost Interview | Full Version.” *YouTube*, October 25, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLXYFEaoq58>
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bichbaum, A. “Snowden Pardoned, Crowd Goes Wild.” *The Yes Men*, 2015. <https://theyesmen.org/project/fauxden/release#>.
- Binnie, Jon. *The Globalization of Sexuality*. London: SAGE Publications, 2004. DOI: 10.4135/9781446218341.
- Bobel, Chris, and Samantha Kwan, eds. *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv16757rr.

- Bobo, Jacqueline. *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- . “*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers.” In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, edited by John Storey, 310–318. London: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Boccia Artieri, Giovanni. “Productive Publics and Transmedia Participation.” *Participations* 9, no. 2 (November 2012): 448–68.
- Bolton, Olivia. “Meet the ‘Real-Life Superheroes,’ Phoenix Jones and Purple Reign.” *The Telegraph*, July 10, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140722025918/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/10172311/Meet-the-real-life-superheroes-Phoenix-Jones-and-Purple-Reign.html>.
- Bongco, Mila. *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Booker, M. Keith. *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014.
- Booth, Paul. *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015.
- Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Bould, Mark. “The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory.” *Historical Materialism* 10, no. 4 (2002): 51–88. DOI: 10.1163/15692060260474378.
- Boylorn, Robin M., and Mark P. Orbe. *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Broadnax, Jamie. “#28DaysOfBlackCosplay: More Than Just a Hashtag.” *Black Girl Nerds*, February 5, 2015. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150306230820/https://blackgirlnerds.com/28daysofblackcosplay-just-hashtag/>.

- . “Cosplay or No Cosplay: The Homicide of Darrien Hunt.” *Black Girl Nerds*, September 17, 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150703103821/http://blackgirlnerds.com/cosplaying-black-homicide-darrien-hunt/>.
- Brock, Nettie A. “The Everyday Disney Side: Disneybounding and Casual Cosplay.” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 301–15. DOI: 10.1386/jfs.5.3.301_1.
- Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Broverman, Neal. “TV Mastermind Jane Espenson: From Ellen to Buffy to Evil Queens.” *The Advocate*, October 27, 2011. <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2011/10/27/tv-mastermind-jane-espenson-ellen-buffy-evil-queens>.
- Brown, Henry “Box.” *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2015.
- Brown, Jeffrey A. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
- . “Supermoms? Maternity and the Monstrous-Feminine in Superhero Comics.” In *Superheroes and Identities*, edited by Mel Gibson, David Huxley, and Joan Ormrod, 185–95. London: Routledge, 2015. DOI: 10.4324/9781315757476.
- . *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Brown, Michael. “Mutant’ as a Codeword for ‘Gay’ in the X-Men Movies.” *Townhall*, November 3, 2011. <https://townhall.com/columnists/michaelbrown/2011/11/03/mutant-as-a-codeword-for-gay-in-the-x-men-movies-n1216545>.
- Bucciferro, Claudia. “Mutancy, Otherness, and Empathy in the X-Men.” In *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis*, edited by Claudia Bucciferro, 209–22. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Hellboy’s World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

- . “X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero.” In *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, 48–78. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Burgess, Olivia Anne. “Utopian Body: Alternative Experiences of Embodiment in 20th Century Utopian Literature.” PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2010.
- Burke, Liam, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndaliansis, eds. *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020.
- Burke, Seán. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Burke, Tarana. “Me Too is a Movement, Not a Moment.” TED, November 2018. https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_moment.
- Busse, Kristina, and Karen Hellekson. “Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now?” In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 1–18. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* London: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Byrne, John, et al. *Superman: The Man of Steel*. New York: DC Comics, 1986.
- Byron, Ada. “Bill Sienkiewicz Pens Rebuke of ‘Comicsgate.’” *The Mary Sue*, August 24, 2018. <https://www.themarysue.com/bill-sienkiewicz-comicsgate/>.
- Caldwell, J.T. “Corporate and Worker Ephemera: The Industrial Promotional Surround, Paratexts and Workers Blowback.” In *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, edited by P. Grainge, 175–94. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Campbell, Gordon. “Muslim Female Superhero Fights Misogyny.” *Werewolf*, June 11, 2014. <http://werewolf.co.nz/2014/06/female-muslim-superhero-fights-back-against-misogyny/>.

- Candis, Sheldon, dir. *The Subculture of Real Life Superheroes*. Thrash Lab, 2012.
- Carpenter, Greg. *The British Invasion: Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, and the Invention of the Modern Comic Book Writer*. Edwardsville: Sequart Organization, 2016.
- carrington, andré m. "Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's 'Black Panther', 1998–2016." *American Literature* 90, no. 2 (2018): 221–50. DOI: 10.1215/00029831-4564286.
- . *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- . "The Unbearable Whiteness of Science Fiction." *Open Democracy*, May 13, 2016. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/andr-carrington/whiteness-of-science-fiction>.
- Carroll, Hamilton. *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. DOI: 10.1215/9780822393870.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Carroll, Rebecca. "I am Black, and Rachel Dolezal Is Not." *Salon*, June 17, 2015. http://www.salon.com/2015/06/17/i_am_black_and_rachel_dolezal_is_not_partner/.
- CBS New York. "Superheroes Suit Up to Combat Anti-Gay Attacks in NYC." *CBS New York*, June 5, 2013. <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/superheroes-suit-up-to-combat-anti-gay-attacks-in-nyc/>.
- Cecchini, Mike. "'The Flash' Season 2 Finale: Every DC Comics Reference." *Den of Geek*, May 25, 2016. <http://www.denofgeek.com/us/books-comics/the-flash/249578/the-flash-season-2-finale-every-dc-comics-reference>.
- Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. London: Fourth Estate, 2000.
- Chambers-Letson, Joshua. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.
- Chemers, Michael M. "Mutatis Mutandis: An Emergent Disability Aesthetic in 'X-2: X-Men United.'" *Disability*

- Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2004). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/874/1049>.
- Cherry, B. *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles: Handicrafting as Fan Art*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
- Chin, Bertha. "From Textual Poachers to Textual Gifters: Exploring Fan Community and Celebrity in the Field of Fan Cultural Production." PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2010.
- Chinchillo, M. "(Post)Colonial (Dis)orders: Female Embodiment as Chaos in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'Nervous Conditions' and Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine.'" In *Exclusions in Feminist Thought: Challenging the Boundaries of Womanhood*, edited by Mary Brewer, 92–117. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002.
- Claremont, Chris, et al. *Uncanny X-Men #170, Dancin' in the Dark*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1983.
- . *Uncanny X-Men #171: Rogue*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1983.
- . *Uncanny X-Men #172: Scarlet in Glory*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1983.
- . *Uncanny X-Men #178: Hell Hath No Fury*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1984.
- . *Uncanny X-Men #179: What Happened to Kitty?* New York: Marvel Comics, 1984.
- Clark, Tom, Emily Finlay, and Phillipa Kelly. *Worldmaking: Literature, Language, Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. DOI: 10.1075/film.5.004int.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture: (Seven Theses)." In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 3–25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- . "The Promise of Monsters." In *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle, 449–64. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.
- Coogan, Peter. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006.

- . “The Definition of the Superhero.” In *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tvd9s>.
- Cooper, T. “Marvel Revealed Iceman Is Gay and It Makes Complete Sense.” *Dorkly*, April 21, 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328134510/http://www.dorkly.com/post/73999/marvel-revealed-iceman-is-gay-and-it-makes-complete-sense>.
- Corbin, Edwin. “Habitar: The Effectiveness of Justice through an Intervention of the Assembly of Barrios and Superbarrio.” *Hemispheric Institute*. https://web.archive.org/web/20090519055652/http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/3.1/eng/en31_pg_corbin.html.
- Costello, Brannon. “Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism.” In *Comics and the U.S. South*, edited by Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, 62–88. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Costello, Matthew J. *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America*. New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Cortsen, Rikke Platz, Erin La Cour, and Anne Magnussen, eds. *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Cremins, Brian. “Bodies, Transfigurations, and Bloodlust in Edie Fake’s Graphic Novel ‘Gaylord Phoenix.’” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34, no. 2 (2013): 301–13. DOI: 10.1007/s10912-013-9214-z.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. DOI: 10.2307/1229039.

- Cronin, Brian. "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #2!" *CBR.com*, June 9, 2005. <http://www.cbr.com/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-2/>.
- . "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #338." *CBR.com*, October 28, 2011. <https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-legends-revealed-338/>.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Ferdinand de Saussure*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Cumberbatch, Chaka. "I'm a Black Female Cosplayer and Some People Hate It." *xoJane*, February 11, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130206095511/http://www.xojane.com/issues/mad-back-cosplayer-chaka-cumberbatch>.
- . "I'm Demanding Better Representation for Black Girls Nerds in Geek Culture." *xoJane*, October 7, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180421073820/https://www.xojane.com/issues/black-girl-nerds-representation>.
- Dabiri, Emma. *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Comradeship*. New York: Penguin Books, 2021.
- Danielle, Britni. "Thanks to '28 Days of Black Cosplay,' Comic Book Characters Are Looking a Lot More Diverse." *Take Part*, February 13, 2015. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/thanks-28-days-black-cosplay-comic-book-characters-204700782.html>.
- Darius, Julian. "X-Men Is Not an Allegory of Racial Tolerance." *Sequart Organization*, September 25, 2002. <http://sequart.org/magazine/3201/x-men-is-not-an-allegory-of-racial-tolerance/>.
- Darowski, Joseph, J. *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- David, Peter, et al. "Valley of the Daals." In *Justice League Task Force #7-8*. New York: DC Comics, 1993.
- Davies, Matilda. "Marvel Tried to Reveal 'Guardians of the Galaxy's' Star-Lord as Bisexual Years Ago with a Mysterious New Love Interest." *Pink News*, December 17, 2020. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/12/17/marvel-comics-star-lord-bisexual-al-ewing-guardians-galaxy-chris-pratt/>.

- Davis, Angela. *Women, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990.
- . *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Davis, Blair. “Beyond Watchmen.” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 114–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44867511>.
- “Dear Comic Fans: We Get it. You’re Racist and Racebending Scares You.” *Stitch Media Mix*, August 7, 2015. <https://stitchmediamix.com/2015/08/07/dear-comic-fans-we-get-it-youre-racist-and-racebending-scares-you/>.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. New York: Random House, 1952.
- de Bruin-Molé, Megan. *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
- Deguzman, Tiara. “You Are Queer Enough.” *Autostraddle*, June 11, 2021. <https://www.autostraddle.com/pride-2021-you-are-queer-enough/>.
- Deitcher, Jay. “The ‘M’ Word—Havok’s Ignorance or Rick Remender’s.” *Unleash the Fanboy*, April 5, 2013. <http://www.unleashthefanboy.com/editorial/the-m-word-havoks-ignorance-or-rick-remenders/49287>.
- Delaney, Samuel. *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction and Some Comics*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Delgado, Richard. “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative.” *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989): 2411–41. DOI: 10.2307/1289308.
- Demby, Gene. “Superhero Super-Fans Talk Race and Identity in Comics.” Interview with Kelly Kanayama. NPR, January 11, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/01/11/261056435/superhero-super-fans-talk-race-and-identity-in-comics>.

- Denison, Rayna, and Rachel Mizsei-Ward, eds. *Superheroes on World Screens*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- . *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981.
- Diaz, Eric. “For LGBT Fans of ‘X-Men,’ Iceman Coming Out as Gay Has Been a Long Time Coming.” *Nerdist*, April 22, 2015. <https://archive.nerdist.com/for-lgbt-fans-of-x-men-iceman-coming-out-as-gay-has-been-a-long-time-coming/>.
- DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011.
- Dittmer, Jason. “American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the Post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 1 (February 2011): 114–30. DOI: 10.1068/d4309.
- . *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013.
- . “Captain America in the News: Changing Mediascapes and the Appropriation of a Superhero.” In *Superheroes and Identities*, edited by Mel Gibson, David Huxley, and Joan Ormrod, 235–50. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Dodson, Zach. “‘The Rumpus’ Interview with Edie Fake.” *The Rumpus*, May 17, 2011. <http://therumpus.net/2011/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-edie-fake/>.
- Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Dow, Bonnie, J. “Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and ‘The Mary Tyler Moore Show.’” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7, no. 3 (1990): 261–74. DOI: 10.1080/15295039009360178.
- Dozier, William, creator. *Batman*. ABC, 1966–1968.
- Driver, Susan, ed. *Queer Youth Cultures*. New York: SUNY Press, 2008.

- Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Souls of Black Folk." In *Three African-American Classics*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007.
- Dubose, Mike, S. "Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 915–35. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00478.x.
- Duralde, Alonso. "How Gay Is Superman?" *Advocate*, June 2, 2006. <https://www.advocate.com/news/2006/06/02/how-gay-superman>.
- Dussere, Erik. "The Queer World of the X-Men." *Salon*, July 12, 2000. http://www.salon.com/2000/07/12/x_men/.
- Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Earnest, William. "Making Gay Sense of the X-Men." In *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, edited by Barry Brummett, 215–32. London: SAGE Publications, 2008.
- Eco, Umberto. "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." In *Travels in Hyper Reality*, translated by William Weaver, 197–211. New York: Harcourt, 1986.
- Eddo-Lodge, Reni. *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Eliot, T.S. "Little Gidding." In *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, 191–98. London: Faber & Faber, 1990.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In *Selected Essays*, edited by T.S. Eliot, 13–22. London: Faber & Faber, 1951.
- Éluard, Paul. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.
- Entwistle, Joanne. "The Dressed Body." In *Body Dressing*, edited by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, 33–58. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001.
- Escobar, Arturo. *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Espenson, Jane. "TV Mastermind Jane Espenson: From Ellen to Buff to Evil Queens." *Advocate*, October 27,

2011. <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/television/2011/10/27/tv-mastermind-jane-espenon-ellen-buffy-evil-queens>.
- Evans, Woody. "Why They Won't Save Us: Political Dispositions in the Conflicts of Superheroes." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 17 (2014). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/533/464>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2014.0533.
- Fake, Edie. *Gaylord Phoenix*. Jackson Heights: Secret Acres, 2010.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
- Farrant, Finola. "Ghosts, Monsters, and Hulk." In *Crime, Prisons and Viscous Culture: Adventures in Criminalized Identities*, 125–45. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Favreau, Jon, dir. *Iron Man*. Marvel Studios, 2008.
- Fawaz, Ramzi. *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*. New York: NYU Press, 2016.
- . "'Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!' Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America." *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (2011): 356–88. DOI: 10.1215/00029831-1266090.
- Figa, Alenka. "Queersplay Cosplay Creates Safe Spaces at Cons." *Women Write About Comics*, November 13, 2015. <http://womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2015/11/13/queersplay-cosplay-creates-safe-spaces-cons/>.
- . "Trans, Genderqueer, and Genderfluid Cosplayers on Finding Their Safe Space in Conventions." *The Mary Sue*, March 12, 2015. <https://www.themarysue.com/trans-genderqueer-and-genderfluid-cosplayers-on-finding-safe-spaces-in-conventions/>.
- Fingerroth, Danny. *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Fiske, John. "British Cultural Studies and Television." In *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and*

- Contemporary Criticism*, edited by Robert C. Allen, 284–326. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
- Fouad, Heba. “Batman, Superman, and Deadpool: The Rise of Comic Subculture in Egypt.” *The Caravan*, April 11, 2016. <http://www.aucaravan.com/?p=3913>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1995.
- . “Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias.” Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Foucault.info*. <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en/>.
- . *Politics, Philosophy, and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*. Edited by Laurence D. Kritzman. Translated by Alan Sheridan et al. London: Routledge, 1988.
- . *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited and translated by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- . *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock Publications, 1974.
- . “Utopian Body.” In *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, edited by Caroline A. Jones, 229–34. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.
- . “What Is an Author?” In *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion, 205–22. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. New York: The New York Press, 1998.
- Foxe, Steve. “Out Cold: Iceman’s Queer Subtext in Chuck Austen’s X-Men.” *Shelfdust*, February 21, 2020. <https://shelfdust.com/2020/02/27/out-cold-iceman-northstar-and-chuck-austen/>.
- Francisco, Eric. “Comicsgate Is Gamergate’s Next Horrible Evolution.” *Inverse*, February 9, 2018. <https://www.inverse.com/article/41132-comicsgate-explained-bigots-milkshake-marvel-dc-gamergate>.
- Frank, Kathryn, M. “‘Who Makes the World?’: Before ‘Watchmen,’ Nostalgia, and Franchising.” *Cinema Journal*

- 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 138–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44867515>.
- Frohreich, Kimberly. “Making the ‘Monstrous’ Visible? Reading ‘Difference’ in Contemporary Fantastic Film and Television.” *SPELL* 26 (2011): 239–53. <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:75963>.
- Fu, Albert S. “Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Racebending and the Colour-Line in Superhero (Re)casting.” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 3 (2015): 269–83. DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2014.994647.
- Fusanosuke, N. “Manga: Komotopia.” Translated by Margherita Long. In *Mechademia 3: Limits of the Human*, edited by Frenchy Lunning, 65–74. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Fuss, Diana. *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Gaines, Jane. “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory.” *Cultural Critique* 4 (Autumn 1986): 59–79. DOI: 10.2307/1354334.
- Gavaler, Chris. *On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015.
- . “Rereading the ‘Fantastic Four #1–9’ (1961).” *The Patron Saint of Superheroes*, May 29, 2017. <https://thepatronsaintofsuperheroes.wordpress.com/2017/05/29/rereading-the-fantastic-four-1-9-1961/>.
- Gelder, Ken. *The Horror Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Geraghty, Lincoln, ed. *Popular Media Cultures: Fans, Audiences and Paratexts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Gibson, Mel. “Let’s Hear It for the Girls! Representations of Diverse Girlhoods, Feminism, Intersectionality and Activism in Contemporary Graphic Novels and Comics.” *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, May 1, 2018. <https://maifeminism.com/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls-representations-of-diverse-girlhoods-feminism-intersectionality-and-activism-in-contemporary-graphic-novels-and-comics/>.

- Gilliland, Elizabeth. "Racebending Fandoms and Digital Futurism." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 22 (2016). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/702> DOI: 10.3983/twc.2016.0702.
- Ginsberg, Elaine K., ed. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Gledhill, Christine. "Klute I: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism." In *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan, 20–34. London: BFI, 1984. DOI: 10.5040/9781838710163.ch-001.
- . "Pleasurable Negotiations." In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 236–49. London: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Glick, Maya. "RAIN: A Fan Film About Storm." *Kickstarter*, September 3, 2016. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/rainfilm/rain-a-fan-film-about-storm>.
- Glover, Cameron. "Why 'Wonder Woman' Is Bittersweet for Black Women." *Harpers Bazaar*, June 9, 2017. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a9992873/wonder-woman-black-women-erasure/>.
- Godoski, Andrew. "Professor X and Magneto: Allegories for Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X." *Screened*, June 1, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130225155436/http://www.screened.com/news/professor-x-and-magneto-allegories-for-martin-luther-king-jr-and-malcolm-x/2316/>.
- Godwin, Victoria. "Mimetic Fandom and One-Sixth-Scale Action Figures." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/686/550>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2015.0686.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin Books, 1963.
- Gooden, Tai. "Unmasking the Cosplay Community's Sexism and Racism Problem." *The Establishment*, May 12, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170518133102/https://theestablishment.co/unmasking-the-cosplay-communitys-sexism-and-racism-problem-3ca9431f58co>.

- Goodman, Nelson. *Of Mind and Other Matters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- . *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quentin Hoare and Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.
- Green, Matthew J.A., ed. *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.
- Griffiths, Kadeen. “No, ‘Wonder Woman’ Wasn’t a Victory for ALL Women.” *Bustle*, June 7, 2017. <https://www.bustle.com/p/wonder-womans-feminism-is-strong-as-hell-but-its-not-intersectional-62798>.
- Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007.
- Grossman, Lev. “All-Time 100 Novels.” *Time*, January 11, 2010. <http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/watchmen-1986-by-alan-moore-dave-gibbons/>.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Gunn, James, dir. *Super*. New York: IFC Films, 2010.
- Haberer, Adolphe. “Intertextuality in Theory and Practice.” *Literatūra* 49, no. 5 (2007): 54–67. DOI: 10.15388/Litera.2007.5.7934.
- Hajdu, D. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- . *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
- . *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.

- . *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- . “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies.” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5, no. 2 (2008). https://biblioteca-alternativa.noblogs.org/files/2012/02/anti_social_turn_halberstam.pdf.
- . *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Halberstam, Jack, and Ira Livingston, eds. *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Hall, Stuart. “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.” In *Essential Essays*, Vol. 1: *Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley, 257–76. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- , ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications, 1997.
- . “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies.” In *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woollacott, 56–90. London: Methuen, 1982.
- . “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1993): 104–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735>.
- Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- . “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.” In *The Haraway Reader*, 63–124. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Harrebye, S. *Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Hassler-Forest, Dan. *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

- Hatfield, Charles. "Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comics Studies." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30 (2006): 360–82.
- Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse, eds. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt2op58d6.
- Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*. New York: Random House, 1988.
- Hernandez, Jaime. *God and Science: Return of the Ti-Girls*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012.
- Hills, Carol. "Captain America Is a Sikh. You Got a Problem with That?" *The World*, October 17, 2014. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-10-17/captain-america-sikh-you-got-problem>.
- Hills, Matt. "As Seen on Screen? Mimetic SF Fandom and the Crafting of Replica(nt)s." *in media res*, September 10, 2010. <http://mediacommons.org/imr/2010/09/06/seen-screen-mimetic-sf-fandom-crafting-replicants>.
- . *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- . "Fiske's 'Textual Productivity' and Digital Fandom: Web 2.0 Democratization versus Fan Distinction?" *Participations* 10, no. 1 (2013): 130–53.
- . "From Dalek Half Balls to Daft Punk Helmets: Mimetic Fandom and the Crafting of Replicas." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 16 (2014). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/531/448>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2014.0531.
- . *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.
- Hoberek, Andrew. *Considering "Watchmen": Poetics, Property, Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- . *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

- . *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Horrocks, Dylan. “The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and World-Building.” *The Perfect Planet*. <http://www.hicksville.co.nz/PerfectPlanet.htm>.
- Hunt, Peter, and Millicent Lenz. *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*. London: Continuum, 2001.
- Hussain, Aamir. “The Man of Steel Represents American Values.” *HuffPost*, June 17, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aamir-hussain/the-man-of-steel-represen_b_3446785.html.
- Ilea, Ramona. “The Mutant Cure or Social Change: Debating Disability.” In *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*, edited by Rebecca Housel and Jeremy J. Wisniewski, 170–82. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.
- Inness, Sherrie A., ed. *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Instant Channel. “In One Breath | Alexander Sokurov’s ‘Russian Ark’ (Making of).” *YouTube*, January 19, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORMTAKh4NHI>.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. “#GirlsLikeUs: Trans Advocacy and Community Building Online.” *New Media and Society* 20, no. 5 (2017): 1868–88. DOI: 10.1177/F1461444817709276.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: NYU Press, 1996.
- Jakobsen, Janet R. “The Body Politic vs. Lesbian Bodies: Publics, Counterpublics, and the Uses of Norms in Horizons.” In *Feminist Theology: Identity, Traditions, and*

- Norms*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, 116–36. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005.
- . *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jasper, Marykate. “Marvel VP Said Sales Slumped Because ‘People Didn’t Want Any More Diversity.’” *The Mary Sue*, April 1, 2017. <https://www.themarysue.com/marvel-vp-no-more-diversity/>.
- Jeffrey, Alex. “Queer X: The Queer History of the X-Men.” *Polari Magazine*, n.d. <http://www.polarimagazine.com/features/queer-x-the-queer-history-of-the-x-men/>.
- Jeffery, Scott. *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Jenkins, Henry. “Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J.P. Wolf (Part One).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 2, 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-one.html>
- . “Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J.P. Wolf (Part Two).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 4, 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-two.html>.
- . “Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J.P. Wolf (Part Three).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 6, 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-three.html>.
- . “Building Imaginary Worlds: An Interview with Mark J.P. Wolf (Part Four).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 9, 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-four.html>.

- . *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.
- . *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.
- . “Important Reminder: Superman Was an Undocumented Immigrant.” *Fusion*, n.d. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150321163028/http://fusion.net/video/103908/superheroes-are-undocumented-immigrants-and-the-other-way-around/>.
- . “Just Men in Capes? (Part One).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 14, 2007. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/just_men_in_capes.html.
- . “Just Men in Tights: Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity.” In *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, edited by Angela Ndaliansi, 16–43. London: Routledge, 2009.
- . “Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, 383–94. London: Routledge, 2018.
- . “Science Fiction World Building in a Capitalist Society: An Interview with Dan Hassler-Forest (Part 1).” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 1, 2016. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2016/09/science-fiction-world-building-in-a-capitalist-society-an-interview-with-dan-hassler-forest-part-one.html>.
- . “Superheroes and the Civic Imagination.” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, February 27, 2017. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2017/02/superheroes-and-the-civic-imagination.html>.
- . *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- . *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- . “The Guiding Spirit and the Powers That Be: A Response to Suzanne Scott.” In *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, edited by Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, 53–58. London: Routledge, 2013.

- . “Transmedia Storytelling 101.” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 21, 2007. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.
- . “Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An Annotated Syllabus.” *Continuum* 24, no. 6 (2010): 943–58. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2010.510599.
- . “What Else Can You Do with Them? Superheroes and the Civic Imagination.” In *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Liam Burke, Angela Ndalians, and Ian Gordon, 25–46. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020.
- Jenkins, Henry, and Colin Maclay. “Star Wars Cluster–Ahmed Best.” *How Do You Like It So Far?*, February 14, 2018. <https://www.howdoyoulikeitsofar.org/star-wars-cluster-episode-1-ahmed-best/>.
- Jenkins, Henry, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik. “Superpowers to the People! How Young Activists Are Tapping the Civic Imagination.” In *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, edited by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis, 295–321. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016. DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9970.003.0022.
- Jenkins, Patty, dir. *Wonder Woman*. Warner Bros., 2017.
- Jerng, Mark C. *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. New York: Fordham Press, 2018.
- Johns, Geoff, and Phil Jimenez. *Infinite Crisis*. New York: DC Comics, 2005–2006.
- Johnson, Derek. “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*: World Building, Reality, and the Economic Possibilities of Narrative Divergence.” In *Reading “Lost”: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, edited by Roberta Pearson, 29–52. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.
- Johnson, Kenneth, creator. *The Incredible Hulk*. CBS, 1977–1988.
- Johnston, Rich. “A Queer Reading of Rorschach and ‘Watchmen,’ at ‘Nine Worlds.’” *Bleeding Cool*, August 4, 2017. <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2017/08/04/queer-reading-rorschach-watchmen-nine-worlds/>.

- Jones, Angela. "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness." *Interalia* 4 (2009): 1–20. https://interalia.queerstudies.pl/issues/4_2009/13_queer_heterotopias_homonormativity_and_the_future_of_queerness.htm.
- , ed. *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Jones, Gerard, and Will Jacobs. *The Comic Book Heroes*. Shreveport: Prima Publishing, 1997.
- Jones, Julia. "I Spent a Night Patrolling with LightStep, Montreal's Real-Life Superhero." *Vice*, November 11, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpwjx7/i-spent-a-night-patrolling-with-lightstep-montreals-real-life-superhero.
- Joseph, Alli. "Stealth Sisterhood: I Look White, but I'm Also Black. And I Don't Hate Rachel Dolezal." *Salon*, April 23, 2017. <http://www.salon.com/2017/04/23/steath-sisterhood-i-look-white-but-im-also-black-that-makes-me-not-hate-rachel-dolezal/>.
- Jottar, Berta. "Superbarrio Gómez for us President: Global Citizenship and the 'Politics of the Possible.'" *e-misférica* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2004). https://web.archive.org/web/20211202005649/http://hemi.nyu.edu/journal/1_1/sb.html.
- Kane, I.M. "'X-Men' Comics and Movies Push Homosexual Agenda." *The Millstone Diaries*, September 3, 2014. <https://imkane.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/x-men-comics-and-movies-push-homosexual-agenda/>.
- Kanigher, Robert, et al. *Showcase #4: Presenting The Flash*. New York: DC Comics, 1956.
- Kavadlo, Jesse. "X-Istential X-Men: Jews, Supermen, and the Literature of Struggle." In *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*, edited by William Irwin, Rebecca Housel, and Jeremy Wisniewski, 38–49. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

Kaveney, Roz. *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

Keating, AnaLouise, and Gloria González-López. *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Kelly, Joe, et al. *JLA #86: Trial by Fire*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.

Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Kirkpatrick, Ellen. "Cosplay." In *Keywords for Comics Studies*, edited by Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Whaley, 63–67. New York: NYU Press, 2021.

———. "Hero-Fans and Fanboy Auteurs: Reflections and Realities." In *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, 127–38. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

———. "On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1483/2107>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2019.1483.

———. "Playing Gods: Identity in the Superhero Genre and Cosplay." MPhil Diss., Bristol University, 2013.

———. "Toward New Horizons: Cosplay (Re)imagined through the Superhero Genre, Authenticity, and Transformation." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/613/502>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2015.0613.

———. "TransFormers: Identity Compromised." *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 124–33. DOI: 10.1353/cj.2015.0066.

———, and Suzanne Scott. "Representation and Diversity in Comics Studies." *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 120–24. DOI: 10.1353/cj.2015.0064.

Kline, Chris. "Defender of Justice Superbarrio Roams Mexico City." *CNN World News*, July 19, 1997. <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9707/19/mexico.superhero/>.

- Klink, Flourish, and Elizabeth Minkel. "Episode 22A: Race and Fandom Part 1," *Fansplaining*, May 18, 2016. <https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/22a-race-and-fandom>.
- Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. London: Continuum, 2002.
- Ko, Dorothy. "Bodies in Utopia and Utopian Bodies in Imperial China." In *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*, edited by Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr, and Thomas Rieger, 89–103. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005.
- Kochalka, James. *The Horrible Truth about Comics*. Gainesville: Alternative Comics, 1999.
- Kohnen, Melanie E.S. *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- . "The Adventures of a Repressed Farmboy and the Billionaire Who Loves Him: Queer Spectatorship in 'Smallville' Fandom." In *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*, edited by Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, 207–23. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2008.
- Kolbeins, Graham. "Rad Queers: Edie Fake." *The Comics Journal*, February 5, 2014. <http://www.tcj.com/rad-queers-edie-fake/>.
- Konzack, Lars. "Escapism." In *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, 246–55. London: Routledge, 2018. DOI: 10.4324/9781315637525.
- Kosstrin, Hannah. "Queer Spaces in Anna Sokolow's 'Rooms.'" In *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, edited by Clare Croft. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199377329.003.0008.
- Kreisinger, Elisa. "Queer Video Remix and LGBTQ Online Communities." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/395/264>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2012.0395.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Léon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

- . “Word, Dialogue and Novel.” In *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, 34–61. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Kuppers, Petra. “The Wheelchair’s Rhetoric: The Performance of Disability.” *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 80–88. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/224559>.
- Kwan, Samantha. “Navigating Public Spaces: Gender, Race, and Body Privilege in Everyday Life.” *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 144–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40835375>.
- Lamar, Cyriaque. “Grant Morrison’s Philosophy of Comics.” *Gizmodo*, April 14, 2010. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5517352/grant-morrison-philosophy-of-comics>.
- Lamerichs, Nicolle. “Fan Fashion: Re-enacting Hunger Games through Clothing and Design.” In *Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, 150–72. Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2018.
- Later, Naja. “Cannibalizing Hannibal: The Horrific and Appetizing Rewriting of Hannibal Mythology.” In *Hannibal for Dinner: Essays on America’s Favorite Cannibal on Television*, edited by Kyle A. Moody and Nicholas A. Yanes, 89–105. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021.
- Lecker, Michael J. “‘Why Can’t I Be Just Like Everyone Else?’: A Queer Reading of the X-Men.” *International Journal of Comic Art* 9 no. 1 (2007): 679–87.
- Lee, Ang, dir. *Hulk*. Universal Pictures, 2003.
- Lee, Stan, and Jack Kirby. *Fantastic Four #1: The Fantastic Four*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1961.
- . *Fantastic Four #26: The Avengers Take Over*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1964.
- . *The Incredible Hulk: The Hulk*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1962–1963.
- . *The Incredible Hulk #1: The Coming of the Hulk*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1962.
- Leitch, David, dir. *Deadpool 2 Trailer: No Good Deed*. Marvel Entertainment, 2017.
- Lendrum, Robert. “Queering Super-Manhood: The Gay Superhero in Contemporary Mainstream Comic Books.”

- Journal for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology* 2 no. 2 (2004): 69–73. DOI: 10.1080/21504851003798405.
- Lepore, Jill. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2014.
- Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Hempstead: Philip Allan, 1990.
- . *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Lewis, John, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. *March: Book One*. Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2013.
- Ling, Amy. “I’m Here: An Asian American Woman’s Response.” *New Literary History* 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 151–60. DOI: 10.2307/469308.
- Loadenthal, Michael. “Professor Xavier Is a Gay Traitor! An Antiassimilationist Framework for Interpreting Ideology, Power and Statecraft.” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 6 (Spring 2018): 13–46. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol6/iss6/3/>.
- Lockhart, Aidan, A. “Capes, Cowls, and the Fragments of Ideology: Toward a Framework for Revealing Retributive Ideology in Film.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 1 (2018): 215–35. DOI: 10.1111/jpcu.12648.
- Lome, Jordan Kass. “The Creative Empowerment of Body Positivity in the Cosplay Community.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 22 (2016). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/712/645>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2016.0712.
- Lopez, Lori Kido. “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in ‘The Last Airbender.’” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (2011): 431–45. DOI: 10.1177/F1367877911422862.
- Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Cheryl Clarke, 110–13. New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984.
- Lothian, Alexis. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.

- Lothian, Alexis, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid. "Yearning Void and Infinite Potential': Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space." *English Language Notes* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 103–11. DOI: 10.1215/00138282-45.2.103.
- Lund, Martin. "The Mutant Problem: X-Men, Confirmation Bias, and the Methodology of Comics and Identity." *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015). <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10890>. DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10890.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- MacDonald, Andrew, and Virginia Macdonald. "Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 10 (1976): 249–58. DOI: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1976.1001_249.x.
- Markham, Annette, and Elizabeth Buchanan. "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research 2.0: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee." *Association of Internet Researchers*, 2012. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.
- Martin, Orion. "What If the X-Men Were Black?" *The Hooded Utilitarian*, December 16, 2013. <http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/12/what-if-the-x-men-were-black/>.
- Martínez-Alfaro, María Jesús. "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept." *Atlantis* 18, nos. 1–2 (1996): 268–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054827>.
- "Marvel Proudly Presents Thor." *Marvel*, July 15, 2014. <https://www.marvel.com/articles/comics/marvel-proudly-presents-thor>.
- Massengale, Jeremiah. "Review of Bradford W. Wright's 'Comic Book Nation'." *ImageText* 6, no. 3 (2012). http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v6_3/massengale/.
- McAdams, Dan P., Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich. "Introduction." In *Identity and Story*, edited by Dan P.

- McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, 1–11. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006.
- McAllister, M.P., Edward H. Sewell Jr., and Ian Gordon. *Comics and Ideology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.
- McCallum, E.L., and Mikko Tuhkanen. “Becoming Unbecoming: Untimely Meditations.” In *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, edited by E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, 1–24. New York: SUNY Press, 2011.
- McClellan, Ann. “Redefining Genderswap Fan Fiction: A ‘Sherlock’ Case Study.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 17 (2014). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/553/454>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2014.0553.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.
- McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence through Work in Women’s Studies.” Working Paper 189. Wellesley: Wellesley Center for Research on Women, 1988. https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/White_Privilege_and_Male_Privilege_Personal_Account-Peggy_McIntosh.pdf.
- McMillan, Graeme. “Why Is ‘Watchmen’ So Important?” *Gizmodo*, January 30, 2009. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5162302/why-is-watchmen-so-important>.
- Medhurst, Andy. “Batman, Deviance and Camp.” In *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, edited by Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, 149–63. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Memmot, Mark. “DC’s Guardian and Phoenix Jones: Real Life Superheroes Open Up — A Bit.” *NPR*, March 14, 2011. <http://www.npr.org/sections/I-way/2011/03/14/134539750/dcs-guardian-and-phoenix-jones-real-life-super-heroes-open-up-a-bit>.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

- Meretoja, Hanna, and Colin Davis, eds. *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Micheline, J.A. "Cosplaying While Trans: Exploring the Intersection Between Cosplay and Gender Identity." *Vice*, January 3, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/wd4v5z/cosplaying-while-trans-569.
- . "Marvel Superheroes Aren't Just for White Men — True Diversity Could Boost Sales." *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/04/marvel-comics-blaming-diversity-bad-sales>.
- . "Why I'm Boycotting Marvel Comics." *Comics Alliance*, August 4, 2015. <http://comicsalliance.com/marvel-boycott-axel-alonso/>.
- Millar, Mark, et al. *Civil War*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2006–2007.
- . *Superman: Red Son*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.
- Miller, Frank, et al. *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. New York: DC Comics, 2001–2002.
- . *Batman: Year One*. New York: DC Comics, 1987.
- . *The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics, 1986.
- Miller, Joan. "Race Play: Whiteness and Erasure in Cross-Racial Cosplay." In *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*, edited by Rukmini Pande, 65–78. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020.
- Mills, Pat. "Working-Class Superheroes & One Million Displaced from Mosul." *Russia Today*, July 17, 2017. <https://www.rt.com/shows/going-underground/396516-british-comics-mosul-censorship/>.
- Mirk, Sarah. "Reading 'The X-Men' as a Queer Text." *Bitch Media*, June 16, 2016. <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/reading-x-men-queer-text>.
- Mittell, Jason. "On Disliking 'Mad Men.'" *Just TV*, July 29, 2010. <https://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/on-disliking-mad-men/>.

- Mohr, Dunja M. "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik / A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 55, no. 1 (2007): 5–24. DOI: 10.1515/zaa-2007-0103.
- Mongan, Shelby Fawn. "Finding Truth in Playing Pretend: A Reflection on Cosplay." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/634/481>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2015.0634.
- Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1986.
- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown: Persephone Press, 1981.
- Morris, Steve. "'Uncanny Avengers' Introduces 'The M-Word'" *The Beat*, March 28, 2013. <https://www.comicsbeat.com/uncanny-avengers-introduces-the-m-word/>.
- Morris, Grant. *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- . *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us about Being Human*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011.
- Morrison, Grant, and J.G. Jones. *Final Crisis*. New York: DC Comics, 2008–2009.
- Morrison, Grant, and Tony Daniel. *Batman R.I.P.* New York: DC Comics, 2008.
- Morrison, Grant, and Yanick Paquette. *Wonder Woman: Earth One*. New York: DC Comics, 2016.
- Morrison, Grant, and Frank Quitely. *Batman and Robin*. New York: DC Comics, 2009–2011.
- Morrison, Grant, et al. *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne*. New York: DC Comics, 2010.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1993.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009.

- . *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Murray, Christopher. "Superman vs Imago: Superheroes, Lacan and Mediated Identity." *International Journal of Comic Art* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 186–208.
- Mutua, Athena D. "The Rise, Development, and Future Directions of Critical Race Theory and Related Scholarship." *Denver University Law Review* 84, no. 2 (December 2006): 329–94. https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/journal_articles/433.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. "The End of Utopia." In Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber, 62–82. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- Nama, Adilifu. "Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers." *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009): 133–44. DOI: 10.1080/14725840902808736.
- . *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.
- Nelson, Patricia. "Fan Protests, Cultural Authenticity, and the Adaptation of 'Avatar: The Last Airbender.'" *Flow*, August 22, 2009. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2009/08/fan-protests-cultural-authenticity-and-the-adaptation-of-avatar-the-last-airbenderpatricia-nelson-flow-staff/>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Nolan, Christopher, dir. *Batman Begins*. Warner Bros., 2005.
- . *The Dark Knight*. 20th Century Fox, 2008.
- . *The Dark Knight Rises*. 20th Century Fox, 2012.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The Origins and History of the Comics Code*, Vol. 1. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998.
- O'Brien, Mary. *The Politics of Reproduction*. New York: HarperCollins, 1981.
- "Occupy Pedophilia." *LGBTQ Nation*. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/occupy-pedophilia/>.

- O'Neil, Dennis. "Introduction." In Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006.
- O'Neil, Dennis, and Neal Adams. *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow*. New York: DC Comics, 1970–1972.
- obsession_inc. "Affirmational Fandom vs. Transformational Fandom." *Dreamwidth*, June 1, 2009. <http://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html>.
- Olb, John, and Madeleine Parry, dirs. *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*. Netflix, 2018.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black." *The Stranger*, April 19, 2017. <https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black>.
- Opie, David. "Stan Lee Made It Feel Okay for Us to Be Queer." *Into*, November 13, 2018. <https://www.intomore.com/culture/stan-lee-made-it-feel-ok-for-us-to-be-queer/>.
- Otis, Hailey N., and Thomas R. Dunn. *Queer Worldmaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1235.
- Paglia, Camile. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Palmer-Mehta, Valerie, and Kellie Hay. "A Superhero for Gays? Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern." *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 4 (2005): 390–404. DOI: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.2005.00242.x.
- Pande, Rukmini. *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018.
- . "Who Do You Mean by 'Fan'? Decolonizing Media Fandom Identity." In *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, 319–32. Hoboken: Wiley, 2018.
- , ed. *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020.

- Pande, Rukmini, and Swati Moitra. "‘Yes, the Evil Queen Is Latina!’ Racial Dynamics of Online Femslash Fandoms." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/908/817>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2017.908.
- Parker, Emma. "Magic, Diaspora, and Klezbian Desire in Judith Katz’s ‘The Escape Artist.’" *Textual Practice* 25, no. 4 (2011): 689–710. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2011.586776.
- Parker, John R. "The Enduring Influence of ‘Watchmen.’" *Comics Alliance*, June 6, 2016. <http://comicsalliance.com/tribute-watchmen/>.
- Patel, Sanjay, dir. *Sanjay’s Super Team*. Pixar Animation Studios, 2015.
- Patten, Fred. "No Import Yet for Pakistan’s Hit Animated TV Series ‘Burka Avenger.’" *IndieWire*, January 3, 2016. <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/no-import-yet-for-pakistans-hit-animated-tv-series-burka-avenger-122437>.
- Peacock, Joe. "Booth Babes Need Not Apply." *Geek Out*, July 24, 2012. <http://geekout.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/24/booth-babes-need-not-apply/>.
- Pearson, Roberta. "The Jekyll and Hyde of Transmedia Storytelling." Paper presented at the Television and the Digital Public Sphere conference. Université Paris II, Paris, France, October 22–24, 2008.
- Pearson, Roberta, and William Uricchio, eds. *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Peebles, Jase. "‘Man of Steel’: A Gay Allegory for Our Time." *Advocate*, June 14, 2013. <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2013/06/14/why-new-superman-gay-allegory-our-time>.
- Perren, Alisa, and Laura E. Felschow. "The Bigger Picture: Drawing Intersections between Comics, Fan, and Industry Studies." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, 309–18. London: Routledge, 2017.

- Pett, Emma. "Cosplay Rey: Intergenerational Fandom and the Importance of Play at the 2016 Star Wars Celebration, London." *Deletion*, November 24, 2016. <https://www.deletionscifi.org/episodes/episode-12/cosplay-rey-intergenerational-fandom-and-the-importance-of-play-at-the-2016-star-wars-celebration-london/>.
- Philips, Dan. "Inside the Mind of Grant Morrison." *IGN*, June 16, 2009. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/02/03/inside-the-mind-of-grant-morrison>.
- Pierce, J. "Mutants and the Metaphysics of Race." In *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*, edited by R. Housel and J.J. Wisniewski, 183–93. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.
- Pollock, Della. "Performance Trouble." In *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, edited by Judith A. Hamera, 1–8. London: SAGE Publications, 2006.
- Polo, Susana. "On the 'Fake' Geek Girl." *The Mary Sue*, March 27, 2012. <https://www.themarysue.com/on-the-fake-geek-girl/>.
- Priest, Christopher, and ChrisCross. *Xero*. New York: DC Comics, 1997.
- Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. London: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Quinlivan, Davina. *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Rahman, Osmud, Liu Wing-Sun, and Brittany Hei-man Cheung. "'Cosplay': Imaginative Self and Performing Identity." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2015): 317–42. DOI: 10.2752/175174112X13340749707204.
- Ramos, Dulce. "Unmasked! The Mexico City Superhero Wrestling for Pedestrians' Rights." *The Guardian*, November 9, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/09/unmasked-mexico-city-superhero-wrestling-pedestrian-rights>.

- Randi, James. 2010. "Big Think Interview with James Randi." *Big Think*. <https://bigthink.com/videos/why-i-came-out-at-age-81/>.
- Raza-Sheikh, Zoya. "Superman Kent Comes Out as a Bisexual in New DC Comic." *Gay Times*, 2021. <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/culture/superman-jon-kent-comes-out-as-bisexual-in-new-dc-comic/>.
- Reed, Brian, and Giuseppe Camuncoli. *Ms. Marvel Special: Storyteller #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2008.
- Rehak, Bob. "Materializing Monsters: Aurora Models, Garage Kits and the Object Practices of Horror Fandom." *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 27–45. DOI: 10.1386/jfs.1.1.27_1.
- Rehal, Priya. "I Fight White Supremacy by Cosplaying." *Guts*, May 18, 2016. <http://gutsmagazine.ca/cosplaying/>.
- Remender, Rick, et al. *Uncanny Avengers #5*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2013.
- Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1992.
- Riba, Dan, et al. "Zatanna." Episode 50 of *Batman: The Animated Series*. Fox Kids, February 2, 1993.
- Rifas, Leonard. "Ideology: The Construction of Race and History in 'Tintin in the Congo.'" In *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, edited by Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, 221–34. London: Routledge, 2012. DOI: 10.4324/9780203839454.
- RLSH Project. "The Real Life Super Heroes Project: DC's Guardian." *YouTube*, July 21, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRJw1LjKz-o>.
- Roach, Emily E. "Cosplay, Drag, and the Transformative Nature of Living Out Your Fandom." *The Mary Sue*, January 4, 2017. <https://www.themarysue.com/dragging-pop-culture-through-cosplay/>.
- Robbins, Richard, dir. *Girl Rising*. GathrFilms, 2013.
- Robbins, Trina. "Wonder Woman: Queer Appeal." *International Journal of Comic Art* 10, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 89–94.

- Robinson, Amy. "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest." *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 715–36. DOI: 10.1086/448734.
- Robinson, Tasha. "Pixar's Sanjay Patel on His Debut Short: 'It was so lovely to have John Lasseter champion it.'" *The Verge*, December 6, 2015. <https://www.theverge.com/2015/12/8/9869646/sanjays-super-team-sanjay-patel-pixar-interview>.
- Robson, L.S. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Rosenberg, Robin S., and Peter Coogan. *What Is a Superhero?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. "'Passing': Race, Identification, and Desire." *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 435–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23126398>.
- Round, Julia. *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2019.
- . *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014.
- Rouner, Jef. "Comicpalooza 2015 Day 3: 'How Can I Be Superman If I Can't Walk?'" *Houston Press*, May 25, 2015. <http://www.houstonpress.com/arts/comicpalooza-2015-day-3-how-can-i-be-superman-if-i-can-t-walk-7460615>.
- Rovin, Jeff. *The Encyclopedia of Superheroes*. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985.
- Royal, Derek Parker. "Introduction: The Worlds of the Hernandez Brothers." *ImageText* 7, no. 1 (2013). <https://imagetextjournal.com/introduction-the-worlds-of-the-hernandez-brothers/>.
- Rucka, Greg, et al. *Wonder Woman*. New York: DC Comics, 2016.
- Russo, Anthony, and Joe Russo, dirs. *Captain America: Civil War*. Marvel Studios, 2016.
- . *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Marvel Studios, 2014.

- Rutledge, Zane, and Jeff Stolhand, dirs. *Rain*. Zane Films and ThunderGoddess Creations, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_W-PBfO57o&.
- Ryan R. "Sanjay's Super Team Interview." *Vimeo*, 2016. <https://vimeo.com/140871418>.
- Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*. New York: Phaidon, 1996.
- Sánchez, María Carla, and Linda Schlossberg, eds. *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.
- Sandvoss, Cornel. "The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture." In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 61–74. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.
- Sargisson, Lucy. *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- , and Lyman Tower Sargent. *Living in Utopia: New Zealand's Intentional Communities*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Savage, William, W. *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945–1954*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
- Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Schlossberg, Linda. "Rites of Passing." In *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, edited by María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, 1–12. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Scott, Joan. *Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Scott, Suzanne. "Battlestar Galactica: Fans and Ancillary Content." In *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, 319–28. New York: NYU Press, 2020.

- . “‘Cosplay Is Serious Business’: Gendering Material Fan Labor on ‘Heroes of Cosplay.’” *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (2015): 146–54. <http://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0029>.
- . *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. New York: NYU Press, 2019.
- . “Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)visibility in Comic Book Culture.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 13 (2013). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/460/384>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2013.0460.
- . “‘The Hawkeye Initiative’: Pinning Down Transformative Feminisms in Comic-Book Culture through Superhero Crossplay Fan Art.” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (2015): 150–60. DOI: 10.1353/cj.2015.0075.
- . “Who’s Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling.” In *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, edited by Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, 43–52. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- . *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by T.J.B. Spencer. London: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Sharf, Zack. “Alexandra Shipp Shades ‘X-Men’ Films for Giving Storm ‘Barely Anything to Say.’” *IndieWire*, April 1, 2019. <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/04/alexandra-shipp-x-men-storm-never-talks-1202054949/>.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London: SAGE Publications, 2002.
- Shyamalan, M. Night, dir. *Unbreakable*. Buena Vista Pictures, 2000.
- Shyminsky, Neil. “‘Gay’ Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero.” *Men and Masculinities* 14, no. 3 (August 2011): 288–308. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X10368787.

- . “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men.” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 387–405.
- Siebers, Tobin. “Introduction: What Does Postmodernism Want? Utopia.” In *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, edited by Tobin Siebers, 1–38. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Sieczkowski, Cavan. “Ian McKellen Took ‘X-Men’ Role Because of Gay Rights Parallel.” *HuffPost*, February 27, 2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ian-mckellen-x-men-gay_n_4865739.
- Sikh Captain America. “Red, White, and Beard.” *YouTube*, December 4, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2G8I_Aq5E4.
- Simon, Joe, and Jack Kirby. *Captain America #1: Meet Captain America*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1941.
- Simone, Gail. “Women in Refrigerators.” *Women in Refrigerators*, 1999. <http://web.archive.org/web/20120111060731/http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/>.
- Simpson, Derek. “Was There Ever a Black Superman?” *Quora*, November 3, 2016. <https://www.quora.com/Was-there-ever-a-black-Superman>.
- Sims, Chris. “Cinco De Mayo Luchadore Comics Special: Viva Santo.” *Comics Alliance*, May 5, 2010. <http://comicsalliance.com/luchadore-comics-santo/>.
- . “Time and Time Again: The Complete History of DC’s Retcons and Reboots.” *Comics Alliance*, June 8, 2011. <http://comicsalliance.com/dc-comics-reboot-history/>.
- Singer, Marc. “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race.” *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 107–19. DOI: 10.2307/2903369.
- Singh, Vishavjit. “The Wild Journey of a Sikh Captain America.” *On Being*, January 30, 2016. <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-wild-journey-of-a-sikh-captain-america/>.
- Skidmore, Max, and Joey Skidmore. “More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Contemporary Comic Books.”

- The Journal of Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (1983): 83–92. DOI: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1983.1701_83.x.
- Smith-Strickland, Stephanie. “Meet Brichibi Cosplay, the Queer, Plus-Size Diva Taking the Cosplay Scene by Storm.” *Mic*, March 4, 2016. <https://mic.com/articles/137034/meet-brichibi-cosplay-the-queer-plus-size-diva-taking-the-cosplay-scene-by-storm#.bcUfqB4sE>.
- Snyder, Zack, dir. *Superman: Man of Steel*. 20th Century Fox, 2013.
- s.O.D. *United Forces*. Megaforce, 1985.
- Solórzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 23–44. DOI: 10.1177/107780040200800103.
- Sperb, Jason. “Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney’s Notorious ‘Song of the South.’” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 25–41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40801480>.
- “‘Spider-Man’ and ‘Batman’ Show Their Support at Black Lives Matter Protests.” *Global News*, June 4, 2020. <https://globalnews.ca/video/7026036/demolition-begins-for-etobicoke-six-points-interchange-improvements>.
- Stanfill, Mel. “The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies.” In *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, 305–17. Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2018. DOI: 10.1002/9781119237211.ch19.
- Stebbing, Peter, dir. *Defendor*. Alliance Films, 2009.
- Steele, Ben, dir. *Hunted: The War against Gays in Russia*. Home Box Office, 2014.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. London: Heron Books, 1978.
- Streeby, Shelley. “Speculative Writing, Art, and World-Making in the Wake of Octavia E. Butler as Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 510–33. DOI: 10.15767/feministstudies.46.2.0510.

Sullivan, Nikki. "Transmogrification: (Un)becoming Other(s)."

In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 552–64. London: Routledge, 2006.

"'Superhero' Arrested, Accused of Pepper-Spray Assault."

NBC News, October 10, 2011. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44848642/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/#.WWSj6YgrJhE.

WWSj6YgrJhE.

Surman, Steven. "Alan Moore's Watchmen and Rorschach:

Does the Character Set a Bad Example?" *Steven Surman Writes*, January 20, 2015. <http://www.stevensurman.com/rorschach-from-alan-moores-watchmen-does-he-set-a-bad-example/>.

Swaminathan, Kayal. "To White Cosplayers Who Cosplay

as POC Characters." *Odyssey*, July 14, 2015. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/to-white-cosplayers-who-cosplay-as-poc-characters>.

Tagg, John. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on*

Photographies and Histories. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Taylor, Aaron. "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be

Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): 344–60. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, ed. *How We Get Free: Black*

Feminism and the Combahee River Collective. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017.

Taylor, Michael Edward. "15 Ways 'Watchmen' Changed

Comics Forever." *Screen Rant*, September 16, 2016. <http://screenrant.com/how-watchmen-changed-comic-books-forever/>.

Terry, Jennifer, and Jacqueline L. Urla, eds. *Deviant Bodies:*

Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

"Testimonies: X-Men." *Polari Magazine*. <http://www.polarimagazine.com/oralhistory/testimonies-x-men/>.

polarimagazine.com/oralhistory/testimonies-x-men/.

- TheMtVernonKid_Christopher Bennett. "RAIN Storm Fan Film REACTION!!!!" *YouTube*, June 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOVae3H1P4I>.
- TheNaimahProject. "Fancasting: Storm in the Marvel Cinematic Universe." *TheNaimahProject*, January 20, 2019. <https://thenaimahproject.wordpress.com/2019/01/20/fancasting-the-actresses-that-could-portray-storm-in-the-mcu/>.
- The New School. "bell hooks—Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body | Eugene Lang College." *YouTube*, May 7, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJkohNROvzs>.
- The Yes Men. "The Yes Men: New York Times Special Edition." *Vimeo*, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/129322969>.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: NYU Press, 1996.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." In *Tree and Leaf*, 11–70. London: Unwin Books, 1971.
- Tran-Thomson, Sophia. "Meet Chibatman—Bringing Smiles to the Streets of Chiba." *BBC News*. September 1, 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-29006188/meet-chibatman-bringing-smiles-to-the-streets-of-chiba>.
- Upkins, Dennis R. "Making It Rain: An Interview with Maya Glick." *Black Sci-Fi*, July 11, 2016. <https://blacksci-fi.com/making-it-rain/>.
- Usher, Shaun. "Diversity Guarantees Our Cultural Survival: Martin Scorsese on the Importance of Foreign Film." *Letters of Note*, April 5, 1993. <https://news.lettersofnote.com/p/diversity-guarantees-our-cultural>.
- Van Ness, Sara J. *"Watchmen" as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010.
- Various. *The New 52*. New York: DC Comics, 2011–2016.
- Vaughn, Matthew, dir. *Kick-Ass*. Universal Pictures, 2010.
- Villeneuve, Denis, dir. *Arrival*. Paramount Pictures, 2016.
- Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*. New York: Dial Press, 1978.

- Wanzo, Rebecca. "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/699/538>. DOI: 10.3983/twc.2015.0699.
- Warner, Kristen J. "ABC's 'Scandal' and Black Women's Fandom." In *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elana Levine, 32–50. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- . "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the (Nearly Impossible to Win) Game: Analysis of Minority Employment." *Flow*, September 30, 2011. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2011/09/don%e2%80%99t-hate-the-player/>.
- . "In the Time of Plastic Representation." *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017). <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>.
- Wein, Len, and Dave Cockrum. *Giant-Size X-Men #1: Second Genesis*. New York: Marvel Comics, 1975.
- Weinstein, Simcha. *Up, Up and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*. Fort Lee: Barricade Books, 2006.
- Weiss, Meredith L., and Michael J. Bosia. *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Wertham, Fredric. *The Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954.
- West, Isaac, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy. "Queer Worldmaking in the 'It Gets Better' Campaign." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* (Fall 2013): 49–85. DOI: 10.1353/qed.2013.0003.
- Weston, Kath. "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 253–77. DOI: 10.1215/10642684-2-3-253.
- Whedon, Joss, dir. *Avengers Assemble*. Marvel Studios, 2012.

- Wheeler, Andrew. "Avengers Assimilate: Identity Politics in 'Uncanny Avengers.'" *Comics Alliance*, March 29, 2013. <http://comicsalliance.com/uncanny-avengers-5-rick-remender-identity-politics-mutants/>.
- . "House of Xavier: How The X-Men Represent Queer Togetherness [Mutant & Proud Part I]." *Comics Alliance*, June 16, 2014. <http://comicsalliance.com/mutant-proud-xmen-lgbt-rights-family-community-identity/>.
- Whitbrook, James. "Uncanny X-Men Ends with a Bang—And Finally Deals with Iceman's Sexuality." *Gizmodo*, November 4, 2015. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/uncanny-x-men-ends-with-a-bang-and-finally-deals-with-i-1740532667>.
- White, Bryony. "Queering the Rural." *Hazlitt*, July 26, 2017. <http://hazlitt.net/feature/queering-rural>.
- White, Martha C. "Wonder No More: 'Wonder Woman' Shows Female-Focused Action Flicks Can Be Hits." *NBC News*, June 5, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/wonder-no-more-wonder-woman-shows-female-focused-action-flicks-n768436>.
- Whitman, Walt. "Old-Age Echoes." In *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, edited by Oscar Lovell Triggs, 31–69. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902.
- Williams, Kelly. "'Watchmen' and the Queering of Rorschach." *Shield Maidens*, November 29, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20171222083943/https://shieldmaidensblog.wordpress.com/2016/11/29/watchmen-and-the-queering-of-rorschach/>.
- Willis Aronowitz, Nona. "Am I Gay Enough? What to Know About Queer Identity." *Teen Vogue*, July 15, 2021. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/am-i-gay-enough>.
- Willis, Ika. "Slash as Queer Utopia." Paper presented at Queer Space: Centers and Peripheries conference. University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, 2007. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1418&context=lhapapers>.
- Wilson, G. Willow, et al. *Ms. Marvel*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014–.
- . *Ms. Marvel #1: Meta Morphosis*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014.

- . *Ms. Marvel #4: Past Curfew*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014.
- Winge, Theresa. “Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay.” *Mechademia* 1 (2006): 65–76. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/368597>.
- Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- . “World-Building in ‘Watchmen.’” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 114–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44867512>.
- Wolfman, Marv, et al. *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. New York: DC Comics, 1985–1986.
- Wolf-Meyer, Matthew J. “The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 3 (2003): 497–517. DOI: 10.1111/1540-5931.00019.
- Woo, Benjamin. “The Invisible Bag of Holding: Whiteness and Media Fandom.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, 245–52. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Wordsworth, William. “She Was a Phantom of Delight” (1803). *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45550#poem>.
- Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Yockey, Matt. “Mutopia: American Utopianism and the Mutant Superhero.” In *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis*, edited by Claudia Bucciferro, 3–16. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- . “Ti-Girl Power: American Utopianism in the Queer Superhero Text.” *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015). DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11014.
- Zhou, Maggie. “Am I Queer Enough to Call Myself Bi?” *Refinery* 29, August 16, 2021. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/bisexual-imposter-syndrome>.

