Be a Heroine!: An Analysis and Reflection of Superheroines and Culture

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts and Cultural Sustainability

Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland

March 31, 2017

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This paper is an analysis of storytelling and superhero themes as well as a supplement to the website project constructed at http://ravenalegria13.wix.com/superheroines. While the website addresses some storytelling aspects, this paper collaborates with the website and contains both a self-reflection piece to answer some personal questions and an analytical section to focus on why superheroes are so important to storytelling, digital arts, and cultural sustainability.

Analysis

This capstone links folklore to superhero narrative, graphic narrative, and productive violence and answer the question of how superhero narratives act as cultural knowledge and practices for the contribution of human well being. Exploring this, we can answer how this storytelling can be strengthened as this incarnation of superheroes has been around in American popular culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drawing on Joseph Campbell's analysis of heroic journey folklore and mythology through history. Heroes have existed for thousands of years; from the stories of Hercules and the god Thor up until Superman and Wonder Woman, these heroes represent hope, justice, and various other things to human beings in diverse cultures throughout history.

Importantly, considered in this project is the fact that superheroes transcend format: they have been represented in comic books, television

series, movies, collectables, action figures, and many other forms of popular culture. In relation to comic books, part of the long history of superhero writing includes various comic book styles like pulp magazines, which were cheap fictional stories published from 1896 to the 1950s, comic strips in newspapers, and penny dreadfuls from the 19th century. All of these had elements of comic book writing, but it was really Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster that would make the first breakout superhero with Superman whose coveted issue number one is still being sold today. "This comic features not only the first appearance of Superman, Clark Kent and Lois Lane, but this comic began the entire superhero genre that has followed during the 76 years since. It is referred to as the Holy Grail of comics... This is .... the Mona Lisa of comics and stands alone as the most valuable comic book ever printed." [1]

One of the main reasons that Superman was a success was because his story was simple and easy to understand, and therefore available to readers and for extensive marketing. Narrative theory of comic books, called graphic narrative in some circles, is a theory explaining how graphic novels can show narrative. Much of the literature focuses on Spiegelman's *Maus,* Satrapi's *Persepolis,* and Moore's *Watchman* (which features a deconstruction of superheroes as a whole). However, we can also construe

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[1] Lance Whitney, "Superman's Action Comics No. 1 Sells for Record $3.2 Million on eBay." *cNet*: August 25, 2014. https://www.cnet.com/news/supermans-action-comics-no-1-sells-for-record-3-2-million-on-ebay/.

conclusions from existing narrative theory and graphic narrative theory on

other existing comic book characters.

Jared Gardner and David Herman explain in their article "Graphic

Narratives and Narrative Theory: Introduction" about the alliances of graphic

narrative:

> One result of this longstanding defensive relationship has been a need for U.S. comics scholars to claim alliances with other, more recognizable fields: autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, etc. The emerging academic canon of graphic narrative (Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and, most recently, Bechdel's *Fun Home*) reflects the influence of these alliances - intellectual partnerships that have provided comics scholars access to academic journals that had never before considered the form.[2]

This explains why not a lot of graphic narrative and narrative theory has

been applied to superheroes like Wonder Woman, Batgirl, Harley Quinn, and

Jessica Jones. They are not considered popular enough to warrant such

academic attention despite the following these female characters have

among comic book fans. On the other hand, Captain America, Superman,

and Batman have at least some narrative theory written about them.

Examples include: The Virtues of Captain America: Modern-Day Lessons on

Character from a World War II Superhero by Mark D. White, "Captain

America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism"

by Robert W. Smith, "The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American

Exceptionalism to Globalization" by Michael Soares, "Up, Up, and Across:

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[2] Jared Gardner and David Herman. "Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory: Introduction." *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (2011): 6.

The Second World War and the Historical Development of Transmedia Storytelling" by Matthew Freeman, "Batman's Female Foes: The Gender War in Gotham City" by Shannon Austin, and "The Dark Knight's Dystopian Vision: Batman, Risk, and American National Identity" by Jeanne Cortiel and Laura Oehme.[3]

Mark Nixon who reviewed some works on women in narrative theory points out: "In recent years, as comics has become a more pronounced and arguably elevated medium in culture, there has also been a development both in the appreciation and participation of women and girls (characters, readers,creators) in comics."[4] Nixon then goes on to review the book The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines by Mike Madrid,[5] explaining a possible reason why female comic book characters are not studied as often:

> Madrid rightly notes the huge impact of the anti-comics agenda of the 1950s, following the publication of the conservative psychologist Fredric Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent (1954) and the resulting creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), on the representation of women in comics. Wertham's fixation on sexuality and clothing, and the CCA's rules on 'suggestive posture' and the 'exaggeration of … physical qualities', ended the careers of many women characters.[6]

This understandably explains why comic books are not studied as graphic narrative unless they fall into the categories that *Maus* and *Persepolis* fall

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[3] See Works Cited for full entries.
[4] Mark Nixon. "Narrating Women in Comics." *Gender and Language* 8, no. 2 (2014): 269.
[5] Mike Madrid, The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines (United States: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009).
[6] Mark Nixon. "Narrating Women in Comics." *Gender and Language* 8, no. 2 (2014): 271.

into: historical graphic narrative. There have been Marvel and DC Comics studied (IE, *Watchmen*), but they are few and far between. Most studies are isolated or they study comics as a whole.

Matthew Flinder and Matthew Wood are integral to understanding Wertham's viewpoint, especially because Wertham thought that comic books were a horrible influence on children. In their paper "From Folk Devils to Folk Heroes: Rethinking the Theory of Moral Panics", they explain what they mean by "folk devil:"

> Moral panic research focuses on how specific issues become amplified into systemic concerns through a process of interpellation, framing and mediation. A social group or category—the "folk devil"—is identified as causing an issue of exaggerated public concern through its immoral behavior, and, moreover, is constructed as an existential threat to the moral integrity of "decent" society in a full-scale demonology process.[7]

This is to say that Wertham viewed comic books as a "folk devil" and this is why he wrote his book, creating the Comics Code Authority in the process. However because comics teach lessons, they can offer a "folk hero" connotation as well, with the heroes themselves being morally good. There are comic conventions where people gather and share in these narratives and the sense of community reinforces the "folk hero" moniker.

This brings us to graphic narrative and how it relates to narrative theory. Hillary Chute, writer of "*Ragtime*, *Kavalier & Clay*, and the Framing of Comics", explains what graphic narrative is:

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[7] Matthew Flinders and Matthew Wood. "From Folk Devils to Folk Heroes: Rethinking the Theory of Moral Panics." *Deviant Behavior* 36 (2015): 642.

It has a partnered relationship with contemporary fiction: In newspaper comic strips, so-called "wordless novels," comic books, and comix—and, most importantly, in book-length graphic narratives— we see a positive awareness of comics as a reproducible mass medium, combined with a rigorous, political attention to form and experimentation. This is also a prominent feature of contemporary fiction, in that it critiques ideology and representation in a mode that we may consider avant-garde or experimental, while yet recognizing that the accessibility of popular culture is an important political register of post-utopianism.[8]

Comics have been around since the turn of the century, mass produced in newspapers as comic strips, then in the 1920s as pulps, and finally as the comic books we know today when Superman became mainstream in 1938. Both contemporary fiction and comic books share innovation and social commentary as part of their narrative. As comics are reproducible as a mass medium, we see that they have an accessibility as popular culture, especially as an adaptable narrative they migrate from the medium of printed comics to the medium of film, with both the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Detective Comics Extended Universe. Both these universes are bringing these narratives to new audiences with social commentary that applies to today's society and culture.

What about the graphic narrative used by comics? Let's start with what Chute says:

The narrative art of comics offers punctual moments in an ongoing, unwinding thread; these moments, or frames, are themselves separated by the "gutter": the gaps, the white spaces of absence between the selected moments that direct a reader's interpretation. All media, to a certain extent, perform

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[8] Hillary Chute. "*Ragtime*, *Kavalier & Clay*, and the Framing of Comics." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 269.

the work of "framing." Yet comics, by means of manifesting
material frames and the absences between them—therefore
literalizing the work of framing and also what it excludes on the
page—offers a distinct and particular poetics.[9]

The white spaces offer the reader an interpretation of how time passes

between the panels where the characters interact. Because of this, we can

infer what happens not only between panels, but what happens between

comic book issues. This is part of what makes the "framing" of the comic

book, allowing the reader to infer meaning to the time that has passed in the

time between panels as well as comic book issues. Chute goes on:

Representing time as space, comics situate the reader in space,
creating perspective in and through frames, which are the
smallest unit of comics grammar. Mila Bongco argues that
comics convey a narrative politics by asserting that, literally,
"discourse becomes a series of views" in graphic narratives,
situating the reader in participatory readings (59). The reader
must slow down enough to make the connections between image
and text and from panel to panel, thus working outside of the
mystification of representation that film induces and produces...
Graphic narratives are highly self-reflexive: by their very
composition in frames, graphic narratives refuse the idea that
any text is disinterested; they assume a linguistic, discursive
world, with the textual and the aesthetic as inherently political.[10]

Comic books involve the reader because not only do they see the text, they

can interact with the images that are conveying the action on the page. The

reader can make the connections from image to text about the characters,

setting, social commentary, and graphic narrative.

For example, if you were to take a panel of Captain America standing

at attention in front of President Barack Obama, the reader could infer the

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[9] IBID, 271.
[10] IBID, 277.

authority of President Obama even over a super-soldier like Captain

America. At the same time, the reader could also see that Captain America

respects the office that President Obama holds when he stands at attention.

If Captain America were to say anything, it would likely be in a respectful

tone, just as there is respect between President Obama for members in

uniform. If the president said anything, a respect could also be inferred. This

is the making of connections to which Chute refers.

But graphic narrative is also full of context, as illustrated by Hillary

Chute in "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative:"

> We may think of graphic narrative, in the innate, necessary
> formalism of its narrative procedure - in its experimentation with
> the artificial strictures of the comics form...: "the empirical
> content needs not just to be known, but to be read-the basic and
> legitimate demand for contextualization of the text itself needs
> to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and
> yet necessary work of textualization of the context". Graphic
> narrative accomplishes this work with its manifest handling of its
> own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar
> rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous,
> inscribing the context in its graphic presentation.[11]

Chute also explains that graphic narrative does not preclude historical

accuracy when speaking about creative invention. Comics are a double

medium, not just narrative, but also drawings of what is happening as the

text is spoken. Chute then goes on to summarize graphic narrative quite

nicely:

> Graphic narrative has echoed and expanded on the formal
> inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic
> attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift toward the

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[11] Hillary Chute. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March 2008): 457.

> democracy of popular forms. In the graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention. Critical approaches to literature, as they are starting to do, need to direct more sustained attention to this developing form, a form that demands a rethinking of narrative, genre, and, to use James Joyce's phrase, today's "ineluctable modality of the visible."[12]

This is true of comic books at the company giants Marvel (formerly Timely Comics) and DC Comics (formerly National Periodical Publications). They produce graphic narrative with alarming regularity (usually once a month for most titles and once a year for annual issues), even if some comics are not always a hit with critics and fans alike.[13] Comic books are usually purchased in comic book shops or hobby shops as part of the mass circulation. They used to be available in grocery stores, but that changed when distribution became too expensive for Marvel, DC, and others to maintain.

This brings around another important connection to cultural sustainability when it comes to comics: storytelling. Specifically, folklore and mythology are important to discuss when exploring comic books. Henry Glassie writes about folklore in "Tradition", explaining that folk and lore exist because of communication, and communication exists because "people acting together, telling tales at the hearth, or sending signals through computerized networks develop significant forms that function at once as

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[12] IBID, 462.

[13] For more information on terrible comics, watch the Youtube series Atop the Fourth Wall with Lewis "Linkara" Lovhaug as he analyzes good and bad comics alike. He also does his own comic book storylines. (http://atopthefourthwall.com)

signs of identity and forces for cohesion."[14] From this, we can construe that

if comic books are a brand of modern folklore/mythology and that

communication exists because of people acting together, then comic books

can be a sign of shared identity and a force for cohesion when it comes to

modern folklore. This is due to the shared identities of subcultures that can

identify with certain characters in comics from Barbara Gordon for the

disabled to Jessica Jones for assault to Harley Quinn for abuse.

Barbara Benjamin elaborates on this in "The Case Study: Storytelling

in the Industrial Age and Beyond":

> Through storytelling, elders can transmit the accumulated
> knowledge and wisdom of the culture, knowledge and wisdom
> that define the rules and the tools of the culture's survival.
> These stories are the handbook of how to behave. Their purpose
> is to ensure that, generation after generation, everyone has
> access to the wisdom of the past as they live in the present and
> move toward the future. Storytelling gives collective heritage a
> tangible form and helps the culture create a collective, distinct
> and, sometimes, isolated identity. This can further serve to
> reinforce the culture's need to compete with others and resist
> any tendency to merge or collaborate.[15]

From this we can determine that not only can comic books be construed as

stories and modern folklore, though cultures change and different elements

recede and arise, comics as an art form can be part of the dialogue for these

elements. For example, we could learn how to be more like Wonder Woman,

who is peaceful until she is called to defend the planet from a threat. We can

learn to be more like Captain America, who questions authority when he

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[14] Henry Glassie. "Tradition." *The Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 430 (Autumn 1995): 400.
[15] Barbara Benjamin. "The Case Study: Storytelling in the Industrial Age and Beyond." *On the Horizon* 14, no. 4 (2006): 161.

does not agree with national policy, and we can learn to be more like Squirrel Girl, who figures out her problems and does not always resort to violence to solve them.

Storytelling in comic books can also be likened to storytelling in role-playing games like Pathfinder and Dungeons and Dragons. In those games, there are rules that a player and a storyteller (known as the Dungeon Master) must follow. This is true in comic books as well. All superheroes must play by the rules of their respective universes or they face consequences. In Dungeons and Dragons, consequences usually involve dice and whether the player rolls a 1 (the worst) or 20 (perfect). In the superhero world, consequences can range from going on the run to other superheroes shunning that person to even off-world exile.

Both superheroes and Dungeons and Dragons have something else in common: productive violence to drive their story forward. They both use violence against others (usually an enemy or some form of evil) as a means of driving the story forward. For example, in Dungeons & Dragons, we see narrative theory of violence at play. That is, a player can make the decision to attack an enemy, roll the dice, and if they attain a good enough roll, the attack on the enemy is successful, thus driving the story forward. But superheroes have no dice system, they have writers and artists. Those working on the story can determine that it is highly important that Jessica Jones use her strength to snap Kilgrave's neck (as she did in the Netflix

series) or that Wonder Woman should attack her fellow Amazons as a training exercise. Superheroes use productive violence to drive their stories forward to create graphic narrative at times. They also use dialogue, silence, and other techniques.

Violence is not always ideal, but in the world of superheroes, it is exciting and plot-driving. It means resolution and making things right again, even if that means fighting each other (as in Civil War in Marvel). Rules mean something in both Dungeons and Dragons and the comic book universe. Nathan Shank explains how rules apply in the Dungeons and Dragons narrative in his article "Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the Dungeons and Dragons Narrative":

> Rules are the essential property of play. In the context of the game, they are flexible as a matter of choice prima facie in whether someone decides to play the game at all and accept the rules. To play a game with someone else is to agree on the rules of the game.[16]

This can also be applied to the comic book universes. When you pick up a comic book, you are agreeing to the rules set forth by the book. For example, if Superman can fly, one will accept this as fact in any medium, including television and movies. We can construe that if something bad happens to Superman, like exposure to kryptonite, it is not a normal situation that he finds himself in, but still keeps to the rules of his universe even when finding himself in trouble.

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[16] Nathan Shank. "Productive Violence and Poststructural Play in the Dungeons and Dragons Narrative." *Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 1 (2015): 186.

As the first mainstream superhero, Superman immediately connected to people in June 1938 who were trying to live their lives at the height of the Great Depression. Superman offered them hope in a desperate and hopeless time. Culturally, Superman represented a turning point in storytelling. Now those who wanted to know what would happen next would have to check every week/month to see the next installment of Superman's adventures and hope that they could follow along with their earnings (if they were lucky enough to have a job before World War II). Along with Batman in 1939 and eventually Wonder Woman in 1941, they gave people of all ages and demographics something to look forward to until World War II.

When World War II broke out, Wonder Woman helped to fight the Nazis with her boyfriend Steve Trevor; while Batman and Superman did not fight, their writers electing to concentrate on establishing the things we know about Batman and Superman today. Wonder Woman's story is as important as the Caped Crusader's and the Man of Steel's because it gives women hope of equality, something we strive for in cultural sustainability while we preserve culture. Wonder Woman strives to do both: respect cultures (as long as they are not oppressing anyone) and strive for the equality of women.

At the height of the feminist movement in the early 1970s, in 1972, *Ms. Magazine* framed Wonder Woman in her original light (as an Amazon warrior) as an equality and feminist figure when they put her on their cover,

boosting her popularity among younger women, engaging allies, and creating an icon for the Women's Movement. She regained her powers due to her now iconic status from the years of powerlessness she had to endure because she wanted to remain with Steve Trevor. Though Wonder Woman fights for truth, justice, and equality, she was only the Justice League's secretary for a number of years because writers after William Moulton Marston (her creator) did not understand the essence of her character: equality and cultural respect. Even if she does not understand a culture, Wonder Woman tries to understand it; something we should all strive to do.

Barbara Gordon, also known as Batgirl, is a crime-fighter in Gotham city who helps others. After losing her legs to paralysis in The Killing Joke at the hands of the Joker (whose goal was to corrupt Commission Gordon, her father), Barbara became Oracle and aided Batman on his quest to fight crime from a wheelchair. Batgirl, even with the recent revival of her legs after being assaulted by the Joker and losing them in the 1990s, still instills respect for disability because as Oracle she accomplished so much in the crime-fighting world, giving others with disabilities hope to be able to accomplish great things.

Harley Quinn was invented for *The Batman Animated Series* as Joker's henchwoman and from there, entered into mainstream comics. Her popularity in the *Animated Series* led to her own integration into mainstream DC comics, where she has an on-again off-again relationship with the Joker

and a friendship with Poison Ivy, a fellow villain who tries to genuinely help Quinn when she's in trouble. Harley gives us hope for abuse victims to throw off the yoke of abuse and get to safety, something women of all cultures desperately need concerning the patriarchal hardships they face.

Jessica Jones is a retired superhero operating in New York City and eventually becomes a member of the Avengers. She has a private investigation service where she helps people in need. In the Netflix show, she takes to drinking to forget about her issues. Ultimately, however, Jessica Jones teaches us that it is not your fault if you have been assaulted, just do not let it hinder you.

Batgirl, Harley Quinn, and Jessica Jones all raise the issues of disability, abuse, and assault, developing a feminist cultural response. Margaret Mills, who wrote "Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore: A Twenty-Year Trajectory Toward Theory," explains what gender studies can do to develop shared solidarity:

> One thing gender studies can add to the notion of social groups is the experiential decentering of social membership. Thus group membership for any one person becomes a Venn diagram of intersecting and superimposed circles of interaction, not all of them face-to-face, as we see now, but all involving alternative shared rules systems upon which assumed alternative shared solidarities are played out.[17]

Let's apply this to Wonder Woman as an example: She is an Amazon, a woman, a warrior, an advocate for women, a member of the Justice League,

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[17] Margaret Mills. "Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore: A Twenty-Year Trajectory Toward Theory." *Western Folklore,* 52, no. 2/4 (April-October 1993): 176.

a former ambassador for what was originally Paradise Island, now known as

Themyscira (where she's from). Already, we can see she has many

interactions within different social groups, so too with Batgirl, Harley Quinn,

and Jessica Jones respectively. But when it comes to writing about women,

you also write about body. Mills goes on to explain this further:

> This attempt to address the global scale of sexist representation, of ideological constructions of difference, in psychological experience, carries with a threat, of psychological determinism, which must be compensated, or at least challenged, by theories of the cultural construction of the body.[18]

Female superheroes are the anomaly in this case as they are typically made

to be equally erotic and to draw attention to moral issues in their narratives.

And just like women in the real world, these fictional ladies have also

experienced stereotyping and marginalization, especially with how their

bodies are drawn and how male heroes have been known to treat them. Mills

extrapolates "The experience of being an object of stereotyping and

marginalization yields a potent reminder of the concrete consequences of

essentialist ideas, however socially constructed we see them to be."[19]

One of the core relations with Wonder Woman is exploring her

relationship to the male heroes of the Justice League. Once Marston (her

creator) died, writers relegated Wonder Woman to being the "secretary" of

the Justice League despite having formidable powers in her own right. Jane

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[18] IBID, 180.
[19] IBID, 185.

Flax explains what feminist theory should be in her paper "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory":

> A fundamental goal of feminist theory is (and ought to be) to analyze gender relations: how gender relations are constituted and experienced and how we think or, equally important, do not think about them. The study of gender relations includes but is not limited to what are often considered distinctively feminist issues: the situation of women and the analysis of male domination.[20]

Wonder Woman, Batgirl, Harley Quinn, and Jessica Jones experience the situation of women and through their powers (or lack thereof) experience male domination whether it be secretary to the Justice League, being told crime-fighting is a man's job, being the victim of a brutal man, or even having their mind invaded by someone who thought they were doing the right thing. They have agency, but sometimes they only have agency after a man has done something terrible to them.

In addition, Michael Goodrum writes in "'Oh C'mon, Those Stories Can't Count in Continuity!' Squirrel Girl and the Problem of Female Power":

> Unlike the machinery of continuity, women are generally far from invisible and women's role as sexual spectacle in comic books is closely tied to both audience and creative teams. Superhero comic books are seen as not only overwhelmingly male but also adolescent, two factors that have a significant impact on the way women are drawn. Given the projected audience of adolescent males, the sexualized representation of women has been repeated and normalized over a number of years, a practice that has largely gone without comment within the comic books.[21]

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[20] Jane Flax. "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory." *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 622-623.

[21] Michael Goodrum. "'Oh c'mon, those stories can't count in continuity!' Squirrel Girl and the problem of female power." *Studies in Comics* 5, no. 1 (2014): 101.

Most superheroines are drawn sexually, and that's what booted Wonder

Woman from her United Nations ambassadorship. All four women are drawn

sexually rather than realistically, because that's what sells comic book issues

to the target demographic: men. An improvement can be seen in the Jessica

Jones Netflix series, as she does not appear to be sexualized in any way,

even when Kilgrave tries to sexualize their relationship, she shuts it down. In

fact, despite rape being a prominent topic in the series, no physical act of

rape is shown, eliminating any possibility of the crime to to be sexualized or

titillating. But Goodrum goes further, explaining her view of hypersexuality:

> The fact that many superheroine bodies share common hypersexualized features such as large breasts, long legs, elfin waists and perfect flowing hair, all presented in the skimpiest of costumes, raises the question as to why particular characteristics are chosen over others. Superheroes are also hypersexualized but there seems to be a crucial difference between men and women. The built male body, while sexually objectified, is also a means of conveying power and authority and, while musculature is on display through the tight-fitting costumes of the men, it is not 'on display' in the same way as the bodies of superheroines, who seemingly exist as display first and agent second. Superhero bodies exist as a consequence of what superheroes must do in the narrative; superheroine narratives, to some extent, operate as a means of organizing the body of their protagonist into a series of poses that constructs the narrative. Both bodily representations are motivated by desire and, in the case of the female body, it is a desire for a body that cannot possibly exist outside the pages of the comic book (not that the male bodies on offer are readily available in reality) – and although desire is not necessarily restricted to its heterosexual variant, narratives are constructed in such a way as to encourage heteronormative readings.[22]

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[22] IBID, 103.

Do comics need feminism? Yes, in my view, because it introduces narrative thoughts and ideas from an angle that white straight males typically do not experience. Giving the hypersexualization of females in comics, feminism would help shape a narrative that includes women of all walks of life, starting with these four: Wonder Woman (being the one who's been around the longest), Batgirl (one of the smartest), Harley Quinn (a reformed villain), and Jessica Jones (a reformed hero). These ladies represent the swath of comic book heroines that help with why we need feminism in comic books. Jessica Jones and Batgirl are not as hypersexualized as some other heroines, and while While Wonder Woman and Harley Quinn are sexualized, they do still represent strength and abuse survivor respectively. All four assert their agency in a way that removes them from their hypersexualization. They are not portrayed as masculine characters, but they are portrayed with their agency intact whereas some superheroines do not even have agency and are only seen as objects for the male gaze.

All four ladies work for a group of people: Batgirl with disability, Harley with abuse, Jessica with assault, and Wonder Woman with equality of the sexes, regardless of race, color, creed, or belief. As a cultural sustainability worker, we should strive to be like these women and understand the plight of those we work with when we preserve their culture, their beliefs, and their practices. Wonder Woman wants equality of all people and believes that all cultures are important, regardless of how war-torn or how peaceful. Batgirl

ran for Congress to clean up the justice system. Harley Quinn has empathy

with Black Canary because Harley was pregnant with the Joker's child at one

point, and though she has not done nearly as much heroics as Wonder

Woman, Batgirl, and Jessica Jones, she does know how to help others, much

like cultural workers should. Jessica Jones also has empathy, especially in

the Netflix show returning to her heroic ways at the end of the series.

Cultural sustainability is important in protecting the human race and

the planet and these women strive to practice respect and dignity with

non-superpowered beings and other superpowered beings (with the

exception of Harley Quinn who is still working towards being a hero). We can

learn from all the superheroes in comics, but these four are an important

starting point for critique. Superheroes can teach us so much about

ourselves and how well we treat others through social commentary. For

example, there was a Green Lantern/Green Arrow team-up where the two

went on a road trip to help others and learn about themselves in the

process. This is something that cultural sustainability workers do: they help

others preserve their culture and help others understand why cultural

sustainability is important.

In *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun*

God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human, Grant Morrison asks:

> Could it be that a culture starved of optimistic images of its own
> future has turned to the primary source in search of utopian role
> models? Could the superhero in his cape and skintight suit be
> the best current representation of something we all might
> become, if we allow ourselves to feel worthy of a tomorrow

where our best qualities are strong enough to overcome the destructive impulses that seek to undo the human project?[23]

Grant Morrison wrote this about people who had seen the end of World War II, but it still applies in our lives today. The superhero can be the best representation of what we might become if we overcome the destructive impulses and preserve the culture of people everywhere, instead of just our melting pot culture here in the United States. In addition, superheroes force us to think outside the box and may come up with solutions that might have real world application.

One thing that superheroes were not prepared for was 9/11. But that was good, because nurses, doctors, firemen, policemen, and selfless others, stepped up to the plate to help others in need, like a superhero would. Grant Morrison explains:

> As the events of 9/11 demonstrated, heroes were real human beings doing the right thing for the best reasons. Next to policemen, firemen, doctors, nurses, and selfless civilians, the superheroes were silly, impotent daydreams, and for a moment, they seemed to falter, aghast. They hadn't been prepared for this and had nothing useful to offer. It was, again, the darkness before a triumphant dawn...It would take the superheroes a few more years to sort out their priorities. They would come to realize that they were a different kind of real and best served the needs of the inner world. They would soon grow stronger and more ubiquitous, but for a moment at the end of 2001, they were knocked from the sky and left wounded.[24]

9/11 did not just change us, it changed our heroes. Villains even came together to mourn the dead (though it seemed frightfully out of character for

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[23] Grant Morrison. Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012), xvii.
[24] IBID, 347.

some of them to do so, like Doctor Doom, who has killed people for fun). However, the heroes we needed weren't impervious and ideological. They were real people without powers putting their lives at risk for a greater good.

With the realization of the Marvel Cinematic Universe along with the superhero films that have come before, we see a trend that more audiences go to attend them, learning the life lessons they can to teach us from the movie theatre. Captain America teaches us that "This isn't freedom, this is fear" in *The Winter Soldier* before he takes down SHIELD after finding out that Nazis of HYDRA have infiltrated the organization since he's been in the ice of the Arctic. *Guardians of the Galaxy* teaches us to come together when it's crucial and save the world even if we are "a-holes". Iron Man learns lessons on excess and alcoholism in *Iron Man 3*. The modern mythology of comic books is being made manifest on screen to appeal to all audiences, not just comic book readers and fans.

Jessica Jones was released in a post-9/11 world and the interest in dark, gritty reboots has only gotten stronger in Hollywood since. Black Widow offers a dark past as an assassin whereas Jessica Jones offers showing us hell. Both of these stories speak to millennials because of how they deal with the older generation messing everything up: "you need experience to get a job, but in order to get a job you need experience," prejudices, climate change, etc. The millennials grew up with the most

technologically advanced climate to date and yet, they do not have a lot of money, they cannot afford houses, and they have crippling student debt. Such issues lead to identifying with the Jessica Jones/Black Widow dark reality, even if it is not the same by any stretch.

Superheroes tell us where we've been, what we feared and desired and they speak to who and what we really want to be. Grant Morrison finishes his book with this passage:

> When no one else cared, they took the idea of a superhuman future seriously, embraced it, exalted it, tested it to destruction and back, and found it intact, stronger, more defined, like steel in a refiner's fire. Indestructible. Unstoppable. The superheroes, who were champions of the oppressed when we needed them to be, patriots when we needed them to be, pioneers, rebels, conformists, or rock stars when we needed them to be, are now obligingly battering down the walls between reality and fiction before our very eyes. There's only one way to find out what happens next…[25]

Grant Morrison understands what heroes mean to the world and what they represent in the realm of cultural sustainability, though he did not use those words.

Superheroines in particular try to make the world a better place in addition to fighting against evil. For example, Wonder Woman was a U.N. ambassador for girls in the real world; Batgirl ran for the House of Representatives to reform the prison system in Gotham City in the comics. But as they are not as popular as their male counterparts, we have yet to have a female led superhero movie (until Wonder Woman in June 2017 to

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[25] IBID, 417.

early positive reviews), though women are the stars of plenty of comic series.

In *Our Superheroes, Ourselves,* editor Robin S. Rosenberg explains that good storytelling "allows us to become immersed in someone else's world…and provides us with both an escape and emotional engagement."[26] The same is true of cultural storytelling. Mythology is an impressive collection of storytelling that we know about from various parts of the world: China, United States, Scandinavia, Greece, Japan, Rome, the Middle East, Zulu, Egyptian, and many other places tell these stories to explain their cultural practices. If this is the case, why can't superheroes explain our cultural practices?

Our Superheroes, Ourselves argues "in the real world there are no villains." That may be true, but harming others is rampant in today's world. Whether through killing, assaulting, or even destroying cultural relics, harm comes to many. We need to be the superheroes as cultural workers to help those in need and to take our lead from Wonder Woman, Jessica Jones, Batgirl, and even Harley Quinn and the countless other heroes who give help to the downtrodden and hope to the hopeless. The book goes onto explain that "We must, along with these characters, choose between right and wrong, strength and vulnerability, power and humility, vigilantism and

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[26] Robin S. Rosenberg. "Our Fascination with Superheroes." In <u>Our Superheroes, Ourselves</u>, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 6.

cooperation, as well as between isolation and teamplay."[27] But remember, these superheroes and anti-heroes are flawed characters that carry some elements of villainy within their goodness.

Self-Reflection

I've always been a nerd about things I love in popular culture: superheroes, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, James Bond, anime, *Hamilton*. But one of the most prevalent influences in my life has been superheroes. Not only do they reflect our social issues, they are also fun and colorful. I was drawn to comics as a teenager. I had grown up with *The Spider-Man Animated Series*, *The Batman Animated Series*, *The X-Men Animated Series*, *Sailor Moon*, and *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*: All superheroes in their own right. As a teenager, I saw a lot of my friends reading comics and starting borrowing them and reading them in study hall. If you told me that I would be writing a thesis on superheroes in graduate school, though, I would have told you "Don't be silly, I'm going to be a lawyer."

When I got to college, I started buying my own comics with the money from my gas station job. What drew me to comics, specifically Captain America and Wonder Woman, was that they told stories that were compelling, had a narrative that was easy to follow, and of course, they were great characters. My love of comics would grow into reading *The Long*

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[27] Lawrence C. Rubin. "Are Superheroes Stories Good for Us?." In Our Superheroes, Ourselves, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 49.

Halloween and *The Killing Joke* in the Batman universe, *The Death of Superman*, *Watchmen*, *The Infinity Gauntlet*, *Secret Wars*, *Maximum Carnage*, *Age of Apocalypse*, and *World War Hulk*.

Then I started graduate school and the wheels started turning, though I had no idea that it would turn out like this. I imagined that I would be doing something quite different as my studies at Goucher College made me take a retrospective look at myself, my life, and my work. I initially thought that I would be looking at my depression and pursuing that, but I realized that superheroes help me with my depression. They help me in most aspects of my life.

My process started in my first semester of graduate school when I was taking Introduction to Cultural Sustainability. I was visiting my grandfather and we talked about superheroes. "You're so passionate about them" he said. "You should do what you're passionate about." His favorite superhero was Spider-Man and he loved seeing superhero movies with me, a bonding that we shared. Very few people in my family understand my love of superheroes like my grandfather did. He passed away a few months later and I hung up my proverbial cape, refusing to read comics and watch superhero movies or television, not wanting to be reminded of what I lost.

My grandfather was always about supporting me, no matter how silly the endeavour. If I wanted to be an astronaut, he would encourage me to follow my passions in science. When I wanted to study law, he encouraged

me to check out law books at the library. My grandfather was a hard-working post office man for the first part of my life, then a driving instructor. When he got sick, I thought it would be fine. After all, my mom survived cancer, how would this be any different? The deterioration was hard to watch and was more pronounced for me as I only visited every few months when I wasn't busy in New York City with my various jobs and responsibilities.

Cancer is the worst thing to happen to the people you love. My mother was never the same after her Leukemia and my grandfather got three cancers over the course of his sickness. Cancer strips the strength out of people, but not my grandfather. He was stubborn and made sure that he kept his hardy and good nature until the very end. When he passed away, I called favors in and got to Albany in less than two days. The funeral was hard, especially turning that corner and seeing the open casket. I couldn't make it without crying and slumping to the floor. I actually contemplated leaving graduate school at one point during the burial because I didn't see the point of continuing my education without such a great cheerleader. Importantly, I remembered that I had promised never to see a Spider-Man movie without him for at least a year (which was a promise I indeed have kept for two and a half years, still having not watched *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*).

In Cultural Partnerships, I was struck by the idea that community and harnessing partnerships is important, especially those you foster from the places you least expect. I thought back to what my grandfather said about my passion for superheroes and started to think about what community and superheroes had in common: That they can support a group of people even in the worst of circumstances. Superheroes were there for me, even in my lowest points, helping me with my depression. I resolved to write about them during my tenure at Goucher College.

I could not stay away for long, because I was excited to see Disney's Big Hero 6, a superhero story centered on the main character's loss of his older brother. After all, what better way to honor my grandfather then to follow my passion? I could not think of a better way. I followed my passion throughout graduate school, submitting a paper on Jessica Jones in Visual Methodologies; and when it came time to submit my proposal, I was very nervous. What did cultural sustainability and superheroes have in common? Then it hit me: They are the modern version of mythological storytelling. Why not tell a story with them?

I planned on making a film originally, but with the money I did raise, I got interviews to help tell the story of superheroes. I went to Trina Robbins, someone who worked on Wonder Woman in the 1980s. I interviewed Julie Kerwin, a mother who created IAmElemental action figures. I learned how to explore superhero tropes, break them down for those who do not read comic

books, and explain why superhero stories are important for not just fans, but everyone. Our modern American mythology and here I was analyzing it in website format, explaining why and what each of the four women I covered represent.

One of the places my research took me was to my past. I had been abused like Harley Quinn and assaulted like Jessica Jones. I had found strength to protect my friends through Wonder Woman. While I researched, it had a profound impact on finding myself and starting a new chapter in my life: forgiveness. Those who hurt you teach you things and for years I took the wrong lessons from those people: it was my fault, it was me, not them, they did it because I deserved it. However, the heroes I covered taught me that it was important to forgive those who do wrong, not just because it's the right thing to do and you can move on; but because every person can change, which means every person deserves a second chance. All this I discovered in myself while reading what people thought these characters represented in academia, in popular culture, and in life.

What do Wonder Woman, Jessica Jones, Barbara Gordon, and Harley Quinn mean to me? Through everything, they represent me: Wonder Woman is my strength, Jessica is my nonchalant self-destruction, Barbara is my intelligence and my desire to help others, and Harley… Harley is my forgiveness of self. That it's okay to be in a terrible situation and find your

way out of it, and to find forgiveness in yourself, even if you don't think you deserve it.

When I first approached this project, I named a lot of female figures who were heroes, both real and fictional. I then decided to focus just on the female superheroes as they were under the theme of fictional characters with narratives that can teach us. When the film funding fell through in January, I decided to focus on four characters after some thought on how to proceed. I wrote a very long outline and decided from there to cut some things as I wrote the text for the website.

As for web design, I originally decided on a WordPress platform, but it was not very versatile, so I decided to go with Wix instead. The versatility of Wix has aided me in seeing the bigger picture and understand where things should flow more easily. It was an experience to make the website fit into what I had imagined for these characters and action figures. I learned quite a lot of how to structure a website as well as how to build one from scratch using only an interface to help me. Once I learned to do one page, the rest was just implementing for each individual page.

One of the main problems I ran into was trying to make everything just right, a perfectionist way of doing things. But after feedback from my friends, I decided that the website looked great and was easily navigable for a normal person, so I kept it the way it was. In regards to strengths and weaknesses, the website format is great for small snippets of information

very quickly, as if scrolling up and down one page. But a drawback of that is definitely not being able to go into a great deal of detail for fear of boring the reader. Another strength is that it looks fluid and prettier in overall design compared to a straight paper. I do like the website better than I thought I would, owing to my incredible support team in this process: Barry Dornfeld, Robert Forloney, Chris Willits, Daren Jackson, John Lestrange, Elizabeth Keiser, and Reggie Poulin, Sr. (who was my grandfather).

I learned many skills while working on this project: concise writing, editing quick videos to illustrate points through Adobe Premiere's interface, and learning two new platforms to create websites (WordPress and Wix, with Wix being far more versatile). While researching, I learned about narrative theory and comics theory which I iterate on above.

One thing I hope to accomplish is to become a professional comic book scholar who links different superheroes to core concepts in society, expanding on the four I have done here. I have plans for Captain America (patriotism), Nick Fury (Big Brother is watching you), Superman (What does truth, justice, and the American Way now mean?), and many other characters. Comics contain a vast array of characters, story arcs, and places to write about and it's my hope to not only write books on the subject, but also to have a panel at San Diego Comic Convention with some of the greats of the industry. I also have plans to write on other franchises with hopes of making it to Galactic Convention for *Star Wars*.

Cultural sustainability is more than just environmental preservation or holding onto a culture -- it's also understanding the relevance surrounding popular culture and how we can take that popular culture and apply it to our lives as we live them, how we use characters to teach others and ourselves how to be better. I can't tell you how many times I've said "just like Captain America" or "don't Hulk out", but Wonder Woman, Barbara Gordon, Harley Quinn, and Jessica Jones have taught me how to be a better person and for that I'm grateful.

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