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Julia Rogers Research Prize Reflection

Global Marginalization and Intra-fandom Comic Book Relations

Throughout my undergraduate studies in Spanish language and literature and Russian culture and society, I've sought to explore global experiences of marginalization on the bases of ethnicity, class, race, gender and sexuality. For my final research paper for WRT 219: Linguistics, I utilized sociolinguistics to understand how comic book writers and fan fiction writers handled themes of race and marginalization within their works. Comic books and fan fiction are comparable mediums as both allow writers to explore and expand their understanding of a character or major comic book event, thus painting a picture of the community's comprehension of larger societal conversations on topics of equity, marginalization and social justice.

As a fan and a researcher, I continuously monitor fan spaces on social media to observe and research the evolution of fandom consciousness in regards to racialization, marginalization and intercultural literacy. I noted early on the small community of fan artists and fan fiction writers who were engaging critically with the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Marvel Comics as they routinely discussed the impact of white washing within the MCU and the ways that fan media, such as art and fan fiction, could honor Marvel comic book characters' racial and ethnic identities.

From these interactions, I designed a research project on the use of slurs ('gypsy') and ethnic identifiers (Roma, Romani, etc) within Marvel comic books and fan fiction works, which primarily center the characters Wanda Maximoff and Pietro Maximoff. The Maximoff twins are canonically Roma (and have been depicted as Jewish numerous times) in the comics, but have only been played by white, non-Jewish actors in their cinematic appearances. As it is not uncommon for comic book writers to incorporate aspects of the films into their own writing, the Maximoff twins were subsequently shifted farther away from their Roma/Jewish origins. These films serve as a gateway for many new fans to Marvel's comics and in instances where fans are unfamiliar with certain marginalized groups, such as the Roma, the repetitive use of derogatory

terms and/or slurs can lead to a sort of apathy being projected towards said groups. Having observed critical fan reactions to Marvel's comics and film adaptations, I hypothesized that Marvel comic fan fiction writers are engaging more critically with content centering Romani comic characters than comic book writers are.

I initially approached the preliminary research phase of my paper by seeking academic scholarship on race, comic books, and history of Romani groups in Europe. However, I encountered my very first roadblock very early on: there was no traditional, peer reviewed research on comic books relevant to my research topic. In fact, there was much debate on whether comic books are even worth academic study, but despite such discourse, I learned that there are a notable number of academics within fields such as psychology, sociology, comparative literature and media and communication studies who are contributing to the emerging scholarship on comic studies.

Having learned this through the lack of resources in the library and outside libraries, I used the academic articles I could find on race and literary studies to inform my analysis of the treatment of racialization and marginalization by comic book writers and fan fiction writers. Then, I scheduled a meeting with a librarian to develop an alternative research plan. We couldn't find exactly what I was looking for at first, but the librarian showed me how to access alternative sources on media criticism, literary/visual analysis, representations of race in popular culture, and the history of Romani groups in Europe from JSTOR using my Goucher College library login information. I was also able to borrow eBooks such as "Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture" through the library. With these sources, I met with my professor and altered my research question to address the varying perceptions of comic book writers and comic book fan fiction through sociolinguistic analysis. I decided to not only count the number of times slurs and self-identifying terms were used, but to analyze the context in which they were written. The results of my study did not explicitly support the idea that comic book writers and fan fiction writers were more or less likely to use the g-slur or terms such as Roma and Romani. Furthermore, the texts examined in my research suggests that comic book writers and fan fiction are grappling with the implications, histories and identities of the Maximoff twins in varying and understandably context ways. My research calls into question what it means to "engage with

media critically.” Must the audience dedicate their time to writing essays on the films, television shows, music and books they consume or can critical engagement be fulfilled through informal, private conversation? This is only one of the many questions which came about as a result of my experiences with this project. But beyond leading me to ask such questions, this research project gave me experience with conducting social science based, quantitative and qualitative research. It helped me to learn ways I could alter my research design and overcome time consuming roadblocks.

As I reflect on my research almost a year later, DC and Marvel have released previews and information for their yearly pride specials, which showcase their LGBTQ+ characters. Similarly, Marvel releases specials for Black characters, indigenous characters, female and Latine comic book characters. This form of marketing, which attempts to appeal to marginalized audiences, is not new. As a comic book reader myself, I have observed the way Romani characters are racialized and marginalized, but their experience is rarely discussed in a careful and articulated way in fandom spaces, and the choice to acknowledge this aspect of a character’s identity is really at the discretion of the writer.

With this research piece, I hope not only to encourage comic books readers, comic book writers, fan fiction writers and readers to think critically about their role in media engagement, but to consider their power as consumers as well. Exploring depictions of Romani characters in literature, films, television shows and theater productions gives us, Americans, the opportunity to question our relationship with and understanding of whiteness and racialization. In fact, it cannot be understated that our ability to address institutional racism and white supremacy in the United States depends exceedingly on our understanding of racialization and marginalization within our own region, but within other regions such as Eastern Europe and Latin America.