IN FOCUS: Gender Identity and the Superhero

Representation and Diversity in Comics Studies

by Ellen Kirkpatrick and Suzanne Scott

In spring 2011, Bart Beaty broke new ground by editing the first In Focus section of Cinema Journal devoted to comics studies.¹ Beaty curated a thematically important issue, concluding with a roundtable on the state of comics studies—a section befitting a rapidly evolving and expanding field. However, there was a noticeable absence of matters of representation and diversity in the section’s vision of “comics studies” and an equal dismissal of studies of representation in that roundtable. To some extent, this absence is understandable, especially as the primary function of the section was to rationalize and celebrate the study of comics as a distinct media form. Though issues of representation were certainly of concern within comics scholarship and culture at that time, Scott Bukatman identified “representation of” studies as one of the problems “endemic to a young field.”²

In their understandable effort to privilege the “how” of comics, the panelists, however, not only marginalized “scholarly work that tends

to dwell on the ‘what’ of comics”; they also failed to engage “critical intersections between the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of comics, and likewise the ‘who’ (audience) and the ‘why’ (economics/industry demographics).”

This current section is another foray into the world of comics scholarship, but it is a very different entity. It is freer, perhaps, than its predecessor or successors—in that we are not tasked with validating or grounding the field, or revisiting a canonical text. Using the superhero as a critical axis, the essays collected here aim to capture both the transmediated nature of contemporary superheroes and the issues surrounding their bodily (trans)formations and identity. The discussions that follow reveal not only the merits—critical and ontological—of working at such intersections but (much like the malleable superhero body) also the elasticity of contemporary comics studies, with its embrace of inter- and multidisciplinarity, collaboration, and border crossings (such as fan-scholar). Indicating some of the ways in which superheroes can, if given the space, speak beyond themselves and their originating medium, this section discusses aspects of representation through several media forms wherein the superhero has particular cultural force, including movies, games, and transformative fan art, in addition to comics.

As a field of inquiry comics studies is perhaps best considered as a series of interlocking debates rather than as progressing toward a cohering formalist theory. We believe that a valorization of the formal is deleterious, resulting in the construction of (literally “man-made”) boundaries and oppositions (e.g., form/content) and not only the privileging of one field of research over another but also an idea of mutual exclusivity: the notion that fields cannot speak to or inform each other. Greg Smith observed during the 2011 roundtable that, though the participants might have “moved on from those early ideas” concerning representation, it was clear that other scholars had not. Four years on, this section demonstrates why we and many others working within comics studies and its allied spheres—scholars, fans, and commentators—have not yet moved on. There is good reason—we simply cannot afford to. What is for some, in terms of representation and diversity, a “predictable parade of scholarly concerns,” is for others a similarly predictable parade of elisions, evasions, and errors. Ever mindful of the value of formal analysis, this In Focus seeks to promote the merit of engaging with matters of representation and diversity and to establish, at the very least, their equal status with other topics in comics scholarship.

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4 For example, the forthcoming *Cinema Journal* In Focus (in 2017) on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen*, edited by Blair Davis.

5 Film is arguably the dominant contemporary media platform for superheroes, at least in terms of cultural visibility, and accordingly a discussion of gender in superhero films might initially seem to be a conspicuous absence. However, as Charlotte Howell’s contribution to this section on the gendered discourses surrounding superhero(ine) film franchising makes clear, the conversations surrounding these filmic representations are often a richer site of analysis than the representations themselves.


Ellen Kirkpatrick’s essay, “TransFormers: ‘Identity’ Compromised” works in just such a way. Drawing on contemporary identity theories, the essay demonstrates, through close readings, how the transforming superhero is readable as speaking not only to various trans realities but also to the variety of broader, ongoing gender-identity debate(s). Carlen Lavigne also tackles gender identity, but from a representational perspective. In “‘I’m Batman’ (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series,” Lavigne interrogates gender representation within a game environment to reveal how it not only fails to step beyond restrictive gender stereotypes common to games and comics, but actually reinforces them.

Representation, not just with regard to form and content, has been a growing source of contention within comics culture in recent years. Interrogations of superhero representation have expanded to consider whether creator and audience demographics are representative, and which superheroes are privileged or marginalized in media texts and paratextual merchandise as a result. Charlotte Howell’s and Suzanne Scott’s essays both critically analyze moments of focused attention on superheroine representation, reflecting the timeliness of these debates and the transformative potential of fannish appropriation.

Charlotte Howell’s essay, “‘Tricky’ Connotations: Wonder Woman as DC’s Brand Disruptor,” addresses how female fans and comics bloggers wielded language designed to explain the failure to successfully franchise an iconic female superhero into a broader critique of the inherent masculinity of superhero branding. In “The Hawkeye Initiative: Pinning Down Transformative Feminisms in Comic-Book Culture through Superhero Crossplay Fan Art,” Suzanne Scott surveys fan art initiatives designed to expose gender discrepancies in how superheroes are costumed and posed and demonstrates the significance of creating male superhero pinups dressed as their female counterparts.

It is noteworthy that during the editing of this In Focus section, Sony Pictures, Disney/Marvel, and Warner Bros. / DC all committed to stand-alone superheroine franchise films in the coming years, including a Wonder Woman film with a female director slated for 2017. Likewise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s transmedia endeavors expanded to feature their first female protagonist, Agent Carter, in an eight-episode miniseries for ABC (2015). DC Comics and Marvel Comics also marked

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9 Other notable stand-alone superheroine properties in the development pipeline include an as-yet-unnamed female superhero movie tied to the Spider-Man franchise from Sony in 2017 and Disney/Marvel’s Captain Marvel in 2018.
2014 with much-publicized (and decidedly more pragmatic) redesigns of Batgirl and Spider-Woman’s costumes, reflecting that both discursive and textual responses by fans around these issues are having some impact.\textsuperscript{10}

One especially significant announcement, reflecting both the malleability of the superhero identity, and the comics industry’s burgeoning efforts to acknowledge female readers, came in July 2014 when Marvel Comics announced that beginning in October 2014 with the launch of \textit{Thor} #1, a woman would be picking up Thor’s hammer. In a subsequent press release touting Marvel’s “ever-growing and long list of female-centric titles that continues to invite new readers into the Marvel Universe,” \textit{Thor}’s writer, Jason Aaron, emphatically insisted, “This is not She-Thor. This is not Lady Thor. This is not Thorita. This is \textit{THOR}. This is the \textit{THOR} of the Marvel Universe.”\textsuperscript{11} Responding to a letter from a disgruntled male fan in the first issue of \textit{Thor} (2014–), Aaron challenged the common complaint that the female Thor was an “obvious gimmick” as follows:

The hammer of Thor has always come with a certain inscription, one that makes a specific promise. The promise of transformation. That promise was first established by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the pages of \textit{Journey Into Mystery} #83, Thor’s very first appearance. . . . That promise is, without a doubt, a fundamental part of the character’s legacy. This story, the one that begins in this very issue, is the next evolution of that promise.

Mjölnir’s inscription is, notably, gendered: “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor” (emphasis ours). Even though Marvel has decided that a woman is “worthy” of Thor’s mantle, and the current run of \textit{Thor} featuring a female protagonist is outselling its predecessor, until systemic changes are made to reflect a commitment to female creators and fans, their “worthiness” will remain a source of debate within comics culture and comics studies.\textsuperscript{12}

This In Focus taps into some of these contemporary debates, aiming to engage the potential transformative qualities of the superhero and ascertain whether the “promise of transformation” afforded by such characters is being achieved with regard to gender and representation. It concludes with a trans-focused roundtable between three noted comics bloggers, Mey Rude, J. Skyler, and Rachel Stevens. Throughout their discussion they indicate many of the issues facing gender representation and reflect on the highs and lows surrounding trans representations in superhero comics, old and new. It is a much-needed conversation, one that points powerfully to the ambivalence of the industry—and the prejudices of some fans—regarding matters


of diversity and representation. But it also suggests ways stories and characters can be turned around to allow a realistic representation of trans realities, in all their range and diversity, to appear routinely within the many realms of the superhero.

TransFormers: “Identity” Compromised

by Ellen Kirkpatrick

Gender is just one of several intersecting axes by which the concept of identity is contested. Gender talk echoes through everything—critically, culturally, and within popular discourse: from restrooms to boardrooms, classrooms to bedrooms, hospital wards to prison cells. Gender identity is at a “tipping point,” at a threshold in the cultural imagination, moving inexorably toward a moment of sociocultural evolution. And, as at all such moments of social evolution, some are more welcoming of change than others. Trans theories and communities may be at the vanguard of this debate, but it is a conversation within which we are all implicated, even those resistant to or not cognizant of it.

As debates go, it is dynamic rather than coherent, with myriad voices, visions, and realities calling out within analogous, as well as opposing, perspectives.

The following discussion indicates ways in which superheroes speak to aspects of this debate. It does so not to merely narrate the subversive potential of superheroes, or set them up as “good” or “bad” examples, but to show how they coincide with the current zeitgeist. By indicating how normative representations of Western superhero identities


2 Transgender (studies and theory) is widely held to have emerged from the tense interface and theoretical collision of feminism and queer theory characterizing the theoretical landscape of the early 1990s. The term transgender has, since 2010, been challenged by open-ended descriptors such as trans, or the increasingly contested trans*, or trans-. As with trans, trans* denotes a range of gender-identity expressions and positions. Trans* was intended to act as a unifying symbol, one indicating sharedness and inclusivity. It has become a common sight within queer and feminist discourse, and although widely used, it has become contested, with some arguing that it is an unnecessary distraction and creates a false, unrepresentative sense of inclusivity within affected communities. I do not use the asterisk here because I am engaging broader, community matters of identity (rather than personal ones), and because I am in agreement that trans* suggests an unrealized egalitarian and utopian idea of trans communities and the various positions occupied within them.
demonstrate trans and borderland theories, identity expressions, and experiences, I wish to initiate a dialogue between the fictional and the lived, and in so doing broaden out the ways in which we conceive (gender) identity and its representation within the superhero genre. Concentrating on the effect of the (changing) visuality of the body within such debates, my goal is not only to support a rethink of genre protagonists away from simple binaries but also to show how they speak to the range of voices within the gender-identity debate. At the same time, I also indicate how superhero characterizations express the often contentious character of identity theorizing.

Identity is a problematic concept, caught up in notions of binaries. Contemporary identity theory demonstrates the limitations, and naturalizing effect, of binary identity, and offers ways to advance our understanding of “identity” beyond a limiting binary model out toward more pluralistic accounts. Chicana/o feminism, for instance, advocates and offers a more useful, more sophisticated idea of the binariness of identity, one that tests the customary and oppositional posturing of identity as “either/or.” Chicana/o feminism offers such resistance through its conceptualization of the borderland, or mestiza, consciousness. Subjects, in proactively and perhaps provocatively adopting borderland positions, can no longer be accommodated or safely resettled within the binary, and so rankle systemic binary ordering. For if it can be reasoned that identity is a series of similarly phrased authentic identity moves (e.g., citizen to costumed hero to citizen and so on), then borderland thinking, for example, takes the binary system and literally, through constant, repeated circular movement, spins it into something new.

This idea evokes the spinning transformations of the superhero character Diana Prince / Wonder Woman (DC Comics, 1941–). To “spin” is to form something: to spin a thread, tale, or truth. Notably, the famous spinning of Wonder Woman’s transformations originated not within the comic books but instead within the live-action television series *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS, 1975–1979). The transforming spin visualizes the identity moves performed by this character as she transfers through subject positions, from Princess Diana / Diana Prince to the Amazonian Wonder Woman ad infinitum. The concept of the parity of authenticity within these subject moves is central. It is a clear illustration of dynamic subjectivity, of identity in transition.

Through her spinning transitions, this character literally and visually narrates and retells herself; she also literally spins herself new threads, clothes, to match her performances. To spin a tale also suggests the story has an element of the fantastical. In working with such ideas, I am not immediately concerned that subjects move through positions, but rather with the ways their moves transform our ideas of subject positions. I am also interested in gauging the effects of these new, transformed spaces and

3 As with queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz and others, I hold that such oppositional ideas of identity should be considered “exhausted” and that theorizing identity must move beyond such limiting counternarratives in order to better understand the experiences and practices of hybrid or ambiguously sited subjects. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

4 In referring to a borderland, I draw from work within border theory, whereby “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.” Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.
their disruptive force within the theoretical landscape. In the spirit of Judith Butler’s work on drag, I engage identity within the superhero genre not to reveal examples of “subversion” but to destabilize, to denaturalize, the idea of the reality of identity.5

Ideas of “trans” form the linchpin of this discussion, whereby the prefix trans denotes notions of crossing, changing, or transcending—specifically around transitioning, transformation, and transmogrification.6 The superhero genre features all manner of material transformations and yet remains obsessed with rigidly and obviously gendered bodies. Quoting Aaron Taylor on the superbody, Edward Avery-Natale writes:

“The sheer otherness of the superbody—its strange powers, its anatomical exaggerations, its continual reconceptualization—should render these antiquated strategies obsolete.” In other words, the super-body has thus far been able to do anything except transcend the norms of the male/female binary and its exaggerated hegemonic representations.7

This obsession can be seen in matters of genre (e.g., naming practices: Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, ad infinitum) and reception (witness the furor over Marvel’s recasting of Thor as a woman).8 So, Hank McCoy may become Beast, but no matter how fantastical Beast is, he remains indubitably male and/or masculine, in the same way that Jennifer Walters remains female and/or feminine when becoming She-Hulk—and named thus, just in case we were in any doubt! Throughout all their transformations, such characters remain neatly gendered; even mimics, those characters performing full material, often cross-gender transformations (e.g., Mystique, Martian Manhunter), return to an original gender point: “even the shape-shifter ultimately shifts back to a perfected and sexed human form.”9

It is this dogmatic representation of gender identity—so much stability in the face of so much flux—that arouses my curiosity. Within this genre, gender norms and stability are performed and reperformed to such an extent that, through repetition, they become not only ubiquitous and “naturalized” but also, I suggest, unseen, and by being unseen, they become unassailable and untouchable.10 It is engaging this paradox, this failure to really see gender as something fluid, something “trans,” especially when set against otherwise unbounded categorical transformation, that interests me here. I want to explore the nature of such superhero transformations to determine whether, almost in spite of itself, this genre speaks to an idea, a reality, of gender in motion.

6 The distinction between transformation and transmogrification is complex, but for the purposes of this essay, transmogrification can be characterized as a material transformation with grotesque or monstrous results.
10 This to me is analogous to the operations of Dyer’s “assumptions of whiteness” or heterosexuality: briefly, that the ubiquity of whiteness renders it invisible and, until recently with the rise of “whiteness studies,” consequently unacknowledged and uninterrogated. See Richard Dyer, White: Essays on Race and Culture (London: Routledge, 1997).
Superhero identity denotes a range of subjective experiences; it is not limited to one model but is rather a continuum. Out of all possible models, this discussion draws upon two classes of shapeshifter: the mimic (e.g., Mystique, Martian Manhunter) and the “tank” (e.g., Hulk, Beast), and, drawing from trans and borderland discourses, interrogates them to reveal something of the ways such theories and representations speak to one another, and of other ways of being in the world.\(^{11}\)

Shapeshifting occurs when a character’s original material form (visual appearance) alters. Shapeshifting is a multifarious, dynamic practice, and while all shapeshifters possess the power of bodily alteration, not all mimic.\(^{12}\) Some transform into the properties and shapes of other objects and substances (e.g., Metamorpho); some stretch (e.g., Mr. Fantastic); some appear the same but change in size (e.g., Atom); and some, as with tanks, grow in stature and power, often becoming animalistic and thereby unrecognizable as their former selves. The archetypal changeling or mimetic shapeshifters (e.g., Mystique, Martian Manhunter) take costuming to another level, for they transform and refashion their bodies into costumes. As we shall see, they may morph into entirely original beings or transform into representations of existent beings. It is an immersive act, in which the body can be both costume and power.

Trans experiences have been explicitly treated and represented within non-superhero comics and web comics, usually with various degrees of autobiographical detailing.\(^{13}\) The superhero genre speaks to trans theory and subjectivity in several ways. It does so through direct representation, and indirectly through symbolic representation, be that, as discussed here, transitioning subjects (e.g., MtF, FtM), or those claiming liminality, or in-betweenness (e.g., gender fluid, two-spirit).\(^{14}\) When exploring trans representation and identities by way of the superhero genre, the mimetic shapeshifter is, problematically, de rigueur. Such characters are commonly posited as symbolizing trans experiences and realities, often suggesting and overstressing utopian correlations between shapeshifter characterizations and trans representation and identity expressions. Alongside interrogating and undermining such correlations, working with tanks as shapeshifters allows me to draw attention to the ways in which

\(^{11}\) “Tank” refers to characters able to withstand and repel bodily attacks (e.g., ammunition, energy). They tend to grow larger and more physically powerful, and often become more animalistic. See “Characters: Overwatch,” TV Tropes, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Characters/Overwatch; and “Tank,” DC Universe, http://dcuniverseonline.wikia.com/wiki/Tank.

\(^{12}\) Shapeshifting can be permanent or temporary (situational) and voluntary or involuntary. The shapeshifting of Billy Batson / Captain Marvel is temporary and voluntary. For Beast and Thing it is broadly permanent, and they no longer have a choice in the manner of their shape or appearance. For Bruce Banner / Hulk, transmogrification is temporary (situational) and largely involuntary, although Banner, in controlling emotion, could be argued to have something of a modicum of choice (or control).


shapeshifters also speak to the uneasy and painful realities of many members of trans communities. While gender receives much attention (both fan and critical) around aesthetic and representational matters, I suggest there is much to gain by analyzing how such characterizations, and their transformations, speak to the broader process of identity: to the means rather than the ends. So, while sex/gender transitions may not be directly or positively represented or treated within these characterizations, they may yet speak powerfully to such ideas and realities. Reading in this way allows the telling of another tale (“truth”): one that (re)positions these characterizations, and matters of gender within the superhero genre, as revealing a counternarrative, one that connects powerfully to ideas triggering the gender-identity “tipping point.”

But Really—Why the Superhero Genre? Electing to (re)think identity and its relations with the mutable body through the superhero genre is fitting for several reasons, not least because of the predominance of the superhero genre, in whatever medium, as a means through which identity is enculturated.\(^{15}\) Comics may be the homeland of “super” characters, but it is not their only dwelling place. Such characters have long since crossed the border into other media (e.g., games, novels, films, animated series, television series), finding success and securing popularity and increased audience and fan engagement (e.g., convention cosplay and the real-life superhero movement).\(^{16}\)

The superhero genre is renowned for its identity play and for transforming visualities (flesh and fabric). Scott Bukatman describes identity as “the obsessional center of superhero comics,” and Edward Avery-Natale further describes the superhero genre as “obsessed with the embodiment of the characters.”\(^{17}\) While there are innumerable and serious issues concerning gender and its (quality and lack of) representation, there is, I suggest, another avenue of hope for this genre, one found in the way these characterizations routinely speak of the fallibility of binaries and of the possibility of being, becoming, and belonging.\(^{18}\) These ideas tie in powerfully with concerns heralded within the gender-identity debate. Despite everything, identity in

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\(^{15}\) For example, reading the superhero genre as capable of expressing powerful and “under the radar” cultural critiques. Also, the genre’s penchant for masking and costuming, alongside the medium’s form, are suggested as facilitating a high degree of reader participation and character identification. That readers may draw from and identify with these characterizations through medium and genre conventions is significant; perhaps more so is the idea that readers may further recognize and identify with the unstable and in-process modes of identity within which characters are routinely constructed. See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), and McCloud, *Making Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

\(^{16}\) The phrase “real-life superhero” describes citizens who practice social activism or vigilantism by imitating the costuming practices of superheroes and emulating their crime-fighting behavior.


\(^{18}\) For example, the “fridging” of female characters, the often-problematic visualization of female superheroines, and the harassment culture dogging cosplay, to name but a few. See Suzanne Scott, “Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)visibility in Comic Book Culture,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 13 (2013): http://journal .transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/460/384. Suzanne Scott also directly engages the disparity, and its contestation, between male and female superhero representation in her essay in this section, “The Hawkeye Initiative: Pinning Down Transformative Feminisms in Comic-Book Culture through Superhero Crossplay Fan Art.”
the superhero genre is readable as indefinite, malleable, and intimately connected to
the (mutable) visuality of the body, and it is this that ultimately aligns the superhero
genre with broader issues concerning gender identity, as expressed within, for instance,
trans theories and realities.

**Shapeshifters: Masters of Mimicry.** Shapeshifters reveal, alongside an idea of
identity as unfixed, an indication of the central role the visuality of the body plays
within the process of identity.\(^{19}\) They also characterize and represent an idea of
identity as embodied performance, subject to the limitations of visuality available
to the “shapeshifting” body.\(^{20}\) Mimetic shapeshifters can move through all manner
of subject positions: Mystique, for instance, has appeared as men and women, and
as various ages, ethnicities, sexualities, and species. Within our sociocultural system,
subjects, or ideas of subjects, with such potential introduce instability and ambiguity
and demonstrate the fallibility of structuring systems based on binaries and visual
recognition. Mimetic shapeshifters tend to aim to avoid detection and need their
costume-body to “read” as performed, and so to read successfully they transform
quietly and quite perfectly.\(^ {21}\) As a rule, such characters have an original material form
(and gender) from which to transform and to which to return.\(^ {22}\) Their power lies in
the ability to read authentically as another. Yet this is a power of degrees: some will
appear as other; some become other. For those who appear, it is a limited power; they are
simulacra, surface representations, and imitations. Mystique, from Marvel’s X-Verse,
for instance, has among her powers the ability to appear as another: she can look,
sound, and act like those she is mimicking, but she cannot assume their powers (e.g.,
when mimicking her son Nightcrawler, she could not teleport, as he can).\(^ {23}\) Meggan,
another Marvel shapeshifting character, is able to assume the powers as well as the
appearance of those she mimics (e.g., when she transformed into Nightcrawler, she
was able to teleport).\(^ {24}\) For the former type, metamorphosis does not bring with it the

\(^{19}\) Considered one of the more potent, desirable, and useful powers, mimetic shapeshifting usually presents in a positive
light, as an empowering ability. This is, I suggest, in large part because of the control and choice that come with it.

\(^{20}\) Ross Murray draws upon the work of Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, among others, to place the superhero and
its shapeshifter class within a posthuman understanding. In describing the posthuman body Murray notes ideas
around multiplicity and dissolving borders, citing Livingston and Halberstam’s idea of “someness”: “(H)ow many
races, genders, and sexualities are there? Some. How many are you? Some.” See Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston,
*Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9. This too evokes borderland identity: by being
more than one, one is also neither and can thus reside outside binary positioning. Ideas of multiplicity and endless
possibility encapsulate the shapeshifter; remember Martian Manhunter—always at least two and always possibly
more. Murray concludes by noting of Mystique that her “unlimited potentiality threatens everything that is controlled,
stable, and individual: the idea of the human itself.” Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*; Ross Murray,
.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/posthuman-superheroes-part-1-posthuman.html.

\(^{21}\) Although there is usually some barely detectable difference, some “tell-tale” only known and/or seen by the hero,
included for narrative purposes, which enables their ultimate discovery.

\(^{22}\) Mystique has her blue-skinned humanoid form and Skrulls their green, reptilian form. Interestingly, Martian Man-
hunter chooses not to return to his original material form between transformations, “choosing” instead to adopt a
more “acceptable” humanoid form.


powers or abilities of those mimicked. Power does not transfer in this way; theirs is a more subtle transmission, one resting on perception, recognition, and misrecognition. It lies too in granting admittance to people, knowledge and information, places, and/or institutions ordinarily restricted. It allows and enables border crossings. Those who, like Meggan, become share these qualities but also gain access to any powers or abilities held within the mimicked subject. On such occasions, the shapeshifter performs a fuller transformation, a becoming rather than an appearing.

Along with holding binaried theorizing to account, transgender theory also works with ideas of transformation, becoming, and appearing. And in calling for the reappraisal of binaries, it has reawakened and reignited debates around essentialism and identity. Transgender theory is, however, not a homogenous field, and it is anything but univocal in (re)handling gender identity.25 Although predominantly associated with analyzing the effect of sex/gender binarism, transgender theory is now not so limited. As with much recent identity work, transgender theory is awakening to, and progressively adopting, an intersectional stance, understanding that, as Susan Stryker writes, neither “gender nor any of the other suffixes can be understood in isolation” (emphasis added).26 Intersectionality firmly rebuts the additive idea of identity whereby each category exists discretely within a subject and understands identity as made up of the dynamic interconnectedness of all categories, in which each contributes to and affects the condition of the others and the whole.27 Stuart Hall also writes of identities as “fragmented; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” and further conceptualizes this continuous process as a “suturing” and “articulation” between external and internal forces or relations.28 Such forces refer to the articulation of subjectivity through its anatomical dimension, a reading of and dialoguing with the visuality of the body. The visuality of the body is, however, a mutable, and therefore unreliable, site of identity performance, and as such it suffers moments of slippage and disjunction. The tank class of shapeshifters is powerfully evocative of such moments, and these shapeshifters are of added interest because of the idea of transformation within limits. Although members of this class enact dramatic transmogrifications, gaining mass and stature, their original material form, I suggest, ultimately delimits the nature of their transformation.

**Troublesome Tanks.** The shapeshifting performed by tanks is not as neat or discrete as within mimetic acts, but it similarly threatens systemic stability and control: it too

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25 Some, for instance, stress, and thereby reinforce, gender identity, while others subvert and disavow it. Not all trans experiences are equal in terms of ease and pain, and yet all these divergent theories and realities find place and voice under the trans umbrella.


is a troubling and troublesome power. The body again acts as costume and power. Power here equates primarily with physical strength as opposed to the sociocultural power available within mimetic shifting, and it is generated, or let loose, through the release of emotional control. The body is again a site of changing visuality, but it involves the supersizing, superpowering, of a subject rather than a smooth transition into other subject positions.

The consequences of such visible transmogrification are broad and wide-ranging: for instance, while increasing power in one way (physical), it can reduce it in other ways (e.g., socioculturally). Characters can thus occupy the strange position of being more powerful and yet less empowered (sociocultural). Transformation, for instance, endows Ben Grimm with increased physical power, stamina, and endurance, and yet this empowerment moves him from a socially powerful position (recognizably white, male, named Ben Grimm) to a feared, marginalized position (as an indefinable, monstrous other, named Thing). These characters may be heroes or villains, but all are prone to issues relating to power (emotional and physical), especially around its control and release. Anger and fear are their drivers. Even hero tanks, who are usually framed more positively, demonstrate pessimistic tendencies and negativity toward their power and their ability to control it. Characters are fearful of the consequences of their new, often undesired visuality and (physical) power. The troubled trials of Thing in adjusting to his permanent, unsought, and unwanted transmogrification are well known. Colossus, too, is uncomfortable with his unsolicited ability and typically has to be cajoled into accessing it. The angst-ridden saga of the tormented Bruce Banner also does not present transmogrification as something particularly liberating and welcome. With this great power comes great trouble.

Transmogrification, then, is not just a source of power but also vulnerability, leaving characters, to varying degrees, feared and excluded. Whereas mimetic shifting allows the character to transform quietly without trouble, the latter can only smash noisily through, demolishing the human form, rendering it “other.” Such transmogrifications, while extreme, are not limitless and occur only within borders set by the original form and gendering; they must work with the material they have. Interpreting them thus permits us to read them as possibly incomplete and imperfect.

Significantly, unlike permanently altered tanks (e.g., Beast, Thing), situational ones (e.g., Hulk, Colossus) possess the ability to move between subject positions. Transformation from tank to originating subject fully transits the originating subject back to a readable, classifiable subject position. Permanently altered tanks possess no such ability and so in systemic terms become a permanently visible, fearsome “other.” Transmogrification, unlike transformation, does not offer the opportunity to blend or assimilate, and while this may or may not be desired, such characters are rendered visibly different, “other,” and routinely suffer the consequences of such “othering.”

29 However, some small degree of recognition (e.g., facial) is usual.
30 Transformation may only occur once, leaving characters permanently altered (e.g., Thing, Beast) or it may be recurrent, situational, and temporary (e.g., Hulk, Colossus). It may be acquired or innate, welcome or unwelcome.
Such characterizations provide powerful insights into the conditions subjects are susceptible to when living with internal and external conflict. They are particularly evocative of the consequences of misreading subjectivity against visuality, where visuality sets up an expectation of subjectivity that is not, and cannot, be met; Thing and Beast regularly despair of just such disparity. Thing particularly seems to voice the concerns of one “stuck” within an unrecognized materiality, a “freak” and monstrous body, one far from his perception of self.

Such interpretation permits the reading of these characters as emblematic of painful subject moves and transitions, of a more conflicted idea of the subject in process, one where transforming subjects desire to claim an identity, and desire to transit from one fixable position to another, but where this ability is, by the limits of their originating material form, denied them. Performance and visuality, both internal and external, must correspond to secure a coherent reading. Subjects desiring to occupy another subject position, especially those limited by their original material form, may find their transformations bounded and thus too may fail to secure their desired “reading.” The visuality of their body may not correspond with their idea, performance, of self. It may be that moving into another subject position, without a corresponding visuality, while empowering, is not enough. It leaves such subjects visibly different, as “other” within bodies that are feared and vulnerable, within a system that, in turn, recognizes only either/or. Compared to mimetic acts, such conflicted transformations are troubled and pained.

Limitless transformation may be a means to inclusion, but limited transformation (transmogrification) can foster exclusion. Such “othering” transformations leave such characterizations, in terms of sociocultural power, weakened, vulnerable, and highly susceptible to social exclusion. Permanently altered tanks manage and control every aspect of their subjectivity from their appearance (e.g., Thing’s hat and trench coat) to their inner drives and desires. They seem to be in a continual battle to remedy a mismatch, to demonstrate they are not the uncontrolled “monsters” their “freak” bodies make them out to be. Such tanks occupy a precarious position, as they know the inclusion they are afforded is conditional; one slip, one uncontrolled moment, and it will be lost. Their position is tolerated, rather than accepted.

Furthermore, the degree of social acceptance received is relatable to the extent of control exerted and maintained. Thing, Beast, and Colossus demonstrate great self-control and thus, while still evoking degrees of negativity, are, with provisos, accepted and included. Bruce Banner aims for this but habitually falls short and becomes socially remote because of his lack of control, and Hulk, at the other end of the spectrum, demonstrates no such control and receives no such acceptance—not that he minds, of course. Such characterizations read easily, yet powerfully, of the precarious conditions of subjectivity lived within uncontrollable bodies and the struggles and strategies deployed to alleviate such disjunctions.

This discussion reveals the superhero genre as, quite uniquely, expressing something of the myriad ways of (re)handling identity. Identity is currently predicated upon an either/or binarism, one politically and hierarchically motivated. It is a dangerous system for those unable or unwilling to press themselves into one or the other position. The superhero genre customarily demonstrates the experiences and consequences of
subjects who try, with varying success, to fit within and/or negotiate binary identity. Within it identity is readable as plural and mutable; borders of all kinds are under constant stress and threat of rupture, whether formal or creative, in terms of character or narrative.

The identity theories touched upon here offer opportunities to enter into newly imagined old debates, each of which offers its own idiosyncratic way of negotiating and interrogating the knotty idea of identity, and these approaches are reflected within the superhero genre. Theorizing fictional depictions of identity alongside similar material examples has exposed how the superhero genre speaks, or rather, shouts to us about the state of contemporary identity theory, particularly trans and border discourses. These characterizations express something of our experiences in identity, visually and viscerally telling us of an idea of identity as accommodating, not segregating; as mutable and plural rather than fixed and binary. Like them, we live in a world of hybrid and nonunitary subjectivity, straddling boundaries and subject positions, and residing within gaps and elisions.

So while it is true that on the surface these characterizations remain within a fixed, binary understanding of gender identity, analysis of the nature (and representation) of their transformations can lead to another reading, one that contradicts notions of surface rigidity in favor of more layered understandings.

“I’m Batman” (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series

by CARLEN LAVIGNE

The overlap between superheroes and games is not new. Superhero comics and films have provided frequent source material for video games over the past thirty years, resulting in a long list of cross-media titles such as Spider-Man (Parker Bros., 1982), Captain America and the Avengers (Data East, 1991), and Lego Batman (Feral Interactive, 2008). But the transformative potentials of both mainstream comics and video games have historically been limited, as they have been targeted primarily and even exclusively toward straight, white, male audiences.¹ Mainstream superhero texts have generally

conformed to strict gender stereotypes, presenting men as hypermasculine authority figures (“strong, powerful, aggressive and usually anti-social”) and women as cleavage-baring sex objects “generally located in patriarchal sites of power struggles and violence.”

Mainstream video games have been no more progressive; they are primarily created by men for men, their violence-prone action heroes and half-clothed damsels in distress still reflecting “offline gender inequalities.” In comics, we have recently seen criticism of Starfire’s emotionless sexual promiscuity, Catwoman’s objectification, and Spider-Woman’s anatomically improbable posterior. In games, we have everything from hypersexualized female characters in World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004–) or Lollipop Chainsaw (Kadokawa Shoten, 2012) to the 2014 Gamergate controversy, which saw several female developers and media critics driven from their homes by rape and death threats. Both industries have a masculine focus that has been exemplified by repetitively misogynist texts.

Despite the majority of previous media products from mainstream companies like Marvel or DC, though, a comic-book superhero is limited only by imagination and ink; it could be a culturally subversive figure with multiple limbs, any body type, any skin color, any ability—it could be any gender or sex. Recent mass-market forays into inclusivity have included a female Captain Marvel and a female Thor; likewise, independent comics like the Batgirl-inspired My So-Called Secret Identity have worked to break down gender stereotypes. And there is significant overlap between the potentially gender-flexible characters in our comics and the potentially perspective-challenging interactivity of our gaming media. Gaming begins with a similar potential for infinitely varied worlds and avatars, then adds an element of engagement that makes superhero characters “inhabitable” by the player. Game elements such as avatar personalization, character interaction, and combat sequences generally require player participation in order to proceed; this give-and-take opens a range of identity play. A video game’s ability to let players “experience” different genders, races, sexualities, ages, or body types, even within strict technological constraints, may potentially lead

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2 Marsh, “But I Want to Fly Too!,” 211.
to greater understandings among individuals occupying different social spaces.\(^8\) *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011) is one example of a mainstream game with a nonsexualized female lead, and Bioware has been notable for allowing player flexibility in terms of the gender, race, and sexuality of avatars in *Dragon Age* (2009, 2011, 2014) and *Mass Effect* (2007, 2010, 2012); other stereotypes about sexuality and gender are challenged in independent works like *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013) and *A Closed World* (Singapore–MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, 2011).

Of course, games may also actively reinforce preconceptions about gender, sexuality, race, or class by restricting user choices, distorting user experiences, and “perpetuat[ing] the most uniform and unsubtle sex role stereotypes”—and the combination of superheroes and video games has so far proven predominantly conservative.\(^9\) One recent commercially successful superhero game franchise has been the *Batman: Arkham* series (Rocksteady, 2009, 2011, 2013).\(^10\) Its second installment, *Arkham City* (2011), suggests the possibility of subversive gender play by allowing the player to alternate between the onscreen avatars of Batman and Catwoman; however, the game fails to challenge existing binaries. This essay is intended primarily as a case study; a close reading of *Arkham City* demonstrates how a superhero game may resist its own archetype-bending potential by allowing only restrictive, heteronormative gender performances. While superhero comics and video games may be independently making small motions toward gender inclusiveness, their combination may also squander the radical possibilities of both media.

**Batman.** There have been many iterations of Batman since the character’s inception in *Detective Comics* in 1939.\(^11\) The Batman of *Arkham City* is the brooding, “dark” superhero popularized by more recent comic books such as Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and films like Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) and Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* (2005); he is typical of the Batman mythos in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.\(^12\) *Arkham City* is not replicating any particular comic or film version of the character but rather the most current cultural concept of “Batman.” This Batman is violent and stoic, “a muscle-bound tough guy with a flowing cape”; he soars above Gotham ready to swoop down on villains with a glide kick, an array of punches, or an assortment of weaponry.\(^13\) He will occasionally aid men such as the officers of the Gotham City Police Department, but he spends much of the game

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10 The first three installments are *Arkham Asylum*, *Arkham City*, and *Arkham Origins*; a fourth, *Arkham Knight*, has been announced and is in production for 2015.

11 *Detective*, no. 27, May 1939.


rescuing a series of women in peril: Catwoman, Dr. Stacy Baker, nurse Fiona Wilson, Talia al Ghul (twice), Vicki Vale, and optionally, Nora Fries. Of the nine named women in the game, seven may share screen time with Batman, and six of those need rescuing; their “female vulnerability” justifies his male violence against equally male threats.¹⁴ This damsel-in-distress trope is common both to games and to superhero narratives in which “roles of gendered power are often acted out in the scenario of the endangered, submissive woman being rescued by the super-powered man.”¹⁵

Arkham City advances heteronormative, hypergendered stereotypes, and the most obvious marker of this is Batman. The player cannot change Batman’s muscular physique or growling tough-guy dialogue, nor is it possible to change the story arc (apart from skipping minor side missions or dying during gameplay).¹⁶ A more role-play-oriented style of game might allow a player to select different conversation options or actions (greet the Commissioner or remain broodingly silent? punch the Penguin or no?); however, in this case, controls are limited to guiding Batman’s movements from place to place or choosing specific combat tactics (attack, dodge, counter) as he punches his way to victory. The player thus inevitably interacts with and through Batman as the hyperpowered, emotionless avatar of vigilante justice, rescuing a lineup of victims that includes almost every woman he encounters; this is the primary representation of heroic masculinity in the game. If mainstream games have tended to advance “societal expectations relating to the male gender role: the myth of the male as a strong, stoic, self-sufficient figure,” then Arkham City’s Batman conforms to expectation; there is nothing new here.¹⁷

Catwoman. Catwoman is available as a player character for four missions in the main game story; this is substantially less playing time than Batman, but she does constitute a second identity that the player may inhabit over the course of Arkham City.¹⁸ Like the Batman gameplay, however, any time spent as Catwoman is eminently predictable. She is immediately established as both a victim and a sex object; captured by the villainous Two-Face, she purrs, “I’m sorry I’ve been a bad kitty. Untie me and I’ll make it up to you.” In contrast to Batman’s powerful build, Catwoman (like every woman in the game) is slender and large breasted, and if an iconic costume is a “direct statement

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¹⁴ Carol Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies’: Sexism and Superheroes,” Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 6, no. 1 (2009): 86–92, 87. The exceptions to the “rescue list” are Harley Quinn (villain), Poison Ivy (villain who does not share any scenes with Batman), and Oracle (disembodied voice, no scenes with Batman).


¹⁶ The fact that the player has little agency in influencing either Batman’s character or the game’s story line is not inherently negative; expanding player choice within a game is one design option but offers no guarantee that players would bother to use such choice, and locking in one particular character or narrative may alternatively require a player to engage with a point of view they might not normally encounter. See Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke, and Katharina-Maria Behr, “Creating Virtual Alter-Egos or Superheroines? Gamers’ Strategies of Avatar Creation in Terms of Gender and Sex,” International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations 1, no. 2 (2009): 52–76.


of the identity of the character,” then it must be noted that she wears a form-fitting black catsuit that is perennially half-unzipped. Also unlike Batman, she has no cape, meaning that the player has an unfettered view of her buttocks and swaying hips as she slinks her way across the city. She is the only named female character in the game to directly participate in combat rather than fighting through proxies, and the player can control her tactics; however, she fights in high heels, using a dominatrix whip or strangling men with her thighs, and in one of her combat animations, she kisses her opponent before slamming his (always “his”) head into the ground.

At the end of her third mission, Catwoman must rescue Batman, but she performs this rescue off-screen. The player’s only actions are to press a button (on the Playstation 3, an “X”) and then walk Catwoman through an unoccupied section of sewer. The animation then cuts to the moment when, having presumably fought her way through a sea of evildoers, Catwoman helps Batman escape the barrier that pins him. The player-as-Batman must navigate at least one combat and strategy sequence when saving a victim, but Catwoman’s successful rescue of the male hero occurs with minimal player interaction or observation. If the most “crucial relationship” in any game is between player and avatar—“a spectatorial/participatory relationship with on-screen traces of self”—then Catwoman’s off-screen adventures directly undermine any potential opportunity for the player to use the game avatar to “toy with subjectivity” or “play with being”; in Arkham City it is not possible to act as either Batman in his moment of weakness or Catwoman in her moment of strength. Any subversion of typical gender power dynamics is thus denied.

Catwoman also exists in a world full of rape threats and sexist slurs that are never directed at Batman. The goon commentary is nearly constant: “Bitch”; “I like the outfit, Cat—take it off!”; “It’s that bitch, Catwoman!” She can overhear exchanges about herself: “I heard she plays both sides,” “I bet she does,” “No, not like that,” “I can dream, can’t I?”

Catwoman is, additionally, sexually objectified for the player via her costume, her animations, and the camera angles that pan across her body. When Batman slides under a low door, he does so on his side. When Catwoman performs the same action, she does so on her back, providing the player with a view straight down her cleavage.

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21 If the player chooses not to press “X”—if Catwoman doesn’t save Batman—the game fades to ending credits and a series of voice-overs that suggest Batman has died. The game then cycles back to the moment at which the player is prompted to press “X.”
22 Rehak, “Playing at Being.”
23 For an illustrative supercut, see Duane de Four, Arkham City—Catwoman, January 19, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADOk3K_lo-Y.
24 Heteronormativity can apparently be challenged if for the purposes of straight male pleasure.
If the player-as-Batman performs the aggressive, powerful hypermasculine, then the player-as-Catwoman performs a version of hyperfemininity that invites, even seemingly demands, sexual objectification. Like Batman, this Catwoman is not based in any particular comic or film iteration, although her tight, revealing costume resembles her current controversial outfit in DC’s New 52.26 This oversexed Catwoman also has a long history in previous “gritty” texts: Miller’s version, for example, was a former prostitute forced by her pimp to dress in costume.27 The Arkham version shares the faux feminism of the Catwoman from Burton’s Batman Returns, an aggressive and sexually suggestive reaction to a sexism that her gender performance embraces even as her violent actions purport to resist it.28 Between Batman and Catwoman, Arkham City does not provide nuanced explorations of gender roles but instead promotes binary stereotypes that emotionally restrict men and sexually denigrate women.29

Nonplayer Characters. Arkham City also establishes rigid gender roles via the nonplayer characters (NPCs) whom the player may interact with in the game. Notably, the city is populated almost entirely by men. This is doubtless in part because of Rocksteady’s attempts to save on costs. While specific characters like Talia al Ghul, Poison Ivy, and Joker are based in the comics canon, only a limited number of generic character skeletons, animations, and background dialogue lines are otherwise created, which means that the same goons appear over and over again, each time voicing the same insults and standing ready to be taken down by a series of well-placed punches.30 Arkham City’s game world privileges the masculine simply by exclusion; all of the generic unnamed henchmen and police officers are male, as the same figures and voices are used repetitively. These characters constitute the main population of the city; as Batman and Catwoman stalk Arkham’s skyline, they overhear police emergencies and conversations between bored henchmen. Batman may overhear two goons casually discussing whether or not a woman was raped: “She was dragged off an ice cream truck by Tom and Harry,” “Those two? Did they . . . you know?” “No. Well, I don’t think so,” “Makes a change.” The city is presumably not safe for women, but these same women are primarily absent, their vulnerability defined by powerful, aggressive men.

29 Anne-Marie Schleiner has suggested that even highly sexualized female avatars such as Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft may still hold potential for male gamers: “Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of Tomb Raider players to experiment with ‘wearing’ a feminine identity, echoing the phenomenon of gender crossing in Internet chat rooms and MUDs.” While this optimistic view may have merit, I’m not convinced that such a hyperfeminine identity contributes much of value toward changing player notions of culturally ingrained gender stereotypes. Anne-Marie Schleiner, “Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games,” Leonardo 34, no. 3 (2001): 221–226, 223.
The only exceptions to the uniformly male NPC “extras”—and the only women apart from Catwoman to participate in combat during the game—are the all-female assassins of the Legion of Doom. Like the gang members who follow Joker or Two-Face, these assassins are constructed on a single body model and are all costumed identically, creating a uniformly female force. But their leader is a man: Ra’s al Ghul, who occupies a literally patriarchal position in the game. One of his primary goals is to recruit Batman as a husband for his daughter Talia, so that Batman and Talia together can lead the Legion to cleanse the world of evil. It is not clear exactly why Talia is incapable of doing this by herself.

There are a multitude of other sexist scenarios involving named female NPCs: when Batman tells Vicki Vale to “stay there and be quiet,” when Poison Ivy’s bikini-cut underwear is made entirely of leaves, when Oracle is apparently jealous of Talia and constantly worries about Batman’s health and well-being. While some examples—like Poison Ivy’s fashion choices and Ra’s al Ghul’s ambitions for his daughter’s marriage—are also endemic to the comics canon, the game does not challenge these and instead replicates or exacerbates the comic franchise’s sexism. Talia al Ghul and Nora Fries are both “fridged”—a term common in contemporary pop-culture criticism but particularly located in comics, denoting a woman who is killed as a plot point in a male character’s central story. Indeed, Nora is literally fridged, and her cryogenically frozen corpse is even subject to goon assault: “So who gets to keep the ice cube?” “I want her. It’s my turn.” Finding her body is an optional side quest for Batman, who then earns the game trophy “Bargaining Chip”—even outside the narrative, Nora is only a reward object for the player. Her voiceless plight represents some of the worst gendering of the game.

Finally, supposed supervillain Harley Quinn is another female NPC who does not fight; rather, she orders Joker’s gang members around, all while fretting over the declining health of her dear poisoned “Mr. J.” As Batman notes, “Quinn’s only priority is to protect Joker.” She is a victim of physical and emotional abuse who is referred to by her henchmen as a “crazy bitch.” In her absence, Batman may overhear a goon making fun of her: (in falsetto) “Oh, Mr. J! Please hurt me some more!” Interactions with Harley are limited; when Batman finds her tied up toward the game’s end, the player only has the choice between removing or replacing the duct tape over her mouth (a choice that has no impact on the outcome of the game—although if Batman removes the tape multiple times, Harley complains, “If you don’t stop doing that, I’m gonna tell Mr. J!”). Harley survives the game as the potential carrier of the now-dead Joker’s legacy; the player-as-Batman may discover her positive pregnancy test while exploring Joker’s steel mill, and she sings “Hush Little Baby” during the end credits.32

31 Gail Simone, Women in Refrigerators (1999), http://lby3.com/wir/. Ultimately, Batman’s supposed romantic and sexual attachment to Talia (she refers to “that night we spent in Metropolis”) mainly serves to disallow the homoeroticism inherent in his yin-yang relationship with the Joker. When Joker asks Batman to admit it (“you’ve always wanted a little me in you”) or croons the lyrics to “Only You” during the closing credits sequence, the player can rest secure in the knowledge that Batman wants Talia, and that she is (as Ra’s al Ghul asserts) “the only person [Batman has] ever loved.” Joker’s flirtations are thus rendered perverse and a mark of criminal insanity.

32 In the optional download quest “Harley Quinn’s Revenge,” a scattering of negative tests belies this, making Harley’s potential pregnancy (and presumed level of sexual activity) fodder for player speculation.
Further, in the downloadable sequel quest “Harley Quinn’s Revenge,” Harley becomes a “madwoman” in the wake of Joker’s death, her grieving hysterics contrasted with the stoic silence that Batman demonstrates in dealing with his (possible) emotions about the game’s end. She exhibits the most overemotional elements of the hyperfeminine stereotype—a shrieking, needy bossiness categorized as part and parcel of clinical, murderous insanity.

**Conclusion.** Kuljit Brar has noted that “the majority of contemporary video games have very narrow and very definite ideas of femininity. This preponderance of games, which are male-only or degrading toward women, creates a tone for the industry that is unwelcoming and damaging towards female gamers.” Of course such sexist trends have been endemic to comics as well: “we can imagine that men can fly, but not that women can and should be able to protect themselves.” *Arkham City* holds to the most regrettable gender tropes of both industries. Gameplay as Catwoman provides only an exaggeratedly gendered counterpoint to Batman’s hypermasculinity; as a woman, the player slinks and flirts, while as a man, the player punches and growls. Surrounding NPCs reinforce these artificial binaries, as the few women who do appear in *Arkham City* are highly sexualized and frequently helpless. Batman may save some men, but he must save almost all of the women—and, except for one Catwoman-press of the “X” button, it’s always Batman who does the saving. The result is a skewed portrayal of gender identities that promotes only tired stereotypes of aggressive and emotionless action heroes, helpless damsels, and sexpot action women. The game is also heteronormative and overwhelmingly white—and it is only one in a long line of similar popular texts that may be both alienating marginalized audiences and skewing player attitudes about gender, race, sexuality, and class.

Superheroes have the potential to be progressive cultural influences. They form the basis of many of our modern mythological archetypes; they are recognized by millions, and they are in theory confined only by the limits of creative visualization. Video games are likewise both culturally pervasive—“no longer a recreational activity but part of what it means to be an active participant in modern society”—and potentially subversive; their interactivity allows players to explore (in admittedly limited fashion) a multitude of virtual identities. But female gamers continue to play “from a

34 Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies.’”
35 The exceptions are Harley Quinn (villain), Oracle (a voice, not appearing on-screen), and Poison Ivy (a villain who does not appear in the same scenes as Batman).
38 Quote is from Michael Heron, “Inaccessible through Oversight: The Need for Inclusive Game Design,” *Computer Games Journal* (2012): 29–38, 29; for criticism of virtual identity play as a fantasy of liberal white males, see Rosi
(produced, assumed) position of exclusion,” and they are not well served by games that only reproduce hegemonic gender tropes—nor does a narrow focus on exaggerated and repressive binaries challenge male stereotypes or include genderqueer players. Superhero games such as *Arkham City* are decidedly conservative, reflecting both the “collective poverty of the imagination” that has characterized gender (and race, and sexuality, and so on) conventions perpetuated by mainstream superheroes, and the straight-white-male focus of many mass-market games. Moreover, by catering to sexist stereotypes, the comics industry only solidifies its reputation for being “no girls allowed.” And “by specifically targeting male gamers, the gaming industry . . . ignores the potential its technology has in closing the gender gap.”

Batman—at least, this version of Batman—is not changing the tone of the conversation; he may rescue twenty, thirty, or fifty damsels, but in doing so, he is not helping anyone.

“Tricky” Connotations: Wonder Woman as DC’s Brand Disruptor

by Charlotte E. Howell

If you frequented or followed certain “geek girl” blogs like *The Mary Sue* and the popular Tumblr *DC Women Kicking Ass* in 2013, you might believe that “tricky” was an adjective frequently used by producers and executives at DC Entertainment to describe Wonder Woman (and only Wonder Woman). In context on these websites, the word became a weapon, turning perceived sexist language into an indicator of atavistic business thinking regarding the capitalization of geek culture. Fans use “tricky” to scold an entertainment industry that describes Wonder Woman as tricky because they believe that geeks are mostly young, white men, even as research indicates women account
for “30 to 45 percent, depending on what metrics are used.”¹ Because of this male-skewed thinking, comics-based franchises are marketed around this industrial construction of their audience, which creates barriers to producing female-led superhero franchises like Wonder Woman.

Regarding franchising, Derek Johnson argues, “Gender anchors cultural negotiations over what franchising is and how we might value those serial production practices and serial narratives defined as franchising.”² As female-friendly online spaces with a focus on the supposedly “masculine” realms of geek culture and comic books, these websites disrupt the primary gendering of superhero franchises as by and for men. The idea of Wonder Woman being “tricky” was seen in these female-supportive sites as part of the male-focused thinking that was one of DC’s many public relations and business model problems. In “Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)visibility in Comic Book Culture,” Suzanne Scott points to sites like these as a reaction to the pervasive perception that “comic book culture is male defined . . . [and that perception] has permeated both the collective consumer consciousness and the spaces in which those [consumer] exchanges take place.”³ Thus, these sites can be seen as a subculture within the increasingly prominent comic book–cum-geek culture. They offer prime spaces in which we can see the struggle over the signifier “tricky”: spaces in which the “geek girls” (and Wonder Woman fans of all genders) steal the term and make it carry, as Dick Hebdige writes, “‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination.”⁴ On these websites and in other spaces in which Wonder Woman adaptations are publicly discussed, “tricky” gains secret meanings for those who resist the normalized notion that the target superhero audience is comprised of teenage boys who would automatically resist female heroes.

From 2013 to the present, “tricky” has carried connotations of DC’s failures and sexism as a result of this resistant discursive turn. But “tricky” itself, as a term, has a longer history as part of comic-book adaptation discourse. The adjective was used by a DC executive during the development of Watchmen (Zack Snyder, 2009) to describe the history attached to comic-book characters generally, and “tricky” appears in the trade press to describe negotiating fan expectations several more times in the ensuing few years.⁵ In general, it was used to describe the costuming and aesthetic challenges

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involved in translating an illustrated medium to live action; the look and its close connection to the character’s brand was key.

In today’s franchise-heavy media climate, the power of a marketable character is significant. However, DC’s approach to Wonder Woman is more about intellectual property to be branded and marketed than about character. As such, industrial expectations appear to focus more on the former with an intended audience of (male) comic-book fans instead of Wonder Woman fans, who are constructed as more feminine and feminist on the basis of how and where potential Wonder Woman pilots were developed between 2010 and 2013: one as a superheroic *Ally McBeal* by David E. Kelley for NBC and another for the female-skewing CW network. Before it becomes attached to Wonder Woman media projects, the term “tricky” most often appears as a general catchall and is used only a few times regarding Wonder Woman specifically. It is the Wonder Woman fans who weaponized the term through repetition, sarcasm, and contrast, using it to throw DC’s business failings—particularly when compared to Marvel’s Cinematic Universe—back in the face of the executives at Warner Bros. and its superhero subsidy.

It makes sense that this challenge to the status quo centers on Wonder Woman. She is the oldest major female superhero, one of the most beloved comic-book characters, and feminism is central to her character and brand, from her origins to her ongoing stories. As Jason Bainbridge argues, “The way the DC and Marvel superheroes were originally structured and conceived continues to inform their responses to real-world issues.”6 For Wonder Woman, this means that she is inherently disruptive to masculine superhero franchise branding because, according to her creator William Moulton Marston, she was intended to be “psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, [he] believe[d], should rule the world.”7 As Jill Lepore argues in *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Wonder Woman was indebted to “bohemianism, socialism, free love, androgyny, sex radicalism, and feminism.”8 Overall, a pretty tough sell to an industry trying to make billions of dollars on a superhero movie. Moreover, in the 1970s, she became for many the face of the second-wave feminist movement, appearing on the inaugural cover in July 1972 of *Ms.* magazine and used as a key symbol in feminist debates.9 It’s perhaps not coincidental that the only live-action adaptation of *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS, 1975–1979) appeared on television during feminism’s cultural prominence in the 1970s. Thus, franchise branding of Wonder Woman often seeks to minimize that which makes her character unique: her close ties to feminism, which are seen industrially as unmarketable, especially to male superhero fans.

The moment of fan resistance under study here, in the summer of 2013, followed two years of intensified fan scrutiny around Wonder Woman as an intellectual property that DC was failing to utilize. News of potential Wonder Woman adaptations cycled

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9 Ibid., 286–290.
through the press a few times before 2011—most notably when Joss Whedon wrote a script for a live-action Wonder Woman film in 2005. However, 2011’s *Wonder Woman* television pilot was the first live-action version since Lynda Carter that made it to filming. The pilot was developed for NBC by David E. Kelley, who later admitted that he had “a lot to learn” about the superhero genre, and was plagued by leaks of the script and releases of images well ahead of the pilot’s completion. The most damning leaked material was a full script that was then mercilessly picked apart by blogs and news sites. In an article on the *Daily Beast*, TV critic Jace Lacob wrote:

> The Daily Beast has obtained a copy of Kelley’s draft of the *Wonder Woman* pilot script, dated December 16, 2010—and it’s laughably bizarre. In Kelley’s vision, Wonder Woman is presented as a weepy career woman-slash-superheroine with three identities (Wonder Woman; Diana Themyscira, the chairman of Themyscira Industries; and mousy assistant Diana Prince) to juggle. . . . The result is a *Wonder Woman* who is more like Kelley’s *Ally McBeal* than the feminist superhero who stands side-by-side with her fellow DC icons Superman and Batman.

The script itself includes a number of scenes that are ludicrous, but Lacob closed his analysis of the script with a final scene that becomes the key point of criticism. He wrote:

> Diana and Myndi [her press secretary] have a “sleepover,” complete with ice cream (“it’s been a three-scoop day”) as they watch Katy Perry’s sexually suggestive Wonder Woman homage music video and “scream like schoolgirls.” Later, Diana glimpses her original costume in the closet (the Lynda Carter one!) and sadly stares at a picture of herself and Steve in happier times, before crying herself to sleep. . . . It is another monumental misstep by Kelley, as well as a complete disconnect with the legacy and strength of this enduring character.

Lacob repeatedly couches his criticism of the pilot within the cultural history of Wonder Woman as a character and an intellectual property. In the first quote, he invokes DC Comics’ “Trinity”: its three major superheroes, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. In terms of recognizability and intellectual property marketability, fans regard Wonder Woman as holding equal ground with Superman and Batman. However, in terms of live-action representations, each male superhero far outnumbers the single representation of Wonder Woman before the 2011 pilot. The constant reference back to Wonder Woman’s history and her legacy further indicate the burden

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13 Ibid.
of representation that the character bears in any live-action adaptation. For Wonder Woman, “tricky” becomes less about the image and staying true to the character for superhero fans, and more about how to minimize certain elements of her character that are seen as unmarketable. This burden adds to both the protectiveness of the fans and the industrial logic of Wonder Woman’s trickiness, and the 2011 pilot fiasco serves as an example of both.

The leaked information indicated that Kelley didn’t know and DC didn’t care about the core characteristics of Wonder Woman, at least as interpreted by her fans. The script and image leaks primed both critics and fans for a fiasco, and the filmed pilot, also leaked before completion, delivered on that promise. As the writer of DC Women Kicking Ass wrote of the pilot, it sets up “a dark, angry, violent Wonder Woman who is lonely and has a goal of doing ‘good.’ . . . Wonder Woman so deserves better than this.” This apparently mishandled adaptation spread even beyond the core comic book and geek-oriented news sites and blogs when clips from the pilot leaked online, landing on TV.com, Gawker, and Deadline with headlines such as “How Bad was NBC’s Wonder Woman Pilot? That Bad” and “Crappy Wonder Woman Clips Finally Make It Online.” It was the closest DC has come to adapting the character, one of its three most recognizable intellectual properties, to live action, and it was a spectacular failure. This failure was augmented only by a series of increasingly visible conflicts between male-dominated comic-book culture and female comic fans in the early 2010s. Suzanne Scott describes a few of these conflicts in “Fangirls in Refrigerators,” but 2010–2013 also saw the invention of the Hawkeye initiative, which Scott analyzes in this In Focus section; the public debate and “memeification” of “Fake Geek Girls”; and a notable increase in attention to and spread of first-person accounts of science fiction and fantasy convention sexual harassment. All of these examples created an environment of media discourse about superheroes and women in which gender and representation in comics and their media became more visible and contentious than in years past. These websites are most invested in making these issues visible as a way to challenge the industry idea of “geeks” as monolithically male. The spectacle of the Wonder Woman pilot’s failure in this context only made the scrutiny of DC even more severe.

In 2012, news broke that the CW—a Warner Bros.–owned network that was on its way to two successful DC superhero adaptations, Smallville and Arrow—was developing a Wonder Woman–origin show script called Amazon. Fans seemed to

think this might be the version of Wonder Woman that could work. It fit with the CW brand, it made sense for Warner Bros.’ corporate synergy, and it was already getting positive reception from fans. However, the series’ development was put on hold and not discussed again until May 2013, when the Hollywood Reporter noted that Amazon was being redeveloped, including this oft-pulled quote from CW president Mark Pedowitz: “It is being redeveloped, we’re waiting for the script to come in; we haven’t seen it yet. . . . We do not want to produce something that doesn’t work for that particular character—it is the trickiest of all DC characters to get done.”

Although “tricky” is used to describe Wonder Woman, neither Pantozzi at The Mary Sue (who leaves that part entirely out of the pull quote) nor Sue at DC Women Kicking Ass reacted to the adjective in their posts. “Tricky” still seemed innocuous. It may have referred to figuring out teen stories for a character raised on an island full of women; it may have meant the CW was actually trying to figure out a way to honor the character’s history instead of erase it. In fact, it was TV columnist Matt Mitovich from TVLine who emphasized “tricky” in his headline and perhaps unknowingly fired the first shot in the discursive battle over the adjective.

Mitovich holds a privileged position in the fight over “tricky” because he is both male and primarily a television critic who perhaps hadn’t seen that word used to describe either television shows or comic-book adaptations. Thus, he was writing outside of the female-oriented geek-girl blogs that were trying to make these issues of diverse representation and inclusion visible.

One executive using the term is unremarkable, given the variety of connotations “tricky” carried before it was applied to Wonder Woman, but two months later when the president of DC Entertainment, Diane Nelson, used it to again describe Wonder Woman while also confirming the character as one of the “top three priorities for DC and for Warner Brothers,” “tricky” began to sound like an empty excuse applied only to Wonder Woman. Suddenly, a word so innocuous as to be left out of the pull quote two months earlier became the rallying point for fans in online spaces. Of Nelson’s interview, Sue at DC Women Kicking Ass wrote, “Great Hera, does everyone, everywhere get a messaging bible about Wonder Woman? Given the number of ‘trickys’ I hear about the character it sure seems so.” Yet she made no mention of the term in her initial post reacting to the Pedowitz quote and forewent her usual hyperlinking to


past posts that deal with the issue because there were none. Part of the power of this term and its weaponization is that it seems to have more history with Wonder Woman than it actually does; it fits the narrative of Wonder Woman’s fraught place in the male-gendered franchise logics of the twenty-first century. In short, it feels right and indicative of long-standing, industrywide sexism. The Mary Sue’s Susana Polo began her report on Nelson’s interview by writing, “[A]nother day, another person in the entertainment industry saying that making a Wonder Woman movie would be ‘tricky.’ . . . Wonder Woman is tricky because our culture has made it tricky.” Moreover, the deployment of the term by DC and CW executives, argued Matt Brown at Twitch Film, undermined the viability of the IP by associating it with problems and difficulties. He wrote, “In a single statement, Nelson has argued for Wonder Woman’s importance while tarring her viability as a franchise, and done it all without mentioning the elephant in the room: the inconvenient reality that, per the second word of her name, Wonder Woman is, in point of fact, a woman.” Both Polo and Brown articulate “tricky” as a coded term implying the systemic sexism that has infiltrated the way in which entertainment executives make decisions, regardless of empirical data, to challenge the notion that women pay to see superhero or action movies. Importantly, I assert that in 2013, the fault lay in the industry and its ideas of superhero fans being predominantly male, not in the character or any version of Wonder Woman. After the failed attempts of adapting Wonder Woman from 2010 to 2013, the various related issues regarding women’s place in the comic book–based entertainment industry, and the weaponization of “tricky” by fans in 2013, this construction of superhero fans began to change and Wonder Woman started to become a less difficult prospect. “Tricky” was turned against DC in the summer of 2013 and used as shorthand for letting sexism limit its imagination and business acumen. Fans understood and perpetuated “tricky” as a lie, always putting it in quotes to indicate its artificiality, but, ironically, it was their use of the term that cemented it to Wonder Woman as a part of her discourse, making it such an assumed part of her production narrative that comic-book writer and artist Grant Morrison was asked if he thought Wonder Woman was “tricky to pull off in an on-screen fashion” in a July 2013 interview with USA Today, to which he replied, “People have just convinced themselves that that’s true.” He, as a powerful industry insider, foregrounded the invalidity of the “tricky” descriptor.

The use of “tricky” as a term with negative connotations for DC continued throughout the summer of 2013, as Marvel premiered the first footage for its film adaptation of the space opera Guardians of the Galaxy (James Gunn, 2014), and fans and journalists began to compare DC’s discourse with Marvel’s actions. One tweet encapsulated the contrast: “DC/WB is all like ‘Wonder Woman’s too confusing for a movie!’ and Marvel/Disney


is all like ‘Here’s a raccoon with a machine gun.’’”27 That comment was retweeted more than 4,500 times, giving a sense of how expansive the sentiment among comic fans on Twitter was, and how readily it fit into the ongoing fan narrative that characterized Marvel’s adaptations as successful and DC’s as pitiful.28 Concurrently, the “Meanwhile at Marvel” image meme became a standard reaction image in any comment section or post on DC news, mostly regarding each news item about the Man of Steel sequel. The image depicts five office workers at a long table, laughing so hard that most are doubled over. The image implies both business success—the office space depicted is bright, airy, and modern—and lack of competition. When such memes are utilized to talk back to DC’s assumptions of what is or is not “tricky,” they add salt to the wound caused by the newly resistant term. Not only has “tricky” come to indicate DC’s inability to profit from one of the three most widely recognized superheroes in the world, but it also reminds fans and the industry of Marvel’s unparalleled success with mostly second- or third-tier intellectual properties.

In the first six months of 2014, DC released little more information and images of their Man of Steel sequel, Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice (Zack Snyder, 2016), but at San Diego Comic-Con that year, they appeared to suppress the label “tricky,” or at least fans’ weaponizing of it. DC’s main film reveal at San Diego Comic-Con was a full-body image of Gal Gadot, the actress cast as Wonder Woman, in her superhero costume, which looked less like a star-spangled vision of hope than a postapocalyptic warrior in heels. As Matt Brown of Twitch Film wrote:

What a difference a year makes. At last year’s Comic Con, Wonder Woman was “tricky.” At the 2014 event, she was the belle of the ball. . . . That horrendous title, Batman v. Superman, gets it half-right: this event movie is, certainly, half about Batman. The other half, beyond question, is about Wonder Woman. . . . Wonder Woman has never been done at the movies, the largest untapped reservoir in the pantheon of major comic book characters, and so all eyes are on her.29

Following the release of Gadot as Wonder Woman and the affirmation that Wonder Woman will finally appear in a live-action film, “tricky” seems to have become a label of the past. It doesn’t appear in The Mary Sue’s posts about the image nor in Sue’s reaction to the image on DC Women Kicking Ass.30 While neither website is particularly

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27 Brett White, “DC/WB Is All Like ‘Wonder Woman’s Too Confusing for a Movie!’ And Marvel/Disney Is All Like ‘Here’s a Raccoon with a Machine Gun,’” microblog, @brettwhite, August 12, 2013, https://twitter.com/brettwhite/status/366999192016662528.

28 In 2013, comics blog The Outhouse created http://hasdcdonesomethingstupidtoday.com, which resets its count each time DC does something deemed stupid, with a link to said something. At the time of this writing, the longest record is sixty-one days; Palmer Rubin, “5 Ridiculous MARVEL CHARACTERS Who Got a Movie before WONDER WOMAN,” Unleash the Fanboy, February 26, 2014, http://www.unleashthefanboy.com/news/5-marvel-characters-got-movie-wonder-woman/91072.


glowing in its assessment of Gadot, the costume, or the background of the image, they do not invoke the term or its history. Brown’s reaction is the only recent use of “tricky” I have found, and even it has been defanged. Where “tricky” was once used as a way to harm DC’s publicity and call out the company’s sexism, in 2014 it is merely a nod to the past. More disturbing, Brown, who was among the most vociferous voices against the idea of Wonder Woman being tricky in 2013, illustrates a shift in onus to the embodied character and away from the wider sexist culture of the industry. The shift from “eyes” on DC and Warner Bros. to Wonder Woman herself reiterates the undue burden of representation. The film now carries the weight of feminist hopes in an industry that seems poised to ascribe its failure to the Wonder Woman character and the idea of a female superhero fan culture more generally.

In 2014, Wonder Woman is a character in a body that can and will be judged harshly, no longer an idea that can be deemed “tricky” or not. The casting of Gadot as Wonder Woman in Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice and the confirmation of her contract for multiple movies guarantees a live-action Wonder Woman coming to theaters in 2016, if only as a tertiary character with the promise of her own film. Although there appears to be a shift toward more superheroines across media—including Wonder Woman (Patty Jenkins, 2017), a Supergirl TV show in development, and a Captain Marvel film announced as part of Marvel’s Phase Three—this cycle is incredibly precarious, and the further appearance of female-led superhero films and television shows will likely depend on how trailblazers like Wonder Woman fare at the box office. The shift away from tracking DC’s inherent sexism as the reason for Wonder Woman’s problems to forcing her solo film to be proof-of-concept for female superhero franchises is disheartening. When director Lexi Alexander was asked if she’d be willing to direct Wonder Woman, her response illustrated the real nature of Wonder Woman’s “tricky” problem: “Imagine the weight on my shoulders,” she says, “How many male superhero movies fail? So now, we finally get Wonder Woman with a female director, imagine if it fails. And you have no control over marketing, over budget. So without any control, you carry the fucking weight of gender equality for both characters and women directors. No way.”

Even as Warner Bros. confirmed female director Michelle MacLaren (since replaced by Patty Jenkins) as an apparent nod to Wonder Woman’s feminist significance, Alexander notes the limits of even this gesture. The film itself may be wonderful and fitting for Wonder Woman’s character, but that matters only if DC and Warner Bros. can figure out how to market it and her, a task they have thus far deemed too “tricky” to attempt.

Fan studies’ preoccupation with fan art has never fully manifested into a robust theorization of the area. That is to say, although fans’ transformative works have long been central to both fandom and the study of fans, fan scholars have paid disproportionate attention to fan fiction and fan vids as objects of study. The relative lack of scholarship on fan art (which, broadly defined, would include fan drawing and painting, as well as digital image manipulations, mash-ups, and even potentially animated GIFs) is particularly confounding given fan culture’s migration to platforms like Tumblr that trade in spreadable fan-produced imagery. Through an analysis of one transformative superhero fan art site, The Hawkeye Initiative, I contend that it is especially vital that we consider the place, and transformative potential, of fan art within comics fan culture. Although fan texts are in no way medium specific (e.g., one might write textual fanfic about an audiovisual fan object, like a television show), the sequential art form of comics lends itself to both a proliferation of fan art and a more robust collection of terminology and texts to theorize it.

The Hawkeye Initiative is a crowdsourced fan-art site, founded in December 2012 on a simple premise: “How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing.” The “initiative” referenced in the site’s title is to “illustrate how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics” by redrawing comic-book panels featuring superheroines with the Marvel character


Clint “Hawkeye” Barton while retaining the superheroine’s hypersexualized costume and pose (Figure 1). The site aims to be not just illustrative but also transformative: a “way that people can express the desire for [a change in the extreme sexism of modern comics] in a way that is both compelling and fun.” Similarly, I position The Hawkeye Initiative as illustrative of a broader trend in comics fan art toward gender-swapped renderings of characters as a mode of transformative intervention, “turning the male gaze of comic book culture back on itself and holding the industry accountable for the paltry number of women being hired to work on mainstream superhero titles.”

Though my focus is on superhero(ine) representations, the industry’s aversion to hiring more female creators and artists is always already an implicit component of this representational critique. Here, I consider both the formal dimensions and the cultural implications of superhero crossplay fan art, and gesture to its transformative capacity for superhero representations specifically and comic-book culture more broadly.

Crossplay, Genderswap, Drag: A Note on Terminology. What, then, do we call this particular strain of fan art, in which male superheroes are parodically styled in the costumes and poses of their female counterparts? Theories of drag and camp, drawing on work by Esther Newton, Judith Butler, and J. Jack Halberstam, among others, would certainly offer a rich theoretical framework. Because superhero narratives

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4 Ibid.
always already complicate the notion of a “true” identity, and likewise drag “subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity,” we might couple these theories toward a better understanding of the camp humor that *The Hawkeye Initiative’s* fan art employs and its capacity as a feminist project.\(^7\)

However, the bulk of the reporting on *The Hawkeye Initiative* has defined the images as examples of “genderswap” art.\(^8\) Though fans have a long history of producing “genderswap” art in a variety of forms (e.g., fanfic, cosplay, and fan art most prominently), the label itself can be slippery in its definition and problematic in its application. “Genderswap” is broadly used to classify fan works in which “characters have become differently sexed.”\(^9\) Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian contend that these “sudden re-embodiments,” particularly those “forcing male characters to experience the social and cultural, physical and emotional realities of life in a female body,” are “connected to feminist concerns with the cultural meanings and effects of gendered bodies.”\(^10\) The fan art featured on *The Hawkeye Initiative* may be designed to provoke male readers of comics to experience the realities of viewing comics as a female reader, and it is mutually invested in commenting on the materiality of the superhero body (or how it is artistically rendered) and the performance of gender it enacts, but technically speaking they are not examples of genderswap. When Hawkeye is redrawn in the costume and pose of a superheroine, he does not become a female version of himself. I have chosen to tentatively label the fan art solicited by sites like *The Hawkeye Initiative* as examples of “crossplay” superhero art. Crossplay has been historically aligned with the fan practice of cosplay, or dressing up in the costume of and embodying a character. Crossplay, in turn, refers to instances in which a cosplayer embodies a character of a different sex from his or her own. The practice embodies qualities of both genderswap and drag, and it explores the relationship between costume design and the body. I have settled on this term both for its evocation of play and performance, and because it opens up a space in which we might engage multiple “crossings” (race, sexuality, age, and so on). Additionally, because “crossplay may portray the opposite gender with accuracy or may have humorous intentions within its display,” it resonates with *The Hawkeye Initiative’s* emphasis on the humorous absurdity of accurately costuming men in superheroine garb.\(^11\) *The Hawkeye Initiative* aims to be both playful and political in its commentary, a dichotomy that is embodied in the fannish concept of crossplay.

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\(^7\) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174.
evoke genderswap and drag here not to dismiss them in favor of crossplay, but to suggest rich alternate frameworks for understanding the appeal and subversive potential of this fan art.

**The Hawkeye Initiative (and Why Hawkeye?).** *The Hawkeye Initiative* represents a more organized, thematically cohesive iteration of a long tradition within superhero fandom of calling attention to sexist costuming and posing practices. Each post on *The Hawkeye Initiative* is fairly uniform in design: the original image and crossplay fan art are positioned side by side, arranged horizontally or vertically. The fan art ranges in aesthetic prowess and professionalism, from sketches that roughly evoke the original image to those that aesthetically echo it in minute detail. The contributor frequently cites the title and issue number of the comic the original image is derived from or offers some brief textual explanation of the fan art and what inspired the parody. As the site has grown in popularity, it has begun to feature the occasional image of male fans cosplaying as “The Hawkeye Initiative,” either at fan conventions or as “live action” embodiments of a particular comic-book image.

An immediate question that the project provokes, but refuses to concretely answer, is “Why Hawkeye?” *The Hawkeye Initiative’s* “Origins” page links to four Tumblr posts, all focused on archer Clint “Hawkeye” Barton. These posts include the aforementioned sentence about “how to fix Strong Female Character poses,” an analysis of the costuming of Black Widow and Hawkeye in their cinematic incarnations, a doodle celebrating Hawkeye’s derriere and Jeremy Renner (the actor who portrays him) as a “Strong Female Character,” and the inaugural example of Hawkeye Initiative fan art. Though other superheroes, such as Thor and Spider-Man, are routinely “dressed down” on the site, the titular and visual emphasis on Hawkeye deserves further unpacking.

We might choose to read Hawkeye’s selection as a by-product of the massive success of *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), as it was released seven months prior to *The Hawkeye Initiative’s* debut and served as the introduction of the character to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Because Hawkeye is presented as mentally and physically vulnerable (he is the only nonempowered male “Avenger” and is immediately brainwashed and rendered servile to the villainous Loki) in that film, it is easy to suggest that he presents a “marginalized,” or comparatively “feminized,” member of the team. A more simplistic explanation of Hawkeye’s selection is that

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12 For a discussion of some examples, see Scott, “ Fangirls in Refrigerators.”
15 Though Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) technically makes a brief, and uncredited, appearance in *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* marked the first time the character was given any notable screen time and thus “introduced” to fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.
he poses a “lower stakes” satirical option than, say, Iron Man as a site of critical commentary while still being iconically legible to a wide audience because of his ties to *The Avengers* franchise. As the only male Avenger without a solo film franchise (or related merchandise) to support, Hawkeye is an ideal satirical subject for fans precisely because his status as a superhero is mocked within the films themselves. To wit, in promotional trailers for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015), each member of the superhero team is introduced by name with a title card and footage of superheroic feats (e.g., flying, throwing motorcycles, summoning lightning). The trailer concludes with Hawkeye, crouching in hiding and fatalistically quipping, “We’re fighting an army of robots, and I have a bow and arrow.”

A more compelling rationale comes from the *Hawkeye* comics, particularly the run by writer Matt Fraction and artist David Aja that launched four months prior to *The Hawkeye Initiative* in August 2012. This run of *Hawkeye* comics, which has been especially popular with female readers, is unique in that the superhero mantle of “Hawkeye” is simultaneously held by a man (Clint Barton) and a woman (Kate Bishop). Without delving into the complex comic-book continuity that allows for this mutual embodiment, suffice it to say that the comics’ equal treatment of the two characters (Kate is not “Hawkgirl” or “She-Hawkeye”) is both an anomaly and a respite from the issues that *The Hawkeye Initiative* seeks to expose and critique.

**Superhero(ine) Physicality, Costuming, and Posing.** Before considering how superhero crossplay fan art might function as a transformative feminist intervention into comics culture, we need to address the semiotic significance of superhero physicality and costuming. As Trina Robbins has noted, by the late 1980s both male and female superheroes were no longer just “physically flawless human beings” but exaggerated fantasies designed for the presumed male, adolescent comic-book reader. *To show off these new, “bizarrely morphed” female bodies that featured “balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they’d break in half,” comic-book artists “clothed the women in bottom-baring thong bikinis, with as little as possible on top.”* Moreover, as Carolyn Cocca’s quantitative analysis of the portrayal of women in mainstream superhero comics bears out, “females are posed in ways in which males simply are not. . . . In the most extreme version, a female character’s back is drawn unnaturally twisted as well as arched, displaying all of her curves in front and back simultaneously.” As I’ve discussed elsewhere, and as Figure 2 exemplifies, much of the transformative fan art focused on superheroine representations highlight the physical impossibility of these proportions and poses. Superheroines may be physically powerful, but they are not always empowered. They are drawn in action but frequently

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17 Ibid.


19 Scott, “Fangirls in Refrigerators.”
contained by a (presumed) male gaze. Their costumes protect their identities, even as they expose their bodies.

Peter Coogan’s “The Definition of a Superhero” utilizes the triptych of mission, powers, and identity to classify the superhero. It is the category of identity, jointly comprising “the codename and the costume,” that is of importance here, particularly because it is what marks superheroes as distinct from other heroes and is the most significant in terms of ruling particular characters in or out of “superhero” status. Not only does the superhero’s code name “externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or biography”; the superhero’s costume functions to “emblematize the character’s identity.” One of the primary issues with superheroines is that they are routinely “spun off” from male superhero franchises. Thus, their code names (e.g., Batgirl, Supergirl) inevitably render their own inner character and biography as secondary to the originating male superhero’s identity. Their costumes function similarly, subsuming the superheroine’s identity by using variants on the male superhero’s immediately recognizable emblem (Superman’s chevron S, Batman’s bat silhouette, and so on). It is simple enough to argue that what is really being externalized and emblematized is the logic of franchising. However, when these superheroine identities are always already embedded in another man’s origin story, it is difficult not to read the choices surrounding superheroine costuming as, first and foremost, emblematizing the comic-book industry’s ongoing commitment to a male, cisgender, heteronormative readership, and the presumption that this demographic desires (or demands) sexual objectification. Thus, despite the superhero’s potentiality as a “culturally produced body that could

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21 Ibid., 78–79.
potentially defy all traditional and normalized readings,” predominantly “super-sexuality has been carefully constructed according to highly visible binaries.”

Comics scholar Scott Bukatman notes that superheroes, “invariably denied the expressivity of the face [due to mask], must rely on the boldness of bodily presentation. Posture, kinesis, and pose structure the theatrics of superheroic performance.” When these bodily presentations and poses are isolated from the rhythmic structure of surrounding comics panels and pages, as they are with The Hawkeye Initiative, their resonance with pinup iconography becomes more pronounced. The digital age has seen a resurgence of pinup art, marked by a nostalgia for the 1940s even as these images foster “a wider range of explicit sexual representation into the mostly soft-core vocabulary of the genre,” and we can certainly locate The Hawkeye Initiative within that trend. Likewise, the comics panels parodied in fan art on The Hawkeye Initiative tend to conform to the two primary stylistic features of pinup art: one body, depicted in its entirety and not engaged in a sexual act with another body, and a focus on the potential sexual energy of the pinup, through a “direct eye-line connection to the implied viewer.”

The bulk of the images that fans choose to parody on The Hawkeye Initiative are, not coincidentally, those that most visibly resonate with pinup or erotic art, particularly in terms of the subject’s pose and look. Here, Richard Dyer’s work on the instability of the male pinup, and its resonance with the images that fill The Hawkeye Initiative, is illuminating. Male pinup images, Dyer suggests, produce a paradoxical effect, in that they are designed to be looked at by women, and yet this act of looking “does violence to the codes of who looks and who is looked at (and how), and some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation.” This “attempt,” for Dyer, is made through the male pinup’s own gaze and pose. Unlike the direct eye-line connection and inviting smile of the female pinup, the male pinup either avoids looking at his implied viewer, or “stares at the viewer . . . as if he wants to reach beyond and through [the camera] and establish himself.” Likewise, while female pinups’ poses suggest they are just there to be looked at, the male pinup either is commonly in the middle of some action or “promises activity in the way he is posed.” Dyer places emphasis on the way the specific pose “tightens and tautens his body so that the muscles are emphasized, hence drawing attention to the body’s potential for action,” while

25 Ibid., 339.
28 Ibid., 66.
29 Ibid., 67. This also resonates with Laura Mulvey’s argument that women are “simultaneously looked at and displayed,” and their appearance is thus eroticized and coded to “connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833–844.
broadly theorizing the ways in which this musculature “legitimizes male power and domination.” These distinctions, between “being looked at” and “staring,” physical “passivity” and “activity,” Dyer suggests, mean that what is at stake with pinups is “not just male and female sexuality, but male and female power.” This is where the fannish canard of “but male superheroes also have hypermasculine physiques, and are costumed in skintight outfits” breaks down, and the potential of a site like The Hawkeye Initiative, or crossplay fan art generally, reveals itself. It is not simply about making visible the amount of skin superheroine costumes reveal; it is also about noting the subtle distinctions between how the equally muscular and kinetic bodies of male and female superheroes are posed and what their gaze implies.

The aesthetic correlations between superheroine art and soft-core pornography have been made more tangible in recent years. One visible, and vociferously critiqued, example from August 2014 was Milo Manara’s variant cover for the relaunch of Spider-Woman #1. Criticisms compounded when another aesthetically reminiscent Manara image surfaced from his erotic comic Click! (1983). These images, when arranged side by side (see Figure 3), simultaneously evoke the aesthetic of posts on The Hawkeye Initiative and illustrate the necessity for the project. The cover’s sexual objectification of the female body is disconcerting, but what is perhaps more disturbing is the now invisible or implied audience present on the Spider-Woman cover. This implied audience suggests not only the appeal of these images of the sexualized superheroine body but also the presumed demographics. The fact that The Hawkeye Initiative’s inciting image and so many of the images that contributors choose to parody are cover images is significant. The cover is not just the signifying or most visible frame (in that it hails the reader, specifically a presumed male adolescent reader, and implies that the images within will representationally or ideologically “cooperate” with the cover), but it frames who it is that the industry cares about, who is valued within comics culture and who is marginalized.

**Framing Crossplay Superhero Art as Transformative Intervention.** In his seminal book *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen identifies six functions of the frame

31 Ibid., 66.
to consider the effect of these functions on both the panel’s contents and the cognitive experience of the reader. Of these six functions, two are especially significant for understanding why sites like *The Hawkeye Initiative* harbor the capacity to transform comics culture: the rhythmic function and the readerly function. Groensteen’s engagement with the rhythmic function of comic frames is pointedly truncated. He acknowledges that a comic, “in displaying intervals (in the same way as persistence of vision erases the discretization of the cinematic medium) rhythmically distributes the tale that is entrusted to it,” but he also cautions against the tendency of comics scholars to prescriptively determine “an automatic correspondence between the form and the dimensions of the frame, and the length of the supposed action that it enfames.”

For Groensteen, the “peculiarity” of comics’ cadence is that “each panel hastens the story and, simultaneously, holds it back,” with the frame functioning as “the agent of this double maneuver of progression/retention.”

As we can see, this “function” within Groensteen’s model is implicitly connected to the “readerly function.” If we should not, as Groensteen suggests, overdetermine how the formal properties of a panel or arrangement of panels represent diegetic time, then the rhythm (of both narrative time and the time spent consuming each panel) is ultimately determined by the reader. Groensteen’s explicitly gendered introduction of the “readerly function” has a decidedly romantic quality to it: “When he ‘meets’ a frame, the reader is taken to presuppose that, within the perimeter that has been drawn, there is a content to be deciphered. The frame is always an invitation to stop and to scrutinize.”

This readerly function, according to Groensteen, “goes beyond the semiotic function inherent in framing because, since the panel contributes to a sequential discourse, its frame calls for not only a contemplation but also a reading.”

Like all fannish transformative works, submissions to *The Hawkeye Initiative* decontextualize, and then recontextualize, images and moments from media texts. But it is literally the decontextualization by the focus on a single frame or panel of a piece of sequential art that is significant. It is not a romantic invitation to peruse the frame; it is a demand to deconstruct it. The images in each submission to *The Hawkeye Initiative*, as evidenced by Figure 4, often lack a gutter or border; they sit uncomfortably close to one another, bleed into one another, and reflect one another like mirror images much as they strive to hold a mirror to comics creators and culture. Here, the rhythms that would typically be established by the reader moving from panel to panel are replaced

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33 Ibid., 45 and 45–46.
34 Ibid., 45.
36 Ibid., 54.
37 Ibid., 57, emphasis in original.
38 Figure 4 can be found at *The Hawkeye Initiative*, n.d., http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/post/73351462778/nathan-morton-tigra-and-hawkeye-just-hanging.
by scrolling through submissions. Looking at an individual submission might be humorous, but when scrolled through in sequence, when the proliferation of this imagery in comics is made clear, the site takes on tragicomic dimensions. Much as Groensteen contends that “bound to the contents that it encloses, the [comics] frame is no less attached to the frames that surround it,” *The Hawkeye Initiative* binds its commentary to the political lineage of transformative fan works, and to the broader frames of comics book art and culture.\(^{39}\)

As Carole Stabile has suggested, “superhero narratives provide important places for imagining different here-and-nows; for defamiliarizing social problems and exploring them in a context that offers fresh insights and radical visions of the future.”\(^{40}\) *The Hawkeye Initiative* is one of many notable spaces in which this defamiliarization and reimagining is occurring within comic-book culture. And there has been a tangible, transformative impact of these sorts of “initiatives,” in the turn toward more pragmatic costuming for Batgirl and Spider-Woman in 2014.\(^{41}\) But, as we celebrate the transformative potentiality of crossplay fan art for comic-book culture, we must remain mindful of the term’s legal origins and the protection that it offers fans who produce satirical or critical creative works based on copyrighted content. In August 2014, the Tumblr site *Escher Girls* received a Digital Millennium Copyright Act takedown notice from comic artist Randy Queen, on the grounds of copyright infringement and defamation.\(^{42}\) *Escher Girls*, which in name evokes the confounding constructions of M. C. Escher in its discussion of representations of the female form, has a similar mission to *The Hawkeye Initiative*, though with an emphasis on critically analyzing comics.

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{40}\) Carol A. Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies’: Sexism and Superheroes,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009): 90.


images (in addition to other media) rather than on producing fan-art parodies. More than just an attack on fair-use doctrine or transformative fan criticism, and despite the fact that Queen ultimately retracted the legal threat and apologized, this incident suggests that feminist critiques of gendered superhero iconography, and their efforts to imagine a different here-and-now for comics culture, are still in danger of being taken down, even as they’re pinned up.

It should be noted that, as transformative or parodic fan art has become a common mode of representational and industrial critique, it has also diversified. In addition to sites like The Hawkeye Initiative that revel in visually commenting on the anatomical impossibility of superheroine bodies and poses, other fan-art movements have emerged to realistically redraw these characters. Drawing on art projects like “If Disney Princesses Had Realistic Waistlines,” by Loryn Brantz, the website Bulimia.com adopted this approach for the 2015 “reverse Photoshopping” campaign Comic Book Heroes with Average Body Types.

Trans Representations and Superhero Comics: A Conversation with Mey Rude, J. Skyler, and Rachel Stevens

moderated by Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick

The year 2014 was a landmark one for discussions surrounding the (in)visibility of trans characters in comics, from the first transgender panel at San Diego Comic-Con International to the celebrations and controversy surrounding the introduction of trans characters in mainstream superhero comics like Batgirl (DC Comics, 2011–). To address the state of trans representations in superhero comics, we convened a roundtable of noted bloggers on this topic to discuss the past, present, and future(s) of trans comics characters. Mey Rude is a trans lesbian Latina, the trans editor at Autostraddle, and author of the weekly column “Drawn to Comics.” J. Skyler is a black trans woman and the LGBT visibility columnist for Comicosity. Rachel Stevens is a staff writer for Women Write about Comics and a white transgender lesbian. They can all be found on Twitter at @lunchinthepark, @jskylerinc, and @positronicwoman, respectively.

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1 Batgirl is a long-running character, but the series under discussion here refers to the post-52 series Batgirl, rebooted in October 2011.
Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick: Let’s begin with a little history: To your mind, what are some of the most important representative moments for trans characters in superhero comics? What do you make of the predominance of male-to-female (MtF) transitions in popular representations?

Rachel Stevens: Starting with the last question there first, media portrayals love to objectify the bodies of trans women, to make them seem exotic and strange. “They had the perks of being a man and now look at what they’re doing to themselves, how bizarre,” seems to be the mindset of cis creators who focus on trans women transitioning, as far as I can tell. Regarding important representative moments, can we count Wanda from *Sandman* (Vertigo, 1989–1996)?

Yes, *Sandman* was released under DC’s Vertigo publishing label directed at more mature readers instead of receiving a release as a standard DC comic, but the comic did cross over with the rest of the DC Universe in important ways. Either way, she was one of the first trans women I’ve seen in comics, if not the first. I don’t know if I’d say that her portrayal holds up as positive, but I did remember Gaiman talking about her being based on trans women he knew and how he was trying to make her a sympathetic character. She was reassuring for me at the time, even if I didn’t relate to her entirely. I’m going to admit that I came to *Sandman* in the mid-to late 2000s in high school, so I could have easily missed other portrayals, but she’s the first and most prominent example in my mind.

Mey Rude: *Sandman* was also my first experience with trans characters in “superhero” comics (I think for the sake of this discussion, we’re going to have to expand what we consider superhero comics to be, as most of the representation comes in fringe titles). However, I think it’s important to mention the trans women that are shown as murder victims in the “Serial Convention” story line in those same comics.² Those were the ones I read first, and they frightened me. One of the serial killers at this convention is talking about how he only kills “preoperative transexuals” because something about them made him “uncomfortable.” So this is how I was introduced to trans women.

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in comics—lying dead on the bed of her murderer. Later, when Gaiman introduced Wanda in the series, I had a mixed reaction to her treatment as well. I was raised Catholic, and so the scene where Wanda is told “it’s like uh gender isn’t something you can pick and choose as uh far as gods are concerned” really shook me. Even though Wanda tells the gods to go and shove their opinion of her, she’s still not allowed to go with her friends because the Moon doesn’t consider her a woman. Like Rachel I read these books in the 2000s in high school (except for me it was the early 2000s), and I don’t think I saw any real trans characters (of course there were always body-swap stories like Sir Tristan in *Camelot 3000* and shapeshifting characters like Mystique, but I don’t think those really count) until Xavin in *The Runaways*. Xavin is a teenage Skrull alien . . . [and] when they find out the person they are supposed to marry is a lesbian, Xavin replies that they are a shapeshifting Skrull and “for us, changing gender is no different than changing hair color.” Xavin’s gender presentation and pronouns change based on the situation, but it’s clear that it’s not just a disguise—Xavin really does identify with the genders they change to. Perhaps the most important trans character, at least in my opinion, is Alysia Yeoh, Batgirl’s roommate and close friend.

![Figure 2: Alysia Yeoh was introduced in Gail Simone’s *Batgirl* #1 (DC Comics, 2011–), and reveals to her roommate, Barbara Gordon (Batgirl), that she is a transgender woman in *Batgirl* #13 (DC Comics, 2013). The issue was roundly praised as a landmark moment in trans representations in comics for its depiction of Barbara’s response.](image)

She’s human, she doesn’t use magic or shapeshifting or futuristic science, and she’s a queer woman of color in an extremely prominent book. Since Gail Simone’s introduction of Alysia, we’ve also seen a trans man character (Alain) in Joe Keatinge’s *Shutter* and trans women introduced in Matt Fraction’s *FF* “6” (the Moloid Tong), Jamie McKelvie and Kieron Gillen’s *The Wicked + The Divine* (another trans woman of

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4 Ibid. As part of the plot the Moon is called down to Earth and appears as a goddess who enables travel to another realm. The moon goddess, however, does not allow Wanda to accompany her friends to this realm, as she considers Wanda to be a man, and only “women can walk in the moon’s path.”
color, the journalist Cassandra), and Warren Ellis’s *Trees* (Zhen).\(^7\) Again, most of these would barely be called “superhero comics,” if they’d be called that at all.

I also agree with what Rachel said about cis people’s fascination with trans women. Introducing a trans man character is just creating another male superhero (or friend of a superhero), and I don’t think that has the same oomph of diversity for a lot of creators.

**J. Skyler:** I have to agree that the most prominent trans character that comes to mind is Wanda from *Sandman*. I also concur that what struck me hardest was her refusal to allow biological essentialism to deter her from asserting her womanhood. The pervasive argument that sex or gender is determined exclusively by chromosomes and external genitalia is not one we should shy away from if we are to combat that way of thinking, but I believe where Gaiman tripped up is he failed to acknowledge such a rigid dichotomy is a very Western, particularly Eurocentric viewpoint that does not take into account how gender is perceived in other cultures. Considering the diversity of supernatural elements present in *Sandman*, it’s odd Wanda would find no affirmation of her gender among the numerous deities present in that story line.

To answer your second question, I remember recently someone asked on Twitter why violence against trans men is not equally as pervasive as it is against trans women. My answer was that in a predominantly androcentric society where manhood is considered quintessential and womanhood is considered either secondary or inconsequential the act of abandoning or denouncing manhood in favor of womanhood elicits a far stronger sense of offense than the reverse, where someone assigned female at birth abandons or rebukes womanhood in order to affirm manhood. Cis or trans, those assigned female at birth simply have more leeway in transgressing gender norms.

**Mey Rude:** Yes, J., I completely agree about your point that the hardline Western and Eurocentric view on gender that Gaiman took in *Sandman*. It is very strange that “the gods” would have this view when it’s particular to only certain cultures. It would have been completely amazing to see a non-Western, non-European deity defend Wanda and her gender.

**J. Skyler:** Mey, you also mentioned an avoidance of shapeshifting characters such as Mystique, which is a topic that always comes up in discussions of transgender representation. They’re problematic because they almost never have any direct correlation to the lived realities of trans people. No person is capable of completely restructuring their entire physiology at will, and yet fictional characters that can are always assumed to be an accurate allegory for trans identities, or at the very least a plausible substitution. Part of the reason we all seem to gravitate toward Wanda is because she’s the first character we came across that we could label without hesitation as an authentic transgender person—one who embodied all of the real-life difficulties we all share.

Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick: What does the controversy around *Batgirl* #37 (DC Comics, 2014) tell us about the state of trans representations in comics? In recent years, there have been extensive discussions around misogyny and sexism within comics representation and comics culture. To what extent is it important (or perhaps problematic) to put issues around transphobia in comics in conversation with other representational concerns?

Mey Rude: I think *Batgirl* #37 is a perfect microcosm of trans representation in comics right now. It had a trans woman in it, but she was only there for a few panels and didn’t really do anything that impacted the story. It also featured Batgirl reacting terribly when she pulled the wig off of someone she thought was a woman, and a trans-misogynistic trope. So I think it shows that although some people are trying, we’ve still got a really long way to go.

I think that discussions about transphobia fit in very nicely with discussions about misogyny and sexism and homophobia in comics. First of all, most of the “transphobia” is actually transmisogyny. Since it’s trans women who get murdered or are subject to tropes that are used, it’s about the intersectionality of trans women being trans-gender and being women.

It’s very clear that trans women are hated and attacked more than trans men, and examining misogyny in comics should, by definition, help to address transmisogyny in comics. Additionally, studies show that very high numbers of trans people also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, so discussions of homophobia in comics should also include trans characters.

Rachel Stevens: Seconding everything Mey had to say there, while also noting that most trans women who are attacked aren’t white—racial tensions overlapping with transmisogyny. Here’s where comics are at for trans portrayals—I can name one

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trans superheroine in comics written by a trans woman: Coagula, written by Rachel Pollack during her tenure on *Doom Patrol* in the 1990s for DC (*Doom Patrol* ##64–87, *Vertigo*, 1993–1995). I sadly haven’t had a chance to read that, but the character is a transgender, gynephilic sex worker, and I feel like that there might be a good chance that the character is portrayed well—but can’t confirm for myself—and would recommend cautious optimism.

Oh, great—in the process of looking up information about Coagula, I discovered that she was killed less than ten years after her creation. There’s one superheroine that isn’t getting resurrected.

**J. Skyler:** I think *Batgirl* #37 illustrates the fact that gender outside of cis normativity is assumed to be a performance. As in trans people aren’t “real” in the strictest sense of the word—we’re just putting on a show for the rest of the world to gawk at, and that, eventually, the truth of our situation will be revealed and we’ll be put away justifiably.

As I mentioned before, I’m not in favor of shying away from problematic elements that actually exist in our day-to-day lives. Comic books should always be discussing things like biological or genital essentialism, racism, ableism, classism, sexism (against both cis and trans women), homophobia, and biphobia and how each of these overlap when it comes to individuals who have multiple intersecting identities. However, as long as publishers and creative teams continually place all their efforts on a singular character (Wanda, Coagula, Alysia), we will never have the kind of nuanced representation the community actually needs.

**Rachel Stevens:** I just realized that most of our examples have been DC focused. That’s interesting. The only trans woman character I immediately remember in Marvel is Tong, in Allred and Fraction’s *FF* “6.” She was also a Moloid and not a human girl, so it was probably easier to sell the character to Marvel. Still, the scene where she came out to her family was very sweet, and I honestly think relatively successful at showing positive representation. However, she is only one character, and J. is right. We need quality and quantity. No single trans woman in fiction could encapsulate every single trans woman’s experience, nor should she. The same goes for all representation in all fiction and media. We need nonwhite trans women, plural, in fiction. We need straight, gay, and bi trans women, and trans women who experience other forms of attraction. We need disabled trans women.

**J. Skyler:** I’m glad you mentioned disabled trans characters. Since there has been an uneasy conflation of gender identity with psychosis or pathology, trans people who also have a mental illness face a very specific type of double jeopardy. Additionally, people who are living with physical disabilities who are also trans obviously require accurate representation as well.

**Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick:** In what ways, positive and negative, has social media impacted debates surrounding trans representation in (superhero)
comics? What’s the environment like out there for people blogging about these issues, or discussing them on social media?

**Mey Rude:** I think the main positive with social media and trans representation is that it gives trans women a voice in situations where we normally wouldn’t have one. Women are often ignored in discussions about comics, LGBTQ people are often ignored in discussions about comics, and, so when you have trans women, we’re often near the bottom of the list when it comes to important people in the comics industry. However, thanks to social media, we can let our opinions be known. Even more, with comics creators being active on social media, we actually have the ability to interact with creators like Gail Simone and Cameron Stewart about their trans characters or use of transphobic tropes. On the negative side, putting our opinions out there like that also allows trolls and transphobes to see them and attack. For example, when I wrote about *Batgirl* #37, I had many people supporting me and was able to talk with *Batgirl* cowriter Cameron Stewart about it, but I also had more people insulting me on Twitter and on *Autostraddle* than I’ve had for almost any other thing I’ve ever written.¹⁰

**Rachel Stevens:** I’ve definitely had people going “um, actually, this isn’t transphobic and how dare you think that?” in response to my own *Batgirl* #37 article, either in the comments for *Women Write about Comics* or in reblogs on Tumblr.¹¹ Some people just refuse to listen. I have managed to change the minds of other people, as well. It’s a mixed bag, which is about what you could expect.

**J. Skyler:** As in many movements regarding social justice, social media has been an invaluable tool in elevating the voices of trans people. With regard to the comic-book industry, Tumblr and Twitter in particular have made it much easier to communicate with creative professionals that are writing these characters. Whether they listen and take our criticisms to heart like Simone and Stewart did or not, we at the very least have platforms that can amplify our concerns so that they are not ignored or silenced completely.

As previously mentioned, the drawback is that we are often attacked for speaking our minds. The most absurd argument I had thrown at me after writing “Batgirl and the Perpetual State of Transphobia” was that presenting a well-rounded critique equates to an assault on freedom of speech.¹² As if my criticisms would somehow lead to government-imposed sanctions.

**Mey Rude:** Yeah, definitely a lot of the people criticizing me online were giving completely ridiculous reasons, including the “free speech” and “this isn’t transphobic” arguments that both of you mentioned. I also had a lot of people telling me that

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¹⁰ See Rude, “How ‘Batgirl #37’ Undid.”
¹¹ See Stevens, “Disappointment Again.”
¹² See Skyler, “Batgirl and the Perpetual State.”
I didn’t understand the difference between trans women and drag queens or cross-dressers, which as a trans woman, I definitely do.

**Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick:** What are the affordances or limitations of superheroes as a space for exploring trans identities? Looking forward, what do you think is most vital for comics publishers and creators to consider when creating and developing trans characters or superheroes?

**Rachel Stevens:** Closeted trans people (at least in my case, I’ve read essays about similar) can find something to relate to in regard to secret identities. Hiding an important aspect of your identity from the people around you because you can’t be sure how they’ll handle it, that’s the kind of pathos you’d find in a Marvel comic. In regards to the latter question: hiring trans women to write and illustrate trans women, trans men for trans men, nonbinary folks for nonbinary characters, and so on. Failing that, consulting actual real-life trans people about their planned portrayal. Failing even that, doing research through reading. I mention Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* for trans-misogynistic tropes and *Transgender History* for trans people in general by Susan Stryker as often as I can, but it’s also worth noting that neither of those are perfect resources. I recall some criticism in the latter’s case especially for not devoting enough space to two-spirit history in precolonial America while Serano has been open about her book not being all-encompassing.

**J. Skyler:** I believe the very idea that there are limitations needs to be challenged. What would preclude any trans or gender-nonconforming person from seeing an accurate depiction of themselves in a comic book? The answer should be none. As Rachel mentioned, having cisgender creative teams actually do their research prior to publishing a story is essential and having publishers hire trans people to create and develop trans characters is paramount. It is so much more logical to entrust these stories to writers and artists who have the lived experience—who can craft realistic portrayals of transgender individuals inspired by their own personal journeys—rather than wholly depending on cisgender men and women to hopefully get it right, only to lament when they don’t. I must also reiterate, placing all of your eggs in one basket with a single trans character is futile. There should be multiple transgender characters with differing points of view (race, class, disability, religion, orientation) at the forefront of multiple books. Otherwise, discussions like this will simply be recycled as time goes on.

**Mey Rude:** Something that I think can be both a limitation and affordance of the superhero genre that comes to mind for me is that there are shapeshifters, there’s magic, there’s body swapping, there’s future tech, and there are nonhuman races. So there are a lot of ways to make characters who have fluid or changing gender. But it

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makes it easy to say, “Hey, look, we have Sir Tristan, who is a man who was put into the body of a woman, that counts as trans representation,” when it really doesn’t.

And I think both Rachel and J. hit the nail right on the head with their suggestions for vital next steps. Having trans creators (several, not just one) and having trans characters (again, multiple, not just one per company) are probably the biggest priorities in my mind. Once we have a good number of trans characters, we can have more diverse trans characters, and that’s when we’ll really be making progress.

Contributors

Charlotte E. Howell received her BA from the University of Virginia and her MA from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include religion and television, broadcast history, cultural studies, and media industry studies. She has published essays in Networking Knowledge and Kinephanos. She is a member of the SCMS Teaching Committee and has contributed to the Cinema Journal Teaching Dossier. Charlotte has worked for FlowTV and InMediaRes, was a co-coordinator of the Flow Conference in 2010 and 2014, and was the graduate student manager for Media Industries from 2012 to 2015.

Ellen Kirkpatrick is a PhD candidate in comics, culture, and “identity” at Kingston University, London. Her research builds upon work undertaken for an MPhil (Brist.) and interrogates the concept of identity, centering on notions of traversable borders. Ideas circulating the dressed body loom large in her work, and within her thesis she examines dressing and costuming practices to explore the implications of the dressed, and visualized, body within the performance of identity. Her work has appeared in Transformative Works and Cultures, and she is currently working on a chapter for an edited collection on representations of fandom in popular culture and media.

Carlen Lavigne is the author of Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction (McFarland, 2013), the editor of Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle (Lexington, 2014), and the coeditor of American Remakes of British Television (Lexington, 2011). She holds a PhD in communications studies and teaches at Red Deer College in Alberta, Canada.

Mey Rude is a trans lesbian Latina, the trans editor at Autostraddle and author of the weekly column “Drawn to Comics.” Her Twitter handle is @lunchinthepark.

Suzanne Scott is an assistant professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work has appeared in New Media & Society, Transformative Works and Cultures, and collections such as How to Watch Television and The Participatory Cultures Handbook. Her current book project examines the gendered tensions underpinning the media industry’s embrace of fans as tastemakers and promotional partners within convergence culture.
J. Skyler is a black trans woman and the LGBT visibility columnist for *Comicosity*. Her Twitter handle is @jskylerinc.

Rachel Stevens is a lesbian and transgender woman living in Washington state, originally from southwestern Michigan. She likes to read and critique comics from a trans-inclusive feminist perspective, and is writing stories of her own about people like her. When she isn’t reading or writing, she can be found listening to electronic music or telling bad jokes about robots. She can be contacted via email at stevens.j.rachel@gmail.com.